

# On the Formal Equivalence of Translating Classical Chinese Drama

—Centered on the English translations of the Northern Drama *Han gong qiu* of the Yuan Dynasty

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## Abstract

The Northern drama (*zaju*) of the Yuan Dynasty has distinct formal characteristics in terms of script structure, arias and speaking lines, musical modes and song suites, as well as the linguistic register and metrical requirements. By comparing the three English translations of the Northern drama (*zaju*) *Han gong qiu* with the original Chinese text, there appear several deficiencies in presenting the capacity of performability and readability of this text, which includes the misplacing of the literary status of the songs and dialogue, the omitting of the musical modes and metrics. The formal feature exemplifies the “significant form” and poses an indispensable part of the content of *Yuan Zaju*.

## Keywords

Formal Features, English Translations, *Yuan zaju*, *Han gong qiu*, Performability, Readability

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## 1. Introduction

The theory of equivalence in translation was proposed by the American linguist and translation theorist Eugene A. Nida (1914-2011) during the 1960s and 1970s. The equivalence theory has experienced the development from dynamic equivalence to functional equivalence, but formal equivalence has always been the basic issue discussed by Nida. He emphasizes that the formal structure of the source language should be retained in the target language, regardless of whether this formal structure conforms to the expression norms of the target language (Guo,

1999). In other words, the translator should center on the source language text in the translation practice and achieve equivalence with the source language text as much as possible in terms of grammatical form, term, and meaning. However, as far as literary translation is concerned, literary genres, textual structure, and poetic style will also be included in the formal aspects of the text. Therefore, when focusing on the study of the English translations of the classical Chinese drama text, we find that the meet of formal equivalence of the genre style, textual structure, and poetic style of drama text in the rendered version is significant for conveying the aesthetic and cultural value of the classical Chinese drama.

As one of the subgenres of classical Chinese drama, the Northern drama (*zaju*) of the Yuan Dynasty (元雜劇)<sup>1</sup> has distinct formal characteristics in terms of script structure (劇本結構), arias and speaking lines (曲唱賓白), musical modes and song suites (宮調套數), as well as the linguistic register and metrical requirements (曲牌格律), etc. Meanwhile, these formal characteristics are essentially an important part of the “content” of *zaju*. In reading and translating *zaju*, the aesthetic and stylistic uniqueness will be lost if the formal features are discarded. As the representative piece of *Yuan zaju*, *Han gong qiu* has enjoyed high popularity among English translators ever since the nineteenth century. There are several English translations of *Han gong qiu*, including full translation and abridged translation. In 1829, John Francis Davis (1795-1890) first translated this drama into English as *Han Koong Tsew, or the Sorrow of Han: A Chinese Tragedy*, and published it in London. Davis only translated the narrative part with and a very small amount of songs, which can be regarded as abridged translation. There are three full translations of this drama, including *Autumn in the Palace of Han (Han kung ch'iu)* translated in 1965 by American Japanologist Donald Keene (1922-2019) (Keene, 1965), *Autumn in Han Palace* translated in 1972 by the translator Liu Jung-en (劉榮恩, 1908-2001), and *Breaking a Troubling Dream: A Lone Goose in Autumn over the Palace of Han* co-translated in 2010 by Sinologists of Stephen H. West (1944-) and Wilt L. Idema (1944-) (Referred to as West & Idema version in the following). These translations show different characteristics in translation strategies and in presenting the formal features of the original text. Considering the historical and cultural contexts of the various translations mentioned above, the following discussion will focus on three translation texts provided by J. F. Davis, Liu Jung-en, and West & Idema.

Based on the analysis of the formal features of *Han gong qiu's* text and the comparative study of the English translations of this drama, we will discuss how the formal features are transformed by different translators, as well as what influences will be exerted on the reception of the *zaju* out of China based on the status of the formal equivalence achieved by those translations.

<sup>1</sup>There have been different ways of addressing *Yuan Zaju* generated in the history of translation, such as Northern drama of the Yuan Dynasty, northern miscellaneous drama, Yuan dynasty drama, and so on. Here we follow Stephen West and Wilt Idema's translation as Northern drama of the Yuan dynasty, or directly using *zaju* as needed. See West and Idema (2010: p. x).

## 2. *Han gong qiu*: The Original Text and Its Formal Features

*Han gong qiu* was composed by the playwright Ma Zhiyuan (馬致遠, date of birth and death unknown, active around the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century) in the Yuan Dynasty. It tells the story of the Yuan Emperor (元帝) of the Western Han Dynasty and his beloved concubine Zhaojun (昭君). Being threatened by the Huns in the west border, Yuan Emperor is forced to send Zhaojun out of the fortress and marry the king of the Huns in seeking peace. There are four Chinese editions of *Han gong qiu* preserved, included in four different anthologies of *zaju* drama, namely *Selection of Yuan Plays* (*Yuan Qu Xuan*, 元曲選, also known by its alternate title as *One hundred plays by Yuan Authors* (*Yuanren Baizhong qu*, 元人百種曲) compiled by Zang Maoxun (臧懋循, 1550-1620), *Zaju New and Ancient Copied and Collated in the Maiwang Studio* (*Maiwang guan chaojiaoben gujin zaju*, 脈望館鈔校本古今雜劇) edited by Zhao Qimei (趙琦美, 1563-1624), *Ancient Zaju* (*Gu zaju*, 古雜劇) compiled by Wang Jide (王驥德, d. 1623), and *Anthology of Libation to the River* (*Leijiang Ji*, 酌江集) compiled by Meng Chengshun (孟稱舜, ca. 1600-1655).

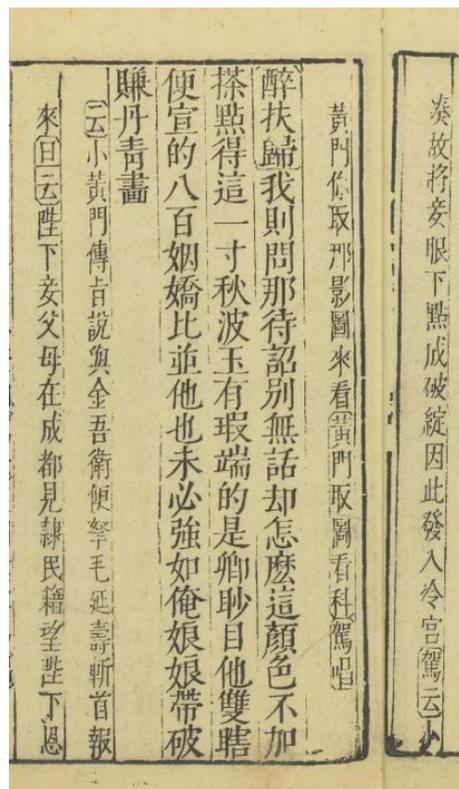
As one of the classical plays of *Yuan zaju*, the text of *Han gong qiu* is endowed with both “readability” and “performability” and presents formal features of *zaju* as following: 1) the script structure is divided into four acts (*zhe*, 折) with one wedge (*xiezi*, 楔子, means interlude); 2) role types include Mo (lead male, 末), Dan (lead female, 旦), Wai (secondary male, 外), Jing (secondary male, 淨), Chou (comic, 丑), etc.; 3) the whole text is composed of songs and speaking lines. Usually the songs are lyrical and emotional, while the speaking lines promote the narration of the plot; 4) songs are usually sung by one role type. In *Han gong qiu*, it is “Zheng Mo” (lead male, 正末) who plays the Yuan Emperor of the Western Han Dynasty and sings although the drama. Other roles only undertake the dialogue parts without singing; 5) each act adopts an individual song suite and each song suite consists of a series of single-stanza songs regulated by the same musical modes; 6) each musical suite and song has their own suite title and song title, as well as specific metrical requirements, such as tone pattern (*pingze*, 平仄), antithesis (*duizhang*, 對仗), alliteration, etc.; and 7) songs under the same musical mode are written to the same rhyme. Reading only the narrative parts may not affect the reader's understanding of the whole plot. The formal features of the songs and the predetermined musical modes listed in 5), 6), and 7) are essential core features and challenges for the translation. Therefore, whether it is centered on the source text or the reader's response, the “form” of the *zaju* plays a higher priority than the plot in interlingual translation.

From the perspective of whether drama scripts are used for reading or performing, most of the scripts may fall into at least three categories, closet-drama, theatrical script, and scripts that are suitable for both reading and performing. As a script of the third category, *Han gong qiu* is endowed with capacities of both performability and readability. Therefore, those seven formal features listed above can roughly be sorted by these two capacities, and there must be features

that carry more than one capacity. For instance, features 1, 2, 3, and 4 are shared ones on page and on stage; while points 5, 6, and 7 are directly related to the aesthetic and poetic effects of the closet-drama. The classical Chinese drama review stresses songs and metrics most, which made the latter three features significant to closet-drama. However, feature 5 is also the essential factor of the theatricality of the performance onstage. It is closely related to how the leading singer and the orchestra interpret the lyrics and the music. Therefore, thought facing the complex situation where performability and readability are entangled in the same play, we have to adopt a simplified way to discuss how translators of *Han gong qiu* present the formal features based on the distinctions of performability and readability.

### 3. Formal Presentation of Performability

The English translations of *Han gong qiu* all retain the “four acts with one wedge” structure but show obvious differences in the presentation of the performability, which includes stylistic forms that differentiate songs and speaking lines, as well as stage directions of the play. Here, we take an excerpt from the first act of the original text as an example (Figure 1). It happens when Yuan Emperor falls in love with his concubine Zhaojun at the first sight only to discover that Zhaojun’s portrait was blemished intentionally by the imperial portraitist Mao Yanshou.



**Figure 1.** Zang Maoxun ed. *Selection of Yuan Plays (Yuanqu xuan)*, vol 1, printed during the Wanli Reign in Ming Dynasty, pp. 6b-7a (Zang, 1615).

(駕雲)小黃門，你取那影圖來看，(黃門取圖看科)(駕唱)

【醉扶歸】我則問那待詔別無話，卻怎麼這顏色不加搽？點得這一寸秋波玉有暇。端的是卿眇目，他雙睛？便宜的八百姻嬌比並他，也未必強如俺娘娘帶破賺丹青畫。

(雲)小黃門，傳旨說與金吾衛，便拿毛延壽斬首報來(Wang, 1990)。

The bracketed words in smaller font size, such as (駕雲) (the Emperor says), (駕唱) (the Emperor sings), and (雲) (says), are implying actions of singing or speaking; while (黃門取圖看科) (the attendant fetches the portrait for a look) means an instruction for certain movement and activities onstage. The name appeared within the bracket in large font size, like [醉扶歸] (*zuifugui*) represents the song title (*qupai*, 曲牌). The song contains six short sentences with six characters to the same rhyme (highlighted by the bold font), namely the rhyme of *jia* and *ma*, (佳麻韻, as *jia* and *ma* rhyme with the same vowel). If the padding words (*chenzi*, 襯字) are removed, the aria will show its neat form that the number of the characters of the six short sentences should be 5/5/7/5/6/5 as the underlining sentences show, and the tone pattern (*pingze*, 平仄) of the final sentence is set to be “| | — — |” (仄仄平平仄)<sup>2</sup> (Zhu, 1959).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, from the perspective of “performability”, the text contains stage directions of singing, speaking, and prompt of actions for different roles; while from the perspective of “readability”, musical and poetical forms and features are also presented.

Let’s review how different translators deal with this excerpt.

Translation from Davis:

EMP.—Keeper of the yellow gate, bring us that picture, that we may view it. (*Sees the Picture*.) “Ah, how has he dimmed the purity of the gem, bright as the waves in autumn!”<sup>3</sup> (*To the attendant*). Transmit our pleasure to the officer of the guard to behead Maouyenshow, and report to us his execution (Davis, 1829).

Davis keeps the speaking lines and the stage directions, using the brackets and italics form to distinguish these lines. But the stanza of six short sentences has only one left as 點得這一寸秋波玉有暇. Davis abandons most of the arias, let alone the titles of the suites and songs. As to the few sentences of arias maintained in his translation, he tends to prosify the metrical sentence and keep the plot in a natural and coherent status. This is the main translation strategy presented from Davis’ version.

Liu Jung-en’s translation:

EMPEROR YÜAN: Boy, bring me the portrait and let me see.

*The YOUNG EUNUCH shows the portrait.*

There is only one question I shall ask the painter,

How could his colours have failed him so?

<sup>2</sup>“—” stands for the flat tones (*pingsheng*, 平聲) of *yinping* (陰平) and *yangping* (陽平); “|” stands for the oblique tones (*zesheng*, 仄聲) of *shang* (上), *qu* (去), and *ru* (入). See Zhu (1959: p. 107).

<sup>3</sup>Original note in Davis version: “The passages with inverted commas are selected from the musical portion.” See Davis (1829: p. 16).

He draws the autumn ripple of your eye as if it were a flaw in a jade,  
 As if indeed your eye were blind,  
 Or he were blind in both.  
 If the eight hundred beauties of my court were gathered to compare,  
 Not one could surpass my lady's portrait even with its flaw.  
 Boy, bear my orders to the captain of the palace guard to have Mao  
 Yen-shou arrested and beheaded. Then report to me (Liu, 1972).

Liu translates all the speaking lines and song stanza. He marks the roles and directions in different formats. For example, capital words point to the role types, italics refers to the stage directions, and newline indicates the lyrics. However, readers cannot tell the difference between the speaking lines and the arias. The poetic styles including the song title and the metrical form of the original text are completely lost in the translation. In other parts of Liu's translation of *Han gong qiu*, we also find that the songs he omitted involve allusions and proper names, which have strong intertextuality with Chinese history and traditional culture and are always the most challenging part of the translation.

West & Idema's translation:

(EMPEROR:) Eunuch, get me that portrait! (Eunuch *fetches the portrait and enters*. EMPEROR *acts out looking at it*):

(*Zui fu gui*)

I will have  
 No other questions for that painter:  
 Except, "Why  
 Did you not do justice to this face?"  
 He has turned  
 A single inch of autumn ripples into a blemished jade.<sup>4</sup>  
 Really,  
 If you are one-eyed,  
 He was doubly blind.  
 Were I to summon forth  
 My eight hundred beautiful concubines to compare with her,  
 They would not necessarily  
 Out do my lady's painted portrait even with all its blemishes!

Eunuch, transmit my order to the commander of the guard to immediately arrest Mao Yanshou and have him beheaded! Afterwards have him report to me (West & Idema, 2010).

West & Idema keep a high consistency with the original script in terms of roles, speaking lines and songs, and stage directions. The newline is employed to arrange lyrics of the aria; names of the musical mode and song title are transliterated in Chinese Pinyin; the padding words in the original text are singled out.

<sup>4</sup>Here is the original note from West & Idema's text: "'Autumn ripple' is a conventional metaphor for beautiful eyes, because autumn rivers are assumed to be especially clear." See West and Idema (2010: p. 169).

The translators also explain the rhetoric usage of “autumn waves” in the annotation, and adopt a stricter literal translation supplemented by “thick translation” in the annotation to achieve the formal equivalence with the original script.

By comparison, West & Idema’s translation is the most complete translation of *Han gong qiu* in the correspondence of the formal features. But it still gives up in presenting the metrics of the song, which shows a prosifying translation strategy in rendering the poetic forms. Davis’ practice of abandoning arias and mixing speaking lines and stage directions has greatly weakened the presentation of the unique style and aesthetic form of *Yuan zaju* in his translation. As he states in the “Preface”, “They (arias) are frequently, moreover, mere repetitions or amplifications of the prose parts; and being intended more for the ear than for the eye, are rather adapted to the stage than to the closet” (Davis, 1829). The French Jesuit and Sinologist Jean Baptiste du Halde (1674-1743) writes in the “advertisement” for another *Yuan zaju* *The Orphan of Zhao* (*Zhaoshi gu’er*, 趙氏孤兒) that, “it must be remembered that, among the Chinese, the Singing is to express some great Emotion of the Soul, such as Joy, Grief, Anger, or Despair.....There are Plays the Songs of which are difficult to be understood, because they are full of Allusions to things unknown to us, and Figures of Speech very difficult for us to observe” (Halde, 1739). Therefore, it is difficult to achieve formal equivalence in translation *Yuan zaju*. The reasons are related not only to whether the target language has an equivalent form but also to the high-cultural characteristics of the *Yuan zaju* script itself.

#### 4. Formal Presentation of the Readability

The standardization process of the musical modes, rhymes, and metrics of *Yuan zaju*, which is the essential domain of the readability of a script, has been one of the core issues studies ever since the Yuan dynasties. We will take the first three stanzas of the musical modes in the second act of *Han gong qiu* as the case to evaluate the formal presentations by different translations (Figure 2).

【南呂·一枝花】四時雨露勻，萬里江山秀。忠臣皆有用，高枕已無憂。  
守著那皓齒星眸，爭忍的虛白晝。近新來染得些症候，一半兒為國憂民，  
一半兒愁花病酒。

【梁州第七】我雖是見宰相似文王施禮，一頭地離明妃，早宋玉悲秋。  
怎奈他帶天香著莫定龍衣袖。他諸餘可愛，所事兒相投；消磨人幽悶，  
陪伴我閒遊；偏宜向梨花月底登樓，芙蓉燭下藏鬪。體態是二十年挑剔  
就的溫柔，因緣是五百載該撥下的配偶，臉兒有一千般說不盡的風流。  
寡人乞求他左右，他比那落迦山觀自在無楊柳，見一面得長壽。情繫人  
心早晚休，則除是雨歇雲收。

【隔尾】恁的般長門前抱怨的宮娥舊，怎知我西宮下偏心兒夢境熟。愛  
她晚妝罷，描不成畫不就，尚對菱花自羞。(做到旦背後看科)(唱)我來到  
這妝台背後，原來廣寒殿嫦娥在這月明裡有(Wang, 1990)。

These three songs with different song titles, named *yizhijhua* (一枝花),



nese ladies, which are compared to the lunar crescent when only a day or two old” (Davis, 1829).

2) Liu Jung-en’s translation:

Each season its measure of rain and dew,  
 A kingdom rich in hills and streams,  
 Officials loyal and well employed,  
 No cares to unsettle happy sleep.  
 I worship one of snow-white teeth and eyes like stars,  
 The wasteful daytime I can hardly bear!  
 Some sickness now has overtaken me,  
 Part anxious for my realm and people,  
 Part languishing for love and wine.  
 How can I bear her heavenly fragrance lingering on my dragon-robe sleeves!  
 Everything that is hers is lovely,  
 In everything our thoughts are one.

...

Within the Long Gate Palace my former concubines complain.  
 How could they know in the Western Palace I dwell among my dreams?

...

Behold! Ch’ang Ngo in the Hall of Immense Cold,  
 Caught in a moon’s brightness (Liu, 1972).

3) West & Idema’s translation:

([NANLÜ MODE:] *Yizhi hua*)

Trough the four seasons, rain and dew spread in due portion,  
 Making ten thousand miles of rivers and mountains splendid.  
 The loyal ministers all have their employment,  
 We have no care or worry in the world!

I’m staying close.

To white teeth and sparkling eyes—  
 How could we bear to leave any bright daylight unused?

But recently

We’ve been infected by some illness,

Due half to

Our care for country and people,

And half to

Our craving for flowers and wine.

(*Lianzhou diqi*)

Even though

When receiving Our Prime Minister in audience,  
 We are alike to King Wen in Our display of respect,

As soon as

We are apart from the Radiant Consort,

We turn into a Song Yu sorrowing over autumn!  
 How can I prevent  
 Her natural perfume from wafting out of my dragon-gown sleeves when  
 they stir?  
 She is adorable in everything,  
 She matches Our Mind in all she does.  
 She dispels one's gloomiest depression,  
 And keeps me company in idle roamings.

...

(*Gewei*)

How did it happen  
 That this resentful beauty from the front of Tall Gate should have become  
 my darling,  
 And wound up as  
 The favorite apparition of my dreams in the western palace?

...

Yes, indeed

Chang E in her Palace of Broad Cold  
 Can be found in this moon (West & Idema, 2010)!

Firstly, from the perspective of the formal equivalence of the arias and the metrics, the translations of Liu and West & Idema adopt a blank verse style with breaking lines to correspond to the songs but lose the tone pattern, rhyme, and antithesis of the original script. In all the translations listed above, the poetic features and cultural traditions of *zaju* carried by the musical and metrical forms are completely obscured.

Secondly, from the perspective of the formal arrangement of the song suites, there are conventional rules for the order of the song titles and also very strict rules for the metrics of the song suites in each act of the drama. Such features are formed under both musical and literal restrictions. As the cases presented above, Liu abandons all the musical modes and song titles. On contrary, West & Idema employ Chinese pinyin to transliterate the musical modes and song titles, which demonstrate their effort in fulfilling the form equivalence.

Li Yu (李漁, 1611-1680), a famous and productive playwright in the Qing Dynasty, emphasized that “the essence of poetry and songs in drama lies in the strict regulations, firstly of musical modes, secondly of tone patterns, and lastly of the number of characters” (Li, 1959). Without formal features, *Yuan zaju* will lose its characteristics as a style and subgenre of classical Chinese drama, as well as the distinctions with other styles, such as modern drama script. Taking *Han gong qiu* as a case, we have explored several deficiencies of the formal equivalence in translingual and transcultural translations. Such deficiencies, on the one hand, may be attributed to the lack of relevant formal features in the target language and culture; on the other hand, may be determined a priori by the inherent feature and structure of different languages. It seems obvious that interlin-

gual translation cannot achieve strict formal equivalence. However, how to avoid the loss of cultural significance and meaningful form in the translation practice is still worthy of our efforts.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the formal presentations of script structures, capacities of the performability and readability of the original *Han gong qiu* text, we have found that all translations reveal deficiencies of form equivalence, which directly affect the understanding of *Yuan zaju* and classical Chinese drama from readers' and researchers' side. These translations will also cause a completely different reception history of *zaju* out of China. Based on the weakened or even obscured presentation of the formal features of *zaju*, readers and scholars relying on the English translations in current days focus more on what the story *zaju* tells rather than in what form the story is told. Therefore, current researchers prefer to explore the content, plot of the drama, as well as its ideological aspect. Thanks to those diligent translators, *Yuan zaju* may travel to meet readers of remote territories and cultures. However, if the translator in the future only seeks to convey the content of the plot and continues to ignore the content of the form of *Yuan zaju*, then readers and scholars will hardly change their impression that *Han gong qiu* is a "tragedy full of literati sadness" (Maeno et al, 2012). In fact, the formal feature of *Yuan zaju* exemplifies the "significant form" (following the term of the English art critic Clive Bell (1881-1964)) (Bell, 1916). Such form also poses an indispensable part of the content of *Yuan Zaju*. The inseparable form and content are woven in the dual interpretation of reading and performing. It also demonstrates a universal feature of the scripts of classical Chinese drama. Therefore, to better convey the formal connotation and cultural significance of classical Chinese drama, translators need to pay more attention to the "significant form" of the specific genre.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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