



Reception of Yu Hua's *Brothers* in the Anglophone World: A Book Review-Based Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This article aims to critically examine the reception of Chinese writer Yu Hua's epic novel *Brothers* in the English-speaking world, including chiefly the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, by analyzing 37 English-language book reviews available to the authors. Shortly after the publication of *Brothers* in English translation in 2009, it received wide critical acclaim primarily for its subject matter along with some negative evaluation and even harsh criticism, particularly regarding its form and language. Meanwhile, the oft-sketchy translation comments included in the reviews themselves also show mixed and even conflicting critical reactions to the English translation. Therefore, much like its reception in China, *Brothers* has also been critically received with a somewhat controversy in the English-speaking world. It is concluded that while the critical acclaim enjoyed by *Brothers* would help promote its circulation, the negative comments on the novel itself and on the English version as well would hamper its reception among Anglophone readers.

Keywords: *Brothers*, Yu Hua, Book Review, Reception, Anglophone World

1. Introduction

Yu Hua (余华), born in 1960, grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Hence, many of his stories and novels are marked by this experience. Honored with a number of international literary awards, including the Italian Grinzane Cavour Prize (1998), the James Joyce Award (2002), Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France (2004), and the Prix Courier International (2008), Yu Hua is one of the world-renowned contemporary Chinese writers. His most famous novels are *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (New York: Anchor, 2003) and *To Live* (New York: Anchor, 2003). The latter was adapted for film in 1994 by internationally-famed Chinese director Zhang Yimou. Because the film was subsequently banned in China, it instantly made the novel a bestseller and its author a worldwide celebrity.

The two-volume best-selling Chinese edition of Yu Hua's *Xiongdì* (兄弟, *Brothers: A Novel* in English) was published amid great fanfare in 2005-2006. It constitutes Yu Hua's first major work after a decade of dormant writing and publishing. *Brothers* tells the story of two siblings' struggles through the turmoil of the Mao era and China's dramatic transformation under Deng Xiaoping. A sprawling satire of contemporary China, it is written in a cheerfully vulgar and obscene idiom. Largely due to its politically sensitive subject matter and vulgar language, the novel has received generally harsh judgment from Chinese literary critics who condemn it as "lowbrow and crass" (Ehrenreich, 2009). Barboza (2006) also notes that although some Chinese critics have lashed out at Yu Hua for producing such a "trashy, Hollywood-style portrait of the country", or a "rough and absurd novel, like a tear-jerking soap opera", *Brothers* has sold nearly one million copies in China.

Largely thanks to the controversy it had aroused in China, the novel garnered unusual critical acclaim in the English-speaking world after its release in January 2009 by the New York-based Pantheon Books and in April that year by Picador in London. It is co-translated into English by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas, the husband-wife duo

teaching at Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of Duke University, USA. Our data, part of which was kindly provided by Carlos Rojas himself, shows that at least 37 English-language book reviews have been published in the press and the Internet, including the prestigious *Time*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Public Radio*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Guardian*, etc. Based on some of these review articles, Wang (2009, 2010b), Guo (2010), Jiang (2010) and Liu (2014) have tried to examine the reception of *Brothers* in the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, these previous attempts are either incomplete in coverage or marred by occasional translation errors. For instance, the concluding sentence “A deeply flawed great novel” of the anonymous review published in *Kirkus Reviews* on December 15, 2008 is mistranslated into Chinese by Wang (2010b: 46) as “这是一部污迹斑斑的伟大作品” (back-translation into English: “This is a thoroughly smeared great work”).

In this article we try to examine the reception of *Brothers* in the Anglophone world by reviewing 37 English reviews available to us. It is recognized that “one way of examining the reception is by looking at the reviews of a work, since they represent a ‘body of reactions’ to the author and the text” (Munday, 2008: 154). Also, according to Steemers (2012: 45), relevant information regarding this reception may be obtained from the “hyper” readers, i.e. the reviewers who critique the texts in the press shortly after the publication of the novel or its translation. Their criticism provides us with a written trace of a reaction by an “abstract” or virtual audience. The main function of the reviewers is not only to inform the reading public of the publication of a book, but also to describe and pass judgment. As Genette (2002: 8) observes, “the reviewer’s taste must inform the general public’s”. As a legitimizing practice, reviews can form “a valuable source of information for the immediate reception of literary works” (Steemers, 2012: 45). We begin with classification and analysis of all the reviews available to us to present a general picture. Then we examine the representative or high-impact reviews by focusing on three aspects: positive and negative evaluation of the novel and translation comments as well.

2. Classification and Analysis of the Media and Book Reviews

The media refer to the main means of mass communication, i.e. broadcasting, publishing, and the Internet. According to their targeted readership, the media carrying these book reviews can be classified into three groups: those intended for the specialist reader and general-interest readers, and trade journals intended for book publishers, traders and librarians. As the name itself suggests, publications for specialist readers are primarily intended for a rather small audience. The mainstream media for general-interest readers can be further divided into “high-impact” and “low-impact” ones in terms of their circulation and impact at home and/or internationally. Professional websites dedicated to literary criticism or translation criticism also offer reviews of translated books. They are basically “borderless” as they are accessible to anyone having access to the Internet and are therefore considered “international” in our study. Owing to their swift circulation, wide coverage and high accessibility, book reviews available on such websites can play a potentially important role in publicizing the book in question. Yet for the sake of convenience, they are put in the “low-impact media” group in Table 1 below.

2.1 Book Reviews in Academic Media for Specialist Readers

In our collected data, there are only three academic publications, i.e. *Kirkus Reviews*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and the MCLC Resource Center Publication (The Ohio State University’s online magazine) in which *Brothers* is reviewed. This is a surprisingly small number compared with the other 30 mainstream media. Yet the figure itself indicates that as a “popular epic” (Row, 2009) Yu Hua’s *Brothers* potentially appeals to the reading public in the West. Book reviews in academic publications are targeted at the “specialist reader”, i.e. scholars, researchers and students engaged in the study of Chinese literature, history and culture. Though a small audience itself, they are most receptive to Chinese literature in English translation since the general reading public in the Anglophone world still lacks enthusiasm about reading English translations of Chinese literature. These scholarly reviews are often authored by academics (e.g. British sinologist Frances Wood reviewing for *Times Literary Supplement*). With a scholarly aura, they often provide somewhat comprehensive comments on the reviewed work’s theme, plot, style, language quality. In some cases brief comments on the translation itself are also included.

2.2 Book Reviews in Mainstream Media for General Readers

Given their number (30 in total), circulation and the targeted audiences, these mainstream media play the most important role in bringing *Brothers* to the general reader. They include well-established English-language newspapers and magazines, both national (*New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Weekend Australian*, *Vancouver Sun*, etc.) and local ones like *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Tucson Citizen’s Calendar*, etc., online book review websites and online literary magazines (Biblioklept.org, PopMatters.com, MostlyFiction.com, *Three Percent*, *Words without Borders*, etc.) and National Public Radio. National newspapers often come with an international edition (e.g. *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*) and enjoy a big circulation, hence are indisputably “high-impact” media. National Public Radio is doubtless also influential. Local newspapers are relatively low-impact. Book reviews published in newspapers are often written in the style of news reporting or news features. They are mostly authored by journalists, editors or columnists.

2.3 Book Reviews in Trade Journals

Trade journals like *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Bookmarks Magazine*, etc. are intended to provide information about newly-released books and short reviews for publishers, librarians, booksellers, literary agents and the like. Among those listed above, *Publishers Weekly*, which carries the tagline “The International News Magazine of

Book Publishing and Bookselling”, is the most influential. Book reviews in such magazines can directly help promote book sales.

Table 1 shows that English-language reviews of *Brothers* appear in at least 17 high-impact media, 4 trade journals, 6 local newspapers, 7 book-review websites and 3 academic publications. Among the 37 media, 19 are US-run, 5 belong to the UK, 4 are operated by Canada, 1 is owned by Australia and Hong Kong respectively, and 7 are international (as they go online). Judging from the number of book reviews (37 in total), their appearance in 4 major Anglophone countries and the level of media (half of them are high-impact), we can conclude that *Brothers* has received not only extensive media coverage but also high-level critical reception in the Anglophone world, and it has been most enthusiastically reviewed in the United States.

It is also interesting to note that the reviewers include London-based Indian writer Pankaj Mishra, *Wall Street Journal* reporter in Beijing Ian Johnson, British sinologist Frances Wood, British translator-cum-scholar Julia Lovell, American writer-cum-scholar Jess Row, US-living Chinese writer Bei Ling, Chinese-American scholar Shirley N. Quan, and managing editor of *The New Yorker* Amelia Lester, etc. This indicates that *Brothers* has drawn wide critical attention from professionals in the Anglophone press, academia and literary criticism circles.

Table 1. Classification of Media and Book Reviews of *Brothers*

Mainstream Media		Academic Media	Trade Journals
<i>High-impact</i>	<i>Low-impact</i>		
1. New York Times (P. Mishra)	1. Cleveland Plain Dealer (K. R. Long)	1. Kirkus Reviews (Anon.)	1. Library Journal (S. N. Quan)
2. Time International (A. Ramzy)	2. Tucson Citizen’s Calendar (Anon.)	2. MCLC Resource Center Publication (C. Rea)	2. Booklist (D. Seaman)
3. Wall Street Journal (I. Johnson)	3. The Ottawa Citizen (CA) (P. McMartin)	3. Times Literary Supplement (UK) (F. Wood)	3. Publishers Weekly (Anon.)
4. Los Angeles Times (B. Ehrenreich)	4. National Post (CA) (J. Paltiel)		4. Bookmarks Magazine (Anon.)
5. Washington Post (Bei Ling)	5. Biblioklept.org (Anon.)		
6. Boston Globe (R. Graham)	6. BookBrowse.com (K. Kovacs)		
7. Newsweek (I. S. Fish)	7. PopMatters.com (C. Barsanti)		
8. New Yorker (A. Lester)	8. quarterlyconversation.com/ (G. McCormick)		
9. New York Times Book Review (J. Row)	9. MostlyFiction.com (K. Merrihew)		
10. New York Times Book Review (E. Dixler)	10. Three Percent Website (C. Post)		
11. National Public Radio (M. Corrigan)	11. wordswithoutborders.org (B. Hughes)		
12. Guardian (UK) (J. Lovell)	12. The Calgary Herald (CA) (P. McMartin)		
13. Financial Times (UK) (J. Urquhart)	13. South China Morning Post (HK) (J. Poon)		
14. Daily Telegraph (UK) (T. Aw)			
15. The Independent (UK) (J. Hill)			
16. Weekend Australian (AU) (N. Jose)			
17. Vancouver Sun (CA) (P. McMartin)			
Total: 37=19 (US), 5 (UK), 4 (CA), 1 (AU), 1 HK, 7 (international)			

Note: Media names are followed by reviewers’ names. “Anon.” refers to an anonymous reviewer. Non-American media are marked in brackets.

3. *Brothers* in the Eyes of Anglophone Reviewers

As a rule, book reviewers give their personal judgment of and comments on the reviewed work's theme, plot, style, and language quality, along with occasional translation comments. For the sake of convenience, the main contents of the reviews (plotline summaries are understandably skipped in our analysis), often in the form of concluding remarks, are not neatly arranged into theme, style, narrative strategy or language quality, but are lumped together in three sections in our highly selective citation and examination of them. The three sections as discussed below are "positive comments", "negative comments" and "translation comments". We are concerned only with high-impact reviews to examine the reception of *Brothers* in the English-speaking world.

3.1 Positive Comments

On the whole, positive comments in the English-language reviews of *Brothers* far outweigh negative ones. Graham (2009) who reviews for *Boston Globe* hails *Brothers* as a "masterful novel", "one of the great literary achievements of this nascent year". Graham notes that *Brothers*, "both ribald and elegiac", "is a satire, but also a rebuke of how China, in its breathless pursuit of success, has compromised its soul". According to him, Western readers might find certain episodes (e.g. the beauty pageant for virgins) in the novel "far-fetched", but "compared with real babies poisoned for profit, a grifter selling bogus hymens in Yu's boundlessly imaginative novel doesn't seem so outlandish after all". Obviously, what appeals most to Graham is the fact that *Brothers* both faithfully represents and satirically criticizes contemporary China's social reality.

Likewise, Lester (2009) reviewing for *The New Yorker* points out that *Brothers* is "a relentlessly entertaining epic", "a family history documenting four decades of profound social and cultural transformation in China". By paralleling the book with the author's characterization of Baldy Li's notoriety using the metaphor of "an expensive dish of stinky tofu", Lester notes that the Chinese novel makes good reading though it is stylistically vulgar. Similarly, Johnson (2009) writing in *The Wall Street Journal Asia* observes that *Brothers* is "a manic, hyperactive account of two brothers whose stories span the past 50 years of hardcore communism and today's no-holds-barred capitalism", the two half-brothers' lives are "almost a parody of reform-era China". In the same vein, Wood (2009) reviewing for *The Times Literary Supplement* notes that "Yu Hua is remarkably successful in depicting the horrible violence of Cultural Revolution and its effect on families and the brashness of the more recent get-quick China, providing an almost text-book history of the past forty years". She also observes that "though many of his set pieces may seem grotesque, they are solidly based in fact. Hymen-reconstruction is big business in China, dangerous unlicensed medicines are widely sold, and the recent scandals involving poisonous baby formula and infected blood are small examples of the dangerous lengths people are prepared to go in order to get rich". It indicates that in Wood's judgment, though some of its episodes may seem exaggerated and "grotesque", *Brothers* successfully depicts the reality of the Chinese society and history.

Corrigan (2009) comments in the National Public Radio in these words: "Read *Brothers*, you'll realize what's missing from a lot of other contemporary social novels, and in particular, Tom Wolfe's opus *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. (Western) Critics are already lauding *Brothers* by comparing it to *Bonfire*, but one is authentic Dickensian down and the other is serviceable fiberfill". By categorizing *Brothers* as essentially "Dickensian", Corrigan suggests that Yu Hua's novel is reminiscent of the works of Charles Dickens, especially with regard to their wide-ranging plots, eccentric characters, or grim depictions of the plight of children and the urban poor, all of which are the distinctive features of *Brothers*. Corrigan concludes that "*Brothers* is a tremendous novel in tone and historical scope and narrative technique. In recognition of this terrific literary achievement, I think that, instead of the Year of the Ox, this should be the Year of Yu Hua".

Mishra (2009: 22) reviewing for the *New York Times* points out that the reasons for the novel's commercial success in China are clear because "it invokes the widely experienced violence and sufferings of the Cultural Revolution while also drawing on another resonant theme in China: the outlandish life style of the rich, especially nouveau-riche entrepreneurs like Baldy Li". According to Mishra, Yu Hua "seems less interested in representing modern-day China through mimetic realism than in evoking it through a bawdy semi-fantastical narrative". Mishra even claims that the novel "may also prove to be China's first successful export of literary fiction". Ramzy (2009) who reviews *Brothers* for *Time International* observes that "Yu Hua's sibling saga paints a grim and sardonic picture of China today". Ramzy also notes that Yu Hua "has a flair for the macabre", which actually characterizes much of Yu Hua's fiction writing, but "there's humor in between the horror". Ramzy's conclusion is that "portraits of contemporary China are rarely sharper or more savage (than Yu Hua's *Brothers*)".

Row (2009) reviewing for the *New York Times Book Review* comments that "*Brothers* is a strange and wonderful thing: one of the first attempts by a Chinese novelist to create a popular epic for the generation that grew up in the Cultural Revolution, came of age in the 1980s, survived the era of the Tiananmen massacre and emerged as the winners and losers in China's market economy". Row concludes that "while Yu Hua's subject matter is new, the novel's episodic structure and its combination of broad caricature and earnest realism, vulgarity and pointed satire, are all deeply rooted in the classic Chinese novels *The Journey to the West* and *The Dream of Red Chamber*". That is, Yu Hua deals with a new and significant topic but draws his stylistic means mainly from Chinese literary tradition.

Judging from the above, we can see clearly that Yu Hua's *Brothers* has received wide critical acclaim from the Anglophone press and academia. It is variously lauded as "a masterful novel", "a boundlessly imaginative novel", "a relentlessly entertaining epic", "a tremendous novel in tone and historical scope and narrative technique", "a terrific literary achievement", "a popular epic created for a generation of Chinese people", "remarkably successful in depicting

contemporary Chinese realities”, “an almost text-book history of the past forty years”. Obviously, the critical applause is predominantly focused on the truth of its representation to the subject matter (i.e. four decades of profound social and cultural transformation in China) it tries to represent and critique. Yet meanwhile the novel is also praised for its “boundless imagination”, “tremendous narrative technique”, and Yu Hua’s “flair for the macabre”. Stylistically, it is interpreted as essentially “Dickensian”, “a combination of broad caricature and earnest realism, vulgarity and pointed satire”. Undoubtedly, this critical acclaim enjoyed by the novel should contribute to its reception in the Anglophone world.

3.2 Negative Comments

Book reviewing is largely a matter of personal taste and critical judgment. And Western critics, though understandably, tend to evaluate contemporary Chinese literature based on Western literary criteria and linguistic aesthetics (Chen, 2011). Meanwhile, *Brothers* itself is marred by a vulgar style, crude language, formal heavy-handedness, and other minor problems. Therefore, it has elicited negative comments and even harsh criticisms from some of the reviewers.

Lovell (2009) reviewing for *The Guardian* notes that the first third of the novel, set in the Cultural Revolution, is laudable, for “Here, the coarseness of the language is well-matched to the horror of the violence”. However, “as you trudge through the long post-Mao sections, though, the author’s refusal to process the raw material of the contemporary People’s Republic grows tiring”. According to Lovell, in *Brothers*, Yu Hua “has taken the crafted restraint out of his nastiness, leaving plain nastiness”; “the rest of the text bludgeons with exaggeration or facetious use of cliché. The novel is supposed to be funny, but mostly fails to be, because its tone and plot are so relentlessly hyperbolic that no punchline can properly stand out”. She also complains that the novel suffers from “the misogyny that sours a good deal of contemporary Chinese fiction by men”: “The women of Liu enjoy a handful of unappealing life choices: to have their bottoms peeped at; to be groped or penetrated, with or without consent; to be left behind; or to die”.

Reviewing for *The Los Angeles Times*, Ehrenreich (2009) observes aptly that in *Brothers* Yu Hua “wrestles with these two toilets and the two Chinas they represent -- one past and one present, one humble and one grand, both, in Yu’s waggish but merciless depiction, equally tragic and equally ridiculous”. Then he proceeds to criticize the novel’s formal and stylistic weaknesses as he judges: it is “unapologetically crude and not just in its humor, which rarely veers far from the outhouse or the bedroom. In broad outline, the novel’s plot ... is simplistic and soap-operatic. It is even less sophisticated in the details. Yu pushes every scene to extremes of sentimentality, or of Rabelaisian grotesquerie or, when he can, both”. “With the exception of his protagonists, Yu’s characterization is purposefully flat”. Later on, however, Ehrenreich admits that “despite a few slow stretches, *Brothers* is a consistently and terrifically funny read”. ... The novel “is no light entertainment but a caustic and painful satire from which almost nothing emerges unscathed”.

Hill (2009) reviewing for *The Independent* observes that “Yu Hua is at his best when unpicking moments of tragedy and following them to their conclusions. Around the many moving scenes, Yu paints the grand backdrop of Liu Town and its residents”. Then Hill points out, “Yu Hua is good at capturing the strangeness of modern China, but with 76 chapters and 641 pages, there is no detour that the author does not pursue; no joke he fails to include. These detours can make the narrative episodic and sagging”. Likewise, Long (2009) notes that “the novel sags with clumsy, cliché-ridden prose; nobody bothered to hack away the useless adverbs littering the pages”. Commenting on the novel’s style, Bei Ling (2009) employs the word “coarse”, especially referring to the spoken idioms in the novel. And McMartin (2009) criticizes harshly, “Yu Hua always writes so woodenly. In any case, the style is strangely stilted and mock-simple, as you’d find in a child’s fable”.

Reviewing for *Daily Telegraph*, Aw (2009) first comments on the style of the novel: “From the outset, the tone is Rabelaisian - scatological with liberal swearing and bawdy humour”, and then he finds faults with the plotting and storytelling: “it is this central relationship between the brothers ... that lies at the heart of the novel’s problems. Bad boy brother on the one hand, kind but ineffectual brother on the other, beautiful but self-obsessed girl in the middle, leading to tragic consequences: it is an arrangement that feels all too familiar. The love triangle sorts itself out almost exactly as we expect it to, and what ought to be affecting feels artificial”; “But the exaggerated storytelling often spills over into the ridiculous”. Aw observes that while Yu Hua’s earlier stories are deeply moving for “moments of quiet beauty and true humanity and his feel for grassroots Chinese life”, in *Brothers*, “such moments are not quite enough to give the novel the true epic status it strives for”.

Quite different from the above basically negative evaluations, the anonymous reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* gives fairly balanced comments. The reviewer notes that *Brothers* is a “massive novel ... where Yu Hua creates a rich panorama of post-Mao China during the 1990s”, but “the novel is cheerfully vulgar and obscene, insistently declarative and overemphatic”. The conclusion is: “it is a deeply flawed great novel, akin to the best work of Zola, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and, arguably, Rabelais”.

To sum up, despite the critical acclaim from the English reviewers, *Brothers* has also been subjected to negative evaluation and even harsh criticism. These are mainly targeted at its “crude” or “coarse” language, “vulgar” or “bawdy” style, “simplistic and soap-operatic” or “artificial” plotting, “episodic and sagging” narrative, “hyperbolic”, “facetious” or “overemphatic” tone, and “purposefully flat” characterization. Since they are almost always based on Western literary criteria and linguistic aesthetics, such negative comments signal at least in part the reaction of Anglophone readers to *Brothers*. Seen in this light, Yu Hua’s ambitious work would most probably meet with both welcome and cold-shouldering on the part of the general reading public. Consequently, its reception in the Anglophone world should be neither too optimistic nor too pessimistic.

3.3 Translation Comments

It is interesting to observe that only 7 reviewers out of a total of 37 briefly comment on or mention the quality and style of the English translation. There are several reasons for the lack of focus in reviews on the process of translation. One of these, noted by Robert Coover (see Christ, 1982: 17), is that “whenever cuts are requested by the publishers of a review, the first to go are usually the remarks about the translation”. Another reason is that many Anglophone reviewers, hardly ever conversant with Chinese, are unable to compare the Chinese original with the English text (Christ, 1982: 21).

Ramzy (2009) observes briefly that “this new English translation of *Brothers* excellently captures its beauty and high farce”. Ehrenreich (2009) points out that “Yu’s language, deftly translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas, is anything but lyrical”. That is, Yu Hua’s “crude” and “coarse” fictional language is fully retained and accurately represented in the English version.

In his detailed discussion of the English translation, Row (2009) notes that reading *Brothers* in English “can be a daunting, sometimes vexing and deeply confusing experience. Partly this has to do with the difficulty of finding an English equivalent for Yu Hua’s extremely direct and graphic Chinese”. “The novel is a whirlwind of verbal and physical violence -- curses, denunciations, black eyes, beatings -- and yet Yu describes this violence so matter-of-factly, and repetitively, that through the filter of translation it becomes nearly impossible to absorb”. In other words, the Chinese original basically defies translation and the English translation can be said as not to be successful. Row actually cites one example appearing at the end of the novel where Yu Hua implicitly compares Baldy Li to “林黛玉” (Lin Daiyu), the delicate, consumptive heroine in the classic Chinese novel *Hongloumeng (The Dream of Red Chamber)*. According to Row, “in such cases one wishes that footnotes were included in the translation”, yet footnotes can “impede the feelings and recognition and absorption a novel depends on”. Hence, “there’s no substitute for that kind of *yiyin*”. Thus ends Row’s veiled criticism of the English translation: “perhaps it’s better to say that the strangeness of this English version demonstrates just how wide the chasm of common reference and understanding between China and the West still is”.

Wood (2009) notes that “this translation of *Brothers* with its American spelling and vocabulary cracks along well”. Then she criticizes, “I don’t think the translators make the literary link between the storytelling style the author has adopted, ... and the characteristic storytellers’ narrative in China’s classic novels such as *Shui hu zhuan* ..., and *San guo zhi* ¹ There are occasional references to classic historical tales in *Brothers*, and the fights, especially when the ‘sweeping leg kick’ (扫堂腿) is involved, are strongly reminiscent of the famous fights in *Shui hu zhuan*”. According to Wood, “these references will not be lost on Chinese readers”, but they will undoubtedly be lost on English readers, because no attempt has been made by the translators to reconstruct the “literary link” in the English version.

Long (2009) observes that “the novel sags with clumsy, cliché-ridden prose; nobody bothered to hack away the useless adverbs littering the pages” and thus blames the translators indirectly for such a poor style. Bei Ling’s (2009) notes that “Yu is paying tribute to the magical realist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but of course his use of language is faithful to his mother tongue, and this translation by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas never falls into the Westernized diction that afflicts many fiction writers in modern China”. Here Bei Ling suggests that the English version is both faithfully and deftly rendered.

McMartin (2009) who reviews for *Vancouver Sun*, *the Ottawa Citizen* and *The Calgary Herald* offers very harsh criticism of the English version. He comments that “the novel’s biggest disappointment lies in its translation. Or maybe it isn’t the translation, but rather the fact that the idiosyncrasies of Chinese don’t easily offer up their subtleties. Or maybe Yu always writes so woodenly. In any case, the style is strangely stilted and mock-simple, as you’d find in a child’s fable”. As it is very likely that McMartin does not know Chinese, his negative comments on the style of *Brothers* are targeted at the English translation.

The above critical analysis indicates that the English translation by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow meet with mixed and even conflicting critical reaction: some reviewers observe that their translation “excellently captures the original’s beauty and high farce”, that *Brothers* is “faithfully”, “deftly” rendered, while for other reviewers their translation is on the whole not successful, and reading it “can be a daunting, sometimes vexing and deeply confusing experience”, or is marred by a “poor, clumsy style”. There is also fault-finding with the disappearance in the translation of the “literary references” to Chinese classical novels. As there is a general disinterest in translated Chinese stories among Anglophone readers, such quibbles about the translation can potentially reduce the size of the book’s readership.

4. Conclusion

The above critical analysis of *Brothers*’ reception in the Anglophone world leads us to the following conclusions and observations:

Firstly, *Brothers* has received not only extensive media coverage but also high-level critical reception in the Anglophone world, and it has been most enthusiastically reviewed in the United States. The critical applause is predominantly focused on the truth of its representation to the subject matter (i.e. four decades of profound social and cultural transformation in China) it tries to represent and critique. Yet the novel is also praised for its “boundless imagination”, “tremendous narrative technique”, and Yu Hua’s “flair for the macabre”. Stylistically, it is interpreted as essentially “Dickensian”, “a combination of vulgarity and pointed satire”. Undoubtedly, this critical acclaim should contribute to its reception in the Anglophone world. Meanwhile, the novel has also been subjected to negative evaluation and even harsh criticism, mainly targeted at its “crude”, “coarse” language, “vulgar” or “bawdy” style”,

“artificial” plotting, “episodic and sagging” narrative, etc. Seen in this light, Yu Hua’s ambitious work would most probably meet with mixed reception on the part of the general reading public.

Secondly, judging by the translation comments reviewed above, we can see that *Brothers* is judged as faithfully and deftly rendered, but meanwhile it is also found by some reviewers to be difficult for English readers to understand. There are probably two main aspects that make the reading difficult -- the original work, particularly due to a large number of Chinese culture-loaded items, and the way it is translated, i.e. the English text tends to stay too closely to the Chinese original. Moreover, the fact that only several book reviews are concerned with the quality and style of the English translation bespeaks that the “translator’s invisibility” observed by American scholar Lawrence Venuti (1995) remains a common phenomenon in America. Given the fact that Anglophone publishers and readers are still stubbornly “resistant to literature in translation” (Wimmer, 2010: 71), there is still a long way to go for Chinese literature to actually “go out to the world”.

Finally, this study indicates that a critical analysis of the book reviews themselves can present only a general picture of *Brothers*’ reception in the Anglophone world. As is shown by pioneering studies by Kung (2009) and Wang (2014a, 2014b), we can more systematically analyze the production and reception of *Brothers* in particular and Chinese literature in general in the target literary field by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and Bruno Latour *et al*’s actor network theory. A sociological approach promises more fruitful research results in this promising area of translation studies.

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Notes

1. *Shui hu zhuan* (水浒传), known in English titles as *Water Margin*, *Outlaws of the Marsh* or *All Men Are Brothers*, and *San guo zhi* (三国志) or *Records of the Three Kingdoms* in English are generally considered the best classical novels of Chinese literature.