

# The History of Czech Literature in China

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During a century-long time span, a remarkable array of Czech literary works had been introduced to China, marked by selections of different writers, genres, and themes. This study attempts to discuss what Czech literary works have been translated in China since its beginning in 1921. Besides the selection of texts for introduction, attention has also been given to the formats of their publication, the adoption of introduction approach, choice of intermediate languages, the numbers of different versions, and the frequency of their publication, as well as the textual and paratextual features of the end Chinese products.

*Keywords:* Czech Literature, literary history, texts and paratexts

## Introduction

China embarked on the introduction of Czech literature relatively late, only in 1921 during the New Culture Movement, which began in 1915 and was focused on attacking traditional values and bringing in new ideas from abroad to transform the nation. Some knowledge of its prologue, which are given as follows, will help better understand why the introduction of Czech literature happened at this time and in such a way as it did.

The post-Opium War world, in Qi's words, was "a time of rude awakening for the Chinese", wakening them from their millennium-old dream of past glories, real or imagined (Qi, 2012, p. 4), and ushering in a turbulent century of national crises, reforms, revolutions, and wars before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In the face of Western encroachments, strengthening and modernizing China, by learning from the West, started to assume the utmost importance. And translation came to be recognized as the vital channel through which Western knowledge could be imported (Lee, 2018, p. 245).

As a result of these pioneering efforts as well as the socio-political exigency, the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century saw an unprecedented scale of introduced Western works in science, technology, social sciences, economics, law, history, and finally literature. It was against this backdrop that Czech literature started its century-long journey into China. In this century-long time span, Czech literature introduced in China has gone through rise and fall, and grown from obscurity to popularity. A remarkable array of Czech literary works had been introduced to China, including those of Jan Neruda, Jaroslav Hašek, Julius Fučík, Karel Čapek, Božena Němcová, Jaroslav Seifert, Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klíma, etc. The publications in these periods were marked by selections of different writers, genres, and themes, and were subject to the influence of socio-cultural and political contexts.

### Czech Literature in China: 1921-1949

Our data from this period include 106 works of Czech literature, which correspond to 57 Czech source texts originally written by 25 Czech authors<sup>1</sup>. With regard to the numbers of works and their proportions in the total of 101, the most introduced writer is K. Čapek (and J. Čapek), followed by J. Neruda, B. Viková-Kunětická, P. Bezruč, K. Světlá, S. Čech, J. Vrchlický, I. Herrmann, and J. S. Machar. The remaining 14 writers all have either one or two works in Chinese. This period's Chinese introductions of Czech literature are very concentrated, with the first five writers accounting for more than half, and the 15 least introduced authors making up just 20%.

The two (groups of) most introduced Czech writers, K. Čapek (and J. Čapek) and J. Neruda, come not as a surprise, given their international fame in the period under study, especially the fact that they had already been acclaimed in the dominant cultures. Yet the high introduction rates of two female writers, B. Viková-Kunětická and K. Světlá, might be somewhat out of expectation, especially considering the lower publication rate or even absence of some more canonized writers in the Czech literature, such as S. Čech and K. H. Mácha.

As far as the genre is concerned, the 101 works are 59% short stories (63 works in Chinese corresponding to 27 original texts by 16 writers, or groups of writers), 22% poems (23 Chinese works of 18 poems by 11 poets), 7% essays (seven works corresponding to four original texts by two writers), 5% dramas, and 4% folk songs (corresponding to four anonymous folk songs in Czech). The others include an excerpt from J. Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Svejk*, J. S. Machar's verse novel *Magdalena*, and J. Fučík's memoir *Reportáž psaná na oprátce* (*Notes From the Gallows*), together making up 3%. Some literary genres show a strong correlation with the variable of writers. For example, the five introduced plays are all by K. Čapek (& J. Čapek), with three by the elder brother and two by both of them. The essays are all by K. Čapek, with only one exception by J. Neruda.

One striking feature in this period's Czech literature introduction is the dominant role played by literary periodicals. A majority of the works were published in them, whereas just a small number appeared in book form. Of the 10 works published in books, five are book-length works, while another five are included in collections of short stories by writers of mixed nationalities. There are altogether 57 periodicals involved in publishing 91 works of Czech literature, almost one third of which are found in the six main ones: *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (*Fiction Monthly*), *Shi* (*Poetry*), *Xin qingnian* (*New Youth*), *Dongfang zazhi* (*The Eastern Mischellany*), *Wenxue* (*Literature*), and *Xiyang wenxue* (*Western Literature*).

Another defining feature of this first phase's Czech literature introduction is its indirectness. Since the first ever Chinese known to translate from Czech is Wu Qi, whose first translated work came in publication only in 1957, and our extensive paratextual (both epitextual and peritextual) examination has produced no evidence of any literary translators' knowledge of Czech at this time, the conclusion is that the 101 works in Chinese of the first period are indirectly introduced, via a third culture. Yet just a very small numbers of the texts in Chinese gave explicit information about their directness or the mediating languages used. We've been able to establish some works' directness and the MLs, mainly based on epitextual information about the translators' life experience, educational background, and their translation activities, combined with the information on the availability of the text in possible Mediating Languages. However, there are 26% of the translated literary works whose MLs cannot be determined.

<sup>1</sup> The data include four folk songs whose authors are anonymous. Moreover, nine translations of Slovakian literary works have been excluded from our data. Three translations whose authors cannot be identified have also been excluded.

Of the 61 Czech works translated in this period, 43 have just one Chinese version, while 18 have more than one. A strong correlation can be discovered between retranslation rates and genre: The works with most Chinese versions are largely short stories: for example, K. Čapek & J. Čapek's "Ostrov (The Island)" (eight) and "Živý plamen (Living Flame)" (seven), and J. Neruda's "The Vampire" (seven). The two short stories by female writers, B. Viková-Kunětická's "Geese" and K. Světlá's "Hubicka (A Kiss)", have seven and six versions respectively. The most translated essay is K. Čapek's "Toothache", which came into three Chinese versions. In contrast, poems have a lower retranslation rate, with P. Bezruč's "The Miner" and "Marycka Magdonova", J. Neruda's "Matičce (To My Mother)", J. Vrchlický's "The Gypsy Violin" and F. Halas's "Nameless Soldiers" all having two Chinese versions.

Close examination of the works in this period reveals a wide range of textual features, which reflect the polar opposites of translation methods used in producing them. At one extreme is a very free adaptation of Karel Čapek's play *Věc Makropulos* (*The Makropulos Affair*), the first book-length Chinese version of Czech literature. It is marked on the cover as "gaiyi", meaning "adapted and translated". Actually, it cannot be considered translation in the strict sense, but more of a combination of adaptation and creation. Omissions, additions, and alterations were made to adapt to the Chinese way of thinking. The end product turned out to be a Chinese story remodeled on the Czech work, with the names of places and characters replaced by Chinese ones. At the other extreme are very literal translations of Czech works. Actually, they conformed so strictly to the source texts that they appear awkward and unnatural to modern Chinese readers. Between the two extremes are translated texts that somewhat struck a balance between adequacy and acceptability. Their languages are readable, natural, and not far from the modern literary Chinese used nowadays.

### **Czech Literature in China: 1950-1977**

In our data of this period there are 44 books in Chinese, whose corresponding Czech source texts were originally written by 21 Czech authors. Apart from those in book form, Czech literary works can also be found in the periodical *World Literature* before 1963, which was previously named *Yiwen* in 1953-1958. Except eight texts that got republished later in various book forms, there are in the periodical 14 Czech literary works originally written by 11 writers. Altogether, there are 28 Czech writers translated into China in 1950-1977, in both books and the periodical *World Literature*. Eight of them, i.e., K. Čapek, J. Neruda, S. Čech, P. Bezruč, J. Hašek, F. Langer, J. Wolker, and J. Fučík, had already been introduced to China in the first phase of 1921-1949, while the remaining 18 writers appeared in Chinese for the first time in this second period.

Because "the popular reception of an author can be judged more accurately by the publication of his works in book form than by their single appearance in periodicals" (Edgerton, 1963, p. 62), we put more emphasis on the 44 books and their 21 original Czech authors. Among them, the most introduced is A. Zápotocký with five books, followed by M. Majerová (four), I. Olbracht (four), M. Pujmanová (three), J. K. Tyl (three), and A. Jirásek (three). The other 15 writers all have either one or two books attributed to them. Four of these book authors, including K. Čapek, J. K. Tyl, V. Nezval, and M. Pujmanová, also appeared in the journal *World Literature*, whereas the seven other writers, including J. Neruda (with four poems and three short stories), K. J. Erben (an excerpt from *Kytice z pověstí národních*), P. Bezruč (an excerpt from *Slezské písně*), J. Wolker (two poems), along with L. Aškenazy (one short story), R. Černý (one short story), and J. Weiss (1 short story), only came in the periodical, but not in any books of this period.

With respect to the genre, the 58 works in both books and journal are 47% novels, 17% short stories, 16% dramas, and 15% poetry. The memoir *Reportáž psaná na oprátce* (*Notes From the Gallows*) came into two Chinese versions. One of them, interestingly, is an adaptation into a three-act drama. There were also in the journal *World Literature* one essay and one letter by K. Čapek. Compared with the first period, one of the most striking features of this period is the dramatic increase in novel numbers and decline in short stories. When it comes to the correlation between genre and writers, the most important dramatist introduced in this period is Josef Kajetán Tyl, whose plays, like Karel Čapek's, also appeared in collections. Božena Němcová's and Jan Drda's short stories and Alois Jirásek's dramas came into Chinese, along with their novels. Jan Nerude, like in the first period, had both his short stories and poems introduced. The main Czech poets include S. Čech, K. H. Mácha, P. Bezruč, K. J. Erben, J. Wolker, and V. Nezval. One interesting finding is that, just like in the first period, the introduced Czech writer with the most varieties in genre is once again Karel Čapek, including novel, drama, short story, essay, and a letter, reflecting his international acclaim.

Of this period's 58 Czech literary works, 46% were introduced via Russian, 21% from English, 18% directly from Czech, 5% from French, and 3% from Esperanto. Among the other Mediating Languages, two works were introduced via German: M. Majerová's *Náměstí republiky* (*Republic Square*) by Dong Wenqiao, and P. Jilemnický's *Kus cukru* (*A Piece of Sugar*) by Liao Shangguo. What's more, there are two notable cases of compilative translation. In 1960 Lao Rong introduced S. Čech's *Písň otroka* (*Songs of a Slave*) based on both the Czech original and an Esperanto version, while also referring to a Russian version. Chen Jingrong's 1952 Chinese version of J. Fučík's *Reportáž psaná na oprátce* (*Notes From the Gallows*) was based on a French source text, while referring to both the German and Russian versions. Compared with the first period in 1921-1949, the most significant shift in the Mediating Languages used is the emergence of direct translations from Czech, the dramatic rise of Russian, and the decline of Esperanto.

Among the 58 Czech literary works, some had been introduced in the first period, in their entirety or partially, such as K. Čapek's plays *Matka* (*The Mother*) and *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Disease*), J. Hašek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*, S. Čech's *Písň otroka* (*Songs of a Slave*), P. Bezruč's *Slezské písně* (*Silesian Songs*), and J. Fučík's *Reportáž psaná na oprátce* (*Notes From the Gallows*). Others were introduced more than once by different translators in the second period alone, including A. Zápotocký's *Rudá záře nad Kladnem* (*Red Glow Over Kladno*), twice from English, M. Majerová's *Haviřská balada* (*Ballad of a Miner*), twice from French, and I. Olbracht's *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* (*Nikolai Schuhaj, Highwayman*), twice from English. J. Fučík's *Reportáž psaná na oprátce*, which had been introduced via Russian in 1949, went on with its peculiar journey. It came again into Chinese in 1952 through Chen Jingrong's compilative translation combining French, German, and Russian. Then the following year another version came out by Chen Shan, based on a Russian three-act play adapted from the Czech memoir, making the final Chinese text a retranslation, an indirect translation, and an adaptation at once.

Close examination of the works in this period reveals particular textual and paratextual features, in comparison with those made in the first stage in 1921-1949. From a textual perspective, the target texts mostly seek to strike a balance between adequacy and acceptability, rendered expressively in natural modern Chinese. This contrasts sharply with the characteristically Europeanized syntactic structures found in many texts in the first period, when modern vernacular Chinese as a new literary language had still been under development and far from mature. When it comes to the paratexts, the published works in this period have some peculiarities, especially when compared with the previous period. First, the verbal peritexts, mainly prefaces, postscripts, and

synopses, usually give introduction of the work and the writer including his/her life experience and other works. Emphasis is given to the socio-historical context, usually with ideology-charged comments about the cruel exploitation and oppression of the ruling class such as the landlords, the capitalists or the Nazis, as well as the suffering of the laboring people including peasants and workers. The working class's bravery, industry, and their indomitable revolutionary spirit are extolled. Second, some forewords are from Russian mediating texts. Some other forewords, by editors or translators, quote comments by Russian critics. Third, a majority of the published Czech literary works of this time period include portraits of the Czech writers, which help the readers to build up more vivid images of the writers. Fourth, the markedness of indirectness is a striking feature differentiating this historical period from others. Detailed information is given about not only the Mediating Languages, but the specific Mediating Texts, their translators, publication years, and publishers. Lastly, the writers' names, especially after 1956, were presented in the standardized Chinese transliterations widely accepted till today. Čapek, for example, is transliterated as 恰佩克, as opposed to the 10 variations in the first period which had been a source of great confusion.

### **Czech Literature in China: 1978-2020**

Our data of this period include 142 Chinese books of Czech literature, corresponding to Czech source texts originally written by 32 Czech authors. Apart from these 142 books by single Czech writers, there are also two collections of works by multiple Czech authors, and 10 collections of works by multiple authors of mixed nationalities, which we will include in the discussion only when it is necessary.

The Czech writers with most of their works introduced are B. Hrabal, I. Klíma, K. Čapek, and M. Kundera. However, the low numbers of introduced works by other writers do not necessarily mean few books in publication, as happened with J. Hašek and J. Fučík, both of whom had just one main work introduced but in the form of different versions. The Czech literature in Chinese publication is very concentrated in terms of their authors. The first six writers, J. Hašek, K. Čapek, M. Kundera, B. Hrabal, I. Klíma, and J. Fučík, have 106 books to their credit, accounting for 75% of the total of 142 books. The books-per-writer ratio is 17, meaning each of them has 17.7 books on average in Chinese published books. The remaining 26 writers, by contrast, make up just 25% of the total, with a 1.4 books-per-writer ratio. With regard to the genre, of the 144 books in publication, including one collections of short stories and another of poems by multiple Czech writers, novels make up almost a half, short stories 15%, drama 4%, poetry 2%, and others 28%. Compared with the second period in 1950-1977, there is a decline in the number of poetry and drama translations and a rise in other literary types including essays, travelogues, memoirs, biographies, letters, and diaries.

Compared with the sole official foreign literature journal *World Literature* (originally named *Yiwen*) in 1953-1965, and virtually none in 1965-1976 during the Cultural Revolution, the new era has seen a boom in literary periodicals, with the suspended one resumed and many new ones established, most notably among them *Waiguo wenyi* (*Foreign Literature & Art*), *Waiguo wenxue* (*Foreign Literature*), and *Yilin* (*Translations*), etc. The Czech literary works in this period's periodicals have two main features. First, some important Czech writers first got introduced in literary periodicals before their publication in book form. For example, after Jaroslav Seifert was awarded in 1984 The Nobel Prize in Literature, there were introductory articles and translated poems of him in Chinese journals the following year in 1985, before *Ziluolan*, a collection of his poems was published in 1986. Bohumír Hrabal's *Přiliš hlučná samota* (*Too Loud a Solitude*), along with two of his short stories, was first introduced in a 1993 issue of *World Literature*, before the novella got

republished in 2002 together with his translated collections *Pábitelé* (Palaverers), the first time for the Czech writer to appear in book form in mainland China. Z. Svěrák's two short stories were first published in Chinese in *World Literature*, before the Zhejiang Literature & Art Publishing House produced a series of four books by the author three years later. Milan Kundera's first Chinese book came out in 1987, but he was first known to the Chinese intellectuals 10 years before through a 1977 introductory article by Yang Leyun in *World Literature*. Second, some Czech writers have only been introduced in literary journals and never appeared in book form in mainland China, such as Jarmira Hasková, Jiří Kratochvíl, and Jan Přibyl.

Moreover, most of the Chinese books of Czech literature in this period have been published in series. These range from the general "World Literary Classics", to "Eastern European Literature", to "Collected Works of Nobel Laureates in Literature", to collected works of individual Czech writers, to genre-based collections of short stories, essays or poems, to the enticing "Collection of Banned Books in the World" such as Milan Kundera's *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), to the gender-based collections of works by women writers in the world, and to the more specific "Great Books About Dogs", in the case of Karel Čapek's *Dášeňka čili Život štěněte* (*Dashenka*), and "Books About Gardening", which includes Karel Čapek's *Zahradníkův rok* (*The Gardener's Year*).

Compared with the second period, the most significant shift in this period is the significant rise of direct introductions from Czech to Chinese. Another notable change is the dramatic decline in the use of Russian as a mediating language. What's more, the mediating role of Esperanto, which peaked in 1921-1949 but was diminishing from 1950 to 1977, came to an end in this period. The last translator of Czech literature via Esperanto, Lao Rong, published the Chinese version of P. Bezruč's *Slezské písně* (*Silesian Songs*), which was based on an Esperanto version while referring to the Czech and Russian ones, making it in effect a compilative translation. His last translation from K. J. Erben's *Kytice z pověstí národních* (*A Bouquet of Folk Legends*), published in 1986, three years before his death, was partly rendered from Esperanto and partly from Czech, with the folk stories in the appendix from Russian, according to the paratextual information. A correlation has also been observed between directness of introduction and the original writers. B. Hrabal and I. Klíma's works are mostly introduced directly from Czech. In contrast, none of Milan Kundera's works have been introduced directly. They were rendered from English in the 1980s and 1990s, before Shanghai Translation became the sole Chinese publisher with the rights to market Kundera's works in China in 2002, who then introduced all of them from the French versions provided by the writer himself. That's why the French-mediated works of Czech literature in this period are all of Kundera's.

Of the Czech literary works introduced in 1979-2020 China, most only have one corresponding version. Yet some of them have come into more than one Chinese version. *The Good Soldier Svejk* has 24 Chinese versions<sup>2</sup>, the most among Czech literary works introduced in this period's China. J. Fučík's *Reportáž psaná na oprátce* (*Notes From the Gallows*) has 11 versions, followed by K. Čapek's *Zahradníkův rok* (*The Gardener's Year*) and *Dášeňka čili Život štěněte* (*Dashenka, or the Life of a Puppy*). All of Milan Kundera's Czech works including novels, short story collection and play have more than one Chinese version, along with K. Čapek's *The Noetic Trilogy* novels and Bohumil Hrabal's *Perlička na dně* (*Pearls of the Deep*).

The paratexts in the 1980s and 1990s were largely reminiscent of those in 1950-1977, putting emphasis on the socio-political contexts of the translated works rather than the literary or artistic features, though they are

<sup>2</sup> These do not include the Chinese adaptations of this novel for teenage or children readers.

generally softer in tone and different editors and translators vary in their personal styles. Some quote the comments of socialist politicians or other famous figures, such as J. Fučík. The realist writing methods of the writers are often praised for their reflection of the people's oppression and struggles, while positive descriptions of the aristocratic or bourgeois classes, such as Mrs. Skočdoplová's philanthropy in B. Němcová's short story "V zámku a v podzámčí", are criticized as the writers' limitations by their times. Paratexts of Milan Kundera's introduced works, published in 1987 in the "Reference Works for Writers" series by The Writers Press, however, deviated from this broad trend. In the publisher's statement it is claimed that the book series "is intended to meet the demands of writers and general readers by offering a glimpse into the trends of thought and literature in today's world".

Since the 2000s there has been a further shift away from the socialist realist convention in paratextual practices. The previous ideologically-charged comments have diminished, though they can occasionally still be found in the republications of earlier works. Emphasis has been given to the literary techniques of the introduced works, the inner world of the writers, the analysis of the characters and their behaviors, as well as the philosophical reflections on human nature and on the relationship between individuals and society. Some previous strict taboos have been broken. For example, the Chinese version of Eva Kantůrková's *Po potopě*, published in 2008 by People's Literature, includes a "To Chinese Readers", in which the writer talked about the stifling of literary creation during the totalitarian rule of the 1950s and how her novels including one criticizing rural collectivization had been banned by the government.

One remarkable thing about Milan Kundera's works published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House is their lack of any forewords and postscripts by the publisher. The only exception is the drama *Jakub a jeho pá n: Pocta Denisu Diderotovi (Jacques and His Master)*, which includes a foreword written by Kundera himself. The introduction of the writer, usually on the back covers, is limited to just one simple sentence: "A novelist, born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and living in France since 1975". Another noteworthy thing since the 2000s is the citation of the praise or recommendation of other writers, in most cases Milan Kundera. Such phrases like "highly recommended by Milan Kundera" have appeared on the dust jackets of Chinese publications of B. Hrabal, J. Seifert, and J. Škvorecký, etc. J. Seifert's praise of V. Vančura also appears on the back cover of the latter's introduced novel. These citations of sponsorship by peer writers contrast sharply with the earlier convention of quoting comments by socialist political leaders or politically famous figures from Czechoslovakia or even the Soviet Union.

### Conclusion

By surveying the history of Czech literature introduction in China over the span of one hundred years, this study makes an endeavor to answer the major research question: What Czech literary works have been translated in China since its beginning in 1921 (Jiang, 1987, p. 37)? Besides the selection of texts for introduction, attention has also been given to the formats of their publication, the adoption of translation approach, choice of intermediate languages, the numbers of different versions and the frequency of their publication in China, and the textual and paratextual features of the end Chinese products. For example, as regards the format, Chinese versions of Czech literature have been published in the form of monographs, periodicals, collections. As for the languages used, some were rendered directly from the source language, whereas there also exist indirect introductions via intermediate languages, such as English, Russian, French, and Esperanto (Jiang, 1987, p. 37; Wang, 2008, pp. 27-28). Due to ideological manipulation, the most

commonly used textual strategies were deletion, addition, alterations, and explication. Apart from being a necessary complement to the existing history of foreign literature in China, the study is intended to help gain a more comprehensive view on Czech literature abroad.

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