

## Lost (and Found) in Translation: Evaluating English translations of *Mulan Shi*

Yan Miao and Jordan Zlatev

**Abstract:** The classical Chinese poem *Mulan Shi* has been translated many times into different languages and adapted to different media. Drawing upon Sonesson's definition of translation as *a double act of communication* and combining it with concepts from narratology and translation theory, we develop a framework comprising three levels of *translation resemblance*: (a) between the structure and content of the source and target texts, (b) stylistic resemblance, and (c) pragmatic resemblance, concerning the impacts of the texts upon respective audiences. We compare five English translations of the poem, selecting the one by Arthur Waley from 1923 for detailed scrutiny. We triangulate between a first-person, second-person and third-person methods, leveraging our intuitive grasp of languages and cultures, and measures of different aspects in the source and target texts. To be able to assess pragmatic resemblance we conducted a survey with 20 participants from each cultural/linguistic group (Chinese and Western English speakers), asking for interpretations and evaluations of key aspects of the poem. The findings were that the target text exhibits *high* resemblance with respect to narrative structure but *moderate* resemblance on content due to some key omissions and substitutions. The stylistic resemblance was also *moderate*, while the pragmatic was *considerable*, with similar assessments in the two groups, though with different proportions.

**Keywords:** cognitive semiotics, cross-cultural communication, descriptive phenomenology, narratology, poetry, translation theory

### 1. Introduction

The classical Chinese poem about the brave young woman Mulan who joins the army disguised as a man in the place of her aging father goes back to folk tales and poems from the 4th century AD (Li, 1992). This legend and the many different poems and other works retelling this story are widely popular across China. There are, for example, mountains and temples in Hubei Province dedicated to the heroine. The poem exists in multiple versions that can be traced back to the Northern Dynasties (439-581 AD) folk song *Mulan Shi* (Wen, 2019), first recorded in the *Gujin yuelu* compiled by Chen Shi Zhi Jiang and later included in the *General Anthology of Yuefu Poems* compiled by Guo Maoqian (Zhang, 2013; Ye, 2022). Yuefu poems, both folk poems like *Mulan Shi* and more literary ones, were usually sung and accompanied by music, which accounts for some of the rhythmic and stylistic qualities of the poem. There are other versions of the poem (Lehr, 2007), but *Mulan Shi* remains as one of the most popular versions. The text in modern Mandarin Chinese that we use was first published from 1979 (Wen, 2019) and is currently included in the compulsory education textbooks approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

*Mulan Shi* is reported to have been first translated into English by the W.A.P. Martin 1880 as "Mulan the Maiden Chief" (Liu, 2022). As we explain in Section 3, we decide to focus on the translation made by Arthur Waley from 1923 under the title "The Ballad of Mulan". More recently, the story about Mulan entered global popular culture, after the animated Disney film *Mulan* from 1998, and the live-action remake from 2020, with an all-Chinese cast, directed by Niki Caro from New Zealand. As the New York Times comments: "Mulan is a most adaptable heroine; there's a version for every era".<sup>1</sup> In sum, the story of Mulan is a rare cultural phenomenon that spans history and cultures, and it is intriguing to ask what has made it so. Given the challenges

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/movies/mulan-history.html>

of adapting the story to different epochs, cultures, languages and audiences, it is a rather obvious topic for Translation Studies. But to our knowledge there have been no in-depth studies on this from a semiotic perspective, with a few exceptions (e.g., Lohr, 2007; Chu, 2018).

The initial goal of our project was to study the animated and live-action Disney films as products of *intersemiotic translation* (Jakobson, 1959; Louhema et al., 2019; Li and Zlatev, 2021). But since these films include numerous changes in the content of the story, it is doubtful if this is indeed translation rather than *transposition*, lying beyond the scope of translation proper, where the aim should be to maintain as much as possible of the content and style of the source text (Sonesson, 2014), as we elaborate in Section 2.1. Thus, we studied how *Mulan Shi* has been translated in the classical, “interlingual” sense of the term: from one language to another. This implied detailed comparison between the source text of *Mulan Shi* and the target text of “The Ballad of Mulan”, which we selected from five different English translations, as we explain in Section 3.

For this purpose, with the help of concepts from translation theory, narratology and cognitive semiotics we formulate a framework of *translation resemblance* involving three levels: semantic, stylistic and pragmatic, as explained in Section 2. Using the cognitive-semiotic principle of *phenomenological triangulation* (Zlatev, 2015; Zlatev and Mouratidou, 2024), we also combine a plethora of different methods. The comparison of structure, content and style between the two texts was carried out using first-person methods (1PM): our respective intuitive knowledge of the source and target languages, and the cultural sensitivities of the respective audiences. In addition, we performed quantitative comparison of the lengths of the different part of the source and target texts, implying a detached, third-person method (3PM). However, to be able compare the pragmatic resemblance (i.e., in terms of effects on audiences) we devised a survey asking both more general and specific questions and distributed this to 20 native speakers per cultural/linguistic group (Chinese and Western, English speakers). Asking for interpretations from the participants, and our efforts to understand these, amounted to a second-person method (2PM), while presenting some descriptive statistics of the replies is a 3PM. Table 1 summarizes our methodology.

**Table 1.** A summary of how phenomenological triangulation was applied in the study

Perspective	Methods
First person methods (1PM)	Language and culture intuitions Systematic comparison of structure, content and style
Second person methods (2PM)	Inter-researcher discussions Interaction with participants and qualitative analysis of open questions
Third person methods (3PM)	Quantification of survey results and narration ratios

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 we provide essential theoretical background, with focus on translation and narrative from the perspective of a cognitive semiotics. In Section 3 we describe the alternative English translations of *Mulan Shi* that we considered, and how we chose the target text for a detailed comparison with the Chinese source text. In the remaining sections we report the comparison in question on the three levels of translation resemblance: Section 4 shows qualitative and quantitative narrative analysis, as well as differences between the source and target texts in terms of the classical strategies of addition, omission, substitution, and narrowing. In Section 5 we compare the texts in terms of stylistic factors like rhyme and meter, direct speech and ideophones. Section 6 presents the design and results of the survey, and we conclude in Section 7.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Different kinds of translation resemblance

As well-known, Nida (1959) distinguished two general approaches in translation, with the traditional one aiming for *formal equivalence*: fidelity to the lexical content and grammatical structure of the source language. As argued by Jakobson (1959), it should be in principle possible to provide such equivalence of semantic content: “No lack of grammatical device in the language translated into makes impossible a literal translation of the entire conceptual information contained in the original” (ibid: 235). Concerning poetry, however, Jakobson was more skeptical if this can be archived:

Only creative *transposition* is possible: either intralingual *transposition* – from one poetic shape to another – interlingual *transposition* — from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic *transposition* — from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting. (ibid: 238, our emphasis).

The problem, however, is that neither Jakobson, nor anyone else to our knowledge, has provided criteria for what counts as “transposition” and its criteria of validity, leaving this entirely to the discretion of the translator. In his work on Bible translations, a genre that in many ways is closer to poetry than to prose, Nida was more optimistic, adding the criterion of *style* to that of semantic content: “Translating consists in producing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning, and secondly in style” (Nida, 1959, p.19). However, Nida proposed – and most within translation studies since then have accepted – that such translation is ultimately not sufficient, as what is most important is the impact of the text on the reader: *dynamic* (or functional) *equivalence*: “the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language” (Nida and Taylor, 1969, p.24). It is once again, however, extremely difficult to specify what the criteria are for a response in target audience between “substantially the same” as that of the audience of the source text.

Jumping to the present context, we can consider what an acclaimed modern translator of Homer’s classic *The Iliad* (see Greenwood, 2023) writes on the matter:

There is nothing like *The Iliad*. No translator, including me, can fully replicate the poetic dramatic effects of the Greek. No translation can simply be “the same” as the original. A translator who underestimates her task will produce clunky, incoherent mess. So I knew from the start that I had to make careful decisions about which features of the Greek poem I most wanted to *echo*, and work with diligence, humility and creativity to find ways to *construct those effects from scratch, within the entirely different palette of the English language*. (Wilson, 2023, p.lxii, our emphasis)

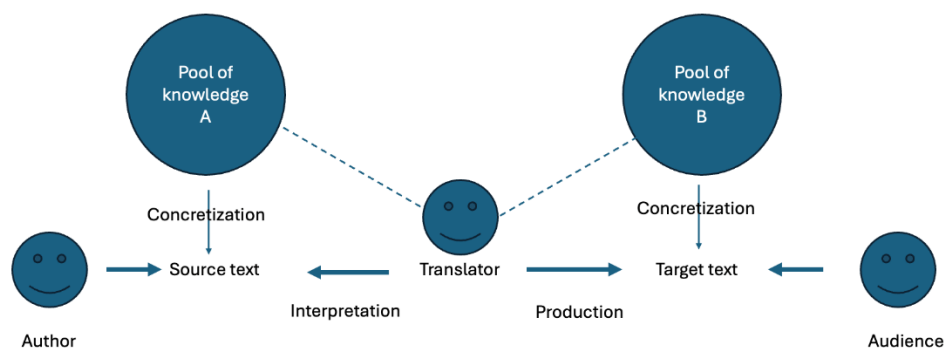
Notably, by speaking of “echoing” and “constructing from scratch” in poetic translation Wilson emphasizes that it can never be a matter of “equivalence”, but rather of *resemblance* between the source and target text. Also, like Nida, Wilson states that the cognitive and emotional effect on the target audience should have priority over any formal matters:

I wanted my English to enable an experience more like that of an ancient listener, who would have understood Homer in oral performance from childhood onward, as a gripping form of entertainment, and as a formative guide to life – not as a difficult old book requiring slow, belabored reading and a mountainous set of footnotes. (ibid, p.lxiii)

Since most English translations of *The Iliad*, as well as those in many other modern European languages, are of the latter type, the translator describes how in the first two years of work on the project she was “completely stuck”, and the breakthrough came when she decided to employ the typical for English, as in most of Shakespeare’s plays, iambic pentameter meter of “da-DUM, da-

DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM” rather than either blank verse, or try to emulate the dactylic hexameter of the original Greek. Wilson states: “I hope that the use of this meter will invite reading out loud, honoring the oral heritage of the original” (ibid: xxiv): a rather straightforward application of the “similarity of effect” principle. This decision consequently led to shorter lines, but of a greater number than in the original. The approach also dictated many specific choices concerning semantic correspondences of names, patronymics, forms of address, metaphors and sound-symbolic expressions, aiming to capture the spirit, as well as sound and light effects of the original, but by using an “entirely different palette”.

What is required from a translator to be able succeed in the face of such almost unsurmountable difficulties? Based on a general, phenomenologically informed model of communication, Sonesson (2014) provides a succinct but informative answer: the translator must be a well-informed and conscientious creator of a *double act of communication*, combining both interpretation and production, ideally with equal sensitivity to the “pools of knowledge” of both source and target cultures. This is shown schematically in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Translation as a bi-cultural, double act of communication, adapted from Sonesson (2014), Figure 5.

To make this argument Sonesson (2014) first shows that it is much too simplistic to think of communication in terms of “conveying information” or “encoding”. Rather, it involves the presentation of an *artifact*, such as a text or an artwork, created by an individual or collective author, to an audience. This needs inevitably to be interpreted by this audience, based on a process of “concretization”, a term that highlights the active, albeit regulated, interpretation of the pool of knowledge, consisting of what many have characterized as a form of (collective) memory realized as *schemas*. “Different cultures may have different memory schemas, meaning that a story coming from one culture is retold from memory by members of another culture using schemas prevailing in their culture.” (ibid, p.254). This implies that if communication is difficult within a culture, it is even more difficult across cultures. As mentioned, the translator should be ideally equally familiar not only with the languages, but with the cultural schemas of both cultures to be able to engage in competent double acts of communication that aims to preserve as much of the meaning of the source text into the target text as possible. Clearly this is an activity where it is impossible to achieve “equivalence”. But it is possible to obtain a compromise between adapting to the *source* text and culture, what Sonesson refers to as the “hermeneutic dimension”, and to the *target* text and culture, or the “rhetorical dimension”:

In the end, this lack of overlap can never be completely remedied. However, it determines two different strategies of the intermediate subject, the translator. He may adapt to the sender of his first act of communication or to the receiver of his second act of communication—or some combination of this. This means that he must situate himself at some point between the hermeneutic and rhetorical dimension of both acts of communication involved. (ibid, p.264)

This is necessary since, as Sonesson emphasizes, the telos or goal of the act of translation is *to preserve the meaning of what is translated as much as possible*, balancing between the “strangeness” of source-oriented translation, and the “ethnocentrism” of target-oriented translation. Returning to Nida, we can see very much the same sentiment:

Though it is fully recognized that absolute communication is quite impossible, nevertheless, very close approximations to the standard of natural equivalence may be obtained, but only if the translations reflect a high degree of sensitivity to different syntactic structures and result from clear insights into cultural diversities. (Nida, 1959, p.31).

To sum up, we can reformulate the classical formulas of translation in light of the above. Translation is a double act of communication where an individual or collective Translator mediates between Author and Audience, aiming for optimal *translation resemblance*, rather than equivalence. Three levels of this may be distinguished: (a) *semantic resemblance* between the structure and content of the source and target texts, (b) *stylistic resemblance*, finding corresponding poetic modes of expression, albeit using a “different palette”, and (c) *pragmatic resemblance*, the impact on the target text audience should resemble that of the source text on the original audience. We elaborate this in much of the rest of the paper.

## 2.2. The three levels of narrative

All kinds of texts are translated, but in the case of the present study, as in many others, the text is that of a *narrative*. This, however, forces us to provide a definition of this concept, as “narrative” has become a term that is so overused that it risks becoming vacuous (Ryan, 2007). A common, but much too restrictive definition is that of Prince (2008, p.19): “the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other”. A more inclusive and useful one for our purpose is that suggested by Bal (1997, p.5):

[A] narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a *medium*, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and “coloring” of a *fabula*. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors.

As can be seen, Bal distinguishes between the “surface” level in one or another medium, which can but need not involve language. Li and Zlatev (2021) refer to this level as that of Narration, which expresses the content of the narrative, the Story itself. This, however, is not a neutral representation of the Fabula, or the underlying sequence of events, but an active *construal* of it, with possible changes in the representation of the chronology of the events. As Zlatev et al. (2024) point out, this three-level division of narrative corresponds strictly to the three levels of *the sign*, as shown in (1).

- (1)                      Narrative [Narration – Story – Fabula]  
                             Sign [Expression – Content – Object]

What remains is to place some general constraints on the content of the text to specify what makes it that of a narrative. That can be done using the classical temporality and coherence-based division of Beginning, Middle and End, made already by Aristotle:

A *whole* [story] is that which possesses a beginning, a middle and an end. A *beginning* is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an *end* is that which does itself naturally from something else ... but

there is nothing after it. A *middle* is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. (*Poetics* 5.1) (Aristotle, 1987)

Thus, we are led to the definition of narrative given in Table 2, as a cognitive-semiotic structure of three levels, corresponding to the three levels of the sign.

**Table 2.** The three levels of *narrative*

Level	
Narration	The actual “telling” of the story – through one or more semiotic systems
Story	Organizing the Fabula in a particular way, with at least Beginning, Middle and End – but not necessarily in this order
Fabula	A causally and chronologically ordered sequence of events

### 3. Deciding on the target text

As stated in the introduction, as source text we adopted the version of *Mulan Shi* published in 1979, used in the compulsory education textbooks approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education. To help choose the target text, we obtained five different English translations of the poem. The earliest we could obtain is from 1912 by Charles Budd, who served as the Bishop of the Anglican Church in Shanghai and mentions in the preface to his book *Chinese Poems* that his translations were done “in his leisure time as a pastime” (Budd, 1912, p.2). A much more ambitious translation was carried out in 1923 by the renowned literary translator Arthur Waley, who gave the poem the title “The Ballad of Mulan” and included it in the anthology *The Temple and Other Poems*. Over half a century later, in 1976 Hans Frankel, a sinologist at Yale University, translated the poem as “Ode of Mulan” and included it in *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*.<sup>2</sup> From the side of translations made by Chinese authors, the following two are best known. In 1992, Xu Yuanchong, a renowned translator and professor at Peking University, translated the poem as “Song of Mulan” in his book *On Chinese Verse in English Rhyme*. As indicated by the title of the book, he endeavored to provide rhymed English as target text. Likewise for Wang Rongpei, who translated the poem as “The Mulan Ballad” and included it in the book *300 Early Chinese Poems (206 BC—618 AD)*.

These five translations were compared for (a) general poetic style and (b) naturalness of the English text for a modern audience. This was done both on the basis of our respective language intuitions, and by asking a reader and writer of modern poetry to carefully read the five translations, and to express their preference. The practicing poet spontaneously judged that the translation of Arthur Waley “sounded the best”, and “least childish or strange” compared to the five options. We did not aim to provide a full justification of this decision but looked for examples that could help explain it; these were not hard to find. In (2) the first two lines of the source text are given, in transliteration and literal translation.

(2)	jī	jī	fù	jī	jī
	ideophone	ideophone	repeat	ideophone	ideophone
	Mùlán		dāng	hù	zhī
	Mulan		face	door	weave

<sup>2</sup> This was also the version used for the 1998 Disney animated film of Mulan, see <http://archives.news.yale.edu/v32.n2/story11.html>

The poem begins with four repetitions of the ideophone *jī*, which creates a distinctive aesthetic effect (Sun, 2020) and, as we discuss in the following sections, has different possible interpretations. In (3-7), we can see how the five translators have rendered these two lines in English.

- (3) Muh-Lan's swift fingers flying to and fro  
Crossed warp with woof in deft and even row. (Bud)
- (4) Click, click, for ever click, click;  
Mulan sits at the door and weaves. (Waley)
- (5) Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,  
Mulan weaves, facing the door. (Frankel)
- (6) Alack, alas! Alack, alas!  
She weaves and sees the shuttle pass. (Yuanchong)
- (7) Alas oh alas! Alas oh alas!  
Mulan is weaving cloth of topmost class. (Rongpei)

Notably, only (4) and (5) use English ideophones.<sup>3</sup> Waley's translation (4) uses the conventional English ideophone *click*, while Frankel opts for the unconventional *tsiek* in (5).<sup>4</sup> While the implied meaning of the former may be somewhat too narrow, it is immediately interpretable as the sound of the loom, especially after the second line. In contrast, the meaning of *tsiek* remains unclear and contributes to a degree of "strangeness" that seems excessive. (6) and (7) do not use ideophones but repetitions of the conventional English words *alack* and *alas*, both of which are rather archaic. Furthermore, their meaning leans more towards the expression of lamentation, contrary to the resolute spirit of the heroine. (3) expresses neither sound symbolism nor sadness, and provides a rather naïve, childlike impression, diverging from the content of the original considerably. On the whole, (4) is the more balanced alternative among the different options.

These differences are characteristic for the overall translations. By insisting on rhyme, the translation of Budd, Yuanchong and Rongpei create a target text that not only appears naïve but departs from the semantic content of the original. For example, (2) contains absolutely nothing about "seeing the shuttle pass" (6) or "cloth of topmost class" (7). We can see a similar pattern in the translation of a key passage, corresponding to a key narrative step in the analysis, that of *Preparation* (see Section 4.1 and Appendix A), in (8-10).

- (8) In the eastern market she's bought a gallant horse,  
In the western market she's bought saddle and cloth.  
In the southern market she's bought snaffle and reins,  
In the northern market she's bought a tall whip. (Waley)
- (9) She buys a steed at eastern fair,  
A whip and saddle here and there.  
She buys a bridle at the south  
And metal bit for the horse's mouth. (Yuanchong)

<sup>3</sup> As in the more recent literature, we use the notion of *ideophone* for the general category of "marked words depictive of sensory imagery found in many of the world's languages. They are noted for their special sound patterns, distinct grammatical properties, and sensory meanings." (Dingemanse, 2012, p.654).

<sup>4</sup> Sun Hongwei (2020) suggests that *tsiek* is a creation of the translator, reminiscent of *tsk* in English, a common ideophone expressing disapproval.



- (10) She buys a strong steed in the eastern market;  
 She buys a saddle in the western market;  
 She buys a bridle in the southern market;  
 She buys a long whip in the northern market. (Rongpei)

Both (8) and (10) capture the symbolic parallelism of the four cardinal directions, helping to express the thoroughness of the preparation of the heroine. However, (8) adopts a high degree of content and stylistic resemblance, where sentence structure, content, and even style correspond to those in the source text. As we discuss in Section 5 in more detail, Waley apparently adopts the iambic pentameter so typical of English poetry (see Section 2.1), at least to a degree. Unlike Rongpei, Waley does not aim at excessive rhymes, for example by repeating “market” at the end of each line as in (10), which leaves a rather bland impression. The least satisfactory of the three is (9), which misses to express the four cardinal directions, only mentioning “the eastern fair” and “the south” and omitting the others, for the sake of providing rather simplistic rhymes *fair/there* and *south/mouth*. This diminishes both the rhythmic and symbolic effects of the original exaggerated parallelism. In sum, we concluded that Waley’s translation was the most appropriate candidate for the target text, for our analysis of translation resemblance with the original.

#### 4. Semantic resemblance: Narrative structure and content

As stated in Section 2.2, a narrative organizes the representation of a sequence of events (the Fabula) in a coherent structure (the Story), expressed in one or another language, or some other semiotic system (the Narration). Given that this last level will inevitably differ in translation, we can ask: (a) to what extent is this the case and (b) is the underlying level of the Story maintained, which could be a requirement for the target text to be considered a translation rather than “transposition”, as argued in Section 2.1.

On the most global level, the Mulan story is typically divided in three parts, following the structure of many folk tales: First the main protagonist is at home; then she is on her quest (i.e. travels, battles, and is rewarded) and in the end she returns home again. This structure falls naturally in the classical Beginning-Middle-End structure of classical narratives, as also acknowledged by Lehr (2007).

Inspired by both such previous analyses and notions from classical narratology, where the story is segmented into a number of steps, starting from initial equilibrium through crisis, and eventual return of the equilibrium (e.g. Todorov, 1969), we divided each of the three main parts of the Mulan narrative into three *story steps* (see Table 3 and Appendix A). The story starts with a *Prologue*, which faces us with the heroine in a state of distress. This is followed by a dialogue with the narrator (or someone else), which explains the *Disruption*, and her decision to take the part of the conscription instead of her father. This is naturally followed by the *Preparation* step, given in translation in (8-10) above. The second part takes place away from home, where the heroine first travels (*Transition*), then engages successfully in battle (*Action*) and is consequently praised and offered a high-ranking position, which she politely turns down for the sake of returning to her home (*Recognition*). The third and final part restores the balance, with Mulan first meeting her family (*Reunion*) and then returning to her original female identity (*Repair*). The story ends with an *Epilogue* that completes the circle, providing also a kind of “sense morale” in the form of a parable about gender identity.

As can be seen in Appendix A, and in Table 3, the source and target texts are indeed quite similar in terms of this Story structure, and also in terms of Narration, considering the number of lines. However, if we consider the number of words, the target text is nearly twice as longer as the source (311 vs. 609). While some of this difference is inevitably due to the different typological properties of the two languages, with many more grammatical words in the English translation, this cannot explain this extreme difference. As we show below, there are many cases



where the English text includes semantic additions and specifications, while the Chinese source text is “minimalistic”, allowing multiple interpretations in line with the genre.

**Table 3.** Story structure and quantitative comparisons of the line and word length of the source text of *Mulan Shi* and target text of “The Ballad of Mulan”

		<i>Mulan Shi</i>		“The Ballad of Mulan”	
Macro structure	Story step	lines	words	lines	words
HOME	1. Prologue	4	19	4	30
	2. Disruption	12	58	12	110
	3. Preparation	4	20	4	36
AWAY	4. Transition	8	48	8	103
	5. Action	6	30	6	54
	6. Recognition	8	36	10	82
HOME	7. Reunion	6	31	7	66
	8. Repair	10	47	10	91
	9. Epilogue	4	22	4	37
Total		62	311	65	609

In the next step, we analyzed these differences in terms of the classical translation strategies: *addition*, *omission*, *substitution*, and the somewhat more novel, *semantic narrowing*.

The target text was found to have three kinds of *addition* of content. The first was the addition of personal pronouns. Given that Chinese does not require the specification of the grammatical subject, it is often left implicit. This is not the case for English, where the subject has to be spelled out, often by using personal pronouns. This occurs a total of 28 times in the target text, as in (12) which has the second person pronoun *you*, lacking in (11). Second, additional content words are introduced, such as *sobs* in (12) and *of your love* in (14), lacking correlates in (13). These additions constitute explications that at least to some degree deviate from the content of the source text, as they (over) emphasize the presumed woes of the heart, cross-culturally typical for a young woman, a presumption that is later shown to be false in both versions of the text.<sup>5</sup> The third type of addition are numerous cases of *oh tell me, lady* as in (14) or similar that signal direct speech, which we also discuss in Section 5.

(11)	bù not	wén hear	jīzhù loom	shēng, sound
	wéi only	wén hear	nǚ woman/daughter	tànxī. sigh

- (12) Listen, and *you* will not hear the shuttle’s sound,  
But only hear a girl’s *sobs* and sighs.

<sup>5</sup> The folk song “Song of the Willow Branch” from the same period as *Mulan Shi* overlaps significantly with the first six lines of source text, but in contrast, refers to a girl's budding love and romantic feelings. Therefore, based on this *intertextuality*, it can easily be assumed that Mulan is a young girl with romantic feelings. But already in the second line she responds that she “thinks of nothing,” and negates this presupposition. Waley's translation accurately captures the implicit meaning of the original text also making it easily understandable for English readers who lack the same cultural background.

- (13) wèn      nǚ                      hé              suǒ              sī,  
ask      woman/daughter      what      AUX      think
- wèn      nǚ                      hé              suǒ              yì.  
ask      woman/daughter      what      AUX      remember

- (14) “Oh tell me, lady, are you thinking of your love,  
Oh tell me, lady, are you longing for your dear?”

There are much fewer cases of (pure) *omission* in the target text, which is not surprising given the source is much shorter in terms of word length, as discussed. But there are a few cases such as when (15) is translated as (16).

- (15) Yé                      niáng              wén              nǚ                      lái,  
father                      mother              hear              woman/daughter              come  
chū                      guō              xiāng              fú                      jiāng  
come                      out-city              each-other              support                      AUX

- (16) When her father and mother heard that she had come,  
They went out to *the wall* and *led her back to the house*.

As can be seen the translator has omitted translating the phrase *xiāng fú jiāng* (‘support each other’), which implies that Mulan’s parents are elderly. Instead, rather redundantly, the target text includes the phrase *led her back to the house*, perhaps making the whole a form of substitution. Another omission in these line concerns *guo* (‘out-city’). In ancient China, reaching this was a very distant journey without the convenience of vehicles, especially for elderly people who need to support each other while walking. The translation *to the wall* fails to convey this extensive distance.

The cases of *substitution* were found to be of four kinds. One form of substitution concerns the use of terms of address to self and others, as summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Substitution examples in terms of address to self and others, see Appendix A for the placement of the lines in the text.

Place in text, context	Source text	Target text
Step 2, lines 1-2, Mulan refers to herself (or Narrator refers to Mulan)	nǚ (‘daughter’)	lady <sup>6</sup>
Step 6, line 8, Mulan refers to herself for Emperor	ér (‘son’)	her
Step 7, line 3, Mulan’s elder sister thinks of Mulan	mèi (‘little sister’)	she
Step 8, lines 1-4, Mulan's self-references when she returns home	wǒ (‘I’)	she/her

<sup>6</sup> This could also be analyzed as semantic narrowing (see below) since *nǚ* can be used to address a younger woman in Chinese, and this aligns with Waley’s translation, where it is apparently the narrator that is addressing Mulan.

The terms used in the source text reflect different social relations and roles in life. For instance, addressing her parents as *nǚ* ‘daughter’, while referring to herself in front of the emperor as *ér* ‘son’ subtly implies Mulan’s dual roles: as a dutiful daughter at home and a courageous son on the battlefield. Further, after returning from the war Mulan refers to herself as *wǒ* ‘I’, implying that through the experiences of life-and-death struggles, her self-esteem has strengthened. In contrast, the target text adopts the rather limited, in this respect, “palette” of the English pronouns, missing the opportunity to connote complex social relationships and associated emotions.

A second form of substitution is a form of cultural adaptation, where elements of the source text are possibly adapted to fit the “pool of knowledge” of the target culture (see Section 2.1). In (17), the word *cí* (‘speak’, ‘bid farewell’) is ambiguous, but is generally agreed to connote a face-to-face farewell ritual (Yin, 2011). In the target (18) it is translated as *steal*, which in the context means leaving secretly. By considering the historical and cultural context, we can better understand this difference. In the Tang Dynasty of ancient China, Mulan was honored with the title of “General of Filial Piety”, a recognition closely associated with the cultural significance of filial piety. Sneaking out without parental approval would have been unacceptable within this traditional Chinese cultural framework.<sup>7</sup>

- (17) *dàn*            *cí*                      *yé*            *niáng*            *qù*,  
          morning    take farewell    father       mother       go

- (18) In the morning she *stole* from her father’s and mother’s house;

In other cases of substitution, the literal meaning of the source term needs to be changed due to cultural connotations that are not within the pool of knowledge of the target audience. In ancient China, numbers were not only used for calculation but were closely related to notions of status, social hierarchy, emotional closeness, and the solemnity of rituals (Cao, 2018). In the source text, there are six cases where numbers are mentioned, including three references to the number 12, often the highest level in various rituals. Additionally, the number words for 10, 100, and 1000 appear. These do not represent specific quantities but rather signify “many” or “extremely many”, depending on the context, as in (19). In (20), we can see that the target text paraphrases the first mention of the numeral, since “twelfth level” would have been incomprehensible, making this a case of substitution.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, the translator provides a *literal translation*, as in the second line of (20). This seems motivated, as it is likely that the target audience would likely understand this non-literally.

- (19) *cè*    *xūn*            *shíèr*    *zhuǎn*,  
       write contribution    twelve    levels/ranks  
       *shǎng*    *cì*            *bǎi*    *qiān*        *qiáng*.  
       reward grant    hundred    thousand    surplus

<sup>7</sup> Yin (2011) argues that Waley’s translation here is simply inaccurate, since Mulan’s decision must have been fully acknowledged and supported by her parents and family. Leaving home without a word would cause great grief to her parents, which is not something that a child would do. Similarly, in other versions of the Mulan story, such as Xu Wei’s (1521-1593) play, it is emphasized that Mulan’s parents fully supported her decision to join the army and even sent her off themselves.

<sup>8</sup> In Chinese, the collocation of the cardinal number *shíèr* (‘twelve’) implicitly conveys the dynamic process of Mulan’s successive military promotions, emphasizing the integrity of accumulated honor. Waley’s translation unfortunately omits this aspect and compresses the dynamic meaning of the source text—indicating steps of military advancement—into a static outcome, namely the direct conferral of high military rank. Although this approach preserves the core event, it diminishes the cultural connotation of *zhuān* as a unit of military merit in the Tang dynasty’s hierarchical system, as well as the cultural model of ritualized promotion encoded in the source text.

- (20) To the strong in battle lordships and lands he gave;  
And of prize money a *hundred thousand* strings.

There were also a few cases of substitution that were apparent mistranslations. In part 4, line 6, *heishan* ‘black mountain’, is translated as *black water*, which also diminishes the parallelism and contrast with *huánghé* ‘Yellow River’. Also, as shown in Table 4, *zī* ‘elder sister’ is incorrectly translated as *little sister*, misrepresenting the relative social status (though it is possible that Waley used a different version of *Mulan Shi* as source text).

A special kind of substitution is what we call *semantic narrowing*, where the source text has more general or ambiguous meaning than in the target text. The ideophone given earlier in (2) has been variously interpreted by commentators as (a) a sigh, (b) the sound of a loom, and (c) the chirping of crickets (Sun, 2020).<sup>9</sup> This ambiguity could be interpreted as contributing to the aesthetic experience. The target translation (4) narrows this down to (a).

Another example of semantic narrowing concerns the allegory regarding the male and female rabbits in the *Epilogue*, with (21) is translated as (22).

(21)	xióng male	tù rabbit/hare	jiǎo legs	pūshuò, fluffy/jumping/in disorder/ground-touching			
	cí female	tù rabbit/hare	yǎn eyes	mílí; hair-covered/blurry/squinting/unfocussed			
	shuāng two	tù rabbit/hare	bàng along	dì ground	zǒu, walk		
	ān how	néng can	biàn recognize	wǒ I	shì am	xióng male	cí? female

- (22) For the male hare has a lilting, lolloping gait.  
And the female hare has a wild and roving eye;  
But set them both scampering side by side,  
And who so wise could tell you “This is he”?

This renowned allegory contains an ambiguous metaphor concerning the differences and similarities between men and women. According to Wang (2015), the contrast between *pūshuò* vs. *mílí* has been variously interpreted as (a) the fluffy appearance of the male rabbit's feet vs. the female rabbit's eyes covered by fur, (b) jumping feet vs. blurry eyes, (c) scratching and clawing feet vs. squinting eyes and (d) feet touching the ground vs. uncertain gaze. According to Wang (2015), among these four explanations, the fourth is the closest to lived reality. In fact, Wang was born in a mountain village and had opportunities to observe both wild and domesticated rabbits, giving him an understanding of their behavior. On this basis he claims that the first two lines of (21) describe the mating behavior of rabbits. When in heat, male rabbits often thump their hind legs forcefully against the ground, producing a loud “pa-pa” sound: a signal indicating the male’s desire to mate with the female. At that time, the female rabbit typically lies flat on the ground with misty, half-closed eyes, passively awaiting copulation. Because male and female rabbits look very similar—not only while running, but even when lying still—it is difficult to distinguish their sexes under normal circumstances. However, this particular moment offers the best chance to tell them apart. Furthermore, Wang (2015) suggests that the metaphor of the male and female rabbits also subtly alludes to *Mulan*’s destiny after returning from the battlefield and reclaiming her

<sup>9</sup> Crickets in China are also known as *cùzhī* with the ancient commentator Cui Bao in the “Annotations of Ancient and Modern Times” describing their sound as resembling the urgency of weaving. Interestingly, in Disney’s 1998 animated film *Mulan*, a cricket is one of the protagonist’s constant companions.

female identity. The last two lines in (21), serve to interpret the lingering mystery of how Mulan managed to conceal her female identity throughout the urgency and turmoil of wartime life. Given this interpretation, we can surmise that in this specific case of semantic narrowing, Waley's translation reflects an accurate understanding of the original poem, rather than being merely adapted to the cultural schemas of the target text audience.

## 5. Stylistic resemblance: Rhyme, rhythm and ideophonic connotations

As stated in the introduction, *Mulan Shi* belongs to the genre of Yuefu poetry, where rhyme serves as an important aesthetic attribute, as well as assisting memorization and cultural transmission. Rhyme has also been argued to reflect semantic transitions and different emotional states in the source text.<sup>10</sup> For example, the initial eight lines feature rhymes employing oblique tones. Subsequently, the following eight lines delve into the concerns raised by the emergent crisis and Mulan's subsequent decision, with the rhyming (*bīng míng yong zheng*) possibly reflecting her steadfast character. It is difficult, however, to determine if such interpretations correspond to experiences by a general Chinese reader, which necessitate audience-directed studies such as that described in the following section.

As seen in Table 5, and in Appendix A, the target text has fewer rhymes, though at least in this part of the poem, there is a degree of correspondence. In fact, Waley commented that “rhymes are so scarce in English (as compared with Chinese) that a rhymed translation can only be a paraphrase and is apt to fall back on feeble padding” (1962, p.9), reflecting also our appreciation of heavily rhymed translations of *Mulan Shi* as giving a naïve and bland impression for an English-reading audience (Section 3). Further, as noted by Kwong (2009, p.189-220): “It is no surprise that no English rendition can rhyme as naturally as an original Chinese poem and achieve the same prosodic resonance that is part and parcel of the latter's artistic appeal.” In other words, stylistic resemblance cannot use “the palette” of the source language, but must necessarily transpose this, as creatively as possible, with the resources of the target languages.

**Table 5.** Rhyming patterns indicated by color patterns, in the source and target texts in the narrative step *Disruption*, as perceived in modern Mandarin Chinese and English

Source text,	Target text
wèn nǚ hé suǒ sī,	“Oh tell me, lady, are you thinking of your love,
wèn nǚ hé suǒ yì,	Oh tell me, lady, are you longing for your dear?”
nǚ yì wú suǒ sī,	“Oh no, oh no, I am not thinking of my love,
nǚ yì wú suǒ yì,	Oh no, oh no, I am not longing for my dear.
zuó yè jiàn jūn tiē,	But last night I read the battle-roll;
kèhán dà diǎn bīng,	The Khan has ordered a great levy of men.
jūn shū shíèr juàn,	The battle-roll was written in twelve books,
juàn juàn yǒu yé míng,	And in each book stood my father's name.
ǎ yé wú dà ér,	My father's sons are not grown men,
mù lán wú zhǎng xiōng,	And of my brothers, none is older than me.
yuàn wèi shì ān mǎ,	Oh let me to the market to buy saddle and horse,
cóng cǐ tì yé zhēng,	And ride with the soldiers to take my father's place.”

<sup>10</sup> In the Chinese tradition *yāyùn* ‘rhyme’ is generally understood as concerning the final syllable of a verse line, which should share the same or similar final vowels and tones. This is a rather different understanding of the notion than in English: “the repetition, in the rhyming words, of the last stressed vowel and of all the speech sounds following that vowel: *late-fate; follow-hollow*” (Abrams and Harpham, 1999, p. 273). Further, Chinese poetic rhyme relies on diachronic phonological systems, such as the phonological system of Middle Chinese, whereas the pronunciation system followed by modern readers has undergone considerable changes. As a result, the auditory effect of rhyme has become less apparent over time. Thus, this aspect of the poem may be ultimately untranslatable, and what we offer in this section is mostly an illustration of the difficulty of achieving translation resemblance on this level.

Rhythm patterns and meter are similarly not directly translatable. The source text consists of 62 lines, among which there are 2 lines of 9 syllables, 7 lines of 7 syllables, but most (the remaining 53 lines) consist of 5 syllables. This arrangement has been suggested to create “a rhythmic ebb and flow in the poem” (Sun, 2011). For example, in the fourth story step, *Transition* (see Appendix A), the eight lines are divided into two groups, each arranged in a sequence of 5, 5, 7, and 9 syllables, creating a rhythmic pattern of urgency followed by a slower pace. Upon comparison, it can be observed that the target text, shown in (23), does not follow these specific “rules”, but maintains the parallelism between the two parts, and oscillates between shorter and longer lines. As also noted by underlining in the first two lines, the basic meter – corresponding to the dominant 5-syllable lines in the source text is at least an approximation of the *iambic pentameter*, which is common for the English language (see Section 2.1).

- (23) In the morning she stole from her father's and mother's house;  
 At night she was camping by the Yellow River's side.  
 She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name,  
 But only the voice of the Yellow River as its hurrying waters hissed and swirled through  
 the night.  
 At dawn they left the River and went on their way;  
 At dusk they came to the Black Water's side.

Turning to *direct speech*, it is known to engage readers and listeners more deeply in the narrative by enhancing empathy with the protagonists (e.g., Louhema et al. 2019) and thus deepens the reader's empathetic understanding in general. The source text of *Mulan Shi* does not make this explicit, but there are at least two instances of direct speech shown in (24) translated as (25), where following the conventions of written English, they are marked by the translator with quotation marks.

- (24) wèn nǚ hé suǒ sī,  
 wèn nǚ hé suǒ yì.  
 nǚ yì wú suǒ sī,  
 nǚ yì wú suǒ yì.  
 .....  
 yuàn wèi shì ān mǎ,  
 cóng cǐ tì yé zhēng.
- (25) “Oh tell me, *lady*, are you thinking of your love,  
 Oh tell me, *lady*, are you longing for your dear?”  
 “Oh no, oh no, *I* am not thinking of my love,  
 Oh no, oh no, *I* am not longing for my dear.  
 .....  
 Oh let me to the market to buy saddle and horse,  
 And ride with the soldiers to take my father's place.”

The target text retains the repetitive structure of the source text's first four lines, but there are several differences from the original text. As described in Section 4, the substitutions for the terms of address, like when *nǚ* is translated first as *lady* and then as *I*, changes the dynamic and nuance of the relationships in the original text. Additionally, the rather blunt and explicit expressions in the target text of *my love*, as well as appeals such as *oh let me*, do not adequately reflect the tone of a noble young woman living in the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China. Thus, they are once again expressions of the “rhetorical dimension” (Sonesson, 2014) of adapting the text to the target audience.

We conclude this section with the connotational (rather than denotational) meanings of *ideophones*: conventional but non-arbitrary expressions with subtle resemblances between sound expressions and meanings (e.g., Dingemanse, 2012). The target text appears to be sensitive to these very difficult to translate stylistic elements, even if this inevitably misses on some potential interpretations, like in the decision to translate the ideophone *ji ji* with *click, click*. In story step 4, *Transition*, there are two cases of ideophones in the source text, shown in (26) and (28), which most obviously imitate environmental sounds. But they can also be said to connote the state of mind in which the heroine finds herself, in contrast with the preceding lines which refer to the home that she has left behind. Thus, these ideophones both enhance the sensory vividness of the poem and suggest certain emotional qualities. How has this been translated? As we can see in (27) and (29), respectively, the translator has not used English ideophones, but in the first case a metaphor that personifies the river as speaking (*the voice*) and the verbs *hissed* and *swirled* with some sound-symbolic qualities, expressed above all through the consonant clusters. The translation in (29) is more indirect, but one can again detect more general sound symbolism in the choice of the verb *muffled*, as opposed to, say, “quiet”.

(26) dàn wén huánghé liú shuǐ míng jiān jiān  
but hear Yellow River flow water make-sound ideophone

(27) But only *the voice* of the Yellow River as its hurrying waters *hissed and swirled* through the night.

(28) dàn wén yànshān hú qí míng jiū jiū  
But hear Yanshan Hu rider make ideophone

(29) She could only hear the *muffled voices* of Scythian horsemen riding on the hills of Yen.

Finally, in step 7, *Repair*, the final line introduces the ideophone *huò huò* which not only elongates the line and easing the tense rhythm but also conveys the joy of the family reunion both audibly and palpably. The English translation (31) uses a phrase that includes an ideophone (*flash*) and interestingly, is one of the few cases where an extra line is introduced, giving extra emphasis to this sensory element at the end of the previous line.

(30) mó dāo huò huò xiàng zhū yang  
sharpen knife ideophone towards pig sheep

(31) He sharpened his knife and darted *like a flash*  
Towards the pigs and sheep.

In sum, as with rhyme and rhythm, with respect to the translation of ideophones, the target text can be said to display at least a *moderate*, if not high degree of stylistic resemblance. And once again, this does not of course imply “equivalence”, since these are subtle aspects of meaning that have even less correspondences than the semantic ones of structure and content discussed in Section 5. But rather, with respect to the effort to use stylistic devices that may *at least have the potential* to create similar effects on the target audience, as the corresponding ones may have on the source audience. Whether this is indeed the case is another matter, one of pragmatic resemblance, which with address with the help of the results of the survey in the following section.



## 6. Pragmatic resemblance: Effects on the audience

### 6.1 Design and participants

In general terms, *pragmatics* (e.g., Grice, 1989; Levinson, 1983) has to do with speaker intentions and audience interpretations. Since we do not have access to the former, or to how ancient Chinese audiences interpreted *Mulan Shi*, by pragmatic resemblance in translation, we here mean to what extent interpretations, and effects more broadly, overlap when comparing how modern audiences respond to the source and target texts. This is in a way our “operationalization” of what Nida (1959) and others call “dynamic equivalence”.

As mentioned previously, we addressed this level of translation resemblance with the help a questionnaire-based study and consisting of 5 types of questions:

- A. Preliminary questions, concerning language competence, age and gender
- B. Background questions, concerning previous familiarity with the story and poem
- C. Open-ended questions, asking for participants to formulate their general impressions on various aspects in their own words.
- D. Multiple-choice questions, concerning specific interpretations, focusing on potential comprehension differences, possibly related to issues of content as those described in Section 4
- E. Open-ended questions, related to content more generally, or to stylistic aspects, with focus on specific parts of the poem.

The questionnaire underwent several stages of development and careful translation between English and Mandarin. After “piloting” and improvements, it was distributed to 20 participants for each language: native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and Western individuals who are either native speakers, near native, or at least fluent in English. The average time taken by the Chinese participants was 45 minutes, ranging from 16 to 193 minutes. Unfortunately, we could not calculate the durations for the English-speaking group, since we used a different application which did not measure this. But in general, they were comparable.

We analyzed the results of the D questions quantitatively, and those of the types C and E qualitatively, using a method inspired by *descriptive phenomenology* (Giorgi, 2009). This implied reading all the replies carefully with focus on understanding the participants’ intentions, extracting “key terms” and generalizing these into “invariants”, or *themes*, written with CAPITALS, as shown in Table 6. We performed this analysis separately for the two sets of data, and then compared the findings, discussed, and eventually agreed on the themes, which were in most cases common for both groups, but with different degrees of representation.

**Table 6.** The first five replies from the English survey to question E1, with extraction of key terms in the second column and generalizing these into themes in the third

1. What do you think mostly drives Mulan to join the army? Please read the following lines and specify briefly in your own words.	Key terms	Themes
To protect her family, and the family's honor, save her brothers who are too young to join	family, honor, brothers	FAMILY HONOR
her father needs to be at home caring for his family, and she <u>want's</u> to take his place in war to avoid him being <u>sant</u> to war	father, family	FAMILY
She knew her father had been called but also knew he was needed at home with his family and none of her brothers were old enough to go so she felt responsible for the family and took his place.	father, brothers	FAMILY
To take the place of her father and protect him and her family from the danger of losing him.	father, family	FAMILY
I think it's her concern over her father's safety. She knows that he is older and that none of her younger brothers may take his place. <u>Therefore</u> she feels that it is her duty to go in his stead as she maybe more able bodied.	Father, brothers, duty	FAMILY DUTY

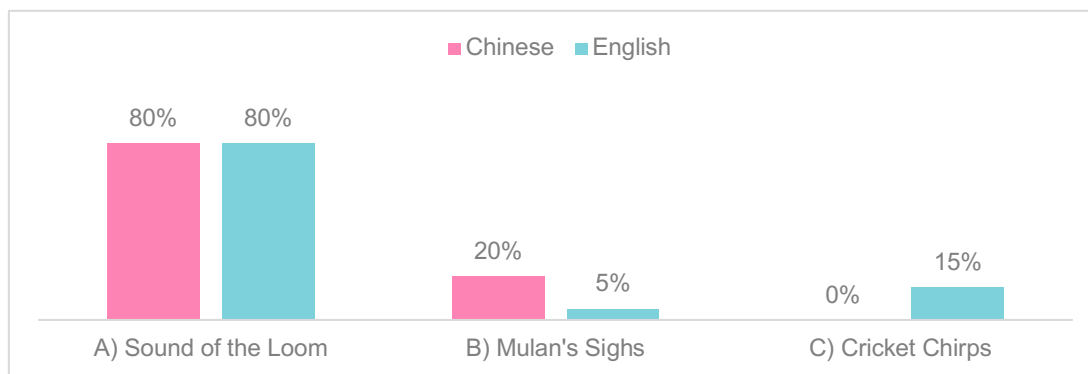
The replies to the background questions (B) showed, as expected, considerable differences. All Chinese participants had studied the story from school, while none of the English-speaking participants had done so. Nearly all the Chinese group reported that they were familiar with the story, while only 6 (30%) of the English-speaking group were. In terms of medium, all Chinese participants had read the poem, and nearly half had seen one or another film adaptation. On the other hand, while half of the English-speaking group had also seen a film version, none had ever read the poem before.

While all the questions concern the interpretations and experiences of actual audiences and the effects of the respective text upon them, and thus a matter of pragmatics, as stated above, they differed in focus, and in fact corresponded mostly to one or another of the three levels of translation resemblance. So, in performing the analysis, and reporting the results below we “re-grouped” these as follows:

- All D questions (1-6) + E1, E2 and E5 address *pragmatic-content* resemblance
- E3, E4, and C5 address *pragmatic-stylistic* resemblance
- C1, C2, C3, C4, and E6 were used to assess *pragmatic-general* resemblance

## 6.2 Pragmatic-content resemblance

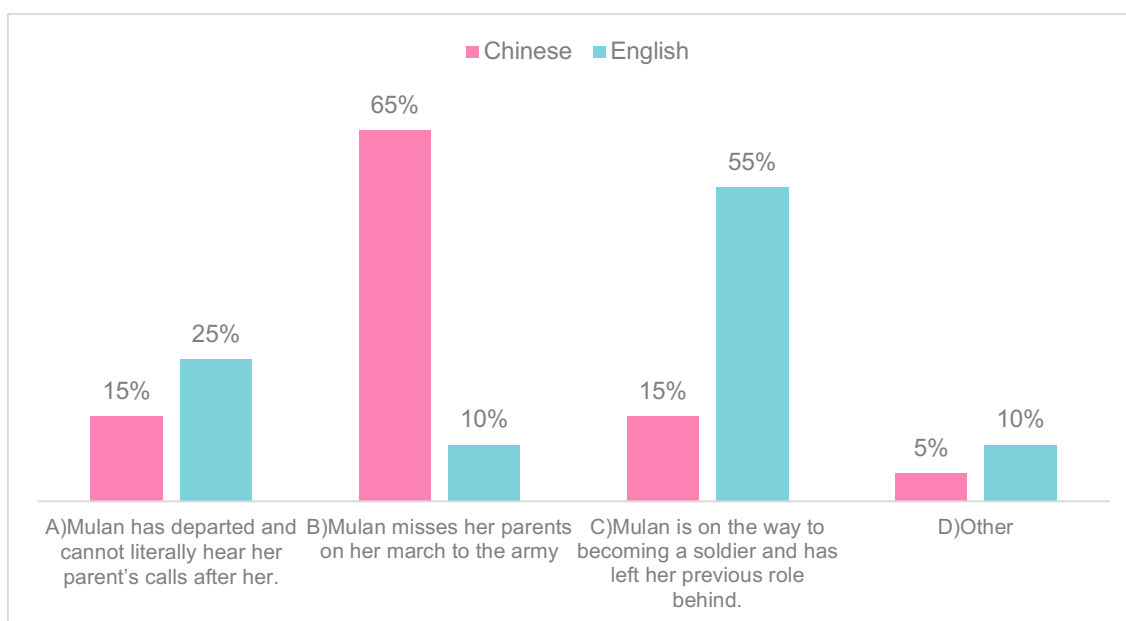
The quantitative analysis of the multiple-choice (D) questions showed very similar responses in the two groups for the first three questions (D1-3), and substantial differences for the latter three (D4-6). For example, the interpretations of the sound expressed by the ambiguous initial ideophone (see Section 4) were proportioned very similarly between the two groups, as shown in Figure 2. Likewise, for question D2, “Who is speaking to Mulan from the start?” in both groups about half the participants (45%) considered that it was the narrator, with only slight differences in the proportions of the other two, less common interpretations: (b) that Mulan was talking to herself and (c) that one of her parents is addressing her.



**Figure 2.** Proportions of replies to the question concerning the meaning of the initial ideophone.

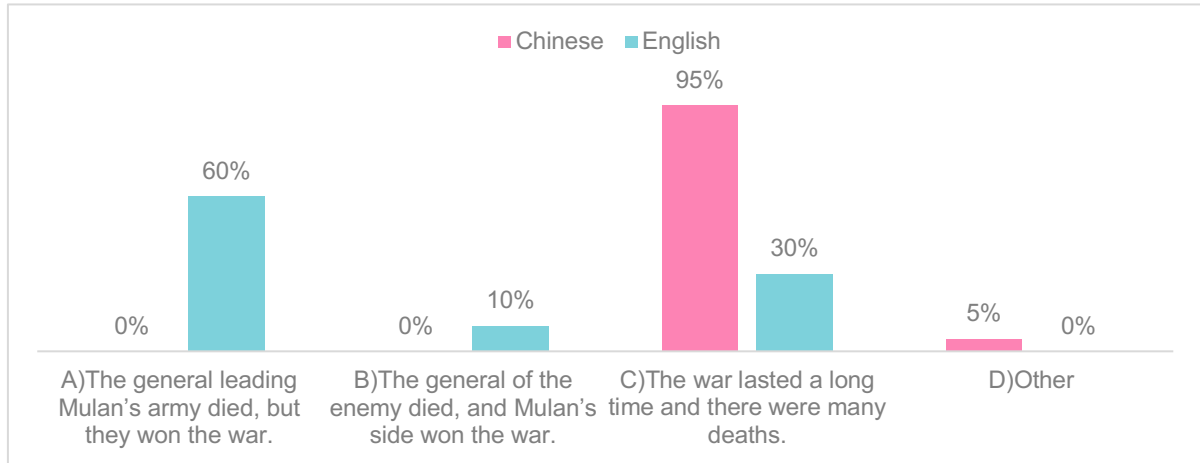
On the other hand, the replies clearly differed with respect to D4, “How did Mulan leave her home to join the army?” While all English-speaking participants chose the option “She left secretly during the night,” only 5 (25%) of Chinese participants selected this, and 13 (65%) preferred “She bid farewell to her parents and family.” As discussed in Section 4, these differences very likely have to do with the substitution *steal*, and possibly also by the way the scene is presented in the Disney filmizations (which as mentioned above, was the only way in which any of the English participants were familiar with the story).

Other differences were apparently due to more subtle factors. As shown in Figure 3, to the question on how best to interpret a key pair of lines, most Chinese participants replied with a “backward focus” to the family that Mulan had left behind, which the Western English-speaking group was “forward oriented” to the adventures to come.



**Figure 3.** Proportions on how to interpret the lines: “She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name, But only the voice of the Yellow River as its hurrying waters hissed and swirled through the night.”

Another line that was interpreted quite differently is shown in Figure 4. While nearly all the Chinese participants opted for the general reply, which is natural since the Chinese expressions *jiāngjūn* ‘captain’ and *zhuàngshì* ‘warrior’ in this context do not so much refer to specific individuals but highlight diverse roles in battlefield and signify the prolonged duration of the war and the resultant high death toll. On the other hand, the majority (60%) of the English-speaking participants understood *the captain* to specifically refer to the general who led Mulan’s army, which likely results from the definite phrasing.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 4.** Proportions on how to interpret the lines: “The captain had fought a hundred fights, and died; The warriors in ten years had won their rest”

In the qualitative analysis of the open questions, there was a similar balance of similarities and differences between the two groups. In question E1 about the reasons behind Mulan’s decision to join the army, *fùqīn* ‘father’ and *father* were nearly always mentioned by all participants in both groups, and FAMILY was the major theme. DUTY was the second most common theme. But while for both groups this was understood above all as duty to her *family*, for a quarter of the Chinese participants this also involved duty to her *guojiā* ‘country’, thus motivating the theme PATRIOTISM, mentioned by only two participants in the English-speaking group. Another difference was that half of the Chinese participants mentioned *zhēngbīng* ‘conscription’ as a key factor, making this a major theme for the group, but not for the English speakers, who seemed to focus on Mulan’s free choice more than external obligations.

Also, for question E2, which asked about understanding Mulan’s preparations, both groups emphasized Mulan’s commitment and diligence, with themes like THOROUGHNESS and DEDICATION. But there were also some differences: many in the English-speaking group interpreted the need to go to different markets to obtain the needed resources as a wish to be discrete: COVERTNESS (coherent with the replies to question D4 about leaving in secret, discussed above), while none in the Chinese group did so. Rather, many tended to view Mulan’s war preparations as *cōngmáng* ‘in a rush’ and *jǐnjí* ‘urgent’, making the theme URGENCY a major one.

Furthermore, both similar and different were the replies to question E5 “How do you imagine Mulan’s parents going to greet her on her on return...?” The English-speaking group

<sup>11</sup> In one of the general (C) questions about parts being difficult to understand, one participant explicitly expressed confusion about this: “Which captain? And in what way does this contribute to the story?”

mostly saw this in terms of positive emotions: personal (*happy, love, joy*) and/or social (*respect, welcoming committee*). But since in the scene these emotions are not explicitly expressed, a significant number of participants also “imagine” this in NEUTRAL, and some even in NEGATIVE terms (*worry, disappointment*). For the Chinese group, more than half of the participants described it with terms expressing both positive and negative emotions: *lèi yǎn pó suō* ‘eyes brimming with tears’, *kuò bié yǐ jiǔ* ‘long-separated’, *xīn qíng jí dòng* ‘heart/mood stirred with urgency’, *wēn xīn gǎn rén* ‘heart-warming and touching’. This mix reasonably reflects both the pain of long-term wartime separations and the happiness and eagerness of post-war reunions. A significant number of participants (5 people) described the scene based on the literal meaning of the text, with a neutral emotional tone. However, it is worth noting that they all mentioned *chān fú* ‘support each other’, which appears in the original text and establishes an emotional tone that is missing in the translation. A few participants imagined the scene as completely positive: *xǐ qì yáng yáng* ‘beaming with joy’, *kǎi xuán* ‘triumphant return’, or entirely negative. Apart from possible differences in cultural background, the omission in translation concerning the need for the parents to “support each other” (see Section 4) probably contributed to this difference.

### 6.3. Pragmatic-stylistic resemblance

Question E3 explicitly addressed one of the key stylistic aspects of the poem – the use of ideophones and sound-symbolism more generally – with focus on those used in (26) and (27) above, in contrast to the preceding line: *She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name*. The formulation was: “How can you describe the SOUNDS that you experience on reading these lines?” Most Chinese participants replied in terms of the theme EMOTIONS – missing her family or anticipating the battle. Fewer replied by giving LITERAL interpretation than in the English-speaking group. On the other hand, about half of the replies of the English speakers related to the theme ATMOSPHERE, which to some degree corresponds to that of EMOTIONS in the Chinese group. Further, about a quarter of replies in both groups explicitly recognizing this as a stylistic figure, SOUND-SYMBOLISM. Thus, the replies to this question can be seen as largely similar, apart from the frequent mention of SADNESS by the Chinese group, largely missing in the English-speaking group.

A second question asking about stylistic effects (E4) asked about the “effect” of repeating the line *She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name*. While the English participants did not comment on this in relation to E3, they compensated, so to speak, with the majority commenting on the sadness of being separated from one’s family, motivating the theme LONGING, while the Chinese had already expressed in relation to the previous question. Interestingly, here the Chinese participants, who as mentioned above had commented on this in relation to E3 focused to a greater extent on the stylistic aspects. Like the English-speaking group, the theme EMPHASIS was prominent as interpretation. But unlike them, the theme EASE was present in about a quarter of the replies: that such repetition contributes to the rhythm of the poem, making it easier to read aloud. Some even mentioned “singing”, which as pointed out from the onset, was the original way in which *Mulan Shi* was performed.

Finally, for this (sub)category, the question C5. “Is there anything in the style that makes the poem becomes *more expressive*, in the sense of creating a stronger impact on you as a reader?” once again revealed both similarities and differences between the groups. What was common were the themes IMAGERY and REPETITION. But while the former was major theme in the English-speaking group, it was explicitly mentioned by only two participants in the Chinese group, which rather focused on more “formal” aspects, mostly falling under REPETITION theme, using technical terms like *pái bǐ* ‘parallelism’, and *duì'ǒu* ‘antithesis’. The Chinese participants’ responses likely reflect more than individual stylistic preferences. As pointed out in the introduction, the poem is a classic text in Chinese secondary school language curricula and a

representative work of *yuefu* poetry. Its teaching typically includes analyses of the stylistic features of classical Chinese poetry like the use of parallelism and antithesis. This pedagogical focus helps explain the observed divergence between the two groups: in response to question C5, the English participants tended to rely more on personal preferences, while the Chinese participants tended to analyze it using specific terminology related to classical poetic genres

However, the Yuefu tradition does not possess intrinsic formal characteristics in the strict sense, as noted by Qian (1998): “Yuefu poetry follows no fixed poetic rules; its structure lies in musical rhythm and the audience’s psychological reception—it takes captivating the listeners’ mind as its organizing principle.” This suggests that the Chinese participants’ interpretations derive not so much from genre-based formal features, but from a familiarity with a more general culturally sedimented tradition of “song-poetry”, to which *Mulan Shi* belongs.<sup>12</sup>

Further, what was missing for the English-speaking group but present in about a third of the Chinese participants were references to RHYTHM and INTERTEXTUALITY. With respect to RHYTHM (as well as rhyme, as we discussed in Section 5), this reflects qualities which were largely, and more or less inevitably, lost in the translation. The latter reflected greater familiarity with the genre, and the whole literary tradition, which is this a difference that is also quite predictable.

#### 6.4. Pragmatic-general resemblance

As mentioned above, we grouped here questions that were most “general”, as well as the final “hare analogy”, which effectively combines content, style and general understanding. For lack of space, we focus only on the most salient differences and between the groups, as well as on key similarities.

Concerning the question about “their general impression of the poem” (C1), a few English speakers gave vague (and positive) comments, but most focused either on the themes CONTENT or STYLE, rarely mentioning both. In contrast, a third of the Chinese participants combined these, and STYLE was on the whole dominant, highlighted by two thirds of the participants. Thus, consistently with the results discussed in the previous subsection, the Chinese participants showed a more pronounced focus on the poem’s stylistic elements.

A second general question asked: “Which scene do you find most memorable and what makes it so?” Following the methodology of finding themes as with the other questions, the most common theme for both groups was that of GENDER (REVERSAL), including scenes when Mulan “changed” into a man, and back into a woman, and the final analogy about the fluidity of gender roles. Other themes were those of Mulan’s SACRIFICE and her HUMBLENESS: the value of simple life and family over honor. Very few participants in the English groups mentioned the theme of BATTLE, which was much more prevalent among the Chinese. This could perhaps be attributed to a lower degree of stylistic resemblance in this respect: in the original text, the description of battle, though brief, is stylistically powerful, whereas in the English translation, it is rather minimally represented, and as discussed in Section 6.2, somewhat confusing.

Concerning the question aspects that were hard to understand (C3), the responses were also mostly similar, with the exception that two of the Chinese participants raised questions about the CREDIBILITY of the story, while some of the English speakers found problems with MISSING EVENTS (often in relation to theme BATTLE as described above), and CULTURAL REFERENCES. A small proportion in both groups pointed out archaic or less terms as the most common comprehension issue.

Moving to an even higher degree of generality C4 asked “Can you identify with Mulan and her actions? If so, what helps you in this?” Interestingly, nearly all participants stated that they identify with Mulan and her actions. The differences transpired when analyzing the second part

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<sup>12</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.



of the question: while PATRIOTISM was a major theme for the Chinese group, this hardly figured for the English speakers, consistently with the replies to E1 above. Conversely, the theme of individual FREEDOM was somewhat more strongly represented among the English speakers. The themes of FAMILY and GENDER were present in both groups, the first much more than the second, somewhat surprisingly for the English readers.

Finally, the replies on how participants understood the Epilogue, with the famous metaphor/analogy of male and female hares, the replies were surprisingly similar. The two dominant themes were GENDER FLUIDITY and GENDER EQUALITY, with the former more strongly represented among the English speakers, and the latter more among the Chinese participants. A few in each groups gave more literal, or “strange” interpretations (e.g. “Mulan was out fighting with other warriors, fighting in a melee unable to distinguish between men and women”). Such idiosyncrasies are inevitable when it comes to metaphor comprehension.

## 6.5 Summary

Our investigation of pragmatic translation resemblance between the source and target texts, in terms of how they were received by modern Chinese and English-speaking audiences, on the whole provided evidence for *considerable resemblance*: in understanding key passages (6.2), appreciating stylistic devices (6.3), and general appreciation of the poem (6.4). Given the major differences between the languages, as well as in the cultural and educational background, and further the fact that all Chinese participants had studied the poem in school, while none of the English speakers had ever encountered it before, this overlap is quite remarkable.

The differences between the groups concerned three, interrelated, aspects. As described in Section 4, the translator represents Mulan’s departure with the verb *steal (away)* and misses to translate that her old parents “supported each other” on her return, and this contributes to further differences, with the English participants reading into Mulan’s actions features of rebelliousness (even calling her “prodigal” in one case) that are foreign to the Chinese group. The Chinese participants, on the other hand, demonstrated a more pronounced emphasis on familial ties, as evidenced by their distinctly different responses compared to the English group on the questions related to Mulan’s departure and longing for her family during her march.

Still, the theme of FAMILY dominated in the English as well as in the Chinese group for several of the questions, so this difference did *not* lead to categorically distinct overall interpretations. The themes related to GENDER were quite similar in both groups, with understandable differences related to different cultural values in the respective communities like more focus on PATRIOTISM for the Chinese, and at least somewhat more on FREEDOM for the English-speakers. These were consistent with the differences in understanding the heroine’s sacrifice in terms of moral obligation for the Chinese participants, and more as a matter of personal choice for the English-speaking group. Notably, however, these were differences in *proportions* rather than categorically.

Perhaps the strongest differences had to do with the Chinese participants appreciating stylistic devices as rhyme and rhythm to a greater degree than the English speakers, which as we noted, is expected given that (a) *Mulan Shi* is analyzed extensively within the Chinese education system, and (b) these are aspects that are impossible to render in an “equivalent” manner. But even here, many of the English speakers commented positively on features such as SOUND SYMBOLISM and REPETITION.

## 7. Conclusions

The *double act of communication* where a translator mediates between source and target texts, as well all the cultural references and schemas of the respective cultures that constitutes the phenomenon of translation (Sonesson, 2014) faces almost insurmountable challenges and should be in principle “impossible”. And yet, as pointed out by many, this act is *necessary*, as it provides



an indispensable bridge for cross-cultural exchange. Following Sonesson's understanding of how translation must always offer a balance between focus on the original and target audiences, as well as Nida's notion of *dynamic equivalence*, we have in this article investigated the possibility of poetic translation with the help of a novel framework comprising three levels of *translation resemblance* consisting of three dimensions: (a) resemblance between the structure and content of the source and target texts, (b) stylistic resemblance, and (c) pragmatic resemblance, concerning the impacts of the source and target texts upon respective audiences.

We applied this framework to the canonical ancient Chinese poem *Mulan Shi* and its translation by Arthur Waley as "The Ballad of Mulan" in *The Temple and Other Poems* (1923). Using a cognitive-semiotic framework, we triangulated between (a) a first-person method, using our intuitive grasp of the languages and corresponding cultures, (b) second-person methods where we "negotiated" these understandings between us through much discussion, as well as our interpretations of the replies of the survey participants, and (c) a detached, third-person method, involving the quantitative assessment of different aspects of the source and target texts, and some of the survey results.

The findings of the study allowed us to conclude that the target text exhibits *high resemblance* with respect to narrative structure but *moderate resemblance* on content due to some key omissions and substitutions. The *stylistic resemblance was also moderate*, while the pragmatic resemblance was *considerable*, given that the two groups exhibited most of the same themes, but with different proportions.

On the whole, our findings have shown that despite many differences on the levels of content, style and effect, the target text "The Ballad of Mulan" can be said to exhibit a relatively high degree of translation resemblance, which is quite remarkable given the temporal, cultural and geographic distances between the source and the target, and its respective audiences. We find this fact encouraging for the possibilities of cross-cultural understanding.

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## Appendix A

The source and target texts of the study, divided in story parts (see Section 4), with corresponding lines. (Partial) rhymes, including repetitions, are indicated by color marking.

#	Chinese text ( <i>Mulan Shi</i> )	English text (“The Ballad of Mulan”)	Story step
1	jī jī fù jī jī, mùlán dāng hù zhī. bù wén jī zhù shēng, wéi wén nǚ tàn xī.	Click, click, for ever click, click; Mulan sits at the door and weaves. Listen, and you will not hear the shuttle’s sound, But only hear a girl’s sobs and sighs.	Prologue
2	wèn nǚ hé suǒ sī, wèn nǚ hé suǒ yī. nǚ yì wú suǒ sī, nǚ yì wú suǒ yī. zuó yè jiàn jūn tiē, kèhán dà diǎn bīng. jūn shū shíèr juàn, juàn juàn yǒu yé míng. ǎ yé wú dà ér, mù lán wú zhǎng xiōng. yuàn wèi shì ān mǎ, cóng cǐ tì yé zhēng.	“Oh tell me, lady, are you thinking of your love. Oh tell me, lady, are you longing for your dear?” “Oh no, oh no, I am not thinking of my love. Oh no, oh no, I am not longing for my dear. But last night I read the battle-roll; The Khan has ordered a great levy of men. The battle-roll was written in twelve books, And in each book stood my father’s name. My father’s sons are not grown men, And of my brothers, none is older than me. Oh let me to the market to buy saddle and horse, And ride with the soldiers to take my father’s place.”	Disruption
3	dōng shì mǎi jùn mǎ, xī shì mǎi ān jiān, nán shì mǎi pèi tóu, běi shì mǎi cháng biān.	In the eastern market she’s bought a gallant horse, In the western market she’s bought saddle and cloth. In the southern market she’s bought snaffle and reins, In the northern market she’s bought a tall whip.	Preparation
4	dàn cí yé niáng qù, mù sù huánghé biān, bù wén yé niáng huàn nǚ shēng, dàn wén huánghé liú shuǐ míng jiān jiān.  dàn cí huánghé qù, mù zhī hēishān tóu, bù wén yé niáng huàn nǚ shēng, dàn wén yàn shān hú qí míng jiū jiū.	In the morning she stole from her father’s and mother’s house; At night she was camping by the Yellow River’s side. She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name, But only the voice of the Yellow River as its hurrying waters hissed and swirled through the night. At dawn they left the River and went on their way; At dusk they came to the Black Water’s side. She could not hear her father and mother calling to her by her name. She could only hear the muffled voices of Scythian horsemen riding on the hills of Yen.	Transition
5	wàn lǐ fù róng jī, guān shān dù ruò fēi. shuò qì chuán jīn tuò, hán guāng zhào tiè yī.	A thousand leagues she tramped on the errands of war, Frontiers and hills she crossed like a bird in flight.	Action

	jiāng jūn bǎi zhàn sī, zhuàng shì shí nián guī.	Through the northern air echoed the watchman's tap; The wintry light gleamed on coats of mail. The captain had fought a hundred fights, and died; The warriors in ten years had won their rest.	
6	guī lái jiàn tiānzǐ, tiānzǐ zuò míng táng. cè xūn shì zhuān, shǎng cì bǎi qiān qiáng. Kèhán wèn suǒ yù, mùlán bù yòng shàngshū láng,  yuàn chí qiān lǐ zú,  sòng ér hái gù xiāng.	They went home, they saw the Emperor's face; The Son of Heaven was seated in the Hall of Light. To the strong in battle lordships and lands he gave; And of prize money a hundred thousand strings. Then spoke the Khan and asked her what she would take. "Oh, Mulan asks not to be made A Counsellor at the Khan's court; She only begs for a camel that can march A thousand leagues a day, To take her back to her home."	Recognition
7	Yé niáng wén nǚ lái, chū guō xiāng fù jiāng; āzǐ wén mèi lái, dāng hù lǐ hóng zhuāng; xiǎo dì wén zǐ lái, mó dāo huò huò xiàng zhū yáng.	When her father and mother heard that she had come, They went out to the wall and led her back to the house. When her little sister heard that she had come, She went to the door and rouged her face afresh. When her little brother heard that his sister had come, He sharpened his knife and darted like a flash Towards the pigs and sheep.	Reunion
8	Kāi wò dōng gé mén, zuò wò xī gé chuāng. Tuō wò zhàn shí páo, zhuó wò jiù shí cháng. dāng chuāng lǐ yún bīn, duì jìng tiē huāhuáng. chū mén kàn huǒbàn, huǒbàn jiē jīng mǎng; tóng xíng shì nián, bù zhī mùlán shì nǚ láng.	She opened the gate that leads to the eastern tower, She sat on her bed that stood in the western tower, She cast aside her heavy soldier's cloak, And wore again her old-time dress. She stood at the window and bound her cloudy hair; She went to the mirror and fastened her yellow combs. She left the house and met her messmates in the road; Her messmates were startled out of their wits. They had marched with her for twelve years of war And never known that Mulan was a girl.	Repair
9	xióng tù jiǎo pū shuò, cí tù yǎn mí lì; shuāng tù bàng dì zǒu, ān néng biàn wǒ shì xióng cí?	For the male hare has a lilt, lolling gait. And the female hare has a wild and roving eye; But set them both scampering side by side, And who so wise could tell you "This is he"?	Epilogue

### About the authors

**Yan Miao** (苗艳) is Associate Professor of Journalism at Chengdu University of Technology, China. She holds a Ph.D. in Journalism and Communication, with research focusing on semiotics, narratology, and mass communication. From 2023 to 2024, she was a visiting scholar at Lund University, Sweden, where she collaborated with Professor Jordan Zlatev on semiotic translation studies of *Mulan Shi*. She is the author of *Discourse Studies of Chinese New Media Events* (2015) and contributed to the book *Brand Semiotics* (2004). Her approach to media studies is deeply influenced by semiotic theory, with an emphasis on the interaction between cultural symbols and audience reception in mass communication.

Email: [miaoyan@cdut.edu.cn](mailto:miaoyan@cdut.edu.cn)

**Jordan Zlatev** is Professor of General Linguistics and Director of Research for the Division of Cognitive Semiotics at Lund University, Sweden. He was the first president of *International Association for Cognitive Semiotics* (IACS), from 2013 to 2014, and continues to be engaged in this community, as board member and conference organizer. He is the author of *Situated Embodiment: Studies in the Emergence of Spatial Meaning* (1997), and of over 100 articles in academic journals and anthologies. His current research focuses on polysemiotic communication, and more generally on the nature of language in relation to other semiotic systems like gesture and depiction. His approach to cognitive semiotics is strongly influenced by phenomenology, the philosophy and methodology of lived experience.

Email: [jordan.zlatev@ling.lu.se](mailto:jordan.zlatev@ling.lu.se)