Understanding the multi-sign communication system: A study on Peking Opera stage translation

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Peking Opera is an artist-centered art rather than a director-centered one, and its true significance lies in its stage performance. However, the realization of the meaning of the "Performance Text" is the result of the joint action of different sign systems. Therefore, translators engaged in the stage translation of Peking Opera must understand the meaning and operation mechanism of this multi-sign system. From the perspective of semiotics of theater and drama, this paper deconstructs the Peking Opera sign system and divides them into several subsystems, describes in detail the characteristics of each secondary system, especially their semiotization process, their manners of meaning transmission, the rules of interaction among them, and finally presents the meaning generation and communication mechanism of this "Performance Text". On this basis, the paper clarifies that the main tasks and challenges faced by translators engaged in Peking Opera stage translation which are they should not only translate the language but also need to find time and space to realize the transformation of the meaning of the non-verbal sign system.

KEYWORDS

stage translation, multi-sign communication system, Peking Opera, semiotization, foregrounding

1. Introduction

Theater contains two aspects: script and stage performance, which greatly increases the difficulty of its translation. After a failed attempt to deconstruct the underlying "action text" of the script, Bassnett (2001, p. 92) points out that the ideal theatrical translator should be not only a language expert, but also a theatrical expert, as well as a director and an actor. Translating the performance is a job that she believes is completely beyond the translator's abilities and that "only a "Superman" can do it". Therefore, she advocates theater translation researchers to return to script translation and do the linguistic work that translators are good at, instead of interfering in the subsequent performance issues.

Such advocacy has been echoed by many scholars. In China, famous translators usually choose to translate classical plays with high literary value, such as the Chinese translation of Shakespeare's plays (Lv and Tang, 2002; Gu, 2019) and the English translation of the *Peony Pavilion* (Zhang, 2014; Pan and Yang, 2017), etc. These translators focus on dealing with various language phenomena in the dramatic text, and strive to fully show the literary nature of the original works to please the readers. There are also translators who provide language services for stage productions. These translators usually finish their works in a very short period of time (mainly providing the framework of the story and the cultural context of the script), and then hand the translation to the theater, where the director and actors adapt the translation to the actual demands of the stage performance, in which the translator's identity is barely visible (Brodie, 2018). However, we might be alert to this mode of translation that

ignores stage performance, especially when the translation of stage performance takes place in different countries and faces a theater with a completely different tradition. Pan and Zhang (2009) pointed out that the first step of stage translation study is to clarify the concept of the it and its particularity. If the value of a theater is more reflected in its stage performance, the translator should not shirk his or her responsibility and only translate the written text of little value, but should challenge the job that only "superman" can be qualified for.

2. The significance of Peking Opera lies in its stage performance

Peking Opera is a unique theatrical form in China, combining music, dance, poetry, martial arts, painting and other art forms. It was born in the era of transition from literati-led drama creation to actor-led stage performance. As actors play the leading role in creation, Peking Opera has three typical characteristics: (1) The scrips are hard to be considered as literary works. Peking Opera stories, most of which are popular among their audiences, are mostly loose frameworks with no fixed author, and actors can change the scripts at will according to the actual needs of their performances. When the same play has different lead actors, the scripts used are also very different. In fact the script is ultimately formed at the end of the stage performance as its appendage. Liao and Liu (2006, p. 296) believes that "it is no longer of great significance to discuss Peking Opera scripts solely from the literary perspective". (2) Peking Opera is an artist-centered art rather than director-centered art. The most attractive part is the superb performance skills of those famous actors on the stage. (3) Peking Opera is a kind of nonrealistic theatrical form with a highly abstract stage performance. The music, actions, props, costumes, etc. on the stage have gone through a complex process of semiotization, forming their own unique ways of expression. Those who are not familiar with these rules cannot enjoy the performance well. Take a very important hand property- the "horse whip" as an example, it is only a baton with tufts of fringe indicating that the actor carrying it was riding a horse. However it is very hard for foreign audiences to understand this without knowing this specific performance tradition. So translators need to explain the function of this baton for audiences to help them to get a better understanding of the performance text. As Zhang (2021) pointed out, the object of Peking Opera translation is the performance rather than the script. Translators must face the challenges of intersemiotic translation.

3. The meaning and operation mechanism of the performance text

In order to translate a stage performance, the translator should first understand the generation mechanism of meaning and its final realization process, which should begin with the perspective of theater composition in semiotics of theater and drama. Mukarovsky (1976) used the terms "signifier" and "signified" by Saussure, regarding sign as a two-faced entity linking a material vehicle or signifier with a mental concept or signified. He pointed out that all the sign systems in the theater constitute a whole, namely "signifier" (ensemble of material elements), and "signified" (aesthetic object) exists in the public collective consciousness for aesthetic purposes. Performance Text is actually a "Macro sign" whose significance lies in its overall effect and acceptance depends on the audience's aesthetic knowledge. This point of view emphasizes the necessity of all components for the formation of the overall meaning. At the same time, it also regards the audience as the decisive factor for the ultimate realization of meaning, that is, the meaning of theater is equal to the meaning constructed by all of the sign systems as well as the audience's response. According to this, we can try to give the meaning- generation process of the performance text of Peking Opera:

Like Figure 1 shows, all the sign systems on the stage have their own meanings and functions. They sometimes express meanings separately on the stage, and sometimes combine with others to form a text with very complicated meanings. In any case, these sign systems must follow specific aesthetic rules to generate a complete stage meaning. Audiences can finally complete the communication process by understanding the stage meaning conveyed by the sign systems under the predetermined aesthetic rules, and then the meaning of the performance text is finally realized. Ideally the meaning of the performance text should be equal to the actual meaning of the stage. However,due to the different perception abilities of the audience (they are not all theater experts), the meaning of the performance text is usually less than the meaning generated by the actual performance of the stage. So in order to realize the meaning of the performance text, the translator needs to help audiences of the target language to understand the meaning of each sub-sign system on the stage and the conventional rules (Zhang, 2020).

4. Classification of the sign system of Peking Opera

Karel (1976) first divided Chinese theater signs into two categories from the perspective of semiotics: one is visual signs related to dramatic space, specifically including props, costumes and makeup, as well as actions, gestures and expressions belonging to the performance space; The other is the auditory signs connected with dialogue, music and sound, including dramatic speeches, singing and music. Unfortunately, this division did not clearly explain which sign systems are more important than others, and his analysis ignored the correlation between various systems. For example, the relationship between lyrics and music in the dialogue or singing was hardly mentioned. This classification is a physical division, which ignores the organic relationship between the primary system and the secondary system, and limits the translator's ability to deconstruct the meaning of the performance text.

In fact, the stage performance of Peking Opera has its own traditional classification: sing, speech, dance-acting, and combat. It not only reflects the four most essential aspects of the Peking Opera art, but also reflects the most important sign systems of it and their relationships, namely, the language system, the action sign system and the musical sign system. The language system is not in the dominant position in the whole system. However, this ancient classification deriving from actors' experience makes it easy for translators to ignore the secondary but highly significant sign

FIGURE 1
The meaning generating process of the performance text.
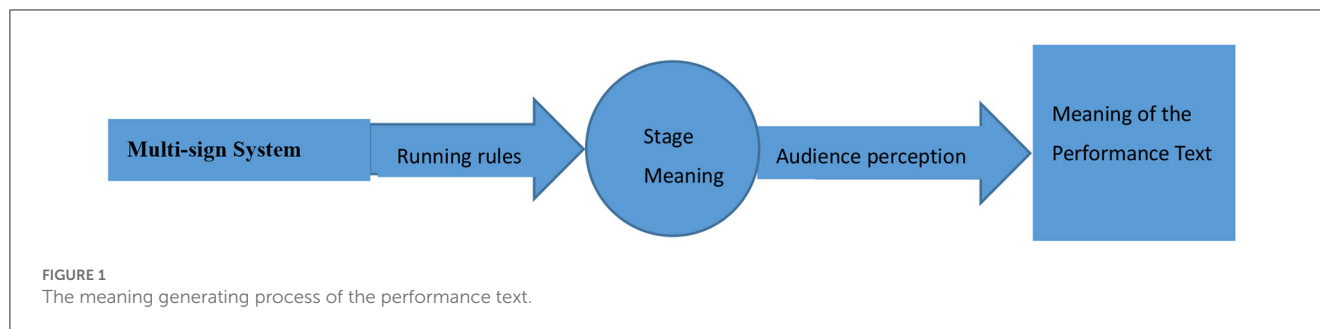
systems, like props, clothing and makeup, and then ignore some translation tasks.

Zhang's classification was finally selected in the article. It includes the dynamic semiotic group, like language, music, and action, and the static sign group like clothing, props and makeup (Zhang, 1988). This classification not only highlights the dominant position of language, action and music of the whole system, but also emphasizes the interaction between the two sign groups, that is, the static sign group can only play a role if it is attached to the dynamic semiotic group. At the same time, it also allows the translators to pay their attention to the meaning generation process of the sign systems such as clothing, props and makeup, and is very helpful to clarify the translator's tasks. On the one hand, translators will pay attention to the influence of the actors' movements and music rhythm on the lyrics translation. For example, instead of simply giving the sentence meaning like Arlington's translation "But I am too poor and can think of no other means of supporting myself in old age" (Arlington, 1973). Yao (1936) converted the lyrics from a declarative sentence into a rhetorical question according to the actual performance of the stage actors—"But I am poor and wretched, and I have a family to feed. What shall I do? (1. He hears a deep sigh and moves toward the (invisible)door).", the purpose of which is to echo the actors' actions such as the soaring pitch, shaking beard (also considered as a prop on the stage), rotating his head and sighing when they sing this sentence. The translated lyrics show a consistent state with the expressive force of music and actor's movement. On the other hand, translators will pay attention to the semantic confusion caused by the conventionality of static symbols, and will find appropriate time and space to explain the meaning of the conventionality of them. For example, when Mei Lanfang performed in the United States, his team drew and translated pictures of Peking Opera costumes and put them on display in the hall before the performance in order to help American audiences understand in advance the specific meaning of the static costume symbols in the Peking Opera stage.

5. Semiotization of the non-linguistic sign systems

In addition to convoluted language, other sign systems are not easy to understand. This is because Peking Opera is different from those realistic theatrical forms in that its stage performance is highly abstract. The non-linguistic sign systems have all gone through the process of semiotization with fixed operating rules. Many movements in Peking Opera tend to be purely choreographic. They are highly semioticalized after a complicated processing by the actors. There is no trace of imitation between the signifier and the signified, which causes a lot of difficulties to understand theirs meaning. For example, the movement of Qiba (起霸) is composed of three leg raising, cloud hand, leg kicking, leg crossing, horse crouching, sleeve adjusting, armor tightening and other basic movements. This not only gives the audience the visual beauty, but also represents the exact meaning of the plot, which shows the scene of ancient military officers putting on the whole armor, being ready to go to battlefield, and also highlights the fighting atmosphere on the stage.

The singing section in Peking Opera is called the Banqiang (板腔)-form musical structure. "It is a kind of singing based on a kind of tone, considering different lyrics and performance requirements, and then develops from various aspects such as plank, tune, singing method, accompaniment, etc." (Liu, 1981, p. 415). Tunes with different rhythms are called different names. The names only work for those who are familiar with them.

Peking Opera does not use language to shape characters, but uses color to convey meaning. Audiences acquire this meaning through the visual system. Color is the standard "language" of the performance text. The facial makeup makes full use of the value of the color. The expression of different levels of meaning through the combination of different colors is particularly prominent in the facial makeup of Peking Opera. The meaning of color is established by convention. Red represents loyalty, yellow represents scheming but not revealing, black represents loyalty, bravery and simplicity, and white represents complete moral negation. The use of different colors can reflect the characters' temperament, physique, loyalty or treachery. For example, the Peking Opera actor who plays Cao Cao (a character in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*) only uses white all over his face, showing his treacherous and suspicious character. Actors often use color combinations to paint faces to represent a person with multiple personalities. In addition, the color of the face will also change with the changes of the same character's experience.

The props of Peking Opera are also different from real life appliances. Like the costumes, they are stage appliances that have been beautified by artistic exaggeration and decoration. Zhang (1988) believes that Beijing Opera props can hardly show their stage significance independently. If no actors appear, the props may be meaningless. That is to say, the independent ideographic function of the props is not strong. For example, a table may

express the physical meaning of the table, but its meaning will be constantly deformed with the development of the plot, extending to the stage meaning of mountains, earth platforms, gorgeous palaces, etc. Another example goes to horsewhip. Only after the appearance of the actors, it can refer to the horses, and the color of horses can be judged according to the decorative color of the whip. In the specific performance, the number of stage props can convey multiple meanings, mainly because the props sign system is ingeniously combined with other sign systems to build a constantly changing space-time framework. At the same time, the high degree of semiotizaion of props is precisely reflected in the phenomenon of "polysemy" of props that changes with the context.

6. Foregrounding of the sign system

Foregrounding, as opposed to automation, refers to the non-automation of behavior. If a behavior occurs naturally, audience's awareness of this is relatively weak. However, if a behavior is foregrounded, audience will have more awareness of it. "When dramatic signs change and produce a sense of strangeness instead of automation, the audience will be prompted to pay attention to this sign carrier and its operation" (Elam, 2002, p. 17–18). In the process of semiotization of the nonverbal sign systems, sound, action, color and clothing are very different from daily life, which is the manifestation of the foregrounding of a single sign.

However, the stage performance is more about the joint transmission of meaning by multi-sign system, especially in its vocal performance. This is because the most wonderful part of the performance is the singing of the actors, and the vocal text contains almost all sign systems. When multi-sign systems express meanings together, there will be a foreground-background structure by Mukarovsky. The components in the foreground structure are aesthetic signs, which are also the meanings that the performance wants to convey the most, while the components in the background structure becomes the secondary part that doesn't get the attention of the audience. In the singing segment, the musical sign system and the rhythm spectrum of linguistic system are foregrounded, while other signs like the actors' movement, the customs they are wearing or prop they are using become secondary. This is because the development of the story is usually driven by the use of dialogue. When the dialogue was changed into the singing performance, the audience will start to focus on the aesthetic aspects of the music and rhythm of the lyrics and their attention will move on to the actor himself or herself instead of the plot of the story. That is why many Peking Opera singers will try their best to expand the limited stage space and time in order to fully foreground the music and the rhythm of the lyrics. When singing adagio, they can even last the sound of seven Chinese character lyrics for a minute. The translator must seize this time expansion to convey to the audience the aesthetic significance of the musical sign system or the characteristics of the lyrics, or both, instead of just following the so-called drama translation principle—"Performability" making the lines more speakable or be understood by audience in shorter time. Take the translation

TABLE 1 Two different translated versions of Farewell my Concubine.

Chinese	Version 1 (translated by William Dolby)	Version 2 (an online translator)
看大王在帐中合衣睡稳	I see the Great King, fully clothed, soundly sleeping there,	In the tent, my lord is asleep with his armor on
我这里出帐外且散愁情	I leave the tent to try and dispel my sorrows in the open air.	I'll take a walk and try to dispel my worries
轻移步走向前荒郊站定	Tiptoeing forward, until I halt in the wild, empty land, I stand there, still	Gentle are my steps in this wilderness
猛抬头见碧落月色清明	and suddenly looking up, I see in its cerulean dwelling the bright moon shining clear.	I look up and see the moon, cold, and bright

of a lyric from *Farewell my Concubine* (William, 1978) as an example.

As can be seen from Table 1, translators adopt completely different ways to deal with the same lyrics. To determine which treatment is more appropriate for stage performance, we need to consider the relationship of the lyrics to other sign systems on the stage. Beijing Opera lyrics should be sung in a certain musical structure, and the performers should make corresponding actions according to the meaning of the words. The characters in the lyrics should also be arranged according to the rhythmic requirements of Chinese poetry, and time and space restrictions should also be considered. The style of the music usually determines how long the words are presented on stage. If the presentation time is short, the translation of the lyrics must be popularized to facilitate the audience's quick understanding. However, this verse is performed in the style of Nanbangzi (a relatively slow rhythm), and the verse has enough time to be seen by the audience, so the rhythm of the verse should be preserved in the translation process. In addition, the actor's movements and words should be highly matched. Translating the Chinese lyrics, we will find the beginning of the first sentence means "I see", the second "I see", the third "walk gently", and the fourth "look up suddenly". When actors sing them, they will make the corresponding beautifying actions according to the stylized performance requirements. Therefore, it is very easy for us to say that version 1 is more suitable, while in reality version 2 is used as the subtitle translation of this performance, which is really a pity.

7. Conclusion

As mentioned above, translators engaged in Peking Opera translation should deal with the performance text, and the final performance text is formed in the process of its stage performance. Therefore, the most meaningful translation of Peking Opera is to translate its theater, that is, to provide subtitle translation for the Beijing Opera digital products or do surtitle translation in the real performance. Knowing the features and meanings of signs on the stage and the meaning generation

process of the multi-sign performance text is very important for translators who are doing these. They will not just translate the lyrics and the dialogues between the characters, nor will they simply deal with the lyrics colloquially following the principle of "performability" derived from drama translation practices. In fact, a new principle should be generated for this group of translators:

At the first stage, translators could read professional books talking about specific terms of Beijing Opera in order to help themselves to have a deep understanding of each sign system in the performance text. On this basis they could then eliminate those signs with lower semiotization degree, which can be easily understood by the audiences without paying too much cognitive cost. Then their attention will focus on identifying signs that cannot be understood by foreign audience and explain them in a reasonable way. Of course, although the actions with low semiotizaion degree are easy to be understood, the aesthetic principles they are following still need to be explained to the audience in advance.

Secondly, when translators deal with the most frequently appeared part—the singing section which includes several different sign systems, they can make full use of the "foregrounding" theory to decompose the multi-layered meanings finding their translation priorities in order to convey the most important meanings to the audiences within the limited time and space on the stage. For example if a singing section lasts about 8 min but with only eight words, it is obvious that the translators cannot just translate the words but they can and should make good use of the time to add information related with the music style, the actor's performance style and the rhythm of the poetic language.

Thirdly, it is impossible for translators to explain every details of those signs which are conventionalized in Chinese culture in such a limited performing time even though their meanings are very important for audience to fully enjoy the show. So to expand the audience's knowledge of Peking Opera, mainly including the basic knowledge required to watch a play, such as the principles of Peking Opera stage performance, scene characteristics, and stylized rules, they may need to search different channels to distribute the translated knowledge of Peking Opera to the audience usually before the real performance, so that they can understand and appreciate the basic meaning

and aesthetic significance of the performance text as much as possible in the process of watching the show restricted by time and space.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

JZ: design the structure of the paper and write it. DZ: provide suggestions and give instructions on writing it. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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