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# The Challenge of Translating Yan Lianke's Literary Creation

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## Abstract

This chapter aims at proving a comparative analysis of *The Four Books*, in its translation into five different European languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. All the books used for this study are direct translations from the Chinese original and they provide insights into how translators have been dealing with the different levels of a literary translation. A comparison of the strategies used by the respective translators will be made in order to examine the extent of adjustments adopted to produce an equivalent of the original text in its target language, and thus illustrate how Yan Lianke's novel translated into European languages relate to his original literary writing. Rather than conducting an assessment, this chapter will examine what type of text non-Chinese readers of these languages have at their disposal and to what extent the literary richness of the original Chinese text can be perceived when reading *The Four Books* in translation. To that end, it is also essential to make an analysis of the original Chinese book and to know in depth the different literary features and levels displayed throughout the novel.

Key Words: Yan Lianke, Chinese Literature, Translation.

In a recent newspaper article, Mario Vargas Llosa, the Nobel Prize literary author, maintained that worthy literature and notably good novels are always subversive. In his opinion, critics should not only focus on philological studies, but also on the relationship between fiction and social reality, as well as fabulation and politics — defending that good novels, among the various literary forms, are the best engines for social change.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, Vargas Llosa published another article with a similar perspective. On that occasion, he was extremely critical of aesthetics and ethic relativism in academia and praised dangerous literature as a tool for real life and social engagement. Precisely, in that article published more than 30 years ago, he mentioned some Chinese literary works as prominent examples of daring literature at that time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, “La función de la crítica” [The Function of Literary Review], *El País*, August 2, 2020, 9, <https://elpais.com/opinion/2020-08-01/la-funcion-de-la-critica.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, “Saúl Bellow y los cuentos chinos” [Saul Bellow and the Chinese Stories], *El País*, December 1, 1991, [https://elpais.com/diario/1991/12/01/opinion/691542011\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1991/12/01/opinion/691542011_850215.html).

*The Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書) is certainly a work that belongs to the above-mentioned description of dangerous novels.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, it is one of Yan Lianke's masterpieces, abounding in creativity from the beginning to the end and touching very deeply an unhealed wound of 20th-century Chinese history. The author makes use of all kinds of symbolic and linguistic devices at his disposal, creating an extremely powerful story that directly links to what occurred in China from 1957 to 1961. The narrated story could be equated with other atrocious holocausts of humanity, since its background is a real fact that truly ended with the death of several millions of people during Mao's time in power. The drama recreated in *The Four Books* takes us back to the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the aftermath. It is a story of immersion in the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the abuse of power in a dehumanized context. An effort was made to somewhat evoke factual episodes with the power of words, thus avoiding the oblivion of these episodes forever.

### Symbolism and Realism in *The Four Books*

It was in 1956 when Mao Zedong, the Great Helmsman of China, called on intellectuals and professionals who contributed to the re-construction of the country. The Chinese Communist Party encouraged the questioning of its leaders' performance, promoting the growth of "flowers" at the cost of the proliferation of "weeds". Apparently, any well-founded criticism was considered constructive and welcomed. Such encouragement for criticism was part of a movement that aimed to correct improper tendencies within the communist organization. Paradoxically, an editorial published in the *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 1957 radically modified these criteria: numerous writers, professionals and scholars from the most diverse specialties became victims of the so-called Anti-Rightist Campaign and were sent to labour camps to be "re-educated". Several hundred thousand professionals and scholars were consequently labelled as "rightists". This is the point in history where Yan Lianke's novel begins.

Throughout 1958 several political campaigns were launched with enormous impact on the population: the establishment of communes, the socialization of private housing and the Great Leap Forward — a campaign that proposed to accelerate China's industrialization through large-scale iron and steel production. For this campaign, peasants were mobilized and assigned tasks related to metallurgy, causing the abandonment of fields which consequently led to the decrease in cereal production. But the official propaganda spread successful news of bountiful harvests instead, showing photos of children jumping over extraordinarily bountiful rice fields. Years later, it would become clear that such images were crude manipulations. The dismantling of some communes provided proof of the failure of such social organization. It has been estimated that between 1959 and 1962 more than 30 million people died in rural areas as a result of this campaign.<sup>4</sup> Official accounts, however, continue to attribute these deaths to natural catastrophes. While the beginning of the new decade did bring with it

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<sup>3</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu* [The Four Books], (Taipei: Maitian Chuban, 2011). This version was printed in traditional characters, nevertheless, the author wrote it originally in simplified characters and those will be used throughout this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> See Yang Jisheng, *Mubei—Zhongguo Liushi Niandai Ta Jihuang Jishi* [Tombstone: A Chronicle of the Great Famine in China in the 1960s], 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu, 2008).

droughts and floods, the great number of deaths was nevertheless a politically provoked catastrophe that is scarcely known both in and outside of China - an event that affected a significant part of China's population, especially in rural areas. In today's China, the responsibility of those who held the power then and the severity of what happened remain issues that is preferably not talked and even less written about.

For this reason, the first problem one encounters when translating *The Four Books* might be how to tell any reader unfamiliar with events in contemporary China that this novel must not be understood as only an imaginative display by the author, but is actually based on real facts. Yan Lianke's narrative leaves no one feeling indifferent, either because of the quality of his prose or his ability to dissect social reality, as he consistently offers a new and profound way to look at that social reality. His texts portray times of incredible hardships and complexities of life. The social responsibility of the writer that runs in the blood of some of the most prominent Chinese authors of the early twentieth century is still present in his writing. In China precisely, Yan Lianke has been labelled as “master of absurd realism” (*huangdan xianshizhuyi dashi* 荒诞现实主义大师). This could be considered either an effort to erase the socio-political implications of his narrative or to detach his works from reality. But Yan himself denies this alleged extravagance of his novels.<sup>5</sup> Some earlier works by Yan Lianke can be described as allegorical and burlesque. In *The Four Books* he does not completely resign from his characteristic parody to address dramatic and concrete events. Additionally, like in other previous works, he makes use of all the linguistic and poetic resources at his disposal with overwhelming creativity.

The original Chinese version of *The Four Books* was initially published in Hong Kong and Taiwan. For this analysis, the Taiwanese version will be used. The Taiwan edition comes with an introduction by Prof. Cai Jianxin 蔡建鑫 who provides a clear historical background to the plot. In both the English and Spanish translations, an introduction was also included to explain the historical settings. In the case of the French version there is a brief comment on the back cover of the book, while in the German version one finds on the book flap the mentioning that the story is based on an historical episode still silenced today in China. On the other hand, the Great Leap Forward is cited as the background of the novel on the book flap of the Italian version. Somehow, all the translators were aware of the plot's link with Chinese twentieth-century history and related their translation to that history in varying degrees. Despite that, the main problem remains: will readers be able to understand the specific choice of words that appear in the text hinting at the author's criticism of the political campaigns and disasters of that period? It is undoubtedly an open question and unimportant whether referring to Chinese or foreign readers, since in both cases the lack of deep knowledge of that time is a general phenomenon. Yet, the author's primary inspiration for many incidents and anecdotes recounted throughout the pages of *The Four Books* is History, chiselled down to the most outrageous follies and tiniest details of real facts.

Translating Yan Lianke's literary works presents a significant challenge for anyone. As an author, Yan Lianke is continuously searching for a new literary language and trying to explore various relationships between form and content, innovating throughout the diverse levels of his text. The importance of structure and style along with the overlapping of form and content can be clearly identified in his works when reading them in Chinese. As he himself declares, he expends a lot of time rethinking what the

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<sup>5</sup> During his visit to Spain in October 2016, and on many occasions later in China, I had the opportunity to discuss several times this “label” with Yan Lianke.

skeleton of his story will be, meticulously intertwining it with the theme yet without forgetting other elements identifiable with literary language. In this manner, each of his novels develops a particularly elaborated style deeply linked with the structure of the text. The poetic elements in Yan Lianke's writings are also unquestionably overwhelming.

In *The Four Books*, he uses four interlocking texts around which he assembles his plot. In the original Chinese novel, formal elements were utilized to reinforce prose variances and even a distinctive font style was used for each of the four texts. For the translations, different font styles were also used in the French, Italian and Spanish versions. The English and German versions did not employ any such distinction and used only one font type throughout all four texts.

As it is quite obvious to anyone familiar with Chinese culture, the title of this novel has a direct relationship with *The Four Books* of the Confucian canon: *Analects*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Great Learning* and *Mencius*. The Confucian code of ethics was collected in various texts, interpreted over time by many later sages, and attained the status as a moral standard until the modern period. Just as for generations intellectual elites studied and even memorized *The Four Books* in which the moral canon of the imperial period was collected, Yan Lianke's new "Four Books" are called to replace or perhaps complement the previous ones, becoming an obligatory reference not to forgetting the collective and individual destruction in which the madness of totalitarianism ended. The many nuances and double meanings of the title allow for multiple interpretations. Here, all five translations have kept the original meaning in Chinese. Titles are maintained with the original sense in most of the translations of Yan's books, but completely different in some cases. That was the particular case for *Shouhuo* 受活, somehow an ambivalent expression with the meaning of "enduring and enjoying life". When first published in 2009 in France, the title was translated as *Bons baisers de Lénine*, an alternative title that exercised an enormous influence on all other language versions. In English (2012) this novel appeared as *Lenin's Kisses*, in German (2015) as *Lenins Küsse*, and even in Spanish (2015) as *Los besos de Lenin*. Nevertheless, an absolute change of the original title remains an exception rather than a norm in the translation of Yan's literary works.

As for *The Four Books*, the first text, "Heaven's Child" (*Tian de Haizi* 天的孩子), opens with the narrative of the establishment of the re-education camps where the "rightists" were confined. The echoing of the biblical account of Genesis resonates strongly in an amalgamation with classical concepts from Chinese traditional thought and religions, such as the supreme duality that rules everything in the universe: Heaven and Earth. Yan Lianke insisted on adopting an obscure language that is at times extremely challenging to translate, similar to that of the Bible in Chinese translation. In all five translations it is recognizable that the text has been inspired by biblical language; probably it would be easier for foreigners with Christian cultural roots rather than general Chinese readers to grasp his primary intention. The vision offered of events in this first book reveals the almost divine power of the Party, personified in an innocent and naive child, capable of the best and the worst. And this child, who rewards inmates with red flowers – an act of giving still done today in Chinese kindergartens – somehow imitates martyrs of the communist revolution or even Jesus Christ.

In the second book, "Old Course" (*Gu Dao* 故道), sublime levels of poetry are reached. The protagonist is the same imaginary author of the text. His everyday behaviour contrasts with the greatness bestowed on the act of writing itself. Dignity and pettiness

accompany him along with the rest of the scholars and fellow prisoners, on his way to transform them into "new men." In this part of the novel, the influence of the Chinese poetic tradition is evident. Human feelings and emotions merge with nature. Interactions of human beings with the world are described with sounds, smells, tastes, colours and textures, in the manner of famous poems of the Tang dynasty. In the old Chinese way, Heaven and Earth, above and below, inside and outside make up a whole that encompasses the universe, including the literary creation itself. The description of the cycle of agriculture becomes a space for a vibrant exhibition of life, dreams and desires, as an attempt to escape from confinement in the re-education camp. In the background of the story the great and impetuous Yellow River – one of the most prominent symbols of Chinese civilization – as well as its ancient course are depicted. Chinese peasants are present in a beautiful allegory about blood, sweat and tears shed on their land and crops.

The third book, "Criminal Records" (*Zuiren Lu* 罪人录) recreates reports on the anti-revolutionary behaviour of the "rightist criminals" living in the concentration camp. The authorities requested the "Old Course" author to write down notes for the reports. A simple language goes along with the reproduction of phrases and expressions used for propaganda during the Maoist era. The annotation of the sayings and deeds of the inmates recalls the routine practice of denunciation during the period in which the action takes place.

As a culmination, "The New Myth of Sisyphus" (*Xin Xixufu Shenhua* 新西绪弗神话) is the fourth and last book. It refers to a very well-known essay with almost similar title, created by Albert Camus (1913-1960), a French author and philosopher. In his famous piece, Sisyphus, a character in Greek mythology, causes the anger of the gods and is punished to push a huge rock forever, showing the tragic and absurdity of his fate. It is a brief philosophical essay that Yan Lianke uses to propose a reflection on Chinese vital attitude towards suffering.

This novel has never been officially published in mainland China. Nevertheless, for private distribution, the author himself informally printed a few copies and circulated them among friends and translators. It seems that this informal edition, together with the published one, was used by the French translator, and presumably were known by the German and Italian counterparts, since both omit the title of the sections as in the case of this unofficial version.<sup>6</sup> In all the five translations compared, the integrity of the text has been maintained.<sup>7</sup> The text is divided into sixteen sections or chapters (*zhang* 章) with main subtitles in each of them. Within each one are included excerpts indicating the number of pages, as if they were related to an imagined complete volume of the four books.

Throughout all the texts, the translators of *The Four Books* faced the unavoidable necessity of making choices and decisions. Very often the author introduces some subtle nuance that turns the phrase into something extraordinary. This happens even in the dedication of the book:

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<sup>6</sup> Complete references of all five translations can be found in the Bibliography section at the end. On page 35 of the French translation, the original Chinese text seems to use page 15 of the author's version for distribution among his friends, not the printed edition in Taiwan.

<sup>7</sup> It is not always the case in all translations. For example when translated into French and Italian, Yan Lianke's *Wo yu fubei* 我与父辈 [My father's generation and me] was reduced to less than half of the original text.

谨以此书献给那被忘却的历史和成千上万死去与活着的读书人。<sup>8</sup>

In this sentence, Yan Lianke does not use the common word “intellectuals” (*zhishi fenzi* 知识分子), as is generally done when speaking of those who suffered the Anti-Rightist movement. The term intellectual is constructed with the combination of “knowledge” (*zhishi* 知识) and “element” or “member” (*fenzi* 分子). Intellectuals are those elements working with the intellect, as opposed to manual workers, distinctive of the proletariat. Yan, however, has not used the common “intellectuals” but a more traditional term, that is, *dushuren* 读书人 – literally “person who study books” in Chinese, which encompasses the meanings of “sage” or “scholar”. The French, German and Italian translators decided to use “intellectuals”, but the English and Spanish versions opted for “scholars” and “*estudiosos*”, respectively, somehow maintaining the author’s special choice of lexicon.

As hitherto mentioned, the beginning of the novel refers us directly to the Bible, although despite being relatively simple, the first sentence in the Chinese original has given rise to very different interpretations:

Original Chinese: 大地和脚，回来了。

English translation: The great earth and the mortal path returned together.

French translation: Ses pieds ont foulé la terre, il est revenu. [His feet have stepped on the ground, he came back].

German translation: Die Erde kehrte heim und mit ihr alle Kreatur. [The earth returned home and with it all creation.]

Italian translation: I suoi piedi calpestavano la terra: era tornato. [His feet stepped on the earth: he had returned.]

Spanish translation: La madre tierra y los pies habían regresado. [The Mother Earth and the feet had returned.]

In fact, this sentence provides a very typical example of a topic-comment standard construction in Chinese, with the topic (*Dadi he jiao* 大地和脚, “the great earth and the feet”) in the initial position of the sentence and separated with a comma, as a pause and topic marker.<sup>9</sup> In Chinese, this kind of sentences provides flexibility for establishing symbolic links and enriching narrative meanings. Topic-comment sentences are abundantly used by Yan Lianke and certainly pose many difficulties when translating into subject-predicate prominent languages. Most likely, for European-language-speaking translators, part of the apparent complexity of a relatively simple announcement has to do with the lack of a grammatical equivalent in the written discourse of European languages. The Spanish translation is the most literal one, maintaining *Dadi* 大地 and *jiao* 脚 as subjects, but erasing the comma as a way of

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<sup>8</sup> One possible literal translation could be: “To all those forgotten millions of scholars, dead or alive, and to the History that has been forgotten.”

<sup>9</sup> As it has been pointed out by Li and Thompson, this is a predominant phenomenon in the Chinese Language. See Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, “Subject and Topic: A New Typology of Language,” in Charles N. Li, (ed.), *Subject and Topic*, (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 457-489. See also Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, *Mandarin Chinese. A Functional Reference Grammar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.) Some linguistics even state that almost all sentences in Chinese could be considered Topic-Comment structures. See Randy Lapolla, “Topic and Comment,” in Rint Sybesma et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics, Volume 4* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 370-376.

grammatically “domesticating” the sentence.<sup>10</sup> The French and Italian versions have both personalized the phrase in the third person, referring to the Child, despite the lack of person in the original Chinese text, and providing in this way a subject instead of a topic. For their part, the English and German translations have maintained “the Earth” as the subject but have omitted “feet” and replaced it in both cases with other elements that accentuate the cosmological and mythological character of the statement. Meanwhile, “mortal path” was added in the English version, and “with it all creation” (*mit ihr alle Kreatur*) in the German version. As already stated by linguists, grammatical categories might carry a high semantic import, especially in poetry.<sup>11</sup> In the same breath, not only a lack of semantic but also a lack of syntactic equivalents in languages makes literary translations much more entangled and poses a significant challenge to translators. In this respect, grammatical features of the Chinese language itself provide Yan Lianke with a range of poetic narrative devices loaded with significance that are difficult to translate into Indo-European languages and require an interlingual transposition.

Without entering into an assessment on how the translators have “domesticated” this initial sentence of the text, it is clear that the author's intention in the first paragraphs of the novel is to refer to a kind of cosmological myth, in which the first chapters of Genesis resonate. For certain, any person familiar with the Old Testament can clearly identify the author's source of inspiration. And in this sense, foreign readers are more likely to have fewer problems for recognising its linkage with the Bible. Despite this, foreigners would probably encounter difficulties understanding that the use of a cosmological myth is far from new in Chinese literature and that it acquires a particular meaning. Some of the most classic texts, especially some master novels like *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglouloumeng* 红楼梦), also begin with a kind of mythological cosmogony, fundamental for framing the story. Further, this narrative device is a feature present in many other famous Chinese works. The use of this strategy in classical Chinese novels has found resonance among Western specialists who have highlighted the importance of the symbolic in the conception and reading of such texts.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, other scholars have emphasized that it is precisely in more realistic novels where the myth gives substance and form to the story.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, such a reputable critic as C. T. Hsia disagrees with an interpretation that primarily highlights the mythical elements of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In contrast, the mimetic aspects in this novel is predominate according to Hsia, since “*Dream* is by and large a realistic narrative,”<sup>14</sup> and there is a “vast amount of contemporary criticism (and not merely Communist criticism) that regards *Dream* as a work of vital social and ideological significance in relation to the Chinese tradition as a whole and to its own times in

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<sup>10</sup> Even if used before, I borrow this term as applied in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*, Second Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspect of Translation,” in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. Third Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 126-131.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Andrew H. Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the “Dream of the Red Chamber”* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976). He tried to underline the archetypal and allegorical elements of the text, in the specific case of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, relating them to Chinese cultural elements present in *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), the *Yin-Yang* cosmogony and the so-called five agents (*wuxing*).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Levi, “Mythe et roman en Chine et en Occident,” in *La Chine romanesque. Fictions d'Orient et d'Occident* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1995), 211-219.

<sup>14</sup> C. T. Hsia. *On Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 171-187. Specially, 172.



particular.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it would be plausible to consider that, from a traditional point of view, the use of myth and allegory in Chinese literature actually points towards a reading of historical and social reality rather than absurd realism – presumably Yan Lianke’s intention would be the former. Undoubtedly, readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture will have trouble establishing a link with this distinctive feature.

In *The Four Books*, main characters of the novels have no proper names in the natural use of the term. Instead, except for the single case of the Child (*haizi* 孩子), we find common nouns referring to the professional expertise of the personages. All of them have strong connotations substituting proper names and requiring a literal translation. At the beginning of the story, they are introduced very briefly as an author (*yi ge zuojia* 一个作家), a scholar (*yi ge xuezhe* 一个学者), a professor of religion (*zongjiao jiaoshou* 宗教教授), and a professor of music and female pianist (*yinyue laoshi, gangqinjia* 音乐老师, 钢琴家).<sup>16</sup> Then, later on, appears a quite important secondary character: “a certain technician in the laboratory of a university” (*mouge daxue shiyanshi de shiyanyuan* 某个大学实验室的实验员).<sup>17</sup> Along the text, their denomination is abbreviated in Chinese as “author” (*zuoja* 作家), “scholar” (*xuezhe* 学者) and “music or musician” (*yinyue* 音乐). While all the translations have adopted these same terms, there are differences in the case of *zongjiao* (宗教) and *shiyanshi* (实验). In the French and the Italian versions “the Religious (person)” (*le Religieux; il Religioso*) are used, whereas in the Spanish translation “the One of the Religion” (*el de religion*), referring to a professor of religion, is used. In contrast, both English and German translators decided to use “the Theologian”. For the secondary role, “the Researcher” was the translation chosen for *shiyanshi* (实验) in the French version (*le Chercheur*) and the Italian version (*il Ricercatore*), while “the Technician” was chosen for the English and German versions and “the lab’s technician” (*el técnico de laboratorio*) for the Spanish version. In all but one case, capital letters have been used for outlining them as proper names. This is in fact already a normal practice in the German language, where names (proper or common) always begin with a capital letter. Spanish is an exception and have maintained the terms in lower case letters for underlining the nameless nature of its use in the original Chinese.

If we examine in more detail, we find that for “the Child” Yan Lianke uses the particular choice of words *haizi ta* 孩子他 38 times. Here we find a juxtaposition of two words: *haizi* 孩子 (child) and *ta* 他 (normally meaning “he”, “him” or “his”, but used also as apposition for emphasising a person’s name). Throughout the novel, except in one case, it functions as a sort of double topic in topic-comment constructions, most of the time with a comma as a topic marker. Only the Spanish translation has tried to replicate this expression as “*el niño ese*” [the child that one]. All the other translations omitted this special way of emphasising this main character and simply used “the Child” in all cases. In the last chapter, apart from Sisyphus (西绪弗), other characters make their appearance: God or gods (*shen* 神) depending on how this was interpreted by each translator. The translators of the English and German versions opted for “God” in singular, while the translators of the Italian and Spanish versions went for “gods” in plural. In contrast, the translator of the French version in this specific case opted for

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<sup>15</sup> C. T. Hsia, *On Chinese Literature*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 57.

domesticating the translation by using “Zeus”, the specific Greek name of the king of gods of Olympus.

### Lexical Devices in Yan Lianke’s Work

Lexical devices used by Yan Lianke are extremely rich and complex for translators. One of them is the creation of new words. He invents them by making use of Chinese common word structures with either different character combination or using them in other contexts, distinctive from the usual ones. For example, he repeats more than one hundred times *yuxin* 育新, formed with *yu* 育 “raise” or “educate” and *xin* 新 “new” or “renew”, in a sort of verb-object compound.<sup>18</sup> In China, the use of *laojiao* 劳教 (“re-educate by physical labor”) or *laodong gaizao* 劳动改造 “reform through labor” (abbreviated also as *lao gai* 劳改) is commonplace. Since this novel refers to 1957, when many intellectuals – in the broad use of the term – were labelled as “rightists” and were interned in reform-through-labour detention camps, Yan Lianke invents this neologism combining it with *qu* 区 (“district”, “region”, “area”) to form the name *yuxiqu* 育新区. Furthermore, he also added the suffix *-men*, as a plural marker restricted to personal nouns in *yuxinmen* 育新们, and the suffix *-zhe* 者 (as nominalizer with the meaning of “doer” or “one who...”) in *yuxinzhe* 育新者, while compounding *yuxin gaizao* 育新改造 as a synonym of the commonly used *laodong gaizao* 劳动改造.

All these are neologisms that have been rendered in the English translation as “Re-Education district” or just “Re-Ed”. For the French translation, “*zone de novéducation*” and also as a verb (*se novéduquer*), which are clearly new created words, are used. In the German version the common verb *umerzogen* (“re-educate”, also in a political sense) is used, as well as other already existent expressions with the same root, such as “*Umerzziehungslager*” with the meaning of “indoctrination camp,” which identified with communist regimes. The Italian version uses an ordinary vocable with the meaning of rehabilitation, reformation or re-education (*rieducazione, rieducare*), quite the opposite to “*re-formación*” in Spanish, which includes a hyphen between “re” and “training” as a way for highlighting its peculiar feature as well as a footnote mentioning that it is a neologism invented by Yan.

Other lexical strategies include modification of the traditional order of disyllabic words to provide alternative meanings. For example, instead of *zhìhui* 智慧 “wisdom”; “intelligence” and “perfect wisdom in Buddhism” (where *zhì* 智 means “wisdom”; “resourcefulness”; “wit”, and *hui* 慧 “wisdom”; “intelligence”), he uses *huìzhì huìzhì* 慧智慧智. Reduplication turns the word into a manner adverb, modifying the verb, as can be identified by the position it occupies at the end of the sentence, located before the verb:

孩子看了跟来的一人眼神后，朝田头，围了玉米杆的一棵杨树慧智慧智走过去。

English: Upon noticing this, the Child turned toward the grove and walked deliberately toward one of the poplars at the edge of the cornfield.

French: L’Enfant suivit un regard, puis s’en alla, l’air entendu, vers un de ces peupliers cernés de chaumes sur la bordure du champ.

<sup>18</sup> For this structure in Chinese, see Li & Thompson, *Mandarin Chinese*, 73-81.

German: Und in seiner Klugheit ging es zu einer der Pappeln am Ackerrand und trat gegen den Haufen von Maishalmen.

Italian: Seguendo lo sguardo di un detenuto, il Bambino scrutò verso l'estremità del campo e si diresse, con l'aria di saperla lunga, verso una catasta di fusti ammassati attorno a un pioppo.

Spanish: Tras observar la mirada de un hombre que le seguía, el niño se encaminó hacia el lindero, se dirigió a las cañas de maíz que había en torno a un álamo, con perspicaz sabiduría e insidiosa lucidez.

This expression has been domesticated in the English translation, and there is no trace of *huizhi huizhi* 慧智慧智 and its singularity.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the whole sentence has been simplified. The French version used *l'air entendu* as a manner adverb and stayed closer to the original sentence. The German version has also simplified the sentence but using the words “in his wisdom” (*in seiner Klugheit*). The Italian version has also utilized “with the air of knowing a thing or two” (*con l'aria di saperla lunga*) and is overall closer to the original. In Spanish, a more elaborate expression, “with insightful wisdom and insidious lucidity” (*con perspicaz sabiduría e insidiosa lucidez*), was used as a way of underlining some distinctive features in the primary text. In all translations but English, this expression was employed as a verb's modifier (a manner adverb), and in the Spanish translation a footnote was added to explain the original pun.

There are also creations of new four-character idioms combining previously established Chinese sayings (*chengyu* 成语). The meaning of Chinese idioms are generally not derived from the literal meaning of the four characters and are a common way for metaphorical expression.<sup>20</sup> Due to their variety and frequency of use in the Chinese language, they often create translation challenges, more so in the case of newly created ones. For example, in *jinjing-shensuan* 金睛神算 we find a mix of two traditional idioms. The first one is *huoyan-jinjing* 火眼金睛 (literally: fire-eyes-metal-pupils), used in *Journey to the West* with the meaning of “penetrating insight” or “great powers of discernment”; while the other one is *shenjin-miaosuan* 神机妙算 (literally: divine-stratagem-marvellous-scheme) known to have been introduced in *The Three Kingdoms* with the metaphoric meaning of “amazing foresight” and “a superb strategy” in military operations, among other meanings. This new invented idiom appears twice in the following paragraph:

收走几本书。再又去搜铁，金睛神算，知道谁把他的搪瓷铁碗藏哪去。谁把他牙缸、不锈钢的调羹藏哪去。上边的，金睛神算，到了也就找到了。上边的，找了许多铁。把孩子，叫到一边说下许多话。

English: After collecting several books, he once again went off in search of iron. He magically seemed to know where each person had hidden their iron rice bowls, teeth-brushing cups, and stainless steel spoons. He then called the Child over, and they proceeded to have a long discussion.

French: Il y confisqua quelques livres. Il y récupéra du fer. Cet homme avait un œil d'or et le don de divination : si quelqu'un avait caché des ustensiles en métal émaillé, il le savait et savait où les trouver. Si quelqu'un avait caché son verre à dents et sa

<sup>19</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 36; English trans, 8; French, 16; German, 14; Italian, 18; Spanish, 27.

<sup>20</sup> See Lei Wang, Shiwen Yu, Zhimin Wang, Weiguang Qu, and Houfeng Wang, “A Study on Metaphors in Idioms Based on Chinese Idiom Knowledge Base,” in Xinchun Su and Tingting He (Eds.), *Chinese Lexical Semantics. CLSW 2014, LNAI 8922*, (Cham: Springer, 2014), 434-440. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-14331-6\_43

cuillère en inox, il les trouvait. Les autorités sont clairvoyantes, il leur suffit de venir pour trouver. Il trouva du fer en grande quantité. Ensuite il prit l'Enfant à l'écart et lui parla longuement.

German: Er nahm einige Bücher an sich, dann suchte er nach Eisen. Und nichts entging seinem Blick. Er wusste, wer seine Emailleschüsseln, seine Zahnputzbecher und Löffel aus rostfreiem Stahl wo versteckt hatte. Auf wundersame Weise fand er, was es zu finden gab. Dann rief er das Kind zu sich und redete lange auf es ein.

Italian: Sequestrò diversi libri. Poi si mise alla ricerca del ferro, dando prova di una miracolosa preveggenza e di una vista acutissima, dato che sapeva dove Tizio o Caio avevano nascosto la propria ciotola di metallo smaltato. O dove avevano infilato il bicchiere per sciacquarsi la bocca o il cucchiaino in acciaio inossidabile. L'uomo aveva una miracolosa preveggenza e una vista acutissima, gli bastò venire per trovare quello che cercava. Scovò una gran quantità di ferro. Poi chiamò in disparte il Bambino e gli parlò a lungo.

Spanish: Recogió algunos libros y se los llevó. Y con pupilas doradas y predicción sobrenatural recogió también hierro; conocía exactamente el lugar donde escondían los utensilios de metal esmaltado y los tazones de hierro. Si alguien ocultaba su cuchara de acero inoxidable y el vaso del cepillo de dientes, allí iba. El de arriba, de pupilas doradas y predicción sobrenatural, allí iba y los hallaba. El de arriba encontró mucho hierro. Llamó al niño a un aparte y le dijo muchas cosas.

In this case, for this newly created Chinese idiom (*jinjing-shensuan* 金睛神算) the English translation uses “magically” as its choice in the first sentence it appears, but the whole sentence where the second time this idiom was used was not included in the translation. As a whole, rhythm and vocabulary used in the original paragraph were simplified. Instead, the French version uses an explanatory translation the first time it appears: “*Cet homme avait un œil d’or et le don de divination*” (this man had a golden eye and the gift of divination); and then, in the second sentence, it was translated as “*être clairvoyant*” (“to be perspicacious” or “clear-sighted”). All the clauses of the paragraph have been maintained, and the most noticeable feature is the introduction of “he” (*il*) as a subject in all sentences, even employing it as a sort of anaphora instead of the one used originally in the novel (*shangbian de* 上边的 “higher-ups”). Anaphora, the usage of the same repetitive words at the beginning of adjacent sentences for emphasis, is also a typical rhetoric device in Yan Lianke’s works, even sometimes with lengthy sequences of words. As for the German translation of this sentence, an amalgam was made with the subsequent clause using “*Und nichts entging seinem Blick*” (and nothing escaped his gaze), and for the second time using “*Auf wundersame Weise*” (in a wondrous way). Nevertheless, it is evident that the paragraph has been partially simplified. As for the Italian (*una miracolosa preveggenza e di una vista acutissima*) and Spanish (*pupilas doradas y predicción sobrenatural*) versions, both have maintained the translation of this idiom in both clauses with a very similar structure, focusing more on the metaphorical sense in the first case and with a more literal translation in the second case. In both cases, readers would be more likely to identify some distinctive features found in the Chinese original. Incidentally, the above-mentioned anaphora, as in the original text, is barely maintained in the Spanish translation.<sup>21</sup>

Another lexical device in Yan’s texts is the introduction of reduplicate characters or even the invention of new ABB compounds of adjectives or adverbs. This kind of

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<sup>21</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 100; English, 65; French, 84; German, 72; Italian, 92-93; Spanish, 90-91.

compounds, mostly trisyllabic or quadrisyllabic, very often have phonaesthetic elements such as affixes and incorporates the semantic feature of intensifying emotions or atmospheres. In fact, they were classified by Yuen Ren Chao as vivid reduplicates, since many of them are formed with vivid affixes (*shengdong houzhui* 生动后缀).<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking, these words are significantly associated with perceptive categories: vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell. In Yan Lianke's narrative, it seems that those related with colours have augmented over the years and its usage frequency has increased in later works.<sup>23</sup> *The Four Books* is actually full of reduplicated adjectives and adverbs, newly created or employed in uncommon situations. While in Chinese they would undoubtedly provide even more vivid description, for translators even those generally used could be a nuisance.

去看孩子脸。孩子望着人，目光哀灰灰的伤。

English: Then they turned to the Child, who looked back at them with a sorrowful expression in his eyes.

French: Ils regardèrent l'Enfant. L'Enfant les observait et son regard était triste, blessé.

German: Da schauten sie zum Kind, und das Kind schaute zurück, und sein Blick war voll Trauer.

Italian: Spostarono lo sguardo sul Bambino. Lui li guardava, con un'espressione ferita e piena di tristezza.

Spanish: Dirigieron la vista hacia el rostro del niño. El niño contemplaba a los hombres con una mirada gris, triste y dolida.

In both English and German translations, *aihuihui de shang* 哀灰灰的伤 is domesticated as "sorrowful". In the French and Italian versions, in addition to "sorrowful" (*triste* and *pieno di tritezza*) "hurt" (*blessé* and *ferita*) was added. In the Spanish version three adjectives: grey, sorrowful and hurt (*gris, triste y dolida*) were used.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the ABB-pattern adjective is an invention of the author. Despite that throughout the texts there are also many other such compounds that could be considered more ordinary, it is not unproblematic to incorporate them in translation. This is the case for the next example:

半个钟点后，红薯的香味黄灿灿在炉的周围飘。

English: (This sentence is untranslated).

French: Une demi-heure plus tard, leur parfum jaune s'était mis à flotter.

German: Als eine halbe Stunde später ihr goldgelber Duft in der Luft trieb,

Italian: Dopo mezz'ora un profumo giallo si diffuse tutt'intorno.

Spanish: Media hora más tarde, por el entorno flotaba un reluciente aroma amarillo a batata.

In this sentence the common compound (*huangcancan* 黄灿灿 found in dictionaries as "bright yellow" or "golden") is used within an unusual context.<sup>25</sup> The vivid bright yellow colour is applied to the aroma of sweet potatoes floating around a furnace. In

<sup>22</sup> See Yuan Ren Chao, *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* 2<sup>nd</sup> print (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 198-210.

<sup>23</sup> See Zhu Dongping, "Yan Lianke Xiaoshuo Yuyan ABB Xing Xingrongci de Xingou," in *Changchun Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Changchun University], 10 no.4 (August 2000): 59-61.

<sup>24</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 260-261; English, 219; French, 266; German, 228; Italian, 92-93; Spanish, 248.

<sup>25</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 95; English, 61; French, 79; German, 68; Italian, 87; Spanish, 87.

the English version this sentence is not translated, while the French translation merely employed “yellow” (*jaune*), as did the Italian version (*giallo*). In the German version “goldgelb” or “golden yellow” is used, and the Spanish version, on the other hand, added “gleaming” (*reluciente*) to “yellow” (*amarillo*).

Along with colours, onomatopoeias are equally used in profusion.<sup>26</sup> For example, the onomatopoeia with two distinct pronunciations and meanings *zhi/zi* 吱 appears in 23 sentences as *zhi* for small and shrill sound and as *zi* for the sound of small animals (equivalent to the English words “squeak”, “chirp” or “peep”). It is introduced in four cases as a reduplicate – *zhizhi* 吱吱 (incisive sound in small broken bits); two cases as *zhizha* 吱喳 (noisy chatter); one case as a trisyllable – *zhizhizha* 吱吱喳; two other cases as a reduplicated disyllabic *zhizha-zhizha* 吱喳吱喳 (sound of footsteps, and sound of something tearing away); and one case as *zizi-zhazha* 吱吱喳喳 (sound of insects and birds under paper). There is also a combination with other onomatopoeias like *zhila* 吱啦 (sizzle); *zhicha* 吱嚓 (sound of wheels on the snow); or *zhiya* 吱呀 (door sound), and even a reduplicated *zhiya-zhiya* 吱呀吱呀. This character also appears in a compound with green – *lüzhi* 绿吱吱 to suggest the sound of vegetation; another with grey – *huiming-zhizhi* 灰鸣吱吱 to emulate the cry of birds/animals/insects; and in other combinations as quadrisyllabic compounds like *qinghong-zhizhi* 青红吱吱, *zuixi-zhizhi* 碎细吱吱, *jizhijini* 叽吱叽呢, and *zhiya-jiji* 吱呀叽叽.<sup>27</sup> The diversity of onomatopoeias displayed by Yan Lianke is overwhelming. Using sound imageries, he explores different phonaesthetic features with alliteration, reduplication, assonance and rhythm, while seeking new symbolic images and relationships. Translators no doubt encounter many difficulties in showing readers his inventiveness of onomatopoeias.

### The Use of Allusions, Similes and Metaphors

By far, the most evident poetic devices one encounters when reading *The Four Books* in Chinese are metaphorical comparisons (mainly allusions, similes and partial or complete metaphors) extensively used throughout the work,<sup>28</sup> for which a comparative analysis would require considerable space. Along the text, Yan uses many allusions and literary quotations and profusely applies insinuations with direct or indirect reference to poems, traditional myths or classical passages, specific places, political events or even concrete persons. For example, a famous sentence by a Tang poet, Xu Hun 许浑 (ca. 788-ca. 854) is introduced as a complete sentence. This verse can be found in dictionaries with the meaning of “ominous portents”; “omen” or “portent.” The allusion is translated with diverse strategies.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See Xiao Shuanrong, “Yan Lianke Zuopin Zhong Nishengci de Chaochang Yungyong,” in Li Jianfa, *Yan Lianke Wenxue Yanjiu*, Vol. II (Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 2013), 438-442. For a description of phonaesthetic features of Chinese language, see Yip Po-Ching, *The Chinese Lexicon. A comprehensive Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 177-218.

<sup>27</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 63; 135; 167; 178; 190; 208; 224; 237; 238; 239; 250; 263; 281; 284; 302; 310; 313; 315; 327; 343; 347; 364; 366.

<sup>28</sup> For lexical feature of metaphorical comparisons and other rhetorical figures in Chinese, see Yip Po-Ching, *The Chinese Lexicon*, 219-264.

<sup>29</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 86; English, 54; French, 71; German, 61; Italian, 78; and Spanish, 79.

山雨欲来风满楼。

English: They seemed to sense that this event heralded something much larger.

French: Quand la tempête va s'abattre sur la montagne, le vent envahit le pavillon.

German: Kommende Ereignisse schienen ihre drohenden Schatten vorauszuwerfen.

Italian: Si sente nell'aria una minaccia di tempesta.

Spanish: La lluvia se abate sobre las montañas y el viento invade el pabellón

The English, German and Italian versions opted for a translation of the sentence without making explicit any allusion to the literal words of the poem, but directly to its metaphorical meaning. In contrast to that, the French and Spanish versions provide a literal translation, with the Spanish version including a footnote to fully explain the allusion. There are plenty of allusions and various examples with much more complex structures and combinations, such as the following sentence:

上边说了，种上小麦，要摘月射日，大炼钢铁，你们平均每人每月，得炼出一炉钢铁，有文化能耐，不能比农民少缺。

English: The higher-ups said that you should plant wheat and smelt steel. Everyone must smelt an average of a furnace-worth of steel every month. Given that each of you has cultural ability, you therefore cannot produce less than the peasants.

French: Les autorités ont dit qu'après avoir semé le blé, il faudra décrocher la lune et fabriquer de l'acier à grande échelle, vous produirez en Moyenne un fourneau par personne et par mois, vous êtes des hommes cultivés, des hommes capables, vous ne pouvez pas faire moins que les paysans.

German: Die Oberen sagen: Ihr sollt Weizen anbauen und Stahl schmelzen, und wenn ihr dafür die Sonne vom Himmel schießen müsst. Ein jeder von euch soll jeden Monat eine Ofenfüllung Stahl schmelzen. Ihr seid tüchtig und gebildet, ihr dürft nicht zurückbleiben hinter den Bauern.

Italian: Lassù dicono che dopo la semina ci lanceremo nella produzione dell'acciaio, sarà uno sforzo epico per spezzare tutti gli ostacoli sul nostro cammino. Dovrete produrre in media il contenuto di una fornace per persona al mese, siete capaci e istruiti, non potete fare peggio dei contadini.

Spanish: Arriba lo han dicho: sembrad trigo, alcanzad la luna y disparad al sol, fundid hierro y acero a gran escala, una media de un horno por persona y mes. Tenéis aptitudes y cultura, no podéis quedar por debajo de los campesinos.

In this sentence, *yao zhai yue she ri* 要摘月射日 resonates mixed allusions from multiple sources.<sup>30</sup> Since words are attributed to the highest leaders of the country, *zhai yue* 摘月 (“pick the moon”) could be considered an allusion to Mao Zedong. In one of his famous poems he used a quite similar expression (*lan yue* 揽月 “take into one’s arms the moon”). It is normally considered that his inspirations come from Li Bai’s poems. Later on, this allusion to the moon becomes a popular saying with the meaning of “attaining the highest goals”. A second allusion, *she ri* 射日 (“shoot the sun”), refers to the legend of Houyi 后羿. This ancient mythological story refers to a time when lands and fields being scorched due to the existence of ten suns. Houyi shoots his arrows and manages to eliminate nine of them, leaving a single sun, and hence making the planet’s climate much more benign. This allusion to Houyi appears four times in the

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<sup>30</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 32; English, 4; French, 12; German, 10; Italian, 13; and Spanish, 24.

novel.<sup>31</sup> In this first case, there is no trace of the double allusion in the English translation. In the French text only the first allusion is partially translated: get the moon (*décrocher la lune*). The German translation mentions the second allusion: “and if you have to shoot the sun from the sky” (*und wenn ihr dafür die Sonne vom Himmel schießen müsst*). The Italian translation uses both allusions, making a more explanatory translation: “it will be an epic effort to break all the obstacles in our path” (*sarà uno sforzo epico per spezzare tutti gli ostacoli sul nostro cammino*). Finally, the Spanish translation opted for a more literal translation of both: “reach the moon and shoot the sun” (*alcanzad la luna y disparad al sol*), accompanied by a footnote with the explanation of the allusions and their meaning.

Therefore, except in English where both allusions are missing, various approaches to the translation of the allusions were made available to foreign readers: partial translation, descriptive equivalent or explanatory translation, and literal translation with detailed annotation. In fact, for Chinese readers both allusions can be easily decoded when they are well-versed in mythology, history and literary tradition. Reading in translation can add some difficulties to the in-depth grasping of the allusions to Chinese mythology or information related to double-level meanings, along with specific hints to the historical background and political movements of the period in which the story takes place. To understand these allusions and insinuations, footnotes can be a useful tool for translators and, in the case of Yan Lianke’s literary translations such annotations can certainly be justified. Throughout the original novel there are no notes,<sup>32</sup> but the Spanish version has 54 footnotes, five in the Italian version and one in the German version. No annotations were added to the English or French versions.

Regarding comparatives metaphors, different rhetorical devices (mostly the use of analogies, metonymies and specially similes) can be found. For the analysis of the translations in question, several words used prolifically by the author can be identified as comparative words that function as a sort of metaphorical markers. Precisely, the most used word is *ru* 如 (meaning “like”, “be like” or “such as”). It appears 416 times throughout the text and is the 34th most used word. The word *yang* 样 (“manner/appearance”) appears 191 times, including 141 times as the disyllabic *yiyang* 一样 (“same/ equally or alike”). Meanwhile, *xiang* 像 (“resemble”, “be like” or “look as”) can be found 172 times and it is the 91st most used word. The term *si* 似 (“be similar/like”) occurs 67 times and *fangfu* 仿佛 (“be like”) 31 times. Finally, the word *ban* 般 (“sort” or “kind”) is used 42 times, *ruo* 若 (“resemble”) 7 times and *wanruo* 宛若 (“just like” or “as if”) only once<sup>33</sup>. Every so often these words are combined in the same sentence. Due to the extensive number of similes and metaphors used throughout the text, for this study only 62 instances were compared. As a general result of the analysis, in the English translation seven were untranslated, five were partially translated, 21 modified, and 29 adhered to the original text. As for the French translation, two were untranslated, one partially translated, six modified and 53 adhered to the original text. In the German version eleven were not translated, seven were partially translated, 13 were modified and 31 adhered to the original text. For the Italian version, one was untranslated, another one partially translated, five were modified and 54 adhered to the original text. Finally, for the Spanish version, none were untranslated

<sup>31</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 32, 34, 121 & 122.

<sup>32</sup> Yan Lianke uses annotations as a literary device in his novel *Shouhuo* 受活.

<sup>33</sup> For words counting Voyant tools’ Web application [<https://voyant-tools.org/>] was used.



and of which two were partially translated, three modified and 57 adhered to the original text.

A few examples with diverse syntactic structures show how these figures of speech were dealt with in all five translations. The first example makes appearance in the concluding sentence of the first chapter, with two poetic parallel clauses.<sup>34</sup>

寂静托着人的脚步，如水面托着它的浮物。

English: This stillness supported people's feet, as though they were floating on water.

French: Le silence emporta le pas des hommes comme l'eau emporte les choses qui flottent. [Silence carried away men's steps as water carries away things floating.]

German: Und die Stille trug die Menschen, als trieben sie auf dem Wasser. [And the silence carried the people as if they were floating on the water.]

Italian: Il silenzio portava via l'eco dei passi come l'acqua porta via tutto ciò che galleggia sulla sua superficie. [The silence carried away the echo of the footsteps as water carries away everything that floats on its surface.]

Spanish: El silencio sostenía los pasos de los hombres, al igual que la superficie del agua sostiene todo aquello que flota sobre ella. [Silence was upholding men's footsteps, just as the surface of the water upholds everything that floats on it.]

In the Chinese sentence, the verb is repeated in both clauses, with a durative aspect marker (*tuozhe* 托着 with the sense of “being held in the palm” or “being supported from under”). This is a syntactic aesthetic device that provides a parallel rhythm and structure. Since it is problematic to find a single-word verb with the same meaning in any of the five target languages, different choices were made. The English and German translations did not maintain clause parallelism, with the verb being modified in each clause, and the analogy of the second clause shortened to adapt to meaning of the original text. The French and Spanish translations, on the other hand, both retain parallelism and are very close to the original sense. The same is seen in the Italian version, where “the echo” was added to complement “footsteps”.

In the case of the following sentence, it poses several difficulties for translators, since a very descriptive image is provide with two similes, both introduced by *ru* 如 and both in between three *ba* 把 constructions.<sup>35</sup>

为了跑得快，他把脚上的鞋子脱下来，拿在手里如拿了两只船模型，因为跌倒甩掉了一只去，他把另外一只也索性扔在田地里，把自己如甩出去的鞋样朝着前边冲。

English: In order to run faster, he took off his shoes and carried them in his hands. When he stumbled and dropped one shoe, then threw the other one into the field as well and continued hurtling forward, like the shoe he had just thrown away.

French: Pour plus de célérité il s'était mis pieds nus et garda ses chaussures à la main comme deux maquettes de bateau jusqu'au moment où, en ayant fait tomber une en trébuchant, il lâcha l'autre et se mil à galoper à la même vitesse qu'il avait jeté sa savate.

German: Um schneller laufen zu können, zog er sich die Schuhe aus und nahm sie in die Hände. Als er ins Straucheln geriet und einen Schuh verlor, schleuderte er auch den anderen von sich und flog nun genauso davon wie sein Schuhwerk.

<sup>34</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 33; English, 5; French, 14; German, 11, Italian, 14; and Spanish 25.

<sup>35</sup> See Randy Lapolla, “Topic and Comment,” 373. I adhere to his proposal, considering *ba* constructions as double topics constructions.

Italian: Per correre più i fretta si tolse le scarpe e le tenne in mano come fossero due barchette giocattolo, poi inciampò e gliene cade una, allora senza pensarci su gettò per terra anche l'altra continuando a galoppare in avanti con la stessa fretta precipitosa cui aveva buttato via la scarpa.

Spanish: Para correr rápido, se quitó los zapatos y los agarró en las manos, como quien lleva dos maquetas de barcos, pero al tropezar y caérsele uno, directamente tiró el otro al campo y se lanzó hacia adelante a la manera del zapato caído.

The first simile is untranslated in the English and German translations, but the second one was maintained. In both cases there are domesticating practices, and the clauses are broken up with a full stop. In contrast, the French, Italian and Spanish translations have kept both similes and are closer to the original.<sup>36</sup>

In the next example, the first sentence introduces a metaphorical simile with *ru* 如 and then, a second one with *fangfu* 仿佛.<sup>37</sup>

夜已经深到如同枯井般。月光在头顶凉白凉白，仿佛结在天空的冰。

English: The night was already as dark as the bottom of a well, but the moon was shining brightly overhead, as though frozen in the sky.

French: La nuit était aussi profonde qu'un puits tari. Blanche et fraîche au-dessus de nos têtes, la lune semblait un bloc de glace solidifié dans le ciel.

German: Die Nacht war tief wie der Grund eines versiegten Brunnens. Kalt und weiß schien der Mond über unseren Köpfen, als wäre er am Himmel gefroren.

Italian: La notte era ormai profonda come un pozzo prosciugato e la luna sulle nostre teste aveva un freddo biancore, come ghiaccio solidificatosi nel messo del cielo.

Spanish: La noche había alcanzado la profundidad de un pozo seco. La luz de la luna fría y blanca se alzaba sobre sus cabezas como hielo solidificado en el cielo.

In this context, the English translation uses the same pattern as before, domesticating and abridging metaphorical comparisons in both sentences. In the first one, the adjective “dried-up” before “well” was omitted. In the second one, the object for comparison (*bing* 冰 “ice”) is absent. In comparison, the German version provides a complete translation of both the first and the second sentences. The French, Italian and Spanish versions have adhered to more literal translations. The French translation even retains the syntactic division and sentence rhythm.

In the next case, several different lexical devices are presented, such as word repetition (*zuizui shangbian*, *shangbian* 最最上边、上边), two quadrisyllabic idioms (*yiliaobailiao* 一了百了 “solve the main problem and everything will follow” and *yingren'erjie* 迎刃而解 “be readily solved”), and a long simile introduced with *ru* 如.<sup>38</sup>

以为最最上边、上边的国家领导来看了育新区，所有的事，都会一了百了，迎刃而解，如一团乱麻被国家的领导抽出了最有序的绳头儿。

English: They had all believed that if the country's highest higher-ups came to visit the Re-Ed region, everything would be easily resolved, like unravelling a ball of thread.

French: Ils s'imaginaient que la tournée du plus haut dignitaire de l'Etat dans les zones de novéducation allait régler leurs problèmes, sans exception, d'un coup de baguette

<sup>36</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 58; English, 28-29; French, 40-41; German, 36; Italian, 44; and Spanish, 50

<sup>37</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 63; English, 33; French, 46; German, 39; Italian, 50; and Spanish, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Yan Lianke, *Sishu*, 283; English, 242; French, 293; German, 251; Italian, 336; and Spanish, 270.

magique. Comme s'il lui avait suffi de tirer le fil d'une pelote emmêlée pour que tout rentre dans l'ordre.

German: Nach dem Besuch eines unserer allerersten nationalen Führer glaubten wir, nun wären mit einem Schlag alle unsere Probleme gelöst.

Italian: Credettero che la visita di uno dei massimi dignitari dello Stato al campo di rieducazione avrebbe portato con sé come per incanto la fine di tutte le loro disgrazie e la soluzione di ogni problema. Sarebbero venuti facilmente a capo delle difficoltà come quando, trovato il bandolo, si dipana una matassa intricata.

Spanish: Creyeron que si los de más arriba, los más altos dirigentes del país habían venido al campo de re-formación, los problemas se solucionarían de una vez por todas y las cosas irían sobre ruedas. Era como si los dirigentes de la nación hubieran sacado el extremo de la madeja de un ovillo enmarañado.

Once more there is a partial translation of the clauses in English. Only one comparable idiom has been introduced and the final simile is not completely reproduced. In the German translation there is an oversimplification (“After the visit of one of our very top national leaders, we believed that all our problems would be solved in one fell swoop”). For the French, Italian and Spanish translations there is an attempt to capture some of the rhetoric elements, introducing the two idioms with target language images, but shortening the simile to avoid reiteration of words that might not be well-considered in the target language. Word repetition in all five Indo-European languages can be interpreted as due to a lack of vocabulary richness when not used clearly as a rhetorical strategy, and this inevitably creates a challenge for translators. Chinese is a language where words repetition is much more accepted. In this specific case, only the Spanish translation has tried to reproduce the rhetoric word repetition at the beginning of the sentence.

### Concluding Remarks

According to Hans Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, “reading is already translation, and translation is translation for the second time... The process of translating comprises in its essence the whole secret of human understanding of the world and of social communications.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, reading as a professional translator can be considered a first translation and the process of rendering the text into another language a second translation. By this argument, foreign readers of a translated text thus perform a third act of translation. The production of a written translation takes place between its first reading and the translation being read by its target public. In this sense, the comparison of the five translations provides clearly different readings of Yan Lianke’s literary work. As for the English version produced by Carlos Rojas, his translation of *The Four Books* is primarily centered on the content of the story rather than on the style or other literary features of the novel. To some extent, the same could be applied to the German version done by Marc Hermann. Fluency in both texts, in terms of style and easy readability, are nearer to either Anglo-Saxon general readers’ cultural domain or publishing current trends. Both could be considered as adherent of “domesticating practices” in Lawrence Venuti’s sense.

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Rainer Schulte, “Interpretation,” in Chan, Sin-Wai and David Pollard (eds.), *An Encyclopaedia of Translation*, 449.

As for the French, Italian and my own Spanish translations, they are guided by Peter Newmark's statement: "the more important the language of a text, the more closely the language has to be translated."<sup>40</sup> These versions try also to be fluent in their target language, but efforts for accuracy with the original text make them all the more challenging for readers. Their closeness to the source language in terms of meaning and style require a greater effort on the part of the readers to interpret the novel. The French translator, Sylvie Gentil even utilizes strategies for maintaining the rhythm of the clauses and sentences. The Italian translator, Lucia Regola sometimes provides a more domesticated translation whilst seeking for fidelity. As for my own Spanish version, annotations have been added as a strategy to alert readers about the richness of the original text.

This comparative analysis was originally undertaken with the aim of finding out what kind of strategies have been used by translators in order to reflect Yan Lianke's literary richness. Through the textual analysis, however, it was discovered that two particularly different approaches actually existed: one that searches for fluency and eliminating all kind of foreignization as a deliberate choice, and the other more concerned with the search for an equivalent of the novel in a foreign language. As a result, the unique literariness of *The Four Books* is unfortunately rather imperceptible for English- and German-speaking readers. In contrast, the French, Italian and Spanish translations make Yan Lianke's extraordinary use of literary devices more recognizable. In their effort to reflect linguistic, poetic and cultural differences, these translations provide a glimpse of the challenges of translating Yan Lianke's literary creation.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Newmark, "Translation Procedures," in Chan, Sin-Wai and David Pollard (eds.), *An Encyclopaedia of Translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese*, 871.

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