The weird third thing
Report on a workshop on Chinese poetry and translation

I n this way, translation and writing about translation are even more intertextual and relational than is commonly assumed, and our meeting bears this out. Participants comprised poets, translators, and junior and senior scholars from PhD students to emeritus professors affiliated with thirteen universities in eight countries on four continents, with fifteen papers selected from close to forty responses to an open call. Topics ranged from a queer-feminist engagement with some of China’s newest poetry to a philological-philosophical approach to some of its oldest, from Charles Baudelaire and Paul Calin in Chinese to the Song-dynasty lyric in English — and yet all became part of one ongoing, expanding conversation.

So how does this hang together? Of course, we could have chosen to tread safer ground than the vast, fissured spaces offered by the triptych of poetry + translation + Chinese. For instance, by limiting ourselves to a subgenre, a historical period, or the old good question of how to reconcile the phenomenon of poetic form with the arbitrariness of the sign across languages. But what we were after was a relational than is commonly assumed, and our meeting bears this out. Participants comprised poets, translators, and junior and senior scholars from PhD students to emeritus professors affiliated with thirteen universities in eight countries on four continents, with fifteen papers selected from close to forty responses to an open call. Topics ranged from a queer-feminist engagement with some of China’s newest poetry to a philological-philosophical approach to some of its oldest, from Charles Baudelaire and Paul Calin in Chinese to the Song-dynasty lyric in English — and yet all became part of one ongoing, expanding conversation.

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on translation, in mainland China today. Rui Kunza (University of Trier) traces the various cultural translations of Liao Yiwu’s poetry into English and German, in a tight entanglement of literature and politics that starts with the suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement in China and extends to a complex dynamic engendered by publishers, prize institutions, and prestigious cultural figures, revealing the difficulty of communicating trauma between East and West. Maghiel van Crevel (Leiden University) shows that Chinese-to-English offers a fascinating case study for the genre of the multiple-author translation anthology, because of continuing tumult on the Chinese poetry scene, foreign readers’ unfamiliarity with this poetry, and profound changes in the positionality of anthologists in the early twenty-first century.

There is much to unite these arguments and more to interlink them, within and across the sections. If the key concepts identified above and the groupings that emerged from the workshop share any underlying themes, these include a resounding affirmation of what we know about binaries in the humanities: they usually don’t work. This is not unrelated to our plans to organise the contents of the book under the three section headings outlined above. As in Daoism, where it is the three that gives birth to the ten thousand things—after being engendered by the two and the one and, before that, the Dao—in our volume’s title a triptych also produces a myriad: poetry + translation + Chinese. The move to push past binaries, then, explains the title of this report, “The Weird Third Thing”—which will hopefully metamorphose into the volume’s introduction once the revisions are in and the manuscript is ready for submission. The specifics of the Weird Third Thing come from an anecdote Jenn related during one of the roundtable sessions. In the ‘Mamma Mia!’ episode of the American sit-com 30 Rock, comedy writer Liz Lemon persuades her boss, Jack Donaghy, to tell his long-lost birth father the truth. “You’re gonna be okay,” she tells Jack: his father will either reject him or embrace him. “One of those two things is gonna happen. There’s no weird third thing.” Liz and Jack orchestrate a contest of three potential fathers (is it Mamma Mia?—hence the episode’s name) in which the true father will be revealed. What happens, however, is neither all-libiliterating rejection nor all-healing embrace. Instead, it turns out Jack’s real dad . . . needs a kidney transplant. And guess who he is looking to.

Isn’t there always some weird third thing—not least when dealing with translation? A collection of Chinese and Anglophone poets ‘in mutual translation’, edited by Yang Lian and W.N. Herbert, is called The Third Shore, and as Tara Coleman reminds us in her paper, for Walter Benjamin the meaning of a word exists in a third space beyond (but not above) the two languages that meet in translation. Translation’s proximity to transplantation troubles our reliance on simplistic affects of love or rejection. We are not sure which of our categories—poetry, or translation, or Chinese—is the weird third thing, or that any one of them should always be (they could take turns, right?). But we know that there being a third thing is trouble enough, and a wonderful kind of trouble. Thirdness destabilizes the symmetry of the binary, opening up multiple possibilities. There may be two sides to a coin, but there are more than two sides to a coinage, as there are usually more than two sides to an argument—especially an academic argument. The weird third thing relinks translation to Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’ and the ‘in-between’ of postcolonial theory, and it articulates our approach: exploratory, in progress, embracing of uncertainty, and nimble, mobile. Thirdness also means there is more than a simple ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, with obvious, immediate relevance to translation. To what extent is the role of the scholar of translation to judge translations right or wrong—technically, ethically, or otherwise? Can a translation wrong a person or party, and can it be right if it does so? If a translation is right, is its rightness forever and for always, or only for a certain purpose, time, or place? What rights does the translator have to respect in order for their translation to be right? What rights does the translator have, full stop—or rather, full question mark? What are the valences of aesthetics, ethics, and philology as they intersect in translation? How audible is the homophony of right and write—and of rite, in a vision of a text’s translation as a rite of passage; think recognition, and entry into another community than that which now starts being called the source? Our questions are not uncommon in the field of translation studies as it turns to ethics and aesthetics, but we see the Daoist weird third thing producing its myriad before us. This stuff explains the full name of our book, which we intend to call Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs, after a suggestion by Jacob when we were brainstorming titles. Rights and Wrongs may sound like a binary at first, but it is ‘Rights and wrongs’, after all, not ‘right or wrong’. Like the surface duality under which translation’s thirdness hides, then, our subtitle signals polyvalence, a multifacetedness that insists that the binary would be one of the wrongs. Or, there is no one correct or ‘right’ translation, even if there may be no end to wrong translations. This is not to say that we do not critically assess translations, but we do so with the awareness that we are at some level doing it wrong ourselves if we fail to recognize that the exploration of translation’s uses is as interesting, and as important, as the exploration of its ontologies. Juxtaposing ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ in our title can reveal their duality to be structurally in flux, and productively unstable.

In this way, we hope our title will do what some of the best (Chinese) poetry and some of the best translations do. Ernest Fenollosa, whose notebooks played a crucial role in Ezra Pound’s vision of Chinese poetry and of modernism, wrote that in the “process of compounding, two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them”. We see this to be that weird third thing.

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