A Study of Conceptual Metaphors and Cultural Cognition in the English Translation of Big Breasts and Wide Hips from a Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract: Framed by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and cultural cognition models, this paper selects Mo Yan's Big breasts and wide hips and its English translation by Howard Goldblatt as its corpus to explore the meaning reconstruction and cognitive mediation of literary metaphors in cross-cultural translation. The study finds that the novel's core metaphor "MOTHER — NATION — LAND" is rooted in traditional Chinese conceptions of the body and agrarian ethics. This paper reveals that translation is not a transparent medium but a process of reshaping cultural cognition, offering insights for literary translation and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, cultural cognition, literary translation, Big breasts and wide hips, Mo Yan

1. Introduction

Metaphor is not merely rhetorical ornamentation but a fundamental way humans conceptualize the world[6]. When literary texts cross linguistic boundaries, the cognitive-cultural duality of metaphor renders translation a complex negotiation. Mo Yan's novel Big breasts and wide hips, centered on the fate of Mother Shangguan Lu and her family, constructs a grand metaphorical system of "MOTHER — NATION — LAND."Cultural knowledge is organized in the form of "cultural models"—shared, story-like chains of simplified events[3]. Its bodily descriptions and agrarian narrative are interwoven with culture-specific Chinese notions such as fertility worship, the family-state isomorphism, and land ethics. However, how metaphors survive, transform, or are lost in the target culture remains underexplored. This paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the high-frequency conceptual metaphors in the novel, and how do their cultural cognitive schemas operate?

RQ2: How does the English translation handle these metaphors? What is the distribution and motivation behind the strategies employed?

RQ3: How do translational choices reshape the original cultural meanings and reflect Sino-Western cognitive differences?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Metaphor Translation Studies: From Rhetorical Equivalence to Cognitive Reconstruction

The study of metaphor translation has undergone a paradigm shift from traditional rhetoric to modern cognitive linguistics[2]. Early research, rooted in rhetoric and contrastive linguistics, focused primarily on reproducing the rhetorical effect of source-language metaphors in the target language, pursuing formal or dynamic equivalence[14]. Such studies often centered on the degree of translatability and treated metaphors as isolated, decorative linguistic phenomena, with translation strategies limited to choices among literal translation, free translation, substitution, or omission[13].

Translation is an act of intercultural communication whose quality hinges on whether the target text achieves functional-pragmatic equivalence with the source text in the target-culture context[4]. Cognitive linguistics, particularly Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) pioneered by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), offers a revolutionary perspective. CMT posits that metaphor is essentially a product of the human conceptual system—a systematic mapping across cognitive domains (e.g., "LIFE IS A JOURNEY")—rather than mere linguistic embellishment[6]. Consequently, the fundamental challenge in metaphor translation is not the conversion of literal images but the transfer and reconstruction of the underlying conceptual system[10]. The translator must discern the conceptual mapping activated by the source metaphor and determine how best to reconstruct it within the target culture's cognitive context, which may involve preserving the mapping conditions, adjusting the image, or replacing the entire conceptual system[15].

As Kövecses (2017) emphasizes, the cognitive perspective views translation as a complex cognitive operation involving comprehension of the source text, conceptual integration, and reformulation in the target language[5]. Mácha's (2023)

recent work further bridges the gap between traditional and cognitive views, insightfully arguing that CMT and the classical view of metaphor are not simply opposed but complementary[9].

2.2 Cultural Cognition and Translation: Power, Ideology, and Cognitive Filtering

The complexity of metaphor translation stems largely from its deep cultural embeddedness. Translation studies must expand into an open, cross-cultural praxis that empowers translators as agents of change[16]. Although conceptual metaphors share universal physiological and psychological foundations, their specific instantiations and expressions vary across cultures, resulting in numerous culture-specific metaphors. This means translation is not merely a conversion of linguistic signs but a cross-cultural, cross-cognitive negotiation practice.

Nida's (1964) theory of "functional equivalence" touched upon this core issue, advocating that the focus of translation should not be formal correspondence but eliciting a response in the target audience similar to that of the source-language readers, necessitating consideration of the target cultural context[13]. From a deconstructionist and cultural studies perspective, Venuti (1995), through the strategies of "Domestication" and "Foreignization," revealed the hidden power relations and ideological struggles in translation[17].

Musolff's (2017) research provides strong empirical support for the cultural-cognitive dimension[12]. Zhang (2013) affirmed Howard Goldblatt's "readability-oriented" translation strategy[19]. His analysis of metaphors like "THE STATE IS A BODY" in European political discourse demonstrates that literal translation ignoring cultural preferences and specific connotations can lead to cognitive dislocation or misunderstanding among target readers.

3. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter employs the aforementioned theoretical framework to conduct quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis on selected metaphor cases, focusing on how Howard Goldblatt handles concepts deeply embedded in Chinese cultural cognitive models during translation, and exploring the cognitive rationale and cultural motivations behind his strategies.

3.1 Body, Motherhood, and Land: Cross-Cultural Transfer of Core Metaphors

The novel constructs a trinity core metaphor system of "MOTHER — LAND — NATION," based on the philosophical views of "harmony between heaven and humanity" and "body-cosmos" correspondence[20], as well as the "family-state isomorphism" model viewing the nation as an extended family with the ruler as patriarch. The female body, especially breasts and hips, is mapped onto the land and nation that nourish life and civilization[8].

Example 1: "Muqin de rufang xiang liang pian feiwo de tudi, ba women xiongmei weiyang de baibaipangpang[11]."

English Translation: "Mother's breasts were like two fertile fields that nourished us until we were plump and white[1]."

Analysis: This example employs a preservation strategy. The source phrase fertile fields is also a powerful and positive image in English culture, capable of activating similar cognitive schemas related to "growth, nourishment, source of life." This indicates that when two cultures share the cognitive basis of a metaphor, literal translation is the most effective way to preserve the original's poetic force[7].

Example 2: "Fei tun shi yi zuo shan, mai zhe zu zong de gen."

English Translation: "Her broad hips were a mountain burying the roots of our ancestors."

Analysis: The translator again uses preservation but with a slight weakening. Translating "feitun" as "broad hips" rather than the literal "fat buttocks/hips" slightly tones down the positive cultural connotations of fertility. However, the core images "mountain" and "roots" are fully preserved. "Mountain" can symbolize stability, mass, and eternity in both cultures, and the "roots" metaphor is also common in English (e.g., "roots of the family"). Thus, the overall cognitive mapping of the metaphor is successfully transferred.

3.2 Negotiating Culture-Specific Metaphors: Explanation, Substitution, and Cognitive Filtering

For metaphors with higher cultural load, where the conceptual mapping may lack direct equivalents in the target culture, the translator must intervene as a "cultural-cognitive mediator."

Example 3: "Gao mi dong bei xiang shi zhong guo de yi ge ru fang, ru zhi bu yu le kang zhan."

English Translation: "Our Northeast Gaomi Township was one of China's breasts, its milk nurturing the war effort."

Analysis: This example demonstrates the use of a foreignization strategy. Comparing a region explicitly to "China's breasts" is unfamiliar and potentially jarring for English readers, as it falls outside conventional Western political body metaphors (e.g., "head of state"). Goldblatt chooses to retain this strong foreign image, forcibly implanting the Chinese cognitive model into the target text, likely aiming to remain faithful to Mo Yan's unique magical realist style and stimulate target readers' cognitive effort to understand and accept this novel mapping. This is a conscious foreignization to preserve

the original's cultural identity and aesthetic impact.

Example 4: "Song zi niang niang de ru fang liu chu sheng shui, xi jing nv ren de zui nie."

English Translation: "The Breasts of the Child-Bestowing Goddess oozed holy water to cleanse women of their sins."

Analysis: Here, "song zi niang niang" is a highly culture-specific deity in Chinese folk belief[18]. Goldblatt adopts an explanatory strategy, creatively translating it as "Child-Bestowing Goddess." This accurately conveys the deity's function while avoiding more literal but potentially clumsier renderings like "Goddess of Offspring."

4. Conclusion

This study finds that the core metaphors of Big Breasts and Wide Hips are rooted in traditional Chinese bodily ethics and the family-state isomorphism model; the English translation prioritizes domestication with foreignization as support, achieving cultural mediation. Translation is not transparent transcoding but a process of cultural-cognitive recreation. Future research could extend to other works by Mo Yan or incorporate reader-response experiments to test the effects of metaphor translation.

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