

---

## REFLECTIONS

# Falling into It: My Experience of Translating Chinese Literature and Reflections on Literary Translation as Profession

Received: 23 August 2022; Revised: 13 November 2022; Published: 16 November 2022

**Christopher N Payne**

University of Toronto, Canada  
Email: christopher.payne@utoronto.ca

---

---

It is not often that literary translators are given the opportunity to reflect on practice, on, shall we say, the multipronged engagement with a work of literature, the travails and the challenges, the joys and the sense of accomplishment upon completing a project – the sheer happiness at seeing one’s translation in print. But I have been given the occasion to do so here in *The International Journal of Chinese and English Translation and Interpreting* and for that I am grateful. Ironic it is, then, that I am unsure of how to reflect upon translator practice. That is to say, I am not sure how to think back on the work I have done translating a number of contemporary Chinese fiction writers inasmuch as I find it difficult to think of ‘practice’ as such. Nor am I a professional literary translator (however one may write that job description).

Rather, like many who translate literature, there is a tacit acknowledgement that surviving exclusively on this as a profession, as a job that provides steady income is veritably impossible (or perhaps only something one does in retirement). In most instances, it must be said, literary translators have (to have) other occupations. These jobs, our actual ‘professions’, if you will, may be more rewarding than others; and some are pure drudgery. In my personal situation, after a fairly long and winding road, I am now at the University of Toronto, teaching on the English and Chinese Translation programme in the Department of Language Studies. For the first time in my ‘professional career’, I am in a position that involves teaching specific translation skills, techniques and approaches to eager students wishing to break into the industry (although I am dubious of what kind of industry translation is). Most of my students have their sights set on scientific or other forms of professional translation; some focus their attention on translation for international trade and business; some on government and others on localisation services for multimedia platforms. Student interest in these fields is eminently practical (provided machines and other computer assisted translation programmes do not wholly replace the human agent in the near future). A much smaller number of students ask me about literary translation, for which I always respond excitedly and to which I generally answer: “first, do not think of it as a career, you’ll need a ‘real’ job to make ends meet; second, be patient, along Biblical lines” (interesting, no, that Job is the person we most associate with patience?). In short, whilst I have aimed to encourage those students keen to travel down the genuine rabbit hole of literary translation, I have also aimed to give them a snapshot of reality, too. How, then, might I reflect upon professional practice in this essay when I cannot say that literary translation is my profession?



For lack of a better starting point, then, I will begin by considering the first literary texts I did in fact translate. These would be Mai Jia's (麦家) novel *Decoded* (解密) and his collection of interlinked stories *In the Dark* (暗算). At the outset, I must admit that I knew little of Mai Jia before translating his novels. Much of my formal study of modern and contemporary Chinese language literature focused on the twentieth century, including works written in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as in the Chinese mainland. Modernism was a key focus. Later, the Misty Poets, the Roots Seekers, the avant-garde, the nativists in Taiwan, the eclectic and varied work from Hong Kong. As a result, I already had a more than sufficient amount of literature to carry out research on and thus neglected, regrettably, much published in the twenty-first century, aside from the writers I was already familiar with and who continued to publish into the new century. It was my friend and colleague Olivia Milburn who introduced me to Mai Jia, and then solely as an enjoyable read, not an author to translate. To further contextualise the situation, I was also, at the time, not long out of my doctoral programme and translating literature was far from my mind, if present at all.

A brief tangent to explain this non-presence of translation in formal academia is, I feel, warranted. In brief, literary translation is rarely, if ever, considered a suitably scholarly endeavour, especially by the administrative ranks in higher education. This is in spite of the importance of translated texts to both research and teaching. The facile argument made against translation is that it is not technically 'research', which is code for saying that translation is less measurable in terms of bibliometrics. Consequently, the argument continues, translations cannot be 'counted' towards research outputs as they have no quantifiable impact factor. After all, academics do not just 'read' translations, and, more importantly for bibliometrics, they do not cite them in subsequent research papers. No citations – let's be frank, what we are talking about here is the same thing as website 'hits' and/or Instagram 'tags' – equals no calculable data. Finally, since bibliometrics determine tertiary levels of funding, from both private and public sources, as well as promotion through the ranks (how many hits did you get?), young academics are especially discouraged, and in some cases, instructed (and/or threatened?), not to engage in translation, unless, and then only reluctantly, if it is in a measurable output such as in an indexed journal. Whilst much more could be said about this entrenched myopia vis-à-vis (literary) translation in higher education, I am meant to reflect on professional translation practice in this essay and, therefore, I shall not dwell on this very important counterintuitive issue more than I already have.

Nevertheless, despite whatever (research) plans I may have had, I did find my way to literary translation (perhaps proving true the Yiddish adage: *Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht* or Man Plans and God Laughs). The journey began with a call for sample translations issued by Mai Jia's literary agent. A call I had not seen – had not been looking for – but which my friend had. Mai Jia was a Mao Dun Literary Prize winner, a bestseller in China whose works had been adapted for both television and film. He was also an author yet to be translated into English. Given his high profile in the Chinese-speaking world, both Mai Jia and his agent were keen to expand his profile internationally. Discussions between Olivia and myself followed, a sample was produced and submitted to Mai Jia's agent, followed by, to use a scene from his work, a period of radio silence. Literary samples can range in length, from a few hundred words to a chapter (or more). They are generally produced gratis and many end up disappearing altogether into the ether or surviving on personal websites for time immemorial and which



few read. Subsequent queries to an agent share an often-similar fate, going unanswered entirely or receiving only brief ‘please standby’ replies (low on the rung is the unknown literary translator).

But on some occasions, (good?) fortune can and does strike and a sample is selected by an agent resulting in additional translated sections being requested (still on a pro bono basis, of course). In our case, we were fortunate Mai Jia’s agent enjoyed the sample we had produced, and we were only too happy to work on a longer passage. Once this sample was complete, the agent began the laborious process of ‘shopping’ the work with publishers (a task for which no one should ever envy). International Book Fairs like those in London, Frankfurt, New York and increasingly Beijing play a significant role in this process, especially as unsolicited sample translations sent directly to publishers are routinely ignored and more often binned without even receiving a cursory read through. During the whole procedure, agents, much like their translator compatriots, need a Biblical form of patience and perseverance. However, good fortune lingered for our Mai Jia sample and, ultimately, the rights were purchased and a translation commissioned (sometime afterwards, we signed a translators’ contract).

Whilst this experience is not always replicated in the exact same manner – the publishing industry is suitably labyrinthine – however the process plays out a contract signed means the work of translation has to begin. It was at this point that I was, admittedly, rather anxious. Since I had not formally trained as a translator, let alone a literary translator, and since I was not a writer of fiction, how was I to begin? True, the sample had been completed, but that was simply that: a sample. Reflecting on this initial anxiety, I admit I felt woefully unprepared and whilst I did not recognise it as such, in retrospect, I can say that my emotional and psychological nervousness were casebook symptoms of what is now commonly referred to as ‘imposter syndrome’. Who was I to translate this award-winning author into English?

Okay. Let us reflect on this for a moment. To do this, I must rewind the reel a little. I had first started studying the Chinese language in my third year of university purely out of interest, a desire, so to speak, to enjoy and read a literature I had read in translation and had found fascinating. It did not once cross my mind that I would be given the opportunity to actually translate a work of this literature. To complicate matters, I had not studied translation in university, at least not in any formal sense. My background was literary and cultural studies. In this field, I engaged with translations only insofar as they were a tool to bridge the gap between an insufficient level of language proficiency to read the source text, and a higher level of language competency that would mean I could read the ‘original’. In this context, my aim in university was to achieve a high enough standard in the Chinese language to make translations unnecessary. Moreover, in this field, translations were (and still are) rarely if ever analysed. That is to say, during my studies, we did not judge their accuracy, or even their lack thereof. Nor did we consider their literary merits. Rather, our studies were interested in the themes, the history, the ‘great China story’ certain writers (in translation) grappled with; like writers and academics in the Chinese-speaking world, we, too, ‘worried about China’. As a result, miniscule concern was given to the question of whether a translator had succeeded in conveying this ‘China story’ in a well-written and readable translation.

Aside: what does *readability* actually mean? We could perhaps here consider the opposing sides of an age-old dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the attempt to render a source text into the target



language in such a way that its imagined reader does not realise it is a translation (what is generally referred to as domestication). On the other hand, a translator who holds onto particular and distinctive elements and features of a source text is said to be ‘foreignising’ it, clearly designating the outcome as a translation. But which is more readable and for whom? This, unsurprisingly, depends on how we imagine the reader. In the former instance, one might conjure up the image of a reader strolling along the shelves of their local bookstore, searching for a new title to enjoy. They are perhaps not altogether keen to have a disorientating experience reading a text that does not meet their expectations, i.e., a text that seems foreign. For them, reading should not be work. However, in the latter case, certain readers can be imagined as searching for that disorientation, a desire to step outside their comfort zone and experience something different, something foreign. No doubt there are readers of both types, but I have a sneaking suspicion that there are more of the former than the latter.

Let me return to Mai Jia’s work. As mentioned above, I was introduced to *Decoded* and *In the Dark* as ‘good reads’. And they are, most certainly. But his novels are not what I expected in the context of what I had studied. They do not really tell a ‘great China story’, at least not in the same manner as the authors I was accustomed to reading. His tales are of intrigue, of unique characters with extraordinary skills caught in far larger matrices that they cannot always find their way out from. Ostensibly espionage, Mai Jia’s themes focus on the individual; his work is character orientated. In many ways, they defy easy categorisation. Consequently, they are ‘good reads’, even if I felt myself at a loss to connect his fiction to what I had studied and analysed in my undergraduate and postgraduate days. As a trained literary scholar, I was therefore unsure of how to probe deeper into Mai Jia’s narratives, to deconstruct them and tease out the implications his work had for the ‘China story’. As a contracted translator, I subsequently wondered how I was to engage with his stories, let alone render his words into English. In other words, if I could not even examine Mai Jia’s literary texts as I had done countless other authors that came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s (Mai Jia is more an author of the first decade of the twenty-first century), how could I translate it? Once more, my imposter reared its head.

Hence, how did I proceed? What techniques, if any, did I use? Alas, thinking back onto this first experience translating fiction for formal publication, I cannot recall if I used any specific theory or approach. I read the novels, cover to cover, highlighting and/or underlining vocabulary words I was unfamiliar with, a practice I had employed whilst studying the language (I can remember vividly the modern Chinese literature readers I had studied where a page contained a paragraph or two of text and then a half page or more of vocabulary items to memorise). I did not utilise Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet’s (1958/1995; 2004) taxonomy of linguistic items (direct and/or oblique translation did not factor into my consciousness). I did not search for principles of correspondence as Eugene Nida (1964) would advise. Skopos was not in my register (Vermeer, 1989). Nor did I consider the polysystems (Even-Zohar, 1978/90) at play or cogitate on the implications of rewriting (Lefevere, 1992). The question of whether I should domesticate or foreignise my target text likewise did not enter my mind – in truth, I was unaware of this question at the outset.

But I did translate Mai Jia’s work. Olivia and I completed our respective sections. We reviewed each other’s work. We questioned our name choices, tone and style (and my penchant to fall into English North Americanisms despite our publishers being British). In the end, we submitted our completed manuscript and progressed through the editorial process which, reflecting on this now, was an



interesting, one might say, alienating, experience, most notably due to the editor's strident effort to wholly domesticate the manuscript we had produced (although that terminology was not used). When we queried this effort, the editor's response was unambiguous: *readability* was essential. We did not question this further; we did not think of the visibility, or rather the sought-after invisibility, of the translator as even an issue to be considered. Upon reconsideration, however, perhaps we should have been more proactive on this matter, if for no other reason than that it may have prevented the error of attributing *Decoded* solely to my friend Olivia, and *In the Dark* solely to me (of course, only on the copyright page, our names were nowhere near the cover). Perchance a year-plus in between publication of each translation was insufficient time to catch the error? Whatever the case, we were very much invisible throughout much of the process.

Notwithstanding the ups and downs we experienced, the lack of awareness of specific theories, or approaches, or what have you, it was a fascinating and enlightening experience translating Mai Jia's two fictional works. And it was a beginning. Olivia and I later collaborated on *Empires of Dust* (农民帝国), Jiang Zilong's (蒋子龙) magnum opus of reform literature. We have both since translated other works individually. In my case, in 2021, I celebrated the release of my translations of Li Juan's (李娟) *Distant Sunflower Fields* (遥远的向日葵地) and Jia Pingwa's (贾平凹) *Mountain Whisperer* (老生). Did I utilise certain approaches when I grappled with these very different and distinct texts? I cannot honestly reply in the affirmative. I will say, however, that my teaching experience since joining the University of Toronto has certainly broadened my understanding of what I have translated, in a retrospective, reflective manner, and I can perhaps see theory operative in the background of my translations and my practice. But I must add that, to my mind, using theory whilst translating is not altogether synergistic.

If I were to speak of some form of method to conclude this reflective essay, I could posit an immersive approach, a 'falling into it', if you will, where I allow the source text to swallow me whole. Is this distinctive to me? I would say 'no', inasmuch as I believe literary translators invariably permit themselves to be absorbed by their source material. This is, at least, the conclusion I have come to as I have been reflecting on practice in this essay. This is not to say there is no place for translation theory. The discipline of translation studies has done enormous work in establishing its vital presence in academia. Alas, 'theory-work' has not wholly resulted in a corresponding acknowledgement of actual 'translation-work', at least not in measurable outputs. I am not a professional literary translator. I applaud those who make it a career. I hope for more recognition of all the effort that goes into literary translation, a hope I see stoked more and more when translator names increasingly grace the covers of published translations. But until such time that recognition matches the effort, skill and patience that goes into translating a work of literature, my reflection on literary translation qua profession must remain suspended. Hence, as my title suggests, I am falling into it.

## Declarations and Acknowledgement:

The author declares no conflict of interest.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

© 2022 All Terrain Publishing

## References

- Even-Zohar, I. (1978/1990). 'The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) (2021), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 191 – 196.
- Lefevere, André (1992). *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nida, Eugene (1964) 'Principles of correspondence', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) (2021), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 171 – 185.
- Vinay, Jean-Paul and Jean Darbelnet (1958/1995). *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*, translated and edited by Juan Sager, and Marie-Jo Hamel. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- . 'A methodology for translation', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) (2004), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 128–37.
- Vermeer, Hans (1989/2012) 'Skopos and commission in translational action', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2021). London and New York: Routledge, pp. 219 – 2230.

## About the Author:

Dr. Payne's background is in East Asian Studies, with a particular focus on cultural production from the Chinese-speaking world. He obtained his PhD from SOAS, University of London, and has taught at the Academy of East Asian Studies at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, The University of Manchester and presently at the University of Toronto – Scarborough. He has published in respected journals such as *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* and *Positions: Asia Critique*. His translations of contemporary Chinese language literature have contributed to increasing greater awareness of this important World Literature. His current research explores the multiple and critical intersections between translation and the environment.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

© 2022 All Terrain Publishing