



The Loss of Cultural Image in Literary Translation-A Case Study of the English Version of *The Peony Pavilion*

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Abstract

Cultural image is the unique cultural symbol formed in different ethnic groups due to different cultural traditions and geological environment. Cultural image is widely used in classic Chinese literary, which was a great difficulty in translation. The paper has a case study of *The Peony Pavilion*, where exists abundant cultural images, among which the use of image “willow” and “plum” were in high frequency. These images were elaborately designed by the author to forward the plots and contained profound connotative meanings. Therefore, the translation of these cultural images is of vital importance. This essay explores the phenomenon of the loss of cultural images in the English version translated by Wang Rongpei and Cyril Birch. There are 55 scenes in *the Peony Pavilion*, among which the image “plum” and “willow” have been mentioned in 32 scenes. The constant repetition of these two images helps depict vivid characters and promotes the development of plots. Unfortunately, in the translation, the expression of these images is more or less absent.

Key words: The loss of cultural image; Translation of dramatic texts; *The Peony Pavilion*

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INTRODUCTION

The Peony Pavilion was written by the dramatist Tang Xianzu in 1598. It depicted the romantic story between Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang. Du Liniang was the daughter of the Prefect of Nan'an. One day, when she had a stroll in the back garden with her maid, she took a snap on a rock and dreamt about a scholar. In the dream, they fell in love. Haunted by the dream, Du Liniang fell badly ill and finally passed away for lovesickness. But in the end of the story, Du Liniang revived and had a happy ending with the scholar Liu Mengmei. *The Peony Pavilion* has catapulted into an international sensation. It can be regarded as the brainchild of Tang Xianzu as well. In this drama, Tang Xianzu copiously quoted authoritative works and each scene ended with a poem, which expressed the artistic attractions of this work. There exist abundant of cultural images in *The Peony Pavilion*, including not only the plant images and animal images, but also the cultural images with specific Chinese idioms and allusions. All of these has brought troubles and dilemmas to translators. In the English version translated by Professor Wang Rongpei, the use of the principle “vivid in description and faithful in meaning” has effectively maintained some of the artistic effects of the original text. However, the loss of cultural image still cannot be avoided.

The studies on cultural image of Tang Xianzu's works started at the beginning of 21st century. There are 25 essays, among which there are three essays studies the “image plum” and “image willow”. Wang Guobin (2005) illustrated that *The Peony Pavilion* was the myth of revival. And “willow” played an important role in Du

Liniang's revival, which indicated "willow" as the carrier of soul. But the understanding of this cultural image was limited." Pan Pan (2008) demonstrated multiple meaning of image "plum". The "plum" has inherited cultural connotations, representing lovesickness, bitterness of parting, desolation, obstinacy and lofty character. However, the research of corresponding cultural image in translated version has been neglected. The research on cultural image mostly focuses on aesthetic value of image but few on the loss of cultural images in translation and in intercultural communication. The English readers' understanding of the cultural images in translated version is influenced as well.

1. THE LOSS OF CULTURAL IMAGE

Image or imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience. (Cuddon, 1979) In ancient China, the authentic theory of image concludes six key aspects. First, it is a kind of ideographic figure. Second, the creation of image is to express the idea of the most fundamental principle. Third, image is formed out of the meaning daily figures. Fourth, the image is created by human to meet psychological needs. Fifth, there exists the amplified expressiveness and a strong appeal inside the image. Sixth, image is of artistic features. (Gu, 1993) Moreover, there are mainly three types of image including literal image, perceptual image and conceptual image. And the cultural image is included in perceptual image. The concept of the loss of cultural image was put forward by Xie Tianzhen (2013) in *Medio-translatology*. People always link cultural image with visualized words, allusions, idioms, metaphors, etc. Cultural images are often regarded as rhetoric. Although their relations are close, there exists lots of differences. Cultural image actually consists of all these categories, but with wider and more profound connotations. Cultural image is the unique cultural symbol formed in different ethnic groups, different living environments and different cultural traditions. The form of cultural image could be various. Plant is one of them. In *the Peony Pavilion*, it appears abundant plant images with specific cultural connotation. There is no corresponding meaning on the same plant images in western culture, which leads to the loss of cultural image in translation.

There are 55 scenes in *the Peony Pavilion*, among which the image "plum" and "willow" have been mentioned in 32 scenes. The constant repetition of these two images covers almost all the important scenes. The high occurrence means everything. And the image "plum" and image "willow" were not simple inherited from ancient times. The author distilled them to depict vivid characters and to promote the development of plots. Unfortunately, in the translation, the expression of these

images is more or less absent.

2. THE CONNOTATION OF IMAGE "WILLOW" IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE

In classical Chinese cultural, the image "willow" was firstly used to describe the charming appearance of a scholar, especially in Wei and Jin dynasties (from 220AD~ 420AD). When Tang Xianzu composing this drama, he borrowed images to create a handsome scholar Liu Mengmei who was blue blood. In scene ten *An Amazing Dream*, it depicted Liu Mengmei as "a handsome scholar by the age of twenty". In scene two *A Scholar's Ambition*, Lui Mengmei was "intelligent enough to pass the country examination." All these descriptions of Liu Mengmei fit the connotative meaning of willow in the ancient times. Besides, "willow" represents the stirrings of love. In the scene *A Scholar's Ambition*, the sentence "when plums and willows grow before the gate, my heart contains a hundred of blooms in buds" implied the start of love story. Nevertheless, while Du Liniang dreaming about Liu mengmei with a willow branch in his hand, this is a typical image in classical literature to express the feeling of lovesickness provoked by willow. Moreover, plants were regarded as a token to convey love in ancient literature. Furthermore, willows have strong vitality. When the willow branch is inserted into the soil, it can survive and grow into a tree, which represents revival. In *the Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang was given a willow branch as a gift. This branch not only conveyed love of Liu Mengmei, but also implicated Du Liniang would return to life after death.

However, in western culture, willow does not contain the meaning of good-looking, love or revival. Willow has symbolic meaning in Celtic religion for a long period which related to metaphysical and ritual practices. Distinctively in Celtic ceremonies, they use willow wood to enchant psychic abilities, honoring the moon. The willow possesses another powerful symbol of psychic and intuitive energy, because of its moon associations and relation with water. After recognizing these natural unions, the spiritual leaders of ancient Celtic considered the willow a holder for water or moon attributes. They began to utilize willow wood or branches to invoke deeper connections to their intuitive goals. The Celts understood that the willow was instrumental in providing psychic visions that produced a lighter understanding of the world. On the other hand, willow is related to death. The evidence can be found in western literature in ancient times. In 16th century, willow represented grief and punishment. In *Hamlet* and *Othello*, willows had been mentioned several times when someone died.

3. THE CONNOTATION OF IMAGE “PLUM” IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE

“Plum” is the incarnation of the fairy and beauty. Du Liniang was brought up in a bower and died as a lonely ghost. She either met Liu Mengmei in the dream or after death as a ghost. All these depictions correspond with the myth of Fairy Plum. In the scene *Seeking the Dream*, Du Liniang was described as a charming lady and had a fancy dream. In the scene *Union with the Ghost*, Du Liniang said: “when the portrait guided me in the moon, I heard a man sigh in a woeful tune.” Fancy dream was just a dream. As mentioned earlier, “willow” is the symbol of stirrings of love, so does “plum”. In the scene *Union with the Ghost*, the sentence “Let’s make this first night sweet and warm.” The plum flower and willow are the token of spring and the intermediary that irritate the stirring of love. Plum flowers can enjoy the warmth of spring only after going through the chilly winter. They also need to go through the life course from withered branches to green sprouts. This course is just like Du Liniang’s experience. She died of lovesickness and became a lonely ghost, which was the chilly winter for her. But she held her belief and overcame difficulties and obstacles to pursuit love, which was the warm spring for her. She revived as well like the plum flowers. In the scene *The Roaming Soul*, when Sister Stone commemorating Du Liniang, she said “the vase with its void, holds the world minute. It’s like the bloom of plums, which carries water and has no root, but still gives off fragrance acute.” and “Miss Du, the offer you receive here will add coolness to your bone. And fragrance to your soul. If you resume the human role, will you return to this selfsame zone?” Eventually, the soul of Du Liniang was recalled and her revival journey started.

Plum or plum blossom are just simple plant’s name in western culture without specific connotative meaning. Therefore, when plum appears in the translated version, the English readers can only feel the aesthetic imagery not the connotations of this flower in Chinese culture.

4. CASE ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION OF THE IMAGE “WILLOW” AND IMAGE “PLUM”

Chinese classical dramatic texts are of uniqueness, which is distinctive from the translation of literary texts like novel and poetry. In *the Peony Pavilion*, there exist plenty of cultural images. In this paper the image “willow” and “plum” was analyzed, which are classic and representative among all these images.

Case 1: 敢柳和梅有些瓜葛 (Scene Twenty-six)

Version A: Is she someone I can’t evade. (Translated by Wang Rongpei)

Version B: surely the “willow” of my name and the apricot branch in her hand must form a closer union yet? (Translated by Cyril Birch)

This sentence was chosen from the scene *Cherishing the Portrait*. In the English version translated by Professor Wang Rongpei, he has fully expressed the meaning of the original texts. But the acceptance of the translation of dramatic texts not only depends on target language culture, but also the forms of drama. In order to be faithful with the original meaning, Professor Wang chose to leave out the image “plum”. The express is understandable for English readers. The sacrifice of Chinese cultural image is a regret. In the version translated by Cyril Birch, he chose “willow” to represent the name of Liu Mengmei and “apricot branch” to represent Du Liniang. This version expressed the literal meaning of original text which helped to keep the cultural images in the translated version. But because of the different cultural connotations of “willow” in Chinese and western culture, the meaning of these images was lost in translation.

Case 2: 梅和柳有分儿些 (Scene Twenty-eight)

Version A: For willow and plum remote. (Translated by Wang Rongpei)

Version B: For one who understand predestined “willow” or “apricot.” (Translated by Cyril Birch)

Professor Wang Rongpei and Cyril Birch both used literal translation here. The English readers can only get the literal meaning, which was just plants’ name for them. However, in fact, the “plum” or “apricot” and “willow” in Chinese culture represented Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei respectively. The author adopted these two cultural images to imply the countless ties and complex relationships between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. Unfortunately, due to the distinctive meaning of same cultural images in different cultures, English readers could not understand author’s special arrangements and implications here. Consequently, translating the original texts of drama under different targeted language culture will leave out part of the meanings or maybe generate new meanings.

Case 3: 等的俺梅子酸心柳皱眉 (Scene Two)

Version A: I seem to sit on pins and needles (Translated by Wang Rongpei)

Version B: and with this waiting “the flowering apricot yields sour fruit; the willow has frowning brows” (Translated by Cyril Birch)

In the scene *A Scholar’s Ambition*, the translator converted the culture images in order to make the text easier to comprehend and more acceptable. Sadly, the Chinese cultural image is gone. “梅酸”(the sour plum) and “柳皱眉”(the willow frowns) implicated that the main characters had suffered a lot before they were together. After changing the cultural images, the images only expressed their anxious feeling not the sufferings they had been through. The loss of cultural image makes the original text lose its unique charm. However,

in Birch's version, he used literal translation which would cause misunderstandings among English readers. Because the feelings and emotions expressed through the cultural images were not fully explained. All these processes in translation fit the idea of the dramatist and translator Patrice Pavis (1989) who believed that dramatic translation is the shifting of language that surpass dramatic texts.

Case 4: 却怎半枝青梅在手，活似提掇小生一般 (Scene Twenty-six)

Version A: How is it that she carries a twig of green plums in her hand as if she were holding me in her arms? (Translated by Wang Rongpei)

Version B: And she bears a green sprig of apricot in her hand, as if somehow she were holding my own self in her arms! (Translated by Cyril Birch)

The image "green plums" or "green sprig of apricot" means something to Chinese readers but nothing to English readers. English readers may not be able to connect "green plums" with Liu Mengmei. Even they know "green plums" referred to Liu, they may not understand the reason. The connotations of cultural images were lost when translating. In view of the uniqueness of dramatic texts, it requires more explanations to show its essence, which including the demonstration on cultural images.

CONCLUSION

The cultural images "plum" and "willow" created by Tang Xianzu in *the Peony Pavilion* are of great significance in the whole drama. The author combined the symbolic meaning of "plum" and "willow" with the characteristics of the couple Liu Mengmei and Du Linxiang. The author has endowed the characters with a three-dimensional depiction and vivid cultural connotations, which promoted the development of the plots and implied the trends of the story. Consequently, only with full comprehension of the connotative cultural images can English readers get in-depth understanding of *the Peony Pavilion* and the author's intricate, elaborate and allusive arrangement and conception. Moreover, the loss of cultural imagery in dramatic texts translation results from multiple elements. Sometimes, to ensure the rhyme and meaning of dramatic text, the translator has to make some adjustments and leave out part of the cultural images. This kind of compromise cannot be effectively avoided at present. The uniqueness of Chinese classical dramatic texts has brought difficulties in drama translation. The acceptance of the translation of pure literary texts mainly bases on the target language culture. And literary texts have full textual functions. However, the dramatic texts do not.

The translators should not only express the cultural connotations in the translated version but also make the language mode fit for performance. Besides, the limitation of development in history and culture in different nations can lead to misunderstandings in cultural images. The cultural images in *the Peony Pavilion* were carefully designed. However, the loss of the cultural images is inevitable in translation with no other ways to solve it. A tiny loss of them could bring a great regret.

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