

# The Use of Language, Characterization, and Tension in Snow in Midsummer

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**Abstract:** Different translators might translate in diverse ways based on their own personal backgrounds for the same piece of work. The classic Chinese play Snow in Midsummer plays a typical demonstration. It has been translated into English several times both by Chinese and native English speakers. This essay will focus on comparing two translated versions of the play from their uses of language, characterization and tension; one was translated by a Chinese translator along with an English translator and the other was adapted by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig.

## 1. Introduction

Snow in Midsummer is a classic Chinese play written by Guan Hanqing during the Yuan Dynasty, which was later translated into English by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang in 1958 and recently adapted by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig in 2017. The original play mainly discusses Tou Ngo (Dou Yi), a child bride who later becomes a young widow, and is unjustly convicted of a heinous crime—killing her father-in-law. By contrast, the adaptation takes place in a contemporary setting, introducing several new characters, such as the businesswoman Tianyun and a young man called Rocket whose heart is transplanted from Dou Yi's. This paper will demonstrate how the translators' and the play wright's use of language and characterization vary distinctly, but both serve to create dramatic tension.

## 2. Translation Comparison

### 2.1 The Translators Differentiated Readability

The 1958 English version of Snow in Midsummer is similar to a traditional Western play since the language sounds very natural. At the same time, the translation retains many Chinese elements as well, including idioms and old sayings, which bring Chinese readers a sense of familiarity. Such harmonious integration is indebted to the background of the two translators — Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Xianyi is a Chinese translator who went to Oxford University to study Classics, while his wife Gladys is a British translator, Oxford's first graduate in Chinese literature. In other words, one is a native Chinese speaker, the other is a native English speaker, and they also have a profound understanding of each other's language. The fact that each of them is a master of both languages endows them the opportunity to translate Snow in Midsummer in a completely English mindset yet preserve the Chinese identity and style of the play. The significant phrase "Heaven and Earth" is a good case in point. It combines the traditional Chinese implication with its Western meaning. In Chinese, "Heaven and Earth" indicates the whole world, the universe; in English, it implies God, the divine. Moreover, the emperor of China in ancient times is called "Son of Heaven," which gives the phrase a sense of irony when Dou Yi reproaches Heaven and Earth and condemns them both for not telling good from bad.

On the contrary, Cowhig's Snow in Midsummer seems to be more captivating but, nonetheless, the language is more difficult to understand, even though the vocabulary is not that advanced. There exists an interesting phenomenon—the play employs English and Chinese expressions alternatively, which compels the readers to change their mindsets constantly to comprehend the text. For instance, in Act 1, Scene 1, the phrase "flower prince" appears to be perplexing so that people may want to look at the context again, trying to find the connotation of flower or prince. When readers fail to

find any clue about either word, they may realize that “flower prince” represents “playboy” in Chinese idiom, and such meaning fits in the context of Scene 1.

People of an older generation in China describe the archetype of a “flower prince” as a young man holding a flower in his hand. Thus, it is fitting that such a phrase should come from an elder character in the play, which is Nurse Wong, who raised Handsome when he was a child. Another example is “Handsome acts like a hard man, but he has a marshmallow heart.” It is manifest to the audience that this sentence is written in a Chinese way, since its literal meaning denotes an exact metaphor in Chinese, whose translation in English would be “one’s bark is worse than his bite.” The playwright Cowhig, a native English speaker who has lived in Taipei and Beijing, probably includes these phrases intentionally. Since the original *Snow in Midsummer* is a Chinese play, Cowhig may want to show various Chinese elements to the audience and indicate the setting of the play. Although it seems to be bizarre when both language habits are integrated in one story, the moment that readers are able to comprehend both language sets will make the play more authentic, which provides a feeling of familiarity in unfamiliarity.

## 2.2 Characterizations

In addition, the techniques of characterization are dramatically different in the two plays. Because the 1958 version is solely translated from the original Chinese play, it inherits everything that Guan Hanqing utilizes to promote the storyline and express the characters’ emotions. For example, before each character’s first appearance, he or she will start a self-introduction, presenting his or her background and life experience. The majority will simply start with “I am (name/occupation),” which is quite awkward to a modern audience. However, since many characters have constant interactions and close relationships, their long monologues will be highly similar, which inevitably makes the first act tedious. Moreover, when Dou Yi sees her father after thirteen years of separation, she is eager to tell him her miserable experience, so she repeats everything written in the previous acts, including all the details, which may be boring to most of the audience and may be improved boring if the actors use gestures and facial expressions to indicate the progress of their conversation.

By contrast, Cowhig employs much more modern methods to introduce the characters in her adaptation. She only gives a brief narration, usually one to two lines, for each character, providing some basic information to the audience. People learn about the characters’ personalities and experiences via the reading, and gradually get to know their relationships from their conversation. Sometimes, even before readers fully understand the characters, their features have already changed, which is a more authentic reflection of our real life, because future is always unpredictable and people never cease changing. Hence, the two versions’ various techniques of characterization demonstrate different time periods of production. The one written by Guan Hanqing is a typical Yuan Drama popular during the 14th and 15th century, and its way of introducing characters is unsurprisingly conventional, whereas the one rewritten by Frances Cowhig embodies the modern way to depict characters through an immersive environment.

## 2.3 Different Tensions

Despite the differences in their use of language and approach to characterization, both plays develop tensions in a similar way—by stark contrast and subtle irony. Act 4 of the original play offers several examples of “beats,” or moments which increase tension in the scene. In this scene, Dou Yi’s ghost confronts her father, who has returned to the village as an official inspector for the Emperor. First, Dou Yi’s father emphasizes that “he has wept for his child till his eyes are dim and his hair is white.” However, this is such an irony because he has only sent one letter to his daughter for the whole thirteen years, which illustrates his indifference to Dou Yi. Besides, readers are aware of the injustice to Dou Yi, but her father knows nothing about it except repeating his love and concern for Dou Yi, which is a situational irony. Secondly, Dou Yi’s spirit comes to visit her father at night. Her father always puts Dou Yi’s case at the bottom since he does not recognize her changed name, but Dou Yi keeps making the lamp burn low and putting her case on top of the files. The two characters perform these actions back and forth until Dou Yi’s father discovers that there

is a ghost and feels terribly afraid. The repetition builds tension, and irony is shown at this moment again—Dou Yi's father claims that he is a just and upright inspector, yet he is afraid of phantoms coming after him—and this intensifies the plot.

In Cowhig's version, Act 1, Scene 11 is a precise illustration of beats and tensions. Rocket finds out that his transplanted heart comes from Dou Yi's body and a sense of guilt lingers over him, so he burns paper money and sends offerings to Dou Yi. Dou Yi's spirit appears at that point and begins to express her indignation. She uses a plethora of sarcastic phrases to convey the injustice done to her and her resentment towards the corrupt officials and those who take her organs. The instant that Rocket sees Dou Yi, he opens his arm to embrace her, but Dou Yi thrusts her hand into his chest to retrieve her heart. Such contrast shocks the audience immediately and makes them sympathize with both characters, which perfectly creates a tension for the story.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the 1958 English version translated from the original *Snow in Midsummer* and the 2017 adapted play by Frances Cowhig utilize distinct methods to convey messages, regarding cultural and linguistic features as well as characters in the story. Nevertheless, both plays share similar ways to create and develop tensions so that the story becomes more gripping and elaborated. The differences of two translated versions and what they bring to the modern audience work as a mirror to show how language and translation important are.

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