

A Study on the Translation and Dissemination Model of the English Version of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” from the Perspective of Communication Studies

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Abstract: This study adopts a communication studies perspective, employing Lasswell’s “5W” model as the theoretical framework and integrating the “6W” elements of translation communication to systematically examine the translation and dissemination model of the English version of Mo Yan’s novel “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out,” translated by Howard Goldblatt. By analyzing key elements such as communication content, translator strategies, dissemination channels, and reader reception, the study elucidates the intrinsic mechanisms behind the work’s successful overseas dissemination. The findings reveal that effective communication stems from the synergistic interplay of four dimensions: the intercultural adaptability of the work itself, the translator’s agential mediation, diversified dissemination channels, and reader-oriented translation strategies. This research provides theoretical and practical insights for promoting Chinese literature globally, demonstrating that successful intercultural communication requires an integrated approach encompassing the work, translator, channels, and reader research.

Keywords: Translation and dissemination model; Intercultural communication; Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out

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1. Background

Since the implementation of the “Chinese Culture Going Global” strategy in the 21st century, the overseas translation and dissemination of Chinese literary works have increased significantly, yet their reception varies considerably. Among them, the international reception of Mo Yan’s works stands out as exemplary, with his magical realist style garnering widespread acclaim among global readers. This success stems not only from the intrinsic literary value of his works but also from high-quality translations and effective dissemination mechanisms. Investigating the translation and dissemination model of Mo Yan’s works from a communication studies perspective can provide valuable insights for the overseas promotion of other Chinese literary texts.

Since its initial publication in 2006, “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Particularly after Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, academic interest in his works surged, peaking in 2015. In recent years, research on this work has primarily focused on Howard Goldblatt’s English translation strategies. For instance, Ouyang ^[1] analyzed the translation of four-character idioms from an intercultural perspective; Shi et al. ^[2] explored the translation methods of rural folk songs; Yu ^[3] investigated the cognition and translation of culturally loaded terms related to folk customs based on cultural schema theory; while Chu ^[4] examined the novel’s innovative narrative structure through the Buddhist concept of the “Six Paths of Reincarnation.”

Despite the expanding scope of Goldblatt’s translation studies, existing research predominantly concentrates on translation strategies, with a notable lack of systematic investigation into the comprehensive translation and dissemination model of the work. This research holds significant academic value: on the one hand, it can serve as a practical reference for the international translation of Chinese literature; on the other hand, it can deepen the understanding of intercultural communication mechanisms and promote cultural diversity. By analyzing the translation and dissemination mechanisms of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out,” this study aims to reveal the characteristics of literary expression and reception across different cultural contexts, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for enhancing the global dissemination efficacy of Chinese literature.

2. Communication theory and translation studies

“Translation is an activity of intercultural information exchange and communication, the essence of which lies in dissemination” ^[5]. In 1948, American scholar Harold Lasswell proposed the renowned “5W” model of the communication process: Who-Says What-In Which Channel-To Whom-With What Effects. This model has had a profound impact on research concerning effective communication ^[6]. As a specialized form of communication, translation introduces an additional key element, the translator, into the 5W model, thereby forming a “6W translation communication model” ^[7]. This model emphasizes the dynamic interaction among various communicative elements, providing both a theoretical foundation in communication studies and practical guidance for translation, thereby optimizing translation strategies ^[8].

Existing studies ^[9,10] have confirmed the dissemination efficacy of Goldblatt’s translation, as evidenced by library collections, sales data, and reader feedback. Statistics indicate that Goldblatt’s translation has performed exceptionally well in Western markets: between 2008 and 2013, cumulative sales in the U.S. reached 10,766 copies ^[11], far exceeding the dissemination efficiency of other Chinese literary works during the same period. This demonstrates the high level of overseas acceptance and influence of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out,” making its translation and dissemination model worthy of in-depth exploration. Given that Howard Goldblatt serves as both the translator and the primary agent of this work’s international dissemination, this paper employs the 6W communication model to examine the translation and dissemination model of this work from four dimensions: message content, translator analysis, dissemination channels, and target readers. The aim is to uncover the key factors behind its successful overseas dissemination, thereby providing insights for the global promotion of Chinese culture.

3. Analysis of the translation and dissemination model

3.1. Communication content

Communication content refers to the source text selected by translators or publishers, which involves three key

considerations: the international influence of the original author, the interests of target-language readers, and the translatability of the source text.

Regarding the author's influence, Mo Yan, as China's first Nobel Laureate in Literature, enjoys significant global recognition, providing a solid foundation for the overseas dissemination of his works. The Nobel Prize Committee praised Mo Yan's writing for blending folk tales, history, and social realities to construct a richly complex world. His distinctive magical realism style has made him a focal point of international literary scholarship.

In terms of reader interest, "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" aligns with Western readers' preference for political allegory and magical narrative. The novel follows a wrongfully executed landlord who undergoes six reincarnations, transforming into a donkey, ox, pig, dog, monkey, and finally a baby with an incurable congenital disease, against the backdrop of China's rural transformations. Through this framework of Buddhist samsara, the novel pays homage to the grand tradition of Chinese classical chapter-divided novels and folk storytelling. The fantastical cycle of rebirth constructs an epic literary edifice, celebrating and lamenting peasants' unyielding perseverance in life. It satisfies Western readers' fascination with political subtext while transcending cultural barriers through its magical narrative.

Concerning cultural translatability, Kam ^[12], former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong, observed that Mo Yan's works employ allegory to mitigate cultural specificity and enhance intercultural resonance, rendering them accessible and relatable across social strata. Additionally, Howard Goldblatt's translation strategies effectively convey culture-bound terms. The translation predominantly adopts foreignization supplemented by domestication, preserving original features while ensuring readability. For instance, the phrase "gen zheng miao hong" (literally "of upright roots and red sprouts," denoting proletarian purity) is rendered as "a member of proletariat, red as could be" omitting the metaphorical "roots" and "sprouts" while retaining the concept of "redness", thus reconstructing the exoticized context of China's "red culture" ^[13].

3.2. Translator

Dual scene learning is a teaching model that bridges industry needs and classroom instruction, connecting the classroom and the workplace. In this model, classroom learning is closely linked to Howard Goldblatt is acclaimed as the "foremost Western translator of Chinese literature," having translated numerous works by modern and contemporary Chinese writers, demonstrating profound insight into Chinese literature. As a pivotal mediator in the intercultural dissemination process, Goldblatt not only achieves linguistic transformation through his exceptional bilingual proficiency but also facilitates international aesthetic resonance for this distinctly Chinese literary work via cultural transcoding and textual recreation. He was honored by the eminent sinologist Professor C.T. Hsia as "the premier translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature" and described by the renowned American author John Updike as the "midwife" of modern Chinese literature ^[14]. Meng ^[15] further characterizes him as a "Global Chimerican" hybrid.

In terms of translation methodology, Goldblatt adopts an "adaptive translation strategy" ^[16], skillfully preserving the original literariness while making appropriate adjustments to text length and expressive modes to accommodate target readers' expectations. This approach transcends the conventional dichotomy between domestication and foreignization, pioneering a novel approach for Chinese cultural export ^[17]. Although occasional mistranslations exist, his extraordinary contributions to globalizing Chinese literature remain undeniable ^[18]. Simultaneously, Goldblatt maintains a commitment to "fidelity," striving to retain essential Chinese cultural elements. This principle constitutes a cornerstone of his translation philosophy, as evidenced

by his statement: “My responsibility is to faithfully represent the author’s intended meaning, not necessarily his exact words. There’s a nuanced distinction here, but perhaps a crucial one”^[19].

As Professor Emeritus in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Notre Dame, Goldblatt has translated over sixty Chinese literary works during his nearly five-decade career, including ten novels by Mo Yan. His distinguished accolades include the Pegasus Prize for Literature, the National Translation Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Man Asian Literary Prize, and China’s highest honor for international publishing contributions, the Special Book Award of China. These achievements underscore his monumental role in globalizing Chinese literature, with his professional authority receiving widespread recognition from both academic circles and readerships worldwide.

3.3. Transmission media

Media, as communication channels, “are the intermediaries inserted into the communication process, the tools used to extend and amplify the transmission of information”^[20]. Modern mainstream media include publishing houses, magazines, the internet, and film or television. In the context of globalization, the international dissemination of literary works largely depends on the selection and combination of transmission channels. The successful global reach of the English translation of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” demonstrates a multi-layered, three-dimensional communication network. From traditional publishing to digital media, the dissemination of this work exhibits the following distinctive characteristics:

In the realm of traditional publishing, Howard Goldblatt’s translation of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” was first published in 2008 by Arcade Publishing, a specialized institution with extensive experience in introducing and promoting international literature. The editorial team at this publishing house has accumulated profound expertise in packaging and marketing non-English literary works. The cover design of this translation is particularly ingenious: a striking bright red background features a meditating infant radiating auspicious light at the center, exuding a solemn, almost divine serenity. Below this figure lies a Buddhist mandala symbolizing the “cycle of samsara,” which not only echoes the magical realist narrative core of the novel but also skillfully incorporates visual symbols of Chinese Buddhist culture, achieving a harmonious unity of cultural depth and aesthetic expression.

In-depth reviews and coverage by mainstream media formed the core discursive space for the international dissemination of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out.” On May 4, 2008, The “New York Times Book Review” featured the work in a special article, praising Mo Yan as a “world-class writer” and highlighting his narrative as “a blend of absurdity and realism that outlines the collective memory of rural Chinese society and the vicissitudes of individual destinies.” This review not only provided international readers with an authoritative interpretive framework but also stimulated Western readers’ interest in Eastern narrative aesthetics by focusing on the historical ruptures and human struggles in China’s rural society, directly contributing to the translation’s penetration into both academic circles and the general market in Europe and America.

In the domain of new media, digital platforms became pivotal hubs for reaching global readers. The English translation of the work was simultaneously released on Goodreads, the world’s largest reader community, and Amazon’s e-book platform, creating an instantly accessible digital reading environment. Community discussions revolved around themes such as “magical realist narration” and “the writing of historical trauma,” fostering sustained engagement. This user-generated content (UGC) model not only extended the work’s dissemination lifecycle but also attracted potential readers through word-of-mouth effects, forming a virtuous cycle of “reading-commenting-resharing.”

The synergistic effect of these diversified transmission channels broke the traditional reliance on singular channels for literary dissemination, instead constructing a three-dimensional communication network integrating “commercial publishing-media reviews-digital platforms.” These channels complemented one another: publishing houses laid the market foundation through professional distribution networks, media critics endowed the work with cultural and academic value, and digital platforms leveraged technological capabilities for precise outreach. This cross-media, cross-sphere dissemination model not only expanded the breadth of reader coverage but also deepened cultural resonance through in-depth content exploration, providing a replicable international approach for Chinese literature’s “going global” strategy.

3.4. Readers

With the widespread adoption of online learning and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, research and practice in self-directed learning have been increasing. This teaching method integrates as the receiving subject and information feedback provider in translation-mediated communication; the target readers play a decisive role in intercultural dissemination. To ensure effective communication, the translation agent must conduct preliminary reader profiling before implementation and continuously adjust translation content and strategies by synthesizing reader-related factors such as ideological frameworks and aesthetic preferences during the dissemination process. This reader-oriented translation paradigm highlights the centrality of target readers in determining communication efficacy.

Howard Goldblatt’s dual identity (as both translator and translation agent) endows him with unique communicative advantages. As a native English speaker, he possesses an intrinsic understanding of target readers’ cultural psychology and reading expectations, consistently applying reader-consciousness principles in his translation practice. This deliberate reader-oriented approach significantly enhances translation effectiveness. Goldblatt revealed in an interview three predominant reading preferences of American readers: depictions of sexuality, political elements, and detective themes. Furthermore, he astutely recognized the target readers’ fascination with cultural alterity, dialects, as linguistic carriers of regional culture, inherently possess distinctive cultural heterogeneities that precisely satisfy such reading expectations. The strategic employment of Gaomi dialects and folk cultural representations in Mo Yan’s works, coupled with moderate sexual and violent elements, perfectly aligns with the target readers’ horizon of expectations, providing crucial criteria for source text selection.

Concurrently, reader consciousness constitutes a fundamental component of Goldblatt’s translation philosophy. Regarding textual content, Mo Yan frequently incorporates Gaomi dialects. Confronted with this intercultural challenge of dialect conversion, Goldblatt adopted multidimensional solutions: through textual research, contextual analysis, native consultations, and authorial communication, he sought equilibrium between cultural fidelity and reader accessibility. He once stated: “I believe translators bear tremendous responsibility; we must be accountable to the author, the text, and the readers... Ultimately, our primary accountability is to the readers rather than the author”^[21].

4. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the translation and dissemination model of the English version of “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” translated by Goldblatt, within the theoretical framework of communication studies. By analyzing the synergistic interactions among four key dimensions in the dissemination process, the research reveals the intrinsic mechanisms underlying the work’s successful reception overseas.

First, at the level of content, the work itself possesses distinct advantages for intercultural communication. Mo Yan's international reputation provides authoritative endorsement, while the unique integration of magical realism and rural narratives meets Western readers' expectations for exoticism while mitigating cultural barriers through allegorical expression. The translator's strategy, prioritizing foreignization supplemented by domestication, preserves cultural specificity while ensuring readability.

Second, the translator, as a pivotal mediator in the communication process, demonstrates remarkable agency. Leveraging profound bilingual competence and cultural sensitivity, the translator creatively handles culture-specific terms. The "adaptive" translation strategy strikes a balance between fidelity to the original and adaptation to target-reader expectations, reflecting the translator's proactive role in intercultural mediation.

Third, the selection of communication channels proves equally critical. The study finds that the work constructs a multi-dimensional dissemination network through traditional publishing, mainstream media reviews, and digital platforms. This synergistic multi-channel approach expands reader reach while enhancing impact via in-depth content engagement.

Fourth, reader research underpins the translation's success. The translator's nuanced understanding of target readers' cultural psychology and reading habits, coupled with adaptive transformation of cultural elements, significantly elevates the work's acceptability. This reader-oriented strategy offers valuable insights for the global dissemination of Chinese literature.

These findings provide implications for promoting Chinese literary works abroad. First, text selection should balance artistic merit and transnational appeal. Second, the mediator role of translators must be emphasized, necessitating the cultivation of translation professionals with intercultural communication expertise. Third, diversified dissemination channels should be consolidated to amplify synergistic effects. Finally, rigorous research on target readerships is essential to inform translation strategies.

Future research could explore: comparative studies on translation models across literary genres, the impact of digital technologies on literary dissemination, and reception variances across cultural contexts. Such investigations would contribute to refining the theoretical framework for the international communication of Chinese literature.

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