
Narrative elaborations (yanyi) of classical drama in the early Republican period: aspects of language, culture and translation

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Abstract

Between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, China's language sphere became the arena for confrontation of multiple cultural instances. On the one hand, the vernacular language (baihuawen) gained favor as the proper vehicle for reform and innovation within society and culture. On the other hand, the literary language (wenyanwen) continued to serve as an essential communicative medium in large portions of cultural sectors. Thanks to a thriving publishing industry, it played a crucial role in journalism and in the activity of translation, which included not only the translation of foreign works but also the translation of traditional texts, which were presented anew to the reader at the beginning of the century in a new formal and linguistic guise.

A set of three classical language novels based on famous premodern plays, the works *Xixiang ji yanyi*, *Pipa ji yanyi* and *Taohua shan yanyi*, which were published one after the other between 1918 and the beginning of 1919, represents an interesting example of this dynamic process of transmission and transformation of Chinese literary tradition through varieties of languages and genres. As a whole, these three works expressed the taste and the sensibility of the commercialized popular culture that boomed in the early decades of the modern period and stimulated the development of the so-called Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literature. After providing a general description and contextualization of the three works, this paper will focus mainly on the analysis of the first novel *Xixiangji yanyi* (1918) written by Yu Xuelun (1892-1967). The analysis will follow three interrelated lines of inquiry. Firstly, it will examine the position of Yu's rewriting in relation to its classical sources (the novella *Huizhen ji*, the play *Xixiang ji* by Wang Shifu, and the commentary by Jin Shengtan). Secondly, it will outline the main features of language use in the *yanyi* version to describe the specific characteristics of its written variety in the context of *wenyanwen*. Thirdly, it will address the ideological concerns that emerge from this new cultural appropriation of the *Xixiang ji* in the early years of the Republican period. Barbara Bisetto is Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Verona. She works mainly on premodern literature from the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, and her research interests include narratology, genre studies, language and style, and translation theory and practice in historical perspective.

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