

Renarrating *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1960s China: Regimented Translation, Demonized Literature, and Conflicting Narratives

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Abstract

As Cold War narratives swept across the world of letters in 1960s China, American literature was translated into Chinese for political rather than poetic reasons. One of the most prominent translated pieces was Jerome David Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). This regimented Chinese version was circulated internally among high-class Chinese officials and scholars. By renarrating this novel into a “degenerate work” of the Beat Generation, Dong Hengxun 董衡巽, along with other spokespersons for Chinese authorities, demonized the United States as an amoral nation, challenged the metanarrative of capitalist modernity, and legitimized its socialist counterpart. However, the translator Shi Xianrong 施咸荣 selectively appropriated clashing voices in his postscript to create a narrative battleground and thus implicitly renarrated *The Catcher in the Rye* from a degenerate work into a controversial one by highlighting its literary merit. The conflicting renarrations of the novel in question essentially epitomized a motley variety of contrasts: politics vs. poetics, the East vs. the West, domestic identity vs. foreign otherness, and, ultimately, socialist modernity vs. capitalist modernity. By weaving together various historical materials and drawing heavily on Social Narrative Theory, this case study contextualizes the translation, circulation, and criticism of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1960s China and positions relevant renarrators within the stories that informed their discursive behaviors,

thereby revealing the variable distance between said transcultural mediators and the dominant narratives of politics and poetics at that time.

Keywords

translated literature, Social Narrative Theory, *The Catcher in the Rye*, renarration, American literature in Chinese

1. Introduction

As Cold War narratives swept across the world of letters in China¹ during the 1960s, American literature was translated into Chinese for political rather than poetic reasons. Jerome David Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* was one of the prominent pieces of American literature that was translated for said political purposes. The novel first went to press in 1951, and, since then, it has become a significant text in the history of translation and publishing around the world, which Yang Lu 楊露 (2015) attributes to its audacious reflection on an unfinished and precarious modernity.

The Catcher in the Rye, employing the first-person point of view, describes a bourgeois teenager aimlessly wandering around the streets of New York City after being expelled from middle school, and, in doing so, it reveals individual crises within the larger picture of modernization. Between the 1950s and 1960s, however, socialist China's literary tradition heavily featured various flawless paragons; consequently, during this period, the novel's poetics were extremely unsettling for the Chinese literati. At the same time, it was these foreign poetics that constituted the discursive resources for casting the United States as "the other" and, accordingly, legitimized *The Catcher in the Rye* being translated in 1960s China. In light of this, the cultural politics behind the novel's first Chinese version deserves further research.

Leaving aside the previous attempts to investigate the translated novel in question on a purely textual level, many Chinese researchers relied on the lens of "manipulation" (Lefevere 1992) or "polysystems" (Even-Zohar 2000) to contextualize it in 1960s China (Hou 2012; Peng 2018; Wang 2020; Yang 2015; Zhao 2006). Although such efforts might generally help to demonstrate the political and poetic constraints behind the translation, these researchers did not pay special attention to the novel's conflicting