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# The constraints of translating martial arts fiction

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This article comments on the notion of 'constraint' by analysing the specific difficulties in the translation of a martial arts ('wuxia') novel into French and English. *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (射鵰英雄傳, *she diao ying xiong zhuan*) is the first part of the 'Condor Trilogy' (射鵰三部曲, *she diao san bu qu*), the masterpiece of Chinese writer Jin Yong (金庸). Little known in the West, the novel was recently translated by Anna Holmwood and Wang Jiann-Yuh. This article studies the strategies adopted by each translator to render the cultural specificities of the source context in the target culture. By so doing, it contributes to theoretical debates concerning transfers between two distant literary and cultural systems.

**Keywords:** translation, culture-specific items, constraints, reception of Chinese literature, wuxia, Jin Yong

Cet article apporte un éclairage critique sur la notion de « contrainte » en commentant les difficultés spécifiques qu'implique la traduction d'un roman d'arts martiaux ('wuxia') en français et en anglais. *La Légende du héros chasseur d'aigles* (射鵰英雄傳, *she diao ying xiong zhuan*) constitue le premier volet de 'La trilogie de l'aigle' (射鵰三部曲, *she diao san bu qu*), chef d'œuvre de l'auteur chinois Jin Yong (金庸). Peu connu en occident, le roman a fait l'objet de deux traductions récentes par Anna Holmwood et Wang Jiann-Yuh. L'article étudie les stratégies adoptées par chaque traducteur pour rendre compte des spécificités culturelles du contexte d'origine dans le contexte de réception. Ce faisant, il contribue aux débats théoriques sur les transferts entre deux systèmes littéraires et culturels éloignés.

**Mots clefs:** traduction, spécificités culturelles, contraintes, accueil critique de la littérature chinoise, wuxia, Jin Yong

## Introduction

Literary translation is subject to various linguistic, cultural, and social constraints.<sup>1</sup> The term 'constraint' refers to factors which shape how a translator renders a word, a sentence, or a whole text in a target language. Constraints may relate to linguistic differences between a given source and

1 Deng Yongshi, Wu Jiaxin, and Zhang Xinxin are thanked for their invaluable input and research assistance.

target language, as well as to how cultures express distinctive world views. There are also temporal and financial considerations that can impact the way in which a text is translated. Moreover, political and ideological contexts influence the extent to which a given text may be deemed ‘translatable’.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores constraints in relation to the translation into English and French of a Chinese ‘wuxia’ (martial arts fiction) bestseller. *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (射鵰英雄傳, *she diao ying xiong zhuan*), is the first part of the ‘Condor trilogy’ (射鵰三部曲, *she diao san bu qu*) by renowned writer Jin Yong (金庸).<sup>3</sup> The ‘Condor trilogy’ is thus named because it assembles three wuxia novels by Jin Yong, *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, *The Return of the Condor Heroes* (神鵰俠侶, *shen diao xia lu*), and *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (倚天屠龍記, *yi tian tu long ji*). However, even the first part of the trilogy is so extensive that it has been translated into four separate English volumes. The present study is therefore limited to the published English and French translations of the first volume. The article begins by reviewing theoretical perspectives on translation before introducing the case study. It draws on systemic and sociological approaches to explore how external factors as well as internal textual constraints have moulded the translation. The aim is to contribute to reception studies of martial arts fiction in English and French as well as to provide new insights into literary translation involving markedly different languages, cultures, and literary traditions.

### Translation in theory

Contextual, textual, and linguistic factors influence translation as an activity and literary practice. Within the academic discipline of translation studies these factors are divided into two main categories, often labelled ‘macro’ and ‘micro’. Broadly speaking, macro factors include global networks of cultural exchange and resistance to translated texts within specific target cultures. Micro textual procedures refer to the linguistic operations undertaken to render words, sentences, and whole passages of text in another language.

Studies which focus on the micro tend to look at the more visible aspects of the text itself, such as how individual words or expressions are

2 There is a considerable body of work that engages with the theoretical notion of translatability, including most notably *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, ed. by Barbara Cassin (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

3 Jin Yong is the nom de plume of 查良鏞 (*Zha Liangyong*), also known as Louis Cha.

substituted, while macro approaches evaluate the impact of more invisible forces, such as deep-seated ideologies, on translation. Case studies of how a specific source text is translated into a target language often adopt the former approach,<sup>4</sup> while sociologically inflected studies consider the latter. Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, for instance, have highlighted the extent to which the translation of literature is tributary to cultural power relations and the ‘symbolic capital’ held by nations and languages.<sup>5</sup> As they have shown, there are dominance-hierarchies that structure the international translation market. Most significantly for our study, Chinese literature has suffered from a deficit in symbolic capital on the international scene which has meant that many works that are famous in China remain untranslated in European languages.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘Manipulation school’, led by André Lefevere, stands at the intersection of macro and micro approaches in translation studies. Lefevere borrowed the term ‘refraction’ from physics to highlight how translation is about ‘the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work’.<sup>7</sup> In particular, he outlined how translation is constrained by patronage, poetics, and natural language. Patronage may be undifferentiated as in totalitarian regimes where a single person or single body controls who is allowed to publish and attributes value to publications that uphold the dominant ideology. It can also be differentiated ‘when economic success is relatively independent of ideological factors’.<sup>8</sup> As James Hadley puts it, differentiated patronage occurs ‘when ideology, status, and economic success are less tightly interwoven, being acquired from a variety of sources’.<sup>9</sup> The poetics

4 See, for instance, Ma Huijuan and Guan Xingzhong, ‘On the Transcultural Rewriting of the Chinese play *Wang Baochuan*’, *Perspectives*, 25.4 (2017), 556–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2016.1192208>>.

5 Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Translation: Economic and Sociological Perspectives’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Economics and Languages*, ed. by Victor Ginsburgh and Schlomo Weber. S. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 373–402.

6 As Wang Jie and Josh Stenberg have argued, the lack of international visibility of Chinese literature has led to concerted efforts by the Chinese government to promote translation as part of an overall drive to increase Chinese soft power. See Wang Jie and Josh Stenberg, ‘Soft Power from Ningxia to Cairo: Chinese-to-Arabic Translation of Modern and Contemporary Literature’, *Translation Studies*, 12.3 (2019), 321–37 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2018.1534698>>.

7 André Lefevere. ‘Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature’, *Modern Language Studies*, 12 (1982), 3–20 (p. 4).

8 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 17.

9 James Hadley, ‘Shifts in Patronage Differentiation: Translation from European Languages in Isolationist Japan’, *Meta*, 61.3 (2016), 709–26 <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1039226ar>>.

of translation, or its ‘code of behaviour’,<sup>10</sup> describes how a particular culture expects a translation should look in terms of genre and style. As for natural language, it concerns grammatical and syntactical differences between languages.

Lefevere’s hierarchy is useful to understand various levels of interaction between constraints in literary translation. There are ideological factors influencing how texts are selected to be translated. There are also stylistic considerations, which are themselves closely tied with ideology as Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, differences between the linguistic structures of two languages affect how a sentence may be rendered. A literary translation is the negotiated point of contact between two literary, linguistic, and cultural systems. It is thus the ‘perfect indicator’ of the constraint hierarchy since it embodies the translator’s interpretation of the source text in a new literary system.<sup>12</sup>

Translators have to adopt ‘work-around strategies’ to make a translation acceptable in a target context.<sup>13</sup> These strategies, and how they tie into broader ideological concerns and social networks, will be at the heart of the analysis of the translation of wuxia novels in the following sections.

### **Wuxia’s journey to the West**

As Lai Tzu-Yun has argued, ‘fiction on martial arts themes is China’s fiction of adventure’.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese name for martial arts fiction, 武俠小說 (*wu xia xiao shuo*), is composed of four characters. The last two, 小說 (*xiao shuo*), mean fiction or fantasy novels. 武 (*wu*) normally stands for martial or military, but in 武俠 (*wu xia*) it takes on its compound meaning of 武術 (*wu shu*), which signifies martial arts or military craft. As for 俠 (*xia*), the character’s connotation has evolved during China’s millenary history. Historically, it used to refer to criminals, however, the term also carries a certain element of endearment, since those referred to by 俠 (*xia*) were deemed to display such noble traits as generosity, honour, and courage in battle. In literature, 俠 (*xia*) has tended to refer to mystic sword-masters

<sup>10</sup> André Lefevere, ‘Mother Courage’s Cucumbers’, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> André Lefevere, ‘Mother Courage’s Cucumbers’, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> See Dominic Glynn and James Hadley, ‘Theorising (Un)performability and (Un)translatability’, *Perspectives*, 29.1 (2021), 20–32 (p. 23) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2020.1713827>>.

<sup>14</sup> Lai Tzu-Yun, ‘Translating Chinese Martial Arts Fiction, with Reference to the Novels of Jin Yong’, unpublished PhD thesis, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 1998, p. 1.

and martial artists. Yet, for Lai, ‘it is impossible to translate [this term] with a single English word’, though ‘Knight-errant [...] is one popular rendition’, and ‘swordsmen’ or ‘hero’ could also work as English approximations.<sup>15</sup> In French, Wang Jiann-Yuh suggests ‘preux’ and ‘justicier’ as possible options.<sup>16</sup>

In relation to both English and French, ‘wuxia’ is what Javier Franco Aixelá calls a culture-specific item. Franco Aixelá describes the difficulties posed by culture-specific items (CSI) in the following way:

In translation a CSI does not exist in itself, but as the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text, which, when transferred to a target language, proves a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value (whether determined by ideology, usage, frequency, etc.) of the given item in the target language culture.<sup>17</sup>

His theorization of CSI neatly describes the translation problem encountered when rendering wuxia into French and English. Terminological issues arise because of a lack of equivalents in the target languages. There are also stylistic difficulties in translating from Chinese into English and French, owing to the differences in syntax between the languages, as well as to specific features of Jin Yong’s style. Translators thus have to compensate by using a range of strategies to translate martial arts terms, from transliteration to mapping onto concepts more familiar in the target cultures.

On the other hand, as Lai mentions, ‘Western readers’ receive wuxia through the lens of martial arts films made famous by Hong Kong or Hollywood productions.<sup>18</sup> Semiotically, wuxia novels and kung fu action films make use of two different channels, since fantasy fiction novels are paper-based texts and action films are audiovisual texts. Yet, the blend of fighting techniques, and, on occasion, supernatural powers in the films create a similar imaginary landscape. In particular, since Ang Lee’s blockbuster *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (臥虎藏龍, *wo hu cang long*) in 2000, international audiences have become familiar with the specific genre of wuxia films.

Among wuxia writers, Jin Yong is arguably the most famous and successful. He was born in 1924 in Haining, Zhejiang Province, China,

15 Lai Tzu-Yun, pp. 4–5.

16 Wang Jiann-Yuh, ‘Avant-propos’, in *La légende du héros chasseur d’aigle, Tome 1*, by Jin Yong, trans. by Wang Jiann-Yuh (Paris: Éditions You Feng, 2004), pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

17 Javier Franco Aixelá, ‘Culture-specific Items in Translation’, in *Translation, Power, Subversion* ed. by Roman Alvarez Rodriguez and Maria Carmen Africa Vidal (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters), pp. 52–78 (p. 37).

18 Lai Tzu-Yun, p. 5.

into the family of a wealthy landowner, and went on to study law and literature, before becoming a professional journalist. He moved to Hong Kong in 1948, when the city was relatively free of ideological restrictions compared to Mainland China. In Hong Kong, Jin Yong worked for the *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* newspaper (香港商報, *xiang gang shang bao*), before co-founding *Ming Pao* (明報, *ming bao*), also a newspaper, in 1959. Jin Yong worked in a variety of different roles throughout his career, from journalist to editor, screenwriter, director, and even policymaker. It is his writing, however, which is most highly regarded. Between 1955 and 1972, he wrote fifteen martial arts fiction novels, gaining tremendous popularity in China, where he inspired a form of martial arts-mania called ‘Jinology’. His work has also been recognized abroad as he was conferred several prestigious honours, such as the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1981, Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur in 1992, and Commandeur de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2004. According to Chinese scholars, Jin Yong’s readership offers an opportunity to reconceptualize the relation between high and popular culture as it cuts through cultural discontinuity and political division over the past fifty years.<sup>19</sup>

The high esteem in which Jin Yong’s work in general, and the ‘Condor trilogy’ in particular, is held in China made it a potential candidate for translation. Indeed, as Dominic Glynn and James Hadley have argued, a work that has ‘accumulated symbolic value in its source culture is more likely to be translated’.<sup>20</sup> However, the likelihood of a particular work being translated increases or decreases based on the ‘amount of symbolic capital or prestige accumulated by the literature’ of the country from which it originates. Thus, while Jin Yong’s work had garnered a large readership and considerable prestige in its source context, China’s periphery in the world literary system worked against its translatability. Also working against Jin Yong’s translation into European languages is that wuxia is not an established genre outside Asia. It is therefore not entirely surprising that there was such a long lapse between the first published English and French translations of this series.

19 See, notably, Chen Pingyuan, ‘Transcending “High” and “Low” Distinctions in Literature: The Success of Jin Yong and the Future of Martial Arts Novels’, trans. by Jiang Mengjiao and Ann Huss, in *The Jin Yong Phenomenon. Chinese Martial Arts Fiction and Modern Chinese Literary History*, ed. by Ann Huss and Liu Jianmei (Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press, 2007), pp. 55–72.

20 Glynn and Hadley, p. 24. The quotation in the following sentence is from the same page of the article.



### The story of the English *Condor*<sup>21</sup>

Jin Yong's *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* is a bestseller in China, having sold more than three billion copies. It was originally published as a serialized saga in the *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* between 1957 and 1959, and later in *Ming Pao* (1959–1963).<sup>22</sup> It was adapted several times for the silver screen, starting in 1958, later for the small screen by Hong Kong's CTV in 1976, and subsequently on numerous occasions by other production companies. Jin Yong also revised the text twice, first in 1976 and again in 2003. While the title of the original work 射鵬英雄傳 (*she diao ying xiong zhuan*) can be literally rendered in English as the 'story of eagle-shoot[ing] heroes', the reference in the English translation to 'condor', which is not a species of bird native to China, can be traced back to the early Hong Kong TV adaptations.<sup>23</sup>

Until the publication of *A Hero Born*, the first of a planned twelve-volume series by MacLehose Press, there had never been a printed English translation. In an interview given to a Taiwanese newspaper, the publisher Christopher MacLehose and literary agent Peter Buckman explained how the saga came to be translated sixty years after its initial publication in Hong Kong.<sup>24</sup> The process they described is familiar to those with some knowledge of publishing in the English-speaking world with its mix of luck, commercial flair, and interpersonal networks. While browsing the web in 2014, Peter Buckman searched for 'the world's bestselling author'. This is where he came across Jin Yong. Intrigued, he reached out to the author expressing interest in purchasing the copyright to publish the series' translation. He also asked his circle of friends for a suitable translator, and the name of Anna Holmwood, who was working in Taiwan at the time, was put forward. Buckman subsequently went to Hong Kong to purchase the

21 Jin Yong, *Legends of The Condor Heroes 1: A Hero Born*, trans. by Anna Holmwood (London: MacLehose Press, 2018). The American edition is printed by St Martin's Press. St Martin's Press has also published a reprint of the four volumes, entitled *The Definitive Edition*.

22 Lai Tzu-Yun, p. 58.

23 Anna Holmwood specifically refers to the 1983 TVB Jade adaptation as the origin of the 'Condor controversy'. See Anna Holmwood, 'The Condor Controversy', in Jin Yig, *Legends of the Condor Heroes I. A Hero Born*, trans. by Anna Holmwood (London: MacLehose Press, 2018), pp. 384–85 (p. 384).

24 He Yue, '《射鵬》英文版為何遲到60年?', *She Diao ying wen ban wei he chi dao 60 nian?* [Why Was the English Version of the Legend of the Condor Heroes 60 Years Late?], *Commonwealth Magazine*, 24 June 2018 <<https://www.cw.com.tw/article/5090667?template=fashion>> [accessed 2 August 2021].



translation rights for non-Asian markets, met Holmwood, and officially hired her.

Holmwood then produced a sample translation that was sent to several English publishers. Christopher MacLehose was the first to respond and bought the copyright for all English-speaking markets. For MacLehose, in addition to Jin Yong's popularity in China, the work and personality of Anna Holmwood convinced him to take the plunge. Holmwood had first heard about Jin Yong when in Taiwan, following studies at the University of Oxford. She later returned to the UK to specialize in Chinese literature and history at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.<sup>25</sup> In 2009, she was one of a group of students recruited by Yan Geling and Nicky Harman to participate in a series of workshops at the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT). Harman became Holmwood's translation mentor under the BCLT mentoring scheme. With her help, Holmwood obtained her first contract as a literary translator from Chinese to English for *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (山楂樹之戀, *shan zha shu zhi lian*) by Ai Mi (艾米), which was published in 2012.

As with many literary translators, Holmwood has juggled several sources of income throughout her career and occupied different professional roles as a teacher, researcher, and reviewer, among others.<sup>26</sup> Most notably, she was editor-in-chief for books from Taiwan in 2014–15 and worked as a literary agent representing some of China's most promising writing talent. Rather than 'consuming' her, this polymorphism made her a more aware translator. As she puts it, '[k]nowing how a publisher selects and packages a book allows me to advise on the publishing process as well'.<sup>27</sup> It was Holmwood's translation as well as her professional networks that convinced Christopher MacLehose to invest in a twelve-volume translation venture.

MacLehose's commercial decision paid off, as the first volume was already in its sixth print run by June 2018, having sold 15,000 copies. Subsequently, three other volumes, *A Bond Undone*, translated by Gigi Chang (2019), *A*

25 Zhang Dailei, '郝玉青: 将《射鵰英雄傳》引入西方世界的瑞典姑娘', *Hao Yuqing: jiang She Diao Ying Xiong Zhuan yin ru shi jie de rui dian gu niang* [A Swedish Girl-Anna Holmwood Introduced the Legend of the Condor Heroes to the Western World], *Xinhua*, 23 February 2018 <[http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-02/23/c\\_1122442603.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-02/23/c_1122442603.htm)> [accessed 2 August 2021].

26 On this matter, see Isabelle Kalinowski, 'La vocation au travail de traduction', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 4 (2002), 47–54.

27 '郝玉青談英譯《射鵰》成「爆款」: 撬動市場耗時近十年', *Hao Yuqing tan ying yi She Diao cheng bao kuan* [Anna Holmwood's translation of The Legend of the Condor Heroes], 每日頭條 *Meiritoutiao*, 4 June 2018 <<https://kknews.cc/culture/02req8p.html>>, Interview by [www.thepaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn) [accessed 2 August 2021].

*Snake Lies Waiting* (2020), translated by Anna Holmwood and Gigi Chang, and *A Heart Divided* (2021), translated by Gigi Chang and Shelly Bryant, have been published. North American publisher St Martin's Press has also purchased the distribution rights for the four volumes in the US market. Moreover, publishers have bought the translation rights for Brazil, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. Buckman hypothesized that these would most likely be indirect translations, with the English serving as a relay. Despite negative discourse concerning indirect translations, research has highlighted that the practice has increased as a result of globalization and is particularly frequent when translating from culturally distant literary systems and when translating from one peripheral language to another.<sup>28</sup> In fact, indirect translation was also a feature of early attempts to provide a French version.

### Jin Yong's French *légende*

A two-volume French translation of *La Légende du héros chasseur d'aigle* was published in 2004 by a small Paris-based publisher specializing in Chinese works, Éditions You Feng. The story goes that Pan Lihui, the owner of You Feng, wished to commission a French translation of Jin Yong's martial arts novels. He reached out to Pan Yaoming, a friend and former colleague of Jin Yong at *Ming Pao*, to ask for a meeting with the author. When he managed to get in touch with him, the author expressed his support.<sup>29</sup> Pan then secured financial aid from the Centre national du livre. However, finding a suitable translator proved complicated. He initially approached a native French translator, but reportedly the source text's intricate plot and style had the better of him. Pan decided that it might be better to go for a translator with an Asian background, by virtue of the greater proximity between Chinese and other East Asian cultures. He therefore hire/d a second translator of Vietnamese origin. The novels had been serialized and translated for Vietnamese newspapers in the late 1950s. It was this Vietnamese serialization which served as a relay to the

28 See Alexandra Assis Rosa, Hanna Pięta, and Rita Bueno Maia, 'Theoretical, Methodological and Terminological Issues Regarding Indirect Translation: an Overview', *Translation Studies*, 10.2 (2017), 113–32 (p. 114) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2017.1285247>>.

29 Yan Huo, '東方的大仲馬 漫談金庸作品外譯本', *Dong fang de da Zhong ma man tan jin yong zuo pin wai yi ben*, [Oriental Alexander Dumas, pondering on Jin Yong's Translation], *鳳凰週刊 Feng huang zhou kan*, 5 September 2013 <<http://www.ifengweekly.com/detil.php?id=1015>> [accessed 2 August 2021].

second translator. Using the method of indirect translation, the translator managed to finish several chapters. However, the vast number of martial arts moves, weapons, and techniques contained in the text also grounded his translation initiative to a halt.

These two thwarted attempts at a French translation underscore the high levels of complexity involved in rewriting a text in a new language. In the case of Jin Yong's wuxia, there were both ideological and poetological difficulties to overcome. The lack of knowledge of martial arts moves and traditions in the target culture meant that the work appeared too foreign, even in translation. The profusion of references also added stylistic obstacles that were deemed unsurmountable by the first two French translators.

In the end, it was Wang Jiann-Yuh, the son of an official of the Kuomintang of Taiwan, who completed the translation. Wang became a polyglot at an early age, travelling around the world with his father. He eventually settled in Paris, where he graduated from the Sorbonne and the École Normale Supérieure, institutions invested with high symbolic capital in France and the francophone world. Like Jin Yong, he worked as a film producer and held a culturally strategic position as the consulting manager of the Fondation Victor Segalen, a foundation for cross-cultural dialogue between China and France. He was subsequently the president of the Comité France-Chine, and executive officer of the Agence Franco-Chinoise pour la Coopération Décentralisée, and is currently the president of Cultures Chine Conseils.

Wang's approach was to frequently consult French native speakers as his translation progressed. When they found it cumbersome or difficult to follow, he would delete passages that included Chinese historical references and terminological technicisms. Omission is a procedure which is used in translation 'much more than any prescriptive translation scholars would like to acknowledge'.<sup>30</sup> Such 'non-translation' allows translators to remove terms or passages that are not central to the narrative and that are otherwise unnecessarily opaque. Moreover, it is this micro-level non-translation, whereby specific terms and passages are omitted, which facilitates macro-level textual translation.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, while the previous translators had become lost in a flurry of details, their suppression enabled Wang to work through two volumes of the text. Analysing translation procedures such as omission is key to understanding how Jin Yong's works came to be rewritten for European language readerships. However, before comparatively examining the English

<sup>30</sup> Franco Aixelá, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Dominic Glynn, 'Outline of a Theory of Non-Translation', *Across Languages and Cultures*, 22.1, 1–13 (p. 7) <<https://doi.org/10.1556/084.2021.00001>>.

and French translations, it is worth saying a few words about paratextual elements such as the covers of the books and how they framed the texts.

### Judging a book by its cover

Brian Mossop has highlighted the importance that covers play in packaging a translation and in inciting a potential consumer to buy a book.<sup>32</sup> MacLehose chose to publish the translated series with a cover that used a light brown background. The English title of the series and numeral for the volume number, *Legends of The Condor Heroes I*, are written in a white font on a burgundy background. Below, in a burgundy font, the title of the volume *A Hero Born* appears. Below that, the image of a black condor wing occupies the centre and most of the cover. To the right of the wing, Jin Yong's name is written vertically in Chinese calligraphy.<sup>33</sup> Below the wing in a larger burgundy font, the name 'Jin Yong' is written in English.

Towards the bottom of the cover, still in the centre, in a smaller black font, the fact that Jin Yong is a 'nom de plume' is made clear by the statement 'Pen name of Louis Cha'. Lower down still, again in a black font, a connection with Tolkien's work is established by a quotation from the *Irish Times* describing the series as 'a Chinese *Lord of the Rings*'.<sup>34</sup> The back cover includes a series of endorsements and a plot summary. At the very bottom, the name of the translator is given in the following statement written in capitals: 'TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY ANNA HOLMWOOD'. The name of the publisher, 'MacLehose Press, an imprint of Quercus', is also provided.

In the top centre of the French front cover, the name of Jin Yong appears. Below that, in the centre of the cover, the title *Légende du héros chasseur d'aigle* is given as well as the title in Chinese. Below the title, the translator is credited with the statement: 'Traduit du chinois par Wang Jiann-Yuh'. There is also a black-and-white illustration, yet it only covers a quarter of the cover vertically.<sup>35</sup> In the bottom left corner, the logo and name of the publisher 'Éditions YOU-FENG Libraire Éditeur' are provided. The

32 Brian Mossop, 'Judging a Translation by Its Cover', *The Translator*, 24.1 (2018), 1–16 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2017.1287545>>.

33 Jin Yong is the author of the calligraphy.

34 The title of the newspaper, *Irish Times*, is itself written in red.

35 The illustration is in fact a cut of the first of a series of illustrations that are included in the source text as well as in both the English and French translations. The illustrations are by Jiang Yunxing (姜雲行), who illustrates nearly all of Jin Yong's works. In the Chinese, each illustration is accompanied by a quotation from the text. The French translation provides

French back cover not only includes a plot summary but also contains a paragraph about Jin Yong, and in the bottom right corner, there is a brief biography of the translator. The biographical note mentions that Wang Jiann-Yuh is an ‘ancien élève de l’École normale supérieure’ but also that he taught philosophy and was a journalist before devoting himself to literary translation. The biography concludes by mentioning his other translations, *Fleurs de Shanghai* (Denoël, 1998), *Passion Métisse* (Bleu de Chine, 2000), and *Elle s’appelle Papillon* (L’Herne, 2004).

The amount of text that specifically concerns the translator and the translation is far greater on the French front and back covers than on the English covers. Indeed, the front cover of the English version only provides covert references to the fact that the work has been translated. These include the quotation about the work being a ‘Chinese *Lord of the Rings*’ and the Chinese calligraphy. The name of the translator is relegated to the back cover. Moreover, the endorsements provided on both the front and back covers only sing the praises of Jin Yong’s work. They do not mention the translation or refer to the translator Anna Holmwood. Conversely, the French edition makes much of the translator’s experience and cultural background. In other words, the text’s Chinese origin is made clear on both the French and English covers, however, the existence of the translator as a mediator is much more evident on the former than on the latter. Thus, to use Laurence Venuti’s terms, the translator gains in ‘visibility’ in the French edition compared to the English.<sup>36</sup> Venuti argues that in British and American publishing cultures, the translator is ‘invisible’. The lack of visibility of the translator is reinforced by a discourse on fluency and transparency regarding the translation itself.<sup>37</sup> This means there is a direct relation between the strategies and procedures used to translate terms and passages, and the extent to which the translator is credited. The following sections will investigate this relation more specifically.

### Birds of fortune

While the previous sections consider how the English and French translations came into being, and were packaged, the following delves into the

a descriptive key for each illustration, while the English translation simply provides the illustrations without further explanation.

36 Laurence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–34.

37 Venuti, p. 1.

texts themselves. It does so by considering the translations of the titles to reveal differences that are revelatory of underlying translation strategies and of the praxis as well as the pragmatism of each translator.

The volume title of the English translation *A Hero Born* is complemented by the title of the series, *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, to which a volume number is added – ‘1’ in this case. As previously mentioned, the inclusion of ‘condor’ is in part due to the prior existence of television adaptations bearing that name. This is explicitly stated by the translator in an appendix to the translation. Holmwood also explains that ‘the birds found in this volume are in fact much larger than the species of eagle found in Asia’ and, moreover, they are ‘fantastical creatures that practice martial arts and are even capable of teaching humans their skills’.<sup>38</sup> The choice of retaining condor was thus motivated both by the assumption that ‘English-speaking fans already know the series by the name’ and by the belief that since the bird is ‘fictional and clearly described in fantastical terms, there is no scientifically accurate translation to be found in any meaningful sense’.<sup>39</sup>

As for the French title, *La Légende du héros chasseur d’aigles*, it is pretty much a literal translation of the Chinese. Given that the Hong Kong television series made next to no impact in France or in the ‘Francosphere’, the reference to condor would have been misleading. Thus, it is not surprising that the French goes with ‘aigle’. Also, in keeping with the meaning of the Chinese, the focus is on the main hero, Guo Jing. The title in fact refers to an incident in Guo’s youth when he shot two eagles with a single arrow. The English subtitle, with its plural ‘Condor heroes’, suggests several possible interpretations. One is that it refers to the birds themselves, the fictional and fantastical creatures that Holmwood describes. Another is that the Condor heroes refer to all the mythical characters that appear in the course of the novels.

If we follow Venuti’s logic, the decision to go with the pre-existing convention of referring to a condor in the English ensures that the reader’s expectations are met and that the text stands out less like a foreign object, or indeed, as a translation. Yet, the translation of the title into French, which is more literal, does not stand out as being particularly foreign either. At most, it suggests that the novel will be a fantasy fiction. Nevertheless, the underlying drive to make the English translation conform to the supposed expectations of readers by being either immediately recognizable or intelligible is manifest in how the names of the characters are translated.

38 Holmwood, ‘The Condor Controversy’, p. 384.

39 Holmwood, ‘The Condor Controversy’, p. 385.



Discrepancies between the strategies adopted by the English and French translators are noticeable here and are exacerbated with respect to the translation of names.

### Winds of translation

The translation of the names of characters in wuxia novels is a particularly thorny issue. Olivia Mok, who translated into English in 1996 another of Jin Yong's works, *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (雪山飛狐, *xue shan fei hu*), highlights the specific difficulty in rendering names that 'describe characteristics of the protagonists'.<sup>40</sup> These can appear cumbersome when rendered into English or French. To avoid this, Holmwood adopts a variety of different strategies in her translations of proper names and sobriquets. For instance, '梅超風' (*mei chao feng*) becomes 'Cyclone Mei'. While the last two characters (超風, *chao feng*) are translated semantically as 'cyclone', a pinyin transcription is provided of the first character (梅, *mei*). Her nickname, '鐵尸' (*tie shi*) is, however, literally translated as 'Iron Corpse'. Mei's husband's name is '陳玄風' (*chen xuan feng*), which literally means 'Chen' (a common Chinese surname), 'black/deep wind'. In Holmwood's translation, it becomes 'Hurricane Chen'. Here, she chooses to render more explicit the symbolism of a 'dark' wind by rendering it as a particularly strong wind, one that is moreover associated with a 'cyclone'. Chen also carries a nickname, that of '銅尸' (*tong shi*), which is rendered literally as 'Copper Corpse'.

In the French translation, '梅超風' (*mei chao feng*) becomes 'Mei Chaofeng'. Here, the Chinese name is transcribed into French using the pinyin system. Her nickname, on the other hand, is rendered literally as 'Cadavre de Fer'. The same strategy is used to translate her husband's names. While his proper name becomes 'Chen Xuanfeng', following the pinyin transcription conventions, the nickname is translated literally as 'Cadavre de Bronze'. The couple is also known by a collective, frightening nickname, '黑風雙煞' (*hei feng shuang sha*), which literally means 'black wind double evil spirits'. Holmwood goes with 'Twice Foul Dark Wind', keeping the four Chinese character structure via a four-word approximation. However, in so doing the translator creates a name which risks being misinterpreted in English. A similar issue is picked up by Richard Vivian in his analysis

40 Olivia Mok, 'Translating Appellations in Martial-Arts Fiction', *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 10.4, 273–81 (p. 275) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2002.9961451>>.



of Robert Chard's English translation of one of Huanzhulouzhū's (還珠樓主) novels. As Vivian remarks, 'how can the reader be expected to take seriously a Taoist abbot with a name like Wang Pure-Wind'?<sup>41</sup> The French language translator steers clear of such pitfalls in part because of the different semantics of 'wind' in French, and in part because he adds a definite article and a preposition to obtain 'Les Deux Maléfiques du Vent Noir'.

Another challenging name is '王重陽' (*wang chong yang*), which literally means 'Wang' (a Chinese surname), 'Double Sun'. The English translation is 'Double Sun Wang Chongyang'. The French goes for 'L'Esprit illimité Central, Wang Chongyang'. The characters '重陽' (*chong yang*) create a translation problem because of their polysemantic properties and cultural specificity: the most common meaning of 重 (*chong*) is 'repeat', while 陽 (*yang*) means both 'sun' and 'yang' the opposite of 'yin' (陰, *yin*). However, as a compound, 重陽 (*chong yang*) means 'double sun/double yang', connoting a culture-bound, traditional concept in China, observable in the name of Chinese holiday 重陽節 (*chong yang jie*) Double Ninth Festival.

While the English translation does not adapt all characters' names homogeneously, the French translator systematically transliterates them. Wang presents the rationale behind the transliteration of all names in a note on the translation. He chooses the pinyin form of transcription 'selon un usage consacré' but adds that when it is necessary to provide semantic equivalents in order to for the reader to achieve a better understanding, these are given in footnotes. Indeed, as he puts it, Chinese names have 'un sens très précis, notamment pour marquer les attentes et les espoirs déposés dans l'enfant, ou pour indiquer l'inscription de celui-ci dans une lignée ou une fratrie'.<sup>42</sup> Such a translation technique is known in Franco Aixelá's terms as 'extratextual gloss' and is useful in order to elaborate on the historical context. The argument against the inclusion of footnotes is that they make for a heavier read. This is no doubt why the English translation does not contain footnotes, though it does provide an appendix with a few 'Notes on the Text'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Wang provides a list of all the characters at the end of the translation, while Holmwood places them before the first chapter, after an introductory note, which does not cover translation choices.

41 Richard Vivian, 'Convolutéd Kungfu Pot-boiler', *Far Eastern Review*, 28 November 1991, p. 31. Quoted in Mok, p. 275.

42 Wang Jiann-Yuh, 'Précisions sur les noms chinois', in Jin Yong, *La légende du héros chasseur d'aigle*, trans. by Wang Jiann-Yuh (Paris: Editions You Feng, 2004), p. 8. Wang also explains that for the names of Mongol origin 'la règle a été d'adopter la graphie la plus simple'. Wang Jiann-Yuh, p. 8.

43 Holmwood, p. 386.

The non-inclusion of footnotes in the English translation goes some way to explaining the greater prevalence of semantic translation than in the French. Indeed, the reader is expected to gather some basic information about the main attributes of the characters from the names themselves without having to refer to a note. This practice also contributes to rendering the translation more readable, as the reader is not obliged to check a reference lower down on the page. Holmwood's translation strategy is thus, once again, tributary to the dominant discourse on fluency, while Wang's emphasizes the presence of the translator through interventions in the notes to add more precise information. Holmwood's fluent translation can be in part explained by the fact that the novels in the MacLehose series are marketed to a wider readership than those of You Feng. Indeed, the latter publisher caters to a niche of readers with specific interest in Chinese culture, while the former aims to reach out to as wide a readership as possible.

### Enter the dragon

Translating martial arts moves is another difficulty which the English and French translators deal with differently. In the source text, '天罡北斗阵法' (*tian gang bei dou zhen fa*), is a move that involves a form of collective defence, in which seven men sit cross-legged in the position known in the UK as 'The Plough' (天罡北斗 *tian gang bei dou*) and show only one palm to face the enemy, while the other palm is placed on the person next to them to collect their inner force. The enemy is thus faced with a collective unit that works together to defeat them. Holmwood translates it as 'The Plough Formation' while Wang translates the move as the 'Mouvement de la Grande Ourse', which directly refers to the Ursa Major constellation rather than to the seven stars that form a sub-group within the constellation. In Franco Aixelá's terms, Wang uses a procedure known as 'universalization'.<sup>44</sup> A likely explanation for this choice of procedure is the greater familiarity of 'la grande ourse' in French compared to 'la Grande Casserole', its subdivision.

Another martial art-technique is '毒龍出洞' (*du long chu dong*), which literally means the 'poisonous dragon goes outside the cave'. Holmwood translates it as 'Deadly Dragon Flies the Cave', while Wang went for 'le Dragon venimeux sort de sa tanière'. Holmwood amplifies the meaning in the source text, emphasizing the dangerous nature of the move while Wang retains 'poisonous' but discards the more literal 'caverne' for 'tanière', which refers to a

44 Franco Aixelá, p. 63.

cavernous space inhabited by a wild animal or beast. These choices are examples of what Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet label ‘modulation’, which in their eyes ‘can be seen as the touchstone of a good translator’.<sup>45</sup> Another martial arts-technique is ‘九陰白骨爪’ (*jiu yin bai gu zhao*), which literally means ‘nine yin white skeleton claw’. It is translated by Holmwood as ‘Nine Yin Skeleton Claw’, and by Wang as ‘la Griffes d’os blanc des Neuf Ténèbres’. Here Wang decided to demystify yin by approximating it with ‘ténèbres’, while Holmwood went for a more literal translation, omitting only ‘white’ which was no doubt considered superfluous in relation to ‘skeleton’. Similarly, when it comes to kung fu schools such as ‘全真教’ (*quan zhen jiao*), which literally signifies ‘all true religion’, and which is a branch of Taoism, Holmwood goes for the pinyin transcription and modulates ‘religion’ to ‘sect’, to produce ‘The Quanzhen Sect’. Wang on the other hand goes for ‘la Secte de la Perfection absolue’, which is more immediately intelligible to readers. The shift from ‘religion’ to ‘sect’ in both English and French can be accounted for by the fact that Quanzhen is a subdivision of Taoism, though ‘school’ would have been an appropriate translation also.

What becomes clear in comparing the translations of the character names and the martial arts moves in the English and French versions is that the translators use diverging strategies for each. The English translation tends to go with options that are immediately intelligible to readers but chooses more source-oriented translations when it comes to the martial arts moves. The reverse is true for the French translation which uses pinyin for the character names and then semantic translation for the moves and names of kung fu schools. In Venuti’s terms, source-oriented translations are ‘foreignizations’ while target-oriented translations are ‘domestications’.<sup>46</sup> Venuti argues that the Anglo-American publishing market massively favours a domesticating approach, resulting in the invisibility of the translator. The fact that Holmwood favours a domesticating approach and that her name does not feature on the front cover of the published translation appears to corroborate Venuti’s analysis. Meanwhile, Wang favours a foreignizing approach, and his name appears on the cover. Yet, neither Holmwood nor Wang adopt a single approach. The English translation does include foreignized renderings, just as the French does domesticate, most notably with respect to the names of martial arts schools. This underscores the fact that translating between such distant language pairings as Chinese and English and Chinese and French requires a range of techniques rather than a single homogenous approach.

45 Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English. A Methodology for Translation*, trans. and ed. by Juan C. Sager and Marie-Josée Hamel (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1995), p. 246.

46 Venuti, p. 19.

### Forgotten histories

Many of the translation issues that come to the fore throughout the novel are at stake in the translation of the incipit. The composition below appears on the first page of the novel. Jin Yong quotes the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) poet Dai Fagu's '戴復古' composition '淮村兵後' (*huai cun bing hou*), which describes Jin dynasty soldiers invading the South and desolate villages in the Jianghuai area after the war.<sup>47</sup>

小桃无主自开花, (xiao tao wu zhu zi kai hua,)  
烟草茫茫带晚鸦。(yan cao mang mang dai wan ya)  
几处败垣围故井, (ji chu bai yuan wei gu jing)  
向来一一是人家的。(xiang lai yi yi shi ren jia.)<sup>48</sup>

Untended, the peach blossoms still open,  
As fallow fields of tobacco draw the crows.  
In times past, by the village well,  
Families once gathered to vent their sorrows.<sup>49</sup>

Le petit pêcher de lui-même se met à fleurir  
À perte de vue l'herbe enfumée attire les corbeaux du soir  
Quelques ruines délabrées entourent le puits asséché  
C'était là le foyer de quelques braves gens.<sup>50</sup>

47 Ye Jiaying, 南宋名家詞讲录, *Nan song ming jia ci jiang lu* [A Record of Famous Poets in the Southern Song Dynasty], 1st edn (Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 2005).

48 Jin Yong, 射鵰英雄傳, *She Diao Ying Xiong Zhuan* [The Legend of the Condor Heroes] (HK: Ming Ho Publications Corporation Limited, 2018), p. 7.

49 Jin Yong, *A Hero Born*, trans. by Holmwood, p. 1.

50 Jin Yong, *La Légende du héros chasseur d'aigles*, trans. by Wang Jiann-Yuh, p. 9.

In the verses above, the poet's deep sympathy for the people suffering war and his hatred for the invading enemy transpire. In the second line, '煙草' (*yan cao*) typically exemplifies the metonymic and metaphoric use of '煙' (*yan*), meaning 'foggy weeds', to describe a hazy impression of natural scenery. The poet uses terms such as '煙柳' (*yan liu*), which literally means 'smoke willow', and '煙雨' (*yan yu*), 'misty rain', in a similar manner. However, 'tobacco', which is used by Holmwood, was only introduced into China in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Wang chooses a more generic translation, 'herbe enfumée', which has the advantage of not containing anachronistic references but is arguably less immediately intelligible, because it is less specific, than the reference to tobacco. Again, the English translation's tendency to render more familiar descriptions than the French is observed here.

More generally though, Holmwood and Wang both choose to omit a number of historical references and CSI in the text. For example, in the first chapter, Jin Yong talks about the political rivalry between Yue Fei and Qin Hui in the twelfth century. There is no reference at all to this historical episode in the English translation while Wang's French translation condenses the description to a brief passing reference.<sup>51</sup> Recalling these historical political events was a means for Jin Yong to denounce contemporary political events covertly and satirically through his literature. However, these events would have been unfamiliar to the target readers, which explains their complete omission in the English and partial non-translation in the French versions. Such a use of omission renders the translations clearer to their readers. It is not surprising that Holmwood's translation should remove more references to Chinese history that are not central to the narrative, given the greater emphasis on creating a domesticated translation. Nevertheless, since both translations aimed to be understood by readers not well-versed in Chinese culture and language, there are also omissions in the French version. Arguably, in the future, if Chinese history gains greater prominence in European and American school programmes, some of these references could be included in later retranslations. Yet that would require some degree of familiarity with both the original historical context and the context which Jin Yong was intending to satirize.

51 Jin Yong, trans. by Wang (2004), p. 32.

## Conclusion

This article has studied two translations of martial arts fiction novels by Jin Yong into English and French. It has done so to outline the different factors that shape and constrain literary translation in general, and such genre-specific translation in particular. It has described how Anna Holmwood and Wang Jiann-Yuh came to translate *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*. It has highlighted how the very nature of the texts and the lack of familiarity with aspects of Chinese culture rendered the task particularly complex. Such complexity explains in part why the novels were untranslated in these major European languages for so many years, despite their popularity in China. These difficulties are to a certain extent shared by all translators of Chinese literature into European languages but amplified in the context of wuxia which has no corresponding genre in 'Western' literature.

In addition, the article has highlighted how the translators came up with a range of procedures to render terms that are specific to the Chinese source culture and which present certain translation difficulties. It has shown that the English translation tended to 'domesticate' to a greater extent than the French version. This is likely to be in large part due to the intended wider readership of the English-language translation than the French. Nevertheless, in both translations, a range of procedures was used, and in both instances, the most complex or opaque terms that are secondary to the narrative have tended to disappear. In summary, the similarities and differences observed reveal translation to be a highly pragmatic practice of rewriting, which is nevertheless conditioned by structural factors including cultural power relations between languages and publishing house-specific requirements.