

Image Construction in The English Collaborative Translation of Brothers

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Abstract

Yu Hua's novel *Brothers* is famous for its profound portrayal of the fate of characters under the dramatic changes in Chinese society, and its English translation plays a key role in cross-cultural communication. Based on the framework of Imagology theory, this study focuses on Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas joint translation, and in-depth investigations into how the translation reproduces and reconstructs the images in complex characters and aesthetic styles, aiming to systematically reveal the translator's strategies of translation under the perspective of the 'other'. The study finds that, driven by both the collective social imagination and the translator's subjectivity, the translator, from the perspective of Imagology, has faithfully conveyed the original text's intention and emotional tension while inevitably reconstructing the image of *Brothers* in the English translation, thus shaping the unique image of *Brothers* and China in the English-speaking world. This study provides concrete examples and theoretical reflections on the cross-cultural communication of *Brothers*.

Keywords

Imagology; *Brothers*; Image construction; Social collective imagination; Translator's subjectivity.

1. Introduction

In recent years, as cultural exchanges between China and the world have deepened, numerous Chinese literary works have successfully gained international recognition. As one of the important representative writers of contemporary Chinese literature, Yu Hua has written many influential works, such as *To Live*, *Brothers*, *The Seventh Day*, and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. These novels were later translated into foreign languages and slowly spread abroad

Among them, there is a novel called *Brothers*, which is particularly popular in China and has sold nearly one million copies. This book is about the emotional bond between Baldy Li and Song Gang. Although they are not a surname and have no blood relationship, that kind of brotherhood runs through the whole story. The novel truly depicts the ups and downs and ill-fated changes of Chinese society from the 1960s to the early stage of reform and opening up. Later, the novel was published in English, named *Brothers*, which was published by Random House in 2009. The translation was completed by Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas. This English version pushes *Brothers* to international readers. Many Westerners understand the changes of contemporary Chinese society through this book. This translation was also shortlisted for the Mansfield Award for Asian Literature, and won the French International Literature Award in 2008. In the months after its publication, the mainstream media in the United Kingdom and the United States also gave a lot of comments and discussions. The *New Yorker* hailed it as "an impressive work" that "charts China's profound social and cultural transformations over the past four decades through one family's history," praising it as "a relentlessly entertaining epic".

It is noteworthy that existing studies on the English translation of *Brothers* have largely focused on aspects such as translation strategies, motivations for translation, handling of culturally loaded terms, thematic conveyance, or reception effects. Regarding translation strategies, Hu Juanjuan points out that throughout the translation process, the mainstream poetics and ideology of the target culture functioned as a cultural filter layer, influencing the translator's decision-making process [3]; Guided by George Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory grounded in hermeneutics, Wang Lili employs comparative analysis to explore the intrinsic connection between hermeneutic translation steps and the translator's strategies in *Brothers* [4]; Zhang Xingxia and other scholars comprehensively collected and organized foundational materials on the translation and research of Yu Hua and *Brothers*, examining the motivations behind its "internal and external differences" and studying the rewriting in the translation of *Brothers* [5]. At the linguistic level, Gao Fei examines the characteristics of antonymous compounds in the process of English translation from the perspective of construction coercion. On the other hand, Dong Guojun put the focus of the study on the English translation of "The Analects of Confucius". He mainly went to see whether the idiomatic expression in it could be faithful enough to the original text [6]. When it comes to culture-loaded words, Wang Baorong and Quan Yubin adopt the translation strategy classification method proposed by Ekksila, which is specifically used to deal with culture-specific nouns. They combine statistical analysis and case study to examine the translation strategies actually used by translators in the English version of *Brothers*[7]. Regarding reception effects, Wang Baorong and Quan Yubin systematically categorized all English-language book reviews to comprehensively examine the critical reception of *Brothers* in the English-speaking world, particularly the United States.

However, systematic and in-depth research remains lacking on two aspects of this translation: the construction of character image and aesthetic style reshaping, and the underlying motivations driving these approaches.

2. Overview of Imagology Translation Studies

Imagology, as a pivotal branch extending comparative literature into cross-cultural studies, centers on deconstructing the dynamic mechanisms of "exotic imagery" within texts, viewing it as a complex mirror reflecting cultural interactions between the "self" and the "other". This discipline was founded by French scholar Jean-Marie Carré in his work *French Writers and the German Phantasm*, 1800–1940 (1947). When Carré first proposed the concept of Imagology, he was actually trying to dissect something - how different peoples understand and interpret each other through travelogues and imaginative texts [9]. In this way, he also initially revealed that there is a certain connection between literary images and collective social psychology. When he arrived at his student Marius-François Guyad, the situation took a step further. Guyad, in his 1951 book *Comparative Literature*, for the first time formally established Imagology as an independent field of study. Later, there was a scholar named Daniel-Henry Pageaux who introduced a very core concept, "collective social imagination", through which he could be said to have made a more systematic theoretical breakthrough in Imagology [10]. Pageaux put forward a very profound view at that time. He said that literary image is actually a double carrier : on the one hand, it is the carrier of ideology, on the other hand, it is also the carrier of Utopia. How to understand it ? That is to say, these images are the result of some kind of cognitive filtering (such as projection bias, or idealization of the other) when we look at the culture of the other. At the same time, they themselves also carry the value judgment of the culture of the other, and some appeals of identity.

In the 21 st century, many scholars who do translation studies have begun to consciously combine the theoretical framework of semiotics with translation studies. They want to explore whether there is any theoretical convergence between the two disciplines, and also try to build

a systematic theoretical framework based on semiotics in translation studies. In this process, the translator is actually a key actor. They will have their own cultural position and make different strategic choices, such as domestication or foreignization, amplification or omission, as well as whether to add annotations or paratexts. These choices will directly affect the characters, scenes and historical contexts in the original text, and finally what will be shaped in the translation. In fact, the process of translation is not only to do language conversion, but also to reconstruct a new image of the "other" within the target culture, which will involve a deep cultural filtering and some semantic enrichment. For example, the same *Water Margin*, to Pearl S. Buck's hands, she used domestication translation, so the whole book has become a story full of universal heroism everywhere; Sidney Shapiro is different. He prefers foreignization translation and emphasizes the local characteristics of this novel as a Chinese peasant uprising. This striking contrast vividly demonstrates the diachronic fluidity of translated images as "collective social constructs", shaped by the interplay of historical context, target audience expectations, and translator subjectivity.

Driven by this international academic trend, in recent years, there have been many scholars doing translation research in our country. They have also begun to actively explore the localization of Imagology translation and try to extract some of their own theories. Liang Zhifang, for example, put forward a concept called "cultural back-translation," mainly to pay attention to such a phenomenon: some texts are reabsorbed by the original source language culture after a circle of transnational translation, which leads to some reconstruction of local image [13]. Taking the case of how Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* was accepted in China and how it caused controversy as an example, she reveals that image transmission is actually two-way and complex. Furthermore, Shi Xinyu and Huang Libo, two of them, have more systematically developed a methodological framework called Imagology in Translation Studies, with particular emphasis on the fact that this framework is based on close reading of the text [14]. This framework integrates the three dimensions of translation process research, translation subject research, and translation product research. In this way, if we want to examine how the image in a specific translation is constructed, we can have a really useful analysis tool. Another example is the English version of *Brothers* translated by Eileen Chengyin Chow and Carlos Rojas, which actually contains a lot of rich and metaphorical Chinese image symbols, and these symbols also greatly shape the Western readers' cognition of certain historical periods in our country.

Therefore, this study focuses on the image studies analysis of the English translation of *Brothers*, exploring the image construction within the translation and analyzing its underlying motivations, thereby expanding the theoretical depth and perspective of research on the translation and reception of Yu Hua's works.

3. Case Study

Translation studies from Imagology serve as a vital bridge in cross-cultural communication. This section will employ Imagology as its framework, utilizing close textual analysis and cultural comparison to examine how translations construct images through two key processes: character image and the aesthetic style.

3.1. Character Image Construction

Example1:

Original text: 李光头被赵诗人揪着站在那里，看着哭哭啼啼的小屁股，心想你哭什么，你一个没发育的小屁股有什么好哭的，我他妈的是没办法才顺便看了你小屁股一眼。（余华，2005:10）

English Translation: Baldy Li, still standing there in Poet Zhao's grip, watched the weeping little butt and thought, What's all this crying over your underdeveloped little butt? I only took a look because there wasn't much else I could do. (Chow & Rojas, 2009:11)

The phrase “小屁股” appears three times in the original text and is translated as “little butt” twice in the translation, with only the final instance omitted. The repetition of the noun phrase reinforces Baldy Li's dismissive contempt for voyeurism, aligning with the coarse language typical of a street thug like him. Additionally, the defensive logic of “没办法才顺便看了一眼” is translated as “I only took a look because there wasn't much else I could do”. The original “顺便” carries an air of casual justification, which is toned down in the translation. It's simplified into the causal structure “only...because”, highlighting the character's stubborn, unreasonable mindset through this cause-and-effect framework. This corresponds semantically to the evasive tone of the original “顺便”. This translation reduces Baldy Li's self-justification and the extent to which his contempt objectifies women, thereby softening his original image as a shameless rogue. The profanity in the original text is directly omitted in the translation, eschewing equivalent English slang in favor of conveying the character's emotion through interjections like the interrogative phrase “what's all this crying”. The original “偷看” (peep) is rendered as “took a look”, a neutral action description that dilutes the moral condemnation implied by “偷” (steal). This avoids the negative connotations of terms like “peep” or “spy”, aligning with English cultural conventions for subtly describing voyeuristic behavior and steering clear of overtly derogatory vocabulary.

As a translator with both Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds, when dealing with the text, he actually reflects the choice of head translation strategies from the perspective of "the other". How to say, Western readers may have a stereotype in their minds about these men of our Chinese working class - they think these people are rough and have a fixed view of gender roles. By removing some swear words, the translator downplays the sexually suggestive content, so that the translation actually avoids reinforcing the prejudices just said. For example, Baldy Li's behavior of peeping at others' privacy is framed as an impulse in adolescence rather than a big moral problem in the translation. In this way, it is easier for Western readers to perceive him as a young man who is experiencing distress, similar to what is common in Western literature, rather than a purely morally problematic individual.

To be clear, the translator's strategy of using neutral terms and euphemisms is essentially a compromise to the cultural standards of political correctness in the West. Doing so does help the text to spread out over there, and can also improve the reader's acceptance, but in turn, it is possible to cover up some of the original revelation of the dark side of human nature in the original work. Therefore, the final portrayal of our China is more likely to become an “Other” that the West is willing to accept, rather than a complex and authentic cultural subject.

3.2. Image construction in aesthetic style

Example2:

Original Text: (李光头)一口气说出了二十个王八蛋...他说还要成立一个王八蛋大赛组委会,要找几个王八蛋领导来当王八蛋主任和王八蛋副主任,要找十个王八蛋来当王八蛋评委,说到这里他强调一下,十个评委都要找男王八蛋,不要找女王八蛋。(余华, 2006:493)

English Translation: He uttered the word fucking more than twenty times...He wanted to establish a fucking Hymen Games organizing committee, find some fucking political leaders to serve as fucking chairmen and fucking deputy chairmen, and find ten fuckers to come serve as fucking judges. Pausing briefly at this point, he specified that the ten judges must all be male.(Chow & Rojas, 2009:379)

The original text of *Brothers* features extensive profanity and repetition. During translation, the translator chose to preserve this linguistic style and rhythm. Profanities were rendered literally, stripping away specific cultural references while simplifying Baldy Li's rage into pure hormonal venting. The translation renders “处女膜比赛” as “Hymen Olympics”, eschewing conventional terms like “pageant” or “competition”. By juxtaposing the sacred Olympic flame with the chastity contest - these two concepts are inherently incompatible - the author uses this to satirize the phenomenon of a large number of beauty contestants before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and even the rise of an “artificial beauty contest”. The inspiration of the image of “virgin beauty” in Yu Hua's novels is originally derived from such a social background. However, the choices made by the translator in dealing with this part may objectively strengthen some negative perceptions of China from the outside world and to a certain extent cater to the biased communication intentions of the Western media.

The original text employs a parallel structure of “要让……要让……” to create a rapid-fire narrative rhythm, mimicking the explosive language of an agitated character while reinforcing the layers of satire through sentence repetition. From media to commerce, from officials to the masses. The translation reflects this parallelism with the structures such as “He wanted to..” and “He was going to...”. At the same time, it also consciously preserves the rhythmic impact of phrases such as “plastered all over the streets” and “feast their fucking eyes”. In this way, the sense of catharsis and release of the language itself can be conveyed more directly to the English readers. This kind of practice, and those images in our Chinese tradition is indeed formed a more obvious contrast, but also to a certain extent, broke the outside world for the Oriental conservative, moderate stereotype - although in the more formal context, like this frequently to use some blasphemous expression, may be more or less will be considered inappropriate.

However, there is also a problem to be noted here : if the swear words are used too frequently, the reader's attention may be directed to the violence at the linguistic level, rather than really paying attention to the fundamental criticism of the capitalist alienation behind the novel.

4. Influencing Factors about Image Construction in the English Translation of *Brothers*

4.1. Social Collective Imagination

The influencing factors behind image construction in the English translation of *Brothers* stems from the collective social imagination—specifically, the long-established Western perceptions of China and its particular historical periods. This collective social imagination profoundly shapes the translators, creating a dynamic equilibrium between the “other” and the “self” in their interplay.

By the 19th century, with the impact of the Opium War, coupled with the previous European 'China fever' also slowly receded, the Western world for the description of Chinese men there was a very dramatic reversal. In the past, in their eyes, China was a civilized, prosperous and progressive country, but in this period, it became an authoritarian, poor and backward place. In the past, Chinese people were said to be smart, hard-working and simple. Later, they were slowly portrayed as ignorant, cunning and conservative. It can be said that the West's overall view of China has undergone a process of transformation from enthusiastic admiration and awe to criticism, contempt and even contempt. Especially in the 1870s, the economy of the western United States was not very prosperous. In this context, Chinese men were further vilified as cunning and dangerous criminals, and even a new stereotype label was called "Chinaman John" This situation continued until the 1990s. With the gradual rise of China's economy and the improvement of its international status, Western society began to eliminate their long-standing stereotypes of Chinese men little by little [15,16].

Although China's position in the international community has changed, there are still many Western mainstream media holding a relatively hostile attitude towards this country, and they will intentionally or unintentionally smear China's image in their reports. It is in such a large communication environment that the translator retains the characteristics of Rogue (that is, a little rebellious and unconventional) when dealing with the role of the core character Baldy Li. On the other hand, he consciously shapes him as a loyal, grateful, and sensitive to business person. In dealing with some specific plots, this translation will also deliberately avoid triggering Western readers' stereotyped associations with Chinese men - especially not to associate Chinese men with sexual threats. The effect of this approach is that it positions the character of Baldy Li more as a young man who is in confusion and struggle, which is a little like the common kind in Western literature. In this way, when Western readers are reading, their disgust for him will be reduced accordingly.

The West holds a prevalent perception of China during the Cultural Revolution and preceding periods, perceiving that era as one rife with violence and authoritarianism. It's an era of collective hysteria and the distortion of human nature. Native English-speaking readers' understanding of this period of history remains significantly less than that of Chinese readers. Cultural Narratives. Western accounts of the revolution have shaped a negative image of China characterized by suffering, poverty, ideological uniformity, and the eruption of human depravity. Under political persecution and high-pressure authoritarianism, human rights were trampled, freedoms were stripped away, and dignity was desecrated [17]. Westerners increasingly view literary works about the "Cultural Revolution" as evidence. They seek ideological clues within them, interpret the historical testimony embedded in the works, and overall present a negative image of China. Therefore, when translating scenes from the Cultural Revolution era, the translator preserved the blind conformity and violent imagery characteristic of the time. Specifically, whether depicting the Red Guards' brutal beating of Song Fanping or the suicide scene where Sun Wei's father drove a long nail into his own skull, these intensely visceral episodes were faithfully rendered in the translation. While this faithful rendering may reinforce Western readers' stereotypes about China during this period.

The reform and opening-up since the new era have truly established China's image as a progressive nation. Since the late 1970s, the West has equated modernization with Westernization, viewing China as following the Western path. Moreover, the rise of consumerism during China's reform and opening-up period allowed the West to see its own reflection. To Western observers, modernization, consumerism, Westernization, and capitalism are inextricably linked. Although Western interpretations of China's reform and opening-up diverge from its true objectives and intentions, the "image of reformed China" embraced by the West has largely replaced the long-standing perception of a stagnant nation, reshaping it into one striding forward with development and progress. In *Brothers*, Yu Hua actually made a profound satire on the logic of capitalism through some well-designed narrative strategies. For example, the protagonist Baldy Li's first start-up project, finally, was completely impossible to do - because he refused to bribe those in office. But the second entrepreneurial project he later did was different. It was a recycling industry around the landfill, and the results were particularly successful and impressive. In the process of his later step by step, in fact, he gradually formed a conspiracy relationship with those power structures. There are also prosperous scenes like the domestic recycling suit market, and these plots are also full of strong irony.

4.2. Translators' subjectivity

Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas are a scholarly couple active in the international Sinology community, renowned for their literary translations and cross-cultural research. Eileen Cheng-yin Chow is a second-generation Taiwanese immigrant, while Carlos Rojas has

Spanish-Cuban heritage. Zhou's immigrant background and Rojas's mixed-race origins combined with their experience in Chinese studies gave them a natural advantage in translating *Brothers* and shaping perceptions of China. Both Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas were great admirers of Yu Hua's *Brothers*. When Yu Hua visited the United States as a visiting scholar, Eileen Cheng-yin Chow was responsible for hosting him. Yu Hua then invited them to translate *Brothers*, and they accepted without hesitation. The original Chinese edition of *Brothers* is divided into two volumes. Eileen Cheng-yin Chow translated the first volume, while Carlos Rojas handled the second. The pair spent considerable time meticulously harmonizing the language across their respective translations [18].

Carlos Rojas considers the translator's preface to be an important subtext. He treats the preface "as an independent short essay, investing considerable time and effort into it... with the aim of giving the work itself a definitive form". When translating *Brothers*, Carlos Rojas added a subtext by incorporating descriptions of Yu Hua's past and terms depicting Baldy Li's stepfather into the preface of his translation. By recounting amusing anecdotes from Yu Hua and his father's academic visit to the United States, the translator allows readers to sense the warmth between father and son, as well as Yu Hua's profound affection for his child. This easily evokes the towering father figure of Song Fanping in *Brothers*. From reality to text, it presents foreign readers with the selfless devotion of Chinese parents who fear no danger to protect their children, while simultaneously constructing the image of China's countless ordinary yet extraordinary parents [19].

Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas did use a lot of translation techniques in the process of English translation of *Brothers*, such as amplification or omission. These techniques can be seen both in the processing of the original text and in the performance of the translation. One of their main purposes is to reconstruct a relatively positive image of China in the translation. However, their otherness inevitably reflected the inherent logic of Western ideology. Especially in the paratext part of *Brothers*, Carlos Rojas deleted a suffix that Yu Hua had originally written, and added a translator's preface to it. In this preface, he mentioned some negative events in China, such as the proliferation of beauty pageants before the Olympic Games. In this way, he intentionally or unintentionally shaped a negative image of China. This ideological framework of the Other perspective caters to Western readers' preferences and the interests of Western aesthetic circles while undermining the construction of China's image. Moreover, the translator's ideologically driven subjective judgments influence readers' perceptions of the work, its characters, and even the national image. Such shaping of China's image ultimately serves the propagation of Western ideology, reinforces Western-centric narratives, and caters to Western target audiences.

Carlos Rojas believes that in literary translation, editors and publishers play a crucial role in the publishing process. However, during the translation process, Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas consciously chose to preserve as much of the coarse language and repetitive characteristics found in *Brothers* as possible. However, at that time, this decision was opposed by the editor-in-chief of the American publishing house. The other side believes that a language style like this is actually more difficult for their publishers to take to the U.S. market. In response to this situation, Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas went to do a communication with the author Yu Hua himself, and finally got Yu Hua's support [20]. Together with Yu Hua, they also affirmed that repetition is actually a very iconic feature of the novel itself. As a result, the two translators actively exercised their autonomy as translators, and specially drafted a long letter, in which a more systematic argument was given, with particular emphasis on the necessity of retaining these repeated expressions - because only in this way can the essence of the original work and its unique language rhythm be conveyed. Finally, the publisher also respects and upholds this core decision made by the translators.

5. Conclusion

As far as the English translation of *Brothers* is concerned, the construction of the images in it can be regarded as a successful attempt made by the translators Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas in the cross-cultural context. Through a relatively in-depth analysis of some specific examples in the translation, we can observe the following aspects: while trying to be faithful to the core spirit of the original, the translator also skillfully uses the method of imagery to reconstruct the characters in it, and consciously constructs the image at the level of aesthetic style. The whole process, on the one hand, will be objectively restricted by the collective social imagination, but on the other hand, it does fully show the translator's own subjective initiative. The success of the English translation of *Brothers* can actually be seen from a larger level - it shows that the literary image in the process of cross-cultural communication involves more than just the transformation of the language level. More accurately, in this process of communication, the translator also needs to use some ideas and methods of Imagology to achieve a more faithful reproduction of the original work, and at the same time to find and maintain a dynamic balance between the "self" image and the "other" image. It is through such a process that this translation provides a valuable literary model for western scholars to understand the dramatic changes experienced by Chinese society. At the same time, it also contributes an exemplary case to the localized application of Imagology in translation studies.

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