



A Literature Review on the Studies of *Four Generations Under One Roof* and its English Translation

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Abstract

Based on the statistics of the studies on the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof* (《四世同堂》) published in China from 2000 to 2022, this paper discusses the current status of the research from the following five aspects with a literature review of the key papers: general introduction, studies on the original text and English translation, studies on the translator and the translation mode, studies on the communication of the work, and studies on back-translation. Finally, suggestions and prospects for further research are also presented.

Key words: *Four Generations under One Roof*; English translation; Literature review; Suggestions

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Lao She, also known as Shu Qingchun or Sheyu, was an accomplished modern writer who produced a wide range of notable works of fiction, dramas, and prose, etc. In his lifetime, he wrote over a thousand works, including *Camel Xiangzi*, *Four Generations Under One Roof*, *Longxugou*, and *Teahouse*. At the same time, literary translations of Lao She's works have a significant impact on Chinese culture's international communication. Lao She's writings have been translated and studied the most internationally among Chinese modern writers (Zhu Chunfa, 2012). This paper focuses on domestic research on the English translation of Lao She's classic masterpiece, *Four Generations under One Roof*. It is evident that translation

of Lao She's literary works has made a significant contribution to cultural dissemination, which has also been one of the hot academic topics.

I. INTRODUCTION TO *FOUR GENERATIONS UNDER ONE ROOF* AND ITS ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Four Generations under One Roof has set the story in Beijing during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), depicting the hardships of ordinary life, as Lao She based the story on the real-life experiences of his wife, Hu Jieqing, who had lived in Beijing during that period. The novel, divided into three parts: "Confusion", "Stealing Life", and "Famine", was mostly based on the Qi family's four generations, supplemented by the various other people's life stories in Xiaoyanjuan Hutong, which was a genuine portrayal of the distorted world in Beijing during the war. Lao She, the author, has also commented that *Four Generations under One Roof* was the longest and probably the finest piece he has ever written during his writing career. It is a realistic masterpiece in which Lao She has depicted the war against Japan while eulogizing the tremendous patriotic sentiments of the Chinese people.

The original composition process of *Four Generations under One Roof* has also implied its later overseas translation and communication. Lao She had finished two-thirds of the novel by the time the war was ended and had it published and distributed in China. Cao Yu and Lao She were invited by the American government to visit the United States in 1946 for cultural exchange. A year later Cao Yu returned to China, while Lao She continued his writing and translation work in the United States, and he completed "Famine", the third part of *Four Generations under One Roof*. At that time, Lao She's novels, *Li Hun* and *Camel Xiangzi* had been translated into English. However, because the translations by Evan King had

severely distorted the spirit and storyline of the original work, it has taken Lao She a whole year for the copyright lawsuit. After that, Lao She paid special attention to the translation of his own works, and then he co-translated several of his own works, including *Four Generations under One Roof*.

The co-translator of *Four Generations under One Roof* with Lao She was Ida Pruitt, an American writer and translator, who was recommended by Pearl S. Buck. Ida Pruitt, the eldest daughter of an American Baptist missionary family, was born in 1888 in Huang County, Shandong Province. She grew up in China and were particularly familiar with Chinese cultural elements. She could speak Chinese well, especially the Shandong dialect as well as native, but she could not read Chinese characters. As a result, the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof* was a unique process in that Lao She himself had to read it to Ida Pruitt orally, and then Ida Pruitt would translate the Chinese she heard into English. According to Ida's letters to her friends, Lao She did not read the manuscript word by word; sometimes he omitted two or three sentences, and sometimes he omitted an entire paragraph. Therefore, the English translation was not translated word by word, but was first abridged by Lao She, and then abridged again by the publisher before publication. This translation was published by Harcourt Brece in the United States as *The Yellow Storm* in 1951 after Lao She's return to China.

After Lao She's return to China in 1949, the third part of *Four Generations under One Roof*, "Famine", was serialized in *Novel Monthly*, which, however, had only twenty chapters and 130,000 words, with thirteen chapters and nearly ten thousand words less than planned, that is to say, what readers can get wasn't the complete version of the novel. Although in the 1980s, Ma Xiaomi translated the last 13 paragraphs from *The Yellow Storm* (the abridged English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof*), his translation was also revised on the premise of retaining the synopsis of the story, which did not exactly reproduce the original story. In 2014, Zhao Wuping, vice president of Shanghai Translation Publishing House, discovered the full English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof* in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, as well as correspondence, notes, cards, and first drafts related to the translation and publication process. After studying the materials, he discovered that the full English translation of "Famine" by Ida Pruitt had nine more chapters than that of *The Yellow Storm*, and while the story outline was similar, but the richness of the plot and the colorful language allowed for a more complete presentation of Lao She's literary style. Zhao Wuping back-translated the unpublished paragraphs 21-36 of "Famine", which totalled for more than one hundred and seven thousand words, and published it in 2017. It is a completion of *Four Generations under One Roof*, an event of great significance for Lao She studies.

In the same year, the People's Literature Publishing House invited Bi Bingbin, a famous author and translator, to back-translate the missing parts of the Chinese text based on the full English translation as well, and the translated texts were published in June 2018.

2. CURRENT RESEARCH STATUS ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *FOUR GENERATIONS UNDER ONE ROOF*

In order to understand the current research status on the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof*, the author searched on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) using the keywords "*Four Generations under One Roof*" and "English translation", and 32 related papers were selected from after eliminating irrelevant documents. And 31 papers related to the topic were retrieved from Wanfang Database, among which 20 papers were duplicated. Then a total of 43 papers was finally selected, which include: 8 master's theses, 2 doctorate theses, 29 journal papers, 2 conference papers, and 2 other papers. The statistics on the types of papers can be seen in Figure 1.

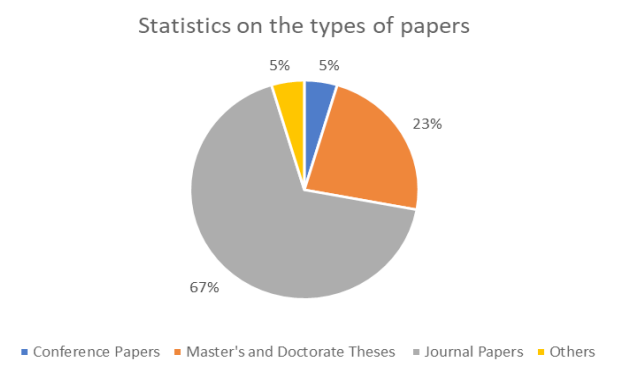


Figure 1
Statistics on the types of papers

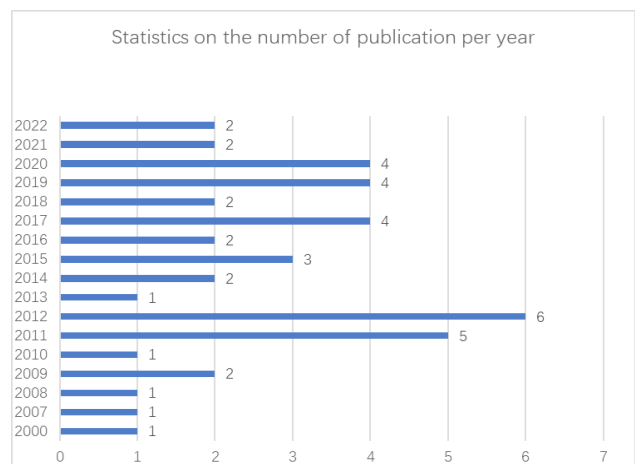


Figure 2
Statistics on the number of publication per year

According to the statistics on the number of publications per year (see Fig. 2), it can be seen that up to 2010, there were relatively few studies on this area in China, with one or two papers published every year; between 2011 and 2012, there is a small peak in this area, with 11 papers published, accounting for 25.6% of total papers; from 2013 to the present, the topic have maintained a certain degree of heat and the number of publication per year tends to be stable. Through the analysis of these publications, it is clear that the research mainly focuses on the generation introduction, translation strategies, and back-translation phenomena, but in general, the research is still very insufficient.

3. STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *FOUR GENERATIONS UNDER ONE ROOF*

By reviewing these 43 relevant papers, the author classified them into five categories: general introduction, studies on the original text and its translation, studies on translator and translation mode, studies on the communication of the work, and studies on back-translation. In the following, the key papers of these five categories of studies will be discussed one by one in the following sections:

3.1 General Introduction

Of the 43 papers, those which focus on research overviews were grouped under this category.

Deng Rui (2014) offered an overview review of studies on the English translation of the novel, analyzing the main content and characterization of the work through a review of the work, and pointing out the distinctive application of direct translation in the translation through a detailed study. Some studies also function as panoramic studies on the English translation of Lao She's works as a whole, for example, Li Yue (2010:4) classified the English translation of Lao She's works from the perspectives of the translator, publisher, and the content of the translation respectively; In 1951, Lao She revised *Four Generations under One Roof* and translated it into English with the American translator Ida Pruitt, renaming it *The Yellow Storm*, which is an abridged version from the perspective of its content. Li Yue (2012) also pointed out that this cooperation mode of author-translator translation deserves some further studies.

3.2 Studies on Original Text and its Translation

One of the most important elements of the present study is the comparative studies on the original text of *Four Generations under One Roof* and its English translation, with a total of 11 papers working on it, including 7 master's theses. The translation process, modifications to manuscript versions, and translation methodologies are the key study topics.

Lots of studies have looked into the translation process of *Four Generations under One Roof*, such as Liu Hongtao (2007), who explored the process of how this novel mutated into the current translation in the context of culture communication, analyzing the efforts of the original author Lao She in cross-cultural communication, as well as the artistic re-creation of the translator Ida Pruitt's unique translation style.

The discovery of the full version English translation of this novel by Zhao Wuping, in 2014 and the completion of the Chinese text through back-translation is a major progress to the relative studies, and a number of studies have followed this significant progress, such as Chen Juncheng (2019), who discussed from the perspective of the sociology of translation and took the translation manuscripts as the research object to analyze the process of translation and mediation.

It is also worth noting that some studies have been zoomed on the linguistic strategies of translation, such as analyzing the features of dialogue translations through the perspective of register (Shen Chen, 2011), comparing and analyzing original works and translations from the perspective of comparative stylistics (Zhang Lulu, Cao Yimin, 2015), and analyzing the features of translation through the perspective of field (Han Heming, 2018), but in general, the number of studies in this part is still insufficient, and there is still more room for future exploring.

3.3 Studies on Translator and Translation Mode

Four Generations under One Roof's distinctive translation technique is a rare occurrence in the translation of Chinese literary works, and it demands further attention. This section has been addressed in six translation research studies so far.

Some studies focused on the uniqueness of the co-translation mode, such as Zhang Man (2015), who pointed out that Lao She and Ida Pruitt adopted a split collaboration to complete the English translation of the novel, with Lao She rewriting the original text and Ida Pruitt translating the rewritten version she had heard into English. Although Ida's translation adopted unique direct translation methods, this way of translation has created an opportunity for cross-culture communication. For example, Wei Shaohua (2011) analyzed the impact of Ida Pruitt's unique direct translation on the English translation, emphasizing the importance of the translator's concept of national equality and anti-colonial attitude; Wang Menglin (2017) also analyzed Ida Pruitt's translation through book titles, culture-loaded words, idioms, and colloquialisms, all of which were influenced by the translator's subjectivity. However, this section of the study is primarily descriptive research, and more theoretical perspectives could be added in future studies.

3.4 Studies on the Communication of the Novel

As a typical case of Chinese literature “going global”, Lao She’s works, as a more successful case of translation and mediation in Chinese modern literature, have also received some attention from scholars, and five translation research papers have discussed this aspect.

Some studies, such as Liu Zenglin (2020) and Yu Wei (2020), focused on the overall situation of overseas communication of Lao She’s works, using the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof* as an example to explore Lao She’s writing of Chinese stories in the United States. Some studies focused more on specific aspects, such as Zhou Hailin (2021), who analyzed the translation strategies reflected in the translation of Lao She’s *Divorce* and *The Yellow Storm* from the viewpoint of the readership, and proposed an effective translation strategy that has put the needs of readers first in order to promote Chinese literature “going global”. Wei Shaohua (2016) analyzed the influence of Lao She’s media experience in London on his work’s translation, and how that has prompted him to construct an initial sense of national image communication.

3.5 Studies on Back-Translation

Zhao Wuping, vice president of Shanghai Translation Publishing House, discovered the full English translation of the novel in 2014 and prompted the completion of the Chinese text through back translation, after which the People’s Literature Publishing House invited Bi Bingbin, famous author and translator, to carry out another back-translation, which contributed to the completeness of *Four Generations under One Roof*. After that, the back-translation of the novel has been studied, and six translation papers have been published in this area.

By comparing the two back-translated versions, Fu Guangming and Xia Yushan (2022) point out in their study that a single translation strategy has its limitations under the cultural back-translation perspective by analyzing the different translation strategies the two versions have adopted and pointing out their respective characteristics and weaknesses. Xia Yushan (2011) also conducted an in-depth and systematic comparison of the translation strategies of the two versions of back-translations through a cross-cultural perspective. At present, the comparison of the two back-translated versions is mainly conducted through the linguistic level, and there is still more room for improvement for future studies in this area.

4. TENTATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

From the above analysis, it is quite evident that the research on the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof* has made some significant progress in recent years, with the number of papers published in this scope

constantly increasing, and including 10 master’s theses on the subject. However, there are still some limitations and shortcomings in current research, and the following are some tentative suggestions for future studies in this area.

4.1 Expanding the Breadth and Depth of Future Studies in This Area

At present, the majority of the papers mainly concerned with linguistic comparisons of original and translated texts, translation strategies analysis, and back-translation comparisons. A clear limitation is the single research perspective of traditional linguistics. Most of the studies focus solely on comparing different translations, confined themselves to the comprehension of specific words and translations, and then discussing the reproduction of styles, etc. It is rather difficult to see any breakthroughs from this perspective, and the content is repetitious, with few innovative research results. Therefore, more researchers are needed to carry out in-depth and systematic research on the subject.

4.2 Applying Diversified Research Methods in Future Studies in This Area

The majority of the studies are written from the perspective of translation theory, such as from the perspective of linguistics, and adopt a descriptive research method. And some papers have used a comparative research method for version comparing and analysis. However, it is clear that the existing study methodologies are severely constrained. Many theories and methodologies in the domains of literature, linguistics, and translation have not been employed to assess and guide the studies on the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof*, and most studies only use a single study viewpoint. Furthermore, we may absorb and learn from research perspectives and methods both at home and abroad, particularly overseas research methods, and completely comprehend the current research methods for the study of its English translation.

4.3 Strengthening With Modern Techniques, Such as the Corpus

More scholars are needed to work on the construction of parallel corpora of English-Chinese translations and the construction of digital comparisons of different translations, which is a common and widely used way to conduct translation research recently, thanks to the advancement of computer technology and the popularity of the Internet. However, based on the foregoing study, it is obvious that no previous research has used this strategy in the English translation of *Four Generations under One Roof*. This will be another viable approach to conduct future investigations in this field. The study of Internet-assisted English translation is a relatively young topic that needs to be researched by more individuals.

In conclusion, as the study of Chinese literature in translation expands, research into the English translation

of *Four Generations under One Roof* will undoubtedly raise global awareness of Chinese literature and culture. This necessitates more researchers devoting their time to research on the subject and promoting cross-cultural communication of modern Chinese literature throughout the world.

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