

Narrative Tension Construction of Extreme-Scale Quadrisyllabic Expressions from the Perspective of Rhetorical Narratology

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Abstract

Extreme-Scale Quadrisyllabic Expressions (EQEs), a distinctive four-character rhetorical form in Chinese, function as a core narrative device in rhetorical narratology, constructing vivid temporal and spatial imagery while intensifying readers' emotional engagement. Drawing on 27 EQE excerpts from Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and Howard Goldblatt's authoritative English translation, this paper systematically examines how narrative tension operates within these expressions and identifies translation strategies best suited to preserving their emotional force and narrative function. These strategies are essentially helpful to avoid the failure of rhetorical conventionality and dissipation of narrative power in the original text caused by the degradation of narrative tension.

Keywords

Extreme-Scale Quadrisyllabic Expressions (EQEs), Narrative Tension, English Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

As highly condensed, culture-laden rhetorical formats prevailing in Chinese literary texts, quadrisyllabic expressions deliver outstanding expressive power in daily communication, among which EQEs stand out for their unique hyperbolic semantic features and prominent narrative value (Liu & Yang, 2022). In a broad sense, quadrisyllabic patterns serve as condensed carriers of cultural connotations and expressive rhetorical tools in Chinese narratives. Within this category, a distinctive subclass termed Extreme-Scale Quadrisyllabic Expressions (EQEs) calls for independent scholarly investigation, for its semantic features differ sharply from those of ordinary four-character idioms. Unlike ordinary quadrisyllabic idi-

oms, EQEs feature hyperbolic, absolutized and extremity-oriented semantics (e.g., 恨之入骨 “hen zhi ru gu” hate to the bone, 绝无仅有 “jue wu jin you” unprecedented and unparalleled, 肝肠寸断 “gan chang cun duan” heartbroken beyond measure), which push sensory perception and emotional engagement to the limits of linguistic expression, creating for target readers a reading experience that approaches the threshold of perceptual intensity. As Jiang and Xu (2024) observe, numerical maximizers and minimizers in Chinese idioms constitute a distinctive linguistic phenomenon in which numerals denote hyperbolic, non-literal quantities, serving to intensify rhetorical force and convey scalar implicatures of universal affirmation or negation—a characterization that aligns with the semantic extremity of EQEs. These expressions operate as core rhetorical tools to advance plots and shape atmospheric contexts.

The translation of EQEs is a cross-linguistic rewriting practice rather than a superficial lexical replacement. It demands simultaneous attention to semantic delivery and the reconstruction of narrative effects. Involving integrated insights from linguistics, cultural studies and literary criticism, the translation of EQEs transcends simple word matching to demand dual-layered transformation: the accurate transfer of literal semantic information and the cross-linguistic reconstruction of original narrative effects. Mo Yan’s literary language is marked by creative linguistic choices that form a vital part of his narrative art (Wu, 2017). This creativity is especially evident in the semantic intensification characteristic of EQEs. Translating such language, particularly when it stretches semantics to extremes, poses a formidable challenge for cross-cultural recreation. If translators weaken the semantic intensity of EQEs in the source-text, rhetorical effect will fade and narrative tension will diminish correspondingly. This would deprive target readers of the original aesthetic impact. Guided by rhetorical narratology’s narrative tension framework, this paper analyses Goldblatt’s translational handling of EQEs in *Red Sorghum* (Mo, 2003), unpacking the operating mechanisms and practical effects of distinct translation strategies for cross-linguistic narrative tension reconstruction. Goldblatt’s translational practice has been characterized as a flexible spectrum oscillating between domestication and foreignization, navigating the cultural and linguistic chasm through creative rendering of dialects, culture-specific terms, and rhetorical expressions for Western audiences (Jia, 2025). This flexibility bears directly on EQEs translation, where extreme semantic intensity demands not lexical substitution alone but a comprehensive recalibration of narrative effect across cultural boundaries.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Narrative Tension and Translation

Rhetorical narratology defines narrative tension as an interactive psychological motivation between readers and texts, whose theoretical framework provides a clear evaluation criterion for literary translation. Rhetorical narratology defines narrative as a dynamic, semiotic process of interaction among author, text, and

reader (Phelan, 1996; Shen, 2002). In this paradigm, narrative tension refers to the inherent suspense and plot-driving force shaped by conflict layout, suspense setting, rhythmic contrast and emotional polarization (Phelan, 1996). Expanding beyond narrow interpretations of plot conflict or suspense, contemporary scholarship redefines narrative tension as a multifaceted psychodynamic process: it not only generates cognitive uncertainty, but also embeds narrative elements within textual semantic structures that evoke profound ethical conflicts and violent emotional fluctuations (Altshuler & Kim, 2023). As Peng (2023) notes, rhetorical narratology has evolved from authorial subjectivity toward intersubjectivity—a rhetorical triangle of author, text, and reader that integrates textuality with human agency, a perspective that is directly relevant to EQEs translation, in which tension reconstruction depends on relational adjustments rather than isolated lexical choices.

EQEs typically generate narrative tension by pushing spatial, quantitative, emotional, or physical dimensions to their absolute extremes through maximalized linguistic forms in Chinese tradition, thereby markedly heightening the text's emotional density and imagery depth. This extremizing mode of writing builds high-intensity narrative tension simultaneously at the affective and cognitive levels, priming readers in their reading expectations for the aesthetic shock and emotional resonance that are to follow. Such affective and cognitive effects are encoded, at the formal level, through multiple linguistic vehicles—lexical, syntactic, metaphorical, imagistic—as identified by Wang (2023), a typology that resonates with EQEs where extreme polarization often converges several such vehicles within a single construction. It is precisely this convergence of multiple vehicles that enables EQEs to generate layered tension beyond what ordinary expressions can achieve.

To systematically examine the generative mechanisms of this tension effect, it is first necessary to establish clear, operationally identifiable boundaries for the extreme quadrisyllabic expressions in *Red Sorghum*. To this end, three inclusion criteria are stipulated: first, constructional fixedness, the expression must have a stable quadrisyllabic form with non-substitutable components; second, semantic extremity, it must denote an absolute maximum along a given dimension; third, narrative surplus, it must transcend literal meaning to generate plot expectations or contextual implications that contribute to narrative tension. Correspondingly, three types of expressions are excluded: non-fixed “degree adverb + adjective” structures (e.g., “very beautiful”), which fail to meet the fixedness criterion; approximate quantifiers lacking extreme semantics (e.g., “in twos and threes”), which do not reach an absolute limit; and highly conventionalized four-character idioms that no longer produce additional narrative surplus or tension in their specific contexts.

2.2. Defining Narrative Tension-Generating Mechanisms of EQEs

EQEs drive spatial, quantitative, affective, or somatic dimensions toward their

threshold extremes through a mechanism of semantic polarization, thereby producing intense narrative tension and eliciting deep aesthetic resonance in target readers. Building on the theoretical framework developed above, this section aims to explicate the internal pathways through which EQEs generate these effects. Mechanistically, EQEs deploy hyper-extensional linguistic strategies that activate readers' perceptual potential, steering affective density, imagistic depth, and narrative intensity to coalesce toward an "extreme" state. The multiple convergent outcomes of this process, including affective pressure, conceptual breadth, and imagistic condensation, jointly form the textual basis for readers' perceptual identification, aesthetic shock, and emotional resonance.

To operationalize the identification of EQEs in concrete texts, that is, to determine which four-character phrases in *Red Sorghum* meet the study's definitional criteria by establishing three interrelated inclusion conditions. As Li (2003) notes, the four-character structure in Chinese encompasses not only conventional idioms but also non-fixed four-character formations, which provides the theoretical basis for distinguishing EQEs—whose extreme semantic polarization actively generates narrative tension—from ordinary quadrisyllabic idioms that tend toward semantic fossilization. First, the candidate must appear as a fixed four-character construction whose internal constituents are not freely substitutable. Second, its semantic orientation must decisively target the "maximal endpoint" along one of the four dimensions (space, quantity, affect, or bodily experience), that is, it must instantiate an absolute extreme meaning. Third, in context the expression must generate a narrative surplus beyond its literal content: it should do more than report a present state, it must provoke specific anticipatory inferences in the reader. By the same logic, three categories of expressions are excluded: items that do not attain semantic extremity; non-lexicalized "degree adverb + adjective" combinations (e.g., "very beautiful") that have not grammaticalized into fixed four-character forms; approximative quantitative expressions lacking extreme meaning (e.g., "three or four together"); and conventional idiomatic phrases that, in their immediate contexts, fail to produce narrative surplus and therefore lack narrative tensile force.

These items can be grouped into four dimensions of semantic polarization: spatial, quantitative, affective, and somatic (bodily). To ensure replicability, corpus collection followed a line-by-line screening of the complete Chinese text of *Hong gao liang jia zu* (Mo, 2012) based on the established criteria. The initial screening yielded 27 candidates, which were independently rechecked by a second researcher applying the exclusion criteria; the final corpus of 27 EQEs was established through joint discussion. Dimension assignment and strategy classification were performed by two researchers independently, with reference to Goldblatt's English translation (Mo, 2003), and were subsequently cross-checked.

As summarized in Table 1, the four polarization patterns identified in *Red Sorghum* do not operate independently as ornamental rhetoric; instead, they coordi-

nate synergistically to build layered narrative tension through four distinct pathways. Spatial polarization constructs unbounded environmental scenes to compress characters' living space and generate oppressive existential tension; quantitative polarization magnifies individual suffering into large-scale collective catastrophe through expanded scale of quantity; emotional polarization turns external brutality into personal trauma, arousing target readers' empathy and lasting psychological tension; physical polarization describes tangible bodily agony to provide embodied carriers for abstract narrative tension. Collectively, these four dimensions form a complete analytical framework that underpins the subsequent discussion of EQEs translation strategies.

Table 1. Dimensional types of narrative tension in EQEs.

Narrative Dimension	Illustrative Examples	Narrative Tension Manifestations	Narrative Effect
Space	无边无际 wu bian wu ji, 密不透风 mi bu tou feng, 铺天盖地 pu tian gai di	From spatial scale to infinity	Recreating spatial suffocation
Quantity	血流成河 Xue liu cheng he, 成千上万 cheng qian shang wan, 全军覆没 quan jun fu mo	From quantity to multiplicity	Magnifying the brutality of war
Emotion	恨之入骨 hen zhi ru gu, 咬牙切齿 yao ya qie chi, 登峰造极 deng feng zao ji	From internal emotion to extreme intensity	Amplifying emotional impact
Body	皮开肉绽 pi kai rou zhan, 尸横遍野 shi heng bian ye, 千疮百孔 qian chuang bai kong	From physical suffering to extreme threshold	Highlighting the fragility of life

3. EQEs Translation Strategies for Narrative Tension Reconstitution in *Red Sorghum*

Based on the corpus identification and classification procedures detailed in Section 2.2, this section examines Goldblatt's translational practices through a four-strategy analytical framework, with each strategy defined and operationalized as follows. Empirical studies on Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum* have characterized his overall translator behavior as exhibiting a primary orientation toward utility-attaining (i.e., reader-oriented accessibility) complemented by truth-seeking (i.e., source-oriented fidelity), a tendency driven jointly by publisher expectations for market reception and the translator's sustained attention to target reader comprehension (Bian & Jiang, 2026). This macro-level behavioral inclination provides the contextual backdrop against which the strategic choices for EQEs translation are to be understood. Within the four-dimensional polarization framework, Goldblatt's translation practices for EQEs into four core strategies are classified, each with unique effects on cross-linguistic narrative tension reconstruction.

3.1. Literal Translation: Preserving Image Conflict and Maintaining Source-Text Emotion

Literal translation applies to EQEs with cross-culturally shared imagery, retaining the original visual contrast so as to transfer narrative tension directly. When the imagery in source-text EQEs evokes scalar or sensory contrast in the target culture, Goldblatt tends to adopt literal translation. This preserves the core conflicting imagery and transfers the narrative tension to the target text. Two illustrative examples are provided below.

Source Text (ST): 伙计们挑着酒来，洒得铺天盖地。奶奶站在酒气里，抿着嘴微笑。(Chapter 2, p. 118)

Target Text (TT): So the men sprayed wine until heaven and earth were soaked. Grandma stood in the intoxicating air with a smile on her lips. (Chapter 2, p. 111)

This case exemplifies spatial polarization. In terms of source identification, the tension source of “铺天盖地 pu tian gai di” lies in imagery conflict: it juxtaposes the ultimate spatial imagery of “heaven and earth” with wine, an ordinary liquid, in an unconventional way, which creates a cognitive-level semantic disparity. Regarding its tension mechanism, the spatial boundaries set by “heaven and earth” are progressively infiltrated and occupied through the dynamic verbs “pu” (spread) and “gai” (cover), thereby generating a stepwise semantic escalation from “spraying wine” to “heaven and earth thoroughly soaked.” Goldblatt opts for literal translation, retaining the imagery combination of “heaven and earth” and “soaked” to preserve the source tension structure intact through the cross-culturally commensurable image of “ultimate spatial domain and complete saturation.” In terms of tension reconstruction, the dynamic scenario of “heaven and earth soaked in wine” obtains isomorphic activation within the English cognitive framework, thereby logically priming a horizon of expectation for subsequent plot development while simultaneously accumulating narrative momentum for Grandma’s entrance.

ST: 老子全军覆灭了，百姓血流成河啦，你们来讲联合啦！(Chapter 3, p. 181)

TT: My troops were wiped out, their blood forming a river across the land, and you come here talking about joining forces! (Chapter 3, p. 164)

This case integrates both quantitative and physical polarization. In terms of source identification, the tension source is imagery conflict: the contrast between “blood” and “river” creates a scalar mismatch within the semantic field of liquid: blood from an individual wound is minute in quantity, yet visually magnified to the massive scale of a river. The tension mechanism, however, does not depend on the noun “blood” itself, but on the dynamic mode of expansion encoded in the verb “flow”, with the shift from individual wounds to a river of blood forms a tension-building path that expands from a single point to a vast area, thereby achieving a semantic escalation from individual suffering to collective catastro-

phe. Goldblatt adopts literal translation with “their blood forming a river”, thereby fully retaining the core imagery conflict between “blood” and “river,” while adding “across the land” to extend the spatial scope of tension accumulation from the river to the entire territory. In terms of tension reconstruction, this compound operation of image retention and spatial expansion maximally releases the cross-cultural commensurability of the tension source, providing maximal semantic space for target readers to perceive the scale of quantitative devastation and the extent of bodily trauma.

3.2. Free Translation: Reconstructing Sensory Experience and Transforming Affective Atmosphere

Free translation reconstructs the holistic sensory atmosphere embedded in EQEs, utilizing target-language syntactic features to rebuild equivalent feelings of oppression for target readers. In contrast to the image-preserving logic of literal translation, free translation addresses EQEs whose tension stems from holistic sensory or embodied experience impossible to reproduce through word-for-word rendering. Breaking free from source-language formal constraints, this strategy adopts target-text supplementation, metaphor substitution and logical explication to reconstruct, and even intensify, sensory oppression and psychological suspense, thereby achieving a comparable narrative effect in the target language.

ST: 八月深秋, 无边无际的高粱红成洸洋的血海, 高粱高密辉煌, 高粱凄婉可人, 高粱爱情激荡。(Chapter 1, p. 4)

TT: In late autumn, during the eighth lunar month, vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and dense, it reeked of glory; cold and graceful, it promised enchantment; passionate and loving, it was tumultuous. (Chapter 1, p. 11)

Exemplifying spatial polarization, the tension source of the EQE “无边无际 wu bian wu ji” (boundless) stems from a structural overlay of imagery conflict and sensory atmosphere. While wubian wu ji constructs an infinitely extending physical expanse, the accompanying “sea of blood” injects a macabre death metaphor, inextricably juxtaposing spatial grandeur with horrific affective coloration. This tension mechanism operates via the semantic resonance between spatial infinity and absolute carnage, steering cognitive processing from visceral visual shock toward profound psychological reflection. In translation, Goldblatt employs “vast stretches” to map this spatial extension, while introducing “shimmered like a sea of blood” to explicate the scene’s dynamic transformation. The verb “shimmered” paradoxically endows the object with an anomalous, microscopic visual beauty that sharply contrasts with the macroscopic horror of the blood sea, effectively restructuring the tension source. Ultimately, by juxtaposing the grandiose with the horrific, the translation reconstitutes a sensory-conflict structure isomorphic to the source text, laying cognitive pathways for the sustained accumulation of affective tension in target readers.

ST: 从奶奶动身第二日就开始下起大雨，雨脚直上直下，密不透风。(Chapter 4, p. 266)

TT: On the day after her departure, the skies opened up and released a torrential rain so dense that even the wind couldn't penetrate it. (Chapter 4, p. 227)

This case epitomizes spatial polarization. The tension of “密不透风” (mì bù tòu fēng) issues from a sensory atmosphere rooted in the causal nexus of density and wind impermeability. Its mechanism is built upon degree-to-consequence semantic logic: extreme density presupposes an airtight enclosure, transmuting a natural phenomenon into fatal oppression. Goldblatt's domesticating free translation fixes “torrential rain” as the baseline intensity, “dense” as the semantic core, and the hypotactic “so...that...” construction to explicate the consequence of wind-proof density. This rendering fully retains the original causal-reasoning tension while syntactic explicitation heightens cognitive access to spatial enclosure, granting Anglophone readers an immediate cognitive entry into the oppressive atmosphere of the source.

3.3. Shift Translation: Reorienting Emotional Focus and Transmitting Core Intensity

Shift translation entails the strategic relinquishment of literal source imagery to preserve rhetorical intent and emotional intensity. Rather than a forced compromise stemming from technical untranslatability, it constitutes a deliberate departure from direct equivalence to achieve specific narrative effects. This strategy operates under three primary conditions in cases of cognitive incommensurability, narrative recalibration, syntactic integration.

ST: 爷爷是登峰造极，创造同时代文明人类长期的穴居纪录。(Chapter 3, p. 173)

TT: Granddad later outdid all the others, setting a record among civilised people of his generation for living in a cave. (Chapter 3, p. 157)

“登峰造极 Deng feng zao ji” belongs to emotional polarization. In terms of source identification, its tension source is irony: the extreme semantic disjunction between the elevated formal register of the expression and the primitive behavior of cave-dwelling. The tension mechanism, rather than deriving from literal imagery, lies in the cognitive disparity between stylistic register and referential content: the more exalted the praise, the more absurd the behaviour it ironically underscores. Notably, the literal imagery is fully commensurable in English as “reach the peak”; yet literal rendering, while retaining the imagery vehicle, would entirely eliminate the ironic tension. Goldblatt adopts shift translation, abandoning the mountain-climbing image and using “outdid all the others” to state the extremity of the act, meanwhile, the juxtaposition of “setting a record” and “living in a cave” reconstructs the conflict logic between “supreme praise” and “primitive conduct.” In terms of tension reconstruction, the rendering enables equivalent activation of

the ironic tension source, characterising cave-dwelling as “record-setting” constitutes a perceptible semantic disjunction within the English cognitive frame, encoding the author’s ambivalent narrative stance toward the grandfather.

ST: 外曾祖父抬手扇了奶奶一巴掌。奶奶腮上的红润啦一声退去，满脸都是青白。后来青白中又渐渐洩出艳色来，一个脸如同一轮初升的红太阳。奶奶明眸闪烁，咬牙切齿，冷笑一声，恶狠狠地看了她爹一眼，说：“只怕你连一根骡子毛也甭想见到！” (Chapter 2, p. 78)

TT: Great-Granddad slapped her. With a pop, the rosiness in Grandma’s cheeks vanished, leaving a pallor behind. But the colour gradually returned, and her face became the red morning sun. Her eyes shining, she clenched her teeth and sneered. Glaring hatefully at her dad, she said: “I’m just afraid...if you...then you can forget about seeing a single hair of that mule!” (Chapter 2, p. 76)

“咬牙切齿 Yao ya qie chi” falls under the category of emotional polarization. As an instance of emotional polarization, yao ya qie chi derives its tension from the externalization of psychological turbulence into somatic action, rather than literal tooth-grinding. Embedded within a physiological continuum (rosiness → pallor → flushing), it establishes narrative suspense regarding Grandma’s ultimate emotional trajectory. While English offers the idiomatic equivalent “gnashed her teeth,” Goldblatt strategically opts for “clenched her teeth.” “Gnashed” would flatten the tension into one-dimensional rage, obscuring Grandma’s transition from suppressed humiliation to resolute resistance. Conversely, “clenched” transposes overt fury into restrained endurance. By internalizing aggression into a nuanced somatic response, this shift translation preserves the core conversion mechanism, recalibrates emotional intensity, and sustains the suspense surrounding her psychological turning point.

3.4. Idiomatic Translation: Replacing Cultural Vehicles to Achieve Psychological Equivalence

Idiomatic translation substitutes culture-specific EQEs metaphors with target-language idioms of matching emotional magnitude, eliminating cross-cultural comprehension barriers. The final translational strategy, idiomatic translation, addresses EQEs that carry extreme emotional meaning through culturally exclusive metaphors that fail to resonate with target readers under literal rendering. This method discards source-language literal imagery and replaces it with target fixed expressions that differ in visual carrier yet identical in functional effect and emotional intensity, thus evoking a comparable psychological response in target readers.

ST: 罗汉大爷迎着朝霞，向那两头大黑骡子走去。他对黑骡恨之入骨。(Chapter 1, p. 21)

TT: Uncle Arhat walked up to the mules, the rosy colour of dawn in his eyes and bitter loathing in his heart. (Chapter 1, p. 27)

“恨之入骨 *Hen zhi ru gu*” belongs to emotional polarization. In terms of source identification, the tension source is imagery conflict: the unconventional combination of “hatred” with “bone” constitutes a cross-domain mapping from abstract emotion to material vehicle. The tension mechanism consists in anchoring unquantifiable emotional intensity onto a perceptible bodily part, thereby achieving extreme expression of emotion. However, unlike in Chinese, “bone” does not carry the metaphorical implication of extreme emotion in English cognitive conventions. Therefore, a literal translation like “hate into the bone”, though retaining the original imagery carrier, cannot arouse equivalent narrative tension. Goldblatt adopts idiomatic translation with “bitter loathing in his heart” as a functional substitute: “bitter” delivers a corrosive sensory quality, “loathing” conveys extreme disgust, and “in his heart” anchors the emotion in English’s conventional emotional container. In terms of tension reconstruction, the rendering reconstructs a functionally equivalent tension-source structure in the target language through triple substitution, establishing an elevated threshold of reading expectation for target readers.

ST: 他们杀人越货，精忠报国，他们演出过一幕幕英勇悲壮的舞剧，使我们这些活着的不肖子孙相形见绌。(Chapter 1, p. 5)

TT: They killed, they looted, and they defended their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison. (Chapter 1, p. 11)

“精忠报国 *Jing zhong bao guo*” falls under emotional polarization. In terms of source identification, its tension sources present a dual overlay of irony and suspense: “they killed and looted” has accumulated moral-negative potential, whereas “*jing zhong bao guo*” collides with it as a maximally positive formulation, with the semantic disjunction constituting ironic tension. Simultaneously, this juxtaposition generates suspense at the narrative level: how can the same people be both murderous looters and loyal patriots? The tension mechanism manifests as a sustained process of cognitive adjustment, as readers negotiate the semantic gap between “utmost evil” and “utmost loyalty.” English lacks a conceptual vehicle fully equivalent to the cultural semantics of “*jing zhong bao guo*.” Goldblatt adopts creative idiomatic translation: “defended their country” specifies the core patriotic act, “valiant” and “stirring” inject emotional intensity, and “ballet” replaces the original “dance-drama,” leveraging Western cultural associations with grand theatrical narratives. In terms of tension reconstruction, the rendering reconstructs the semantic conflict between “utmost evil” and “utmost loyalty” in the target language, achieving equivalent activation of the dual tension sources of irony and suspense.

4. The Synergistic Mechanism between EQEs and Narrative Tension

Based on the foregoing analysis of Goldblatt’s translational practices, this section further probes the intrinsic correlation between EQEs and narrative tension

through a cross-tabulation of translation strategies against narrative tension phases across the 27 validated EQE instances in **Table 2**, thereby illuminating the systematic correspondences between strategic choice and tension progression.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of translation strategies and narrative tension phases (N = 27).

Tension Phase	Literal Translation (n/%)	Free Translation (n/%)	Shift Translation (n/%)	Idiomatic Translation (n/%)
Organization	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)
Accumulation	4 (36.4%)	4 (36.4%)	1 (9.1%)	2 (18.2%)
Resolution	1 (8.3%)	2 (16.7%)	3 (25%)	6 (50%)
Total	7 (25.9%)	7 (25.9%)	4 (14.8%)	9 (33.3%)

As shown in **Table 2**, translation strategies exhibit phase-specific distribution patterns. In the organization phase (n = 4), literal translation predominates (50%), suggesting a tendency to preserve source imagery at the initial stage of tension establishment. In the accumulation phase (n = 11), literal and free translation are equally weighted (36.4% each), indicating a balanced deployment of image retention and perceptual reconstruction for progressive tension building. In the resolution phase (n = 12), idiomatic and shift translation together account for 75% of instances, while literal translation drops to 8.3%, revealing a marked strategic shift toward domestication at moments of emotional climax. Notably, all four shift-translation cases occur exclusively in this phase, suggesting that prioritizing rhetorical intent over imagistic retention is a phase-specific strategy rather than a universal hierarchy of translation methods.

These patterns situate the present analysis within the broader landscape of four-character translation studies. Such research has followed two parallel trajectories: descriptive work that catalogs translation strategies and techniques, and explanatory research that probes the underlying cognitive and generative mechanisms (Lv & Xi, 2009). By moving beyond a mere catalog of Goldblatt's strategic choices to investigate the internal logic governing their distribution across different narrative tension phases, this study aligns with the explanatory tradition, asking not only what strategies are used, but why specific strategies cluster at organization, accumulation, and resolution stages respectively.

Three principles emerge from these patterns. First, linguistic form correspond to the evolution of narrative tension: structural symmetry and fronted modifiers are prominent in the organization phase; semantic layering drives accumulation; and metaphorical rupture with polarity inversion enable resolution. Second, translation strategy correlates with tension phase: literal translation predominates in organization, literal and free translation balance in accumulation, and idiomatic and shift translation concentrate in resolution. Third, the four strategies operate complementarily rather than exclusively: their synergy, calibrated to the evolving demands of each tension phase, jointly sustains cross-linguistic narrative equivalence.

5. Conclusion

English translation of EQEs transcends superficial semantic transfer, operating instead as a narrative-driven act of literary recreation. A textual analysis of Goldblatt's *Red Sorghum* reveals a strategic synergy among literal, free, shift, and idiomatic translation approaches, which collectively drive narrative tension across three sequential phases: organization (establishing semantic anchors via structural symmetry), accumulation (escalating intensity through iterative deployment and layered coding), and resolution (achieving emotional catharsis via metaphorical subversion).

This tripartite dynamic is underpinned by two interwoven linguistic mechanisms. Cognitively, EQEs operate as compact perceptual units. Their structural density reduces cognitive load and quickens the narrative pace, while successive clusters of EQEs create a continuous channel for building tension. Structurally, from a construction grammar perspective, an isomorphic alignment exists between the intrinsic compression-release rhythm of EQEs and the broader accumulation-release logic of the narrative. Goldblatt's translations succeed by structurally accommodating this isomorphism, transmuting the transient perceptual shocks of isolated four-character phrases into sustained emotional resonance within the target text.

Consequently, these findings extend beyond the specific case of *Red Sorghum*. These findings confirm that translating culturally laden, highly conventionalized rhetorical devices requires moving beyond lexical equivalence toward a systematic, multi-strategy approach to tension reconstruction. By successfully re-encoding the source text's aesthetic and emotional dynamics into the target cognitive frame, Goldblatt's praxis offers a paradigmatic model for the global dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature. At a broader level, the present study corroborates existing macro-level inquiries into the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature, which have identified Goldblatt's practice as a recurrent reference point for examining translator agency and reception strategies (Wang & Wang, 2015). By demonstrating how EQEs are systematically recalibrated across narrative phases to sustain emotional equivalence, the present analysis adds a narratological dimension to such frameworks. It thereby suggests that the effectiveness of Goldblatt's model lies not merely in strategic flexibility, but in the systematic reconstruction of narrative mechanics.

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ceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing—original draft, Case analysis. Mingyang Du: Validation, Supervision.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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