

On Notes and Annotations in David Tod Roy's Translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*

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Abstract

Translation of Chinese classics into foreign languages has been a heated topic. Numerous efforts have been spent on translating Chinese classics into English language. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, translated by David Tod Roy, is the latest five-volume English rendition of the novel *Chin P'ing Mei*. It is considered by far the most complete translation of the novel. The translator managed to preserve the properties of the original to the utmost through extensive use of notes and annotations.

Key words: Note; Annotation; Translation

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1. CHIN P'ING MEI AND DAVID TOD ROY

Chin P'ing Mei is the first long Chinese narrative to focus on ordinary people and everyday life instead of mythical heroes or adventures. David Tod Roy calls the novel "a landmark in the development of narrative art, not only from a specifically Chinese perspective, but in a world-historical context...noted for its surprisingly modern technique" and "with the possible exception of *The Tale of Genji* and *Don Quixote*, there is no earlier work of prose fiction of equal sophistication in world literature". (Roy, 1993, p.xviii).

Chin P'ing Mei was first translated into English in 1927. From 1927 to 1939, the book was translated in abridged form. Since 1939, it has been completely translated by Clement Egerton and David Tod Roy. The translation history of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* spans more than 80 years, during which a comprehensive system emerged with translation aims, strategies and skills intertwined with each other. Such a complex book, along with its different translations, presents a valuable subject for translation studies.

David T. Roy is an honorary professor of Chinese literature and a famous Sinologist. He has been working on academic works and papers on *The Plum in the Golden Vase* since 1967. Besides, Roy he has been engaged in the research and teaching of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* at the university of Chicago. He began translating the book in the late 1980s and published the first volume in 1993 by Princeton University Press. Once published, this volume has aroused intense attentions of American readers and critics, and has been praised by some scholars in American critics.

In describing the translation strategies and methods, David T. Roy claimed that he wanted to "translate everything into English" because of the great literary value of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, which can be compared with the first-class literary works in the world. He adopted the tactics of alienation and literal translation method, and through the notes and references, the index and layout method, trying to retain the original of all art forms, verbal skills, cultural image, to reproduce the original unique artistic style and ideological concept, even if doing so would make readers feel uncomfortable, so be it. As for the selection of source text, Roy chose the version published in 1618—the original version of *Chin P'ing Mei*. The reason he chose it was because it is "the earliest version that is closest to the original work of the original author and best reflects the author's innovative rhetorical techniques" (1993, p.xxi).

2. NOTES IN TRANSLATION

2.1 Notes for Volume Name

The title for Roy's translation is called *The Plum in The Golden Vase* Or, *Chin P'ing Mei*. The book is divided into five volumes, which are published separately by Princeton University Press. Each volume has an English name: the first volume as *Gathering*, the second volume as *Rivals*, the third volume as *Aphrodisiacs*, the fourth volume as *Climax*, the fifth volume as *Dissolution*. Each volume at an average of more than 800 pages, five volumes together boast of more than 4000 pages. As for titles, the translator believes that they carry multiple pun meanings, implying the complexity and ambiguity of the content of the work. Therefore, the Roy adopts the interpretation and translation of its semantics, and translates it into *The Plum in The Golden Vase*. He also keeps the original pinyin name *Chin P'ing Mei* so as to retain multiple possibilities of title interpretation.

The naming of each volume shows the influence of David Hawks' English translation of *The Story of the Stone* on the translator. From the naming of the books, it can be understood as an annotation on the overall structure of the text. However, it is a pity that the translator has not explained the naming principle of book names. But from the book names themselves, we can infer that the translator has adopted the principle of paying equal attention to theme and taste, which not only highly abstracted and summarized the core content of each book, but also fully considered to attract readers' interest in reading.

2.2 Contents

The contents for each volume are as follows:

- dedication
- list of illustrations and illustrations
- acknowledgements
- cast of characters
- main text
- notes
- bibliography
- index

In the first volume, there are additional titles such as:
introduction
preface
colophon
etc.

Besides, there are two appendices attached.

Appendix I, Translator's Commentary on the Prologue
Appendix II, Translation of Supplementary Material
Translator introduction and Appendix I were written

by Roy himself, when the first volume was finished in 1992. The translator introduction covers more than 30 pages, introducing all aspects of the long narrative novel. Appendix I is only a few pages long, which is the translator's narration of the whole novel. From the perspective of macro structure, both Translator Introduction and Appendix I can be regarded as annotations to the text content, so that readers can have a clearer understanding of the translator's overall thinking and translation ideology when dealing with the text.

3. TEXT ANNOTATIONS

3.1 Annotation to Person Name

In the above introduction, each volume has a table of characters. In the table, Roy not only lists the characters that appear in this chapter, but also notes the relationship between the characters and other characters in detail, so as to facilitate readers' comprehensive understanding of these characters. In addition, for some important people such as:

Pu Chih.tao 卜志道, the annotation reads "no account Pu, crony of His-men Ch'ing, member of the brotherhood often whose place is taken after his death by Hua Tzu.hsti".

The character of Hua Tzu-hsti 花子虛 is introduced as "Hua the second, Nobody Hua, nephew and adopted son of Eunuch Director Hua, husband of Li P'ing-erh, next-door neighbor of His-men Ch'ing and member of the brotherhood of ten, patron of Wu Yin-erh and Cheng Aihsiang; cuckolded by Li P'ing-erh who turns over much of his property to His-men Ch'ing, he loses the rest in a lawsuit and dies of chagrin."

In these annotations, Roy used pinyin and explanations to accurately express the homophonic pun in the original text. The rich annotation information enables the reader to make clear the pun meaning of its name before knowing the character, and helps the reader to better understand the intricate relationship between characters and plots in this long narrative novel.

3.2 In-text Annotations

15 chapters are randomly selected for this study, respectively Chapter 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 19, 24, 27, 33, 40, 46, 50, 60, 67 and 91, in which a total of 775 annotations appeared that can be divided into the regular expression, place/name annotations, poetry annotations, saying annotations, and annotations for pun and four-word phrases, etc. The annotations appearing in the text are briefly summarized in the following table:

Category	Regular expression	Place/name	Poetry	Saying	Four-word phrase	Pun
Number	75	49	132	138	245	12

It can be seen that, in the translation, the most frequent ones are four-character phrases, sayings and poems, which

will be further illustrated in detail below.

3.2.1 Four-Character Phrases

In the novel, there are a large number of four-word phrases. David Tod Roy retains the literal meaning of these expressions in the course of translating, even if such expressions in English seem to be quite exotic and hard to understand. He wants to “highlight the phenomenon, resulting in the art of alienation effect, cause the reader to notice slight variations in the original language”.

For example, in Chapter Seven, “指手画脚” is translated as:

Gesticulating with both hands and feet

This four-character expression occurs ubiquitously in Chinese vernacular literature. See, e.g., Shui-hu Chuan-chuan, vol 1, ch.14, p206. 1.16; an dvol.3, ch. 75, p.1257, 1.11.

In Chapter 15, “玉兔东升” is translated as

The jade hare rose in the east.

The “jade hare” is a kenning for the moon. This formulaic four-character expression is ubiquitous in Chinese vernacular literature. See, e.g., Hsuan-hoi-shih, p. 52, 1.9; Yuan-chu hsuan wai-pien, 3:974), 1.10; the Shi-hu Ch’uaa-chuan, vol. 2, ch. 35, p. 557, 1.9; the early vernacular story entitled I-k’u kuei lai tao-jen ch’u-kuai (A mangy Taoist exorcises a lair of demons), in Ching-shih t’ung-yen, chuan 14, p. 192, 1.1; and Morgan T. Jones, trans., “A Mangy Taoist Exorcises Ghosts,” in Ma and Lau, *Traditional Chinese Stories*, p. 395, left column, 1.13.

In the above examples, we can see the following features.

- Literal translation, which provides additional information to the reader in the form of annotations to better understand these expressions.
- In the notes, Roy provides an almost exhaustive list of the application of this expression in other secular Chinese literature, listing specific texts, volumes, chapters and pages. It also provides information on how the expression is used elsewhere in the book.
- Most of the annotations do not give much explanation to these expressions, unless the expression is completely absent in the western context, such as the jade rabbit. Roy’s annotations suggest it as the metaphorical use of the moon.

In addition, in the annotations for four word phrases, it can also be noticed that in addition to idioms, there are many general phrases in Chinese, for example, “一吸而尽”, “心中欢喜”, “害人性命”, “人物繁华” and so on. What’s more, some four-word phrases are extracted from poems, for example, “造化无端” (敢恨谁), “富贵繁华” (身上孽) and so on. This is one of the reasons why there are so many four-word phrase annotations. In these annotations, Roy fully adopts his translation principle, that is, “translate everything into English.”

Despite the fact that some phrases are intertwined with the lines, the translator still extracts and annotates them regardless. In this way, the target readers are provided with the original flavor of the source text. Although

annotating takes much effort, it retains the cultural complexities these phrases carry. Through annotating, the translation texts become more readable and thus can appeal to a wider range of readers.

3.2.2 Poetry Phrases

Source Text: 赤帝当权耀太虚

Target Text: The Red Emperor holds sway, ablaze in the Great Void.

Annotation: This song suite is originally from the lost Yuan or early Ming hsi-wen drama T’ang Po-heng yin-huo chih-fu (T’ang Po-heng turns misfortune into good fortune). See Sung Yuan hsi-wen chi-I, pp. 116-17. The fact that the author of the Chin P’ing Mei chose to quote from this play at this point in his story may have ironic significance because in this chapter Hsi-men Ch’ing believes himself to be enjoying good fortune and lords it over his womenfolk, and P’an Chin-lien in particular. But by chapter 79 their roles have been reversed and it is P’an Chin-lien who is the proximate cause of Hsi-men Ch’ing could be said, in contrast to T’ang Po-heng, the protagonist of the quoted play, to have succeeded in turning good fortune into misfortune. This song suite is also preserved independently in Sheng-shih hsin-sheng, p. 552; Tz’u-lin chai-yen, 1:264-65; and Yung-his yueh-fu, ts’e 3, pp. 61b-62a. For a translation, see appendix, item 4.

In this example, since the original text is from a play, the translator not only provides the source of the sentence, but also gives the translator’s conjecture as to why the author chose the sentence here and the background for reasoning. This treatment method reflects that Roy attaches great importance to the author’s intention and constantly tries to figure it out. However, after close reading of this annotation, it is also found that for such strange concepts as red emperor and taixu, there is no further explanation in the annotation. Alienation is adopted here, so that the target language readers can get close to the author and experience the unique beauty of foreign cultures.

3.2.3 General Phrase

In addition to the four-word phrases, *Chin P’ing Mei* contains a large number of words describing life in the Ming dynasty, including clothing, food, shelter, transportation, architecture, medicine, entertainment, ceremony, festival and other aspects. These words have a distinct contemporary nature, and their meanings are difficult to understand in modern Chinese. In the process of translating, Roy mostly dealt with food vocabulary directly.

For example:

“酥油鲍螺” is translated as “butterfat ‘abalone shell’ sweets”.

“冰糖霜梅” is translated as “candied plums frosted with crystallized sugar”.

“玫瑰饼”译为“rose-flavored pastries”.

In these cases, Roy adopted word for word translation for these general food expressions, even though some

of the expressions might sound too exotic for the target readers to understand. The translated expressions contain detailed information that needs no further explanations. For certain terms such as “麻姑酒”, when Roy translated it as “Ma-ku wine”, he provided certain explanation, “Ma-ku wine is a regional vintage, much esteemed in the mid-Ming period, that was said to be made with spring water from Ma-ku Mountain in Kiangsi province. The mountain in question is named after Ma-ku, a female transcendent in Taoist mythology, whose name is also associated with wine making” (p.589).

As for the translation annotations for clothing, Roy selected some of the expressions to add annotations to. For example,

拖的水鬟长长的……学个中人打扮，耳边带着丁香儿。

In the translation, “丁香儿” is translated as clove-shaped earring, with the following annotations, “in the years between 1567 and 1582, clove-shaped earrings made of gold or jade and inset with pearls were in fashion”.

3.2.4 Person and Place Names

Besides the names for person and place, there are a great number of historical, mythical and fictional names in the novel. In these cases, Roy introduced briefly about these names in the translation. For example,

“彭祖” is translated as “P’eng-tsu”, with the annotation as P’eng-tsu is a legendary figure from early Chinese history, sometimes called the Chinese Methuselah, who is said to have lived for more than eight hundred years.

The annotation here adopts the method of naturalization and uses Methuselah in Genesis (a 969-year-old patriarch, the symbol of long life) to explain the P’eng-tsu in Chinese culture. Although the cultural background of the two is completely different, the cultural intention of “peng zu lived a long life” is effectively conveyed to the target language readers through “Methuselah”.

3.2.5 Pun

Puns use the multiple meanings of words or similar sounds to achieve humorous or ironic effects. Many puns in the novel are also a common writing technique in traditional Chinese novels. These puns help to create a subtle and sophisticated style for the novels. In the process of translation, Roy also gives detailed annotations under the literal translation.

For example “白嚼” is translated as “to devour people”, with annotation as “The expression ‘to devour people’ literally ‘to devour [people] for nothing’ means ‘to sponge’ and puns with Ying Po-chueh’s given name. Shorter versions of this joke appear in two Ming compilations. See....” (Vol. 1, p.229).

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of Roy’s translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, it can be seen that the source, frequency and intention of these expressions are listed in detail in

the notes. Such annotations have not been seen before in Yang Xianyi’s or David Hawks’ translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In Yang’s *A Dream of Red Mansions*, for example, there are 249 annotations, which are significantly fewer than the 5,374 ones in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. No further explanations are provided for these 249 notes in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Most are short and focus on historical figures and geographical explanations, not poetry, colloquialism, etc.

It should also be noticed that, before David T. Roy’s *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, in the annotations for four words, phrases, poetry and comments from other translations of Chinese classics, we are seldom able to see further interpretation of the text. Roy’s annotations are more of intertextuality, a further clarification of the text, and a detailed description of the text in the text of the other cases. Such maneuver can certainly help the readers understand the implicit meaning of the text and erase certain obstacles across different cultures. The notes on names, places and puns, however, specify the intention and implied meaning of the author’s intentions. The rich annotation shows David Tod Roy’s profound academic accomplishment and his exquisite mastery of Chinese culture.

Notes and annotations in translation, therefore, are not merely tools that can provide more information about the significance of background knowledge, help more detailed understanding of the original text, but also quite necessary devices in translation for professional reference of intertextuality. Therefore, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is also a rare reference book for scholars, who can acquire the local conditions and customs of China in the Ming Dynasty. Combined with the secular literature at that time, these notes and annotations also offer rich information, enjoying a very high academic value.

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