

On the Gain and Loss of Cultural Connotation behind the Biographical Names of Grassroots in Hong Lou Meng

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Abstract: According to Xu Gongshi, there are 975 people in Hong Lou Meng, including 732 with names and 243 not. Generally speaking, in the feudal hierarchical society, it's hard for servants - the grassroots to have names. While in Hong Lou Meng, Cao Xueqin endowed biographical names with plentiful culture to them, some are vulgar or elegant; some are simple or complicated; some with gold or silver; some with jade or pendant; some with romantic birds or plants. Though they are grassroots, they are indispensable in Hong Lou Meng. It's no wonder that Cao Xueqin has shown great respect to them. In the two English versions, Yang Xianyi and Hawkes have implied different methods dealing with these biographical names, which are worth studying.

1. Introduction

The explanation of the word “grassroots” in Baidu has the following two meanings: one is the power relative to the government or policy makers, which is more closely related to ideology; another meaning is to refer to the mainstream elite culture or elite corresponding to the disadvantaged class. The “grass-root” gens – thumbnail figures, in Hong Lou Meng mentioned in this paper refers to the servant class. Though they are people with lower social status, the dictions of their biographical names are with great value. Exactly as Zhou Chun said, “whenever the author gave biographical names to characters, he was good at metaphor, and the variation, craftiness of all the biographical names are necessary to be studied”. [1]

It's well-known that biographical names are not only the appropriative symbols of individuals, but also a culture. Generally speaking, servants in the feudal hierarchical society have no names, even though they have, they are not appealed to refine taste. However, Cao Xueqin endowed biographical names with plentiful culture to servants, like Yuanyang, Hupo, Moyu, Mingyan and so on. [2] As an indispensable group in Hong Lou Meng, maids have received distinct names: some of them may depict personalities; some of them may reveal destiny; some of them may express the theme; or some of them may seek artistic effect.

Being the pearl of Chinese classical novels, Hong Lou Meng has been translated into a large amount of versions with different languages since 19th century and attracted great and incessant attention both at home and abroad. Among those various versions, there are two complete and frequently being studied English versions: A Dream of Red Mansion translated by Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang, was published by the Foreign Language Press of China in 1978-1979; [3] and The Story of the Stone translated by David Hawkes and his son-in-law, John Minford, was published by the Penguin Books Limited Group of England in 1973-1986.[4] Though the translators have tried their best, cultural connotations contained in the biographical names are to some extent lost and broken during the Chinese-English translating.

2. “Jinchuan”, “Yuchuan”

According to Cihai, a large-scale Chinese dictionary, “Chuan” originates from “Zhuo” (bracelet), and when several bracelets are combined together, the new production will be called “Chuan”. Generally, “Chuan” is made of flattened gold or silver in the shape of spiral roll, and it can be divided into two kinds: “Bichuan” and “Wanchuan”. Sometimes it is composed of jades. Its major

function is female decoration. While in Hong Lou Meng, two of Lady Wang's maids are called "Jinchuan", and "Yuchuan". In China, people devote particular care to "Jinyu Mantang" which not only symbolizes a great deal of wealth, but implies the success of career and the nobility of spirit. Hence, in line with Lady Wang's wealthy family background and her sense of achievement, "Jinchuan" and "Yuchuan" are suitable.

In Yang's translation, "Jinchuan" and "Yuchuan" are translated with Wade-Giles Spelling System "Chin-chuan", and "Yu-chuan". Obviously, he is trying to preserve the original pronunciations. While in Hawkes' translation, "Jinchuan" and "Yuchuan" are translated into "Gold" and "Silver". In accordance of Chinese custom, people get used to treat gold and jade as twins, like Chinese idioms saying "gold and jade predestined match", and "Jinyu Mantang" which has a figurative meaning of wealth. While in the Western custom, gold and silver are habitually treated as a pair. This might be the reason for Hawkes' preference of "silver" rather than "jade". [5]

3. "Yuanyang", "Zijuan"

In Cihai, "Yuanyang" refers to a kind of bird whose family is anatidae, and it is one of rare birds in our country. It is said that the male and female of this kind bird would never live separately, and they were called "Piniao" in ancient time. The supreme feature of this kind of bird is faithful, and loyal. Consequently, "Yuanyang" can be compared to couples, friends having the same goal, or honest savants as well. In Hong Lou Meng, "Yuanyang" is Lady Dowager's closest maid. Once she was wanted to be the concubine of Jiashe, she seriously refused and got the permission from her lady. However, so as to avoid and prevent the later troubles from Jiashe, she was forced to make a promise that she would never get married and serve Lady Dowager until her life end. Another story is that when Lady Dowager died, she not only made good use of her unstable position winning a solemn funeral for her lady, but also showed her loyalty to her lady by death. From the two stories, we can see two characters of "Yuanyang": firstly, though living in the given society, and having the background of maid, she had her own faith in love and marriage life; secondly, though she had chance to be upper class in the big family, and she might be maid of other ladies, she took no account of herself, but being greatly loyal to her lady.

"Zijuan" and "Xueyan" are the maids of Lin Daiyu. "Juan" as well is a sort of bird with silvery-short voice. It has several nicknames in Chinese, like "Guogong", "Duyu", "Bugu" and "Zigui". Meanwhile there is a famous allusion which is related to "Juan". In ancient time, the cuckoo ceaselessly crowed with clear and short voice in spring and summer, which reopened various affections of people. When they carefully examined the tongue of cuckoo, they were impressed that the whole tongue was red, which misguided them that the cuckoo was crying blood, and it just so happened that it was the time for azalea blooming in bright red when the cuckoo cried. Hence people said that the bright red of azalea was coming from the cuckoo's crying. According to this allusion, we can make a brave deduction that Cao Xueqin has attempted to hint the fate of Lin Daiyu by arranging such biographical name for the closest maid.

The same as "Jinchuan", and "Yuchuan", in Yang Xianyi's translation, it is translated with Wade-Giles Spelling System "Yuan-yang". While Hawkes employed "Faithful". It means loyal, truehearted, and dutiful, which are greatly matched with the characters of "Yuanyang". Although the English word cannot hold the original sound and form, it has reserved the most important peculiarity of "Yuanyang".

It is widely accepted that "Dujian" is a very common bird in the world. However, its translation in Hong Lou Meng is the most controversial. In Hawkes' translation, "Nightingale" is applied rather than "Cuckoo". In Chinese, "Nightingale" has a corresponding translation "Yeying", which is rather different from "Dujian". Furthermore, the implications of the two birds are totally opposite to Chinese. "Dujian" to some great extent implies miserable and sad feelings, while "Yeying" implies some kind of cheery and joyous emotions. So if we translate "Nightingale" into Chinese, the translation done by Hawkes is deviating from the original culture implication. But when we look through "Nightingale" in a beautiful legend in the Greek Myth, we might shift our opinions. It is said that Aedon was daughter of Pandareus and wife of Zethus who was the King of Thebes. They

had a daughter called Itylus, but unluckily she was wrongly killed by her mother, which led to endless blame and sadness of Aedon. Taking pity on her hard situation, all the Gods turned her into the “Nightingale”. Since then the “Nightingale” cried sadly every night so as to express her grief to her daughter. So we can see that “Nightingale” can also imply some sorrow and melancholy. Also, in Oscar Wile’s story “Nightingale and Rose”, the “Nightingale” sacrifices herself for others, which as well leave the image of grief. Now we can infer that Hawkes did have his own reason for such choice, though readers cannot get the implication of “Nightingale” at the first sight.

4. Conclusion

In the Yang’s translation, in order to maximally reserve the original information contained in the Chinese characters, they preferred phonetic translation, which can maintain the sound of the original biographical names. However, since Chinese is a language with sound, form and meaning at the same time, the Yang’s phonetic translation without any additional explanations are hard to be understood by Chinese readers who even couldn’t fully comprehend the meaning of the biographical names in Chinese, let alone foreigners in a totally different cultural background. Yet, if some additional explanations are after the transliterations, just like other biographical names they translated, it would be helpful to readers. [6]

Compared with the Yang’s, Hawkes had tried a lot to translate the above biographical names. As to the merits and demerits of his translation, we can discuss them in the two levels, namely, form, and cultural meaning.

In form, he had managed to translate those maids belonging to the same master. For instance, “Jinchuan” and “Yuchuan” into “Golden” and “Silver”; in cultural meaning, it seems that Hawkes had lost much, though he had spared his efforts. As to “Zijuan”, namely the cuckoo, is the symbol of mournfulness in China. However, Hawkes had translated the bird into “Nightingale” which is fairly opposite to the original ones, since “Nightingale” holds the image of joviality. Hence the soreness and homesickness of Lin Daiyu cannot be unscrambled from “Nightingale”.

Chinese character is a sort of aggregation composed of musical sound, graphical form, and meaningful sense. As the masterpiece of Chinese literatures, Hong Lou Meng makes good use of Chinese characters’ distinguished features in naming. However, since Chinese is Sino-Tibetan and English is Indo-European, translations from Chinese to English will inevitably suffer loss of source language’s features. With different aims of translating, translators have spared their efforts to lessen the loss of cultural connotations in the biographical names.

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