

# Introduction

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Translating Chinese literature into English is a special challenge. There is a pressing need to overcome a slew of obstacles to the understanding and appreciation of Chinese literary works by readers in the English-speaking world. Hitherto only intermittent attempts have been made to theorize and explore the exact role of the translator as a cultural and aesthetic mediator informed by cross-cultural knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity. Given the complexity of literary translation, sophisticated poetics of translation with regard to literary value and aesthetic taste needs to be developed and elaborated more fully from a cross-cultural perspective. It is, therefore, necessary to examine attempts to reconcile the desire for authentic transmission of Chinese culture with the need for cultural mediation and appropriation in terms of the production and reception of texts subject to the multiplicity of constraints in order to shed new light on the longstanding conundrum of Chinese-English literary translation by addressing Chinese literature in the multiple contexts of nationalism, cross-cultural hybridity, literary untranslatability, the reception of translation, and also world literature.

Whether or not the target language is their native tongue, translating from Chinese in to English has always been a challenging undertaking for translators. In the early days after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country experienced manifold hardships in recuperating from a war that had torn it apart. The international environment was not without animosity against China's global status. Yet despite all this, in 1951, this "young" country launched an English magazine titled *Chinese Literature*. It is the first and only official publication dedicated to translating Chinese literature and artworks for foreign countries in a timely and systematic manner. The publication of the magazine is an emblematic milestone in building a cultural bridge to the rest of the world. Since then, sustained efforts have been made to translate Chinese literature into English. This is due in part to the rising need to redress the cross-cultural imbalance in translations into and out of Chinese, which is mirrored in an unequal interaction between China and the West. Apart from the fact that the number of English translations of Chinese literature is disappointingly modest in relative terms, most of these translations need to be greatly enhanced in terms of effectiveness. Asymmetrical transcultural contact is implied by literary translation. All translations, according to André Lefevere, are rewriting practices with two components: ideology and

poetics (Lefevere, 1992, p. vi). While the ideological dimension of rewriting has received much critical attention, the evident but neglected fact that not enough attention has been paid to the poetics of translation is a weak link in research on literary translation in relation to world literature.

This volume examines many facets of transcultural poetics in Chinese literature in English translation. Its scope is by no means confined to modern or contemporary Chinese literature: translations of classical Chinese texts, including poetry, are also covered. Given the variable and intricate nature of literary translation, complex poetics of translation concerning literary value and aesthetic taste is required from a cross-cultural perspective. Although it is desirable to convey authentic Chinese culture through translation, transcultural mediation and reflective appropriation in a variety of contexts are crucial. The central question is how to better deal with this. While this may seem unfashionably prescriptive in modern translation studies, it is at least necessary to look for ways to improve the reading experience of the target text by analyzing published translations to explore the mechanisms and interactions that underlie translation. The extent to which interventions are justified also needs to be closely examined. Displacement and reconstruction complicate transcultural poetics, which are interwoven with dynamics, performance, and transformation, all of which boil down to the conditions and outcomes of reception. Among other things, stylistic features, denotations, connotations, and intertextual collages are seen as insufficiently reproducible, calling into question the aesthetic norms of the target culture and thus the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Translation entails a process of poetically reconfiguring the multiple elements of the original to help the target reader experience a different world in a different but comparable way. The task of transferring and reshaping a cultural context for a translated text has never been easy. Cultural untranslatability or limited cultural translatability requires the translator to search for a corresponding set of aesthetic norms in the target system.

Almost without exception, any translation is likely to cause or provoke disagreement or controversy. Translation shifts meaning from one text to another, not only from one linguistic context to another but also, and perhaps more importantly, from one cultural context to another. To translate something is to rewrite it in another language. The process of rewriting is fraught with tensions and conflicts, as it always involves intervention and manipulation of some kind. The pivotal role that translation plays in modern Chinese history cannot be overstated. The cultural, political, and social landscape of the country has been shaped and greatly influenced by translation into Chinese. China, on the other hand, has made efforts to share its culture with the world. Translating Chinese literature into English has increasingly become a cross-cultural task that requires a high degree of literary acumen and consummate skill. Mainly due to the multiple linguistic and cultural incompatibilities or incommensurabilities between Chinese and English, translators are regularly confronted with translation problems. In keeping with translational poetics, it is also important to understand and conceptualize the inevitable manipulation in translation that occurs when trying to resolve various translation problems. Manipulation can be driven by the contextualized intention to recreate

accessibility, communicate better, and help the target reader respond to a different world and time of experience as a result of translation. Primarily for this reason, transcultural poetics is central to the translation of Chinese literature into English.

The chapters in this volume analyze from different perspectives, offering the reader an understanding of and explanation for the labyrinth of literary translation in the context of China and the West. Cultural untranslatability or limited cultural translatability requires the translator to identify and search for a corresponding set of aesthetic norms in the target system. Offering answers to the questions raised from a variety of perspectives, this book brings together a series of interrelated chapters by translation and literary scholars who examine and analyze the multifaceted forms of translation by identifying pitfalls that threaten and compromise the quality of translation. In addition to addressing specific case studies of the translation of drama, fiction, and poetry, the 12 contributors offer general theoretical reflections that actively challenge traditional concepts and paradigms of literary translation.

A word of explanation seems in order with respect to the definition of Chinese literature discussed in the context of this edited volume. It is broadened to refer to literature written in Chinese, including Chinese texts written in Hong Kong and Singapore, as represented in this collection, as well as in other parts of the world. Chinese-language literature from Hong Kong and Singapore is not adequately represented in anthologies and edited volumes related to the translation into Chinese. Yet they are, of course, part of the Chinese cultural heritage and share the same literary tradition and continuum. Admittedly, due to different historical circumstances and developments, different translation problems are to be expected. Chinese literature in Hong Kong, like its counterpart in Singapore, is a minority literature and also deserves global visibility through English translations. This “Sinophone sphere,” defined as such (Chen, 2015, p. 52), has yet to be adequately explored in terms of English translation. Although both Hong Kong and Singapore are supposedly bilingual, many local writers prefer to write in Chinese or are only competent in it. English translation plays an irreplaceable role in introducing this Sinophone literature to the rest of the world.

In his chapter, “Chinese Text and World Literature,” Yifeng Sun elaborates on the need for careful handling of cross-cultural untranslatability in order to promote the internationalization of Chinese literature. Sun first introduces some crucial concepts of literary translation, namely, poetics, literariness, and aesthetic quality. He then analyzes and discusses the translation practices of famous translators such as Howard Goldblatt and Anna Holmwood to show how to translate Chinese literature into English based on their exemplary translation practices. Despite the elusiveness of the concept of translational poetics, it is explored with a contextualized focus by discussing aesthetic or literary untranslatability, which is coupled with the intricate linkage between Chinese literature and world literature. By acknowledging the importance of translation in the canonization of Chinese literature, the chapter has laid the groundwork for this edited volume. Also, in the context of world literature, Todd Foley begins his chapter, “Chinese Literature in Translation, World Literature as Genre,” by first reporting on the controversy

surrounding the literary works of Mo Yan, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Foley explores the relationships between translatability and universality through a close reading of Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death*. By attempting to examine the translatability of Mo Yan's works and their status in world literature, Foley challenges the traditional conceptualization of world literature and proposes to reconceptualize it as a genre with only a limited degree of universality inherent in it. This chapter dethrones the traditional universal paradigm and argues for a reconceptualization of world literature.

The discussion on the promotion of Chinese literature and the dissemination of the Chinese culture in a globalized world cannot avoid dealing with the translation of poetry, one of China's most classical and prestigious literary genres. In her chapter titled "The Translator's Individual Approach: English Translation of Chinese Poetry," Audrey Hejins attempts to trace the unique fingerprint of translators. She has delineated the translator's individual approach to translating Chinese poetry into English through a close reading of the English translations of the poems of Jidi Majia and Jiang Hao, Yang Mu and Ye Mimi, Xi Xi and Liu Waitong, as well as through an analysis of other textual materials about the translation process or the translator's experience. It is expected that this research will expand our understanding of translation and transcultural value transmission through the lens of translators.

Xiulu Wang has focused on translation anthologies of contemporary Chinese literature. In her chapter, "On the 'Clamour of Voices' in Translation Anthologies of Contemporary Chinese Literature," she highlights some existing problems related to translation anthologies of Chinese literature with a detailed overview of their current path in the English-speaking world. Drawing on the notion of "clamour of voices," Wang emphasizes the need to take cultural diversity and literary heterogeneity into account when compiling translation anthologies, as demonstrated by a case study of a typical translation anthology called *By the River: Seven Contemporary Chinese Novellas*. This chapter has provided some refreshing insights and practical editorial suggestions on how to effectively create a polyphonic literary space through translation anthologies of Chinese literature.

Ersu Ding's chapter titled "Repositioning the Injustice to Dou E in a Global Generic Context" focuses on drama translation as its primary topic of discussion. Despite the fact that it is one of China's best-known tragedies, *The Injustice to Dou E* has not been presented as a piece of tragic drama literature when it was translated to the Western world. Ding's chapter addresses this issue of generic identity. It examines the reasons why *The Injustice to Dou E* was not presented as a tragedy to Western readers, and then provides cogent evidence to support these explanations. This informative chapter clarifies several common misconceptions about Oriental drama in the Western world, as well as the many similarities that the literature of tragic drama shares in both Eastern and Western contexts.

"Translating Traditional Chinese Opera for the Stage: The Cult of Qing and the English Script of *The Peony Pavilion* (The Young Lover's Edition)," the chapter by Wenjing Li, is another interesting case study on drama translation. More specifically, this chapter examines the translation of Tang Xianzu's most famous

drama, *The Peony Pavilion*. It uncovers the translation strategies adopted in the English script of an edition of *The Peony Pavilion* tailored to a modern audience and takes a closer look at the representation of the concept of “qing” in the English script. Though a household name as a playwright in China, he is not as world-famous as his Western counterpart, William Shakespeare, which may be partly due to the unsatisfactory reception of Tang Xianzu’s works in the global market. This study of a successful adaptation of his play could be instructive for the future rewriting of Chinese literature, especially theatrical production.

The chapter by Yi-Chiao Chen, “The Silence of Anxiety and Trauma in the English Translation of *Selected Stories of Xi Ni Er*,” stands out as a unique research contribution in this volume because it is a case study of the translation of Chinese literature from Singapore into English. Based on an in-depth study *Xi Ni Er Selected Stories* and their translation, Chen has pinpointed the two prominent themes that pose challenges to translators: anxiety over losing one’s mother tongue and culture, and the trauma caused by the Japanese invasion. Meanwhile, Chen refers to previous literature and provides viable strategies for solving the translation problems he has identified. This contribution is a practical guide for translators and translation scholars interested in translating or researching Singaporean Chinese literature.

This volume contains three studies of Hong Kong literature that focus on the translation of literary genres, including anthologies, poetry, and fiction. Maialen Marin-Lacarta’s chapter, “Silenced Interstitiality: English and French Anthologies of Translated Hong Kong Literature,” addresses the peripheral status of Hong Kong literature and its representation for international readers. It systematically examines 30 translation anthologies of Hong Kong literature. This research displays a general picture of how well these anthologies have challenged stereotypical images of Hong Kong and disseminated local voices. The results are rather disappointing: Hong Kong literature is still stuck in interstitiality, as their translations fail to capture the uniqueness of Hong Kong literature due to omissions. The way to refute the marginalization of Chinese literature requires learning from the past, in this case, from the inadequacy of the anthologies studied.

Chris Song has pointed out the hybrid linguistic features in Hong Kong poetry. His chapter, “The Untranslatability of Heteroglossia in Hong Kong Poetry,” presents a history of heteroglossic poetry in Hong Kong that spans several critical periods and describes the influence of hybridity on modern Chinese poetry. It also discusses the untranslatability of the heteroglossic elements in Hong Kong poetry, analyzing various factors involved in translating poetry in Hong Kong’s complex context.

Dechao Li’s chapter, “Translating Hybrid Texts in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the English Translation of Chan Koon Chung’s Fiction *Kamdu cha canting*,” also focuses on Hong Kong literature. It mainly analyzes how a hybrid literary text, that is, of Chan Koon Chung’s fiction *Jindu cha canting* (Can-do Tea Restaurant), is treated in the English translation. A close reading of the text reveals that the new language deliberately created by Chan Koon Chung is less salient in the translated version because it does not reflect the unique cultural context of the “in-between”

in Hong Kong. Li contends that a translator may opt for a scenes-and-frames model to better translate hybrid literature. This volume also contains contributions that address the translation of Chinese literature from a more macro perspective and suggest possible methods to tackle problems with the unsatisfactory reception of Chinese literature by international readers. The chapter “Cultural Memory and the Translation of Chinese Literature in a Global Context,” by Xuanmin Luo, stresses the paramount role of major translation in promoting Chinese literature in a global context. Big translation contributes to the construction of collective cultural memory, promoted by various forms of lingual-semiotic translation such as words, texts, images, paintings, music, dances, and even inscriptions. This study argues that the cultural awareness of translators and target readers can be greatly enhanced through big translation, giving marginal literature a permanent place in world literature. This study provides valuable guidance to translators and other stakeholders to pave the way for Chinese literature to enter the world. Acknowledging the status of English as a lingua franca in a globalized world, Ning Wang emphasizes the role of English as an effective tool for promoting Chinese literature and humanities. In his chapter titled “The Function of Literary and Cultural Communication of English,” he analyzes both successful and unsuccessful examples of translating literary and humanities works. He concludes that instead of translating from Chinese into English, a more active form of cross-cultural translation should be chosen, namely, writing directly in English.

## References

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