

Rewriting, Ideology, and Poetics in Goldblatt's Translation of Mo Yan's 天堂蒜薹之歌 (The Garlic Ballads)"

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**Ping Du and Lili Zhang**  
**"Rewriting, Ideology, and Poetics in Goldblatt's Translation**  
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**Abstract:** In their article "Rewriting, Ideology, and Poetics in Goldblatt's Translation of Mo Yan's 天堂蒜薹之歌 (*The Garlic Ballads*)" Ping Du and Lili Zhang analyse Howard Goldblatt's translation of the novel in order to explore literary "rewriting" in translation. Du and Zhang posit that Goldblatt's translation reflects ideology in concealing, discarding, rewriting, and even losing some part in his translation. Further, they argue that the translation of the novel has been performed based on specific aspects of poetics including the musical charm of Chinese ballads and their unique cultural images.

## Ping DU and Lili ZHANG

### Rewriting, Ideology, and Poetics in Goldblatt's Translation of Mo Yan's 天堂蒜薹之歌 (*The Garlic Ballads*)

Different ideologies and poetics influence the processes of translation one aspect of which—based on André Lefevere's approach—we designate as "rewriting" for the purposes of the present study. For example, the significance of this creative approach is embodied in the translations of Mo Yan's works and his 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature would not have happened without Howard Goldblatt's translation of his novels to English (on Mo Yan's work see, e.g., Duran and Huang). Mo Yan's narrative in *The Garlic Ballads* disrupts the order of time and space and the narrative includes pieces of real lives, historical stories, reminiscences, illusions, and folk tales which jump back and forth for the reader alternating between fact and fantasy. After layers of exploration and association of these narratives and images, the living state of a socially vulnerable group of peasants in northeast Gaomi is presented to the reader. One of the novel's prominent structural features is that the various threads of these stories are held together by the presence and voice of the blind minstrel Zhang. The employment of folk songs and lyrics at the beginnings of every chapter serves not only as a prophecy and commentary on the debased deeds depicted in the "Garlic Event" in "Paradise County," but also acts as a thread to string along the narrative.

The protagonist Kou Zhang—whose given name means knot or button in Chinese—brings a peculiar meaning to the novel. Blind but clear-hearted, with an abhorrence of sin and a strong sense of justice, Zhang's song lyrics have a fine sense of humor and an inspiring spirit (on humor in Mo Yan's work see, e.g., Huang and Duran) and voice is the conscience of the land and his fate mirrors the country's fate. He is arrested, threatened, and physically abused by the police, but he does not bow to violence and continues his ballads after his release from prison. However, one day, his dead body is found in a side street with his mouth crammed with mud. He is the pivotal "knot" of the novel's narrative. In Goldblatt's translation, the ballads' dictions are full of foreign colors, and Mo Yan's folk imagery has not been overlooked. Goldblatt's attaching importance to these songs and song lyrics signifies his thorough comprehension of the original novel's textual meaning and modality and his accurate grasp of the novel's features, and styles related to the culture of the land.

We submit that rewriting is perhaps the most important aspect in the translation of literary texts including the potential success of a text's arrival on the stage of world literatures. Structural aspects such as plots, characterization, dialogues, points of view, narrative approaches are relatively easy to convey in translation; however, many other things such as the texture or the romantic charm of literature are hard to deliver. Thus, some important elements of the source text are likely to be lost or blurred during translation. These lost aspects can include the weakening of the specific and stylistic rhythms of the source language, the near impossibility of the precise conveyance of connotations and denotations which are unlikely to be carried over into the target language, as well as figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, and culture-specific symbols. Further, the accurate expression and transference of all these matters mark the originality and accuracy of both a writer and a translator. Lefevere advocated the contextual approach by which he meant that a translation ought to be "cultural," i.e., taking into account the text's minute, as well as wide contexts. He argued that literature exists and is understandable in certain social and cultural contexts and that hence the significance and value generated by the text including readers' interpretation and reception, are under the influence and restriction of a series of mutually related or counterbalanced cultural factors. Thus, many vital factors appear in the processes of literary translation including not only internal factors such as the translator's own creativity and concepts of translation, but also external ones such as dominant poetics, social ideology, politics, and even economics. In terms of translation approaches in different cultures, the main goal ought not to be merely to explore the equivalence between the languages of two texts, but to penetrate the impact of the external culture relevant to translation directly or indirectly. In his *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* Lefevere proposed that the same basic processes are at work in translation, literary criticism, the compilation of literary history, anthologization, and editing and that this is in fact "rewriting": rewriting is the expression and manipulation of a cultural relationship, and

tends to respond to ideology in culture and poetics (7-9; on translation and ideology, see also, e.g., Fawcett). Translators, who are knowledgeable to follow the source text's linguistic and cultural relations are able to translate so that the target language performs similar cultural relations and thus functions similarly to the source language. However, no matter what the intentions and results are, rewriting reflects in the target text some aspects of ideology and poetics.

Whenever a language is transplanted into another language, translation becomes a correspondence and connection of the cultures and politics of different nations and a potentially a collusion of thought: as Lefevere's argumentation goes, translation is not the transference of two languages which can be carried out in a vacuum and it advances under the context of (at least) two literary traditions (14). However, translators are often affected and constrained by ideologies either by his/her voluntary choices or by imposition by the publisher, government authorities, market considerations, etc. Jun Xu stressed that "ideology as a thinking and interpretative system" plays a role all along behind the "cultural [literary] translation "as a sort of "recreated behavior" (216; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Du and Zhang). Moreover, ideological elements determine the initial selection of a subject. In one of his interviews, Goldblatt indicates the impact of the reading audience upon the selection and upon the writer's expressive expectations of political ideology. When asked such a question as "what kind of Chinese novels average American readers like," he explained that readers there favor motifs with more sex and more politics, rather than Chinese novels with intellectual themes (see Ji 47). In other words, the US-American readership's interest in Chinese literature is influenced by ideological and social factors.

In Lefevere's definition ideology is a "grillwork of form, convention, and belief which orders our actions" (16). Ideology undoubtedly exists at all levels of the translation process and indicates the power relations hidden behind literary works, including the various impacts of cultural and social content and the translator's own adherences (see Feng). However, translators themselves are not always able to explain every motivation behind a particular translation. It is not until all kinds of distinct ideologies, power relations, and cultural factors are brought into their vision that they are able to achieve a better comprehension of a variety of translation phenomena, processes, and consequences. Among them, political ideology's impact on the translation process of literary works certainly influences the translator's choice of translation strategies, particularly with regard to considerations of nation, race, and politics, as well as the trade-offs of politically related issues in language and the discourse of the original work. Generally speaking, the translator adopts some deliberate omissions and conversions of the translation of politically and ideologically sensitive expressions, usually to make them fit in with the dominant ideological currents of the translator's time and space. For example, in his translations Goldblatt adopted a respectful attitude towards the ideology of the original work and strived to maximize the embodiment of the ideology and significance of the original work. Nevertheless, this does not mean he had total and uncritical acceptance of Chinese ideology nor does he duplicate this ideology in his translation. For example, in chapter five, Goldblatt's translation reads as "Be brave, fellow townsmen, throw out your chests" (67) whereby the original is "依靠着共产党" (61) and its literal translation is relying on the Communist Party. We submit that this is not because of Goldblatt's negligence, but because of his deliberate intention to respond to political sensitivity.

In such a way, the author's original text is altered and introduced to the readership in another cultural context that neither shares the readers' source language in the same cultural environment nor in the same historical period. And thus the reception of the text in a new context creates the phenomenon of "creative treason" (Escarpit) which deprives in some ways the readership of the English version. Here is another example: in chapter ten the lines translate literally as "County Boss Zhong, put your hand over your heart and think / What Party are you in? / If it's the Kuomintang, you can sleep tight; / If it's the Communist Party, you should give a command and go to the court" ("仲县长你手按心窝仔细想 / 你到底入的是什么党 / 你要是国民党就高枕安睡 / 你要是共产党就鸣鼓出堂" (122), have been rewritten by Goldblatt as "County Boss Zhong, put your hand over your heart and think / As government protector, where is the kindness in your soul? / If you are a benighted official, go home and stay in bed; / If you are an upright steward, take charge and do some good" (135). Such references as the "Kuomintang" and "the Communist Party"—related to Chinese political ideology—are rewritten

whereby they are concealed from the English-language reader—and the political system with Chinese characteristics has also been replaced by a political context familiar to US-American readership.

Further, the original text's chapter twenty-one does not appear in Goldblatt's translation and we have to admit this is a pity. As narrated in the original text, Zhang dies miserably and so it is his disciple who continues his singing career thus showing a glimpse of hope for the peasantry. The Garlic Ballads continue to be sung about with the same humorous irony and satire: "Garlic Event spreads from mouth to mouth / It is hard to tell what is right and what is wrong / My master said more than enough and suffered from a fatal disaster / Such a mistake would not happen on me / Please give me a piece of high-grading cigarette / Send you a piece of People's Daily to read" (蒜薹事件众口传 / 谁是谁非真难辨 / 俺师傅多言招祸殃/这样的错误俺不再犯 / 让俺抽您一支高级烟 / 送一张《群众日报》您自己看) (247). Mo Yan portrays wittily the Chinese ideological model and a virtual report in *People's Daily* shows the final result of the story by way of a press release. On the surface, "an overall investigation into 'Garlic Event' has been conducted and 'some disposals' have proceeded" ("对'天堂蒜薹事件'已作了全面调查,最后作出处理决定" [247]) and Weimin Zhong, who should take the major responsibility, is deprived of his positions as County Magistrate and Deputy Party Secretary of Paradise County and Nancheng Ji, the County Party Secretary, is suspended from his office while the case is under investigation and "some other arrangements" will be made for him: "a few of law-breaking criminals who took the opportunity to instigate a riot" have been "punished by Ministry of Justice according to the law" (对借机煽动搞打砸抢的少数违法分子,天堂县司法部门依法进行了严惩" (247). Media commentaries and editorials are narrated as introspection of the incident. The chapter also leaves us some "gossip and rumor": "Heaven Municipal Committee and the municipal government submit a report to Provincial Committee and the provincial government for the approval of appointing Comrade Nancheng Ji County Magistrate of Yuecheng and Comrade Weimin Zhong Deputy County Magistrate and Deputy Party Secretary of Sanhe, respectively" (苍天市委、市政府经研究并报请省委、省政府:拟任命纪南城同志为岳城县委副书记兼岳城县县长;拟任命仲为民同志为三河县委副书记兼三河县副县长" (256). In the original all this is the narration of hypocritical officialdom and for the Chinese-language reader represents a typical event and perhaps because neither the political ideology nor the situation itself would be easy to grasp by English-language readers, Goldblatt chose to omit it.

As far as the English-language readership of *The Garlic Ballads* is concerned, the most fascinating part of the novel is the confusing social and cultural context of the narrative. When the story begins, China has just started to undertake a series of reforms, but the contradictions between planned economy and a market system would be unfamiliar to most US-American readers. If translated literally, such a story would have to be put into the social and cultural context of non-Chinese and perhaps this is why Goldblatt's translation ends with chapter twenty, in which the whole story's curtain is pulled down by Ma Gao's tragic, but heroic death from a gunshot. From this perspective, *The Garlic Ballads* has turned out to be a thorough tragedy in which the protagonist's death gives prominence to an individual spirit and heroism that in US-American culture is thought highly of. The narrative thus meets the readership's expectations for tragedy and heroism. The difference between the two endings of the original text and Goldblatt's translation highlight the depiction of the source culture and intensive social realist criticism; on the other hand, the significance of Goldblatt's creative rewriting in translation is visible in the concealment of politically sensitive concepts and the absence of the last chapter mirror the influence of ideology on literary translation.

In addition to above discussed examples of rewriting with regard to ideology, translators are usually influenced by the currently dominant poetics during the course of literary translation. Lefevere points out that ideology is not the sole factor in determining translator's strategies and that a more important factor is poetics as a connotation of literature and arts on their own (45). As Lefevere explained, the definition of poetics extends to a wider range of artistic activities and includes both aesthetic perceptions and cultural conventions: poetics consists of two broad aspects whereby the first includes literary techniques, schools, themes, prototypes, and symbolic forms while the other involves the various functions of literature within a social system and its subsystem, namely the literary system (26). According to Lefevere, aside from plot narrative and imagery, literary works should possess aesthetic resonance and imagery because a text without aesthetic properties is rarely attractive to readers and hence the aesthetic factor is ingrained into the target of the translation of literary texts: when

translators converts source text to a target text, translators should also convey the style, artistic conception, and culture possessed found in the source text as much as possible. But how to convey accurately all these aesthetic considerations? In *The Garlic Ballads*, there is a ballad leading the commencement of Chapter Four, translated by Goldblatt as "Garlic in the black earth, ginger in sandy soil, / Willow branches for baskets, wax reeds for creels, / Green garlic and white garlic to fry fish and meat, / Black garlic and rotten garlic to make a compost heap" (*Garlic* 51) (黑土里栽蒜沙土里埋姜 / 杨柳枝编篓蜡条儿编筐 / 绿蒜薹白蒜薹炒鱼炒肉 / 黑蒜薹烂蒜薹沤粪不壮" (47). The wording of the translation is loyal to the original text and reaches the level of a direct, sentence-to-sentence translation. Because the ballad is by the folk minstrel, targeting an audience of average garlic-planting farmers in the county with relatively low educational backgrounds and the words of the song describe people's daily life with simple and unadorned language, the ballad is easy to read and possesses a somewhat doggerel flavor. As a result, the English translation is symmetrical, well-arranged, easy to understand, and down to earth. It is noteworthy that although Goldblatt tried his best to guarantee the representation of the original text's patterns and integrity, some aesthetic elements cannot be fully and directly presented in English translation because of the wide differences of language and culture. To achieve the coherence of the ballads, as well as follow the grammatical rules of English, Goldblatt had no choice but to adopt a partial syntactic and lexical rewriting of the original ballads to meet the expectations of English-language readers' poetic customs and aesthetic requirements. For instance, the folk music appearing in the original ballads is difficult to deliver and hence lost in Goldblatt's translation. Another example is in a series of Chinese verbs like 栽(plant), 埋 (bury), and 编(weave) which are used to describe the garlic planters' work. The verbs are all missing in the translation: such specific references cannot be translated because there are no garlic planters in the U.S. and hence even if translated, the terms would mean nothing to the English-language reader.

Aside from the rewritings of grammar and syntax in translation, poetics as an artistic form which the readership of the target language is familiar with drives the translator to rewrite or play down heterogeneous elements thus naturalizing the original text. Because Han literature has had the tradition of "exhausting meaning through images (立象尽意) since ancient times, the unique and long history of Chinese culture has created innumerable cultural images (see Cao31). All these images condense the wisdom and culture of China and contain all kinds of rich and cumulative historical stories, legendary tales, national traditions, and literary works. These images have developed into a culture of symbols with relatively stable and distinctive cultural meanings. Once people mention symbolic images, the customary associations will be aroused with the result of emotional resonance. The barriers to the cross-cultural transmission of cultural images imply that translation on its own is not simply an issue of how to switch languages, but a problem of how to achieve mutual understanding, effective communication, and enrichment. To solve this, translators must adopt some deliberate or intended distorted, misplaced, and even misinterpreted descriptions of cultural images in the original text in order to adapt to the target audience's dominant poetics. For example, in the ballad lyrics that open chapter three, an expression known to every Chinese meaning red-eyed tigers and wolves (红眼虎狼) (33) appears. Although the phrase is not an idiom by itself, people usually use the words tiger and wolf in other Chinese expressions, for example 虎狼之心 (meaning the hearts of the tiger and the wolf) or 虎狼之国 (meaning the nation of the tiger and the wolf). As cultural images, the red-eyed tiger and the wolf signify the aggressive nation and act as a metaphor for corrupt officials or other bad people. In the original text, Mo Yan uses this metaphor to mean evil officials in Paradise County who feed on people. Goldblatt translated 红眼虎狼 to "covetous tyrants" (*Garlic* 35). However, such a translation takes away the specific points of reference which the phrase has in Chinese culture. Another example is when in Goldblatt's translation of "face-turned monkey and face-changed dog" (翻脸的猴子变脸的狗) (93) in the opening ballad of Chapter Eight retains the images of the animals monkey and dog and puts emphasis on the adjectives "face-turned" (翻脸的) and "face-changed" (变脸的), the two words which mean "treacherous" and "turncoat" (*The Garlic* 101) and Goldblatt's translation loses the emphasis on something happening to the face. "Pustule and soft egg" (熊包软蛋) (128) and "pig, dog, cow, and sheep" (猪狗牛羊) (138) in the opening ballads of chapter eleven and twelve of the original respectively, are similar examples and are translated to "flaccid, weak-kneed coward" (141) and



"dumb farm animals" (153), which the English-language readership would be familiar with. In both instances, we see the process of rewriting.

Nevertheless, in translating cultural images, there are three possibilities for mistranslation: image omission, image reinterpretation, and image substitution. The effect of such mistranslations is the loss of foreign flavor and local features, which in turn weakens the power of the artistic expression of the original work and leads to misreading (see Cao105-08). In practice, as soon as a certain work steps into the stage of the cross-age, cross-boundary, or cross-language transmission, the contents cannot escape becoming distorted and deformed. Hence mistranslation (we are referring to deliberate mistranslation, rather than errors of negligence or misinterpretation) tends to be a natural choice on the part of the translator. It is this deliberate act that in most cases turns ultimately to be the natural point of cultural or literary communication. Furthermore, this mistranslation is a universal phenomenon in translation as Yoshizou Kawamori claims that there does not exist a translation without misreading (57). For instance, there is a traditional Chinese expression in the Chinese original of the novel: 哭爹叫娘 (33) which can be translated literally as "crying for daddy and calling mom"). The phrase is used in embarrassing and painful situations which are difficult to handle: Goldblatt translates it as "bemoaning their fate" (35) and the original Chinese term is hence different from the translation. Further, When Chinese people lament or complain about their own fate, they have a peculiar way of doing so different from that of US-Americans: the Chinese are not accustomed to resort to or even mention fate itself, but express their dissatisfaction, disappointment, or even sadness through complaining about the heaven, blame others or feel sorry for things in nature.

The Chinese folk musical instrument 三弦 (sanxian) with three strings, turns up in the opening ballad of chapter fifteen. Goldblatt changed it to "the two-stringed erhu" (205), another Chinese folk instrument with just two strings. In the West, the erhu is better known than the sanxian and hence to achieve resonance, Goldblatt chose to depart from and deliberately mistranslate the text. Of course, Goldblatt did not cater to the taste of English-speaking readers blindly and completely and the moderate and temperate "creative treason" (Escarpit 137) he adopts in the translation process from the angle of poetic arts allows a Western audience to develop a better reception and comprehension of Chinese literature. At the opening of chapter eighteen, the text is "共产党连日本鬼子都不怕" (211) and its literal translation reads "the Communist Party, which didn't fear the Japanese devils" and the expression "Japanese devils" is of course loaded with connotations for the Chinese because of World War II and the Japanese occupation of China. Hence Goldblatt keeps the Chinese term and makes full use of his imagination and creativity in translation and combines the word "Jap" with "devils" into "Jap devils" (247). The two words are not used together by US-Americans who used to use "Jap" only (today such terms of derogatory stereotypes are rarely used, in the case of the Japanese perhaps because of the distance in time to World War II). And here is another example: Goldblatt's translation of *The Garlic Ballads* starts with a "quotation" by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin: "Novelists are forever trying to distance themselves from politics, but the novel itself closes in on politics. Novelists are so concerned with 'man's fate' that they tend to lose sight of their own fate. There lies their tragedy" ("Preface" n.p.). However, the "quotation" was invented by Mo Yan: "This passage emerges in my dream where Stalin is saying to me pleasantly, but sternly, touching my forehead with his tobacco pipe" (n.p.; for an analysis of this, see also Chen). Mo Yan's fabrication shows the wit and humor of his creative work; however, English-language readers do not find the explanation for the quotation in Goldblatt's translation and would likely think that the passage originates from Stalin indeed so that the work can be regarded as a "novel of socialist realism" of some kind and this is a clear mistranslation that does not serve the US-American reader because of its inaccuracy (although some readers would perhaps think that since the novel is by definition fiction, whether the Stalin quotation is true or not would be considered immaterial).

In conclusion, Mo Yan's 天堂蒜薹之歌 (*The Garlic Ballads*) the folklore form and the overflowing yet simple awareness of equality and freedom highlight Mo Yan's concern for a fictional representation of social issues in order to open a window to English-language readers on contemporary Chinese culture. Goldblatt's translation of the novel is imbued with distinctions in ideology and poetics between Chinese culture and US-American culture and in *The Garlic Ballads* Goldblatt employed "rewriting" and adopted

conversion, omission, and mistranslation to degrees to assist English-language readers to appreciate contemporary Chinese literature and culture.

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