

## Two Enlightenments on Chinese Literature Going Out: By Comparing *Wolf Totem* With *China in Ten Words*

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### Abstract

China still has a serious cultural deficit in international cultural exchanges, and few contemporary Chinese literature works are successfully translated and communicated in foreign countries. However, both *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* have been on Amazon's list of best sellers after their English versions were published in the United Kingdom and the United States. Based on comparison between them, this paper aims to find the similarities and differences between *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words*, and then get two enlightenments on Chinese literature going out: First, successful translation and communication of Chinese literature works share some similarities. Successfully finding the similarities will be conducive to Chinese literature going out. Second, not all successful translation and communication of Chinese literature can objectively and truly present China to the world, taking *China in Ten Words* as an example. Therefore, the Chinese government should play a more active role in sending out Chinese literature works which could construct China's national image.

**Key words:** *Wolf Totem*; *China in Ten Words*; Translation and communication; Similarities and differences; Enlightenments

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinese literature going out and winning readers' recognition all over the world have always been the dream of Chinese literary and translation circles. The translation and communication of Chinese literature is also one of the important strategies for China to improve its cultural soft power which is an import part of comprehensive national strength. However, only 6% of global translation works are translated from other languages into English each year, while 50% of translation works are translated from English into other languages, no translation works being among top 24 best sellers on American Amazon website in recent times (Huang, 2008). Therefore, when overseas books such as *Harry Potter* and *The Kite Runner* became popular in China, the overseas travel of Chinese books was difficult. In the 1980s, China Literature Publishing House successfully launched a program called "Panda Books", which was a set of high-quality English versions of Chinese classics, legends, and history. For the first time, Chinese literature went abroad in a commercial form, opening a new world for the commercialization of Chinese contemporary literature. Since then, with unremitting efforts, Chinese government has adopted a variety of measures and methods to encourage spreading Chinese literature overseas, such as several programs: the "Library of Chinese Classics", the books of which have been always given as gifts to foreign leaders and academic institutions, "China Book International", "China Classics International", etc. However, although the pace of Chinese literature going out has accelerated greatly, judging from the share of the world's book market, the total amount of China's publishing foreign trade is still not enough to meet the sales revenue of one of big European or American publishing houses. Under such a severe situation, the English versions of *Wolf Totem* and *China in*

*Ten Words* were published respectively in 2009 and 2012 by mainstream British and American publishers. They not only won the praise and recommendations from various foreign scholars and critics, but also became best sellers on the American Amazon website. From the sales data of the American Amazon website obtained on December 27, 2019, the Amazon Best Sellers Rank in Books of *Wolf Totem* is 156,944, with 105 book reviews and a rating of 4.2 out of five; that of *China in Ten Words* is 40,464, with 119 customer reviews and a rating of 4.6 out of five; Compared with works of Mo Yan who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out: A Novel*, his Amazon highest-selling book, ranks 338,817 in Amazon Best Sellers Rank in Books, with 122 customer reviews and a rating of 4 out of five. Therefore, in the context of China's cultural deficit in international exchange, the English versions of *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* have indeed achieved great success on the way of Chinese contemporary literature to the world.

Different from the traditional research on the translation and communication, mainly focusing on the factors of successful translation and communication of a single Chinese literary work, this study will be made on the comparison between two translated Chinese works, hoping to find out the similarities and differences between *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* as well as their English translation and communication, thus getting two enlightenments on Chinese literature going out. Identifying the similarities of successful translation and communication of contemporary Chinese literature works will provide good ideas and ways when sending Chinese literature out, while finding differences between them will tell us that not all successful translation and communication can help build China's national image and strengthen our cultural confidence. The Chinese government should be more proactive in translating and introducing Chinese literary works of high quality, telling Chinese stories which would warm and touch non-Chinese readers.

## 1. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN WOLF TOTEM AND CHINA IN TEN WORDS

### 1.1 Both Text Styles Are Concise and Easy to Translate

**1.1.1 Plain and Detailed Text Description of *Wolf Totem***  
Contrary to the excessive pursuit of language skills by “modernists” nowadays, the writer Jiang Rong detailed many plots with plain words in *Wolf Totem* to enhance the authenticity and vividness of the story, which is based on his real life experience in the Inner Mongolian grassland. For example, through describing the protagonist Chen Zhen adopting a little wolf who pretends to die, eats greedily and fastidiously, and digs itself a hiding place, the writer showed its strong desire to survive, which was

different from other animals. Chen Zhen was amused by the wolf’s greediness and shrewdness. This detailed narration highlights the unique feature of the little wolf, showing the reader how a little wolf who was raised by humans still gave full play to its wild survival instinct. Hou Haiyan said: “The writer of *Wolf Totem* often uses the simple writing method to describe his observation of life specifically and truly, making the book stand out among a variety of Chinese contemporary novels” (Hou, 2001). The Chinese writer Di Na also commented that *Wolf Totem* was long, but simple in writing, and very readable. The success of *Wolf Totem* does lie in these simplest and most exquisite details instead of the commercial hype. It is these plain and concise words that have made *Wolf Totem* more meaningful and valuable for literary reading. Penguin Press, the publisher of the English version of *Wolf Totem* pointed out that when choosing which Chinese literature work could be translated and published, three factors would be considered, the second being that its language can be successfully converted into English, while retaining the basic elements that appeal to Chinese readers.

### 1.1.2 The Plain and Concise Text Style of *China In Ten Words*

First of all, Yu Hua has always been known for his concise text, which is easier to overcome the difficulties in translation. Statistics were once made on the overall vocabulary used in *Alive* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, another two famous novels by Yu Hua. They showed that vocabulary of each book did not exceed three thousand different Chinese characters. Yu Hua’s sentence structure was also not complicated. The language of his novel could be easily comprehended by average people. Dr. Liu Jiangkai of Beijing Normal University mentioned the concise and unique language when referring to the reason why *Alive* was popular overseas (Liu, 2012). As far as Yu Hua’s essay creation is concerned, some people described it like this: “The conciseness of Yu Hua’s essay is also reflected in language. The language of daily life is always in the essay ... The sentences are simple, direct, and full of intimacy, just like those of Hemingway in the United States” (Jiang, 2018). Furthermore, Allan H • Barr once delivered a speech at the Third International Sinologists Conference on Translating Chinese Literature in 2014 and pointed out: “In terms of language and form, Yu Hua’s plain and simple writing style is probably more in line with the tastes of Western readers. This is one of the reasons why his works have been translated into so many foreign languages. Yu Hua’s works are more refined and subtle, which are characteristics that Western readers can easily appreciate” (Barr, 2014). Secondly, *China in Ten Words* was created after Yu Hua’s lecture entitled “A Writer’s China” at Allan H • Barr’s school, Pomona College, California in 2009. After the lecture, Yu Hua decided to start a book with ten phrases, and Allan

H • Barr suggested the title of the book be *China in Ten Words* and was invited to be the translator of the book. Therefore, in the process of writing *China in Ten Words*, he has considered the acceptance of foreign readers. The author has employed some simple sentences and words, and explained the words with Chinese characteristics to make them easy to understand, so that foreign readers could fully understand their thoughts and feelings.

## 1.2 Both Works Are Translated by American Sinologists

**1.2.1 The Translator of *Wolf Totem*—Howard Goldblatt**  
Born in 1939, Howard Goldblatt, the translator of *Wolf Totem*, began to study Chinese during his military service in Taiwan in the 1960s. After returning to the United States, he continued to study in Indiana University and eventually obtained a doctorate in Chinese literature. Since then, he has taught Chinese contemporary literature and culture for almost thirty years. His rich experience has greatly enhanced his bilingual ability and his cross cultural ability between China and the United States. Therefore, he has not only proficient native language skills, but also a solid foreign language (Chinese) background and profound literary accomplishment. His translation career began at the doctoral dissertation writing, criticizing and translating the works of Xiao Hong, a Chinese female writer, and subsequently translated more than 40 works by several well-known Chinese and Taiwanese writers such as Mo Yan, Su Tong, Jia Pingwa, etc. Mo Yan's works such as *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* have received great response in the United States through Howard Goldblatt's translation. Actually, he has made great contributions to the popularization of Chinese literature with English-speaking readers and to China's first Nobel Prize in Literature, promoting dialogues and exchanges between different civilizations and cultures. John Updike, one of American famous writers, praised Howard Goldblatt as a "midwife" of Chinese contemporary literature. Liu Zaifu once called Howard Goldblatt the most active and accomplished translator of translating Chinese modern and contemporary literary works into English (Liu, 1999). Gladys Yang, who translated *A Dream of Red Mansions* with her husband, also praised Howard Goldblatt for decorating Chinese literature with style of the contemporary British and American literature. His high-quality translation and good reputation in the Western world have undoubtedly ensured the quality of the English translation and communication of *Wolf Totem*. In November 2007, the English version of *Wolf Totem* defeated 243 literary works from Asia and won the Man Asian Literary Prize which helped it enjoy an international popularity.

### 1.2.2 The Translator of *China in Ten Words*- Allan H • Barr

Allan H • Barr, a sinologist, who translated *China in Ten Words*, graduated from the Chinese Department of

Cambridge University in 1977. Then he studied at Fudan University from 1979 to 1980, and obtained a doctorate from Oxford University in 1983. Now he is a professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at Pomona College, California. He has devoted himself to the study of Chinese classical literature for many years, whose research focuses primarily on the life and work of Pu Songling (1640-1715) and his *Strange Stories from A Chinese Studio*, and has also published numerous articles on Ming and Qing literature in both Western and Chinese journals. He also edited and translated the collected blog posts of one of China's most controversial celebrities—author, blogger and racecar driver Han Han. He is currently keen on translating contemporary Chinese literature, especially the works of Yu Hua. In 2001, Allan H • Barr came to China on vacation and bought a book collection of short stories written by Yu Hua, *Boy in the Twilight* in a bookstore in Beijing. The novel attracted him deeply, and the idea of translating it into English came into being after reading. After translating *Boy in the Twilight*, Allan H • Barr met Yu Hua and became friends. *China in Ten Words* was created after Yu Hua's lecture entitled "A Writer's China" at Allan H • Barr's school, Pomona College in 2009. After the lecture, Allan H. Barr suggested Yu Hua write a book with the title *China in Ten Words*. Allan H. Barr received the task of translating *China in Ten Words* before the book was completed. After that, he translated other works by Yu Hua into English, such as *Cries in the Drizzle*, *China in Ten Words*, and *The Seventh Day*. In addition, he also translated some opinion pieces written by Yu Hua in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *International Herald Tribune*. He is even the author of a book in Chinese on a notorious literary inquisition in 17th-century China, *Jiangnan yi jie: Qingren bixia de Zhuangshi shi'an*, published by Zhejiang Ancient Books Publishing House in 2016.

## 1.3 Both Works Are Published by International Mainstream Publishing Houses

### 1.3.1 Penguin Press- the Publisher of *Wolf Totem*

Yangtze Literature and Art Publishing House actively contacted large international publishing agencies to export overseas copyright when *Wolf Totem* became the best seller in China. The English version of *Wolf Totem* was finally published by Penguin Publishing Company. As a veteran and experienced second largest international publishing organization in the world, Penguin Press has a great advantage in marketing and has made great efforts. First of all, they carried out promotion and introduction through multiple channels, such as publishing TV clips through the Internet, and actively negotiating film copyrights with film companies. Secondly, a series of promotion activities were held worldwide, including British companies holding an exhibition of Inner Mongolia grassland style at the Cultural Centre of the Thames South Bank, Australian Penguin giving a seminar on nomadic culture and modern

civilization in Melbourne, American Penguin launching a series of promotions during the Los Angeles Book Fair in 2008. The distribution method was also flexible and diverse. One year after the hardcover edition was published, the paperback edition was also listed, and various reading modes such as “online reading”, “voice book”, and “e-book” were also accessible to the readers on the Internet. These measures have effectively increased the popularity of *Wolf Totem*, expanded sales channels, and increased overseas sales.

### **1.3.2 ANCHOR BOOKS-the Publisher of *China in Ten Words***

*China in Ten Words* was published by ANCHOR BOOKS, a division of Random House. By the time it was published, Random House has published four books of Yu Hua, including *To Live*, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, *Cries in the Drizzle* and *Brothers*. Random House founded by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer in 1924 is headquartered in New York City, USA. In 1927, in order to expand its scope of publication, the trademark of Random House began to be used. Random House is known as the world’s largest English business international publishing house and is a subsidiary of the world’s super media group Bertelsmann Book Group of Bertelsmann AG. Since the establishment of the publishing house, it has been considered as an internationally renowned literary publisher, the home to more than 50 Nobel Prize laureates, over 100 Pulitzer Prize winners. As the largest print and digital trade book publisher which publishes approximately 10,000 new books annually in print, digital, and audio formats, Random House is quite authoritative and academic. It is Random House who has intentionally employed its good reputation and a mature marketing network to ensure the success of the English version of *China in Ten Words*.

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## **2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOLF TOTEM AND CHINA IN TEN WORDS**

### **2.1 Their Genres and Themes Are different**

#### **2.1.1 *Wolf Totem* is a Novel With a Universal Value**

*Wolf Totem* is a novel based on the author’s own experience in the Inner Mongolian grassland, which occurred in the 1970s, where educated urban youth, steppe wolves and nomads interdependently lived together. In order to better observe the wolf, the author slipped into the wolf’s lair and even took away a baby wolf as a pet. The vivid life scenes in the work show a desolate, cruel and mysterious Mongolian grassland realistically and meticulously to the reader and infiltrate his soul. The work reflects the conflict between modernity and civilization, the contradiction between human and nature, the relationship between different cultures, as well as the role that humans play in shaping their destiny. Thence, the theme of *Wolf Totem* has its humanized significance, especially the call for harmony

between man and nature, which is the concern for all mankind. The author’s praise for the wolf totem is actually a call to a beautiful natural ecology. As mentioned above, Penguin Press has pointed out that when choosing which Chinese work could be translated and published, three factors will be considered: First, the work should be the best of its kind; second, its language can be successfully converted into English, while retaining the basic elements that appeal to Chinese readers; finally, it must be able to demonstrate China’s unique thinking, society, life, the charm of culture and history which help to show the colorful China to overseas readers. In addition, it is also important that this work reflects a universal value that the world can agree on, so that readers can emotionally resonate with the work. The theme reflected in *Wolf Totem* jumps out the interest of a country or a region and focuses on the ecological issues faced by the entire human beings, which has a universal value. Actually, in today’s increasingly deteriorating environment, people’s common desire for a beautiful natural ecology enables Chinese and foreign readers to resonate with *Wolf Totem*.

### **2.1.2 *China in Ten Words* is an Essay Collection Facing China’s Social Problems**

*China in Ten Words* is Yu Hua’s first work of nonfiction appeared in English and has not yet been publicly distributed in mainland China. This short essay collection includes the writer’s childhood life and his meditation on the unprecedented social and economic transformation over the last three decades in China – from the Cultural Revolution to current Reform and Opening Up. Starting from daily life, Yu Hua describes the situation of China’s politics, history, economy, and society with ten common phrases: “People”, “Leaders”, “Reading”, “Writing”, “Lu Xun”, “Revolution”, “Disparity”, “Grassroots”, “Copycat”, and “Bamboozle”. Through the description of the meaning of each phrase, the social conflicts and problems of the current society were presented. The conflicts illustrated the expanding gaps that separate citizens of the country. The problems of uneven wealth, fake and plagiarism, and illegal business hidden behind the economic prosperity revealed the social ills, lack of ethics, and confusion of values in contemporary Chinese society. Liu Kun pointed out that Yu Hua was good at portraying ridiculous things with plain and concise language, thus widely and profoundly revealing various ugly social phenomena(Liu, 2018). On the back cover of *China in Ten Words*, Yu Hua wrote, “When I wrote about Chinese pain in this book, I also wrote about my own pain. Because the pain of China is also my personal pain” (Yu, 2011), which shows the work’s attention and criticism on Chinese social problems, making his essay collection critical.

### **2.2 Their Domestic Influences Are Different**

#### **2.2.1 Domestic Influence of *Wolf Totem***

After *Wolf Totem* was published by Yangtze Literature and Art Publishing House in China in April 2004, 50,000

copies were sold within two weeks, causing a domestic sensation. It was the super best seller that year and no one else could compete with it in domestic market. By 2014, it had been reprinted more than 150 times in mainland China, and nearly 5 million copies had been issued. In addition, after publication, it had been ranked in the top ten of the best sellers of literary books in China for six consecutive years, creating a sales miracle in China. The book has also received several domestic awards. For example, it won the Jiu Tou Niao Novel Award in January 2005. On September 23, 2019, *Wolf Totem* was selected into the “70 Classical Novels in 70 Years of New China”. It is the success of *Wolf Totem* in mainland China that has attracted widespread attention from mainstream foreign media and publishing institutions. Thus, its English copyright was sold to the world-famous Penguin Publishing Group in 2005 with 10% royalties and \$ 100,000 in advance. 10% of the royalties set a new record for royalties on book copyright trade in China at that time.

### 2.2.2 Domestic Influence of *China in Ten Words*

Yu Hua is one of the most prestigious writers in contemporary China. His novels *Alive* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* ranked among the ten most influential books in the 1990s by hundreds of Chinese critics and literary editors. In 2005, he won the Special Book Award of China. As far as *China in Ten Words* was concerned, it was based on Yu Hua’s lecture entitled “A Writer’s China” to American audience at Pomona College, California in 2009. So to some degree, this essay collection was written for foreigners in writer’s mind when he began his creation. In 2011, *China in Ten Words* was published by Taiwan Rye field Publishing Company. Nevertheless, so far it has not yet been published in mainland China. Badu, the largest search engine in China, does not even provide a related introduction to this book. The researches on this book are also quite rare, there being less than ten academic papers on *China in Ten Words* on CNKI, the most influential academic website in China, while there being 831 ones about *Wolf Totem* on the same website.

## 3. ENLIGHTENMENTS

### 3.1 Successful Translations and Communications Always Share Some Similarities

After comparing *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* and finding the similarities between the two, we can get an enlightenment that successful translations and communications must share some similarities.

First of all, the source texts of both works are concise, simple and understandable. There are few long sentences, modifiers, compound sentences or complex structures in both books. This kind of simple style has the advantage of “climbing over” the “enclosing wall” in translation, being more acceptable to foreign readers.

Secondly, the translation of American sinologists is a great impetus for their success. Professor Newmark, a famous British translation theorist, put this in his book called *A Textbook of Translation*: “Translating into your language of habitual use is the only way you can translate naturally and accurately and with maximum effectiveness” (Newmark, 2001). Nida also believes that the ideal translation should be translated into the native language (Nida, 2007). A Chinese scholar aslo said, “Given that Chinese literature mainly travels to non-Chinese speaking regions overseas, a group of western sinologists who are not only familiar with the history and current situation of Chinese literature, but also know the reading needs and habits of overseas readers, and are good at communicating with international publishing agencies, the news media, and academic research, are the most ideal translators for Chinese literature going out” (Hu, 2010).

Finally, the publication by the two international mainstream publishers is an important guarantee for the success of overseas dissemination of both works. In reality, there are many good writers and good works in China. However, these works have a lot of problems in marketing abroad. During an interview with Beijing news in 2012, Michael Berry, the translator of *To Live*, explained why American publishers were reluctant to introduce Chinese literature works: it was not the American readers’ prejudice, but the cultural imbalance, lack of recommendation by the publishing industries and media, and lack of access to Chinese works that make few foreign readers read Chinese literature works. Therefore, choosing a large and experienced overseas publisher and making full use of its product packaging and marketing, have a great advantage in promoting Chinese literature going out.

In conclusion, finding the similarities among successfully translated and communicated works, and learning from those cases, can effectively boost the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature.

### 3.2 Not All Successful Translation and Communication Helpful to Constructing China’s National Image

Finding the differences between *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words*, we can get such an enlightenment: Not all successful translations can contribute to the construction of China’s national image.

From the contents of the two books and domestic influence, *Wolf Totem* tells a story of the interdependence among the educated urban youth, the steppe wolf and the nomadic people. Its theme has humanized significance, especially the harmony between man and nature, which is the concern for all mankind. This book not only has a big influence in China, but the Chinese average people’s concerns over environment also help build China’s national image by showing that Chinese people are an integrated part in the global effort for ecological

civilization. While *China in Ten Words*, which has not yet been published in China, describes many social problems in the country. Although Yu Hua did not shy away from the complicated reality, actually he exposed the problems with an uncompromising attitude. Writing about chaos in daily life and Chinese people's inner anxiety showed Yu Hua's courage and social commitment. However, readers should be aware that this is just "China in ten words" and could not completely depict the whole picture of an ancient and oriental China who has gone through rapid and amazing changes over that last three decades. Moreover, as a professional literary creator rather than a sociologist, Yu Hua could not help being biased when analyzing political, historical, economic, and social issues. But the fact that western readers know very little about the status quo of China makes them obviously fail to distinguish which are biases included in the book.

Therefore, if China wants to tell its own stories warm and touching to foreign readers, the government must take the initiative to build a better platform for Chinese literature, so that more foreign readers can have access to good stories which could both attract them and construct China's national image. Through these stories, we can truly and objectively show our culture and history, and then let these beautiful things invite others to know and understand our nation and country.

## CONCLUSION

As one of the most important ways of cultural output, the translation and communication of Chinese contemporary literature is a window for the outside world to know Chinese contemporary literature and culture. Although now China has made a big progress in economy, but Chinese literature in English translation still faces a lot of challenges to reach wider readers. By finding the similarities and differences between *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* as well as their translation and communication, we can conclude that successful translation and communication must share some similarities: the concise and plain original texts, the translation of sinologists, and the publication of dominate international publishing houses all contributed to the successful translation and communication of these two works. Through the study on these similarities, we could have a clearer idea on what kind of works we should choose for translation and communication, who is the better translator and publisher, which absolutely sheds a light on how to make Chinese literature go abroad. By finding the differences between the two, we can see that not all successful translations and communications are helpful to constructing China's national image. Therefore, the Chinese government must play a greater decisive role in the process of sending Chinese literature out,

actively building a literary platform, and selecting more attractive contemporary literary works that can show the wonderful and confident side of Chinese contemporary life, thus letting the foreign countries eliminate their misunderstandings about China and truly know and understand China.

Though comparing *Wolf Totem* and *China in Ten Words* is a fruitful process and some findings are obtained, there are still many limitations to this study. First, thanks to the limit of time and data, my attention is focused on only two books and this type of research inevitably result in the lack of theoretical depth. A further research should be carried out to investigate similarities and differences among more books successfully translated and communicated overseas. The more similarities and differences we find, the more enlightenment we will have to the overseas dissemination of our literature. Second, the specific methods Chinese government should take when playing a more active role in sending Chinese literature out are not included in this paper due to the author's limited ability. Further researches on this should be done to better push Chinese literature going out.

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