

A Study on Variation Strategies for Chinese Literary Works from the Perspective of Intertextuality: A Case Analysis of Howard Goldblatt's English Translation of *Wolf Totem*

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Abstract: The significant overseas reception and copyright export of Howard Goldblatt's English translation of *Wolf Totem* underscore the attention of this translation has garnered. This dissemination practice demonstrates an effective pathway for Chinese literary works to enter the English-speaking world and expand their international influence. From the perspective of intertextuality theory, this analysis examines Goldblatt's strategic use of variation in translating *Wolf Totem*. Focusing on three specific dimensions—intertextual reconstruction, intertextual explicitation, and intertextual loss—it finds that the translator substantially reshaped and adapted cultural elements from the source text. This strategy effectively bridges comprehension gaps arising from cultural differences while aligning the translation with the cognitive frameworks and expectations of English-language readers. Such translation practice not only optimizes the readability and acceptability of the target text but also establishes a valuable reference model for the global dissemination of Chinese literature.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Adaptation, *Wolf Totem*, Howard Goldblatt

1. Introduction

Wolf Totem is the world's only “unprecedented and remarkable book” that depicts and studies the Mongolian grassland wolf [1]. The work deeply portrays ecology, wolf-nature and human-nature, the fierce collision between nomadic culture and farming culture, arousing readers' interest and deep reflection, and provoking strong respond at home and abroad. In 2007 it received the first Man Asian Literary Prize, and in 2019 it was selected as one of the “70 long novels treasured in 70 years of the People's Republic of China”. Since its publication in 2004 the book has been translated into more than thirty languages and published worldwide. The English translation was completed by Howard Goldblatt in 2008. Goldblatt devotes himself to the English translation of Chinese literary works; his achievements are widely recognized, and he is even called “the acknowledged premier translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature” [2]. Especially after Mo Yan received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, Howard Goldblatt's translations and his translation methods have drawn increasing attention and discussion. Scholars have approached the English translation of *Wolf Totem* from many aspects, some focusing on different translation strategies, and some analyzing its overseas dissemination from the perspective of copyright export, but very few have examined it from the perspective of intertextuality. A close reading of the translation practices in the English *Wolf Totem* shows that the translator has adopted variation strategies at many points, which is firmly related to Goldblatt's own translation thought. Goldblatt once proposed that the essence of translation lies in “re-creation” [3], a view that also confirms his affirmation of the translator's subjective initiative. He further emphasizes that in translating the translator must simultaneously perform three different tasks: reading, interpreting (or criticizing), and creating [3]. Therefore, in Goldblatt's view, a certain extent of adaptation of the source text is an unavoidable part of the translation process.

2. Intertextuality Theory

Intertextuality theory is an important theory in the field of literary text analysis; it originated within the structuralist and post-structuralist thought [4]. The definition of the term was offered by French scholar Julia Kristeva in 1969. Every text is constructed like a mosaic of quotations; every text is the absorption and transformation of another text [5]. Afterwards, intertextuality theory was continuously

enriched and developed, forming diverse academic perspectives and schools. In short, intertextuality refers to the relationships between texts.

In 1990, Hatim and Mason, in their co-authored book *Discourse and the Translator*, introduced intertextuality theory into translation for the first time. In China, Professor Luo Xuanmin was the first to bring intertextuality theory into translation field, but he did not render the word “intertextuality” into the now-familiar Chinese word; it was not until Yang Yansong translated it that the concept became widely known among Chinese scholars [6]. Since then, numerous domestic scholars have focused on this theoretical horizon and conducted in-depth research. For example, scholars such as Jiang Xiaohua (1998), Liu Junping (2003), and Zhu Chaowei (2004) have all made important contributions to combining intertextuality theory with translation studies. Zhu Chaowei, in his research, profoundly expounded the relationship between intertextuality and translation; he argues that translation is essentially a cross-temporal and cross-spatial communicative action, and that the textuality of translation and the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of translation studies provide a theoretical basis for bringing intertextuality into the horizon of translation studies [7].

When the translation embodies the intertextual relations in the source text, it is called intertextual translation, referring to two situations: first, the intertextual relations in the source text are fully presented in the translation, that is, the target-language readers become aware of the existence of such intertextual relations in the source text; second, when the target-language readers read this proverb, they can recognize that the line of translation is intertextually related to another text in their own language. Non-intertextual translation means that the intertextual links in the source text are hardly presented in the translation [8].

3. Adaptation and Intertextuality Theory

Huang Zhonglian proposes eleven variation translation methods, one of which is adaptive translation defined as a form of adaptation that alters the original’s form, partial content, or even its style [9]. According to his taxonomy of variation translation methods, adaptive simultaneously employs seven adaptive techniques: reduction, editing, paraphrasing, condensation, merging, alteration, and amplification.

The reasons for a translator’s choice of adaptive can be analyzed from both subjective and objective perspectives.

Subjectively, the translator’s own standards of translation and the priority assigned to factors influencing translation effectiveness are decisive. In the case of the English *Wolf Totem*, Goldblatt has stated explicitly in interviews that his goal is to ensure acceptance by the target-language readership and market [10]. This indicates that, during translation, Goldblatt privileges reader experience and market reception over literal, word-for-word fidelity. Big-data analysis by Liu Guozhi and Li Qingliu shows that 960 libraries in the United States hold Goldblatt’s English version of *Wolf Totem*, of which 528 are public and community libraries and 432 are university and research libraries; holdings in public and community libraries outnumber those in academic and research institutions [11]. These figures demonstrate that the readership of *Wolf Totem* is composed not merely of language and culture specialists but, more importantly, of general readers. From this outcome, it is clear that Goldblatt’s reader-centered orientation aligns with the actual results, and it is difficult to argue that the translation is anything but successful. The data further suggest that adaptive translation of culturally opaque information from the source language facilitates the global journey of literary works.

Objectively, factors beyond the translator’s control—such as cultural gaps arising from cultural difference and editorial requirements from the publisher—are also decisive in prompting the choice of adaptive translation. During translation, disparities between source-culture and target-culture content regularly occur because of cultural distance; in such cases the translator must employ adaptive translation to naturalize “foreign material” for the local environment. In addition, editorial directives from the publisher exert a powerful influence on the translator’s strategic decisions. When discussing abridgements and alterations to the source text, Goldblatt himself admitted: “Although I am the one who makes the cuts and changes, it is always at the publisher’s request.” He continued, “In fact, the works that were noticeably abridged—including *Wolf Totem*—number only four, and in every case the publisher required the changes” [12]. This shows that the publisher’s market positioning and intended readership likewise shape the translator’s choice of strategy.

Adaptive translation is inherently domesticating [13], and intertextual reconstruction likewise

represents a key manifestation of linguistic domestication in translated poetry [14]; Both achieve cultural acceptability by changing the source text's content. In Chinese-English translation, adaptive is likewise a key way of intertextual reconstruction, and the translator's specific adaptive strategies shape its extent of success in the target language.

4. An Intertextual Analysis of the English Translation of *Wolf Totem*

In Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Wolf Totem* reveals many examples of adaptive translation. Through translation method of adaptation, three aspects are manifested respectively: explicitation of source-text intertextuality, reconstruction of intertextual links in the target text, and loss of original intertextual connections. Below, a few brief examples are analyzed.

4.1 Explicitation of Source-Text Intertextuality

In Chapter 6, it is mentioned that "organizing a combat force as formidable as wolves, even the New Fourth Army and the Eighth Route Army would have to exert the strength of 'Jiu niu er hu'". The original Chinese phrase "the strength of nine bulls and two tigers" is a proverbial expression meaning the combined strength of nine bulls and two tigers, symbolizing immense power. Goldblatt translates this as "a Herculean task." Hercules is a hero from ancient Greek mythology renowned for completing arduous tasks, symbolizing courage and strength. Through this variation, Goldblatt transforms the Chinese cultural idiom in the original sentence into a mythological figure with similar symbolic meaning in Western culture, thereby achieving an explicitation of intertextuality in a cross-cultural context. English readers can better understand the immense effort and difficulty involved in forming such a "fighting force," thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the original text's underlying meaning. In contrast, while a literal translation conveys the information that completing the task requires immense effort, the term "Herculean" evokes a stronger emotional resonance among English readers due to its cultural symbolism.

In the scene where Chen Zhen watches the wolves carve a "wolf trail" along the lake, the narrator's scalp prickles in terror. Goldblatt turns that visceral image into the English idiom "make my hair stand on end," capturing the same spike of dread without resorting to intrusive footnotes. For English-speaking readers, the borrowed idiom rings instantly familiar, evoking every horror story or campfire tale in which hair has bristled in fright. By sliding one idiomatic skin over another, Goldblatt preserves the emotional jolt and lets the target audience feel the same shiver of intertextual recognition that the source text once sparked in its own readers.

Similarly, Goldblatt also translates "a brief nap" as "cat-nap" and "the Gobi Desert will never rise again" as "Keep the desert at bay." These translations retain the original meaning while aligning with English expression conventions, successfully achieving the transplantation of language and culture. By transposing the source-culture idiom into its target-culture counterpart, he preserves the original's core image while bridging the cognitive gap between Chinese and English through reconstruction. This approach not only strengthens textual cohesion but also heightens cultural adaptability, rendering the translation more readily acceptable to its intended audience.

4.2 Reconstruction of Intertextual Links in the Target Text

Moreover, the translator proactively relocated the supplementary background information on the E'lun Grassland. In the source text, the author supplies detailed background on the E'lun Grassland when the place is repeatedly mentioned in Chapter Two. In translating, Goldblatt did not follow the original order; instead, guided by considerations of target-reader reception, he moved the detailed introduction to the spot in Chapter One where it first appears. At the same time, after the English edition's preface, Goldblatt added a map clearly marking Beijing, the Greater Khingan Mountains, and other key locations, further reinforcing the target readers' intuitive grasp of the E'lun Grassland and its surrounding geography. When source-language readers encounter above terms, they can activate intertextual links with relevant texts within the source culture, thereby better understanding the information in the current text. When target-language readers see "E'lun Grassland," the supplementary information—both image and text—becomes their intertext, thus constructing intertextual relations within the target language.

Additionally, in describing the scene of "arranging wolf carcasses in the shape of the Chinese character 'jing'". By adding the Chinese character "jing" in the translation, Goldblatt enhances semantic clarity. Target readers not only grasp the concrete shape but also generate an associated intertext in their

minds; the people who says English may connect with the image of a “well,” thereby reconstruct intertextuality in the target language. The visual image of the original is preserved, allowing target readers to locate a corresponding reference within their own cultural context, and thus better comprehend the source text.

Whether by inserting images, reordering the structure, or reproducing the exact shape of a Chinese character, these strategies all serve to create intertexts for English readers, enabling more accurate comprehension of the original. Such translation practice not only facilitates the target audience’s grasp of the source content but, by actively forging intertextual links, also enhances the coherence and readability of the translation, reflecting the translator’s deep concern for textual acceptability within a cross-cultural context.

4.3 Loss of Original Intertextual Connections

In Chapter 15 the author likens the grassland’s action of sheltering wolves in danger to an old hen shielding the wolf under her wings. In traditional Chinese culture, the image of an “old hen” carries connotations of love and bravery; by comparing the grassland to a hen, the original text vividly depicts the harmonious coexistence between grassland and wolf and metaphorically expresses the grassland’s care for the wolf pack.

Yet in Western culture the symbolic meaning of “hen” is entirely different. It is usually associated with cowardice; indeed, English even has the phrase “chicken out,” used to describe shrinking back from fear. Thus, the connotations of the “hen” image differ sharply between Chinese and Western cultures. Goldblatt was clearly aware of this and therefore did not use the word “chicken” directly; instead he shifted to the broader superordinate term “bird.” Although “bird” cannot reproduce the specific image of “hen” and loses the intertextual link, as an animal image with a universally shared basis it helps English readers grasp the grassland’s protective action more intuitively, thereby reconstruction and compensating for the source information on a broader semantic level. This adaptive translation not only demonstrates Goldblatt’s exactly perception of cultural difference but also shows his flexible use of intertextual reconstruction in translation practice.

Goldblatt’s handling of the idiom “like adding wings to a tiger” is particularly clever. In the scene describing horses pursuing wolves, the crosswind slows the wolves yet simultaneously lends them speed. To source-language readers, the idiom does not summon an image of a tiger; it is grasped directly as the wind giving the wolves extra power. Instead of rendering the idiom literally, Goldblatt captures its core—the wind’s aid to the wolves’ running—and adapts it into “the wind lent the wolves wings.” Though this choice breaks the idiom’s links to other intertexts, it aligns with target readers’ habits and lowers comprehension barriers. From a functional view of translation, the adaptation achieves effective transmission of information and, in terms of cross-cultural exchange and message dissemination, proves an appropriate and effective device.

5. Implications of Translation Practice from the Perspective of Intertextuality for Chinese Literature “Going Out”

Although China has made many efforts to promote Chinese literature abroad since the 1950s, its path has generally been full of stumbles [15]. In cross-cultural translation the translator’s agency is crucial for constructing intertextual links within the target text. The translator, acting as a communicator between the source and target languages, may follow a path as narrow as a single-plank bridge or as broad as the open road, and the difference in what is conveyed largely depends on the translator’s subjective agency. Because target-language readers usually lack direct exposure to the source culture, much culturally loaded content remains opaque to them. Translators must therefore employ a flexible range of strategies and techniques, tailoring their choices to the text type and the intended readership.

Take the translation of “Yi Hong Yuan” in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In traditional Chinese culture red usually symbolizes positive images such as prosperity, happiness, and fulfillment, whereas in Western culture red lacks such positive associations and may even evoke danger. Hawkes therefore converted the “Hong(red)” into “green” to suit the cognitive habits of English readers. In Western culture green is generally associated with vitality, hope, and energy; this switch helps English readers create positive associations analogous to those triggered by red in the source culture. The translation not only preserves the original cultural image but also reconstructs intertextuality through elements of the target culture, enabling target readers to understand and accept the original’s cultural content more readily.

Xu Yuanzhong's "Theory of Competitive Advantage" stresses that translators should exploit the linguistic advantages of the target language; this is not only an endorsement of translator's subjectivity but also a strategy for achieving intertextual reconstruction in translation. By reconstructing intertextual links, the translator can locate corresponding cultural references or substitutes for the source text within the target culture, thereby narrowing the cultural gap. Such reconstruction requires not only a deep understanding of both cultures but also a measure of adaptive translation and recreation in the translation process so as to fit the expressive habits and cultural background of the target readers.

6. Conclusion

In the contemporary landscape of global cultural exchange, Chinese cultural export remains relatively weak; compared with the dominant Western cultural export, literal translation alone often yields unsatisfactory results, and full-length translations usually receive limited acceptance in the target culture. Differences in cultural backgrounds among nations create challenges for preserving the source text's intertextual relations in translation practice. To a certain extent, if literal translation cannot satisfy readers' expectations, adaptive translation is no less a form of "faithfulness." By adjusting and reconstructing the intertextual elements of the original, this adaptive translation elicits resonance within the target culture, thereby achieving effective communication and cultural transmission across contexts.

In literary translation, conveying cultural connotation and transmitting specific cultural elements each have their own importance. For a mature literary work, although it was created in the native cultural soil of its author, once completed the work becomes an independent cultural object whose inherent connotations possess the capacity to be shared across languages and cultures. Faithful translation is not the mechanical retention of every cultural element in the source text but the conveyance of the work's core values. Just as in a great music, what strikes the heart is not only the lyrics but also the melody. Likewise, the core value of a literary work lies in its intellectual depth, not merely in its specific cultural elements. Yet as Sino-Western cultural exchange deepens and mutual understanding increases, literal and full-length translations will become more readily accepted by global readers, thereby enabling more outstanding literary works to reach the world.

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