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Representations of the dead and the afterlife in translations of *Mudan Ting*, a masterpiece in Chinese Kunqu theatre

Cindy S.B. Ngai

Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify and analyze the strategies used to translate into English death related cultural taboos viz. death, ghost and resurrection represented in the prominent classical Chinese drama *Mudan Ting*. Particular reference is made to the articulation of these taboos in three seminal English versions of *Mudan Ting* (as *Peony Pavilion*) by Cyril Birch, Wang Rongpei and Zhang Guanqian, respectively. Although these translators all follow the source text closely, certain differences in their translation strategies warrant attention. Cyril Birch takes an acculturation approach to the translation of death-related material, whereas Wang Rongpei adheres to the original text and tends to use semantic translation. In contrast, Zhang Guanqian usually translates literally, infusing the English text with a “foreign” flavor. These differences are examined in light of the general propensity among translators to take an avoidance approach to death-related material. The strategies used to translate taboo subjects are found to depend on the translator’s intentions, the target readership, the specific nature of the culturally loaded elements and the availability of equivalent expressions in the target language and culture.

Keywords

Cultural taboo, death, ghost, underworld, translation strategy, *Mudan Ting*

About the Author

Cindy S.B. Ngai is Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She obtained her BA (Hons) and MPhil from the University of Hong Kong and her Ph.D. in classical Chinese theatre from Nanjing University. She holds a Diploma in Translation from the Chartered Institute of Linguists (IoL) and is currently a Member of the IoL and Professional Translator in NATTI. Her research interests lie in the fields of literary translation of Chinese drama and bilingual communication in the corporate context.

Email: ctcindy@polyu.edu.hk

1. Introduction

Much like the subject of sex, the topics of ghosts, death and the underworld are considered taboo in many cultures, including Chinese culture (Zeng, 2013:109-121). Confucius believed that matters relating to death and the dead should not be discussed, and explained this aversion to his student Chi-lu as follows: “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits... You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (Confucius 1983:99, as transl. by Lau)

Given the conservative attitude held by many Chinese, and their reluctance to raise the topics of ghosts, death and the underworld, it is usually assumed that representations of death and death-related matters in Chinese literary texts, like erotic depictions, are culturally loaded elements. This has posed a great challenge to translators, who must act as mediators to produce target texts that both remain faithful to their source texts and fulfill the target readers’ expectations (Drozde & Vogule, 2008:24).

It is also assumed that Western and Chinese translators use different strategies to translate material on cultural taboos in Chinese literary texts, especially representations of sex and death. Building on previous research on the

translation of erotic material in *Mǔdān Tíng* (also known as *Peony Pavilion*) (Lee & Ngai, 2012), the purpose of this study is to examine the strategies used to translate death-related material in *Peony Pavilion*. Comparing and contrasting the different approaches taken by Western and Chinese translators provides broader insight into the strategies undertaken for translating taboo material.

Peony Pavilion has been chosen for investigation in this research, as in Lee and Ngai's study, because it is a masterpiece of *Kūnqǔ*, a vocal form of classical Chinese theatre that developed during the Míng Dynasty, and continues to be regarded highly by scholars, playwrights, performers and audiences both within contemporary China and around the world. Moreover, *Kūnqǔ* is included in UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Written by Tang Xianzu, *Peony Pavilion* foregrounds the power of romantic love (*qíng* 情), a pervasive theme of Chinese cultural discourse during the late Míng period (Lee & Ngai, 2012:74). Furthermore, its depiction of passionate love includes numerous allusions to the cultural taboos of eroticism and death. Death and the underworld are described in relation to the Platonic ideal of love sought after by the protagonist, Dù Liniáng. *Peony Pavilion*, a love story that subsumes the themes of death and resurrection, thus serves as a useful point of departure for the examination of the death-

taboo translation strategies used by three well-known Chinese-English translators in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to existing research on taboo translation by examining the translation of material on shades and the underworld, which are both Chinese cultural taboos (Chu, 2009), in classical Chinese drama. A thorough comparison of three English versions of *Peony Pavilion*—Cyril Birch's 1980 translation (Birch), reprinted in 2002; Zhang Guangqian's version (Zhang), first published in 1994 and reprinted in 2001; and Wang Rongpei's (Wang) 2000 translation—sheds light on the strategies used to translate material on various aspects of death and the afterlife, from the naming of the dead and the movement of the dead to the incorruptible body and the process of resurrection, in literary renderings of *Peony Pavilion* into English.

2. Comparison of translation strategies for erotic and death-related content in *Peony Pavilion*: A review

Research on the literary translation of material on ghosts and the underworld from Chinese to English is lacking, although the late twentieth century saw a proliferation of translation studies on taboo translation, including sex-taboo

translation.

Regarding cultural translation, Axielà describes a range of strategies for translating culturally loaded elements, from conservation to substitution (1996:61-65). Taboo translation, an important subset of cultural translation, has received attention from many translators and researchers. Researchers highlight a number of strategies used to translate taboo material, such as the avoidance approach, according to the various requirements of translation (Robinson, 1996; Crisafulli, 1997; Davoodi, 2009).

Some research has also been conducted on literary strategies for translating taboo material, with particular reference to the translation of sexually sensitive materials in Chinese literary texts. Much of this research appeared at the beginning of the twenty-first century, such as Lung's 2003 publication *Translating Sensitive Texts* and Han's 2008 work on "Sex taboos in literary translation in China: A study of the two Chinese versions of *The Color Purple*." In general, these studies address the prominent strategies of euphemism and attenuation used to translate sex-taboo material from Chinese literary texts into English.

Lee and Ngai (2012:89) observe that Chinese-English translations exhibit "different trajectories in terms of their translational dispositions," which is especially evident in the depiction of sexually sensitive material in *Peony*

Pavilion. Zhang's translation is found to show "signs of manipulation as far as sexually sensitive content is concerned," whereas Wang's version "does not show significant signs of mitigating sexual references. Instead, sexual references are made more plain and direct." Birch "keeps to the source text very closely in terms of preserving its erotic and sex-related descriptions, to the extent that a foreign feel is often evident." (Lee & Ngai, 2012:89) In a similar vein, it can be assumed that the three translators use different strategies but similar approaches to render original death-related content in English.

The findings of previous studies on cultural and taboo translation and the translation of sex-related material indicate that the following areas are worthy of investigation: 1) the use of the avoidance strategy described by Crisafulli (1997) and Han (2008) to translate material relating to death, a Chinese cultural taboo; and 2) a comparison of the different sex-taboo translation strategies used by Birch, Zhang and Wang with their respective means of translating material on ghosts and the underworld. Five aspects of the death taboo that came into sight in *Peony Pavilion* are addressed: the naming of the dead and the underworld; causes of death; the movement of the dead; the incorruptible body; and resurrection.

3. Text analysis

The five dimensions listed above are examined in each of three English versions of *Peony Pavilion* to compare the approaches taken by their authors to translating representations of death.

3.1 Naming ghosts, spirits and the underworld

Naming supernatural elements

Zeitlin (2007) argues that death and resurrection from *qíng* 情 was a major theme of Chinese literature from the late Ming to the Qing Dynasty, which places emphasis on the translation of material relating to death, the divine and the underworld. In the case of *Peony Pavilion*, for instance, it is important for both the researcher and the translator to “ascertain from lexicographers and standard writers, the meaning of the word which is to be translated.” (Medhurst, 1848:1) Attention and interpretation on the meaning of word amidst the translation of material on ghosts, gods and spirits in *Peony Pavilion* reveals the different strategies adopted by translators from diverse cultural backgrounds. Birch, Zhang and Wang’s renderings of representations of the ghostly and the divine in Scene 23 of *Peony Pavilion* are compared and contrasted below.

(1) Original text (Scene 23)

(淨)花神，這女鬼說是後花園一夢，為花飛驚閃而亡。可是？

(Tang, 1999:2147)

(jìng) Huā shén, zhè nǚ guǐ shuì shì hòu huā yuán yí mèng, wèi huā
fēi jīng shǎn ér wáng. Kě shì?

(Judge) Flower God, the female ghost said she was dreaming in the
garden. She died of shock caused by the fallen petal. Right?

(author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

Judge: Flower Spirit, this ghost maiden claims to have died of a
shock she received when flower petals disturbed her dream in the
garden. Is this true? (Tang, 2002:280)

Zhang's translation

Judge: Flower God, this female ghost claimed she died of a fright
caused by a fallen flower in her dream in the back garden. Is that
true? (Tang, 2001:183)

Wang's translation

Infernal Judge: Flower God, she says that she had a dream in the
back garden and died of a startle caused by a fallen flower. Is that
true? (Tang, 2000:280)

Birch's translation follows the source text closely, as he translates Scene 23's *nǚ guǐ* 女鬼 as "ghost maiden." However, his translation also demonstrates a tendency for naturalization on stylistic grounds, as the connection between ghosts and maidens has been a popular source of artistic creativity in painting, literature and cinema since the Renaissance.

Similarly, Zhang translates *nǚ guǐ* 女鬼 in Scene 23 as "female ghost." The only difference lies in the gender marker. Compared with Zhang's literal translation, Birch's addition of "maiden," which usually describes a young, unmarried female virgin, is highly acculturated and reflects certain characteristics of the Dù Lìniáng persona. In contrast, Wang manipulates the text by rendering *nǚ guǐ* 女鬼 into "she" to minimize the "ghostliness" of Dù Lìniáng's image and on top attenuates the depiction of ghost.

The translators' different versions of "spirit" and "god" are also noteworthy. The Chinese *huā shén* 花神 refers to the spirit of flowers. The word *shén* 神 has multiple connotations. Fundamentally, it defines the creator of all creatures in heaven and on earth, but it can also be extended to the spirits of saints or remarkable men who have passed away. It can even be used to describe the spirits residing in nature, such as those of mountains, trees, stones and flora.

Zhang and Wang's rendering of *huā shén* 花神 as "flower god" is a literal and faithful translation of the original word, although it is not always so easy to transfer meaning literally from the source to the target language and culture. In contrast, Birch does not use the word "god," presumably because in the dominant Western Christian tradition this defines the single absolute being that created and preserves the world. Instead, he translates *huā shén* 花神 as "flower spirit" to reduce the religious implications of a more literal translation.

In addition to the different interpretations of the word "god," there are noticeable differences in the translation of "ghost" and "spirit" in Scene 27 from Chinese into English, as indicated in (2).

(2) Original text (Scene 27)

奴家杜麗娘女魂是也。(Tang, 1999:2162)

Nú jiā dù lì niáng nǚ hún shì yě.

I'm the female spirit of Dù Liniáng (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

You see before you the spirit form of Bridal Dù. (Tang, 2002:151-152)

Zhang's translation

I'm none other than the ghost of Dù Liniáng. (Tang, 2001:214)

Wang's translation

I'm Dù Liniáng in the ghost form. (Tang, 2000:333)

Dù Liniáng descends to the underworld as a result of her overwhelming desire for an unfulfilled love relationship. Tang names her *nǚ guǐ* 女鬼 in Scene 23, during her judgment in the underworld. After being given the opportunity to re-enter the living world to find her true love, she is retitled as *nǚ hún* 女魂 and *hún* 魂 (Scene 27). According to the *Shuō wén jiě zì*,¹ *guǐ* 鬼 and *hún* 魂 differ in Chinese understanding. The former refers to the spirit that remains after death, and the latter refers to “breath” or the human spirit. As stated in the *Zì huì*,² it is traditionally believed that the human life form can be fully regenerated by absorbing essence from heaven, *hún* 魂, and earth, *pò* 魄. When one passes away, one's body returns to earth, one's blood becomes water, and one's “breath” or spirit, *hún* 魂, ascends to heaven. The wandering remnant of the self is known as *guǐ* 鬼. Therefore, Tang deliberately gives Dù's spirit after death the name *guǐ* 鬼, and on her re-entry to the mortal world, names her spirit *hún* 魂.”

Birch translates Scene 27's *nǚ hún* 女魂 as “spirit” to adhere as closely as possible to the original text by differentiating *guǐ* 鬼 (ghost) from *hún* 魂 (spirit). However, both Zhang and Wang translate *nǚ hún* 女魂 as “ghost” in Scene 27, interpreting both *guǐ* 鬼 and *hún* 魂 as “ghost” and eliding the distinction between them.

In reality, the terms “spirit” and “ghost” are often used interchangeably as there is no consensus on their philosophical or psychological definitions. Nonetheless, the psychologist James Hilman argues that “spirit” is often associated with the “afterlife, cosmic issues, idealistic values and hopes, and universal truths,” (Hilman, 1989:112-113) whereas “ghost” conventionally refers to the spirit that has left the body after death.

Naming the underworld

At the beginning of Scene 23 of *Peony Pavilion*, Judge Hú of the underworld describes himself as “Judge Hú under the tenth court governed by Yán Luó Wáng, King of Hell” in the dialogue that follows the music entitled *Diǎn jiàng chún* 點絳脣. The three translators’ interpretations of the underworld setting are compared in (3).

(3) Original text (Scene 23)

自家土地閻羅王殿下一箇胡判官是也。原有十位殿下……玉帝
可憐見下官正直聰明，著權管土地獄印信。今日走馬到任……

(Tang, 1999:2143)

*zì jiā shí dì yán luó wáng diàn xià yī gè hú pàn guān shì yě. Yuán
yǒu shí wèi diàn xià...yù dì kě lián jiàn xià guān zhèng zhí cōng
míng, zhào quán guǎn shí dì yù yìn xìn. Jīn rì zǒu mǎ dào rèn...*

I'm Judge Hu under the King of Tenth Hell. They used to have tenth
Kings... The Emperor Jade saw my dignity and cleverness, awarded
me the seal of the Tenth Hell. I'm reporting duty in a hurry today...

(author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

I am Judge Hu of the staff of the Infernal Prince Yama. There used to
be ten princes... But there was nowhere to dispose of my seal of
office, and the Jade Emperor, impressed by my honesty and
intelligence, has reinstated me acting pro tem in charge of the tenth
tribunal. This very day I have ridden here to take up my duties...

(Tang, 2002:120)

Zhang's translation

I'm Judge Hu who used to serve under the Tenth Prince. There had
been ten princes in office ... Consequently, there was no one to keep

the official seal. As a reward for my honesty and wittiness, he placed it in my hand. Today is my first day in office. (Tang, 2001:171)

Wang's translation

I am Judge Hu under Prince of Tenth Hell. There had been ten princes in the hell... As there was no one to take care of the official seal, the Jade Emperor placed it in my charge as a reward to my honesty and intelligence. Today is my first day to be in office. (Tang, 2000:265)

Birch translates *shí dì yù* 十地獄 as “the tenth tribunal” and “tenth tribunal of hell” in the dialogue (as listed in the parallel texts above) and in the lyrics of *Diǎn jiàng chún* respectively and whilst Wang offers “tenth hell.” Both versions use the word “hell” to emphasize the torture and punishment that is held in many cultures and religions, such as Chinese folk culture, Buddhism (Hsiao, 1988) and Christianity (Cross & Livingstone, 2005), to occur in the underworld.

In fact, the particular legend of *shí dì yù* 十地獄 dates back to the Tang Dynasty, when Taoists disseminated the belief that Hell is composed of ten courts that serve different punitive objectives. For instance, the first court judges people who have died naturally; the second court punishes rapists,

burglars and killers; and so on. The tenth court is the final judicial hurdle that a ghost must overcome before embarking on the path to reincarnation.

Zhang presents the idea of “hell” in a different manner, rendering the word *shí dì yù* 十地獄 as “office” in the dialogue after *Diǎn jiàng chún* 點絳脣 and omitting *shí dì* 十地 in the lyrics. In his translation, the terms “nether” and “hell” only occur in the chapter title and in the song of *Hùn jiāng lóng* 混江龍; not in the first major piece of music, *Diǎn jiàng chún* 點絳脣. In addition, the word “nether” is a fairly neutral and plain descriptor of the underworld, unlike Birch and Wang’s “infernal,” which strongly evokes theological frameworks of the underworld. Zhang seems to take a more subtle and euphemistic approach than Birch and Wang to the translation of *shí dì yù* 十地獄.

3.2 Causes of death

It is interesting to examine the translation into English of the discussion of causes of death—another taboo subject in traditional Chinese society—in *Peony Pavilion*, a play that glorifies the power of *qíng* 情 (love) as manifested in the leading character’s journey beyond life and death in pursuit of love. The three English versions of *Peony Pavilion* provide different translations of the numerous discussions of causes of death in Scenes 23, 27 and 28. The

following first addresses the dialogue in Scene 23 between Judge Hu and the flower spirit regarding Dù Liniáng's cause of death, followed by Dù Liniáng's own reports of her cause of death in Scenes 27 and 28.

In Scene 23, the Judge of the underworld asks the flower spirit whether a disturbed dream can truly induce death. The specific cause of death is mentioned twice during the conversation. The following investigates the similarities and differences between these lines in the original Chinese *Peony Pavilion* and its three English translations.

(4) Original text (Scene23)

(淨)花神，這女鬼說是後花園一夢，為花飛驚閃而亡。可是？

(末)是也。他與秀才夢的緣纏，偶爾落花驚醒。這女子慕色而亡。(Tang, 1999:2147)

(jìng) Huā shén, zhè nǚ guǐ shuì shì hòu huā yuán yí mèng, wèi huā fēi jīng shǎn ér wáng. Kě shì?

(mò) shì yě. Tā yǔ xiù cái mèng de mián chán, ǒu ěr là huā jīng xǐng. Zhè nǚ zǐ mù sè ér wáng.

(Judge) Flower God, the female ghost said she was dreaming in the garden. She died of shock caused by the fallen petal. Right?

(Flower God) Yes. She had a sweet dream with the scholar. Sudden awakened by the fallen petal. This female died of longing for love.
(author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

Judge: Flower Spirit, this ghost maiden claims to have died of a shock she received when flower petals disturbed her dream in the garden. Is this true?

Flower Spirit: It is true. She was tenderly entwined in a dream of a young scholar when a chance fall of petals startled her into wakefulness. Passionate longings brought about her death. (Tang, 2002:280)

Zhang's translation

Judge: Flower God, this female ghost claimed she died of a fright caused by a fallen flower in her dream in the back garden. Is that true?

Flower God: Yes, that's true. She was dreaming a very sweet dream with a scholar when she was startled awake by a fallen flower. She died of yearning. (Tang, 2001:183)

Wang's translation

Infernal Judge: Flower God, she says that she had a dream in the back garden and died of a startle caused by a fallen flower. Is that true?

Flower God: Yes. She was dreaming of a rendezvous with a young scholar when she was wakened by a fallen flower. She died of lovesickness. (Tang, 2000:280)

Before undertaking a detailed comparison of the target versions, it is essential to note that in the original text, the cause of death is described as *wáng* 亡 instead of *sǐ* 死, to enervate the negative emotional effect of the word “die” or “death.” Zhang and Wang both take a faithful but plain approach to the translation of the line on the cause of death, which states that Dù Lìniáng “died of the shock she received when flower petals disturbed her dream in the garden.” However, Zhang interprets the cause of death, *jīng shǎn* 驚閃, as “fright,” whereas Wang describes Dù Lìniáng as having been “startle[d],” to capture the sudden movement of wilting flowers. The former evokes a sense of fear and terror that suits the setting of this scene in the underworld, but does not originate in the source text.

Birch’s interpretation of the cause of death is very different: “passionate longings brought about her death.” His Judge Hú presents Dù’s cause of death actively and directly, whereas the flower spirit responds in a more passive

voice. This interpretation is presumably chosen to suit the roles and stylistic features of the characters. It is not difficult to imagine the judge of the underworld as fierce, powerful and direct when discussing death, and the flower spirit as more subtle and gentle when speaking on the same subject. Again, however, these subtle differences in voice do not originate from the source text.

The flower spirit's description of the cause of Dù's death also warrants further investigation. In response to Judge Hú's enquiry, the flower spirit clarifies that Dù Lìniáng's death was caused by *mù sè* 慕色 (longing for love). The word *mù* 慕 means "longing for" in Chinese; *sè* 色 originally described a facial expression, but later extended its meaning to cover love or even lust. The phrase *mù sè* 慕色 is translated as "passionate longing," "yearning" and "lovesickness" by Birch, Zhang and Wang respectively. Birch's version is euphemistic in that he reduces "longing for love" to "passionate longing." Zhang's version is highly euphemistic and almost incomprehensible. Wang offers the most naturalized and direct translation, deepening and magnifying the meaning of "longing for love" as "lovesickness."

In addition to the discussion between Judge Hú and the flower spirit, Dù Lìniáng herself reports on her cause of death in Scene 28. The interpretations

of the source text by the English translations are discussed in parallel in (5).

(5) Original text (Scene 28)

妾身杜麗娘鬼魂是也。為花園一夢，想念而終。(Tang,

1999:2167)

*qiè shēn dù lì niáng guǐ hún shì yě. Wèi huā yuán yī mèng, xiǎng
niàn ér zhōng.*

I'm the ghost of Dù Liniáng. For the dream in garden, died of pining
for love. (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

I am the ghost of Bridal Dù, who died of pining after a garden
dream. (Tang, 2002:159)

Zhang's translation

I'm the ghost of Dù Liniáng. A dream in the garden drained off my
life. (Tang, 2001:225)

Wang's translation

I'm Dù Liniáng in the ghost form. I pined away for a dream in the
garden. (Tang, 2000:348)

The death of Dù Liniáng is described in Scenes 27 and 28 as *wáng* 亡 and *zhōng* 終, respectively. According to the *Shuō wén jiě zì*, both words are closely tied to the idea of death, *sǐ* 死. However, *wáng* 亡 is more frequently collocated with the word *sǐ* 死 in Chinese, whereas *zhōng* 終 denotes the end or termination, a commonly used euphemism for death. Zhang and Wang's translations embrace the subtle difference between *wáng* 亡 and *zhōng* 終. Zhang translates *iǎng niàn ér zhōng* 想念而終 as “drained off my life,” and Wang interprets the same phrase as “pined away for a dream.” Neither necessarily encapsulate the full meaning of “death.” Birch's translation draws attention to the cause of death by adopting the phrase “died of pining after a garden dream” in the target text.

3.3 Movement of shades

The spirit of Dù Liniáng is seen in motion in five of the scenes in *Peony Pavilion*, particularly in Scenes 27, 28 and 32, during which she is granted the opportunity to re-enter the mortal world to meet her soul mate. The three English translations of the original Scene 27, set in the nunnery built after Dù's death, are compared below, with especial reference to their interpretations of Dù's liveliness and vivacity.

(6) Original text (Scene 27)

趁此月明風細，隨喜一番。(Tang, 1999:2162)

chèn cǐ yuè míng fēng xì, suí xǐ yī pān.

in the moonlight and gentle breeze, touring around (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

This is a night of bright moon and gentle breezes and I roam at will.

(Tang, 2002:151-152)

Zhang's translation

...I can roam freely over the land in this moonlit night and balmy breeze. (Tang, 2001:214)

Wang's translation

...I can roam at will in this moonlit night. (Tang, 2000:333)

Tang describes the movement of Dù's spirit through the nunnery as *suí xǐ* 隨喜 to create a pleasant ambience as she tours the nunnery in soft moonlight and a gentle breeze. This phrase has its roots in Buddhist writing, with the extended meaning of wandering around a temple in no particular order. All

three translators choose “roam” to highlight the action of spontaneous wandering entailed in *suí xǐ* 隨喜 without placing any emphasis on the idea of “touring.”

(7) Original text (Scene 28)

悄然入他房中，則見高掛起一軸小畫。(Tang, 1999:2167)

qiào rán mò rù tā fáng zhōng, zé jiàn gāo guà qǐ yī zhóu xiǎo huà.

Swirling into his room, saw a painting hanging up high (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

Secret I slipped into the room, to find a painted scroll hung high on the wall. (Tang, 2002:157)

Zhang's translation

Thus, I slipped into his room and saw a scroll-painting hanging high on the wall (Tang, 2001:225)

Wang's translation

When I glided into his room, I saw a tiny scroll hanging on the wall (Tang, 2000:348)

The movement of the spirit is even more vividly described in Scene 28, when Dù's spirit enters Liǔ's room swiftly in response to his passionate call. In the source text, this movement is described as *qiào rán mò rù* 悄然驀入. Birch and Zhang translate *qiào rán mò rù* 悄然驀入 as “secret I slipped” and “I slipped,” whereas Wang uses “I glided” to depict the movement of Dù's spirit. All three versions highlight the ephemerality of the movement, which seems to detract slightly from the major emphases on *qiào* 俏 and *mò* 驀 in the original text. The first character means “nimble” and “ingenious,” and the second “sudden.” Zeitlin describes this kind of ghostly movement as a “swift, swirling motion.” (2007:156) In this light, the word “swift” is a closer translation and description of the movement *qiào rán mò rù* 悄然驀入.

In addition to the roaming and swift movements depicted in Scenes 27 and 28, the interaction of the spirit with a mortal man is narrated in Scene 32, when Liǔ and Dù profess their love. The following compares the three translators' interpretations of Dù's reflection on the interaction of her spirit with Liǔ.

(8) Original text (Scene 32)

今宵不說，只管人鬼混纏到甚時節？(Tang, 1999:2180)

jīn xiāo bú shuì, zhǐ guǎn rén guǐ hún chán dào shén shí jié?

Not telling tonight, how long could the man ghost entangle?

(author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

But if I do not speak out tonight, how long can we continue this
masquerade between mortal and ghost? (Tang, 2002:181)

Zhang's translation

I must tell him all this tonight, or what will come of this jumble of
human and ghost? (Tang, 2001:255)

Wang's translation

...therefore, if I don't tell him about it tonight, what good will come
of a rendezvous between man and ghost? (Tang, 2000:397)

Birch characterizes the sexual entanglement between Dù's spirit and the mortal Liǔ Mèngméi as a masquerade. His use of the Western convention of masquerade, the masked costume party, evokes the aesthetics of Gothic literature of the seventeenth century (Morgan, 1998), a period contemporaneous with the production of *Peony Pavilion*.

Zhang's literal translation of *húncán* 混纏 as “jumble” greatly attenuates the emphasis on the key theme of the play, passionate love (*qíng*). He presents the romance between gentleman and maiden, living and dead, in terms of confusion and disorder.

Like Birch, Wang conveys a sense of romance in the joyful entanglement between Liǔ and Dù. His choice of the term “rendezvous,” borrowed from the French, is today associated with a date or planned encounter between lovers. His translation thus manages to strike a good balance between faithfulness to the source text and readability for the target audience.

3.4 The incorruptible body

In traditional Chinese culture, a dead body is generally believed to decay after its spirit has left for judgment and reincarnation. However, Dù Liniáng's dead body is preserved from deterioration for three years by the flower spirit at the behest of Judge Hú in Scene 23, to enable Dù to continue in her pursuit of true love and resurrection. The following compares the references to her well-preserved dead body in the source text and its translations.

(9) Original text (Scene 32)

奴家雖登鬼錄，未損人身。(Tang, 1999:2180)

nú jiā suī dēng guǐ lù, wèi sǔn rén shēn.

My name is registered in the book of ghost, my human body is
unharmd (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

Although my name is entered in the ghostly registers, the moral
body of Bridal Dù remains incorrupt. (Tang, 2002:181)

Zhang's translation

Although I'm registered as a ghost, my human body hasn't
decomposed. (Tang, 2001:255)

Wang's translation

Although I've entered the nether world, I still keep my body intact.
(Tang, 2000:397)

The three English versions reveal the use of different translation strategies and the influence of the translator as a writer (Bassnett & Bush, 2006:1-8). Birch's use of the word "incorrupt" reflects a higher degree of acculturation, as it derives from the term "incorruptible body" as used in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions to describe the post-mortem incorruptibility of the bodies of saints and holy men or women (Cruz, 1977).

Zhang and Wang tend to adhere to the source text. This is evident in Wang's choice of the word "intact" to describe the preservation of Dù's body in a virginal and immaculate state. Zhang highlights the supernatural and anti-physical state of the body in his unvarnished translation: "my human body hasn't decomposed."

3.5 Resurrection after death

In *Peony Pavilion*, Dù Liniáng's longing for love is strong enough to transcend both life and death. However, her resurrection not only confuses her parents but continues to pose a challenge for translators of the text. The process of resurrection and the lovers' subsequent reunion are depicted in Scene 55.

A controversial moment in Scene 55 is Dù Liniáng's explanation of her death and resurrection to her father, in the hope of winning back his support and trust on her revival of life and marriage to Liǔ Mèngméi. The bilingual term *qián wáng hòu huà* 前亡後化 addressed in (10) is a thematic expression of resurrection after death.

(10) Original text (Scene 55)

這底是前亡後化，抵多少陰錯陽差。(Tang, 1999:2273)

Zhè de shì qián wáng hòu huà, dǐ duō shǎo yīn cuò yáng chā.

This is before death after revival, causes a lot of mispairing of ying
and yang (author's source text oriented translation)

Birch's translation

Here was in truth my death and resurrection

And such the reversal

Of ying and yang, of dark and light. (Tang, 2002:330)

Zhang's translation

Any yet the death and birth through which I went

Is of a lesser trial than

The many mispairings of yin and yang. (Tang, 2001:459)

Wang's translation

My revival after death

Implied all the mishaps I had. (Tang, 2000:745)

All three versions are consistent in their translation of *wáng* 亡 as “death,”
but interpret the character *huà* 化 differently. According to the *Shuō wén jiě*
zì, *huà*, 化 literally means “change,” which includes the meaning “change of

form or nature.” A post-mortem change of form or nature is perceived analogically as resurrection after death.

It is worth briefly investigating the different beliefs regarding resurrection and return to life in the target languages/cultures. There is heated debate in *The Apostle’s Creed* and Catholic tradition regarding types of resurrection, such as spiritual resurrection in a spiritual body, and material resurrection in a restored human body. Resurrection, as defined in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, is “the rising again from the dead, the resumption of life.” In the *Creed*, however, this kind of return to life is understood as the resurrection of the body, because the soul is believed to be immortal and can thus neither be said to die nor to return to life. Therefore, the process by which Dù’s spirit reunites with her incorrupt body and she resumes life would in Catholic terms be regarded as the resurrection of the body.

Birch and Wang both translate *huà 化* as resurrection, but Wang adheres more faithfully to the sequential relationship between death and resurrection evoked in the source text. The words “resurrection” and “revival” have different meanings in English. The former implies “rising from the dead,” whereas the latter indicates a reanimation or return to consciousness that does not necessarily begin with death. Birch’s translation has been naturalized and domesticized to conform to the target culture’s religious beliefs. Zhang’s

translation is unique in the sense that he views “birth,” “the moment at which one is born,” as equivalent to the Chinese idea of *chóng shēng* 重生 (rebirth).

4. Discussion, conclusion and further thoughts

The aim of this study is to examine whether the different strategies used by Birch, Zhang and Wang to translate sex-taboo material in *Peony Pavilion* are the same as those used to translate descriptions of ghosts and the underworld. Analysis of numerous bilingual text samples indicates that various strategies are used to translate death-related taboo material. These strategies reflect the translators’ beliefs about death, the underworld and resurrection, and thus diverge somewhat from their observed tendencies in the translation of erotic material. To summarize, all of the three versions uphold the integrity of the source text, but reveal different approaches to death-taboo translation. Birch leans towards the naturalization strategy, whereas Wang adheres closely to the source text, pursuing chiefly semantic translation. Zhang moves between literal translation and euphemism.

With reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, Crisafulli suggests that translators tend to adopt the strategy of avoidance when translating taboo language (1997:240). This does not seem to be true of Birch, as he avoids neither sexual (Lee &

Ngai, 2012:90) nor death-related references. However, the “foreign feel” imparted in his translation of sexual material in *Peony Pavilion* (Lee & Ngai, 2012:90) is not conveyed in his death references, which are instead naturalized and acculturated. This acculturation strategy is particularly clear in his cautious selection of synonyms for “ghost,” “god” and “resurrection,” and his inclusion of culturally or religious loaded utterances in the target language.

Death-related expressions often carry significant religious implications in the Western Christian tradition, and translators should interpret sensitive material on death carefully to avoid arousing resentment and antagonism in their target readers. Instead of using “ghost,” “spirit” and “soul” interchangeably as his Chinese counterparts, Birch makes judicious lexical choices, particularly in the differentiation of “ghost” and “spirit,” as discussed in (2), and the translation of “resurrection” addressed in (10). In addition, he deliberately avoids translating *huā shén* literally as “flower god,” as explained in (1).

Birch’s translation is the product of a higher degree of naturalization, as is clear from his introduction of a number of culturally and/or religiously loaded phrases such as “ghost maiden” in (1), “masquerade between mortal and ghost” in (8) and “incorruptible body” in (9), which are intended to enhance the understanding of the target readers. Birch’s strategy for translating death-related expressions is notably different from his strategy for translating

sexually sensitive materials, as he does not always domesticate sex-related descriptions to suit target-language norms (Lee & Ngai, 2012:90).

Like Birch, Wang does not avoid translating death-related expressions. Rather, he offers faithful semantic translations of such utterances (1, 4, 5, 8 and 9); a strategy highly consistent with his approach to sexual-taboo translation (Lee & Ngai, 2012:89). He translates Tang's poetic and theatrical style of writing semantically and idiomatically. His semantic translation is faithful to the original text, and rhymes in a manner consistent with Tang's own intentions (Tang, 2000:847-849).

Zhang's translation of death-related expressions adheres closely and literally to the source text, to the extent that a "foreign" ambience is often conveyed in his version of *Peony Pavilion* (2, 3, 6, 7 and 8). Examples include his translation of phrases like "died of a fright caused by a fallen flower" (4), "jumble of human and ghost" (8) and "my human body hasn't decomposed" (9), which usually make death references more straightforward, but sometimes alienate them. In contrast with his attenuation of sexually sensitive materials (Lee & Ngai, 2012:89), Zhang tends to take a literal and verbatim approach to translating death-related expressions in *Peony Pavilion* but a euphemistic approach in the rendering of *dì yù* 地獄 (hell) into English.

Birch's tendency to domesticate the source text to fit the norms of the target language and culture can in part be explained by its publication context: his translation was printed and distributed by a renowned university press in the United States to enable elite readers in the West to become acquainted with Chinese literature and culture. An acculturated approach will assuredly enhance target readers' comprehension of the narration. As stated by the translator himself, the purpose of Wang's version is to disseminate Chinese culture to other parts of the world; retaining the meaning of the original text and its musical delivery is thus crucial (Tang, 2000:848). In view of this, a faithful translation of death related expressions could aid the delivery of substances in the original text undoubtedly. Zhang's translation makes death-related expressions plain and sometimes "foreignized," as his revised version focuses on the musicality of the translated text (Tang, 2001:v) and targets a mass readership in general.

In view of the above, it is evident that Crisafulli's argument for the prevalence of avoidance strategies when translating taboo language does not apply to the translation of death-related content from Chinese to English in the three versions of *Peony Pavilion* examined here. The present paper demonstrates that each of the three translations of *Peony Pavilion* into English tends to retain the source text's death-related expressions without mitigating this taboo material in their target texts.

The findings of this study are corroborated by a previous study on the correlation between translation strategies and the role of translators as “writers.” (Basenett & Bush, 2006:1) In other words, translators should be regarded as a writer in a sense that their choices of translation approaches arise from their intentions, perceptions, perceived responsibilities and even the needs of a target readership, regulate the translation strategies adopted and the target texts produced. The strategies used by Birch and Zhang to translate *Peony Pavilion*’s sexual-taboo material differ starkly from those used to translate its death-related content. In Birch’s translation, there is a tendency towards foreignization in the translation of erotic allusions, whereas death-related language is usually domesticated. A similar divergence is revealed in Zhang’s translation between euphemistic erotic translation and the literal translation of material relating to ghosts and the underworld.

This disparity between the strategies used by the same translator to translate sexually sensitive taboo material and to translate death-related taboo material is best explained with reference to cultural differences and the feasibility of locating formal equivalence in the target text. For example, Birch tends to impart a “foreign feel” to his translations of Chinese erotic metaphors when it is impossible to achieve metaphorical equivalence in English. Comparably, Zhang prefers to foreignize culturally loaded, sensitive death-related content in *Peony Pavilion* for dramatic effect when equivalent expressions are not available in the target language and culture.

Based on the above observations, it is possible to hypothesize that euphemistic and avoidance strategies for translating sexual and/or death-related sensitive content in classical Chinese literary texts are not mutually exclusive. Neither are translators' cultural and linguistic backgrounds solely responsible for their translation approaches. Rather, the translation strategy chosen depends on four major factors: the motives or rationale of the translator, the target readership, the nature of the cultural element to be translated, and the availability of equivalent expressions in the target language. The validity of this hypothesis would need to be tested further by comparing and contrasting literary translations of taboo expressions in different genres of Chinese literature.

Note

1. *Shuō wén jiě zì* is the first comprehensive Chinese character dictionary written in Han Dynasty (early 2nd century). A Facsimile Edition of the dictionary can be retrieved from <http://www.gg-art.com/imgbook/index.php>
2. *Zì huì* is the Chinese dictionary edited by Mei Yingzuo in the Ming Dynasty.

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