

Translating the Avant-Garde: A Narratological and Stylistic Study of China's Avant-Garde Fiction in English Translation

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Abstract: Taking Wang Jing's edited volume *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* as the object of study, this paper draws on narratology and stylistics and adopts a comparative textual approach to examine how foregrounded language, narrative perspective, and non-linear narration are handled in the English translation. It further explores how translators' strategic choices affect the transmission of the experimental nature, aesthetic value, and thematic significance of these works. The study finds that semantic deviation is often preserved in full, whereas phonological and lexical deviations tend to be normalized or even omitted. Such tendencies may be related to the conventions of English usage, grammatical constraints, and the consideration of target readers' reception, but they may also weaken the literary value of the original texts. At the narrative level, although translators generally strive to retain narrative perspective, additions and omissions sometimes result in distortions; meanwhile, non-linear narrative structures are often simplified into linear forms through tense shifts and paragraph reorganization.

Keywords: China's avant-garde fiction, Translation, Foregrounding theory, Narrative perspective, Non-linear narration.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the rise of Chinese avant-garde literature has constituted a remarkable reform movement in the history of contemporary Chinese literature. Profoundly influenced by emerging Western literary trends, avant-garde novelists strove to break through established creative norms and embarked on bold formal experiments. They shifted the focus of literary creation from **what to write** to **how to write** (He, 2008), thereby advancing Chinese literature into the broad domain of modernism. In this process, the aesthetic significance of language and narration itself became their central concern, giving rise to a "carnival of narration" whose most distinctive hallmark was embodied in the cutting-edge experimentation with language and narrative strategies.

Since the 1990s, works of avant-garde literature have been gradually translated and introduced to the English-speaking world, attracting the attention of some Western translation scholars. Nevertheless, a comprehensive review of existing Chinese and international scholarship reveals that relevant discussions have largely centered on the historical context, artistic techniques of avant-garde literature (Jiang, 2011), and its connection with Western postmodernist literature (Shan, 2012), whereas systematic investigations into its translation history and translational dimensions remain relatively scarce (Wang, 2013).

Against this background, the present study focuses on the representation of experimental linguistic and narrative devices in avant-garde fiction during the translation process. Taking *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* compiled by Wang Jing as the research text—this anthology collects fourteen works by seven representative avant-garde writers including Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei, and offers a relatively comprehensive picture of the literary school—the study draws on the theory of "foregrounding" in literary stylistics and relevant concepts of narratology. It analyzes the handling of foregrounded language, narrative perspective, and

nonlinear narrative structures in the translated version, and further explores the translation strategies adopted by the translator in conveying the experimental features, aesthetic values, and even thematic connotations of avant-garde fiction, as well as their potential implications.

2. An Overview of Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction

Chinese avant-garde fiction, which emerged in the late 1980s, exhibits a multiplicity of naming forms and is often referred to as "experimental fiction" or "new fiction," a fact that in itself reflects the difficulty of its definition. Scholar Chen Xiaoming (2002) points out that the definition of Chinese avant-garde literature is inherently a complex issue. He defines Chinese avant-garde writers as those who possess a clear consciousness of subverting traditional writing norms and have initially formed their own distinctive narrative styles, with representative figures including Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Su Tong, Can Xue and other prominent writers.

In contrast to the earlier literary tradition that emphasized thematic significance and political enlightenment functions, avant-garde writers shifted their creative focus from "what to write" to "how to write," regarding the narrative act itself as an independent aesthetic object (Liu, 2002). By deconstructing historical narratives, cultural authority, and the established discursive order, their works present a distinct effect of alienation and defamiliarization, attempting to respond to the crisis of rigidified literary expression through bold formal experimentation.

At the linguistic level, the experimental nature of Chinese avant-garde fiction is mainly embodied in three interrelated aspects. First, writers achieve the foregrounding of language through means such as semantic leaps, unconventional lexical collocations, and phonological variations, creating a clear distinction between literary language and everyday language. Second, the text intentionally weakens or even dissolves the

ideographic function of narrative, replacing the verification of signified with the play of signifier (Liu, 2002). Third, the extensive use of color terms as a rhetorical strategy, with these color images carrying latent emotional flows and thematic implications, focusing on language's constructiveness and ambiguity.

At the narrative level, avant-garde writers systematically subverted the traditional realistic paradigm: they prioritized narrative mode over content, exposing the fictional nature of plots to divert readers' attention from "what happened" to "how it is narrated" (Zhai, 2008; Zhang, 2007); they used metanarrative strategies to highlight the narrator's presence; they employed multiple narrative perspectives, with marginal characters' perspectives often serving as a starting point for narrative ethics reconstruction (Zhou, 2003); and they adopted nonlinear, fragmented structures to deconstruct the continuity of traditional realism.

In short, through radical experiments with linguistic signs and narrative forms, Chinese avant-garde fiction has not only reshaped the possible boundaries of literary expression but also provided a rich and complex analytical dimension for subsequent translation studies. The materiality of its language and the multi-layered structure of its narration make translation no longer merely a technical activity of meaning transference, but a cross-linguistic formal dialogue and aesthetic negotiation.

3. Foregrounding Theory and Narratology: Theoretical Framework and Its Applicability

The linguistic analysis in this paper mainly relies on the foregrounding theory in literary stylistics, aiming to systematically examine the representation, transformation, or disappearance of experimental linguistic features in Chinese avant-garde fiction during the translation process. Avant-garde fiction is known for its highly formalized and unconventional linguistic practices, and its meaning production often relies not on plot progression but on deviation, repetition, and structural reinforcement at the linguistic level. Focusing on the core issue of "how language is highlighted," the foregrounding theory is highly compatible with the literary practices of avant-garde fiction in methodology, providing an operable analytical path for translation studies.

The theoretical origin of the foregrounding idea can be traced back to Aristotle's discussion on the enhancement of expressive effects through "unconventional language." He pointed out that the effective reinforcement of meaning can be achieved without undermining clarity by using rare words, metaphors, or unconventional expressions (Aristotle, 2003). In the early 20th century, Russian Formalism further proposed the concept of "defamiliarization," emphasizing that the fundamental mission of art is to break the automatization of language and perception, enabling readers to reawaken to the aesthetic function of form itself (Shklovsky, 1965). This aesthetic stance laid the theoretical foundation for the systematic construction of the foregrounding theory.

On this basis, Leech systematically elaborated on the

foregrounding theory and clearly proposed its two realization mechanisms: the first is syntagmatic foregrounding, mainly manifested in structural reinforcement methods such as repetition and parallelism; the second is paradigmatic foregrounding, that is, the selective deviation from conventional linguistic norms, which can be further subdivided into various types such as lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonetic, and register (Leech, 1991: 36). This study takes Leech's classification system as the theoretical fulcrum to conduct an in-depth analysis of whether the expressions in avant-garde fiction that significantly deviate from daily linguistic norms are retained, weakened, or reconstructed during the translation process.

By introducing the foregrounding theory, this paper converts the highly abstract concept of "linguistic experimentation" into describable and comparable stylistic phenomena, thereby transcending the subjective judgment merely at the level of "whether the style is faithful" and turning to the specific investigation of how translation intervenes in the formal tension and aesthetic function of the original work. This analytical path helps to reveal the way translation participates in the linguistic experiments of avant-garde literature and its inherent limitations.

At the narrative level, this paper mainly draws on narratological theory, focusing on the representation of narrative perspective and nonlinear narration in the translation of Chinese avant-garde fiction. By weakening the authenticity of the story, exposing the process of narrative construction, and breaking the linear time structure, Chinese avant-garde fiction objectifies the narrative act itself, making the traditional analytical path centered on plot and meaning difficult to effectively explain its formal characteristics. Therefore, the analytical framework of narratology regarding "who is seeing," "who is speaking," and time structure provides the necessary methodological support for this study.

In terms of narrative perspective, this paper adopts Shen Dan's (2004) classification system, which divides narrative perspective into omniscient perspective, internal perspective, first-person external perspective, and third-person external perspective. This classification helps to carefully analyze the juxtaposition, switching, and interweaving of multiple perspectives in avant-garde fiction, as well as the handling of these complex perspective structures during the translation process. As Genette (1980) clearly distinguished, "narrative perspective" involves "who is seeing," while "narrative voice" is related to "who is speaking," and the two do not always coincide in the text. Chinese avant-garde fiction often uses the perspective of marginal characters or the instability of perspective to create narrative uncertainty, so narratological theory can effectively reveal the changes in narrative effects generated when the translated text represents or reconstructs such perspective separation.

In terms of time structure, this paper distinguishes two basic concepts, "story time" and "narrative time," with the help of nonlinear narrative theory. Traditional realistic novels usually pursue a high degree of coincidence between the two to create temporal continuity and causal logic; in contrast, avant-garde fiction breaks the linear time order through techniques such as flashback, prolepsis, time jumps, and interweaving, forming a

fragmented, ruptured, and multi-layered narrative structure (Sheng, 1986). The analytical framework of nonlinear narrative theory can effectively examine whether the translated text maintains the rupture and tension of the time structure in the original work, or is reorganized into a more coherent linear narrative form during the translation process.

In general, narratological theory enables this paper to transcend the meaning comparison at the plot level and systematically examine the structural changes of Chinese avant-garde fiction in translation from the perspective of narrative mechanisms, thereby revealing how translation participates in the representation, weakening, or reconstruction of the narrative experiments of avant-garde literature. This theoretical perspective not only enriches the analytical dimensions of translation studies but also provides an important interpretive tool for understanding the fate of the formal experiments of avant-garde literature in cross-linguistic practices.

4. Translation of Foregrounded Language: Types of Deviation and Representational Strategies

Based on Leech's systematic classification of eight types of linguistic deviation, combined with a detailed examination of the source texts, this study finds that lexical deviation, semantic deviation, and phonological deviation are the three most representative and frequently employed foregrounding devices in the selected avant-garde fictions. In view of this, the following analysis focuses on the specific ways in which the translator handles these deviant expressions and evaluates the textual effects produced by the corresponding translation strategies.

4.1 Translation of Lexical Deviation

According to Leech's definition, lexical deviation mainly takes three forms: first, neologism, which refers to the creation of new lexical units through word-formation rules to expand the expressive boundaries of language; second, old word for new meaning, which endows a word with entirely new semantic connotations while retaining its form; third, functional conversion, also known as zero affixation, which means applying a linguistic unit to a new grammatical function without changing its morphological form (Leech, 1991: 43). A systematic analysis of the source texts reveals that among these three types of lexical deviation, *old word for new meaning* and *functional conversion* are most prominent and serve as the major means for avant-garde writers to achieve linguistic defamiliarization.

The following two examples selected from Yu Hua's 1986 typically exemplify the functional conversion of adjectives into nouns:

Example 1

他们尽情地在春天里走着，在欢乐里走着。(Yu, 2013: 10)

They were walking wholeheartedly into spring, walking happily through the streets. (Wang, 1998: 82)

Example 2

很多人在这温暖上走着，他们拖着自己倾斜的影子，影子在地上滑去时显得很愉快。(Yu, 2013: 33)

People streamed down the sidewalk, dragging their slanted shadows behind them. Their shadows, in turn, glided happily over the pavement, oblivious to the heat. (Wang, 1998: 102)

Yu Hua is renowned for his unique manipulation of language, and the foregrounded expressions in his works often endow the text with a grotesque aesthetic tone. In 1986, the nominal use of adjectives constitutes a recurring stylistic feature. According to the grammatical conventions of modern Chinese, words such as “欢乐” (joy) and “温暖” (warmth) usually function as modifiers to restrict nominal constituents; yet in the source text, they are placed in the syntactic position of nouns and acquire a substantival referential function. Such deviant expressions violate the reader's linguistic expectations and compel extra cognitive effort during interpretation, and this heightened perceptual difficulty constitutes an important source of aesthetic pleasure.

However, the functional conversion observed in the above two examples is not preserved in the English translations. In Example 2, the translated phrase “streamed down the sidewalk” completely avoids the unconventional expression in the source text. Example 1 replaces the nominalized “在欢乐里” with the conventional adverb “happily”. In other words, the defamiliarization effect achieved through grammatical deviation in the original is replaced by varying degrees of normalization in the target text.

In addition to functional conversion, 1986 also presents typical instances of lexical deviation in the form of “old word for new meaning”:

Example 3

那一家布店门庭若市那是因为春天唤醒了人们对色彩的渴求。于是在散发着各种颜色的布店里，声音开始拥挤起来，那声音也五彩缤纷。(Yu, 2013: 14)

The fabric shop was thronged by a crowd of people. Spring had awakened their thirst for color. Chatter, as bright and varied as the bolts of silk on the shelves, echoed across the shop floor. (Wang, 1998: 86)

In conventional Chinese usage, “五彩缤纷” (colorful /five-colored) is a visually oriented adjective exclusively used to describe rich and brilliant colors. Yet in Example 3, this word is cross-categorically applied to modify “声音” (sound), which belongs to the auditory domain, thus breaking the boundaries between senses and inducing the reader to cross-modally integrate visual images and auditory sensations at the cognitive level, creating a synaesthetic effect. This unconventional collocation at the semantic level typifies “old word for new meaning”: the word form remains unchanged, but its semantic reference is extended to a new experiential domain.

Faced with this translational difficulty, the translator adopts a

simile strategy, comparing “chatter” to “as bright and varied as the bolts of silk on the shelves”. Although this treatment does not retain the lexical form of the source text, it reconstructs cross-sensory semantic tension in the target language through figurative rhetoric, achieving a functionally equivalent foregrounding effect. In other words, since English lacks a direct cross-domain modifier corresponding to “五彩缤纷”, the translator cannot rely on literal translation; instead, the translator realizes a similar aesthetic function in the target language system through rhetorical compensation. This example demonstrates that the translation of foregrounded language is not a mere code-switching activity, but a process of negotiation and reconstruction between two poetic systems.

4.2 Translation of Semantic Deviation

Leech has pointed out that it is reasonable to understand semantic deviation cognitively as “nonsense” or “absurdity,” since such deviation is often realized through semantically odd collocations, shifts in meaning reference, or even seemingly paradoxical expressions (Leech, 1991: 48). Zu Lijun (2007) further clarifies that semantic deviation in literary texts is mostly realized through rhetorical devices, and the foregrounded and unconventional use of rhetoric is precisely the key mechanism by which literary works create defamiliarization effects and activate readers’ perception of “literariness.”

A systematic analysis of the translated texts reveals that, in handling semantic deviation in avant-garde fiction, the translator generally adopts a strategy of faithful representation, striving to reproduce the rhetorical tension and cognitive impact of the original in the target language.

Example 4

美丽的容颜像一支歌谣一样消失了,又如一只鸟永远飞出了它的巢穴。衰老仿佛是一道黑色的屏障,把她与以往的岁月隔开。(Ge, 2001: 71)

The pretty face had vanished like a song, like a bird flown away forever from its nest. Age was like a black screen, separating her from the past years. (Wang, 1998: 32)

The above example is taken from Ge Fei’s works. As one of the representative writers of Chinese avant-garde literature, Ge Fei has consistently devoted himself to breaking through existing expressive paradigms in his creative practice, seeking to direct the reader’s attention from “what the story says” to “how language speaks,” a dimension of greater metafictional significance. In Example 4, “beautiful face” is successively compared to “a song” and “a bird flying forever out of its nest.” There is an obvious cognitive distance between the tenor and these two vehicles: physical beauty belongs to the visual domain, a song to auditory experience, and a flying bird to spatial imagery. Such cross-sensory metaphorical configurations activate synaesthetic effects at the reader’s cognitive level, interweaving and superimposing visual, auditory, and spatial perceptions to construct a richer and more layered aesthetic image.

In terms of translational treatment, the translator adopts a literal translation strategy, fully transplanting the two sets of

metaphors in the original into the English context. The vehicle structure, rhetorical relationship, and image combination are all faithfully preserved. This approach not only maintains the defamiliarization effect of the original but also allows target-language readers to share an almost identical cognitive path and aesthetic experience.

Example 5

打呼噜的声音显然包含着某种炫耀的成份,一如花枝招展的少女和拄杖老人擦肩而过时的回眸一笑,又象是一种迫使你沉默的滔滔不绝的话语。(Ge, 1992: 219)

The sounds of snoring obviously include certain ostentatious elements, just as when a gorgeously dressed young girl brushes shoulders with an old man who supports himself on a cane and she turns around to look at him with a smile as she passes, or they seem like an unceasing discourse that compels you to sink into silence. (Wang, 1998: 44)

This example presents a more radical form of semantic deviation. From the perspective of conventional rhetorical logic, metaphors are usually based on the cognitive premise that “the vehicle explains the tenor,” with some identifiable similarity between them. However, in Example 5, there is almost no commensurable semantic overlap between the tenor “the sound of snoring” and the vehicles “a young girl’s smile over her shoulder” and “unceasing discourse”: the former is a physiological sound, while the latter refer to a visual scene and a speech act respectively.

The vehicles neither explain the tenor nor provide a cognitive reference for understanding it; their rhetorical connection is maintained only by formal markers such as “一如” (just as) and “又象” (or like). This semantic rupture between tenor and vehicle has, in a sense, exceeded the scope of traditional metaphor, approaching a pure language game. It reflects Ge Fei’s deliberate dismantling of narrative conventions and intentional suspension of language’s referential function (Zhai, 2004).

Faced with this highly deviant rhetorical structure, the translator also adopts literal translation, fully transplanting the two sets of vehicles into the target text without attempting to bridge the semantic gap through domestication or explanatory translation. Although this treatment may increase the cognitive load for target-language readers, it appropriately preserves the original’s rhetorical tension and avant-garde character, allowing the translation to display a similarly “nonsensical” or “absurd” aesthetic effect in English, which corresponds to Leech’s theoretical definition of semantic deviation.

To sum up, the translator tends to choose a strategy of faithful rendering when dealing with semantic deviation. Whether in the complete transplantation of cross-sensory metaphors in Example 4 or the literal presentation of semantically ruptured rhetoric in Example 5, the translator does not normalize the deviant expressions of the original, but strives to maintain their rhetorical structure and cognitive tension within the target-language system.

This translational tendency indicates that, for avant-garde

fiction, semantic deviation carries not merely convertible meaning content, but a poetic orientation toward language itself. The translator's strategy of faithfulness therefore concerns not only the accurate transmission of information, but also the cross-linguistic continuation of the experimental spirit of avant-garde literature.

4.3 Translation of Phonological Deviation

According to Leech, phonetic deviation operates at a relatively conspicuous level of language, often lending literary texts a poetic quality. In his analysis of English poetry, Leech (1991: 46) identifies several conventional forms of phonological irregularity, including elision, apharesis, apocope, and pronunciation adjustments made for rhyming purposes. Within the context of Chinese avant-garde fiction, certain writers—most notably Sun Ganlu and Su Tong—demonstrate a pronounced attentiveness to the sonic dimensions of language. A close reading of the source texts reveals that such phonological effects are frequently achieved through the strategic deployment of four-character idioms, reduplicative words, and end rhymes, all of which contribute to the rhythmic and musical texture of the prose.

Example 6

春天的时候,河两岸的原野被猩红色大肆入侵,层层叠叠,气韵非凡,如一片莽莽苍苍的红波浪鼓荡着偏僻的乡村,鼓荡着我的乡亲们生生死死呼出的血腥气息。(Su, 2011: 111)

In the spring, the open country on each side of the river was wantonly drenched in scarlet: red waves of exceptional beauty rose in swell after swell like a boundless stretch of surf, beat upon this remote village, and quickened the sanguinary life breath of my rural relations for generation after generation. (Wang, 1998:147)

This example, taken from Su Tong's *Flying over My Maple Village*, exhibits notable phonetic deviation in its original Chinese. The reduplicative phrases “层层叠叠” (layer upon layer) and “莽莽苍苍” (vast and hazy) create a rhythmic, poetic cadence, while the repetition of “鼓荡着” (billowing) reinforces both semantic intensity and phonetic resonance. Such phonological foregrounding endows the prose with a musical quality, reflecting Su Tong's deliberate cultivation of the sonic dimension of language.

In addressing this phonetic deviation, the translator adopts a compensatory approach. “Swell after swell” replicates the rhythmic effect of reduplication through structural repetition; “boundless stretch of surf” employs alliteration (boundless/beach/beat) to evoke English-specific phonetic beauty; the short, forceful rhythm of “beat upon” and “quickened” partially restores the dynamic sense of “鼓荡”. Despite fundamental differences between Chinese and English phonological systems that preclude exact replication, the translator reconstructs a comparable aesthetic experience in the target language through alliteration and repetition, achieving functional equivalence in conveying phonetic deviation.

Example 7

他的目光总是越过你,即使他非常爱你,他还是要越过你。就像越过随水而出的舟楫。他的目光总是那么迷离,仿佛他总是迎风而立。(Sun, 2007: 135)

His gaze always passes right through you; even if he loved you dearly, he would still look through you. Like a ship floating by on the current. He has a far away look in his eyes, as if he were always standing proud and aloof. (Wang, 1998:159)

Example 7 is selected from the Chinese avant-gardist Sun Ganlu's *I am a Young Drunkard*. This example demonstrates phonetic deviation through end rhyme that creates a distinctive poetic texture. In the original Chinese, “舟楫” (zhōu jí, boat) and “而立” (ér lì, standing upright) form a rhyming couplet, while “迷离” (mí lí, blurred) phonetically echoes “而立” at the sentence end. This deliberate use of end rhyme imbues prose with poetic cadence, reflecting Sun Ganlu's conscious cultivation of linguistic musicality—the phonetic harmony not only enhances rhythmic beauty but also resonates with the ethereal imagery of “blurred gaze” and “standing proud in the wind.”

Confronted with this phonological foregrounding, the translator adopts a flexible compensatory approach. In the English version, “floating by” and “aloof” approximate end rhyme through vowel resonance; “far away look” and “aloof” also share internal phonetic connections. Although the exact end rhyme cannot be replicated due to inherent differences between Chinese and English phonological systems, the translator reconstructs comparable poetic qualities through target-language rhythmic devices. This enables English readers to perceive the musical aesthetics of the text, achieving functional equivalence in conveying phonetic deviation.

5. Translation of Narrative Techniques: Perspective Switching and Temporal Reconstruction

The previous chapter has outlined four experimental explorations conducted by Chinese avant-garde writers at the narrative level. However, not all types receive equal attention in the present study. For instance, although meta-narration is one of the salient features of avant-garde fiction, it is not included in the detailed analysis below. The reason is that when writers reveal their own narrative acts, they usually employ expressions with relatively simple syntactic structures. Such utterances generally do not undergo significant deformation or information loss in cross-linguistic transfer, so a systematic investigation of them would yield limited insights into the core research questions of this study.

Drawing on theoretical resources from narratology, this chapter focuses on how the translator handles narrative perspective in the original works, as well as nonlinear narrative structures including flashbacks and prolepses. The following sections will examine, from the two dimensions of

perspective shifting and temporal reorganization, how translation represents, adjusts, or reconstructs the narrative experiments in avant-garde fiction.

5.1 Translation of Narrative Perspective

Translation can essentially be regarded as a practice of re-narration accomplished by the translator. Narrative perspective is by no means a mere rhetorical ornament; it determines the angle from which the story is presented, the manifestation of character attitudes, and the distance of reader reception, thus possessing non-negligible narrative functions and stylistic value (Yang, 2009: 192).

This study selects several examples from Yu Hua's *1986* and Ma Yuan's *More Ways than One to Make a Kite*, attempting to answer two interrelated questions: How does the translator handle narrative perspective in the original text? How do the transfer or deformation of perspective in translation influence the transmission of thematic meaning and the reader's interpretive path?

Example 8

这巨大的障碍突然出现，让他感到是一座坟墓的突然出现。(Yu, 2013: 13)

The thing that had so suddenly blocked his way was like a tomb. (Wang, 1998: 85)

The above example clearly demonstrates the loss of narrative perspective in the translation process. The original narrative is conducted from the limited perspective of the history teacher. The violent and bloody world as perceived by the teacher obviously contradicts conventional cognition, thus creating a strong defamiliarization effect. The phrase “让他感到” (made him feel) in the first sentence functions as an explicit perspective marker, indicating that the subsequent urban scene is not an objective representation but a subjective image filtered through the character's consciousness.

However, the translator deletes this marker in the English version, causing the narrative perspective to shift from the character's limited perspective to that of an omniscient narrator. Readers of the translation may easily misinterpret the following descriptions as objective facts, thus deviating from the aesthetic intention of the original text.

Example 9

听说前两年拉萨打狗。拉萨的狗实在太多了。听说以前还要多得多。听说拉萨狗是名贵品种，在伦敦要卖很高的价钱。

那个老太太已经死了，她活着的时候就住在布达拉宫下面，离你们广播电台不远。听说她死了几年了，不过我还是想到她原来住的地方去看一看。

她的收入大概不少，她把钱全部捐给了菩萨。(Ma, 2001: 310)

It is said that two years ago, there was a campaign to eliminate dogs in Lhasa. Lhasa is really overrun with dogs, but it is said that there were even more in the old days. It is said that the

Lhasa dog is a royal breed and would fetch a big price in London.

“The old woman is dead; she lived at the foot of the Potala Palace not far from your broadcasting station. It is said that she has been dead for several years, but I still want to go and have a look at the place where she once lived.

Apparently, she made a good income and offered all her earnings to Buddha. (Wang, 1998: 255–256)

Example 10

他说她养狗不是近几年的事，她多年来一直在养狗，她养的狗的确不下二十只。她不是个做泥佛的，她没有什么亲人，而且她早死了。死了几年了，甚至连住在附近的两个姑娘都没听说过她。她每每把口粮省下来给她们吃，她瘦得叫人很难想象。……她很固执，别人说话她根本不理睬。听说她是饿死的，也有的说是病死的。反正她一个人生活，跟邻里没来往，人们发现她死了又因为太瘦，就风传她是饿死的。(Ma, 2001: 316)

It was in fact Luo Hao who was more informed. Luo Hao stated that the old woman had indeed kept dogs, but that it was not a recent development, that she had always kept dogs, yes, as many as twenty at least. Luo Hao also stated that she had never made clay Buddhist figures, had no relatives, and was dead and gone, so much so that the two girls living in the same area had never heard of her. Luo Hao confirmed that she had always saved her own grain allocation for the dogs, and that she herself was emaciated beyond imagination... She was so stubborn, she never listened to advice. Anyway, she was always alone and never had anything to do with her neighbors. It was believed that she had died of hunger; some said of disease. Rumor has it that she died of hunger because she was so emaciated. (Wang, 1998: 262)

Example 7 and 8 are both taken from Ma Yuan's *More Ways than One to Make a Kite*. The work revolves around an elderly woman who adopts stray dogs in Lhasa, yet her life story and ending are not recounted by a single narrator, but presented through the internal perspectives of three characters: Liu Yu, Luo Hao, and Da Gesang. This results in plot versions that differ from and even contradict one another.

As Klinger (2015: 40) observes, narrative events are always the result of being “filtered” through a (fictional) center of consciousness. The juxtaposition of multiple internal perspectives, on the one hand, highlights the subjectivity and limitations of individual viewpoints, forcing readers to judge and piece together the truth amid uncertain and contradictory accounts, thereby enhancing reader participation and narrative suspense. On the other hand, by offering multiple possible plot developments and endings for the same story, it further reinforces the fictional nature of the text—a deliberate dismantling of the traditional narrative concept of “authenticity” typical of Chinese avant-garde fiction.

In this work, Ma Yuan emphasizes the positions of different perspectives through variations in the narrators' diction. In the original text, Liu Yu frequently uses vague expressions such as “听说” (it is said), lending his narration an air of

uncertainty; in contrast, Luo Hao employs more assertive terms such as “的确” (indeed) and “没有” (never), constructing a relatively conclusive narrative stance.

In rendering the viewpoints of fictional figures, Fang Kairui (2003) emphasizes that translators must remain attentive not only to linguistic markers signaling perspectival shifts but also to the distinct lexical traits of each character. An examination of the translated text reveals that the translator demonstrates a commendable ability to preserve the intricate web of internal focalization present in the original work. In the first selected passage, the source text deploys the speculative phrase “听说” on four separate occasions to preface statements—a repetitive structure that, while stylistically conventional in Chinese, often strikes Anglophone readers as redundant. Yet the translator deliberately refrains from conventional omission, opting instead to replicate each instance in the English version. This strategic fidelity accentuates the ambiguous and unreliable tenor of Liu’s account, thereby conveying both his narrative perspective and discursive manner with notable precision. A comparable sensitivity emerges in the rendering of Luo’s speech in example 21, where the translator repeatedly employs “state” rather than the more neutral “said.” Given that “state” denotes a definitive or unequivocal expression, this lexical choice subtly reinforces the relative authority and credibility of Luo’s version of events. Moreover, the translator introduces terms such as “confirm” and “never”—elements absent from the source text—to further sharpen Luo’s distinctive narrative demeanor, thereby intensifying the stylistic and epistemic contrast with Liu’s voice.

5.2 Translation of Nonlinear Narrative

Different from the linear narrative mode commonly used in traditional fiction, Chinese avant-garde writers consciously resist the chronicle-like unidirectional progression of time and instead pursue multi-layered and three-dimensional narrative structures. Profoundly influenced by Western modernist and postmodernist literature (e.g. Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner), avant-garde writers cut, reorganize, and distort narrative time through frequent shifts and overlapping juxtapositions of flashbacks, analepses, and prolepses, thereby disintegrating the linear logic and causal order of events. As Chen Pingyuan noted, Chinese avant-garde writers are obsessed with the free distortion of narrative “time” in fiction to achieve unique aesthetic effects and formal tension (Chen, 2004: 37).

From a linguistic typological perspective, nonlinear narrative places higher demands on translators’ ability to judge tense in translation. As a non-inflectional language, Chinese temporal expressions often rely on contextual implications or temporal adverbs, with no morphological changes in verbs. English, by contrast, requires explicit marking of temporal relations through verb tense inflection. This fundamental linguistic difference makes it easy for translators to misinterpret or misjudge tense when handling the intricate narrative time in avant-garde fiction due to the vagueness of tense in the source text, which further undermines the faithful representation of the original temporal structure in the target text.

Example 11

直到五十年代初,我的老家枫杨树一带还铺满了南方少见的罌粟花地。春天的时候,河两岸的原野被猩红色大肆入侵,层层叠叠,气韵非凡,如一片莽莽苍苍的红波浪鼓荡着偏僻的乡村,鼓荡着我的乡亲们生生死死呼出的血腥气息。我的么叔还在乡下,都说他像一条野狗神出鬼没于老家的柴草垛、罌粟地、干粪堆和肥胖女人中间,不思归家。(Su, 2011: 111)

Well into the early fifties, the area around Maple village, my ancestral homeland, was still covered with opium poppy fields seldom seen in the south. In the spring, the open country on each side of the river was wantonly drenched in scarlet: red waves of exceptional beauty rose in swell after swell like a boundless stretch of surf, beat upon this remote village, and quickened the sanguinary life breath of my rural relations for generation after generation.

My youngest uncle is still in the country. Everyone says he comes and goes among the bales of straw, opium fields, dry manure piles, and fat women of Maple Village as freely as a stray dog with no thought of going home. (Wang, 1998: 147)

Example 21 is taken from Su Tong’s *Flying over My Maple-Tree Hometown*. The work adopts retrospective narration, constructing a dual temporal structure interweaving the narrator’s “present” retrospection and “past” events, a tension that constitutes a major source of the novel’s aesthetic effect.

The opening phrase “直到五十年代初” (Well into the early fifties) establishes a past-tense narrative frame, in which the translation should consistently use the past tense. However, while the first half of the translation describing the hometown scenery uses past tense, the narration about the youngest uncle unexpectedly shifts to present tense, resulting in a split in temporal reference.

This tense misjudgment has two effects: first, it damages the narrative texture derived from the blending of time in the original; second, it may mislead English readers into regarding the youngest uncle as a “current fact” rather than a figure recalled from the past, deviating from the original narrative intention.

This example shows that the translation of nonlinear narrative is not merely a matter of grammatical choice but concerns the overall representation of temporal structure. Only by sensitively grasping the original temporal layers can the translator reconstruct the corresponding nonlinear effects in the target language.

6. Conclusion

Taking the English anthology *China’s Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* as the research object, this study combines theories of literary stylistics and narratology to examine how linguistic experiments and narrative innovations in Chinese avant-garde fiction are handled in translation. The thesis first outlines the experimental features of avant-garde fiction at the linguistic and narrative levels, and compiles an overview of English translations of representative works by Yu Hua, Ma Yuan, Can Xue and other writers in the appendix.

The study finds that Chinese avant-garde fiction has been extensively translated and introduced into the English-speaking world since the 1990s, with Western academia and publishing institutions playing an important role in promoting its dissemination. However, compared with discussions on its social implications and creative techniques, research on its English translations remains relatively insufficient. The core characteristics of avant-garde fiction lie in two dimensions: linguistically, it is featured by foregrounded expressions, wordplay, and frequent use of color terms; narratologically, it is marked by metanarrative strategies, the juxtaposition of multiple narrative perspectives, and the construction of nonlinear narrative structures.

In translation practice, the translator adopts a combination of strategies including literal translation, compensation, and omission, showing differentiated tendencies. Regarding linguistic experimentation, semantic deviation is mostly preserved faithfully, while lexical and phonological deviations tend to be normalized or even directly omitted. This tendency may be attributed to the constraints of English grammar, writing conventions, and the receptive expectations of target readers. At the narrative level, the translator generally strives to retain the original narrative perspective, though perspective shifts occasionally occur due to addition or deletion; more noticeably, the complex nonlinear narrative structures in the original are often simplified into more linear temporal sequences through tense unification and paragraph restructuring, thus weakening the formal tension of the source text.

Based on an investigation of publication data and overseas book reviews, the translator generally maintains a faithful attitude toward the experimental writing of avant-garde fiction. Although this strategy increases reading difficulty for English readers, it helps construct an image of Chinese literature distinct from politicized stereotypes. Preserving the linguistic and narrative experimentalism of avant-garde fiction not only concerns the cross-linguistic transmission of literary form, but also opens up a reading path that resists the simplification of meaning through aesthetic defamiliarization in the English-speaking world, providing possibilities for the diversified representation of contemporary Chinese cultural images.

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