

## Shifts of Appraisal Meaning and Character Depiction Effect in Translation: A Case Study of the English Translation of Mai Jia's *In the Dark*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore the translation effect of character depiction in Mai's *In the Dark* from an appraisal perspective. Through a comparative analysis of the affect, judgment, and appreciation in ST and TT, this paper demonstrates that translators rewrite the evaluative meaning of attitude in the ST due to the differences in ideology, social ethics and cultural images between East and West, which makes the characters in the translation more expected for Western readers' attitude cognition.

**Key words:** *In the Dark*; Appraisal theory; Novel translation; Character depiction

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### INTRODUCTION

The character image is one of the core elements of the novel. The author of the novel, after observing many persons in the real world, is bound to integrate personal aesthetic consciousness and moral evaluation into the creation of the characters. It is acknowledged that character depiction is the reflection of an author's subjective consciousness. With the development of Chinese culture going global and the inspiration of Mo Yan's winning of Nobel Prize in Literature, the Western

world is gradually beginning to pay attention to Chinese literature. But as far as the quality of culture introducing is concerned, there exist some voices pointing out that, "in the literary works that have been disseminated, only few of them can represent the essence of Chinese literature, few can reflect the whole picture of Chinese literature, and some of them are even of low or inferior quality. Among them, the result is that overseas readers' impression of Chinese literature is not objective enough", even, some works "reflect obvious political tendency". (Han, 2016, pp.105 & 106) Some of the characters in the literary works only function to satisfy the Western readers' curiosity and deepen their stereotype impression of China, that is, backwardness, ignorance and even strong political ideology.

However, it is true that many characters in Mai Jia's works are different from the traditional heroes who are brave and perfect in Chinese espionage fiction. The heroes in his novels are gifted as well as extremely vulnerable in some aspects, which can bring different impression and feelings to Western readers. It can be said that Mai's creation of the unique characters makes his work more readable and touching. Malcolm Forbes (2015) comments that "fascinating rather than gripping and all the better for it, *In the Dark* satisfies as a twisting, riddling and compellingly original exploration of thwarted geniuses and restricted lives". And Li Yi (2019) believes that Mai Jia is generally a character-writer in Chinese contemporary literature because character depiction is the way that Mai can think about the real world.

Mai Jia (the pseudonym of Jiang Benhu) is arguably the most successful writer in China today. He is hailed as the forerunner of Chinese espionage fiction, and has created a unique genre that combines spy-craft, code-breaking, crime, human drama, historical fiction, and metafiction. His book *Decoded* has been published in "more than 30 English speaking countries and more than 20 Spanish speaking countries" in succession. (Wang, 2015) He has won almost every major award in China,

including the highest literary honor – the Mao Dun Award. The award-winning novel is *In the Dark* which was first published in China in 2003 and selected into the “70-year New China novel collection” (Wang Zhiyan, 2019). In addition, the TV series *Ansuan* (2015) and the movie *The Silent War* (2012) adapted from this novel ushered in a new era of Chinese espionage films and TV series. In 2015, the English version of *In the Dark* was jointly translated by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne who are British sinologists and translators, and published by Penguin Random House in the UK. This book has “produced more than 20 versions, translated into more than 30 languages and distributed more than 2 million copies in ten years” (Xü, 2013). Till December 2019, there are 366 Chinese versions and 91 English versions of the book in libraries all over the world. It is clearly that *In the Dark* is another successful work of Mai to be disseminated abroad.

The successful translation and dissemination of the characters are inseparable from the translator’s appropriate evaluation and decision. As is known to all, the translator is firstly the reader of the source text, whose reading is also the process of redefining the meaning of evaluation. During the process of translation, the translator “marks the result of his own subjective consciousness, aesthetic taste or other purposefulness with another language symbol. At this point his translation is no longer fully equivalent to the original assessment of the real world by the author”. (Lü, 2007, p.2) And Jeremy Munday (2012, p.155) also points out that, “translation is a constant evaluative process”, because the translator’s decision-making will be affected by various factors such as “his/her own sociocultural and educational background, ideological, phraseological and idiosyncratic stylistic preferences” (ibid, p.2), so as to make a corresponding judgment on the meaning of the original evaluation. This kind of “evaluation”, namely the critical points of the translator’s decision-making, mainly includes: “the identification of those points and lexical features in a text that in translation are most susceptible to value manipulation; those points that most frequently show a shift in translation, and those that generate the most interpretative and evaluative potential; those that may be most revealing of the translator’s values”. (ibid, p.41) Thus, in the process of translating novels, the translator’s evaluation and judgment often influence his/her interpretation of the source text as well as the characters, which offers us effective tools for analyzing the character depiction effect in translation.

At present, the domestic scholars’ researches on *In the Dark* mainly focus on the field of literary criticism and aesthetic evaluation. For example, Liu Han (2013) makes a research of the interpretation of symbolic meaning in the novel. Han Songgang (2019) explores the phenomenon of the “Qi” and “Zheng” expounded about the novel. Ning Fang & Zhang Xuexin (2017) study the narrative arrangement of human nature in Mai’s novels. Li Yi (2019)

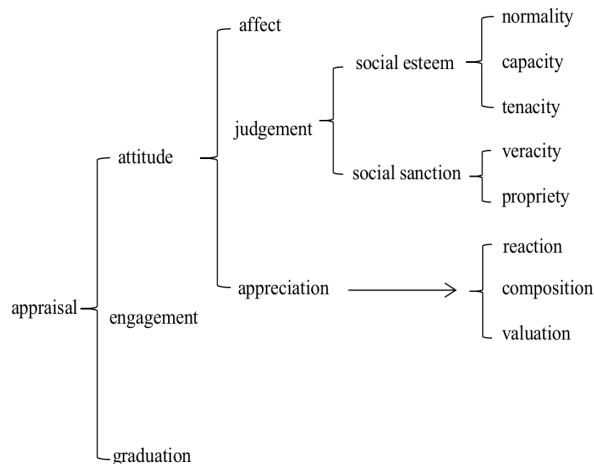
explores the characteristics of the chivalrous narratives. Han Binyu & Hu Ying (2011) studies the modes of adaptation and dissemination of this novel. The overseas researches on *In the Dark* are primarily concerned with book reviews, such as Malcolm Forbes (2015), a professional book reviewer, comments that *In the Dark*’s “immense readability derives from the pervading air of mystery, the Orwellian depiction of Chinese state security and a range of exotic insights, from Chinese history and proverbs to delightfully arcane cryptography terminology.”

However, there are few previous studies on the translation, dissemination and reception of the English version from the perspective of cross-cultural translation.

## 1. EVALUATION AND TRANSLATION

“Appraisal is one of three major discourse semantic resources constructing interpersonal meaning.” (Martin&White, 2005, p.34) James R. Martin (1992, 2003, 2005) develops and creates the theoretical framework of the appraisal system. According to the theory established by Martin & White (2005, p.35), “Appraisal itself is regionalized as three interacting domains – ‘attitude’, ‘engagement’ and ‘graduation’. Attitude is concerned with our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behavior and evaluation of things. Engagement deals with sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse. Graduation attends to grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred.”

Attitude involves three regions, “affect”, “judgement” and “appreciation”. “Affect deals with resources for construing emotional reactions. Judgement is concerned with resources for assessing behavior according to various normative principles. Appreciation looks at resources for construing the value of things, including natural phenomena and semiosis (as either product or process).” (ibid, pp.35-36) An overview of these appraisal systems is presented as follows:



**Figure 1**  
An overview of these appraisal resources (Martin & White, 2005)

Scholars at home and abroad mainly study appraisal theory in the field of linguistics, such as theoretical research (Eggs & Slade, 1997; Thompson, 2000; Wang, 2001), discourse analysis (Korner, 2000; Li & Zhang, 2010), etc. Some scholars have begun to use appraisal theory to explore translation phenomenon. The contents of these studies are mainly focused on the translation of practical texts, such as advertisements (Qian, 2007), news (Chen, 2007), business (Xu, 2011), government documents (Abbamonte & Cavaliere, 2006; Si & Gao, 2019) and so on. However, there are few studies on literary genre, especially novel translation. Xia Yun and Li Defeng (2009) examine the shifts of appraisal meaning and character depiction effect in translation by comparing two versions of *Gone with the Wind*. Liu Xiaoling (2010) compares two English versions of *Hong Lou Meng* with the source text to investigate the degree of translators' faithfulness as well as the reasons of the "unfaithful" phenomenon. Zhou Xiaomei (2017) analyzes the explicitation and implicitation in the English versions of *Wolf Totem* and *Trees Without Wind* to explore how two translators' value-rich is presented in the target text. Yu Li (2019) explores the reconstruction of appraisal meaning in novel translation based on Chinese-English Parallel Novel Corpus. Jeremy Munday (2012) is the representative to study translation combined with appraisal theory abroad. He empirically investigates the critical points of translator decision-making, involving political speech, technical text, and literary genre and so on. A new approach to the study of translator's subjectivity is proposed, which is based on the analysis of language and reveals the key points in the process of translator's decision-making from a micro perspective. On the whole, the combination of current appraisal theory and translation studies mainly focuses on the comparison and interpretation of the ST and TT, with the discussion topics on the translator's value-rich and subjectivity. It is rarely examined or validated in conjunction with the reader's response.

To sum up, the studies of appraisal theory and novel translation still has some research value to discover. Therefore, this paper attempts to study the translation and transmission effect of characters in the novel from the perspective of the attitude subsystem of the appraisal theory, in order to develop a new approach to the combination of appraisal theory and translation studies.

## 2. AN ATTITUDINAL STUDY ON CHARACTER DEPICTION EFFECT IN *IN THE DARK*

*In the Dark* tells the story of the recruits at Special Unit 701, the cryptography department of China's secret service. There is the "wind-listener", a sightless man named Abing who has exceptional hearing; the brilliant mathematician Huang Yiyi who meets a violent end;

the old man Chen Erhu who deciphers codes in his dreams and a few of the others. These talented characters contain Mai's multiple thoughts on human nature and unpredictable fate.

In this part, by using some specified examples taken from the translation of *In the Dark*, the author intends to explore how the translators made critical evaluations from affect, judgement and appreciation dimensions, and thus how the character description was successfully retained in the translation proved by readers' book reviews.

Due to the large number of versions of the novel, this paper uses the 2009 revised version selected by the translators (published by Zhejiang literature & Art Publishing House) to make a comparative analysis with the translation.

### 2.1 Character Description From the Affect Dimension

Affect is concerned with registering positive and negative feeling, such as un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction, etc. Martin and White (2005, p.46) call "the conscious participant experiencing the emotion an Emoter, and the phenomenon responsible for that emotion a Trigger." In short, affect means emotions, reacting to behavior, text/process, and phenomena. The translator's emotional understanding of the characters in the source text, restricted by personal preferences, social culture, social ideology, etc., is inevitably mixed with his/her own feelings in the translation, showing a different understanding of the emotional expression in the source culture.

ST1: 看着两个人恶心得像苍蝇一样在我身边转着, 我浑身都觉得不舒服, 所以, 很快就抽身走掉了。(Mai, 2009, p.74)

TT1: Seeing the two of them circle me like a pair of **disgusting flies**, I felt really uncomfortable; and so pretty quickly I got up and left. (Milburn & Payne, 2015, p.129)

ST2: 她充其量不过是一只“有思想的苍蝇”而已。(Mai, 2009, p.75)

TT2: Fundamentally she was just a **clever bourgeois element**. (Milburn & Payne, 2015, p.130)

ST3: 走出书记办公室, 我想把黄依依也从脑海里甩出去, 但似乎不那么容易, 她的形象、声音、话语、舞姿等, 老是像苍蝇一样, 在我眼前飞来舞去。(Mai, 2009, p.75)

TT3: As I left the Party secretary's office, I put Huang Yiyi to the back of my mind, but it wasn't that easy. Her appearance, her voice, her words, her movements as she danced, came flying in front of my eyes like a **persistent bluebottle**. (Milburn & Payne, 2015, p.130)

The "Emoter" here in this sentence is An Zaitian, the Deputy Director of Special Unit 701, aiming to find a mathematician who can crack the cipher, RECOVERY. And "She" is Huang Yiyi, a fairly well-

known mathematician who is sexy and dissolute. Her flighty words and behavior becomes the Trigger of An's emotion. Before determining the final decipher, An thinks Huang is annoying but intriguing due to her flirty and independent character at the first time, which can be illustrated from the comparison of Huang as “苍蝇” (a fly) three times in the source text. But the difference is that the narrator's emotion is relatively apparent in ST1 and ST3, which can be also recognized by translators. In other words, Huang's image seems like a fly, lingering in his mind, persistent and disgusting. Given this, translators and the author are on the same page for they retaining the emotion “unhappiness” [attitude: affect: unhappiness] of the source text by making explicitation in “苍蝇” as well as translating into “dissipating flies” and “persistent bluebottle” respectively in TT1 and TT3. In this way, not only the image of “苍蝇” can be translated directly, but two modifiers “dissipating” and “persistent” are added to express evaluative key, which makes the unpleasant subjective emotion conveyed directly for readers and endowed with the same negative evaluation meaning as the original. However, the translation of ST2 is obviously different from others. The word “苍蝇” in the source text is limited by the word “有思想的”(thoughtful), which makes the emotion complicated because the noun “苍蝇” contains an negative evaluative meaning while the adjective “有思想的” involves positive one. In this case, however, the image of “苍蝇” in TT2 is translated clearly and directly as “bourgeois element” that does not imply a negative meaning for translators or Western readers whose rejection of the bourgeois sentiment never exists. At the same time, the addition of the adjective “clever” by translators not only weakens the negative image of Huang, but shapes her a progressive bourgeois female image. Therefore, the “unhappiness” expressed in the source text is gone by translation and the image of Huang is somewhat improved imperceptibly. What impresses the Western readers most is a female with free, modern and advanced features. This can be verified in the book review of Malcolm Forbes (2015) on *the national ae*: “Mai's mathematician is the only character that professes love for another, but her advances are rebuffed. A romantic relationship, she learns, is ‘bourgeois corruption’.” It is obvious that the image of Huang in the Western readers' minds is lovely, sincere, optimistic and brave.

## 2.2 Character Description From the Judgement Dimension

Judgement deals with attitudes towards people and the way they behave, which we admire or criticize, praise or condemn. In general terms judgements evaluated by ethics can be divided into those dealing with “social esteem” and those oriented to “social sanction”. Social esteem has to do with “normality” (how unusual someone is), “capacity” (how capable they are) and “tenacity” (how resolute they are); social sanction on the other hand have to do with

“veracity” (how truthful someone is) and “propriety” (how ethical someone is). (Martin & White, 2005, p.52) The translator has different value judgments on the personality and behavior of the characters in the source text, and the rewriting of the evaluation meaning will result in different interpretation of the characters, which is to fit the cognition of the target readers.

ST4: 虽然我同她刚认识, 不了解她, 但我看她的目光可以看得出来, 她内心充满欲望, 她是个心气浮躁的人。(Mai, 2009, p.96)

TT4: ... even though I've only just met her and don't really know her at all, I can see from her eyes that **she is full of hope**, that she is an impulsive person. (Milburn & Payne, 2015, p.16)

The narrator Chen Erhu, as the elder of unit 701, has no good impression on Huang Yiyi whom he describes as “她内心充满欲望, 她是个心气浮躁的人” (She's full of sexual desire and she is a impetuous woman). And Chen's negative evaluation of Huang includes two aspects: on the one hand, she is impulsive and unable to concentrate on the study of the cipher, which makes him full of doubt about whether she can crack RECOVERY. On the other hand, she is eroded by western thoughts and becomes frivolous and uninhibited, as Chen said, “内心充满欲望”. According to the appraisal theory, the original phrase “内心充满欲望” belongs to the category of “normality” (social esteem) that is to judge how unusual someone is. Obviously, the behavior of Huang is endowed with negative evaluation in ST4, which does not conform to the normality. However, the translators rewrites the evaluative meaning of ST4 and integrates their personal judgements, which can be embodied in two aspects: first, the translators translate “她内心充满欲望” [judgement: social esteem: normality] into “She is full of hope” [judgement: social esteem: tenacity]. According to Martin & White (2005, p.54), “Normality is to usuality, as tenacity is to inclination”. Second, the translators rewrite the negative evaluation meaning in the source text into positive one in the target text, so the original image of Huang as a flighty character is swept away and replaced by an extraordinary female image of a strong, courageous and hopeful woman, which highlights her positive and hopeful attitude towards life.

The translators' rewriting of the original negative evaluations can also be interpreted from the cultural perspective. There are differences in national spirit between Chinese and Western cultures in that the former values unity and the latter emphasizes diversity and difference. Chinese tend to be introverted and calm, not boastful or pompous, paying attention to modesty and prudence while westerners have a strong sense of competition and direct personality. The reason is that “although human beings are placed at the center of the value system of Chinese and Western culture, the understanding of them is totally different. Western culture emphasizes the status of human beings as independent

individuals with reason, dignity and free will, and requires human beings to be responsible for their own destinies. Chinese culture, on the other hand, understands man as a member of the group, attaches great importance to man's social value. Man is a derivative of his social relations and his value exists and manifests in the group." (Chen, 2008) So, first of all, the translators, as Western readers, believe that the expression of "内心充满欲望" does not have a negative meaning and Huang's individual behavior is full of hope and appropriate, which is in line with the westerners' strong sense of competition and desire for performance. To some extent, translators have improved the image of Huang, which not only comes from the requirements of their own cultural context, but also caters to the taste of Western readers. Therefore, the intervention of the translators' own evaluation has changed the narrator's moral judgment on Huang, as well as the ideology and values of the source text, which leads to different interpretation by Western readers.

### 2.3 Character Description From the Appreciation Dimension

Appreciation with respect to aesthetics involves evaluations of "things" and natural phenomenon, according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field. In general terms appreciations can be divided into "reaction" (did it grab me or did I like it?), "composition" (did it hang together or was it hard to follow?) and "valuation" (was it worthwhile?). (Martin & White, 2005, p.56) The aesthetic values contained in the source language culture are to some extent contradicted or deviated from the target language culture due to different factors such as historical evolution and political development. Therefore, the cultural connotations of different things are various because of different cultural contexts. Translators often delete or rewrite the value of things that deviate from their own cultural context in order to eliminate cultural conflicts.

ST5: 她叹了口气, 苦笑道: "没有什么对不对的, 一个甚至都不知道为什么活的人, 也许就同一只猪或狗没有两样, 在哪里都一样。在这里, 我起码还是一只有功劳的狗, 受人尊敬的狗。也许这就是我不走的原因, 决不是为你, 也不是为哪个男人, 就是为自己, 行了吧? 这样你理解了吧?" (Mai, 2009, p.159)

TT5: She sighed and said with a bitter smile: "This isn't about having made the right decision. I have no idea why I am even alive, so wherever I go it would be the same. At least here I have been able to make a contribution, people respect me. Maybe that's why I didn't leave. I am not staying for your sake, or for any other man, but for my own, OK? Do you think you can understand that?" (Milburn & Payne, 2015, pp.254-255)

The phrases of "也许就同一只猪或狗没有两样" (perhaps the same as a pig or dog) and "在这里, 我起码还是一只有功劳的狗, 受人尊敬的狗" (Here, I am at least a meritorious dog, a respected dog) are Huang's evaluation of her self-value. According to the appraisal

theory, the words "猪" (pig) and "狗" (dog) [attitude: appreciation: valuation] belong to the category of "valuation" in the appreciation system. In the context of Chinese culture, pigs and dogs are very inferior animals. There are a lot of idioms in Chinese that indicate the low status of "猪" and "狗", such as "猪狗不如" (worse than pigs or dogs), "泥猪瓦狗" (clay pigs or dogs that implicate uselessness) and so on. In ST5, Huang uses the images of "猪" and "狗" to describe her own tiny value. The translators abridge and rewrite the image of pigs and dogs that Huang uses to mock her. From the perspective of cultural context, the images of pigs and dogs do not have the same resonance for Western readers who regard dogs as friends. Huang's self-deprecation with the image of pig and dog does not conform to a Western hero character. Therefore, the domestication of these phrases will portray a more lofty and fearless hero image to whom the Western readers will not feel strange. From the above example, it can be seen that the translators incorporate their own aesthetic evaluation into the translation and delete the animal images such as "猪" and "狗", which makes the image of Huang become more independent and free. In this case, the character depiction effect in translation as well as transmission changes accordingly.

### CONCLUSION

As an effective tool for the analysis of evaluative resources in texts, appraisal theory is of great applicability in translation studies. In the process of translation, the translators inevitably integrate their own decision-making of the original evaluation meaning, which changes the translation effect of the characters in the novel to a certain extent. From the perspective of attitude region, the translators rewrite the attitudinal meaning of the source text, which involves ideology, ethics, cultural image, etc., so that the characters in the translated version can be more in line with the attitude cognition of the Western readers.

The translation and dissemination effect of *In the Dark* is optimistic through the analysis of readers' book reviews on *Goodreads*, *the national* and other websites. For example, a reader named Vanessa comments that "although Mai Jia's writing is sometimes quite surreal. *In the Dark* is very readable and moves along nicely. Reading Chinese literature is always interesting, because characters often don't react as we in the West world". The reader Jade also praises that "intricately woven and smart, yet the pacing was furious and relentless...Discovering this book reignited my love for spy fiction. That said, this book was more of a mixed-genre work, with heavy mystery/spy overtones but the overall feel would be literary fiction". Obviously, Mai's espionage fictions are admired by most of Western readers.

Ji Jin (2018) points out that "Mai Jia tells the story of Chinese heroes through his works, overcomes human weaknesses limitations with the strength of will, and

elevates 'belief' into a spirit and character that can communicate with China and the West and transcend time and space, which is the most strongest power that Mai Jia's works can impress Chinese and Western readers". Indeed, one of the most important reasons why novels such as *Decoded*, *In the Dark*, etc., have been loved and welcomed by overseas readers is that the deep exploration and profound revelation of the world and human nature are contained in them, which is not only the literary value of the works themselves, but also the eternal world theme. Under the call of building a community with a shared future for mankind, those literary works that can deeply excavate human nature's characteristics and touch the common core of human souls are easier to build a communication bridge between Chinese and Western cultures, and also easier for the world to understand Chinese stories. This is the enlightenment that we can get from the dissemination of Mai Jia's works in the Western world for Chinese literature "going global".

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