

Creative Rebellion: Rewriting and Reconstruction in Translation through the English Version of *Frog*

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Abstract— In traditional translation theory, "faithfulness" is regarded as the core criterion for evaluating the quality of a translation, and translators are often expected to faithfully convey the original text while remaining "invisible". However, with the cultural turn and the development of translation criticism, the translator's agency and creativity have increasingly come to the fore. The view that "translation is rewriting" challenges fidelity centrism, emphasizing that translation is a process of re-creation shaped by ideology, aesthetic standards, and cultural context. This study examines Mo Yan's representative work *Frog* and its English version, drawing on André Lefevere's theory of rewriting to explore the translator's creative acts of defiance during the translation process. This paper focuses on adjustments to linguistic style and the reconstruction of culturally loaded language in the translation, analyzing how the translator reshapes the text's meaning within the target culture. Through a close reading and comparison of the source text and the translation, it demonstrates that the English translator, Howard Goldblatt did not mechanically reproduce the source text when handling sensitive themes, stylistic rhythm, and cultural metaphors, but rather engaged in strategic omissions, transformations, and re-creations within the context of the local target culture.



Keywords— creative rebellion; *Frog*; Howard Goldblatt; literary translation

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, "faithfulness" has been regarded as the core criterion for evaluating the quality of a translation. In traditional translation theory, translators are often expected to convey the content and style of the original text "invisibly", striving to preserve the integrity and original character of the source text to the greatest extent possible. However, with the advent of the cultural turn in the late 20th century, translation studies gradually shifted from a language-centered to a culture-centered approach, and increasing emphasis has been placed on the translator's agency and the creativity of translation.

Translation is no longer viewed simply as a form of "language conversion," but rather as a process of cross-cultural meaning negotiation and cultural reconstruction.

With the development of modern translation studies, scholars have gradually recognized that translation is not a purely objective process of linguistic conversion, but rather a creative cultural practice. Translators inevitably exercise their own agency when interpreting the source text, selecting modes of expression, and adjusting the text's structure. Xu Jun points out that "creative rebellion" in literary translation is an objectively existing

phenomenon; it does not imply that the translator arbitrarily alters the original work, but rather represents a means of ensuring the continuity of a literary work's value within a new linguistic context (Xu, 2003).

The concept of translator agency has changed the tendency in traditional translation studies to overemphasize the status of the original author. Cha Mingjian and Tian Yu argue that although translators have long occupied a hidden position in literary transmission, they actually undertake the important tasks of understanding, interpreting, and reconstructing the text; their cultural background, aesthetic judgments, and translation strategies all influence the final form of the translation (Zha & Tian, 2003). Therefore, when evaluating literary translation, we must not merely focus on whether the translation conforms to the form of the original text; one must also examine how the translator handles linguistic differences and cultural conflicts.

Mo Yan's novel *Frog* is a significant work in the international dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature. Published in 2009, the novel uses the implementation of China's family planning policy as its social background and, through the life experiences of "Auntie," a rural obstetrician-gynecologist, explores the complex relationship between social and historical change and individual life experiences. The work not only addresses social issues of special historical significance but also incorporates a wealth of rural dialect, folk culture, and ethical reflections, showcasing distinct regional cultural characteristics.

The English translation of *Frog* was completed by American sinologist Howard Goldblatt. As a key contributor to the international dissemination of Mo Yan's works, Howard Goldblatt did not simply seek formal correspondence between Chinese and English in the translation process. Instead, he adapted the original text to varying degrees based on the reading habits of English-speaking audiences and the cultural context of the target audience. For example, when dealing with regional dialects, the translator tended to adopt expressions more in line with the conventions of English literature; when encountering terms rooted in Chinese cultural context, he used explanations and adaptations to reduce barriers to cultural understanding.

Currently, research on the English translation of *Frog* has primarily focused on the translation of culture-loaded words, strategies of domestication and foreignization, and the dissemination of Chinese literature overseas. However, examining how Howard Goldblatt reorganizes the text's meaning through his translation practices from the perspective of creative rebellion still holds value for further research. Drawing on the theories of creative rebellion and translator subjectivity, this paper explores the concrete manifestations of translator subjectivity in literary translation by analyzing changes in linguistic style and cultural meaning during the English translation of *Frog*.

II. CREATIVE REBELLION AND TRANSLATOR SUBJECTIVITY

2.1 The Theory of Creative Rebellion and Literary Translation

Literary translation possesses strong creative characteristics. Due to structural differences and cultural distance between different languages, translators cannot completely replicate the linguistic form and aesthetic effect of the original work. Therefore, a certain degree of adjustment and change is inevitable during the translation process.

Xie Tianzhen proposed that "creative rebellion" in literary translation is the result of the translator's creative processing during language conversion. Because the cultural environment upon which the original work depends cannot be completely transplanted into the target language system, the translator must re-express the work to give it vitality in the new cultural environment (Xie, 1999).

This view breaks through the simplistic opposition of "faithfulness" and "betrayal" in traditional translation theory. Changes in literary translation do not necessarily mean disrespect for the original text, but may be a necessary strategy adopted by the translator to achieve cross-cultural communication. Especially when dealing with literary works with distinct national characteristics, if the translator completely adheres to the form of the original text, it may lead to the target readers' inability to understand the work's connotation.

Xu Jun further pointed out that creative rebellion reflects the establishment of the translator's subjectivity. Translators are not only language converters but also cultural interpreters. In the translation process, translators need to choose the mode of expression according to the specific context, and this choice itself is a creative activity (Xu, 2003).

For the English translation of *Frog*, the novel's local language, historical background, and folk culture all possess strong Chinese regional characteristics. Howard Goldblatt needed to strike a balance between preserving the original cultural features and meeting the reading needs of English readers, a process that itself embodies creative rebellion.

2.2 Translator Subjectivity and Translation Reconstruction

The theory of translator subjectivity emphasizes the active role of the translator in the translation process. Zha Mingjian and Tian Yu point out that the translator is not in a completely passive position, but plays a crucial role in understanding the original text, selecting translation strategies, and forming the translated text (Zha & Tian, 2003).

The translation of literary works actually involves two stages: firstly, the translator's understanding of the meaning of the original work. Second, the translator's re-expression in the target language. Because translators have different cultural experiences and aesthetic standards, the translated text inevitably bears the traces of the translator's own choices.

Tu Guoyuan and Zhu Xianlong further explain from a hermeneutic perspective that the translator's understanding of the original text is not entirely objective, but rather a reinterpretation process completed based on their own cultural background (Tu & Zhu, 2003). Therefore, the translated text is not a simple copy of the original text, but a new text processed by the translator.

Meanwhile, translation activities are also influenced by the socio-cultural environment. Wang Dongfeng points out that ideology influences translator behavior through language selection, expression methods, and translation strategies (Wang, 2003). For literary works that address socio-historical issues, translators not only need to

consider language conversion but also the differences in understanding of related topics across different cultures.

Yuan Li argues that subjectivity in literary translation is manifested in the translator's active construction of the text's meaning, and the translator needs to find a balance between the author's intention, textual characteristics, and reader reception (Yuan, 2003). Therefore, studying the English translation of *Frog* from the perspective of translator subjectivity can provide a deeper understanding of the cultural logic behind Howard Goldblatt's translation choices.

III. TEXTUAL FEATURES AND TRANSLATION BACKGROUND OF *FROG* AND ITS ENGLISH VERSION

3.1 Textual Characteristics and Cultural Connotations of *Frog*

Mo Yan's novel *Frog*, published in 2009, is one of his significant literary works. Set against the historical background of China's family planning policy implementation, the novel explores the complex interplay between individual destiny, social institutions, and bioethics through the life journey of Wan Xin, a rural obstetrician and gynecologist. While ostensibly centered on reproductive issues, the work actually touches upon multiple themes—including the relationship between the state and the individual, tradition and modernity, as well as responsibility and guilt—endowing it with profound historical reflective significance.

From a narrative perspective, *Frog* exhibits a distinctly complex structure. The first four parts primarily employ epistolary form, unfolding through the protagonist "Tadpole's" correspondence with friends, gradually revealing past historical events through recollection. The final part transforms into a play, shifting the characters from narrators to actors on a stage. This structural change enhances the text's dramatic effect and also reflects Mo Yan's multi-layered expression of historical memory and contemporary reflection.

In terms of language, *Frog* continues Mo Yan's distinctive rural literary style. The novel makes extensive use of the dialect, colloquialisms, and folk expressions of Northeast Gaomi Township. These languages not only serve a function of information transmission but also

contribute to shaping character and regional cultural identity. For example, the exaggerated expressions in the dialogue, the colloquial language, and the folk-influenced narrative style imbue the work with a strong rural narrative atmosphere.

However, because the language system of *Frog* is highly dependent on the background of Chinese rural culture, its English translation faces significant challenges. Dialects, colloquialisms, and folk imagery are not simply units of words but rather comprehensive symbols encompassing social relations, cultural memories, and emotional connotations. Therefore, translators cannot rely solely on literal equivalence but must adjust between preserving the original cultural context and ensuring the target reader's understanding. This adjustment process embodies the creative reconstruction inherent in literary translation.

3.2 The English Version of *Frog* and Howard Goldblatt's Translation Strategies

The English translation of *Frog* was completed by American sinologist Howard Goldblatt. For many years, Goldblatt has been dedicated to promoting modern and contemporary Chinese literature abroad, and his translation work has played a significant role in introducing Chinese literature to the English-speaking world.

In translating *Frog*, Goldblatt faced not only the challenge of linguistic conversion but also that of cultural conversion. On the one hand, the novel's abundance of rural dialects and folkloric expressions required the translator to find new ways to convey them within an English-language context, on the other hand, the work addresses topics with specific historical backgrounds, such as family planning and bioethics, which required the translator to consider how English-speaking readers would perceive Chinese social and cultural contexts.

From the perspective of rewriting theory, a translator's choices are not entirely determined by the source text but are shaped by the norms of the target culture. Wang Dongfeng points out that ideology, acting as an "invisible hand," influences translation practice through language selection, textual treatment, and other means (Wang, 2003). In the English translation of *Frog*, Howard's handling of political and cultural content as well as the socio-historical context effectively demonstrates the

influence of the target cultural environment on the form of the translation.

Therefore, *Frog* is not a simple linguistic adaptation of *Frog*, but rather a text reconstructed within the framework of English literature. Through linguistic adjustments, cultural interpretation, and narrative restructuring, the translator enables the Chinese experiences depicted in the original work to be transposed into a different cultural context.

Therefore, the English translation of *Frog* is not merely a linguistic translation of the original novel of *Frog*, but rather a text reconstructed within the framework of English literature. Through linguistic adjustments, cultural interpretations, and narrative reorganization, the translator enables the China experience in the original work to be situated within another cultural context.

IV. REWRITING THE LANGUAGE STYLE IN THE ENGLISH VERSION OF *FROG*

4.1 Transformation of Local Language and Adjustment of Style

One of the defining features of Mo Yan's novels is the integration of regional linguistic elements into literary expression. The characters' talk in *Frog* bears distinct characteristics of rural colloquial speech, incorporating a wealth of everyday expressions and folk idioms. This language not only reflects the characters' identities but also embodies the unique sociocultural environment of the northeastern countryside of Gaomi.

However, the translation of dialects has long been a challenge in literary translation. Since dialects are not merely linguistic forms but also carry regional identity and cultural memory, directly seeking a corresponding dialectal form in English often leads to cultural misinterpretations. When translating *Frog*, Howard Goldin did not simply adopt a specific regional dialect in English; instead, he opted to transform the regional color of the original text into natural and fluent English expressions.

for instance :

text :

“你可别光想着抱孙子。”

translated text :

“Don’t just think about having a grandchild.”

The phrase “可别光想着” in the original text has a distinctly colloquial tone, conveying a half-admonishing, half-joking tone typical of a close-knit social circle. A literal translation would convey the basic meaning but fail to capture the emotional nuance of spoken Chinese. Howard Goldblatt rendered it as a relatively direct English imperative sentence, bringing the translation in line with English expression conventions.

This approach reflects the translator’s exercise of agency. Cha Mingjian and Tian Yu argue that translators are not passive recipients but rather active agents with the capacity to make choices during the process of cultural transformation (Zha & Tian, 2003). Although Howard Goldblatt sacrificed some of the local color of the original text, he preserved the relationships between characters and the communicative function, ensuring that the characters’ dialogue remains readable in an English context.

4.2 Transformation of Rhetorical Imagery and Aesthetic Reconstruction

The language of *Frog* bears distinct literary characteristics typical of Mo Yan, featuring extensive use of hyperbole, symbolism, and visually striking imagery. While these expressions enhance the text’s emotional impact, they also increase the difficulty of translation.

for instance :

text :

“孩子像韭菜一样一茬茬地割……”

translated text :

“children were being taken, like crops harvested from a field...”

The expression “割韭菜” carries strong visual imagery in Chinese culture. It not only conveys the cruelty of life being controlled by human hands but also reflects the experience of rural life in China. However, “leeks” don’t carry the same symbolic meaning in English culture, so a direct translation might fail to produce the intended literary effect.

Howard Goldblatt transformed it into “crops harvested from a field,” replacing the original expression with an agricultural image familiar to English-speaking

readers. This approach reduces cultural alienation while preserving the tragic connotation of life being reaped.

From the perspective of “creative rebellion,” this transformation does not simply weaken the original work but rather recreates the aesthetic effect within a new linguistic system. Xu Jun points out that “creative rebellion” in literary translation is an inevitable creative act undertaken by translators when confronting linguistic and cultural differences (Xu, 2003). By adjusting the form of expression, translators enable literary meaning to continue to function effectively within a different cultural context.

4.3 Adjustment of Narrative Rhythm and Reorganization of Sentence Structure

The narrative in *Frog* exhibits distinct characteristics of oral literature. Mo Yan frequently uses repetition, elaboration, and long sentence structures to simulate folk storytelling, giving the text a strong narrative voice.

for instance :

text :

“那时候，那是过去的旧时代，也就是在刚解放那阵子，高密东北乡的生孩子方法……”

translated text :

“Back then, in the early post-liberation days, childbirth in Northeast Gaomi County...”

The original text uses the repetition of multiple time expressions to simulate the narrative rhythm of an elderly person recalling the past. However, English expression places greater emphasis on concise sentence structure and logical clarity. Therefore, Howard Goldblatt integrated multiple time pieces of information to make the translation more consistent with the narrative habits of English novels.

This adjustment reflects structural rewriting in translation. The translator did not change the content of the events, but rather rearranged the way information was organized to adapt the text to the expressive rules of the target language. Tu Guoyuan and Zhu Xianlong pointed out that the translator’s subjectivity is reflected not only in word choice, but also in the handling of the overall

structure and semantic relationships of the text (Tu & Zhu, 2003) .

V. CULTURAL LOAD RECONSTRUCTION STRATEGIES IN THE ENGLISH VERSION OF *FROG*

5.1 Adjustment of the Meaning of Political and Cultural Vocabulary

Frog has a distinct historical and political background, involving a large number of social terms related to family planning. These terms not only describe social realities but also contain cultural memories of a specific era.

for instance :

text :

“计划生育办公室”

translated text :

“local health authority”

"Family Planning Office" has a clear institutional meaning in the Chinese social context, but English readers may not necessarily have the same social experience. Howard Goldblatt transformed it into a more easily understood expression of an administrative agency, allowing readers to quickly grasp its function.

This translation reflects the adjustment of cultural meaning. Wang Dongfeng points out that ideological factors are often reflected through word choice during the translation process (Wang, 2003) . The translator's treatment of political vocabulary is not simply deleting cultural information, but rather reorganizing the expression within the target cultural context.

5.2 The Explanatory Reconstruction of Folk Cultural Symbols

Frog contains a large number of traditional Chinese folk cultural symbols, such as "the Goddess of Fertility" and "incense." These words connect to traditional Chinese society's understanding of childbirth, family, and the continuation of life.

Among them, the core image of the "frog" carries multiple cultural meanings. In the Chinese context, "frog" and "child" are homophones, and the word is also associated with the themes of reproduction and childbirth.

However, this linguistic and cultural connection is difficult to directly transfer to the English-speaking world. Therefore, translators need to supplement the context and transform the meaning to enable English readers to understand the relevant symbolism.

This approach reflects a process of cultural reconstruction. Yuan Li argues that literary translation is actually a subjective interpretive activity, where translators need to re-express the meaning of the text based on their own understanding (Yuan, 2003) . Howard Goldblatt's treatment of folk cultural vocabulary seeks a balance between cultural differences.

5.3 Cross-cultural Expression of Ethical Themes

The core of *Frog* is not merely to showcase a historical policy, but to explore ethical issues of life through the fates of its characters. The "aunt" in the novel is both a policy implementer and a complex individual within the historical context.

In his English translation, Howard Goldblatt emphasizes the characters' psychology and ethical conflicts, enabling English readers to understand the novel's themes from a humanistic perspective, rather than simply viewing it as a text about China's social system.

This approach reflects the translator's reconstruction of literary meaning. Zhang Qi, in his research on the English translation of Mo Yan's works, points out that translators often need to creatively adjust the text to create new modes of reception for Chinese literary works in the target culture (Zhang, 2019) .

Therefore, *Frog's* presentation of ethical themes is not a simple replication of the original, but rather a reorganization of meaning within an English-speaking cultural context, enabling the work to achieve cross-cultural dissemination.

VI. CONCLUSION

The English translation of *Frog* is not a simple copy of the original, but rather the result of continuous selection and adjustment across different languages and cultures. Analysis of linguistic style and culturally loaded language reveals that Howard Goldblatt did not adhere rigidly to literal word-for-word translation, but rather adjusted and reconstructed some expressions according to the reading habits of English readers. While this approach results in

some formal differences from the original, it effectively preserves the work's ideological content and literary value, and also makes the translation highly readable.

From the perspective of rewriting theory and creative rebellion, literary translation requires respect for the original work, but is inevitably influenced by factors such as the target language, cultural environment, and reader reception. The translator's deletions, transformations, and additions should not be simply interpreted as a departure from the original, but rather as a strategic choice to achieve effective expression of the work in the process of cross-cultural communication. Goldblatt's translation practice of *Frog* demonstrates that the translator's subjectivity is an important component of literary translation and a crucial condition for the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature.

This article analyzes some of Howard Goldblatt's translation strategies using only the English translation of Mo Yan's *Frog* as an example, and the discussion still has certain limitations. Future research could involve comparative studies of other works by Mo Yan or translations by different translators to further explore the applicability of rewriting theory in the English translation of contemporary Chinese literature, providing more references for literary translation studies and the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature.

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