



## Exploring the Translations and Translating of Yueju (Cantonese Opera)

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### Abstract

Yueju (粤剧/Cantonese Opera), one of the Chinese operas being popular in the Southern China and amongst the overseas Chinese community, works as a vital element for disseminating Chinese culture. However, the English translations for “yueju/粤剧” are dissatisfying for being unprecise, lack of motivation and failing to highlight the cultural elements of the cradleland. Under the guidance of the post-colonialism theory, the present study will try to apply some translation strategies to work out the possible translations.

**Keywords:** Cantonese Opera, translation studies, post-colonialism, Cross-cultural communication

### 1. Introduction

Known as “the Red Bean in the South”, Cantonese Opera (“粤剧”, yueju) is a delicate and unique type of performance in China. With the diaspora of Cantonese-speaking Chinese people, such an opera has been disseminated to the North America, Australia and the Southeastern Asia amongst other places. Besides, in recent years, thanks to its fascinating plot, splendid costume and unique voice, it has attracted non-Cantonese Speakers. Up to 2012, Hong Kong finished the English translation of these texts: the brief introduction of more than 120 pieces of Cantonese Opera and the 18 excerpts of different plays. What’s more, activists in Hong Kong and Singapore had already translated, rewrote the Cantonese opera scripts in languages like English, Malay so as to perform the operas in different languages and attract more audience. For instance, Cha Duk Chang Children’s Cantonese Opera Association in Hong Kong has produced some Cantonese Operas in English, like *Breaking the Red Lantern* (《醉打金枝》, zuidajinzhi). In addition, the Association takes these works as a method to help the teenage members to study English language, Chinese culture and Cantonese Opera itself. However, a big problem may hinder the further spread of Cantonese Opera because there are several different English names for the term “粤剧” (yueju). These English names are as follows: “Cantonese Opera”, “Guangdong Opera” and “Yue Opera”. Even worse, the scholars argue and hold different opinions for these names. Hence, there is a research gap for the present study to find a better term for “粤剧” (yueju) by analyzing its origin from relevant translation theory.

### 2. Reasons for Different Translations of “yueju (粤剧)”

#### 2.1 An Analysis of the Term “Guangdong Opera”

In most cases, the traditional Chinese operas are named after the cradlelands or the dialects used in the performance. Considering that “粤剧” (yueju) is popular amongst people in Guangdong province and its cradleland also lies in Guangdong, the opera is named as “Guangdong Opera” by some people. However, for the skeptics, Guangdong province also has operas like Teochew opera, Han Opera (Hakka Opera), Leizhou Opera and Tea-picking Opera among others. Besides, “粤剧” (yueju) is also popular in Guangxi, Hong Kong and Macau. Hence, it is too broad (or narrow) to name “粤剧” (yueju) as “Guangdong Opera”.

#### 2.2 An Analysis of the Term “Yue Opera”

Some people rendered the term “粤剧” (yueju) as “Yue Opera”. For instance, “广东粤剧院”, literally meaning “The Cantonese Opera Theater of Guangdong” is officially translated as “Guangdong Yue Opera Theater”. The proponents argue that “Yue” is the transliteration of “粤”, which means Guangdong province or something related to Cantonese people, their dialects and culture. Hence, it is reasonable to name “粤剧” (yueju) “Yue Opera”, which shows its cultural connection with the Cantonese people. Nevertheless, the opponents challenge that Yue Opera may confuse the readers because the Shaoxing Opera in Shanghai and Zhejiang province is also named Yue Opera (“越剧”, pinyin also pronounce as “yueju”).

#### 2.3 An Analysis of the Term “Cantonese Opera”

Taking the above mentioned conditions into consideration, Pan (2000) argue that the term “Cantonese Opera” is advisable. The main reasons are the following: 1) the term is widely used in the English world; 2) the word “Cantonese” refers to the dialect used by the Cantonese people residing in both Guangdong and Guangxi. Hence, it can precisely refer to the original audience of the very opera.

### 3. How “yueju” Was and Could be Translated

A proper name for “yueju (粤剧)” means the first step for a better dissemination of the Cantonese Opera. However, a good name is not only about terminology but also about the unequal power relationship between different cultures. It should be noticed that the term “Cantonese Opera” will not confuse the readers like other terms available and used; nevertheless, it clearly unveils a position of the weakness of Chinese culture when it is going global.

#### 3.1 *The Unequal Power Relationship behind the Term “Cantonese Opera”*

Michael Foucault puts forward the power discourse theory, pointing out that power is closely related to discourse: the nature of power is the power of articulation, and discourse is not merely the tool for power but also the key point for mastering power (Wei, 2015, P. 124). In the cultural transmission, power, especially the hegemony of discourse/culture, is ubiquitous. As a critical part of discourse generation, the influence of political and cultural power is omnipresent in the process of translation. The relationship between power and translation can be mainly summarized as follow: Firstly, translation yields to power, for instance, the selection of source text and translation strategy often reveal the power discourse. After it failed in the Opium War in the 1840s, China strong demanded for learning from the West. Hence, for a long time, the directionality of translation in China was mainly from foreign languages to Chinese while the purpose of translation lay in the introduction of western knowledge and values. In a word, the translation activities in China have always been under the western discourse hegemony. Secondly, powers lie in translation. In other words, translation also boasts its value, function, and influence. Therefore, China must make good use of the Chinese-to-English translation to build up its cultural image on the international stage. Meanwhile, different cultures or countries, by making use of translation, can make their voices heard and protect the world’s cultural diversity.

In the following, I will analyze the term “Cantonese Opera” as the English translation of “粤剧” (yueju) from the relationship between translation and power. According to the existing opinions, “Cantonese” refers to the “the dialect of Chinese spoken in the vicinity of Canton in southern China” or “of or relating to Canton (Guangzhou), its inhabitants, their dialect, or their cuisine” (see *The New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*). Hence, it is reasonable to translate “粤剧” (yueju), an opera popular in the Cantonese-speaking areas, as “Cantonese Opera”. However, such a translation shows the hegemony of western culture. In most cases, the name of Chinese opera is translated this way: “the Pinyin name of the Cradleland + Opera”, for instance, Yue Opera (also known as “Shaoxing Opera” because it originates in Shaoxing, Zhejiang), Sichuan Opera. Sometimes, some of the opera are translated in this way: “the local dialect name of the Cradleland + Opera”. For example, Teochew Opera (i.e., Chaozhou Ju in pinyin), is an opera famous in Chaozhou (known as Teochew in the local dialect). Hence, most English terms for translating China’s operas boast the cultural connection with their origins. However, the term “Cantonese Opera” is another story. From the perspective of etymology, “Cantonese” comes from “Canton”, the English name for Guangzhou. The word “Canton” originates from French, meaning an administrative division of a country or the capital city of this division.

Nowadays, the term “Canton” is used as a name for places or territorial subdivisions in France and several countries and regions with French influence like Belgium, Switzerland, Lebanon and the Quebec Province of Canada. In France, the term “Canton” was once one of the administrative divisions above “commune” (analogous to a US civil township or city). In Switzerland, Canton is the name for the federated states of the Swiss Confederation. A Swiss canton may consist of “communes” or “districts”. Guangzhou, being the capital city of Guangzhou prefecture (府 in Chinese) and Guangdong Province in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, was the residence of the officials like prefect (知府) and “governor” (巡抚). Besides, it was consisted of several townships and counties. Besides, the city of Guangzhou, as one of the important cities on the Maritime Silk Road, was one of the coastal cities for communication between China and the world at large. In the Qing Dynasty, the famous “The Thirteen Factories” were located in Guangzhou and merchants from Western Europe, and America came here for business. However, the westerners in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were unfamiliar with China’s administrative divisions, used the word “Canton” to name this city. Some opinions argue that “Canton” was a transliteration of Guangdong. However, the existing corpus has falsified such sayings. In *Canton Guide* (published in 1889) by John Glasgow Kerr, there were paragraphs including the translation of “广州” (Guangzhou), “广东” (Guangdong), and “广州府” (Guangzhou Prefecture) as follows:

*“The City of Canton is situated on Pearl River, 90 miles from Hongkong..... It is the Capital of Kwong-tung Province, and contains about 1,000,000 inhabitants. It is the residence of the Viceroy of the two Kwong Provinces, and of high military and civil officials of the Province. It is also the seat of the officers of the Kwong Chau Department...”* (Kerr, 1889, P. 1)

In the selected text, Guangzhou was called Canton, Guangdong province “Kwong-tung Province”, while the Guangzhou

prefecture “Kwong Chau Department”. It should be noted that “Kwong-tung” and “Kwong Chau” are the transliteration of the pronunciation for “Guangdong” and “Guangzhou” in the Cantonese dialect. In other words, for the westerners in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English names for “Guangdong” and “Guangzhou (Canton)” were distinguished. Therefore, the term “Canton” does not originate from “Guangdong” or “Guangzhou”. Therefore, we can conclude that using “Canton” to name “Guangzhou” reveals the inequality between different cultures in discourse power, namely, the strong cultures would name things of the weaker cultures the way as they like.

Above all, the term “Cantonese Opera” cannot present the characteristics of the Chinese culture (especially the Cantonese culture). Therefore, a better English name is needed to eliminate the hegemony of the western culture and reshape the cultural identity of China.

### 3.2 Thought Resource for Eliminating the Inequality of Discourse Power between Different Cultures

With globalization, it is inevitable that the strong culture will permeate into other cultures, causing the culture of the weakness to face the risk of assimilation. Hence, it is a new project in the research of cultural communication about maintaining cultural identity. As one of the significant methods of cultural communication, translation itself means the contest of the discourse powers of the two cultures. Under the background of the peaceful rise of China, the Chinese culture was and is presenting itself to the rest of the world and gaining the equal rights in cultural communication. The translation theory of post-colonialism, with the aim to unveil the hegemonical nature of imperialism in cultural communication, coincides with the goal of helping Chinese culture win an equal status and increase the world’s cultural diversity. The post-colonialism school, moving away from the existing research paradigms, which mainly focused on the linguistic dimension of translation, considers the historical and cultural elements and points out that 1) translation is a way to get power; 2) translation is an arena of cultural colonialism and decolonization and 3) the process and result of translation reveal the discourse power of the cultures of the source and target languages. Niranjana, one of the representative figures of post-colonialism, believes that the activity of translation is always political. The power relationship lying behind the translation is always where the (ex-) colonialist imposes the “symbolic control” over the culture of weakness or the people of their ex-colony. In other words, the relationship between different cultures is far from equal. Hence, she calls on the people in colonies to “relocate translation and turn it into a place of resisting and transforming” (Niranjana, 1992: 15). As a way of resisting, post-colonialism disagrees with the seemingly objective or neutral cultural opinions advocated by the (ex-) colonialists and the strong culture: these seemingly neutral opinions, by emphasizing the “sameness” of different cultures while neglecting the differences, imposes discourse violence against the weaker and marginalized culture and may cause cultural crisis.

As for translation, post-colonialism school holds that post-colonialist translation should be a tool for the Third World/the weaker culture to achieve these goals: 1) getting rid of the dominance of the strong culture; 2) moving away from the peripheral position and 3) making their voice heard when communicating with the strong culture. In the context of the post-colonialism, there are two major translation strategies: domestication and foreignization, which are not merely about textual style but also connected to political power (Wei, 2015). The strategy of domestication usually adopts a fluent expression that is easy to be understood. The translators using this strategy are required to produce a translated text which reads like the non-translation text in the source language. However, the strategy of domestication, to some extent, might underscore the uniqueness/specificity of the source culture. In a world with the unequal relationship between different cultures, this strategy helps the strong culture not merely in imposing their discourse power on other culture, but also in conducting cultural appropriation of the source text and its culture. For Laurence Venuti, one of the translators of post-colonialism, the strategy of foreignization is a way of resistant translation, i.e., when translating the text of the cultures of weakness, the translator purposely selects the unfamiliar, unaccustomed, and non-fluent expressions to preserve the exotic, unique elements of the source text (Zhang, 2018). By preserving the cultural features of the original text, the original text could resist the assimilation of the strong cultures.

Being affected by post-colonialism, a certain number of Chinese scholars point out that it is reasonable to use the foreignization strategy when helping Chinese culture going global. For instance, Xu (2014) affirms the positive effects of foreignization strategy when analyzing the problems in the translation and dissemination of the Chinese classics, like *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

However, the foreignization has its limitations in helping the Chinese culture go outside. Tan & Zhang (2018) even criticize that “the post-colonialism theory over-emphasizes the cultural and political function of the foreignization strategy while ignoring the translation itself. Hence, it has little guidance to the translation practice”. Therefore, in the dissemination of the culture of weakness, the translator should adopt a flexible method and pay attention to the effect when selecting the strategy. If the translator misunderstands the foreignization strategy and blindly uses the word-for-word method, which seems to preserve the feature of the source culture, they would surprisingly find that their translation works are too obscure for the

target audience to understand. In a word, the translator of the weaker cultures shall maintain the cultural identity and strike a balance between foreignization and domestication.

### 3.3 The Possible Solutions for Translating “粤剧” (yueju)

Due to the dominance of the English language, when talking about the translating texts relevant to English, there are more texts translated from English than texts translated into English. In other words, even the audiences from non-English speaking countries need English materials to learn about Cantonese Opera. Considering this situation, the present paper tries to make a compromise, using both the strategy of foreignization while adding notes. By doing so, the translation can highlight China’s cultural identity while making it possible for the audience to easily understand the meaning. In the following, some possible solutions are provided, and the most appropriate one would be selected through a corpus-based analysis.

The first possible translation could be Jyut Opera (Cantonese Opera). Guangdong (Guangzhou) is home to Cantonese Opera. The Chinese character “粤” (Yue in Pinyin) refers to the city or the province. However, the term “Yue Opera” in English has already been designated to “越剧” (also known as Shaoxing Opera, a Chinese opera in Zhejiang province and Shanghai. Inspired by the case of “Teochew Opera”, with “Teochew” in the local dialect meaning Chaozhou city, “粤剧” (yueju) could be translated as “Jyut Opera” with “Jyut” representing “粤” in the Cantonese dialect. Meanwhile, the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong, an academic group, has developed a romanization system of Cantonese called Jyutping, with the syllable of “Jyut” for “粤”, meaning the Cantonese dialect and “Ping” for “拼”, meaning “phonetic alphabet”. Such a system is widely accepted by the education system in Hong Kong to teach the pronunciation of Cantonese dialects. Hence, it is reasonable to adopt “Jyut” for “粤” according to the Jyutping alphabet. In order to help the foreign readers to understand, a note “Cantonese Opera” is added, and the whole term comes to be “Jyut Opera (Cantonese Opera)”.

Another option would be Guangfu Opera (Cantonese Opera). The opera is an indispensable part of Cantonese culture. Cantonese people name themselves Guangfu people in Chinese. Cantonese people reside in not merely Guangdong province but also Hongkong, Macau and Guangxi. Meanwhile, there are also other operas like Teochew opera and Han Opera (Hakka Opera) in Guangdong province. Therefore, to refer to the opera more accurately, the term “粤剧” (yueju) can be translated as “Guangfu Opera”. Such a translation would be more accurate than the “Guangdong Opera” because it refers to the cultural factor rather than a narrow geographical factor.

The last one could be Guangzhou Opera (Cantonese Opera). Typically speaking, Cantonese opera is said to originate from Guangzhou city. Hence, “粤剧” (yueju) is translated as “Guangzhou Opera”. It should be noted that the term “Guangzhou” has been gradually known to the world thanks to that the city gain momentum economically and in terms of tourism. However, the term “Canton” is more famous than “Guangzhou”. By translating “粤剧” (yueju) as “Guangzhou Opera” with a note “Cantonese Opera” added, the new term can strengthen the connection between “Guangzhou” and “Canton”. What’s more, by impressing the audience that Guangzhou is linked to the popular opera, the term may make Guangzhou more famous and attract more tourists to visit it in the coming future.

To find the most advisable translation version, the proper names in these proposals would be analyzed through corpora. Hence, corpus as Google Books N-grams and Wikipedia Corpus are selected to find out the frequencies of terms proposed above in the historical texts and the academic texts. While the corpus of COCA, British National Corpus, News On the Web (NOW), and Global Web-based English are chosen for checking the frequencies of the terms in the News or Online Texts. The results of searching the relevant terms are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. The Frequencies of the Translations in Corpora

Corpus \ Word	Google Books n-grams (British English)	Google Books n-grams (American English)	Wikipedia Corpus	COCA	BNC	NOW	GloWbe	Total
Jyutping	0	0	366	0	0	59	17	442
Jyut	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	6
Guangzhou	14705	38280	9049	492	15	33896	4456	100893
Guangfu	0	0	92/2	5/0	0	152/0	56/0	2

As for the proposal one, the term “Jyutping” appears 442 times, with 336 times in Wikipedia and 61 examples in the Hong Kong Media. In other words, the term “Jyutping” is only popular among Hong Kong readers and not so widely accepted by the western audience. As for the term “Jyut”, there are only 6 searching results. All the results are mainly the Jyutping spelling of some Chinese words in the Cantonese dialect. However, the samples are not enough to be widely disseminated among the foreign readers. Hence, translating “粤剧” (yueju) as “Jyut Opera” may not be an optimal choice. As for the second proposal, there are 305 examples in corpus like Wikipedia corpus, Corpus for Contemporary American English, News on the Web, and Global Web-based English. However, most examples did not stand for the Chinese “广府” but for other Chinese characters. With such a low frequency, the word “Guangfu” is not likely to help the audience better understand the translation. As for the final term, “Guangzhou”, appears 100,893 times in different corpus. Among different corpus, the term appears 33896 and 4456 times in the News on the Web (NOW) and Global Web-based English (GloWbe) respectively. Obviously, the term “Guangzhou” boasts more frequency than the term “Jyut” or “Guangfu”. In other words, “Guangzhou” is more widely accepted by the foreign readers than the two other proposals. Therefore, Guangzhou Opera (Cantonese Opera) is recommended for rendering “粤剧” (yueju) for both the width of usage and the representation of the cultural identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The different translations of a cultural term mean the contest for different motivation and even the wrestling of discourse powers. The present paper attempts to work as a pathway and to inspire more translation researches on these fields, like the naming of the traditional Chinese operas and other art forms in English, and the translation of terminology in the relevant fields. Under the backdrop of globalization, in order to help more traditional Chinese art going global, the translator is advised to strike a balance between two extremes of foreignization and domestication. On the one hand, they try to practice under the guidance of “resisting translation” according to the post-colonialism theory. On the other hand, they should avoid using the word-for-word translation method blindly which may lead to obscure translation text that fails to attract the target readers.

Finally, more research is needed to explore the translation strategies, methods, and skills in the relevant fields and make it possible for the Chinese culture to “go into the readers’ culture” while preserving its own features. More importantly, it is expected that more translation researchers can put forward theories to help Chinese culture and other marginalized nations go global while building up their cultural identity.

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