Chapter 4

How to Do Things with Words: Yang Jiang and the Politics of Translation

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It seems to me that translation from one language into another, if it be not from the queens of languages, Greek and Latin, is like looking at Flemish tapestries from the reverse side.

Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote

“I don’t have to translate them,” Luo Hou happily informs his colleague Yao Mi in Yang Jiang’s 1987 quasi-autobiographical novel Taking a Bath (Xizao, translated as Baptism). Luo is referring to a translation of some French documents he had been working on, and he further explains that “the originals are extremely valuable. They’re the secret notebooks the old guy brought back from France. He won’t even let them out of his hands for me to use…. He reads them out loud in Chinese and I write down what he says, and that counts as a joint translation.”

The process of “joint translation” (liangren heyi 兩人合譯) that Yang Jiang describes here is reminiscent of the pioneering turn-of-the-century “dual translations” (duiyi 對譯) by Lin Shu 林紓 (1852–1924)—who knew no foreign languages and instead relied on collaborators’ oral interpretations of foreign language novels, which he would then transpose into elegant classical Chinese prose. Lin had turned to translation following the death of his wife in 1897, when friends encouraged him to find an activity to distract him from his grief. His first project was Alexander Dumas fils’ 1848 novel La Dame aux Camélias, which describes an illicit love affair with a courtesan that concludes with her tragic death. The resulting translation, therefore, constitutes a displaced expression of Lin Shu’s mourning for his wife and a reaffirmation of the marital life he had shared with her, even as the passionate love affair at the heart of the work mirrors the intensely collaborative process by which Lin and his collaborators produced the translation itself.

2 Modified from: Yang, Baptism, 141.
While Lin Shu’s translations were immensely popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, he did not receive much scholarly attention until nearly four decades after his death, when Qian Zhongshu published his influential essay “Lin Shu’s Translations” (“Lin Shu de fanyi 林紓的翻譯, 1963), in which he enthusiastically defends Lin Shu’s collaborative translations. Qian opens his essay by citing several Chinese etymological sources to conclude that

the interconnected and semantically interrelated characters yi 譯 [“translation”], you 誘 [“seduction”], mei 媒 [matchmaker], e 訛 [“error”], and hua 化 [“transformation”] constitute what scholars who study poetic language might call a “manifold meaning” [xuhan shuyi 虛涵數意], which appears to reveal not only what translation can accomplish, but also its almost inevitable mistakes, together with the highest order toward which it may aspire. The highest standard of literary translation is none other than hua 化 [“transformation”].

To illustrate one of the implications of this “manifold” approach to translation, Qian cites a remark by the Song dynasty Buddhist monk Zan Ning 贊寧 (919–1002) comparing translation (fan 翻, literally “to turn over”) to the act of turning over a piece of silk brocade, wherein “the back is full of patterns, though they are all reversed.” Qian then juxtaposes this tenth century Buddhist metaphor with Don Quixote’s strikingly similar comparison of translation to the act of “looking at Flemish tapestries from the back,” such that the images from the front remain visible although they are now “full of threads that make them indistinct, and do not possess the smoothness and brightness that characterize the images on the front.” Whereas Don Quixote offers the latter tapestry metaphor to critique the limits of translation, Qian Zhongshu, conversely, cites

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3 Qian Zhongshu, “Lin Shu de fanyi 林紓的翻譯” (Lin Shu’s translations), in Qi zhui ji 贴补记 (Patchwork). Citations in this chapter are from the 2002 Beijing edition. (“譯”、“誘”、“媒”、“訛”、“化”這些一脉通连、彼此呼应的意义，组成了研究诗歌语言的人，所謂“虚涵數意” (manifold meaning), 把翻译能起的作用、难於避免的毛病、所向往的最高境界，仿佛一一透示出来了。文学翻译的最高标准是“化”)
4 Zan Ning, “Yijing pian.” (翻也者，如翻錦綺，背面俱花，但其花有左右不同耳).
5 Cervantes, Don Quixote, John Ormsby, trans. (1885), www.feedbooks.com, 850; Cervantes, Don Quixote de la Mancha, Francisco Rico, ed. (Barcelona: Crítica, 2001), 1144. Ormsby’s classic 1885 English translation of Cervantes’s novel is one of the ones that Yang Jiang consulted while doing her own translation. Here and throughout this chapter, I have silently modified Ormsby’s translation to draw out my comparative points. The original Spanish text of this passage is: Es como quien mira los tápicos flamencos por el revés… aunque se veen las figuras, son llenas de hilos que las escurecen, y no se veen con la lisura y tez de la haz.”