



# Shakespeare Starts a New Century Travel in China: A Comparative Analysis of the Two New Chinese Re-Translations of *Hamlet*

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## Abstract

The two new 21st-century Chinese re-translations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one by Hongyin Wang and the other by Guobin Huang, represent continued efforts by Chinese scholars in studying and translating Shakespeare. Compared with those previous translations, these two have realized fresh achievements in such aspects as use of language with characteristics of the times, employment of new para-textual elements, visual arrangement of verse lines, and new treatment of those literary devices in the original work which usually constitute a major challenge to translators of them. And based on the latest academic research achievements with regard to *Hamlet*, either of them incorporates its translator's own research findings. The two translations also show some different features. Their main differences lie in that Wang, who translates mainly for the reader, is more concerned with the overall artistic effect by giving full play to the literary and expressive force of Chinese in characterization and uses naturally used Chinese language in characterization. Also, he lifts his translation in a philosophical connotation and a literary conception. Huang's version, far more annotated, is rendered for the stage and pays much attention to rhythm-rhyming scheme and image correspondence by concise and accurate Chinese, blending elegant and vulgar features according to the characters' identity. The two translators have made new contribution to the international Shakespeare studies in general and *Hamlet* studies in particular.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*, Chinese re-translation, Hongyin Wang, Guobin Huang, Shakespeare's plays

## 1. Introduction

The eternal humanistic value of William Shakespeare's plays, as literary and cultural canonical works, lies in their ultimate concern for the existing state and fate of mankind, which is displayed when they try to answer the eternal questions of human life. We need Shakespeare today because his thoughts link up with and nourish the spiritual life of modern people. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, or more simply *Hamlet*, is regarded almost unanimously across the world as the best one of the four great tragedies by Shakespeare, the other three being *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. *Hamlet* is characterized by an unprecedented range of dramatic techniques and styles, especially the soliloquies. It combines a powerful impression of design (with, for example, its careful parallels between the families of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras) with an equally strong effect of casual improvisation, its inset stories (and, indeed, its play-within-a-play) perpetually cut short by new circumstances (Dobson & Wells, 2001: 179). According to Zhang (2004:274), a Chinese scholar versed in Shakespeare studies, the period of Renaissance in England was one of flowering for the revenge tragedy. The play is a classic which not only displays fully Shakespeare's genius style and remarkable merits in artistic creation, but also epitomizes the artistry of English literature in the period of Renaissance.

*Hamlet* is a world classic in the true sense of the phrase, for it is a literary work which has been studied with the greatest academic efforts by literary scholars around the world over the ages, and this conclusion is also true of China. Research and translation of Shakespeare have made abundant achievements in China since their inception. Concerning scholarly research, the author found by searching the CNKI on January 27, 2012, with "Shakespeare" as the key search word, that the number of various papers retrievable in the system in the period between 2000 and 2012 reached over one thousand (academic degree theses not included), one fourth of which were concerned with *Hamlet* in one way or another, including those papers on the Chinese translations of the play. Though China started to study *Hamlet* and other works by Shakespeare more than two hundred years later than the western countries, today with various Chinese translations of *Hamlet*, China has caught up with them in Shakespeare studies, as evidenced by the fact that there have been so many research achievements reported every year, with more and more complete and profound understanding of the great playwright. With regard to the study of *Hamlet*, Chinese scholars' research interests are mainly in such areas as the historical background of the story of *Hamlet* and that of Shakespeare's creation of the play, the characters, story lines, and themes of it, the humanistic and philosophic thought implied in the work, the artistic aspects of the play as both a poetic work and a dramatic work, and the comparative studies between Chinese and west drama with special reference to *Hamlet*.

The history of translating *Hamlet* into Chinese is almost a century, but introduction of the story of the play is earlier. The introduction of Shakespeare into China was a gradual process, and the story of *Hamlet* was the first one introduced. Jize Zeng (1839-1890) was the first Chinese to watch the play of *Hamlet*, when he served as a special envoy sent by the Qing Government to Britain in 1879 (Qiu, 2006:29). That was more than two hundred years later than the appearance of the play by Shakespeare. However, the Chinese readers did not read the first translated story of *Hamlet* until in 1903 when a Shanghai press published a classical Chinese version of *Tales from Shakespeare*, a simplified adaptation of Shakespeare's plays by Charles Lamb and his sister Mary Lamb (Meng, 2005:223). Yet it was not a true translation of *Hamlet*. Several years later, Shu Lin (1852-1924), in cooperation with Yi We, rendered over twenty tales from Shakespeare plays, again in classical Chinese. Lin treated those tales as ghost stories and his version got popular among the Chinese readers. Lin's translation was not translation in the strict sense, either. The first translation of *Hamlet* was by Han Tian (1898-1968), a well-known Chinese playwright, who rendered the English play via a Japanese version into a Chinese play in vernacular Chinese in 1921, and next year a full translation was published by Zhonghua Book Company in Shanghai, which was welcomed widely and especially by the academia, the press, and the Chinese drama circles (Meng, 2005:609). In 1920, Shi Hu (1891-1962) a famous Chinese scholar, was the first to encourage efforts by Chinese translators to translate the complete works of Shakespeare into Chinese, and in response, Shiqiu Liang (1903-1987) started his project of rendering Shakespeare the next year, when a tide of translating Shakespeare began to surge in China. From then on, there have appeared many accomplished Chinese translators of Shakespeare's works, including Shenghao Zhu (1912-1944), Shiqiu Liang, Zhilin Bian (1910-2000), Dayu Sun (1905-1997), Ping Fang (1921-2008), etc. In the twentieth century, there were more than 40 Chinese versions by Chinese translators. Most translations of them employed a prose-style strategy of translating mainly for the reader. There are also several attempts to render *Hamlet* in a verse form, for example, Fang Ping's translation. Comparatively speaking, the translations with wide influence in the twentieth century were the four by Shenghao Zhu, Shiqiu Liang, Zhilin Bian, and Dayu Sun respectively, of which Zhu's was the most popular, for, as Hongyin Wang (2011: 204) judges, Zhu was strongly style-conscious and literature-conscious in his translating work and his translation did well in reproducing the original prose and verse parts in different proper ways.

The new century has seen Shakespeare's continued travel in China, and two new Chinese translations of *Hamlet* were published in 2012 and 2013. Compared with those previous translations in the last century, these two translations show their own features, inheriting some merits of those earlier ones and also realizing break-through in some aspects. Here the author will introduce them on the basis of his close reading of the two translations, their prefaces, with emphasis on their conceptual, linguistic, stylistic and textual aspects.

## 2. The Translators and the Translated Texts

Hongyin Wang's translation was published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in August of 2012 and Guobin Huang's, by Tsinghua University Press in January of 2013 (hereafter referred to as Wang's translation and Huang's translation respectively). Translation of plays, compared with other categories of translation, requires super language art and profound cultural understanding on the part of the translator, who should be highly skillful in cross-cultural communication, sympathetic comprehension and empathetic expression. In translating a play, it is important for the translator to grasp the identity and individuality of the characters whose psychology, language, and action should be coordinated in the translation. Mr. Wang is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Nankai University, whose main academic interests are literary translation theory and criticism, and is accomplished in Shakespeare studies. He is also an anthropologic poet, and as a prolific translator, has translated not only some world classics into Chinese but also many Chinese classics and regional folk works into English. Mr. Huang, professor of Chinese University of HK, is a scholar in literary translation theory, European literature, and comparative literature, and also a poet and essayist, versed in such foreign languages as English, French, Italian, German and Spanish. He has been a student of Shakespeare for about half a century. The two Chinese translators are both competent as translators of Shakespeare.

In terms of the text construction of the Chinese translations of *Hamlet*, the two versions both have their innovations. An English-Chinese bilingual text (289 pages) with much annotation, Wang's translation adopts a new pattern of translating *Hamlet* into Chinese, for it draws on the tradition of ancient pattern of making Chinese novel criticism and includes the English text, the Chinese translated text, and the para-textual system, with the translator's preface (comments on the humanistic value of re-reading Shakespeare and on previous Chinese translations of *Hamlet*, the translating principles of the new version, etc.), a Synopsis of *Hamlet*; marginal notes on important translating points; end notes mainly on the English text and the difference between different *Hamlet* texts; references, and the translator's postscript. Huang's translation is a book of two volumes (totally 676 pages), with the editor's note, the translator's foreword and preface, the Chinese translated text, and references. The 134 page foreword and preface contain analysis of the probable year when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, early editions, the English title of the play and its Chinese translations, key points of commentaries on Shakespeare and *Hamlet* through ages, analysis of the character of *Hamlet*, history of performing the play, translations of the play into European languages, and his own translating strategy. Besides the translated text proper, it includes footnotes which occupy three fourth of the whole length of the book. These footnotes concern such as language, images, characters, structure, edition, theatre art, performance effect, stage details, and translation. Though not bilingual, the version offers the English original when necessary in the footnotes. Therefore, Huang's book seems an academic monograph.

### 3. Translating Principles of the Two Translators

On the basis of analyzing their prefaces, translated versions, and comparatively analyzing typical examples of them, the two translators' main translating principles and strategies can be summarized as follows.

Wang's main translating purpose is to provide a theatric literature reader and he attaches more attention to the readability, understandability and appreciability of his translation. Therefore, he writes a long preface for his translation and supplies annotation and critical notes. Stylistically, as he has advocated, he renders Shakespeare's blank verse in a more flexible way, and in a broader correspondence to the original, he does not adhere rigidly to the original feet and metric scheme. What he gives salience to is basically reproducing the rhythmic and syllabic sensation and meanwhile controlling the line length and the folding of a sentence, so that on the whole the lines look nice, natural and symmetrical. He employs some textual principles over arranging lines in free verse, avoiding distortion caused by random sentence folding. In artistic expression, considering the semantic translation as the fundamental basis, Wang makes great efforts to give full play to the literary and expressive force of the Chinese language itself. On the question whether naturally used language can enter into translation, Wang (2011:203) holds that the translation should absorb properly the naturally used language, which is in current daily use, fresh and alive, and strongly expressive, and allow for topoelect to some extent, on the condition that it is not too local to be comprehensible to average readers of the whole country. Besides, some English expressions and ancient Chinese phrases can also be absorbed into the translation. On the whole, he makes sure that his translation language, which retains the main key of theatre language, is a stage language, different from the daily language, and a literary language for characterization, adequate for distinguishing different characters with their typical uttering features.

Huang's translation is, which is rendered for the stage, intended to be a reader for the directors, performers, and audiences in the Chinese-speaking world. In his opinion, the previous Chinese translations of *Hamlet* were all oriented to reading but not to performing. Thus, he tries to stress the stage performing effect, satisfying first the ears of directors, performers, and audiences and second the eyes of readers. He considers it necessary to add preface, rich annotation and commentary to the translated text because of differences in language, culture, ideology, and theatric traditions between English and Chinese. He thinks that both literariness and academic rigor should be considered in translation to meet various needs of different groups of readers so that they can enjoy a full understanding of the classic. His translation pursues mainly a poetic style in an effort to render *Hamlet* into a Chinese poetic drama, not only retaining the content of the "drama" but also conveying the features of "poetry". Huang keeps "dun (group of Chinese syllables, basically equivalent to the English 'foot')" of the Chinese translation in rigid accordance with the English line feet. He emphasizes the naturalness of language in his translation and treatment of images, and ensures that his translation is both novel and expressive in wording and suitable for stage performance, avoiding too obtrusive lines to the audience.

To reach their translation objectives, the two translators have made great efforts in the following three aspects: First, research-based translation. They strive to achieve their own understandings and findings of *Hamlet*, so as to guarantee the cognitive basis for their re-translations. Second, innovative translation. They try to ensure that the translation takes on a new look not only in rendering strategies and methods, but also in textual construction. Third, surpassing translation. The translation is not merely rallying those merits of the previous translations mechanically, but rather pursues a more reasonable and ideal goal. They both are strongly reader-and-audience-conscious, stressing the para-textual sides. As for their differences, their translating purposes are different, Wang translates for the reader, while Huang, for the stage; Obviously different in linguistic and stylistic pursuits, Wang, more flexible in rendering methods, makes conscious efforts to refine naturally used language and employ it in his translation, with emphasis on different characters' distinctive utterances matching their roles, while Huang keeps closer to the English original in metric scheme, concerned more with the stage effect. Para-textually, Huang's is a translation with the most abundant annotation in the history of translating *Hamlet* into Chinese. Wang analyzes the merits and demerits of the four major Chinese translations in the twentieth century in his preface. Huang, by contrast, mentions almost nothing of those previous translations, though he comments on some translations in other European languages than English.

### 4. Comparative Study of the Two New Chinese Translated Versions

The two translations are both rendered from the Q2 text, also making reference to some other editions. Wang (2010:225) argues, a re-translation of a classic should surpass the previous translations in comprehending the original work, translating methods and overall translation effect; though entitled to referring to the previous translations, the re-translator should not borrow too much from them; not necessary to seek novelty completely ignoring those past translations, the re-translation should take on a new overall look of its own. Wang's re-translation of *Hamlet* is the very practice of his opinion. Drawing on some established translated expressions, his translation displays some completely new features. Huang does not state the relationship between his translation and the old ones, but obviously he carries on some traditional practices like using "dun" for the English "foot".

#### 4.1 Proper Names

There is some common ground in this regard. For example, both continue rendering *Hamlet* into "哈姆雷特", and employ the practice of pronunciation-based transliteration. Their differences, however, are obvious. A striking feature of Wang's is his re-translating some proper names on the basis of such factors as laudatory and derogatory color, sex, and literary expression. For example, "Claudius" is transliterated into "克牢菝斯", where the Chinese graph "牢" means "prison", implying that "Denmark is a prison." "Gertrude", into "口特露德", highlighting its femaleness, for "露

” is used in female Chinese names. “Elsinore”, into “哀尔新口”, both close to the English pronunciation and revealing for it implies that “This is a place where some sorrowful things have happened, yet with a new promise.” In the text, Wang uses only the first Chinese graph of a name to mark the speaker; thus when the first syllable of the proper names in English is pronounced the same, he adopts different Chinese graphs for distinction. Huang’s translation uses full names to the mark the speakers in the play. A feature of his is that he limits most of the Chinese translated proper names within four syllables to facilitate stage performing.

#### 4.2 Stylistic Features

After reading the two translations, the author finds that the two translators implement their translating principles and strategies well in practice, each with his own characteristic features. We will cite several examples to illustrate our analysis below.

Stylistically, Wang’s translation corresponds to the original styles, which embodies in that Chinese rhymed verse is employed to render the English rhymed verse, the translation of the original prose parts is strong in rhythm sensation, and Chinese oral language elements enter into dialogues in the play, which read tasteful. In rendering the blank verse, Wang adopts a broad corresponding pattern and thus in such a section, the lines are basically correspondent, with similar length of all lines and natural folding of a sentence. Wang is particularly attentive to stylistic imitation, natural syllabic harmony, and visual effect of arranging the lines. For example, here is a section of the blank verse by Claudius in Act IV, Scene III.

朕已派人去找太子，去找遗体。  
要他放任自流那该有多么危险！  
可是也不能对他重罪加身，  
因为一般不明事理的大众  
很是喜欢他一  
众人只凭眼见，不凭判断，  
众人只恨重罚，不知重罪。  
为了把事情抹得平平整整，  
只好当机立断，把他打发出去  
方是上策。重病要下重药，  
否则就治不了。

(Wang, 2012: 173)

Wang’s translation is prominent in blending technique of expression and the drama language. “Technique of expression” is a concept put forward by Wang (2003:258) pertaining to literary translation, which involves rendering images, thematic expressions, rhythms, stylistic elements, etc. By such techniques, the translator can incorporate into his translation elements of topolect, dialect, folk songs and ballads, popular songs, etc, and even foreign language in order to integrate various elements into a personal writing and translating practice with salient idiosyncrasy, expressive power, and features of the times. Dramatic language is imbued with dynamic and individual traits with strong expressive force and performing features. Thus, by using vivid individualized utterances, the reader and the audience can easily distinguish the various roles in a play. With adequate use of fresh and interesting expressions from topolect and oral Chinese, the translation reads and sounds more vivid, idiomatic, characteristic, and close to the daily life of people, such as “公子哥儿”, “天下无口”, “想咋口, 就咋口”, and “大男人口能没有点那个”. Shakespeare tended to employ some folk songs to express the identity of some typical roles, which did not receive adequate attention in the previous Chinese translations. Wang’s translation does very well in this aspect so that the translated songs match fully the roles’ identity, action, and psychology in specific contexts. For example, in Act V, Scene I, the grave-digger sings two folk songs while digging. Wang repeats the last three Chinese graphs in every line, and thus when the grave-digger sings and repeats the last three Chinese graphs (three syllables), he throws up a spade of earth, which matches his singing well. Without such repetition, the translation would not sound like a folk song. In this example, the “好像我不是土里来, 土里来 (And hath shipp’d me intil the land, / As if I had never been such.)” alludes to the metaphor in the Bible, which says that man comes from the land and finally returns to it, and therefore with his understanding of life and death, the grave-digger makes a philosopher.

年轻时候我爱偷情，爱偷情，  
那感觉真是甜蜜蜜，甜蜜蜜。  
光阴流逝—我一没长进，没长进，  
我感觉—那是一没意思，没意思。

……

时光的脚步溜过来，溜过来，  
一把将我给抓起来，抓起来，  
一下抛我到土里去，土里去，  
好像我不是土里来，土里来。

(Wang, 2012: 217)

In Huang's translation, the original blank verse is also rendered into such similar style in Chinese, with similar rhythm and rhyming scheme, and the original iambic five-foot scheme is put into Chinese lines each basically with five "dun", which looks neat, and the prose parts are also rendered into prose, which reads unrestrained, rich in rhythm. In linguistic and stylistic expression, Huang's translation is on the whole accurate and smooth, blending well written and oral Chinese language, and the elegant and the vulgar elements. For example, the following soliloquy by Hamlet in Act II, Scene II.

犯了罪的人，看戏的时候，  
由于剧情安排跟演出巧妙，  
连魂魄也会受震撼，结果当场  
供出他们曾经做过的坏事。  
谋杀的勾当虽然没有舌头，  
却会用十分神奇的器官来认罪。  
我会叫演员在叔父面前演父王  
遇害一类戏剧。我会鉴貌辨色，  
刺探他的痛处。万一他神情  
有异，我就知道怎么做了。

(Huang, 2013: 354-355)

#### 4.3 Literary Devices and Cultural Interpretation

Huang (2012) concludes, the two biggest challenges in rendering *Hamlet* into Chinese are the puns and images in the original play. The play contains many quotations from the Bible with much allusion back to the cultural fountainhead of mankind and human nature and to the ancient Greek mythology for resources of narrative prototype and mapping framework, which embodies in the large use of such literary devices as puns, epigrams, idioms, and images to construct meaning connection between the dislocated signifier and the signified. Without adequate annotation and hermeneutic information provided, the average reader and audience would only know the general idea implied, yet they can not reach the core of them for accurate interpretation of the deep thought. There are also linguistic cases calling for annotation, and especially where Shakespeare's profound thought is concerned, translation and annotation are both needed. The two translations solve such problems well, which can be illustrated by the following examples.

In Act IV, Scene II, when Hamlet was interrogated by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for information on where the body of Polonius is, there is such a dialogue:

Rosencrantz: My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the King.

Hamlet: The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing —

Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?

Hamlet: Of nothing. Bring me to him....

Wang's translation:

罗：殿下，您得告诉我们遗体在哪里，然后再跟我们回到国王那里去。

哈：遗体和国王在一起，可国王还在等遗体呢。国王是一个—

罗：一个—一个什么？殿下。

哈：一个异体。领我去见他。……

(Wang, 2012: 171-173)

Huang's translation:

罗森坎茨：殿下，你得告诉我们，尸体在哪儿，然后跟我们一起见皇上。

哈姆雷特：尸体伴着皇上；皇上却没有伴着尸体。皇上是个东西—

格登斯滕：你说“东西”吗？殿下。

哈姆雷特：不是东西的东西。带我去见他。……

(Huang, 2013: 494-496)

Here “body” is a pun. Wang’s translation tends to interpret *Hamlet* philosophically, and in it, there are two places concerned with the discussion of “the king” (the other on P. 85), which clarifies the relationship between “本体” (the “body”, that is, the beggar, who does not seek splendor and harbors no ambition) and “异体” (the “shadow”, that is, the kings and heroes, who enjoy splendor and are ambitious), and also makes clear the new king’s inevitable death (for his double sin) implied by “遗体” (both the old king’s body and Polonius’ body are related to the king), and the varied form (killing uncle for he marries mother) of the Oedipus Complex (killing father and marrying mother) (Wang, 2012: xxvi). In the translation, “本体” and “异体” are related as the same kind, and “异体” and “一体” (here referring to the relationship between the new king and the queen) are related as opposites. The three Chinese phrases “遗体”, “异体”, and “一体” are all pronounced in very similar way, and thus several of the most important roles and their relationship are all related with several most important philosophical concepts, which form a broad and deep system of symbols. In Huang’s translation, by using “东西”, it not only imitates the original image, but also expresses the original sarcasm of the king, which shows also rendering ingenuity.

## 5. Conclusion

From above, we can conclude that both Wang and Huang pursue their definite objective in translating *Hamlet* into Chinese, and through creative efforts, realize break-through in translating strategies, use of language, and textual construction, displaying high artistry, and instill new blood into their translations so that they can be regarded as equivalents to the original work. Their main differences lie in that Wang, who translates for the reader, is more concerned with the overall artistic effect of the translation as a reader by giving full play to the literary and expressive force of Chinese in characterization, keeping an eye on the stage performing effect, and by more flexible rendering methods, he makes conscious efforts to lift the translation in philosophical connotation and literary conception, and to use naturally used Chinese, fresh, vivid, and alive, to retain the personal features of the characters in the play. Huang’s version is rendered for the stage and pays much attention to poetic correspondence in rhythm and rhyming scheme and retaining the original images by means of concise and accurate Chinese foregrounding elegant and vulgar features according to the characters’ identity in specific contexts. His translation, far more annotated with valuable sources of information for academic research of *Hamlet*, is a model work of research-based translation in China. In a word, the two new translations by Chinese scholars represent China’s fresh important achievements in studying and translating *Hamlet* and new contribution to the international Shakespeare studies in general and *Hamlet* in particular.

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