

Literature Review of the Translation of Liu Cixin's *The Wandering Earth*

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Abstract

With China's increasing global influence and the growing recognition of Chinese literature on the international stage, Chinese science fiction is also garnering significant popularity abroad. An increasing number of outstanding literary works are being acknowledged and appreciated by readers abroad, reflecting a growing interest in Chinese science fiction in the English-speaking world. This paper first reviews the historical studies and the current status of case studies on the English translation of Chinese science fiction. It then provides a detailed review of the English translation of *The Wandering Earth*, mainly divided into film and book research, and classifies the perspectives of book translation research, focusing on the current research status from the perspectives of Eco-Translatology, Social Translation Studies, and Hermeneutic Translation Theory. Finally, this paper aims to address the insufficiencies in current research practices and propose future directions for the study of science fiction translation.

Key words: Science fiction; *The Wandering Earth*; Liu Cixin; Translation and communication

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Liu Cixin", a leading figure in the new era of science fiction literature, with the breadth and depth of thoughts contained in his works, has emerged as a "literary phenomenon". Liu Cixin has been creating science fictions since 1999, with numerous outstanding works and has repeatedly won a number of domestic and international sci-fi awards. His *The Three-Body Problem* won the Hugo Award, the most authoritative and influential award in the world of science fiction, in 2015. This marked that the Hugo Award was granted to an Asian and for the first time to a translated work. The following year, Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* once again received the Hugo Award. These two translated works share a common translator -- Ken Liu.

Ken Liu, not only as an important writer in this field but a translator, has introduced a large number of Chinese science fiction works to the English-speaking world, providing a window for English readers to glimpse and gain insight into the mysterious China. In 2017, Liu Cixin's first collection in English, led by Ken Liu in translation, was published by *Head of Zeus*, a British publishing company. The collection is titled after the most eye-catching novella, *The Wandering Earth*, revolving around the changes of planets in the solar system, the fate of human civilization, and the development of future technology. The fact that *The Wandering Earth* can be known and accepted by English readers is worth studying. Although *Liulang Diqiu* was highly recognized in the science fiction community when it was first published, there is very little research on the work itself. After the film adaption became popular, research on *The Wandering Earth* gradually increased, but most focused on the original work or the film itself, with relatively little research on the translated version.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION

Chinese contemporary science fiction's exposure in overseas markets owes much to the contributions of Professor Wu Yan and Israeli science fiction writer Ravi Tzedahar.

Professor Wu Yan, who graduated from Beijing Normal University, pioneered the science fiction course in China out of his passion for science fiction. Through writing, translating and editing dozens of science fiction theoretical works, he built the theoretical system of Chinese science fiction and made him an important researcher in the field. Since the 1990s, Wu Yan has introduced the development of Chinese science fiction in famous English science fiction magazines such as *Locus*. Moreover, Wu Yan helps edit the Annual Yearbook of Chinese Science Fiction Development (《中国科幻发展年鉴》) since 2020. The latest data in 2022 reveals that in 2021 around 132 pieces of Chinese science fiction were translated and published overseas for the first time or reissued. In English countries, *Clarkesworld* and *Galaxy's Edge* have been long-standing and reliable allies in promoting Chinese science fiction.

In the year 2000, Ted Hall got in touch with Wu Yan and went to Beijing to learn about science fiction creation. In 2003, he wrote an article about Chinese science fiction in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*. Since 2009, as the editor of *The Apex Book of World SF Series*, he has released numerous initial English versions of Chinese science fiction. The study of English translation of Chinese science fiction has begun to occupy a place in the academic world.

In 2015 and 2016, Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* and Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* successively won the Hugo Awards, setting off a research boom. In 2019, the English version of *Three-Body Problem* became the world's bestselling sci-fi novel. The same year witnesses Liu Cixin's novella sci-fi novel *The Wandering Earth* adapted into a film of the same name, which was a box office hit, spurring related research. On 22 January 2023, the film *The Wandering Earth II* was released simultaneously in mainland China and North America, ushering in a new level of academic enthusiasm.

Currently, there are two major focal points in academic research on translating science fiction into English: diachronic studies on the English translation of Chinese science fictions, and case studies on English translation of a certain Chinese science fiction.

2.1 Diachronic Studies on the English Translation of Chinese Science Fiction

The origin of science fiction can be traced back to the eastern spread of Western learning at the end of the 19th century, which has been more than a hundred years.

However, China's original science fiction rose relatively late, and hasn't exerted significant global influence. According to the existing records, Chinese science fiction has been translated into English for just over 50 years. The earliest known translation was Lao She's novel *The City of Cats* by James E. Dew in 1964. Prior to the 21st century, English translations were scarce due to the slow pace of translation efforts. But now, in the 21st century, China is becoming more important worldwide and Chinese literature is getting more popular internationally. As a result, Chinese science fiction works are starting to do well overseas.

Regina Wang (2018) explores the significance of translating Chinese science fiction for international audiences. She has noticed a steady growth of the number of works written in Chinese and translated into other languages in recent years. By looking back at the history of the translation of Chinese science fiction, Regina sees what lead us here. It is because of the continuous cooperation between *Clarkesworld Magazine* and *Storycom* since 2015 that has been able to continuously showcase Chinese science fiction works to English readers.

Wang Xueming and Liu Yi (2015) examine the history of Chinese science fiction translation, outlining the climax of Chinese science fiction translation and their influence on science fiction creation over the past century, and summarize the characteristics and trends. According to their research, before the year 2000, there were only 9 English translations of Chinese science fiction. During the period of 2000 to 2015, a total of 72 translations of Chinese science fiction into English were published, which is eight times more translations in this genre compared to before the 21st century. Despite this increase, translation research still remains on the fringes, overshadowed by the surge in science fiction writing and literary studies.

Using data investigation and statistical methods, Gao Qian and Wang Xiaohui (2021), systematically analyze the translation of Chinese science fiction novels in the English-speaking world from 2000 to 2020. It is found that from 2015 to 2020, there was a continuous advancement in the translation of Chinese science fiction novels into English. During this period, the publishing channels have continuously expanded, and a relatively mature output model has started to take shape. Based on this analysis, they examine the factors influencing the translation trend and propose the active utilization of existing achievements and resources. They emphasize the need to fix any problems in the translation process and make timely adjustments to ensure a sustained and stable output of Chinese science fiction to the international community. Only with the collaboration of writers, translators, and publishers can Chinese science fictions stand tall among the world's science fiction works.

Wang Yang (2022) divides the process of English translation of Chinese science fiction into five stages: quiet period, starting period, transition period, development period and maturity period. It is pointed out that as an important part of Chinese literature “going out”, the English translation of Chinese science fiction has gradually stepped out of its own way. To help Chinese science fiction grow internationally, it is necessary to strengthen dialogue and communication at home and abroad, establish stable cooperative relations between writers, translators, publishing agencies or publishing platforms, and actively promote the establishment of the copyright agent system by using new technology and social media.

Overall, more and more Chinese science fiction is being translated into English in the 21st century, showing a steady upward trend. To some extent, it reflects that Chinese science fiction is getting closer to being recognized on the global stage of science fiction.

2.2 Case Studies on English Translation of Chinese Science Fiction

The years 2015 and 2016 saw Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang emerge victorious, being honored with the renowned Hugo Award, widely regarded as the foremost prize for science fiction literature on a global scale. Their works significantly impact the creative style and shape the standard of Chinese science fiction, marking that Chinese science fiction is expected to become a new symbol of Chinese culture on the international stage. The two works share the same translator, Ken Liu, who has become a leading figure in translating science fiction. Since then, their successful pieces of work have generated considerable enthusiasm for science fiction in China, leading to a surge in case studies focusing on English translations of Chinese science fiction. The present author has exhausted all the case studies on CNKI, and found that the research objects are concentrated in *The Three-Body Problem* and *Beijing Folding*, and studies primarily revolve around translation approaches and strategies, translator’s subjectivity and translation and dissemination.

(1) Studies on Translation Strategies and Methods

Translation strategy research can further be categorized into two types: one concentrates on specific language phenomena, while the other centers on the overall translation text.

In the study based on Skopos theory, Zhi Haojie (2022) analyses how 244 culture-loaded words are translated in *The Three-Body Problem*. The findings revealed that the translator employs foreignization, domestication, as well as a combination of foreignization and domestication. Additionally, the study indicates a slight preference for domestication over foreignization.

Tan Xiao (2019) and Huang Jing (2022) explore the culture-loaded words in *Folding Beijing* from the perspectives of communicative translation theory and

cultural translation respectively, summarize Ken Liu’s translation strategies and style. Both researchers find that the translator, Ken Liu, uses a mix of literal translation and free translation to keep the Chinese cultural characteristics in the English version of the book.

While Friedman (2021) explores creative subversion in the whole translation of Hao Jingfang’s *Shengsi Yu*, applying relevant translation theory to analyze instances of subversion in English translation. In his own translation, a method called “creative subversion” is used to change the story a little bit so as to help English-speaking readers understand it better. This technique helps to keep the meaning of the original story while making it easier for people who speak English to enjoy.

Xiu Wenqiao and Jiang Tianyang (2018) focus on the whole translation of *Folding Beijing* by Ken Liu. They adopt the perspective of eco-translatology from the three dimensions of linguistics to analyze the use of different translation strategies in the English translation of science fiction works. The research shows that when performing culture transformation, using techniques like conversion of part of speech, conversion of person pronouns and conversion between hypotaxis and parataxis help make the translated text fit better with the ecological environment of the target language; in the process of cultural transformation, domestication and foreignization strategies are commonly used to reduce misunderstandings between the two cultures; in terms of communication adaptation, the conversion between literal translation and free translation, as well as the conversion of logical chains, are crucial.

Quite a few scholars have conducted research on the whole English version of *The Three-Body Problem* from different perspectives like skopos theory, functional translation theory, and high and low context culture. Zhang Genhong (2016), Chen Dan, Guo Min, Gong Li and Lu Jinyan (2019), Zhang Yunli and Yang Yu (2021) have all discovered that Ken Liu has used various effective methods such as literal translation, free translation, annotation, omission, addition, etc. to convey the cultural connotations and Chinese cultural characteristics of the original text.

(2) Studies on Translator’s Subjectivity

There are two kinds of studies on translator’s subjectivity. One is to focus solely on examining translator’s subjectivity, the other is to combine translator’s subjectivity with other theories.

Using *The Three-body Problem* as an example, Gao Wei and Chang Jing (2017) examine translator’s subjectivity. They further argue for the importance of translator’s subjectivity in successful translation based on its three main characteristics: subjective initiative, passiveness, and purposiveness. Their research findings highlight that subjective initiative emphasizes the translator’s optimal alignment with the original text,

passiveness emphasizes the translator's manipulation of the translation activity within the constraints of objective factors, and purposiveness emphasizes the translator's proactive efforts to overcome objective constraints and actively achieve the translation aims and objectives.

Chen Xi (2017) and He Peng (2017) combine the relevant concepts of translator's subjectivity and hermeneutics, and study how Ken Liu's subjectivity is shown in the four steps of Steiner's hermeneutics through a large number of translation examples in the English version of *The Three-Body Problem*. Through the detailed and systematic comparison between the ST and TT, both researchers conclude that Ken Liu fully exercises his translator subjectivity in the translation. He achieved this by adjusting the order of chapters, arranging paragraphs, rewriting sentences, and utilizing techniques such as transliteration, annotation, and word formation. These techniques allow the translated text to retain the original information while ensuring that it is easily understood and accepted by the target readers.

(3) Studies on Dissemination and Reception

Researchers have also analyzed aspects beyond the translation process, focusing on dissemination and reception in their studies.

Wu You (2020) examines the translation, dissemination and reception of Liu Cixin's science fiction across the globe, and points out that the combined efforts made by the translator, mediator and the techno-optimist digital context have propelled the Chinese science fiction to increasingly become a global proposition. Thus, Chinese science fiction's active integration into the world literature system is not only an important facet of East-West cultural exchanges but also an imperative manifestation of the era of globalization.

From translational context and the role of translational actants rather than the translated text itself, Wu Yun and He Min (2019) try to explain why *The Three-Body Problem* has become popular in the United States. It is demonstrated that the rise of China's international status, the vigorous development of Chinese science fiction literature, and the transformation of the American science fiction literature system have created a favorable context for the acceptance of *The Three-Body Problem* in the United States. Well-known publishers and translator Ken Liu have played a necessary role in introducing *The Three-Body Problem* into the American science fiction literature system based on their cultural and symbolic capital. Ken Liu, on the whole, focuses on preserving the original text's uniqueness, while also using techniques such as subtext to ensure the readability of the translated version, thus embarking on a genuine journey of Chinese science fiction in the United States.

Chen Fangrong (2017) presents and sorts out the current circumstance of the translation of Chinese genre fiction, which will be greatly boosted by the successful

acceptance of *The Three-Body Problem* in the United States. By dissecting the five key elements of the successful dissemination and reception of *The Three-Body Problem* from the perspective of reader evaluation, she points out the strategies and methods that Chinese literature can adopt in the dissemination process. She argues that both genre fiction and fine literature should work together in a more balanced way to help Chinese literature "going out" and, based on this, truly achieve "going into" other countries.

Based on Westley-MacLean's ABCX model, Li Qiaozhen (2022) proposes the communication model of *The Three-Body Problem* and *Death Notice*, and analyzed the role of copyright agents, opinion leaders and editors in the dissemination process under the guidance of "gatekeeper" theory. This paper holds that the key to promoting the overseas communication of Chinese literature lies in selecting works within the common experience of both disseminators, striking the best balance between the information function and the entertainment function of communication, always putting the needs of the audience in the first place according to the bidirectional and circular nature of communication, and using the feedback of the audience to promote the sustainable and effective communication of Chinese literature.

Wang Yawen (2019) also proposed from the perspective of communication that the "going out" of Chinese native literature not only requires the involvement and assistance of various fields such as comparative literature, comparative culture, translation, and publishing, but also necessitates a shift in mindset from simply "going out" to actively "going into" the global literary community.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *THE WANDERING EARTH*

Written by Liu Cixin, *Liulang Diqu* is a novella which was first published in the seventh issue of *Science Fiction World* (《科幻世界》) in 2000 and won the Special Prize of the China Science Fiction Galaxy Award in the same year. In 2013, Liu Cixin's eleven stories is translated by Holger Nahm from North America and is collected in the anthology *The Wandering Earth: Classic Science Fiction Collection* by Beijing Guomi Digital Technology Co., Ltd., making it the first English edition. With the international success of *The Three-Body Problem*, it has sparked a wave of creation and research in the field of science fiction literature, leading to the revision of older publications. In October 2017, *Head of Zeus*, the publisher who previously released *The Three-Body Problem*, released a new edition of the *The Wandering Earth*

anthology, led by translator Ken Liu, in collaboration with Elizabeth Hanlon, Zac Haluza, Adam Lanphier, and Holger Nahm. In 2019, the film adaptation of the novella *The Wandering Earth* came out. In 2023, *The Wandering Earth II* was released and received widespread acclaim both domestically and internationally.

3.1 Film Version Research of *The Wandering Earth*

The film research of *The Wandering Earth* is mainly split into two parts: studies at home and abroad. Because the film is mainly targeted at Chinese audiences, the academic research in China is much more than that in foreign countries where most of the film reports and reviews.

In the analysis of the movie *The Wandering Earth*, Du Yumeng (2019) examines the discourse power in the translation of the movie. Du holds the view that the approval from readers and the impact of the translation are good proof of the discourse power. Besides, translator's subjectivity in subtitle translation contributes to the spread of the original language and culture in a foreign language environment, which enhances better telling Chinese stories and realizing Chinese discourse rights.

From skopos theory, Gao Xiaohui (2019) systematically expounds the application of its three rules in the movie translation. Gao proposes that translators should choose translation strategies according to specific conditions. Priority should be given to domestication translation, but for culture-loaded words, foreignization translation should be considered first.

Lei Mo (2021) and Ning Bo (2021) study the subtitle translation of the film *The Wandering Earth* from eco-translatology theory. From principles of the three-dimensional transformations, both analyze the adaptation, selection, and transformation made by the translator in the subtitle translation, and explore some available translation methods and techniques. Eco-translatology theory requires translators to actively adapt to the translation ecological environment and take into account the language habits and cultural customs of foreign audiences, and make appropriate responses and selections on the basis of integrating into the environment. Ning also mentions that the subtitle translation of *The Wandering Earth* has some mistakes and offers some suggestions for improvement.

3.2 Book Version Research of *The Wandering Earth*

The second part is the book research of *The Wandering Earth*. There are currently two English translations of novella *The Wandering Earth* -- a Holger Nahm translation published in 2013 and a translation led by Ken Liu in 2017. The most discussed translation in the academic circle is Ken Liu's translation. Three main perspectives encompass the English translation of *The Wandering Earth*: the perspective of eco-translatology, socio-translatology and hermeneutics.

(1) Perspective of Eco-Translatology

Deng Yueping and Long Shanshan (2020) combine eco-translatology with translator's subjectivity, and conduct a study on the translated version *The Wandering Earth* from three aspects: translator selection, translation strategies and translation methods, aiming to explore a reasonable translation model for the English translation of Chinese science fiction.

Based on eco-translatology, Cong Xueting (2021) focuses on the translation strategy and translation effect from the three dimensions of linguistics, culture and communication. Through analysis, it is found that comprehensively utilizing various translation strategies helps to achieve optimal translation effect. Cong also focuses on one of the latest additions to eco-translatology -- translation ecology. The study reveals that reputable publisher and effective publicity efforts have a certain impact on the dissemination effect.

Chu Hao (2022) studies the two English versions of *The Wandering Earth* at the same time, compares and analyzes the translation strategies of the two from the three dimensions of eco-translatology, and explores the reasons for the emergence of different translations through in-depth discussions on translators' adaptation and selection in different translation ecological environments. Finally, it is concluded that the successful translation should be the one with the highest possible "integrated adaptive selection degree".

(2) Perspective of Socio-Translatology

According to the theory of socio-translatology, Wang Danyang and Meng Chen (2022) conduct an analysis on the differences among translation agents. The research indicates that the award and film adaptations have spurred Western commercial publishers to translate Chinese science fiction works. Moreover, the dissemination effect of works translated by Western commercial publishers is better than that of Chinese independent commercial publishers. Therefore, it is found that promoting the adaptation of Chinese science fiction works into film or television, increasing cooperation with Western commercial publishers, and expanding the channels for translating Chinese science fiction works will all be beneficial to the "going out" of Chinese genre literature.

Using a descriptive research method, Liang Yating's research (2022) summarizes the major agents and their social roles in the field of translation. Liang explores the impact of the interaction between agents on the selection of source texts, translation principles, and translation strategies. By examining para-texts and interviews, she identifies the following agents active in the translation field of *The Wandering Earth*: publishers, online TV providers, editors, book reviewers, authors, readers, and translator. The conclusion drawn is that publishers, editors, and book reviewers strive to maximize their own interests, and the capital they acquire and the structured

habitus have a strong influence on the translator's selection of translation principles and strategies.

(3) Perspective of Hermeneutics

Chen Yajie and Gao Yalin (2020) conduct an analysis of the entire translation process of *The Wandering Earth* using George Steiner's hermeneutic theory. They discover that in the four steps of translation -- trust, invasion, appropriation and compensation -- Ken Liu invades his personal subjective understanding and cultural awareness into the target language, breaking down the differences and contradictions between the two cultures and conveying them to the target language readers in the most appropriate linguistic form. The translator, through the use of domestication and foreignization strategies, exerts their subjectivity and absorbs the inherent meaning of the text, breaking down the obscure and difficult-to-understand aspects of Chinese culture. At the same time, in order to maintain balance and avoid differences, the translator adopts methods such as addition, interpretation and footnotes to restore and reproduce the cultural connotation of the original text to the greatest extent.

In Liang Yali's study (2021), she does the same research. The study finds that the translator's initial trust in the translated work mainly stems from their trust in the selected text. Due to the differences between Chinese and English language and culture, the translator has invaded the text of *The Wandering Earth* and made some creative translations. In the appropriation stage, the translator primarily employed domestication strategies, supplemented by foreignization strategies. Finally, in the compensation stage, the translator compensated for the text at both the linguistic and cultural levels, completing the sentence elements and the cultural connotations of the original text.

(4) The Miscellaneous

Some scholars have studied the English translation of *The Wandering Earth* from the perspectives of foregrounding, rhetoric, manipulation theory, reception theory and digital humanities theory.

From a rhetorical perspective, Lin Zhen (2020) believes that the translation of science fiction novels into English should aim to persuade the audience and gain the readers' recognition. Additionally, when translating into English, the relationship between the rhetor and the audience should be considered to determine whether a literal translation or a paraphrase is more appropriate. Furthermore, the credibility of the original author should be taken into account so as to choose a more effective translation strategy.

Based on Reception Theory, Jiang Xue (2022) uses several important concepts, that is horizon of expectations, aesthetic distance, fusion of horizons and text blank, to explore the translation methods from characterization, science fiction scene and culture-specific words in *The Wandering Earth*. Jiang finds that the translator used domestication more frequently than foreignization.

Dai Jianhua, Xu Minyun, Zeng Daojian (2023) conduct a study using artificial intelligence algorithms to examine the international dissemination of Chinese science fiction works. Data shows that, the English-speaking audience had a generally positive reception to *The Wandering Earth*, while their evaluation of the science fiction film adaptation was more mixed. The negative feedback primarily focuses on aspects such as the film's storyline, special effects, and the portrayal and acting skills of the actors. This research also confirms the feasibility of applying digital humanities theory and methods to the study of international dissemination.

To sum up, previous research on the English translation of Chinese science fiction has mainly conducted by case studies with most concentrating on Hugo Award-winning works such as *The Three-Body Problem* and *Folding Beijing*. In terms of the English translation of *The Wandering Earth*, previous research revolves around analyzing film version and book version. As for its book version research, most studies conduct textual analysis while neglecting to give due attention to the communication process of the *The Wandering Earth*. Up to now, there have been no study exploring *The Wandering Earth* from the perspective of Laswell's 5W communication model, leaving many unexplored areas in this field.

4. DEFICIENCIES OF THE PREVIOUS STUDIES

Through summarizing related studies, it is observed that in recent years, the research trend in science fiction translation has been positive, with an expanding scope and a growing number of publications attracting more scholars to this field. However, several issues persist.

Firstly, there is a narrow focus on research subjects. Current case analyses of science fiction primarily concentrate on works like *The Three-Body Problem* and *Folding Beijing*, with limited and scattered research on other science fiction works, lacking comparative and collective studies. While award-winning science fiction is crucial, other works also play a significant role in disseminating Chinese culture and should receive ample attention.

Secondly, research perspectives are limited. Studies on the English translation of *The Three-Body Problem* have been well-established, yet other works by the same author, Liu Cixin, lack attention. *The Wandering Earth* collection includes numerous award-winning pieces. After its adaptation into the film, the book is becoming popular among readers, holding substantial research value. However, current scholarly focus primarily delves into translation details within the text, lacking out-text research such as the multimodal communication, translator's cultural capital and publisher's marketing strategy.

Thirdly, there is a lack of consensus in research conclusions. Case analyses primarily revolve around singular texts, with translation strategies and methods only targeted at one single case, lacking universality. Consequently, divergences persist in translating new terminologies in science fiction, making unifying terms a daunting task. Thus, more scholars are needed to engage in science fiction translation research, fostering collective wisdom and further promote Chinese science fiction to go global.

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