

# An Analysis of The Story of the Stone by David Hawkes from the Perspective of Prophecies

**Ji Xiaoxia**

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University

E-mail: [xiaoxiaxj@163.com](mailto:xiaoxiaxj@163.com)

**Published: 30 March 2020**

**Copyright © Xiaoxia.**

## **Abstract:**

With the current boom of Chinese literature, literary translation has been on the fast track of going global. Translation with higher quality reflects the demand of the growing strength and influence of our nation. This article attempts to analyze *The Story of the Stone* from the perspective of prophecy. By contrasting the different thinking differences between China and the West, the author summarize the translation strategies for literary works.

**Key words:** Prophecies; Hong Lou Meng; Translation strategies

## **A. Introduction of Prophecies**

Derived from people's worship of the mysterious functions of language in the ancient times, prophecies reflect the ambiguity of the language. It is defined in *Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate Reference 2007* that a prophecy is a divinely inspired revelation or interpretation. With some superstition and fantasy flavor, prophecies are usually characterized with obscure predictions that may come true in the future in the form of the will of the immortals and other supernatural forces. With time going on, prophecies were not favored by rulers any more on account of their negative influence on the political power and people's thoughts, thus abandoning their theological form. Afterwards, a group of creative writers began to employ this specific linguistic skill into their literary works in order

to attract and impress the readers by giving hints of the future destiny of the characters in the work. Throughout the history of Chinese literary development, the application of prophecies enjoys more popularity in the creation of novels in Ming and Tsing Dynasty.

## **B. Application of Prophecies in Hong Lou Meng**

### **1. Variety of Forms of Prophecies**

There is no doubt that Hong Lou Meng marks the top level of the achievement of Chinese classical novels. Deeply rooted in the splendid Chinese literary heritage, Hong Lou Meng lives up to the nurture of the fertile soil of literature world under the great talent of its writer. Hong Lou Meng makes unprecedented breakthrough on the dimension of prophecy application.

Apart from the traditional form of conversational and picture ones, more prophecies emerge in the form of poems, dreams, remarks, riddles as well as opera performances.

Besides, prophecies are more of literary value from the perspective of the innovation of rhetorical devices, metaphors, puns and allusions included.

### **2. Function of Prophecies in the Book**

Different from most former literary works in which prophecies are applied to attract the readers and keep them in suspense with some tiny hints till the unveiling of the finale, prophecies in Hong Lou Meng play an indispensable part in the book on dimension of plot, motif and portrayal of characters.

To begin with, prophecies in Hong Lou Meng are crucial in composing the plot of the whole book. Throughout the novel, prophecies fall into two categories. The first set of prophecies serve as the prediction of the destiny of the Jia clan and other main characters. The second set reveals the tragic ending of the love of three main characters. Jia Baoyu is reincarnated as the magic stone that falls into the mortal realm from the Heaven. Thus, the prophecies foretell the love triangle among the three characters. Interwoven with each other, these two types of prophecies push forward the development of the plot.

What's more, the prophecies also mirror the motif of the book. As a semi-autobiography of Cao Xueqin, Hong Lou Meng reflects the fate of his once affluent and noble family as well as the ups and downs in his own life. Witnessing the decline of his feudal family and the morality in the whole feudal society, he charts a detailed course of collapse of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo Houses. As is stated at the very beginning of the book: "Pages full of fantastic talk penned with bitter tears/ All man call the author mad, none his message hears." Furthermore, the prophecies act as supporters in the portrayal of characters. Apart from revealing the destiny of people in the book, the prophecies indicate personalities and disposition of the characters at the same time.

## **C. The Story of the Stone by David Hawkes**

### **1. Introduction of Different English Versions of Hong Lou Meng**

As a perfect model of Chinese language with both artistic and linguistic fulfillments, Hong Lou Meng has received great favor from other nations in the world. Of all the translation versions in more than 20 foreign languages, English versions, undoubtedly, boast the most profound influence in the academic circle and the reading public. Translation of Hong Lou Meng into English versions can be traced back to 1830s, although few of them involve all the chapters as a whole. It is universally accepted that two existing complete versions are the version by David Hawkes and John Minford and the one by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang.

Entitled *The Story of the Stone*, the translated work by Hawkes and Minford stands as the first complete English version of Hong Lou Meng with its irreplaceable position in the Western world, whereas the couple Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, with their authorship of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, has been highly evaluated in Chinese academic field. The recent years has marked a great deal of research and discussion on these two English translated pieces.

## **2. David Hawkes and His Contribution to The Story of the Stone**

As a British sinologist and translator who once studied in Beijing University, David Hawkes devoted to the research on Chinese language and culture for decades. Before his commitment to Hong Lou Meng, he had already gained breakthrough on the translation of *The Songs of the South* and many other classical Chinese works. All of his translated works demonstrate his great insight into Chinese language and the related cultural backgrounds.

The story of the Stone, a crystal of David Hawkes's attainments on Chinese language and culture as well as his zeal for Hong Lou Meng, represents the most monumental work in his assiduous study on Chinese-English translation. Pioneering in the undertaking of Chinese-English translation, Hawkes successfully introduced this outstanding classic masterpiece to the intellectual circle in the Western hemisphere and set up a perfect model of translated text by applying appropriate translation strategies.

## **3. Analysis on the Choice of Translation Strategies by David Hawkes**

### **a) Translator's Motivation of Translation**

To begin with, the purpose of translator's activity plays a critical role in his choices of methods and strategies. Fascinated by this immortal literary work, Hawkes entertains a sense of respect towards the book and finds it a kind of precious enjoyment to explore in the amazing world created by the author because "It was written by a great artist with his very lifeblood." His preference for the title "Shi Tou Ji" rather than the more universally accepted "Hong Lou Meng" indicates that Hawkes holds his own opinion on this novel in the aesthetic aspect. Thus, Hawkes was mainly motivated to translate Hong Lou Meng out of his personal admiration of the book. Therefore, he wrote in his translation text, "If I can convey to the reader even a fraction of pleasure this Chinese novel has given me, I shall not have lived in vain." In contrast, domestic translators Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang was assigned by Chinese authority with the aim of introducing Chinese literary works to the outside, which means that the priority would be loyalty to the original work. Therefore, the translation of Hawkes is reader-oriented while the practice of Yang is text-centered. In rendering of Chinese novel, Hawkes would turn to liberal translation that can express the information in a more acceptable way, making it easier for Western readers to understand.

### **b) Translator's Cultural Identity**

In addition, the cultural identity of a translator should be discussed. Despite of his good command of Chinese language and culture, Hawkes is still under the major influence of Western culture. English being his mother tongue and Chinese being a foreign language, Hawkes would be inclined to furnish English with higher position. However, Yang Xianyi and his wife, who have both received systematic education on Chinese language and lived in China most of their lifetime, would regard Chinese as the more advanced language system.

### c) Position of Source Language Culture in Target Language System

Since the advent of the Opium War, Chinese culture had declined to a lower position under the invasion of developed powers, with its translated work being somewhere peripheral in the literature polysystem in English-speaking countries. As a result, Hawkes is likely to put the translated text of Hong Lou Meng at a marginal place. Conforming to the content of Polysystem Theory, when translation is at a peripheral or secondary position, translators would become more conservative and are used to adopting the already-given models in the target culture. On the contrary, during the translation of Hong Lou Meng conducted by Yang in 1970s, China has already gained independence with its international position widely acknowledged, particularly among the Asian, African and Latin American socialist countries. In the field of literature, more exchanges and communication also proceed between China and these less developed nations. As for the translated version *A Dream of Red Mansions*, most of whose target readers are from the mentioned countries. In the rendering work, therefore, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang would naturally consider Chinese language as the center of the literature system. In other words, their translated version would be as closely as possible connected with the source text.

### d) Case Study on Prophecies in The Story of the Stone

With his excellent artistic craftsmanship, Cao Xue Qin pulled all his efforts into the design of prophecies as hints and clues of the destiny of the characters and the development of the story. Concerning the rhetorical devices applied in the creation, the prophecies can be classified into various categories as follows. On dealing with these complex cultural carriers, Hawkes adopted proper methods and approaches in a certain context to strive for the recurrence of the delicate equivalence in the original text.

#### 1. Metaphors

Metaphor stands for an implied comparison that is in the use of a word originally denoting one thing to refer another with a similar quality. In Hong Lou Meng a large number of common images in real life are used as stimulators to suggest characters' disposition and future destiny.

Example:

根并荷花一茎香,平生遭际实堪伤。

Your stem grew from a noble lotus root,  
Yet your life passed, poor flower, in low repute.

This is a prophecy of Xiangling, On one hand, “荷花”, another name of “莲花”(lianhua), suggests her original name of Zhen Yinglian, the lost daughter of Zhen Shiyin, On the other, lotus, as a image of nobleness in Chinese culture, shows her noble origin and nature.

When translating the prophecy, Hawkes conveyed the metaphor meaning directly with the word “noble lotus root” under the strategy of liberal translation. What's more, for the sake of acceptability to Western readers, he also made further explanation on the relationship between lotus and the character Xiangling in Appendix. In this way Hawkes transform the original meaning as much as possible.

#### 2. Puns

A pun refers to a use of different words that sounds the same or of two meanings of the same word. The application of puns serves as a vivid and humorous approach to revealing the implied meaning. Generally speaking, puns in Hong Lou Meng be classified into two forms—homophone

(different words that sound the same or similar) and (one word with the same sound but different meanings). Because of the great difference between Chinese and English languages, it is difficult, and sometimes even impossible to express the dual meaning in one form in the cross-cultural activities. In the *Story of the Stone* by Hawkes, however, most of the puns successfully reproduce the hidden implication of the prophecies.

#### a) Homophones

Example :

玉带林中挂,金簪雪里埋。

The jade belt in the greenwood hangs,

The gold pin is buried beneath the snow.

This couple of verse employs puns to indicate the two chief characters in the book. “玉带林” shares the same sound with Lin Daiyu in the reverse order whereas “金簪雪” conversely reads the same as Xue Baochai. Being aware of the puns, Hawkes translated the sentential meaning into English in order to guarantee its acceptability to foreign readers as Chinese poem and at the same time, made further explanation in the Appendix as supplement to the hidden meaning of the puns:

Two trees make up the Chinese character for “Lin”, whilst “jade belt” is an inversion of “Dai-yu”. “Dai” really means eye-black, but sounds the same as the word for “belt”, and “yu” means jade. The pile of snow is a rebus for Bao-chai’s surname Xue, which sounds the same as the Chinese word for “snow”. “Gold pin” is her English name “Baochai”, which means “precious hairpin”. It is in this way that the double meanings of the original text accepted by readers from a totally different culture.

#### b) Homonyms

Example :

桃李春风结子完,到头谁似一盆兰。

The palm-tree bore her fruit after the rest,

Yet, when all’s done, her Orchid was the best.

The couplet above is actually foretelling the future of another female, Li Wan. In Chinese language, the character “李” bears two meanings: the first one is a kind of fruit (plum), and the second, a typical Chinese family name. The verse indicates that shortly after giving birth to her baby, she lost her husband, with her youth withered away in widowhood. In the following line, “兰” alludes to the plant orchid as well as her son’s name Jia Lan.

In Hawkes’ translation, the form and rhyme are retained as an English poem at the sacrifice of the prediction in the homonyms. Again to avoid the loss of the implied meaning, he turned to the detailed statement in the Appendix. Therefore, acceptability is realized with highly faithfulness to the original text.

### 3. Allusions

In classical Chinese literature which is characterized with indirectness in expression, allusion is frequently adopted in poem and novels. With the two typical features—indirectness and ambiguity, allusions can furnish readers with clues on what is going to happen while maintain the enigmatic aesthetics. In *Hong Lou Meng*, obviously, there are a tremendous number of allusive prophecies that requires a good knowledge of Chinese history and cultural background as well as being adept at transforming abstract information in cross-cultural activities. In the translated version by Hawkes,

allusions rendering illuminates the challenge and the solutions on dealing with it.

Example:

可叹停机德，堪怜咏絮才。

One was a pattern of female virtue,

One another wit who made other wits seem slow.

“停机德” refers to the story in *History of Later Han Dynasty* in which the wife of Yueyang cut off the silk that she was weaving on the loom so as to dissuade her husband from quitting his pursuit to gain success in the imperial examination because of his homesickness. His wife, at that time, serves as a prominent model of wifely virtue in a feudal society. Here the author employed the allusion in an attempt to indicate the virtue of Xue Baochai who also encourages Baoyu to gain higher position in the society. “咏絮才” derives from the story of Xie Daoyun, a talent girl in Jin Dynasty who once compared the flying snowflakes into catkin in her childhood and later achieved great fulfillment in the field of literature. With the application of her story, Cao Xueqin alludes to the fact that Daiyu’s literary talent is superior to any other beauties in the book.

In the version by Yang Xianyi, the second line is literally translated into “Her wit to sing of willow-down, poor maid!” However, to those Western readers who definitely know nothing of the story of Xie Daoyun, it would be impossible to comprehend that the author is comparing Daiyu’s talent with another female poet in the ancient times. In contrast, Hawkes paid more attention on whether the effect of translation can be put into full play. In other words, the author’s original intention in the prophecy should be revealed to the exotic readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture. Therefore, he directly showed the implication between the lines by giving praise to the intelligent brain. In this manner of free translation the acceptability is retained in the expense of the literal accuracy of the Chinese source text.

#### 4. Riddles

Riddle is another typical cultural product deeply rooted in classic Chinese literature. For thousands of years, it gains popularity not just in the literary circle, but also in everyday life of common people. With the advantages of indirectness and conciseness, it is widely applied in rebus, wager games and the like. In *Hong Lou Meng*, riddles are also used in prophecies to suggest the future of characters. Basically, the riddles can be divided into two parts in terms of the method of making riddles: deconstruction of Chinese Characters and hidden word puzzles.

##### a) Deconstruction of Chinese Characters

Example:

凡鸟偏从末世来，都知爱慕此生才。

This phoenix is in a bad time came,

All praised her great ability.

In this verse of Wang Xifeng’s prophecy, Cao Xueqin employed the deconstruction of Chinese characters which is called “Xi Zi Fa” (析字法) in the comments by Red Inkstone. The character “凡” and “鸟” composes “鳳” which means phoenix in the traditional form of Chinese. Apparently, the author is indicating that Wang Xifeng is a rare and capable female in the novel.

Since most of the Western readers have little knowledge on the rules of composing Chinese characters, they cannot understand what the characteristics are the writer intends to provide in this

prophecy. To enlighten the readers the purpose of Cao Xueqin, Hawkes demonstrated the implied meaning in his free translation. Although the version may lose the original style of indirectness in a sense, the function of the prophecy is realized. In comparison, Yang Xianyi translated “凡鳥” into “the bird”-- although the form in the source text is saved, foreign readers cannot gain the access to the hidden riddle and accept the verse as a prophecy.

#### **b) Hidden Word Puzzles**

Example 1:

湘江水逝水云飞

The Xiang flows and the Chu clouds sails away.

In this riddle, the character “湘” and “云” serve as the hidden clue of the name of “Xiangyun”, a beauty in the novel. It is obvious for Chinese readers to receive the message given by the author, but to Westerners, they may not notice the elaboration. Due to the differences between Chinese and English language, the translator cannot bring the effect of the riddle into full play in one single line. In such a situation, Hawkes decided to put the acceptability first without any reference to the implied intention. But as a supplement of the lost connotation, he offers a note in the Appendix: This is a rebus of Xiang-yun’s name. “Xiang” is the river which flows northwards through the province of Hunan into Lake Dongting. “Yun” means cloud. Chu was the ancient name of the Hunan-Hupeh area of which Lake Dongting is the center. Thus, both the form and the implication are understandable to English readers.

#### **D. Conclusion**

In these chapters above, the effectiveness and reasonableness is discussed on the translation of prophecies in *The story of the stone* by David Hawkes. As cultural carrier in *Hong Lou Meng*, the prophecies made contribution to composing the plot, reflecting the motif as well as portraying the main characters in the novel. Because of the factors as cultural and linguistic differences, translation of prophecies, undoubtedly, is considered as the hardest part that poses great challenges to the ability of the translators. As is demonstrated in the analysis above, Hawkes, a “messenger” between Chinese literature and Western readers, completed the task successfully with the strategy and method of free translation and domestication in his translation. In comparison with the translation version by Yang Xianyi which is also a fantastic reproduction of the original work, the version by Hawkes is more of feasibility for western readers to gain a better knowledge of the content of the book and the intention of the author. Despite of few unavoidable loss and limitation in *The Story of the Stone*, his translated text functions as an available access for foreign reading public to admire the beauty of this Chinese literary masterpiece.

#### **Reference:**

- [1] Bonsall, B. S. *Red Chamber Dream* (Trans.) (vol. 1/2/3/4) [M/OL].  
<http://lib.hku.hk/bonsall/hongloumeng/index1.html>.
- [2] Burke, K. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (3rd edition) [M].  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd, 1973.

- [3] Chensterman, A. *Memes of Translation: the Spread of Ideas in Translation Studies* [M]. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997.
- [4] France, P. *The Rhetoric of Translation* [J]. *The Modern Language Review*, 2005 (vol. 100): 255-268.
- [5] Hawkes, D. *The Story of the Stone (Trans.) (vol.1/2/3)*[M]. London: Penguin Group, 1973/1977/1980.
- [6] Yang Hsien-yi & Gladys Yang. *A Dream of Red Mansions (Trans.) (vol.1/2/3)* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978.
- [7] 蔡新乐. *文学翻译的艺术哲学*[M]. 开封: 河南大学出版社, 2001.
- [8] 曹雪芹、高鹗. *红楼梦* (舒芜前言, 底本为梦稿本) [M]. 长沙: 岳麓书社, 2005.
- [9] 陈国华. *《红楼梦》和《石头记》: 版本和英译名*[J]. *外语教学与研究*, 2000 (6): 445-449.