

# A Sociological Account of the Translation, Promotion and Reception of Jia Pingwa's *Feidu* Outside China<sup>\*</sup>

SUN Huijun, LI Ying

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

*Feidu*, a novel by Jia Pingwa, which is regarded as one of the most controversial fiction in China since 1993, has recently come back to the attention of the public in China because of the publication of its English version *Ruined City: A Novel* in 2016 in the US. The present paper intends to investigate the different receptions of the novel in China and in countries, like Japan, France, and America. Special attention is given to its translation, promotion, and reception in America on the basis of analyses of the para-texts of the English version, such as the preface of the translator, the promotional words on the part of the American publisher, the endorsement of literary scholars both at home and abroad, and the comments on it by critics. It is found that: (1) The novel was enthusiastically accepted and highly acclaimed in France and Japan, which constitutes a sharp contrast with its reception among Chinese readers and scholars; (2) it got a chance to be translated into English and promoted to the readership 23 years after its publication owing to the efforts of “different agents”, among whom were the translator, the editor, the publisher and many influential scholars both at home and abroad; (3) Goldblatt, rather than others, was finally chosen as the translator of the book on account of the cultural, social, symbolic, and economic capitals he possesses; and (4) the state-sponsored English translation and publication of the book in America was part of China's effort of introducing its contemporary literature outside China. However, in its consecration in the dominant field of world literature, the novel met with obstacles, and its reception not very satisfactory. The authors of the present paper draw on sociological perspectives proposed by Pierre Bourdieu for an explanatory account of the phenomenon. In addition, Actor-Network Translation Studies (ANTS), a sociological framework for translation research proposed by Jonathan Stalling, is also introduced, and its important concepts turn out to have such explanatory power as to give us to a better understanding of the mechanism of literature translation and reception in a foreign culture.

**Keywords:** *Ruined City: A novel*, English translation, Howard Goldblatt, agent, field, capital, ANTS

## Introduction

*Feidu*, one of the most controversial fictions in contemporary China, was first published in 1993 and soon banned in 1994. However, as a contrast to its fate in China, *Feidu* was well-accepted and highly acclaimed in

---

<sup>\*</sup> This is a paper revised on the basis of the Chinese paper by SUN Huijun entitled “The translation and reception of Jia Pingwa's fiction *Feidu* outside China”, which was published in *Translation Quarterly*, No. 91, March, 2019. The present paper is subsidized by “Supervisors as Research Guiders Project” of Shanghai International Studies University. Name of the project the authors are in: on the English translation of contemporary Chinese fiction from the perspectives of stylistics and narratology.

SUN Huijun, Ph.D., professor, Department of English Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.  
LI Ying, graduate student, School of English Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.

Japan and France. On January 22, 2016, its English version *Ruined City: A Novel* was published in the US, bringing it back to the attention of the public and the academia once again. From the perspective of translation sociology, drawing on concepts like field, capital, as well as agents, or in the terms of Actor-Network Translation Studies (ANTS), volitional and non-volitional actors, the paper intends to investigate problems raised by the translation, promotion, and reception of *Feidu*. Given the fact that important concepts used in this paper are ones raised by French scholar Pierre Bourdieu, it is necessary to make a brief introduction of Bourdieu's concepts first. And what follows are concepts proposed by Pascale Casanova and Jonathan Stalling, which turn out to be useful for an explanation of the phenomena revolving the translation, promotion, and reception of *Feidu* among English readers.

Since the 1970s, Bourdieu has become a major theoretical voice in the critical study of cultural practices. Bourdieu's analytical method represents a fruitful alternative to many of the immanent modes of analysis—ranging from New Criticism and various brands of formalism to structuralism and deconstruction—which have dominated literary studies during this period. His work converges with New Historicism and depth hermeneutics and in many ways anticipated the renewed interest in the socio-historical ground of cultural production. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 1)

To be specific, he

provides an analytical model which reintroduces, through the concept of *habitus*, a notion of agent—which structuralism had excluded from social analysis—without falling into the idealism of Romantic conceptions of the artists as creator (or subject) which still informs much literary and art criticism today. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 2)

As Bourdieu (1993) saw it, “agents do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations” (p. 6). To account for these situations without falling into the determinism of objectivist analysis, Bourdieu developed the concept of *field*. In his opinion, actions of an agent should be examined under the objective social relations. There are many kinds of fields, including knowledge field, literature field, political field, economic field, higher education field, religious field, and so on. Competition, as the most essential feature of any field, is also the motive power for the formation, existence, and development of it. Bourdieu's sociology theory was later introduced into the field of translation studies by Pascale Casanova, and the application of “field” has been expanded, from the analysis of domestic problems to international ones. Casanova divides different literature fields into dominating literature fields and dominated ones, which proves to be of great help for us to understand *Feidu*'s reception in the English world.

Bourdieu also uses the concept of *capital* in economics for reference and divides capital into economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. Economic capital is related with market and money; cultural capital refers to cultural and educational capital, such as works, translations, and diplomas, while social capital represents an individual's interpersonal relationship, social status and social influence; and symbolic capital represents the resources a renowned and widely recognized individual can acquire. For example, Howard Goldblatt, praised as the “foremost translator” of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, enjoys quite a few kinds of symbolic capital. In every specific field, different kinds of capital compete against each other through agents.

The concept of agent was discussed in terms of actor in the sociological theory of Latour. But by “actor”, Latour meant human beings only. Jonathan Stalling, a scholar from University of Oklahoma, has modified the concept in his “Actor-Network Translation Studies (ANTS)” by classifying actors into volitional (human) and organizational (environmental) actors.

Translation is a kind of social practice, in which questions, like what an agent did, whether the specific agent or actor was volitional or non-volitional, how and why the actor did it are closely related to the specific field and capital. Investigating field, capital, and agent is of importance for our understanding of the translation activity of *Ruined City: A Novel* and for our efforts to explain related problems.

### Political Field vs. Economic Field

As soon as *Feidu* was published in 1993, it triggered so great a controversy that six months later; it was officially banned, to a large extent for the vulgarity in its sexual descriptions. Almost overnight, Jia Pingwa was denounced as a decadent writer. It was not until the year of 2009 that the ban on *Feidu* was finally lifted. What happened to *Feidu* are significant events in the history of New Period Chinese literature.

In 1993, the novel began to be serialized in the 4th issue of the literary magazine *October*, and then published by Beijing Publishing House as a separate book. It is a novel depicting the life of contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Set in Xi'an in the transitional period after Reform and Opening-up, *Feidu* takes the entanglement of Zhuang Zhidie (the hero) with several women as the main story line and the experiences of other three literary celebrities as subordinate ones. The novel gives a vivid and detailed portrayal of the social situation and mental outlook of intellectuals in the 1980s. Before its publication, news about this "scandalous" book came out. Even before the book was completed, many publishers started to vie with one another for winning its publishing right. After it was launched into the market, it sold so well that it was soon out of stock. It was soon reprinted. Before it was banned in 1994, one million copies of the novel had been sold. As a matter of fact, over 10 million additional pirated copies were also sold within six months (Jia, 2006).

Why did the book sell so well? There is no denying the fact that this was to a large extent because of the graphic descriptions of sex scenes in the novel. In *Feidu*, the writer uses a series of blocks during or following a sex scene, which are followed by a parenthetical note to the effect that the author has deleted a specific number of Chinese characters. In this way, the author seems to be telling the readers that he had replaced sex scenes with blocks because he was certain that the editor would delete them after all. However, some scholars believe that the use of parenthetical notes had been just a gimmick aiming to arouse readers' greater curiosity.

Most probably, however, the novel was also banned for another reason—it reveals the dark side of the Chinese society. Many of the jingles in the novel point an accusing finger at government officials. Here is one of them:

One class of people is on the public weal, a life of leisure they proudly reveal. A second class uses the wealth of others, and enjoys the protection of powerful brothers. A third class contracts for large amounts, charging wasteful spending to expense accounts. A fourth class lives on profits from rents, sitting at home to count dollars and cents. A fifth class, the judges, whose courtrooms are used, profit from both accuser and accused. A sixth class wields a surgical blade, filling pockets with cash from their trade. A seventh class, actors on the stage, by comic routines make a tidy wage. An eighth class, propaganda shills, turn slogans and chants into cashable bills. A ninth class teaches in our schools but where luxury is concerned are impoverished tools. Society's masters stand high on the tenth rung, earnestly studying the life of Lei Feng. (Jia 2009, p. 3)

Now that the present-day Chinese government has launched an anti-corruption movement, such a jingle seems not offensive at all. However, it obviously was considered too critical in the 1980s.

In addition to the exposure of corruption and social injustice, *Feidu* also gives a picturesque and detailed description of the daily life and mental outlook of the intellectuals. Reading the novel, people can feel the

confusion felt by the intellectuals and notice their decadence. The title of the book *Ruined City: A Novel* gives a hint about the novel's theme by the use of the word "Ruined". Apparently, *Feidu* was banned because of the negative image of China it can evoke. Besides, in China, like in most countries in the rest of the world, the economic field has long been weaker than and dominated by the political field. Since the political system determines its cultural products, and the production and circulation of cultural products will be greatly affected by politics. That can explain why *Feidu*, a well-selling book, was banned in 1994. No matter how considerable its economic profit might have been, it was doomed to be banned because of its contradiction with the political field.

### Reception of the Novel by Overseas Chinese Readers

In 1995, two years after *Feidu*'s publication, a Chinese scholar based in the US published a review on the novel in *TriQuarterly*, a literary academic journal of Northwestern University. Firstly, the writer talks about the lifestyle of the Chinese in the time-honored Chinese city that *Feidu* has depicted:

What burns in the hearts and minds of today's Chinese men and women is a flame much more ancient and enduring: sex. And what does life mean besides a good fuck? Well, for the citizens of the abandoned capital, it means eating, bribing, scheming, and generally gypping each other. (Zha, 1995, p. 238)

The novel has a large cast of characters, but "Nobody in sight is innocent or very likable, not even the hero". In the novel, the reader can see "a phony, corrupt mayor and his sycophantic underlings, small-time hustlers, hooligans and creeps, shameless mandarins, sham artists, entrepreneurs who make fake products, scheming family servants, a manipulative and wanton nun, a street hooker spreading VD, even an opium addict" (Zha, 1995, p. 241).

Then, the writer discusses the national image of China this novel has presented:

Dwelling on the details of everyday events in a meticulously realist fashion, the novel unfolds gradually, almost blithely, a picture of life in an old capital city that is rotten and perverse in every way: its pervasive greed, corruption and hypocrisy, its superstitious beliefs, its prurient repressiveness, and its stagnant powers. (Zha, 1995, p. 241)

Besides, the writer also quotes other scholars' opinions to analyze *Feidu* and its author: "The craving for, and fear of, women have always been there in Jia Pingwa's novels, but he was more evasive in the past" (Dai, in Zha, 1995, p. 255). The essay also delves into the universal psychology of contemporary Chinese intellectuals and even all modern Chinese as a whole:

It's a daydream, the psychological compensation of a man who is repressed both socially and sexually. In the past, Jia tried to sanctify his male characters by uglifying the seductive female. This time, he confronts his ambivalence, but in an even more timid and weak way. It's a double fantasy: the hero first attracts the women with his status of a cultural star, and then conquers them with his sheer male potency. Through this imaginary success, he attempts to shore up his self-confidence as a man of culture, which has already begun to totter in reality but it's a double-edged lie, deceiving others as well as himself. This demonstrates not only Jia Pingwa's own anxiety but also a widespread mental crisis among contemporary Chinese intellectuals and modern men. (Zha, 1995, p. 256)

Since there was no English version of *Feidu* before 2016, reviews on the novel outside China were all written by overseas Chinese scholars. In addition, very few of them can be found. So, to some extent, the book review reflects the general idea of overseas Chinese scholars that the novel is to the detriment of the image of China, as well as those of the Chinese, the Chinese writer, and Chinese literature.

### The Reception of *Feidu* Outside China

Although *Feidu* was banned in China, it was translated into Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and French soon after the first publication of its Chinese version, and was even awarded with Prix Femina, a literary award in France. Reaction from scholars abroad constitute a sharp contrast with that from some Chinese and overseas Chinese scholars. Soon after being translated into Japanese by a professor at Kyoto University, the novel attracted a lot of attention. According to Han Xiangdong, an international student at Kyoto University, many famous scholars, especially those studying modern and contemporary Chinese literature as well as sinologists focusing on the Pre-Qin period and the Tang Dynasty made an in-depth study on it. ... “Copies of the first Japanese version of *Feidu* reached 60,000 in number, a record high number of foreign literature publication in Japan since Lu Xun” (Sun, 1998, p. 57).

In France, *Feidu* met with an even more satisfactory reception. While it was being banned in China, Geneviève Imbot-Bichet, a French scholar, representing Stock Publishing House, signed a contract with Jia Pingwa to translate *Feidu* into French. In 1997, the French version of *Feidu* was published and was later awarded with one of the most important international literary awards in France—Prix Femina. This award was literally translated by some other scholars as “foreign literature award given by women judges”, because it was originally established by 22 writers of *La Vie Heureuse* magazine which was later renamed as Femina because the judges of the award were all women. Instead of accusing the novel of male chauvinism, the judges showed such a preference for it that they awarded it with the Femina Prize for Foreign Literature. According to the translator,

as soon as the book was published, it was enthusiastically accepted and highly acclaimed among the French readership. Some readers said it had the same flavour as that of *The Story of the Stone*, one of China’s four great classical novels. Others were so surprised to realize that there should be such a talented writer in contemporary China that they even recognized Jia as the most important and the greatest writer in China. (Jia, 2006)

The novel was no less popular in Japan. Through this novel, the true psychology of the characters and the living conditions of the Chinese were made accessible to the Japanese, among which were businessmen who wanted to find the golden key to the gate of the Chinese market. As far as the French were concerned, what was really appealing was a true reflection of human nature by way of a detailed portrayal of the characters.

What about the fate of the novel in the US? The US has always been at the center of world literature. To some extent, the field of English literature is regarded as no other than the field of world literature itself. After the English version of *Feidu* came out, Michael Orthofer, the initiator of the website of Complete Review published his book review on *Ruined City: A Novel*: “Generally speaking, *Ruined City: A Novel* is a powerful and enlightening work. It has achieved amazing success” (Orthofer, 2016). On November 25, 2016, we searched on the website—<http://www.worldcat.org> for the number of overseas libraries holding *Ruined City: A Novel*. Statistics show that 103 libraries in America, 14 in Canada, and three in Germany have the novel’s English version. Besides, libraries in Netherlands, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, and Singapore also have this book.

### Promotion of *Feidu*’s English Version in the English World

Compared with the Japanese, the French as well as other versions, *Feidu*’s English version was a later comer, which did not appear until January 22, 2016. The publication of *Ruined City: A Novel* should be

attributed to many different agents. In translation activities, the concept of agent raised by Bourdieu refers to the intermediary between the translator and readers of the translation. Translator is one of the agents, but agents

may also be patrons of literature, Maecenas, salon organizers, politicians or companies which help to change cultural and linguistic policies. They may also be magazines, journals or institutions. And they may often combine two or more of these roles. Often they are individuals who devote great amounts of energy and even their own lives to the cause of a foreign literature, author or literary school, translating, writing articles, teaching and dissemination of knowledge and culture. (Milton & Bandia, 2009, p. 1)

In terms of *Ruined City: A Novel*, many agents contributed to its publication, such as the journal of *Chinese Literature Today*, Oklahoma University Press and many scholars, sinologists both at home and abroad, consultative committee of *Chinese Literature Today* Book Series, among which Goldblatt played the most important role.

### **The Selected Translator and His Promotion of *Ruined City: A Novel***

*Feidu* finally met its English readership in January, 2016. Before that, Goldblatt was chosen as the English translator of the novel, and the English version was published by Oklahoma University Press. As a matter of fact, in the year of 2013, professor Hu Zongfeng and Robin Gilbank, Professor Hu's colleague at China's Northwest University had worked together to complete their first draft of the English version of *Feidu*. But Goldblatt obviously had a competitive edge for several reasons. With a Ph.D. in Chinese literature in Indiana University under the supervision of renowned American sinologist Liu Wuji and Xu Jieyu during his graduate years, as a translator of dozens of Chinese contemporary novels, including *Turbulence*, another novel of Jia Pingwa, and as an influential sinologist both at home and abroad, Goldblatt obviously enjoyed unparalleled cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Thus, it is reasonable that Goldblatt was finally chosen as the translator of *Feidu*.

Goldblatt is the most productive translator of contemporary Chinese literature, publishing annually at least one, and sometimes two or even more translations of Chinese fiction. Probably due to the heavy workload and time pressure, most of his translated works are published with only a preface of several sentences, or simply without a translator's preface at all. However, in *Ruined City: A Novel*, Goldblatt wrote a relatively long translator's note illuminating several points.

Firstly, the value of *Feidu* as a critical realist novel is given to show the significance of translating it. According to him,

Some works of fiction excel at capturing the defining spirit or mood of their time, informing contemporaries as well as later generations of what it was like to live then, transcending aesthetic qualities to erect a mirror for society to view itself. Jia Pingwa's *Ruined City* ought to have been one of those, a literary snapshot of urban life in the early years following the culturally sterile and politically savage Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). (Goldblatt, 2016, p. 39)

Secondly, the fact that *Feidu* was once a banned book in China is mentioned. Banned books are more likely to arouse readers' curiosity and interest, which is true both in China and in the US. Emphasizing that the novel is a banned book is a commonly used salesmanship among Western translators, and Goldblatt is no exception. In addition, *Feidu*'s role as the most controversial contemporary work is discussed. The following reasons are given in his translator's note: lurid sexual content, bleak tone, skewed relationships among characters and negative image of public officials and of society in general. In the words of Goldblatt, "although

sexual content played an important role in the governmental decision to keep the book out of readers' hands, there were many other reasons for it being officially banned" (Goldblatt, 2016, p. 43).

Thirdly, based on the version of *Feidu* published in 1993, the translator endeavored to represent the original text faithfully. *Feidu* has two versions in Chinese mainland, namely the 1993 edition and the 2009 edition.

Compared with the earlier version, the content of the new one remains unchanged, and even the number of characters and pages are almost the same. The only difference is that the specific number of deleted characters given by the author in the parenthesis after the blocks "(the author has deleted ...characters)" has been changed into something literally like "... (the author has deleted some characters here)", showing a much vaguer and more low-key attitude. (Li, 2009)

In some places, these two iconic parts are totally deleted. The English version does not make it clear which version it is based on. But considering those faithfully translated blocks and the specific number of the deleted characters, we can conclude that it is based on the 1993 version, rather than the 2009 one.

Fourthly, Goldblatt mentioned that although the novel was banned in China, "copies were smuggled into the country and dozens of pirated versions made it, however briefly, into bookstores and private homes". Even though *Ruined City* could not be openly sold and read in China for nearly two decades, there were many readers finding ways to get copies of it. It further proves that *Feidu* is a beloved novel in China (Jia, 2016, p. 47).

Fifthly, Goldblatt mentioned the fact that "in 1997, a French translation was published and was awarded the Prix Femina (a literary award) and Jia was honored in France by becoming a Chevalier in the Ordre des Artes et des Lettres", which shows the novel has reached its international height (Jia, 2016, p. 47).

Finally, an introduction of Jia Pingwa, the author is given: "He is among China's most popular and most controversial novelists, a man of diverse interests and talents. A writer who is culturally tied to the ancient traditions of China and does not shy away from dark descriptions" (Jia, 2016, p. 59).

Undoubtedly, Goldblatt is good at promotion, and he knows how to arouse western readers' curiosity. Besides, he has tried to make the translation conform to target readers' reading habit. For example, in the English version of *Feidu*, paragraph breaks are inserted, especially for dialogues, so as to match English textual pattern. In his translator's note, Goldblatt writes:

In the preparation of this translation, I have suppressed the impulse to add a more modern touch to the narrative, simultaneously refraining from allowing it to seem quaint. Up-to-date twenty-first-century terminology or archaic terms and expressions would have rung hollow in a twentieth-century novel and might have further shattered the illusion that the reader is dealing with a Chinese author without intervention. (Jia, 2016, p. 120)

As a leading figure and "foremost translator" of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Goldblatt not only excels in translation but also in the promotion of the translated works.

### **The Promotion of the Novel by the Publishing House**

The review by the publishing house on the back cover of *Feidu* is almost the same with that by Goldblatt. Like Goldblatt, the publisher emphasizes the novel's role as a banned book in China and a classical one satirizing and criticizing social reality. In addition, an evaluation of the translation quality follows:

When originally published in 1993, *Ruined City: A Novel* was promptly banned by China's State Publishing Administration, ostensibly for its explicit sexual content. Since then, award-winning author Jia Pingwa's vivid portrayal of contemporary China's social and economic transformation has become a classic, viewed by critics and scholars of Chinese literature as one of the most important novels of the twentieth century. Howard Goldblatt's deft translation now gives

English-speaking readers their first chance to enjoy this masterpiece of social satire by one of China's most provocative writers. While eroticism, exoticism, and esoteric minutiae—the “pornography” that earned the opprobrium of Chinese officials—pervade *Ruined City*, this tale of a famous contemporary writers sexual and legal imbroglios is an incisive portrait of politics and culture in a rapidly changing China. In a narrative that ranges from political allegory to parody, Jia Pingwa tracks his antihero Zhuang Zhidie through progressively more involved and inevitably disappointing sexual liaisons. Set in a modern metropolis rife with power politics, corruption, and capitalist schemes, the novel evokes an unrequited romantic longing for China's premodern, rural past, even as unfolding events caution against the trap of nostalgia. Amid comedy and chaos the author subtly injects his concerns about the place of intellectual seriousness, censorship, and artistic integrity in the changing conditions of Chinese society and modern life.

It is evident that just like the translator; the publishing house has spared no effort in promoting the novel.

### **Jonathan Stalling and Other Agents in the Promotion Effort**

*Ruined City* was selected for “*Chinese Literature Today Book Series*”. Until now, the series has published eight works, of which two are collections of poems, two are collections of short stories, and two are separate fiction editions. Of the two fictions, one is Jia Pingwa's *Ruined City*, and the other is *Sandalwood death* by Mo Yan—the Nobel Prize winner in 2012. After *Ruined City* was published, the journal *Chinese Literature Today* published an introduction and promotion of it on the second issue of 2016. The series' consultative committee consists of many famous figures. The first that deserves out mention is Jonathan Stalling. He

worked hard on sending out review copies to ALL major newspapers and magazines, and to others and had secured an agreement with the Guardian News Paper to publish a section of the novel there through the assistance of the online world lit magazine Asymptote,

as mentioned in an email to me from Jonathan Stalling on August 14, 2019, although at the last minute they pulled out and said that they would not publish it.

Besides Jonathan Stalling, the deputy editor of *Chinese Literature Today*, there are also Daniel Simon, editor of the US' most influential literary journal *World Literature Today*, and Robert ConDavis-Undiano, the executive Editor, Li Jingze, deputy editor of *People's Literature* and vice-chairman of Chinese Writers Association. In addition, the committee also has several distinguished scholars in the field of literary studies in the US, including Goldblatt, Haun Saussy at the University of Chicago, Wai-lim Yip, Michelle Yeh and Huang Yunteat the University of California, Haiyan Lee at Stanford University, Yibing Huang at Connecticut College, Christopher Lupke at the University of Alberta, Peter Hays Gries, Ronald Schleifer, and Paul B. Bellat the University of Oklahoma. There are also Chinese scholars, such as Chen Xiaoming at Peking University, Cao Shunqing at Sichuan University, Cheng Guangwei at Renmin University of China, Ge Fei at Tsinghua University, Meng Huanhua at Shenyang Normal University and Liu Hongtao, Zhang Jian, Zhang Ning, and Zhang Qinghua at Beijing Normal University. As supporters of *Feidu*, Li Jingze and Chen Xiaoming once served as the preface writers for its second edition. The presence of the influential scholars in the committee shows that the novel is highly acclaimed in the field of literary studies both in China and in the US. And their endorsement has made the publication of its English version a reality.

What was behind the enthusiastic promotion of the novel? Firstly, the novel is a masterpiece and shows much artistic merit. In fact, some people suspect that *Feidu* was translated into Japanese and well received by Japanese readers because of the sexual descriptions in it. However, it was only part of the story. As some scholars have pointed out,

Sexual description is not the reason why it had a great vogue in Japan. ... In the past, Chinese novels are to some



extent preaches and too cautious in revealing the psychological activities of characters. They tend to avoid the dark side of human nature and the society. The greatest breakthrough *Feidu* has made is to artistically depict the real psychology of a group of people in a specific time and space. Unlike Chinese novels which usually avoid discussing social problems, *Feidu* never talks about any vague or general principles. It only shows the authentic living conditions. Therefore, Japanese readers regard the novel as a real depiction of the inner world of the characters. In this sense, Jia is a writer of real artistic pursuit. (Sun, 2001, pp. 324-325)

Other than the sexual description itself, what attracts foreign translators is the characters' psychology revealed in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Jia writes: "Truth, however, is at the heart of the work". He is telling readers that *Feidu* is a work reflecting the mind of the intellectuals. The novel vividly shows the living conditions and mental activities of contemporary intellectuals and reveals the confusion, hesitation and decadence of them who have lost their spiritual prop. Zhuang Zhidie, the leading character, serves as a typical example.

Secondly, besides the real reflection of modern urban life and human nature, the novel is also an examination of as well as a reflection on the whole society. In the translator's preface, Goldblatt has quoted Tian Zhenying, the editor of the 1993 version as saying that the novel "depicts the fall of a generation of intellectuals and the societal causes behind the decline of that society" (Jia, 2016, p. 99).

Besides, the fact that *Feidu* should have been translated into English 23 years after its publication is closely related to the status of the writer and the influence of the novel in the history of Chinese literature in the New Period. Jia Pingwa, one of the most influential writers in contemporary China, has won nearly all the important national literary prizes in China, among which are the third Lu Xun Literature Prize (2005), the seventh Mao Dun Literature Prize (2008), and Shi Nai'an Literature Prize (2011). His novel *Fuzao (Turbulence)* was also translated by Goldblatt, which won the Pegasus Prize for Literature in 1987. As the foremost translator of Chinese literature, Goldblatt has no reason not to translate such an influential novel. However, it was not until about two decades later when China rose to be the world's second largest economy that the time seemed ripe to introduce the novel to English readers. As a novel of great controversy and of great literary merit, *Ruined City: A Novel* has naturally become the best choice for *Chinese Literature Today*. Then, how about the reception of *Feidu's* English version in the English world?

### The Reception of the English Version

Written by one of the most well-known Chinese writers, and translated by the foremost translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, this 20th century's most controversial fiction of China has many advantages to recommend itself as far as the US book market is concerned. Moreover, the consultative committee of "*Chinese Literature Today Book Series*" is a great endorsement for its promotion. However, the reception of the English version seems on the whole not very satisfactory. Although many university libraries have bought the book since the English version came out in January 2016, its reception among ordinary readers seems not very enthusiastic. On Amazon, only three readers' reviews can be found and none of them are very positive. In the web's five-star rating system, the book is only rated as 2.5 stars. Comments from scholars are also very rare. Apart from an introduction of the book by *Chinese Literature Today*, a brief book review by Jess Row was published in the *New York Times* on March 20, 2016. After giving a description of the novel's main content, it points out that like traditional Chinese classics; the novel focuses on the description of details, lacking the arrangement of plots. In the end, Jess Row writes that the novel has neither deliberately depicted the

character's trauma nor shown a strong interest in politics. The Complete Review also has a review on it. Besides an overall positive evaluation of the novel, the web mentions that *Feidu's* readability is very limited.

In general, *Feidu* is a critical realist novel that has much artistic merit and also a significant work in the history of Chinese literature in the New Era. It is a thought-provoking novel reflecting the fall of intellectuals and the societal causes behind the decline of the society in the 1980s. About 23 years later, scholars in the field of Chinese literature have attempted to translate *Feidu* into English and introduce it to English readers. Although great effort has been made by related institutions and scholars in promoting the novel, a good reception in the English world is yet to come. There are probably many reasons.

To begin with, according to Casanova,

in international cultural communication, especially in the field of world literature, Chinese literature is a dominated one in the literary sphere. Although it has great literary traditions and a large number of speakers, it is little known or recognized in the international literary market. (Casanova, 2010, p. 290)

The translation and publication of *Feidu* in the US is a movement from a dominated literature field to the dominating one. Since the literary capital of Chinese literature is not rich enough, the reception of it in the dominating field of literature is not easy.

Secondly, the Chinese society in the 1980s reflected in the novel aroused great interest among potential businessmen from foreign countries, for example, the Japanese businessmen had been attracted to it in the hope that they could get the golden key to the Chinese market. However, 23 years later, when the novel was finally made available to English readers, the reality described in the novel has already changed. What about its appeal to the French? Two decades ago, the French loved it for its candid description of human nature, but there had already been a major change in Western culture, both in French culture and in American culture, a turn-away from celebrating art that depicts women as sexual objects rather than fully dimensional character, although the novel was released before the "Me Too Movement" in the US. Professor Stalling believes that this book triggered a censorship impulse to protect mass media from complaints by liberal readers. As far as he sees it, the novel could have sold well as a "banned book about sex" in the 90's or even in the 00's each year these markets have shrunk since World literature in translation is only really read by the same Americans who are sensitive to such cultural changes, as mentioned in an email to me from Jonathan Stalling on August 14, 2019. In other words, the Habitus changed in the US such that it no longer matched the market potential the novel would have had in previous decades. The shift in cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality and shifting reading habits around difficult prose account for a significant percentage of the dampened Western reception.

Thirdly, there has also been a shift away from a willingness to read difficult books more generally. *Feidu* has a quite different narrative rhythm from most other contemporary novels; that the novel is slow in its narrative rhythm and involves insignificant characters and events; that the novel also contains different narrative clues in which characters are almost invisible. What takes much of the space is not the core story as people imagine, but the details of some accidental events. Even when the novel reaches its climax, which is when the leading character goes to the court, the writer still keeps himself away from the event and inclines to give a more indirect generalization. Indeed, readers have to be more patient when reading such a kind of narrative style. Thus, many readers think it is time-consuming and not worth reading. In the words of Professor Stalling,

Its slow pace, meandering plot, huge cast of characters etc, all make it a very slow read and only the most deliberate readers are able to really see its genius. This also may not have been the case in the late 90's and early 00's when postmodern and other stranger prose works were still in heavy rotation (popular). The work ends up being important as a part of intellectual history and while it may one day find its way into controversy in the US and through that controversy, some wider readership, it will likely have a steady readership of professional readers, who will read it for years to come in college classrooms and beyond. But the number will be small. (as mentioned in an email to me from Jonathan Stalling on August 14, 2019)

The length of the version itself, more than 500 pages, may also be a reason to consider.

Finally, the novel was published by a university press, which may have led to a disadvantage in the market in comparison with the English version of *Gaoxing*, another work by Jia Pingwa, which also got published in the English world. Although *Gaoxing* is not as influential as *Feidu* in China, and its translator is not as productive and famous as Goldblatt, even mistranslations can be found in the English version, *Gaoxing*'s English version—*Happy Dreams: A Novel* is better accepted by the readers. The more intriguing plot of the novel may be a reason for its satisfactory reception. However, a more important reason is that the novel enjoys a more efficient mode of translation and promotion. With Amazon Crossing as the publisher of the English version, Amazon could acquire more economic capital and the translator could gain higher remuneration. In this way, the price of the book was much lower. And the economic field in the US has got the upper hand.

All in all, specific social and cultural factors, including field, capital and actors, either volitional or non-volitional, have played important roles during the process when *Feidu* was banned in China and then introduced into Japan and France and finally into the English world, shaping the destiny of the fate in specific times and spaces.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Casanova, P. (2010). Consecration and accumulation of literary capital: Translation as unequal exchange. In M. Baker (Ed.), *Critical readings in translation studies*. London: Routledge.
- Chen, T. (2015). Blanks to be filled: Public-making and the censorship of Jia Pingwa's decadent capital. *China Perspective*, (1), 15-22.
- Chitralkha, B. (2010). Quest for nation's unsung literary gems. *China Daily*, April 23.
- Jia, P. W. (2009). *Feidu*. Beijing: Writers' Publishing House.
- Jia, P. W. (2016). *Ruined city: A novel*. (H. Goldblatt, Trans.). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. (Original work published 1993)
- Li, L. (2009). Jia Pingwa is relieved to see his *Feidu* to be lifted out of ban and published unabridged. <http://www.ce.cn/>. Retrieved from [http://book.ifeng.com/psl/sh/200907/0729\\_3556\\_1274644.shtml](http://book.ifeng.com/psl/sh/200907/0729_3556_1274644.shtml)
- Milton, J., & Bandia, P. (2009). *Agents of translation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Orthofer, M. (2016). Review of the book *Ruined City: A Novel*. Retrieved from <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2016/03/21/ruined-city-review/>
- Row, J. (2016). Jess Row reviews *Ruined City*. *New York Times*, June 20.
- Stalling, J. (2018). The Chinese literature translation archive and ANTS. *International Symposium on Translated Chinese Literature and Its Reception Outside of China*, October 7, Shanghai, China.
- Sun, J. X. (1998). Jia Pingwa in 1998. *Dangdai Zuoja*, (4), 78-85.
- Sun, J. X. (2001). *A Prequel of Jia Pingwa* (Vol. 3). Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House.
- Zha, J. Y. (1995). Yellow peril. *TriQuarterly*, (93), 236-263.