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Readers' Reception of Chinese Crime Fiction: A Case Study of *The Borrowed*

Recepción de los lectores de la ficción criminal china: un estudio de caso de The Borrowed

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ABSTRACT: Chinese crime fiction is gaining attention in English translation, with *The Borrowed* by Chan Ho-Kei as a prime example. Despite extensive research on Chinese literature and its English translations, there has been little focus on its reception by English-speaking readership. My study explores the reception of *The Borrowed* among English-speaking readers through qualitative thematic analysis, using NVivo to analyse 246 book reviews from Goodreads and Amazon. The analysis reveals key themes such as genre, content, difficulty in reading, access to Hong Kong culture, translation, anticipation, format, and paratext. The findings suggest that while readers appreciate the novel's content and cultural insights, they also encounter challenges related to translation and cultural unfamiliarity. The paratextual support such as author notes and character lists are important in enhancing the accessibility and enjoyment of translated Chinese fiction.

KEYWORDS: Chinese crime fiction; English translation; Hong Kong culture; book reviews; readers' reception; thematic analysis.

RESUMEN: La novela policíaca china está ganando atención en la traducción al inglés, con *The Borrowed* de Chan Ho-Kei como un ejemplo destacado. Aunque hay mucha investigación sobre la literatura china y sus traducciones, se ha prestado poca atención a su recepción entre los lectores angloparlantes. Mi estudio analiza la recepción de *The Borrowed* a través de un análisis temático cualitativo de 246 reseñas de Goodreads y Amazon, utilizando NVivo. El análisis revela temas clave como género, contenido, dificultad de lectura, acceso a la cultura de Hong Kong, traducción, anticipación, formato y paratexto. Los resultados sugieren que, si bien los lectores aprecian el contenido y la percepción cultural de la novela, también enfrentan desafíos relacionados con la traducción y la falta de familiaridad cultural. El apoyo paratextual, como notas del autor

y listas de personajes, es crucial para mejorar la accesibilidad y el disfrute de la ficción china traducida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: novela policíaca china; traducción al inglés; cultura de Hong Kong; reseñas de libros; recepción de los lectores; análisis temático.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese crime fiction, though less prominent than Western crime fiction, is gaining interest among English-speaking readers. *The Borrowed* (Chinese original: 13·67) by Chan Ho-Kei, published in traditional Chinese by Crown Publishing Company in 2014, offers a compelling narrative that spans five decades of Hong Kong's history through six interconnected crimes. This novel has received considerable acclaim, winning awards such as the Taipei International Book Exhibition in 2015 and being nominated for Japan's Honya Taisho Booksellers' Award. It has also been translated into multiple languages such as German, Dutch, and Vietnamese. The English translations, by Jeremy Tiang, were published by Head of Zeus (2017 paperback and 2016 hardcover) and by Black Cat (2017 paperback).

Despite the growing interest, there is a gap in research concerning its reception among English readers. This study aims to fill that gap by analysing 246 reviews from Goodreads and Amazon, focusing on nine themes: general impression, genre, content, cultural access, difficulty in reading, translation, anticipation, format, and paratext. By examining these themes, I aim to understand the factors influencing reader reception, offering a comprehensive view of how this genre is appreciated and critiqued in the Anglophone world.

This article is part of my doctoral research, complementing a previously published study on *The Golden Hairpin*. For a detailed literature review, please refer to Li and O'Sullivan's work in 2023. Compared to the previous analysis, this article uncovers new themes such as the impact of paratext, cultural distance, and stereotypes on the reading experience.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. *Selecting the platforms*

Social networking sites and book websites like Goodreads and Amazon are crucial for readers, providing platforms for ratings, reviews, and recommendations. Goodreads, with 150 million members (as of September 2023) attract more passionate readers due to its focus on books and reading communities, while Amazon reviews can be influenced by factors such as purchasing experiences. Both platforms allow users to perform their identities as reviewers publicly, with reviews mostly written by ordinary readers (Stinson and Driscoll 2020, 2). This provides valuable insights into everyday reading experiences that are otherwise hard to access (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 250).

Zheng and Fan (2023) excluded Amazon from their study to avoid issues related to book delivery and quality, focusing solely on reader opinions of the content. However, my study includes Amazon to consider both reader reception and the overall market appeal of Chinese crime fiction.

2.2. *Compiling the corpus*

A total of 304 reviews were collected up to 31 December 2023. After excluding 51 reviews of non-English versions and removing seven duplicate reviews (identical or very similar reviews posted on both Goodreads and Amazon, Goodreads version retained), the final corpus consisted of 227 reviews from Goodreads and nineteen reviews from Amazon. The reviews were converted into a text format compatible with NVivo, stored in Excel, and imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis.

2.3. *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis is the core of my study, providing a systematic approach to exploring qualitative data. Following the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) and using NVivo 12 Pro software, I conducted a three-step analysis: initial coding, category formation, and theme generation. The reviews were coded inductively and grouped into nine themes that reflected readers' understanding of and engagement with *The Borrowed*:

- a. General impression of the book;
- b. Mentions of genre;
- c. Content, including plot, characters and writing;
- d. Difficulty in reading;
- e. Access to Chinese culture;
- f. Translation;
- g. Anticipation;
- h. Formats (e-book, audiobook, etc.);
- i. Paratext.

A second and a third level of coding were applied where necessary. Some themes were considered less relevant or combined with others, thus they are not addressed in this article.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines themes individually related to the book's reception by English-speaking readers. While these reviews were publicly available online, reviewers' usernames will not be disclosed to protect their privacy.

3.1. *General impression of the book*

The Borrowed has a rating of 4.37 out of 5 on Goodreads from 3,838 ratings, and 4.3 out of 5 on Amazon from 197 ratings as of 13 June 2024. Goodreads, a specialised platform for book reviews, has a significantly higher number of ratings than Amazon. The breakdown of star ratings is as follows (Table 1):

Star ratings	No. of ratings (Goodreads)	% (Goodreads)	No. of ratings (Amazon)	% (Amazon)
5 stars	2,061	53.7 %	104	53 %
4 stars	1,264	32.9 %	60	30 %
3 stars	413	10.8 %	25	13 %
2 stars	77	2 %	5	2 %
1 star	23	0.6 %	3	2 %
Total	3,838		197	
Average	4.37 out of 5		4.3 out of 5	

Table 1. Ratings for The Borrowed on Goodreads and Amazon

Both platforms exhibit a similar distribution of ratings, predominantly 4 or 5 stars, indicating widespread recognition from readers. The close percentages for 5-star ratings (53.7 % on Goodreads and 53 % on Amazon) suggest a high level of reader satisfaction. The average ratings are also notably high, reinforcing positive reader feedback. 113 positive reviews praised the engaging plot (Ex. 1 «Enjoyed reading this book which contains various related detective stories in Hong Kong that take place over a span of many years. Well done, well written, engaging»). Sixteen reviewers had a negative impression (Ex. 2 «Clunky, stilted prose makes painfully unpleasant reading»; Ex. 3 «Couldn't finish it, 70 pages in and nothing has happened»). Thirty-six reviewers gave mixed reviews (Ex. 4 «The mysteries are not of great interest, but the panoramic portrait of Hong Kong is compelling»).

3.2. *Mentions of genre*

The Borrowed is categorised under «Crime, Thriller & Mystery Adventures» on Amazon and described on Goodreads as a «propulsive crime drama featuring a legendary Hong Kong detective on a decades-long quest to expose the city's dark underbelly». Keywords such as «detective», «murder», «thriller», and «crime fiction» prominently feature in the cover blurbs to emphasise the novel's genre. Some reviewers appreciated its blend of genres, noting it as a «social novel» that intertwines crime fiction and with a broader examination of Hong Kong's social and historical context.

Readers often contextualized *The Borrowed* by comparing it to established works. It drew comparisons to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (eight reviews) and Agatha Christie's works (three reviews). Comparisons extended beyond the crime genre, situating the novel within broader literary traditions. Readers likened it to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* for its structure and thematic depth. One reader connected its police procedural elements to themes of deceit and justice in the classic Chinese literature *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Readers also drew parallels to TV dramas and films, comparing it to TVB dramas like *Forensic Heroes* (2006), which suggested familiarity with investigative and procedural elements in a Hong Kong setting. References to *Sherlock* (2010-2017) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-2021) indicated varied reader expectations regarding the balance between realism and entertainment. While some readers enjoyed the light-hearted tone of comedic police procedurals in media, they preferred Poirot-esque deduction in literature.

3.3. *Mentions of content*

160 readers frequently discussed characters, plot and writing style, with each subtheme coded as positive, negative, neutral, or mixed based on their responses.

Forty-eight reviewers specifically mentioned the plot: twenty-seven (56.3 %) were positive, fourteen (29.2 %) were neutral, six (12.5 %) were negative, and one (2 %) was mixed. The plot was praised as «twisted» and «thrilling» yet criticised for being «slow and boring» and «pedestrian».

Fifty-two reviews focused on characters. Reviewers appreciated well-developed characters with multifaceted personalities such as Detective Kwan, whose deductive skills added complexity to the stories. However, some characters were criticised as flat or clichéd (Ex. 5 «[The characters] are old fashioned in the sense that they are ALWAYS right and ALWAYS successful—the way Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie and Edgar Allan Poe were written just to name a few»).

Many readers appreciated the writing style and reverse chronological narrative structure, describing it as «unique», «compelling», and «masterful». Comparison to *Cloud Atlas* highlighted its effective technique of interconnected stories spanning different time periods.

3.4. *Access to Hong Kong culture*

111 reviewers (about 45 %) mentioned their access to Hong Kong culture through the book. Readers expressed a strong connection to the detailed portrayal of life in Hong Kong, with many identifying landmarks and cultural references that echo their personal experiences of the city (Ex. 6 «The book draws you into the world of Hong Kong, showcasing different locations, culture, and history»; Ex. 7 «This is not a book SET in Hong Kong. This IS Hong Kong»). Many appreciated how the book interweaved significant historical events, such as the British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, into its narrative.

The depiction of Chinese culture and history can be both fascinating and challenging for readers, depending on their familiarity with Chinese culture, language, and societal norms. While some readers embraced the cultural immersion, others struggled with the unfamiliarity, noting a «veritable deluge of Chinese names and places». Despite these challenges, some reviewers found these linguistic or cultural differences enhanced the exotic allure of the story, particularly the exotic urban landscapes and societal structures of Hong Kong, distinct from Western settings.

Perceptions of Chinese culture varied among readers, influenced by their cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge of China. Some found the books resonate with their perception of Chinese society, while others gained new insights. For example, one reader reflected on various aspects of Chinese society, including politics, economics, family dynamics, and societal norms, drawing parallels between historical events from the 1960s and contemporary political issues. The comparison indicates the enduring impact of political struggles on Hong Kong's identity and encourages reflection upon the region's complex socio-political landscape:

We're seeing a recurrence of the events in the 60s—albeit with different players, executing different moves. Back then they had «white skinned pigs» and today we have the LEGCO exclusive «people's republic of Chee-na». It's a tragedy that Hong Kong, with all its allure and economic development, will likely never shake off its bestowed status as a pawn in political warfare.

3.5. *Difficulty in reading*

Chinese crime fiction faces challenges in gaining attention in the Anglophone market, possibly due to factors that make these books less accessible to readers (Li and O'Sullivan 2023, 12). Readers often struggled with unfamiliar names and cultural references in translations.

Eleven reviewers highlighted difficulties with many characters and unfamiliar names, particularly in works set in Chinese contexts. The absence of a character list exacerbated this issue, with reviewers noting challenges in distinguishing between characters with similar-sounding names such as «Zou, Zhou, Zeng, and Zheng». One reviewer admitted, «I had to focus real hard to differentiate between the names of the characters as they were all long and sounded the same». Similar issues are observed in translated literature such Italian names in Camilleri's works (D'Egidio 2015, 80).

Readers often had a dual reading experience—finding fascination in the rich cultural context of Hong Kong but also experiencing frustration due to comprehension difficulties. This aligns with the observation that unfamiliarity with the culture of a source-language nation can produce varying degrees of (positive or negative) culture shock (Li and O'Sullivan 2023, 13). The novel's setting in Hong Kong provided readers with exotic and cross-cultural experiences but may also trigger culture shock and reading difficulties, especially for those unfamiliar with the source culture.

3.6. *Translation*

Twenty-nine reviews on translation were coded as positively affirmative, critical, or implicitly critical.

Fifteen readers praised the translation, with almost half specifically acknowledging the translator's contributions. Remarks such as «spot on» and «excellently translated from the original Chinese» highlighted Jeremy Tiang's translation in capturing cultural nuances effectively.

However, critiques were almost equally prevalent, with fourteen comments explicitly or implicitly critical. Reviewers noted challenges in balancing literal accuracy with readability, and in conveying the original text's nuances. Some described the translation as «slow moving» and criticised its «strange phrasing». Some critiques suggested the translation might have sterilised certain plots and failed to fully convey the rich cultural context of Hong Kong.

While acknowledging issues like «awkward phrases» or «grammar mistakes», readers debated whether these stemmed from the translation or the original text. (Ex. 8 «When you're holding a translated book and the prose is as stilted and clunky as it is here, you never know whether to blame the original author or the translator»).

3.7. *Anticipation*

Anticipation motivates readers to seek more literature, whether exploring more works by the author or adaptations into other media formats. Thirty-six readers mentioned anticipation as a factor in their reading experiences.

Twenty-six reviewers eagerly awaited more books by Chan Ho-Kei, praising his clever plotting and engaging storytelling (Ex. 9 «Chan's clever plotting drew me in and I look forward to reading more by him»; Ex. 10 «I found it to be a super satisfying mystery and demand more of Ho-Kei's work be translated, please!») Some readers, typically not fans of mysteries, were drawn to explore more of his works. Readers familiar with Chan's other crime novel, *Second Sister*, expressed heightened eagerness to explore more of his writing, indicating Chan's ability to sustain a dedicated and expanding fanbase across multiple titles.

Seven reviewers anticipated the film adaptation, despite mixed expectations about its faithfulness to the original (Ex. 11 «Film rights have been bought by Wong Kar-wai, and hopefully we'll see something to hit the pictures that does this justice. Even with Wong Kar-wai's talents, I'm personally not optimistic»). Adaptations for theatre, cinema, TV, or videogames often contribute to the success of literary texts (Pesaro 2022, 4). Crime series frequently gain larger viewership compared to other genres, driven by the economic appeal of adapting detective fiction, which enjoys a broad readership. Successful adaptations of works by Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie in the UK underscore the commercial viability of this genre (McCaw 2011, 2-3).

Three readers expressed attachment to the protagonist Detective Kwan Chung-dok, hoping for more stories featuring him. Compelling characters like Kwan often sustained interest in crime fiction series and other works by the same author.

3.8. *Format*

Sixteen readers discussed various formats in which they accessed the book, particularly audiobooks and Advance Reader Copies (ARCs).

ARCs are pre-publication versions of forthcoming books. Eight readers expressed gratitude to platforms and publishers for providing ARCs (Ex. 12 «I would like to thank NetGalley and Heads of Zeus for a review copy of *The Borrowed*»). NetGalley stood out

as the most prominent platform facilitating early access to books, which «reflects a growing emphasis on digital review copies as a means of promoting literary works and generating early feedback» (Li and O'Sullivan 2023, 16).

Audiobooks have surged in popularity as a convenient alternative to print or e-books. Reviews for the audiobook varied: some praised the narrator P.J. Ochlan for skilfully portraying characters with diverse voices and accents, while others critiqued confusing pronunciations of names and Cantonese words. Two reviewers even raised concerns over potentially offensive accents for characters, suggesting a cultural sensitivity issue.

3.9. *Paratext*

Twenty-four reviews mentioned paratextual elements such as the title, blurb and afterword (Genette 1987, 1997; Hermans 1996; Kovala 1996; Kathryn 2018, 12).

The title *The Borrowed*, derived from the original Chinese title 13·67, sparked discussion on its symbolic meaning and cultural translation. Nord (2019, 328) emphasises the importance of translated titles fulfilling their functions in the target culture. Some readers find it divergent from the original thematic depth, which indicates the challenges in cultural adaptation (Viezzi 2011, 183).

The blurb sets expectations for the novel. Four readers shared their feedback to the blurb, which promised «six interlocking stories, one spellbinding novel» (Head of Zeus, paperback, 2016). However, some felt it oversold certain aspects, potentially leading to reader disappointment.

Fifteen reviews emphasised the significance of Chan Ho-Kei's afterword. It provided context and insights into the author's creative process and narrative choices, blending classic detective fiction with social realism to explore Hong Kong's societal evolution over five decades. Readers appreciated the afterword for its depth and emotional impact and highlighted its role in shaping their perception of the novel's themes and narrative choices.

4. CONCLUSION

While acknowledging potential limitations, such as concerns about the authenticity and objectivity of online reviews, these reviews offer genuine insights into how ordinary readers perceive Chinese crime fiction in English translation. Readers appreciated the twisted plot, well-developed characters, and cultural insights into Hong Kong. However, difficulties with unfamiliar names and cultural references hindered accessibility in translated crime fiction. Incorporating character lists, glossaries, or author notes can significantly improve readability and engagement. Recognising and addressing these issues common in translated literature can help in developing broader strategies to support readers.

Moreover, readers increasingly diversify their format choices such as audiobooks, where narration quality affects character portrayal and cultural sensitivity. Platforms like

NetGalley use ARCs as effective marketing tools to enhance reader satisfaction and book visibility.

Future research could explore reader demographics and sentiment analysis to uncover more patterns in reader responses. Exploring transmedia adaptations of contemporary Chinese crime fiction for the screen is also a worthwhile endeavour.

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