

Literature as a medium of Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of

Mo Yan's Literature Nobel

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Abstract:

Literature is a medium of intercultural communication and reception of literary creations across cultures can be consolidated through international prizes. Transability of authors, nuances, contexts, and cultures are challenges associated with such prizes. This paper explores the many ways in which literature can serve as an effective medium of intercultural communication and the challenges that can develop during this process. For this, the oeuvre of the Chinese author Mo Yan, the translations of his works in more than fifty languages, and various international prizes becomes the foundation for this analysis. In 2012, Mo Yan became the first Chinese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Some literary critics have argued that Mo Yan's prize belongs to his English translator, Howard Goldblatt who made his works available to English readers outside the China. As international awards are a form of recognition of intercultural communication, this paper enquires how the translation of Mo Yan's works helped to spread Chinese literature and is a perfect case study for intercultural communication.

Based on a form of logical interpretation of texts, this study employs a qualitative method of content analysis. To that extent, this study uses readings of literary texts, criticism, and perspectives. It is based on sources like scholarly research work published in academic journals, books, and print and online media.

Key Words: Chinese literature, translation, Mo Yan, Nobel Prize, intercultural communication

1. Introduction: Literature and/as culture

Language is an important aspect of communication and literature is the artistic expression of language. Language and literature both are part and parcel of any human culture and civilization. Culture is defined by James W. Neuliep as an “accumulated pattern of values, beliefs and behaviour shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal code systems”¹. Bradford J. Hall defines culture as “historically shared system of symbolic resources through which we make our world meaningful”². Mingsheng Li and Fay Patel apprehend the “aspect of history as one of the core elements of identity and see it as markers ‘deeply embedded’ in the values and belief systems of a culture”³. In this way, to recognize culture is to ‘understand all the experiences that guide its individual members through life’⁴. Thus, literature is one of the most effective forms of intercultural

¹ Neuliep, J.W. *Intercultural communication: A contextual Approach*, Los Angeles, Sage Publications, 2012, p.10.

² Hall, B.J. *Among cultures: The challenge of communication*, Belmont, Thomas Wadsworth, 2005, p.4.

³ Li, M. and Patel, F. *Intercultural communication: Building a global community*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2011, p.113.

⁴ Jandt, F.E. *Intercultural communication: An introduction*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2001, p.9.

communication. With the advent of globalization, ‘publishing’ has become an international industry and literary texts of different ‘major’ and ‘minor’ languages are getting traded more often. Literature has now become a national as well as a global product, not only for cultural exchanges but also for economic gains. Literature in its different forms, such as poems, novels, drama, short stories, etc. provide the cultural context of its originating society in which verbal communication occurs because narrative texts create ‘real-world problems’⁵ and represents socio-cultural and historical condition of time. Hall acknowledges that “we as human beings are at heart storytellers and by implication, its consumers. Indeed, consciously or unconsciously, we are often engaged in choosing among competing narratives. The very quality of our lives is thus inseparable from the quality of our stories”⁶. Learning about different cultures through literature, then, is “learning about the way the world works and how we should act”⁷. There are more than 6000 languages that currently exist in the world. On one hand, language is important aspect of communication, on the other hand, it is also a challenge for communication between speakers of two different languages. To face this challenge, translators play the role of mediator in intercultural communication among people from different cultural groups who speak/read/write in different languages.

2. Translation of literary texts, Literary Prizes and Intercultural Communication

German philosopher Goethe (1749-1832) introduced the concept of world literature for the first time encompassing the idea that world literature is an essential part of

⁵ Hua, Z. 2011. Culture, language and thought: Introduction to Part 1. In Z. Hua (ed.) *The language of intercultural communication: A reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.17-18.

⁶ Hall, B.J. *Among cultures: The challenge of communication*, Thomas Wadsworth, Belmont, 2005, p. xiv.

⁷ Ibid, pp. x83.

cosmopolitanism and it allows various national literature to unite. In this context, the question is—whether Chinese literature was ever a part of the world literature or not? David Damrosch's defined world literature as “works circulating beyond their own culture of origin”⁸. And as Mo Yan's work achieves international recognition it also becomes a watershed moment for Chinese literature within the defined category of world literature. After a long hiatus of the closed-door policy adopted during the early Qing China (1644-1911) cut off China from rest of the world, China finally opened up-to other forms of world literature with the May Fourth Movement (1915-21). Against this backdrop the concept of world literature arrived in China and echoed the desire within China's New Culture Movement to form associations with foreign literatures that would help in the development of national literature.⁹ As the Industrial revolution of Europe and the USA along with colonialism has shaped the world order in a new way, ancient civilizations and cultures were looked down upon by the new world power. In the same way, literature from non-European/American countries were also not be able to find their place. With the advent of globalization in post-colonial time, where everything is ruled by economy, ‘publishing’ being the important wheel for traveling of literature, has become an international industry and literary texts of different ‘major’ and ‘minor’ languages are getting traded more often. Literature has now become a national as well as a global product, not only for cultural exchanges but also for economic gains. Intercultural communication, as in Stella Ting-Toomey's *Communicating across cultures*, denotes “the symbolic exchange process whereby

⁸ Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p.4.

⁹ Liu, Hongtao. *Chinese Literature's Route to World Literature*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17.1, Purdue University Press, 2015, accessed on 18 March 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2625>.

individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation”¹⁰. She defined Culture as,

“it is like an iceberg: the deeper layers (e.g. traditions; beliefs, values) are hidden from our view; we only hear and see the uppermost layers of cultural artefacts (e.g., fashion, trends, pop music) and of verbal and nonverbal symbols. However, to understand a culture with any depth, we have to match its underlying values accurately with its respective norms, meanings, and symbols. It is the underlying set of beliefs and values that drives people’s thinking, reacting, and behaving. Furthermore, to understand commonalities between individuals and groups, we have to dig deeper into the level of universal human needs (such as safety; security, inclusion, dignity/respect, control, connection, meaning, creativity, and a sense of well-being)”¹¹.

The meeting of two icebergs is thus intercultural communication. Edward T. Hall developed the iceberg metaphor in *Beyond Culture*, which states two cultures, one external or conscious and one internal or subconscious , where “the external part of culture is visible and includes behaviours and some beliefs while the internal part is invisible: it includes beliefs and the values and thought patterns that underlie behaviour.”¹² In culture, the iceberg metaphor, with its visible part resting on the invisible one, places on one side architecture, arts, institutions, behaviour, food, etc., and values, norms, beliefs on the other (as marked a little further, the invisible part, with its shallow and deep culture, is supposed to represent nine-tenths of the whole). The focus on culture as a constituent part of text and hence of translation has largely developed out of understandings of translation as an act of intercultural or cross-cultural communication rather than just as inter-lingual communication.¹³ Pascale

¹⁰ Ting-Toomey, S. *Communicating across cultures*. New York; London: The Guilford Press, 1999, pp.9-10.

¹¹ Ibid, p.10.

¹² Hall, E.T. *Beyond Culture*, Anchor Books Editions, New York, 1976.

¹³ Anthony J. Liddicoat. *Translation as intercultural mediation: setting the scene*, Perspectives, 24:3, 2016. pp. 347-353.

Casanova explored the fundamental importance of transnational exchanges in a literary field that she characterized as global from the start.¹⁴ In this context of translational flow of literary texts, translation is an important component for the diffusion of literary texts into other cultures and thus creating an environment for intercultural communication. Competitions among individuals and communities were always present in human society. In the post-colonial World, the culture of International prizes (in different fields, such as art, literature, sports, economics, environment, architecture, philanthropy, journalism, etc.) has taken a new rise. In the field of literature, International prizes signify literary value, power of literary canon and is an indicator of distinction. These prizes have played and will continue to play an important role in the promotion of literature. However, it is important to note here that, the process of selection of winners are not full proof and carry flaws. In spite of its limitations, literature prizes are a unique phenomenon for the movement of text and celebration of individuals and at the same time associated culture. To understand the role of literature prizes in intercultural communication, a case study of Mo Yan and his literary achievements has been chosen from a macro perspective. This case study is taken as an approach which has been served by various theoretical streams.

3. Case study of Mo Yan (1955-)

Guan Moye or popularly known by his pen name Mo Yan was born in a small village named Ping'an Zhuang in Northeast Gaomi, Shandong province, China on 17th February 1955

¹⁴ Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2004.

in a peasant family. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)¹⁵, he dropped out from primary school and later at the age of 20 enlisted in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1976. Mo Yan's journey as a published writer started in 1981 with the publication of his short story *A Rainy Spring Night* in a Baoding magazine called *Lotus Pond*. Till now he has written 11 novels, 30 novellas, more than 100 short stories, movie script, plays and prose collections. Although his work *The Garlic Ballads*¹⁶ was banned in China for some time, he has received recognition from every local and national level literary awards within China. He was the recipient of the Liberation Army Literature and Art Award (1984,1985), Beijing Literature Prize (1985), 4th National Best Novel Award (1987), Feng Mu Literature Award (2001), First Ding Jun Literature Award (2003), first Maotai Cup for short stories (2004), first Pusong Ling Prize for short-stories (2007), second Honglou Meng Award (2008), Mao Dun Prize in 2011 for *Frog*. These prizes, first established him as a national writer and later, helped him to bring attention of foreign translators and publishing houses.

3.1 *Mo Yan's works in translation*

Since 1981 Mo Yan has produced a significant amount of work in various literary genres. And simultaneously his work has permeated to other countries through translation, adaptation in movies, and as additions into various anthologies. He has been translated into

¹⁵ Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was a sociopolitical movement launched by Chairman Mao in which youth were sent down to rural area to attend re-education camps.

¹⁶ Mo Yan wrote *The Garlic Ballads*, based on original event of the 1987 Cangshan Garlic Incident. It got banned in mainland China as soon as it was published. Later, it was published in Taiwan, and for republication in China, Mo Yan revised the plot.

more than 52 languages. In 1988, *Folk Music* was Mo Yan's first work to be translated into English by Yu Fanqin. The Research Center for Translations, Chinese University of Hong Kong Press published a collection of short stories *Explosions and Other Stories* by Mo Yan in 1991 and in the same year Prof. Michael Duke translated and published *White Dog and the Swings* in *Worlds of Modern Chinese Fiction*. This marked the arrival of Mo Yan in the Anglophone world, but it was English translations of Mo Yan's works by Howard Goldblatt¹⁷ which made Mo Yan famous in Anglophone literary space. Howard Goldblatt has translated Mo Yan's major works such as *Red Sorghum*, *The Garlic Ballads*, *The Republic of Wine*, *Shifu*, *You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *Pow!*, *Change*, *Sandalwood Death*, *Frog*, *Radish*.

Nevertheless, his works were also translated in other parts of the Western and Eastern world. It is essential to look at the translations of his works in French, German, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Swedish, Norwegian, etc. languages to have a more comprehensive view of his communication to the world. According to reports, Japan's acceptance of Mo Yan began as early as the 1980s. Since the publication of Naoko Kondo's translation of Mo Yan's novella *Transparent Carrots*, Mo Yan's work has been translated and published in Japan in as many as 54 books, with more than one million copies in circulation.¹⁸ Professor Fujii of the

¹⁷ Howard Goldblatt is America's most prolific translator of Chinese literature. He was born in 1939, joined the US Navy and was posted in Taiwan. There, he was introduced to Chinese language and culture. Famous American writer John Updike described the translation of contemporary Chinese novel in America as Howard Goldblatt's "lonely province".

¹⁸ Gao, Lili (高莉丽). 浅析女性编辑的心理特征及应对方法(A Brief Analysis of the Psychological Characteristics of Female Editors and Coping Methods), *编辑之友(Editor's Friends)*, Shanxi, 2010(3), pp. 87-90

University of Tokyo first introduced Mo Yan to Japan followed by the translation of *Red Sorghum* by Iguchi Akira. According to statistics, in the 12 years since 1985, he published a total of 67 works in China, including 35 short stories, 26 novels, and novels.¹⁹ Out of these, 12 works were translated by Fujii Mizo accounting for 18% of total Mo Yan's works. *Red Sorghum* was translated and introduced into South Korea in late 1989. Since then it has received the attention of literature academics and enthusiasts with Mo Yan's winning different literature awards in China and abroad. Almost all of his novels were translated and published by the end of 2012. Park Myung-Ai is the main translator of Mo Yan's works in Korean and won the 'Korean Daesan Culture' for translating Mo Yan's novels. *Red Sorghum* was included in a collection of short stories edited and translated by Thai Ruan Bailian and published by Young Press in 1999. However, it was just a ten-page small part from the novel and not the full volume. Later in 2000, Li Huixiao (academic translator) translated the full novella *Red Sorghum*. Mo Yan quickly gained popularity with the Vietnamese translation of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Chen Tingxian. According to the Ministry of Culture's Publishing Bureau, the translation of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* was the most popular book in 2001. It reached VND 2.5 billion prints, setting a record for the number of books printed in Vietnam in recent years. Chen Tingxian translated Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death* in 2002 and won the 2003 "Translation Literature Award" of the Vietnam Writers Association which is the highest literary honor of Vietnam. French is second to Japanese in the number of

¹⁹ Pang, Qinwen (庞沁文).论创意时代的创意出版 (On Creative Publishing in the Creative Age),*编辑学刊* (Editorial Journal), 2008(2), pp.24-28.

translations of Mo's work. His first work was translated into French in 1988 *Kū hé* 《枯河》 (Dry River) and since then all of his major works (9 novels, 10 novellas and other short stories) has been translated into French. Zhang Yinde in his article *Mo Yan in France: translation, propagation and reception* claimed that Mo Yan is the most favored Contemporary Chinese writer in France. Reviews of his works (in translation), news, interviews related to Mo Yan, etc. has been constantly reported by French newspapers and magazines, such as *Le Monde*, *Liberation*, *Figaro*, *New Observer* and *Express*. The translation of Mo Yan's works in Central and Eastern Europe is mostly assisted by publishing houses. The starting point of Mo Yan's work on the international journey began in 1988 with the Berlin Film Festival in Germany. Zhang Yimou won the Golden Bear Award for a movie adapted from the novel *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, and Mo Yan has received foreign attention ever since.²⁰ In 16 years, a total of 6 works by Mo Yan have been translated into German. However, the works translated into German involved only those which won awards, such as *Sandalwood Death* awarded in Taiwan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* awarded in the United States and Japan, and *The Republic of Wine* awarded in France and Italy. This shows that the German translators did not regard China's literary awards as a reference standard for decision-making and also reflected that the translators did not pay enough attention to understand Mo Yan's works. So, they only relied on international awards to do translations. In terms of the number of translations, Mo Yan is the most famous contemporary Chinese

²⁰ Shao Lu 邵璐. Study on English Translation of Mo Yan's Novels 莫言小说英译研究, *Chinese Comparative Literature* 中国比较文学, 2011(1), pp. 45-56.

writers among German readers. In more than 30 years, since the reform and opening up, 6 works by Mo Yan have been translated into German, which exceeds the number of any other contemporary Chinese writer. Cui Taotao in his article *Translation and acceptance of Mo Yan works in Germany* found that one of the common features of criticism of Mo Yan is the recognition of Mo Yan's language expressiveness and critical spirit, affirming the realistic description of his works and reviews of his works reflected the differences between Chinese and German cultures.

Through the translation of Mo Yan's works into many languages, Chinese culture was permeated beyond national boundaries. Various reviews, appraisal and criticism also helped his works in reaching to more readers. Positive or negative, any response to a literary text helps it to grow. Translation, being the primitive activity in intercultural communication through literary texts is followed and helped by established Literary prizes. Competitiveness among countries to prove its supremacy over others gave rise to many International prizes in different fields, e.g. sports, arts and literature, etc. The rise of new mass media, such as cinema, television, social media, etc. cemented a perfect stage for the consumption of rituals and celebration of these prizes.

3.2 Literature Prizes to Mo Yan

Reception of literary creations across cultures can be consolidated through international prizes. Mo Yan won various National and International Prizes which helped him to grow as a writer in China and, at the same time, it helped to propagate Chinese culture

beyond its national boundaries. English translations of his works gained good readership and were constantly reviewed in famous newspapers and journals which further led academic researchers to critically examine his works. Although these reviews were not uniform, it can be envisaged that his works were appearing and getting promoted through different views and reviews. He has not only won National Prizes inside mainland China but also outside China, such as the Taiwan Union Daily Novel Award (1989), placed 18th in the Top hundred Chinese Novels of 20th Century in 2000, The Laure-Bataillon Award (France, 2000), Ordre des Arts et des Letters (France, 2004), Nonino International Prize (Italy, 2005), 17th Fukuoka Prize (Japan, 2006), first Pu Songling award (2007), second Dream of Red Mansion Award (2008), 1st Newman Prize for Chinese Literature (USA, 2009), Mao Dun Literature Award (2011), Manhae Prize (South Korea, 2011), The Nobel Prize in Literature (Sweden, 2012). Mo Yan was also nominated for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (also known as American Nobel Prize, 1998), Kiriya Prize (Japan, 2005), and the Man Asian Literary Prize (Asia, 2007). In 1998, Mo Yan was a finalist for the Neustadt Prize for International Literature, which is recognized as America's Nobel in literature. Mo Yan won the very first edition of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature 2009. Reviews of Mo Yan's works appeared in the New Yorker Reviews of book, the Washington Post, The Times, and almost all other major Anglophone Dailies. These reviews helped in promotion and dissemination of Mo Yan's works and Chinese culture.

3.3 *Mo Yan's Nobel Prize (2012)*

The Nobel Prize in Literature is one of the five Prizes established according to

Alfred Nobel's will for "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction"²¹ irrespective of nationality. Looking at the history of the Nobel Prize in literature from 1901-2019, till date, 116 laureates have been awarded the Nobel Prize on 112 occasions. Out of some 6500 languages²² of the world, it has been only awarded to the writer of 25 languages. When Mo Yan won the Literature Nobel in 2012, some literary critics have argued that Mo Yan's prize belongs to his English translator, Howard Goldblatt who made his works available to the English readers outside the Chinese border. After the Nobel Prize controversies, Mo Yan works started getting translated into more languages. In India, his work *Biàn* 《变》 (Change) was translated into Hindi from the Howard Goldblatt's English version by Pushpesh Pant, Jawaharlal Nehru University. A project has been signed by the National Book Trust (Institution under the government of India) and Chinese state publication to bring translations of modern Chinese writers in which Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death* has been included. Egypt's National Center for Translation (NCT) released the first Arabic translation of the novel *Red Sorghum Clan* after his win. It was translated by Hassanien Fahmy.²³ Although Mo Yan's works blossomed in Central and Eastern Europe, with the help of Confucius Institutes initiatives, it started getting more attention. Karolina vencbir Bouzaza is the translator of Mo Yan's novel *Change* in Croatian. The Confucius Institute in Croatia with Karolina vencbir Bouzaza organized a special "recitation meeting" to recite this novel to audiences in Croatian, English, and Chinese,

²¹ Facts on the Nobel Prize in Literature, NobelPrize.org, Nobel Media AB 2019, accessed on 13 March 2019, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/facts/facts-on-the-nobel-prize-in-literature>)

²² Towards World Atlas of Languages, UNESCO, accessed on 14 May 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/towards-world-atlas>

²³ First Arabic translation of Nobel prize laureate Mo Yan's 'Red Sorghum Clan', accessed on 18 January 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/59763.aspx>.

conveying a strong sense of China in an intuitive Cultural atmosphere.²⁴ Bian Roll in Serbia was a symposium about Mo Yan jointly organized by the Confucius Institute and the Serbian LAGUNA Publishing House where Chinese experts were invited to give a special lecture on Mo Yan. The symposium was accompanied by multimedia propaganda materials and introduced the current status of Chinese contemporary literature, the relationship between Chinese writers and the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan's life and creation, and Mo Yan's masterpieces to the more than 200 Belgrade citizens and students present.²⁵ The lecture also attracted widespread attention in the Serbian media, with TV stations and mainstream newspapers conducting interviews and reports. Thus, literary translation and exchange promoted by publishing houses is almost a virtuous cycle of cultural promotion in Central and Eastern Europe.

4. Conclusion

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari developed the theoretical concept of “minor literatures” on the basis of its coinage by Franz Kafka in 1911. However, in this article, terms ‘major’ and ‘minor’ literatures are taken in reference to denote literatures written in the dominant languages of the World, such as English, French, and German as ‘major literatures’. There are many historical and socioeconomic factors such as colonialism, etc.

²⁴ Xiao, Jin 肖进 . Translation, dissemination and acceptance of Mo Yan in Central and Eastern Europe 莫言在中东欧的译介、传播与接受, 《华文文学》(*Chinese Literature*), *Shanghai University of International Business and Economics* 上海对外经贸大学 2015, Issue 1, pp. 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 2-3.

for dominance of these languages, however it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss it. Due to this dominance, free flow of literary texts written in major languages are at ease. Winning a literary award is a success of collaboration with the author as the nodal point amid a necessary global network of translators, publishers, nominators, readers, media, etc.²⁶ As seen in the case of Mo Yan, translation led him to win various prizes including the Nobel Prize in literature, which in turn led his works to be translated into more languages. Thus, Mo Yan's achievement had cyclical effect. In China, once Mo Yan's achievement at the Nobel Prize got announced, sales of his books have been so high that the Chinese media termed it "the Nobel effect". This new enthusiasm among people to read Mo Yan suggests that international recognition can increase popularity of Chinese writers at home.²⁷ Director of the Swiss publishing house Unionsverlag, Lucien Leitess noted that Mo Yan's achievement was seen controversial in the West for his speech on censorship. According to Leitess, about 80,000 copies of Mo Yan's books sold worldwide after the win.²⁸ Mo Yan's Nobel win helped not only him as a writer but also led Chinese literature and culture gain worldwide attention and readers across various cultures. As international awards are a form of recognition of intercultural communication, the translation of Mo Yan's works helped to spread Chinese literature and is a perfect case of intercultural communication.

²⁶ Ning Wang, *Cosmopolitanism and the Internationalization of Chinese Literature*, pp 178.

²⁷ Mo Yan's big house and the CCP's reaction to Nobel Prizes, accessed on 06 December 2019, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2012/10/16/mo-yans-big-house-and-the-ccps-reaction-to-nobel-prizes/>

²⁸ Robertson, Aaron. How does the Nobel Prize affect book sales? (And what if there is controversy?), accessed on 4 January 2020, <https://lithub.com/how-does-the-nobel-prize-affect-book-sales-and-what-if-theres-controversy/>

Overall, this paper has given an overview of the translations of Mo Yan's works and his achievements at various national and international award platforms which helped in the enhancement of reader's understanding of Chinese culture. Reading a foreign literature in translation is always both subjective and objective. On one hand readers could hold their own ideas and values gained from their personal experiences, and on the other can gain new understanding through the translated text. To sum up, the above case study can be regarded as a representative of many such cases where an author and his/her/their global achievements place his/her/their work strategically within global politics, which in turn affects its position in its native socio-cultural and political environment. Just like, Mo Yan's unprecedented popularity within China after the Nobel Prize had a "pizza effect"²⁹, it also opened new avenues for understanding inter-cultural communication, for both at the global and local levels.

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²⁹ The term "Pizza effect" was coined by anthropologist Agehananda Bharati in 1970 to explain why some aspects of Indian culture and philosophy became popular in the West. He named it on the basis of re-selling of Pizza (as American-style Pizza) in Italy after re-branding by American conglomerate Pizza Hut.

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