



## On Syntactical Iconicity in Literary Image Translation: Taking the Four English Versions of *Bian Cheng* for Example

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### Abstract

Image translation is an important area in literary translation. From the perspective of syntactical analysis of image translation of the *Border Town*, this research shows that the target images tend to possess the features of sentence pattern iconicity and sequential iconicity compared with the source images which are quite extraordinary under the circumstance of different syntactical structures between Chinese and English. It can be foreseen that the findings in this research will further enhance more researches in image translation.

**Key words:** Image translation; Syntactical iconicity; *Bian Cheng*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Image translation is of great importance to literary translation in that image is a vital part of literary translation which is very challenging in terms of its degree of difficulty. It is safe to say that image construction and image interpretation are a matter of mental process reflecting the pattern of thought.

As Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis of linguistic determination prevails nowadays, it is even more difficult to explain the formation and reconstruction of image from

syntactical occurrence. From a philosophical perspective, Xu Shenghuan proposed that the study of "philosophy of mind and language research" indicated that language use should experience a mental process from "event" to "use case event" (Xu, 2012). "To examine the occurrence of syntax and image construction, we can first examine how the use of language goes from 'event' to 'use case event'...A basic link of the mental process from event to use case event is the formation of image (image) in the mind, so there is the proposition of "image construction and syntactic occurrence" (namely, "there exists the relationship between image construction and syntactic occurrence") (Xu, 2014, p.125). Based on this, he proposed the following hypothesis:

(1) Syntax represents semantic meaning. The syntactic structure is closely related to semantic meaning, and syntactic structure is the organic combination of semantic representation of sentences, which can be inferred from the basic viewpoint of cognitive linguistics that "grammar is conceptualization".

(2) Semantic meaning embodies image. Semantic content is the content of the event object produced in the brain to be displayed, and such content is expressed in the form of image, that is, image.

(3) In essence, syntactic structure is event structure. That is, a simple sentence is the basic unit to express a simple event, and a compound sentence is the basic unit to express a compound event (Xu, 2014, p.125).

According to the above hypothesis, it is easy to find the strong and important linkage between image construction and the syntactical structure. Modern language schools represented by Saussure believe that linguistic symbols are arbitrariness and the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrariness (Saussure, 1916, p.67). Iconicity was first proposed by Pierce, the father of semiotics, to describe the natural basis of language or the rationale for its use. In his book exploring the nature of language, Jakobson proposed that iconicity

also exists on the level of morphology and sentence law (Jakobson, 1965). Consequently, the iconicity in literary works has been studied extensively by scholars. Linguist Haiman also made important contributions to the study of object similarity. His books *Natural syntax* (1985a) and *Syntactic Similarity* (1985b) both focused on the possible representation of iconicity and proposed two important principles: isomorphism and motivation. The isomorphism principle means that “different forms always imply different communicative functions. On the contrary, the repeated occurrence of the same form between different grammatical categories always reflects some perceived iconicity in the communicative function. (1985a, p. 19) the motivation principle means that “if each form with the least difference is closely related semantically, the semantic difference will correspond to the formal difference” (Haiman, 1985a, 20). Because of syntactic structure in one area can directly reflect the real structure, syntax ingredient directly with the conceptual structure composition, there is a relationship between the correspondence so concept differences exist in total to syntactic form, including iconicity, order iconicity, distance quantity iconicity, mark similarity, topics such as iconicity and sentence iconicity (Haiman, 1985a). The importance of syntax in literary image translation is self-evident. All kinds of syntactic factors will affect the stylistic effect of literary image translation. As was mentioned above, “the repeated appearance of the same form between different grammatical categories always reflects some perceived iconicity in communicative function (Haiman, 1985a, p.19). As to what extent the syntactic iconicity influences the communicative effect of literary image translation is the focus of this study. It will focus on the case analysis of four English translated versions of the *Border Town* by Shen Congwen, a Chinese writer, from the perspectives of iconicity of sentence pattern and iconicity of sequence, so as to reveal the genetic representation of literary image translation.

## 2. THE SENTENCE PATTERN ICONICITY OF LITERARY IMAGE TRANSLATION

Wang Yin (1999a) put forward the principle of sentence iconicity, and pointed out that sentence pattern iconicity refers to the way in which words are put together into sentences that resembles the national mindset and social and cultural customs. Sentence pattern, usually refers to the way a sentence is structured. Modern Chinese is rich in sentence patterns, common sentence patterns

include long and short, active and passive, affirmative and negative, declarative and interrogative, single and compound, spoken sentence pattern and written sentence pattern, regular and variant sentence, whole and scattered sentences, etc.

### 2.1 Sentence Pattern Iconicity

The following is the translation of a description of the local people’s characteristics in *Border Town* to illustrate the iconicity of sentence pattern.

**Table 1**  
Literary image translation sentence pattern iconicity examples

Original text	这些勇敢的人，也爱利，也仗义，同一般当地人相似。不拘救人救物，却同样在一种愉快冒险行为中，做得十分敏捷勇敢，使人见及不能不为之喝彩。
Translated by Kinkley	These daring souls typified the local people: they had an eye for their own gain, but also for helping other folks. They were equally joyful salvaging people and property, and they did it with such skill and bravery that onlookers felt compelled to shout hurrahs.
Translated by Gladys	These stout fellows are typical of the locality, being both profit-seeking and good-hearted. Whether out to save lives or salvage goods, they risk their necks cheerfully with a courage and resourcefulness beyond all praise.
Translated by Jin & Payne	Like all the natives of the place they were brave and chivalrous, as well as interested in money. And whether they were rowing out in search of someone who was still alive or something that was quite dead, they would behave with admirable courage and truly earned the applause they received.
Translated by Hahn & Xin	...for those people were fond of money, but they also liked to be called brave. Living creature or dead object, they rescued it with great courage as though they were facing grave dangers, and they acted quickly and smartly, to get applause.

What is described in this example is the honest and brave local people in the Chadong town. The informational factors of the image of “local people” include “brave”, “fighting for justice”, “saving people”, “taking risks”, “being quick and brave” and so on. The following sentence pattern analysis will see how the informational factors of the above image are translated, so as to judge the psychological and aesthetic choices of translators who choose to convey specific informational factors.

The original text consists of two Chinese sentences. Although the theory of translation adaptation and selection can be used in the process of translation, sentence patterns can be selected for multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptability, that is, the translation method can be converted into “three dimensions” under the guidance of the translation principle, that is, adaptive selection of language dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension. However, all of his four English translations ultimately chose to convey this image in two sentences of active voice.

In terms of the substructure of clauses, the processing of the and second sentences varies slightly from translator to translator. In the first sentence structure, Kinkley's translation uses an explanatory colon to connect two sentences with an explanatory relationship with "but also". In order to avoid repetition, "they had an eye" should have appeared in "for helping other folks". However, in Gladys' translation, the first sentence is different from Kinkley's in terms of the treatment of "being generous and generous". Instead, she chooses two adjectives "profit-seeking and good-hearted" and "being both" to form a supplementary relationship to the main sentence.

Jin & Payne used in the translation the attributive phrase "Like all the natives of the place" to modify "they", then use "as well as" to connect the two sentences. It needs to be pointed out that the translator thinks "brave" and "battle righteousness" should be put together to, so will be "the brave and chivalrous" in the first part of the compound, and later will be "love" (interested in money). In the first sentence, the order of the sentences is adjusted, and they choose to translate the words "also love money" (... "For those people were fond of money" is put at the beginning of the parallel sentence before the translation of "brave", and the translation of "brave" is conspicuously ignored.

The processing of the second sentence can also show the translator's different intention of choice. Since the 1970s, there has been a cultural shift in translation studies in the west, and the subjectivity of translators has gradually emerged. Theo Hermans (1996, pp.23-48) proposes that there is another voice between the lines of the translation, "the translator's voice". According to Mona Baker (2001, p.245), the translator's style is the fingerprint left by the translator in the translation through a series of linguistic or nonverbal forms.

Kinkley's translation still chooses to use "and" to connect two parallel sentences to complete image translation. Informational factors such as "救人救物" (salvaging people and property), and "敏捷勇敢" (skill and bravery) are well transferred, while information factor "冒险" (adventure) is not reflected in the translation. Gladys chose a slightly different expression--an adverbial phrase "been out to save mattress or salvage goods," to modify the latter part of the main clause, but should pass information factor "救物" (salvage the mattress or goods), "adventure" (risk their necks) and "敏捷勇敢" (a courage and resourcefulness) are out of the translation. In terms of the sentence pattern of the second sentence translation, the sentences of Jin & Payne's translation as well as Hahn & Xin's translations are almost the same as Gladys'. However, in terms of the choice of adverbial phrases, Hahn and Xin's translation forget to use "whether" as a linking device, which is slightly different from the previous two versions.

According to Tomasello's research, people focus on

two abilities in language acquisition since childhood: intention-reading and patterning-finding (Tomasello, 2003, p.3). The former involves the function of language intention expression, while the latter involves grammatical structure. Distin shares the similar view that "human beings are promoters of cultural evolution, and different human beings have different ways of influencing cultural information transmission and expression (2011, p.169). the sentence style also reflects the translator's subjectivity and own style characteristics. Yuan honggeng (1988, p.110) analyzed the relationship between the author's style and the translator's style in literary translation. He pointed out that the translator's style is both relatively independent and to some extent dependent on the author's style. As you can see the original sentence is of active voice in *Border Town*, and in the four versions there is no ambiguity of active sentences translation, that is, all the translators direct choose active English sentences to render the character image----"honest and brave local people". Through the description of action the important factors of information are presented one by one, the translators unanimously accept this active sentence for the shaping of image, achieving the positive effect of image translation, psychologically meeting the expectation of the readers in terms of the informational factors such as "honest", "brave", "agile" in the character image, and providing the readers with visual aesthetic feeling and enjoyment. In this way it has shortens the distance between the reader and the original work and inspired the spirit of the reader. It further shows that the iconicity of sentence patterns in image translation plays an important role in the study of literary translation. Because "the translator must have a strong sense of style, in the process of translation should faithfully reproduce the author's style (Zhang, 2006, pp.28-30). It can be seen from the sentence style of the four English versions that the sentence style of the original text is well kept in the translation of the image, which reflects the sentence pattern iconicity in the process of translation.

## 2.2 Sequential Iconicity

The linearity of English syntactic structure also basically reflects the sequential nature of event image presentation. In the case of the sequence of events, the former verb can be interpreted to precede the latter in time (Brazil, 1995, p.87). which means the type of action is more closely related to the verb than the time of action.

If we look into the time, space and action sequences formation in translated text and the comparison with the source text, we can find out the iconicity and the difference of mental activities between the source language and target language better reveal two kinds of language transformations occurring in the mental activities and judgment, reflecting the order of the translator from the perspective of syntactic selection and choice of poetics.

The following selected fragment of *Border Town* describes the image of the character “Cui Cui” boat-ferrying details. The sequence selection of translators can be clearly reflected in this following excerpt.

**Table 2**  
**Sequential iconicity of literary image translation**

Original text	有时过渡的是从川东过茶峒的小牛，是羊群，是新娘子的花轿，翠翠必争着作渡船夫，站在船头，懒懒的攀引缆索，让船缓缓的过去。牛羊花轿上岸后，翠翠必跟着走，送队伍上山，站到小山头，目送这些东西走去很远了，方回转船上，把船靠近家的岸边。且独自低低的学小羊叫着，学母牛叫着，或采一把野花缚在头上，独自装扮新娘子。
Translated by Kinkley	When the passengers heading for Chadong from East Sichuan included some: calves, a flock of sheep, or a bridal cortege with its ornate palanquin, Cui Cui would rush to do the ferrying. Standing in the boat's prow, she'd move the craft along the cable languidly and the crossing would be quite slow. After the calves, sheep, or palanquin were ashore, Cui-cui would follow, escorting the pack up the hill, and stand there on the heights, fixing her eyes on them for a long ways before she returned to the ferryboat to pull it back to the shore and home. All alone, shed softly bleat like the lambs, low like a cow, or pick wildflowers to bind up her hair like a bride all alone.
Translated by Gladys	From east Szechuan sometimes come calves, flocks of sheep or a decorated bridal sedan-chair. Then Emerald insists on taking charge and, standing in the stern, pulls lazily on the hawser while the barge inches slowly across. She follows the calves, sheep or bridal-chair ashore, sees them up the hill and watches them vanish in the distance before turning back to take the boat home again. She imitates the bleating of the lambs, the lowing of the cows, or sticks a flower in her hair to play the part of a bride.
Translated by Jin & Payne	And sometimes the boat would carry calves from Szechuan, or sheep, or a bride's flowery sedan. At such times Green Jade insisted on ferrying them over, and standing on the square-ended prows she would pull at the rope lazily so that the boat would go slow. When the calves and the sheep and the sedan-chair left the boat, she would follow them for a while, never returning until she had stood on top of a neighbouring hill and watched them disappearing in the distance. It was only then that she returned to the boat and brought it under the sheltering eaves of the bank, there mimicking the little bleats of the lambs or the moo-oo of the cows, or else she would pluck some wild flowers and wreath them round her hair in imitation of a bride.
Translated by Emily Hahn & Xin-Mo-lei	When people came along from Szechuen with calves and sheep and brides in sedan-chairs, Ts'ui Ts'ui clamored to be ferryman; she pulled the rope lazily so that the boat would go slow. When the calves and sheep and sedan-chair were landed, Ts'ui Ts'ui followed them to the top of the nearest hill to watch them until they were too far to see; then she brought the boat back to her own side. In a soft voice she mimicked the voices of the little goats and the cows, or put flowers in her hair in imitation of the bride.

The original cultural informational factors “Cui Cui” in *Border Town* including action words and phrases: “fight”,

“stop”, “climb guide”, “with”, “send” and “stop”, “see”, “turning”, “hold on”, “learning”, “call” and “mining” and “dress up”. It can be concluded that in the original text, the author used thirteen words and phrases related to actions to describe boat-ferrying of the character “Cui Cui”, and completed the image construction of the character “Cui Cui”. Let's first look at the contrast between the verb words and phrases in the original and the translated versions.

**Table**  
**Comparison of verb words and phrases related to character image description**

Author or translator	Verbs and verbal phrases	Number of verbs/verbal phrases	Sequential Change or not
S h e n Congwen	“争”、“站”、“攀引”、“跟”、“送”、“站”、“目送”、“回转”、“牵靠”、“学”、“叫”、“采”、“装扮”	13	
Translated by Kinkley	“would rush to”, “standing”, “move”, “follow”, “escorting”, “stand”, “fixing her eyes on”, “returned”, “pull it”, “shed”, “bleat”, “pick”, “bind up”	13	not
Translated by Gladys	“insists on taking charge”, “standing”, “pulls”, “follows”, “sees them up”, “watches”, “turning back”, “take”, “imitates the bleating”, “sticks a flower”, “play the part of a bride”	11	not
Translated by Jin & Payne	“insisted on ferrying”, “standing”, “pull”, “follow”, “stood”, “watched”, “returned to”, “brought”, “mimicking”, “bleats”, “pluck”, “wreath”	12	not
Translated by Hahn & Xin	“clamored to”, “pulled”, “followed”, “watch”, “brought”, “mimicked the voice of”, “put flowers in her hair”	7	not

From the perspective of sequence, unexpectedly the translation sequence of ferry movement by the figure image “Cui Cui” in the above four versions basically follows the spatio-temporal sequence of the source text without any major changes, additions or deletions. The time sequence of boat-ferrying has not been changed, the original in the “battle”, “stop”, “climb guide”, “with”, “send” and “stop”, “see”, “turning”, “hold on”, “learning”, “call”, “gather”, “dress up” in four kinds of translation in different language forms. In terms of spatial sequence, the transformation of spatial sequence in the original text from “east Sichuan”, “Chadong”, “bow of the boat”, “shore”, “mountain”, “small hill”, “boat” to “shore” immediately appeared after the characters' movement. In this way, it

shows the translation subconsciously follows that of the source text in terms of its spatial sequence.

The temporal and spatial sequences in all translation strictly comply with the order of time and space of the source text, at least it shows that the translator in the practice of one dimensional linear movement choose to keep the fluency and naturalness of the source text, with no violence breaking spatial and the temporal sequences of the original order, keeping the rhythm of the prose of the source text and the style of the original logic.

It also reflects the similar thinking pattern between the author and the translators, and the daily boat-ferrying, leisure and joy are faithfully conveyed in translation. The image of innocent, carefree girl with a life at the edge of the brook, bamboo forest was very vivid under the pen of all the translators.

This image translation strategy leaves readers with a good sense of sequence and aesthetic feeling, which is in line with the basic purpose of reception aesthetics. Reception aesthetics appeared in the late 1960s, represented by Hans Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in Germany. Based on the phenomenology and hermeneutic principles, it focuses on the status and role of readers and texts in literary reception. According to this theory, textual meaning is pluralistic and a product of the interaction between textual meaning potential and readers (Hu, 2006, pp.10-14).

It seems that the four translations adopt iconicity of sequence as the first choice both from temporal and spatial sequence to ensure the preliminary image construction of “Cui Cui” a smooth transition, but also pave the way for image building of Cui Cui. On the one hand, it presents the movement continuity and rhythm to the reader, and enhances the beauty of the translation and the charm of the translation. The iconicity displayed in this image translation mainly includes iconicity of perception mode and iconicity of temporal sequence.

### 2.2.1 Mode of Perception Iconicity

From the perspective of perception, the cognitive order that appeals to the vision first is the result of our experience in appreciating literary creation. In the original text of *Border Town*, the first thing that comes into sight is “When the passengers heading for Chadong from East Sichuan included some calves, a flock of sheep, or a bridal cortege with its ornate palanquin.” In other words, the first movement of “Cui Cui” in this text is not the mere movement —“compete to”, but the implicit movement of “watch”. After completion of the invisible action of “watching”, a series of actions began to follow up: “compete to”, “stop”, “climb and guide”, “with”, “send”, “stop”, “see”, “turning”, “hold on”, “learning”, “call”, “gather”, “dress up”, and etc.

Kinkley’s translation also puts visual perception first among the four different translations, “When the passengers heading for Chadong from East Sichuan

including some calves, a flock of sheep, or a bridal cortege with its ornate palanquin...” which are exactly a vision banquet of movement. What’s more, the rest three translations also embodies the iconicity of perception respectively, namely, the sequence starts from the visual perception of things, and reflects the successive visual beauty just like the event image in the source text in *Border Town*.

As Lu Xun (1973) said in *The Outline of the History of Chinese literature*, Chinese characters “have three beauties: the beauty of meaning to touch one’s heart; the beauty of sound to please the ear; and the beauty of form to please the eyes.” In the same way, the translation of images should reflect the beauty of meaning, sound and form. And four translations not only render the meanings of “calves”, “goats”, and “the bride’s sedan” with accuracy and delicacy, but also the informational factors such as “fight”, “stop”, “climb”, “guide”, “send”, “stop”, “see”, “turning”, “hold on”, “learning”, “call”, “picking”, and “dress up”, etc. these words are presented one by one in sequence. To target language readers, this way of perception on the iconicity is helpful to deepen their imagination and understanding of the image “Cui Cui”.

### 2.2.2 Temporal Iconicity

Temporal iconicity refers to the chronological order in which linguistic structures are arranged to reflect people’s experience. The speed or lexical order always reflect the logical relationship between those signified (Newmeyer, 1988, p.117).The word order of Chinese is a natural word order. In the original text of *Border Town*, the character image “Cui Cui” has three consecutive movements, namely “striving to be a ferryman”, “standing on the bow”, and “climbing cable lazily”. From the point of temporal sequence, the three actions keep their continuity. That is, “climbing lazily” cannot be placed before the “standing on the bow” or before “competing to make ferryman”. Only after she was qualified, she will be standing in the beautiful scenery of the bow, and then have the opportunity to lead the rope. In this way it makes perfect sense and is in conformity with the logic.

Generally known information or previous information comes first and new information comes later. Haiman’s semantic principle holds that previous information is always at the beginning of a sentence, while new information is always put at the end of the sentence (Haiman, 1985, p.237).This is the similarity of temporal sequence, which is closely related to people’s experience and cognitive ability. In translation, Kinkley translates“翠翠必争着.....站在船头, 懒懒的攀引缆索.....” into “Cui Cui would rush to...Standing in the boat’s prow, she’d move the craft along the cable languidly...”, Gladys’ translation is “Then Emerald insists on taking charge and, standing in the stern, lazily on the side of hawser...”, and Jin & Pyne’s translation is “At such times Green Jade insisted on..., and standing on...She would pull at

the rope lazily...” and the translation of Hahn & Xin’s is “Ts’ui Ts’ui clamored to be ferryman; She pulled the rope lazily...”.

All four translated versions have sequential iconicity from the perspective of time and space. The premise of ensuring the iconicity of the translation sequence is to test the informational factor transmission of the image with the linear structure of syntax and the experience of human’s order, so as to verify the sequential iconicity of the image translation.

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## CONCLUSION

The study of Iconicity in image translation in this article mainly deals with the sentence pattern iconicity and sequence iconicity, which reveals the translators’ similar concerns of efficiency and poetic pursuit in image translation. What’s more, the above translations still reveal translators of their similar aesthetic and stylistic considerations as well. All these features of image translation at syntactic level by translators of different eras indicate though there is a gap between east and west in terms of mindset, the scholars, no matter from the east or the west, they do share very similar poetic and aesthetic standards during the process of image reconstruction. And this is best illustrated in the English versions of *Border Town* in terms of sentence pattern iconicity and sequential iconicity which is of vital inspiration to the target readers.

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