

# Equivalence as a Historically Constructed Fiction: A Case of Bowra and his Translation of Buddhist Concepts in *Hongloumeng*

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## Abstract:

This study aims to explore the historically constructed nature of equivalence, a core concept in translation studies which defines the translational relation between a source text and a target text in terms of correspondence. The relation is described by Anthony Pym, though in a critical tone, as one of “equal value”, i.e., something we say in one language can have the same value as its translations into other languages. Since Jakobson’s famous discussion of the concept in 1959, equivalence has been an invaluable tool in both translation theory and teaching. Some scholars hold that equivalence exists prior to the act of translation, and for a period, some even argue that without equivalence translation would not be possible. However, the idea of equivalence faced significant criticism from later scholars, particularly structuralists, who dominated discussions on the topic during the second half of the twentieth century. Central to structuralism is the belief that different languages form distinct systems since they express different views of the world, thus no words will ever be completely translatable out of their language system. In this way, it denies the existence of equivalence in the sense of complete “equal value” between languages. While structuralists have offered profound insights into the concept of equivalence, as Pym notes, this has not prevented translators from continuing to seek equivalence in practical translation endeavors. Instead, they turned to seek a middle ground by aiming to achieve equivalence on certain levels—whether in form, meaning, or function—where the translated text could reflect the same value as the source text. More recently, however, this understanding of equivalence has been further contested within translation studies. The idea of equivalence as a historically contingent phenomenon and socially constructed fiction has gained increasing recognition from scholars such as Lydia H. Liu, Mary Snell-Hornby, Peter Burke, Anthony Pym, Haun Saussy, and James St André, among others, who emphasize its significance for facilitating communications between cultures, while simultaneously acknowledging its potential risks of fostering cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes. In line with this view, the research examines the early formation of equivalence between Chinese and English by early British sinologists in the nineteenth century when the global expansion of British Colonialism and imperialism had fostered direct cultural and linguistic exchanges between China and Britain for the first time in history. The research centers on one such significant sinologist, Edward Charles MacIntosh Bowra (1841-1874), and his translation of *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, or *The Story of the Stone*, 1791-2), the most renowned Chinese classical novel authored by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, which has been repeatedly translated into English since the nineteenth century. It specifically investigates his translation of those Buddhist terminologies such as *kong* 空 (emptiness) and *se* 色 (form), which permeate the novel and collectively articulate its overarching religious themes, examining how the equivalents he constructed both reveal and distort the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the Buddhist concepts in the original.



Additionally, by comparing his translations with those of subsequent translators, such as Henry Bencraft Joly (1892), David Hawkes (1973), and the couple Yang Hsien-yi 杨宪益 and Gladys Yang (1978), the study highlights how equivalents constructed between languages could evolve over time, particularly in response to deepening cultural exchanges between China and Britain. The retranslation process, the study argues, enables translators to approach a complete understanding of the source text, though such completeness remains ultimately unattainable.

**Keywords: equivalence, translation, Sinologist, *Honglouloumeng*, retranslation**

