TRASVASES CULTURALES:
LITERATURA
CINE
TRADUCCIÓN

Eds.: J. M. Santamaría
Eterio Pajares
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THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL TRANSFER:
MARTIAL ARTS FICTION IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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This paper attempts to explain why anyone trying to translate Chinese martial arts fiction into English may find it difficult to reproduce successfully the authentic appeal of the original. Certain specifics of translating a martial arts novel, as well as those of reading one, will be discussed. Examples will be drawn from *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, a contemporary classic martial arts novel by Jin Yong, one of the best known Chinese writers of this generation.¹ The examples chosen will illustrate how some of the difficulties, inherent in the translating process and stretching beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, may remain insurmountable in the end.

To the translator, the ‘Chineseness’ which marks the genre is to be retained at all costs. For what distinguishes a classic martial arts novel is its ‘Chineseness’, created in part by the enigma associated with the seemingly cryptic and elusive language used in penning this genre. The ‘Chineseness’, namely, cultural elements which impart to martial arts fiction its peculiar flavour and taste, to borrow Eugene Eoyang’s terms, is found, in part, inherent in the Chinese language itself and in part in the Chinese culture inherent in martial arts fiction proper, both of which are to be transposed across the linguistic and cultural boundaries in translation.²

Undeniably, not to be dismissed from a meaningful reading of martial arts fiction as a literary genre is assumed knowledge or shared knowledge in the reading process. Cultural affinity or rapport between readers and author is taken for granted when it comes to unravelling some of the seemingly cryptic and telegraphic descriptions in martial arts fiction. Readers are expected to contribute their implicit cultural knowledge, if not their intellect to bridging the missing links in the story, thereby wringing a coherent whole, or Gestalt, out of the story. Generic expectations are likely to be somewhat different in different cultures, as Lefevere rightly asserts.³ That translated texts may be interpreted differently should come as no surprise as the ‘cultural script’, to borrow Lefevere’s coinage again, differ in each culture.⁴ The concept of ‘cultural script’ is employed here to account for the difference in response to certain terms or phrases found in a martial arts fiction from different readers, hoping to show how different ‘cultural scripts’ can, in fact, affect the interpretation of the story.

Before going into the specifics of reading martial arts fiction, perhaps a few words on the literary genre itself. Like science fiction in the West, novice readers
have to be initiated into acquiring a taste for the genre by acquainting themselves with the setting of the story and specialized vocabulary found in such novels.\textsuperscript{5}

Martial arts fiction dates back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). It is one of the few surviving Chinese literary forms which can claim a direct link with traditional popular literature.\textsuperscript{6} According to Claudine Salmon, these tales of knights-errant gradually emerged as popular fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century. After 1919 the genre expanded in an unprecedented scale as an increasing number of people could read, and were dissatisfied with the limited social improvements accompanying political changes.\textsuperscript{7}

Martial arts fiction, known also as cloak-and-dagger novels, swashbuckler novels or kung-fu novels, but properly known to contemporary readers as ‘wuxia xiaoshuo’ which literally means the ‘martial-chivalric novel’, is really popular literature verging on serious literature.\textsuperscript{8} This literary genre is devoured by Chinese readers from all walks of life, finding great popularity not only in Hong Kong,\textsuperscript{9} but also in overseas Chinese communities around the world \textsuperscript{10} as readers can readily identify themselves with “heroes who had opted out of society and relied solely on their own strength to confront the society whose workings escaped them.”\textsuperscript{11}

Jin Yong’s martial arts novels are set in traditional China.\textsuperscript{12} Most of the protagonists live outside the mainstream of society. These heroes are rebels who live in their own world, who have dedicated their lives to humanitarian ideals and who have pledged themselves to a chivalric code of justice, honour and righteousness, even to the point of sacrificing their lives for certain causes of their own making.

These stories, which go into detail in giving the reader feats of various schools of swordplay and pugilism, are written in a light literary style interspersed with Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist thinking. Besides the usual fighting and revenge, ingredients essential to martial arts fiction, Jin’s stories also feature romance, adventure and intrigue.

There is also no lack of linguistic elegance in the dense, compressed and cryptic prose which Jin Yong employs in describing in a vivid filmlike manner the fierce fighting heightened by the protagonists’ superhuman abilities.\textsuperscript{13} The pseudo-archaic language, that is to say, writing in the vernacular but inclining towards the classical, also serves as a convenient vehicle for conveying metaphysical truths and the teachings of religious cults.

*Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* first appeared as a newspaper serial in 1959 and was later published as a single volume. This martial arts novel, containing ten chapters, features relatively little fighting compared to Jin Yong’s other novels, and yet the excitement, intrigue and action are well dramatized in this beautifully written work, with one event firmly intertwining with other incidents in the story, which is essentially a vendetta involving the offspring of several families.
The story takes place in the Changbai Range in coldest Manchuria, one winter’s morning in 1781. By that time the vast Chinese Empire had come under the imperial rule of the Manchus. The Manchus, a nomadic tribe from Manchuria who ushered in the Qing Dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century, held sway over China from 1644 to 1911. The Manchus brought an end to the Ming Dynasty and the rule of the Chinese Empire by the Han Chinese.

With this much background information, one could perhaps take up an example. A passage in Chapter 5 reads:

The incident took place in the second year of the Reign of Yongchang in the Dashun Dynasty of the Dashing King, being the year Yi You, or the second year during the Reign of Emperor Shunzhi under the Tartar rule. In that year, the forefathers of the four families pledged that, should the Manchu Dynasty survive, the secret should be held back for one hundred years, and could only be divulged in the Yi Chou, being the tenth year during the Reign of Emperor Qianlong, which was some thirty years ago. There was no further need for not divulging the secret.

This passage may read clumsily regarding the dates, underlined as shown above. The two dates in question, in fact, boil down essentially to two particular years crucial to the story - 1645 and 1745. In other words, the whole passage could be rephrased as:

The incident took place in 1645. In that year, the forefathers of the four families pledged that, should the Manchu Dynasty survive, the secret should be held back for one hundred years, and could only be divulged in 1745, which was some thirty years ago.

Monolingual English readers may, in fact, find it a lot easier to follow the second version with the dates simplified. Simplifying the dates has not affected the development of the plot in the least. It turned out that this has even helped towards a more logical reasoning of the meaning conveyed by the passage, making the one-hundred-year period connecting the events more explicit.

In contrast to the first version, the second version succeeded only in bringing out in a tacit and straightforward manner the denotative information, the years in question, falling short as yet in providing readers with a socio-political dimension essential to cushioning the plot as deliberated by the author.

Viewed in the historical and political contexts outlined earlier, the manner in which the dates were introduced into the original text served not only to point out to readers the two specific years in question, but also to enhance the socio-historical atmosphere built up in the story. To those informed and experienced readers of traditional Chinese literature, of historical romance in general and martial arts fiction in particular, the significance of the manner in which the two
years are presented means introducing yet another literary function in the text -
that of providing additional background information for a more comprehensive
reading of the story.

Likewise, the following passage which appears in Chapter 8 of *Fox Volant
of the Snowy Mountain*

Tree twirled his right hand: out flew a metal bead, catching Curio's
right shoulder. Pain gripped his right arm. He felt as if icy claws were laid
upon it. Curio lost his hold on the poniard and it fell to the snowy ground.
can be considered a faithful rendition of the Chinese original. The passage does
mean what it says. Yet the informed readers would know immediately that Curio
was 'piqued' in the process, a genre-specific cultural practice found in martial
arts fiction, which is the act of applying pressure, such as jabbing with a finger
or attacking with a weapon possessing a sharp point or edge, at certain paralytic
points on the body to effect an imbalance of pneuma (or *chi*) which circulates
through the meridians. The person afflicted in such a manner will feel sore, limp,
numbed or paralysed, and if he is not revived soon enough he may suffer perma-
nent injuries or death. There are supposed to be three hundred and sixty paralytic
points in the human body.

So much for the assumed knowledge on the part of the readers. We shall
now expose the inadequacy of the linguistic system in question, a euphemistic
term often employed by translators to cover up their linguistic incompetence. A
direct, word-for-word translation of the title of Jin Yong's novel *Xue shan fei hu*
should read 'Flying Fox of the Snowy Mountain', this English title supplied by
the Chinese source-text publisher. The hero of the novel goes by the name Hu
Fei, 'Hu' being his family name and 'Fei' his given name. He can travel across
snow with great speed, like a fox. His name when reversed reads 'Fei Hu',
which is homophonous to 'fei hu', 'flying fox' in Chinese, an apt description of
his ability to run fast. Since the story takes place in the snow-covered mountains
of the Changbai Range in Manchuria, 'Flying Fox of the Snowy Mountains', in
fact, is the sobriquet of the hero. I have tried very hard to find two words or an
expression to name the hero, whose name when reversed would yield the attrib-
utes of an animal that can travel fast on snow. Unfortunately, I have not yet
been able to come up with the right term. I was, thus, forced to leave out that
part of the text which explains how the sobriquet is derived.

However, the problem of adopting the original translation of the title sup-
plied by the Chinese source-text publisher does not rest here. When I asked my
expatriate colleagues in Hong Kong, mostly British and American, whether they
found the title all right, I heard from them that there was no major problem. But
I was shocked to learn something quite different on a visit to New Zealand.
There I met a lady from Singapore. She was quick to point out to me that a
flying fox is a kind of bat and there are a lot of flying foxes in the zoo in Singa-
with either the medical or non-medical term for the part of the hand I was inj-
ured. But the medical doctor I approached was not able to provide me
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rested in. However, he was helpful in suggesting the word ‘web’ to me. Somehow, I disliked that word for I always associate ‘web’ with a duck and with a foot. And here we were talking about the hand of a human being. Thus, after going through all the trouble of finding an equivalent in English for the notch between the thumb and the index finger, I still kept to the original paraphrase of ‘hukou’ in English, adding Tiger’s Mouth as an additional literal translation of the term and reluctantly adopting the word ‘web’ in the end. Thus, hukou, originally a crisp, two-syllable word in Chinese, is rendered as a mouthful, as shown underlined below:

The middle of his palm started trembling and his *Tiger’s Mouth, the web between his thumb and first finger*, hurt terribly.

In translating martial arts fiction, one is often dazzled by the vast array of weapons wielded by the protagonists. Matching each of the fifty edged or clandestine weapons displayed in the novel called for careful research of Chinese weapons and weaponry in the West. Jin Yong, the original author, occasionally invented a few weapons of his own. As the translator’s knowledge of weaponry is rather limited, as often as not, she failed to differentiate those that owed their origins to the imaginative faculty of the author from the real ones used by warriors and fighters in traditional Chinese society. Take for example, a tiny, golden secret weapon known as ‘xiaobi’, literally meaning ‘small pen’, which could be one of the possible inventions of the author for the translator has not yet been able to find out what exactly that weapon is from books on Chinese weapons other than that of the description given in the original text. From the description that it is ‘a tiny object, made of gold, about three inches long, tapering to a sharp point, and of very fine craftsmanship’, the translator looked through drawings and glossaries of weapons that answered such description and function, used in the West in the eighteenth century as the story is set in the eighteenth century in traditional China. Finally, a similar weapon in the West called ‘bodkin’ was chosen to designate the Chinese weapon in question.

The greatest challenge for anyone attempting the translation of martial arts fiction really comes from wrestling with terms that are not only genre-specific, but also martial arts-specific, which are terms describing martial arts of various schools of swordplay and pugilism. For example, Prime, Chief Escort of the Peking Overland Convoy, is well-versed in one school of fencing with the sword, known as ‘*di tang dao*’ in the Chinese text. In order to convey to the English readers what this martial feat stands for, this special term causing trouble could be rendered as one of the following:

(a) Prime was proficient in *the art of fencing with a sword almost tumbling, and most competent at making falls, dives, rolls and somersaults which were used as feints in striking his enemies.*
Translation suffers further research and investigation.

smooth cultural interfaces, if not to readily respect the wrongs found in the trans-

fundamental issue of universe-of-discourse being at variance in both literal and

ambiguous to the differences in cultural scripts found in different cultures; the

North as well as the translation. As the product itself, this goes wrong could partly be

while reasons why my translation, taken to embrace both the translating process

Subject it to say, the examples cited here serve to show that one of the pos-

creative, if not greater, when handing these elaborate and original inventions

of the author. The translator is usually expected to exercise the same degree of

school, and which are those that become their origin to the creative faculty

which of martial arts descends in the story are the ones that really fall into

Chinese into English, particularly difficult is that the translator has to identify

Like the weapons, which makes the rendering of similar martial arts from

translating process.

much of the esoteric powers shriven in the original language is lost in the

Even though the meaning of this cultural item may still be retained or cap-

(c) Piume was procted in di lang dao, the Ground Blade.

(a) broadsword.

(b) Piume was procted in the Ground Blade, the an of fencing with

THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL TRANSFER: MARTIAL ARTS FICTION IN ENGLISH.
NOTES

1 A complete translation of this work first appeared in 1993, published by the Chinese University Press, Hong Kong. A new edition was brought out in 1996, also by the Chinese University Press, Hong Kong.

Jin Yong’s real name is Louis Cha. Born in 1924 in China’s Zhejiang Province but now based in Hong Kong, Jin Yong is a novelist, publisher, political commentator, historian and Buddhist scholar all rolled into one. He is an Honorary Fellow of St. Antony’s College, Oxford and Wynflete Fellow of Magdalen College, also at Oxford. He was made an Officer of the British Empire by the Queen and received the Chevalier de la Legion d’honneur from France. The University of Hong Kong honoured him with the award of the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences and the University of British Columbia followed suit with the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature.

2 Eugene Eoyang, ‘Beyond Visual and Aural Criteria: The Importance of Flavour in Chinese Literary Criticism’, Critical Inquiry 6 (1979), 99-106. In this article, Eoyang discusses how form and sound as visual and aural criteria are used in Western literary criticism whereas flavour as smell and taste criteria are used in Chinese literary criticism.


4 According to Lefevere, ‘cultural script’ could be defined as the accepted pattern of behaviour expected of people who fill certain roles in a certain culture. He further explains how the cultural script for the role of ‘king’ differed in France and England during different periods in history, hence leading to different strategies for the translation of universe-of-discourse features in connection with the king found in Homeric texts by French and English translators in different periods.


8 A spirited defense of the genre is found in Chen Xiaolin’s article ‘Min shu wen xue de yuan liu yu wu xia xiao shuo de ding wei’ [The origins of popular literature and the status of knight-errantry novels], in Huan Zhu Lou Zhu’s Qing cheng shi jiu xia [Nineteen knights-errant of the Green Mountain], ed. by Ye Hongsheng (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1985), pp. 1-19 (pp. 1-3).

9 Helmut Martin specifically highlights the wuxia genre of Jin Yong as a flourishing printed entertainment business literature in Hong Kong; see section ‘Hong Kong Literature?’ in Helmut Martin’s ‘The Commonwealth of Chinese Literature: A German Perspective’, in The Commonwealth of Chinese Literature: Papers of the International Reisenburg Conference, West Germany, July 1986, vol. 2. Also, comparatist Wong Wai-leung comments as follows on the popularity of martial arts fiction among Chinese readers: “The literature of Hong Kong is extremely diversified. It ranges from the narrowly circulating poetry to the widely popular ‘martial art’ [sic] fiction (wu-hsia hsiao-shuo), which is best selling not only locally but also in the Mainland, Taiwan and Overseas.’ See also his Hong Kong Literature in the Context of Modern Chinese Literature (Hong Kong: Centre for Hong Kong Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1987).

10 Martial arts fiction translated into different Asian languages can be found in articles collected in Literary Migrations. Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17-20th Centuries), ed. by Claudine Salmon (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Corporation, 1987). For translations
into Mongolian, see Boris Riftin’s ‘Mongolian Translations of Old Chinese Novels and Stories - A Tentative Bibliographic survey’, pp. 213-62 (pp. 237-41); translations into Thai, see pp. 5-6, and Prapin Manomaivibool’s ‘Thai Translations of Chinese Literary Works’, pp. 317-20 (pp. 318-19); translations into Malay, see Claudine Salmon’s ‘Malay Translations of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia’, pp. 395-440, plus ‘Writings in Romanized Malay by the Chinese of Malaya: A Preliminary Inquiry’, pp. 441-96, especially the section ‘Overwhelming Success of Cloak-and-Dagger Novels (1924-1942)’, pp. 421-26; translations into Cambodian, see p. 6, plus Jacques Nepote and Hoc Dy Khing’s ‘Chinese Literary Influence on Cambodia in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, pp. 321-72 (pp. 345-46); translations into Indonesian, see Leo Suryadinata’s ‘Postwar Kongfu Novels in Indonesia: A Preliminary Survey’, pp. 623-59 (pp. 624-26, 633, 628); translations into Makassarese, see Gilbert Hamonic and Claudine Salmon, ‘Translations of Chinese Fiction into Makassarese’, pp. 569-92 (pp. 576-77).


12 Jin Yong’s Works Series comprises twelve titles, which in chronological order, are Shu jian en chou lu [Book and sword, gratitude and revenge, 2 vols]; Bi xue jian [The sword stained with royal blood, 2 vols]; She diao ying xiong zhu [The eagle-shooting heroes, 4 vols]; Shen diao xia lu [The giant eagle and its companion]; Xue shan fei hu [Flying fox of the snowy mountains]; included also in this title are two shorter novels Yuan yang dao [Twin companionable knives] and Bai ma xiao xi feng [White horse neighing in the westerly wind]; Fei hu wai zhu [The young flying fox, 2 vols]; Yi tian tu long ji [The heaven sword and the dragon sabre, 4 vols]; Xia ke xing [Ode to gallantry, 2 vols]; Xiao ao jiang hu [The smiling, proud wanderer, 4 vols]; Lu ding ji [The duke of the mount deer, 5 vols]. The English translated titles quoted here appear in the original Chinese texts, except for those of the two shorter novels included in Xue shan fei hu [Flying fox of the snowy mountains].

13 Jin Yong joined the Great Wall Film Productions as a script writer in the late 1950s and produced a number of films as co-director. Jin had already qualified himself as a film critic by subscribing feature articles to local newspapers before taking on this full-time employment as script writer.

14 See definition 1 under the entry ‘flying fox’ in Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language 1989.

15 See definition 2 under the entry ‘flying fox’ in Webster’s.


17 The anatomical term ‘Abductor pollicis’ as explained on p. 56 and illustrated in the diagram on p. 58 in The Concise Gray’s Anatomy means the ‘ridge trapezium and annular ligament - radial side base 1st phalanx thumb [Median]’.
REFERENCES


Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language 1989.

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