



# The English Translation of the Classic Chinese Novel *Chin P'ing Mei* in the Context of Anglo-American Censorship

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**Abstract:** *Chin P'ing Mei* is one of the best-known Chinese vernacular novels. Since its appearance, debate over the book never ceases, with a broad range of attitudes running from enthusiastic compliment to harsh criticism. Compared to such vernacular novel as *Hong Lou Meng*, the readership of *Chin P'ing Mei* is very small. Indeed, *Chin P'ing Mei* is such a highly-controversial book that a complete and unexpurgated version is hard to come by even in mainland China. Its journey to the English-speaking countries also proved to be a bumpy road. Specifically, many measures were taken to make sure it can reach the hands of foreign readers in the context of the Anglo-American literary censorship of obscenity in the 21st century, including downplaying or deletion of sexual description, restriction of readership, and endorsement from distinguished scholars.

**Keywords:** *Chin P'ing Mei*, translation, sexual description, censorship

Controversial as it is, *Chin P'ing Mei* is one of the most high-profile literatures in imperial China. Nearly 2% of the book, or 20,000 characters, are explicit words describing sexual intercourse. Given the characteristics of *Chin P'ing Mei*, one may wonder how the translation versions navigate the strict censorship of obscenity in English-speaking countries in the 21st century. Or, how did such books reach the boarder audience across the world? Did the English versions of the book face backlash from foreign societies? After an in-depth investigation, this paper finds that foreign agents, including publishers, translators and other parts involved in the publication and circulation of the translated book, mainly resorted to 3 means to shun literary censorship: downplaying or deletion of the description, restriction of readership, and endorsement from distinguished scholars.

## 1. Downplaying or deletion of sexual description

Downplaying or deletion of the description is an age-old practice used by publisher across the world to escape censorship. As to CPM, early English versions has tried to downplay the pornographic components by either massive deletion of the source text and generalization of pornographic descriptions or changes of diction so that the text can be less sensual. The first approach is understandable as many English versions condensed the 100-chapter book to less than 10 chapters. As for the second approach, I would like to illustrate it with a few examples.

ST: ta bian wang hou bian geng yi xi zao pin qu le. (Session 59)

TT: Meanwhile she went to the inner court to take off her clothes and wash herself. (Egerton, 1939)

“pin” is a vulgar word that refers to the organ of female, the translator has not chose the v-word or “private part” to equal the concept. Translation is a process of decision-making, the decision of the translator in this sentence offers us an insight into how he juggled between censorship and faithfulness.

One more example:

ST: These two are doing well. (Session 97)

TT: They have been very happy together. (Egerton, 1939)

In Chinese culture, “gan” is also a highly-offensive word describing sexual intercourse. Its counterpart word in English will be the F-word. But they translator did not use “have sex” or any other suggestive word but prefer to obscure its nature of vulgarity.

Indeed, similar examples abound in the whole book. In describing the organ of male, the translator has avoided to make it too explicit as the ST did, he rendered it into a set of words like his member, the treasure, his weapon, the conqueror, the warrior, the sword, the spear, the jade scepter, and etc. By such canny tactics, the translator has managed to tone down the elements in the book.

## 2. Restriction of readership

As a highly-controversial book, CPM demonstrated the consequence of indulgence by revealing the death of almost all major characters. In the preface of the book, Dong Qichang aptly said that, “When reading CPM, he who show mercy to the people described in the book is the Bodhisattva; he who take warnings from it is a good man; he who get delighted at the obscenity is the petty man; he who feel like follow suit is a reckless monster”. In a word, the value of the book is irrefutable. Less certain is the attitude and nature of readers. Therefore, it is necessary to have the English versions of the book reserved for only people who are mature enough that the evil parts of the book will not erode their values. In the case of CPM, the purpose of making the book only be available to a restricted readership was achieved by such forms as secret publication, exorbitant pricing, and language barriers. Let's discuss them respectively. Secret publication means that the translation could be available to only a limited group of people who subscribed in advance. Inscribed on the endpaper of this translation was the following disclaimer: “This edition, scheduled for private circulation, is limited to 750 numbered copies, of which this copy is No. xxx” (ibid.). In this way, the availability of the English version would be greatly restricted to a controllable scale thus ensuing the book would never reach the hands of ordinary people who were prone to be corrupted by the book. In addition to the ploy of replacing public publication with private publication, pricing is also a powerful tool in deciding who should have the privilege of reading the book while who should not. It is believed that those who enjoyed higher economic and social conditions can better guard against the negative impact from the book. *The Adventures of Hsi Men Ching*, one of the early English versions of CPM, was in hardback and contained illustrations. But they were sold at a price above the purchasing power of the masses. As Sutherland puts it, readers who can afford to pay more money for a book is less susceptible to the corrupting elements of the book than less well-off readers. The aforementioned two approaches narrowed the spread of the book by controlling the accessibility and affordability of the rendering. Beside social status and economic conditions, educational attainment was also used in singling out the targeted readers. One telling example is *The Golden Lotus* translated by Clement Egerton in 1939, he translated all sexually explicit passages in the targeted text in Latin. As a result, he who read the book for sensual excitement will simply find himself rather disappointed while people, scholars in particular, who want to absorb the nutrition of the book will not be hindered by the barrier of language.

## 3. Endorsement from distinguished scholars.

In 1939, *The Adventurous History of Hsi Men and His Six Wives* was published by the Bodley Head publishing house in London. Many measures were taken to justify the translation. In addition to all the ways mentioned above, this edition took advantage of the influence of Arthur Waley, one of the most acclaimed Sinologists in the U.K., to prove the value of the book and thus justify the act of translation. Arthur Waley wrote the introduction of the book in which he detailed the background and literary merits of CPM. There is no doubt that, with his literary prowess and established status in the field, Arthur Waley's introduction largely boosted the reach of the book.

According to Bourdieu, the publisher of this particular English version set great store by the symbolic and cultural capital of Waley that they place his name over that of the translator. Or, it went so far as to leave Waley's name on the front cover as a replacement of the translator's name.

Another English version of CPM appeared in the 1960s, it went with the name *The Love Pagoda*. Just like *The Adventurous History of Hsi Men and His Six Wives* in 1939, it invited prestigious scholar to recommend and write prefaces for it. This time, Albert Ellis, a famous psychologist-cum- sinologist was invited. On the front cover of the book read “Introduction by Albert Ellis, PH.D. It is worth noting that the move occurred in a time when the 1857 *Obscene Publications Act* was still prevailing. It was later removed from the book following the relaxation of censorship. The publisher just wanted to have an influential people to told the masses that the book boasts great merits despite the scenes within it.

Indeed, such practice can be found in virtually every English version of CPM. When Tuttle Company in Japan reprinted the *Golden Lotus* by Egerton in 2001, Robert Hegel, professor at Harvard University, was invited to write the introduction of the book. Clearly, endorsement from distinguished scholars, sinologist in particular, is a powerful tool wielded by publishers to boost acceptance and sales.

## 4. Conclusion

From the first English version *The Adventures of Hsi Men Ching* to *The Plum in the Golden Vase* by David T. Roy, CPM has gone through a bumpy road to be known in English-speaking countries. Unfortunately, the literary value of CPM has failed to be grasped by readers of its English versions for many reasons, among which are cultural untranslatability and publisher's intention to exploit its pornographic elements. It is clear that there has been only few commentaries or books about CPM authored by people who were unable to read in Chinese. In this regard, the translation of the book is not very

successful.

Compared to many great Chinese literature works, the English translation of CPM started at a relatively late age and encountered great challenges due to its erotic texts. For example, while early English translation of acclaimed ancient Chinese novels were finished by missionaries like Robert Morrison or Joseph Edkins, they may think the book too vulgar to worth translation. In sum, the difficulties involved in the translation and circulation of CPM are greater than any other famous Chinese novels.

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