

# Translation and Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature: A Case Study of LÜ Jiamin's *Wolf Totem*

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## Abstract:

With its growing Comprehensive National Power and rising influence in the world, China is constantly presenting its image and voice to the world, and literature, an important carrier of a country's cultural connotation, plays an important role in cultural output. However, compared with most developed countries in the world, the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature is not smooth. For decades, famous Chinese works have been widely distributed abroad, such as Yu Hua's *Brothers*, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, Mai Jia's *Declassification*, and *The Wind*. LÜ Jiamin's *Wolf Totem*, set in the nomadic life of the steppe, was particularly popular with foreign readers and even made into a film. In the Chinese theme film and television drama overseas release of several films haven't had a bad performance, for the overseas export of Chinese literature set a model. This article takes LÜ Jiamin's *Wolf Totem* as the research object. The first part shows the spread of *Wolf Totem* abroad. The second part discusses the influence of English translation translators, translation strategies, and commercial publishing houses on the overseas dissemination of books. The third part is to study the promotion of books by film and television and then return to the text itself to explore the book content and the inherent charm of the story. Finally, this paper summarizes the overseas communication experience of *Wolf Totem* and provides experience for the dissemination of other Chinese literary works.

**Keywords:** *Wolf Totem* overseas dissemination, Chinese modern literature, The spread of Chinese literature abroad

## 1. Introduction

The prosperity of a country or a nation is always

marked by the prosperity of its culture. In recent years, the Chinese Comprehensive National Power has been growing; it has made great progress in

economic, cultural, and other fields. However, China's voice in the world is still weak, and cultural soft power is low. This is also reflected in one of the important carriers of culture: literary works in the international literary arena and among international readers, not high visibility, not widely disseminated. At a time when the world is changing rapidly, people should seize the opportunity to strengthen the construction of Chinese discourse and promote the soft power of Chinese culture and the right of cultural discourse by promoting the spread of literary works abroad.

Since the May 4th movement, Chinese literature has been exported overseas. The earliest overseas works, such as Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*, were translated by sinologists. As a result of the translator's personal behavior, so small-scale, lack of commercial operations, almost no visibility, most of the works are only for scholars to use the reference. Before and after 1979, the official was responsible for the external dissemination and translation of Chinese literary works, but it was not widely spread due to its strong ideological nature[1]. Since the 20th century, there have been many excellent literary works in China, and the scope of the spread of literary works has been expanded. However, compared with other major countries, the external dissemination of Chinese literature is still declining. Therefore, how to make more outstanding Chinese literary works international becomes the focus of research.

In 2004, *Wolf Totem* was published and released; it attracted great attention at home and abroad; there are more than 100 different versions. In the process of Chinese literature "Going Out", *Wolf totem* can undoubtedly be studied as a successful case. By searching "Overseas dissemination of *Wolf Totem* and "Translation and dissemination of *Wolf Totem*, the existing research directions in the academic circle are as follows:

First, the translation of works on the spread of the impact. The first direction is from the translator and text translation. Jia Nan introduces Goldblatt's personal biography in her paper *Goldblatt's translation of the Wolf Totem from Multiple Perspectives* and explores the reasons for his success from the author's strength and influence[2]. She also discusses the principle of "faithfulness" in the translation of *Wolf Totem*. Yang Jun Mei, in her thesis *A study of translation of culture-loaded words in the English translation of Wolf Totem* discusses the role played by Goldblatt in the deletion and addition of words in the translation of *Wolf Totem*[3].

The second is the use of works of various media publicity, dissemination of research. In his paper *Research on the overseas translation and communication of Wolf Totem*, Zhou Bai Yi studies the publishing houses and propaganda teams and discusses their role in international propaganda[4]. Cui Yue Jiao started at the government level, discussing a series of preferential policies and a strategy for going global that had helped *Wolf Totem* spread successfully overseas[5].

The study of *Wolf Totem*, a classic case of Chinese literature spreading abroad, has always been a hot spot, but there are some problems in the study. Most researchers are still limited to the study of traditional factors: works text and theme, the influence of the publishing house. There is a lack of research on the influence of books, movies, TV plays, and secondary creations on the spread of paper works under the development of new media. Therefore, this paper hopes to summarize the success of *Wolf Totem* overseas and try to expand the dissemination of new directions for the dissemination of other Chinese modern literature to provide a path.

## 2. The Spread of the Wolf Totem Overseas

### 2.1 The Overseas Dissemination Grand Scene of Wolf Totem Translation

*Wolf Totem* is LÜ Jiamin's novel. From the perspective of Chen Zhen, an educated youth in Beijing, this book tells the life story of the minority nationalities in the Inner Mongolia grassland in the 1960s and 1970s and the harmony and collision between man and nature and the grassland wolf. *Wolf Totem* was published in the United States in 2008. The English version of 2008 is also the most widely translated Chinese contemporary fiction in the United States at that time. By 2014, the hardcover *Wolf Totem* had sold more than 80,000 copies; compared with the few hundred copies of most other English translations of Chinese literature, most of which are in the library, it's a huge leap[6]. So far, *Wolf Totem* has been translated into more than 30 languages, spread in more than 100 countries (regions), showing a good trend. Some of the translations have been compiled from WorldCat, the world's largest online bibliographic database, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Wolf Totem* published abroad

Title	Year of publication	Publishing House	Languages
<i>Wolf Totem</i>	2008	Penguin Press	English

<i>Der Zorn der Wölfe: Roman</i>	2008	Goldmann Wilhelm	German
<i>Чонон Сулд</i>	2011	Монсудар XXXK	Mongolian
<i>Le totem du loup</i>	2009	Le livre de poche	French
Other languages	Japanese, Russian, Italian, Polish, Czech, Vietnamese and so on.		

## 2.2 Comments from Overseas Readers

*Wolf Totem* has a wide readership, including Chinese literature researchers, history lovers, environmentalists, and the public. The author collected some scores and evaluations from GoodReads, the largest online reading platform in the world. At the time of writing, there were 4,730 comments in the English version of Penguin Press published in 2008, of which 1,952 and 1,621 were rated on a 5-point scale and 4-point scale, respectively, accounting for about 75% of the total.

Positive evaluation is mainly from the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, historical and cultural evaluation:

“This book describes this spiritual, unexplained cycle of nature, and the connection between humans and animals.”

“We’re in this beautiful lush grassland environment.”

“As for the writing itself, there are beautiful descriptions. Mountains of many colors---dark and light green, brown, deep red, purple....”

Some critical evaluations focus on characterization and plot verbosity, such as:

“The story goes on too long, it’s too rapturous, it’s repetitious, the dialogue is not well developed.”

“Speeches delivered by the self-autobiographical, main character, Chen Zhen (and few other characters) are overly pompous, and the epilogue sorely outmatches the rest of the book.”

On the whole, *Wolf Totem* has a good reputation among overseas readers. Compared with other Chinese literary works translated by Goldblatt, *Wolf Totem* ranks first on Amazon and second on Goodreads[7].

## 3. An Analysis of the Successful Path of Wolf Totem’s Overseas Dissemination

### 3.1 Choosing the Right Translator

The translation of Chinese literary works into foreign languages was originally done by sinologists, foreign workers in China, and missionaries. After the founding ceremony of the People’s Republic of China, the main body of translation gradually changed into professional translation scholars with rich experience and cooperation with the publishing house. The spread of literary works overseas

cannot be achieved without the excellent translation skills of professional translators. The translator has a great deal of translation experience and fully understands the cultural differences between the exporting and importing countries so that he can translate literary works accepted by overseas readers and widely spread.

The English translation of the *Wolf Totem* was written by Howard Goldblatt, an American. As a naval officer in Taiwan from 1961 to 1965, he discovered his “gift” for Chinese. After returning to the United States, Goldblatt earned his master’s and doctor’s degrees in Chinese literature at San Francisco State University and Indiana University Bloomington and studied under Mr. Wu-chi Liu. Goldblatt began his career as a translator after graduation. In his nearly 40-year career, he has translated more than 40 works of famous writers, including Xiao Hong, Mo Yan, Duan Mu Hong Liang, and Ba Jin. Mo Yan, the Chinese writer who has worked most with Goldblatt, said: “His translation adds luster to my original work”[8]. Goldblatt has won two NEA Awards, a Guggenheim Foundation Award, and nearly every other translation award. Three of the Asian Literary Prize winners were translated by Goldblatt[6].

Goldblatt used a lot of translation strategies in translating LÜ Jiamin’s *Wolf Totem*, trying to keep the cultural features of the original work and make the original content better understood and accepted by the English readers.

The first is culture-adapted translation. When Goldblatt translated the contents of Chinese culture and customs, he often adopted the strategy of cultural adaptation and tried to make the original translation more in line with the western readers’ understanding. For example, instead of transliterating or paraphrasing “蒙古包”, he uses the relatively international term Yurt. In the first sentence of the first page of *Wolf Totem*, Goldblatt translated “你们汉人就是骨子里怕狼” into “A fear of wolves is in your Chinese bones.” LÜ Jiamin thinks 汉人 shouldn’t be translated as Chinese. Goldblatt believes that Western readers see the Han and other minorities as a whole, rather than separate the Mongols in China from the Han Chinese[1]. Second, simplification and deletion. Goldblatt sometimes simplifies long sentences or paragraphs in translation. According to statistics, there are 458,900 words in the original *Wolf Totem* and only 201,000 words in Goldblatt’s English translation, which indicates that the translator has

made a lot of cuts to the original content[7]. For example, in *Wolf Totem*, there is a passage (such as before chapter 6, “Weapons of Turkic peoples, such as bow, armor, sword...”) in front of each chapter that has some connection with the chapter[9]. But most of them are classical Chinese, which is very difficult to translate; even if many explanations are added, they may not be understood by foreign readers. Therefore, Goldblatt chose to delete such text directly.

Third, the combination of literal translation, free translation, and transliteration. Since there are differences between Chinese and foreign cultures and languages, and the translation of literary works itself is a cross-cultural process. Goldblatt has given much thought to it in the process of translation. Try to use a variety of translation techniques to meet the different features of the text to the greatest extent, preserving the original content. For example, 君子动口不动手 was translated into “a gentleman argues but does not fight.” For words or expressions that do not have a corresponding concept in English, Goldblatt will choose free translation. Such as 望不到一缕炊烟 was translated into “far from all signs of habitation.” When it comes to specific nouns, such as “Chaganuul Mountain,” Goldblatt also transliterates words that are themselves transliterated from Mongolian into Chinese.

### 3.2 Choosing the Right Business Press

The domestic publishing house of *Wolf Totem* is Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House. After the great success of the novel in domestic distribution, it has also attracted the attention of many foreign publishing houses and media. Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House did not wait for foreign publishers to come to its door and cooperate. Instead, it prepared itself from the start, working in the US at *Time*, *The New York Times*, the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, British *the Times*, and other foreign newspapers to promote the full use of the media and magazines to promote the novel, so that their cooperation with foreign publishers as far as possible to take the initiative.

In 2005, Penguin reached an agreement with Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House to license *Wolf Totem* in English for \$100,000 upfront and 10% royalties. The Penguin Books is a large, established business publishing house in the English-speaking world, founded in 1935. The issue covers the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Australia, South Africa, and many other major English-speaking countries. It has accumulated experience over the decades of book publishing and has consolidated other well-known publishers to grow its business. Its popularity and extensive publicity experience in many

international publishing houses are critical to the successful promotion of *Wolf Totem* to the world. Penguin China was founded in 2005 with the mission of expanding into the vast Chinese market, which has led Penguin to focus on selling the English version of *Wolf Totem* and then increasing the import of foreign and export of Chinese works.

Penguin Publishing Group held a grand launch ceremony in the Forbidden City of Beijing in March 2008, which was also the first time that English-language books were launched in China[6]. The organizer invited Chen Ji Quan, the hero of Yang Ke in the book, and herdsmen from Inner Mongolia to create momentum on the spot. To promote the *Wolf Totem* English version of the sale, the press also held in the British times of China’s Inner Mongolia Prairie-style exhibition. Penguin USA also hosts book talks and book fairs in Los Angeles, where it promotes book awareness through many offline events.

The Penguin Books also invited many critics to comment on the book. Foreign critics are more liberal, with publishers providing books to well-known critics, who then decide for themselves whether to view the books and review them; the reviews are broader in content and scope than praise. Most critics agree that the wolf totem has a high literary value and a vivid plot; some of the reviews are ideological, political, and social. On the whole, well-known critics of the book played a role in promoting the popularity of the book.

## 4. Other Factors Contributing to the Success of the Wolf Totem in Spreading Overseas

### 4.1 Cross-media Communication

The cross-media communication of literary works mainly refers to the dissemination of literary works through various means, not limited to paper-based media. It includes e-books, web serials, and a series of adaptations, such as movies, TV series, web series, etc.

The movie version of the *Wolf Totem* was first planned in 2008 and officially released on the first day of Chinese New Year in 2015. As a Sino-French cooperation film, from the beginning of the planning has been attracting attention. Director Jean-Jacques Annaud is a well-known French director. And he is also famous in the international film world. His first film won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film Award, and the film “*The Creation of Man*” won the Caesar Award for Best Picture and best director. The film *Wolf Totem* also earned a guaranteed minimum circulation of \$8 million for Chinese films

at the time[10]. The film has been released in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the North, and other regions. According to the online movie statistics site Box Office Mojo, “*Wolf Totem*” grossed 110460000 US dollars at the Chinese box office, 8811832 US dollars at the French box office, 1531645 US dollars at the Spanish box office, and 3473496 US dollars at the Italian box office[11].

The box office success is reflected in the proliferation of book reviews and short videos. First, the more often the book is reviewed, the higher book sales are also. On the Amazon website search keyword “Wolf Totem” has 202381 comments from 2013 to 2023. In 2015, there were 32 reviews, accounting for 40 percent of the 10-yearbook review, the same year that *Wolf Totem* films were released. A search for “Wolf Totem movie” on YouTube, the world’s largest video-sharing platform, yielded 710,000 views of the most watched videos; 20 short videos and previews received more than 10,000 views. While promoting the film, the videos will also allow more overseas readers to learn about the *Wolf Totem*’s print books.

There is another advantage to making books adapted for film and television works: movies and TV let people have more desire to watch; it can attract the attention of people who are not interested in paper books. This inadvertently expands the reach of the book to a wider audience. For example, the films of the British fantasy novel *Harry Potter* have had a huge impact around the world, creating a legion of “Harry Potter fans”, many of whom have never read Harry Potter’s print books, not to mention the English original. A large fan base, whether collecting or learning about the original, means a lot of people will buy books, which can promote the sale of paper books. In addition, the size of the fan is also very easy to form a group. They will participate in various activities, such as Comic-Con, or communicate with Internet friends on the Internet, at which time they will inadvertently attract people who do not understand this IP; this is equivalent to the fan community being the “walking billboard”.

#### 4.2 Psychological Appeal to Readers from Different Countries

“Wolf Totem” has two themes: first, the wolf as a totem and the spirit of the incarnation of the nomadic people, and second, between humans and nature, especially between humans and wolves, wildlife coexistence. Both themes have a strong appeal to Western readers. Because the western literature will often appear to live in harmony with the nature of the theme. *White Fang*, for example, tells the story of White Fang (a symbol of nature and wildlife), the hybrid offspring of a wolf-dog, and human beings (a symbol of human civilization). The story itself

implies a challenge to nature and inner growth. *Wolf Totem* shows another aspect of wolves from a unique angle, highlighting the intelligence and courage of wolves on the grassland, which accords with the interest of western readers in natural aesthetics and ecological ethics.

There is also the growth of the hero. Western readers pay more attention to the personalization of characters and the process of step-by-step transformation than Chinese readers, so they have a strong interest in the story of character growth and improvement. Chen Zhen in *Wolf Totem* realized the true meaning of life and the power of nature through many contacts with wolves, such as watching wolves hunting, killing wolves, feeding coyotes, etc. *Wolf Totem* also deals with the clash of Han and Mongolian cultures, set in a specific historical period. Western readers have a strong interest in the culture and early history of the other side of the ocean; multi-content displays can arouse their curiosity. The book’s detailed depiction of life on the Mongolian steppe and its depiction of the culture of Mongolia enable Western readers to better understand and experience lifestyles and values that are different from their own cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the setting of the story took place during the Cultural Revolution, and even when the books were propagated overseas, they were often combined with politics and ideology, which aroused the curiosity of western readers. They tried to understand the social and cultural conditions during the Cultural Revolution through this book.

*Wolf Totem* in the content, theme, and plot with the Western Reader’s aesthetic orientation has a lot of places. By discussing the relationship between man and nature, the course of personal growth, and the collision of cultures, the novel successfully touches on the core issues concerned by Western readers. This cross-cultural resonance has boosted the book’s reception in the West.

#### 5. Conclusion

*Wolf Totem* is a legendary novel; its overseas dissemination success case shows that for Chinese literature to truly achieve export, there are the following points to note: First, the work itself should have Chinese characteristics. The success of *Wolf Totem* cannot be separated from the choice of its theme; no good content can attract many readers at home and abroad. It should contain the essence of Chinese culture, not just to meet the western aesthetic creation. Second, the choice of the translator’s subject is very important. The popularity of translators will affect the choice of readers, and readers are more willing to choose well-known translators. At the same time, the translator’s translation skills and level cannot be ignored. How to make the text from the language of the country of

export into the language of the country of import involves language, culture, and many other areas, which have put forward very high requirements for the translator. Third, the choice of the publishing house. Excellent commercial publishing houses are profit-oriented, while a lot of popular books are published with publicity experience. It will carefully check the translation, hold a variety of promotional activities abroad, and invite commentators and authoritative media to comment on publicity. This is conducive to the work overseas quickly hitting popularity, and the successful spread of literary works is inseparable. Fourth, we should pay attention to the importance of books, film, and television and the development of new media to broaden the channels. Although Japan has been deeply influenced by Western culture since modern times, there are still differences in cultural concepts between Japan and the Western world. But Japanese anime can go to the world, to the world propaganda, and export its cultural values, from small food culture to large national character, which are inseparable from comic book adaptations of anime. Of course, we understand that the comic book adaptation of the animation itself is much less difficult than the film of the novel, but through the film the way to promote the original is a very good strategy.

It's no coincidence that *Wolf Totem*'s sales have continued unabated. It has attracted the attention of domestic readers and then attracted international attention and shined abroad through the story plot scenes full of national characteristics. The popularity of the film adaptation, the number of screenings, and the box office are also higher than the previous Chinese literary adaptations of film and television drama. This is a good start for Chinese literature to go out and set a successful example for the overseas

dissemination of other Chinese literary works.

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