# Chinese Crime Fiction in English Translation: Readers' Reception of *The Golden Hairpin*

BEIXI LI
University of Bristol

CAROL O'SULLIVAN
University of Bristol

**Abstract**

Chinese crime novels are beginning to join the surge of crime fiction being translated into English, which we have seen in the last twenty years. Despite extensive comparative research on Chinese literature and its English translations, there has been little research on its reception. This is a significant omission in the case of genre fiction, which traditionally attracts a wide readership. Our study aims to address this gap, exploring the reception of Chinese crime fiction translated into English through a case study of *The Golden Hairpin* (2018) by Cece Qinghan, translated by Alex Woodend. Adopting a qualitative content analysis approach and using the software Nvivo, we analyse ninety-eight reviews of the book from Goodreads and Amazon. English readers comment on a range of aspects of the book including genre, content (plot, characters, and writing), difficulty in reading, access to Chinese culture, translation, sequels and adaptations, and format. Reflection on the quality of the translation was fairly frequent. Some readers felt a considerable sense of cultural distance, so paratextual support is important for translated Chinese fiction. The existence of an audiovisual adaptation had a positive effect on reader interest. The lack of resolution in the book, which is the only one in the series to be translated so far, was frequently commented on.

## Introduction

Translated literature is a crucial facet of the "Chinese culture going global" policy (Yu 86-7), which advocates for the export and translation of Chinese cultural products abroad. State entities, publishing houses, and translators have collaborated to gain more international recognition for Chinese literature. For example, the Panda Series of translated fiction was launched by Gladys and Xianyi Yang in 1981 (Geng, "Gift-Giving" 59; Lee 562). In recent years, the Chinese government has rolled out further initiatives to encourage the global circulation of Chinese literature, including the China Book International Program, the Classic China International Publishing Project, and the Chinese Contemporary Works Translation Project (Yun Wu 65; J. Wang, *A History* 146).

There is a long tradition of translating classical Chinese literature, but relatively little contemporary literature from China was being translated (Harman 16; Kneissl 204). This situation has improved in recent decades (e.g. with the literary success of Nobel-Prize-winning authors Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian) (Lee and Dutrait; Lovell; Zhang and Lingenfelter, Klein, Zhang and Wang 18, Yun Wu 285). Novels in genres such as science fiction and martial arts have also gained visibility. Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* (2014), translated by Ken Liu, was awarded a Hugo in 2015 (Dean; You Wu 56; Y. Wang 59), and there has been a steady flow of translations of martial arts fiction by Jin Yong (Y. Wang 111; Zhang 111).

Chinese crime fiction is under-represented among translated crime fiction in the anglophone book market. Starting in the early 2000s (France; Seago and Lei 87), there was a

surge in sales of translated crime fiction in the UK, almost all of it from Europe. This heralded a wider boom in the sales of translated fiction (Stougaard-Nielsen 386). Meanwhile, crime fiction in general has been gaining in popularity; in 2017, it outsold general and literary fiction for the first time in the UK (Stougaard-Nielsen 386). Perhaps partly because of these positive market conditions, Chinese crime fiction has begun to appear in English translation in the past few years, with titles such as *Death Notice* by Zhou Haohui (2018) and *Bad Kids* by Zijin Chen (2022).

Little is known, however, about the reception of this literature. If Chinese literature is translated but not embraced by the general public, the project of reaching the global market will only partly have been achieved. As a result, it is critical to explore the reception of Chinese translated works by their intended audience. This article, which draws on the first author's doctoral work, situates itself within this broader project. The article adopts a case study approach to look at readers' comments on Cece Qinghan's *The Golden Hairpin*, translated by Alex Woodend. A corpus of ninety-eight reviews from Goodreads and Amazon is analysed to understand how the book was received by English-speaking readers. The study aims to identify factors which may impede readers' enjoyment of the book and considers the implications for the translation and dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature.

## 1. Reader reception and Chinese literature in English translation

Work on reception of translated fiction in Translation Studies (TS) is still at a relatively early stage. There have been calls to look more at the role of readers in the international circulation of fiction: as Brigid Maher puts it (177), "circulation from one language and culture to another involves […] not only translators but also editors, publishers, marketers, scholars, critics and, of course, readers" (see also Geng, "Gift-Giving" 59). Such calls have met with a limited response. One significant intervention is by Leo Tak-hung Chan, whose 2010 book *Readers, Reading and Reception of Translated Fiction in Chinese* covers a variety of literary genres and acknowledges the shift from "reception" as the preserve of professional critics to reception by the "general reader". He looks, for instance, at the reception of Chinese translations of the Harry Potter books on "websites, blogs and forums" (134). Chan's work is the earliest example we have found in TS of a researcher looking at online readers' reviews.

There has been very little work on the reception of translated crime fiction, and on the reception of literature translated from Chinese. Qiang Geng comments that for a long time "the issue of reception of translation was barely considered [by the organizations producing outbound translations], resulting in a failure to promote Chinese literature globally" (*Zhongguo* 5). Scholarship on the translation of Chinese fiction has tended to focus on translation strategies and agents of translation (Harman; Zhang). Scholarship on the translation of crime fiction has acknowledged the difficulty of transposing "thick" cultural context. Norms may vary from language to language: Brigid Maher and Susan Bassnett observe that "the dominant strategy in translating crime fiction is domestication" (59), while Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby argue on the basis of a case study of Australian crime fiction into French that "French crime fiction now allows a place for the foreign that was in the early days of the Série Noire systematically denied" (219). This section will situate our study in relation to the broader field of reader reception through online reviews, and in relation to what has been published in translation studies on related topics.

Reader reception covers many different possible approaches and methods. As Ika Willis (n.p.) has observed, it has often been "identified with one particular strand of thought, the "reception aesthetic" or "reception theory" of the Konstanz School". Chan's work draws heavily on literary-critical and historical approaches and looks, for instance, at publishers' marketing strategies ("Historical" 126-131). Today, reception studies draw on "multiple methodologies and approaches including semiotics and deconstruction; ethnography,

sociology and history; media theory and archaeology; and feminist, Marxist, black and postcolonial criticism" (Willis). The shift of focus from the perspectives of professional critics and scholars to those of everyday readers has been facilitated by the accessibility of book reviews through platforms like Goodreads and Amazon. Goodreads reviews are "inevitably written by a much broader sample of the public than 'professional' reviews are" (Stinson and Driscoll 95). Some scholars have made a strong distinction between the two types of reviews. Jiankai Wang ("Zhongguo" 18) classifies the readership of English-translated works into "professional" readers (critics and scholars), and ordinary readers. In *History of Overseas Reception of English-Translated Contemporary Chinese Literature,* Wang (261) comments that professional readers tend to analyse classical Chinese literature from a literary perspective, while "ordinary" readers engage with English translations to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese social realities (261). In the past, online book reviews have been considered "a defective version of literary criticism" (Rebora et al.) but it has been argued that "lay reviews are better than professional reviews in showing the effect of the book on the reader, since users feel no need to be objective" (Rehfeldt, cited in Rebora et al.). We have reservations about making too sharp a distinction between "lay" and "professional" reviews; after all, many Goodreads reviews "mimic" professional reviews (Stinston and Driscoll 110) and, as will be seen in section 5, some Goodreads readers are accessing review copies in a way which would once have been restricted to "professional" critics. We agree, however, that reviews from sites such as Goodreads offer valuable insight into the ways readers frame their opinions of translations.

In Translation Studies, there is a long tradition, going back to Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence (cf. Wang and Humblé 759), of assuming that we can imaginatively project ourselves into readers' responses to a translation. Susan Bassnett claims that "one of the major lines of enquiry that has opened up within Translation Studies since […] the 1970s is the question of the unpredictability of text reception" (149); but her main theoretical point of reference is polysystem theory, and her argument depends heavily on an analysis of the content and framing of texts, rather than on evidence from readers. More sociologically-based studies of reader responses have, however, proliferated in recent years, often analysing reviews from Goodreads and Amazon. These sites have become a new force in contemporary book culture (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 248). We looked at eight studies which take an empirical approach to looking at what Leo Tak-Hung Chan calls the "real", rather than the "hypothetical" reader ("Historical" 117):

- Angela d'Egidio's 2015 study of reader reviews of Camilleri's *La forma dell'acqua*/*The Shape of Water*, translated into English by Stephen Sartarelli, and Stephen King's *Joyland*, translated into Italian by Giovanni Arduino;
- Xiuli Liang's 2015 study of reviews selected English translations of Chinese literature, which compares these reviews to reviews of work originally written in English about China;
- Feng Wang and Philippe Humblé's 2019 study of reviews of Anthony Yu's English translations of *Journey to the West*;
- Jia Miao and Xiaoyan Yu's 2019 study of Amazon reviews of Mai Jia's *Decoded* (2014), translated into English by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne;
- Mi Zhang and Zhiwei Wang's 2020 study of Goodreads reviews of the English translation of Jin Yong's *A Hero Born* translated by Anna Holmwood;
- Jianwei Zhang and Wenjun Fan's 2022 translation reception study of the classical Chinese novel *Hong Lou Meng*;
- Yanqui Cui and Yang Bai's 2023 study of reviews of Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* (2008), translated by Howard Goldblatt;

- Xuemei Chen's 2023 study of reader response to the paratexts of eleven editions of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* in Chinese.

We will outline some of the key features of these studies here.

Goodreads and Amazon are by far the most-mined sources. D'Egidio analyses reviews from Amazon (453 reviews), Goodreads (144 reviews) and the Italian site Anobii (100 reviews). Liang's study analyses reviews of nineteen English translations of Chinese STs on Goodreads and twelve on Amazon. Miao and Yu analyse 141 Goodreads reviews of *Decoded*. Zhang and Wang examine 1280 Goodreads comments on *A Hero Born*. Zheng and Fan examine a corpus of Goodreads reviews of translations of *Hong Lou Meng* consisting of 406 text reviews and 2030 ratings. Cui and Bai analyse 226 Amazon ratings and 152 Amazon reviews of *Wolf Totem*. Wang and Humblé analyse a total of 137 Amazon reviews. Chen, who is looking at reviews of Chinese translations, uses Douban and the book discussion forum Xianxian Shuhua, affiliated to the online forum Tianya. Of some thousands of reader responses in total, she analyses eighty-one discussion threads about the paratexts of the books, across both platforms.

A range of methods were used for analysis, and space does not allow us to conduct a detailed methodological comparison of these previous studies, but they include a number of findings relevant to our study. D'Egidio comments that in general "the American and British reviewers commented more on the stylistic and linguistic aspects of the translation […] than the Italians did because they found the language difficult" (80). Zhang and Fan (12) found that "character names pose a significant challenge for English-language readers' of *Hong Lou Meng*, and that paratextual support was important. They conclude that readability is "undoubtedly the most important textual feature" (12). Cui and Bai read the readers' reviews against the publisher's paratext and found the publisher's framing "effective but not fully decisive […] the audience could freely choose the aspects they wished to react to". Chen finds that adjustments to the paratexts of the editions of *Charlotte's Web* have an observable effect on the book's reception. Cui and Bai quote a 2006 study about the effect of consumer reviews on Amazon and Barnes & Noble which notes that "an incremental negative review is more powerful in decreasing book sales than an incremental positive review is in increasing sales" (15). This speaks to one of the main focuses of our study, which is on barriers to understanding or enjoyment of Chinese crime fiction: reviews which mention these not only reflect readers' difficulties in engaging with the book, but may also put other readers off reading it.

## 2. The novel

*The Golden Hairpin* [簪中录 1, Zan Zhong Lu] is the first volume in a popular Chinese crime fiction series set in Ancient China by Qinghan Cece [侧侧轻寒, Cece Qinghan]. It began in 2014 as a webnovel, a hugely popular format in China. The novel achieved millions of clicks on webnovel platforms such as Jinjiang Literature City and went on to be published in book form by Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing in 2015. Four volumes in the series have been published to date in China. Amazon Crossing published Alex Woodend's English translation of *The Golden Hairpin* in 2018. The story is set in the ninth century during the Tang Dynasty. It centres on a female sleuth named Huang Zixia. She is accused of murdering her family and forced to disguise herself as a eunuch. With the help of Li Shubai, Prince of Kui, she uses her skills and intelligence to solve criminal cases in the hope of clearing her name. The novel was selected for analysis because of the comparatively large number of reviews, and because the expected TV adaptation had attracted considerable interest.

## 3. Methodology

In this section, we will discuss the reasons why we selected Amazon and Goodreads as sources of reviews, how we collected and filtered the reviews, and how we used Nvivo to carry out the

thematic analysis.

### 3.1 Selecting the platforms

Nonprofessional reader reviews 'are significant for researchers because they provide access to a kind of reading experience that has previously been elusive' (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 250). Chen observes that:

> online comments tend to report polarized views (both positive and negative). In most cases, readers simply do not comment on a text unless they are very happy or unhappy with it. Readers who post their opinions on social media represent only a tiny subset of readers, and these data may thus provide a limited picture of the audience. That said, these naturally occurring archived data can lend empirical insight that is readily accessible and that can be used as a starting point for further investigation.
>
> (5-6)

Both Amazon and Goodreads are established and rich sources of reader reviews (cf. d'Egidio 70). Amazon reviews are linked to book purchase; Goodreads is a reader-centred site. Zheng and Fan excluded Amazon from their study so that their corpus would not be "contaminated by extra factors of the book as a commodity, such as its delivery time, price, and printing quality", arguing that "such extra factors are relevant to consumption studies but should be controlled for when studying readers' reception of a translated work's content" (314). However, we are interested not just in readers' reception of the translated content of *The Golden Hairpin*, but also in the general market appeal of Chinese crime fiction in translation. The material aspects of the reading experience that might turn up in Amazon reviews were thus also of interest.

### 3.2 Compiling the corpus

A total of 111 reviews were collected. The cut-off date was 31 July 2023. We eliminated eight reviews of non-English versions. Three reviews were duplicates (an identical or very similar review was posted on both Goodreads and Amazon). In these cases, we retained the Goodreads version only. We did not include comments on reviews, because they were few and brief. Our final corpus consisted of forty-nine reviews from Goodreads and forty-nine reviews from Amazon.

### 3.3 Data analysis

We adopted thematic analysis to examine the reviews using Nvivo 12 Pro. Nvivo provides researchers with a set of tools to examine qualitative data, uncovering insights that might remain obscured otherwise (Jackson and Bazeley; Braun and Clarke 78). Following the fundamental phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 87) and integrating the features of Nvivo software, a five-step analytical approach was adopted. Reviews of *The Golden Hairpin* were selected from Goodreads and Amazon and formatted into an Excel file. After screening out reviews that did not meet the criteria (see Section 3.2), the documents were imported into Nvivo. The reviews were coded inductively and grouped into eight themes reflecting readers' understanding of and engagement with *The Golden Hairpin*: (a) general impression of the book; (b) mentions of genre; (c) content, including plot, characters and writing; (d) difficulty in reading; (e) access to Chinese culture; (f) translation; (g) anticipation of sequels and adaptations, (h) formats (e-book, audiobook, etc.). Within these themes a second and a third level of coding were applied where needed (see Appendix).

## 4. Findings and discussion

We will discuss these themes individually from the perspective of how they shed light on the book's reception by English-speaking readers. See Appendix for a more extensive range of examples. While these reviews were openly available on the web at the time of writing, for reasons of privacy we will not use reviewers' usernames in our discussion.

### 4.1 General impression of the book

*The Golden Hairpin* has a rating of 4.4 out of 5 on Amazon, based on 319 ratings, and 4.07 stars on Goodreads, based on 1005 ratings (both as of 27 August 2023). These break down as follows (Table 1):

| Star ratings | No. of ratings (Amazon) | % (Amazon) | No. of ratings (Goodreads) | % (Goodreads) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 stars | 199 | 61% | 366 | 36% |
| 4 stars | 77 | 25% | 412 | 40% |
| 3 stars | 24 | 8% | 171 | 17% |
| 2 stars | 14 | 5% | 42 | 4% |
| 1 star | 5 | 1% | 14 | 1% |
| Total | 319 | | 1005 | |
| Average | 4.4 out of 5 | | 4.07 out of 5 | |

*Table 1. Ratings for The Golden Hairpin on Amazon and Goodreads*

The ratings suggest that the books have generally been positively received, though we note the much higher preponderance of five-star reviews on Amazon. We had three codes under "general impression of the book": positive, negative and mixed. Fifty-two reviewers had a positive impression (e.g. "I binged the book in two sittings. Read it way into the night to see how it would end"). Ten reviewers had a negative impression (e.g. "Poor translation, full of anachronisms. So many plot holes you could drain spaghetti. Unsatisfactory resolutions. The book was erroneously presented as featuring a prodigy girl detective and a way to learn some Chinese culture and history. Nope"). Seven reviewers gave mixed reviews.

### 4.2 Mentions of genre

The English edition of *The Golden Hairpin* is explicitly presented as a crime novel. The blurb on the back says of the protagonist that "Solving murders has made her indispensable. Being accused of one has made her notorious". On Amazon, the book has been categorized into "Crime, Thriller & Mystery". Analysis of the reviews show that this genre categorization has been accepted easily by readers. On Goodreads, *The Golden Hairpin* is tagged by readers as "mystery", "thriller", "detective" and "crime".

Nine readers compare the heroine, Huang Zixia, to well-known detectives from Anglophone crime fiction including Sherlock Holmes (7), Judge Dee (1) and Hercule Poirot (1) (e.g. "imagine if Sherlock Holmes was a girl in ancient China", and, "this is the first book in a series of Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot like novels set in ancient China" or "think Imperial Chinese court meets Sherlock Holmes meets Bones"). There are mentions of other crime writers such as Agatha Christie (1), Conan Doyle (1); and other crime dramas such as Charlie Chan (1) or the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew (1). Readers have also compared the structure of this novel to other detective novels. For example:

> The structure is very Sherlockian – short stories of cases basically, except
> thankfully NOT in first person. The cases themselves are more Christie than Doyle
> – it's more grounded and less fantastical (let's face it, some of Sherlock's clues are

pretty ambiguous and requires a pretty fantastical leap of logic to interpret it the way the detective did

Ancient China comes to life in *The Golden Hairpin* in a way that reminded me of Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee novels.

Stinson and Driscoll (107) have described Goodreads reviews as "exercises in self-positioning within an interpretive community". Reviewers in our corpus present themselves as genre experts with phrases like "Sherlockian"; "more Christie than Doyle". The mentions of Judge Dee and Charlie Chan suggest that readers are coming to these translations already "primed" with existing popular representations of Chinese detective films and fiction. The Judge Dee novels, originally written in English, have in common with *The Golden Hairpin* that they are set in the Tang Dynasty, but though they are inspired by the Chinese literary tradition of court narratives, they are themselves pseudotranslations (Seago and Lei 90). One reader comments that crime is a less common genre for a Chinese novel in translation, calling the book "a very welcome change to the masses of cookie cutter over the top romances or wuxias".

### 4.3 Mentions of content (plot, characters and writing)

Forty-three readers mentioned the plot, characters or writing style. Opinions on the writing style fell into two camps: some readers thought the pace was too slow: "the pacing is long and dragged out"; by contrast others found that "the writing is fun, fast-paced and full of good humour".

Eleven reviewers summarized the general content of the novel. For example:

*The Golden Hairpin* has a young female protagonist Huang Zixia who was a child prodigy at solving criminal cases. Unfortunately, her family was murdered by poisoning, she is a fugitive when we first encounter her as she is the main suspect. Inadvertently, she enters the carriage of the Prince of Kui and gets roped into helping him solve imperial criminal cases in exchange for his help in clearing her name.

Some readers complimented the author's portrayal of the protagonist's characteristics and behaviour in the book:

I've fallen in love with Huang Zixia.. so young, innocent and beautiful, yet so clever, intelligent with powers of deduction second to none.

These may be the kind of reader who mimics the norms of professional book reviewing (Stinson and Driscoll 110). Such reviews assume a readership because one of their purposes is to guide others' reading choices (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 254).

### 4.4 Difficulty in reading

One of the hypotheses underlying this research was that the lack of traction of Chinese crime fiction in the anglophone market (so far, at least) may be due to factors which make the books less accessible to readers. One of our main codes was therefore "difficulty in reading". Readers mentioned difficulties relating to names (10 reviews), the impact of the translation (8), unfamiliarity with Chinese culture (4), anachronistic language (3), spelling, grammar or lexical errors (2), and paratext (2).

The biggest challenge for readers seems to have been the characters' names. There are over forty characters in this novel. Although the names were given in their transliterated pinyin forms, ten readers mention problems with remembering or distinguishing between unfamiliar

names. While the translator of *The Golden Hairpin* provides a character list at the end of the book (287-289), it may be impractical for readers to consult it frequently. It should be noted that it is not only readers of Chinese fiction who struggle with names; d'Egidio also found that Anglophone readers of Camilleri "found the presence of a high number of Italian names confusing and difficult to remember" (80).

Eight readers remarked on how the translation impacted their reading experience. These comments will be considered together with the other comments on the translation in section 4.6.

A couple of readers spotted typos and other errors (e.g. "the climax of the Kindle version of the book has a bunch of typos, incorrect word choices and incorrect character attribution that makes an already complex plot even harder to get through").

If one is unfamiliar with the culture of a source-language nation, reading in translation can produce a certain level of (positive or negative) culture shock, as several reviews remarked:

> So for more Western audiences than I, especially those who haven't watched at least one episode of any Chinese/Taiwanese/Korean period drama, this book may be somewhat jarring.
> A little difficult for non-Chinese mystery fans...The only problem I had with it was many of the clues related on having a background in Chinese culture I just don't have.

Paratext plays a crucial role in ensuring reader comfort, as Zhang and Fan also found in their study. The translator has incorporated a character list at the end of the book, not present in the Chinese original, to enhance English readers' comprehension of character relationships. One reader wished that the translation had provided "a glossary or footnotes explaining some terms, musical instruments, and titles" to help with their reading. Another regretted the lack of an introduction, saying that "it may have proven helpful if the translator had provided a bit of an introduction? I know I found that helpful in the translation of Anna Karenina that I read – and would revisit that intro often as I found myself lost in the reading".

The paratext provided is not unproblematic, as pointed out by one reviewer who cautions, "warning: the list of characters at the end of the book actually contains the main spoiler of the plot". In a genre where suspense and mystery are paramount, such a spoiler is likely to diminish the reader's engagement.

### *4.5 Access to Chinese culture*

The appreciation of foreign literature is deeply intertwined with one's familiarity with the cultural, social and historical context of the country it originates from. This connection was highlighted by a reader who remarked, "It might be difficult to read if you're not familiar with the historical Chinese setting since it's a translation of a Chinese book", but it's also clear that some (16) readers came away feeling they had improved their knowledge of Chinese culture (e.g. "I also learned so much about the culture" or "I loved how much detail is given to the historical backdrop of the story as it gave me a glimpse of what life might have been like in Ancient China").

Some readers position themselves as already having a good, and sometimes critical, awareness of Chinese culture, such as the reader who wrote:

> To read Chinese novels you must put your assumptions aside. Just as Russian novels do not have the same structure and goals as European or North American novels (which themselves have many variations), Chinese novels are based on a different aesthetic. If you are to appreciate them, you must embrace these

differences […] there is no avoiding the wooden plotting and somewhat stilted dialogue that are artifacts of Chinese style.

### 4.6 Translation

Twenty-six reviews, in other words more than a quarter of the corpus, mention the translation. This is a bit less than the "more than 40%" of readers in d'Egidio's study who commented on the translation (72). Reader reviews of translations were coded as: positively affirmative, critical, and implicitly critical. Thirteen readers praise the translation and the translator. In two reviews, the identity of the translator is highlighted:

> Alex did an excellent job in translating. He captured the essence of Qinghan Cece's intentions. […] It was not a boring read thanks to the author and Alex as a translator. I hope he translates more chinese fictional books in the future. He is one of the best translators I've come across (And I read A LOT of translated material).

> Alex Woodend's translation from Mandarin reads fluently and conveys that sense of other that makes books set in such different worlds and eras so appealing.

These reviews emphasize how a positive perception of the translation significantly enhances the reading experience, bridging cultural gaps and addressing the intricacies of the source language.

While most of the reader responses to the book itself were positive (see section 4.1), the impression that readers have of the translation is equally balanced between negative (13) and positive (13). The translation is described as "a little janky in places"; "stiff in some places"; "wobbled and was a bit awkward"; "rough around the edges"; "poor translation, full of anachronisms". It should be noted that readers often don't point out specific translation issues (after all, they are unlikely to be able to compare the original and the translation), but some go into some detail about why they have a negative impression of the translation. For example:

> I think the book suffered from poor translation. There were multiple places in the book where sentences didn't make sense, incorrect pronouns were used about characters (making it hard to follow along), and typos or repeated words were used. This made the book a challenge at times.

Some readers who are dissatisfied with the book seem uncertain whether the translation is at fault (e.g. "maybe my problem was partly a result of the translation" or "I don't know if it was the translation that didn't help things"). We considered these comments in light of Stinson and Driscoll's discussion of "difficult literature" and how reviews on Goodreads negotiate interpretive challenges. Stinson and Driscoll argue that "the difficulty of the Swan Book becomes an interpretive challenge for this reading community, which produces a rhetorical mode of 'readers helping readers'" (108), but we did not find evidence of this happening in our corpus; it may be that the fact that the text is a translation forecloses some of the collaborative interpretive energies of the reading community.

### 4.7 Anticipation of sequels and adaptations

We were interested to see that a majority of readers (49) mention anticipation of various kinds as being a factor in their experience of reading *The Golden Hairpin*. This broke down into five sub-codes: the desire to read the next book in the series, to watch the TV adaptation, to read more works by the same author, to read more works by the translator, and to read the original Chinese-language version.

As we said above, the Chinese version of *The Golden Hairpin* runs to four volumes, and this translation is the first in the series. Thirty-nine readers mentioned further volumes, most of whom were enthusiastic: "I hope the rest of the novels in this series also get translated"; "I need the other three translated!". A significant minority of these, however, expressed frustration that they had got to the end of the book and not found a resolution of the plot. We note that the English edition of the book does not make clear that it is the first in a series. The information that it is book one of four is only available in the original Chinese-language title on the copyright page. Readers said things like: "I really hate the fact that we don't have translations for other books in this series"; "Never ever become invested in a series that wasn't fully translated"; "I absolutely loved this book and was really disappointed to find out Amazon have only commissioned the translation of the first of a four-book series! It's too cruel to leave readers hanging, desperate to find out the Prince and the 'eunuch's' next mysterious case. Amazon please please please translate the next three books!!". While most readers frame their disappointment in terms of anticipation, it is also worth considering that in Chinese, the book is not necessarily meant to be read as four separate free-standing volumes; in bookshops, it is available as a set of four, rather than the individual volumes which would be more common in English-language crime series. There may be a sense here in which generic expectations vary between Chinese and English. It is to be hoped that further volumes of *The Golden Hairpin* will be released in due course.

Adaptations for theatre, cinema, TV, or videogames can often influence and foster the success of literary texts (Pesaro 4). One reader mentions that they "read [The Golden Hairpin] to find out the ending of the manga" adaptation (unfinished to date). A big-budget TV adaptation was filmed in 2020 by New Classics Media, but the project was shelved in 2021 and it is not certain if or when it will be released. The prospect of a TV adaptation was attractive to six readers of *The Golden Hairpin*: "*The Golden Hairpin* is going to be adapted into a China produced drama, which is how it initially attracted my attention"; "worth reading and I'm looking forward to the television adaptation". In the case of this book, a television series may bring the historical context to life, allowing Western readers to 'see' Chinese literature more visually. Should Chinese film and television adaptations of Chinese detective novels be released with English subtitles and made available to a wider anglophone audience, they could be important vectors in promoting the novels across the English-speaking world.

Five readers expressed a desire to read more English translations of this author: "I would happily read more from this particular author though"; "I wish Amazon had more of this author's works". One reader hoped that the translator could "translate more Chinese fictional books in the future".

### 4.8 Format

Some readers in our corpus were reading in multiple formats, including ebooks and audiobooks. Some were reviewing on the basis of advance copies provided by, for example, Netgalley, a website which makes available digital galley proofs to reviewers. One reviewer mentioned "Goodreads Kindle Copy Win". Another reader commented that the book was "available through Kindle Unlimited and I felt like it was worth it as part of my subscription". One review expressed concern about the quality of the ebook, reporting "a bunch of typos, incorrect word choices and incorrect character attribution that makes an already complex plot even harder to get through". Upon examination, we found these errors were also in the print edition. The observation reminds us how careless copyediting and proofreading can impact readers' comprehension and enjoyment, but we also wondered whether readers may be more inclined to expect errors in ebook formats than in print.

It was clear that readers were considering their options when deciding what format to buy; one reader "bought the ebook and the audiobook and mainly listened to it". Another reader

judged that the book was "tolerable on Audible":

> I basically could not keep track of the characters and was lost with all the 'information'. However, since I was listening on Audible, I made it to the end. I do not think I would have stayed with it (until the end) if I had been reading the book. At times, I read along as I listened to Audible, and the written word was completely different than the text in the book. Audible was much more descriptive, and it had sentences that were not even in the printed version. I cannot even imagine trying to read this.

We have not checked the text against the audiobook, but the fact that the reader was reading two versions simultaneously and found them inconsistent does have potential implications for publishers' strategies for publishing across multiple formats. Such hybrid reading practices indicate that readers may combine formats for a more multimodal reading experience.

The inclusion of a NetGalley review copy showcases the role of digital platforms in facilitating advanced reader access to books. This reflects a growing emphasis on digital review copies as a means of promoting literary works and generating early feedback.

## Conclusions

Overall, we found the data on reader response to the book very rich. In this article we have focused on what we felt were the most important themes, but the data would have the potential for further analysis.

For us, the most significant findings included the intertextual and transmedia aspect. This book was, for many readers, part of an expanded reading experience which potentially included the next volumes in the series, or the manga adaptation of the book, or the TV adaptation.

Second, translators and publishers should consider the difficulties of English readers with unfamiliar cultural elements such as names of characters, which came up several times in our corpus and has also in other studies. While many readers seemed to find this historical crime novel engaging and readable, several found the language of the translation too modern and, as a result, jarring. This suggests that further research on readers' expectations around style and register in the translation of Chinese fiction could be useful.

Our study also shows that the fact of a text being a translation can be a complicating factor for readers, who may not be sure what impact the translation has on their enjoyment, or lack of it. We felt that online reviews could be very interesting to study further to understand what the comments made by readers say about public perceptions of, and understanding of, literary translation.

Our study indicates further directions for research on Goodreads reviews. For instance, one of the features we did not look at is tagging. Goodreads allows readers to navigate to other reviews by the same reviewer; this material could be mined to consider what readers are reading more widely: other crime fiction; translated literature; China-related content, to name just a few related aspects.

## Bibliography

Bassnett, Susan. "Detective fiction in translation: shifting patterns of reception." *Crime fiction as world literature,* edited by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch and Theo D'Haen, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 143-155.

Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. ""Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative*

*research in psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 77-101.

Chan, Leo Tak-hung. *Readers, reading and reception of translated fiction in Chinese: Novel encounters*. St. Jerome, 2010.

———. "Historical and empirical approaches to studying the 'real' reader of translations." *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies,* vol. 9, no. 2, 2022, pp. 117-133.

Cui, Yanqiu, and Yang Bai. "Framing, rewriting, and reception in world literature: the case of Wolf Totem." *Neohelicon,* 2023, pp. 1-19.

Dean, Michelle. "'No' Award' Sweeps the Hugo Awards Following Controversy." https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/23/no-award-hugo-awards-following-controversy. Accessed August 6 20'3.

D'Egidio, Angela. ""How readers perceive translated literary works: An analysis of reader reception." *Lingue e Linguaggi,* vol. 14, 2015, pp. 69-82.

Driscoll, Beth and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. "Faraway, So Close: Seeing the Intimacy in Goodreads Reviews." *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 25 no. 3, 2019, pp. 248-259.

Fornasiero, Jean, and John West-Sooby. "Translating 'Nice try' into 'Bien joué!'- going for the Paris end of Shane Maloney's Melbourne." *Australian Journal of French Studies,* vol. 50 no.2, 2013, pp. 206-220.

France, Louise. "Murder, they wrote." *Observer*, Sunday 12 June. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/12/crimebooks.features.

Geng, Qiang. Z*hongguo wenxue: xinshiqi de yijie yu chuanbo — xiongmao congshu yingyi zhongguo* wenxue yanjiu 中国文学：新时期的译介与传播——"熊猫丛书"英译中国文学研究 [Chinese literature: translation and dissemination in a new era: a study of the English translation of Chinese literature in the Panda Series]. Nankai University Press, 2019.

———. "Gift-Giving: Panda Books Series and Chinese Literature 'Walking toward the World'." *A Century of Chinese Literature in Translation: English Publication and Reception (1919–2019)*, edited by Leah Gerber and Lintao Qi, Routledge, 2020, pp. 57-70.

Harman, Nicky. "Foreign culture, foreign style." *Perspectives,* vol. 14, no. 1, 2006, pp. 13-31.

Jackson, Kristi and Patricia Bazeley. *Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo.* Sage, 2019.

Klein, Lucas. "A Dissonance of Discourses: Literary Theory, Ideology, and Translation in Mo Yan and Chinese Literary Studies." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 170-197.

Kneissl, Eva. "Chinese fiction in English translation: The challenges of reaching larger Western audiences." *Logos,* vol. 18 no.4, 2007, pp. 204-208.

Lee, Leo Ou-Fan. "Contemporary Chinese Literature in Translation: A Review Article."

*Journal of Asian Studies,* vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 561-567.

Lee, Gregory and Noël Dutrait. "Conversations with Gao Xingjian: The First 'Chinese' Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature." *The China Quarterly,* vol. 167, 2001, pp. 738-748.

Liang, Xiuli. "Reception of the Translated Versions of Chinese Literary Works in the English World: Based on the Investigation to Goodreads and Amazon." *Journal of Lingnan Normal University,* vol. 36, no.1, 2015, pp. 104-109.

Lovell, Julia. "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture,* vol. 14, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1-50.

Maher, Brigid. "'La Dolce Vita' meets 'the Nature of Evil': The Paratextual Positioning of Italian Crime Fiction in English Translation." *The Translator*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 176-189.

Maher, Brigid, and Susan Bassnett. "The Translation and Circulation of Crime Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction*, edited by Jasper Gulddal, Stewart King and Alistair Rolls, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 46-64.

Miao, Jia and Yu, Xiaoyan. "Maijia jiemi zai haiwai yuedu jieshou zhuangkuang de diaocha ji qishi-jiyu meiguo yamaxun wangzhan duzhe shuping de shuju fenxi" 麦家《解密》在海外阅读接受状况的调查及启示——基于美国亚马逊网站 "读者书评" 的数据分析 [A survey on the acceptance of Mai Jia's Decoded in overseas reading and its implications – an analysis based on Amazon's reviews]. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, 2019, pp. 92-99.

Pesaro, Nicoletta. "Genres, Translation and the International Dissemination of Chinese Fiction." *Chinese Literature in the World: Dissemination and Translation Practices*, edited by Junfeng Zhao, Defeng Li, and Riccardo Moratto. Springer, 2022.

Qinghan, Cece. "Zan Zhong lu" 簪中录 [The Golden Hairpin]. Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing, 2015.

———. *The Golden Hairpin*. Translated by Alex Woodend, Amazon Crossing, 2018.

Rebora, Simone, Peter Boot, Federico Pianzola, Brigitte Gasser, J. Berenike Herrmann, Maria Kraxenberger, Moniek M. Kuijpers, Gerhard Lauer, Piroska Lendvai, Thomas C. Messerli and Pasqualina Sorrentino. "Digital humanities and digital social reading." *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities,* vol. 36, supplement 2, 2021, pp. 230-250.

Schreier, Margrit. *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice.* Sage, 2012.

Seago, Karen, and Victoria Lei. "Translation." *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction,* Routledge, 2020, pp. 85-93.

Stinson, Emmett, and Beth Driscoll. "Difficult Literature on Goodreads: Reading Alexis Wright's The Swan Book." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2020, pp. 94-115.

Stougaard-Nielsen, Jakob. "Review of *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, edited by Nilsson, Damrosch and D'Haen." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 386-391.

Wang, Feng and Philippe Humblé. "Readers' perceptions of Anthony Yu's self-retranslation of The Journey to the West." *Perspectives*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2020, pp. 756-776.

Wang, Jiankai. "Zhongguo xiandangdai wenxue zuopin yingyi de chuban chuanbo ji yanjiu fangfa chuyi" 中国现当代文学作品英译的出版传播及研究方法刍议 [The publication and distribution of English translations of contemporary Chinese literature and research methods]. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice,* vol. 3, 2012, pp. 15-22.

———. *A History of Overseas Reception of English-Translated Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Fudan University Press, 2020.

Wang, Yingchong. Zhongguo dangdai xiaoshuo yingyi chuban yanjiu 中国当代小说英译出版研究 [Research on Chinese Contemporary Fiction in English Translation and Publication]. Zhejiang University Press, 2022.

Willis, Ika. "Reception theory, reception history, reception studies." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2021.

Wu, You. "Globalization, Science Fiction and the China Story: Translation, Dissemination and Reception of Liu Cixin's Works across the Globe." *Critical Arts,* vol. 34, no. 6, 2020, pp. 56-70.

Wu, Yun. Gaige kaifang yilai zhongguo dangdai xiaoshuo yingyi yanjiu 改革开放以来中国当代小说英译研究 [A study of Chinese contemporary fiction in English translation since Reform and Opening Up]. Zhejiang University Press, 2021.

Yu, Shuang. "Translation and canon formation: Four decades of Chinese fiction in English translation (1978-2018)." *Forum,* vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 86-104.

Zhang, Mi. "Zhonguo wenxue de haiwai chuanbo: yizhe zhuti shijiao — hanxuejia, fanyijia lanshiling fangtanlu." 中国文学的海外传播：译者主体视角——汉学家，翻译家蓝诗玲访谈录. [The diffusion of Chinese literature abroad from a translator's perspective: an interview with Julia Lovell, a sinologist and translator]. *Foreign Language Research,* vol. 1, 2019, pp. 110-115.

Zhang, Mi and Wang, Zhiwei. "Jinyong shediao yingxiongzhuan zai yingyu shijie de jieshou yu pingjia: jiyu goodreads wangzhan duzhe pinglun de kaocha" 金庸《射雕英雄传》在英语世界的接受与评价——基于 goodreads 网站读者评论的考察 [The reception and evaluation of Jin Yong's *A Hero Born* in the English-speaking world: an examination based on reader reviews on Goodreads]. *East Journal of Translation,* vol. 5, 2020, pp. 18-25.

Zhang, Qinghua, and Andrea Lingenfelter. "The Nobel Prize, Mo Yan, and Contemporary Literature in China." *Chinese Literature Today*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2013, pp. 17-20.

Zheng, Jianwei, and Wenjun Fan. "Hong Lou Meng in the English World: reception of a

translated Chinese classic in digital media." *The Translator*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2023, pp. 312-326.