

# Translation Strategies for the Titles of Concubines of the Qing Dynasty

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Qing Dynasty palace dramas draw much attention from the public overseas, such as *Princess of Pearl*, *Empresses in the Palace*, *Story of Yanxi Palace*. Qing Dynasty palace dramas are an effective way for overseas fans or receptors to comprehend Chinese culture. Many scholars only devoted themselves to subtitles translation, but almost no one made deep research about the translation for the titles of concubines. Titles of concubines are the special feature of Qing Dynasty palace dramas, in which the real concubine system of the Forbidden City is also reflected. Standardizing the titles of concubines can further strengthen audiences' comprehension of Chinese culture. This essay aims to analyze the difficulty and status quo on translating the titles of concubines from Chinese into English and then provides appropriate translation strategies for reference.

*Keywords:* the titles of concubines, Chinese culture, translation from Chinese into English, culture-specific items in translation

## The Difficulty of Translating the Titles of Concubines

Historically, from the Zhou Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, China implemented the monogamy all along, but emperors can have many concubines at the same time. Emperors' concubines own different titles which are used to grade them. There are seven levels of concubines, including huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”), guìfēi (“贵妃”), fēi (“妃”), pín (“嫔”), guì rén (“贵人”), cháng zài (“常在”), dāyīng (“答应”) (Zhou & Zhu, 2008). Back to ancient China, the emperor could only take one wife, even the empress owned lots of concubines. Concubines entitled any titles were all subordinate to the empress, but it is noteworthy that those concubines were legally acknowledged and protected.

On the contrary, the western feudal empires implemented the monogamy, which means that the emperor only had one wife, and all his mistresses were out of marriage and could not get the legal protection. It is the most significant difference between ancient China and western feudal society. The titles of concubines of the Qing Dynasty are unique and typical. The title of a concubine contains the meaning of her level in the palace. In English, there are almost no equivalent words to describe it. It is considered that the most difficult point is the huge cultural differences, therefore translators maybe get stuck with translating it.

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**Acknowledgements:** This paper is funded by the Program of Humanities and Social Science of USST (SK18ZD11).

### **The Status Quo of the Translation for the Titles of Concubines**

As far, the Chinese government has not published any official translation for the titles of concubines of the Qing Dynasty. All the translations about it just come from the internet. I collected some translation versions which are most representative and are spread most widely, including Imperial Noble Consort (“皇贵妃”), Noble Consort (“贵妃”), Consort (“妃”), Concubine (“嫔”), Lady or Dame (“贵人”), First Attendant (“常在”), Respondent (“答应”).

By reviewing some literatures related to concubine system of the Qing Dynasty and looking up some authoritative dictionaries, I found that these translations are not appropriate. For example, “consort” in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is explained as “the husband or wife of a ruler”, so “consort” cannot be used to describe concubines. It oversteps its boundary when it is put here. Likewise, “concubine” means “a woman in the past who lived with and had sex with a man who already had a wife or wives, but who was socially less important than the wives”. As mentioned above, this word covers a general meaning and thus it cannot embody the difference of concubines’ levels. Similarly, the word “lady” contains the following meanings, such as the polite expression of women, the title of the wife or daughter of a British nobleman, or the wife of a knight. And the word “dame” refers to “a title given to a woman as a special honor because of important service or work that she has done”. Those words totally deviate from the meanings of those titles in Chinese. They are not understandable and reasonable when being put in the condition, receptors without Chinese culture background cannot distinguish what truly they are. In analysis of “attendant”, we can find that it means “someone whose job is to serve or help people in a place”. Even though the level of *cháng zài* (“常在”) was relatively low, yet they still belonged to the range of concubines and they had servants to wait on them. So obviously the word is used improperly. And about “respondent”, it indicates that the person who replies to something. In this way, the translator only translated the denotation rather than the connotation of Respondent (“答应”). Meanwhile, no aesthetic sense exists in this literal translation.

### **Under the Guidance of Culture-Specific Items in Translation (Aixela, 1996)**

The most significant difficulty in translating the titles of concubines of the Qing Dynasty is the huge difference between Chinese and Western cultures. It is not only about the two languages but also the two cultures. This is the reason that this paper thinks culture-specific items in translation strategy can bring the new inspiration for it. Spanish translation theorist Javier Franco Aixela put forward the concept of culture-specific items in his book *Culture-specific Items in Translation* in 1996. Culture-specific items are usually expressed in a text by means of objects and of systems of classification and measurement whose use is restricted to the source culture, or by means of the transcription of opinions and the description of habits equally alien to the receiving culture. He still pointed that in translation a CSI (culture-specific item) does not exist of itself, but as the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text which, when transferred to a target language, poses a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value of the given item in the target language culture. And he also suggested that these translation procedures can be combined with one another. It is not strange for one translator using different strategies to treat CSIs in the same target text.

In terms of the problem, Javier Franco Aixela brought forward eleven possible manipulations to treat it. They are respectively repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic (non-cultural) translation, extratextual gloss,

intratextual gloss, synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, autonomous creation. Given that the titles of concubines are of nationality, complexity, and cultural heterogeneity, this paper proposes that two among these eleven strategies can be adopted into the translation of the titles of concubines, namely the linguistic (non-cultural) translation and orthographic adaptation plus intratextual gloss. The former one is much more suitable to be used into subtitles translation and the latter one is much more appropriate for the literature or in formal writing. We can choose different strategy of translation on the basis of our needs.

### The Method of Linguistic (Non-cultural) Translation

The translator chooses in many cases a denotatively very close reference to the original, but increases its comprehensibility by offering a target language version which can still be recognized as belonging to the cultural system of the source text. Both the concept of concubines and the levels of concubines in Chinese culture are very complicated. We can clearly find that there are no equivalent words in English to directly explain it, so it is an acceptable way to translate the source texts on the basis of their original connotations. Making deep analysis and comprehension of different levels of concubines before translating is very important and necessary.

This paper makes a classification of concubines according to their levels and also the connotations. The first type includes huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”), guìfēi (“贵妃”). Both of them were at the high level and the number of these two levels was limited, 1 person, 2 persons respectively; The second type consists of fēi (“妃”), pín (“嫔”). Both of them were at the middle stage and the number of these two levels was also limited, 4 person, 6 persons respectively; The last type contains guì rén (“贵人”), cháng zài (“常在”), dāyīng (“答应”). Those were the last three low-level concubines and there was no concrete limitation of the numbers.

#### huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”), guìfēi (“贵妃”)

**huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”).** In the Qing Dynasty, the title of the class of huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”) was of the highest rank among all the concubines, only next to empress. After the reign of Emperor Kang Xi of the Qing Dynasty, emperors not readily bestowed concubines on huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”). This paper tends to translate huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”) into “Imperial Concubine”. The word “imperial” contains the meaning of exercising supreme authority, which can completely reflect the dominant position of huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”) in the palace of the Qing Dynasty.

**guìfēi (“贵妃”).** Compared with huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”), this type of concubines did not have that much power in the palace, but their levels were still very high. This paper suggests that it can be translated into “Secondary Imperial Concubine”. Through the translation receptors can have a clear vision in that it can show guìfēi (“贵妃”)’s high level and authority in the palace and their lower position than huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”) at the same time.

#### fēi (“妃”), pín (“嫔”)

**fēi (“妃”).** The third level among concubines was fēi (“妃”). They were commonly bestowed the title of honor with virtue or good luck. Translating it with the combination of its honor’s title is an effective method, namely “Auspicious Concubine”. It can connect with the former two higher concubines with great coherence and still with aesthetics.

**pín (“嫔”).** In Chinese dictionary, pín (“嫔”) is the general term of women. It also contains the meaning of compliment to women. Similar to the translation of fēi (“妃”), it can be translated as “Decent Concubine”.

**guì rén (“贵人”), cháng zài (“常在”), dāying (“答应”)**

**guì rén (“贵人”).** For this Chinese word, because of its relatively low level, this paper chooses to use “Noblewoman” (Yu, 1999). *Collins Dictionary* defines “noblewoman” as “a noblewoman was a woman who was a member of the nobility”. In fact, “dame”, “senhora”, “dowager”, “gentlewomen” all have the similar meaning like “noblewoman”. But given that these words except “noblewoman” are limited by the condition and context.

**cháng zài (“常在”).** It was the seventh level of concubines. They possessed three maids, two eunuchs, and two servants. “Palace Woman” would be an appropriate translation for it. At first, literally, cháng zài (“常在”) in Chinese can be understood as “common”, “be seen everywhere”. Secondly, the number of cháng zài (“常在”) was large. This is reason that “Palace Woman” reflects well the connotations of cháng zài (“常在”).

**dāying (“答应”).** The lowest level of concubines was dāying (“答应”). According to the record of the historical classic, for all that, all the eunuchs should prostrate to them. “Harem” has the closest meaning to dāying (“答应”) (Zhang, 1995). *American Heritage Dictionary* gives the explanation of it, “a group of women sexual partners for one man”. Those girls picked by the emperors generally would firstly get the title of dāying (“答应”) and then gradually got the promotion. The number of dāying (“答应”) was biggest among all concubines. Besides, they did not possess their own honor’s titles because of the low level. Therefore, “Harem” is the most appropriate word to translate dāying (“答应”), which can totally represent its inferiority.

### **Method of Orthographic Adaptation Plus Intratextual Gloss**

This strategy includes procedures like transcription and transliteration, which are mainly used when the original reference is expressed in a different alphabet from the one target readers’ use. If the term is brand new, or there are huge differences between source language and target language, in the case of semantic gap, transliteration is extremely an important translation strategy. Transliteration contains four methods, including pure transliteration, homophonic transliteration plus partially quoting out of the meaning, partial transliteration, and pictographic translation. The translator uses the orthographic adaptation firstly, considers it necessary to offer some explanation of the meaning or implication of the CSI, and then should include their gloss as an indistinct part of the text, usually so as not to disturb the reader’s attention.

Before 1979, Wade-Giles Romanization was widely used into English standard references and to all the books related to China. So far, the application of Wade-Giles Romanization has been replaced by mandarin phonetic symbols. To the best of our knowledge, it is better to adopt transliteration in mandarin phonetic symbols (Catford, 1965). Words of mandarin phonetic symbols like guìfēi (“贵妃”), fēi (“妃”), pín (“嫔”), guì rén (“贵人”), cháng zài (“常在”), dāying (“答应”) are relatively short, so pure transliteration is an appropriate option. This paper aims to transliterate it into “Guifei”, “Fei”, “Pin”, “Guiren”, “Changzai”, “Daying”. In contrast, the characters of huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”) is much more than the others. If we stick to adopt the method of pure transliteration, it would be cumbersome and inharmonious when compared with the others. This is the reason that this paper adopts the much more appropriate partial transliteration. Through this method, it can be translated to “Imperial Guifei”. As mentioned above in the Chapter 4.1.1, the word “imperial” stands for the supreme authority. Receptors can easily comprehend its connotation through this simple structure. Meanwhile, it has the sense of aesthetic.

Transliteration is only half of the process of translating the titles of concubines in the Qing Dynasty because first of all, there are no such words in the target language, and secondly, those translations have not been widely spread. So for overseas receptors, these words are completely new. For example, it took a long

time for words like “goji berry”, “hongbao”, “hutong” with distinct Chinese culture to be spread worldwide before they were collected into *Oxford English Dictionary* as well. When firstly seeing these translations, they actually don't know the true meanings of these words. In order to make it easier for receptors to understand and comprehend, translator should add the explanation of the levels of concubines with the brackets after transliteration. It is a much more comprehensive translation strategy. For the first level and the last level of concubines, we can adopt the words “highest” and “lowest” respectively, and for the middle parts, we can adopt the ordinal numbers like “second”, “third”, “fourth”, “fifth”, “sixth”. The word “concubine” can describe all the concubines at different levels because of its definition in the dictionary. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines it, “A woman in the past who lived with and had sex with a man who already had a wife or wives, but who was socially less important than the wives”.

Combining the above two translation strategies of orthographic adaptation and intratextual gloss, the translation finally should be like the followings:

- huángguìfēi (“皇贵妃”)—“Imperial Guifei” (the highest degree of empire's concubine);
- guìfēi (“贵妃”)—“Guifei” (the first degree of empire's concubine);
- fēi (“妃”)—“Fei” (the third degree of empire's concubine);
- pín (“嫔”)—“Pin” (the fourth degree of empire's concubine);
- guì rén (“贵人”)—“Guiren” (the fifth degree of empire's concubine);
- cháng zài (“常在”)—“Changzai” (the sixth degree of empire's concubine);
- dāying (“答应”)—“Daying” (the lowest degree of empire's concubine).

### Conclusion

Qing Dynasty palace dramas draw more and more attention from the people overseas, which is not only a new trend in the development of Chinese film and television industry, but also an important means for the promotion of Chinese traditional culture. The titles of concubines are not only an important part of the Qing Dynasty palace drama, but also the characteristics of the Chinese nation. The translation of the titles of concubines not only enables overseas receptors to have deeper understandings of Chinese history and culture, but also promotes the progress of translation in the specific field, which is of great significance. Therefore, this paper analyzes the translation of the titles of concubines in the Qing Dynasty from three aspects: the difficulties, the current situation, and the solutions. It is believed that the biggest difficulty of the translation stems from the huge cultural differences between China and the western society. The title of concubine is the unique characteristic of ancient China, and there is no equivalent concept in western culture. At present, the academic circle has not paid much attention to the Chinese-English translation of the titles of concubines in the Qing Dynasty. There are only some translation versions online, which lack accuracy and standardization. The culture-specific item theory proposed by Spanish translation theorist Javier Franco Aixela is highly compatible with the translation logic of the titles of concubines. Therefore, under the guidance of this theory, this paper believes that the methods of linguistic (non-cultural) translation, transliteration, orthographic adaptation plus intratextual gloss are effective translation strategies. Hopefully, the thoughts of this paper can bring some new ideas to translators interested in the related field.

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