

English Translation and Communication of Dialogues in Paradise

LI Xiaoting^[a]; LI Changbao^{[b],*}

^[a] MA student, School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Hangzhou, China.

^[b] Ph.D., Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Hangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

As a representative of "Avant-garde" novelist, Can Xue is unique in contemporary Chinese literature with her alternative writing style. Most of her works have been translated into English and achieved a quite remarkable literary status in English-speaking countries. Taking Can Xue's first English translation of Dialogues in Paradise as a case study, this paper analyzes the evaluation and manipulation of five elements (the translation subject, content, channel, audience and effect) in the translation process, and points out that the English translation and communication of Dialogues in Paradise is of significance to the "going out" of Chinese literary works: the translation content that is in line with Western literary aesthetics, by way of co-translation between Chinese and Western translators, is transmitted to the translation audience through western channels, so as to promote the "going out" of the Chinese literature.

Key words: Can Xue; *Dialogues in Paradise*; English translation; communication

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a representative of "Avant-garde" novelist, Can Xue is unique in contemporary Chinese literature with her absurd, mysterious and alternative writing style, and that's why Can Xue's novels have always been on the edge of the Chinese literary circle (Wu Yun & Jiang Mengying, 2015, p.104). In stark contrast to the domestic attention, Can Xue and her works have triggered a great deal of response in the United States and Japan. Not only has she been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature for two consecutive years, but is the only Chinese writer to win the "Best Translated Book Award" in the United States. Some of her works have been included in the literature textbooks of many famous universities such as Harvard University and Chuo University in Tokyo, and selected into anthologies of world novels for many times. "In a sense, Can Xue, in contemporary Chinese literature, is the only Chinese writer unreservedly accepted by the European and American world." (Dai, 2000, p.16)

Composing of thirteen short stories, Dialogues in Paradise is Can Xue's first monograph translated into English, including "Hut on the Mountain" and "The Ox" published in the American literary journal Formations in 1987. Dialogues in Paradise has drawn the attention of researchers since its publication in the United States in 1988, which is closely related to its successful translation into English. However, the previous studies on the English translation Dialogues in Paradise are very limited, and mainly focus on its English text. For example, Luo Lixia (2018) has conducted a study on iconicity in the English translation of Dialogues in Paradise, so as to compare the aesthetic effect and value between the original text and the translation. Besides, based on the multiple mapping model of metaphor, He Ling (2020) has deconstructed and analyzed the English translation of "The Ox", a short story in Dialogues in Paradise, hoping to explore better metaphor translation in literary texts.

In view of the limited studies on the translation and communication of *Dialogues in Paradise* in Englishspeaking countries, a systematic and in-depth study on it is quite valuable. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the process of translation and communication of *Dialogues in Paradise* in the English world under the guidance of Lasswell's 5W communication model, in order to reveal the significance of "going out" of Chinese literary works.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF LASWELL'S 5W COMMUNICATION MODEL

Harold Lasswell (2003), an American political scientist, proposes a classic communication model in The Structure and Function of Communication in Society, also known as "5W" communication model. Lasswell's 5W communication model holds the view that a convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions: Who (the communicator)? Says what (the content)? In which channel (the media)? To whom (the audience)? With what effect (the influence)? As a programmatic theory of communication, "5W" model is instructive to realize effective communication. As a crosscultural communication activity, there could be also five elements in translation activities -- translation subject, translation content, translation channel, translation audience and translation effect. These five elements jointly make translation a make-or-break activity.

3. TRANSLATION AND COMMUNICATION OF *DIALOGUES IN PARADISE*

Dialogues in Paradise has drawn loads of attention since its release in the English-speaking world in 1988. The book is still available on Amazon Books and readers have spoken highly of this book. In addition, libraries of Harvard University and other university still have the book collection. According to Laswell's "5W" communication model, the reason why *Dialogues in Paradise* arouses great response in the English-speaking world is that it meets the different requirements of communication elements such as communication subject, content, channel and audience, thus achieving remarkable communication effect.

3.1 Who – A Collaboration of a Chinese Scholar and a Sinologist

Translation subject refers to the initiator of translation who is responsible for selecting and collecting the original text and transmitting the information carried by the original text. It can be the original author, the translator, or an organization such as a publishing house. Communication subject plays a central role in the process of literary translation and communication because the reader's recognition of the translation subject is closely related to the acceptance and communication effect.

The translation subject of *Dialogues in Paradise* has adopted a collaborative translation mode, in which the collection is translated by Zhang Jian, a Chinese researcher studying for his PhD at Hofstra University, and Roland R. Janssen, a sinologist and professor of literature at Hofstra University.

Before starting the first draft of translation, the two translators have launched as much research as they could on Can Xue, including her educational background, philosophy and universal outlook. Through research, Zhang Jian (1997, p.245) realized the fact that "the original text was produced by a writer with only limited school education but lots of social experience and imagination". Therefore, the translator Zhang has made a point of the expression in the translation process, so as to ensure a correct understanding of the original text to a large extent.

On the other hand, with the dual identity as a sinologist and professor of literature, Ronald Janssen has a deep understanding of Can Xue's creative ideas and writing style. As for the stories of *Dialogues in Paradise*, Janssen has held a very detailed opinion: "the rhythms and tones of her scenes evoke the reader's emotions, and the seeming non-sequiturs and sudden transformations disrupt the easy expectations of logical thoughts" (Can, 1988, p.169). These profound interpretations are inseparable from the translator's comprehensive understanding of the author, the original work, the cultural environment and other factors, which not only ensures an accurate and profound understanding of Can Xue and her works, but also serves as the basis for the target readers to grasp Can Xue and her works correctly.

Moreover, as an overseas translator, Janssen is superior to domestic translators in terms of understanding target readers' reading interests, habits and aesthetics. Janssen argues that "the stories of Can Xue contribute vigor to our notions of fiction not unlike that derived a decade or so ago from the Latin American writers" (ibid, p.163). Can Xue has happened to hold the same view, who says that her thoughts and feelings are like "plants growing from western cultural traditions" (Lin, 2001, pp.190-191). Janssen has accurately grasped the characteristics of the western literature contained in Can Xue's works and realized that these characteristics were in line with the interests and orientation of the western readers, and that's why he decides to introduce Chinese writers, such as Can Xue, and their works, like Dialogues in Paradise, which are often ignored in China, into western literary circle through translation.

As mentioned above, the co-translator model of a Chinese scholar familiar with the author and native culture and a foreign Sinologist with dual cultural background complements each other, minimizing cognitive biases. The translation subject model can correctly master the target readers' reading interest, as well as in the largest extent, ensure the accuracy and readability of the translation. It is a rather reasonable model of translation and communication of the Chinese literature.

3.2 What – Selection of Source Text and Translation Methods

The translation content refers to the selection of the source text and the translation methods adopted. The selection of the translated content is crucial to the effective communication of the works, and the key to the popularity of the translated content lies in whether it can arouse the interest of the target readers and even touch the soul of the audience. As for *Dialogues in Paradise*, it is Can Xue's its thematic content and writing style that catch western readers' attention.

3.2.1 Content of Dialogues in Paradise

Can Xue's works are deeply influenced by the western literary, among which Franz Kafka, the master of western modernist literature, has the greatest influence on her. The numerous nightmare-like images in Can Xue's works coincide with the absurdities depicted by Kafka. To a certain extent, Can Xue has consonance to Kafka (Dong, 2006, p.186). However, Can Xue does not accept Kafka's writing style completely, but shows the social background and aesthetic value of oriental style in her writing by referring to the narrative pattern of western modernist novels (Liu, 2017, p.190). The western readers can not only expose themselves to the familiar western literary features, but also appreciate the distinctive oriental atmosphere in Can Xue's works.

As Can Xue says (Shu, 2007), for foreigners, her work has both eastern and western flavor. She combines the oriental color culture with the western soft layering, which not only stimulates people's meditation, but also brings people the pleasure of logic thinking. Therefore, as translation content, the selection of the translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* has undoubtedly won the favor of English readers.

On the other hand, the political issue of *Dialogues in Paradise* has also aroused a debate among some western readers. Howard Goldblatt has pointed out that western readers tend to read works with a little more political orientation (Ji, 2009, p.46). When reading Chinese literary works, western readers not only focus on the plot, but also lay emphasis on the political background and social phenomenon reflected in the works.

In 1957, Can Xue's father was classified as an extreme "right-winger" and her family was in trouble. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, Can Xue began to write. Of this experience, she writes that, "I want to say something about these ten years, about the future, that no one realizes or says, and I want to say it in literary, fanciful way" (Shi, 1986, p.142). As for her original intention to write, Can Xue claims that she writes novels as a result of the incompatibility of human nature. She will never forget revenge -- emotional revenge, especially at the beginning

of her creation career (ibid.). For example, in the short story "Hut on the Mountain", no matter "Mother's false smile" or "Father's eyes as a familiar wolf's eyes" or "little sister's straight eyes pricking my neck with a red rash", all these reflect the hostile and suspicious emotions among people at that time. Through artistic narration, Can Xue describes the depressing social and political atmosphere in China during the Cultural Revolution. It is a pity, however, that some foreign readers, in Can Xue's fantastic works, "read the distortion of Chinese society, and even get pleasure from it with menace" (Liu, 2017, p.190).

3.2.3 Logic-oriented Translation

The quality of translation is also one of the factors affecting the effect of communication. Translators have to consciously adjust their translation strategies according to the needs of the audience in order to cater to the target readers to a certain extent. If the reading habits of the audience are not taken into account and the original text is excessively restricted, the communication will inevitably be confined.

Can Xue's novels break away from the characters and plot in traditional novels and weave an irrational and unrealistic world with the narration of nightmare. Readers who want to enter Can Xue's world must first face the form of words. However, Can Xue's works lack the use of rational vocabulary and logical narrative style (Li & Wu, 2000, p.89), breaking the rules of causal connection and rational logic. "It is very abstract, very obscure and full of the power to repel readers!" (Can, 1988, p.169) Faced with a lot of delirium expression in the original text, it is particularly important for the translator to ensure the readability of the translation without losing original author's unique artistic style. By comparing Chinese and English texts, the translator Zhang Jian (1997, p.245) realizes that she often unconsciously changed the tone and the style of the text, making the writing more rational, more formal, more rhetorically smooth; in short, more appealing to the taste of the western readers.

While translating Dialogues in Paradise, the translators Janssen and Zhang have adjusted the illogical passages and sentences in more appropriate ways to make the translation more coherent and consistent with English writing style. Taking the short story "A Summer Day in the Beautiful South" as an example, the original text has 17 paragraphs while the translation has 46 paragraphs. The translators have made a lot of separation and sorting of the original paragraphs.

Example (1) Original text: 外婆死了,但我一点 也不悲伤,我还不能理解"死"的含义。在我的概念 里,"死"只不过是一件黑的、讨厌的事,不去想它就 完了。只要火红的落日从茅厕后面掉下,塘边升起 雾气,我蹲下来细细一听,就听到了那种脚步声: "踏、踏、踏……"炎热的空气发出咝叫,天地万物都 应和着这庄严神秘的脚步,夕阳的金门里窜出数不 清的蝙蝠,我的小脸在这大的欢喜里涨红了。(Xue, 1989, p.377) Target Text: Grandma died, but I was not at all mournful. I still didn't know the meaning of death. In my mind, death was only something black and disgusting. The best way to deal with it was to forget.

When the red sun dropped behind the outhouse, mist rose near the pond. I squatted down and listened attentively. I could always hear the footsteps, "tit-atat, tit-a-tat." The scorching air whistled. Everything in the universe responded to those solemn and mysterious footsteps. From the golden gate of the setting sun, clouds of bats swarmed out. My little face flushed with jubilation. (Can, 1988, p.5)

As can be seen from the above example, the translators reorganize the original text, separate the paragraphs of the original text into two paragraphs, and open up a new topic into a new paragraph. Through adjustment, the logic between paragraphs become clearer and texts become more cohesive. In Dialogues in Paradise, paragraphs are divided and integrated all over the place (see Table 1 for details), in order to make the translation more consistent with English writing style, reduce or even eliminate the sense of repellency of English readers to the greatest extent, and make it easier for readers to understand. From both the translated text and the translation strategy, the two translators make a choice in accordance with the audience's expectation of Chinese literature, which is of significance for the success of the communication of Dialogues in Paradise.

 Table 1
 Paragraphs of Dialogues in Paradise and its English

 Translation
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Name of Original Text	Paragraphs	Name of English Translation	Paragraphs
美丽南方之夏 日	17	A Summer Day in the Beautiful South	46
阿梅在一个太 阳天里的愁思	28	The Gloomy Mood of Ah Mei on a Sunny Day	40
瓦缝里的雨滴	26	Raindrops in the Crevice between the Tiles	27
污水上的肥皂 泡	29	Soap Bubbles in the Dirty Water	34
雾	25	The Fog	27
山上的小屋	29	Hut on the Mountain	32
关于黄菊花的 遐想	23	Dream of the Yellow Chrysanthemum	57
公牛	30	The Ox	35
旷野里	38	In the Wilderness	38
我在那个世界 里的事情	21	The Things That Happened to Me in That World	24
约会	41	The Date	37
天窗	102	Skylight	104
布谷鸟叫的那 一瞬间	22	The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings	23
天堂里的对话	74	Dialogues in Paradise	82
Total	505	Total	629

3.3 What Channel – Publisher and Journal

Translation channels refer to those ways through which the translation can be introduced to the public, including newspapers, magazines, publishing houses and other media organizations. As the "other" against the backdrop of western mainstream culture, Chinese literature is rejected and resisted by target readers subconsciously, which is the blocking point in its cross-cultural communication. However, according to the Symmetry Theory proposed by American social psychologist Newcomb (1953, pp.393-404), groups or individuals with the same socio-cultural background, worldview and values tend to be more receptive to each other. If a familiar local publisher participates in the publishing process, the translated works are more likely to be trusted and accepted by target language readers.

The English translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* is mainly introduced by Northwestern University Press. The publishing house was founded in 1983, under the northwestern University, a well-known university in the United States, and the Press has been listed as one of the world famous universities by the Encyclopedia Britannica. As a university publishing house, Northwest University Press is committed to publishing translation works including novels, plays and poems and highly academic journals. After publication, the works mainly flow to libraries and academia. The nature and popularity of the publishing house can not only reflect the literary value of the published works, but also guide readers' reading choices and increase their trust, which undoubtedly promotes the overseas communication of the English translation of Dialogues in Paradise.

Notably, before the book published officially, four of the short stories ("Hut on the Mountain", "The Ox", "Skylight" and "The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings") were published in the American literary journal *Formations*. Such an authoritative and academic literary journal, serving as one of the important carriers of literary works, contributes to the official publication of the collection of *Dialogues in Paradise*.

Thus, the "going out" of Chinese literary works should focus on the diversification of translation and introduction channel, not only through the experienced and time-honored publishing institutions and well-known magazines, but through the online bookshop to expand the communication field.

3.4 To Whom – Overseas Readers

The translation audience is the recipient of the translated works as well as the destination of literary translation and communication. Only when translated literary works are read, can they gain meaning, value and life. The effect of communication is not only affected by the translation subject, translation content and translation methods, but also restricted by the audience, namely the differences in reading interest, political attitude and values (Wu, 2009, p.113). Therefore, before translation, it is necessary for the translation subject to thoroughly understand and analyze the translation audience, and to decide the content and strategy of the translation after comprehensively considering the ideology and reading preference of the translation audience.

Based on their understanding of the audience, the translators Janssen and Zhang decide to translate Dialogues in Paradise. Can's novels bear the surrealism similar to that of European and American novels, so that the western audience is able to experience the intimate literary style. As Janssen mentions in the postscript of Dialogues in Paradise, "the stories gathered in the present volume are arranged to lead the reader into Can Xue's fictional world, beginning with works that come as close as she probably ever will to recognizable narrative realism and proceeding toward free flights of primary processes fantasy, dream, nightmare" (Can, 1988). Zhang Jian (1997, p.242), another translator, has also demonstrated a strong desire to translate the story for the American audience and seen the significance of the translation project in changing the western stereotyped consideration of Chinese literature as merely a study of ancient civilization or political realism. Although the surreal artistic style contained in Can Xue's works is still indifferent to the Chinese audience, it has certain correspondence with the essential characteristics of the western literature, which breaks the western audience's inherent impression of Chinese literature and arouses their recognition of familiar cultural forms. No wonder Can Xue's works are easily accepted and understood by Western readers after being translated and introduced into the English world.

However, it must be pointed out that some western scholars habitually interpret Can Xue's works as social or political allegories. Indeed, Can Xue's novels vividly depict the microcosm of human relations in special periods in China. For example, the "child" and the "parents" in "Hut on the Mountain" are always plotting and scheming. And in the short story "The Gloomy Mood of Ah Mei on a Sunny Day", lovers turn away from each other. Can Xue is good at representing the hideous relationship between relatives or lovers to express pessimism and despair about human nature. But western scholars try to misinterpret China from the images and distorted nightmares in Can Xue's novels, and even equate the lives of these characters with the lives of the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution period, and take the world presented by Can Xue's works as a way to cater to their own curiosity to understand China.

A thorough understanding of the target readers' ideology and reading preference is an important strategy to achieve excellent communication effect. Janssen and Zhang know that both the expression technique and content of Can Xue's novels are familiar to western readers, which can not only arouse the audience's aesthetic acceptance of reading, but also satisfy their curiosity to understand Chinese society.

3.5 What Effect – Overseas Reception

Translation effect refers to the reception effect and influence of translated works among the translated audience. Only when a literary work is accepted by the translated audience can the task and purpose of translation be achieved. The translation effect is related to many aspects, and the study of the translation subject, content, channel and audience is helpful to improve the translation and communication effect of works. The translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* has achieved good communication effect because it accords with the requirements of the translation subject, content, channel and audience.

3.5.1 Professional Readers

Professional book reviews by critics and mainstream media represent professional comments on literary works. After the publication of the work, their book reviews and comments are not only the recognition of the value of the work, but also an important way to attract the reading interest of ordinary readers.

As Daniel Bauer has pointed out in the Asian Folklore Studies, Dialogues in Paradise is sure to be an interest for both the general and scholarly reader of contemporary Chinese fiction (Bauer, 1990:338). American Sinologist Jeffrey Kinkley has once commented that Ronald Janssen and Zhang Jian have smoothly translated *Dialogues in Paradise*, and the translation retains the unpleasant content of the original (Kinkley, 2006, p.139). Bradford Morrow (2004), an American writer and Sinologist, has convinced that *Dialogues in Paradise* seems to have a magical effect encouraging readers to open it. Morrow only read the first two stories and was immediately attracted by them, so that he believes Can Xue will definitely enter his novel.

On the other hand, the western literary feature contained in *Dialogues in Paradise* has reminded some scholars of different nationalities and styles, such as Franz Kafka and Thomas Stearns Eliot. For example, *The New York Times* (Innes, 1989, p.48) holds that the stories recall Eliot's fables, Kafka's delusions, and Matisse's nightmarish paintings, while *Booklist* publishes a review: "the thirteen stories of *Dialogues in Paradise* are eloquent in a way that the West associates with both the modern and the ancient – the dark oracles of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the paranoid mystery of Kafka, the moving stream of Woolf" (Mesic, 1989, p.1866).

The comments of professional scholars serve as the "key opinion leaders", who have such a strong social status that their recommendations and opinions are listened to, not only influencing the public opinion related to the socio-cultural context and translated literary works, but also guiding and shaping the reading choices and value judgments of ordinary readers. The mainstream media and critics in the English-speaking world give high appraisal on *Dialogues in Paradise*, which has greatly enhanced the popularity of Can Xue in the western literary circle and exerted a profound influence on the introduction and communication of the work.

3.5.2 Ordinary Readers

In order to realize the "going out" of Chinese literature, it is necessary to attract all kinds of readers, not a certain kind of readers. A translation that fails to draw the attention of readers has limited vitality and influence (Sun, 2016, p.64). To investigate the translation and communication effect of Chinese literature in the English world, ordinary readers should be taken into account besides professional readers. This paper investigates ordinary readers' acceptance of the English translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* by analyzing readers' comments on Amazon Books and Goodreads. Even if their reviews are not as specialized as those of professional readers, they can still provide references for other readers.

On Amazon Books¹, the comments on *Dialogues in* Paradise are overall positive. One of readers believes that "it would definitely be rewarding if people had the time to sit down and slowly analyze every aspect in detail. Every sentence is a many-layered metaphor for something", while another reader states that these stories are a little rougher around the edges than her later stories, perhaps a bit more unstructured, but still good, and that Dialogues in Paradise is an incredibly beautiful piece of fiction. Some ordinary readers hold the view that "fans of Kafka and Beckett will feel right at home here". Some comments are even as technical as professional analyses: The whole set of short stories totally deviates from the realistic writings norms of Chinese authors. The entire series of stories can be regarded as dreams, many of which have elements from previous stories. Despite "dark" in nature, the dreams are more surreal than nightmare and each dream disconnects from the rationality that is common to those stories we tell ourselves while we sleep.

By sorting out and analyzing the total number of star ratings and the distribution of ratings of *Dialogues in Paradise* in Goodreads² (shown in Table 2), its translation and communication effect can be reflected to a certain extent.

Table 2

Reviews on Dialogues in Paradise in Goodreads			
Star	Number	Rate	
5	48	47%	
4	35	34%	
3	14	13%	
2	6	5%	
1	1	1%	
Total	104	100%	

As shown in Table 2, among the 104 readers, the

number of five-star ratings bears the lion's share, with the proportion of 47% of the total number while one-star ratings only accounts for 1%. There are 97 readers rating *Dialogues in Paradise* above three stars, accounting for about 94% of the total, which reveals the fact that the English translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* is well received by the ordinary readers, even though some of the readers have expressed critical opinions.

Moreover, 16 of the 101 readers posted post-reading comments, which can be summarized as follows: (1) most readers have commented on the story itself, believing that the stories are "meditative", "brilliant" and "beautiful", unlike anything else they've ever read. They don't regard it as a traditional narrative and don't even look for a plot line, but so many hues, flavors, and textures. (2) In terms of the writing language, some readers think that sentences and thoughts seem to jerk startlingly from one perception to another, but always remaining within a fabricated world of mystery, perhaps as close as written language has ever come to simulating actual nightmares. There is a reader reviews that Can Xue writes with a withholding sparseness about her strange and feverish ideas that creates for the best of mystic literature. (3) Other readers who have read the works of Kafka and other western writers obtain a feeling of familiarity in Dialogues in Paradise. They believe that the heart of Can Xue's stories lies in the domestic fable carved out by Kafka and Borges, where the intricate performance of movements within reality intermingles with the poetic depth of fantasy and surrealism.

However, every coin has two sides. There are also criticisms and doubts among the many favorable comments. Faced with Can Xue's unique narrative techniques, some readers find the plot and characters of the novel complicated and lack of logic, which makes them feel confused and inexplicable: the characters and plot are so convoluted, fast-paced, and random that by the time you turn the page, you'll have forgotten what craziness happened the page before.

In contrast to the reviews of professional readers, the reviews of ordinary readers are distinctly personal. In general, the English translation of *Dialogues in Paradise* has received widespread praise. Nevertheless, because Can Xue's works are full of power to repel readers (Can, 1988, p.169), some readers cannot get into or even get close to the world of Can Xue's novels. As Jon Solomon, an American scholar, says that the interest in her work can probably only come from an audience who are cultivated upon the premise of innovation. "Undoubtedly, the form this readership takes today is still that of an educated Western audience."³

¹ The data and readers' comments below are obtained on January 31, 2022 from https://www.amazon.com/Dialogues-Paradise-Xue-Can/dp/0810108313.

² The data and readers' comments below are obtained on January 31, 2022 from https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/833757. Dialogues_in_Paradise?from_search=true

³ See the website: http://web.mit.edu/ccw/can-xue/appreciations-jon-solomon.shtml

4. CONCLUSION

Dialogues in Paradise was translated at the end of the 20th century, when communication between China and the rest of the world was much less frequent than it is today, and the translation and communication of Chinese culture in the English-speaking world was much less extensive than it is today. According to Laswell's 5W communication model, the translation activities of Dialogues in Paradise largely meet the requirements of translation subject, content, channel, and audience, and thus achieve quite outstanding translation and communication effect. By examining these five factors, the English translation of Dialogues in Paradise can structure a communication model for the "going out" of Chinese literature, that is, the translation content that is in line with Western literary aesthetics, by way of co-translation between Chinese and Western translators, is transmitted to the translation audience through western channels, so as to promote the "going out" of the Chinese literature.

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