

Original Paper

A Study on the Overseas Reception and Translation Strategies of Shuang Xuetao's Works

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Abstract

The challenges of industrial civilization have given rise to a new generation of Northeastern Chinese writers, including Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, and Zheng Zhi. While their works inherit the creative traits of the traditional Northeastern literary group, they also introduce fresh elements into the landscape. Among them, Shuang Xuetao stands out as the first of the “New Northeastern Writers” to gain international attention, signaling the group’s gradual emergence on the global literary stage. This paper focuses on Shuang Xuetao and the English translation of his novella Rouge Street, exploring its reception in the United States and the translation strategies employed. By examining data such as book sales, library holdings, and reader reviews following its U.S. publication, the study assesses the work’s overseas impact. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti’s theories of domestication and foreignization, it further analyzes translator Jeremy Tiang’s cultural adaptation choices. Ultimately, this research aims to offer valuable insights for the international dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature and to broaden its pathways to global readership.

Keywords

Shuang Xuetao’s fiction, Rouge Street, overseas dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature, translation strategies

1. Introduction

Recently, the label “New Northeastern Writers” has sparked widespread discussion within academic circles. Huang Ping (2017, p. 13), through his study of this literary cohort, proposed a new aesthetic paradigm to characterize their work. As a prominent figure among this new wave, Shuang Xuetao has been hailed by critics as a “belated master” for the distinctive literary brilliance showcased in works such as *Moses on the Plain*. In April 2022, Shuang made his U.S. debut with the English translation of his novella collection *Rouge Street*, marking a significant milestone in his international journey. Translated by Singaporean writer and translator Jeremy Tiang and published by Henry Holt, the volume brings together three of Shuang’s novellas—*The Aeronaut*, *Bright Hall*, and *Moses on the Plain*. Upon its release, *Rouge Street* quickly garnered attention from major American media outlets, receiving a wave of critical response. This moment has come to symbolize the entry of contemporary Northeastern literature into the global literary conversation. Meanwhile, English translations of works by Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi—the other two members of “New Northeastern Writers”—are also underway. In this sense, “New Northeastern Literature” has once again drawn the attention of American scholars in Chinese literary studies, echoing the earlier influence of modern Northeastern literature in China. It is evolving into what Huang Ping (2020, p. 173) terms “Northeastern literature of the world”. As the central figure in this phenomenon, Shuang Xuetao not only offers valuable insights into the overseas dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature, but also reflects the latest developments in the study of Northeastern writing. Examining the translation and international circulation of his fiction contributes to a deeper understanding of Chinese literature today and opens up new possibilities for contextualizing Chinese literary experience within a global framework.

2. Translation and Introduction of Shuang Xuetao’s Works

According to incomplete statistics, a total of eight of Shuang Xuetao’s short stories and novellas have been translated and published in English to date.

Table 1. Overview of the Translation and Dissemination of Shuang Xuetao’s Works

Title	Translator	Year	Publication
<i>The Master</i>	Michael Day	2015	<i>Pathlight</i>
<i>Teeter-Totter</i>	Jeremy Tiang	2019	<i>Brick</i>
<i>White bird</i>	Kevin Wang	2020	<i>Asymptote</i>
<i>Rouge Street: Three Novellas</i>	Jeremy Tiang	2022	
<i>Bottlenose</i>	Jeremy Tiang	2022	<i>Asymptote</i>
<i>Bottlenose</i>	Jeremy Tiang	2023	<i>The New Yorker</i>

In 2015, the English translation of Shuang Xuetao's short story *The Master* appeared in the English-language edition of *People's Literature, Pathlight*. Four years later, in 2019, the acclaimed Canadian literary journal *Brick* published *Teeter-Totter*, translated by Jeremy Tiang. In 2020, New York-based writer Kevin Wang translated Shuang's short story *White Bird*, which was featured in the July issue of the international online literary journal *Asymptote*. With their distinctive narrative styles, *Teeter-Totter* and *White Bird* caught the attention of Brian Lax, an editor at Metropolitan Books. The steady appearance of these stories in overseas publications not only sparked interest among international literary enthusiasts but also laid a solid readership foundation for the eventual English publication of *Rouge Street*.

Actually, Shanghai Translation Publishing House has played an active role in promoting Chinese literature abroad, using translation as a bridge to foster cultural exchange. Since launching its International Rights Center in 2021, the publisher has successfully facilitated the sale of foreign rights to *Moses on the Plain*, which was acquired by the Italian independent press Atmosphere Libri. In April 2022, Shanghai Translation Publishing House partnered with Henry Holt, with Metropolitan Books editor Brian Lax playing a key role in bringing Shuang Xuetao's novella collection to an international audience. Following the publication of *Rouge Street*, Shuang's short story *Bottlenose* appeared in the October 2022 issue of *Astra Magazine*, an international literary journal under the U.S.-based Astra Publishing House. The issue featured the story in both Chinese and English, accompanied by original illustrations by artist Jia Sung. Soon after, in October 2023, Shuang's short story *Heart*, translated by Jeremy Tiang, was published in the *New Yorker*. That issue also included an in-depth interview conducted by Dennis Zhou, which explored the creative background behind *Heart*. Today, alongside Shuang Xuetao, other members of the "New Northeastern Writers" such as Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi are also gaining visibility overseas, with translation and publication projects steadily underway. Together, these developments signal the growing presence of contemporary Northeastern Chinese literature on the global literary stage.

3. Analysis of the Overseas Reception of *Rouge Street*

3.1. Library Holdings and Sales

According to a search of the WorldCat database, the English translation of *Rouge Street* is held in 308 libraries across nine countries and regions worldwide, indicating a modest yet notable presence in global library collections. Geographically, the United States accounts for the vast majority of holdings, reflecting an uneven distribution across the globe. Specifically, approximately 91% of the libraries that carry the book are located in the U.S., while Canada and Australia account for around 3% and 2% (See <https://search.worldcat.org/zh-cn/formats-editions/1372471037>). In contrast, library holdings in regions such as Hong Kong (China), New Zealand, Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Singapore

remain very limited. In November 2022, *The New Yorker* included *Rouge Street* on its annual list of recommended reads, alongside two other Chinese works: *Barefoot Doctor* by Can Xue and *The Wedding Party* by Liu Xinwu.

Table 2. Library Holdings of Three Chinese Works Included in *The New Yorker*

Title	Author	Publisher	Translator(s)	Number of Editions	Library Holdings
<i>Barefoot Doctor</i>	Can Xue	Yale University Press	Karen Gernmart, Chen Zeping	3	251
<i>The Wedding Party</i>	Liu Xinwu	Amazon Crossing	Jeremy Tiang	1	272
<i>Rouge Street</i>	Shuang Xuetao	Henry Holt & Co.	Jeremy Tiang	6	308

Compared to the other two Chinese literary works published around the same time, *Rouge Street* has the highest number of editions and ranks first in terms of global library holdings, suggesting relatively strong circulation overall. However, sales figures tell a different story. As of April 23, 2025, *Rouge Street*'s hardcover edition ranked 1,334,241 in overall book sales on Amazon North America, 15,049 in the short story collections category, and 43,749 in literary fiction. The paperback edition ranked 1,287,419 in overall sales, 14,555 in short story collections, and 25,742 in literary fiction. The Kindle edition stood at 1,006,740 in overall rankings (See <https://www.amazon.com>). These numbers indicate that despite respectable library circulation, actual sales remain underwhelming. Translated literature has long faced disadvantages in the U.S. book market, and the future of Chinese literature abroad continues to be met with significant challenges.

3.2 Reader Reviews

3.2.1 Professional Reader Reviews

In the cultural sphere, professional readers—including media critics, established authors, and scholars—possess considerable cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Their perspectives represent authoritative discourse and often influence the broader cultural landscape, thereby shaping the reading choices of general audiences.

Jing Tsu, Professor of modern Chinese literature at Yale University, reviewed *Rouge Street* in *The New York Times* in 2022. She wrote: “He gives voice to an intriguing cast of characters left behind by China’s economic miracle. They struggle to emerge from their bleak reality in search of light, efforts that sometimes have a religious overtone” (See <http://www.nytimes.com>). Publishers Weekly similarly

praised the collection, noting: “Shuang sustains a cool, placid tone, even when reckoning with lingering traumas of the Cultural Revolution, Japanese occupation, and economic decline. Anglophone readers will be glad to get to know this rising star (See <http://www.publishersweekly.com>). The magazine *Shelf Awareness* commented: “Shuang Xuetao’s remarkable English-language debut features the diverse residents of Yanfen Street, caught between the end of Mao’s China and the country’s emergence as a modern superpower” (See <http://www.shelf-awareness.com>).

Academic commentary, though still limited in scope, has begun to emerge in articles and scholarly forums. In September 2022, Duke University and the international literary platform *Paper Republic* co-hosted an online panel titled *Moses on the Plain: Shuang Xuetao and New Northeastern Literature*, which brought together Chinese and international scholars. The forum focused on a range of topics including the logic behind story selection, intergenerational narratives, and the cross-linguistic rendering of character voices—offering valuable academic insight into the work’s cross-cultural interpretation. Eric Abrahamsen, founder of Paper Republic, praised *Rouge Street* for its innovative engagement with Chinese history and society. He observed that while the stories are set against a backdrop of hardship, Shuang grants his characters enough agency and individuality to create a reading experience that feels open and engaging (See <https://bcac.org.cn/26359057>). Carlos Rojas, Professor at Duke University, expressed particular interest in how the novellas explore personal trauma and collective crisis. He also noted Shuang Xuetao’s stylistic innovation—namely, his use of a unified external voice to convey complex interiority (See <https://bcac.org.cn/26359057>). Taken together, these reviews demonstrate that *Rouge Street* has been met with wide recognition and acclaim among the professional readers.

3.2.2 General Reader Reviews

First and foremost, American readers have expressed their strong interest in the historical and cultural context depicted in *Rouge Street*. Many found themselves emotionally moved during the reading process. The collection not only offers insight into pivotal moments in contemporary Chinese society, but also inspires curiosity about a foreign culture. By portraying the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese families, *Rouge Street* presents a unique and perceptive perspective—one that resonates with international readers and provides both a sense of novelty and connection.

Secondly, several readers drew parallels between the trajectory of Shenyang—the industrial city where all three novellas are set—and the development patterns of industrial towns in the United States. Shenyang’s past prosperity and subsequent decline during economic transition reminded many of America’s Rust Belt. “The tone here is much the same as implied by the American Rust Belt”. one reader commented (See <https://www.goodreads.com>). Another remarked, “It seems like the Pittsburgh of China” (See <https://www.goodreads.com>). These reflections illustrate the emotional resonance the stories have evoked among readers.

In addition, many readers praised the literary quality of the collection. Shuang Xuetao's skillful blend of realism with elements of mystery was frequently noted as a hallmark of his unique style. "I really loved the overall atmosphere of these novellas", one reviewer wrote. "The stories are set in a gritty, impoverished place, with a strong sense of locality that breathes life into the characters—this is a major strength of the work. The resilience and darkness portrayed in the stories are seamlessly woven into the themes, resulting in a powerful artistic expression" (See <https://www.goodreads.com>).

Some readers also praised the philosophical depth of the novellas. "Reading about the day-to-day life of folks who are living through the cultural revolution, about the poor, condemned folks whose names never come up, about folks who got run over by cars which never stop to see who they ran over...its all lovingly brought to life by the author", one reviewer noted (See <https://www.goodreads.com>). Another reader pointed out that the three stories depict the dramatic social transformations in Shenyang from the 1980s through the early 21st century. The characters experience displacement, violence, and abandonment—traumatic events rendered with a deep sense of humanity. They are portrayed as both victims and perpetrators, embodying complex and layered identities. These interwoven tales of tragedy and tenderness deeply moved readers, one of whom described the collection as "a book worth savoring, rich in thought and meaning" (Jenn, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com>).

Some readers even compared Shuang Xuetao to internationally renowned authors such as Haruki Murakami, Ernest Hemingway, and Mikhail Bulgakov (Luce, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com>). Although there were differing opinions, such comparisons point to the potential global appeal of his work. A few readers noted that the complex backgrounds could be confusing, and that the alternating first-person and third-person narration affects the reading flow (Luce, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com>). Nevertheless, the social and cultural context portrayed in *Rouge Street* largely aligned with reader expectations, and the book's combination of narrative strength and literary quality was widely appreciated. On the whole, overseas readers responded positively to *Rouge Street*, and translator Jeremy Tiang's contribution to its success should not be overlooked.

4. Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in *Rouge Street*

In 1995, American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (2024, p. 1) introduced the core strategies of "domestication" and "foreignization" in his seminal work *The Translator's Invisibility*. According to Venuti, domestication emphasizes the translator's invisibility by aligning the language of the translation with the norms of the target culture, making the text more accessible to the target audience. In contrast, foreignization highlights the translator's visibility by preserving the cultural distinctiveness of the source language, thus making readers aware of linguistic and cultural differences and promoting the transmission of cultural diversity. This section focuses on the English translation of *Rouge Street* by Singaporean translator Jeremy Tiang, analyzing how he navigates the balance between domestication

and foreignization in his translation practice. Drawing on Venuti's theoretical framework, the discussion explores how Tiang negotiates the tension between linguistic readability and cultural preservation in the translated text.

4.1 Foreignization Strategy: Constructing Cultural Otherness and Enhancing Translator Visibility

Xu and Zhang (2002, p. 38) argue that foreignization orients the translation toward the source culture, advocating for the preservation of the original author's diction and the cultural nuances embedded in the source language. It calls for the translation to accommodate the linguistic and cultural habits of the source text as much as possible. The application of foreignization strategies helps retain the cultural distinctiveness of the source text, allowing readers in the target culture to experience the richness of cultural difference. In *Rouge Street*, Jeremy Tiang employs various foreignization techniques—such as transliteration, graphic retention, literal translation, and explanatory rendering of cultural terms—to preserve the original's cultural specificity and reinforce the presence of the source culture within the translated text.

One of the most salient examples is Tiang's consistent use of transliteration for personal and place names in *Rouge Street*. Rather than substituting culturally neutral or Anglicized equivalents, he renders names phonetically using Pinyin, such as "Li Fei" (李斐), "Gao Likuan" (高立宽), and "Shandong" (山东). This approach aligns with Venuti's concept of the "visible translator", making the translator's cultural and linguistic decisions apparent to the reader. Although transliteration may to some extent hinder immediate comprehension for English-speaking readers, it preserves the phonetic texture and cultural resonance of the original. The foreignness of the names adds an exotic dimension to the text, encouraging readers to actively engage with the cultural context of the source material. This strategy sparks curiosity about Chinese culture and deepens readers' awareness of the work's cultural background. In doing so, it contributes to a more authentic cross-cultural literary experience. Through a "visible" translator approach, target readers are exposed not only to linguistic differences but also to the distinct cultural system that informs the narrative.

Secondly, Tiang's foreignizing approach is also evident in his treatment of cultural symbols. For example, in *Bright Hall*, the phrase "丁字路口" is rendered as "...that intersection, which is shaped like the character 'ding', 丁". Here, the character not only refers to the T-shaped layout of the intersection in a traffic context but also carries symbolic meaning and metaphorical weight regarding identity. By directly presenting the Chinese character in its written form, Tiang bridges the structural divide between the Chinese and English writing systems, guiding readers to visually engage with the original script and cultural symbolism. This enhances both the sense of cultural otherness and the immersive quality of the reading experience.

In addition, certain culturally specific terms are translated using a hybrid strategy that combines transliteration with explanatory gloss. For instance, “白干” is rendered as “strong baigan liquor”, a choice that preserves the original term while clarifying that baigan refers to a potent type of Chinese liquor. This method allows readers to encounter the cultural specificity of the source term while also understanding its essential meaning, thus balancing foreignization with a degree of domestication.

Overall, Tiang’s use of foreignization reflects a deep understanding of Chinese culture and a thoughtful sensitivity to the needs of target-language readers. His strategy functions as a form of “cultural invocation”, inviting readers to expand their cultural awareness and curiosity through the literary experience.

4.2 Domestication Strategy: Reducing Cultural Barriers and Enhancing Readability

On the side of domestication, Jeremy Tiang places greater emphasis on the fluency and accessibility of the translation. By employing techniques such as paraphrasing, substitution, omission, and reorganization, he enhances the cultural adaptability of the English edition, aligning with what Venuti refers to as the principle of “cultural accommodation”.

For example, in translating kinship terms, Tiang makes context-sensitive choices that resonate with English-speaking readers. In *Bright Hall*, the term “老姑” refers in Northeastern Chinese usage to the youngest paternal aunt—specifically, the youngest female among the father’s generation. In English-speaking cultures, however, such distinctions are generally collapsed under the more general term “aunt”. Tiang opts for “Youngest aunt”, which accurately conveys both the familial role and relative age. Similarly, “二姑父” is rendered as “uncle”, and “柳姥姥” as “Grandma Liu”, using familiar English honorifics to bridge the cultural gap and make character relationships more intelligible for target readers.

When translating regional slang and idiomatic expressions, Tiang adopts a flexible domesticating approach. For instance, the phrase “走背字儿势不可当” from *Rouge Street*—which roughly means “to be plagued by misfortune”—is translated as “tend to keep losing”. The choice of “losing” as a semantic equivalent for “走背字儿” (a colloquialism indicating bad luck) effectively captures the intended meaning while maintaining fluency and intelligibility. Through these choices, Tiang reduces cultural friction, making the text more accessible while preserving the original’s emotional and narrative integrity.

Another example can be found in the *Aviator*, where the Chinese saying “冻人不冻水” is rendered as “chill you to the bone”. This folk expression describes the biting cold of early spring—a time when water may no longer freeze, yet the air remains piercingly cold. Tiang’s translation employs a well-known English idiom, effectively replacing a culturally specific phrase with a target-language equivalent. By drawing on familiar English expressions, he reduces cultural distance and increases the text’s emotional immediacy for English-speaking readers, making the language of the translation feel

vivid and natural.

Even more illustrative is Tiang's handling of dialect. The works of the "New Northeastern Writers" frequently feature Northeastern Chinese dialects that carry strong regional and social connotations. Faced with the challenge of translating culturally embedded language, Tiang often replaces untranslatable culture-bound expressions with functional, idiomatic English that conveys the same meaning and tone. For instance, "你当工人白瞎" is translated as "Why the hell are you still working in a factory?" and "我手欠" becomes "My hands do things they shouldn't". These idiomatic renderings not only enhance the authenticity of the translated text but also align with the gritty realism and working-class speech patterns found throughout Shuang Xuetao's writing. In doing so, Tiang successfully transmits the rough-edged vitality and narrative atmosphere of the original.

In addition, within *Rouge Street*, the translator also simplifies reader comprehension and reduces potential ambiguity through omissions and adjustments aimed at aligning the text with the reading habits of the target audience. These reader-oriented modifications—such as selective abridgment and narrative restructuring—fall under the broader strategy of domestication.

For instance, in *Bright Hall*, Tiang abridges Pastor Lin's retelling of the Biblical story of *Cain and Abel*. In the original Chinese text, the novel includes an extended passage from the Old Testament's Book of Genesis, recounting the fratricide in detail so that readers unfamiliar with the Bible could understand the moral and symbolic weight of the story. However, since this narrative is widely known among Western audiences, Tiang omits part of the original exposition to streamline the prose and avoid redundancy.

In cases involving cultural figures unfamiliar to foreign readers, Tiang supplements the text with explanatory additions. The name "Tong Xiangling", for example, is translated as "the handsome lead actor from *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*", clarifying for readers that he was a celebrated performer in a model opera and providing both contextual and cultural information. This kind of amplification achieves both informational equivalence and effective cultural transmission.

Beyond adjusting content, Tiang also consciously restructures the narrative to better suit the reading expectations of an English-speaking audience. In the *Aviator*, the original Chinese version opens with an alternating narrative structure: one timeline is set in 1979, when Gao Likuan first meets Li Mingqi and feels an immediate aversion upon learning he is the son of his former apprentice, Li Zhengdao; the other timeline flashes back to Gao's youth, gradually revealing his entangled relationship with Li Zhengdao and the origins of his resentment. The structure follows a pattern of "1979-past-1979-past", weaving the two timelines together.

In the English translation, however, Tiang reorders the material to create a more linear narrative. He first presents the full backstory involving Li Zhengdao—from his entry into apprenticeship to his eventual suicide—before returning to the 1979 encounter with Li Mingqi. This structural adjustment

enhances narrative clarity and coherence, making it easier for readers to follow character relationships and plot development. The linear progression aligns more closely with the conventions of English storytelling and improves overall readability for the target audience.

5. Conclusion

Rouge Street, with its distinctive narrative techniques and literary craftsmanship, has succeeded in capturing the attention of international readers. The characters portrayed in the collection, along with the universal emotions embedded in their stories, have resonated deeply with audiences and demonstrated the potential for meaningful cultural exchange. The emotional connection between Chinese and American readers suggests a possible pathway for the globalization of contemporary Chinese literature. By evoking parallels with America's Rust Belt and reflecting Shuang Xuetao's transnational literary vision, *Rouge Street* offers valuable insight into how Chinese literature can gain traction on the global stage and continue expanding its international presence.

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Notes

This paper comes out as the periodical research results of the following project:

Note 1. Construction and Practice of a Transformation Model for the Professional Development of English Teachers in Foreign Languages Universities within an Interdisciplinary, Jilin Provincial Higher Education Association Context, JGJX2022D316 (吉林省高等教育学会课题——多学科交叉背景下

外语类高校英语教师专业化发展转型模式构建与实践)

Note 2. Research on the Cultivation Mechanism for Top-Tier Innovative Foreign Language Talents Guided by Values and Based on Interdisciplinary Integration, Jilin Province Education Science "14th Five-Year Plan" 2022 Annual Project ·ZD 22143 (吉林省教育科学“十四五”规划 2022 年度课题——价值观引领下基于学科交叉与跨界融合的外语专业拔尖创新人才培养机制研究)

Note 3. Interdisciplinary Innovation in the Construction and Implementation of the Core Curriculum System for English Literature Majors, The Second Batch of University-Level New Liberal Arts Research and Reform Practice Projects at Jilin International Studies University (吉林外国语大学第二批校级新文科项目研究与改革实践项目——英语专业文学类核心课程体系跨学科创新构建与实践)

Note 4. A Study on the Cultural Characteristics and Their International Interpretation in Jilin Regional Literary Works (吉林外国语大学 2024 年度吉林外国语大学吉林文化价值阐释与国际传播校级专项)

Note 5. The 2024 university-level general project at Jilin International Studies University, entitled *A Practical Study of Translating Works by the New Generation Northeast Writer Shuang Xuetao* (Project No. JWXSXY2024B009).