

Preface

Are languages incommensurate? If so, how do people establish and maintain *hypothetical equivalences* between words and their meanings? What does it mean to translate one culture into the language of another on the basis of commonly perceived equivalences? For instance, can we talk, or stop talking, about “modernity” across the East–West divide without subjecting the experience of the one to representations, translations, or interpretations by the other? Who fixes and polices the borders between the two? Are the borders easily crossed? Is it possible to have reliable comparative categories on universal or transhistorical grounds?

I propose the idea of “translingual practice” in this book to raise the possibility of rethinking cross-cultural interpretation and forms of linguistic mediation between East and West. Over the past two decades or so, there has been no lack of sophisticated discussions of postcoloniality, cultures, identities, self and other, and so on, but these discussions have reached the point where it becomes unthinkable to continue treating the concrete language issue in cross-cultural scholarship as a superfluity or merely part of a critique of the effects of colonialism and imperialism. I find the work of postcolonial theorists very stimulating and am indebted to the interesting new ways of thinking their scholarship has opened up. At the same time, my research in modern Chinese history and literature has led me to confront phenomena and problems that cannot easily be brought under the postcolonial paradigm of Western domination and native resistance. I am struck by the irony that, in the very act of criticizing Western domination, one often ends up reifying the power of the

dominator to a degree that the agency of non-Western cultures is reduced to a single possibility: resistance.

Are there ways of reconceptualizing this problematic? Homi Bhabha's elaboration of hybridity in *The Location of Culture* tries to add corrective nuances to the postcolonial approach by eliminating the opposition of Self and Other. He draws attention to diasporic situations in which metropolitan European languages disseminate a hybridity of local dialects that return to caricature the presumed integrity of the language of the colonizer. Salman Rushdie's stammering S. S. Sisodia, whom Bhabha loves to quote, articulates this condition of postcolonial caricature very well: "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means" (Rushdie, p. 343). But we must not forget that there are vast areas in this world where metropolitan European languages are not spoken or have not succeeded in competing with native languages and acquiring the status of a national language or dialect. What does the experience of those people and those places tell us about history, agency, hegemony, modernity, and subjectivity?

This book provides me an opportunity to look into language practice as a site of manifested historical relationships where the meanings of Western domination and the anti-imperialist struggle may be reopened and interrogated in a new light. As someone who grew up speaking and writing Chinese in mainland China and did not adopt English as a foreign language until after the Cultural Revolution, I am fascinated by what has happened to the modern Chinese language, especially the written form, since its early exposure to English, modern Japanese, and other foreign languages. In this study, I intend to explore the wide-ranging Chinese contact/collision with European languages and literatures (often mediated through Japan), focusing special attention on the period from the turn of the century to the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War (1937), which encompasses the rise of modern Chinese literature and its early canonization. My emphasis on language and literature, however, does not presuppose a metaphysical divide between representation and reality. What I try to do here is to place language and literary practices at the heart of China's experience of the modern and of its much troubled relationship with the West. If modern Chinese literature stands out as an important event in this period, it is not so much because fiction, poetry, and other literary forms are transparent vehicles of self-expression that register the heartbeat of history in a mimetic fashion as because reading, writing, and other literary practices are perceived as potent agents in China's nation building and its imaginary/imaginative construction of "modern" men and women.

I took care to put the word “modernity” in quotation marks in the opening paragraph. My intention was to point to earlier quotations whose origins are lost in numerous repetitions, evocations, translations, and reproductions. Indeed, what do we mean when we say that the Chinese equivalent of “modernity” or “modern” is *xiandai xing* or *xiandai*? At which moment and in what context does that equivalence or translation become meaningful? From a poststructuralist point of view, performative/constative narratives such as repeated evocations of an idea through situated writing and speech are the materials that make up what intellectual historians perceive as the “continuity” of that idea. The act of translation, for example, cannot but participate in the performativity of a language that circumscribes and is circumscribed by the historical contingency of that act. Any attempt to historicize above and beyond the circumstances of such performative/constative acts of speech and writing (evocation, translation, citation in and out of context, and so on) is bound to lead to the reification of the idea, concept, or theory being analyzed and, consequently, to the impoverishment of our understanding of historical practice. My use or critique of “modernity,” therefore, relies on a citational/translational approach that takes account of both the earlier evocations of that notion and my own present engagement with it; this remains true even when I eschew the use of quotation marks in this book. Briefly put, I bring up this much cited, translated, citable(?), and translatable(?) notion to talk about the *discursive construct of the Chinese modern*.

The central questions I ask myself in this regard are How do people imagine and talk about the Chinese *xiandai* condition? and its corollary: What happens when certain types of discourses are preferred and legitimized over and above others? I am less concerned, though, with the question of the nature of the local character of the Chinese modern. This last question cannot reasonably be approached or contested without substantial engagement with the discursive practice of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals. Of course, I do not claim that this discussion of the discursive notion of the modern exhausts the kinds of questions that may be posed about Chinese modernity. In the context of this study, however, it helps me avoid playing into the old oppositional paradigm that predefines what is modern and what is traditional, which persists in many contemporary historical writings on East–West relations.

The binary of East and West has been much contested and rightly so. But is it enough to dismiss the binary on the grounds of fictitious invention or construction? My own view is that a more effective way

of deconstructing the East–West binary would be to pinpoint, whenever possible, those historical moments in which the usage of this idea becomes contextually meaningful and acquires legitimacy in a given language. If I continue to evoke East and West in this study, it is because I wish to call attention to their translated performance in modern Chinese as *dongfang* and *xifang*. This manner of engagement with modern translations puts me in a position to question the *self-evidence of the commonsense world* (in Pierre Bourdieu’s words) in which twentieth-century Chinese writers *name* their difference from whatever contingent identities they perceive as existing before their own time or being imposed from the outside. In other words, I am concerned with the rhetorical strategies, translations, discursive formations, naming practices, legitimizing processes, tropes, and narrative modes that bear upon the historical conditions of the Chinese experience of the modern since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

It should be clear by now that this book is not about translation in the ordinary sense of the word, much less the so-called sinification of foreign terms and discourses. To talk comfortably about sinification, one would have to assume a good deal about China’s confidence in the absolute centrality of its own civilization vis-à-vis the rest of the world, whereas that confidence was almost completely shattered by the presence of the West in the period I examine, so much so that China could no longer maintain a separate identity for itself without making explicit or implicit references to the rest of the world, which is often represented by the West. Nor am I particularly concerned with neutral-sounding, universalizing projects such as the domestication of foreign words in any language contexts—a frequent concern of historical linguistics. The true object of my theoretical interest is the *legitimation of the “modern” and the “West”* in Chinese literary discourse as well as the *ambivalence of Chinese agency* in these mediated processes of legitimation. Hence, much of the introductory chapter is devoted to rethinking, critically, the condition of contemporary theoretical discourses about East and West, language and power, history and change. Needless to say, I rely on the idea of translingual practice to tackle afresh some of the major methodological concerns in comparative literature, historical scholarship, and cultural studies.

Chapters 2 through 9 are subsumed under three broad headings, each of which centers on a distinct aspect of translated modernity from the perspective of translingual practice. Part I is an attempt to explore the discursive terrain as mapped out by the dominant concerns of “nation” and “individual” in modern Chinese literary discourse. I devote my attention to two outstanding discourses in that regard: the theory of *guomin xing*

(national character) and *geren zhuyi* (individualism); each is a neologistic loanword translation of an earlier Japanese translation of a European concept and theory. I argue that it is within and against the boundaries of these translated theories and discourses that May Fourth writers stake some of their central claims to modernity.

Lest my work be misunderstood as a keyword study in the manner of Raymond Williams, I emphasize that my concerns lie beyond establishing the changing meanings of words, concepts, and discourses that are thought to bear witness to larger historical processes. Given my focus on the legitimation of the modern in Chinese literary practice, it is inevitable that I should also consider the issue of translingual modes of representation. My reading of Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q," for example, seeks to understand the story's appropriation of the discourse of national character in terms of a mediated construction of narratorial subjectivity. This approach is further emphasized in Part II as I raise the question of how the experience of the Chinese modern is worked out in such concrete figures of literary representation as narrative modes, novelistic realism, stylistic innovations, the deixis of writing in the first person, gendered tropes of modernity, representations of the inner world, and transpositions of psychoanalytical symbolism. Although many of these features were unmistakably new to Chinese literature and often came with self-proclaimed affinities with European languages and literatures, there were many others that cannot be safely traced to the effects of foreign influence. For instance, what are some of the surplus meanings that cannot be accounted for by the notion of influence? A seemingly plausible interpretation offered by some scholars is that these are traditional sensibilities transformed into modern forms of expression. An immediate difficulty is, however, in deciding where to draw the line between the traditional and the modern.

In my analysis of these mediated forms of representation between Chinese and foreign literatures, I have resisted the temptation of explaining *change* in terms of either foreign impact or indigenous evolution, the choice of which would bring the issue to a premature closure when one ought to be opening it up to further inquiry. The notion of *translated modernity* is useful because it allows me to identify and interpret those contingent moments and processes that are reducible neither to foreign impact nor to the self-explanatory logic of the indigenous tradition. Readers will notice that my choice and reading of concrete literary texts are prompted by this central problematic of cross-cultural interpretation rather than by the coherence of the modern Chinese literary canon itself.

Indeed, the canon itself needs to be called into question. Part III, “Nation Building and Culture Building,” continues to ponder the meaning of agency, mediation, and translated knowledge, but it does so by taking up the question of legitimation in the areas of canon making, literary criticism, and other culture-building projects. Specifically, I interrogate the function of modern literary criticism in the Republican period and look into the circumstances of canon making, such as the compilation of the authoritative *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* in 1935–36. I am particularly interested in the ways in which modern Chinese culture *interprets its own moment and mode of unfolding* and the ways in which literary projects lend themselves to the diverse political aspirations of individual writers and critics who see themselves engaged, nonetheless, in collectively working out the very contradiction of their existence. That is, what it means to be *Zhongguo ren* (men and women of the Middle Kingdom) in terms of what is not of the Middle Kingdom. This contradiction endorses as well as undermines their unprecedented move of positing Chinese literature and culture as one among many national literatures and cultures in the world. I conclude this book by rethinking the debates on national essence as a culture-building discourse. The changing dynamics of this discourse between the late Qing and the Republican periods brings out the full range of competing narratives and counter-discourses that will inevitably complicate our understanding of the meaning of national culture and translated modernity in China.

TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE

*Literature, National Culture, and Translated
Modernity—China, 1900-1937*

