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From Alley to Longtang: Interlingual Reconstruction of Local Spatiality in English Translation of Wang Anyi's Chang Hen Ge

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Abstract. Wang Anyi's Chang Hen Ge and its English translation, The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai translated by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan, has been particularly well received and become an important example in the transnational dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature. This paper examines the interlingual reconstruction of longtang as a form of local spatiality in this novel. Adopting a spatial approach that involves the four levels of material spatiality, literary-imagined spatiality, translated spatiality and readerly spatiality, this study understands longtang not just as a culture-specific term but rather a multilayered urban space influenced by architectural space, daily life, sensory experience and cultural memories. Methodologically, the paper makes use of techniques of close reading, comparative textual analysis and reception analysis. In terms of source text analysis, the paper begins with an attempt to understand how the source text has transformed Shanghai longtang into a literary space. Following this is a discussion on how the target text has reconstructed the spatiality through visuals, sound, touch and smell. The final section deals with reviews, awards and readers' responses in an attempt to find out the readerly space constructed in the target context.

Keywords: Chang Hen Ge, longtang, local spatiality, interlingual reconstruction, sensory representation

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 20th century, "spatial turn" has gradually taken place in the humanities and social sciences, which challenged the conventional view of space as a container of various social relations and reconceptualized it as a powerful and dynamic force. Space, in this sense, is not only a form of knowledge and practice, but also a new mode of social production that plays a decisive role in the continuity of social reproduction [1]. From the 1990s onward, with the rise of late capitalism and the postmodern turn, spatial critical theories integrating social, cultural, and regional dimensions have gained increasing acceptance and application. In the late 20th century, spatial theory and literary theory had entered into a productive reciprocal dialogue. On one hand, literary theory contributed to the formation of contemporary spatial thought and became one of its important intellectual components. On the other, literary studies informed by spatial perspectives began to

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reconsider the relationship between textual representation and the world it constructs. As Tally [2] observes, space, place, and mapping have become central concerns in contemporary literary criticism. Although "literary space criticism is in the ascendant, the research on its integration and translation criticism is still rare" [3]. The relationship between translation and space is dialectical given that "translation not only actively affects the geographical environment in which it exists but is also influenced by it" [4]. The source text creates a multidimensional spatiality within its original linguistic context, and through translator's rearticulation of this spatiality, the corresponding translation version produces a new spatial configuration shaped by the historical, cultural, and socio-psychological conditions of the target context.

Wang Anyi's *Chang Hen Ge*, often praised by critics as "the epic of modern Shanghai", is a typical novel unfolding through different living spaces to register changes in social history, emotional experience, and urban culture. Shanghai in *Chang Hen Ge* is far more than a narrative setting; rather, it emerges as a literary space dynamically constituted through the intersections of geography, history, sensibility, and identity. Therefore, the reconstruction of Shanghai's local spatiality in its English translation is not limited to the transfer of local geographical or cultural features. Rather, it shapes whether and how target-language readers can perceive the city's atmosphere, enter the narrative rhythm of the work, and grasp the emotional world of its characters. Current scholarship on the English translation of *Chang Hen Ge* may be broadly classified into the following three strands: overseas dissemination [5-7], aesthetic representation [8] and urban image in translation [9, 10]. Feng and Feng [9] discuss the translation of spatial metaphors related to *longtang* and lighting. Nian [10] highlights the translators' selective strategies in representing features of local spaces for target readers. The above studies have addressed spatial elements in the English translation of *Chang Hen Ge*, however, they have not fully examined *longtang* as a concrete and multilayered local space, nor have they traced its transformation from material geography into literary spatiality, translated spatiality, and readerly imagination.

Considering that the essence of Shanghai is is to be found "not in the grandiose edifices of the semi-colonial era, but in the maze of alleyways (*longtang*) that lies behind them" [11], this paper focuses on *longtang* as a key site for examining the interlingual reconstruction of Shanghai's local spatiality. By tracing the transformation of the *longtang* from an objective urban form to a literary space, a translated space, and finally a possible space of reception, this paper aims to contribute to contribute to the study of literary spatiality, translation of local culture, and the cross-cultural representation of Shanghai in modern Chinese literature.

2. Analytical framework and method

This paper does not treat the translation of *longtang* merely as a lexical issue. It approaches *longtang* as a multilayered local space whose meanings are produced, transformed, and received across different linguistic and cultural contexts. The following discussion therefore develops a four-layer framework and introduces method of the study.

2.1. A four-layer spatial framework

According to Zeng [12], there were three levels of local spatiality in literary works:

First is the natural or cultural geographical space that exists objectively, referred to as the "first spatiality". "Second spatiality" is the aesthetic space constructed by the writer through their geographical perception and imagination. "Third spatiality" is the associative space re-created by

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readers during the process of reading, shaped by their own geographical perception and imagination. (pp. 309-310)

Based on the categorization made by Zeng, this article categorizes the spatiality in literature and its translation into four categories:

(1) Material Spatiality: the objective geographical natural or cultural space;

(2) Literary-Imagined Spatiality: the aesthetic space formed by the writer through his/her geographical imagination;

(3) Translated Spatiality: the recreated aesthetic space created by the translator through both preservation of original aesthetic and adoption of target language;

(4) Readerly Spatiality: the recreative space created by target language readers in the act of reading.

This will serve as the basis of analysis in the following sections. Through the analysis of material, literary-imaged, translated, and readerly spatiality, this paper explores how the *longtang* in *Chang Hen Ge* is recreated through the translation process from the objective urban space to the literary imagery and the readerly imagery.

2.2. Corpus and method

The major corpus of this study comprises Wang Any's *Chang Hen Ge* together with its English version, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*, translated by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan and published by Columbia University Press in 2008. The analysis in this paper focuses on the segments where *longtang* is either directly mentioned or implicitly created via architectural description, daily life, personal relations, sensory atmosphere, etc. This study adopts an approach combining close reading and comparative textual analysis. First, it investigates how the source text renders the physical reality of Shanghai *longtang* into literary space. Secondly, it compares the corresponding segments in the English translation of the novel with special emphasis placed on how the translators render different sensory information. Finally, the comparison is widened to include the reception-related texts such as book reviews, comments from critics and available reader responses. These texts will not be considered as exhaustive data about the reception process, but only as representative materials used to understand how the translated *longtang* may possibly be read and imagined by the readers in the target language.

3. Literary construction of *Longtang* from material space

From an architectural design perspective, *longtang* is neither entirely traditional Chinese Jiangnan-style housing nor a purely Western architectural form; rather, it embodies elements of both traditional and foreign architectural cultures. Historically, it is only in Shanghai—serving as the pioneer of Chinese commercial society and the "Eastern Paris" during the first half of the 20th century—that such a unique architectural form and way of life could have emerged. Yang Dongping's [13] *Urban Monsoon* also comments *longtang*:

Over the past century, Shanghai has gradually developed four types of residential buildings: garden-style residences, apartment-style residences, *longtang*-style residences, and simple shacks... *Longtang* is the dwelling of the common people, the main body of urban architecture, and the primary carrier of Shanghai's civilian culture. (p. 161)

Despite being one of the most common aspects of Shanghai that is at once integral to it, *longtang* is elusive in many ways. Based on the description provided in *Chang Hen Ge* of the aspect of *longtang*, the following analysis has been derived. The specifics are listed in the table below.

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Table 1. Spacial characteristics and their corresponding aesthetic significance of *Longtang*

Spacial Characteristics	Aesthetic Significance
Rolling architecture Overlapping structure High density Interplay of light and shadow	壮观的(Magnificent) [14]
Diversified structure Mixed styles Interweaving spaces Contrast material	形形种种，声色各异的(diverse forms and varied sights and sounds) [14]
Intricate structure Soft lighting Delicate material	性感的，有一股肌肤之余似的(sensual, carrying a trace of intimacy akin to the touch of skin upon skin) [14]
Dense detail Everyday lighting Slow rhythm Sensory integration	有烟火人气的感动(a moving sense of everyday human warmth) [14]

The first feature of "magnificence" focuses on the depth and stratification of *longtang*'s construction. Among these metaphorical descriptions of *longtang*, "dots and lines" conveys a sense of surge for its streets and buildings. Such combination of luminous dots and lines creates a massive and complex visual structure, similar to "the layers of brushstrokes in Chinese painting". In addition, high building density unfolds through the records of steep streets that cross each other at an angle, and extremely closely located roofs and facades. Another important element is the interplay of light and shadow. Scene like streets and roofs illuminated by intermittent light among mist acquires a sacred atmosphere. Mundane details such as black railings, flying pigeons and vegetable leaves are artistically incorporated within the landscape composition, which is an example of how the grandeur of *longtang* is created through the combination of intricately detailed and coherent urban components.

"Diverse forms and varied sights and sounds" as the second characteristic is derived from the actual spatial and architectural complexity. First, the structural form of *longtang* varies widely, from residences that have remnants of family compounds to facades of official institutions, forming the embodiment of heterogeneity in *longtang*. Secondly, the material used in the construction of the buildings is different in terms of the ornate features, like the wrought iron gate, stone framed windows, zinc roof, and western style facade. All these differences in terms of texture, color, and sound make up the direct contribution of aesthetic diversity. Thirdly, there is a great mixture of spatial function in these buildings. There are buildings that have front hall and back bedroom, buildings with balcony for viewing the city, and even buildings that have kitchen and bedroom in narrow corridor. What's more, *longtang* also has time layers because new renovated buildings exist alongside aging buildings. Stability is alongside the transient nature.

The third feature of *longtang* is "sensuality", which emerges from the textural qualities of spatiality. *Longtang* is made up of spaces that are compact, meandering and intimate, including elements like low window sills, kitchen doors, clotheslines, etc. In such limited space, people living here have to get close to, lean against, and come into contact with others or objects, thereby creating a subtle atmosphere of intimacy and enclosure, as if one have touched each other's skin. Second, *longtang* contains signs of domestic and private life. Greasy windows, worn out furniture, scattered

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bricks, partially exposed washing and so on, reveal daily life of people who live there, while at the same time suggesting something secret and hidden, stimulating the viewer's sensory imagination. It's worth notcing that the light coming in at "3:00 p.m." does not fall straight but moves in a oblique and rhythmic manner. Soft lighting that is refracted through yellow glasses, bouncing off water, or slipping through narrow gaps infuses the space with a moist, diffused glow, echoing the gentle and tactile quality of warmth on the skin.

Furthermore, the author links the emotional significance of *longtang* with the humanity and authenticity of everyday experience. This kind of "movement" results from the interconnection of space, time, and sensations. *Longtang* itself is full of visible and tangible signs of inhabitation—racks with laundry drying, sheets hung out in the sunlight, grease on kitchen windows, moss between bricks, pigeons in their cages, inviting audiences to physically and emotionally engage with the place. The temporal and luminous dimension of *longtang* also contributes to its emotional quality. The afternoon sunlight, sloping shadows and beams of light appearing through gaps in the roofs create a rhythm of slowness, idle moments, and understated intimacy. These ordinary light effects are not just visual manifestations but also emotional catalysts that have been associated with memory and daily routines. As a multisensory space, cooing pigeons, shaking leaves, conversations in hushed tones, the sound of pots and bowls in *longtang* compose a natural soundscape tied to human beings.

4. Sensory reconstruction of *Longtang* in the translation

To better construct local spatiality in *Chang Hen Ge*, Wang Anyi employs a multisensory narrative approach. While gustatory perception is only indirectly evoked through descriptions of food, the senses of vision, hearing, touch, and smell are directly and extensively portrayed. This chapter aims to examine the primary expressive forms associated with each of these senses and analyze how Bai and Chen rendered the sensory-based construction of local spatiality into the target language.

4.1. Visual representation

To clarify how *longtang* is visually represented in the novel, table 2 organizes its major aesthetic dimensions together with their corresponding manifestations and descriptions.

Table 2. Visual representation of *Longtang*

Aesthetic Significance	Manifestation	Specific Description
Magnificent	Architectural Structure	Densely packed lines, crisscrossing streets, layered structures
Varied	Architectural Styles	Mixed styles, diverse window decorations
Sensual	Light and Shadow	Slanting rays, 3:00 p.m. sunlight, light leaking through gaps
Moving	Concrete Objects	Quilts airing, clothes hanging by doors, uneven tiles, mottled moss

As illustrated in the table above, the visual descriptions of *longtang* in the novel primarily encompass architectures, the interplay of light and shadow, and concrete visual objects. Among these, the most representative example of architectural structures appears at the very beginning of the novel, where *longtang* is depicted through dense networks of dots and lines.

Example 1:

ST: 站一个至高点看上海，上海的弄堂是壮观的景象。它是这城市背景一样的东西。街道和楼房凸现在它之上，是一些点和线，而它则是中国画中称为皴法的那类笔触，是将空白填满的 [14]。

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TT: LOOKED DOWN UPON from the highest point in the city, Shanghai's *longtang*—her vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys—are a magnificent sight. The *longtang* are the backdrop of this city. Streets and buildings emerge around them in a series of dots and lines, like the subtle brushstrokes that bring life to the empty expanses of white paper in a traditional Chinese landscape painting [15].

In order to recreate the "magnificence" of Shanghai's *longtang*, the translation is carried out with domestication as its main strategy for the benefit of the target language audience. It is well reflected in the interpretation of the culturally-specific term "皴法". To avoid translating it literally or explaining it through a footnote, the translator opts to use "the subtle brushstrokes that bring life to the empty expanses of white paper". Thus, the cultural obstacle is overcame and the aesthetic implications of the original are kept intact. In restoring the space perspective of an overhead view, the source text description of the space perspective "站一个至高点看上海" is translated as "LOOKED DOWN UPON from the highest point in the city". The choice of reconfiguring the syntax not only reserves the overlooking viewpoint but also amplifies the visual impact by moving the verb "look" to the front, effectively maintaining the sense of grandeur present in the source text. In addition, the translator uses different techniques of translation to improve the readability and expressiveness of the text. For example, the use of "her vast neighborhoods inside enclosed alleys" as an explanation of the word *longtang* is an example of amplification.

4.2. Auditory representation

Table 3 explores how sound contributes to the construction of spatial locality in the novel. It is organized vertically by types of sound alongside specific descriptions, such as everyday sounds, music, and natural sounds.

Table 3. Auditory representation of *Longtang*

Aesthetic Significance	Manifestation	Specific Description
Varied	Everyday Sounds	Diverse lifestyle noises creating a spectrum of "sound and color"
Sensual	Everyday Sounds	Pillow whispers, soft voices behind curtains (emotional echo)
Moving	Everyday & Natural Sounds	Clinking of dishes, footsteps, pigeons fluttering

As a perfect example of an everyday space, *longtang* is characterized by its rhythms and its details. In turn, the author uses everyday soundscapes like the clatter of dishes, human voices, and footsteps as means of highlighting its essence..

Example 5:

ST: “小心火烛”的摇铃声声，是平安里的一点小心呵护，有些温爱的 [14]。

TT: The ringing bells make their evening rounds, reminding residents to watch their cooking fires, evincing a trace of warmth and goodwill from those who live there [15].

In the above example, the translator creates a detailed auditory impression out of a short auditory one, giving rise to an image of gentle affection and social routine. First of all, the expression "make their evening rounds" expresses both consistency and delicacy, making the bell-ringing a soft routine of everyday life and not an unpleasant warning. Moreover, the phrase "evincing a trace of warmth and goodwill" corresponds to "有些温爱的", since the translator keeps the subtle emotional coloring. The translation does not use obvious emotionalism, but manages to convey delicate warmth, characteristic of this internal space's emotional atmosphere.

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4.3.Tactile representation

Table 4 focuses on tactile and thermal perceptions, emphasizing the connection between bodily experience and emotional resonance. It presents the tactile dimension through modes such as temperature and texture, illustrating sensations specific to each locale.

Table 4. Tactile representation of *Longtang*

Aesthetic Significance	Manifestation	Specific Description
Sensual	Temperature, Texture	Interlaced light warmth, soft fabrics, tactile sensation of pillows and bedding
Moving	Temperature, Texture	Touch of clothing, rough doorboards, humid air

From the above table, we can find that tactile descriptions are more likely to be used to construct feminine features of *longtang*.

Example 8:

ST: 上海的弄堂是性感的，有一股肌肤之余似的。它有着触手的凉和暖，是可感可知，有一些私心的 [14]。

TT: The longtang of Shanghai exude a sensuality like the intimacy of flesh on flesh—cool and warm, tangible and knowable, a little self-centered [15].

In such phrases like "cool and warm", "tangible and knowable" and "the intimacy of flesh on flesh", *longtang* is endowed with a highly tactile nature. The sensuality mentioned here is not in any way sexual but rather the result of the close physical relationship between the body and the space. The English expression "exude a sensuality" implies a natural emanation of the sensuality of *longtang*, maintaining the ambiguous beauty in the given cultural setting. "Like the intimacy of flesh on flesh" is not a direct translation but a sensory extension of "肌肤之余", bringing out the tangible nature of the closeness between space and body while at the same time intensifying the inherent emotional intensity in that closeness. Furthermore, the phrase "cool and warm, tangible and knowable" maintains the parallel structure of the original while bringing out the sensual nature of the longtang as a multi-sensory object. Finally, "a little self-centered" subtly reproduces the layered meaning of "有一些私心的", suggesting both the spatial inwardness and its emotional possessiveness, making the *longtang* not only palpable but also rich in affective and private allure.

4.4. Olfactory representation

Table 5 focuses on the role of scent in the representation of space, with detailed categories including everyday smells, food-related aromas, and natural fragrances.

Table 5. Olfactory representation of *Longtang*

Aesthetic Significance	Manifestation	Specific Description
Sensual	Daily Scents	Pillow smell, musty dampness, moss between wall cracks
Moving	Daily & Food Scents	Oil fumes, quilt scent, soy sauce and fermented tofu smells

According to the above table, the scents of daily life and food are mainly adopted when demostrating the sensual and moving aspects of *longtang*.

Example 9:

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ST: 那种有前客堂和左右厢房里的流言是要老派一些的，带黄衣草的气味的；而带亭子间和拐角楼梯的弄堂房子的流言则是新派的，气味是樟脑丸的气味 [14]。

TT: The kind of gossip exchanged in the front rooms and adjoining wings belongs to the old school and smacks faintly of potpourri. The gossip in the rooftop tingzijian and staircases is new school and smells of mothballs [15].

In describing *longtang* as composed of different domestic environments, the author relates the kind of gossip prevailing in each environment with smells, thus bringing the abstract social phenomenon to a sensory level. The English equivalents, "smacks faintly of potpourri" and "smells of mothballs", maintain the same level of direct experience found in the original. "Smacks faintly of" is an expression superior to "smells like", since the latter gives a less sophisticated impression. It works better for the "old school" spatial context. The translation makes use not only of smells but also of the qualities of the spaces where they exist. It makes them temporally and emotionally charged, as well as warm, in order to recreate "the emotional resonance rooted in everyday life" of the longtang.

5. Receiving *Longtang*: readerly spatiality in the target context

Readerly spatiality refers to the creation of the associative space by target language readers during their process of reading. The reception of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai* proves that the reconstructed space was readable in new cultural context. Critical reviews indicate that the English translation of *Chang Hen Ge* succeeds at least partly in making Shanghai's local space readable for Anglophone readers. The article by Francine Prose from *The New York Times Book Review* praises Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan's "graceful translation," arguing that it helps readers understand why Wang Anyi is one of the most critically acclaimed writers in the Chinese-speaking world [16]. The journal *World Literature Today* calls the English translation a "masterful English translation", suggesting that the work has been effectively introduced into the English-speaking literary field [17]. The Booker Prize website also confirms that Wang Anyi was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2011, a prize that, at that time, recognized a writer's overall achievement in fiction available either in English or in English translation. Such evaluation does not refer only to the translation of *longtang*, but also to the translation of the novel as a whole as an aesthetic representation of Shanghai.

At the level of ordinary readership, the English translation also appears to have generated a generally positive response. According to Amazon data collected on January 31, 2026, the English edition of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* received an average rating of 4.2 stars, with 63 percent of the ratings being five-star reviews. Although such online ratings cannot represent the full range of Anglophone reception, they provide indicative evidence that many ordinary readers found the translated work accessible, engaging, or aesthetically valuable. Some reader responses also emphasize the novel's atmospheric quality, slow narrative rhythm, and evocation of Shanghai's historical and emotional texture. These responses are especially relevant to the present study because they suggest that the translated *longtang* is not merely understood as an exotic local term, but participates in the reader's broader imagination of the city.

In this sense, the readerly space of *longtang* is therefore neither a complete reproduction of the original *longtang* nor a simple domestication into the familiar category of an "alley." Rather, it is an interlingual and intercultural space produced through translation, criticism, publication, and reception. The broadly positive critical and readerly responses to the English version indicate that the translators' reconstruction of Shanghai's local spatiality has, to a significant extent, enabled

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Anglophone readers to perceive the city's atmosphere, enter the narrative rhythm of the novel, and grasp the emotional world shaped by the *longtang*.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the interlingual reconstruction of *longtang* in Wang Anyi's *Chang Hen Ge* and its English translation, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*. By adopting a four-layer spatial framework, the study has traced the transformation of *longtang* from material spatiality to literary-imagined spatiality, from translated spatiality to readerly spatiality. The analysis first shows that *longtang* in *Chang Hen Ge* is rooted in the material and cultural geography of Shanghai. As a hybrid urban form shaped by both Chinese and foreign architectural elements, *longtang* functions as a major carrier of Shanghai's civilian culture and everyday social relations. In Wang Anyi's literary representation, however, it is not merely reproduced as an objective residential form. Through descriptions of architectural density, spatial layering, light and shadow, domestic objects, bodily proximity, and everyday sounds and smells, the material *longtang* is transformed into a literary space marked by magnificence, multiplicity, sensuality, and human warmth.

The comparative analysis of the English version shows that the translators reconstruct the visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory features of the original text through various techniques, which transfer spatial data from the source language to the target one. By virtue of the analysis of the reception, we can argue that this constructed space has entered the target cultural context via multiple pathways, which include the review discourses, the institutional evaluation, and the response from the ordinary readers. While it may be true that these sources may not be able to capture the entirety of the Anglophone reception of the work, they at least reveal that the English version of the work has rendered Wang Anyi's Shanghai writings accessible and understandable to the readers of the target language.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to connect literary spatiality with translation studies through a concrete spatial form. By focusing on *longtang*, the paper shows that the translation of local culture involves not only the transfer of culture-specific terms, but also the reconstruction of spatial experience, sensory perception, and readerly imagination. Future research may further extend this framework to other local spaces in *Chang Hen Ge* or apply it to the translation of other city-centered literary works. Such studies may contribute to a deeper understanding of how literary translation participates in the cross-cultural production of place, memory, and urban identity.

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