
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparative Study of Six Chinese Translations of *The Old Man and the Sea*: From the Perspective of Literary Retranslation

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| ABSTRACT

In recent years, the retranslation of literary classics has become increasingly prevalent, and *The Old Man and the Sea* serves as a notable example. Among nearly three hundred Chinese translations of Hemingway's novella, Sun Zhili — a distinguished scholar and practitioner of translation — contributed a new version that invites serious reflection. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of Sun's translation and five representative earlier versions, focusing on three dimensions: linguistic comprehension, stylistic recreation, and cultural transmission. The study aims to identify both the similarities and differences among the six versions, with particular attention to how Sun's translation surpasses its predecessors. The findings suggest that Sun's retranslation embodies his pursuit of perfection, illustrating both the essential characteristics and intrinsic demands of retranslation in literary classics.

| KEYWORDS

retranslation of literary classics; *The Old Man and the Sea*; comparative study of translations; Sun Zhili

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 15 November 2024

PUBLISHED: 07 December 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.12.11

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, consisting of 26,640 words, is characterized by its simple sentence structures, concise diction, and a distinctive "telegraphic" and formulaic style (Sun, 2012, p. 59). As one of the masterpieces of world literature, it has attracted considerable attention from translators across the Chinese-speaking world. Since Eileen Chang's pioneering translation was published in Taiwan in 1955, a total of 302 Chinese versions have appeared across mainland China and Taiwan. As Gao (2016a, p. 69) notes, the extraordinary number of publishers, translators, and the breadth of distribution make this phenomenon remarkable in the history of foreign literature translation in China. The widespread reception of the novella in China not only attests to its enduring global appeal but also reflects the broader trend of retranslation fever that has swept China since the 1990s.

In 2012, Sun Zhili published his new translation, adding yet another version to the ever-growing corpus of *The Old Man and the Sea* in Chinese. This raises two questions: Why did Sun, given the already vast number of existing translations, decide to produce a new one? And how did his version manage to distinguish itself among those created by other renowned translators?

This study takes Sun Zhili's 2012 translation and five representative earlier Chinese versions produced over the past six decades as its corpus, conducting a multi-perspective comparative analysis to examine similarities and differences, and to test whether Sun's translation indeed surpasses its predecessors. The five earlier versions include those by Eileen Chang (1955), Hai Guan (1956), Wu Lao (1987), and Yu Guangzhong (1957 and 2010). For convenience, they are hereafter referred to as "Chang's," "Hai's," "Wu's," "Yu(a)," and "Yu(b)."

These five versions were chosen for their distinctive value and representativeness in their respective contexts. Chang, a prominent novelist and translator, produced the first Chinese translation of *The Old Man and the Sea*, which occupies a unique place in her literary translation career (Chen, 2011, p. 130). Hai Guan's translation, titled *The Old Man and the Sea*, was the first version published in mainland China and remained the only one available for the next three decades (until Wu's version appeared). Wu Lao, celebrated as a Hemingway specialist, produced what was long considered the most authoritative translation; it has been reprinted or republished thirteen times since its debut (Gao, 2016b, pp. 116–117). Yu Guangzhong, a well-known Taiwanese poet, essayist, and scholar, first translated the novella in 1957 and then retranslated it over fifty years later for publication in mainland China.

Based on Sun's theoretical reflections on retranslation, this paper analyzes six versions of *The Old Man and the Sea* from three dimensions — linguistic comprehension, stylistic recreation, and cultural transmission — to explore how Sun's version both inherits and transcends the earlier ones.

2. Literature Review

It is necessary to clarify the distinction between "revision" and "retranslation". The former generally refers to "a translator's own correction and refinement of an earlier version" (Luo, 1991, p. 29), while the latter refers to a new translation produced after previous versions already exist. As Lin (1997, p. 219) observes, "today, the distinction between revision and retranslation has become largely blurred." Therefore, this paper adopts the term "retranslation".

Since the 1990s, a wave of retranslation of literary classics has emerged in China. Observing this phenomenon, Sun (2008, p. 49) keenly noted that some retranslations suffered from translators' inadequate competence, lack of rigor, or even professional ethics. Furthermore, certain publishers, driven by commercial interests, rushed the publication process, resulting in uneven quality and editorial oversight. Sun (2017, p. 9) emphasized that translation is a never-ending pursuit, while asserting that "the retranslation of classics must strive for perfection" (2015, p. 44). His approach to retranslation therefore involves careful attention to the shortcomings of previous versions — particularly in three areas: misinterpretation or omission of the source text, excessive freedom or stiffness in style, and distortion in cultural transmission. By correcting these issues, Sun sought to elevate the artistic and linguistic quality of his translation.

The stylistic features of Hemingway and his *The Old Man and the Sea* have long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Wang Shouyi (1987, p. 41) argues that Hemingway "pursues a kind of authenticity free from embellishment or ornamentation." With regard to Chinese translations of the novella, Ma Ruofei (2007, p. 62) contends that Eileen Chang's version demonstrates exceptional interpretive precision and achieves a depth of understanding that sets it apart. After comparing the translations by Chang and Hai Guan, Wang Xiaoying (2008, pp. 26–27) suggests that Chang's foreignizing strategy accentuates the protagonist's individualistic heroism, whereas Hai's domesticating approach weakens the characterization of the old man. Wang Jing and Luo Xuanmin (2010, pp. 65–68) further claim that Chang's translation "fails to retain the optimism and spirit of struggle that characterize the original, thereby diminishing its heroic tenor."

Quantitative research has also contributed to this field. Xiang Rong (2011, pp. 57–60), employing a corpus-based methodology, compared Chang's and Wu Lao's translations and concluded that the latter adheres more closely to the stylistic features of the source text. Using a similar approach, Peng Xuanhong (2013, pp. 126–129) examined four translations—those of Wu, Chang, Hai, and Zhao Shaowei—focusing on their fidelity in representing the emotional expressions of the characters, and found that Chang's version remains the most faithful in this regard.

While these studies offer valuable insights, they typically analyze the translations from limited perspectives and often express a favorable bias toward translations produced by well-known figures. What remains lacking is a systematic, style-focused comparative examination of different versions based on a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic and stylistic features of the source text itself.

3. Comparative Analysis

3.1 Linguistic Comprehension.

A correct understanding of the source text is the foundation of any translation. *The Old Man and the Sea* primarily depicts the protagonist's solitary and courageous struggle against the vast and violent sea. In Example 1, the word "freshening" conveys the old man's undiminished hope and renewed vigor. However, the renderings by Chang, Hai, Wu, and Yu—such as "清新有力 (fresh and strong)", "清新 (fresh)", "鲜活 (lively)", and "旺盛 (vigorous)"—do not fully capture the nuance of the original and result in somewhat awkward phrasing (Sun, 2012, p. 60). After careful deliberation, Sun translated the phrase as "鼓得更足 (more

buoyant)," which both precisely interprets the original meaning and reads more smoothly in Chinese. This subtle choice reveals Sun's meticulous attention to textual accuracy and stylistic elegance.

Example 1

Original: "Let me get four fresh ones." // "One," the old man said. His hope and confidence had never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises.

Sun's translation: "我给你弄四条新鲜的来吧。"// "一条," 老人说。他的希望和信心从没消失过, 这时就像微风乍起时那样给鼓得更足了。"

Chang's translation: "让我去给你弄四只新鲜的。"// "一只," 老人说。他从来没有失去希望和信心。但是现在它们变得更清新有力了, 就像一阵风刮起来一样。

Hai's translation: "那么让我弄四条新鲜的来吧。"// "一条," 老头儿说。他的希望和信心从来没有消失过, 现在又象微风初起的时候那样的清新了。

Wu's translation: "我给你弄四条新鲜的来吧。"// "一条," 老人说。他的希望和他的信心从没消失过。 这时可又象微风初起时那么鲜活了。

Yu(a): "我去弄四条新鲜的。"// "一条好了。" 老人说。他的希望和信心从不消减, 如今正像微风渐起那么重新旺盛起来。

Yu(b): "我去弄四条新鲜的。"// "一条好了。" 老人说。他的希望和信心从不消失, 如今正像微风渐起那么重新旺盛起来。

In Example 2, a passage early in the novel recalls the boy's memory of their first fishing trip together. The context reveals that they had caught a big fish that violently thrashed in the boat, breaking the seat board. Some translators—such as Chang, Hai, and Yu—rendered "breaking" as "破 (broken)," "开缝 (cracked)," and "打碎 (smashed)," which obscure the physical action implied. Wu and Sun's version, "打断 (snapped)," fits the scene more precisely. Similarly, "throwing" should not be understood as "throwing away," as in "丢" or "扔." Instead, Sun accurately translated it as "推 (push)," reflecting the old man's protective instinct as he pushes the boy away from the thrashing fish to keep him safe.

Example 2

Original: "I can remember the tail slapping and banging and the thwart breaking and the noise of the clubbing. I can remember you throwing me into the bow..."

Sun's translation: "我记得鱼尾巴叭叭地直扑打, 船上的坐板给打断了, 还有你拿棍子打鱼的声音。我记得你把我直往船头上推 ……"

Chang's translation: "我记得那尾巴拍拍砰砰地打着, 划船人的座位也破了, 还有你用木棒打他的声音。我记得你把我丢到船头去 ……"

Hai's translation: "我记得那鱼尾巴吧嗒吧嗒地直扑打, 船上坐板也裂开了缝, 还有你用棍棒打鱼的声音。我记得你把我扔到船头 ……"

Wu's translation: "我记得鱼尾巴砰砰地拍打着, 船上的坐板给打断了, 还有棍子打鱼的声音。我记得你把我朝船头猛推 ……"

Yu(a): "我还记得它的尾巴拍来拍去的响声, 坐板给打碎, 你用棍子打得砰砰响。我还记得你把我丢进放着湿绳圈的船头 ……"

Yu(b): "我还记得它的尾巴拍来拍去的响声, 坐板给打碎, 你用棍子打得砰砰响。我还记得你把我丢进放着湿绳圈的船头 ……"

Sun's interpretive precision demonstrates a deep sensitivity to both linguistic context and character psychology, which allows his translation to convey emotional authenticity and narrative logic more effectively than previous versions.

3.2 Stylistic Reproduction

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is stylistically distinctive, characterized by recurrent patterns and formulaic expressions. The most notable examples include the phrase "the old man" and its variant "old man", which occur 201 and 27 times respectively throughout the text. The former is used by the narrator, while the latter appears in the speech of both the boy and the old man himself. This repetition underscores Santiago's age and perseverance while conveying the narrator's tone of admiration and compassion.

Sun Zhili carefully differentiates among the uses of "the old man" and "old man" according to the speaker's identity: he translates the narrator's references as the neutral "老人," the boy's address as the respectful "老人家," and the old man's self-reference as the slightly humorous "老家伙" (Sun, 2012, p. 62). This nuanced handling not only preserves semantic precision but also reflects the distinct emotional relationships among the characters.

In contrast, Chang fails to distinguish between speakers, and her use of "老头子" lacks the appropriate interpersonal nuance. Hai and Wu render the boy's address as "老大爷," a form that sounds overly localized ("汉味较浓," as Sun [2012, p. 62] notes) and

diminishes the sense of affectionate equality between the two characters. Yu's two versions also lack consistency, with variations that blur the distinction between the boy's address and the old man's self-reference. In Hemingway's text, "the old man" functions as an iconic, exclusive designation for the protagonist, and deviation in translation risks weakening its symbolic resonance.

Another prominent stylistic feature of the original lies in two recurring narrative markers: "the old man/he said aloud" and "the old man/he thought". These structures signal the protagonist's external speech and inner monologue, respectively, and play a vital role in constructing his character. The repeated use of "said aloud" exemplifies Hemingway's mastery of repetitive narration (Zhang, 2005, p. 75). Sun's translation follows the original structure closely, maintaining both the semantic accuracy and the rhythmic effect of repetition.

By contrast, Chang's frequent use of "自言自语 (muttering to oneself)" weakens the forceful tone of the old man's speech. Hai and Yu's renderings show inconsistent variations that obscure Hemingway's patterned narration. Wu preserves the general sense of unity in voice but sacrifices the concise rhythm of the original.

As for "he thought", the English text contains 133 instances, most appearing at the end of sentences, with a few embedded mid-sentence. All six Chinese versions translate it as "他想", yet differ in placement. Sun replicates the original syntactic positioning exactly, while Wu deviates only slightly. Chang and Yu, however, often shift "他想" to the sentence opening in more than a dozen cases, disrupting the rhythm of Hemingway's internal monologue. Hai goes even further, consistently fronting the phrase and thereby reversing the stylistic effect of the original.

3.3 Cultural Transmission

"Defamiliarization," as a key device in literary construction, prolongs the aesthetic process and intensifies artistic perception (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2004, pp. 33–34). In *The Old Man and the Sea*, this technique is manifested in Hemingway's use of twenty-two italicized Spanish words. Set in the Cuban coastal waters near Havana, the story naturally incorporates local linguistic elements, which enrich its exotic flavor and enhance narrative authenticity.

The six Chinese translations adopt three main strategies for rendering these Spanish expressions:

- (1) translating them into Chinese without annotation;
- (2) translating them with explanatory footnotes;
- (3) retaining the original Spanish terms and adding footnotes.

The first approach conveys meaning but erases the foreign linguistic presence; the second explains the terms but still dilutes their defamiliarizing effect. The third, adopted most frequently by Sun—seventeen times in total—is therefore the most effective, preserving both meaning and foreignness while allowing readers to share the original aesthetic experience.

Example 3

Original: "But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky..."

Sun's translation: 可是，过了四十天还没钓到一条鱼，孩子的父母便对他说，老人如今准是极端 *salao*，就是说倒霉透顶……

Chang's translation: 但是四十天没捕到一条鱼，那男孩的父母就告诉他说这老头子确实一定是晦气星——那是一种最最走霉运的人……

Hai's translation: 可是，过了四十天没有捉到一条鱼，孩子的爸妈就对他说，老头儿现在一定“背运”了（那是表示最倒霉的一个字眼）……

Wu's translation: 可是过了四十天还没捉到一条鱼，男孩的父母对他说，老人如今准是终于“倒了血霉”，这就是说，倒霉到了极点……

Yu(a): 可是过了四十天还捉不到鱼，那男孩的父母便对他说，那老头子如今无可挽救地成了晦气星，而那是最糟的恶运……

Yu(b): 可是过了四十天还捉不到鱼，那男孩的父母便对他说，那老头子如今不折不扣地成了晦气星，那真是最糟的厄运……

Here, the Spanish term "*salao*"—used to describe the old man's extreme misfortune—is culturally loaded. While Chang, Hai, Wu, and Yu replaced it with domestic expressions like "晦气星" or "倒了血霉", "thereby domesticating the text, Sun retains "*salao*" and provides a footnote. His approach not only conveys meaning but also restores the exotic texture and authenticity of Hemingway's prose, exemplifying what Sun (2012, p. 62) calls the translation's "original flavor" or "foreign aroma."

Religion constitutes another vital dimension of cultural transmission. The word “God” appears twelve times in the novella, each uttered by Santiago himself. Among the six translations, Sun’s translation preserves the strongest degree of foreignization, followed by Chang, then Wu, with Yu’s versions the least foreignized. Sun (2003, p. 48) explicitly advocates a “foreignization” strategy to preserve the protagonist’s religious consciousness.

Example 4

Original: “I must hold him all I can and give him line when he must have it. Thank God he is travelling and not going down.”

Sun’s translation: 我得拼命拉住它，它要钓绳的时候，就给它放长些。感谢上帝，它还在向前游，没有往下钻。

Chang’s translation: 我一定要尽我最大的力量不让他跑掉，他挣扎得厉害的时候我就把绳子放长些。幸而他只是航行，并没有往下面去——感谢上帝。

Hai’s translation: 我一定要拼命牵住它，它要钓丝的时候就把钓丝放长些。谢天谢地，它还在游着，没钻到海底去。

Wu’s translation: 我得拼命牵住它，必要的时候给它放出钓索。谢谢老天，它还在朝前游，没有朝下沉。

Yu(a): 我只好尽力将它拉住，万一没法，也只好放索让它。谢天谢地，它一直向前游泳，没向下沉。

Yu(b): 我只好尽力将它拉住，必要的话，也只好放索让它。谢天谢地，它一直向前游，没向下沉。

The renderings “谢天谢地” and “谢谢老天” in the versions by Hai, Wu, and Yu strip the text of its Christian resonance, resulting in cultural distortion. Sun, consistent with his “cultural fidelity” principle (1999, p. 41), translates “God” as “上帝”, thereby maintaining the Christian connotation. Chang also adopts a foreignizing approach, but her sentence structure—placing “感谢上帝” at the end and separating it with a dash—weakens its syntactic and rhetorical force.

4. Conclusion

This study examined Sun Zhili’s 2012 retranslation of *The Old Man and the Sea* alongside five representative earlier Chinese versions, exploring their similarities and differences through the lens of Sun’s philosophy of retranslation. By focusing on three analytical dimensions—linguistic comprehension, stylistic recreation, and cultural transmission—the paper assessed whether Sun’s version transcends its predecessors.

Although the analysis could not encompass every aspect of these six translations, the findings indicate that Sun’s version demonstrates a notable advancement in both fidelity and artistry. More importantly, Sun’s reflections on retranslation underscore that the retranslation of literary classics is not merely an act of “pursuing perfection,” but also a manifestation of a nation’s evolving understanding and reception of foreign cultures. In this sense, retranslation serves as both a linguistic endeavor and a cultural process—one that continuously redefines how literary masterpieces are interpreted, valued, and localized across historical and cultural contexts.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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