



The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature in Translation

Cosima Bruno, Lucas Klein, and Chris Song, eds. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, x+459 pp.

Reviewed by Baorong Wang

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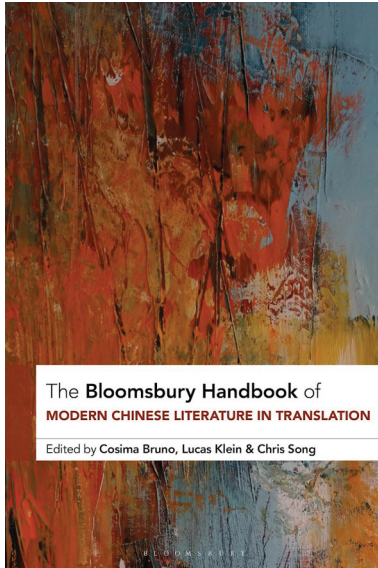


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BOOK REVIEW

Cosima Bruno, Lucas Klein, and Chris Song, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature in Translation*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, x+459 pp.

Reviewed by Baorong Wang



Since Mo Yan's Nobel Prize win in 2012, scholarly attention to the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature has surged. This is in part reflected in the recent publication of several books, including *A Century of Chinese Literature in Translation (1919–2019): English Publication and Reception*, edited by Leah Gerber and Lintao Qi (2021); *Chinese Literature in the World: Dissemination and Translation Practices*, edited by Junfeng Zhao, Defeng Li, and Riccardo Moratto (2022); and *Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation*, edited by Yifeng Sun and Dechao Li (2023). These volumes are small in size, with only a dozen chapters or so each, although this alone does not diminish their value. High expectations thus accompany a hefty volume recently brought out by Bloomsbury Academic. Its three co-editors claim that, given the standard teaching model which “either instrumentalizes translation, making it invisible, or else emphasizes loss in translation,” they intend to “propose a translation- and translation studies-centered discussion of modern Chinese literature” (1). Their handbook portrays translation “as a model for tracing critical aspects of the encounters and clashes between Chinese literature and other literatures of the world” (4). Hence, its thirty-four chapters deal not just with modern (used here to encompass the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) Chinese literature translated into other languages, but

also with foreign literary works translated into Chinese, producing a mismatch between the latter and the book's title. This review focuses on the contributions addressing the central theme, while acknowledging that the unreviewed ones are equally worth reading.

The handbook is arranged into three parts. The six contributions included in Part 1, “The Plural Aesthetics of Translation,” directly concern modern Chinese literature in translation. In “Translations as Versions in Modern Chinese Literature,” Nick Admussen explores this under-discussed topic in his title. Citing Lao She's masterpiece novel *骆驼祥子* (*Rickshaw Boy*) in English as well as several contemporary Chinese writers and their translators, he endeavors to create a workable theory of the version, identifying the active role that specialist readers must play in “versioning” translated literature, that is, choosing one translation of a particular Chinese work after attending to its genetic relationships with potentially multiple previous versions. Admussen argues that this can play a determining role in the work's reception. Tawei Chi's “Negotiations Between the Queer and the Literary: Translations of Chinese-Language Queer Literature” offers a comprehensive survey of this genre of modern fiction from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc., translated into English, French, and other languages. He highlights Pai Hsien-yung (whose novel *孽子* *Crystal Boys* appeared in Howard Goldblatt's English translation) as the most influential Chinese writer on homosexuality across the Sinosphere, observing that the agents involved have to negotiate between the queer and the literary to translate and disseminate this genre effectively.

Zhiyi Yang's contribution, “Voices from the In-Between: Chinese Internet Avant-garde Classicist Poetry at the Crossroad,” focuses on the marginal, largely untranslated works of this kind, classical in prosody while contemporary in language, style, and sensibility. According to Yang, the “in-betweenness” of such poems poses a unique challenge to the translator: “To a large extent, the in-betweenness survives in other languages only through copious footnotes and commentary” (79). One wonders, though, whether there are other factors that make such poetry marginal and under-translated. In “The Success of Chinese Science Fiction,” Cara Healey conceptualizes this popular genre as a mass cultural category wielded by “communities of practice” (103–104), that is, all agents involved in its production, distribution, and consumption. She investigates which individuals and mechanisms have made Chinese science fiction in translation successful, as exemplified by Liu Cixin's Hugo award win in 2015, arguing that, in addition to its thematic appeal

to Western readers, this writing's seamless integration into the genre's global networks of production, distribution, and reception has driven its miraculous success.

Frederick H. Green's "Translating 'Bird Talk': Cross-Cultural Translation, Bergsonian Intuition, and Transnational Modernism in the Fiction of Xu Xu" discusses how Bergson's ideas of intuition are translated into Xu's short story. Written during his exile in Hong Kong; how the story explores the issue of translatability between human and nonhuman forms of communication; as well as how and why Lin Yutang translated this text. Green argues that Lin's free translation, which attempts to bridge perceived cultural divides, reveals his views of translation, cosmopolitanism, and modernity. Jeeseon Hong's contribution, "Ling Shuhua and the Bloomsbury Group: Modernism, Autobiography, and Translation," explores Ling's renderings of her own short stories included in her English memoir *Ancient Melodies* in addition to her interaction with Virginia Woolf and Julian Bell during this process. Hong observes that her fiction writing was heavily influenced by Chekhov and that she translated stories portraying spectacular, festive events where "underneath the dazzling excitement lie indistinct feelings of desolation and sorrows" (135). The English versions are not identical to the original Chinese as Ling had to change modes from episodic short stories to a childhood memoir, in addition to accommodating this narrative shift. Hence, the intricate relationship between translation, autobiography, and modernism.

All but one chapter in Part 2, "Production and Reception of Chinese Literature in Translation," revolve around the central theme. Bonnie S. McDougall explores two translation models and power relations in 1980s China in "Perceptions of Power in Literary Translation: Translators and Translatees," an authoritarian model supported by Beijing's Foreign Languages Press (FLP) and a gift-exchange model practiced briefly by a handful of Chinese writers and foreign translators in China. In addition to proposing a new binary, that is, the "translatee" (a Chinese author seeking a foreign translator) and the translator, her contribution sheds fresh light on the press's workings. Focusing on the Foreign Languages Bureau (FLB) under which the FLP operated, Huijuan Ma in "State-Sponsored Institutional Translation of Chinese Literature, 1951–1983" analyzes its policies during this period as well as both their immediate and far-reaching effects by looking at the bureau's English magazine *Chinese Literature*. She finds that the FLB's translation policies, dictated by Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," affected translators' professional status, the selection of original texts, translation strategies and quality, and these texts' reception in target countries. Ma also notes that the "foreign experts" working at the FLB as language polishers were often not trusted (171).

In "Value-Added Literary Labor in Chinese Literature Translation," Jonathan Stalling explores the use of a new methodology called "Actor-Network Translation Studies"

(ANTS), citing research conducted at the Chinese Literature Translation Archive of Oklahoma University. He uses the term "value-added literary labor" to describe the literary composition process and identifies the crucial differences between Chinese and US literary systems, arguing that these influence our different concepts of "literariness" and impact Chinese-English literary translation. By employing an ANTS approach, Stalling asserts, "we can gain a better understanding of exactly how Chinese literariness is renetworked via translation into the US literary system" (195). Paolo Magagnin's "Chinese Crime Fiction in Translation: The International Circulation of a Peripheral Macro-Genre" investigates the dynamics of the global circulation of these contemporary works, complementing the Bourdieusian concepts of "capital" and "field" with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. Analyzing the international field of translated Chinese crime fiction and its translation flows, he notes that it stands as a "marginal macro-genre" to be consecrated through more translation and circulation. Focusing on Mai Jia and Xiao Bai in translation, Magagnin tries to identify the actors involved in the production network of their translations, their accumulated symbolic capital, and the role played by the two writers in the process.

Drawing on her rich editorial experience for "The Penumbra and the Shadow: Editing Translations of Modern Chinese Literature," Ping Zhu shows how the work of writing, translation, and editing are closely interconnected, though the roles of translator and editor are often invisible. She defines translators of Chinese literature as "shadow writers," while editors recede even further into the darkness as "penumbra writers" (219). She also sees her role as editor as one encouraging the translator to be more creative. Zhu's contribution offers illuminating examples of the editor's essential role in mediating between authors, translators, and readers. In "The Chinese Fiction Book Cover Archive," Marta Dos Santos presents her initial findings from the self-built, open-access database that catalogs the covers of translated modern Chinese fiction. Given that their design impacts how a translated book is marketed, circulated, and received, the publisher's adaptation of covers to different audiences is an important yet hitherto under-explored area of research. Her analysis of these from several European versions of Mo Yan's novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* reveals interesting trends that await further exploration.

Daniel M. Dooghan's "Madmen, Marxists, and Modernists: A Century of Lu Xun in Translation" offers a well-informed, comprehensive survey of this writer's creative work in English translation. He observes astutely that Lu Xun has been represented in English primarily as a literary figure, often at the expense of the polymathic intellectual revealed by the Chinese source. Moreover, Lu Xun as a world literary figure has mutated over the past century in accordance with the commitments of his translators and the purposes of their translations. Dooghan's contribution includes an incisive analysis of a sample

passage from “Kong Yiji” in several different English translations. In “The Translation of Migrant Worker Literature: China’s Battler Poetry,” Maghiel van Crevel investigates mechanisms used in the translation of these works (what he calls “battler poetry”), much of which is “unsophisticated by conventional literary standards” and heretofore under-translated (253, 255). He observes that these renderings are often motivated by the synergy of an aesthetic impulse (primarily addressing a literary audience) and a moral one (for their activist, documentary value). While small-press publishing often leans toward the former, activism platforms and mainstream media frequently lean toward the latter. What mostly gets translated are those battler poems that foreground the hardship of the migrant worker experience.

Rachel Suet Kay Chan’s “Fairy Tales in Action: Chinese Online Fiction, English Fan Translation, and the Fan as the Author” explores the phenomenon of self-publishing Chinese web novels, the popular ones being translated into English by fan-volunteers, some of whom become authors of original English fiction. She delineates the history and context of such web-based publishing, noting that it helps spread Chinese culture. Through the lens of the web-publishing platforms Wuxiaworld and Webnovel, she tries to answer the central question: “How do translators become authors and participate with readers in the creation of web novels in an online translation community?” (269). Yin Zhang’s “Online Translation of Web Novels” discusses the development and mechanisms of international platforms dedicated to the rendering and dissemination of these texts. Her examination of three major translation websites reveals that: the task is often undertaken in the form of team translation by native English speakers of Chinese descent; alternative fantasy and science fiction are favored by translators; additional incentive measures inhere: reader-translator interactions aid the translation of cultural-specific terms. Her small-sized survey shows that these works’ thematic novelty appeals most to readers while respondents are divided on the quality of such translations. As co-translator of the fourth volume of Jin Yong’s *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, a sensational hit amid some controversy, Shelly Bryant addresses in “The Reader in the *Condor Heroes*,” the heated debate in the bilingual Chinese-English community over the translation of character names in the novel, discussing the challenges in treating culture-specific elements and showing that these interlace with issues of character identity, gender, Chineseness, exoticism, and stereotypes in the Chinese original. Along the way, she identifies themes, elements, and issues palatable to a Western audience that generally does not care much about translation issues.

Eight chapters in Part 3, “Living in Translation,” focus on Sinophone literatures in translation. Nicoletta Pesaro’s “Sinophone Routes: Translation, Self-translation, and Deterritorialization” explores the entanglement of factors that affect literary writing and translation in the case of migrant writers. She finds that Eileen Chang’s, Yiyun Li’s,

and Ma Jian’s various dislocations lead to the differences in their “writing” strategies: Chang famously resorts to self-translation while Ma relies on other people’s translations of his work and Li chooses to write directly in English. According to Pesaro, they represent divergent interpretations of the paradigm of migration as a form of translation, and their double identities can be expressive, politicized, and/or repressed. Chris Song’s informative, reflective chapter “Hong Kong and Macao Literatures in Translation: Reconceptualizing Inward and Outward Translation” challenges the conceptualization of “outbound” versus “inbound” rendering with regard to these cities’ bilingual literary traditions. Song examines how official patronage has confirmed the conventional understanding of dualistic, two-way literary traffic there, even as these cities housed both the original and receiving cultures of the regional literature in translation. He thus argues that the two terms widely used in mainland China should be reconceptualized in the case of Sinophone literatures in translation.

Wen-chi Li’s “Taiwanese Literature in Translation: Sinocentric and Eurocentric Predicaments” offers a historical overview of these writings in translation to explore different modes of patronage, the predicaments to which they give rise, and the representation of a literary Taiwan they promote. Li observes that, while pre-1990 translation projects were sponsored by various institutions or individuals, government patronage became the norm after that time. Still, Taiwanese literature “remains on the margins of world literature” (358), which, according to Li, can be attributed to both the Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism that dominate the mechanisms of literary patronage and marketing strategies. In “Translation in Singapore Chinese Literature,” Tong King Lee and E. K. Tan provide an informed survey of this corpus in translation in this multilingual, multicultural city-state. Singapore’s translation policy is inextricably entangled with language politics featuring the structural opposition between Chinese and English. Lee and Tan then turn their focus to English translations of Singapore Chinese literature under state patronage that showcase official multilingualism, delineating how the latent biculturality of Singaporean Chinese writings both enables and impedes the act of translating into English.

In his insightful contribution, “The Translator as Cultural Ambassador: The Case of Lin Yutang,” James St. André observes that early twentieth-century Anglo-American perceptions of Chinese women were “overall negative” (386) and that Confucianism is often blamed for their plight. Focusing on four translations Lin published between 1930 and 1957, he finds that they feature either strong Chinese women or female characters who reject this belief system. St. André’s central argument is that Lin uses translation, adaptation, and original English writings both to challenge and counter Anglo-American stereotypes of China and the Chinese, and that his translation strategy involved heavy intervention in texts, allowing

him better to make his case. Dylan K. Wang's "An Exercise in Futility: Zhang Ailing as a Self-Translator" sheds fresh light on Eileen Chang's practice of self-translation, noting a regular, even obsessive, bilingual practice in her writing career. While Chang was emboldened by praise for her self-translations in 1950s Hong Kong, this was followed by serious disappointments in her US years with self-translation becoming the titular "exercise in futility" for her. Wang argues that Chang's act of rewriting and self-translation was "highly volatile and complex" (402) as evidenced by the tangled web she wove around her novella "The Golden Cangue." He proposes "infinity mirror" (406) as a fitting metaphor for Chang's "bilingual shuttling" (David Der-wei Wang's term; 400), which produces a series of self-images reflected in the two parallel mirrors of Chinese and English.

Mary Mazzilli's "Exophony, Translation, and Transnationalism in Gao Xingjian's French/Chinese Plays" draws on the concept of translanguing ("exophonic") writing to examine the dramatic works this Chinese-born Nobel Prize winner created in these two languages, both of which involve self-translation. Through an analysis of Gao's post-1997 drama, she finds that his translanguing writing features the synergy of separation and contamination, with the former strategy bespeaking an attempt to keep the French and Chinese as separate as possible and the latter evincing his assimilative approach to the two cultures. Lucas Klein's "Born Translated? On the Opposition Between 'Chineseness' and Modern Chinese Literature Written for and from Translation" challenges the critique of Chinese literary works perceived as being created for translation as less "Chinese" or, more specifically, the perception that "Chinese writers accused of writing from and for translation are accused of dumbing-down or universalizing their imagery and rhetoric for easy digestibility" (429). He thus argues against any *a priori* essence of Chineseness. Given that many contemporary Chinese authors write from and/or for translation, Klein raises a crucial issue about the value of translating their works.

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature in Translation might well outdo its predecessors owing to the following features: a wide coverage of authors, genres, texts, and areas (not just mainland China, but also the Sinosphere); the plethora of theoretical approaches adopted, including those from translation studies, sociology, economics, media studies, etc.; a diverse team of competent contributors, including scholars, translators, editors, and teachers; an extensive investigation of important themes and questions thanks to the editors' broad understanding of "translation" as encompassing self-translation, bilingual or translanguing writing, pseudo-translation, etc.; an attempt to

complement case studies with often inspiring theoretical discussions, e.g., Admussen's, Pesaro's, Stalling's, Klein's; and an introduction of useful methodologies and analytical terms such as ANTS, "value-added literary labor" (Stalling), "translatee" (McDougall), "infinity mirror" (Wang), and "editability" (Zhu).

Still, some minor issues might be addressed for a revised edition. The chapters not dealing directly with modern Chinese literature in translation should be relocated or edited into another volume. Given the broad variety of themes dealt with and the number of chapters included here, the book also could be organized into more parts. Some chapters, too, might be more focused on the research questions they explore. Chapter abstracts should be given to help readers quickly grasp the gist of each contribution. Section headings in many contributions need be provided to facilitate reading. Also essential for an edited volume are notes about the contributors, not to mention the editors who are surprisingly not identified. All in all, though, this first handbook of modern Chinese literature in translation will prove a valuable resource for students of Chinese literature, translation studies, comparative literature, and media studies.

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