

The Aesthetics of Reception and S.I. Hsiung's *Lady Precious Stream*

Deyin Chen

School of Foreign Languages
Fuzhou University of Foreign Studies and Trade
Fuzhou, China

Abstract—With the deepening of globalization and the strengthening of China's soft power, cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world have been increasingly frequent nowadays. This paper discusses success of the play *Lady Precious Stream* translated by S.I. Hsiung in both the U.K. and the U.S. early last century from the perspective of the aesthetics of reception while focusing on the reproduction of *Lady Precious Stream's* image and translation of culture-specific terms, hoping to enlighten the current practitioners during translation of Chinese operas.

Keywords—S.I. Hsiung; aesthetics of reception; *Lady Precious Stream*; translation

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the pioneers who introduced Chinese Operas into the western world, S.I. Hsiung has made tremendous contribution to cultural exchanges between China and the outside world. In 1934, the play *Lady Precious Stream* translated by I. Hsiung's has created a sensation as soon as it was published and presented on the stage in London. Later, in 1935, the play, as the first Chinese play landed on America, also became a hit when it was produced on Broadway. Not only had he been given highly complimentary remarks by prestigious writers such as W. S. Maugham and George Bernard Shaw, but also gained cordial welcome by audiences in both countries. Due to the success of the play, Hsiung was received by the Royal family members in UK and Mrs Roosevelt in the U.S. The play *Lady Precious Stream* was adapted and translated from the traditional Peking Opera — Red Mane Horse and Precious Stream, also known as Wang Baochuan in China, is the leading female figure in it. The story depicts Wang Baochuan, the daughter of prime minister in the Dang Dynasty, falls in love with and then marries to a poor young fellow Xue Pingui. Consequently, she is cut off from the family for disobeying her father. Later, Xue Pingui applies for a military post and joins the combat against Xiliang, an affiliated country at the time. Yet, due to all sorts of accidental mishaps, Xue Pingui marries Princess Dai Zan, the princess of Xiliang, and stays there for 18 years while Wang is struggling with poverty alone and waiting for her husband to come back home. Eventually, Xue Pingui comes back home, the couple meet again and happily spend the last 18 days in Wang Baochuan' life together.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE AESTHETICS OF RECEPTION

From late 1960s-1970s, German scholars Hans Robert Jauss [1] and Wolfgang Iser [2] [3] have put forward the ideas of a new theory in literature review — The Aesthetics of Reception. They argue that the center of appreciation of a work should be readers instead of the author since the educational and entertaining functions of a work are realized during the process of readers' appreciation. In addition, the mission and vitality of a work can only be fulfilled during the above-mentioned process.

A. *The Significant Role of Readers*

Jauss holds that in the literary history audience is the driving force in creation. The works would lose its lifeline without their participation. Therefore, a literature work without readers cannot be seen as a real one since there is no value lying inside as the author is the only person reads and appreciates the work. For this reason, the role of readers should be regarded as one of the greatest importance in the life circle of a literature work. The significant role of readers should come to the awareness of the author, he or she has to put this role in the central position and always keep in mind that it is not only active but also positive as well [4]. A work would be fulfilled and enriched only by enhancing the position of audience in the processing chain, hence its value and vitality would be realized. All of these construct the historical nature of literature [5].

B. *The Horizon of Expectation*

Under the framework of the aesthetics of reception, it is believed that during the appreciation process, readers, as the recipients of a literary work, do not comprehend the work with a blank mind, instead, they come to a work with their own literary and life experiences which form a personal pre-reception structure and psychological pattern called horizon of expectation. While the forming of horizon of expectation involves multiple factors, including social backgrounds, culture and customs, life attitude, personal characters, interests and so on. Yet, the horizon of expectation of an individual is dynamic, though one's appreciation of a work is limited by his or her horizon of expectation formed prior to one's contact with the work, each appreciation process might lead to the changes in this horizon as each contact may bring

the individual new insights. Hence, even the same audience may have different understanding of the same work when he or she comes to the work each time.

III. REPRODUCING THE IMAGE OF *LADY PRECIOUS STREAM*

In the original scripts of Peking Opera *Red Mane Horse*, the given name of leading female figure is Baochuan, which means precious bracelet in Chinese language. Nevertheless, Hsiung employed the word "stream" rather than "bracelet" as the former consists only one syllabus which is easy to pronounce and more poetic in English. Furthermore, during his translation process, Hsiung reproduced the image of *Lady Precious Stream* in order to meet the horizon of expectation of target audience, that is, audience from English-speaking world. The U.K. and the U.S. were at a post-war period in 1930s, more and more women in both countries started to work either part-time or full time to help the households and they were becoming increasingly independent compared to the atmosphere prior to the World War I. Certainly, under this context a female figure of obedience and sorrow could not be cheerful and lovable to the public in the west.

To begin with, in the original play, *Lady Precious Stream* is a superstitious traditional Chinese young woman who wishes to land a happy life by marrying to a husband with promising future. And she deeply believes in signs and the individual's facial structure of the good fortune. The night before she meets Xue Pinggui, she had a dream of lucky signs. Later when she first looks at the man, she deems that Xue has the facial structure of a prestigious man with possibility of taking the throne. These two factors contribute greatly to her decision of tying knots with Xue. However, in Hsiung's version, at the scene of the couple's first encounter, Hsiung adds some spice to the plot with a riddle told by *Lady Precious Stream* to boldly express her love for Xue. By doing this, the target audience would see *Lady Precious Stream* as a lively young lady of resolution and wit who courageously takes destiny in her own hands. What's more, Hsiung has removed the plots of the couple's discussion on the issue of chastity. In ancient China, virtue of chastity was stressed in females. A woman was supposed to love and devote herself to only one man in her entire life, even if her husband dies or marries to another woman. In the original play, Xue Pinggui has discussed, and even tested, his wife's chastity twice. The first time is when he is dispatched by *Lady Precious Stream*'s father to battle field in Xiliang, a faraway country depending on China at that time, another is when he comes back home 18 years later. And *Lady Precious Stream*'s responses have portrayed her as an obedient, loyal but indecisive wife who sticks to the rigid rules of feudal tradition set for Chinese women. While in Hsiung's version, he has left out the relating plots and depicts *Lady Precious Stream* as an intelligent and encouraging woman with some romantic ideas. For instance, he has added lines such as "I will love you" and "A man's ambition cannot be limited by space" for her. At the end of the original play, when Precious Stream finds out her husband has married to Princess Dai Zan, her tolerance is so incredible that she is even willing to demean herself as the concubine if her husband ascends the throne of Xiliang one day, which in no

way could be understood by women in the western world, even 80 years go. To meet the target audience's horizon of expectation, Hsiung has subtly adapted the story, and in his version, Xue Pinggui and Princess Dai Zan are never married as Xue is still loyal to his wife [6].

Since his study in Beijing Normal University in 1919, Hsiung has begun his journey of study on English plays. In order to attain further education in the field, he went to the U.K. in 1932 and since then his career as a bilingual writer has raised its curtains. As a writer and translator living in the west, Hsiung fully understood the huge differences lie between the east and the west. In other words, he knew the western audience's horizon of expectations with their distinctive social values, culture and traditions before he adapted and translated the play which is already well-known in China at that time. Meanwhile, he also put high value on the significant role of the audience as he understood the translated play could only achieve success when it reaches and touches the audience regardless the social and cultural obstacles. One way to transcend those handicaps is to reproduce the image of the female character, shape her as an acceptable and adorable female image in front of the western audience. The achievements of the play *Lady Precious Stream* have made explicitly demonstrated the success of this smart move.

IV. TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS

A huge obstacle Hsiung encountered might be the culture-specific terms in the original play. The origin of Peking Opera can be dated back to 1790s. And the wording and rhymes of the lines of original play — *Red Mane Horse* is of strong ancient Chinese characteristics as the story occurs in the Tang Dynasty. The English-speaking audience might get lost if the translation of these culture-specific terms is not handled properly since they lack of the relevant cultural knowledge. The followings are some examples of how Hsiung triumphs over the obstacles brought by these culture-specific terms.

In ancient China, "sān cóng sì dé (literally translated as three obeys and four virtues)" was considered as lifetime rules and virtues a woman must possess. "Sān cóng" refers that a woman must obey her father, her husband and her son while "sì dé" includes a series rules of conduct for women, ranging from how they should speak, act and deal with domestic matters to desirable characters they must carry. While footnotes might be a solution to the issue in print scripts, it is not practicable when the play is put onto stage, not to mention that the long explanation would spoil the mood of the audience. To solve the problem, Hsiung has tactfully employed the technique of induction to sum up the term as "ancient virtues". By doing this, equivalent meaning of the original text is delivered and, in the meantime, the possible confusion is bypassed smartly. This technique is also employed to deal with the culture-specific terms in the imperial edicts and those used to address different relatives.

Among all culture-specific terms, frequently used four-character phrases and polite formulas with unique Chinese characteristics in the original play might be also quite thorny

for Hsiung to deal with. Taking "bù gǎn dāng" for example, this polite formula is commonly used in China as a response to a compliment and a way to show one's modesty as accepted praise directly may be seen as ignorance and arrogance in Chinese culture. However, if it is literally translated as "I don't deserve the compliment", misunderstanding regarding to speaker's characters might be aroused while it also might leads to the question from the English-speaking audience that why does the person say so. In such case, the original intentions of the speaker might be twisted; therefore, the audience's understanding of the plots might be compromised. In the midst of handling above-mentioned terms, Hsiung has employed the method of free translation to deliver the illocutionary meaning of speakers and achieve the pragmatic equivalence of those culture-specific terms. For example, he translated "qīng yún zhī lù" as "ascend the ladder of promotion", "dāo xià liú rén" as "pray wait a minute" while literal translation here is not feasible since the target audience would be lost in them.

V. CONCLUSION

Though a work's life is created by the author, its vitality is given and spurred by its audience. As Lin Yutang has quoted the words from Quo Tai-chi, Chinese ambassador to the U.K., at that time, "the year 1935 seems to be the 'China Year'" [7], and, undoubtedly, Hsiung and his play *Lady Precious Stream* have contributed a large part to it. However, the extraordinary feat of the play and the translator have attained had not aroused due attention in the academic circle in China until the last 30 years. The great success of the play in the western world is mainly attributed to the translator's recognition of the significance of the role of audience and his immense efforts to meet their horizon of expectation as much as possible. At present, as one of the most important art forms, theatre is playing an increasingly part in cultural exchanges. Hopefully, this paper may provide some enlightenment for the practitioners in translation when they try to bring the glamor of Chinese operas to the rest of the world.

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