

Chinese Xianxia 仙侠 Web Novels and Community Translation

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Abstract

Chinese web novels first emerged on online forums in the 1990s, and later on sites like Qidian. They gained popularity further west as amateur fan translators started posting their translations online. As of today, a global community has based itself around Chinese web novels, consisting of Chinese media companies and platforms, Chinese authors, fan translators, and readers. This paper seeks to explore fan translations of web novels, specifically *xianxia* 仙侠 novels, in the context of them being a community effort, as well as discuss the unique qualities of the fan translation community. *Xianxia*, which translates to ‘immortal heroes,’ is a popular fantasy genre based on classical Chinese myths, tropes, and ideologies. It also contains world-building characteristics, making it a challenging genre to translate and ideal for finding patterns in areas where fan translators may struggle. I will explore the web novel industry's background and then discuss community translation in the context of *xianxia* novels. This inquiry involves a group of questions surrounding the different sub-groups of the Chinese web novel community and the impact of their interactions. I will explore the unique characteristics of the Chinese web novel industry and how they became popular among Anglophone readers. Also, the processes and dynamics of community fan translation and the search for patterns in the translations. To understand the unique language and interactions within the Chinese web novel community, I analyzed various *xianxia* novels that had multiple translators contribute. Some defining features of this genre include cultivation, magical themes, and objects. I will identify unique passages throughout these web novels, which occur in footnotes and translator notes, where translators explain, express doubts, or ask for advice. Other notable passages or phrases are ones in which translators make distinct translation decisions. The commodification of web

novels in China led to media companies promoting them to foreign audiences, thus creating an effect where fans started translating web novels. Since the web novel is an internet-based product, it is easy for people to group to translate them, even if it is informal comments. Finally, the world-building and traditional Chinese cultural aspects of the *xianxia* genre show the many difficulties translators face.

Introduction

Chinese web novels have become integral to Chinese culture within the past twenty years. Furthermore, Chinese media companies saw their influence and popularity in China among internet users and decided to promote them to foreign readers, now having millions of readers worldwide. These foreign readers only exist due to the emergence of fan translators. The efforts of Chinese media and publishing companies, fan translators, and readers contributed to the web novel's spread. Exploring the community translation process and web novels brings to light numerous findings about Chinese culture, fan translation, and fan culture. First, the commodification of the web novel, the promotion of them to Anglophone readers, and the themes of the most common genre of web novels show the commitment to spreading classical Chinese culture in the modern era. Second, fan translation is different because fan translators are not paid and sometimes do not get permission for their translations. In the case of Chinese fan translators, there exist issues of stolen translations and exploitation. Third, despite translations being carried out by amateurs, people still have standards for translations. To come to these findings, I analyze the web novel industry and the community's interactions and translations of *xianxia* 仙侠 [immortal heroes] novels. *Xianxia* is one of the most popular genres. *Xiānxiá* novels include elements of cultivation, immortality, magical features, or other aspects from Chinese mythology. The themes of these novels also draw from Buddhism and Taoism. This genre is among the most difficult to translate because fan translators often deal with unfamiliar histories, ways of thinking, tropes, and culturally specific terms (Jin).

History of the Web novel

To put it simply, a web novel is a story written online. They are prevalent today in China, Japan, and South Korea. They allow for complete creative freedom, a greater likelihood of gaining readers, and an opportunity to earn more money. Chinese web novels appeared in their first form in the late 1990s when writers started self-publishing their work on online forums. In 2003, the online publishing site Qidian 起点 launched a model that allowed readers to read the first few chapters of a novel for free but later must pay for the content they want to read (Huang 3). This can be via a subscription, watching ads, paying chapter-by-chapter, etc. (Canada Newswire; Huang 3). The model Qidian launched proved economically viable and was soon adopted by the rest of the web novel industry. Working as a web novel writer can be very lucrative for writers and companies (He). Admittedly, the companies tend to profit more than the authors. The authors are under contract and do not have the rights to their work. Authors have complained about the companies' treatment in the past (Borak). Today there are millions of writers (around seven million), novels (around twenty-five million), and over two hundred genres.

This industry is made up of many websites and companies. The largest company, and the one mainly mentioned in the literature regarding this topic, is China Literature's Qidian. However, many others exist, including Jinjiang, LC Read, QQ Reading, Huang Jin Wu, Qian Qian, Zhou Si, Feixiang Niao, etc. Some of these websites specialize in one genre or cater to one audience, like Jinjiang, which caters to female audiences (Jin 2). Some of the mentioned websites only allow readers to access specific chapters through payment, and others allow readers to read the entire book free of charge. However, since readers do not pay, these free websites may only provide incomplete books or chapters. Despite the sometimes questionable

quality, the sudden appearance of the extreme quantity of websites shows that this industry is rapidly expanding.

The rapid commercialization of the web novel has made it that today, they dominate the literary field in China.¹ The importance China places on this industry is such that top literary companies such as China Literature decided to promote web novels to Anglophone readers and writers. These novels represent Chinese culture, just as western movies and TV shows represent countries like the United States. They were introducing a popular form of entertainment, such as the web novel, to inform Anglophone readers of Chinese culture, possibly increasing the influence of Chinese media. However, besides Chinese media companies, other factors play into the global popularity of these novels. Fan translators and readers themselves also play an essential role. A combination of corporate endeavors, the work of fan translators, and interactions among readers accomplished the push of web novels to foreign readers. Their efforts have succeeded, as today, hundreds of millions of readers visit these sites.

Fan Translation

Fan translators and readers come from various backgrounds, but most of them are younger (in the ‘About Me pages on their blogs, many mention being college students). They might work alone or in a group. Translation groups tend to have editors that check for clarity and grammar, but individual translators can also get others to check their translations. In order to translate a web novel, the translator will first have to obtain the rights to translate the original novel, which is known as the ‘raws’ among translators (LLM Law Review). In the case of Chinese web novels, they must get permission from the media companies (Qidian publishes a list of books that

¹ Web novels may have a higher status among Chinese media companies and publishers, and they seem to dominate in audience and quantity published, but it’s also important to point out that among the literary field, the general opinion is that they are low quality, or trashy (烂文 làn wén). (Jin, “China’s sprawling world of web fiction”)

are allowed to be translated) since the authors have usually signed away the rights to their works. If permission cannot be obtained, then the translation is done without permission, just like many Japanese anime fansubs and Korean scanlations (Evans 180; LLM Law Review). These translations are published on various blogs, where readers can comment and donate. Other types of websites allow readers to read and find web novels. Novel Updates is an archive site with links to translations. Webnovel is a site that allows translators to join and post their translations.

Problems Within The Web novel Industry,

Despite liking web novels, the goals, and ideals of the fan translators and readers often clash with those of the Chinese media and publishing companies. With few exceptions, fan translators work without pay.

Exceptions to this generalization are that translators can get a contract with Qidian's English site, Webnovel, or receive donations from readers on their blogs or via a platform like Patreon (Webnovel). However, people often reference past contracts Webnovel and other translators have had with each other to claim that Webnovel is a scam, unethical, manipulative, etc. They especially point to the contract between Qidian and the creator of Wuxiaworld. Wuxiaworld signed a contract with Qidian that granted him a ten-year license to publish 20 novels. After signing this, Qidian published the English web novel site Webnovel in April 2017, putting out a statement saying they decided to back out of the agreement and requesting that he give them all of his translations. When he did not do that, they started stealing his translations and posting them on Webnovel (Yin). In the eyes of Chinese media companies, fan translators equal free marketing, which brings up the problem of exploitation when we think about this industry. As Cornelia Zwischenberger puts it, "Exploitation does not mean that workers do not take pleasure in the success of a collaborative effort. There are moments of pleasure despite the fact that we

are losing control of our productive and creative activities. While this critique of exploitation does not disparage the pleasures of workers, it also does not nullify exploitative social relations.” (Scholz p. 13). In other words, while fan translators seem to enjoy web novels and the process of translating, if one compares their gains to that of Chinese authors and media companies, one can see the inequality and power imbalances within this industry.

Part 1: People of the Web novel Industry

Chinese Media Companies' Promotion of Web novels

Chinese media companies undertook multiple projects, campaigns, website launches, etc., to expose foreign readers to web novels. For English-speaking readers to access web novels, web novel companies have been searching for translators and completing translations on their own. For example, the owners of Qidian later created the website Webnovel, which provides translations of web novels in multiple languages (Canada Newswire 1). Besides China Literature's Webnovel, Jinjiang (a site dedicated to danmei fiction) also announced its translation website (Jinjiang). China Literature's Webnovel.com works to provide hundreds of English web novels each year. They do this by contracting out fan translators, attempting to provide translations using Artificial Intelligence, or inviting foreign authors to write novels on their platforms. To encourage foreign authors to contribute it hosts its annual Webnovel Spirit Awards (started in 2019) to encourage foreign authors to contribute. This is a writing competition where English, Indonesian, and Thai entries can be submitted. The winners receive a cash prize and the chance to have their work adapted into film or TV by WeTV, a video streaming platform launched by Tencent Video (PR Newswire).

Besides promoting web novels to foreign readers via translations, people are also exposed to web novels through adaptations of a web novel's story. Adaptations include many TV films, graphic novels, and audio-drama adaptations of various web novels, especially the danmei web novels of Jinjiang. The novel *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (魔道祖师 *módào zǔshī*)

[*The Founder of Demonic Cultivation*]) by Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù 墨香铜臭 was adapted to both an animated and live-action tv show. The live-action version, known as *The Untamed* (2019), found its way to Netflix, as did the animated version of the novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* (天官赐福 tiān guān cì fú) (Jin). However, many film adaptations are only available on networks that specifically show Chinese/Asian works, like Bilibili or Tencent. So, those not already interested in Asian media will not see these works. The animated adaptation of *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System* (人渣反派之自救行动 rén zhā fǎnpài zhī zìjiù xíngdòng), is currently only officially available on channels such as these. However, those who watch these *donghua* become more knowledgeable about Chinese culture. Some may even decide to read the web novel on which it is based. Also, if enough people become fans of a movie/tv show, the Chinese media company can produce merchandise and earn more money.

Fan Translators Emerge

Chinese media companies have worked hard to expose foreign readers to web novels, and many of their efforts have paid off. As more and more people have become fans of web novels, they have wanted to translate them. Thus, fan translators emerged on the internet. These fan translators make up the group of translators that are not a part of the professional translation community. Scholars refer to this new type of translation as ‘user-generated translation,’ ‘Web 2.0 translation,’ ‘community translation,’ ‘non-professional translation,’ and ‘guerrilla translation.’ This new type of translation does not only include fan translators of web novels (Zwischenberger 1-5). For example, there is also the volunteer TED Translators program, a group organized in 2009 by 200 volunteer translators to translate TEDx Talks (TED). The earliest well-known group was the Japanese fansubbers of anime, who emerged in the 1980s. It has now expanded to people translating video games, music, fanfiction, Korean webtoons and

dramas, and social media content (Ding et al.; 173; Evans 178). Chinese web novels started appearing in the 1990s but were not translated until around the early 2000s. Web novels can be hundreds or even thousands of chapters long. The novel *Dàizhe nóngchǎng hùn yì jiè* 带着农场混异界 [*Bringing The Farm to Live in Another World*], on Qidian is 12,468 chapters long (Mingyu, Qidian). People can be reluctant to translate them entirely, especially if they do it for free. In the early 2000s, people translated web novels on forums like SPCNET. Finding the oldest fan translation on the internet is difficult, but among them includes a translation of *Little Li's Dagger* by internet user Meh. They posted “Chapter 1. Flying Dagger vs. Quick Sword” on the SPCNET forum on June 25, 2002. Larger translation groups appeared in the 2010s. One of the largest sites that cater to wuxia and xianxia novels, Wuxiaworld, was founded in December 2014. Webnovel, Qidian’s English site, was founded in 2017 (“General FAQ”; Yin). By putting out more content faster, these larger translation groups significantly contribute to introducing people to web novels.

There are four ways that fan translators can publish their translations. (1) They post them on their blog. (2) They post it on a blog but as a member of a larger translation group. Groups such as Exiled Rebels and Chrysanthemum Garden include multiple translators, editors, etc. (3) They translate under a contract for Webnovel. (4) If their translation becomes official, they can publish it as a book.

Translators often try to avoid translating a web novel if they see that someone else is already doing it, likely to avoid making it seem like they are trying to steal the other’s audience or challenge their translation. That does not mean web novels do not eventually end up with multiple translations, like many literary works. If one of them becomes the official one, the other

translators stop their translations, and people have no choice but to get the translation by paying for the official one.

Today, readers can find translated web novels through a variety of means. Websites like Webnovel and Fanmily provide hundreds to thousands of web novels in various genres that are read directly on the website. Novelupdates is an online archive that provides links to online public translations (Shim et al. 841).

As mentioned before, these fan translators are separate from the professional translation community. Unlike professional translators, fan translators tend to lack training, their translations are not official, and their monetary gain tends to be limited. Fan translators are a part of this industry for their enjoyment, not money, unlike Chinese authors and publishers. Even though they can earn some money through their translations via gaining a contract with a larger translation site (it is possible to gain a contract with Webnovel if you publish regularly enough), the donations they receive on their blogs, or if their translation becomes official. They can sell it as a book unless their work becomes extremely popular. This kind of translation is something that people earn little money from. Fan translations are the only way for many of these stories to reach foreign audiences. These novels may not be considered commercially viable enough for publishers to hire professional translators, so fan translators are the only way that these works reach foreign audiences (Evans 178).

Readers

The final major group of the fan translation community, besides the authors, media/publishing companies, and fan translators, are the readers. Of course, fan translators are also readers. Many of them start their work purely out of their love of reading. Nevertheless, for readers, the web novel entertains and connects them with people who share their interests.

Although the publishers have been pushing web novels west and fan translators allowed for the foreign readership base, readers also play an essential role in maintaining the community.

Websites like Novel Updates (novelupdates.com), an archive site that collects links to translations, are organized in various ways that allow readers to find new novels. Novels are categorized by genre, rating, author, completion status, etc. Also, readers have conversations in the comments to discuss books they like and dislike. These readers encourage translators to finish their work (like Chinese readers do for Chinese web novel writers), direct new readers to novels based on previous reviews, and help build the community further. Also, in the comments section, readers will suggest changes or discuss the translation. After Ignition One translated chapter 6 of *Mó jūn zǒng yǐwéi wǒ àn liàn tā* 魔君总以为我暗恋他 [*The Demon Lord Always Thinks I'm Secretly in Love With Him*] by the author Dōng Fāng Huáng Guā 东方黄瓜, a reader with the forum name suzukileo compared Ignition One's version of the chapter with their own.

suzukileo says: February 21, 2019 at 12:01 pm: Actually, I have read and translated from the raw version. Just ... Pffft ... I didn't expect that Huā FēiHuā was a man, hahahaha ... it turned out to be a crossdresser. I think, there will be an exception for that person. It's quite natural that 魔界四公子 (mójiè sì gōngzǐ) is all male. In my translated version, I kept a lot, from the raw version or the English version. For example, Yǒng Yè Mójūn, Jūn Shàng, Gōngzǐ, and etc. But, thanks a lot for the update.

The vast majority of positive commentary tends to compliment the translator on the overall work, thank them for the update (like suzukileo) did here, or comment on the development of the plot. They rarely comment on translation-based topics since many readers do not have the background knowledge to comment on the specifics. When they comment on something unrelated to the plot, as shown in this comment, commenters tend to focus on either the work's quality or specific translation choices. If readers bring up the quality of the work, they are likely pointing out a lack of readability in the chapter. Translation choices are discussed when they

think a better choice could have been made, and they want to provide help, or if the chapter contained world-building or culturally-specific terms, and the readers want to provide their input. That is what suzukileo does in their comment. Rather than offering advice, they told the translator about their own opinions and experience with the translation of the novel. Overall, translators and readers maintain positive relationships.

Part 2: Translation, Translation Methods, and Xianxia Novels

Despite the conflicts between the Chinese and western sides of this industry, people continue to translate them. As previously mentioned, the publishers play their part in the translation community with the foreign language websites like Webnovel that they produce and contract translators to contribute to. On the other hand, Chinese media companies have taken advantage of people's love of translating web novels to avoid hiring professional translators. Given the animosity between Chinese media companies/publishers and fan translators, translators try to keep the groups as separate as possible, to protect themselves and their works. When discussing community translation of web novels, the Chinese publishers and authors are only relevant in how they interact with the translators. Nevertheless, fan translators work together, and even readers get involved in the process.

Fan translation generally falls into the category of community translation, but this community translation works in different ways depending on the situation. Some work in translation groups (like Wuxiaworld, etc), where they contribute a few chapters of a novel. Sometimes, translators start translating, but due to various reasons (translators often mention life events, boredom with the novel, preference for a different project, limited initial translation plans, etc.), they “drop” a novel. An outside life event caused a translator to drop the novel in the case of *Zhǎn xiān* 斩仙 [*Executing Immortals*] (written by Rèn yuàn 任怨). The original translator, bagelson from the group Blue Silver Translations, was injured and unable to type and update. A different translator, ThatGuyWhosThere, then decided to help.² In a translator's note at the beginning of the chapter, ThatGuyWhosThere explained the situation.

² ThatGuyWhosThere only translated chapter 6. Blue Silver Translations picked the novel back up after chapter 6.

So the **guy** doing Zhan Xian got an injury, broken or fractured limb and he can't type, so I decided to pitch in and do chapter six myself. Also cos I wanted to read it. I've found that this is much harder to translate though, so I hope it's not too confusing for you readers over yonder, I really hope it's not, but it is... This was also the reason why there were no updates recently. (I contacted him, don't worry about him being angry or something)

If a novel is dropped and then picked back up again, and that novel manages to get translated entirely, it will likely have had multiple translation groups contribute. Something notable about this phenomenon, which can be seen in this example, is that translators are careful not to step on each other's toes. In other words, they make sure the other translator truly gave up on the novel. They likely do this because they want to ensure they are not stealing the other translator's audience for a novel. Since some readers donate, taking away some of the audience by giving more options for translations to read also means taking away the translator's money.

Fan translators ask readers for help translating specific types of words and phrases. They tend to do this in the footnotes. Sometimes their request is for overall translation help. Most people are aware of the weaknesses in their translation ability, and they permit the readers to correct them in the comments, through email, social media, etc. Jiyang Translations, in their footnote for their translation of chapter 1 of *Tàisui* 太岁 (written by Priest), said, "please let me know if there are any mistakes in the comments or through email! the next chapter is 1/3 longer than this one was, so it might take me a couple of days to translate it!"

Other translators are more confident with their work and do not provide a blanket statement allowing readers to correct them. But, they occasionally ask for help with specific words or phrases. The words and phrases they ask for help with tend to relate to the subtler aspects of Chinese history, culture, and language, as well as unique terms that come along with the xianxia genre. A translator of the novel *Chuān chéng pàohuī zhī fǎnpài yǎng chéng jìhuà*

穿成炮灰之反派养成计划 [*Transmigrating into a Mob Character to Rehabilitate the Villian Plan*] by Shā Xiǎowán 杀小丸, Bonbon Translations, ran into a complication when trying to translate the word *qiú fānwài* 球番外. So, they asked the readers if they had a better suggestion for a translation.

——作者大人快回来, 球番外么么哒! (Shā Xiǎowán 杀小丸, “54 Dì yī zhāng”)

“Great author please come back quickly, *kisses from your fan!” (Bonbon, Translation, “Volume 3 Chapter 1”)

“球番外 –If anyone can give me a great translation of this that would be great” (Bonbon, note, “Volume 3 Chapter 1”)

“Great author come back quickly, kisses for an extra chapter!” (Hoesly, Translation)

The translator Piggybottle for *Qiú mó* 求魔 [*Beseech the Devil*] by Ěrgēn 耳根 struggled to translate a poem. They say they struggled because the poem relates to Chinese literature, which requires more background knowledge of the Chinese language, literature, and culture. They say they are missing the language/cultural knowledge needed to translate the poem accurately.

“The circular heavens, this flat earth, seeming boundless, as it reaches the infinite.....” (Piggybottle, translation, “Chapter 1 - Su Ming”)

(TLN: This line is hard to translate, (天似圆, 地若方, 如无边, 仿无际) I personally do not know much Chinese literature so these poems are a real pain, but the basis behind this line is that the ancient people thought that the earth was flat and surrounded by a boundless heaven, at least that is the interpretation I have, do comment/correct me.) (Piggybottle, translator’s note, “Chapter 1 - Su Ming”)

Fan translators sometimes especially struggle with translating culturally-specific terms or require the most translation creativity. These terms are prominent in the *xianxia* 仙侠 [immortal heroes] and *wuxia* 武侠 [martial heroes] novels. Culturally-specific terms can be defined as

linguistic items in Chinese literature genres, like wuxia and xianxia, and do not appear anywhere in western culture. These terms include personal names, the names of supernatural beings, clans and sects, and the names of places. They also include various terms regarding cultivation and magic, like weapons, artifacts, and types of energy (Dang 2021). Not only are these terms specific to specific genres, but some are also specific to specific novels since the *xianxia* genre includes world-building elements. Due to their limits in their knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, fan translators face many struggles. However, they have devised many different methods to provide decent translations.

Translation Methods

One method translators use to help them with their translations is the use of technology. Translators use technology in a variety of ways. They use social media and networks to communicate with each other. The feedback that translators receive on their translations can significantly impact their translations. Since their language skills are often lacking, many translators use AI, like Google Translate, to help them with the language of their translations. The translator of *Kuài chuān xìtǒng: Nán shén, nǐ guò lái* 快穿系统：男神，你过来 [Quick Transmigration System: Male God, Come Here] by Pineapple Cake 凤梨糕, Yuki_Chao22 from SilentMoonTranslations, claimed to have done this in their notes of chapter one. “This novel will be machine translated (MTL) so you will see errors along the way. Feel free to give some suggestions if you see any errors. I would appreciate it. Thank you.” Yuki_Chao22 says the novel is machine-translated, but it is not entirely machine-translated, as evident by the footnotes and pinyin placed throughout the translation. Technologies such as Google Translate do not produce footnotes and tend to try to translate things word for word. Although they know that most

translators know that machine translation has its flaws, this method is still valid. It helps them with reading comprehension, translation of a word or entire sentences, and conversion between alphabets. In other words, if nothing else, machine translation can get translators to a rough draft (Vazquez-Calvo, et.al., 54).

Fan translators also use context clues, help from other translators, and even help from readers to accomplish their translations. Since fan translators often have little to no formal language training, and again, rely on the help of AI technology for translations, they may even reach out to their readers for advice on their translations. These questions to their readers are put in the translator's notes that are at the beginning and throughout their translations, and the footnotes at the end. In the comments section, where readers and the translator can talk to each other, readers can offer corrections to translations. This communication improves the quality of the content, as well as strengthens relationships within the community (Ding, et.al. 183).

Translation Methods and Xianxia Novels

The translation of *xianxia* 仙侠小说 [immortal heroes] novels comes with many challenges. *Xiānxiá* novels include elements of cultivation, immortality, magic, world-building, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. Translators often get stuck on phrases that they can't find a straightforward translation for. Bonbon Translations (working on *Chuān chéng pàohuī zhī fǎnpài yǎng chéng jìhuà* 穿成炮灰之反派养成计划 [*Transmigrating into a Mob Character to Rehabilitate the Villian Plan*]) struggled with translating the phrase “思兔在線閱讀” [Thinking rabbit reading online] in chapter 54 for reasons such as these.

“But the miracle as always never arrived. si/tu/zai/xian/yue/dun.” (Bonbon Translation)

(思兔在線閱讀. This could be a prayer sutra. As of this moment I'm not completely sure bit will change it if theres a proper meaning.) (Bonbon Note)

In the case of this example, 思兔在線閱讀 seems to be the name of an online reading company (This is the current URL for the reading site: <https://www.sto.cx/pcindex.aspx>). Once a web novel is published, it is often reposted on other websites. This phrase is not included in chapter 54 on the website Quanben, which is where I found the raws for this novel. Perhaps, given the context of the genre that Bonbon was translating in, a prayer sutra was one of the only logical explanations for the phrase that otherwise seemed to have no meaning.

Translating Culturally-Specific Terms

Although the precise number and the language for the procedures of how translators approach translating these culturally specific terms are still much debated, there are four major types that researcher Dang Li identified in his paper on translating Wuxia web novels. I will use his classifications as a guide when analyzing the patterns within the *xianxia* novels I collected. The first method is transliteration or phonetic translation. This is a procedure where the translation attempts to accurately translate the sound of the original language in the translation. In the case of Chinese-English translations, things translated this way are left in the Mandarin Pinyin system. The names of people and places are generally translated in this format. However, translators occasionally stick to a full English translation for place names. Of the two translators who translated the novel *Módào zǔshī* 魔道祖师 [*The Founder of Demonic Cultivation*] (written by Mò Xiāng Tóngxiù 墨香铜臭), Enxiao and K.san from Exiled Rebels, K.san translated *Yúnshēn bùzhī chù* 云深不知处 as the Cloud Recesses (based off of *yúnshēn* 云深 “cloud depth,” *bùzhī* 不知 “not to know,” *chù* 处 and “place/location”)³, and the other translated it as Yun Shen Buzhi Chu.⁴ One thing translators might do for place names is keep them in pinyin

³ The name of this location was based on the last line of the poem 贾岛 Jiǎ dǎo: Xún yǐn zhě bù yù 尋隱者不遇. See *Gushi Wenwang*.

⁴ See Mòxiāng Tóngchòu, “Dì 11 zhāng: Yǎ sāo 1: Bādào hán guāng jūn de fēngdiān xiǎo táo qī???”; Enxiao, “Founder of Diabolism - Chapter 11”; K.san. “GDC Chapter 11: Refinement - Part 1.”

throughout the text, but add a translation as a footnote. Forum user Wandering was translating a chapter of *Zhūxiān* 诛仙 [*The Attack of Heaven*], and they kept all place names in pinyin throughout the text but had a footnote at the end that contained translations. This method shows a combination of multiple translation techniques.

Wandering Footnotes:

Qing Yun Sect = Green Cloud Sect

Tian Yin Temple = Sounds of Heaven Temple

Fen Xiang Valley = Incense Valley

On the other hand, fan translators seem to rarely translate the names of people/characters.

There were three translation blogs for *Qiú mó* 求魔 [*Beseech the Devil*], including PuttyTranslations, WuxiWish, and PiggyBottle. When translating the name of the character *Xiǎo hóng* 小红, only PiggyBottle translated it to Red. The other two kept it as Xiao Hong.⁵

The second method, called added explanation, is when a translator will put an explanation of the meaning of a term. They can put this as a footnote, or within the text, right after the term that they wish to have an explanation for. In the footnotes of fan translators, there is sometimes a tone of uncertainty in their explanations. The translator Ignition One, for their footnotes of *Mó jūn zǒng yǐwéi wǒ ànliàn tā* 魔君总以为我暗恋他 [*The Demon Lord Always Thinks I'm Secretly in Love with Him*] (written by Dōng Fāng Huáng Guā 东方黄瓜), offered alternative translations to what they provided in the text, given the nuance that the Chinese language has.

Uh, he literally left his “手” shǒu. This is literally a hand but I think it’s figurative. It’s probably more like his right-hand man or henchman.
珠 zhū means both “pearl” and “bead” so I’m not sure which. It’s either jade beads or bluish-green (jade color) pearls but since blue-green pearls are extremely rare, I think it’s more likely to be jade beads.

⁵ See Seaweed. “Beseech the devil Chapter 1: Su Ming.”; Piggybottle. “Chapter 1 - Su Ming.”; Flaminghomosexual. “Beseech the Devil - Chapter 1: Su Ming.”

珠光宝气 zhū guāng bǎo qì “adorned with brilliant jewels and pearls”
 龙吟剑 lóng yín jiàn: Dragon’s Roar sword
 腾云 téng yún literally something like “fast-moving clouds” but it’s also used to say
 “riding the clouds (like an immortal) (Ignition One, footnotes, “Chapter 6”)

The third method, after transliteration and added explanation, is rendition. When fan translators attempt to communicate the meaning of a culturally-specific term in their translation, this is known as rendition. This type of translation is often specially used for terms that are created by the authors. The fourth and final way is what is known as convention, where terms are translated in a conventionally acceptable way. These two methods look similar in the final translation (they are often used together), but their purposes are different. Rendition is often to make audiences understand lesser-used terms; ones created by the author. This includes martial arts techniques, magical weapons, and supernatural beings. The method of convention is often used to translate terms related to cultivation and martial arts. This form of translation is used for words that have been translated multiple times before, and already have an accepted translation established.

By having a multitude of translation methods at their disposal, the result of the translation of a culturally-specific term can vary from translator to translator, depending on their language competency, use of resources, or personal preferences. Based on the *xianxia* novels I have collected and analyzed throughout the process of writing this paper, there seem to be areas in which fan translators struggle, or have more inconsistencies and uncertainties in their translations. They struggle with clarity and grammar. Also, I have found that the methods Dang Li identified don’t always fall in line with how fan translators operate, especially when it comes to areas in which they struggle. However, there are also areas in which they have generally excelled. Nuances of the language, such as homophones, show the significance of certain Chinese characters, the various names, and titles of the characters, etc. The areas they excel in

are especially seen when the rest of the community comes in. We see how they explain their choices to the readers and help each other with their translations.

Part 3: Analysis

The web novels that will be analyzed in this section are novels of the *xianxia* genre all have had multiple fan translators contribute in some way. *Xianxia*, which translates to ‘immortal heroes,’ is a popular fantasy genre based on classical Chinese myths, tropes, and ideologies. Some defining features of this genre include cultivation, magical themes, and objects. It also contains world-building characteristics, making it a challenging genre to translate and ideal for finding patterns in areas where fan translators may struggle.

As I compared and analyzed the web novels, I was particularly drawn to several aspects that gave me insight into the fan translation process. The first among them was the footnotes. Footnotes tell readers about specific decisions made during the translation process. Next, I looked for the translator’s notes. These are notes to the readers, which cover various topics, including random notes on updates, requests for advice, notes on their process, notices for switches of translators, etc. Finally, as I compared the various web novels (like, when I compared E. Dangler and Jiyang Translations of Priest’s *Tàisui* 太岁), I looked for instances when there were obvious differences in sentence structure or word choice.

For each section of this analysis, based on the content of the subsection, I include (1) the original Chinese quote (2) any translations/translator’s notes/footnotes (3) my translations accompanied with analysis. My own translations exist to clarify the work of the fan translators. Based on the translations I have collected and my analysis of them, I think some conclusions can be made about the translation conventions of fan translators, their process, and their limits. Through analyzing these web novels, I discovered variations in how fan translators approach translating culturally-specific terms, names, and titles. There is variation in the culturally-specific terms, but not as much as I originally thought. When new translators ‘pick up’ a novel, they

sometimes hesitate to challenge the previous translations. Any changes they make will be easily noticed by the reader, especially in the context of *xianxia* novels, which have various magical items, weapons, cultivation terms, fictional place names, etc., carried throughout the text. I point out that fan translators may sometimes end up with the same results when translating culturally-specific terms, but there are common differences; however, such as the choice of phonetic translation versus methods like rendition. Sometimes more creativity is needed, such as in the translation of titles, and homophones, and sometimes needing to translate phrases in which knowing the shape of the original Chinese characters may impact the reader's understanding. Furthermore, I noted the two aspects within these translations that I argue could be considered flaws throughout these fan translations, which are a tendency to leave out words and phrases from the original, and a lack of clarity and grammar accuracy.

Translation Variation

During the process of analyzing these *xianxia* web novels, I compared each translation to the original, and then analyzed each for grammar and vocabulary. I found variation in almost every example. Of course, some translations are the same or similar across every translation. For example, in the world of fan translation, the original translation of a novel holds a certain level of dominance. Also, the variation of culturally-specific terms occurs less frequently, likely because of the research people do, the help they get from the community, and the thought they put into these translations. Also, names are generally translated phonetically in the world of fan translation, which leaves less room for variation. Nonetheless, the

world-building terms and grammar of Chinese *xianxia* web novels are difficult to translate, so every translation has many differences between them.

Translation Variation: Transitioning to a New Translator

Community translation works in many ways among the fan translation community. I have mentioned fan translation groups, the dropping and continuation of novels, multiple translations, the interaction of readers, etc. When novels are “dropped,” and then picked up by another translator, the new person must decide whether or not to keep previous translations consistent, as one would if a single person translated a piece of text. In the context of translating *xianxia* novels, this means making decisions on how to translate various magic and cultivation terms, sect names, weapons, fictional creatures and places, etc. These decisions matter because readers will continue the previous translation, and any changes may be confusing. So, translators rarely decide to challenge previous work done on a novel explicitly. They are unlikely to say that previous translation decisions made on various culturally-specific terms were completely incorrect. When a new translator picks up a novel, they tend to have one of a few different takes. The first one is that they will completely accept something that the previous translator has done, as Mikan of Orange Translations did with the title of *Chuān chéng pàohuī zhī fǎnpài yǎng chéng jìhuà* 穿成炮灰之反派养成计划 [*Transmigrating into a Mob Character to Rehabilitate the Villian Plan*]. “Hopefully someone other than Hamlin enjoys this translation of Villain Rehabilitation Plan, as the previous translator nicknamed it!” (Makan, “VRP - Volume 02 Chapter 01”) So, although they published their own translation, even if components of the original (the original one being from a translator with the internet name ThisisBanana in this example) are not carried across from the next translation, the translator will not challenge it. In

other ways of responding to a previous translation, translators may either ignore it or somehow object to a previous translation in the form of a footnote.

For this example, while translating chapter one of *Qiú mó 求魔* [*Beseech The Devil*], the three different translators that worked on this novel came up with different decisions for an English translation of the term *Wū lóng xián* “乌龙涎” [Black Dragon’s Saliva].

“阿公推算的果然准确, 今天真有乌龙涎!” (Ērgēn 耳根)

“Oolong saliva” (Seaweed)

“Saliva of the Black Dragon” (Wuxiwish)

“Wu Long’s Saliva” (PiggyBottle)

Piggy bottle: (TLN: I believe it was originally translated as black dragon’s saliva by the first translator, but I personally choose to leave it as Wu Long, because of the Wu Long Tribe and the fact that 乌 (Wu) and 黑 (Hei) both mean black when translated.)

(TLN: Imagine a dripping stalactite)

These three examples are from chapter one of the novel. Therefore, this is not an example of a novel being dropped and picked back up, so keeping the translation consistent matters less. However, thinking in the context of the internet and fan translation, and since so few people publish full translations of these novels, the first translation tends to carry a certain amount of dominance. In this example from *Qiú mó*, only one of the translators, Piggybottle, expressed a disagreement with the original translation of “乌龙涎.” When these disagreements/changes do occur; however, it is not for the sake of being contrary, but rather as a stylistic choice, to differentiate between various other terms in the novel, for the sake of clarifying something wrong. Within the *xianxia* genre, each novel contains dozens of world-building terms to make decisions on, and people are passionate about these novels, so variation is inevitable.

Translation Variation: Culturally-Specific Terms versus Grammar

Earlier in the paper, I discussed the existence of culturally-specific terms within *xianxia* novels and Chinese novels. Due to the difficulty in translating these terms, I expected to find a large variation in the final products. I have found that while there is variation in the culturally specific terms, these variations sometimes are not as obvious as the variations in grammar. Three translation groups contributed to the translation of *Yīniàn yǒnghéng* 一念永恒 [*A Will Eternal*] by Ěrgēn 耳根, including Deathblade from Wuxiaworld, ameryedge from Xianxia Universe, and Xianxia Tales. The following are three translations of the same passage, with the original Chinese text they reference at the top.

“气脉常在，就是紫气驭鼎功修炼到第一层的表现，也代表了达到那什么凝气第一层！” (Ěrgēn 耳根, “Dì sì zhāng liàn líng.”)

“A permanent qi vessel,” he thought excitedly. “That’s the sign that I’ve successfully cultivated the first level of the Violet Qi Cauldron Control Art! It also means that I’ve reached that, what’s it called...? The first level of Qi Condensation!” (Deathblade, “A Will Eternal - Chapter 4: Spirit Enhancement.”)

“Qi meridians will always exists, so reaching the first layer in this Violet Qi Cauldron Technique cultivation also means that I have reached the first layer of Qi Condensation!” (Xianxia Tales, “Chapter 4 - Spirit Refinement.”)

“Maintaining a stream of Qi, this is the Violet Qi Cauldron Technique first stage’s effect. This also means that I have reached the first stage of Qi Condensing!” (Ameryedge, “A Thought Through Eternity: Chapter 4 - Spirit Refinement.”)

“Maintaining a stream of energy shows I have successfully cultivated to the first level of the Violet Energy Cauldron Technique, and also means I have reached the first level of Energy Condensing!” (Hoesly, Translation)

First, the word *qì* 气 was kept in pinyin for all three examples. The character *qì* 气 seems to be conventionally translated phonetically across fan translations, so they all stuck to that

translation convention. They all reached similar or the same translations for the phrase *Zǐ qì yù dǐng gōng xiūliàn* 紫气驭鼎功修炼. They all arrived at the “Violet Qi Cauldron Technique,” therefore all three translators had the same interpretation of the words *zǐ* 紫 ‘purple’/’violet’, *qì* 气 ‘air’/’vital energy’, and *dǐng* 鼎 ‘cauldron’. They also translated “Qi Condensation” 凝气, in the same way.

There are multiple reasons why the translations of culturally-specific terms could be similar. First, I want to point out that people may look at others' translations to get direction for their translations. I have mentioned how translators will ‘drop’ novels or ‘pick up’ novels after other translators. To do that, they must know what is going on with the books they are interested in. Consistency in how specific things are translated eliminates confusion for the readers.

Another possible option is that perhaps since these terms are novel to the translator, they were forced to put more intellectual labor into translating them. As seen in the footnotes and translator’s notes to the readers, translators provide more commentary on individual words, not grammar. Suppose everyone collectively takes more time to consider the different definitions of the term and the context it is being used. In that case, they might be more likely to agree on a “standard” definition for that term.

These three translations also contain differences. For the phrase *qì mài cháng zài* 气脉常在, the translations from Deathblade, Xianxia Tales, and Ameryedge said, “A permanent qi vessel”; “Qi meridians will always exist”; and “Maintaining a stream of Qi” respectively. Deathblade saw this as a noun phrase, Xianxia Tales interpreted it as an entire sentence, and Ameryedge saw it as a verb phrase. The exact phrasing of *qì mài* 气脉 could be up for more debate, but *cháng* 常 means ‘constant’ or ‘always’, and *zài* 在 means ‘to exist’ or ‘be present’. No matter what one interprets *qì mài* 气脉 to be (a qi vessel, qi meridians, a stream of qi, or a stream of energy), we

know that this entire thing cannot be a noun phrase, because 常 is an adverb, 在 is a verb or preposition, and *qì mài* 气脉 is a noun.

To sum up, although the exact wording of these phrases was not the same, the main difficulty in translating these quotes lies not necessarily in the vocabulary, but in translating how a word functions within the sentence. Based on some of the examples I have seen, translators of the *xianxia* genre do well with – or put more time and research into – translating individual words, then struggle with the next step of understanding how it fits within the larger sentence. That being said, patterns still appear throughout the different *xianxia* translations that show differences in the translation of world-building terms.

Translation Variation: Culturally-Specific Terms

As a whole, the basic translation of individual words is not a problem, but there are patterns of clear differences in the translation of culturally specific terms. There is one common difference that I saw the most often. When there is variation in the translation of culturally specific terms, it is often the difference between leaving it in pinyin and translating it. We saw this earlier with Enxiao and K.san translating the location *Yúnshēn bùzhī chù* 云深不知处 as the Cloud Recesses and the other as Yun Shen Buzhi Chu. When the translators Echosresound of Moonlit Grove and Chrysanthemum Garden translated the phrase *Líng xiāo diàn* 凌霄殿 (a location in the novel *Táohuā zhài* 桃花债 [*Peach Blossom Debt*]), Echosresound interpreted it as “Palace Above the Clouds,” and Padam of Chrysanthemum Garden interpreted it as Ling Xiao Hall, keeping it in pinyin.⁶

Other times differences are more obvious. In the case of the example below from *Mó zūn yě xiǎng zhīdào* 魔尊也想知道 [*Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know*] by Cyan Wings 青色羽翼

⁶ See Dàfēng Guāguò. “Chapter 2: Guǎng xū yuán jūn.”; Echosresound. “A Debt of Peach Blossoms.”; Padam. “Peach Blossom Debt: Chapter 2.”

and translations from Lajna of On Time Story and Mourningcrow, these differences are in how they interpreted an object and two characters' names.

钟离谦对闻人厄点点头，有同心蛊制衡，他必须跟百里轻淼回到上清派，有他在，百里轻淼不会有性命之忧。(Qīngsè yǔyì, “43, Fén tiānxiān zūn.”)

“Zhong Liqian nodded to Wen Renhe, their compulsion Gu who provided balance so he must return to Shanqing Sect with Baili Qingmiao. With him around, Baili Qingmiao will not need to worry about her life.” (Lajna. “Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know - Chapter 43 - Burning Heaven Immortal.”)

“Zhongli Qian gave Wenren È a nod. With the influence of the Heart-Linking Parasite, he had to return to Shangqing Sect with Baili Qingmiao. With him there, Baili Qingmiao wouldn't face any threats to her life.” (Mourningcrow. “Chapter 43 – Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know.”)

“Zhong Liqian nodded to Wen Ren'e. To have an equilibrium of the Heart-Linking Parasite, he must return to the Shanqing Sect with Baili Qingmiao. With him there, Baili Qingmiao will not face anything life-threatening.” (Hoesly, Translation)

The main phrase in question here is *tóngxīn gǔ zhìhéng* 同心蛊制衡. Lajna interpreted this as “their compulsion Gu who provided balance,” whereas Mourningcrow interpreted it as “the influence of the Heart-Linking Parasite”. The words within this phrase are *tóngxīn* 同心 ‘united,’ ‘to be of one mind/heart’; *gǔ* 蛊 [archaic], ‘legendary venomous insect,’ ‘to poison,’ ‘to bewitch’; and *zhìhéng* 制衡 ‘checks and balances.’ The character *gǔ* 蛊 seems to be the most difficult here, as it not only has little connection with the words around it but is also an uncommonly used word. It is an archaic noun related to poison, black magic, and a legendary venomous insect that the author used in a new way to build the world of their novel.

Another difference between these two translations is that despite both taking the same approach of translating the characters' names phonetically, the results are different. Lajna's translation of 钟离谦 was Zhong Liqian, and Mourningcrow's was Zhongli Qian. Lajna's translation of 闻人厄 was Wen Renhe, and Mourningcrow's was Wenren È. Generally, Chinese

names go last name, first name. If a name consists of three characters, the first one would be the last name, and the second two, the first. Following this logic, and following the fan translator's convention of translating names phonetically, the first character's name should be Zhōng Líqiān, and the second character, Wén Rén'è. The variation in translation of names and titles is a matter that we see quite a bit of variation in, as will be explained in the next section.

Translating Names and Titles

Names

Throughout the different translations of these web novels, you can see a variety in the approaches translators take in translating names and titles. One can see how the Chinese language and *xianxai* genre can complicate the translation of these phrases. In the book *Mó zūn yě xiǎng zhīdào* 魔尊也想知道 [*Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know*] by Cyan Wings 青色羽翼 (Qīngsè yǔyì), there is a character named 宿槐. In chapter 43 of this novel, the two translators working on this novel provide two different translations. Like translators usually do with the names of characters in Chinese web novels, the translators took the phonetic approach to translate 宿槐, and simply converted the name to pinyin. However, Lajna from On Time Story translated 宿槐 to Xiu Huai, and Mourningcrow translated 宿槐 as Su Huai, so the character 宿 was interpreted in two different ways. Among the possible interpretations for this character include sù 'to stay overnight,' 'old,' or 'former'; xiù 'constellation'; and xiǔ, a classifier for nights. Chinese characters do not give any indication of pronunciation, so when determining how to translate a character's name and are presented with a character that has multiple options, translators either have to guess or go with the one that seems to have a deeper meaning.

A trait that many characters have in these xianxia novels is that they have not only names but also titles. These titles usually relate to their status and/or special abilities and qualities that these characters have. For an example of the difference between the two, the main character of the web novel *Táohuā zhài* 桃花债 [*Peach Blossom Debt*] is formerly named Sòng Yáo 宋珧. Once they became immortal, they received the title of Guǎng xū yuán jūn 广虚元君, as explained in chapter 2. Echosresound translated the title of this character as ‘Lord of Open Virtue.’ The translator Padam from Chrysanthemum Garden translated it as Guang Xu Yuangjun.⁷

Translators usually identify them correctly, but differentiating between names and titles, and keeping track of multiple names for each character can be difficult. The translator Rosana from the translation site Chrysanthemum Garden noted this issue when the novel *Mó jūn zǒng yǐwéi wǒ ànliàn tā* 魔君总以为我暗恋他 [*The Demon Lord Always Thinks I’m Secretly in Love with Him*] was passed onto their group. “The previous belief that the Demon King’s name is Yong Ye is incorrect. Yong Ye actually means ‘Eternal Night’ and is part of the Demon King’s title as the Demon King of Eternal Night. His actual Name is Ji Xi Xuan.” (Rosana. “Chapter 7: The Demon King Always Thinks I’m Secretly In Love With Him.”) Differentiating between the names and titles is important in the *xianxia* genre for two reasons. (1) Names are given to characters at birth, and titles relate to their skills and status. Other characters’ use of them helps to determine relationship dynamics. (2) If a translator does not know that a character has both a name and a title, they may get the impression that the name and title refer to two different characters.

⁷ They also included a footnote that said “First Lord of Infinite Void, Yuanjun can be translated into primordial lord/first lord.” However, the phonetic translation was maintained throughout the text.

Titles

Translating the titles of books and chapters comes with a unique set of difficulties. Many Chinese characters have multiple definitions. Context can be essential in coming to an accurate translation. Titles stand on their own and may contain deeper meanings that are not clarified by the content of the chapter. Of course, sometimes it is fairly straightforward. Chapter 8 of *Fèi chái yào nì tiān: Mó dì kuáng fēi* 废柴要逆天：魔帝狂妃 [*The Good-For-Nothing Defies the Natural Order: Demon Emperor's Wild Consort*], seemed this way, as shown in the shared translations by timebun of Volarenovels and EndlessFantasy Translation. They both translated *Shàngǔ fènghuáng, zǐ xié* 上古凤凰，紫邪 into “Ancient Phoenix, Zixie.”⁸ They both identified “上古” as meaning ‘ancient times’ or ‘antiquity,’; “凤凰” as meaning ‘phoenix’; and “紫邪” as a character name.

Translating titles has an element of artistic interpretation that leads to variation. On one hand, translators want to be accurate. On the other hand, titles are supposed to draw readers in and encapsulate the contents of the entire chapter. While Timebun and EndlessFantasy Translation had the same translations for Chapter 8, there were different translations between them for Chapter 10. Chapter 10 was titled *Dì 10 zhāng liàndān (yī)* 第10章 炼丹（一） [Chapter 10: Refining Immortality Pills (1)]. Timebun translated it as Chapter 10: Refining Pills (1). EndlessFantasy Translation interpreted it as The Art of Refining Pills (1). Timebun translated it to function as a verb and EndlessFantasy as a noun. While EndlessFantasy Translation’s title sounds better, it isn’t correct. The words *liàndān* 炼丹 literally translate to ‘to refine’ 炼 and ‘pellet/powder’ 丹. This verb refers to a Taoist practice of trying to make pills of immortality. If one wrote it as ‘The Art of Refining Pills,’ the title would likely be 炼丹术, with the final word,

⁸ See Xiāo Qīyè, “8. Dì 8 zhāng Shàngǔ Fènghuáng, Zǐ Xié 1”; Timebun, “Chapter 8: Ancient Phoenix, Zixie (1)”; Endless Fantasy Translation, “Chapter 8: Ancient Phoenix, Zixie (1)”

shù 术, meaning ‘technique’ or ‘art’. This example shows how tiny differences can change the translations in the titles.

Dictionaries are extremely useful tools for translators and can clarify many puzzling phrases, but it certainly doesn’t tell you which of the many ways a word is being used. When unsure of the definition of a word, and a dictionary is not helping them, translators often turn to context clues for a final decision. However, sometimes this method is not possible, which can lead to some problems. The most obvious type of situation that this might happen is when translating a title. The title for chapter 11 of *Módào zǔshī* 魔道祖师 [*The Founder of Demonic Cultivation*], Yǎ sāo “雅骚” is translated as “Refinement” by Exiled Rebels; and is translated as “Elegant Disturbance” by Enxiao. Since Enxiao did not know how to translate the title, they went for a direct translation of each character as the title. Yǎ “雅” means “elegant” and sāo “骚” means “disturb(ed)” or “upset.” In a footnote at the end of Enxiao’s translation, they say: “(1) 雅骚. I do a lot of my translating based on context clues. With titles like this, I have to just make a wild guess. If someone has a better suggestion, please let me know.” For this example, we can see how people in the comments section try to help the translators as well. In the comments section, someone tried to answer Enxiao’s question.

佳文

December 28, 2017 AT 8:19 PM

haha

Actually there

But Thanks for the chapter.

雅骚 It is likely to be a word invented by the author 墨香铜臭. Or she wanted to use 骚雅 meaning casual and elegant? But I guess It has same meaning, similar to elegant.

the tilte is 雅骚第四 should be use to describe 羨羨. And in the last chapter, It says 魏无羨在世家公子品貌里排名第四。

I Love the author 墨香铜臭 very much

As pointed out by the commenter Jiāwén 佳文, 雅騷 isn't actually a "real" word, but a word made up by the author. 騷雅 is a real word, which is why Jiāwén said that perhaps the author wanted to say that. “魏无羨在世家公子品貌里排名第四。” This means “Wei Wuxian ranked fourth in appearance among the sons of the family.” “羨羨” refers to his personal name. In this chapter, the character, Wèi wúxiàn 魏无羨, causes a disturbance when he arrives at the Cloud Recesses. Since he is also considered good-looking, perhaps the author is referring to him as an elegant disturbance. This example shows the creativity of Chinese authors as they build their worlds, the creativity and struggles of fan translators, and the potential helpfulness of the readers.

Creative Translation

No matter what languages one is working with within the field of translation, there will be elements that don't transfer well. There will be words and messages that will be hard to convey to the new audience, simply due to the incompatibility of the languages. Furthermore, as we just saw, some authors will completely make up new words. In the case of Chinese, there are two elements I wish to discuss in this section. (1) phonetics, usually the various homophones. (2) The intricacies of the writing system. Authors like to play with words to make their writing more interesting, but it is difficult to render this in English. Fan translators, despite understanding what is going on, usually have no other choice but to explain to the readers what is going on.

Translating Homophones

The Chinese language is limited in its phonetic variation. When tonal differences are ignored, there are about 400 Mandarin syllables. If one brings in the tonal aspect of the language, there are still only about 1,200 syllable types, which is extremely small compared to languages such as English (English has about 8,000 syllable types). The result of this is that there are many homophones within Mandarin (Lin 27-29). Depending on the context in which they are written/spoken, words can be assigned with different definitions and pronunciations. Chinese writers often build these homophones meaningfully into their writing. In which case, translators have to explain how the language is functioning. The web novel author Diànxian 电线 played with homophones in chapter 4 of their novel *Xiāng mì chénchén jìn rú shuāng* 香蜜沉沉烬如霜 [*Heavy Sweetness Ash-Like Frost*].

“狐狸仙又来执了我的手道：“不知锦觅仙童名讳中的mi可是‘蜜糖’的‘蜜’？”我说：“非也非也。”“那是哪个蜜呢？”狐狸仙问得恳切。我正待回复，凤凰却不甚耐烦，插道：“想是‘寻觅’的‘觅’吧。”“非也，乃是‘觅食’的‘觅’。”我郑重其事地纠正他，虽然同字，但意义才是重点。”(Diànxian)

“The Fox grabbed my hand again and said, “The Mi in your name, is the *mi* in sweet honey? [i.e. mi tang].”, I was just about to answer when Phoenix cut in impatiently, “It must be the *mi* in search [i.e. xun mi], right?”, “Not so. It’s the *mi* in forage [i.e. mi shi].” I corrected solemnly. While true that the *mi* in forage and the *mi* in search share the same character, their definitions are meaningfully different.” (Jennyfur)

“The fox immortal also grasped my hand and said: “Is the word ‘Mi’ in the young immortal Jin Mi’s name the ‘Mi’ in ‘honey’?, I was just about to answer when that Phoenix impatiently interrupted: “I think it’s probably the ‘Mi’ in ‘search’.”, “No, it is the ‘Mi’ in ‘looking for food’ [2].” I corrected him with all seriousness. Even though it is the same character, the important thing is the meaning of the word.” (Xiaoyuer)

Xiaoyuer footnotes: [1] Chinese: 月下仙人, direct translation is ‘the Immortal Under the Moon’[2] The ‘Mi’ in ‘search’ (寻觅) and the ‘Mi’ in ‘looking for food’ (觅食) is the same ‘Mi’ (觅), but the ‘Mi’ (蜜) in

‘honey’ (蜜糖) is a different character.[3] *yin* is from 3 to 5 AM, *mao* is from 5 to 7 AM[4] The rosefinch (zhuque) and pig (zhu) have similar sounding names.

“The Fox immortal grasped my hand again and said, “Is the ‘mi’ in the young immortal Jin Mi’s name the ‘mi’ in ‘mi tang’ [honey]? I said, “No, it’s not.” “Then which ‘mi’ is it?” The Fox asked earnestly. I was about to answer, when the Phoenix impatiently cut in, “I think it is the ‘mi’ in ‘xun mi’ [search].” “It’s not. It is the ‘mi’ in ‘mi shi,’ [forage]” I seriously corrected him. “Although they share the same character, the important thing is the meaning.” (Hoesly, Translation)

As pointed out in the notes of the translators, the manipulated syllable here is the sound ‘mi,’ which is the personal name of the main character. As the Fox 狐狸 and Phoenix 凤凰 discuss the name of the main character, Jin Mi 锦觅, they are asking about which ‘mi’ is in her name. Names are supposed to contain special meanings that bring people luck, strength, and fortune throughout their lives. By figuring this out, they can figure out, and the readers can figure out, what her name is supposed to say about her. All three words that they suggest, mìtáng ‘蜜糖,’ xùnmì ‘寻觅,’ and mìshí ‘觅食’ include a fourth-tone mi syllable. The difference in these words is fairly obvious when reading the characters in Chinese, but if a Chinese speaker hears mi by itself, they wouldn’t be able to say with certainty which one they heard without context. That is why, when figuring out the question of which ‘mi’ her name consists of, the method of the two other characters is to put ‘honey’ 蜜 and ‘to look’ 觅 into the context of other words until reaching the correct answer.

However, while this works well for Chinese readers, who likely see the characters and understand the wordplay that is going on, the same is not true for the readers of the translated

text. In addition, even if the ones reading the translation do have knowledge of the Chinese language, that doesn't mean they have access to the original text. For fan translators to effectively translate passages that play with homophones, they need to include both pinyin and a Chinese-English translation within the text. First, they need to convey to the reader which sounds are being repeated with the use of phonetic translation. They should also provide an actual translation to not leave the reader in the dark about what is being said.

Translating the Writing System

The other thing Chinese-English translators sometimes have to do is try to convey the meaning of phrases that relate to or play with the physical characteristics of Chinese characters. The Chinese written language is not made up of an alphabet and is instead made up of characters, all of which are composed with combinations of the same ~200 radicals. The differences between characters can be very small at a glance. The difference can be as small as one stroke, like the characters pīng and pāng 乒乓球 in pīngpāngqiú [ping-pong]. When referencing written works in their novels, Chinese authors sometimes mention the physical characteristics of the writing, like the number or shape of the characters. Also, with a language that can have differences as small as a single stroke, it can be easy to make mistakes. Chinese authors sometimes like to write these types of “mistakes” into their novels as elements to make the story more interesting. This brings a new challenge to translators since the Chinese writing system is so unique, and describing it to readers in English would not reflect the experience that readers of the original novel get. When Fuyu Neko translated chapter 143 of *Miāo miāo miāo* 喵喵喵 [Meow Meow Meow] by Júhuā Sǎn Lǐ 橘花散里, they encountered this small challenge.

呃……似乎是我将竹子写得分太开了，又将管字写错了，不过没关系！这些都是小问题，舞蹈叫什么名字都没关系！(ǔ huā sàn lǐ. “Dì yībǎi wǔshísì zhāng gè gè guān wǔ.”)

“Eh... it seems as if I had written the word ‘bamboo’ too far apart and the word ‘pole’ was written completely wrong. But, its okay! This is only a small problem. It doesn’t matter what the dance is called.”

“(T/N: This is what Miao Miao intended to write 竹管. This is what her words looked like 个个官.)” (Fuyu Neko. “Meow Meow Meow Chapter 143.”)

“Eh...it seems that I wrote the word ‘bamboo’ too far apart and the word ‘pole’ was written wrong. But, it’s okay! These are all only small issues, the name of the dance doesn’t matter!” (Hoesly, Translation)

The said challenge I am referring to is making the reader understand what is going on with 竹管 and 个个官. Within the story, the character Miao Miao signs up to perform a dance. She intends to call her dance 竹管, which would mean ‘bamboo pole’ dance. However, the character for ‘bamboo’ 竹, gets broken up and turned into the two-character phrase ‘each and every’/‘one by one’ 个个. Also, she incorrectly writes the word ‘pole’ 管, by leaving the top radical out, so it gets turned into ‘official’ 官. The challenge here is not capturing the meaning of the author. Rather, it is conveying to the reader what Miao Miao’s problem is since it is impossible to understand the specific mistakes she made when writing the characters if readers can’t see said characters. This is another instance where fan translators usually use added explanations to explain what is going on.

Flaws in Fan Translations

The *xianxia* novels I’ve analyzed have variations throughout that reveal patterns in the processes and conventions of fan translations. However, I would not say that any one of these

translations are completely perfect or flawed, or that there is obvious evidence showing that fan translators completely fail to translate culturally-specific and world-building terms. From the start of my analysis I pointed out the variation in these translations, the work fan translators put into them, and how many of these terms can be up for debate. All of that being said, there are two patterns I noted that affect the quality of fan translations, including missing phrases and issues with grammar and clarity.

Missing Phrases

There are sometimes pieces of the original text missing from the translation. Untranslated words or phrases have occurred across multiple translators and books in my analysis. Skipping these words and phrases is likely to be a mistake, but for some translators, it is a choice. For example, in chapter 11 of *Módào zǔshī* 魔道祖师 [*The Founder of Demonic Cultivation*], the first sentence was missing in one of the two translations.

蓝氏仙府坐落于姑苏城外一座深山之中。错落有致的水榭园林里，常年有山岚笼罩着延绵的白墙黛瓦，置身其中，仿若置身仙境云海。 (Mò Xiāng Tóngxiù)

The residence of the Lan sect was located in a remote mountain outside the city of Gusu. (K.san)

Water pavilion gardens lay scattered in an irregular arrangement with charming effect. (Enxiao)

In a case such as this, likely, Enxiao skipping the translation of the first line was likely a mistake on their part. It is possible that they used machine translation and the first line didn't make it over to the software they used. It is also possible that they thought the first line was an author's note or something like that. Or, in the case of novels like this one, there is one more possibility. The site that 魔道祖师 [*The Founder of Demonic Cultivation*] was originally published on was Jinjiang, which is a web novel publishing site that has undergone a lot of censorship recently. Many of its web novels, including this one, have had their links taken down

(Wang 142-145; Jinjiang, “Jinjiāng Zhènggǎi Shēngmíng”). Translators have to go to other websites to find the original story. As mentioned previously, dozens of such websites exist, and many of them are fine. Even so, there are websites with incomplete chapters.

When missing phrases come in the middle of a chapter, it seems much less likely to be a mistake and more of a choice. If we go back to chapter 43 of *Mó zūn yě xiǎng zhīdào* 魔尊也想知道 [*Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know*], we will see another example of a missing phrase.

她是打算将宿槐当成冥火坛坛主培养的, 至于师从心, 管他去死. (青色羽翼)
 “She planned to train Xiu Huai as a master of Underworld Fire Alter.” (Lajna)

“She had been planning to raise Su Huai as the next Master of the Hellfire Pavilion—to hell with Shi Congxin.” (Mourningcrow)

“She planned to train Su Huai to become the Master of the Underworld Fire Alter – as for Shi Congshi, he can go to hell.” (Hoesly, Translation)

Lajna from On Time Story either decided not to or made the mistake of not translating the phrase 至于师从心, 管他去死, which roughly translates to “*as for Shi Congshi, he can go to hell*”. This example could also be argued to be (1) a careless mistake, (2) Lajna thought the sentiment was already implied (3) laziness, or (4) they thought it was an unnecessary detail.

Some translators purposely leave out details in their translations. A translator for the web novel *Dà shèng chuán* 大圣传 [*Legend of The Great Sage*], Ohdamndone, said in a footnote for their translation of chapter 122 that they would purposefully cut out certain details.

T/N: Hi all, I am a great fan of the novel direction this story is heading with cultivation, but my translations may become slightly unorthodox. I hope to cut down on the descriptive details that are constantly repeated and found in the novel so that I can boost my translation speed. If a lot of you feel it undermines the story then I'll bring them back. I hope you enjoyed the chapter regardless!

The translator mentions that their purpose for cutting down “constantly repeated” descriptive details is to boost translation speed. A part of their wanting to boost translation speed could be the possible monetary gain in putting out consistent translations. I have mentioned multiple times that the vast majority of fan translators make little money off of their translations. But, that doesn’t mean they don’t make any money off of them. If one goes to Ohdamndone’s current blog (the footnote source comes from their Wix site they no longer use), ohdamndone.blogspot.com, there is an option to donate, as well as ads covering the front page. Consistent translations will attract more fans, as well as keep the faith of the old ones, making them more likely to donate. They also mention that they will bring them back if the audience responds negatively to their choice, so they are making some choices based on what they think the audience desires, rather than what they think the original author Dream Teller 说梦者 wanted to convey.

Grammar and Clarity

Among the flaws that people often mention when they discuss their issues with fan translations are the grammar and clarity of the final products. Besides complaining about various plot points and characters, readers sometimes complain about the readability of a translation. Combining all of the elements of fan translators using various software as translation tools, lacking translation experience, and the vast differences in Chinese and English, there will be some translations that fail in their effort to strike a balance between faithful to the original and readable to the new audience. Also, unless they are a part of a larger translation group, they generally lack an editor to help them work out final issues. In many cases, if they encounter problems due to specific conflicting grammar patterns, vocabulary, etc., and the translation sounds odd, a note or footnote may be added next to the problematic phrase to clarify the

meaning. However, this generally is not the case with translations that have questionable grammar throughout. An example of including a translator’s note that clarifies meaning due to grammar mistakes comes from ThisisBanana’s translation of *Xiān liāo wèi jìng*’s 先撩为敬 [*Let Me Tease You*] chapter 1. For some context of this quote, this novel is one in which transmigration is a major plot point. After transmigrating, the main character Jiyuan is told by a voice called the ‘System’ in his head that his soul will be destroyed if he doesn’t do what he is told.

“迷信，什么因为命格奇异，不扮女装就会夭折，身为社会主义接班人，我能粉碎这个设定吗？” (Qīng Duān 青端, “Chapter 1: Rùjú”)

“Superstition. What with the ‘because there are strange signs calculated in life, if don’t act like a female, will die’? As someone who adhere to socialism, can I abolish this setting?” [T/N : Sentence might sound a bit weird because I was trying to make it as short as possible for the impact. The word calculated means fortune-seller foreseen death in the future and recommended raising as different gender to confuse/escape fate :v] (This is Banana. “*Xiān liāo wèi jìng* Let me tease you – Chapter 1.”)

The “weirdness” that they are referring to in the translator’s note is the grammar particles they cut out for the sake of impact. Also, their first line, “because there are strange signs calculated in life,” came out especially strange. My translation would be, “Superstition. What is with the ‘because fate is strange, if I don’t play the part of the female I will die young’? As someone who comes from socialism, can I smash this setting?” They talk about the word calculated meaning “fortune-seller foreseen death in the future” in the context of this chapter. The character they seem to be referring to here is *gé* 格, but 格 does not mean calculated. It has many meanings, including being a grammar case particle, ‘frame,’ ‘standard,’ ‘grid,’ ‘pattern,’ ‘to hinder,’ etc. But ‘calculated’ is not among them. It is supposed to be together in a unit as *mìnggé* 命格, which just means fate. I think the translator got the sentiment of the translation

correct, but since they left out basic English grammar particles for the sake of the effect, and also misinterpreted some of the text, they affected the reader's understanding of the text.

I will counter this by saying that regardless of the gripes that people have with these translations, we can still see that some of these grammar issues come with fan translators trying to adhere to the grammar of the Chinese language. This shows the level of effort they put into their work. In Bonbon's translation of *Chuān chéng pàohuī zhī fǎnpài yǎng chéng jìhuà* 穿成炮灰之反派养成计划 [*Transmigrating into a Mob Character to Rehabilitate the Villian Plan*], there is an eight-word phrase. Within their translator's note, they mention they were translating an eight-character phrase.

“当他搜索作者专栏,这才发现作者已经封笔了, 专栏上只留下八个大字——累感不爱, 江湖拜拜!” (Shā xiǎowán. “Chuān chéng pàohuī zhī fǎnpài yǎng chéng jìhuà: 54 Dì yī zhāng.”)

“He then searches the author's blog, only to find the author's post leaving only eight big words. TIRED AND NOT FEELING THE LOVE, BYE-BYE WORLD!”

T/N Its an actual 8 Chinese characters and I did my best translating it in exact 8 English words... (Bonbon_BL_Translations. “Volume 3 Chapter 1.”)

“When he searched for the author's blog, he discovered that the author had already stopped writing for good, and on the blog only eight big characters remained – I'm tired and not feeling loved, bye-bye world!” (Hoesly, Translation)

The eight-character phrase is, “累感不爱, 江湖拜拜!” (Lèi gǎn bù ài, jiānghú bàibài!)

The second half of the phrase before that says, “专栏上只留下八个大字。” (Zhuānlán shàng zhǐ liú xià bā gè dàzì) This would translate to, “on the blog only eight big characters remained.” In the original, “累感不爱, 江湖拜拜!” is an eight-character phrase, but it does not necessarily gracefully translate to eight words in English. It would be understandable if it would be too challenging for an amateur translator to do it. On the other hand, if they fail, it is slightly

confusing for the reader. Grammar and clarity can indeed be a problem within the fan translation community. However, occasionally sacrificing it to convey the Chinese language's subtleties helps deepen the reader's understanding of the messages the author wants to convey.

Furthermore, fan translators know about their translations' lack of clarity and grammar accuracy. That is the reason for editors (when people can afford them). Also, dissatisfaction with a translation is one reason that may inspire someone to publish their version of a translation. In a note of WertTranslations wrote for their translation of chapter 1 of *Xiān liāo wèi jìng* 先撩为敬 [*Let Me Tease You*] by Qīng Duān 青端 (they only translated chapter 1), they said they simply translated for the sake of correcting the grammar.

TN: I did this purely on a whim and do not intend to further translate this. I merely did this because I was bored and like correcting grammar. I used Google Translate, Grammarly, and changed some parts to make more sense, so it's not the same in some areas as the original chapter 1 translation. In no way in shape or form am I challenging the translator of this novel for the translation. This took me 5 hours to make so you might as well enjoy reading something with overall perfect grammar.

Through these examples, we can see that although there are difficulties in rendering Chinese grammar and vocabulary into clear English, fan translators try to fix their mistakes and clarify what they are trying to do. After all, the Chinese web novel community exists because the people within it genuinely care about the translation and reading of these novels.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I explored the Chinese web novel industry and analyzed the translations of various *xianxia* 仙侠 novels. My inquiry involved various topics surrounding the different sub-groups of the Chinese web novel community and their interactions. I first explored the history, sub-groups, and unique characteristics of the Chinese web novel industry and how they became popular among Anglophone readers. Also, the processes and dynamics of community fan translation and the search for patterns in the translations. I have found that all of these questions have multiple layers – more than I could go into in this paper, but a few general conclusions can be made.

First, the web novel, written online, started on online forums, before being commodified by Chinese media companies when they saw how popular they were. The rapid commercialization of the web novel has allowed it to rule the literary field in China. The popularity of these novels makes them a symbol of Chinese culture, which increased Chinese media companies' motivation to gain a western audience for more money and influence. Despite their popularity, they are mainly translated by fan translators, as web novels are not considered literature in the traditional sense, companies are reluctant to pay for translators, and fan translators are willing to do it for free. However, Chinese media companies are helping by creating English versions of their Chinese novel hosting platforms, turning novels into films and dramas, etc. However, when talking about making this work accessible to English-speaking audiences, it could be argued that most of the credit should go to fan translators. Fan translators are not considered a part of the professional translation community since they enter the work

purely out of interest, generally do not make money off of their translations, do not always obtain copyright permission, and do not have training. Their type of translation takes the form of community translation, a new style of translation that has emerged in recent years.

Community translation in the web novel community comes in various forms. It includes what one might traditionally think of when someone says the words “community translation,” in that there are groups of translators and editors who work together to translate novels. Some individual translators ask for advice from their readers, making them a part of the process. Finally, novels may be ‘dropped’ and ‘picked up’ by multiple translators throughout the translation process. I chose to analyze novels with multiple translations to simplify the process of finding patterns.

I chose to analyze *xianxia* novels for this thesis for consistency and to try and find patterns in areas where fan translators may struggle. A few general conclusions about web novels, fan translation, and community translation can be made by analyzing these web novels. First, the web novel community changes how people approach translation. People are more engaged with their audience, asking for advice and feedback and interacting with them in the comments. People may cut out details for monetary gain to get translations out faster. In addition, because there are so many web novels and so few translators, people do not want to take the audience of another translator. They usually avoid translating a novel if they know someone else is doing it. The first translation tends to have a certain amount of dominance over those that come after it.

Fan translators have a terrible reputation for their low-quality translations, but this is not true. We can not generalize by saying that all fan translators struggle. As in all things, each fan translator has different background knowledge. However, they seem to all share a love of the content. Regardless of their skill level, they try to remain faithful to the original text. This is

shown in their footnotes and translator's notes, where they explain their choices and discuss their research to understand the various culturally-specific and world-building terms in the text. This is also shown in how they try to translate the various intricacies of the Chinese language, like homophones. The biggest issues in their translations are not individual culturally-specific terms but dealing with the intricacies of grammar, parts of speech, context, and missing phrases, since dealing with culturally-specific terms can usually be dealt with via a dictionary search. When they cannot be, it usually is because they are dealing with a term that the original author created to build up the world in their novel. Although fan translators occasionally struggled with arriving at "perfect" translations in the *xianxia* novels I analyzed in this thesis, we can still see the research and effort they put in, and how fan translators entertain, inform, and bring the web novel community closer together.

For future research, it would be worth looking into how these fan translations and fan translators have impacted readers and their understanding of the Chinese language and culture. Given the *xianxia* genre, all of the explanatory notes, and the common cultural references throughout the novels, it is likely that these novels have made some sort of impact. The impact these novels have on readers is unlike that of which a formal education on the Chinese language and culture education would. Web novels are one of the most popular forms of Chinese pop culture that those outside of China consume. Analyzing readers' reactions to them can help us understand how people think about the Chinese language and culture.

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