



DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-2-247-255  
EDN: PGDGGF  
UDC 82.01

Research article / Научная статья

## The study on Grossman's *Life and Fate* in China: history and present advance

Qingle Wang 

Nankai University,  
94 Wenjin Rd, Tianjin, 30071, People's Republic of China  
✉ 15212220464@163.com

**Abstract.** The author attempts to systematize and summarize the review works of Chinese philologists devoted to Grossman's *Life and Fate*. Different Chinese translation versions of the novel are listed and two stages and three aspects of the study on this novel in China are elaborated. The author describes how the study on *Life and Fate* has developed in China, how scholars in Chinese academic circles view this novel, and what place this novel occupies in Chinese literary criticism. It is concluded that the study of *Life and Fate* began early enough in China and nowadays is experiencing a new rise. However, Chinese scholars should hold their own point of view on Grossman's works instead of following Russian or Western scholars' viewpoint.

**Keywords:** reception, translation, literary criticism, intercultural dialogue

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**Article history:** submitted February 7, 2023; revised April 12, 2023; accepted April 14, 2023.

**For citation:** Wang, Q. (2023). The study on Grossman's *Life and Fate* in China: History and present advance. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 28(2), 247–255. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-2-247-255>

## Исследование романа В. Гроссмана «Жизнь и судьба» в Китае: история и современность

Ц. Ван 

Нанькайский университет,  
Китайская Народная Республика, 300071, Тянь Цзинь, Нанькайский район, Вэй Цзинь, д. 94  
✉ 15212220464@163.com

**Аннотация.** Предпринята попытка систематизации и обобщения работ китайских филологов, посвященных роману «Жизнь и судьба» В. Гроссмана. Рассматриваются разные версии перевода на китайский язык. Представлены два этапа формирования новых аспек-

© Wang Q., 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

тов изучения романа. Показано развитие исследований романа в китайской науке, отношение к роману в кругах китайских ученых и место романа в китайской литературоведении. Сделан вывод о том, что исследование произведения В. Гроссмана «Жизнь и судьба» в Китае началось достаточно рано и в наши дни переживает новый подъем. Однако китайским ученым следует выделить свою собственную позицию относительно творчества Гроссмана вместо того, чтобы следовать российским или западным исследованиям.

**Ключевые слова:** рецепция, перевод, китайские исследования, литературная критика, межкультурный диалог

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 7 февраля 2023 г.; отрецензирована 12 апреля 2023 г.; принята к публикации 14 апреля 2023 г.

**Для цитирования:** Ван Ц. Исследование романа В. Гроссмана «Жизнь и судьба» в Китае: история и современность // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2023. Т. 28. № 2. С. 247–255. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-2-247-255>

## Introduction

Vasily Grossman (1905–1964) is a famous Soviet writer of the twentieth century. During his life, Grossman wrote many classic literary works, including the novels *In the City of Berdichev*, *Everything Flows*, *The Old Teacher* and other masterpieces about wars. Moreover, his novel *Life and Fate* is most highly regarded in China. In the early years in Chinese academic circles, the study of Grossman focused on the study of *Life and Fate*. This article is concerned with Chinese translation versions of *Life and Fate*, two stages and three aspects of the study on this novel in China.

## Discussion

### *Chinese versions of Life and Fate*

Grossman's novel *Life and Fate*, completed in 1961, experienced lots of sufferings before it was published in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1980. Eight years later, this novel was available in the Soviet Union. As early as 1989, there was already Chinese version of this novel. During 1989 and 1993, four Chinese versions of this novel were published: 1. *Survival and Fate* (two volumes) (1989), translated by Yan Yongxing and Zheng Hailing, published by Workers' Publishing House; 2. *Life and Fate* (1989), translated by Wang Fuzeng, Li Yuzhen and Sun Weitao, published by China Friendship Press; 3. *Life in the Winds and Rains* (1991), translated by Li Gang, published by Lijiang Publishing House; 4. *Life and Fate* (1993), translated by Weng Benze, Lu Zhaoming, Feng Zengyi and Cao Guowei, published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House. Later,

in the twenty-first century, Yan Yongxing and Zheng Hailing's translation of *Survival and Fate* was reprinted in 2000 and 2015. Li Gang's translation of *Life in the Winds and Rains* was reprinted in 2015 and renamed as *Life and Fate*. Compared to previous editions, a new preface written by media-writer Liang Wendao has been added to the re-released 2015 version of *Life and Fate*. In this preface, Liang places a high value on this novel, "I have been recommending books in print and electronic media for more than 20 years, but I have rarely encountered a book such as *Life and Fate*, and I feel that recommending it is a moral obligation that I cannot avoid" (Liang, 2015, p. 3). The popularity of this novel in Chinese market cannot be separated from Liang Wendao's reputation and acclaim. This 2015 version of *Life and Fate* also includes an introduction by Robert Chandler, who is a translator and has translated *Life and Fate* into English. He believes that Grossman and his books spoke for those who lie in the Earth (Chandler, 2016, p. 1). In addition, Chandler wrote an English biography of Grossman. However, there is not any Chinese biography of Grossman. It can be noted that knowledge about Grossman's works in China is still insufficient, and the existing Chinese literature is still based on foreign scholars' research.

### ***Two stages of the study on Life and Fate in China***

As mentioned above, compared to Russian and European academic circles, there are relatively few research materials on Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* in China. Since its translation into Chinese in the 1980s, the review of the novel can be roughly divided into two stages. In the first stage, the study on *Life and Fate* is mainly descriptive and recommendatory, which attempts to sort out the complex plot, numerous characters and interwoven clues of the novel. The second stage focuses on expanding the external historical facts of the novel, penetrating deeper into the internal details of the novel, elaborating and commenting on the author's life experience, artistic techniques and ideological connotation, and reassessing the overall artistic value of the novel. The research findings of the first stage are often collected in literary histories or literary dictionaries, while the research findings of the second stage are often presented in the form of independent research articles.

The first stage of the study on *Life and Fate* mainly centers on the introduction of the content of the novel and the description of the grand structure. However, there are different views on the value and significance of the novel. While acclaiming the epic writing perspective and narrative structure of *Life and Fate*, some scholars remain highly alert to the acceptance of the ideological connotation of the novel, and even reject and criticize some ideas. For example, in *A Dictio-*

nary of *Evaluating Masterpieces of Modern World Literature*, Yan Yongxing states, “We certainly do not necessarily look up to the ideas that Grossman puts forward in this book as standard. But in terms of the grand structure of his works, the complexity of the events, the depth of the implications, those praise may not be effusive words” (*The Explanatory Dictionary of Modern World Literary Classics*, 1991, p. 239). In *A Brief History of 20th Century Literature*, edited by Wu Yuanmai, it is also noted: “Grossman’s condemnation of Hitler, Fascism, Stalin and the Soviet socialist system (no matter how many serious errors there were in it) as extremism in this works is obviously unfair, unobjective, and therefore wrong” (Wu, 2013, p. 545). In the book *Unforgettable Grossman*, Wen Min also states, “(The) novel *Life and Fate* is not perfect. Its biggest failure lies in its imprudent parallels between Stalin and Hitler, between Germany and Russia during the war, between the two parties...” (Wen, 2000, p. 137). However, according to Wen Min, “The author’s bias is not unrelated to the extreme confusion in the Soviet Union” (Wen, 2000, p. 137). In *Unfreezing and Returning Literature*, the author makes a sharper criticism of the ideological subtext shown in *Life and Fate*, arguing that “although it treats the Battle of Stalingrad as a background, it is the earliest comprehensive denial of the Soviet social system and history since the October Revolution, Stalin and even Lenin. It sets a very bad precedent for literary works that completely negated Stalin and Lenin and the achievements of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and thereafter” (Tan, 2001, p. 97). The opposing viewpoint is to approve of the profound and enlightening ideas in *Life and Fate*, while deeming the artistic technique of the novel immature. One of the most prominent criticisms is that of Qiao Yu, which is recorded in the book *Detailed Explanation of Forbidden Books*. Qiao Yu states, “The novel’s structural conception, character formation, and plot development have not reached the heights that are characteristic of excellent novels that reveal forbidden books. An important reason why it is appreciated by people is that the ideas it expresses are quite profound and instructive” (Liang, 1993, p. 101).

In the second stage, researchers have shown a deeper understanding of *Life and Fate*, which is accompanied by higher appreciation of this works. Researchers have attempted to list *Life and Fate* in the canon of Russian literature, placing Grossman, who was once overlooked, on a par with Nobel Prize winners such as A. Solzhenitsyn, M. Sholokhov, and B. Pasternak. For example, Liu Wenfei, in his lecture at the One-Way Space bookstore in Beijing recorded in the *Collection of Speeches on Russian Literature*, concluded, “Today we should realize that Grossman was unquestionably exceptional in terms of novel writing alone, and should be considered one of the greatest Russian novelists of the 20th century, alongside

Gorky, Sholokhov, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Platonov and Solzhenitsyn” (Liu, 2001, p. 254). In *A Reassessment of Russian-Soviet Literature*, Li Jianjun states that “Grossman belongs to the type of writers who were underappreciated in his time” and “his *Life and Fate* belongs among the works that have long been rejected by readers” (Li, 2018, p. 970). “Both in China and in Russia Grossman and his *Life and Fate* were not taken seriously enough and did not receive the recognition they deserved” (Li, 2018, pp. 971–972). According to Li, “Grossman is a great writer on a par with Sholokhov, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn. His *Life and Fate* is no less profound in thought and artistic perfection than *The Quiet Don*, *Doctor Zhivago*, and *The Gulag Archipelago*” (Liu, 2001, p. 244).

We can observe that the recognition of Grossman and *Life and Fate* in China has demonstrated a dramatic shift in the research trend on Soviet literature over the past 40 years (i.e., from the late 1980s to the present). In fact, this approbation trend is not inexplicable and has long been present in the traditional paradigm of Chinese perception of Russian and Soviet literature. Chinese scholar Liu Wenfei once said that the perception of foreign literature in China, including Russian and Soviet literature, had long been influenced by foreigners, including the official literary policy of the Soviet Union, and the history of literature written by Soviet scholars was considered as “textbook”. Nevertheless, at some point, it began to be influenced by Western colleagues. This was also true of *Life and Fate*. Chinese translation versions of this novel had not attracted Chinese scholars’ much attention until it gained attention and appreciation in the West (Liu, 2001, p. 244).

### **Three aspects of the study on *Life and Fate* in China**

In addition to examining *Life and Fate* from a historical perspective in China, in the past 40 years, researchers have mainly revolved around the following three aspects to make a thorough analysis of this novel.

1. Introductory study on *Life and Fate*. It is not easy for the ordinary reader to read Grossman’s *Life and Fate* because of its rich content, complex plot and multiple intertwined narrative lines. According to Duan Chao’s assessment, “This 900-page ‘epic about human nature’ cannot be consumed as fast food” (Duan, 2015). In contemporary studies of *Life and Fate*, it is of great necessity to make a description and summary of the masterpiece’s content and offer a synopsis for the sake of better understanding and recommendation. A typical example is a brief overview of the creation process and general content of *Life and Fate* in *The Russian Dictionary of Literature*. In this dictionary, Zheng Tiwu states that “the novel focuses on scenes from life in concentration camps and prisons during the Battle of Stalingrad... It is a sweeping epic filled with the blood

and fire of war, tears and laughter of the soul” (Zheng, 2013, pp. 167–168). There is also introductory study in the form of book reviews, such as “*Life and Fate: A voice for the weak good*” by Duan Chao and “The defects do not obscure the virtue, and the virtue do not obscure the defects: Commentary on *Life and Fate*” Wen Min.

2. Interpretation of historical and political background in *Life and Fate*. The twisted fate of Grossman and his novel *Life and Fate* has attracted the attention of researchers. Chinese experts and scholars have studied and analyzed the political implications reflected in the process of the book’s publication, combining the author’s ideas embodied in the book as well as the false interpretations that may arise in reading. For example, in *The Encyclopedia of Banned Books in the World*, Liu Pingqing summarized the contents of the novel and presented the author’s life experience. Liu states: “The main reason why the novel was unpopular with the authorities was that there was the description of Stalin’s panic on the verge of World War II, the comparison of German-Fascist concentration camps and Soviet labor camps, the comparison of Hitler’s despotism and Stalin’s totalitarianism, and the advocate of a life philosophy of the cycle of good and evil” (Sipaen, Xiao, 1995, pp. 630–631). Wen Min paid more attention to collecting the communication or correspondence between Grossman and his friends in his article *The Smothering Writer* and restored this lamentable historical event from the perspective of the memories and comments of Grossman’s friends and fellow writers. Wen Min believes that the authenticity of *Life and Fate* leads to the love of readers or the hatred of the authorities (Lin, 2005, p. 63). In the articles “Manuscripts do not burn: the mystery of Grossman’s *Life and Fate* manuscript” and “The Grossman Case”, *Life and Fate* has been comprehensively examined and analyzed (Yang, 2013, pp. 125–130). Yang Zheng does not explain “Grossman’s case” through the inner ideas of the works; he considers that “Grossman’s case is a microcosm of the complex relationship between Soviet writers and the regime in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Grossman’s creation was so complicated as a result of his times and personal reasons” (Yang, 2016, pp. 96–100). Lan Yinyan also recounts numerous obstacles in Grossman’s life, including the publication of *Life and Fate*, and agrees with Ehrenburg’s view that Grossman was a “maximalist” (Ihrenburg, 2005). Lan interprets this statement as “too naive and idealizing everything” (*2000 Chinese Essays*, 2001, p. 566) and suggests that this is one of the reasons *Life and Fate* was caught in the maelstrom of time to see the light of day 20 years later. In addition, *World Famous Jewish Culture*, *An Encyclopedia of Banned Books in the World*, and *A Detailed Explanation of Banned Books* review and interpret the zigzag publication road of the great novel.

3. Literary techniques of *Life and Fate*. Most researchers perceive that Grossman's *Life and Fate* follows the tradition of Russian realism, which reached its heyday in the 19th century and was embodied in the 20th century socialist realism. Because of this literary technique of realism, *Life and Fate* conveys a sense of unique reality. They place *Life and Fate* in the long Russian realist tradition, further emphasizing the special significance of this works, which combines 19th and 20th century realist traditions. Exploring the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad in the Russian literary tradition through the example *Life and Fate*, Xu Le proclaims that "Grossman's *Life and Fate* employs the 'panoramic epic narrative' of socialist realist literature to describe various scenes of front-line battles and of life at the rear, address almost all social problems on both sides and narrate in parallel the events of different categories which at first sight seem to be completely incompatible. The method of 'collage' creates a picture that contains a rich variety of changes, yet, at the same time remains a consistent reflection of reality" (Xu, 2015, pp. 19–24). This realistic approach and the author's desire for truth results in the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad in *Life and Fate*. In his master's thesis, "On the Russian Literary Tradition of Critical Realism in *Life and Fate*," Zhou Hao also attributes *Life and Fate* to the long Russian literary tradition of realism, detailing Grossman's critical reflections on the Soviet system during the Stalin era. In her master's thesis, "The Moral and Philosophical Symbolism of the Battle of Stalingrad in *Life and Fate*," Wang Li focuses on Grossman's description of the Battle of Stalingrad and analyzes its moral and philosophical symbolism and ethical aspects.

What's more, there are studies in China about Grossman's *Life and Fate* beyond the text, such as the study of its Chinese version from the perspective of translation: "Integrating Horizons in Humanism: A Study on the Translation of Li Gang's *Life and Fate*", written by Guan Linlin; an analysis of a television series based on the novel: "Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* is Screened in Russia as a Gift for the 70th Anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad," written by Kan Kai.

### Conclusion

To summarize, the study of Grossman's masterpiece *Life and Fate* began early enough in China, but it has not received sufficient attention during that time. Early studies of the novel only superficially reflect the relationships between the characters and the plot. In recent years, *Life and Fate* has regained popularity in Chinese scholars' study of Russian literature. Researchers have rethought the significance of the novel in literary history and have regarded it as a classic works of Soviet literature. Researchers have also embarked on a more comprehen-

sive and in-depth study of *Life and Fate*, including a fuller examination of the novel's publication as a literary and historical event, an analysis of symbolism and the historical significance of the works, and an effort to uncover the connections between Grossman's works and the Russian literary tradition. However, current research is far from sufficient for such a voluminous and in-depth literary works, and opportunities for further interpretation remain unexhausted. The academic community continues to present more qualitative studies.

### References

- 2000 *Chinese Essays*. (2001). Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press. (In Chin.)
- A dictionary of appreciation of contemporary world literary classics*. (1991). Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing Press. (In Chin.)
- Chandler, R. (2016). Foreword. In V. Grossman, *Life and Fate* (p. 1). New York: New York Review Edition.
- Duan, Chao. (2015). Life and fate: A voice for the weak good. *Chinese Reading*, (421). (In Chin.)
- Ihrenburg, I.G. (2005). *People, year, life*. Moscow: Tekst Publ. (In Russ.)
- Li, Jianjun. (2018). *Reassessment of Russian-Soviet literature*. Nanchang: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Press. (In Chin.)
- Liang, Shanzi. (1993). *A detailed explanation of banned books*. Tianjin: Tianjin Social Sciences Press. (In Chin.)
- Liang, Wendao. (2015). Preface to the new edition. In V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*. Guangxi Normal University Press. (In Chin.)
- Lin, Xianzhi. (2005). *Humanistic essays 2005. Autumn*. Guangzhou: Hua Cheng Press. (In Chin.)
- Liu, Wenfei. (2001). *Lectures on Russian literature*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University. (In Chin.)
- Sipaen, M., & Xiao, Feng. (1995). *A complete collection of banned books in the world*. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press. (In Chin.)
- Tan, Deling. (2001). *Defreezing literature and returning to literature*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press. (In Chin.)
- Wen, Min. (2000). Unforgettable grossman. *Reading*, (1), 137. (In Chin.)
- Wu, Yuanmai. (Ed.). (2013). *A brief history of foreign literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Nanjing: Yi Lin Press. (In Chin.)
- Xu, Le. (2015). The significance of Stalingrad battle in Russian literary tradition – taking V. Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* as an example. *Literary Theory and Criticism*, (4), 19–24. (In Chin.) <http://doi.org/10.16532/j.cnki.1002-9583.2015.04.004>
- Yang, Zheng. (2013). Manuscripts cannot be destroyed by burning – the mystery of Grossman's *Life and Fate* manuscript. *Russian Literature and Art*, (3), 125–130. (In Chin.) <http://doi.org/10.16238/j.cnki.rla.2013.03.017>



Yang, Zheng. (2016). The affair of Grossman. *Research on the Dynamics of Foreign Literature*, (2), 96–100. (In Chin.)

Zheng, Tiwu. (2013). *Lexicon of Russian literature*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press. (In Chin.)

**Bio note:**

*Qingle Wang*, doctoral student, College of Foreign Languages, Nankai University, 94 Wenjin Rd, Tianjin, 30071, People's Republic of China. ORCID: 0000-0003-2717-3414. E-mail: 15212220464@163.com