

Milan Kundera in Vietnam and China: The Translation Process as an Inter-cultural Dialogue

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Abstract This paper compares the translation process of the same foreign author's works in Vietnam and China. Although Milan Kundera is well-known in both countries, his legacy was translated through distinct approaches, corresponding to different processes of engagement. The translated publications in the two nations reveal the similarities and divergences in the internal dynamics of their respective literatures. Given the shared cultural and literary traditions, as well as similar processes of literary modernization, the differences in the two literatures' responses to the same phenomenon - including the timing of its introduction and the approach to its reception - are more clearly revealed. Beyond factors belonging to the translators, it is necessary to admit that extra-literary powers, specifically political institutions and diplomatic relations, influenced the choice of source texts and the circulation of the translated works. The findings of this study illustrate the way to integrate with global culture through the reception foreign literature, and simultaneously, provide a reference to the direction of sustainable development in the new rising era by fostering culture.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, translation, literature reception, comparative literature, Vietnam, China

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1. Introduction

Since Johann Wolfgang Goethe first introduced the concept of "world literature" in 1827, cultural exchange has been recognized as fundamental to the modernization of each national literature without sacrificing its unique characteristics [1] [p. 9]. Consequently, the need to research the relationships among national literatures grew stronger, leading to the formation of comparative literature. Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's 1886 work, *Comparative Literature*, is considered the formal birth of this new academic discipline [2] [p. 17]. For over a century, comparative literature has served the study of both world and national literatures. The comparison of one literature with another, or of phenomena across different literatures, provides a comprehensive overview of world literature – not only its historical development but also its synchronic aspects. Conversely, a deep understanding of a national literature necessitates the comparison of its indigenous phenomena to analogous ones in world literature.

In the digital era, fostering mutual understanding to strengthen the ties between communities and nations worldwide is one of the key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). During the 9th International Conference of Young Parliamentarians (Vietnam, 2023), the session titled "Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity to Support Sustainable Development" highlighted a shared

view among delegates: that respect for cultural diversity is essential for achieving sustainable development in the current global context. "Our pursuit of digital transformation and innovation should not push us towards global homogeneity. It should amplify the rich tapestry of cultures, experiences and perspectives. Cultural diversity is a strength for sustainable development which should not only be protected but embraced, as it is an indispensable ingredient that can nurture even more creativity and innovation" [3]. From this perspective, translated works serve not only as a bridge to enhance understanding of other cultures but also as evidence of a nation's unique cultural characteristics at a given point in time, thereby providing valuable experience for future development.

As a popular author in both China and Vietnam, Milan Kundera's works reached readers in the two countries through separate translation paths. Kundera had been writing before leaving Czechoslovakia for France in 1989. He continued to use Czech in his works and became one of the most famous emigrant authors when his Czech works were translated. Afterward, he chose French as his sole creative language. Translations from French into many other languages have since helped his name become widely known around the world. This article does not emphasize the reception of Czech and French cultures in Vietnam and China through translations of Kundera's novels. Instead, I draw on the translation of Kundera's works in Vietnam and China to highlight the impact of social and political differences between the two countries

on the selection, method, and timing of translations. Additionally, the circulation level of these translations among elite and mass readers reflects the very different aesthetic psychologies of the two countries.

In my opinion, studying the translation process of Kundera's works in Vietnam and China is significant in many respects. The research findings do more than just illustrate the differences in the reception of Western literature in two culturally close East Asian countries during their period of integration into world literature. Beyond that, I hope this paper will serve as a reference for examining similar cases: the natural gravitational force that isolated literatures recognize upon contact with other literatures; and the fact that despite having shared common values in the past, different literary cultures will impose their own censorship barriers on translation.

With a history spanning over thirty-five years, the translation process of Kundera's works in Vietnam and China offers a sufficient temporal distance for preliminary observations. The modern world has created an increasingly robust environment for cross-national cultural exchange, while access to cultural products has become easier than ever, not only overcoming border barriers but also through digital publishing formats. In this context, it is crucial to analyze the translation process of a foreign literature phenomenon by comparing it with that of a neighboring country to draw lessons for future translation and interpretation strategies.

Song Binghui, in *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature* analyzed the reception of Kundera's works by Chinese writers in the 20th century [4] [pp. 117-145]. Similarly, Paola Inovene focused on a specific case to reveal how this foreign novelist gained attention and subsequently influenced a Chinese author [5] [pp. 197-218]. Additionally, some interviews with Chinese translators about their process of translating Kundera's works have been translated into English and published on the international versions of Chinese websites [6,7]. These studies collectively consider the interaction of Czech/French literature with Chinese literature as a case of major world literatures. In contrast, there has been no dedicated research history on translations of Kundera's novels in Vietnam, nor is there any comparative heritage on translated publications in the two countries. We can only find a few scattered interviews with Vietnamese translators on various Vietnamese websites. This paper, therefore, aims to be the first foundational study in this field, addressing this significant gap in the literature.

Based on empirical data, this paper seeks to identify independent similarities in the translated literature of Vietnam and China by examining the translation process of Kundera's works, particularly after Vietnamese literature had moved beyond the direct influence of Chinese translation. Furthermore, my article highlights distinct local differences in translation, which are a result of disparities in technical factors in both countries. It also provides a comprehensive overview of the diverse and complex international relationships among the four involved nations - Vietnam, Czech Republic, China, and

Russia - during the 1990s.

Comparative literature serves as the methodological principle for this work. In comparing these two literary phenomena in Vietnam and China, this paper employs a historical approach to review and present the translation of Kundera's works in Vietnam. This analysis places the translation within a specific period of foreign literature reception, which is both an inevitable and long-standing cultural activity. The study highlights key events to establish temporal continuity, thereby clarifying the underlying causes and internal literary factors that influenced the translation of Kundera's works at particular moments. This research also applies a sociological approach, focusing on the impact of socio-political factors on the access to translation sources, the translation process, and the publication of translated works. It then demonstrates how differences in these socio-political contexts have led to different outcomes in literary reception. Furthermore, the article combines diachronic analysis (studying the evolution over time) with synchronous comparison (comparing the two countries at the same time) of Kundera's translations in Vietnam and China. This method provides a preliminary evaluation of the influence of non-literary institutions on the selection and publication of foreign works.

2. Milan Kundera's Works - the Special Recipient Case in Vietnam and China

Milan Kundera's works first appeared in Vietnam and China at different times, separated by a decade, but coinciding with periods of artistic liberalization in both countries. In China, Kundera's name was mentioned in an academic journal in 1977. A year later, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCPCC) initiated the reform and opening-up policy. In 1981, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th CCPCC passed a resolution that formally ended the Cultural Revolution and promoted a period of cultural opening. This context allowed Chinese literature to break from its dogmatic past, embracing a spirit of reform and liberation. Alongside a surge of new works, significant efforts were made to update literary theories to move the field beyond its previous backwardness. In Vietnam, a similar shift occurred following the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986, which initiated discussions on the relationship between art and politics. This period of renovation ("đổi mới") in literature expanded both in depth and breadth [8]. European and American literature, previously considered sensitive, was no longer merely a subject of diatribe and rejection. Due to the strained relationship between Vietnam and China at the time, Vietnamese critics sought alternative channels to access foreign literary elites, primarily through the Soviet Union (Russia after 1991) or through English and French versions of key works. Within this context, Ngân Xuyên read the Russian translation of *Immortality* in a Russian scholarly journal in 1994, marking the beginning of the reception of Kundera's works in Vietnam [9].

2.1. The Not Copyrighted Translation Stage of Milan Kundera's Works

According to [10], Milan Kundera was first introduced to China in 1977. The second issue of *New Foreign Literary Movements* published an article by Le Yun (乐云) titled "An American Journal Introduces Czech Writers Václav and Kundera" (《美刊介绍捷克作家伐错立克和昆德拉》). In 1985, Le Ou-fan (李欧梵), a professor at the University of Chicago, wrote an article introducing both Gabriel García Márquez and Kundera. A decade later, the first translation of Kundera's work was released in China.

Table 1. Milan Kundera's works were translated into Chinese during the period of non-copyrighted translation

No	Year	Work – Translator – Publishing Information
1	1987	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> (novel) - Han Shaogong (韩少功), Han Gang (韩刚) - Writers Publishing House, Beijing, "internal publication", ISBN: 978-7-506-30011-7
2	1987	<i>Farewell Waltz</i> (novel) - Jing Kaixuan (景凯旋) and Xu Naijian (徐乃健) - Writers Publishing House, Beijing, "internal publication", ISBN: 10248- 0209
3	1989	<i>Life is Elsewhere</i> (novel) - Jing Kaixuan and Jing Liming (景黎明) - Writers Publishing House, Beijing, "internal publication", ISBN: 9787506301985
4	1991	<i>The Joke</i> (novel) - Jing Kaixuan and Jing Liming - Writers Publishing House, Beijing, ISBN: 9787506303309
5	1991	<i>Immortality</i> (novel) - Ninh Ming (宁敏) – common pen name of Sheng Ning (盛宁) and his wife - Writers Publishing House, Beijing, ISBN: 9787506305471
6	1995	<i>The Art of the Novel</i> (essay) - Meng Mei (孟湄) - Sanlian Bookstore, Beijing, ISBN: 9787108004598
7	1995	<i>Testaments Betrayed</i> (essay) - Meng Mei - Shanghai People's Publishing House and Oxford University Press, Shanghai, ISBN: 9787208021624

Table 2. Milan Kundera's works were translated into Vietnamese during the period of non-copyrighted translation

No	Year	Work – Translator – Publishing Information
1	1996	<i>Immortality</i> (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (from Russian version) - <i>Foreign Literature Journal</i> No. 1
2	1998	<i>The Art of the Novel</i> (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (from original French) - Đà Nẵng Publishing House, Da Nang
3, 4, 5	1999	<i>Immortality, Slowness, Identity</i> (anthology printing) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (<i>Slowness</i> - from the original French, <i>Immortality</i> and <i>Identity</i> - from the Russian version) - Literature Publishing House and East-West Language and Culture Center, Hanoi
6	1999	<i>The Art of the Novel, Testaments Betrayed</i> (anthology printing) (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (from original French) - Writers Association Publishing House and East-West Language and Culture Center, Hanoi
7	2003	<i>Life is Elsewhere</i> (novel) - Cao Việt Dũng (from original French) - Writers Association Publishing House and East-West Language and Culture Center, Hanoi
8	2004	<i>Farewell Waltz</i> (novel) - Cao Việt Dũng (from original French) - Writers Association Publishing House and East-West Language and Culture Center, Hanoi

Milan Kundera's works were enthusiastically received in China. The first translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, although published for internal circulation only, attracted significant attention. Kundera's books even

became a literary phenomenon in the 1990s, establishing a prominent reading trend among intellectuals [6].

In Vietnam, the oldest translation of Kundera's work appeared a decade later than in China. This initial translation and information about the author were both sourced from Russia [9].

The two statistical tables above reveal that Vietnamese translations during this period were the independent work of individual translators, unlike the collaborative translation efforts seen in China. Furthermore, translators from both countries had distinct specializations: those who translated essays did not participate in translating novels and vice versa.

2.2. The Copyrighted Translation Stage of Milan Kundera's Works

In May 2002, Shanghai Century Publishing acquired the exclusive copyrights to Milan Kundera's works in mainland China. Within a span of two years, from 2003 to 2004, the company organized new translations for all of Kundera's previously published works in Chinese. It also released translations of his later works during this period.

Table 3. Milan Kundera's works were translated into Chinese during the period of copyrighted translation

No	Year	Work (original work's publishing year) – Translator
1	2003	<i>The Joke</i> (1967) (novel) - Cai Ruoming (蔡若明)
2		<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> (1984) (novel) - Xu Jun (许钧)
3		<i>Testaments Betrayed</i> (1992) (essay) - Yu Zhongxian (余中先)
4		<i>Slowness</i> (1993) (novel) - Ma Zhencheng (马振骋)
5		<i>Identity</i> (1998) (novel) - Dong Qiang (董强)
6	2004	<i>Laughable Loves</i> (1968) (short stories) - Yu Zhongxian and Guo Changjing (郭昌京)
7		<i>Life Is Elsewhere</i> (1969) (novel) - Yuan Xiaoyi
8		<i>Farewell Waltz</i> (1976) (novel) - Yu Zhongxian
9		<i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> (1979) (novel) - Wang Dongliang (王东亮)
10		<i>The Art of the Novel</i> (1985) (essay) - Dong Qiang
11		<i>Immortality</i> (1990) (novel) - Wang Zhensun (王振孙) and Zheng Kelu (郑克鲁)
12	2006	<i>Ignorance</i> (2000) (novel) - Xu Jun
13		<i>The Curtain</i> (2005) (essay) - Dong Qiang
14		<i>Encounter</i> (2009) (essay) - Wei Chixiu (尉迟秀)
15	2014	<i>The Festival of Insignificance</i> (2014) (novel) - Ma Zhencheng

In contrast to previous practices, not all of the published translations were used for this copyrighted release. Collaborative translation efforts were almost nonexistent, with the notable exception of the cooperation between Wang Zhensun and Zheng Kelu on *Immortality*.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese translators edited and refined their previous works after a domestic publisher, Nhà Nam Culture and Communications JSC, completed the licensing procedures with the author. This meant that instead of being newly translated, many existing translations were simply reissued.

Table 4. Milan Kundera's works were translated into Vietnamese during the period of copyrighted translation

No	Year	Work (original work's publishing year) – Translator
1	2009	<i>Laughable Loves</i> (1968) (short stories) - Cao Việt Dũng (first translation)
2	2009	<i>Ignorance</i> (2000) (novel) - Cao Việt Dũng (first translation)
	2012	<i>Ignorance</i> (2000) – reprint after revised (novel) - Cao Việt Dũng (former translation)
3	2013	<i>Encounter</i> (2009) (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (first translation)
4	2014	<i>The Curtain</i> (2005) (essay) - Trần Bạch Lan (first translation)
5	2015	<i>The Festival of Insignificance</i> (2014) (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (first translation)
6	2018	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> (1984) (novel) - Trịnh Y Thu (former translator)
7	2019	<i>Immortality</i> (1990) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (former translator, re-translating from the French version instead of the Russian version as in the first edition)
8	2019	<i>Slowness</i> (1993) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (former translator)
9	2020	<i>Identity</i> (1998) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (former translator, re-translating from the French version instead of the Russian version as in the first edition)
10	2021	<i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> (1979) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (first translation)
11	2023	<i>The Art of the Novel</i> (1985) (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (former translator)
12	2023	<i>Testaments Betrayed</i> (1992) (essay) - Nguyễn Ngọc (former translator)
Applying for license		<i>The Joke</i> (1967) (novel) - Ngân Xuyên (first translation)

3. Similarities and Differences in Milan Kundera's Works Translation Process in Vietnam and China

The progress of translation consistently reveals information on geographical, historical, and cultural variations. When approaching the same foreign author, Vietnamese and Chinese translators have demonstrated a closeness in their aesthetic and literary sensibilities. However, different technical conditions have led to discrepancies in the publishing and distribution processes for translations of Milan Kundera's works.

3.1. Similarities in the Translation Process

Translators in both countries approached Kundera's works with the shared goal of promoting the development of domestic literature through translation. The pioneers of Kundera's translation in Vietnam, Ngân Xuyên and Nguyễn Ngọc, were excited by what they saw as a new art of the novel. Consequently, many Vietnamese critics hoped that these translated works would encourage domestic writers to adopt new and different styles [9]. Similarly, when translating Kundera's works, Chinese translators shared the intention of influencing the development of Chinese literature. Jing Kaixuan, the first person to translate *Farewell Waltz* into Chinese, found in this novel a spirit of profound sincerity and reflection that he believed was lacking in contemporary Chinese literature. The post-Cultural Revolution era had sparked a desire among Chinese authors to explore the individual's position in historically turbulent times, and they felt

Kundera's works resonated with this very sentiment [6].

When translating Kundera's works, the first issue translators must address is the source language. He wrote in two languages: (1) Czech, his native tongue, during the early part of his career, and later, (2) French. After immigrating to France, Kundera continued to write in Czech, and his works were subsequently translated into French, which introduced him to Western literary circles. However, dissatisfied with these translations, he began to personally edit them. Starting in 1985, after choosing French as his sole creative language, he edited these French translations so meticulously that, as he noted in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, they became “more faithful to the Czech language than the original” [11, p. 313]. He also meticulously edited the English translations of his works. For other languages, he maintained a strict policy, permitting translations to be made only from the French version that he had personally revised [7].

As Chinese literature emerged from the Cultural Revolution and Vietnamese literature began to open up after years of war and embargoes, the initial translations of Kundera's works did not fully meet his high standards. Due to the scarcity of foreign publications circulating within each country, translators struggled to access the original texts and were unaware of the author's specific requirements. This led to what could be called “indirect translation” in both nations - the practice of translating a work through a translated version in another language, without accessing the novel in its original language. For example, Ngân Xuyên (Vietnam) translated *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* from the Russian translation, and Han Shaogong (China) translated *Farewell Waltz* from the English version instead of the original Czech. As a result, many rhetorical devices from the original works were not preserved in the translations, for example, the title *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* became *The Unbearable Lightness in Being* in first translation by Han Shaogong and Han Gang (《生命中不能承受之轻》instead of 《不能承受的生命之轻》) [12, p. 139]. Over time, internal literary movements and the professionalization of publishing gradually addressed these shortcomings. Both countries eventually entered a phase of copyrighted translation, which allowed them to work more meticulously with the author.

The second stage of translation in both China and Vietnam was marked by a profound respect for the author's demands, in both the translation source and the final printed form. Crucially, the source materials were the French originals and the French versions of his Czech works, which Kundera had personally edited. The previous version of indirect translations was eliminated. In Vietnam, translator Ngân Xuyên re-translated *Immortality* and *Slowness* directly from the original French, replacing the older versions translated indirectly from Russian. Similarly, in China, a new French-to-Chinese translation of *Farewell Waltz* by Yu Zhongxian was released, superseding the earlier English translation by Jing Kaixuan and Xu Naijian. Translators and copyright holders in both countries worked with great seriousness and respect for the author. Notably, Nhã Nam Culture and Communications JSC sent the translator's resume to

Kundera for approval and discussion [9], while the Chinese translator Yu Zhongxian even proposed a private meeting in France to seek his opinion [7]. This level of interaction was rare with the reclusive writer, who had refused all interviews since the late 1980s.

Furthermore, the new publications removed all introductions, prefaces, afterwords, and personal portraits, including only the main text as the author wished. Publishers in both countries designed simple covers in accordance with Kundera's preferences and sought his approval before official printing [9].

3.2. Differences in the Translation Process

Vietnamese translators translated Milan Kundera's works more slowly than their counterparts in China. In addition to this time difference, the translation process itself also had many distinct characteristics.

Approaching Kundera's works from Russian translations placed Vietnamese readers at a disadvantage. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his most significant novel, contains strong critiques of Russia, making it almost impossible to find a Russian translation of the work in the early 1990s. Furthermore, even if Vietnamese translators had been aware of the novel through the French original or another translation earlier, they could not have published it publicly as their Chinese colleagues did. Consequently, Vietnamese readers discovered this work much later than Chinese readers and, initially, only through unofficial channels. The first Vietnamese translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was an translation by Trịnh Y Thu, a Vietnamese overseas translator. He worked from the English version, published in 2002 by Literature Publishing House in California, U.S. This translation was then reposted on his personal WordPress, requiring readers to bypass a firewall to access it.

In the initial, non-copyrighted phase of translation, a key difference emerged between Vietnam and China. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, who often worked in teams, Vietnamese translators typically worked individually, completing an entire work and even continuing on to subsequent ones. This solitary approach allowed for a more consistent style throughout the translation. This distinction in methodology became a notable factor in the second, copyrighted stage. As Vietnamese and Chinese scholars chose different paths to continue introducing Kundera's works, the Vietnamese opted to refine and elaborate on their existing translations, whereas the Chinese chose to undertake entirely new translations.

Another key aspect of translation, particularly evident during the copyright stage, is the final output. Compared to China, Vietnam's publishing system revealed its weaknesses when releasing the same types of publications. After a concerted two-year effort in 2003 and 2004 to re-translate older works, Chinese translators quickly caught up with Kundera's new creations. All three of his final works were available in Chinese just one year after their original release. This impressive result was a combination of the translators' efforts and the publishers' methodical and focused planning. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the translation of Kundera's works consistently lagged far

behind their original publication dates. There are two main reasons for this:

- (1). Late acquisition of copyright: Vietnam only acquired the rights in 2009, when Kundera almost completed his writing career.
- (2). Less professional publishing and distribution system: Chinese readers, thanks to publishers like Shanghai Century Publishing, can access Kundera's entire body of work. In contrast, with Nhã Nam Culture and Communications JSC, Vietnamese readers have yet to see a reprint of *Life is Elsewhere* and are still waiting for the translation of *The Joke*.

Using translations as a means to alter the composition of artistic symbols and, by extension, to up level creative thought is a common practice in literatures that have recently emerged from a period of isolation. In Korea, scholar Ch'oe Namson (최남선), one of the first modern Korean literary translators, introduced Lord Byron's works to the country. Through the new spatial imagery in his translations, he contributed to a shift from the "China-centered" worldview toward the "Western-oriented" perspective and, at the same time, influenced a change in Korean cultural identity in the early 20th century [13, p. 284]. In terms of reception, Milan Kundera's works attracted readers in both countries, but the level of influence was very different. In Vietnam, the initial translation of Kundera's works was integrated into a context where translated literature was encouraged to develop through national publishing conferences, state awards for translators, and the establishment of a translated literature council [14]. While Kundera's concepts, such as "Kitsch" and "totalitarianism", gradually became familiar to the Vietnamese literary community, his writing style had virtually no tangible impact on the works of Vietnamese authors. Despite appreciating Kundera's novels and essays, Vietnamese writers did not show any trace of his influence in their works. In China, the mark of Kundera's style was very clear. The Experimental Chinese Literature appeared after the 90s of the 20th century, the satirical style of Wang Shuo (王朔) and Wang Meng (王蒙), and even changes in the writing style of the translator Han Shaogong - who translated *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* - were the results of receiving Western literary achievements during this period, including Kundera's works [5]. In Vietnam, Kundera's influence only stopped at research projects within the scholars club and did not touch the creating field [9]. Kundera's works also did not become a publishing phenomenon in Vietnam like in China, they were mostly the choice of specialized readers.

4. Impact of Non-literary Factors on the Translating Process of Milan Kundera's Works in Vietnam and China

Besides internal factors related to individual translators and technical conditions, the political environment also significantly influenced the translation process of Milan

Kundera's works in both Vietnam and China.

4.1. The Influence of the Geopolitical Relationship between Vietnam and China

Since the 18th century, translation has been an integral part of the literary exchange process, grounded in a culturally open worldview [1] [p. 66]. Literary translation can only fulfill its full value when the translated work transcends mere individual consumption and is published and circulated within a community. Translators share these works as a means of introducing new literary trends and fostering change within national literature. However, for a long period, the concept of “world literature” within Vietnamese literary circles was confined to Chinese works. Until the advent of Western culture in the country, the process of world literary exchange in Vietnam was almost exclusively derived from a single source. Vietnamese scholars read Chinese literature directly, without the need for translation. Literary creation frequently became a matter of direct borrowing, encompassing both themes and linguistic materials. Chinese literature profoundly influenced the poetics of composition and artistic concepts of indigenous Vietnamese literature for centuries [15]. The close relationship between the two countries meant that China played a significant role as an intermediary for Vietnamese literature's connection to the world. Even in the early 20th century, as Vietnam began to engage with Western culture and the translation of French literature into the “Vietnamese script” (chữ quốc ngữ) grew robustly, Vietnamese readers still accessed foreign literature indirectly through Chinese translations (e.g., Phan Châu Trinh's six-eight meter epic poem, *Giai nhân kỳ ngộ điển ca*, was translated and adapted from the Chinese translation of the Japanese novel *Kajin no Kigū* by Tōkai Sanshi) [16]. Furthermore, reading Chinese stories remained a deeply ingrained cultural habit in Southern Vietnam, with a large number of Chinese narratives continuing to be translated into the new script, and Vietnamese novels from this period were heavily influenced by these translated Chinese works [17].

In the early 20th century, China largely lost its intermediary role between Vietnam and the world. The popularization of the Vietnamese script and the rapid growth of translated literature in the press meant that Chinese literature became merely one of several sources with which Vietnamese literature engaged simultaneously through translations [18]. French-language education opened up new horizons for translated literature, and the concept of “world literature” now expanded to the West. Subsequently, concomitant with political shifts, Vietnamese people began to receive foreign literature primarily through translations from English – in the South during the 1954-1975 period – and from Russian – in the North during the same era and nationwide after 1975. By the 1990s, when a translator fortuitously encountered a Kundera's novel in Russian, the path of foreign works reaching Vietnam through an intermediary other than China had become a matter of course.

However, the process of translating Kundera's works also reveals another shift in the mechanism of receiving foreign literature in Vietnam: the agency of translation. Generally, cultural exchange in literary translation in

Vietnam before the 19th century and during the period of resistance against Western invasion primarily flowed through source texts from China, followed by France, the U.S., and subsequently the Soviet Union and later Russia. Until the 1980s, literary translation was largely a consequence of politically driven cultural exchange; translators were not truly proactive in their approach to foreign literary works. By the 1990s, the number of translated books grew significantly, though many were re-editions of classic works [14]. The translation of Kundera's works was an effort to transcend the limitations of conventional literary creation and was particularly significant in breaking down the familiar cultural “barriers” of the time. The shift from passive influence to active reception required major historical movements, and the translation of Kundera's works was fortuitously situated within this period of change.

4.2. The Influence of Political Relations among Vietnam, China, and Russia (the former Soviet Union)

In terms of content, Milan Kundera's works presented delicate points when entering the literary spheres of China and Vietnam. Kundera, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia to France after the Soviet occupation of his homeland, infused his novels with historical traces. His works depicted the Soviet invasion of Prague and the former Soviet leader with deep-seated criticism. He portrayed the totalitarian regime as aggressive and destructive of human rights. This presented a challenge for China and Vietnam, countries with similar political systems to the former Soviet Union. Despite their “opening-up” policies, literary and artistic activities in both nations remained under political censorship. As a result, the limited or reduced circulation of his translations was a predictable phenomenon.

During their initial release in Vietnam and China, translations were restricted to academic and critical circles. In Vietnam, works were published in the *Foreign Literature Journal*, a scholarly publication. Similarly, in China, most translated works in the first decade were labeled as “internal publications”. This approach demonstrated the caution of the artistic communities in both countries toward content considered politically sensitive at the time.

The severity of political sensitivity varied between the two countries, as their differing diplomatic relationships with Russia affected the reception of Kundera's works. The former Soviet Union and its successor, Russia, have historically been close partners of Vietnam. Consequently, Kundera's two most overtly anti-Russian works faced significant obstacles in Vietnam: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, despite having an overseas Vietnamese translation since 2002, was not published domestically until 2018. Similarly, the translation manuscript for *The Joke* has been completed for many years, but its publication remains stalled.

The dynamic between the former Soviet Union and China was different. In the 1950s, most literary translations into Chinese were from Russian. However, diplomatic relations deteriorated between the 1960s and early 1970s, entering a “frozen” period until

normalization in 1989. This strained relationship created an opportunity for Western works to be commissioned, particularly those that had previously been banned for ideological reasons. The uneasy political relationship between Russia and China, therefore, partly helped Kundera's works avoid censorship from cultural management agencies in China [19] [p. 5].

At the turn of the twentieth century, translation in China was not merely a sustained effort by intellectuals to introduce a broader variety of foreign schools and trends into professional discourse. It was also viewed as a crucial mission for modernizing the nation, as it facilitated the transmission of Western ("modern") learning and thought, thereby connecting China with other worldviews. Modern Chinese writers expected that translation could provide them with new tools to reform the Chinese mindset. In this model, translation was neither a simple nor a mechanical process, but a complex one involving the acceptance, elimination, and transformation of ideas [19] [p. 4]. Research on the influence of Kundera's works in China has been popular since the 1980s [4]. Kundera was not only a novelist but also an ideologist who inspired Chinese youth and authors. Their ambition was greater than that of their Vietnamese counterparts: they were concerned with how they could achieve global recognition. Kundera, as a writer who came from a similar political system, gained wide attention among Chinese writers.

The situation in Vietnam was different. Although they had just emerged from a conservative period, like the Chinese writers, Vietnamese writers simply sought to find a new way of writing by learning from Kundera [9]. This is why the influence of Kundera's works in Vietnam is not as deep and widespread as it is in China.

The process of receiving foreign literature is clearly governed by many objective conditions beyond mere literary relationships. In the socio-cultural context, when Chinese readers first encountered Kundera's works, they had just emerged from the Cultural Revolution. This cultural catastrophe left deep trauma and created a strong sense of being technologically and culturally behind the rest of the world. Consequently, the psychological reception of Chinese readers was marked by greater expectations than that of their Vietnamese counterparts. Although Vietnam also experienced periods of cultural ideological suppression, the situation was less severe. As a result, when Kundera's works were introduced, they did not create the same significant impetus for reading and technical writing that they did in China.

5. Conclusion

The translation process of Milan Kundera's works in China serves as an ideal object for comparison, highlighting the limitations in Vietnam's reception of a foreign author. Despite commonalities in cultural and literary traditions and similar paths toward literary modernization, the two literatures responded differently to the same phenomenon. This comparison clearly demonstrates distinctions in the timing of introduction and the direction of access.

Choosing Kundera's works as the subject for translation represents a clear point of convergence arising from the

similar socio-historical and cultural characteristics of Vietnam and China. This demonstrates a shared intellectual trajectory among scholars in both countries, even without direct contact. Although not through China, the mindset of Vietnamese literary intellectuals shared common ground with their Chinese counterparts. The desire to innovate writing styles by referencing a highly renowned foreign literary phenomenon of the time is a key methodological consideration for both.

P. V. Tieghem posited five types of influence in the process of literary exchange: (1) influence from the writer's personality, (2) influence on writing technique, (3) borrowing of materials and themes, (4) influence on artistic concepts, and (5) influence from initiating a new artistic scene [1] [p. 70]. The influence of Kundera's works on Chinese writers falls into the second and fourth categories: writing technique and artistic concepts. In contrast, the internal influence of Kundera's translated works in Vietnam did not generate any significant momentum within the creative flow of Vietnamese writers. The translators' efforts produced only faint sounds without a resounding echo. Vietnamese literature lacked a powerful impetus, a deficiency that perhaps persists to this day. Nevertheless, the purpose of this comparison is not to determine cultural superiority or inferiority. Rather, this paper aims to highlight the specific characteristics of the literary translation process for a particular subject within a defined period. We recognize that Vietnamese literature has always harbored a latent desire for progressive change. However, to achieve a turning point or a clear step forward, as was the case in China, requires a synchronized convergence of the translation team, the reception mindset, the ability to innovate creative methods, and the professionalism of the publishing industry.

The translation process of Kundera's works in Vietnam received a positive reception because it stemmed from a genuine internal movement within the literary community. It began with translators' personal desires and their expectations for creative innovation, rather than from cultural or political coercion. While the translators' intentions were key, it's also necessary to acknowledge that external powers, particularly political institutions, influenced the publication process - a condition difficult to change quickly through sheer will alone. A comparison with the translation of Kundera's works in China highlights the crucial role of publishers in disseminating cultural products in the age of copyright. With today's technological advancements, connections between individuals and nations are easily established. As a result, literature has entered a "borderless" state, where translation is no longer a silent, solitary hobby. We now have the capacity to establish professional translation groups, organizations, and specialized workshops to improve translation quality. However, Vietnam's efforts have largely been confined to professional seminars within the academic sphere, without transitioning into practical application. The coordination among translators, publishing companies, and media and distribution channels needs to be elevated to the level of a network. Moreover, there's a need for a tripartite discussion mechanism involving the translator, the publisher, and the reader to address issues that arise regarding translations. For instance, discussions regarding the quality of the

Vietnamese translation of *Ignorance (Vô tri)* by Cao Việt Dũng [20] only led to the publishing company admitting the translation contained numerous errors and promising to correct them [21]. This event, however, did not become a precedent for publishers to exercise greater caution with subsequent translated works. Improving the publishing environment and enhancing the professionalism of bookmaking units will contribute to overcoming the fragmentation and lack of system when translating foreign literary works.

Kundera's works were presented in Vietnam and China during the modernizing literature process through translation. Translation is a part of reception activities, which can show the development of literature at the time of translation as well as development trends and interactions between literature and cultural or political institutions. From this perspective, Vietnamese literature cannot stand outside the rhythm of change of the modern world literature; it must continue to select and introduce new literary values. Besides the awareness that cultivating internal resources for the translator team is a necessary condition, the case of receiving Kundera's legacy through translating shows that attention must be paid to developing objective factors outside of literature to accumulate sufficient conditions for a new phase of development. Once those issues are resolved, the integration with world literature will be smooth and effective.

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