The Reception of Mo Yan’s Novel Thirteen Steps (《十三步》) in Spanish-speaking Regions from the Perspective of Variation Theory

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ABSTRACT
Mo Yan’s novels were first translated into Spanish in 1992. But the direct translation of his works from Chinese into Spanish instead of from English or French didn’t start until 2012. This essay will focus on the latest direct translation (Chinese to Spanish) of the novel Thirteen Steps (《十三步》), and try to discuss its reception in Spanish-speaking regions from two aspects: one is the reviews and comments from the local Spanish critics; the other is the analysis on variation caused by literary misreading and cultural filtering from the levels of language translation and cultural transmission. The translation and interpretation of Mo Yan’s works could offer us a glimpse of the reception of contemporary Chinese literature in Spanish-speaking regions more generally, while inspiring some new ideas for Chinese literature to “go global.”

The translation and introduction of Chinese literature in the Spanish-speaking world started relatively late. Since the 1990s, the number of Spanish translations of modern and contemporary literary works gradually began to increase, and the novels of Chinese authors including Qian Zhongshu, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Yan Lianke, Yu Hua, Su Tong and other writers have been translated into Spanish. Mo Yan, as one of the representative writers of Chinese modern and contemporary literature, naturally ranks among them. By 2019, Mo Yan’s works have been translated into 43 languages. Among them, the largest number of translated works have appeared in French, with 26 works in total, 17 in Spanish and 12 in English (Wang 26).

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The “Spanish-speaking region” is a regional definition based on the concept of “panhispanismo.” According to the interpretation of Real Academia Espanola, “panhispanismo” intends to “promote coordination and cooperation among Spanish-speaking countries.” Its mission is to unite Spanish-speaking countries to build an Ibero American community. Under the guidance of the same language and “panhispanismo” consciousness, Spain in Europe and Spanish-speaking countries globally have formed a common market for cultural products, including films, music, books and art. The leader of this market is the former suzerain country – Spain. In terms of book, 73% of Spain’s exported books are sold to Spanish-speaking American countries. Spanish publishing houses have branches in 29 countries around the world, of which 81% are in Spanish-speaking American countries. There are 164 branches of Spanish publishing houses globally, and the top five countries in terms of the number of these branches are Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and the United States. In addition, Chinese scholar Zhou Wei has searched the bibliography of libraries and university collections in 21 countries that use Spanish as the official language and found Spanish translations of the works of 85 Chinese writers, including Mo Yan, Chi Zijian, Jia Pingwa, Lu Yao, Tie Ning and Rao Xueman (Cheng and He, 2020 77). From the place of publication of these translations, Spain ranked first. Among the library collections of these countries, the proportion of books published in Spain also far exceeds that of other countries, accounting for nearly 75% of the total collection.

After Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for literature, Kailas publishing house from Spain took charge of the translation and publication of almost all the Spanish versions of Mo Yan’s works. Kailas has always had fixed sales and distribution channels for its books in Latin America. These channels have established cooperative relations between Kailas publishing house and Mexico, Argentina and Amazon, and helped Mo Yan’s novels be noticed by Latin American readers. The Spanish-speaking region discussed in this paper refers to the common cultural market connecting Europe and America based on Spanish and with Spanish publishing houses as the main output center.

More than half of the Spanish translations of Mo Yan’s novels were published after he was awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize for literature. After that, they were translated directly from Chinese into Spanish instead of from English or French. Thirteen steps, as a “climax” work covering all important factors of Mo Yan’s novels (treacherous imagination, absurdity, deep understanding of human nature, etc.), is also among the first novels to be translated directly from Chinese into Spanish. The study of its translation and reception is of great value to understand Mo Yan’s overall reception in the Spanish-speaking world.

Chinese scholars of comparative literature, based on their reflections on the development of the discipline and its theoretical dilemmas, especially the collision between eastern and western civilizations and their increasing conflicts, have put forward the idea of variation study in comparative literature in 2005. The era of globalization has created a new context for the research of comparative literature. Influenced by contact with different languages and cultures, different countries or civilizations, new things will inevitably be generated in the process of transmitting, exchanging and accepting a literature. In this way, variation is produced. The study of variation proposed by Chinese scholars emphasizes the influence of the heterogeneous cultural context between the eastern and Western civilization circles on literary communication, and it suggests that “variation and literariness are regarded as the
academic fulcrum of the variation study of comparative literature, and through the study of the variation state of literary communication between different civilizations in different countries, the inner laws of literature will be explored” (Cao, 2006a97).

The study of the variation as it appears in literature includes not only the differences in linguistic form and content between the translation and the original, but also the subjective and biased understanding of the recipients in other countries due to different cultural backgrounds. Studying the phenomenon of variation in translated literature and exploring the deep-seated reasons for its occurrence are an important method for scholars to study Chinese literary translations and how they have been disseminated around the world in recent years.

1. Translation of Thirteen Steps: cultural connotations and literary misreading

The translation of the Other’s culture is an increasingly debated topic. Apart from the field of language, it also concerns questions of ethnography, diaspora, identity, etc. “The study of language variation under the study of literary variation mainly refers to the process in which literary phenomena pass through the boundary of languages and are accepted in the target language environment through translation, that is, the study of translation in comparative literature” (Cao and Li, 2006 80). That is to say, during the language switching process of translation, especially between Eastern-Western languages, variation happens naturally and inevitably. To study this variation from the language level will lead us to see the text misreading, and the cultural misunderstanding behind the letters.

As a representative writer of “hallucinatory realism” and “root seeking literature”2 in China, Mo Yan’s works are full of local culture and traditional characteristics. Mo Yan himself has also stated “I grew up in an environment immersed with folk culture, which inevitably comes in to my novels when I pick up a pen to write. This has definitely affected, even decided, my works’ artistic style” (Shi). Also, the Swedish Academy noted his ability to combine folk stories, history and modern events in his works, and said that “Through a mixture of fantasy and reality, historical and social perspectives, Mo Yan has created a world reminiscent in its complexity of those in the writings of William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, at the same time finding a departure point in old Chinese literature and in oral tradition” (“Bio-bibliography”).

However, “due to the nonequivalence of cultural images, translation will inevitably create the loss and distortion of cultural images, which will lead to the loss of cultural information of the original and the infiltration of the target culture, and this results in the deformation and distortion of the original work” (Cao 2005 289). So in the dissemination research of Mo Yan’s works, the essential keys on cross-cultural connections for studying the minor units of a translation are no less important. There are various forms of cultural images, including idioms, proverbs and allusions. The study of language variation in the Spanish version of Thirteen Steps focuses on the translation of words and sentences with traditional and local cultural characteristics. Four-character idioms form a major feature of Chinese language art, and it is widely known that it is hardly possible to obtain the
complete equivalence of content, form and artistic conception in translation. Most translators adopt the method of explanatory translation or free translation (paraphrase) based on the context, aiming at striving for a semantic equivalent to the original meaning.

To start our discussion, I would like to point out that the translation strategies for the Chinese idioms in the Spanish version of Thirteen Steps are not consistent or unified. That is to say, for similar forms of Chinese traditional expressions, the translator has adopted different translation methods. For example, the original Chinese sentence “黔驴技穷的叙述者们惯用的字眼” (Mo 160) (the words used by narrators who find themselves at their wits end, literally “the Guizhou donkey has limited skill”), uses a four-character idiom “donkey has limited skill”) uses a four-character idiom “donkey has limited skraditional expressions, the translator has as. The Spanish translation paraphrased this idiom according to the context simply as “torpes palabras” (Mo 230) (to be at a loss for words). “黔驴技穷” tells a story about a donkey transported to a Chinese region “黔” which originally had no such animals. A tiger first thought it was a scary monster, but later found that it could do no more than heehaw (braying) and kicking. The tiger was relieved and jumped up to eat it. Now this idiom in Chinese usually means to be at one’s wit’s end. So here in the Spanish translation the readers can’t see the function of the idiom, nor its cultural-historical background. And this makes it a simple sentence and creates a flat reading experience.

Another case is the Spanish version of “庖丁解牛” (Mo 98) (dismember an ox as skillfully as a butcher). Unlike the translation of “黔驴技穷,” it’s directly transliterated as “Paoding desmiembra el carnero” (Mo 150) (Paoding dismembers an ox). Actually, the translator made a mistake here. The original meaning of “庖” (Pao) is butcher, which refers to his occupation, while “丁” (Ding) is the name of this person. The literal translation of “庖丁解牛” should be: a butcher named “Ding” kills cattle and cuts the meat. But in the Spanish version of Thirteen Steps, the phrase “Paoding desmiembra el carnero” would make readers think that “Paoding” together is a person’s name. In addition, this idiom is borrowed from the literary classic Zhuangzi («庄子»), which gives a vivid description of a butcher’s skillful actions in killing and cutting up cattle. This Chinese idiom, suggests that as long as we as we keep practicing, we will be handy in mastering the complexity of things and grasping their internal rules. It is similar to “黔驴技穷” as they are both metaphoric expressions. Both idioms come from stories that are well-known in Chinese classic literature. Yet for the idiom “庖丁解牛” the translator adopted a totally different translation method than that of “黔驴技穷,” and, worse, made a mistake in translating it.

Common sayings and proverbs are the best embodiment of the essence of folk culture, but they pose a special challenge to translators. We will now look at some of the translations of common sayings in Thirteen Steps. For the common saying “瘦死的骆驼比马大” (Mo 172) (a skinny camel is bigger than a horse), the translation is “Un camello muerto de hambre sigue siendo más grande que un caballo” (Mo 236) (a camel starved to death is still bigger than a horse), which mostly restores the literal meaning of the original text. The first use of this phrase in literary works was found in The Dream of the Red Mansion («红楼梦») to describe Jia’s family wealth. It is often used to imply the high economic and social status in modern times. Without further explanation, the readers will have difficulty to understand its connotations. Moreover, the translation of “人老奸驴老猾兔子老了鹰难拿” (Mo 11) (the older, the trickier) is not that satisfactory. “Un viejo y retorcido burro, un astuto conejo, un viejo halcón difícil de atrapar.”
(Mo 29) (an old and treacherous donkey, a cunning rabbit, and an old falcon that’s hard to catch). The translation lists all the animals in the original text to describe the cunning personality of “孟先生” (Mr. Meng). Though it might make some sense in Spanish, those who know the Chinese saying would find it strange, as the Spanish sentence simply piles up some words of the animals from the Chinese, and doesn’t transmit the correct meaning of the saying, let alone its sarcastic implications. The correct literal translation would be old people grow tricky, old donkeys grow cunning, and even old rabbits are harder for the falcon to catch. It points out the importance of age and experiences of a person. So even if the reader could guess that it is a metaphor of some kind, the translation fails in transmitting the meaning and style of the original. Another case I would like to discuss is “朋友妻不可欺” (Mo 156) (don’t insult a friend’s wife). The Spanish version gives two different translations. One is “A los amigos y la mujer no se puede mentir” (Mo 217) (you shouldn’t lie to your friends or to your wife). This Chinese saying in the original text was talking about the immoral sexual desire of the main character, Fang Fugui’s desire for the wife of his friend Zhang Chiqiu. The Chinese character “欺” here means “insult” or “dishonor.” This first Spanish version translated it as “lie” or deceive, which is obviously inaccurate. And there is another Spanish translation of the same saying, “No se debe seducir a la esposa de un amigo” (Mo 382) (you should not seduce a friend’s wife). Although “seduce” seems to be closer to the original meaning than “lie,” it is still not completely accurate. I would suggest “A la mujer del amigo no se debe ofender deshonrándole” instead of both translations above. In addition, two different translations are used for the same slang in similar contexts, which shows that the translation is not rigorous or consistent to some extent. Therefore, it may lead to an incoherence of understanding in the translation. Another more obvious mistake is the translation of “半老婆” in “为什么要来磨这半老婆” (Mo 32). “半老婆” (half old lady) refers to women aged around 40 to 50 years old, while the Spanish translation is “medio esposa” (Mo 55) (half a wife).

*Thirteen Steps* makes frequent allusions to Chinese myths, legends, and literary classics which are hard to understand from the translation, the more so as no annotations are provided. For example, “世外桃源” (Shangri-La) literally means the land of peach blossoms, which is translated as “El Jardín de los Melocotoneros Inmortales” (Mo 192) (the garden of the immortal peaches), which does not capture the contemporary usage of this allusion as “the wonderful Utopian world.” This allusion originates from *Peach-Blossom Source* written by Tao Yuanming, a poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty in ancient China. It tells the story of a fisherman who rowed into a cave and found a peach garden. The people there were isolated from the world and lived a happy life without taxes, wars and oppression. I believe that such legends and allusions need to be annotated to help readers better understand their content. Many such allusions are loaded with conventional connotations and symbolic meanings unconnected with their literal meanings, hence translators need to explain them a little to help readers understand their cultural roots. For example, the translations of “八仙过海” (eight immortals crossing the sea) and “潘金莲” (Pan Jinlian) in *Thirteen Steps* are acceptable. The Spanish translation even supplements the other half of the proverb “八仙过海, 各显神通” (eight immortals crossing the sea, showing their own supernatural powers) as “Cuando los Ocho Inmortales cruzan el mar, cada uno de ellos muestra sus capacidades (eight immortals crossing the sea)” (Mo 226). In an ancient Chinese folk story, eight Taoist immortals
went to Penglai Celestial Island to see peonies together. On their return trip, one of the immortals, Li Tieguai, suggested that they cross the sea by using their supernatural abilities rather than by boat. Nowadays people often use this proverb to describe people and things that rely on their own unique abilities to create miracles. Pan Jinlian is a character from the Chinese classic Shuihu Zhuan and Jinpingmei. She committed adultery and conspired with her lover to kill her husband. Therefore, she has always been an archetype for flirtatious, lewd and vicious women in Chinese culture. In the original text of Thirteen Steps, Pan Jinlian’s image is used to allude to Li Yuchan and her mother, both of whom have had dubious relationships with many men, so as to highlight the absurd experience and distorted psychology of this pair of mother and daughter, whose stories are not admired by other people. The original stories will help the non-Chinese readers to better understand the cultural roots of the novel and the literary style of the writer. As I have discussed above, the connotations of “潘金莲” and “八仙过海” will be hard for the foreign readers who are not very familiar with Chinese cultural traditions to grasp if these idioms are not annotated.

Many culture-loaded items were mentioned in Thirteen Steps, such as “釉彩大缸” (big glaze colored vat) and “钉铞” (Liao Diao) and some measurement units, such as “尺” (chi). The translator adopted a domestic translation method for them in the Spanish translation. As a result, the folklore and cultural elements conveyed in these words are lost in the translation, and it might even create some misunderstandings among the Spanish readers. For example, “钉铞” in Thirteen Steps refers to the base of a latch, that is, the bulging part under the doorknocker. But because it is a rare word, the dictionary explains it as the door/window lock or cabinet door lock. Therefore, the translator uses “broches dorados” (Mo 41) (golden pin or brooch) to replace it, which makes it impossible to connect with “like a girl’s bulging breasts” in the following text. Other Chinese onomatopoeic words, such as “笃笃笃” (du du du), “咯吱吱” (ga zhi zhi), “嘣嘣嘣” (beng beng beng), are simply omitted in the Spanish translation, which results in a loss of the phonological beauty of the original text.

Of course, the Spanish version also shows outstanding translations. The Chinese “人固有一死, 或重于泰山, 或轻于鸿毛” originally comes from The Letter to Renan («报仁安书») by Sima Qian from the Han Dynasty of ancient China. The literal meaning of this sentence is that though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather. In the Spanish version, the translator elaborated upon the literal translation with: “Todos tienen que morir, unos mueren por los demás y su muerte es más pesada que la montaña Taishan, otros mueren egoístamente y su muerte pesa menos que una pluma de cisne” (Mo 264) (Everyone has to die, some die for others and their death is heavier than Taishan Mountain, others die selfishly and their death weighs less than a swan feather). This is also a case of domestic translation, as wild goose hair is translated as swan hair. In this case, the translation achieved a formal equivalence and conveyed the correct meaning, and the deep cultural connotation is also preserved.

In fact, not only in Thirteen Steps, the culture-loaded units in Mo’s other novels are also deleted, modified and misinterpreted in the process of translating for the Spanish-speaking world. Zhou talked in her article about The Kingdom of Wine and Sandalwood Death’s translation:
Perhaps the target readers in the translator’s mind are not those literary researchers but ordinary readers, so smooth and logical language was his primary standard, and he avoided elaborating on details and did not add too many explanations and annotations to the text body, and deleted the language expressions with historical and cultural factors that may cause reading obstacles to readers . . . The eclecticism in translation makes the text neutral, and the language is featureless and homogenous. Readers may read them as documentary literature reflecting the social situation in China. Therefore, many Spanish readers regard Mo Yan as a poor imitator of García and Márquez. (Zhou 33)

American sinologist and translator William A. Lyell (xlii) holds the opinion that the translator should restore the information of the original text as much as possible to ensure that the readers of the target language can understand the text just as the readers of the source language do. However, in the practice of literary translation, sometimes the cultural factors cannot be seen easily by the reading of a non-native reader from the linguistic level. Other times the untranslatability of culture elements hinders the translator’s pursuit of cultural functional (implication) equivalence. Some scholars agree that, adding comments and annotations (Thick Translation theory proposed by Kwame Anthony Appiah, 1993 in 1993) can help the target language readers to better understand the cultural context of the source language in the face of cultural untranslatability. But Thick Translation is only one of the strategies for the translator to choose in strengthening the connection between the target readers and the source culture. Judging from the successful English translation of Mo Yan’s novels, we don’t see much additional information such as notes or paratexts. And “it is the ‘combination of translation and transformation’ that makes Mo Yan’s works surpass the invisible threshold of the differences between Chinese and Western cultural psychology and narrative mode, and successfully enter the mainstream reading context of the West” (qtd. in Zhang 136).

2. Reception of Mo’s Yan’s works and cultural filtration

Although Mo Yan’s works started being translated into Spanish at the end of the 20th century, before he won the Nobel Prize, due to the lack of accurate Chinese-Spanish translation, the quality of the translations was questionable. In addition, there was no professional overseas marketing and promotion team, and China’s weak soft power led to a weak international influence (Dou). As a result, Spanish readers were not familiar with China’s modern and contemporary writers as represented by Mo Yan. Seix Barral, a Spanish publishing house that published Change («变») in 2014, had on its official website the following introduction: “Mo Yan es un premio Nobel muy desconocido que ha despertado la curiosidad de todo el mundo” (Mo Yan is a very unknown Nobel Prize winner who has aroused the curiosity of the world).

Spanish scholar Marin-Lacarta believes that “Chinese literature in the 20th century is in a marginal position in Spain’s foreign acceptance” (2012: 509). The number and acceptance of Chinese ancient literary classics such as the Book of Songs («诗经») and the Tao Te Ching («道德经») in the Spanish-speaking world are higher than those of modern and contemporary literary works, and one of the reasons is the introduction system of Chinese literary works is based on the recommendations of literary agents in the Spanish publishing industry from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century. In this system, for the sake of efficiency and cost control, most literary
works are translated from English or French to Spanish (most publishers choose to translate from the English or French version, while a few publishers contact Chinese translators to render the text). For example, the Aleph and Kailas publishing house, which first published the Spanish translation of Mo Yan’s novels, translated and published the Spanish versions of Red Sorghum Family («红高粱家族») and Big Breasts and Wide Hips («丰乳肥臀») through Howard Goldblatt’s English translation with the recommendation and help of Sandra Dijkstra, an American literary agent. This mode of indirect translation means that there is no contact with the Chinese literary system at any time in the reception process. The main problem of indirect translation is that those editions are designed to facilitate the comprehension and reading habit of an Anglophone or Francophone audience (public). When the novel arrives in the hands of the Spanish translator, it has already undergone many modifications that will also increase in the process of the second translation. The final work that reaches the Spanish reader will be too filtered and far from the original message and form.

Take Mo Yan’s works as an example. After he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2012, direct translations of his works from Chinese to Spanish began to be published in Spain and Latin America. The book The Red Sorghum Family has one version translated from English and published by El Aleph in 2002, and another version directly translated from Chinese and published by Kailas in 2016. The Spanish versions of books like Sandalwood Death («檀香刑», 2014), Thirteen Steps («十三步», 2015) and Road Building («筑路», 2019) were all translated by professional sinologists or translators directly from the original Chinese version. All these Spanish versions of Mo Yan’s novels published (or reprinted) after 2012 are marked with “2012 Nobel Prize winner for literature” and “Direct Chinese-Spanish translation” on the cover to highlight the importance and recognition of Mo Yan’s works, and the alleged higher quality of direct translation.

The choice of writers and their works is also based on the reaction of the British, American and European markets. Most of the translations published in Spain are chosen based on their position in the Anglophone and Francophone literary systems and no (little) attention is paid to their position in the Chinese literary system. As Marin-Lacarta has pointed out, “The indirect translations, also called second-hand or relay translations, have favored literary perception in the extensive history of relations between cultures, cultures sometimes geographically distant and with disparate languages, or cultures that have been mediated by others of greater power and prestige” (2008).

Therefore, it is not only the translated text that is offered to the readers, but also the para-text and even criticism in the press, often based exclusively on the information that the mediating system provides to publishers and journalists. This mediation means that the same works are published in different Western countries, and a homogenized reception is naturally taking place. It could also show that the Spanish critics do not have a full understanding of Mo Yan’s works, and they echo the views of other western countries. They also view Chinese modern and contemporary literature with obvious western centralism and political stereotypes (political bias). After Mo Yan won the prize, there were reviews which said:
Pero que la Academia sueca se haya a atrevido a premiarlo con la distinción que lo eleva sobre los demás, calificándolo como el mejor escritor vivo del momento confirma, sobre todo, ‘la victoria de la literatura sobre la política’ . . . . Porque tiene que ser muy bueno, y lo es, para que en Estocolmo le hayan honrado con el Nobel sabiendo que la elección de un autor chino que no está en la cárcel generaría una enorme controversia, como así ha sido, en el mundo occidental. (Fermoselle 2012)

(The Swedish Academy has dared to reward him with the distinction that elevates him over others and qualifies him as the best living writer of the moment, then he has to be very good, so that in Stockholm he has been honored with the Nobel knowing that the election of a Chinese author who is not in jail would generate a huge controversy, as it has been, in the western world)

Taking the reviews of Thirteen Steps as an example, the domestic research involves many aspects, such as its literary techniques, critical style, local folk elements, etc. However, the four introductory and critical articles about Mo Yan’s works that the author has found in Spanish local media, without exception, are all related to Chinese politics. They are: The world: Mo Yan: Fiction/reality (El mundo: Mo Yan: Ficción/ realidad written by Ángel F. Fermoselle, founder of Kailas Publishing House and published in the cultural edition of the Spanish newspaper El Mundo. The pleasure of admitting (El placer de admirar), a blog post by a literature fan; Thirteen Steps (Trece Pasos) published by Rafael Narbona, a literary critic, in the journal El Mundo, Culture; the criticism by Jesús Ferrero, a writer, in El País, Mo Yan’s barbarian comedies (Las comedias bárbaras de Mo Yan). The stereotypical words “dictatorship” and “dissidents” are frequently used in all these articles to attract the readers’ attention.

Although the axiom that “literature transcends politics” is widely accepted, Western readers still tend to politicize Mo Yan’s works, paying more attention to the description of Chinese society than to the esthetic value of his work. Anne Hélène Suárez, a famous Sinologist and Spanish translator of Mo Yan’s novel Change («变»), also said that it was those literary works that had been published in English-speaking countries and caused “scandals” in China that impressed Spanish publishers the most. For example, if a book is published in English and promoted as a “forbidden work in China” because of its political or sexual content, it will have many more possibilities than other contemporary Chinese books that lack that illicit appeal, regardless of its literary value (Carrogiio and Suárez).

Howard Goldblatt once said in an interview that average American readers prefer novels from China with more sexual scenes or politically related stories rather than intellectual fiction. A similar situation of Mo Yan’s works is found in France. Zhou Xinkai and Gao Fang once indicated in “Translation and interpretation of Mo Yan’s works in France-based on the critics by the French mainstream media” (<莫言作品在法国的译介与解读基于法国主流媒体对莫言的评价>): “For many readers, reading Mo Yan’s works is to see the dark side of Chinese reality that has been obscured in a sense” (Zhou and Gao 15) and “some allusive features of avoidance of censorship and resistance to mainstream ideology inside China are magnified in the French context, generating a certain acceptance and resonance based on misinterpretation” (Zhou and Gao 15). As we can see, the acceptance of contemporary Chinese literature by Western readers has not completely gotten rid of the traditional prejudice.
For instance, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips (Grandes pechos amplias caderas)* has become Mo Yan’s work with the highest sales volume among those published by Kailas, with its attractive nature of being a “banned book in China.” Of course, Wang Yanqiu also pointed out that Kailas publishing house, which has contracted the Spanish translation of Mo Yan’s novels, has a special person responsible for the marketing and publicity of Mo Yan’s works. They will entrust journalists and critics to write book reviews, interviews and reports related to Mo Yan. As these writers are not professional sinologists and do not know much about Chinese literature, it is inevitable that misreadings will occur in the process of reading the Spanish translations of Mo Yan’s novels. Their one-sided or biased comments will also have a negative impact on the acceptance of Mo Yan’s works by public readers (Wang 60). In the comments of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* on Spanish language book websites such as Amazon and Casa de Libro, the subject words that are repeated include “Chinese Communist,” “Chinese Kafka,” “Chinese Magic Realism,” etc.

The acceptance of one country’s literature in other countries will be restricted by the recipient’s understanding of language, style and theme; and moreover, variation will also be produced in such unnecessary political criticism and insinuation. In Mo Yan’s case, the inherent cultural prejudice, values, reading interests of the receiving country (Spain) and its attachment to English and French literature systems form a double layer of cultural filters on Mo Yan and Chinese modern and contemporary literature. Of course, cultural filtering “is an important embodiment of the subjectivity, selectivity and creativity of the recipients, and is also the reason why literature inevitably produces variation, loss and misreading when it passes through the medium of communication” (Cao, 2006a99).

In terms of the values on and views of ethics, the relationship between men and women, and the social system, there are huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, recognizing the cultural differences or heterogeneity between the subject and object of literary communication and analyzing the variation phenomenon in the process of literary cross civilization communication through different cultural models is a research idea that integrates misreading and innovation from the perspective of cognitive strategy (Cao, 2006a291). Variation theory points out that the research of comparative literature should go beyond the thinking of “seeking similarity” and start to research from the perspective of “variation,” so as to broaden the research scope of comparative literature.

3. Conclusion

In the translation and communication of literary texts, there is no guarantee of absolute “loyalty” to the original text, that is, the complete reproduction of form, meaning and intention. Therefore, as Mo Yan’s Spanish translation enters the direct translation stage, although the quality of the translation is higher than that of the indirect translation, it cannot completely get rid of the variation caused by the translator’s subjectivity. The introductions to Mo Yan from Spanish media and related Spanish literary criticism also reflect the cultural prejudice and misreading encountered by Chinese contemporary literature.
Chinese critic Li Jianjun pointed out that the Nobel award for Mo Yan “was largely the result of the judges’ misreading of the symbolic text. What they see in Mo’s works is the ‘China,’ ‘Chinese people’ and ‘Chinese culture’ as they imagine, rather than the real ‘China,’ ‘Chinese people’ and ‘Chinese culture’ . . . What really impressed the judges was not Mo Yan’s work itself, but the ‘beautified’ and ‘transformed’ translation” (Li 25).

Considering that it takes time for the west to accept Chinese contemporary literature without bias, it becomes understandable that translators modify the original Chinese works to a certain extent to make them conform to the reading taste and esthetic habits of the Western readers. This modification and its effect is also the object of variation study of comparative literature. As world literature is growing to admire the qualities and characteristics of literature from all civilizations, knowing and recognizing the cultural heterogeneity and literary variability urges people to integrate misreading and innovation in a cognitive strategy (Cao, 2006a 107); additionally, it will help Chinese literature be viewed within the scope of world literature, and build a relatively balanced eastern-western literary communication.

Notes

1. The idea of the variation study of comparative literature was introduced by Cao Shunqing in his book The Study of Comparative Literature (《比较文学学》). See also Tian Huiqing and Wang Jinmin. “Literary variation and study of translatology.” Journal of Southwest University For Nationalities, 2005(01): 206–209. Zhang Yu. “‘Incommensurability’ and ‘harmony in diversity’ – On the comparative basis of Variation studies in comparative literature.” Cultural Studies and Literary Theory, 2008(01): 137–144. Cai Jun. “Iconography and literary variation in comparative literature.” Contemporary Literary Criticism, 2011(02): 39–41. Song Hutang. “On ‘Variation’ in iconology of Comparative Literature.” Tribute of Social Sciences, 2016(11): 69–77. Wang Chao and Cao Shunqing. “Culturally Structural Variation in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature.” Journal of Chinese Culture, 2019(05): 117–127 + 1.

2. Root-seeking literature (寻根文学), initiated by a group of young Chinese writers in the mid-1980s, aims to highlight the “cultural” significance of literature against literature as a carrier of social and political ideas, and to explore and reconstruct the national cultural spirit. At that time, the Chinese literary world was greatly influenced by the world trend of “searching for roots.” Garcia Marquez’s works are full of Latin American regional colors, from here, many young writers see the hope of the third world countries’ literature going on the world stage. They firmly believe in the literary proposition that “the more national, the more global,” and “search for roots” is to have a dialogue with the world. Root-seeking literature’s characteristics are to search for the self of national culture and literature, and to search for the individual self of writers. It completely abandoned the purely political analysis of life and history, and put the exploration into the psychological structure of national history and culture. It manifests as an inevitable deepening of the literary process in the period of realism, a deep criticism of traditional culture and a yearning for the rationality of human beings. Many root-seeking writers keep returning to find their individual selves and infuse nature with spirituality. Mo Yan is one of these urban writers of rural origin returned to their native land to work on their novels.

3. Shangri-La is located in the southwest China. Because of its beautiful views, simple folk customs, and far distance from the modern crowded cities people use it to refer to the “utopia” from ancient Chinese literature “世外桃源.”
4. Ku Menghsuan indicates in her article about the indirect translation of *The Garlic Ballads* by Goldblatt that when facing the *Other*, amplification is not necessarily the only solution. Goldblatt is always in favor of letting readers of the translation perceive exotic cultures and at the same time, he also has a preference for fluent reading. The two criteria, which seem difficult to reconcile, favor that his translation is left out of a single radical strategy. However, his translations are always fluid and widely accepted.

5. Theo D’haen analyzed about the declining of the European-centric literature or western-cultural hegemony and a possible uplifting of the literatures of countries and communities covered by the “Belt and Road” policy as a literary, cultural, and scholarly “global” landscape in tune with present geopolitical realities (447).

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