



Overseas Dissemination of the English Translation of Yu Hua's *To Live*

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Abstract

This paper, by gathering overseas rating data and reader comments, examines the factors that contributed to the worldwide popularity of the English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* from the viewpoint of the book's real audience—readers, and the impacts of the overseas dissemination of the English version of *To Live*. The research findings show that factors such as the author's writing style, the attractiveness of the novel's plot, the excellent translation of the translator, and the resonance that the content of the work can arouse, jointly contribute to the wide dissemination, high acceptance and excellent overseas dissemination effect of the English translation of *To Live*. Moreover, overseas readers have gained knowledge of Chinese history and culture through this book. Meanwhile, the work has provided the readers with spiritual encouragement and renewed hope. Through the research on the successful overseas dissemination of the English translation of Yu Hua's *To Live* from the perspective of readers, this paper aims to provide references for Chinese culture to "Go Global" successfully.

Keywords

To Live; English translation; overseas dissemination; readers' evaluations; reasons for success

1. Introduction

Yu Hua's *To Live* (Yu, 1993) is undoubtedly a classic in Chinese literature. It has been translated and introduced into more than 40 countries and regions and has won numerous awards, such as the Premio Grinzane Cavour, the highest award in Italian literature. Yu Hua was also awarded the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) of France thanks to this work. Moreover, the film adaptation of this work won seven major awards at the Cannes International Film Festival (the most influential and top-notch international film festival in the world today). It is clear that Yu Hua's novel *To Live* has enormous international influence, and the work is extremely valuable to the study of how to successfully disseminate Chinese culture abroad. Therefore, this study uses the English translation of *To Live* as an example to investigate the reasons for its success in foreign dissemination and its impacts.

At present, the domestic research on the English translation of *To Live* (Berry, 2003) mainly focuses on translation strategies. Most of these studies analyze the translator Michael Berry's translation strategies from different theoretical perspectives. For example, Wei Fang studied the English translation strategies in Yu Hua's *To Live* from the perspective of translation variation theory (Wei, 2015). Xu Qiong analyzed the specific application of translation variation theory in literary translation by combining the Chinese and English versions of *To Live* (Xu, 2015). Zhu Zhenwu and Yang Leipeng explored Michael Berry's translation aesthetics and cultural responsibility by studying the translation strategies of *To Live* (Zhu & Yang, 2016). Liu Ruiling and Yang Siyu studied the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in *To Live* from the perspective of eco-translatology (Liu & Yang, 2019). Lv Jinmei and Zhan

Quanwang used quantitative and qualitative analysis to study the translation practice strategies in *To Live* and its film and television works (Lv & Zhan, 2020). Shi Chunrang and Zhao Huifang studied the English translation strategies and the dissemination effects of the English version of *To Live* (Shi & Zhao, 2020). Luo Xi studied the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in *To Live* from the perspective of Cultural Translation Theory (Luo, 2022). There are also scholars who conduct research starting from the para-texts of the English translation of *To Live*. For instance, Li Hanji interpreted Michael Berry's translation concepts from the perspectives of internal and external para-texts based on the para-texts of the English translation of *To Live*, aiming to provide references for the overseas translation and dissemination of Chinese literature (Li, 2017).

Wu Yun proposed that under the requirements of international communication capacity building, translation studies in the future can focus on the construction of the theoretical system of translation research, multi-modal research on translation, research on the audience of translation and its acceptance effect, as well as the cultivation of translation talents in four different directions (Wu, 2022). It can be seen that studying the foreign dissemination of English translations of Chinese works from the perspective of the readers of the translated texts is crucial to help improve the international communication competence of Chinese culture.

However, at present, there are fewer studies on the foreign dissemination and acceptance effects of the English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live*. For instance, Shi Chunjian and Zhao Huifang studied the translation mode of the English translation of *To Live* from Lasswell's "5 Ws" communication model (Shi & Zhao, 2020). Moreover, Wang Baorong and Zhou Enqi analyzed the reasons for the successful dissemination of the English translation of *To Live* in the West from the perspective of the sociology of communication (Wang & Zhou, 2021).

No scholars have yet studied the dissemination and acceptance of the English translation of this work based entirely on the reading experience of the readers. However, the existing influence of the author of the work, the strong support from the sponsors, the love and research of scholars, as well as the high-level or even the highest-level literary awards won by the work from different countries cannot fully represent the true feelings of the vast number of readers. In order to understand how the English translations of Chinese works have been disseminated and accepted, and what exactly has been disseminated, the feedback from the readers - the audiences of the translated work - is the most direct, sincere, and accurate.

When Yu Hua was interviewed by Gao Fang, he was once asked if he could talk about the current translation and dissemination of his works abroad. He replied, "My works are accepted differently in various countries. *To Live* has performed the best in the United States, Italy, and Spain... Translators from many countries have said that my books are quite popular in their countries. However, since I haven't got the specific data, it's hard to say for sure." (Gao & Yu, 2014) This article will take the English translation (by Michael Berry) of *To Live* as an example and study the specific reasons for its successful overseas dissemination from the direct feedback of readers. By analyzing and re-searching the overseas reader rating data and readers' comments collected from the American Amazon website (<https://www.amazon.com/>) and the Goodreads website (<https://www.goodreads.com/>), the author attempts to answer the following questions: What are the specific reasons for the popularity of the English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* overseas? What are the impacts of the overseas dissemination of the English version of *To Live*? It is hoped to provide references and lessons for Chinese culture to "Go global" and to tell Chinese stories better in the future.

2. Reasons for the Overseas Popularity of the English Version of *To Live*

It was found that the readers' rating of *To Live* on the American Amazon website is 4.5 stars (out of 5 stars), and on the Goodreads website, it is 4.34 stars (out of 5 stars). The relatively high ratings from overseas readers indicate that Yu Hua's *To Live* is quite popular and well-accepted overseas. Meanwhile, based on nearly 300 overseas readers' comments from American Amazon website and Goodreads website, the author will analyze the reasons for the popularity of the English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* overseas. Through research and analysis, the author discovered that from the perspective of overseas readers, the reasons for the popularity of *To Live* overseas can be attributed to several factors: firstly, the unique linguistic charm of the author. Secondly, the captivating storyline of the work. Thirdly, the cultural and emotional resonance it evokes among readers. Fourthly, the successful enhancement by the translator's excellent translation. Lastly, some other indispensable supporting elements.

2.1 The Unique Linguistic Charm of the Author

Yu Hua's work *To Live* features elegant writing, with simple, fluent, and humorous language. Overall, it is easy to

understand. He tells extraordinary stories in seemingly plain language, which is highly infectious. Yu Hua's unique linguistic charm is deeply loved by overseas readers. This is one of the reasons why the English translation of Yu Hua's *To Live* is so popular overseas and also the aspect most frequently mentioned by overseas readers in their comments. For example, reader J. Parisse-Brassens commented, "Yu Hua told Fugui's epic story with a limited number of words and simple language. The language may be simple, but the story is not, nor is the message it conveys. I like this book and plan to read more of Yu Hua's works." Reader Thomas Willard commented, "The narrative of the story is simple and clear. Yu Hua skillfully created the characters and plots." Reader Kumasama commented, "The writing style is so captivating that it draws you in deeply. It's both attractive and exquisite." Reader Jerry commented, "I was attracted by the narrator's greatness, or at least by its unique narrative style, which is highly individualized and unforgettable."

2.2 The Captivating Storyline of the Work

The work *To Live* unfolds as the author happens to hear an old man narrating his life story while collecting folk songs in the countryside. The story is slow-paced, beautiful, and sad, yet full of strength within the sadness. Its plot is full of twists and turns and is thought-provoking. The life story of the protagonist Xu Fugui is extremely tragic. All his relatives passed away one after another. He experienced all the unfairness of fate and endured all the hardships of the times. In the end, he was the only one left alive, relying on an old ox. The tragedy of the story and the ups and downs of the plot deeply attract readers, making them have a strong desire to finish reading it in one go. This is also one of the reasons why the English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* is popular overseas. For example, reader Karen Montgomery commented, "I think it's a wonderful story. Sometimes it's very sad to read, but it really makes people understand how a person survives in difficulties. This story also reflects the meaning of family and the love that comes with it." Reader Labijose commented, "Yu Hua took us on an emotional roller coaster. This story is full of lessons, either about life or about the tragic living conditions of ordinary people, all just to find a reason to keep living."

2.3 The Cultural and Emotional Resonance It Evokes Among Readers

It can be seen from readers' comments that one of the reasons why the English translation of Yu Hua's *To Live* is so well-accepted overseas is that readers can have a strong cultural and emotional resonance when reading this book. In the preface to the Chinese version of the book in 1993, Yu Hua mentioned, "I heard an American folk song called *Old Black Joe*. In the song, the old black slave experienced a lifetime of hardships. All his family members passed away before him, yet he still treated the world in a friendly way without a single word of complaint. This song deeply touched me, and I decided to write a novel like this, which is *To Live*. It's about people's endurance of hardships and their optimistic attitude towards the world." (Yu, 1993) From this, it can be seen that Yu Hua's inspiration for writing *To Live* came from the American folk song *Old Black Joe*. The thoughts on life, hardships, and the meaning of being alive triggered by this work, as well as the humanistic care embodied in it, are all highly infectious to everyone in the world, and the same is true for the vast number of readers. For example, reader Kalena commented, "My favorite part of this book is that it presents views on human beings and the meaning of being human." Reader Michael J. Reeves commented, "This novel offers some profound insights into Chinese society and culture, as well as the poverty and scarcity. I can see some problems in our own society in this novel. All in all, it's an excellent story." Reader J.M. Hushour commented, "Yu Hua told you that he got the inspiration for writing this novel after hearing an old American slave spiritual. Well, let's face it, hardships are universal."

2.4 The Successful Enhancement by the Translator's Excellent Translation

The fact that Yu Hua's *To Live* has become a big hit overseas in its English translation surely owes much to the efforts of the translator. Without translation, cultural exchanges and the dissemination of culture abroad would be impossible. The fact that the sinologist Michael Berry was able to translate this work into English was the prerequisite for its overseas dissemination. The excellence of his translation further contributed to the work's popularity overseas, which is also evidenced by readers' comments. For example, reader SJH commented, "This is one of the best books I've ever read. All I can say is it's amazing. As it says, this book is about life. The writing is ingenious (even the translation), and it's very easy to read, getting to the heart of life. I can't put it down. Buy it. It's worth reading." Reader D. Knouse commented, "There are some truly touching moments in this book, some very human moments."

Besides, the translation is first-class.” Reader Labijose commented, “I also want to congratulate the translator Michael Berry. I don’t know if any original meaning has been lost in the language transformation, but he really did a great job. Five-star rating! No doubt! Now I’m going to watch the movie version!”

2.5 Other Indispensable Supporting Elements

The English translation of Yu Hua's *To Live* has become so well-liked overseas, and it is certainly inseparable from some other indispensable supporting factors. It can be found from the comments of overseas readers that there are also some other reasons why they read the book *To Live*. For example, they read it due to the publicity and influence of the movie of the same name directed by Zhang Yimou. Moreover, they read it because of the recommendation of friends or classmates. What’s more, they read it for the needs of taking lessons, and so on. For example, reader Z. C. Mercer mentioned, “My Chinese girlfriend introduced me to the movie version of *To Live*. It was so interesting that I then bought the book.” Reader Koppenhagen mentioned, “I got this book because of a friend’s recommendation. It’s his favorite book and he has read it several times.” Reader Philip Smith mentioned, “I bought this book for taking lessons. I had planned to look up notes online as usual when reading books, but the story turned out to be unexpectedly interesting.” Reader Lynn commented, “Firstly, I want to thank my friend Isa for recommending this book to me. Secondly, I must give it five stars. It’s well-written and attractive enough to arouse my interest and touch my heart. This book has achieved all of these.”

3. Impacts of the Overseas Dissemination of the English Translation of *To Live*

Based on the nearly 300 overseas readers’ comments from American Amazon website and the Goodreads website, what specific content the English translation of Yu Hua’s novel *To Live* has disseminated outward and the impact it has generated abroad will be analyzed. Through research and analysis, the author finds that from the perspective of overseas readers, they have learned about Chinese history and culture from this book. Meanwhile, the work has given spiritual encouragement to the readers and bestowed them with new hope.

3.1 Helping Overseas Readers Know More About Chinese History and Culture

It can be found from the comments of overseas readers that after reading this work, they have gained a deeper understanding of Chinese history and culture, as well as got to know Chinese society, the Chinese people and rural life in China. For example, reader Sapphire commented, “This book is very interesting to read and it gives people a different perspective on the culture.” Reader Jsournival commented, “I wanted to read something about the development of Chinese society and modern history, and that’s exactly what I got. I was immersed in the painful emotional journey of a repentant person.” Reader Paul B. Trevarrow commented, “This book is well worth reading. It presents China and the Chinese people more authentically than other Chinese novels I’ve read. Like many Chinese novels, this one is rather depressing, but it’s definitely worth reading.” Reader Michael J. Reeves commented, “All in all, it’s an outstanding story. If you’re interested in Chinese society and culture, I highly recommend it.” Reader Roel commented, “I firmly believe that if you want to have a better understanding of a culture, you must delve into their art. In this regard, literature is especially useful because it usually doesn’t just describe a culture but also offers comments on history, the present or the possible future. Since I’m going to live in China for half a year, I decided to read Yu Hua’s *To Live*. It’s a story that has been widely acclaimed internationally and tells of an arrogant landlord who gradually realizes what’s truly important in life after losing everything.”

3.2 Inspiring Readers’ Spirits and Endowing with New Hope

It can be seen from the comments of overseas readers that reading this work has brought great spiritual encouragement to them and given them new hope for life. After finishing reading this book, no matter what difficulties and hardships they encounter in their future life journey, they can draw huge spiritual strength from it to support them to live on strongly. This is also one of the impacts of the English translation of Yu Hua’s novel *To Live* overseas, and such an impact may last a lifetime. For example, reader Derrick commented, “I was touched by this story. The pure will of Fugui to persevere in the face of misfortune is very inspiring.” Reader Ceres commented, “The protagonist’s will to become better and continue to survive in various difficulties is inspiring. A very good (although sad) reading experience.” Reader Steve commented, “You will be more grateful for your life than before by reading it. You will see that life is so tough beyond the comfortable life you enjoy.”

4. Conclusion

Through analysis, this paper examines factors that contributed to the worldwide popularity of English translation of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* from the viewpoint of the readers and the impacts of the overseas dissemination of the English version of *To Live*. The research has drawn the following conclusions: the unique linguistic charm of the author, the captivating storyline of the work, the cultural and emotional resonance it evokes among readers, the successful enhancement by the translator's excellent translation, and some other indispensable supporting elements have enabled the English version of *To Live* to enjoy a very wide and well accepted dissemination overseas. More importantly, this book has helped abroad readers learn more about Chinese history and culture. Meanwhile, the work has given the readers spiritual inspiration and new hope.

The successful external dissemination of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* has, to a certain extent, helped to realize the "Going global" of Chinese culture. Not only has it "Go global", but also exerted a positive influence externally. This precisely aligns with our ultimate goal of actively promoting the "Going global" of Chinese culture, telling our stories well, and spreading our voice effectively. The research in this paper can provide insights and references for Chinese culture to better "Going global" and make a positive and great impact worldwide.

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