

Bonsall: The First Full Translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

Linggang Kong

College of Chinese Language and Literature, Henan University, Kaifeng, China

Email: konglgyx@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng) was written in the late 18th century and is known throughout China as the greatest classical novel. From the early 19th century to the mid-20th century, the translation of this classical novel constantly appeared in the English-speaking world. However, there were section translations, abridge translations and compiled translations. In the 1970s and 1980s, the full translation was finally realized. This article is divided into five parts: Firstly, it introduced the status and background of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Secondly, in the literature review part, it reviewed the three stages of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* translation in academic circles. Thirdly, it reviewed the translation history of *The Dream of the Red Chambers*. Fourthly, Bonsall's story was told and the background of his full translation was presented. Finally, the three full translations were summarized, and suggestions were given for further study.

Keywords

The Dream of the Red Chamber, Greatest Classical Novel, Full Translation, English-Speaking World

1. Introduction

The Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng) was written in the late 18th century by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) and is known throughout China as the greatest classical novel.¹ At that time, the Qing government implemented a closed-door policy and ignored the development of the outside world. Though the empire seemed peaceful and prosperous, and the upper class lived luxuriously and indulged in pleasure, various social contradictions intensified.

¹*The Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng)* was written in the late 18th century by Cao Xueqin (1715-1763). The first officially published in 1791 and prepared by Cheng Weiyuan (18th century-1818) and Gao E (1758-1815).

More seriously, the whole empire had reached the turning point of prosperity and decline, as well as the brink of collapse. The book describes almost the whole of Chinese society in the 18th century, including politics, economy, and culture, reflecting the social changes, people's lives, and the phenomenon in the 18th century. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* has an unparalleled position in China. The study of the novel has become a specialised subject, known as "Redology", and a scholar who studies "Redology" is known as a "Redologist". Additionally, the book is deemed to be representative and the symbol of Chinese literature globally, which has attracted the attention of scholars worldwide. Among them, the British were the earliest. At the beginning of the 19th century, the British started to translate and introduce this classical novel to the world outside China. In the 1970s and 1980s, British Sinologists Hawkes, Min Ford, Chinese scholar Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang respectively translated and published the full translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which has been regarded as the first two full translations in the world. In 2004, the Hong Kong University Library electronically published the revised version of the full translation which was translated by British missionary Bonsall. From the perspective of existing documentation, he may be the first person to translate the full text of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* into English. This article aims to introduce Bonsall's version by reviewing the translation history of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in the English-speaking world.

2. Literature Review

According to Jiang (2007), the translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* can be divided into three stages. From 1830 to 1900, there were four English versions of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. All of the translators at this stage are British diplomatic officials. The purpose of their translations is mainly to provide language learning materials or entertainment books for foreign students who want to study Chinese. The publication and distribution of translation at this stage is not in the formal way. From 1901 to 1960, there were another four English versions of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The most famous and popular version was translated by Wang Chi-Chen. The common feature of the translations at this stage is the original text has been adapted on a large scale as the translation is written for English readers. From 1960, there were four English versions of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The well-known version is Hawkes and Minford's translation. The translators at this stage are more emphasize on literariness and readability of their translations. Most professional readers started follow *The Dream of the Red Chamber* with interest.

3. Translation History of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

As early as 1812, Robert Morrison (1782-1834), a famous English missionary, translator and sinologist, wrote a letter to the London Missionary Society, which included the translation of the fourth chapter of *The Dream of the Red Cham-*

ber. It was the earliest English version of part of the book, and Morrison was the first translator.² But unfortunately the translation was not published. In 1816, Morrison published a textbook in Macau, which included the translation of dialogue in Chapter 31 of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.³ In 1819, John Francis Davis (1795-1890), a member of the Royal Society, British diplomat, sinologist and the second governor of Hong Kong, translated the third chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in the London Journal Quarterly Review (Davis, 1829). In 1830, Davis issued a 68-page essay that included the poems in the third chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.⁴ Owing to the popularity of Davis in China, he was mistakenly assumed to be the earliest translator of the English version of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Since then, Robert Thom (1807-1846), Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) and William Frederick Mayers (1831-1878) translated parts of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in their own works or articles in 1846, 1857, and 1867, respectively.⁵ The five people mentioned above had a common goal. They each extracted and translated fragments of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* for Chinese language study and Chinese language teaching.

In 1868, Edward Charles MacIntosh Bowra (1841-1874), a British customs official, issued the translation of the first eight chapters of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in *The China Magazine* (Bowra, 1868), becoming the first English translator to translate the chapters of the book wholly and continuously.⁶ From 1892 to 1893, Henry Bencraft Joly (1857-1898), the vice-consul of the British Consulate in Macao, successively translated the English versions of the first 56 chapters of the book.⁷ This is the first translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* published separately, and it is a milestone in the history of the English translation (Cao, 1892). Joly planned to translate and publish the whole 120 chapters of the book, but he died and left the work uncompleted. There were many partial translations of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, including that of Wang Chi-Chen (1899-2001), which was the most popular version in the west.⁸ However, none of them was a full translation. After more than 100 years, between the 1950s to the 1980s, Joly's dream of a full translation and published version was realised. Indeed, three versions appeared one after another within this timeframe.

²The SOAS Library (1994), "Incoming Letters 1803-1927," *Guide to the London Missionary Society Archive*, 1764-1977.

³Morrison (1816), *Dialogues and detached sentences in the Chinese language: with a free and verbal translation in English*.

⁴Davis, "On the Poetry of the Chinese," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 363-461.

⁵See Thom (1846), *The Chinese speaker or extracts from works written in the Mandarin language, as spoken in Peking: Compiled for the use of students*. See Edkins (1857), *A Grammar of the Chinese Colloquial Language Commonly Called the Mandarin Dialect*. See Mayers (1867), "Romantic Novels," *Note and Queries: On China and Japan*, 166-169.

⁶Bowra, "The Dream of the Red Chamber," *The Chinese Magazine*, 99.

⁷*The Dream of The Red Chamber*. Translated by Henry Bencraft Joly, Kelly & Walsh Hongkong, published in 1892 and 1893.

⁸*Dream of the Red Chamber*. Inscribed and signed in both English and Chinese. Translated by Wang Chi-Chen, Doubleday, Doran & Company, published in 1929. See Cao 1929.

From 1973 to 1986, David Hawkes (1923-2009), a British sinologist, translator and professor at Oxford University, together with his student and son-in-law John Minford (1946) translated the full of 120 chapters of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* under the published name *The Story of the Stone*.⁹ Hawkes and Minford's full translation was praised immediately after its publication as it provided for the first time English readers with the complete story of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The full translation needs to reproduce the original information completely. The length is generally larger and translation and publication time is longer than section translation, abridge translation and compiled translation (Zhang, 2018). This version was reprinted several times in succession, and then the hardcover editions were published simultaneously in Britain and America. This version has significant influence in China as well. It has been titled Hawkes' translation by Chinese scholars and has become the subject of study of numerous "Redologists". Hawkes deeply loved the book and wrote at the end of the English version introduction: "*The Dream of the Red Chamber* is a work that a great artist has poured out with his whole life's efforts. If I can convey to readers the joy and happiness that this Chinese novel gives me, then I will not live in vain" (Cao, 1973). Almost at the same time as Hawkes' version, from 1978 to 1980, the famous Chinese translator Yang Xianyi (1915-2009) and his wife Gladys Yang (1919-1999) cooperated to translate the whole 120 chapters of the book into English (Cao, 1978). They called their book *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and in China, it was called Yang's translation.¹⁰

Since their publication, Hawkes' translation and Yang's translation were accepted as the earliest full translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in China and abroad. However, this conclusion is not reliable. In July 2004, the Hong Kong University Library electronically published the revised version of the English version of the book translated by British missionary Bramwell Seaton Bonsall (1890-1960) on its homepage.¹¹ According to the Translator's Foreword of Bonsall, this version was completed in the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, the translation was not officially published and was unknown to readers. However, Bonsall's translation is certainly earlier than Hawkes' and Yang's and replaces Hawkes' and Yang's translation as the first full translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in the English world. It is a significant milestone in the English translation history of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

4. Bonsall and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

In 1911, Bonsall, a 25-year-old young priest, was sent by the Wesleyan Method-

⁹*The Story of the Stone*, also known by the title of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Translated by David Hawkes (vol. I-III) and John Minford (vol. IV-V), published in Penguin Classics from 1973 to 1986 (Cao, 1982).

¹⁰*A Dream of Red Mansions*, also known by the title of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, published in Peking: Foreign Languages Press from 1978 to 1980.

¹¹Bramwell Seaton Bonsall was a Wesleyan Methodist Missionist to China from 1911 to 1926. After his return to England, he continued his interest in China and the study of its language and literature.

ist Missionary Society to preach in China.¹² The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society is one of the main sects of Protestantism and one of the early Protestant churches that preached in China. After arriving in China, Bonsall preached in Wuhan, Central China. At that time, wars engulfed China, and there was widespread prejudice. Bonsall was once kidnapped, and in 1926, to avoid further danger, he boarded a ship in Shanghai and returned to England with his family. In the late 1920s, he graduated from London University with a doctorate.¹³ In the 1930s, Bonsall worked as a full-time priest. In addition to preaching, he continued to pursue his interest in Chinese culture by studying the Chinese language and Chinese literature. In 1934, he published “Confucianism and Taoism”, which was included in the “Great Religions of the East” series.¹⁴ The relevant knowledge of Confucius and Confucianism, and Lao Zi and Taoism is introduced in the book (Bonsall, 1934). It has been reprinted several times and has become a vital reference source for western readers to understand Chinese culture. Thus, it is clear that Bonsall was always interested in Chinese culture. In the 1950s and 1960s, it took him more than ten years to complete his English translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which he called *The Red Chamber Dream (Hung Lou Meng)*.¹⁵ According to the brief introduction written by his son Geoffrey Bonsall (1924-) for electronic publishing, the Asia Society of New York had planned to publish this version, but this was abandoned after they learnt that Penguin Group had signed a translation and publishing contract with Hawkes.¹⁶ In 1955, Bonsall’s son Geoffrey started to work at Hong Kong University. When he retired in 1981, he decided to hand over his father’s painstaking work to the university library to publish so that this version could finally be available to the outside world after half a century of silence.

The translation of Bonsall is large in scale, rigorous in writing, close to the original text, detailed in content, and complete in style (Bonsall, 2005). In addition to the main body, it includes five parts: Notes on some special terms, Notes in the event of Publication, Translator’s Foreword, Contents and Notes, as well as Appendix 1 (Genealogical Tablets) and Appendix 2 (names and notes of characters).¹⁷ This detailed and complete style arrangement is undoubtedly forward-looking and pioneering. Its notes are detailed and can be divided into three categories. The first is that there are 786 text notes, with about 19,000 words.¹⁸ The text of Bonsall’s translation strives for literal translation, although the book’s subtlety and implied rich meaning and culture are difficult to convey through literal translation. Therefore, Bonsall utilised notes and listed them after each chapter, such as figures of speech, cultural vocabulary, names and places, and

¹²The University of Hong Kong Libraries, “Focus,” *New Series*, 14.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Bonsall, *Confucianism and Taoism*.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷*The Red Chamber Dream: Hung Lou Meng*, also known by the title of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Translated by Bramwell Seaton Bonsall, the typescripts published on Hong Kong University Libraries website.

¹⁸Ibid.

poetry rhythm. The second is the note on some special terms, which primarily include entries indicating identity and serving as address forms, such as “Yeh, Lao-yeh, T’ai-t’ai, Lao-T’ai-t’ai”,¹⁹ Take Lao-T’ai-t’ai” as an example; the note is as follows: “Lao-T’ai-t’ai—the old T’ai-t’ai usually refers in the text to the Lady Dowager (Mother Chia) and is so translated.” The third is the notes of novel characters. All the characters are annotated one by one according to the alphabetical order of the transliteration of the characters’ names and then identified by chapter and related interpersonal relationships. This part is ten pages long, with 470 notes.

5. Conclusions

The titles of chapters in Chinese classical novels contain unique features. There are requirements on form, rhyme, and meaning, which are similar to Chinese classical poems, as well as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. As a completely different language family from Chinese, it is difficult to find the equivalent words in English, much less reproduce the beauty of the original language. As John Dryden (1631-1700) said, “It is impossible to pick words and translate well during translation... just like dancing on a rope with fettered legs. A man may shun a fall by using caution, but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected” (Dryden, 1852). However, as far as Bonsall’s translation is concerned, on the premise of reflecting the semantics of the original text, his translation reproduces the beauty of language, artistic conception, image, and style embodied in the original chapter titles of the book. Besides, parts of Hawkes’ translation and Yang’s translation coincide with Bonsall’s version, which establishes Bonsall’s solid translation skills, which are also borne out by his translation of the text. Due to the late discovery of Bonsall’s translation, which has not been published, few academic studies on it exist, but the Chinese academic domain has confirmed its status as the first full translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Together with Hawkes’ and Yang’s translations, Bonsall’s translation is considered one of the three most highly respected versions of the full translation of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

According to CNKI, it shows there were 262 papers that investigate translations of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* from 2018 to 2022. However, there was only one paper of them that indicated Bonsall’s full translation. The study on Bonsall’s full translation is still in the blank. This paper only introduced the history of Bonsall’s full translation and has yet to plumb the depths of his translation. Scholars could focus on detailed translation issues in future studies.

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¹⁹Ibid.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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