

On the Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Children's Literature: Gains and Losses in the Cases of *Bronze and Sunflower* and *Mo's Mischief*

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Abstract: *Setting its goal at providing concrete and actionable insights for optimizing the global dissemination of Chinese children's literature, this study examines the English translations of *Bronze and Sunflower* and *Mo's Mischief*, with emphasis on five key dimensions of dissemination: translation agents, translated content, dissemination channels, target readership, and reception impact. This analysis is essential for effectively promoting high-quality Chinese children's literature to wider international readership.*

Keywords: Chinese Children's Literature; Translation and Dissemination; Lasswell Model of Communication; *Bronze and Sunflower*; *Ma's Mischief*.

1. INTRODUCTION

China's efforts to share its culture globally have, in recent years, gone beyond well-established exports like Confucius Institutes and lion dances and extended to literary transmission boosted by translation and distribution programs. Truly successful literary transmission requires integration into the target culture's literary world and engagement with its public readers. Current dissemination of Chinese literature, including children's literature, in the English world is largely hindered by shortcomings in translation, ineffective ways of distribution and ideological barriers.

Children's literature is a uniquely transcultural type of writing (Pan, 2014). Since 2000, Chinese children's literature has seen major growth in both quality and quantity, winning wider readership abroad (Long & Hu, 2024). Well-known books like Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze and Sunflower* and Yang Hongying's *Mo's Mischief* series are flagship titles actively promoted worldwide. However, reader reception of these books differs sharply. Cao Wenxuan's novel won the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award—a historic first for China. It has also received other international honors and seen gratifying sales in the target markets (Ma & Liu, 2019). Regrettably, Yang Hongying's *Mo's Mischief* series, though distributed internationally, achieves much less acceptance among its intended readers (Deng, 2021). This study employs the Lasswell Communication Model, especially its application to translation and dissemination, as the theoretical framework. With an analysis of the above-mentioned discrepancy in overseas dissemination and reader response, this research hopes to locate transferable practices that facilitate effective global circulation of Chinese children's literature.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

American political scientist Harold Lasswell developed the Lasswell Model of Communication in his groundbreaking 1948 paper "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," which stands as one of the earliest systematic efforts to model human communication. This model breaks down communication into five core questions, known as the "5W" formula (Jiang, 2023): Who (the communicator who collects, processes, and sends information), Says What (the message itself, formed from meaningful symbols), In Which Channel (the medium used to physically carry the message), To Whom (the audience receiving it), and With What Effect (the resulting impact on the audience's knowledge, attitudes, or behavior, which measures success)(Guo, 2021). Its clear, element-based structure provides a vital foundation for subsequent application in interdisciplinary fields, including translation studies.

The Lasswell model works particularly well for studying how translated Chinese literature reaches global readers,

in particular children's books (Tu, 2016). Its value comes from breaking communication into five core elements in translation and dissemination—translation agents, translated content, dissemination channels, target readership, and reception impact. Its focus on readership ("To Whom") requires careful consideration of children's comprehension competence, cultural backgrounds, reading interests and response to stories. Similarly, the medium ("In Which Channel") encourages varied pathways of communication, such as pictures, digital tools, and reading formats made for children. Furthermore, evaluating effect ("With What Effect") requires looking beyond the translated book to study real-world reader reactions. The interconnected dimensions provided by the Lasswell model thus provide a workable framework for enhancing international dissemination of Chinese children's literature across cultural barriers.

3. FIVE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSLATION AND DISSEMINATION

3.1 Translation Agents

The translation-dissemination framework sees "agents" as those who start or actively spread cultural content, which can be individuals, groups, or specialized organizations. When translating and sharing Chinese children's literature internationally, translators and publishing houses are central actors getting the work translated and distributed. (Wu & Jiang, 2015).

The English translation initiative for *Bronze and Sunflower* (2015) partnered with Walker Books, an independent London publisher with a strong worldwide reputation in children's literature (Chen & Xu, 2019). The collaboration secured Helen Wang as the translator (Dong & Wang, 2017), a sinologist who has studied Chinese children's literature for decades. Her bilingual skills and acute literary sensitivity allowed her to capture the book's subtle emotions and artistic nuances. Her translation received the 2015 PEN Translates Award (UK), was named a 2017 *New York Times* Best Children's Book (US), and won the 2017 Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation (UK) (Ma & Liu, 2019). Collectively, these achievements raised the book's international profile and cemented its transnational visibility.

HarperCollins acquired the worldwide publishing rights to the *Mo's Mischief* series in 2007, and in the spring of 2008 they released eight translations simultaneously in the U.S. and U.K. markets. The publisher employs a number of freelance translators who work independently, who, with varied translation skills, demonstrate significant differences in three key areas: Chinese cultural understanding, literary sensitivity, and technical translation skills. The team mainly applied domestication and heavy adaption for Western readers, which occasionally results in unreasonable textual abridgements, substitutions of culturally different terminology, and simplification of Chinese-specific humor. As a result, young English readers find it difficult to meaningfully engage with the stories and their underlying cultural elements.

3.2 Translated Content

In most cases, individual translators have little control over source-text selection, translational modifications, and adaptive strategies. Instead, such choices are mediated by external social and cultural pressures. For instance, dominant ideology guides source-text selection, cultural poetics influence translational modifications, and sponsors determine adaptive strategies. These combined factors ultimately decide translated content (Wu & Jiang, 2015).

Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze and Sunflowers* tells the joys and sufferings of siblings Qingtong and Kuihua during the May 7 Cadre School era in rural Jiangnan. The novel demonstrates Cao's unique writing style through poetic language and artistic focus rich in repetitive phrases and symbolic descriptions of nature. These elements unveil the natural beauty of the area while emphasizing the children's struggles, delivering strong aesthetic and emotional impacts.

Helen Wang set out to translate this culturally complex novel with specific goals to preserve its artistic integrity for English readers. To accomplish this, Wang implemented careful text reductions and modifications. She condensed lengthy descriptive passages and took pains to transfer the cultural and moral conflicts embedded in the stories. Such adjustments enhanced narrative clarity and guaranteed reader engagement without compromising historical authenticity. Her thoughtful cultural mediation ultimately established this Chinese novel within English-language literary discourse (Wu & Jiang, 2008).

The *Mo's Mischief* series, written by acclaimed writer Yang Hongying, depicts the rural adventures of the protagonist Ma Xiaotiao and his friends. This series has become enormously popular in China for its accessible humor and familiar situations, while critics and researchers suggest the stories fall short in offering truly meaningful reading experiences or long-lasting spiritual elevation. (Sun, 2017).

HarperCollins directed translators to heavily edit the translated content. As a result, the English versions are 15-25% shorter than the source texts, which caused serious problems when the series entered English-speaking markets (Deng, 2021). Cultural-loaded elements like “xiehouyu” (folk phrases) were rendered through either literal translation or adaptive rewriting, neither of which was satisfying. In general, Western readers struggled to meaningfully connect with the stories.

3.3 Dissemination Channels

Publishers' professional reputations strongly shape how readers see translated books. Currently, Chinese literature reaches foreign readers through two main paths. The first method comes from Chinese government-sponsored translation projects. The second path happens through well-known international publishers (Wu & Jiang, 2015). The influence of Government-led cultural export are limited to academic or specialized readers, while international publishers usually reach genuine worldwide dissemination. For example, *Bronze and Sunflower's* Chinese-foreign publishing partnership achieved far greater success abroad than in its home market.

Bronze and Sunflower's successful international publication resulted from strategic collaboration between Jiangsu Children's Publishing House and Walker Books, the latter leveraging four decades of specialized children's literature expertise and an extensive backlist of classic titles. Initiated in September 2011, this partnership integrated domestic institutional support through *China Book International* (CBI) with Walker's specialized international distribution resources (Jiang, 2016). Walker crucially positioned the translation within its flagship World Voices—Global Fiction Series, secured the PEN Translates Award to enhance visibility, and coordinated complementary media engagement—notably Paper Republic's exclusive interview with translator Helen Wang within one week of Cao Wenxuan's Hans Christian Andersen Award win, thus exponentially amplifying transnational dissemination impact (Dong & Wang, 2017).

On the other hand, HarperCollins demonstrates critical deficiencies in execution of *Mo's Mischief's* distribution. Unfocused promotion, underdeveloped dissemination channels, and suboptimal resource allocation combined to hinder effective dissemination. The series' peripheral status within the publisher's portfolio further constrained financial and operational investment. Crucially, the absence of tailored marketing strategies for the translated editions hampered their transcultural adaptability, undermining market penetration in anglophone markets.

3.4 Target Readership

Upon reaching target markets, translated works encounter their intended readership, which include everyday readers alongside experts like literary critics and journalists. Their preferences collectively decide which new works publishers select for translation (Wu & Jiang, 2015). Consequently, translators, before making adaptations, must study what readers believe and what literary styles they prefer. (Bao, 2014).

Walker Books deliberately aimed *Bronze and Sunflower* at British readers aged nine and above. This strategy fits within Britain's multicultural education approach, which brings diverse cultural stories into classrooms. The novel features unfamiliar settings—China's countryside during the Cultural Revolution—along with culturally specific themes of struggle. Yet universal human qualities like resilience and compassion cross cultural lines effectively. Artist Meilo So, part of the Chinese diaspora, designed a thoughtful cover showing Qingtong (Bronze) and Kuihua (Sunflower) on a water buffalo in misty mountains. Using peaceful ink-wash style visuals, the cover emphasizes the siblings' relationship and traditional Chinese elements. This deliberate visual approach caught young British readers' attention and sparked their curiosity to connect with the cultural content (Wang & Zhang, 2023).

Mo's Mischief faces greater challenges connecting with its intended Western readers. While Chinese children can easily relate to characters like Ma Xiaotiao, Tang Fei, and Ding Wentao out of familiar cultural contexts, Western children, who grow up in more fluid, diverse societies, find this series' comparatively rigid world uninteresting. Further obstacles occurred when the books show hallow characters, surface-level themes and artistic thinness. Unsurprisingly, Western children, alongside with their parents and teachers, seldom develop lasting enthusiasm for the series.

3.5 Reception Impact

Reception impact reflects target readers' acceptance of translated content (Wu & Jiang, 2015). Translation objectives are fulfilled only when works achieve genuine cultural resonance among foreign readers. This impact is measurable through four key indicators: international awards, global library holdings, commercial sales, and reader reviews.

3.5.1 International Awards

Cao Wenxuan made history in 2016 by winning China's first Hans Christian Andersen Award for *Bronze and Sunflower*. The English translation later won the PEN Translates Award (2015), became a *New York Times* Best Children's Book (2017), and received the Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation (2017) (Ma & Liu, 2019). These honors greatly increased the book's global visibility while affirming its cultural and literary value. Smartly building on this success, Walker Books' American partner Candlewick Press released the U.S. edition immediately after Cao's big award, maximizing reader attention and interest. Meanwhile, Cao participated in international literary events and academic exchanges worldwide, cementing the novel's place in English-speaking readers' minds (Chen & Xu, 2019).

By contrast, *Mo's Mischief* achieved only domestic recognition—notably China's Outstanding Publication Award (2005) and Best Children's Literature Award (2006)—without substantive international honors to elevate its global profile or accelerate cross-cultural adoption. This absence of transnational curatorial acclaim fundamentally limited its capacity to generate meaningful resonance beyond Chinese-language markets.

3.5.2 Global Library Holdings

WorldCat, the world's largest bibliographic database encompassing nearly 9,000 libraries across 112 countries, provides authoritative evidence of institutional recognition (Wang & Zhang, 2023). Distribution patterns across library types indicate both popular appeal and scholarly engagement.

Bronze and Sunflower demonstrates exceptional penetration, with 1,042 holdings globally for its UK and US editions combined, counting holdings from five Chinese libraries. Public libraries, with 673 holdings, constitute the primary repository, supplemented by substantial university and college collections. This distribution confirms the novel's dual status as a publicly accessible work and subject of academic inquiry (Chen & Xu, 2019).

Despite earlier English publication, *Mo's Mischief's* most widely held volume—*Four Troublemakers*—records merely 70 global holdings (including two Chinese libraries), with 54 copies (78%) residing in public libraries and negligible academic presence. This pattern indicates confinement to casual readership circles and absence from scholarly discourse, reflecting limited cultural traction (Chen & Xu, 2019).

3.5.3 Commercial Sales

Table 1: Commercial Sales and Reader Ratings for *Bronze and Sunflower* and *Mo's Mischief* Series on Amazon.com

Author	Translator	Title of Translated Version	Publisher	Year	Star Distribution	Review Count	Ranking in Amazon's "Children's Asian Literature" Category
Cao Wenxuan	Helen Wang	<i>Bronze and Sunflower</i>	Candlewick	2019	4.6/5.0	109	983
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Four Troublemakers</i>	HarperCollins	2008	1.0/5.0	1	4321
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Teacher's Pet</i>	HarperCollins	2008	Unrated	Unreviewed	Unranked
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Pesky Monkeys</i>	HarperCollins	2008	Unrated	Unreviewed	Unranked
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Best Friends</i>	HarperCollins	2008	Unrated	Unreviewed	Unranked
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Super Cool Uncle</i>	HarperCollins	2008	Unrated	Unreviewed	Unranked
Yang Hongying	Collaborative Translation	<i>Mo's Mischief: Best Mom Ever</i>	HarperCollins	2008	Unrated	Unreviewed	Unranked

Commercial sales figures offer a clear view of how readers respond in the marketplace. This study examines Amazon US statistics for both *Bronze and Sunflower* and the *Mo's Mischief* series (see Table 1) and compares their market performance (Ren & Guo, 2023). The results show a striking contrast. *Bronze and Sunflower* ranks #983 in Amazon's "Children's Asian Literature" category and has received 109 ratings and 17 detailed reviews, showing relatively strong, ongoing interest from readers. The *Mo's Mischief* series tells a different story, with only *Four Troublemakers* appears on the charts at #4321. Other books in the series don't rank at all and have almost no reader comments.

Table 2: Star Rating Distribution for *Bronze and Sunflower* on Amazon.com

Star Rating	Count	Percentage
5	79	72%
4	22	20%
3	6	6%
2	0	0%
1	2	2%
Total (Count/%)	109	100%

3.6 Reader Ratings and Reviews

Reader ratings and reviews serve as direct indicators of public and scholarly reception. Given the scarcity of professional critiques for both titles, this analysis focuses on general reader feedback sourced from Goodreads—the dominant English-language book review platform. *Bronze and Sunflower* demonstrates robust engagement with 974 ratings (average 4.13/5), dominated by 4-5 star evaluations (78.4%) and significant participation from major Anglophone markets, confirming successful transcultural penetration.

Among *Mo's Mischief* volumes, *Super Cool Uncle* registers a statistically insignificant average rating (4.60/5 from only 10 ratings)—70% five-star, 20% four-star, and 10% three-star. This outlier status reflects limited data validity rather than substantive acclaim, indicating constrained cultural traction relative to its domestically recognized stature.

Table 3: Comparative Rating Profiles of *Bronze and Sunflower* and Representative *Mo's Mischief* Volumes on Goodreads

Star Rating	<i>Bronze and Sunflower</i>	<i>Mo's Mischief: Super Cool Uncle</i>	<i>Mo's Mischief: Best Mom Ever</i>
5	388 (39%)	7 (70%)	7 (50%)
4	376 (38%)	2 (20%)	5 (35%)
3	162 (16%)	1 (10%)	1 (7%)
2	41 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)
1	7 (<1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total (Count/%)	974 (100%)	10 (100%)	14(100%)

Table 3 demonstrates strong reader approval for *Bronze and Sunflower*, with 974 reader ratings, 93% of which are three stars or higher, and 218 written reviews (Chen & Xu, 2019). Readers feedback on the novel emphasizes their appreciation for the author's vivid portrayal of emotional connections. Besides that, some reviewers express their admiration for Helen Wang's translation craft, particularly her delicate conveyance of the source text's emotional depth; others recognized the novel's enduring literary values. Collectively, reader reactions confirm the work's meaningful connection with English-speaking readers (Chen & Xu, 2019).

Unfortunately, the *Mo's Mischief* series has generated almost no meaningful discussion on Goodreads. Only three books in the series have received any reader reviews: *Four Troublemakers* (3 reviews), *Super Cool Uncle* (1 review), and *Pesky Monkeys* (1 review). The single review for Pesky Monkeys explicitly criticizes the translation's substantial deviations from the source text.

4. CONCLUSION

Bronze and Sunflower and the *Mo's Mischief* series, having garnered gratifying sales and loyal readership in the domestic market, diverge markedly in transnational reception.

Regarding translation agents, effective outcomes require specialized coordination among translators and publishers. On the one hand, Helen Wang skillfully transferred *Bronze and Sunflower's* emotional and artistic

textures with her bilingual sensitivity. And on the other, Walker Books, maneuvering its specialized publishing networks, maximized the book's international reach. The *Mo's Mischief* series exhibited deficiencies on both fronts. The misalignment by HarperCollins directly weakened the books' impact among readers (Dong & Wang, 2017).

In terms of translated content, source-text selection must prioritize works possessing intrinsic literary merit and authentic cultural narratives. *Bronze and Sunflower*'s thematic richness gave Helen Wang strong material to work with. (Ma & Liu, 2019). In contrast, the translation of the *Mo's Mischief* series failed to overcome its fundamental limitations. This case confirms that the quality of the source text ultimately determines its potential for success dissemination.

As for dissemination channels, a domestic-foreign partnership model mitigates dissemination barriers, with international publishers providing market access and expertise to overcome cultural incongruence, and domestic partners ensuring translational fidelity to source-text values.

When it comes to target readership, precise demographic targeting informed by receptivity studies is essential. *Bronze and Sunflower*'s literary gravitas aligned with growing Western appetite for authentic Chinese narratives, whereas *Mo's Mischief*'s culturally anchored triviality failed to transcend its parochial context. Target readership analysis should guide both text selection and adaptive strategies.

With regard to reception impact, success demands integrated performance metrics of awards, holdings, sales, ratings and reviews. *Bronze and Sunflower* exemplifies the combined effort among publishers, translator and authorial engagement to amplify visibility. HarperCollins' failure to orchestrate a sensible scheme cemented *Mo's Mischief*'s marginalization.

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