

Book Review

Prado-Fonts, Carles. *Second-Hand China - Spain, the East, and the Politics of Translation.* Northwestern University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2j6xr48>

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Carles Prado-Fonts, a professor in the Department of Arts and Humanities at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), in Spain, is committed to researching Chinese and Sinophone literatures and cultures from a comparative perspective, focusing on the generation of knowledge about other cultures. He has found that in the field of cross-cultural studies, research on the interactions between China and Spain in the 19th and 20th centuries remains relatively scarce. He asks, is this scarcity due to a lack of actual interactions between the two countries, or is it a result of insufficient academic attention? Per Prado-Fonts, to address this, the “ALTER” research group at UOC has focused on studying the interactive relationship between China and Spain. After decades of efforts, the group have initially completed the establishment of the “Archivo China–España, 1800–1950” (ace.uoc.edu), providing valuable first-hand data and documentary materials for scholars dedicated to the research in this field.

Prado-Fonts’ *Second-Hand China: Spain, the East, and the Politics of Translation*, as a phased achievement of this research project, which was published in 2022 by Northwestern University Press, focuses on the representation of China in Spain from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. It explains how Spain has imagined China through translations from English and French. The author argues that the production of knowledge and the ways of understanding the world are dominated by hegemonic languages, which impose specific ways of thinking about other cultures.

The writing of this book was inspired by an accidental discovery: figures like “John Harrisson,” “T. S. H. Thompson,” and “I. Worski-Riera” were fabricated as pseudonyms and heteronyms in several Spanish publications about China in the early 20th century. Prado-Fonts believes that the use of pseudonyms or the adoption of a foreign perspective actually reveals a specific discursive tendency of Spaniards in the process of interpreting and understanding China (including history, culture, and people). That is, they had to rely on the mediation of foreign countries (especially Britain or France) to understand and imagine China.

Through meticulous research, he found that Spanish newspapers relied heavily on foreign news agencies (such as Reuters, the United Press, or Havas) for

information about China. Moreover, a large number of books related to China (poetry, novels, and nonfiction works) were either translated from English or French, or borrowed extensively from these sources, yet they were not marked as translations. This kind of “second-hand” knowledge significantly influenced how Spain imagined China, confining its perception within the framework of Anglo-French discourse. How China was depicted in Spain’s cultural and literary development largely depended on how it was introduced in English and, especially, French works and literary trends. This intellectual dependence gradually permeated into popular culture. The newspapers, periodicals, and novels of the time relied on European sources for content about China, resulting in a lack of in-depth understanding and direct contact with the real China among the public.

However, the indirect representation of China in Spain from the late 19th to the early 20th century was of great significance. During the period of crisis, presenting China from a European perspective strengthened Spain’s connection with Europe and shaped a unique national subjectivity. Intellectual elites used China as a medium to propose suggestions for the modernization of local politics and culture. Through the existing European representations of China, Spain was able to participate in European intellectual discourses while constructing its own cultural stance. In this process, China was instrumentalized as “other” – that is, a signifier with no real substance. This indirectness was not only a continuation of colonial knowledge production but also a strategy for peripheral countries (such as Spain) to participate in the European intellectual community by using Orientalist discourses during the modernization process.

The book is structured in four chapters, covering the period from 1880 to 1930. Each chapter employs historical approaches and close textual readings to examine how China was represented in the West and particularly in Spain.

The first chapter explores how representations of China were translated from European sources in the late 19th century. In the 18th century, China was an ideal paradigm for philosophers like Leibniz, Quesnay, and Voltaire. However, it declined in the 19th century, seeing the rise of prominent arguments depicting it as a decadent society, with numerous negative images spreading widely. In the mid-19th century, Spain’s systematic reliance on British and French resources was evident in the field of “sinographies”.

Diplomat Adolfo de Mentaberry (1876), sharply criticized the Spanish government but echoed Orientalist views through his reliance on British and French sources. The translator of *English and Chinese People* added a large number of annotations in the “paratexts” but his translation remained derivative of its French original. Lawyer Álvarez y Tejero (1857), shaped by his 14-year experience in Manila, indirectly projected Europe’s polarized perceptions of China (idealized or denigrated) through a colonial lens. Collectively, these accounts reveal the mediated

nature of Spain's understanding of China in that they were dependent on Anglo-French frameworks or colonial intermediation and lacked direct observation. Works such as the diplomat Enrique Gaspar's travelogue *Viaje a China* (1878–1882) and science fiction *El anacronópete* (1887), and *La China moderna* (1900–1901) of “John Harrisson”, which are not regarded as translations themselves, in fact relied heavily on the data, images and viewpoints translated from Anglo-French sources. In them, China was depicted as a backward, stagnant, ancient, and mysterious foreign land, and the Chinese people were often presented in a negative light (animalized).

The textual representation of China in the above-mentioned works projected an anthropological gaze on China and the Chinese people. It placed China within the temporal framework of the past, imposed an allochronic vision on readers, and obscured the real contemporary China. At this stage, the dependence on translation created the illusion of the West as a “unified subject”. Spain's residual imperialist mentality was nourished by its subordinate dependence on the discourse about the East constructed by Britain and France. And it maintained the coherence of the triangular relationship among China, Spain, and other European languages.

The second chapter reflects on the limitations of this second-hand cross-cultural imagination around 1900. The change of China's international status in the world altered people's views on China. In this stage, apart from the accounts of travelers, the reports of missionaries, and the theses of sinologists, other forms of knowledge and new voices representing China emerged (from Chinese who wrote in Western languages or in works by Westerners who had lived in China). Although Spain's understanding of China still relied on the sources of information and discourse from Britain and France, the uniqueness of Spain in the relationship between China and the West gradually became prominent.

The works of Chen Jitong (1852–1907) gained popularity in France and in Spain because the image of China in them was influenced by the prestige and symbolic capital bestowed by French literature. The diplomat Fernando de Antón del Olmet (1901) showed a critical view of the previous research on China (Spain and other European countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands) and questioned the “authenticity” of second-hand knowledge, and for the first time broke the ternary model, suggesting that establishing a direct connection between Spain and China was more reliable. Meanwhile, the intellectual elite Rafael María de Labra held that although the knowledge of China might be second-hand, it was comprehensive, critical and kept pace with the times.

These works reflected a growing interest in the “real China”. “Chinese voices” were recognized, and problems with the acquisition of second-hand knowledge about China – the actual triangular nature of Spain's representation of China – emerged for the first time. However, the representation of China still relied on pivotal Western locations, the coeval and “truthful China” was presented through translation, but

became a tool for intellectual debate, which meant that Spain's understanding of China still remained within the Western intellectual framework.

The third chapter examines the new context for the representation of China that emerged between the 1910s and the mid-1920s. The empathetic and analytical observations of contemporary China by John Dewey stood in sharp contrast to the Orientalist representations of W. Somerset Maugham, and there appeared a wealth of descriptions of different “images of China” during this period. Therefore, China became the object of people's attention, and various ways of representing China competed with each other. The ternary structure of representing China in Spain lost its internal coherence for the first time, but still remained in a state of obtaining information indirectly: Spain's representation of China was either through translation or in works originally written in Spanish, and these works still relied heavily on foreign sources.

José Ortega y Gasset's review of Bertrand Russell's *The Problem of China* reflected the combination of the unique Spanish perspective and the dependence on foreign sources. During his trip to China in 1920, the journalist José María Romero Salas issued the call: “China nos llama” (China is calling us). His intention was to set China as the field for realizing the combination of Spanish race, patriotism and “Spanishness”, and to achieve Spain's imagined spiritual rise and imperialist revival, which was specifically manifested in his following novels. Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1924), in his *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista*, initially attempted to find commonalities between Chinese and Western cultures. However, influenced by the concept of Western superiority upheld by racial dualism and a textualized image of China, he developed biases against China. Racial discourse constructed a monolithic image of China and ultimately belittled the Chinese people. Federico García Sanchiz (1926) depicted the complexity and contradictions of the Western presence in China, and criticized colonialism. Nevertheless, the Chinese people were still presented in an integrated manner. Luis de Oteyza's *El diablo blanco* (1928) revealed the complex interweaving of race and patriotism in Spain's perception of China through a unique narrative, and the representation of China showed the characteristics of feminization and animalization.

These works reflected the plasticity of China as an object within the new representational system. The disintegration of the ternary coherence in the depiction of China in the works of Spanish writers was driven by their strong focus on racism and patriotism. However, it also highlighted the joint influence of Western cultural hegemony and Spanish nationalism. That is to say, Spain endeavored to interpret China through the lens of Western culture in order to integrate itself into the Western cultural sphere, while at the same time attempting to find its own national identity and cultural positioning in the portrayal of China.

The fourth chapter explores the images of China and the Chinese people from the mid-1920s to the 1930s. These images were characterized by richness, diversity, contradictions, and integration with consumerism. Western intermediaries such as George Bernard Shaw, Pearl Buck, and André Malraux played a crucial role in shaping Spain's perception. In the era of mass communication, extreme representative figures like Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan emerged. Films and radio dramas on related themes were extremely popular. China frequently appeared in the media and popular culture of Catalonia and Spain.

During this stage, Catalan poets indirectly translated, imitated and created works based on East Asian poetry through European translations. In fact, they regarded Chinese poetry as an important path to cosmopolitanism and the pursuit of cultural universality. This kind of "Eurocentrism" of Catalan intellectuals is clearly reflected in Joan Sacs' article *Àsia* (1927). In Joan Crespi i Martí's novel *La ciutat de la por* (1930), a contradictory image of China is presented, which is both a tangible reality and an unattainable fantasy. This novel also reflects on the negative impacts of Western civilization's impact on China, and provides a powerful critique of the so-called progress and the dark side of Western civilization. However, the state of Albert's aphasia in the novel symbolizes the sense of powerlessness of Catalans and Spaniards in understanding China.

Carles Prado-Fonts' in-depth analysis of the materials that were not clearly marked as translations reveals the complex role of translation in cross-cultural communication. On the one hand, translation facilitated the dissemination of information about China in Spain and contributed to the generation of knowledge about China. On the other hand, due to excessive reliance on indirect translation, it distorted Spain's understanding of the "real" China. In comparison to China, which has always been an object, translation created an illusion that the West was a homogeneous subject, ignoring the unequal power relations within its discourses. While traditionally, translation was considered to be "neutral" between cultures, in fact, this perception concealed the ethnographic gaze in the process of discursive practice, as well as the political factors hidden behind cross-cultural interactions. Certainly, this cultural hegemonism was not unique to the China-Spain relationship but is a common problem in the process of global cross-cultural communication. Moreover, the author believes that excessive dependence on mediated knowledge often further deepens cultural misunderstandings and unequal power relations.

In terms of research methods, the author adopts the "incommensurability of theory and archive" and breaks through the limitations of traditional translation studies that only focus on formal translation texts. The scope of research is expanded to various types of texts, including newspapers, travelogues, science fiction, and other narrative literature, as well as archival information carried by other forms like images, early films, and radio dramas. It comprehensively reflects the dense, diverse,

and synchronous state of China's presence in Spain. At the same time, an interdisciplinary research method is adopted, integrating the perspectives of multiple disciplines, such as history, literature, cultural studies, and translation studies. The multidimensional approach analyzes the cross-cultural phenomena between Spain and China from different angles, avoiding the limitations of a single disciplinary perspective.

Regarding theoretical application, the author expands the concept of indirect translation from its original linguistic meaning to a broader but interrelated discursive and cultural level. He applies the political theory of translation to the cross-cultural study, and elucidates the operation mechanism of translation as a technology of cultural hegemony from a multi-dimensional perspective, revealing the power relations and cultural hegemony hidden behind translation, and expanding the application boundaries of translation theory. In addition, starting from the perspective of "the rest of the West", this book breaks through the binary model and introduces concepts such as "indirect translation" and "triangular relationship" to construct a new theoretical analysis framework, providing more explanatory theoretical tools for understanding cross-cultural phenomena.

In the aspect of material selection, within the framework of central languages and the context of international geopolitics, the scope of archives for the study of sinographies is further expanded, and new materials that have not attracted the attention of the academic community are unearthed, such as the records of non-traditional writers other than diplomats, missionaries, sinologists and journalists. These materials are helpful for restoring the cognitive scene of Spanish society towards China at that time, and supplementing the deficiencies of previous studies that mostly focused on the perceptions of the elite class. At the same time, taking into account the materials from different cultural backgrounds, by comparing the materials of relevant countries and regions such as Spain, China, Britain, France, and Catalonia, it promotes the development of the research on "dislocation" and "provincialization" of the West, and more clearly presents the uniqueness and commonalities of Spain.

However, this book also has some deficiencies. For instance, in terms of the overall framework and material selection, in chapter 4, the case study of the representation of China in Catalonia in the 1930s, although it has regional representativeness, appears somewhat abrupt and isolated. The author regards Basque, Galicia and other regions of Spain as a single and homogeneous entity, failing to fully explore the regional differences within Spain during the same period, and there is a possibility of overlooking the different perceptions of China that may have existed in different regions. Given the different historical, cultural and economic situations in various regions of Spain, these differences may have significantly affected the perception and presentation of China. Of course, more in-depth discussions on

regional studies can be regarded as the mission of future research by scholars from Basque and Galicia.

Overall, *Secondhand China* is a representative work in the field of cultural translation studies. This book not only reveals the mechanism behind Spain's secondhand perception of China, but also raises important questions about the role of translation and cultural hegemony in cross-cultural understanding. For scholars interested in the "cross-cultural hegemonies", "the politics of languages and cultures", and "China and the Sinophone world", it is a valuable academic resource.

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