

# The Impact of Chinese and Western Cultural Differences on Pun Translation: The Case Study of *A Dream of Red Mansion*

ZHU Jian-chun

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The studies on pun translation are mainly from various theoretical perspectives. This article will analyze the impact of pun translation from the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. The examples mainly include the translation of the mythological characters' names in *A Dream of Red Mansion*, the names of the main characters of men and women, and slave groups' names. Then the emphasis will be put on strategies adopted by Yang Xianyi and Hawkes, exploring why they adopted these translation skills, from the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

*Keywords:* the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, pun translation, *A Dream of Red Mansion*

## Introduction

Puns refer to the use of the polysemy and homophony of words to express two different meanings in a specific language environment, making the language expression more subtle and impressing readers. Puns are mainly divided into homophonic puns and semantic puns. Homophonic puns use words with the same or similar pronunciation to achieve the effect of semantic puns, while semantic puns use different meanings of words to achieve puns in different contexts. No matter in local literature or in foreign literature, authors always spend too much time naming characters, so as to use puns to associate characters' characteristics, fate and end with their names. However, translators are hard to reproduce the charm and meaning of the original text. Zhang Nanfeng believes that "About how to deal with puns, especially in English-Chinese translation can reveal the translator's translation view" (Zhang, 2004, p. 178). The complete equivalence of the two puns in phonetics and semantics is difficult to be achieved, which can be traced back to the historical development of the two languages. And they have no much connection in history and culture. Newmark (1988) pointed out that "monosyllable words are the easiest to create puns, so puns are the most common in English and Chinese" (p. 217).

There are hundreds of characters in *A Dream of Red Mansion*, ranging from kinsmen of the emperor to small handymen. Regardless of the appearances of these characters, the author subtly names the characters with homophony, poems, and literary allusions, and associate characters' names with their characteristics and fate. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang mainly adopt transliteration for the character names, while Hawkes adopts transliteration and free translation. From the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, this article will explore the translation strategies and thoughts of Yang and Huo in the translation of puns.

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ZHU Jian-chun, postgraduate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

### Character Name Features

Name is one kind of Chinese cultures. It not only represents a certain social blood relationship but also is a unique symbol that can highlight someone in society. In Chinese surname culture, the clan surname comes first, then the seniority, and finally the first name. For example, Daiyu's mother "Jia Min", and her brothers "Jia She" and "Jia Zheng", follow the "wen" seniority. However, the names of the four young ladies "Yuanchun, Yingchun, Tanchun, Xichun" are different from the seniority naming mentioned above. Their names are derived from the Chinese character "chun", which also conforms to the general naming conventions. Besides the major feature of seniority, character naming in *A Dream of Red Mansions* also has the following features:

#### Character Names and Their Last Names Homophony

For example, "Jia Zheng", his name homophony refers to "pretended decency", which conforms to his personality with a benevolence and morality. His brother "Jia She", his name homophony means "fake ornament", who is not favored by his mother. And his wife, "Lady Xing", pronouncing like "form" in Chinese, and the two are the host and hostess of the Ning Mansion. Their name homophony combined together represents "hypothetical form", which reflects the author's ingenious writing skills. At the beginning of the novel, the character "Zhen Shiyin", whose name refers to "the truth is hidden", conceals what actually happened, which means the story written in the novel is unreal. "Jia Yucun" appears many times in the novel, promoting the development of the story, but the homophony of his name indicates that what he said is false and unreliable.

In addition, even if some characters are with relatively few appearances, the homophony of their surnames and first names is also quite artistic. For example, Jia Yun's uncle "Bu Shiren", his name homophony means "inhuman". When his nephew determines to borrow money from him, he refuses and even taunts Jia Yun. The author uses the homophony to subtly highlight his disgusting characteristic.

#### Character Names from Classical Poems

Since ancient times, Chinese parents have been willing to choose names for their children from poems and sentences, so as to express their expectation for kids. Similarly, when creating characters, the author also likes to apply allusions to name the characters and give them special meaning in the story. In the novel, the author also quoted a large number of poems and famous lines to name the characters, and the dialogue between the characters can find the relevant source.

For example, the Lady Dowager's maid—Yuanyang, whose name comes from the "Yuanyang" in *The Book of Songs: Xiaoya*, the author takes it with the meaning of gentleman. She is loyal and devoted to the Lady Dowager. Zijuan, as Daiyu's personal maid, is loyal to her master and always puts Daiyu's needs in priority. Her name is taken from Du Fu's poem *The Cuckoo*. The author even makes efforts to give the name for a small role. For example, Hongyu (later changed to Xiaohong), who only has few appearances, is named from Liu Chang's poems. It's not tough to find some clues to the ending of these characters after reading these famous poems quoted by the author.

### Chinese and Western Cultural Differences and Character Name Pun Translation

This novel covers various Chinese traditional cultures, such as clothing, medicine, architecture, food, poetry, religious culture, and so on. If some of these cultures are connected with names, it is difficult to understand the rhetoric and special meanings without a certain cultural background. To the translators, they

should emphasize on how to translate the potential meanings and stimulate English readers' interest in reading. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang mainly transliterate these names, and mark the obvious puns with footnotes to facilitate readers' understanding, while Hawkes adopts a combination of transliteration and free translation, and transliterates the main characters in the novel while free translation is used for slave groups. Furthermore, endnotes are used for complicated character relationships in Hawkes's version. The following will further discuss the features and translation approaches of Yang and Hawkes's version from two aspects: the pun translation of mythical character names and slave group names.

### **Mythical Character Names**

In the novel, the author has used some Buddhist, Taoist, and immortal figures as clues for storyline. In the opening chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansion*, Yang Xianyi directly translates the word "shenxian" as "immortals", while Hawkes chooses the word "salvation". "Shenxian" is an extremely important part of Chinese Taoist thought, which is a cultural word with Chinese characteristics, while salvation refers to "save, rescue"; only Christianity in Western culture has the idea of saving the suffering masses. For Christians, salvation is the highest pursuit, and it's possible that English readers can accept this kind of translation.

There are also several mysterious and unpredictable fairy characters in the novel, such as "Kongkongdao ren", "Mangmang da shi", and "Miaomiaozhen ren", appearing in the opening chapter. The author uses homophonic pun rhetoric to name these characters. "The name means that these characters come and go without a trace, and don't need to pursue" (Hu, 1997, p. 89). In Western Christian culture, there is almost no such thing, so Hawkes uses a combination of Italian, Sanskrit, and English, translating them as "Vanitas, the Buddhist mahāsattva Impervioso, the Taoist illuminate Mysterioso", with the combination of different language features to express characters' mystery, while Yan translates these three characters as "Reverend Void, the Buddhist of Infinite Space, the Taoist of Boundless Time", and the Taoist as "Reverend". Although it is easy for English readers who believe in Christianity to understand, "Dao Ren" is a peculiar vocabulary of Chinese Taoist culture. It seems to be biased to translate it as reverend.

### **Slave Group Names**

In English literature, a great many of works use puns to name the protagonist. For example, the name "Earnest" in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains puns. Therefore, according to the naming tradition in English literature, for the two names "Huo Qi" and "Jiao Xing" with obvious semantic puns, Hawkes translates them as "Calamity" and "Lucky" respectively to help readers better understand the characters' personality and motivate the development of plots. But Yan transliterates these two names directly, leading to reader's misunderstanding about the author's intentions and information loss.

In the context of traditional Chinese culture, few masters would name servants as "calamity", but it is difficult for translators to take both aspects into account when translating. Therefore, it's sufficient to translate the puns and make them understandable for readers. Translators should put their audience in first priority when translating, so that readers can clarify the meaning of the original text.

### **Translation Skills**

"There are so many characters in *A Dream of Red Mansion*. If translating them all, it will be difficult and miserable for readers to remember all the characters..." (Qian & Alberg, 2001, p. 18-19). Therefore, when translating names, Yan mostly uses transliteration or literal translation, which retains the language

characteristics of the novel to the greatest extent, showing a certain foreignization, while Hawkes pursues the loyalty to the original text and translates everything as he can. Therefore, he transliterates the main characters as well as Yan, and free translation is adopted for minor characters, such as slaves. It is convenient for English readers to understand Chinese traditional culture, and then achieve cultural exchanges. When translating literary works, due to puns' untranslatability, achieving pun equivalence is tough for the translators. Only when translating such texts, the translators will translate puns into non-puns. Although there're difficulties on balancing the semantics of the original text and the pun, the examples mentioned above have shown the efforts they made.

Many translators have different attitudes towards the names, and they all hope to find a relatively suitable solution, which not only expresses superficial meaning but also reflect deep connotation. In addition to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, differences in language history, social, and human development, etc., will also cause some puns to achieve translation equivalence. When translating such names, translators can add some annotations to facilitate readers' understanding. Moreover, translators should boldly use footnotes except for transliteration and free translation, so that English readers can understand the meaning and understand the storyline of the original text and character features.

### Conclusions

This article analyzes the different skills adopted by Yang Xianyi and Hawkes for translation the name puns in *A Dream of Red Mansion*, from the perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and summarizes the name culture in the novel. Generally speaking, for majority of the characters mentioned in the novel, Yan mainly adopts a combination of transliteration and literal translation, and intends to reserve the original cultural features as much as possible and help the readers appreciate the charm. Considering the target audience is mainly English speakers, Hawkes takes free translation for slave groups and mythological figures to make readers understand the special meanings given to the characters by the author.

Cultural differences have always been a complicated issue. Therefore, to the translators, in addition to mastering two languages, they should have fully understanding about the two cultures, knowing where the cultural differences lie in, and reproduce the author's intentions and original style based on the faithfulness to the original content. In *A Dream of Red Mansion*, puns are not only involved in character names, but also in place names, poems, and songs. The examples cited for puns are limited; there is still room for improvement in the analysis of cultural differences.

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