

The Translation of Allusions in the Light of Adaptation Theory—A Case Study of Birch’s English Version of *The Peony Pavilion**

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Abstract—The allusion is an implied or indirect reference to a person, event, or thing or to a part of another text. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu adopts 323 allusions from the ancient quotations, historical records, scientific works etc, which makes the play precise and vivid with cultural and historical connotation. Proposed by Jef Verschueren, the Adaptation Theory stresses the properties of variability, negotiability and adaptability in language. The translator’s initiative is greatly underlined in Cyril Birch’s English version of *The Peony Pavilion* in view of the adaptation theory. The translator has to adopt linguistic, structural and cultural adaptability to achieve satisfactory communication effects.

Index Terms—allusion, adaptation theory, linguistic adaptation, structural adaptation, cultural adaptation

The allusion has a long history and is a concentration of a country’s culture and history. The brief allusions embody the historical events, novels, myths and fables etc. *The Peony Pavilion*, a romantic masterpiece and drama in the opera history by Tang Xianzu has been popular in China since its birth in Ming Dynasty. The allusion is one of the greatest features of the dramas in Tang’s representative works of -- *The Four Dreams of Linchuan*. The application of many allusions makes his plays precise, indirect with cultural connotation and historical meanings. In the light of Adaptation Theory, the translator can choose different translation strategies to demonstrate the initiative of the translator.

I. THE ADAPTATION THEORY

The Adaptation Theory was proposed by Jef Verschueren, a Belgian pragmatist in his *Understanding Pragmatics* in 1999. He proposes that “using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and/or language-external reasons. These choices can be situated at any level of linguistic form: phonetic/phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and semantic (Verschueren, 1999).”

Variability is the property of language which defines the range of possibilities from which choices can be made. Negotiability is the property of language responsible for the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed principles and strategies. Adaptability is the property which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs (59-61). The three notions are closely related and inseparable with variability and negotiability as the basis and adaptability as the core concept. The theory probes how the language user communicates with the others through continuous linguistic choices as “the base-line description of language (58)” because language has the three properties. The kernel idea of the adaptation theory is the dynamics of adaptability.

Verschueren assumes language is a continuous making of linguistic choices with different degrees of salience for the purpose of adaptation. Through the angles of contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability and the salience of adaptation process, the translator can make choices in lexicon, syntax and structure to fully present the version to the foreign readers. The application of the theory in translation provides a new viewpoint of thinking and broader space for translation study.

II. ALLUSIONS IN *THE PEONY PAVILION*

The Peony Pavilion is about the love story between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. Du is lovesick and dies after encountering Liu Mengmei in her dream. Three years later, she is resurrected and joins in marriage with Liu. After its first performance in 1598, the play has been adapted into Kunqu, opera, movie and ballet and played throughout the world. *The Peony Pavilion* is a romantic masterpiece mixed with the linguistic heritage of the dramas in Yuan Dynasty and the refined language of poems. Many lines are appealing to the readers till now with high artistic value. It was listed 32nd in the world drama by Daniel S. Burt who deems that the drama combines elements of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Burt, 2008). Till now there are three English

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versions of *The Peony Pavilion* by Cyril Birch (1980), Wang Rongpei (2000) and Zhang Guangqian (1994) respectively. As a professor of Chinese and comparative literature in the University of California, Berkeley, Cyril Birch is highly esteemed for his English version of the play.

Tang Xianzu aims at writing plays that will be handed on from age to age. He is renowned for his fine and flowery languages and adept in adopting allusions which are a very striking feature in his plays. An allusion is a figure of speech that makes a reference to, or a representation of, people, places, events, literary work, myths, or works of art, either directly or by implication. M. H. Abrams defines allusion as “a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place or event, or to another literary work or passage”. It is left to the reader or hearer to make the connection (Fowler); where the connection is detailed in depth by the author, it is preferable to call it “a reference” (2013-03-09). Actually, most allusions are based on the assumption that the background knowledge is shared by the author and the readers and that the readers can understand the author’s intention.

Tang Xianzu adopts 323 allusions in the 55 scenes of *The Peony Pavilion*. The allusions originate from quotations of the ancient writers, historical records, novels, scientific works and Buddhism scriptures etc. Sometimes Tang even combines several allusions in one lyric. The percentage of the allusions in the drama is shown in the following table:

TABLE 1.
ALLUSIONS IN THE PEONY PAVILION

	Ancient quotations	Historical records	Novels & myths	Scientific works	Buddhism scriptures
Numbers	92	98	115	8	10
Percentage (%)	28.5	30.3	35.6	2.5	3.1

It is indicated in the table that Tang adopts the majority of the allusions from novels, myths and historical records. Actually he uses several allusions in every scene of the drama, and even a dozen in the important scenes. The origins of the allusions include:

1) Quotations from the ancient writers or poets. For example, in Liu Mengmei’s line in the second scene--*Declaring Ambition*, “贫薄把人灰，且养就这浩然之气(Ashen from need and hardship I yet maintain my ‘overflowing breath’).” The playwright quotes “overflowing breath” from Kung-sun Ch’au (Part I) of *Mencius*. In the third scene--*Admonishing the Daughter*, Bridal Du said, “寸草心，怎报的春光一二(How can this heart, mere wisp of straw, give thanks for light by loving parents shed)?” Tang adapts the line from “The Song of the Wandering Son” by Meng Jiao, a famous poet in Tang Dynasty. The dramatist refines the famous sayings or poems and alters the lines slightly, which gives the readers a familiar yet strange tinge.

2) Quotations from historical records such as *Records of the (Grand)Historian*, *Book of Han*, *Book of The Later Han*, *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid Government* and *Master Zuo’s Spring and Autumn Annals* etc. In 22nd scene -- *Traveler’s Rest*, Tutor Chen enters saying, “俺是个卧雪先生没烦恼(Poor but unconcerned, Like Yuan An of old, I’ll bother none for help, but sit at ease while snow buries my gate).” Tang cites the allusion of Yuan An in Eastern Han Dynasty who refuses to ask for help in a heavy snow, as recorded in *Book of Later Han*. The adaptation of the historical allusions gives the drama panoramic feature.

3) Novels such as *New Accounts of Old Episodes* and *Taipingguang Collection* and myths and weird fictions such as *Bowuzhi* and *Lie Xian Biography*. For example, in the tenth scene -- *the Interrupted Dream*, Bridal Du said, “我一身冷汗，乃是南柯一梦(Now perspiration chills all my body—it was no more than a ‘dream of Nanke, the human world in an anthill’).” A dream of Nanke is from *Legend of Tang People* in which Chunyu Fen dreamed of being the governor of Nanke and enjoying fame and fortune. Tang uses the allusion to show that Bridal Du has nothing but a dream. Moreover, Chang’e, the goddess who flies to the moon in the fairy tale is mentioned many a time in the drama. The frequently-quoted myths and fictions make the drama more romantic and legendary.

4) Scientific works and encyclopedias etc. like T’ien-Kung K’ai-wu -- *Exploiting the Works of Nature* by Song Ying-hsing. For example, in the 21st scene -- *The Interview*, Miao Shunbin mentioned, “这是星汉神砂，这是煮海金丹和铁树花(Here is the Pebble of the Milky Way, here’s Elixir of Gold can boil the ocean dry and a blossom plucked from the Iron Tree).” The Elixir of Gold is quoted from *T’ien-Kung K’ai-wu*, an encyclopedia of Chinese technology in the seventeenth century. The rare treasures of the allusions from scientific works seem more realistic and authentic with convincing elements.

5) Buddhism books and scriptures such as *Inheritance of Lantern*, *Vimalakirti Sutra* and *Jun Sheng Lun*. For example, in the entrance poetry of the judge in the 23rd scene--*Infernal Judgment*, a line goes, “阎浮界，阳世裁埋，又把俺这里门程迈(Mortals the world over upon their burial must cross this threshold of mine).” “Mortals the world over” is from *Jun Sheng Lun*, a Buddhism literature in Nan Dynasty.

Tang knows the allusions and historical anecdotes at his finger tips and uses them aptly in the drama and sometimes even combines several allusions together. The entrance poetry is an important component of Yuan Drama. For instance, in Liu Mengmei’s entrance poetry of the second scene, he said, “能凿壁，会悬梁，偷天妙手绣文章。必须砍得蟾宫桂，始信人间玉斧长 (Drilling the wall for light, hair tied to beam in fear of drowsing, I wrest from nature excellence in letters and soon the ax of jade to prove its worth must fell the cassia high in the moon’s toad palace).” Tang adopts

the historical anecdotes of Kuang Heng, Sun Jing, the quotation of Lu You, a famous poet and the myth of Chang E in one line. Liu cites the former two scholars who studied assiduously and the myth to show his own effort, talents and confidence. These allusions serve for the theme of the drama, which makes the language precise with cultural and historical connotations. The allusions from novels, historical and scientific works add romance and authority for the drama.

Wang Rongpei(1999) discusses the translation of Tang poem collections envoi at the end of each scene. Tina Lu (2000) researches Bridal Du's portrait, the lovers' dream and the emperor's promise. Jiang Xiaohua (2010) analyzes the "orientalization" in western translators' rendering of Chinese classics. Gao Jiazheng (2010) probes the translation of allusions from the view of literal and free translation. Because of the cultural differences, the allusions with historical and cultural roots become a difficult problem in translation. However, the paper on the translation of allusions in the light of adaptation theory has been rare. This paper intends to have a quantitative analysis of 323 allusions in *The Peony Pavilion* and summarize the translation strategies of different kinds of allusions from the view of adaptation theory.

III. APPLICATION OF ADAPTATION THEORY IN *THE PEONY PAVILION*

In the other texts styles, the translator mostly focuses on the delivery of the language meaning. However, the translator has to take performativity and the audience into consideration in the translation of drama. According to the Productive-Receptive Theory proposed by Patrice Pavis, we must invent a model which combines aesthetics of production and reception, a model which studies their dialectical interaction, which looks at both the anticipated reception of the production and the activity of the spectator in the act of reception (Pavis, 1985: 281-297).

As the popularity and the readers' cognition to the allusions vary in different degrees, it can be seen that Cyril Birch adopts different strategies in various types of allusions. Based on the contextual correlates of adaptability, the translator adjusts the translation strategies from the adaptability in linguistic, structural and cultural respects to make the version smooth and natural.

A. Linguistic Adaptability

As the lines in a drama are limited by different qu pai (tunes), length of words and sentences, the allusion is a good way to express the abundant connotation in few words. However, it is impossible and unnecessary for the translator to add notes for each allusion for the unfamiliar historical figures, places or events. Sometimes, the translator amplifies the translation in the allusion to explain the main points. As a result, the most important information is conveyed to the audience without making the lines redundant.

In the first place, the translator adopts linguistic adaptability in the translation of proper nouns with information unfamiliar to the foreign readers. Otherwise, the readers would have been lost and confused because of the missed and incomplete information. For instance, Birch amplifies the line, "Summon Gao Yao (in 53rd scene--*Interrogation under the Rod*)" with the information Gao Yao, the Prison God. Likewise, he supplements the City of Five Rams with Guangzhou, in the 22nd scene *Traveler's Rest* and "mount the dragon" with a successful match to complete the information.

Secondly, linguistic adaptability can be applied to the allusions which can be conveyed with a few words. For example, in the fifth scene -- *Engaging the Tutor*, Bridal Du wants to express her respect for her father and said, "莲步 鲤庭趋." "Lianbu liting qu"(pinyin) means literally "walk with lotus feet to my father" with an allusion of Kong Li in *Confucius Analects*:

Ch'an K'ang asked Po-yu (Kong Li), saying, "Have you heard any lessons from your father different from what we have all heard?"

Po-yu replied, "No. He was standing alone once, when I passed below the hall with hasty steps, and said to me, 'Have you learned the Odes?' On my replying 'Not yet,' he added, 'If you do not learn the Odes, you will not be fit to converse with.' I retired and studied the Odes.

"Another day, he was in the same way standing alone, when I passed by below the hall with hasty steps, and said to me, 'Have you learned the rules of Propriety?' On my replying 'Not yet,' he added, 'If you do not learn the rules of Propriety, your character cannot be established.' I then retired, and learned the rules of Propriety.

"I have heard only these two things from him." (trans. by James Legge)

In the translation of the lines, it is impossible for the translator to explain the whole story behind the line. The author adopts linguistic adaptation and translates the line into: Lotus feet in tripping measure set long ago as mark of reverence by the son of the Master, Confucius himself. With linguistic amplification, the readers have the same feeling when they read the line with the allusion.

Moreover, the translator amplifies the information in many allusions with historical background such as the story of Bian Shao (mocked for the size of his belly and explained it was full of learning), dream of Nanke (the human world in an anthill), whistling from a moonlit tower (to fill these barbarians with thoughts of home).

Altogether, Birch adopts linguistic adaptability in 23.5% of all the allusions. As to the allusions with historical, cultural and geological information, the translator amplifies a little information to complete the communication so that the readers can get enough background knowledge of the allusion.

B. Structural Adaptation

The dramas comprise chiefly of dialogues or monologues between or of characters. The drama is written for playing out, whether it is in the mother tongue or translated into another language. According to the adaptation theory, the language communication is a process of integration by context, language, cognition and social cultures etc. To communicate means to make choices in the language and the other elements. People make dynamic adaptation in different contexts. The translation will inevitably involve the reconstruction of the target language to make dynamic adaptation and linguistic restructure from the source language to the target language. Different from other text styles, the language of drama is colloquial and precise with individual characters. Should the translation be too long or complicated, the audience would feel difficult to follow the lines and eventually the performability would be affected adversely. The translator adopts structural adaptation in the translation of proper names, exaggeration and allusions with little cultural conflicts.

Altogether, the translator adopts 37.8% structural adaptability in the whole play to make the translated drama precise. In some complicated proper names, Birch omits the unnecessary information and conveys the main explanation of the allusion. For example, the translator just explains the main ideas of “七香汤 (soup with seven flavors)” as fragrant waters, “大方之门 (quotation by Zhuangzi)” as privilege of this visit and 杏坛 (apricot terrace) as tutor's seat.

Moreover, figures in Chinese literature sometimes merely convey the general idea and ambiguous concept with no definite meanings. It is not necessary for the translator to put it into exact numbers. In scene 32, bridal Du said, “Her three senses and seven souls were frozen.” From the perspective of Taoism, a person possesses three senses and seven souls, yet Birch simply puts the line into “Frozen body and soul in coldest chastity.” In the allusion of Song poem by Su Shi, “Of Spring's three Graces/Two have gone with the roadside dust/And one with waves.” Birch simplifies the poem in this way: “Years that flowed ‘carrying as dust the springtime of my youth’.”

In addition, the translator resorts to structural adaptation for the smooth translation for some allusions with definite meaning and little cultural conflicts in translation. For example, in the 45th scene—*A Spy for the Rebels*, tutor Chen sings, “要腰缠十万, 教学千年, 方才满贯 (pinyin: yao yaochan shiwan, jiaoxue qian nian, fang cai manguan).” The term “yao chan wan guan” literally means “one's waist is wrapped with tens of thousands of money” which origins from *Natives of Wushu* in *Novels* by Liang Yun in Nan Dynasty. The story goes that some guests follow and talk about their ambitions. One says he wants to be a governor of Yangzhou, a wealthy city of that time. Another says he wants to be wealthy and the third says he wants to be a fairy riding a crane. The last one says he wants to ride a crane to Yangzhou with tens of thousands of money wrapped on his waist, i.e. he wants to be both a wealthy governor and fairy enjoying all the fortunes. As it is easy to understand the line and not necessary to explain the allusion, the translator puts it in a brief line: “It isn't hard to make your fortune: just teach school for a thousand years.”

The translator has to convey the meaning for syntactic and semantic reasons. Considering the performability and the precise language, structural adaptability is the best choice for the translator to avoid these flowery and redundant expressions in the lyrics of dramas.

C. Cultural Adaptability

What is culture? It is the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar et al. 1998: 36)

Language is deeply rooted in culture and is used to reflect and maintain the culture of a society. The main task of the translator is to convey the possible meaning of the SL to the readers of the TL. The interdependence between culture and language makes it clear that translation is conditioned by culture and is a process of cultural transplantation. The effective translations demands the deep understanding of the culture and original meaning of the source language so that the foreign audience can understand the history, geography, tradition and custom behind the source language.

Birch adds notes in 125 allusions in the book, which is 38.7% of the whole play. In terms of the lines adapted from ancient poets, he writes the literary source clearly in the note, or puts the complete allusion in a note so as to avoid the cultural loss without affecting the performability of the drama. Birch gives the information about the writer, dynasties and the origins of many allusions in the note, such as Song poet Lu You, Du Fu-- China's greatest poet or Tang poet Wang Bo. These notes give a full depiction of the origins of the allusions.

In the case of allusions with cultural and historical backgrounds, Birch explains clearly in the notes. For instance, in 21st Scene--*The Interview*, Miao Shunbin sings, “径寸明珠等让他, 便是几尺珊瑚碎了他 (pinyin: jingcun mingzhu dengrangta, bianshi jichi shanhu sui le ta).” The line means literally that “They must yield before Inch-deep Pearl and three-foot coral tree may still be smashed.” Yet, two allusions are hidden in the simple lyric. Inch-deep pearl originates from a story in *Taipingguang Collection* which goes that a Persian gets an inch-deep pearl by cutting a rock and the pearl was asked by the sea god. To smash the coral tree is a historical allusion from volume 33 of *Book of Jin*: Shi Chong was a famous rich man in the Western Jin Dynasty. He paraded wealth with another rich man Wang Kai who presented a three-inch tall coral tree bestowed by the emperor. Shi smashed the tree with an iron scepter and compensated his loss with six or seven four-inch tall coral trees. Birch adds a note, “The Inch-deep Pearl was discovered by a Persian merchant, but demanded back from him by the Dragon King during his voyage back to his own country. A rich man of ancient times boasted of his coral tree three feet in height, but his rival smashed it and then

presented half a dozen larger ones". The translator conveys not only the meaning, but also the cultural information and let the audience understand the allusions behind the lines by the note.

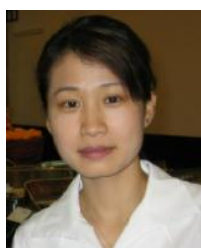
The adaptation theory stresses that the communication is the process of choosing languages which occurs in all levels such as language, structure and culture. In the adaptation process, the translator adapts the translation to the communication purpose and makes the readers understand the intentions of the author in many levels.

IV. CONCLUSION

Although the allusions are precise, the history and cultural background can hardly be depicted in a few words. It is an issue of great importance for the translators to convey the allusions to the audience in a proper way. In dramas with dialogues as the key ingredient, the translator has to take full consideration of receiver-orientedness. The Adaptation Theory is instrumental in transmitting history, geography and cultural background besides meaning and language. In the translation of drama, the translator has to convey the same reading effect in linguistic, lexical, syntactic and textual levels so as to achieve satisfactory communication.

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