

# An Attempt to Translate Hamlet into Drama Language of Yuan Dynasty

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## Abstract

Yuanqu, as a special type of Chinese drama, was one of the most popular art forms flourished in Yuan Dynasty, which has amazing similarities with Shakespeare's plays in terms of drama particularities. This paper attempts to study their similarities and the feasibility of translating a scene of *Hamlet* into Yuanqu, as a bridge of intercultural communication to introduce Shakespeare's works to Chinese and Yuanqu to English native speakers. Besides, it is worthwhile to introduce as well the special beauty of Yuanqu to modern people and revive its performability on the modern drama stage.

**Key words:** Hamlet, Drama, Yuan Dynasty, Chinese opera

## 1. Introduction

Drama is a comprehensive form of art. This so-called “Stage Art” reflects all walks of life by employing different measures, such as literature, directing, performance, music, art design and so on, to tell stories about people and society. The significance of drama in people’s lives has been commonly recognized in the western countries as well as in China. Greek, Indian, and Chinese dramas are the three most ancient dramas in the history of the world. Greek drama started between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.; Indian, around the beginning of the Christian era, and Chinese drama was born in the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese drama has been performed for the past 800 years and has one of the world’s richest and earliest drama development.

Yuanqu was born in a particular era, the Yuan Dynasty, which was the first ethnic minority political power to unify China. Under the nomadic Yuan rulers’ suppression of Han intellectuals, the art form of Yuanqu turned to be of great development and popularity. Its distinguishing features make it an important part of Chinese art forms and encourage its successors to feel the responsibility of inheriting its soul and making it flourish. The idea of translating *Hamlet*, one of the most iconic plays in the western literature canon, into Yuanqu was due to the dreams of firstly introducing the style of western drama to China by the sinicization of William Shakespeare’s plays, and secondly, making Yuanqu more widely known to modern people in order to share its beautiful language although the original opera scene could not be enjoyed exactly as before.

In order to achieve these great goals, first of all, it is necessary to relate Shakespeare’s plays to this seemingly irrelevant form of art, Yuanqu. Here are the criteria that proves it’s possible to get the job done. First, let’s discuss whether it is feasible to translate Shakespeare’s dramatic language into Yuanqu by probing into the similarities of the two dramatic forms. Secondly, it will be proven that it is definitely significant and rewarding to make this attempt.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Related Theories

#### 2.1.1 The Arbitrariness of Language Signs

Structuralists believe that every human mind in every culture at every point in history has used some sort of structuring principle to organize and understand cultural phenomena.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, presents the theoretical basis of drama translation. He makes a distinction between “synchronic linguistics” and “diachronic linguistics”. Another contribution Saussure has made to modern linguistics is that he distinguishes the language (la langue) from the speech (la parole). By this, we distinguish “(1) what is social from what is individual, and (2) what is ancillary and more or less accidental.” (Saussure, 1983: 13). He puts forward the arbitrariness principle of language signs, insisting that language signs are arbitrary and looking on this principle as the most important and the first principle controlling the whole language system. The linguistic SIGN (a key word) is made of the union of a concept and a sound image, which is the combination of a SIGNIFIER and a SIGNIFIED. Saussure says the sound image is the SIGNIFIER and the concept the SIGNIFIED. You can also think of a word as a signifier and the thing it represents as a signified. (Lois Tyson, 1999).

### **2.1.2 The Issue about “Untranslatability” and “Performability”**

In her book *Translation Studies* (2004), Susan Bassnett discussed one of the central issues about “untranslatability”. In this paper she cites large amount of evidence to argue for her standpoint that translation is a “dialectic process that can be accomplished with relative success.” To be more specific, translation may always start with the clearest situations, the most concrete messages, the most elementary universals. But, as it involves the consideration of a language in its entirety, together with its most subjective messages, through an examination of common situations and a multiplication of contacts that need clarifying, then there is no doubt that communication through translation can never be completely finished, which also demonstrates that it is never wholly impossible either. Therefore, it is clearly the task of the translator to find a solution to even the most daunting of problems. Such solutions may vary enormously; the translator’s decision as to what constitutes invariant information with respect to a given system of reference is in itself a creative act. (Bassnett, 2004)

In her paper *Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre* (2000), Susan Bassnett raises a point of ‘performability’ that becomes one of criteria of theatric translation. This exerted great influence on theatric translators by providing them another criterion in translating drama texts. Translators are always confused by ‘performability’ for there is no clear definition of it. Susan believes that what makes a translator of dramatic texts confused is that he or she is expected to grapple not only with the eternal problem of ‘faithfulness’, but also with the problem of what the relationship between the written and the performed may be. I agree with Susan Bassnett’s opinion that “The task of the translator is to work with the inconsistencies of the text and leave the resolution of those inconsistencies to someone else. Searching for deep and trying to render the text ‘performable’ is not the responsibility of the translator.” (Susan Bassnett, 1990) So the translator shouldn’t put the heavy burden on his own shoulders, for his fundamental task is to fulfill the linguistical transition between two cultures. The performability of a text depends more on professional theatric group than on translator himself. “Performability” offers a way out of the dilemma, since it allows the translator to take great liberties with the text than many might deem unacceptable, in the interests of the end product of “performability”.

## **2.2 An Analysis of the Similarities Between Shakespeare’s dramatic language and Yuanqu**

### **2.2.1 What is Drama?**

Drama is a term generally used to refer to a literary form involving parts written for actors to perform. Dramas can be performed as a variety of media: live performance, film, or television. “Closet dramas” are works written in the same form as plays but meant to be read rather than staged. Theatre, in the physical sense, as defined by *the Heath Introduction to Drama*, is the visual and the audible within the three-dimensional physical structure that holds the audience. (Miller, 1988: 3)

### **2.2.2 Chinese Drama: Yuanqu**

Chinese drama is music drama; hence it is often termed Chinese opera. The operas or plays are staged in scenes. The major literary form involved in the construction of dramatic texts is poetry.

Yuanqu can be classified into two categories, namely *Yuan prose melody* and *Yuan zaju*. Prose melody can be regarded as a new style of poetry of Yuan Dynasty whereas zaju is a type of opera from the Yuan Dynasty. Both of the art forms are closely related and indispensable to the development of Yuanqu, yet independent in its distinguishing qualities from Chinese operas as well as poems.

Yuan prose melodies were developed on the basis of poems and resemble them very much in rhythm and structures. The differences, however, are significant and worth discussing. First, prose melodies were created based on musical performance and fell into five “tunes” (正宫、中吕宫、南吕宫、仙吕宫、黄钟宫) and four “melodies” (大面调、双调、商调、越调) with relatively independent titles of Qu. Secondly, as for structures, prose melodies have much more freedom in the length of each sentence and they may have words inserted in the lines to make more vivid and readable. Third, in terms of metrical patterns, antithesis of words is relatively loose whereas Level and Oblique tones are quite strict. Besides, compared with poems, prose melodies were deeply rooted in folk lives and thus more easily understood and accepted by common people.

The term zaju originally referred to ‘variety shows’ which included a mix of short skits and comedy performances by jesters or clowns. Yuan zaju performances were strictly ordered. Performances proceeded continuously, with no curtain rise or fall between acts. Dramas were in four acts ---a beginning, a small climax, a big climax, and the finale. The linear action usually peaks in the 3rd act, and the 4th act brings resolution and restores harmony. Roles comprised *mo* (male roles), *dan* (female roles), *jing* (usually a villainous character), and *chou* (a clown). each category further subdivided according to the portrayed age and prominence of roles.

### 2.2.3 *Hamlet* and It’s Translations

*Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s boldest, most profound play, is a landmark in world literature. It bears many resemblances to Thomas Kyd’s *the Spanish Tragedy*. The greatness of the play lies in the fact that Shakespeare expressed his praise of the noble quality of Prince Hamlet as a representative of humanist thinkers and his disillusionment with the corrupt and degenerated society in which he lived. *Hamlet* has been translated into many languages, including Chinese. Zhu Shenghao (朱生豪), Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋), Bian Zhilin (卞之琳) and Lin Tongji (林同济) are regarded as the pre-eminent translators of Chinese versions. Zhu and Liang chose prose to translate *Hamlet*; Bian and Lin chose verse to translate *Hamlet*.

Act III, Scene I, for example, contains the speech which is the most famous in the play. The power of Hamlet’s soliloquy is absolutely undeniable, and it has attracted numerous translators of different countries to make the attempt to give birth to a better accepted translation. However, as Michael Mangan argues, “The language is obscure and allusive, and it is not always clear exactly what it is that Hamlet is contemplating...But even if it were possible to make firm decisions about these, the dramatic context in which the speech appears introduces further indeterminacies which make a definitive interpretation difficult.” (Michael Mangan, 2005) Nevertheless, some Chinese versions of the speech have proved to be successfully accepted, all of which are the distinguishing reflections of the translators’ own characteristics. Here are versions by Zhu Shenghao and Bian Zhilin given for

reference:

**Hamlet:**

To be, or not to be- that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep-  
 No more- and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to- 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep-  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life.  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry  
 And lose the name of action....

-----Hamlet, Act III, scene I

“生存还是毁灭，这是一个值得考虑的问题；默默忍受命运的暴虐的毒箭，或是挺身反抗人世的无涯的苦难，通过斗争把它们扫清，这两种行为，哪一种更高贵？死了；睡着了；什么都完了；要是在这一种睡眠之中，我们心头的创痛，以及其他无数血肉之躯所不能避免的打击，

都可以从此消失，那正是我们求之不得的结局。死了；睡着了：睡着了也许还会做梦；嗯，阻碍就在这儿：因为当我们摆脱了这一具腐朽的皮囊以后，在那死的睡眠里，究竟将要做些什么梦，那不能不使我们踌躇顾虑。人们甘心久困于患难之中，也就是为了这个缘故；谁愿意忍受人世的鞭挞和讥嘲、压迫者的凌辱、傲慢者的冷眼、被轻蔑的爱情的惨痛、法律的迁延、官吏的横暴和费尽辛勤所换来的小人的鄙视，要是他只要用一柄小小的刀子，就可以清算他自己的一生？谁愿意负着这样的重担，在烦劳的生命的压迫下呻吟流汗，倘不是因为惧怕不可知的死后，惧怕那从来不曾有一个旅人回来过的神秘之国，是它迷惑了我们的意志，使我们宁愿忍受目前的折磨，不敢向我们所不知道的痛苦飞去？这样，重重的顾虑使我们全变成了懦夫，决心的赤热的光彩，被审慎的思维盖上了一层灰色，伟大的事业在这一种考虑之下，也会逆流而退，失去了行动的意义。……”

—— Translated by Zhu Shenghao

“活下去还是不活:这是问题。  
要做到高贵，究竟该忍气吞声  
来容受狂暴的命运矢石交攻呢，  
还是该挺身反抗无边的苦恼，  
扫它个干净？死，就是睡眠：  
就这样；而如果睡眠就等于了结了  
心痛以及千百种身体要承受的  
皮痛肉痛，那该是天大的好事，  
正求之不得啊！死，就是睡眠：  
睡眠，也许要做梦，这就麻烦了！  
我们一旦摆脱了尘世的牵缠，  
在死的睡眠里还会做些什么梦，  
一想到就不能不踌躇。这一点顾虑  
正好使灾难变成了长期的折磨。  
谁甘心忍受人世的鞭挞和嘲弄，  
忍受压迫者虐待、傲慢者凌辱，  
忍受失恋的痛苦、法庭的拖延、  
衙门的横暴，做埋头苦干的人才、  
受作威作福的小人一脚踢出去，  
如果他只消自己来使一下尖刀  
就可以得到解脱啊？谁甘心挑担子，  
拖着疲累的生命，呻吟，流汗，  
要不是怕一死去了就没有人回来的  
那个从未发现的国土，怕那边  
还不知会怎样，因此意志动摇了，  
因此便宁愿忍受目前的灾殃，  
而不愿投奔另一些未知的苦难？  
这样子，顾虑使我们都成了懦夫，

也就这样子，决断决行的本色  
蒙上了惨白的一层思虑的病容；  
本可以轰轰烈烈的大作大为，  
由于这一点想不通，就出了别扭，  
失去了行动的名分。……”

—— Translated by Bian Zhilin

#### 2.2.4 Compare *Hamlet* with *The Injustice Done to Dou E* (窦娥冤)

The reason that Guan Han Qing is chosen to be comparable with Shakespeare is that he could be the most representative playwright of Yuan Dynasty drama.

Guan Hanguang was born in Qizhou (present-day Anguo City), Hebei Province. In his youth he worked as a doctor, but gave up this profession and chose to write plays that exposed the dark side of society. He created 67 Zaju works, 18 of which are still performed. Guan Hanguang's protagonists are people of different categories. He portrays ordinary people in his plays and makes them the heroes and heroines. He writes about the middle-class and the lowest-ranked people and describes many brilliant images of women with rebellious spirits. Their bitter experiences have become the chief melody of Chinese classical tragedy.

Guan Hanqing and Shakespeare are both outstanding dramatists in world literature. Their creative styles have great effect on the creations of future generations and they are both models for the creation of dramatists. Guan Hanqing has been honored as “Shakespeare in China”, for there are many surprising similarities between them from many aspects such as: creative style, subject and content, characteristic of tragedy and language manner, etc.

First, both of them are talented in adapting the originally raw stories into better ones. *The Injustice Done to Dou E*, for example, comes from the story of Zhouqing in Han Dynasty, and *Hamlet* is also adapted from an ancient barbaric narrative of murder and revenge. The two great dramatists gave the old stories a second life and made them well-known to the world. Second, they are similar in some way because they are both successful in creating some typically distinguishing characters, thus they made invaluable contributions for their respective cultures. Third, Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing are both regarded as masters of language. One of the common features of their language is “realistic”. Their dramatic creations reflect the real society of that time and easily readable. Specifically, Guan's Language in *The Injustice Done to Dou E* is quite oral and easily understood by the audience. The following is a part of conversation uttered by Dou E,

(正旦云):”婆婆，那张驴儿把毒药放在羊肚儿汤里，实指望药死了你，要霸占我为妻，不想婆婆让与他老子吃，倒把他老子药死了。我怕连累婆婆，屈招了药死公公，今日赴法场典刑，婆婆，此后遇着冬时年节，月一十五，有寒不了的浆水饭，寒半碗儿与我吃，烧不了的纸钱，与窦娥烧一陌儿，则是看你死的孩儿而上。”

With the help of this inornate language, the character of Dou E can be clearly reflected and thus deeply impressed the audience. As for Shakespeare, he was wise to choose different language to suit different characters, and there are no affected words in his plays. Just as Pushkin commented,

“Shakespeare’s language is not that language of poetry, but language of life.” (石璞主, 1983) Thus we may conclude that although they were not born in the same country and time, the two great dramatists have much in common in the field of dramatic creations.

### 3. Case Study — An attempt to translate some parts of Hamlet into Yuanqu

#### 3.1 Hamlet

Now might I do it, now he is a-praying,  
And now I’ll do’t.  
And so he goes to heaven,  
And so am I <revenged.> That would be scanned:  
A villain kills my father, and for that,  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven. ....

-----Hamlet, Act III, scene 3

This part reflects Hamlet’s psychological conflicts when he got the chance to revenge his father’s death by killing his uncle. It is in this soliloquy that Hamlet’s fatal weakness and value orientation is exposed. And thusly in translating this part into Chinese, the language should be also as psychologically concise and vivid as it is in the original text.

#### 哈姆雷特:

现在容易动手了, 当他在祈祷时; 我现在就下手杀了他...  
... 然後他就直接上天堂, 这就算是复了仇?  
这还需三思:  
一个恶徒杀了我的父亲,  
而我——父亲的独子——却保送此恶徒登上天堂.....

The following is the translation into Yuanqu, adopting the name of Qu Pai “Sai Hong Qiu” (塞鸿秋) in Zheng Gong tune (正宫), based on its structure: 7, 7, 7, 7, 5, 5, 7, namely 45 words altogether.

[正宫·塞鸿秋]

现在我正好动手,  
趁他正祈祷时间,  
我也就报了仇了。  
这要仔细算一算:  
一个大恶汉,  
杀死(了)①我父亲,  
我要把他送上天。

.....

注①了: ”衬字”或”虚字”, 多为起强调语气作用的字词。

### 3.2 Hamlet

...

That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!

哈姆雷特:

而我呢? 我的父亲遭惨杀, 我的母亲被玷污,  
我的理智与情感均被此深仇激动; 而我却无所行动。  
我该多么的惭愧, 当我见到这两万名军士,  
他们甘心在一念之间, 为一虚名而视死如归的步入他们的坟墓;  
全为了争取一块连埋葬他们尸骨都不足之地。  
啊, 从今开始, 我必痛下浴血之决心, 否则一切将枉然!

It has been commonly recognized that this part of soliloquy reflects a turning point of Hamlet's character, from hesitation to resolution, and from delay to action. Therefore, it's significantly important to maintain the quality of decision-making in the original language when translating into Chinese. The translation into Yuanqu takes the name of Qu Pai "Gu Mei Jiu Guo Tai Ping Ling" (沽美酒过太平令) in Shuang tune (双调), based on its structure: 5, 5, 7, 4, 7, 6, 6, 6, 6, 2, 2, 2, 6, altogether 64 words, 13 sentences.

[双调·沽美酒过太平令]

我父亲被害  
我母亲受污  
搞得我血液沸腾  
理智全无  
我却睡去般麻木  
我该多么惭愧  
我哪儿有面目  
看到两万军士  
毅然步入坟墓  
幻梦  
虚名  
归宿  
(啊)

从此是不归路

**3.3** Here comes to the translation of the famous soliloquy occurred in in Act III, Scene I. Three tunes will be used with three different names of Qu Pai in order to make the speech complete as a whole. In the first part, “Chao Tian Zi” in Zhong Lv Tune follows the structure of 2, 2, 5, 7, 5, 4, 4, 5, 2, 2, 5; and, “Shao Bian” in Ban She Tune follows the structure of 6, 7, 6, 7, 6, 3, 5, 5, 5, 7, 7, 6, 6, 7; and “Ying Wu Qu” in Zheng tune is used in the last part.

[中吕•朝天子]

生存  
死亡  
这是个问题  
忍受命运之打击  
亦与苦为敌  
奋斗至息  
何为真谛  
死亡即睡去  
如此  
矣已  
灵肉可安息？

[般涉调•哨遍]

倘能了结百患  
其结果亦为人所盼  
死亡仿佛睡眠  
睡眠亦常有梦魇  
故这正是阻拦  
死之眠  
摆脱皮囊间  
何梦漫无边  
此事最是难  
无边苦难甘承受  
谁愿无奈在人间  
暴君之政、骄者之傲  
失恋之痛、法章之慢  
贪官之侮亦庸民之厌

[正宫•鹦鹉曲]

倘不是一把小刀  
难以消除恩与怨  
谁不愿来个了断  
倘不是因惧怕

身后之事难预见  
自古今无人返  
(正所谓)  
顾虑使人成懦夫  
有心无为是枉然

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In summarizing the relationship between Yuanqu and the contemporary world it might be said that Zaju is “distant, yet present”, ---distant because it disappeared 600 years ago, but present because it is as enjoyable today as in 13<sup>th</sup> century China. (Huo Jianying, 2003) Peking Opera, which is a distillation of various forms of Chinese drama, has 3,800 titles, but only a small number are actually staged. Most of the classical pieces, such as *The Injustice Done to Dou E*, *Zhao Family Orphan*, *The West Chamber*, *River watching Pavilion*, *Zhaojun Goes Out of the Pass*, and *Attending a Meeting Single-handed*, were all adapted from Yuanqu. Some dramas, such as *Zhao Family Orphan* and *Chalk Circle*, were successfully introduced to Europe centuries ago. Therefore, it is absolutely unfounded to believe that Yuanqu has been outdated or it is meaningless to make an effort to develop this form of art. On the contrary, Yuanqu could be more prosperous and developed through the effort of the new generations, for it is highly important to contribute in this field, to make Chinese art flourish, and to make the world more diversified.

Meanwhile, the translating of Shakespeare’s plays into Chinese traditional drama languages has been quite commonly practiced for many years and proved to be well accepted and loved by Chinese people. One of the typically successful example is the adaptation of Hamlet by Wang Guoren into Chuanju, “Sha Fu Duo Sao”, which is considered the first successful attempt to Sinicize Shakespeare’s plays. (孟宪强, 1994) Besides, Peking Opera 《奥赛罗》, Yueju 《天之娇女》 (adapted from *the Merchant of Venice*), Yueju 《天长地久》(adapted from *Romeo and Juliet*), Kunqu 《血手记》(adapted from *Macbeth*), Yuju 《罗密欧与朱丽叶》(张泗洋, 2001) and so on, have all been successfully staged in China and made great contributions in enriching Chinese culture and making it more flourishing.

Seldom, however, do we have the courage to adapt Shakespeare’s plays into Yuanqu due to those tough obstacles. This paper aims at starting this attempt at the first step and encouraging more people to make the impossible possible. The practice has proved that it is feasible and important to make the attempt. Through the efforts of the Sinicization of William Shakespeare’s plays by countless translators, we may confirm that it will help Chinese culture prosper and enhance the pace of international cultural communication.

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