

The English Translation Studies of Yuan Zaju: History, Hotspots and Prospects

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Keywords: Yuan Zaju; Drama Translation; Cultural Communication

Abstract: Yuan Zaju is an outstanding traditional Chinese theatrical art and a comprehensive carrier demonstrating the connotation and charm of Chinese culture. The translation practice and related studies of Yuan Zaju at home and abroad began at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, featuring taking famous works as the entry point, centering on major sinologists, and becoming increasingly comprehensive in research. In recent years, with the prevalence of comparative literature, cross-cultural communication trends and the cultural turn in translation studies, comparative studies on the English translation of Yuan Zaju have gradually emerged, and studies on the performability of drama translations have increased. However, on the whole, the translation theory and norms for the English translation of Yuan Zaju have not been established, and the translation strategies and methods have not yet formed a system. Two difficult problems, namely the selection of Yuan Zaju editions and the processing of discourse language, pose challenges to the English translation of Yuan Zaju. The phenomena of omission, mistranslation, adaptation and reduction in existing translations need to be carefully examined and analyzed with new concepts. Classic plays need to be newly translated and retranslated in a timely manner to construct a new ecology for the English translation of Yuan Zaju.

1. Introduction

Carrying the functions of cultural symbols, media ties and national images, the "going global" of Chinese opera has achieved a transformation from spontaneity to consciousness.^[1] From the end of the 17th century to the 18th century, there was a "China fever" in Europe, and Yuan Zaju has since been spread to Europe. In 1698, the French missionary Joseph Premare first translated Yuan Zaju *The Orphan of Zhao* into French, and the script was published in full in "Description de la Chine" in France in 1735. In 1755, *L'Orphelin de la Chine* adapted by Voltaire of France was staged in Paris. In 1759, the Irish playwright Arthur Murphy brought the re-adapted *The Orphan of China* to the Anglo-American theater stage, and more English adaptations of *The Orphan of Zhao* also emerged. The translation practice and research of Yuan Zaju by both Chinese and foreign scholars have since begun and are in the ascendant.

2. The Translation and Introduction of Famous Works of Yuan Zaju

Based on a series of studies on the English translations of Yuan Zaju, the early studies mostly took famous works as the entry point.

The earliest Yuan Zaju that was introduced to Europe was *The Orphan of Zhao*. Based on the dissemination and translation versions of this play in Europe, domestic scholars proposed that "every process of accepting foreign works is a national re-creation activity carried out by the subject based on the cultural and psychological structure of the nation to the works, and it is also a process of endowing the works with new life and cultural meanings."^[2] Due to regional cultural differences, there will be national variations in artistic acceptance when this play is spread to the West.^[2] That is to say, when Europeans, as the subjects of artistic acceptance, translate and introduce completely different Eastern art, they inevitably have resistance and rejection. When they need to forcibly assimilate the accepted objects, there are disputes between negative deletion and modification and positive identification. At the same time, they also maintain a special sense of novelty, which is conducive to cultural dissemination.^[2] The dissemination process of this play in Europe during the Enlightenment period is a cross-cultural dialogue process through literature. This kind of dialogue and blending constitute a benign interaction and are the driving force for the development of culture itself, playing a positive role in cultural exchanges between China and the West.^[3] Some scholars discuss the strategies of reduction and modification adopted by foreign translators of *The Orphan of Zhao* from the principle of "performability" in drama translation.^[4] In addition to the use of translation text strategies, foreign translators achieve cultural adaptation through rewriting, and ultimately aim at the integration and sublimation of the source text and the target language culture, which is also a practical path for the westward spread of Chinese culture. "When Chinese texts enter the Western context, adaptation to Western aesthetic norms is an important condition for achieving the expected acceptance effect."^[5] Essentially, the wide dissemination of early classic opera plays in the West was mainly introduced as "ideas", and its dramatic essence was greatly ignored.^{[6][107]} "When drama translation is used as cultural utilization, there is no real drama translation. What Joseph Premare translated was only the plot framework and could not reflect the 'wonderful combination of songs and dialogues'."^[6] Strictly speaking, the early translation and introduction of opera by the West cannot be regarded as "drama translation" because it is divorced from text translation and language transmission. Similarly, the cross-genre adaptations of classic Yuan Zaju plays in Europe and America also belong to cultural translation and introduction. In 2021, the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*, adapted by the British scholar James Fenton and directed by Xu Jun, was staged.^[7] This kind of adaptation fully utilizes the Confucian ideas of morality, benevolence and righteousness, conforms to the social reality of Europe, and thereby promotes Enlightenment thoughts and modern humanistic care. It is an in-depth exchange and "dialogue" between Chinese and Western drama literature.^[8]

The dissemination of Yuan Zaju *Romance of the Western Chamber* in Europe was a bit later. The French sinologist Rainier Lanselle pointed out the reason in an interview: "When Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the 18th century, they focused their attention on the novels and drama works that reflected the moral conduct and philosophical thoughts of the Chinese. Obviously, *Romance of the Western Chamber*, this morally 'forbidden book', was not taken into consideration."^[9] It was not until the 19th century when the French academic sinologist represented by Stanislas Julien began to comprehensively examine Chinese literature^[9] that the classic value of *Romance of the Western Chamber* was recognized. Li Anguang conducted a systematic study on the translation and introduction of this play abroad. The translation and introduction of this play roughly went through the process from the introduction of literary history to abridged translations and full translations, achieving a return from emphasizing stage performances to "novelization" adaptations and then to being faithful to the original.^[10] The Chinese playwright and translator S. I. Hsiung translated this

play in 1935, making it the first English translation. Its stage performance version was staged at the Royal Theatre in the UK. In 1936, the English full translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber* by the American sinologist Henry H. Hart was published. In 1972, the full translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber* by the American translator Henry W. Wells made many adjustments and adaptations to the translation, presentation and segmentation of the songs, but the overall plot and structure of the play were consistent with Hart's translation.^[11] With the release of various English translations of *Romance of the Western Chamber*, researchers have made a large number of reviews and comparisons of each version based on different perspectives and methods (such as corpora). In 1991, the American sinologist Stephen H. West, who was deeply engaged in ancient Chinese opera, and the Dutch sinologist Wilt L. Idema collaborated to complete the full translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber*, which is considered "the best translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber* in the current English world".^[12] However, due to the fact that Chinese and foreign translators translated based on different source texts, there is a problem of version mismatch when researchers comment on the quality and cultural value of the translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber*.^[13] Stephen H. West himself also mentioned the translation difficulties brought by the choice of the source text.^[14] First, the relationship between narration and theme expression in different versions is different. Therefore, the translations of different versions actually convey completely different Chinese cultural values to Western readers. Second, the levels and registers of the language of opera, the style of lines, the common sayings, dialects, market language, abusive words and taboo words contained have a strong function of shaping characters, posing challenges in context and language structure for translation.^[15] Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema's joint translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber* comprehensively uses a variety of translation strategies. Among them, the in-depth translation strategies in both within-text and outside-text dimensions, in the forms of interlinear notes, footnotes, illustrations and introductions, have functions such as making the implicit explicit, laying a deep foundation, depicting culture and literary rendering, and restoring the original style of Yuan Zaju to the greatest extent.^[16] In 1992, Xu Yuanchong published the English translation of *Romance of the Western Chamber*, and this translation also aroused the interest of a large number of researchers. In 2002, Lu Lichun studied the literariness of Xu's translation from the perspective of the interpersonal function theory of systemic functional linguistics, analyzing its phonology, rhetoric and intertextuality. How to eliminate cultural barriers by reducing historical and cultural allusions while retaining the original literary characteristics, rich original rhythm patterns and rhetorical devices, and make the English translation easier for Western readers to understand and accept?^[17]

Adolf E. Zucker's abridged translation of the third act of Yuan Zaju *Snow in Midsummer* was published in 1935, taking the first step in the translation of this play. In 1958, Yang Xianyi and Gladys B. Tayler's *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing* included the full translation of this play.^[18] In 1972, the American scholar Shih Chung-wen published her own full translation of this play.^[18] In 2010, Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West jointly published the English translation of this play. Choosing which source text is a problem that most translators such as Stephen H. West encounter at the beginning of the translation work. For example, the revised version of *Romance of the Western Chamber* by Jin Shengtan is a very classic literary text, but its rewriting of the original text, such as the weakening of certain vulgar parts, will have an impact on later translations.^[15] When it comes to the English translation of Yuan Zaju, Stephen H. West still focuses on the version and language. Drama is not only a literary text, but it "has a collective communication with other forms of popular literature"^[15], and it is an art form that can reflect the social style and humanistic spirit at that time, and the colloquial and popular nature of the dramatic language should be retained.

In 1829, John F. Davis, the British sinologist who was the second governor of Hong Kong China and the British ambassador to China, translated Yuan Zaju *Autumn in the Han Palace* into English, accompanied by illustrations and annotations.^[12] In 1935, Harold Acton of the UK selected and

translated this play and discussed the role of "inserted words" in Yuan dramas.^[12] In 2010, the English translation of this play was also included in the translation by Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West. Davis's English translation purposefully deleted a large number of beautiful singing lines in the play, retaining only a small part to string together the entire play.^[19] Such deletions and modifications in the English translation of Yuan Zaju make the translation more in line with the structure of Western drama, but it loses the beauty of the pictures brought by allusions and images, and cannot fully display the unique connotation of Chinese culture. In the academic circle, studies criticizing the limitations of drama translation based on the differences in Chinese and Western dramatic thinking and translation strategies have also emerged one after another. Yuan Zaju *The Old Man's Son* was translated into English by Davis in 1817 and caused widespread repercussions in the Western world. This play was the first Yuan Zaju directly translated from the original Chinese classic into English and also the first Chinese comedy translation in Europe.^[20] Its English translation was influenced by political factors such as Sino-British relations and undertook a certain function of "drama diplomacy".^[21] Davis was critical of Joseph Premare's practice of not translating the songs. Therefore, he basically translated the elements such as symbols, metaphors, historical allusions, songs and "Poem Clouds" in the play, added a large number of annotations, and translated the lyrical songs to show the charm of Chinese culture.^[20] This approach can provide a possible path for the translation and overseas dissemination of Chinese drama, but it has the drawback of easily ignoring the entertainment function of this play as popular literature.^[20]

Yang Xianyi and Gladys B. Tayler's *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing* included the full translation of Yuan Zaju *The Solitary Dagger Meeting*. Later, there were two English translations by Gordon V. Ross in 1976 and Wilt L. Idema and Stephen H. West in 2012. Some scholars examined the translation studies and the quality assessment model of opera translation from the perspective of metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics, and evaluated the deviation phenomenon in the translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys B. Tayler from the three metafunctions of conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning.^[22] The choice of the source text for Yang and Gladys B. Tayler's translation lacks mutual collation with other versions, and cultural carrier words such as dialects, numbers and address terms also increase the difficulty of accurate translation of this play.^[22] The above problems echo the two major translation problems of version and language repeatedly mentioned by Stephen H. West.

These studies on the English translation of Yuan Zaju take famous works as the entry point. By studying the English translation cases of a certain play, analyzing translation strategies, evaluating translation quality, and exploring the overall characteristics of the translation of Chinese drama to foreign countries, they provide experience for the "going global" of Chinese drama.

3. Major Sinologists and Their Translation Practices of Yuan Zaju

There is another common research mode in the academic circle. Studies centering on major sinologists and analyzing their translation methods and achievements are also quite common. Sinologists such as Stephen H. West, Wilt L. Idema, John F. Davis, and William Dolby have received relatively high attention.

Since the beginning of the translation of Chinese opera, the translation practices and research results of Yuan Zaju at home and abroad have been abundant. Some scholars have summarized and compared the research types of domestic and foreign scholars. Centering on major sinologists, they have reviewed the translation practices and research of Western sinologists over the past three centuries and summarized three staged characteristics: textual distortion, cultural presentation, and stage reproduction.^[23]

Some scholars have summarized and commented on the research of Stephen H. West, the

American sinologist J. I. Crump, the British sinologist William Dolby, the American sinologist Dale R. Johnson, etc., and explored the overall characteristics of Yuan Zaju research in the English-speaking world: attaching importance to the study of the language form of Yuan Zaju; attaching importance to the study of social issues (such as legal justice phenomena) in Yuan Zaju; comparative studies have become a commonly used method; paying attention to the study of gender and love subjects; paying attention to the study of Yuan Zaju writers and character images in works; some studies involve folk customs and other arts; studies related to the performance characteristics of Yuan Zaju are of great value and significance.^[24]

Some scholars have compared the research on *Romance of the Western Chamber* at home and abroad and found that Chinese and foreign scholars are different in terms of research scope, content, methods, interests, and perspectives, and even have obvious gaps in fundamental, extensive and deep academic purposes. However, they believe that this is a positive phenomenon. Western scholars' "small entry and deep exploration" of existing resources can lead to refreshing research conclusions and enrich the inherent aesthetic and cultural implications of Yuan Zaju.^[12]

Stephen H. West explored the origin, translation and textual evolution of Yuan Zaju from the perspective of "the other"; in terms of translation, he followed the principles of accuracy and readability and paid attention to the reading experience of readers. His research results have provided new research perspectives and methods for the study and translation of Yuan Zaju at home and abroad, and have played a leading role in the study of Yuan Zaju in Western sinology.

Wilt L. Idema's emphasis on versions runs through his opera research. By comparing different versions, he observed the evolution and rewriting of Yuan Zaju. In the translation process, he always adhered to the concept of being loyal to the original good edition. His method of combining cross-literary research and translation also provides a research idea worth learning for scholars at home and abroad. William Dolby combined the concept of "dramatic consciousness" to analyze the reasons for the emergence of Yuan Zaju and its influence on the development of Chinese drama. John F. Davis used translation methods such as literal translation, transliteration, domestication, and annotation to convey Chinese culture, opening up a documentary channel for the West to understand Chinese classical drama. However, some scholars believe that he had a poor understanding of traditional Chinese opera concepts such as "xie zi" and "zhe", and made significant deletions and modifications to contents such as palace tunes, song titles, lyrics, and role types. His translation was greatly influenced by the historical context, reducing the charm of the original play.

The English translation of *Liu Yi Delivers a Letter* by the British sinologist David Hawkes has also attracted the attention of researchers. Some scholars have conducted a "manipulative" analysis of Hawkes' translation behaviors such as text selection, translation strategies, rewritten translations, and publication and distribution. Under the manipulation of social ideology and mainstream poetics, Hawkes' translation of this play adapted to the characteristics of the times, making the rewritten works more acceptable to more readers.

The translation processes and achievements of early sinologists, as well as their translation strategies and techniques, have brought inspiration and positive influence to the dissemination of Chinese drama. At the same time, there are varying degrees of misreading, misinterpretation and mistranslation in language, culture or aesthetics in these English translations. This is an inevitable phenomenon in the mutual understanding between Chinese and Western cultures and provides valuable practical experience for the subsequent re-translation of Yuan Zaju.

4. Research Hotspots and Prospects of the English Translation of Yuan Zaju

Scholars view the staged characteristics of the Western understanding and translation of Yuan Zaju in specific periods. Linda Liao sorted out the discovery, comparison and measurement of Yuan Zaju

by the West in the 18th and 19th centuries from the four dimensions of "domestication cognition", "cognitive leap", "drama studies / form exploration" and "sociology / concept exploration", observing the misjudgments and anachronistic connections caused by their understanding of Chinese opera from Yuan Zaju, providing lessons for understanding the variability of cross-cultural dissemination of drama.^[25] Li Yuhui started from the initial prosperous period (1940-1990) of the study of Yuan Zaju in the American academic circle, observing the cultural interpretation methods of the study of Yuan Zaju in the American sinology circle and analyzing the cultural misreading in the cross-cultural research of American scholars.^[26]

In terms of the translation studies of Chinese drama in the English-speaking world, Tan Jing and Cheng Yun introduced in detail the existing English translation texts of Yuan Zaju and research literature on English translation, and conducted verification and updates. Among them, two catalogs mainly recording the English translations of Yuan Zaju were mentioned, namely "A Catalogue of English Translations of Chinese Drama since 1741" by Du Wenwei^[27] and "Chronological Table of the Dissemination and Research of Yuan Zaju in the English World" by Li Anguang.^[12] Cao Guangtao's "Research and Translation of Traditional Chinese Drama in the English World", Wang Lina's "Famous Classical Novels and Opera Works of China Abroad", Ma Zuyi and Ren Rongzhen's "History of the Translation of Chinese Classics Abroad", and Meng Weigen's "History of the Translation of Chinese Drama Abroad" sorted out and analyzed the translation and research of Chinese opera overseas from different perspectives, enriching the domestic understanding of the translation research of Chinese opera overseas.^[23] In terms of the translation history of Chinese opera overseas, there are few studies by foreign scholars. *The History of the English Translation of Chinese Drama* by the American sinologist Cyril Birch can be used as a reference.^[23]

The translation and dissemination of opera abroad have always received attention from researchers. The top priority is to establish a normative system for the English translation of drama, with theoretical research taking the lead to guide translation practice; based on a large number of case studies, summarize the strategies and techniques of drama translation; master the evaluation methods of the quality of English translation and view the existing translations with dialectical thinking. Among the drama translation studies published in recent years, there are two hotspots worthy of attention. First is the debate about the "performability" of drama translations. Drama scripts are ultimately a literary genre. Should the translation of classic plays adhere to the principle of "fidelity" and be as faithful to the original as possible? Or, is the focus of the script on being performed on stage and appreciated by the audience? The translation should consider factors such as the action of stage performance, cultural differences in the target language, and market acceptance, and make substantial adaptations to the language and style of the original text? Cao Guangtao believes that "what belongs to the translator should be left to the translator, and what belongs to the director should be returned to the director". Translators should base themselves on the national characteristics of opera and attach importance to the accurate understanding of the essential concepts of opera, scripts and drama translation.^[28]¹²⁶ Liu Lisheng compared the stage English translations of *Romance of the Western Chamber* by Shen Guangren and S. I. Hsiung, analyzed from the two dimensions of the colloquial strategy of lines in drama translation and the singability and action of lines, and advocated that opera translations should comprehensively use multimodal performability strategies and affirmed its promoting effect on the dissemination of Chinese opera.

Secondly, comparative studies are still feasible. As early as the last century, some foreign scholars compared Yuan Zaju with British Elizabethan dramas (such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) and British domestic dramas in terms of structure, characteristics and imagery. For more than two decades, the voice of comparative literature has not subsided, and the demand for cross-cultural exchanges has continued to rise. In 2020, Hu Jiansheng's *Interpretation of the Narrative Art of Yuan Zaju and Ancient Greek Drama* compared Yuan Zaju with ancient Greek drama in terms of drama structure, narrative

techniques, singing and performing forms, etc., providing a research basis and reference experience for the translation and dissemination of Yuan Zaju.

It has been more than three hundred years since Yuan Zaju first arrived in Europe. Domestic and foreign sinologists, translators, and literary and cultural researchers have jointly steered the course for Chinese drama to go global in the cause of the English translation of drama, fully loaded with the charm of Eastern culture and sailing to distant Europe. Due to the language and cultural barriers between the target language and the source language, and due to the differences and limitations of the translation concepts held by different translators at different times, at home and abroad, deviations such as misinterpretation, mistranslation and omission in terms of concepts, interpersonal relationships and text occur from time to time in the English translation texts of Yuan Zaju. Therefore, it is very important for translators and researchers to investigate the background of the text, compare various versions, and verify and update the existing translations. How to balance the classic inheritance of Yuan Zaju and the rewriting for external publicity, while retaining and faithfully presenting the cultural connotation of the text, and how to combine the needs of the multiple practical functions of different drama translation materials, and timely organize and carry out new translations and retranslations of classic plays with new translation concepts to further promote telling Chinese stories and spreading Chinese voices still need in-depth research and discussion.

5. Conclusion

The translation practice and related studies of Yuan Zaju have seen a rapid development in the recent years. However, a new translation norm including the translation strategies and methods for the English translation of Yuan Zaju has not been scientifically established. Problems in the selection of Yuan Zaju editions, the processing of discourse language, the existing situation of improper omission, mistakes, adaptation and reduction in translations, need to be carefully reexamined with new translation notions in the new era so as to construct a healthy ecology for the English translation of Yuan Zaju.

The translation practice and research of Yuan zaju is a systematic project. It needs to proceed from the perspective of constructing a new ecological system for the translation of Yuan zaju classics and the original mission of telling Chinese stories well and spreading the Chinese voice, with the joint participation of opera researchers, translation researchers, opera translators, the academic community of colleges and universities, and publishing entities. It is believed that fruitful results will surely be achieved in the near future.

Acknowledgments

This is one of the findings of the 2023 Guangdong social science project “Research on the English Translation of Yuan Zaju—Taking the English Translation of Guan Hanqing's Zaju as an Example” (GD23XWW01).

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