

# The Current Status of and Theoretical Proposals for the English Translation of Foshan Cantonese Opera

Dong Wang<sup>1</sup> & Guangtao, Cao<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, China

<sup>2</sup> School of International Studies, Guangdong University of Education, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Dong Wang, English Department, Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, 528000, China. E-mail: 2126426609@qq.com

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## Abstract

Foshan Cantonese opera has now had a profound impact around the world. Yet, it faces some challenges in its further dissemination. To propel the further dissemination of Foshan Cantonese opera in the context of globalization, the translation of Foshan Cantonese opera into English has become an important research topic. The research team investigates the current status in the English translation of Cantonese opera, and conducts a series of theoretical studies concerning the English translation. Based on the investigation of the current situation in the English translation of Foshan Cantonese opera, the research team explores and proposes some effective ways for its translation and dissemination to the foreign countries.

**Keywords:** current status, English translation, Foshan Cantonese opera, theoretical proposals

## 1. Introduction

Cantonese opera has been spread to various parts of the world with overseas immigrants since the mid Qing Dynasty, and has now had a profound impact in more than 160 countries and regions around the world, such as Mexico, Cuba, and Africa, becoming an important cultural link connecting overseas Chinese. In order to promote the further dissemination of Foshan Cantonese opera overseas, the translation of Foshan Cantonese opera into English has become an important research topic.

Regarding the English translation of Cantonese opera, domestic scholars have done some research and proposed some strategies. Although scholars have different perspectives on foreign translation, they all believe that the choice of translation strategy is crucial in the process of translating Cantonese opera into English. Alienation strategy helps to preserve the original flavor and cultural characteristics of Cantonese opera, but at the same time increases the difficulty of understanding for target language readers; The domestication strategy places more emphasis on the fluency and readability of the translation, but it may result in a lack of some Chinese cultural characteristics. Therefore, translators need to flexibly choose and apply translation strategies based on specific contexts and translation purposes, achieving an organic combination of foreignization and domestication. To further explore how to improve the readability and performance of Cantonese opera translations while preserving their cultural characteristics, and to enhance the quality and efficiency of Cantonese opera English translation, this study proposes to study and translate Cantonese opera from a new perspective, in order to promote the in-depth development and continuous innovation of Cantonese opera English translation.

## 2. Investigation on the English Translation of Foshan Cantonese Opera

In order to provide data support for the study of the international dissemination status of Foshan Cantonese Opera, gain a deeper understanding of the current situation of translation of Foshan Cantonese opera, and explore effective ways for the English translation of Foshan Cantonese opera, we designed a set of questionnaire surveys, targeting the public of different ages, genders, and residential areas, to investigate the current international dissemination status of Foshan Cantonese Opera, including overseas performances, challenges and measures in foreign translation, etc. A total of 120 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, the respondents aged 19-30 account for the highest proportion, reaching 57.5%; Female respondents account for 71.67%; 50.83% of the respondents reside within Guangdong Province (excluding Foshan).

13.98% of the respondents assert that they are aware of the performance of Foshan Cantonese Opera in foreign countries such as Singapore, 61.29% say they have heard of it but do not know much about it, and 24.73% say

they don't know it at all. From this, it can be seen that the international popularity of Foshan Cantonese Opera is still very low, and most respondents lack in-depth understanding of its overseas performances.

Meanwhile, 77.42% of the respondents believe that understanding and conveying cultural differences is the main challenge faced in the process of translating and introducing Foshan Cantonese opera to the outside world, and 65.59% believe that the accuracy of language translation is also one of the main challenges. In addition, 2.5% respondents also points out the problem that 'it is difficult to understand and translate Cantonese, and deep cultural connotations are difficult to comprehend', which means that Cantonese with profound connotations is an obstacle to the inheritance and dissemination of Foshan Cantonese opera, and the cultural connotations and allusions in Cantonese opera are also difficult for international audiences to understand.

In addition, regarding how to promote the overseas dissemination of Foshan Cantonese opera, respondents generally believe that producing multilingual subtitles or dubbing (90.32%), performing at international cultural/art festivals (80.65%), and using online platforms for promotion (81.72%) would be effective measures.

Our project team went to Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre to interview Ms. Li Shuqin, the director of Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre, to explore the challenges and solutions of translating Cantonese opera into foreign languages. Concerning the translation and introduction of Foshan Cantonese opera to the outside world, Ms. Li Shuqin notes that as an important cultural treasure of Guangdong Province, Foshan Cantonese opera faces three major challenges in its translation and introduction to the outside world. One is language and cultural differences. As a local opera genre, Cantonese opera is deeply rooted in Cantonese culture in terms of singing style, dialogue, and performance style. For non-Cantonese speaking audiences, language barriers are a primary issue. In addition, the cultural elements, historical allusions, and folk customs contained in Cantonese opera also increase the difficulty of understanding and appreciating. The second is the difficulty of translation. Cantonese opera translation should not only accurately convey the meaning of the original play, but also preserve its artistic charm and cultural characteristics. However, due to the richness and complexity of Cantonese, as well as the profound cultural background, translation work has become particularly difficult. At present, there are few translators who can translate Cantonese opera into English while preserving its dramatic charm, which poses difficulties for the dissemination of Cantonese opera overseas. Thirdly, there is insufficient promotion and publicity. Although Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre has increased its promotion of Cantonese opera in recent years, its popularity and influence overseas are still limited compared to other internationally renowned art forms. This limits the dissemination and acceptance of Foshan Cantonese opera on the international stage. Therefore, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre is taking some measures to address these three major challenges. In order to overcome language barriers, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre is actively seeking professional translation talents to accurately translate and annotate Cantonese opera. Meanwhile, it is exploring how to better preserve the artistic charm and cultural characteristics of Cantonese opera in translation. In addition, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre introduces the history, artistic characteristics, and cultural connotations of Cantonese opera to overseas audiences through activities such as Cantonese opera lectures, exhibitions, and performances. These activities not only help to enhance overseas audiences' understanding and recognition of Cantonese opera, but also stimulate their interest and enthusiasm for Cantonese opera. Moreover, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theater actively uses new media platforms, such as WeChat official account, microblog, and station B, to release Cantonese opera information, performance information, and behind-the-scenes tidbits. These platforms not only provide convenient channels for audiences to obtain information, but also enhance interaction and communication between audiences and theaters. Finally, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre actively seeks cooperation and exchanges with international art institutions, promoting Cantonese opera on the international stage through participation in international art festivals, performance exchanges, and other activities. These activities not only help to enhance the international reputation of Cantonese opera, but also promote communication and integration between different cultures.

Therefore, it has been learned from the interview that the translation and introduction of Foshan Cantonese opera to foreign audiences face challenges such as language and cultural differences, translation difficulties, and insufficient promotion and publicity. To address these challenges, Foshan Cantonese Opera Theatre is strengthening its translation work, promoting Cantonese opera culture, utilizing new media for publicity, and enhancing international cooperation and exchanges. The implementation of these measures will help enhance the international influence of Cantonese opera and promote the inheritance and development of Cantonese opera culture.

This study finds that Foshan Cantonese opera has achieved certain results in overseas dissemination and exchange, but also faces huge challenges such as cultural differences and language barriers. Therefore, this study proposes to explore the appropriate translation theories and methods so as to help improve the overseas performance and publicity effects of Cantonese opera.

### 3. Research on the Theories and Methods of English Translation of Foshan Cantonese Opera

According to the current status of English translation of Foshan Cantonese Opera, plus the study on translation theories, our research team puts forward the following theoretical proposals to address the problems that exist in English translation and external dissemination.

#### 3.1 Translation Theory Within the Framework of Communication Studies

Translation theory within the framework of communication studies in communication studies is based on communication studies and translation studies, viewing translation activities as a cross-cultural process of information dissemination and applying communication theories and methods to study translation phenomena. The proposal and development of this theory in China can be traced back to the research of Lv Jun in the 1990s. In 1997, Lv Jun first placed translation studies under communication studies, using communication theory to examine translation studies (Lv, 1997, p.6). Communication studies focuses on the processes of information transmission, reception, and feedback, as well as how these processes are influenced by cultural, social, psychological, and other factors. Translation studies focus on the conversion of texts or discourse between different languages and cultures, including the transformation of language forms and the transmission of cultural meanings. American political scientist Harold Lasswell proposed the foundational theory of communication studies, known as the '5W' model. He pointed out that there are five elements in the dissemination process: Who→Says What→In Which Channel→To Whom→With What Effects (Harold, 2013, pp.1-12). In short, the communication process consists of the communication subject, communication content, communication object or audience, communication channel or medium, and communication effect. This theory has profoundly influenced communication studies and has guiding significance for the external communication activities of drama.

Translation theory within the framework of communication studies is an important research direction in the field of translation studies in recent years. It draws on the theories and methods of communication studies to provide a new interpretation and interpretation of translation activities. According to this translation theory, communicators need to have a deep understanding of the original text, including language form, cultural meaning, context, and other aspects; Choose appropriate translation strategies based on the characteristics of the original text and the needs of the target audience, such as literal translation, free translation, domestication, foreignization, etc. The choice of these strategies will directly affect the quality and effectiveness of the translated text. In the translation process, the disseminator needs to generate a translation that conforms to the target language and cultural habits, and carefully verify and modify it to ensure the accuracy and fluency of the translation, in order to achieve the best communication effect. Translation is not only the conversion of language symbols, but also the transmission of cultural information. Therefore, as disseminators, translators need to deeply understand and convey the cultural connotations in the original text, and promote communication and integration between different cultures.

#### 3.2 Translation Theory of Language Functionalism

The translation theory of language functionalism is mainly based on the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), emphasizing the practical use and function of language in social and cultural contexts. This theory provides a new theoretical framework for translation research and practice by analyzing the functional characteristics of language. Functional translation theory originated in Germany in the 1970s, with its core concept emphasizing the functionality and purposefulness of the translated text during the translation process, rather than simply pursuing linguistic equivalence between the original text and the translated text. This theory holds that translation is an intentional, cross-cultural interaction between individuals, aimed at achieving specific communicative functions. Systemic functional linguistics holds that language has three primary functions, namely conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. These three functions are equally applicable in the translation process, guiding translators to accurately convey the meaning, emotions, and structure of the original text. Translation should pursue functional 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 translated text is functionally consistent with the original text.

Professor Huang Guowen explores the explanation of translation in systemic functional linguistics from the perspectives of "translation meaning" and "translation of flavor". He points out that "translation of meaning" is the foundation of translation, involving the accurate conveyance of the conceptual meaning of the original text; And 'translation flavor' focuses on the reproduction of the emotions, style, and charm of the original text in the translation, which is a higher level of translation (Huang, 2015, pp.732-742+800-801). Translation is not only the conversion of words and phrases, but also requires consideration of contextual factors, including contextual context, situational context, and cultural context. These contextual factors are crucial for the accuracy and authenticity of translation. As we know, 'Halliday defines language in terms of the basic distinction between context of culture

and context of situation.’ (Hatim, 2004, p.19)

The translation theory of systemic functional linguistics emphasizes the functionality and contextuality of language, pursues functional equivalence, and compensates for the shortcomings of structuralist linguistics and cultural translation paradigms. Translators can apply functional translation theory to gain a deeper understanding of the intention and function of the source text, thereby conveying the information and emotions of the source text more accurately. In the specific translation process, the translator needs to conduct in-depth textual functional analysis of the source text, including grasping the character's personality traits, plot development, and other aspects. At the same time, translators also need to pay attention to the cultural background and reception habits of the target readers, and adopt translation strategies and methods that are in line with the target language expression habits and cultural traditions. Based on systemic functional linguistics, a translation quality assessment model can be constructed to comprehensively evaluate translations from three dimensions: conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function, ensuring translation quality. This can not only improve the accuracy and fluency of the translation, but also enhance the communicative effect and cultural dissemination of the translation. This theory provides strong support for improving translation quality and has broad application value in translation practice.

### 3.3 *Three-Classification Method*

John Dryden (1631-1700), the main representative of classical literary theory in 17th century England, proposes "Three-Classification Method", who reduces all translation to three classifications: metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation. Dryden's paraphrase emphasizes that 'when translating, the author should be kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; but that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered.' In Dryden's eyes, metaphrase refers to 'the process of converting an author word for word, line by line, from one tongue to another', while imitation means that 'the translator assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion, and taking only some general hints from the original to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases.' Dryden prefers paraphrase, and advises avoiding metaphrase and imitation. In Dryden's point of view, the original author's meaning is inviolable, sometimes it can be expanded, but it cannot be changed at any time. But in terms of word expression, translators can have some freedom. Because every language has its own characteristics, the beautiful things in one language may be rough, ugly, or even meaningless in another language, so translators must carefully select words for the translation. All in all, the translator may change the appearance of the original text, but cannot alter its essence. John Dryden's Three-Classification Method still has enlightening and guiding significance for the translation of Foshan Cantonese opera classics.

### 3.4 *Three Principles of Translation: Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance*

Faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance are the translation principles proposed by Yan Fu (1854-1921), a famous Chinese translator of Western academic classics. 'Faithfulness' refers to the accuracy and correctness of the translation, which means that the translation should be faithful to the original text. 'Expressiveness' means that the translation should be smooth and in line with English expression habits, making it easy for readers to understand. 'Elegance' means that the translation should perfectly present the writing style of the original text. The principles of faithfulness and expressiveness proposed by Yan Fu have a lot in common with metaphrase and paraphrase proposed by John Dryden.

### 3.5 *The Overall Standard of 'Conveying both Meaning and Essence'*

'It is important that translation studies overall should not focus on either the style of the source text to the exclusion of the target text or vice versa, nor on the author of either text to the exclusion of its reader' (Boase-Beier, 2011, p.5). The translation of theatrical classics into English is an extremely complex activity, and as for the standard for translating classics, Wang Rongpei notes, 'the standard for translation should be a perfect combination of accuracy and appropriateness. This requires translators to have proficiency in both languages, while also having a thorough understanding of the lexical connotations, grammatical features, and stylistic characteristics of the target language. Translators should also be familiar with the cultural context on which the target language relies for survival, especially in the context of the translated content field. Only in this way can the translation achieve meaning and appropriateness. The style of translation should consider both its historical features and focus on the acceptability of the translation by contemporary target language readers.' (Wang, 2009, p.9)

Wang Rongpei assumes that 'the core issue of translation is the regeneration of meaning and the display of connotation, which is particularly important for the translation of classics'. As for the overall standard for translating classical texts into English, he proposes 'conveying both meaning and essence'. 'Firstly, conveying meaning is the starting point for translating classical texts into English, and translators must accurately reflect their

understanding and interpretation of the original text in their own translations. Secondly, simply conveying meaning is not enough, it must convey essence...In short, the formulation of English translation standards for classics is not only closely related to the content, style, text type, and intention of the original author, but also takes into account factors such as culture, social reality, translation purposes, and reader needs. The choice of translator should be based on appropriateness, finding a balance between being as close to the original text as possible and meeting the reading needs of readers.' (Wang, 2009, p.9) The overall translation standards Wang Rongpei proposes are comprehensive, scientific, and practical.

### *3.6 Three-dimensional Transformations of Foshan Cantonese Opera Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology*

There are many difficulties in the translation of Cantonese opera scripts. However, the general principle can be that different textual functions of formal performance scripts and outline scripts should respectively have different focuses. That is, either focus on literary translation or focus on subtitle translation for the purpose of stage performances (Cao, 2019, p.25-26). Film and television language is characterized by listenability, comprehensiveness, instantaneity, popularity and lack of annotation. Subtitle translation is the process of transforming the audio-visual symbols of film language into visual audio symbols. It varies depending on the types of films, the target audience and the focus, and the language used should be easy to understand, clear and concise. Subtitle translation for film and television media is restricted by time and space, so a reduction strategy needs to be adopted to ensure the coherence and cohesion of information transmission. Subtitle translation is different from dubbed text translation or script translation. Due to the effectiveness of communication, cultural differences and time-space limitations and other characteristics, translators must adopt reasonable translation strategies and methods, combine with the specific ecological context of translation, give play to their subjective initiative and correctly and reasonably convey the emotions and meanings of the characters expressed by the subtitles. Therefore, when exploring the subtitle translation of Cantonese opera from the perspective of eco-translatology, the three-dimensional transformation is taken as the basic principle of translation, and transformations are carried out at different levels such as the linguistic dimension, the cultural dimension and the communicative dimension. Various translation techniques are comprehensively applied. Sometimes it is necessary to mention the scene settings in advance, sometimes it is necessary to connect with the context. There are also skillful conveyances of cultural poems, traditional customs, slang and common sayings. All of these are to find the best balance point, on the premise of achieving the ecological balance among the translator, the source text and the target text. It also illustrates the importance of the ecological environment of translation, which requires translators to give play to their subjective initiative and reflect the characteristics of the translator's subjectivity in eco-translatology.

Eco-translatology has developed on the basis of the research on the Adaptation and Selection Theory in translation. This theory combines the global wave of ecological thoughts with the ancient Chinese ecological wisdom, along with the increasing research in relevant fields of 'ecological-oriented' translation studies and the development of related disciplines, which together have given birth to the emergence of eco-translatology. Translation is defined as 'the selective activities of the translator adapting to the translation eco-environment'. The 'translation eco-environment' refers to the 'world' presented by the source text, the source language and the target language, that is, the integrated whole where language, communication, culture, society as well as the author, the reader, the commissioner and others are interconnected and interact with each other. The basic theory of eco-translatology simplifies the translation methods into 'three-dimensional' transformations. That is, under the principle of 'multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection', it relatively focuses on the adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic dimension, the cultural dimension and the communicative dimension (Hu, 2011, p.5-9+95).

Eco-translatology takes in the ecological wisdom in traditional Chinese culture and constructs a new conceptual system of ecological discourse in translation studies. Eco-translatology builds a translation ecology based on the natural ecology and is a research paradigm that examines translation from an ecological perspective.

Translation is a matter of choice and adaptation. The best translation is the cumulative result of the translator's adaptive choices in the translation environment. Since subtitle translation involves the transformation between two languages and cultures, and its reception mode and audience are relatively special, subtitle translation requires that the language be concise and plain, the information be expressed fully and concisely, and attention should also be paid to making the translated language conform to the roles' identities, actions and expressions (Wang, 2024, p.46-49). In short, Cantonese opera subtitle translation should fully consider the ecological environment it is in, make the best adaptation and optimal choices among multiple factors, and finally achieve the best adaptive transformation in terms of language, culture and communication within the limited time and space, effectively providing the audience with the most relevant information.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study adopts various research methods such as literature research, field investigation, questionnaire survey, and meta-analysis. By reviewing a large number of documents, we aim to understand the challenges and opportunities of the dissemination of Foshan Cantonese opera in the context of globalization, as well as the current research progress in the academic field of Cantonese opera translation. Besides, this study conducts field investigations in places such as Foshan Cantonese Opera House and Cantonese Opera Art Museum. Moreover, a questionnaire is designed and distributed to collect public understanding of the current situation, challenges, and opportunities of Foshan Cantonese opera in overseas dissemination and exchange.

In the translation of Cantonese opera classics, translators need to practice and operate according to the translation theories and methods proposed above, so as to create a good translation that combines form and spirit as much as possible, presenting the meaning of the original text while conveying its essence.

By exploiting appropriate translation theories and methods, plus promoting Cantonese opera culture, utilizing new media for publicity and enhancing international cooperation and exchanges, the international influence of Cantonese opera will be enhanced to a higher level.

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#### About the Author

[1] Dong WANG (1969-04), male, Han, Born place: Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, Title: Lecturer, Master of English Language and Literature, Research Direction: British and American Literature; English language.

[2] Guangtao, CAO (1971-11), male, Han, Born place: Minquan County, Henan Province, Title: Professor, Doctor of Ancient Chinese Literature, Research Direction: British and American Literature; drama translation.

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