The English Translation and Cultural Dissemination of Chinese Web Novels

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Abstract: In the digital age, Chinese web novels, distinguished from the traditional paper-based novels, have become an important genre of Chinese literature. The paper reviews the history of Chinese web novels, and their spread to the world through amateur and professional translation and online publication. From the perspective of cultural dominance and communication, this research examines the translation and proposes different translation strategies for different translation purposes. It concludes that Chinese web novels have a niche market in the West, and domestication is the norm of translation of these web novels targeting the dominating English culture.

Keywords: Chinese web novels, English translation, culture

1. Development and overseas promotion of Chinese web novels

Chinese web novels, started at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, keeping pace with the first wave of Internet development in China. Especially, one type of Chinese web novels, Xianxia or Xuanhuan novel, based on Chinese traditional mythology and martial arts literature (Y. Wang, 2017), has just become popular in recent years after they had been long ignored by the mainstream for a long time due the conservative attitude of the mainstream literature in China. Web novel creators, unfamiliar with the mainstream literary norms, discovered that the Internet is their ideal kingdom. They do not have to follow the old path of newcomers in traditional literature, that is, being forced to accept the rules of the system, genre and ideological trend. In 2003, Qidian.com, China's web novel base camp, established a VIP charging system in which readers are required to pay for access to the updates of certain popular novels (Qidian, 2020). From then on, authors could gain financial rewards within that website, and did not have to go to traditional publishers to sell their creations. These

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writers, mostly born in the 1980s or 1990s, gained their writing inspirations from Chinese classical literature and ACG (Animation, Comic, Game) culture in Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea (Rong, 2017).

In recent years, Chinese electronic literature (or web novel) has been translated and published online for the world to read, so its scale and influence have been further expanded outside of China. According to the *White Paper on the Development of Electronic Literature Going Overseas in 2020*, the overseas market scale of Chinese electronic literature reached 460 million yuan in 2019, and the number of Chinese electronic literature users outside China reached 31.935 million; by 2019, China exported more than 10,000 online works overseas, covering more than 40 countries and regions (Shanghai Observer, 2020). As early as the beginning of 2015, Chinese web novels spread fast in North America. In 2016, there were about 20 active Chinese-to-English web novel translation groups including Wuxiaworld and VolareTranslations. Most of the members were "overseas Chinese" or Chinese language learners from all over the world, especially North America and Southeast Asia (Mo & Chen, 2016). Most translation groups had their own websites to publish their translations. The largest group Wuxiaworld, established in December 2014, has Chinese web novels translated by electronic literature fans. Wuxiaworld's works are mostly translated from Qidian.com's originals — amateurs translate the novels in exchange for fan donations (L. Wang, 2016). Wuxiaworld.com has a large readership, receiving numerous visits every day. According to the Alexa website ranking, on 1 November, 2020, Wuxiaworld ranked 2,473 in global Internet traffic and engagement over the past 90 days. In the global comprehensive ranking, it even surpassed Qidian. Wuxiaworld's readers come from more than 100 countries and regions around the world, and the top five countries with the number of readers are the United States, the Philippines, Canada, Indonesia and the United Kingdom. According to Wuxiaworld's "about" page, the website now has 46 translators in 2020. The mechanism of Wuxiaworld's content output is that the group first finds suitable translators, and then translators choose works for translation. In the process of translation, translators usually form a team with two editors (Wuxiaworld, 2020).

In 2017, Wuxiaworld signed a 10-year cooperation agreement on translation and electronic publishing with Webnovel.com (aka Qidian International). Webnovel.com, an overseas portal of China Literature (Yuewen), is one of the important sources of electronic literature for export, and has expanded its footprint all over the world (Xu, 2019). Wuxiaworld's previous translations have always been in the gray area in the copyrights laws. The founder RWX (aka Jingping Lai) negotiated with Qidian for several months, and finally gave the latter the authorization for publishing the English translation of 20 web novels. Webnovel.com now owns more than 400 English translations of Chinese electronic literature, and more than 44,000 original English works created by over 30,000 overseas writers, with nearly 40 million visitors (Xu, 2019).

Chinese electronic literature has experienced many stages: (1) works were authorized for publication; (2) the overseas portal website Webnovel.com owned by China Literature Group was established; (3) Chinese electronic literature was translated and exported on a large scale, and finally, (4) authors outside China were encouraged to create original

works. Thus, the operation mode of Chinese electronic literature has been brought overseas, and more overseas local high-quality authors have been discovered. The legalization of electronic literature translation means that it has entered the commercial mechanism, and thus has been formally incorporated into China's official grand plan of cultural export. It is reported that China Literature Group will also continue to increase investment and promotion efforts in overseas markets, including arranging overseas exchange trips of well-known authors and the export of film and television dramas, games, and animation.

2. Overseas readers' acceptance of Chinese web novels

Chinese web novels have been discovered by English-speaking readers, mainly due to the active translation and dissemination by young Chinese readers. RWX, the founder of Wuxiaworld, revealed that their fans of Chinese web novels originally came from an English language forum website Spcent, where internet users discussed and translated Chinese martial arts movies and novels. Most of these people are overseas Chinese from America and Southeast Asia who are very interested in Chinese culture. According to RWX, for overseas readers, the most important thing at present is a novelty. These martial arts fantasy novels in China are quite new to foreign readers, the concept of becoming immortals through cultivation does not exist in the West. The translation works by RWX and Wuxiaworld gradually received acceptance by certain groups of overseas readers, just like the acceptance of Japanese culture by Americans, which started from subcultures such as comics and games.

The recognition of Chinese web novels by foreign readers comes from the universal reading "pleasure" of human beings. The pleasure brought by reading electronic literature can be "produced". For example, Xianxia, a typical web novel genre, utilizes a set of writing rules and story development patterns according to humans' desire mode, thinking mode and reading mode. The storyline is usually predictable: at a certain point, the hero and heroine inevitably "encounter"; then, the two have misunderstandings; at a certain point, the enemy is bound to make trouble. This writing, also called "patterned literature", has the "iron law" like that of Hollywood commercial films, which ensures the arousal of readers' emotions. When readers' pleasure in reading is mobilized by the mature narrative structure, it is very common for them to become addicted. So, even if a web novel contains layers of routines and nothing interesting to read, its fans will still not abandon it, and will wait anxiously for anything new to be produced.

Compared with classic Chinese martial arts novels such as *The Magic Blade (tiānyá míngyuè dā),* Chinese web novels are better received by western readers, as they are not so "Chinese". According to translator RWX, the reason behind that is the fact that there is a bigger cultural gap between traditional Chinese martial arts novels and western readers. There are numerous Chinese historical allusions in traditional Chinese martial arts novels, much more than those in Chinese web novels. Novels with fewer Chinese historical allusions tend to be more popular in the western market. Nowadays, many Chinese fantasy novels have incorporated western cultural elements, especially those of game culture, which are familiar to younger people. For example, the popular web novel

Coiling Dragon's character names and story settings are all western. In comparison, another web novel *I Shall Seal the Heavens (Wǒ yù fēng tiān)* is not as western, so new foreign readers are recommended to read *Coiling Dragon* first, then progress into *I Shall Seal the Heavens* which is considered as an upgraded version from the first one in terms of cultural familiarity.

3. Translation of Chinese web novels

Translators have played an important role in promoting web novel. Since 2015, overseas fan communities have spontaneously read and translated Chinese electronic literature. The translation of Chinese web novels includes both manual translation and so-called artificial intelligence (AI) machine translation. In 2019, Webnovel.com started to use AI technology to translate some web content, so translation efficiency has been greatly improved (Mei, 2019). Readers can edit and correct the AI translation during their reading, and the revisions will help the translation model to continuously optimize the effect. The reader-participation translation mode is revolutionary in the translation industry, and its influence is yet to be reviewed in future studies.

For translators of Chinese fantasy novels, it is also a big challenge to accurately and properly translate the terms and proper nouns with Chinese cultural characteristics. According to web novel translators, two things need to be dealt with carefully to produce high-quality readable translation: (1) linguistic form transformation between different languages, and (2) cross-cultural communication. It is always a great challenge for translators to find a balance between conveying the original meaning of Chinese and making translation easy for readers to understand. At present, the translation level of overseas electronic literature is uneven. Some translation contains problems such as missing meanings, inaccurate translation, and even using machine translation without post-editing. Most online translators are in the primary stage, that is, they translate word by word without adapting their translation to the target language context. That kind of translation is not going to meet readers' higher requirements for translation aesthetics as these readers are evolving.

3.1 Translators and their elevated status

Hundreds of translators have been translating Chinese web novels into different languages, mostly English. Taking Webnovel.com as an example, there are currently more than 200 translators and translator groups distributed around the world, especially in North America and Southeast Asia, and more than 200 English translation works have been launched, with a cumulative number of words exceeding 200 million (Liu, 2018). These translators are mainly foreigners (non-Chinese citizens) and often have three characteristics: they are familiar with the culture of English-speaking countries, Chinese tradition and contemporary culture, and electronic literature. One famous translator on Webnovel.com is CKtalon (aka Hongwen Wen), a Singaporean research engineer who graduated as a physics major in an American university. CKtalon has been translating Chinese web novels in his spare time since 2015. As a star translator of Webnovel.com, CKtalon translated a large number of electronic literature works in his spare time, totaling

more than four million words. His representative translations include *Path of Soaring Sword (fēi jiàn wèn dào)* and *True Martial World (zhēnwǔ shìjiè)*. When he was a child, Hongwen Wen learned Chinese from his mother. In November, 2015, Hongwen Wen started the Chinese-English translation of the Chinese fantasy work *True Martial World*. Since then, he translated works in different genres, such as the second dimension, the city, and Xianxia (literally, Immortal Heroes).

The translation reward system adopted by Webnovel.com and Wuxiaworld is actually quite controversial: the money given by the reader goes to the translator, not the author. According to Wuxiaworld's website, most of the translations had actually received translation authorization from the author, so it appears reasonable that the translator receives financial enumeration since the translator has worked. Nevertheless, the biggest controversy in this matter is that copyright holders (authors) do not get any financial benefits from their foreign readers. Wuxiaworld even puts the name of the translator at the top of the introduction of the works. What's more, even many foreign readers have become fans of translators. Therefore, the translator has gained a higher status than before, and the original author has become invisible in this case.

3.2 Innovations in translating words with Chinese Cultural references

To help readers understand words with Chinese cultural references, translators add annotations to the words. With the online platform, annotations are hidden but can be easily accessed with a click of the mouse. According to the translator Hongwen Wen, the aim of translation, is to assist in smooth cultural communication and exchange, so it is necessary to ensure the translation's readability and fluency when transcoding electronic literature (Liu, 2018). One of the major difficulties of translation lies in the accurate translation of "Oriental words" such as jīn dān, yuán shén, and shénxiān. Wen remembered that when he first started translating *True Martial World*, he spent nearly two hours on the translation of each chapter, much longer than he expected. He stated he did not know how to handle those idioms and sayings. Then he discovered the two-pronged approach: translation + annotation. He reviewed a large number of documents, selecting the word with the highest accuracy and acceptance, and then explained it in his translation to help readers understand the story and cultural meanings behind the word. The website allows the translator to annotate a word or sentence on their back end platform, and when it is displayed on the front end, a small gray mark will appear on the right side of the word, and the reader can click it to see the complete explanation. That does not affect the reading experience. Rather, it helps the reader access the annotations. In addition to textual annotation, many translators also use illustrations or videos to make reading more interesting. For example, next to the word "tàijí quán", a video of an old man practicing Tai Chi is accessible for readers. The multimedia usage in translation text is unconventional compared with the traditional book printing.

Besides conveying the original meanings, translators also attempt to transfer the "aesthetic feeling and artistic conception of words" (Liu, 2018). To achieve that, translators may use words containing Greek or Latin prefixes, suffixes, and roots to translate certain Chinese or Buddhist concepts. For example, for the Buddhist term

sānqiān dà shìjiè, translator Wen decided not to use the colloquial version "3000 Great Worlds" preferred by many other translators. Rather, Wen translated it as 'trichiliocosm', a combination of tri- + chilia- + Ancient Greek κόσμος ("world"). For another example, concerning the English transliteration of Chinese words hòutiān and xiāntiān, Wen argued that on the one hand those translations are difficult for English readers to understand, and on the other hand, they lack the concepts of 'before birth' and 'after birth'. So Wen used 'postnatal' and 'connate', formal words containing prefix "post" and "con" and the Latin root "nat" meaning "born".

The translation of electronic literature, different from traditional publishing, requires a suitable content production mechanism to improve its production efficiency. In order to effectively avoid the confusion of translation, after some exploration, Qidian International set up a full-platform vocabulary database and sorted out more than 700 specialized terms. By content, the terminology can be divided into three categories: Oriental fantasy, Xianxia, and city; by type, it can be divided into common words, proverbs, and idioms. In order to standardize and optimize the translation of electronic literature, Hongwen Wen and his translator team established a bilingual glossary for the translation of fantasy works. That is especially necessary, as a web novel is usually very long, containing around 1,000 chapters. A term base will help translators keep their term use and the translation of character names consistent. Meanwhile, on the online forum, there is a special section to introduce the basic concepts of Taoism, for both readers and translators.

3.3 Cultural differences

Certain social values embodied in the Chinese web novels may be considered offensive if they are translated directly without alteration. To ensure the survival of translation, translators may be required to omit or blur those cultural references. For example, derogatory remarks against Japan and South Korea pejorative terms such as "bàngzi" for Korean people and "xiǎo rìběn" for Japanese were found in the novels. Due to the historical conflicts between China and its neighboring countries, Chinese writers may often use those terms in their novels, nevertheless, they are considered racist in the west. In addition, in the novels, there are main characters who are male chauvinists discriminating against women. That also violates the moral values of western readers. In 2020, as the racial tension and class conflicts became more intense in the US, Chinese-style web novels have gradually been resisted by more American readers who perceived sexism and racism in the web novels. The translator may need to alter or edit those parts, so as to keep the new texts in line with the target language readers' values. According to Etvolare, the founder of VolareTranslations (Wu, 2020), many translators she knew were forced to resign from their original companies because the Chinese web novels they were translating aroused strong opposition from Western readers, and many platforms and translation groups are under considerable pressure (Wu, 2020). To get a foothold in the western market, some adjustments and changes in writing or translation may be required.

4. Conclusion

Compared to Chinese classics like *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber,* Chinese electronic literature has a better chance to reach foreign audiences. Though studied much in academia by Asian Studies scholars, those classics have a little market or commercial values in the United States (L. Wang, 2016). Chinese electronic literature has a small market share in the US, that is, it is a niche market, rather than mainstream. For instance, in 2016, translator RWX gained his fame in China, and was interviewed by Chinese media every week for half a year, but he was never interviewed by the American media.

Apart from the fans of Chinese martial arts novels, quite a percentage of western fans did not discover Chinese web novels directly; rather, these readers interested in Asian culture first read Japanese light novels, then they turned to Chinese web novels. Currently, these electronic literary translation works are discovered through word of mouth. Hoping to gain recognition of mainstream American readership, RWX planned to use advertising to expand the influence of Wuxiaworld to the west. In an interview with Mo and Chen (2016), RWX stated that people unfamiliar with Oriental culture are not interested in Chinese electronic literature; after all, they have abundant locally published readings available to them.

China's electronic literature has not reached the influence and dissemination level like that of Japanese animation, American Hollywood blockbusters, and Korean idol dramas. As the earliest cultural product exported from Asia, Japanese animation has accumulated a considerable number of fans in Europe and America. Comparatively speaking, Chinese electronic literature is a new player, trying to attract a larger audience. It is believed by translator Hongwen Wen that it is necessary to localize translations of Chinese web novels. That is, for readers from different regions and countries, Chinese web novels can be adapted so that they can be better understood. Translation works that have value resonance and cultural resonance for the target language readers may become more popular than those that do not. Namely, a translation that is target-culture-oriented survives and prospers better. The translation and spread of Chinese electronic literature may provide a reference for the dissemination of other types of cultural works.

When the Chinese web novels are translated into another language and spread overseas for the "mass culture industry", some elements are discounted in cross-cultural communication. That is to say, "Chinese cultural elements" are lost to a large extent and whatever remains in the translation is absorbed by readers selectively. The "Chinese culture's going abroad" is not as much as what most Chinese people expected. Currently, the translation strategy domestication is recommended and preferred in the translation of Chinese web novels targeted at English speaking countries. It has become a norm of Chinese electronic literature in English. Domestication, a concept proposed by the Italian-American scholar Lawrence Venuti (1995:21), aims to eliminate differences between different languages and cultures so as to ensure target language fluency and smooth reading. If the main goal of the Chinese web novel translation is to disseminate Chinese culture, then foreignization, also called resistancy, is recommended, as this

translation strategy challenges the target-language culture and exerts its "ethnocentric violence" on the English text (Lawrence, 1995:24).

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