

# A Descriptive Translation Study of Chinese Translation of French Musical *Roméo et Juliette*

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This paper presents a Descriptive Translation Study (DTS) analysis of the Chinese translation of the French musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, titled *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour. Romeo and Juliet*, a timeless play by Shakespeare, has captivated audiences since its premiere in 1597 and has been adapted into various forms, including stage productions, films, musicals, and operas. The focus of this study is to analyze the Chinese translation of the French musical adaptation from a DTS perspective. DTS is an approach that aims to understand the translation process and its reception in the target culture. By examining language choices, cultural references, and adaptation strategies, this study seeks to shed light on how the Chinese translation of the French musical functions within the target culture and influences the reception and interpretation of the source text. This analysis is expected to gain insights into the challenges and strategies employed in translating a musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* into Chinese. The findings of this study will contribute to the field of translation studies and provide a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the translation of musical works.

*Keywords:* Descriptive Translation Study (DTS), Chinese translation, musical adaptation of classics, *Romeo and Juliet*, reception and interpretation

## I. The Circulation and Reception of *Romeo and Juliet* in China

The original play of *Romeo and Juliet*, along with its related adaptations, has garnered significant popularity in China. Chinese readers and audiences have consistently displayed enduring interest in the love story of Romeo and Juliet, transcending linguistic and genre boundaries. Virtually every type of adaptation has found its own distinct audience. Similar to the functioning of Wikipedia, Baidu Encyclopedia serves as a Chinese platform for information aggregation, where users actively contribute to entry creation and content revisions. As of October 2020, Baidu Encyclopedia boasts over 21 million entries and has attracted more than 7.17 million participating users, encompassing a wide array of knowledge domains. An examination of the search results for “Romeo and Juliet” on Baidu Encyclopedia reveals 49 entries that offer substantial information beyond Shakespeare’s original text. These entries encompass diverse mediums, including films, children’s books, songs, ballets, operas, musicals, plays, TV animations, piano music, TV dramas, and comic strips. Furthermore, in addition to the availability of English and Chinese languages on the platform, Baidu Encyclopedia also provides content in Korean, Russian, Italian, French, and Japanese.

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The reception and dissemination of *Romeo and Juliet* in China commenced in the 20th-century China through the process of translation (Zhang, 2020). Fu (2018) observes that successive generations of Shakespeare translators have presented distinct Chinese renditions to readers. In essence, each Chinese translator of Shakespeare speaks on his behalf in Chinese. The Chinese language articulated by each translator embodies a unique expression of their temperament and literary style. Consequently, Shakespeare's plays naturally manifest a distinct writing style that remains true to their essence. These translations have evolved into classics within the Chinese cultural system, gaining autonomy and intrinsic value. Analyzing these translations not only permits an appraisal of the translation style adopted by individual Chinese translators but also facilitates a cross-cultural examination of the shared thought processes and translation practices within this cohort of native Chinese translators. Consequently, such an analysis contributes to a comprehensive study of the localized translations of Shakespeare's works within the Chinese cultural context and may even serve as a foundation for establishing localization norms for Shakespearean masterpieces in Chinese culture. Given the advent of multimedia technologies, *Romeo and Juliet*'s ancient romance can be depicted through myriad artistic approaches. Western adaptations of the play, infused with contemporary values, have been introduced to Chinese audiences, garnering widespread acclaim. Among these adaptations, the French musical *Roméo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour* has emerged as a contemporary classic with a devoted fan base. Nevertheless, the process of localizing this musical in Chinese is still in its nascent stages.

## II. Introduction to the Chinese musical “Romeo and Juliet”

The musical is a contemporary and interdisciplinary art form that is showcased on stage, combining narrative-driven theatrical performances with popular vocal singing and diverse dance movements. It utilizes a range of theatrical elements such as costumes, sets, lighting, and more to create a cohesive and immersive stage experience. At its core, a musical comprises three fundamental elements: drama, music, and dance. The selection of themes for musical works often draws from a wide range of popular aesthetics, while also being closely intertwined with the political and cultural context of the time. This allows musicals to cater to the psychological inclinations of the audience. In the context of China, the development of the musical theater industry has been closely linked to the country's economic reform and opening-up policies over the past three decades. During this time, Chinese musicals have taken a path of originality while also drawing inspiration from Western musical classics. They have focused on adapting and blending European and American musicals with Chinese themes, thus reflecting a distinct Chinese style and catering to the aesthetic interests and values of Chinese audiences. The introduction of classic musicals has played a catalytic role in nurturing the musical theater market in China. It began with early productions such as *The Fantasticks* (1960), *The Music Man* (1957), *West Side Story* (1957), *The Sound of Music* (1959), *My Fair Lady* (1956), to the later productions of *Beauty and the Beast* (1994), *Company* (1970), as well as the more recent productions of *Fame* (1988) and *Mamma Mia!* (1999), the introduction of these classics has played a catalytic role in nurturing the musical theatre market in China (Ju, 2011).

From November 26 to December 19, 2021, the Chinese version of the musical “Romeo and Juliet” embarked on its inaugural national tour, retaining the essence of the original French version. However, the translation of the Chinese lyrics in this musical has received diverse reactions from the audience. Many critics,

influenced by the original lyrics, tend to view them as the sole criterion for evaluating the Chinese version. Some critics even criticize the Chinese adaptation out of their affection for the original cast. In contrast, a descriptive approach to translation studies aims to objectively describe the translation phenomenon, analyzing and summarizing the characteristics of the translated product based on the translation itself. By closely examining the Chinese translation and considering the Chinese cultural context, this paper seeks to provide an objective and comprehensive understanding of the text, presenting the distinctive features of the Chinese lyrics in the Chinese musical “Romeo and Juliet”.

### **III. Descriptive Translation Study on Translation of Songs in the Chinese Musical “Romeo and Juliet”**

Descriptive translation studies (also known as descriptive translation studies, descriptive translation theory, etc.) is an emerging translation study theory that responds to the shortcomings of traditional prescriptive (also known as normative) translation theory. By way of describing the product function and process of translation, the cumulative findings of DTS would make it possible to formulate a series of general theories which can be applied to various branches of the applied extension of translation, including translation criticism (Yao, 2009). Unlike rigid translation approaches that rely on practical experience, summarize translation standards, and establish rules for others to follow, DTS recognizes the necessity of considering socio-political, economic, cultural, and ideological constraints on translators within the target system. This methodological shift acknowledges that translation is not merely a linguistic art seeking equivalence, but a dynamic practice influenced by broader contextual factors. Consequently, translation criticism should move beyond a focus on error identification, as it tends to provide one-sided and unreasonable assessments of translations (Xia, 2016).

Descriptive translation, in contrast, adopts an open and dynamic approach to translation. It contextualizes the act of translation by comparing different parallel translations of the same text produced at different times or by different translators during the same period. By examining the reasons behind the translation choices made by different translators and the level of acceptance by readers in the specific cultural context of the target language, it seeks to investigate the translation process comprehensively (Xia, 2016). Descriptive translation studies detach themselves from the source text and the relationship between the original and the translation. Instead, they focus solely on the translation itself and its reception in the target language system. This shift in perspective considers the translation as an integral part of the target language system, with the original text and the translator becoming invisible after the translation is completed.

In the case of the Chinese version of the Chinese musical, the translation and distribution team consisted of Liang Mang, Ge Te, and Shang Lian. Liang Mang explained that they would create multiple versions of the lyrics, such as ‘Balcony’, constantly revising and adjusting them based on feedback from the cast’s auditions. The collaboration between Liang Mang, Ge Te, and Shang Lian can be likened to a “scouting team”, with each member bringing a unique set of skills to the table. For instance, Liang Mang, as the lyric director, leverages his extensive compositional experience to meticulously examine every word, pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy to ensure the lyrics are suitable for performance. Ge Te, who specializes in French, doesn’t merely focus on conveying the message through straightforward translation; he also aims to resonate with the audience by employing poetic expression and familiar imagery, using the power of the mother tongue to foster intimacy and

transparency. Shang Lian, the original lyricist known for her “classic style”, seeks to find a harmonious blend of the French musical’s DNA and traditional Chinese aesthetics. These three translators collectively ensure that the translation aligns with the Chinese system in terms of auditory experience, emotional resonance, and aesthetic expression.

In general, the translation process for musicals can be divided into three steps: translating the lyrical meaning of the tracks, deliberating the rhythm of the words, and aligning the words with the melody of the original song (Cui & Zhao, 2014). Among these steps, the translation of the lyrics’ general meaning serves as the foundation for translating musicals. Eugene A. Nida argues that translation involves an exchange between two cultures. It is essential for the translator to be familiar with both cultures, as words can only convey meaning when placed within their cultural context. Therefore, translating lyrics goes beyond a simple linguistic translation; it engages in a clash of different cultural customs and ways of thinking. In order to facilitate a comparative analysis between the original and Chinese versions of the lyrics, this paper will employ English as a mediating language and directly translate both the French original lyrics (ST) and the Chinese versions (TT) into English. The Chinese translator, while ensuring the integrity of the narrative and consistency of the characters’ images, pays attention to the values and aesthetic expectations of the Chinese audience, making necessary adjustments to the Chinese lyrics. For example:

Example (1)

ST: Je suis aimé des femmes, / moi qui n’ai pas 20 ans. / Je connais toutes leurs armes, / elles m’ont tué si souvent. / Je suis aimé des femmes sans les avoir aimées.

English Translation: I am loved by women, / I who am not (even) 20. / I know all their weapons, / they killed me so many times. / I am loved by women without loving them.

TT: 是多么年少/那蜂拥的爱/他们的情迷手段/我被索取着爱/爱却隔着山海

English Translation: How young (I am) / That overwhelming love / And their flirting tricks / Make one sigh / I am asked for love / But love is separated (from me) by mountains and sea. (“Un Jour”)

The translation in question exhibits significant deviations from the original lyrics and lacks smoothness and coherence due to the absence of logical conjunctions and subjects. In the original lyrics, Romeo, despite his young age, is portrayed as an experienced lover, engaging with multiple women without truly committing himself. This image contradicts the subtle and affectionate portrayal of the main character that Chinese audiences are accustomed to (Han, 2013). Therefore, the translator made numerous adjustments to the lyrics to account for cultural differences. These adjustments involved removing the subject from the first four lines, replacing the original lyrics’ sequence of actions with adjective-modified noun phrases, resulting in the replacement of concrete and vivid imagery with abstract and vague expressions. Additionally, the phrase “Make one sign” was added, transforming Romeo from an expert lover into a victim. The necessity and effectiveness of these translator considerations can be evaluated based on the audience’s reception of both the direct translation and the revised lyrics.

When translating songs for musicals, it is crucial to consider that songs are ultimately experienced through auditory means. Thus, the translation of musical songs must account for the smoothness and harmony of the rhythm and rhyme of the words. During the process of musical localization, the translation of song lyrics should

adhere to the rules of the Chinese repertoire in terms of rhyme schemes. This ensures that the Chinese translation possesses a natural rhythm and is more readily accepted by Chinese audiences. Moreover, the Chinese language utilizes different phonemes as rhymes to convey various emotions. For instance, flood rhymes such as /a/, /an/, and /ang/ are often employed to express intense and passionate emotions. Soft rhymes like /ao/, /ou/, and /iu/ can be utilized for narrative purposes. Finally, fine rhymes such as /e/, /ei/, and /i/ are employed to convey sadness or sorrow (Cui & Zhao, 2014). For example:

Example (2)

ST: Les rois du monde vivent au sommet [sɔmɛ̃]. /Ils ont la plus belle vue mais y a un mais [mɛ̃]. /Ils ne savent pas ce qu'on pense d'eux en bas [ba]. /Ils ne savent pas qu'ici, c'est nous les rois [rwɑ].

TT: 世界之王(wáng), 高高在上(shàng); /拥有风光(guāng), 可怜没有梦想(xiǎng); /高塔之下, 我不羡慕仰望(wàng); /认为自己, 才是自己的王(wáng)。(“Les Rois du monde”)

In the original lyrics, each line ends with a rhyme scheme of aabb. However, in the translation, the translator has adapted the rhyme scheme to fit the Chinese song by ending each line with the emotionally charged /ang/ sound. This adaptation aligns with the image of the singer as a young, exuberant, and joyful performer.

In addition to considering the rhythmic treatment of the lyrics based on the language itself, it is crucial to maintain harmony with the musical composition when translating songs. If the original musical arrangement and the French lyrics, which are designed to match French pronunciation, are copied directly without adjustments, it can lead to auditory dissonance or even a comical effect, which would undermine the atmosphere of the story. For instance, if the words “我爱你” (I love you) were sung according to the original arrangement, they would become “我矮你” (I’m short, you), with the second word changing from a rising-falling tone to a falling tone. This alteration would result in a pronunciation resembling the Sichuan dialect rather than standard Mandarin, potentially eliciting laughter and distorting the original meaning. Music director Liu Zhuo mentioned that the translation and arrangement team constantly made adjustments to the words and tones during the actors’ rehearsals to ensure that the lyrics matched the musical notes and the intonation of the actors’ speech. The goal was to make the pronunciation in Chinese accurate and natural both in the singing and the music.

## VI. Conclusion

The response of non-specialist audiences to the translation of lyrics can be influenced by various uncontrollable factors. Factors such as their familiarity with the original musical, preferences for specific casts, and other extralinguistic considerations may impact their evaluation of the translation’s quality. Preconceived notions, such as a fondness for the original musicals or biases against Chinese adaptations, can also lead to subjective criticism of Chinese musicals. Furthermore, it is important to note that the musical theatre market in China is still in the early stages of development. Limitations exist in terms of venue availability, the quality of staff, and stage costs, resulting in musical performances being primarily concentrated in first-tier cities. In contrast, Western musicals have a well-established industry and a solid market presence, often serving as the benchmark against which all musical adaptations are measured. Many Chinese musical enthusiasts regard Broadway and European musicals as guiding influences, which can contribute to a prescriptive perspective when

critiquing Chinese lyrics in adaptations. On the other hand, non-specialist audiences who do not have a strong attachment to the original musical tend to rely on the natural process of perceiving their mother tongue. This process is influenced by cultural memory, which is unconsciously awakened. Chinese translators possess an inherent advantage when translating texts from other languages into Chinese. The shared cultural memory and collective subconscious of native Chinese speakers foster an innate sense of empathy and intimacy between the translator and the audience. Translators unconsciously employ metaphors and metonymy that resonate with the audience, without the need for extensive explanation of cultural connotations. This results in translations that are flexible, native-sounding, and may exhibit differences from the source text.

The DTS approach to translation studies offers a clearer understanding of this phenomenon. Unlike previous normative translation studies, descriptive translation research considers the broader socio-cultural environment of the target language, rather than confining itself to a static, closed textual system. By taking into account these various factors that can influence audience reception and recognizing the advantages of translators working within their native language and cultural context, a more comprehensive understanding of translation emerges.

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