

Constructing the Literary Translator as a Brand:

A Methodological Consideration

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Abstract

Recent attention to the human aspects of translation and translators (e.g., Pym 2009; Kaindl, Kolb and Schlager 2021) has resulted in a possible “human turn” (Bergantino 2022, 7) in Translation Studies, which brings new questions and avenues for researchers in Translator Studies. Against this backdrop, this article first constructs the concept of ‘the translator’s brand’ for investigating the evolution of literary translators into prominent status. It then outlines a three-level framework of brand-building to analyse such personal development of individual literary translators. Combining the transferrable points from the brand-related literature with the Bourdieusian sociology of cultural production, it argues that the formation of a literary translator’s brand can be analysed from intra-field (brand input), inter-field (brand investment) and inter-cultural (brand reception) levels. Finally, the application of this methodological framework is demonstrated in a case study of a prominent Chinese-English literary translator in science fiction, Ken Liu, in the 21st century.

Keywords: Bourdieusian sociology, brand input, brand investment, brand reception, Ken Liu, literary translator, the translator’s brand

1. Introduction

As an essential agent in the translation process, translators have attracted burgeoning research interest in Translation Studies (TS) in recent decades. Scholars have attempted to conceptualise a subfield focussing on “Translator-Centredness” (Hu 2004), or sketch the scope and branches of “Translator Studies” (Chesterman 2009). An abundance of research has taken literary translators as an object of study, ranging from product-oriented perspectives (e.g., literary translator’s style, see Huang 2015) to process-oriented perspectives (e.g., the translator’s decision-making, see Borg 2022). In addition, researchers have approached the human dimension of literary translators, viewing them as “people with flesh-and-blood bodies” (Pym 2014, 161). This has resulted in the development of what has been called “literary translator studies” (Kaindl, Kolb and Schlager 2021), which theorises the translatorial subject and focuses on the person of the translator (e.g., their biographies, histories, identities, etc.), rather than the text they have produced.

One human aspect of the translator’s presence is their status. Discourses on the translatorial status primarily highlight that translators are in a secondary and inferior status in terms of creativity, payment and authorship. Despite their great efforts in cross-cultural communication, they are too often underappreciated. However, a number of studies have shown that literary translators can come to prominence, calling that they can become star translators (e.g., in the Israeli context, see Sela-Sheffy 2008), celebrity translators (e.g., Murakami Haruki in the Japanese context, see Akashi 2018) or brand (e.g., Howard Goldblatt in Chinese-English literary translation, see Zhang 2021). The contemporary contexts have witnessed the growing presence of literary translators taking on hybrid identities and playing multifaceted roles alongside that of ‘the translator’ (e.g., Daniel Hahn, Rosalind Harvey, and Anton Hur). Going beyond the normally conceived job of linguistic transfer, they may also

act as author, editor, mentor, agent or scout. The interactions between these multiple identities have facilitated their attainment of an influential and visible status in literary translation and publishing spheres.

Adopting a humanising approach, this article aims to construct the concept of ‘the translator’s brand’ to investigate a literary translator’s powerful and distinctive status in international literary exchanges. Unlike authors’ brand, sparse attention has been paid to literary translators’ brand in transnational book publishing and transmission, which is rarely exploited as a marketing tool to “ensure reader recognition and loyalty” (Glass 2016, 56) or employed by publishers to build their own brand (Royle, Cooper and Stockdale 1999). Various studies have explored the author’s brand in national contexts (e.g., Squires 2007; Thompson 2012), where books are considered commodities, and authors themselves as marketing tools. “Author-brand” has also been reframed as a promotional tool in transnational book trade, where authorial brand is understood as a kind of “narrative”, which “contains a story that is drawn from the author’s personal life ... [and the purpose] is to sell a cultural product” (Bassi 2015, 50).

In many ways, the creation of an authorial brand is a more straightforward concept and process than that of a translator. Firstly, this is because authors are commonly acknowledged as the creators of their texts, thereby retaining authorship/authority over their literary productions. Authors’ names are routinely shown on book covers and mentioned in book reviews; as such it is easy for readers to trace their presence, gather pertinent information and even form loyalty to or fandom around them. Publishers also frequently use (prestigious) authors’ names to expand their readership and pursue commercial interests. Secondly, an author is normally associated with a distinctly manifested style, a textual attribute that can

characterise their writings in general. It is possible for an author to be awarded and recognised because of their writing style, but literary translators' style is a different story. TS research that approaches the translator's style as identifiable linguistic choices and patterns mainly uses corpus tools (e.g., Baker 2000; Saldanha 2011). While researchers find linguistic patterns that can indicate the translator's style, they admit that these patterns cannot be exclusively attributed to the translator's style, but may be influenced by the original texts, the source languages and other variables as well. More importantly, efforts are still needed to explore the manifestations of stylistic patterns that spread across several translations by the same translator (Saldanha 2011; Mastropierro 2018). In this regard, it is problematic to perceive the literary translator's brand as a kind of textual marker that is identifiable across their translations and can set them apart from other translators.

Publishers have also strived to formulate their own brand identities in order to compete with competitors and stand out in the book market. Publisher's branding can be achieved through various approaches, e.g., famous titles and authors in their catalogues, or unique book design (Royle, Cooper and Stockdale 1999). But for Thompson (2012), it is not just about market appeal, but rather an outcome of accumulating symbolic capital. Thompson argues that symbolic capital is an important asset for publishing houses, because "publishers are not just employers and financial risk-takers: they are also cultural mediators and arbitrators of quality and taste" (2012, 8). Publishers have been increasingly conscious of how prize-winning authors can help them accumulate symbolic capital, but they should not neglect that influential translators can also help them gatekeep taste and quality and accrue symbolic capital.

Admittedly, ‘brand’ is not a new concept in the scholarship of TS. There have been attempts in investigations of translating brand names and slogans (e.g., Feng 2017), or nation branding (e.g., Batchelor and Zhang 2017; von Flotow 2018). It has rarely been used to discuss the personal branding of translational agents, particularly literary translators. To address this issue, this article will delineate why ‘brand’ is necessary in the scholarship of translator studies and how to analyse the brand-building of individual literary translators.

2. A humanising understanding of ‘the translator’s brand’

The concept of ‘brand’ is originally examined from marketing and advertising perspectives, and has been used to underline the distinctiveness and competitiveness of products or services in the market. For example, it is defined as “a distinctive product offering created by the use of a name, symbol, design, packaging, or some combination of these, intended to differentiate it from its competitors” (Fahy and Jobber 2022, 385). In addition to the differentiating function, a contemporary understanding of brand also highlights its role “as a conveyor of image or meaning”, which includes “status/power, added value and, finally, the development of brand personality” (Moore and Reid 2008, 419-420).

Apart from products and services, brand can also be applied to people. “Personal branding” is often used to examine how individuals adopt marketing strategies to pursue career success in the labour market (e.g., Peters 1997; Khedher 2015). Through a strategic process, an individual can make use of their unique sets of characteristics or attributes, to create a positive, distinctive and competitive image in the minds of the target audience (Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova 2018). Different from product brand, personal brand is neither a commodity nor the strategies being used, but rather the actual people who are to become a brand.

As definitions and strategies of personal branding focus on how to build and manage a personal brand in the modern labour market, they cannot be directly applied to the translator's brand. The investigation of literary translators' brand-building here is neither profession-oriented (e.g., Dam and Zethsen 2008, 2010), nor focusing on the economic occupational characteristics of their socially situated activities (e.g., Mirsafian, Pirnajmuddin and Nejadansari 2021). Though the professionalisation of (literary) translators has reached a mature level in certain contexts (e.g., Finland, see Ruokonen 2018; and Sweden, see Svahn 2020), translation has not yet possessed all traits necessary to qualify formally as a profession (Dam and Koskinen 2016, 2). People who translate may neither be trained or educated as translators, nor affiliate themselves with translator associations or institutions, nor work on a full-time basis to earn a livelihood. A translator's professional status can be measured by parameters like "salary; education/ expertise; visibility/ fame; and power/ influence" (Dam and Zethsen 2008, 71). The focus of professional status can be placed on elements such as the translator's competence, working environment, job satisfaction, and the existence of unions and stakeholder organisations. In contrast, to analyse a translator's brand, researchers need to look at the translator's socio-biography, and contextualise it within the environment they play in. By doing so, we can place our focus on the person of the translator, to identify the "personal attributes which enable and constrain action" (van Doorslaer and McMartin 2022, 4) and the "brand triggers" that "catalyse [their] distinction from other field players" (Zhang 2021, 127). Nevertheless, insights can still be gained from personal branding to the translator's brand, concerning questions of how to strategically plan the branding process, how to build and maintain a positive image, what kind of uniqueness a translator possesses, etc.

In addition to insights from brand-related literature, the concept of ‘the translator’s brand’ is also established upon Bourdieu’s sociology (1990, 1993) and the extension of his field theory to a transnational scale to investigate the asymmetrical international translation flow (Heilbron 1999; Casanova 2010). Bourdieu’s (1993) sociology of cultural production mainly consists of analytical devices on social structure (the field), the individual (habitus) and power relations (the various forms of capital). To be specific, inside a field, “the agents struggle for the maintenance or change of power relations on the basis of the various types of capital they have” (Wolf 2011, 4). Their habitus, i.e., the dispositions that inform their decisions (Bourdieu 1990, 53), generates the strategies which enable them to seek the accumulation of capital. The different forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – are important resources that allow agents to enter a field and compete for higher positions in it (Bourdieu 1993). Externally, different fields of activities, though have their own rules of functioning, are submitted to the power relations between each other. Extending to the transnational level, capital is unevenly distributed between cultures and languages, therefore causing power discrepancies between them (Casanova 2010). Since translators are regarded as socially situated agents, the persuasiveness of the Bourdieusian framework and its application to a global scale lies in that they allow for multiple layers of conditions, e.g., literary translator’s trajectories, their efforts and strategies in pursuing capital, their collaborations/competitions with other translational agents, and the structured global system of literary translation that they play in.

Underpinned by the above theoretical thoughts, ‘the translator’s brand’ is constructed as person-centric, accumulative and diachronic. It means a literary translator’s powerful, distinctive and positive status in a specific domain, which is achieved through their investment and management, with the translator as the direct producer and other agents as co-

producers. In other words, the translator's brand is an outcome of making full use of input with strategic methods.

Located in the territory of translator studies, 'the translator's brand' differs from prevailing analytical tools in TS to address the translator's presence, such as visibility, symbolic capital and celebrity translator.

There are some shared grounds between the translator's visibility and 'the translator's brand'. The core of the latter is that the translator achieves brand status due to the accumulation of various forms of capital, some of which can be attained from positive visibility. For example, favourable translation reviews are a type of positive visibility that can yield symbolic capital and contribute to translators' brand-building. As the translator's brand refers to their positive and trustworthy image, negative visibility is not considered part of the brand-building efforts as it is detrimental to the creation and maintenance of such an image. However, having visibility does not necessarily mean that the translator can become a brand. Being a brand means a translator can exert a socio-cultural impact on the target culture, particularly in the literary translation and publishing fields; but as a visible translator, they may not be able to possess an influential status. For example, translators may become visible in the target text because of the translation strategies they adopted, but they themselves may still hold an unprivileged position in the target culture (e.g., Wang's (2008) examination of the *Xueheng* group in 1920s China). Being a brand also highlights the translator's distinctiveness and strategic management, while the translator gaining visibility may not be because of their uniqueness, achievements or intended planning (e.g., in the Japanese context it is standard practice for translators to enjoy high paratextual visibility, see Hadley and Akashi 2015). The

translator's brand is dynamic, individual and cumulative, which is built through a long-committed process.

Symbolic capital usually concerns reputation or consecration (Bourdieu 1993). It is an important asset prevailing in a certain field, but it is also constrained by the field in which it circulates. Bourdieu claims that the production of cultural products involves both material production ("work in its materiality") and symbolic production (producing "the meaning and value of the work") (1993, 37). This symbolic production of transferring symbolic capital is regarded as "consecration", i.e., cultural objects are consecrated as being of lasting value and importance (37). There are different consecration instruments for literary products, e.g., being studied by academics, winning literary prizes, attending literary festivals, etc. (Verboord 2018). When a cultural product achieves consecration, the symbolic capital affiliated with it can, in turn, transmit to its creator. Unlike symbolic capital, the translator's brand is not field-specific and does not refer to reputation alone. Only having symbolic capital is not enough to elevate a translator into a brand, because the brand status is the result of having accumulated different forms of capital and the volume of capital is explicit enough to allow them to achieve "distinction" (Bourdieu 1996), so as to wield power in translation and its adjacent fields.

Another analytical tool for investigation of the translator's prominence is celebrity translators (Akashi 2018), with a specific focus on the Japanese context. Because Japanese translators usually enjoy higher visibility than their Anglo-American counterparts, there is no direct link between the translator's visibility and their translation strategies. Thus, Akashi (2018) aims to identify what kind of factors, other than translation strategies, can contribute to creating translator prominence. In her view, celebrity translators are those who "not only [have] the

talent to produce works that earn readers' respect, but also a public persona that draws readers, attracts media attention, and generates commercial value" (75). The "persona" of "celebrity translators" differs from that of ordinary translators. The former, as argued by Akashi, refers to "a public personality formed through their image as presented by the media including translators' own social media, publishers' promotional activities and interviews"; whereas the latter "is often associated with the works he or she produces" (45). What the "celebrity translator" highlights are the recurrent media visibility and engagement with the public. However, it is just one possible contributing factor to a translator's brand, not a universal prerequisite. 'The translator's brand' is still applicable in sketching the evolution of prominent literary translators who may not use social media or avoid public engagement.

Despite some shared grounds, 'the translator' brand' is different from these three existing concepts: it refers to a powerful and positive image (which does not equal visibility), requires the accumulation of different forms of capital (not just symbolic capital) and does not emphasise media coverage (which is important for celebrity translators).

3. Outlining the methodological framework: brand-building at intra-field, inter-field and inter-cultural levels

The construction of the translator's brand in this article is mainly targeted at literary translators. One essential prerequisite to being named literary translators is that their translations of literary texts are published (either in printed or digital form) in the market. Being published for the market links the translator's practice to the publishing industry, and provides the medium for the translation to be reviewed and evaluated by general readers and critics. When a literary text in translation goes through the hands of publishing houses to become a book and then enter the market, this book has the dual nature of a cultural product

and commercial commodity. The fields that literary translators generally operate in are the translation, publishing and reviewing fields. At the *intra-field* level, literary translators may directly play in or indirectly connect to these fields, attaining field-relevant capital and habitus.

In the contemporary field of international literary translation, many translators possess multiple identities, taking on other employments alongside their job as literary translators. In this case, the fields that they play in are not limited to the three general fields mentioned above. There may be other fields that can influence their translation-adjacent activities. While the translators' multiple identities enable them to be active players in the translation-related operating fields, these fields are not independent of each other but are connected, both directly and indirectly (with the translator as the middleman) to form an *inter-field* circuit. This circuit is the sphere where the translators interact with other agents, and where their brand is established and exercises an influence.

It is noticeable that translators are not only situated in the target culture but also in the source culture. The construction of the translator's brand needs to be placed at the *inter-cultural* level, as it is influenced by the power relations between the source and target languages, and the source and target cultures. More specifically, in the international literary space, capital is unevenly distributed between cultures and languages, which will affect the accumulation, conversion and transmission of capital for literary translators. For example, Chinese is considered a "peripheral" language, though "representing a very large number of speakers, yet occupying a peripheral position in the translation system" (Heilbron 1999, 434). Since the English language bears more linguistic-literary capital than the Chinese language, the translation of Chinese literature into English is "translation as consecration" (Casanova 2010,

294), which brings Chinese literature more international visibility and recognition. Given the peripheral status of Chinese literature and language in the imbalanced international literary exchange, the practices of Chinese-to-English literary translators are inevitably shaped by the market demand and dominant norms in the target culture.

The abovementioned intra-field, inter-field and inter-cultural levels reflect that capital is unequally distributed, and can be converted and transmitted between the translator's different identities, between different agents, and between different languages and cultures. Locating literary translators' personal development in these three levels, there are three critical factors for their brand building, namely brand input, brand investment and brand reception.

Brand input means that translators acquire and accumulate various forms of capital from their translation-related activities, which they can invest in the translation and publishing processes. In cases where a translator possesses multiple identities, we cannot place our focus exclusively on their role as professional translators, because these identities will influence the translator's behaviour and decision-making. For these translators, their habitus is not only acquired in family and schooling, shaped by the translation field, but also through other activities beyond translation. In this sense, the translator's habitus "not only refers to professional expertise but also stands for a whole individual" (Meylaerts 2010, 2). The capital and habitus that they gained from multiple identities and translation-related activities are the preconditions for their brand building.

Brand investment means that translators, as the direct producer of their brand value, invest in the capital and resources they attained at the intra-field level (brand input), interacted with the co-producers (e.g., editors, publishers, literary agents) of their brand value, and get benefit

from participation. The existence of cultural works, according to Bourdieu (1993, 37), involves both material production, i.e., the production of works in their physical form; and symbolic production, i.e., assigning values to the works. Such an understanding brings the direct producers and indirect producers of cultural products together. Informed by this, the genesis of the translator's brand also involves the producer (literary translators themselves), and co-producers including literary agents (economic mediators), editors and publishers (gatekeepers of the publishing industry), and critics and prize committees (consecrating authorities). In the investment process, co-producers can not only help translators accumulate more capital based on their 'consciousness' or 'deliberateness', but also transmit their capital for translators to use, which is achieved through activities both in terms of cultural consecration and in market logic.

At this level, to explore literary translators' 'consciousness' or 'deliberateness' in creating their brand, I borrow insights from Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber (2013), who analyse how people can successfully position themselves as personal brands in established organizational fields. They argue that in order to successfully position a personal brand, an individual "must simultaneously" achieve "standing out" and "fitting in" (383). The former means that through the accumulation of field-specific cultural and social capital agents can stand out from other players, while the latter refers to conforming to the values, rules and expectations that are important in a specific field (375). For Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber (2013), "standing out" does not mean developing an individual's unique selling points by their novel attributes or by breaking existing rules and norms. Instead, it means to find out what is valued in a specific field and strive to accumulate this resource so as to improve their position therein. The insight that Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber's analysis brings to the translator's brand is that if a translator aims to achieve prominent status, only having differentiating characteristics or

adopting an anti-mainstream strategy is not sufficient – strategic investment and management is also necessary. Therefore, literary translators’ investment can be analysed from the following two aspects: the strategies they adopted to stand out from competitors, and strategies they adopted to fit in the inter-field circuit. By “standing out” I mean the translator’s attributes, achievements and turning points that make them distinctive from other literary translators, while by “fitting in” I mean having the acquired feel to play the translation ‘game’ well (Bourdieu 1993).

Brand reception is how the translator’s brand name is perceived, evaluated and deployed in the source and target cultures. Originally examined in literary studies, “reception” is a term that explores the relationship between the text and the reader; in other words, how the reader’s interpretations grant meaning to a literary text (Jauss 1982; Iser 1978). When introduced into TS, its emphasis on readers makes TS scholars view “translations as a product of the target context” (Brems and Pinto 2013, 143). Many reception studies have placed the focus on “translation within the receiving culture and the role translations played in the identity formation and dynamics of the target culture” (Brems and Pinto 2013, 143). Thus, reception studies in TS put their emphasis on ‘translations’ and the ‘target culture’, without much attention being paid to the role played by translators in the source culture. However, translators do not belong to the target culture only, but are situated at the intersection of both the source and target cultures, so their engagement with the source culture should not be overlooked.

Taking into consideration the translation direction and the power discrepancies between the source and target cultures, between the source and target languages, the focus of ‘brand reception’ is placed on the intended outcome of literary translators’ investment of their input,

which may be presented in the form of an influential status, symbolic values attached to their names, functional cutting edges, etc. For ‘brand reception’ researchers can explore questions such as:

- Have the literary translator become a brand in both the source and target cultures or only in one culture? Are the receivers of the brand from the source culture or the target culture or both?
- What are the brand components of their brand in the culture(s)? How to measure their brand status?
- How the added values contained in their names are employed by other parties? What kind of function has the translator’s brand played in the translation and publishing processes?
- What kind of sociocultural impact may the translator have on the culture(s)?

It is worth pointing out that the above aspects are by no means exhaustive, as the intended outcome of the brand status may vary across cases and contexts.

Table 1. Brand-building at the intra-field, inter-field and inter-culture levels

Brand input (Intra-field)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accruing and accumulating capital and habitus in specific fields
Brand investment (Inter-field)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stand out • fit in
Brand reception (Inter-cultural)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • source culture • target culture

The conceptual tool of ‘the translator’s brand’ consists of three levels, as shown in Table 1, which can be applied to investigate individual literary translators’ development in various contexts. Although this tool emphasises the powerful and distinctive status of literary translators, by ‘powerful’ I do not refer to a translator’s dominant position, but more like they

are in a position to exert influence, for example, to influence book translation, production and reception. It also means a positive image or impression has been established in the mind of the audience of this brand, and a kind of trust is built between the possessor and user of the brand.

4. Analysing the brand-building of Ken Liu

In this section, I will use the three-level framework outlined previously to approach the brand-building of Ken Liu (1976 –) (Chinese name: Liu Yukun¹ 刘宇昆). Ken Liu is a pathbreaking American translator and an acclaimed author of speculative fiction. He has contributed significantly to bringing a wide range of Chinese sci-fi writers to a global readership, such as Hugo award winners Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang, and emerging writers like Zhang Ran and Gu Shi. His translations “have reshaped the global science-fiction landscape, which has long been dominated by American and British authors”, and he himself is regarded as “a literary brand as sought-after as the best-selling authors he translates” (Alter 2019).

4.1 Brand input at the intra-field level

As aforementioned, brand input refers to acquiring and accumulating various forms of capital from the translator’s multiple identities and translation-related activities, which they can invest in translation and its adjacent fields. To enter a field and play in it, an agent needs to attain the capital that is valued in this field. These resources are the prerequisite that the agent can later make use of to get benefits (symbolic or material) from playing in the ‘game’ (Bourdieu 1993).

¹ All the Chinese names in this article are listed with surnames first, followed by given names.

Ken Liu's increasing visibility and success in translating Chinese sci-fi was not a strictly designed process. Although he has been considered "almost single-handedly responsible for a surge in popularity of Chinese sf in the English-speaking world" (Doctorow 2019), he said that he fell into this field "by accident", and "translation was not something [he] had studied in any formal way and it was not an art that [he] was interested in" (Tsu 2019). Liu's distinctive cultural and educational background and career path have accumulated essential capital that paved the way for his future writing and translation career. He emigrated with his family from China to the US when he was eleven, and went to Harvard to study English Literature and Computer Science. After graduating from college, he worked as a computer programmer, then as a corporate lawyer after receiving his J.D. from Harvard Law School, and then as a litigation consultant. In 2017, he quit his job as a litigation consultant and has worked as a full-time writer since then (Alter 2019). Being born in China but growing up in the US has acquired him bicultural knowledge and bilingual competence. His educational background, such as majoring in English literature during college has further cultivated his cultural capital in the form of literary tastes and aesthetic ability. Uniting the three roles of programmer, lawyer and writer in one single body has made Liu players in different fields, such as the scientific, law and literary fields. Though performing different roles, Liu found similarities among them, saying that he is "always writing, for machines and also for people [...] by making use of rules in different systems" (Tabler 2021). Benefiting from his diverse employments, Liu has been able to accrue knowledge and experiences across disciplines, which contribute significantly to preparing him for entering the translation field.

Among these roles, Liu's authorial identity is particularly important in accumulating crucial capital for him to play in the translation field. So far, Liu has published more than 150 short stories, one epic fantasy series, two short fiction collections, and one novel. Liu's career as a

published author, long before the start of his translation career, started in 2002, when his short story “Carthaginian Rose” was published in the anthology *Empire of Dreams and Miracles: The Phobos Science Fiction Anthology* (v. 1). What makes Liu a rising star in the American literary market is his award-winning record. His story, “The Paper Menagerie” (2011) is the first piece of fiction to sweep the Hugo Award for Best Short Story (2012), the Nebula Award for Best Short Story, (2011) and the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction (2012). Later, his short story “Mono no Aware” (2012) won the 2013 Hugo Award for Best Short Story.

Through his authorial identity, Ken Liu’s cultural capital in the form of prestigious literary titles has been successfully converted into social capital, i.e., connections to leading Chinese sci-fi authors. One token of Liu gaining the ticket to enter the field of Chinese-English sci-fi translation is to have his translation published. Liu’s first published translation was because of being ‘discovered’ by the Chinese sci-fi writer Chen Qiufan. Their contact started in 2009, when Chen found Liu’s short story “The Algorithms for Love” in an online sci-fi magazine and sent Liu an email to express his liking of this work after reading it (Isaacson 2021, 64). Later, Liu did a favour for Chen to translate Chen’s story “The Fish of Lijiang” into English, which was published in *Clarkesworld* in 2011 and later won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award. This is also the first time a commercial genre magazine published Chinese sci-fi stories from contemporary writers. This example shows that Liu’s cultural capital has helped him to establish social connections with Chinese authors, which leads to the start of his translation career.

At the intra-field level, Ken Liu's identity as a prolific and award-winning author is rather prominent in accumulating important resources, such as cultural capital and social capital, which he can later make use of in the inter-field circuit.

4.2 Brand investment in the inter-field circuit

Because the boundaries of the literary, translation and publishing fields are porous, a circuit connecting these fields is formed. This circuit is the specialised domain where Ken Liu mainly played and where his brand was generated. As a legitimate player in this circuit, Liu can invest his brand input "in the most advantageous way possible" in order to gain "maximum benefit or 'profit' from participation" (Johnson 1993, 8). I will investigate how he achieved standing out and fitting in when investing his brand input.

4.2.1 *Standing out*

'Standing out' means that Liu's attributes, achievements and turning points in his socio-biography that can make him distinctive from other literary translators. The strategies or turning points that allow him to achieve 'standing out' include (1) his author-scout-translator identity, which leads to the bilateral consecration between him and the key Chinese sci-fi authors, and (2) promotional and management awareness and high visibility in the public sphere and cyberspace.

The cultural and social capital that Ken Liu attained from his authorial identity, make his identity as a literary scout and translator possible. In terms of scout, Liu invested in cultural capital in the form of literary tastes and aesthetic values to discover less well-known sci-fi authors and never published sci-fi works in the Chinese literary sphere. Before the international success of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* (2014, Tor Books, volume one

of the *Three-Body* trilogy), the genre of sci-fi was not mainstream in the Chinese literary market, occupying a mere 5.3% of the total pricing of all literary books in 2014 (Chen 2015). Traditional channels for publishing Chinese science fiction were quite limited, including literary magazines and physical book releases (Chen 2015). Some of the thought-provoking Chinese sci-fi writers and works have not been published through traditional avenues, so Liu has searched in online forums and social media platforms to look for their traces (Alter 2019). In addition to the limited publishing channels, some works may have not been published in Chinese before because of the politically sensitive content, but were discovered by Ken Liu, translated and published in English. Baoshu's novella "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" is such a case, which has never been published in China but was first in print through Liu's English translation and included in the anthology *Broken Stars* (2019, Tor Books). The efforts Liu has made also echo his commitment to having a sense of service to the science fiction and fantasy community, which he has highlighted in many interviews (Tsu 2019, *Structo* 2019). Liu has been aware of the fact that there is a diverse body of sci-fi works in China, which have not been visible to Western publishers and readers. To show this diversity, he translated and edited the two anthologies of short stories: *Invisible Planets* (2018, Tor Books) and *Broken Stars* (2019), which cover 26 short stories by 21 Chinese sci-fi writers.

Social capital is also crucial for Liu's translator brand-building, which brought him one of the turning points in his translation career, i.e., the translation of *The Three-Body Problem*. In one interview, Liu mentioned that the initiator of this translation project was the China Education Publication Import Export Company (CEPIEC), which acquired the translation rights of *Three-Body* and was looking for translators (Tsu 2019). CEPIEC did not contact Liu first, but rather another two prestigious translators Eric Abramson and Joel Martinsen. Under

their recommendation, Ken Liu joined this team. However, the translation right was not sold even after finishing the draft translation of volume one of *Three-Body*. At WorldCon in Chicago, Liu's friends Chen Qiufan and Wang Meizi were introduced to Liz Gorinsky, an editor at Tor Books, the New York-based science fiction and fantasy publisher (Tsu 2019). Chen and Wang told Gorinsky that Liu was working on a translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, and Tor Books eventually acquired the book (Tsu 2019). This example shows that social capital in the form of social connections has been effective in bringing Ken Liu important opportunities.

One brand trigger in Liu's translation career is *The Three-Body Problem* winning the prestigious Hugo Award for best novel in 2015, which is the first time a translated Asian work won such an award. Later, his translation of Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" (2015) won the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette. Chinese sci-fi writers garnering the Hugo awards two years in a row was an unprecedented achievement not only for the Chinese literary scene, but also for their English translator Ken Liu. To a certain extent, his English translation was a kind of consecration due to the power imbalance between the English and Chinese languages and cultures, bringing these Chinese authors to the centre of the English literary system from a peripheral culture. On the other hand, these authors' international success and the highly prestigious sci-fi awards consecrate Liu, and turn him into a well-known name in the fields of sci-fi translation and publishing, which catalyses his brand status.

Another trait that makes Ken Liu different from other literary translators is his promotional awareness and high visibility in the public sphere. His brand-building is closely related to the use of social media platforms, which not only broaden the market but also establish and

maintain a professional image for him. For example, on Twitter Liu often retweets and responds to readers' sharing of their comments and reading experience, forming a good author-reader interaction. He also has his personal website (<https://kenliu.name/>), on which he lists his books, short fiction, translation, events, talks, adaptations and other writings. It is noticeable that in the "press kit" section Liu lists his headshots and official bios of 250 words, 100 words and 50 words; which clearly shows how Ken Liu hopes he can be perceived by readers, the public and other agents. He also enjoys being visible. It is said on his website that "[he] enjoy[s] giving keynotes, lectures, talks, and readings. [He has] spoken at universities, high schools, libraries, academic conferences, fan conventions, corporate functions, academic camps, literary festivals, and other public and private venues". This evidence demonstrates Liu's management of his public image, and the willingness for self-promotion and arguing for more visibility.

The promotional and management awareness shows that the translator's brand is not innate or self-evident, but rather needs a long-term and strategic plan, so as to create a distinctive and enduring brand image.

4.2.2 Fitting in

"Fitting in" means having acquired the feel to play the translation 'game' well. Here it mainly refers to Liu's translatorial philosophy and editorial habitus, i.e., how he engaged with the translation and editorial conventions that are prevailing in the American publishing field.

As the editorial culture is prevalent in the American literary field, sometimes the translator needs to share the responsibility of editing. Traditionally, the general rule in editing translated Chinese literature is that the translated texts "need to be polished till we forget that they are

translations, like a window so clean that we are not aware that it stands between us and what we are looking at” (Jenner 1990, 193). However, Liu (2013) states that he disagrees with the translation philosophy of making a translation read like originally written in English. Instead, for him, “the joy of reading a translation is in hearing an echo of the original, in seeing English used in a way that suggests the rhythms and worldviews of another language” (Liu 2013). One example that can show the application of Ken Liu’s translation thoughts is his dealing with cultural-specific items. Liu states that he does not like replacing the Chinese original with a similar one in English, because he thinks it is misleading and creates confusion for readers regarding what this cultural reference really meant (Sonnad 2016). He prefers to try to explain the reference as much as he can in the text; and if he cannot manage to do it, he will add a footnote in case readers who are interested can search online by themselves (Sonnad 2016).

Ken Liu’s editorial habitus is also evident in his translation of *The Three-Body Problem*. When reading the original novel, Liu found that the timeline was chaotic and did not make sense to target readers. After getting permission from the original author, Liu changed the narrative structure in a way that American readers are more familiar with. In addition, Liu also shared the editorial habitus with the editor in Tor Books, Liz Gorinsky, and followed the norms that govern the translation market. In the “Translator’s Postscript”, Liu expressed his thanks to Gorinsky, saying that Gorinsky “helped [him] improve the translation in a thousand ways large and small, and [he] can’t imagine a better editorial experience than working with her” (2014, 319). Though Liu mentioned that his goal is to “act as a faithful interpreter” (318), his translation approach is about how to recreate the overall effect, rather than a sentence-by-sentence or word-by-word recreation (Alter 2019).

At the inter-field level, Ken Liu has been equipped with the necessary ‘skillset’ (e.g., bilingual ability, bicultural knowledge, artistic evaluation skills), and ‘mindset’ (e.g., promotional and management awareness; translation philosophy, editorial habitus) to exert his agency. His standing out and fitting in is not only achieved through his active role as the direct producer, but also involved other agents as indirect producers, from whom Liu can get recognition and consecration.

4.3 Brand reception at the inter-cultural level

Ken Liu has been regarded as the “unofficial link between China’s booming science-fiction scene and readers in the West” (Kidd 2016). In addition, his authorial identity is also important for his brand-building in both the English and Chinese contexts. Being on both ends of the spectrum of the author-translator relationship, and on both ends of the Chinese-English translation flow, Liu has established names as “Liu Yukun” in the source culture and as “Ken Liu” in the target culture, which function as two ‘imprints’ for him in these two contexts. It is worth mentioning that the components and impact of Liu’s brand status in the source and target cultures are different. In the source culture, Liu’s brand is mainly demonstrated as academic visibility because of this translation, and his influence on the sci-fi community and industry; while his brand imprint in the target culture mainly functions in the circuit of literary translation, publishing and reviewing fields.

In the Chinese context, Ken Liu has attracted increasing attention from Chinese academia and sci-fi fans and readers in the post-Hugo era. This is related to the burgeoning of TS in China in recent decades, and more importantly, due to China’s need to promote its literature. Liu Cixin’s winning of the Hugo Award has drawn almost as much attention to the English translator Ken Liu, as it has to the writer himself, which has made Ken Liu gradually known

in the Chinese-speaking world as ‘Liu Yukun’. Recent years have witnessed a predictable surge in the number of scholarly investigations on Ken Liu. Chinese researchers were thrilled to place Liu and his translations under diverse lenses, endeavouring to unveil the underlying factors to Li Cixin’s success and glean insights in order to promote other Chinese authors and literary works. In addition, Liu Cixin’s sensational success has influenced the landscape of the Chinese literary market, and the sci-fi IP (Intellectual Property) industry chain began to gradually take shape. Chinese sci-fi works have been adapted into movies, TV series and other commercial-derived products. For example, Liu Cixin’s novella *The Wandering Earth* was adapted into an eponymous film in 2019 and its sequel in 2023. The *Three-Body* trilogy was adapted into a Chinese TV series in 2023, and a Netflix series to be out this year. The upsurge of sci-fi adaptation and commercialisation has also attracted more attention from the general public to the distribution and translation of sci-fi, which undoubtedly makes Ken Liu a household name in China.

Liu’s literary works have been translated and published in the Chinese literary market since 2009, including anthologies of short stories and novels. Both Liu’s authorial and translatorial identities were frequently employed by Chinese publishers to promote these works, particularly after his translation of the Hugo Award winners. For example, on the book cover of the short story anthology *The Reborn* (2022, Sichuan Publishing House of Science and Technology), there is a hexagon sticker showing that Ken Liu is the winner of both the Hugo Award and Nebula Award, and he is also the English translator of *Three-Body* and “Folding Beijing”. On the book cover of another anthology *Good Hunting* (2022) by the same publisher, the sticker does not contain any information about his translation or award-winning, but rather illustrates that the episode “Good Hunting” in the Netflix animated series *Love, Death & Robots* (2019) was adapted from Liu’s eponymous story. However, in the

“Introduction to Translator” part of the book, detailed information on Ken Liu’s authorial, translatorial and editorial identities is provided. These examples show that both the authorial and translatorial identities are important components of Liu’s brand in the Chinese context.

When it comes to Liu’s brand in the target culture, his name is normally used as “promotional capital” (Wernick 1993, 93) for his translations. Since Liu has been a celebrated author, the added value contained in his brand name is appealing to publishers, who make use of his name in peritexts like book covers and blurbs to guide readers’ choice and perception. For example, on the book cover of Liu’s translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, at the bottom there is a line saying that “Translated by KEN LIU Winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards”. For the two anthologies, *Invisible Planets* and *Broken Stars*, a line “edited and translated by Hugo Award winner KEN LIU” is illustrated on the book covers. The paratextual material indicates that, in addition to the promotional function, Ken Liu’s brand also has a classificatory function. In other words, if one literary title was translated by Ken Liu, the literary merit and translation quality of it can be guaranteed and endorsed. His name works as a trademark, which may be converted into sales figures and economic profit.

Although the names of Liu Yukun and Ken Liu have been differently received in the source and target cultures, it does not mean that Ken Liu has two brands. The formation, circulation and promotion of these names are not independent of the translator’s material body and his proactive and performative agency. These two names are two different aspects of his brand, which are united in one “flesh-and-blood body”. The capital affiliated with the two different names is the stock of capital possessed by the translator figure Ken Liu. He has built an ecosystem of sci-fi creation, translation and publishing across both the source and target cultures.

5. Conclusion

This article has illustrated the significance and applicability of ‘the translator’s brand’ in approaching the human aspect of literary translators. Literary translators themselves may be cautious about the word ‘brand’ when delineating their career development, because of the promotional and marketing sense lying behind it. However, ‘brand’ is more than marketing and selling books. As a processual, accumulative and diachronic construction, ‘the translator’s brand’ refers to a translator’s powerful and distinctive presence in international literary exchanges, particularly in the translation and publishing processes.

It is worth noting that the translator’s brand status is not intrinsic, but rather the outcome of the strategic management and investment of their resources, and is effective only in the specialised domain that they operate in. Because some distinct features or achievements in the translator’s trajectory frequently trigger in other agents’ minds, their individual and positive brand image is constructed. This kind of socially constructed image is not only produced by the translator themselves, but also co-produced by other agents, such as literary agents, publishers and consecrating authorities. In other words, to become a brand not only needs the attainment of essential resources and attributes by literary translators, but also needs the recognition and consecration by relevant agents in the specific fields. The significance of the translator’s brand does not lie solely in the translator themselves, or what kind of status they occupy, but also in what kind of influence they will exert, and how their names can be employed by other agents in the translation and publishing processes.

Ken Liu is one recent example in the Chinese-English literary translation field with clear signs to become a brand. His influence has been substantial, which has changed the state of

Chinese sci-fi in the West. At the intra-field level, Liu played multiple roles in different fields, which constitute the various aspects of him as a social being, and from which different forms of capital were gained. In the inter-field circuit, Liu invested in his brand input, interacted with other agents, and generated his brand value. In the interaction with other co-producers, they not only helped Liu accumulate more capital from participation, but also transmitted their own capital to Liu. At the inter-cultural level, the names 'Liu Yukun' and 'Ken Liu' have been differently received in the source and target cultures. However, it does not mean that Liu has two brands. These two names are united in one material body, and they are two different 'imprints' of Liu's brand. The capital affiliated with the two different names is the stock of capital possessed by the translator figure Ken Liu.

Whilst translator studies as a subfield has witnessed vigorous growth, the concept of 'the translator's brand' is still meaningful for the scholarship of this area. This concept and the three-level framework can be applied to investigate the unique trajectories and hybrid identities of individual translators in other cultural or geographical contexts, thus contributing to a richer understanding of the human dimension of literary translators.

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