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Article:

Decoding and Canonization through Translation:
The Reception of *Decoded* in the English-Speaking World

Binhua Wang, University of Leeds
b.h.w.wang@leeds.ac.uk
Yifeng Sun, University of Macau
sunyf@um.edu.mo

Abstract: The translated English version of Mai Jia's *Decoded* published by the Penguin Group made the author the fifth Chinese contemporary writer included in "Penguin Classics". After the publication of its English translation, the novel has been credited as one of the best 10 novels among "Best Books of the Year 2014" by *The Economist* and also as one of "the 20 best spy novels of all time" by *The Telegraph*. The novel has been published in over 30 other languages, which makes it an international best-seller and a hard-won success for contemporary Chinese writing. The canonization of *Decoded* through translation is a unique and rare phenomenon that merits further investigation. This article begins with an exploration of the major reasons for its canonization in the English-speaking world by drawing upon and responding to relevant book reviews. It intends to reveal several discrepancies in the perceptions of the original Chinese version and the translated English version. It also purports to examine what really happened in translation with a critical textual analysis of the English and the original Chinese versions, through which some theoretical issues in literary translation are revisited and discussed.

Key words: Mai Jia's novel *Decoded*; translated English version; canonization; critical textual analysis; theoretical issues in literary translation

1. Introduction: The Chinese novel *Decoded* and its canonization through translation

Decoded (解密) is the debut novel of contemporary Chinese writer Mai Jia (麦家)[1]. After the publication of *Decoded* in Chinese in 2002, more novels have been published by him, including *In the Dark* (暗算, 2003), *The Message* (风声, 2007), *Whispers on the Wind* (风语, 2010) and *Knifepoint* (刀尖, 2011), some of which have been adapted into TV series that have enjoyed high popularity in China. Mai Jia has won several Chinese literary awards, including the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize (茅盾文学奖) in 2008.

Decoded tells the story of Rong Jinzhen, an orphaned and cursed mathematical genius

who is recruited to work as a cryptographer for the Chinese government. Born illegitimately into the noble Rong family, Jinzhen is adopted by distant relatives and later studies mathematics at an unnamed university in China, where he is soon recognized for his mathematical talent. Jinzhen is taken under the wing of a visiting professor, Jan Liseiwicz, who encourages him to study artificial intelligence, but he is soon approached by a government agent looking for the brightest students for Unit 701, a top-secret intelligence agency with the mission of codebreaking and counterespionage. Working in Unit 701 as a cryptographer, Jinzhen cracks the notoriously difficult Purple Code used by an "enemy country", and then becomes obsessed with trying to crack the even more difficult Black Code. During the process of codebreaking he fights several battles of wit against his former teacher and mentor, Jan Liseiwicz, who has left China working for an "enemy country". Along with the lengthy and nerve-racking process of codebreaking is existential loneliness and finally madness Jinzhen suffers after his notebook is stolen.

Decoded was translated into English by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne and published by Allen Lane (an imprint of the Penguin Group) in the UK and by FSG (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) in the US in March 2014 and then included in the "Penguin Classics" in May 2015. This made Mai Jia the fifth Chinese contemporary writer included in the "Penguin Classics" after the illustrious names of CHANG Eileen, LAO She, LU Xun and QIAN Zhongshu, and also the first Chinese author published by FSG, which is a publishing group that boasts publication of twenty-one Nobel Prize winners such as T.S. Eliot and Pablo Neruda. The fact that the novel was selected by the Penguin Group might to an appreciable extent prepare its favorable reception in the Anglophone world. However, it is more accurate to say that, as will be illustrated below, the parallel canonization of the English translation of *Decoded* is largely attributable to the commendable efforts of the translators.

After the publication of its translated English version, the novel has been credited by *The Economist* as one of the best 10 novels among "Best Books of the Year 2014"[2] and crowned as one of "the 20 best spy novels of all time" by *The Telegraph*[3]. In addition, it has been translated into over 30 other languages such as Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian and Arabic, which has made it an international best-seller. Until now over one million copies have been sold all over the world, which is a hard-won success for contemporary Chinese writing. The meteoric stardom of Mai Jia and his novel *Decoded* in the Anglophone world have played an important role in the canonization of the novel.

The success of *Decoded* outside China is unusual, though in recent years the Chinese government has exerted great efforts in promoting Chinese literature in the world. In May 2015, for example, a number of Chinese publishing giants and copyright companies sent a delegation of up to 500 publishing professionals to the BookExpo America, in which thousands of books were put on display. Similarly, large-scale delegations also visited the Frankfurt and London book fairs, in which lavish displays

were organized for Chinese books. However, despite such government-sponsored efforts, Chinese literature receives a rather lukewarm reception on the international book market most of the time and there is general anxiety among Chinese writers, literary critics and cultural officials over the reception of contemporary Chinese literature overseas. It seems that international readers are more interested in Chinese books on Kungfu, Chinese art, history and traditional Chinese culture than contemporary Chinese literature. In addition, translation still remains a major hurdle for Chinese literature going global. Many prominent Chinese writers remain untranslated. For example, in 2015 only 44 Chinese books of literature were published in English, according to a list compiled by translators and editors Nicky Harman and Helen Wang[4]. Furthermore, many of these books are either badly translated or published only in a small number of copies, which suggests that a lack of quality translation is holding Chinese literature back from carving a niche in the global literary landscape. There are two separate issues here: on the one hand, there is no doubt that poor translations are to blame for mediocre reception. On the other, due to financial constraints, some excellent translations are published only in small editions before their potential marketability is fully demonstrated. Against this background, the international acclaim of the translated English version of *Decoded* is a unique and rare phenomenon in contemporary Chinese literature "going abroad" that merits academic research.

Drawing upon the book reviews of *Decoded* published in influential magazines and newspapers in the UK and the US, this article intends to explore the reasons for the "canonization" of the novel in the English-speaking world. However, during the process several discrepancies are identified in the perceptions by critics and readers of the original Chinese version and the translated English version. A critical textual analysis of the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) will be made to examine how the novel was translated into English. By doing so, several theoretical issues in literary translation will be revisited and discussed.

Previous studies of translation of contemporary Chinese literature are mainly survey analyses of translation and publication activities based on data collected through questionnaires among target readers about reception of the translated works[5]. While reception studies are useful to some extent in showing the roles of the translator and the publisher, such macro-analyses fail to illuminate sufficiently what really happened in translation. The current study will combine the strengths of both reception studies and textual analysis. The reception studies will be based on data from book reviews rather than from questionnaire surveys among target readers, which will make this investigation different from previous studies. It will also be different from previous studies in that its focus will be on critical textual analysis of ST and TT.

2. Reasons for the canonization of *Decoded* in the English-speaking world in relation to the impact of book reviews

After the publication of the translated English version in 2014, *Decoded* has received unanimous plaudits from literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Perry Link, a famous sinologist and author of several books on China, comments that the novel "truly is a page turner (...) gripping plot, otherworldly aura and flamboyant detail."[6] *The Economist* applauds its appearance as "finally, a great Chinese novel (...). It grips from the first page. (...) It is an absolute joy to read."[7] Although the novel's literary merits are no doubt unquestionable, its translation that has won critical acclaim is to no lesser extent the result of the ingenious and masterful approach adopted by the translators. While it is not always possible to separate the original content and its translation in terms of its literary value, whether the latter has done sufficient justice to the former is something that has to be taken into account when analyzing the quality of translation.

As seen from the book reviews of the translated English version, the reasons for the canonization of the novel in the English-speaking world can be summarized in the following three aspects:

First, the original work of *Decoded* is featured with many elements that successfully integrate the East and the West and combine the classic with the popular, which are evident in the novel's intriguing theme and mysterious plot, its multi-perspective narrative, rich Chinese cultural characteristics and indefinable resemblance to genre novels in the West.

With regard to its theme and plot, the novel presents not only a spy thriller of code-breaking, but also the deciphering of human nature, which suggests a universal appeal and a significant impact that transcends cultural boundaries and is therefore easily accepted by the target reader. As recommended by Penguin Books the publisher on the inside cover of the book, "brilliantly combining the mystery and tension of spy thriller with the psychological nuance of an intimate character study and the magical qualities of a Chinese fable, *Decoded* discovers in cryptography the key to the human heart."[8] Didi Kirsten Tatlow, a journalist, writes in *The New York Times*:[9]

> Usually I find the trouble with detective and spy fiction is that the spirit is too mathematical, there's no human character or feelings. With Mai Jia's works there's a mathematical spirit, but also human character and feelings.

If the "mathematical spirit" associated with a genius is a stereotyping of brilliant mathematicians, the humanistic touch permeating the book no doubt resonates with the target reader. As for its magnetic power, Frances Wood, an English librarian, sinologue and historian known for her writings on Chinese history, applauds several of its merits:[10]

> *Decoded* is a subtle and complex exploration of cryptography, politics, dreams and their significance. (...) There is much of interest in this book, from the strange, superstitious beginning to the gradual decline of the Rong family as the twentieth

century progresses. (...) But, in the end, it is the complexity of the characters that is *Decoded*'s enduring pleasure.

Other major British and American newspapers and magazines also bestow lavish praises. David Evans, a popular literary critic, says in *Financial Times* that he is impressed by the novel in presenting "a mix of spy thriller, historical saga, and mathematical puzzle that somehow coheres into a powerful whole."[11] According to Isabel Hilton, a journalist and editor of *The Guardian*, the novel is "deft in its exploration of the world of mathematics and of cryptography."[12] As for its narrative mode, David Der-Wei Wang, Edward C. Henderson Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University, comments in his interview by *The New York Times* that Mai Jia's style is a mixture of "revolutionary historical romance, spy fiction perhaps inspired by Western sources, and the psychological thriller,"[13] which points to its resemblance to the genre of spy fiction and espionage novels in the West. Another book review in *The New Yorker* points out that "Mai plays adroitly with literary genre and crafts a story of Borgesian subtlety and complexity."[14] Tash Aw, a novelist based in the UK, comments in his review in *The Telegraph* that "there is a determination to unsettle the reader; an uneasiness about settling on one focused point of view. (…) (*Decoded*'s) deviations take the novel out of the realms of the hard-edged thriller into somewhere more surreal and unexpected."[15]

The novel's rich Chinese cultural connotations add an exotic flavor that is appealing to Western readers, which includes oriental mysticism, e.g. the dream-decoding technique and the pear blossom drink emblematic of traditional Chinese culture, and the revolutionary heroism and patriotism permeating the orthodox history of modern China.

The second major reason for its canonization in the English-speaking world is the successful marketing by the publisher, who takes advantage of the ready availability of a popular genre of fiction, namely spy thriller in the target culture, through which the target audience can easily identify with the translation from a foreign language and culture. The marketing positioning of the translation is unequivocal on its book cover with two catchy phrases above and below the title of the novel: "China's bestselling espionage novelist" and "China's answer to John le Carré" (who is well-known as one of the most popular espionage novelists in the English-speaking world). By mentioning le Carré, Mai Jia is put in good company here. The underlying subtext is unambiguous: like le Carré, who is far more than a famous best-selling novelist and whose literary reputation is firmly based on serious fiction writing, Mai Jia should also be taken seriously as an ingenious writer in his own right, who also happens to write best-sellers. This is resoundingly echoed and expanded in many of the favorable reviews of the English translation of *Decoded*.

The last major reason for its near unanimous praise in the Anglophone world should be attributed to none other than translation. As commented by some book reviews in *The Guardian*, *The Economist* and *The Independent*: "Credit is due to the translator, Olivia

Milburn, whose elegant prose serves the author and the reader well."[16] The novel is "translated into English with great verve and fluency."[17] "Olivia Milburn's translation is superb example of how to find apt English equivalents (...) without losing the flavor of the original Mandarin."[18] "*Decoded* is compelling for its tightly wrought aphorisms, elegantly turned in Olivia Milburn's translation."[19]

3. Discrepancies between perceptions of the original Chinese version and the translated English version

It is also interesting to note that several discrepancies stand out when we compare the critics' and readers' perceptions of the translated English version with those of the original Chinese version and also with the author's own perception of *Decoded*. First, it seems that the original version and the translated version enjoy different levels of success and popularity. In contrast with the success of the translated English version, the original Chinese version of *Decoded* experienced a rather difficult birth before its publication in 2002 by the China Youth Publishing House, which is hardly known as a publisher in literature. It took Mai Jia the author 11 years to write and revise the work but it was rejected 17 times before it was finally accepted for publication. Given the huge success enjoyed by the novel now, it seems somewhat incredulous to look back at the cold-shouldering of the novel in China when the author was trying to find a publisher. This is due to a combination of discrete factors. To start with, the Chinese publishers were overcautious. One of them "thought the story too fake to attract interest" and another one "felt it was too real and sensitive, and could cause trouble for the publisher."[20] There were other concerns as well. After its publication in 2002, *Decoded* was not highly regarded in the literary circle and there was doubt about whether it should be categorized as serious literature or genre literature. The perception that Mai Jia was no more than an average writer had not changed much until he won the 7th Mao Dun Literature Prize, which finally earned him a place among mainstream writers in China[21]. This is in sharp contrast with the high prestige that is accorded to the translated English version of *Decoded* in the "Penguin Classics" series, which made Mai Jia the fourth ever Chinese writer included in the series after the great names of Chinese literature – CHANG Eileen, LAO She, LU Xun and QIAN Zhongshu.

Second, there are different perceptions of the genre of the novel. In the publication process of the translated version of *Decoded*, the book was promoted as a genre novel or spy thriller. As is evidenced by the presentation on the back cover of the translated English version, Mai Jia is introduced as "the forerunner of the Chinese espionage fiction and has created a unique genre that combines spy craft, codebreaking, crime, human drama, historical fiction and metafiction."[22] The novel is also classified as a "spy thriller" by most of the reviewers[23]. And the author is even labelled as the "Chinese Dan Brown" by a book review in *The New Republic*[24]. By contrast, Mai Jia himself "deems his categorization as a writer of spy thrillers 'unfair' and says his protagonist, Rong, is more akin to British World War II codebreaker Alan Turing than James Bond, someone who 'pays the ultimate price' out of fidelity to his country."[25]

Though the success and popularity of the English version of *Decoded* can be attributed much to the publisher's marketing strategy in promoting the novel as genre spy fiction, it is noteworthy that Mai Jia himself does not agree to such a categorization. Critics of contemporary Chinese literature in China also regard the novel as serious literature rather than popular genre fiction of espionage. As summarized by Bai Ye,[26] a Chinese literary critic, the novel has received high acclaim in the art of novel writing, as is evident in both the construction and narration of the story. In a suspenseful narrative, the novelist writes not only about genius and wits, but also about competition among geniuses; he depicts both character tragedy and fate tragedy. In terms of content, the novel contains rich cultural information of both the East and West and indicates the spirituality and magic hidden in the depths of human nature. The storyline about the mathematics genius who is dedicated to the nation's grand cause shows how one's personal fate is interwoven with that of the nation, how technological advances constrain humanity and how the release of wisdom may countermeasure civilization.

All these constitute an amazing narrative full of paradoxes, which not only makes the story intriguing and thought-provoking but also provides a rich venue for multiple interpretation. Moreover, they add to the so-called universal appeal of the novel in the Anglophone literary system. More importantly and specifically, the daunting complexity is in no way diluted in translation. On the contrary, in the English version, the psychological trauma of cryptography is accurately captured, which performs a pivotal function in the narrative structure of the novel. The breathless suspense and thrilling intrigue underpinned by the subtle and complex intricacies in the source text are well preserved and reproduced by the translators, all of which point to the important role of translation in its canonization.

4. What happened in translation? A critical textual analysis of the translation

Does the translation of *Decoded* merit such positive reviews or is it overrated as summarized in the above section? We have conducted a critical textual analysis of the translation through parallel readings of the original Chinese version [27] and the translated English version[28], in which noticeable "shifts"[29] are annotated and they are categorized as follows in the sub-sections with sample passages cited and analyzed.

While the canonization of *Decoded* in the English-speaking world can be attributed first to the literary values of the original work, including its theme on transcendent universal values of humanity that are acceptable to global readers but integrated with local Chinese experience and its genre features conforming to Western literary conventions though not typical of Chinese literary tradition, there is no doubt that high-quality translation plays a crucial role in its canonization. Apart from adequate rendition of the theme, plot and the unique narrative structure of the Chinese novel, the translation is particularly successful in conveying the prose style and the rich Chinese cultural content in the original. With regard to the novel's prose, Mai Jia "modestly attributes

its elegance to the 'beautiful, classical style' of his translator, Olivia Milburn."[30] *The Independent* also comments, "Olivia Milburn's translation is a superb example of how to find apt English equivalents (...) without losing the flavor of the original Mandarin."[31]

Through a critical textual analysis of ST and TT, this section will analyze how the translators deal with two arguably typical challenges in translating Chinese literature, namely, how to register the prose style and how to convey the rich Chinese cultural content of the original that would be too Chinese and too foreign for the English-speaking readership.

4.1 Registering the prose style of the original in translation: Consideration of adequacy

In terms of prose style, the original Chinese version of the novel is abundant in four-character parallel structures typical of the Chinese language. This style of parallelism is rendered to the full with optimal prose force and in fluent English in the translation so that they are accessible to the English readership. Through close reading and textual analysis of the translation in Example Set 1, we can see how adequacy is achieved in registering the prose style of the original.

Example Set 1:
ST: 他就是这样的人，说话从来都是说完就完。**没有拉扯，没有过渡，没有客气，没有前言，没有后语**。(Mai Jia, 2002: 164)
[Pinyin romanization: tā jiù shì zhè yàng de rén, shuō huà cóng lái dōu shì shuō wán jiù wán. méi yǒu lā chě, méi yǒu guò dù, méi yǒu kè qì, méi yǒu qián yán, méi yǒu hòu yǔ.]
[Gloss: He is just this kind of person. When speaking he would just finish what he wants to say: no dragging; no transition; no courtesy remarks; no preface or postscript.]
TT: This was simply his customary manner. Once he had finished what he wanted to say, then he finished. **He didn't drag things out, he didn't switch topics, he wasn't polite; there was no preface, no postscript**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 201)
ST: 年复一年地，如今，他比容家任何人都熟悉这个大家族里的**枝枝节节**，过去现在，男人女人，明历暗史，兴衰荣枯，以及环环之间的**起承转换、瓜瓜葛葛**，无不在他的心底笔头。(Mai Jia, 2002: 18)
[Pinyin romanization: nián fù yī nián de, rú jīn, tā bǐ róng jiā rèn hé rén dōu shú xī zhè gè dà jiā zú lǐ de zhī zhī jiē jiē, guò qù xiàn zài, nán rén nǚ rén, míng lì àn shǐ, xìng shuāi róng kū, yǐ jí huán huán zhī jiān de qǐ chéng zhuǎn huàn, guā guā gě gě, wú bú zài tā de xīn dǐ bǐ tóu.]
[Gloss: As one year went after another, now he was more familiar than anyone with the branches of the big family – their past and present, the men and women, obvious history and hidden history, their ups and downs, as well as the transitions and connections among them – nothing was not in his mind and in his notes.]
TT: As the years went by, he came to know **the various different branches of the family better than anyone. He knew the history of the clan, the men and women, the main branches and the illegitimate offspring, which ones were flourishing and which had**

failed, who had gone where and done what: everything was sitting in his notes (Mai Jia, 2014: 25).

As shown in Example Set 1, the two examples are representative of the prose style of the novel, in which the four-character parallel structures unfold the narrative to the full, gradually intensifying the prose force, e.g., "没有拉扯，没有过渡，没有客气，没有前言，没有后语" (no dragging, no transition, no courtesy remarks, no preface, no postscript) in the first example. Due to big differences in linguistic structure between Chinese and English, in most cases it would be difficult to transfer the surface structure directly to English. In spite of the difficulty, the translation manages to render them into parallel structures with a similar effect as in the original. Also, the last part is a bold literal translation. In fact, it has nothing to do with "preface" or "postscript". It derives from a Chinese proverb 前言不搭后语 (to utter words that do not hang together), and if literally rendered, it would be "what was said earlier is not related to what followed". The translation "there was no preface, no postscript" preserves the original rhythm and force well.

In the second example, there are not only such four-character parallel structures as "枝枝节节，过去现在，男人女人，明历暗史，兴衰荣枯" (the stems and branches, the past and present, the men and women, the explicit and implicit history, the ups and downs) and "起承转换、瓜瓜葛葛" (the transitions and connections), the phrases also come with very rich implicature and nuances that allude to the complexity of the Rong's noble family. For example, "明历暗史" (explicit history and implicit history) implies that there is one illegitimate child in the family (i.e., Rong Jinzhen). Using the metaphor of family tree in English, the translation practically conveys all the nuanced parts. In this case, the translation deviates from the original in terms of formal structure; however, an uncannily dynamic equivalent effect is achieved.

4.2 Preserving the original Chinese cultural elements in translation: Consideration of adequacy

In translating Chinese culture-specific expressions, including some idioms, proverbs and historical quotations, the translators preserve the cultural elements in some cases instead of replacing them with idiomatic English phrases.

Example Set 2:
ST: 有点欲盖弥彰的意思。(Mai Jia, 2002: 98)
[Pinyin romanization: yǒu diǎn yù gài mí zhāng de yì sī.]
[Gloss: There is a sign of revealing what he tried to cover up.]
TT: In reality, **something that he tried to cover up has been glaringly revealed to everyone**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 120)
ST: "是伯乐，来相马的"。(Mai Jia, 2002: 99)
[Pinyin romanization: "shì bó lè, lái xiàng mǎ de".]
[Gloss: I am Bo Le (a horse dealer), here to judge the horse.]

ST: 'I am **a coper, looking for horses**.' (Mai Jia, 2014: 121)

TT: 矮子里选高个，将就。(Mai Jia, 2002: 102)

[Pinyin romanization: ǎi zǐ lǐ xuǎn gāo gè, jiāng jiù.]

[Gloss: Picking the taller from the short ones – making-do.]

…picking the tallest out of a group of dwarves. (Mai Jia, 2014: 125)

As shown in Example Set 2, the cultural elements in the Chinese idiom "欲盖弥彰" (revealing what one tries to cover up), the Chinese proverb "矮子里选高个" (picking the taller from the short ones) and the Chinese historical quotation "伯乐相马" (Bo Le the horse dealer judging the horse) are all preserved, which ensures adequate cross-cultural communication in translation. Though in the first example this seems on the surface to be akin to "over-translation" because "有点" (a bit) actually means "a bit" whereas in English it is translated into "glaringly", yet this is not only justifiable but also essential in fully bringing out the intended rhetoric of the original.

4.3 Rendering Chinese culture-specific expressions into fluent English expressions in translation: Consideration between adequacy and acceptability

However, in other cases where the Chinese culture-specific expressions are unique in the Chinese language and culture, the translators have chosen to render them into fluent and idiomatic English expressions, as shown in Example Set 3.

Example Set 3:

ST: 他**玩过**的女人要数以百计。(Mai Jia, 2002: 14)

[Pinyin romanization: tā wán guò de nǚ rén yào shù yǐ bǎi jì.]

[Gloss: The women that he played with can be counted to hundreds.]

TT: He had **seduced and abandoned** countless women. (Mai Jia, 2014: 15)

ST: 他的**来头**似乎很大。(Mai Jia, 2002: 99)

[Pinyin romanization: tā de lái tóu sì hū hěn dà.]

[Gloss: His background seems to be big.]

TT: They **seemed to be able to call on considerable resources**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 121)

ST: 我因为下午有课，只跟他**寒暄**几句…… (Mai Jia, 2002: 104)

[Pinyin romanization: wǒ yīn wéi xià wǔ yǒu kè, zhǐ gēn tā hán xuān jǐ jù …]

[Gloss: Because I had classes in the afternoon, I only exchanged with him a few words of courtesy.]

TT: I had a class that afternoon, so after **a few pleasantries**, I … (Mai Jia, 2002: 127)

ST: 一看就是**有身手**的人。(Mai Jia, 2002: 113)

[Pinyin romanization: yī kàn jiù shì yǒu shēn shǒu de rén.]

[Gloss: You could see instantly that they are people skilled in Kungfu.]

TT: You could tell at a glance that they had **had martial arts training**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 137)

ST: 说得**有鼻子有眼**的。(Mai Jia, 2002: 116)

[Pinyin romanization: shuō dé yǒu bí zǐ yǒu yǎn de.]

[Gloss: They described it vividly with every detail including nose and eyes.]
TT: They **made a good story of it**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 141)

As shown in Example Set 3, "玩过" (played with), "来头" (background), "寒暄" (courtesy), "有身手" (skilled) and "有鼻子有眼" (described vividly with every detail including nose and eyes) are all authentic Chinese culture-specific expressions. As the first example shows, if the sentence were translated into "he had played with countless women", the consequence would be not only that the meaning of the Chinese culture-specific expression "玩过" (played with) would not be rendered adequately but also that the meaning of the sentence would be too vague for English readers. To fulfil the task of intercultural communication in the translation, the translators must strike a balance between adequacy and acceptability with more consideration given to the latter. Therefore, the sentence is rendered as "he had seduced and abandoned countless women", in which "玩过" (played with) is explicitated adequately as "seduced and abandoned", which is idiomatic and fluent. Furthermore, all the sentences in Example Set 3 are translated contextually and thus also effectively in achieving both adequacy and acceptability.

4.4 Domesticating culture-specific metaphors and images in translation: Consideration between adequacy and acceptability

It is also observed that in the translation where there are Chinese culture-specific metaphors and images in the original, they are always substituted with corresponding metaphors and images in the target culture.

Example Set 4:
ST: 在**真人**不能屈尊亲临的情况之下，这几乎是唯一的出路。(Mai Jia, 2002: 3)
[Pinyin romanization: zài zhēn rén bú néng qū zūn qīn lín de qíng kuàng zhī xià, zhè jǐ hū shì wéi yī de chū lù.]
[Gloss: When the immortal won't come in person, it seems that this is the only way out.]
TT: If **Mohammed** won't go to the mountain, then the mountain will have to come to Mohammed. (Mai Jia, 2014: 4)
ST: 在开头几年，学堂有点**西洋镜**的感觉，凡是到该城池来的人，都忍不住要去学堂走走，看看，饱饱眼福，跟**逛窑子**一样的。(Mai Jia, 2002: 5)
[Pinyin romanization: zài kāi tóu jǐ nián, xué táng yǒu diǎn xī yáng jìng de gǎn jué, fán shì dào gāi chéng chí lái de rén, dōu rěn bú zhù yào qù xué táng zǒu zǒu, kàn kàn, bǎo bǎo yǎn fú, gēn guàng yáo zǐ yī yàng de.]
[Gloss: In the first few years, the academy was like a zoetrope. Anyone who came to the city could not help going for a look to feast their eyes just like a visit to brothels.]
TT: For the first few years of his existence, the academy was treated somewhat like a **peep show**. Anyone who had business taking them to the provincial capital would make time to visit the academy and have a look, to enjoy the spectacle. They behaved just as if they were taking a walk through a **red-light district**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 8)

ST: "……叫他鬼是有些埋冤了他，那么以后就喊他**大头虫**好了，反正肯定不会是**一条龙**的。"(Mai Jia, 2002: 19)

[Pinyin romanization: "…jiào tā guǐ shì yǒu xiē mái yuān le tā, nà me yǐ hòu jiù hǎn tā dà tóu chóng hǎo le, fǎn zhèng kěn dìng bú huì shì yī tiáo lóng de.]

[Gloss: Calling him a ghost would not be fair to him, so in future we can call him big-head worm. Anyway he surely will not become a dragon.]

TT: Calling the poor little thing the Grim Reaper does seem a little unfair. In the future we can call him **duckling**, though it is hardly likely that he is going to grow into **a swan**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 26)

ST: ……**拿着鸡毛当令箭**。(Mai Jia, 2002: 63)

[Pinyin romanization: …ná zhe jī máo dāng lìng jiàn.]

[Gloss: … holding a chicken feather as a token of authority.]

TT: … **making a mountain out of a mole hill**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 77)

ST: 即便有也是姓不得的，那分明是**把已埋在地下的屎挖出来**往容家人脸上贴，岂不是遭骂！(Mai Jia, 2002: 18)

[Pinyin romanization: jí biàn yǒu yě shì xìng bú dé de, nà fèn míng shì bǎ yǐ mái zài dì xià de shǐ wā chū lái wǎng róng jiā rén liǎn shàng tiē, qǐ bú shì zāo mà!]

[Gloss: The family name could not be used even if he had it: that would be digging out the shit that had already been buried underground, which would be blamed.]

TT: Even if they knew it, it would hardly be appropriate to use it: that would be **rattling the skeletons in the family closet** with a vengeance! (Mai Jia, 2014: 26)

As shown in Example Set 4, the Chinese culture-specific metaphors and images in the original version such as "真人" (the immortal), "西洋镜" (a show from the West), "窑子" (brothel), "大头虫" (big-head worm), "一条龙" (a dragon), "拿着鸡毛当令箭" (holding a chicken feather as a token of authority) and "把已埋在地下的屎挖出来" (digging out the shit that had already been buried underground) are all substituted with corresponding metaphors and images from the English culture in the translation. Though a thicker translation rendering the original metaphors and images as they are from the Chinese culture with elaboration provided in footnotes might serve the purpose of ensuring adequacy, acceptability would easily become a problem for such a translated novel that is positioned as a popular genre fiction by the Penguin Books. Therefore, domestication has been adopted as an obvious strategy in translation with consideration of both adequacy and acceptability.

Example Set 5:

ST: 珍弟说得肯定，但我们总觉得**无风不起浪**。(Mai Jia, 2002: 65)

[Pinyin romanization: zhēn dì shuō dé kěn dìng, dàn wǒ men zǒng jiào dé wú fēng bú qǐ làng.]

[Gloss: Zhendi said it in a definite way, but we still felt that where there is wind, there must be waves.]

TT: Zhendi was very definite, but we still felt that **where there is smoke, there must also be fire**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 79)

ST: 正如你们国人常言的关于**某人买酒他人喝**的幽默一样，…… (Mai Jia, 2002: 85)

[Pinyin romanization: zhèng rú nǐ men guó rén cháng yán de guān yú mǒu rén mǎi jiǔ tā rén hē de yōu mò yī yàng, ...]

[Gloss: Just as the joke always told by your country man about the wine bought by one but drunk by the other, ...]

TT: There is a joke in your country about **the girl who sews a wedding gown for another bride to wear**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 104)

ST: 顿时，人都**如受惊的鸟兽**四处逃散，...... (Mai Jia, 2002: 97)

[Pinyin romanization: dùn shí, rén dōu rú shòu jīng de niǎo shòu sì chù táo sàn, ...]

[Gloss: ...immediately the crowd began to scatter like birds and animals being startled.]

TT: ...immediately the crowd began to scatter **like a frog out of frightened hands**. (Mai Jia, 2014: 119)

It must be pointed out that while fluent translation is achieved by substituting the culture-specific metaphors and images with apt and idiomatic English equivalents, whether the cultural flavor of the original metaphors and images in some cases has lost or not remains a question. As shown in Example Set 5, the Chinese metaphors and images as highlighted in bold have been replaced with corresponding ones from the English culture in translation. However, in these cases preserving the original cultural images would also be the adequate and acceptable option in translation, which might even add a touch of exotic cultural flavor to the translation. For example, instead of "where there is smoke, there must also be fire", "无风不起浪" (without wind there would not be waves rising) might as well be rendered as "where there is wind, there must also be waves", which would enrich the target culture by introducing the foreign cultural expressions to the target language.

5. Discussion: Re-visiting some fundamental issues in literary translation

5.1 "Adequacy" or "acceptability"?

The strategies employed in the translation of *Decoded* as shown in the above textual comparative analysis cannot be fully or simply accounted for by the dichotomic principles of literal vs. free translation, form-based vs. meaning-based translation, formal vs. functional equivalence,[32] domestication vs. foreignization[33] or adequacy vs. acceptability[34] in previous translation theories. Rather, such translation strategies should be understood as spreading over the continuum between "adequacy" and "acceptability". When both the image and sense of the culture-specific items can be accepted by the target culture, their translation attaches more importance to "adequacy"; otherwise, the translation of culture-specific items gives precedence to "acceptability". In most cases, however, the images of culture-specific items would be adapted to varying degrees in translation, whose strategies can be understood as situated somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

As pointed out by Toury,[35]

the normal state of affairs (in translation) is a degree of incompatibility between adequacy and acceptability, so that any attempt to get closer to the one would entail a distancing from the other.

However, the dichotomous and unidimensional thinking underlying much of the perception of translation can be proved to be unnecessary, as Toury also points out: "Any concrete case thus involves an ad hoc compromise between the two."[36] He further emphasizes this point while appearing to contradict the previous statement: "Be that as it may, a translation will never be either adequate or acceptable. Rather, it will represent a blend of both."[37] He then strikes a pragmatic chord:[38]

>…the tensions between a translation's adequacy (vis-à-vis the source text) and acceptability (vis-à-vis TL and the target culture) would have had to be resolved each time anew, on a fully ad hoc basis and with no clear yardstick to go by.

We believe that the "continuum pattern" revealed through the present study can account for the complexity of English translation strategies of Chinese literary classics in determining the canonicity of *Decoded*.

5.2 'Foreign literature' or 'hybrid literature'?

Decoded entered the English-speaking world through translation and has become a classic of "foreign literature" in English. However, as seen from the above analysis, the translated work may as well be perceived as "hybrid literature", involving the translators and publishers, who have strategically relocated the cultural home of the target reader to a "third space", namely a middle cultural space.[39] This is supposed to be culturally neutral, thus providing a site for cultural hybridization so as to avoid reducing the richness and complexity of the original in the created replica that represents not merely salient foreign features but also most of the essential qualities of the source text as a reproduction of cultural forms.[40]

In the current globalized world, translation of literature as "cultural border-crossings are increasingly common, leading to shifting cultural identity, which necessitates a "third space". The foreignizing translation strategy brings about "a higher degree of authenticity and experiential immediacy for the target reader" and "allows or enables the target reader to experience the original 'directly' in its 'authentic' form with defamiliarization effect."[41] It can be said that making foreign otherness accessible to the target readership is always the goal that is set and valued by translators.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the major reasons for the canonization of the Chinese novel *Decoded* in the Anglophone world and demonstrated the role of translation in such a process. It has also examined what really happened in translation with a critical textual

analysis of the English and the Chinese versions, through which some fundamental issues in literary translation are revisited. It is found that the translators of the novel have adopted strategies in the labyrinth of the continuum between "adequacy" and "acceptability", which ensures maximum authenticity and accessibility for a global readership. In doing so, a "third space" in world literature is created, which contributes to establishing the canonical status of the novel in Anglophone culture.

It is necessary to point out that the present study has approached the topic of how the Chinese novel *Decoded* was canonized through translation mainly from the perspectives of translation studies and reception studies through analyses of the translated text and of literary reviews published in major English-language newspapers and magazines. Further studies might be done through the lens of comparative literary studies and of intercultural communication studies.

When national literary works are translated into standardized global languages such as English and French and brought to the world stage, their national features and uniqueness can easily get lost. Therefore, it is a major task and challenge for translators to maintain rather than destroy the multi-phonic features of the original, while making them accessible to the target readership. In this regard, the English translation of the novel *Decoded* and its canonization in the English-speaking world provide an exemplary example.

About the authors:
Prof Binhua Wang is Chair/Professor of interpreting and translation studies and Director of the Centre for Translation Studies in University of Leeds. He is also Fellow of the "Chartered Institute of Linguists" (CIoL) and an editorial board member of *Babel*: *International Journal of Translation*. His research has focused on various aspects of interpreting and translation studies, in which he has published over 50 articles including around 40 in refereed CSSCI/Core journals and SSCI/A&HCI journals and over a dozen peer-reviewed book chapters. He has also authored the monographs *Theorizing Interpreting Studies* (2019) and *A Descriptive Study of Norms in Interpreting* (2013) and edited the themed volume of *Advances in Discourse Analysis of Translation and Interpreting* with Jeremy Munday (Routledge, 2020 forthcoming).
Prof Yifeng Sun is Chair Professor of Translation Studies and Head of the Department of English at the University of Macau, and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland. Previously he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Director of the Centre for Humanities Research at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He is Editor-in-Chief Elect of *Babel: International Journal of Translation*.

Notes:

1. Though he is better known by his pen name Mai Jia (in which Mai should not be used separately as a family name), his original name is JIANG Benhu (蒋本浒).
2. *The Economist*, "Best Books of 2014."
3. *The Telegraph*, "20 best spy novels."
4. *Shanghai Daily*, "Chinese literature," Page B2.
5. For example: Ma, "How modern and contemporary Chinese literature," 64-68.
6. Link, "Spy Anxiety."
7. *The Economist*, "New Chinese fiction."
8. Mai Jia, *Decoded: A Novel*, inside cover.
9. Tatlow, "A Chinese Spy Novelist's World."
10. Wood, "Review of *Decoded*."
11. Evans, "Review 'Decoded' by Mai Jia."
12. Hilton, "An intriguing Chinese thriller."
13. Tatlow, "A Chinese Spy Novelist's World."
14. *The New Yorker*, "Briefly Noted. *Decoded*."
15. Aw, "*Decoded* by Mai Jia, A review."
16. Hilton, "An intriguing Chinese thriller."
17. *The Economist*, "New Chinese fiction."
18. Wilson, "*Decoded* by Mai Jia. A review."
19. *The Independent*, "Book review: 'Decoded'."
20. Gong, "Fiction: The cryptic mind."
21. Bai, "Decoding Mai Jia's 'going global'."
22. Mai Jia, *Decoded: A Novel*, back cover.
23. Aw, "Decoded by Mai Jia, A review."
24. Fan, "China's Dan Brown."
25. Daly, "Decrypting Mai Jia. A review."
26. Bai, "Decoding Mai Jia's 'going global'."
27. Mai Jia, 解密 [*Decoded*], 2002.
28. Mai Jia, *Decoded: A Novel*, 2014.
29. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 80.
30. Daly, "Decrypting Mai Jia. A review," *Beijing Review*, Mar 27, 2014.
31. Wilson, "*Decoded* by Mai Jia. A review," *The Independent*, Feb 14, 2014.
32. Nida, *Science of Translating*, 159.
33. Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation,* 241.
34. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 70.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Sun, *Translating Foreign Otherness*, 57.
40. Ibid.
41. Sun, *Translating Foreign Otherness*, 49.

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