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Reception study: The omission of narrative text in the English translation of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

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This paper examines the omission of narrative texts in the English translation of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. A textual comparison revealed that the translation contains the radical omission of around 50,000 Chinese characters, comprising nearly 13% of the original text. Since the English version reshapes the original work for an English context and a Western audience, it is worthwhile to examine the consequences of the omissions. In particular, are there any patterns among the omitted sections? Is the version with omissions received more favorably by a Western audience? Omissions of narrative texts and their effects were the focus of this study. The adopted methodology comprises textual analysis, narrative analysis, questionnaire, and interviews. The omissions are explored from six categories: narrative text, descriptive text, embedded text, narrator's comments, characters' monologs and lengthy passages containing multiple omission types. The omission of narrative text and its consequences are the focus of this paper. Through textual and narrative analysis, the discussion identifies discrepancies between the source text and the target text, including mitigation of political criticism, stereotyping of Chinese culture, simplification of narrative structure, and plot reorganization. Through questionnaires and interviews, this paper investigates how the omissions may have influenced the reception of the novel by the target audience. Interestingly, significant omissions of political criticism did not impede Western readers' perceptions of the book's political criticisms. Instead, they facilitate and augment the entertainment aspect of the reading. Therefore, this paper argues that the novel has been rewritten to accommodate a Western audience's reading habits and Western poetological systems and to attract a mass audience.

KEYWORDS

readers' response, omission, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan, reception study

1. Research context

Translation enables individuals to read text from languages and cultures that they do not know or with which they are unfamiliar. Many factors influence the production of a translated work. Venuti (1998, p. 124) observes that the publisher's choice is a "primarily commercial, even imperialistic, exploitation governed by an estimate of the market at home". This argument is supported by Woods (2019, p. 518), who coins the term "market censorship" to describe American and English publishing companies' emphasis on the market share when publishing translated works. Thus, the target readership is likely to exert influence on the production of translated works.

Sang (2011) observes that English translators of Chinese literature tend to rewrite and shorten the source text (ST) to a greater extent than translators of other languages. Knight discussed this issue with American sinologist and translator Howard Goldblatt, who is considered the “midwife of American translation of contemporary Chinese fiction” (Updike, 2005) and the “foremost translator of Chinese literature” (Xia, 2004, p. 64). Goldblatt (Sang, 2011, p. 122) claims that Chinese novels have not always sold well in the United States and that the English translations that rewrite some of the ST’s contents can be more easily promoted to major American publishers. As early as 2004, Goldblatt (2004, p. 26–27) professes that literary translation is difficult to sell, with the exception of the work of Nobel Prize winners and selected Japanese authors (such as Murakami Haruki); American publishers, therefore, recommend deletions and reorganizations in order to appeal to a wider market. Balcom (2006, p. 119) explains that to make a work of literature in Chinese come to life in English is a complex process that calls upon a scholar’s knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, as well as a profound knowledge and creative flair in English, since translations of literary works are generally evaluated solely on their merits of readability, or the extent to which the text reads as if it were originally written in English.

The English translations of Mo Yan’s works exemplify the effort required to reshape, rewrite or manipulate a work in a target culture, as well as the complicated interactions and power struggles involved in text production. Mo Yan is the pen name of Guan Moye (管谟业). Although writers are usually denoted by surname only, customarily a Chinese writer’s pen name should not be reduced, so the full identifier of Mo Yan is used to refer to the author throughout this thesis. Meanwhile, other Chinese names are provided following the order of surname and given name. Mo Yan’s works provide reflections and satirical criticism on Chinese political movements and policies in the twentieth century by describing the suffering of characters living in the fictional town of Northeast Gaomi Township. Mo Yan combines sources from traditional Chinese literary works and folk adages with avant-garde methods of modern Western literature. Thus, his works are described as “hallucinatory realism merging fantasy and reality, history and contemporary” (Nobel Prize, 2012).

Mo Yan first entered the English-speaking markets with Yan and Goldblatt (1993), translated by Goldblatt. As of 2022, Mo Yan has published 11 novels, 8 of which have been translated into English by Goldblatt. Mo Yan is the Chinese writer whose work has been most widely translated into English over the past 20 years (Zhang and Mo, 2013, p. 225). Goldblatt considers it his mission to translate for his English-language readers, rather than for the original writer (Lingenfelter, 2007; Sparks, 2013; Stalling, 2014) and places emphasis on the fluency of the English as a priority when translating. Goldblatt himself says “anyone who is reading Mo Yan in English is reading Goldblatt” (Goldblatt and Efthimiadou, 2012), emphasizing the extent to which he feels ownership over the work once he begins the translation process.

In 2012, Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which brought him and his works further international recognition. It has been suggested that, in addition to Mo Yan’s own literary merit, the skill of his translators (and Goldblatt in particular) has

played a vital role in introducing him onto the world’s literary stage (Sun, 2012, 2014; China News, 2013; Liu and Xu, 2014; Bao, 2015). Chinese translation studies Professor Wang (2013, p. 7) propounds that if it had not been for the hard work of Mo Yan’s English translator, Goldblatt, and his Swedish translator, Anna Chen, his award may have been postponed by a further 10 years at least or perhaps not even awarded at all. German sinologist Wolfgang (2012) and China News (2013) suggests that Goldblatt translates Mo Yan’s works by summarizing what he believes Mo Yan intended to say in his own English; Goldblatt edits the original text, sometimes eliminating entire paragraphs or deleting culturally specific references to make the text more accessible to Western readers. As a result, the end product differs significantly from the original.

Sheng Si Pi Lao (《生死疲劳》) (Mo, 2006) and its English translation *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (*L&D*) (Mo and Goldblatt, 2008) is a representative example of omission. The original text is rich in Chinese cultural references and political messages, and its structure builds on the metaphorical framework of the Buddhist belief in the six paths of reincarnation. Historical and political events of the second half of the twentieth century are unveiled from the perspective of folklore as the reader follows the protagonist Ximen Nao through a series of reincarnations, and the ownership of land emerges as a core theme. Ximen Nao’s final reincarnation is as a big-headed boy named Lan Qiansui, who is also the primary narrator of the novel. The second narrator is Lan Jiefang, Lan Qiansui’s grandfather and the son of Lan Lian, Ximen Nao’s previous farmhand. The two narrators also serve each other’s narrates, creating a dialogue. The storyline is written in the past tense, but the two narrators make comments throughout the storytelling, which occur in the present tense. Consequently, the narrative tenses switch continuously back and forth, forming a “most complicated narrative structure” (Knight, 2014, p. 101).

A textual comparison of the English translation and the ST reveals that the translation contains the radical omission of around 50,000 Chinese characters, totaling nearly 13% of the original text. At the macro level, the researchers identified 128 omissions, ranging in length from around seven to eight lines to then around three to four pages. The omissions are concentrated in the second half of the novel and the contents of these erased passages include political critique, cultural references, erotic descriptions, minor and animal characters, amongst other themes. As a result of these translation choices, the Anglophone audience is presented with a radically edited version of the original story.

The omissions have attracted the attention of scholars throughout translation studies. Existing studies on the topic focus on messages related to Chinese culture and politics and provide the following explanations for the omissions: Western ideological manipulation, Western disinterest in Chinese political and cultural messages (Wang, 2012; Huang, 2014; Jia, 2016) and potential barriers to the Western readership (Huang, 2014). However, most English-speaking readers only have access to the English version of the text and may even be unaware that they are reading a specially edited version, which makes it difficult to determine whether the omissions facilitate their reading. Reviews of *L&D* in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* both explain that the novel focuses on the official Chinese communist ideology (Moore,

2008; Spence, 2008). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the political messages are still evident to Western readers, even after the omissions, and that Western readers may not reject these messages, as suggested in previous studies.

Goldblatt (Wangyi Net, 2013) praises Mo Yan as a natural storyteller, however, Goldblatt considers Mo Yan's novels (400,000–500,000 Chinese characters) to be too long for English readers. In an interview with Efthimiadou, Goldblatt regarded Mo Yan as a very Dickensian writer with long sentences and asides; things that most editors would cut (Goldblatt and Efthimiadou, 2012). Goldblatt has clarified that most of the omissions were requested by the English editors with the approval of Mo Yan (Ge, 2011; Sparks, 2013; Goldblatt, 2014; Stalling, 2014). The English editors had minimal knowledge of Chinese language and culture, so their only point of reference for editing the novel was that it should read fluently in English (Ge, 2011). Therefore, this paper hypothesizes that although the political criticism has been significantly reduced, the omissions are made on account of poetological rather than ideological concerns, and that the rewriting aims to align the translation more closely with Western reading habits and poetological systems. To establish the veracity of this claim, it is necessary to identify the key features of the omitted text, to explore the discrepancies between the ST and the TT, and to consider the effects of these omissions on Anglophone readers.

2. Methods and materials

The adopted methodology of the complete study comprises textual analysis, narrative analysis, questionnaire, and interviews. The overall objective of these methods is to examine the consequences of omissions from the reception perspective. The questionnaire and interview design is constructed on the pattern of the omissions, as identified through textual and narrative analysis.

The textual and narrative analysis comprises the selection and categorization of the examples, as well as content analysis. Narratives can comprise multiple layers and levels. Any event recounted by a narrative is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed (Genette, 1983, p. 228). The extreme narrative level is termed the “extradiegetic” (extra-story) level. It is at this level that the extradiegetic narrator recounts the entire narrative. Narrative acts depicted within the narrative are intradiegetic; narrating acts embedded within those are metadiegetic, and then the tetradiegetic and pentadiegetic levels follow (Genette, 1983, p. 229–230). According to Bal (2017, p. 57), the majority of embedded texts are non-narrative.

Our research focuses on omissions at the macro level, so the examples in the paragraph units were selected from a comparison of the ST and the TT, which revealed 128 omissions. These omissions were then grouped into six categories, organized by the functions and type of each text example: narrative text, descriptive text, the embedding of other literary forms, narrators' commentary, characters' monologs, plots and lengthy passages containing multiple omission types.

Patterns have been identified in relation to the omitted passages and the types of discrepancies between the original text and the English translation (refer to Appendix 1). The most evident

discrepancies include the mitigation of political criticism, cutting of minor and animal characters, and the streamlining of plots.

As Hatim (2001, p. 63–64) suggested, the intended audience forms a controlling factor that affects the translation. To explore the translation and rewriting of *L&D* intended for the English-speaking market, feedback from English readers of translations of a representative chapter of *L&D*, is obtained *via* a questionnaire and interviews. Based on the patterns identified, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview are adopted to investigate English native speakers' response on the omission of political criticism. In the questionnaire, the researchers determined both the questions and the range of available answers, with the intention that the interviewees answered the same questions. As a result, the responses could be meaningfully compared and any resultant variability was reduced, making analysis of the answers easier. However, a questionnaire provides only a snapshot of a research subject, not a rich, in-depth picture. Babbie (2013, p. 353–355) suggests, prolonged, intensive and direct engagement with a research subject can further a researcher's understanding more than research based on secondary resources alone. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was also adopted to further investigate respondents' attitudes toward omissions.

In this research, each of the semi-structured interviews followed a common set of topics or questions, the methods and orders in which topics were introduced varied as appropriate for each interviewee. The specific questions for each interviewee were based on responses to the questionnaire, and the aim of the interviews was to further explore readers' attitudes toward the different aspects of omission. The combination of both qualitative and quantitative methodology allows the consequences of the omission to be explored more comprehensively.

The standard of the call-out for the interviewees was native English speakers brought up and educated in the West. The interviewees are asked to read two texts: Text A is from the published English translation (Mo and Goldblatt, 2008), while Text B is from a full translation of the original text provided by the researchers (proofread and polished by a qualified English native speaker to minimize the influence of translation quality on the research). Two English native-speakers are invited to take the pilot study to determine if the questionnaire questions are precise; the length of the questionnaire is acceptable; if there are any redundant questions, and if the tone of the questions is suitable. The two pilot study respondents are also requested to repeat the questions in their own words. This strategy establishes whether the questions have been interpreted as intended. Adjustments are made according to their responses. Since the omitted messages are supplemented by the researcher and proofread by an English native-speaker, the pilot study respondents are further asked whether Text B reads clearly, fluently and consistently. It ensures the language quality does not influence their approach to the text.

Both the questionnaire and the interview utilized in this project involve participants' sharing their opinions and experiences. Therefore, researchers are obliged to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality at all stages of the project, and particularly during interview interactions with the participants (Heggen and Guillemain, 2012; Kaiser, 2012). Hence, Privacy Notices and Debriefing Sheets, covering the protection, use and storage of personal data, and explaining the project objective,

its purpose and participants' rights during the whole process are distributed. The project participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage, and informed consent is received *via* signed consent forms. Further, personal data collected through the questionnaire and interviews include age, gender, native language, and data obtained from the audio-recorded transcripts. Once each completed questionnaire is received, an unspecified number is allocated to it for data collection and analysis purposes. Information that identifies the participant (in this case, the consent form) is kept separate from the anonymized data. All personal data in electronic form is stored on One Drive, and will not be available to anyone outside the research team. For further validation, the anonymized data is archived in the Durham Research DATA base.

The reading is estimated to take 25–35 min. The interviewees are requested to complete a questionnaire (20 questions) related to the texts immediately after reading them, and they are asked to return the questionnaire and take the interview within 2 weeks. Each interview was expected to take 20–30 min, while the actual interview time ranges from 45 to 120 min. The interviews comprise detailed questions about the interviewees' reading experiences and perceptions of the two texts. Thus, a substantial amount of "raw" data is produced, and the transcribing also demands a substantial amount of work and time; hence, the participant sample is kept small.

Chapter 33 of *L&D* was selected as the sample chapter to investigate the reader responses for three reasons. First, the use of a complete chapter presented the respondents with a relatively complete story, which may have helped them understand the omissions within a specific context. Second, chapter 33 contains the most obvious omissions in the novel, as 41% of the original text is lost. Third, the chapter's omissions include all the primary omission categories in this study.

The historical background of this chapter is set from 1978 to 1982 and follows the end of the 10-year period of the Cultural Revolution. The chapter is narrated by a big-headed boy, Lan Qiansui, based on his memory of his reincarnation as a pig. In the form of a pig, Ximen returned to Ximen village. During the journey, the pig saw significant changes in people's lives, including in the land policy, the vindication of victims in the Cultural Revolution and the development of the individual economy. The main storyline is interspersed with several less relevant vignettes, the main narrative is often interrupted by the narrator's memories, comments or flights of imagination, and a substantial number of minor characters are introduced for the first time. A second narrator, Lan Jiefang, also contributes to the telling of the story and a conversation is formed between the two narrators.

3. Results

In the analyses, patterns were identified in relation to the omitted passages and the types of discrepancies between the original text and the English translation (see [Appendix 1](#)). The most evident discrepancies included the mitigation of political criticism, the deletion of minor and animal characters and the streamlining of plots. One example was selected, which was extensively referred to by the interviewees to explain how the omission reconstructed the

ST in the TT culture. The results revealed the reconstruction of the ST through the textual omissions and the reception of the English version by the interviewees.

3.1. Omission, distortion, and reconstruction

Please see [Appendix 2](#) for the excerpt discussed in this section. The focaliser of this excerpt is Ximen Pig, who travels back to Ximen Village after several years away. The changes in the village are reviewed through Ximen Pig's observations. The contextual background is that the Cultural Revolution has ended, and society is being transformed from a planned economy to a market economy. The individualistic economy that was banned during the Cultural Revolution is recovering gradually. Class and political status are no longer as important as they were and people who were marginalized, discriminated against or overthrown due to their political status have been vindicated. Most of the characters involved in this excerpt, with the exceptions of Qiuxiang and Huzhu, are minor characters who only appear in the novel to a limited degree. The changes in the political environment and the improvement of the economic conditions are reflected in these minor characters' conversations.

The consequences of omission will be explored in relation to the soften of political criticism, its enhancement of the diegetic storyline, the alteration of the events, the acceleration of the narrative tempo.

As a result of this omission, the presentation of the changes in the political and social environment is not as evident as in the ST. It is through the minor characters' conversation that the significant changes and emerging issue due to the economic transform are revealed. However, the TT places little emphasis on this aspect.

The omission alters the events that are being narrated. The plots that describe the situations of different villagers in the tavern are changed to Ximen Pig seeing Yang Qi go to the tavern. However, from another perspective, this omission filters out a substantial number of political terms that cannot be understood without knowledge of the cultural and historical background, probably not known to most English-speaking readers. Moreover, the omission of minor characters also reduces the number of Chinese names: the sudden presentation of several minor characters could be difficult for non-Chinese speakers. From this perspective, this omission could facilitate understanding of the novel.

The narration of ST is carried out on the extradiegetic, diegetic and intradiegetic levels. The extradiegetic stories focus on the two narrators' dialogue, the diegetic level concentrates on Ximen Pig's return to Ximen Village, and the intradiegetic stories concern the minor characters' conversations and activities in the tavern that Ximen Pig passes. The crowds in the tavern form the story at the intradiegetic level, which details and supplements the diegetic story. Through the radical omission of the story at the intradiegetic level, the diegetic narrative has been given greater clarity.

In the ST, Qiansui tries to reconstruct every detail in the tavern and presents the scene in a rich and detailed manner, which results in the story's pace slowing. However, the English translation presents an abridged version, with various characters

and details omitted. The narrative time in the TT has been significantly reduced, and the pace is much faster. This multiplicity of perspectives gives depth and dimension to Mo Yan's narrative. In the English version, the roles of minor characters are considerably reduced. As much as possible, the translation favors a single narrative point of view. The linear narrative of the main storyline is strengthened.

3.2. Reception study: Perspectives from English-speaking readers

Through textual analysis, it can be observed that the ST's political criticism has been mitigated but not completely erased. The reception study reviews how the political messages and the omission are perceived by the interviewees. The results will be presented from the following perspectives: is the political criticism evident in the omitted version; how is political criticism detected and accepted; can the omission be noticed, and the justification for the omissions, and which version is preferred.

3.2.1. Interviewees' background

The standard of call-out volunteers was native English-speaking readers, brought up and educated in the West. The request for interviewees was distributed through the academic officer and secretary of one researcher's postgraduate university. It can be reasonably estimated that at least 700 individuals received the request and only 12 responded. From those who eventually completed the interview, eight of them were undergraduate students or held a bachelor's degree from either a UK or a US university and two of them held a master's degree from a UK university. It is interesting to note that all the interviewees had connections with China or Chinese culture; they were either taking courses in Chinese literature or Chinese history, had lived in or visited China in the past, or had Chinese relatives and friends. Nine of the interviewees could read Pinyin and seven could speak some Mandarin. The main significance of the response rate and the interviewees' backgrounds is that the sample represents an approximate percentage of English-speaking readers who may have an interest in reading Chinese novels. It is reasonable to suggest that the readership of the novel is most likely to be composed of people who are already interested in Chinese culture or who have investigated Chinese culture and politics in other ways.

3.2.2. Enhancing reading coherence: The reception of omitting political messages

The interview results reflect that the political text was not resisted by the interviewees. Even though the political criticism has been mitigated compared to the ST, it is evident for English-speaking readers. They could not understand all the critiques, but they could sense and did not resist the political messages.

As indicated by [Figure 1](#), half of the interviewees believed that the political criticism is self-evident in Text A, 30% that it is somewhat clear, and 20% that the political criticism is only a little clear. The interviewees may not have understood which

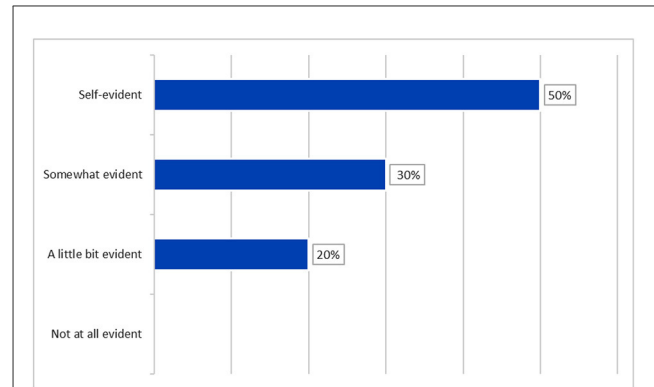


FIGURE 1
Is the political criticism evident in the omitted version (Text A)?

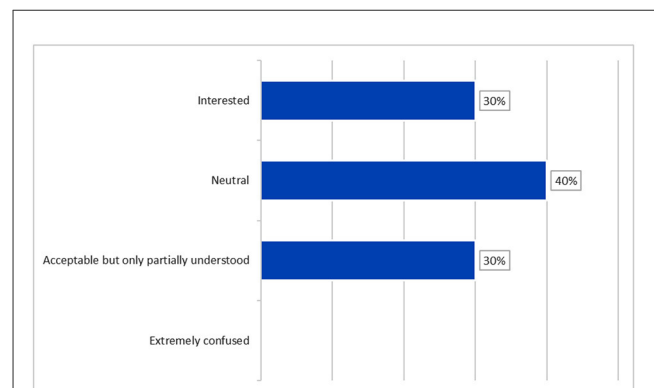


FIGURE 2
Responses to the political messages.

political movements are being referred to in the text or what is being criticized, but they could sense that political criticism is being presented. This confirms that political criticism in Text A is evident and can be detected by English-speaking readers.

Even though the political criticism was detected by all the interviewees, their understandings may vary and the following question sought to further investigate whether the political terms are confusing.

[Figure 2](#) indicates that the political messages are understandable, but to varying degrees for different interviewees. The political messages in Text B include the change of land policy, the vindication of the Cultural Revolution, and the emerging of market economy. In Text B, these two aspects of politics include references to expressions such as “revolution,” “revisionism,” and “people's commune”, and the indirect presentations from the characters' casual conversations. The interviewees were asked from which information they were able to identify the criticism and if the political criticism in Text B is enhanced or diluted compared with Text A.

All the interviewees' responses reflect the idea that, compared with Text A, the political criticism in Text B is enhanced. The 70% interviewees without much Chinese historical background thought that the political criticism is enhanced, but it is through the characters' conversations which contain terms such as “revolution,”

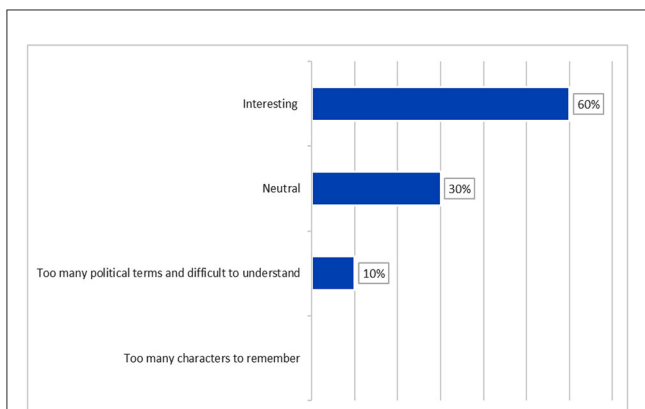


FIGURE 3
Interviewees' response to the description of minor characters.

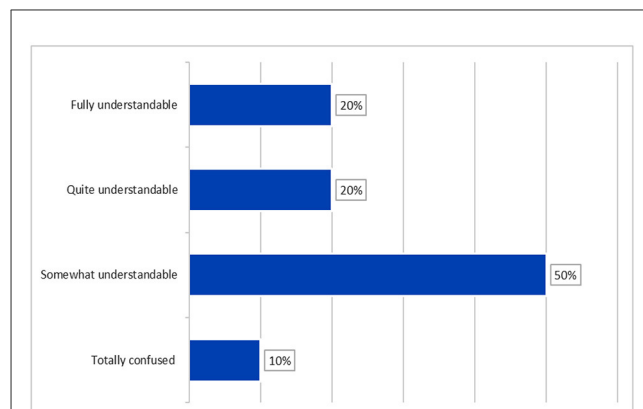


FIGURE 6
Are the omissions justified?

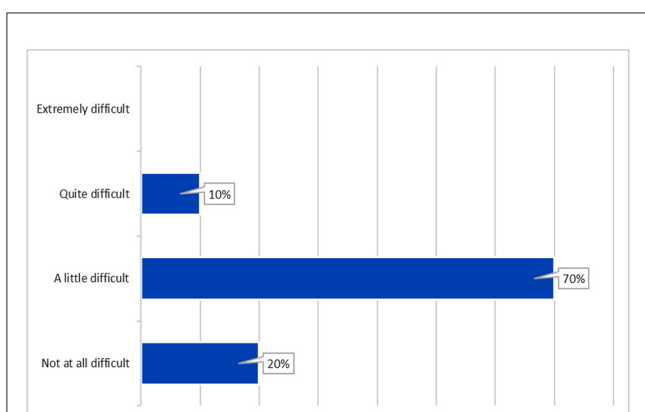


FIGURE 4
Does the number of Chinese names increase the difficulties of reading?

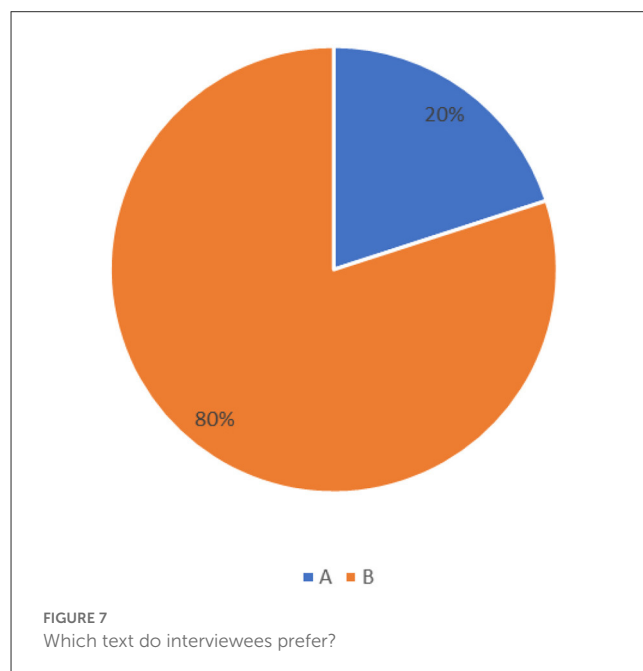


FIGURE 7
Which text do interviewees prefer?

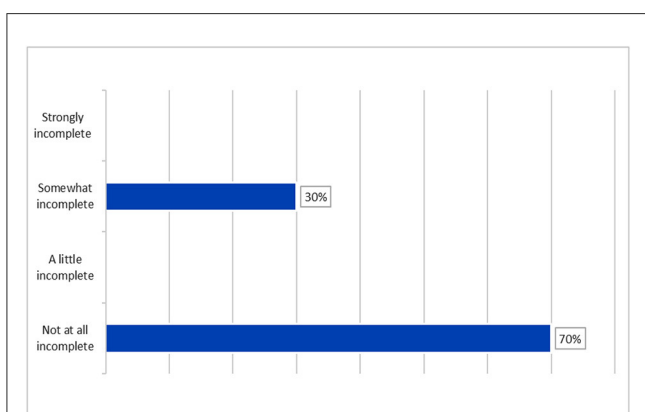


FIGURE 5
Did Text A feel incomplete at first reading?

“revisionism,” and “Communist” that the direct presentations of Chinese political messages are to be found. In other words, they think the political criticism is enhanced because the text contains more political terms, rather than they understand the criticism. The 30% interviewees who had some knowledge of

Chinese culture and history can understand the minor characters' conversation are related to historical background of China's economic transformation and reveals the emerging issues.

Even though all the interviewees agreed that the political criticism is more obvious in Text B than in Text A, they thought that cutting out some of the political messages would appeal to a broader audience that does not have prior knowledge of the historical context. The interviewees felt that for the average reader without a full understanding of the Chinese cultural and political messages, the political criticism in Text A is rich enough and that readers would likely be bored by too many political messages. Their responses also suggest that the ways in which the political messages are expressed in Text B will probably not be understood by the average English-speaking reader since, in English literature, criticism is usually more direct or sharp.

Therefore, from the perspective of native English-speaking interviewees, the omission of the political messages would facilitate

their reading by removing potentially confusing text, and it seems that the text has been edited according to the norms of English poetics. The English version retains the political messages that are most clear to English-speaking readers and maintains a balance between political criticism and the readers' comprehension. The storyline is also streamlined through the omission of minor characters.

However, the negative side of these omissions is also evident. Those interviewees who had some knowledge of Chinese culture and history, or who were learning about the Chinese language, literature and culture, thought that the political messages in Text B are interesting, especially when these political criticisms are connected with their learning. These interviewees took a special kind of interest in these messages, as they regard the novel as a supplement for their textbooks and as presenting history from a different perspective showing stereotypes and representing people from different changing social classes. Apparently, for interviewees in this category, these omissions inevitably result in a loss of subtlety.

Substantial political criticism is expressed through these minor characters, who only appear once or twice in the entire novel. More than 10 such minor characters are introduced abruptly in this example and, through their conversations, the emergence of the market economy and the changes in people's lives after the Cultural Revolution are reflected. Therefore, the following question is designed to investigate all the interviewees' response to the minor characters.

As suggested by Figure 3, three interviewees (I7, I8, and I9) held a neutral attitude toward the minor characters; for them, while there is a lot of information presented in quick succession, they believe that it is difficult but not impossible to follow. Interviewee I7 found the dialogue of the minor characters interesting, but also that the omitted text is too long and that placing it in the chapter could be distracting. Six interviewees thought the description of the minor characters is interesting and adds to the story. The minor characters give them more of an insight into how the village functions, how people are being rehabilitated and how the Communist Party has changed. However, two interviewees (I1 and I3) emphasized that although the reading experience of minor characters is interesting, it is confusing that substantial minor characters are introduced. Even with a background in Chinese history, these two say that firstly, the detailed narrations of a huge number of minor characters are not common in English literature. I1 regarded that the minor characters in Text B provide a bundle of information, however, this will never be good literature by the standards of English literature. The second issue pointed out by I1 and I3 is that the number of Chinese names is a significant challenge and makes the text difficult to follow. In Jiang's studies of the reception of *Hong Lou Meng* in the English market, one anonymous reader comments "the translated novel is difficult to read because of the complexity of Chinese names to Western readers" (Jiang, 2007, p. 100). Inspired by Jiang's studies, there was a question designed to investigate the respondents' perception of Chinese names in the reading and the results are presented below.

Figure 4 indicates twenty per cent of the interviewees (I6 and I10) did not think that the Chinese names are a problem at all which

could be attributed to their backgrounds facilitating their reading: one spoke fluent Mandarin and had studied Chinese history in China for a year and the other was raised in the US in a state with an Asian-influenced culture.

One out of the 10 interviewees (I5) felt that the large number of Chinese names rendered the text quite difficult to follow and that repeated reading is required to remember the relationships between the characters, even though this interviewee could read Pinyin. Interviewee I5 suggested if they were to read more of the book, they would be introduced to the characters more naturally and it may be easier to follow. However, it is worth noting that most of the minor characters in this novel appear only once or twice, with the function of supplementing the background information. Therefore, even if the interviewees were given the whole novel, some of the minor characters still only appear in this chapter, which makes this suggestion by the interviewee less tenable.

Most of the interviewees were of the opinion that the number of Chinese names makes it a little difficult to follow the text and to keep track of each character. The main difficulty being that all the Chinese names in the form of Pinyin looked similar to them because they are not familiar with Chinese names. One interviewee (I7) mentioned an interesting issue that, when reading English literature, even if I7 skims over names, the interviewee can still understand a lot of the story because the names are more familiar and, therefore, I7 can easily tell them apart without much effort. However, with the translated Chinese names since they are less familiar to English-speaking readers and look similar to each other, it is difficult to distinguish between them and remember each character and their relationships, which makes reading challenging. I7 mentioned having to go back and forth, which significantly influences the flow of the plotlines and the entertainment value of the novel. Even though 90% of the interviewees could read Pinyin, seven of them mentioned having to read the text several times to distinguish the characters and understand the relationships between them. Of the six interviewees who thought that the stories of minor acceptable are interesting, four of them thought it would be acceptable, or even better, to cut out some minor characters as it would help them to focus on the storyline.

Considering that the implicit political messages expressed through the minor characters were only perceived by three interviewees (I3, I6, I10), the omission seems to remove potential reading barriers and streamline the stories. Where the political criticism has been significantly reduced, the minor characters' storyline has become a series of separate stories of different minor characters. For 40% of the interviewees, this is not seen as a standard approach in English literature since too many characters are introduced abruptly. Thus, the omissions reflect an adaptation to the poetics of the target culture and facilitate the reading experience for the English-speaking audience.

Since 41% of the original chapter has been omitted, what the interviewees are actually reading in Text A is an extract from the original text. Therefore, it is worth investigating whether the incompleteness of Text A is detectable.

Figure 5 suggests seven of the interviewees' responses (70%) show that, when reading Text A, they believed it is a complete text.

Two interviewees (I1 and I5) thought that generally speaking, there are not many differences between Texts A and B; they see them as essentially the same story. These two interviewees regarded Text A as basic and passive, as it simply tells the readers what is happening and the descriptions are not as vivid as in Text B, which they thought was due to the writing style. The five other interviewees stated that Text B shows more detail, a more in-depth writing style and more fully developed characters. However, they viewed Text A as a complete story in its own right, not realizing that anything is missing until they read Text B.

Three interviewee responses indicated a view that Text A is incomplete. Among them, one (I2) stated, without giving specific examples, that the stories in Text A are too superficial. The other two interviewees (I3 and I8) specified places where they believe some of the text is missing—I3 mentioned the section about villagers watching TV, while I8 highlighted a conversation between the character Yang Qi and two villagers in a tavern. From reading Text A, they expressed surprise that the story stops suddenly and thus they assume that something must be missing, but they also stated that the other parts of the chapter seem to flow fluently and coherently.

These responses indicate that the effects of the omissions are technical; most of them appear to go unnoticed. Even though the full translation is more engaging and compelling and provides more details, Text A reads as a complete story according to most of the interviewees.

Translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting and it projects the image of a work in another culture. To investigate the new image created by the omissions in the sample text (chapter 33), the following question for the interviewees concerned how they would introduce the novel to the English-speaking market based on their reading of Text A. It is assumed that the aspects the interviewees would choose to promote or emphasize are likely to be those that they find most appealing and view as characteristic of the novel.

All the interviewees' responses refer to this novel as showing the influence of Chinese political turmoil on Chinese individuals in the twentieth century as presented by a writer from China. However, they believe it necessary to highlight that, although it has a political theme, this novel is not a biography or a factual work about the time period, but a work of fiction set against the historical background of Chinese political movements. They consider that native English readers will be interested in Chinese politics, and especially in the criticism of communism by a Chinese author. Native English speakers who are interested in what happens in China tend to question the authenticity of works about Chinese politics and history by western authors, who may be biased or anti-communist. Six of the interviewees' responses suggested introducing this novel as a Chinese parallel to *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945), which is more familiar to western readers, as this could provide readers with a context for understanding the novel.

These responses reveal two key points. Firstly, even though Mo Yan's political criticism has been mitigated significantly in Text A, it is still apparent to the English-speaking interviewees. Secondly, English-speaking readers are conscious of the remaining political messages and they are even regarded as an appealing feature.

Therefore, the omission of political messages may not be due to ideological manipulation.

3.2.3. The justification of the omissions from the readers' perspective

This section will analyze the interviewees responses to the overall pattern of omissions in the text.

As indicated by Figure 6, only one interviewee (I2) indicated feeling totally confused by the omissions. This interviewee believes that Text B is much more representative and coherent and allows for more complete character development, which makes it much more interesting to read; and that Text B captures more of Mo Yan's story, allowing the reader to have as close an experience as possible to understanding the original Chinese text. This interviewee recognized that some of the cultural and political messages might be difficult for the average English-speaking reader to follow. However, the interviewee also believes that neither the translator nor the editor has the right to decide to edit these messages for the reader, but that the reader should be presented with a text that is as close to the ST as possible. If there are too many omissions and the text is changed too much, the readers will lose the fundamental meaning of the ST. Even if the full translation might not be as popular as the rewritten version, it would at least provide the readers with the essence of the ST. Moreover, this interviewee suggested that, if translators or western publishing companies continue to edit Chinese literature according to western cultural norms, the target readers will never really learn about Chinese culture or what Chinese authors are actually trying to convey to their audience and therefore, a false image of Chinese culture and literature will be reinforced.

Two of the interviewees (I3 and I5) are in agreement with the omissions. Furthermore, 20 and 50% of the interviewees think that the omissions are "quite" and "somewhat" understandable, respectively. In the interview responses, the reasons for these views are explained from two perspectives. Two interviewees (I6 and I7) understand why the omissions have been made, but they do not agree with the motivations for the rewriting. They argue that a translated work will be unreliable if the reader is actually being presented with an interpretation of the original text. The interviewees' justification of the omission is mainly from the following two aspects: reducing contingent difficulties through omission and adjusting to English language poetic standards through omission.

3.2.3.1. Reducing contingent difficulties through omission

The interviewees' responses indicate that the issue of contingent difficulties proposed by George Steiner (cited in Davis-Undiano, 2011, p. 22) plays an important role in the omissions. A contingent difficulty is referred to by Davis-Undiano (2011, p. 22) as the efforts to unpack and gloss the Chinese cultural and historical contexts of Mo Yan's work. As mentioned by most of the interviewees, the text is challenging to read and the novel will not be a popular book that everyone will read. The publisher of the English version, Arcade Publishing, is a commercial publisher specializing in world literature, hence, market share and the book's acceptability to a general readership are of great importance.

The omissions of the political messages are viewed as justified by 90% of the interviewees. For all the interviewees, the theme of political criticism is still evident in the omitted text. Although the interviewees are interested in reading about Chinese politics, some of the political messages are still too in-depth for most who lack the relevant background knowledge. The responses underscore the cultural gap in the process of literary translation and not all the information in the ST can be appreciated or accepted in another culture. When faced with too much information that they do not understand or are not familiar with the interviewees felt that the entertainment value of the novel is reduced. The most important features of an original novel may not be appreciated or even accepted by the target audience due to cultural differences.

In the case of *L&D*, certain background information is required for an understanding of many of the cultural and political messages as they both fall into the category of the “universe of discourse” (Lefevere, 1992, p. 87). The features of the “universe of discourse” are particular to a given culture—they can include specific objects that exist or have special symbolic meanings in the relevant culture and unique expressions, values or conventions shared by groups with common cultural identities. They are important components of the ST; however, not all such features can necessarily be accepted or understood by TT readers in the same way as ST readers view them. Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, the appreciation of political messages in *L&D* is based on the reader’s pre-existing knowledge. Therefore, these types of omission are justified from the perspective of contingent difficulty.

3.2.3.2. Adjusting to English-language poetic standards through omission

One view that was frequently mentioned in the interview responses was that “this [Text B] is not the way that English literature is supposed to be” (I1), referring to features including the tone of social criticism and the minor characters. In other words, the differences in terms of poetics were deemed as noticeable by all the interviewees. Thus, their different attitudes toward these omissions are related to their openness to the ST and whether they are willing to read a novel differently from works they habitually read.

Goldblatt has defended himself with the proviso that some of the rewriting decisions in this translation were not made by him, but by the book’s editors after the completion of his work (Goldblatt, 2004; Ge, 2011; Goldblatt and Eftimiadou, 2012). The editors were native English speakers with little or no knowledge of the Chinese language and no access to the original Chinese novels and they evaluated the translated work against English-language standards rather than those used by the translator. Therefore, the only standard that they could have applied for their editorial work was to ensure that Mo Yan’s stories read fluently in English to increase their market share.

Based on the interviewees’ responses, the omissions help the flow of the text and make it easier to read. This strongly reflects Venuti’s argument that “Anglo-American cultures are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign and accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in other cultures” (1995, p. 15). There is no doubt that these omissions have tailored the original text to something closer to what a novel is expected to be like in

English, which might attract more English-speaking readers. As suggested by Venuti (1995, p. 17), the cultural capital of the foreign values has been diminished in the English version of the novel, thus presenting English-speaking readers with a false perception of a Chinese novel. The omissions undoubtedly facilitate reading; however, it is worth considering whether the original text has to be rewritten radically in the tradition of western literature in order to promote Chinese literature for the target audience of the translated novel and whether the readers appreciate such omissions.

3.2.4. Interviewees’ preferences between the sample texts

As suggested by Figure 7, seventy per cent of interviewees believed that Text A reads as a complete text and the omissions were justified by 90% of the interviewees. However, when asked which version they prefer, surprisingly 80% of the interviewees state a preference for reading Text B.

Only two interviewees (I1 and I5) stated a preference for Text A. In their responses to the previous questions, both of these interviewees thought that Text A read as complete and viewed the omissions as either quite or fully understandable. Their other responses indicate that they also view almost every omission as justified. They think that Text A is a lot more passive, but they perceive this writing approach as more reflective of a work of social criticism within English literature because the writing style is more formal and less colloquial with less use of informal dialect. They viewed some of the original passages included in Text B as enjoyable and entertaining, but they do not see them as representing the style of a work of social criticism in English literature. Additionally, they stated that the storyline in Text A is clearer, while Text B seems less well organized and the characters’ names also cause difficulties in terms of their understanding of the text. Most importantly, these two interviewees are more concerned with the storylines, especially the social criticism aspect; they do not object to the translator or editor rewriting the text to facilitate the reading process. While they acknowledged that the more faithful translation retains more of the Chinese cultural elements in the novel, they think these contents are unlikely to be understood by the average English-speaking reader and may become obstacles to the reading experience. In other words, these interviewees would not object if they missed out on some details from the original work as long as they could read the main stories about Chinese culture in the English text. Moreover, in response to the previous questions about their attitudes toward political messages, they also shared the view that they are not specifically interested in political themes, but that they find reading stories set against the backdrop of political movements acceptable. From these responses, it is reasonable to speculate that, for native English speakers who are more interested in the main plotlines, the omissions provide them with an easy-to-read and linear story.

Among the eight interviewees who preferred Text B, only one of them was completely confused by the omissions, while the other seven understood their necessity to varying degrees. It is interesting to investigate why the interviewees who justify the omissions prefer reading Text B.

Three interviewees’ preferences for reading Text B is more related to their attitude toward the translated work. Interviewee I3 thought the description of minor characters was not thorough at

first reading, I6 felt that the social critique in Text A is superficial, while interviewee I7 regarded Text A as complete at first reading and would be happy to read Text A if they did not know there was a Text B. None of these interviewees viewed all the ST information as being of value, as it makes the text harder to read and they even find some of the elements omitted from Text A to be boring and irrelevant. However, they still preferred Text B because it contains information that they do not think should be omitted. They hold the view that, if they are reading a book, they want to read it as the original author intended. They do not think that the translator or editor should sacrifice the information in the original text just to facilitate the reading experience; readers should have the right to decide what information they want to read.

The other five interviewees preferred Text B, considering it more informative due to the presentation of minor characters. With these features, the text provides a more detailed description of Chinese society in the 1980s and the language is more vivid. In Text B, the tone of the story is more frantic and comedic, which fits in well with the narrators and the characters being described. Even though there is more dialogue, and it may feel less like traditional literature, the interviewees who preferred Text B thought of it as more skillfully written because the language better suits the characters. The text convincingly reveals the author's build-up of the story and these interviewees were intrigued by the multiple layers of the storyline. For these interviewees, there was also great appeal in the supplementary Chinese politics and history information which adds depth to the story.

It is notable that, although 90% of interviewees maintained the omissions are justified, at least 50% of them preferred Text B for literary reasons. It is therefore worth reconsidering the potential readership and their expectations for this novel. As Jiang (2007) observed, from the 1830s to the 1960s there have been 11 versions of the English translation of *Hong Lou Meng* (Cao and Gao, 1982). The original novel has been adapted to meet a different group of readers for a different purpose, such as learning Chinese culture, entertainment and academic studies. McDougall (2007, p. 22) suggested the hypothetical readership of translated Chinese literature comprise three types: the committed reader, the interested reader, and the disinterested reader. The committed reader refers to the English-language readers with an existing commitment to learning about China, especially those with general cultural interest in China; the interested readers are those Chinese-language readers learning written English; Chinese-language or English-language academics in literary and translation studies; literary critics; the disinterested readers are English-language readers with universalistic expectations of literary values. According to McDougall (2007, p. 23), the disinterested readers are representative of the English-language readers of Chinese works in general. They have their own norms, conventions and preferences as regards what they are willing to read, not so much in term of content but in terms of readability and they seek understanding rather than information.

Based on their interview responses, the interviewees can be divided into three categories. The first, (I1 and I5), focused only on the story itself; they do not have a particular interest in politics, either in China or their own home countries, but they are interested in the stories about the main characters—or, to use one

interviewee's own (I5) words, they “rushed to the ending of the characters and stories”. The first category is like the disinterested readers in McDougall's classification. The interviewees in the second category (I3, I6, I7, and I9) have all studied or read Chinese history and politics intensively, especially the periods of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. They are curious as to how these historical periods are perceived by ordinary people in China and thus, while they enjoy the story, they are more interested in the novel's political themes. The interviewees in the third category (I2, I8, and I10) also have some background knowledge of Chinese history and politics, and they are interested in Chinese culture and the structure of Chinese novels. They regard the sample chapter as an excerpt from a larger literary work and wish to immerse themselves in the stories. They are not familiar with all the political and cultural messages in Text B, but they are willing to learn more and they believe that filtering out these cultural and political messages creates a false image of Chinese culture. Their preference between the texts is thus closely related to their background knowledge and their main interests in reading a novel.

Apparently, the omissions satisfy the expectations of those in category one, with the streamlining of the main plots, the removal of minor characters, the chronology of the storylines and the filtering of political that would require additional background knowledge. For the interviewees in the second and third categories, even though they can understand why omissions have been made and most of them even thought that Text A was complete until they read Text B, their interest lies more in the original text for varying reasons, including wanting to know more about Chinese culture and literature. Goldblatt assumes that his target readership consists primarily of English-speaking readers with an interest in China or Chinese culture but who know little about China (Ji, 2009). In this regard, the published version should be received as more acceptable by the potential readership.

The purpose of these omissions might be to appeal to more English readers who are interested in stories that take place in China. From this perspective, the omissions do facilitate the reading of the novel, however, based on the interviewees of this study, this kind of reader would represent a relatively small proportion of the audience. Most of the novel's English-speaking readers are likely to already have an interest in Chinese culture and politics rather than to know little or nothing about it. Sixty percent of our interviewees suggested that the discussion of politics by the ordinary characters should be retained even though they feel that the number of Chinese names impedes their understanding. Moreover, the potential readers of this translated novel are also likely to take an interest in other elements of Chinese culture. For example, interviewee I8 searched online for the classical novels as well as the political movements mentioned in Text B. Even though this interviewee was not already familiar with the cultural and political messages, the interviewee was interested to learn more through reading about them. Interviewees I2, I3, I6, and I10 have some background knowledge in Chinese history and stated that, compared to factual textbooks, the discussion of politics in Text B has supplemented their understanding of the movements that form the chapter's setting. Interviewee I2 thought that Text A is superficial and more than 50% of the interviewees regarded the

language in Text A as passive and less engaging. The omitted text might read as complete and be more appealing to general readers without relevant background knowledge; however, for those readers who want to learn more about Chinese culture through reading the novel, the omitted version deprives them of the opportunity to appreciate some of the subtlety and the in-depth reflections within the ST.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The omissions clearly indicate that the published English version reconstructs the ST according to the English poetic conventions of a novel with political critique. The omissions also reflect the conflict and compromise between the poetics of the ST and the TT.

For most general readers of the text, as Goldblatt assumes that general American readers are curious but have little or no knowledge of Chinese culture (Shu, 2005; Ji, 2009), the translation strikes an artful balance between maintaining the characteristics of the ST and considering the receptive acceptance of the target readership. The justifications given for the omissions emphasize their role in facilitating reading from the perspectives of both content and poetics. The content of *L&D* requires a certain amount of cultural and historical background knowledge to comprehend, especially with respect to political criticism. This justification reflects the effect that the universe of discourse has on the appreciation and understanding of work integrated from another culture. In accordance with this, due to the omissions, the selected chapter reads more like a novel of political criticism than it should, according to English standards.

An interesting discovery is that despite the omissions mitigate the political criticism, the English-speaking interviewees observed that there is substantial political criticism, and they would like to introduce the novel to other English-speaking readers as a novel reflecting and criticizing Chinese politics. Even though the interviewees may have little or no knowledge about the related political movements and critiques, they regarded the political critiques as evident. On the contrary, the political criticism expressed through euphemism and the indirect mimicking of political slogans and rhetoric inherent to the specific period was only understood by the 20% of the interviewees who had previously studied Chinese history and politics. Most interviewees without this cultural and historical background knowledge were unaware of or uncertain about the parody and therefore regarded the satire expressed through the minor characters as irrelevant stories appearing out of nowhere. This confused them and led them to question the author's competence. From the perspective of the ST, the omission of political critique is ultimately a distortion and loss. However, from the perspective of TT readers, the omission of political messages smooths the reading and strikes a balance between the political criticism in the ST and the receptive acceptance of the target readership. It is through the omission that the original text approaches the target readership by a more acceptable and accommodative route. On the one hand, the critical function of the literary text does not necessarily come from the content alone; on the other hand, the detailed translation of the political content distracts the target readership.

Besides simplification of content, the omissions also accommodate the works within the parameters of what an English political criticism novel is supposed to be according to the opinion of English-speaking readers. The narrative structure of the original novel has often been viewed as highly complex (Goldblatt, 2014; Knight, 2014). The narration by the protagonists and the development of the main storyline are often interrupted by substantial interpolation of minor characters and animal characters. Overall, the contents of these aspects of the novel were not difficult to follow, but the way in which the content was organized differed from the interviewees' expectations based on their reading habits, which added reading difficulty, leading to them feel distracted.

Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, it has been found that 70% of the interviewees could not tell that the published English version was incomplete, even though 40% of the original text was omitted. In other words, even though a substantial amount of text was omitted, the story was viewed as complete, clear and concise to these native English-speaking readers. Therefore, the omitted version is more suitable for the general English readership. The life of the ST has thus been prolonged within the target culture by its being made more accessible through distortion to the general readership. The omissions have resulted in a reconstruction of the ST, creating a more reader-friendly text by anticipating the target readers' reading habits and overall understanding of another culture.

However, it should be noted that Chinese novels and literature may be misunderstood and lose their uniqueness in the long term in western markets. For the readers who have a strong interest in Chinese culture, history, political critique and the structure of the novel, the omissions lead to the loss of original characteristics. Sang (2011) warns that, in the long-term, this method of translation would lead to the loss of characteristics of Chinese literature. Furthermore, the dissemination of translated Chinese works might create a vicious circle in which a false impression of Chinese literature is reinforced. Those who want to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and society through reading will thus be deprived of the opportunity to do so here.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

JG contributed to the original idea, the manuscript, the collection, and analysis of the data. DZ contributed to the final

approval of the version to be published and ensured the accuracy and completeness of the thesis.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

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