

# Study of English Translations of *Peach Blossom Spring* under the Guidance of the "Six Criteria" of Literary Translation Criticism: Taking James Robert Hightower's Translations as an Example

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**Abstract:** *Peach Blossom Spring*, a prose classic by Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, is a foundational work of ancient Chinese utopian literature and a symbol of an ideal society in Chinese culture. The English translation of *Peach Blossom Spring* included in *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, translated by the American sinologist James Robert Hightower, laid a significant foundation for the English-speaking world's understanding of Tao Yuanming's literature and thought. This paper employs the "Six Criteria for Literary Translation Criticism" proposed by Professor Wang Hongyin as its theoretical framework to conduct a systematic critical analysis of Hightower's translation. By examining its practical strategies in aspects such as the accuracy and fluency of language conversion, the conveyance of ideological connotations, the handling of cultural imagery, the reproduction of stylistic features, and the realization of aesthetic effects, this study not only helps to comprehensively reveal the academic value and translational characteristics of Hightower's version but also tests the applicability and explanatory power of this critical system in the study of classical Chinese literature translation. Thereby, it provides useful references for deepening the theoretical exploration and practical pathways of translating Chinese classics into foreign languages.

**Keywords:** *Peach Blossom Spring*, "Six Criteria", James Robert Hightower, Literary Translation Criticism.

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## 1. Introduction

*Peach Blossom Spring* is a prose classic created by the famous recluse poet Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. With its refined writing and profound artistic conception, it constructs an ideal societal vision-free from taxes, without class oppression, where everyone works, is self-sufficient, and enjoys simple, honest customs through the narrative framework of a Wuling fisherman accidentally discovering and entering a "peach blossom paradise beyond this world". This work is not only a foundational piece of ancient Chinese utopian literature but has also profoundly influenced later literature, philosophy, and even social thought with its unique Eastern poetic aesthetics, deriving a rich "Taoyuan culture", and becoming a symbolic representation of an ideal society in Chinese culture. In Western sinology, the American scholar James Robert Hightower was one of the pioneers of Chinese literary studies in the 20th century. He taught at Harvard University for a long time, dedicated to the study of classical Chinese poetry and literary criticism. He is particularly renowned for his research on Tao Yuanming. His complete translation *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien* is widely recognized as the most authoritative English translation of Tao Yuanming's poetry in Western academia, extensively held in libraries and highly influential, laying a solid foundation for the English-speaking world's understanding of Tao Yuanming and his era.

Hightower's translation style reflects a unity of rigorous scholarship and literariness. On the linguistic level, he does not adhere strictly to formal equivalence but strives to convey the semantics and spirit of the original text using concise, idiomatic English. In terms of cultural transfer, he systematically supplements historical context and cultural connotations through detailed annotations, introductions, and background explanations. Methodologically, he emphasizes

close reading and textual research, demonstrating profound scholarly expertise. This paper intends to conduct a systematic examination of Hightower's translation of *Peach Blossom Spring* based on the "Six Criteria for Literary Translation Criticism" proposed by Professor Wang Hongyin—namely, Language, Inclination, Tension, Genre, Style, and Taste. This endeavor will not only help to deeply analyze the strengths and weaknesses of his translation strategies but also promote the accurate understanding and effective reception of classical Chinese literature in cross-cultural communication, thereby fostering a deeper global cognition, and aesthetic appreciation of traditional Chinese humanistic spirit.

## 2. The "Six Criteria" of Literary Translation Criticism

Literary translation criticism, as a core branch of translation studies, holds academic significance not only in evaluating the quality of translations and interpreting translational phenomena but also in deepening the understanding of the nature of translation through the construction of systematic methodologies. Furthermore, it promotes in-depth dialogue between translation studies and disciplines such as literature, linguistics, cultural studies, and comparative literature. Since the 20th century, with the "cultural turn" and "pragmatic turn" in translation studies, literary translation criticism has gradually broken free from the constraints of the early linguistic paradigm centered on "equivalence", shifting its focus to multifaceted dimensions such as cultural intervention, ideological manipulation, reader reception, and historical context in translational activities. Drugan points out that attempts to define and measure translation quality have a long history, yet no agreed-upon standard approach has been established[1]. Reiss argues that

translation criticism is not merely an evaluation of translated works, but also a method for deeply exploring the various potential possibilities and constraining factors in the translation process[2]. Western translation theories have continuously expanded the boundaries of criticism, making literary translation criticism an increasingly comprehensive humanities discipline combining theoretical depth and practical orientation.

In China, the development of literary translation criticism has also undergone an evolution from experiential commentary to theoretical construction. Traditional translation theory often revolved around aesthetic categories such as "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance", and "spiritual resemblance", emphasizing the translator's artistic intuition and aesthetic appreciation. While insightful, it lacked systematic methodological support. It was not until the late 20th century, with the introduction of Western translation theories and the awakening of indigenous theoretical consciousness in Chinese academia, that scholars began to devote efforts to constructing a translation criticism system with Chinese characteristics. In this theoretical exploration, Professor Wang Hongyin's *Draft Discussions on Literary Translation Criticism*, stands as a landmark work. Grounded in an interdisciplinary perspective, it integrates traditional Chinese literary criticism categories such as "imagery", and "lingering charm", while also incorporating Western structuralist fine analysis of textual form, the focus on reader response from reception aesthetics, and the emphasis on the meaning-generation process from hermeneutics. This synthesis systematically constructs a well-structured and logically clear theoretical system for literary translation criticism.

Wang Hongyin's theoretical contribution lies in his breakthrough beyond the limitations of traditional translation criticism, which often relied on fragmented impressions, impressionistic comments, or mere linguistic comparison. He merges literary appreciation with academic research, establishing a comprehensive framework covering the nature of criticism, typology, functional positioning, evaluation criteria, and specific operational procedures. He emphasizes that any serious, objective, scientific, and accurate translation criticism must be conducted according to certain standards; otherwise, it risks becoming arbitrary and lacking in rigor[3]. Based on this principle, he proposed six core criteria for literary translation criticism: Language, Inclination, Tension, Genre, Style, and Taste. These six criteria are interrelated and progressively layered, forming a three-dimensional evaluation network: Language elements focus on the accuracy and fluency of the translated text; ideological inclination examines the conveyance of the original work's emotions and value orientations; cultural tension scrutinizes the interaction and balance between source and target cultures; genre correspondence emphasizes the reproduction of generic features; style type focuses on preserving the author's individualized artistic manner; and aesthetic taste evaluates the aesthetic experience and artistic resonance evoked by the translation among target language readers.

This system continues the Chinese literary tradition emphasizing holistic perception and the creation of artistic conception, while also incorporating the analytical tools and logical frameworks of Western modern critical theory, demonstrating distinct characteristics of theoretical integration. Its fundamental purpose is to acknowledge the artistic value and cultural significance of the translated text as

an independent literary existence, based on full respect for the authority of the original work and the integrity of the text. Wang Hongyin's "Six Criteria" not only provide operable analytical tools for literary translation criticism but also offer an important paradigm for the autonomous construction of translation theory in China. They hold profound theoretical value and practical guiding significance for promoting the systematic study and international dissemination of classical Chinese literature through translation.

### 3. Case Analysis Under the "Six Criteria"

#### 3.1. Language

Among the "Six Criteria", language elements hold a foundational position. They require the translation to achieve accuracy and vividness while faithfully conveying the original meaning, fully exhibiting the original's linguistic style and aesthetic qualities. Specifically, this criterion covers multiple dimensions: First, lexical choices must be precise and vivid, accurately conveying both literal meaning and emotional color as well as stylistic register. Second, sentence structures should maintain logical coherence and rhythmic fluency, avoiding semantic breaks or awkward expressions caused by mechanical correspondence. Third, rhetorical devices such as metaphors, parallelism, and antithesis should be preserved or creatively transformed as much as possible to enhance the text's expressiveness and artistic appeal. Fourth, the translation must adapt to the linguistic habits and cultural context of the target language, ensuring natural expression and strong readability, avoiding comprehension barriers caused by excessive foreignization.

At the level of language elements, Taking Hightower's translation of "芳草鲜美, 落英缤纷" as an example, his handling demonstrates a precise transmission of the uniqueness of literary language. He translates "芳草鲜美" as "fresh and lovely grass," where "fresh" accurately conveys the lushness and vitality of the vegetation, and "lovely" imparts an aesthetic emotion, aligning with the lyrical tradition in English regarding natural scenery. "落英缤纷" is translated as "petals were falling, covering the ground." "Falling" dynamically presents the state of petals drifting down, while "covering the ground" reinforces the visual imagery of blossoms carpeting the ground through spatial description. Although it does not directly translate the sense of profusion, the overall visual imagery is rich, and the language is natural and fluent. Through precise lexical matching and appropriate reconstruction of imagery, Hightower successfully recreates the poetic beauty and linguistic tension of the original within the English context, effectively achieving cross-linguistic transfer of literary language, meeting the dual requirements of literariness and acceptability under the language elements criterion.

#### 3.2. Inclination

Inclination, as a key criterion in literary translation criticism, aims to evaluate the extent to which the translation faithfully and completely conveys the original work's emotional tone, value orientation, and core ideas. This standard requires the translator not only to accurately grasp the author's subjective emotions and ideological stance but also to achieve effective transmission of the thematic spirit across cultural contexts. Its specific requirements include: First, emotional expression should be faithful to the original,

accurately reproducing the author's emotions and inclinations. Second, the presentation of thematic ideas must be complete and clear, ensuring the spiritual core of the original is not weakened or distorted. Third, cultural background information should be appropriately preserved or explained to support the understanding of thoughts and emotions. Fourth, the translation needs to consider the cognitive framework and receptive capacity of the target language readers, using appropriate linguistic strategies to evoke corresponding aesthetic experiences and emotional resonance.

Hightower uses "carefree and happy" to correspond to "怡然自乐", faithfully capturing the emotional tone of ease and contentment among the people of the Peach Blossom Spring, fully preserving Tao Yuanming's projection of the values of human freedom and spiritual peace in an ideal society. The progressive structure "never heard of... let alone..." used to translate "乃不知有汉, 无论魏晋", accurately reproduces the core theme of the Peach Blossom Spring's spatiotemporal separation from the outside world. This approach both adheres to the original work's ideological core of "paradise" and yearning for a transcendent world beyond and utilizes the natural expressive logic of the target language to enable target readers to clearly perceive the opposition between the utopian illusion constructed by the text and the real world. Thereby, it achieves the dual transmission of emotional resonance and intellectual understanding, fully embodying the comprehensive requirements of the ideological inclination criterion for fidelity, completeness, and acceptability.

### 3.3. Tension

Tension arises from the inherent sense of estrangement between the translated text and the source text, a estrangement stemming from the stark contrasts and differences between the source and target cultures[4]. Translation must preserve the original's cultural connotations and tension, properly handle cultural differences to avoid misunderstanding, and adjust linguistic expressions according to the target readers to enhance readability. Even where forms may seem similar, a cultural gap and conflict lie beneath. It is this very tension that endows the translation with unique aesthetic appeal and imaginative space, allowing the source and target texts to complement each other.

At the level of cultural tension, Hightower's translation strategy for proper nouns such as place names and dynasty names in the original text constructs a dynamic balance of estrangement and familiarity between the source and target cultures, forming distinct characteristics of cultural tension. "武陵" is transliterated as "Wu-ling" and "南阳" as "Nanyang" completely preserving the cultural markers of the regions and maintaining the cultural specificity of the names, allowing target readers to perceive the cultural identifiers of specific geographical spaces. For "晋" (Jin) as a core dynasty name, the translator does not directly translate it as "Jin Dynasty" but simplifies it to "China dynasty". While this weakens the specific historical and cultural connotations of the dynasty, it lowers the cognitive threshold for English readers regarding ancient Chinese dynastic systems, creating a tension between cultural unfamiliarity and acceptability. This aligns with the critical standard of cultural tension to "seek balance within difference."

### 3.4. Genre

Genre is a linguistic art form for expressing thought,

possessing normative and typical characteristics. Different literary genres have distinct stylistic features: poetry emphasizes rhythm and density of imagery; drama highlights dialogue and action; whereas classical prose pursues aesthetic ideals such as concise language, coherent structure, and profound artistic conception, emphasizing the natural flow of narrative and the fusion of emotion and scene. Therefore, genre correspondence requires the translation to reproduce the generic features and linguistic style of the original text in the target language, avoiding rendering prose too poetic or colloquial, thereby ensuring the equivalent transmission of generic function.

As a piece of classical prose, *Peach Blossom Spring* is characterized by its concise and coherent narrative rhythm and naturally flowing scene transitions. Hightower accurately reproduces the spatial progression and visual sudden change effect from narrowness to openness in the original through a series of logical connectives like "at first... after... suddenly". His sentence structures vary in length with a clear rhythm, maintaining both the natural fluency of English prose and faithfully restoring the original's narrative logic and spatial aesthetics. This approach not only conforms to the generic norms of classical prose, which emphasize the creation of artistic conception and rhythm control, but also achieves dynamic equivalence at the genre level through correspondence in linguistic form. It fully demonstrates the translator's deep understanding and ability to reproduce the original's generic features, meeting the basic requirements of the genre correspondence criterion for generic fidelity and consistency in linguistic style.

### 3.5. Style

Style is an important criterion in literary translation criticism for measuring whether a translation faithfully reproduces the author's unique artistic style, which implies overall manner and features. It requires the translator to accurately grasp and convey the original work's linguistic personality, rhetorical characteristics, emotional tone, and overall aesthetic import. This involves not only surface-level choices of vocabulary and syntax but also a deeper understanding of the author's artistic temperament and stylistic spirit. The translation should, while conforming to target language expression norms, strive for consistency with the original style in terms of linguistic texture, rhythm, and emotional atmosphere, avoiding stylistic disjuncture caused by excessive domestication or subjective elaboration.

Tao Yuanming's linguistic style is generally characterized by simplicity and naturalness, with concise and straightforward narration and implicit yet profound emotion. Hightower uses "went astray... unable to find" to concisely correspond to "遂迷不复得路". The sentence structure is succinct, without any embellishing or lyrical modifiers, completely conforms to Tao Yuanming's restrained, calm narrative tone. This handling discards any tendency towards romanticized or dramatized expression, faithfully reproducing the original's subtle, enduring linguistic style and transcendent emotion. It effectively avoids misalignment at the stylistic level, reflects the translator's profound grasp of Tao Yuanming's individualized artistic pursuit, and conforms to the core requirements of the style type criterion for stylistic consistency and the transmission of literary beauty.

### 3.6. Taste

Taste varies as an important dimension of literary

translation criticism, concerns the aesthetic experience and artistic resonance evoked by the translation among target language readers. Although aesthetic judgment possesses subjectivity due to its temporal, cultural, and individual variability, it can still be analyzed from the perspectives of artistic reproduction and reception effects. Ideal literary translation should not merely satisfy semantic transfer but should also achieve the cross-cultural transformation of aesthetic value.

The translation renders "落英缤纷" through the pictorial expression "fallen petals covered the ground," constructing a poetic scene of petal-strewn ground for the English reader. "豁然开朗" is translated as "suddenly opened out", using "suddenly" to emphasize the instantaneous visual and psychological change, accurately conveying the aesthetic experience of moving from reclusiveness to openness. The overall language of the translation is concise and natural, avoiding ornate diction, yet it creates a profound artistic conception through plainness. It preserves the Eastern poetic quality under Tao Yuanming's pen while realizing the reconstruction of the artistic conception in a manner, conforming to English idiomatic expression. This demonstrates a translational consciousness that pursues artistic beauty and reader aesthetic resonance within a cross-cultural context.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study employs the Six Criteria for Literary Translation Criticism proposed by Professor Wang Hongyin, as its theoretical framework to conduct a systematic analysis of the English translation of Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* by the American sinologist James R. Hightower. The research demonstrates that Hightower's translation achieves a remarkable balance between semantic accuracy and cultural adaptation in the process of cross-cultural literary transfer. Through meticulous word choice, preservation of the original's concise and lively narrative rhythm, and reproduction of the plain style characteristic of classical Chinese in English expression, Hightower faithfully maintains the literary vitality and inner spirit of the source text. Particularly in handling the core imagery of the "arcadia beyond this world," the translation fully retains its symbolic significance as an idealized utopia and its poetic essence. For culture-specific items, Hightower adopts a strategy combining transliteration with appropriate liberal translation, which successfully highlights the uniqueness of the source culture while accommodating the comprehension habits and aesthetic expectations of English-speaking readers.

Furthermore, by using concrete and highly evocative language, the translator effectively facilitates the cross-cultural transformation of the classical Eastern aesthetic imagery, creating a strong sense of immersion for the reader.

This study not only elucidates the core strengths of Hightower's translation in semantic transmission, cultural adaptation, and aesthetic reconstruction but also validates the applicability and guiding significance of Wang Hongyin's "Six Criteria" in the criticism of classical literary translation. It provides a reference paradigm that integrates theoretical depth and practical applicability for evaluating literary translations in cross-cultural contexts.

Future research in literary translation criticism should, while inheriting the essence of traditional theories, further expand its multidimensional critical perspectives. There is a need to strengthen interdisciplinary awareness by integrating theoretical insights from comparative literature, cultural studies, and cognitive linguistics to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms of cultural transfer and aesthetic reconstruction in the translation process. At the same time, criticism standards should be applied dynamically and contextually, with flexible adjustment of evaluation priorities based on different text types, translation purposes, and target readerships, avoiding mechanistic application of criteria. Researchers should enhance their bilingual cultural competence and close-reading skills, increasing their sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of the source language and the expressive limitations of the target language. Moreover, empirical studies incorporating reader feedback and reception surveys are encouraged to make criticism more reality-oriented. Ultimately, the goal is to construct a translation criticism system that possesses theoretical depth, cultural awareness, and practical effectiveness, thereby promoting accurate dissemination and in-depth dialogue in the process of bringing Chinese literature to the global stage.

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