

# The Problem of Bowdlerization in the Translation of 20th-Century Chinese Literature

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## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the pernicious practice of "bowdlerization," or ideological altering (by both omitting and adding passages), of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mainland Chinese fiction. First the historical parallel with the West is noted: just as in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain the "18<sup>th</sup> century's spirit of tolerance was replaced by a paternalistic attitude toward readers as fragile and easily corrupted innocents who would be grievously misled by heterodoxy or malevolence in literary works," in Imperial China the censorship and bowdlerization of literature was "most extensive and sustained during the Qing dynasty, whose reign included all of the 19<sup>th</sup> century;" however, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this situation has improved in the West while worsening in China. Several telling examples of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Communist Party's blatantly ideological bowdler-izing of important fictional texts by Zhu Lin and Wu Zuxiang are then discussed: in each case we are shown how the emotional and aesthetic integrity of the works has been violated. The conclusion: Western editors and translators must be more careful about choosing unexpurgated editions of texts for translation; that is, they must be more vigilant in avoiding the perpetuation of (ideologically) expurgated ones.

## KEY WORDS

Bowdlerization  
expurgated edition  
party ideology

censorship  
class solidarity  
emotional integrity



## Introduction

The expurgation and alteration of literary works by various heavy-handed editorial functionaries, officials, and clerics might appear at first glance to be a problem that has bedeviled writers and scholars since time immemorial. In terms of sheer ferocity in banning books and suppressing authors, the notorious decrees by China's first emperor of Qin and the Spanish Inquisition's Torquemada could be as ruthless as any twentieth-century despotism's censorship. Yet when one turns from outright proscription to the editorial reshaping of heterodox literary texts, the past couple of centuries stand out as a period of particular emphasis on the censor's scissors.

In the case of British literature, Noel Perrin has noted that "the old calm acceptance of most literature as suitable general reading" quickly eroded in the early nineteenth century (5). The eighteenth century's spirit of tolerance was replaced by a paternalistic attitude toward readers as fragile and easily corrupted innocents who would be grievously misled by heterodoxy or malevolence in literary works—unless society's guardians of morality and truth were to shield the growing reading public from temptation (Perrin 5, 19). This practice of vigilant expurgation has become known as "bowdlerization" from the name of the early nineteenth-century British doctor and publicist who advocated and practiced expurgation with missionary zeal.<sup>1</sup> The expansion of bowdlerization in the nineteenth century marked the evolution of literary expurgation from an obscure activity involving a negligible minority to a majority practice in many publishing circles (Perrin 5). In a curious parallel, the bowdlerization and

censorship of literature in Imperial China was most extensive and sustained during the Qing dynasty, whose reign included all of the nineteenth century. Chinese studies of censorship inevitably brim with the titles of books banned or censored during the Qing, lists which bulk larger than comparable lists of banned books from any earlier dynasty.<sup>2</sup> One major difference with the onset of literary censorship in Western Europe is that China's rage for book banning peaked earlier, occurring during the 18th-century reign of Qianlong instead of during the 19th century. Moreover, the vast upswelling of literary censorship and bowdlerization that proliferated in 20th-century China, particularly after 1949, is of such broad scope as to be comparable only to long-defunct fascist and communist regimes in the West, such as Nazi Germany and Leninist-Stalinist Russia.

Bowdlerization tends to exert an even more corrosive effect on the integrity of a literary work than outright banning, since the banned work may always reappear in uncorrupted form at a later date when the climate of thought changes or the official censors lose some of their power or influence. Once a book has been bowdlerized, however, it lives on as a corrupt rival to the unexpurgated version, and for many years can go on distorting authorial intentions, disrupting aesthetic congruities, and misleading scholars and ordinary readers alike.

### **Wu Zuguang on Bowdlerization in 20th-century Chinese Literature**

Although bowdlerization has significantly declined in literature in English during the twentieth century, especially since the mid-century point, it became an increasingly worrisome problem in 20th-century Chinese literature. One of the most trenchant Chinese critics of bowdlerization has been the controversial mainland dramatist Wu Zuguang. Having been active in literary and performing arts circles since the 1930s, Wu Zuguang observed a sea change in bowdlerizing practices at around the mid-century point. Before the early 1950s, even the most immature and sloppily written *huaju* plays tended to get typeset almost exactly as their authors had written them—the

works of more established playwrights were even less likely to suffer any editorial tampering.<sup>3</sup> While the Nationalist government closed down a smattering of leftist literary journals and censored various works during the 1930s and 1940s, this activity had a direct effect on only a minority of writers, and Wu Zuguang at one point imagined that even this limited amount of censorship and bowdlerization would disappear in China with the coming to power of a different political regime in 1949. He soon discovered to his chagrin that the Communist government had not only neglected to put an end to the occasional bursts of censorship that had been practiced under the Nationalist government, but had moved toward making censorship and bowdlerization a mainstream activity for editors at practically all positions of responsibility. Beginning in the early 1950s, mainland editors grew so zealous in their bowdlerization of literary manuscripts that they came to resemble elementary school teachers correcting the fledgling compositions of little schoolboys and schoolgirls (Wu Zuguang 38).<sup>4</sup> Not only younger mainland writers found their writings vastly transformed under the editorial scissors, but even veteran writers with decades of significant impact on the literary scene behind them discovered that their works were being edited with an ideological heavy-handedness appropriate for a schoolboy's first essay.

The key catalyst for Wu Zuguang's decision to write his 1987 essay decrying bowdlerization and censorship in mainland China was the news about Gorbachev making good on his promise to help promote openness by dissolving the former U.S.S.R.'s drama censorship system (35). In contrast, the mainland government under Deng Xiaoping repeatedly violated Deng's personal promise in 1978 to halt the Chinese Communist Party's long practice of political and editorial interference in literary matters. To be sure, Deng's policy related to the political controls on literature marked a significant improvement over the harshness and dogmatism of the old Mao line; and under Deng, there were relatively fewer works held up for public denunciation in the state-run media. However, the party-state's political interference with literature continued unabated in the mainland.

## Bowdlerization of Fiction by Zhu Lin and Wu Zuxiang

During the quiet before the storm of the 1981 campaign to denounce Bai Hua and the 1983-84 campaign to stomp out "spiritual pollution" from the ever- nefarious foreign bourgeoisie, the relative calm on the surface of the mainland literary scene concealed the daily grind of bowdlerizing and censoring literary works in editorial offices throughout the land. As a case in point, the editors of the journal *Xiaoshuo xuankan* [Selections of Fiction] objected to what they regarded as an excessively dark portrayal of a corrupt rural cadre's harsh victimization of a downtrodden village woman in a story entitled *Wang* [The Web], which had been written by the Shanghaiese "rusticated-youth" writer Zhu Lin (103-22).<sup>5</sup> The journal editors' solution to the problem of having to take political responsibility for any negative repercussions from the story's publication was to append a one-third page happy ending onto the story's bleak conclusion. Originally, "The Web" had concluded in an open-ended or unresolved fashion: the hapless rural female protagonist who had recently been raped, beaten, and publicly shamed by the local Party secretary lies immobile on her hovel's bed, dreading what travails may be in store as she continues to serve as the object of vicious struggle sessions. The editors grossly altered the thrust of the whole story by adding some contrived concluding paragraphs that portray the cadre's spider web, which had been figuratively entangling houseflies like the protagonist, as suddenly breaking apart in a fresh gust of wind that was also cleansing the filthy dust from her hovel in an almost magical fashion. The hapless woman suddenly brims with hope for the future: "The sort of feeling she had was that of awakening from a nightmare; it seemed that all that [suffering] was now but a thing of the past." (122)

The contrived bright ending that Zhu Lin's editors tagged onto "The Web" dutifully toes the familiar party line of claiming that the Cultural Revolution and other chaotic results of the Communist Party's policies are all a nightmarish thing of the past now, and can be safely ignored as the citizenry supposedly looks with confidence to-

wards a rosy future. In technical terms, however, this particular bowdlerized ending does not represent bowdlerization in its most typical form, which is a combination of editorial deletion and addition rather than only one or the other.<sup>6</sup>

This most widespread form of bowdlerization appears in a number of stories by the Anhui writer Wu Zuxiang (no relation to Wu Zuguang), who penned most of his corpus in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1932 story "Guanguan de bupin" [Little Lord Guanguan's Tonic], the scene in which a terrified peasant named Baldy gets executed for having colluded with bandits portrays the executioner as fierce of *mien* and the local farmers as supportive of the execution carried out by the local militia:

The executioner's eyes were both red from liquor, and his face had hardened into a fierce expression—one look at him was enough to make you shudder. Baldy was escorted to the riverbank, and by this time had shouted and wailed himself hoarse and turned pale from fright, his eyes fixed in a blank expression—he hardly looked human anymore. One kick from the executioner was enough to knock him sprawling onto the rocky bank. But this Baldy was still a crafty fellow, and managed to wedge his head part-way between some big rocks on the riverbank. Try as they might, nobody could budge him from that spot. So the executioner just left well enough alone and raised his saber in both hands, hacking away at Baldy with three or four angular strokes, much as if chopping firewood.

A pall of silence descended on the crowd of onlookers, aside from a few stray urchins who clapped.

By the time Baldy had been struck a few hard whacks, his blood was spattered all over the nearby rocks. Since he was already sprawled out and motionless, the militiamen went over to lead the executioner off. Suddenly, what we all thought was a corpse lurched upright, and raising both of his hands high in the air, let out a string of shrill wails,

one after the other, like some kind of demon. Everybody was so scared that we all ran off as far as we could, shouting and stumbling all the way. A few of the braver peasants grouped together to pick up some heavy rocks and hurl them at that stiff's head, much as if they were killing a snake. The ground was soon splattered with splotches of red and white. (159-60)

In the original 1930s version of this story, there is no ambiguity about the portrayal of the executioner as a fierce, aggressive character, or the emphasis upon the accused peasant Baldy's passivity and fear, especially during the final hour of his life. Yet in the bowdlerized 1954 anthology of Wu Zuxiang's writings, the passages describing Baldy's terror and helplessness are cut, and he is described as having the same fierceness of *mien* that the executioner displayed in the original version (58-72, esp. 71-72). In other words, a pathetically helpless peasant victim of circumstance had been bowdlerized into a defiant proletarian hero determined to struggle unflinchingly against the powers-that-be until his dying breath.

In the post-1949 version of "Little Lord Guanguan's Tonic," it seems just as ideologically incorrect to portray peasants as blind to class solidarity as it is to portray them as obviously weak in the face of suppression from a strong local elite. Therefore, the bowdlerized 1954 version of the story cuts the scene in which some of the peasant onlookers at the execution finish the job that the militia's executioner had started by stoning Baldy to death. One can almost imagine the People's Literature Press's editors of the 1954 anthology clucking in disapproval—how could Baldy's own "class brothers" among the local peasantry join together with the "reactionary" local elite to kill him?

One problem that the bowdlerizers could not fix was the dangling plot thread left in the wake of cutting the scene of Baldy's stoning to death. In the bowdlerized version, Baldy lurches upright and scares away quite a few people with his wailing, but we never hear anything more about him. Did he manage to slip away into hid-

ing during the uproar? Or did he finally collapse to the ground for the last time, mortally wounded from the sword's slashing of his neck? The reader has no clue, and the bowdlerizer evidently assumed that Baldy's ultimate fate could simply be brushed aside and forgotten. Somehow this dangling plot line in the bowdlerized version did not appear to bother either the French or English translators of this story: both translators seemed content to translate it without checking it against earlier editions for an unexpurgated version.<sup>8</sup>

Similar, albeit less serious, problems occur in the translations of Wu Zuxiang's story "Fan jiapu" [Fan Hamlet].<sup>9</sup> The protagonist in this story, Xianzi Sao, has become furious with her mother for not lending the elder's lottery nest egg to Xianzi, who believes that she needs the money to help bail her husband out of jail. One night when Xianzi's mother is staying at her daughter's place, Xianzi has a nightmare about her husband's blood-stained corpse sprawled on the floor of his jail cell, and then the repulsive image of her mother's scowling face sticks in Xianzi's thoughts for awhile. Overwrought from worry and filled with hatred, Xianzi impulsively attempts to steal her mother's money from the old woman's headband, but she wakes up and cries foul. In the ensuing physical struggle between them, Xianzi overpowers and impulsively kills her mother. She then makes off with the money, but soon encounters her husband safe and sound on the road; he has been freed by *yamen*-storming bandits. In the finale of the original 1934 journal version of the story, Xianzi finally gasps "Mama" out of contrition after she realizes that she had not actually required any funds to free her husband after all; she had snuffed out her mother's life in vain (*Wenxue jikan* 234). In later versions of the story, this important incident is cut, thereby obscuring the author's original intention of representing Xianzi's feelings toward her mother as ambivalent and complex, rather than one-sidedly rancorous (*Fan yu ji* 61; *Wu Zuxiang xiaoshuo sanwen ji* 177).

A more egregious bowdlerism occurs in connection with Xianzi's nightmare leading up to the murders, when the stern and unfeeling visage of her mother appears in her thoughts. In the 1954 bowdlerized version of the story, the word for mother, *niang*, is cut

and replaced with *zhixian*, or "county magistrate." Because the major function of Xianzi's nightmare is to suggest what sorts of emotion could have contributed to her appalling decision to rob and grapple with her mother, not to mention kill her, Xianzi's visual recollection of her mother's scowling visage has a kind of emotional logic to it. On the other hand, the county magistrate has been at most a distant and shadowy figure throughout the story: he never appears in any of the story's dramatized scenes, nor does he ever enter Xianzi's interior monologues. The magistrate is nothing more than an incidental figure mentioned at second remove on a couple of occasions, and lacks the stature and proximity necessary for serving as an object of Xianzi's intense and concrete hatred. If the pale and distant figure of the magistrate can be characterized at all in "Fan Hamlet," it would be as a rather powerless personage who winds up fleeing for his very life once bandit gangs swoop down from the surrounding hills to storm the *yamen* and free all the prisoners there, including Xianzi's husband. Therefore, the substitution of the magistrate for Xianzi's mother as the focus of her pent-up frustrations in the bowdlerized version amounts to fraudulent tampering with the overall emotional structure of the story, and is unworthy of replication in translation. Unfortunately, both of the two English translations of the story uncritically follow the 1954 bowdlerized version of the story.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Knowingly or unknowingly, translators of modern Chinese literature have often managed to reward bowdlerizers by uncritically looking no further than expurgated texts for their translation sources. While translators from Peking have been notoriously consistent in choosing bowdlerized texts over undoctored versions, many well-known China scholars in countries relatively unencumbered by ideological imperatives have also been quite cavalier at times about deciding among the various existing editions of a given literary work.

For the sake of improving the long-term reputation of 20th-century Chinese literary studies as a subfield in which scholarly rigor

can be assumed rather than wondered at, it will be necessary for scholars in this subfield to pay closer attention to the problems of bowdlerization and incongruent editions. Scholars and translators cannot assume that the handiest edition of a literary work is appropriate for research or translation unless they have already compared it carefully with rival editions. Moreover, in order to facilitate the checking for errors and discrepancies by colleagues in the field, scholars should always provide a clear and full citation for every work they translate. Instances of bowdlerism that are encountered should be neither translated nor simply ignored, but rather pointed out in endnotes or footnotes as a warning to colleagues, as well as to serve notice to the practitioners of bowdlerism that they cannot expect their heavy-handed manipulation of literary works to go unnoticed or uncriticized. By taking a firmer stand against bowdlerization, China scholars will not only rectify many past errors and misunderstandings involving corrupt or expurgated editions, but will also indirectly assist mainland writers like Wu Zuguang in their endeavor to resist some of the most tenacious bowdlerizers in the world today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The standard reference on this subject in English is Noel Perrin, *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*. Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) is known for having published an expurgated edition of Shakespeare's writings.

<sup>2</sup> See Wang Bin. Summaries of literary inquisitions during the Qianlong period alone span more than 30 pages of this study (332-364), and nearly half of the book focuses on Qing censorship as a whole (82-258). Wang Bin compares the unprecedented meticulousness and scope of Qing censorship to a "comb" that brushes against and leaves its mark on every section of a hairdo (83).

<sup>3</sup> Wu Zuguang notes that while his writings from the 1930s were less carefully written than his later works, editors at that time never deigned to change so much as a single word of the early works. See his essay "Against Those Who Wield the Scissors: A Plea to End Censorship," in Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley, eds., *Modern*

*Chinese Writers: Self-portrayals* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 34-39.

<sup>4</sup> A Chinese version of one of Wu Zuguang's criticisms of literary censorship and bowdlerism may be in his eulogy in memorium of Ye Shaojun in *Wenyi Bao* [Literary Gazette], 27 February 1988, 4.

<sup>5</sup> It was originally published in the fourth number of *Xiaoshuo xuankan* in 1980. For an English translation, see Zhu Lin, *Snake's Pillow and Other Stories* 23-42; some brief comments by King on his use of an expurgated version of the story also appear (200). The journal's editors bowdlerized "The Web" by appending a three-paragraph *guangming de weiba*, or "bright ending."

<sup>6</sup> For an example of bowdlerism as strictly the deletion of a passage rather than a reworking of it, see Wu Zuxiang's "Li jia de qianye" [On the Eve of Leaving Home], in which the following passage got cut probably for seeming to border on an unproletarian salaciousness:

"Everyone grew silent at this time, and the nursemaid was embarrassedly rubbing her hands together. I saw that she was a woman who resembles Dieh [the speaker's wife] quite a bit, for both of them were around twenty. Though she was wearing cotton clothing of rustic cut, it was neat and clean. The lamplight shone over half of her plumply contoured face, and her bangs brushed lightly against her bright dark eyes; her reddish cheeks exuded some of the allure of a young maiden. Yet those two breasts that jutted way out underneath her thin single-layered blouse totally destroyed any maidenly ambience she might have had."

(7)

The English translation of this story by S. R. Munro (133-43) follows the bowdlerized version in *Wu Zuxiang xiaoshuo sanwen ji* [An Anthology of Wu Zuxiang's Fiction and Prose] 2-9. For further comments on the expurgation of this story, see Williams 209-210, n 2. For a sound translation into Japanese that uses the unexpurgated version of this story, see Umemura Yoshiyuki.

<sup>7</sup> The translation is by Philip F. Williams. See Williams 57.

<sup>8</sup> For the French translation, see Vallete-Hémery 212-237. For the English translation, see Birch 372-381.

<sup>9</sup> Wu Zuxiang, "Fan jiapu," *Wenxue Jikan* 2 (1934): 216-234. Rpt. in *Fan yu ji* [An After-hours Anthology] (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1935) 1-62, and in *Wu Zuxiang xiaoshuo sanwen ji* (1954), 143-177.

<sup>10</sup> The translations are by Russel McLeod and C.T. Hsia in Lau, Hsia, and Lee, eds., *Modern Chinese Stories*, 398-415, and by Yu Fangin in Wu Zuxiang, *Green Bamboo Hermitage* (Peking: Panda Books, 1989) 120-155.

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