

# A Brief History of Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* in Italian

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## Abstract

No complete translation of Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) famous trilogy of short stories *Sanyan* 三言 exists in Italian. However, over the last hundred years, various translators have been attempting to translate excerpts of Feng's trilogy, with alternating results. This paper analyzes the existing *Sanyan* stories available in Italian.

Firstly, this paper tackles the pioneering period at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Feng's *huaben* 話本 were first presented to an Italian audience, albeit in a heavily edited form. The earliest Italian versions of *Sanyan* stories were mostly rewritings and were heavily influenced by the preexisting foreign versions of the stories they chose to translate.

Secondly, after the Second World War, Feng appeared as the author of stories that included anthologies of Chinese literature, again some of which were still translated from other European languages (mostly English and German).

Thirdly, the decade of the 1980s was a period when Italian translators, mostly scholars of Chinese literature, decided systematically to translate from the original texts and produced accurate and readable versions, which are still used as references.

Fourthly, in the last decade, a new generation of Sinologists has undertaken the study of *Sanyan*, and their translations are mostly inserted inside of scholarly publications.

Finally, this paper shows how the approach to translating Feng has changed over the years, from a quasi-manipulation of the original stories to an extreme respect for the source material. At the same time, the need for a complete version of *Sanyan* in Italian is called into question at the end of the paper.

**Keywords**

Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Sanyan* 三言, *huaben* 話本,  
Italian translation

**1. Introduction**

Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) enormous body of work encompasses more than one genre: he penned down drama, poetry, jestbooks, full-length novels, commentary on the Confucian classics, gambling manuals, and so forth. Nonetheless, his major contribution to Chinese literature is represented by his three volumes amounting to 120 short stories (*huaben* 話本, a term that sometimes has been translated as *novella*), collectively known as *Sanyan* 三言, a name often rendered into English as *The Three Stories*, because all three volumes bear the word “yan 言” (literally means “word,” but here also “story”) in their title. The volumes are *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言 (*Stories to instruct the world*), previously known as *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (*Tales Old and New*, 1620, hereafter *GJXS*), *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (*Stories to Caution the World*, 1624, hereafter *JSTY*) (Yang and Yang 2007), and *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (*Stories to Awaken the World*, 1627, hereafter *XSHY*) (Yang and Yang 2009). Due to stylistic and thematic affinities, *Sanyan* is often mentioned together with Ling Mengchu's 凌濛初 (1580–1644) two collections, *Chuke pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Volume*, 1628, hereafter *CKPAJQ*) and *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇 (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, Second Volume*, 1632, hereafter *EKPAJQ*), known by the collective title “*Erpai* 二拍” (*The Two Slaps*), with seventy-eight stories in total. In fact, in the preface to *CKPAJQ*, Ling Mengchu himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Feng Menglong's work. Before ancient prints of *GJXS* and *JSTY* were rediscovered in Japan in the 1920s, *Sanyan* stories were mostly known in China because of the secondary collection *Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀 (*New and old remarkable stories*, 1630s, hereafter *JGQG*), which includes stories from both *Sanyan* and *Erpai* and for which Feng himself might have been one of the compilers.<sup>1</sup>

As previously mentioned, *Sanyan* copies were found in the first half of the twentieth century in Japan, the first country in which Feng's work had been translated and adapted long before these findings.<sup>2</sup> In fact, just to quote an example, the nine stories from Tsuga Teisho's 都賀庭鍾 (1718–