

How Imagery Variation Influences the Effectiveness of Deliberate Metaphor in Translation¹

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Abstract: In metaphor translation, adjustments such as expansion, narrowing, refinement, or supplementary elaboration often occur to the source domain imagery, but the impact of these adjustments on the effectiveness of deliberate metaphors remains to be explored. Taking the cases of deliberate metaphors in the award-winning works of the “Mao Dun Literature Prize” as examples and based on Deliberate Metaphor Theory, this study analyzes the specific impact of the adjustment of source domain imagery on the effectiveness of deliberate metaphors. It finds that such adjustments, when aligned with the original metaphorical intent, preserve cognitive and rhetorical effectiveness while reducing the difficulty of target-readers’ comprehension. The research shows that deliberate metaphor translation emphasizes communicative and cognitive fidelity over literal equivalence and demonstrates that purposeful imagery adjustments facilitate cross-cultural metaphor identification without compromising the effectiveness of deliberate metaphor.

Keywords: deliberate metaphor, Deliberate Metaphor Theory, imagery variation, translation effectiveness, metaphor translation

CLC: H059

Document Code: A

Article ID: 2096-4374(2026)01-0043-11

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202601004

1. Introduction

Metaphor translation has long been a focus in translation studies, and scholars have proposed various strategies including strict literal rendering, substitution, and paraphrase. However, this research has mainly focused on lexical, semantic, or cultural equivalence, and the cognitive and communicative effectiveness of metaphors in the target language is seldom explored. The proposal of Deliberate Metaphor Theory (Steen, “Paradox”) offers a new perspective, as it shifts attention from metaphor as a mere linguistic device to metaphor as a purposeful tool used by language producers to guide the receiver’s perspective and reasoning.

In literary translation, metaphors, which often carry deliberate rhetorical intent, sometimes experience the adaptation of source domain imagery, such as expansion, narrowing, refinement, or supplementary elaboration. It raises an important question about how such changes affect the intended metaphorical effect. Taking the cases of deliberate metaphors in Chinese literary works of the Mao Dun Literature Prize and their English translations as examples, this study examines the relationship between imagery variation and the preservation of deliberate metaphorical effectiveness. It aims to explore how imagery expansion, narrowing, refinement, and supplementary elaboration affect the effectiveness of deliberate metaphor. The paper first reviews Deliberate Metaphor Theory and metaphor translation strategies, then presents a comparative case analysis, and finally discusses the implications for translation practice.

2. Deliberate Metaphor

“Deliberate Metaphor” (DM) was first proposed by Gerard Steen in 2008. Around the time Steen introduced this concept, other scholars (Shen and Balaban; Cameron; Charteris-Black and Musolff; Semino) had put forward similar ideas. For instance, Jonathan Charteris-Black referred to metaphors used with specific intentions as “purposeful metaphors.”

Deliberate metaphor (Steen; Reijnierse et al.; Cuccio and Steen) refers to the deliberate use of a metaphor by the metaphor producer to influence the metaphor receiver to adopt the same perspective for cross-domain mapping. Steen proposed that when a metaphor producer attempts to change the receiver’s perspective through a metaphor, making them notice the heterogeneity of the source domain and understand the target domain from the metaphorical perspective, then it is a deliberate metaphor (“Paradox” 223). Traditional metaphors are often based on the correlations we perceive in our experiences (Lakoff and Johnson). However, Steen believes that deliberate metaphors are different from traditional metaphors in that the speaker and the listener, or the author and the reader, can tacitly recognize these deliberate metaphors when participating in a conversation containing metaphors (“Paradox”). Deliberate metaphors can change the perspective in ongoing discourse by awakening different conceptual domains as foreign reference objects, and their use can also be influenced by the local style of the discourse.

Compared with non-deliberate metaphors, the source domain concept of deliberate metaphors plays an important role in discourse. The metaphor producer intentionally draws the receiver’s attention to the source domain concept (Reijnierse et al.) and uses it to explain the content of the target domain. The source domain concept often contains images, such as “Juliet is the sun,” which introduces the source domain image “the sun” to present the image characteristics of “Juliet” to the reader, expressing that Juliet is like the sun, warming Romeo. “The sun” has common characteristics in different cultures, so such source domain images can be directly transplanted into the target text in translation. However, deliberate metaphors often undergo image adjustments during translation, including expansion, narrowing, and refinement of the image range, as well as supplementary elaboration. The difference between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphors is that deliberate metaphors draw the receiver’s attention to the source domain concept, which often contains images. If the content of this image changes, it is unknown whether the meaning and effectiveness of the deliberate metaphor will be affected. Taking cases drawn from Mao Dun

Literature Award-winning works, this paper will explore how adjusting the source domain image of deliberate metaphors in translation will affect their meaning and effectiveness, and whether the adjusted or replaced images still have the function and effectiveness of explaining the concept of the target domain in the target text.

3. Metaphor Translation

Metaphor translation research emerged in the 1970s. R. van den Broeck (77) listed three possibilities for metaphor translation: 1) “strict” translation (i.e., converting both the referent and the signifier of the source language into the target language); 2) substitution (replacing the signifier of the source language with a different signifier in the target language, while the referents of the source and target languages are almost the same); and 3) paraphrase (expressing the metaphor in the source language with non-metaphorical expressions in the target language). Peter Newmark (87–91) proposed seven strategies for metaphor translation: 1) replicating the same image in the target language; 2) replacing the image in the source language with a standard image in the target language that does not conflict with the target language culture; 3) translating the metaphor into a simile while retaining the image—Newmark believed that this method could mitigate the impact caused by the metaphor; 4) translating the metaphor (or simile) into a simile plus meaning (sometimes a metaphor plus meaning)—Newmark suggested using this compromise solution to avoid comprehension problems, however, this method may result in the loss of the expected metaphorical effectiveness; 5) converting the metaphor into meaning—this method is recommended when the range of the target language image is too broad or inappropriate for the register, however, some emotional color may be lost; 6) deleting the metaphor if it is redundant; and 7) combining the same metaphor with meaning to enhance the image. These methods are ranked in order of priority. Based on the seven metaphor translation methods proposed by Newmark and the two additional cases added by Gideon Toury (81), Karen Sullivan and Elena Bandín proposed ten methods for metaphor translation, including “replacing the source domain and reproducing the target domain” and “replacing both the source and target domains” (183).

Ernst-Norbert Kurth studied the translation of metaphors in literary works between English and German and summarized nine translation methods: “deletion, demetaphorization, partial deletion, weakening, attachment, strengthening, image displacement, neometaphorization, and refinement” (19). The “substitution” strategy proposed by van den Broeck and Newmark, as well as the “weakening, strengthening, image displacement, neometaphorization, and refinement” proposed by Kurth, all involve adjustments to the source domain image.

Scholars have described various strategies for metaphor translation, but it is unknown whether the adjustment of the source domain image will affect the intended metaphorical effectiveness. This study uses a metaphor identification procedure (Yu and Lu) to identify and deconstruct the intended metaphors in the source and target texts, and analyzes the relationship between the changes in the image during translation and the intended metaphorical effectiveness.

4. The Impact of Imagery Variation on the Effectiveness of Deliberate Metaphor in Translation

The images in the source domain of deliberate metaphor are often an important element for transferring the meaning and effectiveness of the metaphor. These images either express the nature of the target domain at the conceptual level or construct the image of the target domain at the visual level. Images can be either real substances existing in nature or virtual things that can be imagined, and they can be large or small. During the translation of deliberate metaphor from the source text to the target text, the size or scope of the source domain images often changes. It is unknown whether the changes in the size of the image influence the essence and effectiveness of the deliberate metaphor. Take the following cases for instance:

Example 1

ST: 要是在太平盛世，这人心因着礼法的约束，受着教化的熏染，仿佛人人都可致身尧舜；可一逢乱世，还是这些人，心里的所有的脏东西都像是疮疗丹毒一般发作出来，尧舜也可以变作畜生，行那鬼魅禽兽之事。(Ge 132)

(Literal translation: In times of peace and prosperity, human hearts, restrained by rituals and nurtured by education, seem capable of aspiring to the virtues of legendary sage-kings like Yao and Shun. Yet, in times of chaos and turmoil, these very same individuals may find the filth within their hearts erupting like boils and toxins, transforming even Yao or Shun into beasts capable of committing acts as vile as those of ghosts, beasts, or monsters.)

TT: When the world is at peace, the human heart accepts the restraints of law and morality, becoming civilized through education, as if anyone could stand side by side with the Sage Emperors. But once chaos takes over, the bad spots in the hearts of those very same people burst like infected lesions, and even a Sage King can turn into an animal and do beastly things. (Ge [trans.] 180)

Example 1 contains two clear markers of deliberate metaphor, “仿佛” (as if) and “像” (like), which form two metaphorical mappings, “人人是尧舜” (everyone is Yao and Shun) and “脏东西是疮疗丹毒” (filth is boils and toxins). “变作畜生” (transform into beasts), “行那鬼魅禽兽之事” (commit vile acts), and “发作” (erupting) are the extensions of the above two mappings. The source domains “尧舜” (Yao and Shun) and “疮疗丹毒” (boils and toxins) are related and integrated conceptually, which map onto the target domains “人人” (everyone) and “脏东西” (filth). “There’s something dirty in people’s hearts or minds” is compared to “the boils and toxins of a sage erupting.” In the source text, Yao and Shun refers to ancient sage rulers or saints. The translator adapts this culturally specific expression into “the Sage Emperors” (plural, sages in general) and “a Sage King” (singular, a specific ruler). This adjustment using singular or plural forms clarifies the scope of the imagery and reduces cultural barriers. It shows the flexibility of adapting deliberate metaphor imagery in translation. The following parts will explore how expanding, narrowing, or refining such imagery influences metaphorical meaning and effectiveness.

4.1 Imagery Expansion in Deliberate Metaphor Translation

In the translation of deliberate metaphors, there are cases where the scope of imagery is expanded. Take the following examples for instance:

Example 2

ST: 镇上是庙小妖风大啊。特别是近几年来搞大民主, 就鲤鱼、鳊鱼、跳虾都浮了头……
(Gu 151)

(Literal translation: This town is a small temple with fierce evil winds. Especially in recent years, with the so-called “expanding democracy,” all sorts of creatures—carp, bighead fish, and skipping shrimp—have surfaced …)

TT: There’s an ill wind blowing through Hibiscus. The last few years, all sorts of strange fish have surfaced. (Gu [trans.] 168)

In Example 2, the source text employs metaphorical terms such as “鲤鱼、鳊鱼、跳虾” (carp, bighead carp, and shrimp) and “浮了头” (surfaced) (with content preceding the first period treated as background and excluded from analysis). Contextual analysis reveals a metaphorical mapping: “敌对分子是鱼” (hostile elements are fish)—“鱼浮了头” (fish surface)—and “敌对分子出现” (hostile elements emerge). The phrase “浮了头” (surfaced) extends the source domain, which forms an extended metaphor structure. The source domain consists of multiple conceptually similar entities, all aquatic creatures, which are translated in the target text as “all sorts of strange fish.” This translation which generalizes the original specific imagery significantly broadens its scope. However, the functional role of the source domain remains unchanged. The addition of the modifier “strange” not only expands the imagery but also introduces a qualitative judgment that is absent in the source text. Rather than expanding the source domain without discrimination, the translation adopts a generalized conceptual approach by replacing specificity with broader symbolic meanings. Although the scale of imagery is changed, the fundamental nature of the metaphor and the deliberate intent of the producer are preserved. The translation maintains the cognitive and rhetorical effectiveness of the original metaphor.

Example 3

ST: 今天走了一天的路, 累得像死狗一样。(Ge 60)

(Literal translation: Today I walked all day, tired like a dead dog.)

TT: I’m as tired as a dog. (Ge [trans.] 82)

Example 4

ST: 虎豹相伤, 苦了小獐。(Ge 131)

(Literal translation: When tiger and leopard fight, the young muntjac suffers.)

TT: when the big cats fight, the little deer die (Ge [trans.] 179)

In Example 3, the source text “累得像死狗” (tired like a dead dog) is translated into “as tired as a dog” in the target text. This adaptation is due to the conventional expression in the target language, where the common equivalent is either “as tired as a dog” or “dog-tired.” During the translation process, the source domain “死狗” (dead dog) is translated simply as “dog” in the target text. This causes an expansion of the imagery scope in the source domain, as the specific notion of “dead dog” is generalized to the broader concept of “dog.” The expansion of the source domain imagery is mainly driven by the linguistic conventions and idiomatic usage in the target language, rather than a deliberate change of the original metaphor. The translation maintains the key semantic function of expressing extreme fatigue at the same time it adapts to the natural

phrasing in the target language.

In Example 4, the idiom “虎豹相伤，苦了小獐，” or “龙斗虎伤，苦了小獐” (When dragon and tiger fight, the small muntjac suffers), contains two metaphorical mappings, which are “强大者是虎豹” (the powerful are tigers/leopards) and “弱小者是小獐” (the vulnerable are small muntjacs). The comparison between the source domains “虎豹” with “小獐” (“tigers/leopards” with “muntjac”) maps onto the target domains “强大者” with “弱小者” (“the powerful” with “the weak”). It forms a conceptual blended metaphor which indicates “when powerful forces clash, the weak suffer.” The target text translates “虎豹” (tigers and leopards) as “the big cats” (a broader term including lions, tigers, and leopards) and “獐” (muntjac, a small deer species) as “deer” (a general term). This expands the imagery scope but retains the key metaphorical structure. The translation gives priority to conciseness and the symmetry of rhythm, for “the big cats” and “little deer” each consist of five syllables, which retains the balance and brevity of the source text. By using generalized terms, the translation preserves the metaphorical intent and overall effectiveness without distorting the original meaning.

The analysis of the above examples shows even when the imagery of the source domain is expanded in deliberate metaphor translation, the metaphorical mapping and the producer’s intended rhetorical-cognitive effectiveness remain unchanged. Imagery expansion happens in several different ways. Culturally specific or contextually narrow items are generalized to broader categories, such as when “carp, bighead carp, and shrimp” are translated into “all sorts of strange fish,” or when “tiger and leopard” are changed to “big cats.” Idiomatic conventions in the target language may motivate expansion, such as converting “dead dog” into “dog” to conform to the conventional English expression “tired as a dog.” In spite of these changes, the deliberate nature of the metaphor is preserved because the source domain continues to fulfill its function of guiding the reader’s perspective and facilitating cross-domain mapping. Expansion can also serve additional translational purposes, as it enhances conciseness, improves rhythmic flow, reduces cultural opacity, and sometimes introduces a qualitative nuance (e.g., “strange fish”). Expansion does not change the metaphor’s deliberateness. It adapts the imagery to the target audience’s cognitive environment and keeps the metaphorical intention unchanged. Therefore, imagery expansion is a valid and effective strategy in deliberate metaphor translation, on the condition that the fundamental relationship between source and target domains is retained.

4.2 Narrowing and Refinement of Imagery in Deliberate Metaphor Translation

During analyzing the bilingual parallel corpus of deliberate metaphors in award-winning works of the Mao Dun Literature Prize, it was found that the more frequent phenomenon in the translation process is the narrowing and refinement of the source domain imagery. Take the following examples for instance:

Example 5

ST: 虽然我没有被枪击中，但我也像是父亲手中的一件猎物，毫无生气。(Chi 41)

(Literal translation: Although I haven’t been shot, I am like prey in my father’s hands, lifeless.)

TT: Even though a bullet hadn’t struck me, I was lifeless like the *kandahang*. (Chi [trans.] 51)

In Example 5, the metaphorical mapping in the source text is “我 是 猎 物” (I am prey),

while the target text changes it into “I am the *kandahang*.” Both mappings come from the same conceptual metaphor “people are animals,” which preserves the original metaphorical mapping. However, the source domain concept “猎物” (prey, a broad category) is narrowed in the target text to “the *kandahang*” (referring specifically to the large-sized *kandahang* moose hunted by the Ewenki people). Based on the local context, the phrase “父亲手中的一件猎物” (prey in my father’s hands) clearly refers to the *kandahang* moose they had just hunted. The image narrowing of the source domain gives more specific detail in the situational context. While the translation may appear unfaithful to the literal wording on the surface, it achieves deeper fidelity to the specific context and intended meaning.

Example 6

ST: 身上布满了铜钱大小的烙痕，就如出了天花一般。(Ge 136)

(Literal translation: Her body was covered with brand marks the size of copper coins, as if she had smallpox.)

TT: Burns the size of copper coins dappled her flesh like smallpox lesions. (Ge [trans.] 186)

Example 7

ST: 他抱着一棵桦树或杨树，歪着头啃树皮的样子，很像一只小羊。(Chi 232)

(Literal translation: He hugged a birch or poplar tree, tilting his head to gnaw at the bark, looking very much like a lamb.)

TT: He grasped the trunk of a birch or poplar, tilted his head and gnawed on the bark like a young mountain goat. (Chi [trans.] 291)

Example 8

ST: 他平躺在床上，身体绷得紧紧的，像一张弓。(Ge 200)

(Literal translation: He lay flat on the bed, his body stretched taut, like a bow.)

TT: He lay flat on the bed, his whole body as taut as a bowstring. (Ge [trans.] 268)

Example 9

ST: 谢了顶的额头油光发亮，脸上的皱纹像干果一样堆挤在一起。(Ge 93)

(Literal translation: His balding forehead gleamed with an oily sheen, and the wrinkles on his face crowded together like dried fruit.)

TT: [...] his face was covered with wrinkles, like a dried apricot. (Ge [trans.] 129)

Examples 6–9 each contain a deliberate metaphor marker and a pair of metaphorical mappings, which are “烙痕是天花” (brand marks are smallpox scars), “他是小羊” (he is a lamb), “身体是一张弓” (his body is a bow), and “皱纹是干果” (wrinkles are dried fruit). All of these are instances of individual deliberate metaphors which are characterized by their emphasis on the visual effect of the source domain imagery. In the target texts, the imagery experiences different degrees of narrowing and refinement:

Example 6: “天花” (smallpox)—“smallpox lesions” (enhancing visual similarity to scarred textures)

Example 7: “羊” (lamb)—“mountain goat” (matching the contextual action of gnawing bark)

Example 8: “弓” (bow)—“bowstring” (emphasizing tautness and tension)

Example 9: “干果” (dried fruit)—“dried apricot” (specifying wrinkled texture resemblance)

These refinements occur because of the following different reasons: 1) the translated imagery strengthens visual similarities (e.g., brand marks and smallpox lesions share textured scarring); 2) contextual behavior informs choices (e.g., mountain goats commonly gnaw bark, but lambs don’t); 3) physical attributes are heightened (e.g., bowstring evokes tightness more directly than “bow”); and 4) cultural-visual specificity helps comprehension (e.g., dried apricot specifically illustrates wrinkled textures).

The analysis of Examples 5–9 shows that narrowing and refinement of source domain imagery are frequent in the translation of deliberate metaphor, and they can enhance rather than weaken metaphorical effectiveness. Different from expansion, which generalizes imagery, refinement specifies it by replacing a broader source domain concept with a more precise, contextually appropriate one. This specification strengthens the visual or conceptual connection between source and target domains, for example when “prey” becomes “*kandahang*,” “lamb” becomes “mountain goat,” and “dried fruit” becomes “dried apricot.” Such adjustments increase perceptual similarity, reduce ambiguity, and facilitate metaphorical mapping for the target readers. The refinement does not change the metaphorical deliberateness or the underlying conceptual mapping. Instead, it improves comprehensibility and cognitive accessibility, especially when the original imagery is unclear in culture or context. Narrowing and refinement is a deliberate strategy that values functional precision rather than literal fidelity, which supports the communicative goals of deliberate metaphor in translation.

4.3 Supplementary Elaboration of Imagery in Deliberate Metaphor Translation

In the translation of deliberate metaphors, imagery may not only be expanded or reduced but is often supplemented with additional explanations to facilitate target-text readers’ identification and comprehension. Translators frequently employ the strategy of explicating imagery within deliberate metaphors to draw the readers’ attention to the source domain and enhance clarity. Take the following cases:

Example 10

ST: 从来只将鬼神当成笑谈的张英才，下意识地一把搂住孙四海的腰。孙四海也没有沉住气，同样一把搂住余校长的腰。就像学生们在玩老鹰捉小鸡的游戏。(Liu 37)

(Literal translation: Zhang Yingcai, who had always treated ghosts and gods as a laughing matter, subconsciously grabbed Sun Sihai’s waist. Sun Sihai, equally unable to keep calm, similarly grabbed Principal Yu’s waist. Just like students playing the game of “eagle catches chicks.”)

TT: Yingcai, [who] had always mocked the superstitious, found himself wrapping his arms around Sun Sihai. Sun Sihai also lost his cool, and wrapped his arms around Principal Yu. They looked like children playing the schoolyard game of defending each other from attacking “eagles.” (Liu [trans.] 51)

Example 11

ST: 蓝小梅像挑西瓜那样，一边摸着他们的小脑袋，一边要他们报告余校长，有贵客来

了。(Liu 206)

(Literal translation: Lan Xiaomei, as if selecting watermelons, touched their small heads while asking them to report to Principal Yu that a distinguished guest had arrived.)

TT: She stroked each of their small faces in turn, as if trying to choose the ripest watermelon in the market, then asked them to tell Principal Yu that an honored guest had arrived. (Liu [trans.] 249)

Example 12

ST: “你家出了个田螺姑娘!” (Liu 135)

(Literal translation: There’s a River Snail Maiden in your family!)

TT: “There’s a snail maiden cleaning your house.” (Liu [trans.] 161)

In Example 10, the metaphorical mapping “老师是学生” (teachers are students; specifically, teachers grabbing each other’s waists are similar to students playing “eagle catches chicks”) is retained in the target text. The addition of “schoolyard” in the target text clarifies the game’s nature and physical context. In Example 11, the mapping “脑袋是西瓜” (heads are watermelons; with the action of touching children’s heads compared to selecting watermelons) is preserved, while the descriptive expressions “the ripest” and the setting “in the market” are added to enhance visual specificity. In Example 12, the mapping “他老婆是田螺姑娘” (his wife is the River Snail Maiden, a figure from Chinese folklore recorded in 搜神后记 [*Soushen Houji*; *Further Anecdotes about Spirits and Immortals*], in which a divine maiden secretly assists a virtuous man) is reproduced. However, due to the absence of this cultural reference in the target language, the translation adds “cleaning your house” to explicate the Maiden’s role, enabling readers to establish the metaphorical connection without prior contextual knowledge. In the above examples, the core mappings remain the same, and contextual additions are used to facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

In Examples 10, 11, and 12, the target text not only retains the metaphorical mapping relationship in the source text, but also provides explanatory supplements to the source domain. These supplements include clarifying the nature of the source domain content, specifying the environment in which the source domain activities occur, and detailing the actions related to the source domain. By adding these details to the source domain, the translation enhances the clarity of its meaning, characteristics, and context. This approach helps the readers of the target text establish a metaphorical connection between the source domain and the target domain. By highlighting the relevant information of the source domain, the deliberate metaphors in the target text can draw more attention from the reader.

According to Deliberate Metaphor Theory, increased attention to the source domain enhances the deliberate effectiveness of the metaphor. Therefore, supplementary elaboration not only preserves the original metaphor’s impact but can also strengthen it by improving clarity and facilitating cross-domain mapping. This finding suggests that in deliberate metaphor translation, explanatory additions are effective adaptations that respect both the producer’s intention and the receiver’s cognitive needs.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the influence of image adjustment on the effectiveness of deliberate metaphor in translation. In deliberate metaphor translation, the images in the source domain of the original text may be expanded, narrowed, refined, or supplemented with explanatory content. As long as these changes are consistent with the intentions of the metaphor producers in the source text, the metaphor mapping will not be changed, and the effectiveness of the deliberate metaphor will not be affected. On the contrary, such adjustments help the target audience identify and understand the metaphor, help bridge language and cultural differences, and enable the readers of the target text to establish metaphor mapping in their mental space. Although the effectiveness of the metaphor remains unchanged, the difficulty of identifying and understanding deliberate metaphors is reduced.

This study shows that when translators deal with metaphor images, they should not only consider linguistic expressions, but more importantly, consider the expected effectiveness of the metaphor and the communicative purpose of the producer. The latter two aspects are of greater significance. The effect reflects the metaphorical nature of the deliberate metaphor, and the intention reflects its deliberate nature. In the three-dimension “language-cognition-communication” analysis of deliberate metaphor, the cognitive and communicative dimensions should also be taken into account. Linguistic equivalence is not the key factor determining the success of deliberate metaphor translation.

Note

1. This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (Major Project No. 20&ZD287: “Compilation and Research of Documents on the Overseas Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature [1949–2019]”) and the Ministry of Education of China’s Major Research Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences (Project No. 21JZD051: “Research on Chinese Discourse and Image in Overseas Chinese Literary Criticism since the 20th Century”).

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