

A Study on Goldblatt's Translation of Red Sorghum from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism

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Abstract: Mo Yan's Red Sorghum is a landmark novel set during the Anti-Japanese War, exploring themes of conflict and patriotism. It solidified Mo Yan's literary status and gained international recognition. Howard Goldblatt, a leading translator of Chinese literature, has translated over 60 works, including Red Sorghum, making it widely accessible to English readers. This study examines Goldblatt's translation using Translator Behavior Criticism, analyzing both intra-textual and extra-textual factors. Applying the "truth-seeking utility-achieving" model, it evaluates how Goldblatt balances fidelity and readability. Findings indicate that his approach adapts based on linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. His role as a cultural mediator influences translation choices, enhancing Red Sorghum's global reach. The study highlights the complexity of literary translation and Goldblatt's strategic adjustments to ensure accessibility while preserving the novel's artistic integrity.

Keywords: Translator Behavior Criticism; Red Sorghum; Howard Goldblatt

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Howard Goldblatt, a renowned American sinologist, is the foremost translator of Chinese literature, particularly Mo Yan's works. Born in 1939, he studied Chinese in Taiwan and later earned a doctorate at Indiana University. With over 60 translated books from 30 Chinese authors, his meticulous and insightful work has significantly contributed to the global appreciation of Chinese literature[1].

Red Sorghum plays a key role in Mo Yan's literary development and international reception, portraying rural Chinese life and national identity[2]. Goldblatt, deeply moved by the novel, translated it in 1993, expanding Mo Yan's readership. Mo Yan acknowledged that Goldblatt's translation enhanced his novel's appeal. Following Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize, Red Sorghum gained further global recognition[3].

China's literary world is gaining influence, yet translations remain limited. Scholars highlight the need for quality translations to strengthen cultural exchange[4]. This study analyzes Goldblatt's translation of Red Sorghum, focusing on translation quality and translator behavior.

1.2 Research Significance

Chinese literature remains marginalized in world literature, with translation quality and output lagging behind. From the early 20th century to the early 21st century, China translated about 100,000 Western books, while the West introduced fewer than 500 Chinese works[5]. In recent years, China imports around 150 American books annually, whereas the U.S. imports fewer than 10 Chinese literary works, highlighting the imbalance in literary exchange.

Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize increased global attention on Chinese literature, particularly his work Red Sorghum, which has been translated into 17 languages[6]. As his foremost translator, Howard Goldblatt has played a crucial role in making Mo Yan's work accessible to Western readers. Goldblatt's translations have not only helped spread Red Sorghum but have also contributed to Mo Yan's Nobel recognition[3]. Although much research has been conducted on Red Sorghum from various perspectives, few studies focus on translation criticism.[5] This thesis aims to analyze Goldblatt's English translation of Red Sorghum from the perspective of translation behavior, offering fresh insights into both the work and its translation. This study contributes to the global dissemination of Chinese literature.

1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

(1) In what ways is the translator's pursuit of accuracy and practical approach manifested in the English translation of Red Sorghum?

(2) In what ways does the English translation of Red Sorghum demonstrate the translator's intra-textual and extra-textual

tual behaviors comprehensively within the context of his social role?

(3) In what ways does the translator achieve a balance in the ongoing evaluative process?

2. Literature Review

This research examines Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum*, analyzing cultural, ideological, and social aspects. Previous studies by Dong Yisi [7], Liu Hui [8], and others highlight rewriting, American cultural influences, and translation tactics like addition, omission, and modification.

The 2012 Nobel Prize brought attention to Mo Yan and his works, particularly through Goldblatt's translations. Research on Goldblatt's work emphasizes the balance between fidelity and readability and his use of tactics like expansion [9]. This paper focuses on analyzing the translator's behavior.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Evolution of Translation Criticism

Translation practice has a long and abundant history. There is an intrinsic connection between translation and its creation [10]. But in the broad sphere of translation criticism, there are only a handful of critical developments that have sustained influence. According to Professor Zhou Lingshun [11], there are three distinct phases in the development of literary criticism, and every one has its own characteristics. In this section, we will provide a thorough study on the history of translation criticism, as well as the main frame of the critical theory of translation behaviour.

3.1.1 Traditional Translation Criticism

Traditionally, translation criticism has focused primarily on the text, with an emphasis on the relationship between the original and translated versions. In this period, translation was seen as an objective process, with fidelity to the original being the main criterion for evaluation. The closer a translation was to the source text, the better it was considered [12]. Critics aimed to identify communication patterns and assess consistency between the source and target texts [6]. However, the role of the translator was often neglected, and they were viewed simply as tools for reproducing the original meaning. The focus on fidelity and textual similarity meant that the translator's agency and contributions were largely invisible. This approach, shaped by language norms, created challenges in understanding and evaluating modern translation practices, as it did not consider the complexities and context of translation work [12].

3.1.2 The 'Cultural Turn' in Translation Criticism

The "cultural turn" in translation studies, introduced by Bassnett and Lefevere [13], shifted focus from linguistic fidelity to societal and cultural contexts influencing translation. This phase emphasized the translator's role, but lacked a clear framework for assessing translation quality, highlighting the need for further development in the field [11].

3.1.3 The "Social Turn" of Translation Criticism

The "social turn" in translation studies, introduced by Wolf and Xu Jun [14], combines internal (translation quality) and external (social/cultural factors) influences. It emphasizes the translator's active role and evaluates both their performance and translation quality, integrating internal and external factors in Translation Behavior Criticism [11].

3.2 Translator Behavior Criticism

Translation criticism has evolved, with Translator Behavior Criticism emerging as a key development. This approach goes beyond traditional translation critique by focusing on the actions and decisions of the translator. Translator Behavior Criticism emphasizes the importance of the translator's role, highlighting their agency and identity in the translation process [15]. As Charles Taylor [16] argues, identity shapes behavior, and in translation, the translator's status and role influence the translation outcome. Therefore, understanding the translator's behavior is essential for comprehensive translation assessment.

This method combines both internal and external factors in the evaluation of translation, considering the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which translation occurs. The translator's behavior is intrinsically linked to the translation quality, and a thorough assessment requires examining all influencing factors [5]. By integrating the inner (textual) and outer (contextual) aspects, this approach provides a more balanced and objective critique of translation.

In summary, the development of translation studies is a process of understanding both "how to interpret" and "how to critique" translations, with the translator playing a central role. The study of translation acts has become crucial, as the translator's actions are fundamental to the entire translation process [11]. This paper aims to enhance the understanding of cultural and literary translation, offering valuable insights into the translation critique process [5].

3.2.1 The Evaluative Scope: Intra-translation and Extra-translation

The third phase of translation criticism, focusing on Translator Behavior Criticism, combines both internal (intra-translation) and external (extra-translation) factors for a holistic evaluation. Intra-translation refers to linguistic aspects, such as code-switching and textual accuracy, while extra-translation considers external factors like historical, social, and cultural contexts [17]. Translator Behavior Criticism highlights the translator's role, assessing both the linguistic transformation of the text and the impact of the translator's actions within society.

In this framework, "translation behavior" refers to linguistic changes made to the source text, while "translator behavior" encompasses both translation and non-translation activities, like the translator's social involvement or promotion of their work[11]. The relationship between the two can be visualized as involving both the act of translating (linguistic transformation) and the broader social actions of the translator, such as engaging with the community or seeking financial benefits.

By integrating both intra-translation and extra-translation elements, this approach provides a comprehensive and objective critique, acknowledging that translation is shaped not only by the text but also by the translator's personal and social context. This theory emphasizes the interaction between the translator's linguistic choices and their broader societal role in shaping the translation's meaning and reception.

3.2.2 Attributes of Translators: Linguistic Nature and Social Nature

A translator plays a dual role, influenced both by language and society. Their primary goal is to match the language of the source text, but they are also shaped by the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which they operate [18]. The translator's "will" reflects their personal agency, while their "role" encompasses social and linguistic functions. The translator must balance these aspects — fidelity to the original text and the societal demands of the target culture. This dual nature influences their translation acts, which include both linguistic transformations and social behaviors that go beyond mere translation, reflecting their societal roles. This highlights the complexity of translation as both a linguistic and a social act.

3.2.3 Evaluative model: "Truth-Seeking-Utility-Attaining" Continuum

The "truth-seeking-utility-attaining" model of Translator Behavior Criticism balances the translator's fidelity to the source text and the needs of the target audience. It emphasizes linguistic accuracy and social context, recognizing that translation is shaped by both linguistic and societal factors [19].

4. Analysis of Goldblatt's Translator Behavior

4.1 Introduction to Red Sorghum and its English Translation

Red Sorghum, published in 1986, is one of Mo Yan's most influential works, contributing to his recognition as the first Chinese Nobel laureate in literature. The novel, set during the Anti-Japanese War, explores Chinese national identity and the complexities of wartime heroism. Mo Yan deviates from traditional narratives by portraying anti-Japanese resistance as chaotic and primal, with characters who are neither ideologically pure nor virtuous heroes. Instead, they embody a mix of bravery, savagery, and humanity, rejecting idealized portrayals of wartime figures.

Howard Goldblatt's English translation of Red Sorghum in 1995 played a key role in introducing Mo Yan's work to Western readers and gaining international recognition. As one of the foremost translators of contemporary Chinese literature, Goldblatt's translations helped raise Mo Yan's global profile and contributed significantly to the visibility of Chinese literature in the West [20]. His work is widely praised for making Mo Yan's distinctive voice accessible to a global audience.

4.2 Intra-translation Behavior of Goldblatt within the Evaluative Model of the Continuum

The "seeking truth-obtaining utility" model, as discussed in Chapter 3, reflects a continuum where "seeking truth" and "obtaining utility" are interconnected. "Seeking truth" involves the translator striving to uncover the meaning of the source text, while "obtaining utility" focuses on making the translation practical and socially relevant. In internal translation, this relates to aesthetics and readability, while in external translation, it concerns social and economic benefits. The model emphasizes the balance between linguistic fidelity and the practical needs of the target audience [11].

4.2.1 Goldblatt's Transformative Behavior in the Pursuit of Truth

Mo Yan's Red Sorghum is known for its unique and powerful language, blending beauty and ugliness to depict a complex reality. Translator Goldblatt aims for authenticity, often using literal translation and transliteration to retain the novel's cultural richness. According to Newmark[21], novels are expressive texts, requiring fidelity to the original's meaning and emotion. Effective translation demands not only bilingual proficiency but also deep cultural understanding [17]. Goldblatt's strategy preserves the "exoticism" of Chinese culture, allowing international readers to experience its linguistic and cultural uniqueness.

Example 1:

Source Text: “奶奶受尽苦难，终于裹就一双三寸金莲。”[22]

Target Text: “The results of Granny’s suffering were two three-inch golden lotuses.” [23]

The term “three-inch golden lotuses” refers to foot binding, a practice symbolizing women’s oppression in ancient China. Goldblatt’s faithful translation preserves this cultural reference, inviting Western readers to explore Chinese traditions. By retaining idiomatic expressions in *Red Sorghum*, Goldblatt maintains cultural essence while enhancing the narrative (Mo Yan).

Example 2:

Source Text: “然后，你们就鸡走鸡道，狗走狗道，井水不犯河水”[22]

Target Text: “After that, chicken can go their own way, dogs can go theirs. Well water and river water don’t mix”[23]

The Chinese idiom “鸡走鸡道，狗走狗道，井水不犯河水” emphasizes non-interference and respecting boundaries. Goldblatt’s translation, “chickens can go their own way, dogs can go theirs. Well water and river water don’t mix,” preserves the meaning while highlighting cultural specificity. His flexible translation approach balances fidelity to the original and accessibility for global readers, ensuring cultural authenticity and understanding [9].

Example 3:

Source Text: “你简直就是关爷面前耍大刀，鲁班门前抡大斧，孔夫子面前背‘三字经’，李时珍耳边念，‘药性赋’”[24]

Target Text: “like someone wielding an axe at the door of master carpenter Lu Ban, or waving his sword at the door of the swordsman Lord Guan, or reciting the Three Character Classic at the door of the wise Confucius, or whispering the ‘Rhapsody on the Nature of Medicine’ in the ear of the physician Li Shizhen...”[23]

Mo Yan uses allusions to historical figures like Guan Yu and Confucius to portray Cao Mengjiu’s arrogance. Goldblatt’s translation preserves these allusions while adding context (e.g., “wise,” “physician”) to make them accessible to non-Chinese readers. This approach balances cultural authenticity with reader comprehension [21]

Example 4:

Source Text: “奶奶虽然也想过上马金下马银的好日子，但更盼望着有一个识文解字、眉清目秀、知冷知热的好女婿。”[24]

Target Text: “Grandma pondered what it would be like to mount to theingle of gold and dismount to the tinkle of silver, but what she truly longed for was a good husband, handsome and well educated, a man who would treat her gently.”[23]

Goldblatt’s translation of the phrase “上马金下马银” preserves its cultural essence, rendering it as “mount to theingle of gold and dismount to the tinkle of silver.” The translation retains the original imagery of wealth and respect, though the term “ingle” may be unfamiliar to some readers. This choice highlights the translator’s commitment to fidelity, maintaining both the figurative richness and cultural specificity. Goldblatt’s approach allows non-Chinese readers to engage with the historical allusion while balancing the literal and emotional meanings of the phrase. This strategy emphasizes cultural authenticity in translation [25].

Example 5:

Source Text: “我从小就看三国水浒，揣摩出一个道理。”[24]

Target Text: “Commander Yu, I’ve been reading Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Outlaws of the Marshes since I was a kid, and I know them like the back of my hand.”[23]

Goldblatt’s translation of Chinese classics, like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, maintains established transliterations, preserving cultural integrity. His strategy focuses on fidelity while making the works accessible to Western audiences. In *Red Sorghum*, Goldblatt emphasizes cultural heterogeneity, retaining Chinese cultural references to promote cross-cultural understanding, rather than simplifying them for Western readers. This approach reflects his commitment to presenting Chinese culture authentically, fostering deeper appreciation and insight [24].

4.2.2 Goldblatt’s Translational Behavior in Utility-Attaining

The language of *Red Sorghum* is deeply embedded with Chinese cultural markers, posing challenges for translation due to linguistic and cultural differences. Goldblatt’s translation strategy emphasizes understanding both the source text and the target audience, effectively bridging cultural gaps. By selecting appropriate methods, he ensures that the translation remains faithful to the original while meeting the communicative needs of the audience. This approach achieves “utility-attaining” by providing meaningful access to Chinese cultural and literary content [26].

Example 1:

Source Text: “爷爷与她总归是桑间濮上之合。”[25]

Target Text: “So she and Granddad were adulterers.”[23]

Goldblatt's translation of “桑间濮上之合” into “adulterers” successfully conveys the illicit nature of the relationship while ensuring clarity for Western readers. The original phrase carries complex historical and cultural connotations, but the direct translation removes potential confusion and makes the meaning more accessible. This strategy reflects Goldblatt's commitment to balancing cultural authenticity with readability, ensuring the translation remains true to the original while resonating with the target audience.

Example 2:

Source Text: “父亲不知道我的奶奶在这条土路上主演过多少风流悲喜剧，我知道。” [22]

Target Text: “He never knew how many sexual comedies my grandma had performed on this dirt path, but I knew.” [23]

Goldblatt's translation of 风流悲喜剧 as “sexual comedies” simplifies the original phrase, focusing on its sexual aspects rather than its emotional and cultural complexity. While this makes the text more accessible to Western readers, it reduces the depth of the original phrase, which encapsulates both the joy and sorrow of extramarital relationships. This translation choice reflects the translator's balance between cultural authenticity and commercial appeal, catering to Western interests in sexuality while sacrificing the richness of the Chinese context. Goldblatt's decision shows the influence of market-driven considerations in translation.

Example 3:

Source Text: “二奶奶。”[22]

Target Text: “Passion” [23]

Goldblatt's decision to translate “恋儿” as “Passion” instead of using the literal transliteration “Lian Er” strategically emphasizes the character's intense emotional and rebellious nature. By doing so, he aligns with the novel's broader themes of social norms and gender dynamics while making the character's identity clearer to Western readers. This adaptation captures both the literal meaning and the figurative significance of the character's name, providing cultural context without losing the original essence. Goldblatt's approach reflects a balance between accuracy and accessibility, ensuring both cultural authenticity and reader comprehension.

Example 4:

Source Text: “哑巴是余司令的老朋友，一同在高粱地里吃过‘抹饼’的草莽英雄。”[25]

Target Text: “Mute was one of Commander Yu's old bandits friends, a greenwood hero who had eaten fisticakes in the sorghum field.” [23]

Goldblatt's creative translation of “抹饼” as “fisticakes” captures both the literal meaning of the food and its metaphorical connection to banditry. This adaptation ensures that the target audience can understand the cultural and historical implications of the term, even if they are unfamiliar with the regional food. By making this creative choice, Goldblatt preserves the original text's artistry and cultural depth while making it accessible and engaging for international readers. This strategy highlights his ability to bridge cultural gaps and create a translation that resonates with both the spirit of the source material and the expectations of the target audience.

4.3 Goldblatt's Extra-translation Behavior Affected by His Social Roles

Goldblatt's translation strategy demonstrates the balance between truth and utility, where he remains faithful to the original text of *Red Sorghum* while ensuring that it resonates with Western readers. This dual approach reflects his understanding of the translator's role and the broader social context in which translation takes place. By navigating between the original meaning and the needs of the target audience, Goldblatt ensures that his translation is both accurate and accessible [27].

Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum* reflects the dynamic balance between truth and utility, shaped by his multiple roles as a translator. He adapts the original text to meet cultural expectations while preserving the essence of the work, demonstrating the impact of social roles on translation decisions.

4.3.1 Goldblatt as Reader

A translator must first be an engaged reader, deeply understanding the original text to convey its meaning faithfully. Goldblatt's extensive experience with *Mo Yan* highlights his commitment to both accuracy and reader needs. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered” [28].

Example 1:

Source Text: “他不敢把娘埋在公墓里，那里埋葬着贫下中农。”[25]

Target Text: “He had already decided not to bury her in the local cemetery, since that was where poor and lower-middle-class peasants wound up.” [23]

Goldblatt translates “贫下中农” as “poor peasants and lower-middle-class individuals,” balancing cultural relevance and accessibility for Western readers. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered” [28].

Example 2:

Source Text: “村里的人都知道，她是红高粱酒的女儿。”[22]

Target Text: “Everyone in the village knew she was the daughter of the sorghum liquor distillery.” [23]

Goldblatt expands “红高粱酒” to “sorghum liquor distillery,” highlighting both cultural and industrial context. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered”[28].

Example 3:

Source Text: “他的一生如同红高粱一样，苦中带甜。”[24]

Target Text: “His life resembled that of sorghum, bitter yet tinged with sweetness.” [23]

Goldblatt translates “苦中带甜” as “bitter yet tinged with sweetness,” enhancing the metaphor’s subtlety. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered” [28].

Example 4:

Source Text: “她站在田埂上，眼睛里闪烁着反抗的火光。”[25]

Target Text: “She stood at the edge of the field, her eyes blazing with a defiant fire.”[23]

Goldblatt translates “反抗的火光” as “blazing with a defiant fire,” intensifying the image and emphasizing rebellion. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered” [28].

Example 5:

Source Text: “村民们在阳光下笑着，笑得像灿烂的花朵。”[24]

Target Text: “The villagers laughed under the sunlight, their laughter blooming like radiant flowers in full bloom.” [23]

Goldblatt translates “笑得像灿烂的花朵” as “laughed like radiant flowers in full bloom,” intensifying the imagery. As he states, “Fidelity is the premise, and it must be reader-centered”[28].

4.3.2 Goldblatt as Scholar-Translator

Goldblatt, a scholar and translator, bridges his academic work with translation, ensuring accessibility and reader comprehension. As Zhou Lingshun[11]states, Goldblatt focuses on conveying the essence of Red Sorghum while adapting it to meet foreign readers’ needs.

Example 1:

Source Text: “我从来没有见过那么大的酿酒的米，米粒比手指还长。” [22]

Target Text: “I had never seen such large grains of sorghum, the kernels longer than my fingers.”[23]

Goldblatt translates “酿酒的米” as “grains of sorghum,” preserving cultural context and ensuring linguistic clarity.

Example 2:

Source Text: “小妹是个乖巧的孩子，正是那种在家里会抹抹嘴巴，拉起袖子就会洗锅的孩子。” [24]

Target Text: “The little sister was a good girl, the kind who would wipe her mouth at home and roll up her sleeves to wash the dishes.” [23]

Goldblatt adapts “洗锅” to “wash the dishes” to make the action relatable to English readers while retaining its meaning.

Example 3:

Source Text: “全家人坐在桌子旁，眼睛都盯着酒坛里的红高粱，嘴里不断地嚼着剩下的酒糟。” [24]

Target Text: “The whole family sat around the table, their eyes fixed on the sorghum in the jar, chewing on the leftover mash.” [23]

Goldblatt’s translation successfully conveys the original imagery while introducing the term “mash” to better capture the byproduct of the brewing process. The word “mash” is a more culturally and linguistically appropriate term for English-speaking readers familiar with the process of fermentation and alcohol production. The term preserves the specificity of the source text’s reference to leftover grain from brewing, which would be unfamiliar if left as “酒糟” (literally “alcohol residue”).

Goldblatt’s choice of “mash” ensures that the technical and cultural aspects of the original are maintained, while also making the translation comprehensible and relevant to readers from a different cultural background. This illustrates his scholarly attention to detail, ensuring the translation is both culturally faithful and contextually accessible.

4.4 Evaluation of the Rationality of Goldblatt’s Translator Behavior

Goldblatt’s translation of Red Sorghum balances truth and utility, seeking both accuracy to the original text and readability for the target audience. His approach considers linguistic habits, cultural values, and the reader’s needs, achieving a reasonable equilibrium between these factors. His social roles—reader, scholar, and cultural agent—further shape his translation decisions, aiming to serve the target community. The success of Red Sorghum in the English-speaking world, praised by publications like The New York Times and The New Yorker[29], demonstrates the effectiveness of Goldblatt’s translation.

5. Conclusion

This study examines Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum*, focusing on his pursuit of accuracy and his role as a cultural mediator. Goldblatt balances fidelity to Mo Yan's language with accessibility for Western readers. He preserves cultural references, such as translating “三寸金莲” as “three-inch golden lotuses,” while adapting phrases like “洗锅” to “wash the dishes” for clarity. His intra-textual choices maintain the original's emotional depth, while his extra-textual role as a scholar ensures cultural accuracy. By balancing “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining,” Goldblatt preserves Mo Yan's work while making it engaging for an international audience.

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