

# ***On the Translation of Chinese Musical Lyrics from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of classic musical song Heart***

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**Abstract:** As an excellent medium for cultural communication in the new era, musicals are increasingly becoming an important field of cultural research. In this paper, the author will take the classic musical song "Heart" from the first Chinese original musical "Butterflies" as the object of study, and try to explore the translation strategies of Chinese musical lyrics, so as to fill some gaps in the current research field of Chinese musical translation and provide reference for future English translation of similar musicals or related fields.

## **1. Literature Review**

At the beginning of the 20th century, musicals appeared as a new art form, and after a century of development, combining various art forms, such as dance, music, and drama, musical has formed an independent form of music performance<sup>[1]</sup>. Due to its strong vitality and artistic plasticity, musical has been successfully integrated with local traditional culture and art forms from all over the world in its communication, and has been continuously localized as well as characterized. The development of musical also incorporated other art forms, such as jazz music, rock music, street culture, modern dance, etc., The form of musical performance varies from nation to nation, country to country, and period to period. Musical has gradually evolved into a converging medium for world cultures.

In 2018, with the broadcast of the Chinese phenomenal program "Super Vocal", musical and musical actors officially came into Chinese public sight and make musical gradually shifted from niche art to mass entertainment in China. More and more Chinese people went to theaters to enjoy musical, and the development winter of Chinese original musicals is thus able to back to spring. According to the statistical data of DaoLiu Cultural Tourism, the total number of musical performances in China reached 2,460 in 2018, up 7.5% year-on-year from the previous year. The number of Chinese musical performances also grew rapidly with an increase in 2018 of 91.7% compared to the previous year. With a total of more than 900 performances and 103 million yuan box office revenues, it net profit went up 66.13% compared to the previous year. The return of Chinese original musicals has also further promoted the spread of Chinese original musicals. Accurate and beautiful lyric translation can help audiences better appreciate the performance of

characters and the implications of musical stories, and further experience the beauty of music and dance.

In 2020, due to the impact of the epidemic, theaters around the world interrupted their musical touring schedules and turned to online performances, which can mainly be divided into two forms: live performances and releasing official versions<sup>[2]</sup>, which not only relieved the pressure on musical theater workers and actors during the epidemic, but also provided musical fans around the world with an opportunity to enjoy musicals without leaving their homes. The translation of musical lyrics is becoming more important in such period. However, due to the lack of understanding of the characteristics of musicals and cultural background of musicals, the quality of some musical lyric translations is very unsatisfying. Therefore, it's of certain practical significance to carry out research on the translation of musical lyrics.

In terms of musical translation, Han Qimin (2013) explored the influence of multi-modal components and multi-modal relationships in musical discourse on the translation of musical lyrics, and proposed the translation principles of "minimum presence" and "maximum acceptability". Xiao Lu (2018) explored the Chinese translation of English musical lyrics from the perspective of skopos theory, and proposed the translation methods such as amplification, cultural interpretation and rewriting; Zhang Zixing (2021) took the lyrics in *The Phantom of the Opera* as an example to explore the translation strategies of musical subtitles. He concluded that reconstructing language, presenting original flavor and adding annotation should be the three major translation strategies of musical subtitles translation<sup>[3]</sup>. In the past studies, scholars tend to focus on the E-C translation strategies of musical lyrics and evaluation of existing translations of western musicals, and there is no study of C-E translation of original Chinese musicals.

The musical *Butterflies* is the first Chinese original musical with music composed by San Bao and lyrics written by Guan Shan, which is based on the Chinese folk romantic story *The Butterfly Lovers*. It is also a successful attempt to integrate traditional Chinese elements into a new artistic performance form, and is regarded as "a milestone in the development of Chinese musicals".

The author will take the classic song *Heart* from *Butterflies* as the research object, and try to explore the strategies of C-E translation of Chinese musicals to fill some of the gaps in the current musical research, and provide reference for future English translation of Chinese musicals.

## 2. Guidelines for English translation of Chinese musicals

When it comes to translation, Chinese famous translation Xu Yuanchong once said that the process of translation involves not only two languages, but also two cultures<sup>[4]</sup>. Although musical is a relatively new art form compared with other traditional arts, the translation of its subtitles and lyrics is still originated from traditional translation practice and has the basic characteristics of cross-cultural communication and interaction. Therefore, when studying the translation of musical subtitles, the first thing we need to consider is the different characteristics shown by different countries in the creation of musicals and the translation difficulties they bring to.

Influenced by the traditional culture of China and the West, the techniques, skills and story composing methods used in the creation of musicals have their own characteristics and are closely linked to their respective cultural backgrounds<sup>[5]</sup>.

In her column *Broadway Musicals*, Luo Wei discussed and examined the core characteristics of Broadway musicals, concluding that "without lyrics, music in a musical will lose its narrative dramatic function, fail to promote the development of plots, and not able to develop the portrayal of the dramatic characters." According to Luo's opinion, the libretto and lyrics are the cornerstones of musicals. They're the prerequisites for the existence of dialogue and singing, the unique soul of the musical, the giver of the narrative dramatic function of music and dance, and the embodiment of

emotional expression<sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, while there are differences between the East and the West in the creation of musicals, the emphasis on lyrics is always the same in both. So we can conclude that the core of musical translation, or the translation of musicals, lies in the translation of lyrics and dialogues. Among them, the lyrics, as the “dramatic result and the externalization of the character's feelings”<sup>[6]</sup>, are the most important part of the whole translation activity. Only when the lyrics are well translated does the musical have a soul.

Though there's no common guiding principle for the translation of musicals, scholars have discussed this issue extensively. Based on Xu Yuanchong's theory, Zhu Yishu suggested that when translating subtitles, translators must fully consider cultural differences and ensure that the translation is easy to understand, faithful and coherent, and conforms to the language habits of domestic audiences, while maximizing the cultural connotations of the original work<sup>[8]</sup>.

In A Study of Musical Subtitles Translation from the Perspective of Domestication and Alienation, Zhang Keying and Shao Hua suggested that since the lyrics of musicals are subject to both time and space constraints, each line (dialogue) or chant will not stay long on the teleprompter when the musical is performed live or broadcast online, only leaving limited time for audience to understand. Therefore, the subtitle wording should be as simple and concise as possible, avoiding a lot of annotations<sup>[2]</sup>.

In addition, although Chinese modern original musicals are derived from Western theatre, there still exists certain differences between them and Western musicals. Although Western musicals also attach importance to lyricism, dramaticism often enjoys its priority over lyricism. Their focus is on dramatic issues such as dramatic structure, narrative method and conflict, rather than lyricism. Even if lyricism is used to enhance the literary beauty of drama, it is still subordinate to dramaticism<sup>[6]</sup>.

After the examination of various thoughts, three guidelines can be roughly summarized for the English translation of musical lyrics.

1. Follow the basic guidelines of translation-- faithfulness, fidelity, coherence, etc., and on this basis, maximize the cultural connotation of the ST.
2. Keep translation short and concise. Avoid annotations.
3. In C-E translation, transform poetic language (expression) into dramatic language (expression).

### 3. Three Principles of Skopos Theory and Musical Translation

Skopos theory was first put forward by German translation theorist Hans Vermeer in the 1970s, and is one of the most influential translation theory in the world. Its representatives are Katharina Reiss, Hans Vermeer, and Kristina Nord. Its core idea is that the determining factor in the translation process is the purpose of the whole translation action.

There are three basic rules of skopos theory, namely skopos rule, fidelity rule and coherence rule.

#### 3.1. Skopos Rule

Hans Vermeer supposes that all human's action are guided and decided by their original purposes, so is translation. That is, the determining factor of translator's choice of translation strategies should be the expected goal of translation (skopos), in other words, the function of target texts instead of that of original targets that used to be the highlight part in conventional translation theories featuring fidelity or equivalence. Based on this concept he put forward skopos rule and divided the purposes of translation into three types:

- (1) Translator's basic purpose (such as making a living);
- (2) The communicative purpose of the translation (e.g. enlightening the reader);

(3) The purpose to be achieved by using a special translation meaning (such as translate literally according to the structure of the source texts in order to explain the special points of the grammatical structure of source language).

Commonly speaking, “skopos” refers to the communicative purpose of the translation, i.e. “the communicative function of the translation for the readers of the incoming language in the socio-cultural context of the translated language”. The combination of singing and acting in musicals and their short lines determine that audience’s perception and understanding effect should be the primary consideration of the translator when translating. The rhythm and interest of source texts should also be retained to the greatest extent to ensure the effect of cultural transmission and communication.

### 3.2. Coherence Rule

Coherence rule requires that “the information generated by the translator must be able to be interpreted in a context-line correlation manner for the target recipient”<sup>[7]</sup>. The readability and acceptability of the target language are required according to coherence rule, as they may enable the recipient to absorb translated texts under the background of target language culture and the communicative context in which the target language is used. The coherence of the lyric translation determines the acceptance of the audience of the target language. A good English translation of musical lyrics has high requirements on the coherence of musical lyrics.

### 3.3. Fidelity rule

Fidelity rule points out that there should be interlingual coherence between the source text and the target text<sup>[9]</sup>. This is somehow similar to the so-called “faithfulness” to the original text in other translation theories, but the degree of fidelity in skopos theory depends on the purpose of the translation and the translator's understanding of the original text. In the translation of musical lyrics, fidelity rule requires the translator to pay attention to the inner connection between the context and lyrics, and to firmly grasp the plot development line and be faithful to the dramatic language in the process of language transformation or reconstruction.

These three rules constitute the basic rules of skopos theory, but coherence rule and fidelity rule must be subordinate to skopos rule, which is the primary rule in the system of skopos theory. Nord defined the priority of these three rules as:

The theory of a text as an information offer explains that a change of skopos does not violate the fidelity rule but takes precedence over it. The aim is not to pass on a skopos but to offer information about a text-as-action under different circumstances<sup>[10]</sup>.

## 4. Analysis of English translation strategies of *Heart* from the perspective of skopos theory

Butterflies is based on the traditional Chinese mythological story The Butterfly Lovers, and takes it as the cornerstone to tell the story that in a dark, dangerous and labyrinth-like “World Terminus”, there is a group of cursed unreal species that are neither butterflies nor human beings. They’re called as “Butterfly People”.

The protagonist, Liang Shanbo, was a wandering poet, while the heroine, Zhu Yingtai, was the most beautiful girl among the Butterfly People. In order to cure the curse, the leader of the Butterfly People, Zhu’s father, had wanted to marry Zhu to a human to make the whole clan of Butterfly People into pure butterflies. However, Liang and Zhu fell in love with each other and refused Zhu’s father’s demand. In order to break them up, the butterfly clan sentenced Liang to death by fire. Zhu

was deeply impressed by the cruelty of fate and believes in the immortality of love, so she resolutely died in fire with her lover.

Heart can be divided into five parts. The first part expresses the helplessness of Liang and Zhu's love to succumb to reality; the second and third parts are Liang dialogue with his lover Zhu, expressing his determination not to be separated from his lover by the world and interests of others; the fourth and fifth parts express Liang and Zhu's fidelity to love, pushing the emotion of the song to the climax.

This song Heart is full of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, parallelism, metaphor, intertextuality. Just as the author mentioned above, Xiao concluded that the main translation strategies of musical lyrics are amplification, cultural interpretation and rewriting. This part will analyse two translation versions, official subtitle in 2007 and the new version of Translation Team of Butterfly Effect in 2020 under the perspective of skopos theory to study these translation strategies.

#### 4.1. Rewriting

Table1 is the comparison of different translation versions of first two parts of *Heart*. Rewriting is used in these parts to meet three basic rules of skopos theory:

Table 1: Two translation versions of lyrics of *Heart* (part 1 & part 2)

Translation version 1	Translation version 2
Not only once did I Mistake a moonlit field To be an ocean But who can leave his own footprint Upon the surface of the sea?	Did you ever mistake moonlight on the ground For the ocean run? If I step onto the ocean on the ground Would I be drown?
My lover Won't you cry until sunrise? Allowing the sea water To gush into my chest Boiling hot within my bosom	Oh dear of mine Will you let go? Or cry ocean of your tears? They surge into my chest Then burn up in my heart Take all my blood please keep it up

In the first part, translation version 1 (2007 official subtitle) makes a difference between "hai" and "hai mian", translating them as "ocean" and "surface of the sea" respectively. If we are only looking for a word-for-word machine translation version, there is no problem with the official subtitle. However, from the perspective of musical translation principles and the three rules of skopos theory, this translation version neither achieves dramatic language expression nor conforms to the principle of coherence since the principle of coherence requires that the translation of the whole lyric has call back in the entire song, viewing the lyric words as pearls and the story line as a string. The difference in word choice between "ocean" and "sea" is a violation of this important principle. In translation version 2, the translator first unified the two words into "sea", and then free translate the lyric "Who can leave his footprints on the sea?" into "If I step onto the ocean on the ground, would I be drown?". This version allow audience to connect "drown" with the sad of witness stifling love in reality. this kind of rewriting calls back the tragic the story line and is in line with skopos rule and coherence rule.

In the second part, translation version 2 integrates the image of the lyrics in translation version 1 and converts the verb "cry" into the noun "tears", so as to realize the metaphor and logical transformation between them and help the target audience visualize the two abstract things "tears" and "ocean" so as to realize the skopos rule. The last three sentences, "Allowing the sea water, to gush into my chest, boiling hot within my bosom" are change into "They surge into my chest, then

burn up in my heart, take all my blood please keep it up". their meaning is also rewritten, and simple actions of subject "sea water" is decomposed into three dynamics, which is more in line with the progressive singing method of this lyric, and also an excellent practice of following skopos rule.

#### 4.2. Amplification

Table 2 is about the translation of part 5 of the lyrics of *Heart*. *Amplification is used in this part to:*

Table 2: Two translation versions of lyrics of *Heart* (part 5)

Translation version 1	Translation version 2
No matter how cold is the sea I still have a heart	In a dream we whisper our love When you came I lost my heart
No matter how cold is the sea I still have a heart	If the ocean seize our love In your name I found my heart.

This part of lyrics are two repeated sections to achieve an effect of emphasis in Chinese. But in English, in order to conform to the skopos rule, the translation version 2 chose additional translation, to express strong emotion in the lyrics with graduality structure. So as to express the hidden meaning of "No matter how cold is the sea, I still have a heart". Translation version 2 describes a love story with logical expression. This version uses "In a dream we whisper our love, when you came I lost my heart" (When you appear, I fell in love at the first sight), as the first two sentences of translation translation, and "If the ocean seize our love, in your name I found my heart." (Even though reality is cold and cruel, you will always be the beginning and end of my love) as the later two sentences. Amplification makes the second version easier to understand than the first version, and also more faithful to the content and emotion of the original lyrics. Therefore, compared with version 1, version 2 clearly conforms to skopos and fidelity rule.

#### 4.3. Cultural Interpretation

Table 3 is about the translation of part 4 of the lyrics of *Heart*. In order to conform to skopos theory more perfectly, cultural interpretation is used in its translation:

Table 3: Two translation versions of lyrics of *Heart* (part 4)

Translation version 1	Translation version 2
Where must I place you To remember you forever?	Say if I could have tattooed your name on my heart Centuries would it last?

The verb "cang", which can be literally translated as "hide", is a strong verb containing very acute emotions in Chinese lyrics. If it is replaced with the weak verb "place" in English, the emotion and rhythm of the original lyric will be lost. Version 2 uses the word "tattoo" here, and domesticated the famous song *tattoo moi* from the French classic musical *Mozart l'Opera Rock*. In *Mozart l'Opera Rock*, Mozart falls in love with Paris on his first arrival in this city. Lyrics of that song can be translated as "Tattoo my name on the gold leaf of your gate; Tattoo your name on my body and my heart", which express his deep love for the city. Paris, however, not only denied him his talent in the end, but also deprived his mother's life. So the emotion of the second part of *tattoo Moi* turns from joy to sorrow, lamenting Mozart's tragic fate. Here the use of the word tattoo, is not only in praise of the unfailing love between Liang and Zhu, but also hinted their tragic ending. It is an excellent translation adhering to the three rules of skopos theory.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis of the translation of *Heart*, we can summarize the main steps and points in the C-E translation of the musical lyrics.

1. After you get the song (lyrics), you should first stratify the meaning of the it;
2. Sort out the main story line of the lyrics and build a dramatic description on the basis of the story line;
3. Try to rhyme and remember call back;
4. Use different translation strategies flexibly

Musicals are active and changing music, and the translation of musicals should not be stuck in the past and old-fashioned. Today, with the increasing demand of global communication, it has become an urgent need to improve the quality of Chinese musical translation and accelerate the efficiency of cultural communication. Only if the English translation of Chinese musicals can be done well can Chinese culture be further promoted and stand in the forest of world culture in the new era.

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