

A Study of Creative Treason in Xu Yuanchong's Translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* from the Medio-translatology Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper takes the core concept of creative treason in Medio-translatology as its theoretical fulcrum, systematically examining the aesthetic reconstruction pathways of Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* within a cross-cultural context. The paper first traces the academic lineage of creative treason, clarifying its inseparable dual nature of "creativity" and "treason". It then focuses on Xu's translation practice, conducting a close reading of the text from three dimensions: individualized translation, mistranslation and omission, and adaptation. The research reveals: First, individualized translation, which emphasizes the creative treason in translating character names, allusions, rhetoric devices, and scene titles in *Romance of the Western Bower*. Second, mistranslation and omission, analyzed as creative choices made by the translator to improve the conveyance of meaning. Third, adaptation examines Xu Yuanchong's selection of paratexts. Thus, creative treason plays a pivotal role in the translation of the classic Chinese drama *Romance of the Western Bower*, providing an operational choice for the cross-cultural dissemination of classical Chinese drama while enriching contemporary interpretations of translation studies theory.

Keywords:

Creative Treason, Medio-translatology, *Romance of the Western Bower*, Xu Yuanchong

1. Introduction

As globalization accelerates and cultural exchanges intensify, the translation of Chinese classical literary works has become a vital channel for disseminating Chinese culture and fostering cross-cultural communication. *Romance of the Western Bower*, a treasure of Chinese classical drama, holds an unparalleled status in both literary and theatrical spheres due to its distinctive artistic style and brilliant artistic achievements. Research on its English translations not only showcases the charm of Chinese literature but also provides valuable practical cases for studying translation theory,

particularly in Medio-translatology studies. Xu Yuanchong, a renowned Chinese translator, produced a rendition of *Romance of the Western Bower* characterized by elegant style, strict rhythm, and meticulous word choice, achieving remarkable success.

As a core term and theoretical foundation of translation studies, creative treason posits that creativity and treason are inseparable in literary translation. Creativity refers to the translator's limited imagination and subjective initiative, informed by their understanding of the original work. While treason involves altering certain vocabulary, sentence structures, or even the meaning of specific passages from the original work during the translation process, standing in the reader's position to ultimately help readers better understand and accept the original text. In Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower*, creative treason manifests specifically through individualized translation, mistranslations, omissions, and adaptations. [2] This paper aims to analyze the specific manifestations of creative treason in Xu Yuanchong's translation of *Romance of the Western Bower*, seeking to provide new perspectives and case studies for translation studies theory.

2. Origins and Essence of Creative Treason

In 1958, the renowned French scholar Robert Escarpit introduced the term "Creative Treason" in his book *Sociology of Literature*, though he did not elaborate on it at the time. In 1961, he published an English paper specifically addressing "Creative Treason" in a prominent comparative literature journal. Subsequent works also frequently expanded upon and elaborated this concept. Robert Escarpit's Creative Treason centers on the reader, encompassing both domestic and foreign audiences. [4] In 1985, Japanese scholar Yukio Otsuka dedicated a section to translation in his *Principles of Comparative Literature*. Otsuka argued that both the translator's act of rendering a work and the reader's engagement with the translation constitute processes of creative treason, thereby further demonstrating the dual creative treason of the original work toward its readers. [5] In 1987, renowned American comparative literary scholar Ulrich Weisstein further interpreted creative treason in *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory Survey and Introduction*, emphasizing the influence of readers within the reception context on the original work. [6] In the late 1980s, Xie Tianzhen introduced the concept of "creative treason" to China, establishing it as a core term and theoretical foundation for Medio-translatology.

Xie Tianzhen enriched the connotations of creative treason and provided further interpretation and definition. In his *Medio-translatology* which published in 1999, Xie Tianzhen elaborated on "creative treason," explaining it as follows: If creativity in literary translation signifies the translator's subjective effort to approach and reproduce the original work through their artistic talent, then the treason in literary translation reflects an objective deviation of the translation from the original caused by the translator's pursuit of a particular subjective desire during the translation process. Translation studies holds that the creativity and treason are fundamentally inseparable. Creativity in literary translation signifies the translator's subjective endeavor to approach and reproduce the original work through their artistic ingenuity; treason, conversely, reflects an objective divergence from the source text resulting from the translator's pursuit of specific subjective aims during the translation process. He further contends that creative treason manifests concretely in literary translation through individualized translation, mistranslation, omission and adaptations. [3]

3. Study of Creative Treason in Translations of *Romance of the Western Bower*

As the essence of traditional Chinese culture, opera embodies rich folk cultural and artistic value. *Romance of the Western Bower*, an outstanding representative of opera literature, showcases not only the aesthetic qualities of Chinese literature but also the soft power of Chinese culture through its international dissemination. Through analyzing Xu Yuanchong's English translation, this study explores how the translator, while maintaining fidelity to the original, employs the theory of creative treason in translation studies. This approach transforms the deep cultural connotations and unique artistic style of *Romance of the Western Bower* into a form accessible to English readers, thereby preserving the core spirit and distinctive charm of the original work. The creative treason in Xu Yuanchong's translation of *Romance of the Western Bower* manifests in three aspects: individualized translation, mistranslations and omissions, and adaptation.

3.1. Individualized Translation

Xu Yuanchong, a renowned Chinese translator hailed as “the foremost translator of Chinese poetry into English and French,” has earned widespread acclaim from readers and fellow translators worldwide for his stage adaptation of *Romance of the Western Bower*. This English translation, which seamlessly blends verse and prose, showcases both elegance and originality. In translating *Romance of the Western Bower*, Xu Yuanchong employed individualized translation approaches for character's name, allusions, rhetoric devices, and scene titles to ensure accurate meaning transmission.

3.1.1. Character's Name

Xu Yuanchong made numerous adjustments to character names in his text. To convey both the Chinese meaning and the deeper significance behind the names for English readers, he employed individualized translations. For example:

“红娘” is translated as “Rose”.

“红娘” plays a pivotal role in *Romance of the Western Bower*. She is portrayed as passionate, clever, and courageous—the catalyst and guardian of Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying's love. Literally, “红” signifies the color of celebration and matrimony; “娘” denotes a young woman, a common appellation for females in ancient China. Over time, “红娘” evolved from a common title into a cultural symbol representing the matchmaker who facilitates auspicious unions. Yet the character of the “红娘” differs significantly from traditional Chinese matchmakers. These matchmakers resembled modern intermediaries, handling all wedding arrangements from proposing marriage to concluding the ceremony. In contrast, “红娘”—as Cui Yingying's maid—is clever, quick-witted, and eloquent. Despite her lowly status, she tenaciously fights for the love between Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying. Her character not only makes their love story more vivid and engaging but is also the pivotal factor in their happy ending. The image of “红娘” has endured since *Romance of the Western Bower*, and to this day, mention of her immediately evokes the love story of Cui and Zhang. Thus, translating the role of “红娘” presents a challenging task.

A literal or phonetic translation (e.g., Maid Hong, Hongniang) would strip away all cultural associations, leaving English readers with a meaningless syllable. Xu Yuanchong's translation of “红娘” as ‘Rose’ carries profound cultural and symbolic

significance. The most classic and ubiquitous rose is the red rose, directly corresponding to the character “红” (Red). In Western culture, the red rose stands as the ultimate symbol of love, passion, romance, and beauty. This perfectly aligns with her core function in the play: passionately driving the love story forward. Simultaneously, the rose is a common gift flower, playing a role in conveying affection and connecting lovers in social, courtship, and emotional contexts. Thus, using “Rose” to represent “the facilitator of love” is both logical and poetic within the English reader’s cognitive framework. English readers encountering “Rose” will immediately associate it with a female character linked to love, passion, and beauty—something “红娘” cannot achieve.

Translating “红娘” as “Rose” may betray the literal and cultural specificity of the original name—losing the identity information of “young woman” or “maid” implied by the character “娘”—it more vividly captures her passionate and beautiful image as a love mediator. Replacing the source name, which carries romantic symbolism, with the most readily available symbol of love in the target language allows “红娘” to continue functioning as a “shortcut that instantly evokes romance” in the English world. This represents the translator’s creative treason in fulfilling their mandate.

3.1.2. Allusions

(1) Source text:

春光在眼前，
奈玉人不见。
将一座梵王宫，
化作武陵源。(ACT 1, Scene 1)

Xu’s Translation:

With spring’s beauty before my eyes,
It grieves me not to see her face of rosy hue.
When I saw her in the monastery stand,
The temple was transformed into a fairyland.[22]

This text depicts Zhang Sheng’s state of mind after meeting Cui Yingying, forming a stark contrast to the bright spring scenery before him. Zhang Sheng fell in love with Cui Yingying at first sight, yet now, unable to see her lovely face, he feels deeply depressed. Here, Zhang Sheng skillfully invokes the allusion of “武陵源” to express his emotions. “武陵源” originates from Tao Yuanming’s *The Peach Colony* during the Jin Dynasty, described in the text as “During the Taiyuan era of the Jin Dynasty, a man from Wuling made his living by fishing.” In reality, “武陵源” is a fictional utopia where people live carefree and isolated from the world. Zhang Sheng uses this allusion to express his profound longing for Cui Yingying. In Xu Yuanchong’s translation, “武陵源” is rendered as “fairyland.” Recognizing that English readers may be unfamiliar with the *The Peach Colony*, he creatively employs “fairyland” to evoke resonance and facilitate understanding of Zhang Sheng’s complex emotions—where longing for his beloved transforms the visible landscape into an ethereal paradise.

(2) Source text:

小生无宋玉般情，

潘安般貌，

子健般才。(ACT 4, Scene 1)

Xu's Translation:

I possess neither the grace,

Nor handsome face;

Nor skill with the pen.[22]

“宋玉”，“潘安”，and “子建” were all renowned men in ancient China. “宋玉”，a Chu dynasty poet and prose writer, achieved great artistic heights. Often paired with Qu Yuan as the “Qu-Song”，he was also celebrated for his striking beauty. “潘安”，famously handsome throughout history, inspired the phrase “as handsome as Pan An” to describe male beauty, becoming a byword for good looks. “子建”，also known as Cao Zhi, possessed extraordinary literary prowess. Alongside Cao Cao and Cao Pi, he is celebrated as one of the “Three Caos.” His legendary ability to compose poetry in seven steps is widely known, cementing his status as a renowned literary genius. When mentioned, his exceptional talent immediately comes to mind. The original text employs each figure’s most celebrated attribute. Translator Xu Yuanchong creatively rendered the allusions as “I have no grace, nor handsome face, at writing I am not a good hand,” omitting the names since the context clearly conveys their symbolic meanings, thus streamlining the text for readers. Since English readers likely won’t recognize “潘安” or “宋玉” nor understand the allusions, sacrificing form for the essence behind the names preserves literary flavor while enhancing comprehension. Translating allusions must first ensure accurate expression of fixed meanings within the text’s context. Through individualized translation in creative treason, the original emotional intent becomes more accessible to the target readers.

3.1.3. Rhetoric devices

Source text:

法鼓金铙，

二月春雷响殿角。

钟声佛号，

半天风雨洒松梢。(ACT 1, Scene 4)

Xu’s Translation:

Sacred drums and brazen cymbals sound

In every corner of the temple and all around

Like thunder in the second moon of spring;

The prayers to Buddha and the bells ring

Like a half skyful of rain mingled with strong breeze,

Sprinkling among the tips of green pine-trees.[22]

The original text contains two metaphors: “春雷” and “风雨.” Due to differences in natural geography and cultural contexts, various cultures employ distinct metaphors. Translators must therefore handle these metaphors appropriately and logically. In China, “春雷” typically symbolizes the arrival of spring, the revival of all things, and

vibrant vitality. It heralds the beginning of a new year and hope, signifying the awakening of the earth and the renewal of all creation. When the first spring thunder rolls, hibernating creatures awaken, seeds begin to sprout, and everything brims with vitality. Thus, Xu Yuanchong translated “春雷” as “thunder” to ensure smooth communication with readers. “风雨” in Chinese often metaphorically represents adversity and harsh circumstances, or symbolizes swirling rumors and varied legends. In literary works, “风雨” can also symbolize life’s hardships and adversities. Xu Yuanchong translates “风雨” as “a half skyful of rain mingled with strong breeze,” preserving the original’s poetic imagery while conveying its emotional and symbolic weight to English readers. Through individualized translation in creative treason, Xu Yuanchong ensures the precise expression of the fixed meaning of the vocabulary within the article’s context, enabling the target English reader to better grasp the emotions conveyed in the original text. Therefore, Xu Yuanchong replaces these two metaphors with synonyms in his translation to ensure smooth communication between the text and the reader.

3.1.4. Scene Titles

Romance of the Western Bower comprises five ACTs, each containing four scenes for a total of twenty acts. Each act bears a distinct title. Xu Yuanchong’s translations of these highly condensed titles, rich in content and connotation, also reflect creative treason.

Source text:

Scene Title of ACT 1, Scene 1: “惊艳”

Xu’s Translation:

Enchantment

The title “惊艳” is translated as “Enchantment.” On a surface level, “惊” conveys astonishment or surprise, while “艳” refers to a beauty or her radiant charm. At a deeper level, “惊艳” expresses the profound delight and intoxication a beauty evokes. In English, “Enchantment” conveys feelings of rapture, delight, and intoxicating fascination. Xu Yuanchong deliberately chose “Enchantment” to translate “惊艳,” aiming to convey Zhang Sheng’s ecstatic, intoxicated state of mind, thereby highlighting Cui Yingying’s captivating charm. The word “enchantment” transforms the characters “惊” and “艳” into a subjective state of mind arising from the perception of beauty. It makes Zhang Sheng’s obsession and Cui Yingying’s beauty complement each other perfectly, forming a subjective state of mind born from the experience of beauty. This translation is far more sophisticated than a simple literal rendering of “Jingyan.” The use of “enchantment” skillfully conveys Zhang Sheng’s subjective experience of Cui Yingying’s beauty, allowing readers to vividly grasp the allure of this beauty. Through deep comprehension of the original text, Xu Yuanchong achieves a higher level of fidelity in his translation by both adhering to the source material and making judicious creative choices.

3.2. Mistranslation and Omission

Mistranslation and omission are two common forms of creative treason. Mistranslation occurs when a translator misunderstands or misrepresents the original text during the translation process, resulting in a translation that diverges from the intended meaning. Omission refers to the intentional or unintentional exclusion of

certain information from the original text. While these phenomena are unavoidable in translation, they can be strategically employed by translators to achieve specific interpretive effects. For instance, in translating *Romance of the Western Bower*, a translator might make appropriate cuts or adjustments to the original text to maintain the fluency and readability of the translation. While such cuts or adjustments may appear formally as mistranslations or omissions, they are often creative choices made by the translator to better convey the underlying meaning.

Source text:

他们不识忧

不识愁,

一双心意两相投。

夫人你得好休,

便好休,

其间何必苦追求?

常言道:“女大不中留。” (ACT 4, Scene 2)

Xu's translation:

They know neither grief nor sorrow;

They know today but not tomorrow.

They love each other soul and heart;

They cannot bear to be torn apart.

My Mistress, overlook the matter if you can.

This is not an affair for you to probe or scan.[22]

Xu Yuanchong omitted the line “女大不中留” in his translation, which diminishes the construction of Rose’s character. This line not only enriches the plot but also reflects Rose’s open-minded attitude toward Cui Yingying’s marriage and her folk wisdom, serving as a crucial element in shaping her personality. However, Xu Yuanchong’s translation omits this information, leaving the portrayal of Rose incomplete. Furthermore, the third line’s “soul and heart” is an incorrect reworking of the English idiom “heart and soul.” This alteration serves only to rhyme with the final word “apart” in the fourth line, rather than faithfully conveying the original meaning. The correct expression should be “heart and soul,” which aligns with English usage and accurately conveys the original meaning of “wholehearted devotion.” Xu Yuanchong sacrificed this correct form for the sake of rhyme. Furthermore, the word “apart” in the fourth line is an addition by the translator. The original text does not explicitly state “cannot bear to be separated,” but rather emphasizes mutual affection and profound emotional connection. Xu Yuanchong translated this content for the sake of rhyme. While this deviates from the original meaning in substance, it enhances the rhythmic quality of the translation in form. In summary, Xu Yuanchong prioritized rhythmic flow and fluency in his translation, though certain adaptations involve mistranslations or omissions. While these choices partially compromise the original’s informational integrity and character portrayal, they reflect the translator’s deliberate focus and creative intent—manifesting a characteristic of creative treason.

3.3. Adaptation

In Xu Yuanchong's English translation of *Romance of the Western Bower*, the paratexts—comprising the preface, introduction, and annotations—itsself constitutes an act of creative treason. These elements not only facilitate comprehension but actively guide English readers to engage with this Chinese classical drama in specific ways, thereby shaping the translation's overall image and interpretive framework within the Western world.

The creative treason of the translation is primarily manifested in the adaptation of the paratexts. The paratexts includes the preface, introduction, annotations, and other elements that play a crucial role in connecting readers with the text. Through those paratexts, the translator expresses their understanding of the text and their translation philosophy, while readers engage in an indirect dialogue with the translator and gain a fundamental grasp of the text.

In the introduction of *Romance of the Western Bower*, Xu Yunchong contrasts the similarities and differences between *Romance of the Western Bower* and Shakespearean plays on the theme of love, discussing the literary achievements of *Romance of the Western Bower*. He emphasizes the play's nuanced and profound depiction of love, as well as its pivotal place in literary history. Through this comparison, Xu not only reveals *Romance of the Western Bower*'s unique charm, but also heightens readers' interest and anticipation for the work.

In the annotation section, Xu Yuanchong's notes are typically concise. For allusions appearing in the original text, Xu Yuanchong adopts a subdued approach. When encountering numerous Chinese historical and literary references, he often opts for free translation or generalization in the translation, adding brief annotations only at a few critical points. This avoids burdening the text with heavy academic notes, preserving both reading fluidity and the integrity of poetic imagery. For culturally loaded terms like “科举”, “功名”, annotations provide concise explanations such as “the imperial civil service examination” and “government position,” refraining from detailed institutional descriptions.

Xu Yuanchong's adaptation of the original text's subtext not only conveys his interpretation and translation philosophy but also elevates the work's literary elegance and artistic merit. His translation filters out cultural and historical details that would be too obscure or pedantic for the average English reader, guiding readers to focus on the characters' emotions, the beauty of the poetry, and the intrigue of the plot rather than the theatrical form or historical accuracy. This adaptation of creative treason ensures that *Romance of the Western Bower* can be effectively understood and appreciated by English readers.

4. Conclusions

Analyzing the Creative Treason in Xu Yuanchong's English version of *Romance of the Western Bower* from a Medio-translatology Perspective, we can clearly observe the significant role and manifestations of creative treason in Chinese classic drama translation. Xu Yuanchong demonstrated unique strategies through individualized translation, mistranslations and omissions, and adaptation, reflecting his profound understanding of literature and culture. His translation not only enrich the theory and practice of literary translation but also offer valuable insights for cross-cultural communication. Xu Yuanchong's translation is not merely a literary work but a bridge

connecting Chinese and Western cultures, enabling more people to appreciate the literary beauty and cultural soul of *Romance of the Western Bower*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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