

Translation of Lantern-Riddles in *A Dream in Red Mansions* from the Perspective of Interpretive Theory

Lv Liangqiu, Liu Dongmei, and Zhao Yushan

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Email:llq2803@163.com, valelia@126.com, zhaoyushan1963@163.com

[Abstract] As the representative of Chinese classical novel, *A Dream in Red Mansions* recorded the vicissitude of four distinguished families, the lament for twelve girls, and the culture-loaded lantern riddles. With the deepening communication between China and other countries, it is necessary to deliver *A Dream in Red Mansions* to the world. Given the various differences between the Chinese and English, translators, as the bridge between source authors and target readers, play a vital part in the cultural communication. Based on the book of *A Dream in Red Mansions*, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys B. Tayler, this paper mainly studies the application of Interpretive Theory in translating lantern-riddles. This theory is a strategy applied in interpretation, and its essential principle is communicative equivalence. Then, it is concluded that the Interpretive Theory, which is targeted for interpretation, can also find its place in literary translation, especially the translation of lantern riddles, and both kinds of translations will become more authentic after devocalization. The target language could exactly illustrate the intention and emotion of source authors with the assistance of the Interpretive Theory.

[Keywords] interpretive theory; *A Dream in Red Mansions*; translation of lantern riddles

Introduction

The Chinese nation has a long history and glorious culture, which generates the aspiration of several generations of Chinese scholars to translate, edit, and publish the whole corpus of Chinese literary classics so that the nation's greatest cultural achievements can be introduced to people all over the world (Yang, 1999). *A Dream of Red Mansions* is rich in ideas and concepts. It is a multifaceted world of art into which the more one delves, the more one finds. The charm of this novel lies in its revealing youth fully and truthfully, in its uncovering the zeal, grace and tenderness of the younger generation. Although the era has long since vanished, protagonists and their dreams and longings, sorrow and happiness, unlucky destiny and outstanding talents, still strike a sympathetic chord in the heart of people today. This novel is still a hot topic of conversation among the Chinese people, and criticism and research concerning the fate of the twelve girls that were implied in the lantern riddles or poems has crystallized as a branch of study, whimsically referred as "Redology" (Shi, 1999). So vast and broad are the ancient Chinese characteristics that the translation of *A Dream in Red Mansions* has met a lot of obstacles, especially culturally-loaded messages. Questions have been lingering about the translators who have applied such strategies as Functional Equivalence (Eugene, 1964) and Receptional Aesthetic (Has, 1967). However, few of them have ever applied the Interpretive Theory, which is a branch of interpretation.

Interpretive Theory, an important theory with which to study interpretation, is also called the Theory of Sense. What interpretive theory emphasizes is not the simple transformation of linguistic symbols, like words and sentences, but the transmission of sense, especially the meaning of authors (Seleskovitch, 2011). Interpretive theory considers the translation and interpretation as an interpersonal activity that focuses on the transferring of meaning. Another word is that the target text should be identical with the source text in context and meaning. The main purpose is to exactly express the author's thoughts in another language without leaving out any details. There are three procedures in interpretive theory: comprehension, which needs the translator to assign a meaning to the translation unit relying on the knowledge of source language and his/her world knowledge; devocalization, which means the translator should be free from the physical context of the source text but grasps the mental one without omitting any messages; and reformulation, which requires the translator to verbalize the meanings he or she catches in the source of the target text

using the knowledge of the target language in the process, as well as extra-linguistic knowledge (Daniel, 2009). All in all, the interpretive theory thinks that the deeper understanding of the source text, the more essence the translator can grasp and the better translation it is. This principle coincides with the intrinsic quality of Chinese lantern riddles.

The combination of Interpretive Theory and the translation of lantern riddles has been little studied. The devocalization, which is the principle of Interpretive Theory, helps the translator to be free from the physical shackles of language and enables him/her to grasp the main substance of meaning. Given the shining difference between ancient Chinese culture and the English culture, we cannot transplant automatically between them. Their features, either in language or in culture, must be considered carefully, and the beauty and substance of source language must be transformed successfully without any damages. Such fusion between the Interpretive Theory and translation of lantern riddles can provide a new path for literary translations. This paper is based on *A Dream in Red Mansions* (Cao, X. Q. & Gao, E., 1764/1999) translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys B. Tayler, mainly studying the application of Interpretive Theory (Lederer, 1994/2011) in the translation of lantern riddles in *A Dream in Red Mansions*.

Combination between Interpretive Theory and Translation of Lantern-riddles

The translation of lantern-riddles is subject to the literary translation. It seems that the Interpretive Theory cannot be applied to translation, especially in culture-loaded lantern-riddles. However, there are some commonalities between interpretation and translation, especially in lantern-riddles, both of them aiming at bridging communication between a source text and target readers or listeners. The activity of guessing lantern riddles is a cultural communication in ancient China, which prevailed among distinguished families on Lantern Festival, a traditional Chinese festival, on January 15th in the lunar calendar when all participants would make at least one riddle, place them into lanterns, and then pick a lantern and guess the answer of the riddle. The organization of these riddles is likened to ancient Chinese poems with rigorous forms and vigorous cadence. No matter how strict or organized, the people who guessed riddles should take off their external forms and grasp the internal meaning. Although the riddles are very beautiful regarding its language forms, their real purpose is to display the charm of their wisdom. So, translation of lantern riddles cannot be confined within the language units. It should penetrate the flesh of language into the soul of meaning. The answer of riddles must convey the meaning of their makers. The procedure of guessing riddles has common aspects with interpretation, which stresses the meaning of language, not the language itself. So it is feasible to combine the Interpretive Theory and translation in lantern-riddles. There are two common grounds shared by interpretation and lantern-riddles.

On one hand, both of them have the purpose to communicate. The communicative intention of Interpretive Theory plays a vital role in interpretation. The interpretive theories take the translator as the bridge between the source language and the target language. The translator should make full sense of the source text and organize what he or she gets into target texts and then deliver it to the target readers. The communication is based on the understanding, deforming, and expressing. As for the translation of lantern riddles, it mainly aims at conveying the soul of the languages rather than its appearance, which is very beautiful given their forms and images. So the essence of the translation of riddles is identical with interpretation, which focuses not only on the delivery meaning but the forms.

On the other hand, there are common grounds for them in expressing emotions and intentions of the authors. It is a basic principle for poems to express the emotion of authors, like indignation for the reality, the empathy for the unlucky people, or the soreness for the doomed fortunate. The language unit doesn't have feelings, but the authors have. What's more, the authors hide their sensibility behind the language, so the translator should penetrate the clothes of language to grasp the meaning of the author. This is the same case for the translation of lantern riddles, which share similarities with classical poems. Speaking of interpretation, there is no doubt that every conversation or speech must intend to convey messages. Sometimes, the comprehension goes beyond the simple recognition of words and linguistic structures. What the interpreter can do is to grasp the meaning of speaker by any possible means, such as the tone or the gesture of speaker. So the interpretation and the translation of lantern riddles are similar given the same context.

Although the Interpretive Theory is tailored for interpretation, it also can be applied to literary translation, like lantern riddles, considering the similarities in translating and the interpreting process. This paper may provide a new way for studying literary translation.

Application of Interpretive Theory in Lantern Riddles

The basic principle of Interpretive Theory is communicative equivalence or equivalence of meaning, meaning that in the process of translation; the translator should break down the outer shackles of language and comprehend the source text, and finally reformat the meaning of the target language. Traditionally, transcoding, also called automatic word-for-word translation, may result in that a target-language text or discourse is clumsy, erroneous, or even nonsensical without proper comprehension. So, the keen comprehension of a source text is important. Only with accurate understanding of a source text can the translators produce qualified target text. In another word, the target readers should get the same message or the same sensibility as what the authors want to deliver. The translation of lantern riddles in *A Dream in Red Mansions* is a good illustrative example for the application of interpretive theory in translation rather than in interpretation. The following examples of lantern riddles and their translations are all from *A Dream in Red Mansions* in the Library of Chinese classics (Chinese to English), which is an introduction to the corpus of traditional Chinese culture.

Application in Translating Ominous Message

In ancient China, the culture of lantern riddles shares the same distinction as the culture of poems, which is a long history and complicated evolution. It is necessary for translators to deliver the cultural elements. Moreover, these riddles integrate ill-omens for the writers who make up these riddles; in other words, these lantern riddles are the prediction or the suggestion of the destiny of their makers. Such phenomenon is called the “culture of ill-omens” in Redology. In Chapter 22, *A Song Awakens Baoyu to Esoteric Truths*, Lantern Riddles Grieve Jia Zheng with Their Ill-omens, the author implies the doomed fate of main characters by their lantern riddles. For example, the lantern riddles of firecrackers made by Jia Yuanchun suggests that the wealth and dignity she enjoyed at her early life would turn to be smoke and ash after an explosion; the riddles of The Game of Go, a traditional Chinese table game with 180 white pieces and 181 black pieces, composed by Jia Yingchun, implies that her whole life is filled with uncertainties and manipulated by others; the Buddhist shrine made by Jia Xichun demonstrates that the little girl would spend her life with the loneliness in the nunnery temple only accompanied by the Buddhist light. Given the implication in the source text, the translation cannot leave out any intention of the author and must embody the ill-omens penetrated in source languages. Take three instances as follows:

- Eg.1. Monster I can affright and put to flight;
A roll of silk my form; my thunderous crash
Strikes dread into the hearts of all.
Yet when they look around I've turned to ash.
能使妖魔胆尽催，身如束帛气如雷。
一声震得人方恐，回首相看已成灰。

In this example, the lantern riddle is made by Jia Yuanchun, who is the elder daughter of Jia Zheng, the host of the whole family. She is chosen to be a Lady-Clerk in the palace of the heir apparent because of her goodness, filial piety, and talents. The early half of her life is filled with happiness, and every person in the family respects her very much, just like the firecrackers, which can give rise to the scary feeling of people before exploding. The translation conveys the implication completely without following the original pattern. There is no subject in the source text, like “I,” but the translation does. This change doesn't do any harm to the meaning of authors but does well to suggest that this riddle is the reincarnation of some girl. The readers who ponder a little would get the point that the girl is just the lantern riddle's maker. Such a strategy can be concluded by the devocalization in Interpretive Theory.

- Eg.2. A former life's appearance comes to nought,
Deaf to folk-songs the chanting of sutras
She now hears'
Say not this life is sunk in a sea of darkness,
For in her heart a shining light appears.
前身色相总无成，不听菱歌听佛经。
莫道此生沉黑海，性中自有大光明。

This lantern riddle is made by Jia Xichun who is the younger sister of Jia Zhen in Ning Mansions. As the youngest girl in Rong Mansions and Ning mansions, Xichun has a peaceful and timid disposition but a very enlightened mind. She has talents for painting and drawing and the liability to become a hermit. This answer of this riddle is Buddhist Shrine, which is an image of loneliness and insightful wisdom. The hidden meaning of the source language is that Xichun will excuse herself from mortal life just accompanied by the Buddhist light and scripture. Considering these suggestions, the translation doesn't follow the patterns of the source text; it breaks down the formation of the Chinese poem, which has no subject at all. The analysis goes beyond the minimum required to deal with the most obvious ambiguities of the source language and reaches a comfortable threshold by adding the third subject "her." This is the same case with the translation of firecrackers.

- Eg.3. No end to the labors of men, to heaven's decrees,
But labor unblessed by heaven will fruitless be.
What causes this constant, frenzied activity?
The uncertainty of mortal destiny.
天运人功理不穷，有功无功也难逢。
因何镇日纷纷乱，只为阴阳数不同。

This example comes from the lantern riddle made by Jia Yingchun, who is Jia She's daughter by a concubine. The stature of Jia Yingchun is not as high as Jia Yuanchun, who is a distinguished girl in the whole family. Her life, manipulated by her father and controlled by her husband, is just like the pieces in the game of "goes." It is proper for the translation to express the unlucky omens in the source text. Although the translation doesn't replace the word by word, sentence by sentence, or the sentence pattern by sentence pattern, the meaning of the source text was transformed successfully when using the answer-question pattern. The last two sentences of translation is an obvious prediction or explanation of Jia Yingchun. The above three translation examples all break down the obstacles of syntax by subjoining subjects or personifying the objects in lantern riddles. But the meaning behind these riddles suggests the ill-omens of different characters are demonstrated successfully.

Application in Translating Poetic Message

A Dream in Red Mansions represents the peak of Chinese classical literature, containing a lot of poems and poetic message. These lantern riddles are illustrative examples. The difference between Chinese and English poems makes it impossible to realize the equivalence in all aspects, especially in sentence patterns. However, the translation realizes the communicative equivalence by using the Interpretive Theory without damaging the beauty of the poetic message. Take the lantern riddles made by Xue Baochai and Jia Huan as examples.

- Eg.4. Who leaves the levée with smoke-scented sleeves?
Not destined by the lute or quilt to sit,
It needs no watchman to announce the dawn,
No maid at the fifth watch to replenish it.
Burned with anxiety both day and night,

Consumed with anguish as time slips away,
As life speeds past we learn to hold it dear—
What cares it whether foul or fair the day?

朝罢谁携两袖烟，琴边衾里总无缘。
晓筹不用鸡人报，五夜无烦侍女添。
焦首朝朝还暮暮，煎心日日复年年。
光阴荏苒须当惜，风雨阴晴任变迁。

In this example, the lantern-riddle made by Xue Baochai is filled with rich and bright colors. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, the literary talents of Xue Baochai could keep up with Lin Daiyu, who is a gorgeous poet. The translation should not only manifest the suggestion of the source text but also demonstrate the literary talents of Xue Baochai. The rhythm in her lantern riddle is called Qilyu (eight-line Chinese poem with seven characters to a line), filled with elegant words and strict patterns like “朝罢、晓筹、朝朝还暮暮、日日复年年、光阴荏苒、风雨阴晴” which contains the beauty of tonality and rhythm of the Chinese poem. Although the pattern of translation doesn't identify with the source text, the meaning of translation realizes the equivalence by using “day and night, slip away, foul or fair the day.” It could be concluded that the reformation after devocalization is a good way to realize the communicative equivalence.

This example illustrates the importance of devocalization and reformation in upholding the Interpretive Theory. There is no doubt that there are differences in Chinese and English, ranging from hypotactic and paratactic patterns to compact and diffusive styles (Lian, 2009). So, the beauty of language will be different in Chinese poems and English poems. In order to let the target readers catch the elegance of the source language, the translator should achieve communicative equivalence first. After freeing himself from the source language, the translation of Xue Baochai's riddle goes into an elegant expression, while of Jia Huan's poem into a vulgar one. Only by breaking down the language shackles can the translator reform a good translation.

Application in Translating Emotions

There are a lot of poems in *A Dream of Red mansion*. On one hand, these poems suggest the destiny of poets; on the other hand, they disclose the beliefs, values, and sensibilities of the authors toward the characters. This is the same case as these lantern riddles, which are the manifestation of the author's world view. There are two examples.

Eg.5. The body is square,
Its substance is firm and hard;
Though it cannot speak
It will assuredly record anything said.
身自方端，体自坚硬。
虽不能言，有言必应。

This lantern riddle is made by Jia Zheng who is the host of Rong Mansions and the representative of ancient Chinese men who are decent, upright, distinguished, and powerful. Through the answer of lantern riddle we can know the author appreciates the character of Jia Zheng. So the translation should demonstrate emotion. Just as the above examples, the translator doesn't transform word by word or sentence by sentence; he or she devocalizes and reformates the translation in a different way by adding “it” and “assuredly.” The word “assuredly” is a positive word to emphasize the reorganization for Jia Zheng.

Eg.6. The children by the steps look up;
Spring surely has no fitter decoration.
But when the silk cord breaks it drift away,

Blame not the east wind for this separation.

阶下儿童仰面时，清明点妆最堪宜。

游丝一断混无力，莫向东风怨别离。

This lantern riddle is made by Jia Tanchun, the daughter of Jia Zheng by a concubine. Although she is the blood sister of Jia Huan, they have distinct characters. Jia Tanchun is smart and insightful. The people in the mansion admire her very much. However, her destiny is likened to a kite controlled by others and then drifting nowhere. The words “混无力、怨别离” could reveal the emotion of the author, who is pitiful for the talented girls. Although the translation is not identical with the source text in patterns after devocalizing, the targeted readers also can grasp the suggestion disclosed by words “drift and blame.”

These two examples further prove that the targeted readers could get a better understanding of the source text after the translators divorce the translation from the source text at the syntax level and reformat it in an empathetic way. There is no doubt a good way to translate lantern riddles is by employing the Interpretive Theory.

Conclusion

The Interpretive Theory could be modeled as a recurrent three-phase process operating on successive text segments: the first phase is comprehension; the second phase is devocalization from source text; the third phase is reformation in the targeted language. This process that is upheld in Interpretive Theory also could be applied in translation, especially in literary translation like in lantern riddles. Given the difference between Chinese and English culture, as well as the languages themselves, “automatic” word-for-word translation cannot make any sense. So, the Interpretive Theory is a feasible strategy to realize the communicative equivalence between a source text and a target text.

Acknowledgment

This study is supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities” (North China Electric Power University, Grant number: 2014ZD25).

References

- Cao, X. Q., & Gao, E. (1999). *A Dream in Red Mansion*. (Yang, X. Y. & Gladys, B. T. Trans.). Beijing, China: People’s Literature Press. (Original work published in 1764).
- Daniel, G. (2009). *Basic concepts and models for interpreters and translators training*. (pp. 86–98) Philadelphia: American National Standard for Information Science.
- Eugene, A. N. (1964). *Toward a science of translation*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Has, R. J. (1967). *Literary history as a challenge to literary theory*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Lederer, M. (2011). *The interpretive theory in translation and interpretation*. (Liu, H. P. Trans.). Beijing, China: China Translation and Publication Corporation. (Original work published in 1994).
- Molele, L. (1994). La traduction aujourd’hui — le modèle interprétative [释意学派口笔译理论]. (Trans. by Heping Liu 2011) 北京: 中国对外出版翻译有限公司].
- Lian, S. N. (2009). *Constructive studies of English and Chinese*. Beijing, China: High Education Press.
- Lian, Shuneng (连淑能). (2009). *英汉对比研究 (Comparative study of English and Chinese)* 北京: 高等教育出版社.
- Seleskovitch, D. (2011). *The pedagogy of interpretation*. Beijing, China: China Translation and Publication Corporation
- Shi, C. Y. (Eds). (1999). *Library of Chinese classics: A Dream in Red Mansion*. Beijing, China: People’s Literature Press.
- Yang, M. Z. (Eds). (1999). *Library of Chinese classics: A Dream of Red Mansion*. Beijing, China: People’s Literature Press.