



## A Study of the Howard Goldblatt’s Translation of *Sandalwood Death* From the Perspective of Morris’s Semiotics

ZHOU Bingxin<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Shihezi University, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 9 May 2023; accepted 30 May 2023

Published online 26 June 2023

### Abstract

Based on Morris’s Semiotics, this thesis makes comparisons of traditional cultural expressions between 《檀香刑》 and *Sandalwood Death* from three aspects: syntactic meaning, semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning, revealing that Goldblatt has overcome the limitations in translation and achieved the balance between faithfulness and creation in representing Chinese culture in the source text. In this way, he has brought a new literary vitality to the English version of *Sandalwood Death*.

**Key words:** Sandalwood death; Morris’s semiotics; traditional Chinese culture

Zhou, B. X. (2023). A Study of the Howard Goldblatt’s Translation of *Sandalwood Death* From the Perspective of Morris’s Semiotics. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 26(3), 40-44. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13056> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13056>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mo Yan, one of the most well-known and widely translated contemporary Chinese writers, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012. It is Mo Yan that puts modern and contemporary literature of China on the international stage, winning the literary reputation globally. “《檀香刑》 is the most artistic novel among Mo Yan’s all novels” (Liu, 2019, p.90) The comprehensive cultural expressions in 《檀香刑》 deeply describes the existing form and characteristics of the traditional

Chinese culture, reflecting national character and cultural psychology of Chinese society.

Goldblatt, an American translator, is regarded as the most outstanding and influential translator in western countries. He not only obtained fruitful achievements in translation, but also won the good name among readers at home and abroad. Goldblatt has the finest cooperation with Mo Yan and some of his translations have been adopted by other translators as the typical examples of the translation of Mo Yan’s novels. Mo Yan specifically thanked Goldblatt during Nobel Prize banquet speech for his great contributions in translation, stating that “without Goldblatt, there would be no world literature” (Goldblatt, 2013, p.4) *Sandalwood Death* is not only the reproduction but also the rewriting of the cultural expressions in 《檀香刑》. It makes *Sandalwood Death*, a Chinese literature, put on the color of contemporary British and American literature, achieving the same position as 《檀香刑》.

So far, many scholars have done massive research on *Sandalwood Death* from different perspectives such as Translatology, Hermeneutics and Reception Aesthetics and so on. For instance, Guo Yali (2015) explored the acceptance of Susan Bassnett’s cultural translation theory to explain Howard Goldblatt’s specific treatment with the local culture-loaded terms. But her thesis only selects a small number of local culture-loaded terms for research, weakening the representativeness of research sample. Moreover, Gao Xiaona (2017) takes *Sandalwood Death* as an object, using typical examples to analyze how 《檀香刑》 is operated in terms of George Steiner’s four translation steps of Hermeneutic Motion: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. But the study of cultural expressions changes in the process of translation was ignored.

However, there are few articles researches on *Sandalwood Death* from Morris’s semiotics. Therefore, this paper will study *Sandalwood Death* with the

application of Morris's Semiotic theory, so as to enrich the interdisciplinary perspective of translation studies.

Morris is the first philosopher who tries to "discover the real things in the world in the form and structure of a certain language" (Morris, 1936, pp.130-138) according to the idea of signs and its classification, which "affects modern semiotics greatly after Saussure and Peirce" (Li, 1999, p.455) He develops his theory on the basis of his own scientific empiricism philosophy, which absorbed the work of Saussure and Peirce as well as the theoretical achievements of predecessors in other disciplines.

Morris divided Semiotics into three branches: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. He believes that this classification also suitable for "dividing language signs into mutually exclusive categories". (Morris, 1955, p.280) "Semiotic does not rest upon a theory of 'meaning'; the term 'meaning' is rather to be clarified in terms of semiotic". (Morris, 1938, p.44). Corresponding to those three relationships in Linguistics are three kinds of semiotic meanings: syntactic meaning, semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning. "Morris's meaning trisection has a great influence on the teaching of translation theory" (Xu, 2009, p.88)

With the application of Morris's Semiotics, this thesis selects the representative cultural expressions and makes a comparative study of 《檀香刑》 and Sandalwood Death from three aspects: flexible rewriting in syntactic meaning and the emphasis on literariness, faithful translation in semantic meaning and the representation of traditional Chinese Culture, deep exploration in pragmatic meaning and the embodiment of traditional values of Chinese culture, demonstrating that Sandalwood Death has gained new literary vitality in the context of western culture and enhance overseas communication and exchanges of Chinese culture.

## 2. FLEXIBLE REWRITING IN SYNTACTIC MEANING AND THE EMPHASIS ON LITERARINESS

The syntactic meaning of language refers to the internal relationship of linguistic signs. "Any sign, including linguistic signs, does not exist in isolation, but as an integral part of a language system" (Liao, 2006, p.80) Syntactic meaning is mainly manifested in some features of language in phonology, grammar and vocabulary, and some special rhetorical effects, such as rhyme, parallel structure, repeated emphasis.

To maintain literariness, Goldblatt takes flexible translation methods and techniques to appropriately rewrite the metrological and dialect cultural expressions with obvious syntactic meaning in the source text, reshaping the beauty of the English language.

Example 1.

这个监斩侯头大如柳斗,“阎王问”尺寸嫌小,费了很大的劲儿,桶匠箍桶似的才给他套上。(Mo, 2012, p.38)

The head of this particular man was the size of a willow basket, almost too big for the hoop, which we struggled to affix to his head, inept like coopers, greatly displeasing His Excellency. (Goldblatt, 2013, p.36)

“柳斗”is a traditional measurement tool in countryside and it shows the ancient metrological culture in China. In the context of the source text, “柳斗”is obvious syntactic meaning, that is, the rhetorical effect of metaphor and exaggeration. Goldblatt translates“柳斗”into“basket” has also achieved the same literary effect in the context of the translation.“The body of “柳斗”is in the shape of a pot, with a deep belly and a round bottom, and the mouth is slightly closed. The mouth is made of broken wicker or rattan, and a circle of willow sheet hoop is used to ensure the cleanness of the edge of the mouth.” (Zhang, 2007, p.161) It is not only a kind of measuring instrument, but also refers a kind of handicraft art form “ Since the late Tang Dynasty, the workers artistically transplanted the shape of “柳斗” to the porcelain, and the “柳斗”patterns were fresh and unique, which were applied to tea sets, wine sets and stationery” (Shi, 2017, p. 75) According to our research on “柳斗”, it's impossible for someone's head to be as big as it. In source text, the former part of the sentence has told us “监斩侯”has a big head, and the latter part has also explained the influence of his big head. Therefore, even if the word “柳斗”is deleted in source text, the meaning of the sentence in target text will not be affected. So, “柳斗” only plays an exaggerated rhetorical role in source text.

In the context of target text, " basket " is syntactic meaning as“柳斗”. Goldblatt explains“柳斗”---- basket made of willow, which is common to see in Western life, because western readers may not have such a clear concept of“柳斗”.However in English, a basket is a container that is traditionally constructed from stiff fibers and can be made from a range of materials, including wood splints, runners, and cane. It is also much bigger than the head of a man. So although “柳斗”and“basket”are actually two totally different things, they have achieved the same literary effects.

Example 2.

爹,俺最怕的是他们把您打进囚车押送进京,那样可就“姥姥死了独生子-没有舅(救)了”,只要在县里执刑,咱们就有办法对付他们。(Mo, 2012, p.9)

What frightened me, Dieh, is that they will transport you to the capital in a prison van. We can deal with them so long as they carry out the sentence here in the country. (Goldblatt, 2013, p.9)

“姥姥死了独生子--没有舅(救)了” is the idiom of Mo Yan's hometown Shandong, China, demonstrating strong Chinese dialect culture. And in the context of source text, this idiom is obvious syntactic meaning that is to enhance the colloquial color of language.

Goldblatt adopts the translation strategy of Domestication, translation method of Omission, deleting this idiom directly in target text, making the translation more fluent and more befitting the speaker's social status. "舅" and "救" are two Chinese homonyms characters. As Goldblatt once said in an interview,

"There are repetitions in his (Mo Yan's) novels. The publishers often ask me to delete them. We can't let American readers think that this is a book written by someone who doesn't know how to write." (Fu and Zhang, 2008, p.2) Some sentences with the same meaning but different expressions often appear in Mo Yan's novels. Sometimes it seems tediously long, but it is the writing style of Mo Yan. On this point, the flexible translation of Goldblatt shows his creativity in literary language.

### 3 FAITHFUL TRANSLATION IN SEMANTIC MEANING AND THE REPRESENTATION OF UNIQUE CHINESE CULTURE

Semantic meaning refers the relationship between signs and the things it refers to. But the things that the sign refers to is not always the "real thing". It can also be the behavior and process (walking, speaking), nature (long, wide, high), abstract concept (reason, connection, law). "Semantic meaning is the basic content of linguistic signs and the main information it conveys" (Ke, 2012, p.22).

To give the readers a special reading experience of unique Chinese culture, Goldblatt tried to achieve linguistic equivalence between source text and target text in terms of the Chinese fantasy literature cultural expressions and riding and shooting cultural expressions which are both with obvious semantic meaning.

#### Example 1.

那天俺撑着一把绘画着许仙游湖遇白蛇的油纸伞。  
(Mo, 2012, p.16)

I was carrying an umbrella decorated with a copy of the painting Xu Xian.

"许仙游湖遇白蛇" is from Chinese folklore "白蛇传". "白蛇传" is one of the four famous legends in ancient China and the representative of Chinese fantasy literature. In the context of source text, "许仙游湖遇白蛇" is semantic meaning. It refers to the romantic scene that Xu Xian encounters "Bai Niangzi", a beautiful woman when wandering around the West Lake. Goldblatt made a faithful translation, demonstrating the mysterious Chinese culture. According to the literal meaning of "Xu Xian Encounters a White Snake at West Lake", it is easy for readers to think that it may be a Chinese legend that they have never known, making the readers get different reading experience from reading western literature. And even they will explore further about Chinese culture after reading Sandalwood Death.

#### Example 2.

后来俺把老东西送给俺的见面礼给俺干爹看,他说那玩意儿是射箭用的扳指,是用绝好的翡翠雕琢而成,比金子还要贵重。(Mo, 2012, p.27)

Sometimes later, I showed my first-meeting gift to my gandieh, who recognized it as an archery thumb guard, one carved from the finest jade. (Goldblatt, 2013, p.26)

"扳指" is a kind of riding and shooting equipment in ancient China, showing Chinese riding and shooting culture. When drawing bows and arrows, it is used to protect thumbs. In the context of source text, "扳指" is obvious semantic meaning. However, "thumb guard" in the context of target text introduces a unique tool for riding and shooting in Chinese culture to the Western readers, which makes the Western readers come into contact with Chinese riding and shooting culture.

The forerunner of "扳指" is She (鞞), which is a kind of riding and shooting tool. In ancient times, when archery, She (鞞) was put on the thumb of the right hand to hook the string of an arrow.

Ancient She (鞞) can be made of different kinds of materials. She (鞞) made of jade was first found in the late Shang Dynasty. But "the shape of 扳指, which soon evolved into an ornament without practical value in the Qing Dynasty, was imitated from JiaoShe (角鞞), Ge She (革鞞) used by Mongolian people." (Xu, 2012, p. 60) Although "扳指" has pragmatic meaning---the symbol of power and social status, its pragmatic meaning is not obvious in the context of source text. Instead "扳指" is evidently semantic meaning. In English, there is no corresponding word for "扳指". And "thumb ring", which is similar to "扳指", according to the pictures in Wikipedia and Google, is closer to the ancient She (鞞). Goldblatt obviously noticed the difference between thumb ring and "扳指", so he didn't use the familiar word "thumb ring". Instead, he used the translator's subjectivity, attempting to explain "扳指", an ornament unfamiliar to Western readers.

### 4. DEEP EXPLORATION IN PRAGMATIC MEANING AND THE EMBODIMENT OF TRADITIONAL VALUES OF CHINESE CULTURE

Pragmatic meaning refers to the relationship between signs and users. "The main function of linguistic signs is to express and transmit meaning, so as to realize communication finally" (Wang, 2002, p.24). The process of using language is a process of interaction between linguistic signs and users (speakers, authors, listeners or readers). The users will may add their own subjective attitude and attach political position and value orientation to signs. In other words, "the act of containing an actor's (positive or negative) preferential behavior toward

something or something else” (Morris, 1964, p.18).

To demonstrate traditional values of Chinese culture, Goldblatt explores the illocutionary meaning of the source text and restore the author’s implicit emotional attitude and political position in terms of Xia Yi (侠义) and Shi (士) cultural expressions with obvious pragmatic meaning in the source text.

Example 1.

爹，你这一次可是做大了，好比是安禄山日了贵妃娘娘，好比是程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲，凶多吉少，性命难保。(Mo, 2012, p.6)

Dieh, you pulled off something grand this time, like An Lushan screwing the Imperial Concubine Yang Guifei, or Chenyaojin stealing gifts belonging to the Sui Emperor and suffering grievously for it. (Goldblatt, 2013, p.5)

“程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲” was a real historical event in the late Sui Dynasty, After being processed by later generations, this event was written into romantic books such as *Heroes in sui and tang Dynasties* (《隋唐演义》) and was widely spread all over China. Cheng Yaojin also becomes a representative of Chinese folk hero with Xia Yi culture.

In the context of source text, “程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲” is obvious pragmatic meaning, praising Sun Bing’s leadership of “Yi He Quan” (义和拳) in essence is the same as “程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲”--- a kind of heroic behavior with Xia Yi spirit. Xia Yi spirit is “the social responsibility, the life style and spirit attitude of frankness and freedom”, “the values of self-improvement, loyalty and contempt for property, lay down one’s life for justice” (Long, 2010, p. 128). In the context of source text, “程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲” suggests that the essence of the image of Sun Bing is consistent with the image of Cheng Yaojin and other traditional Chinese folk heroes. It is a kind of folk hero’s struggle against the brutal feudal monarchy. It is the same as the subjective feelings aroused by Sun Meiniang and the author himself, which the Chinese readers will also agree that Sun Bing is a folk hero as Cheng Yaojin.

However, Goldblatt translated “程咬金劫了隋帝皇纲” into “Chenyaojin stealing gifts belonging to the Sui Emperor”, making Western readers learn from Chinese folk heroes and Chinese Xia Yi spirit. It is a successful export of traditional value of Chinese culture.

Example 2.

余不得不承认，在这高密小县的偏僻乡村生长起来的孙丙，是一个天才，是一个英雄，是一个进入太史公的列传也毫不逊色的人物，他必将千古留名，在后人们的口碑上，在猫腔的戏文里。(Mo, 2012, p.383)

I must admit that Sun Bing, a product of Gaomi, a small, out-of-the way county, was a true genius, a heroic figure equal to those who appeared in the biographies of Sima Qian’s Records of the Historian. His name will be spoken down through the ages, praised by the masses and memorialized in Maoqiang opera. (Goldblatt, 2013, p.373)

Records of the Grand Historian of China (《史记》) is an outstanding representative of Shi culture in ancient China and enjoys a very high position in Chinese History and Literature. The characters recorded in “列传” chapter in Records of the Grand Historian of China (《史记》) are mostly Shi who had made great contributions to society and played an important role in history. Shi is the ideal personality image of ancient Chinese intellectuals. Shi is the carriers and disseminators of Chinese traditional culture. And Shi spirit is the cohesion of the value system of Chinese traditional political culture (Ge, 2001, p.11).

In the context of source text, “太史公的列传” is obvious pragmatic meaning. “the biographies of Sima Qian’s Records of the Historian” by Goldblatt in the context of target text conveys the same emotional tendency as the source text. In fact, “进入太史公的列传也毫不逊色” is the author’s high comment on Sun Bing, emphasizing that he is a real national hero and the author hopes to resonate with readers on this point. Anyway, for readers unfamiliar with Chinese traditional culture, “the biographies of Sima Qian’s Records of the Historian” introduces them the social psychology and traditional value of ancient Chinese culture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With rich cultural connotation, Sandalwood Death embodies the traditional values of Chinese culture and it is an outstanding representative of modern Chinese literature. With the help of Morris’s Semiotics, this thesis analyses Sandalwood Death from three parts: the flexible rewriting in syntactic meaning and the emphasis on literariness, faithful translation in semantic meaning and the representation of mysterious Chinese Culture, deep exploration in pragmatic meaning and the embodiment of traditional values of Chinese culture. To maintain literariness, Goldblatt takes flexible translation methods and techniques to appropriately rewrite the metrological and dialect cultural expressions with obvious syntactic meaning in the source text, reshaping the beauty of English language. To give the readers a special reading experience of unique Chinese culture, Goldblatt tried to achieve linguistic equivalence between source text and target text in terms of Chinese fantasy literature cultural expressions and riding and shooting cultural expressions which are both with obvious semantic meaning. To demonstrate traditional values of Chinese culture, Goldblatt explores the illocutionary meaning of the source text and restore the author’s implicit emotional attitude and political position in terms of Xia Yi (侠义) and Shi (士) cultural expressions with obvious pragmatic meaning in the source text.

In a word, Sandalwood Death is not only an excellent translation work of 《檀香刑》, but also an excellent literary work that shares the same literary value as 《檀香

刑》. What's more, it is also a fabulous achievement of the exportation of Chinese culture. Sandalwood Death not only brings Mo Yan global reputation, but also provides readers home and abroad with a better reading experience. Eventually it enhances the overseas communication and exchanges of Chinese culture.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Fuge, & Zhang, Y. (2008). Howard Goldblatt on Chinese literature. *Southern Weekly*, (03), 1-5.
- Ge, Q. (2001). On the modern transformation of Chinese traditional "scholar spirit". *Journal of Huaqiao University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, (02), 11-17.
- Goldblatt, H. (2013). Mo Yan in translation: One voice among man. *Chinese Literature Today*, Norman, (03), 3-5.
- Goldblatt, H. (2013). *Sandalwood death*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Ke, P. (2012). A course on English Chinese and Chinese English translation (p.22). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Li, Y. Q. (1999). *Introduction to theoretical semiotics* (p.455). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Liao, C. H. (2006). An analysis of Morris' Semiotics Meaning View. *Northern Essays*, (04), 80-82.
- Liu, Y. (2009). Retreat, or progress in retreat - Re discussing the impact of "Sandalwood Punishment" on Mo Yan's creation. *Novel Review*, (01), 90-100.
- Long, Q. L. (2010). The spirit of chivalry culture and Xiao Renfu's novels. *Contemporary Literature*, (02), 128-131.
- Mo, Y. (2012). *Tanxiang Xing*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Morris, C. (1936). The concept of meaning in pragmatism and logical positivism. *Actes du Contres International de Philosophie*, (08), 130-138.
- Morris, C. (1938). *Foundation of the theory of signs* (p.44). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Morris, C. (1955). *Sings, language and behavior* (p.280). New York: George Braziller.
- Morris, C. (1964). *Signification and significance: A study of the relations of signs and values* (p.18). Cambridge, Mass: MIT.
- Shi, Q. T. (2017). Preliminary exploration of porcelain wicker shaped vessels. *Cultural Relics World*, (08), 72-77
- Wang, M. Y. (2002). The meaning of language symbols. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (04), 24-28.
- Xu, J. (2009). *Introduction to translation* (p.88). Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Xu, X. D. (2012). Archer's thumb ring, archer's thumb ring ornament and ring. *Journal of the Palace Museum*, (159), 49-66.
- Zhang, C. J., & Liu, D. (2007). *Research on Folk Customs*, (01), 161-165.