

# Exploring Style Reproduction from Metaphor Translation in Yu Hua's *Brothers*

Shuxian Gao

Zhejiang University

Email: gaoshuxian\_236@163.com

## ABSTRACT

The presence of abundant novel metaphors in Yu Hua's *Brothers* is a significant stylistic marker of the book. Its English translation accurately reproduces the style of the original and has been widely acclaimed ever since its publication. What strategies could the translators adopt to convey the original flavour? This paper aims to uncover the style translation strategies by analyzing 200 metaphors from *Brothers*. Our analysis reveals that the translators flexibly adopt several strategies including style corresponding, style recasting and style decolouring or generalizing, with corresponding as the most frequently used one. The results show that to better facilitate Chinese literature "Going Out", the overly domesticating strategy at earlier stages can be moderately adjusted and the translations that faithfully reproduce the language style of the original can also win over the market as well as readers.

**Keywords:** Yu Hua, *Brothers*, Style Production, Metaphors

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Yu Hua's novel *Brothers* was published in 2005 and generated much spark in China ever since. Its English translation was soon released by Pantheon Books in 2009, with sinologist Carlos Rojas and his wife, Eileen Cheng-yin as translators. Upon its publication, the English version "drew widespread attention from the Western mainstream media and received almost unanimous approval"<sup>[1]36</sup>. Maureen Corrigan, a leading American critic, calls *Brothers* "a magnificent work in terms of style, historical span, and narrative technique"<sup>[2]120</sup>. For such success overseas, the English translation and translators should be given the credit. Several book reviewers have expressed their approval of the English translation, and Austin Ramzy, a book reviewer for *Time* magazine, believes that "the English translation captures the linguistic beauty and strong farcical effect of the original work brilliantly"<sup>[3]44</sup>. Poet Bei Ling believes that "the English translation of *Brothers* is generally faithful to the original work in terms of language and style"<sup>[4]69</sup>. So, how does the English translation of *Brothers* reproduce the original language style? How can its successful translation affect our endeavour in the cause of Chinese literature "Going out"?

In terms of the language translation strategies of the English version of *Brothers*, most of the current

domestic studies have focused on the translation of culturally loaded words as well as colloquialisms and idioms<sup>[5]90[6]60</sup>. These studies have explored the reproduction of the original in English translations from different perspectives and are of great value for appreciating the charm of the English translations. However, according to the relevant literature available so far, current research has paid less attention to the linguistic style of the English translation of *Brothers*. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the typical stylistic markers of the novel, namely, the English translation of its metaphorical images, and to uncover the translators' translation strategies regarding the linguistic style of the original work as well as the reasons behind their strategies.

## 2. METAPHORS: THE STYLE MARKER OF BROTHERS

Style reproduction has always been a difficult issue in novel translation. In order to successfully reproduce the style of the original text, it is necessary to first recognize the style correctly. In other words, it is essential to identify the style markers of the original text. *Brothers* tells the story of the ups and downs of two brothers, Baldy Li and Song Gang, with the great changes of the Chinese society as the background. After the creative experience of previous works such as *To*

*Live and Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, Brothers* becomes a “masterpiece of language”<sup>[7]166</sup>, not only with its dialogue and distinctive rhythm, but also with a more varied and pioneering narrative style than previous works.

This narrative effect is inextricably linked to the abundance of vivid and imaginative metaphors found everywhere in the novel. As an ancient form of figure of speech, metaphors can stimulate imagination and evoke associations, thus creating refreshing and enlightening reading experience for the reader. The novel *Brothers* is abundant with metaphorical images, ranging from natural objects (e.g. bamboo pole and spring bamboo shoot), birds and animals (e.g. crab and robin), culinary delicacies (such as stinky tofu and MSG) and traditional objects (such as wind box and rattle) to traditional culture (e.g. qigong and childbirth confinement), it even involves certain literary characters (e.g. Tang Monk and Piggie). These novel and interesting metaphors enhance the vividness of the original text and help induce the aesthetic experience while reading, thus assuming an important role in conveying the novel’s unique language style. And since “rhetoric is a stylistic device that cannot be ignored and the unique style of many writers lies precisely in their adept use of rhetorical patterns”<sup>[8]225</sup>, it stands reason to believe that one of the reasons why *Brothers* has become a “masterpiece of language” in Yu Hua’s novels is that it contains a large number of metaphors, and they naturally become an important marker of the author’s language style. On the other hand, while there is no doubt that these metaphors enhance the original work, they also pose a great challenge to the translation and deserve to be studied in detail. In addition, metaphorical image belongs to imaginative discourse, and “translation of imaginative discourse is basically not influenced by external factors, but is handled relatively independently by the translator under the guidance of his own translation principles”<sup>[9]71</sup>. With that in mind, a systematic study of the metaphorical images in *Brothers* can more accurately grasp the translators’ translation principles, thus of great value.

In view of this, this paper randomly selects 200 metaphors from *Brothers* and attempts to explore the translators’ style translation strategies. This study aims to get a general grasp of the translators’ overall tendency in their reproduction of the original work through quantitative statistics first, and then with the help of qualitative analysis of specific translation cases, at the same time further explore the translators’ style reproduction strategy and the reasons behind their choices. Hopefully, the results can shed some light on the overseas circulation of Chinese fictions.

### 3. THE REPRODUCTION OF LANGUAGE STYLE OF METAPHORS IN *BROTHERS*

This section compares 200 metaphors of the original text with their translated version to analyze whether the images are retained, modified or omitted, and using that analysis to infer the translators’ stylistic translation strategies. Liu Miqing classifies the stylistic reproduction strategies in translation into three categories, namely style corresponding, style recasting and style decolouring or generalizing. The retention of metaphorical images can be classified as style corresponding. Preserving the rhetoric device while changing the specific images corresponds to style recasting, and the omission of metaphorical images and direct revelation of meaning is a reflection of style decolouring or generalizing strategy. It should be noted that metaphors that appear several times in the original text and whose translations are consistent in those different occasions, such as “wooden fish”, “wild dog” and “ghost” are only counted once. As for two or more than two metaphors in the same sentence that express the same or similar semantic meaning, such as “the wolf has entered the sheep pen and the dog has entered the chicken coop”, is regarded as one metaphor, and as long as the translator reproduces one of the images, it is also classified as image retention.

**Table 1** Metaphorical images and style translation strategies in *Brothers*

images	retention	modification	omission
Style translation strategy	corresponding	recasting	Decolouring or generalizing
number	151	20	29
percentage	75.5%	10%	14.5%

As shown in Table 1, among the 200 metaphorical images, 151 (75.5%) were retained by the translators, while 20 and 29 (10% and 15.5%) were modified and omitted respectively. It can be seen that in terms of metaphorical images alone, style corresponding strategy is absolutely dominant, which also reflects the translators’ efforts to faithfully reproduce the style of the original text. What are the circumstances under which translators choose their translation strategies? What are the reasons behind their choices?

#### 3.1 Style Corresponding: Preserving Metaphorical Image

First, In translating Yan Lianke's *Lenin's Kisses*, in response to the unique dialect in the novel, Luo Peng(the Chinese name of Carlos Rojas) chooses an

alternative way to preserve the traditional cultural elements of Chinese characteristics by creating new words. The purpose of this particular action is likely to convey the style of the original text. Similarly, when dealing with the metaphorical images in *Brothers*, Luo Peng prefers style corresponding to faithfully reproduce the flavour of the original text, especially when the original metaphors are crucial to highlighting the personality of the character, the theme of the novel and even the writer's personal discourse features.

### 3.1.1 Personality of the character

Example 1. 宋钢涨红了脸，嘴里啾啾响个不停，李光头不知道他在说些什么，李光头说：“别啾啾啦，像蚊子放屁，像臭虫撒尿。”<sup>[10]123</sup>

Translation 1: Baldy Li said, “Stop rasping, you sound like a mosquito farting or a dung beetle crapping.”<sup>[11]99</sup>

As a certain kind of social indicator, language can in some degree show the social background of the speaker in question. In other words, the speaker's social and educational background and economic status can be reflected through language. The metaphor in the above example vividly depicts the image of Baldy Li as a vulgar man full of foul language. In order to help target readers better understanding the personality of Baldy Li, the translators retains the vulgar image in the original metaphor. The strategy of “translating vulgarity with vulgarity” better restores the image of the character.

### 3.1.2 Theme of the work

Example 2. ...让她的身体像奔驰宝马轿车的发动机一样隆隆地抖动着。<sup>[10]658</sup>

Translation 2: ...making her body tremble like the engines of Baldy Li's BMW and Mercedes and making her cry out like the cars' horns.<sup>[11]569</sup>

*Brothers* can be considered as a satirical fiction and this is particularly true for the second part of the book. In that part, the author focuses on absurd scenes such as the beauty pageant to reflect on the ethical subversion and material indulgence during the transition period of Chinese society. The marathon sex scenes in the novel have been heavily criticized by critics in China, but Luo Peng believes that it is through the blunt and vulgar sexual descriptions and incredibly violent narratives that Yu Hua presents the dramatic transition of the society. In other words, both the perverse scenes and the vulgar language are crucial to the presentation of the novel's themes. Therefore, the vulgar metaphors of the sexual description in the above example is also preserved through the translators' not “elegant” words.

### 3.1.3 Writer's personal discourse features

Example 3. ...让那些人的嘴巴像是牙疼似的哎呀哟赞叹不已。<sup>[10]87</sup>

Translation 3: ...repeatedly saying “Ah, ah” as though they had toothaches.<sup>[11]71</sup>

Example 4. ...而且是一封令人亢奋的信，李兰像是吃着激素似的读完它。<sup>[10]144</sup>

Translation 4: ...Reading it made her feel as though she had been given a shot of adrenaline.<sup>[11]117</sup>

To uncover the writer's personality is the highest level of stylistic analysis work<sup>[8]228</sup>. Due to different life experiences, artistic accomplishments and personalities, writers tend to have their own characteristics in handling subjects and portraying images, and their styles are often related to the writer's own experiences and personalities. In the specific case of Yu Hua, the connection between his work and his profession as a dentist can be seen in the medical metaphors that appear several times in *Brothers*. In dealing with these metaphors, the translators choose to retain the images of the original text for direct correspondence, thus preserving the author's linguistic characteristics.

## 3.2 Style Recasting: Modifying Metaphorical Image

Language is a carrier of culture and people with different languages tend to have different ways of thinking. The same goes for literary aesthetic criterion. While Chinese likes to make use of repetition, English prefers brevity and clarity. As a native English-speaking sinologist, it is only natural for Luo Peng to take into account the linguistic characteristics of English during the translation process. When the style of the original metaphor conflicts with the literary poetics of the target language, the translators choose style recasting strategy. Although the rhetoric device of metaphor is preserved, they modify the images of some metaphors or directly use English expressions with similar meaning to make the translation more in line with the thinking and reading habits of English readers.

Example 5 ...就是狼进了羊圈，狗进了鸡窝。<sup>[10]97</sup>

Translation 5: ... were like bulls in a china shop...<sup>[11]78</sup>

With two similes and four images in one sentence, the original text itself is repetitive. And instead of offering new information about the plot, the repetition only has the linguistic function of adjusting the rhythm. The meaning of the English idiom “a bull in a china shop” is consistent with that of the metaphors in the original text. In order to ensure the fluency of the

translation, the translator takes into account English language's preference for simplicity and clarity and uses just one image in the English version.

**Example 6.** 李光头那次一口气看到了五个屁股，一个小屁股，一个胖屁股，两个瘦屁股和一个不瘦不胖的屁股，整整齐齐地排成一行，就像是挂在肉铺里的五块猪肉。那个胖屁股像是新鲜的猪肉，两个瘦屁股像是腌过的咸肉。<sup>[10]7</sup>

**Translation 6:** That time Baldy Li snared five butts with a single glance: a puny one, a flat one, two bony ones, and a just-right one, all lined up in a neat row, like slabs of meat in a butcher shop. The fat butt was like a fresh rump of pork, the two bony ones were like beef jerky, while the puny butt wasn't even worth mentioning.<sup>[11]5</sup>

The original text uses pork as a metaphor for butt. Whether it is the general term "five pieces of pork", "fresh pork" or "cured salted meat", they are all essentially "pork". In the English translation, however, the translators avoid the repeated use of pork by choosing the more general word "meat" and flexibly changing the image into "beef", thus avoiding the dullness of the translation.

### **3.3 Style Decolouring or Generalizing: omitting metaphorical image**

As an expedient countermeasure, the essence of the so-called decolouring or generalizing is to sacrifice (or at least partially sacrifice) the stylistic meaning in order to convey the conceptual meaning<sup>[8]234</sup>. According to Newmark, metaphorical rhetoric is like a wrapping that more or less generates illusion for the readers and conceals the author's real intention<sup>[12]104</sup>. If, due to linguistic and cultural differences and other reasons, the readers are unable to make a connection between the source domain and the target domain of the metaphor, they may take the metaphor literally or even misunderstand it. Therefore, for certain metaphors in the original text, when the translators deem that they will cause difficulties in reading, they would omit the metaphorical images and reveal the metaphorical meaning directly. In this way, the cognitive load on the readers is significantly reduced, but to some extent, the artistic appeal of the original text is also at the same time weakened.

**Example 7.** 五个孩子的五个脑袋，像五个拨浪鼓一样摇晃……<sup>[10]298</sup> (

**Translation 7:** The boys' heads shook their heads vigorously...<sup>[11]246</sup>

The language of a nation, its metaphors particularly, is often imprinted with the culture of it. In the above example, the author compares "heads" to "拨浪鼓", vividly reproducing the graphic image of children

shaking their heads vigorously. But in order to stimulate this aesthetic reading experience on the readers' part, they must first be equipped with the basic understanding of the traditional Chinese toy "拨浪鼓", which is unlikely to happen among ordinary English readers. And "if the original image refers to something that does not exist or is uncommon in the target culture, direct translation is mostly inappropriate"<sup>[13]55</sup>. In this case, due to the target readers' lack of prior knowledge of the toy, a direct translation of the image may not enable the readers to understand the text, let alone appreciating the artistic charm of the original text and having an aesthetic reading experience. The translators therefore opt for the decolouring strategy and omits the original image, retaining only the meaning of fierce shaking.

**Example 8.** ……要是带上一百四十个、一千四百个健全人，里面要是像炒菜撒上味精那样，再撒些学士硕士博士和博士进去，那就不知道能挣多少钱了？<sup>[10]390</sup>

**Translation 8:** Therefore, were he able to have 140 or even 1,400 healthy workers, as well as a handful of college grads, M.A.'s, and Ph.D.'s and even some postdoctorate fellows, who could say how much money he'd be able to make?<sup>[11]325</sup>

While discussing the fundamental contradiction of metaphors, Wang Xijie asserts that "the more obvious the similarity is, the easier it is to understand, but the novelty and aesthetic appeal will suffer; on the contrary, the more obscure the similarity is, the more difficult it is to interpret, but its aesthetic value will increase"<sup>[14]397</sup>. In the original text, MSG is used as a metaphor for high-level talents such as masters and doctors, and the similarities are so obscure that they are by no means clear even to readers of the original text, let alone to those in English speaking countries who are not familiar with Chinese cooking habits and this particular ingredient. Therefore, the translators opt for omitting the image of the original text.

Based on the analysis above, we can see that the translators have chosen different translation strategies appropriately under different circumstances. Among them, style corresponding accounts for 75.5%, which is absolutely dominant, showing the translators' efforts to reproduce the style of the original text faithfully. In addition, for some metaphors that they deem too obscure for the target readers to understand or do not conform to the English literary poetics, they also adopt the strategies of style recasting and style decolouring or generalizing to deal with them flexibly.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The English translation of *Brothers* captures the unique narrative style of the novel and renders a brilliant reproduction of the important stylistic marker of

metaphor in the novel. Specifically, the translators have made the following efforts to reproduce the original style.

For starters, in order to reproduce the original style as faithfully as possible, the translators heavily rely on the strategy of style corresponding. Besides, the translators' stylistic translation strategies are flexible, with style corresponding, recasting and decolouring or generalizing co-existing. The comprehensive use of multiple means makes the translation not only reproduce the exotic cultural characteristics of the original text, but also at the same time takes into account the aesthetic experience of the target readers, which promotes the circulation of the English translation of *Brothers* in the English-speaking world. Finally, the translators' choice of translation strategy is far from arbitrary. When the metaphor of the original text is crucial to highlighting the personality of the character, the theme of the novel and even the writer's personal discourse features, the translators adopt a style corresponding strategy. When the style of the original metaphor conflicts with the poetics of the target culture, the translators tend to choose style recasting strategy and style decolouring or generalizing will be adopted when the translators presume that the original metaphor will cause reading obstacles to the readers of the translated language.

Zhao Xifang, after analyzing a large number of translation practices, believes that "translation is an inevitable process of domestication"<sup>[15]245</sup>, and Hu Anjiang also believes that "domesticating translation should become the consensus when it comes to the cause of Chinese literature 'Going out'"<sup>[16]10</sup>. However, the translation practice of *Brothers* in the English-speaking world also reveals that, with the improvement of China's comprehensive national power, the tendency of over-domestication in the early stage of Chinese literature "Going out" can be slightly adjusted, and translations that faithfully reproduce the language style of the original can also win applause.

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