

# From Omission to the Mediation of Conflicts between Chinese and Western Narrative Norms and Poetics: A Case Study of English Translation of *Wolf Totem*


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## Abstract

As a work of Chinese ethnic minority literature, *Wolf Totem* embraces a narrative structure and discourse rich in national and ethnic historical overtones, while also aligning with the narrative conventions of Chinese novels. This study, based on Howard Goldblatt's English translation, investigates how the translator reshapes the text's narrative structure and discourse through the strategy of "omission", and explores the resulted narrative effects. The analysis is situated within the broader context of the differing narrative poetics of Chinese and Western literary traditions. Drawing on the concepts of "grand narrative" and "little narrative" as well as "duration" and "narrative speed", the study reveals the translator's motivations and strategies in negotiating the tensions between Chinese and Western narrative norms. Furthermore, it revisits the relationship between modern and postmodern theories in Translation Studies (TS), advocating for a renewed focus on the translator, the translated text, and ideology through the lens of narrative conventions and underlying poetics. In this light, this study seeks to promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue between source and target language cultures through the practice of translation.

**Keywords:** *Wolf Totem*, Omissions, Narrative Norms, Narrative Poetics, Chinese Ethnic Minority Literature

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## 1. Introduction

As Translation Studies (TS) increasingly expands into interdisciplinary fields, narratology has emerged as a vital theoretical resource for interpreting translation phenomena. Gerald Prince, in his seminal essay *Narratology and Translation* (2014), systematically explores how inevitable shifts, deviations, and interpretive renderings in translation impact both the narrating and narrated levels of narrative structure. His work deepens the theoretical dialogue between narratology and TS, highlighting that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a complex act of (re)narration involving cultural negotiation, ideological positioning, and translator agency (Prince 2014: 23). The introduction of this perspective marks the nascent formation of an intersectional paradigm between narratology and TS. It has also facilitated the deepening of the "translation as narration" concept within the field, providing a theoretical framework for uncovering the latent reconstruction of narrative structure and discourse in the course of translation. In recent years, the intersection between narrative theory and TS has become increasingly diverse, exhibiting a trend towards specialization. For instance, emerging studies such as cognitive narratology (Yang, 2021) and affective narratology (Chen, 2022) are being gradually introduced into TS. These approaches aim to illustrate the complex interactions between textual narrative, the translator's cognitive mechanisms, and the reader's affective response. The adoption of such interdisciplinary perspectives has not only expanded the theoretical dimensions of TS but also conceptualized translation as a complex meaning-making process. In this regard, translation is not merely a linguistic act of interlingual transfer, but a dynamic process of reproducing and reconstructing narrative and cultural meanings.

*Wolf Totem* is a semi-autobiographical novel whose author, Jiang Rong, draws upon personal experience. The narrative threads the life and observations of Chen Zhen as a sent-down youth (知青, educated young people in China during the 1960s–70s who were sent from cities to rural areas as part of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" movement) into the Inner Mongolian grasslands, depicting a unique social and ecological panorama of the region during the 1960s and 1970s. The text not only depicts survival experiences within a specific historical context but also offers profound insights into the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, as well as the complex nature of Chinese ethnic cultural identity. Since its publication in 2004, the work has garnered widespread attention and has been translated into over thirty languages. The English version, translated by the renowned sinologist Howard Goldblatt and published by Penguin Books in 2008, represents a milestone in the translation of contemporary Chinese literature.

Academic attention to the English translation of *Wolf Totem* has surged in China, only with a small subset of studies from the lens of narratology. A review of existing literature reveals several deficiencies: first, corpus selection lacks systematicity, often relying on fragmented cases that cannot support broad conclusions; second, theoretical frameworks

remain singular, predominantly relying on Mona Baker's socio-narrative theory of "narrative reframing" while neglecting the perspective of literary narratology; third, narrative analysis remains superficial, often limited to describing structural changes without probing the narrative mechanisms and cultural motivations. Simply put, few studies have systematically categorized omission within the *Wolf Totem* translation with a corpus approach, nor have they adequately explored the behind these strategies through the lens of comparative narrative poetics. By integrating literary narrative theory with corpus-based methods, this study systematically observes the narrative structure and discourse of the translation, supplemented by case studies. Against the backdrop, this study attempts to reveal how the translator navigates conflicting narrative norms, thereby deepening the understanding of translation itself and its function in narrative and cultural construction.

## 2. Research Methods

A mixed-methods paradigm that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches is adopted to achieve a systematic identification and interpretation of omission in the course of translation. At the initial stage, an operational definition of omission is introduced to clarify its manifestations and identification. Along with the definition, instances of omission in the translation are systematically identified and annotated based on a parallel comparison of the Chinese and English texts. Subsequently, all omissions are manually screened and categorized into different types of omitted information. Grounded in this, the study employs certain narratological concepts to explore the structural and discursive shifts induced by omission, unveiling the underlying narrative poetics and cultural motivations.

### 2.1. Data Collection and Categorization of Omission

Dimitriu (2004: 165) defines it as "a strategy by means of which professional translators delete words, phrases, sentences, sometimes even more consistent parts of the source texts in order to adjust—linguistically, pragmatically, culturally, or ideologically—the translated text for their target audiences." Given the specific characteristics of the text and operational feasibility, this study limits the analysis unit to the sentence level. In this light, the sentence is viewed as a relatively autonomous narrative unit. Accordingly, sentence omissions are classified into two categories: "Partial Omission", where the translation retains part of the sentence content but omits specific words, phrases, or clauses; and "Full Omission", where the entire source sentence is removed in the target text.

The study first compiled the source and target texts into a parallel format and utilized the TMXMALL Aligner tool to achieve segment alignment, constructing a bilingual corpus for systematic analysis. Following this, a manual comparison of source and target segments was conducted to identify omitted segments. This process resulted in the compilation of the "Statistics of Sentence Omission" (see Table 1), which serves as the quantitative basis for subsequent categorization.

**Table 1 Statistics of Sentence Omission**

Omission Type	Frequency	Total Number of Sentences in ST	Omission Rate
Partial Omission	95	11,530	0.82%
Full Omission	3,410	11,530	29.58%
Total	3,505	11,530	30.40%

P.S. Partial Omission Rate = Frequency of Partial Sentence Omissions ÷ Total Number of Sentences in ST

1. Full Omission Rate = Frequency of Full Sentence Omissions ÷ Total Number of Sentences in ST
2. Overall Omission Rate = (Partial + Full Sentence Omissions) ÷ Total Number of Sentences in ST

Building upon the omission statistics presented in Table 1 and the omission annotations, this study further categorizes and quantitatively analyzes the omitted instances according to their information types. It is important to note that the classification of information categories is primarily based on the overall informational attributes of the omitted content. Given that the omitted content often involves certain overlaps and intersections, categorization was determined according to the dominant information type present in each omission, thereby ensuring the scientific rigor and accuracy of the classification.

Specifically, the omitted information in the source text can be broadly classified into the following five categories:

1. Historical and Cultural Information: Including historical context, cultural descriptions, and references to allusions or classical texts.
2. Settings: Involving descriptions and exposition of the story's setting, environmental atmosphere, and specific scenes.
3. Character Actions and Speech: Encompassing the concrete actions and dialogues of both primary and secondary characters.
4. Character Psychology: Covering expressions of inner thoughts, emotional changes, and psychological responses of characters.
5. Other Information: Referring to omitted content that does not fall clearly into the above four categories and lacks a distinct informational tendency.

To quantitatively analyze these categories, the study employs the following calculation formulas:

1. Category Proportion = (Number of omissions in the category) ÷ (Total number of omissions) (Formula 3.4)
2. Subcategory Proportion = (Number of omissions in the subcategory) ÷ (Total number of omissions) (Formula 3.5)

Based on this classification and calculation method, detailed statistical data on the omission of different information categories were obtained, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Statistics of Omission by Information Category**

Category	Subcategory	Quantity	Subcategory Proportion	Category Proportion
Historical & Cultural Information	Historical & Cultural	1330	37.95%	37.95%
Settings	Background	126	3.59%	8.50%
	Environment	172	4.91%	
Character Actions & Speech	Wolf's Actions	247	7.05%	27.22%
	Chen Zhen's Actions	112	3.20%	
	Chen Zhen's Speech	455	12.98%	
	Minor Characters' Speech	140	3.99%	
Character Psychology	Chen Zhen's Psychology	341	9.73%	10.93%
	Minor Characters' Psychology	42	1.20%	
Others		540	15.40%	15.40%
Total		3505	100%	100%

According to the data presented in Table 2, omissions involving Historical and Cultural Information account for the largest share, constituting 37.95% of the total deletions. This is followed by omissions related to Character Actions and Speech, which represent 27.22% of the overall omissions. The category labeled as Others accounts for 15.40%, while deletions concerning Character Psychology make up 10.93%. The smallest proportion of omissions falls under Settings, comprising 8.50% of the total omitted content.

## 2.2. Conceptual Framework from Narratology

The analytical framework draws upon the theoretical groundings of Genette's (1983, 27) tripartite model of narrative structure. Genette's narratology, a classic structuralist framework for narrative analysis, divides narrative into three levels: story, narrative, and narration (Genette, 1983: 27). Narration, the surface level, refers to the concrete and directly visible way in which a story is told. Word choice, sentence length, and narrating agent are all elements that belong to this level. Narrative, the second level, does not concern the act of narration but rather the way in which the events and characters of the story are offered to the reader. Genette's final and deepest narrative level is *histoire*, which is translated as story. As Herman and Vervaeck point out, "this level is not readily available to the reader. Instead, it amounts to an abstract construct" (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019: 43).

This study further adopts Herman & Vervaeck's (2019: 64) detailed classification of the "narrative level," anchoring the analysis on three core dimensions: time, characterization, and focalization. This dimensional division not only maintains the hierarchical logic of Genette's model but also provides a vantage point for specific textual analysis. To deeply elucidate the latent motivations behind narrative reconstruction, this study employs two sets of core narratological concepts: First, Lyotard's (1984: 38) theory of "grand narrative" and "little narrative" is utilized to explain the narrative poetics underlying the translator's omissions—specifically, how the translator responds to or resists the macro-narrative framework of the source text through omission. Second, Chatman's (1978: 68-69) concept of "duration" and Prince's (1982: 55) "narrative speed" are applied to discover the mechanism by which omission impacts narrative rhythm.

### 3. Interconnection between Translation, Omission, and Narratology

The development of TS shares a parallel developmental trajectory with narratology: both fields underwent a theoretical turn from structuralism to post-structuralism, reflecting the interconnected understanding of translation, omission, and narrative. The modern phase of TS is grounded in modern linguistic theories and predominantly adopts empirical or descriptive paradigms, viewing translation as a phenomenon in the target cultural and social systems (Song, 2018: 20). In other words, this phase emphasized the faithful transfer of the source narrative's surface content; narrative was considered an inherent, relatively stable property of the source text, while interventionist acts like omission, which disrupt the source's "integrity", were often marginalized and conflicted with the principle of faithfulness.

As the post-structuralist philosophy influenced TS, the modern paradigm shifted to the postmodern. Postmodern TS, influenced by post-structuralist theories on language, meaning, and representation, posits that language does not objectively describe the world but constitutes it, and that meaning is not fixed but results from subjective power (Song, 2019: 10). In this light, translation is redefined as the practice of re-narration, where the translator actively participates within the target cultural context. The translator, constrained by the source narrative framework, simultaneously reconstructs the source narrative through linguistic choices and structural adjustments, allowing their ideological stance and cultural cognition to intervene in the process. From this perspective, omission ceases to be a mere shift at the textual surface; rather, it becomes an explicit expression of the translator's voice, thus facilitating the reconstruction of the source text's story world (Herman, 2002).

#### 3.1. Shifts of Narrative Structure from Omission

The source text's narrative structure exhibits a sense of historical and cultural construction, with all 35 chapters beginning with an "Epigraph" (跋, referencing ancient texts or legends about wolves and nomadic people), which is classified as "Historical and Cultural" information (accounting for 37.95%) in Table 2. Compared to the main plot

progression, these Epigraphs form the deep cultural foundation of the source narrative, providing a basis for subsequent plot development through historical tracing and cultural positioning. In contrast, the translator employed a uniform omission strategy for all 35 Epigraphs: every textual quote was completely removed, leaving only the chapter number and the main body text. This intentional act directly results in a simplified, de-interculturalized tendency in the target text's surface narrative structure. The following specific cases from Chapters 5 and 27 of the source text illustrate this contrastive analysis. Incidentally, literal translation (LT) is my own translation made for non-Chinese speakers to better understand the omitted Chinese text.

#### Example 1 (Historical and Cultural Information)

ST: “或云，突厥之先出于索国，在匈奴之北。其部落大人曰阿谤步，兄弟十七人，其一曰伊质泥师都，狼所生也。谤步等性并愚痴，国遂被灭。泥师都既别感异气，能徵召风雨。娶二妻，云是夏神冬神之女也。一孕而生四男……此说虽殊，然终狼种也。”

——《周书·突厥》（Jiang, 2004: 41）

LT: “It is said that the ancestors of the Tujue originated from the State of Suo, located north of the Xiongnu. The tribal chieftain was named Abangbu, who had seventeen brothers. One of them was called Yizhi Nishidu, who was born from a wolf. Abangbu and others were all foolish by nature, and their state was consequently destroyed. Nishidu, however, possessed an exceptional aura and could summon wind and rain. He took two wives, said to be the daughters of the Summer Spirit and the Winter Spirit. One pregnancy bore four sons... Although this account differs from others, they are ultimately descendants of the wolf.”

—— The Book of Zhou: Turks (Jiang, 2004: 41)

#### Example 2 (Historical and Cultural Information)

ST: “在我们的血液里，特别是在君主和贵族的血液里，潜伏着游牧精神，无疑它在传授给后代的气质中占着很大的部分，我们必须把那种不断地急于向广阔地域扩张的精神也归根于这部分气质，它驱使每个国家一有可能就扩大它的疆域，并把它的利益伸展到天涯海角。”

——（英）赫·乔·韦尔斯《世界史纲》  
（Jiang, 2004: 287）

LT: “In our blood, particularly in the blood of rulers and aristocrats, lies a dormant nomadic spirit; beyond doubt, it constitutes a large part of the temperament transmitted to subsequent generations. We must attribute that spirit of constant haste to expand toward vast territories to this part of our temperament, which drives every nation to expand its territory and extend its interests to the ends of the earth whenever possible.”

—— H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (Jiang, 2004: 287)

From a narratology perspective, the chapter-opening Epigraphs are by no means simple supplementary information but actively participate in narrative construction through intertextuality. Example 1, denoting the mythical account of being born of a wolf, constitutes a cultural intertextual chain linked to the wolf ancestor cult myth (e.g., the relationship between the protagonist Chen Zhen and the wolf). This provides narrative overtone from a mythical archetype and enhances the text's historical validity. Through a spiritual interpretation, Example 2 draws on H.G. Wells's argument that the nomadic spirit is deeply ingrained in rulers' temperament, providing both cultural motivation and narrative evidence. Taken together, the translator's omission of the Epigraphs can be seen as a strategic act of systematically severing this intertextual network. As a result, the target text's surface narrative structure is simplified into event progression, directly initiating the chapter with the specific plot.

Regarding the internal narrative structure, the systematic omission of "Settings" (accounting for 8.50%) drives a structural shift from the source text's composite "Natural Environment-Character/Animal-Plot" narrative to a linearly driven "Character-Plot" narrative. This shift is concretized through the effects of omission on two types of typical scene information: background information (3.59%) and environment information (4.91%). The following specific cases illustrate this shift.

#### Example 3 (Settings - Background)

ST: “在冬季，干牛粪主要用来引火。那时的燃料主要是靠风干的羊粪粒，因为家家守着羊粪盘，每天只要在羊群出圈以后，把满圈的羊粪粒铲成堆，再风吹日晒几天就是很好的燃料，比干牛粪更经烧。但是在草原的夏季，羊粪水分多不成形，牧民在蒙古包里就不能烧羊粪，只能烧干牛粪。” (Jiang, 2004: 280)

LT: “In winter, dried cow dung is mainly used for starting fires... The primary fuel then relies on sun-dried sheep pellets, because every household guards their sheep dung pile, and after the sheep leave the pen each day, the pellets are collected, piled up, and dried for a few days, making a better, longer-burning fuel than dry cow dung. But in the grassland summer, sheep dung contains too much moisture to hold shape, so herdsmen cannot burn sheep dung in the yurt, and can only burn dry cow dung.” (Jiang, 2004: 280)

#### Example 4 (Settings - Environment)

ST: “六股浓浓的白烟像六条凶狠的白龙，杀向厚密的蚊群。顷刻间，毒蚊群像遇上了更毒的天龙一般，呼啸溃逃。救命的艾烟将整个羊群全部罩住，疲惫不堪的大羊小羊，扑通扑通跪到在地。” (Jiang, 2004: 282)

LT: “Six columns of thick white smoke charged like six vicious white dragons, slaying the dense swarm of mosquitoes. Instantly, the noxious mosquito swarm scattered and fled, as if encountering a fiercer celestial dragon. The life-saving artemisia smoke covered the entire flock, and the exhausted large and small sheep plopped down onto their knees on the ground.” (Jiang, 2004: 282)

Example 3, detailing the use of cow/sheep dung as fuel across seasons, establishes the relationship between the herdsmen and the ecological resources of the prairie, revealing the survival logic of the nomadic people. Example 4, creating the dynamic scene of white smoke driving away mosquitoes, utilizes sensory environmental details to construct the spatial structure of the prairie ecosystem. Background information in the source text usually depicts the history and lifestyle of herdsmen and the prairie's flora and fauna, serving as a foreground narrative that supplements and foreshadows the plot development. Environmental descriptions provide the ecological setting (prairie, sky, climate), helping build the overall spatial structure of the narrative—the composite “Natural Environment-Character/Animal-Plot” model that embodies Mongolian ecological philosophy and wisdom. The prairie ecosystem is closely linked to the lives of the wolves and herdsmen, and environmental changes (such as grassland degradation, extreme weather) indirectly propel the plot. Following the substantial omission of background and environment information by the translator, the overall narrative structural emphasis shifts from the complex interaction of “Environment—Character—Plot” towards a simplified, linearly driven “Character—Plot” narrative model.

### 3.2. Shifts of Narrative Discourse from Omission

The preceding section analyzed the resulted effects of the target text at the narrative structure level through the omission of “Historical and Cultural Information” and “Settings.” As the core element of narrative, the construction of a character's image relies on the interaction among their action, speech, and the mode of focalization in the narration (Bal, 2009: 114). Accordingly, this section focuses on the omission strategy concerning the actions, speech, and psychological descriptions of the core character, Chen Zhen, in *Wolf Totem*. Specifically, it elucidates the rewriting of characterization at the narrative discourse level and discusses its impact on character construction.

#### Example 5 (Character Action and Speech - Chen Zhen Action)

ST: “陈阵就先把马驹的胃包大肠小肠掏出来，扔到炉灰堆旁边，随狗们去抢。然后从包里拿出两个空肉盆，把马驹的心肝肺、腰子气管盛了满满两盆，放在包里碗架下的阴凉处，留作下一顿的狼食和狗食。” (Jiang, 2004: 249)

LT: “Chen Zhen first took out the foal's stomach, large and small intestines, and threw them beside the ash pile for the dogs to fight over. Then he took two empty meat basins from his bag, filled them both with the foal's heart, liver, lungs, and kidneys, and placed them in the cool area under the bowl rack inside the yurt, saving them for the next meal for the wolf and the dogs.” (Jiang, 2004: 249)

#### Example 6 (Character Action and Speech - Chen Zhen's Action)

ST: “陈阵把小狼安顿好了以后，给小狼一顿美餐——大半个煮熟的肥羊尾，让它体内多积累一些御寒的脂肪。” (Jiang, 2004: 346)

LT: “After settling the little wolf, Chen Zhen gave it a gourmet meal—more than half a cooked fat sheep tail—so that it could accumulate more fat to ward off the cold.” (Jiang, 2004: 346)

Chen Zhen’s detailed actions in the source text, such as processing the foal’s entrails (Example 5) and feeding the young wolf (Example 6), are not isolated survival details but the practical manifestation of the human-wolf symbiosis culture. A character is not a pre-existing entity in the text but a dynamic result constructed through a series of actions, speeches, and the narrator’s choices (Bal, 2009: 113). In this light, these action details transform Chen Zhen from an observer into a practitioner: he directly engages in the material practices of grassland culture by participating in the herdsman’s daily labor; and he elevates his personal curiosity about the wolf to cultural symbiosis through actively caring for it. Narratively, these action details not only give the character depth and development but also establish the necessary real-world context and psychological motivation for the subsequent emotional bond between Chen Zhen and the wolf, constituting key nodes in his character arc. It is fair to say the translator’s selective omission of the narration of these related actions weakens the process of Chen Zhen’s transformation from observer to practitioner, leading to a flattening effect in character construction. The character image tends to be compressed into a one-dimensional plot device, losing its cultural embeddedness and emotional growth trajectory.

#### Example 7 (Character Action and Speech - Chen Zhen’s Speech)

ST: “陈阵小声对杨克说：我有一个发现，听了狼的长嚎，你就会明白蒙族民歌为什么会有那么长的颤音和拖音了。” (Jiang, 2004: 258)

LT: “Chen Zhen whispered to Yang Ke: I’ve made a discovery. If you listen to the wolf’s long howl, you’ll understand why Mongolian folk songs have such long trills and trailing notes.” (Jiang, 2004: 258)

#### Example 8 (Character Action and Speech - Chen Zhen’s Speech)

ST: “陈阵低低自语：小狼，小狼，腾格里会告诉你的身世和真相的。在我的梦里咬我，狠狠地咬吧……” (Jiang, 2004: 353)

LT: “Chen Zhen muttered low to himself: little wolf, little wolf, Tengger will tell you your origins and the truth. Bite me in my dreams, bite me fiercely...” (Jiang, 2004: 353)

From a narratological perspective, character speech is the primary mechanism by which the narrator filters a character's consciousness, serving as the internalization and individualization of narrative. Cohn (1978: 14) defined this narrative mode as “narrated monologue,” which occurs: “when the inner world of a character is presented by the narrator in language stylistically approximating the character’s own.” In Example 7, Chen Zhen links the wolf’s howl to the trills and trailing notes of Mongolian folk songs, revealing that prairie music imitates natural acoustics and reflects the cultural gene of the nomadic people to convey truth through sound, thereby demonstrating Chen Zhen’s deeper understanding and reflection on Mongolian culture. Example 8, through internal

monologue, portrays Chen Zhen's dual emotion of worship and guilt toward the wolf, illustrating his spiritual symbiosis with it. This technique of implanting the character's consciousness strengthens the cultural reflective dimension of the character, allowing the reader to perceive his cognitive and emotional evolution through his language. Nevertheless, the translator's omission of some narrated monologues creates a more external, behavior-oriented narrative style. While this approach facilitates the reader's rapid grasp of the main narrative flow by constructing Chen Zhen's cultural understanding and psychological change primarily through plot progression rather than explicit speech, it may reduce the depth of the character's complexity.

#### Example 9 (Character Psychology)

ST: “他的心怦怦直跳，如果狼粪冒出浓烟，那可是有史以来，汉族人在蒙古草原腹地点燃的第一股狼烟。” (Jiang, 2004: 204)

LT: “His heart pounded. If the wolf dung emitted thick smoke, that would be the first wolf smoke ever lit by a Han person in the heartland of the Mongolian grassland.” (Jiang, 2004: 204)

#### Example 10 (Character Psychology)

ST: “陈阵有些害怕，如果他真把狼烟点起来，不知全队的知青会对他怎样上纲上线，口诛笔伐呢。” (Jiang, 2004: 204)

LT: “Chen Zhen was somewhat afraid. If he really lit the wolf smoke, he wondered how the educated youth in the whole team would subject him to criticism and verbal attacks.” (Jiang, 2004: 204)

Psychological description, an important means of revealing a character's consciousness and emotional change, is closely linked to “focalization” in narratology. Genette (1980, 186) clearly distinguishes between “who speaks” (the narrator) and “who sees/perceives” (the focus of perception), noting that the mechanism of focalization concerns the perspective from which narrative information is selected, organized, and transmitted. In other words, focalization determines the viewpoint of the perceiving subject in the narration, critically influencing the depth with which the reader accesses the character's psychology, emotions, and cognitive experience. He classified focalization into three types (1980: 188–190): (1) Zero Focalization: The narrator possesses knowledge transcending any character (Narrator > Character), presenting an omniscient viewpoint; (2) Internal Focalization: The narrator's knowledge aligns with that of a specific character (Narrator = Character), allowing the reader to experience events through that character's perception; (3) External Focalization: The narrator lacks sufficient information to enter the character's mind (Narrator < Character), restricting the narration to external behavior and appearances, akin to an objective record.

Examples 9 and 10 employ typical internal focalization to show Chen Zhen's contradictory psychological activity (curiosity and fear) before lighting the wolf smoke. This narrative focalization mode not only conveys Chen Zhen's imagination and

expectation regarding the symbolic meaning of the wolf smoke but also hints at the psychological projection of “individual vs. collective” and “Han vs. Mongol” identity, constituting a dual tension between individual experience and the grand narrative. The target text’s omission of similar internal focalization shifts the narrative focus from internal focalization toward external focalization. The character's internal conscious activity, emotional conflict, and the cultural identity cognition it carries are consequently weakened, with the narrative emphasis leaning toward external behavior and the event itself. Simultaneously, this makes the narrative in the translation focus more on the experiential description of human-nature interaction, weakening the original work's metaphorical structure concerning ethnicity, politics, and identity.

In summary, the selective omission of narrative details concerning Chen Zhen’s action, speech, and psychology in the English translation of *Wolf Totem* alters the path of character construction. It shifts the original narrative mode—centered on the character's internal consciousness—towards a more objective, external narrative orientation, prioritizing plot progression via visible behavior, moving toward an event-driven narrative mode.

#### 4. Narrative Norms and Narrative Poetics

Toury describes norms as “the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community—as to what would count as right or wrong, adequate or inadequate—into performance ‘instructions’ appropriate for and applicable to concrete situations” (Toury, 2012: 63). He further observes that “norms can influence not only translation of all kinds, but also at every stage of the act” (Toury, 2012: 81). In this regard, the translator’s intervention through omissions—which leads to narrative shifts—can be traced back to latent conflicts between Chinese and Western narrative norms grounded in poetics differences. As Hermans (1999: 79) notes, translation norms are “constructive,” emerging from the collision and negotiation of different cultural narrative logics, not single-sided cultural replication. Consequently, omission can be viewed as a practical path for reconciling conflicts between source and target cultural narrative norms. This section aims to analyze the underlying motivations for the translator's modulation of narrative effects by contrasting Chinese and Western narrative poetics and norms, utilizing narratological concepts.

##### 4.1. Mediation between Grand Narrative and Little Narrative

Within Lyotard’s postmodern framework, the “grand narrative”, derived from the Enlightenment, constructs social consensus through its function of “unification and legitimization;” the “little narrative”, conversely, employs localized, differentiated, and decentralized narrative practices to deconstruct singular authority, becoming the core vehicle for the decentralized reconstruction of meaning in postmodern society (Lyotard, 1984: 38). The tension between the grand and little narratives can essentially be viewed as a dispute between the narrative paradigms of modernity and postmodernity: the former

pursues universal truth and historical inevitability, while the latter emphasizes pluralistic experience and the legitimacy of individual discourse. The source text constructs Chinese historicity and collective narrative through extensive information outside the main storyline, representing the grand narrative poetics of Chinese ethnic minority literature: the micro-narrative of individual experience carries and conveys the macro-intent of collective cultural reflection and civilizational critique.

Firstly, the author establishes historical authenticity by invoking Mongolian secret histories, Genghis Khan legends, and world history, supplemented by extensive background and environmental descriptions of the nomadic people, linking the wolf totem to Mongolian secret histories and contemporary ecological crises. Secondly, the source text interweaves the history of prairie ecology with the trauma history of the Cultural Revolution through the speech and psychological descriptions of educated youth like Chen Zhen (e.g., policy-driven wolf extermination and dust storms), implying a critique of “sheepish culture” by the sent-down youth collective and embodying the grand theme of “Critique of Agrarian Culture – Salvation by Nomadic Civilization”.

Lytard suggests that postmodern society needs to replace grand narratives with little narratives to advocate for difference and express the theme of social decentralization (Song, 2020: 17). The translator, acting as a mediator of cross-cultural narration, uses omission to shift the source text’s “little narrative in the context of grand narrative” mode toward a target text dominated by individual experience. This is essentially a dynamic negotiation to reconcile conflicting Chinese and Western narrative norms. On one hand, the translator's omission of historical/cultural details, background, and environmental description weakens the historical and nationalistic coloring, redirecting the narrative focus towards individual adventure and simplifying the complex ethnic cultural symbol into a “prairie adventure story”. On the other hand, the translator’s omission of speech and psychological descriptions related to Han-Mongol cultural comparison dissolves the civilizational critique dimension of the Chinese narrative. This approach reflects the Western narrative’s rejection of culturally critical grand narratives, favoring a shift towards depoliticized, universal ecological themes, aligning with the Western narrative tradition of separating individual experience from macro-history.

#### 4.2. Narrative Duration and Narrative Speed

Narrative duration and narrative speed are the mechanisms for regulating narrative rhythm. Narrative duration involves the relationship between the time spent reading the narrative (discourse time) and the duration of the story events themselves (story time), comprising five possibilities: (1) Summary (Discourse time < Story time); (2) Ellipsis (Discourse time = 0); (3) Scene (Discourse time ≈ Story time); (4) Stretch (Discourse time > Story time); (5) Pause (Story time = 0) (Chatman, 1978: 68-69). Prince (1982: 55) further stated that in any specific narrative, the events and states that constitute the narrated world can be presented faster or slower. The rate at which it unfolds is the narrative speed. The speed of a narrative equals the relationship between the duration of the narrated

events—the (approximate) time taken for events to progress or be imagined to progress—and the length of the narrative (e.g., expressed in words, lines, or pages). The narrative duration of the *Wolf Totem* source text is primarily “stretch” (discourse time > story time): the author prolongs the discourse time through dense historical allusions, cultural details, and character action, speech, and psychological descriptions, resulting in a reduced narrative speed ratio and presenting a slow-paced, dense narrative structure.

The translator’s omission affects this duration relationship: On one hand, removing extensive historical allusions and detailed cultural descriptions compresses discourse time, mitigating the degree of “stretch” and moving the duration relationship closer to “scene” (discourse time story time). On the other hand, the translator’s omission physically shortens the narrative length. While retaining the main plot and maintaining the event progression time, this adjustment objectively increases the narrative speed (event progression time / narrative length) of the target text, making the narration faster and more compact. The deep logic of this mediation lies in the differences between Chinese and Western narrative norms: Chinese literary tradition emphasizes depth through slowness, while Western narrative favors efficiency and speed in individual experience narratives, essentially reflecting a preference for “showing” over “telling”. Western narrative tradition holds that excessive narrative intervention “dulls the edge of mimesis”, indicating that it weakens the text’s ability to allow readers to autonomously perceive meaning through specific scenes, actions, and dialogue. They tend to favor the “showing” mode (where events drive the narrative) over the “telling” mode (which relies on the narrator’s direct interpretation or evaluation) (Zhao, 2013b: 46–47). Furthermore, “telling” narratives often involve narrator intervention, which, while quickly conveying meaning, may suppress the reader's imaginative space and sense of participation; “showing” narratives, by “letting the events speak for themselves”, construct a more open production of meaning (Barry, 2009: 229). In the translation of *Wolf Totem*, the translator uses omission to gradually shift the source text’s “telling” rhythm toward a “showing” rhythm. The translator’s adjustment process deeply aligns with the starting point of norm theory: “saving the difference” (Zhu, 2007: XI). This “saving the difference” is not mere cultural compromise but the reconstruction of a hybrid narrative norm in the target culture: it retains core symbols like the ecological significance of the wolf totem from the source text while adapting to the Western narrative expectation dominated by individual experience. Beyond the text, the translator's conciliatory action reflects the core concern of postmodern translation studies: redirecting translation research toward a more politically conscious practice (Lemert, 1994: 268)—that translation is not just linguistic conversion but a site for the practice of power, ideology, and cultural discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

The translator’s strategic act of omission reconstructed the narrative structure and discourse of *Wolf Totem*, reshaping the narrative effect, which can essentially be seen as a mediatory act amidst the conflict between Chinese and Western narrative norms. On one

hand, the translator reshaped the surface and internal narrative structures, diluting the source text's "grand narrative" features and moving it closer to the Western "little narrative" norm, aligning with postmodern philosophy. On the other hand, the omission of action, speech, and psychological discourse shortened the discourse time, gradually shifting the source text's "telling" rhythm toward a "showing" progression, increasing the narrative speed and satisfying Western aesthetic expectations for fast-paced narratives.

In this regard, translation could be viewed as a process of cultural mediation rather than mechanical reproduction of the source text. The translator's intervention echoes the core issues of postmodern Translation Studies, demonstrating how narrative poetics and ideology subconsciously shape the translator's decisions and influence the narrative reconstruction of the target text. In the translation of Chinese ethnic minority literature, it is necessary to move beyond the binary stance of cultural conservatism or cultural compromise, dynamically examining the interaction between source and target narrative norms, and attempting to gradually integrate the narrative norms of the source world into those of the target world. This study reaffirms that academic attention to the interplay among the translator, the translated text, and ideology from the perspective of narrative poetics not only helps deepen the understanding of translation practice of Chinese ethnic minority literature but also provides new theoretical insights for Translation Studies.

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