



Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation

Yifeng Sun and Dechao Li, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. vii +227 pp.

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To cite this article: Reviewed by Baorong Wang (2024) Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation, Translation Review, 118:1, 47-50, DOI: [10.1080/07374836.2024.2315900](https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2024.2315900)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2024.2315900>



Published online: 06 Mar 2024.



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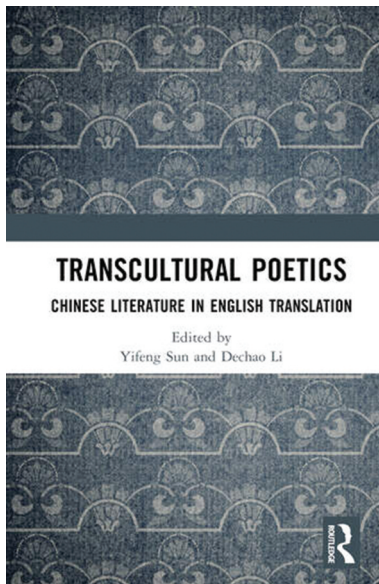


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BOOK REVIEW

Yifeng Sun and Dechao Li, eds. *Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. vii+227 pp.

Reviewed by Baorong Wang



Recent years have witnessed an increasing scholarly attention to the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature for an international audience owing to a growing interest in China and the Chinese government's enhanced efforts to promote "Chinese culture going global" (188). *Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation* is yet another fruit of this admirable enterprise. Co-edited by Yifeng Sun and Dechao Li, editor-in-chief of *Babel: International Journal of Translation* and *Translation Quarterly*, respectively, this book should have much to offer the interested reader. Sun and Li observe that while the ideological dimension of rewriting theory developed by André Lefevere in 1992 has received much scholarly attention, its poetical dimension has been under-examined in Chinese-English literary translation studies. As a result, it is worthwhile to explore this significant yet challenging field by focusing on translational poetics from a cross-cultural perspective. Bringing together twelve established or emerging scholars, *Transcultural Poetics* aims "to shed new light on the longstanding conundrum of Chinese-English literary translation by addressing Chinese literature in the multiple contexts of nationalism, cross-cultural hybridity, literary untranslatability, the reception of translation, and world literature" (1–2).

Sun's contribution, "Chinese Text and World Literature," elaborates on the need for a dexterous handling of transcultural untranslatability to promote the

internationalization of Chinese literature. Delineating crucial concepts such as "poetics," "literariness," and "aesthetic value/quality," he analyzes the translation practices of Howard Goldblatt and Anna Holmwood (who rendered the martial arts fiction of Jin Yong 金庸 into English) to show how to boost Chinese literature's international recognition by retaining the literariness or aesthetic value in source texts without sacrificing acceptability. Sun explores the core term "translational poetics" with a contextualized focus by discussing aesthetic untranslatability, coupled with the intricate linkage between Chinese and world literatures. Noting that "there is no overarching framework for understanding translational poetics that can triumphantly overcome literary untranslatability," Sun argues that we can find proof in Goldblatt's ingenious ways of handling literary untranslatability through mediation and negotiation, "an indexical reference to translational poetics" (30). Insightful and thought-provoking, this opening chapter casts fresh light on the translation and internationalization of Chinese literature by valorizing poetical manipulation. Despite this, a bit more scholarly rigor is sometimes called for, as is the case when Sun readily accepts the Chinese media's report that characterized Goldblatt's translation of the fiction of Mo Yan 莫言 as a "radical rewriting of the original in the form of abridgments" (19). This is only partly true. A recent study finds noticeable changes in Goldblatt's translation strategies in different phases of his career,¹ indicating that his translational poetics has been dynamic and flexible.

Todd Foley begins his contribution "Chinese Literature in Translation, World Literature as Genre" by tracing three famous debates about the evaluation of Chinese literature, involving C.T. Hsia and Jaroslav Prusek in the early 1960s, Stephen Owen and Rey Chow in the early 1990s, and the controversy surrounding the literary works of Mo Yan after his winning the Nobel Prize in 2012. According to him, "they all pivot around the unsolvable problems implicit in the notion of world literature" (36), featuring "an initial negative assessment based on the failure or unwillingness to seriously engage with Chinese literature on its own terms" (38). Foley then explores the relationships between translatability and universality by citing several passages from Mo Yan's fiction in Goldblatt's translation. In so doing, he challenges the traditional conception of world literature and proposes to reconceptualize it as a genre with a limited degree of universality inherent in it. His forceful, cogent argument, that is, world literature is not "an authoritative marker of legitimacy or greatness," but should be conceived of as "a genre of great works that are more translatable than others" (48), might spark other competent translators to work on Chinese literary works. Yet one is skeptical that this reconceptualization alone can

help relieve the perennial anxiety of Chinese writers and scholars who continue to “yearn for universal recognition while bemoaning the unequal standards of literary valuation” (33).

In her chapter “The Translator’s Individual Approach: English Translation of Chinese Poetry,” Audrey Hejins attempts to trace the strategies used by translators Denis Mair, Ming Di, Andrea Lingenfelter, Steve Bradbury, Jennifer Feeley, and Lucas Klein for contemporary Chinese poetry. Focusing on the so-called “untranslatable” items perceived as constituting the “central quality of the source text” (52) that should be conveyed to the English reader, she examines how the translators deal with these problems. The findings verify her hypothesis that the translator’s perception of the source text’s special feature determines his or her individual approach to poetry translation. While its unique perspective on poetry translation and the concrete examples given are laudable, this study proceeds from the dubious premise that “that special feature or central quality is the most challenging to translate because the translator has set himself the task to convey this characteristic to the target reader” (54). Another flaw lies in the hasty conclusion that some translators deploy domestication while others opt for foreignization, as the two concepts are not discussed in the examples.

Offering an overview of English anthologies of translated contemporary Chinese literature published since the 1980s, Xiulu Wang’s “On the ‘Clamour of Voices’ in Translation Anthologies of Contemporary Chinese Literature” focuses on the political and poetic factors that have influenced the criteria for the selection of Chinese works for translation. She finds that the editing and publication of these anthologies tend to be motivated by non-literary considerations. Inspired by David Der-wei Wang’s oft-cited term “众声喧哗” (translated here as the “clamour of voices”), Wang emphasizes the need to take cultural diversity and literary heterogeneity into account when compiling such volumes. This chapter offers practical editorial suggestions regarding how to effectively create a polyphonic literary space for Chinese literature through these collections. However, exploring the translational dimension would have better matched the theme of this title under review. Another hidden problem is its author’s source-culture orientation, which urges her to demand that justice be done to Chinese literature in English translation without giving much consideration to the receiving end.

Ersu Ding’s chapter “Repositioning *The Injustice to Dou E* in a Global Generic Context” deals with classical Chinese drama in translation, focusing on the issue of generic identity. The case under close examination is *The Injustice to Dou E* 窦娥冤 by Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) dramatist Guan Hanqing 关汉卿, who is dubbed “the father of Chinese theatre.”² The play portrays a chaste and filial young woman whose undeserved suffering and death “moves heaven and shakes earth” (84). Regarded as a typical “drama of woe” 苦戏 arousing pity and fear in the Chinese context, it was not presented as a piece of tragic

drama literature when anthologized for English readers. Ding examines the reasons for this generic misreading and provides cogent evidence to support his explanations. This informative chapter clarifies some common misconceptions about Chinese drama in the West, calling for a repositioning of classical Chinese drama “as members of the tragic genre in the global context” (93). From a literary perspective, it is a work of excellent scholarship, though the reader might complain about the absence of section headings.

“Translating Traditional Chinese Opera for the Stage” by Wenjing Li offers an interesting case study of drama translation. Originally written by Ming dynasty (1368–1644) playwright Tang Xianzu 汤显祖, *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 is a critically acclaimed romantic comedy and the most actively translated Chinese drama into English.³ Li’s study focuses on its modern play script titled *The Young Lovers’ Edition*, which was produced to revive the traditional kunqu opera. English surtitles prepared by Lindy Li Mark are provided for English-speaking audiences. Li first analyzes general translation strategies, then focuses on the translator’s treatment of “qing” (love) and “chun” (spring), two central concepts in the play. Her conclusion is that, despite a tendency toward simplification, the English surtitles are “successful in maintaining the poetic style of the original song lyrics,” highlighting the play’s romantic quality as the two recurring terms are “well translated” (111). This chapter is instructive for the future rewriting of Chinese literature for theatrical production yet, without investigating how the target audiences reacted to the English surtitles, Li’s assertion that “the international audience is well served and helped to understand the content of the original libretto text” (111) may strike the reader as ungrounded.

Yi-Chiao Chen’s “The Silence of Anxiety and Trauma in the English Translation of *Selected Stories of Xi Ni Er*” presents a case study of English translations of Chinese literature from Singapore, a former British colony occupied by the Japanese during World War II. Based on a close reading of Xi Ni Er’s short-short stories and their English versions by Goldblatt and Li-Chun Lin, he pinpoints in Xi’s flash fiction two themes that pose challenges to the translator: the author’s deep anxiety over losing his mother tongue and culture, and the trauma caused by the Japanese occupation. His fine-grained textual analysis shows that the original author’s representations of anxiety and trauma by means of homophonic pun, allusion, irony, etc. tend to be “silenced” in the English version. Arguing that the textual and ideological messages intended by the original author should be fully conveyed to the target reader, Chen provides viable strategies for addressing these translation problems. Excellently researched and well written, this chapter, which investigates the unique problems in translating Singaporean Chinese literature into English, is a most welcome contribution.

In her chapter “Silenced Interstitiality: Translated Hong Kong Literature in English and French

Anthologies,” Maialen Marin-Lacarta addresses the peripheral position of Hong Kong literature in the world and its international dissemination. She conducts a close reading of the editors’ introductions in thirty English and French anthologies of translated Hong Kong literature (some of them also including non-Hong Kong Chinese authors), aiming to investigate how these paratexts shape and define Hong Kong literature, which can potentially impact its international recognition. Her findings are rather discouraging: in most editors’ introductions there is a “silenced marginalization” (133) of Hong Kong literature, which is coupled with the invisibility of translation, that is, the fact that the selections are translated from Chinese is not mentioned. Hence, Hong Kong literature’s interstitial nature, a linguistic and cultural in-betweenness, is for the most part passed over in these anthologies. This study offers a unique perspective on Hong Kong literature’s global dissemination though it might have yielded more illuminating findings had the selection of authors and works in translation as well as the various translation strategies also been analyzed.

The translation of heteroglossic literature has remained largely under-researched. Chris Song’s “Cultural Untranslatability of Heteroglossia: Hong Kong Poetry in Colonial Time” focuses on the exemplary productions of four Hong Kong poets, including Quanan 崑南 and Outer Out 鷗外鷗, who often insert English terms and phrases into their Chinese-language poems. Based on a chronological review of heteroglossic Hong Kong poetry from the 1930s to the 1960s, Song explores the extent to which heteroglossic elements in such poems can be rendered properly into English. His conclusion is: the more heteroglossic literature is tied to its colonial context, “the more culturally untranslatable the heteroglossia is,” that is, “[t]he untranslatability often appears to be more cultural than linguistic” (165–66). This chapter continues the scholarly efforts to examine the relationship between heteroglossia and translation in a (post-)colonial context, yet the fact that all the poems discussed by Song are still not available in English indicates that heteroglossia remains a marginal translation problem.

“Translating Hybrid Texts in Hong Kong” by Dechao Li offers a well-researched case study of hybrid Chinese literary texts in English translation. After a comprehensive survey of various interpretations of “hybrid” in Translation Studies, Li adopts Mary Snell-Hornby’s definition of hybrid discourse—“texts written by the ex-colonised in the language of the ex-coloniser, hence creating a ‘new language’ and occupying a space ‘in between’” (174)—since it lends itself well to hybrid literature produced in postcolonial Hong Kong. Analyzing how the hybrid language of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English in the short story “Kamdu Tea Restaurant” by Chan Koon Chung 陈冠中 is treated by its English translators, he finds that its cultural and linguistic hybridity is “lost to some extent” (181) in the English, though it is “both grammatical and idiomatic” (182). Suggesting that the translator can

properly treat hybrid literature by adopting Charles J. Fillmore’s scenes-and-frames semantics, he accordingly offers his revised translations to reproduce the hybrid effects (184). These, however, read rather unnaturally, though the original hybrid elements are accentuated. One might wonder whether it is worthwhile to render so at the cost of readability.

The last two contributions are from the established Chinese scholars Xuanmin Luo and Ning Wang, respectively. In “‘Big Translation’ and Cultural Memory: The Construction and Transmission of National Images,” Luo stresses the paramount role of “big translation” in promoting Chinese culture’s global dissemination. The term, recently developed by Luo himself, is defined as “a set of collective and coordinated translation activities” encompassing the three types of translation proposed by Roman Jakobson, undertaken to “establish a far-reaching collective cultural memory” (194). As the “key to the construction of national images,” collective cultural memory is built primarily on classics. Accordingly, Chinese culture’s global dissemination depends mainly on the translation of such works. Luo points out that many earlier translations of Chinese classics were unreliable; thus, the collective cultural memory of China has been distorted. China’s national image construction will proceed smoothly if these misunderstandings and mistranslations are corrected through “big translation” projects. Luo’s theory is gaining currency in China, yet the extent to which it can guide or promote Chinese culture’s global dissemination remains to be seen.

Finally, Wang’s “The Function of Literary and Cultural Communication of English” emphasizes this language’s role as an effective tool for promoting Chinese literature and culture globally, pointing out astutely that “Chinese culture going global more or less means going to the English-speaking world first” (205). He notes that with the increase of China’s comprehensive power, the call for the construction of China’s national image is growing louder. Since the very image of China is mainly for foreigners to see, it is imperative to “tell China’s story well” (206) in English. Wang finds an exemplary case in Goldblatt’s rendering of Mo Yan’s works into “beautiful and idiomatic English” (206). The second half of this chapter calls upon Chinese scholars to publish internationally “to enable Chinese culture to go global” (209), which departs somewhat from the theme of this book.

Transcultural Poetics presents the reader with a fine sampling of the latest scholarship in this burgeoning field. The title will be of much interest to students of Translation Studies, Chinese literature, Comparative Literature, and East Asian Studies. Still, in hopes that necessary improvements might be made, this reviewer has some quibbles regarding: (1) the uneven quality of the contributions; (2) an underrepresentation of Chinese-language literature, for example, the robust and distinctive Taiwanese literature should also be included; (3) a lack of methodological innovations with

big data, corpus, distant reading, empirical research methods, and so forth, which are not discussed; (4) inadequate reception studies; and (5) language-quality and proofreading problems. Nevertheless, the editors should be warmly congratulated for bringing out such an overall impressive book.

Notes

1. Wang, *Modes of Translation and Dissemination for Chinese Literature*, 246–58.
2. West and Idema, *Monks, Bandits, Lovers, and Immortals*, 2.
3. Chang and Zhang, “English Translations of *The Peony Pavilion*,” 35.

Funding

This research work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China [Project No. 22BYY013: “Chinese Socio-Translation Studies: Theories and Applications” 中国特色社会翻译学理论建构与实践研究] and the Center for Translation Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies [Project No. CTS202106: “Socio-Translation Studies: Theories and Applications” 社会翻译学理论体系建构与应用研究].

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Baorong Wang is professor of Translation Studies at Hangzhou Normal University in Hangzhou, China. In 2012 he received a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Hong Kong. His main research interests are the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature and culture, the sociological approaches to Translation Studies, audiovisual translation, and translation history. He has published two scholarly books and over 100 papers in refereed Chinese and international journals.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2024.2315900>

