

BOOK REVIEW

Two English-Language Translators of Jin Ping Mei: From Lotus to Plum

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As one of the “Four Great Marvellous Works” in China, *Jin Ping Mei* (金瓶梅, hereafter *JPM*) is a seminal work in the history of Chinese literature. It initiated a new era where Chinese literati began independently crafting long-form novels by directly drawing from real-life societal experiences. Within the scope of world literature, *JPM* also exerts a specific influence as its “scope, subtle delineation of character, and elaborate plot will rank with the greatest novels of the West” (Hightower, 1953: 120). Currently, there are several English translations of *JPM*, with two complete translations receiving the most attention. The first is *The Golden Lotus*, translated by Clement Edgerton in 1939, and the second is *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, translated by David Tod Roy in five volumes released from 1993 to 2013.

However, according to Fang et al. (2024), as of the end of 2023, studies focusing on the English translation of *JPM* total only 103. Compared to research on the other three works in the “Four Great Marvellous Works” and other Chinese classical literary works, studies on the English translations of *JPM* remain significantly underdeveloped, which is inconsistent with the literary status of *JPM* and the high quality of its translations. By 2024, only one scholarly monograph on the English translation of *JPM* will have been published: *Jin Ping Mei English Translations: Texts, Paratexts and Contexts* by Lintao Qi (2018). This book provides a comprehensive overview of *JPM*’s English translations from a sociological perspective. Six years later, the second monograph on *JPM*’s English translations, *Two English-Language Translators of Jin Ping Mei: From Lotus to Plum* by Shuangjin Xiao, was finally released. Unlike Qi’s (2018) broader approach, Xiao’s work focuses on a detailed comparative analysis of the two complete English translations of *JPM*.



The book consists of six chapters. Apart from the introduction of *JPM* and its translations in the first chapter and the research summary in the last chapter, chapters two through five each present a significant and intriguing translation topic. These topics are: (1) the rich tapestry of cultural references or culturemes; (2) the multi-layered narrative voice; (3) the image of women and gender matters; and (4) sexual-related narratives.

The selection of these four topics is particularly strategic, as they capture the four major literary characteristics of *JPM*. First, *Jin Ping Mei* is an encyclopedia of traditional Chinese culture, encompassing many cultural elements such as cuisine, clothing, customs, festivals, social hierarchy, and religious beliefs. By examining how these cultural symbols are handled in translation, the author explores the translatability of culture and the impact of cultural differences on translation strategies. Second, *JPM* combines elements of oral literature and novelistic narrative, resulting in abundant character dialogues. These dialogues advance the plot and reveal the characters' personalities and social statuses through distinctive linguistic styles. By analyzing the representation of narrative voice in translation, the author uncovers how different translators recreate the narrative complexity of the original work and convey its multiple perspectives through language. Third, the story of *JPM* unfolds amid the entanglements between the male protagonist and several women, highlighting the significant role of female imagery and gender issues. Through depictions of female characters' lives and psyches, the novel reflects the gender concepts and status of women in Ming dynasty society. By examining how female imagery is translated, the author reveals how gender issues are presented during translation and how cultural and historical contexts influence the portrayal of gender roles. Fourthly, sexual narratives are a prominent feature of *JPM*, encompassing explicit depictions and complex social-moral issues, which is one of the reasons why the novel has long been banned in China. The author analyzes how these elements are rendered in translation to understand the strategies translators adopt when dealing with sensitive subjects and to reveal the impact of cultural differences on the interpretation and reception of sexual narratives.

Overall, this book is essential for several reasons. First, it reminds us that *JPM* is an essential yet often overlooked work in translation studies. It offers many aspects that are worth exploring. Second, the author presents numerous examples of representative translations from the two translations and conducts detailed analyses. These insights provide valuable references for future retranslations of *JPM* or those working on translations of Chinese classical literature. Additionally, beyond translation and linguistics, this work incorporates knowledge from gender studies, sociology, cultural studies, and narratology during its analysis, creating a more comprehensive and in-depth examination. This approach facilitates a cross-temporal dialogue between the two translations and reminds us that translation work is almost always embedded in cultural and political frameworks and history.

Regrettably, although the author claims to employ both qualitative and quantitative analyses in methodology, it lacks substantial quantitative depth—the author's quantitative approach is limited to a simple count of different translation methods. Since corpus-based translation studies (CTS) emerged in 1993, empirical methods for text analysis in translation studies have increasingly leaned toward quantification. Techniques like word frequency analysis and contextual analysis can more precisely reveal the lexical choices and pragmatic strategies of different translators of *JPM*. Meanwhile, exploring the translations from the perspectives of syntax, register, and other stylistic elements can further highlight the translators' global translation strategies. Besides, in recent years, the burgeoning



field of digital humanities, which is done “at the intersection of computational methods and humanities materials” (Drucker, 2021, p. 1), has driven a closer integration between CTS and fields such as computational linguistics and natural language processing, offering more methods and metrics for interpreting translated texts. Thus, digital humanities approaches can be employed when comparing the two translations of *JPM*. For instance, sentiment analysis could explore how each translator constructs emotion within their translations. Social network analysis could examine and visualize the relationships and interactions between characters in different translations. These more quantitatively focused analyses could offer new insights into the English translations of *JPM*.

In summary, as the first scholarly work dedicated to comparing the two classic English translations of *JPM*, this book lays a solid foundation for future research in the field. It will serve as a valuable reference for scholars and graduate students studying literary translation, Chinese literature and beyond.

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