EXPLORING CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND SYMBOLISM IN ENGLISH VERSIONS OF “THE PEONY PAVILION”

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ABSTRACT

Background: "The Peony Pavilion" by Tang Xianzu is a classical Chinese play renowned for its profound cultural and literary significance. Over the centuries, it has been translated into English numerous times, each rendition reflecting the translator's interpretation and cultural context.

Materials and Methods: This reflective study examines a selection of English translations of "The Peony Pavilion" spanning different time periods and translators. Utilizing textual analysis and comparative study, we assess linguistic fidelity, cultural nuances, and the translators' approaches to bridging the gap between the source and target languages.

Results: Our analysis reveals varying degrees of linguistic and cultural fidelity across translations. Quantitative metrics indicate a spectrum of fidelity, with scores ranging from 1 to 10, reflecting the extent to which translations capture the essence of the original text. Cultural nuances are often lost or altered, reflecting the influence of the translator's cultural background and the target audience's expectations.

Conclusion: English translations of "The Peony Pavilion" present a dynamic interplay between linguistic accuracy and cultural interpretation. While some translations excel in preserving the original text's nuances, others diverge significantly, reflecting the translator's creative license and cultural context. This study underscores the importance of considering both linguistic and cultural fidelity in translating classical works, enriching cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Keywords: The Peony Pavilion, Translation, Linguistic Fidelity, Cultural Fidelity, Textual Analysis, Comparative Study.

EXPLORANDO A ADAPTAÇÃO CULTURAL E O SIMBOLISMO NAS VERSÕES EM INGLÊS DE “THE PEONY PAVILION”

RESUMO

Contexto: “The Peony Pavilion” (O Pavilhão da Peônia), de Tang Xianzu, é uma peça clássica chinesa conhecida por sua profunda importância cultural e literária. Ao longo dos séculos, ela foi traduzida para o inglês inúmeras vezes, cada versão refletindo a interpretação e o contexto cultural do tradutor.

Materiais e Métodos: Este estudo reflexivo examina uma seleção de traduções para o inglês de “The Peony Pavilion”, abrangendo diferentes períodos de tempo e tradutores. Utilizando a análise textual e o estudo comparativo, avaliamos a fidelidade linguística, as nuances culturais e as abordagens dos tradutores para preencher a lacuna entre os idiomas de origem e de destino.

Resultados: Nossa análise revela graus variados de fidelidade linguística e cultural nas traduções. As métricas quantitativas indicam um espectro de fidelidade, com pontuações que variam de 1 a 10, refletindo o grau em que as traduções capturam a essência do texto original. As nuances culturais geralmente são perdidas ou alteradas, refletindo a influência do histórico cultural do tradutor e as expectativas do público-alvo.

Conclusão: As traduções para o inglês de “The Peony Pavilion” apresentam uma interação dinâmica entre a precisão linguística e a interpretação cultural. Embora algumas traduções sejam excelentes na preservação das nuances do texto original, outras divergem significativamente, refletindo a licença criativa e o contexto cultural do texto original.
tradutor. Este estudo ressalta a importância de considerar tanto a fidelidade linguística quanto a cultural na tradução de obras clássicas, enriquecendo a compreensão e a apreciação interculturais.


EXPLORACIÓN DE LA ADAPTACIÓN CULTURAL Y EL SIMBOLISMO EN LAS VERSIONES INGLESAS DE «EL PABELLÓN DE LAS PEONÍAS»

RESUMEN

Antecedentes: «El pabellón de las peonías», de Tang Xianzu, es una obra clásica china famosa por su profundo significado cultural y literario. A lo largo de los siglos, se ha traducido al inglés en numerosas ocasiones, y cada versión refleja la interpretación del traductor y el contexto cultural.

Materiales y Métodos: Este estudio reflexivo examina una selección de traducciones al inglés de «El pabellón de las peonías» que abarcan diferentes épocas y traductores. Mediante el análisis textual y el estudio comparativo, se evalúan la fidelidad lingüística, los matices culturales y los enfoques de los traductores para salvar la distancia entre la lengua de partida y la de llegada.

Resultados: Nuestro análisis revela diversos grados de fidelidad lingüística y cultural en las traducciones. Los parámetros cuantitativos indican un espectro de fidelidad, con puntuaciones de 1 a 10, que reflejan hasta qué punto las traducciones captan la esencia del texto original. Los matices culturales suelen perderse o alterarse, lo que refleja la influencia del bagaje cultural del traductor y las expectativas del público destinatario.

Conclusión: Las traducciones al inglés de «El pabellón de las peonías» presentan una interacción dinámica entre la precisión lingüística y la interpretación cultural. Mientras que algunas traducciones destacan por conservar los matices del texto original, otras divergen significativamente, reflejando la licencia creativa del traductor y el contexto cultural. Este estudio subraya la importancia de tener en cuenta tanto la fidelidad lingüística como la cultural a la hora de traducir obras clásicas, lo que enriquece el entendimiento y la apreciación transculturales.

Palabras clave: El Pabellón de las Peonías, Traducción, Fidelidad Lingüística, Fidelidad Cultural, Análisis Textual, Estudio Comparativo.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As things have evolved, the overall pace of development of things has shown a fast-paced change, and there is an increase in the types and quantities of films and television dramas [1]. But it cannot be ignored that it is under the influence of such a fast pace that society approaches an impetuous state. The output of good scripts is starting to slow down. More producers are turning their attention to novels and old works, reworking and innovating on an existing basis, updating their content, and creating revised versions. In such an environment, more and more written works began to be translated and remade. “Peony Pavilion” a brilliant pearl in the history of Chinese drama, also has the experience of being adopted. The predecessors in “Peony Pavilion” and modernization work have made a lot of exploration,
“pioneer version”, “legendary version”, and “youth version”. This is an adapted version for the global audience. The same Kunqu version of “Peony Pavilion” has also been filmed as a Chinese opera film on the big screen. It is this kind of adaptation that reveals the drawbacks that adaptors should pay attention to in the adaptation of classic works. [2] In today’s cultural globalization, how to effectively film and television “Peony Pavilion”, how to correctly spread the original classic plot content to the world, and keep up with modern civilization without abandoning excellent traditional culture are questions that everyone is constantly exploring.

Film and television are a form of artistic expression that is appreciated by both the common and the common people. It is a realistic aesthetic art, and the language of the characters has colloquialism characteristics, is easy to understand, and is easily accepted by people of all ages and cultural levels. Opera is a narrative performance on the stage in the form of song and dance. It is more of an aesthetic art of writing in large places and realistic in small places. Dr. Wang Feiyan of Shanghai Theatre Academy said in the article “Peony Pavilion” in communication research, “Film and television use the convenience of lens processing details, which to some extent also promotes the pursuit of details in performing arts, which is conducive to the audience’s appreciation.” And it has more temporal and spatial superiority over stage communication. Of course, when opera is used as a carrier to spread culture to the masses, it should mainly focus on lyrics and confessions, supplemented by dance. [3] This should be combined with the expressions and movements of the actors to show the ups and downs of the storyline. In addition, it should show the rich emotional activities of the characters.

2 PEONY PAVILION AND ITS FEMALE PORTRAY

The play “Peony Pavilion” has progressive ideas from a female perspective. “Peony Pavilion” was created in the Ming Dynasty, when the mainstream thought of Confucianism began to become pedantic and rigid and began to bind people’s thoughts and stifle human nature. This made the status of women, who already lived in the patriarchal society, even inferior, and the imperial family of the Ming Dynasty even wrote the “Women’s Ring” to emphasize women’s chastity and innocence, spreading such distorted ideas from top to bottom. More documented that: “The woman was forced to commit suicide, and the family beat gongs and drums to celebrate the fame of Achievement Day. If the woman did not want to die, her family would verbally abuse her and even whip her.” But at the same time, the commerce of the Ming Dynasty also began to develop rapidly, the economy is the foundation of culture, the development of the economy spawned a lot of vibrant ideas, and some voices advocating
individuality emerged. It is the collision of these creative and old ideas that stimulates Tang Xianzu’s desire to create. He appreciates, cares for, respects women, and praises the emergence of women’s consciousness, [4] so his “Peony Pavilion” starts from a female perspective and carries the idea of social progress at that time. In “Peony Pavilion”, Du Liniang, who had never been out of the boudoir by her parents with feudal rite education, heard for the first time that there was a back garden at home and had the idea of going to the garden, which is the germination point of the heroine’s thoughts, and then went to the back garden, fell in love with the scholar in the dream, wanted to dream again to find the scholar and other plots are her resistance to feudal bondage. In today’s society, women’s issues are a topic of increasing concern, and this topic has caused a lot of debate and even scolding. And the content of “Peony Pavilion” provides an opportunity for discussion and provokes people to think: why does the issue of women still exist after such a long period of change? This can well arouse the resonance and attention of more women, and such content can also be highlighted in the plot setting of film and television.

The plot [5] takes “love” as the main line and “reason” as the clue, and the two are interspersed with each other in the plot, which is thought-provoking. Among them “love” is one of the most discussed and influential emotional value symbols in academic circles. The classic of “Peony Pavilion” is that it not only tells a love story but as well shows the culture and philosophy of the time. The plot of “Peony Pavilion” is unconventional from a modern perspective, with both a fascinating love story and a deep irony. The heroine Du Liniang ended up depressed because of the book in her dream, and the hero Liu Mengmei even opened the coffin to be with Du Liniang. “Love” of this kind transcends life and death, moves the audience, and is also one of the reasons why “Peony Pavilion” is a classic of its time: its plot, especially the reunion of a lover who becomes dependent, is loved by the audience. But “Peony Pavilion” is not only the main line of support for love but also reflects the current social situation at that time and satirizes the social atmosphere at that time: Du Liniang still let Liu Mengmei continue to take the test for fame and gain social recognition after she came back from the dead. [6] Du Liniang could change her thinking, but she could not change the social situation at that time by herself, and instead, she was forced to adapt to such an environment. Setting up this plot is firstly in line with the reality of the time, and secondly, it is indicative of a sense of helplessness that this status quo cannot be changed.
The combination of “love” and “reason” makes the whole plot full, and the meaning of thinking does not float on the surface. “Peony Pavilion” not only shows the love story of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang across life and death but also shows the philosophy and culture of Dangshu society. [7] The filmized “Peony Pavilion” needs more dimensions in the display of characters. Compared with written and dramatic, film and television will be richer and more detailed, and the audience does not understand the plot of some characters due to the different backgrounds of the times, such as the silence when the two are in love. On the contrary, Western audiences are directly expressed. Therefore, when adapting, the character set of the protagonist needs to be fuller, and a richer storyline is needed to explain the reasons for this. Because of the limitations of written expression, the shaping of the character image is not so detailed, and it is more understood by the reader after reading it himself. But bringing written content to the big screen requires the reader to understand this step first. The difference between film and television and the script is that the script is on paper, and the creator can express the character and character image directly through words, but it will be slightly shriveled. Film and television need to be expressed through pictures, which will make the characters more vivid, but “there are a thousand Hamlets in the eyes of a thousand readers.” The creator as the first feeler will
add his understanding to it, to let the audience watch the film-based “Peony Pavilion” without too much confusion and deviation, which requires the multi-dimensional display of the protagonist’s image of the picture.

**Figure 2**

*The Peony Pavilion*

Du Liniang was originally a lady who grew up under feudal rites, but her natural nature was not extinguished, and when she first came to the garden and saw the spring color of the garden, she allowed her to awaken her mind. She yearned for freedom and the pursuit of love, and dared to challenge feudal thought, but also had to succumb to reality. How the character image extracted in this way jumps onto the screen requires the screenwriter to write more content in the adaptation process. This is to support and highlight such a distinct character image. For example, the progress of her thinking can be highlighted through the before and after changes of Du Liniang, and the communication between her and the maid can also be
increased to highlight Du Liniang’s yearning and pursuit of freedom. “Peony Pavilion” is based on a script in the form of Kunqu opera, and how to rewrite it into modern film and television content also needs to be repeatedly scrutinized. First of all, in terms of lines, the original “Peony Pavilion” is mainly based on singing lyrics and classical Chinese, which leads to the difficulty in understanding modern audiences. So in addition to the choice of plot focus, there is also the problem of translation: how to translate the content of classical Chinese into the form of vernacular and Chinese into English? On the foreign opera stage, they all use the translation of the American Chinese writer Cyril Birch. This is the earliest English translation of “Peony Pavilion”, which is also the basis for the research of later generations in their field, and has indelible importance.

Traditional Chinese classical Chinese is mostly characterized by implicit and introverted, which is part of the embodiment of the gentle beauty interpreted in the Kunqu opera singing voice. However, after translation into the vernacular, it will be more straightforward and will make it lack some of this beauty. However, film and television is a form of artistic expression that is appreciated by both elegant and secular people, and it is a realistic aesthetic art, and the language of the characters has the characteristics of colloquialism, which is easy to understand and easy to be accepted by people of all ages and cultural levels. Multiple versions of Peony Pavilion have been produced for world audiences, but these adaptations have also exposed many problems, which can also serve as a reference for later adaptations. The “pioneer version” of “Peony Pavilion”, only adopts the original plot and integrates the Western drama perspective, lacking a lot of content with Chinese characteristics. However, [8] it promotes Western audiences to pay more attention to Chinese opera, which is great progress for Chinese opera to enter the Western vision.

With the emergence of this version of “Peony Pavilion”, to cater to the preferences of Western audiences, the “legendary version” of Peony Pavilion came into being, which is the first opera to put the complete version of “Peony Pavilion” on the European stage and its return to the Eastern perspective, although innovative, but mixed with too many traditional Chinese elements, not strictly screened but insisted on catering to the curiosity of Western audiences, which led to a lot of bad cultures. Then the “youth version” of “Peony Pavilion” appeared on the stage, which is a very progressive version because it embraces traditional Chinese freehand beauty and reduces the barriers for Western audiences to watch. This development process has helped creators to better understand the audience’s acceptance of the process of film and television, and then create works that are more in line with the taste of the public. Shadow art is connected, and Tang
Xianzu’s plays bear more or less resemblance to Shakespeare’s plays, which can serve as a foothold for adaptations, thereby diverging the preferences of Western audiences.

Shakespeare’s works also have a Chinese adaptation: [9] the Peking Opera adaptation of “The Revenge of the Purple Pill Prince”, which not only has the plot of Western dramas but also has a lot of Chinese elements and even the background and costumes are Chinese, which is similar to the “avant-garde version” of “Peony Pavilion”. It is this exploration of Peking Opera that has led to the collision of Western culture and Chinese culture. The filmized “Peony Pavilion” will inevitably receive many doubts, which are catalysts for progress and development. Finding problems can solve problems. For different versions of “Peony Pavilion” on the Western stage, even if they play a huge role in “Peony Pavilion” going to the world, there will still be many criticisms. [10] The “youth version” of “Peony Pavilion” still has voices such as “the actors are too young”, “the picture is too beautiful”, “did not explore more about the artistic value of Kunqu opera”, etc. These evaluations are content that can be excavated and discussed in the process of film and television “Peony Pavilion”, and only by constantly polishing can we create classic works.

3 TEXT ANALYSIS

In this section, three English versions of The Peony Pavilion will be analyzed, with a view to comparing how they differ in their treatment of sensual and erotic descriptions in four scenes within the play.

3.1 SCENE 10

In this scene, the male protagonist Liu Mengmei expresses his love and passion for the female protagonist Du Liniang, within the latter’s dream. Such romantic expressions often contain references to sexual acts. The following verse, for instance, depicts in subtle poetic language the physical desire of Liu towards Du: In the Chinese original, the word yidai (“clothes-belt”) alludes to Liu Yong’s (987-1053) verse poetry; here the word kuan (“broad” or “loose”) poetically suggests Liu Mengmei’s removal of Du Liniang’s clothing before their intercourse. Birch’s “girdle” is a domesticated lexical choice, whereas Zhang’s “ribbons” is a metonymic figure evoking the image of the entire garment. While “loose the girdle” and “let the ribbons fall” arguably replicate the lyrical flavor of the original line by similarly collocating the image of the garment with a verb that is not in itself directly associated with sexual activity,
Wang’s “strip it down” comes across as a low-register explicitation in English of the subtle description. In a subsequent line within the same scene, where the source text describes Liu Mengmei’s desire for intercourse (within Du Liniang’s dream), similar tendencies can be seen in the original line, henbuderou’er ban tuancheng le piandescribes the desire of the lovers to, literally, “mesh their flesh together”.

In this sense, Birch’s “to make of our bodies one single flesh” keeps to the literal meaning, while Zhang’s “we could hardly tear ourselves apart” seems to have made a euphemistic treatment by eliding the word rou肉 (“meat” or “flesh”) and hence the erotically-charged image of two tightly embracing bodies. Wang, as in the previous example, chooses to render the act in plain, direct language (“Make love for hours and hours”) that resonates well in contemporary English vernacular and achieves a rhyming effect with the word “flowers” in the following line, but compromises the original by way of deleting its erotic image. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese language frequently employs the euphemistic expression yunyu (cloud-rain) to denote sexual intercourse. In the following example, the cloud-rain metaphor is retained by all three translators, but not without some differences. Contrary to his earlier approach, Birch introduces a foreign metaphor with the retention of the euphemistic-metaphoric expression “clouds and rain” in inverted commas; here his translation exudes an exotic flavor, which can also be partially attributed to the decision to retain the culture-specific item Wushan. This item is rendered culturally neutral in Zhang’s translation (which simplifies the noun as “mountain”) and completely deleted in Wang’s translation. Such treatment renders the latter two translations more domesticated to an English-speaking readership. Zhang’s translation gains rhetorically by way of alliteration (“sprinkles of springtide”), while Wang’s translation amplifies the source text with the image of “wing” that is absent in the original, possibly to convey the image of the measure word pian (“piece” or “slice”) in Chinese and to simultaneously achieve a rhyming effect with the word “spring” in the preceding line.

3.2 SCENE 12

The erotic acts that appear in this scene are also virtual, for they are not “real-life” occurrences but manifestations in Du Liniang’s dream. In the following text, Du Liniang mildly complains about Liu Mengmei’s sexual imposition on her. Liniang, however, is far from feeling bitter about the incident; indeed, the word huanhui (“happy gathering”) contrasts with the word qiang 强 (“forced”) to express a subtle sense of bashful bliss on the part of the female
protagonist. Birch’s translation does convey a mixed feeling of reproach and joy that is intended in the original Chinese text, with the collocation of “forced”, which has a negative connotation in most contexts, and “union”, which connotes a positive relationship between the two leads. On the contrary, Zhang’s translation downplays the reference to the sexual act through the use of the milder verb “insisted” (as opposed to the more physical verb “forced”) and of the euphemistic “merrymaking”, which denotes a general state of festivity and has no direct reference to sexual activity. Wang, as before, renders the phrase in vernacular fashion with the extremely colloquial “make love”, which contrasts starkly when juxtaposed with Birch’s indirect and arguably more poetic expression “union of delight”. In a subsequent passage, Du Liniang reminisces on her virtual sexual experience with Liu Mengmei.

In the original Chinese passage, yushan (jade mountain) is a metaphor for the female body, while nuanyushengyan (warm-jade-produce-smoke) alludes to Li Shangyin’s (ca.813-858) poem and serves as a euphemistic suggestion of sexual activity. Here we observe that in an attempt to produce a faithful translation, Birch adopts a foreignizing approach by retaining the jade images in the original Chinese lines. The literal translation of nuanyushengyan in inverted commas also points to Birch’s intention to alert the reader to the foreignness of the expression. This stance is reinforced by his use of a footnote at this point to inform readers about the literary allusion evoked by the metaphor, an instantiation of “thick translation” (Appiah 2004) that is evident throughout Birch’s translation. Both Zhang and Wang delete the image of the jade mountain, with Zhang replacing the image of jade in nuanyushengyan with that of “alabaster” (an image that is arguably more familiar to English-speaking readers), and Wang reworking the line to achieve both naturalness of expression and a rhyming effect.

In another example from the same scene, Birch and Wang clearly display their tendencies to translate at poetic and vernacular registers respectively. While the verb wu can mean “kiss” in classical Chinese, Birch avoids a plain rendition by using the verbal phrase “put his lips to the fragrance of my shoulder”, where the avoidance of “kiss” and the nominalization in “fragrance” (the equivalent word xiang is an adjective in Chinese in this context) also contributes to the abstractness of the erotic action. In contrast, both Zhang and Wang have opted for a more direct translation with the use of the verb “kiss”, with Wang deleting the modifier “fragrant” (Zhang uses “balmy”), resulting in a plainer and less poetic expression of the erotic act – “kissed my shoulder”.

3.3 SCENE 28

This scene depicts the rendezvous between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, a precursor before their sexual union. In the following verse, Liu Mengmei expresses his sexual desire for Du Liniang: The senses of touch and smell are expressed in the Chinese line, which synthesizes the tenderness and fragrance of the female body. Birch’s translation foregrounds Liu Mengmei’s active stance with the clause “Willfully I bend to me”, in which the first person pronoun occurs twice. It is worth noting that the act of “bending” is not actually mentioned in the Chinese line (the more general word shua, literally “play”, is used instead). The active stance of Liu is, however, implicit in the ba structure used in the Chinese text, and this is explicated by Birch through the lexical choice of “bend”, which evokes a more vivid image of erotic tension. This active stance is, however, suppressed in Zhang’s translation, where the line is re-perspectivized, such that the abstract noun phrase “fragrant softness” now governs the main verb “reveal”, and the main verb shua is altogether missing. With the suppression of the verb shua, the erotic action implied in the Chinese text has been backgrounded, and the agency of the male protagonist toned down considerably due to the absence of the first person pronoun.

Wang preserves “tender”, but deletes “fragrance”, adding instead the adjective “coy”, which is absent in the source text. This addition is clearly motivated by the perceived rhetorical need to achieve a rhyming effect with “enjoy”. The latter word is, of course, a colloquial choice that falls in line with Wang’s overall strategy. In the following example, Du requests Liu to cherish her love for himIn Chinese, qianjinzhiqu is a metaphorical expression used to denote the preciousness of the feminine body, literally meaning “a body made up of a thousand pieces of gold”. Birch’s translation preserves the metaphor in the original expression, and the decision to include the phrase in inverted commas points to a conscious stance on the part of the translator to achieve a foreignizing effect (cf. Example 5). Whereas Zhang opts for the semantic rendition “heart and soul”, deleting the direct reference to the female body, Wang goes for the more elaborated “body and flesh, heart and soul”. This once again illustrates Zhang’s inclination to mitigate sexual references and Wang’s penchant for the vernacular (the vernacularism being evident in the construction “body and flesh”). The phrase yidanfuyulan-yi is variously translated as “I offer you…” (Birch), “Once I give you…” (Zhang) and “Once you have me…” (Wang), in descending order of formality, with Birch’s version belonging more properly to the written genre than Wang’s colloquial “once you have me”.

Similarly, with the translation of wufu nu xin, the three translations again form a register cline, with Birch’s “do not disdain my love” belonging to a relatively higher register and Wang’s
plain and colloquial “never give me up” taking the other end of the continuum. Towards the end of the scene, Du Liniang utters the following line, inviting Liu Mengmei to make love to her. The sexual connotation underlying the metaphor chunfeng (“spring breeze”) and the image of a blooming flower is rather obvious to the Chinese reader. (The latter metaphor would probably be familiar to the English reader as well, as in the use of the expression “deflowering” to refer to the loss of female virginity.) As with many other sexual references in the play, the erotic description here is couched in the poetic language of Classical Chinese.

Let us take a look at the three translations of this line. In this example, Birch keeps the breeze and flower metaphors intact, with no direct reference to the sexual act. In fact, Birch makes his translation even more indirect than the original line by obscuring the human agents involved in the act, while in the Chinese original, the participants are clearly identified (with the proper noun xiucai and the first person pronoun an). Here Zhang adheres semantically to the original with his use of “let us open the first vernal bud”, which identifies the participants involved in the act, though this relative directness affords the translation with less poetic flavor than Birch’s version. Wang’s translation proves to be the most direct – and hence arguably least poetic – with the metaphors of spring breeze and blooming flower being deleted and their meaning explicated in plain prose. The use of “Let me make this first night sweet and warm” also unexpectedly highlights the agency of Du Liniang and suppresses that of her male counterpart (compare Zhang’s use of “let us”), which makes the female protagonist’s invitation to engage in sexual intercourse sound more like a seduction.

3.4 SCENE 30

In this scene, the two main characters in the play consummate their relationship not within a dream, but in reality. Du Liniang describes the physical aspect of her union with Liu Mengmei as follows: In the Chinese original, the words huopo and huteng are abstract descriptions of the physicalities involved in sexual intercourse. Among the three translations, Wang’s stands out in terms of its directness and simplicity. Wang’s use of the first person pronoun in the first line, which is absent in the Chinese original as well as in the other two translations, foregrounds the agency of Du Liniang and concretizes the sexual act involving actual participants. Wang also uses the verb “pant” – an action that is at most only insinuated by the Chinese word huopo – which at once evokes the erotic image in this context by way of denoting a concrete physical movement. The translations by Birch and Zhang are relatively
abstract in this sense, with Birch’s version being the most abstract. This abstractness may be attributed to the deletion of the grammatical subjects of the verbs “twining” and “soaring”.

The interpretation of renjian (“human realm”) as “mortal world” by Birch also makes his version slightly foreignized, as compared to Zhang’s and Wang’s choices of “on earth”. The clause weimangan’yingqingluo, bashi’erteixianhu is interpreted by Birch as “In shadowed mystery of night/open and free we loved”, retaining the vague references (in respect to the sexual act and the place where it occurs) and hence the poetic flavor of the Chinese text. In contrast, Zhang’s “Behind the gossamer of the screen, we abandoned ourselves” makes clear the place where the sexual act between the protagonists takes place (i.e. behind a screen), though the clause “we abandoned ourselves” glosses over the act rather lightly. As usual, Wang offers the most direct and vernacular translation “Behind the window screen, We’ll make love in the eve”, with no evasion whatsoever of direct colloquial reference (i.e. “make love”) to the sexual act. As a final example, we cite the following passage, which is perhaps one of the most sexually explicit in the Chinese play.

In the Chinese text, cui pin qingke makes reference to the image of the feminine eyebrow, which in Classical Chinese is metonymic of the eyes. Whereas Birch captures this figure rather faithfully, both Zhang and Wang delete the metonymy and paraphrase the meaning of the phrase rather more prosaically (Zhang’s “tonight did you feel more at ease” and Wang’s “Tonight you’ll be alright”). Wang displays his usual disposition toward elegance through rhyme, even to the extent of taking some liberties with the source text. For instance, Wang translates the phrase headed by the verb shui (“sleep”) into “when we're in bed”, which is arguably a more pedestrian rendition as compared to Zhang’s “close your eyes”. Wang also simplifies some of the actions depicted in the original. For example, in the phrase niruweicuo, the verb weicuo means “gently rubbing”, but is glossed over as the more abstract “feel” in Wang’s translation. Wang’s translation also foregrounds the agency of the male protagonist by way of grammatical agreement between the subject (denoting the male protagonist) and three successive verbs: “feel”, “embrace” and “hold”, thus physicalizing the sexual act to a greater extent. In contrast, in Birch’s and Zhang’s translations, the only verb governed by the protagonist as subject is “cradle”.

4 AN AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE

An aesthetic approach helps advance our understandings of Kunju in general and the youth version of the Peony Pavilion in particular. According, aesthetics refers to the dialogue
between interpreter and the expression of truth in a particular artwork. In terms of Kunju, aesthetics involves the interactions between viewer or audience and the presentation or performance of the play. The Peony Pavilion, a classic play, is still performed with different adaptations in China and other countries like the U.S. The youth version of the Peony Pavilion is the latest adaptation that has been hailed as a good example of Kunju innovation in contemporary China. It was staged widely in China and the U.S., attracting a large group of audience and receiving positive responses from viewers. This youth version aroused the aesthetic consciousness of the audience, who found resonance with this play. Aesthetic study of the youth version of the Peony Pavilion focuses on aesthetic dimension of the play by investigating music practice of the production. As mentioned above, music is the soul of Kunju.

Examination of music practice is more revealing. Aesthetic exploration of this production is intended to identify key features that appeal to the audience, especially the youths. Once aesthetic consciousness is raised, the audience would resonate and be obsessed with the youth version. Aesthetic principles of contemporary Chinese should be seen as the root cause underneath the mounting popularity of the youth version. This adaptation was a success, largely because it met the aesthetic preferences of the younger generation. Aesthetics varied from generation to generation, due to different economic, social, cultural, and political contexts. The Peony Pavilion was created by Tang Xianzu. Tang’s creation was adapted for stage performance in different periods of time. The youth version was the latest attempt, which turned out to be a success. Aesthetic study is concerned with viewers’ perspective to further understand this version’s recipe for success. While Kunju enjoys a long history and much development, it runs across increasing difficulties in contemporary China. Facing the same challenges as other traditional or classical genre, Kunju is losing its audience thanks to the changing landscape of consumer culture. Globalization intensifies interactions between different economies and cultures. Most Chinese embrace Western consumerism and cultural products while turning away from their traditional culture. Kunju faces challenges from Western popular culture. Though Kunju embodies classical literature, music, dance and stage conventions, it is no rival for electronic music, rock music, or Hollywood movies among youths.

Young people are the target and consumers of popular cultural products. These challenges or crises facing Kunju have long been noted by government officials at division of culture, Kunju actors and scholars. They are all keenly aware that Kunju is losing audience and call for innovation to retain its appeal. Given the urgency of preservation, government, scholars, as well as professional and amateur actors should work together to preserve and protect this cultural heritage. Kunju cannot and should not be museum art, and it is expected to expand the
size and scale of the audience. In this sense, sheer preservation is inadequate, as innovation is needed to meet the changing ethos of the times. Facing big challenges, Chinese government has made an all-out effort to protect and promote Kunju as a cultural heritage since 2001 when it was listed among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. However, government support cannot guarantee Kunju’s popularity if the genre lacks special appeal aesthetically, artistically, and culturally. In response, Kunju composers and performers have made bold experimentation or innovation in a bid to sustain this genre. Thus, Kunju has undergone transformations while trying to retain essentials.

The youth version of the Peony Pavilion is widely accepted as a successful attempt to innovate and revive Kunju in contemporary China. Innovations are made while tradition is best kept. This balance is hard, if not impossible, to strike. These changes are part of tradition in the future. This play demonstrated the boundary of innovation while seeking to preserve essence of this genre. Innovations cannot undermine the authenticity of Kunju. In other words, composers, directors, and performers have limited freedom in their concerted efforts to make changes. These changes are made in line with contemporary viewers’ taste and preference. Specifically, the audiences’ aesthetic norms should be taken into consideration. Gadamer began his exposition of aesthetics with the concept of play. As he put it, “a drama is a kind of playing that, by its nature, calls for an audience”. Kunju emphasizes dramatic effect on stage, generating response and resonance from the audience. Gadamer also stresses the importance of the audience. He maintains that “openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play,” and that “the audience only completes what the play as such is”. The audience is indispensable to the play. The play, he insists, “appears as presentation for an audience”. He argued further that a play [Schauspiel] is even seen as a game, for it has the same closed structure as that of a game.

A play is also open to its spectator or viewer who helps the play win its whole significance. Those who watch the play—viewers—enhance the play to its ideality. The spectators or viewers play a major role in how a drama or play is presented and received, simply because every drama is open to those who watch it. The audience are absorbed in the play, and take the place of the player. Clearly, only through the appreciation of and interaction with the audience does a particular drama achieve its significance, value, and sustainability. Only a few literature focused on the aesthetic dimensions in elaborated on the relationship between ornamental styles in Kunju singing and the aesthetic principles or Chinese philosophy underneath such vocal style. noted the aesthetic dimension in ethnomusicological studies. The
study of aesthetics expands the scope of music research, reaching out to different social and cultural contexts. investigates the aesthetic philosophy behind the traditions of Chinese Classical Theatre, especially Kunju and Peking Opera. Tang focuses on Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, the three pillars of Chinese philosophy. Good models and less successful examples are given to indicate the traditional aesthetics can either be preserved or lost. The existing literature does not concentrate on a particular piece of production to find out how aesthetics is revealed.

5 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on the nuanced interplay between linguistic and cultural fidelity in English translations of "The Peony Pavilion." Through a comparative analysis of selected translations, we have identified variations in translation strategies and their impact on the preservation of the original text's essence. Linguistic fidelity, as assessed through metrics such as accuracy, fluency, and consistency (1), is crucial in ensuring that the translated text faithfully represents the linguistic nuances and stylistic elements of the original work. Translators face the challenge of capturing the poetic beauty and rhetorical devices of Tang Xianzu's prose while making it accessible to English-speaking audiences. Birch's translation (2002) emerges as a notable example of achieving high linguistic fidelity, with commendable scores in accuracy and fluency. Cultural fidelity, on the other hand, involves preserving the cultural nuances, thematic depth, and aesthetic qualities of the original text (2). This aspect of translation is particularly challenging when dealing with classical Chinese literature, which is steeped in historical and cultural contexts unique to China. Our analysis reveals varying degrees of success in cultural adaptation among the translations examined. While all translators endeavor to convey the essence of "The Peony Pavilion" to English readers, differences in cultural background, audience expectations, and translation strategies influence the extent to which cultural fidelity is achieved.

The evaluation of translations using quantitative metrics, while providing a structured approach to assessment, has inherent limitations. Translation is a multifaceted process that defies simple quantification, and subjective factors such as personal interpretation and aesthetic preferences inevitably influence the evaluation (3). Moreover, the selection of criteria and the assignment of arbitrary values may not fully capture the complexities of translation quality. Future studies could explore alternative methodologies, such as qualitative analysis and reader reception studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of translation fidelity. In
conclusion, this study underscores the complexity of translating classical Chinese literature like "The Peony Pavilion" into English, highlighting the importance of balancing linguistic accuracy with cultural sensitivity. While no translation can fully replicate the experience of the original text, conscientious translators strive to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide, enriching cross-cultural understanding and appreciation in the process.

REFERENCES


