

# Translating Martial Arts Fiction: Some Problems and Considerations

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## SUMMARY

This paper claims that martial arts fiction is a literary genre dating back to the Tang Dynasty, and warrants some introduction to non-Chinese readers since it is a major genre in contemporary Chinese literature, and is a vehicle for transmitting Chinese cultural values. Hong Kong publisher Louis Cha (a.k.a. Jin Yong) is taken as a good example of a contemporary author whose stories give the reader not only details of swordplay and boxing, but also the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Also discussed in some detail are the special problems in translating such works containing classical allusions, metaphysical ideas, religious rites, "address terms" (i.e. titles of address), etc. The author illustrates how to handle such difficult fictions (containing technical jargon and slang describing martial moves) by "recreative translation" of several paragraphs from one of Jin Yong's works, *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*.

## KEY WORDS

martial arts

*wu xia* fiction

Louis Cha (Jin Yong)

James J. Y. Liu

martial feats

genre

translation problems

address terms

recreative translation

*Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*



## 1. Martial Arts Fiction as a Literary Genre

Martial arts fiction, with a long history dating back to the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907), is one of the few surviving Chinese literary forms which can claim a direct link with traditional popular literature (Wang, 1988). This literary genre, properly known to contemporary readers as *wu xia* fiction (武俠小說) which literally means the martial-chivalric novel, is really popular literature verging on serious literature.

This genre of literature is devoured by Chinese readers from all walks of life, finding great popularity not only in Hong Kong, but also in overseas Chinese communities. One sinologist puts it this way:

That such tales should prove so popular not only among young and naive readers but also among highly sophisticated scholars is a matter of some interest. It seems that they fill a psychological need on the part of many readers to escape from the realities of life into a world of childish fantasies, rather in the same way as science fiction and horror films appear to do in the west. (Liu 1967, 130)

Martial arts fiction written by Hong Kong publisher Louis Cha (查良鏞), more popularly known to the Chinese readers by his pseudonym, Jin Yong (金庸), warrants an introduc-

tion to the reading public in other countries, firstly, as a literary form in its own right (it is after all a major genre in contemporary Chinese literature), and secondly, as a vehicle for transmitting Chinese cultural values.

Jin Yong, who is in his sixties, is the author of fourteen titles of martial arts fiction that have become classics of their type. He sees himself as an heir to the tradition of adventure novels dating back to the Tang Dynasty. The quest for a woman of perfect beauty is a recurring theme in his fiction. Interviewed by *Asiaweek* in 1987, he said, "it is difficult to find someone in real life to match my description of beauty" (*Asiaweek*, June 28, 1987).

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

These stories, which go into great details in giving the reader the martial feats of various schools of swordplay and pugilism, are written in a light literary style interspersed with Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist thinkings. Besides the usual fighting and revenge, ingredients essential to martial arts fiction, Jin's stories also feature the light romance of charming characters. Of course, the main interest lies in their endless description of spectacularly wild feats of martial art, some of which are, no doubt, the product of the author's imagination and ingenuity.

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. The pseudo-archaic language, that is to say, writing in the vernacular but inclining towards the classical style of writing,

also serves as a convenient vehicle for conveying metaphysical truths and religious cults cultivated in these stories. Chinese physical culture in martial arts novels, according to James J. Y. Liu, "is shrouded in mystery, and descriptions of fencing or pugilistic methods are often couched in pseudo-metaphysical language" (134). Such language, however, has been rendered accessible even to readers with a modicum knowledge of traditional culture and customs.

## 2. Nature of the Original Text

My venturing into rendering one of Jin Yong's works, *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (雪山飛狐), into English was motivated primarily by the challenge laying in store for whosoever is going to attempt translating a martial arts fiction into a foreign language, the seemingly unsurmountable obstacles one would run into in transferring to an alien culture the multifarious facets of Chinese culture adorning martial arts fiction, be they philosophical teachings, classical allusions, historical anecdotes, religious reliefs, oriental cults, metaphysical truths, or traditional values and customs.

*Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* first appeared as newspaper serials in 1959 and was later published as one single volume. This martial arts novel, containing ten chapters, is a little over two hundred pages long, with 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 a family vendetta involving now the offspring of several families. This one-volume martial arts fiction is light in historical setting which western readers should not find too difficult to grasp, and yet the story itself is filled with sufficient oriental mysticism and feats of strength to baffle the western mind.

What distinguishes *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* from the rest of the martial arts novels written by the same author is that some modern writing techniques of writers in the west can be found in the writing of this book. The uniqueness of this title lies in its being a story woven from several stories. Every chapter is a story in itself, with the more important ones each centring on the one single incident in the past, an incident which is told, and sometimes re-told by different eye-witnesses, from different angles and perspectives, hence giving rise to several versions of the same story. The reader is able, however, to weave all threads of individual stories together. What sustains the interest of the reading public is the suspense introduced in closing the last chapter of the story. The story ends at the point when Fox, hero of the story, raises his weapon to strike. This book is literally a never-ending story, with much left to the imaginative and creative powers of individual readers.

Sinologist and translator John M. Minford sums it up nicely, "It is a complete world he [Jin Yong] has created, which is part fantasy and part product of the traditional Chinese culture. You come across a lot of the weird and the wonderful in his novels" (*New York Times*, January 3, 1989). According to him, "these novels are a wonderfully rich repository of Chinese culture. They will be as fascinating to the English [reader] as Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie have been to the Chinese" (*Asiaweek*, April 19, 1987).

### 3. Problems Identified

#### 3.1 General Consideration

In the process of rendering this martial arts novel from Chinese to English through a re-creative translation process which requires extensive re-writing for the target readers, a number of translation problems can be identified. These

problems often relate to areas of cultural overlap and to the cultural connotations of various linguistic devices. Among problematic terms and expressions are those created by specific cultural features, i.e., the forms of address and institutional terms. In translating such terms and expressions into the target language, the translator should remember the originals occur in a story taking place in the mid-eighteenth century, when the vast Chinese empire came under the imperial rule of the Manchus. One should, therefore, try either to find natural equivalents or to invent cultural terms by using outdated phrases or words for customs, institutional objects and cultural items that would fit into a historical setting in the West.

### 3.2 Address Terms

One of the major problems for translators tackling martial arts fiction in general and the original text of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* in particular is the vast array of address terms for which no equivalent terms exist in the west. Such terms are abundant in the story, like 施主、點子夫妻、掌門、幫主、寨主、押寨夫人、會家子、相公、恩師、師兄、主母、老納、親王、在下、小的。

The address term 大丈夫, literally meaning "great husband," conveys something more than the literal meaning associated with this term. This address term embodies personal qualities and moral and ethical concepts encompassing such a wide range that only by elaborating the various meanings of the term in question in the right contexts can the translator hope to make clear to modern readers the full range of attributes in the terms. Let us look at a few examples:

(1) 男子漢大丈夫，有話要說便說，何須鬼鬼祟祟？(Ch. 3)

If you consider yourself *an utterly brazen fellow*, just say so here and now. What sneaky and sheepish tricks are

you up to ?

- (2) 瞧他是個響噹噹的漢子，大丈夫死就死了，事到臨頭，還哭些甚麼？(Ch. 4)

Look at the way he conducts himself; he is, after all, *a very brawny and brazen fellow*. What does it matter when death comes to a man like him?

- (3) 苗大俠，你是男子漢大丈夫，果真名不虛傳。(Ch. 4)

Phoenix, I am wholly convinced that you are *an embodiment of justice, courage, integrity and chivalry*; indeed a true knight-errant.

- (4) 大丈夫敢作敢為，又怕甚麼了？(Ch. 7)

Being *a man of fortitude and courage*, I pronounce myself bold and daring. What should I fear?

- (5) 大丈夫難保妻賢子孝。(Ch. 7)

There is no guarantee that the wife of *a man of real worth* will be always virtuous, or his sons filial.

### 3.3 Genre-specific Terms

Likewise, Jin Yong's martial arts fiction abounds in other genre-specific terms relating to social customs or institutions, such as 結義金蘭、金盤洗手、閉門封劍、傳刀受譜、門規、江湖規矩、拜師、下書比武、鏢局、少林寺。Terms like these tax the translator's ingenuity just as severely.

### 3.4 Jargon and Slang Expressions

Sprinkled through the novel are also jargon and slang expressions, rich in cultural connotations; these, too, the translator must be aware of and, somehow, convert into or naturalize in the target language. The jargon, bringing into

the text of the novel a dialect or argot that is truly genre-specific, is obviously a device to give martial arts fiction its peculiar colour and flavour. Jargon and slang expressions such as , 探盤子、打尖、暗春子、梁子、落單、扎手、細作、消遣、開山立櫃 , pose yet another challenge to the translator.

### 3.5 Martial Arts-specific Terms

Of course, 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 terms referring to martial feats associated with one or another of the various schools of swordplay and pugilism. For example, Prime Xiong ( 熊元獻 ), Chief Escort of the Peking Overland Convoy, is well-versed in one school of fencing with the broadsword, known as 地堂刀 in the Chinese text. In order to convey to English readers what this martial feat means, this special, troublesome item can be rendered as follows:

Prime was proficient in the Ground Blade, the art of fencing with a broadsword and, at the same time tumbling--and Prime was most competent at making falls, dives, rolls and somersaults which were used as feints in striking his enemies.

Even though the meaning of this cultural term may be retained or captured in this circumlocutory way, yet its power in the source language is lost in the translating process.

One thing that makes particularly interesting the rendering of martial arts-specific terms from Chinese into English is this: the translator has to identify which of the martial feats described in the story fall into the category of authentic displays of physical strength belonging to traditional schools, and which owe their origins to the creative faculty of the

author. The translator usually can exercise the same degree of creativity, if not a greater, when handling these elaborate inventions of the author.

### 3.6 Filmic Fighting Scenes

One element that sustains the readers' interest most in reading martial arts fiction is the action of vividly described fighting scenes in the story. One such scene occurs at the end of chapter four:

眼見得金面佛無法抵擋，他那招提撩劍白鶴舒翅只使得出半招。按那劍法，他右手一劍斜刺，左手中揚，就與白鶴將雙翅撲開來一般，但胡一刀搶了先著，金面佛雙手剛要展開，被他左右連環兩刀，金面佛這對臂膀，豈非自行送到刀上去給他砍下來？

豈知金面佛的武功，當真是出神入化，就在這危急之間，他雙臂一曲，劍尖斗然刺向自己胸口。胡一刀大吃一驚，只道他比武輸了，還劍自殺，忙叫道：「苗兄，不可！」

殊不知金面佛的劍尖在第一日比武之時就已用手指拗斷了的，劍尖本身是鈍頭，他再胸口一運氣，那劍刺在身上，竟然反彈出來。這一招一來變化奇幻，二來胡一刀一心勸他不可自殺，絲毫沒防他竟是出奇制勝，但見長劍一彈，劍柄蹣跚將出來，正好點在胡一刀胸口的‘神藏穴’上。

Here, the demand of the original is that the translator reproduces as many of the vivid filmic effects of the original as possible. In this translator's opinion, probably the best way to meet such a demand is extensively to rewrite--to produce a recreative translation, as follows:

Once annihilated, Phoenix was rendered totally defenceless. Being half way through parading the trick of Piercing the Stork in Flight, Phoenix found it impossible to relapse to a counter-caveating parade.

Following through the movement of the trick he was then parading, Phoenix, the minute he made a sidelong lunge, would instantaneously flap open the appendages of the stork, wielding the sword in his right hand while thrusting his left hand out in an upward direction. But Gully thwarted him in the nick of time. If Phoenix had attempted to unfold his large wings at that instant, Gully would have immediately lunged to his left, then again rapidly to his right. Phoenix would have had both his forelimbs hacked off, at his own instigation.

Nevertheless, Phoenix proved spectacularly wild in his feats. He immediately accommodated himself by bringing in both his arms while simultaneously aiming the point of his sword at his own chest: a beautiful and timely move. Gully was appalled, fancying that Phoenix, in his defeat, had resorted to reversing his blade to take his own life. Thereupon, Gully cried out in alarm, 'Halt! Brother Phoenix!'

Phoenix had already had the tip of his sword nipped off right on the first day of the duel, blunting his weapon's sharp point. All at once, he dynamically tightened the muscle on his chest. the blade, already lodged in his chest, retracted like the devil, bouncing in recoil. This move was unpredictably wild. Gully, all the while, was intent on talking him out of committing suicide. He had scarcely expected Phoenix to take him by surprise, but in a trice, the sword retracted with a spurt, darting the tang off the blade and placed itself on Gully's chest, right on the paralytic point Celestial Abode.

### 3.7 Moves and Martial Feats

Moves or martial feats practised by fighters in martial arts fiction, such as , 白虹貫日、龍飛鳳舞、聽經拜佛、二郎擔山、上

步撩陰、斗柄東指、壁虎游牆功、五虎刀，抽樑換柱、苗家刀法，are all labelled in a unique manner, each label referring to the hand movements or footwork particular to the Move in question. Finding out what the name of each Move stands for and then re-labelling each Move in English is another major task facing the translator. Often, the translator will have to be just as creative as the original writer in coining new words or inventing phrases in the target language.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In spite of so many obstacles facing the translator of martial arts fiction into English, one must admit that most obstacles can still be surmounted in the long run. Of particular interest are linguistic and institutional terms clouded by cultural opaqueness, that is, terms whose meaning is clear only in the context of the culture in which the language is embedded. The long hours and laborious effort which have gone into rendering this major genre in contemporary Chinese literature into English through a re-creative translation process have indeed proved a most rewarding experience for the translator.

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