This chapter starts with a palm-of-the-hand story written by a Shanghai Neo-Sensationist in 1934. It is a genre appropriated from the tenohira no shōsetsu 掌の小説 (palm-of-the-hand story) made famous by the Japanese Neo-Sensationist Kawabata Yasunari, who had learned it from the conte by the French modernist Paul Morand (Peng 2006). Through this story, I would like to demonstrate how a literary genre, having crossed the borders of nations from Europe to Asia, was used in China to ridicule the trend of scientism and modernist pursuits, while taking on aspects quite different from its original Japanese and French models.

The topic of the palm-of-the-hand story is usually about a male narrator ogling a seductive girl. The particular story I am going to analyze, written by the Hong Kong poet Ogai Kamome 鷗外鷗 (or Ouwai Ou, 1911–1995), elaborates on this classic topic, while equating human behavior with insect behavior. Titled “Yanjiu chujiao de sange ren” 研究觸角的三個人 (The three who study antennas), it used the science of insect behavior to interpret love between the opposite sexes in a playful fashion, typical of Neo-Sensationist stories. But the meaning of the story goes beyond humor. Although no names or books are ever mentioned, it evokes Lu Xun’s (1881–1936) advocacy of Jean-Henri Fabre’s (1823–1915) ten volume work Souvenirs entomologiques: étude sur l’instinct et les mœurs des insectes (Memories of insects: study on the instinct and manners of insects; 1879–1907) during the 1920s. Lu Xun, who did not know French, read the Japanese translation, titled Konchūki 昆蟲記 (Book of insects, 1922–1931), of which the first volume was translated by Osugi Sakae 大杉栄 (1885–1923) and vols. 2–4 by Shiina Sonoji 椎名其二 (1887–1962), two anarchists of the Taishō period.

1  An earlier version of this essay was previously published in my monograph Dandyism and Transcultural Modernity: The Dandy, the Flâneur, and the Translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) and has been revised for the present volume.
The intriguing questions this study addresses include: Why were anarchists attracted to Fabre's work? Did it ever occur to Lu Xun, who used Fabre's work to comment on the Chinese national character, that science carried special meanings for anarchism? Was Ogai Kamome, intending to ridicule intellectuals like Lu Xun, aware of the complex implications of Fabre's work, including his famous disputes with Charles Darwin on the theory of evolution? This study will explore how texts and ideas traveled in the Euro-Asian context during the 1920s and 1930s, and how certain values were lost during the transaction, while others were accrued during the process.

As Walter Benjamin tells us in “The Task of a Translator,” meaning “is in a constant state of flux—until it is able to emerge as the pure language”; a text, having transcended language boundaries, reaches its “afterlife” or “the age of its fame” in a new language and culture (Benjamin 1923). Yet, absorbed in the metaphysical concept of the pure language, he never directly addresses the issue as to why the text is transformed after it crosses the borders of languages. Poststructuralist translation theories, following Benjamin, often emphasize the untranslatability or incommensurability of languages, while addressing this issue from the epistemological perspective. The dissemination of knowledge cannot transcend the limitations and traditions of cultures; the needs and limits of the receiving culture complicate the transaction and often force a transformation in the meaning of a foreign text. In examining the travel of Souvenirs entomologiques in the Euro-Asian context during the early decades of the twentieth century, I would like to explore the following issues related to this: Why is a certain text favored and introduced into a new language and culture at a particular historical moment? A translator or a transmitter, with a view to using foreign knowledge to reform the domestic cultural tradition, may choose particular texts that meet this goal. But when foreign knowledge enters into a new language and culture, it may undergo transformation because of the translator’s or the transmitter’s own cultural agenda. Therefore this study emphasizes the agency of the translator and the receiving culture, which play key roles in the selection, interpretation, and transmission of a foreign text.

Science of Love: A Subject of Independent Value?

Scientific concepts or terms, taken at their face value, were often debunked in a tongue-in-cheek fashion in Shanghai Neo-Sensationist stories when they used these terms to describe relationships between the opposite sexes. To illustrate my point, I will analyze “The Three who Study Antennas,” Ogai Kamome’s palm-of-the-hand story published in Furen huabao 婦人畫報 (Women's