

Globalization, cultural translation and the construction of multicentric modernities

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In the age of globalization, the meaning and function of translation have largely changed beyond one's recognition, especially the translation of different cultures. According to Susan Bassnett, translation from a cultural perspective should be viewed as a sort of cultural mediation.¹ If it is true, I will in the present paper deal with the function of cultural translation in the age of globalization which has helped construct or reconstruct different forms of modernity. I still hold that there is no such thing as the so-called "singular

1 In the conference on cultural transmission organized by the University of Cambridge on May2-4, 2008, Susan Bassnett was invited to give a keynote speech entitled "Translation as a cultural mediation," which aroused a considerable critical attention among the participants.

modernity,”² for modernity itself has become multicentric, or modernities in plural form.³ Even in China, different regions, in the process of their modernization, have different forms of modernity. In this way, the unique form of Chinese modernity will contribute a great deal to global modernity while deconstructing the singular modernity.

Cultural translation in the age of globalization

22 Globalization, like other Western things, has finally settled down in China, exercising a strong influence on China’s economy and finances. China could not but make its own choice although it was at first reluctant to do so: whether to involve itself in this world-wide historical trend or resist it with its own national mechanism. Obviously it takes the former attitude since China intends to put itself in the severe world-wide economic competition in which to develop its national economy. As a result, China has made tremendous achievements in its economic reform with its GDP ranking the second immediately after the United States. As a direct consequence of economic globalization, cultural globalization has also been more and more confronting scholars of both humanities and social sciences.

2 In the 22nd conference of the Academy of Latinity, “Globalization and emerging differences,” on November 17-19, 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, I gave a plenary speech entitled “Deconstructing singular modernity: the modernization of China’s past and present.” The present speech is aimed to further elaborate my ideas in that speech.

3 As for the modernity in plural form with regard to its Chinese practice, cf. Wang Ning, *Translated modernities: literary and cultural perspectives on globalization and China*, Ottawa and New York, Legas, 2010.

Although many of my colleagues are opposed to the process of cultural globalization, I still think it necessary to adopt a dialectical attitude toward such a phenomenon. That is, cultural globalization has certainly brought us with both negative and positive effects: its positive aspect lies in that, domestically, it enables our cultural industry and academic research to be manipulated by the rules of market economy rather than the previous government's political intervention, thereby linking up economic construction to cultural construction more closely; while its negative aspect obviously lies in making the production of elite culture or non-market oriented cultural production more and more difficult, as a result of which, a new sort of hierarchy is formed. Internationally, it is true that cultural globalization has brought more cultural products and academic ideas from the West and Japan thus strengthening the established "overall Westernization" in China, but on the other hand, it has helped Chinese culture and humanities studies move toward the world and have equal dialogues with our international counterparts. During the past decade, we have found that China has become one of the very few countries which are most benefited from globalization in an overall way: not only has Chinese economy become the second largest economic entity in the world, but also has Chinese culture moved from periphery to center enjoying more and more popularity among world people. The Chinese mode of development and modernization has attracted world wide attention. What is the function of translation in promoting

China's modernization? That is what I will deal with before exploring a Chinese mode of modernization.

I should say that translation has indeed played an indispensable role in promoting the process of China's modernization. In speaking of translation from a linguistic point of view, it has long been viewed as a sort of change from one language into another. But from an inter-cultural perspective, it is actually a change from one culture into another largely by means of language. As either literal translation or cultural translation is associated with two cultural contexts in which their cultural content is conveyed in two different languages, these two types of translation can both be regarded as cultural translation in its narrow sense as well as in its broad sense. Undoubtedly, one of the basic principles of translation is that the translated version should be faithful to the original, namely, reaching the plane of the so-called "*xin*" (faithfulness) as was defined by Yan Fu over a hundred years ago and heatedly debated about in the field of Chinese translation studies for a century. According to this principle, translation should first of all be faithful to the content of the original, with literal translation laying more emphasis on formal fidelity and cultural translation on how to convey in an adequate way the original cultural connotation and how to interpret it or even rewrite it more or less from an inter-cultural perspective. In this way, it is not the fidelity but variation that functions more dynamically. Furthermore, cultural translation, different from the traditional linguistic rendition, usually brings about cultural transformation, which finds particular embodiment

in the birth of the new Chinese culture and literature which are largely different from their tradition but which could carry on effective dialogue with the latter while dialoguing with their international counterparts. Of course, both sorts of translation are significant to China's cultural modernity, but to me, cultural translation is more important and necessary even today when we Chinese intellectuals want to translate our ideas and works into the world.

Since Chinese culture and Western culture have entirely different traditions, either of the two is more or less “mysterious” to the other. It is true, according to sinologist and comparatist Eugene Eoyang, that such a “mysteriousness” has been in existence for quite a long time: “In surveying the history of translation, one encounters so many traditional misconceptions, shibboleths, and half-truths that no systematic analysis is possible before these “weeds” of confusion are cleared away. Yet these “errancies” are not blatant “vulgar” errors, for they cannot be accurately characterized as weeds to be cleared away or destroyed, since each of them contains a kernel of truth that must be recognized. It is for this reason I call these anomalies “myths” rather than errors, because “error” would presuppose a prior original “truth” that is contravened.”⁴ Obviously, it is from the cultural perspective to arrive at the above conclusion since Eoyang himself is an “inter-cultural” scholar or a Chinese-Western comparatist. But if we want to commu-

4 Cf. Eugene Eoyang Chen, *The transparent eye: reflections on translation, Chinese literature, and comparative poetics*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1993, p. 3.

nicate with our Western colleagues on an equal plane, how could we overcome the block of such a “myth”? To me, we should neither cater favor to the taste of Western scholars nor express our own view without paying any attention to the Western audience. For neither of the approaches will lead to effective dialogues. Then what we should do is to find a topic which is of common interest and which will arouse theoretical discussion and even debate in our intercultural comparative studies. In this way, the dialogue will be of certain significance.

26 If we say that Eoyang’s view of translation has already gone a bit far from traditional linguistic rendition, then Homi Bhabha’s concept of cultural translation is typically characterized by cultural transformation and cultural mediation. In Bhabha, translation should not necessarily be faithful to the original since it appeals to something new. In his essay “How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation,” he endows cultural translation with completely new significance. Bhabha, in dealing with the contrast between Lucretius and Ovid, points out:

Living in the interstices of Lucretius and Ovid, caught in-between a “nativist,” even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation, the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as the irresolution, or liminality, of “translation,” the *element of resistance* in the process of transformation, “that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation.” This space of the translation of cultural difference *at the interstices* is infused with that Benjaminian temporality of the present which makes graphic a moment of transition, not merely the continuum of history; it is a strange stillness that defines the present in which

the very *writing* of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible. The migrant culture of the “in-between,” the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslability; (...).⁵

Obviously, to Bhabha, translation in the age of globalization is no longer confined to the translingual practice, but rather, points to a sort of transcultural practice. In this way, it is correct to view translation in today’s global context as a sort of cultural mediation: relocating one culture and different cultures in a broad transcultural and global context, in the process of which center moves to periphery and periphery moves toward center in an attempt to deconstruct the monolithic center. This is also true of China’s domestic practice.

Toward multicentric modernities: the case of Shanghai modern

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Starting from Bhabha’s cultural translation, we could observe the case of Shanghai modern which was constructed as a consequence of such cultural translation and representation. Of all the Chinese metropolises, Shanghai is perhaps the most modern, most cosmopolitan and most Westernized, with unique characteristics of Shanghai culture, partly for its past colonial legacy, and more importantly, for its open and embracing characteristics. That is, it is open to a sort of ubiquitous modernity, in the process of which Shanghai has become a world-renowned metropolis, or another center in China only next to Beijing. And in econo-

5 Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 224.

my and finance, it is even more important to China's modernity project. In this megacity, everything, both modern and postmodern, both colonial and postcolonial, and sometimes even premodern, could be found among people of different walks of life. It is also politically hybridized: it used to be a financial center under the Nationalist regime, which is still the very financial center in socialist new China. It has all the imperialist concessions and buildings of European colonial architectural styles, and it is also the very cradle of the working class uprising with the country's biggest contingent of industrial workers in it. It is the birth place of the Communist Party of China, and it is also the very place where its worst enemy Chiang Kai-shek and his clique rose. All the progressive and reactionary forces came here, now coexisting each other, and now fighting against each other in this megacity with the Communists finally winning in 1949. But after the birth of New China, along with the political and cultural centralization in Beijing, capital of new China, and the political and administrative decentralization in Nanjing, capital of old China, Shanghai still keeps its unique metropolitan status and modern characteristics, even becoming more and more modern toward the replacement of Hong Kong as another more forceful financial center and shipping center.

Since Shanghai has all the above unique characteristics as a cosmopolitan metropolis, various writers and humanities scholars express their interest in it and some of them have even written about it. In the history of modern Chinese literature, the so-called new sensationalist school rose

in this city and became well known throughout the country. It should be recognized that the status of modern metropolis of Shanghai was formed historically, politically, economically and culturally. Just as Leo Lee, who is both interested in the issue of modernity and in this modern metropolis, in describing the modern cosmopolitan characteristics of Shanghai, writes:

By 1930 Shanghai had become a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis, the fifth largest city in the world and China's largest harbor and treaty port, a city that was already an international legend ("the Paris of Asia"), and a world of splendid modernity set apart from the still tradition-bound countryside that was China. Much has been written about Shanghai in the West, but the corpus of popular literature which contributed to its legendary image bequeathed a dubious legacy....At the same time, the negative side of this popular portrait has been in a sense confirmed by Chinese leftist writers and latter-day communist scholars who likewise saw the city as a bastion of evil, of wanton debauchery and rampant imperialism marked by foreign extraterritoriality, and a city of shame for all native patriots.⁶

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Such is the mixed and hybridized image of Shanghai. It is certainly correct of Lee to have the above descriptions as he has made long and careful investigations into this city from his unique perspective of a Chinese American scholar. But what does Shanghai modern mean to us Chinese humanities intellectuals today? Will it still be satisfied with its colonial legacy or has it got rid of all the colonial and traditional legacies looking completely new to the world? This is a question hard to answer. But still, I think it

6 Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai modern: the flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930-1945*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 3-4.

necessary to confront it. Obviously, Leo Lee here observes Shanghai from the perspective of an outsider rather than an insider, while we just observe it from that of insiders as we are engaged in building Shanghai into a modernized cosmopolitan metropolis, or another cultural center in China. In this sense, we have actually pushed forward his ready-made research.

30 Undoubtedly, the modernity of Shanghai lies in the following three fields: first, as an economic and financial center whose position has long been established and universally recognized; second, as a shipping center whose important role has been made more and more manifest in the present era along with the recent expansion and modernization of the city itself; and third, as one of China's cultural centers whose role has somewhat controversial as the city is not the capital of the country, far from the geographic central areas but whose characteristic is also apparent. Frankly speaking, the first two roles of center have long been formed historically, economically and geographically. The last role of center, although existing in history as well, is currently in the process of coming into being.

Historically speaking, Shanghai was, from its very beginning of Chinese modernity, not built as a political capital, but rather as a financial capital. It is close to the old capital Nanjing, but closer to the sea which was more convenient for overseas transportation and shipping. Thus it certainly has its geographical advantage. Since Shanghai is closer to the sea, symbolic of the oceanic civilization of global capital, it attracted great deal of foreign direct investment more easily. Thus numerous foreign empires oc-

cupied parts of the city as their concessions and built the headquarters of their transnational corporations. By and by, Shanghai's role of both the financial center and shipping center of China was established. After the founding of the PRC, the central government also realized the important place of Shanghai in world economy and finance. It immediately re-established Shanghai, in the new national administrative divisions, as a special municipality directly under the leadership of the central government.

Since the administrative and economic means did play an important role in putting Shanghai as an important position in China, then how shall we explain the role of cultural center of Shanghai in China? People might well raise the questions: why could Wuhan and Zhengzhou, two of the provincial capitals which have a splendid cultural heritage and solid foundation for the central plains civilization, not become cultural centers? Again, due to the disadvantage of these two cities which were not developed so fast as Shanghai, they could not attract cultural and intellectual talents who might well help modernize them both culturally and intellectually. But Shanghai did, even before the founding of the PRC, attract lots of eminent writers, artists and humanities intellectuals, and establish quite a number of prestigious universities. Even now, we have noticed that there are 83 universities and colleges in Shanghai, while there are 81 in Beijing. Furthermore, according to statistics of international publication, the numbers of articles published by Shanghai's scholars of humanities and social sciences are immediately after those from Beijing.

In view of the above historical, geographical and economic advantages, Shanghai has certainly formed its unique culture: the so-called Shanghai Culture (Haipai wenhua) as opposed to the so-called Beijing Culture (Jingpai wenhua). They co-exist and contend each other forming different characteristics of Chinese national culture. If we say that Beijing culture represents traditional Chinese culture, then Shanghai just plays a role of cultural translation and cultural mediation between different cultures. And the phenomenon of Shanghai modern also plays the role of multicentric modernities in the Chinese as well as global context.

32 Centralization and decentralization in culture

Since Shanghai, as a megacity in present day China, plays a very unique role in today's Chinese society and people's life, it cannot be replaced by any other Chinese cities, not only because of its past colonial history but also because of its present condition of modernity. The reason why Shanghai could become such a world renowned cosmopolitan metropolis in China is largely due to the following two facts. Or we should say that it has undergone the processes of both centralization and decentralization.

Firstly, I will deal with its centralization. Due to Shanghai's unique geographical, colonial and economic advantages, various Chinese governments from the beginning of the 20th century have tried to centralize this city placing it in a very important position in the mapping of China. And

lots of eminent writers and artists, such as Lu Xun, Xu Beihong, Fu Lei, Ba Jin, etc, settled down here or viewed it as their bases, thus helping to form another cultural center in China. Some influential newspapers and literary magazines, such as *Wenhui Bao* (Wen Wei Po), *Shouhuo* (Harvest), and *Shanghai Wenxue* (Shanghai Literature) are all published in Shanghai, not only enriching the cultural life of the city, but also influencing the orientation of development of entire Chinese literature and culture. If we say that the first so-called Marxist-Leninist Dazibao (big character poster) was released in Beijing in June 1966 which officially launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, then we can certainly date it back to the publication of Yao Wenyan's critical article on Wu Han's *Hai Rui Baguan* (Hai Rui Dismissed from Office) in late 1965. Although the producing of the article was firmly supported by Mao Zedong at the time, it was still prevented from being published in Beijing. In this way, Mao could not but think of Shanghai, another cultural center which would influence the entire country. Another important event should be mentioned here is the development of Pudong which was later than that of Shenzhen but which is now proved much more modernized and global with Shanghai's late-coming advantages. Although Shenzhen is also quickly developed and modernized from an economic point of view, it is still far from being a cultural center as compared with Shanghai. In this sense, we should say that the formation of Shanghai modernity is also a result of administrative and cultural centralization.

Secondly, let us look at the process of its decentralization. As we all know, China used to be called a “Middle Kingdom,” or a sort of central empire, viewing all the other countries, be they developed or under-developed, “uncivilized,” and all the other peoples “barbarians.” Chinese people have long had a very stubborn consciousness of hierarchy or centrality. In this sense, democracy in China should be realized in a gradual and long process. Any democratic movements in modern Chinese history have finally caused big turmoil and even achieve contrary results. The same is true of Shanghai which suffered a great deal during the Cultural Revolution when the “grang of four” were in power.

34 But since Shanghai has a unique position in the country, the formation of Shanghai modern is also due to its decentralizing efforts, as a result of which the city is becoming more and more indispensable not only economically and financially but also culturally. The above-mentioned facts, such as the settlement of eminent writers and artists and the function of influential media, have certainly centralized Shanghai, but they have also helped deconstruct the monolithic center of Beijing. If we say that the successful running of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 is to a great extent a political and cultural success, then we shall affirm that the successful organization of the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 is more an economic and cultural success: the former announced to the world that gone are the days when Chinese people are viewed “the sick of east Asia” (*dongya bingfu*), and the latter largely

contributed to the increase of China's GDP and its cultural influence world wide. In speaking of culture, the former put more emphasis on promoting a sort of traditional Chinese (Confucian) culture with lots of Confucian ideas highlighted during the opening ceremony, while the latter tries to emphasize a truly pluralistic cultural atmosphere in this modernized city with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds feeling quite at home. Thus Shanghai modern means in today's global context both cultural decentralization and cultural recentralization, with the latter more and more conspicuous in the years to come. In view of the above-mentioned facts, a sort of multicentric modernities has come into being even within the country. Here, translation plays the role of cultural mediation: it not only mediates between a cosmopolitan culture and a regional culture, but also mediates between centralized great (traditional) Chinese culture and a decentralized schizophrenic (modern) Chinese culture.

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Cultural translation and the de-marginalization of Chinese culture

It is true that, like cultural studies, cultural translation is characterized by deconstructing the artificial binary oppositions, such as the opposition between elite culture and popular culture, that between strong culture and weak culture, that between Eastern and Western culture and that between global culture and regional culture, enabling different cultures to have equal dialogues. To realize this aim, translation is no doubt an indispensable means. But unfor-

36 Fortunately, there has been an unbalance in China's cultural and literary translation, with the number of translations of foreign culture much more than that of Chinese culture, the simple reason of which lies in the fact that Chinese people know much more about the West than Western people know about China. But even so, Occidentalism has become a mysterious concept or phenomenon among quite a number of Chinese people, especially those young people who do not have much knowledge about the West and its culture. As far as translation itself is concerned, we have stronger and more translators in introducing Western culture into China than vice versa. Particularly in recent years, affected by contemporary commercializing trend, many of the young translators do not spend much time laying a solid foundation in foreign languages and accumulating as much knowledge as possible, so they find difficulty translating Chinese culture into the major Western languages, especially into English, which is more and more hegemonic in the age of globalization playing the role of lingua franca. In this sense, the significance of cultural translation in today's Chinese context lies in that we should translate the essence of Chinese theory, thinking and culture into the major Western and international languages so that Chinese culture and scholarship will move from periphery to center in an attempt to deconstruct the monolithic center of Eurocentrism or Westcentrism.

In the past, China, in the Western people's eye and the means of Western representation and cultural translation, was both poor and backward far from the center of world

civilization. Due to the distorted descriptions and translations either by the sinologists or non-sinologists, China and Chinese people long appeared inferior to the West and Western people. Such is the direct reason caused by the so-called orientalism, or more specifically, a sort of “Sinological-orientalism.” According to Daniel Vukovich, this sort of “Sinological” form of orientalism is characterized by taking “as its object an “Other” that has since the 1970s occupied an increasingly central place within the world system and Western intellectual-political culture: the People’s Republic of China.”⁷⁷ But now, along with the rapid development of Chinese economy, China appears much different in the Western means of representation and translation:

Why China, then? Let us begin by assuming the antagonisms and epistemological challenges—such as orientalism—that have subtended the China-West relationship for, say, three hundred years. Let us assume these exist and that they have something to do with China in theory (...). So, too, let us recall that “our” relationship to China is overwhelmingly an economic (and political) one. China’s rise, its status as the “next” superpower, the manufacturer of the world, the new Asian hegemony, the world-historical consumer market, the buyer of last resort for U.S. dollars, the second largest economy—and so forth.⁸

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But even so, we should say that China is developing in an uneven way with the striking difference between the rich and the poor and that between city and countryside and between the coastal areas and interior regions. Similarly, Chinese culture, like the Chinese modernity, is by

7 Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western knowledge production and the P.R.C.*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 1.

8 Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western knowledge production and the P.R.C.*, p. 142.

no means in singular form since China is one of the largest countries with the biggest population in the world. The above description of Shanghai modern proves that even within the Chinese context, there are multicentric modernities. The task of translation is to mediate between these different cultural modernities making them harmonious without erasing their differences. This is perhaps the very force where Chinese culture lies.

Then people might raise another question: there once appeared an “overall Westernization” in China, is translation responsible for it? Yes, it is. That is why today’s intellectuals of nationalist sentiment often offer their critique of such large-scale (cultural) translation in modern Chinese history. As for this, I would say a few words.

As we all know, Chinese culture which is profound in content and splendid and rich in heritage cannot be “colonized” although it has been “Europeanized” or “Westernized” since the beginning of the 20th century through a large-scale translation. It is true that we lack our own critical discourse and has borrowed a lot in our cultural and literary criticism according to some scholars. Also it is true that we have to publish our research results in the international language—English—which is said to have “colonized” the Chinese language and Chinese culture largely due to the advent of globalization and the popularity of Internet. But it is an inevitable stage through which Chinese culture will become more mature approaching the mainstream of world culture. So it is unnecessary to launch a campaign to “decolonize” Chinese culture and its lan-

guage, which may well give rise to a new state of isolating China from the international community. We should not, however, neglect another fact: of world culture, Chinese culture is still in an inadequate position of marginality, whose value has by no means been fully recognized by the world with the exception of very few sinologists who usually have a deep understanding of certain aspects of Chinese culture but lack a comprehensive grasp of Chinese cultural and aesthetic spirit. Therefore, it might help Chinese culture to move from periphery to center and deconstruct the monolithic center if we set off to “de-marginalize” and “de-territorialize” Chinese culture by starting with a new cultural translation. If it should be done in an adequate manner, it would put Chinese culture in a favorable position of carrying on equal dialogues with Western culture as well as international scholarship. Hence the function of cultural translation in the present era known as that of globalization can never be replaced by any other means of communication.