

Preface

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**Twentieth-Century Chinese Translation Theory: Modes,
issues and debates**

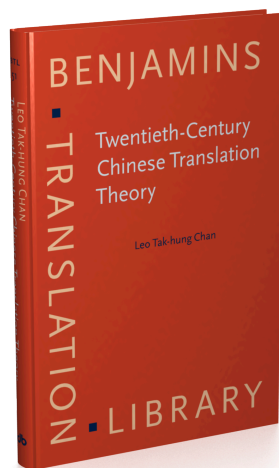
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Preface

Initially, this book grew out of an interest in systematically analyzing the history of translation theory in modern China. The study of metatextual material (like theory and criticism) helps us understand the norms upheld by a certain society at given points in time, and in recent years it has attracted the attention of translation scholars and teachers. The importance of knowing more about the history of translation theory is that it allows us to see through the surface features of translated texts, providing information that will support, or compel us to revise, our hypotheses. There are different concerns in different periods, as witnessed, for instance, by the perennial debate on the proper way to translate poetry, especially with regard to formal matters like rhymes and metrical patterns. In different periods different answers have been posed, and actual translations must be seen as responding to the multiplicity of positions advanced by the theorists. This fact is borne out nowhere else more clearly than in the various methods used by Chinese translator-poets to render meter through the course of the twentieth century.

Theoretical debates, of course, also reveal broader political concerns and are not necessarily concerned only with the practicalities of translation. For one obvious example: the fierce disputes between Lu Xu and Liang Shiqiu need to be viewed against the backdrop of rivalries between the Left-league Writers and the Crescent Moon Society in the 1930s. It could be said, in fact, that what happened *behind* the theories is more fascinating than the theories themselves. Indeed, the controversy over whether translation is as much an act of creation as original writing reflects the struggle on the part of translators to gain respectability, first in the 1930s and then again in the 1990s. Judging by the fact that the arguments, vehemently presented by both sides, are still heard even today, evidently the battle has not yet been won.

One thing highlighted by the present anthology of translated essays is that translation theories seldom exist independently. Most have to confront oppositions of one kind or another, so that a fruitful way of studying the history of translation theory to see how ideas are dialectically juxtaposed, as well as how this affects practicing translators who constantly have to choose between

alternatives. Anthony Pym has put this succinctly in *Method of Translation History*: “In principle, since no one theorizes just to state the obvious, each individual theory or act of theorization should find at least one counterpart somewhere” (p.129). For translation scholars, one might add, the translation theories propounded through the centuries revolve around possible choices more than likely solutions.

Naturally, in contrast to elements of contention and disagreement, we should also notice some attempts at reconciliation or resolution. For instance, Lin Yutang sought to bypass the distinction between literal and sense-translation with his theory of sentence-for-sentence translation. However, in the poststructuralist and postmodernist times that we happen to inhabit, a universally agreed theory of translation may not be possible, or even desirable. Consequently, the chances are that we will continue to live — but thrive — between the polar opposites of translation and creation; literalism and liberalism; foreignization and domestication; translation as art and as science; formal and spiritual resonance; and so on and so forth.

Two caveats. Some readers going through Part II of this book might think that certain articles ought to be included in a different debate than the one they are presently allotted to. For instance, in the final part of Sun Zhili’s article on “Some Thoughts on Building Our Nation’s Translation Theory” (included in “Translation Theory for China”), the author expounds at some length on the “Science vs. Art” debate. Several articles, too, are at least partially concerned with the controversy over literal and sense-translation, though they do not belong to Section E. In allotting the 38 articles to the eight different sections, however, the primary concern has been to show how each debate has evolved through a number of articles that were historically connected, in the sense that some were actually written in response to others that preceded them. Other readers might think that certain articles have been inadvertently left out. The truth of the matter, however, is that while a more comprehensive selection could have been made, one wonders if that is at all advisable at this stage of the game.

The four essays that constitute Part I of this book are revised from the following articles I previously published: “What’s ‘Modern’ in Chinese Translation Theory? Lu Xun and the Debates on Literalism and Foreignization in the May Fourth Period,” *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Redaction* 14.2 (2001), pp.195–223; “Translation Studies in Hong Kong-China and the Impact of ‘New Translation Theories,’” in *Translation in Hong Kong: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Chan Sin-wai (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong

Kong Press, 2001), pp.157–74; “‘Colonization,’ Resistance, and the Uses of Postcolonial Theories for Translation in Twentieth-Century China,” in *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*, edited by Paul St. Pierre and Sherry Simon (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2000), pp. 53–70; and “The Impressionistic Approach to Translation Theorizing; or, Twentieth-Century Chinese Ideas of Translation through the Western Looking-Glass,” in *Translation as Intercultural Communication*, edited by Mary Snell-Hornby, Zuzana Jettmarová and Klaus Kaindl (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1995), pp.57–66. Two translations originally appeared elsewhere: Yen Fu’s “General Remarks on Translation,” *Renditions* 1 (autumn 1973): 4–6 (tr. C. Y. Hsu); and Ch’ien Chung-shu’s “Lin Ch’in-nan Revisited,” *Renditions* 3 (autumn 1975): 8–21 (tr. George Kao). I wish to thank the publishers concerned for permission to use or reprint them.

Offering indispensable help in the preparatory stage of the book is a long-time friend and colleague, Paul Levine, without whom this project might not have taken off at all. I hope the final product has not fallen far too short of his expectations. I am especially indebted to the twenty translators, all of whom exercised the utmost patience during the three years in which the book was looking for a publisher. Among those to whom I am grateful for timely help and expert advice are: Chu Chi-yu, Eugene Eoyang, Luo Xuanmin, Sherry Simon, Mary Snell-Hornby and Xu Jun. I am glad this book has finally found a niche where it can feel truly comfortable. For this I have to thank Professor Gideon Toury, Editor of the Benjamins Translation Library; the two anonymous reviewers, who spotted many an omission or repetition; and Isja Conen, who ensured smooth sailing for the manuscript after it was accepted for publication.