

Review on Translation Studies of *Red Sorghum*

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Abstract: Since the publication of *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* translated by Howard Goldblatt, a great number of long and elaborate theses has sprung up. Theoretically, many theoretical viewpoints have been employed to analyze this novel, but in a cumbersome jumble. On the aspect of the selection of linguistic data, superficially distinctive linguistic units tend to be selected more frequently as the research subjects, while those representing the unique style of the original text are less likely to be comprehensively researched. Methodologically, subjective text analysis method takes the upper hand, while only a few scholars employ the objective and exhaustive methods.

Keywords: *Red Sorghum*, Howard Goldblatt, Mo Yan, translation

INTRODUCTION

Deeply influenced by the social realism of Lu Xun and the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mo Yan, Chinese contemporary novelist, represents a mysterious and transcendental world to the readers home and abroad. In his novels, stories are narrated in a unique style, full of subjective sensations and unconstrained imaginations. On October 11, 2012, he won the Nobel Prize in literature for his work that "with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary". Mo Yan becomes the first Chinese writer who won this honor.

Goran Malmqvist, the only judge in the committee who understands Chinese, suggests that capable and responsible translators are in urgent need to help Chinese literary works comprehended and appreciated in the world by those who do not speak Chinese. Some of Mo Yan's works have been translated into English, which should be partially attributed to the American sinologist Howard Goldblatt. Mo Yan's representative work *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* is translated by him.

This novel is written in a terse style characterized by non-chronological storytelling and pseudo-third-person viewpoint. It is perceived in the magic-realistic genre due to its combination of folk-tale elements, myth and superstition. It has been attracting an increasing attention among scholars since its publication. When Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in 2012, translation studies of this novel immediately became a hotspot. Given that scientific research usually develops at an imbalanced speed, the translation studies of *Red Sorghum* can be divided into three stages, each with distinct features. In this essay, every stage will be reviewed from the following three aspects: macroscopic research on various theoretical bases, microscopic research of linguistic data and research methods.

INITIAL STAGE: 2004-2012

Mainly due to *Red Sorghum's* unique stylistic features and the theoretical development of translatology, values of its English version gradually enter into the view of the translation circle.

On the one hand, translation studies experienced "the cultural turn" in the 1980s. Scholars have realized that translation is greatly and frequently affected by diverse and distinctive cultures, thinking modes and national psychology and regarded translation as a transmission of cultures. Accordingly, cultural elements, since then, have been involved in translation studies and played a critical role in translation practice.

On the other hand, *Red Sorghum* is worthy of research due to its unique historical and cultural features. The plot of this novel revolves around three generations of a Shandong family. The story is, in fact, his family's saga, wine workshop owners at first and then resistance fighters during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which carries distinctive cultural features. At the same time, Mo Yan subtly narrates the story in the dialect of Gaomi Township, Shandong Province. Therefore, how to transmit the historical and local cultural characteristics of this novel to the westerners is and will remain the focus of translation studies.

MACROSCOPIC RESEARCH ON VARIOUS THEORETICAL BASES

Influenced by "the cultural turn" in translatology, researchers in this stage tend to explore how cultural elements influence the translation of *Red Sorghum*. Theories involved include Memetics by Chesterman, modern hermeneutics, reception theory, cultural power theory, translation ethics, translation as adaptation and selection, and so on.

Jiang [1], under the guidance of memetic theory, elaborates how Goldblatt successfully transmits to western readers the memes containing abundant Chinese culture in *Red Sorghum* and illustrates how translation norms, namely expectancy norms and professional norms, influence the transmission of cultural memes. The whole novel is abundant in intense Chinese folk culture. The translator adopts certain appropriate translation strategies to abide by the translation norms and help folk cultural memes survive in the new western cultural environment to the greatest extent [1]. At the same time, English version's success can be attributed to the observance of expectancy norms and professional norms. Before translation, Goldblatt has rationally abided by the expectancy norms, such as, correctly selecting the source text, making reasonable judgment on the expectations of target readers as well as the target market. During the translation process, the translator adopts foreignization strategy and information change strategy to help cultural memes favorably pass the four successive stages of transmission and finally gain the capability to survive in the target cultural environment.

Based on modern hermeneutics and the reception theory, Y. Hu [2] studies the cultural misreading of the English version of *Red Sorghum*. She [3] claims that cultural misreading may arise mainly from subjective reasons, that is, translator's presupposition and subjectivity. Such Goldblatt's presupposition as intrinsic ideas, recognizing ability and linguistic background leads to the cultural misreading in the English version. Besides some subjective elements: political ideas, aesthetic taste and moral values, may also contribute to the cultural misreading. Hu [2] also analyzes the various expectancies of readers in both source language and target language. With the purpose to satisfy the expectancy of readers in target language, Goldblatt's adjustment of the source text is perceived as one of the reasons resulting in cultural misreading.

Zuo [4] illustrates the reception and variation of the *Red Sorghum* in American from the perspective of cultural power disparity. Chinese culture and western culture enjoy unequal status and power in western countries, which determines Goldblatt's final selection of the source text and his translation strategies. In many

cases, he tends to meet the psychological needs of western readers [4].

On the basis of Chesterman's five models of translation ethics, Chen [5] studies the cultural mistranslation and its effects. On individual aspect, Goldblatt's historical background, ethical values and the English version's target readership can be regarded as one of the reasons of cultural mistranslation [5]. As to theoretical aspect, the inherent conflicts among the five models of translation ethics themselves may lead to cultural mistranslation (Ibid: 62-68). Despite certain negative effects, cultural mistranslation usually has produced various positive effects: enrichment of literature and culture in the target language environment, enhancement of the sense of translator's ethics. In the English version of *Red Sorghum*, positive effects of cultural mistranslation, to a large degree, outweigh its negative effects.

C. F. Li [6] bases his analysis of Goldblatt's translation process of *Red Sorghum* on Adaptation and Selection Theory and suggests that the English version can be conceived as an appropriate selection in order to adapt to the eco-environment of the target language during the translating process. In the pre-translating phase, Goldblatt has been selected as the translator by the source text, while in the while-translating phase, he selects corresponding translation strategies and techniques to adapt to the target language world. Wise and smart selections in the two phases boost the wide acceptance and popularity of *Red Sorghum* in the western world.

MICROSCOPIC RESEARCH OF LINGUISTIC DATA

Despite of "the cultural turn", some scholars still employ the traditional philosophy of translation to analyze the linguistic data in *Red Sorghum*, including data representative of the stylistic features and narrative elements.

Dai [7] and J. Wang [8] adopt the "deceptive equivalence" in stylistics to analyze the translator's deliberate "revision" of the original text. Most cases, selected from the contrast between the original text and the target text, can provide evidence that "deceptive equivalence" in *Red Sorghum* fails to represent the artistic style of the original version [7].

From the narratological viewpoint, Lv [9] compares and contrasts the spatial and temporal relationship, story representation and plot reconfiguration between the English version and the Chinese version. In the Chinese version, the story develops in a twisted and distorted plot which is interrupted frequently by flashbacks and flash forwards, breaking the traditional chronological development of

the story. Whereas Goldblatt brings a more compact and continuous story to western readers through reconfiguration of the events, omission of the author's comments and unimportant incidents, contributing to the success of the English version in western cultural environment [9].

RESEARCH METHODS

In this stage, most researchers adopt only one method, that is, text analysis, whereas Lv [9] combines text analysis, contrastive study, graphic statistics, deduction and induction. Although text analysis has somewhat explanatory power, the selection of text tends to be subjective, covering only a limited number of cases. Compared with graphic statistics, deduction and induction, case study is less persuasive.

PEAK STAGE: 2013-2014

In October, 2012, Mo Yan won the Nobile Prize in literature. Due to the fact that most of the winners of the prize are westerners, Mo Yan's Nobile Prize award immediately draws scholars' high degree of concern about the English translation of his novels, *Red Sorghum* in particular. Within a short period of two years, there emerge a great amount of research achievements of the English version of *Red Sorghum*.

Compared with the previous stage, on the aspect of macroscopic research of theoretical bases, scholars tend to adopt theories from a wider range of disciplines, covering culturology, linguistics, sociology, translatology etc.; on the aspect of microscopic research of linguistic data, linguistic units of different levels have entered into the research scope, resulting in a higher quality of research achievements; on the aspect of research method, an increasing number of scholars combine both objective and subjective research methods together, making their conclusions more persuasive.

MACROSCOPIC RESEARCH ON VARIOUS THEORETICAL BASES

Dong [10], Liu [11] and Ma [12] focus on the rewriting cases of *Red Sorghum* and divide them into three categories: ideological rewriting, cultural rewriting and social rewriting. As to ideological rewriting, the translator tends to delete or replace some elements in the Chinese version; when it comes to cultural rewriting, Goldblatt frequently address them by addition, deletion, transliteration, transfer or free translation; with regard to social rewriting, Goldblatt applies amplification strategy and omission strategy for culture-loaded words, transliteration strategy and conversion strategy for proper nouns, free translation for folk adages.

Wu [13], Feng [14] and B. Wang [15] applies Skopos Theory to analyze the culture-loaded words,

marked collocations, etc. With subtle adjustment, the English version facilitates western readers' understanding of the novel (Feng, 2014: 13-21). In some cases, the English version tends to be more coherent and cohesive by adjusting the order of the satellite events, addition of logical connectives, splitting and merging sentences, etc. (Ibid, 22-30). No matter what the translator has done, he aims to represent the style of the Chinese version.

Q. Li [16] studies the subjectivity of the translator with reference to Steiner's Hermeneutic Motion, which subdivides the translation process into four stages: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. The trust of *Red Sorghum* cannot be parted from Goldblatt's personal interests, aesthetic values, life experiences and the expectation of the translation. In the second stage, Goldblatt subjectively aggresses into the source text and addresses the conflicts between source text and target text, and finalizes his own understanding. At the incorporation stage, the translator, by means of literal translation, addition and omission, translates the text on the basis of his own subjective initiation, with the aim to cater the psychology of the target readers and meet the needs of the publisher. In the compensation stage, Goldblatt attempts to restore the cultural information lost in the previous three stages. All in all, translator's subjectivity is the essential key to the success of the English translation of this novel.

F. Qian [17] and X. Zhou [18] employ Toury's Translation Norms to analyze Goldblatt's translating behavior and the reason why the English version gains great popularity in western market. Guided under the preliminary norms, F. Qian [17] argues that western readers' expectation of Chinese historical stories, Goldblatt's love of Mo Yan's novels, and the preference of the publisher all contribute to Goldblatt's selection of this novel. Target readers' preference to natural and idiomatic language leads the translator to adopt domestication strategy (Ibid: 27-34). In the translating process, Goldblatt mainly employs domestication to enhance the English version's readability, as well as foreignization strategy to preserve and transmit the original flavor to the largest degree (Ibid: 34-56).

L. Zhou. [19] explores the dynamic development of the translator's identity. The English version mainly embodies Goldblatt's identity of an American, a translator, as well as an individual who appreciates and admires Mo Yan, enthusiastic about Chinese and proficient in both English and Chinese. All these identities determine that his translation is a kind of creative betrayal.

Zhu [20] and Huang [21] adopt Verschueren's Adaptation Theory to analyze the English version from

cognitive, social and cultural perspectives. Non-textual elements, such as the selection of the source text, the social identity of the translator and the publisher, the "material" conditions of the translated work partially lead to the success of the English version; textual elements, such as modifications, deletions, addition of cohesive devices, etc. help the English version adapt to the context of the target language [20]. Huang focuses on the omission and studies how the translator achieves the adaptation at the level of culture, society and cognition through omissions. It is found that omissions are made mainly to adapt to the communicative world, and the selection of omissions is a dynamic process [21].

The Relevance Theory has been selected by Qin [22] as the theoretical basis to analyze the pragmatic enrichment in the English version of *Red Sorghum*. When addressing linguistic-related expressions, Goldblatt mainly employs the narrowing method, whereas broadening method usually tends to be employed as a cultural device when the cultural-related utterance is addressed [22].

Nan [23] contrasts some sentences and paragraphs between the source text and the target text on the basis of Thematic Progression Theory, Hyper-theme Theory and Periodicity Theory. Though the thematic progression pattern of the source text is complex, it should be retained in the English version; for fear that the information structure and rhetoric intentions in the Chinese version may be destroyed. Hyper-theme Theory and Periodicity Theory can account for most of the restructuring and rewriting phenomenon in the translated version, which enhance its readability and acceptability [23].

Y. Li [24] and Zhao [25] explore the stylistic features of the English version. The former argues that Goldblatt tends to employ longer words to express concrete meanings, varied sentences in medium length to enhance the readability and acceptability, frequent use of conjunctions to achieve cohesion [24]. Based on the theory of stylistic markers, the contrasts of the lexical markers, the markers of figures of speech and textual markers between the Chinese version and the English version reveal that in most cases, the English version represents the style of the Chinese version and is well accepted by western readers [25].

H. Zhou [26] examines how zone activation in cognitive linguistics is executed in the English version of *Red Sorghum*. Through comparison and contrast, the non equivalent phenomenon between the source text and the target text reflects the cognitive difference between English language and Chinese language, and zone activation methods can enhance the readability and acceptability of the translated version [26]

Zheng [27] and Ge [28] make reference to Bourdieusian sociological theories and explore the reasons why the English version *Red Sorghum* can be accepted by western readers. The theme, historical background, political elements and post-modern style of *Red Sorghum* can meet the requirements of contemporary literary field [28]. The movie *Red Sorghum* enhances the cultural, economic, social and imagery capitals (Ibid: 27-29). The following habitus: Goldblatt's selecting his favorable source text to translate into English, his loyalty to the source text and creativity in his translation ensures the high quality of the translated version, meeting the requirements of western readers (Ibid: 30-41).

L. Hu [29] combines Foucault's theory of power discourse and Lefevre's translation manipulation theory to analyze the influences of discourse, power, ideology and poetics. Even though Goldblatt's translation has been greatly influenced by manipulation of power discourse, he still tries his best to comply with it and thus promotes the popularity of the translated version in western countries [29].

By revisiting the Rewriting Theory from the viewpoint of Systemic Functional Linguistics, X. Zhang [30] figures out that on the macro level, *Red Sorghum* is rewritten under the influence of two major factors: ideology and poetics, for the sake of the target readers' contemporary ideological patterns and poetic expectation; and on the micro level, systemic analysis of the English version can provide solid evidence to the conclusion just mentioned above [30].

MICROSCOPIC RESEARCH OF LINGUISTIC DATA

Compared with the initial stage, more achievements with higher quality, in this stage, have been achieved on the aspect of microscopic research of linguistic data. Besides linguistic units closely related to cultural elements, such as similes, culture-loaded words, imagery color words, dialects, linguistic data superficially having nothing to do with culture, such as unconventional modifiers, temporal expressions, special lexical collocations, syntactic structures, etc., have begun to attract the attention of scholars.

She [3] makes a tentative comparison of the deviant use of color words and modifiers between the Chinese version and the English version. Goldblatt adopts different translating methods to translate those deviant usages of color words and modifiers mainly due to the translator's subjectivity and target readers' acceptability [3].

J. Liu [31] selects the expressions of tenses in *Red Sorghum* and their translation as major linguistic

data and explores the hidden cultural elements behind these linguistic phenomenon. Chinese version usually implies the temporal meanings in the context; and Chinese culture is high-contextual and polychromic, whereas English culture is low-contextual and monochromic [31].

Under the guidance of the Relevance Theory, Z. Li [32] analyzes whether the metaphors in the English version have reached optimal relevance or not. It is found that the optimal relevance principle not only can direct the translation of metaphors, it may be considered as an effective standard to judge the quality of metaphors translation [32].

Culture-loaded words have also attracted the attention of scholars. Some scholars categorize the translating methods of culture-loaded words on the basis of Skopos Theory [33, 34]. With the purpose of the communicative functions and the introduction of more Chinese culture to western readers, Goldblatt smartly combines domestication strategy with foreignization strategy, with transliteration, free translation and literal translation as the three major translating methods [33].

X. Wang [35] bases the research on Hornby's Integrated Approach and explores how the translation of dialects influence the cultural transmission by analyzing the linguistic coherence in the source language, the linguistic coherence of the translated text and the inter-textual coherence between the target version and the source version. The translation of dialects in the novel lead to cultural loss and dwarfing, leaving insufficient the transmission of emotions, personalities and intensity of mood [35]. J. Y. Wang [36] and C. Zhang [37] detail the translation of culture-loaded words, but from different theoretical viewpoints. The former bases the study on semantic and communicative strategies, the latter Relevance Theory.

Song [38] conducts an exhaustive corpus-based study of *Red Sorghum* on the lexical, collocational and syntactic levels. Variety of words, the average length of words, the intensity of information; the simplification and conventionalization on the collocation; the average length of sentences, frequency of passive voice, all of the above mentioned details should be taken into account seriously when Chinese culture is and will be introduced to other cultures [38].

RESEARCH METHODS

In peak stage, text analysis remains the major research method. However, an increasing number of scholars attach great importance to the combination of subjective methods and objective methods, the representative of which is the monograph *The English Translation Style of Mo Yan's Novels: A corpus based*

Investigation by Song. Besides, X. Wang [35] and C. Zhang [37], to a large degree, successfully combine the subjective method and objective method together.

STABLE STAGE: 2015 TILL NOW

As time passes by, the influence of Nobel Prize weakens down gradually. There emerge comparatively less achievements on the research of the English version of *Red Sorghum*. If some, they usually make slight adjustments to the previous studies.

C. Li [39] analyzes the translation strategies of the rewriting phenomenon from the perspective of Rewriting Theory. Qian [40] tentatively explores the translation compensation strategies. Despite slight differences, the above two employ the same theories as those in peak stage and draw comparatively similar conclusions.

On the aspect of microscopic research of linguistic data, most of the achievements in the stage are short essays, which are not suitable for exhaustive research of a certain linguistic unit in the novel. Methodologically, subjective methods, for instance, case study, still takes the upper hand. Few scholars collect linguistic data exhaustively and make an objective study.

CONCLUSION

The publication of *Red Sorghum* in western countries has immediately attracted Chinese researchers' great interest, especially since Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in literature. There emerge a great number of long and exhaustive theses investigating the features of the English version from diversified theoretical viewpoints. Linguistic, cultural, translational theories have been adopted to analyze the English version. As time passes by, less and less research achievements have been published. And researchers are more likely to select those linguistic data that can be easily recognized.

On the aspect of macroscopic theories, despite of the variety of theories, research that has been done remains comparatively superficial, covering only several aspects relevant to translation, for example, translation strategy, translation methods, translation process, translation norms, translation effects, etc. Most of the research attempts to verify that the English version aims to adapt to the requirements of western readers. The translation views, literary views and linguistic views have been insufficiently under discussion. If some, they are roughly addressed without solid evidence of exhaustive linguistic data and the conclusions are thus less persuasive.

On the aspect of microscopic linguistic data, the distinctive linguistic units are more frequently

selected as the research items, such as color words, imagery color words, tenses, culture-loaded words, dialect, sentences, figures of speech, paragraphs, etc. However, *Red Sorghum* embodies Mo Yan's aesthetic viewpoints, for example, appreciation of ugliness, unique images of living creatures, degradation of human beings, which have been attracting less attention of scholars. Because the expressions, which represent the above features, are comparatively difficult to identify and recognize.

On the aspect of research methods, most of the research has been done on the basis of the subjective case study. Only a few of the research has been completed by combining both the subjective and the objective methods, which contribute to the persuasiveness of the conclusion.

It is particularly important to note that, except a few experts, such as C. F. Li [6] and Zhu [20], most of the researchers select the Chinese mainland version as the source text. However, it is the Taiwan version that is selected by Goldblatt to be translated into English. Furthermore, the Taiwan version and the Chinese version are different to some degree.

Although the research of the English version of *Red Sorghum* has come into stable stage, it does not mean that there will be no breakthrough. The translator's viewpoints of translation, literature and language have less been investigated. And the combination of objective and subjective research methods may bring some unexpected and scientific achievements.

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