

Gain and Loss: An Analysis of the English Translation of Chinese Ci from the Perspective of SDRT Theory

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Abstract. Chinese Ci, a classical Song Dynasty lyric genre, relies heavily on syntactic economy and zero anaphora (ZA) to achieve a compact and highly accessible coherence grounded in vivid imagery and shared scene schemas. This implicit mode of cohesion stands in tension with Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT), especially its Right Frontier Constraint (RFC), which expects explicit, accessible referents for coherent discourse attachment. Using Su Shi's "Riverside Town" (1075) and Xu Yuanchong's English translation as a case study, this paper demonstrated that translating Ci into English necessitates inserting overt pronouns, connectives, and subordinate clauses to "repair" the implicit references. These changes alter the discourse structure of the poem, increase RFC compliance and resolve attachment ambiguities, but at the cost of narrowing the poem's aesthetic openness and imaginative space. The analysis highlights a fundamental trade-off in classical Chinese poetry translation—a gain in clarity and cohesion versus a loss in subtlety and interpretive freedom—and underlines the need for translation strategies that balance logical coherence with poetic integrity. This research thus offered valuable insights for translation practice, illuminating the inherent yet necessary trade-offs in bridging profound cultural and poetic divides.

Keywords: Personal Reference; Zero-anaphora; Chinese Ci; SDRT; Translation Strategy.

1. Introduction

Classical Chinese Ci achieves coherence through parataxis (意合), imagistic continuity, and pervasive ellipsis, including zero anaphora (unexpressed but inferable referents). This implicit discourse style sustains a distinctive artistic mood by inviting readers to infer links among compact images rather than tracing overt connective structure. By contrast, English typically favors hypotaxis and explicit cohesion—overt pronouns, conjunctions, and syntactic subordination—which shape expectations for clarity, referent tracking, and linear attachment [1].

Translating Chinese poetry into English therefore does more than substitute words: it reconfigures discourse structure. Common operations—supplying pronouns, adding connectives, and restructuring clauses—make implicit relations explicit, alter reference chains, and regularize attachment paths [2]. These shifts are often described by the explicitness tendency in translation studies [3][4] and, in discourse-analytic terms, can be captured by changes to segment boundaries, rhetorical links, and accessibility of referents.

These cross-linguistic and translation-induced shifts make a formal discourse framework necessary to describe, compare, and quantify how coherence is reconfigured in translation. Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT) provides exactly such a lens: it (i) segments both source and target into Elementary Discourse Units (EDUs), (ii) encodes rhetorical relations (e.g., Background) between EDUs, (iii) tracks referent introduction and accessibility through the evolving discourse graph, and (iv) uses the Right Frontier Constraint (RFC) to make attachment sites explicit. Using SDRT allows this study to show how pronoun insertion, connective addition, and clause restructuring in English move Chinese paratactic juxtapositions toward explicit subordination/coordination, select specific attachments where the original tolerated alternatives, and reduce ambiguity in referent chains—while keeping the analysis replicable and comparable across versions [5].

Several strands of prior research inform this gain and loss phenomenon and its cause. First, studies on personal reference and coherence have shown that discourse cohesion in many genres is carried by reference chains. In Chinese poetry, zero-personal reference is a primary cohesive device, whereas English discourse typically relies on overt pronouns to maintain reference cohesion [3][6]. Second, theories of accessibility and salience argue that reduced referential forms are permitted when the referent is highly activated in the listener's or reader's mind. A zero anaphor often signals very high cognitive accessibility, yielding compact expression and fluent cohesion in context [7][8]. Third, translation studies note a well-known explicitness tendency in translation: translators tend to add connectives, pronouns, or other markers to make the target text more explicit and cohesive than the source, and this often happens in Chinese-to-English poetry translation. Such shifts steer the translation toward an English-like cohesion profile and typically increase attachments that readily satisfy the RFC [4].

Despite these insights, SDRT remains little-known in Chinese literary linguistics, and only several studies have applied SDRT to analyze classical poetry or its translation. This gap suggests the need for further research on whether and how formal discourse constraints like the RFC operate in poetic discourse and cross-linguistic translation.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on how translation-driven “repairs” to the omissions in the Chinese text affect the discourse structure (in SDRT terms) of a classical Ci poem. Specifically, using Su Shi's “Riverside Town” (1075) and Xu Yuanchong's English translation as a case study, the analysis addresses three questions:

RQ1: How does inserting explicit pronouns and connectives in translation reallocate the poem's SDRT rhetorical relations and increase RFC compliance, and does this reduce ambiguity in attachment (for example, by eliminating alternative links that the original ZA allowed)?

RQ2: Where and why does the original poem's use of zero anaphora lead to attachment points that are ambiguous or problematic with respect to the RFC (i.e. “right frontier” violations), and how is coherence nevertheless sustained through imagery or scene continuity in the original?

RQ3: What strategies can translators adopt to balance coherence with poetic integrity—for instance, using minimal necessary pronouns or a paratactic (implicit) style—and can discourse theory be refined (with an imagery/scene-licensed attachment rule or similar) to better account for the coherence of such poetic texts without strict RFC compliance?

By answering these questions, this study aims to bridge formal discourse analysis and literary translation, shedding light on both practical translation strategies and potential theoretical refinements to SDRT for handling literary.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Right Frontier Constraint

Right Frontier Constraint (RFC) is A key principle in SDRT. The RFC stipulates that new discourse units (or anaphoric references) can typically link only to the most recent or still “open” units along the rightmost edge of the discourse structure. This constraint also affects how pronouns and other anaphoric references can be resolved: usually, a pronoun can only refer to an entity introduced in a segment that lies on the current right frontier of the discourse structure. The RFC has strong empirical support in analyses of logical texts, narratives, and dialogues. However, its applicability to highly poetic or non-linear texts is less clear. Prior studies - for example, “Troubles on the Right Frontier” (Polanyi et al.) - have observed that literary narratives and other complex texts sometimes appear to violate the RFC by referring back to earlier themes or images in ways that do not conform to a strict right-frontier progression. These observations suggest that rigid application of SDRT's rules might need adjustment for certain genres.

2.2 Zero Anaphora in Chinese Poetry

Classical Chinese poetry exhibits a paratactic structure—clauses and images are placed side by side with minimal use of connectives or explicit markers of subordination. A hallmark of this style is the extensive use of zero anaphora.

Zero anaphora means that a referential argument is omitted when context makes its identity clear. Chen Ping formalizes this phenomenon: if a clause's meaning presupposes an entity that has been introduced in the discourse context, but the language provides no overt pronoun or noun for that entity, then a zero reference has occurred [9]. In Zhao's terms, if the antecedent of a pronoun is known or inferable, the pronoun is often dropped; this is termed "zero personal reference" in Chinese poetry, and the null element is called a zero pronoun [2]. Such zero pronouns play a crucial role in linking lines of verse, and corpus-based studies have confirmed that zero-personal reference is the dominant cohesive device within a Chinese poem, whereas translations into English usually resort to overt pronouns for cohesion [2].

These typological characteristics pose a challenge for theories like SDRT. In an SDRT analysis, even an omitted pronoun must be represented as an implicit discourse referent that attaches somewhere in the discourse graph. If a zero pronoun's logical antecedent lies in an earlier segment that is no longer on the right frontier, a strict interpretation would deem it an RFC violation. In classical Chinese poetry, however, such "violations" are commonplace and are not perceived by readers as incoherent. The poetry's meaning is carried by continuous imagery and context rather than explicit anaphoric links. This raises the question: how can Chinese poems remain cohesive and interpretable despite seemingly flouting structural constraints like the RFC?

2.3 Translation, Explicitness and Coherence Shifts

Scholars of translation have long observed systematic shifts in cohesion when texts are rendered from different languages. Blum-Kulka's [4] explicitness hypothesis posits that translations tend to be more explicit than their source texts, adding connectives or referential markers to ensure the target reader grasps the coherence. In Chinese-to-English translation, this often manifests as inserting pronouns and explanatory conjunctions where the Chinese original relied on contextual inference. For instance, a Chinese poem might juxtapose two images without a linking word, but an English translation may insert "and" or "while" to clarify the relationship, thereby increasing overall cohesion and clarity for English readers [4].

These interventions, while necessary for readability, inherently shift the discourse structure. In some occasions, the translator chooses one interpretation of an ambiguity and forgoes others by making an implicit link explicit; some EDUs that were only loosely connected in the original get welded into a tighter configuration in the translation, and some that were separate become explicitly linked by new rhetorical connectives. These can improve RFC compliance in the translated text by ensuring that new material attaches to a recent, explicitly introduced context, rather than "dangling." However, as the next sections will explore, these gains in explicit coherence may come at the expense of the original poem's subtlety and openness of interpretation.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study combines qualitative literary analysis with formal SDRT-based discourse analysis to examine the translation's impact on coherence. The procedure involves three main steps.

First, a comparative textual analysis of the source poem and its English translation was performed. Su Shi's original Ci was aligned with Xu Yuanchong's translated version line by line, and all personal reference instances were annotated. This step highlighted instances where the translator added, omitted, or altered references (such as inserting pronouns or explicit subjects) to fit English discourse expectations. By systematically cataloguing these changes, the translator's strategies for handling zero anaphors and other implicit elements were identified.

Second, discourse segmentation and referent identification were carried out for both texts. Each version was segmented into Elementary Discourse Units (EDUs): For the classical Chinese text, a modern punctuated edition and semantic cues were used to determine EDU boundaries, since it lacks explicit punctuation. The English translation's EDUs were then compared to those of the original to observe how they correspond or diverge. In particular, instances where the translator merged separate Chinese EDUs into a single English sentence, or split one Chinese segment into multiple English sentences, were examined. This restructuring was analyzed to determine how it contributed to making the translation more coherent or explicit. The referents of pronouns in both versions were also tracked to see how the translation made implicit referents explicit.

Third, compliance with the Right Frontier Constraint (RFC) was evaluated in both the original and translated discourse structures. Instances in the original poem were identified where a new line or clause appears to relate back to an earlier line in a way that might violate the RFC. For some such instances, the translator's handling of this potential coherence issue in the translation were analyzed. In particular, the analysis checked whether the translation explicitly reattached the segment to a more recent context, and whether it added a connector or restructured the sentence to avoid an RFC violation. By examining these factors, it was then determined whether the translation systematically "fixed" any right-frontier problems present in the original's implicit structure.

3.1 Case and Overall Structure Analysis Reference

Table 1. Source Text (Chinese) and English Translation

Original Chinese text(T ₀)	Xu Yuanchong's English translation(T ₁)
十年生死两茫茫，不思量，自难忘。	For ten long years the living of the dead knows nought, Though to my mind not brought, Could the dead be forgot?
千里孤坟，无处话凄凉。	Her lonely grave is far, a thousand miles away. To whom can I my grief convey?
纵使相逢应不识，尘满面，鬓如霜。	Revived even if she be, Could she still know me ? My face is worn with care, And frosted is my hair.
夜来幽梦忽还乡，小轩窗，正梳妆。	Last night I dreamed of coming to my native place; She was making up her face Before her mirror with grace.
相顾无言，惟有泪千行。	Each saw the other hushed, But from our eyes tears gushed.
料得年年肠断处，明月夜，短松冈。	Can I not be heart-broken when I am awoken, From her grave clad with pines, Where only the moon shines!

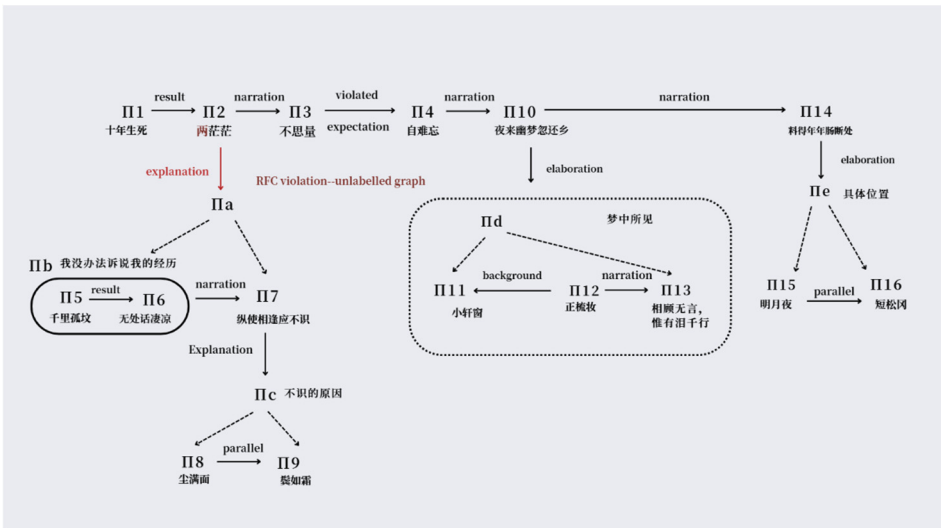


Figure 1. SDRT Analysis of the Original Text

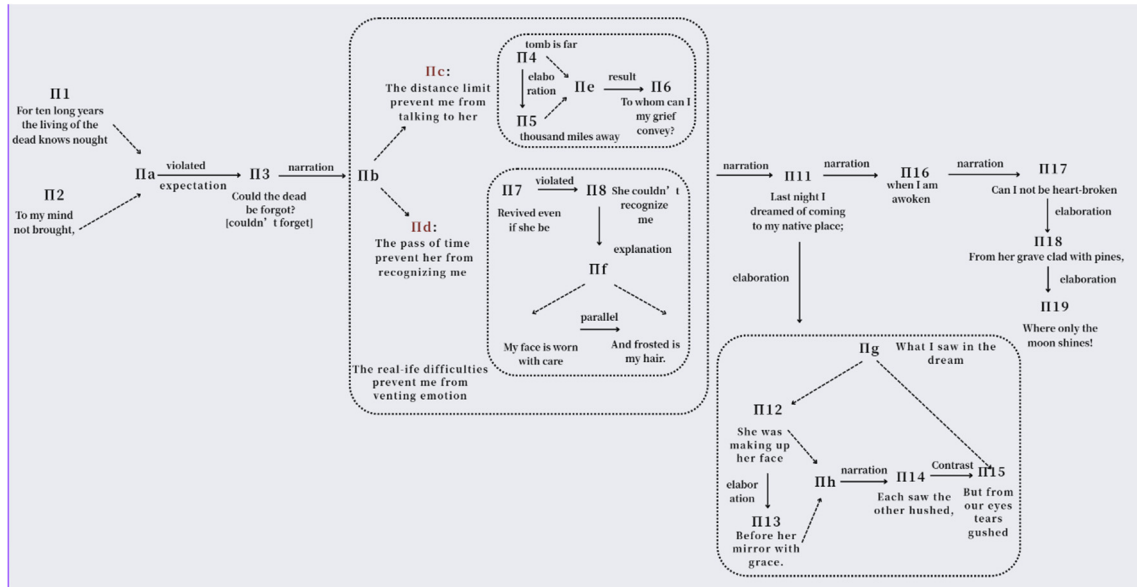


Figure 2. SDRT analysis of the English Translation

Before delving into the discourse analysis, we present the source text and its translation. In the Table 1 below, T_0 refers to the original Chinese *Ci* and T_1 to Xu Yuanchong's English translation. Figure 1 illustrates the SDRT discourse structure of the original poem, and Figure 2 shows the structure for the translated version. (In the translation excerpt, any personal pronouns that have been added by the translator, and were absent in the original, are indicated in bold for emphasis.)

4. Result and Specific Analysis

4.1 Translation Strategies and the Adaptation Outcomes

When analyzing a translation through the lens of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT), it is indeed beneficial to discuss not only what strategies the translator used, but also how those strategies impact the discourse structure and coherence. Here we distinguish the translator's attempts to fit the structure of the English discourse.

4.1.1 Adding Explicit Pronouns

One of the most immediate transformations in the translation is the explicitness of subjects and other pronouns. The original T_0 relies on context and cultural background to supply subjects – for example, in the first verse of the Chinese text, the phrase “不思量，自难忘” contains no pronoun for each actions; no explicit subject pronoun says “I” or “she,” even though the poet and his deceased wife are implicitly understood. Xu's English T_1 , by contrast, makes all participants grammatically explicit. We see pronouns or possessives in nearly every line: “the living (one) ... the dead (one)”, “I”, “she”, “my grief”, “our eyes” and so on. The translation has filled in what the original leaves unsaid. By reintroducing the subjects and objects omitted in Chinese, the translator ensures that each reference is clear to an English reader.

This strategy renders anaphoric references unambiguous. By explicitly stating “I” (the narrator) and “she” (the deceased wife), Xu Yuanchong provides a concrete discourse referent for each action. The antecedents—the poet and his wife—are established early and remain available for reference, thus obeying the RFC's preference for linking to the current discourse frontier. In this case, coherence is enhanced in a surface sense; readers do not have to infer subjects from context, because the subjects are overt; the kind of ambiguity that zero anaphora can create is eliminated as well.

4.1.2 Discourse Segmentation and Unit Restructuring

Using semantic cues and modern punctuation, we divide the original Ci and Xu's translation into elementary discourse units (EDUs), and the results are in the Figure 2. The outcomes inform that the original text tends toward fragmentary imagery and implicit subjects, whereas the translation frequently connects these fragments into explicit clauses.

For example, a notable structural modification occurs in the dream sequence of the poem. The original lines “夜来幽梦忽还乡，小轩窗，正梳妆” depict a sudden return in a dream and a vivid image of the wife “at the little lattice window, just combing her hair.” These are split into three compact EDUs, where “小轩窗” (“[at the] small window”) is a stand-alone scene-setting fragment. In translation, Xu Yuanchong combines these into a single polished sentence, removing the need for a separate scene fragment: “Last night I dreamed of coming to our native place. She's making up her face before her mirror with grace.” The translator deletes the explicit mention of the window (complex scene-setting fragment) and supplies the implicit referent (a mirror) to maintain clarity, then merging all the elements into a whole scene. The result is that two EDUs in Chinese (location + action) collapse into one integrated English clause, makes the translated discourse flows more naturally, and the referent (the wife's dressing scene) remains clear. Here again, what was implicit or poetic in T_0 is spelled out or merged in T_1 to meet the expectations of English readers.

As a result, the SDRT analysis of the translated text can assign a definite coherence relation between these segments, rather than leaving it to the reader's inference. Merging the thoughts into one sentence also means that instead of two separate discourse units that the reader must connect, we now have a single integrated discourse unit (or a clear nucleus-satellite structure) which is easier to process. [10]

4.1.3 Ensuring RFC-Compatible Attachments

A crucial question is how the translation handles places where the original text's coherence might violate the RFC. Classical Chinese poetry often permits what we might call “non-local attachments”—a new line referring back to an earlier idea or scene that is not the most recent one, purely because the poem's imagery or logic allows it. Such backward references can conflict with SDRT's Right Frontier Constraint. Our case study reveals that the translator actively mitigates these potential conflicts by rewriting or reordering content to respect a more linear attachment structure.

To illustrate, consider the poem's opening lines. The first line of the original (T_0), “十年生死两茫茫”，sets a scene of mutual oblivion between the living and the dead over ten years. The next lines, “不思量，自难忘” and “千里孤坟，无处话凄凉”，logically seem to elaborate on or explain the emotional state introduced in the first line. Semantically, “a thousand-mile distant lonely grave” and the inability to talk about sorrow is an explanation of why the living and dead know nothing of each other. However, in the discourse structure of the original, the clause “不思量，自难忘” may have already closed off the attachment to “十年生死两茫茫.” By the time we reach “千里孤坟...”，the strict RFC reading would say the most recent open segment is “自难忘”，not the very first line. Thus, attaching “千里孤坟...” as an explanation to the first line violates the RFC. In our SDRT diagram of the original (Figure 1), this manifests as a coherence link that appears to leap backward, creating what a logician would flag as an illicit attachment. Classical Chinese readers, of course, understand it intuitively: the imagery of the distant grave explains the two souls' separation. But formally, the original's coherence relies on the reader's willingness to bridge that gap in defiance of a linear attachment rule.

Xu's translation addresses this by reordering and slightly modifying the content to maintain linear progression. He renders the first line as “For ten long years the living of the dead knows naught,” stating the two parties (the living one and the dead one). He then immediately follows with “Though to my mind not brought, Could the dead be forgot?”, which combines the idea of “not thinking (not brought to mind)” and the rhetorical question of forgetting into one continuous sentence with the first line. In doing so, the translation creates a single composite thought: “Though I don't bring her to

mind, knows nothing of the dead, could she be forgotten?” This complex sentence in English corresponds to the entire sense of the original first two lines, but crucially, it binds them together in one coherence discourse unit [CDU]. As a result, when the translation moves to the next sentence “Her lonely grave is a thousand miles away, to whom can I my grief convey?”, this new sentence does not have to attach back to the distant first line concept at all—it naturally follows from the immediately preceding idea. The English first sentence establishes the separation and the (failed) attempt at forgetting; the very next sentence about the lonely grave now reads as a continual narration of the story rather than a retroactive explanation of a ten-year oblivion. The RFC is thus respected in the translation: each new clause attaches to the most recent context provided by the previous clause, creating a smooth narrative flow.

4.2 The Loss of the Poem’s Aesthetic Openness and Imaginary Space in Translation

One notable loss in translation is the ambiguity of the poem’s final lines, which in the original creates a rich space for reader imagination. Classical Chinese poetry often omits grammatical subjects, allowing multiple interpretations. In Su Shi’s famous closing line—“料得年年肠断处，明月夜，短松冈”—the absence of an explicit subject means the verse can be understood in two ways: the Deceased Wife as the Subject and the Poet (Husband) as the Subject.

The first possible explanation is premised on casting the poet’s deceased wife in the role of the subject. The poet imagines his departed wife is heartbroken year after year at her lonely gravesite under the bright moon. In this reading, the line poignantly suggests the wife’s lingering spirit pining for the husband: an interpretation that deepens the tragedy by extending sorrow into the realm of the dead.

Alternatively, by construing the poet (in the role of the husband) as the subject, the line can be interpreted to mean that he is the one heartbroken annually upon remembering the far-off burial ground under the moonlight. In this view, “年年肠断处” refers to the poet’s own heartbreak each year at the time and place of his wife’s tomb. The emphasis falls on the husband’s recurring grief whenever the bright moon shines on the pine-covered mound of her grave.

This deliberate ambiguity contributes to the poem’s aesthetic openness. By not specifying who endures the “肠断” (gut-wrenching sorrow), Su Shi invites readers to imagine both possibilities – or even to sense a fusion of the two, as if both souls suffer in echoing communion. Such openness is a hallmark of classical Chinese poetics, where suggestiveness and “leaving blanks” (留白) create an imaginary space for the audience to inhabit the poem’s emotional landscape. The ghostly image of a moonlit grave and the unspecified mourner evoke a haunting scene that readers can fill with their own empathy.

In Xu Yuanchong’s English translation, however, much of this ambiguity is resolved. English syntax requires an explicit subject, so the translator chooses one interpretation and supplies the missing agent. Xu opts to spell out the subject as the first-personal speaker, removing the original’s strategic uncertainty. His version reads, “Can I not be heart-broken when I am awoken/ From her grave clad with pines/ Where only the moon shines” Here, Xu clearly identifies “I” as the sorrowful one and explicitly mentions “her grave.” By this way, the translation narrows the interpretive scope to the second reading (the husband’s annual heartbreak). The subtle possibility that the wife’s lonely spirit also “yearns and breaks her heart” is lost, as the English lines focus on the poet’s pain alone. Moreover, details that the Chinese text left implicit – notably the word “grave” which Su Shi only hinted at with “短松冈” – are made explicit (“her grave clad with pines”), further reducing the original imagistic ambiguity.

While Xu’s translation is emotionally powerful and clear to the target audience, it illustrates how translating an implicit device into explicit terms can diminish the poem’s aesthetic openness. The Chinese reader is free to envision either the living or the dead as the subject of heartbreak, or even to oscillate between both interpretations in a way that intensifies the sense of shared sorrow. The English reader of Xu’s version, by contrast, is guided to a single, definite image – the poet grieving by the

grave – with no hint of the wife’s perspective. As a result, a layer of imaginary space and resonance inherent in the original is sacrificed. This trade-off stems from Xu’s overall translation strategy of conveying clear meaning and achieving poetic elegance in English. Xu typically prioritizes semantic transparency and lyrical form, which in this case leads to a comprehensible but more determinate rendition.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how an English translation of a classical Chinese Ci poem balances clarity and ambiguity within the framework of Segmented Discourse Representation Theory, using Xu Yuanchong’s rendition of “Riverside Town” as a case in point. The research is significant because it highlights the interplay between language-specific discourse norms and the translator’s choices, particularly how implicit references in Chinese are handled in English translation. By analyzing the discourse structure through SDRT, readers could see how translation adjustments affect cohesion and meaning. The findings thus illustrate the double-edged effect of explicitness—gains in cohesion and comprehension vs. losses in mystique and emotional resonance.

Additionally, the insights from this research open up two potential directions. First, for translation practice, translators might explore a more “minimalist” strategy—adding only the most necessary pronouns or connectors—so as to maintain more of the original poem’s brevity and interpretive space. By preserving some deliberate gaps and relying on the reader’s inferencing, the translator can keep a measure of the poem’s artistic mood and allow multiple interpretations to flourish. Second, for theoretical development, the results suggest that formal discourse models might be extended for literary texts. Existing frameworks like SDRT could be refined to account for the poetic coherence seen in classical Chinese poetry. For instance, researchers might propose an imagery-licensed attachment rule or a special lyrical coherence relation to handle cases where later lines echo earlier images or themes without strictly following linear attachment rules. This would align discourse theory more closely with how readers intuitively understand poetic texts, and in turn guide translators on which implicit connections can be left untranslated without losing coherence.

It should also be noted that this case study only focused on a single poem, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions. Future research should examine a broader corpus of classical Chinese poems and their English translations to see if the same patterns of added explicitness and reduced ambiguity occur. Such studies could strengthen or qualify our findings and provide more guidance for translators.

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