



Translating Characters' Names in *Hong Lou Meng* during the 20th Century: From Seeking Lexical Equivalence to Maintaining Communicative Function

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Abstract

The classic Chinese novel *Hong Lou Meng* has been introduced into many different cultures through an important medium: translation. Over one dozen of English versions have been published so far, and have been studied by so many researchers. In those translated works, a variety of translation strategies are adopted for translating characters' names. Name translation is a small field of studies on translating *Hong Lou Meng*, however this topic is not only interesting but also important. This study examines how characters' names in *Hong Lou Meng* are translated in the various versions of the novel's English translation, and investigates the reasons behind the name-translation strategies. More specifically, this paper focused on the four English versions of *Hong Lou Meng* published in the 1920s and 1970s. Different translation strategies and associated underpinning reasons are revealed. Specifically, translators in 1920s (e.g. Wang Chi-Chen, 1929) tackled the task of translating names in *Hong Lou Meng* by word-to-word translation and pin-yin transcription, placing an emphasis on seeking an equivalence at the lexical level. Hawkes (1973) and Yangs (1978), on the other hand, made more efforts to determine the functions of the character names in the source text and attempted to find methods that would more adequately render the functions in the translated work. Through examining the prevailing theories for translating Chinese texts into foreign languages during those two periods, together with name-translation by different translators, the study reveals that the changes in translators' strategy in the name-translation indicates a shift from seeking lexical equivalence to maintaining communicative function.

Keywords

Chinese-English Translation, Lexical Equivalence, Functional Equivalence, Translation History, Characters' Names, *Hong Lou Meng*

Subject Areas: Literature

1. Introduction

As a classic with an eternal appeal in its own country, the Chinese novel *Hong Lou Meng* has 975 characters, 732 of which have individualized names. The novel has been introduced into many different cultures through an important medium: translation. Over one dozen of English versions have been published so far. In those translated works, a variety of translation strategies are adopted for translating characters' names. All these strategies form a history of translating characters' names in *Hong Lou Meng*. As a study of translation history, this study not only examines how characters' names in *Hong Lou Meng* are translated in the various versions of the novel's English translation, but also investigates the reasons behind the name-translation strategies.

History of translation is one of the four areas of translation studies, as well as a component of literary history [1], while translation history is more than a description of translation activities, results, and processes. The essence is asking why certain translations are done in certain ways [2]. More specifically, this paper focuses on the four English versions of *Hong Lou Meng* published in the 1920s and 1970s. Through examining the prevailing theories for translating Chinese texts into foreign languages during those two periods, together with name-translation by different translators, the study reveals that the changes in translators' strategy in the name-translation indicates a shift from seeking lexical equivalence to maintaining communicative function.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Hong Long Meng* and Its English Translations

Hong Long Meng was originally written by Cao Xueqin. The novel has been passed down since its first manuscript of sixteen chapters was found in 1754. The following chapters were uncovered throughout the following years and there are in total eighty chapters written by Cao himself, and another forty chapters written by his successor Gao, E., whose identity hasn't been acknowledged by many researchers. Due to its long history of hand-copying and editing done by writers in the later generations, *Hong Lou Meng* has many slightly different versions with the same characters. But this didn't stop the effort of translating this classic novel. All the three ways of interpreting a verbal sign, namely *Intralingual*, *Interlingual*, and *Intersemiotic translation* [3], have been undertaken in the case of translating *Hong Lou Meng*. Intralingual translation has been applied as this novel has numerous adapted versions for children, adolescents, and adults written in its original language Chinese; interlingual translation has been applied as the novel has been interpreted into many other languages; intersemiotic translation refers to the translation from the written works into other forms of presentation, and this novel has been transmitted into other forms of art such as operas and films.

There are many English versions of *Hong Lou Meng*. Some of them have only several chapters, some of them are adaptations, and some of them are completed versions. Four important English publications based on *Hong Lou Meng* prior to the 20th century are *Chinese Poetry* by John Davis (1830), *Dream of Red Chamber* by Robert Tom (1846), *Dream of Red Chamber* by Edward Charles Bowra (1868), and *Dream of Red Chamber* by Ben-craft Joly (1892).

This study focuses on publications around the two high points of modern Chinese translation, especially in the field of literature: 1920s and 1970s [4]. The former has representative publications *Dream of the Red Chamber* translated by Wang Chi-Chen, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Wang Liangzhi. The most well-known English versions published in 1970s are *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang, and *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes & John Minford.

2.2. Translating Characters' Names

Both oriental and western writers fancy endowing characters' names with special meanings. For instance, Mr. Worldly Wiseman in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Murderstone in *David Copperfield*, and Mr. Allworthy in *The History of Tom Jones*. Names in *Hong Lou Meng* are similarly endowed with special meanings. The majority of names in this novel contain words referring to different types of germs or flowers, and at the same time, many characters' names are suggestive of the destiny or personality of the characters.

To illustrate, characters Lin Daiyu's and Xue Baochai's family names both have implied meanings. The family name "Lin" is a simile of wood, trees or forests while the family name "Xue" is a metaphor for snow. The first name Daiyu is a piece of black jade, and the first name Baochai is a precious hairpin. In the novel, there is a painting indicating the fate of the two ladies. Their family names Lin and Xue were represented by the image of

two trees and a pile of snow, and their given names by “a jade belt” and “a golden hairpin”. So the overall portrait were “a jade belt hanging on the tree” and “a golden hairpin buried in a pile of snow”. Their names are suggestive of the fragile, sensitive and secluded personality of Lin Daiyou and the quality of Xue Baochai as a hidden treasure respectively, which is made vivid with the help of the portrait. If the implied meanings of their names were lost in the English version, readers would not understand what the painting is referring to, and as a result, they cannot appreciate the choreographed scenarios. Therefore although name translation hasn’t been the focus of the majority of translation tasks and studies, it is of great significance in translating this novel. There is a difference between name translation achieved on the level of lexical equivalence and on the functional equivalence. A lexical equivalence between the original names and the translated versions refers to the transfer on the lexical level through simple transcription or word-to-word literal translation; a functional equivalence, on the other hand, could be achieved through other translation strategies to maintain the hidden implication and the communicative function of the names.

The most common way of translating names from Chinese to English is *transcription*, which refers to a method that matches the sounds of terms in one language to those in another. In Chinese-to-English translation, names are usually transcribed into Chinese pin-yin, Latin letters that do not possess phonological value for English speakers. Even native Chinese could hardly grab the essence of the names’ connotation carefully shaped by the author through reading pin-yin, let alone foreign readers, whose knowledge, background, or aesthetic value have little association to Chinese pin-yin. As a result, pin-yin could never suffice in helping readers to make any connection between the names and their suggested implication or image. This is the reason why some translators have adopted other strategies in their translation to compensate the loss.

Each components of the language in a story tells something as part of the story or serves a function in the story-telling. This function of a component may or may not be maintained for different groups of readers. Katharina Reiss [5] argues that functional equivalence cannot be guaranteed if the readers of the literal work are different from those the work intended to serve originally. For example, *Hong Lou Meng* was written for well educated readers from high social classes in the eighteenth century’s China, and it is doubtful that the translated versions are reaching a similar group of readers, not to mention that the original book and the translated versions are in different languages. However, the functions of characters’ names in this novel are a necessary part of the story-telling. Although not every character name in *Hong Lou Meng* has implied meaning, some of the names reflect characters’ personalities, and some tell readers about the characters’ fate, etc. Therefore, an effort should be made to maintain the functions of the characters’ names in translating *Hong Lou Meng*, in spite of the difficulty in achieving it.

2.3. Previous Studies on Name Translation

In the twenty-first century, a number of translation studies have been conducted, demonstrating a growing interest in investigating the optimal techniques to translate the great work. Some studies focus on one single translated version (e.g. [6]), while some others contrastive researches (e.g. [7], [8]) compared at least two translators’ work, examining topics such as the choice of vocabularies, construction of sentences, or maintenance of aesthetics in the context.

Besides the translation of traditional poetry, special expressions, and title of each chapter, the research related to translating *Hong Lou Meng* has taken on a new topic: Names in *Hong Lou Meng*. Some researchers found the task of translating names in *Hong Lou Meng* both meaningful and challenging and then carried out researches exclusively on name-translation, both non-contrastive (e.g. [9] [10]) and contrastive studies, many of which compared the edition written by David Hawkes & John Minford with that by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang. For example, the paper written by Wang Jinbo and Wang Yan [11] analyzed the similarities and differences between the methods applied by individual translators. Their study concluded that Hawkes & Minford’s version is target-oriented, while Yangs’ version is source-oriented. In 2007, Zhuang Weiguo’s [12] research mainly analyzed the two techniques employed by translators: Foreignization and Domestication. Later, some other researchers such as Huang Xiaoyi [13] had stressed the necessity and priority for translators to pursue new achievements in name-translation. This research differentiates itself from the previous studies by focusing on the historical perspective of the name-translation of *Hong Lou Meng*. The translated versions used in this study are from those published in the 1920s and 1970s, two important periods with intense discussion in China about translating literature.

3. Discussion: From a Historical Perspective

3.1. 1920s: Seeking Lexical Equivalence

The period from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to the outbreak of World War Two is viewed as “the decisive period in modern Chinese translation history” [4]. Chinese translators were having debates on the proper language for translating foreign literature into Chinese (e.g. [14], [15]). During this period, Europeanized structures and expressions were introduced to Chinese readers through translated works, and some of them were digested and absorbed into the Chinese language [4].

At the same time, translators were seeking formal correspondence between original and target text to achieve fidelity, which was viewed as the first criterion for translation by many translators. There was a similar trend in the Chinese-to-English translation during the period. Although it was doubtful that this effort of seeking lexical equivalence in every aspect of translation was unanimous, this paper suggests that its influence on contemporary translation theories is evident, which can be examined through the way of how individual translators translated the names in *Hong Lou Meng*.

Translator Wang Chi-Chen’s and Wang Liangzhi struggled to seek lexical equivalence in their own and separate translations of *Hong Lou Meng*, both of which were under the same name: *Dream of the Red Chamber*. They adopted a similar strategy for name-translation: some names were translated word by word, while the others were transcribed.

Taking Wang Chi-Chen’s publication [16] as an example, names such as “Lin Daiyu”, “Xue Baochai”, “Zi Juan”, and “Shi Xiangyun” were translated word by word into English as Black Jade, Precious Virtue, Purple Cuckoo, River Mist. The translation shift happening between the original names and the translated versions is a “unit-shift” [17]. Although these names read like phrases, an equal value has been abstained on the lexical level since two-word names are translated respectively into two English words. This type of equivalence is not a natural equivalence, because after being back-translated, the names do not remain the same. Hence they are viewed as “directional equivalence” [18] created by the translator. However, the equal value on a lexical level made very limited contribution to helping readers understanding characters’ roles in the novel. But instead, it sometimes even misled readers in interpreting characters’ personalities [12].

Another type of translation technique used by these two translators is transcription. Characters whose names have no direct connection with objects such as germs or flowers were all transcribed in accordance with their pronunciations. The equivalence was achieved on the phonological level. However, without further explanations, a pin-yin name in the English versions failed to communicate anything, beyond being a designation of a character.

It has been argued that translators should not approach equivalence by searching for “sameness”, which can rarely be achieved in intralingual translation, let alone in interlingual translation [1]. Less transferable associations and connotations in characters’ original names left translators with the choice of resorting to “dynamic equivalence” [19], which focuses on achieving equivalent effect through preserving the relationship between readers and texts in the original novel. However, seeking lexical equivalence seemed to be the dominating strategy during this period.

3.2. 1970s: Maintaining Communicative Function

Since 1950s, translation study has gradually emerged as a specialized knowledge [20]. In the late 20th century, Chinese translators advocated departing from word-to-word literary translation, and paid more attention to transmitting the sense of the language (e.g. [21]). An explosive growth of translation came after Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), accompanied by changes in how translation was done [22]. The focus was shift from discussing the language of translation, for example linguistic equivalence, to the art of translating and translation theories.

A Dream of Red Mansions translated by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang [23] and *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes & John Minford [24] are the two most popular translated versions published in 1970s. Hawkes translated the first eighty chapters written by Cao Xueqin, and Minford translated the following forty chapters. Names in Minford’s translation remain the same as those appeared in Hawkes’ translation [24].

Transcription was also used in many cases of name-translation, but not in the same way as it was used by the translators in 1920s. In the earlier period, whether a name was transcribed or literally translated depended on

whether this name contains characters referring to objects such as germs, flowers or animals. In 1970s, the attention was shifted from the Chinese characters of the names to the function of names. Characters' names that do not have implied meanings were transcribed in accordance with their pronunciations. For those names with implied meaning, Hawkes and Yangs resorted to other ways to supplement the transcription.

The Yangs [23] had adopted transcription more than Hawkes and Minford [24] and sought compensation through annotation, which was advocated by Xia Dengshan [25]. Although it would give readers a clear insight into the implications of names such as Jia Yu-Cun, which was noted by Yang Xianyi [23] as *homophone for fiction in rustic language* [7], this method itself has certain drawbacks in practice. If a translator keeps annotating names every time they show up, it may block the whole reading process. But if the translator only explains the names in the first place, readers would easily forget their connotations in the following context.

David Hawkes [24] noticed the value of properly translating Chinese names in *Hong Lou Meng*. His *The Story of the Stone* (vol. 1) has a note meticulously explaining the spelling of Chinese names, which says: "Chinese proper names in this book are spelled in accordance with a system invented by the Chinese and used internationally, which is known by its Chinese name of Pin-yin" [24]. He also noted that the systems of spelling and pronunciation are "tedious and hard to follow" [24]. David Hawkes' attempt to explain the spelling of Chinese names was a breakthrough in terms of the heightened attention to the name-translation.

David Hawkes combined transcription, annotation, and liberal translation in his version of *Hong Lou Meng*. This translator attached great importance to the communicative function of characters' names. He also included an appendix explaining the meaning of the characters' names and their kinship. Here is one specific name for illustrating Hawkes' liberal translation: Huo Qi, whose homonym means "the beginning of catastrophe" [24]. The name was associated with his position in the plot as he started a misfortune in the novel. David Hawkes named him "Calamity" according to the homophone [24]. Other names with implied meanings were all liberally translated by David Hawkes. Whilst many researchers thought highly of his strategy, this essay questions his strategy for three reasons. First, a negative expression like this could not be a natural name for a real person. Second, Hawkes used a single word to cover both Huo Qi's family name and given name, making readers confused about his full name. Last but not least, the beauty of homonymic names and the room for readers' imagination is lost. As Baker pointed out, to bridge the gap between readers' knowledge and the original connotation in source text and culture, translators should be careful "not to overdo things by explaining too much and leaving readers with nothing to do" [26].

Another Hawkes' strategy is also note-worthy. He domesticated the name "Bu Shi-Ren" by equaling it with "Mr. Hardleigh Hewman" [24]. Although according to Catford [17], the level shifts could only happen between grammar and lexis, in this case the equal value was achieved through a level shift from phonological level to lexical level, or at least through a joint shift of both levels. Compared with liberally translated name "Calamity", "Hardleigh Hewman" is close to a real western name that has both family name and given name, as well as its sense of humor and space for imagination.

Both of two translated versions published in 1970s place an emphasis on communicative function of the character's names. The translators realized the significance of interpreting names, and acknowledged the difficulty of accomplishing the mission of adhering to the conventions of names in English and maintaining the implied meanings of the Chinese names as relating to the storyline in *Hong Lou Meng*.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, it is impossible to guarantee a match between the content of a message in a source language and an expression in the target language [27]. This is because "each language has its own patterns to convey the inter-relationships of persons and events" [28], and languages "do not express all aspects of meaning with equal ease" [29].

Name translation is a small field of studies on translating *Hong Lou Meng*. However this topic is not only interesting but also important. It seems that oriental and western names do not have "mutual translatability" [3] due to the completely different naming conventions. Just as Enkvist [30] argues that "a sentence is not autonomous, it does not exist for its own sake but as part of a situation and part of a text", many characters' names in *Hong Lou Meng* also exist as indispensable parts of the novel. The author's intention is verbalized and must be understood by the translator, who then recreates it for the readership in a target culture [31]. Through adopting appropriate translation strategies, translators have enhanced the translatability of characters' names in their own

way.

Through examining how name-translation was done for *Hong Lou Meng* in 1920s and 1970s, various translation strategies and associated underpinning reasons are revealed. Specifically, translators in 1920s (e.g. [16]) tackled the task of translating names in *Hong Lou Meng* by word-to-word translation and pin-yin transcription, placing an emphasis on seeking an equivalence at the lexical level. Hawkes [24] and Yangs [23]), on the other hand, made more efforts to determine the functions of the character names in the source text and attempted to find methods that would more adequately render the functions in the translated work.

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