Lin Shu’s Translations

The Han dynasty epigraphist Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124) provides a gloss on translation that is richly suggestive. The entry for the twenty-sixth character under the “wei” 囚 (enclosure) radical in his Etymological Explanation of both Simple and Complex Characters (Shuowen jiezi 說文解字), juan 6, reads: “The character e 訯 means to translate (yi 譯). It comprises the ‘Enclosure’ radical wei and the phonetic hua 化. When a bird catcher makes use of a live bird as decoy, this is called e, and this character is read with the same pronunciation as the character e 訯.” Chinese “philologists” (xiaoxue jia 小學家) from the Southern Tang dynasty onwards have explicated the word rendered “translate” above as meaning: “To transmit the speech of the Barbarians of the four quarters as well as that of the birds and the beasts,” in a manner akin to that of a “bird decoy” (niao mei 鳥媒) which serves to “inveigle” (you 誘) the “various birds” (qinniao 禽鳥), the characters e 訯 (misrepresent), hua 化 (transform) and e 訯 all being variants of the same character.¹ The interrelated and mutually denotive meanings of the words “translate” (yi), “inveigle” (you), “decoy” (mei), “misrepresent” (e) and “transform” (hua) constitute what scholars of poetic diction call “polysemy” or “manifold meaning.”² This spectrum of meanings serve to tease out all the various aspects of translation; its function (“inveiglement”), its unavoidable shortcoming (“misrepresentation”), and the highest sphere to which it can aspire (“transformation”).

The highest ideal of literary translation, it may indeed be said, is “to transform.” A translation which manages to change a work in the language of one nation into the language of another whilst not evincing any of the forced or inflexible usages that derive from differences between language habits, and which at the same time preserves intact the flavour of the original work, may be considered to have entered this “realm of transformation” (huajing 化境). In praising the attainment in translation of just such a sphere, a seventeenth-century Englishman compared the process to “the transmigration of souls” whereby, although the external form of the original is completely replaced, the

¹ For details, see the Etymological Explanations of both Simple and Complex Characters, with Collected Commentaries (Shuowen jiezi gulin 說文解字詁林), ce 28, pp. 2736–38. Cf. also my Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters (Guan zhui bian 管錐編), p. 1171.
inner soul remains exactly the same. In other words, a translation ought to cleave to its original so faithfully that it does not read like a translation, for in its original language a literary work certainly ought not to read like a translation. It was this consideration that led a major Italian poet to reflect that, on the face of it, the desiderata for a good translation were mutually incompatible, even contradictory (paiono discordanti e incompatibili e contraddittorie); in attempting to replicate the unaffectedness, naturalness and spontaneity (inaffettato, naturale o spontaneo) of the style of the author of the original the translator was, by necessity, prone to affectation (ora il traduttore necessariamente affetta) as he followed the original at its every step.

There exists inevitably a hiatus between the language of one nation and that of another, just as it is impossible for there not to be an interstice between the understanding and literary style of the translator and the content and form of the original work. Moreover, there is also frequently a disjunction between the translator’s appreciation of an original work and his or her own powers of expression. To speak only of genre or style here, it may well be that there exist two distinct methods of translation, as identified by Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher. The first method would attempt to “Europeanise” (ouhua 歐化) the translation as far as possible, thus leaving the foreign author in peace and quiet and leading Chinese readers towards him. The second method would seek to “Sinocise” (hanhua 漢化) the translation as much as possible, leaving Chinese readers in peace and quiet to the greatest extent practicable and leading the foreign author towards us (Entweder der Übersetzer lasst den Schriftsteller möglichst in Ruhe und bewegt den Leser ihm entgegen, oder er lässt den Lesermöglichst in Ruhe und bewegt den Schriftsteller ihm entgegen).

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3 See George Savile, First Marquess of Halifax’s letter to Charles Cotton, the translator of Montaigne’s Essays, in Complete Works, W. Raleigh, ed., p. 185. Ulrich v. Wilamowitz-Mollendorff, a great nineteenth-century German scholar of Greek, employs a similar metaphor in the introduction (entitled “Was ist Uebersetzen”) to his bilingual Greek-German edition of ancient Greek tragedies, Euripides Hippolytus.
