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Renderings of *The Painted Bird* on the Chinese Literature Market

ABSTRACT

The translation of *The Painted Bird* in China, though lagged behind due to the social and historical background, has its unique feature from the adoption of translation methods to the rearranging of contents. It can be seen that the Chinese rendering by Wang Zhang follows the doctrine of faithfulness, and in the meantime takes Chinese people's thinking mode and ideological system into consideration. By the flexible application of the translation methods, Wang Zhang's rendering fulfils the demand of publication regulations, copes with Chinese people's thinking habits, and reproduces the war's destruction to the society and humanity in a neutral perspective.

Keywords: *The Painted Bird*, Chinese rendering, comparative study, historical and cultural context, Jerzy Kosinski

The Painted Bird, written by Polish-American writer Jerzy Kosinski in the 1960s, has been translated into many languages varying from Polish, German, Russian to Persian ever since its publication. The Chinese translation of *The Painted Bird*, however, started in the 1990s, which was almost 20 years later than the publication of the book. The particular features of the Chinese renderings are caused by many historical and cultural elements. The research on the translation of *The Painted Bird* in China comparing with its Polish and German renderings offers a glimpse of the differences between the translation in the language of an involved culture, i.e. a culture present in this work, and the translation in the context of a culture not involved. It also reveals the uniqueness of its translation in China, which can enrich the research in this field.

1. General survey of Chinese renderings of *The Painted Bird*

The Painted Bird, which first appeared in the USA in 1965, now has six accessible Chinese renderings.

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The first Chinese rendering of *The Painted Bird* (Kosinski, 1992¹) was published by Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House in February 1992 and translated by Yaping Mo. In this version, the translator wrote a preface for the book and briefly introduced the book and the writer, emphasising the catastrophe of the Second World War, and its aftermath. The translator also reflected on the issue of confronting past trauma. “As long as there is still violence, war, suffering or their potential threats, this book has its significance” (Kosinski, 1992, p. 11). Under the guiding principle of conveying this tone, the translator followed the original layout of the book. Besides, the translator added reading guides to each chapter, where the translator summarised the disasters either suffered or witnessed by the protagonist.

Other accessible Chinese renderings are listed as follows:

The version translated by Wang Zhang (Kosinski, 2000), published by Beijing Normal University Publishing Group in April 2000, is copyrighted and sponsored by the News & Culture Department of the US Embassy in China and collected in *Translated Collections of American Post-modernist Literature* together with the translated works of *Snow White* and *In Watermelon Sugar*. In his rendering, the translator followed the layout of the original text, without any extra explanation. The fact that it is collected in this series has aroused the readers’ interest and reflection. On one of the biggest online reading platforms in China, Douban Reading, the readers of this version speak highly of this book, and in the meanwhile, believe that “this book is an unconventional one in post-modernist works, as it is post-modern in thought instead of in style” (Song, 2012).

The version translated by Deli Chen and published by Jilin Photography Press in March 2001 (Kosinski, 2001a), is collected in *World Literature Treasury* in which Émile Zola’s *La Terre* and Maupassant’s *Une Vie* are also included. The same version is also collected in *World Alternative Literature Research Institute Recommendation Booklist – Western Literature Classics* in June 2001, in which, for instance, *Lolita*, *El Amor En Los Tiempos Del Colera* are also included.

The version translated by Shuailing Liu and published by Inner Mongolia Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House/Inner Mongolia Culture Publisher in May 2001 (Kosinski, 2001c) is collected in *The World Forbidden Books Collection* in which *Decameron* and *Ulysses* are also included.

The version translated by Jun Fan and published by Yuanfang Publishing House (Kosinski, 2001b) is collected in three series, the *World Muckraking Classics* in 2001, the *100 Forbidden Books of the World* in March 2002, and *The Best Sellers of the World* in August 2004, among which the *100 Forbidden Books of the World* was republished in 2011.

¹ All editions cited in this paper are *translated* from Kosinski’s original work published in 1976.

The version translated by Ju Sun (Kosinski, 2001d), was published by Kizilsu Kirghiz Publishing House in September 2001 in the series together with *The Golden Room* as the fourth volume of *The World Top Forbidden Books*. In the meantime, this version has also been included in *The World Top Forbidden Novels*, in which *Lolita* and *The Catcher in the Rye* are also included.

From the other books included in the series listed above, it can be inferred how the then Chinese publishing industry valued the importance of *The Painted Bird* and classified its style. All the above versions are now no longer available in online or offline bookstores. The books used in this research are all collected from the transaction platform of used books, www.kongfz.com.

When making a general survey on all these versions, one observation was found:

From the perspective of time, the Chinese renderings of *The Painted Bird* were generally published from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, when the demand for understanding the social life and humanities of western countries by Chinese readers experienced rapid growth.

Through brief research on the above versions, the findings are as follows:

First, as to the translation of the title, most Chinese renderings of the book followed the first version and translated it as 被涂污的鸟 [literally: *The Smeared Bird*]. In back translation, the word “涂污” means “smeared”, where the translator regarded “the painted bird” as an image of a twisted and alienated victim. One exception is Wang Zhang’s translation 色彩缤纷的鸟 [literally: *The Colourful Bird*]. The word “色彩缤纷的” means “colourful”. The translator used literal translation and left space for the readers to find the deeper connotation of the title. The two very different choices by different translators can also be related to the diversified translation purposes.

Second, except for the first Chinese rendering, other Chinese renderings of *The Painted Bird* are collected in different series. Besides the consideration of marketing, it also shows the understanding of the values of the book by its translators. It is included in *Western Literature Classics*, *Holocaust Literature*, *Post-modernist Literature or Alternative Literature*. The translation work of this book was once prosperous in Chinese academia, however, there is not a broad audience of this book.

Because of the various standards of the translation qualities and the many suspicious similarities in different versions, this research chooses Wang Zhang’s translation “色彩缤纷的鸟” [literally: *The Colourful Bird*] (Kosinski, 2000) as the object of study. The reason for this choice is that the language used in this version is the most refined and idiomatic. What is more, it serves a very clear purpose, which is to meet the demand for interpreting and broadcasting the most influential literary works from western countries. Therefore, it is typical, representative, and worthy of academic discussion.

2. Background of the translation of *The Painted Bird* – general survey on literary translation in China since its foundation

When it comes to literary translation, both elements within the text and multiple extratextual elements should be taken into consideration. In other words, translation shifts involve the shift of languages as well as the whole dynamic process. Moreover, as translated text is regarded as the “afterlife” of the original text, translation studies inevitably concern the interactive process and result of the original text and the context of target language. Meschonnic (1973) states that “the concept of translation is historical” (p. 310), which shows translation “not only a complicated process with rich connotation, but also a historical activity deeply influenced by the changeable time factors” (Liu, 2017, p. 615). Therefore, to find out and evaluate the translation activity and results of *The Painted Bird* in China, it is of great importance to comb the development track of China’s literary translation practice since its foundation, so as to understand the time context and cultural context of the Chinese renderings of the book.

After going through the “eastward transmission of western learning” in Late Qing Period and the prosperity of translation during the May Fourth Period, the translation practice underwent a regular development since the founding of new China in 1949, despite the fact that the interaction and communication between the east and the west decreased during that time. However, the literary translation in China declined during the 1960s and reached its lowest ebb because of Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Sun (2018, p. 3) even reported that during the Cultural Revolution not a single work of foreign literature was published in China between May 1966 and November 1971. During this period, most foreign literature was neglected; even the proletarian literature from other countries was twisted and denied; both translation practice and the academic research ran into stagnation. Nevertheless, the description of the translation of foreign literary works during the Cultural Revolution as “complete absence” is lopsided.

Since the conference on publishing work presided by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971, the translation of foreign literature increased gradually, which explains why the achievement of literary translation was mostly made in the latter phase of Cultural Revolution. Ma (2003) classified the translation of foreign literature in China during this period as three categories, namely, openly accessible translations, translations with restricted circulation and unpublished translations. The openly accessible translations were single in type, the original texts of which were mostly from China’s allies at that time. The literary works of western capitalist countries were not favoured, however. The original texts of translations with restricted circulation were mainly from Soviet Union, and Japan comes second. Literature from other countries were also chosen as the source text, including Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz’s play *Dziady* [Forefathers’ Eve]. And the unpublished translations refer to the spontaneous translation by the Chinese translators during

this period, including Mu Dan's translation of *Don Juan* and Ji Xianlin's translation of *Ramayana*. The first wave of translations of *The Painted Bird* overlapped with the complete stillstand of literary translation in China. André Lefevere, the representative of polysystem studies of translation from the United States, regards translation as the rewriting of the original text, which reflects ideology and poetics and manipulates literature in certain ways (Lefevere, 1992a, p. xi). Translation is bounded by social, historical, and cultural context. While other countries paid attention to and showed interests of *The Painted Birds*, this book was not the text choice for China in the 1970s due to the fact that it didn't cope with the mainstream ideology then. Hereby, the translation and broadcast of *The Painted Bird* in China was lagged behind.

Ever since the end of Cultural Revolution announced by The 11th National Congress of the CPC, there was a recovery and revival of literary translation. The Cultural Revolution was over and the country opened to the West, which brought increased interest in translated literature, previously restricted for years from the public space and unavailable to the audience. This in turn stimulated translation activity (Fan, 1999). Qi uses the metaphor of a tsunami to describe the strength and scale of people's eagerness to study, read and get familiar with foreign ideas, through imported literary works in translation (Qi, 2012, p. 136). The put-forward and enforcement of the reform and opening-up in 1978 was an even greater promotion of literary translation. The development of translation studies fit the goal of the reform and opening-up and facilitated it, too. Huang (2008) states that

the reform and opening-up brought about the unprecedented development of translation course in China; while translation, as the pilot force to serve the demand of reform and opening-up, exerted its effects to promote the fast-changing modernization (p. 7).

Translation coexists with times. The translation boom caused by the reform and opening-up is "large in scale, various in style, and complex in mechanism" (Hu, 2019, p. 106). The translation achievement was much remarkable in the aspects of level, quality and significance, thus served as the bridge of intercultural communication between China and other countries.

In the 1980s, with the translation of foreign literature developing fast and profoundly, the output value of the publishing industry increased largely. On the basis of the economic take-off, Chinese people have become increasingly liberated and open-minded. Openness and pluralism, as a result, became the theme of development, which brought China's literary translation into a new era, with text choices more diversified, and theme more various. Texts from more countries were translated and introduced in China and many translated works were published as a collection or a series. The drive for "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" facilitates the blending and merging of thoughts,

schools, styles, and genres. The first and the follow-up Chinese renderings of *The Painted Bird* are all the products during this period of time, which conforms to Chinese people's urgent demand to get to know and communicate with the foreign culture.

The choice of translation strategy is related to the choice of texts and the adoption of translation methods (Baker, 2004, p. 240). Ever since Yan Fu's proposal of "faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance" while translating Thomas Huxley's work *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays* in the late 19th century, this doctrine has been highly evaluated in Chinese translation studies, in which "faithfulness" is regarded as the premier rule of translation. In his review of relevant features of the view of translation in China, Tan (2019) finds that "the most outstanding characteristic of Chinese translation theory has been adherence to the fundamental principle that a translation should be Xin or 'faithful' to the source" (p. 22), regardless of the historical circumstances.

However, although the translation practice is attached to the Chinese translation tradition, it cannot be denied that it is also closely related to the microscopic historical background and the particular characteristic of thought and ideological system of Chinese people (Lan, 2018, p. 12). Lefevere (1992b, pp. 11–12) viewed a culture as a complex system composed by multiple subsystems, literature being one of them. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator should combine the historical context of his own and that of the target reader, in order to re-interpret the original text. Such translation process involves the faithful transference of the semantic meaning in the linguistic perspective, as well as the rewriting based on cultural and ideological elements, and the decision on what to translate and what to omit. Instead of the preference for the translation strategy of domestication, Chinese translators of this time re-examined domestication and foreignization, and sought a balance between the two. It can explain while faithfulness is adopted as the basic doctrine of translation, the application of omission/deletion, and the semantic changes of the original text are also seen in most Chinese renderings. As will be shown, the examined translation of *The Painted Bird* followed them all.

In the following section, a more detailed analysis on the selected Chinese rendering with the Polish/German renderings of *The Painted Bird* as references will be made.

3. Textual analysis of Chinese translation

The Chinese rendering of *The Painted Bird* is different from the Polish version and German version which show the specificity of a manipulative nature. Besides, the translator also made some changes in order to cater to the needs of Chinese readers.

3.1. Comparative study with German and Polish renderings

The first chapter of the original text is the background introduction of the story. The setting in the Chinese version is 东欧某大城市 [literally: some major city in East Europe] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 2) which is consistent with the one in the original text, whilst the language used by the protagonist is unidentified. The boy's "temporary foster parents" and his father's "prewar anti-Nazi activities" (Kosinski, 1995, p. 3) in paragraph 3 are translated as 临时养父养母 (Kosinski, 2000, p. 3), meaning exactly the same as the original text, and 战前参加过反纳粹活动 (Kosinski, 2000, p. 3) meaning "participated in the anti-Nazi activities in the prewar period", which is also consistent with the original text, although slightly weakened. Unlike the substitution with "Zwangsverschleppung" [literally: forced deportation] in the German version (Harmon, 2022, p. 61), "forced labor" (Kosinski, 1995, p. 3) is rendered literally as 强制劳役 [literally: involuntary servitude] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 3): Chinese readers are no strangers to this concept nor particularly sensitive to it. As one of the victims of World War II, a large number of Chinese captives and male civilians between the ages 20 to 50 years were forced to serve hard labour for the military projects of Japan.

The expressions "differed ethnically from the region of his birth" (Kosinski, 1995, p. 3) about the local peasants, "Gypsy or Jewish stray" (p. 4) about the boy and "the harshest penalties" (p. 4) regarding the possible consequences of helping Gypsies or Jews are translated without prettification as 人们的种族同他的故乡完全不同 [literally: the races of people there are totally different from his hometown] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 3), 吉普赛或犹太流浪儿 [literally: Gypsy or Jewish stray] (p. 3), and 最残酷的惩处 [literally: the cruellest punishment] (p. 3), respectively. It is different from the German rendering (Harmon, 2022, p. 61), in which the tone is softened. Besides, the somehow disturbing observation on the persecuted nations: "whose place was in ghettos and extermination camps" was translated faithfully as 吉普赛人和犹太人的最终归宿是贫民窟和死亡集中营 (Kosinski, 1992, p. 4), which intensifies the sarcastic tone of the original text. The exculpation of the local peasants' ignorance the brutality: "Though not by choice" (Kosinski, 1995, p. 4) is translated as 尽管他们不情愿如此 (Kosinski, 1992, p. 4), meaning "in spite of their reluctance" in back translation, which preserves the original meaning, unlike the Polish rendering in which the translator neglects the sarcasm (Barciński, 2022, p.37), arguably in order to be politically correct.

"Mysterious beings, phantoms, ghosts", and "vampires" (Kosinski, 1995, p. 20) in Chapter 2 are translated literally as 神怪 [literally: spirits], 幽灵 [literally: phantoms], 鬼怪 [literally: ghosts] and 吸血鬼 [literally: vampires], respectively (Kosinski, 2000, p. 16). The translator does not try to reinforce the nationality of the boy as the Polish version does by translating the above-listed terms in accordance with Slavic mythology (Barciński, 2022, pp. 27–28). Both references to historical fact: "The partisans had become divided into factions" (Kosinski, 1995,

p. 68) and “land reform” (p. 68) are rendered literally as *游击队已分裂成两派* (Kosinski, 2000, pp. 45–50) and *土地改革* (p. 50) respectively. There is no further explanation of the historic backgrounds as in the Polish version, probably because the translator lacks the Polish translator’s cultural, historical background knowledge of these events.

The somewhat shocking explanation of the German’s alleged superiority is softened in Chinese rendering:

Source Text:

[...] because he gobbled up the brains of the Poles, Russians, Gypsies and Jews (Kosinski, 1995, p. 90).

Target Text:

因为德国人把波兰人、俄国人、吉普赛人和犹太人的智力全吞下去了 [literally: because the Germans swallowed the intelligence of the Poles, Russians, Gypsies and Jews] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 66).

The translator substituted the word “brain” with “intelligence”. The same explanation is reportedly introduced in other translations, so that formidable cannibalistic image of the Germans has been softened.

The German officer’s suitability to “order the death of inferior, forlorn creatures” (Kosinski, 1995, p. 113) is translated faithfully as *下令处死什么低级可怜的生物* [literally: order the execution of some inferior, poor creatures] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 81). Compared with the prettification in the German version (Harmon, 2022, p. 62), the Chinese rendering tends to manifest the past sin and suffering directly.

In the following paragraph, “awaited his decision” is translated as *等待着他的裁决* [literally: awaited his verdict] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 82). Such change in meaning undoubtedly intensifies the dramatic effect, no matter if the translator made this modification on purpose or not: the German officer was depicted as an omnipotent and powerful authority, which further tells the reader how the mind of the protagonist, as a young boy, has been twisted by the chaos of war.

Another example is the statement about the Kalmuks:

Source Text:

[...] joined the Germans who permitted them to loot and rape in the manner of their war customs and manly traditions (Kosinski, 1995, p. 175).

Target Text:

他们加入了德军，而德国人允许他们按照他们的战争惯例和男人传统掠夺奸淫。 [literally: They joined the German army, who permitted them to loot and rape based on their war customs and men’s traditions] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 119).

In the above example, the word “permitted” is translated as “允许”, which means in back translation that it has no connotation of “authorisation” as in the original text or understates it on purpose as in the German version (Harmon, 2022, p. 64). The last sentence “I was somehow disappointed; the war seemed to be over” (Kosinski, 1995, p. 182) is not omitted as in the Polish version (Barciński, 2022, p. 41). Understandably, the Polish translator wants the readers to remain empathetic to the little boy. However, the Chinese version readers are, to some extent, in a more neutral position. Even though Chinese people are as empathetic as any other nationals, they do not have the same level of relatedness to the Polish/Jewish/Gypsy boy. Therefore, the need to translate faithfully prevails over the need to protect a certain imagery of the boy.

The information about Soviet Union is also processed differently:

Source Text:

[e]very Soviet citizen was in debt to this man for everything he possessed and for all his good fortune (Kosinski, 1995, p. 188).

Target Text:

每一个苏联人都为自己幸运和幸福对他感恩戴德 [literally: Every Soviet citizen is deeply grateful to him for the fortune and happiness he has] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 127).

This sentence is reportedly omitted in the German version (Harmon, 2022, p. 64), arguably to prevent the infiltration of the communist ideology.

Another observation of the communist practices is as follows:

Source Text:

The group decided what could make him more useful and what could reduce his usefulness to others. (Kosinski, 1995, p. 192).

Target Text:

由集体决定怎样才能使他更有用、怎样使他对其他人有用 [literally: the group decided how to make him more useful, and how to make him useful to others] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 130).

It can be regarded as a translation error, but the expressive effect is still close to the original text and does not interfere with the understanding of the context. Because the communist ideology and personality cult that were once dominant in the Soviet Union are easy to understand for Chinese readers, the relevant information has not been concealed in the Chinese version.

3.2. Other characters of Chinese rendering

Apart from the details discussed in the above section, Wang Zhang applies literal translation when rendering the words referring to local people: “man” is translated as 男人, “woman” as 女人, “adolescent male” as 男孩, and “old woman” as 老太婆 throughout the text; all of them are neutral words. As for the pronouns, there are no derogatory words as the ones in the Polish version (see Chapter 3). Instead, the translator follows the original text and applies literal translation without comments or judgements or trying to guide the readers. However, there is one exception: the expression “the Black One” (Kosinski, 1995, p. 20) used by Olga to address the protagonist is translated as 黑娃娃 [literally: the black kiddo] (Kosinski, 2000, p. 15). The original words are neutral, but the word choice of “娃娃” [literally: kiddo] in the Chinese translation is an intimate way to address the young by the elders. This intervention softens the harsh image of Olga to some extent.

In this rendering, the translation of all the names of people and places applies transliteration to give the story an exotic feeling. What is worth mentioning is that in some of the other Chinese versions, the translators use foot notation to ensure the completeness of information.

What is more, different degrees of deletion can be found in all the Chinese renderings. The large-scale deletion in Wang Zhang’s translation is worth discussing in more detail. Based on the comparison between the original text and the target text and statistical analysis, the following deletions can be confirmed: 1) paragraph 5 of Chapter 5 (Kosinski, 1995, p. 43) that mentions two saints of the Catholic church and their namedays deciding the migration of storks. This reference sounds alien to the Chinese reader who is not familiar with the cult of saints; 2) paragraphs 36–50 of Chapter 9 (pp. 104–107) that depict, in detail, a rape committed by a peasant on a Jewish girl; 3) paragraphs 9–21 of Chapter 12 (pp. 145–147) that picture a young woman’s erotic vagaries with the boy; 4) paragraphs 39–41 of Chapter 13 (p. 151), describing an act of zoophilia; 5) paragraphs 8–18 of Chapter 14 (pp. 163–166), in which sexual intercourse is reported; 6) paragraphs 26–33 (pp. 176–178) paragraph 37 (Kosinski, 1995, p. 179); and paragraph 39 (p. 179) of Chapter 15.

The deleted contents can be divided into two types: one is about culture-loaded information, for example the contents connected with Biblical characters or stories. Preserving these contents might cause confusion among the readers; yet too many footnotes might interrupt the reading experience, thus paragraph 5 of Chapter 5 is deleted.

The remaining deletions belong to the second type where the information is too bloody, cruel, immoral, and related to coitus. Such scenes include a rape of a Jewish girl in Chapter 9, the scene where the young woman Ewka has coitus with the underage protagonist, and where bestiality and incest is described in Chapter 12, the scene where Labina has sex with her customers in Chapter 14, and the scenes where the Kalmuks compete in raping women in different ways.

The acts of sexual violence reveal the increasing decay of humanity, the description of which partly presents the savagery of human beings at that time and the tremendous damage brought by the war. It is in coherence with the message of the whole story. However, the anti-traditional and anti-moral information is difficult to perceive for the conservative Chinese readers. As a work listed among *Translated Collections of American Post-modernist Literature*, the translation deleted the above contents in order to attract a larger audience.

4. Conclusion

The Painted Bird is precisely peculiar in description and sharply cruel in the close-up depiction of violence. Such literary work deserves to be sampled repeatedly instead of being buried and ignored in the immense ocean of literary works. In the light of so many Chinese translations of this book, there were also readers expressing their expectation for a better style of writing. Comparatively speaking, Wang Zhang's translation is fluent in expression and rich in sympathy. It has reached its aim of broadcasting the American post-modernist literature.

Through the comparative analysis of the Chinese version, the Polish version, the German version, and the independent analysis of the Chinese version, the translator's interventions in this rendering are listed as the following:

Table 1. Translator's Interventions in Zhang's Rendering

Omission/deletion	Some culture-loaded information and a great deal of anti-traditional and anti-moral information are deleted or down-played
Addition	Barely seen
Semantic change	A few: for the purpose of emphasis
Style/tenor	No archaisation; all the language used is straight-forward to go with the identity of the protagonist as a child
Evaluation and emotional shifts	None; faithfulness is the top priority

All in all, the Chinese rendering of this book is quite distinct from the German rendering and the Polish rendering. The Chinese version of *The Painted Bird* retains a neutral perspective to be as faithful as the original text with some understandable deletion to better meet the needs of its readers. It reveals the cruelty of the war, and the catastrophic destruction to the society and to humanity. In the meantime, it takes into consideration the psychologically conservative reading habits of Chinese readers. With the omission of certain violent and sexual scenes, it meets the requirements of publication regulations in China.

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