

# An Analysis on the English Translation of Cantonese Opera

Guangtao Cao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guangdong University of Education, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510303, China

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: caoguangtao@gdei.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

Cantonese opera is one of the most influential Chinese traditional operas in the overseas world. In response to the national development strategy of Chinese culture going global in the new era, it has been increasingly important to further promote the globalization and influence of Cantonese opera. Based on the analysis of the English translations of four Cantonese opera plays, Dai Luer Fa-Xiang Yao, Spanking the Princess, Tragedy in the Qing Palace, and Golden Chrysanthemum, this paper explores the translation art of Cantonese opera, aiming at optimizing Cantonese opera translation.

**Keywords:** *Cantonese opera translation, Cultural strategy, Intangible cultural heritage protection.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the new era, how to improve the translation quality and communication efficiency of Cantonese opera, so that Cantonese opera can be more complete in the spread of the world, and achieve the fundamental purpose of spreading the original artistic charm of Cantonese opera, is an urgent problem to be solved. With the continuous expansion of modern cultural exchanges, foreigners' understanding of Chinese traditional culture and Chinese traditional art gradually deepens, and this reduces the misunderstanding caused by cultural differences.

There are a few English translations of Cantonese opera, including Golden Leaf Chrysanthemum, Tragedy in the Qing Palace, Dai Luer Fa-Xiang Yao, Spanking the Princess. On May 19, 2012, the English version of Xiang Yao (TVB) was broadcast. This paper is to analyze these four Cantonese opera plays and their English translation.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF CANTONESE OPERA TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

There have been some English versions of Cantonese opera plays since the 20th century, and they have greatly enriched the understanding and

appreciation of this kind of theatre art. Besides the great contribution these efforts have made, the English translation versions see a lot of mistranslations and misunderstandings, and it is of great significance to analyse these problems in order to improve the translation quality.

### 2.1 The Original Understanding of Cantonese Opera Translation

Without a professional understanding of Cantonese opera culture, it is difficult for translators to translate Cantonese opera well. A translator cannot directly translate the play texts according to the literal meaning, but to restore the true meaning of the original text, otherwise it is easy to make mistranslation. For example, in the "鸳鸯侣, 相偎傍", "鸳鸯" represents a symbol of a loving couple. But in the TVB version, it was translated as "birds of love", which was difficult for foreigners to understand. But if it is translated as "loved couple", the famous image of mandarin duck, a symbol of love, is gone. In "地府阴司里再觅那平阳门巷", "平阳门巷", a metaphor for the ordinary family, implying that the Princess Changping did not want to live in the imperial family in the next life after death. But in the TVB version, the sentence is translated as "we shall consummate our marriage in the other world", expressing Princess Changping's desire to continue her marriage to her husband in the afterlife, but does not express a strong desire to

be an ordinary couple. "夫妻死去树也同模样" means that dead couples are next to each other, like two winding trees. However, in the TVB version it is translated as "after we have died, these trees will still look the same", which is a misunderstanding of the original text.

## **2.2 Translation of Culture-loaded Words in Cantonese Opera**

It is quite difficult to find a target word that corresponds with the original to replace the text of the original. Many Cantonese opera plays are based on historical stories, so the words related to Chinese historical stories are very common in Cantonese opera. These words are difficult to translate into English, because no English words can have the same source of story as these words. For example: in "将柳荫当做芙蓉帐", "芙蓉帐" is the difficult word of this sentence. "芙蓉帐" is made of hibiscus dyed silk accounts, but also refers to gorgeous bed accounts. It is not a mosquito net nor a "canopy" as it is translated in the TVB version. In "百花冠替代袪装", "百花冠" refers to the "凤冠", 凤冠 is mostly used in the weddings of ancient noble ladies. "凤冠" takes its name from its phoenix decorative elements. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, women used "彩冠", also known as "凤冠", which were mostly used for weddings. In the TVB version, "corolla" is translated as "floral crown", which lacks its true features used for weddings by Chinese noble brides. It may be more appropriate to translate the "百花冠" into "wedding crown", but the "wedding crown" does not fully show the characteristics of the 百花冠.

## **2.3 Translation of the Rhyme and Rhythm of Cantonese Opera**

When translating Cantonese opera, it is difficult for the translated lyrics to adapt to the rhyme rhythm of Cantonese opera. It is very difficult to maintain the characteristics of the original text while matching the rhythm. There are great differences in the expression of words between Chinese and English. For example, an English word can represent a Chinese phrase composed of two single Chinese characters, such as: "明亮" and "bright", "疼痛" and "pain", "长久" and "long". In Cantonese opera, the extended pronunciation is very common. However, when extending English words, especially those equal to or less than two syllables, the effect is not ideal and can sound very uncomfortable. In addition, some Chinese phrases can use two Chinese characters to express adjectives and nouns at the same time, such as "明珠

", "繁花" and "闹市". However, in English, they are expressed as "bright pearls", "various flowers", and "busy shopping centers". Obviously, these English lyrics are difficult to match with the rhythm of Cantonese opera, which makes it difficult for foreign audiences to appreciate the rhyme beauty of Cantonese opera.

## **2.4 Translators in Cantonese Opera Translation**

Only when translators are familiar with the love of Cantonese opera can they well translate and successfully spread the excellent Cantonese opera art and culture. Translators should improve their own translation level, and pay attention to the translation work. Literary translation is the most difficult of the translation. And opera translation, based on its literary and performance, is more difficult. How to translate the excellent language and culture related to opera, and how to make foreign audiences have the same viewing perspective as domestic audiences, all confused the translators. Therefore, the translator must have a solid English foundation, a very high literary and drama literacy and the appreciation and understanding ability of Cantonese opera.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF CANTONESE OPERA TRANSLATION EXAMPLES**

By a contrastive analysis of two different translation versions of the same play, a much clearer understanding of their translation quality can be obtained.

### **3.1 Understanding the Source Text**

The following are two English translation versions of the Cantonese Opera Dai Luer Fa-Xiang Yao, one of which is TVB version (hereinafter known as version 1) and the other English translation is online version (hereinafter referred to as version 2).

落花满天蔽月光. Version 1: falling petals hide the moon; Version 2: falling petals in the air obscure the moon.

愿丧生回谢爹娘. Version 2: In gratitude to my parents, I'll sacrifice my life.

佢带泪带泪暗悲伤. Version 2: He is tearful, tearfully grieving in secret.

与妻双双叩问帝安. Version 2: As husband and wife, we bow to show our respect for the deceased emperor.

合欢与君醉梦乡. Version 2: Happily, we get drunk in the land of dreams.

夫妻死去树也同模样. Version 1: After we have died these twin trees will still look the same.

"夫妻死去树也同模样" uses metaphorical rhetoric, implying that dead couples are next to each other, like two intertwined trees. However, in the translation of version 1, the lack of understanding, and did not restore the same scene as the original text.

地老天荒情凤永配痴凰. Version 1: Till this young world grows old, I will stay by you; Version 2: Till the earth grows old and the sky cease to exist, we would never part.

"凤凰", an auspicious bird in ancient Chinese legend, is often used as a metaphor for a loving couple. "情" and "痴" are used to deepen the feelings between couples. "情凤永配痴凰" means that a loving couple will always accompany each other.

怕驸马惜鸾凤配, 不甘殉爱伴我临泉壤. Version 1: And I fear he would so treasure our marriage that he won't come with me to the grave; Version 2: I'm worried that my prince values this royal wedding too much to give up his life and journey into the land of death with me".

谁个愿看花烛翻血浪. Version 1: Who would want a gory wedding night? Version 2: Who would want her wedding to end in death.

地府阴司里再觅那平阳门巷. Version 1: We shall consummate our marriage in the other world. Version 2: In the afterlife we build a bridal chamber. There we will be together.

"地府阴司" means the afterlife, and "平阳门巷" is a metaphor for ordinary families. This sentence expresses that princess Changping is not willing to regenerate in the imperial family, but hopes to be born in ordinary people's homes. Both translations simply show Princess Changping wanting to continue her marriage in the next life, without expressing her desire to be an ordinary couple.

### 3.2 Application of Compiling Translation Method

The following example is the English version of Cantonese opera play Spanking the Princess performed by The Children's Cantonese Opera

Association in Hong Kong. Its English lyrics are obviously different from the original Chinese lyrics of the play. In the translation, the English version is not a literal translation; it is an edited passage with concise and simple short sentences. For example: 我父寿辰不到堂前贺喜, 致令哥哥嫂嫂冷语相讥 What an insult at the banquet, 对对拜堂前, 偏我成孤寡 All went in pairs alone, I am alone, I went alone / 忿怒难平 I must show my anger / 且问她是何道理 Ask her why / 要她亲来迎接莫延迟 Come, follow me, see my wife. 你都算斗胆, 你将哀家红灯打破 How you dare to break the rule. / 帝女尊贵实无价, 今夜何堪遭责骂 How you dare to drive me mad. Such translated sentences are easy for the audience to understand.

### 3.3 The Loss Caused by Casual Translation

Golden Chrysanthemum translated in 1899 by William Stanton is an English version lacking accuracy. For example, there is a paragraph in the script about Lin's son Zhang Guifang: 相貌堂堂志气昂, 武启星象冲斗牛, 定知他日不寻常. Its English translation is: "A Kuei is bright-eyed and intelligent, and surely no mean person." "bright-eyed and intelligent" is far from enough to express the appearance, "no mean person" is also unable to express the concept of "他日不同寻常".

This version of English translation is not a full translation but an abridged translation or semi-translation. In the Chinese script, there is a dedicated chapter mentioning Lin Yuejiao selling her son:

"林姐接郎泪涔落, 低声吩咐子其葬, 仔你东家人使唤, 不比在家做主行, 谷泔话时你领命, 不好多声执主人, 孩儿听得多泪流, 不愿东家做仆人" In the translation, it only mentioned: "My son, while you're in the Chen's family, be diligent and good, then you'll do well."

The English version tries to use one short English sentence to summarize the content of the whole chapter. However, this chapter reflects Lin Yuejiao's helplessness in the departure with her son, composing the most moving plot of the play, depicting the separation of flesh and blood, and it is also a very sharp contradiction, so this part can not be omitted in translation, instead it should be highlighted.

The translation of Cantonese opera is not only the translation of the script, and it also includes the stage performance, action, tone, voice line and so on. From the perspective of stage effect, this translation is relatively popular and simple in

language. Though "Don't mention this, my friend", "Just so and come now and take some wine" has certain readability, it weakens the literary nature of Cantonese opera.

In the script of Golden Leaf Chrysanthemum, there is a paragraph in which Lin Yueyue makes a daughter deed. Each sentence is written according to the tone of Cantonese opera, with coherence and tone, while in the English translation, it is difficult to change the same functional words on the basis of the translation. The Chinese play script says: "为国夫母俱连亡, 愿将自己亲儿卖" and the corresponding translation is "My family is poor, my mother-in-law and husband had died, hence is the right. In order to obtain the funeral expenses, I sell to his honor Chen, my son, for twenty tales, as proof thereof." From this interpretation, it is difficult to express the unique tone of Cantonese opera in the English translation.

### 3.4 The Problem in Translating Rhythm

The beauty of Cantonese opera rhyme is very important in the promotion of Cantonese opera. How to express the rhyme and beauty of the original Cantonese opera after translation is still a difficult problem. In the TVB translation of Dai Luer Fa-Xiang Yao, the length of the lyrics is more suitable for the rhythm of the Cantonese opera queen than the online version, so the audience can enjoy the musical beauty of Cantonese opera in the English translation of TVB version. Although some English words are not ideal when extending their pronunciation, the length of their lyrics is more appropriate than that of online version when matching with the rhythm of Cantonese opera. The extended sounds of some English words in TVB version are as follows:

借一杯附荐风台上: upon the al--tar I place wine.

好应尽礼揖花烛深深拜: Let us bow deep--ly to the God of Love.

明朝驸马看新娘: Prin--cess of the Ming Dynasty.

碰杯共到夜台上: Let's drink to e--ternal night.

长伴有心郎: For--e--ver beside my love.

夫妻死去树也同模样: Af--ter we have died these twin trees will still look the same.

"我半带惶恐," he said, singing for seven seconds, but in the English translation, only 'I'm afraid was used.' Such a translation is lacking in accuracy, and it is difficult to achieve the original tone of Cantonese. How to match the translated lyrics with

the rhythm of Cantonese opera is still a difficult problem in the translation of Cantonese opera today. Compared with version 1, version 2 considers less about the language rhythm of Cantonese opera, so that version 1 is indeed slightly better and is worth learning from.

### 3.5 The Translation of Rhymes

English Cantonese opera Dai Luer Fa uses a large number of end rhymes.

落花满天蔽月光, 借一杯附荐风台上。帝女花带泪上香, 愿丧生回谢爹娘。我偷偷看, 偷偷望, 佢带泪带泪暗悲伤。我半带惊惶, 怕驸马惜鸾凤配, 不甘殉爱伴我临泉壤。 Since the day we say goodbye/ tears are swelling in my eyes/ I just can't sleep all the time/ thinking of you all the while/ why can't we try what you did/ you ever go, you made me so sad when I thought I'd have to go on without you by my side

寸心盼望能同合葬, 鸳鸯侣相偎傍, 泉台上再设新房, 地府阴司里再觅那平阳巷。 Oh no I am not a lucky guy/ though I know love is blind/ never thought that you don't wine/ truly I know it was so wrong of me go and lie.

In the above lyric translation, the vowel /ai/ is used as the end rhyme. Some other vowels are used in the following lyric translation:

帝主, 婚配非同儿戏, 我已经安排你心中满族丽儿。 Emperor, it's time for marriage as you are now eighteen. Choose fami--lies whom I have screened. ("Qing Palace")

公主尊荣欺驸马 Early down you frown at me / 宫院里怒容怒气高声乱骂 Late at night you shout at me / 堂上礼未许作罢, 你分明嚣张有心应该责骂 I am right, you are wrong, stand aside / 刁蛮不治恁齐家莫恃住公主尊荣欺驸马, 英风未许折, 辱才华, 纵有刀锋横颈架, 一样照打金枝断玉芽若然再敢犯家规, 我打打打 Stop your talk/ Stop your talk/ Stop fooling around/ Beware, beware.

我哋! 遭痛责奏父王将你拘拿, 我 我 我要撕碎龙凤八宝衣 Early down you wait on me/ Late at night you sing to me/ Now, you're mad, turn your head/ No more chance, you can't go back/Can't go back/ Down with your head / 你敢 You dare/ 你敢 You dare. Each sentence follows the same vowel /e/.

哀家是玉叶金枝女 I'm the princess in the court / 你是驸马, 我是你的主 You're my husband I'm your Lord / 莫恃有驸马尊荣, 便当此宫规虚假 Watch your manner you gonna stop / 敢触哀家怒, 天子如犯法, 一样要锁拿 Should anything happen. It's all your fault. (《醉打金枝》 Spanking the Princess).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Cantonese opera is an outstanding representative of Lingnan culture, and translation is the key to cross-cultural exchanges. However, there are many obstacles and problems in the translation of Cantonese opera, which leads to the low output of Cantonese opera translation. At present, the vast majority of Cantonese opera works still lack translation, and the existing translations have many imperfect places, such as misinterpretation, omission and mistranslation. Cantonese opera translation has always been difficult. The key is the lack of qualified theatre translators. Most translators are not familiar with the professional knowledge of Cantonese opera, cannot accurately understand the Cantonese opera lyrics and dialogue, and cannot correctly convey the original story, let alone the verve of Cantonese opera. Cantonese opera translation requires translators to have solid language skills, excellent translation skills, and be familiar with professional knowledge of Cantonese opera art. How to improve the quality of Cantonese opera translation is an urgent problem faced by Cantonese opera translation in the international communication. Therefore, efforts should be made to cultivate excellent translators and make contributions to promoting the excellent culture of Cantonese opera.

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