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# The International Reception of Shaanxi Rural Literature and Its Challenges of Cultural Adaptation

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**Abstract:** Within the broader strategy of internationalizing Chinese culture, rural literature from Shaanxi represents a corpus of significant narrative and symbolic value. However, its global circulation remains limited, both in terms of the number of translations and the depth of its reception. This study analyzes the translational trajectory and international reception of key works such as White Deer Plain, The Shaanxi Opera, and The ordinary world across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, particularly in English, French, and Japanese. Adopting a translational and communicative perspective, the study examines the strategies applied in translation, the challenges of cultural adaptation, and target readers' responses through comparative textual analysis, online reviews, and translator interviews. The findings reveal a lack of cultural contextualization, difficulties in rendering dialectal elements, and a mismatch with the expectations of foreign audiences. Finally, the paper proposes recommendations to enhance the visibility, accessibility, and intercultural relevance of this body of literature on the international stage.

**Keywords:** Chinese rural literature; Shaanxi; cultural translation; literary reception; intercultural adaptation

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the global promotion of Chinese culture has become a central pillar of the country's strategic agenda, particularly under the framework of strengthening its cultural "soft power." Within this context, literature has emerged as a privileged vehicle for conveying national values, historical narratives, and indigenous ways of life. Although institutional and academic attention toward Chinese cultural exportation has increased in recent years, rural literature from Shaanxi—marked by its deep territorial rootedness, ethnographic richness, and distinctive linguistic style—remains largely under-translated and insufficiently studied in terms of its international circulation and reception.

To better understand the causes of this limited international projection, the present study focuses on analyzing the translational trajectory and reception of some of its most emblematic works, such as *White Deer Plain* ( 白鹿原 ), *The Shaanxi Opera* ( 秦腔 ), and *The ordinary world* ( 平凡的世界 ). These three texts are representative of Shaanxi's literary production, as they portray with acute sensitivity the social conflicts, rural transformations, and relational structures of northwestern China. Furthermore, they hold a significant place in the contemporary Chinese literary canon and have been translated into multiple languages, primarily English, French, and Japanese. However, their penetration into foreign cultural contexts has been limited. The mere existence of translated versions has not guaranteed either visibility or global impact. Numerous obstacles continue to hinder the effective dissemination and deep comprehension of these works by

international readers. This not only restricts the global presence of such literature, but also diminishes its potential to serve as a cultural bridge between China and the world.

This study seeks to systematically examine how Shaanxi's rural literature has been translated and received in international contexts, with a particular focus on three interrelated dimensions: the quality and orientation of the available translations; the strategies—or lack thereof—of cultural contextualization employed by translators and Publishers; and the actual reception of these texts by foreign audiences. The primary objective is to identify the factors that obstruct the effective circulation of this literature and to propose strategies that may enhance its cultural adaptation. Based on this overall aim, the following research questions are posed:

(1) How have the representative works of Shaanxi rural literature been translated and culturally mediated?

(2) What linguistic, semantic, or narrative barriers hinder their understanding and reception outside of China?

(3) What types of editorial, paratextual, or pedagogical strategies could facilitate better reception in diverse international contexts?

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines principles from cultural translation studies with tools from textual analysis, reception theory, and intercultural communication. Drawing upon selected corpora and empirical data—including reviews, editorial materials, and translator interviews—it aims to construct a critical overview of the international trajectory of these works.

## 2. Translation of Chinese and Shaanxi Rural Literature

Aligned with China's cultural strategy of "going global," the translation and international circulation of Chinese literature have witnessed notable growth in recent decades. However, this translational expansion has been uneven. Most studies and editorial efforts have focused on internationally renowned authors such as Mo Yan, Yu Hua, or Gao Xingjian, whose works have been widely translated, critically analyzed, and actively promoted abroad. In contrast, rural literature originating from specific regions—such as Shaanxi—has received considerably less attention, despite being represented by highly influential literary figures like Jia Pingwa, Chen Zhongshi, and Lu Yao. Although these authors have begun to garner some interest within translation studies, their presence in international publishing catalogs remains limited, and their works are rarely incorporated into the dominant canon of translated contemporary Chinese literature.

Among them, White Deer Plain, written by Chen Zhongshi and Published in 1993, stands as one of the most representative and enduring examples of Shaanxi rural literature. It was translated into English as White Deer Plain by Howard Goldblatt and Published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2014[1]. A French version titled Au pays du Cerf blanc, translated by Shao Baoqin and Solange Cruveillé, was Published by Éditions du Seuil in 2012. Additionally, versions in Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese were released between 2008 and 2014, making this work one of the few cases of Chinese rural literature with sustained multilingual circulation[2]. The text's rich cultural density—particularly in its lexicon and everyday references—has been the subject of translational research. Guo Xiaohua, for example, analyzed how gastronomic and folkloric terminology in White Deer Plain poses specific challenges for English translation from the perspective of eco-translatology, emphasizing the difficulty of preserving deeply rooted cultural traits[3].

Qinqiang, written by Jia Pingwa and Published in 2005, has experienced more recent international circulation. It was translated into English as Qin Opera by Nicky Harman and Dylan Levi King, and Published by Amazon Crossing in 2023[4]. A French version, Qin Qiang appeared in 2021 from Patayo Éditions, in a visually artistic format. Unlike White Deer Plain, these translations are relatively new and have not yet been widely examined in academic studies. Nonetheless, editorial reviews highlight the challenges of rendering regional lexicon and culturally specific references into English, particularly those tied to the Shaanxi dialect and rural family structures. Some reviewers also note the translators' efforts to balance intelligibility with linguistic exoticism, including the use of glossaries and explanatory notes in the English edition[5].

Lastly, The Ordinary World, written by Lu Yao and Published in 1986, was translated into English by Yan Fu and

released by China Translation and Publishing House in 2011[6]. Unlike White Deer Plain or Qinqiang, this work has received limited international circulation, with no known French, Japanese, or other language versions. According to Wang[7], the English translation places emphasis on smooth readability, often at the expense of dialectal features and cultural-specific expressions. The translator's tendency toward generalization and omission of local color reduces the depth of cultural immersion for foreign readers. While the translation succeeds in conveying the main narrative, it illustrates the common trade-off between cultural fidelity and accessibility in the translation of Chinese rural literature.

Taken together, these three works demonstrate an uneven trajectory in the translation of Shaanxi rural literature. While *White Deer Plain* enjoys a consolidated network of translations and some degree of critical reception, *Qinqiang* and *The ordinary world* represent more recent or limited cases, in which translation practices and cultural adaptation have yet to be thoroughly addressed in academic research.

# 3. Cultural Mediation Strategies

One of the most significant challenges in translating rural literature from Shaanxi lies in handling deeply localized cultural, linguistic, and social references. In this context, *cultural mediation* encompasses not only the translator's linguistic decisions but also editorial strategies that accompany the translated text—such as prefaces, footnotes, glossaries, or other paratextual adaptations. Various studies have pointed out that the omission of such resources may reduce the cultural density of the original text and lead to a superficial reception among target readers[8–9].

In the case of White Deer Plain, Dong (2025) identifies a partial eco-translatological approach in which the translator attempts to preserve the "cultural environment" of the original through adaptive strategies across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Nevertheless, the absence of explanatory notes or paratextual tools limits the target reader's access to localized references, thereby diminishing the cultural richness of the translated text[10]. In Qinqiang, the English version Published by Amazon Crossing and translated by Nicky Harman and Dylan Levi King adopts a more visible mediation at the linguistic level: dialectal expressions, rural metaphors, and the narrative rhythm typical of Northwestern China are retained, helping to reconstruct the stylistic world of the source text. However, the translation does not include glossaries or explanatory notes and instead focuses on maintaining stylistic fidelity[11–12].

In contrast, *The ordinary life* by Lu Yao employs a more functional and less interventionist approach. As recent studies point out, the absence of paratextual tools—such as cultural notes or glossaries—makes it difficult for foreign readers to grasp many of the subtleties inherent in the depicted rural context. The translation tends to neutralize dialectal expressions and omit key sociocultural references, which impedes a deeper engagement with the narrative content[13–14]. This lack of mediation may limit the intercultural resonance of the work, highlighting how the presence or absence of editorial strategies directly affects the communicative efficacy of Chinese rural literature.

# 4. Reception in International Contexts

The international reception of rural literature from Shaanxi has been limited both in scope and interpretative depth. While key works such as *White Deer Plain* and *Qinqiang* have been translated into English and French, they have not always succeeded in establishing a meaningful connection with foreign readers. An empirical analysis of online reviews reveals recurring patterns. On Goodreads (2020–2023), English-speaking readers commend the thematic richness and sociocultural depth of *White Deer Plain* but also point to its "cultural density" as an obstacle to comprehension. Some note difficulties in understanding certain scenes or historical references due to the lack of explanatory annotations. Similarly, on Babelio (2022), several French readers describe *Qinqiang* as "too local" and highlight the absence of cultural introductions that could have provided context.

These responses align with the conclusions of recent studies that have shown how the lack of contextualization strategies can significantly diminish the symbolic capital of a translated work, affecting both its accessibility and aesthetic

impact. For instance, Li (2023) notes that the English version of *White Deer Plain* prioritizes fluency, but at the cost of omitting key cultural referents, thereby weakening the text's evocative power[15]. Similarly, Tu (2024) observes that the absence of explanatory devices and the translator's invisibility in *Qinqiang* hinder the semantic reconstruction of the narrative universe[12]. In *The ordinary Life*, Wang (2024) demonstrates that the neutralization of dialectal and cultural elements results in a diminished emotional resonance and a loss of sociocultural depth[14].

Given that Shaanxi's rural literature is deeply embedded in specific linguistic and social frameworks, it requires textual and paratextual mediation to support the reader in the cultural decoding process. Without such resources—glossaries, prefaces, footnotes, or editorial commentary—the translated work may be experienced as alienating or even frustrating. It is thus confirmed that the international reception of this literature depends not only on technical translation but also on a complex articulation of style, editorial mediation, and the cultural predisposition of the target audience.

# 5. Factors Affecting Intercultural Reception

Despite the availability of English and French translations of key works of Shaanxi rural literature, their international reception remains limited. This cannot be attributed solely to linguistic barriers but rather to a series of cultural and editorial factors that hinder deeper comprehension among foreign readers.

One major obstacle is the gap between cultural codes. Shaanxi's rural literature is deeply rooted in local social structures, familial relationships, and symbolic frameworks that are often unfamiliar to international readers. As Li points out, the English version of *White Deer Plain* prioritizes textual fluency but eliminates essential referents of the rural Chinese imagination, thereby reducing its symbolic impact. Another critical issue is the lack of textual or paratextual mediation[15]. Although *Qinqiang* retains dialectal expressions, it lacks glossaries or introductory notes that would help readers contextualize the work. Tu emphasizes that the translator's invisibility limits the semantic reconstruction of the narrative[12], and Wang (2024) likewise observes that the translation of *The ordinary world* neutralizes dialectal and cultural references, reducing the text's emotional resonance[11].

Additionally, editorial limitations compound the problem. Most of these works have been Published by small presses, without proper marketing strategies, academic inclusion, or institutional support. As Dong warns, without pedagogical guidance or critical mediation, the communicative potential of these works remains restricted[10]. Finally, divergent horizons of expectation also play a role: whereas Western readers tend to favor introspective, individual-centered narratives, rural Chinese novels are often structured around collective, historical, and oral traditions—creating potential dissonance in reception[8].

Taken together, these factors indicate that the global circulation of Shaanxi rural literature requires not only faithful translations but also tailored strategies of cultural mediation and editorial visibility adapted to the target context.

# 6. Recommendations and Conclusion

The international dissemination of Shaanxi's rural literature reflects both the progress and the ongoing limitations within the broader process of globalizing contemporary Chinese literature. Despite the growing number of translations and the institutional support received in recent decades, these works still face significant challenges in becoming fully integrated into the literary systems of target countries. To achieve a more effective and sustainable global presence, a coordinated strategy involving translators, Publishers, media, and cultural policy makers is essential.

First, it is crucial to optimize the translation model. Given the shortage of foreign translators who are well-versed in Chinese language and culture, it is recommended to promote mixed co-translation teams, in which sinologists or native speakers of the target language collaborate with Chinese professional translators. This collaborative model leverages the strengths of both parties: the deep cultural insight of the original author and the communicative competence of the native

translator. Such an approach not only improves translation quality but also minimizes interpretive biases that can arise from either exoticization or over-domestication.

Second, active attention must be paid to the target readership. The identification of potential audiences—whether academic, general readers, or Sino-curious communities—should inform editorial decisions and selection of works. It is essential to analyze reading preferences, accessible formats, and favored distribution channels in different regions. In this regard, the creation of a digital international corpus of Chinese literary translations is proposed. This corpus would consolidate data on circulation, library holdings, online platforms, and critical reception, serving both as a foundation for comparative impact studies and as a tool for translators and Publishers.

Third, dissemination channels must be diversified. Rural literature can benefit from intermedial formats such as film, television series, or audiobooks, which expand audiences and help contextualize content. Adaptations like those of *White Deer Plain* and *Red Sorghum* demonstrate how the narrative capital of literature can be transferred into other cultural languages, generating a virtuous cycle of recognition and symbolic redistribution. In addition, book fairs, author talks, and reading clubs hosted at international universities and cultural centers can help promote intercultural dialogue around these texts.

Finally, closer coordination is needed between public and private institutions. The internationalization of literature cannot rely solely on the isolated efforts of authors or individual Publishers. Government agencies, cultural institutes, universities, and media organizations should collaborate to design sustained support policies, including translation grants, media visibility, and curricular inclusion in academic contexts. Only through such efforts can a supportive ecosystem be built—one in which rural Chinese literature not only "goes abroad" but also meaningfully enters the cultural frameworks of international readers.

In conclusion, the global projection of Shaanxi's rural narrative demands a multilayered and integrative strategy. Translation quality, cultural mediation, editorial adaptation, and institutional support must come together to transform these works not just into translated texts, but into truly shared cultural experiences.

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## Disclosure statement

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