

The media reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain

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Abstract. This study examines the reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain, focusing on translations published between 1990 and 2024. By combining quantitative data with textual analysis, the research explores how contemporary Chinese literature has been received by Spanish media. Based on book review data and publication records from Spain's mainstream media, the study reveals the phased characteristics of the dissemination of Chinese literature, its reception effectiveness, and the influencing factors. The findings provide empirical insights for the international promotion of Chinese literature.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese novels, cross-cultural communication, Spanish media, reception studies

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, literature serves as a crucial medium for cultural dissemination and has become an essential channel for cross-cultural exchange. In Spain, the translation and introduction of contemporary Chinese novels offer a new perspective for Spanish society to understand Chinese culture. However, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, historical experiences, and political systems, the reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spanish media often encounters challenges and misinterpretations. The dissemination of these works is not only influenced by Western literary frameworks but is also inevitably shaped by Spain's political and cultural context.

Previous studies suggest that the Western reception of Chinese literature is often confined to an "exotic spectacle" perspective, which reduces Chinese literature to political metaphors or cultural symbols while overlooking its artistic qualities and deeper cultural connotations. This phenomenon aligns closely with Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism," which argues that Western media often interpret Eastern culture through their own cultural standards and construct an understanding of Chinese literature based on stereotypes.

Thus, this study seeks to explore the following key questions within Said's theoretical framework:

- 1) How do Spanish media shape the image of Chinese literature through cultural comparisons? Specifically, is there a tendency to exoticize Chinese literature?
- 2) How do political interpretations coexist with literary analysis in media reviews? Does this influence how Spanish readers perceive contemporary Chinese novels?
- 3) How do translation strategies impact the reception of contemporary Chinese novels? What role do translators play in cross-cultural communication?

By employing a combination of quantitative statistical analysis and textual analysis, this study examines book reviews from Spain's mainstream media between 1990 and 2024 to reveal the dissemination characteristics of Chinese literature in Spain and provide empirical support for the global promotion of Chinese literature.

2. Overview of the translation and introduction of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain

2.1. Analysis of publication data and trends

This study primarily covers contemporary novels by authors from mainland China that were translated and published in Spain between 1990 and 2024. The data and information used in this research are sourced from several major Spanish publishing houses, as well as key literary journals and news media, including *El País*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo*, and *El Imparcial*. These media outlets play a crucial role in shaping the reception of contemporary Chinese novels among Spanish readers, as they are among the most widely circulated and influential newspapers in Spain.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the translation and publication of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain have significantly increased, especially after Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. Works by Chinese female writers, representative works from different literary genres, as well as literature from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora have gradually gained recognition in Spain. This diversification has led to the introduction of a broader range of literary themes, including science fiction and detective fiction.

According to statistical data from the National Library of Spain (Biblioteca Nacional de España, BNE), a total of 106 Spanish translations of contemporary Chinese novels were published between 1990 and 2024, with an average of 3.1 books published annually, covering 53 authors [1]. Among them, Mo Yan's works account for the largest proportion, with 16 titles, followed by Yan Lianke and Liu Cixin, each with seven translated works. In terms of translators, experienced professionals such as Blas Piñero Martínez (who translated 10 works) and Javier Altayó (7 works) have played a leading role in introducing Chinese literature to Spain. Additionally, independent publishers such as Kailas, with their systematic "Chinese Literature Series" publishing strategy, have become important forces in promoting Chinese literary works.

2.2. Dissemination of representative authors and works

Mo Yan is undoubtedly the most influential figure in the dissemination of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain. His works, such as *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts & Wide Hips*, have become landmark titles in the Spanish literary market. According to publication data, Mo Yan's works have been the most frequently published among Chinese authors in Spain, with a total of 20 novels translated and released. Apart from Mo Yan, other prominent Chinese authors such as Yu Hua, Liu Cixin, and Yan Lianke have also had multiple works translated. Yu Hua's *To Live* and Liu Cixin's science fiction series, particularly *The Three-Body Problem*, have not only achieved commercial success but have also received positive critical reception in mainstream Spanish media.

Furthermore, the Spanish publishing market has shown increased interest in works by Chinese female authors. Writers such as Wang Anyi and Chen Ran have had their novels published in Spain, offering Spanish readers a glimpse into the social status and psychological world of contemporary Chinese women through their narratives. Through the systematic translation and introduction of representative authors and works, contemporary Chinese novels have gradually established a solid foothold in the Spanish literary market.

3. The reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spanish mainstream media

3.1. Media selection and number of book reviews

The reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spanish mainstream media is primarily reflected through book reviews published in major newspapers, literary journals, and online platforms. Research indicates that reviews are concentrated in influential newspapers and media outlets such as *El País* and *El Mundo*.

Between 1990 and 2024, Spanish mainstream media published a total of 70 book reviews on contemporary Chinese novels, covering 41 different works. The distribution of these reviews is as follows:

- El País: 21 reviews (30%)
- El Mundo: 9 reviews (13%)
- ABC: 7 reviews (10%)
- La Vanguardia: 6 reviews (8.6%)
- El Imparcial: 6 reviews (8.6%)
- Other media outlets: 21 reviews (30%)

From a trend perspective, Spanish mainstream media responded promptly to Mo Yan's Nobel Prize win in 2012 by publishing numerous reviews analyzing his literary style and historical context in depth. Similarly, works such as *Change* (Bian) also received multiple reviews upon publication. The number of reviews peaked following Mo Yan's Nobel Prize award and then gradually stabilized. Statistical data suggests that the volume of reviews is closely linked to an author's prominence and the social relevance of their work. For instance, the novels of Mo Yan and Yan Lianke frequently attract substantial attention and critique, whereas other authors receive comparatively fewer reviews.

3.2. Analysis of book review content

Spanish media reviews of contemporary Chinese novels often interpret these works through the lens of Western literary traditions, exhibiting a strong tendency toward cross-cultural comparison. For example, *El Imparcial*'s review of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* highlights its "lyrical Eastern charm" while drawing a parallel between its narrative structure and Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism, stating that it "blends the absurdity and symbolism characteristic of Latin American literature in the portrayal of historical trauma"[2]. Similarly, *El País*'s analysis of Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died* notes that the novel contains distinct "Cervantes-style satire," and suggests that it incorporates numerous Western literary motifs, including *Sleeping Beauty*, H.G. Wells'

The Country of the Blind, Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, and certain chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, constructing "an allegorical world where reality and madness intertwine".[3] Although such reviews attempt to establish a literary dialogue between Chinese and Western traditions, they also implicitly reflect the "Orientalist" perspective criticized by Edward Said—that is, evaluating Chinese literature through Western aesthetic standards, reducing it to an "exotic spectacle" or a "political metaphor." For instance, ABC's review of Mo Yan's *Change* focuses primarily on "the transformation of China's social system," while overlooking the novel's nuanced portrayal of individual destinies [4]. This tendency suggests that Spanish media, despite engaging in cross-cultural interpretation, still struggle to break free from an ethnocentric cognitive framework.

3.3. Characteristics and trends in media reviews

3.3.1. Political metaphors and the reproduction of "Orientalism"

When reviewing contemporary Chinese novels, Spanish media often exhibit a specific cultural interpretation tendency, linking these works to China's social environment and focusing on how they present real-world issues. Many reviewers pay close attention to the depiction of social problems in the novels, as well as the author's creative intentions. For instance, when Murong Xuecun's novel *Déjame en paz* (*Leave Me Alone*, Chengdu) was published in Spain, reports emphasized the author's identity as an independent writer and, in interviews, explored his views on publishing regulations and content censorship [5]. Similarly, when discussing Nobel laureate Mo Yan, most media outlets showed a heightened interest in China's political landscape, particularly in relation to Mo Yan's personal stance within this context.

These reviews reflect an interpretation framework rooted in Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," in which Chinese literature is primarily seen as an exploration of a particular model of social development, while the complexity of the works—especially their literary value and cultural significance—is often overlooked.

3.3.2. Attempts at literary analysis

Despite this trend, some reviewers attempt to understand Chinese novels through a more nuanced literary analysis. A number of critiques seek to move beyond the political framework and instead focus on narrative techniques and thematic elements. For example, in an ABC book review, Darío Villanueva commented that the narrative elements in *Half of Man is Woman* "correspond with our own traditions, yet they are uniquely blended in an unusual manner—incorporating elegy, digression, lyricism, eroticism, philosophy, landscapes, and dialogue—interwoven with linguistic expressions characteristic of specific historical periods, which have become idiomatic" [6].

Similarly, a La Verdad review of Chen Ran's *A Private Life* praised the novel's storytelling, stating that it is "engaging, directive in tone, dreamlike, and subtly captures the complexities of the human condition, while revealing the multiplicity of individual identities through unexpected twists." The reviewer also highlighted the novel's incorporation of "Kafkaesque obsession, Murakami-style surrealism and fantasy, existentialism and postmodernism, as well as themes of gender and transgender identity" [7].

In summary, Spanish mainstream media's reception of contemporary Chinese novels presents two major trends: on the one hand, novels are often interpreted through cultural comparison and political metaphor; on the other hand, there is a growing recognition of their literary qualities, with critics increasingly attempting to analyze their narrative techniques and artistic style in greater depth.

4. Factors influencing the reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain

4.1. Translation quality and cultural differences

As the core process in cross-cultural communication, translation directly affects the reception of contemporary Chinese novels. Spanish translators Iñaki Preciado and Emilia Hu, when translating Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman*, added over a hundred annotations to explain the historical context of the period and Confucian cultural symbols, earning praise from critics for "building a bridge of cultural understanding" [6]. However, issues related to semantic loss due to indirect translation remain prominent. For example, the English-translated version of Yu Hua's *Brothers*, which was later translated into Spanish, was criticized by Spanish media for being a "flattened narrative of suffering" due to the omission of dialects and folk customs [8].

In recent years, publishers such as Kailas have adopted a "direct Chinese translation + cultural annotations" model, but small publishing houses often face resource constraints, leading to inconsistencies in the depth and systematic nature of annotations. Therefore, establishing a professional Chinese-Spanish translation collaboration mechanism and setting up special funds to support cooperation between translators and scholars has become an urgent need to improve translation quality.

4.2. Influence of social and historical factors

The attention that Spanish mainstream media pays to contemporary Chinese novels is often shaped by Spain's own historical and cultural background as well as its journalistic tendencies. First, Spain experienced a unique social governance model in the 20th century, making issues such as freedom of expression and cultural diversity particularly sensitive. As a result, when interpreting foreign literature, Spanish media tend to focus on how a work reflects social realities and are inclined to analyze it through the lens of political systems and historical change.

Second, due to the nature of cross-cultural communication, Western mainstream media, when introducing non-Western literature, often incorporate their own interpretive frameworks, emphasizing social metaphors and critiques of reality rather than purely focusing on artistic and cultural expression. This interpretive approach has, to some extent, influenced how Spanish audiences engage with Chinese literature.

Additionally, from a media studies perspective, global media outlets, when reporting on cultural news, often select topics that are more provocative and relatable to their audiences. Discussions of social transformation and values tend to attract more attention than purely artistic analysis. Consequently, Spanish media are more likely to highlight how contemporary Chinese novels reflect social realities in their book reviews and literary reports, rather than focusing on literary techniques or artistic value alone. These factors collectively shape the reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spanish media, making their dissemination not only subject to cultural influences but also guided by media reporting conventions.

4.3. Market and reader demand

Market demand plays a significant role in determining the extent to which contemporary Chinese novels are disseminated in Spain. According to Spain's Amazon literary bestseller rankings in 2020, the Spanish version of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* remained in the Top 10 science fiction novels for six consecutive months [9]. In contrast, Yan Lianke's *Lenin's Kisses*, which deals with sensitive historical themes, had lower sales, failing to surpass 1,000 copies [10]. Furthermore, the preference of Latin American markets for magical realism differs from the Spanish domestic audience's stronger inclination toward social realism. This divergence influences publishers' selection of works, as they must carefully consider market positioning.

For novels rich in cultural symbolism or historical allegory, mainstream Spanish readers tend to show lesser acceptance. Many Spanish readers feel somewhat distanced from works that involve complex cultural contexts and are more inclined toward narratives that directly address social issues. Thus, optimizing the promotional strategies for Chinese literature in Spain and attracting greater attention from Spanish readers has become a key challenge for the international dissemination of Chinese literature.

5. Challenges and strategies in the reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain

5.1. Existing issues

Despite the increase in the number of contemporary Chinese novels translated into Spanish in recent years, several challenges persist in their reception. First, Spanish media's acceptance of Chinese literature remains limited by cultural differences and is significantly influenced by geopolitical contexts. Second, Spanish publishers and media outlets often favor works that either involve politically sensitive themes or align with Western ideological expectations. This bias has led to many outstanding contemporary Chinese literary works failing to gain adequate market opportunities and widespread readership.

Additionally, the publication of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain is largely undertaken by young, small-scale publishers, while major Spanish publishing houses show relatively little interest in Chinese literature. This results in limited market influence. Furthermore, these smaller publishers frequently rely excessively on "Chineseness" as a marketing strategy, often exploiting superficial cultural symbols to attract readers rather than focusing on the literary value of the works themselves.

5.2. Recommendations for improvement

To enhance the dissemination of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain, the following strategies are crucial:

(1) Strengthening Translator Training and Incentive Mechanisms: Establish a "Chinese-Spanish Literary Translation Award" to encourage young translators to engage in direct Chinese-to-Spanish translation. Promote collaboration between Chinese and Spanish universities to offer joint courses on "Chinese Literary Translation," fostering professionals with both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity.

(2) Optimizing Publishing Collaboration and Marketing Strategies: Chinese authors should cultivate deeper, long-term relationships with publishing houses and seek partnerships with publishers specializing in related literary genres to facilitate systematic and sustainable translation efforts. Large publishing houses (such as Planeta) could collaborate with Spanish Sinologists to curate a "Chinese Literary Classics Series," which would reduce overreliance on politically themed works. Additionally,

leveraging social media platforms—such as book-related discussions on Twitter and visual book reviews on Instagram—can attract younger readers and expand the audience beyond traditional media consumers.

(3) Balancing Academic and Popular Dissemination: Establish a "Chinese Literature Column" in mainstream media outlets such as *El País*, inviting Sinologists to write in-depth analyses. Simultaneously, organize virtual author discussions (such as Zoom book clubs) to facilitate direct interaction between readers and authors like Mo Yan and Liu Cixin, which would help to reduce cultural misunderstandings.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the translation and reception of contemporary Chinese novels in Spain reflect various challenges and complexities in cross-cultural exchange. While misunderstandings and cultural differences persist, the future of Chinese literature in Spain appears promising as cultural interactions between China and Spain continue to deepen. Leveraging digital media and social networks to expand literary influence, alongside increased cultural promotion initiatives and higher-quality translations, will undoubtedly enhance the impact of contemporary Chinese novels in the Spanish literary landscape.

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