

## *Original Paper*

# A Study on the English Translation and Reception of Vernacular Language from the Perspective of Chinese Local Literature: A Case Study of Mo Yan's Novels

Kang Xinyuan<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Henan Normal University, Henan, China

\* Kang Xinyuan, Henan Normal University, Henan, China

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### **Abstract**

*Against the backdrop of globalization, international cultural exchanges are growing closer. With distinctive regional features and folk connotations, Chinese rural literature serves as a vital carrier for cross-cultural communication and a crucial medium for the world to understand Chinese grassroots society. As the essence of rural literature, vernacular language embodies regional customs and the wisdom of ordinary people, functioning as a key medium to showcase indigenous Chinese culture. Taking Howard Goldblatt's English version of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as the research object, this paper adopts functionalist Skopos theory as the sole theoretical foundation to analyze translation strategies for dialect terms, rural address forms and other vernacular expressions. The paper explores the translator's logic of balancing cultural authenticity and target readers' acceptability guided by the rules of Skopos Theory, and summarizes existing problems and optimized approaches in vernacular translation. The research aims to resolve cross-cultural translation difficulties and offer theoretical and practical references for the English translation and global dissemination of Chinese rural literature.*

### **Keywords**

*rural literature, vernacular language, translation strategy, Skopos Theory*

## **1. Introduction**

As a uniquely indigenous literary genre in China, rural literature is characterized by distinctive local features and vivid depictions of folk customs, with vernacular language functioning as the core carrier of the artistic style. With China's strategy of Chinese culture Going Global, sinologists represented by

Howard Goldblatt have made remarkable contributions with innovative characteristics in their literary translation practice (Tan, 2019).

Since rural literature is expressed through diversified vernacular expressions, the translation of rural literature inevitably entails research on vernacular translation (Zhou, 2016). Covering dialects, slang and folk terms, vernacular language originates from grassroots life and bears regional, cultural and temporal attributes, preserving unique folk memories and regional spirits as key symbols for Chinese cultural export. Given translation's nature as cross-cultural communication, translators should take communication purposes as the primary guideline throughout translation practice (Zheng, 2016). Rooted in the rural landscape of Northeast Gaomi, Mo Yan's writings adopt authentic vernacular to depict rural realities. His masterpiece *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* adopts the transmigration of souls as its narrative framework to unfold decades of social changes, abundant in northern Chinese rural dialect and folk terms that faithfully reproduce local linguistic and cultural ecology, making it an ideal research sample for vernacular English translation.

Though abundant studies focus on Mo Yan's translated works, few carry out systematic case analyses on vernacular rendering in the novel from the perspective of a single translation theory. Constrained by Sino-Western linguistic and cultural gaps, vernacular translation often suffers meaning loss. Accordingly, this paper takes functionalist Skopos Theory as the theoretical basis to analyze relevant translation strategies and communication drawbacks, offering references for the overseas dissemination of Chinese rural literature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper takes functionalist Skopos Theory as the exclusive theoretical framework, providing theoretical support and evaluation criteria for research on the English translation of vernacular language.

### 2.1 Functionalist Skopos Theory

Put forward by Hans Vermeer, Skopos Theory centers on the maxim that the end justifies the means, breaking the constraints of the traditional equivalence principle. The theory consists of three core rules: the skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule. Unlike conventional translation theories which only involve authors, translators and target readers, functionalism also identifies initiators, users and recipients as relevant participants in translation activities (Zhong, 1999).

The highest rule of a theory of translational action is the "Skopos rule": any action is determined by its purpose (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014). According to Vermeer, there are three kinds of purposes distinguished in translation: the general purpose of the translator in the translation process, the communicative purpose of the language in the target context, and the purpose of a specific translation strategy or procedure. The English rendering of vernacular language in this novel aims at literary dissemination and cultural export. Therefore, all translation choices must serve the fundamental

purpose: translations should conform to English linguistic norms (coherence rule) while faithfully reproducing the original meaning and ideas (fidelity rule), striking a proper balance between readability and fidelity. The coherence principle holds that the target text must achieve intralingual coherence, that is to say, the target text reader must be able to accept and understand the target text, which means that the translator should fully consider the cultural background or social environment of the target text reader and translate the target text that is meaningful to the target text reader (Vermeer, 2014). The principle of loyalty was put forward by Nord. She believes that loyalty is based on the translator's interpretation of the source text and the translation purpose, and the translator must explain the translation behaviour in the translation process (Nord, 2006). All case analyses in this paper will be carried out around the three core rules of Skopos Theory.

### **3. Case Study on English Translation of Vernacular in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out***

Vernacular expressions in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* fall into three major categories: dialect terms for rural objects, daily rural appellations and varied folk idioms. Guided by Skopos Theory and based on context, cultural features and the overall goal of cross-cultural communication, Howard Goldblatt adopts differentiated translation strategies to strike a balance between preserving original culture and facilitating readers' comprehension.

#### *3.1 Translation of Dialect Terms for Rural Objects: Retaining Cultural Features while Ensuring Readability*

Dialect nouns referring to unique rural buildings, utensils and farm implements are core symbols of regional culture with no equivalent expressions in English. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the translator prioritizes the goal of cultural transmission and smooth reading, and mainly employs transliteration, annotated transliteration and compound literal translation to fully retain the distinctive features of Chinese rural material culture.

##### Example 1

ST: 天色微亮，他便钻进锅屋生火做饭。

TT: At dawn, he went into the kitchen-house to make a fire and cook.

Analysis: As a typical dialectal expression prevalent in Shandong and northern Jiangsu rural areas, “锅屋” refers to simple rural kitchens distinct from standardized urban ones, embodying rustic rural characteristics. Goldblatt adopts a hybrid literal translation strategy and renders it as “kitchen-house”. This version distinguishes itself from the common word “kitchen”, highlighting the crudeness of rural constructions. Meanwhile, the compound word is easy for English readers to understand, which strictly complies with the coherence rule of Skopos Theory. On the premise of ensuring reading fluency, the translation retains the original rural cultural characteristics and fulfills the communication purpose of vernacular translation.

### Example 2

ST: 炕上挤着四个半大的孩子，缩着身子取暖。

TT: Four half-grown children huddled together for warmth on the kang.

Analysis: The “炕” is a unique heated residential facility in rural northern China, with no direct equivalent in English. Instead of adopting the oversimplified rendering of “bed”, Goldblatt directly transliterates the term as “kang”. This method adheres to the fidelity rule of Skopos Theory and retains the unique cultural symbol of northern Chinese rural life. Combined with the contextual information in the sentence, target readers can easily understand the function of “kang”, which meets the requirements of the coherence rule. After long-term use, “kang” has become a fixed loanword in English, perfectly realizing the translation skopos of spreading Chinese rural culture.

### 3.2 Translation of Rural Appellations: Faithful Reproduction of Cultural Connotations

Chinese rural society is built on clan kinship, generating a sophisticated appellation system marked by strict generational rankings, which differs from the simplified kinship terms in Western languages and embodies unique rural ethics and clan culture. To realize the translation purpose of conveying traditional rural ethics and clan culture, Goldblatt mostly applies literal translation with ordinal numbers or explanatory rendering. These methods follow the fidelity rule and coherence rule of Skopos Theory at the same time.

### Example 3

ST: 村里的二老爷、三婶皆是热心肠的好人。

TT: Second Uncle and Third Aunt in the village were all warm-hearted people.

Analysis: In Chinese rural communities, ordinal numerals are used to distinguish seniority among relatives, an important manifestation of clan culture absent from Western kinship nomenclature. Goldblatt employs the literal strategy of “ordinal number plus kinship term” instead of oversimplified rendering. This choice abides by the fidelity rule, fully preserving the traditional hierarchical ethical order of Chinese rural clans. The expression conforms to English writing habits and satisfies the coherence rule, so that target readers can accurately perceive the cultural connotation behind rural appellations and achieve the expected communication effect.

### Example 4

ST: 她自幼认下的干娘，待她如亲生女儿。

TT: Her nominal mother, whom she had recognized since childhood, treated her like her own daughter.

Analysis: “干娘” is a unique kinship custom in rural China, referring to a ritual adoptive mother without blood ties, for which there is no equivalent term in English. Goldblatt employs the explanatory literal rendering “nominal mother” to accurately interpret the core connotation of nominal kinship. On the one hand, it keeps faithful to the original cultural meaning (fidelity rule); on the other hand, it eliminates cross-cultural comprehension barriers and ensures the fluency of the text (coherence rule).

This translation well serves the overall skopos of vernacular translation.

### 3.3 Translation of Folk Idioms: Flexible Strategies for Communication Purposes

As the cream of vernacular language in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, folk idioms summarize working people's life experience accumulated over centuries. Written in plain and vivid language, they carry profound folk wisdom and rural values and pose the biggest challenges for vernacular translation. Guided by the skopos rule (the supreme rule of Skopos Theory), Goldblatt flexibly alternates among literal translation, free translation and hybrid translation according to idioms' cultural load and structural features, so as to balance stylistic charm, semantic meaning and target readers' acceptability.

#### Example 5

ST: 你别硬撑，骑驴看账本 —— 走着瞧！

TT: Don't force yourself; we'll see how things unfold.

Analysis: This two-part allegorical saying has no equivalent cultural images in Western culture, so a rigid literal translation would cause reading obstacles and fail to realize the communication purpose. Following the skopos rule, Goldblatt adopts free translation. He abandons the unique riddle structure of Chinese xiehouyu, extracts the core implication of "waiting to see the final outcome" and converts it into concise, natural English expressions. Although this method sacrifices part of the original linguistic charm, it ensures fluent narration, avoids cross-cultural misunderstanding and fully conforms to overseas readers' reading habits.

#### Example 6

ST: 如今他自身难保，就是泥菩萨过河——自身难保。

TT: He is like a clay Buddha fording a river—hardly able to save himself.

Analysis: This two-part allegorical saying features vivid imagery and a plain implication. Goldblatt adopts a full literal translation, retaining the core cultural image and sentence structure of the original idiom. This translation not only keeps faithful to the original text (fidelity rule), but also uses straightforward metaphor to lower readers' comprehension barriers (coherence rule). Under the guidance of the skopos rule, it realizes the dual transmission of both the formal features and in-depth connotations of rural vernacular language.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper takes Howard Goldblatt's English translation of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as the research object, and adopts functionalist Skopos Theory as the sole theoretical basis to systematically analyze the English translation strategies and communication effects of three types of rural vernacular language, namely dialectal material words, rural appellations and folk idioms.

The study finds that the core difficulty in translating rural vernacular lies in balancing cultural authenticity and reader acceptance. Guided by the three core rules of Skopos Theory, which are the skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule, Goldblatt adopts diversified translation strategies for

different vernacular expressions: he retains unique rural cultural features on the premise of faithfulness, and adjusts translation methods flexibly to ensure textual fluency and reader comprehension. All translation choices serve the ultimate purpose of literary dissemination and cultural export. The translated text validates the translatability of rural vernacular, faithfully reproduces the original rural style, and sets a fine example for the overseas translation of Chinese rural literature.

Nevertheless, restricted by Sino-Western cultural differences, the translation inevitably loses certain dialectal charm and subtle folk cultural nuances. Accordingly, the external translation of rural literature should always take communication purposes as the primary principle guided by Skopos Theory. Translators can integrate diverse translation strategies, supplemented by paraphrasing and annotation to minimize cultural loss, and facilitate the high-quality international dissemination of Chinese rural culture.

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