



A Comparative Study of Zhu Shenghao's and Liang Shiqiu's Translations of *Hamlet* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Kewei Qian

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China
Email: quilla2026@163.com

How to cite this paper: Qian, K.W. (2026) A Comparative Study of Zhu Shenghao's and Liang Shiqiu's Translations of *Hamlet* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e15784. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115784>

Received: July 20, 2026

Accepted: August 11, 2026

Published: August 14, 2026

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Abstract

Skopos theory provides the theoretical framework for a comparative study of two canonical Chinese translations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, namely those by Zhu Shenghao and Liang Shiqiu. Working from the same source text, the two translators produced different versions, a divergence attributable to their distinct translational purposes, shaped by differing historical contexts, target audiences, and cultural missions. Zhu Shenghao, translating during the War of Resistance, aimed to popularize Western classics among the general Chinese readership; he predominantly adopted domestication, recreating puns and toning down vulgar expressions to ensure readability and stage performance, with priority given to intratextual coherence. Liang Shiqiu, engaged in a long-term academic project, sought to produce a scholarly reference edition; his translation favors foreignization, preserving cultural proper names, linguistic ambiguities, and Elizabethan vernacular, with primary commitment to intertextual coherence and textual fidelity. Through comparative analysis of cultural imagery, puns, and vulgar language in selected passages, translation purpose is shown to determine strategy selection. The complementary coexistence of Zhu's version and Liang's version enriches *Hamlet's* Chinese reception, confirming the explanatory power of Skopos theory in evaluating literary translations with divergent social functions. This also offers a valuable lesson for the current retranslation boom.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Hamlet, Zhu Shenghao, Liang Shiqiu, Skopos Theory

1. Introduction

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. Since Tian Han pioneered its translation into vernacular Chinese in 1921, more than ten complete Chinese translations have been published in China, among which the translations by Zhu Shenghao and Liang Shiqiu are the two most frequently discussed.

There has been considerable academic discussion regarding the differences between Zhu's and Liang's translations. Early research primarily focused on comparisons of linguistic style and translation strategies. With the cultural turn in translation studies, scholars have begun to examine the historical and cultural factors underlying these differences. For example, Wang Zhen (2010) analyzed the translators' distinctive styles from the perspective of translator's subjectivity [1]; Xie Shijian and Zhao Jie (2018) employed polysystem theory to investigate the influence of historical and cultural contexts [2]; and Li Weifang (2011) traced two patterns in the reception history of Shakespeare in China [3]. At the level of close textual analysis, Zhou Ye (2008) explored translation strategies for puns and the limits of translatability [4], while Hu Kaibao and Zhu Yifan (2008) conducted a corpus-based quantitative study of explicitation in Zhu's and Liang's translations [5].

While Zhu Jingwen (2021) has previously applied Skopos theory to the comparative study of *Hamlet* translations, the present paper builds on this theoretical foundation by focusing more specifically on three strategic dimensions, cultural imagery, puns, and vulgar language, to conduct a comparative analysis of the strategic differences between Zhu Shenghao's and Liang Shiqiu's translations, and to discuss the causes of these differences in light of the translators' respective translation purposes [6].

2. Theoretical Framework and Historical Contexts of the Two Translations

The Skopos theory was proposed by German scholar Hans J. Vermeer in the 1970s. Its tenet is that the primary factor in the translation process is the overall purpose of a translation act. This theory comprises three major principles: the skopos principle serves as the highest rule; the intratextual coherence principle requires that the translation be fluent and acceptable to the target readers; and the intertextual coherence principle requires that the translation maintain logical correspondence with the source text. Both the intratextual and intertextual coherence principles are subordinate to the skopos principle, and their application standards can be flexibly adjusted according to the specific purpose in question [7]. Within this theoretical framework, translation is a cross-cultural practice grounded in the context of the target language, directed at a specific audience, and aimed at fulfilling a specific function.

Zhu Shenghao began translating Shakespeare in 1935, a decision deeply influenced by the national crisis of the time. At that time, it was widely believed among intellectuals that translating and introducing Western classics was the path to re-

vitalizing Chinese culture, and Zhu Shenghao was no exception. In a letter to Song Qingru, he wrote: “Do you admire national heroes? My younger brother says I will become a national hero if I succeed in translating Shakespeare.” [8] In his “Translator’s Preface,” Zhu Shenghao further elaborated on his translation philosophy: “My primary aim in translating this work is to preserve the spirit and charm of the original to the greatest extent possible; when this is unavoidably impossible, I will use clear and lucid language to faithfully convey the original’s meaning and flavor; however, I do not endorse a rigid, word-for-word, sentence-by-sentence translation.” [9] By the time of his death from illness in 1944, Zhu Shenghao had translated a total of thirty-one and a half Shakespearean plays. Although his manuscripts were destroyed twice during the war, he persisted in re-translating them. His objective was to enable the general Chinese public to understand and appreciate Shakespeare through fluid and elegant translations, thereby promoting the widespread dissemination of Western classics.

Liang Shiqiu’s situation was somewhat different. In late 1931, Hu Shi, as chairman of the Chinese Education and Culture Foundation, launched a project to translate *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. The project was originally intended to be undertaken jointly by five individuals—Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo, Ye Gongchao, Chen Xiyong, and Liang Shiqiu—and was expected to take five to ten years to complete. Liang Shiqiu immediately set to work on the translation, while the other four never put pen to paper; the task ultimately fell solely on his shoulders. By the time the War of Resistance broke out, he had already translated eight plays. Work was interrupted during the war but resumed in Taiwan region in 1959. By 1967, he had completed all thirty-seven plays, and in 1968, he finished the three poetry collections, taking a total of thirty-eight years to complete the forty-volume *Complete Works of Shakespeare* [10]. Liang Shiqiu’s translation principles are outlined in his “Introductory Notes”: “The original text often presents textual difficulties, and there are many passages that are obscure and difficult to understand; the translator has selected the most plausible interpretation and added notes where necessary”; “The original text contains many puns and various allusions; where these cannot be directly rendered, explanatory notes are added”; “The original text contains much vulgar language, which is translated verbatim to preserve its authenticity.” [11] His translation orientation is clear: to faithfully recreate the character of the original text, providing the academic community with an authoritative scholarly edition suitable for textual criticism and philological research, and laying a solid textual foundation for Shakespearean studies in China.

In sum, the two translations differ in their paths of dissemination and reception. Zhu’s translation was published by the Shanghai World Book Company in 1947. The translation, fluent and well-suited for stage dialogue, has long been used in theatrical productions; since the 1950s, it has been the most widely circulated translation of Shakespeare’s plays in mainland China. Liang Shiqiu’s *Complete Works* translation was published in Taiwan region in 1967 and has long served as the reference text for Shakespearean studies in academic circles in Taiwan region; and a Chinese-English bilingual edition of this translation was published in main-

land China in 2001.

3. The Impact of Translation Purposes on Translation Strategies

3.1. Cultural Imagery

To make Shakespeare's plays more accessible to the general public, Zhu Shenghao tended to downplay the sense of strangeness associated with foreign cultural symbols, while Liang Shiqiu chose to preserve these symbols in their original form. In other words, Zhu's translations leaned toward domestication in their treatment of cultural imagery, whereas Liang's translations inclined toward foreignization. Of course, this does not mean that the two translators followed a single strategy; rather, in terms of overall tendency, each had their own dominant focus.

(Excerpt from Act III, Scene IV)

Original text:

Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself;
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury,

New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill: [12]

Zhu's translation: 太阳神的鬃发, 天神的前额, 像战神一样威风凛凛的眼睛, 像降落在高吻穹苍的山巅的神使一样矫健的姿态。 [12]

Liang's translation: 有海皮里昂的鬃发; 头额简直是甫父的; 眼睛像是马尔士的, 露出震慑的威严; 那姿势, 就像是使神梅鸠里刚刚降落在吻着天的山顶上。注释: 海皮里昂(Hyperion)日神, 周甫(Jove)大帝, 马尔士(Mars)战神, 梅鸠里(Mercury)使神, 均男性美之代表者。 [11]

Hyperion (the Titan god of light in Greek mythology), Jove (Jupiter, king of the gods in Roman mythology), Mars (the Roman god of war), and Mercury (the messenger of the gods in Roman mythology) [5]. Zhu Shenghao rendered these names as "Sun God", "God of Heaven", "God of War", and "Messenger of the Gods", which, in the Chinese context, convey radiance, majesty, valor, and swiftness. Even readers unfamiliar with the Roman mythological pantheon can appreciate *Hamlet's* praise of his father's image. Liang Shiqiu, by contrast, transliterated them as "Hai Piliang" (Hyperion), "Fu Fu" (Jove), "Ma Er Si" (Mars), and "Mei Jiu Li" (Mercury). These transliterations carry no semantic meaning in Chinese, forcing ordinary readers to rely on the footnotes for comprehension. While this sacrifice of immediate readability preserves the cultural otherness of the original for scholarly readers, it fulfills the academic translation's goal of "preserving authenticity."

(Excerpt from Act V, Scene I)

Original text:

Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew and dog will have his day. [12]

Zhu's translation: 有本领的, 随他干什么事吧; 猫总是要叫, 狗总是要闹

的。[12]

Liang's translation: 不管赫鸠里斯自己怎样干, 猫总要叫, 狗总有得意的一天。注释: “狗是总有得意的一天,” 系成语。此段大意, Chambers 译做 “下流东西, 如赖尔蒂斯, 总是很难令其改变性情的, 有时候总是得令其稍占上风。” 所谓赫鸠里斯当系哈姆雷特自喻; 或意谓赫鸠里斯犹不能防止猫狗之常态, 自况不如赫鸠里斯, 更不须计较矣。[11]

“Hercules” refers to Heracles in Greek mythology, known for his immense strength. Zhu Shenghao rendered it as “capable”, replacing the proper name with a general adjective. This allows ordinary readers to grasp the literal meaning without any background knowledge, though the satirical force of the mythological allusion is somewhat diluted. Liang Shiqiu transliterated the name as “He Jiu Li Si” (Hercules) and appended a footnote that not only identifies the figure but also notes that “a dog will have his day” is a proverb, citing Chambers’ interpretation to connect the line to the play’s characters and offer two possible readings. These details preserve the cultural and interpretive dimensions of the original for researchers [1]. From the perspective of Skopos theory, Zhu’s translation prioritizes intratextual coherence (fluent reading), while Liang’s prioritizes intertextual coherence (exact correspondence), a difference rooted in their respective goals of popularization and scholarly fidelity.

3.2. Puns

Puns are the essence of Shakespearean linguistic artistry, combining humor with dramatic tension, and they also present a challenge in English-to-Chinese translation. In handling puns, Zhu Shenghao mainly focused on recreating the theatrical wit within the Chinese linguistic context, catering to both theater audiences and general readers; Liang Shiqiu, by contrast, primarily concentrated on unpacking the layers of meaning through detailed footnotes, addressing an academic audience and preserving the semantic structure of the original text.

(Excerpt from Act V, Scene I)

Original text:

Clown. He was the first that ever bore arms.

Other. Why, he had none.

Clown. ...The Scripture says Adam digg’d. Could he dig without arms? [12]

Zhu’s translation: 甲丑 当然, 他在创立家业方面很有一套呢!

乙丑 他有一套?

甲丑 ……《圣经》上说: “亚当掘地”。没有一套, 能够掘地吗? [12]

Liang’s translation: 乡甲 他是第一个佩戴纹章的。注释: Arms 是双关语。(一) 绅士佩戴之勋章, (二) 掘地用之铲等工具。

乡乙 什么, 他哪里有过纹章?

乡甲 ……《圣经》上说: “亚当掘地”; 他能掘地而不用“工具”吗?

[11]

The word “arms” functions as a pun, referring both to a coat of arms symbolizing noble status and to bodily arms, that is, the limbs used for digging [4]. The comedic exchange between the two gravediggers turns on this ambiguity. Zhu Shenghao recreates the pun in Chinese using the phrase “you yi tao” (literally “having a set”, colloquially “being capable”), which captures both the sense of having the necessary implements and having the ability, preserving the original humor within the target language. Liang Shiqiu, by contrast, acknowledges the pun in a footnote, where he glosses the second sense as “tools”. The main text thus loses the immediate punning effect of the original, and the physical dimension of the wordplay is somewhat attenuated. These two strategies serve different needs, each with its own strengths and limitations.

(Excerpt from Act V, Scene I)

Original text:

Ham. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

Clown. You lie out on't sir, and therefore 'tis not yours:

For my part, I do not lie in't, and yet it is mine.

Ham. Thou dost lie in't to be in't and say it is thine: 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick, therefore thou liest.

Clown. 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you. [12]

Zhu's translation: 哈 胡说! 坟墓是死人睡的, 怎么说是你的? 我看也是你的, 因为你在里头胡闹。

甲丑 您在外头也不老实, 先生, 所以这坟不是您的; 至于说我, 我倒没有在里头胡闹, 可是这坟的确是有的。

哈 你在里头, 又说是你的, 这就是“在里头胡闹”。因为挖坟是为死人, 不是为会蹦会跳的活人, 所以说你胡闹。

甲丑 这套胡闹的话果然会蹦会跳, 先生, 等会儿又该从我这里跳到您那里去了。[12]

Liang's translation: 哈 我也以为是你的, 因为你在里面卧。注释: 原文 lie 双关语, 有“卧”及“谎”二义。

乡甲 你在外面卧, 先生, 所以这坟不是你的; 至于我呢, 我虽不卧在里面, 这坟还是我的。

哈 真说谎, 你在坟里就说坟是你的; 这是为死人的, 不是为活人的; 所以你必是说谎。

乡甲 这真是个活活的谎, 先生; 还会跑呢, 留神跑到你嘴上去。[11]

The word “lie” carries the dual meanings of “to recline” and “to tell a falsehood”. *Hamlet* and the gravedigger trade barbs by exploiting this double meaning [4]. Zhu Shenghao used the Chinese term “hunao” (roughly “making mischief” or “nonsense”) to cover both senses, and rendered “a quick lie” as “words that can jump and skip”, effectively recreating the playfulness of the dialogue. Liang Shiqiu distinguished the two meanings in the main text as “to lie down” and “to lie”, losing the wordplay but restoring it through a footnote that identifies the pun and its two senses. The former keeps the theatrical exchange lively; the latter keeps the

linguistic architecture intact for reference.

3.3. Vulgar Language

The vernacular slang and street-level profanity of the Elizabethan era are a quintessential manifestation of the realistic style in Shakespeare's plays; some lines contain playful innuendo and worldly attitudes. In most cases, Zhu Shenghao, mindful of public taste and stage presentation, refined and toned down such vulgar expressions; Liang Shiqiu, by contrast, tended to translate the original language style more literally in the interest of textual authenticity.

(Excerpt from Act III, Scene II)

Original: Ham. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Oph. No, my lord.

Ham. I mean, my head upon your lap?

Oph. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Do you think I meant country matters? [12]

Zhu's translation: 哈 小姐，我可以睡在您的怀里吗？

奥 不，殿下。

哈 我的意思是说，我可以把我的头枕在您的膝上吗？

奥 嗯，殿下。

哈 您以为我转着下流的念头吗？ [12]

Liang's translation: 哈 小姐，我可以躺在你的大腿裆里去吗？

奥 不，殿下。

哈 我的意思是说，把我的头放在你的大腿上面？

奥 好，殿下。

哈 你以为我撒野吗？ [11]

"Lie in your lap" and "country matters" are both playful remarks in the play [1]. The sexual innuendo of "country matters" derives from the phonetic resemblance between "country" and the slang term "cunt". Zhu Shenghao rendered "lie in your lap" as "睡在您的怀里" and "country matters" as "下流的念头", using the honorific "您" rather than the informal "你", thereby softening the flippant tone of the dialogue. Liang Shiqiu, by contrast, opted for a literal translation, rendering the two lines respectively as "躺在你的大腿裆里去" and "撒野", and using the informal "你" to preserve the dialogue's crude nature and confrontational atmosphere, providing a credible text for stylistic analysis. But in terms of conveying the original punning effect, both translations involve some loss.

(Excerpt from Act IV, Scene IV)

Original: By Gis and by Saint Charity,

Alack, and fie for shame:

Young men will do 't, if they come to 't,

By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, before you tumbled me,

You promis'd me to wed.

So would I “a” done, by yonder sun,
And thou hadst not come to my bed. [12]

Zhu’s translation: 凭着神圣慈悲名字，
这种事太丢脸！
少年男子不知羞耻，
一味无赖纠缠。
她说你曾答应婚嫁，
然后再同枕席；
谁料如今被你欺诈，
懊悔万千无及！ [12]

Liang’s translation: 天乎天乎真可耻！
男子一定这样做
只消他们有机缘；
哎，这是他们的错。
她说，你害我以前，
答应娶我做新娘。——
他回答说：
我发誓必定这样做，
你若没来上我的床。 [11]

This folk song employs vernacular expressions typical of the Elizabethan era, with phrases like “come to my bed” carrying subtle romantic innuendo. The two translators adopted different strategies based on their respective goals. Zhu Shenghao prioritized public acceptability, transforming the blunt “come to my bed” into the elegant euphemism “share the same pillow”, softening the original’s earthy tone, and supplementing it with words like “disgrace”, “deception”, and “endless regret” to emphasize the young woman’s tragic plight. This domesticating approach, elegant and understated, appeals to the aesthetic of popular literature. Liang Shiqiu, aiming to preserve the original text’s information, retained the dialogue structure and colloquial style, translating “come to my bed” literally as “上我的床” without embellishment, thus restoring the folk song’s plain and straightforward character.

4. Conclusions

In summary, Zhu Shenghao tended to adopt a strategy of domestication in most cases to bridge the cultural divide between China and the West; by recreating puns and purifying vulgar expressions, he promoted the popularization of Shakespeare’s plays in China. Liang Shiqiu, on the other hand, generally favored a translation approach characterized by literal translation and foreignization to preserve the linguistic style of the original work; supplemented by detailed annotations, he constructed an authoritative text suitable for academic reference. Of course, this does not mean that the two translators consistently adhered to a single strategy throughout the entire play; when dealing with specific passages, they may have flexibly adjusted their approach based on context.

Admittedly, Skopos theory emphasizes the communicative function of a translation and has certain limitations when exploring the aesthetic value of the original text; however, since this study centers its analysis on cultural motivations and translation orientations, this theoretical framework still possesses sufficient explanatory power. When evaluating literary translation, one must not overlook the translator's intent, the target audience, and the context of cross-cultural communication; only by comprehensively examining these diverse factors can a holistic and objective judgment be formed.

The translations by Zhu and Liang embody the missions of popularization and academic research, respectively, and these two complementary approaches together ensure that this classic work takes root and endures in China. This complementary logic also offers a valuable lesson for the current retranslation boom: instead of claiming to “surpass” previous versions, retranslators should identify their own functional niche by asking “for whom, for what purpose, and for what use”, thereby contributing to a pluralistic rather than homogenized reception of Shakespeare in China.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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