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Translating eroticism in traditional Chinese drama
Three English versions of *The Peony Pavilion*

Tong-King Lee and Cindy S.B. Ngai
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts three English versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, with a view to exploring the strategies adopted in the three translations in respect to their treatment of erotic passages in the Chinese dramatic masterpiece *Mudan Ting*. It is found that while all three translators generally respect the integrity of the Chinese source text, they demonstrate different trajectories in terms of their translational dispositions. Specifically, while Zhang Guangqian shows evidence of attenuating sexually sensitive material in his translation, Wang Rongpei demonstrates a tendency to translate in a register that is closer to contemporary English vernacular than to the highly poetic register that characterizes the original Chinese play. Cyril Birch differs from his two Chinese counterparts by faithfully preserving the poetic flavor of the erotic passages, to the extent that a foreign feel is often evident in his translation. The study also locates its findings against the background of previous studies, concluding that the general norm exhibited by the three translators in respect to the treatment of erotic passages in *The Peony Pavilion*, which is that of retention, departs from the norm of deletion/mitigation found in Chinese translations of English literature with sexual content. The paper hypothesizes that euphemism is not the universal norm adopted by translators in the treatment of sexually sensitive material in literature. Rather, the strategy used in translating eroticism is a function of the assumed acceptability of such material by the target readership.

About the Authors

Tong-King Lee is Assistant Professor of Translation in the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He obtained his Ph.D. in Translation Studies from The University of Queensland. He is NAATI-accredited Professional Translator, Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists and Member of IATIS. His research interest lies in the area of translation and ideology.
Address: Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong.
Email: ctleetk@polyu.edu.hk

Cindy S.B. Ngai is Teaching Fellow 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 Member of the IoL. Her research lies in the fields of literary translation and bilingual corporate communication.

Address: Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong.
Email: ctcindy@polyu.edu.hk

1. Introduction

As with many other languages, Chinese exhibits euphemistic tendencies when dealing with the subject of sex. This is evidenced in the poetic treatment of the relevant lexis, as for example, the metaphorization of the act of romantic dalliance as *fenghua xueyue* "flower in the breeze, snow under the moon" and of sexual intercourse as *yunyu* "cloud-and-rain" (Kao 1994: 173). The presence of such euphemisms in the language does not, however, mean that sex is a much evaded subject in Chinese literature. Traditional Chinese literature has in its repertoire a fair share of sexually suggestive and erotically charged content. The latter part of the Ming dynasty, in particular, witnessed a proliferation of such works. At this critical juncture in Chinese cultural history, indulgence in sensual gratification among the literati existed alongside deeply-rooted Confucian values, culminating in what Timothy Brooks (1998) calls the "confusions of pleasure".

A key theme that prevailed among the literature of this period was *qing*, or romantic love. Exemplary among works that expounded on this theme is the dramatic masterpiece *Mudan Ting* (The Peony Pavilion) by the Ming playwright Tang Xianzu (1550-1616). Critical discussion on *Mudan Ting* has for the most part focused on the way in which this play foregrounds the power of romantic love, a theme that reverberated through discourses on *qing* during the late Ming. The play, however, is not about platonic love; it comes as a surprise that few studies have been made of the erotic nature of *Mudan Ting*, which contains several sexual descriptions of a considerably explicit nature. These sexual descriptions were not written merely for the sake of sensual pleasure – though that could conceivably be a motive behind their composition – but as a complement to the love and passion that transpire between the two protagonists. Indeed, the combination of love and desire, or *qingyu heyi*, underlines the kind of passionate love espoused by Tang Xianzu.

As far as *Mudan Ting* is concerned, the cultural-linguistic issues involved in translating the play have been the focus of previous studies (e.g., Wang 2009). This paper contributes to the literature by examining the translation of erotic descriptions in *Mudan Ting*. As Levy (1982: 314) has noted, among the various sub-genres in popular literature, drama presents "the most varied

and formidable challenge to the translator", not least because of the co-existence of various registers in the play and the formal conventions of Chinese drama that differ from those of Elizabethan drama. It is our contention that the translation of sexually explicit descriptions in *Mudan Ting* poses an immense challenge to the translator, as such descriptions are often couched in rhetorical terms in the classical language that serve to poeticize the sexual acts without mitigating their intensity. By comparing three English versions of the play, we seek to explore, through close reading, how the three English translators have adopted different strategies in handling erotic passages in the play, and to compare and contrast the three translations in terms of their textual relations with the source passages as well as their aesthetic effects on target readers.

2. Translating eroticism: the Chinese context

There is a general paucity of research in the translation of sexually sensitive material (Lung 2003: 255), particularly within the Chinese context, in which scholarly references to the translation of erotic content are made at most in passing (Han 2008: 83). Wang (1998: 9), for instance, notes that the norm for Chinese translators in the treatment of sexually sensitive material is "neutralization, archaicization, generalization and deletion". Such norms are reinforced in the Chinese academia by scholars who advocate the deletion or manipulation of the source text as far as sexual descriptions are concerned (e.g., Xu 1997: 215; Sun 2001: 22). Ke (1999: 139) also notes that in translating Indian sutras, Chinese translators are characterized by "their equivocation in passages involving sex because educated Chinese, influenced by Confucianism, have a distinct aversion to writings about sex". Citing Nakamura (1981: 260-261), Ke provides the example of a line from a Pali text that reads "those who drink liquor are apt to display their sexual organs", which was altered by a Chinese translator to become "those who drink liquor are apt to become angry". Taking the perspective of translation pedagogy, Lung (2003) proposes that Chinese and English differ in terms of how taboo subjects are conventionally expressed in each culture, hence the need to domesticate sexually explicit statements in English using euphemistic expressions in Chinese translation. In his article on sex taboos among Chinese translators, Han (2008) analyzes two translations of Alice Walker's sexually explicit novel *The Colour Purple*, illustrating how the two Chinese translations have attempted to "cleanse" the novel by mitigating

the degree of sexual explicitness through the textual devices of euphemism and deletion. Han concludes that the norm to suppress sexual descriptions in translation is a function of sex taboo at work among Chinese translators.

Studies on the translation of Chinese sexual material into English have been even rarer. Chang (2004: 221-222) briefly compares two English versions of the Chinese novel *Hongloumeng* and points out that while the Chinese translators Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang tend towards deleting sexual descriptions in the novel, David Hawkes chooses to reproduce such descriptions rather more faithfully. In a similar vein, this paper compares and contrasts three English versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, one by the British-American translator Cyril Birch (Tang 2002) and two by the mainland Chinese scholars Zhang Guangqian (Tang 2001) and Wang Rongpei (Tang 2000). In the following section, we will perform a comparative reading of the three translations with respect to four scenes in which sexual descriptions are present. Rather than impose some preconceived theory on our data, we will juxtapose the three versions and allow their differing tendencies to emerge by themselves.

3. Text analysis

In this section, three English versions of *The Peony Pavilion* will be analyzed, with a view to comparing how they differ in their treatment of sensual and erotic descriptions in four scenes within the play.

3.1 Scene 10

In this scene, the male protagonist Liu Mengmei expresses his love and passion for the female protagonist Du Liniang, within the latter's dream. Such romantic expressions often contain references to sexual acts. The following verse, for instance, depicts in subtle poetic language the physical desire of Liu towards Du:

Example 1

Original text

领扣松，衣带宽，袖梢儿揾着牙儿苫也，则待你忍耐温存一晌眠。(Tang 1999: 2098)

ling kou song，yi dai kuan，xiu shao er mo zhe ya er shan ye，ze dai ni ren nai wen cun yi shang mian。

collar button loose, clothing belt wide, sleeve tip touch teeth cover, and wait you endure stay a period of sleep.

Birch's translation
Open the fastening at your neck
Loose the girdle at your waist,
While you
Screening your eyes with your sleeve,
White teeth clenched on the fabric as if against pain,
Bear with me patiently a while
Then drift into gentle slumber.
(Tang 2002: 48)

Zhang's translation
To release your collar pins
and **let the ribbons fall**.
You may need to bite your sleeve,
but hold yourself a little while
just to savor a tender dream.
(Tang 2001: 68)

Wang's translation
I shall unbutton your gown
And **strip it down**.
You'll bite your sleeve-top with your teeth,
Then make a hug and beneath.
(Tang 2000: 105)

In the Chinese original, the word *yidai* 衣带 ("clothes-belt") alludes to Liu Yong's (987-1053) verse poetry; here the word *kuan* 宽 ("broad" or "loose") poetically suggests Liu Mengmei's removal of Du Liniang's clothing before their intercourse. Birch's "girdle" is a domesticated lexical choice, whereas Zhang's "ribbons" is a metonymic figure evoking the image of the entire garment. While "loose the girdle" and "let the ribbons fall" arguably replicate the lyrical flavor of the original line by similarly collocating the image of the garment with a verb that is not in itself directly associated with sexual activity, Wang's "strip it down" comes across as a low-register explicitation in English of the subtle description. In a subsequent line within the same scene, where the source

text describes Liu Mengmei's desire for intercourse (within Du Liniang's dream), similar tendencies can be seen.

Example 2

<u>Original text</u>
紧相偎，慢厮连，恨不得肉儿般团成了片，逗的个日下胭脂雨上鲜。(Tang 1999: 2099)

jin xiang wei，man si lian，hen bu de rou er ban tuan cheng le pian，dou de ge ri xia yan zhi yu shang xian。

tightly both lean, slowly link together, to itch to meat like become slice, make a under the sun rouge rain above fresh.

<u>Birch's translation</u>
how close I clasped you
and with what tenderness,
longing only **to make**
of our two bodies one single flesh
but bringing forth
a glistening of rouge raindrops in the sun.
(Tang 2002: 50)

<u>Zhang's translation</u>
Don't forget
so close we hugged each other to the heart
that **we could hardly tear ourselves apart**!
How fervently we wished our bodies fused,
and how your cheeks glowed as if freshly rouged!
(Tang 2001: 72)

<u>Wang's translation</u>
Please never forget the day when we
Lie together side by side,
Make love for hours and hours,
And hug as man and bride,
With your face red as flowers.
(Tang 2000: 107)

In the original line, *henbude rou'er ban tuan cheng le pian* 恨不得肉儿般团成了片 describes the desire of the lovers to, literally, "mesh their flesh together". In this sense,

Birch's "to make of our bodies one single flesh" keeps to the literal meaning, while Zhang's "we could hardly tear ourselves apart" seems to have made a euphemistic treatment by eliding the word *rou* 肉 ("meat" or "flesh") and hence the erotically-charged image of two tightly embracing bodies. Wang, as in the previous example, chooses to render the act in plain, direct language ("Make love for hours and hours") that resonates well in contemporary English vernacular and achieves a rhyming effect with the word "flowers" in the following line, but compromises the original by way of deleting its erotic image.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese language frequently employs the euphemistic expression *yunyu* (cloud-rain) to denote sexual intercourse. In the following example, the cloud-rain metaphor is retained by all three translators, but not without some differences.

Example 3

Original text
行来春色三分雨，睡去巫山一片云。(Tang 1999: 2099)

xing lai chunse sanfen yu, shui qu wushan yipian yu

walk here springtime light rain, sleep Wu mountain a cloud

Birch's translation
Rain threatened the spring garden as she approached
and when she slept the **"clouds and rain"**
broke over **Wushan**, hill of faery love
(Tang 2002: 50)

Zhang's translation
"She approaches with **sprinkles of springtide**,
And dozes like a plume of mountain **cloud**."
(Tang 2001: 72)

Wang's translation
"She comes like gentle **rain** in spring
And wets me like **clouds on the wing**."
(Tang 2000: 107)

Contrary to his earlier approach, Birch introduces a foreign metaphor with the retention of the euphemistic-metaphoric expression "clouds and rain" in inverted commas; here his translation

exudes an exotic flavor (cf. Guo 2009), which can also be partially attributed to the decision to retain the culture-specific item Wushan 巫山. This item is rendered culturally neutral in Zhang's translation (which simplifies the noun as "mountain") and completely deleted in Wang's translation. Such treatment renders the latter two translations more domesticated to an English-speaking readership. Zhang's translation gains rhetorically by way of alliteration ("sprinkles of springtide"), while Wang's translation amplifies the source text with the image of "wing" that is absent in the original, possibly to convey the image of the measure word *pian* 片 ("piece" or "slice") in Chinese and to simultaneously achieve a rhyming effect with the word "spring" in the preceding line.

3.2 Scene 12

The erotic acts that appear in this scene are also virtual, for they are not "real-life" occurrences but manifestations in Du Liniang's dream. In the following text, Du Liniang mildly complains about Liu Mengmei's sexual imposition on her. Liniang, however, is far from feeling bitter about the incident; indeed, the word *huanhui* 欢会 ("happy gathering") contrasts with the word *qiang* 强 ("forced") to express a subtle sense of bashful bliss on the part of the female protagonist.

Example 4

Original text
呀，昨日那书生将柳枝要我题咏， 强我欢会之时。(Tang 1999: 2105)

ya , zuo ri na shu sheng jiang liu zhi yao wo ti yong，qiang wo huan hui zhi shi。

oh, yesterday that scholar gets willow branch wants me write chant, force me the time of gathering.

Birch's translation
…yesterday, when the young scholar sought a poem on his willow branch, before **forced our union of delight**! (Tang 2002: 59)

Zhang's translation
Ah, it was here yesterday that the young scholar asked me to compose a poem for his willow branch and **insisted on merrymaking**.
(Tang 2001: 84)

Wang's translation
Oh, this is the place where the scholar asked me to write a poem in the name of willow twigs and **forced me to make love with him.**
(Tang 2000: 129)

Birch's translation does convey a mixed feeling of reproach and joy that is intended in the original Chinese text, with the collocation of "forced", which has a negative connotation in most contexts, and "union", which connotes a positive relationship between the two leads. On the contrary, Zhang's translation downplays the reference to the sexual act through the use of the milder verb "insisted" (as opposed to the more physical verb "forced") and of the euphemistic "merrymaking", which denotes a general state of festivity and has no direct reference to sexual activity. Wang, as before, renders the phrase in vernacular fashion with the extremely colloquial "make love", which contrasts starkly when juxtaposed with Birch's indirect and arguably more poetic expression "union of delight".

In a subsequent passage, Du Liniang reminisces on her virtual sexual experience with Liu Mengmei.

Example 5

Original text
他倚太湖石，立着咱玉婵娟。待把俺玉山推倒，便日暖玉生烟。捱过雕阑，转过秋千，肯着裙花展。敢席着地，怕天瞧见。好一会分明，美满幽香不可言。
(Tang 1999: 2105-2106)

ta yi tai hu shi，li zhe zan yu chan juan。dai ba an yu shan tui dao，bian ri nuan yu sheng yan。ai guo diao lan，zhuan guo qiu qian，ken zhe qun hua zhan，gan xi zhe de，pa tian qiao jian，hao yi hui fen ming，mei man you xiang bu ke yan。

he leans on Tai lake stone, standing our jade moon. until let my Yu mountain push over, then sunny warm jade grow smoke. endure carved balustrade, turn around a thousand years, be willing to wear dress flower unfold. to dare to sit on the ground, afraid of sky see. nice period of clear, beautiful and fragrant cannot be said.

Birch's translation
Against the weathered rock

he leaned my wilting body,
then as he **laid my jade limbs down**
"smoke issued from jade in warmth of sun."
By balustrade
past swing
there I spread the folds of my skirt,
a covering for earth
for fear of the eyes of heaven.
Then it was we knew
perfect mystery
of joy ineffable.
(Tang 2002: 59)

<u>Zhang's translation</u>
He was leaning against the Taihu rocks,
my delicate body beside him stood.
He **pulled me down onto the floral bed**,
and warmth effused from my alabaster skin.
Along the fence,
around the swing,
my skirt fell loose and spread out on the ground.
On we lay, facing the sky,
but what if heaven should have spied?
A timeless time,
its sweetness was beyond my words.
(Tang 2001: 87)

<u>Wang's translation</u>
He leaned against the rocks and stones;
I stood beside him with faint groans.
He **pulled me softly to the ground**,
Permeated with springtime warmth around.
Above the fence,
Across the swing,
My skirt spread out from hence.
We lay on grass and faced the sky,
But what if heavens should spy?
It was eternal time
That we enjoyed life's prime.
(Tang 2000: 130)

In the original Chinese passage, *yushan* 玉山("jade mountain") is a metaphor for the female body, while *nuanyu shengyan* 暖玉生烟 ("warm-jade-produce-smoke") alludes to Li Shangyin's (ca.813-858) poem and serves as a euphemistic suggestion of sexual

activity. Here we observe that in an attempt to produce a faithful translation, Birch adopts a foreignizing approach by retaining the jade images in the original Chinese lines. The literal translation of *nuanyu shengyan* in inverted commas also points to Birch's intention to alert the reader to the foreignness of the expression. This stance is reinforced by his use of a footnote at this point to inform readers about the literary allusion evoked by the metaphor, an instantiation of "thick translation" (Appiah 2004) that is evident throughout Birch's translation. Both Zhang and Wang delete the image of the jade mountain, with Zhang replacing the image of jade in *nuanyu shengyan* with that of "alabaster" (an image that is arguably more familiar to English-speaking readers), and Wang reworking the line to achieve both naturalness of expression and a rhyming effect.

In another example from the same scene, Birch and Wang clearly display their tendencies to translate at poetic and vernacular registers respectively.

Example 6

Original text
他兴心儿紧咽咽，呜着咱香肩。俺可也慢掂掂做意儿周旋。(Tang 1999: 2106)

ta xing xin er jin yan yan，wu zhe zan xiang jian。an ke ye man dian dian zuo yi er zhou xuan。

his excited heart tightening, hoot our fragrant shoulder. I can also slowly make meaningful thing to deal with.

Birch's translation
Tense in his eagerness
he **put his lips to the fragrance of my shoulder**
while I with thoughtful ease responded to him.
(Tang 2002: 59)

Zhang's translation
He held me tight with all his might
and **kissed me deeply on my balmy neck.**
I tried to take my time and play with grace…
(Tang 2001: 87)

Wang's translation
He grew much bolder
and **kissed my shoulder.**
I played with him in little haste
(Tang 2000: 130-131)

While the verb *wu* 呜 can mean "kiss" in classical Chinese, Birch avoids a plain rendition by using the verbal phrase "put his lips to the fragrance of my shoulder", where the avoidance of "kiss" and the nominalization in "fragrance" (the equivalent word *xiang* 香 is an adjective in Chinese in this context) also contributes to the abstractness of the erotic action. In contrast, both Zhang and Wang have opted for a more direct translation with the use of the verb "kiss", with Wang deleting the modifier "fragrant" (Zhang uses "balmy"), resulting in a plainer and less poetic expression of the erotic act – "kissed my shoulder".

3.3 Scene 28

This scene depicts the rendezvous between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, a precursor before their sexual union. In the following verse, Liu Mengmei expresses his sexual desire for Du Liniang:

Example 7

Original text
把他绝软香娇做意儿耍，下的亏他？便亏他则半霎。(Tang 1999: 2169)

ba ta jue ruan xiang jiao zuo yi er shua，xia de kui ta？bian kui ta ze ban sha。

make her extremely tender fragrant beauty as meaningful thing to play, below loss him? then loss him half an instant.

Birch's translation
Willfully I bend to me
your pliant, fragrant softness,
bringing you distress
but for one passing instant.
(Tang 2002: 164)

Zhang's translation

Let your **fragrant softness reveal itself**.
I will not let you down,
for every minute counts.
(Tang 2001: 233)

Wang's translation
You are tender; you are coy.
How can I let you down?
For every minute, we shall enjoy.
(Tang 2000: 356)

The senses of touch and smell are expressed in the Chinese line 绝软香娇, which synthesizes the tenderness and fragrance of the female body. Birch's translation foregrounds Liu Mengmei's active stance with the clause "Willfully I bend to me", in which the first person pronoun occurs twice. It is worth noting that the act of "bending" is not actually mentioned in the Chinese line (the more general word *shua* 耍, literally "play", is used instead). The active stance of Liu is, however, implicit in the *ba* 把 structure used in the Chinese text, and this is explicated by Birch through the lexical choice of "bend", which evokes a more vivid image of erotic tension. This active stance is, however, suppressed in Zhang's translation, where the line is re-perspectivized, such that the abstract noun phrase "fragrant softness" now governs the main verb "reveal", and the main verb *shua* is altogether missing. With the suppression of the verb *shua*, the erotic action implied in the Chinese text has been backgrounded, and the agency of the male protagonist toned down considerably due to the absence of the first person pronoun. Wang preserves "tender", but deletes "fragrance", adding instead the adjective "coy", which is absent in the source text. This addition is clearly motivated by the perceived rhetorical need to achieve a rhyming effect with "enjoy". The latter word is, of course, a colloquial choice that falls in line with Wang's overall strategy.

In the following example, Du requests Liu to cherish her love for him:

Example 8

Original text
妾千金之躯，一旦付与郎矣，勿负奴心。每夜得共枕席，平生之愿足矣。(Tang 1999: 2169)

qie qian jin zhi qu，yi dan fu yu lang yi，wu fu nu xin，mei ye de gong zhen xi，ping sheng zhi yuan zu yi。

concubine a thousand pieces of gold body, once give to man, not to disappoint slave's heart. every night enjoy together pillow mat, in all one's life wish enough.

Birch's translation
This body, "**a thousand gold pieces**," **I offer you** without hesitation. **Do not disdain my love**. My life's desire is fulfilled if I may share your pillow night by night. (Tang 2002: 164)

Zhang's translation
Once I give my heart and soul to you, **do not abuse my love**. To be together every night is all that I wish for. (Tang 2001: 233)

Wang's translation
Once you have me, **body and flesh, heart and soul**, please **never give me up**. My lifelong desire is fulfilled of only we share the pillow night after night. (Tang 2000: 356)

In Chinese, *qianjin zhi qu* 千金之躯 is a metaphorical expression used to denote the preciousness of the feminine body, literally meaning "a body made up of a thousand pieces of gold". Birch's translation preserves the metaphor in the original expression, and the decision to include the phrase in inverted commas points to a conscious stance on the part of the translator to achieve a foreignizing effect (cf. Example 5). Whereas Zhang opts for the semantic rendition "heart and soul", deleting the direct reference to the female body, Wang goes for the more elaborated "body and flesh, heart and soul". This once again illustrates Zhang's inclination to mitigate sexual references and Wang's penchant for the vernacular (the vernacularism being evident in the construction "body and flesh"). The phrase *yi dan fuyu lang yi* 一旦付与郎矣 is variously translated as "I offer you…" (Birch), "Once I give you…" (Zhang) and "Once you have me…" (Wang), in descending order of formality, with Birch's version belonging more properly to the written genre than Wang's colloquial "once you have me". Similarly, with the translation of *wu fu nu xin* 勿负奴心, the three translations again form a register cline,

with Birch's "do not disdain my love" belonging to a relatively higher register and Wang's plain and colloquial "never give me up" taking the other end of the continuum.

Towards the end of the scene, Du Liniang utters the following line, inviting Liu Mengmei to make love to her.

Example 9

Original text
秀才，且和俺点勘春风这第一花。 (Tang 1999: 2170)

xiu cai，qie he an dian kan chun feng zhe di yi hua。

scholar, just with me explore spring breeze this the first flower.

The sexual connotation underlying the metaphor *chunfeng* 春风 ("spring breeze") and the image of a blooming flower is rather obvious to the Chinese reader. (The latter metaphor would probably be familiar to the English reader as well, as in the use of the expression "deflowering" to refer to the loss of female virginity.) As with many other sexual references in the play, the erotic description here is couched in the poetic language of Classical Chinese. Let us take a look at the three translations of this line.

Birch's translation
Sir, it is for you
the spring breeze opens this first bloom.
(Tang 2002: 165)

Zhang's translation
Mr. Scholar,
Let us burst open the first vernal bud.
(Tang 2001: 234)

Wang's translation
My dear sir,
Let me make this first night sweet and warm.
(Tang 2000: 357)

In this example, Birch keeps the breeze and flower metaphors intact, with no direct reference to the sexual act. In fact, Birch makes his translation even more indirect than the original line by obscuring the human agents involved in the act, while in the Chinese original, the participants are clearly identified (with the proper noun *xiucai* 秀才 and the first person pronoun *an* 俺). Here Zhang adheres semantically to the original with his use of "let us open the first vernal bud", which identifies the participants involved in the act, though this relative directness affords the translation with less poetic flavor than Birch's version. Wang's translation proves to be the most direct – and hence arguably least poetic – with the metaphors of spring breeze and blooming flower being deleted and their meaning explicated in plain prose. The use of "Let *me* make this first night sweet and warm" also unexpectedly highlights the agency of Du Liniang and suppresses that of her male counterpart (compare Zhang's use of "let *us*"), which makes the female protagonist's invitation to engage in sexual intercourse sound more like a seduction.

3.4 Scene 30

In this scene, the two main characters in the play consummate their relationship not within a dream, but in reality. Du Liniang describes the physical aspect of her union with Liu Mengmei as follows:

Example 10

<u>Original text</u>
活泼、死腾那，这是第一所人间风月窝。昨宵个微芒暗影轻罗，把势儿忒显豁。为甚么人到幽期话转多？(Tang 1999: 2175)

huo po、si teng na，zhe shi di yi suo ren jian feng yue wo。zuo xiao ge wei mang an ying qing luo，ba shi er te xian huo。wei shen me ren dao you qi hua zhuai duo？

lively, flirting, this is world's first moon nest. yesterday night one tiny light slightly reflect on light cloth, to make conditions salient. why people until tryst period talk more?

<u>Birch's translation</u>
Twining,
soaring,
Love nest unmatched in mortal world.
In shadowed mystery of night

open and free we loved
How is it
reaching the hour of bliss
there comes this urge to words?
(Tang 2002: 173)

Zhang's translation
The spirit soared;
the bosom heaved;
this is the coziest love-nest on the earth.
Behind the gossamer of the screen
we abandoned ourselves
I wonder why the tongue went loose at that point.
(Tang 2001: 244)

Wang's translation
I pant,
And heave
In this paradise of love on earth.
Behind the window screen,
We'll make love in the eve;
Why do we speak so many words?
(Tang 2000: 378)

In the Chinese original, the words *huopo* 活泼 and *huteng* 死腾 are abstract descriptions of the physicalities involved in sexual intercourse. Among the three translations, Wang's stands out in terms of its directness and simplicity. Wang's use of the first person pronoun in the first line, which is absent in the Chinese original as well as in the other two translations, foregrounds the agency of Du Liniang and concretizes the sexual act involving actual participants. Wang also uses the verb "pant" – an action that is at most only insinuated by the Chinese word *huopo* – which at once evokes the erotic image in this context by way of denoting a concrete physical movement. The translations by Birch and Zhang are relatively abstract in this sense, with Birch's version being the most abstract. This abstractness may be attributed to the deletion of the grammatical subjects of the verbs "twining" and "soaring". The interpretation of *renjian* ("human realm") as "mortal world" by Birch also makes his version slightly foreignized, as compared to Zhang's and Wang's choices of "on earth". The clause *weimang an'ying qingluo, ba shi'er tei xian huo* 微芒暗影轻罗 把势儿忒显豁 is interpreted by Birch as "In shadowed mystery of night/open and free we loved", retaining the vague references (in respect to

the sexual act and the place where it occurs) and hence the poetic flavor of the Chinese text. In contrast, Zhang's "Behind the gossamer of the screen, we abandoned ourselves" makes clear the place where the sexual act between the protagonists takes place (i.e. behind a screen), though the clause "we abandoned ourselves" glosses over the act rather lightly. As usual, Wang offers the most direct and vernacular translation "Behind the window screen, We'll make love in the eve", with no evasion whatsoever of direct colloquial reference (i.e. "make love") to the sexual act.

As a final example, we cite the following passage, which is perhaps one of the most sexually explicit in the Chinese play.

Example 11

Original text
娇娥、似前宵雨云羞怯颤声讹，敢今夜翠颦轻可。睡则那，把腻乳微搓，酥胸汗帖，细腰春锁。(Tang 1999: 2175)

jiao e、si qian xiao yu yun xiu qie chan sheng e，gan jin ye cui pin qing ke。shui ze na，ba ni ru wei cuo，su xiong han tie，xi yao chun suo。

lovely woman, like before night nimbus shy treble sound false, to dare to tonight green frown lightly to approve. sleep is that, to make plentiful breast slightly twisted, sexy chest sweat submissively, slim waist spring locked.

Birch's translation
On former nights, beloved,
our loving made you bashful,
robbed you of speech;
tonight your eyes
need not so tightly close.
Sleep now, while I
cradle your swelling breast,
guarding with this kerchief
firm flesh now moist with sweat
and slender curve of waist
against the springtime's chill.
(Tang 2002: 173-174)

Zhang's translation
Sweetheart,

last night you were all too shy,
tonight did you feel more at ease?
Close your eyes,
and I'll **cradle** your creamy breasts.
Tiny sweat drops moisten the chest;
spring encircles the slender waist.
(Tang 2001: 245)

Wang's translation
My dear,
You were too shy last night;
Tonight you'll be right.
When we're in bed,
I'll **feel** your creamy breast,
Embrace your sweaty chest
And **hold** your waist tight.
(Tang 2000: 379)

In the Chinese text, *cui pin qing ke* 翠颦轻可 makes reference to the image of the feminine eyebrow, which in Classical Chinese is metonymic of the eyes. Whereas Birch captures this figure rather faithfully, both Zhang and Wang delete the metonymy and paraphrase the meaning of the phrase rather more prosaically (Zhang's "tonight did you feel more at ease" and Wang's "Tonight you'll be alright"). Wang displays his usual disposition toward elegance through rhyme, even to the extent of taking some liberties with the source text. For instance, Wang translates the phrase headed by the verb *shui* 睡 ("sleep") into "when we're in bed", which is arguably a more pedestrian rendition as compared to Zhang's "close your eyes". Wang also simplifies some of the actions depicted in the original. For example, in the phrase *ni ru wei cuo* 腻乳微搓, the verb *wei cuo* means "gently rubbing", but is glossed over as the more abstract "feel" in Wang's translation. Wang's translation also foregrounds the agency of the male protagonist by way of grammatical agreement between the subject (denoting the male protagonist) and three successive verbs: "feel", "embrace" and "hold", thus physicalizing the sexual act to a greater extent. In contrast, in Birch's and Zhang's translations, the only verb governed by the protagonist as subject is "cradle".

4. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the preceding parallel text analysis, a number of tendencies can be observed with respect to the translation of sexually sensitive material in *The Peony Pavilion*. Generally speaking, while all three translators respect the integrity of the Chinese source text, they demonstrate different trajectories in terms of their translational dispositions. Among the three translations, Zhang Guangqian's version stands out as the one that shows signs of manipulation as far as sexually sensitive content is concerned. Although no overt deletion has taken place, there are evidences of erotic descriptions being attenuated in terms of their explicitness and intensity (Examples 2, 4, 7, 8, 10). In discussing the norms of Chinese translators in their treatment of sexually-sensitive material, Han (2008) argues that the existence of sexual taboos impose an ethical constraint on Chinese translators, leading to their deleting or neutralising of sexually explicit content (cf. Ke 1999: 139; Wang and Shen 1999: 92-93). Han (2008: 82), citing Chang (2004: 221-222; 225-226), finds evidence to this claim in the English translation of *Hongloumeng* (A Dream of the Red Mansions) by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, who tend to delete or neutralise sexual descriptions. This tendency departs from the general strategy adopted by the Yangs, which is to prioritise adequacy over acceptability. The inclination of the Yangs to delete sexual passages is also brought into relief when their translation is compared to that by David Hawkes, who tends to preserve the sexual descriptions in the Chinese novel. Zhang's strategy of mitigating sexual references, as opposed to Birch's literal translation of such references, thus conforms to previous hypotheses that ethical constraints do have a bearing on the decisions of Chinese translators in dealing with sexually sensitive material. Having said that, it should be stressed that Zhang's manipulation of sexually sensitive material in *Mudan Ting* is rather restrained, as compared to the blatant deletion or suppression of such material as performed by Chinese translators working from English into Chinese (see Han (2008) for a case of such overt manipulation in the translation).

However, the ethical constraint hypothesis does not seem to hold for Wang Rongpei's translation, which does not show significant signs of mitigating sexual references. Instead, sexual references are made more plain and direct (for instance, through the frequent use of the phrase "make love") in Wang's version than in the other two translations. Wang's translation exhibits two distinct characteristics as far as sexual material is concerned. First, Wang constantly translates in a register that is closer to contemporary English vernacular than to the more poetic

register that characterizes the original Chinese text. He vernacularizes the original Chinese text by turning metaphorical and poetic sexual descriptions into more colloquial forms (Examples 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10). In some cases, Wang alters the relationship between the participants in a sexual act (Example 9 and 11) and concretizes in his translation sexual references that are implicit in the source text (Example 10). The second feature of Wang's translation is his rhetorical aim to achieve a rhyming effect (Examples 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11), as opposed to Zhang's strategy of using the irregular blank verse (Tang 2001: v). We believe some of the vernacular lexical choices Wang has made in his translation could be motivated by the need to achieve rhyme with the rest of the verse. The more important motivation underlying his choice of register, however, seems to be that the skopos (or purpose) of Wang's translation is to disseminate *Mudan Ting* as a cultural resource to the Western world (Tang 2000: 850). In line with this skopos, it is reasonable to assume that he might be targeting a more general, rather than specialized, readership, and this is textually realized in the fact that Wang's translation is the only one among the three that refrains from the use of discursive notes. As Wang notes in a commentary to his own translation, one of his aims was to produce a translation which "[contains] the flavour of the far away and the long ago yet never really archaic to be intelligible" (Tang 2000: 848). Intelligibility is thus the primary skopos underlying the translator's strategies, which may explain why many of the sexual descriptions in the Chinese play have been rendered in a colloquial register and uninhibited fashion that conforms to the linguistic expectations of lay contemporary readers of English.

In contrast, Cyril 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 in his translation (Examples 3, 5, 8 and 10). The fact that some of the metaphorical and culture-specific items in the Chinese text are literally translated and cast within inverted commas in the target text (Examples 3, 5 and 8) shows that the translator generally resists domestication into target language norms (cf. Wang 2009). This claim is further corroborated by the fact that Birch adopts the strategy of "thick translation" by using the paratextual device of footnoting to explicate literary and cultural allusions that may have been lost in translation (Example 5). With Birch's translation, the reader is constantly reminded of the Chinese cultural origin of the text being read, though Birch does occasionally adapt certain items in the Chinese text to bridge them into the

cognitive world of the target readership (Example 1). What distinguishes Birch from the other two translators (and especially from Wang Rongpei), however, is his stoic attempt in keeping intact the poetic flavor of the original and hence in preserving the generic and linguistic qualities of the classical dramatic text. The erotic passages in the Chinese play, which are delivered in metaphorical and poetic constructions, are poetically rendered by Birch in a way that may not come across as easily comprehensible to a lay English reader (Examples 4, 6, 8 and 10). It is possible that Birch's version, published under the label of a renowned university press, is targeting at a more scholastic community, which hence justifies the semantic stance of his translation strategy, as compared to Wang's relatively more communicative stance (cf. Newmark 2003).

On the basis of these observations, we propose a preliminary hypothesis that serves as a counterpart to previous findings on the translation of erotic material in literature. As mentioned earlier, scholars have proposed that in translating sexually sensitive material from English into Chinese, obliteration or mitigation of such material is generally the norm as far as Chinese translators are concerned. Our study demonstrates that this norm does not hold in the reverse translation direction. On the whole, the three English versions of *The Peony Pavilion* show, to varying degrees, a tendency to retain explicit sexual descriptions in the original text. Even Zhang's version, in which evidence for the euphemistic treatment of certain sexual descriptions can be found, does *not* represent an overt manipulation of the source text, as no outright deletion has taken place. Birch's version, as discussed earlier, presents a strong adherence to the source text not only by retaining the sexual descriptions in full but also by inscribing them in a poetic register in English, thus achieving stylistic equivalence with the Chinese source text. (This strategy, as we have argued, may be attributed to the scholarly audience that Birch could be targeting at, which justifies a literary rather than vernacular treatment of sexual descriptions.) In terms of sexual explicitness, one could argue that Wang's version goes the furthest among the three translations, as Wang's colloquial treatment of erotic material in *Mudan Ting* often results in an expressive directness that serves to amplify the erotic sense emanating from the text. We therefore argue that Zhang, Birch and Wang can be located, in ascending order, on a vertical continuum in terms of the sexual explicitness of their respective versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, and that the general norm exhibited by the three translators with respect to the treatment of erotic

material is that of retention, which departs from the norm of deletion/mitigation found in Chinese translations of similar material written in English.

Why would the tendencies of the English-language translators of Chinese literature differ from those of Chinese-language translators of English literature, as far as sexually sensitive material is concerned? We contend that the inclination to retain rather than suppress sexual descriptions can be explained by factoring the target readerships of these translations into our consideration of the translational norms. As the target audience of *The Peony Pavilion* comprise English-speaking readers, most of whom from English-speaking communities, the three translators may have adopted different assumptions about the commensurability of sexual descriptions with the general ethical atmosphere within the target language community. While translators working from English into Chinese may practice self-censorship based on the assumption that erotic material presents a taboo to the Chinese-reading community, translators working in the reverse direction would not have the same assumption. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that euphemism is *not* the universal norm adopted by translators in the treatment of sexually sensitive material; rather, the strategy used in translating erotic material is a function of the assumed acceptability of such material by the target readership. The validity of this hypothesis would, of course, need to be tested through further case studies of more parallel texts and language pairs.

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