7. A Scots Quair in Chinese Translation

By John Corbett & Li Li

Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* is, as its title asserts, a book rooted in Scotland, both in content and style. The task of translating this trilogy of novels into other languages is, therefore, daunting; the translator must mediate not only the cultural specificities of Scottish rural life in the period before and after the First World War, but also, in theory at least, find an equivalent to the 'speak of the Mearns', the stylised Scots narrative voice that makes the novels so distinctive. Indeed, the translation of much of Scottish literature, older and contemporary, must address the fact of its engagement with the historical and social varieties of Scots and Gaelic. This linguistic richness intensifies the challenges faced by translators of Scottish poetry, fiction and drama, no matter the period concerned. In this article, we address some of the issues faced by Chinese translators in the modern Scots revival of the first half of the twentieth-century, and on *A Scots Quair* in particular.

In 2022, Professor Li Li of Macau Polytechnic University (MPU) initiated a project on 'Modernist Scottish Literature in Chinese Translation', alongside several of her colleagues at MPU, including Drs Liu Aihua, Zhu Ying and Kong Hao. She also recruited Professor John Corbett of BNU-HKBU United International College, in the neighbouring city of Zhuhai, to act as a consultant. The team has been working, with others in China and Europe, on a number of articles, and a forthcoming book in Brill's SCROLL series, which consider examples of literary exchange between China and Scotland, in both directions. The core of this volume will be chapters on twentieth-century figures such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Eric Linklater and Nan Shepherd. The chapter exploring the translation into Chinese of Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* published in China in 1993 is, perhaps, amongst the most intriguing.

It is only in the last half century that there has been evidence of a sense in Chinese academia of a Scottish tradition in literary history that is worth attending to in its own right. Admittedly, there has been interest among Chinese scholars

and translators in canonical figures such as Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson since the early twentieth century. Poems and songs by Burns, for example, have been translated by successive generations of Chinese translators. However, the study of Scottish writers was subsumed into British Literature, a category still dominating Chinese university curricula today. An explicit acknowledgement in China of a distinctively Scottish literary tradition really only began with the death of Hugh MacDiarmid in 1979. Following MacDiarmid's death, alongside an obituary, the eminent translator and scholar Wang Zuoliang published an appreciation of MacDiarmid in Chinese, to accompany his translations of a selection of his work, including some of the Scots lyrics (Li and Liu, 2022). A version of this appreciation was translated into English and published in *Studies in Scottish Literature* in 1984. Wang Zuoliang was the predominant Chinese scholar of Scottish literature in the later twentieth century; he followed his essay on MacDiarmid with anthologies of Scottish poetry in translation, and a number of critical essays on Scottish literature in general, which circulated in Chinese literary journals and anthologies. Wang's pioneering work has impacted deeply on the wider understanding in China of the literatures of Scotland.

The ambitious project to translate *A Scots Quair* into Chinese began some five years after Wang's appreciation and translations of MacDiarmid appeared in China, and it can be seen in the context of Wang's assertion that the literatures of Scotland should be considered in their own right. In 1984, another literary scholar and translator, Cao Yong, asked his friend, Li Fu'an, a mathematician who was a visiting scholar in the USA, to bring him back a copy of Grassic Gibbon's trilogy of novels. Li did so, and Cao enlisted his son, Sun Yu, and a fellow scholar at Shanghai University, Hu Ruisheng, in the task of translating the three books – Cao would take *Sunset Song*, Sun would work on *Cloud Howe* and Hu would translate *Grey Granite.* The book was published in 1993. Despite the allocation of translating responsibilities, a postscript by Sun informs the readers that his father died unexpectedly before completing his part, and that most of the task of completing and editing the translation ultimately fell to him.

In his postscript, Sun also describes the arduous process of co-translating and then proofing such a long text as 'thankless'. Even so, he continues (our translation):

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> *myself, I gradually understood the painstaking efforts of my father, which are indicative of the noble qualities of the older generation of translators. Their only concern was to accord foreign literature a high status. The work was introduced to our country, and my father wanted to translate this book to fill in a blank in the translation of representative works of Scottish literature, because A Scots Quair represents Scottish literature in the 1930s, and has been republished until recently.*

The Chinese *Quair,* then, joins other translated versions of Grassic Gibbon's trilogy, which has been rendered into languages such as German (twice) and French. In an earlier issue of *The Bottle Imp*, Regina Erich relates the circumstances surrounding the East German version of the *Quair*, translated in the 1960s, and its retranslation later, after post-German unification. Élizabeth Lavault-Olléon discusses her own translation of the trilogy into French, published in 1997, focusing on how Hans Vermeer's *skopos* theory informs her translation of the Scots elements of the text. Like these translations, the Chinese version lends itself to a consideration of how Grassic Gibbon's politics – his nationalism and communism – were mediated for international audiences, and how the Scots of the *Quair* might be rendered in other languages. At the time of writing, Zhu Ying and Liu Aihua are working on their study of *A Scots Quair*; pending the publication of their chapter, we note only a few brief points here.

As Sun observes in his postscript to the translation, *A Scots Quair*, was an attractive novel to translate in China in the 1980s for different reasons: its popularity had endured for over half a century, and it was critically acclaimed. In addition, Wang Zuoliang had drawn scholarly attention to the modern Scots revival, and self-proclaimed socialist writers such as MacDiarmid and Grassic Gibbon were, superficially at least, politically acceptable in late twentieth-century China. But perhaps most pertinently, the trilogy charts, through the personal narrative of Chris Guthrie, an arc from rural to urban life, which many individuals in Chinese society were also experiencing in the late 1990s to early 2000s (cf. Qi). As Hanne Tange puts it:

> *In the narratives Sunset Song (1932), Cloud Howe (1933) and Grey Granite (1934), Gibbon evoked the history of Scottish modernization through the village of Kinraddie, the small town Segget, and the city of Duncairn. The three communities were rooted in Gibbon's home region of the Mearns, but the*

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The universality of this experience is affirmed by a recent article in a Chinese journal by Hu Jiyun, an associate professor at Shanghai University of International Business and Economics. Hu focuses on Grassic Gibbon's changing concept of history in the *Quair,* and argues that the trilogy 'presents a compelling reference and inspiration for the rest of the world' (1).

Despite the ideological compatibility between Chinese official ideology and communist writers of the Modern Scottish Revival, it was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976, that conditions in China again became amenable to the translation of western works like *A Scots Quair*. Even then, the continuing history of restrictions and censorship in China meant that some of the themes in the trilogy continued to be sensitive topics. For example, the translators started working on the text in 1984; Sun observes in his postscript that, at this time, the sexual frankness of the novels was a topic of concern to the translators, and it will be interesting to see how they mediated this aspect of the novels. It might also be noted that this concern is less evident forty years later, with translations of works like Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* readily available in China.

Cao, Sun and Hu translated *A Scots Quair* into standard Mandarin Chinese. The option of rendering the 'speak of the Mearns' into the national standard language has been followed by the French and the first of the two German translations (the second German version opted for Low German as an equivalent to Scots). To give a flavour of the Chinese version, a famous passage from *Sunset Song,* the first novel in the trilogy, is given here, with its Chinese equivalent and a back-translation into English from the Chinese.

[…] you wanted the words they'd known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true–for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all.

你希望能听到他们所知道并且用过的词语，就是在他们早已消失的年轻时 代里忘却

> *了的词语，一些能够打动你的心的苏格兰词语，苏格兰人是怎样得到并且保持这些词语的，他们天天辛勤劳动，斗争不息。可是，过了一会，时过境迁，你又是英国人了，又重新把英国的词语说得那么清晰，简洁，逼真。一会儿工夫，又一会儿工夫，那些词语又那么自然而然地打你的嗓子眼里滑脱了，因为你知道，那些词语根本就无法说出值得一说的东西来。*

> *[…] you wish you could hear the words they knew and used, the words they had forgotten in their long-gone youth, the Scottish words that touch your heart, how the Scots got and kept those words, how they worked and struggled every day. But then, after a while, you're English again, and you can say English words again with such clarity, simplicity, and realism, and then, after a while, those words slip out of your throat so naturally, because you know that there is nothing worth saying about them.*

The MPU team has not yet explored the style of the translated text in close detail, but early impressions are that the Chinese translation is relatively prosaic in its narrative: it is possible that Sun conveys the lyricism of the original style more effectively than his father, Cao, or his colleague, Hu, but firmer conclusions await a closer and more systematic examination of the language of the source and target texts.

What we hope, collectively, to do, over time, is to place the translation of *A Scots Quair* in the fast-changing context of a reappraisal in China of the distinctiveness of the literatures of Scotland. The awareness of Scottish literature in China remains patchy, and there are even still occasional misapprehensions about (for example) the difference between Scots and Gaelic. But, certainly, the past forty years have seen a growing awareness of Scottish literature in China and a number of translations of Scottish writers including John Galt, Nan Shepherd, Irvine Welsh, Claire McFall and Graeme Macrae Burnet. The translation of work that is not in standard English raises a number of challenges for Chinese translators. One of our more general aspirations is that the projects we are currently working on will lay the foundations for a better understanding of the linguistic and cultural challenges of translating from Scots into Chinese, and to identify digital and human resources that can support literary translators. For example, it should not be impossible to develop educational packs giving translators guidance on how to use online resources such as the *Dictionaries of*

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(c) The Bottle Imp