

Book Reviews

Wang Ning. *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives on Globalization and China*. New York: Legas, 2010. \$29.95 Cdn.

Modernity is deeply ingrained in the modern Chinese consciousness and the continuing search for modernity has also given an unusual impetus for reconstructing its culture through translation. While there is no doubt that globalization features prominently in the rapid rise of China, the world is largely unable to make sense of this somewhat unexpected pace of change. China is still a great mystery to the outside world and often misunderstood and misinterpreted. This is not entirely surprising, for China is a country full of perplexing contradictions, characterized by a long history of civilization and driven by a renewed awareness of modernity and modernization. The current state of its political and cultural discourse reflects the anxiety globalization has implanted in Chinese intellectuals, who have made various attempts—not very successfully—to theorize about the traditions and cultural practices in the country and their impact on the wider cultural and social value.

Globalization is relatively new for China, and much as the country seems to benefit from it, the concept still poses a bewildering challenge. As part of cultural reconfiguration after China opened up to the outside world beginning in the late 1970s, globalization has become increasingly relevant to the Chinese reality. However, many ordinary Chinese are totally unaware of the heated debates about globalization. The extraordinary achievements of China's economy have somewhat obliterated concerns about other social, cultural and political implications of globalization. But there is no doubt that the emergence and rise of modern China are invariably attributable to globalization, which helps reconstruct the cultural and intellectual dimensions of Chinese life. *Translating Modernity* makes an important contribution to our understanding of how cultural practice shapes Chinese society and cogently addresses two essential concepts: modernity and globalization in a cross-cultural context. And, by connecting these two concepts, Wang Ning is able to examine the vibrant energy in China's persistent pursuit of modernity and tentative flirtation with postmodernity, which has captured the attention and imagination of many avant-garde literary writers and critics alike.

Modernity, or rather the proverbial search for it, has been a key part of modern Chinese history after the late Qing Dynasty when the country began to be resuscitated through forced exposure, though in a very limited way,

to the outside world. Since then cultural translation has not abated except perhaps during the time prior to and during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. It should be noted that, however, the Cultural Revolution did not completely annihilate cultural translation: although literary works from the West and the Soviet Union were not openly published, they were made available in Chinese translation to elite Party insiders. Also, Chinese literature was translated into English and published in a magazine called *Chinese Literature* published by Foreign Literature Press in Beijing (There was also a French version). In the 1980s, Chinese cultural and intellectual life began to change radically with massive translation projects from Western languages, especially English, into Chinese. Not long after this, in an ironic twist, *Chinese Literature*, the only magazine to introduce Chinese literature to the world, ceased to exist due primarily to financial constraints. Professor Wang laments the imbalance of cultural translation between China and the West as reflected in Chinese literature being scantily translated into English, let alone other Western languages. The only prospect for correcting the vast imbalance is, as he believes, to co-ordinate efforts at the national level to translate Chinese into world languages.

This book is by turns challenging, informative, thought-provoking, and surprising. Each chapter focuses on one theme and the central idea of cultural translation is strongly present in all the chapters attempting a dialogic theorizing of the implications of Western theories to Chinese cultural and intellectual creativity. By drawing on the extraordinarily rich resources of Chinese cultural practice, particularly its modern and contemporary literature and translation as well as Western influence on such literature, it offers some useful insights for understanding a Chinese cultural tradition that traverses a vast amount of debates. One example is particularly revealing: the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to contemporary Chinese literary texts is both timely and effective. However, despite the claim that “any well-educated person in present-day can see an obvious Freudian influence on contemporary Chinese literature” (26), perhaps linear causality is not so easy to establish. Not many Chinese readers are necessarily aware of a psychoanalytical approach to reading the related literary texts and for that matter, it is perfectly possible that the novelists in question might rely on commonsense to describe the inner working of the characters’ minds. Nonetheless, the well-known novella by Zhang Xianliang’s “Half a Man is Woman” is one of a long list of writers who have experimented with a psychoanalytical probing of central characters, showing strong Freudian undercurrents.

Interestingly and revealingly, the question of misunderstanding and misreading is raised and analyzed in the book. First of all, it is only fair to point

out that inasmuch as that Western influence has significantly increased, the quality of translations does indeed vary and many of them are less than satisfactory or downright atrocious. Chinese translations in the early days of the reform period were often hastily and badly done. While contributing to the development of Chinese cultural discourse, these translations caused some serious semantic confusion. For instance, Meyer Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* published by Peking University Press in 1989, though carefully translated by three scholars, is fraught with errors and mistakes. And no less importantly, differing cultural and intellectual assumptions are responsible for misreading or misinterpretation because of different cultural traditions and deep-seated assumptions. Moreover, Wang points to the possibility of "intentional misreading", which can be a good thing, for "innovation" may result from the Chinese perception of Western concepts (31). Further, the book demonstrates the influence exerted by such Western thinkers as Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre on the New Period Chinese literature through analyzing Wang Guowei's aesthetic opinions, which resurfaced in the 1980s to cultivate and nourish literary creativity. Similarly, Sartrean existentialism was at one point a powerful critical apparatus particularly for "the scar literature", thus foregrounding the horrors and traumas of the Cultural Revolution.

Many themes are explored under the rubric of postmodernism, a concept that has fascinated Wang. Usefully enough, he has summarized the six salient features of postmodernism in connection with contemporary Chinese literature, especially in its avant-garde form (pp. 40–1). This six part scheme proposes a dialogic model as a means of shedding light on the complex and fluid nature of postmodern literature in contemporary China. In this regard, it is of great significance to examine the avowed animating influence on modernist and postmodernist literary experimentation in contemporary Chinese novels. It is repeatedly stated that to establish a dialogic relationship between Chinese literature and Western literature, translating Chinese into world languages is of paramount importance. Evidently, it is easier said than done. Wang's remedial proposal is to introduce Chinese literature to the world through translation, and he argues that the consumption of Chinese literature in the West is of great cross-cultural importance for Chinese culture to exert an influence on Western literature, which seems to be cross-culturally felicitous in the contemporary period.

However, this can be seen as an over-reaction on the part of the author to redress the severe imbalance of cross-cultural communication. As for the perceived likelihood of Chinese culture influencing Western literature, Wang offers a somewhat contradictory view. On the one hand, he is confident that

“increasing cultural and academic exchanges between Chinese and Western scholars and writers will fill the gap of Chinese influence on Western literature in the near future” (43). On the other, he turns towards “pessimistic” cultural realism because “statistical data” is contrary to sanguine expectation: “We have imported too much Western theory and introduced too many Western cultural trends and literary words, but we have exported too little Chinese theory and too few literary works!” (58). This insistence on exporting culture is no doubt distinctive but may prove problematic, since such a yawning “trade deficit” can barely be narrowed or eliminated in any artificially manipulative way. The author is entirely right in drawing attention to the grossly unequal patterns of cultural exchange between China and the West, but it is also important to be reminded that inter-cultural dialogue is historically and culturally conditioned, which defies any easy solutions.

Nevertheless, in the context of globalization, this cross-cultural imbalance can be productively addressed by the Chinese. The book has an interesting chapter devoted to the analysis of globalizing postcolonialism. The religious-cultural legacy of Confucianism is presented as a possible counter-balance to the type of globalization dictated by the domination of the West. The author reports that while the Chinese Writers Association has completed an ambitious project to translate one hundred contemporary literary works, the Chinese Government has funded hundreds of Confucian Institutes around the world. Of course, the primary purpose of these Institutes is to disseminate Chinese culture and to further cross-cultural communication rather than move into a global phenomenon of cultural domination. Such a measure can be seen as a crucial part of China’s effort to enhance its cultural modernization as well.

Chinese modernity was once starkly at odds with Confucianism, notably during the May Fourth Movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, Confucianism is still at the very root of Chinese culture. The virtual impossibility of expunging the near-religious doctrine is widely acknowledged. In order to promote Chinese culture, there is a good reason to revive it. *Translated Modernities*, therefore, duly highlights and persuasively discusses the importance of reconstructing a transformed Confucianism, or Neo-Confucianism. Wang is no doubt correct in insisting on the enduring value of Confucianism. As he sees it, traditional Confucianism can function to supplement with Western globalization. Inevitably and inextricably, the revaluation of Confucianism has rekindled interest in traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, Neo-Confucianism has become increasingly influential in China. Chinese scholars nowadays are more confident than ever before. In the past, there was a strong preference for one kind or another of Western theory

to underpin their theoretical inquiry. Today, fast translations between Chinese and Western languages, particularly English, thanks to the internet, allow the rapid dissemination of information and new ideas, and the academic ecology has thus changed significantly. This changed literary and critical practice calls for a rewriting of Chinese literary history in Chinese. For the author, it is not enough to just promote the Chinese language, which, as he observes, is becoming a major world language, but more importantly, the study of Chinese literature should include a high variety of Chinese or Chineses for the purpose of composing literary texts.

While Wang admits that “[c]onfronted with Western influence and globalism, revisiting Confucianism is certainly a positive step” (62), he shows no concern whatsoever for the effects of the worldwide promotion of Chinese culture in the form of Confucian Institutes. He maintains that “global Neo-Confucianism” (63) will not cause clashes with the Western civilization, as long as bridging dialogues between civilizations takes place constantly. Indeed, how such “bridging dialogues” have been and can be conducted is a truly challenging question posed to humanistic scholars. He observes: “... after hundreds of year’s [sic] of revisions, reinterpretations and reconstructions, especially by Tu Wei-ming, Cheng Chung-ying and other overseas Chinese scholars, dramatic changes have taken place in today’s Neo-Confucianism” (75). In other words, Confucianism is continuously renewed and critically scrutinized. The localization of Western theories and ideas is a prerequisite for deconstruction and reconstruction before it is possible for China to make more visible contributions to knowledge in a global context.

The all-important advent of the internet is an unmistakable sign of cultural globalization, and the language of the internet is duly discussed, seen by the author as “being challenged by “the rise of Chinese” (83). Given the ever-increasing number of internet users in China, most of whom use Chinese, localization has become as very important aspect of modern life. It is thus true that English in its “linguistic hegemony” (92) is indeed challenged globally, but remains the dominant media language, which is translated into Chinese for local consumption. In addition, the wide use of English as an international academic language provides striking evidence of its hegemony. Among other things, English is the most effective means to globalize scholarship. Likewise, the international role of English worldwide has many implications to the Chinese literary language. And the translation of English literary works has produced an enduring impact on the Chinese literary language which has undergone significant metamorphosis. Due to Western influences, such a language has been repeatedly “colonized”. In a way, it has become a “borrowed” language (149), but more precisely, it is a language with many “loaned” words

and syntactical constructions. And a literary language is always an innovative one, ready to experiment with new modes of expression. All this constitutes China's "cultural modernity" (149). In this particular sense, linguistic and cultural colonization is seen in a positive light, although it may be potentially controversial.

Nevertheless, American-style cultural globalization remains a serious concern. *Translated Modernities*, in this respect, offers a large amount of empirical evidence about the social, political and cultural complexities of the issue. Wang argues that "In today's China, many people simply hold that globalization means Westernization, and Westernization, Americanization, embodied in the world-wide popularization of McDonalds, Hollywood and the English language in Oriental and Asian countries" (67).

Young children love McDonalds, and the so-called "cultural colonization" has permeated Chinese society as an inevitable part of globalization. However, made in China products sell well globally, including in America. This is a true picture of globalization which draws heavily on European colonialism in the nineteenth century. Dialogue between cultures is essential to understanding global issues. Globalization does mean the flow of commercial as well as cultural products.

It is clear that a more constructive understanding of globalization is called for, and as the book indicates, dialogues can help not only understanding but also (re)production. New ideas are often locally (re)produced in a different form. As Wang writes, "Like any Western theories or cultural trends, once it has entered [China], it will be subject to certain metamorphoses and finally generate new and different versions and meanings. That is, globalization cannot occur until it has been localized, or becomes "glocalized" (68). This is very true but it also implies that "Western theories or cultural trends" are part and parcel of globalization, and the author's grasp of the reality of globalization in China is patently firm. In the realm of critical theory and cultural exchange, glocalization puts a positive spin on globalization in cross-cultural engagement. In a broad sense, an importation of foreign ideas invariably goes through some form of cultural translation and hence transculturation, which, along with a shifting dialogic focus, gives rise to something different, with formal, structural, and cognitive consequences for Chinese cultural modernity. As a result, traditional Chinese literary discourse is enriched and transformed by translating and working with Western literary and critical works. Cultural globalization is in fact a crucial impetus for the cultural and intellectual creativity of modern Chinese life.

Glocalization is best exemplified in creative constructions and interpretations of global texts. The book includes a concise chapter on Ibsen in re-

lation to Chinese modernity and even postmodernity. His *A Doll's House* has been performed by Chinese and Norwegian actors with “Chinese and Western cultural conflicts replacing the original family ones” (112). The key paradox is that Western influence is alternately espoused and resisted. As the author argues, “[i]n current Chinese critical circles, the prevailing debate on the ‘constructing of Chinese critical discourse’ is of a postcolonial attempt to resist Western influence” (207). This demonstrates a typically ambivalent cross-cultural mentality with a sharp dichotomy between modern Chinese literature and Western influence, which has helped China with its cultural modernization so as to shape its modern cultural discourse. A new generation of Chinese critics has tried to embrace Western literary theories, including Russian formalism, New Criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism and so on, which has provided the cultural and intellectual nourishment for an ancient civilization that urgently needed revitalization. Consequently, many novelists and filmmakers have become better informed about how to produce cultural artifacts in a more innovative way.

This book is not a simple conventional influence study and Wang takes pains to establish a dialogic conception between China and the West. As a collection of articles and essays devoted to discussions of various but related topics, inevitably there is some repetition from chapter to chapter, but it is wide-ranging enough to encompass a large range of hotly debated issues in Chinese cultural and intellectual context, thereby enlightening our understanding of a dialogic interplay of different voices in the process of cross-cultural communication. The rise of China may reshape the world with China being part of globalization. From both modern and postmodern perspectives, the book helps the reader arrive at fundamental aspects of Chinese cultural practices, which are of increasing relevance and importance to the world. Despite a built-in tendency to dichotomize China and West in cultural terms, *Translated Modernities* consists of an important and insightful approach to the elaborate process of localization and cultural adaptation within a value system derived from a different cultural tradition and practice in response to globalization. Throughout the book, translation is said to play the pivotal role in modernizing China and its culture, and in bringing it more responsibility on the world stage. China has learned to play the game designed by the West. And it has become plainly evident that China’s cultural provincialism is diminishing and the move towards increasing globalization will be continued by the nation’s apparent willingness to promote serious cross-cultural understanding.

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