

Translator Subjectivity and Creative Rebellion: A Study on the English Translations of Martial Arts Moves in the Legend of the Condor Heroes

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Abstract: This study examines the English translations of martial arts moves in Jin Yong's "The Legend of the Condor Heroes", specifically focusing on the renditions by Anna Holmwood (Volume I) and Gigi Chang (Volume II), and investigates the core challenges of cultural transfer in translating martial arts terminology. Through case-by-case analysis, it is found that Hao Yuqing adopts a domestication-led strategy, enhancing readability by supplementing translations and substituting evocative imagery, thereby foregrounding reader-oriented subjectivity. Zhang Jing, by contrast, prioritizes the retention of uniquely Chinese cultural elements, reflecting deeper cultural engagement. Both translators employ creative rebellion to balance cultural fidelity and reader accessibility, yet their divergent strategies stem from differing self-positioning: the former regards martial arts fiction as "fantasy literature," while the latter emphasizes its role as a "vehicle for Eastern philosophy." This research confirms that creative rebellion is an essential mechanism in cultural recoding, offering strategic insights for the international promotion of Chinese literature.

1. Introduction

Jin Yong's wuxia novels, as the pinnacle of Chinese popular literature, have consistently encountered fundamental challenges in cultural translation during their dissemination abroad. In 2018, Hao Yuqing (Anna Holmwood)'s English translation of "The Legend of the Condor Heroes", Volume I, titled *A Hero Born*, was published globally by MacLehose Press in the U.K. This event marked the first time Jin Yong's work entered the mainstream English-language market via a commercial pathway^[1]. In 2019, Zhang Jing (Gigi Chang) followed with *A Bond Undone*, the second volume, together forming the English rendition of the opening volumes in the Condor Trilogy.

Martial arts techniques - the central symbolic element of martial arts culture - contain unique philosophical connotations and aesthetic values. Translating them inherently becomes a dialectical practice reflecting translator subjectivity and so-called "creative rebellion." Most existing scholarship has focused on the translation strategies employed in the first volume, while a

systematic examination of the stylistic evolution in the second volume's translation remains lacking. Given the abundance of martial arts terms in "The Legend of the Condor Heroes", their translations bear deep cultural significance, yet there is a notable absence of focused research on the translation strategies applied to these terms. Translator subjectivity and creative rebellion are often discussed in isolation, without exploring their connection to the creative transformations involved in translating these martial arts techniques. This study investigates how Hao Yuqing's strategies in Volume I and Zhang Jing's in Volume II manifest differentiated subjectivity in the translation of martial arts terms. It further examines how creative rebellion evolves across volumes and how this "rebellion" navigates the tension between cultural fidelity and readability for target audiences. By analyzing representative cases, this study elucidates the interactive mechanisms between translator subjectivity and cultural adaptation choices. The findings will offer useful insights for the English translation of wuxia novels and provide strategic reference for promoting Chinese martial arts literature internationally.

2. Translator's Subjectivity and Creative Rebellion

The English translation of "The Legend of the Condor Heroes", especially regarding the richly cultured and aesthetically unique martial arts move names, provides an excellent case for exploring the role of the translator^[2]. Any analysis of this translation phenomenon is inseparable from the two core concepts of translator subjectivity and creative rebellion.

2.1 Translator's Subjectivity

Translator subjectivity denotes the proactive agency that translators exhibit throughout the translation process. It underscores that translators are not mechanical converters of language, but autonomous agents endowed with independent thinking, judgment, and decision-making capabilities (Jiangtong, Zhangye, 2023). This subjectivity permeates every stage of translation and profoundly shapes the final output.

When confronted with the source text, translators must decide which overarching strategy to adopt: should they lean toward foreignization, preserving the original's cultural characteristics and expressive forms, or towards domestication, adapting to the target audience's linguistic norms and cultural context? Hao Yuqing, for instance, frames "Legends of the Condor Heroes" as fantasy literature rather than traditional wuxia, choosing to render "Condor" as Condor instead of Eagle. This reflects her subjectivity at a macro-strategic level (Zhaogang, Yajun Gou, 2019). On a micro-linguistic level, translators must determine how to handle the source's stylistic features and establish a translated style that aligns with target-language literary conventions while appealing to the intended readership. Hao Yuqing's translation aims for linguistic fluency and balance-avoiding archaic or overly modern expressions-which reveals her subjectivity in nuanced language choices. (Huangqin, Binlin Dai, 2025) The translator's core challenge lies in how to convey culturally laden imagery across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Should these images be directly preserved, or substituted with equivalents in the target culture? The translator's choices and creative interventions illustrate the heart of their subjectivity. A salient example: Hao Yuqing retains key Chinese cultural Machiavellian terms like "neigong" and "qi" by using transliterations-neigong, qi-accompanied by contextual explanations or clarifications, rather than substituting scientific equivalents in English (Zhaogang, Yajun Gou, 2019; Liwei, Haifeng Yan, 2022). This retention underscores not only the cultural specificity of these martial arts concepts but also the translator's active decision-making power and creative autonomy^[3].

Translator subjectivity, therefore, refers to the autonomous authority exercised by the translator in understanding the source text, choosing strategies, and reconstructing the target text-manifested

through their creative role in the translation process.

2.2 Creative Rebellion

The concept of "creative rebellion" profoundly illuminates a fundamental trait of literary translation: slavish, word-for-word "faithfulness" is often unattainable and may even be counterproductive. It refers to translators' necessary adjustments, transformations, or even innovations applied to form, details, or even superficial elements of the source text-executed purposefully to convey its essential spirit (Xie, 1999). This "rebellion" is not a departure from or denigration of the original; rather, it constitutes a higher-level form of loyalty through creative means.

2.3 Relationship between Concepts

Subjectivity as the Foundation of Rebellion: all acts of creative rebellion stem from translator subjectivity. Every decision-from overarching strategies to micro-level lexical choices-is grounded in the translator's perceptive understanding of the source text, their judgment of the target audience, the intended purpose of the translation, and their bicultural competence. For instance, Hao Yuqing's macro-level decisions-positioning "The Legend of the Condor Heroes" as fantasy literature, employing domestication strategies, and creatively adapting martial arts terms-all manifest her subjectivity (Jiangtong, Zhangye, 2023; Zhaogang, Yajun Gou, 2019).

Rebellion as the Expression of Subjectivity: creative rebellion becomes the most immediate and vivid manifestation of translator subjectivity in practice. Whenever a translator opts to paraphrase a martial-arts technique, add a cultural annotation, omit a background scene, or transform an image, they exercise their agency through acts of rebellion to achieve specific translation goals. In translating the second volume, Zhang Jing, although aligning broadly with Hao Yuqing's style, exhibits a stronger inclination to retain certain cultural details-underscoring how different translator subjectivities result in varying scopes of creative rebellion. (Huangqin, Binglin Dai, 2025) Meanwhile, Hao Yuqing often employed omission to tailor the Chinese wuxia narrative for Western readers^[4]. The resulting reduction and rewriting yielded an English version that adhered to Western narrative expectations-a hallmark of successful translation. (Ruoyu Dai, Chenlin 2019)

3. Comparative Analysis of English Translations of Martial Arts Moves

3.1 Overview of Martial Arts Move Characteristics and Translation Challenges

In "The Legend of the Condor Heroes", characters frequently bear martial-arts titles, and numerous strikingly named techniques-such as "Haughty Dragon Repents" and "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw"-appear repeatedly in dialogue and fight sequences. Translating these names into English while maintaining brevity and dramatic tension is a significant challenge, as English renditions often become verbose, thereby diminishing narrative fluency and intensity (Zhang ying, 2023). Jin Yong's technique names typically follow a four-character Chinese structure-e.g., "Haughty Dragon Repents" or "Cascading Peach Blossom Palm"-that combines a dynamic verb showing action, with natural imagery to craft visual and philosophical resonance. These names integrate action, imagery, and cultural signification: they describe the mechanics of attack or defense, embed Daoist philosophical meaning, and reveal character traits.

However, the underlying martial-philosophical meanings and historical or cultural allusions embedded in these names often lack direct parallels in English-language cultures^[5]. For example, the term "dragon" in Chinese denotes authority and power, whereas in Western culture "dragon" is

usually associated with evil-making a literal translation of "Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms" potentially misleading. Likewise, "Haughty Dragon Repents" references yin-yang transformation from the Book of Changes, requiring additional explanation for non-Chinese readers to grasp the philosophical subtext.

Natural imagery in technique names also risks misinterpretation or aesthetic flattening when translated. For instance, the phrase "Cascading Peach Blossom Palm" carries a dual meaning in Chinese-contemplative beauty of falling blossoms alongside a piercingly fierce strike. Rendering it as "Falling Petal" risks retaining only the visual, losing its poetic tension. Similarly, "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw" translated literally as "White Bone Claw" would weaken its horror connotation. Both Hao Yuqing and Zhang Jing therefore adopted the term "Skeleton Claw" to evoke Western fantasy imagery related to skeletons and enhance its visual impact.

The four-character rhythm and conciseness of Chinese are difficult to replicate in English. For instance, the tonal and imagery-driven balance in "Hallowed Turtle Steps" employs a tonal contrast and a parallel between "wind" and "leaf." Zhang Jing's rendering as "Hallowed Turtle Steps" preserves the action, but substitutes a noun phrase for the original dynamic construction; this choice sacrifices the verb "sweeping" and thus diminishes kinetic intensity. Similarly, the four-character phrase "Haughty Dragon Repents" is condensed into three syllables. Translating it as "Haughty Dragon Repents" (Zhang Jing) leverages alliteration (H/R) to compensate rhythmically, yet the deeper philosophical resonance is conveyed only through abstract terms ("haughty," "repents"), weakening both the terseness and poetic depth of the original form.

Translating martial-arts move names necessitates a dynamic equilibrium between readability, cultural fidelity, and literary aesthetics. The translator must reconcile the target readers' cognitive expectations with the cultural essence of the source text, while employing creative strategies to compensate for structural losses.

3.2 Comparative Tendencies in Overall Strategy

Hao Yuqing (Anna Holmwood) possesses a deep understanding of Anglophone readers' cultural sensibilities and reading expectations, while simultaneously striving to present the "distinctive style of Jin Yong" to an English-language audience (Shanshan Peng, 2018) to achieve cultural authenticity. This dual objective is evidenced in her translation strategy, which seeks an equilibrium between domestication and foreignization (Liu yi, 2021). Both Hao Yuqing and Zhang Jing employ domestication-oriented strategies in translating martial arts move names, reflecting the cross-cultural transmission objectives of the wuxia genre. Hao Yuqing has emphasized that her translations do not aim for verbatim "word-for-word accuracy," but rather prioritize clarity and fluency-seeking to emulate the effect of "Jin Yong speaking English to his readers". (Shuqin Han, 2020) She ensures reader accessibility by conforming to Anglophone cognitive patterns-for instance, translating "The 18 Palm Attacks to Defeat Dragons" as "The 18 Palm Attacks to Defeat Dragons." This dynamic phrasing highlights the outcome ("Defeat") while diluting the potentially negative connotations of "dragon" in Western cultural contexts, thus enhancing readability. Zhang Jing, though also attentive to readability, leans more heavily on preserving literary artistry and philosophical depth^[6]. For example, the move "Haughty Dragon Repents." is rendered as "Haughty Dragon Repents." The adjective "Haughty" recalls the original sense of excess implied by "Haughty Dragon," and "Repents" conveys the philosophical notion of restraint. This strategic divergence reflects their cultural positioning: Hao Yuqing situates wuxia within the framework of Western fantasy literature-emphasizing narrative fluidity; Zhang Jing, in contrast, regards wuxia as a vessel for Eastern philosophical thought, embedding cultural depth even within a domestication approach.

3.3 Comparison of Specific Method Applications

Literal translation is employed for move names with clear action orientation. For example, "Bare Hand Seizes Blade" is uniformly rendered as "Bare Hand Seizes Blade", since the action is universally comprehensible and does not require cultural adaptation; literal translation achieves functional equivalence.

Paraphrastic translation highlights stylistic variation between translators. Hao Yuqing often enhances dynamic imagery through adaptation—for instance, translating "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing" as "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing", where the added "Sparrow" simulates the technique's lightness and agility. In contrast, Zhang Jing leans toward philosophical paraphrase: her rendition of "Haughty Dragon Repents" as "Haughty Dragon Repents" is not a literal conversion but intentionally captures the Book of Changes-inspired dialectical logic of "extreme leads to reversal," exemplifying creative rebellion.

A combined transliteration-and-literal approach is used for culturally loaded terms: both translators render "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw" as "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw." Here, "Yin" retains the philosophical notion inherent in Yin, while "Skeleton" replaces the literal "White Bone," invoking Western fantasy imagery to evoke dread. This balance preserves cultural essence while remaining accessible to readers.

3.4 Manifestations of Translator Subjectivity and Creative Rebellion

Hao Yuqing's translation choices clearly demonstrate a reader-oriented approach. In order to enable Anglophone readers to comprehend and embrace the wuxia universe without difficulties, she amplifies imagery. For instance, she translates "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing Moves" as "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing Moves", deliberately inserting the term "Sparrow" to significantly enhance the visual imagery and convey a sense of lightness^[7]. This represents an active compromise designed to align with the cultural cognition and aesthetic expectations of the target audience.

In contrast, Zhang Jing's renderings are informed by a profound appreciation of martial-arts philosophy. Take the movie "Parting Clouds to Reveal Moon": while it literally describes "pushing the window to gaze at the moon," it symbolically incorporates taiji principles of simultaneously attacking and defending. Rather than translating it as "Push Window to See Moon", she reconstructs it as "Parting Clouds to Reveal Moon". The phrase "Parting Clouds" metaphorically signifies the deflection of an attack, while "Reveal Moon" denotes the moment of counteraction. Through this reinterpretation, the move name transcends its literal form, encapsulating a tactical and philosophical elevation. This rebelliousness not only does not diverge from the spirit of the original text, but on the contrary, realizes fidelity at a higher dimension—just as translation theorist Xu Jun posits, a deft rebellion is precisely the dialectical fulfillment of loyalty.

4. In-Depth Interpretation of Creative Rebellion

4.1 Filling Cultural Defaults: Transcoding Philosophical Concepts

In the English translation of martial arts technique names, translators employ creative rebellion to bridge the cognitive gap between Chinese and Western cultural frameworks—most notably through the transcoding of abstract philosophical concepts such as Daoist Wu Ji Bi Fan (Things turn into their opposite when they reach the extreme), Confucian ethics, and Taiji philosophy. This form of transcoding is not a mere semantic substitution but represents a localized reconstruction tailored to target-language cultural logic^[8]. It relies on the strategic use of dynamic, metaphorical vocabulary to activate English readers' cognitive schemas and facilitate cross-cultural migration of

philosophical meaning.

For example, Zhang Jing's translation of "Haughty Dragon Repents" as "Haughty Dragon Repents" embeds philosophical depth. The Chinese phrase originates from the Book of Changes "Qian hexagram," literally meaning "an excessive dragon will regret." Here, "Repents" does not imply subjective contrition, but metaphorically signals the inevitable contraction following maximal extension. By choosing "Repents" over a literal "regrets," the translator recontextualizes Daoist cosmology into a Christian moral narrative of "pride preceding repentance," thereby evoking Western cognitive resonance regarding "hubris leading to downfall". Similarly, Zhang Jing renders "Dispelling Clouds to Push the Moon" as "Dispelling Clouds to Push the Moon," a title that embodies the dialectical mindset of Tai Chi's "defend-through-attack." Within this schema, "dispelling clouds" represents the defensive stance-an act of neutralization-whereas "pushing the moon" signifies the offensive thrust. Together they form a dynamic yin-yang equilibrium. By eschewing a literal translation that foregrounds cultural symbols like "window" or "moon," Zhang reconstructs the scene through natural imagery-" clouds" and "moon." The phrase "Dispelling Clouds" conveys the neutralizing, protective power akin to defense, while "Push the Moon" transforms the passive act of observing into an active, forceful gesture-aligned with the "violent aesthetics" often favored in English action descriptions. Linking the two with "to" (Dispelling → Push) creates a linear causative chain, effectively translating the taiji principle of "retaliation" into a coherent logical sequence. This allows English readers to intuitively perceive the tactic of "concealed offense within defense."

4.2 Compensation for Poetic Loss: Strategies for Reviving Literary Imagery

The central challenge in translating martial arts move names is balancing the loss of poetic resonance with the need to regenerate aesthetic appeal in the target culture. Translators deploy creative rebellion to culturally re-code literary imagery, thus compensating for lost poetic nuance and imbuing the imagery with renewed vitality.

Anna Holmwood's rendition of "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw" as "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw." The original Chinese embodies dual imagery: a literal "white bone" and a metaphorical sense of grim, ghostly dread. The English word "bone" only conveys a physical reference, lacking the intended horror. By substituting in "skeleton," Holmwood activates the Western cultural symbolism of skeletons to evoke fear, thus compensating for the poetic loss through visual impact. The metaphorical literary connotation of "white bone" is relinquished in favor of a more immediately violent image-fingers penetrating a skull-transforming the aesthetic from "poetic beauty" to "horrific thrill".

Zhang Jing's translation of "Cascading Peach Blossom Palm" as "Cascading Peach Blossom Palm." The phrase "Cascading Peach Blossom" originates from "Tao Hua Yuan Ji" (The Peach Blossom Spring), carrying connotations of faded beauty and the swift momentum of a sword palm strike. A literal translation-"Falling Petals"-tends to feel static. Instead, "Cascading" evokes a dynamic flow reminiscent of a waterfall, preserving the peach blossom imagery while simulating the rhythm of the palm move. This dynamic verb restores movement and aesthetic intensity lost in translation.

Holmwood opts to replace the original imagery with culturally resonant symbols from the target language, deliberately sacrificing some poetic nuance to improve accessibility-an approach aligned with the conventions of popular literature translation. Zhang Jing, however, uses linguistic artistry-dynamic verbs and rhyme-to re-generate literary imagery in English, striving to recreate the "poetic martial arts" deeply embedded in Jin Yong's philosophy, thus aligning closely with his vision of the fusion of literature and martial arts^[9].

4.3 Reader-Acceptance Adjustment: The Balancing Act between Readability and Depth

Translating martial-arts move names fundamentally involves the translator's deliberate effort to bridge cultural understanding gaps. The translator must reconstruct cultural symbols within the comprehension threshold of the target-language audience, using creative rebellion to balance the conflict between "smooth readability" and "philosophical depth."

Hao Yuqing translates "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing" as "Yanqing Sparrow Boxing", deliberately adding "Sparrow." In Chinese, "Yanqing" refers to a well-known character in *Water Margin*, whose historical background is obscure to English-speaking readers. A literal translation, "Yanqing Boxing", would leave Western readers with a meaningless proper noun devoid of context or imagery. By appending "Sparrow," the translator sacrifices the historical and chivalric allusion to gain a universally recognizable animal symbol. This triggers intuitive associations-speed, agility-aligning with the sparrow's cultural connotations in Western understanding. Sparrows symbolize smallness and liveliness, complementing the boxing technique's leaping, evasive footwork. Although this rendering detaches Yan Qing's chivalric identity, it employs a "visual translation" through animal imagery, enabling readers to swiftly associate the technique with a specific movement style. This aligns with the demands of popular literature for "immediate comprehensibility."

"Nine Yin" originates from the Taoist cosmological concept of "nine as the ultimate Yin," signifying the zenith of cosmic feminine energy. Complete domestication (e.g., "Ultimate Darkness") would erode its philosophical profundity, while explanatory annotations disrupt narrative flow. In her Volume II translation, Zhang Jing retains the transliteration "Nine Yin" ("Nine Yin Skeleton Claw"), augmenting it with kinetic descriptions during the technique's inaugural appearance-such as "fingers curved like hooks, piercing through bone"-to intensify its sinister aura. A glossary of Taoist terms appended to the volume defines "Yin" as "cosmic feminine force," thereby transforming the transliterated term into a cultural signifier. The orthographic choice of "Yin" over alternatives like "In" leverages the negative connotations of near-homophones ("Sin" and "yin"), subtly aligning with the technique's malefic nature. This transliteration preserves cultural heterology while achieving "deep accessibility" through paratextual and contextual cues. Readers progressively apprehend the philosophical essence of "Nine Yin" during subsequent readings.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the pivotal role of translator subjectivity in cultural transcoding through a comparative analysis of martial arts technique translations in *"The Legend of the Condor Heroes"*. The core divergence in translators' styles stems from the negotiation between target-reader orientation and cultural preservation: Although both Zhang Jing and Anna Holmwood's translations belong to the wuxia genre, the former prioritizes "fluency and reading pleasure" for target readers, while the latter endeavors to retain uniquely Chinese philosophical concepts, supplementing cultural annotations in appendices to manifest fidelity to source-culture values. This contrast confirms that creative treason constitutes a necessary mechanism in cultural transcoding.

Reader feedback further validates the efficacy of this strategy: Amazon reviews indicate that 66.7% of readers prioritize translation readability, showing higher acceptance of "cinematic descriptions" in action sequences. However, some readers questioned the semantic translation of culture-specific items, reflecting the complexity of balancing cultural retention with target-reader cognition (Liu Yi and Lina Xu 2019). This study's limitation lies in its absence of quantitative thresholds for reader receptiveness. Future research could incorporate questionnaires or eye-tracking experiments to deepen empirical analysis. Additionally, expanding the investigation to Jin Yong's other works may establish standardized pathways for translating wuxia terminology, thereby advancing systematic translation strategies for the global dissemination of Chinese

literature.

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