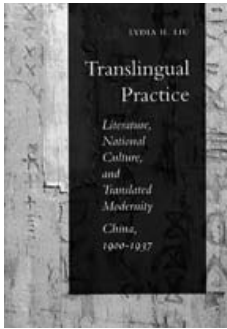


Interview: *translation* speaks to Lydia Liu

translation assistant editor Carolyn Shread met with Lydia Liu in New York City on the occasion of the annual Nida Research Symposium on September 25, 2015. The theme of the symposium was “Untranslatability and Cultural Complexity” and Dr. Liu gave a fascinating and timely talk on “Translation Theory in the Age of Digital Media” with a response by Mary Louise Pratt. The other speakers at the symposium were Michael Wood and Philip Lewis. After the day of talks, Dr. Liu found time to sit down to answer the questions below, some of which were prompted by her article on “The Eventfulness of Translation: Temporality, Difference and Competing Universals” that appeared in Issue 4 of *translation*. It was an honor and pleasure to continue the conversation in this way, weaving together thoughts from the panels and Liu’s innovative approach to translation. It was particularly encouraging to hear about how, having distanced herself from translation after a perceived lack of receptiveness to her initial ideas, notably the proposal of a guest/host paradigm as an alternative or supplement to the source/target dichotomy, when she published *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulation* (1999), Liu has since returned to the field. As someone positioned within the U.S. academy with an Asian perspective and understanding of the history of translation, Liu’s contributions are especially valuable for offering cross-cultural perspectives on translation which, ironically, can be so very culturally constrained. In her research, Liu is perhaps most compelling in her dissections of the ways in which translation has the power to decenter canons and question imperialism and its effects. Her analyses draw on historical context and material culture to produce new and exciting insights, for instance in her comments here on the history of scripts and their relation to translation practices and effects. This interview acts as a hyphen between Liu’s proposals published in the *Politics* issue and her forthcoming article that will appear in Issue 7.

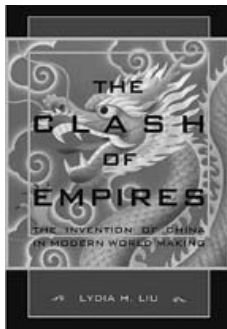
CS: In addition to your position as Professor in the Humanities in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and Director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University, USA, you are also founding director of the Tsinghua–Columbia Center for Translingual and Transcultural Studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. I’m intrigued by the title of this center: do “translingual” and “transcultural” exhaust the concept of translation for you? Do they overlap with translation? By discussing these two terms, I’m hoping we might have an insight into how you conceive of translation.

LL: The center’s name indicates a certain direction of my work that dates from twenty years ago when I published *Translingual Practice*, which thinks about a national literature through its multilingual, multicultural connections. It was not just an attempt to critique nationalism: I tried to demonstrate that if you were to take out all the so-called “foreign” elements from modern Chinese, you would not be able to speak. That is the

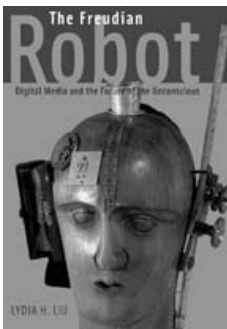


magnitude of what I was trying to point out—not only at the level of vocabulary, at the level of syntax, but also at the level of genre, intellectual discourse, political theory. . .

CS: And at the level of the script?



LL: And at the level of the script, too, because in the twentieth century there were a number of major campaigns to eliminate Chinese characters and replace them with Roman scripts. The “Latinization” or “Romanization” movements were happening all around the world, including in neighboring Korea and Japan. In colonial Vietnam they succeeded because the French crafted their Romanization system so as to get rid of the Chinese characters used to write Vietnamese. That move was replicated in China. There was a point in the twentieth century, in the 1920s and 1930s, when all progressive intellectuals were in favor of Romanization. This would have led to the elimination of Chinese characters, cutting the writing system off from its own history, scholarship, and literature in the same way that Turkish nationalist language reform succeeded in eliminating Arabic script, replacing it with the Roman script. The failure of the Romanization movement in China preserved Chinese literature and its history of writing, but this doesn’t mean that there was no room to incorporate foreign words and neologisms—often via Japanese—into the Chinese script.



CS: Often these types of movements emerge because there is a technological shift. Was this linked to a particular moment in history where a certain technology was driving this change?



LL: Yes, absolutely. First it was the telegraph, which implied the need to do something about the Chinese script because there is too much information to send, and the telegraphic code required simplification. But more importantly it was the introduction of the typewriter that put a lot of pressure on all East Asian societies to reform their scripts. It is interesting that the misrecognition of the typewriter and its limitation led to political campaigns that targeted the native script in China, Japan, and many other places as a backward writing system. Progress

meant forward looking, efficiency, rapid literacy and education, so the national elite believed that their language or their writing systems were backward and must be replaced. They overlooked the limitation of the typewriter and focused on the perceived constraints of the writing system. In hindsight, it was the technology of the typewriter that was backward since it was incapable of processing nonlinear characters. They went so far as to design a number of models for Japanese and Chinese, but these were clumsy. In the 1970s, the Japanese monopolized the manufacture of the fax machine, which could reproduce both graphs and letters. The fax machine made them realize for the first time that it was not the writing system—it was the backwardness of the machine itself that was to blame! The typewriter was too simple to reproduce something that the fax machine could easily capture, and now, of course, the computer can do even better. Today, nobody would even bring up Romanization issues in China or elsewhere because the computer is so advanced in terms of its input methods and its ability to process large quantities of information, whether visual or alphabetical.

CS: My second question is about how you have recently been framing translation as a political problem in your work, notably in your article in the *Politics and Translation* issue (Issue 4) of this journal. Could you talk about the way politics contributes to the way you think about translation?

LL: I have always been unhappy with the way translation studies have been conceptualized. From the mid-1990s I distanced myself from translation studies because I thought it was too constraining—for instance, the source/target language distinction which I tried to refashion as a distinction between host language and guest language in *Translingual Practice*—but nobody seemed to pay attention. Then, when I did my research on the Opium Wars, especially treaties and international law, and saw how central translation was to imperial politics, it became clear to me that translation could provide an illuminating angle for understanding international politics. For instance, one of the chapters in *The Clash of Empires* looks at how the British included an article in the 1858 Sino-British treaty at the Second Opium War,

Article 51, which outlaws a Chinese character. It's pronounced *yi*—at that time written as *i*, Romanizing it—and it is the Chinese character that the British translated as “barbarian,” arguing that the Chinese called the English barbarians on the evidence of that character. After establishing the translation or the semantic equivalence which I dispute in my book, they relied on the unequal treaty to forbid the Chinese to use the character. Of course, they did not outlaw the other side of the equivalence, the English word “barbarian” that they continued to apply to the Chinese. A fascinating story, isn't it? Amitav Ghosh's recent novel *Flood of Fire* draws on the research from my book and retells this story of translation from the Opium War. I sometimes wonder if there are any similar legal prohibitions against other people's words elsewhere in international relations, other attempts to kill a native word through translation. The Chinese word (*yi*) was killed after the Opium War and hasn't been used for more than a hundred years.

In *The Clash of Empires* I also look at how a text in international law was translated into Chinese for the first time and fundamentally prepared the ground for modern political theory in China. Many familiar modern Chinese concepts—including “sovereignty” and “human rights”—were first coined in the 1864 translation called *Wanguo gongfa* from the *Elements of International Law* by American legal scholar Henry Wheaton. This was the first international law book introduced to China or East Asia. The Japanese relied on this Chinese translation to gain an understanding of the modern world and used it to refute the West's extraterritorial demands on Japan, as well as justify their own annexation of Korea and Taiwan. I took that translation as a triple event: a textual event, a diplomatic event, and an epistemological event, anticipating the global importance of sovereign rights and human rights in the twentieth century. In short, the event of that translation did not just “happen” in 1864 and it has traversed a temporality that spans our own times.

CS: I'd like to ask about another element in the title of your article in *translation*: the phrase “competing universals.” Since today at the Nida Symposium the theme was “Untranslatability and Cultural Complexity,” how would you articulate competing universals and untranslatability?

LL: It's only when you begin to worry about the whereabouts of meaning that untranslatability becomes a central concern. The idea of "competing universals" emerged out of the research I did in the archives of the UN to reopen the moment when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted. That document was initially conceptualized as the "International Declaration of Human Rights." In the process of drafting it, the UN Commission on Human Rights decided to change the word "international" to "universal" in the title to emphasize the moral and philosophical importance of the Declaration. One question that I like to put to my students and others is this: do you think the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a Western document? Without thinking twice, most people answer yes. This reaction says something about where the universal lies in most people's minds. My answer is that, on the contrary, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is NOT a Western document. This conclusion is based on my research on the minutes, summary reports, and a lot of other UN archival material as well as the secondary studies of the drafting of the UN document. For instance, Article 1 includes the term "conscience" and it is English, but if you look at the discussions that went on behind the scenes, there was a Confucian concept proposed by the Vice-Chair of the UN Drafting Committee, P. C. Chang, who worked closely to craft the document with Eleanor Roosevelt, the Chair, along with a number of other delegates from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Chang was the one who proposed that human attributes should not just be defined as reason, but must also include *ren*, a written character from Confucian philosophy that consists of a human radical plus number two, which Chang rendered as "Two-man mindedness" whereas I would translate the character as "the plural human." Chang tried to explain the word in a way that would help the committee members reground the idea of human rights in the plurality or sociality of human beings, rather than in individuality. There is a fundamental difference between the two. I see Chang's move as proposing a competing universal. Some people might object that Chang's stance was merely nationalistic, but this is not the case because the Confucian classics were

the shared legacy of many societies across East Asia, including the Japanese and Koreans and Vietnamese who all contributed to the study of Confucianism in the past. Confucianism was one of the civilizational resources that P. C. Chang tried to mobilize. He made many other contributions—for instance, his refusal to let a Christian understanding of natural rights be the dominant, determining factor in the definition of rights. Theological terms were debated and some terms were taken out. Conscience—an inadequate translation of the Chinese, *ren*—was eventually added. This drafting process staged a play of competing universals among the delegates from many countries around the world. Let's not let this document be taken as simply a European-inspired, or American-inspired, document. My argument in the essay is that if you look at the actual day-to-day debates at the UN on concepts—very important concepts that we tend to associate with the Western tradition of human rights today—you would be surprised to find multiple contributions, not only from a Confucian humanist like P. C. Chang, but also from feminist activists, Latin American legal traditions, and Islamic traditions. I conclude that the Declaration of Human Rights is not a Western document but a document that registers competing universals.

CS: I have another question about the notion of “eventfulness.” I’d like to quote one of your phrases from a footnote in your article, in which you suggest that rather than “an endless rehashing or deconstruction of the biblical story” of the Tower of Babel, it might be more productive to think about translation in terms of an event. I wonder if you could talk about this, perhaps relating it to the way that you have discussed the history of translation in specific contexts, such as the Afro-Asian Writers Conferences?

LL: Eventfulness helps me in my attempt to work out the temporality and spatiality of the act of translation. Translation is not just reduced to one instance of textual transfer, based on a communication model—which I reject—or a theological model, concerned with the fulfillment of meaning, since hermeneutics is still part of that tradition. How can we radically reconceptualize the problem of translation in terms of its situatedness in time—whether we call it history or not—and place, where it

happens? Eventfulness might help us grapple with this problem if we were not to think of translation as merely a textual event going after meanings across languages. If we were to think of it, for instance, in terms of the Afro-Asian Writers' Conferences and the multiple translation projects they carried out, through journals, correspondence, conferences, collaborations across many divides, then translation is something else as well—it may inhabit multiple temporalities. I want to free us from thinking of it merely as one time, one place, with its significance limited to whether one gets the meaning or not. To open it instead to the multiplicity of texts, open it to interpretations, open it to other temporalities. Some people argue that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was simply crafted by an international elite, and that it didn't really mean much at that time, in the Cold War. But you never know its mode of existence. Human rights can be appropriated in any given instance and can generate surprising modes of survival. For instance, in the 1930s human rights discourse was mobilized in China to fight fascism when the nationalist government was rounding up Communists and leftwing intellectuals and putting them in jail, but in the Cold War it was mobilized to fight Communist, totalitarian regimes. So it never had a stable meaning. While the Declaration of Human Rights gave us a blueprint, the interpretation itself varies from place to place, time to time, and so I grant the concept itself a certain mobility, an openness to other languages and other intellectual traditions. Eventfulness allows these temporalities to give any particular text a new mode of life in a new language. That's how I wanted to take translation in the direction of eventfulness and then to identify its political mode of being.

The kind of translation work that took place among those who participated in the post-Bandung Afro-Asian Writers Conferences is a good example of this. There was a tremendous effort to collaborate across nations and they produced so much—I think in my article I mentioned one instance of the translation of some of the writers from Africa, such as the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who was known in the 1960s and 1970s as an Afro-Asian writer—he was not primarily thought of as an Anglophone writer, as we call him now in Anglo-American ac-

ademia. I have become wary of the imperial reappropriation of Afro-Asian writers as Anglophone writers, as Francophone writers. . . What does this mean? They disavow that earlier history, the Afro-Asian writers' solidarity and their mutual translations and wipe it out by incorporating them into English departments, or Francophone departments, across American and European universities. Today the teaching of Afro-Asian writers is redistributed among these departments, but in the recent past the writers belonged together in a mode of political solidarity.

CS: Today in your lecture you touched on *la petite lettre*. Since I understand that you are working on psychoanalysis, translation, and media studies, I was hoping for a few comments on these new directions in your thought.

LL: *The Freudian Robot* didn't really focus on translation, although translation was part of it. For instance, the translation of Lacan into American academia is a fascinating story that I dug out when I was writing the book. What puzzled me was that Lacan's reading of Poe's "Purloined Letter" has been interpreted by American translators and American literary critics and theorists as something entirely different from what Lacan was actually doing. I traced that to the *Yale French Studies* (No. 48, *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* [1972], 39–72) translation of Lacan: they eliminated a third of Lacan's original essay, which dealt with cybernetics and information theory, and thereby created something called French theory. The United States has been fabricating French theory for some time—even today with the translation of Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables*! I looked at the Cold War situation during which disciplines did not speak to each other in the United States, but Lacan himself read across the disciplines. He was reading Freud along with cybernetics—so how did we miss this? Using Lacan as an example—but he was not the only one—I point out that there is an economy of translation: French theory has been manufactured by American academia through translation.

CS: In 2013 you published *The Nesbitt Code* in Chinese, which has not yet been translated. Would you consider translating it?

LL: Last month when I was in Beijing, a friend of mine asked me the same question: whether I would consider rendering it into English. I feel ambivalent about this. The main reason is that I wrote this book as part of a collective effort among Chinese writers to rethink the political history of the twentieth century. I was involved in a three-year-long Indian–Chinese writers’ conversation and I consider myself as a writer in Chinese. *The Nesbitt Code*—a kind of pseudodetective novel—emerged out of that conversation because I was very interested in the way that Chinese and India poets and novelists remembered their histories. I wrote the book to reflect on the history of the twentieth century, starting with the Russian Revolution and the writers who went into exile, connecting the life stories of these people to reflect on the legacy of the Chinese Revolution. I’m not sure that people in the West are very interested in the psychic aspect of the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution, whereas in China this resonates because it’s their lived history. Since the Revolution ended in failure, there’s a great deal of melancholy and soul searching in China, a lot of pain associated with that history and many personal tragedies. But a question persists: why did so many intellectuals and scientists—Chinese, British, Russian, and others—rally around the idea of the Revolution? It’s something one cannot brush aside. I wrote this book to confront that question. What has deterred me from translating it into English is that the readership of English language publications is only interested in testimonial literature against the Communist regime. That’s why I hesitate. This melancholy story about the fundamental homelessness of modern intellectuals and the tragedy of the Revolution is not something that would resonate with publishers in the West. Look at how they talk about China! They talk about the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in the same breath as they talk about the Holocaust and are only excited by the evils of Communism. What do they know? Next to nothing! But I’m not at all interested in telling them what transpired in the Cultural Revolution. For the most part, the reading public in the United States and Europe only seek repeated confirmation of the superiority of their political system, the superiority of their culture, and superiority in general. They are not interested in learning

about the difficult existential decisions that faced intellectuals in other parts of the world from the First to the Second World War and all the way to the Cultural Revolution. So you see where my difficulty lies.

CS: Maybe it's not for them. But what about in India? Have you thought of this, since the book came out of these exchanges? In that context do you think there would be an interest?

LL: Maybe, there will be an interest when another worldwide revolution looms on the horizon or a new generation of the intelligentsia is born. Translating the book into English for my Indian friends who actually asked for it would make good sense. That would be a compelling argument. Maybe I should have it translated into English, not for North American and European or British readers but for other English language readers. I'll give it some thought.

References

- Liu, Lydia H. 1995. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity. China 1900-1936*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 2004. *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2010. *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2013. *The Nesbitt Code* (六個字母的解法 non-fiction, in Chinese) Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.



Lydia H. Liu is a theorist of media and translation living in New York. She is Wun Tsun Tam Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University and has published on literary theory, translation, digital media, Chinese feminism, and empire in English and Chinese. Her English works include *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (2010), *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (2004) and, more recently, a coedited translation with Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko called *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (2013).