

The Translator's Adaptation and Choice: A Study of the English Translation of To Live from an Eco-Translatology Perspective

Kexin Liang

*Department of English, School of Foreign Studies, Jiangsu University of Science and Technology,
Zhenjiang, China
kexinliang@stu.just.edu.cn*

Abstract. Based on ecological translation, this article examines Michael Berry's English translation of Yu Hua's novel "Living". Ecological translation was proposed by Hu Gengshen in 2001. It places translation in a dynamic ecological environment and emphasizes the multi-dimensional adaptive decision-making of translators. Translators are neither passive transmitters nor unrestrained re-creators, but active actors, choosing from various feasible options to maximize the ecological adaptability of the translation. Through a typical bilingual translation, this article analyzes Berry's translation choice from the three dimensions of language, culture and communication. At the language level, translators have made flexible adjustments in vocabulary conversion, syntactic reconstruction and discourse connection. At the cultural level, he dealt with Chinese images, folklore and value systems through precise alienation and naturalization and selective annotations. In terms of communication, he uses the reader-centered strategy to meet the cognitive needs of the target readers and realize the author's communication intention. The results of the study confirm that ecological translation is an effective framework for literary translation criticism, and show that Berry's translation constitutes a coherent adaptive selection practice. The study also provides practical guidance for translators engaged in cross-cultural literary exchanges.

Keywords: eco-translatology, translator adaptation, To Live, literary translation, cultural mediation

1. Introduction

Yu Hua's *To Live* (Huozhe, 1993) ranks among the most celebrated works of contemporary Chinese fiction, tracing the life of Xu Fugui through war, land reform, and the Cultural Revolution [1]. Written in plain, unadorned prose that mimics peasant oral narrative, the novel conveys the philosophy: 'Man lives for the sake of living itself, not for any purpose beyond living.' Michael Berry—a professor of modern Chinese literature at the University of California, Los Angeles—translated the novel into English, published by Anchor Books in 2003. The translation has been widely studied as a successful case of cross-cultural literary mediation [2]: it received positive

critical reception, entered East Asian literature curricula at several American universities, and stimulated broader Western interest in contemporary Chinese fiction [3]. Its translation demands sensitivity to folk register, dense cultural imagery, and the novel's existentialist core.

Eco-translatology, developed by Hu Gengshen from 2001 onward, conceptualizes translation as the translator's adaptive-selective behavior within a 'translation ecological environment' composed of source text, target culture, readership, and other stakeholder forces [4, 5]. The translator actively adapts to multi-dimensional ecological pressures and selects optimal strategies accordingly [4, 6]. Despite growing scholarship applying the framework to Howard Goldblatt's translations of Mo Yan and Lao She [7, 8, 9, 10] and to subtitling and public-signage translation [5], systematic three-dimensional analyses of Berry's *To Live* remain rare [7, 8]. This paper addresses the gap by applying Hu's macro-meso-micro framework to representative bilingual examples, verifying the theory's analytical power and illuminating the principles underlying Berry's practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Core concepts

Ecological translation draws on Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest" and believes that successful translation is a translation that can best adapt to its ecological environment [4, 6]. The translation ecological environment is an overall system composed of the source text and its cultural background, the target readers and their culture, and stakeholders including authors, translators and publishers [5]. Adaptation refers to the strategic adjustment made by translators to meet these needs - not only to internalize the language and cultural connotation of the source text, but also to take into account the norms and communication expectations of the target readers [11]. Selection refers to the specific strategy chosen after adaptation; translators will actively choose from various feasible plans to maximize ecological adaptability [4, 5].

2.2. Three analytical dimensions

Hu divides the ecological environment into three dimensions [11]. The language dimension (micro level) focuses on the differences in vocabulary, syntax and discourse between the source language and the target language - translators need to select words, reconstruct sentences and maintain coherence to generate a natural and fluent target text. The cultural dimension (macro level) involves the coordination between the specificity of the source culture and the accessibility of the target culture: translators need to deal with cultural images, folk customs and potential value systems to ensure that the target text does not alienate readers while conveying cultural significance. The communication dimension (middle view level) focuses on the function and audience of translation: the knowledge that readers already have, the emotional and aesthetic effects that translators hope to achieve, and the acceptance of the translation [12]. These three dimensions interact organically: cultural adaptation guides language selection, while language adjustment serves the goal of communication [12]. This integrated structure is a unique advantage of eco-translation - it prevents analysts from cutting individual word selection from cultural or rhetorical backgrounds, and guides practitioners to make overall decisions.

3. Linguistic adaptation and selection

3.1. Lexical choice

Berry's lexical strategy is context-sensitive rather than formulaic. Two occurrences of *xixiao* ('smiling/giggling') illustrate adaptive selection [7]:

Example 1 (SL): 他嘻嘻笑着说: "今天运气真好。"

Example 1 (TL): He said jokingly, "I'm having such a good day."

Example 2 (SL): 孩子嘻嘻笑个不停, 让人摸不着头脑。

Example 2 (TL): The child kept giggling, leaving everyone baffled.

In Example 1, "*xixiao*" indicates a joking conversation tone; Berry chose the adverb "jokingly" to express the attitude rather than the actual voice. In Example 2, the same word describes the child's repeated laughter; "giggling" not only conveys the characteristics of the sound, but also reflects the repetitiveness. This context-driven difference shows that translators interpret the appearance of each word in the local narrative ecology, rather than mechanically corresponding [7]. For metaphorical language, Berry retains images under the condition of strong cross-cultural applicability, but adjusts the strategy when the target readers understand the risk:

Example 3 (SL): 父亲哭的声音像唢呐般凄厉。

Example 3 (TL): Father's crying was woodwind-like, piercingly sorrowful.

The unique sound (a Chinese oboed instrument) in the novel is replaced by "the tone similar to a woodwind instrument", which retains its sharp and mournful sound quality without additional annotations. Berry has always used simple colloquial English words throughout the novel, echoing the folk narrative style of the novel, so that the translation is rooted in daily colloquial language [11].

3.2. Syntactic restructuring

Chinese favors short paratactic clauses; English requires more explicit subordination. Berry merges Chinese clause chains into English complex sentences:

Example 4 (SL): 扔了手里的锄头就要往城里跑, 跑出了十来步, 我不敢跑了.....

Example 4 (TL): I threw down my hoe and ran toward town. Hardly had I taken ten steps when I stopped.

The original text contains three broken sentences. Berry used "and" to connect the first two broken sentences and changed the sudden pause to "Hardly had I take...when" - an English idiom, indicating a sudden turn, which not only retains the characteristics of compact speech speed, but also conforms to syntactic norms. In addition, when the original Chinese text omits the subject or uses non-connected words, Berry usually adds clear subjects and conjunctions. For example, the sentence "rich looks at the sky and feels that the sun is a little dazzling" uses "and felt" to connect two junctantoposed subordinate clauses. These adjustments reflect the systematic adaptation to the grammar ecology of the target language [11].

3.3. Discourse cohesion

Berry uses the English tense form to reconstruct the time structure: when narrating the reverse, the translation changes from the general past tense to the past perfect tense, which shows the misalignment of time. At the scene boundary, he added a transition mark ("then", "later that day"), while Chinese directly started a new paragraph. When there is a lack of a clear referring object in the dialogue, he will provide noun phrases to avoid ambiguity.

Example 5 (SL): 福贵问: "她好吗?"/家珍点点头。

Example 5 (TL): "How is our daughter?" Fugui asked. "She's doing fine," Jiazhen replied, nodding her head.

The noun phrase "our daughter" and the pronoun "she" clarify the alleged object that Chinese readers originally take for granted. Although these additions are small, they accumulate to ensure that English readers understand the coherence of the text [9]. In a word, Berry's adjustment at the discourse level - tense adjustment, transitional marking and clarification of the alleged object - constitutes a coherent micro-strategy to bridge the narrative conventions of Chinese and English literary prose. This shows that translators not only read the original text sentence by sentence, but also regard it as an interconnected narrative ecosystem, which needs to be systematically adjusted to suit the reading habits of the target language.

4. Cultural adaptation and selection

4.1. Transmission of cultural imagery

To Live is dense with culturally embedded referents lacking direct English equivalents. Berry's primary strategy is foreignization with annotation—retaining the Chinese term in pinyin and appending a brief gloss.

Example 6 (SL): 他离家十里地远就开始想念家里的炕头。

Example 6 (TL): He began to miss the "kang", the heated brick bed at home, when he was still ten li (about five kilometers) away from the village.

The exotic word "kang" highlights the special nature of Chinese culture, and the annotations in parentheses ensure a minimum understanding. The traditional grain units "stick" and "bean" also adopt a similar structure: retain pinyin and use parentheses to explain, even for readers who are not familiar with traditional Chinese rural life, they can retain the cultural connotation of the novel. This dual treatment method satisfies two conflicting ecological pressures at the same time: not only to be faithful to the cultural characteristics of the original text, but also to take into account the understanding of the target readers [11]. When the original text is directly retained and lacks sufficient cultural connotation to make up for its vague meaning, Berry turned to the presentation of literal translation and interpretation:

Example 7 (SL): 这种人就是典型的泥菩萨过江。

Example 7 (TL): Such a person is just like a clay Bodhisattva crossing a river—hardly able to save himself, let alone others.

The idiom's visual image is retained (foreignization of form) while its figurative meaning is immediately explicated (domestication of semantics). This hybrid technique exemplifies optimal selection under competing ecological constraints [7, 11].

4.2. Cultural customs and values

The wedding ceremony, folk divination and Confucian family hierarchy mentioned in the novel are relatively unfamiliar to most Western readers. The gong in the wedding scene is translated as "a loud oboe"; the feng shui master (yin and yang fairy) is translated as "the feng shui master of choosing auspicious days" - this concept has been spread in Western culture [9]. When Confucian ethics was threatened, Berry clearly presented the cultural subtext through supplementary explanation: when the rich gambling ruined the family property and his father died of excessive fright, the translation clearly pointed out that he "can't stand the shame and disappointment brought by his son to the

family", which reflects the habit of Chinese readers. The ethical logic of face. This supplementary explanation belongs to the communication dimension of ecological translation [9].

The core philosophical thought of the novel - "People live for themselves, not for any purpose beyond life" - has been faithfully translated into Western languages without any localization [11]. Berry believes that the narrative context can give meaning to this oriental existentialist assertion and reflect the cultural differences themselves. When the character expresses fatalistic acceptance (it is up to fate), Berry retains the narrative voice of the character and does not make any editorial intervention, which not only respects the autonomy of the reader, but also maintains the cultural integrity of the original text [12].

5. Communicative adaptation and selection

5.1. Meeting readers' needs

At the communicative level, Berry anticipates Anglophone audiences' informational and affective needs. Cultural annotations bridge gaps through parenthetical glosses, keeping the narrative flow uninterrupted [9]. In climactic scenes, he calibrates emotional register through understatement:

SL: 家珍闭上眼睛，眼角流出两行泪。福贵轻声喜她，没有回应。

TL: Jiazhen closed her eyes as two lines of tears trickled down. Fugui called to her softly, but there was no answer.

'No answer' rather than 'she had died' mirrors the Chinese text's oblique treatment of death while generating acute emotional charge for readers familiar with literary understatement. The translator's selection here is doubly adaptive: it respects the source aesthetic and simultaneously meets target readers' literary expectations—a convergence that exemplifies successful communicative adaptation [8].

5.2. Realizing communicative intent

Yu Hua's creative intention is to show the lives of ordinary people, so as to witness their resilience and trigger people to think about survival. Berry further reinforced this intention: in the end monologue of Fugui, short parallel clauses progress in a rhythmic way, enhancing the philosophical weight of the work without deviating from the concise language [12]. Berry also expands the scope of dissemination of the work by using simple vocabulary and clear sentences to ensure that readers who are not familiar with China can also understand and be moved by it - thus broadening the ecological position of the text in the target language world [3].

5.3. Translation strategies and effects

Berry's translation practice integrates a variety of complementary strategies. Literal translation and interpretation complement each other: culturally unique nouns maintain literal translation, while idioms are presented in the form of interpretation and supplemented by explanatory annotations. Additions and deletions also complement each other: necessary background information is added in parentheses; redundant exclamations common in spoken Chinese narratives are omitted if they appear stiff in English prose. Externalization and naturalization are dynamically adjusted: cultural terms with high significance are externalized to highlight their Chinese characteristics; the combination of low significance is naturalized to reduce the cognitive load [13]. Keywords related to survival - "live", "for survival" and "life" - appear at a strategic frequency, strengthening the core

of the theme [12]. The positive response of the translation - being included in the curriculum, academic citations and having a wide readership - confirms that these adaptive choices are effective in language ecology [3, 13].

6. Conclusion

This article uses the three-dimensional framework of ecological translation to analyze Michael Berry's English translation "Living". At the language level, context-sensitive vocabulary selection, syntactic reconstruction and discourse connection means ensure that the translation is fluent and easy to read, while being faithful to the original content. At the cultural level, the carefully adjusted alienation and naturalization - supplemented by targeted annotations - not only retains the Chinese cultural characteristics of the novel, but also does not alienate English readers. At the communication level, the reader-centered strategy realizes Yu Hua's creative intention, strengthens it, and expands the emotional and philosophical connotation of the novel. In summary, these findings verify the effective perspective of ecological translation as literary translation criticism: it not only captures the "content" of translation decision-making, but also explores the "reasons behind it", places translation selection in the broader ecological logic of the translation environment, and proves that Berry's translation constitutes a coherent adaptation. Sexual selection practice [4, 11, 12].

It should be noted that there are some limitations in this article. This analysis is limited to one novel and one translator, and the conclusion needs to be verified through a broader corpus comparison. Some assertions about reader acceptance are based on anecdotal evidence rather than systematic evidence. Future research can extend ecological translation to Berry's other translations, apply quantitative adaptation degree indicators [5, 13], or combine ecological theory with cognitive translation research to explore the decision-making process. The quantitative analysis of the literature [13] of ecological translation research shows that this field is still developing, leaving a wide space for further case studies. Despite these limitations, this study still provides practical guidance: when translating literary works with rich cultural connotations, translators should cultivate a dynamic and multi-dimensional ecological awareness and flexibly respond to conflicting pressures such as the faithfulness of the source text, cultural adjustment and the acceptance of target readers.

References

- [1] Yu, H. (2012). *To Live*. Writer's Publishing House.
- [2] Yu, H. (2003). *To Live: A Novel* (M. Berry, Trans.). Anchor Books. Original work published 1993.
- [3] Jiang, Y. (2015). Study on the characteristics of Howard Goldblatt's English translation of *Red Sorghum Family*. *Foreign Languages and Translation*, 41(2), 65-70.
- [4] Gengshen, H. (2003). Translation as adaptation and selection. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 11(4), 283-291.
- [5] Hu, G. (2011). Research foci and theoretical tenets of eco-translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 32(2), 5-9.
- [6] Hu, G. (2004). *Translation as adaptation and selection*. Hubei Education Press.
- [7] Shen, D. (2013). Howard Goldblatt's translation from an eco-translatology perspective. *Journal of Wuyi University: Social Science Edition*, (3), 55-59.
- [8] Sun, H. (2014). On Howard Goldblatt's translating of Mo Yan's novels. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (5), 98-105.
- [9] Dong, S., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Studies on Howard Goldblatt's translation works with the application of adaptation and selection in translation. In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Economics and Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (EMEHSS 2018)* (pp. 526-529). Atlantis Press.
- [10] Luo, G. (2018). Analysis on Howard Goldblatt's translation of Mo Yan's novels from the perspective of eco-translatology. In *Proceedings of the 2018 International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences*

and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018). Atlantis Press.

[11] Hu, G. (2014). *Eco-translatology: An interdisciplinary perspective of translation studies*. The Commercial Press.

[12] Song, Z., & Hu, G. (2016). Ecological interpretation of some key issues in translation studies. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 37(1), 21-26.

[13] Xiong, X., Qin, H., & Liu, X. (2023). The evolution and development of ecotranslatology studies based on the analysis of CiteSpace mapping knowledge domains. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, Article 712. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02104-z>