A Study on the Translation and Introduction of Liu Zhenyun's *Someone to Talk To* in the UK and the US

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Abstract—*Someone to Talk To* is one of the representative works by Liu Zhenyun [1], a neo-realist writer, who introduces readers to contemplations on "discourse" and "loneliness" through his unique brushstroke and vernacular language. The work won the eighth Mao Dun Prize for Literature in 2011. A film of the same name, scripted by Liu Zhenyun, received the "Best Screenwriter" award at the Berlin Film Festival's Asia Brilliant Star in 2017. Subsequently, in 2018, the English translation Someone to Talk To, co-translated by the couple Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin [2], was published by Duke University Press in the United States. This paper explores the reception of this work in the UK and the US from the aspects of library holdings, mainstream media coverage, and reader reviews, aiming to understand the reception of translated Chinese rural literature abroad.

Keywords—*Someone to Talk To*, Liu Zhenyun, translation studies

I. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to traditional rural novels, Liu Zhenyun employs an interlocking structure in his novel *Someone to Talk To*, deviating from the spatially extensive layout commonly used in prior rural narratives. Although Liu introduces a multitude of characters, their presence primarily underscores Yang Baishun's "solitary soul." The intricate relationships between these characters are not elaborated upon; instead, Liu profoundly captures the spiritual nomadism of Chinese farmers, reflecting the narrative dimensions of Chinese rural literature through keen insight and narration [3]. Central to his novel is the revelation of modern individuals' inner secrets, which encompass solitude, hidden pain, unease, anxiety, and the unspoken—essentially exploring the significance behind human communication [4]. The novel has garnered multiple awards and boasts high book sales, positioning itself as a new benchmark in China's rural fiction. However, there is a scarcity of research on the translation and introduction of this novel into the UK and the US. Consequently, this paper aims to investigate and explore the reception of *Someone to Talk To* in these two countries.

II. THE RECEPTION AND DISSEMINATION OF LIU ZHENYUN'S WORKS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE USA

Liu Zhenyun began to gain attention with the publication of his debut novel, Pogoda Depot, in 1987. The first English translation of Liu's works was "Corridor of Power", published by Chinese Literature Press in December 1994 as part of the "Panda Books" series. This collection also included "The Unit", "Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers", and "Pogoda Depot", all translated by David Kwan. However, at that time, neither Liu Zhenyun nor his translator were well-known abroad, so the release did not generate significant interest. A turning point came with the publication of the English translation of his novel "I Did Not Kill My Husband." In 2014, this work was translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin and published by Arcade Publishing. Following its release, mainstream media in the English-speaking world began to praise the book, gradually increasing curiosity and enthusiasm for Liu Zhenyun's works. Major media outlets in the English-speaking world have given positive reviews of Liu Zhenyun's fictional writing and literary achievements, especially commending his political narratives, disaster narratives, female narratives, and his use of "allegorical satire" and "ethical writing" techniques in describing various social issues and ordinary "nobody" [5]. Liu Zhenyun's fame has also been boosted by films adapted from his novels, such as "I Did Not Kill My Husband" and "Back to 1942," directed by the renowned Chinese filmmaker Feng Xiaogang. The publishing of Liu Zhenyun's novels is demonstrated in the Table 1:

Table 1. Publishing of Liu Zhenyun's novels

Name	Publisher	Translator
One Day Three Autumns (2023)	Sinoist Books (UK)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
I Did Not Kill My Husband (2014)	Arcade Publishing (USA)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
Someone to Talk To (2018)	Duke University Press (USA)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
The Cook，the Crook, and the Real Estate Tycoon (2015)	Arcade Publishing (USA)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
Cell Phone: A Novel (2011)	Merwin Asia (USA)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
Remembering 1942: And Other Chinese Stories (2016)	Arcade Publishing (USA)	Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin

Some authors consider Liu Zhenyun to be "undoubtedly one of the most thoughtful writers among contemporary Chinese authors." American sinologist Sabina Knight even stated in a report: "Liu Zhenyun is a candidate for the Nobel Prize in my mind. His works possess storytelling, philosophical depth, and literary quality, which I believe are very appealing to readers" [6]. British sinologist Julia Lovell believes that "in the 1980s and 1990s, Liu Zhenyun became known as a compassionate chronicler of everyday trivialities with a great sense of humor; he was also considered a 'new realist' writer. After engaging with modernism and magical realism in the 1980s, he attempted to return to everyday life, focusing on the survival details of the urban petite bourgeoisie [7]."

III. THE RECEPTION OF *SOMEONE TO TALK TO* IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE USA

Someone to Talk To is one of Liu Zhenyun's most beloved and noteworthy works, has garnered attention from readers in the United States and the UK since its publication in the United States in 2018. Library holdings, mainstream media coverage, and reader reviews are three crucial aspects for understanding a work's dissemination and reception. This analysis will examine data from these three perspectives to explore this novel's dissemination and reception.

IV. LIBRARY HOLDINGS

Library holding is regarded as an important yardstick to measure cultural and ideological value of books and to examine the knowledge productivity and popularity of publishing institutions. Therefore, library holdings in the United States and the UK should be considered as vital criteria to evaluate the dissemination of *Someone to Talk To* in the United States and the UK, which can be accessed through the WorldCat database of Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the world's most comprehensive database of information about library collections. As of August 2024, data in WorldCat has been updated to August 2024. The search results indicate that in the United States, 113 libraries have acquired the print version of the novel, while 135 libraries have the electronic version. In the United Kingdom, 148 libraries have the print edition, and 163 libraries have the electronic version.

Regarding library holdings, *Someone to Talk To* is primarily found in university libraries, such as suggesting that it is largely used for academic purposes by readers with a certain level of expertise. Its presence is less common in public libraries, indicating a lower reach among general readers.

V. MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE

Kirkus review, one of the most influential book review magazines in United States, acclaimed Liu as China's leading candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature and described characters in *Someone to Talk To* as "friendless, untruthful, and unheard" and a novel about "a chronicle of lives of quiet desperation lived half a world away, understated and thoughtful, cheerless without being morose" [8]. The China Daily, the only Chinese newspaper with significant international outreach and the highest reprint rate by foreign media, recommended *Someone to Talk To* in September 2021. It also mentioned that the novel was awarded the Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011. Media coverage about this novel is limited, most coverage is focused on the author but the novel itself.

VI. READER REVIEWS

The writer will study the attitudes of general readers based on ratings and reviews from Amazon and Goodreads. Amazon, the biggest transnational e-commerce platform and the most popular online bookstore, and Goodreads, the biggest English social cataloging website that allows users to share their reviews, annotations and recommendations on books, cover a large number of English audiences.

Searched on Amazon, *Someone to Talk To* received a 5 star rating but no review. While Goodreads is supplied with more ratings and reviews. As shown in the page that the average rating of *Someone to Talk To* is 3.66. There are 349ratings and 59 reviews. An anonymous reader remarked "Interesting to see how rating get much lower for translated version/non-China readers. Historical backgrounds are not introduced but obvious enough for readers who know modern Chinese history. A story also picks its readers." And a reader named Stephanie remarked "this book is a torture to readers who cannot remember character names. This book is full of characters. Each character probably takes one to two pages, and a new one is introduced. I understand the intent behind this, but I couldn't appreciate the method. There's very little plot. It's all about relationships between different characters."

The negative comments are mainly about "long, descriptive, cumbersome, torture to readers, full of characters, slowness, unfocused." And the praise voice root in inspiration of mortal life.

VII. CONCLUSION

Medio-Translatology extends translation studies from the language transformation between two languages to the communication, dissemination, reception and impact between two cultures [9]. After research on library holdings, mainstream media coverage and reader reviews, the writer finds that *Someone to Talk To*, translated by Goldblatt enjoying relative better dissemination and reception in the United States and the UK, compared with the Liu's other novels translated by David Kwan. Meanwhile, *Someone to Talk To* appeals more to academia than general readers for its low-legibility.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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