

Research on the Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in the English Translation of "Red Sorghum" under the Alienation Strategy

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Abstract: This paper uses Lawrence Venuti's alienation theory to analyze Howard Goldblatt's translation strategies of culture-loaded words in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*. On the lexical level, the research looks at how literal and word-for-word translation techniques are used as a system to keep cultural images and different ways of talking. By comparing texts about idioms, vulgarities, metaphors, and material culture terms, it can be seen that these kinds of alienation tactics work well to make "cultural fidelity" happen by making a purposeful distance between the source and target languages. Findings show that this method has both beauty and efficiency in conveying the special cultural environment of the original text and promoting the spread of Chinese literature around the world.

Keywords: Red Sorghum; Alienation; Literal translation; Cultural Fidelity

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1986, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* has been acclaimed for its unique narrative and regional cultural expression. Howard Goldblatt's English translation is notable for its strategic handling of culture-loaded words, reflecting a deep engagement with the source text's heterogeneity (Cui, 2018). Translation of culture-loaded terms has always been a problem: to make it easy to understand, we should use naturalized language; or to keep the foreign flavor, we should keep the original language and culture. These kinds of terms that include idioms, everyday talk, what we can see and touch are not just simple words, they are places where our memories and things we do together live. And so their proper rendering is crucial for determining how much of the source culture's special ecology makes it through the translational journey. This research uses

Lawrence Venuti's theory of alienation translation as a theoretical framework to explore how certain translation methods, specifically literal and word-for-word translation, function on a lexical level. Previous studies have discussed Goldblatt's general strategies from the perspective of Skopos theory or creative treason, but there is no detailed microanalysis of his alienating lexical choices based on Venuti's explicit framework. The main purpose is to evaluate how effective these strategies are in maintaining cultural otherness and enhancing the aesthetic appreciation of the novel among Anglophones.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of alienation translation can be traced back to the German Romantic period intellectually. In his 1813 lecture "On the Different Methods of Translating," Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed what became known as the famous binary path: either "leave the author alone as much as possible and move the reader towards him" or "leave the reader alone as much as possible and move the author towards him." The former is considered the philosophical precursor of alienation translation, its core being the respect for and maintenance of the original text's foreignness, requiring the reader to actively bridge the cultural distance. This idea was systematically and politically articulated by the contemporary translation theorist Lawrence Venuti. In his landmark book *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti criticizes the smooth, clear "domestication" strategy that has long been prevalent in Anglo-American translation practices as a form of cultural colonialism, erasing the difference of foreign texts and stealthily assimilating them into the values of the target culture. Venuti consciously opposes the domestication tradition and proposes "alienation" translation, advocating

for the intentional use of non-standard, resistant linguistic forms that deviate from the prevailing hierarchy of domestic values in the target language culture, thus making the translator visible and emphasizing the unique identity and differential existence of the source culture. It is not intended to produce obscurity, but rather to create a kind of controlled strangeness that resists cultural hegemony and encourages true intercultural dialogue on equal terms. Conceptually, alienation translation and domestication translation constitute a basic dialectical relationship. Domestication takes the target language culture as its final reference point, aiming for a natural and smooth translation, but it carries the danger of losing the cultural specificity of the original text – a full domestication. Alienation, however, takes the source language culture as its point of reference, and is willing to accept the “strangeness” or “uncomfortableness” caused by retaining heterogeneity. It is a type of cultural intervention and ethical position. According to Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, translation does not happen in a vacuum; it is heavily influenced by power relations, ideology, and poetics. Alienation translation is a conscious effort to. Choice within this context is a rejection of the notion that texts from less powerful cultures must submit without question to the expressive norms of the dominant culture; rather it seeks to uphold and spread the splendor of their cultural diversity. At the operational level, the alienation strategy can appear as a word-by-word or literal translation that stays as close as possible to the lexical, syntactic, cultural imagery, and stylistic characteristics of the source text, even if this temporarily upsets the target reader’s expectations. Liu Miqing, a translator theorist, put forward the concept of “cultural fidelity,” which stresses that translation should try its best to transmit the cultural information contained in the source text. It is almost identical to the spiritual essence of alienation translation. Regarding the English translation of *Red Sorghum* discussed in this study, Howard Goldblatt has handled many culture-bound terms. The basic idea is to create a kind of intentional strangeness, reproducing as much of the original work’s cultural specifics and literary style as possible in the target language, thus completing the circle of cross-cultural transmission from source text to target text.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, textual method based on comparative descriptive translation analysis. The methodology follows Toury (1995) who proposes a systematic investigation of the source and target texts in order to find out the translational norms and regularities. Instead of judging the “quality” of a translation in a prescriptive way, this analysis attempts to describe and interpret the translators visible choices through the theory of alienation. This is especially appropriate for looking into culture-laden terms because it lets us look closely at how particularities of language and culture get kept, changed, or wiped out when going from one place to another.

The main data for this study consists of Mo Yan’s Chinese novel *Honggaoliang Jiazu (Red Sorghum)*, 1986) and its English translation *Red Sorghum* by Howard Goldblatt (1993). Culture-loaded words have been selected from these parallel texts purposefully. In this research, culture-loaded words are defined as lexical items, phrases, or idiomatic expressions which refer to concepts, objects, customs, or social practices particular to Chinese culture without exact counterparts in the target language. These items are then divided into three different categories according to their meaning field and textual function:

(1) Idiomatic Allusions: Proverbs, set phrases (chengyu), and literary references that encapsulate Chinese cultural archetypes or historical narratives. These items derive their meaning not solely from the sum of their lexical components but from shared cultural knowledge within the source community.

(2) Sensory and Unusual Metaphors: Figurative language that involves synesthetic imagery, personification, or semantic anomalies – these are all part of Mo Yan’s signature “defamiliarization” style. Such expressions intentionally go against normal perception and make it hard to copy formally.

(3) Material Culture-Specific Items: Nouns and nominal phrases referring to actual artifacts of Chinese material culture, such as traditional clothing, ceremonial objects, food items, and architectural elements. These things were part of the social and cultural life of old countryside China.

Analytical procedure is made up of three consecutive procedures. Firstly, we find the

possible candidates from the source text by careful reading and put them together as a bilingual collection. Secondly, every source-text item is matched up with its matching target-text rendering, and the translation method used (literal, word-by-word, transliteration, free, or omission) is sorted out. Lastly, every classified case is interpreted according to Venuti's alienation theory, especially focusing on whether the selected approach keeps or nullifies cultural difference. And then it looks at any extra intratextual glosses, paratextual notes, or other context clues that could affect how someone reads the strange part.

This research has been limited to the lexical level of translation. Alienation can work on the syntactic, discursive, and stylistic levels as well; however, by looking at culture-loaded words we get a good idea of what the translator's larger strategy looks like. Moreover, these results pertain specifically to the *Red Sorghum* translation, and may not apply to Goldblatt's translations of other authors, or to other translators' renditions of Mo Yan's works. Nevertheless, the case studies to follow are meant to give us some insight into how an alienating translation practice might be carried out at the micro-textual level.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 Literal Translation of Idiomatic Allusions

For idioms with culture-specific archetypes, Goldblatt chooses direct transplantation over functional equivalence.

For example:

"You're like someone with an axe at the door of Master Carpenter Lu Ban, or brandishing a sword before Lord Guan Yu!"

Analysis: This rendering keeps the names "Lu Ban" and "Guan Yu," as well as the exact images of their actions. Minimal glosses (master carpenter, lord) help readers understand without making the reference too familiar. Alienation effect makes the reader interact directly with the Chinese cultural paradigm.

4.2 Formal Replication of Sensory Metaphors

Mo Yan's defamiliarization technique usually depends on unusual sensory language, and Goldblatt imitates it formally.

For example:

The sorghum leaves howled shrilly in the wind.

Analysis: "squealed shrilly" is directly translated from the original's personification and onomatopoeia. This kind of word-for-word translation makes it work well by taking the mixed-up, strange way the writer uses words from the original story and putting that same feeling into how people talk in English.

4.3 Direct Introduction of Material Culture

For tangible cultural objects, descriptive literal translation can achieve direct cultural transmission.

For example:

My grandma got into the bridal sedan chair... with the red wedding veil covering her head.

Analysis: "Bridal sedan chair" and "red bridal veil" keep the objects foreign, with the modifiers "bridal" and "red" giving necessary context. It prevents the loss of culture that a more domesticating version would cause.

5. Discussion: Effect, Limitation, and Translator's Subjectivity in Alienation Strategy

Howard Goldblatt, an American sinologist, has greatly promoted the cultural exchange between China and the West, and he is recognized as the most outstanding translator of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world, having translated more contemporary Chinese novels than any other translator. Goldblatt has translated eleven of Mo Yan's novels. In 1993, his translation of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* was a turning point in his translation career. In 2012, Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, which was due to Goldblatt's translation work (Wang, 2025). Goldblatt's English version of the *Red Sorghum* saga shows great language skills and life-like characters, so many people think he is the main person who brought Mo Yan to the English-speaking world (Cheng, 2024).

The above-mentioned cases show that by translating literally and word for word, Goldblatt sets up a line of defense against cultural assimilation on the lexical level. The main effects of this approach are threefold: (1) it retains the distinctiveness and wholeness of the original culture to the greatest extent possible; (2) it reproduces the fresh, unconventional linguistic style of the original work in the target language so that Mo Yan's literary innovations can be perceived; (3) it turns the English reader into an active "cultural

learner,” creating a more immersive cross-cultural reading experience.

But still, this is not without its limits. The extreme word-by-word translation can sometimes cause awkwardness or obscurity; for example, “Your old man” would need a brief pause for the reader to understand. Thus, Goldblatt’s practice is a form of “moderated alienation,” where the literal translation is predominant but is accompanied by some intratextual explanation (e.g., glossing Lu Ban as Master Carpenter). This method tries to find a nice balance between keeping things different and making them easy to read. It shows how the translator is subjective and good at what they do - not just translating words directly, but making choices that come from knowing about languages and cultures deeply, with a careful and strong belief in making things strange.

6. Conclusion

Mo Yan’s novel *Red Sorghum* is both a classic of modern Chinese literature and a dazzling gem in the treasure house of world literature. With its own distinctive narrative artistry, it makes a deep revelation on the existent conditions and spiritual world of people in North China during wartime, which shows Mo Yan’s great talent and literary skills. Alienation in *Red Sorghum* is not a technique that has been used sporadically by Mo Yan; rather, it is a comprehensive and innovative approach that he has consistently employed throughout the work from the themes to the forms. Portraying the various kinds of alienation among characters in social history, he reveals the complicated truth about human life under harsh circumstances. He creates a totally new kind of aesthetic experience through the strange way he uses words and tells stories, which is full of sights and sounds that make people pay attention actively to history, people, and books themselves.

The ultimate purpose of this alienating story is not to fall into a nihilistic negation. Just as the sorghum in the novel grows robustly despite being drenched with blood, Mo Yan’s dissection of outdated ethics, heroic figures, and historical myths aims to release repressed original vitality and pursue a more genuine, all-encompassing form of existence. He tries to rebuild the concept of “human” on top of the ruins of “alienation”. From *Red Sorghum* to his later works such as *Life and Death Are Wearing*

Me Out and Frog, this estrangement strategy – challenging conventions and interrogating essence via “estrangement” and “deviation” – has become the hallmark narrative style and pioneering approach of Mo Yan.

Howard Goldblatt’s translation of culture-loaded words in *Red Sorghum* is a deliberate and organized act of alienation. Within it, literal translation and word-for-word translation, as main methods, are important. They work as the most sensitive archaeology instruments, gently taking out cultural fossils such as “Lu Ban,” “bridal sedan chair,” and “Laozi” from Chinese land and putting them, just as they were, into the English text itself. This kind of translation choice can not only convey the cultural information of the novel, but also on an aesthetic level, make Mo Yan’s style, which is rooted in the countryside, full of wild vitality and perceptual explosion, resonate in another language.

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