

# Finnish Plays in Hong Kong Translation

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## Abstract

Few Finnish plays have been exported to China. As a result, even fewer Finnish dramas have been translated into Hong Kong Cantonese. The **objective** of this article is to analyze the management of culture-specific items in translating Finnish plays into Hong Kong Cantonese. The theoretical backdrop for this article includes **Javier Aixelá's** (1996) culture-specific items; **Sirkku Aaltonen's** (2000) finding that translated drama reflects the ideology of the target culture more than that of the source culture; **Gideon Toury's** (1980) norm notion; and **Even-Zohar's** (1990) polysystem. I argue that, since Finnish culture is particularly unfamiliar to the Hong Kong audience, when the translator's approach of "naturalization" is largely adopted for rendering into the Hong Kong language the culture-specific items in Finnish plays, they are more acceptable to the HK audience.

The scope of the article includes culture-specific items -- proper names, socio-political concepts, religious references, idioms/slang, and everyday life objects -- in Chapman Chen's translations (2005a, 2007, 2009a) of Aleksis Kivi's *Kullervo*, Laura Ruohonen's *Olga*, and Reko Lundán's *Unnecessary People* -- the only TTs available. Acceptability of Chen's translation of *Olga* has been tested by sending a questionnaire to 30 participants in a scenography workshop based on the translated play. The study will show how choice of translation strategy for introducing a lesser known European drama to a populous Asian culture determines the effect it has on the target culture. The study will also shed light on Euro-Sino cultural differences.

## 1 Introduction

According to Jessica Yeung's (2007) survey, 922 Western plays were translated into Hong Kong Chinese (Cantonese) and performed there between 1962 and 2005. However, very few Finnish plays have been exported. Apart from Chapman Chen<sup>1</sup>'s

published Mandarin cum Cantonese translation (2005a; 2007) of Aleksis Kivi's (1860, 2002) *Kullervo*<sup>2</sup>, and his Cantonese translation of Laura Ruohonen's (1995; 2004) *Olga*<sup>3</sup>, only 9 have ever been translated into Chinese, and these are in standard Chinese, or Mandarin (6 of which are contained in Yu Zhiyuan [2007a; 2007b]). In fact, no Finnish plays have ever been performed in China except for certain parts of *Olga* (as translated by Chen) by a scenography workshop organized by the Hong Kong Theatre, Theatrespace, in 2009. Virtually no academic research has been conducted on Chinese translation of Finnish literature, let alone drama, with the exception of a few academic articles published by Chapman Chen (2005b; 2006, 2008a, 2008b). It is high time to start rectify this situation.

## 2 Objective

The purpose of this article is to analyze the management of culture-specific items in translating Finnish plays into Hong Kong Cantonese. The goal of the translator in this case is to translate the culture-specific items in such a way that the Hong Kong Chinese audience will find them acceptable and interesting, and yet also appreciate the Finnish culture and values as manifested in the plays. The only materials available for this purpose are Chapman Chen's translation of Aleksis Kivi's (1860) *Kullervo*, Laura Ruohonen's (1995/2004?) *Olga*, and Reko Lundán's (2003) play, *Tarpeettomia Ihmisiä* (Unnecessary People)<sup>4</sup>.

## 3 Hypothesis

Finnish culture and drama are particularly unfamiliar to the Hong Kong Cantonese speaking audience, even more unfamiliar than Anglo-Saxon culture and plays, which have been regularly performed in Hong Kong. On the whole, Hong Kong Chinese are not overly interested in totally alien cultures, politics, or foreign drama, etc. unless the play concerned is famous, e.g., Shakespeare's or Ibsen's work. It is, therefore, hypothesized that when the translation approach of naturalization is largely adopted for rendering into the Hong Kong Cantonese language the culture-specific items in Finnish plays, they will be more acceptable to the Hong Kong audience.

#### 4 Theories employed

**Javier Franco Aixelá** (1996: 58) defines culture-specific items as “those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem ... whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different inter-textual status in the [target] culture system.” He divides the treatment of culture-specific items in translation into **conservation** (repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic [non-cultural/literal] translation, extratextual gloss, intratextual gloss) and **substitution** (synonymy, universalization, naturalization, deletion, autonomous creation). Naturalization is defined by Aixelá as “bring[ing] the culture-specific item into the intertextual corpus felt as specific by the target language culture” (1996: 63). Many culture-specific items in the three Finnish plays concerned are handled with this approach in Chapman Chen’s translation. (Absolute) universalization is defined by Aixelá as a neutral reference with all foreign connotations deleted to replace the culture-specific item (1996: 63).

**Sirkku Aaltonen** (2000) argues that drama translation mirrors the ideologies of the translating ego more than it does the translated Other. Accordingly, current interests, concerns and ideologies of the Hong Kong audience, e.g. their unease about the re-interpretation of their mini-constitution by Beijing, are catered for and reflected in the choice of which Finnish play(s) to translate and in the translation approach adopted by Chen.

According to the polysystem theory of **Itamar Even-Zohar** (1990), in the course of translation, if indigenous literature is in a weak position, then translated works will tend to differ remotely from local literature, in order to absorb new forms of expression and thought for changing and reforming local literature. By contrast, if indigenous literature is in a powerful position, then translations of foreign works must defer to and align themselves with indigenous literature (Even-Zohar 1990: 11 - 30). This matches the development of Western drama in Hong Kong translation. Since the 1960s, Western drama in Hong Kong translation has prevailed in the theatres of Hong Kong. When local drama was still in its developmental stage between the 1960s and 1970s, it capitalized on or fed upon the achievements of Western drama and regard for the ‘original’ was shown through a strong tendency to repeat the narrative and structures of

the source text (cf. Chan 1992: 167 - 168).

Subsequently, the Joint Declaration in 1984 with its concept of “One Country – Two Systems” clearly marked the people of Hong Kong as a special kind of Chinese. Moreover, the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 united at least 1.5 million Hongkongers on a particular course, unprecedented in Hong Kong history. A Hong Kong identity was thus firmly established. Meanwhile, locally written drama had more or less matured. Examples of breakthrough pieces include Tsoi and To’s (1985) *Ngo hai Hoenggong Jan* (We are Hong Kong), Mandu James YC Cheung’s (1990) *Jan dou mougau Ban zi Gou* (One will naturally become virtuous when one no longer has desires) and To Kwok-wai’s (1993) *Namhoi Sapsaam Long* (The mad phoenix). Since then, translated plays have been shifting to a peripheral position, and have been more and more fashioned to fit into local ideology and poetics (cf. Fong 2000: 131). Chapman Chen’s translations of Finnish drama follow this trend of naturalization.

**Gideon Toury** (1980) argues that translators often sacrifice part of the **norms** of the source culture as well as try to break part of the norms of the target culture. (Norms are defined as standards or criteria established and accepted through long common practice in a culture or community regarding language, ideology, and power relationships.) Almost all translated texts represent a compromise between adherence to the norms of the source system and acceptability to those of the target system (Toury 1995). In order to educate the Chinese about Finnish culture as well as to enable the Chinese audience to relate to them, Chinese theatre translation of Finnish plays would have to strike a balance between the ideological and poetical norms of Finnish culture and those of Chinese culture. (In Chen’s translations, although the cultural specificity of certain items in the original is sometimes renounced in exchange for the target audience’s acceptance of the play as a whole, the Finnish culture and values<sup>5</sup> contained in the original in the form of plot, structure and characterization remain intact for the Chinese audience to appreciate.)

## 5 Method

For the purpose of discussion, **culture-specific items** are divided into proper names,

socio-political aspects, religious/mythological references, idioms/slang, and everyday life objects. Examples will be quoted from the translations concerned to illustrate the ways they are handled, which will be related to the theories above, taking into consideration the translator's subjectivity. The translator's parents came from Singapore, another former British colony. Born in Hong Kong, he grew up there and was educated there. His Master's degree thesis supervisor was British and his first doctoral dissertation supervisor American. Although he has never joined any political party, he has taken part in demonstrations in Hong Kong for democracy and freedom. He appreciates the British legacy of rule of law, human rights, reason, and tolerance. He also admires Finland for its realization of Laozi's ideal of a small peaceful country with a small population and Confucius' ideal welfare state in which the old and the young are cared for and everyone can realize their potential (Chen 2005c: 42).

The Hong Kong theatre, Theatrespace held a scenography workshop based on Chapman Chen's Cantonese translation of *Olga* between October 2008 and September 2009. Through the theatre, Chen distributed a questionnaire to the 30 participants in order to find out their response to the naturalization approach of the translation. Twenty responses were received in June 2009. Some of the survey findings will be employed in the analysis below.

## 5.1 Proper Names

In *Olga*, the names of many senior Finnish women are translated into those of Hong Kong movie stars of the fifties and sixties. For example, "Olga" is rendered as Au Gaawai (1940 - ); her neighbor, Lehtimäki as Lam Fung (1940 - 1976); Olga's sister-in-law, Taimi, as Tam Lanhing (1908 - 1981). Eighteen of the twenty respondents, in response to the question, "What do you think about the personal names in the translated play?", thought that the proper names of the characters in the translated play sound idiomatic, homely and appropriate. As pointed out by Thomas Y.K. Luk (2007: 214) and Lin Kehuan (2007: 89), when Hong Kong people are disappointed about the present and worried about the future during the postcolonial period, they tend to miss the past of Hong Kong. Nostalgia for the old Hong Kong has been reflected in many Hong Kong movies and plays since 1984, the year in which Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, sealing Hong Kong's fate. And as put by Chapman Chen (2008b: 23)), the

purpose of naturalization of the personal names in the play, *Olga*, is to “instill a sense of nostalgia in the Hong Kong audience and enhance their identification with the play”. In this connection, the subjectivity of the translator is that he likes old Cantonese movies. In addition, Chen (2009b) argues that “postcolonial HK drama translation reflects nostalgia for enlightened British rule and a need to negotiate with Mainland China as the second colonizer.”

## 5.2 Socio-political Aspects

In one section of *Olga*, in her loneliness and restlessness, *Olga*, the senior heroine of the play, picks up a Finnish law book and starts reading:

Excessive use of force for self-defense...Disturbing domestic peace...Serious Wounding...Nothing special. Employment of Women as Shepherdess Ordinance...Offense of a man endangering the integrity of a cow? When was this book released? (Flames up) The law of Finland is such a mess that it is difficult to tell what will happen when idiots of entire Europe<sup>6</sup> gather together and stir it up. Thank God. I won't have to witness that. (Ruohonen 2003: 53, Part 15) (My literal English translation)

These awkward Finnish laws are rendered by Chen into an article of the loophole-ridden Basic Law of Hong Kong as follows:

“If...the Legislative Council refuses to pass a budget or any other important bill introduced by the government, and if consensus still cannot be reached after consultations, the Chief Executive may dissolve the Legislative Council.” What kind of book is this? So full of traps and so malleable. No wonder it has to be reinterpreted by the National People's Congress so often. There being no upper time limit for "consultations," theoretically, they can be consulted until 2046, and by then my bones will have been used to beat the drum. (Chen 2007: 102-103)

The rewriting is inspired by an essay written by one of the most popular Hong Kong columnists, Chip Tsao (2005: 214). Concerning the subjectivity of the translator, Chapman Chen, who had worked as a full-time court interpreter for almost nine years,

thinks like Chip Tsao (2004: 148) that English is a rational language while Chinese is an emotional language, such that English is a more suitable language of law. In fact, Chen majored in English and minored in Chinese in his undergraduate years and he worked as a full time court interpreter in the Judiciary of the British Hong Kong government between 1988 and 1996. The Basic Law, the mini constitution of Hong Kong, has been interpreted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress thrice, and such interpretations have been regarded by many Hong Kong people, including Chapman Chen, as erosion of the rule of law of Hong Kong (cf. Zeldin 2004: 27). According to Chung Ting-yiu's Public Opinion Programme (POP) (2004), after every interpretation, the Hong Kong people's confidence in the Central and local governments always fell considerably.

Moreover, all twenty respondents to the questionnaire about *Olga* think positively of the Cantonese translation of the passage concerned. One remarks that it is "highly relevant to the political reality of Hong Kong." Another states that the interpretation of the Basic Law by the National People's Congress is a tricky practice that will eventually "marginalize" Hong Kong. Yet another claims that the passage "reveals a sincere solicitude about Hong Kong society." One respondent says that he/she feel "helpless" after reading the passage. Therefore, this kind of rewriting echoes Sirkku Aaltonen's theory that translated drama divulges more of the target language culture's ideology than the source language culture's.

### 5.3 Religious/Mythological Allusions

*Ahden*<sup>7</sup> *kartano* (booming mansion) into which Kullervo's sister plunges herself (58, ac. 3, sc. 2) is translated as the Chinese *Seoizingung* (Water Crystal Palace) of *Hoi Lung Wong* (sea dragon king). *Tuonela* (the Finnish rest home of the dead) (17, ac. 1; 59, ac. 3, sc. 2) is transformed into the Chinese *deifu* [underground mansion] or *Wongcyun* [Yellow Stream]. On the other hand, *Ukko*, the Finnish thunder god to whom the ghost of Kullervo's mother begs for the forgiveness of her son's grave sins (88, ac. 5, sc. 1), is replaced with the more universal "*soengtin* [upper sky/Heavens]", as, to quote Chen (2005b: 183), "the Chinese have a long tradition of worshipping heavens as the ruler of their fate." Here again naturalization and universalization are preferable to conservation,

for linguistic translation would not make sense to the Chinese audience. Extratextual gloss in the form of footnotes or endnotes is further out of the question for stage performance. Intratextual gloss, e.g., the mansion of Ahti the water god in the case of *Ahden kartano*, may help but would be a little too long. At any rate, Finnish mythological terms would be difficult for a Chinese audience to remember unless repeated a number of times and thus would not contribute to disseminating Finnish culture.

#### 5.4 Slang/idioms

In Lundán's *Unnecessary People*, Petri encourages his unemployed friend, Kari, to brace up himself by saying the Finnish idiom, "*Pidä lippu korkealla!* [hold the flag up high]" (Lundán 2003: 64; ac. 2, sc.3). Literally translated into Cantonese, this may suggest "erect your penis"! It is thus translated idiomatically as "*Zaanzyu* [hold up]" instead. In this case, adherence to the linguistic norm of the source language text is out of the question. The subjectivity of the translator is that he was born in Hong Kong and is thus very familiar with Hong Kong Cantonese slang and idioms.

#### 5.5 Everyday Life Objects

To quote Chapman Chen (2005b: 183), "As the major theme of *Kullervo* is revenge for the death of one's parents and dangerous love, coupled with a lot of bloodshed and clashes of swords, an ancient Chinese martial arts undertone [as a target language norm] is added to the play by the Chinese translator in order to increase its acceptability [in the Gideon Touryian sense] to the Chinese audience." Many a fighting movement in *Kullervo* is named in Chapman Chen's translation after the Chinese martial arts fashion. For instance, in Act 4, Scene 2, Tiera describes how *Kullervo* has skillfully and fiercely disposed of his enemies as follows:

*Kuin leimaus miekkansa vilahteli, ja nyrkkinsä, vieläpä kyynäpäätänsä ja jalkansakin aika survauksia antoi, ja näytti kuin olisi hän uiskennellut vihamiestensä seassa, joita hän ympäriltänsä viskeli kuin meren vahtoa.* (Kivi 2002:91)



[Like lightning, his sword flashed, and his fist, and also his elbow and feet were always dealing out blows, as if he were floating amidst his foes, whom he flung out of his realm like foam of the sea] (My literal English translation)

*Nyrkki* [fist], *kyynärpää* [elbow], *jalka* [foot] become in the translation (Chen 2005a: 180) *qinsau sankyun* [thousand-hand fist], *titsaa zoeng* [iron-sand palm], and *mojing goek* [shadowless foot], which are *kungfu* styles well-known to the Chinese. In this connection, the subjectivity of the translator is that he is very interested in Chinese *kungfu* fiction, TV drama and movies set in ancient times. In fact, the Chinese title of Chen's translation of *Kullervo, A Legend of Hate and Love around the Sea and the Lake*, is based on a Hong Kong ancient *kungfu* television series (Chen 2005c: 48).

In *Unnecessary People*, the teacher Petri relates to his mistress, Sonja, that his stewardess-wife has told him that she has an affair with a Malaysian pilot. Petri then indicates that it must be a European pilot instead, because Asian men usually have small penises (Lundán 2003: 103, sc. 5, ac. 2). In order to avoid offending the Chinese audience, this is reversed in the translation such that Petri says that the adulterer could not be European on the grounds that when his wife watches pornographic videos, she always yells that the white men's penis is so menacingly huge that it could fuck people to death. Here the importance of acceptability to the target audience completely overrides that of adherence to the original. As an ethnic Chinese man, the translator knows well the inferiority complex of Chinese males in general with regard to the size of their penises in comparison with their Western counterparts.

## 6 Conclusion and Significance

In conclusion, having performed more than nine hundred translated plays from the West, Hong Kong has made a very significant contribution to drama translation and thus cultural exchange between the West and the East. Before the mid-eighties, when Hong Kong drama was immature, conservation dominated the scene of Hong Kong drama translation. Since Hong Kong local drama and identity shifted to the central position in the mid-eighties, naturalization as defined by **Aixelá** (1996) has become more important as a drama translation approach. This fits in with **Even-Zohar's** (1990) polysystem

theory. Finnish plays have never been performed in Hong Kong except pieces of *Olga* as translated by Chen, and the only Finnish plays translated into Hong Kong Chinese are those by Chapman Chen – Kivi’s *Kullervo*, Ruohonen’s *Olga*, and Lundán’s *Tarpeettomia Ihmisiä*. As Finnish culture is unfamiliar to the Hong Kong audience, who are rarely interested in anything totally alien, naturalization is largely adopted for rendering Finnish plays. Extrinsic culture-specific items, as defined by **Aixelá** (1996), such as proper names, socio-political aspects, religious/mythological items, slang/idioms, and everyday life objects, are often “sacrificed” in exchange for successful delivery of intrinsic contents – Finnish values, national character, artistic structure, etc., echoing **Gideon Toury’s** argument that the translators often renounce part of the norms of the source culture as well as try to break part of the norms of the target culture (1995: 53-69). Meanwhile, to follow **Sirkku Aaltonen’s** drama translation theory (2000), Chen’s translations of Finnish cultural markers also mirror the ideology of Hong Kong people. The analysis of the handling of these items has taken into consideration the translator’s subjectivity and background. The naturalization approach of translating *Olga* is endorsed by most of the participants of a Hong Kong scenography workshop based on Chen’s Cantonese of the play.

Only when the Hong Kong audience becomes more accustomed to Finnish drama, will the approach of conservation be adopted more. Translation of Finnish drama into the language of Hong Kong may be regarded as a springboard from which to introduce Finnish drama and culture into China as a whole. The findings will be a useful reference to drama translators and theatre practitioners in that they illustrate how the drama of a lesser known Western culture may be introduced into a “major” Asian culture through naturalization. And because cross-cultural issues have been discussed in terms of culture-specific items, light will be shed on the theoretical study of translation between Chinese and Western languages as well as intercultural studies in general.

## Research Material

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<sup>1</sup> “Chapman Chen” refers to the author of this article. However, as this is a piece of scholarly writing, I invariably use my personal name for the sake of objectivity.

<sup>2</sup> Chapman Chen’s translation of *Kullervo* consists of a Cantonese version and a modern standard Chinese version in the same book. The plot of the play is as follows. When Kullervo is a child, his uncle, Unto, tries to massacre the whole family of Kullervo’s father. Kullervo is enslaved by Unto and when Kullervo grows up, he is sold to Ilmarinen. Humiliated by Ilmarinen’s beautiful wife from the North, Kullervo kills her. In his flight, he finds that his parents have survived, but does not get along with them well. Wandering in the forest one day, he has intercourse with a young girl, and discovers that she is his sister afterwards. Out of shame, she commits suicide. Kullervo, in coalition with Unto’s enemies, finally exterminates Unto and his family. When he finds that his parents have perished out of grief for their dead daughter and his best friend has gone mad, he kills himself with his own sword.

<sup>3</sup> One night, a young thief called Rundis breaks into the apartment of an elderly lady named Olga, who lives alone. When Olga discovers Rundis, she obliges him to sit down and questions him as to why he became a burglar. The two then begin to chat and argue fervently about a lot of things. While most relatives and friends of Olga try to use her, she and Rundis gradually become good friends. Subsequently, escorting Olga to look for her childhood house in the countryside and trying to protect her, Rundis is

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wounded by a mayor. Before Rundis attends the court to be tried, he bids farewell to Olga and the two reveal the profound love they have developed for each other. Finally, Olga dies alone.

<sup>4</sup> Chapman Chen is currently translating the play from Finnish into Cantonese and Mandarin, which will be published in 2010. The play is about two middle-aged couples. Kari, a middle-aged mechanic, is laid off by his company which has transferred its plant to Vietnam. Whereas his wife, Tuula, is promoted to store manager, Kari has to stay at home looking after their three-year-old son. Petri, a primary school teacher, is Tuula and Kari's family friend. Petri's wife is a stewardess. Petri is tired of his heavy teaching workload and bored by his married life. He has an affair with Sonia, a young colleague of Tuula. Kari, deeply frustrated in his unemployment, starts physically abusing Tuula. One night, he hits her head so hard that he thinks she is dead and he tries to commit suicide. He is rescued but he becomes a vegetable, while Tuula survives and forgives him.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, from the point of view of Chapman Chen, the Finnishness of *Kullervo* is the raw energy, the independence, and the straightforwardness of Kullervo as compared with *kungfu* characters in Chinese martial arts fiction (Chen 2006: 104-105). That of *Olga* is the intelligence and toughness of elderly Finnish women and the Finns' concern with environmental protection and heritage conservation.

<sup>6</sup> Finland joined the EU in 1995, and the Union then began to have the power to cause certain changes in Finnish laws, especially regarding agriculture.

<sup>7</sup> Ahti is the Finnish water god, who lives a gloomy damp life in a wave-lashed, cloud-shrouded cliff, putting the world into whirlpools.