

On the Translation of Chinese Drama in *The China Review*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the translation of Chinese drama in *The China Review: or Notes and Queries on the Far East*, a sinological journal published in Hong Kong from 1872 to 1901. It approached the topic mainly from aspects of source text selection, translation motivation, translation strategy and impact of translation. It is found that most of the Chinese drama selected were lesser-known regional dramas, primarily Cantonese drama. The translators' motivations ranged from a desire to present Chinese popular culture to Western readers to critical assessments of Chinese drama as inferior to Western theatrical traditions. The translation strategies employed were predominantly literal translation and omission. The translations marked the first introduction of several Cantonese dramas to the Western world and played a pioneering role in familiarizing Western readers with local Chinese theatrical traditions. The findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural mediation and early transnational circulation of Chinese drama.

Keywords:

Drama Translation, *The China Review*, Motivation, Translation Strategy

1. Introduction to *The China Review*

The China Review: or Notes and Queries on the Far East (hereafter referred to as *The China Review*) was an English journal founded by British journalist N. B. Dennys and published in Hong Kong from 1872 to 1901. Having lasted for 29 years, *The China Review* occupied an important position in the history of Western sinology and has been hailed as “the first truly sinological journal in the Western world”. [1] As a professional sinological publication, *The China Review* covered a remarkably wide range of topics, touching upon virtually every aspect of Chinese society. It can be regarded as an encyclopedic work on China at the end of the nineteenth century, containing a vast number of papers on Chinese history, society, and culture.

2. Translation of Chinese Literary works in *The China Review*

Among the papers published in *The China Review*, most of them (more than 80%) are articles and translations. As for translations, statistics shows that the 25 volumes

of *The China Review* published a total of 250 translated works. Based on their subject matter, these translations can be broadly classified into literature, philosophy, law, history and geography, and other categories. Among them, literary translations accounted for 139 pieces, representing more than half of the total (55.6%); philosophical translations numbered 43, or 17.2%; legal translations, 17, or 6.8%; historical and geographical translations, 35, or 14%; and translations in other categories, 16, or 6.4%. These figures clearly indicate that *The China Review* was primarily a sinological journal devoted to introducing Chinese literature through translation.

Within the translated Chinese literary works published in *The China Review*, fiction occupied the largest share at 48.2%, followed by folklore at 28%, poetry at 18.8%, and drama at just 5%. Correspondingly, existing research on translations in *The China Review* has concentrated mostly on fiction and poetry, with very little research devoted to drama translations. In view of this gap, the present study focuses on the drama translations published in *The China Review*, examining them from the perspectives of source text selection, translation motivation, translation strategies, as well as their broader impact.

3. Drama Translation in *The China Review*

3.1. Selection of Source Texts

Altogether six Chinese plays were chosen for translation in *The China Review*. The details of the translations are presented in the table below:

Table 1. List of translations of Chinese drama in *The China Review*.

Translation	Original work	Translator	Volume/Issue/Year
A-LAN'S PIG	《亚烂卖猪》	A.Lister	Vol.1/No.1/1872
The Borrowed Boots	《借靴》	L.M.Fay	Vol.2/No.6/1874
Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother	《四郎探母》	G.S.Stent	Vol.10/No.5/1882
The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau	《附荐何文秀》	W. Stanton	Vol.17/No.3/1888
The Willow Lute	《柳丝琴》	W. Stanton	Vol.17/No.6/1889
The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum	《金叶菊》	W. Stanton	Vol.22/No.4/1897
The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum	《金叶菊》	W. Stanton	Vol.22/No.5/1897

Of the six plays selected and translated in *The China Review*, with the exception of *Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother*, most belong to lesser-known regional dramas, primarily Cantonese drama. These scripts are relatively short, with simple and plain plots, lacking the dramatic tension typically generated by sharp conflicts between characters in classical drama, and are therefore lower in literary value.

A-LAN'S PIG tells the story of a villager, He Yalan, who squandered all the money he had earned from selling cloth on gambling. When he got home, he was scolded by his wife and planned to open a tofu shop. In order to raise capital to open the shop, his wife asked him to sell the pig in the market, only to be cheated out of it by two other gamblers. Returning home empty-handed, he was tied to a doorpost by his wife. At that moment, a hunchback monk happened to pass by. He persuaded the monk to untie him and deceived the monk out of his subscription list for buying oil for monastery lamps, so that he was able to scrape together the funds needed to start his tofu business.

The Borrowed Boots recounts how a villager, Zhang Dan, asked his friend Liu Er to lend him a pair of boots. Liu Er refused at first, but after Zhang Dan's repeated pleas, he finally agreed on the condition that Zhang Dan perform a ritual for the boots and repeatedly instructed him on how to wear them properly. However, by the time Zhang Dan put on the boots and rushed to the banquet, the feast had long since ended and the guests had dispersed. Zhang Dan was furious and vowed not to borrow anything from Liu Er again.

Ssu-Lang's Visit to His Mother depicts the story of Yang Silang (Yang Yan Hui), a captive of the Liao during the Song-Liao wars and later the imperial son-in-law of the Liao Emperor. With the help of his wife, the Liao princess, he briefly returned to the Song camp to reunite with his family before going back to the Liao.

The remaining three plays translated by William Stanton—*The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, *The Willow Lute*, and *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum*—are all Cantonese operas with similar themes. They revolve around male and female protagonists who suffer persecution but eventually have their grievances redressed and justice restored.

3.2. Motivation of translating Chinese Drama

Functional translation theorists view translation as “a purposeful activity” [2], and a translator always undertakes the translation of a work with a specific aim or motivation in mind. Such motivations are generally revealed—either explicitly or implicitly—in the translator's prefaces. In the case of the dramatic translations published in *The China Review*, the translators' motives were conveyed in an indirect manner.

In the preface to his translation of *A-LAN'S PIG*, Lister expressed his “very great disappointment” with the play. He first lamented that much of its best fun part had been omitted; second, and then criticized the extremely poor printing quality, describing it as “almost as badly printed and got up as if it had cost sixpence at Lacy's in the Strand” [3]. He further pointed out that the script of the original play contained no list of characters, no stage directions, no indications of entrances or exits, and, from beginning to end, not a single punctuation mark. Even the actors' names were left unidentified. In order to make himself better understood, he directly quoted several line from Shakespeare as follows: “Falstaff dost thou hear me hal prince ay and mark thee too jack falstaff do so for it is worth the listening to these nine in buckram that I told thee of prince so two more already falstaff their points being broken...” [3]. From Lister's comments it is evident that he regarded the script of *A-LAN'S PIG* as inferior, his words tinged with sarcasm and disdain. Yet he immediately added: “I have therefore literally translated the dialogue, the only departures from literality being caused once or twice by the manufacture of rhymes in the parts that are sung” [3].

It can thus be inferred that Lister's translation motive was to present to Western readers, as fully and faithfully as possible, a peculiar play that had left him both disappointed and bemused.

In the preface to her translation of *The Borrowed Boots*, Fay remarked that the play was “possessing little point to the foreign reader” [4]. Nonetheless, she noted that it revealed the general level of a large number of similar Chinese dramas. Such plays, she explained, were popular in China not because of any intrinsic merit in the plot, but

rather because of their lengthy exchanges of dialogue between the actors. Clearly, Fay held a very low opinion of the plot of *The Borrowed Boots* and, by extension, of similar Chinese plays. She finally concluded: “It is chiefly as a contribution to our better conception of what passes muster with native critics as a “screaming farce” that this translation possesses a certain amount of interest.” [4] From these remarks, it can be inferred that Fay’s purpose in translating *The Borrowed Boots* was to present to Western readers a Chinese farce which, in her view, was of “little value” to them.

In the prefaces to the three plays he translated, Stanton generally refrained from commenting on the original texts. However, in the preface to *The Willow Lute*, he shared his views on Chinese drama. He felt it necessary to inform readers who had never seen a Chinese play performed that the Chinese stage bore no resemblance to the stage scenery familiar in the West. On the Chinese stage, mountains, roads, city walls, temples, tombs, and even beds were represented merely by the arrangement of chairs, while many other scenes were conveyed through actors’ pantomime. He then added that “From this it will be seen that their scenery is inferior to what ours was at the Cockpit and Globe theatres in Shakespeare’s time, and about equal to Peter Quince’s scenery in his ‘most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby.’ ” [5]

He further commented that the music in Chinese theatrical performance was “ear-splitting” and posed a “great hindrance” to foreign audiences. Stanton also introduced readers to the so-called “green-room” behind the stage, describing it as being filled with “strange things” and “strange-looking people.” He noted that the room was crowded with various weapons from different Chinese dynasties, along with masks and beards of diverse colors, which he characterized as exceedingly “hideous.”

Similarly, from what Stanton commented on Chinese drama, we can infer that the motivation behind his translation of these Chinese dramas is to introduce the true Chinese drama which in his view is much inferior to that of the west to the western readers.

3.3. Translation Strategies

“Translation strategy” generally refers to the overall approach or method a translator adopts during the process of translation. As for the drama translations published in *The China Review*, the main translation strategies translator adopted include literal translation and omission.

3.3.1. Literal translation

As the British translation theorist John Cunnison Catford stated, literal translation is a method situated between word-for-word translation and free translation. He said “Literal translation ... may start, as it were, from a word-for-word translation, but make changes in conformity with TL grammar (e.g. inserting additional words, changing structures at any rank, etc.); this may make it a group-group or clause-clause translation.” [6] Overall, the dramatic translations published in *The China Review* were predominantly literal in nature. This literalness manifested across different linguistic levels, but most prominently at the level of sentences and vocabulary, with lexical literalism being particularly evident.

3.3.1.1. Literal translation at sentence level

Regarding literal translation at the sentence level, contemporary translator Xu Chongxin has made some comments on it. He argues that literal translation at this level should take the sentence as a unit: if the source text is a single sentence, the translation should generally remain a single sentence as well. Thus, the translation should neither split one source sentence into several, nor merge several source sentences into one. On the basis of this principle, however, it is permissible to adjust the order of components within a sentence, as well as the sequence of main and subordinate clauses [7]. The language and sentence structures selected for translation in *The China Review* are relatively simple, and are predominantly rendered through literal translation. Let's take the opening sentence of A-LAN'S PIG for example:

Source text:

黄氏: 家贫无奈, 难以度日光。奴家黄氏, 配夫何亚烂。今日老娘把了二丈布, 叫他往圩场去卖, 许久不见回来, 好叫奴家挂心也。

Translation:

Wife: Alas! Alas! We're very poor, we scarce can get along! My name is Wong and I married Ho A-lan. To-day I gave him a few yards of cloth which I had woven, to take and sell in the market. What a time he is coming back! What a fidget he keeps me in!

In the above example, the translation and the source text correspond almost one-to-one, with no splitting or merging of sentences, and the original word order is largely preserved in the translation. The only exception lies in the sentence “今日老娘把了二丈布, 叫他往圩场去卖, where the structure of the main and subordinate clauses has been slightly adjusted within the translated version.

3.3.1.2. *Literal translation at lexical level*

When discussing literal translation at the lexical level, Catford pointed out that, similar to word-for-word translation, literal translation at this level tends to achieve a lexically word-for-word rendering. In the dramatic translations published in *The China Review*, most instances of literal translation at the lexical level conform to what Catford described as lexically word-for-word translation, which is mainly reflected in the rendering of Cantonese slang words and culture-specific terms.

As it is mentioned above, most of the plays selectively translated in *The China Review* are Cantonese operas, whose original scripts contain a large number of Cantonese slang words. In translation, the translators rendered these slang terms literally into English, and sometimes used literal translation with added notes.

For example, in *A-LAN'S PIG*, when A-Lan describes to his wife how he played the game of Fantan, he says: “嗰个龟蛋三个做一皮, 四个做一宗, 扒来扒去得个乌龟缩颈”. Here, both “龟蛋” and “乌龟缩颈” are Cantonese slang. “龟蛋” is an abusive term equivalent to “bastard” or “son of a bitch,” while “乌龟缩颈” in this context refers to bad luck or losing streaks in gambling. The translator rendered them literally as “tortoise-egg” and “black tortoise pulled in his head”.

Another example comes from *The Willow Lute*. When Tian Wang appears and notices the beauty of Li Qi's wife, he sighs: “哎, 老人娶少妾, 必定戴莲葉。唔做得番鬼进靴入脚咯哦! ”. In this sentence, “戴莲叶” is slang meaning “to be cuckolded,” which the translator rendered literally as “wear the lotus cap,” with the additional note “be made cuckolds.” Another frequently used slang term is “番鬼,” a colloquial

expression from Guangdong used to refer to foreigners. The translator rendered it literally as “foreign devil.

In addition to Cantonese slang words, the original scripts also contain many culture-specific Chinese terms, which the translators likewise rendered through literal translation. For instance, in *The Borrowed Boots*, before allowing Zhang Dan to borrow the boots, Liu Er required him to worship them. Zhang Dan retorted: “靴子要磕头么?”. Fay’s translation of this line is: “What! Am I to knock head to the boots?”. Here, “磕头” refers to the traditional Chinese ritual of kneeling and knocking one’s head on the ground to show respect or reverence. Clearly, the translator adopted a literal approach, rendering it as “knock head to.”

Let’s look another example from *The Willow Lute*. When Liu Xiaoxiang, the foster father of Zhang Guizhi, worries about his adopted daughter’s marriage prospects, his wife consoles him by saying that marriage is a matter of fate. Liu Xiaoxiang then sings: “夫人说话真有理。还要月老早为媒呀。” In this line, “月老” is a classic culture-loaded term, it is a deity in Chinese folklore believed to preside over marriages. The translator rendered it literally as “old man in the moon.”

Similarly, in *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum*, after Qu Yunguang is injured by Zhang Guifang, his father brings a complaint before the emperor. The emperor responds: “国丈无旨上殿，何解？” The term “国丈” refers to the emperor’s father-in-law, and the translator rendered it literally as “state’s father-in-law,” among other examples.

3.3.2. Omission

Another notable translation strategy found in the dramatic translations published in *The China Review* is omission, whereby the translators, for certain specific purposes or needs, abridged or simplified parts of the source text in the process of translation. This strategy appears mainly in the three plays translated by Stanton, though instances of omission can also be found in *The Borrowed Boots*.

3.3.2.1. omission in *The Borrowed Boots*

The Borrowed Boots is a one-act play of relatively short length. Nevertheless, in the translation, the translator either omitted certain lines altogether or rendered some of the dialogue in a simplified manner, as shown in the following table:

Table 2. Omissions identified in the translation of *The Borrowed Boots*.

No.	Source text	Translation
1	说得干鱼睁开眼，道得铁佛放毫光。	/
2	元来是月明千里故人稀	My old friend! Such a friend as one seldom meets.
3	亏着你这乔嘴脸好一似柳盗跖，亏着你恶面皮认你一似打劫贼。	You plundering, robbing villain!
4	除非是李太白方敢穿，高力士才可脱，杨贵妃捧砚旁边立，锦衣花帽才敢脱。	Only a great poet or learned scholar should wear them.
5	借我的靴子有个比方，好一似粪堆生出灵芝草，污泥中生出比目鱼。	/
6	我想人而无信，不知其可也。大车无輹，小车无輹，其何以行之哉？	Of what possible use can such a man be in the world?
7	养军千日，用在一朝。	/

As we can see in the above table, for sentence No.1, No.5 and No.7, the translator omitted the whole lines together; for sentence No.2, No.3, No.4 and No.6, the translator simplified the translation by omitting some parts of the source text.

By examining the portions of the source text that were omitted or simplified, we can identify a common feature: the omitted or simplified parts are all, to some extent, closely tied to Chinese culture. Some involve Chinese proverbs, others historical allusions, and still others reference to historical figures.

For example, in sentence No.5, the line “借我的靴子有个比方，好一似粪堆生出灵芝草，污泥中生出比目鱼” contains a Chinese proverb, which metaphorically suggests that something fine and noble may emerge under adverse conditions. The translator omitted this sentence entirely.

In sentence No.3, Liu Er, upon hearing that Zhang Dan wants to borrow his boots, says: “亏着你这乔嘴脸好一似柳盗跖，亏着你恶面皮认你一似打劫贼” (“With that brazen face of yours, you’re just like Liu Daozhi; with that vile look of yours, you’re like a robber!”). Here, Liu Er compares Zhang Dan to Liu Daozhi, a legendary figure in Chinese folklore said to be a notorious bandit of the Spring and Autumn period, leader of thousands of brigands, a native of Lu, surnamed Zhan, also known as “Liuxia Zhi,” hot-tempered and morally corrupt. In the translation, the figure of “Liu Daozhi” was omitted entirely, and the line was simplified as: “You plundering, robbing villain!”

The same cases can be identified in sentence No.4, where names of many eminent Chinese cultural figures were omitted and simplified as “great poet or learned scholar”.

3.3.2.2. Omissions in Stanton’s translation

In the dramatic translations published in *The China Review*, the plays translated by Stanton exhibit the greatest degree of omission. Stanton’s abridgment of the source texts mainly falls into two categories: passages that are not closely related to the development of the plot, and passages that repeat what has already been stated. He makes this point explicit in his translator’s preface, noting that those parts of the original text “not required for the development of the plot” as well as “unnecessary repetitions” were omitted. [5]

Taking *The Willow Lute* as an example, there are four instances where parts of the text were omitted on the grounds of being “not required for the development of the plot.” It is noted that what these omitted sections have in common is that they are all self-introductions or background narratives delivered when a character first appears on stage. While the translator regarded them as dispensable for the overall development of the plot, in the original they generally serve a bridging function—linking preceding and following events. Their omission, therefore, inevitably undermines, to some extent, the integrity of the plot.

Another type of omission in Stanton’s translations involves the deletion of repetitive passages from the source text, most of which are found in the sung portions of the plays. Traditional Chinese opera scripts are generally composed of three parts: spoken dialogue, sung lyrics, and stage directions. These three elements are interdependent and indispensable, working together to advance the dramatic plot. Among them, the spoken dialogue and sung lyrics form the core, closely connected and mutually reinforcing. One important artistic technique in traditional Chinese drama is qubai futa (曲白复沓), which refers to the practice whereby “the meaning

conveyed in the spoken dialogue is repeated once more in the sung lyrics, in order to emphasize and highlight it”[8]. However, many sung lyrics were deleted or omitted by Stanton in his translation. Let’s take the translation of the opening part of *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum* as an example:

Source text:

.....

(英白) 相公不用悲泪, 修书一封, 叫老院回家迎接婆婆姐姐来就是。
(邦白) 女儿说的有理, 坐列堂前听年迈道来可。(唱) 贤婿且把眉开放, 为岳有言说知详, 修书一封回家往, 迎接婆婆媳到庄堂。
(王氏唱) 此番带兵回家往, 川资路费带便身旁, 见了婆婆言禀上, 携同媳妇起程忙。
(英唱) 坐列堂前把言讲, 妻子有话禀夫郎, 平安远寄回乡党, 婆媳见信快行藏。
说话间腹儿痛上。
(邦唱) 夫人扶女转闺房。(王氏扶英下)
(彦埋位唱) 一见我妻回房往, 定然不久产儿郎。手提狼手来写上, 书函拜上我亲娘。自从一别京邦上, 功名不就实恶还乡, 多蒙周府仁义广, 招赘你儿坐东床,

.....

Translation:

.....

C. S. Y. These are no obstacles;
Send, call my mother-in-law and sister here,
That they may live in peace and happiness,
And your suspense on their account remove.
C. H. P. Our daughter’s right, send to Kiangnan and call
Your family here, to dwell with us in peace.
C. S. Y. [*In pain*] Oh! Oh!
C. H. P. Go with her to her bedroom wife.
Mrs. C. leads off C. S. Y.
C. Y. L. [*Goes to table and wirtes*] ‘I came hither in search of fame, but failed
in the examination. I am, however, very grateful to the chou
family, for they showed compassion on me and took me into their
home for a son-in-law....’

In the above example, the original text includes both spoken dialogue and sung lyrics. The content of the spoken dialogue is later reiterated and elaborated upon in the form of sung lyrics. A comparison of the source text and the translation reveals that Stanton retained the spoken dialogue of Zhou Shuying and Zhou Huabang, but heavily abridged the sung lyrics: the entire sung passages of Zhou Shuying and her mother, Madam Wang, were omitted, and large portions of the sung lines of Zhou Huabang and Zhang Yanlin were also removed.

As noted above, Stanton’s omission of the sung lyrics was motivated by his belief that they constituted “unnecessary repetitions.” Yet in the context of Chinese drama, sung lyrics are indispensable. Wang Guowei, a modern Chinese cultural celebrity, argued that the aesthetic appeal of Chinese opera lies precisely in the lyrical expression of emotion through elegant verses, in the tension created by “few words

with lingering tones,” and in the charm revealed through repeated cadences and refrains. [9]

Stanton’s deletion or omission of the sung portions weakened greatly the emotional expression of the original text, and reflects, to some extent, an ethnocentric orientation and a translation strategy guided by the perceived needs of the target-language audience, rather than fidelity to the aesthetic conventions of the source culture.

3.3. Impact of the translation

In terms of quantity, drama translation in *The China Review* can by no means be deemed to be large, yet since the original dramas chosen by *The China Review* are mostly non-classical and local ones, many of the drama translations published in *The China Review* mark the debut of these dramas in the western world, making *The China Review* a pioneer in introducing local Chinese drama, especially Cantonese drama, to the west. For example, *A-LAN’S PIG* is so far the first Cantonese drama introduced to the western world. The translations of the other three Cantonese dramas, namely *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*, *The Willow Lute*, *The Golden Leaved Chrysanthemum* translated by W. Stanton, made their first appearance in the western world through *The China Review*. In addition, Stanton compiled the above-mentioned three Cantonese drama translations into a small book entitled *The Chinese Drama* published by Kelly & Walsh, Ltd. in 1899. This small book played a very constructive role in promoting Cantonese drama among westerners. As Xu and Zhou [10] remarked: “The publication of William Stanton’s *The Chinese Drama* cleared the westerners’ misunderstanding of Cantonese drama,... and it enables the western readers to familiarize and understand the Cantonese drama, an art originated and popular in South China region.”

4. Conclusions

The translations of Chinese drama in *The China Review* may be few, but their significance should not be overlooked. By selecting mostly local and lesser-known Cantonese plays, the journal became the first medium through which such works reached Western audiences. The translators’ motivations reveal an ambivalent stance: while aiming to showcase Chinese dramatic traditions, they often expressed condescension and emphasized the perceived inferiority of Chinese theatre compared with its Western counterpart. Their strategies, dominated by literal translation and omission, reflect both a pursuit of fidelity at the linguistic level and a pragmatic adaptation to Western readers’ expectations. However, omissions of cultural references and sung lyrics inevitably diluted the aesthetic qualities of Chinese drama. Nevertheless, the translations made a lasting impact by broadening Western understanding of Chinese theatre and by laying the groundwork for subsequent intercultural exchanges. Overall, these early translations illustrate the complexities of cultural transfer in a colonial context and underscore the role of *The China Review* as a pioneering platform in the introduction of Chinese drama to the Western world.

Conflicts of Interest

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