
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Translation of the Myths in *Honglouloumeng* from the Narrative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

There is a tradition of incorporating myths into literary works in Chinese literature, and *Honglouloumeng*, the central book in the canon of Chinese literature, is no exception. The whole mythological narrative of the novel is composed of three myths, which contain religious and mythological concepts, such as Buddhist terms and mythological names of the place, as well as ancient Chinese titles of nobility. According to Mona Baker's socio-narrative theory, translation is conceived as a form of re-narration. The present study approaches the translation of the myths in *Honglouloumeng* by David Hawkes and John Minford from the narrative perspective and finds that the translation deviates from the original narrative in two ways. The narrative about Buddhism and Taoism is suppressed, while that about Christianity is accentuated. The narrative about ancient Chinese nobility is weakened while that about European nobility is highlighted. It is found that the framing of the translated narrative is realized through selective appropriation. The reason for the deviation is the translators' intention to facilitate the understanding of target readers, as well as their consideration of the relevant existing narratives in English-speaking countries.

KEYWORDS

Honglouloumeng, myth translation, narrative, Buddhist and Taoist thoughts, titles of nobility

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1. Introduction

Myths, as one of the factors contributing to the emergence of novels, have played an important role in the development of Chinese literature. Novels of Ming and Qing Dynasties tend to incorporate myths with the purpose of revealing the motifs through them. Myths serve as the metaphysical model on which the novel's theme is based (Yue, 1986, p. 312). *Honglouloumeng* can be regarded as composed of two stories interwoven with each other, with one telling about the mortal world in which the stone lived out the life of a man in a traditional Chinese bureaucratic family, which was going to its doom from prosperity, and the other (the myths) narrating the supernatural scheme of things, including the karma of the stone and the Crimson Pearl Flower and how the stone attains nirvana. The myths play an important role in *Honglouloumeng*, as they anticipate and reveal the theme of the novel based on the Buddhist understanding that karma determines the shape of our lives.

Li Xifan (1989, pg. 16-17) discusses the three myths in *Honglouloumeng* in an essay: "The Myth of Origin", "To Return the Tears," and "The Land of Illusion", with the first two told in the first chapter and the last one in the fifth chapter, seemingly independent from each other, are in fact closely related. It is found that Bao-yu's dream of returning to the Land of Illusion in Chapter 116 is part of the third myth, so it is within the present study scope. The present study regards the three myths as a whole, which constitutes the entire mythological narrative of the novel. Here is a brief account of the three myths, respectively.

(1) The Myth of Origin: the goddess Nvwa left a piece of magic stone unused after repairing the sky, which was abandoned at the foot of Greensickness Peak of the Great Fable Mountains. The stone felt sorry for himself each day. It just happened that a monk and a Taoist passing by saw it. Finding it magical, they decided to take it to the world of mortals to experience it. After countless

aeons, a Taoist called Vanitas passed by the stone below the same peak and read the inscription on it, which turned out to be a story of joys and sorrows.

(2) To Return the Tears: Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting (the title given to the stone by fairy Disenchantment) found the beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower on the bank of Magic River while wandering; he liked it very much and took to water it every day with sweet dews. Later, the flower was able to assume the form of a girl and decided that the only way she could repay the stone was with a lifetime of tears as a human in the world below. Therefore, she was sent down into the mortal world with a group of amorous young souls.

(3) The Land of Illusion: Bao-yu entered the Land of Illusion in his dream, and fairy Disenchantment led him to the Department of the Ill-fated Fair. He was able to read the judgment of the fate of twelve outstanding women in Jinling and watch the fairies perform the twelve songs of "A Dream of Golden Days". However, Bao-yu doesn't realize that they reveal secrets about the fate of girls at his home. Nor did he understand the meanings of the words of judgement until he returned to this place again in his dream after losing his jade.

In light of Mona Baker's narrative theory, the present study aims to explore the differences between the translated mythological narrative and the original and analyze how the translators frame the new narrative and the reasons behind it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Study on the translation of Honglouloumeng of Hawkes and Minford

The Story of the Stone is divided into five volumes, with the first eighty chapters translated by David Hawkes and the last forty by John Minford. A study on the translation of *Honglouloumeng* of Hawkes and Minford has achieved fruitful results. An anthology of studies on the translation of *Honglouloumeng* was published after an academic symposium was held at Nankai University in 2004. Several papers in the collection discuss the translation of Buddhist terms. With regard to religious issues, Hawkes faithfully retains the original culture in translating most descriptive terms. For oral speeches, however, he has other considerations, and the Christian "God" has replaced the Buddhist "阿弥陀佛" and the traditional Chinese Confucian "天" (Cui, 2004, p. 84). This domesticating approach is criticized by many scholars, who argue that the translator is not faithful to the original text in order to cater to western readers, which reflects the translator's west-centrism.

Feng Qinghua (2008, p. 125) discusses specifically the translation of "阿弥陀佛" of *Honglouloumeng* by making a statistical analysis of domesticating and foreignizing approaches, respectively, and argues that the domesticated translation as an exclamation, an expression of gratitude or a tribute to Buddha won't make western readers mistakenly think that the Chinese believe in Christ.

Hong Tao (2011, pp. 290-311) criticizes the view of many scholars that Hawkes replaces Buddhist concepts with Christian ones in the translation. He argues that Hawkes adopts a hybrid method in translating religious terms, combining domestication with foreignization. In addition, the back cover of Hawkes' translation indicates that the theme of *Honglouloumeng* involves Buddhist beliefs, which suggests that the translator does not intend to make western readers think that Chinese people believe in Christianity.

The present study agrees that the translators did not deliberately cover up the Buddhist beliefs in the novel, although they applied domestication under specific circumstances to facilitate the understanding of the novel by English-speaking readers. However, most scholars discuss Hawkes and Minford's translation of the novel in isolation. In fact, Christian concepts in the English translation of Chinese religious texts and even the interpretation of Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism from a Christian standpoint have already existed since the Jesuits came to China.

The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci was the most famous missionary in China in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. He adopted the methods of "supplementing Confucianism" and "combining Confucianism" in his preaching and translated "天" or "上帝" in *Sishu* ("Four Books") into "God". This translation approach was later imitated by other missionaries in China (Yue & Cheng, 2009, p. 33). Timothy Richard, a Protestant missionary in the late Qing Dynasty, translated Buddhist concepts from a Christian standpoint, viewing *Mahayana* as "New Buddhism" and implying the difference between *Mahayana* and *Hinayana* as the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament (Ban, 2014, p. 277). Hawkes and Minford's translation strategy may have been influenced by the narratives of Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism that already existed in the west.

2.2 Mona Baker: Translation and re-narration

Mona Baker (2006) discusses the role of translation in shaping social reality. She regards translation as a form of re-narration, which actively disseminates or contests the original narration, and probes into the ways of framing narratives in translation, the role played by the translator and the relationship between translation and power conflict.

With reference to the framing theory of Erving Goffman, Baker (2006, pp. 106-140) explores how translators accentuate, undermine or modify aspects of the narrative(s) encoded in the source text or utterance and, in so doing, participate in shaping social reality. She defines framing as an active mediation strategy through which people consciously participate in the shaping of reality. Baker mainly distinguishes four framing strategies, namely, temporal and spatial framing, selective appropriation of textual material, and framing by labeling and repositioning of participants.

2.3 Selective appropriation of textual material

Selective appropriation refers to patterns of omission and addition of textual material designed to suppress, accentuate or elaborate particular aspects of the source text (ST) narrative in translation (Baker, 2006, p. 114). An example serving to explain this mediating strategy in translation is the translation activities under the background of the Irish independence movement. Maria Tymoczko analyzes from the post-colonial perspective that the translator, under the background of the Irish independence movement, selectively appropriated the text by abandoning the content that was detrimental to the Cú Chulainn's heroic image and highlighting his heroic and courageous spirit, thus inspiring Irish nationalism and promoting the success of the Irish independence movement (Baker, 2006, p. 116).

3. Analysis and Discussion

The main characters in the mythological narrative of the novel include the stone, Crimson Pearl, the monk (the Buddhist mahasattva Impervioso), the Taoist (the Taoist illuminate Mysterioso), and many fairies. The mythological narrative contains Buddhist and Taoist thoughts and mythological concepts. In addition, the earthly affairs of a group of people, mainly a bureaucratic family, are also mentioned in the myths, and titles such as “国公” and “娘娘” appear in the original narrative. The present study analyzes the translation of two categories of concepts in the mythological narrative, with the first category consisting of Buddhist, Taoist, and mythological concepts, and the other the titles of ancient Chinese nobility.

3.1 Buddhist, Taoist, and mythological concepts

Buddhist and Taoist concepts frequently appear in the mythological narrative, as the story concerns the once lifeless stone block which was taken down by a Buddhist and a Taoist into the world of mortals, where it had lived out the life of a man before finally attaining nirvana. This section analyzes cases of how Buddhist, Taoist, and mythological concepts are translated and how the translation is different from the original narrative and explores the reason why relevant strategies are taken by the translators.

Example 1

In the “Myth of Origin”, the Taoist Vanitas listed the shortcomings after reading the inscription on the stone, and the stone replied in the following way.

ST:

我师何必太痴！(Cao, 2005, p. 2)

TT:

“Come, your reverence,” said the stone (for Vanitas had been correct in assuming that it could speak), “must you be so obtuse?” (Hawkes, 1973, p. 49)

“我师” is how the stone addresses the Taoist, which is translated as “your reverence” by Hawkes. According to Britannica Academic (2007), the reverend is “the ordinary English prefix of written address to the names of ministers of most Christian denominations”. Collins English Dictionary explains the usage of “reverence”: “Reverence (preceded by Your or His) is a title sometimes used to address or refer to a Roman Catholic priest”. From the citations above, it can be seen that “reverend” or “reverence” are generally associated with forms of address of Christian priests. Therefore, the form of address of a Taoist is rendered into that of a Christian priest in the translation above.

Example 2

In the myth of “To Return the Tears”, the Taoist accompanying the monk asked him where they would take the stone. After the monk explained his intention, the Taoist replied in the following way.

ST:

原来近日风流冤家又将造劫历世。(Cao, 2005, p. 3)

TT:

Well, well, so another lot of these amorous wretches is about to enter the vale of tears. (Hawkes, 1973, p. 52)

“造劫历世” is a Buddhist term that means “to come to the world and experience hardships” (Li & Feng, 1990, p. 402). This term is translated as “to enter the vale of tears” by Hawkes, which is an expression derived from the Bible. *Wycliffe's Bible* has the following verse: “In the valley of tears, in the place which he hath set. For the giver of the law shall give the blessing, (And as they pass through the dry Baca Valley, they shall find water from a spring. For the Giver of the Law shall give them a blessing.) (2001, Ps. 84:6).” The term appears in some other versions of the Bible as “the valley of Weeping”. “Valley” is synonymous with “vale”, and “the vale of tears” should be a term familiar to Christians, which will remind them of narratives about Christianity.

Example 3

In the myth of “To Return the Tears”, the monk was explaining to the Taoist how Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting came to meet Crimson Pearl Flower and the reason why she wanted to pay him back.

ST:

只因西方灵河岸上三生石畔有绛珠草一株，时有赤瑕宫神瑛侍者日以甘露灌溉，这绛珠草使得久延岁月。(Cao, 2005, p. 3)

TT:

There, by the Rock of Rebirth, he found the beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower, for which he conceived such a fancy that he took to watering her every day with sweet dew, thereby conferring on her the gift of life. (Hawkes, 1973, p. 53)

“三生石” in the myth is translated as “Rock of Rebirth” by Hawkes. “三生” (literally meaning “three lives”, Sanskrit Samsara) is a Buddhist view that a person's present existence is the present world, that he lived in a previous life before he was born, and that he will live in the afterlife after his life. The good and evil karma of the past world is the cause of the present world's bitterness and happiness, and that of the past and the present world will be the reason for the bitterness and happiness of the future world (Lin, 2006, pp. 90-91). There are discussions about “rebirth” in the Bible. “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked...Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you; no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’ (*New International Version Bible*, 2011, John. 3: 4-5). “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here (*New International Version Bible*, 2011, 2 Cor. 5: 17)!” It can be seen that the Christian “rebirth” is the spiritual rebirth and the only way to the kingdom of God. Only by accepting Jesus as Savior can people be reborn. Therefore, “三生” and “rebirth” have different meanings associated with their own religion, and translating one into the other introduces a narrative of the other religion into the translated narrative.

Example 4

In the myth of “The Land of Illusion”, Bao-yu listened to tunes about the fate of twelve women in *Jinling*, among which the tune about Xi-chun has the following line.

ST:

闻说道，西方宝树唤婆娑，上结着长生果。(Cao, 2005, p. 34)

TT:

In paradise, there grows a precious tree that bears the fruit of immortality. (Hawkes, 1973, p. 143)

Xi-chun eventually converts to Buddhism, which regards “西方” (literally meaning “the west”) as nirvana, where the Buddha is. “西方” in the line above is translated into “paradise” by Hawkes. According to Britannica Academic (2012), “paradise” is often used as a synonym for “the Garden of Eden” before the expulsion of Adam and Eve. They are used interchangeably in the context of Christianity. The translation of some mythological names of the place, which are associated with Taoism, also applies the same strategy. For example, “天仙福地” (Cao, 2005, p. 819) is translated as “fairy paradise” (Minford, 1986, p. 293), and “遣香洞” (Cao, 2005, p. 30) “the Paradise of the Full-Blown Flower” (Hawkes, 1973, p. 129).

The examples mentioned above are those of obviously translating religious or mythological concepts into Christian ones. There is another group of concepts that, rather than being rendered into Christian ones, are omitted. For example, “度脱几个” (Cao, 2005, p. 3) is translated as “save a few souls” (Hawkes, 1973, p. 54). “度脱” conveys the Buddhist thought of “to make people escape from the suffering of the world and reach the state of Buddha” (Li & Feng, 1990, p. 402). The original meaning of this phrase is lost in the translation. Omitting Buddhist concepts in the translation can also play a role in highlighting the Christian narrative.

However, it should be pointed out that Hawkes did not deliberately conceal the religion in the original narrative. The back cover of the translation indicates that the novel contains Buddhist concepts. In addition, some key religious concepts have been translated with the strategy of foreignization, with “道人” (Cao, 2005, p. 3) translated into “Taoist” (Hawkes, 1973, p. 54) and “佛” (Cao, 2005, p. 31) into “Buddha” (Hawkes, 1973, p. 135). In fact, Christian terms have long been introduced into English translations of Chinese classics. As discussed above, Matteo Ricci translated “天” into “God”, and these translations formed certain narratives, which may have influenced the choice of translation strategy of later translators.

3.2 Titles of ancient Chinese nobility

The earthly affairs of a group of people, mainly an ancient Chinese bureaucratic family, are mentioned in the myths, and titles such as “国公” and “娘娘” appear in the original narrative. This section analyzes cases of how titles of ancient Chinese nobility are translated and how the translation is different from the original narrative. The reasons why relevant strategies are taken by the translators are explored.

Example 5

In the myth of “The Land of Illusion”, Fairy Disenchantment invited Bao-yu to be a guest to her home, the Land of Illusion. Since the other fairies complained that she brought him back, she explained that she was entrusted by “宁荣二公” to guide Bao-yu on the right path.

ST:

你等不知原委，今日原欲往荣府去接绛珠，适从宁府经过，偶遇宁荣二公之灵……(Cao, 2005, p. 32)

TT:

Let me tell you the reason for my change of plan. It is true that I set off for the Rong mansion with the intention of fetching Crimson Pearl, but as I was passing through the Ning mansion on my way, I happened to run into the Duke of Ning-guo and his brother the Duke of Rong-guo …(Hawkes, 1973, pp. 136-137)

“宁荣二公” refers to “宁国公” and “荣国公”, which are translated as “Duke of Ning-guo” and “Duke of Rong-guo”. “公” is the highest rank of the five classes of nobility in ancient China, which are 公, 侯, 伯, 子, 男 in the order of rank. According to Britannica Academic (2014), “Duke, feminine duchess, is a European title of nobility, having ordinarily the highest rank below a prince or king (except in countries having such titles as archduke or grand duke).” Therefore, the translation replaces the ancient Chinese noble title with a European one familiar to English-speaking countries. As the nobility in Europe is generally divided into five classes (Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount, Baron), which correspond to the aforementioned ancient Chinese hierarchy in form, it is customary to translate one system into the other correspondingly, though the cultural connotations are different.

Example 6

When Bao-yu came to the Department of the Ill-fated Fair in the Land of Illusion, he looked at some pages of the albums that recorded the fate of women from her hometown and saw the following lines of verse.

ST:

寿夭多因诽谤生，多情公子空牵挂。(Cao, 2005, p. 31)

TT:

And in the end, you were by slanders slain, your gentle lord’s solicitude in vain. (Hawkes, 1973, p. 133)

These are words of judgment of Bao-yu’s maid Qing-wen, in which “公子” refers to Bao-yu. Modern Chinese Dictionary (2012) explains the meaning and usage of “公子”: it refers to the son of a vassal in ancient China and later the son of a bureaucrat. It is also an honorific name for the son of others. Bao-yu is the son of Jia Zheng, who is an official in the court, so Bao-yu is addressed as “公子”. “Lord” is a general title for a prince or sovereign or for a feudal superior (especially a feudal tenant who holds directly from the king, i.e., a baron) in the British Isles (Britannica Academic 2016). It is a title of nobility in Britain, and the four classes below Duke are all generally regarded as “Lord” (Zhou, 2008, p. 79). The use of “lord” in the translation will also remind English-speaking readers of the narrative about the British hierarchy of nobility.

Example 7

Bao-yu was finally chased by ghosts in the Land of Illusion. The monk showed the ghosts a mirror and said the following to Bao-yu.

ST:

我奉元妃娘娘旨意，特来救你。(Cao Xueqin, 2005, p. 819)

TT:

By order of Her Grace the Imperial Jia Concubine, I've come to save you! (Minford, 1986, p. 293)

In the example above, “娘娘” is translated as “Her Grace”. “娘娘” is a title of an ancient Chinese empress or imperial concubine. Among the titles of British nobility, the duke or duchess is addressed as “Your Grace” in person and “His (or Her) Grace” indirectly, while a marquess or marchioness and the remaining noble ranks are generally addressed as “My Lord (or Lady)” in person (Zhou, 2008, p. 79). Therefore, in the translation above, the title “His Grace or Her Grace”, which is familiar to English-speaking readers, is introduced to the original narrative. In the same myth, “候旨” (Cao, 2005, p.819) is translated as “Wait here for your instructions from Her Majesty” (Minford, 1986, p. 291). In a narrative, titles of nobility such as “Her Grace”, “Her Majestic”, “Duke,” and “Lord” appear in the same context, which will cause English-speaking readers to associate with the narrative about European nobility.

3.3 Reasons for the deviations in the re-narration

Through the analysis above, the present study finds that there are deviations in the translated narrative from the original one, which is achieved through domestication, specifically by omitting certain terms of Buddhism, Taoism, and ancient Chinese titles of nobility and adding the concepts of Christianity and European nobility, such as the translation of “三生” into “rebirth”, of “西方” into “paradise” and of “娘娘” into “Her Grace”. Although the translators did not add or omit content above the lexical level, they still frame a new narrative by selectively appropriating the original content, in which the original narrative of Buddhist and Taoist religion and ancient Chinese nobility is suppressed, while the new narrative of Christianity and European nobility is accentuated.

Replacing religious concepts with Christian ones is not a new approach to translating Chinese classics into English. Li Xinde (2009, pp. 52-53) points out that the English translation of Chinese Buddhist scriptures began with Protestant missionaries coming to China in the late Qing Dynasty with the mission to preach. Joseph Edkins was the first missionary who translated Chinese Buddhist scriptures into English. He published the *Handbook for the Student of Chinese Buddhism* in 1870 and studied the Sanskrit and Tibetan sources of Chinese Buddhist terms, which facilitated the study of Chinese Buddhism by later missionaries.

Li Xinde believes that missionaries tend to have their own choice of strategies in translating Buddhist scriptures. The representative that took the domesticating approach is Timothy Richard, who translated Buddhist scriptures from a Christian standpoint, with “Buddha” rendered into “God” and a frequent appearance of “church”, “faith”, and “glory” in the translation (Li, 2009, pp.57-58). Timothy Richard’s English version of *Mahayana* is still a classic translation of Buddhism in English-speaking countries even today.

Some missionaries, such as William Edward Soothill, abandoned the Christian standpoint in the translation of Buddhist scriptures and pursued objectivity and accuracy. For example, he translated “佛” into “Buddha”, which was the Sanskrit title after Shakyamuni became samma-sam-buddha (Perfectly Enlightened One) (Li, 2009, pp. 59-60). Unlike the Jesuits and conservative Protestant missionaries who resisted Chinese Buddhism blindly, the Protestant missionaries who came to China in the late Qing Dynasty made great contributions to the spread of Chinese Buddhism to the west and the religious and cultural dialogue between China and the west.

Therefore, different versions of narratives about Chinese Buddhism have long existed in English-speaking countries. Translating Buddhist concepts from a Christian standpoint is only one of them. The present study believes that Hawkes and Minford have referred to the existing narratives about Buddhism in the English-speaking world when translating the religious concepts in *Hongloulou*. They have chosen to introduce Christian concepts into the re-narration like Timothy Richard so as to facilitate the understanding of target readers. Similarly, there have been narratives about ancient Chinese nobility in English-speaking countries, and the translators have adopted the existing translation corresponding to the European noble hierarchy.

4. Conclusion

The present study regards translation as re-narration and analyzes the differences between the translation of the mythological narrative and the original in *Hongloulou*. The main findings are that the new narrative is different from the original one in two ways. The narrative about Buddhism and Taoism is suppressed, while that about Christianity is accentuated. The narrative about ancient Chinese nobility is weakened while that about European nobility is highlighted. The framing of the translated narrative is achieved by the selective appropriation of textual material, specifically by omitting certain terms of Buddhism, Taoism, and ancient Chinese noble titles and adding the concepts of Christianity and European aristocracy. The present study considers that the deviations in the translation while facilitating the understanding of English-speaking readers of the story, weakens the elaboration of the theme of the novel, the Buddhist understanding that karma determines the shape of our lives because the Christian narrative disturbs readers from understanding Buddhist thoughts and in so doing hampering their comprehension of the novel’s theme.

The present study also analyzes the reasons why Hawkes and Minford choose to translate some religious concepts into Christian ones and replace ancient Chinese titles of nobility with European ones. Their translation is not intended for academic research but for the interest of western readers. Thus, the translators have framed the translated narrative to facilitate the target readers' understanding. In addition, there are already narratives about traditional Chinese concepts of Buddhism and Tasm in English-speaking countries, which can be traced back to the translation activities of Jesuits in China. Because missionaries have the purpose of preaching the gospel, certain translators interpreted traditional Chinese religious concepts from the perspective of Christianity. Similarly, the five-rank hierarchy in ancient China has long corresponded to the European hierarchy of nobility in translation. The present study believes that these existing narratives have also influenced the translators' choice of translation strategies.

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