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# Reception Aesthetic Interpretation and Comparative Analysis of Chinese Translations of Wordsworth's *The Rainbow*

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## KEYWORDS

*Reception Aesthetics;*  
*Wordsworth;*  
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## ABSTRACT

William Wordsworth, a leading figure of British Romantic poetry, captivates readers with his nature poems that depict natural beauty and mystery through delicate imagery and profound emotion. From the perspective of Reception Aesthetics, this study conducts a comparative analysis of two Chinese translations of Wordsworth's classic nature poem *The Rainbow*--Zhang Baohong's version and He Gongjie's version--focusing on rhythmic transmission, imagery conveyance, reconstruction of artistic conception, and readers' horizon of expectations. The paper aims to deepen Chinese readers' understanding of Wordsworth's poetry and offer new insights for poetic translation.

## AN OVERVIEW OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS

The genesis and evolution of Reception Aesthetics constitute a rich academic journey, deeply rooted in the intellectual soil of the University of Konstanz. The formation of this theoretical school is primarily attributed to five young literary theorists and professors of the Konstanz School, who collectively catalyzed the rise of Reception Aesthetics as an emerging field. Core members included Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, professors specializing in Romance literatures and English literature respectively, whose scholarly contributions laid the cornerstone for Reception Aesthetics.

The term "reception aesthetics" (Rezeptionsästhetik) was coined by the German scholar Hans Robert Jauss. His theoretical framework, primarily derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, was also influenced by formalist schools including structuralism (Wang Zhongling, 2012). As a pivotal figure, Jauss integrated Gadamer's hermeneutic theory into his research, proposing key concepts such as the "horizon of expectations" and "fusion of horizons".

The "horizon of expectations" refers to the interpreter's cognitive orientation and anticipated fulfillment when engaging with a text, shaped by their prior experiences. The "fusion of horizons" denotes the dynamic interaction between the recipient's expectations and the horizons of the text or lived praxis (Fang Jianzhong, 2004).

Concurrently, Wolfgang Iser's theoretical work was influenced by Roman Ingarden's phenomenology. Iser focused on how readers actualize textual meaning during the act of reading, deepening the understanding of reader-text interactions and invigorating the development of reception aesthetics. Over time, Reception Aesthetics transcended literary theory to become an interdisciplinary methodology, exerting profound influence beyond literary studies—including art history, film theory, and beyond. Today, as a significant academic domain, its origins and evolution not only reflect scholarly progress but also offer novel perspectives for comprehending the relationship between texts and readers.

William Wordsworth, a pioneer of British Romanticism and the most accomplished poet among the Lake Po-

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ets, devoted his career to composing lyrical poetry that predominantly celebrates natural landscapes while expressing profound reverence for nature (Li Yan, 2011). Stylistically, his verse harmonizes contemplative tranquility with imaginative depth, characterized by sincere, natural language and an unpretentious authenticity that captures quotidian details and excavates emotions embedded in daily life.

In Chinese translations of Wordsworth's poetry, these distinctive features and stylistic essences have been effectively transmitted and received, enabling Chinese readers to apprehend the unique allure of his poetic oeuvre. Grounded in Reception Aesthetics, this study selects two Chinese renditions of Wordsworth's *The Rainbow*—Zhang Baohong's translation (hereafter Zhang's version) and He Gongjie's translation (hereafter He's version)—for a comparative analysis. The examination focuses on four dimensions: poetic imagery, artistic conception, rhythm and meter, readers' horizon of expectations. This approach aims to provide novel perspectives for researching the Sinicization of Wordsworthian poetry.

## RECEPTION AESTHETICS AND THE TRANSLATIONS OF WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

Reception Aesthetics, a literary critical theory pioneered by the German Konstanz School in the 1960s, centers on the reader's role in dynamically generating and enriching a work's value and meaning through textual interaction. This paradigm challenges traditional text-centric approaches by shifting the focus of aesthetic experience from the work itself to the reader's reception process. William Wordsworth, a pioneering figure of British Romantic poetry, infused his verse with profound aesthetic contemplation, expressing reverence for nature, humanity, and art. This study examines the interplay between Reception Aesthetics and Wordsworthian poetry, analyzing their mutual influence across three dimensions: aesthetic experience, textual interpretation and literary value.

Reception Aesthetics posits that reading constitutes active participation and co-creation, not passive consumption. Wordsworth's poetry vividly exemplifies this principle. In *To a Butterfly*, for instance, the poet employs the butterfly symbol to evoke nostalgia for childhood and passion for natural beauty. Readers engage not only with the depicted beauty but also actively construct new meanings and emotions through personal aesthetic experiences and imagination—embodying the reader-centric paradigm emphasized by reception aesthetics. Furthermore, Reception Aesthetics underscores the diversity of aesthetic experiences, asserting that readers' reception modes and aesthetic standards evolve across historical periods and socio-cultural contexts. This very diversity constitutes a core tenet of the theory.

Wordsworth's poetry is imbued with multifaceted aesthetic elements—encompassing natural aesthetics, narrative aesthetics, tragic aesthetics, and moral aesthetics. These elements not only augment the artistic value

of the poetry itself but also expand the interpretive possibilities and depth for readers during the reception process. Central to Wordsworth's oeuvre is his profound contemplation of human nature, reflecting a deep engagement with ethical concerns. In *The Solitary Reaper*, for instance, the poet's symbolic depiction of the reaping maiden articulates a yearning for human-nature harmony and delivers socio-realist compassion for impoverished laborers. Simultaneously, the poem manifests the poet's humanistic vision toward existential human struggles. Such thematic depth evokes resonance and affective power among readers. When engaging with these verses, readers not only perceive poetic artistry but also draw human warmth and strength from the textual experience. This humanistic contemplation—interweaving ethical inquiry with emotional catharsis—epitomizes a core literary value pursued by Reception Aesthetics.

Therefore, a profound synergistic dynamic exists between Reception Aesthetics and Wordsworthian poetry. Reception Aesthetics furnishes novel hermeneutic perspectives for interpreting Wordsworth's works, foregrounding the reader-centric paradigm and the diversity of aesthetic experiences. Conversely, Wordsworth's poetry—through its multifaceted aesthetic elements and humanistic contemplation—supplies rich interpretive resources and aesthetic engagements for reception theory. This dialectical reciprocity collectively advances the evolution of both literary criticism and creative praxis. By interrogating this nexus, we gain deeper insights into the value and significance of literary works, while cultivating innovative analytical frameworks for appreciating and comprehending literature.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TWO CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF *THE RAINBOW* THROUGH RECEPTION AESTHETICS

### Rendering Poetic Rhythm

From the perspective of metric analysis, Zhang's translation demonstrates meticulous effort in preserving the original poem's rhythmic structure. First, Zhang adheres to the principle of "formal correspondence in poetic translation," striving to replicate the original's metrical patterns. The original poem employs iambic meter with strictly regulated feet per line. Zhang's translation maintains equivalent pause units (Chinese *dun*) to match the original's foot count, as evidenced in lines such as "我心欢跳, 每当看见 | " ("My heart leaps up when I behold | "). This precise rhythmic calibration allows the translated verse to generate cadences akin to the original when recited while preserving its underlying suspense. Second, Zhang exhibits exceptional skill in handling rhyme schemes. The original's rhyme pattern (ABCCABCCDD) is adapted to AABAACDDDD in the translation. Though the structure diverges, Zhang's deliberate lexical choices and syntactic adjustments ensure that the rhymes align with Chinese poetic conventions while conveying the original's melodic aesthetics. Such flexibility not only reflects the translator's technical

Table 1 | Original Poem and Chinese Translations

Original Text	He's Version	Zhang's Version
My heart leaps up when I behold A rainbow in the sky; So was it when my life began; So is it now I am a man; So be it when I shall grow old, Or let me die! The Child is father of the Man; And I could wish my days to be Bound each to each by natural piety.	我的心无比激动 威廉·华兹华斯 每当我看到天上的彩虹， 心情就无比激动。 过去我生活开始时是这样， 现在我成了大人也是这样， 愿我老了的时候也是这样， 不然，就让我死亡！ 小孩是大人的父亲： 所以自然的虔诚，我希望， 能维系我一生的岁月时光。	我心欢跳 威廉·华兹华斯 我心欢跳，每当看见 彩虹飞挂天边： 人生之初心如此； 而今成年情不变； 此情弥笃到老年， 否则，不如死去！ 三岁孩童百岁心； 但愿有生之光阴 天天充满着对自然的虔敬。
	*Translated by He Gongjie, selected from English and American Poetry compiled by He Gongjie	*Translated by Zhang Baohong, selected from <i>The World of English</i> , no. 10, 2008

mastery but also accommodates target readers' expectations, enhancing the translation's accessibility and resonance within the Chinese literary context.

He Gongjie's translation does not strictly adhere to the original poem's rhythm. Instead, it employs a domestication strategy aligned with Chinese linguistic conventions. For instance, the line "Whenever I behold a rainbow in the sky / My heart leaps with excitement" presents the adverbial clause ("Whenever I behold...") before the main clause ("My heart leaps..."). This structure conforms to Chinese readers' expectations by placing background information first and the focal content later. Regarding prosody, Zhang's rendition modifies the original rhyme scheme to ABBBBBCBB, deviating from conventional fixed patterns (such as ABAB or AABB) in favor of a relatively free rhyme scheme.

In translating the original poem's third to fifth lines: "So was it when my life began; So is it now I am a man; So be it when I shall grow old," He Gongjie utilizes a simple repetitive structure: "过去我生活开始时是这样， / 现在我成了大人也是这样， / 愿我老了的时候也是这样". Conversely, Zhang employs a parallel progressive structure: "人生之初心如此； / 而今成年情不变； / 此情弥笃到老年". This approach not only preserves the emotional core of the original but also achieves progressive intensification (climactic effect). Each line accelerates in rhythmic momentum, generating heightened emotional intensity. This cumulative effect immerses readers in the poet's profound passion and conviction.

Transmission Of Poetic Imagery

Imagery constitutes the "vocabulary" of poetic grammar and embodies the soul of poetry (Zhang Baohong & Liu Shicong, 2002). Examining the characteristics of Chinese and Western languages, classical Chinese features relatively loose grammatical relations and highly flexible lexical properties, whereas English poetry demands strict syntactic structures with inflections for

part of speech, number, case, and tense. This fundamental distinction significantly contributes to the divergent presentation of objects and distinct imagistic structures observed in Chinese and Western nature poetry (Su Hui, 1997). The English language's extensive use of modifiers and rigid syntax rigidly defines the relationships between images. Consequently, instead of the direct juxtaposition and presentation characteristic of classical Chinese poetry, English poetry often develops imagery through linear progression based on a specific perspective or visual focus. Consider the original lines:

"My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky."

Here, the verb "leaps up" is modified by "when", and "A rainbow" is modified by "in". The relationships between images are explicitly and rigidly defined, which compromises the autonomous independence and objectivity of the scenery. This limits polysemy and diminishes vivid visual effects.

In contrast, the translation employs the method of juxtaposing images. Zhang's rendition "三岁孩童百岁心" (The Child is father of the Man) juxtaposes the two images—"三岁孩童" (child of three) and "百岁心" (centenarian's heart)—inviting readers to freely imagine the connecting link between them. Readers readily connect "百岁心" (centenarian's heart) with preceding phrases like "我心欢跳" (my heart leaps up) and "人生之初心如此" (So was it when my life began), aligning with the profound connotations of the original work.

He's translation, "小孩是大人父亲" (The child is father of the man), strictly adheres to the original's literal expression. While conveying the surface meaning that adults should learn from children to preserve innate innocence, it overlooks the polysemic potential of "father"—which also implies "origin". Thus, the phrase could be interpreted as "三岁定老" (The child shapes the man), suggesting that adulthood stems from child-

hood, with many adult traits and dispositions rooted in early years.

Through comparison, Zhang's rendition more effectively prompts readers to contemplate the philosophical implications behind the imagery. Consequently, readers' horizon of expectations is both expanded and renewed.

### Recreating Poetic Atmosphere

Zhang Baohong demonstrates meticulous lexical selection in his translation process. For instance, when rendering "leaps up", he avoids literal equivalents like "跳跃" (jump) or "跃起" (leap), opting instead for "欢跳" (leaps with joy). This choice employs a more affectively charged expression that more precisely conveys the poet's excitement and exhilaration upon first seeing the rainbow. Such lexical ingenuity not only preserves the emotional essence of the original poem but also endows the translation with vivid imagery, thereby recreating the original's atmosphere through evocative imagery. In contrast, He's version uses the adjective "无比激动" (immensely excited), which possesses less dynamic force and visual immediacy than Zhang's verbal expression. Within this sentence structure, a verb better captures the poet's mental state.

Zhang's translation of "a rainbow in the sky" as "彩虹飞挂天边" employs the verb "飞挂" (flying arched). This not only depicts the rainbow's suspended posture but also creates a dreamlike, fairy-tale ambience, rendering the entire scene more vivid and poetic. He's rendition, "天上的彩虹" (A rainbow in the sky), presents static beauty and faithfully reproduces the original image. However, since Chinese favors verbal dynamism, translating the prepositional phrase "in the sky" into a verb phrase better aligns with Chinese readers' expectations. This crafting of atmosphere perfectly presents the original poem's emotional essence and aesthetic beauty before the reader. Consequently, readers experience strong emotional resonance and aesthetic pleasure during the reading process.

Finally, the word "natural" carries dual meanings: "inherent" and "pertaining to nature". Here, both translators exercise translator's subjectivity, selecting the meaning "pertaining to nature" that aligns with Wordsworth's thematic focus on nature. This creates thematic coherence from the opening "rainbow" to the closing "natural", allowing readers to experience the poet's emotions throughout the text and fulfilling their horizon of expectations.

### Reader's Horizon of Expectations

The concept of "horizon of expectations" comprises three intrinsic components upon structural analysis: the present understanding of literary genres; the forms and themes of familiar works; the opposition between poetic language and practical language. The first two components constitute the reader's determinant horizon in literary reception, while the third represents the innovative horizon (Sun Qian, 2014). The determinant horizon refers to the pre-existing framework formed by a reader's personal Weltanschauung, cultural perspective, artistic-literary cultivation, and aesthetic experiences prior to engaging with a literary work. This framework

fundamentally shapes the reader's interpretative approach to the text. Conversely, the innovative horizon arises during the reading process as readers anticipate content and forms that transcend their pre-existing expectations. This dimension liberates readers from the constraints of the determinant horizon, enabling them to discover and assimilate new meanings and realities within the work.

Synthesizing the translators' approaches to imagery, atmosphere, rhythm, and prosody discussed earlier, both Zhang Baohong and He Gongjie accommodate Chinese readers' linguistic expectation. Their translations are structured according to Chinese cognitive patterns, allowing readers to perceive, comprehend, and resonate with the poetry.

While the translations by Zhang Baohong and He Gongjie diverge in lexical choices and prosodic preservation, both demonstrate profound comprehension of the source text and a distinctive pursuit of aesthetic excellence. In addressing the determinant horizon, Zhang's rendition prioritizes emotional conveyance and fidelity to the source. Through phrases like "我心欢跳" (my heart leaps with joy) and "彩虹飞挂" (a rainbow flying arched), he meticulously captures and transmits the poet's ardent passion for the rainbow. Simultaneously, his preservation of the original rhythm and cadence enables readers to immerse themselves in the poet's emotional world, evoking a shared experience of childlike wonder and exhilaration.

He's translation, conversely, emphasizes emotional resonance and the integration of modernity. Expressions like "每当我看到天上的彩虹" (Whenever I see a rainbow in the sky) and "心情就无比激动" (my heart is immensely stirred) foreground the poet's sensibility toward natural beauty and affective kinship. He retains the original poetic atmosphere while employing contemporary diction, as seen in "愿我老了的时候也是这样" (May it be so when I grow old) and "不然，就让我死亡" (Else, let me die). These choices articulate the poet's cherishing of life and aspirations for the future, endowing the translation with enhanced temporal relevance and modern sensibility.

Regarding the innovative horizon, Zhang provides readers with an emotionally proximate version through nuanced affective depiction and scrupulous source-text reproduction. He, however, manifests a unique modern perspective. His linguistic innovation and assimilation of contemporary expressions align the translation more closely with modern readers' reading conventions and aesthetic needs, offering a novel aesthetic experience during the reading process.

## CONCLUSION

Within the framework of Reception Aesthetics, the reader's horizon of expectations is regarded as a pivotal element for elevating aesthetic realms and enriching aesthetic experiences. This study conducts a comparative analysis of two translators' distinct approaches to poetic imagery transmission, atmospheric reconstruction, and prosodic treatment from a Reception Aesthet-

ics perspective. Specifically, Zhang Baohong's rendition prioritizes faithful retention of the original imagery while placing particular emphasis on prosodic restoration, resulting in a translation characterized by clear rhythmic cadence and strong metrical coherence. In contrast, He Gongjie's version focuses on preserving the source text's imagery while simultaneously infusing the translation with distinct temporal relevance and modern characteristics.

Regarding lexical choices, Zhang's translation demonstrates a preference for dynamically potent vocabulary, effectively recreating the original atmosphere and endowing the target text with enhanced poetic resonance. He's rendition, comparatively, exhibits limitations in this dimension. Nevertheless, both translations successfully convey the artistic effects of the original poem to varying degrees, offering readers diverse reading pleasure. As culturally literate individuals, the translators bring distinct interpretive insights to Wordsworth's nature poetry. Accordingly, many tend to interpret the text based on their personal understanding during the translation process—a practice that fully embodies translator's subjectivity.

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