

A Report on English Translation of Ceramic Texts from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

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Keywords: Reception Aesthetics; Reader-centered; Ceramic Texts; English Translation

Abstract: Jingdezhen ceramic culture stands as one of the representatives of China's outstanding traditional culture, serving as a vital cultural symbol for China's engagement with the world and the world's understanding of China. This report explores translation methods for ceramic terms, ware names, description of ceramic shapes, quotations from ancient records, and poetry from the perspective of reception aesthetics. Reception aesthetics emphasizes the active role of readers in generating textual meaning, requiring translators to fully consider the cultural background, aesthetic habits, and receptive capacity of the target readers. Through case analysis, this report proposes that the English translation of ceramic texts must balance accuracy, aesthetic quality, and cultural adaptability. Flexibly employing diverse translation approaches is essential to meet reader expectations, achieve a fusion of horizon, and convey the essence of Chinese ceramic culture.

1. Introduction

Chinese porcelain art possesses unique aesthetic characteristics and significance in the eyes of Westerners. Texts related to ceramics encompass multiple dimensions, including terms, ware names, vessel shape descriptions, ancient records, and poetry.

This report applies the reception aesthetics theory to the ceramics field, which is intrinsically linked to aesthetics, exploring methods for translating ceramic texts into English from the perspective of reception aesthetics. Applying reception aesthetics theory to the study of ceramic text translation into English means placing target readers at the center of the translation activity. Translators are not merely language converters but also mediators and harmonizers between the source culture and the target audience. Their task is not to pursue absolute equivalence but to creatively construct a new text within the target culture that satisfies reader expectations and achieves a fusion of horizon. This report aims to apply core concepts of reception aesthetics to analyze diverse translation practices within ceramic texts.

2. Reception Aesthetics and Ceramic Translation

Reception aesthetics, also known as reception theory, was put forward by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the mid-1960s. Jauss suggested that the value and significance of a literary work

does not depend only on the author and the time period, but is also related to the reader’s aesthetic experience and historical conditions^[1]. Iser also emphasized the subjectivity and creativity of the reader in literary reception, arguing that reading is an interactive process in which the reader does not passively receive the work but participates in the creation and interpretation of the work through his or her own aesthetic experience and imagination^[2].

Reception aesthetics is a reader-centered theory that posits readers as active creators, with the value of literary works being realized by readers^[3]. The readers’ horizon of expectation and the fusion of horizon constitutes its two core concepts. The horizon of expectation, proposed by Jauss, refers to the reader’s potential aesthetic expectations before reading and understanding a work. It emerges with the appearance of the translated work, influenced by past reading experiences and determined by textual style. It constitutes the reader’s orientation in literary reading and their directed expectation of how the work will manifest^[4]. This report applies the two core concepts to ceramic text translation, analyzing cases to find methods that better meet target readers’ expectations and facilitate cultural transmission.

3. Meeting the Readers’ Horizon of Expectation

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the core of translation lies in satisfying the target readers’ horizon of expectation through language transformation, namely ensuring that the translated text conforms to the target readers’ cognitive frameworks, aesthetic experiences and reading expectations while preserving the cultural essence of the source language^[5]. In this section, the translator explores the translation methods for ceramic terms, ceramic ware names and ceramic shape descriptions, aiming to meet the target readers’ horizon of expectation.

3.1 Ceramic Terms

Translation is not a simple conversion, but an “accommodation” to make the cultural elements of the source language resonate with the target readers’ cognitive framework^[6]. Therefore, when translating ceramic terms, the translator considers the target readers’ existing knowledge and potential expectations for the target text, employing translation methods such as literal translation, transliteration with annotation, and literal translation with annotation.

3.1.1 Literal Translation

Table 1 Ceramic Types and Related Descriptions.

Shapes of Vessels	
Common Shapes	Equivalent
wan	bowl
hu	pot/ewer
tuo	saucer
ping	bottle/vase
Descriptions of Shapes	Translation
hua kou	petal-mouth
gua leng	melon-shaped
juan bian	rolled edge
gai guan	covered jar

Among the Chinese ceramic type names, the equivalents in English can be found for many common names. In such cases, the translator may retain interpretations where the source and target

languages share common meanings, employing literal translation to arouse the readers' cognitive experience to the greatest extent, as shown in the Table 1.

3.1.2 Transliteration with Annotation

There are also the ceramic type names which are constituted by the ancient Chinese rare characters and refer to a particular type, reflecting the cultural background and porcelain-making characteristics in different periods of time. Although there are similar types in Western culture, there is no specific word corresponding to them, and domesticating method cannot retain the cultural characteristics of the source text. In this case, in order to help the target readers to know the function of the vessels in a specific historical period and better convey the cultural information contained in the vessels, transliteration with annotation is employed, so as to avoid the loss of cultural elements caused in the translation process and to preserve the unique cultural connotation of the vessels.

Example 1:

ST	English Translation
zun	zun (the ritual wine-holding vessel)
gu	gu (wine-drinking vessel in ancient times, similar to beaker)

TT: A large number of excavated bluish white porcelains imitate the shapes of bronze ritual vessels from the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties (2070-771 B.C.), including vases, zun (the ritual wine-holding vessel), censers, and gu (wine-drinking vessel in ancient times, similar to beaker) and so on.

In Example 1, “zun” refers to a large and medium-sized wine vessel in China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, which was mainly used as a wine container. “gu” is also an ancient wine vessel prevalent in China during the Shang and early Western Zhou dynasties, mainly used as a wine drinking vessel. As it has already been mentioned in the context that “zun” and “gu” imitate the porcelain shape of the bronze ritual vessels of the Three Dynasties, there is no need to repeat the dynasty information in the connotation, and only the most important information, namely the function of them, needs to be annotated. In English, there is a word “beaker”, which has the same original meaning as “gu”, so in the annotation of “gu”, the translator adds the phrase “similar to beaker”, which builds a bridge between the abstract concept of “gu” and its concrete form. This translation method pays attention to the readers' horizon of expectation, and is conducive to their understanding and acceptance. In this example, the translator adopts in-text annotation to prevent readers from interrupting their train of thought during reading. In-text annotation is usually placed after the words or phrases that need explanation and is mainly used for immediate explanation of information. The translator's use of in-text annotation here is based on the background knowledge and cognitive needs of the target readers, with the aim of meeting their reading expectations.

3.1.3 Literal Translation with Annotation

Example 2:

ST	English Translation
ban dao ni	half knife mud

TT: Such as bluish white porcelain bowl with carved and incised pattern of children playing amidst flowers, the craftsman employed the “half knife mud¹” technique (a unique decorative technique in Chinese ceramic culture)...

Footnote¹: Half knife mud is the name of the ceramic carving technique. Jingdezhen calls the carving technique with one side deep and the other shallow “half knife mud”. “Half knife mud” carving is developed on the basis of inheriting the decorative carving craft of Jingdezhen in the Song dynasty. Patterns and decorations are concise and elegant, and the technique is mainly based on

impressing, carving and embossing. In the “half knife mud” method of carving patterns, each line has a depth change, combining virtuality and reality. Its “as ice as jade” artistic effect became the mainstream of ceramic decoration at that time.

The translation process, to a considerable extent, constitutes a dual “reading” process: it involves the reading of the source text by the translator as a reader, and the determination of translation strategies by the translator based on an anticipation of how the intended readers will read the translation^[7]. The “half knife mud” technique is a unique decorative technique in Chinese ceramic culture, which was developed on the basis of inheriting the decorative craft of Jingdezhen during the Song Dynasty. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator takes into account the potential expectations of the readers, i.e., the readers want to understand the connotation of this technique. As the in-text annotation is considered to be too long, which will affect the reading experience of the readers, the translator adopts the form of literal translation with footnote to better help the target readers understand the specific meaning.

3.2 Ceramic Ware Names

Ceramic ware names carry rich cultural information, so when translating them, the translator should start from the perspective of the target reader and deeply explore the connotations behind the ceramic ware names, rather than merely pursuing the correspondence in language form. The translator mainly applies the following methods to translate the ceramic ware names into English.

3.2.1 Literal Translation with Annotation

Example 3:

ST	English Translation
yuan yang xi shui	paired mandarin ducks playing in water (symbolizing a happy couple with everlasting love)

TT: bluish white porcelain box with design of paired mandarin ducks playing in water (symbolizing a happy couple with everlasting love)

As translation is a cross-lingual and cross-cultural communicative activity, the translator must first identify the target audience for the translated text before embarking on the translation process^[8]. The intended audience for this translated text is foreign readers who have an interest in ceramic culture. In Example 3, the image of “yuanyang” always appears in pairs in the context of traditional Chinese culture, and it is a metaphor for the fidelity of love between a man and a woman or the love between couples. In Western culture, “mandarin ducks” are more often regarded as a kind of ordinary ducks, without any special symbolic meaning. Therefore, the special cultural image of “mandarin ducks” is missing in the cognitive horizon of English readers. In this example, the translator uses the word “paired” and annotates its symbolic meaning “symbolizing a happy couple with everlasting love”, which better meets the target readers’ reading expectations.

3.2.2 Free Translation with Annotation

Example 4:

ST	English Translation
dao jiao shou xing	Taoist longevity immortal

TT: bluish white porcelain statue of Taoist longevity immortal²

Footnote²: Longevity immortal, also known as the Antarctic old immortal, is the god of longevity in ancient mythology. It is also a deity in Taoism, originally a stellar name, one of the three gods of happiness, fortune and longevity. After the emperor Qin Shi Huang unified the world, he built the

Longevity Immortal Shrine in Du County near Chang'an. Later, Longevity Immortal evolved into the name of an immortal, often set off by deer, cranes, peaches, etc., symbolizing longevity. According to the popular belief, worshipping this fairy god can make people live a long and healthy life. It is actually a Taoism belief in the pursuit of longevity.

In Example 4, “daojiashouxing” is unique to Chinese culture and refers to the Taoist immortal of longevity. “shouxing” does not refer to a “long-lived person” in the literal sense, but rather symbolizes a deity in charge of longevity and good fortune in Taoist culture. If the literal meaning of “shouxing” is retained solely through literal translation, namely translated as “longevity star”, it fails to convey its profound connotations in Chinese culture. The free translation pays more attention to convey the symbolic meaning of “shouxing”, so the translator uses the phrase “longevity immortal”, which is closer to the expectation of target readers and easier for them to understand and accept. However, only through the free translation may bring about the loss of cultural information, so annotations are added to explain the specific meaning of “longevity immortal” and its symbolic meaning in Chinese culture to the target readers. The translation method of free translation with annotation also expands the target readers’ horizon of expectation on the basis of satisfying their expectations.

3.3 Description of Ceramic Shapes

When translating ceramic shape descriptions, the translator considers the linguistic differences between Chinese and English. Therefore, to meet the aesthetic expectations of the target readers, the translator aims to evoke deep resonance with the beauty of Chinese ceramic wares in terms of “artistic conception, form and craftsmanship” through flexible syntactic restructuring, prepositional phrase deployment, and other means.

Example 5:

TT: Shaped like a six-petalled melon with a raised spout at the front and a curved handle at the rear, a small mouth in diameter and topped with a lion figurine on its cover, the warming bowl resembles a blooming white lotus, exuding a noble charm untouched by worldly impurities.

The source text is a description of the shape of the warming bowl, although the source text consists of two sentences, they both describe the same ware, so the translator merges the two sentences in the translation process, transforming the Chinese parallel structure into the English subordinate clause structure, and the whole sentence has only one transitive verb “resemble”, which is in line with the English sentence structure and meets the readers’ horizon of expectation. At the same time, in order to leave some space for the readers’ imagination, the translator has adopted the technique of omission translation. “Translators should adopt the foreignizing method to transplant the infectious image descriptions and rhetorical devices in the original text, which can not only add literary meaning to the translation, but also bring new expressions to the target language^[9].” Therefore, the translator uses the literal translation method to retain the rhetorical effect of the source text, translating it as ‘it resembles a blooming white lotus’, so that the target readers can have a similar experience to that of reading the source text. The phrase “untouched by worldly impurities” is often used to describe the lotus, which comes from Zhou Dunyi’s *Ode to Lotus Lovers* in the Song Dynasty, and literally means “grows out of the silt without being stained”. In order to let the target readers understand its deeper meaning, the translator chooses the method of free translation.

4. Achieving the Readers’ Fusion of Horizon

Reception aesthetics emphasizes that “translation is a fusion of the horizons of the translator, the source text and the reader^[5].” In this section, the translator aims to achieve the target readers’ fusion of horizon by discussing the translation of quotations from ancient records and poetry. This allows target readers, based on their own cultural experiences, to understand deeper connotations through

the mediating role of the translator, thereby reproducing the humanistic beauty of ceramics, the semantic beauty of texts, and the artistic conception beauty of poetry.

4.1 Quotations from Ancient Records

For the translation of quotations from ancient records under the perspective of reception aesthetics, the translator first understands the literary works as a reader and possesses a certain horizon of expectation. With the deepening of the understanding of the texts, the original particular horizon will be transformed into a new horizon with the continuous integration of cultures, so as to transcend the original horizon and realize the fusion of horizon^[10]. The translator proposes the following translation methods, including: free translation and amplification.

4.1.1 Free Translation

Example 6:

ST	English Translation
dou cha	tea-appreciation contests

TT: Zhu Yan wrote in his book *Illustrated Descriptions of Ceramics (Tao Shuo)*: “By the Song Dynasty, tea-appreciation contests were in vogue, and porcelain cups were valued highly for their use in the contests.”

The source text quotes Zhu Yan’s *Illustrated Descriptions of Ceramics (Tao Shuo)* on the record of tea culture in the Song Dynasty, which shows the importance of porcelain cups in tea-appreciation contests. “doucha” is a unique custom related to tea in the Song Dynasty, which belongs to the tea culture in ancient China. It is developed on the basis of tea tasting. For the target readers, this is a concept that is unfamiliar to them. Reception aesthetics emphasizes the central position of readers in the literary reception process, and holds that the reader’s reading experience and understanding are important links in the generation of literary meanings^[5]. Therefore, when translating the phrase “doucha” with profound cultural connotations, if literal translation method is used, it may cause the target readers to fail to understand its true meaning due to cultural differences. The translator adopts the method of free translation, translating the phrase “doucha” as “tea-appreciation contest”, taking into account the target readers’ horizon of expectation. The translator also does not translate the whole sentence literally, but gives full play to the translator’s subjectivity in understanding and rewriting, so that the translation can be integrated with the expectations of the target readers.

4.1.2 Amplification

Example 7:

ST	English Translation
ying zhou	Yingzhou (present-day Jingzhou area of Hubei Province)
wu cheng	Wucheng (present-day Huzhou area of Zhejiang province)
xing yang	Xingyang (present-day near Zhengzhou of Henan province)
fu ping	Fuping (present-day Fuping area of Shaanxi province)
jian nan	Jiannan (present-day Sichuan area)

TT: Li Zhao’s *Supplement to Official History of Tang Dynasty* mentions “Among wines, there are Fushui from Yingzhou (present-day Jingzhou area of Hubei Province), Ruoxia from Wucheng (present-day Huzhou area of Zhejiang province), Tukuchun from Xingyang (present-day near Zhengzhou of Henan province), Shidongchun from Fuping (present-day Fuping area of Shaanxi province), and Shaochun from Jiannan (present-day Sichuan area)”. The “chun (spring)” mentioned in these records all refer to mellow wine.

The source text cites Li Zhao's *Supplement to Official History of Tang Dynasty*, a historical book about wine records. In Example 7, the ancient Chinese place names such as "Yingzhou", "Wucheng", "Xingyang", "Fuping", "Jiannan" are beyond the cognitive horizon of the target readers, and there are no words corresponding to them in English. A geographical name serves to identify a specific location, and its inherent geographical information should be retained in translation^[11]. In order to achieve readers' fusion of horizon, the translator chooses to transliterate these ancient Chinese place names, while explaining their geographical location today in parentheses. The core of reception aesthetics is reader-centered, emphasizing the reader's understanding and acceptance of the original text. When translating the ancient Chinese place names, the method of transliteration with annotation is adopted to realize the aesthetic representation in cross-cultural communication. Transliteration retains the characteristics of the original place name, while annotation provides geographical information supplement, helping the target readers to overcome cultural barriers and realize fusion of horizon. Furthermore, when translating the names of famous wines produced in different places, the translator directly uses the transliteration translation method to preserve the cultural characteristics of the source text, so that the readers of the target text can feel its unique exotic flavor, and can understand the names of these famous wines through the context.

4.2 Poetry

Reception aesthetics holds that the translation activity is reader-centered. While conveying the linguistic charm and emotional experience of the original text to the readers, the translator must also consider whether the translation meets the aesthetic expectations of the readers. For the target readers, understating the meaning of poetry is their main expectation. "As a reader, the translator needs to mobilize his or her literary capabilities such as emotions, will, aesthetics and imagination to engage in dialogue with the text and achieve a fusion of horizons with the work, thereby realizing the complete construction of the text's meaning^[10]." Under the guidance of reception aesthetics theory, the translator should start from the target readers, choose the translation strategy suitable for the target audience, meet their expectations, and finally achieve the integration of the horizon of poetry, translator and reader.

Example 8:

TT: Zhou Zizhi (1082-1155), a poet of the Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1127-1279), writes in one of the *Ten Poems of Late Spring at Beihu*: "In the bustling streets of Chang'an, the crowd is as vast as the sea; in the quiet hermitage, each day stretches like a year. The dream breaks, and the shadow of flowers on the afternoon window shifts; the small incense burner still exhales the smoke of slumber."

In Example 8, "In the bustling streets of Chang'an" describes the people in the bustling city, using the metaphor of "ruhai". Chang'an was the political, economic and cultural center of China during the Tang and Song dynasties, and the poet expressed the hustle of a big city through this metaphor. The translator uses the word "streets" to symbolize the ancient city's cityscape, and adds an adjective "bustling" to show the scene in the city. The translator translates "ruhai" into "as vast as the sea", which is faithful to the original meaning and conveys the vastness and immensity symbolized by "vast", so that the target readers can associate with the bustling Chang'an city in the original poem. For poetry translation, the process of aesthetic perception is one in which the translator, as the aesthetic subject, exercises their aesthetic judgment on the source text, which serves as the aesthetic object^[12]. For example, the sentence "in the quiet hermitage, each day stretches like a year" shows the psychological contrast between the poet in the bustling city and the quiet hermitage. "hermitage" is a place for ancient people to live in seclusion and practice, which stands in sharp contrast to the bustle of the outside world and represents a kind of suspension of time and space. The translator uses "quiet hermitage" to keep the image of "an", while the word "hermitage" has strong cultural color,

not only refers to “an”, but also means hermit and reclusive life.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, considering the reading expectations of the target readers is crucial in the process of translating ceramic texts from Chinese to English. Translators should fully recognize the reader’s pivotal role. This report explores the translation of ceramic terms, ware names, description of ceramic shapes, quotations from ancient records and poetry. Throughout the process, various translation methods were flexibly applied to meet the target readers’ reading expectations and achieve a fusion of horizon. Applying reception aesthetics theory to the English translation of ceramic texts holds significant implications for future translation research.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by Jingdezhen Social Science Fund Project entitled “Research on the Non-Native Language Writing and the English Translation Accommodation of Chinese Ceramic Cultural Terminologies” (No. 2023005), by Jiangxi Higher Education Humanities and Social Sciences Research General Project entitled “Research on the Mining, Organization, and English Translation of Chinese Ceramic Terminology” (No. YY24101), and by Jiangxi Social Science Fund Project (No. 21YY15).

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