

A Literature Review on *Li Hun* and its English Versions

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Abstract

Li Hun, as one of the most satisfactory works of Lau Shaw, occupies an important position in his literary career and is regarded as a sign of the maturity of his literary creation. Up to now, it has been translated into two English versions, one by Evan King and the other by Helena Kuo and Lau Shaw. After carding relevant researches, it is found that the studies on *Li Hun* range from the literary features, artistic style to English versions' reception while the researches on its English versions are conducted mainly from the aspects of aesthetic characteristics, cultural translation theory and translator's subjectivity. Through the analysis of previous studies, the thesis aims to provide a reference for the study of *Li Hun* and its English versions.

Key words: *Li Hun*; English versions; translation; Lau Shaw

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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Li Hun* in 1933, it has been highly praised by the academic circles and regarded as a classic work superior to all previous works of Lau Shaw. Many

scholars have attached great importance to the literary features of the literature on Beijing-flavor and philistines, as well as the artistic style full of humor and Beijing dialect in *Li Hun*. However, the two English versions of *Li Hun*, since published in 1948, are not widely accepted in the English-speaking world due to the copyright and differences of cultural subjects. At present, a few researches mainly focus on the aesthetic characteristics, cultural translation theory and translator's subjectivity, which shows a lot of space to do research.

1. PRECIOUS STUDIES ON *LI HUN*

Li Hun has been highly recognized by domestic scholars since its publication in 1933. In *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, Xia Zhiqing (2005) comments that "*Li Hun* is a novel that shows Lau Law's new performance in comedy talent. To further explore the weakness of Chinese national character and the morbid state of Chinese society in different backgrounds, *Li Hun* is also regarded as a sequel to Lau Shaw's two previous novels (*Zhao Zi Yue* and *Er Ma*)". Previous studies on *Li Hun* can be roughly divided into two parts: literary features and artistic style.

1.1 Studies on Literary Features

First of all, most researches focus on the literary features of *Li Hun*. Qin Yuhui (秦宇慧, 2001) believes that *Li Hun* is a literary story concerning philistines. Compared with the themes of new-realist novels emerging in the 1980s, *Li Hun* describes the life thoughts of the protagonist Lao Li, which not only shows the psychological process of Lao Li's transformation from an idealist to a philistine, but also reflects the critical purpose of the writer's subject. Wu Xiaomei (1984) thinks that *Li Hun* is a gray tragedy of civil life and primarily depicts the most ordinary daily life. In revealing the ordinary existence of gray figures in civil society, Wu holds that Lau shaw shows the irreconcilable contradiction between individual pursuit

and social system, and reveals that this tragic experience is also closely related to the characters' weaknesses.

At the same time, some scholars have realized that *Li Hun* is also a novel revealing the tragic fate of small intellectuals. From the point of view of Wu Qinming and Liu Lian (2018), "the image of Lao Li in *Li Hun* is not only a poetic pursuer, but also a representative of the small intellectuals created by Lau Shaw". And the tragic ending of *Li Hun* is not merely a personal tragedy, but the macro tragedy of the intellectuals and their times. Liu Lian (2004) also argues that Lao Li in *Li Hun* is also the representative of intellectuals with primitive nature. This image also mirrors the entanglement of rationality and autonomy of intellectuals facing the social situation at that time, and reveals Lau Shaw's reflections and doubts of social phenomena to a certain extent in *Li Hun*.

It is worth noting that some scholars regard *Li Hun* as a representative of Beijing-flavor literature. Actually, Beijing-flavor is a typical symbol of Lau Shaw's works. Qian Liqun (1998) makes it clear that Lau Shaw still maintains the Beijing-flavor in *Li Hun*, which is mainly reflected in the description of Beijing's unique cultural charm and cultural landscape. Besides, Qian (2012) further added that Beijing-flavor in the novel is also shown in the display of the cultural interest which has the brand of Beijing citizen culture. Han Jingtai (2011) not only analyzes the concept of Beijing-flavor literature, but also concludes Lau Shaw's contribution and influence on Beijing-flavor literature through exploring his classic works such as *The Yellow Storm* and *Li Hun*. Yin Hang (2017) explicitly comments that Lau Shaw is the source of Beijing-flavor literature. His works have achieved the standard of elegance and vulgarity, marking an important breakthrough in the pursuit of nationalization and individualization of modern novels, which can also locate traces in *Li Hun*.

1.2 Studies on Artistic Style

Secondly, many scholars focus their researches on the artistic style of *Li Hun*. Chen Yuan (2009) considers that "Lau Shaw completes the description of the miserable life of the middle and lower classes intellectuals and the criticism of the decadent bureaucracy and culture in *Li Hun* through the use of irony". The art of irony used in *Li Hun* reflects the patriotic feeling of nationalism and humanitarian concern in satire, and it is the expression of the feelings of a writer with a sense of social responsibility.

In addition, "humor" is recognized as the typical artistic style of *Li Hun*. Humor is one of the characteristics of Lau Shaw's literary language, as the scholar Hu Qing (1981) argues that the uniqueness of Lau Shaw's humorous art lies in that "his humor contains philosophy and sadness, not just in order to amuse the target readers". This "tearful smile" style of humor is fully displayed in *Li Hun*. Xu Zhongjia (2014) sings highly that humor is

Lau Shaw's main capital for successfully occupying the position in the literary field. Similarly, from the point of view of Cui Mingfen (1984), the humor in *Li Hun* is accomplished by describing the characters' personalities and real life. Meanwhile, Cui also compares Lao Shaw's language style with Lu Xun's. According to Cui, Lu Xun's language style is often sharp and sarcastic, while Lau Shaw shows more witty humor.

Furthermore, Chen Yuan (2009) reveals that humor is not only Lau Shaw's language style, but a part of his literary thought. Lau Shaw's humor contains fun and makes people laugh, and criticizes reality in laughter as well. Therefore, the humor in *Li Hun* has strong social concern and reflection. Shang Yuhong (2014) also claims that Lau Shaw's humor contains more suffering and sorrow, which is influenced by his attitude towards life. Yin Hang (尹航, 2017) explores that the humor in Lau Shaw's literary works shows an elegant Beijing-flavor and implies a spicy irony between the witty and funny words. Yin also perceives that Lau Shaw's humor has gone through two stages, from the deliberate humor in the early period to the natural humor in the later period, the deep thinking of laughing instead of anger having injected into his works. Sun Xianqing (1994) highly recognized the humor style involved in *Li Hun* in his research, which is the most glorious and valuable part of Lau Shaw's works, and also a sign that Lau Shaw's creation enters into the mature period.

What's more, some scholars find that the use of Beijing dialect is also an artistic feature of *Li Hun*. Hong Zhonghuang and Ke Ying (1993) express that Lau Shaw is "a unique writer who created the modern literary language completely out of pure Beijing Language". In the view of Shang Yuhong (2014), the simplicity of ethnic minorities endows Lau Shaw with a unadorned writing psychology. Therefore, in the process of creating *Li Hun*, Lau Shaw attaches great importance to the simplicity and elegance of language. Also based on psychological theory, Shang believes that Lau Shaw cannot be separated from Beijing where he grew up and lived and therefore reveals a strong Beijing charm in his works. According to Wang Xin (2005), Lau Shaw forms his own unique language style with his profound language skills and rich life experiences. Wang lists the vocabulary of Beijing customs and local characteristics in *Li Hun*, and finds that Lau Shaw's proper application of Beijing dialect makes the works full of life interest and national beauty. Yin Hang (2017) shares the same view that Lau Shaw is well aware of the role of Beijing dialect in the popular literature and has carried out this goal in his language practice throughout his life. Ma Erhua (2002) takes *Li Hun* as an example to analyze the lexical and syntactic features of the use of Beijing dialect in Lau Shaw's works. Finally, Ma draws the conclusion that the novel successfully employs the vibrant Oral Beijing language, which makes the characters vivid and the customs of the people real and moving.

To sum up, up to now, researches on *Li Hun* have been mainly carried out from these two categories, literary feature and artistic style respectively.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *LI HUN*

There are currently two English versions of *Li Hun*. The first one, published in 1948 by King Publications Incorporated, was translated by Evan King. The second one, *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*, published by Reynal & Hitchcock, was co-translated by Helena Kuo and Lau Shaw in the same year. It is not difficult to find that the English versions of *Li Hun* have not been widely studied in the academic circle. The remaining researches are conducted from perspectives of reception study and textual study and a few studies can be divided into two categories: reception studies on the English versions and text studies from different perspectives.

2.1 Reception of the English Versions

Limited by time and copyright, *Li Hun* is not well accepted in the English-speaking world. According to the data from the Worldcat online catalog database, there are 150 collections of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*. While Evan King's version, *Divorce*, is only collected in one university library. In terms of the number of collections, *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* seems to be more popular. Quite different from the facts, Ma Zuyi and Ren Rongzhen (1997), the famous experts in translation studies points out that Helena's translation, which is faithful to the original text, does not have an expecting selling record sell well at the beginning of its publication. However, *Divorce*, which has been rewritten a lot, is accepted by American readers. The reason of such difference is that *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* fails to take the recipients' cultural background and reading psychology into account. As the director of the Institute of Literature of Anhui Academy of Social Sciences, Qian Niansun (1989) proposes that the faithfulness of Helena Kuo's version aims to guide American readers to accept Lau Shaw and the Chinese cultural imprint in his work. On the contrary, Evan King tries to cater to American readers so that *Divorce* can be integrated into American cultural values. Base on the difference of reception, Zhang Man (2015), a professor from Shanghai International Studies University, contends that *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* seems faithful to the original text but actually adds cultural and political intentions, which is contrary to the original intention of American government inviting Lau Shaw to visit the United States. Compared with the translation of Lau Shaw's works in the same period, Iwasaki (2015), from University of California, Los Angeles, finds out that *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* has no unforeseen impact on the history of contemporary literature. In a short book review published in *America*, Howe (1949) says that *Li*

Hun is "translated into excellent English by Helena Kuo, it is a smooth, well knit piece of literary work". Helena Kuo's translation can help American readers to recognize the Oriental background delightfully.

2.2 Text Studies From Different Perspectives

In recent years, the English translation of *Li Hun* is explored by domestic scholars from different perspectives.

2.2.1 Perspective of General Theory of Verbal Humor

Adopting the general theory of verbal humor, Chen Fang (2015) establishes a corpus for case analysis and comparative analysis of the original text and *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*. In her analysis, Chen takes 130 humorous passages in the novel as the research objects to explore the theoretical significance and practical value of the production of verbal humor. Chen's analysis proves that the rhetorical devices and translation methods based on the original concept have a great influence on the retention of humorous effect in the English translation of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*.

2.2.2 Perspective of Aesthetic Characteristics

Based on the aesthetic characteristics of the translation, Zhang Man (2012, 2015, 2016) has published at least three articles pointing out that literary translation is subject to political or cultural aesthetic manipulations, which are also reflected in *Divorce* and *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*. It is generally acknowledged that Evan King's political intention to rewrite original text is obvious, while Helena Kuo and Lau Shaw's translation reproduces the aesthetic appeal of the original text. However, "in terms of its internal structure, the translation has two meanings: one is the significance of cultural exchange, and the other is the significance of the times in the target society" (2016). Therefore, Zhang insists that the process of translation should take into account both the cultural traditions of the original country and the society and culture of the target country. Derived from the above two aspects, she reexamines the two English versions and finds that *Divorce* not only accords with American political intention, but also attempts to construct the original aesthetic intention, such as restoring the humorous features in Lau Shaw's novels. It is worth mentioning that Zhang man (2015) notices that the fidelity of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* is higher than that of Evan King's. In her opinion, it is also obvious that Helena Kuo and Lau Shaw try their best to restore the aesthetic and national characteristics in the process of translation. However, inevitably, influenced by the background of the invitation from the United States, Lau Shaw adds the political purpose in *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* to arouse the resonance of the American elite.

2.2.3 Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

Besides, there are some scholars exploring the English translations of *Li Hun* from other perspectives. Employing the theory of cultural translation, Liao Yan (2015) takes

a comparative study on language and text rewriting to analyze the translation features, advantages and disadvantages of the two versions. Liao clearly points out that the cultural phenomena behind the translation plays a crucial role in target readers' inclination. Finally, combining with cultural translation theory, she summarizes the translation strategies adopted by the two translators and their translation effects. Liao also analyzes the reasons of the popularity of Evan King's translation, and continues to reveal the important role of cultural factors in the process of making the translation popular.

Similarly, from Ma Zuyi and Ren Rongzhen's (1997) view, they criticize that "Evan King sees through rose-colored glasses with strong American social and cultural atmosphere, turning a tragic divorce satire into a farce with American humor". Qian Niansun (1989) pays more attention to the influence of cultural conflict on literary translation. Qian insists that there are cultural differences between source and target countries due to their different language and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the readers' attitude towards the translation will also change. After a detailed description and comment on the translation of *Li Hun*, Qian draws a conclusion that *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* is more faithful to the original.

2.2.4 Perspective of the Theory of Extended Hermeneutic Motion

Employing the theory of extended hermeneutic motion, Xia Tian (2009) takes a systematic analysis to make four elements of Trust, Aggression, Incorporation and Restitution corresponding to text selection in translation activities. In the research, Xia completes an in-depth analysis of the English translation of Lau Shaw's works from a historical perspective, and points out that the theory of extended hermeneutic motion is both descriptive and prescriptive. She also strongly advocates that the original text and the English translation should be analyzed in the historical and cultural context, and it is essential to explore the background and reasons of the selection of works by translators or publishers. In the compensation stage, Xia also examines the compensation activities that the original author participated in or initiated translation, as the translation of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* by Helena Kuo and Lau Shaw. Finally, her thesis claims that the theory of extended hermeneutic motion is of special significance to the study of the history of English translation of a certain writer or a certain type of literary works.

2.2.5 Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

Many scholars have studied the English versions from the perspective of translator's subjectivity. As far as the translator's responsibility is concerned, Lau Shaw (1999) thinks that "the translator has the responsibility to introduce what is written in the original text and should pay attention to convey how it is described as well". Sun Huijun (2004) points out that "Lau Shaw, as the original

author of the novel, requires the translator to be faithful to the original and reproduces his original text to the target language readers. On the contrary, the main purpose of Evan King's translation is to cater to the taste of the target language readers, hoping to bring reading satisfaction in the translation for American readers".

From the same point of view, Li Yue (2010) contends that Evan King changes tragedy into comedy through a lot of rewriting and deletion, which are the performances of excessive subjectivity of the translator. It is noteworthy that Lau Shaw has a dual identity who is both an author and a translator in *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*. In contrast to the criticism of Evan King, Zhu Zhenwu (朱振武, 2019) thinks that in order to consider the acceptance of the translation by American readers, *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* has actually made some modifications and deleted some paragraphs or chapters. However, from the perspective of translator's subjectivity, he continues to insist that translator's creativity is influenced and restricted by subjective and objective factors. Moreover, Zhu draws a conclusion that the rewriting and deletion of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* constrain the translator's creation in a degree, which not only takes into consideration the acceptability of the target language readers, but also conveys the real connotation of the original work.

2.2.6 Perspective of Theme and Language Style

Some scholars focus on the faithfulness of the English versions to the theme and language style. Shu Yue (舒悦, 1986) strongly criticizes the problems of modification and deletion in the English version of Evan King. This kind of rewriting is considered to have changed the literary theme of *Li Hun*. As a result, in the beginning of publication, Lau Shaw's resistance and criticism are understandable. Adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, Wang Yaru (2019) analyzes the restoration of language features in two versions. On the whole, she concludes that the language of *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee* is more vivid, which can accurately convey Lau Shaw's language style and writing theme. However, due to the lack of understanding of Chinese, many misinterprets occur in the translation of Evan King, resulting in the loss of the original language features. Finally, Wang comes to conclusion that there is no difference between the two English versions, and both of them spread Chinese cultural characteristics to a certain extent.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, from the previous studies on the English translation of *Li Hun*, it is not hard to find out that the research in this field is comparatively limited, not only in research angles but also in numbers. Meanwhile, these studies present a sweeping feature due to the lack of quantitative concrete examples. Nevertheless,

the application of language is the most obvious feature of Lau Shaw's works, so the previous studies on fragmented examples are not very rigorous to some extent. Consequently, the thesis hopes to make a further study of the English versions of *Li Hun* through a quantitative study based on the translation characteristics of Beijing dialect.

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