

An Analysis of “The Gift of the Magi” from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract:

Henry’s short stories are celebrated for their humorous and vivid language, reflecting the local condition of late 19th-century America. His work has captivated readers worldwide since their publication. Maggie’s gift is one of his masterpieces and reflects his unique language style. At the same time, the Functional Equivalence Theory as a classical theory of translation also can be used to deal with the problems in the process of translating. Guided by Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of two Chinese translations of different eras by Wang Yongnian and Cui Shuang in order to explore how the translators accurately convey the author’s thoughts and emotions. Therefore, the readers can understand the unique charm of the original literary style. According to the research, both of the translators’ work achieved the goal of the functional equivalence excellently in their unique ways, representing the reading aesthetics of readers in two different eras.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi”

1. Introduction

O. Henry’s fiction is renowned for its surprising but logical endings and “The Gift of the Magi” is one of his representative works. Rooted in the social context of late 19th-century America, the story depicts an impoverished couple who sacrifice their most valuable possessions for each other. This story not only critiques the vast wealth gap between the rich and the poor in American society but also celebrates the protagonists’ selfless devotion and profound love [1]. Due to significant cultural differences between

China and the United States, as a reflection of the lives of the American underclass in the 19th century, “The Gift of the Magi” holds considerable value for cross-cultural studies. Moreover, O. Henry’s distinctive writing style combines wit and humor with incisive social criticism, engaging readers emotionally and intellectually.

In China, multiple translations of O. Henry’s works has been published, including those by Wang Yongnian, Li Wenjun, and Zhang Jinghao. Among them, Wang Yongnian’s translation is widely regarded as a classic and influenced considerably due to its faith-

fulness to the original text [2]. Meanwhile, Cui Shuang, a contemporary translator, has gained increasing attention in recent years for her Selected Short Stories of O. Henry, which has emerged as another popular version following Wang’s version.

According to data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), considerable scholarly are attracted by O. Henry’s short stories consistently. As of August 2025, the number of research papers on O. Henry’s fiction has reached 1,060, with 203 focusing specifically on “The Gift of the Magi.” Among them, some studies analyzed O. Henry’s works, including “The Cop and the Anthem,” through the lens of Functional Equivalence Theory. By contrast, there remains a relative research gap in the literary translation studies of another representative work by O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi.” Only 12 relevant academic papers have been identified, and most of these primarily focus on the manifestation of translator subjectivity. These studies neglect the application of Functional Equivalence Theory, which is a fundamental concept in the translation process. Therefore, this study employs Functional Equivalence Theory to compare how two translators reproduce the cultural connotations and humorous elements of the original text, aiming to provide insights and practical references for future translation practices.

2. The Concept of Functional Equiva-

lence Theory

Eugene Nida’s “Functional Equivalence Theory” centers on the core principle of “functional equivalence.” He emphasized “dynamic equivalence” developed into functional equivalence, proposing that the translation should not rigidly pursue formal correspondence but aim to elicit a psychological response in the target-language readers similar to that of the original readers [3]. Nida’s theory outlines four basic requirements: first, the translation should stand to reason; second, the translation should convey the spirit of the original text; third, the expression should be natural and fluent; and fourth, the translation should resonate with readers [4]. Although the theory was originally developed to address cultural barriers in Bible translation, its core principle of achieving equivalent reader response remains highly applicable to analyzing the cross-cultural reception of literary works. It is therefore theoretically valid to employ this framework to analyze the mechanisms by which cultural elements such as the religious significance of the “Magi” and the cultural meaning of Christmas as well as humorous language, are either preserved or adapted in translation [5].

3. Reproducing Source-Text Features in “The Gift of the Magi” from a Functional Equivalence Perspective

Table 1: The Comparison of Rendering the King Solomon Allusion

Original Text	Translated by Wang	Translated by Cui
Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft,Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’ s jewels and gifts.Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.	王永年译：如果示巴女王住在天井对面的公寓里，德拉总有一天会把她的头发悬在窗外去晾干，使那位女王的珠宝和礼物相形见绌。如果所罗门王当了看门人，把他所有的财富都堆在地下室里，吉姆每次经过那儿时准会掏出他的金表看看，好让所罗门妒忌得吹胡子瞪眼睛。	崔爽译：假如示巴女王住在通风天井对面的另一间公寓里，只要某天黛拉将头发披散在窗外晾晒，就能让女王陛下的珠宝都比得黯然失色。若是由所罗门王来做公寓的看门人，就算他把金银财宝堆满底层，吉姆每次经过时肯定会摸出自己的金表，好看看国王一脸嫉妒地拽着胡子。
	王永年译本脚注：示巴女王示巴古国，在阿拉伯西南，即今之也门。《旧约·列王记上》载示巴女王带了许多香料，宝石和黄金去觐见所罗门王，用难题考验所罗门的智慧。 所罗门王：公元前十世纪以色列国王，以聪明豪富著称。	崔爽脚注：示巴女王，又称席巴女王，是公元前非洲东部示巴王国的女王。她在非洲势力最强的 时候，疆域涵盖东部非洲以及现今的沙特阿拉伯南部地区和也门，是当时的人间巨富。 所罗门王，犹太民族历史上最伟大的君王，耶路撒冷第一圣殿的建造者，拥有超人的智慧，大量的财富和无上的权力。

Culture-loaded terms refer to words or phrases that carry unique meanings and symbolic significance within a

specific cultural context. These terms bear the memory, emotions, and values of a culture, reflecting the lifestyle,

beliefs, and traditional customs of particular social groups. They play a vital role in daily communication, literary works, and musical performances, serving as a bridge for interaction and cultural identity. British translation scholar Susan Bassnett once pointed out that in cross-cultural contexts, untranslatability arises when the source text involves distinctive cultural concepts, historical events, place names, allusions, or customs [6]. In such cases, literal translation fails to convey the original meaning, while free translation risks losing cultural nuances. Therefore, annotation becomes the optimal strategy for translators.

As Table 1, O. Henry alludes to two ancient figures whose stories are generally unfamiliar to the Chinese readership. Consequently, both translators resorted to the use of footnotes to provide necessary context, thereby preserving the cultural imagery and linguistic features of the original

text to the greatest extent. However, O. Henry's reference to the legendary couple—the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, serves as a deliberate parallel to the relationship between Della and Jim. By comparing Della's hair and Jim's gold watch to the legendary wealth of Sheba and Solomon, the author hyperbolically underscores the value of their most prized possessions, thereby highlighting the depth of their love and the magnitude of their sacrifice.

In this regard, Cui Shuang's footnote does not clarify the particular relationship between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Moreover, a translator's annotation should be concise so as not to disrupt the reader's narrative immersion. In contrast, Wang Yongnian's annotation is more succinct, making it easier for readers to grasp the rhetorical intention behind O. Henry's allusion and thus providing a smoother and more coherent reading experience.

Table 2: The Comparison of the Translation of “the Magi”

Original Text	Translated by Wang	Translated by Cui
The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.	麦琪带来了宝贵的礼物,但其中没有那件东西。对于这句晦涩的话,下文将有所说明。 王永年脚注:麦琪,指基督初生时来送礼物的三贤人。一说是东方的三王:梅尔基奥尔(光明之王)赠送黄金表示尊贵;加斯帕(洁白者)赠送乳香象征神圣;巴尔撒泽赠送没药预示基督后来遭受迫害而死。	麦琪带来了无价的礼物,但他们也没有答案。这句话说的有些莫名其妙,我们稍后再交代明白。 崔爽脚注:麦琪,又称东方三贤人,东方三博士,东方三智者等,名字分别为梅尔基奥尔(光明之王)赠送黄金表示尊贵;加斯帕(洁白者)赠送乳香象征神圣;巴尔撒泽赠送没药预示基督后来遭受迫害而死。

As Table 2, both Wang and Cui continued to employ a foreignization strategy with annotations in their translation of the term “the Magi.” Being different from the previous example, “the Magi” originally refers to the three wise men in Christian tradition who presented gifts to the infant Jesus and could thus be literally translated as “the wise men”. The image of the Magi in Western Christian culture carries a profound connotation of “offering.” These people traveled a long distance to present the most precious gifts they considered, paralleling Della and Jim's sacrifice of their most valued possessions for each other. The value of their gifts lies not in the practical utility of the items but in their symbolic meaning and spiritual significance, repre-

senting an unconditional, self-sacrificing love [7].

The story of the Magi aligns so closely with the theme of the novel that both translators ultimately chose to preserve the solemnity of this religious element. In doing so, they not only retain an exotic flavor in the text but also profoundly elevate the theme of this ordinary love story [8]. By linking the narrative to a grand religious allusion, they endow the actions of this impoverished couple with a sacred radiance.

4. On the Translation of Humorous Language

Table 3 The Comparison of the Translation of Exaggerated Character Descriptions

Original Text	Translated by Wang	Translated by Cui
Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied.	这些铜子儿是每次一个,两个向杂货铺,菜贩和肉店老板那儿死乞白赖地硬扣下来的;人家虽然没有明说,自己总觉得这种掂斤播两的交易未免太吝啬,当时脸都臊红了。	都是一个两个攒下来的,在杂货铺摊主那儿,在卖菜小贩那儿,在屠宰户那儿软磨硬泡,直到他们涨红了双颊,对着抠门至极的买卖流露出无声的愤懑。

According to Functional Equivalence Theory, the stylistic features and textual structure of the target text should be consistent with those of the source text. Although different translators may employ distinct methods, their ultimate goal should be to preserve the original linguistic style as closely as possible [9]. O. Henry's writing is renowned for its humor, which is manifested not only in his famously unexpected yet logical endings but also in his distinctive use of hyperbole and metaphor, skillfully blending daily details with characters' psychological states [10].

In the original text of Table 3, the phrase "one's cheeks burned" refers to the protagonist's feeling of shame and

embarrassment while haggling to save money. Wang Yongnian accurately captures the protagonist's sense of humiliation and awkwardness in this situation, aligning with the original context of the "imputation of parsimony." In contrast, Cui Shuang's translation contains a clear misinterpretation: the pronoun "one's" in the original cannot logically refer to a group of different shopkeepers. By shifting the sense of shame from the protagonist to the anger of the vendors, the logical connection of the phrase "blushed cheeks" is altered, thereby distorting the original meaning.

Table 4 The Comparison of the Idiom Translation

Original Text	Translated by Wang	Translated by Cui
It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.	虽不能说是绝对难以形容, 其实跟贫民窟也相去不远。	虽说这间屋子也不是完全没法用笔墨形容, 但谁要是住在这里, 可真得提防那些专抓乞丐的警察找上门来。

In Table 4, the phrase "beggar description" is an English idiom meaning "to be impossible to describe." if the latter part of the sentence is translated literally, the translation could be understood as "must have something to do with the word 'beggar,'" using exaggeration to emphasize the shabbiness of Jim and Della's living conditions. Wang Yongnian grasped the core idea of poverty but abandoned the image of the "beggar," opting instead to domesticate it with the culturally familiar Chinese term "贫民窟" (slum). His word choice is more accessible to readers but it sacrifices the humor conveyed by the original hyperbolic expression [11]. In contrast, Cui Shuang attempted to preserve the formal structure as much as possible and

reconstructed the "beggar" imagery through amplification. Although the expression "专抓乞丐的警察" (police who specifically arrest beggars) is somewhat lengthier and may feel unfamiliar to readers compared to Wang's version, this defamiliarization strategy aligns strikingly with the creative expression of the original text. From the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory, Wang's translation completely abandons formal correspondence, yet it also fails to fully reproduce the stylistic effect of the source text. Cui's version, while striving to retain formal equivalence, succeeds to some extent in recreating the humorous tone of the original so that achieves a closer functional equivalence.

Table 5 The Comparison of the Special Transformation of Imagery

Original Text	Translated by Wang	Translated by Cui
In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring.	下面门廊里有一个信箱, 但是永远不会有信件投进去; 还有一个电钮, 除非神仙下凡才能把铃按响。	楼下门廊里有个信箱, 不过没一封信会进来, 还有个电铃, 只有鬼才能按得响。

In Table 5, the phrase "no mortal finger could coax a ring" is used to describe the broken doorbell, thereby illustrating the poor living conditions of the two protagonists. A literal meaning in Chinese would be "no living person's finger could make it ring". Nevertheless, such a rendition is noticeably obscure and fails to effectively convey the humor in O. Henry's language. The two translators adopted different approaches to address this. In Table 5: Wang Yongnian took a counterintuitive strategy by domesticating "mortal" into the cultural image of "神仙 (immortal),"

a figure familiar to Chinese readers. Using the Chinese colloquialism "神仙下凡" (an immortal descending to the mortal world), he successfully recreated the humor of the original text [12]. In contrast, Cui Shuang's translation emphasizes visual impact, reinforcing the fact that the doorbell is broken. While preserving humor, her version carries a stronger sense of despair and irony. Moreover, compared with the more literary tone of Wang's translation, Cui's version aligns more closely with the linguistic habits of modern readers.

5. Conclusion

According to Functional Equivalence Theory, this study examines whether the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transmission of “The Gift of the Magi” successfully preserves the original’s linguistic techniques, cultural context, and emotional resonance. Some implicit meanings would be revealed in intercultural interpretation in this process so that translated versions can evoke reader responses equivalent to those elicited by the source text. Functional Equivalence Theory provides a renewed perspective, emphasizing that translators should not deliberately pursue formal correspondence, which means word-for-word alignment with the source, but rather strive for equivalence in meaning. This requires translators to convey the deeper connotations of the original work accurately while ensuring the translation reads naturally and fluently.

Both of the translations demonstrate distinct characteristics. Wang Yongnian’s version frequently utilizes domestication strategies to bridge cultural gaps without sacrificing humor. His work reads like an authentic Chinese literary work and avoids the stiffness of “translationese.” In contrast, Cui Shuang’s translation adopts a more colloquial style, aligning better with the reading habits of audiences in the 21st-century digital era. From the standpoint of Functional Equivalence, both translations have their respective merits. In terms of literary and aesthetic function, Wang’s version even better, while Cui’s work benefiting from evolving reader preferences, proves superior in emotional transmission because her work ignites contemporary readers’ enthusiasm.

Both Wang Yongnian and Cui Shuang have produced translations that offer excellent reading experiences, providing valuable references and insights for future research and practice in translation studies.

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