

# Chinese Online Novel Translation Under the Guidance of Reception Aesthetics

-- A Case Study of the English Version of *Battle Through the Heavens*

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**Abstract:** Online novels have achieved a certain degree of success in the foreign dissemination of Chinese culture. The research on the translation of online novels is conducive to the decoding on the success of cultural communications abroad. This paper takes the translation of *Battle Through the Heavens* by Kong Xuesong as an example from the perspective of the theory of reception aesthetics to discuss the translator's translation strategies and study how to provide a better translation through the analysis of the characteristics of network novels and the current situation of translation.

**Keywords:** Reception aesthetics, Online novels, *Battle Through the Heavens*.

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## 1. Introduction

Online novels refer to literary works, literary texts and online art works with certain literary components, which are presented by the Internet as a platform for communication. As the product of the Internet era, it is the cultural achievement of the public and the carrier for young writers to express their feelings and imagination. These novels absorb the elements in Chinese and western fantasy literature while creating. Thus it's seen as a widely-accepted cross-cultural communication. However, due attention has not been paid to it, and there are few academic studies on it, not to mention the study of online novel translation from the perspective of reception aesthetics (Wu, 2020). Moreover, the translation studies on reception aesthetics are mainly focused on the theoretical level. The main direction is to analyze its significance to translation from the perspectives of "horizon of expectation", "fusion of horizon" and "appeal structure", and there are no sufficient examples to explore corresponding translation strategies and methods.

The English translation of online literature is not only a theoretical problem, but also a practical one, so it is necessary to explore the translation methods of online literature translators (Wu, 2020). *Battle Through the Heavens* (Li Hu) is an online fantasy novel. It describes the story of Xiao Yan, a genius boy who accidentally becomes a loser and experiences a series of hardships, but then reverses his success. The book depicts a fantastical, colorful, and desirable world, which is loved by overseas readers. Among them, Kong Xuesong's English translation has a high page view and acceptance on wuxiaworld. Therefore, the author will make use of the key concepts of reception aesthetics and take Kong's translation as an example to analyze the translation of this text, in order to provide translators with some new ideas for translation.

## 2. Studies on Reception Aesthetics

### 2.1. Development of reception aesthetics

In 1976, Hans Robert Jauss gave a famous speech, entitled "Literary History as a Challenge to Scholarly Theory". Wu Tiezhu (2014:45) reckoned that "the publication of it marked the birth of reception aesthetics. It established a literary theory centered on the reader as the center of study, which addressed a theory of reception that criticized the shortcomings of past literary theory studies". Reception aesthetics breaks the pattern of centering on writers and works in the past, and studies literary works with readers as the orientation. This theory holds that the reader is the most important part of the process of completing a literary work. Liu Jianming & Wang Taixuan (1997) believes that "the educational and entertainment functions of a work must be realized in the reading of the reader, and the process of realization is the process of the work gaining vitality and final completion. The reader is active in this process and is the driving force behind the creation of literature; the reception activity of literature is not only governed by the nature of the work, but also by the reader".

Reception aesthetics developed from Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and was influenced by Russian formalism and Prague structuralism. It integrates hermeneutics, formalism and structuralism into a complete and rational new system. Reception aesthetics is represented mostly by Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but the most important of them are Hans Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who were the pioneers of reception aesthetics. Jauss (1967) proposed "horizon of expectation". Iser (1969) inherited the development of reception aesthetics and proposed "appeal structure" of the text. Later Gadamer (1960) put forward the concept of "fusion of horizons".

These three concepts are the main direction of the domestic studies on this field. What's more, domestic scholars have fully discussed the important theoretical significance of reception aesthetics to translation. However, the number of

case studies on this theory and translation studies is insufficient, and the studies on application are weak. Therefore, this paper will start from these three concepts, but further analyze the translation process, discuss the use of translation strategies under the influence of reception aesthetics, interpret the translation from the perspective of readers, and study how to provide a better translation.

## 2.2. Main concepts of reception aesthetics for this study

### 2.2.1. The horizon of expectation

The horizon of expectation is the most important methodological approach of Jauss. It refers to the reader's standards and expectations of appreciation of a new work of art, influenced by previous reading experience, life experience, literary training, and artistic taste. And there are established concepts and ways of thinking in the psyche, and expectations for the literary work in the mind. This expectation is called reading expectation or directional expectation. Readers try to confirm their predictions based on their previous reading experiences and knowledge. In this respect, readers' horizon of expectation manifests itself as an expectation of confirmation of their pre-existing "experience." To some extent, the horizon of expectation has predetermined the basic orientation of literary reception. The opposite of this is innovative expectation. It breaks readers' habitual tendencies, adjusts their expectations, and accepts a vision that is different from their pre-existing experience. It is a demand for novelty, which motivates the reader to take the initiative to find something new and thus to receive the joy of literature. Directional expectations and innovative expectations together constitute the readers' horizon of expectation. According to Jauss, the horizon of expectation is the only medium that connects the reader and the author.

As an aesthetic object, a literary work starts out as a bunch of meaningless letter symbols. It is only in the process of reading that its social meaning and aesthetic value are manifested. While a literary work is being read, the reader uses the horizon of expectation to appreciate and integrate. Thus, horizon of expectation is the starting point and foundation for receiving literary works.

### 2.2.2. Fusion of horizons

Mi Yaning(2020:99)states that "'horizon' is the area of seeing that encompasses everything that can be seen from a certain foothold." Thus, it functions as a framework which makes it possible for the reader to understand the meaning of the text. Generally, we interpret texts through our own long-established and fixed horizons. In reading, there is a great tension between the vision of the text and one's own. In the process of interpretation, we need to acquire a historical perspective, but it is impossible to eliminate our own original standards, or even prejudices. Therefore, we should be aware of the differences of both horizons and overcome them by establishing an acceptable relationship. Fusion of horizons is the solution. Gadamer introduced it into reception aesthetics. Subsequently, it became one of the important principles of reception aesthetics. The key point of "fusion of horizons" is that the reader has his or her own vision of expectations and the text has its own vision. Only when these two horizons merge with each other can interpretation be approached.

According to Zhou Ning and Jin Yuanfu (1987:6), "the fusion of horizons refers to the objectification of the recipient's desired horizon. The reader plays an active role in the fusion of horizons. They change their own vision to

communicate and integrate with the vision of the text. It is in the process of fusion of horizons that interpretation exists, and textual meaning is created."

In the process of literary translation, there are three main subjects: the author, the translator, and the target reader. The translator and the target reader are not isolated but interconnected. The translator is both the reader and the author, so the translator bears the responsibility of bridging the two. This requires the translator to first understand the original work through his or her own vision, and then choose appropriate translation strategies.

### 2.2.3. Appeal structure

The "appeal structure" is the central concept of Isser. He viewed the text as an open structure with uncertainties arising from gaps in meaning. A good work of literature has a certain uncertainty of meaning, and this uncertainty is the semantic gap. It leads readers to activate their own previously cultivated reading experience in the text to explore and supplement this gap, thus achieving the purpose of engaging readers. At the same time, the semantic gap also prompts the reader to search for the meaning of the work, thus empowering him to participate in the reconstruction of the work's meaning. The reader can combine the uncertainty and meaning gaps in the text with his or her own life experience and aesthetic expectations and use his or her imagination to fill in the gaps and make diverse and practical interpretations of the text. Such interpretations allow readers to deeply engage with and understand the text, and possibly recreate the potential value and meaning of the text.

As a bridge between the author and the reader, the translator, when confronted with such semantic gaps, will cause a great obstacle to the reader's imagination if he or she simply fills in the gaps. Since the translator fills the gap in the first place, without the help of the original text, it is difficult for the reader to fill it again, and the regenerative meaning of the text itself will no longer exist. Therefore, the translator should carefully figure out what the author wants to express, and on this basis, combine the expectation horizon to grasp the characteristics of the work in a dialectical way. The translator should make appropriate use of translation strategies and decide, through his own research in language art, where to extend the unsettled points, where to fill in, and how to fill in, under the premise of being faithful to the original text and not affecting the reader's further reading.

## 3. How Reception Aesthetics Guide the Translation of *Battle Through the Heaven*

### 3.1. Meeting horizon of expectation with naturalization strategy

As an online novel, *Battle Through the Heaven* is designed to entertain the public. Its target readers expect to get a sense of pleasure in the process of reading. This sense of pleasure needs to be obtained from several aspects: firstly, the storyline should be smooth, and the language should be natural; secondly, unique cultural elements are indispensable to satisfy the target readers' curiosity about heterogeneous cultures. Considering these two points, the translator adopts the strategy of naturalization.

Example 1: "炼药师"(第六章)

Translated version: "Alchemists" (chapter 6)

“炼药” was pioneered by the ancient Chinese Taoists and first originated in Taoism. Herbs and certain minerals were burned in a furnace to make an elixir in the hope of achieving some healing effect. And there is no equivalent word in English. In order not to affect the reading, the translators took a naturalized approach and used the similar concept of "alchemist" instead. This dissolves the cultural barrier and makes the reading more fluent and natural.

Example 2: 当初我为了搞到这“骨灵冷火”……(第六十六章)

Translated version: In the past when I discovered this “Bone Chilling Flame” ... (chapter 66)

“骨灵冷火” is an image word which is unique in the source language and do not have exactly the same usage in the target language. In order not to hinder the readers and reduce their reading pleasure, the translator naturalized the expression in a direct way.

Example 3: “恐怕加列家族就真的只能喝汤水了。”(第八十三章)

Translated version: “...the Jia Lie Clan would not have had any business at all.”(chapter83)

In this example, the original text uses the metaphor. In Chinese, “喝汤水” means gaining a small benefit. However, in English, it is usually expressed in a direct way. Therefore, the author abandoned the rhetorical device of metaphor to meet the language habits of the target readers.

The translator adopted naturalization for parts of the original text having unique meanings and without counterparts in the target language. This caters to the purpose of the original text to entertain the reader while respecting the reader’s expectations.

### 3.2. Meeting fusion of horizon with communicative translation

The fusion of horizon is the intersection of the vision of the original text and the vision of the target reader. The translator plays the role of a bridge by finding out the original vision, striving to understand and interpret from the reader’s perspective to rewrite in an acceptable way.

The translator accomplishes this integration of perspectives mainly through deletion of parts and addition of new content. Here are some relevant examples:

Example 4: 苦涩的摇了摇头, 萧炎心里其实有些委屈, 毕竟他对自己身体究竟发生了什么事, 也是一概不知, 平日检查, 却没有发现丝毫不对劲的地方, 灵魂, 随着年龄的增加, 也是越来越强大, 而且吸收斗之气的速度, 比几年前最巅峰的状态还要强盛上几分, 这种种条件, 都说明自己的天赋从不曾减弱, 可那些进入体内的斗之气, 却都是无一例外的消失得干干净净, 诡异的情形, 让得萧炎黯然神伤...(第二章)

Translated version: Bitterly shaking his head, Xiao Yan felt miserable. He had no clue what happened to his body, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. His spirit was growing as he aged, as expected. His absorption of Dou Zhi Qi was also extraordinarily fast. It was faster than the strongest fighter from a few years back. All these factors should have meant that Xiao Yan was a natural genius, but all the Dou Zhi Qi that he absorbed seemed to be completely gone. His self-esteem

took a big hit, and he could only feel depressed. (chapter 2)

The underlined parts of the Chinese text have been omitted by the translator. From the translator’s point of view, it would be cumbersome if it were not deleted. The underlined part in English was added by the translator. The contrast is created by the huge blow to the self-esteem of the main character, which further exaggerates his disappointment.

Example 5: 就在萧炎有些为自己的感应感到奇怪的时候, 药老的声音, 忽然的在心响了起来。(第十三章)

Translated version: Right when Xiao Yan was confused about why he felt such a strong feeling towards the seemingly worthless metal, Yao Lao’s voice sounded in his mind. (chapter 13)

The underlined part in English is the translator’s additional translation. Through the translator’s understanding, the confusing part is that the main character has a feeling for worthless objects, so an additional translation is made for this point. This measure makes the reader of the translated text clearly access the meaning that the original text is intended to convey and achieves a smooth integration of the text and the reader’s vision.

The translator’s use of omissions and additions is the conduct to integrate the original with his visions and that of the initial readers’ thereby to fulfill the good of fusion of horizons between the source text and the target readers.

### 3.3. Meeting appeal structure with foreignization strategy

As a textual structure, the “appeal structure” anticipates the presence of the recipient without explicit explanation, leaving only hints in the message carrier for readers to establish the context or the meaning of the text. “It is the union of text and reader that produces the literary work.” Since the text cannot spontaneously respond to the reader’s instructions and questions in reading, the text can only serve as a precondition for communicating with the reader through various different forms such as unqualified or semantic blanks, calling for readers’ cooperation. Isser(1974:7) said:“The meaning of a text depends on the creativity of the reader and his or her imagination to fill the gaps in the text .”

There are many semantic gaps in Battle Through the Heaven. Faced with such gaps, the translator has adopted transliteration and literal translation instead of filling them based on his understanding. Examples are as follows:

Example 6:“斗之力, 三段级别: 低级”测验魔石碑之旁……(第一章)

Translated version: “Xiao Yan, Dou Zhi Li, 3rd stage! Rank: Low!” Beside the Magical Testing Monument... (chapter one)

There is no explanation of what “斗之力” here, but the phonetic reproduction. However, the Magical Testing Monument that follows implies to the reader that it is a form of magic.

Example 7:“黄泉”(第一千四百三十二章)

Translated version: “yellow spring (Huang Quan)” ... (chapter 1432)

“黄泉” in the native Chinese culture, refers to the place where people go after death. Translator adopted the literal translation without explanation. “Literal translation retains the cultural flavor and language form of the original text,

which is a good translation strategy choice if the meaning of the source text and readability of target readers can be well achieved.” (Zhu Lingli ,2020).

Example 8:“拱手” (第五章)

Translated version: “Putting his hands together” (chapter 5)

Li Yijuan et al.(2021)said that“there are a lot of absolute vacancy words in *Battle Through the Heaven*, such as words about ancient Chinese manners, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and other various culture. Absolute vacancy words are missing in the target language, and it is difficult to deal with them when translating. Common methods are phonetic translation, direct translation, and supplemented by annotation.” Here is a typical case.

“拱手”is an ancient Chinese way of greeting each other when they meet. The translator just translated the action, and the reader not knowing Chinese culture could not know the meaning of this action. Thus, readers would picture it and guess the meaning themselves to join in the construction of text.

The translator, Mr. Kong, adopts transliteration and literal translation for the semantic gaps without imposing his own interpretation on the readers, leaving the similar space as the original for readers to establish their own interpretation. This precisely forms the potential charm of the translation and a powerful appeal to the readers.

### 3.4. Significance of reception aesthetics to translation studies

The emergence of reception aesthetics has brought a great impact on literary studies. Under the influence of reception aesthetics, the understanding of the production and reception of literary works have been greatly changed and developed. However, the application of this theory is not only limited to aesthetic studies, but also brings new enlightenment to the study of translation. With the help of reception aesthetics, the position of readers and translators in translation studies has been greatly enhanced. Reception aesthetics emphasizes that the meaning of a text is indeterminate, and its generation requires the active participation of the reader. The reader, like the author, is the creator of the text. A text that has not been interpreted by the reader is no real literary work except the characters printed on the paper; only a text that has been read by the reader can become a real aesthetic object with actual meaning. This shift in status is very enlightening for translation studies. Under the guidance of reception aesthetics, translators change their previous thinking and pay attention to the interaction with readers. This is very conducive to improving the acceptability and aesthetic value of translations.

In addition, due to their great curiosity about Chinese culture, overseas fans are quite enthusiastic and supportive of the translation of Chinese online novels. They not only help translators improve the quality of their translations, but also provide financial support for them. In a sense, they are interpreters, critics, and patrons of translation practices. Since acceptance aesthetics emphasizes the active role of the receiver in the interpretation of the meaning of the text, the aesthetic sensibility of the target readers should undoubtedly become the dominant force in the translation of online novels, not to mention their other two roles as critics and patrons of translation. Therefore, in the Internet era, the position of readers has become much higher than that emphasized by reception aesthetics, which can be fully reflected in the

translation of online novels. Therefore, discussing the translation of online novels from the perspective of reception aesthetics has certain innovative significance in both theory and practice.

### 3.5. Summary

Generally speaking, the three main subjects in translation practice (author, translator and target reader), especially online literature translation, are not isolated, but interactive.

Moreover, the three major concepts of reception aesthetics are interconnected in the translation process. When considering the reader’s expectation horizon, the translator should also integrate the author’s, the reader’s and his or her own horizon, while appropriately preserving the textual gaps and leaving room for the reader’s imagination. In this way the message of the text can be better conveyed, and the text can remain dynamic. Application of these three theories can flexibly ensure highly acceptable translations.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper takes *Battle Through the Heaven* as a case study of online novels and carries out an in-depth analysis of the translation strategies from three aspects, standing from the perspective of reception aesthetics. This paper finds that the target readers not only play an active role in the interpretation of the text, but act as the critic proposing some criteria for judging the translation, which influences the translator’s choice of translation strategies. In the selection of the source text and the choice of specific translation strategies, the range of expectations of the target audience is the main consideration. That’s the reason why his translation a great success on wuxiaworld.com.

We can conclude that the wide application of reception aesthetics to literary translation provides some useful experiences for Chinese literature to go out.

## Acknowledgment

Research results of Shandong Provincial Social Science Research Project “research on Building a New Ecology of College English Learning Based on Language practice Projects” and Qingdao Social Science Project: “Research on the Integration of Qingdao Culture Heritage and College English Course Civics”.

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