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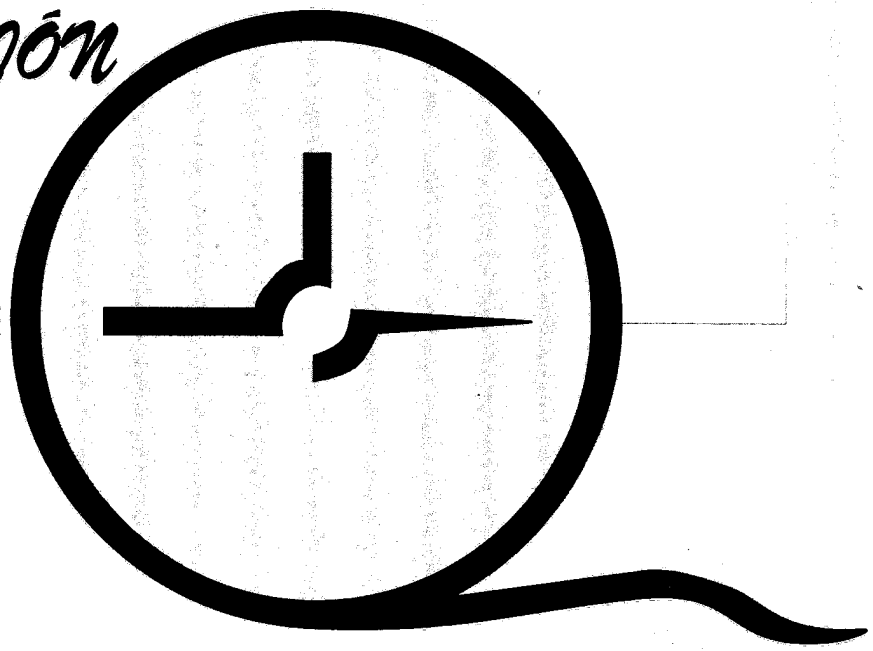

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THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL TRANSFER: MARTIAL ARTS FICTION IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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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.[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.[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.[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.[8] This literary genre is devoured by Chinese readers from all walks of life, finding great popularity not only in Hong Kong,[9] but also in overseas Chinese communities around the world [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." [11]

Jin Yong's martial arts novels are set in traditional China.[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.[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 Dyansty 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 permanent 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 attributes 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 supplied 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-

pore. What she told me turned out to be true, for the *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictiionary of the English Language (1989)* confirmed my fear that a flying fox is indeed 'any large fruit-eating bat of the family *Pteropodidae*, esp. of the genus *Pteropus*, as *P. edulis*, of Old World tropical regions, having a foxlike head.' [14] My worst fear was yet to come when a New Zealander asked me whether it was the story about a suspended carrier shuttling between the snowy mountains in Australia. The same *Webster's* again confirmed my fear for the second time, for another definition of 'flying fox' in Australian English describes it as 'an aerial conveyor belt or suspended carrier operating on cables, often used to convey ore, dirt, or the like, over rivers and gorges in mining or construction operations.' [15] As the original translation of the Chinese publisher turned out to be not only misleading, but also such a mouthful, I then decided to rename the translated text as *Fox*, hoping that a crisp, short title would have more to recommend itself than the original wordy one. But this new title again did not work for it resembled too closely *The Fox* by D.H. Lawrence. After further consideration, I eventually settled for the title *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*. Though this title can definitely avoid giving readers the wrong impression that it is a story of a bat or of an aerial conveyor belt, it fails still to solve the problem of providing an answer to explain how this sobriquet can be coined by reversing the name of the hero, as mentioned in the original text.

In the story, there is a villainous character, a monk, known as Bao Shu, meaning 'precious tree' in Chinese. When I first embarked on this translation project in 1985, I gave the monk the name Bush, which, at that time, I considered quite a good transliteration, for it not only retains the Chinese pronunciation of 'Bao Shu', but also the meaning of a tree. But years later, another Bush was elected President of the United States. George Bush's victory thus caused the name of the monk in the story to be changed to Tree later on.

Writers of martial arts fiction often employ peculiar terms to label different parts of the body, a stereotyped usage unique to the genre. One example is the term '*hukou*', literally meaning 'the mouth of a tiger', which is the notch between the thumb and the index finger. I tried to find an equivalent term for this part of the hand first by asking a native speaker. He told me his people did not have a name for that part of the hand. I then looked up *The Concise Gray's Anatomy* and I found a medical term carrying a Latin root pointing to that part of the body in one of the illustrations shown in the textbook.[16] A moment's thought told me that the term 'Abductor pollicis' may sound too medical for a novel so well steeped in Chinese traditional culture.[17] I figured that if a medical term did not fit into the text, perhaps a layman's term would. I reasoned with myself that if there existed a medical term, there must also exist a corresponding term for the laymen. But the medical doctor I approached was not able to provide me with either the medical or non-medical term for the part of the hand I was inte-

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.*

(b) Prime was proficient in *the Ground Blade, the art of fencing with a broadsword.*

(c) Prime was proficient in *di tang dao, the Ground Blade.*

Even though the meaning of this cultural term may still be retained or captured in the circumlocutory way of describing a term as shown in (a), and yet so much of the esoteric powers shrouded in the original language is lost in the translating process.

Like the weapons, what makes the rendering of similar martial feats from Chinese into English particularly difficult is that the translator has to identify which of the martial feats described in the story are the ones that really fall into the category of authentic displays of physical strength belonging to traditional schools, and which are the ones that owed their origins to the creative faculty of the author. The translator is usually expected to exercise the same degree of creativity, if not greater, when handling these elaborate and original inventions of the author.

Suffice it to say, the examples cited here serve to show that one of the possible reasons why my translation, taken to embrace both the translating process as well as the translation, the end product itself, has gone wrong could partly be attibuted to the differences in 'cultural scripts' found in different cultures; the fundamental issue of universe-of-discourse being at variance in both target and source cultures, aggravated also at times by the author's own peculiar repository of universe-of-discourse features. How to minimize the discrepancy, to ensure a smooth cultural interflow, if not to totally redress the wrongs found in the translation awaits further research and investigation.

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.

[3] A detailed discussion of the translation of universe-of-discourse features is found in Andre Lefevere's article 'Translation: Universe of Discourse. "Holy Garbage, tho by Homer cook't"', in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 87-98.

[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.

[5] Tom Shippey introduces readers to the art of reading science fiction in his 'Preface: Learning to Read Science Fiction', in *Fictional Space: Essays on Contemporary Science Fiction*, ed. by Tom Shippey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1-33.

[6] A succinct account can be found in Wang Hailin's *Wu xia xiao shuo shi lue* [A brief history of Chinese martial arts fiction], (Shanxi: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1988). See also James J.Y. Liu's *The Chinese Knight-errant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[7] Claudine Salmon, 'Malay Translations of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia', in *Literary Migrations. Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17-20th Centuries)*, ed. by Claudine Salmon (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Corporation, 1987), pp. 395-440 (p.423).

[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).

[11] 'Malay Translation of Chinese Fiction in Indonesia', in Salmon, pp. 395-440 (p. 425).

[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 zhuan* [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 zhuan* [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.*

[16] C.H. Leonard's *The Concise Gray's Anatomy* (Adelaide: Savvas Publishing, 1985), pp. 56-58.

[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]'.

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