**Translating Western Musicals into Chinese: Language and Cultural adaptations**

**Stella Sorby**  
*University of Portsmouth*

**Abstract**
In view of the increasing popularity of translated musicals in China, this paper considers the translation and cultural parameters for such translations using cultural adaptation, dynamic equivalence, domestication and Low's criteria for singable translations of songs with an assessment of the language treatment and adaptations involved in the translation of western musicals into Chinese.

**Introduction**

**What's on?**

While western musicals such as *Cats, The Sound of Music, Phantom of the Opera, Mamma Mia, The Lion King* and *42nd Street*, are steadily making their way to Chinese theatres performed in English with Mandarin surtitles, Chinese audiences are becoming more demanding: they want to see productions in Mandarin (*Newsweek*). *Les Misérables*, is scheduled to be the first for staging in Beijing.

As a result, in 2007, a joint venture agreement was signed between China Arts & Entertainment Group and Sir Cameron Mackintosh Limited to localise classic productions such as *Les Misérables, Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera. Mamma Mia!* is also to be performed in Mandarin during 2009.

Across the Atlantic, BAE (Broadway Asia Entertainment), which was formed in 2006, is keeping to its promise to produce and present tours of at least 12 English-version musicals, such as *The King and I, 42nd Street, Cinderella, Hairspray*, at more than 20 cities in China between 2006 and 2009. While touring with the English version of *The Sound of Music* at cities such as Chengdu, Wuhan and Shenzhen in China this year, Simone Genatt (the Chairman) announced that they will launch the Chinese version of the same musical in 2010 (*Sun Yuan* (ed.), 2006; *Chen Huiru*, 2008); *Huang Lijuan* (2008)). Also, the Nederlanders, one of the big three Broadway theatre owners, has formed a joint venture - Nederlanders New Century - which aims to present and market tours and live entertainment in China (*Robertson* 2007).
The rush of eager producers and presenters is growing in the hope of sharing in this potentially vast market. Over the next decade, more musicals including *Miss Saigon, My Fair Lady, Mary Poppins, West Side Story* and others will run in Beijing, Shanghai and other metropolises across the country (China Daily Sept. 2007).

Chinese operas, with 800 hundred years of history and heritage, used to be regarded as the number one entertainment form in China. Owing to this theatrical tradition and the popularity operas enjoy among audiences, this paper argues that, unlike some western opera goers who tend to put more emphasis on the music and the singing, for Chinese audiences the poetic and rhyming lyrics are equally important in opera.

Through comparing, analysing and evaluating three published singable translations of the lyrics of ‘Memory’ from *Cats*, this paper intends to raise awareness of the differences in language and culture when western musicals are translated into Chinese. It examines some of the issues involved in the intercultural adaptation and the uses of domestication. It attempts to identify what translation strategies would be most acceptable to Chinese audiences and, consequently, how best to achieve an enduring reception for musicals in China.

Although their rich cultural and theatrical heritage inevitably plays an important role in Chinese audiences’ expectations and influences their perceptions, the focus in this paper is solely on the language treatment and adaptations involved in the translation of western musicals into Chinese.

**Libretti translation**

Compared to other forms of performing arts translations, the ‘confrontation between two linguistic codes as well as between two art forms, poetry and music’ (Gorlée, 1997) creates more constraints for the translation of musical libretti. The translator has to face issues involving not only the aesthetic requirements of the poetically rhyming libretto, but also the functional requirements of fitting the libretto into the existing music framework for singable purposes. In the case study presented below which deal with characteristics of the Chinese language, some language-specific treatments, such as tones, need to apply.

Three Chinese singable versions of ‘Memory’ from *Cats* will be investigated in the case study. All three translations have been
produced by professional translators. Xue Fan is a veteran translator and many of his published singing lyrics have been widely available in China for over 50 years. This translation version is from his *A Collection of the Famous Euro-American Musical Songs* (Xue, 2005) which is a fully staved singable collection. As a music major postgraduate, Fei Yuanhong has surtitled a number of musicals such as *Les Misérables, Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* for the Shanghai Grand Theatre. Although this translation does not come with staves, the syllable count and the rhymes in his translation have evidently shown that during the translation of the lyrics, he has the music in mind. In his blog, he writes that in the past he had focused more on accurate meaning in the musical translation, but since *The Phantom of the Opera*, he has started to think more from the musical point of view in order to make the lyrics more cadenced, rhythmical and even singable (Fei, 2007). Yan Yang is also a familiar name in the translation of western musicals and songs, and his lyrics are widely used by singers for their performances and albums. This version is from Kris Phillips's *Broadway Album* (2004).

**Singability**

Peter Low, who proposed his Pentathlon criteria (singability, sense, naturalness, rhyme and rhythm) for singable translation of songs, regards singability as the first principle (Low, 2003). This is particularly important to the Chinese, not only for the actors singing on stage but also for the audience to sing elsewhere, such as at a Karaoke party.

The following example shows the first paragraph of ‘Memory’ in *Cats* with three Chinese translation versions. The number of syllables is marked in brackets with the Chinese translation. The ending rhymes are marked in bold with the Chinese Pinyin version:

**ST:**
- midnight (2)
- not a sound from the pavement (7)
- has the moon lost her memory? (7)
- she is smiling alone (6)
- in the lamplight (4)
- the withered leaves collect at my feet (9)
- and the wind begins to moan (7)

(ST. Lyrics)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translators</th>
<th>Chinese translation</th>
<th>Chinese Pinyin</th>
<th>English back-translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fei Yuanhong</td>
<td>午夜 (2) 路上寂静无声 (6) 月儿也失去记忆(7) 她笑得多孤寂(6) 街灯下(3) 枯叶在我的脚下堆积(9) 风儿也开始哀鸣(7)</td>
<td>wu ye Lushang jijing wusheng¹ yue er ye shiqu jiyi ta xiaode duo guji jiedeng xia kuye zai wode jiaoxia duiji feng er ye kaishi aiming</td>
<td>Midnight, silent without a sound on the road The moon has also lost her memory She smiles so lonesome Under the lamplight The withered leaves pile-up at my feet The wind also begins to moan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan Yang Phillips, K. 2004</td>
<td>夜霧 (2) 悄悄偷襲著大地 (7) 看不見一個人影 (7) 街燈分外淒清 (6) 沒有月亮 (4) 也沒有一片落葉嘆息 (9) 寂寞心 等待明天 (7)</td>
<td>ye wu qiaoqiao touxizhuo dadi kanbujian yige renying jiedeng fenwai qiqing meiyou yueliang ye meiyou yipian luoye tanxi jimoxin dengdai mingtian</td>
<td>Night fog quietly creeps over [sneak attack] the ground No one is in sight The lamp light is so sad No moon Not a single leaf sighing Alone, I am waiting for tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xue Fan</td>
<td>夜深 (2)</td>
<td>ye shen</td>
<td>Late night,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The end final (Chinese name for a vowel) marked in bold are the rhymes. Although, in the western phonetic alphabet, ian may be considered as two syllables, in the Chinese Pinyin system, it is regarded as a final. Other finals include iao, ie, uai, uan, uo, etc.
In order to enhance the singability of their translations, all three translators have clearly endeavoured to match their syllable count with the tempo of the ST by adding and/or repeating words. For example, both Yan and Xue’s TT match the syllable count precisely with that of the ST. By doing so, they sometimes add, (e.g., in the second line “not a sound from the pavement”) the Chinese character 着/著( zhuo ) which carries no extra meaning and is only used to indicate the continuous tense. Although Fei doesn’t match the syllable count for this line, his translation offers the same meaning in this context even without the tense indicator, which is common in Chinese. Again, for the fifth line “in the lamplight”, Xue’s version “在灯光下” (bt: under the lighting) matches the syllable count with the ST by using one extra character “在” (bt: at) compared with Fei’s version “街灯下” (bt: under the streetlight). The preposition ‘at’ could be either included or not depending upon the writing style and context. As for Yan’s version for the same line, although he also matches the syllable count, he uses free-translation here which will be discussed in the next section *Rhyme and sense*.

**Rhyme and sense**

When it is considered that in Chinese theatrical practice, the rhyme requirements in song lyrics are not usually as strict as in poetry, all
three translators clearly attempt to adapt their translation to the rather complicated rhyming system.² (See the ending rhymes marked bold in Fig. 1).

Libretto translation has always been debated in relation to the concepts of ‘freedom’ or ‘creativity’. In this case, Nida allows more room for manoeuvre than his ‘dynamic equivalence’ theory. He points out: “the fully adequate translation of a lyric poem normally requires almost a “new poem” on the same theme, especially if the source and target cultures are distinct” (2001, p.94). Peter Low supports semantic compromise in terms of sense (Low, 2003). Clearly, freedom and creativity are very important in artistic genre translations. But how free can one be? What are the constraints for creating a “new poem”? How can one ensure that the TT’s dramatic unity of language and music have a similar effect on the audience as that of the ST?

Fei and Xue follow the ST closely and achieve both poetic and semantic equivalence. Although Yan’s version is very poetically written, is both romantically touching and neatly rhyming, there are distinct semantic shifts compared with Fei and Xue’s versions, for example, the first paragraph of Memory (Fig. 1).

As we can see from the examples, the translation shift resulted in the image now straying away from the ST, even though the atmosphere remains similar. The moon is omitted, perhaps because, for the Chinese, the moon is a symbol of reunion (the 15th August in the lunar Chinese calendar is the annual festival for family reunion) and therefore represents happy moods. It is acceptable because this is a cover version for an album. If it was intended to be for the stage performances, it would confuse the audience since in this scene the moon is shining down on Grizabella from the sky. Any lack of coherence between the lyrics and the stage setting should be avoided. As for changing from the withered moaning leaves to no leaf at all, perhaps the translator believes that loneliness was stressed even more without them? Nevertheless, by doing so, the image and the metaphorical effect which the ST created in relation to Grizabella who, just like those withered leaves, was mourning for her faded beauty, is lost.

² The Chinese rhyming system is quite complicated in terms of the different grouping methods. The two widely used ones are eighteen yun and thirteen zhe. Some different vowels, such as eng, ing, ueng, ong and iong are considered in one rhyming group (He, 2004, pp. 97-103).
Lexical choice

When there is a need to decide the lexis in the TT for the purposes of register and singability, the lexical choice can demonstrate the translators' strategic decisions on priorities. In the ST, touch me expresses the abandoned Grizabella’s desperate plea to be taken back as a Jellicles member again. The Chinese, as a nation who prefer to express their intimate feelings in less direct ways, even in such a context, would find it rather sensitive to deal with in their cultural environment. Fei’s TT keeps a little more distance than the ST using 靠近我 (come close to me), which transfers the meaning of ‘don’t abandon me’ and keeps it within the acceptable bounds of Chinese culture. Yan opts for 伸出雙手觸摸我充滿幸福的心 (stretching your hands to touch my happy heart), which carefully confines the metaphorical sense to eliminate the physical sensitivity. Xue goes even further than the ST in amplifying the sentiments by choosing 爱抚我 (caress me) which is very intimate and would not usually be used as an imperative, even privately, for the Chinese. For this reason, when singing, it could easily be sub-consciously or even consciously mistaken for 爱护我 (ai hu wo) meaning ‘protect me’ instead of 爱抚我 (ai fu wo) meaning ‘caress me’.

Tones

In some Chinese operas such as Kunqu Opera, the original tones of the language are considered very important when integrating the lyrics with the music and it is this principal consideration with which the composer must comply (Sun, 2003, p.1). This is because tones are arguably the most important element in the Chinese language. Therefore, tones can be very tricky and may easily cause misunderstanding even in the dialogue. In singing, listeners have to rely solely on hearing without ever having the opportunity to question when in doubt. Therefore, the loss of tones could leave them with no means to comprehend. During the process of singing, when the listeners struggle to make sense of the different sounds, some words could accidentally fall into unintended tones which could be mistaken for something else and result in creating comic effects or even misunderstandings. As Nida points out (2001, p.95):
The translation of songs almost always means considerable formal adjustment, e.g. the accented syllables must occur on the right notes; in the case of sustained notes, or a series of notes on the same syllable, the quality of the vowels must be “singable”.

Gorlée also observes:

The libretto is translated but the musical score remains unchanged. Opera translators break up the original dramatic unity of language and music, replacing it with a whole new one. (Gorlée, 1997)

This misplaced accent is what the Chinese translator must always endeavour to avoid. Based on his years of experience in translating songs, Xue believes that on top of meaning, lexis, rhythms and rhymes, how well the translator can handle the misplaced accents is crucial for the quality of song translation in Chinese (Xue, 2002, p.146). He gives as an example that in a very popular song, the lyric ‘come back’ sounds like ‘come, ghost’ - 归来吧-鬼来吧 (薛 p.138).

**Syllables**

The Chinese characters are all monosyllabic with normally one consonant and one vowel except for a few characters with only one vowel, such as 啊 (a), 爱 (ai). Each character has its own meaning, although more often than not they are used in combination with other characters, such as 字 stands for ‘letter/word/character’, 文 is for ‘article’, and 文字 together also stand for ‘character’. Compared with the polysyllabic words in English and other languages, Chinese characters have more flexibility and one can jigsaw/juggle the characters, by adding or omitting them, changing the word order to form various combinations e.g., using one character for more than one musical note or vice versa. Nevertheless, when fitting the characters to the musical notes, the meaning group must not be breached otherwise comic effects could occur, if not a serious misunderstanding. As with any other language, the key words should always be under the strong or long music note to avoid a mismatch between words and music. (我一见 她就神魂飘荡, when I see her/she lost all sense 薛 110 ) This is because the Chinese for ‘her’ and ‘she’
is the same character 她. Therefore, when 她 is grouped together with other words, it sounds like ‘when I see, she loses all sense’ instead of the ST: when I see her, I lose all sense.

**Cultural Adaptation**

As any translation involves differing languages and cultures, cross-cultural issues are unavoidable. In dealing with these issues, various theories have been proposed such as Vinay and Darbelnet’s adaptation: use of a recognised equivalent between two situations; Nida’s ‘dynamic equivalence’ and Venuti’s ‘domestication’.

In *Cats*, some of the cats adopted Chinese names. Although for English speakers, these names may carry some indications of their characteristics, for the Chinese audience they are merely meaningless sounds and do not represent anything. In order to help the audience fully enjoy the musical, the standard way of transliteration for names was abandoned and, instead, the Shanghai Grand Theatre invited experts to give each of the 14 principal cats a Chinese name which, to the Chinese audience, would be much more meaningful and easy to remember, such as in Fig. 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English names</th>
<th>Chinese transliteration</th>
<th>Chinese adaptation and their back translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Deuteronomy</td>
<td>老杜特洛内米</td>
<td>领袖猫 (leader)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grizabella</td>
<td>格里泽贝拉猫</td>
<td>魅力猫 (glamour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rum tum tugger</td>
<td>若腾塔格</td>
<td>摇滚猫 (rock n roll)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumpus Cat</td>
<td>兰帕斯猫</td>
<td>超人猫 (super-man)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennyanydots</td>
<td>詹尼安点点</td>
<td>襁褓猫 (nanny)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistoffelees</td>
<td>米斯托弗里</td>
<td>魔术猫 (magician)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 (Qian, 2003)

**Conclusion**

Through investigating the impact of western musicals in China, comparing, analysing and evaluating their singable translations, this paper attempts to explore the major genre characteristics in libretto
translation and the strategies used in dealing with Chinese language specifics. Owing to time constraints, this paper is unable to comment on the staged Chinese versions of western musicals which are still to appear. This is only a starting point for research on the issues involved in translating western musicals for Chinese audiences. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered here suggests that translating western musicals markedly benefits from taking into account the Chinese audiences' cultural heritage. In addition to meeting the criteria for translating libretto, the culturally considerate adaptation in libretto translation will greatly enhance the popularity of musicals so as to achieve an enduring TL audience reception.

Bibliography


Chinese Encyclopaedia – Theatre, (中国大百科全书 戏曲曲艺), 1982,

编著的中国戏曲剧种表统计, 中国地方戏 Local Operas

Christian, Retrieved on 5 October 2008 at: http://hi.baidu.com/%F2%AF%B3%CF_christian/blog/item/fc5c7f1999bc127cdab4bddd.html


Hanlon, G. Football changed to basketball and Yao Ming jersey.
Translating Western Musicals into Chinese: Language and Cultural adaptation

Retrieved on 10 April 2008 at:
http://smallswordsmagazine.com/articles/life/mandarinmusical.html

He, P. 2004, Chinese Opera Rhyme Studies, Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Book Publishing House

Huang, D. The panorama of Musical (《音乐剧概论》), 2003, Beijing: China Drama Publishing House (中国戏剧出版社)

Huang, L. March 3, 08, 音乐之声欲做中文版引入中国传统故事, 武汉晚报,

Ju Q. 2002, Musical Les Mis Fascinates Shanghai, China Daily, 26, June
Lee, M. Chinese ‘Les Mis’ Set to Open in 2008, The Associated Press,
17 Sept. 2007


Macartney, J. and Hoyle, B, 2007, Mama Mia! West End musicals get ready to conquer the East, The Times, 15 Sept.


Phantom of the Opera in Chinese, Retrieved on 15 February 2006 at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_L4x4BBy-9c


Qian, S. 2003, 经典音乐剧登陆上海, 《走进上海大剧院》, Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing House (文汇出版社)

Robertson, C. March 14, 2007, Ballyhoo of Broadway Shuffles Off to ... China
Retrieved on 26 Oct.2008 at:
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/theater/14nede.html

St. Lyrics Retrieved on 26 April. 2008 at:
http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/bestofbroadway-americanmusical/memory.htm


Sun Y. May 26, 2006, 百老汇进中国文化市场 3 年至少推 12 部音乐剧,

人民网， Retrieved on 26 Oct. 2008 at:
http://ent.people.com.cn/GB/4405785.html


Venuti, L. 2007, p. 29, Adaptation, Translation, Critique


Xiao, X. 2007-05-16, Retrieved on 11 March 2008 at:
http://www.douban.com/subject/1291554/reviews

Xu, H. I love you, Retrieved on 10 April 2008 at:
http://hi.baidu.com/quhui1989/blog/item/c75de9b73cb499f631add19d.html

Xue, F. 2002, Song translation research and practice (《歌曲翻译探索与实践》)
Translating Western Musicals into Chinese: Language and Cultural adaptation

Wuhan: Hubei Education Publishing House


Ye ban ge sheng, Retrieved on 20 April 2008 at: