

**TRANSLATED MEMORIES AND THE TRANSLATION OF MEMORIES: *AMULETO*,
FORMAS DE VOLVER A CASA AND THEIR CHINESE TRANSLATIONS**

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TRANSLATED MEMORIES AND THE TRANSLATION OF MEMORIES: *AMULETO*, *FORMAS DE VOLVER A CASA* AND THEIR CHINESE TRANSLATIONS

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Amuleto (1999) by Roberto Bolaño and *Formas de volver a casa* (2011) by Alejandro Zambra are two literary works that narrate traumatic experiences in Latin American history. Both narratives diverge from the testimonial and historical genres, diluting the borderline between the real and the fictional with nonlinear narrative and metafictional techniques. Memory is translated and reinterpreted in the narrative with a female voice, in the case of *Amuleto*, or from a child's perspective in *Formas de volver a casa*. The constant dialogues between individual memory and collective memory form a discourse against oblivion. In the light of previous studies of these two novels, I will analyze how Chinese translators deal with the cultural and linguistic distance between the source and target text, whereby traumatic memories pass through double prisms that refract both the author's poetics and Chinese translation norms.

The art of writing memories

The use of intertextuality as a literary device is prominent in the narration of *Formas de volver a casa*, where the author lists multiple references to songs and films that produce "un archivo mediático audiovisual, que permite construir la memoria de un sujeto que muchas veces aspira a confundirse con el autor a través de una estrategia autoficcional" (De los Ríos 146). The socio-historical context is constantly explained for readers, thus providing non-Latin American readers easier access to the text. At the linguistic level, Zambra employs a neutral Spanish with limited usage of localisms, which by some means lowers the level of difficulty

in terms of translation into other languages. In the Chinese translation of *Formas de volver a casa*, we shall see that words with socio-cultural connotations, though rare, fail to be reproduced.

In *Amuleto*, however, Bolaño invites readers to participate actively in rebuilding memories in order to establish his own poetics against the writing of an official story by providing “los referentes para que el lector reconozca inequívocamente el acto criminal aludido” (Ferrer 14). While Bolaño indicates the dates and places in which the events occur (1968, 1973), he avoids giving details on them or directly explaining the terror. Hence it is the duty of the reader, and not the writer or the translator, to interweave disorganized reminiscences and leaps through time and space. This feature of *Amuleto* allows readers with another background to approach the novel without hindrance and to develop a story of their own. The autofictional strategy in *Formas de volver a casa* also has similar effects. The narrator Auxilio uses a mixture of Latin American dialects (Uruguayan, Argentine and Mexican) in her monologue voice, thereby inscribing traumatic experiences of the Latin American continent that she has not personally experienced into her individual memory. The victims of Tlatelolco represent young Latin Americans who sacrificed their youth and life at a given moment in history (Álvarez 432-434).

The novel unfolds in first-person narration, with hallucinatory elements and memory lapses (Auxilio always mistakes the date). The self-diegetic narrator is presented through the repeated use of the pronoun “yo”: “[L]a insistencia del ‘yo’ permite que esta voz se esté actualizando constantemente [...] la voz de Auxilio nos alerta que contra el olvido debe lucharse en cada frase” (Álvarez 427). The pronoun works as an amulet against oblivion; Auxilio inserts it into the text with a repetitive sonority capable of producing a discursive effect of a narrator seeking to invoke their existence by linguistic repetition. In the last pages of the novel, this affirmation of testimonial character disappears: “y los oí cantar, los oigo cantar todavía [...] los oí cantar y me volví loca” (Bolaño 153), which presents “una distribución del pronombre ‘yo’ que coincide con el contraste inestabilidad versus certeza” (Álvarez 426). This resource is phonetically and morphologically feasible in the original Spanish text since Spanish usually omits the subject pronoun; this makes the repetition of “yo” striking and unusual, and then its absence enhances the effect. The difficulty of reproducing this distribution of verbal declinations is attributed to characteristic features of the Chinese language (perhaps also in other languages, such as German), which normally calls for a mandatory use of the pronoun for the lack of verbal conjugations.

Moreover, the visible repetition of “y” and “luego” at the beginning of paragraphs also formulates a coherent and natural oral narration, as if Auxilio were telling the story aloud in front of the audience or

readers. Unlike time markers, the continuous and neutral “y” connects the fragments of an uninterrupted speech that becomes a spectacle. The memory is thus presented through a voice that tries to remember the details. The continuous narration is also mingled from time to time with the use of more specific time markers. As a result, it creates a structure that breaks the linearity of time by expanding, contracting and fragmenting it. In the Chinese translation, the wave of events can still be recounted in disordered chronology without these markers, yet within Bolaño’s poetics. However, the repetition of “yo”, “y”, “luego”, “entonces” which functions as a punctuation in an integral structure, is inevitably lost in translation.

There are three phases in this “translation” procedure. First comes the transformation of memories into a literary creation of memory. Then, through a translation activity that implies a certain level of both individual and collective imagination among the translators (Raimondo), the original text is translated from one language, and from one sociocultural context, to another. Eventually comes the reception, which arises from the negotiation of diverse discourses that give translated texts and paratexts the authority to (re-)construct the image of the author and his / her works in the receiving context. In this particular case, on one hand, many Chinese publishers’ marketing strategies are consistent with the Western pattern, especially that of the U.S., whereby the figure of the author is placed in the center of attention; on the other hand, the depoliticized tendency that govern the Chinese reception of foreign literature tend to generalize and attenuate the violence that appears in Latin American narratives (Teng 178). Studying translated texts as the first reception of the original work allows us to glimpse how this general tendency leaves or does not leave an impact on the translator’s practice.

Gains and losses in word translation

In the following I will examine a few excerpts from the Chinese versions of these two novels, and especially the translation of words; as Walter Benjamin claimed, “words rather than sentences [tend] to be the primary element of the translator” (260).

ST: “No voy a vender la casa, no **incistas**, dice, y Claudia no puede creerlo: dice **incistas**, con c, realmente.” (Zambra 112)

TT: “我不会卖房子,你**别监持**。”珂罗蒂雅简直不敢相信:希美纳说“你**别‘监’持**, **监狱的监**。”(Tong 80)

(No voy a vender la casa, no **incistas** (jiānchí, insistir), dice. Claudia no lo puede creer: dice Ximena **incistas** (jiānchí), con “jiān” de “jiānyù” (cárcel).)

ST: “No voy a **insistir**, piensa Claudia: no tiene sentido insistir. En el fondo entiende que Ximena se aferre a la casa.” (Zambra 113)

TT: “我不会坚持的。”珂罗蒂雅想,“坚持也毫无意义。”她终于懂了,希美纳就是要守住那栋房子。”(Tong 80)

(No voy a insistir, piensa Claudia: no tiene sentido insistir. Ximena quiere defender la casa.)

There are several pairs of tensions in the novel that are related to the concept of “casa”: between the protagonist (both real and fictitious) and his parents’ home in which he grew up, between him and his former partner, and the complex relationship between Claudia and her sister that originates from ownership issues related to their old house. In the dialogue above, the “坚(jiān)” of “坚持(jiānchí)”, which is the initial character of the Chinese word “to insist” and the “监(jiān)” of “监狱(jiānyù)”, which means “jail” has the same pronunciation but a distinct figure. If Claudia’s return to Chile is an attempt to detach from her unpleasant memories, then the Chinese homophones create a wordplay effect, which makes the implication more explicit: Ximena is imprisoned by the house and the past.

ST: “No quiero hablar de inocencia ni de culpa; quiero nada más que iluminar algunos rincones, los rincones donde estábamos.”(Zambra 64)

TT: “我无意讨论孰是孰非,只想让我们曾经藏身的角落重见天日。”(Tong 41)

(No quiero hablar de **qué/quién es correcto y qué/quién no es**, solo quiero sacar a la luz el rincón donde nos habíamos escondido.)

With the use of an idiom comprised of four characters, “correct” and “incorrect” replace “guilt” and “innocence”. This shift in translation generalizes the sense of evaluation without reproducing a semantic association with crime; therefore it conceals, or attenuates the author’s tone of reflective nostalgia and his evaluative dilemma of the past, which is in fact the key cause of this generational tension. The judgment is already made, which influences the younger generation’s thinking about their parents. It is the central theme of the novel, in which the recent history of the country is involved. When the translator opts for this approach, it is probably not with the purpose of depoliticizing the text, but with the intention of forming a smoother sentence in Chinese that seems more literary than colloquial. This choice, however, externalizes the apolitical tendency in terms of translation and reception. It should be mentioned that this is not an isolated case; also the habit of using frequently four-character idioms in this Chinese version of *Formas de volver a casa* can somehow change the tone and rhythm of the original text, for example, the following citation is one of the most quoted ones among Chinese readers and also frequently appears in promotional texts of the novel.

ST: Mientras los adultos mataban o eran muertos, nosotros hacíamos dibujos en un rincón. Mientras el país se caía a pedazos nosotros aprendíamos a hablar, a caminar, a doblar las servilletas en forma de barcos, de aviones. (Zambra 56)

TT: 成人们互相残杀时，我们躲在角落里涂涂画画。这个国家土崩瓦解时，我们还在牙牙学语，蹒跚学步，叠着纸轮船和纸飞机。(Tong 34)

The Chinese translator uses five times the four-character idiom, which creates a flow of sounds in a continuous structure. This shift in translation extends the length of the text with superfluous description such as “牙牙 (yáyá, the onomatopoeia to represent babies’ sound when they start to learn how to speak)”, “蹒跚 (pánshān, to walk in an unsteady way)”, and “涂涂画画 (tútú huàhuà)”, a word in which all four characters have the same meaning of “paint”. The repetition in these idioms makes the narration more vivid and tender. However, the verbs in the original text have a direct and neat effect with the tone of a calm but sharp narrator. The intention here, as we have argued, is not to tune down the historical context in this novel, but probably in order to show a good command of Chinese language.

When translating *Amuleto*, Chinese translator might have faced his first challenge in the name of the heroine, Auxilio Lacouture. “Auxilio” meaning “help” or “assistance”, stands for central concepts of the novel, which begins with a quote from Petronius:

“Queríamos, pobres de nosotros, pedir **auxilio**; pero no había nadie para venir en nuestra ayuda.”

Auxilio’s French surname “Lacouture”, which can be read as “la couture”, is associated with meanings of “seam” or “sewing”, and also insinuates how the story is presented: fragments of the life of young Mexican poets wandering on the labyrinthine streets of Mexico City, where space and time are intertwined, all told from the perspective of Lacouture, whose memory stitches together state violence and individual experiences.

Auxilio Lacouture, “la amiga de todos los mexicanos”, “la madre de la poesía mexicana” (Bolaño 11), whose name symbolizes a refuge and also the absence of it, is herself a crucial symbol. It is possible that both “Auxilio” and “Lacouture” can transfer their connotations to European and American readers without losing validity. The Chinese language, however, does not share the etymological basis of Romance languages. Either a phonetic or a semantic translation will inevitably invoke losses, as in the following case:

ST: “Auxilio, Auxilio, Socorro, Amparo, Caridad, Remedios Lacouture” (Bolaño 61)

TT: “奥克西里奥!奥克西里奥!救人啊!救救奥克西里奥!” (Zhao 56)
(Aokexili’ao! Aokexili’ao! Socorro! Ayuda a Aokexili’ao! Ayuda a Aokexili’ao!)

Here Bolaño portrays a tense situation playing with the synonyms of “Auxilio”: relief, shelter, charity, remedies, the way that her friends Arturo and Julian call her when she is being persecuted by a man that wants her dead. Although the translation appears to be an error, a priori morphological differences make it impossible to recreate this wordplay in the Chinese text.

The semantic loss is more visible in the unsuccessful attempt to translate “intemperie”, a concept related to “help” that appears in an important paragraph in the novel:

ST: “¡Todos iban creciendo amparados por mi mirada! Es decir: todos iban creciendo en la **intemperie** mexicana, en la **intemperie** latinoamericana, que es la **intemperie** más grande porque es la más escindida y la más desesperada. Y mi mirada rielaba como la luna por aquella **intemperie**.” (Bolaño 43)

TT: “他们可都在我的关注下长大的啊!就是说都是在墨西哥的**风吹雨打** (viento y lluvia) 下、在拉丁美洲**气候的影响** (impacto del clima) 下长大的,这是最大的**气候影响** (impacto del clima),因为它是最分裂和最令人绝望的**气候影响** (impacto del clima)。我的目光在这样的**气候影响** (impacto del clima) 下像月光一样闪烁。” (Zhao 35)

“Intemperie” refers to an atmospheric condition: inclement weather that progressively affects places or objects that are not covered or under protection.¹ This word conveys “una reflexión desesperanzada [sobre] la derrota por lo menos a dos generaciones” (Manzoni 31) and represents the absence of a refuge (Long 135). The etymology of “intemperie” indicates that the word is related to the double references of the Spanish word “tiempo”, which contains both atmospheric and chronological denotations. The abstract concept, according to Long, corresponds to the author’s rejection of a linear chronology such as the text presents. It is obvious that the translation fails to express more than only one part of its connotations and is reduced to the meaning of “atmospheric impacts” (气候影响 qìhòu yǐngxiǎng) without indicating the helpless situation.

In many cases, translating requires a selection whereby the decision would exclude another dimension (or more). *Amuleto* is a novel that revolves around traumatic memories; hence the word “recuerdo” could be a vital one in the translation process.

ST: "Luego me desperté. Pensé: yo soy el **recuerdo**." (Bolaño 146)
 TT: "后来,我醒了。我想:我就是**一个纪念品**。" (Zhao 147)

The dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy defines "recuerdo" as the "memoria que se hace o aviso que se da de algo pasado o de que ya se habló", as well as the "objeto que se conserva para recordar a una persona, una circunstancia, un suceso".² This polysemy requires translators to choose between the abstract and the material aspect. It seems that the translation "纪念品 (jìniànpǐn, souvenir)" goes with the second one. Although connotations are usually assumed to be lost in translation, the composition of this word actually makes the polysemy possible in Chinese, since "纪念 (jìniàn)" means "to commemorate", and "品 (pǐn)" refers to an object. In this regard, the decision of not translating it as "memory" (which should be "记忆 (jìyì)" in Chinese) actually broadens the universe of interpretation. Auxilio perceives herself not as a dead memory that is sealed in the past, but as a stimulus that can provoke people into recalling what happened in those years. The heroine, as well as the novel itself, fulfills the function of re-opening a historical wound for the purpose of remembrance.

The translator's decision also consists in adding information, for instance, on how to orient readers who are not familiar with the foreign context. "Terror" is another essential concept of this novel; it refers explicitly to the Tlatelolco massacre and implicitly to other crimes that took place in Latin America. When Arturo Belano returns from his trip to Chile in early 1974 after Pinochet's coup d'état, he becomes another person that "en el fondo algo había cambiado o había crecido o había cambiado y crecido al mismo tiempo" (Bolaño 69). The author (or perhaps the Spanish editor) uses "Horror", with a capital "H" to allude to the atrocity that happened in Chile. Incapable of using the same resource with Chinese characters, the translator chooses to explain the "Horror" by translating it into "恐怖镇压 (kǒngbù zhènyā, terrible repression)" (Zhao 64). A textual comparison shows that the Chinese translation is in general quite faithful in this regard, trying to provide supplementary information by adding dates or footnotes as necessary in order to illuminate references and allusions.

The translation of words can reveal a translator's priorities, or sometimes their misinterpretation and lack of knowledge. As the above examples demonstrate, translating is not always about encountering constraints; it is also a creative process that can achieve an surprising amplifications of original meanings.

Last but not least, I would like to include a small discussion on translator's notes, which should be regarded as an integral part of the translation process. For some researchers, *Formas de volver a casa* "no debe

leerse como un gesto apolítico” (Logie and Willem 5), but the Chinese translator states that the book is “not a political work at all” (Tong 124, the translation is mine); she continues, “Although Chile is one of the most remote countries for China, this story is familiar to us”. If a traumatic past is not narrated in a “contiguous and agreeable” way, or if the story does not occur in an intimate, private and domestic atmosphere such as the book of Zambra, there tends to be a clear boundary in reception between two fractured worlds: the reader’s universe (Chinese society), and the circumstances where the text is produced (the Latin American continent). In his note, the Chinese translator of *Amuleto* points out the social and critical value of the works of Bolaño by emphasizing the correlation between the author’s personal experience and the broader social context (157-159). This stance is also reflected in his translation decisions. We can hereby recall what Octavio Paz once pondered in his famous article on literary translation as the end of this article: “the translator’s activity is no different from that of a reader or critic: each reading is a translation, and each criticism is, or begins as, an interpretation” (159).

NOTAS

1 “intemperie.” *es.oxforddictionaries.com*. Oxford dictionaries, 2017. Web. 30 April 2017.

2 “recuerdo.” *dle.rae.es*. Diccionario de la lengua española, 2017. Web. 8 May 2017.

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