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PREFACE

In his collection of notes and anecdotes, the Northern Song *homme de lettres* Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) relates the story of a scholar who, when for the first time visiting an official treasury, does not recognize the money which is being stored there. Asked for the reason of this incapability, he replies: “I surely knew it was money, but I just wondered why it wasn’t wrapped up in paper.”¹ The bookworm’s non-recognition (he was only familiar with one appearance of money) is an excellent metaphor for the attitude towards Western knowledge of the overwhelming majority of Chinese literati and the emerging group of intellectuals during the second half of the nineteenth century. The imported knowledge, whose designation shifted within a few decades from “foreign knowledge” to “Western knowledge” and, finally, to “new knowledge”, was surely recognizable as something dramatically different from the age-old Chinese traditions of both the contents and organization of knowledge. However, according to the Chinese élite’s standards of perception, it could only be accepted when “wrapped up in paper.” Even in the transition from reading books to studying the Book of Nature, words written on paper remained the predominant instrument. Consequently, the study of what had been written by both Chinese and Western writers about natural phenomena was often given priority over the observation of these phenomena themselves. In the same way, late Qing poets scarcely looked at the clouds over a lake, but rather studied what poets from more creative periods had written about such clouds. In this bookish universe, even the somewhat marginal attempts to prove that the Chinese canonical and classical writings had already contained the essentials of the new knowledge (and thus showing that one dealt only with an allegedly new phenomenon), were deeply rooted in the insurmountable faith in words—words whose interpretation drew heavily on more or less haphazard coincidences between ancient texts and newly coined terms that had often been created alongside the ancient terminology, thus enhancing all kinds of linguistic fetishism.

The intellectualistic reluctance to open one’s eyes for observation was joined by an almost total abstention from practical performance in technological matters. When Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909), taking up older ideas about the difference between Chinese and Western knowledge, popularized the infamous formula of “Chinese knowledge as the core, Western knowledge for use” in 1898, he pointed to the performative dimension of Western knowledge, and it is significant that he cited railways as the prime example. However, people versed in performative skills did not enjoy an elevated status in late nineteenth-century China. The idea that *ingenium* or *génie* is the root of the word ‘engineer’, and that it was this root which conferred dignity upon the profession and made a person member of the *élite* in the West, was simply inconceivable for both scholars and intellectuals of the time. Technological performance was left to petty specialists, or at best to second-rate intellectuals (in other words, to people who could be used to produce useful things), whereas the men who saw their main task in preserving the core of Chinese knowledge contended themselves with condescendingly guiding and supervising the needed practical efforts. The literati continued to read and write about what they read. Western technology may have seemed more cunning, still it was seen to belong to the same kind of second-rate business. Even the despised compradore, or the badly paid translator (“linguist”) still dealt with words and figures, and were therefore more easily compatible with the standards of elitist behavior than any technician or craftsman. Much of the tragedy of Chinese modernization well into the late twentieth century can be explained by this inveterate aversion towards manual labor: neither the Westernizing “science” debates and campaigns of the Republic nor the subsequent Sovietization, where the image of soot-blackened workers and optimistic engineers was to replace the traditional self-perception of the *élite*, had any lasting success. The establishment of an academic discipline called “History of Chinese Science and Technology” was meant to remedy a national complex of inferiority, but it grew roots in the public conscience only in the last decade of the twentieth century. Even the “Great Leap Forward”, destined to transform the entire population into self-made engineers, turned into a catastrophic failure. However, the often deplorable state of “physical” hardware technology in China up to the present day stands in sharp contrast to the enormous achievements in the field of “softer” technologies: here, in the realm of the “clean,” as
it were, deeply rooted élitist attitudes seem to have finally been reconciled with the demands of the (post-) modern period.

Theories of cross-cultural transfer, especially those which refer to intra-European transfer processes, sometimes tend to underestimate the importance of semantic ruptures which take place in the course of cultural migration. It is true that scope, speed, rhythm and results of all transfer processes are influenced by the needs and interests of the concerned social groups and the will of the political decision makers. It is also true that these processes share common chronological features, regardless of where and when they take place. However, in a civilization whose élite almost entirely relied more strongly on the authority of the written word than on any other kind of evidence, words become an even more crucial instrument, first, in the establishment of borders between the “new” and the “old”, and, subsequently, in the amalgamation of both. No “myth of origin” needs to be established in this context, since the history of mentalities reveals sufficient behavioral continuities in the attitudes towards the abstract and the concrete; moreover, the Chinese language had some experience in dealing with concepts of foreign origin. However, the radical transformation of the entire body of knowledge and its organization cannot be narrated without taking into account its foremost medium: terms. Although it is evident that the history of the migration of terms will never come to an end, the unprecedented scope of lexical transformation in the relatively short period from late nineteenth to early twentieth century clearly speaks out in favor of the hypothesis of a formative period that continues to shape Chinese discourses.

Both Western and Chinese intellectual history have experienced several decisive breaks: for the Chinese world, we might recall the influx of Buddhism, or the rise of Song Confucianism, for the Western world, we could think of the Cartesian turn or the Enlightenment. One of the results of such breaks is that ancient texts are no longer read (and understood) as they have been read (and understood) before. A process of intra-cultural translation has taken place, and the meaning of words and their eventual mapping in more or less coherent systems have changed. In the West, the very idea of *translatio imperii*, the frequent shift of responsibility for the cultural heritage of the Ancients from one civilization (and its respective language) to another, involved continuous translation as a vital part of the culture. Concurrently, the concept of *translatio imperii*, by always referring to
one and the same *imperium*, fostered the belief that all ruptures, changes and modifications came from within, and were not imported from without. The sentence “Aristotle is a Western philosopher, but he speaks different languages” reveals its full meaning only when simultaneously read vice versa: “Aristotle speaks different languages, but he is (and will always remain) a Western philosopher.” At least within the realm of ideal Western self-perception, cultural continuity and discontinuity are thus kept in a comforting balance.

The absence of a similar idea in China certainly diminished a comparable inclination to translation efforts. Buddhism, definitely a faith coming “from without”, took centuries before it became embedded in Chinese society, and its world-view only invited retouches to the traditional mapping of knowledge and the Chinese lexicon without completely transforming it. Moreover, only a small number of Chinese were involved in the impressive translation of the Buddhist canon. Song Confucianism, partly influenced by Buddhist forms of thought and argumentation, dramatically changed the interpretation of crucial parts of the Chinese written heritage, but there was scarcely a feeling at the time that this effort was an act of translation. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, however, China became a member of the universal community of translators. It is difficult to assess the depth of the break with tradition brought upon by translation, in comparison with similar discontinuities in the West. Yet it seems safe to say that both the speed and the scope of translation work were unprecedented. When its climax was reached (roughly speaking in the decades before and after 1900), not only a new mental topography was acquired, but the Chinese traditions themselves began to be made “compatible” to the Western challenge. A new terminology and a new conceptual universe helped Confucius to embark on a new career, first as a specialist of natural philosophy, and, subsequently, as a moral philosopher; in the course of time, he was to become a pedagogue, an expert for the philosophy of religion, and so forth. Since the time when some Zhejiang scholars rediscovered the works of Mo Di (fifth century BC) in the mid- and late Qing period, the long-forgotten book bearing the philosopher’s name became a main authority for “Chinese science” in the field of optics, mechanics, logic and other domains. No vital issue of the Chinese past was spared an interpretation along the lines of the new meanings and their respective mapping. Nonetheless, the fervent translation activities did not necessarily imply the percep-
tion of a Chinese *translatio imperii*. Taking up the statement about Aristotle cited above, one might therefore be enticed to say “Confucius is a Chinese thinker who always speaks Chinese.” The illusory continuity of the Chinese language and the culture it represents tend to obnubilate the fact that the twentieth-century Confucius speaks a radically different kind of Chinese than all his previous traditional incarnations: and, as suchm we may say that he suffers from a complex form of linguistic alienation.

To speak of alienation in this context may still be less justified by the depth of the rupture (although it was deeper than most Westerners imagine), but even more so because of the foreign origin of the “new” knowledge and the short period of time in which it was appropriated. The fact that the break was induced from without makes an enormous difference for Chinese identity constructions up to the present day. Little wonder therefore that the alienation is sensed more strongly in fields where words matter most—in the humanities and, generally speaking, in all fields with a rich cultural matrix.

Notwithstanding the price that China had to pay for her membership in the global community of translation, the new language was a new Chinese language. China never entirely lost control of her political and linguistic sovereignty. And thus the story of China’s loss of continuous access to the nation’s past and traditions is paralleled by the story of an enormous success, which, within a few decades, enabled China to catch up with modernity, at least in terms of reading and writing. It took another century to make up ground in terms of practical performance, where words wrapped up in paper do not play a similar vital role.

The present volume is the second monograph 2 emerging from a research project studying *The Formation of Modern Chinese Terminologies (Wissenschaftssprache Chinesisch, WSC)*, which I started, in late 1996, with Iwo Amelung and Joachim Kurtz. In the meantime, we have advanced our initially rather narrow terminological approach by establishing a preliminary database 3 containing roughly 127,000

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entries on Chinese neologisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The conference organized in December 1999 was meant to enlarge the framework of the ongoing research by placing the history of migrating words and concepts into a steadily increasing context of social, political, and institutional issues. Since Natascha Vittinghoff, the co-organizer of this conference, who is also the co-editor of the present volume, has not only taken manifold pains to make this book coherent, but has also expressed, in her introduction, our acknowledgements to persons and institutions to which we are indebted, the pleasure to thank her remains entirely mine.

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