Translating Mao-era Memory for Global Audiences: Hybridized Political and Cultural Discourse across Yu Hua's *Huozhe*, Translation, and Film Subtitling

Xiaozhuo Ji

Chinese Studies, School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
Email: hazelji1211@gmail.com
Manuscript received January 30, 2026; accepted September 23, 2026; published November 23, 2026

***Abstract*—Translation plays a critical role in cultural exchange, not only enabling the global circulation of modern Chinese narratives but also reassembling political memory into forms that can be recognized, processed, and felt by new audiences. The analysis brings together three interconnected sites: the Chinese source text, Michael Berry's English translation *To Live*, and the English subtitles for Zhang Yimou's 1994 film adaptation. Using Venuti's domestication/foreignization as a guiding lens, this paper shows that "hybridization" is a discursive outcome: Mao-era political language is selectively clarified, streamlined, or retained in culturally marked terms, producing an interpretive frame that is simultaneously political (attuned to campaigns, surveillance, and risk) and cultural (organized through terms and categories familiar to Anglophone audiences). Subtitling intensifies this process because audiovisual constraints require compression and prioritization. Following established subtitling principles, the English subtitles tend to condense dense historical-political discourse into rapidly readable units, which shapes reception by foregrounding certain meanings while backgrounding others. This paper situates these translational choices within the film's broader transnational circulation, where censorship conditions and overseas exhibition contexts influence what aspects of Mao-era experience become speakable, visible, or emotionally emphasized. Overall, the paper demonstrates that translation and subtitling function as mechanisms of cross-cultural mediation that actively produce the terms through which Mao-era memory is understood internationally.**

***Keywords*—translation strategies, contemporary Chinese fiction, Mao-era memory, Chinese political culture, global audiences**

I. Introduction

Yu Hua's novel *Huozhe* 活着, published in 1993, is a poignant portrayal of resilience and the human spirit amidst relentless adversities. *Huozhe* sets against the backdrop of tumultuous political and social changes—from the Civil War, the Great Leap Forward, to the Cultural Revolution. The novel follows the life of Fugui, a once-wealthy landowner turned peasant, as he endures the loss of family members and hardships. Through Fugui's journey, Yu Hua paints a portrait of a man stripped of everything yet determined to survive, eulogizing the ability to find hope in the midst of suffering while implicitly criticizing the oppression brought by the times to ordinary people which makes people have to live in pain and go through. One year later, the novel's adaptation into a film by director Zhang Yimou in 1994 further amplified its international acclaim, despite the film being banned in China at the time. Internationally, *To Live* has been well-received, with its English translation by Michael Berry, published in 2003, introducing the novel to a broader audience.

This paper will study Yu Hua's novel *Huozhe* 活着, the only English translation version of the novel *To Live* by Michael Berry, and the film adaptation *To Live* by Zhang Yimou. First of all, the paper will analyze Yu Hua's writing characteristics and the core of his works, and point out the possible obstacles in translation and cultural exchange. Based on Lawrence Venuti's theory of domestication and foreignization from his work *The Translator's Invisibility*, I will analyze how the English translation of *To Live* and the film's subtitles use domestication and foreignization techniques to ensure the foreign audience can effectively absorb and understand the material while presenting the political environment and atmosphere of different political movements periods in China, especially focusing on the Great Leap Forward period and the Cultural Revolution period. The article will also compare the film's plot with the original novel, highlighting how the film's changes to the main character Fugui's profession and death scene more sharply critique the tragedy caused by political movements. Overall, this paper argues that translation and cross-media rewriting are central to this transnational afterlife: it does not simply transmit *Huozhe* to new readers and viewers, but reshapes how Mao-era political and cultural discourse is made legible, emotionally graspable, and politically interpretable for global audiences.

II. Yu Hua's Style and the Translation Challenge

Yu Hua's unique writing style, characterized by its simplicity, avant-garde, and realism depth, combined with his ability to integrate language with the "colors of the times," may pose challenges for translation. First, Yu Hua is regarded as having undergone a significant transformation in his writing style, from an experimental pioneer writer in his early works to a realist writer in his later novels [1]. During the 1980s, Yu Hua was part of the avant-garde literary movement in China, known for its experimental approaches that challenged traditional narrative forms. His early short stories, such as *One Kind of Reality* and *1986*, featured fragmented narratives, surreal imagery, and a heavy emphasis on exploring the psychological states of his characters. As Yu Hua's career progressed, he shifted toward a more realist approach, one that was deeply rooted in the lives of ordinary people and their experiences in modern Chinese society. This transition is evident in his later novels, such as *Huozhe* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. However, in Yu Hua's realistic works, traces of his avant-garde language can still be observed. For example, in describing the scene after Fugui

lost his son, Yu Hua said, “我看着那條彎曲着通向城裡的小路,聽不到我兒子赤腳跑來的聲音,月光照在路上。像是撒滿了鹽” [2]. When an uneducated man loses his son, he does not immerse himself in direct pain and collapse but generates poetic language from the scene in front of him. Yu Hua’s language evokes a sense of absurdity and detachment by introducing a metaphor similar to stream-of-consciousness writing. As Carlos G. Tee points out, the stream-of-consciousness technique is characterized by a free flow of thoughts and a lack of conventional structure. Translating this style requires capturing the author’s unique voice and the intended disorientation or fluidity [3]. Thus, it may be difficult to combine the technique of translating stream of consciousness in translating realistic literature. Translating such abstract emotions in the above example into a practical metaphor may reduce Yu Hua’s linguistic charm. Secondly, although the theme of the novel is to depict the resilience of life, much of the description of the circumstances of Fugui’s time implicitly satirizes political change and social unrest. With the post-Mao improvement in people’s standards of living, Yu Hua felt that China was becoming much richer than before, but an increasing number of people were forgetting the past, giving up their memories of adversity [4]. Thus, Yu Hua intertwines with the political and social upheavals of China, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in his writing to record the suffering of China’s developing time. He integrates historical language that reflects the slogans, propaganda, and public sentiment of those times. This can be particularly difficult to translate, as these words and phrases evoke a specific atmosphere that is hard to recreate for readers unfamiliar with Chinese history.

III. Translation Strategies

In order to better restore the novel’s political background and narrative features of the times, and to make it easier for foreign readers to understand, Michael Berry simultaneously used two translation techniques of domestication and foreignization in his translation *To Live*. Domestication and foreignization are two strategies in translation theory, first introduced by Lawrence Venuti in the 1990s. Domestication refers to the process of making a translated text closely align with the target culture, thereby making it more accessible and familiar to the target audience [5]. This approach often involves adapting idioms, cultural references, and phrases to suit the preferences and expectations of readers from the target culture. On the other hand, foreignization is a strategy that aims to retain the cultural elements of the original text, thereby preserving the foreign nature and providing readers with an understanding of the source culture [6]. This approach may involve keeping culturally specific references intact, even at the risk of alienating readers who may not be familiar with them.

The domestication technique is widely used by Michael Berry in translating terms emerging from a particular era but easy to read literally. For example, in translating terms like 食堂 in 人民公社, Berry simply uses the word “communal dining hall” [7]. Since in the context of foreign readers, there are also areas like college cafeterias for group dining in a public place and proceeding communal dining, direct literal translation not only makes it easier for foreign readers to understand but also emphasizes the collectivism of the canteen during the Great Leap Forward era. Berry also employs domestication to simplify complex political terminology and while making it easy for the reader to understand the core meaning of terms, it can be brought into the same position as Fugui. For instance, as Yu Hua describes, during the period of the people’s commune, “村長”(village head) ‘s title changes to “隊長”(team leader) [8]. The village head is the common name for the leader of a village from village administration before liberation in China [9],while the concept of “隊長” refers to a grass-roots leader who manages the 生產隊 production team during the people’s commune period [10]. The change of leaders’ titles reflects the change of the rural management system in different political periods. However, Berry does not introduce too many explanations of political terms and just uses the term “team leader” just same as the title of all the leaders in any team in a foreign context, because despite the name changes, the village head and the team leader in the novel are actually the same person and perform the same duties, leading a village. At the same time, the reader does not need to have a deep understanding of the rural ruling system under the political change, because ordinary farmers like Fugui are also confused and vague about that. Berry’s domestication strategy of unexplained translations does a good job of satirizing political changes, which make no sense to the average person and only cause confusion.

On the other hand, in order to better reflect the special political atmosphere of China which is different from that of foreign countries, foreignization is a necessary translation strategy. During the Cultural Revolution, the pervasive atmosphere of political fervor, denunciation, and turmoil deeply influenced personal relationships and social dynamics. In his translation, Berry uses foreignization by retaining political slogans and revolutionary language, like translating “紅衛兵” into Red Guards, along with related terminology that conveys the ideological fervor of the era. By keeping such terms intact, Berry preserves the distinctive political lexicon of the Cultural Revolution, enabling readers to appreciate the propaganda-driven atmosphere that characterized the period.

IV. Subtitling as Political Compression

Similar techniques of domestication and foreignization are also used in the translation of the film *To Live*’s English subtitle. The English subtitles for Zhang Yimou’s 1994 film *To Live* were translated by Shuqin Cui, a scholar specializing in Chinese cinema and media studies. Her translation has been widely used in various screenings and DVD releases of the film [11]. Compared to the English translation of the novel *To Live*, in the realm of subtitle translation, conciseness is paramount due to constraints in time and space. As noted by Díaz Cintas, subtitles should be concise and to the point, ensuring that viewers can read them effortlessly while following the visual narrative [12]. Thus, the domestication technique has to be heavily used in translating subtitles, as the subtitles cannot contain too many annotations, and in order to make the audience get the rough meaning of the original sentence in a short time. For example, the phrase “這是典型

的四舊", which is translated as "Classic feudal types." The term "四舊" carries specific historical connotations from that period, but there is insufficient time and space for a literal translation in the subtitles. The use of "feudal" succinctly captures the core meaning of "四舊" and serves as a simplified generalization. Therefore, a domesticating strategy is employed here, sacrificing the surface meaning of the original text to preserve the deeper cultural significance. The subtitle translator adjusts by using "feudal" to achieve two primary goals: to introduce the historical context of the story and to facilitate audience comprehension, thereby ensuring viewers understand the unfolding events in the film.

However, if a film aims to capture the audience's attention, it needs to possess a distinctive style and unique characteristics, including setting political metaphors to attract the audience to interpret. In the English subtitle translation of the *To Live*, the translator appropriately retains some characteristics of the source language culture and tries to help the target language audience understand the exact political environment of China, so as to trigger exploration and reflection. In the scene, the mayor publicly praised the Fugui family for steelmaking, so when the Fugui saw the students go to school to participate in steelmaking, also dared not slack off, hurriedly waking up the sleeping son to participate in steelmaking. As Fugui said to encourage his son, "咱可不能落後啊!", the word "落後" is translated as "politically backward". Fugui's phrase "不能落後" refers to the necessity of responding to the policies of the time; otherwise, one could be labeled as "opposing the Three Red Banners". In the translation, the word "politically" vividly conveys the cautious attitude of the people during the Great Leap Forward, who were fearful of bringing trouble upon themselves [13].

V. Film Adaptation

Besides subtitle translation, plot adaptation that deviates from the original novel transforms the film *To Live* into a vivid political satire. The shift from a deeply introspective portrayal of personal suffering to a broader critique of political upheaval makes the film distinct, highlighting the absurdities and tragedies brought on by political movements such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The film achieves this through plot adjustments and the inclusion of new symbols like shadow puppetry, which not only depict the protagonist's fate but also reflect the manipulative forces of political authority. In the novel *To Live*, land serves as an essential symbol that represents Fugui's connection to his roots. The land sustains his family: Fugui relies on farming, Jiazhen forages for wild vegetables during famine, and Fengxia fights for sweet potatoes, illustrating their deep bond with the earth. Yu Hua uses this imagery to convey a sense of fatalism, where all lives are ultimately tied to the earth. In Zhang Yimou's film adaptation, the imagery of land is largely replaced by the focus on shadow puppetry (皮影戲). The puppets become a metaphor for the manipulation and control experienced by Fugui and his family, mirroring their lives being directed by the "invisible hand" of political movements. For instance, during the Great Leap Forward, shadow puppetry was repurposed as a tool to enhance productivity and spread political propaganda, showing how culture is co-opted for political ends. In one of the most significant moments, Fugui is forced to burn his shadow puppets during the Cultural Revolution because they represent the "Four Olds" —old customs, culture, habits, and ideas—highlighting the absurdity of the era's ideological purges. This destruction of his beloved puppets symbolizes not only the loss of personal identity and cultural heritage but also serves as a powerful critique of the political dogma that stripped people of their history and joy. The film thus adds an additional layer of political satire that critiques the Cultural Revolution's destruction of personal and cultural identity. Considering global audiences' baseline familiarity with Chinese culture, shadow puppetry functions also more effectively than land as an immediate visual marker of "old" Chinese culture, offering a clearer symbol and more readily guiding viewers' understanding.

Besides, the re-portrayal of the death plot in the film highlights the fragility of ordinary people's lives and the powerlessness of fate in the period of political revolution. In the Cultural Revolution scenes, the tragic consequences of inexperienced "revolutionaries" taking over critical services, such as when Fengxia dies from a lack of proper medical care after giving birth that highlight the devastation these political campaigns inflicted on innocent people. Unlike the novel, where Fengxia dies from complications during childbirth in a more ambiguous manner, the film explicitly blames the incompetence brought on by the political environment, thereby enhancing the political satire.

The ending also marks a significant divergence between the two mediums. The novel concludes with Fugui as the sole survivor of his family, left with nothing but an old ox named after himself, emphasizing the relentless sorrow of his life and the cyclical nature of suffering. In contrast, the film ends on a more hopeful note, with Fugui, Jiazhen, their son-in-law Erxi, and grandson Mantou happily gathering for a meal. This shift from a tragic to a more optimistic conclusion conveys the director's message of hope and perseverance despite the harshness of political upheaval. The final scene, where Fugui explains to Mantou that a chick will grow into a goose, then a sheep, and eventually a cow, reflects an optimistic belief in progress and the resilience of life, softening the tone of the story and suggesting that, despite the suffering, there is hope for a better future.

VI. Conclusion

The persecutions and personal tragedies caused by political movements such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution have long been topics that the Chinese government has sought to avoid, and literary and artistic works about these events are subject to strict censorship. Due to political sensitivity, the film *To Live* has never been publicly screened in cinemas in mainland China. In this context, works that depict the political periods after the founding of New China can only present an idealized and official image of China. Without the constraints of strict political censorship, the English version of the novel and the film screened abroad have more opportunities for political expression and can better restore the true image of China and its historical atmosphere. Moreover, under the tide of major historical events, the tragedies of ordinary people are often overlooked. The adaptation of the plot in the film *To Live*

helps global audiences better focus on ordinary, lower-class urban residents during times of social change, enabling them to empathize with and care for their happiness and sorrow, thus imbuing this study with humanitarian concern.

In conclusion, Yu Hua's *Huozhe* is a profound exploration of human resilience amidst the political upheaval of 20th-century China. Both the novel and its film adaptation provide a vivid portrayal of ordinary people enduring immense suffering during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Through Fugui's journey, Yu Hua critiques the relentless hardships faced by individuals under oppressive regimes, while celebrating their will to survive. Michael Berry's translation of *To Live* and the film's subtitles utilize domestication and foreignization techniques to make the story accessible to international audiences while retaining its cultural essence. These strategies help convey the complex socio-political atmosphere of the time. Zhang Yimou's film adaptation, with its changes to plot elements and symbolic imagery like shadow puppetry, adds an additional layer of political satire, highlighting the absurdities of political movements. Despite the challenges of translating Yu Hua's unique blend of avant-garde and realism, both the novel and its adaptations resonate universally with their themes of survival and resilience and accomplish the task of political satire. Reading these versions together clarifies the role of translation in cultural exchange as a process that reassembles political memory across languages and media.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] K. Liu, "The short-lived avant-garde: The transformation of Yu Hua," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 89–117, 2002. [Online]. Available: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/22923

[2] H. Yu, *Huozhe*. 6th ed. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 1994, pp. 202.

[3] C. G. Tee, "Stream of consciousness, peristalsis and translation: *Lestrygonians* from the narratological perspective," *NTU Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. 29, pp. 53–85, 2013.

[4] K. Liu, "The short-lived avant-garde: The transformation of Yu Hua," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 89–117, 2002. [Online]. Available: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/22923

[5] L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 1995, pp. 4.

[6] L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 1995, pp. 9.

[7] M. Berry, *To Live: A Novel*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, pp.75.

[8] H. Yu, *Huozhe*. 6th ed. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., Ltd., 1994, pp. 191.

[9] G. Foley, "A 'democratic moment': Political education in the Chinese liberation struggle," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 12, pp. 323–342, 1993.

[10] U. Patnaik, "Three communes and a production brigade: The contract responsibility system in China," *Social Scientist*, vol. 15, no. 11/12, pp. 34–61, 1987.

[11] X. Sun, "Between locality and internationality: Fifth- and sixth-generation Chinese directors' films and their translations," *Int. J. Appl. Linguist. English Lit.*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 50–61, 2022.

[12] J. Díaz-Cintas, "Audiovisual translation," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Language Industry Studies*, E. Angelone, M. Ehrensberger-Dow, and G. Massey, Eds. London: Bloomsbury, 2019, ch. 10.

[13] X. Deng, "English subtitle translation strategies for the film To Live from the perspective of Skopos theory," Journal of Suzhou University, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 65–67, May 2015. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1673-2006.2015.05.018

Copyright © 2026 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (CC BY 4.0).