Exploring the Field of Translating Chinese Contemporary Literature:
A Case Study of Howard Goldblatt’s Translation Habitus

Xuanming Lu
lxm178@gmail.com
Howard Goldblatt

Arguably the most prolific and influential American translator of Chinese Literature, Howard Goldblatt’s 70+ translated novels, several anthologies and many essays and articles have made him one of the most well-known translators and sinologists of our time.
Habitus

It is sometimes believed that Pierre Bourdieu is the inventor of the concept of habitus. In fact, it is an old philosopheme, originating in the thought of Aristotle and of the medieval Scholastics, which the French sociologist retrieved and reworked after the 1960s.¹

Habitus

Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions. It expresses first the result of an organizing action; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination.²

Field: A network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions.\textsuperscript{3}

- The Translation of Chinese Novels into English

Agent: Individuals, institutions, etc. in the field.

Goldblatt’s Translation Habitus

1. Life Trajectory
2. Translation Thoughts
3. Internalization of the Influence of the Field
Internalization of the Influence of the Field

Goldblatt’s first published translation (book version)

*The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*

1978, Indiana University Press

Chen Ruoxi (陳若曦)

*Mayor Yin (《尹縣長》)*

1976, Yuan Jing Press (遠景出版社，臺灣)
Letters, notes and contracts, which are known as paratexts, help uncover the translation process through which translators, authors, editors and other agents are interacting with each other in the field. The data also provides a much clearer explanation for the making of Goldblatt’s translation habitus. ⁴

⁴ The data, such as letters between Goldblatt and authors and editors, notes and contracts, was collected from an archive of the library of the University of Oklahoma by the presenter, with consent of the director of the archive. Because of the issue of copyright, the raw materials that the presenter collected cannot be made available in the powerpoint slides.

Citation of the data in the powerpoint slides: Howard Goldblatt Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, Chinese Literature Translation Archive, University of Oklahoma Libraries.
Two Major Conflicts over the Publication of *Mayor Yin*

1. The Naming of the Translated Work
2. The Publishing Schedule

Agents Involved

- Howard Goldblatt (葛浩文)
- Nancy Ing (殷張蘭熙)
- Chen Ruoxi (陳若曦)
- Joseph Lau (劉紹銘)
- Leo Ou-fan Lee (李歐梵)
- John Gallman (印大出版社主任)

“I definitely do not like Lau’s and Lee’s choice of Mayor Yin.” - in a letter that Goldblatt wrote to Chen Ruoxi on Sept. 6, 1977.

“If you/Nancy/Chen agree to it, I would like to see Mayor Yin and Other Stories as the book’s title. Change Magistrate to Mayor; Magistrate appears only in traditional fiction.” - in a letter that Joseph wrote to Goldblatt on Oct. 12, 1977.
“In the issue of Mayor vs. Magistrate, however, I still prefer the latter. My argument with Mayor is that it is incorrect and could easily be misleading, as well as a reflection on the translators’ ability.” - in a letter that Goldblatt wrote to Joseph on Oct. 15, 1977.

“John Gallman would like to change the title from Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Cultural Revolution to Chairman Mao is a Rotten Egg and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” - in a letter that Leo wrote to Nancy and Goldblatt on Dec. 21, 1977.
“To a potential readership, the new title will seem offensive and it is a distortion of the author’s intent; the title story of the volume is neither the most important nor the best; the title will be a disappointment to the most obvious market. Any trace of sensationalism or political bias will have an adverse effect on this volume.” - in a letter that Goldblatt wrote to Gallman on Jan. 1, 1978.

“Irving, John and myself finally agreed to change the title back, with a slight polish from me, into *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.*” in a letter that Leo wrote to Goldblatt on Jan. 9, 1978.
Goldblatt’s Translation Habitus

- Fidelity and readability.
- Free of political bias and sensationalism.
The Publishing Schedule (Selected Letters)

“I also have written to Yeh Shan at Washington U. to see about possibility of their cooperating if in the end, we do have to publish this book over here...We really can’t afford to wait another year or so for this to come out...the climate is so uncertain, who knows what will come next?!” - in a letter that Nancy wrote to Goldblatt on Jul. 25, 1977.

“One of my concerns is that if I. U. P. takes over a year to get this out, it may prove too late, as the political situation now is so uncertain.” - in a letter that Nancy wrote to Goldblatt on Aug. 18, 1977.
Conclusion

- Overlap and interaction between fields, such as the field of translation of Chinese novels and the field of international politics, reveal the dynamic and social nature of translation profoundly.

- Goldblatt’s translation habitus was strengthened and almost intact through his interaction with other agents in the field.
Conclusion

- A comprehensive study of what is within and outside texts broadens the scope of translation studies and provides powerful explanations for some of the phenomena of translation.
Thank you!