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Pym's Evolving Translator Ethics and the English Translation of *The Garlic Ballads*

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Abstract— *Anthony Pym's translator ethics has developed from an account of transaction costs through cooperation and risk management to a renewed emphasis on trust. This article traces that development to reconsider Howard Goldblatt's English translation of Mo Yan's The Garlic Ballads. Close comparison of selected passages, read alongside published archival research, shows how the translation combines literal rendering with explanatory additions and selective attenuation of political language. Communicative and credibility risk offer a basis for interpreting these choices. The revised ending raises questions about trust under unequal publishing conditions, particularly in the relations between author, translator, and editors. Reported reception data document sustained circulation. The analysis relates textual decisions to editorial negotiation and treats differences between Chinese editions as a limit on attribution. It supports a differentiated assessment. Interventions backed by documented negotiation and authorial participation meet Pym's conditions for cooperation, whereas unattributed attenuation remains open to ideological critique.*

Keywords— ***Anthony Pym; translator ethics; risk management; trust; The Garlic Ballads***

I. INTRODUCTION

First published in 1988, Mo Yan's *Tiantang suantai zhi ge* (《天堂蒜薹之歌》; *The Garlic Ballads*) draws on the garlic-marketing crisis in Cangshan, Shandong. Its depiction of rural conflict has prompted debate about the novel and its subsequent revision (He & Ma, 2019). Howard Goldblatt's English translation appeared with Viking in 1995 and was later reissued; research on its overseas circulation records continuing interest in the work (Teng & Zheng, 2019).

Goldblatt's willingness to revise as he translated has divided commentators. Ji (2009) discusses revision as a means of bringing Chinese literature to readers abroad. Other critics question how domestication, omission, and rewriting affect the novel's local idiom and cultural difference (Q. Wu, 2014). At issue are the translator's obligations and the adequacy of particular renderings. To whom is a literary translator accountable, and under what conditions can an intervention be ethically defended?

Gu (2017) applies Pym's translator ethics to this novel, relating the translator's linguistic and cultural background to transaction costs and risk. The present article revisits the case through Pym's later work and subsequently published archival evidence. His 2021 restatement gives trust a more explicit place in the relationship between cooperation and risk, while Zhang's (2019) archival study examines correspondence concerning the revised ending. Together, these works allow a reconsideration of how Pym's developing account explains differences among textual strategies and informs an ethical assessment of editorial negotiation. The case also raises questions about translating Chinese literature for international readerships.

The textual comparison uses the 2017 Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House Chinese edition and the 2006 Methuen English edition. In his *Translator's Note*, Goldblatt identifies the 1989 Taiwan Hung-fan edition as his principal source and notes that he consulted other versions (Mo Yan, 2006, *Translator's Note*). Differences between that source and the Chinese edition

examined here must therefore be considered when attributing textual changes. Accordingly, the comparison below describes relations between the 2017 text and the translation, and specific changes are attributed to Goldblatt personally only where independent evidence exists. Chinese wording is retained where the analysis depends on a particular image, name, or political term. Page references to the Chinese and English texts follow the printed pagination of the 2017 and 2006 editions, respectively. English quotations from the novel reproduce Goldblatt's translation; the article's own explanatory glosses are identified separately. The correspondence is examined through Zhang's published archival research, without independent consultation of the original letters. The evidence thus supports analysis of textual treatment and reported negotiation, and the article's questions take shape within those limits. Which textual choices show risk-sensitive treatment of colloquial and political language? How can the documented negotiation over the revised ending be understood through trust? And how far does the available evidence support an ethical defense of the intervention? The article argues for a differentiated answer. Choices backed by documented negotiation and authorial participation meet Pym's conditions for cooperation, whereas local attenuation without such documentation remains open to ideological critique.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Debate over Goldblatt's revisions concerns the balance between preserving cultural difference and making a novel accessible to English-language readers. Q. Wu (2014) reads changes in *The Garlic Ballads* through ideology and representations of China. Hu and Peng (2024) offer a qualified defense of deletion and modification across Goldblatt's translations, while acknowledging the loss of cultural detail and the risks of excessive adaptation. Their textual examples and selected reviews clarify the grounds on which revisions are defended and mark the point at which defense becomes speculation about reception.

Archival research changes how responsibility for revision is assigned. Zhang (2019) reconstructs the publishing network behind *The Garlic Ballads*, challenging attribution to Goldblatt alone. Li's (2026) genetic study examines editorial correspondence to trace demands for narrative restructuring, faster pacing, and a revised ending, relating them to poetics, market expectations, and editorial authority. These studies already connect textual intervention with publishing decisions. Li notes that the archive lacks the novel's translation manuscript; she reconstructs revisions through surviving correspondence and comparison with the published texts. Correspondence records editors' stated concerns and anticipated readers, a record of intention rather than of reception.

Drawing on ethnographic and documentary material, Marin-Lacarta (2024) examines collaboration among literary translator collectives in selection, rights acquisition, production, and dissemination. Her distinction between professed collaboration and observed practice directs attention to how decisions are actually made. In a dialogue prompted by artificial intelligence, Liu and Xu (2026) return to a wider ethical question, asking how trust among authors, translators, and readers can be sustained through responsibility and respect for cultural difference. Neither study concerns Goldblatt's novel directly. For the present analysis, they prompt a distinction between participation in a shared undertaking and the ethical justification of particular decisions.

Chinese discussions of translation ethics question how such judgments should be reached. S. C. Wu (2021) calls for descriptive research to engage with normative reasoning, rather than allowing the description of translation practices to substitute for their evaluation. Hu and Peng (2023) challenge the idealization of intercultural mediation in Pym's earlier formulations and emphasize the difficulty of measuring literary translation's delayed benefits. Their reservations about the relation between practical gains and professional obligations remain relevant even when an intervention is authorized. Pym's rejection of neutrality in 2021 answers one part of this critique; the distribution of benefits and the legitimacy of particular revisions remain questions for evidence.

Gu's (2017) application of Pym to *The Garlic Ballads* remains the direct predecessor of this article, which reassesses the case through Pym's later treatment of risk and trust. Reading local choices alongside published archival accounts allows a more specific question about how far communicative purposes and documented authorial participation support an ethical defense under unequal publishing conditions? The analysis distinguishes these ethical claims from claims about readers' actual understanding, and treats source-edition differences as a limit on attributing changes to the translator.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PYM'S TRANSLATOR ETHICS

3.1 Ethics in translation studies

Berman's account of the foreign (1992) and Venuti's critique of domestication (1995) give cultural difference an important place in translation ethics. Pym's introduction to the 2001 special issue of *The Translator* explicitly identifies a return to ethics (Pym, 2001), and Chesterman's

(2001) proposed Hieronymic oath addresses professional commitment within that discussion. Although these approaches differ in their objects and priorities, Chinese scholarship continues to question how translation ethics should be formulated and assessed (Hu & Peng, 2023; S. C. Wu, 2021). Pym's work can be read as an attempt to connect ethical reasoning with the practical conditions of translators' mediation.

3.2 Transaction costs (1995)

Pym's economic starting point treats translation as a transaction cost (1995). Cooperation across languages entails costs that must be weighed against the benefits an interaction may produce, and reducing costs may allow more participants to benefit (2021, p. 13). Economy contributes to cooperation, but cannot on its own establish ethical adequacy.

3.3 Cooperation and interculturality (2012)

In the introduction to *On Translator Ethics*, Pym (2012) asks why a translation should be undertaken and proposes cooperation as its purpose. The principle is contextual. Translation may strengthen long-term cooperation between cultures, whereas in other circumstances declining to translate may be preferable. Interculturality provides a related working hypothesis. Translators work where cultures overlap, hold attachments that belong exclusively to neither side, and remain subject to cultural and institutional constraints. Their position complicates a simple choice between loyalty to the source culture and loyalty to the receiving culture.

3.4 Risk management (2015)

Pym (2015) distinguishes credibility risk, uncertainty risk, and communicative risk. The first concerns the translator's standing with clients and readers; the second arises from insufficient confidence in an interpretation; the third concerns the relative importance of textual elements to the success of communication. Because visible intervention is an unreliable measure of effort, risk management concentrates attention where failure has greater consequences. Trust enters at this point, since readers unable to consult the source must rely on the translator's judgment, often from an unequal position of knowledge.

3.5 Cooperation, risk, and trust (2021)

Pym's 2021 restatement traces a movement from cross-cultural cooperation through risk management to an increasing interest in trust (p. 6). Loss of credibility is a central risk because a translator who is not trusted cannot readily facilitate cooperation. Drawing on Luhmann, Pym understands trust as a response to risk and complexity, noting that familiarity does not preclude distrust (2021, p. 16). Cross-cultural exchanges may involve less shared knowledge and thus a greater need for thin, risk-based trust (p. 17).

Cooperation in this account requires neither equal benefits nor equal starting positions. Participants may exercise different degrees of agency and pursue their own interests; what matters is that each gains relative to their initial position (Pym, 2021, pp. 11-12). Neutrality is not presumed. These qualifications answer the objection that cooperation necessarily assumes symmetry, while leaving the distribution and acceptability of benefits in a particular publishing arrangement open to investigation.

3.6 Analytical implications

Three concepts do analytical work below. Communicative risk guides the reading of textual choices in Sections 4.2-4.4, where retention, brief explanation, and attenuation carry different consequences for readers' access to the novel's voices; interculturality directs attention to the knowledge and position from which Goldblatt worked. Trust organizes Section 4.5, where editorial requests and authorial authorization entered production, and the question becomes not only what changed but who relied on whom, and under what asymmetry. Cooperation supplies the evaluative frame. An intervention earns its defense by addressing a communicative problem with the informed participation of those affected, and promised benefits alone settle nothing about whether everyone benefited. The analysis below argues from the evidence supplied by the texts and the correspondence.

IV. AN ETHICAL READING OF *THE GARLIC BALLADS*

4.1 Intercultural positioning and the development of trust

Goldblatt's career spans Chinese and English literary settings. Born in California in 1939, he began learning Chinese while serving in Taiwan in the early 1960s and later completed a doctorate in Chinese literature at Indiana University under Liu Wu-chi (Ji, 2009, p. 46). His background is relevant to his engagement with the dialect, rural customs, and political language in Mo Yan's fiction, as well as his familiarity with English-language literary publishing. It provides resources for judgment without guaranteeing accurate interpretation or prediction of audience response.

Evidence of sustained consultation offers a more direct basis for considering trust. Gu (2017, p. 21) cites Mo Yan's recollection of more than a hundred letters and numerous telephone calls concerning his novels,

sometimes about a single word or unfamiliar detail. The account documents their broader collaboration rather than the correspondence for this novel alone; even so, it points to a relationship that can be read through Pym's distinction between thin trust based on professional standing and thick trust based on personal knowledge (2021, pp. 16-17).

Goldblatt's *Translator's Note* provides evidence specific to the novel. It thanks Courtney Hodell for her "editorial insights and unflagging enthusiasm," identifies the Taiwan Hung-fan 1989 edition as the principal source, and states: "Parts of Chapter Nineteen and all of Chapter Twenty have been revised, in conjunction with the author" (Mo Yan, 2006, *Translator's Note*). By disclosing editorial and authorial participation, the note qualifies any account of the revised ending as Goldblatt's unilateral decision.

4.2 Proverbs and colloquial images

Several proverbial expressions retain their source images in English. Gao Ma's reflection on Jinju's proposed marriage compares the match to a flower stuck in cow dung and a butterfly marrying a dung beetle:

> "嫁给刘胜利，好比鲜花插在牛粪上，又好比花蝴蝶嫁给屎壳郎" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 21).

Goldblatt renders the paired comparisons as follows:

> "Marrying him would be like planting a flower in a pile of cow dung, or seeing a gorgeous butterfly fall in love with a dung beetle" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 17).

Both images and the parallel construction survive in English. The second comparison is present in the Chinese and is therefore not an explanatory addition by Goldblatt. Similar retention occurs in "鸡晒翅膀，三日内必有大雨" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 13), rendered as "Chicken wings absorbing rays, it'll rain within three days" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 9). "穷生虱子富生疥" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 163) becomes "The poor get lice, the rich get scabies" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 143), and the insult "棺材瓤子" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 30) becomes "coffin pulp" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 26).

The flower and dung imagery offers a readily recognizable contrast between attraction and repulsion. The rural weather saying and the contrast between poverty and wealth preserve familiar forms of colloquial expression. The abrasive insult likewise retains the source's harsh register rather than softening it. In risk terms, these are cases in which miscommunication is unlikely and the cost of failure is limited, so that extensive explanation may be unnecessary; how far each image lands with English-speaking readers is a question for reception research.

4.3 Explanatory additions and culture-specific meanings

At its first occurrence, "炕" (*kang*; Mo Yan, 2017, p. 5) appears as "the kang, a brick platform that served as the family's bed" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 2). Later references use *kang* without repeating the explanation. The apposition locates the object within the household while retaining its Chinese name.

The name "守法" (*Shoufa*, literally "abide by the law"; Mo Yan, 2017, p. 314) raises a different problem. In "Shoufa-Law Abider" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 283), transliteration preserves the name and the attached gloss supplies its meaning. The wish for a law-abiding child acquires irony in a novel whose arrests and punishments expose official injustice. The gloss gives readers unfamiliar with Chinese access to that implication.

Marriage arrangements are conveyed descriptively: "换亲" (*huanqin*, exchange marriage) becomes "a tawdry way to create new families" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 22), and "三换亲" becomes "the three-family marriage contract" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 203). In a ballad, "青天" (*qingtian*, literally "blue sky"; Mo Yan, 2017, p. 332) is rendered as "the blue sky of justice" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 300). The addition "of justice" makes the appeal for just authority explicit while preserving the image. Each solution addresses a particular obstacle to understanding; their differences resist classification under a general preference for domestication.

English kinship vocabulary accommodates generational and familial titles, but the treatment of measurements is inconsistent. "二亩" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 21) becomes "Two acres," retaining the numeral without converting the numerical value from *mu* to acres, whereas "三十里" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 102) becomes "ten miles" (Mo Yan, 2006, pp. 18, 90). The latter uses an approximate 3:1 ratio of *li* to miles, broadly consistent with converting thirty modern *li*. One passage thus retains the source numeral despite the difference in units; the other adjusts it. Assessing these approximations requires attention to the represented landscape and livelihood as well as communicative convenience.

In "瞎子张扣", rendered as "Zhang Kou, the blind minstrel" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 14), the English adds the character's artistic role to the reference to blindness. This foregrounds his narrative function; its effect on readers' judgments is a question for reception research.

4.4 Political language and selective attenuation

Criticism of ideological rewriting has focused in part on political language (Du & Zhang, 2015; Q. Wu, 2014). The

examples considered here include explicit retention as well as attenuation, requiring a risk-based interpretation to account for their coexistence.

The courtroom scene retains the declaration "The people have the right to overthrow any party or government that disregards their well-being" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 329; Mo Yan, 2006, p. 298) and the cry "The Communist Party has changed! It isn't the Communist Party we once knew!" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 329; Mo Yan, 2006, p. 297). During Gao Ma's interrogation, the reference to officials acting under the flag of the Communist Party and destroying its reputation also remains (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 290; Mo Yan, 2006, p. 266). "国民党" appears as "the Nationalist Party" in Schoolmaster Zhu's account of his past (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 183; Mo Yan, 2006, p. 159). The chapter 18 ballad names the Communist Party when asking why a party unafraid of the Japanese would fear hearing its own people speak (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 296; Mo Yan, 2006, p. 271).

Elsewhere, particular formulations are attenuated. The policeman's claim "现如今国民党比共产党还吃香" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 183) compares the current standing of the Nationalist and Communist parties; the English response, "That must have been the life," omits this explicit comparison (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 159). In the courtroom speech, "社会主义肌体上的封建寄生虫" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 329) becomes "feudal parasites on the body of society" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 296). The attack on officials remains, with the modifier "社会主义", "socialist," absent.

A frequently cited ballad example raises a problem of attribution. The third line of the chapter 5 epigraph in the 2017 Chinese edition reads "老百姓依赖着共产党" (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 83), glossed here as "ordinary people rely on the Communist Party." The corresponding English position contains "Be brave, fellow townsmen, throw out your chests" (Mo Yan, 2006, p. 74). This wording also closely resembles "乡亲们壮壮胆子挺起胸膛" in the chapter 12 epigraph of the 2017 Chinese text (Mo Yan, 2017, p. 193). The opening chapter's ballad differs between the editions as well. These discrepancies could reflect a line moved or replaced by Goldblatt, wording already present in his stated source, or a combination of processes. He and Ma's (2019) account of the novel's revisions makes the edition question relevant; attribution requires comparison with the 1989 Hung-fan text.

Political accusation and protest remain prominent in English despite the attenuation of individual terms or comparisons, a pattern that complicates any account of uniform political deletion. Within Pym's account of communicative risk, retention preserves the novel's principal voices and conflicts, while local changes reshape the framing of particular statements. The treatment is selective rather than suppressive. What the published record leaves open is the translator's own deliberation over these passages, which the correspondence cited here does not cover.

4.5 Rewriting the ending and negotiating trust

The revision of chapter 20 is the most consequential editorial intervention considered here. Zhang (2019, pp. 196-197) reconstructs it through correspondence. On May 5, 1994, Courtney Hodell wrote to Goldblatt that the original ending "didn't have the same power as the rest of the novel." On May 9, Nan Graham described the editors as feeling "totally cheated and...betrayed" and asked Goldblatt to persuade Mo Yan to "end with the story a bit more." In a letter dated June 15, Mo Yan reported that he had rewritten chapter 20 and authorized further modification. Zhang reproduces the sentence "个别地方，如您认为不合适，请尽管修改" with the translation "In some places, if you think it is inappropriate, please do not hesitate to modify it" (p. 197; translated by Zhang). All these quotations are taken from Zhang's article.

Zhang's Bourdieusian analysis locates the publisher in the strongest position within the translation network and relates compliance with publishing norms to the project's continuation. Trust offers a way to examine how requests and authorization passed between participants with unequal resources. The editors approached Goldblatt as an intermediary, and Mo Yan granted him discretion over further changes. Both acts are consistent with reliance on another participant's judgment. Goldblatt's intervening letter persuading Mo Yan is absent from the correspondence Zhang cites; the published record moves from editorial request to authorial agreement, with the translator's mediation as the trusted middle step.

The editors' dissatisfaction identifies a perceived communicative risk in the ending; it records what the editors anticipated, not how readers responded. Mo Yan's rewriting documents his participation in the decision under conditions that could also involve commercial pressure, and his authorization sits inside that asymmetry rather than outside it.

Zhang reports that later Chinese reprints adopted the revised ending (2019, p. 197), which would make the translation project an actor in the later history of the source text itself. The observation awaits edition-by-edition confirmation. Under Pym's cooperation criterion, publication and prospective benefits mark the beginning of the ethical question, not its answer.

An ethical defense of the revision thus rests on the author's informed agreement, a documented communicative problem, and an account of who benefited. Trust describes the relationships through which revision became possible; evaluating it means scrutinizing the publishing power and the resulting changes at the same time.

The case therefore supports a differentiated judgment rather than a global verdict on Goldblatt's practice. The revised ending meets the minimal conditions of cooperation. A communicative problem was identified in writing, the author rewrote the chapter and authorized further changes, and the *Translator's Note* disclosed the collaboration to readers. The local attenuation documented in Section 4.4 stands on thinner evidence. The published correspondence concerns the ending, and for these particular changes the record offers no communicative problem, editorial request, or authorial view. Under the framework developed above, the first category is defensible and the second is not; the difference lies in the presence or absence of informed participation, not in the scale of textual intervention.

V. LIMITED EVIDENCE OF RECEPTION

Teng and Zheng (2019, pp. 66-68) report approximately 1,634 OCLC holdings for the work in February 2019, compared with 504 reported for August 2012, and state that the English translation predominated. Their reported overseas sales figures are 2,535 before October 2012 and 9,635 through Arcade by October 2013. Read with care, these figures track visibility rather than cause. Holdings mix editions and formats, the two sales figures cover different periods, and the later one follows Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize. They show that the translation circulated widely, and they leave the contribution of any single decision open.

The same study records an Amazon rating of 3.5 out of five in February 2019, with 79 percent of ratings at three stars or above, and mentions *New York Times Book Review* coverage in 1995 and 2012, seventeen years apart. These are historical traces of visibility over time, not newly collected reception data. Teng and Zheng also discuss comments that they regard as reproducing stereotypes about China (2019, p. 67).

Continued availability is relevant to Pym's emphasis on long-term cooperation because it permits further reading and exchange. As evidence of cooperation it remains indirect, since holdings and sales record circulation rather than the effect of any particular textual decision on readers or on the interests of the author, translator, and publisher.

VI. CONCLUSION

Pym's developing account of translator ethics, read alongside published archival research, supports a differentiated assessment of *The Garlic Ballads*. The translation combines recurring retention of colloquial imagery with brief explanations for culture-specific meanings, and explicit political language coexists with local attenuation. Communicative risk interprets this variety. Where the cost of misunderstanding was low, the source image was retained; where culture-specific meaning carried weight, a brief gloss was supplied. The revised ending meets the minimal conditions of cooperation because the editorial problem was documented and Mo Yan participated in writing. The unattributed attenuation of political modifiers meets none of these conditions and remains open to ideological critique. Differences among Chinese editions still condition what can be credited to Goldblatt himself.

A trust-based reading of the ending examines the reliance underlying these exchanges while keeping the publisher's stronger position in view. The editors approached Goldblatt as an intermediary, and Mo Yan granted him discretion; the missing intermediary letter leaves the precise terms of persuasion in the archive rather than in print. The framework also reaches its own limit here. Cooperation and trust assess the conditions under which decisions were made; the distribution of benefits and the responses of actual readers belong to reception research, where continuing circulation is a starting point rather than a causal link between revision and outcome.

For translation research and training, the case suggests that ethical evaluation works best at the level of particular decisions and documented processes rather than whole texts or whole careers. Three tasks follow. The first is a comparison of Goldblatt's stated 1989 source with the editions available to scholarship; the second, reception research on how readers engage with retained and glossed items; the third, closer attention to the political and institutional pressures under which authorization is given and trust extended.

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