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Is “Seven Sisters” Mistranslation of “^{liù gè jiě jie}六个姐姐”?—A Second Defense of Howard Goldblatt’s “Seven Sisters”

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ABSTRACT

In the context of “Chinese-Cultures-Go-Global,” effectively communicating Chinese culture to the world has become a significant challenge. Numbers in literary and cultural texts are not merely quantitative markers but carriers of emotions, thoughts, and cognitive connotations, making the translation of numbers an increasingly important area of focus. Drawing on the prototype theory in cognitive linguistics, with an empirical survey, this paper offers an additional defense of Howard Goldblatt’s translation of “^{liù gè jiě jie}六个姐姐” as “seven sisters”. First, the paper explores and explains the rationale behind Goldblatt’s choice of “seven sisters,” arguing that “seven sisters” is more typical than “six sisters” because it embodies more core features of the source text, while the latter exhibits more peripheral ones of the source text. Second, the paper proposes a new standard for evaluating a literary translation: The core feature—fidelity to the source text—takes precedence over other factors; diversified versions of translations (i.e., “seven sisters” and “six sisters”) belong to a family category of varied versions of the original. Evaluating the versions requires balancing core and peripheral features rather than solely emphasizing fuzzy fidelity to the original, which is adhered to by traditional translation studies, and the assessment of literary translation becomes more objective than before. By conducting a

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comparative analysis of the cultural connotations and cognitive characteristics of the source and target texts, this paper not only defends Goldblatt's translation choice but also provides new theoretical supports for translating numbers in literary texts and a new literary translation standard. It is both realistic and valuable for literary translation studies as well as constructive to cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Mistranslation; Prototype Theory; Core Feature; Peripheral Feature; Core-Feature-Fidelity; Howard Goldblatt

1. Introduction

Shifts between typologically distinct languages (e.g., Chinese and English) remain a core challenge in literary translation, as they hinder “idealized translation”—no version can fully convey a source text's (ST) denotative meaning and cultural connotation, the two traditional translation evaluation dimensions. Translators, akin to tightrope walkers, strive to balance these two; neglecting cultural connotation not only fails cross-cultural communication goals but also undermines the ST's aesthetic function. Thus, cultural adaptation in the target text (TT) is essential to achieve translational objectives.

Howard Goldblatt, a pivotal figure in Sino-American cultural exchange, has drawn extensive scholarly attention for his contributions to promoting modern Chinese literature globally^[1]. However, his rendering of “六个姐姐 (liù gè jiě jie)” in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan as “seven sisters” has been criticized as inaccurate or a mistranslation, with little exploration of its underlying rationale—leaving unresolved questions about his choice.

Against this backdrop, this paper, grounded on the prototype theory in cognitive linguistics, addresses two core questions: 1) the feasibility and rationale for Goldblatt's “six sisters”→“seven sisters” translation; 2) a proposed new literary translation standard. It is hoped that this case study offers theoretical and practical insights for Chinese-English/English-Chinese literary translation, particularly in the context of “Chinese-Cultures-Go-Global,” making its significance extend beyond the case exploration itself.

2. Locating the Problem

To make the defense more understandable and clear, the author aims to first clarify the issue—ensuring its validity. According to a paper titled “Sailing with Borrowed

Sails: Further Exploring Howard Goldblatt's Misinterpretations” published in the journal of *Foreign Language and Literature*, co-authors of the paper, Professors Zhu Zhenwu and Qin Airong^[2], declare that Howard Goldblatt has mistranslated “六个姐姐” into “seven sisters” in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips: A Novel*, which was originally written by the Chinese writer Mo Yan, the Nobel Prize winner in 2012. To confirm their claims, the author of the paper, Wensheng Deng, has delved into the ST and the TT, respectively, and consequently found that there are three instances of mentioning “六个姐姐” in the ST, and three times it was translated into “seven sisters” indeed. To see the issue more objectively, he cites one of the original excerpts from the novel as follows:

E.g.1. 母亲抱着我，带着我的六个姐姐 (the author's emphasis), 跳下萝卜窖子，在黑暗潮湿阴冷中爬行一段，进入宽阔之地，母亲点燃了豆油灯 (the author's emphasis)^[3]

Howard Goldblatt's translation of the above-quoted original into English reads as follows:

Version 1. ...with me in her arms, Mother led my seven sisters (the author's emphasis) down into the turnip cellar, crawling through the dark, dank tunnel until we emerged into a wider space, where Mother lit an oil lantern (the author's emphasis)^[4].

Currently, it has been confirmed that Howard Goldblatt translated “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters” in his novel translation. This rendering has sparked debates and discussions within the Chinese translation studies community. Generally, the mainstream academic community in translation studies considers it a case of mistranslation. Some scholars, such as Professors Zhu Zhenwu and Qin Airong, have argued that Goldblatt clearly mistranslated the original term “六个姐姐” into “seven sisters”. In this regard, there are two opposing schools of thought concerning

Goldblatt's translation: critics of the translation denounce it as inaccurate and unacceptable, while proponents hold the opposite view.

However, Howard Goldblatt, as a translator and sinologist with a Ph.D. in Chinese literature, it seems unlikely that a translator of his expertise would fail to recognize the difference between the numbers 6 and 7 in the original Chinese text. Undoubtedly, it is improbable that any translator, especially one with his level of Chinese expertise, would make such a fundamental error. But, literally speaking, Howard Goldblatt seemingly has made the so-called mistranslation.

Wensheng Deng, as a supporter of Howard Goldblatt, argued that "seven sisters" is not a mistranslation of "六个姐姐", and made his first defence of Goldblatt. He has published a paper in the journal *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*^[5]. In the paper, he presented his first defence of Howard Goldblatt's translation, based on five dimensions given below: First, Connotative and associative meaning match. He claimed that "seven" in English carries similar connotations of abundance and holiness to those of "六" in Chinese, a number traditionally associated with completeness, security, and luck in Chinese culture, and it conveys the hidden meanings of "六个姐姐" instead of merely adhering to the literal number. Second, the spiritual similarity principle. "Seven sisters" better satisfies the principle of spiritual similarity in literary translation from the traditional views of translation studies than "six sisters" does in English. Third, cognitive equivalence. From the perspective of cognitive translation studies, "seven sisters" enables English readers to have a cognitive experience similar to Chinese readers' perception of "completeness, luck" or "a large family with many children", while "six sisters" is less likely to evoke such associations. Fourth, optimal choice in cognitive psychology. Based on cognitive psychology theory, English readers are more familiar with the cultural symbol of "seven", and "seven sisters" can reduce comprehension effort and is a choice consistent with readers' psychological acceptance mechanism, while "six sisters" may increase readers' cognitive load. Fifth, functional equivalence. According to Nida's "functional equivalence" theory, "seven sisters" better undertakes the emotional function (reflecting the Mother's concern) and the poetic function (creating a literary scene) of "六个姐

姐", as it evokes the same sense of family warmth as "六个姐姐" does for Chinese readers, meeting the functional needs of literary texts. The defense is multi-dimensional, but none of its arguments is examined in depth. What's more, the paper did not employ the prototype theory in linguistics as a guide. After four years, he further discovers new evidence regarding the translation of "seven sisters," which is the prototype theory in cognitive linguistics. Consequently, he thinks it necessary to provide a second defense of the translation.

In the scholarly discourse addressing the controversy over Howard Goldblatt's rendering of "六个姐姐" (liù gè jiějie, literally "six elder sisters") into "seven sisters," the renewed defense of this translation choice exhibits distinctiveness and novelty across three dimensions: theoretical framework, methodological design, and practical application.

First, from a theoretical standpoint, prior defenses of this translation predominantly remained at the qualitative assertion of "non-mistranslation" and failed to provide a systematic account of its rationale. The integration of Prototype Theory (PT) with the second defense, however, addresses this gap. PT explicitly demonstrates that the core semantic value of "六个姐姐" resides in the essential meaning of the ST rather than the superficial numerical reference to "six." By contrast, "seven sisters" better aligns with the cognitive prototype of English-speaking readers regarding a "complete" kinship group, thereby achieving deep-level fidelity to the ST's core attributes. This theoretical advancement elevates the defense paradigm from the "passive refutation" characteristic of the initial defense to the "active justification of rationality" in the second iteration.

Second, methodologically, the first defense relied heavily on deductive reasoning, lacking empirical validation—a limitation that constrained its external validity and persuasive power. In contrast, the second defense employs empirical methodologies, such as cognitive surveys administered to native English readers, to empirically verify the efficacy of "seven sisters" in transmitting the ST's "core meaning." This methodological shift transforms the argumentative basis from "logical self-consistency" to "data-driven corroboration," substantially enhancing the credibility of the conclusions drawn.

Third, the second defense prioritizes the application of its novel insights to two interrelated domains: literary translation evaluation and cross-cultural communication studies of Chinese-English. This applied orientation not only offers a paradigmatic alternative for the field of translation studies—facilitating the dissolution of the rigid epistemological assumption that “formal equivalence equates to fidelity” and advancing theoretical inquiries into “cultural cognition and meaning reconstruction”—but also delineates a cross-cultural transmission pathway for “conveying core attributes” in Chinese literary works. Consequently, it mitigates the loss of cultural connotations that often results from rigid literal translation practices.

3. Literature Review and Methodology

3.1. Literature Review on H. Goldblatt: Gaps in Number Translation and Prototype Theory Application

Spanning from 2012 to August 2025, a systematic search on CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) has identified 1,545 academic papers and six monographs that have been devoted to Howard Goldblatt’s translation work^[6]. Among them, there are six papers applying related theories of cognitive linguistics to the studies. Three of them are based on the construal theory to explore Howard Goldblatt’s translation. Wang Yin examines the deviation phenomena in Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of Mo Yan’s *Sandalwood Death*^[7]. Luan & Lu analyze the construal interpretation and reconstruction of culture-specific words in Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of Mo Yan’s *Frog*, and explore the translator’s cognitive mode^[8]. Xia analyzes the lexical mistranslation phenomena in Howard Goldblatt’s English translation of Xiao Hong’s *The Biography of Hulan River*^[9]. The other two papers, by Liang Xiaohui and Chen Lu, respectively, are devoted to the translation based on the conceptual metaphor theory^[10,11]. One paper, co-authored by Chen Zhaorui and Aaliya Aini, which is based on the core principle of “reality-cognition-language” in embodied translation studies, interprets the embodied process of Howard Goldblatt’s translation of local dialects in *Frog*^[12]. Among the literature, none of them on Goldblatt’s translation has

specifically focused on his number translation, nor has any study adopted the prototype theory as its analytical framework.

According to the latest literature review conducted on CNKI up to August 12, 2025, only Wensheng Deng has published a paper exploring Goldblatt’s number translations. In this paper, he defends Goldblatt’s rendering of “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters”, though he also does not employ the prototype theory in his analysis^[5]. However, despite the extensive research on Goldblatt’s translation work, a notable gap remains unexplored: no existing study has adopted the prototype theory as its primary analytical framework, nor has any focused specifically on Goldblatt’s number translation—whether in China or abroad. And this research on the gap is significant because the oft-quoted numbers in Mo Yan’s works and other literary works, for instance, “three”, “seven”, “six” and “twelve”, embody a kind of rich Chinese culture^[13], and number translation is also crucial for conveying the cultural connotations of the ST. As the primary translator of modern Chinese literature, especially of Mo Yan, Howard Goldblatt’s translation practice and paradigm have a demonstration effect for fellow translators, and his rendering of “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters” may be the best example. The number translation reveals unique challenges and strategies in Goldblatt’s translation practice that have not been adequately addressed. This highlights the need for cognitive linguistic research—specifically, the prototype-theoretic analyses—of such translation cases. So the paper aims to apply the theory of cognitive linguistics to translation studies, specifically, to interpreting Goldblatt’s rendering “六个姐姐” into “seven sisters”.

3.2. Methodology: Prototype Theory-Based Frame

To better understand the application of prototype theory in this study, it is first necessary to grasp the theory’s essentials. Prototype theory is a conceptual framework that explains how humans cognitively categorize objects or phenomena. Take the category of “birds” as an example: while all birds belong to this category, some members align more closely with the intuitive “idea of a bird” than others. Most people perceive robins or sparrows as typical birds—they can fly, sing, and have feathers. In contrast,

penguins or ostriches, though unable to fly and visually distinct from robins or sparrows, are still classified as birds because they share the core biological features of the category (e.g., laying eggs, having feathers).

In prototype theory, the “best example” of a category (such as robins or sparrows for “birds”) is termed the prototype. When humans process a category, they typically first recall its prototype; other members are deemed part of the category if they share sufficient key features with this prototype, even if they diverge in non-essential aspects. This theory reveals that categories are not rigid or clear-cut: membership exists on a gradient, with some members being “more central” and others “more peripheral.” Human cognition relies on these prototypes to organize and make sense of the world^[14].

When applying prototype theory to translation studies, this gradient nature of category membership becomes particularly relevant. All translations belong to the “translation category” because they share the core feature of relating to a source text (ST). However, unlike classical category theory—which posits strict binary membership (“either in or out”)—translations do not fit an “all-or-nothing” framework. Instead, their differences lie in their degree of approximation to the ST: some translations are perceived as “more typical” (colloquially “better”) than others, even though all remain valid members of the category. From a prototype theory perspective, the traditional translation criterion of “fidelity to the original” essentially emphasizes a translation’s typicality within the broader category of possible translations. A translation that is more faithful to the ST is thus considered a more central, prototypical member of the category. Importantly, prototype theory also acknowledges that translations vary across multiple dimensions (e.g., accuracy, readability, cultural appropriateness). An “ideal” or prototypical translation is therefore not merely one that is infinitely close to the ST, but one that balances these dimensions to best serve its intended purpose and audience.

This prototype-based understanding of the translation category also provides a lens to explain why retranslating or rewriting the ST is a common and meaningful practice in translation. Retranslations or rewritings can be seen as adding new members to the translation category, each with its own level of typicality. These new translations often

emphasize different aspects of the original text, depending on their specific goals and contexts. For instance, a translation targeting a different cultural audience might prioritize readability and cultural appropriateness over strict ST fidelity—positioning itself as a more peripheral (but still valid) member of the translation category. In this way, retranslations and rewritings enrich the category by offering a range of options that better meet diverse needs and contexts^[15].

Prototype theory’s insights into translation can be contextualized alongside classical theories in translation studies. These classical frameworks, while distinct in their focus, collectively highlight translation’s gradient and context-dependent nature—an observation that aligns with prototype theory’s rejection of binary categorization, though they approach the phenomenon from different angles:

- Eugene Nida distinguishes between formal equivalence (prioritizing ST linguistic form) and functional equivalence (prioritizing reader response), framing “six sisters” as formally equivalent and “seven sisters” as functionally equivalent^[16].
- Lawrence Venuti classifies “seven sisters” as a domesticated translation (adapting to target culture norms) and “six sisters” as a foreignized one (preserving ST cultural specificity), focusing on cultural stance^[17].
- André Lefevere conceptualizes “seven sisters” as a rewriting of the ST, emphasizing how translators adjust texts to align with ideological or poetic goals^[15].
- Functionalist and Skopos theories explain “seven sisters” as a response to Howard Goldblatt’s goal of transmitting Chinese culture, linking translation choices to purpose^[18,19].
- Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory accounts for multiple literary translation evaluation standards, reflecting translation’s contextual variability^[20].

Compared with these classical frameworks—each focusing on a specific dimension of translation (e.g., equivalence, cultural stance, rewriting), the prototype theory exhibits both its strengths and limitations. On one hand, the prototype theory offers a unifying cognitive lens that connects the individualized insights of classical theories:

it frames Nida's equivalence types, Venuti's cultural stances, and Lefevere's rewritings not as isolated binary choices, but as variations in "translation category typicality"—each representing a different degree of alignment with the ST-centered prototype and contextual needs. This allows researchers to avoid reducing translations to mutually exclusive labels (e.g., "either domesticated or foreignized") and instead view them as a spectrum of valid category members, which helps explain why diverse translation practices coexist.

On the other hand, the prototype theory is not unlimited. It primarily addresses the cognitive structure of the "translation category" rather than the socio-cultural, historical, or ideological drivers of translation choices—domains where classical theories excel. For example, while the prototype theory can describe "seven sisters" as a peripheral category member, it cannot fully explain why Goldblatt prioritized cultural transmission (a question Lefevere's rewriting theory or Skopos theory answers more directly). Similarly, it does not elaborate on how power dynamics (a focus of Venuti's work) shape which translations are perceived as "prototypical." Thus, prototype theory complements rather than replaces classical frameworks: it integrates their observations into a coherent cognitive model of translation, but relies on them to account for the contextual and ideological dimensions that lie beyond the category theory itself.

3.3. Empirical Survey Design

To empirically verify the theoretical analysis of prototype theory in translation typicality, this study designed an empirical survey targeting 30 native English speakers. The selection of participants followed strict criteria: all respondents had no long-term residence experience in Chinese-speaking countries and no professional background related to the Chinese language or culture. This was to eliminate potential interference from Chinese cultural cognition and ensure the authenticity of their cognitive responses to English numerical connotations.

The survey adopted a structured questionnaire, focusing on three core dimensions that align with the prototype theory's "typicality evaluation": First, the perception of positive cultural associations (e.g., whether "seven sisters" or "six sisters" evokes connotations of "luck" or

"completeness"); second, the familiarity with numerical cultural connotations (to measure the ease of cognitive processing of the two translation versions); third, the recognition of family-related implications (to verify whether the translations match the ST's core connotation of "a large family").

During the survey implementation, each respondent was asked to complete the questionnaire independently in a quiet environment, with a response time limited to 10 minutes to avoid fatigue affecting answers. After data collection, the valid questionnaires were sorted and statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on the proportion of respondents holding different cognitive opinions on the two translation versions. The survey results were used to further validate the theoretical conclusion that "seven sisters" is more typical than "six sisters" in the English cultural context, forming a "theoretical analysis + empirical verification" dual support for the study's arguments.

4. "Seven Sisters" as a More Typical Translation of “六个姐姐” than “Six Sisters”

In the previous sections, we have discussed the concept of typicality in translation from the perspective of the prototype theory, emphasizing that a translation's typicality is not solely determined by its fidelity to the denotative meaning of the ST but by a balance of multiple dimensions, including accuracy, readability, and cultural appropriateness. We have also explored the rationale behind retractions and rewritings, highlighting the dynamic and diverse nature of translation. Building on these discussions, we now turn to a specific case study to further illustrate these points: Howard Goldblatt's translation of “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters.”

4.1. "Seven Sisters" vs. "Six Sisters": A Comparison of Typicality in Translating “六个姐姐”

Translating “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters” by H. Goldblatt has sparked considerable debate. Opponents argue that this translation is unfaithful to the ST, while

supporters do not entirely agree with it. On one hand, the opponents, for example, Professor Zhu Zhenwu and Qin Airong, acknowledge that literary translation is not a word-for-word exercise; on the other hand, they maintain that translating “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters” is a clear mistake^[2]. A closer examination of their arguments reveals an academic paradox here: while Zhu and Qin recognize the complexity of literary translation, they still insist on a strict numerical correspondence. In their eyes, “six sisters” is the best translation of “六个姐姐”. It is self-evident that such a paradox cannot be regarded as a consistently optimal strategy for advancing and justifying one’s theoretical or empirical claims in academic discourse.

The author of this paper contends that “seven sisters” is not a mistranslation but rather the most typical rendering of the ST, given the available corresponding versions at present^[4]. This argument is based on the understanding that translation, from the perspective of the prototype theory, should be evaluated across multiple dimensions, including cognitive, cultural, aesthetic, and stylistic aspects etc, which are classified as typicality. In brief, an idealized translation should bear more typicalities of the ST. Subsequently, the author will delve into the typicalities that “seven sisters” embodies and embeds, by examining dimensions conveyed by the ST and the TT, respectively.

In addition to accuracy, fluency, and consistency mentioned in the above section, the essential feature of a typical translation is to convey the core semantic and cultural features of the ST in context. As translation scholars, we must clearly understand that meaning encompasses at least the following seven dimensions: 1) conceptual meaning (sometimes called ‘denotative’ or ‘cognitive’ meaning), 2) connotative meaning, 3) social meaning, 4) affective meaning, 5) reflected meaning, 6) collocative meaning, and 7) thematic meaning. Geoffrey Leech has also referred to the meanings from No. 2 to No. 6 collectively as associative meaning^[21]. Regarding the different language families of Chinese and English, we must accept that the meanings of the ST and the TT cannot completely corre-

spond. Therefore, a typical translation aims to find the best balance among these dimensions, approximating the original text as closely as possible.

Specifically speaking, currently there are two versions of the translation of the ST “六个姐姐”: one is “six sisters” and the other is “seven sisters”. According to the author’s knowledge, there is no third version. So, which one is more typical than the other? On the brevity of the ST, the accuracy, fluency, and consistency of the TT are relatively easy to handle, therefore, they are ignored here; we can focus on whether the TT conveys more typical dimensions of the ST. The typical dimensions, core features, and peripheral features are determined in the context of the ST. These dimensions include cognitive meaning and associative meaning, including aesthetic, cultural, stylistic, and psychological aspects, which are central to the typicality.

Subsequently, an analysis will be conducted on the denotative and connotative meanings of “六个姐姐” in two interrelated contexts: the general Chinese cultural context and the contextual specifics of the source text (i.e., Mo Yan’s Big Breasts and Wide Hips), as listed in **Tables 1–3**. The rationale for this dual-context focus lies in the fact that the broader Chinese cultural background facilitates a more comprehensive and in-depth grasp of the phrase’s meaning. Only by understanding the typicality of the ST, can we then examine the denotation and connotation of the TT translations “seven sisters” and “six sisters” within the context of English culture. By comparing these translations with the typicality of the ST, we can assess how closely they adhere to this typicality. This will provide us with the basis to support our claim that “seven sisters” is more typical than “six sisters” in the translation, from the perspective of prototype theory. In Chinese, “六个姐姐” is a verbal phrase that is rich in both denotation and connotation. It consists of three parts: “六” (liù), “个” (gè), and “姐姐” (jiějie). The number “六” (liù) is rich in meaning, as is the term “姐姐” (jiějie) as an address term. The character “个” (gè) is a unit of measurement.

Table 1. Denotation of 六个姐姐 in Chinese.

六个	Here, it refers to six units of measurement.
姐姐	An address term, elder sister/close elder female friend
六个姐姐	Six elder sisters or six close, elder, female friends

Table 2. Core Connotation of 六个姐姐 in Chinese.

六	1. “many” or “blessing” as in the phrase “多子多福” or “六畜兴旺”, etc;
	2. “safe and sound” or “lucky” as in the phrase “六六大顺” and “六福临门”, etc;
	3. “complete and full” as in the phrase “六合之内, 皆为王土”, etc;
	4. a smooth and successful life as the phrase “人生六六六”, etc.
	1. warmth and strong affection; 2. maturity; 3. friendship and closeness;
	4. model and example; 5. tradition of support, care and love, and help;
	6. a sort of humor of respect but with a mild reprimand;
六个姐姐	It may refer to the meanings combined together in the two columns above.

In Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the narrator “I” by the name of Shangguan Jintong (Golden Child), has six half-elder sisters from the same mother. Listed in descending order of age, the sisters are: Shangguan Laidi, Shangguan Zhaodi, Shangguan Lingdi, Shangguan Xiangdi, Shangguan Pandi, and Shangguan Niandi. From the sisters’ names, readers of the novel can see how eagerly the narrator’s Mother (Shangguan Lushi) was looking forward to having a son, as each sister’s name contains a hint of a boy’s birth. Finally, the Mother, Shangguan Lushi, gave birth to the only boy, named Shangguan Jintong, which means he is the gold child of the Shangguan family. This reveals the deep-seated male dominance in both the family and the era. From an ethical perspective, the familial relationships depicted in the text demonstrate distinct features of ethical chaos and ambiguity, and such characteristics are substantiated by the following cases.

- The first two sisters share the same father, who is

their mother’s uncle.

- The third sister’s father is a bandit spy who borrowed ducklings.
- The fourth sister’s father is a quack doctor.
- The fifth sister’s father is a dog butcher.
- The sixth sister’s father is a monk named Zhitong from Heavenly High Temple.
- The narrator “I”—Shangguan Jintong’s father is the Swedish missionary Maloyah^[3].

Not only does the narrator “I” share no father with all his sisters, but the first two sisters also share no father with the other four younger sisters, and the four younger sisters do not share a common father among themselves either. So, based on the background introduction given above, the phrase “六个姐姐” literally means that “I”, Shangguan Jintong, has six sisters, but they are actually half-sisters.

Table 3. Core Connotations of 六个姐姐 in Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*^[3].

1. “many” or “blessing”
2. “safe and sound” or “lucky”
3. “complete and full”
4. smooth and successful
5. wealthy and rich (In traditional Chinese culture, a bride price is paid when a daughter gets married.)

In the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Shangguan Jintong is tragic in both his life and emotions. His relationship with his sisters is distorted and twisted, which means they are not as normal as those in average families of traditional culture. They are not always warm, friendly, or full of love and care for him. Symbolically, “sisters” is not necessarily a positive or commendatory substitute word of care, love, or warmth, for him.

Then, we will explore the denotation and connotation of “seven sisters” and “six sisters” in the context of English culture, as listed in **Table 4**. Only by comparing and contrasting them with the ST can we clearly see which one is closer to the typicality of the ST. Either “seven sisters” or “six sisters” is just different from varied distance to the typicality or the idealized version. The idealized version of the translation families is considered an embodiment of the

ST. However, each version is merely a possible approximation to the typicality or the idealized version. “Elder sisters” and “姐姐” share very close cognitive meanings in many dimensions, which are not directly relevant to our current discussion. Therefore, we will not delve into them further. Instead, we will focus on exploring the denotations of “seven” and “six” in the English context. These numbers have specific meanings that are closely related to the ST or TT. Other denotations, while interesting, do not directly impact our analysis and are thus beyond the scope of this discussion.

First, the number “seven,” in particular, has rich and varied denotations in English culture, especially within the contexts of Judaism, Christianity, Greek myths, and symbolic traditions. In the *Bible*, the number “seven” sym-

bolizes holiness, completeness, and perfection^[22]. For example, there are seven days in a week, with God resting on the seventh day after creating the world in six days. There are also bunches of expressions like the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. In Judaism, the Sabbath Day is observed every seven days. In Greek mythology, there are stories of seven cities competing for the honor of Homer and seven heroes attacking Thebes. In games, seven is often considered a lucky number. In short, “seven” symbolizes luck, completeness, and mystery in English culture and is often associated with religion, philosophy, and the occult. Because it is the largest odd number from 0 to 9 and is only divisible by 1 and itself, “seven” enjoys the highest popularity in English culture.

Table 4. Connotation of "Seven" in English^[4].

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. many; 2. blessing and lucky; 3. big; 4. complete and full; 5. mysterious. 6. a kind of supreme degree.
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Additionally, the number “six” also carries rich symbolic meanings in the English context. It symbolizes balance, harmony, and stability in many cultures due to its divisibility by 2 and 3. In English culture, it is also associated with family life and love. In Christianity, “six” is linked to God’s creation of the world in six days, representing creation and divine order, as seen in the concept of the “six days of creation.” The Star of David in Judaism signifies the harmony between the universe and humanity. However, in the *Book of Revelation*, “666” is

associated with evil beasts because the beast committed evil sins with man’s number 666 (Rev.13:18)^[23]. Besides, sometimes, “six” can refer to something very small in extent, as in the phrase “six degrees of separation.” It can also indicate something that has ended or been buried, as in “six feet under.” Furthermore, it may refer to two equivalent situations or choices with no significant difference, as in the expression “six of one, half a dozen of the other.” To see the denotations better, they are listed in the following table (**Table 5**).

Table 5. Connotation of "Six" in English.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. balance, harmony, and stability; 2. family life and love; 3. creation and divine order; 4. something evil; 5. a very small in extent; 6. two equivalent situations or choices with no significant difference;

The denotation and connotation of “六个姐姐” (ST), derived from the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, “seven sisters” (TT1), and “six sisters” (TT2) are shown in **Tables**

3–5, respectively. By comparing these tables, it is notable that TT1, “seven sisters,” is more typical of the ST and represents an idealized version of “六个姐姐” than TT2,

“six sisters,” does. Specifically, when comparing **Table 3** (ST) with **Tables 4** (TT 1) and **5** (TT 2), it can be seen that TT1, “seven sisters,” shares more core connotations with the ST than TT 2, “six sisters,” does. When evaluating the connotative overlap between the target texts and the source text, it is evident that TT1 (“seven sisters”) shares five core connotative dimensions with the ST (“六个姐姐”), while TT2 (“six sisters”) exhibits a narrower overlap, matching merely two of these dimensions. This indicates that TT1, “seven sisters,” is closer to the ST in terms of connotation and is more typical of the ST than TT 2, “six sisters,” which coincides with the ST in terms of literal numerical meaning. Thus, based on the above comparisons, it can be concluded that “seven sisters” is relatively more typical than “six sisters”.

In previous sections, we discussed the rationale behind the differences between the ST and the two target texts (TT1 and TT2), which provides Goldblatt with a solid basis for his translation choice of “seven sisters.” First, Goldblatt’s translation philosophy is the foundation of his translation practice. He asserts that “a translator is a communicator, an interpreter.”^[24] This philosophy guides his actions and principles during the translation process. By viewing the translator as a “communicator” and “interpreter,” Goldblatt emphasizes the importance of considering the target audience and ensuring that they can understand the original text, including its thoughts, emotions, imagination, aesthetics, and unique style. This approach ensures that readers can experience or have similar feelings to those in the ST. Cultural adaptation is a key tool in achieving this goal. Second, this philosophy is evident in Goldblatt’s translation choices. In his translations, readers can both feel the original culture and appreciate a writerly expressive diction, without encountering any awkward translation tone. For example, his choice of “seven sisters” instead of a more literal translation like “six sisters” exemplifies how he balances cultural nuances with readability. This choice ensures that the translation is both faithful to the original meaning and accessible to the target audience. By doing so, Goldblatt avoids the pitfalls of awkward or unnatural translations, making the text more engaging and culturally appropriate. Third, Goldblatt’s approach is further explained in his own remarks^[24]. He emphasizes the importance of considering the target audience while

maintaining the essence of the original work. This dual focus allows him to create translations that are not only accurate but also engaging and culturally appropriate. By prioritizing the reader’s experience, Goldblatt ensures that his translations are both faithful to the original text and accessible to a broader audience. This balance is crucial in achieving his goal of effective communication and interpretation.

Translators often misuse the term “faithfulness” (faithful to what? Vocabulary? Form? Meaning? Style? Impact?). Some words and idioms in the original work are meaningless to foreign readers and may lead to a completely distorted view of the culture represented by the writer and the literary work.

However, translators are reluctant to render them with creative synonyms. In fact, there are a great many similar thoughts and feelings among people of different cultures; the differences lie mainly in the ways of expression. Thus, the duty of the translator—which is always a difficult task—is to translate the different expressions of similar thoughts and feelings in such a way that both the “similarity” and the “difference” are evident in the translation. This means that, given the fact that cultures are different, the translator cannot sacrifice the unique style of the original work, but must do his utmost to show that the differences lie in the way of expression, not in the thoughts themselves^[24].

In the above-given remark, Goldblatt explains some aspects of his translation principles. First, he addresses the oft-debated standard of “faithfulness.” Translation should not be merely faithful to the “words and idioms in the original work,” because these can be meaningless to foreign readers and may lead to a completely distorted view of the culture represented by the writer and the literary work. For example, although “six sisters” is a faithful translation of the source text “六个姐姐,” doing so could have terrible consequences. Therefore, a translator needs to engage in creative work to convey the similar thoughts and feelings that exist among the ST of different cultures. This is the second dimension of the idea: translation requires creativity. Third, Goldblatt outlines the translator’s task. The task of a translator is to express similar thoughts and feelings

from different cultures in a way that reflects both their similarities and their differences.

Notably, the theory of spiritual similarity of Chinese scholars aligns with Goldblatt’s core feature-fidelity priority. It is further confirmed with the core viewpoints of Chinese scholars in translation, which demonstrates the rationality of Goldblatt’s choice from a local theoretical perspective. Fu Lei, a pivotal figure in Chinese translation history, proposed the “shensi (神似)” principle. He emphasized that literary translation should focus on capturing the “spiritual essence” of the source text—including its emotional tone, cultural connotations, and aesthetic style—rather than being constrained by rigid formal correspondence such as word-for-word or numerical consistency^[25]. This is exactly in line with the prototype theory’s emphasis on “core feature fidelity”: the “spiritual essence” advocated by Fu Lei is the “core feature” that must be retained in translation, while “formal correspondence” often belongs to the “peripheral feature” that can be adjusted. Qian Zhongshu further developed this idea into the “huajing (化境)” theory. He described the ideal translation as a stage where the target text “transcends the formal shell of the source text but fully preserves its core meaning and

cultural charm^[26].” Applying this to the translation of “六个姐姐”: “six sisters” adheres to the formal feature of numerical consistency, but fails to convey the spiritual core of “abundance” and “auspiciousness” in the source text; while “seven sisters” appropriately adjusts the peripheral formal feature (number) to achieve the “huajing” stage—making English readers perceive the same cultural connotation and emotional resonance as Chinese readers do when encountering “六个姐姐”.

4.2. Empirical Verification of "Seven Sisters" and "Six Sisters": A Survey among Native Speakers

To verify the cultural connotation differences between ‘seven sisters’ and ‘six sisters’ in English, this study surveyed 30 native English speakers (with no long-term residence in Chinese-speaking countries or Chinese-related professional backgrounds, ensuring no Chinese cultural interference). The survey focused on three dimensions: positive cultural associations, connotation familiarity, and family-related implication perception, with the following key results (Table 6):

Table 6. Survey Data of Positive Cultural Associations and Familiarity with “Seven Sisters” (n = 30).

Connotation Type	Number of Respondents	Proportion (%)
Luck	20	67
Completeness/Perfection	22	73
Holiness	17	57
Large Family Size	21	70
No Positive Association	2	7
Familiarity (Very+ Relatively)	23	77

4.2.1. Positive Cultural Associations of "Seven Sisters"

As shown in Table 6 (Survey Data of “Seven Sisters”), 67% of respondents associated “seven sisters” with “luck” (consistent with the “lucky” connotation in Table 4), 73% with “completeness/perfection” (aligning with the “wholeness” symbol in Table 4), and 70% with “a large family size” (matching the core implication of “abundant family members” in the ST “六个姐姐”). Only 7% reported no positive associations, confirming that “seven” in English carries rich positive cultural meanings as analyzed earlier.

4.2.2. Positive Cultural Associations of "Six Sisters"

According to Table 7 (Survey Data of “Six Sisters”), the total proportion of respondents associating “six sisters” with positive meanings (balance/stability: 33%, family connection: 27%, creation/order: 20%) was only 80% (per capita with less than 0.3 positive associations). In contrast, 37% had no positive associations, and 13% linked it to negative meanings (e.g., the “evil” connotation of “666” in the Bible), which directly supports the conclusion in Table 5 that “six” has narrow positive connotations and potential negative associations.

Table 7. Survey Data of Positive Cultural Associations and Familiarity with “Six Sisters” (n = 30).

Connotation Type	Number of Respondents	Proportion (%)
Balance/Stability	10	33
Family Connection	8	27
Creation/Order	6	20
No Positive Association	11	37
Negative Association	4	13
Familiarity (Very + Relatively)	12	40

4.2.3. Comparative Perception of the Two Versions

In the comparative dimension (Table 8. Comparative Survey Data), 67% of respondents believed “seven sisters” triggered more positive associations than “six sisters,” and 67% chose “seven sisters” as the version better conveying “a large family size”—a proportion far higher than the 20% who chose “six sisters.” This empirical result verifies that “seven sisters” is more consistent with the ST’s core connotation of “abundant family members and implicit auspiciousness” than “six sisters”.

The above survey data (Tables 6–8) empirically

confirms the cultural connotation differences between “seven” and “six” in English proposed in Tables 4 and 5. For native English speakers, “seven sisters” not only evokes more positive and familiar cultural associations but also better aligns with the ST’s core implication of “a large family with implicit auspiciousness”—a result that strongly supports the earlier argument that “seven sisters” is a more typical translation of “六个姐姐” than “six sisters.” This empirical verification also provides concrete evidence for Goldblatt’s translation philosophy (discussed below) of “prioritizing cultural communication over literal fidelity.”

Table 8. Comparative Survey Data of “Seven Sisters” and “Six Sisters” (n = 30).

Comparative Dimension	Number of Respondents (Choosing “Seven Sisters”)	Proportion (%)
More Positive Associations	20	67
Better Conveying “Large Family Size”	20	67
Higher Familiarity with Connotations	20	67

4.3. A New Prototype-Oriented Standard for Literary Translation: The Principles of Core-Feature-Fidelity and Family Resemblance

The debate between “seven sisters” and “six sisters” in translation reveals a fundamental question in literary translation as well: what constitutes a good or bad translation? Should a translation be faithful to the verbal meaning or the thought of the ST? These questions have long been discussed and debated among academicians, who often seek the best version among translations, considering it as the most faithful to the ST. However, in daily life, defining what is good, bad, or best is rarely straightforward. So is it in translation assessment. The boundaries between different translations are not always clear-cut. Instead, all

versions of a translation of the same ST share some commonalities. These shared parts represent the typicality of an idealized translation. The more typicality a translation embodies, the more it is regarded as a central, representative, or idealized version—the prototype or perfect model of other versions.

Cognitive prototype theory supports this view with its three major features: core features, peripheral features, and family resemblance. Briefly, core features in translation refer to the essential meaning of the ST that must be conveyed. These are the central, indispensable aspects of the original message. Peripheral features, on the other hand, refer to the minor or less critical aspects of the meaning in the ST. These elements are not as crucial as the core features but still contribute to the overall meaning. Finally, family resemblance emphasizes the shared similarities

among different translations without requiring them to be identical. These similarities are derived from the core qualities of the ST, ensuring that while translations may vary in their peripheral features, they maintain the essential meaning and intent of the original.

The three features—core features, peripheral features, and family resemblance—provide significant theoretical support for translation practice and theory.

As the most typical and essential attributes of prototype theory, core features correspond to the primary translation standard: identifying the specific, objective content that requires “fidelity.” For example, the core feature of “六个姐姐” (liù gè jiějie) is the concept of “multiple sisters,” which is still conveyed in “seven sisters” (despite the numerical difference), thus meeting the fidelity requirement. By contrast, Goldblatt’s translation of “豆油灯” (dòuyóudēng) as “an oil lantern” is insufficiently precise: it fails to convey the core feature “豆油” (soybean oil). A better version, “a soybean oil lamp,” not only denotes the traditional, rudimentary lighting tool used in electricity-lacking rural areas but also evokes China’s bygone era, carrying nostalgic aesthetics and humanistic warmth—aligning more closely with the ST’s emotional and cognitive core than “an oil lantern.”

Peripheral features, by contrast, are less typical and important attributes of the ST. Translating “六个姐姐” as “six sisters” only conveys the denotative meaning of “六” (six) and thus deviates from the ST’s core cultural connotation, whereas “seven sisters” stays closer to this core. Similarly, “an oil lantern” only retains the peripheral feature of “油灯” (oil lamp—a lamp using any oil) while losing the cultural connotation and core feature of “豆油” (soybean oil), and fails to convey the intended aesthetics. Thus, peripheral feature fidelity serves as a secondary standard for evaluating literary translations.

Family resemblance emphasizes the similarities among members without requiring complete identity. It means different versions of ST are acceptable only if they share core characteristics. The choice between translating “六个姐姐” (from Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*) as “seven sisters” or “six sisters” depends on the translation purpose. When the goal is to communicate Chinese culture to audiences in other countries, some adaptation or rewriting in translation is inevitable—for example, “six”

in the original text carries implicit connotations of traditional Chinese familial ethical order, which may be difficult for English-speaking readers to grasp. Thus, “seven sisters”—as a form of adaptation that enhances cultural accessibility—is preferred. In contrast, when the sole purpose of the translation is to convey numerical information about the character relationship, “six sisters” is also a valid translational choice, as it directly retains the original numerical meaning. The two versions still retain the family relationship of sisters, and family resemblance is highlighted. Likewise, the two versions of “an oil lantern” and “a soybean lamp” for “豆油灯” show what is family resemblance. According to Goldblatt, a translator is “a communicator and an interpreter”^[22], “a soybean oil lamp” is preferred for its cultural connotation to fulfill the purpose of transmitting Chinese culture to the world, another one, “an oil lantern” is secondary to shoulder the task of communicating culture. More importantly, we must give space to different translation versions of ST, which is especially critical to literary classics retranslated. While assessing the literary classics retranslated, we should be very careful to claim that which is better than which, or which is the best, it is not scientific and comprehensive to do so, by just judging its fidelity to the original without considering the translation brief.

The cases illustrate the practical and theoretical value of the prototype theory in translation studies. Translators need to balance the core and peripheral features of ST; meanwhile, they should treat varied translational versions of ST as a “family category” of translations, as these versions all share the core features of ST (a defining characteristic of family resemblance in prototype theory).

Moreover, Goldblatt’s adherence to “core feature fidelity” is not limited to *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*; his translation of another Mo Yan’s masterpiece, *Red Sorghum*, further validates this principle^[27], especially in his handling of chapter structure and plot details.

In the source text of *Red Sorghum*, chapters of the novel are presented without subheadings, leaving readers to infer core themes from narrative threads. Goldblatt, however, added targeted subheadings to each chapter in the English translation.

“The original is composed of 9 chapters, which each chapter has no topic. There is only one

title “*Red Sorghum*” capitalized from Chapter 1 to Chapter 9 throughout the original. As to the translation, *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, it consists of 5 chapters, in which each chapter has a sub-topic of its own; they are listed as the subsequent: Chapter 1 *Red Sorghum*, Chapter 2 *Sorghum Wine*, Chapter 3 *Dog Ways*, Chapter 4 *Sorghum Funeral*, and Chapter 5 *Strange Death*”^[28].

These subheadings are not random creations but precise distillations of each chapter’s core theme—they directly highlight the narrative focus for English readers, who are accustomed to structured chapter guidance, without deviating from the source text’s original intent. This modification, though altering the “no-subheading” form of the source text, strengthens the core feature of “theme transmission”—a key requirement for readers to grasp the story’s essence.

In terms of the plot translation, Goldblatt deliberately omitted trivial details that are peripheral to the main narrative of the novel. For instance, the source text contains lengthy descriptions of the sorghum field’s trivial elements. In the translation, these were condensed into clear short descriptions. While redundant trivialities were removed, the core plot elements—the rustic setting of the sorghum field and the solemn, melancholic atmosphere—were fully preserved. Similarly, colloquial redundancies in character dialogues (such as dialectal modal particles and repetitive emphatic phrases) were streamlined to align with English conversational habits, without changing the characters’ personalities or the dialogues’ core messages.

From the perspective of the prototype theory, these practices by Goldblatt accurately distinguish between the “core features” and “peripheral features” of the ST *Red Sorghum*: Core features: Chapter themes, main plot threads, character personalities, the emotional tone of the story (e.g., the tragic and passionate spirit of resistance), and stylistic characteristics (rough, rustic narrative language). Peripheral features: The form of having no titles, trivial descriptions of local environments, and redundant colloquial expressions in the ST. This practice also echoes Goldblatt’s own translation philosophy—that “a translator is a communicator and an interpreter.” The core task of a translator is to enable target readers to understand the ideas and emotions of ST, rather than mechanically transmitting

the linguistic form. In the translations of *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Goldblatt consistently adhered to the principle of “core-feature-fidelity priority.” Through flexible adjustments to peripheral features, he achieved effective cultural and literary communication. This also provides important reference for literary translation in the context of “Chinese-Cultures-Go-Global”: a good literary translation should not be a “word-for-word copy” but rather an accurate transmission and creative transformation of the core spirit of ST.

The adherence to core feature priority is directly reflected in the final effect of the English translation *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*^[29]. Despite trivial modifications, such as “changing title”, “adding titles” and “simplifying details,” the translation remains highly consistent with the source text in plot integrity, theme transmission accuracy, and stylistic consistency. English readers can not only clearly grasp the main storyline but also perceive the rustic charm of the sorghum fields and the characters’ spirit of resistance in the original work. This aligns perfectly with the logic of translating “六个姐姐” as “seven sisters”: both prioritize “core feature fidelity” over literal form or trivial details, ultimately achieving “different in form but close in spirit.” This further verifies the prototype theory viewpoint that “the typicality of a translation depends on the degree of alignment with core features.”

Based on the previous discussion, a prototype-oriented translation standard should emphasize three dimensions: First, adhering to core features. Literary translation requires as accurately conveying the core features of ST as possible—these refer to the “skeletal” elements of the work, such as its central theme, key plotlines, character essences, and fundamental artistic intentions, which constitute the non-negotiable prototype of the translation. Second, peripheral features. Though less essential than core features, they are “adaptive” elements that serve the transmission of core features. Specifically, peripheral features ensure cultural appropriateness (e.g., adapting ST cultural images to be intelligible to target language readers), popularity (the accessibility of the target text’s language), or “aura”—a semantic prosody that mirrors ST’s stylistic tone (e.g., the lyrical rhythm of poetry or the satirical register of a novel)^[30]. These features are not part of the ST’s “skeleton,” but their proper handling prevents

core features from being obscured by cultural barriers or rigid language, thus facilitating the target audience's perception of the prototype. Third, family resemblance. This dimension guarantees that the varied translational versions of ST are progressive and growing. Rooted in the premise of "core-feature fidelity," family resemblance means that while translations may differ in peripheral features (e.g., approaches to cultural adaptation or linguistic style), they all share similarities derived from retaining ST's core features—this common ground is what makes them "members of the same translation family." The differences in peripheral features, meanwhile, drive the "progressiveness and growth" of the translation family (e.g., subsequent versions may refine cultural image transmission to better suit contemporary readers). In this way, family resemblance not only unifies diverse translations under ST's prototype but also ensures that all variants remain anchored in core-feature fidelity.

By balancing these three dimensions, translators can produce more "typical" translations that both align with ST's prototype and enrich the family category of translations. Moreover, such a prototype-oriented translation standard would prompt a more objective assessment of literary translation, as it evaluates versions based on both their adherence to the core prototype and the appropriateness of their peripheral adjustments, rather than rigidly demanding uniformity.

5. Conclusive Remarks

Based on the prototype theory in cognitive linguistics, this paper explores the rationale behind Howard Goldblatt's translation of "六个姐姐" (liù gè jiějie) as "seven sisters" in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, with conclusions firmly grounded in theoretical analysis and alignment with classical translation frameworks.

First, Goldblatt's choice of "seven sisters" is not a "mistranslation" but a cognitively more typical rendering of the ST "六个姐姐". This typicality stems from its stronger alignment with the ST's core features: in the Chinese cultural context, "六个姐姐" carries connotations of "abundance," "auspiciousness," and "a large kinship network"—rooted in the symbolic meaning of "六" (linked to completeness and luck in traditional Chinese culture)

and the emotional weight of "姐姐" (familial warmth and solidarity). Its peripheral feature is the literal numerical reference to "six." In English culture, "seven sisters" retains these core connotations (e.g., "completeness" from Judeo-Christian traditions and "luck" in Western symbolism), while "six" in English has narrower positive associations and potential negative undertones (e.g., links to "evil" via "666" in the *Book of Revelation*). This core-peripheral distinction—central to the prototype theory—explains why "seven sisters" better preserves the ST's cultural essence and emotional function.

Second, the prototype theory complements rather than replaces classical translation frameworks, forming a more holistic explanatory system. Classical theories (e.g., Nida's functional equivalence, Venuti's domestication/foreignization, Vermeer's Skopos theory) clarify specific dimensions of translation choices but fail to answer why certain features (e.g., cultural connotation over literal form) merit priority. Prototype theory fills this gap by framing translation as a gradient category: "seven sisters" and "six sisters" exist on a "translation typicality" spectrum, with their value shaped by alignment with the ST's core features and the translator's goal. For Goldblatt, whose mission is to promote Chinese literature globally^[5], prioritizing the ST's cultural connotations (core feature) over numerical accuracy (peripheral feature) aligns with both prototype theory and Skopos theory's purpose-driven logic.

This study holds critical guiding significance for Sino-Western cultural communication, particularly amid the "Chinese-Cultures-Go-Global" initiative. A key challenge in cross-cultural exchange is bridging the "cognitive gap" for culturally loaded elements (e.g., numbers, symbolic expressions) that resist literal translation. The prototype-theoretic framework proposed here offers a practical solution: it urges translators to first identify the ST's "core cultural feature" and then select target-language expressions that retain this core, even if peripheral forms require adjustment. This avoids two pitfalls: "cultural dilution" from over-literal translation (which strips away the ST's cultural nuance) and "cultural alienation" from excessive adaptation (which distorts the ST's identity). It provides a scalable model for translating other culturally loaded elements in Chinese-Western exchange, ensuring cultural meanings are not lost but resonated with target audiences.

The study also extends two implications for literary translation in Sino-Western communication. First, it proposes a prototype-oriented evaluation standard: literary translation should prioritize fidelity to core cultural/thematic features over rigid adherence to peripheral elements (e.g., literal wording). Second, it advocates for “family resemblance tolerance”: different translations of the same ST (e.g., “seven sisters” and “six sisters”) belong to a “translation family” if they share the ST’s core features, rejecting rigid “either-or” judgments and affirming context-specific validity.

In summary, the “seven sisters” case highlights prototype theory’s value as a cognitive framework for Sino-Western cultural communication and literary translation. By guiding translators to distinguish core from peripheral features, it enables more effective cultural mediation—ensuring Chinese literary works and cultural values are not just “translated” but truly “understood” by global audiences, fostering more balanced and reciprocal cross-cultural exchange.

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