



Translator's positioning and cultural transfer with reference to *The Book and the Sword*



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on positioning theory, this study investigates how the translator, based on a certain sociocultural positioning, has reconstructed aspects of Chinese martial arts culture in the English translation of Jin Yong, with reference to *The Book and the Sword*. In so doing, this study foregrounds the hold of positioning over linguistic and cultural production, and particularly how the translator, as opposed to a priori and fixed modes of positioning, can perform dynamic alternative positions even on the same issue, thus practicing an ethics of balance in translation. It also calls into attention the role of translation in intercultural communication, and particularly how martial arts translation contributes to the reconstruction of Chinese national and cultural identity in the context of globalization.

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1. Introduction

Jin Yong's martial arts fiction has a widespread following in Chinese-speaking communities all over the world (Minford, 1997: XI). His fourteen novels written between 1955 and 1972 have been translated into most Asian languages. However, so far only three of his novels have been officially translated and published in English. They are *雪山飞狐* [*Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*] (1996 [1993]), *鹿鼎记* [*The Deer and the Cauldron*] (1997, 1999, 2002), and *书剑恩仇录* [*The Book and the Sword*] (2004). Olivia Mok, the translator of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, is also among the first to study Jin Yong in English translation. Based on her own experience, Mok has discussed the translation of appellations, titles and nicknames in martial arts fiction (Mok, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2002). She argues that many difficulties inherent in translating martial arts fiction can be constructed within the theoretical framework of André Lefevere's concept of "constraint" (Mok, 1998). In mainland China, Chen Gang's case study of *The Deer and the Cauldron* demonstrates that domestication will continue to serve as an important strategy in intercultural communication (Chen, 2006). Fei Yuying (2007), in his doctoral dissertation, makes a case study of the same novel, where he examines the translator's strategies for rendering kung fu terms, poems, proverbs and taboo words that are involved in the novel. Studies of Jin Yong in English translation not only blaze new ground for Translation Studies (TS) but also map out useful strategies for mediators between different cultures. However, the previous studies have, consciously or unconsciously, treated Jin Yong' work as mere popular literature that is created for entertainment rather than a serious mode of writing that abounds in sociocultural import. An author such as Jin Yong deserves to be taken seriously, not simply in terms of readership and popularity, but because the themes advanced in his martial arts fiction are closely related to Chinese national and cultural identity. This study draws on positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999) to investigate how the translator, based on a certain sociocultural positioning, has reconstructed aspects of Chinese martial arts

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culture in the English translation of Jin Yong, with specific reference to *The Book and the Sword*. Working from the premise that our positioning, our speech acts, and the jointly generated storylines are mutually determinate (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999), this case study not only accounts for the hold of positioning over linguistic and cultural production but also enables us to understand how the translator, as opposed to a priori and fixed modes of positioning (Touy, 1995; Venuti, 1995, 1998), can perform dynamic alternative positions even on the same issue, thus practicing an ethics of balance in translation. It also calls attention to the role of translation in intercultural communication, and particularly how martial arts translation contributes to the construction and reconstruction of Chinese national and cultural identity in the context of globalization.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of positioning was introduced in the social sciences by Hollway (1984) in her analysis of the construction of subjectivity in the area of heterosexual relations. Her use of positioning represents one of the many versions of social constructionism, which stresses that social phenomena are generated in and through conversation and conversation-like activities. According to van Langenhove and Harré (1999, 16), conversations have three inherent and mutually determining elements: the participants' positions, their relatively determinate speech-acts and the jointly generated storylines. They, together, constitute the "positioning triad" in conversations. Among them, positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal narratives that make our actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the participants in the conversation have specific locations (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Herman et al. (2005, 445) maintain that our position has a two-way orientation. First, it orients how we are situated in space and time in the "story world" as relational story-agents; secondly, it orients how we define a social location for ourselves in the act of recounting narratives about ourselves and others.

The discussion of translators' positioning may date from the first century BC, when the Roman orator Cicero thought it a "duty" for himself to translate classical Greek oratory not "as an interpreter but as an orator" (Cicero, cited in Munday, 2009, 1). Since then, especially in the new millennium, motivated by an increasing acknowledgement of the sociocultural role of translators, various approaches have converged on the study of translators' positioning. Three types of translators' positioning can be roughly identified in the literature of translation studies, namely as implementers of norms or translation briefs, challengers of linguistic and ideological hegemony, and neutral mediators between cultures. For Touy (1995) and other descriptivists, translators should comply with the established power hierarchies within the target language/culture, and hence act as **implementers of norms**. In postcolonial analysis, translators are seen as **challengers of linguistic and ideological hegemony** of the imperialist mind that would press otherness uniformly into homely molds (Venuti, 1995, 1998). For Pym (2001), professional translators as **skilled neutral mediators** enable effective interlingual communication.

Instead of privileging the abstract, repeated and sweeping patterns of translators' behavior as elaborated by the descriptivists, or the postcolonialists, a perspective from positioning theory foregrounds the various relationships involved in translation and the need to situate translators in a specific location for the inquiry of their positioning. We position ourselves in terms of our personal narratives, which are simultaneously informed by various other narratives being circulated such as institutional and master narratives (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Hollway, 1984). Positioning theory particularly emphasizes the power relationships involved in translation, which range from the power hierarchy between translators and other participants in translation, and the power asymmetry between cultures. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999, 14) state that positioning can also be understood as "a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role". In moving from the use of "role" to "positioning", the focus of attention shifts from the more ritualistic and formal to the more dynamic and negotiable aspects of interpersonal encounters. As such positioning theory encourages us to see the binding forces involved in the formation of the translator's positioning and allows us to focus on variations as well as sweeping patterns of the translator's behavior.

In terms of methodology, the elaboration of the positioning triad will prove to be very useful for measuring translators' positioning in a specific translation event. As noted above van Langenhove and Harré (1999) take our position, speech act and jointly generated storyline to be mutually determinate. It is thus possible for us to investigate the subjects' positioning at any of the three poles in a specific location. In the context of translation, we can study the translators' claimed self-position, their action of translating, or the narratives they have reproduced in the target language and culture (TLC) in order to pinpoint their positioning in translation. First, we can ask the translators for their intentional self-positioning in translation through interviews, and thereby locate other speakers such as authors and readers relative to it; secondly, we can investigate their speech-act by examining the strategies they have employed for translation; thirdly, we can conduct questionnaire research with expert bilingual readers, asking them to compare the translation, as the jointly generated storyline, with the source text. The investigation on one pole is usually verifiable by that on another. To ensure the reliability of research, investigation at the three poles can be conducted simultaneously.

3. Data and methodology

《书剑恩仇录》[*The Book and the Sword*] (2004), written in 1955, represents Jin Yong's first martial arts novel. The story is set in the early Qing dynasty, when the Manchu Emperor Qian Long is quelling the last sparks of Chinese resistance. Among the underground organizations fighting the Manchu is the Red Flower Society. The newly elected leader of the society, Helmsman Chen (Jialuo Chen), is the son of a former prime minister. The society tries to save one of their own members, Rolling Thunder

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