

Representation

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From: **“The (un)importance of flagging Chineseness. Making sense of a recurrent theme in contemporary Chinese discourses on translation”** (2011)
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“**T**ranslation studies in China is best understood in the context of the cultural politics of the time. Many debates about translation are in fact debates about the perennial problem of China’s cultural relationship with the world. In its most recent form, the debate is about whether the ‘influx’ of foreign translation theories and the wholesale acceptance of these theories has resulted in a loss of identity for Chinese translation studies. A related question concerns the appropriateness of asserting Chineseness in academic discourses on translation. (p. 1)

[...]

On the Chinese mainland, the notion of Chineseness emerged in the theoretical consciousness of scholars in different branches of the humanities in the mid-1980s. That development, which I will analyse in the following pages, was initially a reaction to the theories, imported through translation, which became so influential on the Mainland after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that they came to be regarded not only as a threat to the indigenous modes of scholarship, but also as reflecting a general loss of confidence in Chinese culture. The arrival of other cultural goods—such as films, fast food items, fashion and others—which became equally popular with the Chinese people was also seen by many as a violent intrusion driven by greed and by thinly veiled cultural imperialism. There was concern that unless the development was checked in time, Chinese culture would be abandoned or changed beyond recognition, all its unique features eroded.

This ‘threat’ is generally believed to have come from ‘the West’, with ‘the West’ to be understood in this article as a construct and, in the words of Naoki Sakai, as a “cartograph-

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ic category” (Sakai 2005: 201) denoting “the geographic areas imagined to constitute the West—mainly Western Europe in the nineteenth century, with North America being added later in the twentieth century” (ibid.: 194). Sakai also stresses, rightly I think, that the notion of modernity as a historical development and the process of “developmental teleology” have (mis)led many into believing that the West has the right “to expand and radiate towards the peripheries of the world”, so that “the representation of the world became hierarchically organized into the West and the Rest, the modern and its others, the white and the coloured” (ibid.: 202). The West also came to be regarded as centres of power where theories and models are produced, disseminated to the peripheries, and consumed by local academics keen to be part of the global community. As a category, I think that ‘the West’ is as much of a gross generalization and biased discursive construction as ‘the Orient’. But since this article deals with the historical circumstances in which Chineseness became a discursive topic as a result of the perceived threat posed by theories from ‘the West’, it is necessary to retain the use of such a category whilst bearing in mind that there are “no neutral, uncontaminated terms or concepts”, only “compromised, historically encumbered tools” (Clifford 1997: 39). (p. 2)

[...]

Is the debate about Chineseness, which has taken a myriad of forms and has erupted repeatedly in different cultural and intellectual domains in China since the mid-1980s, indicative of an obsessive compulsive disorder plaguing the Chinese? Is it a minor and purely local affair? What significance, if any, does it have for the international community of scholars?

In the field of translation studies, that significance can be gleaned from the appearance of a number of publications in English thematizing translation in China or discourse on translation in China. The fact that these publications—edited or authored by Chinese scholars based in the PRC—all came out in the first decade of the twenty-first century is significant. It indicates that on the international translation studies scene, Chinese voices are making themselves heard in quick succession. Perhaps the West is beginning to take an interest in listening to what China, or for that matter, what the non-West, has to say, following the initiatives taken by Western scholars themselves to learn from other translation traditions and guard against Eurocentric tendencies. With such an interest, and with the availability of primary material in translation, the West can, should it choose to make the effort, achieve a deeper and more thorough understanding of the Other, an understanding that is absolutely necessary if translation studies is to become “truly ‘international’” (Susam-Sarajeva 2002: 203). Certainly, understanding is a prerequisite for conducting what I have called explorations in a dialogic, fully collaborative mode, meaning a mode of discourse based not on the pattern of “one topic, separate narratives”, but on the exchange of views on equal terms.

The debate about Chineseness also has significance for the international community of scholars. Voicelessness or speaking with a voice not one’s own is not peculiar to the Chinese, but is the common affliction of scholars in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This

being the case, the Chinese sense of culture in crisis assumes significance as an instance of the general sense of vulnerability and defencelessness that is tormenting the (intellectually and culturally) subjugated. The fact that this is the plight of the Third World intellectuals in general is a chastening reminder that although knowledge, ethnicity, identity and nationalism should be separate and independent concepts, in reality they are often hopelessly entangled. We do not live in a post-nationalist world—not yet.

The debate about Chineseness has implications, too, for the promotion of intercultural dialogue in the new geopolitical settings of the twenty-first century. One of these settings will be ushered in by the rise of China as a major power and the radical changes that are likely to follow in the power politics of the world. Bearing this in mind, I would argue that a productive debate about Chineseness will be an enabling condition for intercultural dialogue. As we have seen, that debate, though occasionally given to belligerent assertion of nationalistic sentiments, is equally accompanied by stern warnings against such sentiments and against academic sinocentrism. It is also characterized by discursive attempts to project interpretations and constructions of China via a range of media. The intensity of these activities suggests that Chineseness will continue to be a contested concept, and that the Chinese will be engaged in a continuous process of self-constitution and cultural self-translation. This is healthy. In the course of their history, the Chinese lived all too long in the mentality of a Middle Kingdom. For centuries they were used to imagining themselves as the centre of power, taming and domesticating their nomadic neighbours with their superior civilization and turning them into vassal states. No doubt, there were occasional periods when China lived in self-imposed isolation. It is also true that for much of the last two centuries, the Chinese were driven by the humiliation of national defeat into a pattern of behaviour typical of the cowed and wounded. Nonetheless, the Middle Kingdom still features prominently in the imagination of the Chinese. Unless China becomes fully aware that identity is not fixed but is an ongoing narrative with a plot crisscrossed with possibilities and an indeterminate end, it could easily get trapped in a victim-turned-aggressor complex and become a monolithic entity determined to dominate the world—through either a policy of aggression or cultural imperialism. Far from being conducive to intercultural dialogue, that would only lead to a clash of empires. The debate about Chineseness—whether philosophical or discursive in orientation, and whether ontological, epistemological, existential, hermeneutical, or political and ideological in emphasis—will prevent China from hardening into such a monolithic entity. (pp. 13-14)

THEO HERMANS

From: *Conference of the Tongues* (2007) Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

The thick of it

Let us leave the examples for what they are and try to formulate the more general issue at stake. I think it is at least twofold. First, there is the problem of grasping and gaining access to concepts and discursive practices, in our case those pertaining to translation, in languages and cultures other than our own; this is primarily a problem of hermeneutics, of understanding and interpretation. Secondly, the cross-lingual and cross-cultural study of concepts and discursive practices involves recourse to translation if we want to articulate in our own language what we have understood as happening in another language. We need to translate in order to study translation across languages and cultures.

[...]

Both issues are familiar territory for anthropologists and historians, and for comparatists in a number of other disciplines. Both also carry an element of latent or overt self-reflection on the terms on which and the contexts in which the representation of otherness is acted out. But while these problems have been debated anxiously and extensively by ethnographers and historiographers, they have remained largely and surprisingly absent from the study of translation.

The absence is not inevitable, as becomes clear when we recall some earlier attempts to create a methodology for the cross-cultural study and representation of concepts. In 1932, for example, in his book *Mencius on the Mind*, I.A. Richards developed what he called a “technique of multiple definition” as a way of negotiating alien meaning.

[...]

Twenty years after *Mencius*, in *Speculative Instruments* (1955), Richards reviewed his cross-cultural mapping tool in the essay *Toward a Theory of Comprehending*.... As regards the cross-cultural study of con-

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cepts, he observed, we compare things in certain respects, and we select those respects that will serve our purpose.

[...]

Any similarity thus established between two entities is a function of the respects that were selected as the ground for comparison in the first place. Comprehending, as the perception and positing of similarities and differences, is continually thrown back on an examination of the instrument which enables the similarities and differences to be established.

[...]

This brings us to what Kwame Anthony Appiah has called “thick translation” (Appiah 2004). Appiah means by it the academic, heavily footnoted translation of texts from traditions alien to that of the translating language. I will not use the term in Appiah’s sense. Instead I will use it as a label for a self-critical form of cross-cultural translation studies. The transposition seems appropriate if, as I suggested above, we take the study of translation as consisting in translating concepts and practices of translation.

Appiah grafted his term “thick translation” on Clifford Geertz’s characterization of the ethnographer’s work as “thick description.” This was a notion that Geertz introduced in the programmatic essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” which introduced his collection *The Interpretation of Cultures* in 1973.

[...]

Applying this line of thought to ethnographic work, Geertz notes several practical points. Firstly he insists on both the interpretive and constructivist nature of the ethnographers’ descriptions (1973: 15-16). The point at issue for him is not whether the ethnographer’s thick description presents an accurate account of a particular society...but whether it allows an appreciation both of what is similar and what is different, and in what ways, from what angles,—in what “respects,” as Richards might have said—things appear similar and different.

Finally, thick description keeps the universalizing urge of theory in check. Preferring the microhistories of particular situations, it prides itself on the “delicacy of its distinctions, not on the sweep of its abstractions” (Geertz 1973: 25). As one commentator phrases it, thick description privileges the many over the one (Inglis 2000: 115).

[...]

For all these reasons, “thick translation” seems to me a line worth pursuing if we want to study concepts and practices of translation across languages and cultures. As a form of translation studies, thick translation has the potential to bring about a double dislocation: of the foreign terms and concepts, which are probed by means of a methodology and vocabulary alien to them, and of the describer’s own terminology, which must be wrenched out of its familiar shape to accommodate both alterity and similarity. In other words, thick translation is a double-edged technique. It engages with very different ways of conceptualizing translation, and it serves as a critique of current translation studies. (pp. 145-150)

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From: **“Three Narratives in Dialogue: the Text, the Translators and the Readers”**, presented at the conference “Translation, Identity and Heterogeneity”, organized by the Nida Institute and other institutions at the University of San Marcos, Peru, December 2007.

To see cultures as narratives allows us to see the ‘other’ as an event impossible to capture in rigid or static concepts, univocal or one dimensional. This starting point for a reflection on translation in the context of pluriculturalism carries two consequences. On the one hand it challenges all pretension of absolute equivalency in translations, already refuted by the new translation theories. On the other hand, it re-dimensions the contribution of dynamic and functional equivalencies by radicalizing them.

Now, speaking of dialogue, we need to bring together the elements we are working with, that is, the biblical text, the translator and the reader. In this light, the figures of body and narrative are important in relation to the translator and the reader, the same as the text, because in the end a narrative is also a text and a narrated text is a body. The semiotician Roland Barthes has said that in the circle of Arab scholars they speak of the text as a body. If the body is text, then the translator and the reader are also texts because they are bodies made up of an infinity of interwoven tissues and textures; the text is interwoven; as bodies are weavings of flesh and texts are weavings of linguistic signs, but all are narratives, bodies and texts.

This symbolic terminology is important because it breaks with fundamentalism, giving life, specificity and spontaneity to the three elements in the approach that we are attempting to develop in this essay.

Of these three narrative elements, that of the readers is the motor that starts up the dialogue in the translation process. The Bible is not translated just because, or in order to impose a particular kind of message. It is done in order to share a message that dignifies and empowers the person and it does so with a particular audience in mind that has requested said translation. This happens when that audience wishes to hear or read in its own mother tongue what it has heard or read in another

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