

Rural Literature of Shaanxi and Its International Projection: Translation, Circulation, and Reception

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Abstract

Within the broader internationalization of Chinese culture, the rural literature of Shaanxi constitutes a distinctive corpus characterized by ethnographic density, the centrality of agrarian landscapes, and a stylistic profile shaped by local dialect and communal structures. Despite its literary and cultural value, its presence in global publishing circuits remains uneven: translation catalogues show incomplete language coverage, fragmented trajectories, and a dissemination pattern that combines state-led initiatives, academic endeavors, and—more recently—commercial platforms such as Amazon Crossing. This article offers a synoptic account along three axes—translation, circulation, and reception—across Anglophone, Francophone, and Japanophone contexts. Drawing on publication data and reader reviews from platforms such as Goodreads, Babelio, and Bookmeter, the analysis identifies a shift of regime from an initial “institutional outbound” model to a more recent “platformization” that increases visibility but does not, by itself, resolve language-coverage gaps or deficits in cultural mediation. It argues that consolidating the international projection of Shaanxi’s rural literature requires strengthening co-translation teams, diversifying media formats, and designing reader-oriented contextualization strategies so that these works can function as robust intercultural bridges.

Keywords

Shaanxi
Chinese rural literature
literary translation
international circulation
comparative reception

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1. Introduction

In the context of cultural globalization and China’s national “going-out” strategy, literature has assumed a central role in shaping national image and fostering intercultural understanding. Since the late twentieth century, a range of translation programs has sought to introduce to foreign audiences both established authors and regional writers whose work reflects the

country’s cultural diversity. Within this panorama, the rural literature of Shaanxi occupies a prominent place, articulating a narrative universe in which historical memory, social transformation, and the linguistic richness of China’s northwest coexist^[1].

Authors such as Chen Zhongshi, Lu Yao, and Jia Pingwa have produced novels that, while deeply rooted in local realities, interrogate processes of universal

scope: the disintegration of rural communities, tensions between countryside and city, and the struggle for upward mobility. Works such as *Bailuyuan* (*White Deer Plain*), *Ren sheng* (*Life*), and *Qinqiang* (*The Shaanxi Opera*) have become landmarks of the contemporary canon. Their international circulation, however, has been uneven: whereas *Ren sheng* has versions in English, Russian, French, and Japanese, *Bailuyuan* still lacks a complete English translation, a fact that has sparked debate among critics^[2].

The case of *Qinqiang* is even more complex, as its dialectal and cultural elements pose a genuine challenge for translators and condition its reception abroad. Recent studies show that the absence of explanatory paratexts and mediation strategies has weakened the transfer of its cultural density^[3]. A similar dynamic emerges with *Ren sheng*, whose international trajectory has been examined as exemplary of the dilemmas faced by Chinese rural novels when reaching new readerships, oscillating between cultural fidelity and readability for foreign audiences^[4].

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the translation, circulation, and reception of Shaanxi's rural literature in international contexts. Unlike studies focused solely on the "challenges of cultural adaptation," the approach adopted here considers the full process of internationalization—from the production of translations to market diffusion and the ways in which foreign readers construct meaning from these texts. This perspective makes it possible to identify both achievements and persistent gaps, and to propose strategies that can strengthen the international projection of this literary tradition.

2. Translation and International Circulation

The internationalization of Shaanxi's rural literature has unfolded in successive phases shaped by political conjunctures, editorial decisions, and transformations in the global market. In its early stages—the 1980s and 1990s—translations were driven primarily by cultural-diplomacy projects: a few versions appeared in European and Asian languages, but with limited print runs and little continuity, which reduced their medium-term impact.

A second phase opened with niche editions in Japan and France. The Japanese translation of *Bailuyuan* (1996) is a key case: although it attracted attention in specialized circles, critics have underscored the loss of cultural imagery and the problematic handling of dialectal and ritual markers, which curtailed the work's resonance among the broader Japanese reading public^[5].

Against this backdrop, a symbolic fact stands out: *Bailuyuan* still lacks a complete English translation^[2]. This absence is explained not only by the work's cultural density and stylistic complexity but also by contractual constraints that blocked its release into other Western languages, as documented in recent Chinese criticism.

A third phase corresponds to the twenty-first century and is characterized by the emergence of global platforms and commercial imprints (e.g., Amazon Crossing). The publication of *Ren sheng* in English (2019) and *Qinqiang* (2023) marked a shift in model: print and digital distribution now coexist, and circuits of visibility and recommendation within reading communities are activated immediately. However, greater visibility does not automatically translate into a deep understanding of cultural referents: reception depends largely on how translators manage peasant lexicon and dialectal features and on whether editions incorporate paratextual mediation devices. In the case of *Ren sheng*, analyses grounded in translator-behavior criticism point to a tilt toward pragmatic domestication strategies, prioritizing clarity and fluency for the target reader (including evidence of solid performance on platforms such as Amazon)^[6].

Beyond individual cases, comparative studies of internationalization routes for Chinese rural fiction—contrasting, for example, the trajectories of Mo Yan and Jia Pingwa—emphasize that outcomes hinge on an assemblage of factors: modes of working with translators, sponsorship, editorial alliances, media promotion, and audience definition. From this perspective, the difficulties of Shaanxi literature are not exceptional but rather part of a structural pattern: when mediation and sustained support are lacking, circulation fragments and insertion into the translated canon remains fragile^[7].

In the realm of translation challenges, *Qinqiang* functions as a proving ground. Recent studies show that carrying over its dialectal register and references to the local opera into English requires fine-grained decisions

of “adaptation and selection” (notes, glossaries, prefaces) so as not to sacrifice cultural density for readability. The framework of eco-translatology describes this balance as a process in which the translator adapts to different ecological constraints (target language, editorial norms, reader expectations) while selecting strategies that retain local color without undermining intelligibility^[3].

In sum, the trajectory of translation and circulation for Shaanxi’s rural literature has moved from an institutional-diplomatic model to an academic-niche model, and finally to a globalized, digital model. In each phase, however, persistent limits remain: gaps in key languages, loss of cultural density in existing versions, dependence on a small number of commercial platforms, and scarcity of paratextual mediation. Overcoming these bottlenecks requires integrated mechanisms that balance cultural fidelity and accessibility, anchoring these works in international markets and reading communities in a sustainable way.

3. Reception in International Contexts

The reception of Shaanxi’s rural literature abroad displays differentiated patterns depending on language communities and media ecosystems. In the Anglophone sphere, the recent entry of *Ren sheng* and *Qinqiang* produced a visibility boost via global-reach imprints/platforms; however, the critical conversation tends to cluster in online fora and reader communities, where readers value the social realism and the “window onto rural China,” yet stumble over dialectal markers, ritual references, and densely ethnographic features. Analyses of large-scale online reviews indicate that, in the absence of robust paratextual mediation, reader debates oscillate between enthusiasm for cultural novelty and difficulty interpreting local signifiers; the result is a “sawtooth” reception more responsive to immediate readability than to cultural depth^[8].

In the case of *Ren sheng*, the cartography of opinions across networks and platforms reveals relatively stable thematic cores: social mobility, the tradition–modernity clash, moral dilemmas, and individual agency. This constellation of themes facilitates identification by general readers, but it coexists with recurrent misunderstandings when the text alludes to communal

practices, ritual kinship, or local speech. Qualitative tracking of discussion threads and quantitative ratings suggests that the acceptance curve improves when editions incorporate mediation devices (prefaces, notes, glossaries) and worsens when these are absent^[9].

Reception of *Qinqiang* in English introduces a complementary problem: its dialectal register and the centrality of the local opera compel translators to negotiate between preserving local color and securing intelligibility. From the perspective of eco-translatology, this tension is described as a process of “adaptation–selection” conditioned by the receiving environment (editorial norms, reader expectations, cultural horizon). Where editions prioritize fluency, readers show greater adhesion, but at the cost of blurring cultural thickness; when local features are preserved, the “strangeness index” rises and paratextual scaffolding becomes crucial to sustain reading^[10].

Shifting the lens to Francophone and Japanophone spaces brings other nuances to the fore. The Japanese translation of *Bailuyuan* fostered academic discussion and found its way into university courses, yet the general readership remained more distant when versions softened or neutralized cultural images and certain localisms, thereby reducing the “imprint of reality” the text carries in Chinese. This asymmetry between academic legitimation and broader readership uptake reappears in European experiences, where Chinese rurality is often read as “documentary” rather than as a situated aesthetics—except when editions are accompanied by cultural maps and reading guides.

To explain why the *same* works elicit such divergent receptions across reading communities, the framework of the manipulation theory is useful: the hypothesis that receiving literary systems “rewrite” texts through norms, dominant poetics, and institutional values. Applied to *Ren sheng*, this perspective illuminates how translation and editorial decisions—especially in treating peasant speech and dialectal markers—configure a “more universal” image of the original, yielding greater accessibility but reduced local density. Evidence from theses and case studies confirms that small microtextual decisions (lexical neutralization, cultural substitutions, suppression of modal particles) *accumulate* and steer reading toward a model of socially oriented fiction that is “globally legible”^[11].

Reception, however, does not depend solely on translation and its paratexts, but also on the architecture of mediation. From the perspective of 译介学 (translation–intermediation as a dual operation), the external circulation of Shaanxi literature requires meshing bridging agents: translators, editors, critics, festivals, book clubs, and educators who “build the bridge” between the text and new communities of meaning. Where the mediation chain is fragmented or overly personalized, reception disperses; where an articulated dispositif exists—press kits, teaching materials, university circuits, public conversations with translators—the work stabilizes and reading gains depth^[12].

This framework even helps reinterpret early attempts to bring *Bailuyuan* into English^[13]: the well-known “test translation” of two chapters revealed not only the difficulty of cultural lexis (e.g., *kang kang*-beds, ritual-kinship terms, proto-toponyms) but also the institutional fragility of mediation at the time; without a sustained editorial project or a network of cultural agents to accompany the work, the draft could not become a reference edition, and Anglophone reception remained on hold.

Finally, an empirical cartography of digital receptions around Jia Pingwa’s novels suggests an operational diagnosis: (a) international readers are sensitive to the authority of recommenders (critics, translators, reading influencers); (b) curatorial paratext (prefaces, glossaries, timelines, kinship maps) measurably affects the persistence of conversation and ratings; (c) enriched editions (digital versions with hyperlinks, audio, and opera music samples) correlate with “longer reads” and lower abandonment. Such findings do not merely describe how Shaanxi is read outside China; they offer levers for intervention to refine future dissemination strategies.

In sum, the international reception of Shaanxi’s rural literature combines sustained interest with challenges of intelligibility. Where mediation and curation fail, a reading of “proximate exoticism” predominates and the conversation quickly loses steam; where interventionist frameworks (译介学), situated translation designs (eco-translatology), and conscious management of rewritings (manipulation) are integrated, reception gains density, discussion is prolonged, and the works begin to secure a

place of their own within receiving literary systems.

4. Challenges and Problems of Translation and Circulation

The internationalization of Shaanxi’s rural literature does not depend solely on the existence of translations. The process faces a series of structural challenges that limit its impact and merit detailed analysis. These problems can be grouped into four principal dimensions: linguistic, cultural, editorial, and reception.

First, the linguistic plane constitutes an evident difficulty. Shaanxi’s narrative is characterized by intensive use of dialects, popular sayings, folk songs, and rural expressions that do not always have clear equivalents in target languages. The temptation to neutralize these elements in order to guarantee readability in international markets often results in a loss of local color. Without dialectal thickness, characters appear homogenized and the work risks diluting the cultural specificity that gives it value. Conversely, an overly literal translation can produce estrangement or even incomprehension among foreign readers. The balance between fidelity and fluency remains an unresolved challenge^[10].

Second, there are cultural barriers. Shaanxi’s literature not only tells the stories of individuals; it also conveys a universe of collective practices—community rituals, kinship systems, religious celebrations, and rural honor codes. In many cases these referents lack immediate counterparts in the receiving culture. If explanatory notes, prefaces, or accompanying materials are absent, readers tend to interpret these elements through their own frameworks, generating misunderstandings or reductionist readings. Hence cultural mediation is not an accessory but a basic condition for enabling the work to engage with foreign publics.

A third set of challenges concerns editorial structures and channels of circulation. For years, the international dissemination of Chinese rural literature depended almost exclusively on institutional projects or individual initiatives. This produced a dispersion of efforts: single editions, limited print runs, and a lack of continuity. The recent entry of platforms such as Amazon Crossing has modified this panorama by offering immediate global distribution and digital versions that expand availability.

However, this opening is not always accompanied by sustained promotional campaigns or strategies for insertion into academic or critical circuits. As a result, visibility may be high at the time of launch but quickly declines, leaving no stable imprint on the international literary field.

Finally, the reception dimension shows its own limits. Even when translations reach foreign readers, the reading experience does not always translate into deep comprehension. The slower narrative tempo, the abundance of characters, and the historical density typical of Shaanxi's works contrast with the expectations of a public accustomed to more linear structures and rapidly resolved plots. This sometimes generates divided reviews: on the one hand, those who appreciate cultural richness and epic breadth; on the other, those who feel disconnected or overwhelmed by excessive contextual information. Added to this fragmentation is the lack of interpretive devices, which limits the likelihood that these novels will circulate beyond a specialized audience.

Taken together, the problems described should not be understood as insurmountable flaws but as critical points that require strategic solutions. The challenge is to articulate mechanisms that preserve cultural authenticity while simultaneously opening spaces of accessibility. This implies rethinking translation as a collective process that involves not only translators but also editors, scholars, and cultural mediators. It also implies designing circulation policies that combine institutional, academic, and commercial pathways, avoiding exclusive dependence on a single model. Finally, it requires recognizing the foreign reader as an active agent whose expectations must be taken into account without renouncing the work's identity-rich texture.

Only through such an integrated perspective can the obstacles currently limiting the international projection of Shaanxi's rural literature be overcome. The challenges are considerable, but so too is the potential of these works to become bridges between cultures and universal testimonies of human experience in the context of rural modernization.

5. Optimization Strategies and Proposals

Given the challenges outlined above, it is essential

to design strategies that strengthen the international projection of Shaanxi's rural literature. These strategies should not be conceived as isolated measures but as an articulated set of actions spanning translation, cultural mediation, editorial circulation, and public promotion. Four principal lines are proposed below.

First, it is crucial to optimize translation models. Experience shows that neither absolute literalism nor full domestication offers satisfactory solutions. To strike a balance, it is advisable to promote co-translation teams that combine the linguistic competence of native target-language translators with the deep cultural knowledge of Chinese specialists. Such teams can ensure both fidelity to local nuances and stylistic fluency. In addition, it would be prudent to develop pre-established treatment protocols for sensitive elements—dialects, folk songs, religious references—so that decisions are not taken ad hoc in each case^[14].

Second, cultural mediation should be reinforced through paratextual and pedagogical resources. The incorporation of glossaries, translator's introductions, explanatory notes, and even visual appendices (maps, family trees, historical timelines) can significantly reduce barriers to comprehension. These tools should not be seen as obstacles to literary enjoyment but as bridges enabling foreign readers to access a dense and complex cultural universe. Likewise, in the digital era there is scope for offering enhanced electronic editions with links to audiovisual materials—songs, photographs, recordings of opera—that intensify the reading experience^[15].

The third strategic line concerns diversifying channels of circulation. Publishing printed translations is not enough: multiple formats should be leveraged, such as ebooks, audiobooks, and—where feasible—screen or stage adaptations. Owing to their strong narrative and visual dimension, works of Shaanxi's rural literature hold considerable potential for documentaries, television series, or theatrical pieces. These products do not replace the literary work, but they enlarge its reach and bring it to broader audiences. Similarly, digital review platforms and reading communities can be integrated into promotion campaigns, encouraging reader participation through virtual book clubs, interviews with translators, or events with specialists.

Finally, audience strategy requires special attention.

Segmenting readerships allows for tailored messaging: critical editions with scholarly apparatus for academic readers; fluent translations with minimal notes for general readers; interactive digital versions or multimedia adaptations for younger audiences. By recognizing audience diversity, Shaanxi's rural literature can avoid remaining confined to specialist circles and reach a wider readership base.

In sum, optimization strategies should aim to transform the current fragmented model into a coherent dissemination ecosystem in which translation, mediation, circulation, and promotion operate in an integrated manner. Only then can the rural voices of Shaanxi secure a stable and meaningful place in the international literary imagination—not as exotic curiosities, but as universal contributions to understanding the human condition.

6. Conclusion

The internationalization of Shaanxi's rural literature is advancing, but in an uneven and fragile manner. Translation is a necessary yet insufficient condition: although *Ren sheng*, *Qinqiang*, and *Bailuyuan* have crossed certain borders, language gaps persist

(emblematically, the absence of a complete English version of *Bailuyuan*). In terms of circulation, the model has shifted from cultural diplomacy to niche academic editions and, more recently, to global platforms; this widens visibility but also generates commercial dependence. In reception, interest in authenticity coexists with difficulties of intelligibility when mediation on dialects, customs, and social structures is lacking.

The challenges are not purely linguistic: there is a deficit of sustained editorial strategies, paratexts and pedagogical materials, and a better fit between the works' potential and reader expectations. Optimization entails: co-translation teams, cultural mediation devices (prefaces, glossaries, guides), format diversification (ebook, audio, adaptations), and sustained cooperation among institutions, publishers, and universities.

In sum, the strength of Shaanxi lies in narrating universal processes from local experience. Converting that potential into durable legibility requires going beyond translation: contextualizing and articulating circulation so that these works are recognized not as regional curiosities but as central contributions to contemporary world literature.

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