



“Meaning Prior to Form” in Translating *The Nanke Dream* under Threshold of “the Overseas Promotion of Chinese Culture”

Lingyan Xiong¹, Haiming Huang²

¹School of Foreign Language, Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, Ganzhou, China

²National School of Education, Gannan Medical College, Ganzhou, China

Email: xly0122@126.com

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Abstract

The Four Dreams in Linchuan by Tang Xianzu is a brilliant play throughout the history of Chinese drama. To implement the strategy of “the overseas promotion of Chinese culture”, the four plays should be taken as a whole and paid the same attention to. However, *The Peony Pavilion* has a long history of being widely disseminated at home and abroad, while there are only two existing English versions of *The Nanke Dream*, so interpretations from different dimensions are quite necessary. However, even modern Chinese people cannot fully understand the profound cultural words in the classics, let alone foreigners. The best way to spread the classics is to make them plain to read and easy to understand. On the basis of former scholars’ theories of cultural translation, “meaning prior to form” in translating *The Nanke Dream* was proposed to help foreign readers have a better understanding of classical works. Except for thorough and meticulous academic research, the method is applicable to the translation of most Chinese classics.

Subject Areas

Culture, Linguistics

Keywords

The Overseas Promotion of Chinese Culture, *The Nanke Dream*, Cultural Translation, Meaning Prior to Form, *The Four Dreams in Linchuan*, Chinese Classics

1. Introduction

The report to the 19th CPC National Congress clearly stated the need to “pro-

mote international communication capacity building, tell China's good stories, present a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China, and improve the country's cultural soft power" [1]. The masterpieces of Tang Xianzu, a famous playwright in Ming Dynasty, *The Peony Pavilion* (also known as *The Return of the Soul*), *The Handan Dream*, *The Nanke Dream* and *The Purple Hairpins*, which are known as "*The Four Dreams in Linchuan*", are the bright pearls in the long river of ancient Chinese drama, showing profound ideological implication and refined artistic style. However, the world knows more about *The Peony Pavilion*, and rarely hears about *The Nanke Dream*. To implement the principle of "the overseas promotion of Chinese culture", the four plays should be taken as a whole and paid the same attention to. The original play *The Nanke Dream* was created more than 400 years ago. So far, no translator or publishing company has translated or published a full copy of it. Even modern Chinese people cannot fully understand the profound cultural words in the classics, let alone foreigners. The translating principle of "meaning prior to form" was proposed to help foreign readers have a better understanding of *The Nanke Dream*.

2. A Brief Introduction to *The Nanke Dream*

Having a profound understanding of the cultural background of and the current situation of research on *The Nanke Dream* is the basis for translating and spreading it at home and abroad. Before a profound understanding of the cultural translation under the threshold of "the overseas promotion of Chinese culture", readers should better have a general idea about the cultural background *The Nanke Dream* as well as current situation of research on it.

2.1. A Brief Introduction to Author

Tang Xianzu, born in Linchuan, Jiangxi province, on September 24th, 1550 and died on July 29th, 1616, is a playwright and litterateur in Ming Dynasty, known as "the Shakespeare of the East". Born in a scholarly family, he was famous early in his childhood, not only skilled in ancient prose and poetry, but also proficient in astronomy, geography, divination and medicine. Tang Xianzu has made many achievements, especially in drama composition. His dramatic works *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Purple Hairpins*, *The Nanke Dream* and *The Handan Dream* are collectively called as "four dreams in Linchuan", among which *The Peony Pavilion* is his representative work. These plays are not only loved by Chinese, but also have been spread to Britain, Japan, Germany, Russia and many other countries, and are regarded as the treasures of the drama art in the world. His monograph *A Biography of Master Qingyuan Drama God of Yihuang County* is also an important literature on the drama performance in the history of Chinese drama, playing a pioneering role in the study of directors. He was also a distinguished poet.

Tang Xianzu despised the feudal dignitaries and often offended celebrities. In his later years, indifferent to fame and wealth and willing to live a poor life, he

refused to deal with the county officials. This character and style made him have close contacts with Gu Xiancheng and Zou Yuandong, who emphasized strict integrity and attacked corrupt politics at that time, and also made him promote Hai Rui and Xu Wei, who were very upright. Meanwhile, he had relatively negative thoughts, which was also related to his dedication to Buddhism and his long escape from the political struggle after his resignation.

2.2. Cultural Background of *The Nanke Dream*

One of representative works by Tang Xianzu, a famous playwright in the Ming Dynasty, *The Nanke Dream* is adapted from *The Biography of Nanke Prefecture*, a legend in the Tang Dynasty. It mainly tells the life experience of a young man named Chunyu Fen, who lived a dull life since he has no chance to display his talent in real life, but experienced ups and downs in the dream. He was promoted after getting married with a princess, and then went to guard the border in Nanke. However, he was forced to go back to the court to plead guilty in making wrong decisions. Finally, he was demobilized because of the death of the princess. Once again he came back to the real world and became a monk since he couldn't accept the reality. Tang mainly expressed his dissatisfaction and disgust with the social reality and officialdom, as well as his contempt and rebellion against the feudal ethics through Chunyu Fen's experience. After experiencing all kinds of things, coupled with the enlightenment of Master Qixuan, Chunyu Fen suddenly realized that everything in the world is the flowers in the mirror and the moon in the water. Only by converting to Buddhism can we resolve the doubts in our heart and achieve a sincere spirit.

Tang Xianzu was influenced by Confucianism in his early years and devoted himself to studying Buddhist classics and dramas after retreating to mountains. Throughout his life, Tang had quite high attainments in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. He was in his old age when he conceived *The Nanke Dream*. Due to many years of world-weariness, Buddhism and Taoism had become his main spiritual sustenance, which is fully demonstrated in *The Nanke Dream*. Tang combined Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism into the play, making the imprint of traditional Chinese culture ubiquitous. In addition, many literary and artistic skills were applied to depict the characters in different scenes, which also added to the strong literary appeal of the play [2].

2.3. Current Situation of Research on *The Nanke Dream*

Throughout the years of the research on *The Four Dreams in Linchuan*, the attention is mainly paid to *The Peony Pavilion*, while the research on *The Nanke Dream* is slightly scarce. By advanced retrieval in electronic library, set language for Chinese, literature type for journal and dissertation titled *The Nanke Dream*, time span for 80 years from 1943 to 2022, 72 results were obtained (see **Figure 1**), among which 63 are journal papers and 9 dissertations, with the research content mainly on its provenance, narrative structure, tragic features, political



Figure 1. Research papers on *The Nanke Dream* over the past 80 years.

tendency, communication research, translation strategies, comparison of English versions and religious thoughts.

Up to now, there are only two English versions of translating *The Nanke Dream*, one translated by Zhang Guangqian and published by Foreign Language Publishing House in 2006, while another translated by Wang Rongpei and published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Publishing House in 2012. Although the two scholars are quite different in translation strategies, their purposes of translating the play are the same, to promote foreign readers' appreciation of the charisma in traditional Chinese culture.

3. Cultural Translation under the Threshold of “the Overseas Promotion of Chinese Culture”

The external dissemination of Chinese culture is conducive to enhancing the international voice of China, beautifying the country's international image, promoting its overall national strength, improving its own cultural attraction, and explaining the profound connotation of Chinese culture. “The overseas promotion of Chinese culture” builds up a good image of international communication of Chinese culture through cross-language translation and communication, and its effect depends on the whole process of translation and communication. Therefore, it's the key to success to deeply study the culture, system and ideology of the target language and break through the barriers of translation and communication.

Xie Tianzhen pointed out that Chinese culture should achieve the goal of “each of its own beauty, demonstration of other's beauty, share the beauty of

both, and the world is in harmony” [3]. Cultural translation involves a wide range of contents, including the national psychology, cultural evolution, customs and regional characteristics reflected in the language. The famous American translator Eugene A. Nida divided it into four categories, ecological ecology, material culture, social culture and linguistic culture. Lin Yutang has his own unique views on translation. In the essay *On Translation* he wrote in 1933, he clearly proposed that “translation is a kind of art” and “translation is creation”, namely, creative translation [4]. For English and Chinese with great differences, creative translation has immeasurable value and significance.

As for the overseas promotion of traditional Chinese drama texts, we can learn from the “three-stage theory of translation” proposed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [5]. Specifically, Goethe once divided the translation activities into three stages in *Review on Understanding the Compilation Commentary of East and West*. In the first stage, translators assist people to understand foreign things in a localized way, namely, domesticating them from a foreign language into a local language and using the local language to spread foreign information to the readers of target language countries. In the second stage, translators can domesticate from the perspectives of thought, content and concept, which goes further than linguistic domestication. The third stage is the most advanced stage of translation, which is also the stage of “full translation”, namely, to translate the source language word by word into the target language culture. At present, Chinese culture is still not the mainstream culture in the world, and Chinese drama is not the mainstream art form in the world. Meanwhile, Chinese drama translation is still in the first stage, as proposed by Goethe. During this period, domestication must be adopted to weaken the exoticism, to avoid readers from rejecting our culture. Therefore, domestication translation method should be taken in the practice of drama text translation. In the process of domestication, objective conditions are created for the faithful translation, and gradually the elements of alienation increase. In short, in order to do a good job in the overseas promotion of Chinese drama texts, translators must fully grasp the artistic differences between Chinese and western dramas, based on which make clear the expectations of foreign readers, and compromise appropriately, providing readers and audiences in target language with drama translation that they are willing to accept.

It is an indisputable fact that there are differences between Chinese and Western dramas. The roles of cultural communicators are not only to respect the original cultural information as much as possible when conveying these cultural differences, but also to make the target audience understand and accept them happily. It is obvious that the west progression of Chinese drama is not to pursue the homogeneity of the two cultures, but to complete the process of “harmonious real creature”, namely, the process of generating new quality of two different things, which requires us to adhere to the diversified cultural position in the future overseas communication activities of drama, care about the cultures of other countries in the self-cultural position, constantly switch between the two

cultures, and constantly compare and analyze them from the perspectives of two cultures [6]. Only in this way can it be possible to break through the acceptance barrier of western cultures, and make more and more western audiences know more about, understand and gradually like Chinese drama, so that our national art can show a more moving charm in western countries.

Due to the huge differences between Chinese and English, creative translation is the inevitable requirement of Chinese-English or English-Chinese translation. Ideal translation is just like the original author writes in the target language, to change the form, integrate the meaning, master the spirit and show the wonder of the original language. In fact, the best way to translate words or allusions rich in cultural connotations is to express their meaning directly. No one wants to keep on reading the notes, because they may lose the fun of reading. Therefore, in order to make Chinese culture go abroad more widely, we should translate the classic works into popular books, so that target readers or audiences can understand them and enjoy them. If readers have to pay much attention to cultural connotations or the beauty, classic works can only be on the shelf of a few people.

There are 44 scenes in *The Nanke Dream*, from which six typical examples rich in culture and allusions are selected to translate. In order to accurately convey the meaning, allusions are abandoned. Meanwhile, the meaning contained is expressed in straightforward language so as to make readers understand the story.

4. “Meaning Prior to Form” in Translating *The Nanke Dream*

Some example sentences with cultural connotations are taken to study how to apply the principle of “meaning prior to form” into translating *The Nanke Dream* [7].

1) SL: 玉茗新池雨，金柅小阁晴。有情歌酒莫叫停，看取无情虫蚁也关情。国土阴中起，风花眼角成。契玄还有讲残经，为问东风吹梦几时醒？ (cited from Scene 1)

TL: It has just rained in the pond ahead of the Yuming Hall. The sun shines over the Jinni Hall. Don't stop singing and drinking, since seemingly ruthless ants also show signs of affection. The Ant country was founded in the seventh lunar month. A good marriage started from flashing amorous glances. Master Qixuan is still preaching the incomplete Buddhist scriptures. When will you wake up from the dream blown by the east wind?

This is the preface of *The Nanke Dream*, to warn people that the story of Chunyu Fen is only a dream, not the real world. The first two sentences depict a scene after a sunny rain, suggesting that Chunyu Fen was lucky to marry the princess and lived a life of singing and dancing. “Yuming” and “Jinni” are the names of two halls, and it is unnecessary to express the implied meaning, otherwise readers will be distracted by the life experience and psychological journey of Tang Xianzu. The busy ants seemed to be ruthless but also were affectionate,

creating the Ant Country. Princess Yaofang and Chunyu Fen met in a temple and fell into love. In the real world, Master Qixuan was still preaching the incomplete Buddhist scriptures. When would Chunyu Fen wake up from the dream and realize that his experience is only a dream like floating clouds?

2) SL: 窃以某等生维扬花月之区，岂无恶业；接古润金焦之境，亦有善缘。凡依玉蕊之花，尽抱香檀之树。(cited from Scene 4)

TL: As we live in Yangzhou, a place of debauchery, how can we escape from “evil karma”. Yangzhou borders on Zhenjiang, where there are two Buddhist mountains, so we can also soak up the light of Buddha. Who come to rely on the Buddhist temples in Zhenjiang are those who believe in the Buddhist dharma.

“Evil karma” is a Buddhist term, which refers to acts or crimes that harm others, generally done by a greedy person, or improper occupation. In ancient times, people led a gay life in Yangzhou, where whorehouses were ubiquitous. So the negative impacts brought to people were difficult to ignore. “Evil karma” was used to show the deep influence of the place on people and Tang Xianzu’s contempt and disgust towards it. “Gurun” refers to Zhenjiang today, while “Jinjiao” are Mountain Jin and Mountain Jiao in Zhenjiang, which implies there are temples in the two mountains. “Shanyuan” indicates that since Yangzhou is adjacent to Zhenjiang, it is not insulated from the Buddhism and people there can still enjoy the protection of Buddha. And the people who come to rely on the Buddhist temples in Zhenjiang all believe in the Buddhist dharma and seek for the blessing of the Buddha. Therefore, Mountain Jin and Mountain Jiao are omitted. In the last sentence, “flower of jade core” and “tree of sandalwood” are not literally translated, but expressed into the belief of Buddhism and Buddhist temples.

3) SL: 从空下，甚意儿？正秋窗风剪槐叶初，一枕黑甜余，双星使临户。(cited from Scene 10)

TL: What fell from the sky? It was the autumn wind, that blew down the leaves of the locust trees. When I woke up, two stars are at the door.

In the original Chinese text, the “autumn wind blowing down locust leaves” is an unusual collocation. In this word collocation, “wind” is the subject, “blow down” the predicate and “locust leaves” the object. Generally speaking, the subject of “blow down” is human, but in the text the subject of “blow down” is “wind”. Obviously, the wind is anthropomorphic. The autumn wind blows down the locust leaves, which reflects the cold and power of the autumn wind. Meanwhile, it also creates a specific picture of the autumn scene. In this scene, Chunyu Fen felt depressed because he was humble despite his great ambition. The scene of the autumn wind blowing down the leaves of the locust trees reflects his mood. But when he woke up from a drunk dream, two messengers came to brighten his future like stars.

4) SL: 彩云乍展，下妆台回眸低盼。才离月殿，试临朱户，知为谁缱绻，教人腼腆。(Scene 13)

TL: When rosy clouds appeared, I’d been dressed up, looking forward to the bridegroom. Saluting to my parents, I left my palace to the decorated new house. I feel shy under the red bridal veil, waiting for my sweetheart.

Princess Yaofang married to Chunyu Fen, which is the perfect match of a handsome man and a pretty lady, so her heart was full of joy. Tang Xianzu used the festive and colorful words “rosy clouds” and “decorated palace” to depict Yaofang’s psychology at the moment, which is very consistent with the scene. The new couple should salute to the bride’s parents and go to their new home, decorated with red-colored couplets, paper-cutting, silks and carpets. The bride under the red bridal veil waits in the bridal chamber, while the bridegroom toasts to the guests. This scene depicts the wedding day and the psychology of the princess.

5) SL: 俺偷风斫砦寻闲货，则要俺蛇皮鼓再打向花廊过，少不的会温存的飞虎把河桥坐，少不的怕聒炒的昭君出塞和。是惹起风流祸，为一个观音菩萨，起三千拼命喽啰。(cited from Scene 26)

TL: Pretending to be a salesman to spy on military affairs, I beat the snakeskin drum while passing the flower gallery again. Princess Yaofang will be taken far away to the place of the barbarians, unless Chunyu Fen led his troops to save his wife. It is the cause of romantic trouble, a war launched to grab a pretty lady.

The forth prince of Tanluo wanted to rob Chunyu Fen’s wife, Princess Yaofang, so the garrison of Qianjiang River quickly reported the news to Chunyu Fen. Tang Xianzu cited two allusions of Sun Feihu besieging a temple to save a lady and Wang Zhaojun taking the diplomatic mission to the Western Regions (a Han Dynasty term for the area west of Yumenguan, including what is now Xinjiang and parts of Central Asia) to reflect the emergency of rescuing the princess. Either Chunyu Fen led his troops to save his wife, or Princess Yaofang would be taken far away to the place of the barbarians. Foreign readers haven’t the knowledge of either Sun Feihu or Wang Zhaojun, so the implied meaning is interpreted without mentioning the allusions so as to reduce dyslexia. The soldiers of the two countries fought on the battlefield, only because the forth prince of Tanluo wanted to rob Princess Yaofang, who was compared to Guanyin (Avalokitesvara, a Bodhisattva).

6) SL: 俺几度护娇花一寸心。俺则道他美前程一片锦。止知他娇多好呢鸳鸯枕，也怪他病浅长倚翡翠衾。当日个凤将雏，你巧笑禁。今日呵，掌离珠，我气成暗。天呵，俺曾写下了目连经卷也，谁知道佛也无灵被鬼侵。(Scene 35)

TL: I’ve been keeping her under my wings with my whole heart. I thought she had a bright prospect, with an endearing spouse. Who’d ever known, such a good girl would be confined in bed because of illness. You laughed with joy when our daughter was born, but now I choked up with the death of our beloved daughter. Good Heavens, I’ve copied the Maudgalyayana Sutra. How could Buddha feel powerless in front of ghosts.

The queen was devastated by the tragic death of her daughter. “Keeping her under my wings” shows the extreme care and love of the queen towards the princess, while “with my whole heart” reflects the sadness and helplessness of the queen after hearing the news of her daughter’s death. The king and the queen thought that such a good girl could have a bright prospect with her beloved husband. However, she was confined in bed because of illness. Compared

to the happiness on the day when the princess was born, the king and the queen were indulged in great sadness. The queen complained to heaven that she had copied all the scriptures, how could Buddha do nothing in front of death. The pain of the parents losing their beloved daughter is expressed incisively and vividly.

5. Conclusion

We are required to stand on the intersection of Chinese and western cultures, with the vision of Chinese and western comparison, with a specific translation purpose, and adopt a unique translation strategy to achieve the expected function of translation: “the overseas promotion of Chinese culture”. Therefore, translators should stand on the basis of western readers’ understanding of the time differences and language differences in Chinese culture and avoid unintelligibility because of over-interpretation. At present, abridged translation and adaptation can be taken to select appropriate classic Chinese cultural stories and spread them to western readers in a popular way, with cultural consciousness as the core. In this paper, based on former scholars’ theories of cultural translation, “meaning prior to form” was applied to translate *The Nanke Dream* to help foreign readers have a better understanding of classical works. Except for thorough and meticulous academic research, the method is applicable to the translation of most Chinese classics.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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