Translating Chinese pop fiction

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Abstract

This article questions the assumption that pop literature is easier to translate than high literature. It uses a real-life example, namely, the translation from Chinese into Catalan of Chun Sue's autobiographical novel *Beijing wawa* as a case study. I argue that translation difficulties arose not only because its wealth of culture-specific references but also because of the characteristics of the author's literary style, where most of the appeal of the novel lies for the original audience. Organized according cultural categories, I start by identifying some cultural referents in the source text and go on to discuss the suitability or unsuitability of using different translation techniques, taking into account both authorial intention and the target reader knowledge of the original culture.

Key words
Chinese-Catalan translation, Chinese literature, cultureme, literary translation, popular literature, swear word translation

Introduction

Pop literature is often dismissed as being superficial and of little literary value. However, as professionals, translators are expected to apply themselves to always do the finest job possible, and as professionals the quality of work is above considerations of whether the work they have before them is considered to be of little or great literary value.

Because popular literature is often ranked low as a form of literature, consciously or not, the common assumption is that pop literature is therefore easier to translate than high brow literature. But, my own experience translating *Beijing wawa* (*Beijing Doll*),[1] by Chun Sue, from Chinese into Catalan[2] challenges this facile assumption.

Firstly, this kind of translation entails a thorough study of the work as a whole: decisions cannot be made intuitively and need to be appropriately justified and explained. This unavoidably requires reading the entire text before embarking on the translation itself, and although translators are always encouraged to do this anyway, the fact is that more often than not time constraints prevent them from doing so. After having given much thought to the difficulties presented by this text and possible solutions, I realised that I wouldn't be able to apply the same translation method systematically to the same kind of problem. Since my own sense of methodological coherence was threatened, I felt the need to draw up a detailed list explaining my criteria for my own reference. I later handed this in to the editor together with the translation.[3]

The novel's socio-historical undercurrents

Beijing wawa (*Beijing Doll*) is an autobiographical novel about a seventeen year-old Chinese girl. Although some critics have included her in the group of so-called "beautiful writers" (*meinü zuojia*) along with well-known Chinese female writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian, she claims to be independent and denies being representative of anything or anybody. This type of literature has also been labelled as "body writing" (*shenti xiezuo*) partly because the book's appeal relies mainly on the author's personal and sexual experiences. Allowing for these, I agree with Long Chen and Yiguo Zeng (2000: 107) who locate this phenomenon within the broader Chinese literary movement called "newly new humanity's literature" (*xin xin renlei wenxue*), which advocates individualism, materialism and consumerism. It is easy to realise that these new values are shared by many youngsters all around the world, and that they are probably one of the visible consequences of globalisation.

To ascertain the reason why someone is motivated to write a book has always been difficult, but if we understand the changes taking place in the rapidly developing China of the 1990's and the socio-historical context in which this novel was written, we can guess that Lin Jiafu (under the pen name of Chun Sue) was looking for a way of asserting herself, free from the self-imposed censorship Chinese writers have had to practice for so long. She describes her experience growing up in a world she dislikes and rebels against, as for example, how she questions the education system in her country, filial piety and women's role in society. She expresses her anger and discontent with society by actively taking part in marginal or even underground cultural activities, concentrated mainly within the punk music circles of Beijing. All in all, what she says and does is in clear defiance of traditional values in Chinese society and which are still present today in official discourses. In my opinion, this is the reason why this book and others like it have been censored by the Chinese authorities.

Translation method, techniques and strategies

More often than not actual working conditions for a translation assignment are incompatible with the theoretical considerations we read in translation studies publications. Since this paper is based on a real-life case, I would like to briefly outline the working conditions in which I had to do this translation because, generally speaking, I believe that these conditions have a direct impact on the attitude translators adopt towards their work, their feelings in general during the translation process and, consequently, has a bearing on the quality of the final product.

First of all, there was some flexibility when negotiating the price I was going to be paid and the deadline to deliver the translation to the editor. Another consideration is that I was able to raise questions with the author herself by email, although these emails had to be addressed to her agent and, absurd as it may seem, I had to do so in English.

But, returning to the issue of theoretical considerations, in this paper I follow Lucia Molina and Amparo Hurtado's (2002) terminological distinction between translation method, translation technique and translation strategy. The first, translation method, is a global choice which affects the whole translation and refers to how the translation process is to be carried out according to the end objective of the translation, and in turn affects the translation techniques that are subsequently adopted. For example, the assignment from the editor could be an academic translation, a free translation, a communicative translation and so on. In this case, the editor requested that I avoid footnotes as much as possible because the novel was addressed to a general audience of young readers, and this in turn implied a given translation method to be adopted.[4]

Translation techniques are defined as the end result after translators choose one option or another and can only be judged within the limits of a given context: the aim of the translation and the reader's expectations. That is to say, they are not inherently good or bad.

Finally, translation strategies are the procedures, both conscious and unconscious, translators employ to solve the problems they encounter during the translation process, i.e. asking a native speaker, searching for information on the web, etc.

Language: Chun Sue's idiolect

Both her youth and the willingness to create her own style are palpable in the fresh, direct and ready to take-away street language the author uses all through the book. Chun Sue writes just as she speaks and her language does not give the appearance of having been polished or filtered in any way. The text is largely composed of directly or indirectly quoted conversations and the first person narrative is hardly distinguishable in style from the dialogues. The dialogues are colloquial and colourful, containing a wide range of swear-words and local slang, which adds liveliness to the text but also poses difficulties for the translator.

However, this flow of the language is now and then interrupted by quotes from the Chinese classics, so the division between literary and spoken language thus vanishes completely. This hybrid language used throughout proved to be one of the major challenges I had to deal with, because by maintaining her shifts in style (which sound as awkward in Catalan as in Chinese), I ran the risk of my readers accusing me of being a bad translator.

Cultural elements

A considerable amount of literature already exists on the subject of cultural elements and, although different authors have applied different labels, I have not discovered any fundamental discrepancies among them. For the purposes of this paper I consider any of the commonly used terms to be synonymous. One interesting contribution to the field is that by Molina (2001: 89-90), who claims that we should consider the dynamic component of culturemes when analysing them. This implies taking into account the situation, textual function and the goal of the adopted solution. I thus base the contents of the following section on the premise that culturemes are not static elements but, among other factors, are directly related to the language pair in question.

In this particular case, besides the huge cultural gap between Chinese and Catalan audiences, there is a poor tradition of translating Chinese literature into Catalan (or even Spanish) that separates Catalan readers from Chinese culture even more than, for instance, French ones. The smaller the common cultural horizon between the original author and the audience of the translation the more translators need to intervene and the more visible they become. This cultural distance and the certainty that editors and readers are expecting a Chinese voice, i.e. an 'other' or an "exotic" voice (which can be obscured or highlighted depending on the decisions made throughout translation), put translators from Chinese in a different position from those working with more commonly translated languages, and highlight their role as a cultural mediator.

This book is time, place and culturally marked and these markers are of paramount importance because the story is built on them. In addition, references

are very local, so I was fortunate that I happened to have lived in the neighbourhood where some of the events of the novel take place. The book is filled with a mixture of classical and contemporary references. The classical references mainly refer to mainstream canonical literature while the contemporary references include all sorts of examples such as places, music and literature. These contemporary references can be further broken down into two categories: those that could be considered mainstream or available to the general public, and those which are clearly marginal in the sense that they are only known to those people that are actually their leading actors.

The remainder of this section is devoted to illustrating what kind of culturemes arose from the contact between Chinese and Catalan when translating Chun Sue's novel, what kind of difficulties they posed for me, how I dealt with them and how they were eventually transferred. Needless to say explaining all these using a third language, English, which was not part of the translation process, makes the undertaking even more challenging.

My starting point is Eugene Nida's (1961) classification of cultural categories, but I also take into consideration later contributions by other authors (Peter Newmark 1988, Lucia Molina 2002, Laura Santamaria 2002) adapted to the specificity of cultural transfer between my language pair. Since dealing in detail with all the possible cultural categories and culturemes found would be too lengthy, I will concentrate on just a representative sample.

Linguistic culture

I will deal with linguistic culture first because in my translation this affected all the other cultural categories to one degree or another. This subsection includes culturemes related to: transcription; differences in the writing system; lexical differences; the use of metalanguage; and the use of intertextual references.

To translate or to transcribe? That is the question

Hanyu pinyin (hereafter "pinyin") is the transcription system for Mandarin Chinese endorsed by the People's Republic of China to be used worldwide for

transcribing Chinese words. Its use is quite predominant within the academic milieu, but it not so among Spanish language professionals (such as proof-readers, translators, journalists and editors) who when they come across a Chinese word, resort to the Spanish or Catalan language academies or sanctioning institutions[5] for reference and prefer to use the forms endorsed by them or sanctioned by long-term usage when there is one (for example, Iang-tse instead of Changjiang, Yang-tse river in English). Therefore, nowadays, despite academics' claims for the advantages of using a standardized system like pinyin, the fact is that it still has to coexist with other transcriptions that, as I will explain later, made it impossible for me to strictly follow the criterion of using pinyin.

Whenever I used pinyin I followed the rules issued by the Chinese linguistic authorities, but in practice, the main issue was transcribing versus translating. Since this is not a transparent issue, I will comment on the advantages and disadvantages of both applied to different examples, laid out below according to cultural categories.

Culturemes due to differences in writing systems

Beijing wawa's chapter eight begins with a pun in its title. When one first reads it in Chinese it does not make any sense at all. The pun is based on the fact that Chinese characters are not the representation of sounds but rather the representation of meanings. So, although they all have a pronunciation, it is not directly related to its written form as is the case in alphabetical languages.

The title comprises only four characters: *wo cao ni ma* (卧槽泥马), where *wo* means to sleep or bedroom, *cao* means trough (to feed cattle), *ni* means mud and *ma* means horse. Although these four characters all have separate meanings, the way that they are combined does not make any sense. It is only when you read it out loud several times and hear how it sounds, that you realise that in fact the insult *wo cao ni ma* (我操你妈) [Literally: 'I fuck your mother'] is hidden behind homophonous characters. It was indeed a difficult pun. I chose some insults in Catalan that could be considered more or less equivalent and then I started to look for a way of representing those sounds differently from conventional spelling. It took me some weeks to come up with a formula whose

meaning could not be understood at once but that read aloud several times would sound just like *ves a prendre pel sac* [Literally: 'fuck off']. At first sight the resulting translation, *bes ah! vendre x sak*, does not make sense, but if the Catalan reader is curious enough to find out what is going on and spends some time guessing (just as the Chinese reader has to do), I am confident readers will get it.

Culteremes due to lexical differences

This section focuses on insults and swear words because they are rarely the object of study within the context of translation studies involving Chinese. Slang and swear words are difficult to translate because: a) they do not usually appear in dictionaries; b) they can be both derogative or laudatory, so it is very important to recognise the contextual meaning; c) they are used in different syntactic environments and; d) they do not have a single nor literal translation. For example, how can we translate *gou shi* (狗屎) [Literally: 'dog shit'], *shabi* (傻逼) [Literally: 'silly cunt'], *cao dan* (操 蛋) [Literally: 'fucked egg'] or *fang gou pi* (放狗屁) [Literally: 'dog fart'] without a context?

There is another important point I would like to make here referring to one difficulty specific to my language pair, which is the outstanding lack of normalized (i.e. accepted by the academia) slang and vulgar language in Catalan for socio-historical reasons. Nowadays, most Catalans (especially those in urban areas) still resort to Spanish to fulfil communication needs of this sort because Catalan dictionary-sanctioned vocabulary and expressions sound funny and old fashioned. Therefore, whenever I came across vulgar or slang language, I had to be particularly imaginative when it came to finding suitable and satisfying equivalents.

To start with let's consider the use of *niubi*, either written 牛 X or 牛逼, which cannot be translated literally, meaning cow's ass or cunt. In the following examples Chun Sue uses it as an isolated exclamation with a laudatory meaning (like 'great', but in a more vulgar register) as in (1a) and (3a); as a verb modifier with a positive meaning as in (2a); and as a predicate also with a positive

meaning as in (4a). As shown in the following examples, for each case I tried to find the expression that a Catalan youngster would most likely say in such a situation, namely, the adjective *collonut* [Literally: 'balls'], as in (1b) and (2b), the expressions *de puta mare* [Literally: 'Whore mother'] and *ser la hòstia* [Literally: 'To be the host'], as in (3b) and (4b), respectively.

(1a) "好牛逼耶！"后面一个男的用女声夸张地喊道。我听出是刘峰的声音。

(1b) «Sou collonuts!», va cridar un noi amb veu de noia des de darrere. Vaig saber que era el Li Feng per la veu.

(1c) You're fucking great! Shouted a boy in a girl's voice from behind. I knew it was Li Feng from the voice.

(2a) 不知为什么，我这个人有一个很庸俗的观点，那就是，谁能特牛逼地蔑视生命，视生命如粪土「……」我就会觉得他很无畏，很有勇气……

(2b) No sé per què, però tinc un punt de vista molt vulgar i és el següent: tot aquell qui menysprea la vida d'una manera prou collonuda, que la considera una merda (…) el considero un intrèpid i un audaç (...).

(2c) I don't know why but I have the following common point of view: anyone who has the balls to look down on life, who thinks it's a piece of shit (…) I consider them to be bold and daring…

(3a) "林姐！林姐！"几个后排的男生拼命向我招手递眼色："行啊你林姐，牛逼！"

(3b) –Lin, Lin! –uns quants estudiants de la fila del darrere em feien gestos amb les mans i em llançaven miradetes–. Molt bé, Lin, de puta mare!

(3c) Lin, Lin! Some students sitting in the last row were making gestures with their hands at me and giving me looks. Well done, Lin, fucking great!

(4a) "我想什么时候在嚎叫演上一场可就太牛逼了。"

(4b) –Estic pensant que quan puguem fer una actuació al Haojiao serà la hòstia.

(4c) I'm just thinking that if we play at the Haojiao it'll be fucking brilliant.

To take another particularly revealing example, let's look at the use and translation of *cao* (操 being one of the possible ways of writing it). This word means "fuck" and can be considered more or less equivalent in use to the English "fuck" or "shit". But when you look more carefully at how it is used in *Beijing*

wawa, you can see why I had to rack my brains to find equivalents that might sound natural and acceptable for a Catalan audience.

(5a) 他说，操，回家好好练……

(5b) Va dir: «Merda, quan torni a casa ho practicaré…».

(5c) He said: "Fuck, I'll practise it as soon as I get home…".

(6a) 我走在前，他紧跟在后，把门锁上。"我操你妈。"我看着他。

(6b) Jo anava al davant i ell enganxat al darrera. Va tancar la porta amb pany. «Ets un fill de puta», li vaig dir mirant-me'l.

(6c) I was walking in front and he was right behind me. He locked the door. "You, son of a bitch," I told him staring him right in the face.

(7a) 所以当他下次再打电话找我时我当机立断地说："我操你妈……"

(7b) Per això, el següent cop que em va trucar vaig aprofitar l'oportunitat per dir-li: «Em cago en ta mare…»

(7c) That is why the next time he called me I made good use of the moment to tell him: "Go fuck your mother."

(8a) 他说："操，多没面子，我出钱。"

(8b) Va dir: «I un colló! Faltaria més, ja pago jo».

(8c) He said: "The hell you will. No way. I'll pay."

As we can see from the above translations, although there are equivalent words in Catalan for "fuck", such as *follar* or *cardar*, they are not used as exclamations but rather as verbs. So I had to resort to other expressions like *merda* [Literally: 'shit'] or *un colló* [Literally: 'testicle'], as in (5b) and (8b), respectively. Moreover, when *follar* is used as a verb in Catalan, it is not an insult but just a rude way to talk about sex or a vulgar equivalent of the verb "to do". Therefore, when the Chinese text reads *wo cao ni ma* (我操你妈) [Literally: 'I fuck your mother'], I also had to look for different solutions in Catalan, for example, *ets un fill de puta* [Literally: 'you're a son of a bitch'] as in (6b) or *em cago en ta mare* [Literally: 'I shit on your mother'] as in (7b).

Finally, let's take a look at one of the more widespread Chinese swear words. *Tama(de)* (他妈的) [Literally: 'his mother's], which is both a swear word and an insult. It is normally used as an independent unit because it does not follow any

grammatical rule and thus it can be placed almost anywhere in the sentence. Its main function is to add a degree of expressiveness to the utterance. Again, there was no single equivalent useful for all the occurrences of *tamade,* so I adopted one translation or another according to target text collocation criteria. Sometimes I felt it was appropriate to resort to an expression affecting the overall sentence as in (9b), (12b), (13b) and (14b), where I used *per quins colons* [Literally: 'for who's balls'], *hòstia puta* [Literally: 'whore host'], *collons* [Literally: 'balls'] and *la mare que els va parir* [Literally: 'The mother who gave birth to them]*, respectively; and sometimes finding a modifier for the main substantive, such as *puta* [Literally: 'whore'] and *puta merda* [Literally: 'whore shit'], used in (10b) and (11b), respectively.

(9a) 我就是<u>他妈的</u>不明白了，为什么非得 7 点 30 之前到校，既然早读 7 点 45 开始。

(9b) La veritat és que no entenia <u>per quins collons</u>, per què havíem d'arribar a l'escola tant sí com no abans de dos quarts de vuit, si l'estona de repàs matinal no començava fins a tres quarts.

(9c) To tell you the truth I did not understand <u>why the hell</u> we had to get to school before seven thirty at any rate if morning review did not start until a quarter to eight.

(10a) 这荒唐的该死的一切，这<u>他妈的</u>让人心寒并且恶心欲吐的一切！

(10b) Tot plegat era una ximpleria de merda, tot plegat era una <u>puta</u> història decebedora que feia vomitar!

(10c) After all it was fucking stupid; all in all the story was a <u>fucking</u> let down that made you feel like throwing up.

(11a) <u>他妈的</u>真没隐私。

(11b) <u>Quina puta merda</u> d'intimitat!

(11c) <u>Some fucking</u> privacy this is!

(12a) "我<u>他妈的</u>真的受不了这个弱智了！

(12b) «<u>Hòstia puta</u>, ja no aguanto més aquest subnormal!

(12c) <u>Fuck it</u>, I cannot stand this cretin any more!

(13a) 一句话，我那时过得简直不是<u>他妈</u>人过的日子。

(13b) Amb una paraula, simplement no hi ha Déu que se les passi tan magres com me les vaig passar jo, <u>collons</u>!

(13c) In a word, there's no <u>fucking</u> way that anyone is suffering as much as I did!

(14a) 我下定决心要好好学习，因为这学费实在<u>他妈的</u>太贵了！

(14b) Vaig decidir que m'aplicaria força perquè el preu d'aquella matrícula, <u>la mare que els va parir</u>, era molt alt.

(14c) I decided to study hard because the registration fees, <u>the assholes</u>, were really steep.

The previous examples are only a small sample of the wide range of similar words that abound in Chun Sue's narrative. Sometimes, when I could not find an equivalent in Catalan, I just ignored it and tried to compensate for it somewhere else. In general, rather than looking for an equivalent for each individual insult or swear word I came across, I did my best to try and achieve a certain level of slang language and to maintain the same register throughout the book.

Culturemes due to Metalanguage

Although the use of metalanguage is quite common in Chinese due to its very idiosyncrasy (many homophones, its pictorial side, etc.), in *Beijing wawa* I did not find many culturemes derived from its use.

(15a) 当初报那儿的原因一是离北大近(我被北大鬼迷心窍)，第二个原因是那个学校的名字里有个"<u>西</u>"字，听着倍感亲切(北大以前有个诗人叫<u>西川</u>，北大地处北京<u>西郊</u>……

(15b) Al principi, la primera raó per inscriure-m'hi va ser que estava a prop de Beida –jo estava totalment eclipsada per Beida–, la segona raó va ser que el nom de l'escola contenia la paraula «<u>oest</u>», en sentir-lo se'm redoblava la simpatia que hi sentia (a Beida abans hi havia un poeta que s'anomenava Xi Chuan, Riu de l'<u>Oest</u>, Beida també es trobava a l'<u>oest</u> de la ciutat (...)).

(15c) At the beginning, the first reason for registering there was that it was near Beida –I had become completely enchanted by Beida-; the second reason was that the school's name had the word '<u>west</u>' in it, so when I heard it I felt doubly attracted to it (there had been a poet in Beida called Xi Chuan, <u>Western</u> River, and Beida lay in the <u>western</u> part of the city (…)).

In the preceding paragraph Chun Sue explains the reasons why she chose a given high school to pursue her studies. Her argument is based on a series of mental associations she makes with the character *xi* (西) [Literally: 'west']. First, her new school is near Beijing University, which she adores; and second, the name of her new school has the character 'west' in it. Some years ago Beijing University had a poet whose name also contained this character and Beijing University is located in the west of the city, she considers these to be good reasons to mention. For the translation of this paragraph, I eventually decided to translate the meaning of the character *xi* and maintain the name of the poet in pinyin (Xi Chuan) followed by its translation (Western River) between commas.

Culturemes due to Intertexuality

I understand the term intertextuality in the broad sense, i.e. reference to other texts such as poems, discourse, books, films, newspapers, journals, music albums, songs, etc. Through the ages, in China showing that one is familiar with pretexts has not only been a way of belonging to the elite, but has also become a literary resource.

Before embarking on the translation itself, one difficulty concerning the translation of the classical texts Chun Sue quotes in her novel was, first, identifying that there was in fact an intertexual reference (often they are not formally distinguished from her own text), and then finding the origin of the quote. Generally speaking, this meant that I had to be extremely alert to intertextual references to avoid missing one. Let's take a look at some examples of these overt and covert intertextual references.

(16a) 我爱你。我的爱是<u>千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭</u>。
(16b) T'estimo. El meu amor és com <u>mil muntanyes sense ni un ocell i deu mil camins sense petja humana</u>.
(16c) I love you. My love is <u>from hill to hill no bird in flight, from path to path no man in sight</u>.

The two sentences in (16a) are uttered by Chun Sue when speaking on the telephone with one of her boyfriends. After telling him she is in love with him,

she uses a metaphor to describe her love. The metaphor is in fact the first two lines of the poem "Snow on the river" by Liu Zongyuan, a Tang Dynasty poet. The Catalan translation of these lines is my own, complete with a footnote to ensure that the reference is made clear.

(17a) 快到开封站时，天边的夕阳散发出美丽的金黄色的光芒，我想起那句"大漠孤烟直，长河落日圆"。

(17b) Quan estàvem a punt d'arribar a l'estació de Kaifeng, el sol ponent espargint els seus bonics raigs de llum daurats, em va recordar «al gran desert, un sol rastre de fum, l'esfera ponent al Iang-tse».

(17c) When we were about to arrive at Kaifeng station, the setting sun scattering its beautiful golden rays reminded me of "on the great desert, a lone column of smoke, the sun setting on the Yang-tse river".

In (17a) Chun Sue's describes the sunset she is enjoying from the train as she arrives at Kaifeng. She explains how this makes her remember a similar scene described in the poetic lines that follow. These lines belong to the poem "My Mission to the Frontier" and were written by Wang Wei, another of the great names in Tang poetry. Again, I translated the lines myself and then included an explanatory footnote.

(18a) "你知道吗？"我在找着话题，"我会背《长恨歌》

(18b) «Ho sabies...», buscava algun tema, «...que sé recitar el "Cant de l'etern pesar"»?

(18c) "Do you know…" –I was looking for something to say– "…that I can recite 'Song of Eternal Sorrow'?"

In the fragment (18a), the author explains she can recite "Song of Eternal Sorrow". This is the famous long poem by the Tang dynasty poet, Bai Juyi, but as it is impossible to expect such knowledge from a Catalan reader (with the exception of sinologists), here also I found it unavoidable to include a footnote.

As for contemporary textual referents, there is a wide range of text types, both Chinese and Western. The list is too long to enumerate them all, but here perhaps

the most difficult to translate were again covert references. Take, for instance, the following example:

(19a) "我曾见过九片棱角的回忆，我已忘记昨日的消息。"
(19b) «M'han vingut uns records polièdrics i, en canvi, he oblidat què va passar ahir».
(19c) "I've had polyedric memories, yet I have forgotten what happened yesterday."

Example (19a) is the first two sentences of a letter Chun Sue writes to a friend. Since the sentence 我曾见过九片棱角的回忆 (*wo ceng jianguo jiu pian lengjiao de huiyi*) [Literally: 'I saw a memory of nine edges and corners'] sounded very strange, I ran it through a Google search and it turned out to be the first two lines of a song by Chao Zai, a Chinese punk band. After this discovery I felt much more relieved and plumped for a more or less literal translation and accompanying footnote.

Ecology

Place names

There are place names in the book that are central to depicting the environment in which Chun Sue lives, so it is not enough to just translate or transcribe them because the target reader lacks the knowledge to understand the context and the implications. Let's take a look at some examples:

(20a) 我爱五道口。
(20b) M'encanta Wudaokou.
(20c) I love Wudakou.
(21a) "……我在中关村做软件程序设计。"他说。我看着他想笑。就他，还中关村？
(21b) −(...) Sóc dissenyador de programes de software a Zhongguancun− va explicar. Vaig veure que estava a punt de riure. Ell precisament... i ni més ni menys que a Zhongguancun?

(21c) (…) I am a software designer in <u>Zhongguancun</u>— he explained. I realised I was about to laugh. He, of all people… and none other than in <u>Zhongguancun</u> itself?

(22a) 录取我的是一所职高。颐和园附近。离北大西门骑车五分钟。离<u>海淀图书城</u>也不远。

(22b) La que em va acceptar va ser una escola de formació professional, que era a prop del Palau d'Estiu, a cinc minuts en bici de l'entrada oest de Beida i també força a prop del <u>Mercat del Llibre del barri de Haidian</u>.

(22c) The one that accepted me was a Technical College near the Summer Palace, a five-minute bike ride from the Western entrance to Beida and also quite near <u>the Haidian district Book Market</u>.

(23a) 第二天晚上我们坐地铁去了<u>三里屯</u>。

(23b) El dia següent al vespre, vam anar en metro fins a <u>Sanlitun</u>.

(23c) The following day we took the tube to <u>Sanlitun</u>.

(24a) 第二天赵平约我去他在<u>树村</u>租的房子去玩。

(24b) El dia següent, el Zhao Ping em va proposar d'anar a passar el dia a una casa que tenia llogada a <u>Shucun</u>.

(24c) The following day, Zhao Ping suggested going to the flat he rented in <u>Shucun</u> for the day.

Sentence (20a) is the title of chapter twenty-nine. Wudaokou (五道口) lies to the north-west of Beijing, in the Haidian district. This area houses some of China's most famous universities, as well as lots of pubs which promote activities related to punk and underground music. All this information is implicit within the name of the place and any Beijingnese teenager knows this. Chun Sue loves Wudakou because the area symbolizes and incorporates all that she likes. Zhongguancun (中关村) in (21a) is an area in Beijing near Wudaokou where, in recent years, the Chinese authorities have focused their urban planning policies regarding promoting new technology companies. Since it now symbolizes China's leading centre of innovation and technology (it has been called the Chinese Silicon Valley), she feels surprised that this guy she has just met works there as a software designer. In (22a) Chun Sue says that her new high school is not far from *Haidian tushu cheng* (海淀图书城) [Literally: 'Haidian Book city']. This is an area in Haidian district with lots of bookstores. Thus translating it as *El*

mercat del llibre del barri de Haidian [Literally: 'The Haidian district Book Market'], I was able to clearly negotiate the meaning without having to resort to a footnote. Sanlitun (三里屯) in (23a) refers to an area in central Beijing where you can find many fashionable pubs, as well as most of the foreign embassies and consulates. For these two reasons, one can usually meet many foreigners there. In the last example (24a) Chun Sue explains that a friend of hers rents a house in Shucun (树村). Shucun is a little village in the northern part of Beijing where many rockers with very low incomes have moved to live. It also hosts the headquarters of at least twenty well-established music bands. Unless one has some encyclopaedic knowledge or personal experience about these places, one misses the point so, except for example (22a), in all these cases I resorted to a footnote to help Catalan readers to understand what was behind the place name that made it somehow important or interesting for the story.

Social culture

People's names

According to pinyin rules, the diminutive and affective prefix *xiao* (little) should be written together with the name, as in Xiaojie (小洁). This prefix, together with *lao* (old) is very common in Chinese and is used to address people in a polite and familiar way. It is in fact one of the linguistically visible consequences of the importance of hierarchy in Chinese society. Therefore, when transcribing it, the translator is aware that this is lost but, at the same time, any of the possible translations sound awkward in Catalan. Since I assume the Chinese are not very aware of the hierarchical aspect embedded in its use and simply see it as being part of the name itself, I eventually transcribed the prefix together with the name.

I have transcribed all personal names according to pinyin with a few exceptions. The correct transcription of the author's name in pinyin is Chun Shu, but she prefers to be called Chun Sue. There was also one Japanese character whose name (Takuo Adachi), after consulting with a Japanese university colleague, I transcribed according to Japanese transcription rules. There were some pop singers (most coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan) that have an English name besides their Chinese name. In these cases, I respected their artistic English name,

following the western order (first given name, then surname), which consists of an English name plus a Chinese surname in a transcription different from pinyin. For example, Liu Dehua is known as Andy Lau, Zhou Huimin as Vivian Chow and Xie Tingfeng is Nicholas Tse.

There is one name which proved particularly difficult to resolve. Boli (namely, glass) is Chun Sue's best friend's name, and in modern Chinese it is a euphemism to refer to a gay person, although there is some ambiguity in the book about his sexual orientation. In Catalan, 'glass' does not share this connotative meaning, so one possibility was trying to change it for an equivalent euphemistic nickname in Catalan, but there were two drawbacks to this option. First, when they first meet, she thinks to herself that his look is as transparent and innocent as glass. Later on, as a preface to chapter twenty-eight, we find a poem written by him entitled *Boli wawa* [Literally: 'Glass doll'] where there are different metaphors related to the breakability of glass. Second, I should point out that when they first meet, he tells Chun Sue that everyone at school calls him Boli because they think he is gay. So although the Catalan word for *boli* does not have this connotation, thanks to the context, the Catalan reader can quickly see that there is such a connection in Chinese. So, after juggling various possibilities, I eventually opted for a literal translation and left it as 'Vidre' [Literally: 'Glass'].

Material culture

Institutions

In colloquial Chinese it is certainly common practice to abbreviate an expression composed of two compound words, especially when it comes to university names. This phenomenon is also very common in Catalan but the way it is done is different. Catalan uses acronyms but, since Chinese is not an alphabetical language, it does this by taking the first character of each one of the words composing the name of the university. For example, Beijing Daxue [Literally: 'Beijing University'] becomes Beida and Renmin Daxue [Literally: 'People's University'] becomes Renda. I decided to respect the way people call them in Chinese because otherwise the full name sounded too long and did not suit the

colloquial style of the dialogues. However, the first time they appeared in the text I added the translation in brackets; for example, Shida (Beijing Normal University).

Food culture

Food culture is generally one of the main sources of culturemes in a text but, since in this book food was irrelevant to the story, I avoided footnotes to the maximum and did my best to translate them: either resorting to cultural transplantation (as in translating *youtiao* (油条) for *porres* [Literally: 'fried dough'] or *jiaozi* (饺子) for *crestes* [Literally: 'dumplings']), or by resorting to what Sándor Hervey, Ian Higgins and Louise M. Haywood (1995: 148-149) call communicative translation as in translating *baozi* (包子) for *panets farcits* [Literally: 'stuffed bun'], *doujiang* (豆浆) for *llet de soia* [Literally: 'soya milk'], *zhou* (粥) for *farinetes* [Literally: 'porridge'] and *mantou* (馒头) for *panets al vapor* [Literally: 'steamed bread']. As far as food culture was concerned, the criterion, thus, has been what Laurence Venuti (1995) calls the domestication of the original text.

Monetary system

According to pinyin, the Chinese money unit should be transcribed as yuan, but, since there is already a different Catalan transcription sanctioned by Termcat I had to respect it. Chinese has two different ways of naming its monetary unit: the formal term (*yuan*) and the colloquial one (*kuai*). Since Catalan colloquial forms for money either refer to it generically or are specific terms for old types of Spanish currency, I could not find a suitable equivalent and reduced the two different forms to *iuans* [Literally: 'yuan']. 1/10 yuan is called mao o jiao (colloquial and formal, respectively) and 1/10 *mao* is called *fen*. Since the euro does not have this intermediate unit, in order to avoid a footnote whenever the word *mao* appeared in the text, I translated it as cents (for instance, 3.40 *kuai* was translated as *tres iuans i quaranta centims* [Literally: three yuan and forty cents]. When partially adapting the Chinese monetary system to the target

culture, I maintained the original quantities without introducing new terms or footnotes that would distort the reading unnecessarily.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have illustrated, with examples from real translation practice, that successful works of contemporary pop fiction are no less difficult to translate than highbrow literature. Popular literature can be just as challenging to its would-be translators as any other genre. In fiction, the plot, theme or subject-matter may have a strong enough appeal by itself to compensate for possible formal writing deficiencies. But in *Beijing wawa* there is no plot as such and its main appeal lies in the language itself, thus its translation also requires special consideration regarding language and form. Nevertheless, we have seen that apart from the translation problems posed by Chun Sue's idiolect, I also had to deal with a wealth of culturemes.

The translation method chosen at the outset did not allow for adding a preface or a glossary while footnotes were to be avoided as much as possible. So, faced with an avalanche of culturemes, I had to establish a series of criteria at the outset and then be flexible when applying these criteria. In addition, I had to resort to all kinds of translation techniques to achieve an equilibrium taking into consideration both the author's intention, and thus respect otherness, and the target audience in terms of acceptability and intelligibility of the target text. I agree with Venuti (1998) that a translation should not read as if it were an original, but should bear some traces of its translatedness, thus the practice of what Confucius called the *zhongyong* or "doctrine of the mean" is what allowed me to achieve this goal.

What Venuti's (1995) calls the 'translator's invisibility' is partially due to the fact that the translator's work is usually quite opaque, i.e. the criteria used to translate a literary work, for example, remains unknown not only to the general public but even to the publisher. By explaining what went on inside my brain when translating *Beijing wawa* from Chinese into Catalan and what made me adopt one translation strategy and technique or another, I hope to have

contributed to the understanding of how a translation is formulated in the translator's mind and shed some light on the conflicting criteria the translator has to deal with before making a decision on the best solution for each case.

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NOTES

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[1] Original: Chun, Sue. 2003. Beijing wawa. Huhehot: Yuanfang chunbanshe. Catalan translation: Chun, Sue. 2003. *La nina de Pequín*. Barcelona: Editorial Empúries.

[2] Catalan belongs to the family of Romance languages. It is spoken in a large area in the east of Spain, Andorra, the south of France and in the Sardinian city of L'Alguer. Today it has almost 11,000,000 potential speakers over an area of 57,880 Km^2.

[3] I did not receive any feedback about this list but I must admit that all my decisions were respected.

[4] It is worth noting that my footnotes not only were they respected but also many of them were also included (copied) in the Spanish translation, made by a team of three translators.

[5] In the case of Catalan these are represented by Termcat (Catalan Centre for Terminology), the Institut d'Estudis Catalans and the Enciclopedia Catalana, the latter being a private corporation but often taken as a reference source of information due to its leading role in language normalization during decades.