

# Right to Untranslatability and Hospitality of World Literature

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## Abstract

For translation studies, untranslatability has long been deemed as an obstacle which engenders linguistic and cultural loss of the source text. In terms of world literature's development, however, untranslatability can be regarded as the right of non-English literature to resist the Anglocentric literary mainstream. By examining the Chinese texts chosen for translation after 1949 and studying the untranslatability of literature from assorted trajectories within the Chinese context, this paper discusses the possibility for Chinese literature to enjoy the right to untranslatability in the international literary system that seems to be Anglocentric, based on which exploring the hospitality of world literature at present.

*Keywords:* untranslatability, world literature, literary hegemony, Chinese literature.

Speaking in narrow terms, translation is to find the equivalent expressions of the source text in the target language. On account of the linguistic and cultural differences, it is almost unavoidable to encounter, for instance, terms, concepts or styles that cannot be rendered, the phenomenon of which named by Catford (1965) as untranslatability. In translation studies, untranslatability has long been regarded as an obstacle that hinders the process of translation. However, it is such untranslatability that enables translation to mark the peculiarity of the source language-culture(s). By retaining the exclusive features, non-English writings can emphasize their linguistic and cultural identities in the domain of world literature. In this sense, untranslatability can be deemed as a way of resisting the Anglocentric literary mainstream. Hence, it seems to be increasingly essential to have a discussion about the right to untranslatability and the role translation plays in strengthening the position of various non-English literature.

To translate Chinese literary works into English is always a challenge, encountering difficulties such as polysemy and realia. With the more frequent interlingual and cross-cultural communications between the east and the west, untranslatability has become a popular topic in the studies on the exportation of Chinese literature. Fan Min (2007), for instance, examines the cultural issues in translating Chinese idioms in *Honglou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber). Laurence Wong (1997) and Helena Wu (2012) discuss respectively the untranslatable elements in *wuxia xiaoshuo* (martial arts fiction) which is a unique genre of Chinese literature. These researches, as well as other studies from similar perspectives, stress more on the cultural connotations hard to translate and the strategies used to ameliorate the untranslatability of Chinese literature. But it might also be intriguing to discuss the possibility of preserving such untranslatability in Chinese literature, especially when the monolingual understanding of world literature is meant to be eliminated.

### 1. Liberty of the Source Texts

The right to untranslatability, as is interpreted in this article, refers to the liberty of Chinese literature and other non-English literature to choose what to be (un)translated and the way of translation such as strategies employed to render a text into English. Since the global literary system seems to be Anglocentric, it is essential to first have a discussion about whether Chinese literature is now enjoying the right to untranslatability. Back in the middle of the twentieth century, non-western textual traditions made their first appearance during the decolonization era. However, such engagement of non-English literature has been made through the “philological Orientalism” which is incorporated “in a genealogy of cultural power that current theorizations hide [partially] from view (Mufti 2010: 459; 461)”. The world literary system, although seemingly diversified, is in essence still operated in a monolingual way. Such point of view can be fortified through the study of the English translations of Chinese literature. To some extent, the hegemony of English literature is reflected in the selection of the Chinese texts. Instead of being decided by Chinese authors or translators, Chinese literature’s right to be (un)translated seems to be often in the hand of western sinologists or the market of English literature. “Many Chinese writers claim that what gets translated into English are not the most representative works, but the works most accessible to the understanding of Western readers (Balcom 2008: 19)”.

If one looks up the archives of English literary reviews such as *Times Literary Supplement*, it is easy to conclude that the Chinese works translated into English since 1949 can be divided into the following categories, namely ancient Chinese classics, novels concerning the turmoil of revolution and few contemporary ones written by Chinese authors recognized by the western academia. Contemporary Chinese literature with less ideological concerns or written by less-known authors seem to be ignored to a large extent. Some might argue that such phenomenon results from the fact that there are no excellent literary works from China in the modern times. This can be partly confirmed by the negative comments on contemporary Chinese literature back in the 1950s to 1970s. For instance, in the --1955 volume of *TLS*, the literary pieces published in *Chinese Literature*, an influential literary periodical of China, were criticized as “deadly dull”<sup>1</sup>. To some extent, the deficiency of contemporary Chinese literature in the English literary domain could be ascribed to the lack of Chinese masterpieces during that historical period. However, the untranslatability of Chinese literature as was mirrored in such deficiency was also the deliberate choice of the English-speaking countries in consideration of both market demand and ideological struggle. Such conclusion was drawn because the situation of contemporary Chinese literature in western countries did not change in the following decades even when Chinese literature reached its peak in the 1980s.

During this prime time of Chinese literature, Foreign Language Press of China published “Panda books” that compiled the English versions of the qualified Chinese literature selected from all historical periods. Nevertheless, this book series failed to arouse the interest of the western audience. The readers had no interest in the “dull” life of China, but were fascinated more by “the many bestselling memoirs and real-life horror stories that have come out of post-Mao China” such as *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986) by Zheng Nian which records the author’s personal experiences during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The “Panda books”, with the intention to imitate the “Penguin books”, were “more like introductions to university texts and school readers” (Kneissl 2007: 204). Yet even in the academic context, Chinese authors and translators still failed

to enjoy the right to decide what to be (un)translated. Ancient Chinese literature seemed to be more popular than the contemporary pieces in Sinological studies. *The Golden Casket* (1965), a collection of traditional short stories from ancient China chosen by sinologists, was published in English in the 1960s despite the fact that it might not be “academic” enough since the stories are “weak in characterization and realistic detail...[and] poorly constructed”. Obviously, Chinese intellectuals tried to select texts according to Chinese aesthetics, but the right to untranslatability was still seized by the Anglocentric literary system. Chinese authors were not influenced by such trend, but “surely it affect[ed] what gets translated and published” (Kinkley 2002: 275) because Chinese translators then had to render ancient Chinese classics “to attract foreign readers to have a look at contemporary Chinese literature” (Ni 2012: 25)<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays, Chinese literature is still struggling for such right. Howard Goldblatt, an American sinologist that dedicates to the translation of contemporary Chinese literature, used to say that he has a standard for translation, i.e. to translate only the literature that is able to be published in the western countries<sup>3</sup>. Although his excellent translation is believed to have helped the Chinese author Mo Yan win the Nobel Prize, it is still difficult for him to find a place in the western market for other contemporary Chinese writers such as Liang Xiaosheng.

## 2. The Invisible Source Language

The loss of the right to untranslatability of Chinese literature is also reflected in the role Chinese language plays in the process of translation. There seems to be a strange phenomenon that English-speaking translators who know nothing about Chinese language can carry out the work of rendering Chinese literature. *The Golden Casket*, for instance, was translated into English from not the original Chinese text, but the German version. Such means of translating Chinese literature is “a roundabout way...that has been tried before and has yet to be thoroughly successful”<sup>4</sup>. With the absence of the original text, the English version of this book fails to follow the concise style of ancient Chinese short stories. Its verbosity can be discerned in the following translation of the story “Li Wa Zhuan (Story of a Singsong Girl)” written by Bai Xingjian of the Tang Dynasty (618–907A.D.).

ST:

生忽见之，不觉停骖久之，徘徊不能去。

TT1:

Catching sight of her so unexpectedly, the young man involuntarily reined in his horse and for some time stood rooted to the spot as if under a spell. Then he rode up and down without being able to summon the strength of purpose to continue on his way.

(by Christopher Levenson)

TT2:

When he saw her, the young man unconsciously reined in his horse and hesitated, unable to tear himself away.

(by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang)<sup>5</sup>

The original sentence only contains fifteen Chinese characters, while Levenson’s translation is long-winded. Compared with the Yangs’ translation which is more accurate, it is also apparent that Levenson’s version deviates from the source text. The most obvious mistakes lie in the two underlined phrases which have never appeared in the Chinese text. The absence of source language in the translation of Chinese literature was a common

phenomenon back in the 1960s because “only a handful of people will be able to enjoy [Chinese literature] in the original” although there was “the mushrooming of Chinese departments in universities.” It was then natural for the western literary circle to witness the birth of *Cathay* (1915), a collection of classical Chinese poetry rewritten in English by Ezra Pound, the translator again being utterly ignorant of Chinese language.

T. S. Eliot’s appraised, in the 1928 introduction to *Selected Poems*, that Ezra Pound was “the inventor of Chinese poetry”. Such comment was literally true because the poems in *Cathay* were “translated” on the basis of Ernest Fenollosa’s notes on the classical Chinese poetry. Intriguingly, Fenollosa knew perhaps only little about Chinese language and thus studied the poems with Japanese poets and scholars who used in teaching the method of *kundoku*. The word means reading the Chinese characters using Japanese pronunciations which allows those who lack the knowledge of Chinese language to study Chinese poetry. Fenollosa’s notes on Chinese poems only encompassed, consequently, the original Chinese text, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters and the English meaning of each character. In other words, Chinese language was almost entirely excluded in the whole process of creating *Cathay*. Predictably, *Cathay* was largely influenced by Japanese and holds little fidelity to the original Chinese poetry. In the translation of the following poem “Seeing Meng Haoran off at Yellow Crane Tower” by the Tang poet Li Bai, it is noteworthy that Pound did a literal translation. The term “smoke-flower”, for instance, is the word-to-word translation of the two Chinese characters “烟 (smoke)” and “花 (flower)” while the connotative meaning of the Chinese phrase “烟花” should be the beautiful scenery in spring. Moreover, the words “Ko-jin” and “Ko-kaku-ro” obviously have Japanese origin, resulting from the *kundoku* teaching method. Pound also abandoned Chinese poetry’s convention of using sentences of even numbers.

ST:

故人西辞黄鹤楼，烟花三月下扬州。

孤帆远影碧空尽，唯见长江天际流。

TT1:

Ko-Jin goes west from Ko-kaku-ro,  
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.  
His lone sail blots the far sky.  
And now I see only the river,  
The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

(translated by Ezra Pound)

TT2:

My friend has left the west where towers Yellow Crane,  
For River Town while willow-down and flowers reign.  
His lessening sail is lost in the boundless azure sky,  
Where I see but the endless River rolling by.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong, a famed Chinese translator)

From the above examples, it can be indicated that not only does Chinese literature fail to decide what to be (un)translated into English, it also encounters difficulty in using Chinese as the source language in the process of translation which reflects from another perspective that Chinese literature has been deprived of its right to untranslatability. Some might say that such way of translation helps Chinese literature circulate internationally. For example, although *The Golden Casket* is inadequate as for its translation, it has introduced for the

first time some ancient Chinese short stories never rendered into English. However, one must be wary of whether the absence of the source language in translation is the expedient to integrate non-English works into the global literary system or a means of strengthening the monolingual hegemony of world literature.

### 3. Recapture of the Right to Untranslatability

It is apparent that the right to untranslatability as for Chinese literature is still grasped by the Anglocentric literary circle. It is then worth considering whether there is possibility for Chinese literature to get its right back and put into practice such untranslatability at its own will in the Anglophone literary milieu. It seems to be a simple task: to resist translating the literary works into English or to select the works based on the indigenous aesthetics and translate them properly into English other than localizing entirely the untranslatable elements. But in effect, the situation may be more complicated. The former idea seems to be a drastic way of rejecting the Anglocentric understanding of world literature and is consequently advocated by some authors who support strongly non-English literature. The Welsh poet Twm Morus, for example, has refused to have his works translated into English in order to be “in solidarity with a beleaguered culture”<sup>6</sup>. Similar point of view is adopted in terms of the translation of African languages into English. Such translation is regarded by some scholars as “a form of containment” or as, in a metaphorical way, a “colony” (Coetzee 2013: 383-4). Translation can be, as is believed by Niranjana (1992: 2), “a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism”. It is hence deemed as a resort to “marginalize the original utterance or text” and consequently “serves to extend and confirm monolingual privilege” (Coetzee 2013: 383; 388). Thus, it seems necessary to oppose such translation with the purpose to “destabilize the hegemony of English” (ibid.: 383). But such refusal, if interpreted from another perspective, can be regarded as a kind of silence. Instead of resisting the current inequality in world literature, such refusal is actually handing over the right to untranslatability of non-English literature to the Anglophone groups, being “an inadvertent running-dog for the Anglocentric narrative”<sup>7</sup>.

The latter idea of choosing literature for English translation on the basis of the aesthetics of the source language-culture may sound familiar. This was exactly what the “Panda books” did and the result of such effort is clearly mentioned in the previous discussion. Although there might be difficulties from both linguistic and cultural aspects, the translation of Chinese literature is not a job that cannot be completed. However, it will be pointless to do so if no one has the interest to read the rendered Chinese works. To include Chinese literature in the world literary domain means more than a self-complacent monodrama with translation employed as the main “playwright”. According to some existing examples of translating Chinese literature into English, even for those works that taking into consideration both Chinese literary aesthetics and western standards, it is still grueling for them to fully establish themselves in the Anglocentric system of world literature. The works of Mo Yan, said Howard Goldblatt, attracted the attention of the English readers only within the first three months after the author acquired the Nobel Prize for literature<sup>8</sup>. Professor Goldblatt is an experienced translator of contemporary Chinese literature, and therefore it can be inferred that he knows well the needs of both the Chinese and English sides. However, the translated Chinese works only enjoyed a transient success in the English-speaking countries.

*The Three Body Problem* trilogy which has been awarded the Hugo Prize in 2015, is another “popular” Chinese literature in the West in recent years. It has faced a situation similar to Mo Yan’s works. Although this sci-fi series received positive comments from icons in non-literary areas such as Cameron who was “stunned and blown-away” by the novels and Obama who “ended up in really liking [the story]”, it was undeniable that the trilogy was more popular in countries like Japan than in the western countries.<sup>9</sup> Liu Cixin, the author of this sci-fi trilogy, is the successor of the literary aesthetics of Arthur C. Clarke, the well-renowned British sci-fi writer. Liu said that all his works are the poor imitation of Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Science fiction is a literary genre that roots deeply in western popular culture which makes it easier for *The Three Body Problem* to find a place in the English market than other canonized Chinese literature. Although Liu’s trilogy starts with the Great Cultural Revolution which is of Chinese flavor, most of its designs as for characters and plots can be integrated in the English sci-fi system. If such novel which is connected closely to English literature is still under strain in the domain of world literature, it will no doubt be difficult for other Chinese fictions to recapture the right of untranslatability. *Qin Qiang* (Qin Opera), for example, is a representative novel written by Jia Pingwa, a famous author in China. The novel is about a unique kind of local Chinese opera and the profound changes in the rural area during the reform and opening-up period of China. It is now deemed as a contemporary classic in China. His translator Howard Goldblatt, nevertheless, suspected whether this book would have readers in the English world. Chinese literature with high quality but low market expectation is experiencing difficulty even in finding a publisher in the West, let alone enjoy the right of untranslatability in the Anglocentric literary system.

Likewise, strategies such as foreignization can certainly be adopted as for the linguistic and cultural parts which are untranslatable in the Chinese texts. However, such attempt may only be regarded as a means of adding an exotic touch to the target text because the English-speaking readers perhaps cannot be bothered to dig up what is buried under the untranslatability, especially when footnotes are not commonly applied in English literature. Regrettably, “there has never been a Chinese [literary] blockbuster in an overseas market (Kinkley 2002: 274)”. For a long time, “the majority of translations of [Chinese] fiction...[has been] done by sinologists for other sinologists” (Kneissl 2007: 205). Such phenomenon seems to echo the above argument that only those experts (usually sinologists) who are interested in China and its culture will have a positive attitude towards the untranslatability of Chinese literature. *The Golden Casket*, Pound’s *Cathay* and Mo Yan’s translated works, for example, all raised more attention in the English academic circle than in the western public. To take back the right to untranslatability may sound easy, but it is in effect an arduous and complex task for Chinese literature. It then becomes significant for those who are concerned with the international development of Chinese literature to find out the reasons behind this plight in order to fight for equality in the Anglocentric literary system.

#### 4. Hospitality as the Foundation

The rationale behind such difficulty may lie in the fact that the English literary circle lacks the foundation for accepting Chinese language-culture. Translation, as an activity including both linguistic and cultural transfer, can be deemed as an important way of spreading foreign cultures. By adapting and adding the “foreign import” to the

“indigenous culture”, traditions of the recipient can be changed which, from time to time, is even reckoned as a “driving-force of history” (Eisenberg 2005: 99-100). Nevertheless, such acculturation through translation will be affected by factors such as the willingness of the target audience to accept the source language-culture. From the previous discussion, it can be indicated that the global literary system with an Anglocentric narrative is not that hospitable to non-English literature. Difficulty in creating the diversity of world literature is then inevitable because the success of such aspiration not only calls for the participation of the source language-culture, but also requires the efforts of the target language-culture. Chinese *wuxia xiaoshuo* (martial arts fiction), contains possibly more untranslatable elements than other Chinese literary genres because of its strong Chinese characteristics. However, websites such as “Wuxiaworld” has been established by the foreign fans of this Chinese genre. Despite the challenges in translation, the aficionados have translated voluntarily and successfully some *wuxia* fictions. It proves that the right to untranslatability can be enjoyed when readers from the recipient countries are ready to welcome the source language-culture. Another attestation of such argument is related to the translation of Buddhist sutras in ancient China.

Back in 68 A.D., White Horse Temple was established by the feudal government of the Eastern Han as the first Buddhist temple in China. Since then, Buddhism has played a pivotal role in the spiritual life of Chinese people. The admiration of Buddhism reached its peak in the Six Dynasties (222–589A.D.) and the Tang Dynasty (816–907A.D.). The well-known Chinese monk and translator Xuanzang (602–664A.D.) travelled to India in the seventh century, bringing back plentiful Buddhist classics which were then translated into Chinese by him and his disciples. The translation of Buddhist sutras into Chinese in ancient times, just like the translation of Chinese literature into English at present, has generated different opinions as for the translation strategies. Yancong (557–610A.D.) argues that the Sanskrit text should be read as it is without being translated into Chinese, while Xuanzang refutes such viewpoint by putting forward the translation theory of “the five untranslatable” (Fu 2012: 61). Under Xuanzang’s standards, transliteration was used for some Sanskrit terms even if they could be translated literally into Chinese. For instance, *Prajñā* was translated as “*bō rě*” instead of “*zhìhuì* (wisdom)” in Chinese to show respect for Buddhism<sup>10</sup>. Although such transliteration makes no sense to Chinese readers, it was appreciated in ancient China and remains alive nowadays amongst the Chinese people who believes in Buddhism. Terms translated liberally into Chinese were also welcomed, although Chinese people were unacquainted with such Buddhist concepts. Due to their similarities to native Chinese phrases, such terms have been used more widely in China since their creation. For instance, *zhízhúo* (Upādāna) and *fāngbiàn* (upāya)<sup>11</sup> are now applied frequently in Chinese people’s daily life.

With the hospitable attitude towards Buddhism, the influence of this new philosophical school on China has been immense; Buddhist notions have been applied broadly in Chinese literature, music, painting and so on (Yan 2020). Compared with the acceptance of the untranslatability of Buddhist sutras in ancient China, the Anglocentric narrative in world literature shows little hospitality to non-English works such as Chinese literature. It is on account of such inhospitality of the global literary system at present that disempowers Chinese literature to take back the right to untranslatability. Hence, the calling for the participation of the English literary circle in promoting Chinese literature should be paid more attention to since it is the basis for enriching the diversity of world literature which is currently monolingual.

## 5. Conclusion

The language and culture of the minority have attracted increasing attention throughout the world. Many countries have formulated anti-discrimination policies for those languages and are making efforts in the translation field to popularize their literary works. *The EmLit Project: European Minority Literatures in Translation* (2003), for instance, compiles the translated works from nineteen minority languages in Europe. The population base using Chinese is larger than many languages and hence there may be a chance for Chinese literature to be neglected when talking about protecting the diversity of world literature. But to some extent, Chinese literature can also be considered as a kind of “minority”, taking into consideration the status quo of its translations within the somewhat Anglocentric structure of world literature. This is a problem encountered not only by Chinese literature, but also by other non-English literature. According to the discussions in this article, it can be inferred that the global literary system is currently not that hospitable to literary works written in other languages. The right to untranslatability, as a means of resisting the Anglocentric literary milieu, is in fact not in the hand of Chinese literature as well as its non-English companions. In spite of all the efforts, Chinese literature is still struggling for the right to decide what to be (un)translated and the way of translation in the Anglocentric literary circle. Such difficulty may derive from the fact that the English-speaking readers are still reluctant to embrace non-English language-culture. Without such basis in the monolingual literary field, it will be strenuous for non-English literature to introduce itself to English readers. Hence, the effort from the Anglophone side should also be called for because the enrichment of the heterogeneous world literature is a task that should not be accomplished only by non-English literature, but also by the target readers from the English-speaking environment. Although it is perhaps difficult for Chinese literature to recapture the right to untranslatability at present, it should be emphasized that Chinese literature needs not refuse to be translated into English. It may sound plausible for non-English literature to remain untranslated because even the best translation of such literary texts will inevitably engender linguistic and cultural loss. However, the refusal of translation can be misunderstood as a sort of silence. Instead of fighting against the Anglocentric way of understanding world literature, the absence of such literary works in the English form gives up the right to untranslatability. Chinese literature and other non-English literature which is facing the similar situation should be insistent on choosing and translating works based on the indigenous standards. After all, the emphasis on the differences between the traditions of English literature and the assorted literary aesthetics as is embodied in non-English literature is the very foundation for mutual understanding.



## Notes

- \* *Hanyu Pinyin* system of Chinese transcription is used in this article where appropriate; the surname of the Chinese authors, translators and scholars is placed before the given name to conform to the Chinese tradition.
- <sup>1</sup> From *The Times Literary Supplement*, Issue 2774, April 1955, p.35.
- <sup>2</sup> Translated from Chinese into English by the author of this article. For the original Chinese text, please refer to Ni, Xiuhua. "A Survey of English Translations of the 'Seventeen-year Chinese Literature' by Foreign Languages Publishing House.", *Chinese Translators Journal*, no.5, 2012, p.25.
- <sup>3</sup> "Howard Goldblatt: Mo Yan does not speak foreign languages, which is not good for publicity." *The Beijing News*, 15 Oct. 2013, [http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2013-10/15/content\\_471083.htm?div=-1](http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2013-10/15/content_471083.htm?div=-1)
- <sup>4</sup> From *The Times Literary Supplement*, Issue 3350, May 1966, p.5.
- <sup>5</sup> "Li Wa Zhuan (Story of a Singsong Girl)", in Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. *Tang Dynasty Stories*. Foreign Languages Press, 1986, p.71.
- <sup>6</sup> "Against the Current: An Interview with Gwen Davies." *PEN Transmissions*, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://pentransmissions.com/2019/08/27/against-the-current-an-interview-with-gwen-davies/>
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> "When will Chinese writers get the Nobel Prize again." *people.cn*, 15 Oct. 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1015/c70731-23204643.html>
- <sup>9</sup> "Economic adviser reflects on 8 years of serving Obama." MSNBC, 15 Jan. 2017, <https://www.msnbc.com/weekends-with-alex-witt/watch/economic-adviser-reflects-on-8-years-of-serving-obama-855354947575>; see also "James Cameron Dialogue Liu Cixin: Why not take a three-body?" YouTube, uploaded by leon copper, 18 Feb. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaFWxHRQ8jk>
- <sup>10</sup> In Chinese, the words should be written as "般若" and "智慧".
- <sup>11</sup> In Chinese, the words should be written as "执著" and "方便".

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