

# Opera Translation and Globalization of Chinese Local Culture: A Case Study of Wuxi Opera\*

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Against the background of a rigorous campaign of globalization of Chinese culture, the global dissemination of local operas has drawn attention from the government, art performers, translators and scholars. This paper takes Wuxi Opera, a precious cultural treasure in Jiangsu province, China, for example. We will discuss the difficulties in spreading Wuxi Opera globally and learn the successful globalizing experience from other operas, such as Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera and Sichuan Opera. Considering the important status and rich resources of Peking Opera, we will analyze Peking Opera thoroughly and the most important aspects of Sichuan Opera and Kunqu Opera. By analyzing their translations and globalization process, we believe that Wuxi Opera should make efforts especially in four aspects to make progress in its globalizing campaign.

*Keywords:* Wuxi Opera, globalization, Chinese culture, opera translation

## Introduction

According to Culpeper, drama is considered as “the neglected child” (1998, p. 3), especially those small operas. No wonder, drama translation is considered as the most neglected and problematic field of translation studies. And there has been a relative absence of theoretical writings on dramas translation (WANG & LI, 2014, p. 15).

“Unlike the translation of a novel, or a poem, the duality inherent in the art of the theatre requires language to combine with spectacle, manifested through visual as well as acoustic images” (Baker, 2009, p. 92). The translator is therefore faced with the choice of either viewing drama as literature or as an integral part of a theatrical production (Broeck, 1988). James McFarlane’s translation of Ibsen’s collected works is an example as a literary work. And when performing on the stage, translations of the lines pay more attention on “performability” or “speakability”. In general, drama translation studies center on “dialect, style, register”, “socio-cultural differences” and “adaptations and versions”.

With the development of Chinese economy, China has expanded its influence in almost every aspect. And global dissemination of local culture plays an important role in strengthening Chinese soft power. However,

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despite the fact that there are various kinds of traditional Chinese operas, few of them have been translated into other languages. Only the translation of big operas, like Peking opera, can be set as reference. There are three kinds of ways that traditional Chinese operas are translated into English versions. First, it is the literary drama translation for the purpose of reading. The prominent translators are Yang Xianyi, Wang Rongpei etc.. Second, when some traditional operas troupes, such as Peking opera troupes, are on a tour, the actors try to use English to say the lines. Third, as the increase in foreign visitors to the Chinese theatre, the lines are translated into English. The actors still say Chinese lines and the English versions are just to help foreigners to better understand the plots.

From the above, it can be found that few researches have been done on the translation of Wuxi Opera and how to spread it globally. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring how to successfully disseminate Wuxi Opera globally by learning from the experience of other Chinese operas.

### **Difficulties Confronting the Global Dissemination**

In the article *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, Lasswell (1948) wrote,

A convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions:

Who  
Says What  
In Which Channel  
To Whom  
With What Effect? (p. 117)

Lasswell (1948) states that the “Who” refers to “control analysis”, the “Says What” to “content analysis”, the “In Which Channel” to “media analysis”, the “To Whom” to “audience analysis”, and the “With What Effect” to “effect analysis” (p. 117). Therefore, we explore the reasons why it is difficult to spread Wuxi Opera globally through these aspects.

#### **Who: Disseminator of Wuxi Opera**

The main disseminators of Wuxi opera are the government, Wuxi opera troupes, amateurs, and reviewers and so on, among which various kinds of Wuxi Opera troupes are the direct disseminator of it.

#### **Opera Actors**

Nowadays, there are not enough trained younger actors ready to take over the responsibility from the older experts. Taking Zhangjiagang Wuxi Opera Art Centre for example. The leading actress, Dong Hong, is about 40 years old. Although she tries to train some young actors, they are so young that they cannot take over the responsibility of spreading Wuxi Opera globally.

The reasons for this phenomenon are various. First, the prospect of Chinese traditional opera industry is not rosy. Fewer people are willing to be opera actors in recent years. In addition, there are not many ways of training that can be provided for people who want to be opera actors. And the types of roles in Wuxi opera are also not as various as other kinds of traditional Chinese operas. Male actors play both men and women. Except *huadan* and *xiaosheng*, other types of role in Wuxi opera have little room to polish their skills, which is harmful for the development of Wuxi opera actors.

### **Government**

Protection mechanism of governments at all levels is crucial to the protection of the intangible cultural heritage—Wuxi opera.

However, government hasn't paid enough attention to it. First, there is not enough money to support the development of Wuxi opera. In 2010, many Wuxi opera troupes were converted into enterprises and faced much more pressure to survive. It is even difficult for them to maintain the basic operation with the result that little consideration is given to its globalization effort. Second, government has made few efforts to publicize Wuxi opera. Although there is a Wuxi Opera Museum in Wuxi, only a small number of people have visited it and even some staff there don't know about it. And if Wuxi Opera wants to go globally successfully, the great supports of government are indispensable.

### **Scholars**

Translation is crucial to the success of the process of spreading Wuxi opera abroad. However, Chinese scholars usually just pay attention to the importance of protecting Wuxi opera. Few of them have thought about translating Wuxi operas into English or other languages. The reasons may lie in the difficulty of translating operas and little attention that is given to small local operas.

### **Says What: The Content of Dissemination**

The contents of Wuxi opera are old-fashioned, most of which are about everyday life stories of rural areas, most of which are against feudal marriage ethics and greedy landlords. *The Pearl Tower* has been put on stage for so many years without changes that some audience are already tired of it. Compared with the renewal of Peking Opera, creating a new Wuxi opera is in a much slower pace. What's more, the newly created Wuxi operas are still confined to those old kinds of stories with little innovation.

In addition, its performing way, which remains the old tunes and melodies, is usually monotonous. In this way, it loses the favor of young audience. Also, as a local opera, actors usually speak dialect, which hampers foreigners from understanding the content of the opera.

### **In Which Channel: The Media of Dissemination**

With the advance of science and technology, the spreading ways have become various. However, the publicity of most Wuxi operas still relies on traditional media. According to "Chinese Traditional Operas and Internet Transmission", a survey done by Communication University of China in 2008, the number of Wuxi opera websites fell far behind Yue Opera and Huangmei Opera. There were 133 Yue Opera websites, about 23.2 percent of the total. Beijing Opera and Huangmei Opera accounted for 7.1% and 5.2% respectively. However, the proportion of the other 30 operas was 7.2% in total. Wuxi opera is one of the 30 operas, so the situation of Wuxi opera is not optimistic.

Besides, the updating of Wuxi opera's official Wechat accounts and microblog accounts is very slow; the information of them is little and the communication channels between experts or officials and amateurs are few. There is also a serious shortage of audio and video materials, not to mention the videos with English subtitles.

Under such conditions, it is even difficult to spread Wuxi Opera throughout the country, let alone spreading globally.

### **To Whom: The Receiver of Dissemination**

It is true that the survival of any opera is closely related to its audience. People who have interests in Wuxi operas in China are usually the generations after 1940s, 50s and 60s. The generations after 1970s and 80s often show little attention to Wuxi Opera, and the generation after 1990s is unfamiliar with it at all.

There are various reasons. For example, in today's society, leisure activities are rich and colorful. People have various choices for entertainment. It is obvious that going to the cinema gains more popularity than seeing an opera, because it is more convenient considering that there are far more cinemas than theaters. After going shopping, most people would like to choose watching a movie in the shopping centre rather than taking a taxi or bus to watch an opera. The situation of big operas is not promising, not to mention Wuxi opera.

Also, many foreigners even pay little attention to their own dramas, so audiences of Wuxi opera may be highly restricted to those who have strong interests in Chinese culture. Most importantly, language is a huge obstacle.

### **Implications From the Global Dissemination of Other Chinese Operas**

In the second half of 18th century, the spread of the *Orphan of Zhao* in European countries has gained great popularity of Chinese operas. And the active dissemination of Chinese opera toward the world is a contemporary and effective method to introduce elements of Chinese culture to the world. Some kinds of operas have achieved great success and the spread of them can be valuable experience for the translation of Wuxi opera.

#### **Peking Opera**

As the quintessence of Chinese culture, Peking Opera is always the pride of Chinese people and it is also the outstanding representative of Chinese traditional operas. Besides, Peking Opera has played a pioneering role in the process of introducing Chinese traditional culture to the world. Since Peking Opera artist Mei Lanfang performed in Japan in 1919, it has attracted a great number of audiences from both home and abroad. Peking Opera has a history of several hundred years and was first introduced to the world in 1919. Since then, it has evolved through three stages and created a massive impact in the world of arts (LI, CHEN, & CHEN, 2014). And the translation of this kind of opera would certainly have much influence on the exploration of Wuxi Opera's translation approach.

In 1919 and 1924, artist Mei Lanfang brought Peking opera to Japanese and his performance proved to be a great success. In 1930 and 1935, he, as the introducer of Peking opera, visited America and the former Soviet Union. Then, Chen Yanqiu introduced it to the Europe in 1932 (SUN, 2015). Besides the constant effort and excellent performance of these two artists, Peking Opera has won lots of audiences overseas with its own charm. The project "The English Translation Series of 100 Peking Opera Classics" launched by Renmin University of China and Beijing Foreign Studies University has already produced influential effects overseas. Comparing with Peking opera, Wuxi Opera has received less attention and had no such influential artists as well as actors before. As the quintessence of Chinese culture, Peking Opera is much more famous than local operas such as Wuxi Opera, and undoubtedly has more actors, trainers as well as financial support. So far, a lot of people out of Jiangsu province have never heard about Wuxi Opera, and even worse, few important projects or measures are related to the translation of this regional culture. Although there are a few performers, such as Dong Hong,

who have got some achievements in the spread of Wuxi Opera, their popularity is much less than Peking Opera. Also, few translators who excel in the translation of Wuxi Opera is known by the broad masses of the people, let alone some outstanding translation projects. Besides, the respective number of actors of these two operas contains huge gaps.

After all these years, Peking Opera has made some progress in displaying its stage art in an all-around way through practicing performances on international stages. However, Wuxi Opera lacks this kind of experience. When it comes to spreading globally, Wuxi Operais under an immature condition, it is in want of not only the translation scripts but also opera troupes. Besides, in comparison with Wuxi Opera, Peking Opera has abundant types of role and each of them has their most successful repertoires, for example, *wusheng* have their famous military play *Crossroads* in which they can exert their own talents. Wuxi Opera only focuses on *xiaosheng* and *huadan*, and doesn't pay attention to other types of role, which costs a great loss of its glamour. Meanwhile, Wuxi Opera has a tendency to ignore the thorough training in basic skills, which is also harmful to the development of young actors. As for overseas dissemination, the magazine *Chinese Peking Opera* has English categories in each issue, which can be a good example for the spread of Wuxi Opera. Also, thanks to a good many of excellent translators, lots of Peking operas have their widely-known English names, such as *Princess Shuang Yang*, *Silang Visiting His Mother* and so on. However, Wuxi Opera, which is still struggling for its popularity at home, has not put enough efforts to expand its overseas influence. Owing to this reason, you may easily find several Peking operas with their English versions, whereas it is hard to get some English materials about Wuxi Opera.

Most importantly, because of its long history, Peking Opera has already had its solid mass base. Lots of Peking Opera lovers are distributed in various communities both in cities and in the countryside, at home and abroad. They have played an important role in Peking Opera's inheritance and development. Wuxi Opera, with its comparatively few fans, has small influences on citizens in other provinces, let alone foreigners. What's more, there are plenty of books as well as magazines which aim at introducing the Peking Opera to the world. Besides stage performances, those relevant documents contribute a lot to the success of the spread of Peking Opera. Besides, with the help of modern technology, Peking Opera also has more media channels to attract foreign audiences. For examples, CDs, movies and TV programs are more accessible to its target audience. And new media, such as microblog, provides a brand new platform for more and more people to participate in the process of Peking Opera's dissemination. Meanwhile, Chinese Embassy in other countries sometimes would organize some art salons with regard to Peking Opera. When it comes to the spread of Wuxi Opera, all of these channels can be regarded as reference and lessons. After all, the advertisement of Wuxi Opera is far from enough. It is even harder to bring it to the world if only a few Chinese are familiar with it. Nowadays, most Wuxi Opera groups survive only by stage performance which is absolutely insufficient to globalize it. Therefore, taking in new channels should be a necessary step to improve the popularity of Wuxi Opera.

Obviously, the international spread of Peking Opera must put emphasis on foreign audiences, especially those who do not understand Chinese culture. Many scholars who study the translation of Peking Opera pointed out that the translators should always prepare for the worst because those foreigners may know nothing about Chinese culture. In this case, the primary goal of the translation is not to make them enjoy the music for voices in opera or stage action, but to help those "culture outsiders" to understand Peking Opera as well as the Chinese

culture therein. However, it is never an easy task to accomplish. There are still many problems in the effectiveness of translation of Peking Opera. Regarding Wuxi Opera, it still has a long way to go. How to make it understood thoroughly by foreign people is a question that has not found satisfactory answers yet. And in order to deal with it, we may need the cooperation between Wuxi Opera artists, translators and the government.

### **Sichuan Opera**

The successful dissemination of Sichuan Opera owes to its entertaining performance. It combines face-changing, tihuiyan, sword-hiding, fire-spitting and beard-changing with the plot and different characters. And the act is highly polished. In addition, Sichuan Opera plays an important part in the history and culture of Sichuan, so many scholars recognize the significance of its spread. By comparison, the content and the forms of performance of Wuxi Opera is less diversified, therefore it results in the loss of its attraction.

Since Sichuan Opera is also a local opera and researchers have already done many studies on the translation of it, it can definitely give some valuable experience to the spread of Wuxi Opera. Sichuan dialect is the unique characteristic of Sichuan Opera. According to Baker (2009):

Satisfying the linguistic requirements of performativity may entail adjustments at a number of different levels. If, for instance, a play was originally written in dialect, the translator will have to make a decision as to whether there is a suitable dialect in the TL into which it may be translated. (p. 92)

And MA (2013) states that the translation of local dialect should be first translated into standard Chinese, and then into English. When translating the local dialect, “appellation” and idioms should be given more attention. For example, “Lao zi” in Sichuan dialect means “I”. However, it literally means father in Standard Chinese. “Lao zi” embodies Sichuan people’s unconstrainedness. Under this circumstance, it should adopt “domesticating translation.” Besides, in order to let foreign audience grasp the essence of Sichuan Opera, many scholars advocate “foreignizing translation” strategy in combination with literal translation or literal translation with notes.

When it refers to Wuxi Opera, it is also essential to think about which translation way is more suitable for considering its use of dialect. Just like Sichuan dialect, Wuxi dialect also has its distinctive characteristics. Therefore, we need to solve this crucial problem how to make foreigners, who know nothing about Wuxi dialect, understand it thoroughly by the correct and exact translation. Though it is never an easy task, we can learn from Sichuan Opera and use its translation as reference.

### **Kunqu Opera**

Kunqu Opera of China was listed among the first group of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001. It stands for the artistic zenith that Chinese traditional operas have ever reached. Kunqu Opera is a comprehensive art with literature, music, dance, performance, make-up, costume and prop as its components, thus characterized by multimodality (ZHU, 2015, p. IV). In this part, we will only discuss the successful dissemination of *The Peony Pavilion* and learn some experience from it in order to accelerate the process of the spread of Wuxi Opera.

*The Peony Pavilion*, the masterpiece of famous playwright Tang Xianzu, is a long play of 55 scenes revolving around the extraordinary love story between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. *The Peony Pavilion* was not introduced to Europe until the early 20th century. H. Acton translated one scene of the play into English in

1939. The first complete English translation was done by Cyril Birch and published in 1980; the second one was completed by Zhang Guangqian and published in 1994. These translations have made the play accessible to the English-speaking countries (WANG, 2003, p. iv). Obviously, *The Peony Pavilion* has attracted some famous translators in comparatively early period. They are the pioneers who contribute a lot to the worldwide dissemination of Kunqu Opera. One of them, Wang Rongji (2003), said *The Peony Pavilion* written by Tang Xianzu was worth the same position as *Romeo and Juliet* written by Shakespeare. And because of the accident that they passed away in the same day and the important role they both played in their own country's opera area, it has given an excellent chance for Kunqu Opera to gain its popularity in Western world, especially the activity held in 2016 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of them.

Comparing with Kunqu Opera, the lack of translator's attention certainly is a big problem that hinders Wuxi Opera's dissemination. And we also think it is necessary for Wuxi Opera to make some connection with other country's famous opera, which may be an efficient and direct way to make it popular overseas. If Wuxi Opera wants to find some way out, it must grab every chance to advertise itself both at home and globally. Also, it needs to draw more attention from good translators who can bring it to the world area.

### **English Translation of Wuxi Opera**

The translation of Wuxi Opera is still on its way. It is really difficult to translate a traditional Chinese opera, especially a local one. The operatic dialogues and monologues are in dialects, and some of the words are pronounced in a special fashion which is unique to the opera.

Under such conditions, we can draw some experience from the translation of some other local operas, such as Sichuan Opera. According to the paper written by CHEN Zhe-min and XIE Qing-feng (2015):

It is not easy to translate Sichuan dialect into foreign languages. It requires the familiarity with both Sichuan dialect and English. Since drama can be regarded as either literature or stage works, the translation should not only pay attention to written language translation but also spoken language translation. (p. 20)

Every dialect has its own characteristics. When we translate Wuxi Opera, we should combine foreignizing translation and domesticating translation. In this way, we would not only let foreign audience understand the lines but also preserve the original meaning and emotional coloring. From our perspective, it should be in the same style as in standard Chinese. If it is formal, then formal. If it is slang, then slang. And when actors perform on stage, it is better to translate lines in spoken English because it is easier to understand. And most importantly, we should remember not to translate lines in Chinglish.

In short, the translation of Wuxi Opera is difficult. First, the translator is supposed to have a good command of both Wuxi dialect and English. Second, the translator should be familiar with Wuxi Opera. Despite these difficulties, translators could still make a progress. For example, translators could translate operas with the help of some Wuxi Opera experts. After finishing the translation version, the translator could also invite some foreigners to help him review and revise his work.

### **Conclusion**

From the comparison between Wuxi Opera and other operas in China, it is not hard for us to find out that much work still needs to be done with regard to the worldwide dissemination of Wuxi Opera. From our

perspective, it is advisable to put efforts in those four aspects we have discussed above. The first is to cultivate more talented people who can devote themselves to Wuxi Opera to ensure cultural inheritance. Secondly, we need to boost the creativity of Wuxi Opera's form and contents so that it can have long-term development. Thirdly, we should dig out more spreading channels with the help of modern technology for the Opera to reach more potential audience. Finally, we should have more exchanges and communication with the target audience.

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