Introduction

The Philosophy of Translation, the Translation of Philosophy, and Chinese

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This third of three volumes edited by us in celebration of 50 years of the Journal of Chinese Philosophy is devoted to the subject of translation, especially as it concerns the relations between Western languages and Chinese. At a moment in history when the Journal’s longstanding mission of promoting a better understanding of China in the West has never been more urgent, the subject of translation (the foundation and sine qua non of virtually all understanding between different cultures) seems especially apt.

Historically speaking, both translation itself and the philosophy, or theory, of translation have until recently been much more concerns of the West than of China (though this is now changing). In the West, the ancient Greeks did little translation (with few and late exceptions, such as the translation of the Septuagint) and accordingly developed hardly any philosophy of translation either. As a relatively self-sufficient and dominant culture, they had little need of either. Translation, and in its train the philosophy, or theory, of translation, only became major preoccupations in the West with the Romans, who were culturally dependent on the Greeks and therefore needed to translate their works into Latin. Since the Romans,
translation and the philosophy, or theory, of translation have continued to be central preoccupations of Western culture. Saint Jerome’s translation of the Bible into Latin in the 4th century CE, Luther’s translation of it into German in the 16th century (together with his theoretical essay Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen), and the King James Bible in the 17th century are several prominent examples.

Until the 19th century, China’s situation was somewhat similar to that of the ancient Greeks: as a relatively self-sufficient and dominant culture, China hardly needed translation—although much translation of one sort or another occurred from it, much less occurred into it—let alone a philosophy, or theory, of translation. Even the one important exception, the large-scale translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese that took place between the Han and Tang dynasties, seems not to have generated much philosophy, or theory, of translation (recent scholarship suggests that even the Buddhist scholar and abbot Dao’an, who has sometimes been credited with developing such a theory, may not really have done so). There is therefore a certain cultural asymmetry involved in the very subject of the present volume: it is more reflective of traditional Western concerns than of traditional Chinese ones.

However, since the 19th century, when China fell prey to Western imperialism and as a result developed a sense of the need to become better acquainted with Western ideas, this situation has been changing dramatically, with translation and to some extent even the philosophy, or theory, of translation coming to play an increasingly important role in China. It is therefore our hope that the present volume will be of as much interest to contemporary Chinese readers as to contemporary Western ones.

In the West, there has been a major cleavage in both the practice and the philosophy, or theory, of translation since the late 18th and early 19th centuries, some people practicing and advocating a ‘domesticating’ approach (examples are the French ‘belles infidèles’ tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries and more recently Eugene Nida), whereas others practice and advocate a ‘foreignizing’ approach (the classic example is Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher in his translations of Plato and in his epoch-making 1813 essay “On the Different Methods of Translation,” but more recent practitioners and theorists of translation such as Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, and Barbara Cassin continue this approach). Roughly speaking, the choice involved here is this: Given that languages often differ greatly in their conceptual, grammatical, and musical (e.g., metrical) resources, should translation sacrifice distinctive conceptual, grammatical, and musical features of the source language in order to stay within the bounds of those already available in the target language (this is the domesticating approach) or should it instead modify the target language in order to preserve those features as far as possible in the translation (this is the foreignizing approach)?

Champions of the foreignizing approach cite three main reasons for preferring it over the domesticating approach: first (and perhaps most obviously), it promises to achieve greater conceptual, grammatical, and musical fidelity to the source-text; second, it thereby shows greater respect for the author and his or her culture; and third, it promises to enrich the target language by importing new conceptual, grammatical, and musical resources into it. Champions of the domesticating approach counter with arguments of their own, including arguments that appeal to the importance of intelligibility and readability.

For people who are interested in this dispute, considering translation between Western languages and Chinese ought to seem highly relevant. The dispute largely arose in the context of translating between the various members of just a single language-family: the Indo-European languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian, Spanish, English, etc.). However, the Indo-European...
family of languages is just one among more than three hundred language-families that are currently known to exist. Hebrew, a Semitic language, was to some extent taken into account in this dispute as well. However, the differences between Hebrew and Indo-European languages are in certain ways rather modest – for example, both use inflection and both use an alphabetic-phonetic script. By contrast, Chinese and its relatives are strikingly different in character – for example, lacking inflection and using a fundamentally ideographic-pictorial rather than alphabetic-phonetic script. It therefore seems very likely that adding a consideration of Chinese to the set of languages already considered in this dispute will throw important new light on it.

Hitherto the merit of paying attention to Chinese in this theoretical context has largely been a monopoly of French-speaking scholars, especially François Jullien and Jean François Billeter. Jullien and Billeter disagree sharply on the question of how Chinese ought to be translated into a Western language such as French, however. Roughly speaking, whereas Jullien advocates a foreignizing approach in order to optimally translate such distinctive Chinese concepts as dao (way) into a Western language, Billeter questions the extent to which such concepts really are distinctive and in consequence advocates a domesticating approach to translating them (albeit while, rather paradoxically, emphasizing the distinctiveness of Chinese, and therefore tending to support a foreignizing approach, in other respects, especially concerning grammar).

Three of the articles in the present volume are largely concerned with this broad issue in the philosophy, or theory, of translation as it relates to Chinese (the articles by Michael Forster, Tze-wan Kwan, and Yijing Zhang). But the same issue is also involved to some extent in the other, more specialized, articles in the volume.

A further common preoccupation of Western philosophy, or theory, of translation has been with the question of how to translate philosophy. While it would involve a crass fallacy to simply assume that the philosophy of translation must be primarily, or even largely, concerned with the translation of philosophy (compare: ‘Obviously, the philosophy of economics should mainly focus on the economics of philosophy’), there may nonetheless be non-obvious and special reasons why the translation of philosophy is unusually important for the philosophy of translation. Moreover, besides its arguable importance for the philosophy of translation, the case of translating philosophy is more obviously of special interest to philosophers for other reasons as well. Accordingly, a number of philosophers of translation (especially ones from the foreignizing camp) have shown a high degree of interest in the translation of philosophy. Schleiermacher was already an example of this, not only himself focusing on translating Plato but also identifying philosophy together with literature as the two most important cases for the philosophy of translation to consider. A more recent example is Barbara Cassin with her ambitious and influential project Vocabulaires européens des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles.

Here again, extending translation theory to consider not only the translation of Western philosophy from one Western language to another (on which Schleiermacher and Cassin both focus) but also the translation of Chinese philosophy into Western languages and conversely looks like an attractive move to make. For this has the potential to bring even more extreme problems for the translation of philosophy to light than are found among Western cases alone, to motivate the development of strategies for handling them, and perhaps even to throw light on the philosophical
questions involved themselves. For instance (to mention an example that is discussed by several of the authors in the present volume both here and in their other work), the well-known absence from classical Chinese of the Western concept of Being raises serious problems for translating Western philosophy into Chinese, prompts the development of various competing strategies for coping with those problems, and may even require a reconsideration and reevaluation of the Western tradition of philosophical theories of Being (from Aristotle to Heidegger).

Several of the articles in the present volume are concerned with this question of how to translate philosophy between Western languages and Chinese (in particular, those by Michael Beaney/ Xiaolan Liang, Tze-wan Kwan, Qingjie James Wang, and Yijing Zhang).

The present volume contains six articles in all. While the first three of them discuss general problems of the translation from and into Chinese, mainly centered around the aforementioned contrast between foreignizing and domesticating approaches, the last three contributions offer case studies on the translation of paradigmatic philosophical and mathematical terms into Chinese, and thereby illustrate some of the general problems involved with specific details.

In his paper “Foreignizing Translation and Chinese,” Michael Forster presents and assesses the foreignizing approach to translation. Focusing on Herder and Schleiermacher, he considers several arguments for, and advantages of, such an approach. But he also points out that its original version was developed almost exclusively in relation to Indo-European languages. He argues that while Herder and some of his successors did already take into account Hebrew as a possibly challenging further case, the Chinese language creates especially radical challenges for foreignizing translation. Drawing in part on examples from classical Chinese poetry, Forster argues that the fundamentally different features of Chinese semantics (e.g., the absence in Chinese of central Western concepts such as ‘being’), Chinese grammar (e.g., the lack of inflection in Chinese), Chinese linguistic music (e.g., the system of tones), and Chinese script (in particular, the ideographic-pictorial dimension of the Chinese characters) all render completely successful foreignizing translation from Chinese into Western languages impossible. Forster argues that although at first sight this might seem to undermine the foreignizing approach, that is not actually the case. For the impossibility of completely successful translation was already a central principle of the theorists of foreignizing translation themselves, who in consequence regarded translation as a matter of approximation to a never-fully-attainable ideal. The aforementioned problems for translation involving Chinese therefore in the end, far from discrediting the foreignizing approach, confirm and radicalize it.

Yijing Zhang, in her contribution on “Translating Philosophy From and Into Chinese in the Light of Humboldt’s Comparativism,” reads Humboldt’s theory of language as a form of comparativism which aims at an understanding of the unity of human nature in the differences of the various languages. On Zhang’s reading, Humboldt’s comparativism entails a commitment to understanding the other in its specific otherness, and to translating accordingly. Discussing the current French debate between Jullien and Billetter, she therefore ultimately argues in favor of Jullien’s foreignizing approach over Billetter’s domesticating approach. Zhang considers Humboldt’s claim that the lack of inflection renders the Chinese language inferior to the Indo-European languages. While she emphatically rejects the derogatory spirit of this assessment, she also argues that we should acknowledge the kernel of truth that it contains: the insight into deep differences. Taking as an example Aristotle’s doctrine that ‘being’ is said in many ways, she argues that while the Chinese language as it already exists does indeed offer several different words which roughly correspond to the several different senses of ‘being,’ there is no single Chinese word that captures not only these different senses but also their unity, which is precisely what Aristotle found expressed in the Greek
verb ‘to be.’ She therefore suggests that the best approach to take when translating this verb into Chinese is to violate the existing rules of Chinese in a foreignizing spirit. On Zhang’s view, it is a mistake when French sinologists equate the positing of radical difference in foreign cultures with taking a derogatory attitude toward them. On the contrary, Humboldtian comparativism ultimately contributes to transcultural understanding precisely by identifying such differences and the problems of untranslatability that they initially pose.

In his contribution “Lexical Field Theory and the Translation of Philosophical Works into Chinese,” Tze-wan Kwan offers a comprehensive systematic account of the difficulties of translating Western philosophical texts into Chinese. He argues from the background of lexical field theory, which holds that the meanings of individual terms are holistically constituted by lexical fields, which are moreover themselves intertwined in various ways. Kwan first discusses difficulties of translation that arise due to the typological distance between the source language and Chinese. He then proceeds to what he considers the real challenge of translation, viz. achieving semantic consistency across multiple lexical fields. Ideally, the meaning of an individual term of the source language should be rendered in a way that is consistent with all other uses of that term in the same and every other text of the source language. Kwan observes that consistency in translation often conflicts with readability, however, and he maintains that when this happens the latter deserves priority over the former. Writing from his lifelong experience as a philosopher, interpreter, and translator, Kwan offers a rich variety of examples of the problems involved, most notably ones drawn from Kant and Heidegger, as well as suggestions and maxims for future work in the translation of philosophical texts into Chinese.

The remaining three contributions turn to case studies on the translation of crucial terms from philosophy and mathematics. In his paper “Transcendence in Being and Time and its Chinese Translation,” Qingjie James Wang contributes to an ongoing debate concerning how best to translate Heidegger’s terms ‘transcendental’ and ‘transcendent’ into Chinese. The main idea is that whereas beginning with Kant’s critical philosophy ‘transcendental’ pertains to a range of a priori conditions of experience, the term ‘transcendent’ in both Kant and Heidegger signifies something that lies beyond experience. Wang first considers three different definitions of ‘transcendental’ in Kant. He then argues, on the basis of a detailed examination of Heidegger’s lectures The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic and Being and Time, that Heidegger’s use of the term ‘transcendent’ is inherently connected to his fundamental ontology of Dasein, in which it mainly signifies the temporal ecstatic modes of Dasein’s existence. Wang concludes that the crucial difference between ‘transcendental’ as something prior to experience and ‘transcendent’ as something beyond experience should be preserved in any suitable Chinese translation of Heidegger.

In their paper on “Logic, ‘logic,’ ‘luo ji’， and 遼輯,” Michael Beaney and Xiaolan Liang discuss the debate over the translation of the term ‘logic’ into Chinese from the first decades of the 20th century. While Yan Fu argued for a semantic translation that was supposed to capture the meaning of the term ‘logic,’ for which he suggested the translation ‘mingxue 名學’ (‘the science of names’), Zhang Shizhao famously opposed any such approach and instead promoted an exclusively phonemic rendering – ‘luoji 邏輯’ – suggesting that we need to allow any such neologism time to grow on us. While Beaney and Liang reconstruct Zhang’s arguments against a semantic translation and for a phonemic rendering in detail, they also point out that phonemic translation itself is not totally unrelated to semantic meaning. In particular, Beaney and Liang argue that the character luo 遼 was carefully chosen out of a range of available homophones because both the character itself and its specific novel combination with the character ji 輯 bear obvious semantic affinities to the connotations that are most commonly associated with the Western term ‘logic.’
Finally, Uganda Sze Pui Kwan’s paper “Misnomer or Mistranslation?” focuses on the translation of the term ‘arithmetic’ into Chinese by highlighting the hitherto neglected work of E. T. R. Moncrieff, a protestant missionary in Hong Kong from 1850–1852, who published a Chinese textbook on arithmetic in 1852. Kwan also discusses the much better-known Alexander Wylie, who published an influential series of mathematical textbooks in Chinese, starting with his *Compendium of Arithmetic* from 1853. Through a detailed philological investigation she argues that Moncrieff’s work is no less important than Wylie’s both in terms of chronological priority and in terms of quality. She also points out that Moncrieff’s and Wylie’s translations of the term ‘arithmetic’ as *suanfa* 算法 and *shuxue* 數學, respectively, differ from today’s practice, in which ‘mathematics’ is translated as *shuxue* 數學, while ‘arithmetic’ is rendered as *suanshu* 算術. Nevertheless, she argues that Moncrieff’s alternative choice of *suanfa* for ‘arithmetic’ is not only appropriate in itself, but also justified by traditional Chinese books on mathematics, and that Wylie was likewise justified in suggesting *shuxue* as another possible translation.