

An Analysis of Huang Bikang's Translation of *The Peony Pavilion* from the Perspective of Paratext Theory

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Abstract—As a celebrated Chinese classic, *The Peony Pavilion* has seen multiple translations, with recent focus shifting to paratextual framing. Huang Bikang's Shakespearean-style translation provides a valuable case for examining paratext in cross-cultural transmission, an area still underexplored. Using Gérard Genette's paratext theory, this study analyzed both peritext (cover, preface, notes) and epitext (interviews, media, reviews) of Huang's translation. Findings show these elements work together to contextualize the text, clarify translation strategies, and mediate between the source and the readers. The Shakespearean style is reinforced through the preface and notes, while visual design aids readability. Epitexts further shape public reception and interpretation. Overall, paratext plays a key role in cultural negotiation and reader engagement. Huang's integrated paratextual design represents an innovative effort to globalize Chinese classical drama, underscoring paratext's importance in effective cross-cultural communication.

Keywords—paratext, English translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, Huang Bikang, drama translation

I. INTRODUCTION

Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), one of the most famous play writers in Ming Dynasty, regarded *The Peony Pavilion* as the most accomplished of his four "dream plays." This masterpiece narrates the story of Du Liniang, who falls in love in a dream, dies for love, and is resurrected. From its creation until the end of the Qing dynasty, the play enjoyed enduring popularity [1] and continues to be adapted into various performance forms, including dance. Renowned for its ornate and elegant language, profound artistic conception, and innovative incorporation of romantic elements into dramatic writing, the work places particular emphasis on the representation of characters' inner worlds.

Since H. Acton's English translation in 1938, numerous translations have appeared, including those by Cyril Birch, Wang Rongpei, and Xu Yuanchong (partial translation). Among these, Cyril Birch's translation has received the greatest acclaim, hailed as "a milestone in Chinese theatre" [2]. Existing scholarship has largely focused on these translations, examining them from perspectives such as translation evaluation [3], translation methods [4], translator subjectivity [5], and image construction [6].

Huang Bikang, a Chinese Shakespeare scholar, has completed the latest English translation, adopting the style of Shakespearean poetic drama to preserve cultural individuality while demonstrating global significance [7]. Research on Huang's translation remains limited and relatively preliminary. To date, the only CSSCI-indexed journal article is a study by Xie and Chen [8] on the English translation of "death" metaphors, published in *Foreign Languages and Literature*. Against the backdrop, this study adopts a

paratextual perspective to explore the types and functions of paratexts in Huang's version and the translator's behavior reflected therein.

II. PARATEXT AND TRANSLATION

Paratext, a concept proposed by Gérard Genette, refers to auxiliary elements that surround and extend the main text. It's typically divided into peritext (e.g., prefaces, titles) and epitext (e.g., interviews, reviews, and external commentary) [9]. Paratext theory has expanded from literary studies to translation research [10]. Urpo Kovala was among the first to introduce it into translation studies, arguing that translated texts need more mediation for target audiences. Kathryn Batchelor's *Translation and Paratexts* is the first systematic monograph dedicated to this field.

In China, paratext-based translation studies have grown significantly since 2015 [11]. Following the cultural turn in translation studies, paratext has become an important approach for mediating between text and context due to its ability to "mediate the relationship between text and context" [12], often in conjunction with concepts like thick translation and translator behavior.

Regarding *The Peony Pavilion*, mainstream English translations have been extensively studied; however, research focusing specifically on paratext remains limited. Zhang [13] examined paratexts in Wang Rongpei's translation, while Cao and Zhao [14] conducted a comparative analysis of the paratexts in the translations by Birch and Wang. Yu and Dong [15] further distinguished intentional and contextual paratexts in Birch's two editions. As the latest complete translation in a Shakespearean style, Huang Bikang's version possesses unique paratextual features and research value. Accordingly, this paper focuses on analyzing its paratexts, discussing their role in cross-cultural communication and the translator's behavior they reflect.

III. PERITEXT IN HUANG'S TRANSLATION

Paratext constitutes an indispensable component of translated works, as it significantly shapes how readers approach and interpret the main text [16]. In translation studies, academic paratexts encompass a wide range of elements, including notes, illustrations, prefaces, postscripts, glossaries, bibliographies, translator's annotations, afterwords, and records of related research [17]. An analysis confined solely to the translated text remains limited to the level of linguistic transformation; by contrast, the motivations underlying translation choices, as well as the socio-cultural constraints influencing the translator, can only be uncovered through systematic examination of paratextual elements.

Thus, paratexts should not be regarded as merely supplementary. Rather, they provide valuable insights into translator behavior [18] and serve as a key medium for conveying both Chinese and Western translation philosophies [16]. In Huang Bikang's translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, the peritexts consist mainly of the cover design, illustrations, translator's preface, annotations, afterword, and acknowledgments. These elements collectively construct cultural context, guide the reader's interpretive focus, and facilitate comprehension, while also reflecting the translator's underlying motivations and strategic decisions.

A. The Book Cover

The book cover serves not only as a visual representation of the text but also as a mediating interface between author and reader [19]. Huang's translation (Fig. 1) features a pink-purple background adorned with abstract patterns resembling petals, foliage, clouds, birds, or paired butterflies, thereby evoking a dreamlike aesthetic consistent with the themes of "love" and "dream." The textual information on the cover is presented bilingually, with English preceding Chinese, which foregrounds the intended readership of English-speaking audiences.

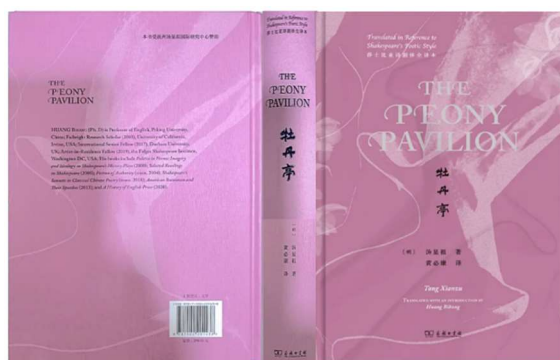


Fig. 1. The cover of Huang's translation.

The English title *The Peony Pavilion* is typographically emphasized: arranged in two lines, with "The" rendered in a smaller font. The use of a silver-gray serif font lends a classical elegance. Above the title, the distinctive feature appears: the phrase "Translated in Reference to Shakespeare's Poetic Style 莎士比亚诗剧体全译本," with the English version above the Chinese in a smaller white font. Below the English title, the original Chinese title "牡丹亭" is displayed in a black calligraphic style, reinforcing the work's cultural origins. The lower section presents the names of the author and translator, introduced by the phrase "Translated with an introduction by," with typographical variation used to distinguish between them. The publisher's logo appears at the bottom, completing a well-structured layout in which textual and visual elements are harmoniously integrated.

The spine retains a layout consistent with the cover, presenting the title, author, and publisher in vertically arranged Chinese text, thereby enhancing visual coherence. The back cover shares the same background design, ensuring stylistic unity. Its content is organized into three parts: a sponsorship statement ("本书受抚州汤显祖国际研究中心

赞助"), meaning "This publication is sponsored by the Fuzhou Tang Xianzu International Research Center"), a repetition of the English title, and a brief introduction to the translator's academic background and publications. Notably, the design foregrounds the work itself rather than the translator, aligning with its intended positioning in the literary market.

B. Inner Illustrations

Huang's translation incorporates 38 inner illustrations¹ selected from Huaidetang (怀德堂) woodblock prints of the Ming dynasty, each placed before the corresponding scene. The original Huai Detang edition contained 40 illustrations in the refined Huizhou style, which appealed to both elite and popular audiences (Fig. 2). During the Wanli period (1573-1620), folk woodblock printing flourished, ushering in a golden age in which illustrated editions became both widespread and artistically sophisticated [20]. These illustrations summarize content, aid plot comprehension, and suggest theatrical staging [21]. Their inclusion in Huang's translation serves multiple functions.



Fig. 2. The specimen of the Huaidetang version.

First, they enrich the content and introduce visual variety. Given that Huang's translation spans 728 pages with 691 pages of dense text, the insertion of classical woodblock prints offers readers moments of visual engagement and aesthetic respite. Second, they recreate scenes and facilitate comprehension. For readers unfamiliar with traditional Chinese culture, the illustrations offer visual cues that help clarify plot development and character interaction. Third, they serve as decorative elements that contribute to the book's overall aesthetic coherence, as their classical style aligns with the work's dreamlike thematic design.

In terms of layout, the 38 illustrations follow the ancient edition's order but are presented through a distinctive structural arrangement. Each scene is preceded by three pages: a title page, an illustration page, and an excerpt page. The title page, rendered in pink-purple and light white, displays the scene number, title, and list of characters, with the scene number prominently highlighted within a peony-shaped frame. The illustration page presents woodcut lines in pink within a square frame with indented corners (*wojiao* style). The excerpt page contains selected passages from the original text, ranging from one to four segments. For example, in Scene 14, "The Self-Portrait of a Young Beauty (写真)", as an example: the title page lists characters (Du Liniang, Chunxiang, Gardener); the illustration page depicts Du

¹ Scenes without illustration: 1, 4, 5, 7, 11, 15, 20, 22, 25, 31, 34, 40, 42, 47, 51, 52, 54.

Liniang painting her self-portrait before a mirror; the excerpt page contains arias such as “Po Zhen Qi (破阵齐)” and “Shua Zi Xu Fan (刷子序犯).” This design gives readers a preliminary understanding while stimulating interest in the original text, thereby enhancing engagement.

C. Notes and Character List

Huang’s translation includes an extensive system of notes spanning 62 pages. Among these are 75 footnotes (including three in the translator’s afterword) as well as 17 notes and 5 “notes on textual affinities” following the translator’s preface. In addition, a two-page character list is provided before the main text. The following discussion focuses on the 75 footnotes and the character list.

The majority of the footnotes are devoted to explicating aspects of traditional Chinese culture, including folk customs, history, and symbolic imagery. A smaller number (12) offering plot interpretation, while only one explains the translation strategy. Notably, many annotations adopt a comparative approach to enhance accessibility for Western readers. For instance, “*bazi*” (八字) is explained as part of the “Chinese astrological interpretive system,” drawing a parallel with Western astrology, while the historical figure “Xiang Yu” is interpreted through a comparison with Antony and Cleopatra.

Given the presence of religious elements in *The Peony Pavilion* [22], the notes also clarify relevant Buddhist and Daoist concepts. Terms such as *qi* and *yinyang* are explained alongside more specific references, including “The Rock of the Three Lives,” which is contextualized in relation to reincarnation and the concept of karma. For imagery lacking equivalents in English, Huang opts for direct plot interpretation. In Scene 55, Du Liniang uses puns on three medicinal herbs to imply her father’s foolishness; such wordplay is difficult to translate directly. Huang applied an explanatory paraphrase rather than a literal translation. The sole footnote on translation strategy appears in Scene 47, where a Tartar general’s speech is represented through a hybrid linguistic form combining Chinese characters, Jurchen elements, and pinyin, thereby reflecting both linguistic diversity and stylistic experimentation.

The character list provides concise descriptions of major figures in order of appearance. For example, Liu Mengmei is “a scholar, lovelorn, later Prime Laureate,” while Du Liniang is introduced as “daughter to Du Bao and Madam Du.” Minor characters receive more succinct descriptions, and those with minimal appearances are omitted. This approach resembles the conventions of Shakespearean drama editions, offering readers essential contextual information without revealing excessive plot details.

D. Prefaces, Afterwords, and Acknowledgements

Prefaces and afterwords aid in “excavating theoretical resources for translation” and “investigating translator behavior” [9]. Huang’s translation includes both Tang’s original author’s preface and the translator’s own extensive preface. Tang’s preface, written in an essayistic style, discusses the spiritual essence of Du Liniang, the origins of the story, and the conflict between “emotion” (*qing*) and “reason” (*li*). Huang’s translation remains largely faithful to the original while incorporating elevated literary diction (e.g.,

“saints,” “selfsame,” and “multitudinous”), thereby aligning with the goal of “translating a classic with a classic” and “placing Tang and Shakespeare side by side.”

The translator’s preface, comprising 25 pages (5,623 words), provides a detailed account of the translator’s interpretive framework, translational strategies, and broader aspirations. It draws comparison between Tang’s lyric from *The Purple Flute* with Shakespeare’s “Seven Ages of Man,” arguing that Tang’s view of life is transcendental—an “ever ongoing dream” within Buddhist karma. He contrasts dreams in Shakespeare’s works and Tang’s works, noting that Tang’s dream constitutes “one’s genuine thoughts and feelings about real life, identical to life itself.” He cites similarities between the two playwrights in creative techniques, character settings, and themes, and suggests the underworld recalls the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. He analyzes the “dream” as the play’s dynamic and charm: forming dreams from emotion, building a bridge between reality and dream.

In terms of translation strategy, Huang renders arias, dialogues, and lyrical passages primarily into blank verse, particularly iambic pentameter, while also incorporating forms such as heroic couplets, ballads, and prose dialogues. He frequently employs intertextual references to Shakespeare’s works to “facilitate [readers] towards a better comprehension and entertainment.” The rationale is twofold: to promote English readers’ understanding (using the familiar Shakespearean style), and to reflect an evolution in the translator’s mission—not just accurate conveyance but recreation of deeper significance, theatrical tradition, and poetic musicality. He views translation as rewriting, an “indispensable part of cultural reproduction and cross-disciplinary communication,” proposing a fourfold task for translators of classical Chinese drama.

The 17 notes following the preface are mostly source citations. The 5 “Notes on Textual Affinities” introduce the base text, the decision not to translate aria titles (*qupai*), and approaches to translating poetry, spoken parts, and the epilogue. Overall, the translator’s preface is rich and detailed, but its formidable length may burden readers and potentially “spoil” the plot.

In the translator’s afterword, Huang recounts the origins and process of his Shakespearean-style translation. Following the 400th-anniversary commemorations of Tang and Shakespeare, he began contemplating a new translation of *The Peony Pavilion*. He advocates for placing Tang and Shakespeare side by side as an effective strategy for promoting Chinese dramatic classics internationally, in which intertextual grafting is a viable approach. Translation of classical Chinese literature should “both capture the details of literary imagery and poetic sentiment of the original and integrate into the linguistic-cultural psychology and theatrical aesthetic tastes of the target readers,” striving toward Qian Zhongshu’s “sublimity” (化境). Among the three footnotes here, two cite news reports and scholarly speeches (epitexts); the other mentions three existing English translations (by Cyril Birch, Wang Rongpei, and Zhang Guangqian), reflecting his translational stance.

The acknowledgments section, positioned after the translator’s preface, expresses gratitude to various individuals and institutions involved in the project, including academic collaborators and publishing organizations. It

reveals the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the translation process, encompassing research, revision, and reader engagement.

IV. EPITEXTS OF HUANG'S TRANSLATION

Epitexts are a diverse group of supplementary materials that provide essential context for understanding the reception and impact of a translation [23]. These elements can take various forms, including author interviews, publisher publicity materials, media coverage, and reader feedback. Alongside peritexts, epitexts "jointly influence the fate of a translation" by shaping its reception and public perception [24]. In the case of Huang's translation, the epitexts include a variety of elements, such as translator's notes published in academic journals, media interviews, news reports, and online reader reviews across different platforms.

A. Translator's Notes and Interviews

Huang [25] has contributed several notes to academic journals that discuss the translation's Shakespearean approach in detail. These notes draw comparisons between Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, using concrete examples to demonstrate how Huang's Shakespearean stylistic framework is applied. For example, in an interview with Sooxue.com in August 2022, Huang explained that his translation aims to create cultural resonance for English readers while simultaneously easing domestic readers' engagement with Shakespeare's works.

In June 2024, Huang was interviewed by YLYK (友邻故事), where he recalled his academic journey and stated his goal as "cultural confidence, linguistic confidence, and telling Chinese stories well." His translation of *The Peony Pavilion* thus embodies his commitment to a "cultural soft landing," which aims to integrate Chinese literary traditions into the global literary ecosystem. Huang's reflections on the translation process reveal the broader ideological aims of the project, which go beyond mere linguistic translation to encompass the cultural and aesthetic promotion of Chinese classical theatre.

The Folger Shakespeare Library reported on Huang's translation project in February 2020², highlighting the innovative Shakespearean approach through an analysis of Scene 1. The report was accompanied by a discussion of the translator's broader academic work and his efforts to create a translation that bridges the cultural gap between Chinese and Western theatrical traditions.

B. Lectures and Media Coverage

Huang's translation has garnered attention from various academic and media outlets. After publication, lectures were held at Zhejiang University, Tsinghua University, and Yunnan University, where the translator compared Shakespeare and Tang based on his practice. The Commercial Press published several articles on its official WeChat account, from previews to reprint promotions, introducing the translation's features and value through sample readings and expert recommendations.

In December 2025, the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press published Huang's Shakespearean-style

translations of *The Purple Hairpin* and *The Dream of Nanke*. Their articles³ noted that the translation provides a "thick description" that "maximally represents the textual content of Tang's original work." They also highlight the innovative efforts to use Shakespeare's literary style as a vehicle for cross-cultural communication, ensuring that the translation resonates with international audiences while preserving the essence of Chinese drama.

In 2024, a five-act English verse drama adapted from Huang's translation, *The Dream Love in The Peony Pavilion*, was performed at Peking University. Later, it was presented at the 7th Tang Xianzu International Drama Exchange Month in Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province. The former was reported by *China Daily*, the latter by *People's Daily*, with coverage reprinted by *CPC News Network* and *China Youth Network*. The performances received enthusiastic responses, reflecting two-way cultural exchange and the translator's practical achievements.

C. Reader Reviews

Huang's translation was published in September 2021, yet reader reviews remain scarce. On international platforms, ratings are often conflated with other translations (especially Birch's), making it challenging to isolate Huang's specific impact. However, reviews on domestic platforms such as JD.com have praised the translation for its authenticity and suitability for introducing Chinese culture to foreign audiences. One reviewer, for instance, noted that the integration of Shakespeare's linguistic style into a Chinese classical drama masterpiece demonstrates the effort of Chinese scholars to bridge cultural divides.

Despite its limited reach, Huang's translation has been well-received by certain audiences, particularly translation enthusiasts who view it as an essential work for the study of both Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu. With further promotion, it is expected that the translation's influence will expand, and its innovative approach will gain wider recognition among English-speaking readers.

V. CONCLUSION

Paratexts can "compensate for the insufficiency of cultural mediation within the translation itself, narrow the cultural distance between readers and the original work, and enhance the effectiveness of translation reception" [26]. As Huang's translation of *The Peony Pavilion* demonstrates, paratextual elements such as the cover design, illustrations, translator's preface, annotations, and media coverage contribute to shaping readers' understanding of the translation and its cultural context. These elements work together to position the translation as a bridge between Chinese and Western literary traditions, with the Shakespearean stylistic approach serving as a key vehicle for cross-cultural communication.

The paratexts also reveal the translator's agency, offering insights into Huang's motivations, strategies, and broader aspirations. By employing Shakespeare's poetic style, Huang aims not only to preserve the cultural specificity of the original but also to make *The Peony Pavilion* more accessible and engaging for a global audience. The inclusion of detailed

² See <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/peony-pavilion-tang-xianzu-shakespearean-translation/>

³ See <https://heep.fltrp.com/contents/456723394944176128?type=1>.

annotations, character lists, and afterwords further aids in the process of cultural mediation, ensuring that readers can better appreciate the text's historical and cultural significance.

While Huang's translation has not yet achieved the desired level of global recognition, it represents an innovative contribution to the international dissemination of Chinese classical drama. The combination of peritexts, epitexts, and the translator's nuanced approach showcases the potential for literary translations to serve as powerful tools for cultural exchange. As such, Huang's translation offers an important model for future efforts to globalize Chinese literary classics and deepen cross-cultural understanding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ruping Fang and Yi Zhang contributed to the conception and design. Ruping Fang performed text collection and analysis and drafted the manuscript, and Yi Zhang provided guidance and contributed to manuscript revision. Both authors read and approved the version of the paper.

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