

Reception Theory and the English-Chinese Translation of Fantasy Fiction: A Case Study of *In an Absent Dream*

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Abstract

In recent years, fantasy fiction has attracted growing attention among Chinese readers, generating increasing demand for high-quality translations of Western works. Yet the translation of this genre remains under-explored, particularly in terms of linguistic style, cultural imagery, and emotional resonance that shape reader reception. Guided by Reception Theory, this study examines the English-Chinese translation of Seanan McGuire's *In an Absent Dream*, focusing on the interplay between linguistic and stylistic features, culturally specific expressions and symbolic imagery, narrative tone and emotional impact, and the strategies adopted to align the text with target readers' expectations. The analysis demonstrates that a reception-oriented approach allows translators to balance fidelity to the source text with audience engagement, enhancing both cultural accessibility and affective resonance. This study advances the understanding of translation strategies in fantasy fiction and offers practical insights into reader-centered approaches in cross-cultural literary translation.

Keywords

Reception Theory; Fantasy Literature; Translation Strategies; Reader Engagement; *In an Absent Dream*.

1. Introduction

Fantasy literature occupies a unique position in global literary culture, blending myth, imagination, and psychological realism to explore both the ordinary and the extraordinary. In recent decades, its influence has expanded far beyond Western readership, capturing the attention of Chinese audiences who seek emotionally resonant and aesthetically rich narratives. As the market for translated fantasy fiction continues to grow, translation has become an essential medium for cross-cultural exchange and literary enrichment.

However, fantasy literature poses particular challenges for translators. Its world-building, metaphorical language, and culture-specific imagery often resist straightforward equivalence. Translators must decide how to convey imaginative worlds and emotional depth in ways that remain accessible and appealing to target readers. Despite the growing popularity of the genre, academic studies focusing on its English-Chinese translation remain limited, and few have examined how translation strategies can be guided by reader-oriented theories.

Seanan McGuire's *In an Absent Dream* (2019), the fourth novella in her award-winning *Wayward Children* series, presents an ideal case for such investigation. The story of Katherine Lundy, a girl torn between the rational world and a realm of impossible bargains, embodies the emotional complexity and moral ambiguity typical of modern fantasy fiction. The author of this paper previously translated the novella during her graduate studies; although the translation has not been formally published, it was incorporated as part of the materials in her master's thesis.

This study addresses that gap by applying Reception Theory, developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, to the analysis of translation strategies. The theory emphasizes the reader's active role in shaping textual meaning and introduces key concepts such as the "horizon of expectations" and "interpretive gaps". By examining how linguistic, cultural, and stylistic features are adapted in translation, this paper explores how translators can anticipate and shape the reception of fantasy literature among Chinese readers.

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it demonstrates how Reception Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the interactive process between text, translator, and reader. It offers translation strategies that enhance readability and engagement without compromising artistic integrity. Ultimately, the study contributes to both translation practice and the scholarly discussion of how fantasy fiction can be effectively mediated across cultural boundaries.

2. Literature Review

The term "fantasy" derives from Western fantasy literature. As a major genre in European and American literary traditions, it possesses a long and rich history, drawing sustenance from mythology, epic poetry, and medieval romance (Chen, 2017). Fantasy literature traces its roots to ancient myths and legends. In the 9th century BC, Homer's *Odyssey* tells a story of the hero's magical journey after the Trojan War. The earliest existing epic poem in English, *Beowulf*, was written in the 7th century and tells the story of a hero's victory over monsters, witches and dragons. Fantasy novels of later ages mostly draw inspiration or materials from these originator works. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), for example, falls into the Arthurian category. In addition, *The Lord of the Rings* was also inspired by *Beowulf*. Fantasy writers such as E. M. Forster, J. R. R. Tolkien, and W. R. Irwin have all offered their own interpretations of the genre. In their view, fantasy fiction is characterized by boundless imagination and features elements that could never exist in reality, such as witches, magic, and dwarfs (Guo, 2010). Given the imaginative and culture-specific nature of the genre, the translation of fantasy fiction poses unique challenges and has thus attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years.

In the Chinese-speaking world, fantasy literature was introduced and popularized primarily by Zhu Xueheng in Taiwan, whose translations and writings, along with early magazine coverage and role-playing games, cultivated an early readership and laid the foundation for domestic fantasy fiction (Chen, 2017). In fictional literature, readers are increasingly captivated by these richly constructed imaginative worlds, prompting the translation and introduction of numerous fantasy works into the domestic market. These fantasy worlds are entirely distinct from reality, comprising supernatural beings, invented laws, and phenomena that have no real-world counterparts, and realizing them requires substantial creative and interpretive effort from both authors and translators. In particular, the handling of the internal laws of the fantasy world and elements that do not exist in reality is critical in translation. Translators must carefully analyze and evaluate these elements to preserve their original characteristics as faithfully as possible, while simultaneously considering the target readers' comprehension and cultural expectations. This careful negotiation ensures that the imaginative and immersive qualities of fantasy worlds are maintained for the target audience, highlighting the unique challenges and scholarly significance of translating fantasy literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

Reception Theory, also known as the aesthetics of reception, is an influential school of literary criticism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Founded by scholars such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser at the University of Konstanz in Germany, it is also referred to as the Constance School. Jauss (1982) first proposed the concept of Reception Theory in 1967, arguing

that a literary work remains incomplete until it is read and interpreted by readers. Rooted in modern hermeneutics and influenced by Piaget's epistemology, the theory emphasizes the reader's role as an active participant in meaning-making. Drawing on phenomenology and hermeneutics, Reception Theory redefines the relationship between text and reader. It holds that the reader, rather than the author, is the decisive factor in the process of interpretation. Readers bring to a text their own pre-understandings, aesthetic abilities, and social backgrounds, which directly influence their interpretation and acceptance of a work. However, reader subjectivity does not exist in isolation—it is shaped by historical and cultural contexts. As Iser notes, the "gaps" and "indeterminacies" within a text invite readers to cooperate with it, thus realizing communication between reader and text.

Harold Marcuse defines reception history as "the history of the meanings that have been imputed to historical events... tracing how participants, observers, and interpreters have made sense of events both as they unfolded and over time" (Marcuse, 2003). This idea underscores that interpretation evolves across time and context, a principle equally applicable to literary and translation reception.

A central concept in Reception Theory is Jauss's horizon of expectations, which denotes the framework through which readers perceive and evaluate a literary work. It is shaped by prior literary experience, historical and cultural context, and individual traits such as age, education, and aesthetic literacy. Readers approach a text with anticipations of its style, imagery, and meaning, seeking both alignment with and transcendence of these expectations. This horizon is dynamic, evolving with accumulated reading experience and enabling reinterpretation. Jauss distinguishes between directed expectations, shaped by habitual responses, and innovative expectations, which embrace novelty and deviation. For translators, understanding these expectations is essential, as they must ensure that their renditions resonate with the target readers' aesthetic norms and cultural comprehension (Chen, 2010).

Another important notion in Reception Theory is Iser's concept of blankness and indeterminacy, derived from Roman Ingarden's phenomenological aesthetics. "Blankness" refers to the textual gaps or unspoken elements that require readers to infer meaning, while "indeterminacy" denotes linguistic or thematic ambiguity. These textual gaps invite active participation from readers, stimulating imagination and interpretive creativity. In translation, cultural and linguistic differences often generate additional blanks and ambiguities. Translators must decide whether to fill these gaps to facilitate understanding or to preserve them to maintain interpretive openness. As Hu et al. (2006) note, the externalization of such indeterminacies should remain appropriate and context-sensitive, since they serve as vital channels for reader-text interaction.

Reception Theory fundamentally challenges the traditional author-centered paradigm by shifting attention toward the reader. Jauss maintains that the meaning of a literary work arises from the interaction between text and reader, not solely from the author's intent. Similarly, in translation studies, the reception of the target text determines its ultimate significance. This perspective parallels Skopos Theory in its emphasis on reader-oriented translation, but Reception Theory further stresses that reading is an active process, where readers construct meaning through engagement rather than passively receive it. In essence, Reception Theory establishes a reader-centered model in which texts exist for readers and gain value through their interpretation. The theory redefines the triadic relationship between author, text, and reader—asserting that a work achieves completeness only through active reception. For translation, this means that translators, as mediating readers, must anticipate and adapt to the target audience's horizon of expectations to achieve both fidelity and resonance.

4. Case Study: Translation of *In an Absent Dream*

Seanan McGuire's *In an Absent Dream* is the fourth volume in the *Wayward Children* series. The novel combines elements of portal fantasy and psychological allegory, exploring themes of freedom, belonging, and the price of choice. Its poetic narrative style, lyrical rhythm, and metaphorical language present unique challenges in translation.

In this section, the analysis focuses on how the translator adapts linguistic and stylistic features, cultural imagery, narrative tone, and emotional resonance to enhance target readers' engagement and align with the expectations implied in Reception Theory.

4.1. Linguistic and Stylistic Features of the Source Text

The way Seanan McGuire writes in *In an Absent Dream* shows a careful mix of poetic language and a storytelling rhythm like a fairy tale. Her style moves between realistic and dream-like parts. This two-sided nature is difficult for the translator, because she has to keep both the exact meaning and the feeling of the original.

The linguistic and stylistic analysis of *In an Absent Dream* reveals how the translator negotiates between linguistic naturalness and stylistic fidelity, seeking to balance readability for child readers with the preservation of the original's fantasy tone. As a work of children's fantasy, the novella features a distinct narrative rhythm and imagery that requires both semantic accuracy and stylistic creativity in translation. The translator's approach demonstrates the dynamic interplay between literal rendering and adaptive re-creation, particularly in the translation of metaphorical language, reduplication, and rhythmical phrasing.

In character dialogue, the translator often resorts to colloquialization and rhythmical restructuring to maintain the liveliness of spoken language. For instance, the original line “Hello, the house!” she shouted. ‘It’s Moon! I’m outside! I found a new girl! She doesn’t know the rules!” (ST) is rendered as “房子，你好啊！我是月亮，在门口站着哩！我找到个新来的小姑娘，她还不知道咱们这儿的规则哪！”(TT). The target version skillfully integrates interjections (“啊”, “哪”) and regionalized particles (“哩”), imitating the rhythm of child speech in Mandarin while maintaining the character’s exuberant personality. This approach ensures pragmatic equivalence rather than strict syntactic fidelity, enhancing the sense of immediacy in the target text.

A similar adaptation is evident in the rendering of “Shake on it.’ Moon stuck out one long-fingered hand. ‘Come on. Shake.’” (ST) as “拉钩。月亮伸出一只长长的手指：‘来吧，拉钩上吊，一百年不许变！’” (TT). Here, the translator replaces the culturally specific handshake with the Chinese idiom “拉钩上吊，一百年不许变”, a children’s folk rhyme meaning “pinky swear”. This creative domestication transforms a foreign gesture into a culturally recognizable one, maintaining the tone of youthful sincerity while preserving the performative function of the original dialogue.

In narrative prose, syntactic adjustments are often employed to enhance coherence and readability. The sentence “The Lundy who had stepped through the door for her second visit to the Goblin Market would barely have recognized the one who came stumbling through it for her second return to the world of her birth” from the source text is translated as “第二次去妖精市场的伦迪要是看见第二次从妖精市场回家的伦迪，一定认不出那个跌跌撞撞穿过门的人是自己。” into the target text. By introducing the reduplicated verb “跌跌撞撞”, the translator preserves both the motion and emotional fatigue of the character while simplifying the sentence structure for better accessibility. The rhythmical restructuring illustrates a functional equivalence approach, prioritizing fluency and emotional continuity over strict grammatical correspondence.

Overall, the translator's manipulation of linguistic and stylistic features demonstrates a deliberate balance between literal precision and reader-oriented adaptation. Through the selective use of reduplication, idiomatic expression, and colloquial tone, the translation succeeds in reconstituting McGuire's poetic and childlike style within a Chinese linguistic framework. This section highlights how linguistic strategies function as mediators of narrative mood and reader empathy, laying the foundation for the subsequent discussion on cultural imagery and emotional resonance.

4.2. Culture-specific Expressions and Symbolic Imagery

The cultural and symbolic dimension of *In an Absent Dream* constitutes one of the greatest challenges in its Chinese translation. McGuire's narrative draws heavily upon Anglo-European folklore and mythic archetypes—such as the Goblin Market, the wasp, and the impossible door—which carry deep intertextual associations for Anglophone readers. For Chinese readers, however, these motifs lack direct cultural resonance. The translator must therefore reconstruct symbolic meaning through contextual adaptation, enabling the target audience to experience comparable emotional and cognitive engagement.

One recurrent image is that of the Goblin Market, the novella's central metaphor for moral exchange and personal choice. The English term “goblin” evokes a rich lineage of European fairy tales, connoting both mischief and danger. In the Chinese translation, it appears as “妖精市场”, a term that bridges the fantastical and the familiar. The word “妖精” carries ambivalent connotations in Chinese—sometimes charming, sometimes malevolent—thus reproducing the moral ambiguity embedded in the original. Moreover, the substitution of “Market” with “市场” rather than “集市” or “市集” reflects a deliberate modernization that aligns with younger readers' linguistic intuition, while still retaining the allegorical tension between fairness and temptation.

Another striking instance is the image of the Wasp Queen, who embodies order and punishment. The translator renders it directly as “黄蜂女王”, preserving the biological specificity of “wasp” and the royal metaphor of “queen”. However, as “黄蜂” is a relatively uncommon term in everyday Chinese, it introduces a sense of estrangement that mirrors the unsettling aura of McGuire's world. Here, foreignization becomes a stylistic device that heightens the text's otherworldly tone, inviting readers to confront unfamiliarity rather than resolving it. This echoes Iser's (1978) notion of the “gap”, where interpretive distance stimulates imaginative participation.

Equally symbolic is the motif of the door—a recurring image in McGuire's Wayward Children series, representing transition, self-recognition, and belonging. In the line “The impossible door opened on its own” (ST), translated as “那扇不可能存在的门自己开了” (TT), the translator retains the paradoxical modifier “不可能存在的” to maintain the metaphysical tension of the original. Rather than domesticating the image into a more idiomatic phrase, such as “那扇神奇的门”, the translator's literal rendering underscores the philosophical depth of the narrative—the coexistence of impossibility and revelation. By doing so, the translation preserves the novella's existential undertone, aligning with Jauss's (1982) idea that readers reconstruct meaning through the transformation of their horizon of expectations.

Throughout the text, symbolic imagery operates as a bridge between language and imagination, and the translator's task is to sustain its interpretive openness. In Chinese, metaphorical density is often modulated through rhythm and tone rather than lexical precision. The translator thus leverages sound, structure, and repetition to echo the original's symbolic cadence. For example, when rendering “the Market demanded balance” (ST) as “集市追求平衡” (TT), the simplicity of diction and the rhythmic bisyllabic pattern evoke a moral equilibrium

familiar to Chinese readers through idiomatic structures such as “因果平衡” or “天道酬勤”. This subtle alignment of cultural rhythm compensates for the potential loss of mythic familiarity. By mediating between foreign symbolism and local aesthetic sensibility, the translation transforms McGuire's cross-cultural fantasy into a narrative that resonates emotionally without diluting its strangeness. The resulting text demonstrates how translation functions not only as linguistic transfer but also as cultural re-imagination, constructing a new symbolic world where fantasy and philosophy converge

4.3. Culture-specific Expressions and Symbolic Imagery

In fantasy literature, tone and emotional resonance are central to the reader's immersion in the story world. The translator's task, therefore, extends beyond lexical accuracy to the recreation of the affective and stylistic atmosphere of the source text (ST). In *In an Absent Dream*, McGuire's narrative tone oscillates between wonder and melancholy, shaping the protagonist Lundy's journey from curiosity to disillusionment. To preserve this delicate balance, the translator must adopt strategies that maintain emotional authenticity while ensuring linguistic accessibility for young readers.

For instance, the novella's title itself embodies a poetic ambiguity. “*In an Absent Dream*” conveys both absence and longing, alluding to Lundy's detachment from reality and her yearning for the Goblin Market. A literal rendering such as “缺席的梦中” appears faithful but lacks emotional pull and clarity. By contrast, the chosen translation “穿梭树门的孩子” not only captures Lundy's repeated crossings between worlds but also conveys an aura of mystery and vitality suited to a children's fantasy. This demonstrates that the recreation of tone sometimes demands interpretative freedom rather than rigid fidelity, allowing the title to embody the emotional rhythm of the narrative.

A similar tonal sensitivity appears in the rendering of culturally charged expressions. For example, in the translation of Goblin Market (ST), the translator opts for “妖精市场” (TT) instead of “精灵市场” or “哥布林市场”. The choice of “妖精” resonates more with the Chinese child reader's imagination, invoking an image of playful yet eerie creatures, while avoiding culturally dissonant associations with “elves” or “goblins”. This adaptation underscores how emotional resonance depends on the translator's ability to align cultural imagery with the target reader's expectations without distorting the story world.

Emotional and stylistic nuance also emerges in micro-level choices. When the text reads, “The shimmer remained, but the wood itself was dry as a bone,” the translator renders it as “这些木水果还闪着光，可实际上却像骨头一样干巴巴的。” The addition of the reduplicated form “干巴巴的” amplifies the tactile and emotional dryness of the scene, imitating the rhythmic softness of McGuire's prose while making the description vivid and accessible. Similarly, in “The sandwich was heavy in her hand, weighted down with sweetness,” the translator transforms the metaphor into “她手里的三明治就像一块大石头，沉甸甸的，也甜腻腻的”, skillfully balancing literal imagery with emotional symbolism. The use of reduplicated adjectives (“沉甸甸的”, “甜腻腻的”) enhances the rhythm of the target text (TT) and mirrors Lundy's psychological burden, effectively transferring emotional tension through linguistic rhythm.

At times, emotion is carried not through explicit sentiment but through syntax and structure. In “The Lundy who had stepped through the door for her second visit...” (ST) the translator reorganizes the sentence into a natural Chinese rhythm: “第二次去妖精市场的伦迪要是看见第二次从妖精市场回家的伦迪，一定认不出那个跌跌撞撞穿过门的人是自己。” (TT). The repetition of “第二次” and the insertion of “跌跌撞撞” evoke both the cyclical pattern of Lundy's journeys and her psychological exhaustion, strengthening the emotional cadence of the TT.

Moreover, the translator's adaptation of idiomatic expressions demonstrates an awareness of child readers' linguistic familiarity. For example, "Sink into the school" (ST) is turned into "老老实实在这里呆着" (TT), a colloquial expression easily understood by younger audiences. Likewise, "The impossible door" (ST) becomes "不思议之门" (TT), a term frequently found in Chinese children's media, such as games and cartoons, thus tapping into the "expectation horizon" of the target audience.

These stylistic choices collectively highlight how tone reconstruction is inseparable from cultural resonance. In translating children's fantasy literature, the translator functions not merely as a linguistic mediator but as a cultural storyteller—recasting sound, rhythm, and emotion to harmonize with the sensibility of a new readership. The resulting translation preserves the emotional cadence of McGuire's prose while achieving fluency and accessibility in the target language.

4.4. Culture-specific Expressions and Symbolic Imagery

Building upon the tonal reconstruction above, the Chinese translation of *In an Absent Dream* reveals a deliberate orientation toward the horizon of expectations of its target readership—primarily young readers steeped in local fantasy discourse. The translator employs strategies of cultural domestication, intertextual resonance, and rhythmic accessibility to sustain immersion and affective engagement.

The adaptation of "Goblin Market" (ST) into "妖精市场," (TT) as discussed earlier, exemplifies how lexical choice reflects readerly psychology. "妖精" evokes mischief without grotesqueness, narrowing aesthetic distance (Jauss, 1982) and embedding familiar archetypes in the target ecology. Similarly, transforming "Shake on it" (ST) into "拉钩上吊, 一百年不许变" (TT) activates shared cultural memory, converting a neutral gesture into a ritual of sincerity familiar to Chinese childhood.

Reader expectation also governs rhythm and syntax. The rendering of "Others sank into the school" (ST) as "其他人老老实实在这里呆着" (TT) uses reduplication to create idiomatic warmth, while "It's not the kind of curfew you may know..." (ST) becomes "你理解的宵禁可能是....." (TT) introducing direct address to foster reader participation. These shifts embody Venuti's (1995) concept of domestication as ethical engagement—translation as relational empathy rather than linguistic compromise.

Even pacing reflects reception awareness. By merging short sentences such as "He decided to set up camp and wait for his mother to come back. She didn't. He found me, instead..." into a smoother Chinese sequence with cohesive connectors, the translator enhances narrative continuity for younger readers.

Through these adaptive maneuvers, the translation operates as a dialogue between text, culture, and reader. It transforms foreignness into familiarity without erasing its strangeness—remaining faithful to McGuire's lyrical vision while resonating with the affective sensibilities of the Chinese audience.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the E-C translation about *In an Absent Dream* through the lens of Reception Theory reveals that translation is not merely a linguistic transference but a dynamic interaction between the translator, the text, and the target reader. As both a reader and a re-creator, the translator mediates between the imaginative universe of the source text (ST) and the cultural horizon of the target audience. This mediating role becomes particularly significant in the case of fantasy fiction, where unfamiliar worlds and symbols require interpretive negotiation to achieve emotional accessibility. From a reception-oriented perspective, translation strategies

such as cultural domestication, rhythmical restructuring, and the use of reduplication all serve to bridge the “horizon of expectations” between source and target readers. By transforming culturally specific elements like the handshake into “拉钩上吊，一百年不许变”, or the “Goblin Market” into “妖精市场”, the translator anticipates the cultural and psychological frames of reference of young Chinese readers. These strategies confirm Jauss’s view that the act of reading—and by extension, translation—is a historical and culturally conditioned process. The translator’s choices reshape the text’s reception by reconfiguring its aesthetic distance, inviting the target reader into an imaginative yet emotionally familiar world.

Moreover, the translator’s adaptations illustrate the productive role of Iser’s concepts of “gaps” and “indeterminacies.” Rather than eliminating every ambiguity, the translation sometimes preserves strangeness—such as retaining the meaning of “The impossible door” by translating it into “不思议之门” instead of domesticating it—thus stimulating interpretive participation from readers. This reflects an advanced understanding of Reception Theory: effective translation does not aim to erase cultural difference but to convert it into a space for imaginative engagement. By doing so, the translation enables Chinese readers to actively co-construct meaning, transforming the reading experience into a process of discovery rather than mere consumption.

The findings also underscore that the translation of fantasy literature must balance readability and otherness. Over-domestication risks flattening the rich symbolic landscape of the original, while excessive foreignization may alienate readers. The translator of *In an Absent Dream* negotiates this tension by alternating between domesticated and foreignized strategies, depending on narrative function. For example, emotional scenes employ colloquial Chinese expressions and reduplication to sustain empathy, while scenes of mystery or moral tension retain foreignized imagery to preserve narrative strangeness. This strategic duality aligns with the dual aesthetic demands of Reception Theory—recognition and renewal—allowing the text to both satisfy and challenge the reader’s expectations.

Since children often encounter obstacles in comprehending translated texts, translators should not only attend to their general cognitive and emotional characteristics but also consider their capacity to receive the linguistic and cultural nuances of the source text. In this sense, the translation process becomes both interpretive and pedagogical—an act of cultural mediation that shapes how new generations perceive foreign literary imagination. In the context of children’s fantasy fiction, translators must not only render language but also cultivate empathy, curiosity, and cognitive engagement. Reception Theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding this process: it reconceptualizes translation as an act of “responsive creation”, where the translator predicts and shapes how readers emotionally and cognitively receive the text. This approach shifts the focus from static equivalence to dynamic interaction, emphasizing that translation success is measured not by literal faithfulness but by the depth of reader engagement it elicits.

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