Revising the Chinese Translation of Verdi's Opera "La Traviata" Linguistic and Methodological Issues

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Abstract This essay deals with the methodological and linguistic aspects of the translation into Chinese of the original libretto of Verdi's *La Traviata* written in 1853 by Francesco Maria Piave. The translation is performance-oriented, so it is part of a field of study that is still scarcely investigated today, and requires careful reflection and accurate guidelines (Desblache in A tool for social integration? audio-visual translation from different angles, pp. 155–170, 2007; Golomb in Songs and significance: Virtues and Vices of vocal translation. Rodopi, Amsterdam/New York, pp. 121–161, 2005; Mateo 2012). Starting from a reflection on the tradition of translating opera librettos in China, the author highlights the historical and social significance of Verdi's opera. *La Traviata*, key access-point of Italian melodrama onto the Chinese cultural scene, becomes here the field in which specific trans-cultural elements of an artistic language are expressed, a language that, despite having defined rules, remains open to numerous semantic variations. After a historical excursus on the translation of the work, the study focuses on the linguistic analysis of the criticalities in the Chinese translation of the text when aimed at stage performance. The aim is to update a translation dating back to the last century already reviewed by Chinese conductor Zheng Xiaoying, but with special attention to the transcoding of sociolinguistic and cultural elements in a diachronic and diamesic key.

Keywords Opera in china · Translating opera for the stage · Chinese translation strategies · *La traviata*

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1 Introduction

The present paper[1] deals with the methodological and linguistic aspects of the Chinese translation of Francesco Maria Piave's 1853 libretto of *La Traviata*; it is therefore relevant to a field of studies that is currently in need of careful consideration and accurate guidelines (Desblache 2007; Golomb 2005; Mateo 2012). On the one hand, studies on audio-visual translation from Italian to Chinese have bloomed from the 1990s onward (Jin and Gambier 2018, 36), and much research has been dedicated to the translation of films, both from a historical and a methodological perspective (Jin 2013; Xiao 2016), and also to surtitling of opera (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2016; Bogucki 2016); on the other hand, the micro-area of translation into Chinese of Italian opera librettos remains to this day mostly *terra incognita.*

It must be taken into consideration that, within the three elements that connote the multimedia genre of melodrama, i.e., libretto, music, performance, the compilation of the libretto may take place before, after, or in parallel with, the music, but always highly integrated with it (Marschall 2004; Mateo 2012; Huang 2013). These three elements, according to Rossi (2018, 41), are equivalent and may not be ranged hierarchically.

As far as western melodrama is concerned, *La Traviata*, back in 1907, was the first to be performed in Chinese translation, in Japan. The Chinese libretto was staged again in China in 1956,[2] and, after a long hiatus, again in 1978. Since then, the opera has been performed numerous times, more often than not in Italian.

The analysis proposed here responds to an ad hoc request linked to a project by Orchestra Director Zhèng Xiǎoyīng 郑小瑛 (1929-), and is part of a wider field of reflection on the way melodrama is represented in contemporary China: the theaters of the great megalopolises like Beijing, Shanghai, and Canton, attract an audience fond of the Western melodrama genre; the tendency is therefore that of staging operas in their original language, with surtitles in Chinese, inviting Western singers, or Chinese singers who have studied in Western countries. In less globalized cities, where musicians of great caliber operate, such as Zheng Xiaoying herself, local audiences prefer translated works, and singers who are not trained in the original languages of those librettos perform better in their native language.

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[2] Following the guidelines of Culture Secretary Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981), several Italian literary works were translated in the Fifties of the twentieth century, but from intermediate languages (English or Russian). Wen (2008, 215–216) quotes Zhu Weiji's translations from the English of the librettos of *Madama Butterfly* (1958) and *La Traviata* (1959). In 1962 he also translated the *Divina Commedia* and the *Decameron.* But his translations of the librettos have never been staged.

Revising the translation involves two phases: analysis of the translation in use—identifying signifiers and parts that were omitted or modified in previous translations—and reconstruction of identified parts within a new version. The first phase saw the involvement of the present writer, as translator in the two languages, and of the director, who pointed out the critical points. The second phase took place as a collaboration between the director, the singers, and the stage director, and had to be integrated with the musical score.

Maestro Zheng Xiaoying's involvement in the translation, apart from being aimed at improving the transmission of the narrative plot, was especially directed at conveying the "nuances" that bind the opera's characters—their inner world, and their psychological make-up—to the music.

2 The Translation Issue from a Historical Viewpoint

First of all, one must analyze the subject matter from a diachronic point of view, and enquire on how the tradition of translating Western literary works originated in China, and what this implies linguistically and inter-linguistically.

In China, translation projects in the years between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries developed under the influence of the intellectual political paradigm, which had among its adherents Yan Fu 严复 (1854–1921) and Lin Shu 林纾 (1852–1924), faithful to the principle of "Chinese knowledge as substance, Western knowledge for application."[3]

In 1898, Yan Fu framed the three founding principles of Chinese translation theory—to this day important reference points for translators at large—faithfulness (*xìn* 信), expressivity (*dá* 达), elegance (*yǎ* 雅).[4]

From this moment, Western cultural works elicited a deep and widespread interest in late nineteenth-century China, stimulating reactions to the intellectual and political crisis which permeated the last years of the Manchu empire.

Many of the young students who had participated to the study-abroad program, attending university courses in Japan, Germany, or France became translators of works they felt the need to introduce in the rapidly changing Chinese cultural scene. Translations were mainly mediated by a third language, especially Japanese. In the first years of the twentieth century, in the research of a literary dignity of the *báihuà*—the vernacular style—, Yan Fu and Lin Shu's translations in *wényán*—classical Chinese—contrasts with the ideas of the young intellectuals that, from 1915 onwards, had given birth to the New Culture Movement (*xīn wénhuà yùndòng* 新文化运动). The latter were inclined to experiment in literary works written in *báihuà*,

[3] *zhōngtǐ xīyòng* 中体西用.

[4] .Yan Fu introduced these cardinal principles in the foreword to his translation of T.H. Huxley's, *Evolution and Ethics* (1898). See Elizabeth Sinn, 1995 "Yan Fu" in Chan, Pollard 2001 (1995) *An Encyclopedia of Translation*, 429–447. Also Brezzi (ed.) 2008.

and to conceive new literary styles, free and unencumbered by the rigidity of the classical dogmas.[5]

Among these, Lu Xun (1881–1936) stands out both for his original productions and for his translations in the vernacular. Lu Xun and the other translators of the first 20 years of the twentieth century felt the need to find a language medium capable of making a text both accessible and enjoyable, and of stimulating the Chinese reader's interest (Lundberg, 1989; Pesaro and Pirazzoli 2019).[6] Likewise, in his 1922 translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Zhao Yuanren (Chao Yuen Ren) 赵元任 (1892–1982) non only used vernacular Chinese for the transfer of contents, but also paid special attention to the sounds of the original work's and to its extralinguistic aspects, for instance, Lewis Carrol's imaginary words (Chao 1976, 166–168).

That was the spirit of the times. Translators spoke to readers who were all literati, educated individuals who paid a great deal of attention to textual elegance and contents, but were frightfully few in numbers.[7] Literacy levels in the population at large was very low, and only 10% had access to written texts.

The opera, especially by means of its multimedia nature, was very well adapted to the purpose of conveying new and engaging meanings. In analyzing Chinese translations of opera librettos, one must keep in mind the three features that characterized the onset of western melodrama in China.

1. Innovations in language; the shift from *wényán* to *báihuà* was fluid and gradual, and for a long time admitted the presence of both variants within the same text.
2. Innovations in the arts: forms which had hitherto been considered "high" gave way to other forms of expression derived from folk culture and previously denied the full status of intellectual dignity. Within this process, different styles, dialogues, narrations, poetics, and music mixed and mingled.
3. Innovations in thought and ideas. The intent is that of involving a wider section of the population. The stimuli represented by the yet little-known West, seen as a passionate, optimistic representation of the world, were enthusiastically welcomed. Western culture—inasmuch as linked to the French Revolution and its ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, and awash with the populist, and nationalistic principles of latter-day romanticism—was seen, by some of the intellectuals of

[5]The drive for the adoption of *báihuà* became one of the banners of the New Culture Movement, but it had already begun in the second half of the nineteenth century. This variant of vernacular language derives from Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) operas (*huàběn* 话本), and had been used in novels written in the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1911 CE) periods.

[6]After his return from Japan, where he had studied from 1902 to 1909, Lu Xun dedicated himself mainly to a literary production for the spiritual betterment of the Chinese people. He developed a narrative style of his own and a straightforward literary language close to the common speech, thereby influencing the whole literary framework of the Chinese twentieth century. Please refer to Nicoletta Pesaro's contribution in this book.

[7]Men, for the most part; but during this period, the translation of foreign texts and the linguistic innovations in *baihua* also influenced the development of a literary production by female authors, among whom we may mention Ding Ling, Bing Xing, and Huang Luyin. (Goldman 1977; Biasco 1983; Hu 2000).

the day, as a window onto a new, young world, and conveyor of positive ideals for the birth of the nation.

In the following paragraph we will see how the translation of *La Traviata* is representative of an age, and how its contribution to operatic culture in China is both meaningful and important.

3 *La Traviata*: A Key to How Melodrama Entered China

The origins of the theatrical form of melodrama lie in nineteenth-century Italy, whence it spread all over Europe.[8] The genre's main characteristic is its widespread diffusion in a popular environment: born in the blooming season of bourgeois culture, it often represents the contrast between courtly life and that of the common people, thereby kindling in the souls of the public the fires of romantic culture and budding nationalism. The genre gained a fast foothold in Italy and thence spread in other European countries, where Italian librettos got translated and others written directly in various national languages. According to Minors 2012, the circulation of opera librettos in the beginning of the twentieth century was strictly linked to the ongoing development of national identities. Indeed, she writes that:

> In the late nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century, foreign elements of operas were essential either way: as exotic features of art allowing distancing from everyday customs and tradition, linguistically and culturally; and/or as ways of providing an international platform for visibility to national cultures in the making. (Minors 2012, 14)

In China, as we will see, Western opera arrived later, in the first half of the twentieth century, but the knowledge of themes and style-features of nineteenth-century bourgeois Italian melodrama was present already at the beginning of the last century, in a period of vast intellectual excitement and cultural renewal throughout China. *La Traviata* was the first Western opera to be performed in China in Chinese.

By what route did Piave's libretto take to land on a Chinese stage?

In nineteenth-century China, the influence of Italian culture was practically nil: attention for the West was primarily focused on Great Britain and on the United States; but between 1895 and 1910, an echo of Italian culture reached China through Japan. The Chinese intellectuals in Japan developed a keen interest in Italy, and contributed to spreading a positive image of Italian culture (Masini in Brizzi 2008, 198). In 1899, Lin Shu translated Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias* (1848) with the title *Bālí cháhuā nǚ yíshì* 巴黎茶花女遺事 [The Paris adventures of the Camellia lady]. His translation was several decades subsequent to Verdi's 1853 operatic composition of *La Traviata* on Piave's libretto, which also stemmed from the French novel.

The libretto was recast in Chinese with many adaptations and staged, of all places, in Japan in 1907. The author was Lǐ Shūtóng 李叔同, a.k.a. Hóng Yī 弘一 (1880–1942), an artist with a wild love for western music and founder in Tokyo of the

[8]We will not take into consideration here the earlier forms of melodrama, which had different stylistic features and social purposes.

Chunliu Opera Society (*Chūnliŭ shè* 春柳社) (Lee in Goldman 1977, p. 29). In 1956, with the collaboration of several Soviet musicians, Beijing's Tianqiao (*Tiānqiáo* 天桥) experimental theater staged the *Traviata* with lyrics translated by Miáo Lín 苗林 and Liú Shīróng 刘诗嵘 from Russian and English, but heavily influenced by Hong Yi's earlier work. It was the first time that a western opera was put on stage in Chinese (Chen and Shao 2011, 1–8). It was an indirect translation, inspired by the revolutionary and progressive spirit that characterized the panorama of Chinese translations of Western works in the 1950s (Wen 2008, 215–216). In the ten years that followed, *La Traviata* was performed many times in China, but not between 1966 and 1978. Conductor Zhèng Xiǎoyīng remembers that in those years musicians and opera singers had no chance to put their western-opera artistic skills to work. Thanks to the collaboration of an American conductor, a woman, the opera was once again staged in 1978—for the first time in 28 years—in the auditorium of a factory on the outskirts of Beijing, for a public of factory workers. These were used to attend popular theater shows in total relaxation, munching on snacks and chatting among themselves; but faced with the grandeur of that tragic love story, they were immediately fascinated, and a dead silence fell upon the public. This is what the tenor who played the leading role of Alfredo in the 1978 show remembers. And then, having passed the scrutiny of the factory workers, *La Traviata* became the first opera, in all of contemporary China, to be subject to analysis for the purpose of a staging according to the Western operatic style. Zhèng Xiǎoyīng, in the Beijing National Opera Theater put it again on stage after a meticulous study of the opera's characters, its music, and a first revision of the translation. Subsequently, she kept on adding revisions to the libretto, until 2011 when in Xiamen she staged the latest Chinese revision, a version she had worked on personally to make the lyrics fit the music and the rhythm better, and make the whole opera more suitable—that is, "comprehensible" and engaging—to a Chinese public.

In 2018, Zheng Xiaoying felt the need to involve a bilingual expert to check out the version, and correct errors in the translation which had led to misunderstandings, both at the textual and co-textual level. This is how the current re-translation came about; it has therefore taken on the characteristics of a focused study, raising the following queries:

1. What translation issues may be the object of negotiation on the part of experts involved in re-translation (translator, conductor)?
2. What components of the language-message must be mandatorily conveyed in the new Chinese text, and what kind of "freedom" may the translator grant the musicologist?

4 Language Transfer and *Intentio Operis*

The translation contained errors, at various levels. The most obvious appeared already in the first act, when Gastone introduces Alfredo to Violetta and says to her:

Egra foste, e ogni dì con affanno qui volò, di voi chiese.

You were ill, and every day he flew here in anguish, and asked about you.

The sentence implies that Violetta, in her illness, is staying at home, and that Alfredo, unbeknownst to her, visits the house to get news of her. But the Chinese version, after many manipulations, comes out like this:

你在医院里养病的时候他每天送来花

Nǐ zài yīyuànli yǎngbìngde shíhòu tā měi tiān sòng lái huā

While you were in the hospital, he'd send flowers every day.

This is a semantic error, and should obviously be corrected. But what caused the "error"? In our opinion, this flaw bears the burden of an enthusiastic and optimistic viewpoint, a positive ideal that the then-translator was expressing with regard to Western society.[9] A sick person, in Violetta's world, would certainly receive treatment in a hospital, and not at home. This is a language-transfer error that allows the *intentio operis*,[10] the work's intent, to seep through, i.e., the meaning of importing the operatic genre into China.

Next, we will focus on the scenic adaptation of the duet in the 5th scene of the second act; it allows a quantitative appraisal of the ratio of Chinese vs. Italian, and elucidates an aspect which at first might appear to be strident from the point of view of translation rendering: the insertion of "new" expressions and the relocation of information within the text. It will be seen how such insertions are actually necessary in the light of the multimedia nature of the lyrics.

Violetta and Germont, Alfredo's father, have decided, without Alfredo knowing, that she will find an excuse to leave him, so as to mend his sister's reputation, damaged by the disgrace of her brother's relationship with a woman of low social status and little moral virtue. In the 2011 revision, Zheng, when weighing out the connection between the verbal part (libretto) and the musical one (score), had worked on the basis of a "one note/one syllable/one word" correspondence, and on the expression of the two contrasting worlds the characters belong to. Violetta conveys the tragedy and suffering of the moment in which she realizes she'll never see her loved one again; Germont emerges triumphant and full of self-conceit, knowing that he's secured, first of all, a moral victory for his and his family's well-being, but also a personal achievement, where a man's superiority over a woman (he stands over the female character, who remains sitting) as well as his social class (he's a nobleman, she is low-born) are brought to the fore (Table 1).

The first obvious aspect is how Chinese uses more words to render the same musical piece: the Italian text has 28 words, while the Chinese one uses 54.

In the original Italian, the melodic effect is brought about by the greater number of vowels, and through the use of polysyllabic words, at times formed through "creative" juxtapositions in the morphology.

[9]This observation is shared with other analyzes of translations from the 1950s, among which Wen in Brezzi 2008.

[10]I refer here to Eco 2003.

Table 1 Act 2, Scene 1

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Violetta: Dite alla giovine ~ sì bella e pura ch'avvi una vittima ~ della sventura, cui resta un unico ~ raggio di bene… che a lei il sacrifica ~ e che morrà! (*repeated twice*) Violetta: *Tell that young maiden ~ so beautiful and pure/That there's a victim of sorrow ~ who has only one ray of goodness left…/And that she will sacrifice it to her ~ and that she'll die*	薇: 1.我请你告诉她, 那纯洁的姑娘, 一颗孤独的心布满着创伤, 为了她的幸福, 我牺牲了仅有的希望, 生命已值不得我再留恋, 前途就是死亡! 2. 我求你告诉她, 那纯洁的姑娘, 一颗孤独的心布满者创伤, 为了她的幸福, 我牺牲了仅有的希望, 生命已值不得我再留恋, 前途就是死亡 (*she adds*) 死亡能为我解脱痛苦! (*repeated twice*) 前途绝望, 前途绝望, 离开人间才能得到安详!	1. Please, say to that pure young woman (that there is) a broken lonely heart. For her happiness, I've sacrificed all hope, life will never bring me love again, in my future there is naught but death 2. I beseech you, say to that pure young woman (that there is) a lonely wounded heart. For her happiness I've sacrificed all hope, life will never bring me love again, in my future there is naught but death Death will free me from sorrow! (*repeated twice*) My future is hopeless, hopeless; only by leaving this world shall I find comfort

The Chinese language uses mono-phonemic and mono-morphemic words, with a single vowel or diphthong. The translated text therefore needs a higher number of words than the Italian one, where the words are longer, have more vowels, and have wider prosodic extensions than the Chinese ones. Moreover, as the (Chinese) syllable is the minimal meaningful unit, indivisible and unmodifiable, it is not possible to represent each word with variations in the standard form; but one can elaborate shades of meaning using synonyms and less common polyrhemic constructions. In translation, the possibility—often adopted by operatic Italian—of creating new sounds, and resorting to lofty, ad hoc expressions that make the text "exotic," i.e., distant from common speech, is practically nil. In this piece, a notable example is the (ungrammatical) expression *ch'avvi* ("that one has" = "that there is") coined by the author especially for this text, and most probably not to be found elsewhere in other communication contexts.

The morphological characteristics of the Chinese language justify, in the translation, the insertion of many repetitions. Eschewed in Italian, they are not so in Chinese; we might add that these repetitions are—borrowing Jacobson's terminology—*phatic*: that is to say, they are meant to keep the listener's attention aligned with the music. In other words, they make the lyrics fit the tune.

Even if the correspondence at the semantic level is not complete, the central role played by correspondence with the music, together with the intrinsic characteristics of the Chinese language, allow us to consider this translation successful at the multimedia level.

Table 2 Act 2, Scene 1

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Germont Piangi, piangi, piangi, o misera… ~ supremo, il veggo, è il sacrifizio ~ ch'or io ti chieggo… Sento nell'anima ~ già le tue pene… coraggio e il nobile ~ cor vincerà *Cry, cry, cry, you poor thing… supreme, I see, is the sacrifice I now ask of you. In my soul, I already feel your grief … be brave, and the noble heart shall prevail*	1. 哭吧, 哭吧, 哭吧,可怜的人, 哭吧, 眼泪能给你安慰。眼泪能治疗痛苦和伤悲 (repeated twice)。 离别的痛苦, 我都能体会, 这样的牺牲是多么可贵, 是多么可贵 2. 眼泪给你安慰 (repeated twice) 眼泪能治好痛苦和伤悲, 离别的痛苦啊,我都能体会, 这样的牺牲是多么可贵。哭吧, 哭吧, 哭吧, 可怜的人, 这样的牺牲是多么可贵! 哭吧, 哭吧, 哭吧, 可怜的人, 痛苦将随着时间消亡, 请相信我的话, 那一切痛苦将随着时间消亡	1. Cry, cry, cry, you poor thing, cry, tears can comfort you Tears can heal sorrow and grief. (*repeated twice*) In the sorrow of separation I can feel the nobleness of this sacrifice, the nobleness of it 2. May tears bring you comfort. (*repeated twice*) Tears may heal sorrow and grief In the pain of separation I can feel the nobleness of this sacrifice Cry, cry, cry, you poor thing, this sacrifice is so noble! Cry, cry, cry, poor thing sorrow will vanish with time, I beg you, believe my words, with time all sorrows shall vanish

In the following section we will consider other points that may appear as faults from a linguistic standpoint, but effective from a textual standpoint. The following piece brings to light how the translation is functional at rendering the musical impact of the opera. It also sheds light on the translation strategies used for transferring the *intentio operis* (Table 2).

Insertions stand out here, i.e., additions of sentences that neither add nor subtract to the meaning of the narration, but have the purpose of adapting the lyrics to the music.

眼泪能给你安慰 *Yǎnlèi néng gěi nǐ ānwèi*	tears can comfort you
眼泪能治疗痛苦和伤悲 *Yǎnlèi néng zhìliáo tòngkǔ hé shāngbēi*	tears can heal sorrow and grief.

And this insertion is particularly functional to rendering the music, as the two lines, rhymed in Chinese, follow the course of the score and its rhythm: even the placement of vowels favor the singer's enunciation.

The same may be said for the relocation of information clusters within the sentence: *kěguì* 可贵, the expression that indicates the nobleness of Violetta's *cor,* "heart," is attributed to her "sacrifice" and replaced the end of the sentence. Moreover, some parts that have been "sacrificed" in the name of musical modulation: we may highlight here the expression *ch'io chieggo* ("that/which I ask") that in the Italian

version puts the blame of the sacrifice on Alfredo's father Germont. This is not made explicit in the Chinese version, but in the second repetition he asks Violetta to believe his words:

请相信我的话 *Qǐng xiāngxìn wǒde huà*	I beg you, believe my words

This last phrase is absent in the original but is aptly located in terms of the duet's musicality. The original lyrics and their translation in the target language may not overlap, but this strategy is a well-wrought "stage performing effect."[11]

As far as language register is concerned, the translation uses a colloquial form of speech, much more intelligible than Piave's, which has all the characteristics of nineteenth-century librettos. According to Fabio Rossi (2018), the Italian opera libretto:

> *ha una sua immediata riconoscibilità, per l'elevato tasso di forme desuete, antirealistiche e le* oscure contorsioni sintattiche*".*
>
> is immediately recognisable for the high rate of its obsolete, counterintuitive forms and *obscure syntactic contortions.* (Rossi 2018, 67)

The more libretto-language diverges from common speech—Rossi goes on to say—the higher its effectiveness. It displays

> *preferenza per forme fonetiche e morfologiche arcaiche, alla selezione di un lessico aulico, all'ordine delle parole caratterizzato da spezzatura e inversioni (iperbati), scarso peso dato all'agentività del soggetto, alla manipolazione della transitività verbale, all'ellissi, o viceversa, alla ridondanza di forme pronominali.*
>
> a proclivity for archaic phonetic and morphological forms, for selecting a high-prose vocabulary, for resorting to broken up word-orders and inversions (hyperbaton), for scarce attention to [grammatical] subject agency, for manipulating the transitivity of verbs, for ellipsis, or—vice versa—for redundancy in pronominal forms (Rossi 2018, 67)

The Chinese translation, on the other hand, is penned in a straightforward, vernacular language, with many repetitions, few synonyms, and little use for figurative speech. Piave's *raggio di bene,* "ray of goodness," remains untranslated. The Italian libretto's author constantly seeks equivalent synonymic expressions, draws from a high vocabulary register, is quite partial to contracted constructions in phonetics and morphology (ellipsis, exchange of consonants or vowels, like in *cor*, *sacrifizio*), to vowel endings that follow the course of the music (*io avea*), semantic contractions, allotropic verbal forms (*veggo, chieggo*), and invented forms borrowed from a high-register vocabulary, but concentrating meanings derivable only from that specific libretto-context.

This may be gleaned also from the following excerpt, taken from the fifth scene of the first act, where, in the Chinese version, the condensed meaning and lexical invention contained in the expression *le egre soglie* ("sick thresholds") is not conveyed. In this case, there is no mention of Violetta's sickness; what remains is a shade of warmth and vitality (Table 3).

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[11] Wang 2013 in http://translationjournal.net/journal/65hamlet.htm.

Table 3 Act 1, Scene 5

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Lui che modesto e vigile ~ all'egre soglie ascese, e nuova febbre accese ~ destandomi all'amor. *He who, modest and attentive/came up to my sick thresholds/and kindled a new fever/awakening me to love*	我记得你明亮的眼光, 你说话热情奔放, 使我的心情欢畅	I remember your shining glance, your kind and unrestrained speech, which made my soul leap with joy

In this passage, *febbre (*"fever"*)* and *destandomi* ("awakening me") are rendered by *rèqíng* 热情 ("kind," "warm," "passionate"), *bēnfàng* 奔放 ("unrestrained"), *huānchàng* 欢畅 ("jubilant," "excited"). Thus, the general meaning of the sentence gets "reinterpreted" with enhanced attention to the categories of *da* (expressivity) and *ya* (elegance), to the detriment of *xin* ("faithfulness")—going back once more to Yan Fu's categories. In other terms, it would seem permissible to detect here—in this choice of translation pointed in the direction of functionality (*skopos* theory) (Reiß and Vermeer 2014 [1984]; Vermeer 2000)—what Chao defined as a "functional" (rather than semantic) "faithfulness" (Chao 1976,149): the choice of retaining some identifying textual signs, by transferring them into semantic clusters or to a different paratextual level, furthers a positive outcome in the stage performance.

Moreover, as we have already seen, adhering to a straightforward register responds to the cultural context of the historical moment in which the work was introduced to China.

5 The Sociolinguistic Aspect

The transposition of hierarchical relationships of the various characters reflects the concept of society current in the translator's times. In the original Italian libretto, verbal expression between characters does not exhibit sociolinguistically symmetric dyadic exchanges; on the contrary, the relationships among the speakers are marked by expressions that clearly point out a social hierarchy: among friends, the pronoun of address is "*voi,*" as was common at the time, and servants use formulas of respect when speaking to their masters. In the Chinese version, however, the use of pronominal referents reveals an optimistic vision of social relationships in twentieth-century French high society parlors: an ideal of parity among the characters, who are seen as individuals in a society of equals. In fact, sociolinguistic differentiations seem to cancel out in the Chinese translation. In literary Chinese tradition, interpersonal relationships are indeed linguistically marked by pronominal referents functional to the representation of a society with well-defined hierarchies. Characters do not call each other by names, but use pronouns that always reflect the social interplay among

speakers. But in the translation of the libretto, there is an extensive use of the familiar *nǐ* 你 form for "you," whereas the more formal *nín* 您 is completely absent. Here are some excerpts from the second and third acts (Tables 4 and 5).

Furthermore (Tables 6 and 7).

In Italian, the lines exchanged between Violetta and Annina constitute an asymmetric interaction, and bring out social inequality: Violetta uses the "*tu*" with Annina, whereas Annina addresses Violetta as well as all other characters with "*voi.*" Violetta feels pity for Annina ("Were you sleeping, you poor thing?"). In the Chinese interactions, everyone uses the informal form for "you," and there are no titles of courtesy.

Table 4 Act 2, Scene 2

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Alfredo: Donde vieni? Annina: Da Parigi Alfredo: Chi te'l commise? Annina: Fu la mia signora. *Alfredo: Whence did you get here?"* *Annina: "From Paris".* *Alfredo: "On whose orders?".* *Annina: "'Twas my lady's"*	阿: 阿尼娜,你从哪里来? 仆: 从巴黎来 阿: 谁叫你来的 仆: 我的小姐叫我	Alfredo: Annina, where did you get here from? Maid: From Paris Alfredo: Who called you here? Maid: My missy

Table 5 Act 2, Scene 2

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Alfredo: Or vanne… andrò a Parigi…Questo colloquio ignori la signora… Il tutto valgo a riparare ancora… *Alfredo: "Now be gone hence…I shall go to Paris…Your lady must not know of this conversation… I can still set everything right"*	阿: 我现在立刻去巴黎, 但是你不要将这事告诉小姐, 让我来帮她度过当前的困难	Alfredo: I shall go to Paris immediately. But don't tell your missy anything, let me help her overcome these difficulties

Table 6 Act 2, Scene 6

Annina: Mi richiedeste? Violetta: Sì, reca tu stessa questo foglio *Annina: "Did you [*formal*] call for me".* *Violetta: "Yes, you yourself [*informal*] deliver this piece of paper"*	仆: 是你叫我吗? 薇: 是, 把这封信给男爵送去	Maid: Did you call for me? Violetta: Yes, take this letter to the baron

Table 7 Act 3, Scene 1

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Violetta: Annina?… Annina: Comandate? Violetta: Dormivi, poveretta? Annina: Si, perdonate… Violetta: Dammi d'acqua un sorso. (Annina eseguisce). *Violetta: "Annina?…".* *Annina: "Yes, madam?".* *Violetta: "Were you sleeping, you poor thing?".* *Annina: "Yes, madam, forgive me".* *Violetta: "Give me some water. A sip"* *(Annina complies)*	薇: 阿尼纳! 仆: (醒来) 我在这里 薇: 亲爱的,你太累. 仆: 不,请你原谅. 薇: 请你倒杯水来. (仆为薇倒水)	Violetta: Annina! Maid: (waking up) Here I am! Violetta: Dear, you're too tired! Maid: No, forgive me Violetta: "Bring me a glass of water, please." (maid pours water for Violetta)

Violetta uses terms of endearment for her maid (she calls her here *qīn'àide* 亲爱的, "dear," a term which implies a closeness that does not surface in the original. In these exchanges, Annina is labeled "housemaid" *pū* 仆, even if everybody calls her "Annina" *Ānínà* 阿尼纳. In Italian, Annina refers to Violetta as "my lady," but in Chinese she's *wǒde xiǎojiě* 我的小姐. Alfredo, too, when speaking of Violetta to the maid, refers to her as "lady" in Italian and *xiǎojiě* 小姐 in Chinese.

One must remark here that *xiǎojiě* is an epithet that in pre-modern times was used to indicate prostitutes, dancers, or hostelry serving girls; but in the twentieth century it was used for young unmarried women, and to translate the English term "Miss"; like "Miss," it is always followed by the person's name, without a name it is used to call waitresses or salesgirls.[12] Therefore, the way in which Violetta's maid uses it here with regard to her "lady" is incorrect, because it exhibits an ideal of social equality that is absent in the original text. From this choice of translation filters the spirit of the times in which the Chinese text was composed, and this is a common occurrence in other contemporary translations of foreign texts (Wen 2008). In the 1950s, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, an ideal of equality of gender and class was being widely proposed; thus, linguistically, the use of pronominal titles was leveled out toward more symmetrical sociolinguistic forms of address than in the past. This is the period in which, in "high literature" contexts, the use of the personal pronouns "*wǒ*," "*nǐ*" "*tā*," introduced in the 1920s, became widespread. In the 50s, the feminine third-person pronoun *tā* 她 became mandatory: gender was thus marked only in the grapheme, where the radical element corresponding to *rén* 人, "non-gendered marked person" was substituted with that for "woman," *nǚ* 女. The same sort of process is ongoing today in the non-simplified script (*fántǐzì*) used

[12]This form of address is mainly used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South China, and in the North it is increasingly frequent.

in Taiwan and Hong Kong: the second person pronoun, *nǐ* 你, is gender re-marked as 妳: the pronunciation is the same, but the character is once again written with the female-gender component *nǚ* 女, especially in song lyrics and in transcriptions of the jargon of the younger generations.

As a consequence, in the matter at hand, modifications were applied to the text in order to better reflect the sociolinguistic aspects. Thus, in the latest revision, *xiǎojiě* has been changed to *fūrén* 夫人, "lady," a term of respect that brings out the social disparity between Annina and Violetta. Moreover, in the lines, it was deemed necessary to introduce the courtesy term *nín* 您 for "you," which is commonly used in today's spoken Chinese.

6 The Feast in France in the First Half of the Nineteenth-Century

The first act begins with a party/feast in which the guests arrive late, after having lingered at Flora's home. They all urge each other to have fun and enjoy the party. The atmosphere is genial, and the all-around glee is steeped in abundant quantities of wine. Though mirth is marred by the spectre of Violetta's illness, she intends to enjoy the moment and not linger on her troubles. In this context, Violetta and Alfredo are introduced for the first time.

We shall now take a look at the expressions used by the Italian author and the Chinese translator, and point out the different modes of constructing the festive event in the original and in the target texts (Table 8).

The translation of this passage drifts away from the expressions used in the Italian lyrics: first, one can see an excessive use of the term "pleasure/joy," *huānlè* 欢乐, repeated all of four times here. In the original, for Violetta pleasure/joy is the medicine that helps her get over her ills, but this similitude is lost in the Chinese.

Piave uses eight different expressions to describe the event and establishes a festive atmosphere, without ever repeating any of them: *gioia, viva, festa, goder, piacere, i mali sopir, vita, gioir.* One adjective, two verbs, four nouns, and one idiomatic expression (*i mali sopir*). In the translation, thirteen expressions are found, but one word has been repeated six times; we have: *huānyíng* 欢迎 (one occurrence), *huānlè* 欢乐 (six occ.), *jiànkāng* 健康 (three occ.), *jīngshén hǎo* 精神好 (one occ.), *jìnqíng* 尽情 (one occ.). We find here one noun (*huānlè* 欢乐), one verb phrase (*huānyíng* 欢迎), one adjective (*jiànkāng* 健康), one adverb (*jìnqíng* 尽情), one adjectival phrase (*jīngshén hǎo* 精神好).

The original exhibits considerable verbal chiaroscuro, alternating terms for joy and sorrow. In the Chinese, this is not brought out. The task is therefore one of realignment of the translation, conveying these nuances in a more effective way. But this operation must be in synch with the modulation of the music, which is very quick-paced here: it must be therefore carried out by the conductor working with the singers, and this is considered necessary to rendering the general sense in translation.

Table 8 Act 1, Scene1

Italian original	Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of the Chinese
Violetta: Flora, amici, la notte che resta d'altre gioie qui fate brillar… fra le tazze è più viva la festa… Flora e Marchese: E goder voi potrete? Violetta: Lo voglio; al piacere m'affido, ed io soglio col tal farmaco i mali sopir Tutti: Sì, la vita s'addoppia al gioir. *Violetta: "Flora, friends, make what's left of the night shine here with other joys…amongst cups the feast is more lively"* *Flora and Marquis: "And will you be able to enjoy?"* *Violetta "I want to; I commend myself to pleasure, and with this drug am wont to sooth my ills".* *All: "Yes, by rejoicing does life redouble*"	薇: 弗洛拉, 朋友们, 欢迎你们来到! 我们大家尽情欢乐, 快把欢乐的酒杯斟满了 弗, 侯: 不妨碍你的健康? 薇: 不要紧. 只有欢乐使我精神好, 只有欢乐使我身体健康 众: 对, 欢乐使我们更愉快	Violetta: Flora, friends, welcome! Let us all be merry as we please, quick, fill your cups with the wine of joy! Flora and Marquis: will this not impair your health? Violetta: Don't worry. Joy makes me feel good, Joy is good for my health All: Yes, joy makes us happier

7 Translation as a Vehicle for (Un)Shared Knowledge

Between the source and the target texts, one often incurs in a misalignment between translational knowledge bases (Mazzoleni and Menin 2011, 3). In our libretto, this emerges when, in the dialogues, one finds references to information relevant to mythology, folk-lore, and geography, amply shared by the European cultural milieu of the nineteenth century, but little-known in China at the time of the earliest translations. In the first act, Violetta, while pouring wine to her guests, compares herself to a goddess of the Greek pantheon: Sarò l'Ebe che versa, "In pouring, I shall be Hebe." In the Chinese lyrics this appears as:

现在让我来斟酒 *Xiànzài ràng wǒ lái zhēn jiǔ*	Let me now pour the wine

This is a "domesticating translation," according to the categories elaborated, among others, by Venuti (1995): an evasive strategy, due to the fact that most probably neither the translator nor—even more probably—the readers were familiar with the figure of Hebe, daughter of Zeus and Hera, who in Olympus was charged with filling the cups of the gods with nectar and ambrosia.

The second act offers several opportunities for this analysis, where an important part of the opera describes the scene of the gypsy-girls' ball.

Noi siamo zingarelle venute da lontano
d'ognuno sulla mano leggiamo l'avvenir.
Young gipsy girls are we, come from afar
We read the future on everybody's palm.

In Chinese this is translated as: (Table 9)

Table 9 Act 2, Scene 10

Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of Chinese
有谁想知道命运, *Yǒu sheí xiǎng zhīdào mìngyùn* 快来找茨风姑娘 *Kuài lái zhǎo Cǐfēng gūniang* 让我们看看手心, *Ràng wǒmen kànkan shǒuxīn* 就给你说端详 *Jiù gěi nǐ shuō duānxiang*	He who would want to know his destiny, let him quickly come to us, the young *cifeng* girls. Let us read your palm, we'll tell you everything in detail

Cǐfēng 茨风 is the now-obsolete Chinese term for "Gipsy," and it comes from a phonetic transcription of the Russian term Цыганы (Cygany),[13] whereas the term used today is a phonetic loan from the English "Gypsy," i.e., *Jípǔsài* 吉普赛 or *Jíbǔsài* 吉卜赛.

Besides the fact that it fits well with the modulation, keeping the expression *cifeng* is a noteworthy choice; according to Venuti's categories, it would be *estraniante,* "foreignizing"—thus, it fulfills various translation goals:

1. It has a historical origin that befits the time in which the opera was introduced in China;
2. It expresses the spirit that inspired the *intentio operis* of the translation: making society's outcasts rise on the stage of art;
3. Inasmuch as it is now obsolete, it represents an exotic term that reflects the character of operatic Italian.
4. It improves the flow of the lyrics.

Among the items that belong to a corpus of (un)shared knowledge are the matadors (*mattadori* in the Italian text), and the relevant geographical information on Spain. In the chorus of the Gastone and the *mattadori,* the "Feast of the Fattened Ox," is mentioned, but this is untranslated in the Chinese:

Di Madride noi siam mattadori,
siamo i prodi del circo de' tori,

[13]This is the term used in the translation of Pushkin's 1824 narrative poem *The Gipsies*. The work gained the interest of Qu Qiubai (1899–1935), one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, who had studied in the Moscow, at the Institute for Foreign Languages. Qu published a partial translation in the poetry journal *Wǔyuè* in 1937, and then again in a pamphlet, Shanghai, 1939. The complete version was published in 1939 by the People's Publishing House (*Rénmín wénxué Chūbǎnshè*) in Beijing.

testé giunti a godere del chiasso
che a Parigi si fa pe'l bue grasso.
We are the matadors from Madrid
We are the gallants from the bull-circus,
who have come here to enjoy the commotion
they stir up in Paris for the Fattened Ox.

In Chinese, we have: (Table 10)

Table 10 Act 2, Scene 11

斗牛的勇士从马德里来到, *Dǒu niúde yǒngshì cóng Mǎdélǐ lái dào* 战胜公牛不知有多少条。 *Zhànshèng gōngniú bù zhī yǒu duōshao tiáo* 斗牛的英雄我们天下扬名, *Dǒu niúde yīngxióng wǒmen tiānxià yángmíng* 我们知道一件奇怪事情, *Wǒmen zhīdào yí jiàn qíguài shìqíng* 喂小姐,你们如要想听, *Wèi xiǎojiě, nǐmen rù yào xiǎng tīng* 我们就给你听听. *Wǒmen jiù kěyǐ gěi nǐ tīngting*	The matadors have come from Madrid, who knows how many bulls they have conquered in the fight! The whole world knows the fame of the bullfight heroes. We know a curious tale: hey girls, if you want to hear it, we can tell it to you

Whereas the term matadors *mattadori* is rendered with a semantic loan (*dǒu niúde yǒngshì* 斗牛的勇士, literally "the gallants who fight bulls"), the whole sentence that refers to the "fattened ox" (*giunti a godere del chiasso che a Parigi si fa pe'l bue grasso*), that is to say, to Mardi Gras, is eliminated and replaced with an invitation to listen, an anticipatory formula that belongs to the style-repertoire of the traditional novel and theater ("We know a curious tale: hey girls, if you want to hear it, we can tell it to you.").

In this specific case, one feels no need to revise the translation; rather, this passage may be singled out as an example of virtuous translation, inasmuch as it is performance-wise effective, despite it having had to "sacrifice"… the "fattened ox"!

In the following instance, however, the need for revising the translation is felt, because of the obsolescence of the domesticating translation: the evasive strategy, which made sense at the time of the first translation, is now obsolete. It appears in the latter part of the same scene, again with Gastone and the chorus of the matadors:

È Piquillo un bel gagliardo biscaglino mattador:
forte il braccio, fiero il guardo, delle giostre egli è signor.
D'andalusa giovinetta follemente innamorò;
Piquillo is a strapping matardor from Biscay:

his arm is strong, his eyes are bold, he's the master of the fray.
He fell madly in love with an Andalusian maiden;

Piquillo is translated *Bǐkāiluó* 比开罗, that is to say, a phonetic rendering that fits well with the music; but all geographical references have been wiped out, both the *bel gagliardo biscaglino* and the *andalusa giovinetta.* At the time when the first translation was executed, the locations of Biscay and Andalusia were unknown; today, on the other hand, Andalusia (*Āndálǔxīyà* 安达鲁西亚) is one of the preferred locations of Chinese tourism in Europe, and the Gulf of Biscay (*Bǐsīkāi wān*比斯开湾) has found a solid place in the knowledge-base of many present and future Chinese opera lovers.

In this case, therefore, effacing the two geographical references gives rise to an obsolete domesticating translation, and brings about the loss of elements of "color" which are important to the original text.

We can see an instance of domesticating translation also in the following case. Flora, one of the female characters, is courting the Marquis; she says:

La volpe lascia il pelo,
non abbandona il vizio.
Marchese mio, giudizio,
o vi farò pentir.
A fox may lose its fur
But won't give up its vices.
O Marquis mine, behave yourself,
Or I'll make you repent.

And the Chinese translation is: (Table 11)

In this case, the Italian expression "*la volpe lascia il pelo, non abbandona il vizio,*" an adaptation of the adagio "*il lupo perde il pelo ma non il vizio*" ("a wolf may lose his fur but not his vice," i.e., "a leopard cannot change his spots"), has not given rise to a search for an equivalent through a similar Chinese saying, whether through *chéngyǔ*, (catch phrase), or *yànyǔ* (proverb) (Lei in Brezzi 2008; Moratto 2010, 2020). The translation is bent on expressing the contrast between the two characters, but the meaning is modified. In the Italian text, Flora hints at the vice of unfaithfulness that

Table 11 Act 2, Scene 10

Chinese translation	Interlinear translation of Chinese text
凡事都有个限度, *Fánshì dōu yǒu ge xiàndù* 我的忍耐也有尽头, *Wǒde rěnnài yě yǒu jìntóu* 侯爵啊你要当心, *Hóujué ā nǐ yào dāngxīn* 当心我报复你! *Dāngxīn wǒ bàofu nǐ!*	There's a limit to everything, even my patience will run out, oh, Marquis, rest assured, assured that I'll get back at you

the Marquis is prone to, on which she has no intention of lowering her guard; in the Chinese one she puts up with betrayal, but only up to a point.

8 Conclusion

Many are the points of attention that come into play in a translation of a multimedia text like an opera libretto. Aspects relevant to language, music, and performance, all indissolubly interlaced, require one to operate a selection of the linguistic and extralinguistic information that gets transferred into the target language.

The problems, as we have seen, are:

1. Semantic features that nullify the passage of information;
2. Misalignment of semantic nuances in transmission;
3. Misalignment of linguistic registers in the two languages;
4. Lack of sociolinguistic references and historicized declarative knowledge.

Lü Jia, who studied under Zheng Xiaoying, and was formerly Art Director in Italian opera theaters like the Arena of Verona (today, he is Art Director of the National Center for the Performing Arts), has stated in various interviews that he prefers staging operas in the original language: according to him, the linguistic complexity of Italian librettos is not reproducible in Chinese. Should we then refrain from translating opera librettos altogether?

Maestro Zheng is of the opposite opinion. As we have seen, translation may transmit information conducive to the creation of a highly effective performance on stage, for a public who wishes to know and enjoy the cultural elements of an opera. On stage, knowing the language of the lyrics allows singers to improve their performing skills, in terms of expressivity and ease of pronunciation of familiar sounds.

Granted, transposing Italian melodrama on the Chinese stage is an arduous undertaking, because of the former's specific nature and highly defined styles; however, it also responds to a challenge that a collaboration between translator and musicians are able to meet, to the satisfaction of all.

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