# An Analysis of Zhu Chunshen's English Translation of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* from the Perspective of Thematic Structure

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*Abstract: The prose, Moonlight over the Lotus Pond, a masterpiece by Zhu Ziqing, a famous modern Chinese writer, is a classic among the classics. Over the years, different English translations of the prose have been produced and numerous studies on these translations have been conducted. This paper attempts to analyze the English translation by Zhu Chunshen[1] (1992) from the perspective of thematic structure, since thematic structure is of vital importance in organizing the message and influencing the audience. By analyzing the thematic organization of the original prose and Zhu Chunshen's translation, the author tries to present the idea that translators should choose the Theme of the text carefully and arrange clauses appropriately so as to express the original thematic meaning as much as possible.*

*Keywords: Moonlight over the Lotus Pond, Zhu Chunshen's English translation, Thematic structure, Theme-Rheme, Thematic progression, English-Chinese translation, Translation teaching*

## 1. Introduction

*Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* is a classic Chinese prose written in the 1920s by Zhu Ziqing, an outstanding Chinese essayist, poet and educator. The prose, with its simple but beautiful descriptions of the lotuses in the moonlight, has not only been favored by students and teachers, but also attracted the attention of many translators, hence different English translations of the prose, including that by Wang Jiaosheng[2](1985), Zhu Chunshen[1](1992), Howard Goldblatt[3] (1995), Yang Xianyi & Dai Naidie[4] (1999), Li Ming[5] (2006), etc.. Numerous studies on the English translations of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* have been conducted, with many of them focusing on the conveying of the original style or the beauty of the language(Yang[6] 2008; Cui[7] 2008, etc.) . This paper is to analyze one famous English version of this prose, the one by Zhu Chunshen[1] (1992)(hereafter referred to as Zhu), from the perspective of thematic structure, since thematic structure is of vital importance to the realization of a coherent text in translation. By analyzing the thematic organization of the original prose and Zhu's translation, the author tries to present the idea that translators should mind the Theme choice of the original text and arrange clauses appropriately so as to express the original thematic meaning as much as possible.

According to Geoff Thompson[8] (2008:142), the Theme is the starting point for a clause/clause complex which is chosen to make it easier for the hearers or readers to see how the clause/clause complex fits in with the previous ones, while the rest of the clause/clause complex is the Rheme. Themes help give the structure of the content or the perspective to view the content, and Rhemes provide the content, the main information that is intended to convey.

Theme choice should be given careful consideration for a successful realization of the original meaning in translation. Comparing sentences with the same state of affairs but different Theme choices, Geoff Thompson[8] (2008:143) points out that "the different choice of Theme (amongst other changes) has contributed to making a different meaning".

Geoff Thompson[8] (2008:165) also illustrates four main related functions of Theme choices:

(1) "Signaling the maintenance or progression of 'what the text is about' at that point… Maintenance is conducted by keeping to the same Theme as the preceding clause, progression often by selecting a constituent from the preceding Rheme."

(2) "Specifying or changing the framework for the interpretation of the following clause (or

clauses)", which is realized by, especially, Adjunct or clause, or by including textual or interpersonal elements in Theme.

(3) "Signaling the boundaries of sections in the text."

(4) "Signaling what the speaker thinks is a viable/useful/important starting point."

## 2. Analysis and Discussion

In this paper, based on the functions of different thematic structures and the characteristics of the original text, *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, thematic structures will be divided into three types: (1) keeping to the same Theme, (2) having Themes of the same kind, and (3) choosing constituent from the preceding Rheme as the Theme. Each of these thematic structures will be discussed in details, with examples and figures given to illustrate the points.

### *2.1 Keeping to the Same Theme*

In the main part of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, Zhu Ziqing successfully depicts the beauty of the lotus pond on a moon-lit night: the leaves and flowers in paragraph four, the moonlight in paragraph five, and the trees around the pond in paragraph six. Close examination reveals that in each of these paragraphs, Zhu Ziqing generally keeps to the same Theme, which signals "maintenance" (Thompson[8] 2008:165), and thus the content of the whole paragraph is enhanced.

The present author takes the major part of paragraph six in the Chinese original text as an example, a total of 8 clauses starting from "around the pond" to "as listless as sleepy eyes". And a detailed analysis of the Themes and Rhemes of this part is given, based on which *Table 1* is made to further illustrate the thematic structure of this paragraph. And "T" stands for Theme, while "R" stands for Rheme (which is followed in the examples hereafter).

*Table 1: The Thematic Structure of the Major Part in Paragraph Six of the Original Prose*

| About "the pond" | About "trees" | About "the path side" |
|---|---|---|
| T1 | | |
| | T2 | |
| | T3(T3≈T2) | |
| | | T4 |
| | T5(T5≈T2) | |
| | T6(T6≈T2) | |
| | T7(T7≈T2) | |
| | T8(T8≈T2) | |

As Table 1 shows, T2 is the focus of this paragraph, which is about trees around the pond. The trees, with their charming figures, are important elements that constitute the beautiful scenery in the moonlight. Therefore, the author uses a whole paragraph to describe the beauty of the trees. Furthermore, he chooses to keep the same Theme to make the description well-knit and coherent, and in this way the beauty of the night is highlighted.

Since Theme choices convey meaning, one needs to take notice of the thematic organization in translation. The corresponding paragraph in Zhu's English version is analyzed below to check whether the translation is faithful from this perspective.

(1) <u>Around the pond, far and near, high and low</u>, are trees. (2)<u>Most of them</u> are willows. (3)<u>Only on the path side</u> can two or three gaps be seen through the heavy fringe, as if specially reserved for the moon. (4)<u>The shadowy shapes of the leafage</u> at first sight seem diffused into a mass of mist, against which, (5)<u>however, the charm of those willow trees</u> is still discernible.(6) <u>Over the trees</u> appear some distant mountains, but merely in sketchy silhouette. (7) <u>Through the branches</u> are also a couple of lamps, as listless as sleepy eyes.(Zhu[1] 1992)

And to illustrate the the thematic structure of this paragraph in Zhu's translation more clearly, *Table 2* is made.

Comparing Zhu's translation with the original text, one can find that generally, Zhu follows the original Theme choice. The translation also starts almost all the clauses with "trees", in order to maintain and highlight the topic of this paragraph, which agrees with the main related functions of

Theme choices pointed out by Geoff Thompson[8] (2008:165) : "Signaling the maintenance or progression of 'what the text is about' at that point… Maintenance is conducted by keeping to the same Theme as the preceding clause, progression often by selecting a constituent from the preceding Rheme." Therefore, it is safe to say that Zhu's translation of this part is successful from the perspective of thematic structure.

*Table 2: The Thematic Structure of the Major Part in Paragraph Six of Zhu's Translation*

| About "the pond" | About "trees" | About "the path side" |
|---|---|---|
| T1 | | |
| | T2 | |
| | | T3 |
| | T4(T4≈T2) | |
| | T5(T5≈T2) | |
| | T6(T6≈T2) | |
| | T7(T7≈T2) | |

### 2.2 Having Themes of the Same Kind

In the first part of the prose, the author describes the environment, the background information when he takes a walk to appreciate the beauty of the lotus pond. In this part, the Theme choice of each clause varies constantly. However, these different Themes are not random selection of the author. Analysis shows that many of them are of the same kind, which makes the prose well-knit and coherent, as keeping to the same Theme does.

In the first paragraph, the author uses the actor of action or the topic of the clause, a noun phrase as the Theme to start a description of what happens about others one by one, before introducing what happens about "I". The whole paragraph runs very smoothly because of this thematic organization. They are of different subjects, but they all belong to the same kind of information. In this way, readers' attention is oriented from one thing to another smoothly and naturally until a full picture of the background information is revealed.

Here sentences starting from "A full moon was rising high in the sky" to "I made my way out, closing the door"of the first paragraph in the original prose are quoted as the example. And the Themes of this quoted part of the original prose are clearly shown in *Table 3*. As can be seen in this table, almost all the Themes are about the background information of that particular night. Readers can learn about the moon, the laughter of the children and my wife in succession, all about the background information which depicts that night when "I" would take a walk to the lotus pond.

*Table 3: The Thematic Structure of the Major Part in Paragraph One of the Original Prose*

| About background information | About "I" |
|---|---|
| (1)the moon | |
| (2)the laughter of the children playing outside | |
| (3)my wife | |
| | (4)I |

The following is the translation of this part by Zhu.

(1) A full moon was rising high in the sky; (2) the laughter of children playing outside had died away; (3) in the room, my wife was patting the son, Run-er, sleepily humming a cradle song. (4) Shrugging on an overcoat, quietly, I made my way out, closing the door behind me. (Zhu 1992)

It can be noticed that Zhu follows the original text in terms of Theme choice in the first and second clause, but makes different choice in the third and the forth. In the third clause, he starts the sentence with the Adjunct, which is a marked Theme in English (Thompson[8] 2008:164), while in the original Chinese text, the choice of Subject as Theme is usual or unmarked. In this sense, some equivalence is lost in the translation of this sentence. In the forth sentence, Zhu chooses a non-finite clause describing the action of "I" as the Theme of the clause complex. In this way, the Theme in clause (4) is consistent with the Rheme in clause (3), both about actions, which signals natural progression of the sentence according to Thompson (2008:165). However, though Zhu's translation is coherent in its own way, the thematic organization delicately chosen by Zhu Ziqing, the original author, is lost.

When one goes back to the first two clauses of the first paragraph, and compare the original work with the translation by Zhu, some differences can also be found. In the original work, Zhu Ziqing starts

each sentence with the Adjunct of time to direct the reader's attention to time information, signaling something different happens on that particular night comparing with other time during those days. However, Zhu's English version makes some changes. In his translation, the Theme in clause (1) is "I", the Subject, while the Theme in clause (2) remains to be the Adjunct of time. Here is the translation by Zhu[1] (1992).

(1) I have felt quite upset recently. (2) Tonight, when I was sitting in the yard enjoying the cool, it occurred to me that the Lotus Pond, which I pass by everyday, must assume quite a different look in such moonlit night. (Zhu 1992)

In this respect, some equivalence is lost in Zhu's translation. Yet, his choice is understandable when one makes a comparison of Chinese and English Thematic structures. In the original text, the Theme in the first clause is a topic and the Adjunct of the clause rather than the subject, and this is quite common in Chinese (Li[9] 2002). However in English, Adjunct as Theme is not that common, or marked. Therefore translators normally have to choose Subject as Theme to maintain unmarkedness.

The choice of Themes of the same kind in *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* is displayed not only in the first paragraph, but also in the following paragraphs in the first part of the prose. Yet in these paragraphs, besides being of the same kind, the Themes of many pairs of sentences are deliberately chosen to show contrast, all about time information, but one being the past, one being that particular moonlit night.

Take the last two clauses of paragraph two as an example, and here is the translation from Zhu (1992):

(1) The foliage, which, in a moon-less night, would loom somewhat frighteningly dark, looks very nice tonight, although the moonlight is not more than a thin, greyish veil. (Zhu 1992)

In the original Chinese work, both the two clauses start with time information, "a moon-less night" and "tonight", to construct a contrast. The original text can help draw the readers' attention to the different phenomena at different time, so the unique beauty of that moonlit night is highlighted. Yet, adjustment of the thematic structure is made in its English translation, since the original text with time Adjunct as Theme is unmarked, while in English a clause with time Adjunct as Theme is marked. Zhu Chunshen's version chooses the Subject as Theme, positioning the time adjunct at the end of each clause. Thus, the unmarkedness of the original text is maintained, while the contrast between a moon-lit night and a moon-less one is somewhat less obvious.

### 2.3 Constituent from the Preceding Rheme as the Theme

Having examined some particular parts of the original text and Zhu Chunshen's translation of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, this paper now analyzes the thematic structure from a wider view. The first six paragraphs of this prose, the part that gives direct description to the lotus pond and the night, which is followed by the part that shows the author's recalling of lotus-gathering, are taken as an example.

The first sentence of each paragraph of the original work, all of which indicate what the paragraph is about as a starting point, is chosen to show how each paragraph is connected by choosing constituent from the preceding Rheme(the italicized parts) as the Theme(the underlined parts) .

Paragraph One: (1) "These days", "Tonight"... "*the lotus pond, "the moonlight"*

Paragraph Two: (2) "the lotus pond"... "*a small cinder footpath*"

Paragraph Three: (3) "on the road"

Paragraph Four: (4) "the lotus pond"

Paragraph Five: (5) "the moonlight"

Paragraph Six: (6) : "the lotus pond" ( Zhu Ziqing, 1927)

Figure 1 is drawn to show how the original author delicately chooses constituent from the preceding Rheme as the Theme.

T1➡R1

T2（T2≈R1）➡R2

T3（T3≈R2）➡R3
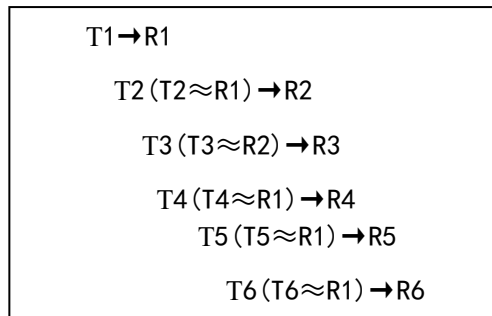
T4（T4≈R1）➡R4

T5（T5≈R1）➡R5

T6（T6≈R1）➡R6

*Figure 1: The Thematic Structure of Paragraph One to Six of the Original Prose*

As the structure shows, the Themes of clauses (2) to (6) are constituent from the previous Rheme, with four of Themes being the Rheme of clause (1), one being the Rheme of clause (2). Since Themes are about old information while Rhemes are about new information (Li[9] 2002), the delicate arrangement of Themes and Rhemes can firstly reminds the reader what has been talked, and then naturally introduces what will be talk about next. Therefore, readers will connect each paragraph with the previous ones and find the prose smooth and well-knit. The Themes are like a bridge, connecting the old with the new, and in translation, one should make sure that the bridges are not destroyed. The following is Zhu 's translation of these parts.

Paragraph One: **I** have felt quite upset recently. (1) <u>Tonight, when I was sitting in the yard enjoying the cool</u>, it occurred to me that the **Lotus Pond**, which I pass by everyday, must assume quite a different look in such **moonlit night**.

Paragraph Two: (2) <u>Alongside the **Lotus Pond**</u> runs a small **cinder footpath**.

Paragraph Three: (3) <u>**I**</u> am on my own, strolling, hands behind my back.

Paragraph Four: (4) <u>All over **this winding stretch of water**</u>, what meets the eye is a silken field of leaves…

Paragraph Five: (5) <u>**The moon**</u> sheds her liquid light silently over the leaves and flowers…

Paragraph Six: (6) <u>Around **the pond**, far and near, high and low</u>, are trees. Most of them are willows.(Zhu[1] 1992)

Figure 2 is made to show the thematic structure in Zhu's translation more clearly.

T1➡R1

T2（T2≈R1）➡R2

T3➡R3

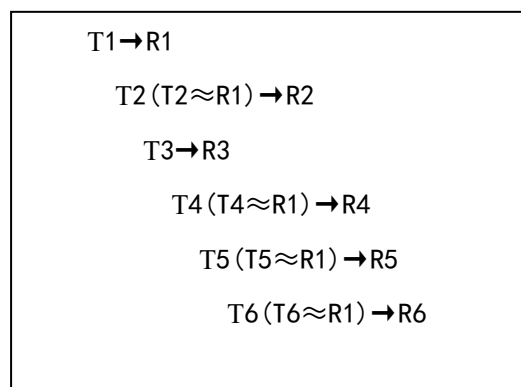T4（T4≈R1）➡R4

T5（T5≈R1）➡R5

T6（T6≈R1）➡R6

*Figure 2: The Thematic Structure of Paragraph One to Six of Zhu Chunshen's Translation*

It is found that generally, Zhu's translation starts each of paragraph one to six and each sentence in the starting position of the paragraphs as the original prose does. The only difference lies in clause (3), the first sentence of paragraph three. In the original text, paragraph three starts with "on the road", linking the paragraph with the previous one that describes small cinder footpath, before introducing the fact that the author is alone and feel free that particular night, which is the main idea of the paragraph. However, in the translation by Zhu, paragraph three starts with "I", which makes the link disappear, although in the present author's understanding, Zhu probably wants to maintain the unmarkedness of the clause, so he chooses not to start the clause with "on the road", which is regarded as the Adjunct of location in English but the Subject of the clause in the original Chinese sentence.

## 3. Conclusion

It is believed that thematic structure plays a major role in organizing the message and in enabling it to be communicated and understood clearly. So is it in translation. After an analysis of the thematic structure from both micro and macro perspectives, it is found that in *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond,* Themes and Rhemes are chosen delicately to help realize the textual function of the prose, making the text well connected. Although it is a prose, which is often referred to as "loose in form, but not in essence" (Xiao[10] 1961), it is found that this prose is not loose in form either. Besides, the analysis also reveals that while Zhu Chunshen's translation is generally believed to have successfully conveyed the original beauty of the prose, just like an "authentic English prose (Li[11] 1998), when examined from the perspective of thematic structure, it can be seen that some equivalence is lost in his translation, although in these cases probably the translator attempts to take the difference in English and Chinese thematic structure into consideration. Finally, the author of this paper also realizes that keeping equivalence both in form and in content is a difficult task in Chinese-English translation, and it is suggested in translation classes more efforts can be made to raise awareness of the relationship between Thematic structure and translation, and more effective ways to integrate it in class should be explored.

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