

Narrative Criticism in the Translation of Lu Xun's Short Stories: A Case Study of "Kong Yiji"

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Abstract: Narratology, with its broad research scope, profound analytical dimensions, and mature theoretical framework, has opened up vast and deep exploration space for literary translation criticism. Drawing upon narratological theory, this thesis conducts a narratological translation critique of two authoritative translations of Lu Xun's short story "Kong Yiji." The analysis examines four aspects: narrative time, narrative perspective, speech/thought presentation, and legibility versus readability. By comparing how narrative effects are transferred or lost, the paper reveals the subtle narrative mechanisms in the original and evaluates the cross-cultural adaptability of each translation strategy.

Keywords: Kong Yiji; Narrative; Translation criticism

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1. Introduction

Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji," as a classic short story of modern Chinese literature, not only carries profound social criticism, but also constructs a unique artistic system in terms of narrative perspective, narrative time, imagery, and other aspects. This paper takes Wang Shuhuai's narrative model of translation criticism as its theoretical foundation, selects the English translations by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (hereafter the Yang translation) and by Julia Lovell (hereafter the Lovell translation) as its research objects, and conducts a critical analysis of the two versions of Kong Yiji from a narratological perspective. By comparing the narrative transmission and transformation in these two translations, it aims to reveal the subtlety of Lu Xun's narrative strategies and their cross-cultural adaptability.

Early studies on the English translation of "Kong Yiji" mostly focused on the reproduction of the original style at the lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical levels. But this way often reduces "style" to formal linguistic equivalence, while neglecting the deeper functions of style within narrative structure.

Wang Shuhuai and Wan Guangrong, through a survey of English readers' reading responses, indirectly link narrative readability with reader pleasure from an empirical perspective. However, that study focused

on presenting reception data, leaving the multidimensional analysis of the translation's narrative strategies themselves in need of further development. Overall, existing criticism has made contributions at both the "linguistic form" and "reader reception" ends, but lacks systematic theoretical attention to the intermediate link connecting the two aspects: how translations convey the original narrative mechanisms and effects^[1, 2, 3]. This is precisely the starting point for introducing a narratological framework in this paper: shifting the analysis from "the fidelity of linguistic conversion" to "the cross-cultural transmission of narrative effects," in order to more comprehensively assess the gains and losses of the translations in reproducing the narrative art of "Kong Yiji." Meanwhile, this approach helps promote the integration of narratological theory and translation criticism, and may accumulate referable analytical samples for the narrative criticism of modern literary classics in translation.

2. Theoretical framework

Narratology focuses on the internal rules of narrative texts. Tzvetan Todorov first introduced the concept of "narratology." He treated narrative as a kind of "grammar," distinguishing between *histoire* and *discours*, and analyzing narrative tense, mood, voice, and other grammatical elements^[4]. Gérard Genette constructed a systematic analytical framework for narrative, with core categories including duration, frequency, focalization, voice, etc^[5]. Wang Shuhuai constructed a narrative criticism model for translation criticism from twelve aspects, advocating a dual critical strategy of "prescriptive plus dialectical"^[6, 7]. For core narrative elements, the translator should faithfully reproduce them; otherwise, thematic meaning will be impaired—this is prescriptive criticism. For non-core narrative elements, if the translator makes changes due to poetic traditions, target reader positioning, or ethical stance, the effects and rationality of such changes should be analyzed—this is dialectical criticism. This approach avoids the one-sided stance of either "fidelity above all" or "creative treason," making the criticism more persuasive and inclusive. This paper draws on Wang's model and selects four dimensions closely related to the narrative art of "Kong Yiji".

In narratological research, the classification of narrative perspective has always been a core issue. Genette classifies narrative perspective into three types: zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. Building on this framework, Shen Dan proposes a fourfold classification by adding the firstperson external perspective^[8]. This perspective refers to the "I" in retrospective narration, who serves as a minor character with a strictly limited cognitive range—knowing only what is directly observable, able to recount events objectively but incapable of penetrating their deeper meanings. Lu Xun's short story "Kong Yiji" is a typical example of the use of first-person external perspective. "I," as a minor character, has a strictly limited cognitive range — generating narrative tension.

The choice of narrative time is also based on the retrospective narrative structure of "Kong Yiji." The story opens with "over twenty years ago," establishing a frame of *analepsis* and creating a dual temporal layer of "present" and "past"—which serves both as the temporal basis for the shift between the "narrating self" and the "experiencing self" and as temporal support for understanding Shen Dan's concept of "dual narrative dynamics." In terms of translation into foreign languages, the accuracy of tense shifts and the complete reproduction of repetitive frequency are key indicators of whether a translation can convey the implied author's critical intent.

The choice of speech/thought presentation is based on the narrative strategy of "Kong Yiji" to shape characters through dialogue and create atmosphere through soundscape. Kong Yiji's direct speech vividly

presents the character's pedantic yet pitiable nature. Leech & Short point out that direct speech preserves individual traits, while free indirect speech accelerates narrative pace ^[9]. How a translation handles these forms of speech presentation directly affects the conveyance of characterization and social critique.

The choice between legibility and readability expands the critical perspective from within the text to the level of reader reception. Prince distinguishes between legibility and readability, and this distinction is particularly crucial for translation criticism. In *Kong Yiji*, the protagonist's classical language and cultural allusions pose barriers to English readers. Meanwhile, the original's cold and restrained narrative tone requires finding a corresponding aesthetic mode of expression in the translation. Assessing these trade-offs in cross-cultural contexts is essential to narrative translation criticism.

In summary, the four dimensions correspond respectively to the fundamental questions in the narrative art of "*Kong Yiji*": "who narrates," "how time is arranged," "how voice is presented," and "how the reader receives." Together, they form a critical chain from textual production to reader reception, from formal reproduction to effect evaluation, and constitute the core analytical framework of this paper.

3. Research design

This paper selects two influential English translations of "*Kong Yiji*" as analytical materials.

The Yang translation was first included in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsün* published by Foreign Languages Press in 1960. Since then, it has been reprinted multiple times. Their translations of Lu Xun's stories have been regarded as authoritative, with far-reaching influence. The target readership of this translation has a dual orientation: on one hand, it serves English learners seeking to understand Chinese literature; on the other hand, it provides reliable English versions of Lu Xun's works for both academic research and general reading in the English-speaking world.

The Julia Lovell translation was included in *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* published by Penguin Books in 2009. This translation belongs to the "Penguin Classics" series. It is the most complete English translation of Lu Xun's fiction published in the twenty-first century for the general English-speaking readership. Its target readers are explicitly ordinary English readers, aiming to present the literary charm of Lu Xun's stories in fluent, readable modern English.

Among the multiple English translations of *Kong Yiji* currently available in academic circles, the Yang translation and the Lovell translation respectively represent the official paradigm of Chinese-to-foreign translation and the market-oriented sinological approach to translation. Spanning the mainstream conceptions of Englishing Chinese literature over the past half-century, these two versions offer a typical basis for comparative study. The procedure is: first extract the core narrative elements of the original text, then compare the textual forms of the two translations, analyze the loss or gain of narrative functions using narrative theory, and finally apply the "prescriptive + dialectical" criteria to evaluate the rationality of the rewriting comprehensively.

4. Narratological critique of the translation of "*Kong Yiji*"

4.1. Narrative perspective

Narrative perspective determines from whose viewpoint the story is told. The story unfolds through the first-person external focalization of the apprentice "I," which generates a subtle interplay between the "experiencing self" and the "narrating self."

Original: 我从此便整天的站在柜台里，专管我的职务。虽然没有什么失职，但总觉得有些单调，有些无聊。

Yang translation: Thenceforward I stood all day behind the counter, fully engaged with my duties. Although I took satisfaction in this work, I found it monotonous and futile.

Lovell translation: All day, every day I spent behind the bar, devoting myself to this task – bored senseless, even though I never made any mistakes.

The subtlety of the original “总觉得有些单调，有些无聊” lies in the overlap of dual narrative voices: The “experiencing self” (the twelve-year-old apprentice) conveys daily monotony and tedium; the “narrating self” (the adult looking back) adds a detached, critical perspective. The two translations differ accordingly, each with gains and losses. Yang’s “futile” elevates boredom to meaninglessness, allowing the adult’s helplessness to permeate the child’s mind—shifting the effect from concrete experience to existential insight. This better matches Lu Xun’s vision of a stagnant society, yet sacrifices the boy’s authentic voice. Lovell’s “bored senseless” intensifies emotional immediacy, fitting the apprentice’s youthful character, but suppresses the narrating self’s necessary restraint. In terms of the core narrative element of “dual voice overlap,” both translations exhibit prescriptive inadequacy. The atmosphere of “doing anything is meaningless” created by Yang’s “futile” is closer than Lovell’s “bored senseless” (which conveys “this moment is hard to bear”) to the ultimate sentiment of Lu Xun’s perspective through the twelve-year-old’s eyes as he surveys the stagnant pool of society. However, we must acknowledge that this closeness comes at the cost of partially sacrificing the authenticity of the “twelve-year-old identity”—and this is precisely an irresolvable paradox in translation, a “necessary loss” that should be pointed out.

Original: 我想，讨饭一样的人，也配考我么？便回过脸去，不再理会。

Yang translation: I thought, “I’m not going to be tested by a beggar!” So I turned away and ignored him.

Lovell translation: What right did he – a beggar – have to test me, I thought. I turned away, ignoring him.

In the original, after “我想” there is no quotation mark or colon; it is directly followed by “讨饭一样的人，也配考我么？” This contempt is so taken for granted that it remains an unformed instinctive reaction, not formulated into complete language. This formless indifference is more profound than overt rejection. Yang’s translation uses a direct inner monologue, transforming “unformed indifference” into “formed rejection,” conveying the narrator’s contempt for and coldness toward Kong Yiji, and enhancing the clarity and impact of the narration. Lovell uses the interrogative structure “What right did he... have,” preserving the grammatical form of thought and rationalizing “unformed indifference” into “questioning,” with a stronger tone that intensifies the narrator’s contempt and disdain for Kong Yiji. Both translations eliminate the ambiguity of the original thought presentation, rewriting the “unformed instinctive reaction” into “complete linguistic form.” In this narrative element, both exhibit prescriptive shortcomings. “What right did he... have” makes the twelve-year-old apprentice appear more self-aware and self-respecting, adding vividness and empathy to the character. Although it fits the character’s personality, it fails to capture Lu Xun’s intention of using numb character attitudes to satirize social phenomena. Therefore, Yang’s translation is slightly superior in terms of tonal restraint.

4.2. Narrative time

Genette discusses narrative time from three aspects: (1) order, including prolepsis and analepsis; (2) duration,

including summary, pause, ellipsis, scene (discourse equal to story time); (3) frequency, including singular narrative, repetitive narrative, and iterative narrative ^[5].

Original: 听人家背地里谈论，孔乙己原来也读过书，但终于没有进学。

Yang translation: From gossip I heard, Kung I-chi had studied the classics but had never passed the official examination.

Lovell translation: Somewhere in the distant past, the story went, Kong Yiji had received a classical education, but it had never got him past even the lowest grade of the imperial civil service examination.

The subtlety of Lu Xun's original here lies in the dual ambiguity of the information source: “听人家背地里谈论” indicates hearsay from unspecified others, implying secrecy and informality. The narrator neither fully understands nor truly cares about Kong Yiji's past; he merely tells the reader what he has heard, like relaying news. This “indifferent retelling” is a core technique conveying social numbness via the narrator's voice.

Regarding the core narrative element of “information source ambiguity and narrator indifference,” both translations show prescriptive inadequacy, but for different reasons. Yang uses the past perfect tense (“had studied”) to clearly demarcate the main narrative from the analepsis for readers. This typically embodies what Genette calls “temporal anachrony” through analepsis, forming a dual temporal layer of “past events” and “present narration” in narrative time structure. Lovell uses “Somewhere in the distant past” to explicitly mark the retrogressive time, making the temporal distance explicit so that readers can recognize the analepsis without relying on tense comprehension. In effect, Yang tends to shorten the informational distance between narrator and reader; through grammatical and attitudinal signposts, she makes it clear that the narrator is both recounting and evaluating. This reflects a translational poetics of the “translator as clear communicator.” Lovell tends to shorten the reader's temporal distance from the events—she informs the reader of the analeptic temporal anchor, preventing readers from getting lost in tenses. At the same time, “the story went” elongates the distance between the reader and the truth of the information, indicating that this is a story rather than fact. This double estrangement — remote in time and indirect in source — is closer to the original narrator's passive reception and relaying of a past unrelated to himself. In this respect, Lovell's version is slightly more effective in preserving the narrative tone of the original.

Original: 掌柜也伸出头去，一面说，“孔乙己么？你还欠十九个钱呢！”

Yang translation: At this point my employer leaned over the counter and said: “Is that Kung I-chi? You still owe nineteen coppers!”

Lovell translation: “Is that Kong Yiji?” the manager craned forward. “You still owe me nineteen coppers!”

Original: 到了年关，掌柜取下粉板说，“孔乙己还欠十九个钱呢！”到第二年的端午，又说“孔乙己还欠十九个钱呢！”

Yang translation: At the end of the year, when the tavern keeper took down the board, he said, “Kung I-chi still owes nineteen coppers!” At the Dragon Boat Festival the next year, he said the same thing again.

Lovell translation: “Kong Yiji still owes me those nineteen coppers!” the manager said, as the year neared its end, taking the slate down again. “Kong Yiji still owes me nineteen coppers!” he repeated at the Dragon Boat Festival, in early summer the following year.

In Genette's classification, the manager's three repetitions of “Kong Yiji still owes nineteen coppers” constitute repetitive narration—that is, one narrative act corresponding to multiple events: the manager says

it three times (before Mid-Autumn, at New Year, and at Dragon Boat Festival), and the narrator presents these three instances successively to the reader. The Yang translation preserves this frequency feature, using the identical sentence “Kung I-chi still owes nineteen coppers!” each time, which demonstrates the reinforcement effect of repetitive narration. Through the manager’s identical repetition, it also reveals that the manager is utterly unconcerned about Kong Yiji’s life or death, caring only about the coppers he owes. The Lovell translation, while retaining the repetition, makes a slight change: it adds “those,” referring to the coppers Kong Yiji owed earlier, making the repetitive narration more coherent. In terms of conveying the core narrative element of “consistency of repetitive frequency,” the Yang translation achieves equivalence, while the Lovell translation introduces a change, constituting prescriptive inadequacy. Lu Xun’s three repetitions are not meant to make readers feel that “the manager has a good memory and keeps dunning for the debt,” but quite the opposite: to make readers feel that “the manager’s entire cognition of Kong Yiji is these nineteen coppers, and this cognition is isolated and without history.” Yang achieves this “isolation” by “saying it anew each time,” while Lovell’s “those” replaces isolation with continuity. Yang is superior to Lovell in preserving this narrative element.

4.3. Speech/Thought Presentation

Leech et al. classify speech/thought presentation into five types: direct speech/thought, indirect speech/thought, free direct speech/thought, free indirect speech/thought, and speech act narration. Generally, direct speech (DS) highlights character personality, and free direct speech (FDS) accelerates rhythm^[9]. Lu Xun shapes characters through dialogue and creates atmosphere through soundscape.

Original: 孔乙己便涨红了脸，额上的青筋条条绽出，争辩道，“窃书不能算偷……窃书！……读书人的事，能算偷么？”

Yang translation: Then Kung would flush, the veins on his forehead standing out as he remonstrated: “Taking a book can’t be considered stealing, . . . Taking a book, the affair of a scholar, can’t be considered stealing!”

Lovell translation: Kong’s face would flush scarlet, the veins on his forehead throbbing in the heat of discomfort. “Stealing books is no crime! Is scholarship theft?”

In this passage, both translations retain the direct speech form. Leech & Short’s theory points out that the core function of direct speech is to “maximally preserve the acoustic effects and individual characteristics of speech.” Here, the “fragmented form” within direct speech is an externalization of Kong Yiji’s character—repetition, ellipsis, logical contradiction—these forms themselves are the direct carriers of the character’s “pedantic yet pitiable” nature. The first-person external perspective narrator “I” records this speech verbatim without explication, precisely so that readers perceive the character through the form of the speech itself. The Yang translation, by preserving repetition, ellipsis, and lexical substitution, accurately conveys this narrative mechanism of “speech equals character.” The Lovell translation compresses the three sentences into two, deletes the ellipsis, and abandons the lexical substitution—these changes touch upon the core narrative element of “speech form as character.” Therefore, the Lovell translation constitutes prescriptive inadequacy.

Original: “他总仍旧是偷。这一回，是自己发昏，竟偷到丁举人家里去了。他家的东西，偷得的么？”“后来怎么样？”“怎么样？先写服辩，后来是打，打了大半夜，再打折了腿。”“后来呢？”“后来打折了腿了。”“打折了怎样呢？”“怎样？……谁晓得？许是死了。”

Yang translation: “He was stealing again. This time he was fool enough to steal from Mr. Ting, the

provincial scholar! As if anybody could get away with that!” “What then?” “What then? First he had to write a confession, then he was beaten. The beating lasted nearly all night, until his legs were broken.” “And then?” “Well, his legs were broken.” “Yes, but after that?” “After? . . . Who knows? He may be dead.”

Lovell translation: “He was stealing, as usual. But he must have been out of his mind to try it on with Mr Ding, the magistrate. Just asking for trouble.” “So what happened?” “First they got a confession out of him, then they beat the hell out of him and broke his legs. Past midnight it went on.” “Then what happened?” “Well, his legs were broken.” “I mean after that.” “Oh... Who knows? Maybe he’s dead.”

In the original, the drinkers’ dialogue is presented in free direct speech (FDS)—omitting reporting verbs and advancing the plot and accelerating narrative rhythm through tight question-and-answer structures. The ellipsis in “怎样? 谁晓得?” creates a break in the speech flow, producing the effect of hesitation and impatience before the drinker’s answer. The Yang translation preserves two features of FDS: no reporting verbs and retaining the ellipsis, allowing English readers to sense the perfunctory coldness. The Lovell translation, while consistent with the original in “no reporting verbs,” deviates from the narrative core of FDS in the following aspects: (1) it cuts the repeated question “And then?,” compressing the rhythm of the questioner’s repeated confirmation of “broken legs”; (2) it changes “怎样? 谁晓得?” to “Oh... Who knows?”, retaining the ellipsis but replacing the interrogative “怎样?” with “Oh,” changing the impatient retort into a more natural everyday conversation. Although this improves readability, it also makes the “numb voice” less piercing, weakening the social critique that Lu Xun conveys through the FDS form itself. Therefore, in preserving the FDS form, the Yang translation aligns with the narrative core, while the Lovell translation makes a narrative form change, constituting prescriptive inadequacy.

4.4. Legibility and readability

Legibility refers to the amount of effort required in reading: the less effort, the higher the legibility; readability, on the other hand, refers to the novel being not only decipherable but also vivid, interesting, and pleasurable ^[10].

Original: 直起身又看一看豆，自己摇头说，“不多不多！多乎哉？不多也。”于是这一群孩子都在笑声里走散了。

Yang translation: Then straightening up to look at the peas again, he would shake his head. “Not much! Verily, not much, forsooth!” Then the children would scamper off, with shouts of laughter.

Lovell translation: Straightening up, he would glance back at the beans, shaking his head: “Hardly any! Are the beans multitudinous in abundance? Multitudinous in abundance they are not.” At which his young audience would scatter hilariously.

The Yang translation preserves much of the native culture, using archaic English vocabulary to reproduce the stylistic features of the original classical Chinese, but at the cost of reader acceptability. Yang’s strategy essentially raises cognitive cost, lowering legibility in exchange for a higher-level cultural aesthetic experience. The Lovell translation adopts cultural adaptation for clarity, using repetitive interrogative structures that both reproduce the classical Chinese features of the original and allow readers to sense Kong Yiji’s character. Lovell’s strategy essentially prioritizes reducing cognitive cost and improving legibility, providing another form of aesthetic pleasure through syntactic complexity. Moreover, the Lovell translation features more varied sentence patterns, more short clauses, more cohesive devices, stronger colloquialism, and stronger readability and receptivity.

Original: 听人家背地里谈论，孔乙己原来也读过书，但终于没有进学，又不会营生；于是愈过愈穷，弄到将要讨饭了。

Yang translation: From gossip I heard, Kung I-chi had studied the classics but had never passed the official examination. With no way of making a living, he grew poorer and poorer, until he was practically reduced to beggary.

Lovell translation: Somewhere in the distant past, the story went, Kong Yiji had received a classical education, but it had never got him past even the lowest grade of the imperial civil service examination. Since he had no head for any other kind of business, he grew steadily poorer until he was on the point of having to beg for food.

The subtlety of the narrator “I” here lies in the “indifferent retelling” of Kong Yiji’s background, while maintaining the informational limitation of the first-person perspective “听人家背地里谈论” indicates the narrator neither guarantees the truth of the information nor shows any emotional fluctuation regarding Kong Yiji’s fate. Yang’s rendering of “进学” as “official examination” is more precise in institutional transmission and preserves the first-person limited perspective’s voice authenticity of “merely retelling without explaining,” but its cultural default strategy sets a higher cognitive threshold for ordinary English readers. Lovell, through explicit strategies, significantly lowers the comprehension threshold, allowing readers to establish cognitive nodes such as “China had an imperial civil service examination system” and “Kong Yiji couldn’t even pass the lowest grade” without needing to consult additional references. Yang’s choice makes the translation closer to the original narrative mechanism but raises the entry threshold for readers; Lovell’s choice makes the translation more widely acceptable but simplifies or transforms some cultural information. Both have their legitimacy, depending on the reader positioning and dissemination goals of the translation—Yang serves Sinological research and academic comparison, while Lovell serves cross-cultural mass dissemination.

5. Conclusion

This paper, drawing on narratological theory, conducts a narrative translation critique of the Yang and Lovell translations of “Kong Yiji” from four aspects, revealing the differences and effects of the two translators in conveying the original narrative. Lu Xun closely links Kong Yiji’s personal tragedy with the decay of the social system and the coldness of human nature, achieving a critical effect of “seeing the big from the small.”

The Yang translation pursues fidelity to the original and prioritizes faithfulness to the narrative core; the Lovell translation contains more modifiers and connectives, prioritizes reader reception fluency, and is somewhat exaggerated in places to facilitate comprehension for Western readers.

More importantly, this study demonstrates that narratological criticism is not merely about judging which translation is “better,” but about revealing the “conservation” and “dissipation” of narrative effects in cross-linguistic transfer. Yang’s conservation of narrative form dissipates reading fluency; Lovell’s gain in readability inevitably dissipates the original’s austere critique. This paper validates the applicability of Wang Shuhuai’s model to Lu Xun’s translations and offers strategies for translating classicalized characters and retrospective first-person narratives. The limitations are: first, the analysis is confined to Chinese-English translation, so broader applicability remains to be verified; second, it focuses on four dimensions and does not cover narrative space or reliability^[11].

Disclosure statement

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