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A Study on the Cultural Phenomenon of “Web Novels Going Overseas” from the Perspective of Communication Studies (Post-Print)

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Abstract

[Objective] In response to the national cooperation initiatives of the “Belt and Road” and “Culture Going Global”, this article, under the theoretical guidance of translation communication studies—an emerging interdisciplinary field—takes the cultural phenomenon of “web novels going overseas” as its research object. [Method] It selects Chinese online literary works and their dissemination platforms that are highly popular among overseas readers as case studies to analyze the translation and communication process of Chinese online literature overseas. [Result] The study finds that various stages in this process interact with each other, collectively influencing the translation and communication effectiveness of Chinese online literature overseas. [Conclusion] Therefore, the subjects, translators, and media of translation communication should follow three fundamental principles—sufficient interaction, overcoming obstacles, and image construction—to conduct translation and communication activities of Chinese online literature. The article will theoretically expand new research areas for the emerging discipline of translation communication studies and provide new research perspectives for the study of Chinese online literature dissemination; practically, it will offer insights for improving translation and communication effectiveness from the perspectives of subjects, translators, and media in translation communication, truly making “web novels going overseas” a successful path for Chinese culture’s outward dissemination.

Full Text

A Study on the Cultural Phenomenon of “Web Literature Going Overseas” from the Perspective of Translation Communication Studies

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Abstract

[Purpose] In response to the national cooperation initiatives of the “Belt and Road” and “Culture Going Global,” this study examines the cultural phenomenon of “web literature going overseas” under the theoretical guidance of translation communication studies, an emerging interdisciplinary field. **[Method]** By selecting Chinese online literary works and their dissemination platforms that have gained significant popularity among overseas readers as case studies, this paper analyzes the translation and communication process of Chinese web literature abroad. **[Results]** The study reveals that the various stages in this process interact with one another, collectively influencing the effectiveness of Chinese web literature’s translation and dissemination overseas. **[Conclusion]** Therefore, the subjects, translators, and media involved in translation communication should adhere to three fundamental principles: full interaction, overcoming barriers, and image construction. Theoretically, this paper expands new research areas for the emerging discipline of translation communication studies and provides novel research perspectives for the study of Chinese web literature’s dissemination. Practically, it offers insights for improving translation and communication effectiveness from the perspectives of subjects, translators, and media, thereby enabling “web literature going overseas” to become a successful pathway for Chinese cultural dissemination.

Keywords: translation communication studies; web literature; overseas dissemination; going global; cultural identity

In recent years, the unexpected popularity of Chinese web literature in overseas markets has sparked heated academic discussions, marking a breakthrough in the longstanding bottleneck of Chinese cultural output and exploring a successful path for the international dissemination of cultural products. According to the *2021 China Web Literature Blue Paper*, the overseas market for Chinese web literature exceeded 3 billion yuan, with 145 million users covering most countries and regions worldwide. As Professor Ouyang Youquan, a doctoral supervisor in web literature studies, summarized, “China’s ‘web literature going overseas’ has become a particularly noteworthy cross-cultural phenomenon.” However, due to the unique nature of Chinese culture and the amateur status of many web literature translators, the translation of these works faces considerable challenges, with translation quality varying significantly. Meanwhile, existing research on

the English translation of web works remains largely empirical and lacks theoretical guidance, preventing Chinese culture from achieving its desired impact in the translation and communication of web literature. Therefore, this study adopts the emerging disciplinary perspective of translation communication studies to examine the “web literature going overseas” phenomenon, exploring how subjects, translators, and media can enhance the translation and communication effectiveness of Chinese web literature abroad.

Translation communication studies, as an emerging interdisciplinary field, has a relatively short history of systematic theoretical development. In the 1960s, American linguist and translator Eugene Nida applied research findings from information and communication theories in communication studies to translation practice, first drawing attention to the relationship between translation studies and communication studies. In China, academic attention to translation communication theory emerged slightly later than in the West. Since the late 20th century, domestic scholars such as Lü Jun, Xie Ke, Liao Xueru, Tang Weihua, and Zhang Shengxiang have successively introduced communication theories into translation research, endorsing the notion that “translation is communication,” though they failed to clearly define the fundamental connotations of translation communication studies. Only recently has Yin Feizhou, author of *Ten Lectures on Translation Communication*, defined translation communication studies as “the science that studies translation communication and its laws, a knowledge system that explains how humans use different language symbols for information transmission and exchange,” proposing a 6W model: Subject → Object 1 (source message) → Translator → Object 2 (target message) → Medium → Receptor → Effect. The interactions among these six elements constitute four stages of the translation communication process: the initiation stage centered on the subject, the translation stage centered on the translator, the transmission stage centered on the medium, and the reception stage centered on the receptor. This paper will examine these four stages to explore how subjects, translators, and media can improve the translation and communication effectiveness of Chinese web literature overseas.

Since the 20th century, the translation and overseas dissemination of Chinese web literature has developed rapidly, which Professor Zhang Yiwu of Peking University has called “China’s fifth great invention in the cultural domain.” Consequently, scholars from literature, translation, communication, and other disciplines have begun researching the translation and overseas communication of Chinese web literature. In 2013, communication scholar Yang Zhen defined “web literature” as “literary works created and disseminated through internet platforms that reflect the social characteristics of the internet era,” encompassing genres such as fiction, poetry, and prose like traditional literature. This study focuses primarily on web novels, the most widely disseminated genre in overseas markets. Based on visual bibliometric analysis tools for CNKI literature, research on the overseas dissemination of Chinese web literature has shown significant growth since 2016. As of April 2019, keyword searches on CNKI yielded 182 relevant documents after manual screening, primarily consisting of journal

articles and master' s theses. While these studies cover dissemination content, media, and audiences, focusing mainly on the Wuxiaworld platform and the novel *Coiling Dragon*, they remain fragmented and have not formed a mature theoretical system. Therefore, more macro-level cultural phenomenon research is needed for guidance. This study selects the cultural phenomenon of “web literature going overseas” as its research object, adopting the emerging disciplinary perspective of translation communication studies to provide insights for the future development of the web literature translation and communication industry.

2. Analysis of Chinese Web Literature Translation from the Perspective of Translation Communication Studies

2.1 The Initiation Stage Centered on the Subject

The initiator of translation communication activities is the translation communication subject. Creators have shifted from traditional professional writers to freelance writers from diverse backgrounds, with their numbers multiplying exponentially. To maximize the dissemination effectiveness of web literature, Chinese web literature translation communication subjects primarily consist of organizational entities such as Qidian Chinese Network and Chuangshi Chinese Network. The translation communication subject is “the responsible entity of communication behavior that determines translation content, establishes presentation formats, selects media methods, chooses translators and interacts with them, and provides the necessary conditions for implementing translation communication.”

First, from the current state of translation communication, works in the martial arts and fantasy genres are particularly popular. Their historical backgrounds and cultural connotations mostly derive from Chinese classical literature and traditional culture, which determines the overall direction of Chinese web literature creation to cater to the massive web literature market. Second, China' s robust economic development provides fertile ground for web literature, which has formed a relatively mature IP industry chain with diverse product forms including physical books, online games, film and television dramas, animation, and other derivatives. Third, “Internet Plus” has provided tremendous momentum for web literature development. Supported by massive user data and technology for tracking consumption habits, it has achieved “precise user positioning, consumption preference segmentation, and post-development forecasting,” further promoting the dissemination of Chinese web literature. Fourth, the translation model for web literature differs from traditional translation activities, requiring full interaction among authors, translators, and readers through online platforms to enable effective translation. However, in actual translation communication processes, most original authors lack the right to select translators and cannot obtain timely, effective feedback from readers. In other words, the subjects of these translation communication activities only participate in

the initiation stage of the entire process but struggle to remain involved in subsequent stages. Fifth, creators or original platforms of Chinese web literature, through their insights into the web literature market, have developed a large volume of original content that readers enjoy, providing the necessary conditions for implementing translation communication activities with strong dissemination power.

2.2 The Translation Stage Centered on the Translator

The translator is the person, machine, or combination thereof that completes translation tasks in translation communication activities, converting information from the source language to the target language in what can be considered a recreation of the original work. In the early stages of Chinese web literature translation, overseas translation platforms were spontaneously created by overseas reader-fans, exhibiting distinct grassroots characteristics. For example, the founders of Wuxia World (赖静平) and Gravity Tales (孔雪松) initially shared their self-translated martial arts novels on online platforms based on personal interest, unexpectedly attracting growing numbers of overseas readers. With explosive fan growth and the voluntary participation of freelance translators, various online platforms formed grassroots translation groups of different sizes. Meanwhile, the success of these grassroots translation platforms reflected the enormous overseas demand for Chinese web literature translation and communication, attracting capital market attention and gradually developing into organized team activities centered on translation platforms. In 2017, China Literature officially established the web literature overseas translation portal Webnovel (Qidian International), consolidating freelance translators from around the world and reorganizing translator resources, which partially alleviated copyright issues in translated works.

“The interactivity, fragmentation, and ‘nomadic’ reading style of the internet has not only influenced the creation process of web literature but also determined its translation methods and characteristics.” Whether in the early grassroots translation model or the later capital-market-coordinated translation process, the relationship between translators and audiences in the entire translation communication process is no longer a simple linear opposition but a more interactive and complex relationship. Therefore, translators possess significant agency in this process: on the one hand, “translators are key elements in translation communication; without translator participation, translation communication cannot be realized” ; on the other hand, translators can screen and reprocess original work content based on the social environment and mainstream culture of the target language.

Example 1: Original: 林雷身体周围猛地震开一片气浪。那气浪地能量竟然将奥夫震地抛飞开去。 Translation: The space around Linley trembled violently, unleashing a wave of energy that actually knocked Orloff flying away.

In this sentence, the most notable translation point is “气浪” (qi wave). Mention

of this term naturally brings to mind China's traditional practice of Tai Chi. In fact, it represents the perfect combination of Chinese dialectical thinking with martial arts, art, and traditional Chinese medicine, embodying the core concepts of Confucian and Daoist philosophy in human movement. Precisely because it is an Eastern cultural practice rich with traditional flavor, Western readers cannot deeply understand the profound meaning of "qi." The originality of Lai Jingping's translation lies in his deletion and rewriting of the Chinese term "气浪"—rather than explaining or translating it literally, he directly rendered "气浪" as "a wave of energy," perfectly avoiding target readers' confusion about "qi."

In the development of the web literature IP industry chain, due to the potential "stakeholder" relationship between translators and translation communication subjects (i.e., original authors), there are sometimes instances where translators and subjects "overlap." This largely prevents translators from misunderstanding original content and facilitates smoother interaction between subjects and translators. However, this situation is exceptional in the rapidly evolving web literature market and cannot meet rapidly growing user demands. The "ideal translator" in translation communication is "a translator or translator team that fully masters and applies the languages and cultures of both communication parties"; otherwise, the phenomenon of "cultural discount" easily occurs during translation communication—that is, "after cultural products are exported to overseas markets, they are not easily understood by audiences in other countries due to cultural differences in values, beliefs, and other factors."

Example 2: Original: 林雷, 我告诉你, 地系可是地、火、水、风、雷、光明、黑暗等各系中最强大的一系。 Translation: Linley, let me tell you, amongst the elements of earth, fire, water, wind, thunder, light, and darkness, earth is the mightiest style of them all.

Metal, wood, water, fire, and earth are the five basic elements of matter. They mutually generate and restrict each other, forming the famous Daoist "Five Elements" theory. Ancient Chinese philosophers used this theory to explain the formation and relationships of all things in the world. Clearly, all martial arts schools in the novel are related to the traditional "Five Elements" theory. Therefore, if translators render these culture-loaded terms word-for-word, they would be novel but incomprehensible to foreign readers. Using the "literal translation with annotation" method would be more appropriate.

2.3 The Transmission Stage Centered on the Medium

After more than 20 years of vigorous development, Chinese web literature translation and communication has entered an industrialized development stage through the "Internet Plus" modern network technology and the "domestic literature platform + overseas translation platform" transnational cooperation model. This involves diverse cultural industries and social organizations, and the cross-media dissemination of web literature IP has become a normalized means of realizing value circulation and multi-dimensional interpretation

across different cultural industry fields. However, due to the particularity of translation communication media, Chinese web literature translation currently faces a series of prominent issues in the transmission stage.

First, the prerequisite for dissemination activities is obtaining authorization from the copyright holder. In May 2020, due to China Literature' s hegemonic contract terms, many contracted web literature writers initiated the “May 5th Writing Strike” to protest; although China Literature subsequently revised the contract, conflicts behind the disputed terms did not disappear. Meanwhile, most works on overseas translation platforms are uploaded by readers after self-translation, raising piracy concerns. Qidian International has even had legal disputes with Wuxia World over work authorization. Therefore, both domestic web literature platforms and overseas translation platforms have recognized the importance of legally obtaining copyright authorization, though this has not yet achieved scale effects.

Second, some translation communication activities require management and maintenance by relevant authorities. Although both overseas countries and the Chinese government have issued laws protecting domestic work copyrights or online intellectual property rights, Chinese web literature works still face difficulties in protecting their rights in overseas markets. Relevant systems and regulations remain relatively vague, and legal content regarding copyright provisions and commercial regulations requires further improvement by governments at all levels.

2.4 The Reception Stage Centered on the Receptor

The receptor in translation communication activities refers to the group recipients of object information, who are inevitably influenced by local ideologies, traditional culture, and group consciousness. The ultimate translation communication effect directly depends on the receptor' s reception of translation communication information. According to the *2021 China Web Literature Blue Paper*, martial arts and fantasy are the main reading genres, with popular works such as *Lord of the Mysteries* and *The King' s Avatar* featuring highly immersive storylines that provide readers with emotional satisfaction. In terms of reader distribution, Asian countries such as India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have the largest audiences, primarily due to geographical proximity and cultural similarity that make Chinese cultural elements in web literature more accessible. North America represents the second-largest audience region, where enthusiasm for Chinese web literature mainly stems from curiosity about exotic cultures, though this often leads to cultural misunderstandings. Based on user reviews, most overseas readers have developed interest in Chinese culture and have begun to explore Chinese martial arts, cuisine, traditional medicine, literature, calligraphy, and other cultural content.

Reader comment on *Coiling Dragon*: “Ren thank you for the translations. You did your part in sharing such an epic story, thank you. This was the first

web novel or whatever you call it that I' ve read. I' m just a simple man from central Kentucky so me learning Chinese isn' t ever gonna happen so thank you once again for the translations..."

Reader comment on *The King' s Avatar*: "This is one of the best novels and the only that I can really enthusiastically delve into. It' s got a lot of Chinese culture in terms of mannerism, language (slang & idioms), and mostly its humor and gaming culture..."

4. Implications for Chinese Web Literature Translation

By analyzing the four main stages of Chinese web literature translation communication—initiation, translation, transmission, and reception—this study reveals that while "web literature going overseas" has contributed to disseminating Chinese culture, this cultural phenomenon also faces certain dilemmas. To achieve effective translation communication, the key factors in the translation communication process should adhere to three fundamental principles: full interaction, overcoming barriers, and image construction.

4.1 The Subject

Based on the preceding analysis of the initiation stage, translation communication subjects must enhance interaction with translators and readers: monitor the implementation of the translation stage and grasp the effectiveness of the reception stage. They should consider target readers' age, gender, education, income, region, and sociocultural background in advance to conduct targeted market segmentation, overcome readers' cultural and emotional barriers, and develop original content oriented toward different audiences. Simultaneously, they should not blindly satisfy target readers' demands but should instead inject the power of Chinese culture into enjoyable web literature, root it in the core of Chinese traditional culture, and consciously construct a positive cultural image.

4.2 The Translator

In Chinese web literature translation communication, translators or translation platforms serve as bridges. However, the Chinese web literature works that have crossed overseas still suffer from uneven translation quality. On one hand, translators themselves need to receive necessary training in translation strategies to improve translation quality, overcome language barriers in translation communication, and construct positive images of works. On the other hand, the overseas dissemination of Chinese web literature relies heavily on capital market investment, and major translation platforms need to establish their own translation monitoring mechanisms, improve codes of conduct for translation, and provide conditions for full interaction among subjects, translators, and readers.

4.3 The Medium

Modern “Internet Plus” network technology and autonomous capital investment provide more possibilities for enhancing Chinese web literature translation communication effectiveness. China’s official cultural institutions should ride the wave of Chinese web literature going overseas, seize the opportunity for Chinese culture’s overseas dissemination, encourage substantial investment from domestic and foreign enterprises in related cultural products, fully tap the potential of the web literature IP industry, and actively guide the cultural connotations presented by various content products to shape a positive national image through the “web literature going overseas” phenomenon. Meanwhile, to protect the rights and interests of China’s cultural products in overseas markets, relevant Chinese government departments also need to cooperate and exchange with foreign governments to establish and improve relevant laws, regulations, and commercial provisions, safeguarding translation communication activities for Chinese culture.

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