

## Analysis on Howard Goldblatt's Translation of Rice From the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

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### Abstract

With the emergence of culture turn in the 1980s, translator's invisible status has been changed. Translation process is no longer considered as a simple conversion process from the original language to the target language, but a process full of creativity.

*Rice* is the Chinese novelist Su Tong's second novel which deals with China in the 1930s. He vividly portrays Depression-era China and the characters that populate this novel. Howard Goldblatt devotes himself to the translation of modern and contemporary Chinese novels into English and *Rice* is one of his numerous works. His impeccable translation does much justice to the flow of the tale. From the study on Goldblatt's case, inspirations can be drawn on the exercise of translator's subjectivity in the process of introducing and translating Chinese literature to the world.

Research methods such as exemplification and induction were adopted in this article. Different interpretations of translator's subjectivity were reviewed at the beginning of the article according to Professor Lü Jun's division of three paradigms in Chinese translation study. The influential factors on translator's subjectivity were analyzed on the theoretical basis of manipulation school and functionalist school. The manifestation of Howard Goldblatt's subjectivity in the translation of *Rice* was analyzed, followed by reflections on the exercise of translator's subjectivity.

**Key words:** Translator's subjectivity; Howard Goldblatt; Translation of *Rice*

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### INTRODUCTION

For quite a long time, under the influence of source-text oriented theory, traditional translation studies have this tendency to consider faithfulness and/or equivalence the absolute standard in the evaluation and judgment of a translation.

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are few imperfections-scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself. (Venuti, 1995, p.1)

Consequently, the translator tries his/her best to reduce the subjectivity involved in the process of translation. Despite numerous articles and researches on the significance of the translator's subjectivity, the principles and criterions on the display or the exercise of translator's subjectivity remain controversial. Many contemporary translation theories such as functionalist school, descriptive school, hermeneutics, deconstructionism, aesthetics of reception etc. are starting to question the authority of the original. They push translators into a more authoritative and subjective position. Study on translator's subjectivity can better our understanding of the role and nature of the translator not only in the process of translation but also in the cultural communication and construction.

Howard Goldblatt enjoys the highest position in Chinese literature translators in the Western world. Chinese translation scholars concentrate their study on

several typical novels including *Wolf Totem*, *Red Sorghum*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* etc from various perspectives, while Su Tong's *Rice* is rarely mentioned in the studies. Under this background, this article tries to find its way to the exploration of Goldblatt's translation of *Rice* from the perspective of the translator's subjectivity.

## 1. STUDY ON TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY IN CHINA

Chinese scholars have made huge progress on the construction of translation theory. They gradually deepened their awareness and understanding of the objects and properties of translation. Professor Wang Zuoliang (1997) and Tan Zaixi (2000) made a clear explanation on the objects of translation; Professor Liu Miqing (2007) and Lü Jun (2006) also explored the nature of translation. Professor Lü Jun believes that translation has gone through three phases, which are also known as three paradigms: paradigm of philology, paradigm of structuralism and paradigm of deconstructionism. He analyzes the philosophical and theoretical foundation of those three paradigms separately, pointing out their weaknesses. In his view, the paradigm of philology lacks systematic theory. Translation is understood as an inspirational and irrational performance under this paradigm. The philosophical foundation is based on a certain degree of subjectivism and mysticism. Linguistics is the theoretical foundation of the paradigm of structuralism. The paradigm of structuralism gives full explanation on the importance of the text, but it steps to an extreme for over-emphasizing the text. It puts excessive emphasis on linguistic generality and language analysis, ignoring the differences between languages and translator's subjectivity and creativity. While in the deconstructionism paradigm, under the influence of Hermeneutics, reception aesthetics and deconstructionism, the subjectivity of the translator is awakened, reaffirmed and undisciplined.

From the analysis above we can see that, paradigm of philology and paradigm of deconstructionism are irrational. Translator's subjectivity and translator's initiative are closely related. Translator's subjectivity is interpreted differently in the three paradigms. In paradigm of philology, translation activities are believed to be dependent on the translator's personality, extensive knowledge and translation skills. This interpretation of translator's subjectivity is not based on scientific epistemology, so during this period, most translation studies are about translation method rather than translation theory. In structuralism paradigm, the translator's status is downgraded sharply. Translator's subjectivity is restrained and the text is seen as a fixed, closed and self-sufficient system, which has nothing to do with the subjective experience. With the development

of translation studies in recent years, more and more scholars begin to explore translation from different angles. Paradigm of deconstructionism is a theory of skepticism and a non-rational thought. Deconstructionism denies the significance of determinism and announces the death of the author. It gives translator absolute right of explanation and translator's rewriting is believed to be necessary to make the original widely spread in the world and constantly survive.

From the review above, we can see the translator's humble status has changed greatly in contemporary translation studies. The claim of subjectivity endows the translator with freedom to show his/her initiative and creativity. The translator starts gaining independent personality and academic fame.

## 2. INFLUENTIAL FACTORS ON TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

With the development of new paradigms in translation theory, two influential schools emerged: Skopos Theory and Manipulation School. The former focuses on the translation of practical text, while the latter is committed to the study of literary text. The two schools also have different interpretations about the influential factors to translator's subjectivity, for translator's subjectivity is constrained by different factors in the translation of practical text and literary text.

### 2.1 Purpose of Translation: On the Basis of Skopos Theory

The core concept of Skopos theory is that the purpose of translation is the most important and influential factor to the translator's subjectivity. Skopos theory believes that translation is a purposeful activity, which should pay special attention to the features of the target text rather than the features of the original text. The orientation of Skopos theory is the purpose and function of the translated text and it focusses on the practical use of translation in target language. Skopos theory believes that translation is an intercultural communication activity with clear purpose and the production of interaction between the multiple factors. Skopos theory believes that in the principle of purpose, coherence and fidelity, the purpose comes first. Hence, under the guidance of Skopos theory, the translator should by all means to achieve the translation and transmission of purpose and function, even by the cost of coherence and fidelity. That is to say, the translator has been endowed with subjectivity and authority in the process of translation in order to achieve the ultimate purpose. Source text is dethroned, so it is possible now for the same text being translated in many different ways according to the purpose of the target text and the commission is given to the translator.

## 2.2 Ideology, Patronage and Poetics: On the Basis of Manipulation Theory

Lefevere, the representative of Manipulation School, suggests that translation is the most obvious recognizable type of rewriting, and it is potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and those works beyond the boundaries of their origin (Lefevere, 2004, p.9) Lefevere has repeatedly stressed that translation is not an activity in vacuum and culture is a complicated system which consists of many subsystems such as literature, science, and technology. Thus, choice of the original work and translator's subjectivity is affected and restrained by many factors.

A key claim is made by Lefevere concerning the interaction between poetics, ideology and translation: "On every level of the translation process, it can be shown that, if linguistic considerations enter into conflict with considerations of an ideological or poetological nature, the latter to win out." (Lefevere, 2004, p.39) For Lefevere, the most important consideration is the ideological one, which in this case refers to the translator's ideology, or the ideology imposed upon the translator by patronage. Lefevere lists English translations over the years that have rendered penis variously as nose, leg, handle, life-line and anything else. According to Lefevere, such euphemistic translations are "to no small extent indicative of the ideology dominant at a certain time in a certain society" and they quite literally become the play for the target text audience that cannot read the source text.

Lefevere describes the literary system in which translation functions as being controlled by three main factors, which undoubtedly are the influential factors to the translator's subjectivity, which are professionals within the literary system, patronage outside the literary system and the dominant poetics. Professionals within the literary system include critics, reviewers and teachers who decide on the poetics and at times the ideology of the translated text. Patronage outside the literary system refers to the powers, such as persons and institutions that can further or hinder the reading, writing and rewriting. Patron may be an influential and powerful individual in a given historical era, groups of people such as publishers, the media and political class or party and institutions such as national academies, academic journals and so on. The dominant poetics consists of literary devices and the concept of the role of literature. The former includes the range of genres, symbols and so on. The latter refers to the relation of literature to the social system in which it exists.

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## 3. MANIFESTATION OF TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY IN *RICE*

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As the subject of translation, the translator's subjectivity is inevitably manifested in his translation activities. And the manifestation is throughout the whole translation

process. Until fairly recently translation was thought of purely as an activity performed by a single rational agent, the translator, on a text created by another rational agent, the source author. Translator's subjectivity is displayed throughout the whole translation process, starting from the choice of the original and throughout the process of understanding and expressing.

### 3.1 In the Choice of the Original

As a pioneering writer of new fiction, Su Tong does not seem to get too much artistic nutrition from Western literature. On the contrary, he gets more benefits from Chinese traditional culture and Chinese classical novels. And it helps him to build a distinct style from the others. It seems that the more endlessly and alienated the world in his novel he creates, the more freely and simply he can capture and pursue his imagination. And *Rice* is a vivid portrayal of Su Tong's "doctrine of evil human nature".

*Wolf Totem* gains its popularity in different cultures for the universal and non-politicized theme. It has been approved that Western readers prefer those novels which are non-politicized or reveal the dark side of China. *Rice* is not the first novel written by Su Tong that Howard chose to translate. He has finished the translation of Su Tong's *My Life As Emperor* and *Binu and the Great Wall* before *Rice*. Goldblatt (2008) once said, this preference and taste of the Western reader are closely related to the choice of those translators like him. Choosing the right original work rather than translating is the most important task in the whole translation process. The novel he chooses to translate must be appealing to the translator himself. He admits that he is quite pessimistic and personally he prefers those novels of heavy and pessimistic themes. But everyone has different taste. American critics always say that Chinese literature put too much emphasis on the dark side of human nature and the conflicts between man and society. Goldblatt does not agree because most works are chosen by translators. In other words, those choices are quite personal and subjective.

### 3.2 In the Process of Understanding

*Rice* is the name of the book and it's also of great significance in Chinese culture. For tens of thousands of years, Chinese live on rice. Rice means a chance of survival in this agricultural country and it has become an important image in Chinese culture. *Rice* is introspection to the meaning of survival and life in this nation. This novel revives a historical picture in which different relationships are affected by rice: Northern China and Southern China, city slickers and country bumpkins, men and women, scenes of life and underworld figures.

Su Tong has fashioned in *Rice* a heart-rending and enormously passionate assault on the traditions of the western novel. There is no love here; there is no redemption; there is no triumph of the individual unless you count the triumph inherent in Su Tong's

overwhelming and imaginative virtuosity. It is not difficult for a Sinologist to appreciate the virtuosity in terms of literary creation, but can he fully get Su Tong's imagination and unflinching honesty, and understand the darkness of the story and the great significance of this special image, rice, to Chinese culture in the process of translation? Undoubtedly, Su Tong is one of Goldblatt's favorite Chinese novelists. He likes his work, especially *Rice* and *My Life as Emperor*, and he resonates with all of Su Tong's idea in *Rice*. Let's have Howard Goldblatt (2009) answer the question by himself. He once said in an interview, "*Rice* is particularly well written, everything is dark and every character is evil in that novel, like Dostoevsky seizing the dark side of the human heart, Su Tong skillfully manifested it. In fact, one cannot always be good, everyone has the bad side. We hide this dark side under the pressure of life and we keep it depressed, but occasionally it bursts out. Su Tong has the courage to go to a more extreme end; everything is about the bad side in *Rice*. Nothing bright shows up. His description about the person's inner world is so rich, and I personally agree with his 'doctrine of evil human nature' ". That is to say, he fully understands the original. What is more, he appreciates the author's courage and the subtle theme of this novel. The following paragraph describes Five Dragons' very first impression of the city:

Travelers from home are like stray dogs; they sleep when they are tired, wherever they are, and their expressions-lethargic and groggy at times, ferocious of others- are more doglike than human. Five Dragons turns and looks at the gaudy painted advertisements on the wall behind him: soap, cigarettes, and a variety of herbal tonics in the hands of pouty, pretty young women with lips the color of blood. Tucked in among the sexy women are the names and addresses of VD clinics. Five Dragons grins. This is the city: Chaotic and filled with weird things that draw people like flies, to lay their maggoty eggs and move on. Everyone damns the city, but sooner or later they come anyhow. In the dying light Five Dragons sees the legendary city smoke rising into the air, confirming his image of what a city is: one gigantic smoke-stack, just as Maple-Poplar villagers had told him. (Goldblatt, 2000, p.2)

Goldblatt's translation is concise yet reveals Five Dragons' very first impression about the city "without losing a drop". Some sentences are rearranged to narrow down the gap between hypotaxis and parataxis. Despite all the rearrangements and deletion he makes, Howard's translation fully reveals the attitude towards city. "Everyone damns the city, but sooner or later they come anyhow". The word "damn" is quite intriguing and persuasive. People are yielding to the temptation of the city. They surrender themselves to the lust and desire. This is one of the important themes of this novel, which is also quite universal in our civilized world: the fall of mankind in the city. It is a very paradoxical phenomenon. City is a result of human's civilization, while people in the city are falling and downgraded because of poverty, lust and desire for fame and wealth.

### 3.3 In the Process of Expressing

#### 3.3.1 The Translation of Characters' Names

The names of the characters are part of the writer's intention, especially in Chinese literature. They are rendered according to their inner form and the most important meanings are usually conveyed by names. It has already been observed that names in literary works are often used to convey a message to the readers. Like any other translations, translation of names is also a kind of form of intercultural communication; it involves language laws, cultural psychology, aesthetic interest and some other factors. Theoretically speaking, the translated names should achieve a perfect linguistic unity among sound, form and meaning. Meanwhile, cultural obstacles in the target language should be surmounted. The translated names should conform to the writer's intention, the theme of the original, target readers' aesthetic interest and psychology.

Two translation strategies are preferred in the translation of Characters' names of Chinese literature: transliteration and liberal translation. The Wade-Giles System is adopted in transliteration. But Goldblatt prefers liberal translation when he comes across Chinese characters' names. Translators such as Pearl Buck and Zhang Ailing had the same preference in translation history. Su Tong names the hero of this novel "五龙", a name that is so Chinese and oriental. We are quite familiar with the different interpretations of "龙" (dragon) in the East and West culture. A dark and twisted soul is hidden under the surface of this authoritative name. Goldblatt keeps the image of "龙" in his translation and translates it into "Five Dragons". His translation of the sisters' names is quite creative and also indicative. "织云" and "绮云" are translated into "Cloud Weave" and "Cloud Silk". The "Cloud" sisters are of vastly different personalities and Goldblatt's translation indicates that successfully. "Cloud Weave" is the temptation of lust in the city, just like a fallen and corrupted prostitute weaving to her potential customers. "Cloud Silk" is more down to earth and she still has consciousness and the spirit of hard-working. As for the names of the children, Howard translates "柴生", "米生" and "小碗" into "Kindling Boy", "Rice Boy" and "Little Bowl". All those names are related to the theme of this novel and Goldblatt's display of subjectivity in the translation of those names keeps the symbolic meaning to the maximum.

#### 3.3.2 The Transmission of Theme and Culture

The Chinese literature is a good example of ancient human wisdom because it was written in one single language without any alterations or changes. In the western world a piece of Chinese literature is really appealing. That is why the Chinese literature is highly respected and considered as one of the most complex and interesting literatures in the world. In fact, China is the only nation that has the same writing system for almost 3,000 years. The

singular characters, graphics and signs that they employ in its writing make a big difference when compared with other western languages and countries. Each Chinese character or graphic means a different thought or idea. The development of the Chinese writing language during past centuries has relevant effects nowadays. Let's look at an example when Goldblatt has to deal with the character itself: "Above the outer gate hung a black signboard with four gold inlaid characters, although most people could only read the word for rice: MI." (Goldblatt, 2000, p.9) Most people could only read the word for rice "米" because it is the simplest character in the name of the rice store. "米" is the character with the fewest strokes. People are not civilized or educated enough to recognize the other three characters. Actually they are suffering so much from hunger that all they can see and all they need is "米". Is it possible to keep one single Chinese character in the English version of a Chinese novel? I guess the answer is negative. Goldblatt uses a phonetic word here: "MI". Some of the hidden meanings disappear in this phonetic translation. Goldblatt also makes some bold deletion and rearrangement in his translation to make the conversation concise and the feelings more impulsive: "Bloody money. Money well spent. What better way to part with a silver dollar than to have it end Abao' life?" (Goldblatt, 2000, p.53) Goldblatt's display of the subjectivity is quite obvious. "钱要花在刀刃上" is very difficult to find the equivalence in target language and it is unnecessary to explain that "it is necessary to spend money where they are needed most". So Howard translates it into "Bloody money". What is more, a declarative sentence is translated into a rhetorical question by Goldblatt here to make the feelings stronger.

Language is essentially rooted in the reality of culture. It cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance. Translation is a rendering of ideas or concepts from one language into another, i.e., the faithful representation in the target language of what is written or said in the original language. Literary translation, as a cross-cultural communication in the form of converting an expression from one language into another language different from each other by means of recreating or rewriting the original meaning of the source language text in a target language text, is a rendering process of words and sentences at discourse level. Hence, every literal expression of the original thought with its culture reflected by culture-loaded words and structures in the original text must be reproduced as faithfully and expressively as possible in the target text through corresponding words and sentence patterns, nothing should be added to or taken away from the original meaning. Goldblatt does a great job in the translation of those culture-loaded words and structures. "玄色福祿棉袍" is translated into "a black 'luck-and-wealth' padded jacket", "福" and "祿" are well explained;

"月光灯影" is translated into "the faint moonlight and the glare of an occasional lantern", here Goldblatt gives up the neatness of the form to keep the meaning well expressed; "不怕野贼怕家贼" is translated into "Thieves on the outside, thieves in the family, one or the other." and "偷鸡摸狗" is translated into "a stray dog was looking for one of the family hens". He also let his subjectivity displayed a little bit, but every created expression should be made on the bases of the author's intention to created in the original text.

The following paragraph describes a scene Five Dragons saw in an autumn evening when he stood on the Brick Mason Street. Description about the environment aims at creating a certain atmosphere and artistic conception for the character's activities and development of the story:

Children were rolling iron hoops down the street; the high pitched screeches of a two-stringed huqin and the hollow notes of a bamboo flute, followed by the childish, lackluster strains of a female voice, came from a local opera troupe at a distant intersection. Odd aromas from the pharmaceutical plant and smoky chimney smell from factories to the west arrived on the same wind. A man is roasting chestnuts across the street wrestled his cauldron out of the way of a rickshaw traveling down the street. (Goldblatt, 2000, p.28)

Five Dragons sees the ugly side of the glamorous city and tastes the bitterness from the loss of affection. Survival becomes the priority in the distorted reality. This setting provides a chance for Five Dragons to show his personality freely and reveal the darkest side of human nature on the stage of life. The setting here consists of many historical and specific images. We can see many things with strong Chinese characteristics in the description of this scene. Howard keeps all the details and Chinese flavor in his translation: "rolling iron hoops", "a two-stringed huqin and the hollow notes of a bamboo flute", "strains of a female voice", "roasting chestnuts", and "rickshaw". He leads target readers into a different world, a world that is so Oriental and mysterious. The strange smell from the pharmaceutical factory and chimney breaks this harmonious scene. Sharp contrast is made to let readers feel the helplessness in the process of industrialization. Description of the details with such exotic flavor brings a vivid picture of a different nation in the target language readers. Howard makes a slight change here in his translation: "他听见" is deleted, "the childish, lackluster strains of a female voice" come after "the high pitched screeches of a two-stringed huqin and the hollow notes of a bamboo flute" directly. Howard's translation makes all the images come one after another, creating an effect just as montage technique does in a movie.

*Rice* tells an intriguing story. As a contemporary Chinese novel, this kind of literary genre is more widely accepted than poetry or drama. Unlike so many novels with happy endings, *Rice* demonstrates a different path. The theme of *Rice* caters to the curiosity of the target

readers: evil side of human nature, twisted personality, combination of a certain amount of sex and violence. Su Tong is a literary talent and a master at bringing out extreme ego-centricism in his characters:

By then he was sprinkling rice over her nude body and watching it funnel down between her breasts. The silky grains made her skin tingle strangely...He was too engrossed in watching her swelling abdomen rise and fall to answer. Panting heavily. Suddenly he clenched his teeth and crammed a handful of rice into Cloud Weave's vagina...He kept at it, still panting heavily. Rice is cleaner than a man's cock, so what are you complaining about? (Goldblatt, 2000, p.107)

He flung her onto the pile and watched her wet body make a dent in the rice, showering the area with loose grains. Stepping on the shifting rice, he towered over writhing limbs and churning torso. The scene threw him into frenzy. Infantile moans of passion emerged from his mouth. As Cloud Silk struggled, Five Dragons once again satisfied his deepest urges. After cramming a handful of raw rice up her vagina ... (Goldblatt, 2000, p.130)

There is more sex in *Rice* than one normally expects from a Chinese novel. Description in the two paragraphs above is quite brutalizing rather than sensual. The translation by Goldblatt is colloquial but not jarringly so. He keeps all the details to bring the authentic sensuality to the target reader: "funnel down", "swelling abdomen rise and fall", "silky grains" and "writhing limbs and churning torso". The brutality and sadism of Five Dragons are also depicted without losing a drop: "flung", "clenched his teeth", "crammed into", "Infantile moans" and "cramming up". Five Dragons devotes all his love to rice and women are just victims of his sadism. Sadism and masochism also result in his final self-destruction. For Five Dragons, rice is more reliable and realistic than woman's body. Rice is the root of all the emotion and desire in the agricultural country. Rice symbolizes the cultural background, the connotation and value of life. Rice provides a delicate and emotional interpretation for the culture of the race. Rice is the ultimate explanation for the cultural psychology, mentality and way of life. Here rice joins Five Dragon's survival, lust and sadism together. And rice is the eternal complex for Five Dragons as well as the whole nation.

#### 4. REFLECTIONS ON THE EXERCISE OF TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

The so-called principles of translation and criteria of translation are actually the two sides of the same thing. The former lays emphasis on the translator, who should follow them while translating, where the latter on the reader or critic, who may use the criteria to evaluate a translation. The translation criterion—faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance—have been widely accepted in China as a yardstick for a long time. Though concise and seemingly all embracing, the criterion has its limitations in practice. The correct attitude towards them

is to accept them critically and absorb what is still useful to us. In *Rice*, many settings and descriptions are quite Southern China. So here comes the paradox: Exoticism is the most appealing factor to target readers, but it can also distance the target readers from the novel if there is too much of it. Definition and criterion of faithfulness are flexible. Howard keeps the exoticism of the original to the maximum extent while make slightly grammatical changes to bring the target readers closer. The well known Chinese American author Anchee Min uses the following words to praise Howard Goldblatt's translation: "It is like holding a handful of water with his palms without losing a drop."

#### CONCLUSION

Translation and introduction of Chinese literature to the West have never been easy. The success of Goldblatt's translation can bring us inspiration. Under the double influence of the East and the West, Goldblatt forms his attitudes towards two different cultures and his unique understanding of Chinese literature. In order to achieve the goal of introducing Chinese literature culture to the West and making them appealing to the western reader, Goldblatt has been doing a great job in keeping the exoticism of the original to the maximum extent while making slightly grammatical changes to bring the target readers closer. From the above analysis, we can now come to the conclusion: Goldblatt's translation of *Rice* is a typical example in the manifestation of translator's subjectivity. From the study on Goldblatt's case, we might also conclude that the translator's subjectivity is a kind of internal characteristics of the translator that exist from the beginning of translation activities. Admit it or not, the translator unavoidably participates in the process of translation. The existence and functions of the translator's subjectivity require that the translator should not be in the shadowy presence any longer.

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