

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**A Translation Study on Chinese Xiqu:  
through the Case of *Silang Visits His Mother***

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## **1. Introduction and main objectives of the dissertation**

Xiqu, known as traditional Chinese opera or Chinese theater, is different from European opera, the performance of which involves a combination of singing and dancing, while the artistic structure of Xiqu is made up of the comprehensive application of Singing, Speaking, Dance-acting, and Combat. Xiqu includes rich cultural content, such as proverbs, idioms, poetry, and intricate character relationships; it can be seen as a condensed representation of Chinese culture, requiring a comprehensive set of translation solutions to handle effectively. Currently, there are few studies of Xiqu translations, and only a handful of Xiqu have been translated into English. This is because Xiqu translation is difficult due to cultural and specialized vocabulary, among other hurdles, and there is no systematic translation solution to use. Therefore, in the English translation of Chinese Xiqu, is it possible to construct and apply a systematic set of translation solutions that can faithfully convey the cultural connotations and emotional nuances of the original work? Specifically, this study summarizes such a set of translation solutions through an analysis of various culturally specific terms in Xiqu, such as the translation of Modal Particles, body part expressions, and four-character idioms.

It is worth noting that the translation challenges addressed in this study—such as Modal Particles (MPs), body-part expressions, and idioms—are not exclusive to the specific Xiqu text under analysis, but are common across Xiqu script translation and, more broadly, in the translation of literary texts. What distinguishes Xiqu as a particularly compelling focus is the high frequency and density of such linguistic elements, which stem from its dialogue-driven form and deep embedding in traditional Chinese cultural and rhetorical conventions. Although these may be considered general issues in literary translation, examining them through the lens of Xiqu allows for a more nuanced understanding of their manifestations within a highly culture-bound genre. This typology of solution, which will be presented in this dissertation, not only sheds light on the specific translational demands of Xiqu but also offers broader insights into how culturally loaded words and expressions can be effectively negotiated in translation

practice. Hence, the use of Xiqu as a case study contributes both to the field of Xiqu translation and to the broader discourse on translating culture-specific elements in literature.

This dissertation aims to overcome the barriers discussed above, to study the English translation of Xiqu, and to explore whether an overall set of translation solutions can be applied to Xiqu translation, as it would facilitate the promotion of this art form. This research presents a series of case studies focusing on the issue of Xiqu translation, a subject that has received limited scholarly attention so far. The analysis primarily argues for going beyond the literal translation of the text and delving into how the cultural nuances and emotional aspects conveyed in the original text can be equivalently expressed in English. In the final analysis step of each case study, I will summarize and synthesize the research findings while standardizing relevant terminology and presenting a systematic overview of key terms. This overview will be based on Pym (2016a)'s solutions, unifying the terminology from individual case studies to align with a more general translation framework. This standardization represents a significant advancement in the study of Xiqu translation. By establishing a standardized terminology system, we can not only facilitate a more systematic discussion of Xiqu translation but also enhance our understanding and application of translation solutions. This will increase the general applicability of research findings and provide a more solid theoretical foundation for future studies in this field.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Pym's translation solution types will serve as the basis of the solutions used in this dissertation. In 2014, Pym compared the translation solutions of Vinay and Darbelnet with those of Loh Dian-yang and proposed his classification. It was primarily prepared for pedagogical purposes. He suggested that the solutions concern many language pairs. He also argued in *A Typology of Translation Solutions* that, in principle, all solution types can be used to solve all problems (Pym 2018: 46). For precise solutions, Pym proposed a default category, namely **cruise mode** translating, as when an airplane is cruising at altitude, all goes well until there is a 'bump', then attention is required, and

something needs to be done. The typologies are used to deal with the ‘bump’ in the translation process. There are three main categories for maximum simplification, namely: **copying**, **expression change**, and **material change**, and there are other subcategories under them. As a result of Pym’s analysis, these translation solutions have not only a pedagogical role but also a role in expanding the repertoire of available solutions for novice translators. In the translation of the body-part expressions of this Xiqu, besides Cruise mode, the following translation solutions are also involved: Perspective change, Density change, Compensation, and Cultural correspondence. Now I will explain each of the involved translation solutions. According to Pym (2018), **perspective change** refers to a replacement name for “modulation”, which was introduced by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995). This translation solution always comes up when something needs to be approached from a different perspective. It includes “changing sentence focus”, “changing semantic focus”, “changing voice”, and so on. **Density change** includes some subtypes, such as “generalization”/ “specification”, “explicitation”/ “implicitation”, etc., which means there are significant variations in the amount of information available in a given text space. Translators can increase and reduce text density by using a solution that concentrates or allocates information to a smaller or larger text space. The standard solution, which under **compensation** is “new level of expression”, “new place in text”, according to Pym, “A value is rendered with resources different from those of the start text and in a textual position or linguistic level markedly different from that in the start text” (Pym 2018). **Cultural correspondence** is considered when different elements from different cultures are presented to perform similar functions; the category broadly covers what Vinay and Darbelnet termed Adaptation and Equivalence (Pym 2018, Pym et al. 2020). Then Pym verified it in *A Typology of translation solutions for Chinese- English* in 2020, which is a collaborative article by Pym and several Chinese students, and used this table on another Chinese corpus, which are everyday phrases in Chinese, so it has been tested that it can be used for dealing with the problem of Chinese- English translation. As Pym mentioned, this translation solution applies to all kinds of texts, but the list of sub-types is open-ended for more focused work (Pym 2016a: 221); thus, a set of translation

solutions applicable to Xiqu translation can be developed to provide better guidance. In my research, I have modified Pym’s solution by introducing several additional translation solutions. I have also excluded the category of text tailoring to make the solutions more applicable to Xiqu translation. I will analyze the specific details of these solutions in the examples provided later in this dissertation.

Cruise mode (normal use of language skills, reference resources, parallel texts, intuition – anything prior to bump mode – so no special solutions are needed)		
Copying	Copying Words	Copying sounds Copying morphology Copying script ...
	Copying Structure	Copying prosodic features Copying fixed phrases Copying text structure ...
Expression Change	Perspective Change	Changing sentence focus Changing semantic focus Changing voice Renaming an object ...
	Density Change	Generalisation / Specification Explicitation / Implication Multiple Translation...
	Resegmentation	Joining sentences Cutting sentences Re-paragraphing...
	Compensation	New level of expression New place in text (notes, paratexts) ...
	Cultural Correspondence	Corresponding idioms Corresponding units of measurement, currency, etc. Relocation of culture-specific referents ...
Material Change	Text Tailoring	Correction / censorship / updating Omission of material Addition of material ...

Table 1. Translation Solution Types by Anthony Pym (Pym 2016a: 220)

### 3. Corpus

In this dissertation, one famous Xiqu, *Silang Visits His Mother*, serves as the corpus. This Xiqu has existed on the stage at different times since the birth of Jingju. Therefore, the history of the performance of *Silang Visits His Mother* is almost equal to the history of Jingju, with a history of more than 200 years (Wu 2019: 70). This is a very famous and frequently presented Jingju. It is widely sung by the public in China.

The Xiqu *Silang Visits His Mother* comprises approximately 7,500 Chinese characters and features numerous translation problems. For this study, I analyze two English translations of the text. The first translation, which I refer to as **Translation 1**, consists of approximately 11,300 English words and was produced collaboratively by a group of Xiqu theorists, artists, and translators both within and outside China, and was edited by Sun Ping (2012). This translation is part of the renowned *English Translation Series of a Hundred Peking Opera Classics* series. The second translation, referred to in this dissertation as **Translation 2**, was completed by A.C. Scott (1967), a pioneer in the study of Chinese and Japanese theatre. His translation in *Traditional Chinese Plays: Ssu Lang Visits His Mother*, contains approximately 23,000 English words. The substantial difference in length is attributed to Scott's extensive use of compensation. He provides detailed descriptions of the actors' on-stage movements between lines of dialogue, ensuring a thorough explanation of the performance for readers.

*Silang Visits His Mother* contains a wealth of character dialogues that, while presented in written form, reflect spoken language and include extensive emotional expressions. The Xiqu is rich in vocabulary imbued with Chinese cultural significance, such as terms that convey hierarchical relationships between characters. These cultural elements present challenges in translation, requiring careful consideration to convey their cultural connotations effectively. This is why I selected this Xiqu as the corpus for my study. Translating Xiqu is essentially a process of recreating traditional Chinese culture. The core challenge lies in presenting the cultural essence embedded in Xiqu to readers or audiences in other languages. This difficulty is also the focus of my research, where I aim to address these translation issues by proposing suitable translation solutions.

#### **4. Analysis and discussion**

Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six are case studies and discussions.

**Chapter Three** specifically explores translation solutions for Modal Particles in Chinese Xiqu. A general translation problem can be detected between English and

Chinese concerning the so-called Modal Particles (MPs). This problem is because Chinese has a vibrant system of MPs; English, on the contrary, is regarded by most linguists as a language without a separate group of MPs. The six common MPs in Chinese are 的 (de), 了 (le), 么 (me), 呢 (ne), 吧 (ba), and 啊 (a). They usually indicate the speaker's attitudinal and emotive tone, and they occur at the end of sentences in most cases. The use of MPs in Chinese is widespread, especially in spoken communication. This chapter addresses this translation problem for the Chinese MPs when translating Chinese Xiqu. It is worth taking a Chinese Xiqu text as a basis for investigating translation solutions adopted for MPs because Chinese Xiqu texts involve many dialogues performed on stage. Therefore, they are, in some sense, oral dialogs. I demonstrate that several translation solutions include omission, linguistic amplification, explicitation, and changing semantic focus that are used in translating MPs.

**Chapter Four** studies the solutions of translating body-part expressions in Chinese Xiqu. It also discusses the cultural differences in the functions and meanings of body-part expressions between Chinese and English. It was found that the difference in the way of thinking between Chinese and English causes different understandings of the functions of body-part expressions. Hence, most body-part expressions need specific solutions for translation. Through the analysis of examples in Xiqu, there will be three types of translation, named 1-1 translation, 1-X translation, and 1-null translation. Pym's (2016a) terminology of translation solutions will be used as the framework to deal with these types of situations. It is shown that, even though body-part metaphors exist in both languages, the meanings and functions are different. It is difficult to find a one-to-one solution when translating, so it is necessary to understand the culture, to reformulate the meaning of the culturally loaded words and expressions in the sentence into English, and then find reasonable solutions for the meaning.

**Chapter Five** examines the translation of four-character idioms in Xiqu. Idioms appear regularly in Xiqu, among which four-character idioms are typical representatives of Chinese culture, expressing specific meanings with fixed forms and structures in common sayings. The research is based on my corpus and studies English translations of Chinese four-character idioms. In this chapter, the translation solutions

of idioms in Xiqu are studied. Through the analysis of examples, it is found that four translation solutions (Wang and Wang 2013) are preferred in translating: literal translation, free translation, abridged translation, and borrowing translation. The analysis of these foundational solutions highlights the importance of addressing both semantic content and structural differences when translating idioms between Chinese and English.

**Chapter Six** delves into the translation challenges of Xiqu subtitles. I present a case study that examines the challenges and solutions encountered in translating Chinese Xiqu subtitles. Building upon the model proposed by Qian and Feng (2021), the study investigates solutions applicable to translating Chinese Xiqu subtitles, finding that Xiqu subtitle translation must streamline the language to ensure that audiences can understand the important content in a short period. This requires 1) omitting some details and emphasizing core meanings to keep subtitles concise and clear. Therefore, omission is often used in subtitle translation. 2) Additionally, enhancing the audience's grasp of the script involves solutions such as introducing punctuation or changing the semantic focus to highlight specific aspects. 3) When dealing with culturally loaded words and expressions, it is necessary to employ cultural correspondence to resonate with the audience's cultural context. This research contributes to the advancement of subtitling translation practices in Xiqu, shedding light on effective translation solutions tailored to preserve the essence of these performances for diverse audiences.

Since these case studies are based on various translation solutions, at the end of each chapter, I have systematically summarized the translation methods employed in the preceding case studies, unifying them according to Pym's (2016a) framework. For the translation solutions in Pym's framework that do not appear in the chapters of case studies (Modal Particles, body parts words and expressions, and four-character idioms), **Chapter Seven** attempts to explore whether Pym's table of other solution types can also be effectively applied to Xiqu translation and to identify any solutions used in Xiqu translation that are not included in his typology. This chapter not only refers to Pym's classification but also supplements it by studying Xiqu translation, which in itself provides originality and new insights. This further enhances the main contribution of

my dissertation by presenting a set of translation solutions specifically designed for Xiqu translation. In the following chapter, I will examine translation results from another perspective: machine and AI translation.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine translation (MT) has undeniably impacted the field of translation. Given the various challenges inherent in Xiqu translation, a key question arises: Can AIs and MTs contribute to the advancement of Xiqu translation? **Chapter Eight** will explore this question through a series of tests. By comparing high-quality human translation (Translation1) with results from trained Neural Machine Translation (NMT) and GPT models, this chapter aims to evaluate the potential of AI-assisted translation in addressing the unique challenges of Xiqu translation. The evaluation process adopts a multidimensional approach that considers not only fidelity to the original meaning but also the preservation of Xiqu's artistic expression, emotional nuances, and cultural significance.

## **5. Conclusion and contributions**

Compared with previous studies, this dissertation's most significant contribution is that it presents a preliminary and comprehensive analysis of Xiqu translation, proposing an integrated Xiqu translation solution for Xiqu texts. In this dissertation, I have reviewed Xiqu translation and found that existing research primarily focuses on isolated translation issues, with no comprehensive framework summarizing translation solutions for Xiqu texts. Therefore, Table 2 represents the first attempt to propose an integrated typology of translation solutions for Xiqu. This serves as a practical guide for applying translation solutions in Xiqu translation practice, thereby promoting its development.

The translation solution terms I analyzed are initially based on the research traditions of each respective field, as they belong to vastly different directions (e.g., Modal Particles, idioms). However, my framework standardizes these terms using Pym's classification as a foundation. This synthesis of translation solutions applies to Xiqu and extends to the translation of all Chinese cultural texts. Since Xiqu serves as a representative form of Chinese culture, it encompasses various cultural terms and

expressions. Therefore, these analyses can be utilized as a generalized framework to offer solutions for the broader Chinese cultural translation field.

Based on all the analysis, I conclude that Xiqu translation can adopt Pym's translation solution types, though I have made some modifications, including changes in the understanding of terminology. I will explain these terms again one by one.

**Cruise mode** can be understood as a literal translation, requiring no special translation techniques—just a straightforward bilingual translation. In Xiqu translation, **copying** is often used, such as when translating personal names or Chinese classical musical instruments, where **copying sound** is commonly applied. For the parallel sentence structures frequently found in Xiqu, **copying structure** can be used to translate more aligned with the original, maintaining the literary quality of the text. Xiqu characters often have a strict hierarchy in their interactions. If there is a need to weaken the tone, we can use **perspective change** solutions like **changing sentence focus, changing semantic focus, changing voice, and changing sentence types; density change** refers to changes in the density of the translation compared to the source text. This change can occur through the following solutions: **generalization**, during the translation process, specific concepts or details from the source language are replaced with broader, more generalized terms or expressions in the target language. **Specification** refers to replacing vague or general terms from the source language with more specific words or details in the target language. **Explicitation**, during translation, makes implicit information, cultural background, or omitted language from the source text explicit in the target language. In comparison to Pym's original solution types, I have omitted implicitation. This is because, in Xiqu script translation, the goal is to retain and communicate cultural elements, making it easier for the audience to understand the Xiqu language more effectively. Implicitation, which involves leaving out specific details to make the translation more concise, contradicts this goal, as it would obscure some of the cultural and contextual richness of the original text. It is worth mentioning that **compensation** is frequently used in Xiqu text translation. Compensation refers to the supplementation of information in new places in the text, such as through footnotes or paratexts, to enhance the comprehensibility of the

translation. Since script textual translations are not constrained by time or space, Xiqu translations for publication often provide explanations of historical allusions and character relationships beforehand or incorporate cultural knowledge within the translated text. The two translations we studied both employed this solution. The official Chinese version provides a detailed introduction and explanation of the original story and its background before the translation. Scott’s translation intersperses numerous explanations within the text, sometimes using footnotes to offer additional context for readers. It helps readers gain a general understanding of the story before engaging with the translation, facilitates comprehension of the translated text, and contributes to the dissemination of excellent cultural allusions and traditions. Another frequently used solution is **cultural correspondence**. Whether translating body parts, idioms, or culture-specific items, if an equivalent expression exists in the target language, it often becomes the preferred translation. This solution conveys the underlying meaning to the readers and allows them to experience the cultural essence embedded in the original text. Regarding **material change**, this is one of my modifications, as I also analyzed in chapter seven. Pym considers omission as not being a translation solution, arguing that if an item is omitted, another translation solution must be employed to compensate for the omitted content. However, in Xiqu translation, **omission** is frequently used, particularly in translating MPs. **Linguistic amplification** can be seen as a form of addition that aids comprehension, where certain linguistic items are introduced to make the text more accessible to the readers.

Based on the above, I conclude that the solutions for Xiqu text translation (subtitle translation solutions are not included) can be summarized as shown in Table 2:

Cruise mode (normal use of language skills, no special solutions are needed)		
Copying	Copying words	Copying sounds
	Copying structure	Copying sentence structure
Expression Change	Perspective Change	Changing sentence focus Changing semantic focus

		Changing voice Changing sentence types
	Density Change	Generalisation/Specification Explicitation Joining sentences Cutting sentences
	Compensation	New place in text (footnotes, paratexts)
	Cultural Correspondence	Corresponding idioms Corresponding culture-specific items Corresponding body parts
Material change	Text change	Omission Linguistic amplification

Table 2. Translation solutions for Chinese Xiqu texts

Secondly, for subtitle translation. Unlike script translation, subtitle translation has time constraints and requires more concise expressions. Therefore, the **omission** is frequently used in subtitle translation to remove unnecessary elements, such as names that do not contribute to the audience’s understanding. Sometimes, **addition** is used to clarify character relationships, and **adding punctuation marks** can also improve understanding, such as adding ellipses to suggest that there is more to be said. **Changing semantic focus** by converting rhetorical questions into declarative sentences can make the meaning more transparent and help the audience understand the text more quickly. **Cultural correspondence** can make the meaning of the source text more transparent to the target audience. Regardless of the solution used, subtitle translation follows a fundamental principle: to facilitate rapid comprehension of the source text meaning, sometimes at the cost of neglecting the aesthetic features of the Xiqu, such as rhyme and ornate language. This distinguishes subtitle translation from script translation.

Thirdly, I have also examined and compared the results of human translation and machine/AI translation, identifying patterns in their translation solutions, which is a new attempt. The findings reveal that, in some cases, machine/AI translation adopts the same translation solutions as human translators for specific expressions. Regarding structural correspondence within a text, AI translation even outperforms human translation. However, for culturally loaded words and expressions such as idioms or body parts, human translation remains superior to machine/AI translation.

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