

Reproduction of the Pastoral Flavor in Gladys Yang's English Version of *Biancheng*

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Abstract

Biancheng (*Border Town*), Shen Congwen's classic novel, has been acclaimed as "an indelible pearl through all ages". Pastoral flavor which is embodied in the unique scenery description and rich West Hunan local color constitute prominent parts of its everlasting fascination. Gladys Yang's English version succeeds in the reproduction of the pastoral flavor.

Key words: *Biancheng*; Gladys Yang; Pastoral flavor; Reproduction

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1. THE STYLE OF SHEN'S *BIANCHENG*

Shen Congwen's novels, because of the deep exploration into the eternal humanity, the serious concern for modern people's situation in the world and their unique style, are attracting increasing attention in the literary circles in and out of China. Owing to his fantastic imagination and peerless devotion to art, his more successful stories not only deeply affect common readers, but also prove to stand careful critical scrutiny. *Biancheng*, a novel valued by the writer himself, is acclaimed as "an indelible pearl through all ages." There are so far two English versions of *Biancheng*, one by Ching Ti and Robert Payne, published in 1947, reprinted in 1982, the other done by Gladys Yang in 1981.

Shen Congwen's regional pieces are generally noticed for the folksy tone, rich texture, local color and the limpid pastoral flavor. Some critics complain that his fictional world is too idealized and "some folksy dialogues seem at times self-consciously rustic" (Kinkley, 1987, p.171). Or as more sharply pointed by Su Xuelin, the conversation between the old ferryman and Nuorong in *Biancheng* is "unrealistic", "too poetic to be true" (as cited in Liu, 2005, p.127). Desirable or not, they constitute Shen's style. It is highly possible that Shen doesn't care about being "realistic." With the construction of an ideal land in mind, he couldn't bring himself to give up poeticness.

So what exactly is Shen's style like in *Biancheng*? On the whole, it is a fiction full of lyricism yet in very simple, original language. It creates mood more than plot. Pastoral flavor and light melancholy is pervasive. His characters and scenes are merely sketches but very touching. The language is limpid, simple, but invested with long-lasting flavor.

The present study conducts a comprehensive critical study of the reproduction of the pastoral flavor in Gladys Yang's *Biancheng*, with Ching Ti's version referred to when necessary, and concludes that what's vital are the successful conveyance of scenery description and the preservation of rich local color.

2. REPRODUCTION OF THE SCENERY DESCRIPTION

Biancheng tells of an old ferryman, his grand-daughter Cuicui and two brothers who want to marry her. Both of them are strong and capable and dependable. The elder brother Tianbao is more down to earth while the younger one is sort of a poet. Cuicui cannot forget her first encounter with the younger one—such a poetic scene where Nuorong, the champion drake chaser, found Cuicui alone at dark, fetched someone to see her home while she had taken him for a hooligan and sworn him as such. It

is the starting point of their mutual love. This love is as pure as crystal, though unsaid. To Cuicui, it is a hidden sweetness to be savored by herself. But later Cuicui was disturbed a little by the hearsay that a wealthy landlord wants to marry his daughter to Nuosong with a mill as her dowry. Here is a piece of scenery description in Cuicui's eyes after she ferries that wealthy girl and her mother over the river on Dragon Boat Day.

1. 那首歌声音既极柔和，快乐中又微带忧郁。唱完了这个歌，翠翠心上觉得浸入了一丝儿凄凉。她想起秋末酬神还愿时田坪中的火燎同鼓角。

远处鼓声已起来了，她知道绘有朱红长线的龙船这时节已下河了。细雨依然落个不止，溪面一片烟。(Shen, 2001, p.265)

1a. This gay, haunting melody has an undertone of sadness, making Emerald feel a pang of loneliness. Her thoughts fly to the bonfires and drumming in the fields to welcome the spirits at the end of autumn.

Meanwhile drums sound up in the distance. The long crimson dragon boats will soon be starting their race. A light rain falls steadily, the stream is misted over. (Yang, 1981, p.44)

The original text is a well-done Chinese ink-painting! Readers could see the slender figure of Cuicui in solitude and sense her quiet, vague yet sincere longing for love tinged with a faint sense of sorrow.

The rendition is excellent in that it not only translates the conceptual meaning but also translated the flavor and sound beauty of the original. “柔和”, “忧郁” and “凄凉” are all rich in color. Being visually evocative, they arouse sympathizing reactions in readers. The final vowels of “柔” and “忧”, similar to [əu] in English are very becoming to tender lingering feelings. “凄凉” consists of the combination of a vowel and a nasal sound which takes a certain period length of time to be pronounced and thus effectively add to the note of lingering sadness.

The target text shows a master translator's competence in diction. “Gay”, “haunting”, “melody”, “sadness” and “loneliness” are all arresting words with rich emotional color. They strike a sympathetic chord in readers' heart. What's more, combinations of long vowels and nasal sounds in “haunting” and “loneliness” contribute to the softness.

Have a close look at the last sentence. Both the original and the rendering deserve to be praised as quintessence of scenery description. In the original, the repeatedly occurring vowel [i] in “细”, “依”, “溪”, “一” helps to create the sense of fineness and softness. In the rendition, the high frequency of the fricative [s] in “steadily”, “stream”, “misted” achieves approximately the same effects. Both SL and TL texts are beautiful to read. If some change has to be made, that might be the replacement of “fine rain” for “light rain”, for the sake of alliteration in “a fine rain falls steadily.”

This is Shen Congwen's style of scenery description—scenery mingled with human emotions.

Even his depiction of pure natural things is rich in lyricism. See it in the following example:

2. 那条河水便是历史上知名的酉水，新名字叫作白河。白河下游到辰州与沅水汇流后，便略显浑浊，有出山泉水的意思。若溯流而上，则三丈五丈的深潭可清澈见底。深潭中为白日所映照，河底小小白石子、有花纹的玛瑙石子，全看得明明白白。水中游鱼来去，全如浮在空气里，两岸多高山，山中多可以造纸的细竹，长年作深翠颜色，逼人眼目。近水人家多在桃花水里，春天时只需注意，凡有桃花处必有人家，凡有人家处必可沽酒。夏天则晾晒在日光下耀目的紫花布衣裤，可以作为人家所在的旗帜。秋冬来时，酉水中游如王村、保靖、里耶和许多无名山村，人家房屋在悬崖上的、滨水的，无不朗然入目。黄泥的墙，乌黑的瓦，位置却永远那么妥帖，且与周围环境极其调和，使人迎面得来的印象，实在非常愉快。(Shen, 2001, p.239)

2a. This river, famed in history as the You, is now known as the White River. After reaching Chenzhou where it mingles with the River Yuan, **its waters grow turbid**. But if you sail upstream, you can see clear to the bottom of pools thirty to fifty feet deep, so transparent is the water. In sunlight, even the white pebbles in the riverbed and the veins on the cornelian pebbles stand out distinctly. The fish darting to and fro seem floating in air. The mountains on either side, covered with the tapering bamboos from which paper is made, are a deep, vivid emerald the whole year round. Most homesteads near the water are set among peach and apricot trees, so that **in spring wherever there is blossom you can count on finding people, and wherever people are you can count on a drink**. In summer the girls' purple tunics hung up to dry in the sun serve as flags to mark the whereabouts of men, **while all through the middle reaches of the river in autumn and winter your eyes are caught by the cottages perched on crags overhanging the water**. With their brown mud walls, black tiles and perfect setting, they harmonize so completely with the surroundings that your heart leaps up in delight (Yang, 1981, p.10).

In this description, the eye beholds beauties that are really the comforts of a traveler. Nature, in harmony with man, forms an ordered, cultivated pattern. These commonplaces of life, related in simple language by Shen Congwen, acquire everlasting artistic charm. C. T Hsia highly appreciates Shen Congwen's talent in scenery description.

“He is the greatest impressionist in modern Chinese literature, no one equals him in his effortless capturing of the essence of a landscape, much in the manner of the best Chinese poets and painters, or in his rich evocation of the subtle nuances of feeling” (Hsia, 1971, p.208).

In “凡有桃花处必有人家，凡有人家处必可沽酒”，two “whatever” and two “count on” fully convey the flavor of “凡” and “必”，and still retain the parallel structure and terseness of the original.

“白河下游到辰州与沅水汇流后，便略显浑浊，有出山泉水的意思。”“有出山泉水的意思”is an adapted use of two lines from Du Fu’s *The Beauty* (《佳人》)—“The mountain springs are clear and pure; when they flow outward, turbid they grow.” (“在山泉水清，出山泉水浊。” (Trans. By Sun, 1997, p.324).

For readers with Chinese cultural background, their knowledge of these two lines is automatically activated to fill up the coherence gap between “spring water” and “turbid.” But for most TL readers, they probably have no idea in what way spring water far from its source is similar to turbid river. They need this cultural default element to be explicated.

Here, however, Gladys Yang gives up efforts at using explanation or adding a footnote, but simply omits it. Perhaps this is out of consideration that it is not worthwhile to overburden the TL reader for such a trivial use of allusion, since it provides nothing new, a mere repetition of “its waters grow turbid.”

With this I couldn’t agree. My opinion is that “出山泉水”here is of thematic value and could not afford to be omitted.

Du Fu’s *The Beauty* depicts a young lady after suffering the loss of people dear to her in the war, and being abandoned by a light fickle husband, chooses a pure life in deep mountain, as limpid as mountain springs, far away from the dirty outside world where even “spring far from its source place” becomes turbid.

For a proper understanding of the thematic value of “出山泉水”, a mention of Shen Congwen’s general attitude towards life and his creation is relevant.

Shen always holds contempt for decadent urban civilization and urban sophistication. He has a Romantic and Taoist view of life that people without a highly developed intellect capacity and sophistication, whose life is incorporated with nature, are more likely to get happiness (Hsia, 1971, p.200).

In a preface to one of his anthology, Shen says that he wants to present “a form of life that is elegant, healthy, natural and not contrary to human nature” in *Biancheng* (Shen, 1989, p.45). That’s why Cuicui and Nuorong’s story has to be set in a little “border town”—in the then war-torn China, it has to be detached from the outside world to be pastoral.

So “出山泉水”in the original text implies that in this border town, country folk are not polluted by urban decadence. Like limpid mountain spring, they live a pure, simple life.

My suggested version goes as follows:

After reaching Chenzhou where it mingles with the River Yuan, its waters grow turbid, sort of being “spring water far from its source in the mountain.”

A footnote accompanies it to make clear the allusion to Du Fu’s lines.

3. REPRODUCTION OF THE LOCAL COLOR

Readers are impressed by the rich local color in *Biancheng*. Shen Congwen distills the country folk’s language and presents the cream in *Biancheng*, which takes the forms of names of things, local aphorisms and metaphors, rustic yet poetic conversations and folk songs. The above mentioned all directly contribute to the local color.

Gladys Yang deals with the local color of the bucolic language in different ways, guided by the principle of preserving it as much as possible without hindering TL readers’ understanding.

Distinct strategies are adopted according to the nature of the cultural elements. In terms of images, some are preserved, some adapted and some totally given up and replaced by equally functional ready-made matches in English. As for allusions, historical figures’ names get filtered, but the essence of events remains. As for names of some things peculiar to the local culture or some special expressions, which forbid faithful literal translation, Gladys Yang deals with it “unfaithfully” with satisfactory effects.

3.1 Image Preserved

3. “老伯伯，你翠翠长得真标致，像个观音样子。” (Shen, 2001, p.260)

3a. “Uncle, your Emerald’s grown into a fine girl, a **regular Guan Yin***.”

(*The Goddess of Mercy)

(Yang, 1981, p.38)

3b. “...Green Jade is **very attractive**.” (Ching, 1982, p.223)

“Guan Yin” is a very familiar goddess in China. Her elegant features, graceful carriage and more important, her generous and loving heart win her admiration especially from country folk. In West Hunanese villages, they use “Guan Yin” to describe the feminine beauty they’ve sensed. But this beauty is of a demure trait, like that of Guan Yin.

The image of Guan Yin is preserved in 3a. From “a regular Guan Yin”, readers know this is Number One, an outspoken country boy’s sincere way of praising Cuicui and the girl deserving to be called “Guan Yin” is dainty and demure. Moreover, the rustic local color carried by “Guan Yin” provides room for readers’ imagination of Cuicui’s closeness to nature.

Compared with 3a, 3b “Green Jade is very attractive” is much plainer and lacking in rural flavor. Because perhaps a dancing girl is more attractive than Cuicui! Cuicui’s beauty is not to be described with “attractive.”

4. 假如另外高处真有一个玉皇上帝

4a. If there really is a **Jade Emperor** up in the sky... (Yang, 1981, p.37)

Just contrary to derogatory associations of “loose women” with jade, in Chinese, the character “玉”(jade)

arouses pleasant associations of beauty, purity, integrity and constancy. We call a beautiful woman “玉人” (jade person), her photograph “玉照” (jade picture), her fair complexion “玉颜” (jadelike face), best green tea “玉露” (jade dewdrops), snow or exquisite writing “玉屑” (jade bits/ chips) and beautiful sound “玉音” (jadelike music). So the Supreme Deity of Taoism is reverentially called “玉帝” (Jade Emperor).

Such an important cultural image deserves to be introduced to other cultures. The foreignization of “玉皇上帝” retains the image and thus the local color.

3.2 Image Simplified

In Gladys Yang's rendition, there are cases where literal translation is still adopted but with partial deletion of the original images. Deletion occurs when full preservation of images leads to lengthiness or confusedness while deleting does little harm to the core.

5. “八面山的豹子，地地溪的锦鸡”，全是特为颂扬你这个人的好处的警句！（Shen, 2001, p.267）

5a. “**Brave as a panther, handsome as a cock**”—that's you! (Yang, 1981, p.47)

5b. The **Leopard of Eight-Face Mountain**, eh? Or the **Pheasant of Thousand-Field Stream**? That's what they call you! (Ching, 1982, p.233)

6. “一本百家姓好多人，我猜不着他是张三李四。” (Shen, 2001, p.270)

6a. “How can I guess? **Chang the Third** or **Li the Fourth**?” (Yang, 1981, p.49)

In 5a, two adaptations are evident. One is the omission of place names “八面山” and “地地溪”, the other is the addition of the two epithets “brave” and “handsome” to bring out the admirable qualities of a panther and a cock. These adaptations do justice to the original in that the two images “八面山” and “地地溪” are not indispensable and their absence only sets “brave” and “handsome” in prominence, which is surely a desirable effect. But there remains one little thing: if we change “cock” in 5a into “pheasant” in 5b, 5a is a better one. A pheasant is more brilliant in color and more valiant in fighting than a cock.

In 6a, similarly, “一本百家姓” (*Book of Surnames*) is omitted to avoid verbosity while “张三”, “李四” still have their identity—they are not transformed into John and Jack.

3.3 Image Replaced

In *Biancheng*, country folk like to make their point by a rhyming aphorism. These aphorisms, balanced in structure, musical in rhythm, are good embodiment of folksy humor and wit. The cultural elements embedded in them in some cases pose thorny problems for translators. Unlike cases discussed in previous sections where cultural images are preserved to varying degrees, the present section displays three examples in which cultural images are replaced by images in the English language. **Replacement occurs either when there is a ready-made**

match in English that will ease TL readers' decoding process or when the replacement lends poem to the text.

Examples 7 and 8 fit the first type.

7. “.....我要个能听我唱歌的有情人，却更不能缺少个照料家务的好媳妇。我这人就是这么一个打算，'又要马儿不吃草，又要马儿走得好'，唉，这两句话恰是古人为我说的！” (Shen, 2001, p.260)

7a. “...I want a sweetheart to listen to my songs, but I need a good wife who'll manage my household well. **I want to eat my cake and have it.** That's me!” (Yang, 1981, p.38)

8. “他说，'下棋有下棋规矩，车是车路，马是马路，各有走法。.....一切由翠翠自己做主！’” (Shen, 2001, p.273)

8a. “He said, ‘chess has its rules: the **castles** and **knights** have to move in different ways.’” (Yang, 1981, p.53)

In example 7, the original horse image is replaced by the cake image; in example 8, carriages and horses in traditional Chinese chess game are replaced by castles and knights in western chess game. The domesticated translation blends well with the context and guarantees a smooth decoding process of TL readers, only that it erases all exotic elements and may even create a regrettable impression that cake is an important part of Chinese diet and Chinese country folk play the same chess as westerners do.

The following versions may be considered.

7b. “My horse better needs no grass, but still she must run fast.”

8b. “Carriages and horses have different moves. One straightforward, one roundabout.”

The next example is the second type—replacement for additional poem.

9. “伯伯，你到这里见过两万个日头。” (Shen, 2001, p.268)

9a. “You've seen many **summers** here, uncle.” (Yang, 1981, p.47)

When it poses no problem to literally translate the original into “You've seen twenty thousand suns rising into the sky”, Gladys Yang chooses “summer.”

The reason is that summer, in the Great Britain, is temperate and lovely, the best time of the year. So just like “spring” in Chinese literature, “summer” is a recurring image in British literature, bound with pleasant associations of beauty, the prime of life and the like. Take Shakespeare's sonnets as examples. Besides the most widely cited “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?”, there are “summer's green” in sonnet 12, “summer's honey breath” in sonnet 65, “The summer's flower is to the summer sweet” and so on (Bai, 2001, p.125).

The replacement of “summer” for “sun” gives additional poem to Nuorong's compliments for the old ferryman.

3.4 Allusion Simplified

Country folk in *Biancheng* occasionally refer to historical figures in their conversation. These historical figures are certainly not of an intellectual type, but familiar names they get from folk tales or country operas, rustic in flavor.

10. “喂，喂，摆渡的张横，这不成的。你不开糟坊，如何这样子！……” (Shen, 2001, p.266)

10a. “Hey, this will not do, **ferryman**! You’re not a brewer!” (Yang, 1981, p.45)

11. 一船快慢既不得不靠鼓声，故每当两船竞赛到剧烈时，鼓声如雷鸣，加上两岸人呐喊助威，便使人想起小说故事上梁红玉老鹳河时水战擂鼓种种情形。(Shen, 2001, p.266)

11a. Generally the drum and gong are in the middle, and when the race reaches a critical stage they raise a din like thunder which, added to the roar of cheers and boos on the bank, reminds you of **some epic river battle of old** (Yang, 1981, p.19).

12. “……他说好意请你上家里坐坐，等候你爷爷，你还骂过他！你那只狗不识吕洞宾，只是叫！” (Shen, 2001, p.251)

12a. “...Said he asked you to wait in our house, but only got cursed for his pains! And your dog **took him for a bad lot** and kept on barking!” (Yang, 1981, p.27)

13. “好，翠翠，你不去我去，我还得戴了朵红花，装刘姥姥进城去见世面！” (Shen, 2001, p.258)

13a. “All right, Emerald. If you won’t go, I will. I’ll wear a red flower and **be an old country bumpkin** going in to see the sights of the town.” (Yang, 1981, p.36)

The figures’ names “张横”，“梁红玉”，“吕洞宾” and “刘姥姥” are all justifiably omitted. Each name bears with it a story familiar to a person of Chinese culture background (“梁红玉” perhaps not so familiar). However, these names are not the writer’s emphasis. To literally render every name and their stories is bound to make the text fat and confusing. Gladys Yang’s use of simplification produces desirable effects.

3.5 “Unfaithful” in the Literal Sense

14. 那边一个眉毛扯得极细、脸上擦了白粉的妇人就走过来问：“大哥，副爷，要甜酒？要烧酒？” (Shen, 2001, p.241)

14a. Then a woman with plucked eyebrows and a powdered face will come to ask, p. “Would you care for sweet wine or **rice wine**, master?” (Yang, 1981, p.13)

14b. ...a heavily powdered woman with plucked eyebrows would ask: “Sweet wine? **Spirits**?” (Ching, 1982, p.198).

15. 油行屯桐油。盐栈堆四川火井出的青盐。(Shen, 2001, p.241)

15a. The oil depots purchase *tung* oil. The salt merchants store the **dark rock salt** from Sichuan’s salt wells. (Yang, 1981, p.13)

15b. Oil shops sold wood-oil. Salt shops stocked the **green salt** produced from hot springs. (Ching, 1982, p.198)

“烧酒” and “青盐” are rendered into “rice wine” (VS “spirits” in Ching’s) and “dark rock salt” (VS “green salt” in Ching’s), which in literal sense are not good correspondents. They may be labeled “unfaithful” on the surface level, but the truth is that they achieve a higher level of faithfulness—equivalence of the designative meaning that is based on the translator’s deep understanding of and a discreet attitude towards Chinese culture.

For “烧酒”, although it is of a rather high percentage of alcohol, is still different from spirits in the west. The rendition “rice wine” clearly shows that this is an alcoholic drink made from rice with distinct Chinese flavor. According to *Chinese Culture Encyclopedia* (Li, 1989, p.613, Sichuan Basin was vast expanses of sea 180 million years ago. Because of later crustal movement, thick salt mine was formed and greenish rock salt was produced. So “rock salt” better conveys the designative meaning of “青盐” and is of more local color than the literally translated “green salt.”

16. 气运好，两年之内船不坏事，于是他从所赚的钱上，又讨了一个略有产业的白脸黑发小寡妇。(Shen, 2001, p.243)

16a. His luck held for two years, and with the money he made he married a fairly well-to-do, **good-looking** widow (Yang, 1981, p.15).

16b. Luck was with him, for nothing happened to the boat, and with the profits he had married a widow **with a pale face and ink-black hair** (Ching, 1982, p.201).

Shen Congwen is extremely stingy with his ink when it comes to the appearance of women. He usually describes them as “脸黑眉毛长”(dark face, long eyebrows, “小脸长眉毛”(small face, long eyebrows) etc.. Even to Mei Jin (means “Bewitching Gold”), whose beauty is hard for any acclaimed litterateur with a gilded tongue to imagine, Shen’s description is no more than “Her round face was set with a tiny mouth, a fine straight nose, a pointed chin and long, long eyebrows.” (“有小小的嘴与圆圆的脸，有一个长长的鼻子，有一个尖尖的下巴，还有一对长长的眉毛” (Shen, 2001, p.47).

So his women characters’ faces are all obscure to us and yet we know from the context that they are beautiful. Given Shen’s particular way of describing women, we have reason to believe that “white-faced” is the understatement of “pretty” and “black-haired” that of “young.”

Gladys Yang’s choice of “good-looking” is unfaithful on the surface but it captures the true meaning of Shen’s and is faithful to what may be called “fictional reality.” Ching Ti’s “with a pale face” gives a strong sense of unhealthiness. The faithfulness here is regrettable.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Gladys Yang's version gives a successful reproduction of *Biancheng*'s unique style—its pastoral atmosphere and rich lyricism. In the transfer of scenery description, the translator fully appreciates the indescribable beauty of the original and manages to reproduce it with the most lyricism preserved. Dealing with local color, the translator retains it using diverse strategies, but in some cases the principle is bent in favor of easy decoding or additional poem.

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