

No translation

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3

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Eatery on Kat Hing St, Wuhan, site of Chi Li's Life Show (Source: city.ifeng.com)

I am very much looking forward to attending the *Intercultural Literacy, Communication, and Competence in the Context of Multiculturalism Conference* at [Zhongnan University of Economics and Law](#) in [Wuhan](#) in November this year. I've never been to Wuhan before (nor anywhere else in China) and what I usually do before going anywhere is read. I've asked my students and colleagues from China for recommendations, and as soon as I mention Wuhan, they've all said: "Chi Li! You have to read Chi Li's novel about a restaurant owner in Wuhan."

I'd heard the advice a couple of times but googling "Chi Li" turned out to be easier said than done, particularly as I had a summary of the plot of her most famous novel but no title. I

asked around some more among the Chinese I know, wondering whether there was a translation into English and the answer I received was "Of course! She's very famous. Her work has been translated into many languages."

So, I asked for "Chi Li" in Chinese characters and then googled "池莉" – restricted to English-language sites, of course, as I can't read Chinese. This way I found [the Wikipedia entry for Chi Li](#) although it's only a stub and disappointingly short. However, at least I found out the English title of the novel I was after this way: *Life Show*. The Wikipedia link from "Chi Li" to "*Life Show*" however did not bode well: "[Wikipedia does not have an article with this exact name](#)" it says.

No matter, I now had the author and the English title and so I should have found the book in a matter of a few clicks. It wasn't to be. In [a blog post on ilookchina](#) I learnt why:

Although many of her novels have been translated into French, there are no English translations yet, which is a shame.

What?! A famous Chinese author not translated into English?!

Unfortunately, it's true and I shouldn't have been surprised, of course. Global book translations look very much like a one-way street out of English. According to [UNESCO's *Index Translationum*](#) English is the original language of a cool 1,220,893 books translated into other languages. The runner-up, French, is the source language of less than 20% of that number with 215,216.

Chinese is in 16th position – behind such relatively minor European languages as Swedish (7th), Danish (9th), Dutch (11th), Czech (13th), Polish (14th) and Norwegian (15th).

Table 1: Top 20 Source Languages of Translated Books (Source: [Index Translationum](#))

1.	English	1,220,893	8.	Japanese	26,735	15.	Norwegian	13,812
2.	French	215,216	9.	Danish	20,675	16.	Chinese	13,267
3.	German	199,232	10.	Latin	19,102	17.	Arabic	11,829
4.	Russian	101,119	11.	Dutch	18,723	18.	Portuguese	11,143
5.	Italian	66,044	12.	Ancient Greek	17,172	19.	Hungarian	11,018
6.	Spanish	52,387	13.	Czech	16,300	20.	Hebrew	9,802
7.	Swedish	38,662	14.	Polish	14,034			

By contrast, considering the target languages into which the world's books are being translated, unbelievably English is nowhere near the top. As Table 2 shows, English is only in fourth place as the target language with less than half of the number of translations than the 1st placed, German. If you think 4th place is not bad, consider the number of English-language readers and the size of the English-language book market, and the position is obviously ridiculously low.

Table 2: Top 5 Target Languages of Translated Books (Source: [Index Translationum](#))

1. German 290,828
2. French 237,890
3. Spanish 228,151
4. **English 145,737**
5. Japanese 130,610

The figures for source and target languages of books translated in the world are a good indicator of the inequality of cultural flows. The UNESCO figures make a mockery of the rhetoric of intercultural communication: it's almost as if the whole world was listening to the communication emanating from a narcissist.

In Australia “becoming Asia-literate” is currently a very fashionable media topic. How that is supposed to happen without translations from Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean and Asia’s many other languages, I don’t know.

As far as my quest to read at least one novel by Chi Li before I visit Wuhan is concerned, I’ve now ordered [Le Show de la vie](#) and will be looking forward to brushing up my French while I learn about China!

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