

## Introduction

Cultural translation is an important concept in East Asian hermeneutic traditions and Anglo-European critical theories. In the Chinese Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記 (*Record of Rites*), 譯 *yi* is used to refer to the institutionalization of interlingual translation, but the etymological root of translation (易 *yi*) suggests a broader range of meanings that include translation, transformation, and transaction. A dominant definition of the Chinese character for translation—譯 *yi*—could be traced back to Kong Yingda's 孔穎達 comments on the earliest Chinese reference of translation in the *Wangzhi* 王制 ("Royal Institutions") chapter of *Liji*. Kong equates "to translate" (譯 *yi*) with "to exchange" (易 *yi*), and defines it as "to change words and sayings to enable mutual understanding (換易言語使相解 *huanyi yanyu shi xiangjie*)." 易 *yi* was closely associated with all kinds of "investiture transactions" such as gift-giving and receiving—those activities that contribute to the formation of one's social and cultural identities.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of 易 *yi* speaks to the translingual and transcultural nature of cultural translation. The term "cultural translation" was employed in the 1950s by anthropologists to describe the act of interpreting for readers at home the exotic cultures and customs they encountered in the field. Whether they sought to bring readers closer to the original by keeping the exoticness of the other cultures, or move the original towards the readers by making the text approachable and understandable, there are always pitfalls. This romanticized version of cultural translation reduces foreign cultures to palatable "texts" that

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1 See Wolfgang Behr's in-depth discussion on the various terms used for "to translate/translator" in the pre-Qin era. Wolfgang Behr, "'To Translate' Is 'To Exchange' 譯者言易也—Linguistic Diversity and The Terms For Translation in Ancient China," in Michael Lackner and Natascha Vittinghoff (eds.), *Mapping Meanings: The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2004), pp. 186-197.

one is entitled to translate and consume. The gap between cultures is reduced, but cultural difference is rendered invisible.

Since Homi Bhabha's 1994 book *The Location of Culture*, "cultural translation" has been used metaphorically to refer to the negotiation and transmission of meanings, which are constantly changing in space and time. In the current critical ideology, translation is often used as a catchword for the relativity of meaning and identity.<sup>2</sup> Translation is no longer merely the communication of ideas by rendering words from one language into another.

This special issue emerged from the conference on "Cultural Translation, East Asia, and the World" hosted by National Taiwan University Institute for Advanced Studies of Humanities and Social Sciences, May 28-29, 2011. The conference aimed at exploring the phenomenon of cultural translation that has come to shape the world we live in. Encompassing a broad range of cultural and artistic activities taking place in the contact zones, cultural translation defines the time and space between different historical moments of the same culture, between national spaces, or between genres and forms of expression including textual and visual cultures. The key questions include: How do ideas and genres migrate across these boundaries? What driving forces are at work behind the formation of the culture of translation and the translation of cultures? This interdisciplinary conference brought together specialists of East Asian humanities to explore the issues of identity formation, localization and globalization, and transnational cultural flows in both pre-modern and postmodern times.

Translation is first and foremost an essential tool for making sense of the relations between different cultural entities. Zhang Longxi's article, "Divine Authority, Reference Culture, and the Concept of Translation" establishes ancient Greece and ancient China as two "reference cultures" with disparate models of cultural translation. While translations of Hebrew scriptures into Greek honored

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2 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

the authority of the original text, the translations of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese show no similar sense of necessity to honor the theological authenticity of the original. It is common for the Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures underwent significant rewritings in order to appeal to the intended audience. As Zhang Longxi insightfully indicates, translation is a hermeneutic practice that involves continuing negotiation between the original and the translation version, the author and the translator, the two languages and their corresponding cultures. Because of this particular nature, the adequate concept of translation can only be situated somewhere in between the two extreme cases that were thoroughly explored in this article.

Along a similar trajectory of intercultural connectedness but with a different goal, Wilt Idema's article, "Old Tales for New Times" warns us against the pitfalls of viewing any specific form of culture (such as elite culture) as representative of all cultural forms within a given time at a given location. The fact that cultural tradition is always undergoing a process of transformation is manifested by the Chinese term for culture, *wenhua* 文化. Oftentimes our understanding of a cultural artifact was shaped by the ideological construction of the contemporary society. In his article, Idema explores the 20<sup>th</sup>-century construction of the notion of *shenhua* 神話 (myth) in Chinese literature, with a specific focus on the canonization of the so-called China's "Four Great Folk Legends"—the legend of Meng Jiangnü, the tale of Buffalo Boy and Weaving Maiden, the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, and the story of the White Snake. Idema delineates how, through intensive and radical process of reinterpretation initiated in the May Fourth period, these four works with disparate nature and origin have come to represent a kind of romantic sensibility and a protest against the oppressive patriarchal system—thoughts that were alien and perhaps non-existent in the premodern mindset. The "remaking" of these four folk legends is more than part of the process in the Chinese construction of the modern; it also symbolizes a sense of nostalgia for a past tradition that would never return.

Another dimension of cultural translation lies in the questions of representation and moral agency. A classic formulation of this issue has been provided by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: can the subaltern speak? While these two articles deal with pre-modern ramifications of cultural translation, Nicholas Kaldis highlights the postmodern characteristics of contemporary Taiwanese literature. His article, "Infectious Postmodernism in/as *Note of a Desolate Man*," presents a close reading of Chu T'ien-wen's controversial novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* and engages in a critical conversation with current scholarship on the work and its cultural context. Can and should a mainstream female writer speak for gay men? What is the impact of this self-assigned spokesperson on Taiwanese gay culture's public image? These are topics for ongoing debates. Focusing on the structure and themes of Chu's novel, Kaldis argues that, much against what is expected by the critics, the rhetorical excesses of the work and the author's deliberate figuring of Taiwan's gay culture as a plague or threat nevertheless prompt its readers to side with the mainstream cultural attitudes. This "outside threat" of homosexuality presented in the novel become a cultural and societal one. The novel's postmodern pastiche of foreign (mostly Western) terms creates a unique kind of gay subculture that infiltrates mainstream local Taiwanese culture.

This special issue is part of *The Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies'* effort to address large issues that are shaping the future of the field. This collection of articles examines a number of fascinating case studies and elucidates important dimensions of cultural translation, but this special issue is hardly comprehensive. Among many other modes of exchange, there are interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translations to be studied systematically to shed light on the place of East Asian traditions in the world. If these studies can generate even more conversations, our work is done.



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