

# A Comparative Study on the English Translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”: A Frame Theory Perspective

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As prose is a significant part of Chinese literature, the English translation of prose works is able to promote Chinese literature to the world. Although frame theory has been widely used in translation studies, its combination with prose translation deserves further exploration. Based on frame theory, this study selects two translations of Zhu Ziqing’s prose “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” translated by Yang Xianyi, Gladys Yang, and Howard Goldblatt to analyze frame operation existing in text. Frame operation includes ideal frame operation and non-ideal frame operation: the former is the correspondence of two frames, and the latter contains replacement of frame elements, addition or deletion of elements, change of frame relations, adjustment of frame hierarchy, change of frame perspective, and frame transplantation. This paper summarizes the frame operations adopted by two translations, offers cognitive explanations for the translation, and describes the different translation effects. It intends to explore the following questions: First, how do translators use frame operations to make the target readers comprehend the meaning of the source text? Second, what are the differences in frame operations between the two translations? Third, what are the implications for translators in cross-cultural communication after an in-depth analysis of frame operations?

*Keywords:* “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”, English translation, frame operation

## Introduction

With the deepening of China’s economic development and opening up to the world in recent years, rapid development of China’s foreign cultural exchanges, as well as the promotion of cultural confidence, has been emphasized, so that an increasing number of Chinese literary works have been introduced to foreign countries. The translation of modern Chinese prose has become an increasingly significant part of China’s vast and profound cultural and literary works. “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” has a high status and plays an important role in the development of Chinese prose, and a detailed analysis of its language is of great research value. At present, most of the outstanding research results in the application of frame theory focus on the English translation of classical Chinese poems, but the cognitive translation of modern Chinese prose, in particular, the research on frame operations, deserves more attention. From the perspective of frame theory, this paper takes two English translations of Zhu Ziqing’s prose “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” as an example to comment on frame operation and its effects in the English translation of Chinese prose, aiming to provide useful insights for the theoretical research and practice of translation of literary works. At the same time, “translational action views

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translation as purpose-driven, outcome-oriented human interaction” (Munday, 2016, p. 124). It also contributes to inspiring the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture.

### **Literature Review**

Frame theory arose in the 1970s as an interdisciplinary theory that integrates perspectives from multiple fields. Fillmore (1985, p. 223) described that frames are specific unified frameworks of knowledge, or coherent schematizations of experience. In 1988, Snel-Hornby utilized the scene frame to explain the creative process of translation as a decision-making process; both original analysis and translation expression are significant process. Ammann (1990) brought Fillmore’s concepts of scene and frame into the construction of a model of translation criticism. Neubert and Shreve (1992) argued that translation means not word to word, but frame to frame. Petruck (1996) suggested that frame theory highlights the continuity between language and experience, and that the frame-building process is influenced by long-term factors that are strongly related to culture. The translator is supposed to identify the implicit frames behind the text and adjust them in order to make them match each other.

Frame theory has only been introduced to China from abroad for a few decades, but it has been extensively utilized in mathematics, sociology, jurisprudence, linguistics, and many other fields. Some domestic scholars try to use frame theory to translate Chinese literature, and Wang (2005) pointed out that translators use target language expressions with the same or similar frames to the source language, which are the foundation of a sound translation. He and Mei (2021) applied frame theory as a guide to the translation of sub-scientific vocabulary in scientific and technical English and discussed the vocabulary composition mechanism of sub-scientific vocabulary from the perspective of cognition. Y. F. Zhang and H. T. Zhang (2021) discussed the translation practices during the creation of the Chinese frame network from the perspective of frame semantics and found that these practices were not simply straightforward academic translations. However, most previous studies focus on detailed translation and rarely refine its theoretical model. Frame operations can provide a theoretical basis for the application of frame theory in translation. This paper compare two different translated versions of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond” from the perspective of Xiao’s (2012) frame operation models, which validates the theoretical model of the cognitive process of translation.

### **Analysis of Frame Operation in Translation**

The two translations of “Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond”, one from Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, and the other from Howard Goldblatt, both have contributed to the dissemination of Chinese culture. This study takes the perspective of frame theory. Wen and Xiao (2019) suggested that there are two cases of frame operation: ideal frame operation and non-ideal frame operation. The first case is that the frame in source language and the frame in target language can realize direct correspondence. In the second case, there is a mismatch between two frames, which requires the translator to apply replacement of frame elements, addition or deletion of elements, adjustment of frame hierarchy, change of frame perspective, and frame transplantation.

#### **Ideal Frame Operation**

Ideal frame operation refers to the realization of direct correspondence between the original text frame and target frame through the cognitive operations of the translator at the conceptual level. Since the target readers’ reading ability is similar to that of the readers of the original text, there is no need for the translator to adjust the

complexity of the target text. It is important to mention that the ideal frame operation occurs only when the two frames and their elements correspond exactly, as determined by the general characteristics of different cultures.

Example 1:

荷塘的四面，远远近近，高高低低都是树，而杨柳最多。

Far and near, high and low around the pool were trees, most of them *willows*. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

On all sides of the lotus pond, far and near, on high ground and low, there are trees, most of them willows. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

The imagery of the “杨柳” is a natural phenomenon shared throughout the world. Both “杨柳” in Chinese and “willow” in English belong to tree frame. Willow is not only a portrait of natural landscape in Chinese and Western cultures, but also a symbol of emotion, culture, and aesthetics, carrying profound cultural connotations. Through the two translations, the target readers can also feel the faint sadness expressed in the original text.

### Non-ideal Frame Operation

When there is a non-correspondence between the original text frame and the target frame, the translator is required to perform a non-ideal frame operation. The specific operation that translators need to take depends on the type of mismatch situation and the translator’s judgment of the target reader’s existing knowledge and information processing ability.

**Replacement of frame elements.** In translation, the frame element corresponding to the original language expression may activate the whole frame in the reader’s mind, but in the target culture, the same frame may be activated by another frame element within that frame. Since the target reader will activate the frame by another frame element, it is necessary to replace the elements of the original frame with those that the target readers recognize or are familiar with in order to activate the same frame.

Example 2:

采莲人不用说很多，还有看采莲的人。那是一个热闹的季节，也是一个风流的季节。

They turned out in force, we may be sure, and there were spectators too, for that was a cheerful *festival* and a romantic one. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

It goes without saying that there were great numbers of lotus gatherers as well as those who came to watch them, for that was a festive and a romantic *occasion*. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

“季节” in the source text would literally be understood as “season”. However, it describes and evaluates activity of lotus gathering. The words “festival” and “occasion” in Example 2 both belong to the same frame. The two frame elements activate the event frame which means all activities and phenomena in human life. In Yang’s opinion, this activity of lotus gathering is an organized series of events, such as musical concerts or celebration. Therefore, it is acceptable to the target readers in English culture to replace literal translation “season” with “festival” element. In Howard’s opinion, the activity is a case of something happening, the frame element “occasion” conveys the meaning of the original text. Both Yang and Howard replace original frame element with other elements that target readers understand and know well.

**Addition or deletion of elements.** In translation, it is not only necessary to replace the frame elements, but also to add or delete frame elements, because while the frames in the source culture correspond to the frames in the target culture, there are differences in the quantity and structure of the frame elements, and in some cases,

more elements are required in the target frame to activate the whole frame, and then the translator needs to add frame elements.

Example 3:

这令我到底惦着江南了。

I was feeling quite *homesick* for the south. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

All of this stirred up in me a *sense of longing* for the South. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

In Example 3, both “homesick” and “a sense of longing” can activate frame of feeling. In the original text the author expresses his longing for the South directly. Howard’s version conveys only the superficial meaning and does not translate it in detail with the author’s real circumstances and background, and fails to express the author’s distinctive feelings for the South. In order to more accurately deliver to the target readers the author’s longing for the South, Yang’s version adds “homesick” in the frame of yearning, completing the mood and emotion of the original text.

**Adjustment of frame hierarchy.** According to Barsalou (1992), attribute-value sets are basic elements of frame. He defines an attribute as a concept that describes an aspect of at least some category members. At the same time, values are defined as subordinate concepts of an attribute. Therefore, attributes and values can develop into sub-frames, and attributes and values of these new sub-frames may further evolve into the next level of sub-frames. Xiao (2012) suggested that the lower and more concrete the level of the frame, the more culturally independent it is, and in the same way, the higher and more abstract the level of the frame, the less culturally dependent it is, and the more likely it is to find a corresponding frame between the two cultures. When there is a mismatch between the frames of two cultures, the translator can utilize the upper and lower levels of the frame to translate more smoothly.

Example 4:

塘中的月色并不均匀；但光与影有着和谐的旋律，如梵婀玲上奏着的名曲。

The moonlight on the pool was not uniform, but light and shadow made up a harmonious *rhythm* like a beautiful tune played on a violin. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

The moonlight on the pond was spread unevenly, but the rays and the shadows were a *concert* of harmony, like a celebrated tune played on a violin. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

In Example 4, Yang uses the method of literal translation, and directly translates “旋律” into “rhythm”. Howard adjusts frame hierarchy in order to depict a greater spectacle of light and shadow intertwined to target readers, so he translates “旋律” into “concert”. Both “rhythm” and “concert” belong to music frame, “concert” is at a higher level than the “rhythm”, which not only contains rhythm, but also a variety of music, and is also able to make the original static light and shadow become dynamic.

**Change of frame perspective.** Wen (2007) suggested that frames are closely related to cognitive perspectives, and that for the same scene, cognitive subjects will activate different background frames in their minds due to different cognitive perspectives, and thus will have different construals of the scene, which will be reflected in differences in vocabulary. There is another case; for the same frame, the translator adopts different perspectives and chooses different frame elements to realize different linguistic expressions, namely, choosing different subjects and changing different predicates in their translations. Chinese literature often lacks a subject, and translators need to work according to the context and combine it with their own understanding, so different perspectives often emerge.

## Example 5:

路上只我一个人，背着手踱着。这一片天地好像是我的；我也像超出了平常的自己，到了另一世界里。

Strolling alone down the path, hands behind my back, I felt as if *the whole earth and sky were mine* and I had stepped outside my usual self into another world. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

Finding myself alone on the path, I folded my hands behind me and strolled along. *The stretch of land and sky that spread out before me seemed to belong to me*, and I could transcend my own experience and enter another world. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

In the source text, “这一片天地好像是我的” can be translated into two frame perspectives. In Howard’s translation, it retains the frame perspective of the original text, and emphasizes the stretch of land and sky in front of “me”, which focuses on the scenery described by the author. In Yang’s translation, it takes “I” as the perspective and puts “the author” in the foreground. Compared to the original text, it changes the frame perspectives and uses a first-person perspective, which allows the reader to make an emotional connection with the author and allows them to better place themselves into the scenario of the text. From these two translations, we can learn that the perspective of observation affects the translator’s understanding of the original text and language expression, and chooses different subjects; Yang chooses “I” as the subject, while Howard chooses “the stretch of land and sky” as the subject, bringing different emotions and imaginations to the target readers.

**Frame transplantation.** Frame transplantation refers to the direct transplantation of the frames of the source language culture into the target language culture, so as to realize the cross-cultural transplantation of the elements included in the frames. The creation of literary works and the readers’ interpretation and understanding depend on their own cultural backgrounds, so if the translator fails to use his or her skills to convey the cultural connotation of the source text, it will be a burden of understanding for the target readers. Translators sometimes use annotation to translate, which can provide a richer cultural background, but it can also affect the reader’s reading pace. Sometimes, translators will directly deliver cultural elements from the frame of the original text into the translated text, which requires not only the translator’s efforts, but also the target readers’ knowledge reserves as well as their comprehension skills.

## Example 6:

叶子底下是脉脉的流水，遮住了，不能见一些颜色；而叶子却更见风致了。

That was the *softly running water* beneath, hidden from sight, its colour invisible, though the leaves looked more graceful than ever. (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Trans.)

Beneath the leaves *restrained currents of water* flowed, imprisoned beneath them, the color forever hidden, while the stirrings of the leaves were even more pronounced. (Howard Goldblatt, Trans.)

In Example 6, “脉脉” is from the Chinese idiom “含情脉脉”, which describes someone’s eyes fulling of tender affection. In the original text, this expression is exclusive to Chinese culture, and an excellent example of the manner in which the Chinese express their emotions. “脉脉的流水” activates the frame of flowing water, and vividly depicts the tenderness, silence, and slowness of flowing water. In Yang’s version, they delicately capture these qualities of flowing water, and translate it into “softly running water”. However, Howard fails to express this tenderness, “restrained currents of water” even expresses a picture of raging water that may destroy original beauty and artistic conception.

## Conclusion

In order to compare the effects of cultural differences on frame operations, the two translators coming respectively from the source and target languages meet different expectations. This comparative study exists several aspects that could prove it. The first is faithfulness to the original meaning of the text and the manifestation of the aesthetic feeling. As a user of the source language, Yang Xianyi uses more detailed expression in his translation, better able to depict the artistic conception of the original text, and more precise and clear in expressing the author's emotion, as well as the aesthetic sense of the original text. Contrarily, Howard prefers sentence-by-sentence translation and fails to fully translate the implicit meaning of the source text, but he tries his best to perform frame operations and find the corresponding frames so that his translation is faithful to the original text. This is indispensable for the authentic reproduction and inheritance of literary texts. Second, the role and influence of the two translations in the continuation and dissemination of culture. For example, Yang Xianyi, Gladys Yang, and Howard respectively translate “裳” into “silks” and “dress”, “脉脉的流水” into “softly running water” and “restrained currents of water”. Yang can better explain cultural phenomena that are unique to the original text and express cultural connotations. For readers who only want to understand the superficial meaning of the original text without unfamiliar concepts, Howard's translation is preferable. And for readers who want to know more about the connotation of Chinese culture and the deeper meaning of the original text, Yang's translation is preferable.

Based on the analysis, this paper summarizes Xiao's frame operations in both frame matching and non-matching situations in translation: ideal frame operation and non-ideal frame operation. Due to the differences in the translators' life experience, knowledge building, and different cultures, thus resulting in differences in cognitive ways, the frames activated are inevitably different, which manifested in the differences in the translated texts. The translator's subjective construal plays a constraining role in the understanding and re-expression of meaning in translation (Wang, 2021). Translation, as a cross-linguistic artistic recreation, inevitably involves the translator's aesthetic cognition and cognitive processing process. The translator's translation process is essentially a process of cognitive operation at the conceptual level, not just a conversion of linguistic forms (Xiao, 2017). Under the frame theory, when there is a difference in cultural frames between the original text activated in the original language readers and the translated readers, the translator needs to realize the correspondence between the translated text and the original text on the frame through the frame operation, so as to make the target readers get the reading experience from the translations as close as possible to that of the original language readers. English translation of prose requires the translator to handle frame operation appropriately, taking into account the cultural transmission of the source language and the acceptability of the target readers, in order to realize the charm of Chinese literary works in translation.

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