



## On the Allusion Translation in Traditional Chinese Drama: A Case Study of the English Version of *The Peony Pavilion*

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**Supported by** the “Research on the Translation of Traditional Chinese Drama” granted by Jiangxi Province Humanity and Social Studies Department (No. YY61008); Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University; Nanchang, Jiangxi, China.

Received 6 April 2021; accepted 11 May 2021

Published online 26 June 2021

### Abstract

The allusions applied in traditional Chinese drama contain prolific cultural connotations, which aren't familiar to English readers. Therefore, translators should take the interpretation of cultural meaning into consideration thoroughly in the process of translating allusions of traditional Chinese drama, so as to make the translation readable. This paper takes the English version of *The Peony Pavilion* translated by Xu Yuanchong as the research object, and analyzes its translation methods for the allusion of story and the allusion of language from the perspective of cultural translation, aiming to provide a reference for the translation of allusions in Chinese classical drama.

**Key words:** Traditional Chinese drama; Allusion translation; *The Peony Pavilion*; Xu Yuanchong

Zhou, Y., & Cao, Y. C. (2021). On the Allusion Translation in Traditional Chinese Drama: A Case Study of the English Version of *The Peony Pavilion*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 22(3), 67-71. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12140> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12140>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the heart within the body culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation

of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril (Bassnett, 2005). It is common that Chinese classical dramas apply a large number of allusions, which embody so many histories and cultures that readers feel difficult to understand and translators redouble efforts to transcribe. Translations have been made with the intention of influencing the development of a culture (Lefevere, 2003). Hence, the quality of allusion translation exerts an important impact on the spread of Chinese classical drama and translators need to take cultural background into consideration in the process of allusion translation. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task since culture impacts and constrains translation (Munady, 2016).

Cultural translation is a translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture in some way, or in which information is introduced which is not linguistically implicit in the original (Nida, 2004). According to the cultural translation theory proposed by Liu Miqing, the main task of allusion translation for translators is to transfer its strata of semantic content, cultural aesthetics, story and extralinguistic meaning (Liu, 2016). Taking *The Peony Pavilion* as an example, this paper studies its English version translated by Xu Yuanchong who is an eminent translator and researches how he deals with the four information strata in the allusion of story and the allusion of language, so as to conclude translation methods for allusion translation in traditional Chinese dramas.

### 2. ALLUSION AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA

In the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Eleventh Edition* (2014), the definition for allusion is an implied or indirect reference especially in literature. More precisely, allusion is a kind of literary quotation, with profound

national cultural features and far-reaching social and historical origins. Sapir claims that language is a guide to social reality and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society (Sapir, 1956). Lotman declares firmly that no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture (Lotman, 1978, pp.211-232). Liu Miqing proposes in the *Culture and Translation* that “language itself has no reference to something, so all allusions are historical and cultural accumulation of language, which always reflect a certain form of life” (Liu, 2016).

Proper application of allusion plays a key role in Chinese dramas. Dramas are made unintelligible by excessive use of allusion, but they would be monotonous without application of allusion (Wang, 2012). That is, the appropriate application of allusion makes a great contribution to traditional Chinese dramas in terms of expressiveness, connotation and sentiment. Allusions in traditional Chinese drama are manifested in two functions: the vivid descriptions and evaluations of characters; the succinct expression of characters’ opinions and wishes. For example, a large number of allusions are applied in the drama *The Peony Pavilion* with the purpose of expressing emotion and depicting characters. Du Liniang sings the lyric “寸草心，怎报的春光一二” to show her gratitude to her parents when she greets them in the morning. And Liu Mengmei cites allusive sentences “画似崔徽，诗如苏蕙，行书逼真卫夫人” to praise Du Liniang for her profound attainments in painting, poetry and calligraphy.

Traditional Chinese drama belongs to poetic drama where characters are skillful in expressing their feelings with many poetic librettos involved various allusions. The most classic example is *The Peony Pavilion* where characters borrow allusions from ancient stories and words of previous works. The former includes “鲤庭趋”，“嫦娥窃药”，“谢女班姬女”，“雀角”，“东床” and so on, while the latter incorporates “临行赠女绕朝鞭”，“窈窕淑女，君子好逑”，“朝看飞鸟暮飞回”，etc. Therefore, the author classifies the allusions in traditional Chinese drama into the allusion of story and the allusion of language according to their sources. The first is relative to myths, legends, fables, historical stories and anecdotes, whereas the second is extracted from various literatures, especially famous works (Yuan, 1999, pp.3-5).

### 3. FOUR STRATA OF INFORMATION IN ALLUSION TRANSLATION

Liu Miqing discusses the allusion translation in detail with a separate section, holding that an allusion mostly has the strata of semantic content, cultural aesthetics, story and extralinguistic meaning, which requires translators to accomplish a four-fold task when translating allusions (Liu, 2016).

The first stratum is semantic content that fixes on the fundamental concept of words in an allusion. For example, “而立之年” semantically means the year when a person should be independent in his life. Although semantic content reveals the most superficial meaning of an allusion, it is a significant information stratum that translators need to deal with in the process of allusion translation. Thus, translators have to focus on the transference of semantic information when they conduct an allusion translation.

The stratum of cultural aesthetics is the second one, whose emphasis is mainly on the visualization, structural form and rhyme in allusions. Musicality in Chinese classical drama requires that the language in script is rhythmic (Wang, 2015). As to translatology, aestheticization is implemented for aesthetic representation of cross-language culture (Liu, 2016). Hence, translators need to focus on the information of cultural aesthetics contained in the allusions of source text and transform aesthetics with their own subjectivity and creativity.

The stratum of story is the third one, which refers to the allusion source with mythology and historical story plot. It primarily stresses the original meaning of allusions and source of allusions. For example, extracted from *The Analects*, “而立之年” can be translated as “thirty years old”. The third stratum provides the context or source of an allusion for readers. Therefore, in the process of translating allusions, translators should think about their origins and literal meanings, which can help target readers to understand Chinese culture and history better.

As the most pivotal stratum, extra linguistic meaning equals implied meaning. For instance, “而立之年” illustrates that a person fully becomes an adult to go in for a profession. People use allusions in works for the reason that their extra linguistic meanings make articles elegant, interesting and euphemism. Furthermore, it shows that the author is a man with high level of literary accomplishment. Besides, the author’s cultural background can be best displayed to readers. As a result, translators should make more prompt explanations of allusions when translating allusions. To be specific, the comprehension of deep implication in allusions is an essential precondition for deeply understanding the culture of source text, so that the implied meaning of allusions is reproduced in target text by rule and line.

### 4. ANALYSIS OF ALLUSION TRANSLATIONS IN *THE PEONY PAVILION*

*The Peony Pavilion* is a famous Chinese drama written by Tang Xianzu in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which tells the love story of the woman Du Liniang and the learned-man Liu Mengmei. Its uniqueness of art finds

expression in the words and sentences of source text, such as the beautiful melody and exquisite lyrics. Particularly, Tang Xianzu applies many allusions in the librettos and spoken parts of this opera script, including a wide variety of stories and works that originate from many dynasties in China with large time span. Frequently where there is cultural focus, there is a translation problem due to the cultural 'gap' or 'distance' between the source and target languages (Newmark, 2001). Even though the application of allusion can enhance language communication, emotion expression and artistic appeal of dramas, some allusions are strange and abstruse for translators let alone target readers, which greatly increase the difficulty of translating allusions in traditional Chinese dramas.

Based on the English version of *The Peony Pavilion* translated by Xu Yuanchong (hereinafter "Xu"), the author will explore how the famous translator copes with the four strata of information according to allusion resources and sum up the translation methods for the allusion of story and the allusion of language from the perspective of information reproduction through case studies.

#### 4.1 Translation of the Allusion of Story

The allusions of story are generally extracted from the myths, legends, fables, historical stories and anecdotes with story plots, thus target readers feel difficult to comprehend the allusions if they don't know the cultural background. With the method of explanation, targets readers know the historical, social and cultural background of allusions, so that the understanding of allusions can be complete. By contrast, the method of deculturation is to weaken the culture contained in allusions and to reproduce their extralinguistic meaning, which is conducive to improving the readability of allusion translation.

##### Example 1

ST (source text): 小生待画饼充饥，小姐似望梅止渴。

TT (target text): I cannot stay my hunger by a portrait fair, nor can you quench your thirst by a shower in air.

The source text is what Liu Mengmei says to himself when he looks at the portrait of Du Liniang, expressing his feeling of loss that the beautiful woman is in sight but he can't touch her. "画饼充饥" and "望梅止渴" are two allusions from historical stories recorded in *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *New Anecdotes of Social Talk*. The former stems from a story about the Emperor Wen who talked to Lu Min that personnel selection didn't rely on the fame of candidates because fame was like a cake painted on the ground and can't taste, whereas the latter originates from a story about Cao Cao who told his soldiers that there were plum trees ahead and the sweet and sour plums would relieve your thirst. Semantically, they mean that people can't realize their desires but meet themselves with imaginations. Literally, "画饼充饥" means "drawing cakes to allay hunger" and "望梅止渴" is translated as "looking at plums to quench thirst".

Aesthetically, they are Chinese four-character allusions with neat and balanced form. The two allusions imply that Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang wish to meet each other.

Xu fails to keep the third stratum of information, but he transfers other three strata of information through deep explanation in the target text. The semantic contents of original allusions are represented by words "hunger" and "thirst" in target text, both of which refer to "a strong desire for something". Besides, he replaces the structural aesthetic of source text with the rhythmic beauty of target text. That is, Xu makes it rhyme with "fair" and "air", so as to reproduce the original artistic expression in translation. Furthermore, the extralinguistic meaning is directly expressed in the target text on account of different cultural background between Chinese and foreigners. Xu adds "a portrait fair" and "a shower in air" into translation according to the context of this drama since target readers rarely get to know the deep meaning of Chinese allusions. Through deep explanation and amplification, he achieves the reproductions of cultural aesthetics and language aesthetics in the process of allusion translation.

##### Example 2

ST: 必须砍得蟾宫桂，始信人间玉斧长。

TT: I do not know if my arms can cut the tree down, till I have won the laurel crown.

The sentence of source text originates from the allusion "蟾宫折桂", which is a mythological story written in the book *Yaw Yang Essays*. It is said that the laurel tree in the moon was five hundred feet tall, and that a man named Wu Gang was condemned to cut down the tree as punishment for stealing immortals and he had cut the tree day and night with unremitting efforts because every time the tree was chopped by his axe its wound would heal immediately. Then future generations use the allusion to illustrate that people pass an imperial examination in ancient China. The original aesthetic is created by "蟾宫桂" and "玉斧", which are reminiscent of wonderful things about myth. Literally, it is translated as "I must fall the tree in the moon and people will believe the handle of jade axe is long enough". The original sentence vividly describes that Liu Mengmei has a great ambition and wishes to change a miserable life through the imperial examination.

Xu weakens the cultural background of original allusion when translating and just partially transfers the semantic and literal meanings of the source text. He translates the Chinese characters "蟾宫桂" with the equivalent English expression "laurel crown", which is a symbol of victory, success and excellence. The translation conforms to target readers' cultural environment and is semantically equivalent to the source text. However, "玉斧" that literally means "jade axe" is diluted into "my arms" so greatly that target readers may feel confused why Liu Mengmei would confirm that he can cut the tree down if he wins the laurel crown. Xu reproduces the aesthetic

in terms of sound to compensate the cultural aesthetic of original text. In the translation, the word “down” rhymes with the word “crown”, but the semantic meaning is influenced by the aesthetic of sound. Thus, deculturation is appropriate to allusion translation, but the semantic content of source text would be affected if the information of allusion is generalized to a large extent.

#### 4.2 Translation of the Allusion of Language

Cited from famous works, the allusions of language are mostly full of rhetorical devices and easier to understand than the allusions of story. Therefore, their four strata of information can be maintained with the methods of literal translation and free translation.

##### Example 3

ST: 寸草心，怎报的春光一二！

TT: How can young grass repay the warm light of spring day?

The source text is quoted from sentences “谁言寸草心，报得三春晖”，which are the last two lines of the poem *Song of the Parting Son* composed by Meng Jiao for showing his gratitude to his mother and eulogizing greatest maternal love. The two lines adopt traditional Chinese rhetorical method, Bi Xing, which fills the works with fresh and lively images. Grass is used as a metaphor for a child and spring sunshine for maternal love. Semantically, the original means that children can't repay maternal love. From the view of aesthetics, Du Liniang fully expresses her love and respect for her parents through the vivid images of the source text. The literary information of the allusion is that the grass with a thankful heart can't return the spring shines. Du Liniang sings the poem when she sends greeting for her parents in the morning, aiming to assure her parents of her love and filial piety.

Xu wields the method of literal translation to render the four strata of information in original allusion. He literally translates “寸草” and “三春晖” as “young grass” and “the warm light of spring day”, as a result of which the original semantic and literal meaning are represented best in the target text. Meanwhile, the translation maintains the original metaphors that compare Du Liniang with the grass and her parents' love with the light of spring day, which reproduces the rhetorical aesthetics. Target readers can associate the extralinguistic meaning of the allusion, because the images of “grass” and “the light of spring day” are familiar to them. And the words “young” and “warm” added are beneficial for target readers to comprehend the target text. The original allusion of language is translated word for word, but its four strata of information are largely kept in the target text. In summary, Xu not only translates the surface meaning of allusions, but also makes it easy for the target readers to understand the metaphors and to know the deep meaning contained in allusions.

##### Example 4

ST: 玉不琢，不成器；人不学，不知道。

TT: Unpolished jade cannot be bright; Unlearned maid knows not what is right.

Du Bao, the father of Du Liniang, exhorts his daughter to learn more knowledge with an allusion of language. The allusion is copied from the Chinese classic *The Book of Rites*, whose writer draws an analogy between the jade and human in the two sentences. Jade comes into being under natural environment, but it would not become an exquisite artifact if it is uncarved, which is the same idea as people learning knowledge. People are born without knowledge, so they have to study assiduously if they want to be talents. The semantic content is that the unpolished jades are unfit for use and the uneducated men are unaware of the truth. Literally, jade without carving can't become implements and men without education can't understand the Tao. The third stratum of information is reflected by the neat and short sentence structure. Du Bao cites the allusion to emphasize the importance of learning knowledge.

Xu applies the method of free translation to deal with the allusion of language, so that he partly transfers the third strata of information and fully transmits other three strata of information. Instead of translating “不成器” as “cannot be implements” literally, he renders it as “cannot be bright” with the method of free translation, because jades of high quality have bright color and fine texture after they are polished. It can be seen that “bright” thoroughly conveys the deep meaning of the original. Moreover, the person whom Du Bao admonishes is his daughter, as a result of which the translator renders “人不学” as “unlearned maid”. In the view of aesthetic representation, Xu makes efforts on the sentence structure and rhythmic beauty when translating. In other words, he creates a matching both sound and sense in the two sentences through the transformation of parts of speech in translation. Judging from the extralinguistic meaning, the method of free translation is suitable for allusion translation, since the analogy maintained in the target text enables target readers to understand the allusion well.

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## CONCLUSION

*The Peony Pavilion* is a masterpiece in Chinese dramatic history, in which allusions are widely applied to enhance its linguistic expression and cultural aesthetics. However, the application of allusions increases the difficulties of translating traditional Chinese drama. Through the analysis of *The Peony Pavilion*, some suggestions for the translation of allusions in traditional Chinese drama will be listed as follows. Firstly, the methods of explanation and deculturation are appropriate to translate the allusion of story, while the methods of literal translation and free translation are suitable for the translation of the allusion

of language. Secondly, translators should transfer the extralinguistic meaning, which is the most significant stratum of information in allusion. Meanwhile, the third stratum of information is a vital factor and translators can use alliteration, assonance and rhyme to keep the aesthetics of allusions. All in all, translators need to take the four strata of information into considerations and then interpret their cultural meaning since allusions in traditional Chinese drama contain rich cultural connotation and national culture.

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