

## Chinese Literature in Translation after the Digital Turn

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### **Abstract**

The digital turn in the humanities brings with it a potential for paradigmatic changes, and one of these could be a reevaluation of what constitutes a “translation” of a literary text. In the past, translations were thought to be the bound commodity object sold and read as a self-complete version of the original. But because these objects did not expose the negotiations taking place in the process of translation, they have not been considered sufficient textual bodies to support literary criticism. Literary critics are discouraged from publishing criticism on literature in the absence of recourse to its original language. Since the digital turn, however, translations can include digital archives of drafts, correspondence, notes and other textual embodiments of the translation process through open access archives. With such a wide range of materials to draw upon, scholars from a wide range of other fields can engage not only the content of the texts but create methodologies of reading work in translation. This essay asks how such archives might impact the reception and study of Chinese Literature in relation to the current popularity of world Anglophone Literature.

**Key Words:** Translation, Digital Archive, Chinese Literature, Documentation, World Literature, Cross Cultural Literary Criticism.

### **Chinese Literature in Translation after the Digital Turn**

The Chinese Literature Translation Archive at the University of Oklahoma came about as a practical response to an abstract question: Can we expand our sense of what constitutes a translation to include digital archives, and, if so, how would this expanded sense of translation transform the way literature in translation is studied, taught, and (ultimately) read by non-academic communities? In this short piece, I will only touch on a small fraction of these questions by exploring a hypothetical question: Why has Chinese Literature—and much other world literature in translation—not acquired the same kind of cultural capital as Anglophone world literature in American academia, and how could an expanded sense of translation change this?

To open this line of inquiry further, I would ask why Chinese Modern Literature is not studied on a par with the work of writers like Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Seamus Heaney, and others. The answer at one level obviously comes down to one of language competency and complacency, but there is a wider range of theoretical and critical obstacles undergirded by “print cultural beliefs,” which have in aggregate made it more difficult for scholars to write on and teach literature in translation. One reason for this may lie in the fact that after the “linguistic turn” (poststructuralism/semiotics), literary analysis has performed been grounded in the materiality of signification. This trend has inadvertently reinforced practices and habits of thought nourished

by a Platonic view of mimesis as a deviation from originality. Despite the seeming theoretical contradictions, the fact remains that translated literature was far more likely to be read and discussed outside of language-specific fields prior to the “linguistic turn.” So-called “theory” did not cause this problem, but it has been disappointing to witness how little it has helped either.

The fact is that literary scholars need more than the black box of a printed translation (a commodity form) of a work to write on. If such works were to be opened up by way of a wider and deeper archive of drafts, correspondence, notes, and parenthetical or critical commentary documented by translators during the process of the final commodity translation formation, scholars from outside the translators’ language disciplines would be able to ground their work on a far more richly nuanced semiotic field. My argument is pretty straightforward—during the nearly year-long period a translator spends working on a novel, they accumulate a wide range of material resources (correspondence with authors, editors, other translators, etc.) and a tremendous amount of intellectual work that is not routinely captured or documented (linguistic and cultural questions, negotiations, insights), and this “intellectual property” has never had a place in the form of print-commodities. After the digital turn, however, we are no longer limited to the economics of print economies, and there is almost no limit to the material documentation that can be archived and made available in digital workspaces. The print commodity of a book of poems or novel is rarely the “director’s cut” (translator’s version) of the text, but reflects instead the decisions of editors and others, while excluding any parenthetical intrusion by the translators themselves.

Rather than accepting the market commodity form of translation as a “final” version, translators can create (if compensated) archives of earlier drafts, correspondence between translator, author, and editor, and, ultimately, drafts with as many parenthetical asides and as much critical apparatus as a translator desires (or, depending on the digital spaces these are curated in, contributions from scholars, readers, and others). By expanding the scale in which we imagine the translated text, the very foundation of translation studies can be altered, which I believe would have a wider effect in literary criticism and pedagogy. However, there are two steps to this process. The first is to collect and archive existing translation documentation and papers. Some of this work has been undertaken at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana over the last decade (although not for Chinese Literature in translation). Secondly, these materials need to be digitized and made available to scholars around the world in well-maintained and organized open-access depositories, or in other curated or collaborative digital work spaces.

### ***How Would Open-Access Digital Translation Archives Change Literary Criticism?***

In the academy, literary scholarship is almost exclusively undertaken by scholars who specialize in the language of the original text (Sinologists in the case of Chinese Literature). Due to this convention, literary scholars who are not able to read the original rarely write on Chinese literature because translation is not seen as an adequate substitute for the “source” text. Furthermore, in addition to being

affected by the taboo against relying on translated texts for literary criticism, it must be stressed that Chinese literary texts are often thought to be so “other” that many literary scholars do not feel they have the agency to even enter into a closer proximity to Sinophone texts or their translations. I would like to argue, however, that if translations were not measured on the scale of equivalency with source texts in any conventional sense they could (and should) be read as if they were “just literature” alongside other literary texts in classrooms and in the public at large. But more importantly, this expanded vision of a translated text transforms them into far more than this—each is an historically specific nexus of intercultural and hermeneutical semiotic material fully capable of generating serious scholarship and rich literary and learning environments. Libraries collect and digitize the papers of authors, but translation documentation archives offer a different set of opportunities for scholarship and cultural production.

After the “linguistic turn” it is no longer possible to discuss “referents” or “meanings” without first situating them within the differential structures (contexts) from which they signify. Under these conditions, how can one discuss Kafka, Camus, Sartre, or Kawabata’s work without reference to the chains of signifiers of the original? One thinks of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “minority language” using Kafka as an example. Such nuanced, linguistic theorization requires close structural attention and meta-critical speculation grounded in the original language(s). Following this turn, suddenly, what was previously an afterthought (the language of composition) became a linguistically specific semiotic space which raised new concerns that the “work” of literary criticism could not be done through another language’s “version” of the original, for the “text” itself became inextricably tied to the language of that text. One of the great ironies in this, however, is that theory itself became one of the most successful genres of translated literature, as most Anglophone theorists adopted French or German terminology, methods, and approaches but did not read or cite the originals in their work. In other words, “Continental thought,” as it was called, was primarily consumed in English outside Europe because it was read at the level of reference and not in its specific forms of signification. It has ironically seemed to escape the traps it has helped lay for literature in translation.

For over forty years, the prevailing theoretical idea that literature is imbedded in a given “language” offered a variety of incredibly productive nodes for critical and literary inquiry; but it also provided a new set of enabling reasons to ignore literature in translation and gave rise to the limited economies of exchange taking place in language-specific academic habitats. Given the perceived need to do critical work within the “original” systems of signs, literary critics have often sought literary texts composed in English but written from within vastly differing global structures of feeling, cultural difference, and historically specific realities. When these realities were not anticipated by literary methodologies generated in English literature, this deficiency was ameliorated by postcolonial criticism. Intralingual cross-cultural reading spaces like these appear to have created economies of value that could satiate theory’s need for source language proficiency, while also fulfilling the humanist charge to make literature the primary space for an ethical encounter with the Other. I do not want to draw too simplistic a binary of translated World Literature versus Anglophone

World Literature, but the following example should help articulate the kind of structural problems facing literatures like those written in Chinese when it comes to gaining proximity to readers outside the field of Sinology.

It is striking to note that English Literature graduate students and faculty routinely teach Anglophone works of world literature like those by Achebe or Roy without much grounding in the cultural contexts of Nigeria or Kerala; and yet they often shy away from teaching Chinese short stories by Su Tong or Mo Yan, because they feel unprepared or under-qualified. I would argue that the reason for this sense of disparity in hermeneutic agency arrives on the heels of the operative methodologies created in literary critical circles specific to questions that can be productively asked of Anglophone postcolonial literary texts but that are less well-suited for literature in translation because these works are almost always excluded from the broad conversations taking place in literary studies outside of world language departments.

If the literary critics who have popularized critical nodes like nationalism, gender performativity, or race theory had been reading Chinese literature from the 1980's forward, then migrant labor and other issues around bio-environmental concerns attached to rapid urbanization would have likely been at the forefront of the pedagogical questions we ask literature to engage. Crucial questions about Aesthetics and politics would necessarily have been adjusted. If Modern Chinese Literature had been a part of our common discourse, when Negri and Hardt came to write their critique of postmodern theory in *Empire*, they would likely not have ignored China to the degree that they did; and this work, along with countless others, would have contributed more significantly to rethinking cultural and political thought under the transnational capitalism of the Pacific Era.

My point is simple. Canons are created by the questions we ask of literature, but we cannot generate productive questions if literature is locked away into the insular silos of language-specific disciplines. Therefore, we need to study and talk about literature in translation while not pretending that literature in translation operates within the same semiotic, cultural, economic, or historical networks as intralingual literatures. It follows that we need new tools drawn from and suitable for use within the expanded materials of digital archives.

When we take a translation to constitute a wider network of textual traces (as opposed to the "bound" commodity version), we will find a cultural and institutional space to rethink translation as a vital practice of deep hermeneutic, aesthetic, and cultural engagement. Unfortunately, many translators do not archive their work in this way and thus these materials, which are such a vital part of intellectual and literary history, remain highly vulnerable to damage and, ultimately, loss. To make archiving practices more successful, therefore, the benefits of documentation must be made more explicit to translators themselves. One of the most obvious benefits to translators is the tax deduction they can receive for giving their papers to libraries (usually this would be for late-career translators who have done a good job collecting such work). And of course, examples of other translator archives can inspire those whose works have not been collected to imagine their work receiving the same long-term care as it is preserved and made available to researchers long into the future. However, it is

my hope that a richer form of documentation could also become a “deliverable” with a more direct form of monetization in the form of supplemental pay from publishers or research collections.

### ***The Translation Documentary***

The shift from print to digital media means that we are no longer bound to the single commodity version of translations but can host as many iterations of texts with extensive additional material as can be imagined. If such work could become considered intellectual property, then it is possible to imagine economies of exchange capable of valuing the storehouse of additional cultural materials that attend to the making of any substantial translation of note. On the “consumer” side one could imagine texts as having a “translator’s cut” that, like DVD extras, could provide a running commentary, discussion of key points of difficulty or other important elements in their process. Within the economic structure of print culture, such “critical editions” would not have been possible, but reconsidered under the material conditions of the digital humanities, such versions could become available in different ways as per the specifics of each negotiation with publishers, translators, and authors. Critically expanded versions would not threaten the sales/IP of the commodity version because of their different goals and readers. Of course, such drafts or annotated versions need not contain the whole narrative/text either (think Google Books). In the end, a shift in the material foundations for translation must account for the economics, however, and the prototypes or proof of concepts would likely need humanities funding rather than look for profits from pay walls or other monetization models. In the end, translators need a system of valuation that will allow for a return on these extra efforts. In some cases the cultural or prestige capital might be sufficient: e.g., translation documentaries as a species of academic production akin to peer-reviewed essays, books, papers, etc.; or having one’s documentary “published” in the domain of digital humanities. Others, especially non-academic literary translators, would need supplemental pay in one form or another. As the quality of critical versions rise, the likelihood of potential uses and value would also increase and we would see a more developed economy of exchange rise to handle these transactional flows. In other words, the economy for such documentaries does not yet exist, but library archives with open access policies (like the one pursued by the University of Oklahoma) can lead the development of such resources and help establish working models upon which others can build.

### ***What Would a “Translation Documentary” Look Like?***

In addition to collecting drafts, correspondence and other “papers” collections would likely need to encourage translators to reflect on their experience of translation in order to bring out and make legible the diverse forms of intellectual and artistic and creative labors that coalesce in the form of the work they do. One way to do this may be to have them engage set questions about process. For instance, translators may be asked to respond to how they overcame the four difficulties George Steiner identifies when discussing difficulty of interpretation: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological difficulties.

**Contingent Difficulties:** Things a translator must look up. Obscure references, vocabulary, dialect, idiolect vocabulary, etc. Learning about these will key the non-Chinese reader into the different layers of difficulty embedded in the original text between the general language of the text (say Mandarin Chinese) and these moments of interpretive obscurity.

**Modal Difficulties:** Moments of difficulty that cannot be solved by dictionaries or other reference materials (or recourse to native speakers, authors, etc.).

**Tactical Difficulties:** Hidden patterns deliberately obscured by the author. Here translators often must reference either scholarship about the text being translated or discuss “intentions” with the author to decode in order to re-encode the English version in a cognate fashion.

**Finally, Ontological Difficulties:** This difficulty arrives from the a-priori cultural worldview which gives a text its logic and its reason for being. These in turn impart, even if in a deeply encoded or imbedded way, a perspective and even a cosmology that cannot be explained in translation but that does nonetheless find a way into one’s translation in subtle ways. The translator can reflect on what aspects of these difficulties carry over and how. Translators are close readers of the texts we translate, but we are not necessarily trained to ask such questions directly about our process, and we certainly are not rewarded for doing so. Such speculative digressions might even be thought of as a distraction (again remember we are already talking about \$3 an hour, so halving that is not an option). This is why translators will need to find a way to make such labor recognizable as a valuated form of time/energy exchange.

### **Conclusion:**

If literary criticism cannot accommodate the particular textual condition of World Literature in translation, then the content of this important work will remain locked within the limited economies of language-specific disciplines and only tangentially reach the broader conversations of literary and cultural theory and criticism. Even now, Chinese Literature’s productive churnings of cultural materials drawn from the experience of its rapid urbanization, migrant labor, cyber statecraft, and new micro-macro capitalist politics have yet to be widely introduced as important critical nodes. If we do not ask these questions, the cannon will have no need for literature that addresses them. In the end (by which I mean now), do we want to pursue literary and cultural studies and theory that enables only a critique of Western power formation? Do we want to produce forms of literary criticism that fail to find anything interesting in Chinese literature due to its illegibility? We are already operating in this epistemologically self-enclosed literary space, and I would argue that the field of cultural studies and literary theory as a whole cannot remain vital in a world of transpacific capital and cultural flows unless these fields change. While I am not suggesting that translation archives can “answer” these challenges, I do believe they are one way to imagine new forms of literary criticism based on the new digital conditions of material production and dissemination that could address primary obstacles lying between readers and the texts that need to be included in the broad conversations of our time. If scholars who cannot read a primary in text in Chinese (or another language) can critically engage (write on) works of

literature in translation by learning to write within the translative space of world literary production, then we may be able to bring attention to and derive new methodologies from World Literature.

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