

The Reception of *The Catcher in the Rye*: A Paradigm for “Counter canon”

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Abstract

The study investigates the acceptance of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* in China based on David Damrosch’s concepts of world literature which presented mainly in his influential book *What is World Literature*. Damrosch elaborates the notion by focusing on a threefold definition, namely the world, text and reader, therefore the discussion of this research is divided accordingly into three subchapters: the circulation, translation, and reading. It is found that the reception of *Catcher* in China shows three stages, which originated from the intrinsic nature of the novel and the complicated phasic social condition of socialist China; the findings also show how an alienated “counter canon” has been accepted by foreign readers from the perspective of translation distinction; analyzes the reason why it could be appreciated by Chinese readers of different backgrounds who have long been nurtured by Confucianism and meet their horizon of expectations. In this way, the study hopes to contribute to overcoming the barriers encountered by literary works stepping into the world literature realm and setting a paradigm for literature, especially “counter canon” literature dissemination.

Keywords

The Catcher in the Rye, World Literature, David Damrosch, Reception

1. Introduction

The Catcher in the Rye by Jerome David Salinger is one of the classics of American literature in the last century. It discloses the depression, emptiness, and rebellion of the protagonist Holden, which has aroused strong resonance in America as well as the rest of the world ever since. Due to his in-depth insight into the social condition and humanity in America, Salinger was also regarded as the one who kicked off the counterculture movement in the 1960s which was

primarily characterized by the rejection of traditional social norms (Liao et al., 2005).

In the 1950s America, despite the escalation of political tensions, the economic prosperity then enabled partly the white and middle-class youth, who constitutes the bulk of counterculture, to pay attention to the social issues at that time. Social conditions restrained the individual characteristics of Americans so that they resort to voracious consumption and material enjoyment as spiritual sustenance, which left the mass, notably the youth “in a state of indifference” (Guan, 2013). Salinger was the first writer to howl the scene. In *Catcher*, he shaped the twisted and rebellious Holden, who was enraged by the ubiquitous “phonies”, but ultimately invested in pursuing innocence exemplified by preventing children from falling off into the “cliff”—namely the hypocritical adulthood (149). Despite mixed reviews after its initial publication and even today, the objections are still voicing, Holden has become a renowned iconic adolescent for more than half a century worldwide.

In this study, the reception of *Catcher* in China is examined through David Damrosch’s concepts of world literature, aiming to investigate the tortuous circulation process of the novel in socialist China and provide a paradigm for the spread of literary works of the world.

2. Previous Research on *Catcher*

Earlier research on *Catcher* mainly engages in the following aspects: the theme, psychology research, parallel study, and narrative techniques, etc., among which Arthur Heisman and James C. Miller are the first researchers to discuss the theme of the novel by comparing Holden with Mark Twain’s Huck and maintain that both of them grow up in the wandering processes (Hamilton, 1988). Then Tom Davis expounds on the influence of oriental philosophy on *Catcher* and points out that “catcher” is the embodiment of the oriental compassionate bodhisattva who is dedicated to preventing people from suffering. Some critics also analyze the image of the protagonist Holden in virtue of psychology, for example, David J. Burrows maintains that the records Holden gives to his sister Phoebe finally become fragments, representing his fragile consciousness and broken personality. Based on individual psychology theory, R. J. Huber insists that Holden represents a strong tendency toward inferiority for which he utilizes sarcasm for others serves as compensation, and Nadel believes that Holden’s language and struggle reflect the pressure and contradiction that prevail during the Cold War.

Starting from the 1980s when the second translation version was published, researches on *Catcher* in China tend to repeat most of the fields above, except for some investigation of the values and significance of the novel in hope of bringing enlightenment to education and youth. Li Xiujuan studies the influence of Salinger’s identity and life experience to believe that *Catcher* virtually reflects the Jewish literary motifs: wandering, salvation, and margin (Adam, 2010). Moreover, Chinese scholars also utilize modern literary theories to analyze it, exemplified by Tang Zi’s discussion of the disillusionment of Holden’s mirror period

based on post-psychoanalytic theory (Alfred, 1964), which has testified to the bewilderment of the social reality.

From above all, it can be concluded that previous researches on *Catcher* mainly focus on image interpretation, narration, language features, and theme, while few researches have examined the interpretation and analysis of the acceptance of the novel in China. However, there are certain similarities between the current economic and cultural development of emerging China and that of America in the last century. A comprehensive study of the reception of the novel in China will be considerably significant for the growth of Chinese youth, and more specifically, serve as a paradigm for the spread of world literature in China, the developing nations and more.

3. Damrosch's Notion of World Literature

It is generally believed that world literature has four levels of meaning: literature in the world, world literature based on Euro-centrism, world literature of world classics, and Goethe's ideal world literature (Wang, 2014). In Damrosch's (2003) monograph *What is World Literature*, he proposed a new elliptic perspective (see Figure 1) to elaborate on the changing process of literary work. In his view, world literature is not a static conception. It is created in specific nations, developed in the dynamic process of translation, and ultimately read by others. He takes the world, text, and reader as the core sub-concept respectively, argues that: "world literature is the elliptical refraction between national literature; world literature is a literature that benefits from translation; world literature is not a set of classic texts, but a mode of reading" (Damrosch, 281).

Meanwhile, Damrosch proposed a threefold system with hypercanon, countercanon and shadowcanon to redefine literary classics in his "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age". The hypercanon designates the literary works that have received increasing attention as time progresses; the shadowcanon refers to works whose influence and visibility have diminished for a while and the less stable and influential status as hypercanon; and the countercanon designates the works that differ from the conventional norms of literary creation, nevertheless, it definitely reflects a trending preference among readers, mainly exemplified by postcolonial canon.

In all, Damrosch takes a unique approach to the study of world literature, exploring how literary works are circulated, translated and read in a cross-cultural context, and then draws a distinctive threefold perspective. Based on this notion, this study explores the reception of Salinger's *Catcher* from the aspects of circulation, reading, and acceptance in China to provide a new research perspective for the holistic study of the novel and of world literature dissemination.

4. Circulation of *Catcher* in China

According to Damrosch, "world literature is an elliptical refraction between national literatures" (281). He sees world literature as an elliptical space and intends to explain that, for national literature, the practically feasible pathway to

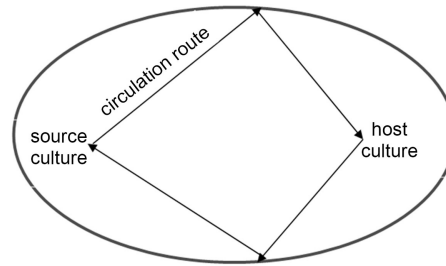


Figure 1. Elliptic refraction in world literature space.

the realm of world literature is not a simple and direct “reflection”, but equivalent to a “refraction” through some media (such as language, culture, time, space, etc.); and “a work of world literature moves into an elliptical space created between the source and receiving cultures, shaped by both but circumscribed by neither alone” (283). Therefore, this part firstly explains how *Catcher* crosses time and space to socialist China.

In the early 1960s, a range of postwar western literary works reflecting the young generation’s dissatisfaction with society such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road* and *Waiting for Godot* were introduced into China for internal research (Wang, 2014: p. 67). In this way, Chinese authorities intended to obtain certain experience from the bourgeois literature to cope with the potential setbacks then. Each version of these books was generally printed in less than 900 copies in 1963, with “internal release” printed on the front or back cover which was often made of plain yellow paper and commonly known as “yellow book”. Moreover, every purchase of these books should be strictly in accordance with the roster provided by the censorship bureau. The term “banned book” virtually presents a mysterious fascinating sense for readers, arousing a rapid craze for it in return. In this sense, the restriction feature of *Catcher* made the reading practice itself rebellious, which coincides with the rebellious protagonist Holden in the novel (Shan, 2012). Consequently, shortly after the publication of the book, the “manuscript” of it emerged in restricted sections exemplified by the underground literature salons in many cities. Furthermore, the chaos during the phase also unexpectedly contributed to the spread of this novel in China.

Dong Dingshan, who was honored as “an outstanding ambassador of Sino-US literary exchanges”, first introduced *Catcher* to China in Reading Magazine, believing that the protagonist is another Gao Juehui in Ba Jin’s *Home*, a youth who bears a radical rebellious spirit against the society (Guan, 2013). Then Shi Xiaorong’s translation version was quickly published by Lijiang Press in 1983, which marked the beginning of the formal circulation of *Catcher* in China and a rapid profound impact on Chinese writers ensued. Two years later, the first wave of “Chinese Modernist Novels” deeply influenced by western modernist literature appeared. Furthermore, coupled with the rapid development of the Chinese book industry and the diversification of reading methods, Sun Zhongxu’s translation version emerged in 2007. According to the related reviews and readability

ratings (8.1 - 9.1) of the book in Douban, the largest interest-based reading forum in China, *Catcher* has spread in China on an unprecedentedly large scale ever since. In 2009, this novel (1983 edition) was also selected as the “300 Most Influential Books in 30 Years in China” (China Publishing Group).

5. Translation of *Catcher* in China

Damrosch maintains that “world literature is writing gains in translation” (281), and “works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range” (289). Translation is not only the cornerstone for world literature but also the only approach to lead national literature to cross the language barrier and circulate in the realm of world literature and ultimately recognized by readers. Without translation, world literature may not exist. In this sense, world literature is composed of translations, which are highly mixed and symbiotic works combining the source culture with the target culture.

5.1. The Translation Process of *Catcher* in China

With the acceleration of cultural globalization and increasingly frequent cultural exchanges, cross-cultural translation plays a progressively important role in world literature. It introduces foreign culture into national culture through language conversion and cultural reproduction, and the interaction based on “the two foci generate an elliptic space within which a literary work lives as world literature” (283). In this way, cross-cultural translation is not only the translation of language but also intercultural communication based on distinct cultures.

Before the implementation of reform and opening up policy, the translation of American literature in mainland China has generally undergone “rewriting” represented by new textual construction and in-depth interpretation of the original texts, partly resulting in the broad scale of reconstruction of American literature in the Chinese context. Shi Xianrong initially translated the novel for restricted circulation and internal criticism in 1963, however, due to the limitation of circulation at this stage, it didn’t exert massive influence in China. The economic growth and political awakening since the late 1970s triggered the diversity of ideology among Chinese people and gradually changed the situation. Numerous people aspired to read literary works that could comfort them so that publishers began to introduce a wide range of modern western literature and philosophy to satisfy the spiritual needs of readers, the 1983 version of *Catcher* then emerged.

The historicity of literary translation determines that there are multiple translation versions of the source texts, therefore, retranslation is definitely reasonable and inevitable (Shan, 2012). As the new century progressed, coupled with the more intense intercultural communication and reading methods changing, Sun’s version was published by Yilin Press in 2007, which marks a new round of prevalence of the novel in China.

5.2. Sublimation and Loss in Translation

According to philosophical hermeneutics, translation is carried out in but also limited by specific historical backgrounds and cultural tradition (George, 2008). As the limited accessibility to foreign cultures and less positive attitude towards bourgeois culture in the 1960s China, Shi's version tends to be literal translation in faithful conformity with the source language. However, with the enhancement of Chinese comprehensive national strength and higher acceptance of foreign culture among readers, Sun tends to adopt free translation based on the source culture and Chinese culture simultaneously. For example, in "He always says, 'Try this for size, and then he'd goose the hell out of you while you are going down the corridor. That stuff's sort of flitty. That's it.'" (Salinger, 2001: p. 91) Shi's version is "他总是说, '这事儿你可以实地干一下试试。'当你走到走道上的时候, 他还会在你后面呵痒。这些玩艺儿有搞同性恋的意思。一点都不假" (Salinger, 2010), while Sun translated it as "他常在你经过走廊时说。'试试', 然后你捣弄你的敏感部位。这种事儿有点同性恋的意思, 没错就是这样。" (Salinger, 2007) In fact, homosexuality was still unacceptable to the majority of Chinese then. Taking the readers' expectations into consideration, Shi omits many details of the dialogue. With the tremendous social changes in the new millennium, Chinese readers' acceptance aesthetics changes accordingly. There is no need for Sun to worry about the homosexuality taboo today so that he chooses to translate the dialogue as it is. It is obvious that Sun version is freer and the former tends to be reserved and literal, virtually indicating the leading distinction between the both. However, despite a few losses of source language derived from the social limitation, the two translation versions definitely contributed to the spread of the novel at the time.

However, there are still some unexpected legacies from the former intercultural translations. According to the statics from Douban, an interest-based reading website with the largest user base in China, the study finds that the popularity of *Catcher* among young people is mostly due to the attraction of the word "catcher" in the Chinese context. The word "守望" in Chinese derives from Mencius Teng Wen Gong I:

"In the fields of a district, those who belong to the same nine squares render all friendly offices to one another in their going out and coming in, aid one another in keeping watch and ward, and sustain one another in sickness" (James, 2011).

In Chinese, "catcher" means watch, wait, and hope, while "catcher" in English literally refers to the player who stands behind the batter and catches the ball if he or she does not hit it or a person, or an entity that catches something, which means, the "catcher" in *Catcher* may be the "master" of life who is dedicated to controlling and mastering one's life. More specifically, in the novel, the "catcher" means a person who "stands by the rye to prevent children from falling from the "cliff" (107). But for Chinese readers, the translated word "守望" represents a sort of continuous and inspiring hope, expectation and yearning for the future

and unknown beauty. At the 15th anniversary of the publication of the translation version of *Catcher* in 2013, Shi Liang (son of Shi Xianrong) recalled his father and mentioned that his father had initially intended to translate “catcher” as “看守人”, but after he saw a watchman who was responsible for the lighthouse in a book, he decided to change it to “守望者”. Shi Liang noted: “my father thought that the theme of *Catcher* was not only what some scholars called the ‘anti-ethic’, but also the critique for the false reality. The theme therefore contains some sort of salvation significance” (China Weekly 83). In other words, the “catcher” here is actually a “guardian” or a “savior” who saves people from adversity in English. But for Chinese readers, the “catcher” here is a “dreamer” or “one who bears beautiful expectations for the future”. Coincidentally, such reconstruction has led *Catcher* to be a classic over decades.

Another possible explanation for the similar misinterpretation of “catcher” in China rooted in the stable cultural image (Liang, 2009). Once a cultural image is formed, it is relatively stable and inevitably restricts people’s reading, understanding and interpretation of future texts, as Damrosch noted, “works continue to bear the marks of their national origin even after they circulate into world literature” (283). Based on what they have learned about America before, Chinese readers choose to believe that the word “catch” comes from people’s yearning and longing for the future. The optimism here is also probably related to the well-known “American Dream” which believes that everything is possible as long as you work hard, even if you are temporarily struggling.

From all above, it can be drawn that the widespread circulation and reception of the novel may stem from the beautiful misunderstanding caused by translation recreation and cultural distinctions, in this sense, Chinese readers may partly ignore or misunderstand the very meaning of “catcher” in English but lead to the unexpected sublimation of the theme in the Chinese context.

6. Intercultural Interpretation of *Catcher*

The relationship between world literature and reading mode is another aspect that Damrosch attaches great importance to. He maintains that “world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (281). According to Damrosch, literary works derive from different historical and cultural backgrounds, only if readers are familiar with the cultural context of the literary works can they better understand them; and when a literary work is read outside its motherland, it attracts new audiences and gains regeneration. Thus, intercultural reading and communication across time and space are indispensable for contemporary world literature.

6.1. The Canonization of *Catcher* in China

For the definition of literary classics, Damrosch studies the papers from 1964 to 2003 published by the American Modern Language Association to find that the

scope of world literature classics has expanded over eras, while the status of the former classic writers is stable as before. Based on these findings, Damrosch firstly proposed that the study of world literature has entered a threefold structure model, namely hypercanon, countercanon and shadowcanon, replacing the binary model composed of “mainstream writers” and “non-mainstream writers” which presents two categories of literary works: classic and non-classic (43).

The creation of hero image has long been a tradition in western literature. However, with the emergence of western realist literature, the deconstruction of traditional western heroes gradually begins and the “anti-hero” in postmodern literature appears. Holden in *Catcher* does not embody the characteristics of a hero who is generally courageous and selfish to save civilians from adversity, on the contrary, he is always depressed and rebellious to denounce the ubiquitous hypocrisy in society, more specifically, an “anti-hero” in a countercanon (Damrosch, 2006). It's apparent that such anti-heroes are not in conformity with traditional Chinese culture. However, since the 1980s, *Catcher* has unexpectedly been listed as a classic through the acceptance of Chinese mass readers and scholars who find that Holden is rebellious and cynical in mind and behavior, but also embodies the personality of an “anti-hero”: innocence, benevolence and ideal pursuit for beauty. Although it seems that the protagonist is inconsistent with people's general cognition of heroes, he has uttered what others mute and has pioneered the way others haven't gone before—fleeing from his neighborhood. That's probably the very reason why Chinese of different ages queue up to read the novel: they surprisingly develop great empathy with Holden, the boy who shares the same sentiment about the world with them. In this way, Holden has been the embodiment of mass readers' hero in the real world.

In the late 1980s, Xu Zidong (1988) insists that “there are three foreign idols in contemporary Chinese youth literature: Pavel Korshgin in Nicola Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, Julien Soher in *Red and Black*, and Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*” (53). These figures not only exert massive influence on the literary creation of Chinese young writers but also revive in numerous Chinese novels to nurture and transform Chinese literature and trigger countless Chinese young people's interests in culture and literature. Two years after *Catcher* was initially published by Lijiang Press in 1983, the first wave of Chinese modernist novels exemplified by Liu Suola's *You Have No Choice* and Xu Xing's *No Theme Variations* that were deeply influenced by western modernist literature appeared, which were regarded as milestones in the history of contemporary Chinese literature. Critics then pointed out that the two novels, which show certain characteristics of postmodernism and express the absurdity of human existence, were directly influenced by *Catcher* for the similar structure construction and emotional expression (Chen, 1988: p. 58). Liu also acknowledged frankly that he was influenced by *Catch-22* and *Catcher*. Meanwhile, *No Theme Variation* is considered to be a more explicit imitation of *Catcher* with the narrative of hypocrisy and indignity as well as the utilization of profanity as *Catcher*. Fur-

thermore, inspired by Holden, Mai Jia, the winner of the 7th Mao Dun Literature Prize, even changed his name to “Mai Jia” (similar pronunciation as catcher) as his pseudonym and wrote in Holden’s tone ever since. In this way, Zhu Wei observed that “Salinger’s influence on Chinese writers in the 1980s was millions of ‘Xu Xing’” (The Beijing News). These contemporary literary works influenced by *Catcher* have greatly expanded the reputation of the novel, contributing to its literary classic status in China.

6.2. Chinese Readers’ Horizon of Expectation

Accepting aesthetics argues that the essence of artistic work could not be obliterated by investigation and criticism (Zhu, 2004). On the contrary, readers should regard literary works as a dialectical process of production and acceptance in which the education and entertainment effects of literature could be achieved and the works regain vitality as well. If readers are pretty active in this process, writers will certainly gain momentum for literary creation, in this sense, the acceptance of literature is not only restricted by the work itself but also influenced by the readers. From the production to reading by readers, foreign literary works have to go through the process of creation, translation and reading. Although readers are not directly involved in the process of production and translation, as the final phase of literary production and consumption, they participate in the recreation of literary works in their unique ways. Since the 1960s, *Catcher* has been introduced into China for more than 50 years. Due to the phasic social condition and readers’ aesthetic cognition changes, the research of the novel shows distinct stages of literary acceptance.

In the 1980s, *Catcher* was finally accessible to Chinese mass readers. However, research on the novel did not exceed the simple superficial introduction and analysis until the end of the 1980s. On the one hand, numerous scholars and readers felt bewildered to analyze and excavate the deep significance of the novel because of its oral and coarse utterances. On the other hand, it originated from the limited social environment of China at that time, which directly affected readers’ aesthetic acceptance and values. As Zhu Liyuan (2004) observed: literature acceptance is virtually a social cognitive activity, and the aesthetic cognition formed in the reading process is ultimately a kind of social cognition. At the end of the last century, China was striving to explore a new developmental pathway and the whole society is partly in a midst of new chaos. Therefore, the main theme of literature then appears to pursue consistent social progress and realistic texts with inspiration and educational significance. Therefore, the rebellious descriptions in *Catcher* are incompatible with the Chinese social condition then, and it is reasonable that *Catcher* is not an instant big hit in China.

Reader’s horizon of expectation is another pivotal concept of acceptance aesthetics proposed primarily by Jauss who believes that the horizon of expectation refers to the reader’s mind orientation or antecedent structures formed by their previous literary reading experience. Readers’ preceding life experiences, aes-

thetic tastes, knowledge, etc., form the appreciation requirements for literary works. He also first divided readers' expectations into directed expectations and creative expectations. The former is a pre-established schema from readers' previous reading or life experience with which readers could quickly be identified with a literary work. If the content exceeds the readers' directed expectations, it will stimulate them to overcome the understanding barriers to satisfy their creative expectations for new knowledge. Therefore, on the one hand, the expectation horizon of aesthetic experience prescribes readers' aesthetic selection and aesthetic orientation rather than simply passively accepting new information; on the other hand, it breaks the tradition and transforms readers' horizon structures to accept different even opposite messages in literary works.

Influenced by Confucianism, which is the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture, the main literary images in traditional Chinese literature have generally been decent. However, as the new century progresses, Chinese readers tend to realize that they have grown up in a relatively conventional and restricted way so as to prefer literary works about growth, trauma, and education. Consequently, Holden's rebellious personality is definitely a fascinating feast for Chinese readers and the theme of growth also meets the literary aesthetic expectation of numerous Chinese readers. According to reader reviews from Douban and similar reading platforms, the reason why Chinese readers could accept the American best-selling novel is that the novel is undoubtedly warm, touching, and healing, reflecting many existing social issues represented by family, growth, and loneliness, etc., which are also the problems that emerging China is facing. In this sense, it is the cultural similarities that lead Chinese readers and American readers, and even readers all over the world to be deeply touched by the novel.

7. Conclusion

In recent years, discussions on world literature have expanded the horizons of translation studies and literature in the world. Based on Damrosch's concepts of world literature and literary classics, national literature could not become world literature until it has gone through circulation, translation, and then read by readers worldwide. Based on this study, it is found that the spread of *Catcher* in China has gone through three distinct stages, coinciding with the social economic condition and the subsequent individual accepting aesthetics changing in China from the 1960s to the 21st century. Moreover, the dissemination experience of *Catcher* in socialist China will serve to help overcome the barriers encountered by national literature stepping into the world literature realm and promote the widespread of national literature and culture abroad. Further research is needed to investigate the reception difference between *Catcher* and other western literary works, as well as the spread of national literature in the world.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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