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LU XUN: TRANSLATION AND MODERNISM IN CHINA

At the turn of the twentieth century, as the prestige of the last Qing emperor was eroding and the foreign presence maintained its colonial hold on China, the emerging generation of writers was inspired to translate according to nationalist cultural politics.



Lu Xun, George Bernard Shaw and Cai Yuanpei (chancellor of Beijing University during the May Fourth Movement), after lunch at the home of Sun Yatsen's widow in Shanghai, February 17, 1933. "As we stood side by side," Lu Xun wrote six days later, "I was conscious of my shortness. And I thought, thirty years ago, I should have done exercises to increase my height."

Lu Xun (1881-1936), the great modernist innovator in Chinese fiction, enthusiastically read the Western works rendered by his predecessors and then began developing his own translation projects.

Lu Xun chose to translate science fiction by Jules Verne because it was missing from the Western genres currently in Chinese and because he believed that popularizing science could prove useful "to move the Chinese masses forward." He thought of the Chinese "national character" in the evolutionary and Orientalist terms that circulated in scientific and missionary texts which led him to raise questions at once physiological and humanist, like "what were the roots of [China's] sickness?" and "what was the best ideal of human nature?" And

although he was proficient in several foreign languages, his popularization view of translation led him to adopt the domesticating strategies that prevailed in the last years of the Qing dynasty. He translated into the classical language (*wenyan*) and edited the foreign text for accessibility. In his 1903 version of Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, Lu Xun reduced the number of chapters, gave them summary titles, and, as he explained, revised passages that were "dull or not suited to the [experience] of my fellow countrymen."

Yet the late Qing approach soon revealed its limitations. Since neither Lu Xun nor his brother and collaborator, Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), shared their predecessors' investment in the imperial dynasty, their translating quickly assumed the revolutionary aim of displacing traditional Chinese culture. They wanted to build a vernacular literature that was modern, not simply Westernized, earning the acceptance and esteem of modern Western writers. And to initiate this new literary tradition they came to reject the example of translators like Lin Shu who, Zhou complained, "did not want to learn from foreigners, so they busied themselves in making foreign works resemble the Chinese." In 1909 Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren published a pioneering anthology of translations that sought to register, rather than remove, the linguistic and cultural differences of foreign fiction.

This they did by deviating from late Qing practices in selecting Western texts and in developing discursive strategies to translate them. Instead of sentimental romances and adventure novels, instead of fiction governed by the popular aesthetic of immediate intelligibility and sympathetic identification, they chose the more distancing narrative experiments of romanticism, fiction governed by the elite aesthetic of oblique signification and critical detachment. Since they saw literary translation as a means of altering China's subordinate position in geopolitical relations, they gravitated toward foreign countries that occupied a similar position, but whose literatures threw off their minority status to achieve international recognition. Their anthology contained mostly Russian and Eastern European short stories, including

several by Leonid Andreyev and Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Retaining the foreignness of the text

And instead of the fluency that characterized the domesticating strategies of previous translators, Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren cultivated greater stylistic resistance by closely adhering to the foreign texts, which were often German or Japanese intermediate versions. Hence, they created a translation discourse so heterogeneous that, despite such aids as annotations, the anthology retained its foreignness for readers. Their translations were written in *wenyan* combined with Europeanized lexical and syntactical features, transliterations of Western names, and Japanese loan words. In opposition to the comforting Confucian familiarity offered by many late Qing translations, their strategies were designed to convey the unsettling strangeness of modern ideas and forms.

Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren produced this effect by deriving their translation discourse from another Western literary tradition which, however, they revised according to their rather different concept of national identity. They followed the foreignizing strategies favoured by German theorists like Goethe and Schleiermacher, whose writings they encountered while studying in Japan. "The more closely the translation follows the turns taken by the original," argued Schleiermacher, "the more foreign it will seem to the reader."

Schleiermacher also wanted foreignizing translation to serve a nationalist agenda, to issue a Prussian challenge to French cultural and political hegemony during the Napoleonic wars by contributing to the creation of a German literature. Yet his nationalism was grounded in a belief of racial superiority which ultimately devolved into a vision of global domination. He asserted that Germany, "because of its respect for what is foreign and its mediating nature," was "destined" to preserve the canon of world literature in German, so that "with the help of our

language, whatever beauty the most different times have brought forth can be enjoyed by all people."

This is just the sort of naive cultural chauvinism that Lu Xun questioned in contemporaries who supported the imperial dynasty. His shift to foreignizing translation was intended to build a modern literature that interrogated traditional Chinese culture by exposing its contradictions. In a 1907 essay about the revolutionary potential of romantic literature, he skewered the self-congratulatory songs in which Chinese soldiers "rebuke[d] the servility of India and Poland," reading them as an imaginary compensation for the oppression endured by their own country. In resorting to translation to precipitate stylistic innovations, Lu Xun aimed to revise the self-image of conservative Chinese readers by forcing them, somewhat unpleasurably, to examine their complacencies and to confront their dependence on foreign cultural resources—which is to say their dependence on translingual practices.

The far-reaching consequences of the 1909 anthology indicate that Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren's foreignizing strategies made a difference in Chinese literature. Initially, the heterogenous *wenyan* of their translations proved to be too alienating to the elite readers who comprised their primary audience, so that although the anthology was issued in a printing of 1,500 copies, it evidently sold little more than 40. A second edition was published in 1920, however, and by that point their translation practices had shifted from the margin to the center of Chinese culture, influencing younger writers to pursue the same innovations in the vernacular (*baihua*). These writers associated Euro-Japanized *baihua* with emancipation and used it to translate a suitable range of Western texts, including *The Communist Manifesto* (1920), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1922), and *Faust* (1928). Lu Xun himself explored nationalist themes in vernacular narratives whose formal inventiveness was inspired by foreign writers like Gogol. And because the translation of romantic literature imported a number of psychological terms, the first Chinese novel of socialist realism, Ye Shengtao's *Ni Huanzhi* (1928-29), presented a revolutionary

schoolteacher who strikingly resembled Werther.

The 1909 anthology began as a translation addressed to an elite readership so as to mobilize it against rearguard trends. Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren risked not only deepening the divisions among the various constituencies in Chinese culture, but imposing on them the values of a minority. Yet their influence, however decisive, was neither sufficient nor total in promoting change. Their anthology was in fact joined by such other translation projects as the Union Version of the Bible (1919) in fostering the development of a literary discourse in *baihua*, which subsequently evolved into the national language of China.

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