

## “DARE TO THINK, DARE TO SPEAK, DARE TO ACT”: TRANSLATING POLITICAL SLOGANS IN MO YAN’S *FROG* FROM CHINESE INTO ROMANIAN, ITALIAN AND SPANISH

Mugur ZLOTEA<sup>1</sup>

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### **ABSTRACT.** *Dare to Think, Dare to Speak, Dare to Act*<sup>2</sup> - *Translating Political Slogans in Mo Yan’s Frog from Chinese into Romanian, Italian and Spanish.*

Slogans are some of the most typical elements of Chinese politics and a significant part of the important decisions took by the Communist Party are made known to the masses using slogans, such as “It is right to rebel!”, “Destroy the four olds!”, or “The most serious problem is to teach the peasants”. Participation in political life after the founding of the People’s Republic, in 1949, could be done only by employing slogans or formulae derived from the elite political discourse. The major impact of politics upon people’s lives has transformed the slogan from a manifestation of political authority into a manipulation tool used by people to make their counterparts react in a desired way. Mo Yan’s novel *Frog* (*Wa/Broaște/Rana/Le rane*) shows to what extent slogans can influence ordinary people’s lives, where the use of real political slogans or even make-believe slogans – discourse modeled to resemble a political slogan –, are either attempts by the characters to make their voices

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<sup>1</sup> **Mugur ZLOTEA** is currently an Associate Professor of Chinese at the University of Bucharest. He got his B.A. and M.A. at Beijing Language and Culture University, in China, followed by a Ph.D. at the University of Bucharest. His areas of interest are contemporary Chinese society, elite political discourse, the role of tradition within modern Chinese society and translation studies. He is also a translator of Chinese literature and history from Chinese and English into Romanian. E-mail: mugur.zlotea@g.unibuc.ro

<sup>2</sup> “Dare to think, dare to speak, dare to act” (*gan xiang, gan shuo, gan zuo* 敢想敢说敢做), which later became a slogan, was initially used by Mao Zedong in his *Talks at the Wuchang Conference*, on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958. Talking about eradicating superstitions, Mao said: “[T]he effects have been extremely great: [we] have dared to think, dared to speak, and dared to act.” The full Chinese text is available at <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/mia-chinese-mao-195811.htm>. The quotation in English comes from *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, edited by Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, p. 514, Harvard Contemporary China Series: 6.

heard and participate into decision making, or small acts of rebellion against the system. Considering the culture specific character of the slogans, the fact that they were created into a very particular socio-political context, the paper analyzes the translations of the slogans in Mo Yan's novel into three Romance languages, in an attempt to identify not only the techniques and the choices made by the translators, but also the possibility, or impossibility, to recreate the slogan and conserve its original impact into the target culture.

**Keywords:** *political slogan, ideology, translation, Cultural Revolution, Mo Yan*

**REZUMAT.** *Îndrăznește să gândești, îndrăznește să vorbești, îndrăznește să acționezi. Traducerea sloganelor politice în romanul Broaște de Mo Yan, din chineză în română, italiană și spaniolă.* Utilizarea sloganelor este una dintre trăsăturile definitorii ale politicii chineze, cele mai importante decizii ale partidului fiind adesea comunicate maselor sub formă de slogane, ca de exemplu celebrele „E corect să te revolți!”, „Distrugeți cele patru vechituri!” sau „Să educi țărani este o problemă foarte serioasă”. După fondarea Republicii Populare în 1949, participarea la viața politică nu se mai poate face decât prin intermediul sloganului sau a formulelor fixe derivate din discursurile elitelor partidului. Importanța majoră a factorului politic asupra vieții cotidiene a transformat sloganul dintr-o formă de manifestare a autorității într-un instrument de manipulare utilizat de omenii de rând pentru a-i determina pe receptori să acționeze în felul dorit. Romanul *Broaște*, (*Wa/Rana/Le rane*) al scriitorului chinez Mo Yan, laureatul premiului Nobel, reflectă impactul sloganului asupra vieții omului de rând. Utilizarea sloganelor reale sau a pseudo-sloganelor – organizarea discursului după modelul sloganelor politice –, de către personajele din roman sunt fie încercări de a se face auzite, de a lua parte la deciziile politice, fie mici acte de răzvrătire împotriva sistemului. Ținând cont de caracterul local al sloganelor politice, lucrarea analizează traducerea acestora în trei limbi romane cu scopul de a identifica tehnicile de traducere folosite, alegerile pe care le-au făcut traducătorii, precum și posibilitatea sau imposibilitatea recreării în cultura gazdă a impactul unui slogan în cultura sursă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *slogan, ideologie, traducere, Revoluția Culturală, Mo Yan*

## Introduction

Slogans are nothing new to Chinese politics, no matter if we talk about classical or modern China, where for thousands of years, politics has been an integrant part of people's lives. For almost two millennia, the imperial China was governed according to Confucian principles, an all-encompassing ideology

that regulated not only governance, but also family life and individual behavior. After the fall of the last dynasty in 1911, and especially after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, things did not change much when it came to the impact of politics upon private life, with Mao Zedong’s campaigns, or Deng Xiaoping’s demographic policies as examples.

The most important ideas which stood at the base of the regimes, no matter whether imperial or republican, have been communicated to the masses as fixed formulae or slogans, short utterances either directly clipped out of classical texts or communist speeches, or inspired by these. One of the main texts used in the imperial China to teach children to read or write was *The Three Character Classic*, (*San zi jing* 三字经)<sup>3</sup>, in which the basic features of the Confucian thinking was taught in three-character formulae, with rhyme and easy to remember. Even today, it is not uncommon to meet people, young or old, who can recite at least the beginning of the *Classic*: “Men at their birth are naturally good. Their natures are much the same; their habits become widely different.”<sup>4</sup> With such a rich and text-dependent tradition, it seemed absolutely natural that the newly formed Communist party would be very much “party of the word” (Apter & Saich 1994, x). In spite of the anti-traditional rhetoric of the Communist party, most of its leading figures in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were intellectuals educated in a Confucian way, and therefore the use of slogans and slogan-like formulae came naturally to them. Of course, the fact that at the beginning, the new Communist ideology targeted mainly uneducated peasants helped a lot, because short-rhymed slogans were the easiest way to reach them.

The numerous political campaigns that characterized Chinese society during the second half of the past century meant that no aspect of private life was shielded from politics. The continuous bombardment of the people with slogans, in the newspapers, on the radio, or written on walls resulted in slogans creeping from the public discourse into the private one, reaching its climax during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), just as Yu Hua remembered in his *China in ten words*:

That was a characteristic of the Cultural Revolution era: no matter whether it was an argument between rebels or between Red Guards or simply a row between housewives, the final victor would always come out with something Mao Zedong had said, so as to crush their opponent and bring the argument to an end (Yu Hua 2011, 101-102).

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<sup>3</sup> According to *Cihai*, the text was written at the end of the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279) and it is attributed to either Wang Yinglin or Ou Shizi.

<sup>4</sup> Translated into English by Herbert Giles. Full text in Chinese and English available at <https://ccontext.org/three-character-classic>.

The invasion of the slogan into the private discourse is very much present in Mo Yan's novel *Frog*. The story carries the reader through almost seventy years of recent Chinese history, from the decade before the founding of the People's Republic up to beginning of the new millennium, through *gugu's* life, the narrator's great aunt. The daughter of a Communist military doctor, *gugu* follows in her father's steps becoming a midwife and delivering thousands of babies, until her fiancé defects to Taiwan and she is accused of conspiracy. After her rehabilitation, the aunt works with even more dedication to prove her loyalty to the party, following the party's orders and becoming by the end the feared enforcer of its draconic demographic policy.

### The slogan

There is nothing particularly Chinese in using slogans, they exist and have been used successfully in all cultures (Denton 1980; Lu 1999; Newsome 2002). The word itself derives from the Gaelic "slaughghairm" meaning "battle-cry" (Sharp *apud* Lu 1999).

The Chinese have always attached a significant importance to language, especially to the written word, believing that it can affect the well-being of the society. Confucians talked about "the correct naming" (正名 *zheng ming*), meaning that the relation between the name and the referent was not arbitrary, it reflected the natural order, and thus to name was to arrange the world in a certain order, to act upon it. Confucius makes this very clear in his *Analects*: "If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished" (Confucius 2003, 139). In a speech made in 1963, in Hangzhou, Mao could not agree more: "A word can rejuvenate a country, a word can destroy a country. It is the mind changing into the material" (Mao 1968, 52).<sup>5</sup> Controlling the speech and imposing on people what Schoenhals (1992) calls a "formalized language" ultimately means telling people how to think.

In China, the correct words have always been imposed upon the masses from above. In the old days, it was the duty of the Confucian scholars to explain the wisdom of the sages to the commoners and make sure they acted accordingly. The new China came with a new set of classics, the red ones, but they were as inaccessible to the people as those of the ancient times, and just as

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<sup>5</sup> Mao stated this in his speech in Hangzhou, in May 1963. The speech was included in one of the Read Guards' publications, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (*Long live Mao Zedong thought!*), the fifth volume, containing speeches made between January 1961 and March 1968. The five volumes were published in 1968 in Wuhan as "material for internal study, not to be made public" (*neibu xuexi, bu de waizhuan* 内部学习, 不得外传).

before they needed to be explained. Reality was organized based on the knowledge the new "keepers of the truth" shared with the masses and most of the times this knowledge came encoded in shapes easy to remember.

If the use is universal, the slogans themselves are culture specific. According to Denton (1980), slogans are dynamic statements which evoke emotional non-rational responses, with persuasive functions, operating as "social symbols" shared by a community. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Lu (1999) considers that the continuous use of slogans in China, especially during the decades of Mao's rule, resulted in a "lack of conceptual clarity", people having troubles to think for themselves, going as far as using slogans and formulae even in private conversations. Her view echoes that McGee's (1980) who saw "ideographs"<sup>6</sup> as taken by people for granted, something that never had their validity questioned, and Newsome's (2002) for whom using the slogans was an expression of consent: "Slogans can come to characterize the ideas of those who use it" (2002: 22).

However, the education level and the exposure of the subjects to other ideological systems might affect the persuasive function of a slogan, and it does not affect all the recipients equally, even if they belong to the same community. Song and Gee (2020) observe that in China, the Communist Party made slogans talking about shared values and goals "a leading form of political communication" (2020: 205). Slogans created and imposed top-down can make at least some of the people look at slogans with suspicion, because they feel that policies are imposed upon them. During the turbulent decades under Mao, people were basically forced to talk in slogans, since using the wrong word could have huge repercussions.<sup>7</sup> Things changed after Mao's death; not using the formulae did not automatically make people "counterrevolutionaries", but it made it impossible for their voice to be heard. The party discourse on various aspects with direct impact upon people's life abounds in slogans or slogan-like formulae:

This does not mean that all speakers are forced to use the formulae, but the ability to demonstrate one's mastery of "ideological literacy" (Yurchak 2006) is also a matter of identity and it proves one's belonging to the dominant group, it permits the access to a community bond not necessarily by shared beliefs, but by a common language (Zlotea 2020, 327).

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<sup>6</sup> For McGee, "ideographs" are "the building blocks of ideology" which "signify and contains a unique ideological commitment" (1980: 7). Slogans belong to this category.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Hua recalls in his *China in ten words* how two of his former classmates in the primary school were labeled "little counterrevolutionaries". One joked about Marx being a woman because he had long hair, and the other one had folded a portrait of Mao's and as a result a cross appeared on Mao's face. He also mentioned a three-year old criticized as "counterrevolutionary" because he had said "The sun went down" instead of "It's getting dark", and Mao was always compared to the sun.

In other words, content could sometimes be less important than form. As long as what you say does not overtly contradict the official policies, the way you say is likely the key to be heard. To participate in political life means to make those around you believe that what you say is what the party says and thus they will not question it. Slogans are used as justifications for actions, as Lu (1999) points out, and they are meant to persuade the members of the community that it is the only right way to act.

The Chinese slogans we are going to analyze are brief utterances either taken directly from a political speech belonging or attributed mainly to Mao Zedong, or modelled to resemble this type of discourse, and reflect principles or policies of the Communist Party. They are succinct, reflect a single policy, emphasize a certain value, use simple words so they can be easily understood by anybody regardless of their education level, are rhythmical, easy to remember and repeat. To keep them short and increase their emotional charge, slogans employ superlatives, parallelisms, syntactic or semantic ellipsis, abound in illocutionary, perlocutionary and modal verbs, and if they consist of more than one short utterance, the structure is often repetitive.

### **Translating slogans**

Strictly speaking, slogan translation enters under the larger frame of political text translation. However, the slogans analyzed here cannot be treated as pure political discourse, since they are an integrant part of a literary text. This distinction is pertinent because, although the slogans retain their characteristics and are identified as originating in political discourse, they can be translated as literary texts, which allows the translator more freedom.

The origins of the political slogans in China, mainly speeches by the top party leaders, associate the slogan with the leader himself and bestows upon it the same aura of "holiness". This results in the slogan being treated almost as a "sacred" text, and nobody is allowed to make any changes. Cheng Zhenqiu, one of the senior English language translators responsible for supervising the translation of the collected works by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, mentions in one of his essays: "In political translation, we should try our best to be faithful to both the letter and the spirit of the original text" (Cheng 2002, 197). The reason behind this is not only that when doing political translation, a mistranslated word might have very serious consequences, but considering Mao's China, when the ruler was venerated as the shining sun, the mother and father of the people, the translator simply disappears, he or she must be nothing else than the tongue or the hand of the ruler and no degree of self-awareness, no matter how insignificant, is acceptable.

On the other hand, the sensitivity of a political text is not based solely on the choice of words, it is the function of the text that adds to its sensitivity, the impact it has upon its public. Interpreting the text from a certain perspective, according to a certain ideology has very much to do with the background information (Schäffner 1997). In this case, the translator must pay close attention to the function of the text in the source culture, because it can change in the target culture where the background information for decoding correctly a slogan might be missing. The functionalist approach could be the right approach to this type of text, meaning that the translator should consider the text within the much larger picture of the source culture and try to recreate it into the target culture in such a way that it maintains its original function as much as possible. Just as Nord (2018) was pointing out, literary texts use ordinary language, it is the readers who interpret them as literary. Slogans function the same way, so the translator should lead the reader in such a way that he/she can read the text as political. When translating slogans, the translator can act in a more dynamic way, in the sense that, while preserving the original message, he/she must pay additional attention to form, because it can signal the correct way of reading, making up for the reader's limited background knowledge.

Our analysis will consider the source text to the target text both from a linguistic and a functional perspective. We will compare the slogans in Mo Yan's *Frog* to their translation into Romanian, Italian and Spanish to identify the translation methods employed by the translators, difficulties they faced and how much of the original function could be preserved in the translated text.

While academic literature regarding the translation of political texts into and from Chinese is not at all scarce, when it comes to slogan translation, things could not be more different. The vast majority of the papers researching slogan translation stay clear of political slogans and deal exclusively with commercial ones. There are some papers which analyze the translation of slogans used by various institutions for tourism, welfare, security, etc., (Lim and Loi 2015), or include some social slogans into their wider analysis of public signs, (Wu 2006, Zhang 2009, Ko 2012). Political slogans are occasionally discussed in papers about political terms (Cui 2012, Huang 2017, Chen and Zhao 2018). We could find only one article focusing on the translation of political slogans, (Dou and Zhu 2013). In this article, Dou and Zhu list a number of Chinese scholars writing on slogans, however, these articles are either related to non-political slogans, or compare the characteristics of the slogan in Chinese and American politics. The explanation is given by the authors when mentioning Lu Xing's study (1999): "Since the study involves ideology, a quite sensitive topic, this essay does not provide much insight to the study of this thesis" (Dou and Zhu 2013, 692).

### Mo Yan's *Frog* in Romanian, Italian and Spanish

Mo Yan's novel *Frog* was first published in 2009, at the Shanghai Literature and Arts Publishing House (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe) and concentrates upon China's demographic policy, following a midwife's life, first during Mao Zedong's rule when she helped delivering babies, and later on, during Deng Xiaoping's draconic one-child policy, when she turned into one of its the most fervent supporters, doing her best to lower the birth-rate. Political slogans were widely used during these years to convince the masses to follow and support party's decisions.

Out of the three translations, the one in Spanish, *Rana*, was the first to come on the market. Published in 2011, the novel appeared at Kailas Editorial, in Madrid, translated by Li Yifan. Liu (2020) mentions that it was the first novel by Mo Yan translated into Spanish directly from Chinese and not a retranslation from English, as it had been previously done. According to the information on the copyright page, the novel was translated after a 2010 edition, probably the one published in Taiwan at Rye Field Publishing Co. (Maitian chubanshe).<sup>8</sup> The Spanish translation is the only one done by a non-native speaker and, unfortunately, it is not complete either. For reasons unknown, the final chapter of the first part, (part one, chapter 15), which describes events during the Cultural Revolution and which contains the highest number of slogans in the book, was totally omitted. According to Ku (2020), Li Yifan works as a translator for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and he is a member of the Translators Association of China.

The Italian version, *Le rane*, was published in 2013, at Einaudi in Torino and was translated by Patrizia Liberati, after the first 2009 Chinese edition. Patrizia Liberati got her Chinese Studies diploma at SOAS, in 1990, and she has been living in Beijing ever since, working in the Italian Cultural Institute. She is a prolific translator of Chinese literature in Italian.<sup>9</sup>

The Romanian *Broaște* appeared in 2014, at Humanitas Fiction in Bucharest, translated by Florentina Vișan. It is also based on the first 2009 Chinese edition. Florentina Vișan is an Emeritus Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Bucharest. She has translated Chinese classical poetry and philosophy, as well as Chinese modern fiction.

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<sup>8</sup> The novel had many editions on the mainland, but none in 2010. See [https://baike.baidu.com/item/蛙/4544779#6\\_1](https://baike.baidu.com/item/蛙/4544779#6_1) in Chinese. Liu (2020) and Ku (2020) also list the Taiwanese edition in their Bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> Information available on the Officina di Traduzione Permanente website, [https://officina.formazione.unimib.it/team\\_item/patrizia-liberati/](https://officina.formazione.unimib.it/team_item/patrizia-liberati/), and Istituto Italiano di Cultura – Pechino, at [https://iicpechino.esteri.it/iic\\_pechino/it/chi-siamo/lo-staff\\_1.html](https://iicpechino.esteri.it/iic_pechino/it/chi-siamo/lo-staff_1.html).



## Slogans and their translation in Mo Yan’s *Frog*

From a larger perspective, there are two approaches available to the translator, either literal translation, or free translation, and there is no rule when to apply one or the other.

There are not too many instances of literal translations, meaning that the translator tried to replicate the source text into the target text with as little changes as possible, in any of the three texts analyzed. Although the translators are expected to stick very close to the source when dealing with a political text, slogans tend to resist literal translation, because their very succinct nature would make them sound unnatural, foreign, and would obscure their function.

Even so, there are a few instances of literal translation:

(1) 我们到达那里时喇叭里正播放着“语录歌”：马克思主义的道理，千头万绪，归根结底，就是一句话，造反有理——造反有理——<sup>10</sup> (68)

Quando arrivammo, stavano trasmettendo *Il canto delle citazioni del Presidente*: «Il marxismo comprende numerosi principi che, in sintesi, si racchiudono in una frase sola: *ribellarsi è giusto... ribellarsi è giusto...*» (137)

Când am ajuns, din ele răsună *Cântecul Citatelor*: „Adevărul marxismului este complicat, dar până la urmă se poate rezuma așa: *e drept să te revolți, să te revolți e drept...*” (83)

*The Song of Chairman Mao’s Quotations* contains fragments of Mao’s speeches included in the famous *Red Book*. This particular line comes from one of his speeches in 1939 celebrating Stalin’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and it includes one of the most famous slogans of the Cultural Revolution: “To rebel is justified!”, also used by Mao in a letter sent to the Red Guards at the Tsinghua Highschool, in 1966 (Mao 1998, 87).

Example (1) comes from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first part which was not included in the Spanish version. Both the Italian and Romanian translators identified the slogan and translated it just as it is in Chinese. A short search on Italian language texts about the period also came up with the same translation of the slogan. Even if there is a different word-order between the first and the second slogan in Romanian, the first one places the subject-clause after the predicate, which is the preferred order in Romanian (Pană Dindelegan 2013, 119), while the second one places the subject-clause before the predicate with an emphatic result, the slogan is conserved and easy to recognize.

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<sup>10</sup> My emphasis, unless otherwise indicated.

(2) 这是对当时流行口号的一种图解——把阶级敌人打翻在地，再踏上一只脚... (69)

Tot spectacolul acesta însemna aplicarea unei lozinci răspândite: „Să punem la pământ dușmanii poporului și să-i călcăm în picioare”. (85)

The slogan comes from Mao's *Hunan Report* where he talks about peasants “striking the landlord down to the dust and keeping him there” (Mao 1927). The line was used during the Cultural Revolution either without an explicit verbal object (“strike [them] down and step on them”), or with a specific one, depending on the context, as in the example above where the “landlord” was replaced by “class enemies”, (translated into Romanian as “people’s enemies”). Same as above, this fragment does not exist in the Spanish translation. In Italian, it is translated as following:

[U]n'interpretazione scenica degli slogan del tempo – *che aveva gettato nella polvere il nemico di classe, se l'era messo sotto i piedi* ... (141)

In all languages, the reader is warned that what follows is a slogan, because it is introduced as such: “the performance of a popular slogan of the day”. In Chinese and Romanian, it is also marked by punctuation, a dash in Chinese, colon and quotation marks in Romanian, isolating it from the text and bringing it closer to the direct speech; the Italian translator kept the dash, but introduced it through a relative pronoun, making it an explanation of the “slogan del tempo” and including it the reported speech. The choice of verb tenses also differs in the two Romance languages – subjunctive (*conjunctiv*) in Romanian, with imperative value (Pană Dindelegan 2013, 45), and past perfect (*trepassato prossimo*) in Italian, used to describe past narratives (Maiden and Robustelli 2013, 295).

(3) 破坏计划生育就是反革命! (59)

Boicottare la pianificazione familiare è un atto controrivoluzionario! (119)

Sabotarea planificării familiale este un act contrarevoluționar! (73)

¡Negarse a la planificación familiar se puede considerar una acción antirrevolucionaria! (85)

Example (3) is not a real slogan, but it can be perceived as one. It employs a frame reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, “violating [an official policy] is a contrarevolutionary act”, it is short, imperative and sounds very

much as coming from an official document, and the fact that it is uttered angrily by the party secretary in a diatribe against those opposing vasectomy adds to its credibility. The Italian and Romanian translators opted for a direct translation using the present tense, preserving its slogan-like character. In Spanish, the translator's choices softened the message and translated it more as a warning than a slogan. "Negarse", defined in DLE as "excusarse de hacer algo" lacks the agency of "boicotear" or "sabotear", the equivalents used in Italian and Romanian, while "poder" followed by infinitive implies possibility and, by extension, choice (Batchelor and San José 2010, 233).

Example (4) is also close to a literal translation adapted to the grammatical features of the target language.

(4) 政府提出口号：一个不少，两个正好，三个多了。(54)

Il governo lanciò lo slogan: *uno non è poco, due sono giusti, tre sono troppi*. (108)

Guvernul a lansat lozincă: „*Unul nu-i puțin, doi e potrivit, trei e depășit*”. (67)

El Gobierno elaboró un nuevo eslogan: «*Uno no es poco, dos son suficientes, tres son demasiados*». (78)

Faithful to the source text, all the three translators announced their readers that what follows after the colon is a slogan. All of them follow the original structure: three short sentences, one negative, two affirmative. The main difference are the lexical choices, especially in the second sentence. The Chinese 正好 *zheng hao* ("just right") is much closer to the Italian "giusto" and the Romanian "potrivit", than to the Spanish "suficiente". The Romanian translation also preserves the rhyme, moving it from the first two sentences (少 *shao* - 好 *hao*) to the last two (*potrivit* - *depășit*) and the rhythm coming from the same number of syllables, 4 - 4 - 4 in Chinese, 3 - 3 - 3 in Romanian, ("nu-i" is pronounced in one syllable).

Literal translation is generally not the first choice of the translators, they opting, most of the time, for a freer approach, involving amplification by adding missing information, omissions by leaving certain parts out, paraphrasing, such as in the Italian translation in example (2), or to a bigger extent in the Spanish translation example (3), repetitions, restructuring, simplifying or specifying by narrowing down the original context choosing either more general, or more specific concepts.

(5) 把“牛鬼蛇神”拉上台来！(69)

Să fie aduși pe scenă *ticăloșii* ... (84)

Portate sul palco i *demoni mucca e gli spiriti serpente!* (140)

“Cow demons and snake spirits” (牛鬼蛇神 *niu gui she shen*) was a pejorative term originating in classical Chinese poetry, first used by Mao in 1955, and later by the Politburo member Chen Boda in a 1966 article entitled “Sweeping away all the monsters and demons”, transforming it in one of the recurrent slogans of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Mo Yan did not use it as a slogan *per se* and placed the slogan between quotation marks. He used to characterize people who were in no way “class enemies”, such as *gugu*, the narrator’s aunt, suggesting the absurdity of the whole situation, but even so, its origins as a slogan cannot be lost on the Chinese reader. The verbs collocating with it indicate violence, the enemies are “dragged up the stage” and then, a few lines below, “sent off the stage under escort”<sup>12</sup>, as if taken into custody, echoing the original call of “sweeping them away”. The Italian translation preserves the term, even if it does not sound very natural to the reader, but it is this very unusual nature that can signal the Italian reader its special usage; the Romanian one opts for simplification, replacing it with the more general “*ticăloși*” (villains). The fragment is totally omitted in Spanish.

(6) “破四旧”战斗队 (192)

la squadra di lotta contro i «*quattro vecchiumi*» (361)

brigada de luptă contra „*celor patru vechituri*” (214)

la Brigada de Destrucción de “*cuatro objetos históricos antiguos*” (224)

In example (6), the name of the struggle corps is a slogan, “Destroy the four olds”, again, one of the most common of the time. Used by the Red Guards, the “four olds” referred to the “old ideas, old customs, old habits and old culture”, in a word, to all that was related to the imperial Chinese tradition and needed to be destroyed, in order to build a new socialist society. None of the three translators chose to keep the slogan.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/牛鬼蛇神/3333436>.

<sup>12</sup> In Chinese, “to detain” (translated by Goldblatt in English as “sent off under escort”) (押) is homophonous with “to press” (压), *ya*, and sometimes even used instead of “to press”.

<sup>13</sup> It is however preserved in Goldblatt’s English translation - “the ‘Down with the Four Olds’ struggle corps” (e-book, p. 379).

In most common translation of this slogan in Italian is “distruggere i quattro vecchi”, but here the translator chose “vecchiumi”, adding a pejorative meaning to it, and opting to replace the original verb “destroy” with the preposition “contro” (against). The same did her Romanian colleague by choosing “vechituri” and the preposition “contra”; in addition to that, the Romanian translator added a footnote explaining about the four olds. The Spanish translator omitted the noun “fight”, (which required the prepositions above), there is no “brigada de lucha (contra)”, translating the verb “destruir” as a noun, “destrucción”. However, he felt the need to explain the “four old” by adding a lot of information. Instead of “cuatro viejos” or “cuatro antiguos”, the usual rendering into Spanish, he chose to over-translate, without making the text any clearer.

Many of the slogans included in the novel are marked as such by Mo Yan. They are often preceded by “President Mao said”, followed by a colon, and end with an exclamation mark, as in examples (7) and (8).

(7) 伟大领袖毛主席教导我们：人类要控制自己，做到有计划的增长  
.....(102)

Il nostro grande dirigente, il Presidente Mao, ci insegna *che l’umanità deve controllare le nascite e crescere secondo i piani...* (199)

Mărețul nostru conducător, președintele Mao, ne-a arătat că *creșterea demografică a omenirii trebuie controlată și că e bine să alegem o creștere planificată...* (120)

El grandioso Presidente Mao nos ha enseñado *que el ser humano debe controlarse a sí mismo y hacer caso de la planificación familiar...* (122)

None of the three translators felt the need to preserve the slogans, probably due to the verb 教导 *jiaodao* (to guide) translated as “to teach” in Italian and Spanish, and “to show” in Romanian. The slogans sound more as pieces of advice, a good path to follow, rather than a strong obligation. The modal verbs also allow for this reading.

Example (7) is a statement belonging to the narrator’s aunt who utters it in a grave and loud voice. It is not very clear if the lines really belong to Mao, but it is not relevant, because if the audience believe they do, they function as a slogan. As a matter of fact, example (8) which is a fragment from the dialogue between the narrator’s aunt and his mother, contains pseudo-slogans. It is an argument between the two women framed in Maoist make-believe slogans:

(8) 毛主席说：人口非控制不可！ [...] 毛主席说：人多力量大，人多好办事，人是活宝，有人有世界！ (56)

[Il Presidente] ha detto che è *imperativo limitare la crescita demografica!*  
[...]

Il Presidente Mao ha anche detto: «*Piú siamo numerosi, piú siamo forti, piú siamo e meglio si lavora, il popolo è prezioso, il mondo esiste perché ci sono gli uomini!*» (111-2)

[Președintele Mao] a spus: „*Trebuie musai să controlăm creșterea populației!*  
[...]

Da, dar a zis și că, *atunci când suntem mulți, avem putere și putem împlini mai bine opera noastră, că oamenii sunt o comoară vie, că atâta vreme cât sunt oameni, lumea va dăinui.* (69)

El Presidente dijo: «*No podemos dejar que la población se dispare sin medida!* [...]

—El Presidente también dijo que *la fuerza reside en los seres humanos* — replicó entonces mi madre—, *que el verdadero tesoro está escondido en la población, que los hombres construyen este mundo.* (81)

The narrator's mother and his aunt argue about the demographic policy. The mother tries to use historical and tactical reasons for a woman to have as many children as possible, arguing that in the case of a war with Taiwan, the country will need all the manpower it can get. The aunt, who was doing her best to implement the party orders and limit the number of newborns, tries to shut her up with a quotation attributed to President Mao.

The aunt slogan-like quotation is partially preserved in Romanian and Spanish. In Chinese, the object of the verb 控制 *kongzhi* (to control) is topicalized and placed at the very beginning, before the emphatic negative structure 非.....不可 *fei ... buke* (approx. without ... cannot be done) which shows obligation. The Romanian translation preserves the idea of obligation (“trebuie musai”), but changes the sentence into an affirmative one. The negation was preserved in Spanish, but it switches from obligation to impossibility by saying “We cannot allow the population to grow without measure.” The Italian version preserves the obligation (“è imperativo”), but integrates it in the larger discourse, translating it as an object-clause introduced by a relative pronoun.

The mother does not give up so easily and fights back the same way, pretending to quote from the highest authority. Her discourse is arranged in a slogan-like manner: short statements with the same subject, containing common-sense information shared by the whole community, hard to question, and emotionally charged. For the aunt, the attempt to mimic Mao's words is a sin and warns her sister-in-law that in the old times she would have had her head cut off for this.

The slogan-like character of the answer is preserved only in Italian. In Chinese, with the exception of the third utterance, all the other are logical cause-effect structures, leaving out any connectors such as "because", or "therefore". The third utterance is a strong hyperbolic statement, with people defined as "living treasures". The use of "piú" in Italian for the first two utterances preserves the Chinese structure, but it did not work for the last one, where the cause is introduced by "perché". On the other hand, the translator's choice for the Chinese subject 人 *ren* (man, human) was "il popolo" (the people), a collective noun, leaving out the central theme of "many individuals equals strengths", preserved by the Romanian "om" and the Spanish "hombre".

In Romanian and Spanish, mother's attempt to mimic political slogans was left out, the utterances being translated as arguments, lacking the authoritative force of the slogan. In Spanish, the discourse is interrupted by insertion in the middle of the narrator's comments.

### Conclusions

There is no doubt that translating slogans could put any translator's skills to a test. Slogans go far beyond the words that compose them, they need to fit into particular patterns and have a very specific purpose which is generally culture-bound. At the same time, one must never forget the importance slogans have not only in Chinese politics, but also in people's daily lives. Slogans are the main tool for popularizing important state policies and decisions among ordinary people, and at the time, they are appropriated by the common folk and used to fight the very policies slogans are meant to disseminate.

Most of the slogans analyzed in this paper belong to the Cultural Revolution and originate in Mao Zedong's speeches, or, at least, the characters in the book pretend so. They are introduced by the phrase "President Mao said", visually marked as slogans by quotation marks, and finish with an exclamation mark. The time period is relevant not only due to the widespread usage of slogans in daily life, but also because it is one of the best known periods in modern Chinese history to the Western public. Chinese and Western scholars alike wrote hundreds of pages about the excesses during this decade and Mao's role, it is the historical background for many Chinese contemporary novels and movies familiar to the Western audience, and therefore the reader has at least some background knowledge. There is also the chance that the most common slogans of the time have already been translated into Italian, Romanian or Spanish.

The usage of slogans in Mo Yan's novel is not coincidental, they show how change is imposed vertically, from the top down, both upon the Chinese culture as a whole and the individual private lives. At the same time, easy to

remember and repeat, they can start promoting change horizontally. By warning their partners of dialogue that they do nothing else but follow Mao's directives faithfully, the characters use slogans or slogan-like utterances to borrow his authority and quell any opposition. The change promoted is violent – “down with...”, “opposing is counterrevolutionary”, and slogans are crucial for understanding this.

There is also the case that, by repeating the same slogans over and over again, people start believing in them, they lose their capacity of reasoning (Lu 1999), especially because the slogans they use come from the most venerated man in the country, the God-like Mao, so they are never doubted.

The choices the translators made are very diverse. Some slogans are marked as slogans, especially when it comes to the most common ones during the Cultural Revolution; others are integrated in text, simplified, restructured or paraphrased.

On the whole, though, the habit of “fighting” with slogans from Mao's speeches or make-believe slogan-like quotations was lost in translation. It might be possible that marking them as slogans could have had an adverse effect upon the target reader, making the text too foreign and excessively political for an audience not used with politics dictating private choices. But, as we keep on reading, the closer we get to the new millennium, the less slogans exist in the text, to none by the end of the book, and this is obvious because references to Mao disappear, reflecting an important change in China, its transition from a heavily politicized society to one in which the “redness” was replaced by materialistic interests driven not necessarily by political forces, but by the market ones. Slogan frequency might not be the only key available to the reader to understand this change, but not having it deprives the reader of a better understanding of the Chinese society. Reshaping the make-believe slogans in characters' dialogue, translating them as subordinate clauses, part of the narrative line, is also unadvisable, because it makes the reader miss out on the rebellion of the characters, as well as, the depth slogans penetrated into the society.

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