

Tackle the Challenges in Editing and Publishing a Long-running Series

■ Paul Engles (Editor of MacLehose Press, UK)

□ Qu Jingfan

□ As an editor specialising in translated literature, do you think there are elements in common among the Chinese titles that drew both publisher's and reader's attention despite their different genres?

■ I'm not that familiar with *Decoded*, but my understanding is that *The Three-Body Problem* wasn't that big in China compared to its reception in the English-speaking world. However, Jin Yong has been the bestselling Chinese author for decades. And I'm not sure they could be more different in their settings. I think Jin Yong's works have struck a chord here because many readers are familiar with kung fu films and with the martial arts in practice. They are also a very entertaining way to learn about so many aspects of Chinese culture. *The Three-Body Problem* and Liu Cixin's other works have sold better in the UK and USA than Jin Yong's, helped, of course, by the TV series. Perhaps because they speak to another view of Chinese society in the west: its modernity and innovation, with their sci-fi settings. So I think there might be common elements in their appeal.

□ Are UK publishers interested in Chinese literary works? What type of stories have sparked your interest or touched you?

■ I think a lot of the focus at the moment is on Japanese and Korean literary works, but there have been auctions for some Chinese titles recently, I can think of a couple of occasions where I or one of my colleagues have been involved. One was a novel (*Invisible Kitties* by Yu Yoyo) about a woman and her cat – which echoes a strong trend in Japanese fiction. One was for a non-fiction book (*I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* by Hu Anyan) about a man who did gig economy style jobs in Beijing – which echoes concerns we have about the future of work in the West. I don't feel like it's a period of intense interest in Chinese literature, but the wind could change at any moment. Many of the titles being translated from Japanese and Korean are very “cosy”

in nature, and one successful book in genre can lead to many others. I suspect editors are not looking to China for cosy. Perhaps they are more likely to be looking for something similar to *The Three-Body Problem*. Then again, some of the successful cosy fiction titles are rooted in food culture, which is very rich in China, maybe something could happen there.

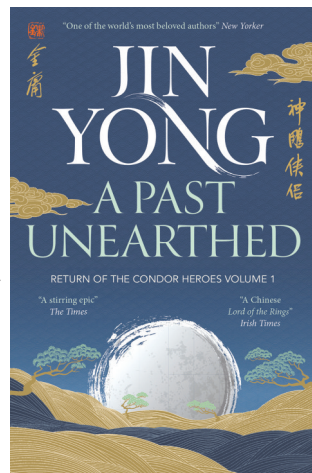
□ What are the typical challenges you have faced in acquiring the rights of translated works?

■ They are two-fold: either the auction to buy the rights is too competitive and you lose out, or you are able to acquire them, you publish the book and the sales are poor. Both of these are more common than buying the rights with ease and the book selling well. But that is the same for the publishing, and that's the challenge. You have a choice: you can publish books that stand apart from the crowd, and your book might be simply ignored, or you can follow trends and your book might be lost among the crowd. Sometimes you have challenges with the quality of the translation, and you have to spend a lot of time working on it to get it right. Sometimes the title in the source language wouldn't work for your market and you have to think of something new. It's a tough business, but when you get it right or you get a bit of luck it is very satisfying.

□ What difficulties have you faced when editing and publishing such a long-running series? How do you balance the demands of working on a long series like the *Condor Heroes* trilogy with the other works you are editing?

■ It was hardest at the beginning, when we didn't know if it would work or not. Then, just before publication, we had an extraordinary flurry of publicity that originated in China and that made all the difference. Another challenge is that sales tend to diminish the further you get in a series – just because it makes sense to start with the first book and not everyone will want to continue. But things are still going well and we are

A Past Unearthed: Return of the Condor Heroes was published in trade paperback in Oct 2023, and republished in B-format paperback in Mar 2024.



convinced that this is a project of the utmost importance – and I always want to know what happens next. Most of the hard work is done by the translators. Anna Holmwood has moved on to other things, but Gigi Chang is with us for the long haul. My role is just helping out with her final draft. Each volume is quite long, so it takes a bit of time, but I've always been able to balance it with other projects.

□ Has the target readership for the Jin Yong series changed over the years? How does your vision in editing and promoting the series shift with developing publishing trends?

■ I'm not sure the core readership has changed that much, but we undertook a cover refresh last year, reissuing all four volumes of *Legends of the Condor Heroes* in more appealing editions. Sub boxes are an exciting new development, and the work we did on the covers has led to a special edition from The Broken Binding (<https://thebrokenbindingsub.com/products/a-heroborn>). But I'm not convinced that the rise of romantasy as a genre will be that impactful. Even though there is more romance in *Return of the Condor Heroes*, it's quite hard to get that across in a way that can be picked up on TikTok, which is driving the romantasy boom. Then again, we have just heard the news about the ticket pre-sales for the new *Legends of the Condor Heroes* movie, driven by fans of Xiao Zhan, who plays Guo Jing. Perhaps that will have an effect that will reach the wider world too.

Bring More Contemporary Voices and Produce an Exciting Translation

■ Gigi Chang (translator of Jin Yong's *Condor Heroes* series)

□ Qu Jingfan

□ How did you start translating Chinese literary works and become a translator of Jin Yong's *Condor Heroes* trilogy?

■ It was by accident that I became a literary translator. I studied art history and my first job was at a London museum on an exhibition about Chinese design. I ended up doing all kinds of translations, some of which were published in catalogues or appeared on the walls in the gallery. At the same time, I wanted to work in theatre and saw the lack of Chinese stories on the UK stage (they are still very rare today), so I started to translate plays in my spare time. It was during my time working at the museum that I met Anna Holmwood – who later became a literary agent and translator – and when our paths crossed again, she invited me to translate samples for authors that she was representing and we also co-translated several works together. After some time, she asked me if I would like to join her in translating Jin Yong's *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, and I said yes without a second since Jin Yong's wuxia martial arts stories played a huge part in my childhood growing up in Hong Kong, China.

□ Translation is still a relatively small part of English-language publishing. Are there specific genres or kinds of stories you'd like to introduce to publishers and readers overseas?

■ Theatre has a very special place in my heart and I would love to translate more classical Chinese dramas

for the stage. I had the good fortune of working with the Royal Shakespeare Company and playwright Frances Ya-chu Cowhig some years ago to bring a new interpretation of Guan Hanqing's *The Injustice to Dou E* (《窦娥冤》) to English-speaking audiences, but there are still many interesting stories worth telling.

It is also a personal mission to try to bring more contemporary voices from the southeast of China – particularly those writing in local tongues, such as Cantonese – to international readership. Therefore, I have been working with literary agents to translate samples of novels by writers like Ge Liang and Lin Zhao. Their stories and the language they write in not only reflect my own experiences but also the concerns of younger Chinese today who are migrants within their own country and are searching to reconnect with the landscapes and the sounds of their forebears as they find their place in the wider world.

□ You have been working on the translation of Jin Yong's *Condor Heroes* series with MacLehose Press since 2015. What are the challenges working on such an epic story?

■ Jin Yong's *Condor Heroes* series is made up of three novels – *Legends of the Condor Heroes* (which we have completed over four volumes), *Return of the Condor Heroes* (I'm working on the second volume right now) and *Dragon Sabre, Heaven Sword* (this is still some years away!) – with a total word count of al-

most three million Chinese characters. The length alone is a huge challenge, from making sure the translation opens a window for our English-language readers, to keeping my writing fresh over tens of thousands of words year after year. Another difficulty is producing an exciting translation within a reasonable timeframe, when a significant portion of the story is driven by high-flown martial arts sequences, which take much more time to hone and craft than scenarios of the everyday in more contemporary, real-world stories, so our readers won't have to wait too long for the next book.

□ Do you work with other translators? How do you support each other in your work?

■ *Legends of the Condor Heroes* was translated by three translators – Anna Holmwood, Shelly Bryant and myself. It was lovely to have someone to discuss issues with, who understood exactly the kind of stumbling blocks, hidden and obvious, in the translation process. Alas, I am now translating *Return of the Condor Heroes* on my own. Fortunately, the Chinese-to-English literary translation community, connected through different social media platforms, is welcoming and supportive. In these chat groups or mailing lists, we talk openly about challenges – whether in the work we do or in working with partners and clients – share tips and news, as well as tell each other about the work opportunities out there.