

## Literature Review on Ren Rongrong's Chinese Translation of *Charlotte's Web*

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### Abstract

The fairy tale *Charlotte's Web* written by the American writer Elwyn Brooks White is featured with concise language, childlike innocence and profound meaning. It has been translated into various languages and introduced to many countries. In China, there are also different Chinese translations, among which the most influential and widely accepted translation goes to Ren Rongrong's. Ren is one of the most experienced translators in children's literature, making great contributions to the development of children's literature translation in China. This paper first attempts to analyse the status quo in terms of the previous studies on *Charlotte's Web* at home and abroad and then provide a review of domestic researches of Ren's translation, focusing on the researches of Ren's Chinese translation of *Charlotte's Web* from the perspectives of skopostheorie, reception aesthetics, among others, and pointing out the deficiencies of the previous studies so as to make clear the current situation of the studies and

provide some suggestions for the further studies of children's literature translation in China.

**Key words:** *Charlotte's Web*; Ren Rongrong; Translation; Deficiency

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Born in Mount Vernon, New York, Elwyn Brooks White (1899-1985) graduated from Cornell University. He is a critic, essayist and early *New Yorker* columnist, laying the foundation for the magazine's witty and elegant style of writing. He was awarded the National Medal of American Literature in 1917 and the Pulitzer Prize for Special Arts in 1978. His literary style is pure and unique. He is passionate about writing stories for children, in which such themes as loyalty, tolerance, rustic life of animals and children are naturally conveyed. He is famous for his children's literature, with such classical works as *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan* regarded as the most widely read and loved fairy tales in the twentieth century. *Charlotte's Web* written in 1952 is recognized as his outstanding representative work. According to a reader survey conducted by *Publishers Weekly*, it topped the list of the top ten children's literary works in the United States, with more than 10 million copies being sold. Now, it has become a classic of children's literature in the world. *Charlotte's Web* is featured with humorous language, distinctive images, vivid story, interesting plot and gripping suspense. The author delicately displays

a beautiful and warm pastoral picture as well as sings high praise for the love, harmonious relationship among animals, especially sincere friendship between Wilbur and Charlotte, making readers acquire a relaxing and pleasant aesthetic feeling in the process of reading and giving them infinite room for imagination. Although it is a fairy tale, the author also conveys profound philosophical thoughts about love, friendship, life and death in the most natural way. The web woven by Charlotte is actually a symbol of kindness, warmth, friendship and love, stimulating children's imagination, touching the heart of every reader and planting the seeds of happiness and love in children's heart. The story goes like this. In order to protect his friend Pig Wilbur from being killed and reduced to the food on the table, the spider named Charlotte weaves a variety of words on the web to attract people's attention on the farm. As a result, Charlotte manages to save Wilbur's life and passed away quietly. Then Willbur takes care of Charlotte's egg bag filled with its five hundred and fourteen offsprings. At last, three little spiders decide to stay with Wilbur and maintain their mother's friendship with Wilbur. Wilbur is very grateful to Charlotte, bearing this bosom friend in heart forever .

*Charlotte's Web* is a bestseller all over the world, and there are more than 20 translations (Qie, 2009, pp.102-103). According to the first children's book list appraised by children in China, *Charlotte's Web* topped the list in 2005, which showed that the book was very popular with the vast number of children in China at that time. On the basis of incomplete statistics, there are at least six Chinese translations in China, namely, *Charlotte's Web* (1979) translated by Kang Xin, *The Magic Web* (1982) translated by Chun Xin and Liu Shui, *Wonderful Pig and Magical Web* (1991) translated by LingYue, Xiao Mao's online translation of *Charlotte's Web* (1999), *Charlotte Weaves the Web* (2000) translated by Zhou Yi and *Charlotte's Web* (2004) translated by Ren Rongrong (Wu and Zhang, 2015, pp.91-94). Although there exists mistranslation, Kang Xin's translation is refined and elegant. As to the translation strategy, the translator adopts the strategy of domestication, showing the charm of Chinese and better meeting adults' aesthetic needs. In addition, it should be noted that Xiao Mao innovates the form of translation and creates online translation by means of network, which can allow real-time communication among the translator and readers at any time by tapping the keyboard to send a message. As Xiao Mao is an amateur in translation, it goes without saying that there are more imperfections in his understanding of English and mastery of Chinese expression. Therefore, his translation is more rigid, and translationese is too obvious. Besides, because the network at that time is not so available as it is now, only a small number of readers have access to online translation. However, his translation embodies his own mixed feelings of life and netizen readers can exchange ideas with the

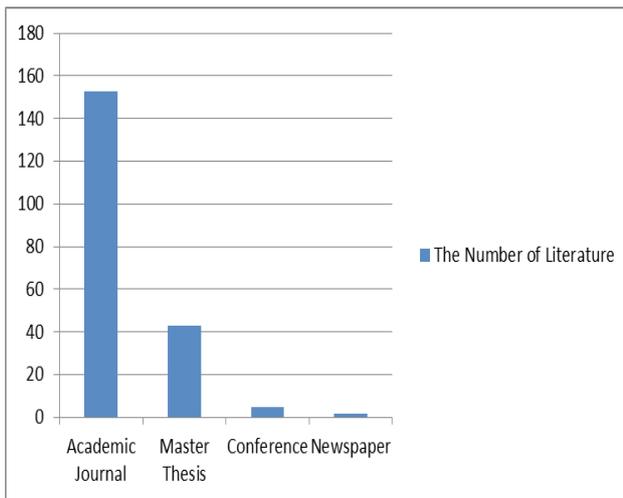
translator in the course of translation. When it comes to Ren Rongrong's translation, it is concise, simple, vivid and easy for children to understand and more in line with the characteristics of children's literature. His translation has also been widely accepted and loved in China over the years, having a great influence on children and adults. So this paper attempts to analyze Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web* in detail.

## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*

American writer Sims Michael, in his book *The Story of Charlotte's Web: E.B. White's Eccentric Life in Nature and the Birth of an American Classic* (2011), describes the growth, education, work and marriage of E.B. White and tries to reconstruct White's writing scene. Not only does Michael vividly display the idyllic life of such a rigorous and elegant writer, but he reveals many little-known details during the process of White's creation of such a world-renowned fairy tale. At the end of the last century, Lucien Agosta, an American scholar, introduces White and his fairy tales in detail in his book *E.B. White: The Children's Books* (1995). The book can be divided into three parts. Firstly, it's because of White's working experience on the farm that makes him pay more attention to nature and rethink about human beings' pursuit of material life which results in the destruction of nature and the imbalance between man and nature. Secondly, White changes his perspective of observing nature. In White's eyes, all natural things, especially animals, are not inferior to human beings, but equal to human beings. What's more, animals have the same feelings as men do. In *Charlotte's Web*, animals and humans have all kinds of emotions, and some animals even think that humans are inferior to them. Thirdly, White's mindset also changes. In White's fairy tale, he reflects on and criticizes the relationship between man and nature from the standpoint of putting people first. White dispels the overemphasized superiority and inferiority, maintaining that the coexistence of all things in nature is a fundamental principle. Apart from that, there are also some biographies about White, such as *To the Point: A Story about E.B. White* (1988) written by David Collins and Amy Johnson and *E.B. White: A Biography* (1984) written by Elledge Scott. These studies provide a realistic basis to explain White's works, enabling readers to have a better understanding of White.

In China, Yan Feng, a professor from Fudan University, wrote in the introduction to Ren Rongrong's translation of *Charlotte's Web*, "I think, in an ideal world, there should be only two kinds of people: those who have read *Charlotte's Web* and those will read it. Sometimes, waking up in midnight and feeling heart beating, I am so happy. Because being alive means reading *Charlotte's Web* again, and reading *Charlotte's Web* means being alive."

According to the data from CNKI, as figure 1 shows, there are 471 articles related to the study of *Charlotte's Web* in China, most of which are from academic journals and some from master's theses. *Charlotte's Web* is White's most widely popularized fairy tale in China. Book reports, adapted film reviews and other articles conveying such themes as life, friendship and love are published in *Teenagers*, *Happy Composition*, *Crazy English* (junior version) and other student-oriented magazines. Besides, there are more studies on Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web*. All relevant master's theses come from English majors and are written in English. For example, Jiang Yi's *English -- Chinese Translation of Children's Literature from the Perspective of Skopostheorie -- Comparative Studies of Two Chinese Translations of Charlotte's Web* (2011), Wang Juan's *A Study on the Application of the Strategy of Domestication and Foreignization in Children's Literature Translation -- Taking the Chinese Translation of Charlotte's Web as an Example* (2012), Lu Yi's *A Study on the Translation Strategy of Children's Literature -- Taking the Translation of Charlotte's Web as an Example* (2013) and so on. In the published papers, scholars interpret and analyze *Charlotte's Web* from different perspectives. Some scholars (Qin, 2018; Lu, 2015; Huang, 2016) make a study of the narrative time, narrative style and narrative strategy of the fairy tale from the perspective of narratology; Some (Huang, 2020; Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2018) use the fair tale as the reading material for reading teaching; some (Guo, 2015; Lu, 2017; Liu, 2015) interpret ecological ethics and metaphorical charm; some (Jiang Lin, 2019; Yang, 2005; Li, 2015) analyze the image of the spider, pig, mouse and other animals in the fairy tale and the symbolic meaning of the web; Some (Zhang, 2015; Luo, 2012; Liu, 2012) analyze the characteristics, theme and connotations of the fairy tale and so on.



**Figure 1**  
**The number of literature in terms of studies on *Charlotte's Web***

### 3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE CHINESE TRANSLATIONS OF *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*

Through collating relevant articles and studies, it is found that scholars mainly analyze the characteristics of Ren's Chinese translation of *Charlotte's Web* from the perspective of skopostheorie and reception aesthetics. Besides, this paper also gives a brief introduction to a few studies analyzed from other miscellaneous perspectives for reference.

#### 3.1 Skopostheorie

*Charlotte's Web* belongs to children's literature. The creation and translation of children's literature should first take into account the characteristics of the target readers. The particularity of children's literature is reflected in its linguistic stylistic style, depending on its specific readers, that is, children and teenagers (Xu, 2004, pp.91-92). Therefore, the translator should take into consideration the age, psychological characteristics, cognitive ability, knowledge reserve and reading habits of children, adopting expression techniques that can be accepted and appreciated by children in order to promote the development of children's mental health and achieve the original purpose of enlightenment and education. An accomplished writer can create intelligible children's literary works popular with children, if he is willing to observe, feel and listen to the world with children's eyes, ears and hearts. (Chen, 1959, p.21).

Qie (2009, pp.102-103) believes that in the process of children's literature translation, the translator should take children's understanding and acceptability as the starting point. Ren Rongrong's translation of *Charlotte's Web*, which conforms to the principles of skopostheorie, is a case in point. In terms of words and expressions, Ren's translation abounds in reduplicated words and onomatopoeic words which are simple, lively, rhythmic and humorous. In the meanwhile, they are pleasant to read and sound. The translation is in a childlike and innocent tone. When it comes to sentence structures, long sentences in the original text are changed into short sentences in the target text, and compound sentences are changed into simple sentences. Therefore, the translation is more concise and easier to understand. As to semantic meaning, source language and source culture vary from target language and target culture. Sometimes literal translation may confuse children, so annotations are added to make the translation readable and acceptable. Zhou and Xiang (2017, pp.128-130) also draw similar conclusions based on an analysis of expressions, sentences and cultures.

Wu and Zhang (2015, pp.91-94) make comparative studies among three translations of *Charlotte's Web* by Kang Xin, Xiao Mao and Ren Rongrong in terms of title translation, name translation, poem translation, expressions and sentences. The title in Ren's translation is simple, colloquial and intelligible, deliberately catering

to the needs of children. Transliteration is adopted while translating roles' names. Poem translation takes account of children's thinking and reading habits. The most direct purpose of Ren's translation is to let children understand fairy tales.

Bian (2012, pp.146-148) analyzes Ren's and Kang's Chinese translations of *Charlotte's Web* under the guidance of skopostheorie, pointing out the problems existing in the translation and opening up a new research field. At first, she points out that Ren uses the Wu dialect and Shanghai dialect in the translation. Dialect is a kind of language varying in geographical locations that embodies different pronunciations and daily expressions (Bian, 2012, pp.146-148). Children are short of a knowledge of dialect and cultural background. There is no doubt that dialects cause a big obstacle to children's understanding of the story. Therefore, dialects should be avoided as much as possible both in original text and in target text. In addition, there are some typos in Ren's translation, and even some widely used simple words are wrongly written. Although it is not clear that whether these errors are from the translator's original manuscript, editing or printing, children in the stage of language acquisition tend to learn and use words from children's literary works. So there must be stricter requirements for language accuracy and standardization in children's literature translation.

### 3.2 Reception Aesthetics

Among the author, works and readers, the readers are not passive, but actively involved in works. The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader (Iser, 1978, p.102). Actually children are actively involved in the process of reading, so many scholars analyze Ren's translation from the perspective of reception aesthetics.

Cheng (2016) makes a comparative study of Kang's and Ren's translations of *Charlotte's Web*, drawing a conclusion that Ren's translation can better correspond to readers' horizon of expectations after giving an analysis of the language and culture. In addition to theoretical analysis, Cheng also distributes questionnaires to primary and secondary school students to investigate their acceptance and preferences of the two translations. As a result, the survey shows that Ren's translation is more popular. At the same time, she also finds out some shortcomings of the survey, pondering that future research and investigation can be more detailed and categorized according to age, gender and even regions to make the results more convincing and scientific. It should be noted that Cheng innovates the way of the research and increases the credibility of her research with data support, setting a good example for other scholars to do research in various ways.

Fan (2019, pp.124-132, 159) makes a comparative study of Xiao's and Ren's translations of *Charlotte's Web*

under the guidance of reception aesthetics. By making comparison and giving examples, she first analyzes the acceptability of Ren's translation in the four aspects of lexical characteristics, sentence structures, figures of speech and rhythm. Then she reflects on whether the source text conforms to the author's horizon of expectations, whether the style of the source text is embodied in the translation, whether the pedagogical meaning of the translation is in line with that of the source text. Finally she analyzes the translation from the perspective of cultural differences, values and religious spirit. Compared with the previous studies, her research is more concrete. She also summarizes the principles and strategy of children's literature translation under the guidance of reception aesthetics, which provide valuable reference and suggestions for scholars to make in-depth research on children's literature translation in the future.

Tan and He (2017, pp.194-196) makes a comparative study between Kang's and Ren's translations from the perspective of Chinese and Western food culture. She gives examples to analyze the translation of food, finding that expressions of food in Ren's translation are closer to children's daily life and more attractive and acceptable to children. Therefore, children are more attentive and interested in reading. Her research provides new research ideas and broadens the field of research.

### 3.3 The Miscellaneous

Zou (2015, pp.104-105) makes a brief analysis of Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web* from the perspective of functional equivalence. She elaborates how to use simile and parallelism effectively in translation and retain the rhetorical effect embodied in the source language. Apart from that, Huang (2012) analyzes four translations from the same perspective. She pays attention to the four aspects of the characteristics of linguistic style of children's literature: simplicity, vividness, musicality and childlike innocence. She makes a detailed analysis while giving a large number of examples selected from the four translations, summarizing techniques and strategies in children's literature translation from the perspective of stylistic equivalence. Therefore, her studies can better help scholars understand the particularity of children's literature, realize the functional equivalence of children's literature translation and provide valuable reference and suggestions for studies on children's literature translation.

Gao (2019, pp.77-79), taking Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web* as an example, expounds the application of the strategy of adaptation in children's literature translation. She summarizes that supplement, integration and other artistic techniques are used in Ren's translation. In consequence, Ren's translation is easy to understand and pleasant to sound.

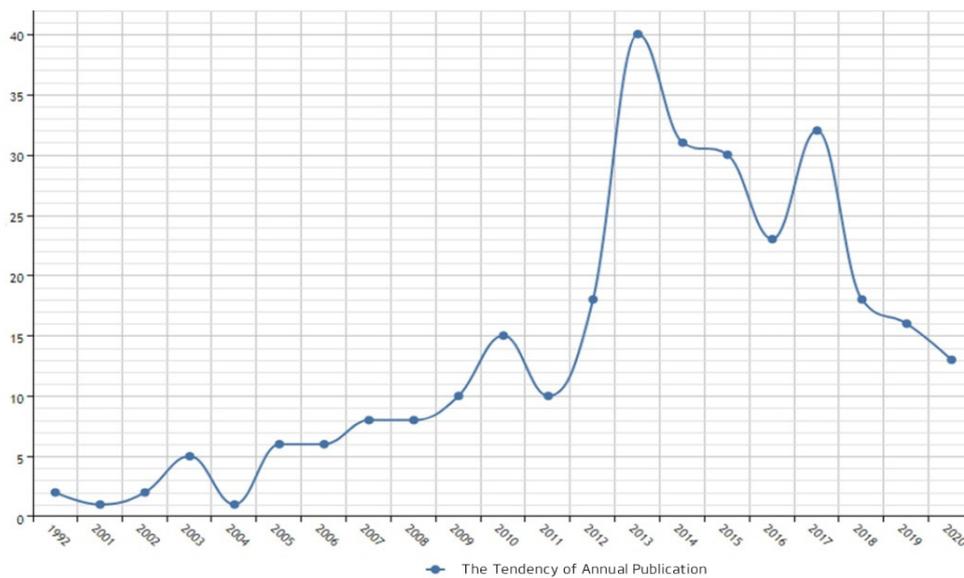
Zhang (2018) introduces eco-translatology into children's literature translation innovatively through a combination of qualitative and quantitative researches.

In the process of children's literature translation, such factors as economy, language, society, culture, politics, translators' ability, target readers and linguistic style of children's literature translation can affect the translator's choice. Accordingly, translators make adaptive selection in the three dimensions of language, culture and communication, and actively adapt to the translational eco-environment of children's literature translation, so that different translations can adapt to different translational eco-environment and children's literature translations with a high degree of adaptation can meet the needs of educational development as well as win children's favor. Each translation is optimal in its own translational eco-environment. Different translational eco-environments constitute the entire translation ecosystem, so different translations can coexist. Yuan (2019) also analyzes the application of eco-translatology in children's literature translation and reaches similar conclusions.

#### 4. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON REN'S TRANSLATIONS

According to the data from CNKI, from 1986 to 2020, there are 1,744 articles relevant to children's literature

translation and 293 articles related to Ren's translations. From the above, it can be seen that studies on Ren's translations take up a great proportion. As is shown in figure 2, there were only a few articles which mainly deal with comments on Ren's creation of children's literary works before the 21st century. From 2000 to 2005, the number of relevant articles increased slightly, but there were very few reviews on Ren's translations. Since 2005, there have been 86 articles published in academic journals and 73 master's theses. It is clear that the amount has increased significantly and Ren's translations receive great attention. In the meanwhile, the research perspectives, theoretical basis and research methods are more diverse. At present, domestic studies are mainly divided into three parts. Studies in a small proportion are involved in the introduction of Ren as a writer and translator in the field of children's literature. Studies occupying a large proportion are the analysis of Ren's translation theory and translation strategy in children's literature translation by choosing some of his translations as specific research objects from a certain perspective. Some scholars make comparative studies by analyzing his translations and others' translations.



**Figure 2**  
**The number of literature in terms of studies on Ren's children's literature translation**

After collecting and collating the relevant literature, it is found that scholars arrive at similar conclusions in terms of studies on Ren's translation of children's literature despite their different research methods and perspectives. The following are the representatives.

Yang and Liu (2020, pp.66-69) summarizes that Ren holds on to child-orientation in children's literature translation by analyzing Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web* from such aspects as translator's personality, translation purpose and linguistic style under the

guidance of translator's subjectivity. Ren believes that only if one puts his love for children in the first place, he will complete good children's literature translations. Ren carefully selects widely circulated classical works which reflect the characteristics of children. Taking into account cultural differences, children's cognitive ability, translation purpose and other factors, Ren adopts the strategy of domestication and foreignization during the process of translation, which fully indicates that the translator's subjectivity is to serve children. Domestication

strategy helps children understand the original text and makes translation more readable and acceptable. Foreignization strategy displays linguistic style of the source language and exotic culture, and annotations are often added where there is difficulty for children in the course of reading. Wang (2016, pp.63-65) also points out that Ren understands, respects and appreciates children. Ren's translations of children's poems are natural, simple and colloquial, full of freshness, childlike innocence and rhythm. Zhu points out that children are instinctively sensitive to the rhythm and rhymes of poems, and they mainly use their ears to feel the charm of literary languages including poems (Zhu, 2009, p.158). Ren always avoids awkward-sounding and rare words. Therefore, his translation is fluent and loyal to the original in form and content, attaching great importance to standardized Chinese expression at the same time. His translations have a great influence on the development of translations of children's poem both in theme and style in China.

Wu (2014, pp.112-113), choosing Ren's translation of *Witch* as a case study, analyzes the translation from three aspects of expressions, sentence structure and rhetoric and points out that childlike innocence is indispensable to the translation of children's literature. Childlike innocence is the artistic reflection of children's tastes and interest in literary works. The author tells children stories to make children both understand and glad. Telling the original stories in Chinese should also achieve the original purpose (Wang, 1989, p.82). In terms of vocabulary, Ren mostly uses reduplication, onomatopoeia and interjection. Reduplicated words are catchy and rhythmic. The onomatopoeias make the images vivid and reconstruct the scene to let children feel immersive. Interjections reinforce the character's emotion. As to sentence structure, Ren uses a large number of short sentences. The reason why short sentences are widely used in children's literature is that short sentences are much simpler than long sentences and easier for children to understand. Moreover, it is also because short sentences are closer to children's nature and children's language (Wu, 2014, pp.112-113). The use of rhetorical devices can vividly recreate a picturesque world in the fairy tales for children readers, making the whole story more attractive.

In addition, different from the above viewpoints, Liu (2015, pp.15-17) mentions that Ren also pays attention to the principles of fidelity and colloquialism in the translation of children's literature. Ren believes that faithfulness is the most important among the well-known translation principles of faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. The content and style should be faithful. The principle of fidelity means being faithful to the original text in terms of vocabulary, sentence, grammar and style. The principle of colloquialism refers to intelligible expressions which are in line with children's psychological characteristics and children's language.

Because children's literature is for children, the translation of children's literature should be acceptable to children.

Fan (2019, pp.124-132, 159) makes a comparative study of Xiao Mao's and Ren's translations of *Charlotte's Web* from the perspective of reception aesthetics, and she concludes that the educational function of the original should be consistent with that of the target text. Not only can good children's literary works offer children joy, but they can play an educational role. Ren is serious about translation, paying attention to the artistic value and educational significance of children's literature. He believes that all children's literary works need undertake the task of educating children, and translations are no exception. Therefore, children's literature translation should pay special attention to the standard Chinese language and even the punctuation for the purpose of improving children's language proficiency and expressive ability.

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## DEFICIENCIES OF THE PREVIOUS STUDIES

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The domestic scholars have conducted a large number of researches on Ren's translation of *Charlotte's Web*, which have laid a solid foundation for subsequent studies and to a certain extent have aroused scholars' attention to the study on children's literature translation. However, the existing studies mainly focus on the language style, Ren's translation strategies and translation theory, while other aspects are still rarely discussed. A large number of studies are repetitive, with similar themes, examples, contents, viewpoints and conclusions. Most of the previous studies fail to be supported by first-hand data. In addition, they are mainly analyzed from a single and repetitive perspective. Therefore, the depth and width of the research should be expanded. Further researches can be conducted on material nouns based on corpus, conceptual metaphors in the translation under the guidance of cultural translation theory, introduction and acceptance of the translation in China.

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