DIGGING THE PIT OF BABEL—RETHINKING THE INTERPRETATION OF 'CHINESE MODERNITY' IN THE CONTEXT OF CROSS-CULTURE

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Are languages incommensurate? If so, how do people establish and maintain hypothetical equivalences between words and their meanings? What does it mean to translate one culture into the language of another on the basis of commonly perceived equivalences? For instance, can we talk about 'modernity' across the East-West divide without subjecting the experience of the one to representations, translations, or interpretations by the other? Who fixes and polices the borders between the two? Are the borders easily crossed? Is it possible to have reliable comparative categories on universal or, trans-historical grounds? And indeed, what does it mean for a contemporary scholar to cross the 'language barrier' between two or more cultures and linguistic communities? With these concerns in mind, this project devotes to rethinking, critically, the condition of contemporary theoretical discourses about East and West, language and power, history and change.

In the title, the tower of Babel is often invoked by theorists of translation to symbolize the chaos of human communication. As if prefiguring the long history of Bible translation, the Babel story itself (Gen 11:6) derives in part from earlier Sumerian legend and made its way into the

Hebrew Bible through adaptation and translation.[1] Babel not only figures the impossibility of translating among the irreducible multiplicity of tongues but institutes a desire of completion and for the original Logos (George Steiner). However, the faith in the original Word does not help resolve the contradiction of a common language when it comes to translating the Bible into vernacular tongues. As Willis Barnstone puts it, 'on the one hand, there is the sacred view that holds to the process of entropy, the idea that any passage between languages implies waste, corruption, and fundamental loss. On the other, there is the constant didactic and messianic need to spread the word of God to potential converts, for which Bible translation is an indispensable tool.'[2] Focusing on the ways in which the perennial question of translatability has been asked in translation theory, their work has actually offered a historical critique of the metaphysical foundation of Western philosophical tradition and, in particular, it Universalist notion of language.

Perhaps, it would be useful to turn to Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' at this point, for not only is Benjamin self-reflexive about his role as a practicing translator but his formulation of cross-linguistic communication follows a new mode of inquiry that promises to take us outside the familiar terrain of universalism and cultural relativism.[3] He dismissed the factor of readers' reception or the 'ideal' receiver as a useful approach to the theoretical issues under question. In his view, the original in the source language and its

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[1] For the prehistory of the Babel story and its implication for the theory of translation, see Barnstone, Willis, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 135-152.

[2] Barnstone, p. 43. And, indeed, there is a great deal more at stake politically surrounding the translation of the Scriptures. As we know, Martin Luther's revolutionary *Verdeutschung* of the Bible into common German became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. He was also celebrated as a great writer, a creator of literary German by Herder and Klopstock.

[3] Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations* Harry Zohn (trans.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.70.

translation in the receptor language must yield to a third concept, or pure language, which 'no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages.'[1] Nevertheless, what is pure language? It binds both the original and translation to Holy Writ and belongs to the realm of God's remembrance where the original and translation co-exist in a complementary relationship. It is in this sense that 'the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them.'[2] Apparently, in this context, Benjamin discloses, wittingly or not, his own profound indebtedness to the story of Babel.

But can the Babel story not be questioned on its own ground? Has the story itself not been translated into and read in numerous tongues and, therefore, always already contradicted the myth of the origin? Through a 'complementary' re-reading of Maurice de Gandillac's French translation of Benjamin, Derrida offers a deconstructionist approach to the problematic of translation theory. He reminds us that the irony surrounding the story of Babel is that 'one pays little attention to this fact: it is in translation that we most often read this narrative' and yet one continues to reiterate the impossibility of translation.[3] Hence, the structural linguist's concern with the original and its untranslatability is now replaced by a fundamental questioning of the metaphysical status of the original and originary text. In this sense, translation is no longer a matter of transferring meaning between languages 'within the horizon of an absolutely

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[1] Ibid., p.80.
[2] Ibid., pp. 70, 82.
[3] Derrida, Jacques, 'Des Tours de Babel' Joseph F. Graham (trans.), in J.F. Graham (ed.), *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 165-208), p.171.

pure, transparent, and unequivocal translatability.'[1] The original and translation complement each other to produce meanings larger than mere copies or reproduction. In other word, the irreducible multiplicity of languages cannot be reduced to anything other than itself, and yet, like proper names, these languages are bound to call for interpretation, translation, and complementarity. Babel and God are examples of such names that simultaneously command and forbid one to translate.

Here, it sounds to me that translation becomes an oxymoron: inasmuch as nothing can be reduced to anything else and translation cannot but say one thing in terms of another, the epistemic violence is committed out of necessity—a condition that circumscribes cognitive understanding itself and must, therefore, be grasped in its proper context. Even so, how does hypothetical equivalence get established and maintained between concrete languages? What needs are served by such acts of equation historically? These are not just technical or linguistic issues that one may hope to resolve in a case-by-case study; rather, they point to forms of practice and power that deserve our foremost attention in cross-cultural inquiries.

My hypothesis, in this study, is that cultural translation of foreign ideas in early twentieth-century China are not simply the linguistic translation of one language into another, to a certain extent, they are very medium in and through which cultural and political power relations are negotiated and implemented, and in the modern era there was a deep asymmetry in the power relations between China and the West. The slippages, distortions, enhancements, and accommodations of meaning that occur as a guest language enters a source language are produced as the source re-appropriates the alien form and inscribes new values to fit it into its own environment and to meet the needs of the time. The target language may simultaneously

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[1] Derrida, Jacques, *Positions* Alan Bass (trans) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), p.20.

serve as a vehicle through which a foreign discursive power becomes embodied within a source culture, lodged deeply in something as pedestrian, unconscious, and everyday as language.

Methodology and Expect Result

I am interested in theoretical problems that lead up to an investigation of the condition of translation and of discursive practices that ensure from initial inter-lingual contacts between languages. Broadly defined, the study of trans-lingual practice examines the process by which new words, meanings, discourse, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the source language due to, or in spite of, the latter's contact/collision with the guest language. Meanings, therefore, are not so much 'transformed' when concepts pass from the target language to the source language as invented within the local environment of the latter. In that sense, translation is no longer a neutral event untouched by the contending interests of political and ideological struggles. Instead, it becomes the very site of such struggles where the guest language is forced to encounter the host language, where the irreducible differences between them are fought out, authorities invoked or challenged, ambiguities dissolved or created, and so forth, until new words and meanings emerge in the host language itself. Since the crucial goal of ASCA seeks to further acquaint and provide practical debates and problem solving, or, even more importantly, to contribute to an understanding of social and political realities, sensitive to the manifold historical contingencies, I truly believe that this project can certainly fix into this framework, especially at the research field of literature and philosophy.

Basically, my goal is to reconceptualise the problematic of 'language' in a new set of

relationships that is not predicated on some of the familiar premises of contemporary theories of language, which tend to take metropolitan European tongues a point of departure. It is my contention that the study of modern Chinese history must take the history of trans-lingual into account. The prominence of the problem of language in the Chinese imagination of modernity can hardly be disputed. Rather than continuing to argue about tradition and modernity as essential categories, one is compelled to ask: How do Twentieth-century Chinese *name* the condition of their existence? What kind of language do they use in talking about their differences from whatever contingent identities they perceive as existing before their own time or being imposed from the outside? What rhetorical strategies, discursive formations, naming practices, legitimizing processes, tropes, and narrative modes impinge upon the historical conditions of the Chinese experience of the modern?

With bearing these concerns in mind, this study intends to expose the wide-ranging Chinese contact/collision with European languages, and literatures, focusing special attention on the period from the turn of the century to the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War (1937), which encompasses the rise of modern Chinese literature and its early canonization. My emphasis on language, and literature, however, does not presuppose a metaphysical divide between representation and reality. What I try to do here is to place language and literary practices at the heart of China's experience of the modern and of its much troubled relationship with the West. It is possible to say that if modern Chinese literature stands out as an important event in this period, it is not so much because fiction, poetry, and other literary forms are transparent vehicles of self-expression that register the heartbeat of history in a mimetic fashion as because reading, writing, and other literary practices are perceived as potent agents in China's nation building and its imaginary/imaginative construction of 'modern' men and women.

In brief, this study is not about translation in the ordinary sense of the word, much less the so-called signification of foreign terms and discourses. To talk comfortably about signification, one would have to assume a good deal about China's confidence in the absolute centrality of its own civilization vis-à-vis the rest of the world, whereas that confidence was almost completely shattered by the presence of the West in the period I examine, so much so that China could no longer maintain a separate identity for itself without making explicit or implicit references to the rest of the world, which is often represented by the West. Nor am I particularly concerned with neutral-sounding, universalizing projects such as the domestication of foreign words in any language contexts—a frequent concern of historical linguistics. The true object of my theoretical interest is the legitimation of the 'modern' and the 'West' in Chinese literary discourse as well as the ambivalence of Chinese agency in these mediated processes of legitimation.

About the Author

An Chu Tee completed Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees in Chengchi University in Taiwan. She then went to the UK where she obtained her second MA degree at the Lancaster University as well as her PhD degree from Manchester University.