

## Research on the Spread and Acceptance of Wang Anyi's Works in Western Countries

—Take the English version of Song of Everlasting Sorrow as an Example

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**Abstract:** As one of China's most famous contemporary writers, Wang Anyi enjoys a high reputation abroad. Her most recognized work is Song of Everlasting Sorrow, which describes a woman's life experience in Shanghai. A professor at Harvard once praised her as a "writer belonging to Shanghai." The study of the spread of Wang Anyi's novels in western counties is beneficial to examine contemporary Shanghai-style literature and even the practical problems of cross-cultural communication of Chinese literature, further promoting Chinese literature to the world.

### 1. General situation of the spread of Wang Anyi's works

Favored by western translators, the translation of Wang Anyi's works can be traced back to the 1980s at the earliest, and the number of translations is considerable. According to the influence list of Chinese female writers' works in Europe and America provided by OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), an extensive literature and information service organization, Wang Anyi ranks among the best with 12 works and is the first person after Zhang Ailing. Her works are translated mainly through three channels. The first is the state-sponsored literary publishing organizations Chinese Literature and Panda Series, which translated and published Records of Small Courtyard Trivial and Elapsed in the 1980s. The second channel is Yicong, sponsored by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which translated and published her works. Thirdly, some of her works were translated by overseas Sinologists and posted by foreign publishing institutions (Columbia University Press, etc.), such as Song of Everlasting Sorrow, Xiaobaozhuang Village, Love in Jinxiu Valley, Elapse, etc.<sup>[1]</sup>

Wang Anyi's most influential work is The Enduring Song of Sorrow, collected in 692 libraries in Europe and America, surpassing Zhang Eiling's Broken Love and Mo Yan's Red Sorghum. With the 692 collections, the influence of her works ranks 10th in the list of Chinese contemporary literary works in Europe and America. Some of Wang Anyi's short stories have also been included in the collection of Chinese writers' works. Among them, Spring Bamboo Shoots: Selected Chinese Contemporary Short Stories has been collected by 513 libraries, ranking 27th in the influence list of English-speaking countries in Europe and America.<sup>[2]</sup>

Song of Everlasting Sorrow, published by Wang Anyi in 1995, was highly praised. It has been printed 22 times before and after, with a sales volume of more than 550,000 copies. It has been translated into various languages, sold in different countries, and has won multiple awards. In 1998 won the fourth Shanghai Literature and Art Award (SLAA). In 2000, it won the fifth SLAA. In 2005, it was nominated for the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature. It won the Man Booker International Prize in 2011. Columbia University Press has published the English version of Song of Everlasting Sorrow. The Taipei Times called her a "great classic." In 2008, the New York Times Book Review gave Song of Everlasting Sorrow a very high professional evaluation. There are many factors for successfully disseminating Wang Anyi's works, including the diverse and deep cultural themes and the images of Chinese women shaped in her works. This all goes hand in hand with the creative betrayal of the reader, translator, and environment.

## **2. The exploration of the reasons for the acceptance of her works**

### **2.1 Description of the city Shanghai**

The publication of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* in America attracted the attention of American cultural elites to Wang Anyi. It broke through the long-term rule that the West has not well received Chinese literature. One of the main reasons why western readers accept *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* lies in its urban theme. Shanghai, the Oriental Pearl, has always been a city in China most known and loved by Westerners. As a woman living in Shanghai, Wang Anyi is good at presenting the ups and downs of people's destinies. Her works have implied the ups and downs of Shanghai, showing national characteristics, cultural psychology, and many social problems. The Lanes and Shikumen represent the regional culture of Shanghai; the boudoir shows the charm of Shanghai women, pigeon symbolizes the spirit of the city. From these representations, she abstracted the cultural and spiritual connotations of Shanghai. Leo Oufan Lee, an American cultural critic, once evaluated *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* as: "Wang Anyi not only described a city but also presented the city to readers in an angle that is difficult to be felt through historical study or personal experience. The skill has been rarely seen in the current novel circle." Through the description of a woman's life and the daily public history, Wang Anyi has presented the urban culture and the times with a grand historical narrative. It is precise because of the particularity and importance of Chinese cities and society shown in her works that the works resonate with western readers to the greatest extent and satisfy their curiosity in foreign culture and psychology.<sup>[3]</sup>

The author has described Shanghai in detail in her work. Although this has been recognized and praised in some comments, not all western readers can accept it. Some of them even think that the book is worthless for understanding Shanghai. It is not difficult to find that Wang Anyi did not focus on the prosperity of Shanghai in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*; instead, she presented the significant changes in Shanghai in the past decades through trivial life in the alley. "There are various kinds of alleys in Shanghai. The oleander in the courtyard extends out of the wall, indicating that spring is not concealable. However, the courtyard is safe because the lock of its back door is a spring lock made in Germany, and the windows on the ground floor are fenced. The low iron gate has sharp corners. The patio is surrounded by the center of the room as if people can come in but cannot go out."<sup>[4]</sup> Many western readers hope to see the colonial narrative and style of the times of Shanghai, the city called oriental Paris. However, what is presented in the book has a strong contrast and value vacancy with their inherent impression, thus making them disappointed.

### **2.2 The image of Asian women**

With the feminist movement in the 1960s and Western feminist critical theory of the promotion and development in the 1980s and 1990s, the Western world has been paying more attention to female writers. Wang Anyi's works were just in the time in which the Western world knew charming Chinese women. Critics began to notice China. Western society thinks that Wang Anyi constructed an emotional model with women as the main body, which is different from the previous models, and subverted the traditional model in China since ancient times, in which men are superior to women. Sylvia Chen pointed out that Wang Anyi's novels have changed Westerners' view that contemporary Chinese literature is dull, lacking literary value and ultimate concern.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although many of Wang Anyi's novels have implied feminism, the complex and authentic love experience of Shanghai women in the social changes has been uniquely expressed in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Wang Qiyao, the character in the novel, always pursued a warm and reliable belonging. The relationship between her and Director Li was probably a relationship of waiting. From the novel's beginning, she was waiting; Then, she continued to wait; There were more waiting days than not. The word "waiting" was consecutively repeated six times, showing her helplessness. It can be seen that Wang Qiyao's image did not show feminism, and her "independence" was just a helpless move. However, in the English version of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, "wait" is translated as a game of waiting. Wang Qiyao became more active, bravely pursued love, and had independent and free thoughts, just like the Westerners.<sup>[6]</sup> From the view of the author, the image of Wang Qiyao was not distinct. Unlike the distinct personality of Cao Qiqiao in Zhang Ailing's *The Golden Cangue*, Wang

Qiyao's nature and life were always the symbols of Shanghai. In the first chapter of the novel, Wang Qiyao is described as the daughter of a typical alley in Shanghai, and there are many Wang Qiyaos in Shanghai. It can be seen that the author tried to shape Wang Qiyao into a representative image of Shanghai.

The personalized translation of the translator Bai Ruiwen and Chen Yuxian was undoubtedly a kind of creative treason. Although they tried to reproduce the original text, they did not equivalently reflect the content of the original text due to cultural differences. As a result, readers of the English version of the novel cannot feel the same image of Wang Qiyao as the original readers. Meanwhile, it is precise because of this creative treason that Wang Qiyao's idea and *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* are well-accepted in western countries.

### **2.3 The acceptance of the background of the times**

In the 1980s, the "root-seeking literature" in the Chinese literary world was influenced by the global trend of "root-seeking." Taking "cultural root-seeking" as the theme, writers focused on traditional culture and national psychology. Inspired by "Magic Realism" in Latin America and "Orientalism" in Japan, Chinese writers attempted to find something with vitality from Chinese culture to make it more acceptable to western culture, thus promoting Chinese literature to the world. In 1983, Wang Anyi participated in the International Writing Program in the United States, which gave her a new perspective and made her rethink the traditional Chinese lifestyle from a cross-cultural perspective, thus expanding her artistic vision. Later, she constructed her hometown in a "foreign land."<sup>[7]</sup>

Wang Anyi also showed the consciousness of seeking roots, nostalgia, and sentiment for "home" in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Home is where everyone habitats his body and soul, as well as the main clue to studying Wang Anyi's works. Compared to Zhang Ailing, however, Wang Anyi is a person who has lost the sense of "rooting." Although she lived in Shanghai for most of her life, she mentioned at the beginning of the *Documentary and Fiction* that her family was an outsider who moved to Shanghai. She had no relatives, friends, or family. This sense of losing root exists in Wang Anyi's creation, which drove her to seek her possible destinations and prompted her to write *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Like in the Xiaobaozhuang Village, Wang Anyi focused on investigating and expressing the group existence of people's lives in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. In her own words, she wrote about the fate of a woman. But this woman was just the city's spokesperson, and what she intended to write was the city's story."<sup>[8]</sup>From the perspective of the study of modern and contemporary literary history, Wang Anyi described Shanghai in her novel as a city she has lived in for 40 years from a cultural point of view. The life of Wang Qiyao, though she sought the roots of her spirit and nostalgia for this city, was presented.

### **2.4 The central western position**

One primary reason why *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* aroused western interest was that it described the daily experience and living conditions of Shanghai and even Chinese people in detail, accurately, and calmly. In addition, in the western cultural context, the narrative of the English version of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is out of incredible history, which is full of expression of individualism and fits well with the western mainstream literary aesthetics. Therefore, mainstream media such as *New York Times*, *World Literature Today*, *Publisher Weekly*, and *The Chicago Tribune* have been highly concerned with this work. All these comments praised Wang Anyi's writing skills, praised her for deviating from the great history, not describing the significant events in history and politics, and focusing on nostalgia, Shanghai, women's experience, and daily life.<sup>[9]</sup>

Nevertheless, some western readers still followed the ideological literary theory line and deliberately highlighted the political interpretation of the novel, which is why *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is popular in the western world. As mentioned at the beginning of *The Quarterly Conversation*, "the English version of *Everlasting Sorrow* Song has changed the way Western literati, especially American, view China." The perspective and position of the whole novel are based on politics. As for Wang Anyi's writing style of not mentioning historical narratives, they think that the author deliberately carried out political criticism in a euphemistic and obscure way. As for "gossip," one of

the characteristics of Shanghai, it is "a depoliticized control over the women's world" and "often reflected in various revolutionary and political movements in contemporary Chinese history." At the end of the article, it was pointed out that Wang Anyi used a euphemistic writing style to let many readers participate in political criticism.

For a long time, the Western's acceptance of contemporary Chinese literature has always been driven by political ideology. Although many works are full of delicate psychological descriptions and a strong sense of the times, as well as universal aesthetics of literature and reflection on the philosophy of human nature, they will be politically interpreted and judged once spread to the world. This ideological interpretation of Chinese literature leads to a narrow understanding of Chinese literature.

### **3. Reconsideration of overseas dissemination**

#### **3.1 Elimination of cultural prejudice**

The comments of the American translator Eric Abrahamsen (Tao Jian) may prove something: "Chinese people are eager to promote local literature, while overseas readers have no concept of "Chinese literature" at all. .... Foreign publishers, media, scholars and ordinary readers know nothing about Chinese literature. It is not their choice to dislike or resist Chinese literature because they never know what it looks like." It can be seen that even though China's comprehensive national strength is rising day by day and its international influence is increasing, the value of Chinese literature is still seriously ignored. Moreover, it can be seen from the acceptance and spread of the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Some western readers and media consciously explore and highlight the so-called political narrative, disaster narrative, female narrative, social crime, fable irony, and ethical writing in Chinese literary works, which conform to the mainstream western literary tradition. In the eyes of overseas readers, Chinese literature has always been a "vassal" of politics. Especially in the 1950s, the overseas dissemination of socialist literature with strong political ideology further strengthened this point. The deep-rooted prejudice and "exotic image" have deformed Chinese literary works. Therefore, to make Chinese literature accepted by foreign readers, one of the factors is to eliminate the prejudices and inherent "exotic image."

#### **3.2 Breakthrough in literary translation**

Besides, literary translation is also a critical link. The translation and dissemination of Chinese literary works in the West are facing many challenges, among which translation is essential.

The first and primary issue is who translates it. It is not difficult to find in numerous translation practices that although native translators understand Chinese culture, few are proficient in the target language and culture of the target country. However, a few excellent overseas sinologists exist, such as Ge Haowen and Chen Anna. It is almost impossible for Chinese literature going out just depending on them. Therefore, the cooperation between native Chinese translators and western sinologists in translation during the going out process of Chinese literature will be an effective way to solve the problem of lacking Chinese and Western translation elites.

The second issue is how to translate. The literal and free translation should be considered according to specific situations, which can be determined by translation effectiveness, reader acceptance, and functional communicative effect. In terms of literal translation, the author thinks it is necessary to avoid intentional or unintentional mistranslation and omission as much as possible because it will probably change the work's original meaning and result in readers' misunderstandings. Translators should be faithful to the literary characteristics of the original text as much as possible in terms of language, rhetoric, and culture. After all, there are significant differences between the source language and the target language. To let the target readers better understand and accept another culture and language style, the translator should reasonably use some creative treason instead of translating the whole original text.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **4. Conclusion**

Bai Ruiwen once said: "The powerful storylines and skillful writing techniques in contemporary

Chinese novels all point directly to human nature, that is, the common hopes, dreams, desires, fears, sadness, and nightmares of humankind. Although the number of overseas readers of Wang Anyi, Yu Hua, Mo Yan, and Su Tong is far less than that in China, it is hoped that more and more overseas readers will sense the charm of these writers' novels in the future. "[11]To make these works more literarily significant overseas, it is necessary to actively promote mutual understanding and respect among different literary and cultural forms. Eliminate the established cultural stereotypes and prejudices of ethnocentrism, and protect the heterogeneous literary and artistic factors contained in the original works during the translation. It is not something that can be done in a day, but the beauty of classical Chinese literature is gradually being recognized, appreciated, and accepted.

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