

# A Corpus-Based Evaluation of English Readers' Aesthetic Reception of the Shandong-English Translation in *Red Sorghum*

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## Abstract

In the context of world literature, target readers' aesthetic reception of literary works has shifted from single culture to multiple cultures and has become a crucial factor in social-cultural communication. Shandong dialect, previously misidentified as vulgar expressions in literary research, has proved to have specific aesthetic values as explored in this research. This paper aims to analyse reasons for aesthetic criticism and find solutions to enhance the aesthetic acceptability of Shandong-English translation in *Red Sorghum* among English readers. Data were collected from different channels, including scholarly critiques, book reviews, blog posts by literary critics, and online forums. A corpus-based methodology is utilized to examine the aesthetic acceptability and reasons for aesthetic criticism by employing a re-framed aesthetic reception theory. Results showed greater frequency of aesthetic acceptance in book reviews than in online forums and blog posts by literary critics, with 53.7 per cent aesthetic acceptance versus 39.7 per cent aesthetic criticism from a total 529 sample data, excluding 6.6 per cent neutrality. Furthermore, book reviews showed a greater tendency towards aesthetic acceptance (64.3%) than online forums (51.5%) and blog posts by literary critics (33.3%). Lastly, the reasons for aesthetic criticism were mainly demonstrated in cultural disparity and defamiliarization of Shandong dialectal expression. The paper concludes by underscoring the significance of shifting from a text-oriented tendency to readers' expectancy, initiative interaction, and social consciousness in the interaction with literary works. The study contributes reconstructed theory and practical insights for translators to balance the original cultural references and acceptability among English readers.

**Keywords:** aesthetic acceptability, aesthetic criticism, re-framed aesthetic reception theory, Shandong-English translation, *Red Sorghum*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Aesthetic Reception of Red Sorghum in World Literature

*Red Sorghum*, a representative local novel written by Mo Yan (1987), depicts the Shandong villagers' heroic resistance against invaders. It highlights the characters' distinctive personalities, unyielding spirit, desire for freedom, and deep love for their hometown. It is a modern dialectal novel with Shandong culture as the background. Along with the process of literature globalization, there has been an increasing focus on world literature (Damrosch, 2003) and readers' aesthetic reception of specific local cultures. *Red Sorghum*, a novel written by Mo Yan in 1987 and translated by Howard Goldblatt (1993), is highly regarded in modern China and is considered a representative novel known as "hallucinatory realism" (Zhang, 2015, p. 6). It is also widely popular among Western readers because of Goldblatt's creative translation, gaining him fame as a key figure in translating contemporary Chinese dialectal novels (Updike, 2005). Undoubtedly, winning the Nobel Prize greatly enhanced Mo Yan's reputation in world literature and increased his popularity among Western readers. Mo Yan sought "a prominent status for Chinese dialectal literature in the world literature by fully employing his distinctive personal writing styles and aesthetic values" (Jing, 2021, p. 28). However, Shandong local literature, especially *Red Sorghum*, is still in a disadvantageous position. One reason lies in its insufficient dissemination and translated works (Yang, 2024). *Red Sorghum*'s entry into the world literature may also be affected by the "competition and interaction among different subjects in the field of translation literature" (Jing, 2021, p. 29). Therefore, it remains to be investigated whether *Red Sorghum* has truly achieved recognition as world literature and gained aesthetic acceptance among English-speaking readers.

### 1.2 Significance of Translation in Enhancing English Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Red Sorghum

When studying world literature, it is vital to evaluate aesthetic acceptability among English readers. World literature refers to "a process of literary translation mutually interacted and influenced among authors, translators, literary critics, and readers" (Jing, 2021, p. 28). Among these, the positive interaction between the translator and target readers can significantly promote the aesthetic acceptance of both the author's source text (ST) and the translator's target text (TT). Therefore, Goldblatt, the translator of *Red Sorghum*, "played a crucial role in facilitating Mo Yan's recognition in world literature" (Guo & Zou, 2023, p. 2). Goldblatt also "increased the possibility of Mo Yan's awarding Nobel Prize" (Wang, 2013, p. 7), which demonstrates the key function of the translator and TT in the acceptance of the

Chinese novel and its unique aesthetic values.

The significance of translation in enhancing English readers' aesthetic reception is demonstrated in the following aspects. Firstly, in the bilingual context, translators are forced to adopt different translation strategies to accommodate the target readers' acceptance of the uniqueness of the translated version (Bonaffini, 1997). Secondly, although foreignization is very popular in literary translation, domestication is also important and contributes greatly to the target readers' aesthetic reception of cultural-specific items in the bi-cultural context (Borysenko et al., 2024). Finally, aesthetic value lies in uniqueness in literary translation, and whether or not it can be conveyed to the target readers in literary translation is crucial for the degree of aesthetic acceptance among English target readers (Ma, 2009).

### 1.3 Relevant Scholarship

#### 1.3.1 Aesthetic Reception Theory in Literary Criticism

Aesthetic reception theory, proposed by Jauss (1982), originated from two prominent philosophical approaches—i.e. Husserl's (1977) phenomenological approach and Heidegger's (1982) hermeneutic approach. Many contemporary literary critics (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978) aimed to challenge the conventional approach of formalism and objectivism in literary studies, arguing that the historical viewpoint is crucial in deciding readers' aesthetic reception of a literary work (Mambrol, 2018). Based on Iser's (1978) concepts of the "artistic pole" (the author) and "aesthetic pole" (the reader) and Fish's (1980) "reading strategy", Jauss (1982, p. 164) further developed aesthetic reception theory and proposed the concept of "readers' horizon of expectations" based on previous theories, which suggests that a reader can interpret a literary work by considering both their expectations from the narrow literary horizon and wider life horizon (Mambrol, 2018). Jauss (1982, p. 164) introduced the concept of interaction patterns of identification with roles, which include five types of identification: (a) associative identification, (b) admiring identification, (c) sympathetic identification, (d) cathartic identification, and (e) ironic identification. These identification patterns highlight the social function of literary works. According to Jauss (1982, p. 22), the "coherence of literature is influenced by the expectation and life experience of its readers." Jauss (1982) also proposed the concept of the "horizon of expectation", arguing that "the connection between literature and reader has both aesthetic and historical implications" and that "the history of literature involves the process of authors' production and readers' aesthetic reception, which occurs through the active engagement of authors and readers during reading activity" (Jauss, 1982, p. 45). Furthermore, Jauss' (1982) aesthetic acceptance theory places significant emphasis on subjective determinants from a historical perspective. However, evaluation of the influence of literary works on target readers using empirical data has not yet been discussed.

#### 1.3.2 Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Literary Works

Aesthetics, originating from philosophy, is related to the appreciation of literary works. "It requires [the reader] to employ aesthetic evaluation to capture unique aesthetic features in literary works" (Lamarque, 2007, p. 5). However, evaluating the level of aesthetic reception of literary works among target readers is challenging due to the impact of multiple subjective elements. Many researchers (Lamarque, 2007; Kivy, 2011; Verheyen, 2015) have investigated the aesthetic reception of literary works from various perspectives. Kivy (2011) suggested that the form and content of a novel can be separated when appreciating its aesthetic elements, and the general reader is concerned only with the form of the novel; however, Verheyen (2015) disputed this viewpoint and argued that the form and content of the novel are inseparably related and collaborate to invoke emotional responses in readers. Lamarque (2007, p. 22) pointed out that "readers have expectations regarding the benefits they will gain from paying attention to the literary work" and that these expectations go beyond mere aesthetic appreciation and involve aesthetic value, aligning with Jauss' (1982, p. 164) concept of the "horizon of expectations". However, as world literature has evolved, readers' aesthetic reception has shifted from a single culture to multiple cultures, and the aesthetic reception of translated literary works has aroused great attention among scholars (Skotarek, 2023; Sun, 2022; Wang & Qian, 2023). Sun (2022) held the viewpoint that acceptability in literary translation is closely connected with the translator, who plays a crucial role in shaping the target text and influencing the target readers' reception, whereas Skotarek (2023) argued that readers' aesthetic reception is influenced by factors such as the editor and proofreader, in addition to the translator, which can be seen as a social activity. By studying the translation of children's literature, Wang and Qian (2023) argued that readers' expectations and interaction with the target text are much more valuable than focusing solely on the text itself, which has significant implications for this study.

#### 1.3.3 Target Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Shandong-English Translation in *Red Sorghum*

The attainment of aesthetic reception can be more challenging for target readers when it encompasses both the source language and the target language, because "the codes of these two languages are inherently different" (Nida, 1972, p. 310), especially when dialects are involved. Bonaffini (1997, p. 283) highlighted "distinctiveness in translating dialects", which increases the difficulty as well as the potential for untranslatability to preserve the local colour. Zhang (2015) asserted that equivalent translation can undeniably enhance readers' reception and boost the reputation of an author. For example, some of Mo Yan's English translations, particularly *Red Sorghum* by Howard Goldblatt, are more enjoyable to read than their original Chinese versions. When studying the English translation of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, Goldblatt (2014, p. 32) argued that "literary translation can result in a diminished aesthetic experience for target readers compared with original work". According to Guo and Zou (2023, p. 2), Goldblatt attaches great importance to the fluency of English when translating Mo Yan's novels and focuses on the readability of the translated version from the target readers' perspective, which potentially leads to cultural and aesthetic losses in their original works. Nevertheless, readers' expectations evolve with time and location, and the reader plays a subjective role in the process of aesthetic reception. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the target readers' aesthetic reception by considering their identity, cultural background, and social values. Yang (2022) conducted a study on the aesthetic reception

of *Red Sorghum* among overseas readers; however, this study only focused on qualitative analysis of translation strategies adopted in catering for target readers' reception. The lack of quantitative data prevents a thorough investigation into the frequency and influential factors of aesthetic reception among individual English target readers. Therefore, an in-depth quantitative exploration of the frequency and influential factors of aesthetic reception among individual target readers is significant to enhance the global acceptance of Chinese dialectal literature.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Data Collection

In addition to the scholarly critics from academic journals presented in the literature review, data were collected from a range of channels and platforms: (a) readers' reviews of *Red Sorghum* from Amazon (<https://www.amazon.com>), Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com>) and Thriftbooks (<https://www.thriftbooks.com>); (b) literary blogs on *Red Sorghum* by literary critics from The Millions (<https://themillions.com>); and (c) the online literary forum on *Red Sorghum* from Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com>). Regarding the book reviews obtained from Amazon, all 416 English reviews were collected as corpus data. For the book reviews from Goodreads, 561 English reviews out of a total of 959 comments were collected and filtered by the item "English". Regarding the book reviews from Thriftbooks, a total of 12 English reviews were gathered as the corpus data for analysis. In addition, a total of 12 detailed literary critiques of *Red Sorghum* were collected from The Millions literary blog. A further 33 comments on *Red Sorghum* were collected from a Reddit online literary forum. The collected data encompassed a wide range of participants, varying from general readers to literary critics, which ensured the reliability and credibility of this study.

### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

What is the level of English readers' aesthetic reception of Shandong-English translation in *Red Sorghum*? What are the key factors that influence English readers' aesthetic reception of Shandong-English translation in *Red Sorghum*? How to enhance the aesthetic reception and reduce negative evaluations of Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum* for English target readers? A re-framed theoretical framework is employed in the analysis of collected data to answer the above three research questions.

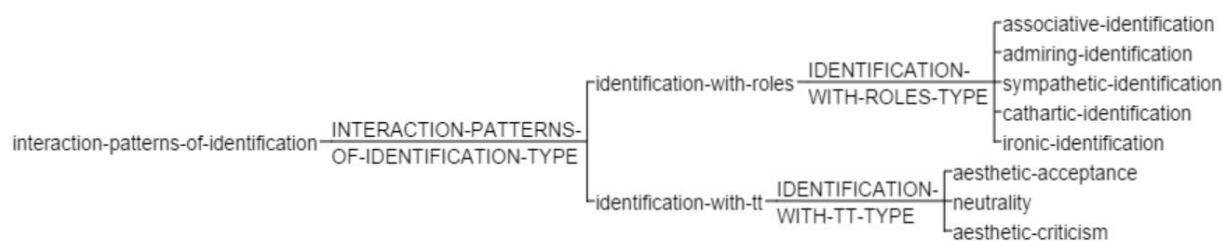


Figure 1. Re-framed aesthetic reception theory

The re-framed aesthetic reception theory shown in Figure 1 is reconstructed based on interaction patterns of identification proposed by Jauss (1982). It is an extension of reader reception theory and the theoretical frame employed in the annotated corpus data analysis in this study. This re-framed theory has introduced new measurements and criteria for evaluating the aesthetic reception of translated works by target readers from diverse cultures; it is also a shift from the traditional aesthetic reception study of national literary work to the examination of translated literary works that encompass two distinct cultures and languages. The traditional aesthetic reception study of national literary work is limited to the reader's aesthetic reception of the author's literary work inside their cultural context, whereas the aesthetic reception study in bi-cultural context focuses on translated works from a foreign culture, hence intensifying the complexity of the target reader's aesthetic reception due to cultural divergence. Therefore, the conventional analysis of Jauss' (1982, pp. 164–188) aesthetic reception primarily concentrated on the native reader's identification with the roles portrayed in literary works, namely "associative identification, admiring identification, sympathetic identification, cathartic identification, and ironic identification". However, in the context of world literature and intercultural communication, it is not persuasive to restrict readers' aesthetic reception by limiting their own culture. An emerging trend is to evaluate the target reader's aesthetic reception of literary works from diverse cultures and translation, and translators have become influential factors (Yang, 2022; Zhang, 2015). Therefore, how the target reader interacts with the target text is crucial in the process of aesthetic reception.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

A quantitative methodology and a corpus-based research method were employed in the analysis of data collected from book reviews, literary blogs, and online forums. The collected data were classified into five categories based on their source, and then segments in each book review were annotated using a corpus tool. Simultaneously, a predesignated coding scheme (refer to re-framed aesthetic reception theory depicted in Figure1) was created in the corpus as the theoretical framework for interpreting the presented frequencies and statistical outcomes. Firstly, each item of collected data was annotated and categorized into two types, as illustrated in Figure 1, namely identification with roles type and identification with target text (TT) type. Subsequently, each book review item underwent a second round of annotation, specifically focusing on the sub-categories within each type, namely associative identification, admiring identification,

sympathetic identification, cathartic identification, and ironic identification within the identification with roles type, and aesthetic acceptance, neutrality, and aesthetic criticism within the identification with TT type. Finally, visualized statistical data in the corpus were displayed for analysis.

### 3. Results

To answer the three research questions raised in the previous section, corpus research was conducted utilizing three types of data source: (1) book reviews from platforms including Amazon, Goodreads, and Thriftbook; (2) blog posts from the literary critics' platform The Millions; and (3) online forum platform Reddit. These sources provided comprehensive comments on the aesthetic reception of *Red Sorghum* via different channels. In addition, the re-framed aesthetic reception theory was employed as the theoretical framework in the process of data analysis. The results and findings of the corpus study are presented in the subsequent parts.

#### 3.1 Evaluation of English Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Shandong-English Translation in *Red Sorghum*

To explore the frequencies of aesthetic reception in the TT of *Red Sorghum*, two types of identification with the target readers were taken into account during the data processing procedure: identification with roles type and identification with TT type. The former is based on Jauss' (1982) interaction patterns of identification with roles, while the latter is based on improved criteria for aesthetic reception derived from Jauss' (1982) interaction patterns of identification. These two types of interaction pattern contribute to accurately interpreting the frequency of aesthetic reception among English target readers in *Red Sorghum*.

##### 3.1.1 Frequency of English Readers' Identification with Roles in Shandong-English Translation of *Red Sorghum*

Table 1. Frequency of English readers' identification with roles in *Red Sorghum* across five review datasets (N=214)

| Identification with roles in<br><i>Red Sorghum</i> | Amazon<br>book review |        | Goodreads<br>book review |        | Thriftbook<br>book review |        | The Millions<br>blog posts |      | Reddit<br>online forum |        |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------|------|------------------------|--------|
|                                                    | N                     | %      | N                        | %      | N                         | %      | N                          | %    | N                      | %      |
| Associative identification                         | 1                     | 3.8    | 31                       | 16.8   | 0                         | 0.0    | 0                          | 0.0  | 0                      | 0.0    |
| Admiring identification                            | 2                     | 7.7    | 33                       | 17.8   | 1                         | 33.3   | 0                          | 0.0  | 1                      | 100.0  |
| Sympathetic identification                         | 11                    | 42.3   | 52                       | 28.3   | 2                         | 66.7   | 0                          | 0.0  | 0                      | 0.0    |
| Cathartic identification                           | 9                     | 34.6   | 45                       | 24.5   | 0                         | 0.0    | 0                          | 0.0  | 0                      | 0.0    |
| Ironic identification                              | 3                     | 11.5   | 23                       | 12.5   | 0                         | 0.0    | 0                          | 0.0  | 0                      | 0.0    |
| TOTAL                                              | 26                    | 100.0% | 184                      | 100.0% | 3                         | 100.0% | 0                          | 0.0% | 1                      | 100.0% |

The data regarding target readers' reviews of the Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum* were collected from three sources: book reviews, literary blogs, and internet forums. These comments were then categorized into five separate datasets. The initial three datasets were collected from book reviews (Amazon, Goodreads, and Thriftbook). The findings reveal notable similarities among them, as all exhibit a great degree of sympathetic identification with roles in the novel: 42.3 per cent in Amazon book reviews, 28.3 per cent in Goodreads book reviews, and 66.7 per cent in Thriftbook book reviews. In reviews in The Millions blog posts by literary critics, no comments were found that specifically discussed the roles in the novel *Red Sorghum*. The comments focused on the book as a whole. As shown in Table 1, there was only one comment regarding roles in the novel that expressed an admiring identification. However, it is important to note that this single case does not hold statistical significance. Therefore, the most notable characteristic observed among English target readers in *Red Sorghum* is the demonstration of sympathetic identification. The result further demonstrates that sympathy with roles in literary works is the most significant factor for target readers' aesthetic reception. Target readers have a great tendency to show sympathetic emotions towards roles that have similar experiences or suffering to themselves (Jauss, 1982). In the Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum*, the tragic lives of Jiu'er and Uncle Arhat, as well as ordinary people who suffered a lot from the war, arouse emotional involvement and great sympathetic identification among English readers.

##### 3.1.2 Frequency of English Readers' Identification with TT of *Red Sorghum*

Table 2. Overall frequency of English readers' identification with TT of *Red Sorghum* (N=529)

| Identification with TT of <i>Red Sorghum</i> | N   | %      |
|----------------------------------------------|-----|--------|
| Aesthetic acceptance with TT                 | 284 | 53.7   |
| Neutrality with TT                           | 35  | 6.6    |
| Aesthetic criticism with TT                  | 210 | 39.7   |
| TOTAL                                        | 529 | 100.0% |

Evaluation of the degree of aesthetic reception among English target readers cannot be solely determined by their identification with roles in the novel. The identification with the TT is another important determiner. These two factors collaborate to provide more accurate data. The results in Table 2 display three distinct forms of identification among English target readers regarding the TT of *Red Sorghum*: (1) aesthetic acceptance with TT, (2) neutrality with TT, and (3) aesthetic criticism with TT. The prevalence of aesthetic acceptance is 53.7 per cent, surpassing neutrality at 6.6 per cent and aesthetic criticism at 39.7 per cent. This result indicates a significant degree of aesthetic acceptance for Goldblatt's Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum* among English target readers.

Table 3. Frequency of English readers' identification with TT of *Red Sorghum* in five datasets (N=529)

| Identification with TT of<br><i>Red Sorghum</i> | Amazon<br>book review |        | Goodreads<br>book review |         | Thriftbook<br>book review |        | The Millions<br>blog posts |        | Reddit<br>online forum |        |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--------------------------|---------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|------------------------|--------|
|                                                 | N                     | %      | N                        | %       | N                         | %      | N                          | %      | N                      | %      |
| Aesthetic acceptance                            | 57                    | 57.0   | 196                      | 52.7    | 10                        | 83.3   | 4                          | 33.3   | 17                     | 51.5   |
| Neutrality                                      | 5                     | 5.0    | 24                       | 6.5     | 1                         | 8.3    | 1                          | 8.3    | 4                      | 12.1   |
| Aesthetic criticism                             | 38                    | 38.0   | 152                      | 40.9    | 1                         | 8.3    | 7                          | 58.3   | 12                     | 36.4   |
| TOTAL                                           | 100                   | 100.0% | 372                      | 100.00% | 12                        | 100.0% | 12                         | 100.0% | 33                     | 100.0% |

The research results in Table 3 indicate that there is greater aesthetic acceptance than criticism in the three book review platforms, Amazon, Goodreads, and Thriftbook, and in comments on Reddit. However, blogs by literary critics in The Millions exhibit a higher level of aesthetic criticism than aesthetic acceptance. Specifically, aesthetic acceptance for Goldblatt's Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum* is notably higher among English readers on popular book review platforms Amazon (57%), Goodreads (52.7%), and Thriftbook (83.3%) compared to literary critics on The Millions (33.3%) and the online forum Reddit (51.5%). This result indicates that book reviews and online forums on *Red Sorghum* written by general readers tend to demonstrate a higher level of aesthetic acceptance compared to blog posts written by literary critics among English target readers.

### 3.1.3 Comparative Analysis of English Readers' Aesthetic Reception Across Five Review Datasets

Table 4. Comparative analysis of interaction patterns of identification type across five review datasets (N=743)

| Interaction patterns of<br>identification type | Amazon<br>book review |        | Goodreads<br>book review |        | Thriftbook<br>book review |        | The Millions<br>blog posts |        | Reddit<br>online forum |        |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|------------------------|--------|
|                                                | N                     | %      | N                        | %      | N                         | %      | N                          | %      | N                      | %      |
| Identification with<br>roles type              | 26                    | 20.6   | 184                      | 33.2   | 3                         | 20.0   | 0                          | 0.0    | 1                      | 2.9    |
| Identification with<br>TT type                 | 100                   | 79.4   | 372                      | 66.8   | 12                        | 80.0   | 12                         | 100.0  | 33                     | 97.1   |
| TOTAL                                          | 126                   | 100.0% | 556                      | 100.0% | 15                        | 100.0% | 12                         | 100.0% | 34                     | 100.0% |

The results of a comparative examination of the aesthetic reception by English target readers in five review datasets, namely Amazon, Goodreads, Thriftbook, The Millions, and Reddit, reveal that the respective percentages of target readers' identification with the TT of *Red Sorghum* were 79.4 per cent, 66.8 per cent, 80 per cent, 100 per cent, and 97.1 per cent. This result indicates that English target readers are more inclined to focus on the translated version rather than the roles in the novel *Red Sorghum*, particularly when two languages or cultures are involved. This finding serves as a valuable addition to Jauss' (1982) study on how readers identify with roles, specifically when just considering readers from their own culture.

Table 5. Comparative analysis of English readers' aesthetic acceptance across five review datasets (N=529)

| Identification with TT type | Amazon<br>book review |       | Goodreads<br>book review |        | Thriftbook<br>book review |       | The Millions<br>blog posts |        | Reddit<br>online forum |       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|-------|----------------------------|--------|------------------------|-------|
|                             | N                     | %     | N                        | %      | N                         | %     | N                          | %      | N                      | %     |
| Aesthetic acceptance        | 57                    | 45.2  | 196                      | 35.2   | 10                        | 66.7  | 4                          | 33.3   | 17                     | 50.0  |
| Neutrality                  | 5                     | 10.0  | 24                       | 4.3    | 1                         | 6.7   | 1                          | 8.3    | 4                      | 11.8  |
| Aesthetic criticism         | 38                    | 30.2  | 152                      | 27.3   | 1                         | 6.7   | 7                          | 58.3   | 12                     | 35.3  |
| TOTAL                       | 100                   | 79.4% | 372                      | 66.80% | 12                        | 80.0% | 12                         | 100.0% | 33                     | 97.1% |

The results in Table 5 demonstrate that aesthetic acceptance in book reviews on Amazon, Goodreads, and Thriftbook accounted for 45.2 per cent, 35.2 per cent, and 66.7 per cent respectively within identification with TT type. The results also demonstrate a higher frequency of aesthetic acceptance compared to aesthetic criticism and neutrality among English target readers of *Red Sorghum*. Moreover, the results indicate that the online forum Reddit accounted for a higher proportion (50%) of aesthetic acceptability. However, the results also reveal that blogs posts by literary critics in The Millions present more aesthetic criticisms: research results for these data only accounted for 7 out of 12 in the total, which is not statistically significant in the overall data analysis. Overall, the findings show a greater level of aesthetic acceptance towards the TT of *Red Sorghum* among English target readers. Meanwhile, special attention should be paid to comments from literary critics, who tend to demonstrate more aesthetic criticism towards TT of *Red Sorghum* than general readers.

3.2 Factors Influencing English Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Shandong-English Translation in *Red Sorghum*Table 6. Wording and frequencies of English target readers' aesthetic acceptance in the TT of *Red Sorghum*

| The original wording of aesthetic acceptance extracted from book reviews of English target readers                                                                         | Frequencies |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Mr. Mo's artistry be a silent force in the push for change within Chinese society                                                                                          | 0.0070      |
| it be stunningly brunt                                                                                                                                                     | 0.0070      |
| Imagine the translation from Chinese contribute to how wordy the book be but I be also fascinate by the description and the way the detail within the story unfolded       | 0.0070      |
| <i>Red Sorghum</i> be a book in which fable and history collide to produce fiction that be entirely new and unforgettable.                                                 | 0.0070      |
| it be a incredibly powerful book that present a genuine Chinese viewpoint.                                                                                                 | 0.0035      |
| take together, this be a amazing book                                                                                                                                      | 0.0035      |
| I love it all and highly recommend it for those who be adventurous in nature and who be not afraid of the graphic detail haunt they dream                                  | 0.0035      |
| Mo's genius be tell a compelling tale involve complex, three-dimensional character in a style which be direct and gritty but also mystical and rich with symbolic imagery. | 0.0035      |
| the ever-present sorghum of the title be a metaphor for life and death, safety and menace, and, above all, blood, red blood.                                               | 0.0035      |
| a colorful, complex and beautiful novel.                                                                                                                                   | 0.0035      |
| the writing be beautiful                                                                                                                                                   | 0.0035      |
| through vivid description and rich storytelling,                                                                                                                           | 0.0035      |
| it be interesting read the book                                                                                                                                            | 0.0035      |
| in this fable, these conjoined aspect be not just coincident                                                                                                               | 0.0035      |
| a great percentage of the work in English go to Howard Goldblatt, the book's translator                                                                                    | 0.0035      |
| he prose be very pretty, sometimes too much and sometimes just perfect                                                                                                     | 0.0035      |
| it be so masterful how Mo Yan wove together all of the character and time period                                                                                           | 0.0035      |
| the language and symbol and character' dialogue teach I a lot about a culture I can barely relate to.                                                                      | 0.0035      |
| the beauty of the lighter side of the human experience also run throughout the book,                                                                                       | 0.0035      |
| stick with this book, do not skip over the brutal part, though many.                                                                                                       | 0.0035      |

Table 6 presents the top 20 comments from English-speaking readers on the TT of *Red Sorghum*. These comments were collected from five review channels: Amazon, Goodreads, Thriftbook, Reddit, and The Millions. The book reviews from English target readers can be categorized into three main perspectives: (1) Mo Yan's vivid description; (2) Goldblatt's skilful translation; and (3) the cultural value of the novel *Red Sorghum*. The most prominent book reviews highlighted Mo Yan's skilful portrayal of historical events in his novel *Red Sorghum*, Goldblatt's significant role in translating the book to enhance its readability and appeal, and the profound metaphorical elements present in *Red Sorghum*. The results in the table show that the top ten comments in book reviews regarding aesthetic acceptance of the TT of *Red Sorghum* primarily focus on the distinctive Chinese culture, the unique writing style, the vivid natural description, and the symbolism of red sorghum. In the top 20 book reviews, two of the English target readers emphasized the positive correlation between the translation and aesthetic acceptance among English target readers. In world literature, an English version of *Red Sorghum* that is culturally and aesthetically equivalent to the original novel and Shandong culture can significantly enhance the aesthetic acceptability of the English version of *Red Sorghum* for its English target readers.

Table 7. Wording and frequencies of English target readers' aesthetic criticism in the TT of *Red Sorghum*

| The original wording of aesthetic criticism extracted from book reviews of English target readers                               | Frequencies |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| I have to force myself to finish it because the detail of the horror perpetrate on the Chinese be overwhelming                  | 0.0095      |
| greatly disappointed with it after I finish read the novel                                                                      | 0.0048      |
| Man's inhumanity to man be endlessly portray.                                                                                   | 0.0048      |
| I get bore with what I feel be a overly prolonged outcome                                                                       | 0.0048      |
| disgust scene                                                                                                                   | 0.0048      |
| the brutality relay be a constant thread throughout and be disturbing                                                           | 0.0048      |
| Overuse of flashback-often and vary and confuse                                                                                 | 0.0048      |
| if you be look for sex, violence, murder, warfare, rape and pilage, this book be for you!                                       | 0.0048      |
| a bit difficult to follow at time                                                                                               | 0.0048      |
| I be depressed                                                                                                                  | 0.0048      |
| and it be the repetition of it that finally choke I                                                                             | 0.0048      |
| Disappointment to say the least, the word sorghum be reiterate to the point it annoy sometimes it go to 4 time in a single page | 0.0048      |
| but gory and exaggerate.                                                                                                        | 0.0048      |

|                                                                                                                      |        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| it be obscure by the style                                                                                           | 0.0048 |
| it have far too many description of red sorghum fields                                                               | 0.0048 |
| poorly write, chop up and hardly understandable                                                                      | 0.0048 |
| the imagery be all about putrid entrail and similarly disgusting image                                               | 0.0048 |
| translating be too off-putting                                                                                       | 0.0048 |
| the author use more than one narrator can be confuse at time and seem to have a Stephen King like tendency to ramble | 0.0048 |
| the writing style do not appeal at all, also the frequent use of colloquialism see often very inappropriate          | 0.0048 |

Table 7 displays the specific wording and frequencies of the top 20 aesthetic criticisms found in the collected comments on the TT of *Red Sorghum*. The results reveal that aesthetic critiques among English readers primarily focus on five specific aspects: (1) Mo Yan's description of horrific scenes and brutality of human beings in *Red Sorghum*; (2) frequent repetition of the term "red sorghum"; (3) excessive use of flashbacks in the narrative; (4) critiques of the writing style and frequent use of Shandong dialect language; and (5) critiques of Goldblatt's translation of *Red Sorghum*. The findings show that the unique Shandong culture and its dialectal language have significant effects on English target readers' understanding of Mo Yan's writing style. Moreover, the translator's equivalent representation of cultural and aesthetic elements in Mo Yan's original novel is the major factor that influences the readability and aesthetic reception of the translated version of *Red Sorghum* among English target readers. Therefore, the research question of how to enhance the aesthetic reception and reduce negative evaluations of Shandong-English translation of *Red Sorghum* for English target readers can be solved by improving translation to a certain degree.

### 3.3 Strategies for Enhancing English Readers' Aesthetic Reception of Shandong-English Translation in *Red Sorghum*

#### 3.3.1 Enhancing English Target Readers' Sympathetic Identification with Roles in *Red Sorghum*

The relationship between the source text and target text of *Red Sorghum* is a dynamic rather than a static process, the emotions of implied target readers being the most influential factor. Aesthetic reception is a process of emotional engagement, presented as the identification with roles portrayed in literary works (Jauss, 1982). The research findings reveal that English target readers' sympathetic identification with roles in *Red Sorghum* greatly increases their likelihood of aesthetic acceptance of the novel. "Aesthetic reception is the 'fusion of vision', which initiates from the perception of beauty and ends up with understanding, during which emotion is the driving force" (Liu, 2005, p. 300). Therefore, by fostering a strong sense of aesthetic sympathetic identification among the author, translator, and target readers, the aesthetic reception among the target readers can be significantly enhanced. For example, the repeated use of "red sorghum" and abundant natural description are a metaphorical and symbolic writing style employed by the author Mo Yan to express his strong emotion in the novel. The translation may lead to aesthetic criticism if Goldblatt failed to convey Mo Yan's aesthetic values accurately in the TT. The concept of aesthetic empathy, as proposed by Liu (2005), has been widely promoted in traditional Chinese translation as an effective device in aesthetic translation. The translator plays a crucial role in determining the representation of aesthetic empathy in the TT, whose translation should surpass linguistic equivalence and pay more attention to its aesthetic and cultural equivalence. Goldblatt's several communications with the author Mo Yan and his profound comprehension of Chinese culture and aesthetic values in *Red Sorghum* greatly contributed to his popularity among English target readers.

#### 3.3.2 Transferring Cultural Uniqueness in Shandong-English Translation of *Red Sorghum*

The Shandong dialect is a regional variant of the Chinese national language spoken in the Shandong area; it is distinctive compared with standard language. Translating the Shandong dialect involves transferring language from a monolingual context to a multilingual context, which undoubtedly increases the complexity and difficulty for translators. As a result, translators "are forced to employ translation techniques like compensation and reduction" (Bonaffini, 1997, p. 282) to improve the readability and aesthetic acceptance of the English version of *Red Sorghum* among the target readers. The issue of untranslatability has long been a challenge in the dialect translation of literary works. This difficulty arises from the cultural uniqueness and the historical and social distinctiveness of dialects. There are numerous examples of onomatopoeia, culturally specific items, and idioms that do not have an equivalent expression in the English language—for instance, 克朗克朗 kè lǎng kè lǎng (a squishing sound), 里 lǐ (mile), 煎饼 qiǎ bǐng (fistcake), and 滚瓜溜熟 gǔn guā liū shú (soon had it down pat). Therefore, readers' aesthetic reception should be evaluated from both historical and cultural perspectives to help readers accurately grasp the aesthetic values in literary works. Readers' cultural knowledge and personal experience have a reflective effect on their aesthetic acceptance; aesthetic values can only be conveyed through the intertextuality between literary works and implied readers (Jauss, 1982). Goldblatt has achieved a balanced translation that preserves the local flavour of the Shandong dialect while also considering the acceptability of English target readers (Guo & Zou, 2023).

In the process of translation, the translator plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural uniqueness in the ST and representing cultural values in the TT (Hue et al., 2022). Gibello and Lesch (2017) discussed different translation norms, including domestication and foreignization adopted by Goldblatt in the translation of *Red Sorghum*. However, this research was limited to linguistic equivalence, and cultural uniqueness and aesthetic values are yet to be investigated. Liu's (2005) aesthetic translation theory, especially the aesthetic modulation devices, including word modification, stylistic changes, metaphorization and visualization, provides enlightenment and alternative translation strategies for representation of cultural uniqueness and aesthetic values in *Red Sorghum*. In addition, the translator's sensitivity and fluency in respect of both the source and target cultures can greatly enhance the aesthetic equivalence between two different cultures.

### 3.3.3 Utilizing Multiple Translation Strategies in Shandong-English Translation of *Red Sorghum*

Goldblatt argued that translation is not for the author but for the target readers (Levitt, 2013). Consequently, Goldblatt predominantly employed a domestication translation strategy in the Shandong dialect translation of *Red Sorghum*, aiming to ensure the target readers' acceptability (Gibello & Lesch, 2017). However, Guo and Zou (2023, p. 11) argued that "the long-term use of a domestication translation strategy tends to lose Chinese cultural uniqueness", potentially impacting the world transmission of Chinese literature. The domestication translation strategy is suitable for those target readers who have limited knowledge of Shandong culture, while foreignization with annotation can be a preferable choice for those target readers who are enthusiastic about learning Shandong culture in the dialect translation of *Red Sorghum*. For some culturally specific items, such as 清明节 qīng míng jié (the day set aside to attend ancestral graves) and 大洋 dà yáng (money used in the years of the Republic), a foreignization translation strategy with annotation can significantly improve the aesthetic acceptability for English target readers who have limited familiarity with Shandong culture. Moreover, employing an aesthetic translation strategy that involves visualization and metaphorization can be a more favourable option for translating metaphoric expressions such as 人面桃花 rén miàn táo huā (the girls' faces looked like peach blossoms), which can immigrate and represent the aesthetic elements of character descriptions in the process of translation from the ST to the TT, thereby enhancing aesthetic acceptability for the target readership.

## 4. Discussion

This paper aimed to evaluate English target readers' aesthetic acceptance of the Shandong-English translation in the Shandong dialectal novel *Red Sorghum* and to determine individual English readers' expectations and criticisms of the translated version by Goldblatt. To do this, this paper reconstructed Jaus's (1982) aesthetic acceptance theory as the theoretical framework and collected book reviews along with reflective literary critiques of English target readers from five different channels as data.

Firstly, the research findings indicate a high frequency of aesthetic reception of the TT of Goldblatt's (1993) translated version of *Red Sorghum*. This conclusion is derived from two research findings. The first finding indicates that English target readers have a strong empathetic identification with roles in the novel, which has high correlation with readers' acceptance. The empathetic emotions experienced by target readers are influenced by the roles in the novel and their aesthetic experience, aesthetic attitude, and aesthetic values. The aesthetic style and the characters in the novel collaborate to evoke readers' emotions (Verheyen, 2015). Aesthetic empathy has been demonstrated to be the most prominent factor that influences target readers' acceptance. Readers either appreciate Mo Yan's unique personal writing style, which includes abundant flashbacks and natural descriptions, or empathize with the sufferings of characters in the novel. The second factor is English target readers' identification with Goldblatt's TT. According to Goldblatt (2014, p. 28), his translation is "catering to the readers and considering their reading habits," and he regards translation as "a rewriting process for foreigner readers". Goldblatt also preserves Mo Yan's unique style and aesthetic values, which have gained him unprecedented popularity among English target readers (Jing, 2021).

Furthermore, the primary factors influencing English target readers' aesthetic reception are centred on the chronological sequence of storytelling, the repeated occurrence of the term "red sorghum", and the depiction of brutality and cruelty in the novel. One reason is Mo Yan's "magic realistic" writing style, which leads to the confusion of chronological order when reading this novel. Another influential factor is the cultural and historical divergence between the Chinese and Western world. The social significance of a literary work can be achieved through the target readers' active reading of the target text (Yang, 2022); thus, the social meaning of the text is endowed by readers. Evaluating reader-centred aesthetic reception is more socially significant than text orientation, which focuses on the unique reading habits, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences of individual readers. The finding from individual readers' wording on different book review platforms reveals that general target readers are also required to possess a specific level of understanding of Chinese history and culture to improve their aesthetic appreciation. The story of *Red Sorghum* is set in a special historical period in China. The villagers in Mo Yan's hometown Shandong endure much suffering during the war. The novel contains numerous specific cultural items pertaining to the Shandong dialect, making it challenging for English target readers to grasp the symbolic meaning of blood represented by red sorghum in the war, as well as the cultural references to Shandong's distinctiveness.

Finally, Shandong-English translation is a complicated process that requires the translator's proficiency in both the original Chinese language and the English language, as well as their respective cultures. The equivalence of dialect translation is not limited to its linguistic level but involves its aesthetic representation, too (Ma, 2009). Goldblatt employs domestication as the primary translation strategy by rewriting the Shandong dialect into English local dialects and focusing on fluency of readership (Jing, 2021). This gained him great popularity in English-speaking countries. However, this translation strategy may result in the loss of aesthetic and cultural distinctiveness of the Shandong dialect, thereby diminishing the target readers' aesthetic reception (Sun, 2022). A combination of domestication, foreignization with annotation, and aesthetic translation strategies can greatly enhance aesthetic acceptability among English target readers.

## 5. Conclusion

Kronegger et al (1985, p. 25) argued that studies of literary works' aesthetic function focus only on its "production rather than reception", signifying the shift from a text-centred approach to reader orientation in literary studies. Previous studies on literary translation mainly focused on a text-oriented tendency from the perspective of formalism (Kivy, 2011) and the translation strategies employed by specific translators (Jing et al., 2023; Sayahen et al., 2024). In world literature, it is imperative to shift from a text-oriented literary translation

study to a reader-centred reception study. Readers' active reading engagement is essential for the real completion of the literary work (Jauss, 1982). Furthermore, the target readers' reception process involves recreating the original literary works' intended meaning, which occurs in active interactions between the TT and target readers during their reading activity (Kronegger et al., 1985). The interpretative strategies employed by general readers, which are shaped by their different personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social statuses, have a significant influence on the degree of aesthetic reception of the target text. Rather than relying on case studies, evaluating individual readers' aesthetic reception and influential factors from a corpus perspective using statistically significant methods is of great importance. The research findings indicate that the utilization of multiple translation strategies by the translator in Shandong-English translation and raising awareness of Shandong culture among English target readers can enhance the aesthetic acceptability of *Red Sorghum*. The significance of Shandong-English translation is evident in both its aesthetic and social function. This study has established a constructive framework for evaluating the aesthetic reception of dialectal literature among English target readers and enhancing its global identification.

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### Authors' contributions

Yanqing Yu was responsible for the data collection, data analysis and manuscript preparation. Dr. Ng Boon Sim was responsible for the research design and framework revising. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Roslina Mamat was responsible for format and manuscript revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors contributed equally to the study.

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