The Huajian ji as English Ballad: A Case Study of Literary (Re)Translation
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Re-translations are often influenced directly or indirectly by previous versions in the target language, a phenomenon comparative literature scholar Eugene Eoyang has termed déjà lu. The genealogy of a single text in translation illuminates individual translators’ distinct approaches, yielding fruitful insight for scholars of translation history and practicing translators alike.

The late-Ming Cantonese narrative poem Huajian ji (Story of the Flowery Notepaper) spawned no fewer than four European-language translations, including two in English: Peter Perring Thoms’s Chinese Courtship: in verse (1824) and John Bowring’s Hwa Tsien ki: The Flowery Scroll, a Chinese Novel (1868). This paper presents a case study, from the translator’s perspective, of a new translation in verse of the Huajian ji conceived with a self-conscious knowledge of its translation history. Unlike previous versions, this re-translation uses the English ballad as a vehicle for reproducing the style and sentimentality of the source text in English, foregrounding the formal, poetic characteristics of the Huajian ji over literal meaning when the two conflict. This paper describes the rationale for adopting ballad meter and details strategies for approximating the Huajian ji’s literary devices, such as parallelism and alliteration, as well as potential challenges of poetics-focused translation strategies. Through discussion of specific examples, the case study argues for a broad definition of equivalence that prioritizes formal elements of a source text in addition to linguistic content while presenting a re-translation that not only complements its predecessors but also aspires to expand the literary exchange between China and English-speaking communities.