

# Study on Interpretation and Translation of *The Young Prodigy* in *The China Review*

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the translation of *The Young Prodigy* published by *The China Review*, this paper explores the translation strategies of the chapters' headings, plot contents and poetics, and presents the panorama of the translation of *The Young Prodigy* in the historical context of Chinese knowledge western spreading. Through the analysis of specific translation examples, it examines the translation features of antithesis, allusions, enrichment and omission, notes, proper nouns, narrative, and poetics in the translation, and discusses the reasons why the translation of *The Young Prodigy* published in *The China Review* is accepted by readers in the English-speaking world. In the process of translating *The Young Prodigy*, Clement Francis Romilly Allen, the translator, flexibly implements translation choices including translation strategies, language expressions based on the cultural context of the target language, which ensures the readability and acceptability of the translation on the basis of faithfulness to the original text. As a medium of the cultural exchange between China and the West in the 19th century, the interpretation and translation of *The Young Prodigy* in *The China Review* can provide some enlightenments and references for the Chinese and Western literature and culture exchange in this day and age.

**Keywords:** *The China Review*, *The Young Prodigy*, Clement Francis Romilly Allen, interpretation and translation

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The China Review*, or *Notes and Queries on the Far East* was an English periodical founded in Hong Kong in the late 19th century. It was published in July 1872 and ceased publication in June 1901 for a period of 29 years. It had a total of 25 volumes and 150 issues and was highly influential among English readers in the Far East. Nicholas Belfield Dennys (1840-1900), a British, was a former editor-in-chief of Hong Kong's *China Mail* newspaper, founder of the *Notes and Queries on China and Japan* and founder of the Hong Kong city municipal museum and library.

The publication of *The China Review* clearly points out the purpose of its publication: "In undertaking the publication of the *China Review*, its projectors are animated by a desire to provide, for a constantly increasing circle of readers, a repository for papers connected with China and the Far East" [1]. *The China Review* mainly consists of essays, book reviews and translations. It introduces Chinese language, culture, history, geography etc. and provides detailed information for western sinologists to understand and study China. Because of all kinds of valuable articles it provides, it has become an important media and knowledge treasure

house for the West to understand the eastern, especially Chinese culture, what's more, it is regarded as "the first sinology periodical in the true sense of the Western world" [2].

*The Young Prodigy* belongs to the category of scholar beauty novels which tells a story of a good turn deserves another with 16 chapters. The villager Lian Xiaocun is kind-hearted and willing to help others. The celestial being received alms from him and instructed him to bury his mother who passed away in a god-blessed place. His wife got a good son at fifty. Lian Qing, the son of Lian Xiaocun, ranked the first in the imperial examination when he grew up. The son married Xing Zhaohua and Mao Xiaoyan as his wife afterwards.

The translator of the novel is Clement Francis Romilly Allen (1844-1920), a British diplomat, is a member of the Royal Asiatic Society. He came to China in 1863 and served successively as a student translator of the British Embassy in China, a translator of the Xiamen consulate, and a consul in Zhenjiang and Fuzhou etc. until his retirement in 1896. *The China Review* serialized five English translations of *The Young Prodigy* translated and introduced by Allen, Volume II, No. 1 to No. 3 in 1873 and Volume II, No. 4 and No. 5 in 1874, which is the

first known translation and introduction of *The Young Prodigy* in the English world at present.

## II. THE TRANSLATION OF CHAPTERS' HEADINGS

The early Qing Dynasty was the heyday of the development of novels about gifted scholars and beauties. At that time, nearly 40 novels of chapter style were published [3], such as *Hau Kiou Chooan or The Pleasing History*, *P'ing Chan Ling Yen* and so on and so forth. The reason why the novel got its name is that the author wants to uphold and project the philosophy — good is rewarded with good. Allen translated it as “the young prodigy”, which highlights the intelligence of the protagonist and eliminate the conclusive role of title in original text.

The chapter-styled novel is “the main form of Chinese classical novels” which originated from the Song-Yuan script [4]. Chapter heading is one of the important sources of the content information of chapter-styled novels, and it is also a stylistic feature that distinguishes classical novels from modern novels. With neat sentence pattern, concise language and rhetoric, the title of chapter has its unique artistic effect. The novel *The Young Prodigy* has 16 chapters with 32 chapter headings. Take the first three chapters for example:

CHAPTER I. OLD LIEN ASSISTS A POOR MAN— THE GENIUS KO GRANT HIS WISH.

CHAPTER II. THE OLD PRODUCES A PEARL.— A SHARP EYE DETECTS A GENIUS, AND “THE WILD LICHEN CLINGS TO THE MAGNOLIA.”

CHAPTER III. LIEN CHING ATTRACTS THE PRESIDENT'S GOOD WILL, WHO BESTOWS A GREAT BENEFIT ON HIS FAMILY.

In Allen's translation, chapter headings are labeled with Roman numerals and names of people and places are all transliterated by means of Wade-Giles romanization. All the letters in the title are capitalized, separated by a dash or a period and each sentence ends with a period. Except for the third chapter headings, the eighth chapter headings and the sixteenth chapter headings, furthermore, the number of sentences in the translation of other chapters is consistent with that of the original.

Based on the understanding of the content of the novel and the interpretation of the catalogue of chapters, Allen, the translator, translates the chapter catalogue of *The Young Prodigy* in concise language. The translation of the chapter headings is arranged in the order of the original text, and the sentence structure is consistent with that of the original text. In addition, the translator makes the implicit information in the chapter headings explicit, which makes it easier for foreign cultural readers to understand.

Chinese classical literature is good at using allusions, quoting relevant idioms and allusions to expound viewpoints and understandings, so as to reduce the

complexity of language, thereby expressing the meaning and ideas distinctly. Chapter headings take advantage of allusions to make the content way more abundant, profound, intriguing and associated effectively. Take the translation of the second chapter as an example:

The chapter heading is “The old shell produces a pearl. — A sharp eye detects a genius, and ‘the wild lichen clings to the magnolia.’” “The old shell produces a pearl” is an allusion which serves as a metaphor for getting children in old age. In this chapter, the original text tells the very story that the celestial being Ge in appreciation of good deeds of Lian Xiaocun, he remembers with gratitude that Lian Xiaocun put up him for the night in the snowy evening. In return, Ge instructed him to bury his mom to a god-blessed place and he was so fortunate to have another son Lian Qing in his fifty. “The wild lichen clings to the magnolia” comes from volume 17 in *Amazing Tales* which is used to describe a person with a low status obtained a help from a person with a high status. In Allen's translation, the allusions in chapter headings was translated literally which only conveyed the literal meaning, however, the allusion's role in quoting and explaining the plot of the chapter was not reflected

## III. THE TRANSLATION OF THE PLOT

The unique narrative mode of Chinese classical novels is composed of the following forms: the headings of chapter-styled novels, the poems at the beginning of the chapter and the formulaic expressions at the end of the chapter. They are often disconnected at the key points of the story, ending with “to be continued” or other similar formulaic expressions, which make the readers reluctant to stop and arouse their interest in reading the next chapter. And in the next chapter, the plot often continue the previous chapter's, summarizing and quoting the following. On the one hand, in the details of the story, in order to make the narrative structure compact and the story more coherent, the translation of *The Young Prodigy* instead of following the narrative mode of the original text, it adjusts the plot of some chapters, placing the unfinished plot of the last chapter in the beginning of the next chapter, so as to make it more in line with English writing habits. For instance, the story of Lian Qing's trick on Pang Yin at the end of chapter three was moved to the beginning of chapter four. The plot of sending Lian Qing to the monastery for cultivation at the end of the fourth chapter, was moved to the beginning of the fifth chapter. At the end of the fifth chapter, the plot of Lian Qing followed his uncle to take provincial examination was moved to the beginning of the sixth chapter. And late in the seventh chapter, the plot of Minister Xing encountered Bei Jin giving betrothal presents to his family was moved to the beginning of the eighth chapter and so on.

On the other hand, the sequence of the translation is not consistent with the original text with regard to stories or plots. Such as Chapter VI “Do good to yourself, and

the world will speak well of you.’ — ‘Beauties, beware of Mao Yin’”, the original text first briefly describes Lian Qing follows the uncle to take the provincial examination and then depicts Lady Ning breaks the pledge of marriage, then runs through the plot of Lian Qing winning the first in the provincial examination. However, in translation, the plot of Lian Qing winning the first in the provincial examination comes ahead of the plot of Lady Ning breaking the pledge of marriage. For another example, Chapter IX “Chu, the marriage broker plays a trick on Pei Ching. Our young scholar makes out the genius’ names”, the plot of matchmaker Chu acting as the bride moves before Lian Qing attends the Lu Ming Banquet (a banquet held by the government for the examinee) and Zhongju (passing the provincial civil service examination under the old Chinese examination system) and returns to his hometown. Chapter XI “A trick is played on Lien Ching. Chao Hua plans an ingenious device to escape detection” has made the plot that Jie Yuan Lian (the scholar who won the first place in provincial imperial examinations) was coaxed into drinking ahead of the marriage of Xing Zhaohua and Mao Xiaoyan. On the surface, this arrangement in the translation seems to connect more smoothly with the plot of the previous part of each chapter, but it disrupts the original narrative order of the novel and changes the narrative mode of Chinese classical chapter-styled novels to a certain extent.

In *The Young Prodigy*, the development of many plots depends on the dialogue between the characters. In the translation, however, the translator cuts out some characters’ dialogues and generalizes the story by indirect quotation. In the translation, the translator Allen often changes the direct speech in the original text to indirect speech, and basically translates the words of the important person. Such as the plot of Lian Qing’s trick on Pang Yin in chapter four, Lian Qing’s words are basically translated with direct quotations, while those of Xing Yunlu and Pang Yin mostly use indirect quotations. The reason why the translator deals with it in this way, on the one hand, it does not make the story full of superfluous dialogues which makes readers lose motivation of reading; on the other hand, it highlights the image of the protagonist Lian Qing. In addition, as for Lian Qing’s words, the translator did not translate them word by word but adjusted the structure of the original sentence by adopting the method of faithfulness in meaning. For example, as mentioned above, in the plot of Lian Qing’s trick on Pang Yin, interrogative sentences in the original text are translated into declarative sentences: “Your eyebrows are your own, I have no power to alter their position, ... I am really much concerned for you” [5]. The purpose of this treatment in translated text is to make it more in line with the context of the protagonist’s speech. If they are translated into interrogative sentences, English readers may find it stiff to understand.

There are 20 footnotes in the translation of *The Young Prodigy* published in *The China Review*, which mainly

explains the imperial examination system, official positions, customs, proper nouns, metaphors, names and place names. For instance, the footnote of “Lohans” is “Buddhist Saints” [6], and the footnote of “the returning happiness visit” like this: “The Visit of Returning Happiness’ is the term applied to the first visit of the bride to her own parents” [7]. “On a similar occasion in old times Li T’ai- pai made the verses called the Ching Ping Stanzas” explains “Li T’ai- pai” and “Ching Ping Stanzas” in the footnote: “Li T’ai- pai was a celebrated statesman of the Tang Dynasty, as famous for his habits of intoxication, as for his accomplishments and poetic powers. The Ching Ping stanzas were some verses he wrote to be set to music” [8]. These annotations will help readers in the English speaking world better understand Chinese culture.

Moreover, from the perspective of narratology, the style of the source language is maintained in renarration of the translation. In addition to the differences of deletion and annotation, there are other narrative methods differences from the original. In the first chapter, for instance, in addition to the content of poetry there are 79 paragraphs in the original text, but only 44 paragraphs in the translation. In Chapter XIII, there are 56 paragraphs in the original text and 37 paragraphs in the translation in addition to the content of poetry. The renarration of the translated text reconstructs the original text according to the plot of the original novel and the narrative needs of the target language culture, including the separation and reconstruction of the original discourse conversion, and the direct speech and indirect speech.

#### IV. THE TRANSLATION OF POETICS

Chinese chapter-styled novels often start with poems to make comments on the contents of the chapter, *The Young Prodigy* is no exception. Plenty of poems are often embedded into the narration of the plot, which are used to depict the characters, sublime atmosphere of the environment or reveal the theme of the story, or comment on the events and characters, and connect the plot. All these serve as an organic part in Chinese classical novels.

There are 74 poems and 29 single-line couplets in *The Young Prodigy*. Poetry is often regarded as untranslatable, especially in terms of rhythm. The translator has realized the difficulties in translating the poetic language, therefore some of the redundant stanzas from the original text has been got rid of in translation. The translation omits the translation of poems at the beginning of each chapter in the original text, what’s more, the poems in the original text are only selectively translated. Free translation works as the most conspicuous approach in the translation of poetry. Only the general idea of poetry is translated, which belongs to some form of re-creation, furthermore, some poetry translation can only be regarded as partial translation. Take the poem between Xing Zhaohua and Mao Xiaoyan in chapter ten as an example:

*“Behold the blossoms on the tree  
Shine like a sheet of living snow  
Throughout the garden, where is he,  
Can peach from almond truly know?  
When autumn comes, then all may see,  
Tis by the fruit we know the tree.” [9]*

The original poem is a seven-character quatrain and the first two sentences are translated into prose poetry as the stylistic feature. Free translation is adopted in the process of translation, however the translation only conveys the surface meaning, but not the underlying meaning. As Newmark points out, “metaphor translation is the epitome of all translation” [10], because it always provides translators with various translation choices: meaning or image, or modifying one of the two, or combining both. All of these are closely related to contextual factors, which attach importance to metaphor in the text. Metaphor translation involves not only the conversion of superficial denotation, but also the conversion of implied meaning and meaning of image. Translated text is receptors centered, the translator reconstructs the translation by taking into account the poetic flavor of the source language and the acceptability of the target reader in translation. However, the quality of translation is not as good as expected, the translator failed to accurately convey the metaphors of “peach” and “almond” in the original poem, and the meaning of the original poem is relatively vague.

For another example, the poem in the fourth chapter:

*“You shall not be a youthful noble’s bride,  
But to a country clown must you be tied:  
From early dawn weighed down with sordid toil:  
Tis yours to turn the mill and press the oil;  
Then with a work-bent form and faded face  
Recall your beauties, all your pliant grace,  
Your blooming cheeks, each with the peach that vies,  
Your penciled eyebrows, and your brilliant eyes.  
Be warned in time; at my advice don’t scoff,  
But get your friends to break this marriage off.” [11]*

Compared with the original poem, it can be found that part of the original poem is directly deleted without translation. In terms of syntax and rhetoric, the original poem attaches importance to antithesis. The translation pays due attention to the antithesis of individual words, but it is difficult to convey the antithesis and phonology of the original poem and so on. Restricted by the differences between Chinese and Western languages and cultures, as well as the translator’s capability and reader’s

preference, the translator should give full play to the aesthetics and creativity of poetry in translating poetry, and adopt translation methods such as transplantation and replacement to deal with the poetic language of the original text according to the context, so as to make the translation reader-friendly.

## V. CONCLUSION

Translation serves as a significant medium to cultural exchange. In the cultural communication of Chinese knowledge western spreading, the translator must make the best translation choice between the source language and the target language, including the choice of text and translation strategies, so that readers of foreign cultures can understand Chinese novels and Chinese culture. Text and cultural communication are dynamic in the process of translation, and “as a carrier of cultural communication, translation is influenced by political and cultural factors” [12]. During the translation of *The Young Prodigy*, Allen, the translator, made flexible translation choices, including translation strategies and language expressions to maintain the original authenticity based on the cultural context of the target language, so as to meet the expectations of English readers for oriental culture.

As a professional sinology-centered journal with China as its main research object in the 19th century, *The China review* had a substantial influence in the English world and built a bridge for the cultural exchange between China and the West at that time. With this medium, the translation of *The Young Prodigy* and its spread in the English-speaking world played a certain role in promoting the dissemination and acceptance of Chinese classical novels in the West and the cultural exchange between China and the West.

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