

The Western Reception of Distinctive Suzhou Culture: The English Translation of Cultural Signs in *Kunqu Fushengliuji*

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Abstract

Kunqu Fushengliuji (Garden Edition), newly born in 2018, is an immersive performance in a Suzhou garden (world cultural heritage), namely Canglang Pavilion, through the artistic form of *kunqu* (world intangible cultural heritage), which proves itself a perfect window for an audience to understand the distinctive Suzhou culture and Suzhou lifestyle. From a perspective of translation semiotics, specifically the translation of the three headings of cultural signs, we analyze its English translation by sinologist Kim Hunter Gordon, and find the status of communication of distinctive Suzhou culture to the West. With these findings, and more importantly, through the understanding and cognition of Westerners, we may be able to see the achievements and shortcomings in the communication of Chinese culture to the outside world, observe the initiative and tactics of “Chinese culture going out”, and improve them deeply and constantly.

Keywords: *Fushengliuji, distinctive Suzhou culture, cultural signs, translation semiotics, kunqu*

1. Introduction

Fushengliuji (《浮生六记》, *Six Records of a Floating Life*), an autobiographical prose of Suzhou native Shen Fu (1763-1825), was written in 1808, the 13th year of Jiaqing period of Qing Dynasty. It tells a story of a scholar-literati family dwelling near Canglang Ting (沧浪亭, the Canglang Pavilion) that is located in the south of

Suzhou city. In contrast to average Chinese classics that mostly center on the grandeur of royal families and heroic figures, it is the acute portrayal of love that sets it apart. The hero Shen Fu and his cousin, the heroine Chen Yun, fall in love at first sight, then become man and wife. After marriage, this affectionate couple is always seeking joy amid hardship without falling into secular daily life. Unfortunately, Chen Yun dies of illness in her middle age, while Shen Fu roams away from home and writes *Fushengliuji* to comfort his grief of separation between life and death. The original text is composed of six volumes, including *Guifangjile* (《闺房记乐》, *Wedded Bliss*), *Xianqingjiqu* (《闲情记趣》, *The Little Pleasures of Life*), *Kankejichou* (《坎坷记愁》, *Sorrow*), *Langyoujikuai* (《浪游记快》, *The Joys of Travel*), *Zhongshanjili* (《中山记历》, *Experience*) and *Yangshengjido* (《养生记道》, *The Way of Life*). However, only the first four volumes have survived till today. By mid-2021, there are four English translated versions of *Fushengliuji*: Lin Yutang's (林语堂) in 1939 by Shanghai HisFeng / Westwind Press, Shirley Black's in 1960 by Oxford University Press, Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui's in 1983 by Viking Press in London and Graham Sanders' in 2011 by Hackett Publishing Company. It is quite interesting that the studies on its translations are much more than those on its original work, among which Lin Yutang's version is a frequented object.

Fushengliuji is an acknowledged “phenomenal Chinese classic, well acclaimed both at home and abroad” (Meng & Meng, 2020, p. 124), while the *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition)¹ (园林版昆曲《浮生六记》) wins the title of “a phenomenal play” in China as well and widely welcome by its audience from home and abroad even though it is still in infancy. Such an immersive performance in Suzhou garden (world cultural heritage), namely Canglang Pavilion, through the artistic form of *kunqu* (world intangible cultural heritage) proves itself a perfect window for visitors to understand distinctive Suzhou culture and Suzhou lifestyle. Therefore, the English translation of the signs of distinctive Suzhou culture in this play deserves further attention and may bring us new ideas for the improvement of the “Chinese culture going out” initiative (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A poster of *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition)

2. *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) and Its Translator

Kunqu Fushengliuji (Garden Edition) is a “theatre+” innovative cultural project jointly created by Suzhou Gusu District Government, Suzhou Garden and Greening Administration Bureau and Yu Theatre Company², aiming to display the charm of distinctive Suzhou culture and lifestyle, propel the development of urban tourism and culture, and enhance the international popularity of Suzhou city. Due to the original intention and the constraints of time and space of performance, this version does not include all the plots in Shen Fu’s original work. A young scriptwriter named Zhou Mian adapted the story into a *kunqu* playscript with one *yinzi* (引子, prologue) and five scenes: *chunzhan* (春盏, a bowl of spring), *xiadeng* (夏灯, summer lanterns), *qiuxing* (秋兴, autumn excursion), *dongxue* (冬雪, winter blizzard) and *chunzai* (春再, spring again). It only takes Shen Fu and Chen Yun’s love as the key thread and presents episodes of their marriage and daily life in different seasons as if unrolling a picture of Suzhou life characterized by literature, paintings, streets, waters, lotus and stone bridges, all of which show distinctive Suzhou culture of interest and elegance.

Since its premiere at the Canglang Pavilion in Suzhou on August 17th, 2018³, *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) has put on around 190 performances in less than three years, in spite of more than half a year's pause due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. To a great surprise, this version has attracted large audiences both at home and abroad, and is especially popular with youngsters. Moreover, it was invited to stage at the Avignon Theatre Festival in France in July 2019, which is an exceptionally rare phenomenon among newly adapted plays in China in recent years. One secret of its winning lies in its immersive performance by “*kunqu* plus garden” initiative. Canglang Pavilion is the oldest extant garden in Suzhou today that was listed as a world tangible heritage site in 2000, while *kunqu* was born in Suzhou more than 600 years ago and was listed as a world intangible heritage of humanity in 2001. This play gives a new lease to classical garden and traditional *kunqu* and brings new life to Shen Fu's famous work. As Hunter Gordon says, “The special thing about this production is that it is set in the very garden next to which Shen Fu grew up and where he and his wife Chen Yun first set up home. It was an important place in their life. In one episode in the book, Shen arranges for them to visit the garden in private. While much of the layout, scale and architecture of the present garden has changed since then, the current pavilion is the same one that they visited. So by coming into the actual setting of their story, the audience is invited back in time into the book itself” (see Zhang & Zhou, 2018). What is most impressive for the audience is that everyone can be “immersed” in the beauty of classical garden as well as *kunqu*, two representative items of distinctive Suzhou culture, and perceive Suzhou's exquisite elegance and charm without distance.

It is worth noticing that *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) has paid special attention to a multi-levelled, multi-channeled and multi-model publicity and promotion since the beginning of its creation, especially an international style in external communication. One of the most ingenious measures is the installation of Chinese-English subtitles at various locations by the path of the performance in Canglang Pavilion, either embedded on walls beside flower windows or at the foot of rockeries, which perfectly blend in with the plot of the story. Moreover, the English subtitles were translated by Kim Hunter Gordon⁴, a young sinologist. Hunter Gordon was born in Scotland in 1981. Interested in theatre since childhood, his doctoral research at Royal Holloway, University of London was concerned with the transmission and construction of *kunqu* performance. As a visiting scholar in China, he studied Chinese language, *kunqu* singing and performance at the Beijing

Film Academy, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Nanjing University and Jiangsu *Kunqu* Theatre. Hunter Gordon is now Assistant Professor of Chinese and Performance Studies at Duke Kunshan University, China. He is an experienced translator of *kunqu* subtitles of English versions of more than 10 *kunqu* full-lengthplays and 20 selected scenes. He has been living and working in Suzhou in recent years and was invited to engage in the creation of *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) from its very beginnings⁵, not just as a translator, but as a *kunqu* consultant. Such a special background distinguishes Hunter Gordon from many other translators of *kunqu* that his professional understanding of *Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) and unique expressions of the target subtitles offer us a case in point for translation studies of this renowned work.

3. The Perspective of Translation Semiotics

Hunter Gordon says that “(t)here is a certain universal appeal to an evening performance in a beautiful garden. As for the play itself and its relationship to both Shen Fu’s original work and Chinese culture more broadly, we’ve thought really hard about how to use subtitles to make it more accessible to international audiences in the most effective and concise way possible.” (see Zhang & Zhou, 2018) Why is it really hard to convey the original meaning of the play through English subtitles? One obvious and undeniable reason is that *Fushengliuji*, especially this “*kunqu* plus garden” edition, is quite rich in distinctive Suzhou cultural signs. Following an old Chinese saying that goes like “To do a good job, one must first sharpen his tools”, let us first focus on some basic cultural elements from the perspective of translation studies.

3.1 Culture and cultural signs

Culture is normally defined as the material and spiritual achievements made by human beings. The term “culture” under discussion is defined both in a narrow sense and a broad sense. In the narrow sense, the concept of culture mainly pertains to the spiritual achievements gained by human beings, while in the broad sense it signifies the artificial transformation of nature, including both material and spiritual aspects.

There are different ways of classifying culture. In this paper we choose the trichotomy, that is, culture is classified under three headings: culture of material, culture of social system and behaviors, and culture of ideology. As Yang et al.(2003,

p. 3) elaborate: Culture of material mostly comprises productive forces, including tools of production, articles for daily use, science and technology applied to their production. It constitutes the fundamental part of culture. The second heading is composed of two aspects, culture of social system and behaviors, both of which are closely related to society. Culture of social system refers to the various systems that took shape in society, such as the economic system, the political system, the military system, the system of law, the system of education, and the system of marriage and family. The culture of behaviors indicates the kinds of customs and habits formed in society, which represents a kind of collective behavioral mode of human beings. Culture of ideology includes the spiritual systems abstracted and synthesized by great thinkers. As the culture of ideology profoundly reflects the essence of culture, it is mostly regarded as the core of culture.

3.2 Translation of cultural signs

Culture is not only an important factor for the formation of sign domain, but also the main factor to distinguish the boundary of sign text. Special snacks, customs and social conventions, ethics, laws, religious beliefs, literature, art and other cultural signs all belong to the research scope of translation semiotics.

Dinda L. Gorfée of Finland proposed the concept of translation semiotics as early as the 1990s. Since 1988, scholars in China have studied translation from the perspective of semiotics, using semiotics theory to analyze and verify literary translation, equivalence translation and translation of body language. However, the concept of translation semiotics did not appear until Jia Hongwei came up with it in his article in 2015 (Jia, 2016, p. 94). According to him, if we define all forms of human communication as translation in the broad sense, signs are the only medium of translation. Traditional translation activities mainly focus on the transformation between natural language signs, while translation activities, from the perspective of translation semiotics, include not only the transformation between tangible signs such as natural language, but also the transformation between tangible signs and intangible signs (Jia, 2018, p.111). Wang Mingyu contributes in his article that the purpose of translation semiotics is to explore the relationship between the nature, laws, rules, arbitrariness and interpretability of sign transformation from the perspective of semiotics, and to construct the semiotic theory and methodology with sign transformation as the object (Wang, 2015, p. 21).

We can benefit from the perspective of translation semiotics because its subject

connotation is very rich and it does make sense in the study of the translation of our play. Preliminary studies show that translation semiotics involves at least the following factors: the translation process of the signs, sign behavior, signrelationship, sign hierarchy, intersemioticalness, sign function, sign conservation, etc. (Wang, 2015, pp. 21-23).

According to the aforementioned definition and classification of culture, in the case of *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) we can find both material and spiritual culture, both of whose factors are presented in cultural signs. In the following part of this article we will use “cultural signs” to refer to marks or shapes that always have a particular meaning in distinctive Suzhou culture and Chinese culture, including cultural signs of material, cultural signs of social system and behaviors, and cultural signs of ideology. “As a comprehensive art that has been mature for hundreds of years, the heritage value of *kunqu* is reflected in many fields, such as language, literature, music, singing technique, dance, performance, acrobatics, props, makeup and so on.” (Zhu, 2020, p. 66) In other words, cultural signs are presented in many forms in *kunqu*, let alone in such an “immersive” performance in the classical garden. Therefore, the translation of the cultural signs is the biggest obstacle in introducing this play to foreign audience. Meanwhile, their translation by Western sinologists reflects their understanding of distinctive Suzhou culture, which serves as feedback on distinctive Suzhou culture in their eyes.

4. Translation Analysis of the Cultural Signs in *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition)

Since *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) is born rich in cultural signs and from the perspective of translation semiotics, the translation of cultural signs is an important index to judge the translator’s skill, let us analyze Kim Hunter Gordon’s English subtitles from three classifications of cultural signs, including cultural signs of material, cultural signs of social system and behaviors, and cultural signs of ideology.

4.1 Cultural signs of material

Cultural signs of material mostly comprise signs related to productive forces, including tools of production, articles for daily use, science and technology applied to their production. It constitutes the fundamental part of culture and compared with the other two classifications of culture, it is more obvious and perceivable. In *Kunqu*

Fushengliuji (Garden Edition) cultural signs of material are mostly displayed in the couple's basic necessities.

Fushengliuji tells a story of Suzhou in which Shen Fu and Chen Yun, like a fine pair of earthly celestials, comfortable and elegant, living the Suzhou lifestyle that finds contentment in nature and everyday life. Many cultural signs of material are represented by foods and articles for daily use, all of which, of course, are of distinctive Suzhou style. Suzhou natives are well-known to be fastidious about foods so that they, more often than not, only eat foods that are in season, following what the old saying *bu shi bu shi* (不时不食, never eat foods that are not in season) indicates. In such a play about an average couple's daily life, a large number of Suzhou specialties are mentioned. We list them as follows:

Table 1. Suzhou specialties

| | Original Text in Chinese | Kim Hunter Gordon's English Translation |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | 一只蘸玫瑰酱个白水粽 | a glutinous rice ball dipped in rose sauce |
| 2 | 白鱼, 银鱼和白虾 | whitefish, whitebait and white shrimp |
| 3 | 麻油, 白糖, 卤乳腐 | sesame oil, white sugar, fermented tofu |
| 4 | 桂花酒酿圆子 | osmanthus mead rice balls |
| 5 | 生煎馒头 | fried buns |
| 6 | 蟹壳黄 | crabshell buns |
| 7 | 香菇菜包 | vegetable dumplings |
| 8 | 豆沙包 | red bean dumplings |

For these specialties in the original text, the translator mainly adopts the method of literal translation in the target language, that is, uses the corresponding or close material objects in English to render them. Even the Suzhou style food, such as 一只蘸玫瑰酱个白水粽 (a glutinous rice ball dipped in rose sauce) and 桂花酒酿圆子 (osmanthus mead rice balls) which sound a little tongue-twisted in English translation, is conveyed in ready-made English by the translator, which is visual, obvious and is consistent with the real scene during the performance, thus in line with the situational characteristics of subtitle translation. Such a translated version by the sinologist shows that in his eyes, he is not unfamiliar with the food materials selected in these Suzhou style diets. There are the same or similar ingredients in English, so the translation can be fully understood and accepted. Furthermore, on the basis of the above translation

we can infer that in terms of food signs, although there are some differences between Chinese and Western cooking styles, patterns and tastes, it is still relatively easy to communicate with each other. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Suzhou style food and many other Chinese dishes are so popular all over the world.

Figure 2. *Luotuo danzi* (骆驼担子, camel stand with portable stove)



The middle of the Qing Dynasty witnessed Suzhou and Hangzhou's developed industry and commerce, prosperous economy and culture, and increased mobility of the population's spatial status. The cultural quality and the tradition of secluding in urban areas accumulated by the average people since the Ming Dynasty created a group of intellectuals who still had expectations for official careers, but did not abandon the embrace of mountains and rivers. "Up in heaven, there is paradise; down on earth, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou." Suzhou is famous for its beautiful scenery and it is one of the most popular entertainments to travel with friends. According to the plot in *Fushengliuji*, Shen Fu plans to admire the flowers in bloom outside the city walls, but at such distance how would it do to toast the flowers with only a cold dinner? Resourceful Chen Yun employs a vendor's *luotuo danzi* (骆驼担子) (see Figure 2), that they can enjoy warm food and wine in the open country amid the blossom. *Luotuo danzi* is two towering snack loads shaped like camel humps, and Suzhou natives also call it *liang jian ban* (两间半, two and a half). At one end of it is a stove with a pot on it, stocked with firewood for cooking whenever and wherever possible, and at the other end are several small drawers full of food, dishes, chopsticks

and seasonings. This kind of snack load with Jiangnan characteristics is popular in the Yangtze River Delta region, especially distinctive of the Suzhou streets. Just as the renowned writer Lu Wenfu (陆文夫) said in his *Search Dream in the Old Suzhou. Water Town*, “This kind of load is very special. It is called *luotuo danzi*, which is named because the two towering are shaped like camel’s humps. This kind of camel load is really a well- equipped small kitchen that can be carried.”

Many foreigners and even some Chinese have never seen a *luotuo danzi*, let alone knowing its function. If it is only literally translated into “camel stand”, it is far from enough for the audience to understand. Therefore, in *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition), Hunter Gordon translates it into “camel stand and portable stove”. The added words “and portable stove” serve as a key information because only with a “portable stove” that a camel stand can ensure Shen Fu and his friends hot rice and hot dishes, which also reflects Chen Yun’s intelligence. Through this translation we can see that the Westerners represented by Hunter Gordon have some understanding of the urban life in Suzhou, or they have access to understanding urban life in pre-modern Suzhou, and grasp the key points in the translation. In the translation of such unique materials in Suzhou life, literal translation, adding and highlighting key information is a good choice, for it helps the audience to catch the plot in both textual and sociocultural context. However, there is a small problem worthy of discussion. “Portable stove” is actually an inseparable part of “camel stand”. The conjunction “and” used to connect them appears they are two absolutely different articles, which might lead to misunderstanding. Perhaps it would be more accurate to translate *luotuo danzi* into “camel stand with portable stove”, for the proposition “with” suggests that this is a single moving kitchen called “camel stand”.

4.2 Cultural signs of social system and behavior

Cultural signs of social system and behaviors are both closely related to society. Systems include the economic system, the political system, the military system, the system of law, the system of education, the system of marriage and family. Behaviors indicate the kinds of customs and habits formed in society, which represent a kind of collective behavioral mode of human beings. Cultural signs of this category are also key information to catch the plot in *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition).

In the feudal society of China, it is customary that women are often forbidden to go out of home, while Chen Yun is an exception. Shen Fu and Chen Yun, this lovey-dovey couple, often went out hand in hand and visited scenic spots and attended fairs

and festivals secretly, composing and chanting poems, drinking wine and tasting tea. They left merry footprints in many sites of Suzhou, such as the Canglang Pavilion, the Tiger Hill, the Lord Dongting's Temple in the Vinegar Warehouse Lane, the Rice Barn Lane, the Eternal Bridge and the Taihu Lake, all of which are still well preserved today. Their deeds of insubordination to the feudal system are radiating a tiny flicker of the rare light of modernity: man and woman are equal. One day in the play, Shen Fu encouraged his wife to attend a parade of lanterns for the Dragon Boat Festival with him. In those days it was improper for a woman to attend such a social activity, but spirited Chen Yun dressed herself as a man to enjoy the scene together with her husband. Here are some lyrics sung at the moment, and we list the translated subtitles by Hunter Gordon:

Original text

沈复:

袭吾衣履着吾冠

减除唇香损纸胭

唱喏个男儿礼遍

谁去也静女其变

谁来也花家木兰

陈云:

袭他衣履着他冠

倩添蛾眉淡画髻

唱喏个男儿礼遍

堂堂的小哥儿然

安辨这小足儿焉

Hunter Gordon's translation

Shen Fu sings:

She puts on my hat and robe

Removes from her lips the fragrant rouge

Reciting politenesses and bowing as a man

That demure belle as she began

Has returned as a living Mulan

Chen Yun sings:

Borrowing his robe and hat.

Painting my brows and chin fluff.

Exchanging pleasantries with a manly greet

Looking just like those dapper chaps,

How will they ever notice my tiny bound feet?

Such an intelligent, resourceful and “one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature” (Lin, 1999, p. 20), in addition to disguise by dress, our heroine would not allow her behavior to betray her true gender. As is known to all Chinese, in the feudal society, both men and women were required to perform many complicated rituals. Men were required to perform male rites and women were required to perform female rites. Therefore, Chen Yun picked the rites of her opposite gender outside, that is *changre* (唱喏), a ritual performed by men in ancient China that men cross their hands, bow and salute with a sound to show respect. In Hunter Gordon's subtitles, it was translated into “bow” and “manly greet”. Is “bow” or “manly greet” an equivalence of 唱喏? Not exactly. It is quite common that when you bow to someone,

you briefly bend your body toward them as a formal way of greeting them or showing respect. “Bow” is indeed one of “male rites” in ancient China, while 唱喏, besides a gesture of “bow”, contains more information, including both body languages (cross hands in front of the chest) and language (salute with a sound to show respect). Meanwhile, “manly greet” is only a superordinate term for 唱喏, not accurate. The main reason for such a translation might be that in the eyes of Westerners, “bow” is the most common and most typical “male rites” between Suzhou men at that time, so the translator chooses it to stand for all “male rites”. And “manly greet”, the second translation for 唱喏, according to the translator, derives from the consideration for rhyming with “feet”. From such a translation we venture that many of the complicated rituals of China have not been well or widely introduced to the world. The Chinese nation has always been a land of ceremonies with complicated rituals as its important cultural signs. The lack of introduction to Chinese rituals will probably hinder the initiative of “Chinese culture going out”.

Figure 3. A poster of Disney’s animated movie *Mulan*



According to the military system in ancient China, only men have the right and obligation to serve in the army, while women are not allowed to join the army, with one exception, Hua Mulan (花木兰), a well-known woman who disguised herself as a man to join the army for her old father. Therefore, Hua Mulan has always been regarded as a typical woman disguised as a man, which is often quoted as a classical allusion by later generations. Therefore, 花家木兰 in the original text is rich in historical and cultural connotations that one can hardly expound it within a few words. How should Hunter Gordon tackle problems of this kind? To our surprise, in the English subtitles it is literarily translated into “a living Mulan”. Mulan is just a name, and as for who is Mulan and why the heroine mentioned Mulan in her lyrics, the translator does not provide any further information. This means that the translator is deeply convinced that the original story of Mulan is already widely known in the English world, and his adoption of this translation method will not cause difficulties for the audience to understand. Why is the translator so convinced of the audience’s comprehension? It is no denying that the American Disney classic cartoon *Mulan* (see Figure 3) since 1998 contributes much, because through the animated movie, common people from many countries in the world have learned Mulan and her story. There is little necessity to explain it, and adding more information is just like adding feet to a snake, in vain. This case gives us a revelation that the influence of modern mass media on cultural communication, especially the external communication of Chinese culture, cannot be underestimated.

Foot-binding, a corrupt custom of the folk which originated from the late Northern Song Dynasty, was a unique product of the feudal society of China. Of course, women in Suzhou also suffered from it. In the aforementioned lyrics, Chen Yun mentioned her 小足儿 (literally means “little feet”) as a feminine symbol in her times. With the background knowledge of Chinese culture we learn that the expression “little feet” can not provide adequate information for the audience to know what the Chinese women’s feet actually look like at that time. Here the translator tactfully conveys it into “little bound feet”, which, after all, is a distinctive and important cultural sign in the play. From this translation we can judge that this Western translator himself well understands the corrupt custom of binding foot in ancient China, but he is not quite sure that the audience can follow the point. This indicates that the average Westerners are not familiar with Chinese distinctive customs, good or bad, which is also a barrier in international communication.

4.3 Cultural signs of ideology

Culture signs of ideology include signs related to the spiritual systems abstracted and synthesized by great thinkers. As the culture of ideology profoundly reflects the essence of culture, it is mostly regarded as the core of culture.

Due to the different production modes of geographical environment, Easterners and Westerners have formed different beliefs, values and life concepts. As for belief, there is a big difference between China and many Western countries. Many Westerners are religious, meaning they believe in a certain religion; some countries even have a state religion, meaning the whole people believe in a certain religion. Throughout Chinese history, we have never had a national unified religion, but the common people have the freedom to believe or not to believe in a certain religion. As far as Chinese ideological tradition is concerned, Chinese people tend to pay attention to the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and take the essence of each of their thoughts but do not regard any of them as a strict religion to abide by. In terms of the actual situation of the folk, except for a few believers of a certain religion, the vast majority of average Chinese have a strong practical purpose towards religion. It is not surprising that the phenomenon of burning incense and kowtowing whenever one comes to a temple is very common. Specific to the area of the south of the Yangtze River, Buddhism has a bigger impact on the daily life of the common people. The line from Du Mu's poem "there are four hundred and eighty Buddhist temples in the Southern Dynasty" is a well-known proof. Buddhist temples in Suzhou are not large in number but are very famous, such as the Hanshan Temple, the Xiyuan Temple, and the Chongyuan Temple.

In the original text of *Fushengliuji*, Shen Fu found that the time when Chen Yun began her *chi zhai* (吃斋, religious vegetarian diet) coincided with his small-pox illness, and said to her laughingly, "Now that my face is clean and smooth without pock-marks, my dear sister, will you break your fast?" (Lin, 1999, p. 11) Chen Yun looked at him with a smile and nodded her head. In *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition), Shen Fu expressed the same meaning by saying:

Original text

病在我身
痛在你心
乃为我吃斋数年

Hunter Gordon's translation

When I was ill
you took the toll
To appease the heavens, for many years you abstained from eating
meat.

“Only through a heightened awareness of the polymorphic interfaces between linked national, social, cultural, historical and aesthetic spaces, can it become possible to produce a translation version that is reasonably balanced and consistently coherent.” (Sun, 2020, p. 5) It is quite true with the translation of this sentence. The ancient Chinese were superstitious, believing that illness was often caused by the evil spirits and it is only by praying to the gods and doing good deeds that one can eliminate diseases and disasters. People with a little common sense know that Chen Yun’s *chi zhai* is different from that of vegetarians. For Suzhou natives, it is a common way of wishing and praying to Buddhist gods, say Buddha or Bodhisattva, to use one’s special diet (do not eat meat and do not kill) in exchange for his or her family’s early recovery from illness. Praying for Buddha or Bodhisattva instead of other gods does not mean Chen Yun is a devout follower of Buddhism. Instead, she followed the belief and habit of the Chinese masses that she prayed to any god whoever she thought would help her achieve aspirations. Hunter Gordon translates this sentence into “to appease the heavens, for many years you abstained from eating meat” with the supplemented information of “to appease the heavens” that reveals the original intention of the heroine’s behavior, so as to make the audience associate with the religious significance and avoid being misinterpreted as a purely personal eating habit. Here, for Buddhist gods or any other gods in whatever religions, the translators all apply the word of “heavens” to indicate them which shows that it is neither the capitalized God in Christianity, nor any other religious god, but just a practical purpose which also coincides with the cultural significance between the line in the original work. The handling of the English translation here tells us that the Westerners represented by the translator have got a thorough understanding of the religious beliefs of the Suzhou people in ancient China. Meanwhile, the majority of Westerners might not be quite clear about this, so the translators still need to add necessary information to help the audience’s understanding. In a word, the introduction to China’s religious culture is comparatively effective but also needs further improvement.

5. Conclusion

The life of Shen Fu and Chen Yun depicted in the *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) is the epitome of the life of average people in the southern part of China, especially in Suzhou at that time. The spiritual world, interest of life and the personalities of the characters reflected in it are all with distinctive characteristics

of Suzhou culture. The English translation of subtitles is often limited by time and situation, but Kim Hunter Gordon, a young sinologist, tries his best to convey the cultural characteristics of Suzhou style life while ensuring the audience to watch and understand on the spot. It is precisely these cultural characteristics of Suzhou that seem novel and fresh to Westerners. It is attractive to go to Suzhou, a water city known as the Venice of the East, to pursue the true stories that happened here hundreds of years ago. At the same time, the translation of subtitles also serves as a mirror. We can compare the changes from the original Chinese work to the English translation, so as to explore the breadth and depth of the understanding and cognition of the Westerners represented by sinologists on the Suzhou culture and even Chinese culture. By a detailed analysis of the translations of cultural signs in *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) from three headings of culture, we find that: (1) Cultural signs of material, obvious and perceivable, are easier to communicate, and the translator can find a counterpart or an equivalence in conveying them in English. (2) Cultural signs of social systems and behavior, especially rituals and customs, rich in implied meaning and local distinctive features, are in dire need of access to the West with one exception that some historical figures and stories, such as Hua Mulan, have been quite popular in the West with the convenience of modern mass media. (3) Cultural signs of ideology profoundly reflect the essence of culture; thus it is mostly regarded as the core of culture. Under this heading, China's religious culture is learned by some sinologists, but for the majority of Westerners, it still needs further improvement. With these findings and, more importantly, through the understanding and cognition of Westerners, we may be able to see the achievements and shortcomings in the communication of Chinese culture to the outside world, observe the initiative and tactics of "Chinese culture going out", and improve them deeply and constantly.

Notes

- 1 *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition) is not a panoramic display of Lin Yutang's original work, but is an adapted version merely inspired by moments from it.
- 2 Yu Theatre Company is a theater production company based in Nanjing, which specializes in the introduction and cooperation of foreign theatrical forms.
- 3 According to Chinese lunar calendar that day was July 7th, the so-called Qixi Festival (七夕节), similar to Valentine's Day in the West.

- 4 Kim Hunter Gordon's Chinese name is Guo Ran (郭冉).
- 5 Kim Hunter Gordon is the executive producer and translator of *Kunqu Fushengliuji* (Garden Edition).

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