



A Comparative Study of Translator Behavior under the 'Text-Behavior-Society' Trinity System in English Translations of *Teahouse*

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Abstract

Teahouse is an outstanding representative work of Mr. Lao She and a classic drama that epitomizes the old Chinese society. Based on the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity evaluation system proposed by Professor Zhou Lingshun, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of the two English translations of *Teahouse* by Ying Ruocheng and Howard, focusing on the translator behaviors of the two. The study finds that in the "Text-Language" perspective, analyzing from the lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, Ying Ruocheng's translation behavior tends to attain utility, focusing more on the colloquialism and performability of the drama, while Howard's translation behavior leans more towards truth-seeking, tending to preserve the cultural imagery of the original text. From the "Behavior-Text" perspective, due to the differences in the identities and translation intentions of the two translators, their choices of translation strategies also differ. From the "Behavior-Society" perspective, the dissemination effects of the two translations will be explored. This thesis, through a comparative analysis, demonstrates that the translator's truth-seeking or utility-attaining orientation is not an isolated textual phenomenon, but rather the result of the combined effects of translator identity, translation intention, and social expectations.

Key words: *Tea House*; "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity; Drama translation; Ying Ruocheng; John Howard.

1. Introduction

Teahouse is Lao She's most accomplished work in the art of language, long celebrated and renowned in the theatrical world as a play where "one line of dialogue sketches a character". Written by Lao She in 1956, the three-act play *Teahouse* is hailed as the pinnacle of modern Chinese drama. Through the changes of Beijing's Yutai Teahouse across three historical periods—after the failure of the late Qing Dynasty's Reform Movement, during the Warlord Era, and after the victory of the Anti-Japanese War—it reveals the profound transformations in Chinese society over nearly half a century. The play brings together characters from all walks of life, each vividly portrayed despite the large cast. From Manchu nobles to the lower strata of society, it paints a panoramic picture of Beijing's cultural essence, making it a representative work of Beijing-style literature. The unique Beijing dialect, rich folk cultural imagery, exquisite depiction of urban life, and profound critique of the era contained in *Teahouse* not only constitute its exceptional artistic value but also make it a vibrant carrier of traditional Chinese culture and modern history. Successfully translating and introducing *Teahouse* is both a crucial way to disseminate Chinese literary classics to the world and an important window to showcase the profound heritage of Chinese culture (Krauter, 1983).

There are two English versions of *Teahouse*. One was translated by Ying Ruocheng in 1979 and published by China Translation & Publishing Corporation in 1999. Ying Ruocheng was a translator, actor, and the Vice Minister of Culture of China at that time. He promoted the internationalization of Chinese drama by translating Chinese theatrical works into English and foreign works into Chinese. The other version was translated by John Howard and published by Foreign Languages Press in 2001. John Howard has worked in Taiwan and mainland China for many years and has a deep understanding of China and Chinese culture. He also hopes to spread Chinese culture to the

world through translation. The two versions present distinctly different textual forms and dissemination trajectories due to the differences in the translators' backgrounds and translation purposes. Howard has long been committed to the translation and introduction of Chinese literature, with the aim of cultural dissemination; Ying Ruocheng, as a director, actor, and translator, aimed directly at stage performance. This difference provides an ideal sample for examining translator behavior.

In the field of translation, drama translation has always been an important research direction. Dramatic texts possess unique linguistic characteristics and functions, as they must meet the needs of stage performance while also conveying the cultural connotations and artistic charm of the original work. Professor Zhou Lingshun's proposed "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity evaluation system provides a new theoretical perspective for drama translation criticism. This system breaks through the limitations of traditional translation criticism, which only analyzes from the textual level, by incorporating translator behavior and social factors into the evaluation framework. It emphasizes a comprehensive examination of translation activities from three perspectives, making translation criticism more objective, comprehensive, and scientific. By applying this evaluation system to the study of the English translation of *Teahouse*, we can deeply explore the translator's behavioral choices during the translation process and their impact on the dissemination and reception of the translation, providing valuable references for drama translation practice and criticism.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, the study of translator behavior has garnered widespread attention in the field of translation studies both domestically and internationally. To date, three major research arrays have been formed in the study of translator behavior (Ma, 2024), with the systematic characteristics of the translator

behavior research under the critical perspective of translator behavior in China being the most prominent. The “Chinese Scholars’ Translator Behavior Criticism Research Array” is the first array. This array of research began in 2010, has its own theoretical core, and is supported by a wealth of research results. It has gradually developed into a “prominent field” in domestic translation studies, initially forming an academic community, which is currently the main front for the systematic study of translator behavior theory. Translator behavior criticism research is about the study of translators, considering the interaction between translator identity, role, behavior, translated texts, and social factors. The types of research results related to translator behavior criticism are mainly divided into three categories: theoretical ontology research, theoretical application research, and comprehensive research. Theoretical ontology research mainly refers to the construction of theoretical frameworks, the elaboration of research methodologies, and the analysis of knowledge points. Applied research mainly refers to the analysis of the rationality of individual or group translator behavior in a certain text or different texts based on the theory of translator behavior criticism. Comprehensive research refers to the combination of translator behavior criticism theory with other disciplines to explore translator translation behavior from multiple perspectives.

The study of translator behavior outside the critical perspective of Chinese scholar translators can be referred to as the “Applied Research Array of Chinese Scholar Translator Behavior”, which belongs to the second array. The research in this array is in a state of individual dispersion, verifying other theories through the study of translator behavior. The third array is abroad, which can be called the “Foreign Broad and Narrow Translator Behavior Research Array”. Some Western scholars attempt to apply sociological theoretical concepts to translation studies, such as P. Bourdieu’s cultural sociology, B. Latour’s

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), N. Luhmann’s social systems theory, etc., and place the translator and their behavior in society at the center of their research (Zhou, 2023).

Currently, domestic research on the English translations of *Teahouse* is quite abundant, mainly focusing on comparative studies between John Howard’s translation and Ying Ruocheng’s translation. These studies can be broadly categorized into the following three types: first, comparative studies of the two translations from a cultural perspective; second, comparative studies of the two translations using translation theories; and third, comparative studies of John Howard’s and Ying Ruocheng’s translations from a linguistic perspective of *Teahouse* (Cai & Chen, 2021). Research from the cultural perspective includes exploring cultural factors in drama translation and the performability of the translations (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001); studying the translation of culturally loaded words in *Teahouse*, etc. From the perspective of translation theory, the two translations of *Teahouse* are mainly studied using theories such as Skopos theory, functional equivalence theory, translation aesthetics theory, and translation shift theory. Research from the linguistic perspective includes comparative analysis using linguistic theories, such as context theory, relevance theory, speech act theory, and pragmatic adaptation theory.

However, existing research has two shortcomings: first, it has not yet applied the “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity system to compare the translations of *Teahouse*; second, it rarely integrates the translator’s identity, strategy selection, and dissemination effects into a unified analytical framework. This study introduces the “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity evaluation system to go beyond the limitations of existing comparative studies on the English translations of *Teahouse*, which predominantly focus on single-dimensional analyses of linguistic transfer or translation strategies. By incorporating textual features, translator

identity, translation intention, and social dissemination effects into the analysis, it examines the differences in translator behavior between the two versions.

3. Theoretical Foundation

In recent years, the theory of Translator Behavior Criticism proposed by Zhou Lingshun has emerged as a prominent indigenous contribution to translation studies, opening up new pathways for the Chinese school of translation theory alongside Huang Zhonglian's Variation Theory and Hu Gengshen's Eco-Translatology (Zhou & Zhao, 2017). Its originality and comprehensiveness have filled a significant gap in translator behavior research both domestically and internationally.

The development of the theory can be traced through three key stages. From 2010 to 2015, the germination stage, Zhou introduced the "Truth-seeking – Utility-attaining" continuum mode of evaluation and systematically constructed the research paradigm, culminating in the publication of two foundational monographs in 2014. During the deepening stage (2020–2023), a translator behavior criticism model was built on the "intra-translation" and "extra-translation" division, and the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity evaluation framework was formally proposed at the Third National Forum on Translator Behavior Research in 2022, marking a shift toward integrating the social dimension. Since 2024, the theory has entered a mature stage, with comprehensive theoretical verification and applied research further establishing its macro-level theoretical system, meso-level analytical framework, and micro-level evaluation model (Zhou, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). In the same year, Zhou compiled *The Applied Research of Translator Behavior Criticism* (Zhou, 2024), a culminating work that integrates theoretical construction, applied research, and the operability of translation criticism, detailing the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity analytical framework. Its feasibility has since been verified

by scholars through case-specific applied research.

As Professor Xu Jun observes, "The Translator Behavior Criticism theory established by Zhou Lingshun has already formed its own school" (Xu & Zhou, 2025). Through progressive refinement, the "Text-Behavior-Society" trinity evaluation system has become its core theoretical construct, encompassing a macro-level theoretical and critical evaluation system, a meso-level analytical framework, and micro-level methods and models (Zhou, 2025). Rooted in three major pathways—combining text and humanism, intra- and extra-translation, and static and dynamic approaches (Li & Zhang, 2023)—it derives the Text-Linguistic, Behavior-Text, and Behavior-Society perspectives, which converge into the trinity system and achieve theoretical innovation.

The first, the "text-language" perspective, forms the core of traditional text studies, analyzing the "faithfulness" of the translation by examining how the original meaning is reflected in the target text. It focuses on linguistic meaning, translation standards, and translation strategies. The second, the "behavior-text" perspective, centers on the translator's subjective actions, examining how the translator's volition, identity, and strategic choices influence the text. This perspective attends to the translator's sociality, psychology, behavior, and role-playing in the translation process. The third, the "behavior-society" perspective, treats translation as a social activity and enhances explanatory power by exploring the interaction between translator behavior and social factors such as readers, the market, and ideology, with an emphasis on the socialized effects of translation.

Whether it is the "behavior-text" perspective, or the "behavior-society" perspective, related research cyclically serves the "text-language" perspective, ultimately returning to the essence of translation, the root

of translation practice, and the starting point of translation evaluation, or more accurately, the fundamental dynamic relationship research of “people-oriented” (Zhou, 2024). The three horizons are in a cyclical relationship, which can be further condensed into three semantic frameworks: “text criticism”, “behavior criticism”, and “effect criticism”.

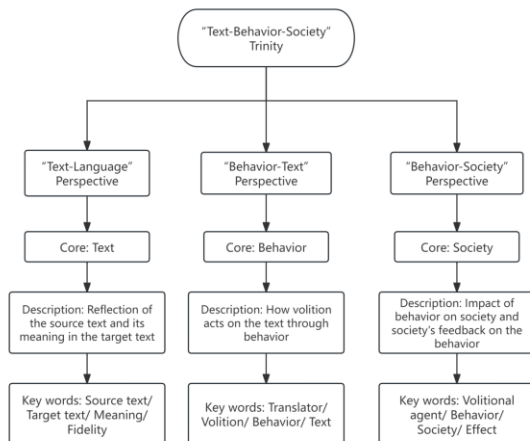


Figure 1 “Text-Behavior-Society” Evaluation System

4. A Comparative Study of Translator Behavior from the “Text-Language” Perspective

4.1 Appellations

In this section, we mainly compare and analyze the appellations in *Teahouse*. The relationships between characters in *Teahouse* are complex, and the appellations carry rich identity information, hierarchical emotions, and social conventions. In *Teahouse*, there is a respectful term that frequently appears, which is “爷”. In Chinese, “爷” can be interpreted as “a respectful term for an elder or older man”, “a term for a master, superior, or noble person in the old times”, etc.

Example 1 : 松二爷、秦二爷、马五爷、常四爷

Ying’s translation: Master Song, Master Qin, Master Ma, Master Chang

Howard’s translation: Second Elder Song, Qin Zhongyi, Fifth Elder Ma, Fourth Elder Chang

In traditional China, the way names and titles were used reflected not only the family surname but also the background and social status of the individual, indicating their position in the social hierarchy. The feudal society emphasized a strict social hierarchy. The term “爷” was often used as a respectful title for individuals from prosperous and powerful families. The structure “Surname + Sibling Order + 爷” is a unique cultural phenomenon in China. In English, there is a lack of equivalent vocabulary to convey the same imagery. In translating “爷”, Ying Ruocheng preferred to use “Master + Surname”, while Howard tended to use “Ordinal Number + Elder + Surname”. Howard’s translation is more straightforward, and if a Chinese person were to read it, they would immediately understand its meaning. However, the translation does not convey the character’s status, and readers cannot deeply grasp the respect implied. Regarding Ying Ruocheng’s translation of “Master Song”, many would argue that it does not reflect the “second” in the sibling order.

Let us analyze in detail: the title “松二爷” actually emphasizes “爷” rather than the “二”. Comparatively, Howard’s translation is more faithful, as it expresses both the surname and the sibling order, but the term “elder” refers to an older person and does not convey the sense of respect for a high-status individual as in *Teahouse*. Ying Ruocheng’s translation captures the status difference but does not translate the sibling order in the title. From the perspective of reader understanding and stage performance, Ying Ruocheng’s translation makes it easier for the audience to grasp the emphasis on respect for a high-status individual. However, in some cases, it may also seem slightly inappropriate.

Example 2: 王淑芬 : 三爷, 你的小辫儿也该剪了吧?

Ying’s translation: Master Li, don’t you think it’s time you got rid of that pigtail?

Howard’s translation: Third Elder, should’t you cut off your old queue?

When Wang Shufen referred to Li San as “Third Master”, the English translation was “Master Li”, while the Huo translation was “Third Elder”. In Chinese culture, calling someone “Master” generally carries a sense of respect, and servants or subordinates often refer to their masters as “Master”. However, referring to Li San, a teahouse worker, as “Master” might suggest an inversion of the master-servant relationship. In the Huo translation, the term was translated as “Third Elder”, a form of address that is more akin to the order of seniority within a family. Regarding this term, the author believes it could be directly translated as “Li San”, as calling him by his name might better reflect the relationship between employer and employee, while also avoiding unnecessary confusion for foreign readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture.

In many situations in our country, whether formal or informal, people often have a habit of adding “小” or “老” before people’s surnames. This method is commonly used as a general way of addressing and referring to people. This method does not represent a specific difference in age between people, but rather a more commonly used idiomatic expression. In *Teahouse*, there are also such appellations, such as “老林”, “老陈”, “小心眼”, etc. Ying Ruocheng translated them as “Lao Lin”, “Lao Chen”, “Xiao Xinyan”, while Howard translated them as “Old Lin”, “Old Chen”, “Little Xinyan”. In Howard’s translation, “Old” implies that the person is older, and “Little” might be misleading, which does not conform to Chinese expression habits. Ying Ruocheng adopted the method of transliteration, which is more faithful to the original text, has a higher degree of authenticity, and also makes readers want to understand the relevant background knowledge.

4.2 Idioms

The term “idiom” has a broad meaning, generally referring to those phrases that are commonly used together and have a specific

form, the meaning of which often cannot be inferred from the individual words in the phrase. Idioms usually include proverbs, sayings, colloquialisms, maxims, allegorical sayings, aphorisms, slang, jargon, etc. Idioms are the essence of language, carrying strong national colors and distinct cultural connotations. In the conversations of the many characters in *Teahouse*, there are numerous idioms, which contain some allusions and cultural connotations.

Example 3: 庞太监:说得好, 咱们就八仙过海, 各显其能吧! 哈哈!

Ying’s translation: Eunuch Pang: Well said! Let’s both try our best, and see what happens. Ha! Ha! Ha!

Howard’s translation: EUNUCH PANG : Nicely said like the Eight Immortals crossing the sea, we each have our own strengths, eh?(Laughs heartily)

The Chinese idiom “八仙过海, 各显其能” tells a Chinese mythological legend. It is said that the Eight Immortals wanted to cross the sea, and each of them displayed their own magic and power. Howard preserved the imagery of the original text and translated it literally, retaining the component of “Eight Immortals”, leaning towards authenticity. This gives readers a sense of foreign culture and sparks their interest in understanding the allusion, but it also makes it more difficult for readers to comprehend the original text. Ying Ruocheng, on the other hand, adopted a free translation, rendering it as “try our best”, which is the implied meaning of the original text. Although it does not achieve equivalence in linguistic form and avoids a literal translation of cultural elements, it takes into account the readers’ and audience’s understanding in a short period of time, leaning towards utility.

Example 4: 刘麻子: 隔行如隔山, 你老得开茶馆, 我老得干我这一行!

Ying's translation: Once in a trade, always in the trade. You'll always be selling your tea. I'll always be doing my business.

Howard's translation: We just live different sorts of lives. You'll always be running a teahouse, and me, I'll always be working my own little game--always.

“隔行如隔山” means that each industry has its own way of doing things, and outsiders cannot understand the insiders' methods. The background of this passage is that Liu Mazi was being harassed and beaten by Kang Shunzi in the teahouse, and Wang Lifa advised him to leave. However, Liu Mazi said that “隔行如隔山”, and for the sake of livelihood, he had to continue his “business” in the teahouse. Therefore, the translation should reflect the differences between industries that Liu Mazi wanted to express. Ying Ruocheng adopted a free translation approach, translating it as “Once in a trade, always in the trade”, meaning that once you choose a profession, you should stick to it forever. This conveys the basic meaning of the original text but does not convey the idea of significant differences between industries. Moreover, the proverb is replaced with an English idiom, which is catchy and has a balanced sentence structure, making it easier for actors to deliver with rhythm. Ying Ruocheng considered the performative nature of the dialogue and the audience's acceptance, with a clear pragmatic orientation. Howard translated it as “We just live different sorts of lives”, reflecting that Liu Mazi and Wang Lifa have different ways of living. This translation is relatively faithful and more accurate in terms of truthfulness. Considering the readers' understanding and acceptance, it also does not retain the imagery of “mountain”.

4.3 Beijing's Characteristic Dialect

As a native Beijinger, Lao She unconsciously incorporated Beijing dialect into his literary works, making the language of the plays more lively, authentic, and distinctive. The dialogues in *Teahouse* contain a large

amount of authentic Beijing dialect, which is highly regional and poses significant challenges in translation. To truly capture the characteristics of Beijing dialect, translators face a considerable challenge. They must not only understand the intrinsic meanings of dialect words but also correctly grasp their emotional nuances in context, allowing readers to appreciate the charm of the dialect and the deeper meanings the author intends to convey through language. In many dialects from the Central Plains to the North, the vowels of many words undergo sound changes due to the retroflex action, a phenomenon known as “erhua”. The vowels affected by erhua are called “erhua vowels”, marked by adding an “r” after the vowel. One of the most prominent features of Beijing dialect is the extensive use of erhua sounds, which make the speech sound relaxed, casual, lively, and playful.

Example 5 : 王利发: 可是, 您搜我吧, 真一个铜子儿也没有啦!

Ying's translation: You better research me, I haven't a copper left.

Howard's translation: ...but I really don't have a penny left-you can search me if you like.

“铜子儿” refers to copper coins, a general term for various new-style copper coins minted in China from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, commonly known as copper plates.¹ silver dollar is 100 copper coins. Ying Ruocheng translated it as “copper”, meaning copper coins, conveying the authenticity of the material, and the pronunciation of the suffix “er” coincidentally resembles the retroflex sound in Chinese. Therefore, this word achieves a similar effect here. Howard translated it as “penny”, which refers to British brass coins. Since the decimal system was implemented in 1971, each penny is worth one-hundredth of a pound, equivalent in monetary value to copper coins, and it also activates English readers' recognition of the smallest monetary unit, closely aligning with the core semantics of “extreme poverty” in the

original text. However, the word “penny” cannot capture the beauty of the retroflex sound, which Mr. Ying Ruocheng handled better. Both avoided the Chinese historical concept of “copper coins” and chose existing English vocabulary to replace it, lowering the understanding threshold for the audience and readers, reflecting the translator’s pragmatism.

Example 5 : 小刘麻子说“老头儿，你都甭管，全听我的，我跟小丁宝有我们一套办法！是吧，小丁宝？”

Ying’s translation: Leave it all to me, old man. Me and baby have got a way all worked out. Haven’t we, baby?

Howard’s translation: Listen, old fellow, you don’t have to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of everything for you. Me and Little Ding Bao have things all set up. Eh, Little Ding Bao?

“甭管” is a typical Beijing dialect term, meaning “you don’t need to worry about anything”, and is translated into English as “leave it all to me”, which fully conveys the meaning of not having to worry and leaving it to me, staying close to the original text and being very concise. The Hawkes translation renders it as “you don’t have to worry about a thing”, which only conveys that Wang Lifa doesn’t have to worry, but doesn’t explain why he doesn’t have to worry or who will take care of it. Although the translator later adds “I’ll take care of everything” as a supplementary explanation, the language becomes somewhat repetitive and verbose. Therefore, from this perspective, the English translation approach is better. The Ying Ruocheng translation uses only 4 syllables, making it more concise, more suitable for the stage, and more pragmatic. Howard’s translation sacrifices dramatic rhythm in pursuit of pragmatic authenticity.

4.4 Stylistic Features

In the dimension of discourse, the two translations exhibit a distinction between colloquial and literary styles.

Example 5 : 秦仲义：来看看，看看你这年轻小伙子会做生意不会！

王利发：唉，一边做一边学吧，指着这个吃饭嘛。谁叫我爸爸死的早，我不干不行啊！好在照顾的主儿都是我父亲的老朋友，我有不周到的地方，都肯包涵，闭闭眼就过去了。在街面上混饭吃，人缘顶要紧。我按照我父亲遗留下来的老办法，多说好话，多请安，讨人人喜欢，就不会出大岔子！您坐下，我给您砌碗小叶茶去！

Ying’s translation: Wang Lifa : Well, I learn as I go along. I have to. It’s my living! With my father dying so young, I’ve no choice. Luckily, my customers were all friends of my father. They are ready to overlook my slips. In a business like this you have to be popular. I do everything just like my father. Always be polite, always make obeisances, try to please everybody. Then there won’t be any serious trouble. Please take a seat, Sir. I’ll make you a cup of our best tea.

Howard’s translation: WANG LIFA : Ai! I’ve had to learn because I depend on this place for a living. Since my father died young, I have no choice. Luckily, the regular customers are all old friends of my father; they’re prepared to overlook my mistakes. When you’re in business to make a living, it’s important to be well-liked. I do things just like my father did. If I’m not dropping to my knee, in greeting, I’m dropping compliments-trying to please everybody. That way you avoid trouble. Please sit down. I’ll make you a bowl of the very best.

Howard used a total of 10 sentences to process, among which 4 were complex sentences, with the longest one containing 17 words. He strived to remain faithful to the original text word by word, resulting in a more formal expression with complex sentence structures, which are not easy to perform on stage. On the other hand, Ying Ruocheng used 11 sentences, all of which were simple sentences, short in length, not adhering strictly to grammar, and using very colloquial language. Particularly in the phrase “多说好话，多请安”，“pay more respects” refers to showing

politeness and respect to others. Howard translated this directly from the original text without omission, using 12 words, while Ying Ruocheng only used 6 words to convey the same meaning, which is more in line with colloquial expression habits and easier for the audience to understand. In terms of word choice, for the phrase “不周的地方”, Howard used “mistake”, which is more formal than Ying Ruocheng’s “slip”. Similarly, when expressing the term “人缘”, Ying Ruocheng’s translation “to be popular” is more colloquial than Howard’s “well-liked”. In the original text, “指着这个吃饭嘛”, the word “指着” is typical Beijing dialect, meaning “to depend on”. The English translation simplifies it to “It’s my living!”, using the general colloquial term “living” to convey the core meaning but stripping away the dialectal flavor. Howard’s translation, “depend on this place for a living”, retains the semantic logic of “依靠” but the sentence structure is slightly more verbose. Here, Ying Ruocheng’s pragmatic approach emphasizes immediate understanding on stage, while Howard’s truth-seeking approach focuses on semantic completeness.

From numerous examples in the translation, it can be concluded that Ying Ruocheng’s translation style is concise, clear, and highly colloquial, closely adhering to Lao She’s original style. When creating *Teahouse*, Lao She employed a large amount of Beijing dialect and colloquial expressions to depict the dialogues in people’s daily lives at that time. Ying Ruocheng adopted methods of sentence compression and cultural filtering: the sentence structure is simple and logically clear, avoiding lengthy and complex nested clauses; the vocabulary tends to be practical, everyday, and easy to pronounce, fitting the characters’ identities and the stage context; cultural details that do not directly contribute to the main plot or pose significant obstacles to the understanding of English-speaking audiences are omitted, such as the translation of idioms containing cultural allusions mentioned above.

The translation language is lively and vivid, with a strong sense of stage and action, making it easy for actors to perform and for the audience to understand the emotional conflicts and plot development in real-time. It excels in performability and spokenness (Nie, 2010).

Howard’s translation style is characterized by its literary quality, rigorous precision, and a commitment to fully presenting cultural connotations. Howard employs methods such as annotation compensation, cultural imagery reproduction, and linguistic defamiliarization to recreate the original meaning. The sentence structure strives to closely resemble the original text, with some sentences containing complex syntax to reflect the rhythm and register changes in Lao She’s language. The vocabulary is more formal and precise, aiming to accurately convey the subtle nuances and cultural connotations of the original words. The translation exudes a profound cultural atmosphere and historical sense, with a more prominent literary quality, making it a panoramic literary reading close to the source text. However, it falls short in terms of immediate stage performance and oral fluency compared to English translations, requiring a higher level of reading comprehension from the average reader.

5. A Comparative Study of Translator Behavior from the “Behavior-Text” Perspective

5.1 Translators’ Identity and Translation Intention

Previously, we have learned that Ying Ruocheng and Howard have different nationalities, and naturally, their upbringing and educational backgrounds are also different. These differences will inevitably affect the translator’s work. Ying Ruocheng is a renowned Chinese performing artist, translator, and theater director. The combination of these three identities allowed Ying Ruocheng to have a deeper and more detailed understanding of the original work when translating *Teahouse*, and also enabled him to grasp the nuances of

theatrical translation more accurately from the perspective of a dramatist. Having grown up in China, he shared the same life background as Lao She, which allowed him to better understand Lao She's creative intentions and empathize with his works, thus capturing the linguistic features and style in his translation.

From his student days, he devoted himself to the stage arts, which laid the foundation for his future career in theater. Influenced by his father, Ying Ruocheng was admitted to the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Tsinghua University. His English pronunciation is standard and fluent, and his English expression is very authentic, demonstrating a high level of linguistic proficiency. In 1979, when *Teahouse* was preparing for its first overseas tour, there was no suitable script for the performance, so Ying Ruocheng personally translated the English version of *Teahouse*. In the preface, Mr. Ying Ruocheng stated, "The five plays collected in this series, translated from English into Chinese, all have existing translations. Why did I start from scratch and do it again? The unspoken reason is that these existing translations are not suitable for performance." His translation also facilitated the overseas performance of *Teahouse*, which became the first Chinese play to tour abroad. The version of *Teahouse* in which he participated was successfully performed in over 100 countries. Mr. Ying Ruocheng made outstanding contributions to the exchange of Chinese and foreign theater, and also set an example for Chinese theatrical translation.

John Howard-Gibbon, a Canadian whose native language is English, majored in Chinese in Canada. He served as an editor for China Daily for many years and spent two years living in Taiwan, becoming well-versed in Chinese culture and fluent in Chinese. Howard has a deep interest in Chinese literature, with a particular fondness for the Beijing dialect. He has translated numerous Chinese literary works, with the most representative being

Teahouse. After studying in Taiwan for two years, he returned to Canada to teach English language and literature and the translation of Chinese literature for fifteen years. In 1978, Howard came to Beijing and taught English language and literature at the Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute. In 1980, he decided to attempt the translation of Lao She's *Teahouse*, hoping to bring this excellent Chinese drama to a wider Western audience. The significant cultural differences between the East and the West created an insurmountable cultural gap between Lao She and Howard. Different life backgrounds, coupled with Howard's upbringing under capitalist ideology, led to a lack of cultural identification with Chinese culture, making it impossible for him to achieve 100% understanding and recognition.

Ying Ruocheng and Howard's translation purposes are not entirely the same. Ying Ruocheng's purpose in translating *Teahouse* was to bring it to the international stage, meet the needs of foreign performances, allow this excellent Chinese drama to go abroad, be understood by more foreign audiences, and promote cultural exchange between China and the West. Howard translated *Teahouse* out of his love for the Chinese language and culture. He wanted to extend this love to a broader scope, hoping that through his translation, more foreign readers could access this outstanding drama and understand Chinese culture.

5.2 Translation Strategy Selection

Translation strategies (such as foreignization and domestication) operate at the cultural level and are often considered from a cultural perspective; whereas translation methods (such as literal translation and free translation) operate at the textual level and are often considered from the perspective of discourse and language. This paper analyzes the differences in translators' choices of translation strategies from the perspective of foreignization and domestication. Domestication refers to the localization of the source language, taking the

target language or the readers of the translation as the destination, and using the expressions that the target language readers are accustomed to in order to convey the content of the original text; foreignization is when the translator tries not to disturb the author as much as possible, allowing the reader to move closer to the author. A comparative analysis from the "text-language" perspective reveals that Ying Ruocheng often adopts the domestication strategy and the free translation method, while Howard often adopts the foreignization strategy and the literal translation method.

The translation by Ying Ruocheng exhibits a high degree of domestication, often replacing culturally specific expressions with English idiomatic expressions; omitting or simplifying difficult cultural information in the original text; optimizing syntactic structures to make them more in line with English oral habits; adjusting the length and rhythm of lines when necessary to meet performance needs; and simplifying character titles. In the preface, Mr. Ying Ruocheng mentioned that "drama is the art form most dependent on the immediate effect of spoken language", and thus, in his translation, he strives to restore the colloquial expressions in the original text. As a director and actor, Ying Ruocheng is well aware of the time-sensitive nature of stage language. A line that cannot be instantly understood by the audience is a failed line. He stated, "A line is fleeting; it cannot be paused for annotation or explanation. This is the artistic essence of theatrical language." Therefore, his translation is characterized by concise language, adopting a domestication strategy to produce smooth and fluent expressions that are easily understood by the target audience, thereby reducing language barriers. He aims to allow the audience to gain the same impression as those who read or listen to the original work. When the characteristics of the original text may hinder the smoothness of the performance or the audience's understanding, the pragmatic needs of stage performability and immediate communication

become the primary driving force behind his strategic choices, and the translation shows a significant tendency towards pragmatism over fidelity.

Howard's translation exhibits a highly alienating characteristic, striving for literal translation of cultural imagery and specific expressions; it extensively uses annotations (footnotes, endnotes, glossaries) to explain cultural, historical, and linguistic difficulties; it maintains the cultural depth of character appellations; it almost completely retains the original content, with minimal deletions. As a scholarly translator, Howard regards *Teahouse* as a literary classic that demands rigorous treatment. The translator's responsibility is to act as a bridge across language barriers, striving to fully and accurately convey the literary world, linguistic features, and social significance constructed by the original author, allowing readers interested in Chinese culture to experience it as authentically as possible. The primary goal is to maximally 'reproduce' the authentic appearance of the original text in the target language, even if it may cause comprehension difficulties or awkward reading. The "utility" consideration is reflected in the use of annotations and other paratexts to compensate for comprehension barriers caused by "truth-seeking", rather than altering the core of the text, showing a strong tendency towards truth-seeking over utility. However, from the perspective of stage performance, the translation is not concise and colloquial enough, making it difficult for the audience to understand in a short time.

The fundamentally different identity positioning and translation purposes of the two translators are the intrinsic reasons for their choice of completely different translation strategies. These strategies directly act on the textual level, shaping the differences in the comparative results of the "text-language" perspective in Chapter 3. The translator's identity is the premise of behavior, the purpose of behavior determines the direction of strategy

selection, and the strategy is condensed into the specific form of the text (Huang & Dai, 2025; Huang & He, 2025). The “behavioral perspective” is the key to understanding “how textual differences arise”.

6. The Dissemination Effect of Translated Texts from the “Behavior-Society” Perspective

Under the “Behavior-Society” perspective, it is necessary not only to consider the rationality of the translator’s volitional behavior but also to pay attention to the interaction between the translation and society, the effect of social acceptance, and the social role of the translator (Li & Liu, 2025; Huang & Dai, 2025). This article will examine the social evaluation of the translated text and the translator’s behavior through objective data from the target language society. Readers’ personal book reviews mainly come from the American book-selling website Amazon and the book review website Goodreads for the evaluation and feedback of *Teahouse*. Goodreads, founded in 2007, is known as “the Facebook of books” and is one of the largest reader reading and book recommendation websites in the country. Its users make friends through books, can rate books, leave comments, create book discussion groups, etc., and the interactivity and openness of book reviews are strong. A total of 566 readers rated the English translation of *Teahouse*, and the ratings of both translations were 4.07, with 93% of the reviews being three stars or above, indicating that the general readers’ evaluation of *Teahouse* is generally high. As the world’s largest online library, the post-sale evaluation function of the Amazon book-selling website can, to a certain extent, indicate the public acceptance of books.

The ratings of both English translations of *Teahouse* on Amazon are 4.7, which also proves that the English translation of *Teahouse* has good acceptance overseas. Some readers mentioned in their comments that “Ying Ruocheng’s bilingual version is an excellent textbook for Chinese learners like him”. The

world’s largest online union catalog database, Worldcat, shows that the global library holdings of *Teahouse* translations reach 402, which can be seen the overseas readers’ love for *Teahouse*, which is inseparable from the translator’s translation of the original text. This study also has certain limitations. Due to the design of Goodreads and Amazon websites, the reader ratings of different translations are unified into one, so it is impossible to further compare the different dissemination effects of the two translations, and only the overall dissemination effect can be obtained.

The Ying Ruocheng translation, known for its concise and clear, colloquial style and emphasis on performability, is the most frequently performed and widely influential English version of *Teahouse* on the international theater stage to date. Its excellent “performability” and fluency in spoken language have made it the standard script of choice for overseas professional theater companies staging *Teahouse*. The Huo translation, with its rigorous translation, completeness of textual information, and detailed annotation system, has gained significant status in academia, library collections, and the educational field, exerting a certain influence in cultural studies and literary dissemination.

7. Conclusion

This study employs Professor Zhou Lingshun’s “Text-Behavior-Society” trinity evaluation system as the theoretical framework to conduct a comprehensive and systematic comparative analysis of two representative English translations of Lao She’s *Teahouse*—the Ying Ruocheng translation and the John Howard translation. From the “Text-Language” perspective, the Ying Ruocheng’s translation is characterized by a highly colloquial and performance-oriented approach, adopting extensive domestication strategies or semantic simplification for Beijing culture-loaded words, idioms, and dialects. Cultural imagery is

significantly diluted, and the sentence structure is concise and fluent, all serving the immediacy and performability of stage communication. In contrast, the Howard's translation prioritizes literariness and cultural accuracy: it tends to use foreignization strategies or literal translation to preserve the original imagery, Beijing flavor, and cultural depth as much as possible. The sentence structure strives to adhere to the original rhythm, with extensive annotations to bridge comprehension gaps, creating a literary integrity and linguistic meaning closer to the original work. From the "Behavior-Text" perspective, the differences presented in the "Text-Language" perspective stem from the fundamental differences in the translators' identity positioning and translation purposes.

Ying Ruocheng, as an actor, director, and translator, centers his translator behavior around a core pragmatic purpose: to create a script that can be successfully performed on the international stage and immediately understood and accepted by English-speaking audiences, which drives him to adopt pragmatically oriented domestication strategies. John Howard, as a seasoned sinologist and literary translator, centers his translator behavior around a strong truth-seeking purpose: to rigorously and completely present the linguistic artistry and socio-cultural depth of Lao She's *Teahouse* as a literary classic, driving him to choose truth-seeking oriented foreignization strategies. From the "Behavior-Society" perspective, both translations have achieved success in overseas dissemination but point to different social fields. The Ying translation has succeeded in the international performance market, proving its stage effectiveness; the Howard translation has been widely adopted in academic research, realizing its cultural dissemination value.

Through this study, not only were the characteristics of the two English translations of *Teahouse* and the differences in translator behavior deeply revealed, but the effectiveness and practicality of the "Text-Behavior-Society"

trinity evaluation system in drama translation criticism were also verified.

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