

A Study on the English Translation of Cantonese Opera: Taking the Subtitle Translation of *The Qing Imperial Court* as an Example

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Abstract

With the acceleration of globalization, the external dissemination and exchange of Cantonese opera has become a new topic. Subtitle translation is an important step in the overseas dissemination of Cantonese opera. Through making comparative analysis of the Chinese script and English translation of the Cantonese opera *The Qing Imperial Court* in the aspects of cultural element processing, dialogue style, place name and official position translation, this paper evaluates the translation quality of the subtitle translation of English Cantonese Opera *The Qing Imperial Court* and points out the existing problems. In order to improve the quality of Cantonese opera translation and ensure that the translated works can accurately convey the cultural essence and artistic charm of Cantonese opera, this study proposes a series of strategies and evaluation methods in the English translation of Cantonese opera by conducting investigation and case analysis.

Keywords: English translation research, Cantonese Opera, *The Qing Imperial Court*

1. Introduction

Foshan is the birthplace of Cantonese opera, which, as an important part of traditional Chinese opera, carries the essence of Lingnan culture and the unique charm of Guangfu culture. With the acceleration of globalization, the external dissemination and exchange of Cantonese opera has become a new topic. However, Cantonese opera faces many challenges in the process of translation and introduction to the outside world, such as cultural differences and language barriers. In order to deepen the understanding of the essence of Cantonese opera art, and provide new perspectives and ideas for the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera, this paper explores the rules of Cantonese opera Chinese and English subtitles, English Cantonese opera, and Cantonese opera translation from the perspectives of communication studies, functional linguistics, and Cantonese opera English subtitle translation, taking the English Cantonese opera *The Qing Imperial Court* as an example, in order to effectively promote the international dissemination of Cantonese opera and enhance the international influence of Chinese opera culture.

Subtitle translation is an important step in the overseas dissemination of Cantonese opera. Due to Cantonese being the main language of Cantonese opera, and overseas audiences often being unfamiliar with Cantonese, providing Chinese and English subtitles has become a common practice for Cantonese opera performances overseas. However, how to better translate Cantonese opera Chinese subtitles into English subtitles is a question worth exploring in depth. Currently, the translation quality of Cantonese opera subtitles varies greatly. Some translations are too literal and overlook the cultural background and performance characteristics of Cantonese opera; However, some translations are too free, resulting in inaccurate expression of the plot and characters' emotions. Therefore, improving the translation level and accuracy of Cantonese opera subtitles has become an important task for the external dissemination and communication of Cantonese opera.

In order to improve the translation quality of Cantonese opera subtitles, it is necessary to strengthen research on Cantonese opera culture and performance characteristics. Translators need to have a deep understanding of Cantonese opera's singing style, body movements, performance techniques, and plot background in order to more accurately convey the plot and characters' emotions. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen research and practice on English subtitle translation, and explore translation methods and techniques that are more in line with the characteristics of Cantonese opera. In addition, we can also learn from the experience and practices of subtitle translation in other theater genres, such as Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, etc. These theatrical genres have also

accumulated rich experience in subtitle translation during their overseas dissemination, which can provide useful references and inspirations for Cantonese opera subtitle translation.

In this study, our team members searched and watched the recorded video of the English Cantonese opera *The Qing Imperial Court* jointly performed by Dunhuang Theatre in Singapore and Guangzhou Red Bean Theatre Company online, extracted its Cantonese and English subtitles, and analyzed them. This opera depicts the power struggle between Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi, as well as the tragic love story between Emperor Guangxu and Empress Zhenfei. It also includes major historical events such as the Reform Movement, the Yihetuan Movement, the Sino Japanese War of 1894-1895, and the invasion of China by the Eight Nation Alliance.

This study compares the English and Chinese scripts of *The Qing Imperial Court* and uses meta-analysis to analyze the translation differences between Chinese and English, evaluate the translation quality, identify problems, and propose effective strategies for Cantonese opera translation.

2. Current Research Status on the Translation of Foshan Cantonese Opera into Foreign Languages

As a national intangible cultural heritage, the English translation of Cantonese Opera is of great significance for promoting its international dissemination and cultural exchanges. However, the English translation of Cantonese Opera faces numerous challenges, such as language differences, cultural differences, and the preservation of the characteristics of performing arts. Many scholars have delved deeply into the difficulties and strategies of translating Cantonese Opera from different theoretical perspectives, providing useful references for improving the accuracy and dissemination effect of Cantonese Opera translation.

Cai Xiaoyi (2021) adopted the theory of multimodal context parameters, combined with text analysis, case analysis, and quality control, to study the translation strategies for Cantonese Opera terms, culture-loaded words, and poems in Cantonese Opera scripts. It was found that multimodal context parameters have an important impact on Cantonese Opera translation, and a macro-meso-micro translation strategy was proposed to improve the accuracy and readability of Cantonese Opera translation.

Yang Guifang et al. (2022) adopted the theory of Medio-translatology to study the current situation of the English translation and dissemination of the Cantonese Opera *The Princess Cheung Ping's Romance with Toi*. They analyzed it from five aspects: the subject, content, channels, audience, and effect of translation and introduction. The study found that the English translation of Cantonese Opera faces challenges such as obscure language and lack of cultural background, and the effect of translation and introduction is affected by multiple factors such as the subject of translation and introduction, translation strategies, and audience acceptance. It was proposed to strengthen the cultivation of translation talents, deeply explore the culture of Cantonese Opera, and utilize modern media to promote the "going global" of Cantonese Opera.

Zhu Yanbing (2021) through the theory of Eco-translatology, combined with the corpus research method and the case analysis method, studied the adaptive selection and transformation at the lexical level of the English translation of the Cantonese Opera "The Princess Cheung Ping's Romance with Toi". It was found that translators made adaptive selections on the source language text in multiple dimensions such as the linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension. It was proposed that in the process of translating Cantonese Opera into English, attention should be paid to the leading role of translators, and a translation strategy combining domestication and foreignization should be adopted to conform to the language expression habits and cultural background of the target language audience and improve the acceptance and dissemination effect of the translation.

Yang Haoran and Zhang Yingxian (2021) utilized the theory of domestication and foreignization, combined with the translation strategy of cross-cultural communication, to study the translation errors and improvement strategies in the English translation of the Cantonese Opera "The Peony Pavilion: Startled Dream". They proposed methods such as transliteration, free translation, and annotation to improve the accuracy and readability of the translation and promote the international dissemination of Cantonese Opera culture.

3. Comparison of Chinese and English Scripts for *The Qing Imperial Court*

As a local opera, Cantonese opera contains a large number of vocabulary and expressions with Lingnan cultural characteristics in its scripts, which are difficult to find corresponding expressions in English. Therefore, some vocabulary and expressions with profound cultural backgrounds will be simplified into ordinary words in English translations, using a more direct translation method. Although they basically convey the meaning, they may lead to difficulties or misunderstandings for readers. For example, "Old Buddha" and "Father" are both translated as "Old Buddha". Although this translation is intuitive, in Chinese history, Guangxu called Empress Dowager Cixi "Father", which is a unique title that contains profound cultural connotations. It reflects the close relationship between Guangxu and Cixi, as well as the supreme status of Cixi. And 'Old Buddha' is a respectful title for Empress

Dowager Cixi, reflecting the hierarchical relationship of ancient China. However, 'Buddha' in Buddhism refers to the Buddha, and Empress Dowager Cixi is not a Buddhist. Therefore, such translation may cause misunderstandings, so it may be better to translate it as "the Empress Dowager" or "the Empress Dowager Cixi". In addition, translating "Yihetuan" as "Boxers" is a commonly used translation internationally, but the original meaning of "Boxers" is boxers. Therefore, such a vague and unexplained translation may make it difficult for readers to understand.

"What translating does is to help us get inside literature" (Rose, 2007, p.13). The lines in Cantonese opera scripts have a classical literary style and are carefully worded. The English translation cannot showcase their cultural charm, such as "Man proposes and I dispose", which is concise but difficult for international readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture to understand its deeper meaning. English scripts are limited by English expression habits and sometimes appear unnatural, such as "Be patient, Your Majesty. It's a conspiracy very blatantly usurping and clipping your authority". Therefore, we can see that English cannot translate the elegant language art and poetic language of Cantonese opera scripts.

This Cantonese opera script mentions a large number of place names and official positions. In the corresponding English script, translations like "daughter of governor of Anhui" and "eldest daughter of viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi Province" are basically right, but not precise enough. A more professional translation may be "daughter of provincial commander-in-chief of Anhui Province" and "eldest daughter of provincial commander-in-chief of both Guangdong Province and Guangxi Province".

The language expression in Cantonese opera scripts often has strong colloquialism and regional characteristics, which makes it difficult to find a direct corresponding expression in English. Therefore, in the translation process, it is necessary to make appropriate adjustments based on English expression habits and context.

For example, the Chinese word "喳" is a response word from eunuchs in the Qing Dynasty court to the emperor or empress, with distinct cultural characteristics. In the English translation, there is no directly corresponding vocabulary to express this specific response. If translated simply as 'Yes, Your Majesty', although it conveys the basic meaning, it loses the cultural connotation of Chinese history. A better translation should take the specific context into consideration to create an expression that not only conforms to English expression habits but also reflects Chinese cultural characteristics. For example, it can be translated as "At your service, Your Majesty" or "Yes, Majesty, I am here", which not only reflects the humility in the response of the eunuch in ancient Chinese culture, but also conforms to English expression habits.

Overall, the translation quality of English scripts is at a moderate level. It basically conveys the main plot and dialogue content of the Chinese script, but there are shortcomings in the preservation of cultural elements, the maintenance of language style, and the accuracy of details.

- (1) Accuracy: The English script is quite accurate in its basic content, but there is still room for improvement in some details, such as the translation of official positions and place names.
- (2) Fluency: The lines in English scripts sometimes appear too stiff and not natural enough, which may be the result of translating Chinese lines too directly.
- (3) Cultural Communication: English scripts try to translate Chinese cultural elements as much as possible, but in some cases, this preservation may confuse foreign readers, such as the use of the title "Old Buddha" for Empress Dowager Cixi, which may require additional explanation or commentary. Some translations are too straightforward, lacking the charm and deep meaning of the original Chinese sentence, and the handling of some vocabulary with specific cultural connotations is not appropriate enough.

4. Investigation, Case Analysis, and Discussion

As a local opera, Cantonese opera faces dual barriers of language and culture in its international dissemination due to its unique language and cultural elements, which poses challenges to the translation and international dissemination of Cantonese opera. On the one hand, Cantonese opera's lyrics and dialogues are mainly in Cantonese, which creates language barriers in international dissemination; On the other hand, the cultural elements, historical allusions, and folk customs contained in Cantonese opera increase the difficulty of understanding and appreciating. In addition, the translation quality of Cantonese opera varies greatly, which affects its international dissemination effect. Translation theory in communication studies regards translation activities as a cross-cultural process of information dissemination, emphasizing the accuracy, fluency, and cultural transmission of translation. This study suggests that in the English translation and introduction of Cantonese opera, the following strategies can be adopted by drawing on the communication studies of translation and interpreting:

4.1 Establish a Cantonese Opera Translation Language Database

This study believes that establishing a Cantonese opera translation corpus database is of great significance and feasibility. It can organize personnel to collect and organize the establishment of a Cantonese opera translation corpus database, providing a foundation for the international dissemination and research of Cantonese opera.

4.2 Offering Cantonese Opera Translation Courses in Universities

This study aims to provide courses such as Cantonese opera translation for foreign language majors in higher education institutions, in order to cultivate versatile talents with knowledge of Cantonese opera and cross-cultural communication skills. These talents will play an important role in the external translation and international dissemination of Cantonese opera, promote Cantonese opera translation work, and improve the quality of external translation.

4.3 Guiding Translation Practice with Translation Theory to Enhance the Quality and Effectiveness of Cantonese Opera Translation into Foreign Languages

4.3.1 Clearly Define the Communication Subject and Target Audience

In the translation and introduction of Cantonese opera to foreign audiences, the dissemination subject should be a professional translation team or Cantonese opera experts who possess profound language skills and cross-cultural communication abilities. The target audience is overseas audience, including groups with different cultural backgrounds and language habits. In the translation process, full consideration should be given to the needs and acceptance habits of the target audience.

4.3.2 Choose Appropriate Communication Channels

With the development of technology, the channels for translating and introducing Cantonese opera to foreign audiences are becoming increasingly diverse. In addition to traditional theater performances and television broadcasts, new media channels such as online platforms and social media can also be utilized for dissemination. These channels can cover a wider audience and enhance the popularity and influence of Cantonese opera.

4.3.3 Analyze Language Functionality

“The language of drama is different from that of novels, prose, and general poetry. Compared to the former, it is more like poetry, even if it is a drama written in prose, its language should be poetic and full of poetic flavor; Compared to the latter, it has more descriptive, popular, colloquial, and personalized qualities of a novel. It is a third literary language that combines the characteristics of both and is different from both” (Wang, 2009, p.142). When translating Cantonese opera scripts, attention should be paid to analyzing the language functions of the original text, including conceptual functions, interpersonal functions, and discourse functions. Conceptual function refers to the reflection and description of the objective world by language; Interpersonal function refers to the interactive role of language in interpersonal communication; Discourse function refers to the organizational structure and coherence of language in expressing meaning. By analyzing the language function of the original text in depth, translators can more accurately grasp the intention and style of the original text.

4.3.4 Optimizing Translation Strategies and Methods for Evaluating Translation Quality

“The translation of drama requires higher language arts and deeper cultural understanding, as well as more cross-cultural communication and creativity, and more empathetic understanding and expression” (Wang, 2007, p.7). When translating Cantonese opera scripts, in order to ensure accuracy, fluency, and effective cultural communication, translators should pay attention to the accuracy of content and diversity of form. Translation is not only the conversion of language symbols, but also the transmission of cultural connotations. Therefore, in the process of translation, translators should pursue functional equivalence rather than formal equivalence, that is, to accurately reproduce the conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and discourse structure of the original text in the target language as much as possible, ensuring that the translation is functionally consistent with the original text. Taking the English lyrics of the Cantonese opera *The Qing Imperial Court* as an example, this paper proposes some important translation strategies. At the same time, in order to improve the quality of Cantonese opera translation and ensure that the translated works can accurately convey the cultural essence and artistic charm of Cantonese opera, this study proposes a new quality evaluation method under the guidance of Communication Studies of translation and interpreting and Functional Translation Theory.

The translation strategy and evaluation method are proposed as follows:

① Annotation Method

For cultural elements, historical allusions, and other content in Cantonese opera that are difficult to translate directly, translators can use annotation to explain and clarify. For example, in *The Qing Imperial Court*, the titles "Old Buddha" and "Father" have rich cultural connotations, and if translated directly as "Old Buddha", it may cause misunderstandings. Therefore, it is recommended to add annotations in the translation, explaining as "a title of respect used by court officials and the emperor to address the Empress Dowager Ci Xi" and "an affectionate title used by Emperor Guang Xu to address the Empress Dowager Ci Xi", to help readers better understand the cultural connotations and historical background of Cantonese opera.

② Transliteration Method

Transliteration is a commonly used translation strategy for proprietary terms, personal names, place names, etc. in Cantonese opera. This helps to preserve the original flavor of Cantonese opera while facilitating international readers' understanding and memory. For example, in *The Qing Imperial Court*, "Emperor Guangxu" and "Empress Dowager Cixi" can be transliterated as "Guang Xu Emperor" and "Ci Xi Empress Dowager", which preserves the original pronunciation and is easy for international readers to recognize.

③ Integration Strategy of Domestication and Foreignization

When translating Cantonese opera lyrics and dialogues, translators should flexibly adopt domestication or foreignization strategies according to specific situations. The domestication strategy can make the translation more in line with the expression habits and cultural background of the target language readers, while the foreignization strategy can help preserve the cultural characteristics and artistic charm of Cantonese opera. For example, in *The Qing Imperial Court*, the line "谋事在人成事在天" can be translated as "Man proposals, God disposals" using domestication strategy, which not only conveys the original meaning but also conforms to English expression habits. For some words with unique cultural characteristics, such as the Chinese word "喳" (a response word for eunuchs in the Qing Dynasty), alienation strategies can be adopted and explanations can be added, translated as "Zha (an imperial response word used by eunuchs in the Qing Dynasty)", to preserve cultural features.

④ Contextual Analysis Method

When translating Cantonese opera, translators should fully consider factors such as contextual context, situational context, and cultural context. This helps to convey the meaning and emotions of the original text more accurately, improving the authenticity and naturalness of the translation. For example, through contextual analysis in *The Qing Imperial Court*, the emotional color and contextual information of the original text can be better reflected.

⑤ Give Equal Importance to both Meaning and Flavor in Translation

When translating Cantonese opera, translators should pay attention to the combination of translation meaning and flavor. Translation meaning is the foundation of translation, which involves accurately conveying the conceptual meaning of the original text; And the translation style focuses on the reproduction of the emotions, style, and charm of the original text in the translation. In the translation of Cantonese opera lyrics in *The Qing Imperial Court*, it is not only necessary to accurately convey their literal meaning, but also to preserve their musicality and rhythm as much as possible. Translators can reproduce the charm and style of the original text by selecting appropriate English vocabulary and sentence structures, as well as adjusting word order and rhythm appropriately.

⑥ Evaluation of Communication Effectiveness

Drawing on the 5W model in communication studies, evaluate the dissemination effect of Cantonese opera translation and introduction to the outside world. Specifically, attention should be paid to the disseminators (i.e. translators), content (i.e. Cantonese opera scripts and their translations), target audience (i.e. overseas audiences), communication channels (such as international art festivals, online platforms, etc.), and communication effects (such as audience feedback, media coverage, etc.) of the translated text. Collect feedback from overseas audiences on Cantonese opera and its translations through questionnaire surveys, social media feedback, etc., to understand their understanding and acceptance of Cantonese opera culture, as well as improvement suggestions.

⑦ Functional Equivalence Evaluation

Based on the translation theory of systemic functional linguistics, evaluate the equivalence between the translated text and the original text in terms of conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. This requires translators not only to accurately convey the meaning of the original text, but also to preserve its cultural charm and emotional expression. Firstly, evaluate whether the conceptual functions are equivalent, that is, evaluate

whether the translation accurately conveys the meaning and information of the original text. Secondly, evaluate whether the interpersonal function is equivalent, that is, whether the translation retains the emotional expression and interpersonal relationships of the original text. For example, whether the classical literary style and colloquial expression in Cantonese opera lines have been appropriately handled in translation to reflect the relationships and emotional communication between characters. Finally, evaluate whether the discourse function is equivalent, that is, whether the translation maintains the discourse structure and coherence of the original text. For example, in the translation of *The Qing Imperial Court*, the translation needs to be consistent with the original text in terms of logic, coherence, and continuity, so that overseas audiences can better understand the plot development.

⑧ Context Adaptation Assessment

Analyze the adaptability of the translation in different cultural contexts. Due to the strong Lingnan cultural characteristics of Cantonese opera, translators need to fully consider the cultural background and expression habits of the target language in the translation process, so as to make the translation more in line with the cognition and understanding of overseas audiences. Firstly, evaluate the translation's handling of cultural elements in Cantonese opera and whether appropriate translation strategies have been adopted to preserve or interpret these cultural elements. For example, the term "Yihetuan" in *The Qing Imperial Court* is translated as "Boxers", which, although commonly used internationally, may require additional explanation to help overseas audiences understand its historical background. Secondly, evaluate whether the translation retains the language style of Cantonese opera lines, such as classical literary style and colloquial expression. For example, whether the poetic and ornate language in Cantonese opera lines has been appropriately reproduced in translation to reflect the artistic characteristics of Cantonese opera. Thirdly, evaluate whether the translation fully considers the cultural context and expression habits of the target language, making the translation more relevant to the cognition and understanding of overseas audiences. For example, when translating specific titles, customs, etc. in Cantonese opera, it is necessary to use expressions that are in line with the cultural background of the target language.

The study believes that the translation strategies and evaluation methods proposed above can play the role of "conveying essence and meaning", which is proposed by the famous translation theorist Mr. Wang Rongpei, who notes that the principle of "conveying essence and meaning" "can be a kind of translation criticism theory" (Wang & Men, 2010, p.7).

5. Conclusion

With the deepening development of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, and the external dissemination and exchange of Cantonese opera has become an important topic.

Through research of the English translation of Foshan Cantonese opera by taking the English Cantonese opera *The Qing Imperial Court* as an example, this study provides scientific analysis and suggestions for the translation of Cantonese opera, and proposes a series of strategies and evaluation methods in the English translation of Cantonese opera, so as to promote Cantonese opera to better enter the world stage.

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