

General Problems in Chinese Translations of Shakespeare

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Abstract

Shakespeare was not known to the Chinese until Lin Zexu's (1785-1850) translation of Hugh Murray's (1789-1845) *Cyclopedia of Geography* (1836). Since then, the Chinese perception of Shakespeare has changed several times, from his being regarded as a story-teller to being fully received as a seasoned playwright and poet, through to his plays being rendered into the Chinese language and performed on the Chinese stage. First and foremost is the question of how to adequately translate Shakespeare. The quality of the translation is important, particularly for those readers who have no knowledge at all of the English language or of the historical and cultural backdrop to his plays. But this is no easy task – not least because there are many significant cultural and linguistic divergences between China and England and their respective languages. Through detailed analysis of previous Chinese renditions of Shakespearean plays, this article will point out some general problems frequently facing the translator of the playwright.

Keywords: Chinese translations of Shakespeare, General problems in renditions, Language, Culture

Since the first true rendition of a Shakespearean play into modern vernacular Chinese by Tian Han with his *Hamlet* in the year 1921, many Chinese scholars have attempted to translate Shakespeare and his works. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in particular, apart from the ten-year Cultural Revolution between 1967 and 1977, translations, together with performances and literary criticism, flourished. The achievements of Shakespearean studies were significant; nevertheless, apart from the intellectual challenges of translation, literary criticism and performance, Chinese scholars and critics have always searched for ways of extending and fostering the appreciation of Shakespeare and his works in the Chinese language. First and foremost is the question of how to translate him adequately, for "[a] translation is primarily for those readers who have no knowledge at all of the foreign language upon which the text is based." (Chang, 1953:115) Furthermore, translation is the fundamental element for Shakespearean criticism and performance. In addition, Shakespeare is a supreme literary genius both in poetry and drama and his lines were "... so rich spun, and woven so fit. / As, since, she will vouchsafe no other Wit." (Li, 1991:14) The process of translating Shakespeare into the Chinese language itself is one of pushing back boundaries.

Fu Lei (1908-1966), a great Chinese translator, pointed out the "differences between two languages in lexicon and syntactic structure, in grammar and idiomatic usage, in rhetorical devices and sayings – all these differences reflect dissimilarities in the modes of thinking of people of different nations, in the range of their perceptions, in their points of view, in their customs and habits, in their social backgrounds, and in their means of expression." (Fan, 1999) Having learned English against a background of Chinese culture, history and society, the Chinese translator accordingly comes across many problems while rendering Shakespearean plays.

The Chinese language is different from the English language, which is based on the phonetic principle of spelling and pronunciation, whereas the Chinese character is primarily of monosyllabic nature. With regard to rhythm within a sentence, in the English language system stress is of importance. In Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, for example, we have the stress on the second syllable: 'So long | as men | can breathe | or eyes | can see / So long | lives this | and this | gives life | to thee', which is different to the four tones in Chinese, for example, *Bái rì yī shān jìn, huáng hé rù hǎi liú.* (Note 1) The fundamentally different language systems lead to different systems of ideas and modes of thought. "A word in any language is nothing but a cluster of connotative as well as denotative meanings which it has accumulated down the centuries since its birth." (Chau, 1978:241) For example, the meaning of being jealous is expressed by Shakespeare in terms of "green-ey'd jealousy" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.104) (Note 2) rather than "red-eyed disease" in the Chinese language.

Unfortunately, there is no standardized grammatical system in Shakespeare's English; moreover, Elizabethan English differs from present-day English in that, for instance, any irregularity whatever, whether in the formation of words or in the combination of words into sentences, is allowed. For example, almost any part of speech can be used as any other. An adjective can be used as a verb, "He will happy his friends"; as an adverb, "He has done it easy"; as a noun, "You can talk of 'fair' (instead of 'beauty')", and so on.

The great change of words in meaning and usage from Shakespeare's time also adds difficulty to the Chinese translation of the playwright. For example, "Thou art an elm, my husband, I vine / Where weakness, married to thy stronger state / Makes me with thy strength to communicate" (*The Comedy of Errors*, 2.2.150-2). The word "communicate" in Elizabethan English used to mean to share rather than to exchange information – the common usage in present-day English. Take the word "cousin" as another example. Nowadays, cousin refers to a child of one's aunt or uncle. However, during the Renaissance it was a general term for a relative descended from a common ancestor, Claudius's address of Hamlet "now my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.67) for instance. While rendering "Nay, then I cannot blame his cousin King / That wished him on the barren mountains starve" (*Henry IV, Part I*, 1.3.164-5), Zhu Shenghao correspondingly makes a literal translation as follows "Nay, I cannot blame his uncle (King Henry IV), who wishes Mortimer to starve to death in the desolate mountains" (Zhu, 1994:122). But historical materials prove that King Henry IV was Richard II's cousin rather than uncle, for none of Richard's six uncles ascended the throne and Henry IV – Henry Bolingbroke – was the son of his third uncle John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, which is by chance in accord with its modern general meaning. Hereupon, He Xianglin recommends that the translator deduce its exact meaning from the context of the given situation instead of mechanically following its superficial understanding. (He, 1982:307) And then how many words did Shakespeare use in his works? "Some concordance puts Shakespeare's vocabulary at 43,566 words. (I am using the maximum estimate. There are other concordances that put his vocabulary at a much fewer 20,000 or so.) But anyway the consensus in Shakespeare's vocabulary outnumbers the entire vocabulary of the Authorized Version of the Holy Bible, or the King James' Version." (Lu, 2005:28) So breaking the language barriers in Shakespeare's plays is one of the most difficult challenges of translating him into Chinese.

It is well-known that if possible, Shakespeare liked to employ the use of puns in his plays, much to the delight of his audience, which often confuses modern audiences as well as translators. Generally speaking, a pun is a linguistic game, in a given context, mainly relying on meaning, usage, and pronunciation of words which have the same sound but different meanings; "thus a pun can serve as an ambiguous answer to a direct question, rendering the response devoid of any real information" (Hooper, 2003:121) Hamlet quibbles from time to time, using puns as weapons of attack and counterattack in the Danish court. At Claudius's claim of familial bond upon him, Hamlet defends himself: "Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun." (*Hamlet*, 1.2.70) In other words, with the help of a pun, Hamlet objects to being called "son" once too often by Claudius, thus changing the literal meaning of the text. Frankly speaking, how to interpret Shakespeare's puns differently depends on the reader/audience's status, education, experience, and age. Thus the use of puns in Shakespearian plays is another real challenge facing the Chinese translator as well, for the ambiguity of the pun (its connotative and denotative meanings) will be easily distorted in Chinese, resulting from the limited overlap between the different language systems. Liang Shiqiu completely imitates Shakespeare's pun in "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.68) by rendering it into "A little more than nephew, and less than son" (Liang, 2001:33), thus Hamlet's implied meaning is thoroughly unmasked and the pun correspondingly loses its value. The Chinese translator cannot help but literally translate Shakespeare's puns. For example, "I am baked in the sun too much" (Zhu, 1994:291), which nonetheless misses the connotative meaning of Shakespeare's pun. Some translators, probably intentionally, ignore Shakespeare's wordplay by directly rendering, for instance, "The sunbeam rests on me too much", but then make amends in later explanatory notes (Liang, 2001:35).

"Translation is never a purely philological activity but a collusive re-creation in which cultural differences cling to grammar and syntax and history mediates the effect even of single words." In addition, no two languages or parts of two languages are exactly identical. Inga-Stina Ewbank goes further: "Translation, then, is only one form of rewriting, and needs to be thought about and studied as much." (1995:6-7)

As a good illustration of the cultural difference, Chang Chen-hsien takes Lady Macbeth's words "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't" (*Macbeth*, 2.2.16-17) as an example. (1953:112) According to conventions in English culture, Lady Macbeth simply means that she thinks that King Duncan and her father look alike. But for a Chinese reader or spectator this sentence has a denotative and a connotative meaning as well. On the one hand, it explicitly states that Duncan does look like Lady Macbeth's father, but it implies, on the other hand, that Duncan's mother has had an improper relationship with Lady Macbeth's father, which sounds totally absurd to the Western audience. In fact, whether the translator should render the sentence into Chinese

literally or give a translation of the meaning, after considering the ideological divergences, makes a great difference to the Chinese audience. Without doubt, when the literal translation of this sentence is printed or spoken on the Chinese stage, a misunderstanding of the original is not to be avoided.

Sexuality is another difficult topic in Shakespeare's plays when introducing the dramatist to the Chinese. It is known that in ancient China a woman, from a noble family in particular, must consciously avoid being seen by men, staying in her boudoir all the time and obeying her father before marriage and her husband after marriage and her son after the death of her husband. Even when a lady was sick and a male doctor had to come into her chamber, she was not allowed to show her face to him. Instead, she only stretched her hand out to the doctor through a curtain. What is incredible is that the doctor had to feel the queen's or queen dowager's pulse through a red silk thread hung around her wrist, because, according to the old rigid Chinese etiquette, women and men should be separated from each other and a woman's hand could not be touched by a man, not to mention a queen's or king's mother's hand. Therefore, when King Duncan's says to Lady Macbeth: "Give me your hand" (*Macbeth*, 1.6.37), this, in accordance with sex segregation in the Confucian tradition, has to be cut out in the original when it is transferred into an ancient Chinese story in order to avoid sexual associations.

Likewise, some Chinese translators, with their traditional Chinese cultural background, would delete or excise Shakespeare's bawdy or dirty language from his text, Zhu Shenghao's translation of *Othello*, one of "Shakespeare's most sexual, most bawdy plays" (Partridge, 2001:57), is a case in point.

At the beginning of Act III, Cassio instructs some musicians to play music for the newly married Othello and Desdemona, which is interrupted by Clown:

- Clown Why, master, have your instruments been in Naples, that they speak i' the nose thus?
 First Musician How, sir, how?
 Clown Are these, I pray you, wind-instruments?
 First Musician Ay, marry, are they, sir.
 Clown O! thereby hangs a tail.
 First Musician Whereby hangs a tail, sir? (*Othello*, 3.1.6-11)

Obviously, Shakespeare's "tail" contains an ambiguous sexual allusion; however, Zhu's Chinese translation shows that he completely cuts out "O! thereby hangs a tail. / Whereby hangs a tail, sir?" from the original text. Fortunately, the omitted vulgar expressions have been supplemented in the 1978 edition. It is also true in the case of rendering the implied sexual activity of Shakespeare's puns. For example, in the sentence "for this drivelling love is like a great natural, that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in hole" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.4.45) we read of a possible pun on "bauble" (the Fool's sceptre) – the penis; nevertheless, Zhu prefers to give a direct translation than attempt to paraphrase the author's intended meanings, and expressions of sexuality in particular.

As a matter of fact, purifying the text and deleting sexuality from Shakespeare's plays is not unfamiliar to Western readers, as Stanley Wells contends in his Foreword of Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy*: "Partridge was writing at a time when all editions of Shakespeare intended for use in schools were bowdlerized, when editors even of scholarly editions frequently shied away from sexual glosses, and when attitudes to expressions of sexuality were far less liberal than they were to become during the 1960s." (Partridge, viii) The circumstance in mainland China was as similar as or even more restrictive than that in England at the time, due to the great influence of China's Confucianism.

Shakespeare's plays are full of information on a variety of topics and can be called encyclopaedic, with topics ranging from astronomy, geography, history, politics and science, to culture, including the Bible and mythology. The encyclopaedic knowledge had once contributed to the doubt whether William Shakespeare himself, "an upstart Crow beautiful in our feather", (Note 3) wrote all these wonderful plays. Lu Gusun remarks that some of Shakespeare's plays have been attributed to Francis Bacon (1561-1626), to Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), another famous playwright in Shakespeare's time, to Ben Jonson (1572-1637), Shakespeare's friend and rival as well, to the Earl of Oxford Edward de Vere (1550-1604), and even to Queen Elizabeth. Lu concludes that Shakespeare stole most of his materials from other authors by reading widely. (Lu, 2005:30-3) Consequently, the Chinese translator has to read as widely as Shakespeare to understand his history plays well, for instance, English history at least from the Plantagenet (1216-1485) to the Tudor dynasties (1485-1603), which is not simple at all. With regard to the mythological references which can be found in most of his plays, the tragedy *Hamlet* can be regarded as one of the best examples.

When Hamlet is called to come in by his mother, he fulminates against her remarrying the present king, who is his father's brother and murderer as well. "Look here, upon this picture, and on this; / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. / See, what a grace was seated on this brow; / Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself; / An eye like Mars, to threaten and command; / A station like the herald Mercury / ..." (*Hamlet* 3.4.63-8) At this very moment, Hamlet compares his father to four gods from Greek and Roman mythology, all of whom are unknown to the Chinese reader. The translator is then faced with the problem of how to best translate them into Chinese. Generally speaking, he/she will directly transliterate foreign names. But this common method seems unsuitable in the case of these gods, for all of them are related to myths and therefore have certain connotations. Therefore, making Shakespeare's mythological references understood plays a crucial role in appreciating him and his works. In contrast to Zhu Shenghao, who amalgamates Chinese culture with Western culture, *Masi* (Mars) – god of war – for instance, Liang Shiqiu preserves the original form by, firstly, transliterating them; secondly, giving explanatory notes to help the target reader understand the sources well. In conclusion, both of them exert effective influence on the Chinese reader.

Similarly, the fact that Shakespeare took his stories from the Bible increases the difficulty of translating into Chinese, as He Xianglin points out: one of the reasons that the translator has failed to give a correct rendition is that the Book is completely unfamiliar to the Chinese. In *Twelfth Night*, Clown blames Malvolio for his ignorance by saying "there is no darkness but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in the fog." (*Twelfth Night*, 4.2.21) The fog, in He Xianglin's view, is quoted from Chapter 10 of EXODUS in the Old Testament: The Lord sends a plague of locusts – this is followed by thick darkness in all Egypt for three days – when Moses is cast out from the presence of Pharaoh, who forbids him to leave with his people. And then he suggests the word "fog" be translated into the Chinese by "darkness"; otherwise the direct translation by Zhu Shenghao needs a detailed explanation about the source of the story. (He, 1982:307-8)

Despite the problems of rendering the works of this great playwright and poet into the mother tongue, Chinese translators have made every effort to present a true Shakespeare to the reader and to hone their translations over the course of the years. As an example, Zhu Shenghao's 1954 version of *Complete Works of William Shakespeare* was revised in 1978 and again in 1998 and some additions were fully made. Certainly, it is likely that the growing globalization of politics, economy, society and culture will bridge some of the difficulties and discrepancies in translating Shakespeare into Chinese.

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Notes

Note 1. These two sentences are the first part of a well-known poem *Mounting the Guanque Tower* by Wang Zhihuan (688-742), a famous poet in the Tang dynasty (618-907).

Note 2. All the quotations from Shakespeare's plays in the essay are taken from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Craig, William James, London: Oxford University Press, 1914.

Note 3. Shakespeare was once satirized by Robert Greene (1558-1592) when he began with his playwriting in London.