



English Translation of Cantonese Opera in the Context of Lingnan Culture Going Global

—Taking the Cantonese Opera "Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court" as an Example

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Abstract. The paper discusses the English translation and dissemination of Cantonese opera in the English-speaking world. It begins by providing an overview of Cantonese opera, highlighting its prevalence in Guangdong province and its embodiment of Guangzhou's cultural characteristics. Then it delves into the plot of "Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court," and provides examples of its English translation. The theoretical framework of drama translation is explored, including the roles of translators, the translation object, and the audience. The English translation of "Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court" is analyzed, considering factors such as who translates, what is translated, and the intended audience. Corresponding translation strategies are proposed. In conclusion, the paper highlights the successful integration of the dual attributes of Cantonese opera into its English translation, emphasizing the importance of the close connection between translation and performance in the dissemination of Cantonese opera's cultural characteristics.

Keywords: Cantonese opera, English translation, dissemination, Singapore Dunhuang Opera Theater, Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court, performance.

1 Introduction

Cantonese opera, also known as "daai hei", is sung in Cantonese dialect. It is a comprehensive performing art that integrates script writing, music and dance, costumes, facial makeup and stage. Cantonese opera is the largest opera type in Guangdong and best embodies the cultural characteristics of Guangzhou^[1] (Gong, 2004:195). In 2009, it was selected into UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Humanity. The 'Outline of the Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area' regards Cantonese opera as the most representative Lingnan culture. The Development Outline of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area identifies Cantonese opera as the most representative Lingnan cultural heritage. The international dissemination of Cantonese opera relies on English translation, which serves as a

prerequisite for dissemination, a medium for communication, and one of the most important factors that determine the effectiveness of dissemination.

Founded in 1981, Singapore's 'Dunhuang Opera Theater' is committed to promoting English Cantonese opera. The chairman of the theater, Huang Shiyong, personally wrote an eight-act drama 'Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court', which portrays the tragic love story between Emperor Guangxu and his beloved concubine Zhenfei and the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform. This drama has participated in the Singapore Chinese Cultural Festival and the Guangzhou International Cantonese Opera Festival (2016). In terms of the professionalism of the playwright, the translators, the performability of the script, and the wide acceptance and recognition among audiences, both the drama and its script are exemplary in the translation of Cantonese opera into English.

This paper, based on the English translation playtext of the Cantonese opera "Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court", take the multi-modal playtext as the research object, explores the ontological issues of the English translation of the multimodal Cantonese opera playtext and its dissemination in the English-speaking world.

2 Literature Review of Drama Translation Theory

Drama translation is not a thoroughly studied field in translation. Drama translation not only involves interlingual rendering of the sign systems in both languages, but also multiple sign translations of multimodal texts. Looking back at the theoretical research on drama translation over the past century, "Academic attention to drama translation has been limited."^[2](Diazintas&Anderman,2009:12). This is also the case for Cantonese opera translation. This paper will explore the ontological issues of drama translation, specifically the translator, the translated multimodal playtext, and the target audience.

1. Who translates?

The status of the drama translator has long been a contentious issue in the study of drama translation. Some argue that drama translators occupy a subordinate and dominated position, "being disadvantaged economically, aesthetically, and intellectually"^[3] (Bassnett, 1991). However, other researchers in drama translation disagree with the above view. Batty (2000:68) believes that drama translators should clearly be in a dominant position in the process of transmitting dramatic information, while directors and actors are merely conveyors of the translated textual information^[4]. The information of the drama performance comes from the translated text, not elsewhere." While Suh (2002:30) does not agree with the translator's dominant position, he also emphasizes the central role that drama translators play in the entire process of drama reception. He states: "Drama translators are experts in intercultural communication... They can professionally convey the content and aesthetics of the original work, achieving the communicative purposes of the original. Translators can compensate for potential understanding deviations of the audience and establish the performance mode for the actors."^[5]

In summary, this paper believes that within the interpersonal chain of playwright/director-actors-audience, both the translator and the director play roles in reproducing the multimodal texts of Cantonese opera to convey the thoughts and contents of the drama to the audience. Playwrights/directors can only access the original works through drama translators; after completing the translation task, translators, like playwrights, entrust the target language text to the director. Through the director's guidance, the performance personnel convey the translated information to the audience. The multimodal text of the drama ultimately received by the target language audience is the result of their collective efforts. "Translators, directors, actors, designers, technicians, etc., all contribute to their own interpretations of the text, which collectively contribute to the stage performance, forming the basis for the audience's understanding of meaning"^[6] (Aaltonen 2000:6).

2. What is translated?

Drama is a comprehensive performing art that utilizes language, movement, dance, music, props and other forms to achieve its social purposes. Drama translation can be defined as the process of translating theatrical texts from one language and culture to another and bringing the translated or adapted text onto the stage^[7] (Zuber-Skerritt, 1988: 485). Drama translation not only focuses on the textual foundation for stage performances but also emphasizes the performance aspect of drama. In other words, the dual nature of drama translation, the performability and readability of the text, blurs the boundaries and is unified in the multimodal text of drama, ultimately serving the stage performance and its audience.

Based on the aforementioned textual functions of drama, this paper divides drama translation into text translation and paralinguistic text translation. Text translation is based on different textual functions, namely informational text represented by background introduction, stage instructions, and narration, and expressive and emotional texts that occupy the main position of the drama - libretto. Libretto translation should reproduce and preserve the performance characteristics of the original language script such as performability, colloquialism, and action as much as possible. Paralanguage texts include text on drama elements such as stage, action, lighting, color, costumes, props, music, etc.

3. Who are the audience?

Zuber-Skerritt (1988:486) pointed out that the purpose of most script creation is to serve the stage performance^[7]. Drama text translation can be seen as an activity intrinsically linked to stage performance and therefore, both translation and performance involve the same action of artistic selection in various systems of symbols^[8] (Pavis, 1992:145-146). Therefore, when translating, one of the important criteria for selecting a symbol system is the reader/audience. The acceptance of readers/audience is a necessary means to promote the "Lingnan culture going global", promote Chinese culture, and construct a friendly and respectable image of Chinese people. Therefore, during the period of diversified dissemination of operas, it is particularly necessary to study the types of audiences for translated scripts/stage performances.

Based on the different degrees of involvement of the audience in translated scripts/stage performances, we can divide the audience into elementalized audience, text audience, and research audience. The elementalized audience refers to the popular

culture audience, who are curious about exotic cultures and purely seek entertainment. The text/script audience focuses on the readability of the script, and they include the crew members and general readers who deeply engage with the text. The research audience has the highest level of content engagement, including drama scholars, drama translation practitioners, researchers, and overseas sinologists, who deeply engage with both the script and the performance.

3 Practical Analysis: The English translation of the English Cantonese Opera " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court "

In Huang Shiyong, the chairman of Singapore Dunhuang Theater Company, created the Cantonese version of " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court", based on which an English translation and adaptation was conducted in 2022. The story revolves around the power struggle between Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing Dynasty, as well as the love story between Guangxu and Consort Zhen, interspersed with major historical events of the Hundred Days' Reform. This Cantonese opera has won the "Singapore Outstanding Youth Award," "World Outstanding Youth Award," and the "Ukrainian Traditional Theater Modernization Certificate." It is the world's first award-winning Cantonese opera translated and performed in English.

The main research object of this paper is the translation of the Cantonese opera " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court", which involves ontological issues of translation, that is, who translates, what is translated, how to translate, who are the audience and other issues. By studying the translation issues, the paper aims to spread Lingnan culture and China's excellent traditional culture overseas, and enhance their influences as well as improving the international communication capabilities, build china's international discourse system and contribute to the national soft power.

1. Who translates?

The most prominent feature of the Cantonese opera " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court " is the unity of roles among the playwright, translator, director, and main performers. The script was created by Huang Shiyong, and the director is Huang's wife, Hu Guixin, who also plays the role of Empress Dowager Cixi in the opera. The husband and wife, along with the performance team, collaborated on translating and producing the English version of the script, thus achieving a unified identity of playwright, director, main actors, and translator.

Due to the integration of these four roles, the translator, director, and actors are able to convey the intentions of the playwright as much as possible in interpreting and handling the paratext's stage elements. This allows for the maximum transmission of all information, movements, gestures into the language of the stage such as music, sound, and facial expressions. At this point, the translator transforms into a cross-cultural communicator, a creator of performance modes, and a corrector of misinterpretations and deviations, thus maximizing the conveyance of the original work's content, form, and aesthetic appeal, achieving the communicative purpose of the original text.

2. Translation object: Cantonese opera as a multimodal text

The dual nature of drama text (on page & on stage) is crucial for drama translation. Firstly, drama translation aimed at performance is constrained by various factors beyond the text itself. In theatrical communication, besides dialogue, there are also elements of gesture, costume, props, makeup, set design, sound effects, and lighting. During theatrical performances, the linguistic symbol system must integrate seamlessly with the non-verbal theatrical symbols. Therefore, the object of drama translation is a multimodal text composed of both static scripts and non-verbal symbol systems, which requires translating the script for readership within the literary system while also considering the overall effect of the translated text and other non-verbal theatrical symbols on stage performances. "Only after being brought onto the stage can the creative purpose of the translation be realized"^[9] (Nikolarea, 1999:185).

Drama text translation

The script of "The Regret of the Qing Palace" consists of lyrics, spoken lines, soliloquies, narrations, stage directions, and background introductions. Therefore, the script is a multimodal text composed of informational text types (background introductions, stage directions, narrations), expressive text types (lyrics in the form of songs), and affective text types. Different translation strategies are employed for each text type in this script.

Firstly, informational text emphasizes "authenticity" and the reality outside language, with its core being the reality beyond language. Translators need to focus on the authenticity, objectivity, and accuracy of the original content, so informational text mostly adopts a literal translation strategy to achieve semantic equivalence with the source text, striving to convey the same concepts and information as the original in the translation.

[example 1]

【原文】旁白：公元1894年，甲午战争爆发。中国海军不敌装备先进的日军战舰，几乎全军覆没。中国战败被迫与日本签订丧权辱国的马关条约。

【Translation】In the year 1894 the Sino-Japanese War erupted. China's navy was virtually annihilated, as its boats were no match against the Japanese warships using new and advanced weapons. China lost the war resulting in the signing of the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki.

Example 1 is taken from the narration in Act II, "Strategizing," which describes the situation of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, setting the background and evoking emotions for the subsequent "Memorial Presented to the Throne." The English translation adopts a literal translation strategy, emphasizing the characteristics of informational text, focusing on the sequence of time-events-(events)-consequences. Apart from adding the causal conjunction "as" and adjusting the cause-effect order, all transformations are made based on the Chinese syntax and semantics. The literal translation strategy ensures that the English information function is equivalent to the original text, and the direct translation of the evaluative word "humiliating" sets the stage for the forthcoming angry emotion.

【Example 2】

如雷轰,由心向外震
 尽泯,尽泯,尽泯,亲情尽泯
 想不到将母后皇叔命陨,

痛心,痛心,痛心,痛心此叛君
 离叛有心,顿引起我报复之心
 骂句畜生,骂句畜生
 负恩负恩你无情,莫怪我心狠

【Translation】

By a thunder bolt appalled and shaken
 Beyond beyond beyond expectation
 So quick and so sudden he comes in direct collision
 Treason treason defies comprehension
 Must nib the plot in the bud before its execution.
 He has become far too loathsome.
 It's time I replace indulgence with venom.

Example 2 is from the third scene, "The Seller." Yuan Shikai betrays Empress Dowager Cixi, claiming that Emperor Guangxu is about to implement reforms, arousing anger in Cixi's heart. The lyrics in this segment focus on evoking feelings of shock, heartache, and hatred. Therefore, the main textual type highlighted in this audio-visual lyrical text is affective, aimed at rendering the characters' emotions, achieved through semantic resources with extreme evaluative meanings to affect the audience.

Affective texts, both in content and form, serves the implicit effects intended by the text. If the translation still needs to be affective, the translator should be guided by the overall goal of eliciting an equivalent response from the reader/audience. Thus, the translation does not mimic the original text word by word, but rather adapts it. For example, "亲情尽泯" is not translated literally, but the translation emphasizes the extent of shock caused to the characters, thus paraphrased as "beyond beyond beyond expectation." Additionally, the repeated rhyme of "骂句畜生, 骂句畜生" reflects Cixi's intense hatred. In the translation, this degree of abhorrence is compensated for by adverbs, ensuring functional equivalence between the two texts and allowing readers/audience to vividly sense Cixi's shock and anger.

【Example 3】

具体上有六方面 调整教育和法律制度
 废除所有行政分局而设立一个中央制度机构
 建立中央政府与国会
 废除腐迂的旧儒家制度
 实行“君权变法”速颁布“明定国是诏书”

【Translation】

To reform at once change both the education. and the legal systems,
 Get rid of the Grand Council,
 together with other related segments.
 Draft a constitution and in Peking quickly,
 Create a Parliament,
 Establish more effective institutions,
 Abolish and demolish the old archaic governance,
 Replace with a constitution led by a monarch with a cabinet,

overhaul the present corrupt administration.

Example 3 is selected from the "Transition" section, where Kang Youwei presents his proposal for political reforms to Emperor Guangxu. It belongs to the expressive text type, with the main language function being emotional expression and a focus on aesthetic characteristics of language. The translation method should aim to imitate the original text and be faithful to the original author^[10](Munday, 2022:74). In this case, the semantic chain of "reform-draft-establish-abolish-replace" in the form of language reflects the proposal and determination for implementing changes, precisely embodying the semantic content of adjustment- abolishment- establishment- abolishment-implementation in the original text. Additionally, the parallel form highlights the arrangement of information in the original text, showcasing the grand and forceful momentum of the reforms. Therefore, the original text and translation are equivalent in form and function.

Paralanguage text translation

The paralinguistic text of Cantonese opera has always been a challenge for translators. During a performance, it seems that only music, lyrics, and narration are the media through which actors communicate with the audience. But in fact, during performances, it may seem that only music, lyrics, and spoken dialogue are the means of communication between actors and the audience. However, in reality, the movements (dance, martial arts, acrobatics) in Cantonese opera, as well as stage settings, costumes, and facial makeup, all constitute a symbolic system that conveys communicative significance.

This sign system differs from the textual structure of the drama in its static and non-real-time nature, carrying fixed meanings that influence the audience's comprehension of the overall meaning of the opera. Therefore, the strategy for translating paralinguistic texts is completely different from text translation. Due to the non-real-time characteristic of information transmission and the relatively stable indicative meanings of signs, non-textual structures such as pre-performance explanations, experiential activities, and thematic readings can be used to help the audience understand the relevant symbolic system meanings.

First, the general knowledge of Cantonese opera props, facial makeup, scenery, programmed movements, musical instruments, etc. can be explained and demonstrated in English. Secondly, Cantonese opera experience activities are provided, such as trying on costumes, drawing facial makeup, and teaching movements. Afterwards, you can watch Cantonese opera performance videos. In addition to the above, before watching the show, each subject was given an English instruction manual about the plots, characters, facial makeup, costumes, and props of " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court " for them to read. At the same time, it was supplemented by a Cantonese opera performance played on a screen with English subtitles and English on-site translation. Through the above-mentioned arrangements before watching Cantonese opera performances, the audience has a preliminary understanding of the Cantonese opera sign systems. During the viewing process, the static symbol system can be combined with verbal information such as lyrics, dialogue, and recitation to improve the acceptance effect.

3.Cantonese Opera Audience

There have been few influential researches in the field of audience analysis of traditional Chinese operas, and the audience only exists in the translators' imagination. In the context of the strategy of "building a culturally strong city and a culturally strong province " to promote China's international communication capacity, China should launch a staged plan to subdivide the recipient groups of cultural products, so the translator must have readers/ audience awareness, which is the key to the external dissemination of Cantonese opera.

Most foreign audience lack in-depth understanding of Cantonese opera and Chinese culture, viewing China as unfamiliar and mysterious. Their interest in watching Chinese Peking opera is often driven by novelty and curiosity. Misinterpretations of signs (such as facial makeup, singing styles, and colors) frequently occur. Therefore, this paper divides the audience into three categories: elemental audiences (popular culture audiences, driven by curiosity), literary text audiences (interested in scripts and historical stories), and cultural research-oriented audiences.

For elemental audiences, whose primary purpose is entertainment, Cantonese opera performances should aim to satisfy curiosity and exploration. The translation should lean towards domestication, reducing comprehension difficulties caused by cultural differences. For instance, in the translation of historical allusions in " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court," a heavy-handed approach with excessive annotation or interpretation should be avoided to prevent hindering the entertainment experience for the audience. In the fourth act, there is a reference to the historical event of "petitioning the emperor," which involves various cultural expressions related to the imperial examination system of the Qing dynasty. The translator chooses to translate it simply as "petition," although this simplification may entail a cultural discount. However, it does not disrupt the flow of information for the audience, thereby achieving better reception.

For textual audiences, whose purpose is reading, they can be divided into ordinary script readers, scriptwriters, adapters, directors, and other production personnel. For this type of audience, the paratext sign systems no longer participate in cognitive activities. Therefore, Cantonese opera becomes a regular form of expressive literary text, emphasizing aesthetic form and literary aesthetic value.

Cultural research audiences include scholars of Cantonese opera culture, translators of Cantonese opera, Chinese language teachers at foreign universities, researchers at research institutes, sinologists, and others. These audiences focus on the dual nature of Cantonese opera and are equally interested in both the text and paratext sign systems. Therefore, the successful reception of Cantonese opera by this type of audience requires a combination of the aforementioned script translation strategies and the introduction of sub-language symbolic system strategies.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the English Cantonese opera " Intrigues in the Qing Imperial Court" produced by Singapore Dunhuang Opera Troupe seamlessly integrates the dual attributes of readability and performability of Cantonese opera. Chairman Huang Shiying,

who serves as the playwright, director, translator, and actor, skillfully combines these two aspects. By conducting a functional analysis of the script, direct translation and compensatory translation strategies were employed for informational text, expressive text, and sub-language text. For the translation of paralanguage text, the approach focused on pre-show explanations, in-show subtitles and live translation, as well as post-show cultural activities to allow the audience to fully experience the cultural essence of Cantonese opera.

This paper believes that in the early stage of "Lingnan culture going global," represented by Cantonese opera, the dual nature of translation and performance cannot be separated. The script and paratext must be closely integrated to emphasize the dissemination of the cultural characteristics of Cantonese opera while remaining audience-oriented. This approach ensures a dynamic balance between promoting regional cultural features and gaining recognition from overseas audiences.

Acknowledgement

The research, a phased achievement, was financially supported by 13th Five-Year Plan of 2020 *Yangcheng* Young Scholars research projects of the Guangzhou Planning office of Philosophy and Social Science: *Research on the English Translation and Disseminating of Cantonese Opera in the Context of Lingnan Culture "Going Global"* (2020GZQN57)

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