

# A Brief History of Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* in Italian

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## Abstract

No complete translation of Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) famous trilogy of short stories *Sanyan* 三言 exists in Italian. However, over the last hundred years, various translators have been attempting to translate excerpts of Feng's trilogy, with alternating results. This paper analyzes the existing *Sanyan* stories available in Italian.

Firstly, this paper tackles the pioneering period at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Feng's *huaben* 話本 were first presented to an Italian audience, albeit in a heavily edited form. The earliest Italian versions of *Sanyan* stories were mostly rewritings and were heavily influenced by the preexisting foreign versions of the stories they chose to translate.

Secondly, after the Second World War, Feng appeared as the author of stories that included anthologies of Chinese literature, again some of which were still translated from other European languages (mostly English and German).

Thirdly, the decade of the 1980s was a period when Italian translators, mostly scholars of Chinese literature, decided systematically to translate from the original texts and produced accurate and readable versions, which are still used as references.

Fourthly, in the last decade, a new generation of Sinologists has undertaken the study of *Sanyan*, and their translations are mostly inserted inside of scholarly publications.

Finally, this paper shows how the approach to translating Feng has changed over the years, from a quasi-manipulation of the original stories to an extreme respect for the source material. At the same time, the need for a complete version of *Sanyan* in Italian is called into question at the end of the paper.

**Keywords**

Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Sanyan* 三言, *huaben* 話本,  
Italian translation

## 1. Introduction

Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) enormous body of work encompasses more than one genre: he penned down drama, poetry, jestbooks, full-length novels, commentary on the Confucian classics, gambling manuals, and so forth. Nonetheless, his major contribution to Chinese literature is represented by his three volumes amounting to 120 short stories (*huaben* 話本, a term that sometimes has been translated as *novella*), collectively known as *Sanyan* 三言, a name often rendered into English as *The Three Stories*, because all three volumes bear the word “*yan* 言” (literally means “word,” but here also “story”) in their title. The volumes are *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言 (Stories to instruct the world), previously known as *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (*Tales Old and New*, 1620, hereafter *GJXS*), *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (*Stories to Caution the World*, 1624, hereafter *JSTY*) (Yang and Yang 2007), and *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (*Stories to Awaken the World*, 1627, hereafter *XSHY*) (Yang and Yang 2009). Due to stylistic and thematic affinities, *Sanyan* is often mentioned together with Ling Mengchu's 凌濛初 (1580–1644) two collections, *Chuke pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Volume*, 1628, hereafter *CKPAJQ*) and *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Volume*, 1632, hereafter *EKPAJQ*), known by the collective title “*Erpai* 二拍” (*The Two Slaps*), with seventy-eight stories in total. In fact, in the preface to *CKPAJQ*, Ling Mengchu himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Feng Menglong's work. Before ancient prints of *GJXS* and *JSTY* were rediscovered in Japan in the 1920s, *Sanyan* stories were mostly known in China because of the secondary collection *Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀 (New and old remarkable stories, 1630s, hereafter *JGQG*), which includes stories from both *Sanyan* and *Erpai* and for which Feng himself might have been one of the compilers.<sup>1</sup>

As previously mentioned, *Sanyan* copies were found in the first half of the twentieth century in Japan, the first country in which Feng's work had been translated and adapted long before these findings.<sup>2</sup> In fact, just to quote an example, the nine stories from Tsuga Teisho's 都賀庭鍾 (1718–

1794) collection *Hanabusa sôshi* 英草紙 (*A Garland of Heroes*) are all adapted from *Sanyan* and *Erpai* stories.<sup>3</sup> *Sanyan* arrived in Europe around the same time: The first stories coming from Feng's collection via *JGQG* were made available to Western audiences in 1735, when three of them appeared in French in the volume *Description de la Chine* (Description of China), by Jesuit missionary Jean-Baptiste du Halde (1674–1743). These stories were in turn published in English in 1736 and German between 1747 and 1756. Reportedly, they attracted Goethe's attention (Robinson 2015, 82–83; Ma 2017, 227).

Even before the resurfacing of the ancient copies in Japan, *Sanyan* stories in their *JGQG* form enjoyed considerable fame in China as well as outside of it. *JGQG* was briefly mentioned in Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901, 322), where it was described as a “favorite with the romance-reading Chinaman,” possibly because of its plain and intelligible style. Giles also notices that by that time most, if not all, stories from the collection were already available in Western languages (322–323).<sup>4</sup>

Italy was a relative latecomer to the party. Despite its enormous contributions to world sinology, such as the first translations into Latin of the Confucian classics *Daxue* 大學 (*The Great Learning*, 1662 [1593]) or *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*The Doctrine of the Mean*, 1667), *Sanyan* stories were introduced much later to the Italian readership (Masini 1999). In this article, we will reflect on how Feng's work has been translated into Italian and presented at various epochs.

The concept that helps us understand Feng Menglong's foray into the Italian literary world, especially in the first and second periods that I will highlight below, is “manipulation.” This is a concept that many scholars of literary translation are familiar with: All translation implies rewriting, and all rewriting implies a level of manipulation. Although its sole purpose might be better communication and acceptance between the source text and the target culture, the generally accepted axiom is that translation is never “innocent” because it is always connected to the dominant ideology and poetics of the receiving culture (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, 11).<sup>5</sup> In the following paragraphs, I will show how manipulation and rewriting were crucial in the beginning of the previous century but played an increasingly smaller role as time went by. Nonetheless, the most recent, more precise, and more complete translations of Feng Menglong's work also imply a different reader.

## 2. The Pioneering Period: Rewriting *Huaben*

Pollard (1998) paints for us a vivid picture of translation into Chinese in the beginning of the twentieth century. According to him, in the Chinese literary world of the time, the “boundaries between translation, adaptation, rewriting, and imitation do not seem to have been seriously discussed,” and that, despite a “split” between “freedomists” (those who tolerated messing up with the wording, as long as the spirit of the original text was conveyed) and “literarists” (those who promoted calquing foreign structure into the target text, to the point of unintelligibility), “literary translators [...] thought themselves licensed to add and subtract” (13–14). What catches our attention is that the earlier translators of *Sanyan* into Italian seemed to have adopted strikingly similar strategies.

This paragraph would have had a completely different structure were it not for the recent discovery of Giuseppe Barone’s (1861–1924) body of work by Professor Renata Vinci. A prolific writer and translator, Barone is the author of a total of thirty-one China-themed publications, and Professor Vinci has been kind enough to share with me some of her scanned copies of Barone’s translations. Three of the stories that Barone translated come from Feng Menglong’s trilogy, and they are *Hin-lo-tu: Il Ritratto Misterioso* (*Hin-lo-tu: The mysterious portrait*, viz., *GJXS 10: Teng Dayin guiduan jiasi* 滕大尹鬼斷傢俬, 1912), *Se-hiong-hiong-ti: I Due Fratelli di Sesso Diverso* (*Se-hiong-hiong-ti: Two brothers with different sexes*, viz., *XSHY 10: Liu Xiaoguan cixiong xiongdi* 劉小官雌雄兄弟, 1912), and *Il Leopardo Vendicatore* (*The avenging leopard*, viz., *XSHY 5: Dashupo yihu songqin* 大樹坡義虎送親, 1915). As mentioned by Vinci herself (2022), when we talk about “translation” here, we are mostly talking about an attempt at creative rewriting, and more interestingly, although Barone claims to have been translating directly from the original texts, the preexisting versions in other European languages were at least taken into consideration. Barone’s Italian renditions are heavily influenced by the decisions taken by previous translations; he follows the convention of starting directly from the main story and ignores all the poems and the introductions that are not central to the plot (143–158).

An element undoubtedly worth noticing is the paratextual nature of the titles Barone chose: In two of them, he leaves a transliteration of the Chinese (short) title: “*hin-lo-tu*” is none other than “*xingle tu* 行樂圖” (literally “the life portrait,” which is a central element of the plot), and in the same way, “*se-hiong-hiong-ti*” is “*cixiong xiongdi* 雌雄兄弟” (literally

“female and male brothers”). My speculation is that Barone left these transliterations in the titles because he wanted to give his Italian readers at least a hint of what the Chinese title sounded like, to communicate a sort of exotic and foreign flavor.

It is easy to jump to the erroneous conclusion that Barone manipulated his texts for his personal or ideological agenda, whatever they might have been. However, a deeper and closer reading of his versions reveals that he was at least inspired by the versions in other languages, most evidently the ones in French, translated by Stanislas Julien (1797–1873). Barone lifted from Julien the idea of keeping a short Chinese title together with the translated one, and one can clearly see Julien’s shade in his renditions “from Chinese” (Vinci 2022, 151–152). Therefore, one can refer to Barone’s versions as *second-hand* manipulations of the target text since he was already working with Julien’s shortened versions.

After Barone, the earliest Italian volume in which we can find some of Feng’s stories is a book called *Novelle Cinesi* (Chinese novellas), published in 1922, in which Paolo Bellezza translated and edited stories coming from *JGQG*, as well as two other collections, namely *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, hereafter *LZZY*), and *Longtu gong’an* 龍圖公案 (Longtu’s court cases, also known as *The cases of Judge Bao Longtu*, hereafter *LTGA*). Bellezza (1922, vi, footnote 2), a renowned translator from English, French, and German, who by no stretch of the imagination could be described as a sinologist, by his own admission based his work on stories already available in German (he mentions Wilhelm Grube’s translations published in 1906 and Paul Kühnel’s translations published in 1914) and French (Stanislas Julien’s translations published in 1860 and D’Hervey Saint-Denis’s translations published in 1892). At least nine of the stories he included in *Novelle Cinesi* can be identified as coming from *Sanyan: Un Episodio della Vita di Li Taibo* (An episode in Li Taibo’s life, viz., *JSTY* 9: *Li Zhexian zuicao xiamanshu* 李謫仙最草嚇蠻書), *Il Liuto Infranto* (The smashed lute, viz., *JSTY* 1: *Yu Boya shuaiqin xie zhiyin* 俞伯牙摔琴謝知音), *Il Marito Ingrato* (The ungrateful husband, viz., *GJXS* 27: *Jin Yunu bangda bao qinglang* 金玉奴棒打薄情郎), *Pronostici Fisionomici* (Physiognomic prognostics, viz., *GJXS* 9: *Pei Jingong yihuan yuanpei* 裴晉公義還原配 [introductory story]), *Il Dipinto Meraviglioso* (The marvelous portrait, viz., *GJXS* 10), *Gli Sposi Prima Separati e Poi Ricongiunti* (The married couple who was first separated and then reunited, viz., *GJXS* 9 [main story]), *Delitto e Castigo* (Crime and punishment, viz., *GJXS* 2: *Chen Yushi qiaokan*

*jinchaidian* 陳御史巧勘金釵鈿 [main story]), *Due Fratelli di Sesso Diverso* (Two brothers with different sexes, viz., *XSHY* 10), and *Saggezza di Giudice* (A judge's wisdom, viz., *GJXS* 2 [introductory story]).

Seen from our twenty-first century perspective, it might appear rather puzzling that the publishing house (Vallardi, based in Milan) decided to entrust Bellezza with the task of compiling this volume, since in that period, Italian translations carried out directly on the original texts were not as rare and impossible a task as one may think. Just to name a few examples relevant to our case, already in 1872 Italian sinologist Carlo Puini had published a collection of seven stories from *LTGA*. Bellezza himself (1922) mentions in his preface a previous (1904) translation of an unidentified Chinese novel named *Promessa Sposa... A Due* (The woman who was betrothed to two men). Moreover, we are only a few years away from *Fiabe Cinesi* (*Chinese Fairy Tales*, 1926), the first translation of ninety-nine *LZZY* stories, rendered directly from the original by Italian doctor and diplomat Nicola De Giura.<sup>6</sup> However, given the extreme scarcity and rarity of primary sources outside of China at that time, retranslation was a rather widespread practice all over Europe.<sup>7</sup>

It is rather challenging to assess the exact sources of the stories presented by Bellezza, for different reasons. First, no clear original version is named or indicated for any individual story, and as we have just observed, all of them are rebranded with new Italian titles. However, this minor problem can sometimes be worked around by reading attentively: *GJXS* 10 reappears in *LTGA*, thus the story about the clever magistrate who simulates the presence of a ghost to solve a case may virtually derive from either of the two collections; nevertheless, we can be sure that the source is *GJXS* 10, (or better, *JGQG* 3), because the virtuous magistrate is called “Teng 滕” instead of “Bao 包.” Secondly, none of the stories that I just identified as coming from *Sanyan* are retranslated in their entirety, since Bellezza prefers to impose on the reader his own abridged versions of the source material; I hope the irony is not lost on us if we consider that the original *Sanyan* stories were, in fact, longer and more articulate rewritings of much shorter texts. Feng Menglong adopted as a practice the reworking and expanding in vernacular language (*baihua* 白話) of stories coming from ancient sources; for example, *GJXS* 13 (*Zhang Daoling qi shi Zhao Sheng* 張道陵七試趙升) and 14 (*Chen Xiyi sisi chaoming* 陳希夷四辭朝命) are both based on anecdotes in literary Chinese (*wenyan* 文言) appearing in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records of the*

*Taiping Era*, ca. 978 CE), about Daoist immortals Zhang Daoling 張道陵 and Chen Tuan 陳搏, respectively.<sup>8</sup> It is thus ironic to see them being shrunk once again, albeit in a different form and in another language. In his preface, Bellezza justifies his editing work with the following words, after quoting a long dialogue between the English diplomat James Bruce Elgin and a Chinese Imperial Magistrate, as evidence of the “excessive” Chinese attention to rituality and etiquette:

This would suffice to convince the reader that, when we translate from Chinese, we should not aim for a faithful version [...]. Chinese narrators love to indulge on the same topic in a way which appears cloying to the Western reader [...]. If we then consider the trivial and inappropriate poetry which they are so fond of, their word puns, and their bizarre metaphors, we are forced to admit that the letter and the spirit of the text have to be reworked by the translator, if he really wants to make the text accessible to the Western reader. (Bellezza 1922, xi, my translation)

Bellezza actively restructured the stories and justified his approach in the preface. He removed all poems but one (introduction to his *GJXS* 2), then heavily summarized and shortened all the stories translated. He even got so far as breaking down two tales (*GJXS* 2 and *GJXS* 9), from which he extracted their respective introductory segments (*touhui* 頭回) and rendered them as two independent stories, without even hinting at the relationship between them and their main stories (*zhenghua* 正話).

It is also astonishing to see how Bellezza plays the role of the patronizing translator almost by the book: He decides, without being able to read the original version, that the Italian readers will surely not appreciate the long structures and poetic verses that populate the Chinese *huaben*, as well as the so-called “storyteller’s manner,” viz., the simulated interaction between narrator and audience, typically signaled by such expressions as “*kanguan* 看官” (dear reader).<sup>9</sup> Secondly, he further domesticates the stories by attributing titles with a higher degree of familiarity among the Italian readers.<sup>10</sup> The most blatant example is that of *GJXS* 2 [main story], where the case of Censor Chen (*Chen Yushi* 陳御史)<sup>11</sup> is given the title *Delitto e Castigo*, which, since 1889, had been the official Italian title of Dostoevskij’s *Prestuplénie i nakazànie* (known in English as *Crime and Punishment*, 1866). No doubt, the story may, if only ever slightly, lend itself to this title: the sneaky Liang Shangbin 梁尚賓 seduces his cousin Lu Xueceng’s 魯學曾 wife-to-be Axiu 阿秀, by

impersonating him, and Axiu commits suicide out of shame. Censor Chen eventually solves the case, and Liang Shangbin ends up in prison, waiting to be beheaded and dying without a male heir. Bellezza's retitling and rewriting reduce the complex plot to a simple "crime and consequence" story, neglecting all the elements that make it unique: the Censor's ingenious disguise as a cloth merchant in order to bring Liang Shangbin to justice (Censor Chen is nowhere to be found in Bellezza's version); the tragic scene of Axiu's death; her spirit talking to her mother through Liang's wife, Lady Tian 田; ultimately, the intervention of *retribution* (*bao 報*) with Lady Tian getting married to Lu Xueceng. All these elements undoubtedly show the richness and the manifold elements of cultural specificity in *Sanyan*, and Bellezza ends up being excessively patronizing when he wants to cut the story short and present only some of these aspects. By the standards of that time, Bellezza's immoderate intervention may be open to justification if only he were an authoritative sinologist.<sup>12</sup> Also his introduction, in which he hopes to provide an overview of Chinese culture in general, comes out as rather incomplete and biased.

As opposed to Barone's *second-hand* manipulation, which can be deemed involuntary, Bellezza did have access to more complete renditions of the Chinese texts (such as those by d'Hervey-Saint-Denys, for example), but he nonetheless decided voluntarily to rework them into a form that he considered more digestible and enthralling for the Italian reader.

### **3. The Transitional Period: More "Honey Twice Decanted"**

After the end of the Second World War, interest in China and its rich culture rose in Italy, with more people being active in this field, especially in the Italian intellectual circles. Such Italian intellectuals as Alberto Moravia (1907–1990) and Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957) developed a genuine interest in China. This in turn gave way to numerous translations of authoritative works being rendered and published directly from Chinese, such as a collection of Confucian classics published in 1956 and translated by Bishop Stanislaus Lo Kuang 羅光 (1911–2004). Publications of less mainstream appeal came to life at the same time, such as Shen Fu's 沈復 *Fusheng liu ji* 浮生六記 (*Six Chapters of a Floating Life*), which appeared as *Sei Racconti di Vita Irreale* (Six stories from an unreal life) in 1955, translated by Lionello Lanciotti (1925–2015, considered the father of

modern Italian sinology). Roughly in the same period, there had been a rediscovery of Feng's work in Mainland China, especially thanks to scholar Wang Gulu 王古魯 (1901–1958), who photographed the editions found in Japan and handed them to the publishing house *Shangwu yinshuguan* 商務印書館, which in 1947 published its first edition of *GJXS*. This would be followed by two other prestigious editions in 1955 and 1958, published by *Wenxue guji kanxingshe* 文學古籍刊行社 and *Renmin wenxue chubanshe* 人民文學出版社, respectively (Sha 2002, 30–33). Finally, Feng Menglong's name was mentioned as an author in the Italian editions of his works. We should notice, though, that these new editions were still rendered from another Western language, be it German or English. The collections that were published in this period include: *Una vedova, Una monaca, Una cortigiana e Altre Famose Novelle Cinesi* (1955) based on Lin Yutang's 林語堂 1951 book *Widow, Nun and Courtesan: Three Novelettes from the Chinese*, containing *Madamigella Du* (Mademoiselle Du, viz., *JSTY 32: Du Shiniang nuchen baibaoxiang* 杜十娘怒沉百寶箱); *Antichi Racconti Cinesi* (Ancient Chinese fables, 1959) translated from Yang Xianyi 楊憲益 and Gladys Yang 戴乃迭's 1957 book *The Courtesan's Jewel Box*, containing *La Figlia del Re dei Mendicanti* (The daughter of the beggars' king, viz., *GJXS 27*); *La Camicia di Perle* (1959) translated from Franz Kuhn's *Das Perlenhemd* (The pearl shirt, 1956), containing *GJXS 1: Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhushan* 蔣興哥重會珍珠衫 (*Jiang Xingge Reencounters His Pearl Shirt*); and *Tre Racconti Cinesi* (1961) once again translated from Kuhn's *Chinesische Meisternovellen* (Chinese masterpieces, 1952), containing *La Figlia del Re dei Mendicanti* (The daughter of the king of beggars, viz., *GJXS 27*), and *Il Ritratto misterioso* (The mysterious portrait, viz., *GJXS 10*). For these versions, the Italian publishing houses relied either on the prestige of the original Western-language translators, such as Franz Kuhn and Lin Yutang,<sup>13</sup> or on the relevance of the Italian translators in the intellectual circles of that time, such as Italian poets and intellectuals Margherita Guidacci and Piero Jahier.

Regarding Jahier's 1955 version, by that time he had already become Lin Yutang's official Italian translator. In 1939, Jahier had overcome a personal and professional crisis by translating and publishing Lin's *The Importance of Living* (1937) (Boccardo 2007, 373). Even though Jahier only approached Lin's English publications, the sheer abundance of Chinese terms and cultural concepts with which Lin filled his writings made Jahier feel at times like "[s]omeone decanting honey which has

already been decanted once” (373). To this, we can add that Lin’s translation of *JSTY* 32 is presented as a creative rewriting of the original story (207). Jahier does not impersonate an authoritative voice in Chinese literature; in fact, this work does not even feature a translator’s introduction. Although quite different from Feng Menglong’s original, Jahier’s translation follows strictly Lin’s English, and with its eighty-nine pages, it is effectively the first full-length translation of a *Sanyan* story into Italian.

In order to get a glimpse of *Sanyan* stories with more faithfulness to the original, we have to wait until 1959, when *La Camicia di Perle* and *Antichi Racconti Cinesi* saw the light. The former, *La Camicia di Perle*, bears the subtitle *Storia d’Amore Cinese* (A Chinese love story). Here, the story of Jiang Xingge 蔣興哥 and his pearl shirt is rendered by prolific translator and Germanist Ervinio Pocar, who closely follows Franz Kuhn’s German version. Already by glancing at the first page, we can see that Pocar (Kuhn, more precisely; 1959, 7) cuts away the introduction and starts the story with the words “*Adesso, cari lettori, ascoltate la storia della camicia di perle*” (“Now, Dear Readers, you are going to listen to the Story of the Pearl Shirt”). This small detail alone indicates that, once more, we are dealing with an abridged version of the story, which keeps its plot and *fabula* unaltered but edits out some details and poetic intermissions. An example is the following poetic verse:

羊肉饅頭沒的喫，空教惹得一身騷。

The Mutton Bun had escaped his Lips,  
He had but the foul Smell all over his Body.<sup>14</sup>

Which Feng uses to describe Mr. Lu’s 呂 disappointment over his failed plan to marry Chen Dalang’s 陳大郎 widow to his own son. My hypothesis is that Kuhn decided to leave this sentence out of his text because it either stood out as an unnecessary obstacle to the narrative flow or it would sound rather quirky and cumbersome in translation. As for Pocar, he was most probably unaware he was dealing with an abridged text; therefore, strictly speaking, he had no creative choice.

One aspect for which Pocar’s (and in turn Kuhn’s) version deserves some praise is the choice of translating poetic lines in rhyme while at the same time keeping their meaning as close to the original as possible. Once again, this is actually Kuhn’s choice, who, rather than trying to imitate the

lyrical style and terseness of these poetic interludes, decided to replace them with short rhyming couplets, which transmit the same message as Feng's text. We can give a short example here; after Wang Sanqiao'er 王三巧兒 knows from a blind oracle that her husband is already on his way back home, she goes back into her house in a much higher spirit, and this is Feng's description of her mood:

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Chinese</b> | 正所謂：望梅止渴，畫餅充飢。                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>English</b> | As the proverbs go, she was “slaking thirst by looking at plums” and “allaying hunger by drawing cakes.”<br>(trans. Yang and Yang 2000, 15)                                                                                           |
| <b>German</b>  | <i>Es traf in diesem Falle der alte Satz zu:<br/>Eine saftige Pflaume zu erblicken,<br/>Kann durstige Gaumen schon erquicken.<br/>Leckere Speisen zu sehn im Bild,<br/>Bisweilen ärgsten Hunger stillt.</i><br>(trans. Kuhn 1956, 11) |
| <b>Italian</b> | <i>Faceva al caso suo l'antico adagio:<br/>Se vedi una prugna matura,<br/>Ti passa la sete e l'arsura.<br/>Un cibo, dipinto che sia,<br/>Ti placa la fame più ria.</i><br>(trans. Pocar 1959, 16)                                     |

It is a creative license uncalled for in Feng's original text, but which conforms well with the other poems in the story. Whenever the original narrator inserts a poem into the Chinese story, it is not always in rhyming couplets (AA, BB), but in the German and Italian versions, they are all standardized into this poetic form.

In 1961, Italian writer and journalist Italo Chiusano (1926–1995) translated Kuhn's *Chinesische Meisternovellen* (Chinese literary masterpieces) into Italian, with the title *Tre Racconti Cinesi* (Three Chinese novellas). He also wrote a short preface (Chiusano 1961, 7–9). On the one hand, he appears to hold in high regard these stories and their apparent simplicity, because after reading them, “we return to this world, convinced [...] that the small vacation we have just taken, together with the protagonists of such extraordinary events, has been a fruitful stay in the company of people who, without putting on too many airs about it, knew better than us how the world goes” (7). He even rebukes French sinologist Paul Demiéville's (1894–1979) opinion that these stories are

not examples of good narrative, because in his view, their spontaneity and the experience of enjoyment that derives from reading them are much more remarkable than their faults; he firmly believes that we can identify some archetypal model behind the stories when he admits, “we do not know the path that these short stories have pursued before ending up in the compilers’ hands, and precisely for this reason, they seem to bring us back to the sources of the fables and novellas, even before they spread throughout the world and took a new form in the classical Italian narrative” (8). On the other hand, as an expert of European literature, he lets himself speculate in an impressionistic way about similarities and differences with Western fiction: “[A]nchronistic as it may seem, we find ourselves musing on the way these points, situations, and characters would have evolved, were they to be put under the crafty pen of our classical narrators” (8–9). Here are two of his suggested comparisons and matchings: “The old and clever magistrate of *The Portrait* (GJXS 10) [could be easily misplaced] into one of the days of *Decameron*” (9), and “*The king of beggars* [GJXS 27], with his richness and his almost legal power on the people’s earnings and profits, hints at some kinship, maybe only fortuitous, with Brecht’s inventions in *The Threepenny Opera*” (9).

There is not much more to add to Chiusano’s translations. He probably did read his friend Pocar’s earlier texts and decided to align with his closest predecessor.<sup>15</sup> He does not resort to using rhymes in the poetic intermissions, simply because Kuhn’s book did away with them as well.

We also have to mention that in 1959, Italian sinologist Giuliano Bertuccioli (1923–2001) published *Storia della Letteratura Cinese* (History of Chinese literature), which he revised in 1968 and republished as simply *La Letteratura Cinese* in 2013. Both a textbook and an anthology of Chinese literature, Bertuccioli’s (2013) volume features an extract of *JSTY 2: Zhuangzi xiu gupen cheng dadao* 莊子休鼓盆成大道, called *Picchiettando una Ciotola, Zhuangzi raggiunge il Grande Dao* (Zhuangzi reaches for the Great Dao by beating on a bowl). Bertuccioli’s version, though heavily edited, was translated, like all the excerpts in the book, directly from the original version. A few words on his analysis, which appears punctual but somehow indebted to that time: The first fallacy is that Bertuccioli identifies the sources of some *Sanyan* stories as coming from the drafts used by the chantefables (*shuoshuren* 說書人), whereas it has been later proven that the stories were instead deliberately written as an *imitation* of the oral context.<sup>16</sup> The second fallacy is the following comment:

This novella was the source of inspiration for many librettos of Chinese musical theater, both during the Ming and during the Qing dynasty, and this version [the one in the librettos], above all, has contributed to turning this legendary adventure by Zhuangzi into an extremely popular story in China. However, the Boccaccio-esque and anti-feminist nature of its topic has not met the favor of the new authorities, which, although allowing Feng Menglong's collection to be reprinted time and again, have since the beginning severely prevented the musical drama from being staged. (Bertuccioli 2013, 252, my translation)

It is worth noticing that this comment by Bertuccioli echoes the words of Chinese critics in those years, as I demonstrate in the following part. In the preface to the 1959 volume *Huaben xuan* 話本選 (A selection of *huaben*) Chinese scholar Fan Ning 范寧 points out (in a way that we can remotely associate with feminism) the unlucky fate and passive condition of some female characters, such as Du Shiniang 杜十娘, whose story is defined as one of the most unfortunate and (emotionally) heavy (*zui buxing'er chenzhong* 最不幸而沉重), Jin Yunu 金玉奴, and Shen Yaoqin 莘瑤琴, among others, calling them “an exact representation of women's life in a backward society” (Wu et al. 1959, 22). Therefore, even though Bertuccioli is right in informing the reader that the so-called “new authorities” kept allowing the publication of *Sanyan* stories, it was not without some critique.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, I seem to detect a problem with the adjective *Boccaccesco* (*Boccaccio-esque* or *Boccaccio-like*). Two definitions are present in the Devoto-Oli dictionary of the Italian language:

- (1) Imitating G. Boccaccio (1313–1375) in form or tone.
- (2) Of a very bold licentiousness.

Certainly, Bertuccioli intended the adjective in the second sense. However, he passed this moral judgment on Feng Menglong's story before contradicting himself. In a later paper of his, we read, “[a]ctually the reason for which this melodrama has been forbidden is not to be found in its licentiousness, because there is nothing offending the morals: no scurrilous expressions, no Boccaccio-esque scenes [...]” (Bertuccioli 1959, 53–54, my translation). Moreover, as Bertuccioli himself accurately points out, the inclusion of the story in *JGQG* is itself a sign of its moral irreproachability, and it is probably its strict adherence to the “old and

traditional Confucian morals” that resulted in its ban, not his purported antifeminism. Even when scenes of carnal love are depicted in *Sanyan* (for example, in *GJXS* 3 or *GJXS* 12), Feng Menglong hardly ever crosses the threshold of metaphorical expressions, with such recurring images as “*yunyu* 雲雨” (clouds and rain). Again, it is astounding that Bertuccioli did not deem Boccaccio-esque the much more graphic descriptions present in *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅), for which he followed the old convention of rendering the scabrous passages into Latin.

The leitmotif of this second period seems to be, once again, second-hand, and therefore involuntary, manipulation. In all cases but one (the eminent Bertuccioli), the translators themselves were receivers of manipulated texts, and since they could not read (nor probably have access to) the original source material, they had no choice but to reproduce the choices made by the pivotal-language versions with which they worked.

#### **4. The Mature Period**

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, premodern Chinese literature lost what little relevance it previously held in the Italian cultural discourse. Suffice it to say that the most authoritative and popular work on China to come to the spotlight during that period was probably Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972). The major publications of the time were centered on political and social commentary on what was happening in the East at the time, with the founding of such academic journals as *Mondo Cinese* (Chinese world, first issue in March 1973), with a clear focus on modern and contemporary events. Among some representative publications of that time, we can quote Alberto Moravia’s book *La Rivoluzione Culturale in Cina* (The Cultural Revolution in China, 1967), together with Giorgio Manganelli’s *Cina e altri Orienti* (China and other Orients, 1974). These texts, however, were meant for a general audience with an interest in China, not written by sinologists for sinologists. They are indicative of the Italian public discourse regarding China, which at the time was dominated by then current events, such as the aforementioned Cultural Revolution, and one cannot avoid noticing a vague sense of orientalism in them. Even in the literary field, where current events could be put on the side, the publishers resorted either to reprinting ancient philosophical texts, such as *Laozi* 老子 (1973, from Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak’s French edition) and the Confucian classics (1974, translated

from Chinese by Fausto Tomassini), or to translating modern authors, such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (1965), Lao She 老舍 (1977), or Xia Zhiyan 夏之炎 (1978). A single instance of Ming-Qing literature in Italian translation manifesting itself in those years was the first translation of Li Yu's 李漁 *Rouputuan* 肉蒲團 (*The Prayer Mat of Flesh*, 1973, once again from Franz Kuhn's German version). Feng Menglong and his short stories all but disappeared from the Italian literary context during those years, and we have to wait well after the end of the Cultural Revolution for more *Sanyan* stories to appear on the Italian market. I prefer starting my discussion with Edi Bozza's work, even though Giorgio Casacchia's *Apparizioni d'Oriente* (Apparitions from the East) precedes it by four years. For the sake of clarity, I discuss Bozza's two volumes (1990 and 1991) before moving on to Casacchia's (1986, 1992, and 1995).

Bozza, a talented translator of Chinese, published *Il Corpetto di Pelle* (The pearl garment) in 1990 with Mondadori. Although only seven stories are featured in this short book, it represents the first time that an anthology dedicated solely to *Sanyan* stories has been published in Italian. The stories featured in this collection are: *L'Oliandolo Conquista la Regina Delle Graziöse* (The oil seller seduces the queen of the courtesans, viz., XSHY 3: *Maiyoulang duzhan huakui* 賣油郎獨佔花魁), *Il Vecchio Giardinere* (The old gardener, viz., XSHY 4: *Guanyuansou wanfeng xiannü* 灌園叟晚逢仙女), *Du Shiniang Butta Via I Gioielli Del Suo Scrigno* (Du Shiniang throws away the jewels in her box, viz., JSTY 32), *Jin Yunu Fa Bastonare Il Marito Mascalzone* (Jin Yunu lets her scoundrel of a husband suffer a beating, viz., GJXS 27), *Il Corpetto di Perle* (The pearl shirt, viz., GJXS 1), *Il Testamento* (The last will, viz., GJXS 10), *Zhuangzi Raggiunge Il Grande Dao* (Zhuangzi reaches the great dao, viz., JSTY 2). One year later, Bozza then publishes three more *Sanyan* stories in the collection *Il Governatore Della Provincia del Ramo Meridionale e Altri Racconti* (The governor of the southern branch province and other stories, 1991), namely *Zhao Taizu Accompanya Jing Niang per Mille Li* (Zhao Taizu accompanies Jingniang for one thousand li, viz., JSTY 21: *Zhao Taizu qianli song jingniang* 趙太祖千里送京娘), *Shi Runze Incontra Per Caso Un Amico a Tanque* (Shi Runze meets by chance a friend in tanque, viz., XSHY 18: *Shi Runze tanque yuyou* 施潤澤灘闕遇友), and *Su Xiaomei Fa Far Tre Prove allo Sposino* (Su Xiaomei tests her new husband three times, viz., XSHY 11: *Su Xiaomei sannan xinlang* 蘇小妹三難新郎).

Not only does Bozza present Feng's stories in their most complete form, but some of them are even expanded for the sake of clarity. As we can see below, Bozza has made an intelligent rendering of some introductions, where the culturally and historically specific elements turn the original poems into a thick and impenetrable mass of intertextual references. The introductive poem in *GJXS 10* deserves our attention and praise for its creative solution. This is the original poem:

玉樹庭前諸謝，紫荊花下三田。  
墳簾和好弟兄賢，父母心中歡忭。  
多少爭財競產，同根何苦自相煎。  
相持鷸蚌枉垂涎，落得漁人取便。

This is its most recent English translation:

Like the Xie brothers of jade-tree fame,  
And the three Tians under the redbud twigs,  
Brothers who live in harmony,  
Fill their parents' hearts with delight.  
All too many fight over property,  
And torment siblings who share the same root.  
When the snipe and the clam grapple,  
They benefit none but the fisherman.<sup>18</sup>

This is Bozza's Italian version, retranslated into English for convenience:

Xie An, who lived in the Jin (265–420), asked his children: "Why does everyone want their children to be healthy, strong, and to love each other?" One of them replied, "Because everyone wants a robust and beautiful tree to grow in their own garden!" During the Han dynasty, three brothers decided to divide their wealth, when they finished, only a tree had to be assigned, so they decided to cut it into three parts, but the tree suddenly withered and died. The brothers then decided to be together, and the tree bloomed again.

Already in the *Book of Poetry* we know that great happiness for the parents is to see their children together and loving each other. Many others behave like Cao Bei, who told Cao Zhi, "Walk seven steps and

tell me a poem, if you cannot do it, I will get you killed.” His brother improvised:

“You need fava beans to cook soup, when they gurgle in the pot, we add their peels. Both are born out of the same plant. Both of them burn in the same fire, but why do peels have to torment fava beans this way?”

He meant that two brothers should not fight, because they generate from the same plant.

There is always a third person benefiting from an argument between two parts. A clam was on a beach, enjoying the sunlight, when a crane arrived, wanting to eat it; the clam closed its valves and imprisoned the crane’s beak. The crane said: “If it does not rain today or tomorrow, you are going to die.” The clam replied, “If you cannot set yourself free today or tomorrow, you are going to die as well.” Since neither of them was willing to give up, a fisherman passed by and caught both of them. (Bozza 1990, 187–188)

Rather than admitting the translator’s own “inferiority” with a footnote, Bozza reshapes the original text in a way that resembles what Newmark (quoted in Osimo 2011, 123) advocated: An explanation inserted directly in the text, for which the author may erroneously be credited, rather than the translator. Osimo (2011, 123) advises against this practice because, in his opinion, “this method tends to manipulate the text without the reader knowing it. The implicit model reader of this method is not worthy of knowing the manipulative operations carried out without a precise justification on the translator’s side, nor has he/she any curiosity, as far as we can see, for what can be typical of another culture, or anything different from one’s own.” However, Bozza legitimizes his operation by adding the following small footnote:

The original is an eight-lined poem, and all the lines include idiomatic expressions which refer to popular anecdotes. The literal translation of these verses into Italian would make no sense to a reader who does not know these stories, therefore we preferred to translate the anecdotes, rather than the verses. (Bozza 1990, 188)

According to Eco (2003, 105), the translator who adds a footnote implicitly signals his/her own defeat; and many scholars oppose the adding of footnotes, but here we witness a creative reversal of what the common practice of translation would suggest (Osimo 2011, 118). The

long explanation is interpolated in the text in its own entirety, and the Italian reader is left to imagine the presence of a terse eight-lined poem in the original.

Apart from this creative use of the footnotes, Bozza's translation inaugurates a new period for the *Sanyan* stories on the Italian market. The two publications which we just mentioned appear to be a compendium of stories in digestible amount for the general reader, but in no way expect an "imbecile reader," as Nabokov (quoted in Osimo 2011, 119) calls them. Bozza uses footnotes and interpolations carefully and moderately, adding context where necessary and leaving enough space for the reader to gather information on some more obscure passages. In *XSHY 4*, the narrating voice mentions ancient personalities Zhang Hua 張華 and Yu Shinan 虞世南:

就是張華的《博物志》，也不過志其一二；虞世南的《行書廚》，也包藏不得許多。

Which Bozza translates as:

Even Zhang Hua, who wrote the great treatise *Bowuzhi* in which he gathered lots of extraordinary things and of which there is no equal book in the world; and Yu Shinan of the Tang, whom his emperor wanted always by his side because he knew lots of things and considered him to be a walking library; even these people could not know everything and write down everything. (Bozza 1990, 68)

When we put the two texts side by side, the translator's manipulation is much more evident. Bozza decides to explain what Zhang Hua and Yu Shinan are famous for in order for the reader to understand their usage as terms of comparison for all-knowing people. Since it is just a passing reference, it is legitimate to make the allusion to these two characters more explicit.

The comparison adopted on the paratextual level is the one with Boccaccio. On the back cover of *Il Corpetto di Perle*, we read, "Seven tales, seven small masterpieces selected from *Sanyan*, the most famous collection of novellas in Chinese literature, comparable for its importance and literary influence, to *Decameron*." We are left wondering whether this comparison was a genuine one or merely a market device.

Giorgio Casacchia, an eminent sinologist, translated and published copiously on Feng Menglong. He started as early as 1986 with the

anthology *Apparizioni d'Oriente* (Apparitions from the East), which, apart from the popular narrative from *Dunhuang* 敦煌, *Kongzi Xiang Tuo xiangwen shu* 孔子項託像問書 (Confucius has a conversation with Xiang Tuo 項託), and some extracts from the jestbooks *Xiaofu* 笑府 (*Treasury of Laughs*) and *Guangxiaofu* 廣笑府 (*Extended Treasury of Laughs*), introduces the Italian reader to eight *Sanyan* stories. In 1992, he published *Nuove e Antiche Meraviglie* (New and ancient marvels), an abridged version of *JGQG*, in which he included no less than eleven stories from Feng's trilogy. Lastly, in 1995, he also published *Le Sette Prove* (The seven trials, viz., *GJXS* 13), a short (only seventy-one small pages) volume where he translated the story of Daoist master Zhang Daoling 張道陵 and his disciple Zhao Sheng 趙昇. Casacchia's translations are, generally speaking, intended more for the scholar or student of Chinese literature than for the general reader. Their scholarly appeal is proven by the copious footnotes (forty-nine in the Zhang Daoling story alone), and by his extreme precision in reporting the stories to the finest details, sometimes even quoting the original text in the translated version for the sake of accuracy. Let us analyze the most evident example of this approach. The last story of his 1992 translation is based on *XSHY II*, and is the love story of Su Xiaomei 蘇小妹, poet Su Dongpo's 蘇東坡 younger sister, with Qin Guan 秦觀 in which courting is played as a game of wits. After Qin Guan and Xiaomei finally celebrate their marriage, a long epilogue is told in which Su Dongpo and his monk friend Foyin 佛印 exchange poems, and the literatus is able to decipher the monk's cryptic writings only with his sister's precious help. The ballad that Foyin sends is made of twenty couplets of six- and seven-character lines, where the characters are reduplicated between the first and the second line. I believe that many translators would be tempted to edit out this part of the story since the protagonist has already had her own happy ending, and what remains is only a sophisticated way for the story to gently fade out like a curtain slowly descending on the stage. Another Italian version of the story (Bozza 1991) transcribes Foyin's ballad into a string of Italian words that make no sense, and then lets Xiaomei explain the riddle to the poet (and to the reader). Casacchia, on the other hand, decides to have the original Chinese characters copied into the text, and then translate Xiaomei's interpretation. This method is also used for the last three poems that Su Dongpo, Su Xiaomei, and Qin Guan exchange, for which he reproduces the circular structure and the ending interpretation. At the end of the book, he instructs us in a footnote that the ballad and the ending three poems have to be read according to a precise grouping scheme.

In the same period, two more texts are worth mentioning, one for the general audience and one for scholars. Tarcisio Muratore (Ciceri and Li 1993) edited and wrote the preface to a small booklet called *Le Mogli Fatali* (The fatal wives), made out only of *XSHY* 7 (*Qian Xiucui cuo zhan Fenghuang chou* 錢秀才錯佔鳳凰儔) and *XSHY* 33 (*Shiwu guan xiyan cheng qiaohuo* 十五貫戲言成巧禍), two tales in which wives play a crucial role. The translation is handled by Michela Ciceri, aided by Li Fu, at the time a lecturer in Chinese at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. It is a text that fully translated the original versions, including poems. The reader is left free to fill the culturally specific gaps. One thing that the translator and the preface fail to mention is that, since both stories are from *XSHY*, its authorship has been debated as early as 1971 (in the Western Academia), and its style is visibly different from that of the other two volumes (Hanan 1981, 120–121).

Another volume worth mentioning, if only for the inclusion of *GJXS* 3, is the anthology *Il Pennello di Lacca* (The Lacquer paintbrush, 1997), translated and edited by Mario Sabattini and Paolo Santangelo. It is an anthology of Chinese literature from the late Ming to the present day. The story translated is presented in a precise and complete way; the only thing which would somehow contradict the common translation practice is the Italian renaming of the village in which the story takes place, “*Xinqiao* 新橋,” as Pontenuovo (literally “new bridge”). Once again, Osimo (2011, 253) tells us that toponyms should be kept in the original, unless there is a commonly accepted form in the target language (For example, *Beijing*, commonly translated into Italian as *Pechino*). The editors wanted probably to domesticate the story, which in this text appears back-to-back with excerpts from modern and contemporary literature, undoubtedly less *exotic* and more appealing for the Italian reader. Obviously, this is not the only possible strategy, especially if we are dealing with the so-called “talking names”: in fact, people’s names and even toponyms have been translated in David Hawkes’s translation of *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 (*The Dream of the Red Chamber*), considered to be the one of the best examples of a Chinese novel translated into any Western language (Fan 2022, 168).

A praiseworthy textual aspect of this translation is that all rhyming poems are translated with rhyming poems in Italian as well, and a praiseworthy intertextual aspect of the whole volume is the thematic connection of Feng’s story with *Hu Meiniang zhuan* 胡媚娘傳 (The story

of Hu Meiniang) by Li Changqi 李昌祺 (1376–1452), from his *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話 (More stories by the lamplight, 1420), which shares with *GJXS* 3 the theme of the femme fatale.

## 5. The (Mostly) Scholarly Period

The last few years have seen a resurgence of publications connected with Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* in the Italian market. The pattern repeats similarly to all the other periods: translations by different people appeared within a few years of one another, forming a cluster of *Sanyan*-related texts, after one or more decades of absolute “silence.”

Luca Stirpe translated and published the collection *Echi d'Amore* (Echoes of love, 2013), in which he translates and comments on four *Sanyan* stories, together with their classical Chinese sources and their different versions. With a complete and well-documented introduction, the book makes for great reading overall. Stirpe managed to keep the balance between a scholarly-philological approach and a will to divulge Feng's writings to non-specialists. The translation of the original stories, coming from such ancient texts as the aforementioned *Taiping guangji* or *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 (*Records of Yijian*), and placed back-to-back with their corresponding *Sanyan* stories, adds a new dimension to Feng's storytelling and displays his ability in crafting and reworking the original materials. An example: In his first chapter, called *L'amore oltre la morte* (Love beyond death), Stirpe (2013) puts *JXTY* 30 (*Jinming Chi Wu Qing feng Ai'ai* 金明池吳清逢愛愛) back-to-back with an anecdote featured in the Tang collection *Benshi shi* 本事詩 (Poems from happenings) and with a tale from the aforementioned *Yijian zhi*, showing the reader how the source material was reworked by Feng Menglong.

*Sanyan* excerpts appeared in 2017 in Lavinia Benedetti's volume *Storia del Giallo in Cina* (History of the detective story in China). I concentrate my attention on *GJXS* 10, which is abridged and given a new title, *Il Magistrato Teng smaschera un ingegnoso assassinio* (Magistrate Teng unmasks an ingenious murder); Benedetti chose a more concise and explicative title to replace the verbosity of the original one. She also decided to translate only the part referring to what she calls “the second narrator who replaces momentarily the main one,” in order to showcase, once more, Feng Menglong's extraordinary narrative talent (Benedetti 2017, 212). In fact, the excerpt translated starts from the scene in which

Shanshu 善述, the wronged son of Official Ni 倪, observes a group of people preparing for a sacrifice at Lord Guan Temple, and ends with one of the villagers' accounts of how Magistrate Teng saved his life. The other two excerpts, *JSTY* 20 and *XSHY* 33, have no major abridgement, the style of the original is reported faithfully in translation, and they are presented in rapid succession as further examples of non-linear courtcase (*gong'an* 公安) narratives. Benedetti points out how retribution takes place in spite of incompetent judges and false accusations; in fact, heavenly justice intervenes and sets in motion a chain of coincidences working like pieces in a mosaic.

Both volumes represent a series of studies in which stories are translated in their entirety or in part as objects of research and scholarly commentary, while later on some new attempts to introduce *Sanyan* to the Italian general reader would be made.

In 2018, we can mention the appearance of two volumes. The first one is *Stratagemmi, Intrighi e Messaggi d'Amore* (Stratagems, intrigues, and love messages), in which Catello Criscuolo (2018), lecturer in Italian at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, translates three stories from *GJXS*, and my own *Quattordici Storie per istruire il Mondo* (Fourteen stories to instruct the world) (Leggieri 2018), in which the first fourteen stories of *GJXS* appear retranslated from the original into Italian. In both cases, the main focus is on the stories; the texts present terse introductions and translate the stories in their entirety, reporting all the poems and all the direct speeches of the original.

## 6. Conclusion

As we have just seen, the sheer quantity of Italian publications with at least one *Sanyan* story would, in theory, suffice to silence most questions related to the translatability of the trilogy. Nonetheless, a number of practical remarks can be made about Feng's fortune in Italy.

The first evident point is that the strategies adopted by the translators have been gradually moving from a domesticating approach to a foreignizing one. According to Wang (2015, 77), the translator's level of importance in relation to the original author can be of three kinds: (1) higher, (2) as high as, or (3) lower. Undoubtedly, not only did the translators of the earlier periods have to respect the authority of the original texts, but they were also, and more evidently, subjugated by the

translators of the versions they based their works on. Therefore, their choices were informed by someone else's choices and strategies. Their various omissions and continuous rephrasing were not dictated by a knowledge of the original but by someone else's choice. At the same time, some translators were clearly attaching more authority to themselves than to Feng, judging by the way they reshaped the texts in translation. The more familiar the translators have become with the original, the more able they have been to reproduce the flavor of Feng's writings in Italian, and the less daring they have become in remolding the source materials.

The second question pertains to the model reader that these texts imply. We can easily hypothesize that in a time when even the translators were not familiar with *Sanyan*, they would not expect their readership to be well-versed in Chinese literature as well. The situation has clearly changed nowadays. With a growing number of Italian students deciding to major in Chinese language, *Sanyan* stories, even though not written in perfectly discernible *baihua*, remain mostly understandable and enjoyable reading for the advanced student of Chinese. Therefore, the most recent versions, with their critical introductions and well-researched footnotes, cater more to a niche audience than to the general market.

This brings us to the question of the utility of translating *Sanyan* into Italian in this day and age: Late-Ming literature is far from being considered fashionable reading for the general Italian readership, and the people who are interested and proficient enough would no doubt prefer to read the original stories. Two major publications on Chinese-Italian translation (Pozzi 2022; Pesaro 2023) deal with literary translation, but they do not mention late-imperial narrative texts, mirroring the fact that, from a methodological point of view, these texts are treated as a translational "No man's land." If we then consider that universities and private schools prefer (rightfully so) to concentrate on professional and vocational uses of Chinese and that in most majors there are no more than one or two general exams of literature, in which students cram in everything from Confucius to Mo Yan 莫言, the question about *Sanyan*'s relevance remains open. Nonetheless, the sheer joy and enthusiasm that come with breathing new life to age-old texts is antipodean to the cold reasoning of the market or to the questions of peripherality in late-imperial Chinese literature. In other words, I believe with Camus that "one must imagine the translators happy."

## Notes

- 1 I follow Hanan's (1981, 99) hypothesis on Feng's involvement in *JGQG*. He was, however, most surely involved in compiling other texts, for example, the collection *Shi dian tou* 石點頭 (*The rocks nod their heads*, 1627), which bears one of his pseudonyms, Mohan Zhai 墨憨宅, as a commentator (*ping* 評).
- 2 According to a hypothesis briefly stated in Nienhauser (1986, 380) but later disproved, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, Feng himself might have migrated to Japan.
- 3 Such Japanese scholars as Okada Hakku 岡田白駒 (1692–1767) and Sawada Issai 澤田一齋 (1701–1782) translated stories from *Sanyan* and *Erpai* in different volumes, themselves collectively known as *Shôsetsu Sengen* 小説三言 (Stories from *Three Words*). Tsuga Teisho might have based his stories on these translations. For a more detailed analysis, with more examples of *Sanyan* stories adapted by Japanese writers, see Oki and Otsuka (2013, 73–82).
- 4 I believe Giles's affirmation to be true only if we include the stories translated into Latin.
- 5 For a summarized example of manipulation, see the entry on rewriting in Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014, 147). A less cynical view of manipulation can be found in Sun and Li (2023, 2–3), “[m]anipulation can be driven by the contextualized intention to recreate accessibility, communicate better, and help the target reader respond to a different world and time of experience as a result of translation.” Another more neutral approach to the notion of manipulation is found in Venuti (1995, 286–287), “[i]n order to produce the effect of transparency in a translated text, in order to give the reader the sense that the text is a window onto the author, translators must manipulate what often seems to be a very resistant material, i.e., the language into which they are translating, in most cases the language they learned first, their mother tongue, but now also their own.”
- 6 On De Giura's translations, see Antonelli (2010, 69–88).
- 7 It is a rather widespread practice today as well: Contemporary writer Ma Jian's 馬建 (1953) most recent novel *Zhongguo meng* 中國夢 (China dream, 2018) has been translated into Italian from Flora Drew's English version, and most China-related texts available on the catalog of the Italian publishing house Luni (including the four Ming masterworks *si da qi shu* 四大奇書) have been translated from French.

- 8 For a study on the sources of *Sanyan* and *Erpai*, Tan Zhengbi's 譚正壁 research (1980) is still unsurpassed.
- 9 For a definition of the storyteller's manner (*shuoshuti* 說書體), see Børdahl (2010, 85–86).
- 10 He even points out the overbearingly long titles of the originals in his introduction when he writes that, “[o]ften redundancies and unnecessary words appear in the titles. Thus, the novel on page 35 of this volume (*The Smashed Lute*), bears in the original the title *Yu Boya Smashes the Lute to Bid Farewell to His Musician Friend*” (Bellezza 1992, xi).
- 11 In Yang and Yang's (2000) translation, this story bears the title *Censor Chen Ingeniously Solves the Case of the Gold Hairpins and Brooches*.
- 12 For a case in which the translator operated in an analogous way, see Lin's analysis (2018) of Clement Allen's translation of the *Book of Chinese Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經). Although Allen's translation was undoubtedly faulty and claimed exclusive interpretative authority, he could at least read Chinese!
- 13 Moreover, Lin Yutang's novel *Moment in Beijing* had already appeared in Italian in 1941, followed by translations of other works after the end of the Second World War. Another point on which I can base my argument for Lin's prestige in Italy is his appearance, next to such personalities as Picasso, Cervantes, and Valéry, as a fictional character in Giovanni Papini's novel *Il Libro Nero: Nuovo Diario di Gog* (The black book: Gog's new diary), published in 1951.
- 14 The English translation is from Yang and Yang (2000, 41).
- 15 This supposition is motivated by the fact that both Pocar and Chiusano's translations saw the light under the Italian publishing house Il Saggiatore, which still today mostly publishes foreign literature in Italian translation.
- 16 On this, see Idema (1973). We should specify that Chinese and Western scholars have not always seen eye to eye on the matter of *huaben*. In the exhaustive *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (1986), one can already read that the theory according to which *huaben* were promptbooks is obsolete and therefore incorrect. However, in a later publication such as the equally exhaustive *Song Yuan Ming Qing baibu xiaoshuo yuci da cidian* 宋元明清百部小說語詞大辭典 (Great dictionary of a hundred novels in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, 1992), *huaben*'s first definition is still given as “a promptbook for the storytellers” (*shuoshuren de diben* 說書人的底本).

- 17 Actually, this approach lasted beyond Mao Zedong's death: In his 1979 study "*Feng Menglong he Sanyan* 馮夢龍和三言" (Feng Menglong and Sanyan), Miao Yonghe 繆詠禾 rehearses this already outdated approach. He comments on the female protagonists as victims of the backward (*fengjian* 封建) society as well as of the "human-eating rituality" (*chiren de lijiao* 吃人的禮教): a clear reference to Lu Xun's 魯迅 *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記)! See Miao (1979, 26–32).
- 18 Translated by Yang and Yang (2000, 172). Incidentally, a long note with full-length references accompanies the English version.

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