

# An Analysis of Kinship Term Translation in *Hong Lou Meng*

Liquan Tsao

School of Languages and Culture  
Shanghai University of Political Science and Law  
Shanghai, China

**Abstract**—*Hong Lou Meng* is an outstanding masterpiece in Chinese Literature, ranking with *Hamlet* and *War and Peace*. In terms of language and culture, the novel is regarded as more an elegantly-conceived cultural encyclopedia than a story. There are two noted versions of translation of this book, namely, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's and David Hawks'. Kinship terms in this novel are numerous and diverse, reflecting very intricate and anfractuous kinship relations. This paper selects a few representative scenes and tries to contrast the kinship terms in different versions of translation to see how kinship terms reflect their cultural connotations.

**Keywords:** *Hong Lou Meng*, kinship terms, translation, culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Hong Lou Meng* is the magnum opus of the author, Cao Xueqin (1715-1763). It depicts a family from its peak of power and prosperity to decline and fall. In terms of language and culture, the novel is regarded as more an elegantly-conceived cultural encyclopedia than a story. Poetry, painting, gardening, herbal medicine, clothing, food, almost all aspects of Chinese culture are embodied in the book. Actually, it is widely believed that without Chinese culture as the background and the source, there would be no *Hong Lou Meng*.

## II. THE DIFFERENCE IN KINSHIP TERMS IN THE EAST AND THE WEST

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, the more complex the address term system in a culture, the more complex social hierarchy, family status and ranks, and gender distinction (sexism). Cao Xueqin exquisitely manipulated the terms to manifest status, rank, power, and intimacy among different characters in the novel.

In English the kinship terms are quite limited. Parents, grandparents, grandchildren, uncle, aunt, cousin, niece, nephew, those words are almost all the terms to address kins. This means the translation of kinship terms in *Hong Lou Meng* is doomed to encounter great difficulties.

In *Hong Lou Meng*, there are four generations in family Jia. From the dowager Mrs. Jia (the first generation), to her sons Jia She and Jia Zheng, and their wives (the second generation), to Baoyu, Daiyu, Tanchun etc. (the third

generation), and to her great grandson (the fourth generation), the relations and the corresponding address terms among them are so dazzling and confounding that it would be almost impossible for western readers to understand what the kinship terms mean and what implications and connotations they stand for.

## III. A CONTRAST BETWEEN THE TWO VERSIONS OF TRANSLATION IN KINSHIP TERMS

Yang Xianyi and David Hawks began to translate *Hong Lou Meng* almost at the same time (in the 1960s and 1970s) without knowing that the other was working on the same book. It is very intriguing to compare the versions from the two translators.

Example one:

In Chapter Fifty-five, Tanchun said to Concubine Zhao, “依我说, 太太不在家, 姨娘安静些养神罢了, 何苦只要操心。太太满心疼我, 因姨娘每每生事, 几次寒心……”

Yang: *Take my advice and have a quiet rest while the mistress is out. Why work yourself up? The mistress is kindness itself to me, but you've grieved her more than once by the way you make trouble.*

Hawks: *And I really do think that while she is away you might try to compose yourself a bit and not go working yourself up into such a state. Although Lady Wang is so good to me, I'm constantly worried that you will spoil everything with your perpetual trouble-making.*

Tanchun calls Lady Wang, her nominal mother, “太太” in the original novel. In Yang's translation “太太” is the mistress, In Hawks' *Lady Wang*. Both the translators use you to translate “姨娘”, Tanchun's real mother.

In Chinese “太太” means a married women or a wife. Also “太太” is an address term used by servants to show respect.

In the whole novel, Lady Wang is addressed “太太” by the entire household, including her son, Baoyu. It is an honorific term. In fact, even the dowager herself calls Lady Wang “太太”, despite the fact that she is Lady Wang's mother-in-law.

Tanchun's mother is Concubine Zhao. However, according to the ethical code of her time, she is not allowed to call Concubine Zhao mother. Instead, Lady Wang, her father's wife, is her nominal mother. In other words, Tanchun is allowed to call Lady Wang mother, but not Concubine Zhao.

Tanchun says these words to Concubine Zhao at the absence of Lady Wang. In Yang's version, “太太” is “*the mistress*”, indicating that Tanchun is lower in status than Lady Wang's son, Baoyu. We can see that in neither of the versions is Baoyu's “太太” translated into “*the mistress*” (either “*madam*” or “*mother*”).

In Hawks' version, “太太” is translated into “*Lady Wang*”, which I personally think is inappropriate. Nobody dares to call her Lady Wang, either in her presence or absence, which is really disrespectful. As the second important mistress in the family, Lady Wang has the power to decide who can live and who will die. How dare Tanchun, a girl of a humble status but of a quick wit, defy and provoke the mistress with such a foolish address term?

On the other hand, what intrigues the readers most is the address term of Concubine Zhao. In fact in the novel she is 姨娘, with the meaning “concubine”. This is a very special word in Chinese address term system, because there is no equivalent in English.

Owing to this word deficiency, both the two translators use “*you*” to replace “姨娘”. But in *Hong Lou Meng*, “*you*” is not allowed to address people of higher status or older generation. In some certain scenarios “*you*” even indicates disrespect and disdain.

For example, in Chapter Fifty-five, Xifeng's maid, Pinger/Patience, said to Xifeng: “你太把人看糊涂了, 我才已经行在先了, 这会子才嘱咐我!”

凤姐儿笑道: “我是怕你心里眼里只有了我, 一概没有他人之故, 不得不嘱咐, 既已行在先, 更比我明白了! 这不是你又急了! 满嘴里‘你’呀‘我’的起来了。”

Yang: *Long before the end of this speech Pinger was smiling.*

“What do you take me for – a fool? That's what I've been doing, and here you are warning me.”

Xifeng replied: “I was afraid you'd forget other people in your concern for me, that's why. if that's what you've been doing, it shows you've more sense than I have. Don't get so worked up, though, that you forget yourself and whom you're talking to.”

Hawks: *Before she could go on, Patience laughingly interrupted her: “Why are you so ready to assume that other people are stupid? I've been taking that line with her already; I don't need you to tell me!”*

“I was afraid you might have no time for anyone but me,” Xifeng said. “That was my only reason for warning you. If you have been taking that line with her already, so much so better. Evidently you are cleverer than I am. By the way,

*aren't you perhaps getting a little carried away-this ‘you’, ‘you’, ‘you’ all of a sudden? What's wrong with ‘madam’?”*

In Yang's version, Pinger/Patience, Xifeng's trusted maid, addresses her mistress in private “*you*”, and Xifeng reminds her “*you forget yourself and whom you're talking to.*” Obviously she is not quite pleased with this “*you*” from Pinger.

In order to make the meaning clearer to the western readers, Hawks added a sentence that does not exist in the original novel: *What's wrong with ‘madam’?* According to Xifeng, “*you*” is not proper on that occasion for Pinger/Patience to address her. Instead, “*madam*” is.

From the depictions above readers can infer that it is impossible for Tanchun to address the concubine “*you*”.

Example two:

In Chapter Thirty-three, Tanchun's full brother Huan, said to Jia Zheng, his father, “父亲不用生气。此事除太太房里的人, 别人一点也不知道。我听见我母亲说……”

Yang: *Don't be angry, sir. No one knows about this except those in my lady's apartment. I heard my mother say……”*

Hawks: *Don't be angry with me, Father, but apart from the servants in Lady Wang's room, no one else knows anything about this. I heard my mother say—”*

“父亲” means father. As the son of Jia Zheng and Concubine Zhao, it is alright for Huan to call Jia Zheng “父亲 (father)”, but in Yang's version “父亲” is translated into “*sir*”. As a matter of fact, in a big feudal family like Jia, family status and hierarchy are more important than ties of blood and marriage. When Huan uses “*sir*” to address his father, he is consciously try to please Jia Zheng. The translator tried to stress on the superiority of Jia Zheng, and obviously this is the intention of the author Cao Xueqin. In comparison, Hawks used “*father*”, which facilitates western readers' understanding of the context, but to some degree weakens the appellation's connotation.

Furthermore, let us look at Huan's “太太”. As Tanchun's full brother, he is also the nominal son of Lady Wang. In Yang's translation, “*my lady*” properly illustrates Huan's status in the family, since it is an honorific word. Son of a concubine, he is also lower in status than Baoyu. However, in Hawks' version, “太太” becomes *Lady Wang*, a direct and very disrespectful address. When Huan addresses Jia Zheng “*father*”, he tries to suggest a close relation to show his bond with Jia Zheng, in fact to flatter him. How could Huan ingratiate himself with his father on the one hand, and irritate him with such a provocative address on the other?

There is a very interesting contrast between Tanchun's and Huan's address of Concubine Zhao. In example one, Tanchun calls Concubine Zhao “姨娘”, and since there is no equivalent word to mean “姨娘”, neither of the two translators were able to find proper words or phrases. As a result, replacement is employed in the translation (*you*) by both translators. Nevertheless, in here Huan calls Concubine

Zhao “my mother”, instead of “姨娘”, even in the presence of Jia Zheng.

Contrast his address with Tanchun’s in example one. Tanchun has never called Concubine Zhao “mother” either in the absence or presence of the concubine. This could suggest her character and mentality. The daughter of a concubine in family Jia means that in status she is higher than the servants but lower than the masters. She is eager to stand side by side with Baoyu and Baochai, but her humble origin doesn’t allow her to. By using these addresses, she wishes that she could differentiate herself from her mother. Sadly, her aspirations, expectations and dreams fall in vain.

Example three:

In the same chapter, when Baoyu learned that his father Jia Zheng was going to beat him for he had infuriated his father’s superior, he sent a servant for help: “快进去告诉:老爷要打我呢!快去!”

Yang: *Go in quick! Tell them the master’s going to beat me. Do hurry!*

Hawks: *Quickly! Go and tell them that Sir Zheng is going to beat me. Quickly!*

“老爷” in Chinese means sir, master or lord. It’s an honorific term. Baoyu’s “老爷” is his father Jia Zheng. However, unlike Huan, his half-brother, he calls his father “老爷”, rather than *father*. As is pointed out in example two, in the time of the novel “father” and “mother” are not in their traditional sense. That is to say, kinship ties have to yield to family status and ranks. To these people in the novel, Confucianism is deeply embedded in their minds, so that younger generation’s obedience to the older, and female’s submission to male transcend all the relations in a family. Parents above children, male above female, elder brother above younger brother, wife above concubine, those are established rules in the time of the novel. In this case, “*father*” is seldom used by Baoyu, on most occasions he calls his father “老爷”, a term that shows Baoyu is more humble and more submissive.

Yang’s translation of “老爷” into “*the master*”, and Hawks’ “*Sir Zheng*”, both display Baoyu’s acknowledgement of his father’s higher status. By comparison, I personally think that “*the master*” is no better than “*Sir Zheng*”, or vice versa. In fact, in that case it is very difficult to find a word which not only expresses the source language’s implied information but enables the target language readers to understand its connotation.

Further evidence can be found in the following novel. When Lady Wang learned the message, she hurried where Baoyu was being beaten by Jia Zheng. She cried, “宝玉虽然该打, 老爷也要自重。”

Yang: *I know Baoyu deserves a beating, but you mustn’t wear yourself out, sir.*

Hawks: *No doubt Baoyu deserved to be beaten, but it is bad for you to get over-excited.*

Again “老爷”. But this “老爷” is not a term from the son but the wife. Females’ low position in the family is exactly depicted with this address term in Yang’s version. However, Hawks translated “老爷” into “*you*”. This is a natural term for a wife to address her husband to the western readers, but to Chinese readers it just sounds weird in the context. (Please refer to the analysis in example one.)

Example four:

In Chapter Twenty, Baoyu told Daiyu, “咱们是姑舅姊妹, 宝姐姐是两姨姊妹, 论亲戚, 她比你疏……”

Yang: *You are the daughter of my father’s sister, while Baochai is a cousin on my mother’s side—you are more closely related to me than she is.*

Hawks: *You are my cousin on Father’s side; Cousin Bao is only a mother-cousin. That makes you much the closer kin.*

The word cousin in English stands for eight meanings in Chinese, i.e. maternal elder brother, maternal younger brother, maternal elder sister, maternal younger sister, paternal elder brother, paternal younger brother, paternal elder sister and paternal younger sister. That is a case in point to demonstrate that Chinese culture distinguishes clearly between paternal kins and maternal kins.

Both Yang and Hawks use *father* to indicate “姑舅姊妹” and *mother* “两姨姊妹”. We can see that since there are no equivalent terms in English, the two translators both employed free translation rather than literal translation at the same time. The point is that it is very easy for Chinese readers to understand the difference between “姑舅姊妹” and “两姨姊妹”, but it is absolutely not for western readers. To them, there is no distinction between this cousin and that cousin.

In Chinese culture, in a family a son is more important than a daughter. A son’s son is 孙子, which is eligible to inherit the family name and property and all the rights, while a daughter’s son is 外孙 which literally meaning an outside grandson.

That’s why Baoyu said, in Yang’s version, *you are more closely related to me than she is* and in Hawks’ *That makes you much the closer kin*. The two versions are quite similar in meaning, but I’m afraid western readers might have difficulty understanding why. In reality the fact that males are superior to females is one of the most significant elements embodied in sociolinguistics, and widely acknowledged by both males and females. Daiyu is Baoyu’s cousin on his father’s side, Baochai/cousin Bao on his mother’s side. That is why Daiyu is closer to Baoyu than Baochai/cousin Bao.

#### IV. JOHN CATFORD AND HIS TRANSLATION THEORY

British linguist and translation theorist John Catford put forward his theory of translatability in his *Linguistic Theory of Translation*. In this book he defines translation as the “replacement of the textual material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language

(target language).” (1965:20) Equivalence is the key point in Catford’s theory, and is categorized into textual equivalence and formal correspondence. By the former Catford means that any text or portion of the text can be translated into or find the equivalent in the target language, by the latter the equivalent should take same or similar form (i.e. unit, class, structure etc.) even occupy the “same” place as much as possible. However, it is self-evident that there are no two language systems in existence that take the same form and have the same meaning. In this sense it is impossible to transfer the text and the form of the source language to those of the target language at the same time. What a translator can do is to find a contextual equivalent to the largest degree.

Since formal correspondence is nearly unachievable, translation shift occurs as the result. Catford defines translation shift as “departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL to the TL.” (1965:75) He classifies translation shift into level shift and category shift. The former means shift between grammar and lexis, the latter can be sub-divided into structure shift, class shift, unit shift and intra-system shift. In terms of level shift, for instance, English words’ inflected forms are embodied in their tense, voice, mood, etc., while Chinese words don’t have such changes. In the case of category shift, Catford holds that translation may shift up and down from sentences, clauses, phrases, words etc.

The kinship terms in *Hong Lou Meng* are so significant that it is actually out of the question to ignore or skip their translation. According to Catford’s classification of translation, full or partial, total or restricted, rank-bound or unbounded, the translation of the kinship terms is an issue too conspicuous to overlook. In this case word-for-word translation is inevitable and necessary. However, with so many words and concepts missing, are the complicated kinship terms translatable?

Catford brings forward his theory of limits of translatability, or untranslatability, which entails linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability. At the linguistic level words such as puns, homonyms, homophones, polysemy, etc. are untranslatable. At the cultural level nonlinguistic factors, such as allusions and idioms from history as well as lack of words caused by social customs and historical background, contribute to untranslatability.

There is no absolute equivalence between words from two languages and the cultures behind them, particularly when Chinese and English belonging two completely different language families. Replacement is a means to achieve the purpose of language transfer or meaning transfer, but not the ultimate one. When translating the unique kinship terms in *Hong Lou Meng*, at the semantic level it is quite difficult to find equivalents of “太太”, “姨娘”, “老爷”. Yang and Hawks had to employ various translation strategies to achieve maximal information transfer. The inequivalence, above all, is caused by cultural differences.

The novel is, beyond doubt, the epitome of its culture. Native Chinese readers are fortunate enough to fully enjoy and appreciate the lasting charm of the novel. The elegantly

worded and meticulously plotted novels with delicate depictions of exquisite details have displayed in front of readers a fantastic ink painting beyond words. The literary attainment of the novel is unparalleled, before or since, in China’s history. Since we Chinese nation has stepped from the novel’s time to a more modern and more liberal one. In this sense the novel has helped us retain and preserve the exquisite manners and traditions that will not reappear in our life. Sadly, when English readers are reading the translation, many of these beautiful elements are lost and missing, because translation has done nothing more than retelling the novel in another language, without recreating and reconstructing the original profound and lasting cultural connotations.

China’s Confucius philosophy puts much emphasis on family relations and interest. This is the origin of such a large and complex system of address terms, because Chinese culture needs the comprehensive system to signal status, power, rank, intimacy, gender, age, generation and the like, while in the west, similar system is missing and blank. The deficiency in culture leads to misunderstanding and even lack of understanding of *Hong Lou Meng*, making western readers unable to appreciate the profound and unique artistic conception of the novel. In fact, while four generations living under the same roof is thought of as a great happiness in Chinese culture, there are no such notions in the west. This is convincing evidence in Catford’s cultural untranslatability.

Furthermore, we can infer from Catford’s theory that there is no sharp distinction between linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability. In the case of *Hong Lou Meng*, untranslatability of the words like “姨娘” attributes to missing elements in culture, or rather, deficiency of similar concepts. Therefore linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability are interrelated and interdependent. All in all, cultural factors matter most.

## V. CONCLUSION

Novel translation is more than word and sentence interpretation from one language to another. Rather, in many cases it is a shift of one culture to another. As a bridge between different languages and cultures, a translator has to identify the source language writer’s intentions first, then evaluate the target language readers’ cognition, and finally translate the source language into a text that target language readers are able to understand and accept. In all, novel translation is an art, and more precisely it is an engineering of reconstruction and transformation.

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