Haun Saussy's latest book, *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia*, is an honest exploration of the culture in premodern China, though the concept of “China,” as readers will find out, is neither simple nor single. The book begins with an inquiry into what defines China. As China was deemed as the center of the world (zhong 中) in the past dynasties, what was outside China (wai 外) created the boundaries. Communication between the outside and inside required a process called the “nine relays” (jiu yi 九譯), which rhetorically means many layers of encoding and decoding translation. The book tries to answer a core question of how these nine relays and exotic customs interacted with Sinographic culture.

To provide possible answers to the question, the book contains five coherent and interrelated chapters to investigate texts of translation, adaptation, and appropriation within the boundaries of China. Unlike current research which focuses on translated texts between Chinese and other languages from 1900 onwards, the book turns to the long period before 1850. Adopting perspectives of comparative literature, these chapters include a host of beautifully written texts such as poems, songs, and memoirs that give us a glimpse of imperial China and its neighboring “barbarians.”

In Chapter 1, the author informs the readers that the book is about exceptions. China had been using Chinese as a self-sufficient language for thousands of years. Generally, translations did not occur and did not have to occur because few occasions required information to be translated. Therefore, the author invites us to look at the unusual times in the history of China when translations took place. One of the exceptions is Dao’an, a famous Buddhist scholar, who “translated” a Buddhist text from the Hu language into Chinese in the year 360. However, the author points out that what Dao’an did is hardly an act of translation but more like editing. Since Dao’an could not read the Hu language, he only compared one text in different languages and tried to make sure those translations are complete by noting discrepancies, such as missing paragraphs. Even so, his effort is still significant because it was “translating without translating,” as described by the author. The editing work did not ensure validity, which means translations are correct, but it did ensure reliability, which means translations are consistent. It has set standards and methods for Buddhist literature in a foreign language to flourish in China.

The Example of “translation”, by Dao’an, brings up another question. As discussed in Chapter 2, if a minority culture was made valuable only with
representations from another alien language, was that culture valuable enough? In other words, could the “barbarians” sing (in their own language)? The author does not give us an answer directly but provides us with some historical events. One notable event is in the Han dynasty when a group of “barbarians” from Bailang and other remote places composed a song namely “Song of Distant Aliens Rejoicing in Virtue” to praise the great accomplishment of the Han emperor and wish him longevity. The author doubts the sincerity of the song because firstly, it intended to please the court; secondly, the original script of the song in the Bailang language is no longer accessible and what we see today, the Chinese version, is what the translator, who was from the Han dynasty, wanted us to see. It was, therefore, a “translation as citation” that is designed to meet the expectations of the target audience. Nevertheless, some of the “barbarians” did sing in a rather naive way. For example, Xianbei general Hulü Jin commemorated his birthplace, Chi-le, by singing a song that describes its natural landscape such as grass, cattle, and sheep. Indeed, “barbarians” sing!

Chapters 3 and 4 continue to illustrate how sociocultural elements including populations, territories, nations, cultures, languages, and communications networks flowed around the “Chinese-character Sphere,” which had a center, peripheries, and borders. By referring to the famous An Lushan rebellion in the Tang Dynasty, the author shows that historical narrations could be so different from different points of view. From the centered Tang’s point of view, the event was, to say the least, one of the greatest tragedies in history. It brought countless poems to mourn for the losses and texts look for the reason. Du Fu, the renowned poet, used strong metaphors such as serpents and tigers in his poem to picture the critical situation of the empire. To him and many others at the center, it was a matter of life and death. On the other hand, “barbarians” who took part in the attack of Chang’an, the Tang capital, simply narrated that they “led a military campaign to the capital and sacked the capital. The Lord of China fled, another Lord of China was newly appointed, and the military campaign returned.” The same history could be another story as seen from the peripheries.

Chapter 5 moves on to the borders of the “Chinese-character Sphere.” In the ancient past, those well-educated lived their social life near the center of the sphere. They could hardly make contact with the “barbaric” places throughout their lifetime. One, if not the only, way was through exile. Even a man of high culture like Su Shi got the chance to visit the “edge of the world.” In 1097, Su Shi was banished to Hainan, an undeveloped island back then, due to his opposition to the radical transformation initiated by Wang Anshi, the prime minister under the Song emperor Shenzong. What is so special about Su Shi is that, unlike other banished poets like Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan who
fell into self-pity, Su Shi considered himself one of the local inhabitants with no superiority and said that “I am a Hainanese.” He even wrote a poem with four-character verses to urge the locals to elevate the economic structure from exploitation of natural resources to grain-based agriculture. It was an introduction of central Chinese culture to the exotic land, which is actually an act of colonization, according to the author, despite Su Shi’s plain intention to help the “barbarians.”

The greatest advantage of *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia* is the author’s mastery of translation between the Chinese and English languages. Most of the original materials are in classical Chinese, which is much harder to understand than modern Chinese. In spite of such huge difficulty, the author managed to present those works in English so beautifully written that non-Chinese speakers can share the charm of Chinese poetry and feel for the poets. For instance, one poem translated in chapter 2 reads: “What night is tonight, that I take the boat to the middle of the stream? What day is today, that I get to accompany my prince on the boat? Ignorant and shy, I have hidden my affection, but now I do not fear being exposed or denounced. Longing fills my heart and has no end; I can now be acquainted with my prince. Mountains bear trees, trees bear branches; my heart rejoices in my lord, but he is not aware.” The poem was translated from the Yue language to the Chu language, or Chinese, in the sixth century BCE. Today, it was found again in translation and has transcended the boundary of space and time in the book.

Above all, Saussy’s 192-page book is an enjoyable read. Therefore, readers, who want to know about Chinese culture and literature, should find it not only valuable but particularly interesting. It also makes a great contribution to the field of comparative literature, cultural studies, sociology, history, and translation studies. Students of all levels – whether with knowledge of the Chinese language or not – can benefit from the book.

*Tszy Chung Yow*
Doctoral Student, School of Marxism, Shanghai Jiao Tong University,
Shanghai, China
tomyow@qq.com