

# Performance-Oriented Drama Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of Characters' Names by Cao Yu

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## Abstract

Despite Cao Yu's reputation as an outstanding dramatist in China, not many researches have been done on his Chinese version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Based on the definition of drama and main features of dramatic translation from the perspective of dramatic language, audience orientation, performance orientation and presence orientation, this paper analyzes the translation of some characters' names to illustrate that Cao Yu's version is most suitable for stage performance.

**Key words:** Drama; Drama translation; Cao Yu

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## INTRODUCTION

Cao Yu is a well-known Chinese dramatist in early 20th century, his plays are widely known both at home and abroad, however, there is no research particularly focusing on Cao Yu's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, therefore, it is necessary to analyze his unique translation strategies and methods. From the perspective of dramatic translation, this paper aims to indicate that Cao's version is the best stage-oriented one and his experience in drama translation deserves the reference for future translation.

## 1. DEFINITION OF DRAMA

According to Oxford Dictionary of Theater, drama is defined as "a term applied loosely to the whole body of work written for the theater or to a group of plays related by their style, content, or period, as Restoration drama, realistic drama" (Found & Hartnoll, 2000). It is suggested that drama exists in two forms: the printed script and performance on the stage. That is to say, drama, as a genre of literature, can be defined as a composition, in prose or poetry, accommodated to action, and intended to exhibit a picture of human life or to depict a series of grave or humorous actions of more than ordinary interest.

Drama can be classified into different types. According to the content, it can be divided into tragedy, comedy, farce and historical plays. And it can be also categorized in terms of different periods or styles such as naturalistic drama, realistic drama, and so on. Moreover, based on its writing pattern, drama can also be classified into verse drama and non-verse-drama.

Drama includes characters, plot and theme, and so on. Most plays include major and minor characters. The plot is generally made up of acts and scenes. One type of plot is dependent on the suspense of a conflict in which the hero is not ill-fated. The theme has been described as the soul of the play. Most plays have some type of conflict--between individuals, man and society, man and a greater power or man and himself. Plot and theme in drama should complement each other and be in sync.

## 2. DRAMA AND ITS TRANSLATION

Drama translation, as a significant part of literary translation, is quite different from the translation of other forms. It is "the most problematic and neglected area of translation studies research", according to Bassnett (2001). Some scholars also claim that in translating drama, translators have to encounter more difficulties than other

literary genres. Besides this, drama translation to a certain extent is connected with actors, directors and staging devices. Therefore, drama translation can be shortly described as translation of the dramatic text from one language and culture into another. It consists of playwrights, translators, directors, actors, readers and audience.

### 3. DRAMATIC LANGUAGE

As a special genre of literature, drama has its own features in language. Generally speaking, a dramatic text is primarily made up of two components: stage directions and drama dialogues. Stage directions can be further considered as the combination of stage descriptions and stage actions. As a rule, the appearance of stage descriptions is at the beginning of each act, providing correlative information such as a brief introduction of the background, scenery dispositions and properties. Stage actions are dissimilar in length: a single word, a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph. Since they are written as the guidance for action, it is supposed to be concise and precise.

Characters' language is treated as the most direct way for the audience to understand plot development and stage performance. What is spoken by performers ought to go together with their own identities, experiences, careers, habits, educational background and current feelings. Therefore, colloquialism is absolutely specific feature of dramatic language. In order to make a present audience have a deep impression on different characters and keep pace with the development of the plot, all playwrights and drama translators need to keep in mind that dramatic dialogues should be informal rather than formal. That is to say, it is certainly preferable to use words, phrases or short sentences in dialogues so that actors can easily remember and speak. Meanwhile, a specified interval is needed for the audience to digest these lines. Furthermore, rhythm is very significant in the Chinese drama. Practically the attempt to create an equivalent rhythm is very important in the successful translation of a Chinese drama. Rhythm makes words in good balance and also operates well between speeches within scenes. Meanwhile, pauses should not be neglected. Because pauses may be accompanied by the actor's movements and gestures which might arouse immediate resonance of audience.

To sum up, a drama performance usually lasts for only 2-3 hours. In order to avoid audience feeling tired, translators ought to introduce information in short dialogues. Dramatic language should be characterized in concise and distinct style.

### 4. AUDIENCE ORIENTATION

Reception Aesthetics has always been considered as an approach mainly dealing with literature criticism. It is also used to analyze literary translation, especially drama translation. As Bernard Shaw, the great playwright, once

pointed out, "If my readers do their fair share of the work, I dare say they will understand nearly as much of my plays as I do myself" (Cadden, 1986).

In the light of stage-oriented drama, theater audience is direct receptors. Just as Aaltonen (2000) has mentioned that, drama is inherent with social quality, it is always performed for a great number of people in an exclusive place at a time. As for the majority of the audience, to present a drama show in the theater equals to have a group experience with hundreds and thousands of people simultaneously. With respect to stage-oriented drama translation, long and clumsy sentences should be restricted in the performance for the reason that it is hardly possible for the audience to spend more time in pondering the lines of actors. Only short and colloquial words can arouse audience's interests and strike a chord so as to achieve the purpose of entertainment. Only in this way, can the works be generally accepted and widely popularized. Cao Yu's version is a successful case. In his version, he employed some kinds of strategies and methods to make the language easily accepted, such as short sentences, colloquial expressions, old sayings, proverbs, and so on. Cao's version is the most successful version which best fits the stage.

Owing to individuals' tastes, the difficulty to reach all individuals' assessment and compliment is greatly increased. Supposing a version is successfully accepted by its target receptors, it shows that the translator has taken receptors' horizon of expectation into consideration. If a version is boycotted by the readers, the translator ought to change his methods in order to bridge the aesthetic gap between his readers and translation.

With the development of society, language, culture, receptor's expectation will change constantly from generation to generation. Furthermore, the individual's variations do exist. Their cultural and educational background, age, personal experience and world view will greatly influence their understandings of the works. The translator ought to take all sorts of factors into consideration in order to reduce the aesthetic distance between the original text and receptors.

### 5. PERFORMANCE ORIENTATION

According to Skopos Theory, in translating drama, a translator is not just confronted with fixed texts, he has to take the potential "actability" into consideration. The translated text ought to provide clues and implications to the actors on how to act on the stage.

According to most dramatic texts, their stage directions mainly consist of two parts, stage actions and stage descriptions. Stage actions, which are usually located at the end of the character's name or in the middle of his or her lines, supply assistance to actors on stage by describing the motions, postures and facial expressions. In this way, actors can manage to change

the written words into characters in three dimensions, showing the progression of the action, indicating what is happening and revealing their suffering and growth. Stage descriptions usually appear at the beginning of each act or scene, providing introduction for the stage design. Vivid stage directions are helpful for the director to retain an exotic atmosphere so that receptors have the opportunities to get in touch with other culture. They can appreciate the illusory beauty of the stage with their horizon of expectation and intoxicate themselves in their own world. Therefore, translation of stage directions plays a very significant role in drama translation. Although the stage directions can not be heard in the performance, they are beneficial to the actor's better performance and audience's better understanding. What's more, there are also some actions underlying in the actor's lines, which denotes that the translated text can bring forth both verbal and non-verbal actions. In this case, the stage directions and actor's notes are interdependent and inter-complementary on the stage.

## 6. PRESENCE ORIENTATION

According to Marco, drama on stage is considered as "text+image+ action in real time." "Real time" here means the "fleeting nature of a theatrical performance" (Marco, 2002). Consequently, the drama text tends to be filled with colloquialism and follow the habits of target language.

Different from readers who have a lot of time savoring and digesting each page, audience is in a comparatively restricted time and place. Thus, the stage-oriented drama translation is much more associated with the immediate context than pure literary translation. Presence, in other words, immediacy inevitably innovates a new vision of dramatic translation. Chinese famous playwright Ying Ruocheng once strives for "immediate effect" on the stage which echoes with the ephemeral feature of drama raised by some Western scholars. The effect of presence also requires colloquialism and conciseness. Consequently, the methods and strategies which can be adopted in other genres may not appropriately be employed in drama translation. That is a different story. For example, in translating Chinese idiom "dōng shī xiào pín" (Chinese phonetic alphabets), literary translator prefers to introduce the identity Dong Shi first and the difference between Dong Shi and Xi Shi, then puts forward the implied meaning that ugly woman trying to imitate a famous beauty knitting her brows. In this way, specific explanation is employed for the sake of satisfying the readers' needs for comprehension and leaving them enough space for imagination. As opposed to literary translation, drama translation would probably refuse a lengthy note because it may cause audience's blockage in comprehension. Accordingly, a translator prefers to translate this idiom as blind imitation with ludicrous effect-ion. Such short and colloquial expression can help present audience quickly understand its meaning. To make

a long story short, a translator should take the present feature of drama into consideration and seek the best solution to ensure the "immediate effect".

## 7. TRANSLATION OF SOME CHARACTERS' NAMES

It is known that the names of characters are regarded as an indispensable ingredient of literature works. Although this element is not the most significant part of a work, the public acceptance of these names can determine the success of the work in some cases. For example, some actors and actresses can be clearly remembered by the readers or audience in the names of roles rather than their own names. Compared with other translators, Cao Yu adopts transliteration in translating the names of characters of Romeo and Juliet.

Cao Yu's translation of names not only maximally complies with the pronunciation of the original one, but also vividly represents the characteristics of each role to a large extent.

First and foremost, it is obvious to figure out that Cao Yu translates all the names of roles in accordance with Chinese culture. In China, a person's name is commonly made up of two to three Chinese characters. Given names resonant of qualities which are perceived to be either masculine or feminine are frequently given, with males being linked with strength and firmness and females with beauty and flowers. In Cao's version, all translated names obey such rule. For example, Cao translates "Gregory" and "Capulet" into "lì gāo" and "kǎi bù" (Chinese phonetic alphabets). His translation is considerably helpful for Chinese readers and audience to have a better understanding of the play. What's more, Cao Yu considers both pronunciation and meaning seriously during the process of name translation. While translating Romeo and Juliet, Cao Yu chooses "róu mì ǒu" and "yōu lì yè" (Ditto), because in Chinese, "róu" (Ditto) means something flexible, soft and gentle and "mì" (Ditto) indicates sweet or honeyed. This Chinese name implies that Romeo advocates love most but sometimes he is irresolute and hesitant. "yōu" (Ditto) represents something quiet and secret. Meanwhile, this name also hints that their love is impossible to open up and will not be accepted by the public, to some extent, it suggests their tragic ending.

According to Reception Aesthetics Theory, the more acceptable the language is, the more successful the work is. Iser says, "...the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: The artistic is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (Iser, 1978), which illustrates readers' significance to literary works and translations. It is believed that no completely perfect interpretation of the text exists, but only through readers' reading, can the original text be embodied vividly and picturesquely. Readers' creative role in the realization of meaning and

aesthetic value of a literary work is fully recognized. Readers enter the world of the text with their "horizons of expectations", then analyze and conclude the text until "fusion" of horizons between them and the text is reached.

Translation of characters' names, as a significant part of a text, has always been paid highly attention since good names can impress receptors easily and deeply. What's more, it is also a vivid reflection of character's personality. Cao Yu obeys the rules of Chinese names in order to cater to native audience's taste. He bears in mind that this version is stage-oriented. Audience and actors are the two basic receptors in stage performance. In the reception process, the receptor will continuously "fill or reject blank spaces" in order to reach such "fusion of expectations" (Jauss, 1982). Cao Yu's translation can almost perfectly meet the demand of target receptors.

#### Example

Friar John Holy Franciscan friar, brother, ho!  
[Enter Friar Lawrence]

(Cao, 2002, p.332)

It is clear that Cao Yu translates the above appellation under the guidance of domestication. According to Dictionary of Translation Studies, domestication and foreignization, or domesticating translation and foreignizing translation, were the terminologies used by Lawrence Venuti in 1995. The terms originated directly from the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's address. In a lecture "On the Different Methods of Translating" in 1813, Schleiermacher argued that "there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him" (Lefevere, 1992). Venuti defines domestication as "may conform to values currently dominating the target-language culture, taking a conservative and openly assimilationist approach to the foreign text, appropriating it to support domestic canons, publishing trends, political alignments" (Venuti, 2004). In short, domestication refers to the target-culture-oriented translation in which unusual expressions to the target culture are exploited and turned into some familiar ones so as to make the translated text intelligible and easy for the target readers. Nida's advocacy of domestication mainly focuses on the equivalence to the target culture, which can be established in the translation process by replacing the unrecognizable source language features with recognizable target language ones. The equivalence includes the equivalence in linguistic form and in cultural features of the source text. Nida also attaches importance to reader response. His contribution is that he transfers the focus from the comparison between the communicative processes and takes every linguistic and cultural factor, which is possible to affect the reception of information into consideration. Cao Yu uses some culture-specific items in Chinese to the native audience.

From the above example, Cao Yu translates "Friar" into "zhǎng lǎo" (Ditto) which is typical traditional

Chinese expression. "zhǎng lǎo" (Ditto) refers to the elder of a Buddhist monastery. While "Friar", in the West, means a male member of a religious order that originally relied solely on alms. Undoubtedly, the concept of Friar is broader than that of "zhǎng lǎo" (Ditto). The reason why Cao Yu translates it as "zhǎng lǎo" (Ditto) is that audience in his time knows nothing about Western culture, full translation of religious terms will make Chinese readers misunderstood. While culturally-loaded item "zhǎng lǎo" (Ditto) is commonly used by Chinese people to address elderly Buddhist respectfully. Therefore, in order to get the foreign text closer to the target readers, traditional Chinese address is reasonable here. What's more, Cao Yu's version is for stage performance, colloquial expressions of daily life can be more accepted by the audience and easily uttered by the actors.

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## CONCLUSION

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Drama, different from other literary genre, is meant to be performed on the stage. In order to meet audience's needs, Cao Yu mainly employs domestication translation strategy. Besides, Cao uses dramatic language which is more concise and colloquial for stage performance. What's more, he adds proper action and stage descriptions which undoubtedly become a unique feature of Cao's version. All in all, his rendition is regarded as a typical and successful one for stage performance.

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