

The Translation of Sound from the Postcolonial Perspective: A Case Study of the English Translation of *Sandalwood Death* Written by Mo Yan

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Abstract. Mo Yan, as the first Chinese Nobel Laureate in Literature, holds significant importance in the overseas dissemination of his translated works. The intentional retreating of *Sandalwood Death* writing makes it a unique narrative where characters, folklore, and culture weave together in a polyphonic tapestry of the era. Drawing upon post-colonial translation theory, this analysis delves into Howard Goldblatt's English translation of *Sandalwood Death*, focusing on the translation and retransmission of sound embodied in characters (narrative translation of characters), folklore (translation of idioms and proverbs), and culture (terms, Maoqiang). The study suggests that the translator employs a plethora of estrangement strategies, reflecting an overall trend of post-colonial translation. Many Chinese cultural terms seamlessly integrate into Western discourse, illustrating the potential for establishing a balanced discourse between East and West. This investigation explores the nuanced interplay of voices, unraveling how translation choices contribute to a broader discourse of cultural equality and understanding in the context of post-colonial translation.

Keywords: Postcolonial Translation Theory, *Sandalwood Death*, Sound.

1. Introduction

As the first Chinese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan holds an exceptionally high literary reputation and achievement. His work, *Sandalwood Death* stands as a deliberate step back, portraying a pure folk perspective while drawing from the distinctive folk art form—Maoqiang [1]. It intricately weaves together a series of historical events centered around punishment from a folk standpoint. Characters, folklore, and culture within the book compose a multi-part folkloric symphony, resonating deeply with the essence of the times, and lingering in one's thoughts long after. However, the prominent folk narrative features undoubtedly pose numerous challenges in the translation process. This paper focuses on Howard Goldblatt's English translation of *Sandalwood Death* employing postcolonial translation theory. It selects the distinct voices of folk characters (narrative translation of characters), the sounds of folklore (translation of idioms and proverbs), and the sounds of culture (terms, Maoqiang) for examination. The study aims to assess whether the English translation effectively conveys the sound within the novel authentically showcasing China's unique cultural characteristics. Furthermore, it delves into the discussion on challenging the stereotypical Eastern image in Western discourse and exploring the potential for establishing equal discourse power between East and West.

2. Method

In this paper, the author employs the methods of case study. The author undertakes a meticulous examination of *Sandalwood Death* savoring the diverse sound interwoven within the narrative. Different characteristics of these sounds are classified, aiming to distill the translator's strategies.

Another research approach utilized in this paper is comparative analysis. By juxtaposing the original text with its translated counterpart, the author assesses the translator's ability to faithfully reproduce the sounds of the novel. This method scrutinizes the cultural gains and losses during the translation process, seeking to unveil whether the translated work authentically portrays the Eastern

world. The author endeavors to analyze and summarize the translator's strategies, exploring the role and value of translation in establishing equal discourse power between East and West.

3. Theory

In the early 1950s and 1960s, Fanon criticized the imagery of colonialism [2]. Later, *The Orientalism* by Edward Said in 1978 became a foundational piece in postcolonial theory. Then he revealed the Western imperial discourse's formulaic construction of the East in *Culture and Imperialism* [3]. Gayatri C. Spivak argued that the objective portrayal of the East by the Eurocentric discourse is a set of colonial narratives supported by Western notions of truth, obscuring the authentic East [4]. Homi K. Bhabha suggested significant gaps or discontinuities between first-world and third-world cultures, emphasizing the ambiguous and hybrid nature of colonial exchange, and introducing concepts like hybridity and the third space to encapsulate the outcomes of cultural collisions [5].

With the incorporation of various texts in cultural, economic, and social domains, the content of postcolonial theory has continually evolved and expanded. In the 1970s, there was a broad cultural turn in translation studies. The introduction in 1990, "Proust's Grandmother and 'One Thousand and One Nights' — The 'Cultural Turn' in Translation Studies" in "Translation, History, and Culture," had a profound impact on translation studies. Subsequently, postcolonial translation theory has become increasingly enriched and refined through translation practices between European colonial languages and former colonies, revealing the cultural construction role of translation in challenging the Eurocentric discourse.

Postcolonial translation theory asserts a close connection between translation strategies and the power dynamics of different languages. When translating from a disadvantaged language to a dominant one, translators often opt for domestication strategies to achieve assimilation, without the need for in-depth investigation or understanding of the weaker culture, essentially perpetuating the conqueror's desire for domination over the original culture. Mo Yan, was the first Chinese writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, and the systematic translation of his works into English-speaking countries, plays a crucial role. The translator's strategies and effects become particularly important; Howard Goldblatt's English translation reflects directly whether the Nobel-winning portrayal of the authentic East by Mo Yan is preserved or whether Howard Goldblatt, as a member of the English-speaking world, constructs a formulaic "East." This, in turn, determines whether Mo Yan's works exert a major postcolonial challenge to Western discursive authority or further deepen the hegemonic paradigm of the dominant language.

4. Analysis

In the postscript of his novel, Mo Yan succinctly summarizes, "What I have actually written in this novel is sound. The titles of the chapters, like 'Head of the Phoenix and Tail of the Leopard', these sections are all expressions of the narrative protagonist's way of speaking, such as 'Meiniang's Lewd Talk' 'Zhao Jia's Ravings' 'Qian Ding's Bitter Words' 'Sun Bing's Opera Talk' and so on [6]". The seemingly objectively omniscient perspective in the *Belly of the Pig* section, while appearing to narrate events, also captures a legendary history conveyed through oral transmission or sung in a folk manner—ultimately, it is still about sound. In the following analysis, the author extracts the translator's rendition and compares it with the original text, examining whether the essence of "sound" has been effectively conveyed.

4.1. Character voices

4.1.1 Sun Meiniang

Sun Meiniang is a central character in *Sandalwood Death*, with the narrative revolving around the theme of punishment, and each character in the plot is intricately connected to her. The uninhibited and willful female portrayal of Meiniang adds a vivid touch to the entire book. Her language is

brimming with distinctive features, being both vulgar and bold, yet simultaneously emotionally vivid and genuinely expressive [7].

Example 1:

俺家里有一个忠厚的老实能挡风遮雨的丈夫，外边有一个既有权又有势、既多情又有趣的相好；想酒就喝酒，想肉就吃肉；敢哭敢笑敢浪敢闹，谁也不能把俺怎么着 [6]。

Translation: *I have a kind and simple husband at home, a man who can keep out the wind and the rain for me, and a powerful, affectionate, and entertaining lover outside the home. There is strong drink when I feel like it, meat when I want it, and no one can stop me from crying or laughing or flirting or causing a scene [6].*

Due to linguistic differences, there are instances where direct translation may not achieve an equivalent meaning. For instance, when Meiniang refers to herself as "俺" ("an" in pinyin), a pronoun with dialectal implications, there is no direct counterpart in English to convey the same nuance. The phrase "想酒就喝酒，想肉就吃肉" is translated successfully. It conveys the intertwined relationship and inherent meanings of the words "酒" (alcohol) and "肉" (meat) in Chinese culture. In the Chinese cultural context, consuming large quantities of alcohol and meat is almost a stereotypical trait of a robust man, and when applied to Meiniang, it aptly reflects her unrestrained, liberated nature, setting her apart from conventional female characters. Meiniang's proclamation, "敢哭敢笑敢浪敢闹，谁也不能把俺怎么着," is translated with "浪" (lang) rendered as "flirting," skillfully conveying the auditory effect and showcasing Meiniang's audacious and unrestrained characteristics.

4.1.2 Zhao Jia

Zhao Jia, as the executor of punishment, is depicted as cold, ruthless, and devoid of humanity. He takes the act of administering punishment to extremes, treating torture as a performance, deriving pleasure from the act of killing, and maintaining a self-righteous demeanor [8]. In pursuit of fame and fortune, he studies various grotesque methods of punishment to satisfy his own desires.

Example 2:

你们，还敢对着我瞪眼吗？

.....你爹我二十岁未几时，就当这咸丰爷和当今的慈禧太后的面干过惊天动地的大活儿，事后，宫里穿出话来，说，皇上开金口，吐玉言... [6]

Translation: *How dare you glare at me like that!*

In the presence of the Xianfeng Emperor and the consort who would one day become the Empress Dowager, I, your dieh, had done something that would make your knees buckle before I'd reached my twentieth birthday. When it was all over, word came from the palace that His Imperial Majesty, He with the mouth of gold and speech of jade, had said... [6]

The original text's interrogative form and the translated version's exclamatory sentences, in the author's view, serve to highlight Zhao Jia's haughtiness and self-importance. The translator, in rendering "惊天动地" as "make your knees buckle," opts not for a literal translation but vividly portrays the overwhelming impact, achieving a dynamic effect. In the case of "开金口，吐玉言," the translator chooses a literal rendition, "the mouth of gold and speech of jade," employing a strategy of estrangement to construct Zhao Jia's character as a sycophantic executioner, conveying an image of his vain and self-respecting, yet cold-blooded nature. This analysis explores how the choice of rhetorical devices in translation contributes to shaping the portrayal of Zhao Jia's character in terms of arrogance, servility, and a ruthless executioner persona.

4.2. Sounds of Folk Customs

Mo Yan's novels are imbued with a folk atmosphere, and a significant portion of this ambiance emanates from the extensive use of folk sayings [9].

Example 3:

俗话说水满则流，月满则亏，人欢没好事，狗欢抢屎吃 [6]。

Translation:

A popular adage has it that "When the moon is full, the decline begins; when the river is high, water flows away. When someone is too happy, bad things happen; and when dogs feel good, they fight over shit [6].

Due to the unique nature of folk narrative language, translation cannot achieve an equivalent formal transformation. This implies that the colloquial and folk characteristics of the language are considerably compromised. However, in this context, the translator has preserved the imagery of the source language, opting for a literal translation to convey the original meaning as faithfully as possible.

4.3. Sounds of Folk Culture

4.3.1 Terms

In *Sandalwood Death*, a diverse array of characters spans from rural village women to high-ranking officials in the imperial court, each addressed with colloquial or formal terms, reflecting various degrees of familiarity [10]. The translation of different forms of address deserves further exploration.

Example 4:

“爹，这是俺的媳妇，俺娘给俺讨的” [6]

Translation: “*This is my wife, Dieh. Niang made the match for me.*” [6]

Example 5:

“奉县台大老爷之命，传唤赵甲进衙问话”

小甲提着一把血淋淋的杀猪刀跑过来，点头哈腰地问：

“差爷，差爷，什么事？” [6]

Translation: “*We bring orders from His Eminence the County Magistrate to escort Zhao Jia to the yamen for questioning.*”

Xiaojia came running up, bent humbly at the waist, still gripping his bloody butcher knife, and, with a bow, asked:

“*What is it, Your Honors?*” [6]

Example 6:

“老爷，老爷，俺没翻供啊！俺没翻供，为什么还要给俺施刑？！” [6]

Translation: “*Laoye!*” the man screamed. “*Laoye, I did not commit the unforgivable act of retracting my confession, I did not. Why are you doing this to me?*” [6]

In example 4, terms like “爹” and “娘” are transliterated as “Dieh” and “Niang,” respectively. Throughout the entire novel, terms such as “爹” (father), “娘” (mother), “干儿子” (godson), and “干爹” (godfather) are directly transliterated by the translator. The same approach is applied to “Laoye” in example 6. Howard Goldblatt specifically mentions this transliteration method in the preface, stating, “I think it is time to update and increase the meager list, and to that end, I have left a handful of terms untranslated; a glossary appears at the end of the book” (Mo Yan, 2013: p.ix). By directly transliterating and providing a glossary, readers can comprehend the meaning of terms like “Laoye” and “dieh” and gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. However, some English equivalents are still used, such as “Your Honors” for “差爷” and “His Eminence the County Magistrate” for “县台大老爷.”

4.3.2 Maoqiang

In the afterword, Mo Yan states that *Sandalwood Death* about sound, encompassing various characters' speech patterns, among which Maoqiang (catgut singing) represents a distinct form of sound. As a highly distinctive form of folk art, the author compares the original text with the translation, analyzing whether the translator has captured the rhythmic qualities of Maoqiang [11]. An excerpt from Zhao Jia's local opera Maoqiang with /əŋ/ rhyme scheme (生 – 风 – 崩) is chosen.

Example 7:

常言道，南斗主死北斗司生，人随王法草随凤。人心似铁那个官法如炉，石头再硬也怕铁锤崩。（到了家的大实话！） [6]

Translation: *The adage has it: By the Northern Dipper one is born, by the Southern Dipper a person dies; people follow the Kingly Way, wind blows where the grass lies. People's hearts are iron, laws the crucible, and even the hardest stone under the hammer dies. (How true!)* [6]

In the translation, the translator's awareness of reproducing rhythm is evident, with words like "dies" and "lies" rhyming, achieving a similar sound effect and successfully conveying the essence of the sound [12].

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of postcolonial translation theory, textual translation practices play a crucial role in defending the distinctive features and charm of marginalized cultures. In summary, Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Sandalwood Death* goes beyond merely conveying the information in the original text. It is dedicated to faithfully translating the literary qualities of the original, preserving the "sound" of the text to the greatest extent possible. This includes the stylistic elements of character dialogue, colloquial expressions, and terms of address, as well as the rhythmic qualities of Maoqiang. While the unique nature of language prevents a complete restoration of the original form of *Sandalwood Death*, the translator's faithful translation and the use of estrangement strategies are evident. The effective transmission of "sound" has facilitated the integration of numerous Chinese vocabulary into Western discourse, showcasing a pure Chinese style as much as possible. This aligns with Mo Yan's original intent in writing *Sandalwood Death* — a conscious and deliberate retreat. It provides the possibility of challenging the Western-centric discourse and stands as another successful application of postcolonial translation theory, further establishing the groundwork for equal discourse rights between the East and the West.

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