Chinese Poetry and Translation

Rights and Wrongs

Edited by
Maghiel van Crevel
and Lucas Klein

Amsterdam
University
Press

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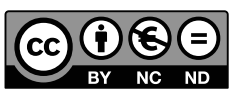

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Weird Third Thing

Maghiel van Crevel and Lucas Klein

This book first took shape during a two-day workshop on Chinese poetry and translation at Leiden University in June 2018. About halfway through, Nick Admussen said he found the community represented at the event to be inspirational to his work as a translator and a scholar of Chinese poetry. As an example he mentioned the recent *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* double (*JMLC*, issues 14-2 and 15-1, edited by Maghiel van Crevel), with papers given at Lingnan University in 2017 by several of those who had now come to Leiden. What Nick said about community echoed Eleanor Goodman's earlier observation that her paper was inspired by an essay in which Nick digs into a mistake he made while translating a poem by Ya Shi 哑石 and into the ensuing correspondence with Ya Shi – who did *not* consider it a mistake. "Translators translate through their libraries," Joseph Allen said after Eleanor's paper, and he is right; but it is equally true that translators translate, and poets and scholars write, through personal relationships with one another. The topic of Chinese poetry and translation is a case in point. And the workshop reaffirmed that the community in question is, well, kind of happening right now. Nick later called it a ragged family (Admussen 2019, 122).

In this way, translation and writing about translation are even more intertextual and relational than is commonly assumed, because they offer so much room for encounters of individual positionality and creativity on the one hand, with fundamentals of human expression and experience, on the other. This book bears this out in one ongoing, expanding conversation, with topics ranging from a queer-feminist engagement with some of China's newest poetry to a philosophical and philological approach to some of its oldest, and from Tang- and Song-dynasty poetry in Western languages to Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan in Chinese.

So how does this hang together? Of course, we could have chosen to tread safer ground than the vast, fissured spaces offered by the triptych

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of poetry + translation + Chinese. For instance, by limiting ourselves to a subgenre, a historical period, translation from Chinese and not into Chinese, or the good old question of how to reconcile the phenomenon of poetic form with the arbitrariness of the sign across languages. But what we are after is precisely the *un*-safeness offered by leaving things wide open between three words-and-things people have talked about forever and will continue to talk about forever – and then the dialogue that this yields.

First, the horizon of translation has widened over the past decades, and translation studies is a bubbly, interdisciplinary enterprise whose expansion and diversification worry some and thrill others. Witness, for example, discussions of the translational turn in scholarship. Second, to borrow from the *JMLC* special issue, coupling translation with poetry will trigger claims the size of office blocks, all the way from Robert Frost (censored here) to Eliot Weinberger's "Poetry is that which is worth translating" (2016, 1). Third: add Chinese to the mix, and things get even better. The script and its myths and truths, the question of whether texts used at the imperial court in antiquity are at all relatable to what today's migrant workers post on social media beyond the fact that both are called "poetry," the stubborn, sheer specialness of the genre in various Chinese settings, and so on. And what is China? For this book, China should be understood less as a political entity than a linguistic and cultural presence in today's world whose (self-)identification reaches back a long way – we have chapters on poetry from the bronze age, the twenty-first century, and various moments in between.

So the last thing we aspire to is full coverage, which is a scary notion at any rate. Instead, we trust the triptych's ability to make us visible and legible to one another and to our readers, and this volume works toward establishing such connections. Needless to say, there are many things it doesn't do or, phrased more generously, many other things it could have done – but this does not make the nodes of the conversation we build around the individual chapters any less visible. These nodes are key concepts that have resurfaced throughout the process of making this book, from the call for abstracts to the finishing touches to the manuscript. They include norms and ethics of translation; its ontologies, uses, and effects, such as what translations can "do" in the target culture; valuations of translation, for instance as these are affected by power relations between source language and target language; but also gender issues in Chinese poetry and translation and in the study of these things; and a vision of translation as creative nonfiction. The latter offers plenty of space for the time-honored genre of reflection by the translator on their strategies, choices, and mood swings.

We present our work in chapter groupings that these key concepts can run through. As such, this book is divided into three parts: "The Translator's Take," "Theoretics," and "Impact." Of course, different groupings could have resulted from the process that started with the call for abstracts, and we claim no necessity or self-evidence for these three. Nonetheless, our table of contents suggests a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, relating to translation studies as well as literary studies, China-focused and beyond. Below, with apologies for the enumerative mode we are about to enter, we introduce the chapters along these lines.

Part one, "The Translator's Take," opens with two essays that foreground activist aspects of poetry translation, by two poet-scholars who draw on the US context but build an argument that gestures toward translation and literature in general, with implicit and explicit reference to (geo)political, (geo)economic, and (geo)cultural power relations. **Chapter 1** begins with Jenn Marie Nunes's radical renditions of poetry by Yu Xiuhua 余秀华, who catapulted to fame when her blog went viral in 2014. Jenn then lays out a queer-feminist approach to translating Yu, which is informed by fiercely intimate textual encounters as much as by the recognition of the poet's and translator's identities in their social and (geo)political contexts, and by translation as discomfort and failure as well as solidarity and collaboration. In **chapter 2**, Eleanor Goodman offers an activist perspective on the *work* of poetry and of translation. Noting that literary translation does many things, from enabling the practice of comparative literary studies to the representation outside China of Chinese migrant worker poetry in a global-capitalist world, she discusses how her translations of Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, Wang Xiaoni 王小妮, and Zang Di 臧棣 confront English-language poetics at the same time as they interface with the work of several poets writing in English. In **chapter 3**, Joseph Allen takes the Take back – and forth – across great distances in space and time, illustrating a range of practical and theoretical issues that come to the fore in his new, in-progress translation of the *Shijing* (詩經, also known as the *Classic of Poetry*, *The Book of Songs*, or *The Book of Odes*). In incorporating the commentarial tradition of Chinese-intralingual interpretation into his English rendition of this foundational text, he brings together philosophy, philology, and literary aesthetics. **Chapter 4** contains Wilt Idema's reflections on purpose and literary form in poetry translation, against the background of translation traditions that change over time. Circling out from a poem by Tang-dynasty poet Han Shan 寒山, he draws on examples from Dutch and English to address issues that bear relevance to classical Chinese poetry's translation into any language, and indeed to the art and the craft and the trade of poetry translation at large.

Part two, "Theoretics," begins in **chapter 5** with Nick Admussen's advocacy of the concept of embodiment in the translation of (Chinese) poetry to challenge what he calls the equivalence icosis, founded on dated yet dominant assumptions of objective method and the clean interoperability of different languages. Looking at Jennifer Feeley's translations of Xi Xi 西西, Austin Woerner's of Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, and Ming Di 明迪 and Jennifer Stern's of Liu Xia 刘霞, the argument conjoins embodiment with present-day manifestations of poetry's transmedial and political potential. In **chapter 6**, Jacob Edmond asserts the generally neglected importance of poetic theory in the study and practice of translation and of comparative and world literature, as a crucial complement to the overwhelming focus on the form/content binary. Theory not only travels but translates as well, as the essay argues through a case study of how Russian Formalism found its way into Bei Dao's 北岛 translations of Boris Pasternak. In **chapter 7**, Zhou Min investigates the phenomenon of narrativization in English translations of Tang- and Song-dynasty *ci* 詞 poetry, in contradistinction to a widely assumed opposition of lyric and narrative poetic modes. Atop her deconstruction of the standard binary between these modes, she builds a new framework through which the translator can be appreciated as an "immersive reader" in texts of low experientiality. In **chapter 8**, focusing on Qu Yuan 屈原, known as "China's first poet" (even though his life in the Kingdom of Chu predates the empire), Nicholas Morrow Williams argues that the translator should not assume that the *li* 離 of Qu's "Li sao" (離騷) always means either "to depart" or "to encounter," but look for translation strategies that embrace the contradiction. This exemplifies an approach to the translation of poetry that will allow for or indeed invite a "double exposure," a dialectical movement between different modes of interpretation. In **chapter 9**, Lucas Klein starts from the premise that a poem is a translational process: always, not just once it has been translated in the conventional sense. From there, he complicates and reorients the authenticity claims that have been built into the discourse around both the *Shijing* and today's migrant worker poetry. He argues that these two poetries' many moments of intralingual, interlingual, and cultural translation constitute and reiterate each other – and that the recognition of this should place proper attention on the work and the art involved in each.

Part three, "Impact," starts with **chapter 10**, in which Liansu Meng reveals how Chen Jingrong 陈敬容 realizes the translator's agency in strikingly original ways in her influential mid-twentieth-century renditions of Baudelaire, and how Chen's translations are intertwined with her development of an ecofeminist poetics *avant la lettre*. Against the backdrop of modern

China's tumultuous, politicized encounters with foreign literatures, the essay highlights Chen's personal trajectory as a female author in a pervasively male-dominated literary field. Another debt owed to translation comes to the fore in **chapter 11**, in Chris Song's discussion of the Chinese-language debut of Western surrealist poetry in Hong Kong and its effect on the local poetry scene through the work of Ronald Mar 馬朗, from the early years of the Cold War era onward. The essay traces the trope of poetry being "true to life" – as resistance to the surrealist influence – through evolving notions and experiences of Hong Kong identity over time, up to the present day in the post-handover era. In **chapter 12**, Tara Coleman shows that the postwar Taiwanese poetry scene is a particularly rich example of the fact that translation and its impact come in "vertical" (or indigenous) varieties as well as "horizontal" (or foreign) ones. In dialogue with film theory, she employs the notion of "lyrical montage" to consider how juxtaposition in Ya Xian's 瘂弦 poetry leads to interactions that are mutually transformative and destabilizing, questioning conventional assumptions about the original and the translation. In **chapter 13**, Joanna Krenz reads three embattled Chinese renditions of Celan – by Wang Jiaxin 王家新, Bei Dao, and Yi Sha 伊沙 – for what they reveal about discourse on poetry and poetics, and on translation, in mainland China today. Drawing on historical context as well as images of poethood and poetry, the essay asks why Celan is so important for contemporary Chinese poets, and contextualizes this question in debates and polemics that go back to the 1980s and continue today. In **chapter 14**, Rui Kunze traces various cultural translations of Liao Yiwu's 廖亦武 poetry into English and German. Her essay foregrounds a tight entanglement of literature and politics that starts with the suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement in China and extends to a dynamic engendered by publishers, prize-giving bodies, and prestigious cultural figures abroad. It reveals the complexities of communicating trauma between East and West and the gripping textual traces that are left in the process. In **chapter 15**, Maghiel van Crevel suggests that in the early twenty-first century, Chinese-to-English presents a fascinating case study for the genre of the multiple-author translation anthology – because of infighting on the Chinese poetry scene, foreign readers' unfamiliarity with this poetry, and profound changes in where the anthologists come from and what language they speak, with both questions taken in the broadest sense.

There is much to unite these essays and more to interlink them, within and across each of the book's parts. This includes a resounding affirmation at every level of what we know about binaries in the humanities: they usually don't work, which is not unrelated to our decision to arrange the chapters

under the *three* headings outlined above. Also, any duality quickly creates what rhetoricians call a *tertium comparationis*. Likewise, in the *Laozi* 老子 the Two gives birth to Three 二生三 (after the Dao has given birth to One, and the One given birth to Two 道生一，一生二); but it is the Three that gives birth to the Ten Thousand Things 三生萬物. Similarly, in our volume's title, the triptych of poetry + translation + Chinese produces a myriad.

The move to push past binaries, then, explains the title of this introduction, "The Weird Third Thing." During the workshop, Jenn Marie Nunes related an anecdote about the "Mamma Mia" episode of the American sit-com *30 Rock*, in which comedy writer Liz Lemon persuades her boss, Jack Donaghy, to tell his long-lost birth father the truth of his identity. "You're gonna be okay," she tells Jack: his father will either reject him or embrace him. "One of those two things is gonna happen. There's no weird third thing." Liz and Jack orchestrate a contest of three potential fathers in which Jack's true dad will be revealed. What happens, however, is neither all-obliterating rejection nor all-healing embrace. Instead, it turns out Jack's real dad… needs a kidney transplant. And guess who he is looking to.

Isn't there always a weird third thing, and certainly when dealing with translation? A collection of Chinese and Anglophone poets "in mutual translation" edited by W. N. Herbert and Yang Lian is called *The Third Shore* (2013), in homage to Walter Benjamin's concept of translation as the "third language" (1977, 102) and as creating a "third space" (Bassnett 2014, 12) – where the meaning of a word exists beyond the two languages that meet in translation. Homi Bhabha repositions this image from a postcolonial perspective, when he speaks of the "Third Space" of enunciation as an indeterminate, "*inbetween*" space that carries the meaning of culture, a precondition for the articulation of cultural difference, and "the cutting edge of translation," where we may "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (1994, 55, 311). In her turn, Doris Bachmann-Medick sees (multiple) "third spaces" as the sites for developing translational approaches and epistemologies within and across disciplines in the humanities and social science (2013, 187). And so on. As thirdness enters the equation, translation's proximity to transplantation troubles our reliance on simplistic affects of love or rejection of an other by a self. In literature, and certainly in poetry, this troubling and its resolution (or exacerbation) happen in how words are made to sound, but also in a translated text's need to find the right match between donor and recipient, or source and target contexts.

We are not sure which of the triptych's elements – poetry, or translation, or Chinese – is the weird third thing, or that any one of them should always be. They could take turns, right? But we know that per se, there being a

third thing is trouble enough, and a wonderful kind of trouble. Thirdness destabilizes the symmetry of the binary, opening up multiple possibilities. There may be two sides to a coin, but there are more than two sides to a coinage, as there are usually more than two sides to an argument, especially an academic argument. The weird third thing articulates our approach: exploratory, in progress, embracing of uncertainty and possibility, and nimble, mobile.

Thirdness also means there is more than a simple "right" and "wrong." On this point, we could be taking our cue from the sculpture by contemporary Shanghai artist Xu Zhen 徐震 that graces the cover of this book. A Tang-era Heavenly Guardian 天王俑 holds aloft one of Constantin Brâncuși's early twentieth-century Sleeping Muse heads: the mash-up highlights not only the ways Chinese culture and the West do or do not fit together, and how the Chinese past looks in the light of the present – but also the ways both China and its others have been products of cultural translation from the beginning.

Similar questions and observations have always accompanied translation in formal and informal discourse, in the translator's practice as well as in academic theorization, and they explain *Rights and Wrongs* in the name of this book, after a suggestion by Jacob Edmond. When and why is the role of the scholar of translation to judge translations as right or wrong – technically, ethically, or otherwise – and when and why is it not? Can a translation wrong a person or party, and if so, can the translation still be right? If a translation is right, is its rightness forever and for always, or only for a certain purpose, time, or place? What rights does the translator have to respect in order for their translation to be right? What rights does the translator have, full stop – or rather, full question mark? What are the valences of aesthetics, ethics, and philology as they intersect in translation? How audible is the homophony of *right* and *write* – and of *rite*, in a vision of a text's translation as a rite of passage: think recognition, and entry into another community than that which now starts being called the source? Phrased and framed in multiple ways, questions such as these are well known in translation studies. The way we write them up here intends to give pride of place to the dyad of sound and sense that is so central to translation; and, in the process, not coincidentally, to blur any "hard" boundaries between translation and research.

Rights and Wrongs may sound like a binary at first, but it is "rights *and* wrongs," after all, not "right *or* wrong." Like the surface dualism under which translation's thirdness hides before exploding it, our subtitle signals polyvalence, a multifacetedness that insists the binary would be one of the wrongs. Or, there is no one correct or "right" translation, even if there may be no end to

wrong translations. This is not to say that translations should not be critically assessed – but only with the awareness that we are doing it wrong ourselves if we fail to recognize that translation's uses and effects are as interesting, and as important, as its ontologies. Juxtaposing "rights" and "wrongs" in our title can reveal their duality to be structurally in flux, and productively unstable.

In this way, we hope our title will do what some of the best (Chinese) poetry and some of the best translations do. Ernest Fenollosa, whose notebooks played a crucial role in Ezra Pound's vision of Chinese poetry and of modernism, wrote that in the "process of compounding, two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them" (2008, 46). We see this to be that weird third thing.

Leiden / Hong Kong, August 2019

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Maghiel VAN CREVEL is professor of Chinese language and literature at Leiden University. A specialist of contemporary poetry, he has published a dozen books in English, Dutch, and Chinese, including scholarly monographs and

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