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TRANSLATING FOREIGN OTHERNESS

CROSS-CULTURAL ANXIETY IN MODERN CHINA

Yifeng Sun



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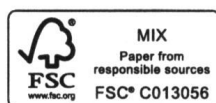
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Translating Foreign Otherness

This book is the first attempt to study and explore the deep-rooted anxiety about foreign otherness manifest through translation in modern China. It purports to contextualize and theorize a range of key issues concerning translation practice as a result of and in response to foreign otherness, which provides fertile sources for competing ways of thinking. While greatly expanding the Chinese perception of the world, they pose a threat to the stability of the Chinese self, which is then questioned and judged in a new light. China has had an uneasy relationship with the rest of the world, particularly the West, for well over a century. The transformative power of translation can best be outlined and illustrated by making a central argument about China's complex relationship with foreign otherness and identifying and exploring a range of relevant and interrelated aspects of theoretical concerns with regard to translation practice. The book is structured to specifically deal with and develop such interrelated themes in relation to foreign otherness: authenticity, foreignization, (un)translatability, translational violence, cultural attitude(s), and the practice of glocalization, all of which are fundamentally related to how translation can function to shape China's trajectory and interactions with the outside world.

Yifeng Sun is a Professor of Translation Studies, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and Director of the Centre for Humanities Research at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He is also an Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland, Australia, and an Adjunct Chair Professor at Jinan University, China.

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Introduction

Translation in China

Translation in China has been entangled with foreign otherness. While its freshness of appeal provides much enlightenment, it is also a primordial source of anxiety. This ambivalence is of critical significance to understanding the nature of translation in the Chinese cultural-political context. And, a related range of issues concerning translation practice needs to be contextualized and theorized in relation to the interplay between foreign otherness and anxiety that has been aroused. Misconceptions of foreign otherness may have exacerbated tensions and dilemmas inevitably produced by the changing cultural landscape. The unnerving presence of foreign otherness manifest through translation has haunted China since the late Qing dynasty, when China started to embark on a long and arduous journey in search and pursuit of modernity. Since then, translation has been inexorably linked to social development in modern Chinese history. Foreign otherness is alienating and liberating in equal measure. This book seeks to demonstrate that central to Chinese translation practice is a generalized cultural anxiety about foreign otherness. It is thus meaningful to examine how foreign otherness, though initially and thereafter from time to time perceived as desirable, leads to suspicion and distrust and is also related to ideology inherent in translation.

Modern Chinese history has witnessed numerous social, political, and cultural upheavals, and generations of intellectuals have turned to the West for enlightenment and inspiration. As is often the case, translation has served as both the catalyst and conduit for stimulating cultural political changes in China. Mainly as a result of translation, ethnocentric beliefs and feelings have gradually given way to a more open and liberal way to explore and appropriate foreign otherness. Meanwhile, people are still gripped by the fear of Westernization, perceived as a threat to the Chinese cultural integrity and social stability. However, it can be seen that through translation, a universalized and universalizing cultural language reawakens and reinforces cultural identification. Translation activities are part of local realities in relation to the global world of transnational cultures. Global economic integration has enabled China to play an increasingly prominent role in the world today, especially in economic and political terms, though clearly not in cultural terms – a perennial source of frustration for many Chinese. With the growing localized appropriation of globalized cultural information, more shared or universal references are making it possible for Chinese translations of foreign, especially Western texts, to be less hampered by cultural difference.

2 Introduction

For China, translations have been largely pragmatic necessities, as evinced by two periods of impassioned translational activities that occurred in the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century, both of which are in a multitude of ways intertwined with ideology. Marxism was imported to China – via Russia – from the West through translation and retranslation, and then numerous translations of other Western texts ensued to challenge or undermine, in almost equal measure, the ideological centrality of Marxism in China. Historically, in spite of the potential of Marxism, the period between the May Fourth Movement and the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) was marked by a rich plurality of ideologies (Wang 2003: 42). During the period spanning from the late Qing dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China was much pre-occupied with national survival and salvation. Thus there were translations of, either Western works to arouse the people with modern concepts to modernize and revitalize China, or literature of “weak and small nations” including Poland, Hungary, Finland, Spain, Turkey, and India, among others. All such nations share the detritus of great civilizations whose broken-up quality was reminiscent of the tragic and convoluted situation in China. Under the circumstances, the Chinese cultural identity was not the paramount concern of the nation. Due to the urgency of national salvation, there was little interest in searching for or maintaining a cultural identity, and ideological differences were readily overlooked from time to time.

Starting from 1950, issues of cultural politics began to play a pivotal role in Chinese life with regard to ideological control once again. Marxism was taken ever more seriously to serve the political needs of the Chinese Communist Party, which, through its Central Compilation of Translation Bureau of Marxist and Leninist Works established in 1953, institutionalized the translation of Marxism-Leninism into Chinese. Ideological manipulation was manifestly embodied in selections of texts for translation. Soviet and Russian literature was prioritized by the Party in the 1950s and 1970s, respectively, even though the two communist parties broke up in their ideological disputes, and the ensuing border conflict in 1969 brought the two countries to the brink of a full-scale war. By and large, the supreme irony was that their ideological affinity remained intact. However, in the 1960s, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, Soviet literature became the undesired other and, in an inherently paradoxical way, viewed to be ideologically repugnant, although certain Soviet literary works were translated for the purpose of “criticizing revisionism”.

The Cultural Revolution erupted in 1966, lasting for ten years, and unleashed destructive powers not merely victimizing individuals, but tarnishing the cultural identity of an entire nation. And it turned out to be culturally cataclysmic, with translation getting its full blunt. Anything to do with traditional or Western cultures was wantonly banned. For ordinary people, reading such banned texts was tantamount to a criminal offense. On grounds of political prudence, even works by Maksim Gorky, highly esteemed by the Chinese authorities, were banned at the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. The translation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in the 1950s and regarded as “progressive” at the time, was no

longer ideologically acceptable by the time the Cultural Revolution started. For a while, translation of foreign literature drew to a standstill, and over five years, from May 1966 to November 1971, not a single translation of foreign literature was published. Once again, China was estranged from the international cultural community. However, in 1971, things began to improve when the rigid policy was somewhat relaxed, and publication of foreign literary works resumed to a limited extent (Ma 2003: 65). An unusual form of publication of translation called “internal circulation” began to develop, dating back to the late 1950s and culminating in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution. Such translated works were restricted to officials at or above a certain level, as well as some researchers, but then extended to ordinary intellectuals, but only to those who were from working class backgrounds. Not surprisingly, critical essays were routinely attached to translations to serve as an ideological safeguard to “guide” the reading. This also offers compelling evidence of anxiety about ideological corruption from foreign sources and also about damaging insulation from the outside world.

As a consequence, immediately after the political cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, Chinese literary discourse was found to be in a state of devastation. The enforced or benighted ideological uniformity and the subsequent concomitant cultural homogeneity had practically precluded innovation in art and literature. The hardheaded writings of the traumatic years with a decidedly Marxist bent denoted that literature could not be divorced from politics, and, furthermore, literature was under obligation to serve a political need. Although there is nothing unusual about reading literature politically, the tendency that the reader was expected to read everything politically and ahistorically was no doubt detrimental to constructing a credible and meaningful modern literary discourse.

As noted earlier, well before the Sino-Soviet ideological disputes, which became public in the mid-1960s, the Chinese had surrendered their collective ideological autonomy to the so-called orthodox Marxist discourse shaped by the Soviet Union.¹ The Soviet model was ostensibly the desired other, taking over the whole of Chinese cultural life. The profound irony was that even after the Sino-Soviet rupture, and China overtly reinvented a political discourse, albeit not very successfully, to establish and demonstrate its different ideological identity, its literary discourse remained more or less unchanged. There was not even an attempt to redefine the principles of socialist realism that had been proclaimed to be the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union. No reconfiguration of China’s literary policy was provided to displace the Soviet type of Marxist literary theory, and although some attempts were made to criticize the “revisionist” literature, they appeared to be theoretically insubstantial and haphazard. And despite the ideological barrier between the two countries, China barely did anything to encourage ideological innovation in literature and was still explicitly obsessed with the social role of literature, which culminated in the near extinction of novel writing at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when China’s cultural system was virtually in collapse.²

To be sure, the Chinese literary discourse during the pre-culture fever period up to the early 1980s was relatively crude and schematic. And meanwhile, the

reductionist approach to foreign values was embodied in the vilification of the West: any attempt to turn to the West for inspiration was equated with Westernization – a supposedly dangerous tendency to be roundly denounced. With regard to literature itself, there was a uniform lack of thematic variety and an absence of artistic experimentation, and the latter was highly suspected by the literary establishment of the day. The underlying assumption was that anything related to experimenting with artistic form would be seen as an unmistakable deviation from the politically and ideologically designated role of art. Regardless of the form it took, any art that was anathema to the official canons of socialist realism was systematically suppressed. Literary works had to be made easily accessible to the mind of the public, and, thus, they were necessarily related to or based on “reality” with the aim to represent a larger officially perceived and sanctioned ideological reality. All this forms a grim corollary: literary discourse was reduced to no more than repetitive political or ideological indoctrination. For a long period of time, socialist realism as the official aesthetic situated at the center of the official discourse was the only mode of writing about literature as well as of reading and producing it. In these circumstances, literature and literary criticism were stifled. Socialist realism, despite its crude nature, was a crucial concept in Chinese literary discourse, and few critics and theorists had the audacity to question the totalitarian monolith by suggesting any alternatives. Indeed, no one was in a position to perform any useful service to critical understanding of literature. Meanwhile, the term critical realism was frequently confined to the nineteenth-century Western literary works, such as those by Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens, or modern Chinese left-wing literature exposing the evils of capitalism, or the old social system prior to the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949.

Nevertheless, for a period of 30 years or so, a fairly limited amount of Western literary theory was introduced to China. As for the part that was introduced to China, it was usually fragmented and distorted because it was chiefly for the purpose of “criticism”. It was against this historical background that New Criticism enjoyed a momentary revival in the 1960s, for 1962 witnessed the publication of a collection entitled *Selected Works of Modern American and British Bourgeois Literary Theory*, containing some important works by T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks. Beneath all the apparent critique of Western literary theory, some Chinese scholars at least showed an earnest desire and effort to understand, and where deemed necessary, appropriate the artistic culture practiced by the Western literary establishment. Together with New Criticism, archetypal criticism was introduced to China as well. Among others, excerpts of Maud Bodkin’s *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* are included in *Selected Works of Modern American and British Bourgeois Literary Theory* published in Chinese, although Northrop Frye’s works were curiously excluded from the collection. As an odd contrast, the works of some well-known Marxist critics, such as Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, were not made accessible to the Chinese reader. Although Terry Eagleton’s *Marxism and Literary Criticism* was published in 1976, it was not translated into Chinese until 1987, and even to date, Williams’s influential

Key Words, perhaps due to its somewhat sensitive nature in ideological or political terms, has not yet been translated into Chinese.

In view of the political and cultural context, the Aesthetic Debate (1956–1964) can be construed as initial preparation for the second cultural movement in the 1980s, known as the Great Cultural Debate, on an unprecedentedly large scale in China. The earlier debate was harnessed to a greater political purpose: to disseminate Marxism in literary circles. And, it was also instigated to work on the reconstruction of Chinese culture. Since it involved handling politically sensitive probes, the Debate was confined to a relatively small, exclusive group of aestheticians. In stark contrast, however, the Great Cultural Debate in the 1980s is of a very different nature; it took place against the backdrop that Marxism had obliterated literature and artistic value. In the meantime, there was an urgent call for radical repositioning of culture and literature in relation to politics and ideology. Despite many cases of serious, stubborn resistance to this call, much of it was no more than symbolic half-hearted resistance. This is partly evidenced in the fact that many intellectuals decided to protect themselves by using Marxist terminology to reflect, once again, an anxious engagement with the West. What characterizes the Great Cultural Debate was that people offered neither an out-of-hand rejection of modernist literature nor blind acceptance. Most tellingly, cultural translation means that the monolithic Marxist literary theory and criticism could no longer remain the only determining and defining authority. But it does not mean rampant Westernization, either, and many people still shared a pejorative view of it and upheld that some resistance in a critical sense would be both necessary and proper.

After years of cultural deprivation, a renewed enthusiasm and genuine craving for foreign culture were apparently overwhelming. Yet, all the translation activities during the period emanated some uneasiness regarding the outcome of cultural disorientation. In the past, the combination of national humiliation and pride in a superior civilization became a source of consternation when China was forced to open itself to the outside world. Even now, when China is fully integrated into the international community, the emergence of difference stemming from foreign otherness is sometimes experienced as a shock to the target system, and as a sudden puncturing of the illusion of the accustomed sameness can be disturbing, even though this is not entirely unexpected.

When a nation experiences a cultural transition, it succumbs more easily to the overpowering foreign ideological influences and ideas because there is a pressing need for change and for this reason also for flexibility, openness, and tolerance. However, openness to experiment, debate, and admission of inadequacy or backwardness may be prompted by a sense of cultural nihilism, which means that the pendulum seems to swing very far in one direction, but it is likely to swing back in favor of re-establishing selfhood. In terms of foreign influence, it is symptomatic of a massive shift in power from the center to the periphery, and when circumstances change, from the periphery back to the center. In the late Qing period, China was unprecedentedly weak economically and militarily, but

not culturally – at least, it was not perceived as such. In spite of the humiliation dispensed by the Western powers, the Chinese were still immensely proud of their own culture and tended to be dismissive of Western cultures, with their ideologies and political concepts. The values of home culture were still firmly at the center of the dominant cultural discourse. Though national culture was held in high regard, many Chinese thinkers signaled a willingness to learn from the outside world, particularly the West. But in cultural terms, there was still a clear reluctance to abandon the intrinsic cultural values as demonstrated in the translations by Lin Shu and Yan Fu, who adhered to the classical style of writing in undertaking translation. In order to satisfy the needs of the home culture, reception was a factor they had to take seriously.

Among others, the maverick writer Lu Xun searched for an effective cultural medium in which he could import new ideologies that would serve the interests of the working class people in order to promote the development of new, dynamic social forces. He applauded what had happened in the Soviet Union, where people “had become masters of their own destiny” (2005: Vol. 4, 426). He rarely translated anything that could be subsumed under the category of leisure culture but focused instead on the alleviation of human misery with a programmatic vision of social rebirth. In challenging the traditional authority and order, Lu Xun endeavored to introduce into China through translation new ideas and social order. He also compared himself to the Titan Prometheus, “stealing fire from other countries” (2005: Vol. 4, 213–214). The initial intention was to bring forth light for enlightenment but then for something far more radical: to mobilize people into challenging the status quo and reconstructing Chinese culture.

Today’s China has become one of the most enthusiastic participants in the global economy. Perhaps because China has benefited from such economic integration, globalization has met with relatively little resistance. Moreover, even the homogenizing effect of cultural globalization is rarely felt by ordinary Chinese. The new commercial culture has become so vigorous that it is poised to overshadow the old orthodox ideology. Correspondingly, social and cultural values have changed to such an extent that the formation of new ideology – if there is such a thing – seems to be in order. In the context of economic globalization, capital, personnel, and technology transfer is experiencing an explosive expansion in China. What about its impact on culture? In a curious way, ideology and culture interact with one another: “So skillfully is the post-socialist state weaving its agenda into a new common sense that ideology is blurring into (commercial) culture, and the haunting presence of the state is disguised in the new apparel of the market” (Sigley 2013: 242). Because of the erstwhile domination of orthodox ideology, “post-socialism” virtually harbingers the end of ideology. The ruling paradigms of transnationalism and globalization have created different cultural conditions of ideology, which is governed to a large extent by market economy.

It is little exaggeration to say that foreign otherness has fostered the development of modern China whose discursive transformation results from various contacts and interactions with foreign ideologies and cultures. Translation activity and reading translation are part of the learning process of a proud nation with a long

history of civilization. One salient feature of Chinese translations is that the values of untrammelled individualism and unconstrained nature of the uncanny “otherness” are simultaneously denied and recognized in line with the transformation of events into ideological paradigms. By situating the problematic of otherness at the limits of translatability, I hope to demonstrate how translation performs a certain internalization or inscription of otherness within the Chinese cultural discourse. With the rapid development of Translation Studies, there is an increasing interest in translation activity and research in China, which still remains an enigma to the outside world. The transformative power of translation in China can best be illustrated by making a central argument about China’s complex relationship with foreign otherness – a continual source of tension and excitement – and offering some related examples to show how translation can be better perceived and explained.

Notes

- 1 The preponderance of literary concepts and theories were mostly imported from the Soviet Union to China in the 1950s.
- 2 Although during the period, poetry writing was no more than panegyric, it was fairly common for poetry to serve propaganda purposes because of its compact form.

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1 Translation and cross-cultural anxiety

The antithesis between familiarity and otherness is fundamentally linked with translation. Central to translation in the Chinese context is anxiety and ambivalence about foreign otherness, which is essentially reified in ideology. The cultural politics of difference has much to do with truth-telling, sincerity, intelligibility, and empathy, all resulting from direct interaction with the other. Effective translation depends not only upon a reasonable understanding of the content of the message to be translated, but also on an ability, on the part of the target reader, to relate that message to the relevant cultural situation by developing a necessary knowledge of foreign otherness in its cultural political context. The artifice or artificiality of sameness or alleged authenticity entails turning away and reduction, while cultural impositions are understandably considered as intrusive, and, thus, debates on literature and translation, often politically and ideologically charged, generally center around what foreign otherness is capable of doing or undoing. Notwithstanding the prevailing political conditions of the target system, translation may introduce and embrace foreign political and ethical values. Whatever the case may be, displacement caused by translation opens up significant interpretative and transformative possibilities. Equally noteworthy is that increasing transnational mobility has profound implications to the perceived composition of otherness.

1 Understanding otherness

Translation activities are infused with traces of otherness centrally reflecting the different, unfamiliar, unrecognizable, and alien. Foreign otherness in relation to traditional Chinese cultural values is the forcible reminder of difference embodied in otherness. As observed by Richard Kearney: “We need, at crucial moments, to discern the other in the alien and the alien in the other” (Kearney 2003: 67). Other traditions and practices epitomize previously unknown otherness, and, for this reason, the otherness of different perspectives, epistemological, social, aesthetic, or linguistic, is made visible and represented in translation, which has subsequently shaped the cultural landscape of China. Both the familiarity and strangeness of the other can be engaging and empowering, as a result of which the irreducibility of the otherness of the other has gradually gained matrix in the