

# Study on Adaptations in Bestseller Translation From the Perspective of Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

With the booming copyright trade in the world, bestsellers are increasingly exported to different destinations. As market-oriented and readers-targeted cultural products, bestseller translation lays emphasis on profitability, readability and popularity. Firstly, this paper defines and classifies adaptations in bestseller translation in terms of composition, paratexts and information. Then, it proposes the macro-, meso- and micro-ethics of adaptations in translation as the motives, publication requirements and professional norms respectively to be abided by translators and editors for profitability, publication legitimacy and readability. Through the case study of adaptations in the simplified Chinese version of *The Kite Runner*, it maintains there might be more adaptations in bestseller translation with the motive integration of literary demands, profitability, readability and popularity.

**Keywords:** adaptation, bestseller translation, profitability, readability, legitimacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, with rapid development of industrialization, urbanization, mass media and readers' literacy, mass readers enjoyed wider access to books and education, which brought about large-scale participation of the public in the social culture. The mass culture came into being, forming an overwhelmingly important part in the social culture. Characterized by entertainment, commercial commodity, mass production and consumption, the mass culture has exerted impacts in all sectors of society with the elite and mainstream culture together. In this context of prevailing mass culture, bestseller appeared around 1890s along with the chart for bestselling book titles, which may be defined by *the Encyclopedia Britannica* as "book that, for a time, leads all others of its kind in sales, a designation that serves as an index of popular literary taste and judgment." Catering to the mass culture, corresponding with the popular reading tastes, aided by intensive marketing, resulting from the promotion of various book charts and prizes, "bestsellers are instant and usually unpredictable hits with the public, making both their authors and publishers lots of money". As typical products of mass culture, bestsellers are often looked down upon as lowbrow, popular and genre fictions, though "the categorization of literature as highbrow or lowbrow, popular or serious, entertainment or instruction simply does not work" and "popular fiction may often fall into stereotyping, vulgarity, sensation and the fashionably disposable whilst serious fiction may be 'literary', elitist and cerebral, yet both meet in the bestseller, confusing category expectations and spoiling a convenient reading of purchaser demographics" [1]. Inexplicably, the

underestimated literary recognition of bestsellers has never failed to obstruct continuity of bestsellers or blockbusters.

At present, with the booming copyright trade in the world, bestsellers may continue their life travel in other forms of language when exported to different destinations. Among Amazon's top 20 bestsellers, most of them have been published globally in non-English languages. Throughout China, the share of translated bestsellers has been on increase annually in the book market. According to the annual book sales report released by OpenBook, a leading provider of data and information services for the book industry in China, the translated bestsellers have amounted to over 30 percent of the Top Ten Chart for the category of fiction and nonfiction, and even more for children's titles.

On the journey to exotic lands in process of complicated transcultural communication, bestsellers involve transferring of copyrights, translation organization, translating, editing, proofreading, censorship, marketing before being published in the target language. When the translated bestsellers finally present themselves in brand-new contexts, they have been found there are outwardly some changes in paratexts, such as the covers, forewords, content introduction, notes, epilogues, postscripts and illustrations, and inwardly some modifications in texts. These changes and modifications have been conducted by the collaboration of editors and translators for various reasons, which are political, copyright-binding, commercial, poetic, reader-oriented and etc.

To achieve the expected commercial and social benefits and prolong the life expectancy of potentially steady or canonized selling books, the translated bestsellers, as market-oriented and readers-targeted cultural products, lay emphasis on popularity, readability and profitability. Through the elaboration and collaboration between

translators and patrons, some adaptations are made in title selection, binding design, language style, poetics and etc. This essay tries to investigate the specific reasons behind the bestsellers' adaptations. It constructs a theoretical framework for the ethics of the adaptations in translation, exploring elements to be balanced in adaptations, thus seeking to propose some benchmark for the bestsellers' translation.

## **2. ADAPTATIONS IN BESTSELLERS TRANSLATION**

### ***2.1. Adaptation in Translation***

To begin with, the definition of adaptation is worth differentiating in terms of categories and functions. According to Johnson, translation and adaptation are related disciplines entailing a great deal of transposition and reproduction [2]. By borrowing Roman Jakobson's classification of translation into three types as intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation, Johnson divided adaptation into intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic ones, with text simplification for accessibility to a particular category of the reading public or refashioning of texts of a distant past for modern consumers as intralingual adaptation, the transposition from a source language into a target language as the interlingual adaptation, the transformation from one format or genre into another as intersemiotic adaptation [2]. To most people, intersemiotic and intralingual adaptation sound familiar, especially literary, film or theatre adaptations in cultural production field. Here, adaptation is related to the literary adaptation and film adaptation, meaning the transmedia or transformed way of narration. It is frequently recognized as a kind of transmedia storytelling or reproduction in different genres of formats for different subjects. In today's media convergence era, new media technologies enabled the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception [3]. For literary works, the intralingual adaptation is understood as remaking, extension, simplification, scaled-down version of the original work. And more closely related to translation is the interlingual adaptation, which requires more emphasis on fidelity to content and form. From the above classification, it may be assumed that adaptation is quite encompassing and inclusive, even some scholars claimed that all translation is to a certain degree adaptation [4].

For purposes or functions, translation stays basically at the level of meanings, adaptation seeks to transmit the purpose of the original text, and exegesis attempts to spell out the intentions of the author [5]. These techniques, such as translation, adaptation and exegesis, are applied in literary production field by writers and dramatists.

Then, if we narrow down adaptation in translation studies, it has more to do with shifting formal diction and expressive rhetoric between the original and target language. It is considered as a translation technique or a procedure which

can be used whenever the context referred to in the original text does not exist in the culture of the target, thereby necessitating some form of recreation [6].

This paper tries to pin the adaptation as one type of translation techniques or procedures, which may be implemented collaboratively by the translators or the editors representing the publishing patrons. Specifically, forms of adaptation in translation include: (1) Transcription of the original (word-for-word reproduction of part of the text in the original language); (2) Omission (the elimination or reduction of part of the text); (3) Expansion (making explicit information that is implicit in the original); (4) Exoticism (the substitution of stretches of slang, dialect, nonsense words, etc. in the original text by rough equivalents in the target language); (5) Updating (the replacement of outdated or obscure information by modern equivalents); (6) Situational equivalence (the insertion of a more familiar context than the one used in the original); (7) Creation (a more global replacement of the original text with a text that preserves only the essential message/ideas/functions of the original) [5]. Though abundant in forms theoretically, the adaptation has been conducted in limited varieties practically for multiple reasons.

### ***2.2. Forms of Adaptation in Translated Bestsellers***

According to Bastin [5], translators tend to adopt adaptation because of the four reasons such as the cross-code breakdown (where there are simply no lexical equivalents in the target language), situational inadequacy (where the context referred to in the original text does not exist in the target culture), genre switching (a change from one discourse type to another), disruption of the communication process (the emergence of a new epoch or another approach or the need to address a different type of readership often requires modifications in style, content or presentation). Realization of reproducing the functions, purposes or the intentions of the original text in another language has been the underlying motives for adaptation. In classic literary translation, adaptations are more made for artistic and aesthetic considerations, which could even be omission, addition, restructuring of information, genre substitution, narrative arrangement, let alone the wording changes. Motives for bestseller translation involve winning more target readers' preference, creating readability, popularity and profitability in the target book market as much as possible, with the motive of profitability as the priority. Accordingly, mass reader and market-oriented adaptations are restricted subjectively for translators and editors, which may contain outwardly the paratextual switching of title, binding design, cover, illustrations, forewords, postscripts, etc., and inwardly the textual modifications in information, diction, composition as well.

### 2.2.1. *Adaptation in composition*

Bestsellers are intended to attract wider popularity and readership by appealing to public tastes and interests. In today's transmedia era, in addition to the printed publishing, the digital or online translated bestsellers would be the complementary means for the publishers to seek the additional or even the larger volume of readership. The superficial reading tendency behind the digital reading era plus the popular fictions' attribute of catering to the public taste require the original and the translated language of bestsellers easy readability. To be accepted and spread in a larger scope and for a better profit is the foremost motive for bestseller translation. Hence, it can be understood adaptation in terms of diction or the composition is well conducted in bestseller translation. In addition to the overall readers' tendency of shallow reading, fragmented reading or easy reading in mass culture context, there exists another kind of adaptation for specific target readers' tastes and needs in terms of horizon of expectations. According to aesthetics of reception, the text reading is an endless dialogue between the text and the reader, the past and the present [7]. When the bestsellers are imported into other circumstances, they may rouse different responses from target readers with new horizon of expectations. The process of literature translation activity is a cycle which covers the translator-writer and the reader- translator-writer interpretation, reception and recreation. Through the dialogues between the writer and the translator, between the translator and target reader, the gaps between horizons are bridged and fused together. To obtain better fusion of horizons, the translator communicates and adapts his interpretation through diction and composition.

### 2.2.2. *Informative adaptation*

After bestseller copyright owners grant some agencies or individuals to translate their works in other target languages, publishers are required to apply for the print permits for publication by complying with corresponding censorship. Censorship is defined by the Cambridge International Dictionary of English as "the practice of examining books, films, etc. and removing anything considered being offensive, morally harmful, or politically dangerous. It is the suppression of objectionable, harmful, sensitive, or inconvenient materials to authorities, which is enforced by the relevant institutions, represented by the censor on whom censorship responsibilities are conferred. Reasons for censorship in publication have long been categorized into four complex aspects including politically, culturally, religiously objectional contents, which may give rise to the informative adaptation in translated bestsellers. In the process of translated bestseller publication censorship, both translators and publishers may tend to filter the objectional contents, either voluntarily or involuntarily, making adaptations to produce rewritings in order to produce rewritings which are 'acceptable' from both social and personal perspectives [8].

### 2.2.3. *Paratextual adaptation*

Timeliness is of significance for bestsellers to perdure and enlarge the target readers' attention in the target environment. Hence, copyright transactions are implemented as soon as possible at fairly high copyright price. To reduce the risks in importing the bestsellers, the publishing companies may take advantage of the paratextual adaptation in translated bestsellers, where the paratexts concerned are found different from the original. Bestsellers stress the marketing for promoting their sales, which may be attributed to the attention-based economy. To lure the attention of readers, the publishers have to take the public psychology into account, analyzing the appealing points for the social media marketing and redesign the format and language for publicizing the bestsellers. In this aspect, the paratexts including the cover, the foreword, the outline introduction, the advertising slogan, etc. have been adapted. To maximize the instant money-making of bestsellers, the target buyers of bestsellers' copyright would negotiate the copyright contracts in their interests. According to the Copyright Act, the translated work is a derivative work that could only be accomplished and published with the permission of the copyright owner. In accordance with requirements for the copyright, the translated ones may only have the right to make some adaptations in terms of illustrations, photos, type-setting, etc., without infringement on the original.

## 3. ETHICS FOR ADAPTATIONS IN BESTSELLER TRANSLATION

### 3.1. *A Framework of Adaptation Ethics in Translation*

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, ethics is defined as "the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong", which is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. Ethics may be interpreted from philosophical perspective as utilitarianism, contractual norms, or moralism, which constitute moral values, standards or principles to evaluate or guide people or their behaviors. Thus, Chesterman [9] defines translation ethics (or translator ethics) as "the set of accepted principles according to which translation should be done and hence the norms governing what translations should be like".

Since 1980s, there have been fruitful researches on translation ethics by such academicians as Berman [10], Venuti [11,12], Pym [13,14], Chesterman [9,15,16], Berman & Wood [17], Inghilleri [18], Goodwin [19], Baker [20], Eser [21] and Drugan [22], etc. Pym declared that translation studies had returned to questions of ethics [13]. To summarize, detailed findings could be categorized into four types: (1) Cultural attitude towards "the Other". Berman [10] proposed readers receiving "the translated source text as foreign, the Other as Other" and Venuti [11]

suggested good translation release the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and marginal. Resistant translation gains an extra level of significance in preserving the foreignness and otherness of the translated text. Foreignizing translation signifies the differences of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the codes that prevail in the translating language [12]. Berman and Wood [17] reiterated the ethics of respecting otherness in intercultural communication. (2) models of translation ethics. Chesterman [9] analyzed the model of representation, service, communication and norms, then proposed an ethics of professional commitment. Chesterman [9] distinguished between what he sees as four current models: the ethics of representation (of the source text, or of the author), an expanding ethics of service (based on fulfilling a brief negotiated with a client), a more philosophical ethics of communication (focused on exchanges with the foreigner as Other), and a norm-based ethics (where ethical behavior depends on the expectations specific to each cultural location). To these four, Chesterman would add an ethics of 'commitment', an attempt to define the 'good' ideally attained by translation, embodied in an oath that might work as a code of professional ethics for translators [13]. (3) Translators' ethics. Translators, as mediators, can actively create cooperation between cultures. Accountability is now a key issue in all professions, and that the responsibility of translators and interpreters extends beyond clients to include the wider community to which they belong [23]. (4) Professional ethics. Sustainability in translation services is not a concept referred directly in the codes of ethics described above, but inherent intrinsically in terms of such dimensions as individual and organizational. Translation businesses have an economic, legal and societal responsibility towards stakeholders such as customers, employees and the community [21]. To sum up, ethical issues in translation can refer to the attitudes towards heterogeneous cultural element, the norms and liability of the translation profession or industry, or translators' obligations and responsibilities in the process of rendering the original from the macro-, meso- and micro-level respectively.

When these ethical issues are narrowed down in the adaptations for the translated bestsellers, motives, publication requirements and professional norms are to be evaluated for translators and editors. In view of cultural motives, the publishing patrons or the translators needs to take into account the items related to censorship infringement. As for professional norms, translators and editors adopt changes in wording or composition for better readability. Translators and editors need to collaborate for reassuring the legitimacy and quality of the translation.

### ***3.2. Macro-, meso-and micro- ethics of adaptations in bestseller translation: a case study***

The Kite Runner, the Top 1 New York Times bestselling debut novel that introduced Khaled Hosseini to millions of readers the world over, was published in 2003 and has been on the bestseller list for over 240 weeks, with millions of copies sold in the United States and worldwide. It was awarded with many titles and accolades, including the Book Sense Bestseller List Sensation, Boeke Prize, Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, ALA Notable Book, Alex Award, Borders Original Voices Award, Entertainment Weekly's Best Book, San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year, Literature to Life Award, 2012 Great Graphic Novels for Teens. When it was adapted into a movie in 2007, it attracted much attention from people all over the world. In agreement with Chandler Crawford Agency Inc., through The Grayhawk Agency, The Kite Runner was introduced into the mainland China in 2006 by Horizon Media Co., Ltd., published by Shanghai People's Publishing House with the simplified Chinese version translated by Li Jihong. The Chinese version has been on the Top 30 bestsellers list for nine years in mainland China with over 10 million copies, being a rare "blockbuster" for translated literature. The following analysis is conducted to illustrate the ethical factors for adaptations in the Chinese translation of The Kite Runner, mainly from the macro, meso, and micro aspects of ethics, including the attitudes, publication requirements and professional norms.

#### ***3.2.1. Macro-ethics: motives towards the bestseller translation***

According to Zohar's polysystem [24], within a literary polysystem, there exist different types of literature such as the canonized, non-canonized, translated ones, and ect. Bestselling literature, known as popular or mass literature in contrast to pure or high literature, has been considered products of industrialization in mass-culture context, characterized by timeliness, popularity and entertainment. It can be inferred that translated bestsellers occupy the peripheral or the secondary position in the target literary polysystem and cultural polysystem. The role of bestsellers assumed has affected patrons' attitudes in importing them into new audience. Pym [14] believed any substantial ethics should be formulated with "reference to the many forms of social involvement" within the frame of intercultural communication. Here bestsellers translation serves more as cultural products distribution than intercultural communication or literary enlightening. Motives or attitudes towards bestseller translation are quite different from those of classics or high-brow elite works. Instant success of bestsellers is reflected in the sales of the cultural marketplace, which can be guaranteed by catering to mass readers' tastes and psychology with charming stories. Bestsellers have been imported to other territories mostly

for their potential profitability instead of out of literary consideration or heterogeneous reference, though bringing about corresponding changes in the target popular genre fictions writing unintentionally. Motive of profitability outweighing the others presets the prototype of bestseller translation, among which adaptations tend to be minor or utilitarian skillfully without essentially structural, informative and narrative adaptations.

In Chinese version of *The Kite Runner*, Li [25] repeated his purpose in the postscript for translating this novel, “In this touching novel, the kite is symbolic, which can be family, friendship, love, or integrity, kindness and honesty. For Amir, the kite represents metaphorically an indispensable part of his personality. Only when he grabs it can he become an intact man, being Amir he expects to be. Maybe for each of us there is a kite in their heart. No matter what it symbolizes, let’s go for it bravely.” For the translator, the empathy from the story triggered his translation, which may fall into the traditional literal value of emotional or artistic enlightenment. During an interview, when Li was asked about his choice of translating materials, he stressed that interest and meaningful morals or virtues are important orientations ([http://www.sohu.com/a/166985905\\_212874](http://www.sohu.com/a/166985905_212874)). Tan Guanglei recalled his experience and attitude in purchasing the simplified Chinese copyright of *The Kite Runner* into China as the copyright broker. Due to the alien and sensitive subject matter in terms of religion and politics, it was rejected by the publishing houses in the book fair. Horizon Media Co., Ltd. finally bought as one editor insisted it was so touching a story that it was worth purchasing with the theme of friendship and kinship, loyalty and betrayal, pursuit and redemption that the Chinese readers are likely to be moved (<http://www.qdaily.com/articles/31525.html>).

Both the patron (copyright purchaser) and the translator noticed the appealing story of *The Kite Runner*, which might contribute to the selling point. In this way, it is natural to maintain the original story and the way of narration in translating without any adaptation in the narration or plots. Attitude towards the bestseller translation for reproducing the original charm or the selling point may determine the minimum extent of the structural adaptation.

### *3.2.2. Meso-ethics: publication requirements for informative adaptation*

Before publication, the translators and editors are told to pay special attention to any contents against the relevant publication provisions which need to be modified for informative adaptation. According to China’s Regulations on the Administration of Publication, any materials containing elements (1) opposing the basic principles established in the Constitution; (2) jeopardizing the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state; (3) disclosing state secrets, jeopardizing national security or harming the honor and interests of the state; (4) inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination, undermining national unity, or infringing on national customs and customs; (5)

promoting cults and superstitions; (6) disturbing the social order and undermining the social stability; (7) propagating obscenity, gambling, violence or instigating crime; (8) insulting or slandering others and infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of others; (9) jeopardizing social morality or the cultural tradition of national excellence; (10) having contents prohibited by laws, administrative regulations and state regulations. In translating *The Kite Runner*, the translator Li Jihong admitted that he modified several points that are not in line with Chinese conditions in the translation postscript attached to the Chinese version [25]. For example, there are five places with negative comments on the communist government in Afghan, which are obfuscated by “new government” intentionally in Chinese version. Similarly, “the year of Tiananmen Square” in the original was omitted skillfully in the Chinese translation.

Here, the publication requirements serve as the important boundary for the translator and editor not to trespass on. In translating and editing process, both the professionals and patrons involved in publishing the translated bestsellers need to watch out any information which is not in accordance with publication regulations or laws, who may adopt some skills by adaptation of modification or omission.

### *3.2.3. Micro-ethics: professional norms for the adaptations*

It may be safely summarized that the responsibility of adaptation may fall into the hands of translators and editors. Under the macro-and meso-ethics, translators and editors are restricted to a large extent to minor adaptations for not infringing the copyright in the preexistent work. Both the copyright contracts of the translated books and translation service specifications in the world leave little space for adaptation in contents or information for translators and editors due to the fact that the translated works shall not be omitted, modified or added without the written consent of the copyright owner.

Imported bestsellers need to maintain or prolong the original sensational effect by great readability and profitability. Readability is achieved in familiarizing the translated works in terms of language and style when translators adapt flexibly the translation. For example, Li commented that he adopted Chinese characters to mark the pronunciation of Afghan words and free translation for non-English terms so as to make the translation flow smoothly. Meanwhile, he tried to add proper footnotes at the bottom of the page to offer necessary explanation for place names, history of Afghanistan, Islamic rituals to lessen the barriers of readers’ understanding.

Profitability is nourished by the desire of a book’s readership – whether it is a question of a classic or of a contemporary bestseller – to prolong their experience of the original textual universe through another medium [26].

In an interview, Li Jihong once referred to his translation principles in literary translation as the accuracy and readability. According to him, to reproduce the original

touching story without deviating any information is priority, while there is no need to create any obstacles to smooth reading just for so-called exotic flavor. Take *The Kite Runner* for example, he chose domestication of easily understood Chinese phrases in translating terms of Islamic culture, such as the Muslim greetings, Afghan cuisine and addressing, so that “he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” [27].

Editors serve as the patronage of translation, who review translated manuscripts on behalf of publishers in terms of politics, morality, language and poetics. To guarantee the publishing legitimacy, to meet the quality requirements, and to promote the favor of the mass market, editors may follow closely the reader-oriented principle in adaptation of translated paratexts and composition by redesigning the title, cover and binding and by expediting reading ease. That’s why we often read the translated bestsellers whose covers, binding designs, recommendation texts are quite different in different target language.

Translators and editors should be very careful when there is a need to make major changes, especially content changes rather than textual changes. Hence, the degree of adaptation is balanced, with the discretion of adaptation among legitimacy, readability and profitability.

From the above analysis of *The Kite Runner*, adaptations in the simplified Chinese version are carried out mainly for legitimacy and readability from the meso- and micro-ethics. All of these adaptations are subordinated under the motive of profitability from the perspective of macro-ethics. To admit or not, among the macro-, meso-, and micro ethics of adaptation in the bestseller translation, the motive of profitability presets the framework or principle for the adaptations conducted by translators and editors.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Given the potential success in view of dramatic economic benefits and social sensations already achieved in the local markets, bestsellers are most frequently imported to different places in different languages. To prolong their favor by wider target readers, the translated bestsellers are faced up with well-thought minor adaptations in information, composition and paratexts, which are collaborated between the translators and editors. The ethics for adaptations in translation can be divided at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, emphasizing the motives or attitudes towards the translation as the macro ethics, which may predetermine the meso ethics of the relevant requirements for this industry, and the micro ethics of professional norms. When bestsellers are imported for translation, they are more or less treated as reproduction of cultural products in mass market, potential profitability has been the priority rather than the motive literary reference. Translators and editors make all efforts for legitimacy of their publications, readability, popularity of mass audience, and the ultimate purpose of profitability in bestsellers translation.

Bestsellers have long been despised in terms of aesthetic property, creativity and abundance. This stereotyped preconception against bestsellers predetermines people’s motive or attitude towards their translation for greater profitability rather than artistic or aesthetical orientations, which in turn affect variations or adaptations in bestseller translation. That may account for the fact that there are more and greater artistic modifications in translation of classic works or serious literature. It must be noted that bestsellers are not only cultural commodities, but cultural arts with social, cultural and literary attributes. In the long run, publication and translation of bestselling books is not only for the economic benefits of the market, but also should be considered in terms of social benefits, cultural and literary effects, which may constitute the basis of the adaptations. It is hoped that there may be more adaptations in bestseller translation thanks to the integration of literary demands, profitability, readability and popularity.

The key to the macro-ethics of best-selling books translation is pursuing the synthesis of cultural and literary values and economic interests, coordinating the development of foreign and local literature, while conforming to popular interest and leading the public interest. The meso ethics in bestseller translation is mediation of all parties for publication legitimacy; micro ethics aims at the dialogue between professional norms of translators and editors for better readability.

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