

Review of *The Journey to the West*, Vol. 1, Translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu

Radovan Škultéty
National Taiwan University

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Recommended Citation

Škultéty, Radovan. "Review of *The Journey to the West*, Vol. 1, Translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.4 (2020): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3435>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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Volume 22 Issue 4 (December 2020) Article 18

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss4/18>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.4 (2020)**

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Abstract: This is a critical review of volume 1 of the 2012 revised translation of the classical Chinese vernacular novel *Xiyou ji* (*The Journey to the West*) by the late Dr. Anthony Yu (1938 - 2015), former Professor Emeritus in Humanities and in the Divinity School at The University of Chicago. It represents the first of four volumes of a thorough overhaul of the first edition, published originally from 1977 to 1983; this complete edition in 4 volumes and almost 1,900 pages (including extensive introduction, endnotes and index) appeared simultaneously on December 17, 2012. It is a result of the translator's lifetime engagement with the novel, as well as his expertise in religious studies and comparative literature.

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This is a critical review¹ of volume 1 of the 2012 revised translation of the classical Chinese vernacular novel *Xiyou ji* (*The Journey to the West*) by the late Dr. Anthony Yu (1938 - 2015), former Professor Emeritus in Humanities and in the Divinity School at The University of Chicago. It represents the first of four volumes of a thorough overhaul of the first edition, published originally from 1977 to 1983; this complete edition in 4 volumes and almost 1,900 pages (including extensive introduction, endnotes and index) appeared simultaneously on December 17, 2012. It is a result of the translator's lifetime engagement with the novel, as well as his expertise in religious studies and comparative literature.

According to the preface to his previous, abridged version entitled *The Monkey and the Monk*, published in 2006, Prof. Yu had two motives behind his translation project: "to rectify the acclaimed but distorted picture provided by Arthur Waley's justly popular abridgement, and to redress an imbalance of criticism championed by Dr. Hu Shi who supplied the British translator with an influential preface." (Yu, *The Monkey* xiii) Another, personal motivation – the legacy of the translator's late grandfather ("Anthony Yu" 07:48 - 09:38) – arguably served as inspiration to convey the story in authoritative voice as intact as possible to the Western reader ("Re: A few concluding remarks"). His coming to terms with Waley—and the effort to stress the philosophical-religious dimension of the novel rather than the attributes of "good humor, profound nonsense, good-natured satire, and delightful entertainment" (Hu 5)—can be thus felt already in the title of the abridgement with its somehow forced inclusion of the monk's character. This subtle awkwardness in word choice is a sign of close translation that does not allow a single character of the original fall through the cracks, a new rendition that delivers the message alright but somehow lacks the passion in doing so.

Sure enough, with this new edition, the reader gets a superbly researched resource with a detailed scholarly introduction in almost 100 pages, as well as rich footnotes and an index. Prof. Yu displays his profound knowledge of textual history, poetic tradition, comparative religion, and literary theory that enabled him to produce both a translation and an annotated edition in one. This fact further enhances the significance of the project since the resulting novel in English is more approachable than its Chinese original, surpassing even the best Chinese commented editions like that attributed to Ye Zhou.

Then, however, there is the translation and reception part of this project. Thirty years had passed by and Anthony Yu stepped into a significantly different river with his new rendering. Nowadays, the potential reader can choose from at least one another complete English translation (by W.J.F. Jenner), an excellent French translation with extensive commentary (by A. Lévy) and a slew of abridgments and popular retellings in addition to native monkey-heroes in works of original fiction and the monkey-stories produced by the entertainment industry. With their undeniable appeal to the reader and consumer, they are likely to exert much more influence than the "original" story duly brought by the translator. This situation is a perfect example of Bassnett-Lefevere's thesis that literature reaches those who are not its professional students much more by way of the "images" constructed of it in translations rather than by means of "originals," however venerable they may be. (Bassnett-Lefevere 9) After all, even in China, the country of its origin, the novel as a whole has been rather the prerogative of a narrow circle of connoisseurs, while the "layman" public accesses the story through abridgements and popular culture.

One can see here a process similar to the literary evolution that happened in China roughly four hundred years ago – the story that had been first transmitted orally and that had developed for centuries got eventually "carved into the stone" of the 100-chapter novel; all subsequent oral versions and sequels were based on this ultimate edition. In the West, however, Prof. Yu's edition represents just one strain in the story tradition—in terms of fluidity of the language and entertainment quality one that is most detached from its popular origins, while the other current versions are closer in spirit to the rich marketplace storytelling tradition.

This reviewer had the privilege to discuss in detail the work on this new edition with the translator during the process of his revision. This helped to clarify main issues of the translation and to make the current review as accurate as possible. In particular, Prof. Yu made it clear that he followed no specific

¹ The author wishes to express his heartfelt thanks to Prof. Robert E. Hegel, Washington University, St. Louis, for his comments on an earlier version of this review.

translation method, however, he accepted Schleiermacher's view—later popularized by Berman—on the question of foreignizing (the alienation of) the translation. In his own words, "the translated work should try to challenge the targeted reader with as much cultural otherness as possible, while observing more or less the bounds of linguistic propriety and conventions." ("Re: Reply to your May 10 e-mail.")

In practice, this approach can produce greatly variable results. While introducing the reader to cultural otherness of *The Journey to the West* is not just perfectly plausible but also highly desirable, the major issue with Prof. Yu's translation approach has been his use of language, especially in poetry and dialogs, and the overall aesthetic pleasure brought by the outcome. Translating a novel of such length to a Western language is an admirable feat by itself. And sure enough, in some places the translator's effort at maximizing translation authenticity while searching for the roots brought about interesting, heterogeneous effects, like, for example, the instance of blending Indian names of Buddhist deities with Chinese names. After all, the novel itself is a fictional account of a search for religious roots during the times when Buddhism was becoming an instrumental part of the Chinese worldview. However, quite often this translation sounds a little stiff and professorial with just occasional resort to idiomatic English. Sometimes Monkey's witty exchanges with his peers and foes get inundated with academic diction, and brisk jokes become lengthy anecdotes. The choice of words that sounds alright for the bookish, irritable Tang Monk sounds somewhat out of place with his disciple who, on the allegorical and narrative level, represents a very different personage: "Pilgrim laughed and said: "Dear old man! Though you are quite old, you can't even recognize a joke! I was just teasing you a little, and you took my words literally" (Yu, *The Journey* 373).

Occasionally, the loan translations look quite foreign, e.g. "BanHorsePlague" (Yu, *The Journey* 148), where a hyphenated version would probably be more palatable; and then, even after numerous edits, a Chinese expression jumps at the reader without warning, like "the Bima" a page later.

Many a reader's objection to Anthony Yu's approach has been related to his treatment of the novel's poems that even such a gifted translator as Arthur Waley claimed to go very badly into English. Prof. Yu, on the other hand, painstakingly rendered them one by one, doing that in an almost word-for-word fashion. The result, at times, sounds playful and inviting, like "Golden balls and pearly pellets,/ Red ripeness and yellow plumpness" (Yu, *The Journey* 107), but quite often lies heavy on the reader with its philosophizing diction, even though many poems were improved significantly over the first edition. Not that the original author(s) were mediocre poet(s) per se; in the Introduction, the translator seconds C.T. Hsia's praise of the poets' superb poetic eye and a gift of the language. It is important to realize that these are not the *Red Chamber Dream*-type romantic poems expressive of aesthetic feelings but rather they are descriptive, narrative poems that either offer a commentary on the plot or foreshadow the upcoming events, and as an important structural part of the novel cannot be excised or skipped. However, it is with poems that the difference between Prof. Yu's *savoir* and *pouvoir* is most pronounced. In spite of his scholarly expertise in the field, he may not have made all the right decisions with this new translation. Poems are like butterflies—holding them too tightly can kill them, so rather than stretching them on a Procrustean bed of versed poetry, some of them may have been better served by prose—no matter how blasphemous it may sound—or at least rendered more freely. Comparison to André Lévy's apt use of *dizain* in his French translation reveals how much can be done by loosening the grip on the original. I.A. Rogachev along with V.S. Kolokolov, the authors of the 1959 first complete Russian translation, in fact entrusted two poets, A.E. Adalis and I.A. Golubev, with the translation of these poetic parts; the result is the most liberal in form—generally using the whole stanza for each two lines of original verse—but it reads in one breath. Prof. Yu was well aware of this strategy, yet he chose to not sacrifice proximity to the original in order to accomplish smoother and perhaps more elegant readings in the target language. Said another way, he "committed himself to [...] achieve intelligibility" (Wang - Xu 115) at the expense of readability.

The determination and perseverance needed for a project of this scope can hardly be overestimated—and Prof. Yu proved he still had it when he finished his revision within roughly six years' time. The introduction to this new edition, however, displays a certain amount of selective memory as it fails to give credit to all the sources of suggestions and critique that helped to tune up the translation. This started with reviews of the translator's scholarly colleagues, Professors Andrew H. Plaks, Robert E. Hegel and David E. Pollard, as early as in 1977, and kept coming for more than 30 years. This fact further underlines the relative importance that Prof. Yu put on the research part of this project over the translation.

In conclusion, this latest English translation of *Journey to the West* represents a specialty edition with exceptional scholarly value that, however, requires a very patient and dedicated reader. It has all prerequisites to become THE ultimate reference book and a sort of encyclopedia of the novel in English

for decades to come, in a manner similar to how the 1592 version of the Chinese novel superseded all other retellings of the story. As arguably the most thoroughly annotated edition it has also set a new benchmark for exegesis of the novel. With this publication, Prof. Yu has built himself a monument in the history of Sinology and assured the novel's recreation in Western literature as intact and authentic to the original as possible. So while it may not become the ultimate book market hit by itself—as the sales numbers have attested—students of Chinese literature, comparative literature and religion, scriptwriters, game designers, fans of the fantasy genre as well as fiction writers, et al., will undoubtedly turn to it for inspiration and as a source of authority on one of the most amusing and influential traditional Chinese novels.

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Author's Profile: Radovan Škultéty (Chinese name: Lei Duowen 雷多聞) studied Sinology at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. As a graduate student in comparative literature, he focused on the Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. He was a visiting Fulbright researcher at Washington University in St. Louis under the supervision of Prof. Robert E. Hegel. At National Taiwan University, he wrote a PhD. dissertation on literary nonsense between silence and madness in the work of Daniil Kharmis and the *Zhuangzi*. Email: <skultety@gmail.com>