The "Reader" Factor in Martial Arts Fiction in English Translation: With Special Reference to the "Yellow Knapsack" in Jin Yong's *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain**

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the "reader" factor, one among various others, which contributes to a meaningful reading of martial arts fiction, either in its original or in English translation. A cultural item, a yellow knapsack, is drawn from Jin Yong's *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, to exemplify this point. The five excerpts presented in the paper, in their order of appearance in the story, will serve to illustrate how informed readers with assumed knowledge will derive something quite different from reading these excerpts concerning an article called a yellow knapsack, or *huang bao fu* in the original text, owned by the Gilt-faced Buddha, known also as Phoenix the Knight-errant, alias the Invincible Under the Sky. Thus, seasoned readers will be able to delve into another side of Phoenix's character in the story. 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 out of the martial arts novel.

KEY WORDS

martial arts fiction
Louis Cha (Jin Yong)
realia
shared knowledge
universe of discourse
wuxia xiaoshuo
Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain
"reader" factor
cultural affinity
jianghu characters

Martial arts fiction, with a long history dating back to the Tang Dynasty (A. D. 618-970), is one of the few surviving Chinese literary forms which can claim a direct link with traditional popular literature.[1] This literary genre, properly known to contemporary readers as *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說, which literally means the martial-chivalric novel, is really popular literature verging on serious literature. This major genre in contemporary Chinese literature is devoured by Chinese readers from all walks of life, finding great popularity not only in China, but also in overseas Chinese communities around the world as readers can readily identify themselves with heroes who opt out of society and rely solely on their strength to confront the society whose workings elude them.

Jin Yong 金庸 (real name Zha Liangyong 查良鏞, alias Louis Cha), is one of the best Chinese writers of martial arts novels of this generation. His novels are set in traditional China and 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, honor 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 readers 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, which are ingredients essential to martial arts fiction, Jin's stories also feature romance, adventure and intrigue. *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, which is *Xue shan fei hu* 雪山飛狐 in English translation, is one of Jin's most famous novels.

Martial arts fiction being so steeped in Chinese culture, one would, therefore, expect to find cultural items or realia found in such novels constituting one of the central issues in the translating process. In "Realia in Translation" (1993), Sider Florin points out that realia are "words and combinations of words denoting objects and concepts characteristic of the way of life, the culture, the social and historical development of one nation and alien to another" (123). Since they connote local and/or historical color with no exact matches in other languages, realia, classified thematically, temporally, and geographically according to Florin, therefore, require a special approach.[2] Concurring with Florin, Lauren G. Leighton also observes that realia "present an especially acute problem of translation as communication" because:

> Taken as words, realia constitute a problem of linguistics; as objects, concepts, or phenomena, they become a cultural problem of conveying distinctive national character. Because certain objects, concepts, or phenomena are distinctive to a given national culture, the words that designate them are said to exist only in the language of that nation.[3] (219)

Despite difficulties confronting translators in tackling realia in translation, Leighton warns us against avoidance, as "their erasure from a foreign work results in blandscript or, even worse, in outright nationalization. Yet the immoderate introduction of realia can damage the native language and, simultaneously, make the translation ridiculous" (221). Leighton would appear to suggest that realia be introduced moderately so as to avoid excessive acculturation on the one hand and outright alienation on the other.

Translators have suggested various strategies for handling problems of linguistic and cultural diffusion. Eugene Nida has identified five types of cultural knowledge for translators, namely, material, religious, social, linguistic, and ecological.[4] Stephen Straight has elaborated on Nida's five broad categories of knowledge required of a

translator: ecology, material culture and technology, social organization, mythic patterns, and linguistic structures.[5] Peter Newmark suggests translational devices for cultural items, such as direct transfer, paraphrase or circumlocution, loan translation or calque, transliteration, and footnoting.[6] Vladimir Ivir includes in his procedures for the translation of unmatched elements of culture borrowing, definition, literal translation, substitution, lexical creation, omission, and addition, as well as their various combinations, pointing out that the choice of a particular procedure is governed by the nature of the cultural term to be translated and the nature of the communicative process in which it appears.[7] Karsten Lomholt identifies different approaches to translating terms designating a specific concept in the text. Her study, grew out of translating an Urdu book on Islam dated 1892, a text tinged with strong mysticism, led her to formulate different strategies for a key concept in various contexts.[8] C. K. Wang lists five factors, i.e. historical, geographical, social, religious, and literary, for transmission and transformation of Chinese popular traditions.[9] Yo-In Song introduces "the ethnocultural pentad" to examine the nature and function of cultural transfer from Korean, which include the cosmogonic-ecological dimension, the bio-physiological dimension, the psycho-physical dimension, the socio-institutional dimension, and the techno-scientific dimension.[10] André Lefevere advances the concept of "cultural script" and "universe-of-discourse features" in translation, pointing out that different attitudes developed toward the original, generic expectations, as well as the intended audience all play a part in determining strategies for the translation of universe-of-discourse features.[11] Javier Franco Aixelá maps out the possible strategies for handling culture-specific items in translation according to the extent of intercultural manipulation required, on a scale "divided in two major groups, separated by their conservative or substitutive nature, i.e. by the conservation or substitution of the original reference(s) by other(s) closer to the receiving pole" (60-65). The translator's choice, according to Aixelá, can be accounted for by a series of supratextual, textual, intratextual and "inherent" variables established (65-70).

Also, not to be dismissed is the "reader" of the translation. Ke Wenli 柯文禮 is apt to point out that "the success of a translation may be assessed by many factors, one of which is its practical effect on the reader" (50). He believes that the translator must always bear the reader in mind while translating, remarking that:

> The translator's task, however, does not end when he has found a satisfactory English equivalent for the Chinese with which he is confronted: he must visualize a hypothetical general reader and devise means of conveying the material into something within this general reader's range of experience without doing too great a violence to the original. He has to assist his reader by making his version a little more accessible. (51)

Bonnie McDougall also reminds us to take genre, background knowledge, and presentation into consideration as these are some of the things related to reader expectation,[12] without forgetting to warn us also that reader response to a translation can be completely independent of its accuracy.[13] Florin, likewise, emphasizes the "reader" factor in choosing realia in translation, observing that:

> Which factors characterize the "average reader" of the target text and how do they compare with analogous factors characterizing the "average reader" of the source text? Translators translate for their readers and no communication has been established if readers fail to understand the realia that have been transcribed. If translators introduce realia by other means but lose their local and historical color, communication has not been achieved either. Translators should therefore know their readers, anticipate possible losses and try to compensate for them in other ways. (127)

The five excerpts below, taken from Jin Yong's *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (1993), in their order of appearance in the story, will serve to illustrate how informed readers with assumed knowledge may derive something quite different from reading each one, concerning an article called a yellow knapsack, or *huang bao fu* 黃包袱 in the original text, hence will be able to delve into another side of Phoenix's character in the story. Here, the cultural presuppositions called for are not only those of traditional Chinese society, but extending to those of the martial world. The cultural item in question first presents itself in the story as Phoenix the Knight-errant enters the inn with a yellow knapsack slung across his back, with the inscription "The Invincible Under the Sky" embroidered in black silk on the bundle, as described in Excerpt A below:

Excerpt A

> The moment the door was flung open, some twenty fierce fighters rushed into the room, all armed with edged weapons. They stood abreast, barring the entrance to the inn, maintaining silence. At length, one man stepped forward. He seated himself on a stool beside a table. He divested himself of the *yellow cotton knapsack* slung across his back and laid it down on the table. There was sufficient light from the candles, and I was able to make out the inscription "The Invincible Under the Sky" embroidered in black silk on the *bundle*. (Ch. 4, 130)

The knapsack mentioned above is no more than a piece of makeshift luggage that travelers in ancient China carried on them, a pack prepared from a big sheet of cotton cloth, with paraphernalia such as clothing or other personal belongings placed over the center before tying each of the two opposite corners in turns to yield a nice and snug bundle to be slung easily across the back. This practice of wrapping articles with a big piece of cloth is still being retained in rural China up to the present times. To a general reader, Phoenix is just

carrying a bundle containing his personal belongings like any other commoners did in ancient China, except that his is a bit fanciful, with some characters embroidered on the pack, reading "The Invincible Under the Sky."

Likewise, the general reader may get the same impression, as before, concerning the yellow knapsack described in the excerpt below when Gully, whom Phoenix came expressly to seek him out on an answer concerning the disappearance of his father years ago. Excerpt B below describes what Gully tells his wife inside their room in the inn after running into his enemy Phoenix, known also as the Gilt-faced Buddha, earlier in the day in the same inn:

Excerpt B

> Gully heaved a sigh, responding, "I have always been unafraid; nothing can unnerve or worry me. But it was strange how this very evening, with the baby in my arms, I suddenly broke into a cold sweat. It happened the minute the Gilt-faced Buddha barged into the inn. He laid his *bundle* on the table before casting the child a look from the corners of his eyes. Your are right: I have a great fear only of the Gilt-faced Buddha." (Ch. 4, 132)

Perhaps by now, the reader may be bewildered by Gully's apprehension and may not be able to figure out why Gully is intimidated. How can the Gilt-faced Buddha, sobriquet of Phoenix the Knight-errant, instill fear into Gully simply by barging into the inn?

Excerpt C below describes what Bush the monk tells the other parties about his eavesdropping on Gully some twenty-seven years before:

Excerpt C

> Gully let out a laugh and answered, "It still does not necessarily mean that I would be beaten by him if we were to

take up a duel now. I am afraid his *knapsack* with the emblem 'The Invincible Under the Sky' may have to change hands." Though I was on the other side of the partition, I could still hear that Gully's voice was trembling despite the cheerful act he put on. (Ch. 4, 133)

In Excerpt C above, the reader may perhaps begin to see some kind of association between Gully's fear and the knapsack, or some kind of link that the knapsack may pose a threat to Gully or present itself as a written challenge to a duel.

In Excerpt D below, Bush the monk again describes to the parties present the face-to-face encounter between Gully and Phoenix some twenty-seven years before:

Excerpt D

The Gilt-faced Buddha glanced affectionately in the direction of the baby in Gully's arms. He then unstrapped the *yellow knapsack* from his back and undid the *bundle*. I craned my neck forward, expecting to see strange paraphernalia inside; but I was disappointed to see only some very ordinary-looking clothing. Phoenix parted the *yellow wrapping*, studied the inscription embroidered on the outside and muttered to himself, "The Invincible Under the Sky: all balderdash!" He reached his hands out for Gully's baby and wrapped the *cloth* round the little one. Turning to Gully, he vowed, "Brother Gully, if anything untoward should happen to you, you may rest assured that no one will dare to trample on your child." Overwhelmed with joy, Gully at once expressed his gratitude. (Ch. 4, 153)

Excerpt D itself may perhaps begin to inform the reader that the yellow knapsack may connote some kind of power, as Phoenix tries to assure Gully, after wrapping the yellow cloth round his baby, that his child will not be trampled upon.

The yellow knapsack re-appears when the story closes, as described in Excerpt E below:

Excerpt E

> All this time, Orchid was waiting, standing in the snowy ground. A long, long time had elapsed, and yet there was no trace of her father and her true love. Thereupon, she gently undid the parcel Fox had entrusted to her. Inside she found only a few infant clothes, a pair of baby's slippers and a *bundle wrapped in yellow cloth.* The moonlit sky saw clearly embroidered in black on the *pack* the inscriptions "The Invincible Under the Sky." This was the very *covering* which her father had wrapped around Fox all those years ago. (Ch. 10, 379)

After going through the last excerpt, the reader may begin to wonder what significance this piece of cloth which made up the yellow knapsack could bring to bear on the event described in Excerpt E as the author has gone to great lengths to describe it again as the story closes.

In all these five excerpts, the meaning of the yellow knapsack in question can, in fact, all be taken literally without affecting the story line. But an informed reader sharing the same assumed knowledge of the author on the martial world will immediately read the inscription "The Invincible Under the Sky" as a sobriquet bespeaking its owner's martial prowess. The ways of the martial world prescribe that this, being an honorary title in its own right, can, under normal circumstances, only be bestowed on a champion fighter by other fighters. But fighters in the martial world sometimes do claim their own titles. "The Invincible Under the Sky" is supposedly to be a title Phoenix, known also as the Gilt-faced Buddha, claimed on his own, as confirmed in the text "'This Gilt-faced Buddha who was bold enough to call himself the Invincible Under the Sky years ago," commented Tree, "was once rather vain and arrogant . . . '" (49).

The seasoned reader will also call to mind the true significance of a yellow knapsack, as a common saying in the martial world goes: 黃包袱上了背,打死了不流淚,[14] literally reads: "No tears shed if beaten to death by one carrying a yellow knapsack." What is implied is that only those martially endowed would dare carry a yellow knapsack on trips out of town. Pingjiang Buxiaosheng 平江不肖生 elaborates this saying in Chapter 7 of his *Jin dai xia yi ying xiong zhuan* 近代俠義英雄傳 (Chronicles of modern knights-errant and altruists):

> The *jianghu* characters (people roaming the rivers and lakes) will invariably step forward to greet the one carrying a yellow knapsack. They may choose to test out each other in fighting at will. If the yellow knapsack owner is hard on travelling expenses, the *jianghu* characters somehow have to help out. If one chooses to challenge the yellow knapsack owner to a duel, his family will have to reclaim the body should he suffer death; the yellow knapsack owner can just walk away, incurring no liabilities whatsoever. However, the one who beats the yellow knapsack owner to death has to get him a coffin and can bury him just anywhere, incurring no liabilities whatsoever. This is the meaning of "no tears shed if beaten to death." (qtd. in Ye 142-43. trans. mine)

Another version of the same common saying goes: 身背黃包袱,打死不抵命,[15] literally reads: "No life repaid if beaten to death by one carrying a yellow knapsack." Unlike the general reader, the informed reader with assumed knowledge will be able to infer from his reading that Phoenix, who carries the yellow knapsack, must believe himself to be so martially endowed or he is so full of himself that he dares to bare his audacity by announcing to the martial world that he is the champion fighter. It can also be inferred that Phoenix is daunting other adept fighters into challenging him in open. It could also be assumed that supremacy over other fighters or Schools in the martial

world can be claimed by challenging one's opponents to a contest of martial ability and defeating them in the process. As Phoenix has already announced himself to be the owner of the yellow knapsack, he proclaims the right to daunt any fighter into challenging him in combat.

The five excerpts concerning the yellow knapsack presented above show that a meaningful reading of martial arts fiction as a literary genre presupposes assumed knowledge or shared knowledge in the reading process. 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. 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. The excerpts also illustrate how some of the difficulties, inherent in the translating process and stretching beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, may remain insurmountable in the end.

NOTES

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[1] See Wang Hailin 王海林.

[2] See Florin 123.

[3] Of particular interest is Chapter 17, 'On Realia' 218-31.

[4] See Nida.

[5] See Straight.

[6] See Newmark 30-32.

[7] See Ivir. Appeared earlier in *Translation Across Cultures*, ed. Gideon Toury (New Delhi: Bahri Publications Private Limited, 1987) 35-46.

[8] Lomholt's different approaches include: (1) translation according to context if a word admits more than one rendering; one rendering throughout if the key function of the term is evidently significant in the text, (2) explanatory translation, (3) transliteration or

bogus translation as to let the text define the term, (4) explanation in a footnote, (5) using an established translation, (6) translation according to a definition in the text as the text may provide definition, and (7) use of established target language expressions (Lomholt 29-30).

[9] See C. K. Wang.

[10] See Song.

[11] See Lefevere 91-93.

[12] See McDougall 11-12.

[13] See McDougall 17.

[14] This saying appeared originally in Chapter 7 of *Jin dai xia yi ying xiong zhuan* 近代俠義英雄傳 (*Chronicles of modern knights-errant and altruists*) by Pingjiang Buxiaosheng 平江不肖生, cited in Ye Hongsheng's 葉洪生 *Ye Hongsheng lun jian* 葉洪生論劍 (*Ye Hongsheng on martial arts fiction*). See Ye Hongsheng 142-43.

[15] See Shen Ji 沈寂, Dong Changqing 董長卿, and Gan Zhenhu 甘振虎 39.

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