



A Study on Cross-Cultural Translation Strategies of Chinese Peking Opera Based on Relevance Theory

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Abstract. Chinese Peking Opera, as a precious art form in traditional Chinese culture, boasts a profound historical and cultural heritage, gaining popularity among international audiences and drawing attention from academic circles. However, due to factors such as the intricacies of the Chinese language, cultural contexts, and unique aesthetic elements, Peking Opera faces challenges and difficulties in its overseas dissemination. This paper takes classic Peking Opera works as examples and employs Relevance Theory to explore cross-cultural translation strategies for Peking Opera. Specifically, the study analyzes the Chinese-English script of *Wenzhao Pass* from a cognitive relevance perspective, investigating cross-cultural translation issues in Chinese Peking Opera. The paper proposes relevant strategies and methods to facilitate its international dissemination, thereby enhancing its global recognition and aesthetic value.

Keywords: Peking Opera, Relevance Theory, translation strategies, context, *Wenzhao Pass*

1 Introduction

Chinese Peking Opera, recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, embodies profound cultural significance. However, Chinese expression, cultural context, and distinctive Chinese musical aesthetics all have their impacts on the overseas dissemination of Chinese Peking Opera faces challenges. Taking the classical Peking Opera as an example, the paper adopts Relevance Theory to explore the cross-cultural translation strategies of Peking Opera. Relevance is a crucial aspect to consider in cross-cultural translation. As a pragmatic principle, relevance aids in ensuring the effective dissemination of a text across different regions and audiences (Rodríguez, CV, 2023). Specifically, it analyzes the Chinese-English script of *Wenzhao Pass* in light of cognitive relevance and proposes relevant strategies to help promote its international dissemination, thus to enhance its international recognition and aesthetic value.

2 Relevance Theory and Peking Opera Translation

Relevance Theory, as introduced by Sperber (1986) and Wilson (1995), constitutes an interpretive framework addressing discourse comprehension and language communication. Derived from the fundamental concept of optimal relevance, Gutt (1991) incorporated Relevance Theory into translation studies, asserting that the potency of relevance is contingent upon two factors: Processing efforts (E) and Contextual effects (C). Di Fangfang (2021) also believes that relevance is a process involving a large amount of information input into the human mechanism, influenced by Processing efforts and contextual effects. Put simply, $\text{Relevance (R)} = \frac{\text{Contextual effects (C)}}{\text{Processing efforts (E)}}$. Other scholars who have delved into this field include Olsen (1992), Hjort-Pedersen (1996), among others. These scholars have contributed to making relevance theory a significantly influential cognitive pragmatics theory in recent years. It proves to be effective in explaining translation, considered as the “most complex phenomenon in the history of the universe” (Richard, 1953).

Based on relevance theory, the translation field has conducted research in areas such as semantics, culture, and multimodal aspects. Some scholars have explored network-based translation strategies for Peking Opera to meet the grammatical requirements of the target language to enhance translation accuracy (Chen Xuan, Zhu Xingyue, 2021). Others have focused on the conversion and management of cross-cultural elements in Peking Opera (Guo Chenxu, 2022). Additionally, scholars have analyzed the connections and interactions among language, music, and dance elements in Peking Opera (Yang Yang, 2023). In summary, macroscopic achievements in translation research using relevance theory are substantial. However, there is still limited microscopic research applying relevance theory to specific language phenomena in particular works.

The classic Peking Opera work *Wenzhao Pass* delves into historical events, reflecting the corruption of feudal dynasties and the imminent danger faced by the nation. Against this backdrop, this paper relies on the English-Chinese script of *Wenzhao Pass* and utilizes Relevance Theory for an in-depth exploration. The study conducts a detailed analysis of lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic language phenomena.

3 Relevance Translation Strategies for *Wenzhao Pass*

In order to extensively promote China’s outstanding traditional culture on the international stage, the National Library of China published the *Translation Series of a Hundred JingJu Classics* in 2017. As one of the inaugural productions, *Wenzhao Pass* meticulously documents the script, music, performance actions, stage management, and stage art of this opera. The script translation enlisted the expertise of domestic authorities. Through this insightful primer into Chinese culture, we will analyze the relevance translation strategies employed in the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese Peking Opera, using *Wenzhao Pass* as a case study.

3.1 Lexical Relevance Strategy

In Peking Opera, there are numerous linguistic phenomena such as numbers, geographical names, and references. It is necessary to strike a balance between preserving the original meaning and reducing the difficulty for readers (Wang Jiaqi, 2023). Applying appropriate strategies for translation is crucial for ensuring the quality of English subtitles for this opera.

Numbers.

When translating numbers in Peking Opera, a relevance strategy should be applied to handle semantics. Numbers in the script often involve concepts related to eras, time, age, quantity, etc. However, due to differences in how Chinese and English express numbers, a direct transliteration may result in information loss. In the script of *Wenzhao Pass*, there are examples of number translation, such as “五湖四海” translated as “five lakes and four seas,” “五更天” translated as “the dawn,” and “莫非是五行八个字我的命生成” translated as “But it’s just the destiny I was born to.” The translation strategies for numbers involve literal translation, free translation, and omission, reducing processing efforts while enhancing contextual effects, thus increasing relevance and aiding audience understanding of the plot.

Geographical Names.

Wenzhao Pass features numerous dialogues and lyrics related to geographical names, involving locations such as the mountains where Gao Gong hides, Dragon’s Pool and Tiger’s Den, and Zancheng. Since place names carry specific historical and cultural backgrounds, the English translation of these names must convey geographical information while maintaining plot coherence. According to relevance theory, translating geographical names should ensure relevance within the English context, stimulating the audience’s understanding and emotional connection to the original geographical background. Chinese geographical names can be either directly transliterated or freely translated. For instance, when transliterating the geographical name “樊城” as “Fancheng City” retains the original flavor and aligns with the cognitive habits of English audiences. In conclusion, choosing appropriate translation strategies (such as free translation, transliteration, or explanatory translation) can accurately convey the geographical and cultural significance of place names, deepening English-speaking audiences’ understanding of regional culture in Peking Opera.

Reference.

Reference refers to the forms of reference to names, official positions, and titles in Peking Opera scripts. In *Wenzhao Pass*, names such as Wu Zixu, Dong Gao Gong, and Huangfu Ne frequently appear. In the process of cross-cultural translation, the translation of personal names involves two strategies: transliteration and free translation. For example, for the name “伍子胥”, the optimal solution is to transliterate it as “Wu Zixu,” retaining the original syllables and phonetic features. This translation method helps

English-speaking audiences pronounce it correctly and enables in-depth understanding of Wu Zixu through standard searches.

Official positions and titles are also important forms of reference in Peking Opera. Translating such references requires consideration of the English cultural hierarchy and social system while retaining the social and political status of the referred roles in Chinese culture. In Wenzhao Pass, “将军” is translated directly as “General,” a term corresponding to a high-ranking military position in English-speaking countries. Whereas, under the principle of relevance, translators can flexibly translate “将军” as “Commander” or “Generalissimo” not only retains the original meaning but also adds emotional and cultural associations.

3.2 Syntactic Relevance Strategy

Syntactic translation strategies involve the correlation handling of sentence structure, word order, and grammatical relationships. To ensure smooth and accurate sentences, translators should employ strategies such as antithesis translation, interrogative sentence translation, and non-subject structures to improve the accuracy and readability of subtitle translations.

Antithesis Translation.

Antithesis translation showcases its unique charm in cross-cultural translation by ingeniously combining Chinese and English. Taking Wenzhao Pass as an example, Gao Gong's lines “门外青山绿水，黄花百草任风吹” are successfully translated while preserving the original parallel structure and meaning. By translating “门外青山绿水” as “Outside the door, there are green hills and clear waters” and “黄花百草任风吹” as “Chrysanthemum and grasses blow in the wind,” the Chinese phrases “青山绿水” and “green hills and clear waters” form a semantic parallelism, while “黄花百草” and “Chrysanthemum and grasses” echo each other. This not only retains the parallel relationship in the original text but also conveys a clear artistic imagery and emotion. Readers can feel a similar artistic effect in the target language, demonstrating the successful use of antithesis translation to maintain the poetic and aesthetic qualities of the original work.

Interrogative Sentence Translation.

In Wenzhao Pass, interrogative sentence translation is often used to express communication and emotional conveyance between characters. The key is to maintain the directness of the question and the appropriateness of expression. For example, the Chinese sentence “请问老丈哪条道路可通吴国？” is translated as “Can you tell me which road leads to the State of Wu?” The question in the translation seeks information about the route but lacks the respectful tone conveyed by “请问” in Chinese. A more accurate translation would be “May I ask you which road leads to the State of Wu?”

Non-Subject Structure.

Chinese non-subject structures, achieved through the omission of the subject, emphasize the occurrence of actions or states, providing the audience with imaginative space. However, when translating non-subject structures into English, the translator must pay special attention to completing the sentence structure. For example, the Chinese line “闲来无事不从容” is translated as “I am at leisure and without cares.” By omitting the subject, the Chinese phrase emphasizes Gao Gong’s leisurely and carefree state during idle moments. In English, it is necessary to explicitly state the character and state to eliminate ambiguity. Nida posits that English and Chinese emphasize different aspects, with English focusing on “form” and Chinese on “meaning” (Nida, 2001). English is regarded as a language that emphasizes form and connectivity, whereas Chinese tends to lean towards reducing the use of connecting elements. Thus, non-subject structures contribute to the artistic tension and entertainment of operas, extra attention is needed in English translation to refine sentence structures.

3.3 Pragmatic Relevance Strategy

Pragmatic relevance plays a crucial role in the translation of Peking Opera, involving context reconstruction and information transmission. Audiences aim to understand the context with minimal cognitive effort to achieve optimal relevance, leading to a profound understanding and appreciation of Peking Opera works.

Context Reconstruction.

In the Peking Opera play “Wenzhao Guan,” one way of context reconstruction is to simplify the expression by condensing lengthy Chinese phrases into concise English, reducing the cognitive effort for the audience. Context reconstruction can also involve amplification translation, where additional information is added in English to alleviate the cognitive effort of English-speaking audiences, making it easier for them to understand cultural differences. For instance, when Gao Gong says, “老汉东皋公，昔年曾拜扁鹊先生门下为徒”，most English-speaking audiences may lack knowledge about historical figures. To ease their cognitive difficulties, the translation can be rendered as “I, Donggao Gong, was once the apprentice of the famous doctor Bian Que,” where “the famous doctor” is added to enhance the audience’s understanding of the background information in this dialogue. Similarly, when Wu Zixu says, “心猿意马终何用”，the translation can be “My heart beats wildly and my mind races, but it is in vain,” by adding emotional details to transform the abstract imagery in Chinese into an expression that is easier for the audience to understand, fostering a stronger emotional resonance with the character.

Information Symmetry.

In translation, maintaining a similar level of information and length as the original text is often referred to as “information symmetry.” For example, in Wenzhao Pass, the line “冤仇未报容颜变，一事无成两鬓斑” can be condensed in translation as “I

have not gotten my revenge, however, my beard has already become white!” This reduction retains the original meaning while expressing it more concisely and aligning better with the audience’s understanding habits, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. From the perspective of relevance theory, the cognitive effects in the source text (ST) will also be perceived by readers of the target text (TT) (Díaz-Pérez, F. J., 2021).

Free Translation.

Free translation is employed to address the conveyance of cultural information. In the Peking Opera Wenzhao Pass, Gao Gong's line “将军是大丈夫” can be freely translated as “Of course you are!” This allows English-speaking audiences to intuitively grasp Gao Gong’s affirmative attitude towards the general without requiring excessive cognitive effort. It facilitates the conveyance of cultural information from the source language, helping eliminate the impact of cultural differences on communicative intent. This approach makes the translation more congruent with the audience’s contextual assumptions.

Cultural Omission.

Cultural omission refers to the phenomenon where certain implicit meanings in the source language may be omitted or challenging to convey in the target language. Since Peking Opera contains numerous expressions with cultural nuances, it is essential to address and compensate for cultural omissions through translation and explanation in cross-cultural translation (Yang, Y., & Tian, D., 2024). For example, in Wenzhao Pass, Gao Gong quotes a poem by Cheng Hao from the Northern Song Dynasty, “闲来无事不从容，睡觉东窗日已红，万物静观皆自得，四时佳兴与人同”. The translation is “I am at leisure and without cares. Everyday when I get up the sun is already high. I take delight in quietly observing the myriad wonders of nature. The four seasons and my emotions blend in perfect harmony.” This is a typical example of cultural omission, where the English translation can only provide a literal rendering, and an audience unfamiliar with the poem “秋日偶成” lacks the cultural background to fully understand the lyrics. By referencing this poem, Gao Gong expresses themes of appreciation for nature, leisure in life, and harmony of emotions.

4 Conclusion

As a significant undertaking in the field of literary translation, the translation of Peking Opera can benefit greatly from the application of Relevance Theory. Translators should adhere to the principle of optimal relevance, ensuring a precise understanding of the essence of Peking Opera scripts and gaining a profound understanding of the cognitive environment of international audiences. Employing strategies at the levels of vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics guided by the Relevance Theory, translators can enhance their work to better meet the appreciation needs of the audience. This approach not only

ensures accuracy and fluency but also facilitates the effective promotion of the international dissemination and cultural exchange of Chinese Peking Opera.

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