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Just Pottering Around: Impersonation and Translating The Case of *Harry Potter*

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In the world of children's literature, almost everyone (except perhaps the child reader) is an imposter or impersonator of sorts. Children's authors are obliged to return to a time in their past when they were…children. Or thought they were. Thus translators of children's books (or books for children, or books said to be for children but not really, or books for both children and adults who have never grown up, or books for childlike adults, or—the permutations are seemingly endless here) find themselves involved in an even more complex impersonation act. How does the translator find the space of that original text, where the author was, after all, an "original" impersonator and then proceed to successfully repopulate that same textual space in order to create a translated text world for a reader who is, at least sometimes, a "real" child?

Together with this basic conundrum the translator faces the additional problems posed by certain children's texts, like those in the Harry Potter series, that for one reason or another, become "classics", "must-reads", in many languages, in many cultures. The German fairy tales of the Grimm brothers, the French fairy tales of Perrault, and the English fairy tales of Andrew Lang afford us ample historical evidence of the extremely complex and interconnected relationship of language and culture involved in the translation of such typical "children's" classics. But of course in the case of a present-day Internet-driven reading public, rather than the somewhat slow-paced study of international translation and re-translation of fairy tales, we are experiencing what many have termed a Harry Potter phenomenon in rapid real time. And translation has become swept up in the fray.

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The many interesting "problems" involved in the translation of Harry Potter (proper names, issues of rhymes or anagrams or invented words), analyses of theme or imagery (cultural, religious, political, psychoanalytical) found within the Harry Potter series, or sociological musings relating to trends in children's literature observable in the Harry Potter craze are not the main focus of this piece. Suffice it to say, however, that from the time of the first Harry book published in 1997, many many readers in many countries have either read the books themselves or listened to detailed retellings of Harry's adventures by a child reader of their acquaintance. They may also have spent many dollars, euros, yen, or pesos (and not an inconsequential amount of time standing in line) in order to purchase each succeeding volume as it rolled merrily off the press. And then, too, there have been the films, the tie-in merchandise, the posters—all forming part of a gigantic global consumer system that "sells" not only the ideas and ideologies embedded in children's books but their visual representations as well.

It is clear that the translation of Harry Potter texts is simply one part of this massive Harry Potter phenomenon, but translation participates here in a peculiar variation on the impersonation theme, one that is tied very closely to the economics of the publishing industry and to the difficulties (or benefits, depending on your position) involved in cross-cultural translation. Statistics show that by May of 2008 world-wide sales of Harry Potter books were estimated at over 400 million copies (http://www.news.bbc.co.uk 17 Oct 2008). The books have been translated into more than 60 languages, 67 at last count (http://www.boxofficemojo.com 29 July 2008). Ironically (but probably to the delight of ESL instructors around the world), since the Harry Potter translation process was always contractually delayed by J.K. Rowling and her publishers until after the publication of each English-language version (in order to prevent a rogue translation from pipping the "original"

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text at the post), many readers in non-English countries actually began to order succeeding volumes in English, a bizarre twist that saw *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth title of the series, become the first English-language book ever to top the bestseller list in France (http://www.news.bbc.co.uk 28 July 2008). In Italy Harry Potter aficionados organized "Operation Feather" (reminiscent of Hogwarts' messenger owls) to deluge Salani, the Italian publisher, with demands for an expedited publication of the translation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final volume in the series. In today's Internet culture, the speed of transmission of such a popular cultural iconic text is truly amazing. However, the strategic withholding of the "original" has resulted in both a plethora of "unauthorized" translations and "fake" versions that have appeared in many countries. And this is a space where impersonation truly moves into a new realm.

As is always the case with pirated versions of any text, pirate translations of Harry Potter were hastily done, sometimes by groups of translators in order to speed the process. Sold illegally (if printed at all) or simply posted on the Internet, they are usually riddled with errors and poorly written but they can be found everywhere from China and France to Venezuela, Germany, and Sri Lanka. In France, for example, a 16-year-old translator was arrested for having published a serialized translation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* online (http://www.guardian.co.uk 12 Dec 2008). In Venezuela an illegal translation of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* appeared soon after the English version and five months before the Spanish translation was scheduled for release. This translation was apparently so bad that the translator added messages, including "here comes something that I'm unable to translate, sorry" and "I'm sorry, but I didn't understand what that meant" in some sections (http://www.news.bbc.co.uk 18 Feb 2007). In Iran several unauthorized translations of the Harry Potter books exist concurrently (there may be as many as 16 different Persian

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versions), but since Iran is not a member of the Universal Copyright Convention no one has been prosecuted for publishing foreign books without respecting copyright or paying royalties. Pirated translations are not new, of course, but the convoluted narratives behind some of the Harry Potter pirated translations may be worth examining in detail, if only for the sake of teasing out the impetus behind their availability in such a variety of cultural and linguistic regions.

Yet whereas the translator of a pirated version of Harry Potter is really no more than an unauthorized, even illegal, impersonator, the translator of what we term a "fake translation" has taken on a far more intriguing role since a "fake translation" is published "as if" it were a "real" translation of an original text. Usually made up of stitched together pastiches of characters and actions vaguely resembling what the original seems to contain, the "fake translation" would appear to respond to a slightly different consumer demand. And indeed does not the translator of a "fake" translation become in essence the "author" of a new text, an impersonator of a different kind? Is this a new creation? Or simply another variety of plagiarism?

In the case of fake translations of Harry Potter, there have been multiple examples, the most famous (or perhaps infamous) of which come from China: *Harry Potter and Leopard-Walk-Up-to-Dragon*, which was written and published in China in 2002, prior to the release of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*; *Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll*; *Harry Potter and the Golden Turtle*; and *Harry Potter and the Crystal Vase*, to name just a few. In August 2007 *The New York Times* noted that the publication of Rowling's *Deathly Hallows* had inspired "a surge of peculiarly Chinese imitations" and included plot synopses and excerpts from these derivative works, among them *Harry Potter and the Chinese Overseas Students at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry* and *Harry Potter and the Big Funnel* (French, np). In India as

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well, legal pressure from the licensors of Harry Potter led a publisher there to stop publication of *Harry Potter in Calcutta*, a work in which Harry meets figures from Bengali literature.

It is clear that in the world of children's literature the adult writer/translator has an unequal relationship with the child reader. Moreover, it is also true that in the end it is adults who have decided the very extent and boundaries of childhood and by extension what does or does not form part of the corpus of children's literature. Childhood, since it was first designated as a discrete phase of life, has always been a flexible period adjusted historically to meet what are generally thought of as economic necessities. Childhood is a different concept dependent on both culture and history. In the global market of the early 21st century, concepts of childhood have become to depend increasingly on business involving fashion, games, and toys.

Adults also dictate in many ways what children read, given that they are writers, publishers, and arbiters of children's reading. Jacqueline Rose has argued, using a psychoanalytical approach with Peter Pan as her illustrative case, that

> adult self-interest is at stake in writing for children whether as part of a cathartic revisiting of childhood concerns or because the adult has retained certain childhood qualities. Yet even the adult writers who come closest to understanding the desires of childhood can never fully adopt a child's perspective, and this fundamental adult-child difference frequently expresses itself in the duality of the narrator's mode of address to the child reader. (Rose, 5)

Thus translators must always take into account an adult presence within the text in a number of forms, from the specter of the controlling adult presence looking over the child's shoulder, to a playful irony intended for the adult reading aloud to a child. In the case of cross-cultural "fake" translations, this controlling presence becomes even more relevant.

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Given the fact that in a global literary phenomenon such as Harry Potter, an entire cultural machinery seems to be involved, it would seem an important concern to examine more closely at least one of the Chinese "fake" or "impersonated" translations of Harry Potter.

In her article, "Harry Potter with Chinese Characteristics: Plagiarism between Orientalism and Occidentalism," Lena Henningsen, researcher at the Institute of Chinese Studies at Germany's Heidelberg University, has provided a treasure trove of information about fake Chinese translations of Harry Potter as well as a stimulating and provocative discussion about the contradictory cultural influences at work between western and eastern translations of extraordinarily "popular" literature.

Arguing that although Chinese bogus books are commonly treated as matters of copyright infringement, Henningsen suggests that there are actually sufficient grounds to consider these fakes as pieces of art in themselves (275). As fakes they simultaneously employ two strategies: they use the value of the original (as a commercial tool to increase readership) but at the same time they want to break out of this narrow frame in order to be recognized as a fake, that is an original that only appears as a counterfeit. On this basis, says Henningsen, it is obvious that the particular Harry Potter texts mirror recent trends of popular culture. Using an Orientalism/Occidentalism framework, she then attempts to demonstrate that the different notions of "China" and "the West" embodied textually can be seen as indications for the "Chineseness" of the text: the West becomes nothing but an image to convey a message on the state of affairs in China (275).

In the broadest sense then, Harry Potter fake translations can be viewed as exemplifying many of the processes related to the reception and translation of texts and cultural events in China. In the process of copying a Harry Potter text's "western" format (presumably to

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make some money), many of these translator/authors actually transform the underlying concepts into something new. Although the Chinese "fakes" are set in the context of the authorized books, very early on distinct Chinese elements are introduced, both in terms of content and form. In that way, of course, certain key elements of the "original" series are fundamentally modified. The fake Harry Potter texts very much resemble fan fiction (fan fic), another popular genre for readers in the virtual world of the Internet, in their use of characters from the original work but in a new context or alternative universe, thus creating their own original characters, as well as out-of- character situations, in which Harry or Hermione behave in ways that are completely inconsistent with their original character. Yet unlike fanfics (which, as Henningsen points out, never leave the virtual world of the internet) the Chinese fakes are published as real and claim to be the original.

According to Henningsen, Chinese readers quickly became part of the Harry Potter phenomenon that began after the publication of the first Harry Potter book in Great Britain in 1997. Translations into Chinese were readily available and once the original books were adapted into film, the transposition from text to cinema made Harry Potter even more popular in China since the different medium exposed Harry to even more people. She notes that the Harry Potter films were released at the same time as and in competition with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. As a result of the extreme commercial success of these films, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was translated and published in mainland China in 2002 (following a 2001 translation in Taiwan). In brief, for China the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the Harry Potter series have become linked in terms of their content and form as well as the timing of their appearance in Chinese culture (276).

Harry Potter and Leopard-Walk-Up-to-Dragon was published in China in 2002 and describes how Harry and his schoolmates complete some practical wizard training during the summer

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holidays before their fifth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They are assigned the task of challenging Bao Zoulong Gemao, the elder brother of Voldemort, the most evil of all wizards. However, even before they set off, Gemao casts a bizarre evil spell on Harry, Hermione, Ron, and even Draco Malfoy, all of whom shrink to about half their size. Harry is described as having a rather big stomach and dressed in bright colors. He also goes barefoot because he has tough feet, and there is no mention of the scar on his forehead. To add a further twist to an already extremely confusing situation for readers who have followed the Harry Potter narratives in chronological order, all the characters lose their magic powers, and Harry, Hermione and Ron are no longer friends.

On their journey they are joined by Wormtail, or Peter Pettifrew, who was a classmate of Harry's parents, along with nine dwarves, who are referred to as the treasure hunters. Their meeting is organized by an old and wise but slightly cranky wizard who is not called Dumbledore but rather Gandalf. Of course, by this time any reader familiar with Tolkien's fantasy, *The Hobbit*, soon recognizes that *Leopard-Walk-Up-to-Dragon* is, in fact nothing more than a fake version of Tolkien's text into which a few elements of Harry Potter's world have been inserted. Tolkien's thirteen dwarves are replaced by nine treasure hunters and five adventurers, namely the five characters taken from Harry Potter. The overall storyline, however, is the same as *The Hobbit*. Only the ending differs. Before returning home, Harry must face his enemy Gemao (who has already been severely injured by Bard the dragon). He wins the battle, thus properly avenging his parents' death, and completes his mission successfully.

Henningsen's analysis of the complex interrelationship between Orientalism and Occidentalism in this text is incredibly detailed and clearly argued, thus picking and choosing

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from among the fake Harry Potter translations she chooses as examples is an almost impossible task and does disservice to her work.

However, from the varied readings the Chinese Harry Potter translations offer, it becomes obvious that plagiarism should not here be reduced to the question of simple copyright infringement even though one very reasonable analysis of the Harry Potter phenomenon does focus mainly on economic aspects. According to that analysis, authors and publishers have copied a successful Western formula, added a couple of individual and new elements and have thus attempted to maximize profits through deceiving readers and making them believe that the works are authentic. Yet Henningsen argues that such an analysis or explanation is only partial. The rapid sell-out of the bogus books is also due to the appeal they have for readers as an alternative to the original books. And given that the "fake" appears to be distinctively Chinese seems only to contribute to the overwhelming success of the impersonated translations of the original. Not only can readers relate better to a Harry Potter who roams through China and has to rely on his Chinese friends, the idea of a Harry Potter produced in China itself only increases the attraction. She compares this to the fact that some years ago the slogan "The Chinese Coke" proved to be a great selling point for a Chinese beverage manufacturer, Wahaha. In selling their product, both Wahaha and the various author/translators of the counterfeit Harry Potter books play on different notions of the relationship between China and the West: the respective product has to appear as distinctly Chinese, but at the same time it needs to have a close association with a Western brand (298).

One way of interpreting the Harry Potter phenomenon in China would be to see it as simply symbolic of Western imperialistic cultural practices (and this would be a fairly traditional interpretation). Harry Potter would simply be another Western product (like

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Coca Cola or McDonalds') from a culture that seeks only to globally dominate consumer societies. In this interpretation, China has no other role than to consume the western product by buying and reading a Harry Potter novel. Henningsen argues, however, that the fake translations represent another twist within Orientalist discourse. By attempting to imitate a Western format, author/translators in a way accept and thus support Western dominance and in that light could be considered even more imperialist than the original cultural imperialists from the West. Their practices could be termed self-Orientalist (298). Yet they are not simply "copying" a Western format in its entirety.

Henningsen proposes instead that we consider *Harry Potter and Leopard-Walk-Up-to-Dragon* in view of what she calls Western anti-Occidentalism. What she argues is that images of the Occident are being manipulated in this text so as to serve as a negative example for the Chinese audience. This is reinforced by giving the text a (counterfeited) Western authorship and thus allowing the assumption that it is an indigenous Western cultural product. In the case of *Leopard-Walk-Up-to-Dragon* even if average Chinese readers might not be aware of *The Hobbit* as an intertext they might still consider the book as a product of the West. Thus a Chinese reader can read it as a Western book offering a rather negative vision of the West: black magic, evil forces, lurking dangers, the lack of friendship, and seemingly unending struggle and conflict. At the same time some aspects of content and form (certain songs or the dwarf who yearns for food from KFC) indirectly render the text more Chinese than the reader will consciously be aware of. In Henningsen's terms, we "are thus facing a (pseudo) Western anti-Occidentalism text with Chinese characteristics" (299).

According to Henningsen, "these fake texts give the reader both different interpretations of Harry Potter and different visions of the world: Western dominance versus Chinese moral and strategic superiority and the West as source of evil or as a location for imagination

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and as the Other" (299). These readings offer a better understanding not only of the Harry Potter phenomenon but also of the Chinese reality and its perception by both Chinese readers and authors.

In summary then, the translator as an impersonator is but one role among many played by anyone assuming the task of translation. In the world of children's literature, that role becomes even more difficult to describe or analyze when we consider not only the linguistic challenges faced when moving across language frontiers but the cultural and political impersonations that the translator, especially the "translator/impersonator" of a "fake" translation, assumes (even if subconsciously) in terms of the transmission of both cultural and political ideology.

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