

Original Paper

Translation Strategies for Huangmei Opera Aria English Versions Based on the Theory of Functional Equivalence: An Analysis of Huangmei Opera Translations

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Abstract

As one of the five major Chinese operas and an important vehicle for cross-cultural communication, Huangmei Opera integrates language, singing, music, performance, and set design, reflecting the traditional cultural characteristics of China and its regions. With its unique singing style, beautiful lyrics, and strong local cultural expressiveness, Huangmei Opera is deeply loved by the public. However, due to cultural differences between China and other countries, it is difficult for English translations of the lyrics to reflect local characteristics and retain the original flavor. Guided by cultural translation theory and taking wonderful singing segments from Huangmei Opera as examples, this paper mainly explores the English translation strategies of Huangmei Opera, specifically analyzing the application of translation techniques such as addition, transposition, omission, and domestication in the singing segments to achieve equivalent functions at the cultural level. This provides a new perspective for the translation of drama and promotes the dissemination and exchange of Chinese opera culture.

Keywords

Huangmei Opera lyrics, translation methods, cultural differences, investigation of translation status

1. Introduction

1.1 The Cultural Characteristics of Huangmei Opera

Huangmei Opera, as a brilliant pearl in the treasure trove of Chinese traditional culture, ranks among the five major Chinese opera genres. Throughout its long history, Huangmei Opera has always

maintained its roots in local culture, continuously inheriting and innovating, and demonstrating a strong and enduring vitality. In today's era of diverse cultural integration, Huangmei Opera, with its unique singing style, beautiful lyrics, and strong local cultural characteristics, exudes a captivating charm and is deeply loved by the general public. Under the context of "telling Chinese stories well," Huangmei Opera shoulders the mission of inheriting local culture, vividly narrating stories of traditional Chinese culture through this unique art form of opera, and becoming an important link in promoting excellent Chinese culture to the world stage. On January 14, 2016, the classic Huangmei Opera "The Fairy Couple" made a splendid appearance at the opening ceremony of the "China Tourism Year" event in New Delhi, winning warm applause and high praise from the local audience and achieving good cultural dissemination effects. However, how to make Huangmei Opera shine on the international stage and become an effective way to spread Chinese opera art and promote Chinese culture is an important issue that we urgently need to solve.

1.2 The Significant Importance and Challenges of Translating Huangmei Opera into English

As a gem of traditional Chinese opera, Huangmei Opera presents a unique artistic form across three dimensions: vocal melody, textual expression, and stage presentation. Its cross-cultural dissemination faces multiple challenges. During the process of cultural translation, translators must fulfill a dual mission: to accurately convey the cultural imagery and philosophical connotations in the opera text while deeply considering the aesthetic expectations and cognitive frameworks of the target language audience, achieving cultural resonance through creative artistic expression. High-quality English translations of excellent Huangmei Opera productions provide the possibility for the global dissemination of Huangmei Opera and open a window for overseas audiences to understand its artistic charm and cultural connotations. However, currently, there are only about 96 Huangmei Opera pieces that can be sung overseas (all included in Zhu Zhongyan's bilingual edition of Classic Segments of Huangmei Opera). The representative work *The Fairy Couple* has only eight highlights translated, while there are thousands of singing segments in Huangmei Opera. The translated works are just the "tip of the iceberg." Even the classic play *The Fairy Couple* is not fully translated. The translation volume of other Huangmei Opera plays is even more seriously insufficient. This issue deserves our high attention.

2. The Theory of Functional Equivalence

The Theory of Functional Equivalence was proposed by the renowned scholar Eugene Nida. In his theory, he advocates breaking away from the traditional focus on form in translation in order to build a smooth bridge for cross-cultural communication and to achieve more effective communication. The theory emphasizes "the closest natural equivalent," meaning that the aesthetic experience of the target language audience when reading the translation should closely reflect the aesthetic perception of the source language audience when reading the original text. The theory pays more attention to the equivalence of the readers' feelings and understanding triggered by the information conveyed, rather

than merely focusing on the correspondence of linguistic forms. This provides a brand-new perspective for translation studies.

In literary translation, the Theory of Functional Equivalence requires translators to achieve equivalence not only at the linguistic level but also in style and tone. For the translation of Huangmei Opera into English, this means that when dealing with the unique elements of Huangmei Opera, such as lyrics, vocal styles, and cultural connotations, translators should strive to evoke similar emotions and understanding in foreign readers as the original text does in Chinese readers. For example, vivid and lively descriptions in the original Huangmei Opera script that convey specific emotions or cultural meanings should be translated in a way that elicits equivalent perceptions and reactions from English readers. By ensuring that the translation creates a similar aesthetic experience for foreign readers, it helps to preserve the artistic essence of Huangmei Opera in cross-cultural communication. For instance, when translating lyrics closely related to the unique vocal rhythm of the opera, translators can skillfully adjust sentence structure and word choice based on this theory to give the English version a certain sense of rhythm and musical beauty.

3. Case Analysis: From the Perspective of the Theory of Functional Equivalence

The Theory of Functional Equivalence emphasizes that the core goal of translation is to make the feelings of foreign readers after reading the translation as close as possible to those of Chinese audiences watching the original Huangmei Opera. It's like converting a Chinese dish's recipe into a foreign kitchen - understandable one. It should preserve the original flavor while using familiar ingredients and steps. This theory also pays special attention to how the translation accurately conveys the original text's intentions, emotions, style, and cultural connotations in the target culture and context, rather than just pursuing literal correspondence. So, translation shouldn't be limited to literal translation. Instead, it should achieve equivalence on a broader level, including language, culture, communication, and aesthetics.

3.1 Equivalence in Information Conveyance

The script and performance of Huangmei Opera contain a wealth of cultural information and unique local characteristics. When translating into English, the translator must ensure that this information is accurately and completely conveyed to the target audience, thereby achieving the goal of allowing them to gain a deep understanding of the cultural connotations of Huangmei Opera. For example, information such as the historical background, customs, and character relationships involved in the play must be properly retained so that foreign audiences can better understand the plot development and character relationships. Take the Huangmei Opera "The Fairy Couple" as an example. The play is imbued with strong elements of traditional Chinese mythological stories, in which the Jade Emperor is the father of the Seventh Fairy. In contrast, in the Western mythological system, God is the savior, and humans are born with original sin. During the translation process, it is necessary to build a bridge for cultural understanding: not only must the narrative tension and mythological archetypes of the original

lyrics be faithfully presented, but also emotional resonance points must be recreated in a cross-cultural context. For instance, the line “I fear that I will drag Donglang into suffering and death” can be translated as “my Father would make you suffer and kill you.” Here, “my Father” refers to the Jade Emperor, and the capitalization of the first letter of “Father” echoes the word “God” in Western culture. In Western culture, “God” governs both heaven and earth and has the power to redeem everything. The use of “Father” and “God” here achieves a similar effect, realizing the equivalence in information conveyance between the source and target languages.

3.2 Aesthetic Equivalence

Huangmei Opera attracts a large number of audiences not only because of its exciting plot but also because of its unique music, vocal style, and performance form, which have a charming artistic appeal. In the process of English translation, the translator should try to retain these artistic characteristics so that readers or audiences of the translation can feel the aesthetic value of the original work. This requires careful description of the lyrics' rhyme, rhythm, and changes in emotional state to ensure that the translation can reproduce the artistic charm of the original work. For example, the minor plays in Huangmei Opera often contain many filler words and padding words, such as “Xinlang er suo, liulang er suo, xin suo liu suo liu lang er suo yang er suo.” Although these filler words have no actual meaning, they are melodious and are an important part of the characteristics of Huangmei Opera, which should not be ignored in translation. However, in the process of translating Huangmei Opera into English, the emotional transmission of these culturally specific filler words faces translation barriers. To achieve accurate cultural connotation transmission, the translator should follow the dual principles: on the one hand, to implant the source language cultural genes through context reconstruction and retain the artistic characteristics of the opera genre; on the other hand, to adopt adaptive strategies to build a cultural cognition bridge in the target language expression and balance the relationship between cultural fidelity and audience acceptance. In cross-cultural drama translation practice, Huangmei Opera can refer to the phonetic translation method of the chorus “every sha la la” in “Yesterday Once More” to phonetically transcribe the characteristic filler words. This cross-cultural transplantation strategy, by retaining the original phonetic characteristics, can not only maintain the folk music texture of opera singing but also form a unique cultural symbol in the international communication field for “Chinese voice,” achieving a dual effect of artistic authenticity and effective communication. In the practice of opera vocal translation, the filler word system of “Water Drawing Tune (III)” in “Lanqiao Water Drawing” can be cross-culturally transformed through a phonetic counterpoint mechanism. For example, “In a hurry (yi zi ya yi yo)” is translated as “In a hurry I (yi zi ya yi yo),” strictly following the original text's “4+3” syllable structure (four syllables for the main word and three syllables for the filler word), constructing a cross-linguistic rhythmic structure. This phonology-oriented translation strategy not only ensures the melodic compatibility of the vocal through phonetic mirroring but also transforms the patterned filler words such as “ya yi yo” into recognizable cultural phonetic symbols, achieving the performance integrity and aesthetic self-consistency of the opera music text in the target language

system.

3.3 Dynamic Equivalence

Starting from the principle of dynamic equivalence, the English translation of Huangmei Opera needs to take into account a variety of factors such as culture, emotion, context, style, and communicative effect to ensure that the translation achieves a similar function and effect in the target language as the original text. In the intersemiotic translation of cross-cultural opera, the typological differences between Chinese and English in terms of meaning combination and form combination constitute the core challenge. Chinese expressions value coherence of meaning (for example, relying on natural connections in context), while English emphasizes rigorous structure (for example, the use of conjunctions to clarify logic). Behind this difference lies the different ways of thinking in the East and the West. If we translate opera literally, it is easy to confuse foreign audiences and even lead to misunderstandings. For example, in "The Fairy Couple," there is a lyric: "The bell urges all the elder sisters to return to the palace, but I, the Seventh Fairy, have no heart to go back to the palace. I turn around to take a closer look at Dong Yong, and he is still lingering in front of the cold kiln." Mr. Zhu Zhongyan's translation is: "On hearing the bell we know it is time to go home, but I feel so reluctant to go back to the Palace home. Dong Yong is still wandering in front of the cold kiln, when I turn round to fix my eyes on him time and again." The translator, Mr. Zhu Zhongyan, translates "无心" as "feel so reluctant to", which, although not a literal translation, accurately captures the Seventh Fairy's contradictory psychology when facing the bell - "reluctant" (unwilling) implies anxiety and hesitation, and by emphasizing the predicate verb, it highlights the emotional core of the character. Compared with the literal translation "absent-minded" (无心), this translation is more in line with the logic of English expression: English takes the predicate as the core of information, "feel so reluctant to" directly conveys the Seventh Fairy's emotional focus on refusing to return to the palace, while downplaying the description of the action "go back" (回), allowing the audience to instantly grasp the character's psychological conflict. This kind of translation strategy oriented by functional equivalence not only retains the dramatic tension of the original sentence's "antithetical expression of emotion" but also achieves similar emotional resonance among cross-cultural audiences, confirming the artistic transformation law of "different forms but the same spirit" in opera translation.

4. Strategies and Methods for Translating Huangmei Opera into English

There is a "rhythm code" in the translation of Huangmei Opera: for example, if the original text has 10 characters, it is best to keep the English translation within 12 to 15 syllables. If one were to force a 20-syllable English sentence into the melody of 10 characters, it would be like putting a motorcycle engine on a bicycle—the tune would go off-key, the actors would be out of breath while singing, and the audience would not be able to appreciate the original "slow swing" flavor. Translation should be like a tailor altering clothes: replace long words with shorter ones ("magnificent" to "grand"), and break up awkward combinations into more fluent ones ("unexpectedly" to "out of the blue"). Only in this way

can the English lyrics be made to fit seamlessly with the Chinese melody.

4.1 Translation Methods of Part-of-Speech Conversion and Changing Word Order

Part-of-speech conversion and changing word order are commonly used methods in the translation of Huangmei Opera lyrics. Example 1: "转身我再把董永仔细看, 他还在寒窑前徘徊留恋" is translated by Mr. Zhu Zhongyan as "Dong Yong is still wandering in front of the cold kiln, when I turn round to fix my eyes on him time and again." This translation employs a change in word order, also known as the shot recombination method (changing word order). The original Chinese version's "shots" are: "Close-up of the Seventh Fairy turning her head to look at Dong Yong → Wide shot showing Dong Yong wandering in front of the cold kiln." In Mr. Zhu's translation, it becomes: "First, a long shot of Dong Yong circling in front of the cold kiln → Then a close-up of the Seventh Fairy turning her head repeatedly." (This allows English-speaking audiences to first see "what is happening" and then understand "who is observing," which aligns with the Western straightforward narrative habit.) Example 2: In the "Love Song" from "Chunxiang Zhuan," the lyric "打一更当当叮" is translated as "At the first stroke it clangs." This demonstrates part-of-speech transformation (changing word classes), where the verb becomes a noun. The Chinese "打更" (striking the bell) is an action scene (clang, clang, clang), while the English becomes "stroke" (a noun that captures the image), saving syllables and paying attention to the artistic conception. Another example is from "The Fairy Couple": "董郎欢喜我也欢喜, 谁人不夸我好夫妻" is translated as "We shall be the happiest parents, admired by all people around us." The Chinese "欢喜" (happy) is a dynamic expression, while the English is upgraded to "the happiest," directly maximizing the sense of happiness. The Chinese "夸" (praise) is an active thumbs-up, while the English is turned into the passive "be admired" (automatically receiving praise), which is more in line with the Western habit of subtly showing affection. The translation also reflects the law of rhythm conservation: the 7-character Chinese sentence "董郎欢喜我也欢喜" becomes the 7-syllable English "happiest parents" (hap-pi-est pa-rents), ensuring that the translated English lyrics fit seamlessly with the original melody, so that the actors do not have to hit high notes and the audience does not feel tongue-tied.

4.2 Domesticating Translation Strategy

Translation is like building a bridge between different languages, but each bridge is made of different materials—Chinese uses "artistic conception bricks" (such as "melancholy"), while English uses "logical steel" (such as "melancholy"). Some unique "cultural crystals" in Chinese (like the "water sleeves" in opera that symbolize something) don't have a perfect refractive surface in the English-speaking world. At such times, the translator should act as a "cultural jeweler": polishing the crystal into a gem shape that the target language can understand, preserving its original luster while making it understandable to new audiences. For example, the Chinese "dragon" is an auspicious totem (equivalent to the Western unicorn), but a direct translation into "dragon" would lead Western audiences to automatically associate it with a fire-breathing monster (similar to the misunderstanding caused by translating "Batman" into "bat"). In this case, the translator should act as a "linguistic

guide"—rewriting the Eastern dragon as "Phoenix Dragon" and adding cultural annotations. This not only preserves the sense of mystery but also helps foreign audiences avoid cultural pitfalls, much like attaching a smart label to an antique porcelain piece to ensure its beauty is correctly decoded. Therefore, during the translation process, translators need to fully consider the cultural factors of the target language audience, adopt domesticating methods, and align with the target language audience's way of thinking to help them better understand the original text, thereby promoting Chinese culture overseas.

4.3 Amplification Translating

Huangmei Opera is like performing a cultural grafting surgery—taking the branches of Chinese opera and grafting them onto the trunk of the English-speaking world, then using amplification as the nutrient solution to help them thrive. This involves adding annotations (labeling cultural symbols), finding substitutes (using Western symbols as stand-ins), and expanding context (providing historical background music for actions). Example 1: From "Pigweed Gathering"• Original: "小女子本姓陶，天天打猪草"• Literal Translation: "I'm Miss Tao, collecting pigweed every day"• Amplified Translation: "This Tao maiden (a rural girl's humble self-identification), gathers wild herbs (a survival chore in 19th-century China) from sunrise to sunset "The amplified translation adds the historical context of "打猪草" (collecting pigweed), which was a common rural labor task in 19th-century China, and specifies the time span to emphasize the hard work involved. Example 2: "娇儿生下地，两眼笑咪咪" is translated as "To see the baby at birth, smiling up at us both." In this translation, the verb "see" is added to correspond with "两眼" (eyes) in the following phrase, and the object "us" is added to make the sentence structure more balanced and in line with the important feature of English's preference for formal coherence.

4.4 Omission

Omission is a key translation strategy in translating Huangmei Opera lyrics. It makes the translation more concise and clear, and better fits the singing rhythm and the expression habits of the target language. Example 1: Trimming Repetitive Parts• Original: "You become the Wanshou Bell of Chang'an Bell Tower" (10 characters)• Literal Translation: You become the Wanshou Bell of Chang'an Bell Tower• Omitted Version: You become the Wanshou Bell of Chang'an (9 syllables)By omitting "Bell Tower," the sentence changes from a "bulky long sentence" to a "tight short sentence," perfectly matching the rhythm of the original song. Example 2: Removing Emotional Flab• Original: "No matter how many heavenly rules tear us apart, my heart will always be with yours, no matter in heaven or on earth!"• Literal Translation: Though you tear us apart with layers of heavenly rules, we'll stay connected between heaven and earth!• Condensed Version: Though heaven's torn us apart, we will always be one in heart! The phrase "layers of heavenly rules" is shortened to "heaven's torn us apart" (the verb "torn" already conveys a sense of tearing apart, so there's no need for the repetition). Also, "between heaven and earth" is omitted (since "heaven" is already mentioned in the previous sentence, repeating it would sound like endless repetition). This transforms the sentence from a "bandage - like long sentence" into a "golden - phrase barrage," allowing foreign audiences to immediately understand

the Seventh Fairy's fierce love. Example 3: Combining Similar Elements• Original: "Mortals all say fairies are good, but fairies' lives are too lonely" (the word "fairies" is repeated twice)• Literal Translation: Mortals all say fairies are good, but fairies' lives are too lonely• Formula - Optimized Version: Fairies, although admired by mortals, live lives dull and dreary. The second "fairies" is merged, and "although" is used to stitch the two sentences into one, using only 10 syllables. This version is easier to sing and more concise than the original.

5. Conclusion

Huangmei Opera is like the "musical dialect" of Anhui Province. Translation helps it to be equipped with a "global language system," enabling the story of "The Fairy Couple" to resonate in New York theaters and allowing the arias of "The Lady Prince" to be softly hummed in the London Underground. Guided by the theory of functional equivalence, this paper has selected wonderful singing segments from Huangmei Opera as specific research cases to conduct an in - depth and comprehensive exploration of the English - translation strategies for Huangmei Opera. It has meticulously analyzed the specific application methods and practical effects of various translation techniques such as amplification, transposition, omission, and domestication in the translation of Huangmei Opera arias. By flexibly and appropriately employing these strategies and techniques, the paper has explored how to achieve equivalent functions at the cultural level, providing the field of drama translation with a brand - new perspective and innovative ideas.

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