

Literature Review of the English Translation of *Red Poppies*

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Abstract

Red Poppies is the first full-length novel of A Lai, a Tibetan writer. With its unique narrative perspective and rich Tibetan culture, it gets the Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award and is selected as one of the 70 classic novels collected during the 70 years of New China, winning numerous accolades. The English translation of *Red Poppies*, translated by the famous translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife Sylvia Li-chun Lin, has attracted widespread attention since its publication and is named a bestseller of the year by the Los Angeles Times. However, through the investigation, it is found that there is still a lack of research on the translation of this novel. According to the statistics of CNKI, from 2002 to the present, there are only 43 translation studies on the text of *Red Poppies*, and the research perspectives are also limited, such as focusing on Skopostheorie, literary stylistics, rewriting theory and narratology, etc. Thus, it can be seen that there is still a lot of room for further studies on the translation of this novel. The purpose of this paper is to sort out the research status of the English translation of *Red Poppies* and try to find room for further research in order to help the Chinese culture go abroad.

Key words: *Red Poppies*; English translation; literature review

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1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Red Poppies* written by Tibetan writer A Lai was published by the People's Literature Publishing House in 1998, won the Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award in 2000, and was selected as one of the most influential novels in the forty years of reform and opening up in 2018. Since its publication, this book has been a hit with readers, selling millions of copies. It can be said that it is a very representative work in the history of Chinese contemporary literature. In the novel, the author uses the first-person writing technique to describe the growth experience of a "fool" and the story that the chieftain system accompanied by him, after experiencing various changes and fluctuations, transfers from prosperity to descent and at last it is heading for extinction. Through reading this work, readers can get a glimpse of the living conditions of the chieftains, the fierce fights among them and the miserable life of slaves under the chieftain system in Tibet. In addition, the author A Lai gives the work profound historical and cultural connotations with his humanistic care beyond the national character and deep exploration of human nature. All these features make *Red Poppies* extremely valuable for literary research, and it is a classic well worth reading.

The English translation of *Red Poppies* translated by American translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife Sylvia Li-chun Lin was published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in the United States in 2002 and was listed as one of the best books by the Los Angeles Times in the same year. As a famous American Sinologist, Goldblatt translates more than 60 works by more than 30 Chinese writers and is hailed as one of the most important translators of contemporary Chinese literature. Although his translation of *Red Poppies* in the English world has attracted the attention of foreign readers, due to the unique Tibetan cultural characteristics and specific historical background of this book, the translator may not have an accurate understanding of the source text, and

cannot fully convey the content and style of the original, which adds the difficulty for overseas scholars to study its English version. In consequence, it is a pity that the novel is less discussed in the English-speaking world than it is at home. Ultimately, according to the previous domestic and foreign studies on *Red Poppies* and on its English translation, the purpose of my paper is to summarize the research status of its English version and attend to put forward some relevant suggestions in order to provide some references and inspirations for future researches.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON *RED POPPIES*

The existing literature shows that the researches on *Red Poppies* mainly include two parts.

2.1 Previous Studies on *Red Poppies* at Home

In China, scholars have done a lot of researches on *Red Poppies*. From Figure 1, we can see that as of November 29, 2022, a total of 746 Chinese articles have been searched for the key words “*Red Poppies*”. On the whole, the number of articles published each year presents a trend of fluctuation and rise. And the topics include the image of the “fool”, the interpretation of the novel’s

themes, and the textual and historical narratives of the novel. Scholars Yang Yumei and Lai Chungang (2001) stress the image of the “fool” in the novel. They believe that the fool’s fate constitutes the main plot line of the novel, and the work reproduces the historical process of the Tibetan chieftain system from flourishing to declining and from surviving to dying in showing the life and emotion experience of the “fool”, offering a deep elegy for the decaying feudal chieftain system. Wu Daoyi (2006) places particular emphasis on the analysis of the novel’s themes. He argues that the author’s writing of his own people’s life, his overall reflection on history, and his view of human destiny are organically integrated into the rich and profound themes of *Red Poppies*, consisting of the tribal life of the Tibetan people, the relationship between power and history, desire and knowledge, and the dilemma of human existence, etc. Liu Chengyong (刘成勇, 2019) thinks that *Red Poppies* is a typical audio text. The sound in the novel is not only an indispensable means to shape characters and set the scene, but also has a powerful narrative function, showing the subtlety and complexity of textual and historical narratives in the conflict/confrontation and inheritance/replacement of the sounds. The change in sound also represents a fundamental change in history and culture of the land in Maichi.

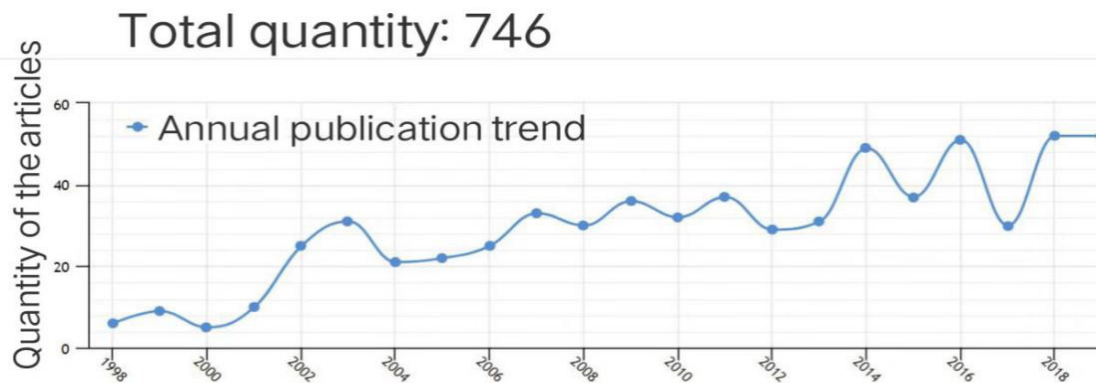


Figure 1
The Number of Literature Related to *Red Poppies*

2.2 Previous Studies on *Red Poppies* Abroad

Compared to the domestic studies, only a few foreign scholars have studied *Red Poppies*. According to the retrieved documents, the topics include the content and theme of the novel, the narrative features and the counter narrative strategy and so on. Carolan (2003), in his book review of the novel, points out that the author, A Lai, paints an impressive portrait, that is, Buddhism and Bon shamanism compete to assert their superiority, while serfdom, slavery, casual brutality, ritualized murder, mate stealing and the worst of sexual exploitation flourish under the tribal patriarchy. Even so, the people in the novel survive successfully, thanks largely to their vulgar peasant ability to take pleasure and the supreme hell created under the guise of religion, astrology and agricultural

orgy. Despite their dire social situation, A Lai makes these Tibetan bumpkins easy to love. Another scholar Baranovitch (2010) mentions that so far, few people have paid serious attention to the sociopolitical implications of *Red Poppies*, and those who have attended to this matter are united in their criticism, suggesting that it repeats the standard Han Chinese narrative about “Old Tibet”. But Baranovitch’s article provides a new interpretation of A Lai’s novel, arguing that in spite of its many obvious overlaps with the Han Chinese narrative, the novel also contains a subtext with an alternative narrative. He proposes that the main agenda in *Red Poppies* is to undo the hellish humiliation that the Chinese government and the Han majority have imposed on “Old Tibet” and the accompanying account of the People’s Liberation

Army's "liberation" of Tibet. And the researcher Rigumi (2011) examines in his paper how the novel *Red Poppies* fictionalizes a historical conflict from the point of view of the chieftains of the eastern Tibetan borderlands as a counter-narrative to these linear, ideological narratives of nationalist histories. He puts forward that this novel presents this historical event from another perspective through the fictional witness of the people on the border of eastern Tibet, which is consistent with the literary genre of historiographic metafiction. Besides, Rigumi holds the view that although A Lai sees the novel as an effective counter-narrative to the nationalist histories, he falls a little short in exploiting the subversive potential of historiographic metafiction.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *RED POPPIES*

On the basis of the articles available, experts and scholars mainly study the English translation of *Red Poppies* from four perspectives, namely the perspective of Skopostheorie, the perspective of literary stylistics, the perspective of rewriting theory, and the perspective of narratology.

3.1 Perspective of Skopostheorie

Feng Xiaopan (2015) takes the culture-loaded words in the English translation of *Red Poppies* as the object of study and analyzes them from the perspective of German functionalist Skopostheorie. She mentions that under the Skopos rule, in order to better meet the purpose of spreading Chinese culture, translators mainly use the method of addition to retain the words with cultural loads. Hu Yuyun (2018) supposes that at present, the highest purpose of Chinese literary translation is to take Chinese culture to the global stage. However, in the process of translating the book *Red Poppies*, the huge differences between Chinese and English lead to the cultural vacancy, which results in the loss of the unique cultural implication. Therefore, it is imperative for translators to put an emphasis on the translation of culture, and the aim is to let the target readers feel the authentic Chinese traditions and to make the cross-cultural communications smoother. In her dissertation, guided by Skopos Theory and combined with the methods of literature analysis, translation case analysis and qualitative research, she explores the compensatory strategy for the cultural vacancy in the English translation of this novel. Shen Lingbo (2021) argues that the purpose of the English translation of *Red Poppies* is to exhaustively disseminate Chinese culture to the foreign readers, so that our culture can be successfully introduced to the Western world. In order to achieve this purpose, the translation of the novel mainly adopts the strategy of foreignization to preserve the genuine Chinese culture, selects the literal translation to highlight the

poetic language features, and uses the free translation and transliteration to present the cultural images, together with the methods of compensation and omission to satisfy the intended function of the original to the greatest extent.

3.2 Perspective of Literary Stylistics

Kuang Ye (2018) advocates that in literary texts, content and form are inextricably intertwined and cannot be separated. Thus, in literary translation, the translator needs not only to accurately convey the content of the source text, but also to effectively identify the unique forms of expression in the original and to achieve its stylistic effects in the target text as much as possible. Taking *Red Poppies* as an example, he draws on the foreground classification from the English linguists Leech and Short in the perspective of literary stylistics to analyze the foregrounded linguistic features of the novel. He also explores how the translator reconstructs the foregrounded features and their effects in the translation, so as to retain the artistic expressive force of the source text to a larger extent. Zhang Biyu (张碧玉, 2018) focuses on whether the translation of *Red Poppies* reproduces the style of the original text, attempts to find out which stylistic features are reflected in the target text and which features are lost and tries to explain the reasons. Finally, she concludes that the translator has recreated the smooth and soothing rhythm of the novel, the illogical peculiarity caused by the author's contradictory expressions, and the frequent use of loose sentences and figures of speech such as simile, metaphor and contrast. Meanwhile, she also points out the shortcomings of the translation, like the loss of the musicality and poetry and so on. Based on the theory of literary stylistics, Yang Qinghua (2020) takes the English translation of *Red Poppies* as an example, and analyzes in terms of vocabulary and rhetoric whether the translator preserves the linguistic forms that express aesthetic functions and stylistic values and whether the target text produces stylistic effects similar to those of the source text, thus indicating the significance of literary stylistics. Through the study, he proposes that in spite of some false equivalence in the translation, the translator basically delivers the idea of the original and maintains the aesthetic effects and stylistic features.

3.3 Perspective of Rewriting Theory

Qu Xiajin (曲夏瑾, 2013) holds the view that if Chinese literature wants to enter the overseas market, it should be rewritten according to the reading habits of the target language readers. Therefore, she chooses rewriting theory as the theoretical framework to describe and analyze the whole translation process of the English version of *Red Poppies*, and studies the influence and manipulation of ideology, poetics and patronage on the translator's selection of the text and his translation strategies adopted, so as to explore the applicability of rewriting theory to the English translation of Chinese literature. In her paper, Wu

Xin (2016) takes the English version of *Red Poppies* as the object and illustrates how the main translator, Howard Goldblatt, is manipulated in his translation practice. Specifically, she first explores the translator's own poetics and ideology. Secondly, Wu Xin expounds the manipulation of the translator by the poetics of Western society and its dominant ideology. Finally, she discusses the manipulation of the translator's translation process by his patrons. On this basis, the article demonstrates the feasibility of Lefebvre's rewriting theory by describing the manipulation of the translator Howard Goldblatt in the process of English translation of *Red Poppies* from poetics, ideology and patrons. Zhang Ting (2019) emphasizes two major factors, ideology and poetics, under the perspective of rewriting theory, and carries out a descriptive research. She examines the influence of the ideology of the translated language on the text, including the ambiguous Sino-Tibetan ethnic relations and the exaggerated mystical and magical elements that do not exist in the source text but appear in the target text. She also discusses the influence of the poetic norms on the translation, involving the changes of narrative perspective and person and the weakening of the linguistic characteristics of the "fool".

3.4 Perspective of Narratology

Gu Yi and Li Li (2016) suppose that narrative perspective is one of the significant elements of the novel, therefore, they insist that the translation should not only be faithful to the content, but also reproduce the changing perspectives and the author's narrative techniques. By comparing the first-person narrative point of view in *Red Poppies* and its English translation, they analyze the translator's grasp and reproduction of the original narrative perspective, as well as the equivalence between two texts at the level of literary and aesthetic values. Li Li (2016) suggests that *Red Poppies* has been widely praised for its unique narrative technique and narrative language, but the research on its in English translation has been little studied. As a result, based on narratology, she takes the English version of *Red Poppies* as a model and compares the source text with the target text in terms of narrative perspective, narrative discourse, and narrative plot structure, combining typical examples from both Chinese and English texts. Finally, she summarizes the principles that should be followed in the English translation of the novel from narratology: firstly, narrative perspective should be reconstructed; secondly, narrative discourse can change its form as appropriate; thirdly, narrative plot structure can make adjustments, such as paragraph integration and splitting. Ge Yongli (2018), on the basis of the Chinese-English parallel corpus of *Red Poppies*, takes the character's dialogue, the character's thought and narrative perspective as the focal points from narratology and selects the "fool" as the research target to infer how the translator deals with the process of image

reconstruction. Ge Yongli's study finds that the translator uses the methods of adaptation and shift of perspective to remold the "fool", which weakens his image in the translation compared with the original.

3.5 The Miscellaneous

Si Bingyue and Huo Yuehong (2014) study the emotional tendency expressed in the translation of *Red Poppies* by Howard Goldblatt and his wife from the perspective of stylistics of translation based on the corpus. They find that there are differences between the English version and the Chinese version in terms of both the number and density of emotional words and the intensity of emotion: the Chinese text has a clear tendency toward negative emotion, while the English translation shows an obvious inclination toward positive emotion. Si Bingyue and Huo Yuehong's study on translators' emotional trend goes beyond the linguistic level and expands the dimension of stylistic research. Guo Peiying and Wang Yu (2019) argue that the translator plays a crucial role in considering how to transmit minority literature to the outside world in a comprehensive and authentic way. Taking the English translation of *Red Poppies* as an example, they analyze the translator's subjectivity in terms of pre-translation text selection and translation strategies by comparing the original work and the English translation with hermeneutic theory. After that, they conclude that the unique language style, folk customs and character features of Tibetan literature are well presented in the translation, and the life of the national literature is continued, reflecting the subjective initiative, re-creation and motivation of the translator. Shao Lu and Yu Yajing (2021) suggest that metaphor, with its characteristics of liveliness, simplicity and uncertainty of meaning, has always been an indispensable element in literature. They point out that modern metaphor has developed over the past 40 years and has formed a relatively complete theoretical system, but the research on metaphorical translation is not deep enough. Their study takes cognitive stylistics as the theoretical guide, draws on western metaphor classification criteria and translation strategies, analyzes the unique characteristics of Chinese metaphors, and tries to classify them into three categories: conceptual metaphor, imagery metaphor, and imagery pictorial metaphor. Taking the English translation of *Red Poppies* as a case study, they state the cause and effect of metaphor from two dimensions of cognition and style, and then propose different translation techniques for these three metaphors.

4. DEFICIENCIES OF THE PREVIOUS STUDIES

In short, the English translation of A Lai's novel *Red Poppies* is still inadequately studied. Domestic

scholars usually start from four perspectives, namely Skopostheorie, literary stylistics, rewriting theory and narratology, and then study culture-loaded words, translation strategies, the extent to which the translation retains the stylistic features of the book, and the degree to which the translation reproduces the narrative perspective and narrative techniques of the novel. Moreover, it can be found that not only the research perspectives are limited, but also the number of literature that can be searched under each perspective is also small, with only three to four articles at most, not to mention other fragmented theoretical perspectives. However, it is worth mentioning that there are more studies on the novel *Red Poppies* in China, focusing on the analysis of the image of the “fool”, the interpretation of the novel’s theme and its narrative characteristics. In addition, scholars have also paid attention to the study of the translator Howard Goldblatt, including translation ideas and translation strategies. In contrast, overseas studies on both the English translation of *Red Poppies* and the translators are quite scarce. To sum up, the present author believes that in future studies on the English translation of *Red Poppies*, scholars can start from a new perspective or a theme across fields, for example, the social aspect of translation. The present author thinks that scholars may try to innovate by looking at the phenomenon of translation from a sociological perspective, rather than limiting the study of translation to the literary level of the work. What we would like to see is that the study of the English translation of *Red Poppies* can be linked to theories in other fields, thus promoting each other and developing together.

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