

# Research on the Dissemination of Eileen Chang's Self-Translated Novels through Actor-Networks

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**Abstract:** *Eileen Chang is an outstanding representative of 20th-century Chinese literature, and the dissemination of her works in the English-speaking world holds significant value for cross-cultural exchange. The dissemination of her self-translated works is a dynamic process involving multiple participants and collaborative interactions, reflecting the complexity and variability of cross-cultural dissemination of literary works in a globalized context. This paper employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to analyze the mechanisms of translation and dissemination of Eileen Chang's novels in the English-speaking world, focusing on the period around 1996. By closely examining the interactions between translators, publishers, critics, readers, and cultural intermediaries, it reveals how they constructed an effective network to promote cross-cultural dissemination. The study concludes that the actor-network not only facilitated the translation and publication of Chang's works but also significantly enhanced their reception and cultural impact in the English-speaking world. The findings provide new perspectives on understanding the dissemination of literary works in the age of globalization and offer important insights for cross-cultural studies.*

**Keywords:** *Eileen Chang; self-translation; cross-cultural dissemination; actor-network; English-speaking world*

## 1. Introduction

Eileen Chang, hailed by sinologist C.T. Hsia as “the most outstanding writer in contemporary China,”<sup>[1]</sup> occupies a significant position in modern Chinese literary history. Her works enjoy high acclaim domestically and have been translated into various languages, gaining a wide readership internationally. Her works rank prominently in overseas library collections, underscoring their broad and enduring literary influence. The translation and dissemination of Chang's literary works have been a lengthy and profound process, with translations and publications continuing to this day, demonstrating their transcendence of temporal boundaries.

Despite her prolific output, Eileen Chang's works did not immediately gain widespread attention in English-speaking countries. Early on, various constraints—such as cultural differences, translation quality, market acceptance, and the international political and economic environment—limited their popularity. However, her literary works gradually gained recognition in the English-speaking world due to their unique charm and profound connotations. Over time, more scholars and translators began to focus on and study her works, promoting their dissemination and impact in English-speaking countries and beyond.

In the 19th century, while Eileen Chang's novels were widely popular in the Chinese-speaking world, their reception in the English-speaking world was lackluster. One prevailing explanation is that Chang, in her self-translations and adaptations, tried to “cater to English readers' expectations of Chinese themes while hesitating over her own perception of Chinese cultural identity,” leading her to remain on the periphery of the English-speaking world.<sup>[2]</sup> According to Zheng Weiling, the lukewarm reception of Chang's *The Golden Cangue* in Europe and America was influenced by cultural status, political stances, and readers' expectations.<sup>[3]</sup>

During the dissemination of Eileen Chang's self-translated novels in the English-speaking world, translators, publishers, and critics played indispensable roles in shaping the textual value of her works and contributing to their canonization.<sup>[4]</sup> The phenomenon of Chang's novels gaining traction in the English-speaking world in the early 21st century is merely the beginning of a broader understanding of her works. Scholars have analyzed the reasons behind the successful dissemination of her works in the English-speaking world during the 21st century. For instance, Gao Luyi attributes it to Chang's long-

term experience living in Hong Kong and abroad, which gave Western scholars a sense of familiarity, while the exotic settings in her works, especially the urban depictions of Shanghai, offered readers a captivating “Other” reading experience.<sup>[5]</sup> Li Guangrong suggests that the external translation of Chang’s works was driven by three factors: the faithful reproduction of her artistic style, the in-depth exploration of her works’ inner meaning, and the critical role of patrons.<sup>[6]</sup>

These studies delve deeply into the internal and external factors facilitating or hindering the dissemination of Chang’s novels in the Western world, emphasizing the critical roles of translators, authors, and patrons. However, questions remain about how these intermediaries coordinated to advance the translation and dissemination of her works. Additionally, what changes did these intermediaries experience around 1996, and how did these changes lead to a turning point in the dissemination of Chang’s works? To address these questions, this paper adopts a sociological perspective on translation, based on Actor-Network Theory, to analyze the actors and their influence in the translation production process, focusing on the English translation of Chang’s novels. It aims to explore the actor-network and successful strategies underlying the translation and dissemination of her works.

## **2. Theoretical Analytical Tool: Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**

In constructing and operating a series of actor networks, the translation of Chinese literary works can be successfully produced and introduced into the target country's book market. Only through such networks can these works gain recognition within the cultural production domain of the target country, ultimately achieving global literary prominence. Based on this concept and incorporating theories from Bruno Latour and others, this study uses the concept of "translation and dissemination actor-network" to analyze the dissemination of Eileen Chang's works. This concept aims to construct a network model to analyze the entire process of translation and dissemination, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of its intrinsic mechanisms and dynamic changes.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), introduced in the 1980s by French sociologist Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and British sociologist John Law, is a sociological framework. Its core concepts include actors, networks, and translation.<sup>[7]</sup> Actors encompass not only humans but also non-human entities such as technology, machines, and texts, which can influence the actions of other actors. The inclusion of non-human entities in actor networks is an innovative aspect of ANT. Networks are composed of connections between these actors, and since relationships between actors continuously evolve during the production process, the networks themselves are dynamic. Translation describes the coordination of interests among heterogeneous actors, where actors establish connections with others to achieve their own goals, mobilizing them to participate in activities and dissolving these connections when necessary, thereby constructing the network.<sup>[8]</sup> In simple terms, ANT can be understood as the process by which actors involved in social practices are linked and transform roles through translation, forming and operating networks to accomplish social production processes.

Since the 1990s, ANT has been introduced into the field of translation studies, offering a new perspective. Canadian scholar H el ene Buzelin is a pioneer and key representative of ANT-based translation research. She emphasizes that ANT provides conceptual tools and methodologies for studying actors and their relationships in the translation production process. Researchers have identified multiple actors involved in translation production, including human actors such as authors, translators, publishers, editors, designers, reviewers, and readers, as well as non-human actors like translated texts, manuscripts, films, technologies, and ideas. These translation actors, both as individuals and in coordination during translation, form translation actor networks that ensure successful translation production.<sup>[9]</sup>

According to Wang Baorong, the "translation and dissemination actor-network" formed by translation actors involves three stages: "project initiation—translation production—translation dissemination." The successful realization of each stage relies on the construction and operation of actor networks. Therefore, the "translation and dissemination actor-network" can be subdivided into three interrelated sub-networks: "project initiation actor-network," "translation production actor-network," and "translated works dissemination actor-network".<sup>[10]</sup>

### ***2.1. Construction and Operation of the Actor-Network for Eileen Chang’s English Translation and Dissemination***

Given the guidance of Actor-Network Theory in studying the translation production process, this study examines the dynamic construction and operation of the actor-network for Eileen Chang’s English

translations and dissemination. It analyzes the processes through which core actors in the three sub-networks recruit and connect other actors, as well as their relationships, aiming to summarize the strategies for English translations of Eileen Chang's novels before and after 1996.

## **2.2. Construction and Operation of the Project Initiation Actor-Network**

The construction of a project initiation actor-network involves an initiating translation actor who launches the translation project, recruiting related actors to participate in the project, and clarifying their responsibilities and benefits. The smooth construction and operation of this network are marked by the successful signing of a translation contract and the formal establishment of the project.

In the initial stage of a project, building an efficient actor-network is critical. Typically, this is led by a project initiator who launches the translation project and actively attracts experts in the field of translation. Responsibilities and benefits among participants must be clearly defined at the project's outset. The success of the network's construction and operation can be evaluated by whether the translation contract is successfully signed and the translation project formally initiated. Key participants in the English-speaking world's Chinese literary translation and dissemination plans include translators in English-speaking countries, Chinese authors and their overseas agents, Western commercial publishers, and international publishing companies.<sup>[11]</sup>

During the preparation phase of a translation project, several core issues must be resolved. First is the selection of texts, which includes deciding which author's works to translate and choosing the most suitable texts from the author's repertoire. Next is the selection of translators, ensuring their professional level meets the expectations of both the author and the publisher. Finally, selecting publishers capable of bringing the translations to the market is equally critical.

Eileen Chang's works are prolific, ranging from Chinese-language literature to English compositions and self-translated works. The following are her notable English works:

1) *The Golden Cangue*: A self-translated work based on her Chinese novella *Jin Suo Ji*. In translating it into English, Chang not only remained faithful to the literary spirit of the original but also showcased unique artistic charm in terms of language style and narrative techniques. Her translation practice is considered a significant contribution to modern Chinese literature on the global stage.

2) *Chinese Life and Fashions*: A self-translated essay highlighting Chang's agency as a translator. Integrating her creative poetics, intent, and translation, she tailored the text to readers' reception capabilities and needs, featuring prominent "translated writing" characteristics.

3) *The Rice-Sprout Song*: Initially composed in English and later rewritten by Chang into Chinese. It reflects her challenges and efforts in cross-cultural exchange while showcasing her ability to recreate and adapt her works.

4) *Stale Mates*: A short story first published in English and later translated by Chang into Chinese. Comparing the original and translated versions reveals her more refined narrative techniques in the Chinese text.

5) *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*: Chang translated this Qing Dynasty Wu dialect novel into both Mandarin and English. Her translation work contributed significantly to its dissemination and demonstrated her deep expertise in literary translation.

## **2.3. Construction and Operation of the Translation Production Actor-Network**

Self-translation plays a significant role in Eileen Chang's translation activities, spanning her entire creative career. As she stated, "If I can control it, I wouldn't easily entrust the translation of my works to others."<sup>[12]</sup> Works such as *The Rice-Sprout Song*, *The Rouge of the North*, and *Stale Mates* were often published in English before their Chinese versions. In 1968, her self-translated *The Golden Cangue* was included as a teaching material in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University. This marked an important milestone in the academic recognition and attention her works received. Columbia University, being one of the world's top academic institutions, applies high standards to its curriculum choices. The inclusion of *The Golden Cangue* as teaching material indicates its literary value as well as its significance in fields such as modern Chinese literature, translation studies, and cross-cultural communication.

While Chang aspired to become a more renowned writer in the English-speaking world than Lin

Yutang, she did not achieve this ambition before her death in 1995. Multiple factors contributed to this outcome.

From a translation perspective, Liu Shaoming pointed out that Chang's translations exhibited certain characteristics of "bookish English," which might mean her work appeared somewhat academic or bookish rather than colloquial and natural.<sup>[13]</sup> Leo Lee observed that Chang's strict adherence to the original text in her self-translations sometimes led her to use literal or transliterated approaches for Chinese cultural terms and expressions. This approach may have posed challenges for English readers' comprehension and impacted the work's acceptability. Furthermore, Chang's English works retained numerous Chinese linguistic and cultural features, which affected their fluency and naturalness.<sup>[14]</sup> Duan Feng argued that Chang's early extensive self-adaptations might have aimed to address such issues but resulted in diminished literary and cultural heterogeneity, reducing the translated works' effectiveness compared to the originals.<sup>[15]</sup>

From the perspective of ANT, Chang's self-translation was a double-edged sword, with significant dual effects during the translation process. On one hand, as both author and translator, she occupied a unique and central role in the actor-network, allowing her to directly participate in and dominate the "translation" process. Within this network, Chang was not merely a traditional translator but an active actor who could adjust the text to better align with the reception habits and expectations of English-speaking audiences. This seamless integration between textual creation and translation granted her unparalleled freedom, enabling the adapted works to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries more smoothly and resonate with English-speaking readers.

However, this same emphasis on Chinese cultural expressions during translation posed challenges. While these culturally rich elements shone in the original works, they could become barriers to understanding and acceptance during cross-linguistic translation. Readers might require background knowledge and cross-cultural interpretation skills to grasp the nuances, which could inadvertently lead to misinterpretation, diminishing the overall influence and dissemination of her works. As a result, her self-translation partially hindered the penetration of her works into the English-speaking world, limiting the comprehensive and accurate transmission of her literary achievements and intellectual depth to the target audience.

#### ***2.4. Construction and Operation of the Translated Works Dissemination Actor-Network***

From the publishing perspective, Eileen Chang's works were primarily released through overseas publishers. Specifically, her novels were published by academic and research-focused university presses, with a smaller portion issued by independent publishers specializing in feminist and women's literature, such as New York-based women's presses. A notable example is Pantheon Books, under the American Random House Group, which published *Lust, Caution* in 2007, illustrating the interplay between film adaptations and the publishing industry. The dominance of university presses, particularly Columbia University Press, in disseminating her English translations underscores the recognition her works first received in Western Sinology before gaining attention domestically.

Despite the gradual recognition her works attained, Chang's publishing journey was not without setbacks. For instance, her 1955 English novel *The Rice-Sprout Song*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in New York, received a modest reaction in the United States, prompting Chang to continue her English-language creative efforts. In 1956, she expanded her Chinese novella *The Golden Cangue* into the English-language novel *Pink Tears*. Unfortunately, Charles Scribner's Sons rejected this manuscript in 1957. Undeterred, Chang extensively revised the novel but faced another rejection in December 1959. She subsequently adapted the work again, retitling it *The Rouge of the North*, which was published in the United Kingdom in 1967. These persistent efforts reflect her dedication to literary creation and passion for cultural dissemination.<sup>[16]</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, Western society's acceptance of Chinese authors increased significantly. The rise of feminism and cultural pluralism paved the way for Chang's novels in the English-speaking world. Landmark events such as the publication of a special issue by *Traduction* in 1996 and the release of Hui Yi Kong's *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories* in 2000 signaled a new phase in the English dissemination of Chang's works. Furthermore, Ang Lee's film adaptation of *Lust, Caution* accelerated this process, cementing Chang's status as a significant cultural figure in English and American literary circles. Since 2006, English-language publishers have released numerous translations of Chang's works.<sup>[17]</sup>

Film adaptations often enhance the visibility and influence of literary works. For instance, Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution*, based on Chang's novel, gained international acclaim and amplified the global reach

of her translated works. This highlights how adaptations across media platforms expand a work's audience and extend its cultural impact.

### 3. Conclusion

This study, employing Actor-Network Theory (ANT), has explored the complex process of disseminating Eileen Chang's self-translated novels in the English-speaking world. The findings emphasize that the success of her translated works depended on constructing and operating a robust actor-network, consisting of three interrelated sub-networks:

1) Project Initiation Actor-Network: Involving key actors such as Chang and publishers, this network set the foundation for translation projects.

2) Translation Production Actor-Network: In this phase, Chang's self-translations played a central role, supported by editors, critics, and other participants to ensure translation quality.

3) Translated Works Dissemination Actor-Network: This network focused on market promotion and cultural dissemination, engaging marketing teams, literary critics, and readers in active interactions.

The collaboration and division of labor among diverse actors—human and non-human—ensured the effective operation of the actor-network. This case study of Eileen Chang's translations offers valuable insights into the international dissemination of Chinese literature, demonstrating that meticulously constructed and maintained networks can overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to achieve effective cross-cultural communication.

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