

An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Creative Treason in Goldblatt's Translation of *Frog*

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Literary translation should not solely focus on “what to translate”, but also on “how to translate”, extending the perspective to the target audience and environment. It is crucial to recognize that translation involves more than rendering words; it entails navigating cultural differences and facilitating literary communication during the process of language conversion. By comparing and contrasting Mo Yan's work of “蛙” with Howard Goldblatt's English translation *Frog* from both the two aspects of language and culture and the four perspectives of alienation and naturalization, deletion and addition, processing of address and dialogues, symbols of animal cultural, this study explores the phenomenon of creative treason in literary translation, and provides a specific and in-depth analysis to offer valuable insights for the translation of Chinese literature.

Keywords: creative treason, *Frog*, translation, cultural differences

Literary translation is not only to convert one text into another, but also to make an accurate grasp of the cultural characteristics and ideological connotations of the original text, and make appropriate changes on the basis of faithfulness to the original text. The success of literary translation should not only focus on “what to translate”, but also on “how to translate”, expand the perspective to the receiving group and the receiving environment, and realize that the translation of words is only an appearance, but the essence is the cultural difference and literary exchange in the process of language conversion. It can be said that the translator gives a second life to the literary work, which profoundly affects the popularity of the work abroad. The English translation of *The Frogs* helped author Mo Yan take the Nobel Prize for Literature in one go, which is undoubtedly a great success, and its dissemination and acceptance overseas cannot be separated from the translator Howard Goldblatt's second creation. This paper compares Mo Yan's work *Frogs* and Goldblatt's English translation, and specifically explains and analyzes the phenomenon of creative rebellion, so as to provide a reference for the translation of Chinese literature.

Introduction to *Frog*

Frog is a full-length magical realism novel written by contemporary Chinese author Mo Yan, first published in 2009. Spanning the 1950s to the beginning of the 21st century, the story is set against the backdrop of the ups and downs of rural fertility in New China over the past 60 years, and uses the experience of Wan Xin,

a female doctor's aunt, who has been practicing obstetrics and gynecology for more than 50 years, to paint a picture of the arduous and complex implementation of family planning policies, revealing sensitive social issues while portraying a group of characters of different shapes and sizes. The novel was awarded the 8th Mao Dun Literary Award in 2011. Subsequently, in 2012, Mo Yan achieved a historic milestone as the first Chinese author to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature because of *Frog*. The English version of *Frog* was skillfully translated by renowned American sinologist and translator, Howard Goldblatt. Initially published in Australia in 2014, it later made its way to the UK and the US in 2015. Its publication coincided with its inclusion in the Washington Post's prestigious "2015 Novels to Watch" list. This successful publication and distribution of the English translation significantly amplified the global appeal and popularity of *Frog*.

Analysis of Creative Treason in the English Translation of *Frog*

Creative treason was first proposed by French literary sociologist Robert Escarpit, who explains in his book *Sociology of Literature* that "it is always an act of creative treason, but it is still treason because it puts the work into a system of references (linguistic, in this example) for which it was not originally conceived-creative, because it gives new reality to the work in providing it with the possibility of a new literary interchange with a larger public and because it assures not only mere survival but a second existence" (Escarpit, 1971, p. 85). From this perspective, creative treason in translation involves more than superficial changes to the language's form; it also allows the translator to make decisions on whether to creatively adapt the text based on the cultural characteristics and ideological connotations of the target country, while remaining faithful to the original ideas and expressions.

Howard Goldblatt, the English translator of *Frog*, possesses a nuanced understanding of Chinese culture, owing to his prior study experience in China. During the process of translating Mo Yan's work, Goldblatt adeptly navigated the differences in cultural concepts, historical development, and ideological connotations between China and the United States. His flexible approach to translation garnered the approval and support of the original author, Mo Yan. The translation exhibits a noticeable creative treason, primarily evident in two levels: linguistic and cultural adaptations, including alienation and naturalization, deletion and addition, processing of address and dialogues, symbols of animal cultural. This scholarly and culturally sensitive translation not only showcases Goldblatt's expertise but also contributes to an enriched cross-cultural literary exchange, further enhancing the global appreciation and recognition of Mo Yan's masterpiece *Frog*.

Creative Treason at the Level of Language

Alienation and Naturalization

Alienation and naturalization, initially introduced by American translator Lawrence Venuti, are key characteristics of personalized translation. "Alienation" entails the translator adhering closely to the author's expressions in the source language to convey the original content effectively. These two concepts are essentially opposite yet complementary. On the other hand, "naturalization" involves adopting expressions familiar to the target language readers to effectively convey the original content.

(ST) 那些曾以人体器官或身体部位命名的孩子，也大都改成雅名，当然也有没改的，譬如陈耳，譬如陈眉。
(莫言, 2015, p. 7)

(TT) Most of those who were named the earlier way have adopted more conventional names, most but not all. We still have Chen Er (Ears) and Chen Mei (Brow). (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 17)

In the original text, characters with names derived from body organs or body parts, such as “陈耳” and “陈眉,” are directly transliterated as “Chen Er (Ears)” and “Chen Mei (Brow).” Throughout the subsequent passages, the titles remain consistently transliterated, except for the initial appearance where the meaning of the transliterated words is introduced within parentheses. This reflective practice of direct transliteration in later sections indicates the alienation introduced by the translation process.

(ST) ……得知八路军在他眼皮底下建了一座医院，医院院长就是把死马医活的神医万六府。(莫言, 2015, p. 16)

(TT) He learned that the Eighth Route Army had established a hospital right under his nose, and that the medical skills of its director, Wan Liufu, were responsible for saving the life of his horse. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 25)

In the original text, the phrase “把死马医活” is rendered in the translation as “were responsible for saving the life of his horse,” skillfully avoiding a literal translation of the word “死.” The term “死” in Chinese carries the direct meaning of “the end of life,” but in this context, it signifies that the horse is severely injured but not deceased. Translating “死马” directly as “dead horse” could mislead native English readers, as it might imply that the horse has completely lost its life characteristics. Thus, the translator astutely opted for a translation that conveys the essence of the phrase while preserving clarity and avoiding potential confusion for the target audience.

(ST) 他的须发已经全白，但面色红润，气定神闲，颇有几分仙风道骨。(莫言, 2015, p. 236)

(TT) His hair and beard had turned white, but his complexion was as ruddy as ever; composed and serene, he was a nearly transcendent figure. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 226)

In the original text, “仙风道骨” is used to describe a person’s demeanor and elegance, which is elegant and unassuming. In traditional Chinese culture, immortals are immortal beings, transcendent, handsome and ethereal. Taoism is one of the three major religions in Chinese tradition, which advocates the attitude of purity and indifference, not competing and not desiring to deal with the worldly life, and the spirit of “我命在我不在天” to practice, through various Taoist practices, to unite with the Tao and to become an immortal god. It can be seen that “仙风道骨” is only a short four-word idiom but contains two weighty traditional Chinese cultural meanings. In the Western cultural system, there are also ancient Greek gods such as Zeus and Hera, but their cultural characteristics are completely different from those of the Chinese immortals. Taoism, as the only indigenous Chinese religion that originated in China and was founded by Chinese people, is so culturally different from the West that it is difficult to attract the attention of the Western public, and its circulation is even smaller. The translator skillfully avoids translating “仙” and “道” by omitting the explanation of these two cultural symbols and replacing them with “transcendent”. Using “transcendent” instead of “仙风道骨” to describe Hao Dashou can achieve the same effect of character praise.

Deletion and Addition

Cultural variations and distinct linguistic characteristics among different languages inevitably lead to the inherent “betrayal” of the original text in literary translation. It is important to recognize that literary translation

is not a simple word-for-word or phrase-for-phrase endeavor. Instead, it involves a meticulous adjustment of words and sentence structures to accommodate language disparities and meet the specific objectives of the translation, while striving for coherence in semantics and ideology.

(ST) 姑姑的讲话大多是以这样几句话开场：敲锣卖糖，各干一行。干什么吆喝什么。三句话不离本行。我今天要讲的就是计划生育…… (莫言, 2015, p. 63)

(TT) Gugu's announcements invariably opened in the same way: People do what they're best at and peddle the goods they have. I'll stay with mine, so today I want to talk to you about family planning…… (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 73)

Mo Yan, being a representative of “root literature”, incorporates abundant slang and colloquialisms in his vernacular literary works, giving them a distinct Chinese folklore essence. In this excerpt, the phrase “敲锣卖糖，各干一行” exemplifies a typical rhyming colloquialism, and “干什么吆喝什么。三句话不离本行” presents an expressive adaptation of the proverb. The imagery of gongs being commonly seen in the early streets of China adds a vivid dimension for Chinese readers. However, given that the English-speaking world may not be familiar with such scenes, Goldblatt chooses to omit the phrase “干什么吆喝什么。三句话不离本行” and replaces it with a more easily understandable expression “People do what they're best at and peddle the goods they have”. As unfamiliar descriptions are replaced with expressions that align with English readers' daily language habits, this substitution ensures the ease of acceptance in the English-speaking world.

(ST) 阴雨连绵，道路断绝，河水暴涨，外省前来购买吾乡所产大蜜桃的车辆，一辆也没有到来。(莫言, 2015, p. 186)

(TT) For days on end it was cloudy and drizzly; the roads were disrupted, keeping the buyers of our local peaches from getting through. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 186)

The meaning of the selected sentence is that vehicles buying large peaches could not reach the township of Gaomi in Northeast China because of excessive precipitation. The first three phrases “阴雨连绵，道路断绝，河水暴涨” are powerful and concise, and they vividly depict the picture of the road being blocked by the continuous rainfall. In fact, however, the latter part of the text refers to the inaccessibility of vehicles rather than boats, so it can be seen that the description of the “河水暴涨” is not helpful to the development of the plot here. As a matter of fact, in the original text, the description of the river serves more to create a gloomy atmosphere through the scenery and to express the character's anxious and disappointed state of mind. However, Western literature does not pay much attention to the depiction of mood, and there is no special mood in the literary theories of Western countries. The direct omission of the description of the river in the translation, directly expressed as “it was cloudy and drizzly” has accurately conveyed the meaning of the original text, which is an appropriate deletion of the conversion, but also a typical creative rebellion.

Creative Treason at the Level of Culture

Cultural differences are common, and exploring literature from different countries provides an opportunity to experience diverse cultures. Therefore, it is essential to approach cultural differences with a tolerant attitude of “harmony in diversity.” However, the disparities between Chinese and Western cultures necessitate appropriate “rebellion” during the translation process of Chinese works. This is done to ensure the reading

experience of English readers and overcome cultural barriers that might hinder their understanding. The aim is to achieve an ideal state of “beauty and harmony” in the translated work, where cultural differences are acknowledged and addressed to create a cohesive and enjoyable reading experience for the target audience.

Processing of Address and Dialogues

(ST) 老师我们吃煤，您要不要尝尝？王胆在前排座位上举煤大喊……（莫言，2015，p. 12）

(TT) Want some, Teacher Yu? called out Wang Dan, who sat in the front row…… (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 21)

Traditional Confucian culture not only emphasizes benevolence and ethics but also places significant value on respect and propriety. Throughout history, Chinese society has held Confucian values in great esteem, and the influence of Confucianism has permeated every aspect of Chinese life. Wang's title “您” is a term of respect used to address his teacher, seniors, and superiors. However, the Western world, as the primary user of the English language, advocates principles of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of natural human rights. While students in the Western context still show respect to their teachers, the classroom setting often fosters a more egalitarian relationship between teachers and students. Hence, during the translation process, the honorific was omitted, resulting in the phrase “Want some, Teacher Yu?”. This adaptation aligns better with the language habits of English readers and reflects the more egalitarian nature of the Western educational context.

Animal Cultural Symbols

(ST) 田桂花，别耍死狗了，打你算轻的，应该送你进班房！（莫言，2015，p. 23）

(TT) Tian Guihua, stop the phoney act. You got off lightly with only being struck. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 33)

(ST) 多年之后，我才知道，姐姐跑得急，摔了个狗抢屎，那碗面条泼了，碗也碎了。（莫言，2015，p. 30）

(TT) Years later I learned that in her haste, my sister stumbled, spraying the soupy noodles everywhere as she dropped the bowl and broke it. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 39)

The traditional cultural connotation of “dog” varies greatly between the East and the West. In Chinese culture, most of the idioms and proverbs about dogs are derogatory in nature. In English culture, however, dogs are the closest, faithful and trustworthy friends of human beings, and many idioms about dog imagery are often used to describe the daily life and behavior of human beings, with positive connotations... and American people generally have dogs, and consider dogs as the closest friends of human beings (Wang, 2018). The difference in cultural connotation has led to creative treason in the English-Chinese literary translation of the term “dog.” When translating derogatory expressions involving “dog” in the original text, such as “别耍死狗了” and “摔了个狗抢屎”, the translator directly omits the term “dog” and employs similar expressions like “stop the phoney act” and “stumbled.” These alternative expressions effectively convey the same expression effect while respecting the cultural sensibilities of English readers. This can be regarded as a successful instance of creative treason, as it demonstrates how adapting the language can ensure cultural relevance and maintain the intended impact of the original text in the target language.

Typical Mistranslations in *Frogs*

Despite being a world-renowned sinologist and having received numerous translation awards, Howard Goldblatt, the translator of *Frog*, still unintentionally makes translation errors during the translation process.

(ST) 用筷子不得劲，索性用上了“皮箊箸”，大把抓着往嘴里塞。(莫言, 2015, p. 31)

(TT) His pointed chopsticks were hard to use, so I dug in with my meat hooks, cramming food into my mouth. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 41)

In the original text, “箊箸” refers to a long-handled ladle-shaped utensil made of bamboo, wicker, or wire, used for fishing items from oil or soup due to its water-leaking properties. The quotation marks added to the term indicate its special meaning. Contextually, Aunt Wanxin’s bold and unconventional nature during her childhood is conveyed through this metaphor. Here, “箊箸” symbolizes Aunt Wanxin’s hands, as she preferred to eat directly with her hands rather than using chopsticks, reflecting her free-spirited character vividly. Regrettably, the translator misunderstood the original meaning and mistranslated “箊箸” as “meat hooks”. While this mistranslation does not impede comprehension, it fails to capture the essence and intrigue of the original expression.

(ST) 我们趴在窗台上，看着他像卡通中的人物一样，迈着大步，向小区对面的儿童游乐场走去。那里，有一辆过山车忽隐忽现。(莫言, 2015, p. 233)

(TT) So we went to the window, where we sprawled against the sill and watched him clomp like a cartoon character on his way to the playground opposite our housing compound, where the funicular railcar hove in and out of view on its way up the mountain. (Goldblatt, 2014, p. 224)

“过山车” is not a literal car that goes up a mountain but rather an amusement park ride, commonly known as a roller coaster. The translator’s rendition of “the funicular railcar hove in and out of view on its way up the mountain” reflects a significant misinterpretation. However, it is important to consider that this translation was published in 2014, while the *English Translation and Writing Standards in Public Services* were introduced in 2017, and until then, “过山车” was required translating into Roller Coaster. If the translator was not previously familiar with this amusement park equipment, the mistranslation based on the literal meaning becomes more understandable. As Xie Tianzhen appropriately stated, “Excluding translation errors caused by irresponsible and abusive translations, mistranslations are of unique research value. Because in the mistranslation, collisions between different culture, distortion and deformation are particularly distinct and vividly reflected, conveying the misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the acceptance and dissemination of foreign culture” (Xie, 2013, p. 150). The unconscious mistranslation has its own reason for existence.

Conclusion

Creative treason is an inherent aspect of literary translation practice, serving as a crucial means for translators to achieve a heightened level of fidelity to the original work. In the case of *Frog*, Howard Goldblatt places considerable emphasis on maintaining consistency with the original text while remaining faithful to its essence. As a result, the translation not only faithfully reproduces the ideological connotation and cultural characteristics of the original content but also adheres to the language habits of the target language readers in

terms of its expression. This successful application of creative treason serves as an effective exemplar of Chinese literary translation.

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