

Dilemmas and Pathway Reconstruction of Chinese Literature's "Going Global" through Polysystem Theory: Insights from the Overseas Success of Online Literature

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Abstract: This study examines the persistent challenges confronting Chinese literature in its "Going Global" initiative, analyzing the issue through the theoretical lens of Polysystem Theory. It identifies the historical dual-periphery position of Chinese literature—both within the global literary macro-polysystem and domestically—as the structural root of its international dissemination difficulties. The paper also evaluates the limitations of the long-dominant government-led patronage model, value-driven and project-based operational approach, and disconnection from market mechanisms. Furthermore, it analyzes the prevalent translational practice of over-domestication when Chinese works enter central literary systems, which often dilutes cultural specificity and reinforces stereotypes. Crucially, the study proposes reconceptualized pathways inspired by the unexpected overseas success of Chinese online literature. These include shifting from "pushing out" canonized texts to "fostering a literary-cultural ecosystem," and adopting a collaborative "Foreignization + Community Interaction" translation model. The research concludes that selecting translation works based on market rules, leveraging community patronage and fostering organic reader communities offer more sustainable and effective routes for enhancing the global presence and reception of Chinese literature.

Keywords: Polysystem; Online literature; Chinese literature; Translation

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1. Introduction

The "Going Global" of Chinese literature, as a significant component of China's cultural development strategy, has garnered sustained scholarly and institutional attention for decades. Despite concerted national efforts, the international influence and readership of Chinese literature have not achieved a fundamental breakthrough. A considerable body of research attributes this dilemma to factors such as cultural barriers, inadequate translation quality, and insufficient promotional resources. However, these explanations often overlook the deeper, structural constraints embedded within the hierarchical dynamics of the world literary system.

This paper argues that the core challenges facing Chinese literature's global dissemination stem from its

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historical dual-periphery position: its marginal status within the global literary macro-polysystem dominated by central cultures, coupled with the central position once held by translated literature within the modern Chinese literary polysystem itself. This structural predicament has given rise to two interconnected issues: a government-led patronage model that, while pioneering, has proven inadequate for cultivating genuine overseas readership due to its value-driven and project-based limitations; and a prevailing tendency towards over-domestication in translation, which sacrifices literary idiosyncrasy for easier target-culture acceptance, often resulting in cultural distortion.

Building on Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, this study moves beyond symptomatic analysis to investigate these systemic determinants. It further contends that the recent, unexpected overseas success of Chinese online literature provides valuable insights for reconceptualizing dissemination pathways. The organic, community-driven reception of genres such as Xianxia and science fiction demonstrates the potential of leveraging peripheral agency and fostering a literary-cultural ecosystem, rather than solely pursuing direct entry into the established center.

By integrating theoretical analysis with case studies of the translation of online literature, this paper aims to systematically delineate the structural dilemmas of Chinese literature's international journey and propose a strategic paradigm shift. It calls for a move from a state-driven "pushing out" model to a more decentralized, market-responsive, and community-engaged "drawing in" approach, offering a new framework for enhancing the global presence of Chinese literary and cultural expression.

2. Current Dilemmas in Chinese Literature's "Going Global" Initiative

(1) Historical dual-periphery position of Chinese literature

Since the modern era, particularly during the May Fourth Movement, Chinese intellectuals have translated a substantial number of foreign literary works with the aim of enlightening the public and revolutionizing domestic literature. As a result, a translation "deficit" emerged, wherein the number of translated foreign works significantly exceeded that of Chinese literary works translated for export. Among the limited number of Chinese literary works that have been translated into other languages, very few have gained widespread acceptance overseas. These phenomena indicate that Chinese literature remains relatively marginalized and peripheral compared to other literature, especially English literature.

When examined through the lens of the Literary Polysystem Theory, the root cause can be traced to the position that Chinese literature occupies within the world literary system.

According to Even-Zohar, translated literature tends to occupy a central position in the literary polysystem under three conditions: (a) when a polysystem is not yet crystallized—that is, when a literature is "young" and still in the process of formation; (b) when a literature is "peripheral" within a broader group of correlated literatures, or "weak," or both; and (c) when a literature experiences turning points, crises, or literary vacuums. (Even-Zohar, 1990)

If we conceptualize world literature as a global macro-polysystem, it is evident that, since modern times, English literature—buttressed by its political, economic, and cultural influence—has long occupied a central and canonized position. In contrast, Chinese literature has been marginalized and structurally relegated to the periphery. Moreover, since the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese literary system underwent a series of radical transformations, as intellectuals sought to reform it and break away from established literary conventions. During this critical juncture, foreign literary works were extensively introduced through translation to facilitate such changes. It was against this backdrop that translated literature assumed a central role in the Chinese literary system, serving as a vital force in shaping contemporary literary norms, models, and repertoires.

This dual center-periphery structure—the peripheral status of Chinese literature within the global literary macro-polysystem, alongside the central role of translated literature within the Chinese literary system—has profoundly influenced the flow and communication between Chinese and foreign literatures. It has also created a long-standing dilemma for the outward translation and international promotion of Chinese literature, thereby complicating its “going global” agenda.

(2) Limitations of the government-led patronage model in the outbound translation of Chinese literature

With China’s unprecedented growth in overall national strength since the reform and opening-up, the country has pursued the “Going Global” strategy for Chinese culture at the national level. Against this backdrop, state-owned or government-backed institutions, as the primary patrons, have become deeply involved in the entire process of selecting literary works, organizing translations, and facilitating dissemination. A typical example is the “Panda Books” series, launched by the Chinese Literature Press—a subsidiary under the China International Publishing Group (formerly the Foreign Languages Bureau)—with the aim of promoting Chinese literature and culture in major Western countries through translation, giving priority to modern and contemporary Chinese novels. Since then, governmental bodies have played a dominant role in guiding Chinese literature to “walk toward the world” (Geng Qiang, 2010).

According to André Lefevere, patrons can either promote or constrain the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature. Their influence operates through a combination of such as factors as economics, and status. (André Lefevere,2004) When state-affiliated institutions act as patrons, their efforts are primarily driven by the objectives of shaping a positive national image and enhancing the global presence of Chinese culture through literary translation. This core mission inevitably leads to a strong value-driven and a project-based operational model.

Although this government-led patronage played a pioneering role in introducing Chinese literature to the world during a specific historical period and, to some extent, raised its international visibility, it has failed to fundamentally alter the peripheral position of Chinese literature within the global literary macro-polysystem due to its inherent limitations.

First, the works selected for translation tend to be classical or pure literary works with pronounced philosophical significance and profound, often esoteric, themes. Their highly serious tone and elevated style offer little pleasure to ordinary readers in the target culture, who consequently show limited interest.

Second, the project-based approach exhibits characteristics of a planned economy. This mode of operation runs counter to the principles of spontaneous cross-cultural communication and is ill-suited to a market-oriented economic environment. As a result, most translated Chinese literary works circulate mainly within sinological or related academic circles, failing to enter mainstream commercial publishing channels or reach general readerships.

By the turn of the new century, the limitations of this patronage model had become increasingly evident. It demonstrates that relying solely on official promotion is insufficient to build a sustainable and vibrant ecosystem for the international reception of Chinese literature. Moreover, it risks creating a historical path dependence—an overreliance on top-down promotion that overlooks bottom-up market dynamics and the cultivation of genuine reader communities.

(3) Over-somestication of Chinese literature in the target cultural system

The position occupied by translated literature significantly influences translation norms, behaviors, and strategies. When translated literature holds a central position, it participates in shaping new and primary models. In such cases, the translator’s main concern is not merely to identify ready-made models in the target

repertoire that can accommodate the source text; rather, the translator may deliberately deviate from target-culture conventions. Under these conditions, the translation is more likely to adhere closely to the original text—achieving a higher degree of “adequacy” by reproducing the dominant textual relations of the original (Even-Zohar, 1990). This pattern is evident in the translation of English literature into the Chinese cultural system. When English literature—which occupies a central position globally—is introduced into China, particularly during periods of cultural transition, translators tend to adopt a foreignizing strategy. For instance, in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement, translated works served as an innovative force, introducing new vocabulary, syntactic structures, and Western literary genres into the Chinese literary system. This not only enriched modern Mandarin and the Chinese literary repertoire but also accelerated the modernization of Chinese literature. Foreignization-oriented translation thus played an active and formative role in the evolution of the Chinese literary system.

By contrast, when Chinese literature—which occupies a peripheral position in the global polysystem—is introduced into the central Western literary system, translators tend to apply a strong domestication strategy. In some cases, this extends to the removal or rewriting of portions of the original text to facilitate easier integration into the target culture and enhance reader reception. A notable example is Howard Goldblatt’s translation of Mo Yan’s works, which is characterized by fluency, idiomatic language, and a consistent use of domestication. These qualities contributed significantly to the success of Mo Yan’s works in the Western cultural system, as exemplified by his reception of the Nobel Prize in Literature. However, this very success also reveals the dilemma faced by literatures from the periphery.

First, many of Mo Yan’s stories are set in rural villages of China and explore themes such as peasant life, violence, human suffering, history, and collective trauma. These narratives of suffering align with Western readers’ expectations and preconceptions, which in part explains why his works were selected for translation and well-received in the target culture. Yet this preference risks reinforcing cultural biases, potentially deepening stereotypes of Chinese culture as “backward” and obscuring the image of a modern, prosperous, and democratic China.

Second, while Mo Yan conveys traditionalist values through a mythorealist style, mythorealism itself is not an indigenous narrative technique within the Chinese literary repertoire but originated in the West. The use of this borrowed narrative mode reduces the sense of alienation among Western readers and lowers resistance to the works’ entry into the target cultural system.

Third, the translator employs a high degree of domestication, at times going so far as to omit or rewrite parts of the original. Such manipulation has indeed facilitated Mo Yan’s works’ entry into the target culture and enhanced their popularity among Western readers. As Anna Sun aptly observes: “The English translations of Mo Yan’s novels, especially by the excellent Howard Goldblatt, are in fact superior to the original in their aesthetic unity and sureness. The blurb for *The Republic of Wine* from the *Washington Post* says: ‘Goldblatt’s translation renders Mo Yan’s shimmering poetry and brutal realism as work akin to that of Gorky and Solzhenitsyn.’ But in fact, only the ‘brutal realism’ is Mo Yan’s; the ‘shimmering poetry’ comes from a brilliant translator’s work.” (Lucas Klein, 2016)

Nevertheless, it must be noted that such translational intervention inevitably dilutes the original works’ literary idiosyncrasy and depth, leading to distortion and potentially reinforcing existing stereotypes.

The root cause of this imbalanced translation practice lies in the fact that Chinese literary works entering the target cultural system have become a conservative force, constrained by the center-periphery structural disparity within the global literary macro-polysystem. Although sporadic successes may occur, the biased selection of works for translation and the pervasive use of over-domestication compromise the philosophical richness and narrative diversity of Chinese literature. As a result, they hinder an accurate understanding of

authentic Chinese culture and impair the diversity of the world literary repertoire. Furthermore, such practices reinforce the structural imbalance between center and periphery, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

3. New Pathways for Chinese Literature's "Going Global" Based on Polysystem Theory

Around 2017, Chinese online literature began to gain remarkable popularity overseas. A prominent example is the website Wuxiaworld, which emerged as a leading platform for the translation of Chinese online literary genres such as Xianxia. Within less than four years of its establishment, it had risen to global and regional prominence—ranking 1,271st worldwide and 1,045th in North America according to Alexa traffic metrics—and attracted readers from more than 110 countries and regions. In terms of geographical distribution, approximately 40% of its readership came from North America, 25% from Southeast Asia, and 20% from Western Europe.(Wang Jingjing, 2017).

This unanticipated and remarkable overseas success of Chinese online literature offers a revealing window into the internal dynamics of literary systems. It demonstrates that breakthroughs in the effective dissemination of Chinese literature and culture are possible, even within an ostensibly rigid center-periphery structure, through strategic pathway reconstruction. A close reexamination of translation's role in this success yields crucial insights for the challenged field of Chinese literature's international dissemination. Specifically, it suggests a paradigm shift: from pursuing direct "center entry" to leveraging "peripheral agency," and fundamentally, from a "pushing out" model to a "drawing in" approach through innovative pathway development.

(1) Pathway for selecting works for translation: from "pushing out classic literature" to "fostering a literary and cultural ecosystem"

The fundamental challenge facing Chinese literature's "Going Global" initiative stems from a mismatch between entrenched path dependency and the structurally peripheral position of Chinese literature within the global literary macro-polysystem. Persisting in unilaterally "pushing out" canonized Chinese literary works—without acknowledging this systemic reality—encounters strong resistance from conservative forces at the center of the polysystem. This often results in distorted aesthetic outcomes and compromised intercultural communication. Many such works, laden with complex cultural references, present high entry barriers even to domestic readers, let alone overseas audiences.

It is therefore necessary to abandon the illusion of immediate "centralization" and instead adopt a strategy of "achieving breakthroughs from the periphery." The core of this approach lies in avoiding direct confrontation with central literary canons and prioritizing the overseas promotion of popular and genre fiction—categories that also hold vibrant positions within the central polysystem. Represented by online literature and science fiction, these genres can transcend cultural barriers and rapidly cultivate a substantial overseas readership, thanks to their accessible narrative conventions, immediate entertainment value, and built-in audience appeal. (Wang Shirong, 2023) The global success of *The Three-Body Problem* exemplifies this potential. As a science fiction novel, its target audience consists of global sci-fi enthusiasts—a pre-existing, community-oriented readership. These readers are not isolated individuals but part of interactive communities, and they represent potential consumers not only of the original work but also of its transmedia adaptations, such as films, TV series, and games derived from intellectual property (IP) development.

Thus, it is more impactful to foster a sustainable literary and cultural ecosystem within the central system through strategic work selection and IP transformation than to focus solely on exporting literary classics.

At the operational level, the power to select works for translation should be decentralized—shifted from "authoritative" patrons to market mechanisms and reader communities. Lai Jingping, founder of "Wuxiaworld," highlighted this principle when he stated, "We don't select translation works but translators, and let translators

select the works they like,” explaining the platform's success with translated online fiction. This bottom-up approach captures genuine reader preferences and helps transition the driving force behind international dissemination from “pushing out” to “drawing in.”

The role of institutional patrons should correspondingly evolve from that of a “dominator” to an “enabler,” a “facilitator,” and a “platform builder.” Their primary responsibility should shift from designating works for translation to empowering translators and energizing market dynamics through policy support, copyright services, and platform infrastructure. Furthermore, the outbound translation of Chinese literature should extend beyond textual export to prioritize the development of a mature IP industrial ecosystem. The high overseas viewership of the online series *Joy of Life*, adapted from the web novel *Qing Yu Nian*, demonstrates how a full industrial chain—spanning literature, film, television, and games—can create synergistic effects and present a multifaceted portrait of “China” from diverse angles. (Chen Dan, 2022) Such an ecosystem enables audiences within central cultural systems to develop a more objective and comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture, thereby contributing to more equitable intercultural dialogue and exchange.

(2) Pathway for translation strategy: from domestication to innovative foreignization

To gain acceptance among target readers, translators have often employed a high degree of domestication—or even rewriting—leading to oversimplified narratives and a dilution of the aesthetic uniqueness inherent in Chinese literature. However, the recent translation practice of Chinese online literature offers insights into an alternative pathway. When translating these works, translators no longer predominantly resort to domestication to conform to target-language norms and cultural expectations. Instead, they confidently apply foreignization strategies and develop innovative models, forming a new approach to cross-cultural mediation.

Culture-specific terms such as “Jin Dan”, “Nei Li”, and “Xiu Zhen” are now frequently transliterated rather than replaced with perceived English equivalents. To aid comprehension, translators provide annotations—either immediately following these terms or as end-notes. More significantly, translators and readers collaboratively identify recurrent culture-loaded concepts in Chinese online literature and compose explanatory essays circulated within overseas reader communities. This collaborative practice can be termed the “Foreignization + Community interaction” model.

Through this approach, translators do not seek to eliminate cultural foreignness for the sake of assimilation; rather, they aim to re-contextualize these concepts within the target cultural system. For instance, Wuxiaworld has established dedicated columns to elucidate the connotations and historical evolution of foundational Chinese concepts such as Dao, Yin, and Yang. The platform also hosts forums where translators and readers engage in lively discussions and mutual learning to deepen their understanding and facilitate accurate translation and communication. Community interaction as such plays a critical role in brand building and user loyalty. Competitions, themed events, and fan gatherings transform users from passive consumers into active participants, strengthening emotional commitment and long-term attachment. (Yichen Wang, 2025)

This model transforms translation and reading into a dynamic process of cross-cultural learning and exchange within a participatory community. It demonstrates that peripheral literature need not fully adapt to the linguistic norms or cultural expectations of the center. Cultural foreignness is no longer treated as a barrier to be erased, but as a distinctive and attractive feature. Through systematic and active participation in community discourse, originally alien concepts become familiarized, accepted, and even cherished by target readers—gradually enriching their cultural and literary repertoire.

In the long term, this innovative foreignization strategy can cultivate an environment in which target readers develop the patience and enthusiasm to appreciate the distinctive narrative and aesthetic qualities of Chinese literature. It helps reverse the cultural distortion and misunderstanding caused by excessive domestication and presents a more authentic and multifaceted image of a dynamic China. This evolution also illustrates how

peripheral systems within the polysystem can actively intervene in the center by introducing new literary forms, thereby contributing to dynamic, system-wide change.

4. Conclusion

This study investigates the structural challenges and prospective pathways for the international dissemination of Chinese literature from the perspective of Polysystem Theory. It finds that the long-standing dual-periphery position of Chinese literature—marginalized within the world literary system and historically dependent on translated literature domestically—remains the root cause of its limited global influence. This systemic imbalance manifests in two main obstacles: the constraints of a government-led patronage model and the widespread tendency toward over-domestication in translation.

Drawing inspiration from the overseas success of Chinese online literature, the study proposes a strategic shift from a state-driven, project-oriented “pushing out” model to a decentralized, market-responsive, and community-driven “drawing in” mechanism. Specifically, this transformation involves reorienting translation selection toward popular and genre fiction with strong cross-cultural adaptability, and promoting innovative foreignization practices that combine translation with participatory reader communities. These emerging models demonstrate the potential of leveraging peripheral agency and digital ecosystems to enhance international engagement.

Future opportunities lie in fostering an integrated “content–platform–market” framework supported by digital infrastructure, community translation networks, and IP-based industrial collaboration. However, persistent challenges—including unbalanced cultural power relations, limited coordination among institutions and markets, and insufficient protection for independent translators—continue to constrain sustainable development. Future research should strengthen empirical investigation into reader reception, cross-sector partnerships, and the policy environment governing literary IP and digital dissemination.

Overall, the “Going Global” of Chinese literature requires systematic collaboration between government, industry, and academic sectors. By integrating policy support, market mechanisms, and community participation, Chinese literature can build a more resilient global communication framework and contribute to a diversified and balanced world literary order.

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