

# Strategies for Chinese Fantasy and Kung Fu Novels to Go Global: Taking *Sage Monarch* as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

The past five years has seen a dramatic rise of online Chinese fantasy and kung fu novels (hereafter called Chinese fantasy novels), or xianxia novels, both for domestic readers and readers overseas. The novels, characterized by their Chinese flavor, are so popular among foreigners that many English native speakers dive in as translators on websites like Wuxiaworld. Why did the English versions on the Wuxiaworld website gain so much popularity? This paper tries to take the version of *Sage Monarch* on it as an example and report on its language features and readability with the help of SEO, a tool for text analysis, in addition to an investigation into its translation strategies. The result shows its translator has turned to domestication for readability and foreignization for novelty, with the former being predominant, which helps explain why it has mesmerized a widespread readership in the receptor language.

**Keywords:** Chinese fantasy novels, *Sage Monarch*, domestication

## I. INTRODUCTION

The journey for Chinese literature to go overseas has been tough due to an obscure outline of the target readers as well as a misjudgment of what strategies to use in translation (Hu 2010). This is also true for novels such as Chinese fantasy novels on the Internet which have embarked on their journey to attract readers from western countries as early as 2014. Compared with traditional Chinese literature, these works are telling Chinese stories the way people from abroad can easily understand since they make individual existence universal. This makes it possible for literature featuring Chinese culture to reach its readers in English-speaking countries (Ouyang 2019; Peng and Hu 2019).

Chinese fantasy novels, similar to Chinese martial arts novels, have something in common with light novels already familiar to westerners. That means they are not a totally strange spectacle for readers in the West. Instead, they appear special for their fantastic plots related to "cultivation to immortality", presenting the exotic Chinese culture, even more special in this era as they are updated quickly and consecutively on the Internet. The Wuxiaworld website that came into the sight of readers with translated works like *Coiling Dragon* in 2015 gains more than 2.4 million times of page view every day over the last three months, 25% of which is from the U.S, according to estimates by ALEXA. The following year has witnessed an even

more impressive surge of translated fantasy novels after the website put forward the collaboration with the Qidian website, a Chinese website for readers to explore fantasy novels. The sudden increase dominated topics on WeChat and Microblog for some while. Even mainstream Chinese media like *The People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily* weighed in.

So did scholars like Shao Yanjun (2016) who probed into the reason why Chinese webnovels could find their market in the U.S with interviews. Such novels cater to what readers expect and can be easily translated since they are written for the mass, eastern or western, according to Shao. A corpus-based study on *7 Killers* by Ma Huanna (2017) shows the typical language, plot and readability of the novel after it was translated into English. Similar studies were also done on other translated works including *Coiling Dragon* and *To the Sky Kingdom* (Lin Ling 2018).

Undoubtedly, translated fantasy novels on the Internet are reaching their readers at a speed that traditional literature can never imagine, delivering stories of a particular cultural group to foreigners obsessed with the rare type of literature. The Wuxiaworld website is the one that distinguishes itself from several ones serializing the English versions of such novels, by any standard either in quantity or quality. Why do works on this website receive more attention from readers than others? This study takes the translation of *Sage Monarch* as an example to find out the reason.

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II. CORPUS STUDY OF *SAGE MONARCH*

As a xianxia novel that mixes elements of both western and eastern fantasy, *Sage Monarch*, written by Divine Dreamwalker, a star Chinese author on the Internet, caused a sensation as soon as it appeared on the market. So did its English version by Deathblade, an American translator. The very first chapter of the novel has received 226 comments after it was released on the Wuxiaworld website. Readers' fever for its following chapters does not weaken either.

This study takes its first 50 chapters published on the website for a clear outline of its reading ease and language features, with the assistance of SEO, an online tool for content analysis. Information about the corpus can be concluded after the composition is put in the blank of its Text Editor, including its keyword density, content analysis data and readability. The result is shown in "Table I" and "Table II"

TABLE I. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Word Count	108673
Character Length	599483
Letters	477558
Sentences	7533
Average Words/Sentence	14.4
Lexical Density	46%
Lexical Diversity	7%

TABLE II. READABILITY

Reading Ease	72.5%
Grade Level	6.7
Automated Reading Index	6.5

The average words of a sentence in it is 14.4, which renders online readers easy to skim, compared with 20 words for each sentence in an average writing. The lexical density stays 46% while lexical diversity is as low as 7%, indicating that it does not cram many diversified words into one sentence, especially notional words. This can be confirmed by its reading ease of 72.5%. According to the tool's standard by which the data is provided, the Flesh Kinkaid reading ease score is used to judge the content's readability, presented as a percentage, where a high score means it is easy to read, or as a grade level indicating the readers' education level. The lower the grade level, the better it is for all readers.

Its keywords "Yang" of 2042 uses and "energy" of 1323 uses top the list of keyword density, accounting 1.9% and 1.2% respectively. The former is the first name of the protagonist Yang Qi while the latter a term related to what he is doing and how he is judged in the fantasy world. No more keywords dominate the list, which implies that over-use of specific terms or phrases is avoided, according to the standard of the tool on its website.

III. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR *SAGE MONARCH*

The translation strategy a translator chooses can largely tell whether his/her version is acceptable or unacceptable to certain readers (Mu Lei 2008). The translator should be able to make the right judgement as to what approach is most adequate and accordingly arrange his/her moves in a certain situation (Wolfram Wilss 1996). Domestication or foreignization has its own play in the translation of a work, despite the translator's own tendency, the purpose for which the work is converted, social or political influence, etc.

For *Sage Monarch*, Deathblade turns to both domestication and foreignization all through his project. The American translator does not come from a Chinese background according to the message the author got from the staff working for the website by email. Yet he has plenty of experience with Chinese after living in China for years. With both an editor and a proofreader to check for mistakes in his versions, he is considered as an outstanding translator on the website. Domesticating information too foreign to understand may bring the original plots closer to its target readers, which are mainly Americans predominantly western-educated, while reserving something alien keeps it mysterious.

A. Study on the lexical level

Chinese four-character idioms are rendered in such a natural way that westerners can hardly sense its exotic flavor. Words carrying images necessary for expressions in Chinese are either blurred or explained, or even omitted. Examples of domestication are as follows.

刀枪不入 (become impervious to all sorts of weapons)

气接云霞 (fuse their energy with the clouds)

洪钟大吕 (stentorian)

声势猛烈, 夺人心魄 (shocking to the extreme)

In the first two examples, original images in the source are blurred in the target since those specific images are strange to westerners and appear not as important in language structure to readers as they are in the source. The third example shows the target explaining the source without keeping images mentioned in Chinese. The last one, however, just expresses the meaning instead of finding equivalents for each image in the source.

Examples of foreignization are shown below.

a. 养气 (energy growth)

b. 气海 (the sea of energy)

- c. 伏龙丹 (Latent Dragon Pill)
- d. 白虎衔尸 (Corpus-Chomping White Tiger)

The expressions above are all literarily translated, with a strong sense of Chinese culture which itself is considered as the supreme martial art by westerners (Meir Shahr 2007), which may stay novel and interesting to westerners.

*B. Study on the syntactical level*

The gap between the hypotaxis language and the parataxis language is what challenges translators in their work. The original *Sage Monarch* is typically structured in syntax as most Chinese fantasy novels usually are. In Deathblade's version, however, logics between the lines are represented clearly in the target so that online readers can quickly grasp the point.

Examples of domestication are as follows.

Source: 巨掌拍下。一张铁木大桌粉碎。

Target: A massive palm strike smashed a nearby table into bits.

The source has two sentences separated in form but connected in meaning, as it shows after it is converted into English. Also, the word "nearby" is added in the version so that it could be more logical. If the syntactical structure of the original is reserved, western readers may be left in confusion. The copy of Chinese syntax into English will give such a version: A massive palm was given. A table fell into pieces.

Source: 这头雷霆大象，蕴含毁灭性的力量，杨奇感觉得到，如果从自己身躯中冲了出去，整个府邸都要被其毁灭。

Target: Yang Qi could sense that the lightning mammoth contained massive destructive power, power so great that, if he could somehow release it in an attack, it would probably destroy the entire mansion he was in.

The target sentence shows a cohesive description of how Yang felt about the mammoth inside his body, so natural that the readers could not sense it was a translated sentence. Clearly, word orders were changed to fit the grammar and sentence-making in English during translation. If not, the version should go like this: The lightning mammoth contained massive destructive power. Yang Qi could feel that if the power went out from his body, it would destroy the entire mansion.

Few examples of foreignization on the syntactical level can also be found.

斩草不除根，春风吹又生，我就不能够放过你了。

As the saying goes, if you cut the grass but not the root, it will grow again when the spring breeze blows. I guess letting you go free isn't really an option.

The expression "cut the grass but not the root" is just a copy of the Chinese text, which can also be understood by the target readers.

Source: 再加上一山不容二虎，如果投靠我，将来燕家立国他杨家就是臣子，得要向我磕头朝拜，如何能够忍受？

Target: Besides, as the saying goes, two tigers cannot live on one mountain. If things go as planned, and we found the State of Yan, then the Yang Clan will be our feudal vassals, and would be required to kowtow to us. How could he possibly go along with that?

The text above indicates the reservation of the Chinese style in the target, including "two tigers cannot live on one mountain" and "kowtow".

Overall, the translator prefers domestication to foreignization. Some paragraphs are even trans-edited instead of merely being reproduced in English, original words added or deleted or changed to make sure the target readers can get the sense. The details are shown in "Table III".

TABLE III. USE OF DOMESTICATION AND FOREIGNIZATION

	Domestication	Foreignization
Frequency	More	Less
On the lexical level	Chinese four-character idioms	Names of characters, arts, cultivation levels, etc
On the syntactical level	Almost all the sentences	Sentences that contain Chinese idioms with which westerners have sympathy

**IV. REASONS WHY DOMESTICATION DOMINATES**

A careful investigation of the translated text shows that domestication dominates the translation strategies the translator chooses. This can be traced to the following reasons:

Chinese fantasy novels or xianxia novels cannot meet western readers' perception of the novels if they are not presented in a western way in regard of their syntactical structure or plot development. What the readers expect is a plot of the story that they can easily follow or that can take them into a totally new world, xianxia world as depicted by the author. They feel what the characters who may be considerate of the weak or

eager to stand out in the novels feel, as if they are the ones who are experiencing what comes all the way in the fantasy landscape.

Such novels are for ordinary people without calling for much education. They have little interest in looking for what a specific culture-loaded word means in the dictionary, unlike those who read texts for academic or research purposes. Foreignized elements hard to comprehend may stop them from enjoying the plot. They just want to obtain an outline of the whole story, as they are expecting from a native story.

Other types of xianxia art works have not found their market in the West and readers are not ready for what appears to be too foreign to them. Though smartphone games featuring role-playing fantasy developed by Tencent including Honor of Kings have been reported by western media like *The Wall Street Journal* (Zhang and Yang 2019), xianxia works still have a long way to go into the sight of everyday people abroad.

## V. CONCLUSION

As the writer of *Coiling Dragon* once mentioned at a forum for web literature, webnovels owe their overseas spread both to the sympathy from the readers while they are reading and the myth itself. Translators need to stir the sympathy among the target readers with a desirable outcome just as the original text does among the readers of the source language, while attracting the target readers with something borrowed from a different culture. Translation strategies used by the translator of *Sage Monarch* have ensured its reading ease in the English language so that arousing some sort of sympathy among the target readers becomes possible, and meanwhile its novelty that offers a breath of air to them. It has set an example for Chinese fantasy novels to go global. Up to now, 1226 chapters of the novels are available on the website, still attracting a large group of readers anxious to know how the story will end.

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