

Re: John F. Franz's Translation of *The Debt Collector* by Wang Shou (Penguin Special, 2020)

Below is a paragraph from the source text, followed by Franz's translation of it and my translation, in that order. Underlined sections are where I differ substantively from Franz. In three of the four cases, the disagreement is not merely literal, but grounded in contextual and cultural rationales. For these cases, I number each of them and explain why Franz's translation misleads.

Source Text: 热州有一句很有特色的话——“棺材都抬到三脚门外了”，意思是说，事情都可以落结了。过去给死人送葬，三脚门外是一个界线，到了那里，亲人磕头，送者止步，棺材也要送往坟地了。也就是说，这三脚门外是个城市的边缘，是个荒凉之地，民警就是在这里被人瞄上的。

Franz: There is a saying in Rezhou, 'The coffins are only carried until Sanjiaomenwai (1)'. This meant anytime anyone found themselves in Sanjiaomenwai, things could always easily go south. Funeral processions in the past would always stop at the border of Sanjiaomenwai. When the procession reached this point, the deceased's family would all stop and kowtow to the coffin, then send it on to the graveyard on its own (2). In other words, Sanjiaomenwai was a slum at the edge of the city (3), a desolate place, and it was the place where that policeman was targeted.

Me: There is a saying in Rezhou, 'The coffins are already carried beyond Sanjiaomen (1)', meaning that something is as good as a done deal. In the past, Sanjiaomen was a terminus for funeral processions. Once a procession reached this point, the distant relatives and other attendees would kowtow to the coffin and bid farewell, leaving the family alone to carry it into the graveyard (2). In other words, beyond Sanjiaomen lie the outskirts (3). It's a desolate place, and it was here that the policeman was targeted.

- (1) Franz treats *Sanjiaomenwai* as a location noun. But more likely this is a locative phrase and ought to be read as *Sanjiaomen-wai*, where *wai* (外) means 'beyond, outside'. I base my interpretation partly on context, partly on the fact that Rezhou clearly references the author's hometown Wenzhou, where Sanjiaomen (三脚门) is a real landmark. It is an ancient city gate that funeral processions really did use to pass through. This is not to say that *Sanjiaomenwai* cannot be treated as a descriptive name. It can—in the same way New Yorkers would speak of 'above 96th street'. But teasing the locale and the preposition apart in translation brings more specificity and visual clarity. Moreover, regardless how we translate *Sanjiaomenwai*, Franz's rendition of the construction 都...了 as 'only...until' is simply incorrect.
- (2) In Chinese funeral rituals—at least in this part of the country—a funeral procession pauses once it has marched outside the city or village. Here relatives and friends bid farewell and only the closest family members proceed to the burial. A proper burial is *never* unattended; but Franz's translation, especially with the added 'on its own', unfortunately suggests the impossible. Wang's text is minimalist, and it can be tempting

to read 亲人 as referring to all relatives. But given the traditions, it is clear that we ought to read 亲人 as distant relatives, excluding the family itself. Note: there *is* another possibility, where 亲人 refers to the family, and the kowtowing is done by the family to attendees as a display of gratitude. This is a tradition called 谢孝 or 孝子头. But this interpretation is fairly implausible for reasons I won't get into here.

- (3) I object to Franz's insertion of 'slum'. It is not in the original text and adds the wrong connotation. Slums describe areas inhabited by the lowest rung on the social ladder. But shortly before this section, we learn that the policeman also lived outside Sanjiaomen. A policeman *can* live in the slum, but that would be odd, and the oddity is produced solely by the translation. Sticking to the literal 'outskirts' avoids this difficulty. As a side note, the sentence that introduces the policeman also contains a mistranslation. See the comparison below:

Source Text: 民警在黎明派出所上班，家住三脚门外的北庄。

Franz: That policeman was working at the Liming Police Station, but he lived in Sanjiaomenwai, a village to the north.

Mine: The policeman was working at the Liming Police Station, but he lived in North Village outside Sanjiaomen.

It is worth pointing out that this is not where 'slum' is first introduced in the translation. Right before the passage I cited, Wang compares the area to 软肋, lit. rib cartilage. It is a Chinese allusion effectively carrying the same meaning as 'Achilles' heel'. To describe the outskirts this way means, quite simply, that it's a rough neighborhood in an otherwise same place. But Franz's delivery of the allusion takes it a bit too far. See below:

Source Text: …这个地方也是一个“软肋”

Franz: the place...was considered to be Rezhou's 'dark-underbelly', its slums

Mine: the place...was considered the Achilles' heel of Rezhou

This note is a supplement to my book review, for the Review Network at the Leeds Center for New Chinese Writing.

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