

Gu, Ming Dong, ed., Translating China for Western Readers: Reflective, Critical and Practical Essays

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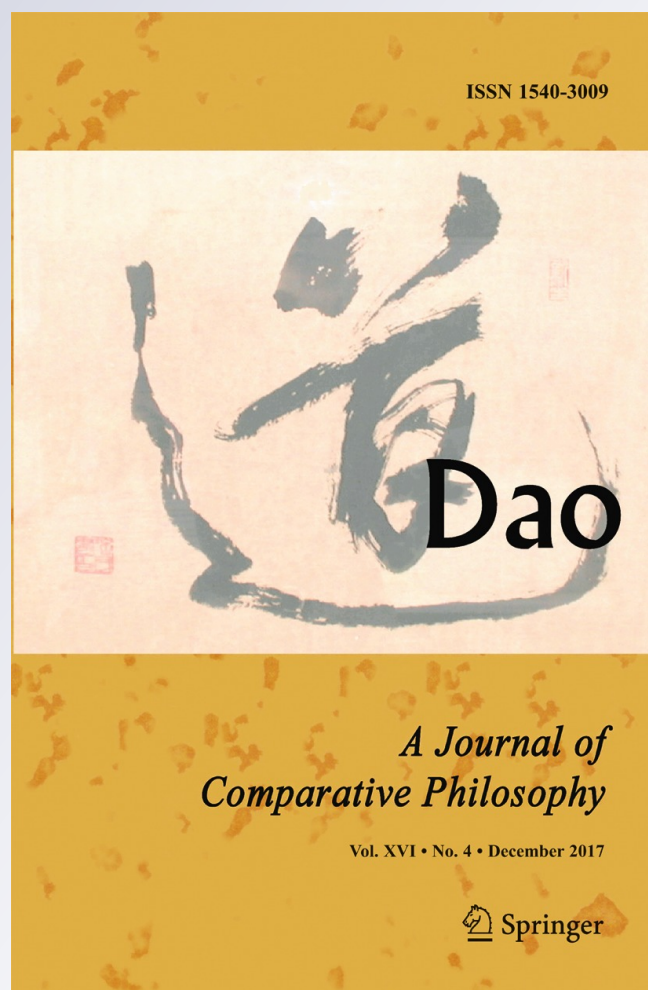
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**Gu, Ming Dong, ed., *Translating China for Western Readers: Reflective, Critical and Practical Essays*
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 329 pages**

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This edited volume of twelve essays originated with a conference on translation held at the University of Texas at Dallas in 2009. A guiding hope of the conference and volume, summarized in the afterword, is that the humanities should pay greater attention to the practice of translation (301). By detailing its nuances and difficulties, the volume challenges the view, sometimes found in philosophy departments, that translation is a rather straightforward process, and significantly less important to the field than original research or monographs. In addition, a second motivation is the relative dearth of translated Chinese texts available in English, compared to the numbers of Western canonical texts long since available in Chinese (1). In response, the volume offers practical and theoretical discussions of how to translate premodern China for the contemporary Western reader.

To illustrate the challenges involved, GU Ming Dong cites LI Zehou's 李澤厚 *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Hua-Xia Meixue* 華夏美學), translated in 2010 by Maija Bell Samei. This is a text in which a contemporary Chinese thinker discusses classical Chinese thought by using modern Western philosophical theories and modern Chinese thinkers. Gu writes, "Only a translator equipped with adequate knowledge of both the Chinese and Western aesthetic traditions is capable of successfully rendering the book into a Western language" (3). While not every translated text deals with aesthetics, successful philosophical translations may require excellent classical and contemporary Chinese language skills; knowledge of Chinese culture, history and literature; the ability to render archaic terms and customs in modern English; and familiarity with the relevant Western philosophical theories.

Such difficulties can also be framed in terms of specific problems in translation. Consider how to translate quotations from well-known classical Chinese texts when

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cited by a contemporary Chinese author. Relying on an established English translation of the passage might not suffice; if the author uses the original Chinese quote to illustrate his or her theory or interpretative standpoint, then the English translation must reflect this distinctive interpretation, which can call for a new rendering of the passage. The translator must be able to grasp the nuance that the author reads into classical texts. It is thus unsurprising that “more and more translators nowadays shy away from translating classic Chinese texts” (3), and many of the volume’s papers are a response to this challenge.

The volume’s attempt to shed light on both theoretical and practical aspects of translation proceeds via three discrete sections. Part 1, “Reflections on Conceptual Issues of Translation,” deals with theoretical frameworks; part 2 concerns “The Art and Craft of Translation,” while the final part, “Critical Assessment of Translation Practice,” is largely a series of personal reflections on the act of translation. Within these loose divisions are found a wide variety of perspectives and topics. These include CHENG Chung-ying’s application of hermeneutics to translation theory (Ch. 1), the difficulties of translating metaphor (Ch. 2), the insidious influence of colonialism in translations (Ch. 3), the challenges of translating Medieval Chinese panegyric poetry (Ch. 6), and comparisons of contemporary translations of Chinese poetry (Ch. 12). Given such breadth, I will here focus on a paper or two from each section that broadly represent the aims and merits of the volume.

The first section attempts to develop theoretical tools to guide and evaluate translation, and GU Ming Dong’s “Readerly Translation and Writerly Translation” (89–116) addresses the dispute about the appropriate aim of translation—whether it should center on the author, the reader, or the text. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ distinction between a “readerly text” and a “writerly text,” Gu divides translations into two kinds—those which aim to reproduce the original text as faithfully and conventionally as possible for the reader (“readerly translation”), and “writerly translation” in which the translator is engaged in a more creative process, “discovering new connections” and producing “new meanings out of the source text” (93). Gu insists that these two approaches are not in conflict but rather “form a continuum of intellectual and artistic development” (94). Nevertheless, Gu questions whether good translation necessarily equates with conveying as accurately as possible the voice of the original author and context. As Walter Benjamin muses in his classic essay, “The Task of the Translator,” which Gu quotes, if the original author does not write for an audience, then why would the translator do so? Building on Barthes’ “death of the author” claim, Gu emphasizes the creative role of the translator, as someone who gives new life to a text. His paradigm is Ezra Pound, whose creative reimagining of the meaning of Chinese characters through their constituent radicals produced critically acclaimed interpretations of classic Chinese poetry. Writerly translation is thus a more complex and in some sense higher form than the more literal but less insightful readerly translation.

Gu’s approach raises several philosophical issues. His emphasis on the creative role of the translator is relevant to comparative philosophy, and the considerations that guide scholars’ encounters with early Chinese texts. On one view, the more that is known about the historical conditions that give rise to the text, the more convincing are claims about the text. However, Gu’s analysis of translation supports the view that maximal knowledge of such conditions is not the only ideal. By raising doubts about whether an original authorial intent or meaning can be isolated, and whether any intended audience

can ever be pinned down, Gu suggests that these texts can be read more creatively, to emphasize new associations between their different elements not explicitly made in the original work, and by bringing literary and conceptual resources to bear on a text from outside its original milieu. By their very nature, the words on the page allow for a certain openness in understanding that can never be entirely corralled by greater knowledge of material or textual history.

Gu's distinction is cogent and neatly highlights the power of the translator to shape the reader's experience. That said, one wonders whether Gu's defense of writerly translation is better suited to branches of the humanities or to texts that are more open to interpretation, such as poetry or the *Daodejing* 道德經. Works presenting a philosophical system, however—including those by the thinker that Gu references as an inspiration for the conference and volume, Li Zehou—might be more suited to readerly translation because they strive to present a coherent conceptual system. Perhaps Gu somewhat overlooks the potential dangers of too much creativity on the part of the translator. For example, insofar as certain early Chinese texts are understood as presenting a social or ethical vision of the good life which can be captured in propositional terms, an excessively creative response to the original text could obscure that vision and thus hinder debate.

In the second section, on translation as a practical task, Michael Nylan's "Translating Texts in Chinese History and Philosophy" is noteworthy. She addresses several salient problems in a single piece, many relevant to philosophers, and offers a series of insightful guidelines to those who attempt philosophical translations. Her chapter also complements Gu's piece, since Nylan is particularly concerned with translations of classical Chinese works (defined by her as 323 BCE to 316 CE) that are insufficiently sensitive to the historical and cultural concerns that shape these texts, and which instead approach them through a narrow focus on logical structure and recognizably modern forms of argument. Focusing only on the classics (*jing* 經) and master's texts (*zi* 子), Nylan's avowed goal in translation is to show the original authors as "reasonable men making reasonable presentations to their peers" (121). To do so requires awareness of the rhetorical goals of these texts (to persuade rulers and people of authority to adopt certain practical suggestions) and of the cultural and historical norms that determined how this goal was achieved. Specifically, Nylan points out that the literary and cultural norms of the time required that ideas be presented in a certain way, in a culture of "public display" where establishing reputation required "impressive spectacle" (128), and the peculiarly modern fascination with explicit and dialectical argument can render translators blind to such features.

For example, even seemingly philosophical texts often make use of verse or literary allusion in their arguments. The uninitiated might consider these superfluous, distracting or even signs of defective argument; but this would be a mistake, insists Nylan. Rather, they reflect the standards of reasonable persuasion of the time, which involved proving the excellence of one's character through the ability both to memorize important works at a time before reproduction was widespread, and by creating "an air of decorum, leisure and erudition" before the audience. After the appropriate reputation was established, more explicit arguments would immediately follow. Nylan thus offers an argument against neglecting parts of the original text in order to make them appear more compliant with modern demands for explicit reasoning and ordered logic. Stated another way, it is a call to not indulge the demands of the contemporary reader.

A very different approach to the practice of translation is found in Richard Lynn's article (Ch. 8). This offers reflections on utilizing internet resources when translating. Lynn's comments derive from his experiences translating the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and several of its commentaries, including that of GUO Xiang 郭象. His approach is avowedly personal and pragmatic, and discusses online resources that have proved useful for that project. This includes a summary of the kinds of digitized commentaries and textual studies that can now be found online—such as the *New Edition of the Grand Compendium of the Philosophers* (*Xinbian Zhuizi Jicheng* 新編諸子集成)—and reflections on how the electronic format has made translation projects easier (such as how relevant sections of original text, commentary, and modern Chinese text can now be easily collated).

Lynn's approach illustrates both a strength and a weakness of the volume: it is admirably inclusive and diverse in scope; but the narrow focus of some articles might be of limited appeal to those not working in that specific area, at least when compared to the more general essays about translation theory. Still, the general reader might profit from studies such as Lynn's. He also reviews a array of useful electronic dictionaries and offers durable insights, such as noting that the new version of the *Hanyu Dacidian* 漢語大辭典 (*Comprehensive Chinese Word Dictionary*) recognizes simplified input (a boon to those long reconciled to laborious swapping between simplified and traditional when using the dictionary). There is a need for a systematic database of online tools and resources available to translators of classical Chinese texts and, since many useful websites remain largely unknown, Lynn's listing of resources used in his work is welcome. It should be noted here that the volume's final contribution also addresses this information deficit, in the form of an extended bibliography of texts dealing with translation—both those with China-focused content and general works in translation theory.

The third and final section of the volume largely consists of a series of personal reflections on translation by translators, many with a focus on poetry. Most of these translators work on China; some do not. Also included here is some discussion of issues with clear philosophical import. One such example is found in CHEN Yuehong's comparison (Ch. 12) of Ezra Pound's translations of Chinese poetry with those of his contemporary and posthumous winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Amy Lowell. The dispute between Pound and Lowell revisits a familiar tension: between being faithful to the original text and achieving beauty or elegance in the translation. Comparing Lowell's concern with accuracy with Pound's concision and imagery, Chen seeks to defuse the supposed tension between beauty and fidelity by drawing on a concept from traditional Chinese aesthetics—*yijing* 意境 (lit. ideorealm, but often translated as “artistic conception” or “aesthetic conception”). Chen argues that *yijing* offers an alternative ideal for literary translations: “aesthetic faithfulness” (278). Translated poetry should capture the aesthetic realm created by the original, even if this means some creative tinkering with the literal meaning of the text. This is a significant repost to those sinologists who lined up to catalogue the linguistic inaccuracies in Pound's versions. The success of Chen's argument is questionable, however, due to the difficulty of articulating *yijing* or what counts as aesthetic fidelity. That said, this argument fittingly returns us to the contention of the volume's editor: that good translation should prioritize the experience of the reader and the creative dimension of translation. Chen's contribution here is an account of how, at least in poetry, reader-centric translations might also retain what was most important to the original author—the mood or aesthetic realm he or she sought to create.

Taken as a whole, the volume is a fascinating compendium of insights and anecdotes into the challenges of translating early China. Its strengths lie in the application of translation theory to the particular field of premodern Chinese literature, and in the array of helpful guidelines and research resources that can be extracted from the collection as a whole. On the downside, the emphasis on poetry (roughly half of the chapters) and the discipline-specific nature of some of the personal reflections might limit the volume's appeal to philosophers. Regardless, this volume is a much-needed contribution to a vital task that Anglophone philosophy is only just beginning to confront systematically—bringing more work by Chinese thinkers to an English language audience. The theoretical and practical difficulties inherent in such a challenge deserve wider debate, and this volume commendably serves that end.