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Reception Aesthetics in Zhuangzi Translations: A Comparative Analysis of Lin Yutang And Burton Watson

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ABSTRACT: *Zhuangzi(《庄子》) holds a significant and influential position in ancient Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, and literature, renowned for its extensive content and fantastical beauty. This study examines the English translations by Lin Yutang and Burton Watson from the perspective of translation aesthetics. By analyzing the translation strategies, language use, and artistic expression of Zhuangzi's philosophical ideas employed by these translators, this research aims to highlight the differences and similarities between their translations. It explores their strategies for bridging the gaps in cultural meaning and the concretization of the readers' horizon of expectations. This study provides new insights into the aesthetic value of Zhuangzi in English translations and offers valuable contributions to the field of cross-cultural translation studies.*

KEYWORDS: *Reception Aesthetics; Zhuangzi; Lin Yutang; Burton Watson; translation*

I. Introduction

Zhuangzi (《庄子》) is a compilation of Daoist teachings attributed to Zhuangzi himself and his disciples during the later stages of the Warring States period in ancient China. It stands as a pivotal treasure within the realm of Chinese classics. The initial translation of Zhuangzi emerged in 1881, crafted by the British sinologist Frederic Henry Balfour. Subsequently, a total of 23 English translations have been published, comprising 10 complete translations and 13 selections.

In 1942, Lin Yutang (林语堂) published a selected translation of *Zhuangzi* in *The Wisdom of China and India*, including six chapters from the Inner Chapters (excluding *Ying Di Wang*, 应帝王) and five chapters from the Outer Chapters, totaling eleven chapters. As a renowned Chinese translator and writer, Lin Yutang's primary motivation for translating was to disseminate Chinese culture. Consequently, his translation reflects the principle of "harmony without uniformity". In his translation, he strived to reproduce the original style of the Chinese classic and preserve the unique philosophical concepts of Daoism.

In 1964, the American sinologist and translator Burton Watson published a selected translation of the *Zhuangzi*, and by 1968, he had produced the complete translation *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Watson's translation balances the philosophical and literary qualities of the original text, targeting English-speaking readers with fluent, coherent, and accessible language, even incorporating colloquialisms and slang. His translation is considered in the American academic community to be readable, accessible, scholarly, and faithful,

making it the preferred version used in most undergraduate courses on *Zhuangzi* in the United States [1]. Scholars have surveyed and compiled data on the overseas reception and circulation of various English translations of "Zhuangzi," finding that Watson's complete translation is the most frequently cited[2], highlighting its significant influence abroad. One scholar pointed out that Watson reconstructed a distinctive image of Zhuangzi, making the translation of *Zhuangzi* more diverse and open, moving away from the previous flat and ahistorical interpretations, and creating a multi-dimensional and comprehensive image of Zhuangzi overseas, making his translation one of the best among the English versions of *Zhuangzi*[3].

Chinese classical texts have unique characteristics, deeply embedded in cultural traditions and history, with rich cultural connotations and profound thoughts that are challenging to fully present in translations. Firstly, these texts often use classical Chinese language, which is concise and integrates form with content, featuring complex literary styles and rhetorical techniques that make it difficult for translators to maintain both meaning and form. Secondly, the texts frequently involve deep philosophical and ethical concepts rooted in Chinese culture, with prominent intertextuality. Preserving the cultural essence of the source text during translation can alienate readers due to cultural differences, while eliminating Chinese cultural elements can diminish the aesthetic effect and hinder cultural dissemination[4].Therefore, translating Chinese classics is a formidable task; approaching it solely from a static textual perspective while ignoring socio-cultural considerations will impede the translation's ability to achieve cross-cultural communication.

At present, there is limited comparative analysis between the English translations of Lin Yutang and Burton Watson in the academic community; most studies focus on each translator independently. Therefore, this paper attempts to compare their translations, providing new insights for the English translation of *Zhuangzi*.

II. Reception aesthetics in the field of translation

"Reception aesthetics," also known as reception theory, emerged from the anti-textual- -centrism movement in Europe in the 1960s. It encompasses the examination of both authors and readers, with a particular emphasis on exploring how the agency of readers impacts a work and influences its reception. Reception aesthetics was coined by the German scholar Hans Robert Jauss (1921-1997) and originated from his lecture *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*. "Aesthetic Response Theory" comes from a paper published by Wolfgang Iser titled *The Call of Textual Structures*. These two concepts together form the cornerstone of reception theory[5].

Reception aesthetics places readers at the forefront, focusing on how individuals infuse their subjective agency into the interpretation of a work and how they come to accept it, asserting that audiences play an active role in textual engagement. Currently, much discussion within this theoretical framework revolves around "horizon of expectations" and "appealing structure". The notion of the horizon of expectation, originated by Jauss and rooted in Heidegger's concept of pre-understanding, can be described as "an inter subjective framework or arrangement of anticipations, a network of contextual references, or a mindset that an imaginary individual could employ when engaging with any text"[6]. It refers to readers' pre-existing mental frameworks

or anticipatory structures, shaped by past experiences and knowledge, which they bring to the reading of literary works. Consequently, readers do not approach a work as blank slates but rather engage with it through the lens of their prior experiences and cognitive structures, which in turn influence their degree of acceptance. To some extent, the horizon of expectations manifests as a latent aesthetic anticipation during the specific reading process[7]. Importantly, readers' horizon of expectations is not static but rather a dynamically evolving process. Diverse social, cultural, and experiential backgrounds result in varied horizon of expectations among different readers. When considering readers' latent horizon of expectations, the diverse individual perspectives lead to distinct aesthetic distances and levels of acceptance towards a given work. During the translation process, it is imperative for translators to reconstruct these perspectives, acknowledging their variability, and endeavor to harmonize the viewpoints of the author, translator, and reader, thus facilitating the universalization of the horizon of expectations.

On another note, owing to appealing structure, or the inherent uncertainty within texts, readers have the liberty to exercise their subjective agency within a certain semantic space, spontaneously interpreting the text. According to Jin, it refers to semantic indeterminacy and semantic blanks. Structures that captivate, acting as a conduit between the author and the reader, empower the reader to construct the meaning of literature, thus expanding their previous horizon of expectation [8]. The voids and uncertainties in meaning found within a text, termed as "textual uncertainty," necessitate readers to creatively fill them based on their own expectations, as described by Iser[9] as "the concrete manifestation of uncertain information." In such a reading process, the text becomes imprinted with the reader's personal touch, imparting to them the significance they derive. As readers engage in interpreting textual gaps, they imbue certain voids with concrete significance. Holding specific messages in consideration, readers play a role in shaping the meaning of literary works. Consequently, each individual can offer varied interpretations of the same text. Furthermore, exposure to conflicting information enables readers to broaden their horizon of expectation.

The influence of reception aesthetics theory on translation studies is evident in its focus on reader response and the emphasis on the translator's subjectivity, providing translators with greater freedom. Translators decide which aspects of the original text to retain, modify, or rewrite based on their translation objectives, the intended function of the translation, and the target audience. This theory has shifted the traditional text-centric approach in translation studies, directing attention towards the translator and the translated text. Translation has thus become a complex, multidimensional interactive process involving the original text, the translation, the original author, the translator, and the reader. Reader reception is now the starting point and ultimate goal of translation activities. Translators need to thoroughly consider the readers' expectations and aesthetic needs during the translation process.

As both readers of the original text and its secondary creators, translators interpret and concretize the original meaning, striving to ensure that the translated text conveys the original intent clearly and effectively to its readers. This dual role requires translators to fully engage the readers' subjectivity and initiative. Consequently, Western translation theory has seen a shift towards reader-centric approaches and an emphasis on

the translator's role. The inherent complexity of translation necessitates multiple standards, varying by text type, historical context, translation purpose, and reader demographics. Translators must consider the target audience's comprehension and aesthetic preferences, employing flexible translation strategies to achieve an optimal balance between the original and the translated text in terms of aesthetic and reception quality.

Throughout the translation process, translators take on a dual role, serving as both readers and authors. Hence, whether it's in grasping the uncertainties within the original text or in filling in the gaps within the translated text, translators must exercise their subjective initiative to imbue the text's uncertainties with meaning and specificity. This translator subjectivity is particularly pronounced in the translation of Chinese classics.

III. Comparative Analysis of Lin Yutang's and Burton Watson's Translations of Zhuangzi

3.1 Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Horizon of Expectations

Zhuangzi is deeply rooted in the rich culture of China, containing a plethora of vocabulary and expressions infused with Chinese elements. This leads to gaps in the corresponding expressions and background knowledge in the target language environment. Reader "horizons of expectation" need to meet the literary appreciation needs, and this manifests as a latent aesthetic anticipation. In the specific process of reading, this horizon of expectation is constantly changing, correctable, and reshapeable. *Zhuangzi* contains numerous culturally specific terms such as Chinese names, place names, and historical allusions. These culturally specific terms fall outside the horizons of expectation of Western readers. Therefore, Western readers, with their different aesthetic expectations, experience varying degrees of horizon fusion when reading different English translations of *Zhuangzi*.

Therefore, Translators must consider cultural differences while also taking into account the readers' horizon of expectations. They can achieve this by employing domestication to render the foreign culture into a familiar understanding for readers, thereby reducing feelings of unfamiliarity and alienation. Alternatively, they can use foreignization to introduce innovative cultural elements, challenging readers' existing perceptions and thought patterns. This approach involves reconstructing the horizon of expectations of the target audience, enhancing their engagement with the source culture and translation, and ultimately generating unique literary value and audience effects.

3.1.1 Title Analysis for Translation Comparison

To begin with, we will analyze the translations of the seven chapters from the Inner Chapters and the fifteen chapters from the Outer Chapters of *Zhuangzi*. By comparing Lin Yutang's[10] and Burton Watson's[11] translations of each chapter title, we aim to delve into the choices made by each translator in their translation strategies. Table 1 illustrates how each title was handled in Lin's and Watson's translations.

Table 1. Summary of *Zhuangzi* Chapter Titles in Lin Yutang's and Burton Watson's Translations

	Title Original Text	**Lin Yutang's Translation**	**Burton Watson's Translations**
Inner Chapters (内篇)	逍遥游	A Happy Excursion	Free and Easy Wandering
	齐物论	On Levelling all Things	Discussion on Making All Things Equal
	养生主	The Preservation of Life	The Secret of Caring for Life
	人世间	The Human World	In the World of Men
	德充符	Deformities, or Evidences of A Full Character	The Sign of Virtue Complete
	大宗师	The Great Supreme	The Great and Venerable Teacher
	应帝王		Fit for Emperors and Kings
Outer Chapters (外篇)	骈拇	Join Toes	Webbed Toes
	马蹄	Horses' Hoofs	Horses' Hoofs
	胠箧	Opening Trunks, or A Protest against Civilization	Rifling Trunks
	在宥	On Tolerance	Let It Be, Leave It Alone
	天地		Heaven and Earth
	天道		The Way of Heaven
	天运		The Turning of Heaven
	刻意		Constrained Will
	缮性		Mending the Inborn Nature
	秋水	Autumn Floods	Autumn Floods
	至乐		Supreme Happiness
	达生		Mastering Life
	山木		The Mountain Tree

	田子方	Tian Zifang
	知北游	Knowledge Wandered North

Taking the title "养生主" as an example, in modern annotations related to *Zhuangzi*, it is interpreted as the essence of nourishing life, with the main idea being the preservation of the spirit. Lin Yutang's translation, "the Preservation of Life", effectively captures the essence of the main idea in a concise manner. The word "preservation" in Cambridge Dictionary is defined as "the act of keeping something as it is, especially in order to prevent it from decaying or to protect it from being damaged or destroyed", which particularly emphasizes the prevention of damage. When used to modify "life", it reflects the avoidance of spiritual erosion, in line with the viewpoint that conforms to nature and the belief that the spirit is not harmed by external forces. The word choice is accurate, aligns with the original text, and reflects the orientation of the source culture. On the other hand, Burton Watson's translation, "The Secret of Caring for Life", is more literal, with the term "主 (zhǔ)" translated as "secret", adding a mysterious tone that captures the reader's attention. The phrase "caring for life" reflects the concept of nourishing life in a straightforward manner. The translation is audience-oriented, aiming to engage the reader.

In conclusion, Lin's translation focuses on accurately conveying the essence of the original text while reflecting the cultural orientation of the source language. Watson's translation, on the other hand, is more straightforward and audience-oriented, aiming to intrigue the reader with a sense of mystery while effectively conveying the concept of nourishing life. Both translations demonstrate their own strengths in conveying the nuanced meanings of the original text while catering to the needs of the target audience.

3.1.2 Content Analysis and Reception Validity

Comparative analysis of the translations provides initial insights into the translators' subjectivity. However, a deeper exploration of the effects of translation strategies on reception aesthetics can be achieved through analyzing how Lin Yutang and Burton Watson handle specific content.

(1) Example 1:

Original Text: 六合之外，圣人存而不论；六合之内，圣人论而不议。

Lin's Translation: Beyond the limits of the external world, the Sage knows that it exists, but does not talk about it. Within the limits of the external world, the Sage talks but does not make comments. (Lin, 1942: 79)

Watson's Translation: As to what is beyond the Six Realms, the sage admits it exists but does not theorize. As to what is within the Six Realms, he theorizes but does not debate. (Burton, 1968: 13)

In this example, "六合" refers to heaven, earth, the universe, or the world of humans. Lin's dynamic equivalence translates it as the "external world", making it more accessible to readers with a secular understanding. On the other hand, Watson's literal translation as "Six Realms" may be less familiar to readers lacking background knowledge, necessitating his explanatory note: "Heaven, earth, and the four directions, that is, the universe". This additional information aids comprehension but may not fully capture the distinction

between the "spiritual world" and the "material world" as intended in the original text.

Regarding the translation of "论" and "议", Lin translates "论" as "talks" and "议" as "comments", whereas Watson translates as "theorizes" and "debate" respectively. The divergence in translation choices here alters the nuance of the original text. Lin's translation better captures the philosophical implications of "论" and "议". Furthermore, in the subsequent sentence, where "辩" is used, Lin translates it as "expound", whereas Watson translates it as "discriminate". Watson's choice of "debate" for "议" in the previous sentence seems less appropriate, and his translation of "辩" as "discriminate" appears to be a misinterpretation, which indicates that the sage's behavior as not involving discrimination. Overall, Lin's translation more accurately reflects the philosophical ideas of *Zhuangzi*. This analysis illustrates how different translation strategies can affect the reception and understanding of the text by readers.

(2) Example 2:

Original Text: 自我观之，仁义之端，是非之涂，樊然淆乱，吾恶能知其辩!

Lin"s Translation: In my opinion, the doctrines of humanity and justice and the paths of right and wrong are so confused that it is impossible to know their contentions. (Lin, 1942: 81)

Watson's Translation: The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong all are hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations? (Burton, 1968: 15)

In terms of sentence structure, Lin transforms the emotionally charged question into a statement using the structure "so...that". The expression maintains a formal tone and structure, with phrases like "it is impossible" preserving the objectivity of the original text, maintaining its rigor and philosophical nature. On the other hand, Watson follows the structure of the original text, rendering it as a question. He enhances the vividness of the translation with imagery such as "hopelessly snarled and jumbled", creating a chaotic scene in the reader's mind. This approach introduces subjective elements and attempts to establish a connection with the general reader.

(3) Example 3:

Original Text: 众人役役，圣人愚芚，参万岁而一成纯。万物尽然，而以是相蕴。

Lin's Translation: Rank and precedence, which the vulgar sedulously cultivate, the Sage stolidly ignores, amalgamating the disparities of ten thousand years into one pure mould. The universe itself, too, conserves and blends all in the same manner. (Lin, 1942: 81)

Watson's Translation: Ordinary men strain and struggle; the sage is stupid and blockish. He takes part in ten thousand ages and achieves simplicity in oneness. For him, all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold one another. (Burton, 1968: 16)

In this sentence, "愚芚" refers to the appearance of being ignorant and simple-minded. The meaning of the sentence is that ordinary people bustle about, while the sage remains tranquil in simplicity, blending the countless variations of past and present into one pure essence. All things are alike, mutually interwoven within this pure and simple state. Lin translates "愚芚" as "stolidly ignores", suggesting that the sage serene in

apparent ignorance, embodying the notion of "great wisdom appearing as foolishness". The phrase "参万岁" is rendered as "amalgamating the disparities of ten thousand years", which refers to the countless variations of past and present, aligning well with the original meaning. On the other hand, Watson translates "愚芚" as "stupid and blockish", indicating a sense of foolishness and stubbornness, similar to being as dull as wood. The choice of words here by Watson carries more negative connotations and does not align with the sage's image, resulting in a mistranslation. Furthermore, the handling of "参万岁" as "takes part in ten thousand ages" directly conveys the concept of time without fully reflecting the changes over time, showing some deviation from the original meaning. Therefore, from this perspective, Watson's translation does not integrate the expectations of the author, translator, and reader as effectively as Lin's.

(4) Example 4:

Original Text: 天下有道，圣人成焉；天下无道，圣人生焉。

Lin's Translation: When the right principles prevail on earth, prophets will fulfill their mission. When the right principles prevail not, they will but preserve themselves. (Lin, 1942: 90)

Watson's Translation: When the world has the Way, the sage succeeds; when the world is without the Way, the sage survives. (Burton, 1968: 32)

Lin"s translation provides a more specific rendering of "道" as "the right principles", creating a balance in the sentence structure with "prevail" and "prevail not" corresponding to "有" and "无". Combining the treatment of "成" and "生" with prevail and preserve respectively, Lin's translation exhibits strong phonetic harmony, enhancing its aesthetic quality. On the other hand, Watson translates "道" directly as "the Way", maintaining simplicity and accessibility in language without the same level of structural symmetry. While lacking in symmetry, Watson's translation is straightforward and reader-friendly, making it easier to comprehend.

(5) Example 5:

Original Text:

适来，夫子时也；适去，夫子顺也。安时而处顺，哀乐不能入也，古者谓是帝之悬解。

Lin's Translation: The Master came, because it was his time to be born; he went, because it was his time to go away. Those who accept the natural course and sequence of things and live in obedience to it are beyond joy and sorrow. The ancients spoke of this as the emancipation from bondage. (Lin, 1942: 85)

Watson's Translation: Your master happened to come because it was his time, and he happened to leave because things follow along. If you are content with the time and willing to follow along, then grief and joy have no way to enter. In the old days, this was called being freed from the bonds of God. (Burton, 1968: 21)

Lin's translation preserves the rhythm and word order of the original text while using more formal language, retaining the solemnity of the original. "The emancipation from bondage" emphasizes the philosophical concept behind "帝之悬解", which involves an understanding of life, nature, and the universe, attaining a spiritual state that transcends worldly constraints, achieving spiritual freedom. Lin's translation highlights the intellectual depth of the original text and demonstrating strong literary qualities. On the other

hand, Watson's translation adopts a more colloquial tone and translates it into "being freed from the bonds of God". He uses simpler vocabulary and expressions to make the translation more accessible to a wider audience and reduce readers' unfamiliarity with Chinese classics and cultural barriers by domesticating the term "God", which is more familiar in a Western cultural context. Watson pays attention to absorbing the research achievements of Zhuangzi studies at home and abroad during the translation process, possesses a good aesthetic judgment of classical Chinese, and presents elegant text in the translation, while also striving to adhere closely to the original imagery[12]. Despite the difference in expression, both translations convey similar concepts and philosophical implications.

Lin's translation and Watson's translation adopt different translation strategies and techniques for readers from different eras. They employ domestication and foreignization, direct translation paired with paraphrasing, or transliteration supplemented by interpretation. By retaining the imagery of the source language while enhancing the comprehensibility of cultural connotations, they endeavor to integrate the author's and target language readers' horizon of expectations. In terms of the treatment of Zhuangzi's content, both translations make efforts to shorten the aesthetic distance and reconstruct the readers' horizon of expectations. The translations generally achieve the universalization of the horizon of expectations, facilitating reader acceptance.

3.2 Specific Strategies for Bridging Cultural Significance Gaps

Zhuangzi, as an ancient classic, often contains content and archaic terms that lend themselves to multiple interpretations, highlighting its intertextuality and the prominence of "textual blanks and uncertainties". Readers navigate these uncertainties by relying on their systems of expectation and aesthetic distance. With the assistance of translators, they creatively fill in the blanks to gain a better understanding of the original text.

(1) Example 1.

Original Text: 德充符

Lin's Translation: Deformities, or Evidences of A Full Character (Lin, 1942: 90)

Burton's Translation: The Sign of Virtue Complete (Burton, 1968: 34)

The title "德充符" from the Inner Chapters implies being filled with virtue internally, with everything manifesting externally, seamlessly blending the internal and external like a harmonious symbol. Lin's translation attempts to convey the literal meaning of the original title. It comprises two parts, "Deformities" and "Evidences of A Full Character", emphasizing the correspondence between the internal and external in the original title. Watson's translation is more concise, directly conveying the main meaning of the original title, which is that "德充符" signifies the fulfillment and completeness of virtue, emphasizing it as a symbol of virtue. However, this translation slightly deviates from the literal meaning of the original title, which may not fully convey the philosophical idea of the seamless blend of the internal and external.

Scholars have analyzed the characteristics of Watson's translation, pointing out that "德" is one of the core concepts in *Zhuangzi* and appears multiple times in the text. Based on its homophony with "得" (to gain), it creates a pun. However, there is no equivalent word in English to reproduce this homophony and pun. Therefore, Watson can only translat "德" as "virtue" and "得" as "gain". To restore the rhetorical artistry of

Zhuangzi, he even presents the pronunciation and defines the difference through annotations, highlighting the technique of punning, allowing readers to appreciate the literary charm of *Zhuangzi*. This strategy attempts to preserve the expressive features of the original work and restore the authentic *Zhuangzi* experience[13].

(2) Example 2.

Original Text: 丽之姬，艾封人之子也。

Lin's Translation: The Lady Li Chi was the daughter of the frontier officer of Ai. (Lin, 1942: 81)

Waatson's Translation: Lady Li was the daughter of the border guard of Ai. (She was taken captive by Duke Xian of Jin in 671 BCE and later became his consort) (Burton, 1968: 16)

This passage is a historical anecdote. Li (丽) was from the small state of Lirong(丽戎) during the Spring and Autumn Period, and Ai (艾) was a city in Lirong. In this city, there was a frontier officer, and Li was the daughter of this officer. The story tells of her marriage to the state of Jin. In the context of Western language and culture, this Chinese anecdote may be unfamiliar to readers. Watson adds annotations to help readers understand, filling in the cultural gap. However, Lin does not provide any introduction, which might leave readers confused.

IV. Conclusion

The reception aesthetic theory has brought a fresh perspective to translation studies, establishing the translator's aesthetic subjectivity during the translation process. Their productive and creative aesthetic interventions have become essential elements in the construction of translated works.

Lin Yutang and Burton Watson, as translators of the classic work *Zhuangzi*, each faced different target language readerships and had distinct translation purposes due to their respective historical contexts. Consequently, they employed different styles of language and varied structures of composition. They flexibly utilized a range of translation strategies, combining literal translation with paraphrase to achieve their desired translations. As translators, they both endeavored to enhance the cultural comprehensibility of the text, bridge aesthetic gaps, and reconstruct reader expectations, striving to universalize the target perspective. Furthermore, through the use of paratexts such as prefaces, footnotes, and afterwords, they provided specific information to fill in the gaps of uncertainty in meaning, thus enhancing the readability and comprehension of the text.

Lin's and Watson's translations to a certain extent successfully achieved the goal of intercultural communication, effectively integrating the perspectives of the author, translator, and reader. Through the process of concretizing the uncertainties within the text, they filled in the gaps in readers' understanding, thus broadening the scope of value; and both translations contribute significantly to expanding the discourse surrounding *Zhuangz*i.Translation can only achieve continuous development through the dialectical unity of the translato's creativity and the constraints of the text.

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