Chapter 4

The Birth of a Profession: Translators and Translation in Modern China

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Foreword

Translation has been one of the major occupations of Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century. Translators were at the forefront in defining the direction and the shapes of modernity in China, spearheading the introduction of new ideas and providing models from abroad. However, the socioeconomic circumstances and the organizational environment in which these translations were produced have changed significantly over the course of the century. These changes have in turn affected the texts themselves—Chinese translations from a wide variety of foreign-language sources, ranging from science textbooks and engineering manuals to poetry and novels.

The birth of translating as a Chinese profession was a process that went through several stages between the 1930s and the 1950s and involved different actors, including both translators and the regulatory authorities of the nation-state. During the 1930s and 1940s translators began, for the first time, to emerge as a professional group: specialists who relied on their multilingual skills to earn their living, who worked as full-time cross-cultural mediators, and who identified themselves with and through their occupation. Yet the process of professionalization was completed only in the early 1950s, when the new Communist government stepped up the regulation of intellectuals and their occupations, and redefined the parameters for the work of translators.

The emergence of translation as a profession reflects broader trends towards occupational differentiation in the Chinese intellectual community.

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since the 1930s, especially in major urban centers such as Shanghai. Up to the 1920s, the majority of translations—literary and otherwise—were produced by cosmopolitan and multilingual writers such as Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), or by academics like Pan Guangdan 潘光旦 (1899–1967) and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897–1986). For them, translating was a sideline-business, part of a larger project to reform Chinese culture and society by way of importing ideas and models from abroad. Beginning in the 1930s, however, more and more translators emerged who came to understand translating as a profession in its own right, populated by specialists self-conscious of their mission to mediate between cultures and intent on establishing professional norms. Yet in contrast to other professions—lawyers, journalists, doctors—translation did not develop organizational forms and binding regulatory standards until the early 1950s. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takeover, translators became either salaried employees of the Writers’ Association or, more commonly, were assigned to work with publishing houses in narrowly defined fields of specialization. Division of labor, in line with Soviet models adopted in the 1950s, reshaped the occupational landscape for the Chinese intelligentsia in general, and for translators in particular, making them part of a bureaucratically regulated cultural machinery.

This chapter traces the two distinct stages outlined above, examining the emergence of translation as a profession by way of focusing on the agents involved in this process—intellectuals and the party-state, respectively. After a brief discussion of professions and professionalization in Republican China in general, I will turn to the rise of a new breed of translators since the 1930s. The second section of the chapter follows the career path of Fu Lei 傅雷 (1908–1966), one of the foremost translators of nineteenth-century French fiction, showing how Chinese intellectuals after the 1920s faced increasing occupational competition and were thus forced to specialize in more clearly defined areas such as translation. Fu Lei’s personal trajectory, and those of many other translators coming of age in the 1930s, illustrate the formation of a new profession with its particular identity and the search for its own professional standards. The third section turns to the party-state, discussing the translation reforms after 1949 and the effects of these changes on translators and their work. Taken together, this development paralleled the transition from the literati (wenren 文人) ideal of intellectual generalists (as opposed to specialists), a holdover from imperial times that had still informed the major May Fourth intellectuals. The emergence of a new breed of professional cultural brokers, I argue, marks a significant step in the transition of translating from a part-time occupation into a modern profession, in twentieth-century China.