

Case Study of Howard Goldblatt's Translation of *Red Sorghum*—From Media-translatology Perspective

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Abstract—Since Mo Yan was given the Nobel Prize for Literature, literary translation has been heatedly debated. Howard Goldblatt, as one of Mo Yan's major translators of English world, is gaining global eyes. And his translations are so popular that some scholars claim that Howard flatters Mo Yan himself, and he has rewritten Mo Yan. To make the debate known to the public, the thesis explores Howard's translation of *Red Sorghum*, based on the perspective of Media-translatology. In the translation, Howard Goldblatt has made addition, subtraction, rearrangement, etc., in the translation. His changes and adjustments are quite different from the ST, but it retains the image, structure of the ST, and it adopts aesthetic fidelity, which is a universal principle in literary translation. Howard's choice of Mo Yan is another reason to help him achieve success in translation for western readers are particularly interested in Mo Yan's invention of genre, style, techniques and language. And what Howard's action has coincided with the significant opening-up policy of China is also a great power to popularize his translation. Actually, Howard's performance and practice are necessary steps to communicate culture in cross-cultural interactions, he is not only a communicator of Chinese literature, modern and contemporary, but also a constant contributor of world civilization and culture, for his new attribute in translation—a thirdness.

Index Terms—Howard Goldblatt, media-translatology, aesthetic fidelity, translation action, thirdness

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Media-translatology or Media-translation study was first put forward by Professor Xie Tianzhen,¹ it's been more than 20 years' elapse. From the time on, various voices, including arguments, doubts and even attacks, are constantly carried out inside or outside of translation territory. To our surprise, some of both parties involved into the debate have not understood the essentials of the new discipline. Some say that, the advocate of so-called Media-translatology, is a flag-bearer or a pioneer of random translation; and others declare that the followers of the new science are a bunch of self-sabotage of translation standards, especially, the first and foremost one, i.e., "Translation should be faithful to the original." From the different opinions about Media-translatology, we can see it is a must to get the participants involved to know what the new discipline is actually about. For the purpose, the thesis intends to illustrate the indispensable dimensions of Media-translatology, by studying the case of Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum*, a representative of novels written by Mo Yan.

As we all know, since Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, literary translation has become a heated topic among related academic fields at home and abroad. Because Mo Yan writes works in Chinese, and gets them published in Chinese as well, his international awards are closely connected with his translators over the world. And Mo Yan remarked that his Nobel Prize is due to constant contributions made by every translator of his works over the world. Among the translators, the most remarkable ones of them are, Swedish Anna Gustafsson Chen, who is regarded as "the Queen without a royal crown"; French Dutrait and Chantal Chen-Andro, Japanese Fujiishozo, and American Howard Goldblatt, who is recognized as "No.1 Midwife for Mo Yan". It is probably true that, without the translators, Mo Yan would have lost or be delayed at least for some time to be awarded the laurel since there is only Goran Malmqvist, the committee member of Nobel Literary Prize Council, who can appreciate the works written in Chinese. Thus, without various translations, Mo Yan would not be noted by the world, and the Nobel Prize Council would not have paid much attention to him. It is no exaggeration that the translators are heroes behind Mo Yan, though they have been invisible in most cases. Therefore, the readers of Mo Yan can't wait to read the translations or the source works after he is given the Prize. As to the readers of English edition translated by Howard Goldblatt, they only discovered that the translation is far from the ST, taking *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* as a case study, judged by the principle of fidelity to ST, the first standard of translation evaluation. Because of the great gap between the translation and the original, many of translators or scholars of translation studies express concerns and worries, that is: Howard's translation is not translation at all but a kind of adaption, rewriting, edition or treason of the original text. Out of sudden, Howard's translation is a

¹ Xie Tianzhen is professor of Shanghai Foreign Language International Studies. He first put forward the concept of Media-translatology or Media-translation studies in 1990s in China.

target of all sorts of criticisms and comments; the hero seems to have been degenerated into a zero, who is regarded as a misleader of communication of MoYan's works.

So, it is a time of paradox for translators at home and abroad. On one hand, the translations are the driving force of Mo Yan's international prizes; the translators deserve the privilege to share the honor with the prize-winner, though they do have been invited to attend the Award ceremony and reported on medias, they are visible in the end; on the other hand, when researcher colleagues are devoted to studying the translations (as far as the author of the paper is concerned, hereby it refers to the English version), what they have found the truth is: the Prize seems to have been awarded to the translations, presented in front of the committee members of the Prize Council, not STs written by Mo Yan. No wonder that many academicians of translation or literature have various voices about the Prize and the translations. Confronted with the polyphony of criticisms and conflicts, translation studies have its new problems obviously, under a kind of new context, whether nationally or internationally. And many of translator fellows started to rethink the essence of translation in general, i.e. the traditional concept. Thus, it is the best time and the noisiest time as well for us to analyze the essence of the new occurrences in translation domain, i.e. Media-translatology as Professor Xie Tianzhen has called it.

II. HOWARD'S ACTIONS IN TRANSLATING *RED SORGHUM* FROM MEDIA-TRANSLATOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

If we take a good look at Howard Goldblatt's *Red Sorghum* from the perspective of Media-translatology, it is not difficult for us to understand Howard's actions in the translation, for whose actions and strategies are complete compatible with the definition of Media-translatology, which is roughly described as the following:

Media-translatology is quite different from translation studies in general. If we want to define it briefly, we may safely declare that, at first, it derives from the stance of Media Studies, a branch of Comparative Literature, and at present, it launches its studies of translation (especially literary translation) and translated literature more frequently from the angle of Comparative Culture. But strictly speaking, the studies coverage of Media-translatology is not language studies but literary or cultural studies. What it is not primarily concerned with problems at linguistic levels, such as how a source language is shifted into a target language, but with lose, deformation, addition and extension and the like in the conversion process from the original into foreign language or vice versa, and it mainly cares about the unique value and significance as translation (especially literary translation) is deemed as a practice of cross-cultural communication. (Xie Tianzhen, 1999, p.1-2)

According to the explanation quoted above, we translators could grip the basic essentials of the new discipline: First, "the studies coverage of Media-translatology is not language studies but literary or cultural studies."(ibid.) Second, it is a kind of media-communication. The previous one clearly shows that the science is not dedicated to exploring how ST is shifted into TT, the technical problem in translating; the latter one stresses that a translator should take possible efforts to convey and communicate message to receivers. Howard has integrated many actions in translating *Red Sorghum*, i.e., adaption, reconstructing, addition, subtraction or treason, etc., which are adopted just for readers' convenience. Meanwhile, translators of literature would also get clear that why previous translations of Chinese literary texts, which had taken pain-efforts and time to be accomplished by numerous translators, have not evoked wide repercussions and exerted active influence among the circles of literature and translation, let alone global response. Are the translations not good enough to attract readers' interest or attention? Or the translators are mediocrity? Of course, none of them is acceptable because the translators are masters of foreign literature, both familiar with alien language and culture. And then, there should be other reasons hidden behind the phenomenon which have embarrassed us translators for decades since China's adhered to the goal to communicate and convey its culture over the world, especially after the founding of new China in 1949. Now, more reasonable and acceptable explanation to it may be that, we have paid too much more attention to linguistic level rather cultural one, to the authors of ST instead of the readers of TT; though we have intended to communicate with the world, we haven't follow the law of media and communication at all throughout our translation. Such mode of the translation in the past is author-oriented, a self-communication without effect.

All the actions in Howard's translations have conveyed a kind of message, i.e., they are audience-oriented and market-targeted. Compared with the previous translations in China, which are supposed to have been communicated globally, Howard's translation is a great success, for which have aroused international interests not only in Mo Yan, as a matter of fact, but also a kind of a domino effect of things, including Chinese Literature and Culture, everything conceivable, even a banquet of imagination about China from all nations on the Earth. By making use of the Prize, China's soft power is greatly strengthened. Hence, it is urgent and significant for us to unveil Howard's translation so that China's translator fellows could follow something to improve the situation of literary translation in China.

In fact, Howard's actions in translating *Red Sorghum* are crucial cases of communication, which means aiming to send message to audience. In Howard's eyes, translation is a vehicle of communication to readers and receivers, audiences; he is a sender of information, "a communicator, an interpreter, a major node of the chain to understand the world."(Goldblatt, 2011, p.15) Eventually, as a translator, everything he has tried his utmost efforts to fulfill is "for the audience, by the audience and of the audience"² to receive his message, i.e., to ensure his translations to be popular in

² The quotation is a parody of a speech, "for the people, by the people and of the people" delivered by Abraham Lincoln in Gettysburg Address.

western market. For the great goal, as a result, his translation of *Red Sorghum* is altered immensely, which is far from fidelity to the original text in Chinese. First, he has reorganized the structures of the original in his translation; the original text has 9 chapters altogether with no sub-title, but as to the translation, it has been reduced into only 5 combined together, which has been added with a sub-title respectively. Second, the ending of the translation is rewritten, which is absolutely different from the original one. Consequently, in the translation, to satisfy western Poetics or publication principles as well as the aesthetics, mentality and even ideology and the like, the translator, Howard, cut off some bizarre narrations, like reminiscence, flashback and unimportant minor plots. (Wensheng Deng & Ke Zhang, 2017, pp.50) Coincidentally, there are other translators like Howard Goldblatt in translating works; China has Lin Shu (1852—1924) and Yan Fu(1854—1921) in Late Qing Dynasty and early period of Republican China, cited as two cases in point; and America has Ezra Pound(1885—1972) to illustrate. Both Lin Shu and Yan Fu frequently cut off something they think useless and irrelevant to spread and disseminate modern ideas and technology. Lin even goes further than Howard Goldblatt, he has changed some of the original plots to describe characters as his idea; both he and Yan adds their remarks in translation to convey his modern values, such as democracy, science, freedom and equality or the like. To communicate the modern values to readers of intellectuals, who have accepted China's traditional education in life, Yan and Lin adopt an elegant style of Chinese, a classical style, for they think only using the official style employed by upper society, not vulgar style taken by lower society, can they convey the ideas and convince the so-called higher ranks of society. So when we read some of the translations by the two, like *Oliver Twist*, *The Evolution*, just mentioning the two examples, they read smooth and enjoyable, according to Qian Zhongshu (1910--1998), a master of scholar and novelist, he even prefers to read the translations by Lin Shu rather than the ST, for which he regards as redundant and slow. The cases cited here have taken place in a special context. That is, old China needs new message and modern knowledge to turn China into a modern country like western powers at the time. For the purpose, Lin and Yan have done what they had taken for granted.

As to Ezra Pound, as a great poet and translator in America, he is another example of Howard Goldblatt, and his translation is a kind of translation legend. Once he read some translation of Classical Chinese poems by chance, and after that, he began to be fascinated by it. As he read more and more translations of Classical poems, he took interest in Chinese. Unfortunately, what Pound has translated Chinese Classical poems is quite different from the original, and with abundant of misunderstanding. One of his characteristics in translation is terse, objective and clear, which is adopted by his followers as one of the three principles of Imagist Movement, opening a new chapter in western Poetics. To some extent, the improper actions, including the adaption, edition, deletion and rewriting the original, judged by the traditional theory in translation studies, only bring about a proper event in a proper period, which is never expected for contemporaries. But history never allows expectation and imagination. All the cases home and abroad are somewhat similar to each other, every translator has done something “with lose, deformation, addition and extension and the like in the conversion process from the original into foreign language or vice versa” (ibid. Xie Tianzhen, 1999) to make readers believe what he has communicated, and we can see they are reader-centered.

As we discussed above, Howard's actions in translation are communication, audience-oriented, but also the supplies of the times, western book market and western Poetics. First, besides reader's aesthetics and mentality, Howard also takes western Poetics and his sponsor into his consideration of translation communication. To satisfy the Poetics, he has to make some changes, revisions or something the like. Once he wrote letters to get the permission from Mo Yan to rewrite *Red Sorghum*. From the incidents we can see he is rigorously responsible for MoYan and the ST, and he is not a translator of random and rashness at all. Second, what he is compelled to do comes from the western book market's demands, i.e., his sponsor, not his own will and wish, for who is a good writer as well and every letter is his bone and flesh, and is so hard to be part with. Nevertheless, “it is a truth universally acknowledged that every book in possession of a good reputation must be in want of a reader;”³ which means whatever a great book is, it needs reading and appreciating, otherwise it is dead. So, when Howard is entitled to revising or rewriting the ending of *Red Sorghum*, it is Mo Yan not Howard Goldblatt who is getting criticized in the ceremony of Nobel Prize for he writes for a translator; MoYan refuted such kind of criticism, he has not done this for any translators but for the world, which has established mutual trust between a writer and a translator, whose combination is a magnificent marriage indeed; no wonder there are not many translators like Howard Goldblatt. Additionally, to get his translations published and sold well, Howard is forced to take his actions. For the point, he addresses (Goldblatt, 2011, p.248), “Without careful selections of his materials in writng, some novelists have composed his stories with the raw materials in his works. And the novelists are compelled to revise the mistakes of their own for without a demanding editor's supervision, and the novelists are not well qualified to play the role as an editor. Whoever he is, whether he has published piles of books or he is renowned, he or she can't see works of his or her own objectively; at the critical moment a second pair of eyes is necessary, which can both check something self-contradictory and roughly provide a new angel for the novelist. Habitually, the publishing presses and houses of China have not entitled to an editor such right to revise and rewrite a piece of original text or script. So, the drudgery of revision falls upon a translator or an editor to execute.” From what Howard said above, we can understand why he is bold enough to delete some irrelevant parts of ST here and there, and sometimes he jumps

³ Here it is a parody of the first sentence in novel *Pride and Prejudice* written by Jane Austin, which is “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

onto the front to act as a ghost writer for a ST author for some time. Not only has he treated *Red Sorghum* this way in translating but also undertaken similar adjustments in translating other works, like *The Moon Opera* and *Three Sisters* written by Bi Feiyu, and *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong, etc. Apparently, it's known to any reader of the novel that he has rewritten the title of ST, *The Moon Opera* and *Three Sisters*, to be faithfully to convey the theme and attract the potential readers of the two books at their first glance over the title. He is successful in drawing attention from readers and receivers over the world. Before Mo Yan is given the Nobel Prize, he has been awarded other international prizes over and over, such as Newman Prize for Chinese Literature, National Endowment for the Arts and Man Asian Literary Prize (Sun Huijun, 2016, p.7), which have signified that Mo Yan has gained global recognition; then his translations have captured more and more market shares and had be best-sellers in USA for a time. But, we can't help ask some questions, why are Howard, Pound, Lin and Yan especially popular? And why are not so for the translations of Chinese literatures, translated by senior translators in 1960s and 1970s? An important reason is time changed. For Lin Shu and Yan Fu, to cultivate and develop a new type of culture to transfigure old China, China is on a stage to absorb new knowledge; for Pound, he is urgent to find something new to revolt against his former literary society. For a receiver or audience with wishes or interests to take in new culture, he is anxious to accept whatever it is, it is either something changed or deleted, this phenomenon could take place only during the input period. However, for a receiver with no idea to a new culture, like Chinese literature to a western receiver, the communicator, here it refers to translators, he has to rack his brain to communicate to the receiver, or he is doomed to fail. The western readers of Chinese literature are readers with no idea to absorb, that's why Howard should have carried out in his early period of translation. According to Professor Xie Tianzhen, the period is called an output one, because China has been opening up to the world for several decades since 1978, and oversea readers have been interested in China, they wish they could understand Chinese culture; and Chinese literature is a good opening for them to do so; and Howard's translations have aroused global eyes partially just for the opening-up policy. The years Howard started his translation coincide with the early period of the opening-up policy, so the history gives a timely help and hand to Howard's success.

Although Howard has made changes in his translation, especially in *Red Sorghum: a novel of China*, structurally speaking, the translation is still faithful to the ST. And it is hard for the reader of the two works feel the distance and difference between them. On the contrary, English readers get the same aesthetic images in the translation as our Chinese readers reading the ST *Red Sorghum*, which indicates the TT has preserved and conveyed the same images in the ST. Howard lost his formal fidelity at language level but has retained aesthetic fidelity, structural fidelity, as Lin Shaohua, a major translator of Haruki Murakami, a Japanese writer, have remarked, "...as to literary translation, the key to a good literary translation lies in aesthetic fidelity". (Zhang Chang, 2018) Both Howard and Lin Shaohua are translators of literature, Lin does his translation from Japanese to Chinese, and Howard from Chinese to English, however, they have drawn the same idea and taken similar actions about translation of literature, which have proved that aesthetic fidelity is practically applicable with universality, for it has both retained and reserved the original literariness and image, the core constituents in a piece of work. More broadly speaking, not only the literary image in ST should be retained, but also cultural image and aura⁴ should be conveyed and communicated as far as anything cultural is concerned.

And one of the reasons which Howard Goldblatt has succeeded in translating is also linked to his purposeful choice from the original works. What he has chosen is the works of modern Chinese literature and contemporary literature, written by like Mo Yan, Bi Feiyu, Jiang Rong etc., for the works are totally different from the classical ones in theme, genre, style, techniques and language. Taking Mo Yan's works as an example, what he has been portraying in his works is wide enough to cover from new China to modern China, as well some part of old China, based upon his hometown Northeast Gaomi Township. His depiction of characters has broken the stereotype boundaries of dichotomy characters, i.e. good guy opposition to bad guy, a kind of binary model; and Mo Yan adopts but a new type of bad/good-criminal-narrator him/herself, (Hu Tiesheng, 2017) a kind of trichotomy character. And he has taken some of modernist writing skills, like stream-of-consciousness, meta-narration, black humor and word-play, picking up something from William Faulkner, Garcia Marcks and other master writers of modernist literature, integrating them with classical Chinese literatures. Mo Yan is a path-finder of writing fiction in contemporary Chinese literature; no doubt, he is one of the most brilliant writers. Hence, his stories are brand-new and welcome at home and abroad, the most popular is his materials and themes, particularly his new forms in his fictions. Supposedly, if Howard made a choice of somebody else instead of Mo Yan, likely, Mo would not have been given the Prize for other works is not as suitable as Mo Yan's among western readers. The trends in Mo Yan are just fit for them.

Admittedly, some people remark that Howard is just implementing a principle of domestication or naturalization in his translation. In fact, his practice is different from domestication at all. First, domestication focuses on words, expressions and texts at language levels, belonging to linguistic translation, which frequently adopts native speaker's usage though domestication can introduce some new forms of expression to TT culture, which have been existing in ST culture for some time, then, in a global way, the new forms are not newly invented because they are nothing but introduced into a new context, i.e., cultural transfer, the total quantity of form is never changed; Howard's practice and performance tend to take steps at cultural levels, pertaining to cultural translation, he not only uses native speaker's

⁴Aura is something to be felt true in reading a piece of work, but is hard to explain or tell clearly, which expresses a kind of unique sentiment and artistic conception in implicative ways and finite language.

tongue, but also introduces more new culture, sometimes even he creates new words and forms and gets a cultural thirdness, a combination of ST culture and TT culture, for which brings about diversities to the grand garden of world culture and civilization. Second, domestication mainly claims its responsibility for ST and the message sender; and Howard favors to care about TT and the receiver, the terminal of Howard is a literature translated, i.e., national literature, everything he has done is tied up with his receiver. In addition, domestication, as an opponent of foreignization or alienation, has been part and parcel of translation studies, a kind of classical tradition in the science for a few thousands of years, throughout domestication, the translator is invisible, hiding behind the TT; Howard's practice, adopting either domestication or foreignization, or both strategies mixed together, belongs to a branch of Media-translatology, a new discipline arising out of translation, communication and literature just over decades ago.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above-given analysis covers the choice, "lose, deformation, addition and extension" of Howard's translation actions, context of history, Western Poetics, publishing patron, aesthetic fidelity and etc., from the perspective of Media-translatology. (Xie Tianzhen, 1999, p.1-2) Thus, His achievement is due to a resultant force of various factors listed above or other ones hidden beneath the action. In the new era of globalization, translation is playing the role of communication in cross-cultural practice and performance, as Howard remarked, "A translator is a communicator...to understand the world". (Goldblatt, 2011, p.15) To some extent, Howard is a sample case of Media-translatology, which opens a door to a new field of translation, literature and communication.

At present, China is pursuing the policy that China's cultures go to global. Cross-cultural communication is a routine part of international interactions. The communication and interaction will be the only channel for nations to understand each other. Culture, as well as literature, needs exchanging over the world. For the time being, we belong to the output period of cultural exchange. Until the output period is expired, to carry out the policy, i.e. China's cultures go to global, needs talent translators like Howard for some time, at least fifty years. In such a context of globalization, we must spread and sow the seeds of China's culture over the world to enhance our national soft power. During the lengthy period, we translators are also communicators, who should keep it in mind, and never follow the old suit in 1960s or 1970s to do translation, a self-centred, isolated one, which historically proves to be futile. But, after the output epoch is over, with the implementation of China's culture-going-overseas, the oversea readers could understand Chinese culture at a higher level, so they could accept and appreciate Chinese literature, the author of the thesis does not hope China's works would not be absorbed without any adaption by translators or communicators; by doing so can China's culture be brought into the garden of world cultures, and be fully appreciated by other nations. If the day wished came some day in the future, though Media-translatology is short-lived, and disappearing out of the horizon of academic domain, nations over the world could develop harmoniously with differences and mutual understanding, that is to say, we are open to multi-culturalism over the world, and each nation will respect and accept the difference and diversity respectively regardless of ideologies, cultures, races and regions.

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