

The Dissemination of Dream of the Red Chamber Overseas through an Aesthetic Reception Lens

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Abstract. This essay considers the spread and reception of Dream of the Red Chamber in the West through the theory of aesthetic reception. Though it was originally read with wonder and Orientalist suspicion, its Western reception has progressed through increasing exposure to Chinese culture and literature, gaining an appreciation of its thematic and cultural depth. In its conception, aesthetic reception theory, developed by Hans Robert Jauss, emphasises the openness of reading, even when texts traverse linguistic and cultural borders. The paper covers translation issues confronting Dream of the Red Chamber translators, such as interpreting culturally distinctive symbols, reusing narrative conventions, and conveying Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist philosophical concepts. By investigating choices in translation and their effect on reception, the paper illustrates how cultural translation turns the text around for Western readers, turning Dream of the Red Chamber from an exotic object into a world literature classic. If it takes account of the significance of cultural exchange in translation, this research offers a glimpse of the future of Chinese literature's global influence.

Keywords: Aesthetic Reception Theory, Dream of the Red Chamber, Chinese Literature, Translation Studies, Cross-Cultural Exchange

1. Introduction

The literary classic Dream of the Red Chamber – China's most famous literary work – poses a set of special translation challenges and enticements when translated for a target audience that is not familiar with its cultural roots. The novel's layered, symbolically complex plot, infused with Chinese social and philosophical realities, mirrors an image of the world unlike that of Western literature. Translating this sort of text takes more than just language skills; it also calls for cultural adaptability, and an awareness of how the text might be perceived by non-native readers. In this research, we approach the novel's Western reception from the lens of aesthetic reception theory – that is, an awareness that understanding isn't fixed but depends on how one is read in relation to its socio-historical setting. The reception of Dream of the Red Chamber in the West was, at first, Orientalist in focusing not on literary merit but rather on perceived exoticism [1]. Over time, though, the growing global popularity of Chinese scholarship has made space for more nuanced interpretations, and modern translations strive to cross cultural boundaries and give readers more context. This essay looks at the various translation approaches used to translate Dream of the Red Chamber into something meaningful for Western readers. Bringing into focus the way translators deal with cultural symbolism, narrative form and philosophical themes, it reveals how the reception of literature changes across cultures, and why translation can function as a kind of linguistic/cultural negotiation. In the long run, however, this interpretation demonstrates the power of literature to promote cross-cultural awareness, as Dream of the Red Chamber continues to be read in new countries.

2. Background on Aesthetic Reception Theory

2.1. Development of Aesthetic Reception Theory

Aesthetic reception theory, largely inspired by Hans Robert Jauss, shifts the emphasis in literary criticism from the text as an object to a text-reader relationship. This theory responded to previous theories that based their arguments on authorial intention or content, rather than on the historical and cultural context in which readers found themselves in order to give a meaning to a work. The premise of this line of thinking is that literature has no singular, fixed meaning: it fluctuates in its significance as it's read to

different audiences across cultures and time. Reception theory emphasises the reader's experience, suggesting that every reading is motivated by readers' needs, beliefs and expectations, which in turn are shaped by wider societal and cultural changes [2]. This change in interpretive frame adds up to a "horizon of expectations," a set of collective expectations readers bring to the reading experience. The theory suggests that these borders shift across generations and cultures, and literary texts are re-imagined at every stage to meet the evolving values and interests of a culture. This view is particularly useful for the study of translation, because translation carries the text into another cultural and linguistic world, and creates new meanings and new potentials of expectation that can differ greatly from the original context. Aesthetic reception offers scholars the possibility of tracking the ways that changes in a culture's historical imagination determine what is thought of as a translated work, and how different cultures use other works.

2.2. Relevance to Translation Studies

Aesthetic reception theory provides translation scholars with a framework for thinking about translation as more than a mere language conversion, but as a cultural crossroads through which one culture's arts and minds can be interpreted for another. In translating, translators need to maintain both adherence to the original and respect for the culture, values and reading preferences of the target. The simultaneous task for translators is to choose how closely to match the original cultural cues of the text in a work for which certain parts are not familiar or even inaccessible to intended readers. Translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, for instance, reflect this challenge directly [3]. The novel's overly large kaleidoscope of references to classical Chinese verse, history and conventional social life presents enormous challenges, as references to Chinese culture are part of Chinese culture. Western readers whose aesthetic and literary expectations have been influenced by different traditions might find it difficult to comprehend or interpret these allusions. Translators, in turn, have to figure out how to translate these, sometimes simplifying or substituting culturally appropriate words and phrases for concepts they already know well, while losing some sense or complexity. This adaptive process underpins aesthetic reception theory's thesis that translation is intrinsically interpretive: translators are not neutral conduits of meaning but rather active brokers who affect the way that foreign texts are read and valued. Aesthetic reception theory allows scholars and translators to investigate the effect of translation choices on how foreign texts are perceived in the target culture, uncovering the layers of adaptation and accommodation that allow cross-cultural literary encounters [4].

2.3. Applications to Chinese Literary Works Abroad

When aesthetic reception theory is applied to translated Chinese literature, like *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it demonstrates just how complex it is to get culturally specific stories across to aesthetically different audiences. Chinese literature typically based its values, morality and visions on Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist ideologies that are part of the characters' values, moral questions and world views. These philosophical principles are embedded within the narrative, accompanied by cultural symbols, ethical lessons and allegorical scenes that are unheard of to Chinese readers, and perhaps completely unfamiliar to Westerners [5]. For example, "filial piety," one of the Confucian virtues, plays a major role in explaining most characters' motivations and choices, but perhaps doesn't carry as much force or significance in Western societies. Chinese translators struggle to translate such ideas into language familiar to the audience, often adjusting or explaining them to accommodate Western readers' cultural expectations. Aesthetic reception theory helps us to understand the interpretive process in such translations, where translators flit between the source culture's meaningfulness and the intended reader's space of expectation. We can compare translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* to see how translators address such issues, some keeping the original language and putting in additional commentary, others moving it to make it seem more general. These choices, in turn, define the Western reader's experience of Chinese literature, and its reception of Chinese values and philosophies [6]. The theory also serves to evaluate whether translations succeed in cultivating cross-cultural appreciation or reinforce stereotypes or misconceptions. In terms of aesthetic reception, scholars can also consider how each translation both tells the story and plays its part in a broader conversation about cultural exchange, influencing how Chinese literatures are perceived internationally and how they fit into a global literary culture.

3. Translating Cultural Contexts in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

3.1. Translating Cultural Symbols and Metaphors

Dream of the Red Chamber uses symbols and metaphors deeply rooted in Chinese culture, so it's not always obvious what to choose when translating them into Western languages. Floral imagery, for instance, symbolizes some of the characters' virtues and qualities, including purity, endurance and impermanence. These flowers – plumps that mean strength, peonies that represent prosperity and glory, lotuses that represent purity – carry subtly symbolic meanings that audiences unfamiliar with these associations might not be able to appreciate. In addition, the novel's numerous references to historical incidents, well-known poems and characters from mythology serve as abbreviations for subtle emotional or moral aspects, which are not commonly known in the West, and so the writer is at a loss to what the reader is trying to understand [7]. Translators have to decide whether to retain these symbols, which can be confusing, or translate them to universally recognised images that might destroy a portion of the text's cultural individuality. For example, some translators will insert explanatory footnotes to preserve the content but

distort the flow of the text, or substitutes close to what is originally intended without the heightened metaphoric intensity. This translation problem affects the reader's aesthetic experience as much as their perception of Chinese culture, thereby possibly confirming or distorting cultural expectations, depending on how faithfully or freehandedly the translation treats these metaphors. So, translation decisions concerning cultural symbolism and metaphor are now pivotal in order to sustain *Dream of the Red Chamber's* thematic richness and resonance in foreign settings.

3.2. Adapting Narrative Style and Structure

Dream of the Red Chamber's distinctive style, which weaves prose with poetry breaks, helps define the rhythm of the story's emotional tone and lyrical polarisation. By its nature, the novel itself is designed to move from a moment to another, alternating lulls of poetry and grandeur with existential tragedy and political commentary. Western literary traditions, however, prefer a more linear, uniform storyline, making it difficult for translators to convey the text without undermining its aesthetic integrity [8]. The translator is often forced to reduce or frame a few sections to meet Western readers' pacing expectations, changing how the reader feels the narrative moves. A translator, for instance, could shorten descriptions or shift poetic reminiscences in a manner that will keep the reader hooked, but such changes could undermine the novel's intended pace, which alternates scenes of animated family life with quiet moments that are meant to be fleeting. Translators who manipulate this rhythm may also unwittingly add weight to certain plot points and deflate others, so as to reorient the reader's attention towards specific themes or characters [9]. Such a variant can have profound effects on how the novel is received, as readers might read it differently depending on whether or not it follows or departs from its original stylistic pattern. Therefore, structuring narrative form in translation is not only a technical exercise but also a negotiation of culture and artifice, and it shapes the way the Western reader sees the story's emotional and thematic complexity.

3.3. Addressing Religious and Philosophical Themes

Dream of the Red Chamber is steeped in Chinese philosophy and religion, with Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist themes interwoven through its story and character development. These ideologies are not merely ornamental but fundamental to the moral and existential questions the characters confront, as well as to the novel's interpretation of destiny, good will and suffering. Soucy notions of family fidelity and social coherence inform the characters' relationships and actions, Daoist concepts of balance and distance shape their reactions to fortune, and Buddhist ideas about karma and temporality underlie the story's exploration of life and death. In the West, such contexts can be alien to readers, and translators often find themselves wondering how to make sense of them without a great deal of background information. Some translators choose to add footnotes or glossaries that detail specific words and ideas, but this can halt the reader's interest in the text. Instead, translators may condense or revise these themes to more closely follow Western philosophy, which compromises the cultural verisimilitude of the text and changes its message. For instance, interpreting the Buddhist idea of "emptiness" as "loss" or "void" might capture some aspect of the concept while eluding its more subtle ideas of transcendence and enlightenment [10]. This parsing can cause readers to view the narrative as tragic, not religious, influencing their sense of the intentions of the characters and the final philosophical position of the novel. Translating these philosophical tenets is therefore a careful trade, in which translators are forced to choose between how much culture to present and how little to leave the narrative as open-ended, a bid to represent Chinese thought in a form that resonates with a Western reading comprehension.

4. Audience Reception of Translated Texts

4.1. Initial Western Reception of Translations

Dream of the Red Chamber draws deeply on Chinese philosophy and religious doctrines and it weaves Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist concepts into its story and characters. Such philosophies are not merely ornamental, but part of the moral and existential crisis facing the protagonists and define the novel's views on fate, virtue and suffering. While Confucian values of fidelity to family and social harmony motivate their relations and decisions, Daoist principles of harmony and separation inform their responses to evil, and Buddhist notions of karma and transience shape the story's exploration of life and death. These philosophical contexts might be foreign to Western audiences, and translators might struggle to explain such concepts without extensive prior knowledge. Some translators choose to include footnotes or glossaries to clarify terms and ideas, but this ruins the reader's experience of the text. Other times, translators might cut these themes down or rewrite them to make them more suitable for Western philosophy, which tends to compromise the text's cultural integrity and change its meaning. It is possible, for instance, to translate the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" as "loss" or "void", in order to catch a flavour of it but lose some of its more subtle associations with transcendence and insight. Such oversimplification can make readers view the story as simply tragic rather than spiritually charged, and affect their perceptions of the motivations of the characters and of the novel's ultimate philosophical position [11]. Translating these philosophical issues is therefore always a matter of compromise, with translators trying to strike a

balance between providing cultural context and making sure that the narrative does not feel too narrow, in order to show off Chinese ideas in a way that works in the Western interpretive context.

4.2. Changing Perspectives and Appreciation Over Time

As international attention to Chinese literature and culture intensified, the West's reception of *Dream of the Red Chamber* slowly changed. By the latter half of the 20th century, the rise of Chinese studies as a discipline encouraged more careful and culturally sensitive methods of translating and interpreting Chinese literature. Later translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* used more comprehensive introductions, notes and glosses, all of which attempted to give Western readers the cultural context they needed to engage the work. Those additions enabled readers to make sense of the cultural terms, historical contexts and linguistic subtleties at the heart of the novel's themes and sentiments. That slow reversal marks part of a much wider shift in the ways that Western readers viewed translated texts. Instead of viewing the novel as a distant curiosity, readers and academics began to appreciate it as a work of art, one that provides an expansive picture of the human condition within a particular culture. This transformation in perception fits with aesthetic reception theory, which proposes that the interpretive frame through which readers interpret a work is neither fixed nor determined by changing social and cultural assumptions [12]. As Western audiences increasingly experienced and valued non-Western writing, the initial fascination with the "exotic" quality of *Dream of the Red Chamber* gave way to an increasingly sophisticated appreciation of its themes and aesthetic nuance. Academics and readers alike began to look at the novel's implications about human relationships, morality and the meaning of life in general as a reflection that was not confined by cultural differences, and which could thus be understood more fully and balancedly without neglecting both its uniqueness and universality.

4.3. Modern Interpretations and Cross-cultural Dialogue

Today, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is increasingly conceived as a text that transcends cultural barriers and that can engage in cross-cultural dialogue in ways that preserve and honor its Chinese roots, yet also make it available for everyone around the world. Contemporary readers and translators see the necessity of preserving the novel's cultural and linguistic qualities as crucial to its identity and aesthetic appeal. Contemporary readers demand translations that are at once true to the original and legible, translations that maintain the uniqueness of Chinese cultural expressions and include contextualisation to help them make sense of it. This practice fits into a wider trend towards valuing cultural authenticity in translation, whereby readers are invited to treat foreign works as shared cultural creations that further their knowledge of global literary history. The reception of *Dream of the Red Chamber* today is thus characterised by an increasing awareness of the interpretive challenges that reading across cultures presents, and by readers seeking to grasp the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the tale. [13] This is in line with the shifting tenets of aesthetic reception, which hold that literature acquires new meaning through its encounters with different time and place audiences. The novel's reception in the West today reveals one way in which translations can foster empathy and cross-cultural exchange, as readers experience the norms, problems and values of a culture distinct from their own. Reading it this way, readers today engage in a continuous discussion that not only stretches the reach of Chinese literature but also asks readers to question the generality of themes and the specificity of cultural production. Such a contemporary reception rooted in a respect for cultural particularity and a willingness to be read for interpretive nuance underscores how literature can bridge cultural divides and create a more global and compassionate society.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of *Dream of the Red Chamber* from a literary masterpiece in China to an international bestseller shows how potent and tricky literary translation is. In the light of aesthetic reception theory, it has considered the ways in which translation decisions reshape Western understandings of the novel and affect how it feels and makes sense. Although originally regarded as an exotic cultural relic, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has gradually acquired a reputation for literary elegance and for its universal message of love, loss and goodness. Translators are faced with the distinct task of bringing the novel's culturally distinct qualities – symbolic language, philosophical overtones and narrative structure – to the Western reader while preserving its cultural authenticity. As aesthetic reception theory suggests, every new translation encodes the evolving expectations and cultural sensibilities of its readership, and so literary texts are constantly recast as they come into contact with new audiences. Today, the reception of *Dream of the Red Chamber* in the West illustrates how literature could lead to empathy, cultural respect and a more interconnected world if read carefully and respectfully within its milieu. This research reflects the significance of culturally sensitive translation to bridge disciplinary boundaries and enliven global literature.

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