Translators’ Adaption-selection in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*

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**Abstract.** After Mo Yan has won 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature, the study on English translation of his translator Howard Goldblatt have been conducted continuously in literary translation fields. Making China heard and understood in a favorable way, English translators of Chinese literature offer an effective perspective. And it seems that Howard Goldblatt is much more successful in breaking down linguistic, cultural and communication barriers of the English and Chinese in his translation of Chinese literary works. The paper here attempts to study Goldblatt’s translation of Mo Yan’s *Life and Death are Wearing Me out* with translators’ adaption-selection in the ecological environment within the eco-translatology. Based on English texts of Goldblatt’s translation, his role as a translator, i.e. adaption to eco-translational environmnet, and his selection in translation process will be discussed. Adaptiona and selection of a translator in Hu Gengshen’s eco-translatology is explored from dimension of linguistics, culture and communicatins. So in the paper, Goldblatt’s selection in his adaption to ecological translation environment in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* is analysed accordingly. It is expected that the tentative study on translators’ adaption and selection would be some of value in translating Chinese literary works into English speaking countries in the long run.

**Introduction**

China has gained more popularity since she intends to improve her “soft power”. Establishing international communication as a basic national policy, China is to disseminating China’s social system, ideology, people’s way of living and religion as well as China’s human rights with her own voice. That’s why English translation of Chinese literary works is carried out at all levels of governmental or nongovernmental organizations and aimed at moving from margin into the center of literary and cultural streams in international communities. That Mo Yan has won 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature made great difference in Chinese literary translation, and Chinese people are inspired by Mo Yan’s international recognition. The numbers of debates and study on how to translate Chinese works into English effectively from then on has been soaring up, discussing China’s literature “go global” strategy [1].

Howard Goldblatt now has translated most of Mo Yan’s novels, such as *Red Sorghum, Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, The Republic of Wine, Frog* and etc. There is no exaggeration that Mo Yan has contributed a lot of his international success to his translator Goldblatt. It is believed that the translator, a sinologist from America, has facilitated English readers to understand and accept the language itself and Chinese culture and literature in all-round way through proper translation. Mo Yan’s works can be successfully understood and appreciated in English dominating world. We cannot afford to ignore Goldblatt’s competence and adaption and selection in the translation process.

The paper will deal with one of successful translation of Goldblatt’s *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, which has earned a lot of awards. [2] The role of a translator will be employed to analyze Goldblatt’s translation of Chinese literary works into English successfully. With the framework of eco-translatology put forward and formulated by Hu Gengshen from 2001 [3] ever since, who attempts to describe translation as ecological system analogically compared with the Nature in Darwin’s Evolution. Adaptation-selection, translators’ responsibility and “survival of the fittest” constitute the core of the theory.
Consequently, adaption and selection of Goldblatt’s translation of Mo Yan’s *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* will be discussed tentatively on the basis of eco-translation. It is expected to make out in Goldblatt’s translation why he translate Mo Yan, what strategies he chooses to translate Mo Yan’s works into English in the dimensions of linguistics, culture and communications, and how he adapt to eco-translation environment. Anyhow, English translation of Chinese literature will not reach the goal unless it is translated properly in the historical and cultural contexts and the harmony of eco-environment of translation is achieved.

**Literature Review**

Chinese literature represented by Mo Yan now enjoys a high prestige in international literary forum. *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* is written by Mo Yan and the book has earned him favorable international reputation. The book depicts a family saga in imaginary Gaomi county in Shandong, focusing on average individual fates and accidents, rather than grand description of crucial political movements during the Mao and Deng period of China, through the perspective of human being and animals. Ximen Nao, a benevolent landowner, is the main narrator. He is deprived of his estate and belongings, shot dead and reincarnated as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey and a Big-head boy. Even if Ximen is transmigrated as animals and a boy, they perceive his family and country as Ximen Nao. The way Mo Yan’s writing expresses the truth, his grasp Mo Yan depicts human emotions and thoughts, the way he creates narration, writing styles and mesmerizing setting in Gaomi county amaze readers. [2]

Actually, Westerner readers are amazed and shocked by Mo Yan too, or we can put it as Goldblatt’s translation of Mo Yan since reviews and critics of translation would generally attribute Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize to Goldblatt’s successful translation. English translation of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* has been studied in all fields of translation. On the whole, the first kind of study concerned about international translation and communications of Chinese literature. The scholars in this school explore feasible ways to introduce and publicize ancient and modern Chinese literary works into Western world in order to set up effective models of translation and communications. The goal is that Chinese literature would enter the mainstream of world literature without ideological and cultural prejudice.

The second kind of the study talked about the translation strategies in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*. Skopos, readers’ response, post colonialism and other theories were employed to analyze the translation strategies in the translated texts. Among these studies, the eco-translation has been quoted frequently to discuss the adaption of the translated texts in the ecological environment. Even though the role of translators’ has been named as centeredness, the selection of translators’ in adaption to the environment in the eco-translation still needs further explanations. So in this paper, the translator’s selection in the process of the translation will be highlighted and analyzed in details with an example from Goldblatt’s *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, in order to find out in which dimensions a translator can make his choice in adapting to the whole translation eco-environment and lead to the harmony of eco-environment of translation.

**Translator’s Adaption-selection**

Before we move on to analyze the translation of Goldblatt, we have to figure out the notion of a translator’s adaption-selection in the eco-translation. The theory has been developed by a Chinese scholar Hu Gengshen from 2001 in his paper, with metaphor and analogy of translation and nature. Hu Gengshen borrowed some of ecological concepts in Darwin’s Evolution to compare to translation process, such as survival of the fittest, adaptation and selection, viewing translation as a series of selection by a translator so as to adapt to the translational eco-environment [3].

Eco-environment of translation is a general environment in which a translator tackles a number of translational restrictions, makes his choice and adapts to the whole eco-system. Adaption is the
starting point and finishing line of the eco-translatology and selection is the means to adaption. The principle of a translator’s selection is to erase “the weak” make sure “survival of the fittest”. Anyhow, translators can be the role of bridge, media, negotiator or midwife. The role of translators in the eco-translatology is usually summarized as “centeredness”, which means translators stay no long behind translation and translated texts in Venuti’s The Translators’ Invisibility. a translator’s psychological and intellectual function in Steiner’s After Babel initially is focused on and the centeredness of eco-translatology push the study of translators further.

Over the years, literary translation has been expounded by quoting rewriting, manipulation, aggression, differance, hybridity and the other from theories of cultural turn, hermeneutics, deconstructionism and post-colonialism in the Western philosophy and literature since translation is regarded as a historical and cultural activity thus. It is advocated in the theory that a holistic and dynamic view should be achieved during translation in the eco-translatology just like in ecology, and a translator in the process of translation is one of the most crucial and active factors in the translating language, culture, history, poetry and even ideology in eco-translation environment and play a key role in the whole translation system. With the above analysis of the theory, translators in his translation activity would choose to manipulate, rewrite, and even subvert the original texts in order to make the translated texts “adaptable” to eco-translation context and environment in the methodology.

According to adaption-selection of a translator in eco-translatology, we can find out that translators do not keep faithfulness literally as a basic principle to original texts or writers any more. Rather, they begin to establish a natural connection and create a continued life of the original—afterlife, with translators present and steering in the translation environment.

Analysis of Goldblatt’s Selection in Translation of Life and Death are Wearing Me Out

Now we’d like to analyze Goldblatt’s translated version with a translator’s adaption-selection. In the whole chain of translation eco-environment in Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, we will try to find out Goldblatt’s choice: why he would translate Mo Yan, what strategies he would employ in Three Dimensions and that is, how he would translate the text to adapt to the whole eco-translation environment.

A lot of Chinese writers and critics are jealous of Mo Yan because Goldblatt translates for him and translation of Mo Yan to some degree has helped him winning the readers of English-speaking countries. Why it is Mo Yan?

Howard Goldblatt’s would choose writers and his translated texts on his own literary taste. He would translate who he takes interest in and what he likes to read. It is said that Goldblatt has got his own translation principle: first I like the book, and secondly, I think I am suitable to translate it. When he worked on his Ph.D dissertation about a Chinese writer Xiao Hong, Goldblatt went through all the troubles to make out her life and her works because he was obsessed with Chinese and Chinese people in her works. Goldblatt has made extraordinary achievement in Chinese and has become a master of Chinese with Ph.D. Goldblatt has got unprecedented advantages than other translators because he would discuss the work with Mo Yan until he has got the whole idea of the work. A natural trust grew between Mo Yan and his Goldblatt. The moment Glodblatt read Mo Yan’s novels by accident, Goldblatt felt excited and believed that he would translate Mo’s works for English readers. If Goldblatt thought that the ending of the book would not be easy for the targeted readers, Mo Yan would rewrite his last chapter and mail him. It turned out that nearly most of Mo Yan’s works has been translated by him.

A translator’s selection of his translated author and texts at the beginning line of ecological environment has been demonstrated by Goldblatt. Subjectivity in Goldblatt’s selection of Mo Yan’s works register translator’s psychological and intellectual concern for target audience. The Chinese literature translated for English-speaking countries in the past used to be dominated by political or ideological ones, and the committee of the 2012 Noble Prize is said to be a little disappointed to find out that there is no such traces in Mo Yan’s novels at first.
Why does an excellent translator choose Mo Yan’s work and make readers hooked in his translation? There must be some unique elements in Mo Yan’s works that attract Goldblatt. By depicting individual and average people in the rural areas of Gaomi county combined with fantastic Chinese folk, Life and Death are Wearing Me Out tells not only the grand narration of that history in China, but human’s universal meditation on his existence, life and death in the minor perspective. [5] That is, the local Chinese features and the universal themes in the book, different from Chinese literary tradition at that time have attracted Goldblatt and he believed that English readers would likewise be moved by Mo Yan through his translation. He, as a translator and negotiator from English, knows well of his readers, taking psychology, or reading habits and expectation of them into full consideration subconsciously.

Next come to Goldblatt’s adaption-selection in eco-translatology of translation strategies in three dimensions linguistics, culture and communications. In the whole system of translation environment, Goldblatt has to make his choice in transferring the original work, selecting translation methods and then adapt to his translation eco-environment.

In this level, Goldblatt’s selection in linguistic dimension would be discussed first, which is also the fundamental requirement of the translator’s competence in the eco-translatology.

To begin with, he has translated the title of “生死疲劳 (sheng si pi lao)” in his understanding instead of wod-for-word “Life, Death and Exhaustion”. As a translator, he never shows his stiff faithfulness for the original texts or writers, instead he registers his extraordinary creativity in the translation of Life and Death are Wearing Me Out. He intends for his readers to understand the book from the title.

Another example “阳光灿烂, 空气清新, 鸟在天上叫, 兔在地上跑” is taken from the fiction of Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out. It is obvious that paralleled phases in the sentence structure have been used in original Chinese texts and it is common for Chinese with short and neat style. Goldblatt has made some adjustment in English translation, “The sun shone brightly, the air was fresh and clean: birds flew in the sky, rabbits hopped along the ground”. From his translation, we can tell that domestication and foreignization have been used at the same time. On one hand, he keeps original short and neat Chinese sentence structure in oringial work. On the other hand, Goldblatt rewrites the phrase “清新” and transfer it with an English conjunction “and” to adapt to english readers’s reading habits. All linguistic selection of his translation demands profound proficiency of Goldblatt’s bilingualism. That’s a translator makes his linguistic selection with holistic view to ensure the healthy and harmonious relationship in the translation eco-environment.

The cultural dimension in eco-translatology is clearly demonstrated by Goldblatt’s culture-consciousness in his translation. Goldblatt uses ways of Chinese pinyin to translate names of characters in the fiction, with surname ranking first and given name followed, so as to keep style of Chinese names, such as Ximen Nao. It is a long tradition for Chinese parents to name their children after these popular words to follow the trend of the time. He knows that English readers are eager to have a general picture of Chinese culture. On one side, Goldblatt shows faithfulness of translation in the form with Pinyin to translate names of characters’ names. And on the other side, Pinyin sounds foreign for English speaking readers. For example, Huzhu (互助) and Hezuo (合作) have got political implication of that time in China. Huzhu and Hezuo refer to “cooperation” and “collaboration” respectively, which reflect the movement of rural cooperatives in 1950’s in China. By using the method of annotated transliteration, explaining words of Pinyin right after the name, Goldblatt presents a different way of pronunciation in the eyes of English readers and target readers would be glad to accept the foreignness here [6].

Dimension of communication in Goldblatt’s translation strategies can be well detected in addition, deletion and supplementation of the text. He decided to add “The Buddha said transmigration wearies owing to mundane desires; few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind” in the front of the story. Goldblatt chooses a Buddha’s saying for English readers so that what conveys in the original text for Chinese readers can be understood approximately by English readers. The added words would help
English readers comprehend transmigration of Ximen Nao in his fiction with magical realism and Chinese folks with hybrid elements. In order to make dialogue between the author and target readers smooth, Goldblatt supplemented a list of principal characters in the front of the translated fiction, i.e., a name roll, which has served a good reference for target readers to check during reading the translation. English readers believe that the list of principal characters helped them a lot in making out the relationship of the characters in the translated version. No one can deny that Goldblatt is conscious of original text, the author, editors, his readers and publishers in the ecological environment of translation. And it is Goldblatt who makes his professional choice in guaranteeing successful communication between different language and culture. Translators make use of his knowledge of language and culture as well as his responsibility so that the participants of a dialogue have the similar cultural presupposition in eco-environment of translation.

From the above discussion, we can come to a natural idea that Goldblatt has made his choice in selecting translation materials and translation strategies during his translation of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*. And he has been successful to make him adapt to translation eco-environment.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the paper has attempted to analyze adaption-selection of Goldblatt in his translation of Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* on the base of the eco-translatology. English translation of Chinese literature is one in which translators or interpreters rewrite original texts in form and content so that the translated texts can be the afterlife of the original works in the translational environment. Translators of literary works have to negotiate with the author, publishers, editors or even readers before the translation is conducted. Goldblatt believes he is an avatar of Mo Yan, just like other translators of Mo Yan. It means that translators make selection in conveying writers’ intention in and therefore adapt to the translation environment, and could not ever break the ground offered by original works. Goldblatt thus in his translation puts lots of emphasis on his choice in linguistic, cultural and communication dimensions to ensure adaptation in the translation eco-environment.

As have been discussed above, translators are key element in the eco-translatology who can transfer the original texts by selecting original texts and translation strategies. It is expected that the conclusion derived from the thesis will offer methodological instruction in C-English translation of literary works can be made in order to help China’s literature go globally.

Of course, the discussion of role of translators in the paper is far from satisfaction. There is a long way to go to translate Chinese literary works into English and other foreign languages successfully.

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**References**


