Study on Howard Goldblatt’s Translational Behavior from a Postcolonial Perspective*

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Abstract—This paper aims to review Howard Goldblatt's translational behavior in terms of both “intra-translation” and “extra-translation” by probing into his translation of My Life as Emperor. A postcolonial scrutiny of Goldblatt’s translation reveals the inherently ambiguous and hybrid nature of his translation practice. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the study on the status quo of the output of contemporary Chinese fiction in the era of globalization.

Keywords—Howard Goldblatt; translation behavior; postcolonial perspective; My Life as Emperor

I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, cultural and ideological hegemony are the most effective yet subtle forms of a new round of colonization. Nearly every country is more or less involved. The serious imbalance between import and export of cultural products in China is a clear evidence of our predicament. Contemporary fiction constitutes a major part of cultural products. Compared with the import of western contemporary fiction, the export of Chinese counterpart is almost insignificant. Furthermore, the undertaking of exporting Chinese literature seems to fall on the shoulder of one man, an American Howard Goldblatt. Hence, his rendering of Chinese contemporary fiction has a major importance of studying Goldblatt’s translation from a postcolonial perspective is self-evident. Current research on Goldblatt is either restricted to a macro study of his translation career, or to an analysis of his translation in terms of translator’s subjectivity, creativity or the traditional principle of fidelity. This paper intends to study Goldblatt’s translational behavior from a postcolonial perspective through an in-depth analysis of his translation of My Life as Emperor by Su Tong. Hopefully, this study can shed new light on further exploration of the export of Chinese contemporary fiction.

In the meantime, it is worth noting that translator’s behavior in this paper is applied in a broad sense, including translator’s linguistic translational behavior and social translational behavior, namely his intra-translation behavior and extra-translation behavior. Hence, this paper provides a comprehensive assessment of Goldblatt’s translational behavior with reference to My Life as Emperor.

II. GOLDBLATT’S EXTRA-TRANSLATION BEHAVIOR

A. Goldblatt’s Cultural Identity

We recognize someone and distinguish him from others by his identity. Normally, a person’s identity refers to the detailed information on his identity card, which is determined almost from the moment he was born and remains consistent probably through his whole life. On the other hand, however, cultural identity is defined in a more general way. Rien Segers said, “Cultural identity has double meaning such as the fixed ‘character’ and the theoretical ‘construction’” (Le Daiyun, 2002: 68-71). The “fixed ‘character’” equals the aspects mentioned above while the “theoretical ‘construction’” indicates that it is a dynamic building process. In other words, there are aspects of cultural identity that are acquired or formed with the passing of time and they are constantly changing. Those changes are so minor that they often go unnoticed at first but little by little, the accumulation can exert a major influence on a person’s cultural identity as a whole. To summarize, cultural identity is a complex issue that requires continuous negotiation and is constantly in motion. A look into the translator’s cultural identity helps us get a clear picture of his “signature move” that separates his translation from others and explains his choice of texts and strategies. The following part of this section focuses on Goldblatt’s cultural identity from three major aspects, namely, racial recognition, educational background and research field.

Howard Goldblatt was born and bred in California, US. After graduating from college, he joined the Navy and was distributed to Taiwan working as a communications officer. During his service in Taiwan, he discovered his passion and gift for language learning and started to learn Chinese. He chose to stay in Taiwan after his retirement from the Navy and continued his study of Chinese language and culture in the Mandarin Center of National Taiwan Normal University. Later, he married Sylvia Li-chun Lin, a Chinese woman, who is also a master of both Chinese and English and gave him support and help in many of his translation projects.

There is of course, no dispute over Goldblatt’s nationality, a pure American. But is this single fact able to suffice when we talk about his racial recognition? Apart from the...
“American part” of him, that is the recognition of his own race, we cannot ignore another substantial piece of information — his long stay in Taipei, China and his bond with a Chinese woman. His unique relationship with China and Chinese language certainly complicates his racial recognition. Despite being an American, there is a part of him that identifies with the Chinese culture. To some degree, Goldblatt has a double racial recognition, built on his nationality as well as his Chinese experience.

Goldblatt further studied Chinese when he returned to US from Taipei. After years of study and research, he received an M.A. in Chinese from San Francisco State University and a Ph.D from the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures in Indiana University three years later. In graduate school, he read a Chinese novel for the first time in his life and began to know the famous Chinese writer Xiao Hong. In his Ph.D years, he acquired knowledge of a wide range of Chinese literature and chose Xiao Hong as the research topic of his doctoral dissertation. The solid educational background of Chinese literature undoubtedly exerts huge influence on the formation of his cultural identity.

Goldblatt now is the research professor of Chinese at the university of Notre Dame and the founding editor of Modern Chinese Literature. Meanwhile, he is actively engaged in the teaching and translation of modern Chinese literature and culture. It is safe to say that most of his time has been devoted to the cultural exchange between China and the west, or more specifically the dissemination of Chinese culture to the west.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that Goldblatt’s cultural identity is definitely not as simple and as clear-cut as the personal information on his identity card. Contrarily, it resembles a crossroad or borderline with blurry boundaries. As an American, Goldblatt conforms to the western ideology and is essentially disposed to the core of American value. However, his rare relationship with China and his passion for Chinese literature and culture add a new dimension to his cultural identity. Shaped by factors such as double racial recognition, educational background and research field, it gradually develops a hybrid nature which may grow stronger or become weaker depending on the changing social and historical context. And this hybridity offers a plausible explanation for the hybrid translation and discursive strategies in Goldblatt’s translation.

B. Goldblatt’s Ideas on Translation

“I translate to stay alive” is how Howard Goldblatt describes his intimate and dependent relationship with this enterprise. Translation gives Goldblatt a second life and defines who he is. It is his utmost zeal and passion for translation that leads him to where he is today and inspires him to explore further in this realm. Goldblatt impresses us with his scrupulous attitude and his own set of translation principles. Having been in this profession for decades, Goldblatt still considers translation a tough task and every practice a challenge. He is so close to being a perfectionist that he dares not to read his translation after its publication in fear of it not being perfect. For instance, it once took him a long time to decide how to translate “好色之徒”, for he wants to measure the exact extent of this expression so as to convey the exact connotation.

Apart from the scrupulous attitude, Goldblatt develops his own set of principles regarding translation. First and foremost, he believes that good translation should be “reader-centered”. In an interview with Lingenfelter, Goldblatt said, “I believe first of all that, like an editor, the translator’s primary obligation is to the reader, not the writer” (Andrea Lingenfelter, Interview, “Goldblatt”). Translation should aim for the acceptance of the target readership, and in his case, the American readership. So if that means the source text must be compromised in some way, then so be it because when it comes to a choice between the writer and the reader, Goldblatt gives priority to the latter. Albeit the “reader-centered” principle, Goldblatt shows respect for the source text and always asks permission of the original writer before he makes the alteration. Closely intertwined with the “reader-centered” principle is his belief that translation is rewriting. When he is attracted to a work, he will endeavor to give it a second life in translation. Goldblatt is clearly aware that compared with Chinese readers, their American counterparts are far less tolerant and gives little leeway for the work and since no one can deny or ignore the colossal difference between Chinese/English language and culture, translation as rewriting, to a certain extent, is inevitable for the better understanding of American readers. His translation of Liu Zhenyun’s Cell Phone is a vivid example. Chinese writers have a tendency to narrate a story in strict chronological order; the technique such as flashback which is so common in English literature is rare in Chinese literature. Cell Phone spends 40 pages to reminisce before the story really unfolds, which doesn’t cater to American readers who would only consider it boring and would soon give it up. What Goldblatt did is to first captivate the reader with a contemporary setting and then flashback to thirty years ago, the opening chapter of the original text.

Goldblatt is also against literalism and highlights English writing competence. He deems translation of Chinese literature a process of writing in English. Literalism renders translators salves of the source texts; thus makes it impossible to deliver the original dynamics and spirit. According to Goldblatt, literalism is what stands in the way of a good translation and those who practice it have no sense of what an English writing should be like. For all these years, he keeps nourishing himself with English literature, which lays solid foundations for his translation. Goldblatt says he is enamored by the tension between fidelity to the original writer and the display of translators’ creative power and the ultimate compromise between the two. Although he puts readers’ interests before writers’, he doesn’t reckon these two to be mutually exclusive. Instead, he tries to strike a balance between them. Specifically, he translates Chinese literature into real, refined English while strives his best to preserve cultural differences, idiosyncrasies of the original writer and flavor of the source text.

During decades of translation career, Goldblatt never ceased to seek out the new faces of Chinese literature arena and always remains true to his beliefs in translation.
Knowing that the translation of Chinese literature is at a marginal place in American society but still making untiring efforts to “let it be heard”, Howard Goldblatt is truly a translator that deserves our reverence and respect.

C. Choice of Texts

Goldblatt once said, the most difficult part in translation process is not translating but the choice of texts, which he later comments as the most important step. When Goldblatt was asked how he chooses translation materials, he talked about two points: his interests—personal preference as well as press and publication-market’s needs. Basically, he only selects works that intrigues him; works that he thinks is worth translating and works that he believes American reader could not miss. From his long list of translation oeuvre, we can see his passion for an ancient China (My Life as Emperor, Binu and the Great Wall etc.), a rural China (Frogs, Red Sorghum, Big Breasts and Wide Hips etc.) and a mystic China (Wolf Totem, The Republic of Wine etc.). We can also see his particular interests in wartime, Cultural Revolution, characterized with commotion and turbulence: in a backward period, characterized with violence and brutality; in the dark, twisted minds of people with swollen desires. This partly explains why he favors Su Tong and Mo Yan over other writers. Su Tong’s fictional world is shrouded with an overpowering darkness and evils that ultimately taints the conscience of almost everyone involved. Su possesses an incredible strength to grasp the darkest side of human mind and then bring it out with the most exquisite yet gloomy words. Goldblatt says he likes Su’s works because they are extreme in presenting the vicious, diabolical side of people, which is so overwhelming that suppresses and suffocates the good side. The complicated and distorted inner world of characters fascinates him in that it exists as evidence of his belief that human mind is originally evil (Ji Jin. I translate, therefore I am — an interview with Howard Goldblatt). Mo Yan’s works are most ostensive in presenting violence and brutality in a remote, primitive world. Red Sorghum, known for its Oscar-nominated film adaptation directed by Zhang Yimou, for example, is set against the restless 30’s in rural China. The original peace is disrupted by the Japanese invasion; the original spirit Red Sorghum stands for is turned into a struggle for life. In those turbulent years, people are made cold-blooded and ferocious by the most unfavorable condition. A cycle of bloody murder, suicide, betrayal and violence all congregate in an exotic countryside in China, at a particular historical time sounds appealing enough to western readers with curious minds to look for an answer they are able to accept: China as what they have pictured in their heads.

My Life as Emperor is a typical combination of themes and elements Goldblatt favors. First, the story is set in mysterious ancient China; Second, the fabricated Xie Empire is constantly under attack from neighboring countries, which results in a highly unstable socio-political context; third, the immature and tyrannical young ruler shows us the utmost brutality and last but not least, palace scheming and conspiracy between concubines, who are driven to the edge of insanity by twisted desires intensifies the whole dark, mystic atmosphere.

In fact, it is no coincidence that the works Goldblatt chooses happen to fit with the profile of an imagined China depicted in Said’s Orientalism. Being an American, Goldblatt is “brainwashed” by the western ideology, whether he admits it or not. The truth is translators’ personal preference is not so personal anymore, because a “collective unconsciousness” actually functions in the forming of their personal preference from the day they were born. Here the collective unconsciousness specifically refers to American or western ideology in general. It is invisible but most powerful in infiltrating into the mindset of every member within the domestic circle without him or her even noticing it. Therefore, albeit all the memorable years Goldblatt has spent in China, he still cannot help but be trapped in an intangible web woven by a narcissistic representation of self against other as a reflection of the hegemonic ideology.

From the above analysis, it is not difficult to see that Goldblatt’s personal preference is not so different from that of the majority American readers, because after all, they are held together by the same ideology. Even though Goldblatt has publicly expressed his love and passion for Chinese literature and culture, the fact of being an American, of being influenced by the deep-seated American values doesn’t change. To some extent, it might not be so wrong to say that his interests in Chinese culture lie more in its exotic, mystifying side than its glorious, progressive side. Hence, while we are appreciating the untiring efforts Professor Goldblatt has made to disseminate Chinese literature and culture, we should also be aware of what is at stake here: the slanted, misleading and most untrue image of China presented in translations, which might or certainly will contribute to the consolidation of an oriental stereotype. And if that be the case, it is a problem deserving our serious attention.

III. GOLDBLATT’S INTRA-TRANSLATION BEHAVIOR AND MY LIFE AS EMPEROR

After the choice of texts is made, translators are to get in the zone of actual translation. In this complex process, translators are bound to be confronted with various kinds of cultural and linguistic incongruity, and how they react to them is reflected in discursive strategies, which to a large extent, defines the nature of the final translation product. In Venuti’s words, “whether the effects of a translation prove to be conservative and transgressed depends fundamentally on the discursive strategies developed by the translator” (1998: 68). Therefore, it is worthwhile to conduct a comprehensive research on the discursive strategies employed in the translation of My Life as Emperor.

A. Discursive Strategies — Attitudes Towards Difference

1) In cultural level: My Life as Emperor narrates a story in a non-specific ancient period in China. In order to create an authentic archaic ambience, Su Tong has used a large amount of culture-loaded items including idioms, four-character phrases, expressions with unique Chinese allusions
etc. What is more, since the story takes place in a royal palace, there are also many particular proper names involved, such as names of numerous halls and geographic locations with ancient Chinese flavor. The diversity of culture-loaded items has certainly enriched the original text, but at the same time makes it incredibly difficult to translate. In face of such a tough text, Goldblatt holds a general principle of respecting cultural differences in the condition that translation's readability is not to be significantly reduced. For a detailed analysis of Goldblatt’s translation regarding cultural differences, it would be better if we categorize them properly. Roughly speaking, cultural differences presented in *My Life as Emperor* falls into four categories: proper names, titles, four-character phrases and idiomatic expressions. The following paragraphs will discuss each category respectively.

In respect of proper names, Goldblatt generally applies foreignization, even transliteration (direct rendering of phonetic values of Chinese characters) in the case of person’s name. All the main characters’ names are rendered in Pinyin spelling method, with only one exception, the name of the emperor, Duanwen’s most loyal servant, the chief eunuch “燕儿” is translated in the light of its literal meaning. “Swallow”. Goldblatt treats this case differently for a reason: Swallow is the only one in the novel, whose name actually matches his personalities. Despite a low-birth eunuch, Swallow is the emperor’s favorite for being particularly smart and nimble, the adjectives people would use to describe a swallow. So the Chinese name “燕儿” is not just a name, but also an embodiment of his personal traits. Regardless of the enormous cultural differences, Chinese and western readers share their impression on swallow almost in common; therefore the translation “Swallow” creates a similar experience in western readers as in Chinese. However, if he translates it otherwise, following the phonetic rules, western readers with zero knowledge of Chinese language will for sure, fail to grasp this subtlety. Transliteration and literal translation of names both belong to the realm of foreignization and highlight cultural differences displayed in the source text.

Names of various geographical locations are also literally rendered. The following are a few examples: “繁心殿” as “Abundant Hearts Hall”, “清修堂” as “Received Virtues Hall”, “龙凤腰带” as “Cultivation Hall”, “铜尺山” as “Brass Rule Mountain”, “苦竹寺” as “Bitter Bamboo Monastery”. As we know, the art of naming is a reflection of culture. The names above are not just a remote time, of elegant antiquity. Mountain “玉如意” is even rendered as “jade ruyi”, a combination of English and Chinese Pinyin, characteristic of a discourse heterogeneity. Foreignizing translation of such culture-loaded items not only preserves unique Chinese cultural heritages, but also disrupts the fluency of translation to reach a defamiliarizing effect. Western readers are forced to momentarily identify with a foreign culture, or at least acknowledge the existence of the other.

Translation of titles is a different case. It should be noted that, even within Chinese culture, titles in ancient times is very different from that in modern times, let alone that in the west. Most of them are no longer used in today’s society. Hence, extreme foreignization may cause unavoidable misunderstandings. Considering readers’ comprehension, Goldblatt uses a fairly westernized discourse to translate. For instance, “刑吏” as “Imperial Executioner”, “锦衣卫” as “Imperial Guardsman”, “司礼监” as “chief of the Imperial House”, “兵部侍郎” as “the vice head of the military board”, “礼、吏、兵、刑四部尚书” as “The Heads of the Four Boards — Ceremonial Rites, Civil Service, Military and Punishment”. It is easy to discern that this kind of translation above is consistent (the repeated use of “imperial”, “head” and “board”) and faithful to the meaning, even though it scarifies an archaic flavor of the original. The rendering of concubines’ titles is slightly different. Basically, Goldblatt adopts two western titles “Lady” and “Madame” to refer to concubines and wife of the emperor respectively. The emperor’s favorite girl “慧妃” is translated as “Lady Hui” and his grandmother, wife of the former emperor, “皇甫夫人” as “Madam Huangfu”. “Lady” and “Madam” are two frequently used titles in ancient England court. Its reference resembles Chinese “妃子” and “夫人”. Goldblatt’s transference here is appropriate; moreover, it foregrounds a hybrid nature in translation, because for western readers, the rendering is at once near and distant, for it recalls a familiar historical time, but simultaneously feels foreign at the sight of a Pinyin spelling. Unlike proper names, total foreignization of titles will not make any sense to western readers, nor even to Chinese readers without relevant background knowledge; thereby, proper domestication is this case in understandable and justifiable.

Four-character phrase is a distinctive cultural heritage in China. Only four characters condense a deep meaning with rich cultural allusions. Su Tong’s dexterous use of them in *My Life as Emperor* renders it a peculiar beauty of clarity and delicacy. The uniqueness of four-character phrase determines the difficulty to translate them. Goldblatt’s translation seems random, sometimes complete domestication, sometimes complete foreignization, other times, he chooses to stay in the mid-half domestication and half foreignization. In fact, there are rules behind these seemingly random choices. Now let us exam a few examples of all three kinds and try to unveil the hidden rules behind. “三叩九拜” and “三叩九拜” as “three compounds and six courtyards” and “three kowtows and nine bows” respectively. These two phrases couldn’t be more familiar to Chinese readers. The former is often used to describe numerous concubines of the emperor while the latter refers to a traditional propriety of kowtow. Normally, the numerals in both phrases are no longer active and tend to be a general referring in modern context. Goldblatt, however, literally renders them in English as an indication of some cultural
specifics. Sensitive readers may soon find out there must be some Chinese cultural allusions regarding the number “three” and “nine”. This rendering strikes western readership as exotic but still comprehensible. Another example, he translates “兔死狐悲” into “demonic wails and wolfish howls”. Four characters are directly rendered in English, no more, no less. There might not be the exact same expression in English; the meaning here however, is crystal clear.

In stark contrast, Goldblatt translates the following phrases with complete domestication. “大惊失色” in Chinese is a very vivid description of people in great shock. Goldblatt’s translation is devoid of the meaning of “失色” and transforms it into an authentic American expression: “scaring my guards out of their wits”. Undoubtedly, his translation does not diminish the vividness of the original text; only recreates it in a way that American readership can readily grasp. If he translates the otherwise, “失色” as “losing color”, chances are the target readers will find it difficult, even impossible to understand. The translation of “’s translation reserves the latter since there are no more, no less. In the first case, despite being Chinese exclusive, this idiom does not hide its meaning too well. Or, it would only be fair to say that Goldblatt intends it to be so: he intends the foreignization of various cultural differences. In terms of linguistic style, however, it almost fails to deliver a sense of foreigness. Or, it would only be fair to say that Goldblatt intends it to be so: he intends the translation to read like real English instead of some fragmented pieces put together by a non-professional translator. Although he does try to keep the original linguistic flavor when it is not much at odds with the English.

The last category adopts a hybrid strategy. Goldblatt domesticates the phrases while preserving traces of the original. “金科玉律” originally means the perfection of laws and regulations and is now often used to describe strict laws tolerating no alteration. The characters “金” and “玉” do not have substantial meaning, only indicating a sense of preciousness and supremacy. In translation, Goldblatt manages to preserve part of the original traits: “golden words with the force of law.” Two images “golden” and “law” are saved to restitute the loss of domestication. This rendering reads like English but still carries traces of foreigness. “绝头鼠窜” is translated similarly as “scurries off like rats”. The meaning of this Chinese phrase is self-evident. Literally, it covers too moves: bury one’s head and run off like rats. Goldblatt’s translation reserves the latter since there are references in English alike. The former part is omitted probably for consideration of the number of words involved. From the above analysis, we can see that Goldblatt tries his best to preserve Chinese cultural difference as long as the translation is fairly readable. If foreignization creates no big trouble in comprehension, he is more than willing to display cultural specifics; on the other hand, he chooses domestication if cultural differences concerned are far beyond the comprehensibility of western readership.

His rules in translating four-character phrases are found again in the translation of idiomatic expressions. Here are two more examples: “山穷水尽” as “No mountain can be home for two tigers” and “翻手为云覆手为雨” as “Shifting her stance-one hand to the clouds and the other to the rain”. This first is a complete foreignization, and so is the second without the explaining part. In the first case, despite being Chinese exclusive, this idiom does not hide its meaning too well and it is easy for western readers to guess. In the second case, the meaning is more subtle compared with the first; therefore, Goldblatt slightly domesticates it by adding a simple interpretation. Nevertheless, cultural differences in either case are fully presented in translation.

In conclusion, Goldblatt’s attitude towards cultural difference is hybrid but positive at large and this hybridity is actually a result of his hybrid cultural identity: the love for Chinese literature and culture impels him to preserve differences while the fact of being an American constantly reminds him of the interests of American readership. His translation and choice of discursive strategies follow the same principle: preserving differences without reducing intelligibility of the translation.

2) In linguistic level: If cultural differences are individual and independent, linguistics differences are collective and dependent. Together they form a unique linguistic style characterized of one specific language. Translators may encounter cultural differences once in a while, but they are confronted linguistic differences every step of the way. Hence, it is of paramount importance for us to explore translators’ choice of discursive strategies in terms of the linguistic dilemma.

Goldblatt’s attitude towards and treatment of linguistic differences is much different. When we talk about his ideas on translation in the last chapter, we have learned that Goldblatt considers translation as an act of rewriting. In other words, the translation of Chinese literature equals a rewriting in English, and it is his obligation to write it in a most natural style, which explains why he deems it important to improve his writing ability through reading masterpieces of English writers. The entire translation might still read like a translation, because of the foreignization of various cultural differences. In terms of linguistic style, however, it almost fails to deliver a sense of foreigness. Or, it would only be fair to say that Goldblatt intends it to be so: he intends the translation to read like real English instead of some fragmented pieces put together by a non-professional translator. Although he does try to keep the original linguistic flavor when it is not much at odds with the English way, he opts to domesticate it when he feels the need to. We can get a clearer perspective by looking at a few examples.

Example 1: 对此我视若无睹, 我知道我是在高空悬索之上, 而他们的行尸走肉将永远滞留在红尘俗世之中, 我知道只有当我站在高空悬索之上时, 才有信心重新蔑视地上的芸芸众生, 主宰我的全新的世界, 我知道我在这条横跨上抬起了一生中最后的梦想。 (苏童, 2005: 165)

I was oblivious to all this, for I knew that I was high up on a suspended rope, while they were walking corpses doomed to spend eternity stuck to the mud of the mundane
world. I knew that only up there could I confidently scorn all living things below me once again; only then was I the master of my own fate, filled with the knowledge that balancing on the rope allowed me to cling to life’s ultimate dream. (Howard Goldblatt. 2005: 252)

Su Tong writes a beautiful parallelism to depict and intensify Duawen’s moment of clarity: like an epiphany, the once emperor, currently commoner finally realize the one thing he can beat anyone with, the one thing he truly loves, the life he is destined to live and the person he is meant to be. The past life of supremacy and luxury has been nothing but shifting clouds; he finally breaks out of the royal bondage and lives for himself for the first time in his life. The clean and powerful parallelism congregates complex emotions, heartfelt confessions and ultimate realization all in just one utterance. Su Tong’s writing artistry is really one of a kind; having this in mind, Goldblatt tries his utmost efforts to create a quasi-style. We can see in his translation a similar parallelism, plus two paralleled inverted sentences leading by “only” to restitute the loss of the third parallel branch of the original. Reading Goldblatt’s translation, we can almost have the same experience as reading Su Tong’s original: we can also feel the resonance and weight of it. But if we really think about it, Goldblatt preserves the original flavor without putting his translation at stake, for there is a similar parallelism literary technique in English, only with minor linguistic differences. Therefore, American readership still finds his work “properly translated”.

Example 2: 棵后露出女孩子美丽绝伦的面容,惊骇和战栗在她的眼神中闪烁,定格在她的晶莹瞳孔中。 (苏童, 2005: 68)

A face of peerless beauty peeked out from behind the tree, a look of fear and trembling nestled in the radiant, nearly heart-stopping aura of the girl’s twinkling eyes and glistening teeth. All but blinded by her beauty, I was utterly captivated. (Goldblatt, 2005: 104)

Chinese language has the tendency to place the adverbial phrase at the beginning of a sentence, different from the English structure to put the major information at front and supporting contents, such as adverbial phrases at the back. In this case, the original sentence starts with an adverbial phrase, followed by a verb phrase, which is completely normal in Chinese, but apparently not so in English. Hence, in translation, we can see a change of orders in light of the English rule. In regard to the second branch, a neat reorganization of original sentence elements becomes Goldblatt’s maneuver to produce a roughly domesticated translation that caters to the American mass market without being accused of adventitious disregard for original linguistic features, because when examined individually, each linguistic unit is largely preserved. Besides, by using the standardized “all... but” sentence pattern, he turns the original into a passive voice, because in English, the word “captive” and others with similar interpretations rarely appears in an active voice. It is true that Goldblatt does keep all parts of the original sentence, even foreignizes some traditional Chinese phrases as “明眸皓齿”, but on the linguistic level only, he still largely domesticates it.

From the above three examples, Goldblatt’s attitude towards linguistic differences show obviously: he does not mind to erase them for the sake of a proper translation. To summarize, he preserves and foreignizes cultural differences, as long as they does not cause major problems in comprehension while showing a less friendly attitude to linguistic differences.

B. Discursive Strategies — the Hybridity Approach

Hybridity is a frequently discussed concept in postcolonial studies and postcolonial translation studies. If we say hybridity is a hybrid form of A and B, then it is neither A nor B, but simultaneously it is both A and B. Applied in translation, the final product of hybridity is neither completely domestic nor completely foreign, but inherits features from both sides. Contrary to the traditional prejudice against hybridity, scholars today have paid more attention to its positive implication. Some of them even pointed out that hybridity is ubiquitous in translation; taken to the extreme, every translation is a hybrid text. Although no consensus has been reached on how to measure the effect of hybridity and exactly what proportion is the most appropriate, the unimaginable potential it possesses to alter, even subvert univocal discourse remains indisputable.

This section engages in an analysis of hybridity in Goldblatt’s translation. As a translator in practice, he probably does not overthink about which theory he is going to apply to his translation, nor will he wittingly employ a hybrid strategy to protest against English hegemony. However, given his hybrid cultural identity, hybridity in his translation seems not to be an option, but a “destiny”. It is akin to serving two masters: he has to satisfy the need of a domestic readership but meanwhile showing respect for the source text and culture out of his love and passion for them, which could only lead to an inevitable compromise between the two, a hybrid translation product. Specifically, hybridity takes two forms in Goldblatt’s translation: the explicit and the implicit.

1) Explicit hybridity: As suggested by the name, explicit hybridity refers to the ostentatious, distinct hybrid discourse appear in Goldblatt’s translation, most manifest in his hybrid use of languages, not only English and Chinese (the Pinyin spelling form) are involved, Goldblatt also borrows words from French, or at least chooses words of foreign origins over pure English ones to signal the difference. Words of unusual, exotic forms combined with straight English foster a mixture, a hybrid that recalls domestic readers of a foreign existence.

Example 1: …边疆外寇侵犯，西线郑将军有急信呈交陛下。 (苏童, 2005: 14)

“…Barbarians have broken through our defenses. General Zheng on the western front has sent an urgent communiqué for Your Majesty.” (Goldblatt, 2005: 23)

Within two utterances, Goldblatt implants three foreign forms. The first is “Barbarians” with the first letter capitalized, indicating a specific referring. Although “barbarian” is an English word, the capitalization alerts the
reader that the barbarian here concerned is not as what is used in general sense, thereby creating a foreign atmosphere. The second is a Pinyin spelling of a Chinese name, “Zheng”, even though he seems to have made a mistake of the spelling, either “Zheng” or the correct form “Zou” functions the same in disrupting the fluency of translation, since there is no such naming in English. Last but not least, the employment of a French word “communique” further demanifies the text. It is obvious that apart from the three words mentioned above, other parts of the translation is straightforwardly domesticating, expressions like “broken through our defenses” and “Your Majesty” is characterized with a fluent English. However, these three words, albeit weak in number, work like a magical spell in signaling differences and externalizing hybridity.

Example 2: I saw a grey bird fly by overhead, its strage cry slicing through the sky.


Needless to say, the translation of “亡…亡…亡” is most distinctive and creative. Goldbatt takes a risk to provide readers with a non-translation translation. One minute ago, readers are immersed in the fluent English text, the next minute they are brought to reality by an awkward spelling, with no clue to what just happened and no idea of what it means. Unlike the direct Pinyin spelling of proper names or physical locations, in this case, “亡” does have a substantial meaning. So what exactly propels Goldbatt to make such an unconventional decision? Before answering this question, it should be noted that he adds appendix as explanation at the bottom of the page when it first appears: “literally ‘die,’ but a homonym for ‘Ruler’ ” (207). In this way, Goldbatt actually blends his own interpretation into the translation, clarifying a potential double-reference, because in original text, this intended meaning is up to readers’ own judgment, sensitive readers may spot the insinuation, while others may not. Furthermore, the sound of “Wang” resembles that of a bird. The direct translation “die”, however, fails to function in the same manner. Therefore, Goldbatt’s translation is of proper grounds in this specific context. Putting all reasoning aside, we can see “Wang — Wang — Wang” does distinguish itself from English and represents an embodiment of foreign language and culture.

Explicit hybridity constantly reoccurs in Goldblatt’s translation. To some extent, it can be viewed as a practice of Bhabha’s Third Space, for it directly preserves foreign forms and skillfully combines them with the domestic. Hence, translation becomes a new site of dialogue, impregnated with refreshing and inspiring cultural forms.

2) Implicit hybridity: Implicit hybridity concerns the indirect, hidden forms of discursive heterogeneity. In contrast to explicit hybridity, which can be spotted at plain sight, it requires people with knowledge of both source and target culture to discern. It is a way to present hybridity from inside the target language. On the surface, we may see uniform standard English, but inconsistency and incongruity emerges when we dig deeper. Implicit hybridity takes the form of target language, in this case, English to signal the difference. It is a subversion of authoritative discourse from within, which is a no less powerful means to de-throne hegemony than explicit hybridity. As discussed earlier, in translation, Goldblatt holds the principle of displaying differences without severely reducing intelligibility of the text: implicit hybridity seems to be the best possible means to reach this end.

Example 1: I do not know what sort of game she is playing, Lady Hui said, her eyes turning red again. Why does she keep sending it if she knows I won’t eat it? One bowl after another, plate after plate. Does she really expect to win me over that way, to soften my long-hardened heart? (Goldbatt, 2005: 132)

This translation appears to be perfectly normal, with standard English vocabulary and sentence patterns. To look more carefully however, we can sense some strangeness. For the first part half, Goldblatt does apply domestication to render a Chinese idiom into an English counterpart, though with different cultural allusions. He even inverts the original sentence order “她知道我不会吃, 为什么还要天天送来?” to fit for English sentence pattern “why... if...”. In the second half, however, he manages to blend in Chinese cultural specifics. For instance, Goldblatt literally translates “一碗又一碗, 一碟又一碟的”, such expression is widely used in Chinese, but rare in English. Moreover, “枯石心肠” is a unique Chinese cultural image. To directly render the original into “soften my long-hardened heart” seems too abrupt for domestic readership. Therefore, he borrows from English a similar expression “to win me over” to pave the way for the introduction of a cultural-loaded term in Chinese. This mixture not only ensures a correct understanding of readers but also facilitates the acceptance of a foreign concept. Although Goldblatt does not use conspicuous foreign vocabularies, this translation is still characterized with a heterogeneous discourse. The charisma of implicit hybridity lies in a natural blend of foreign cultural specifics with target language, which eases the tension between two completely different languages and cultures, leading to a co-existence of the two. It is both a blessing and a curse to the target language, for on the one hand, by adding new elements, it certainly enriches target language and culture, on the other hand, standard discourse are bound to digress after the introduction of new elements, thereby for a target language of hegemonic authority, it poses a serious threat.

Example 2: 铁匠父亲一掬老泪, 仰天长叹, 都说你会衣锦还乡, 还乡盖房, 修坟建庙, 谁想到你是空着手回来了。老铁匠睁着浑浊发红的眼睛望大铁砧旁, 他一边拾起中断的活计一边说, 以后可怎么办? (苏童, 2005: 142)

With tears flowing freely, the blacksmith father looked up into the sky and sighed. Everyone said you would return home in fancy clothes, buy some land and build a house,
repair the family grave sites and erect a temple. That you would come home empty-handed was the furthest thing from our mind. The old blacksmith dried his clouded eyes, red from weeping, and walked back to his anvil, where he picked up a piece of steel he had been working on and said, Now what? (Goldblatt, 2005: 220)

The first sentence pattern in translation follows English linguistic rules, with the subject put behind a present participle clause; however, the expression “blacksmith father” is at odds with Standard English. It is clearly a direct rendering form the Chinese original, somewhat against English usage. The following three four-character phrases not only challenges a translator, but also tests his attitudes towards difference, since they represent the Chinese symbol of being rich, powerful and accomplished in ancient times. If we say people in the west also deem fancy outfits and luxury mansions as a symbol of wealth and social status, the last one “修坟筑庙” is definitely a Chinese cultural specific. Goldblatt neither omits nor domesticates any one of them in translation. Even “修坟筑庙” is literally rendered as “repair the family grave sites and erect a temple”. Putting ourselves in the position of western readers, we can imagine how awkward this translation reads. Even though every single word is plain and simple, the sense they deliver and images they build are somehow alien. Moreover, the sentence pattern he applies here is rather basic and stiff in order to keep in line with Chinese linguistic structure. Then, however, Goldblatt constructs a complex long sentence frequently seen in English, English literature in particular as if compensate readers for the previous diversion. What brings back the hybridity is the abrupt emergence of “Now what?”, a fairy colloquial terms, standing in stark contrast with the elegant artistry of the former sentence. The colloquialism here falls into Venuti’s category of a domestic remainder, which deviates from the formal, standard discourse and foregrounds the excluded, peripheral dialects. The mixture of linguistic styles and registers, shifting from formal to informal, fosters a de-familiarizing ambience, thereby interrupts a fluent, narcissistic reading experience of western readership. With limited eighty-five words, this translation encompasses cultural, linguistic differences as well as different linguistic styles. Wittingly or unwittingly, Goldblatt provides us with a typical example for discourse heterogeneity with implicit hybridity.

IV. Conclusion

As a winner of multiple awards and a prime translator of contemporary Chinese fiction, Howard Goldblatt aims to provide American readership with a proper translation. Hence, he prioritizes the interests of domestic readers and emphasizes intelligibility, or to a certain extent, elegance of a translation. Nevertheless, he aspires to disseminate Chinese literature and culture out of a pure love and passion for it, which explains why he tries the utmost to preserve cultural differences in the source text. The two opposing purposes resulting from his hybrid cultural identity thus leads to an inevitable compromise — a hybrid discourse, or in Venuti’s terminology, discursive heterogeneity. Goldblatt is undeniably a successful translator, the consistency of his intra-translation and extra-translation behavior deserves our in-depth study for reference to the spread of Chinese culture in the globalized era.

References