

REVIEW ESSAY

The Translational Turn and the Dual Pressures on Chinese Literary Studies

Abstract

Whereas sinology, or the study of Chinese literature in English, has often been identifiable by a Chinese culturism, or belief in Chinese civilization as a coherent whole united by its writing system, this review article looks at five books that could be described as participating in a “translational turn” in Chinese literary studies. Yet even as they make powerful arguments against the fundamental unity and cohesiveness of a diachronic Chinese cultural-political identity in their translingual and translational approaches to scholarship, the books—Carla Nappi’s *Translating Early Modern China* (2021), Haun Saussy’s *The Making of Barbarians* (2022), Tze-Yin Teo’s *If Babel Had A Form* (2022), Yunte Huang’s *Chinese Whispers* (2022), and Nan Z. Da’s *Intransitive Encounter* (2018)—risk taking for granted the longevity of China’s participation in globalization and its economic integration with the United States. In light of current changes to the relationship between China, the US, and the world order, this review article reads these books while attempting to think through the gains and pitfalls of the translational turn in Chinese literary studies.

Keywords: translational turn; Chinese literary studies; translation studies; Carla Nappi; Haun Saussy; Tze-Yin Teo; Yunte Huang; Nan Z. Da; New Qing History; Sinophone Studies; Sinographic Studies

I. Introduction

“These foreign forces you are talking about—are they Marx and Engels?” 你说的境外势力是马克思和恩格斯吗?¹ The comment comes from a student leader in a viral video from the late 2022 protests against the zero-Covid policies of the People’s Republic of China, where people had been kept under intermittent lockdowns for 3 years and which was lately responsible for the deaths of at least 10 in an apartment building fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang—because residents were prevented from leaving their homes and fire-fighters were unable to cross barriers from the outside. The protests were tarred with accusations of having been instigated by “foreign forces” 境外势力, in line with recent attempts the Communist Party of China has made under Xi Jinping 习近平 to both stoke

¹ Cindy Yu [@CindyXiaodanYu], “This Was Such a Brilliant Video I Subtitled It ...,” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 28, 2022 (<https://twitter.com/CindyXiaodanYu/status/1597247427781984257>).

nationalism and extol its Marxism, which did not, of course, originate in China.² The student's shouts against the hypocrisies of such contorted logic are an example of the underlying perspective I also find in a handful of recent scholarly books that show the obvious gains but also the potential pitfalls of a global, postcolonial approach to the study of Chinese literature. The books—Carla Nappi's *Translating Early Modern China: Illegible Cities* (2021), Haun Saussy's *The Making of Barbarians* (2022), Tze-Yin Teo's *If Babel Had A Form* (2022), Yunte Huang's *Chinese Whispers* (2022), and Nan Z. Da's *Intransitive Encounter* (2018)—all argue against assertions of the fundamental unity and cohesiveness of a diachronic Chinese cultural-political identity, even as they take for granted the longevity of China's participation in globalization and its economic integration with the United States. In light of current changes to the relationship between China, the US, and the world order, I will try to think through these gains and pitfalls (and how we might avoid them) here.

With the important takes in these books on how Chinese literature has shaped and been shaped by translation in both modern and premodern periods, we seem to be at the crest of a translation turn in Chinese literary studies, parallel to what Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere announced in 1990 as the “cultural turn” in Translation Studies.³ How does this implicitly political stance of Chinese literary scholarship interact with the standard critique of East Asian Studies, that it creates and then deploys knowledge about East Asia for the purposes of the imperial interests of the United States of America? I admit that I observed last year's debate between John Guillory and Bruce Robbins from my position in Chinese literary studies with a bit of bemusement: neither Guillory's “aesthetic/critical” “rationales for literary study” nor Robbins's “democratic work of representing the collective experience of previously underrepresented others” defines the bulk of writing in my field.⁴ “It should be well known by now,” Harry Harootunian explained two decades ago, “that area studies had grown out of service language schools in the United States that had been established to train young men and women in the languages of the enemy in order to serve as

² For an academic treatment of how this relates to contemporary literature, see Michel Hockx, “Truth, Goodness, and Beauty: Literary Policy in Xi Jinping's China,” *Law & Literature* 35, no. 3 (January 24, 2022): 515–31.

³ See Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, eds., *Translation, History, and Culture* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), and Susan Bassnett, “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies,” in *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, ed. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (Bristol, PA: Multilingual Matters, 1998). There have been important studies of Chinese literature and translation before, of course, but this many books coming out more or less at once creates a different impression.

⁴ John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), xv; Bruce Robbins, “John Guillory's Nonalignment Pact: Is the Prominent Critic Stuck in the '90s—or the '60s?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 3, 2023 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/john-guillorys-nonalignment-pact>). See also, John Guillory, “We Cannot All Be Edward Said: John Guillory Responds to His Critics on Politics and Criticism,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13, 2023 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/we-cannot-all-be-edward-said>); Bruce Robbins, “The Politics of Organic Intellectuals: A Debate about Criticism and Society,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 22, 2023 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-politics-of-organic-intellectuals>).

interrogators of Japanese initially, then Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese.”⁵ East Asian Studies began during World War II, developed through the Cold War, and has since remained focused on American interest narrowly defined. Of course, there have been rogue scholars who have defected from dominant American ideologies to defend those of the erstwhile adversary, but in the process “of studying/marrying the area,” Shu-mei Shih argues, “scholars acquire the characteristics of the area they study ... becom[ing] defenders of the area where something like patriotism or nationalism on behalf of the area occurs.” This leads “to nothing less than a foreclosure of critique,” Shih says.⁶ With these books by Nappi, Saussy, Teo, Huang, Saussy, and Da, though, the possibility of critique is wide open—and the knowledge not, I think, deployed for the sake of a narrowly considered American interest.

Of course, the study of Chinese literature—the branch of East Asian Studies in which most of these books find their disciplinary homes—has rarely (aside from a few exceptions I will not bother to name) been so easily instrumentalized for the purposes of power/knowledge. Yes, there is a “spatialization of time in the disciplinary construction of the world,” as Jack W. Chen has pointed out, wherein the “spatial divisions” between the West and the rest of the world often become “temporal divisions” dividing western modernity from a perceived East Asian premodernity even today, due to “the devil’s bargain that was struck between philology and area studies” through which it happened that “the dusty old oracle bone specialist participates in the same colonial, disciplinary logic as the gleaming, modern agent of the state interests.”⁷ And true, the study of Chinese language and literature by Europeans and their descendants does claim a pedigree of philologists with curious and often disparaging preconceptions about China. But not only do Longobardi, Leibniz, Hegel, and so on have only a distant pull at best on the shape of literary scholarship on China today, even the most incisive critics of the sinological tradition are bound to defend it: “If by ‘sinology’ we mean the effort to understand, through texts, documents, artifacts, and interviews, the vast Chinese civilization, I see nothing reprehensible in this project,” one critic wrote.⁸ By and large, scholarship on Chinese literature,

⁵ H. D. Harootunian, “Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/Area Studies’ Desire,” in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 155.

⁶ Shu-mei Shih, “Racializing Area Studies, Defetishizing China,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 37.

⁷ Jack W. Chen, “Modern, Medieval” (Keynote speech, *Historicism Beyond Periodization: Transhistorical Methods in Chinese Literary Studies*, University of Chicago, April 21, 2023), ms. pp. 7–8.

⁸ Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 212 (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 11. For more critical engagements with the philosophers and philologists who took on China, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Fortieth Anniversary Edition, newly revised translation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Ho-Fung Hung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of

especially on premodern Chinese literature, can enjoy the dubious achievement of being (seen as) mostly apolitical.

Nevertheless, I have noticed a division in the study of Chinese literature, or a decision to be made for those of us engaged in such study, over which word we emphasize in that term. Interestingly, the term you emphasize in “Chinese literature” will also impact your treatment of the term you do not: emphasizing “literature” allows you to call the definition of “Chinese,” or even “China,” into question, while emphasizing “Chinese” allows you to argue that “literature” is not necessarily the same around the world in all eras. But, Harootunian again: though “the establishment of area studies programs promised to ‘transcend’ disciplinary boundaries—partitioned knowledge to provide holistic and integrated accounts of different regions ... because of the relentless kinship area studies formed with strategic policy making, serving national interests and ‘contract research,’ it was never able to free itself from the pursuit of a knowledge bonded to the necessities that had given it shape.”⁹ And as most scholars, I think, have traditionally emphasized “Chinese” rather than “literature,” by which I mean that they have taken “China” as the unassailable given while reducing literature to something transparent, almost invisible, then of course the study of Chinese literature has become simply sinology, whose ideology is perhaps best summed up by quotations such as this, from Frederick Mote in 1964: “Sinology means the study of Chinese civilization as a coherent whole,” and “language study is the only pass leading through the Great Wall and into the *chung-yuan* [中原],” or central plains.¹⁰ This is a culturism also expressed by Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), when he calls the Chinese writing system the “visible symbol of China’s unity.”¹¹

So it is against both such Eurocentric, Herderian definitions of literature and such a monolithic vision of China—against the thinking behind metaphors that posit great walls segregating the “coherent whole” of the *zhongyuan* from the rest of the world—that the books under discussion stand united. They constitute an internal challenge to earlier notions of Chinese literature as defined within the purview of East Asian Studies. But there also exists external pressure on East Asian Studies, and in fact to some of the underpinnings of these books, which I will be discussing in this review article. These challenges to the formation of Chinese literature as a field of study are not independent of each other, but rather exist in a kind of feedback loop.

The external pressure on the study of Chinese literature is China itself, as in, the People’s Republic of China as it exists today. I say this advisedly: one review my monograph received complained that I tend to argue “from the perspective

East–West Differences from 1600 to 1900,” *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 3 (2003): 254–80; Timothy Michael O’Neill, *Ideography and Chinese Language Theory: A History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

⁹ Harootunian, “Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/Area Studies’ Desire,” 156–57.

¹⁰ Frederick W. Mote, “The Case for the Integrity of Sinology,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. 4 (1964): 533.

¹¹ Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: John Day, 1935), 17, quoted in Yunte Huang, *Chinese Whispers: Toward a Transpacific Poetics*, *Thinking Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 125.

of present cultural conditions.”¹² This was meant as a criticism, but many scholars do this—and should. The state and direction of China matter to us as scholars of Chinese literature because, for better or worse, our experiences of and with that country establish the normal against which we frame our critical injunctions. This is true whether we are from China or not. To take an example I come back to often—Stephen Owen’s 1990 critique of Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949) for writing poetry that was insufficiently “Chinese” by being overly influenced by foreign literatures—Chinese culture’s opening up to the rest of the world was new to Owen’s experience of China.¹³ But even in Bei Dao’s response, where he says that his poetry is written in a “translation style” meant to challenge the “severely closed language system” of Chinese, his vision of Chinese writing is of something no less isolated from the rest of the world than Owen’s.¹⁴ Both Owen and Bei Dao contrast contemporary Chinese poetic openness to the closed, conservative past of China in their imaginations. As I point out in a recent piece, both men were born in the 1940s, on the eve of the establishment of the PRC: when they were expressing these opinions in the early nineties, China had in fact been closed-off to much of the world for most of their lives. They were naturalizing their historically contingent vision of what made China “China,” projecting it backwards onto the past.¹⁵ Our scholarship responds to dominant discourses about China, many of which come from China itself. One way or another, then, we will be writing in reaction to our sense of China; we may as well acknowledge this and benefit from the insights of self-reflexivity.

The thirty-plus years since Owen’s critique of Bei Dao have seen China grow rich because of its participation in US-led globalization, so the idea of China as definitionally closed-off might strike some as odd. By extension, the translational approaches of the monographs under review here to Chinese literature as consistently engaged in acts of translation might seem to have momentum on their side. But while Da’s, Nappi’s, Huang’s, Teo’s, and Saussy’s books all react against Chinese nationalism, the kind that has asserted that Xinjiang and Tibet are inalienable parts of China even as Uighur and Tibetan (and other) cultures are subservient to the culture of (not to mention subject to political oppression by) the dominant Han majority, they do so in ways that seem to take the economic integration of China and the United States for granted. Critics have analyzed this behemoth of globalization as “Chimerica” (the neologism’s resemblance to

¹² Benjamin Ridgway, review of *The Organization of Distance: Poetry, Translation, Chineseness*, by Lucas Klein, *MCLC Resource Center*, November 2020 (<https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/ridgway/>). See Lucas Klein, *The Organization of Distance: Poetry, Translation, Chineseness*, *Sinica Leidensia* 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹³ Stephen Owen, “What Is World Poetry? The Anxiety of Global Influence,” *New Republic* 203, no. 21 (November 19, 1990): 28–32.

¹⁴ Bei Dao, “Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution” [翻譯文體：一場悄悄的革命], in *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*, ed. Wendy Larson and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, trans. Wei Deng (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 61.

¹⁵ See Lucas Klein, “Born Translated? On the Opposition Between ‘Chineseness’ and Modern Chinese Literature Written for Translation,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature in Translation*, ed. Cosima Bruno, Lucas Klein, and Chris Song (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 423–33.

“chimera” is fortuitous),¹⁶ but here things get complicated—because as the past few years’ worth of current events have determined, Chimerica can now barely be said to exist.¹⁷ Not only have US–China relations soured, but both countries’ interest in globalization has dwindled. Bloomberg is reporting on what it calls “The Great Fracture.”¹⁸ The US is less interested in leading globalization, while China hardened its borders with its zero-covid policy and has kept them hardened since. With its population in rapid decline China can no longer take advantage of its cheap labor pool, the main factor contributing to its having become the world’s workshop (read: sweatshop), which was in turn one of the main factors for the country’s impressive growth under globalization.¹⁹ There is effectively no way that China can maintain its position as the second largest economy in the world for much longer (the 2019 World Bank estimate was that China’s GDP was 67% of that of the US; China’s GDP is still growing, at around 5%, but its total debt ratio is over 280% of gross domestic product). And in response, rather than letting a hundred ideological and policy proposal flowers bloom, the country has consolidated power into the limited vision of one man, who will have to be responsible for the crises China is facing in the environment, in housing, in finance, and of course in population, which will see the cost of labor increase as consumption falls, all while a generation born under the one-child policy try to save more to take care of their aging parents. “Chimerica” may have allowed us to see past China’s nationalism, but how do we see China now that the global order, and China’s integration into it, is coming undone?

The changes to the US–China relationship are already affecting undergrad enrolment in our Chinese language courses, but soon enough they will be affecting our scholarship, too.²⁰ I do not want to predict when or how these changes will take place, but already certain moments of the books in question look out of date—and most of them were published only 2 years ago. So the

¹⁶ See Niall Ferguson, “The Trillion Dollar Question: China or America?,” *The Daily Telegraph*, June 1, 2009 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/5424112/The-trillion-dollar-question-China-or-America.html>).

¹⁷ Ho-Fung Hung, *Clash of Empires: From “Chimerica” to the “New Cold War”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁸ *Globalization Is Fracturing. So What Comes Next?* (Bloomberg Originals, 2023) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttaaMw8wAy0>).

¹⁹ On the US being less interested in globalization: Donald Trump imposed many tariffs, against the judgment of the World Trade Organization; under Joseph Biden, as Paul Krugman writes, “the tariffs on Canadian metals are gone, as are most of the similar tariffs on Europe (although the agreement there stops short of full free trade). But the tariffs on China are still in place. More important, the Biden administration has declared that the W.T.O. has no jurisdiction in the matter: It’s up to America to determine whether its trade actions are necessary for national security, and an international organization has no right to second-guess that judgment” (Paul Krugman, “Opinion | Why America Is Getting Tough on Trade,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2022, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/12/opinion/america-trade-biden.html>). See also, Eric Levitz, “The Biden Administration Just Declared the Death of Neoliberalism,” *Intelligencer*, May 3, 2023 (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/05/biden-just-declared-the-death-of-neoliberalism.html>).

²⁰ See Emily Baum and Yingyi Ma, “China Studies in an Uncertain Age: The Luce/ACLS Program in China Studies Report” (American Council of Learned Societies, 2023, <https://www.acls.org/resources/china-studies-in-an-uncertain-age-2/>).

questions that will motivate the rest of this response, then, are: how do these books by Nappi, Saussy, Teo, Huang, and Da plot the trajectory of Chinese literary studies? What do they say about China and its place in the world, and what can we hold onto and what should we discard as we try to forge a new vision of Chinese literary studies in the future?

II. Translating early modern China

“A history of translation is always a history of power and the ways that language use conjures and transforms it,” Carla Nappi writes, in *Translating Early Modern China: Illegible Cities*.²¹ I have reviewed this book on its own elsewhere, but I begin my take with it here as its background offers a direct view into the relationship between scholarship and the concerns of the government of China.²² A story of court translation in the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, via a study of the Translators’ College (*siyi guan* 四夷館, *tongwen guan* 同文館) with chapters arranged by year (1578, 1389/1608, 1678, 1730, 1848), Nappi imagines a gathering of translators where each presents “a text, a document that represents a crucial point in the history of translation in early modern China.”²³ Her book is not limited to the historiographical trend called the New Qing History, but it is clearly inspired by and expansive of its visions and revisions. Poet Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) has explained its background and hinted at the significance of the New Qing History:

At the end of the last century, scholars of Qing history became embroiled in a fierce debate: one camp argued that the foundation of the Qing dynasty in 1644 was based on a homogeneous Han culture, and that the Manchus assimilated into the socio-political order of the ruling Han; the other camp believed the Qing creatively fused the traditions of central China to those of the Asian hinterland. The latter revisionist approach was called the “New Qing History” and was critical of the anti-Manchu nationalism of the “Han assimilation model.” Scholars of the New Qing History have placed particular emphasis on the Qing’s achievements in territorial expansion and control. They believe that at the height of the Qing the cultural crossroads wasn’t located in the central plains or Jiangnan, but rather in the vast expanse of the Asian hinterland: Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the equally marginal Manchuria in the northeast.²⁴

²¹ Carla Nappi, *Translating Early Modern China: Illegible Cities*, Global Asias (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9.

²² Lucas Klein, review of *Translating Early Modern China: Illegible Cities*, by Carla Nappi, *MCLC Resource Center*, December 21, 2021 (<https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/translating-early-modern-china/>).

²³ See Nappi, 2021, *Illegible Cities*, 11.

²⁴ Xi Chuan, “Author’s Afterword: The Tradition This Instant,” in *Notes on the Mosquito: Selected Poems*, trans. Lucas Klein (New York: New Directions, 2012), 247.

Xi Chuan's synopsis soft-pedals, however, how ideologically controversial the New Qing History has been in certain circles in China (in part because the controversy got hottest after Xi Chuan's writing). While as a historical tendency it has been critiqued academically, it is most relevant here for how it has drawn the attention, and ire, of the PRC's state apparatus.²⁵

What would later be called the New Qing History first emerged as little more than necessary shifts in perspective that followed from arguments to learn Manchurian and other languages associated with the rule of the Qing dynasty.²⁶ But when the implications of such learning grew, and the relevant organs in China heard of it, they understood the threat. By 2003 the Chinese State Council commissioned a National Qing Dynasty History Compilation Committee (国家清史编纂委员会) to compile their own multi-volume *New Qing History* (an update of the *Draft History of the Qing* 清史稿 commissioned by the Republic of China government but left incomplete in the 1930s), which as Mark Elliott points out "has all the hallmarks of an endeavor of dynastic legitimation (complete with patronage networks, intergenerational tensions over interpretation, real estate transactions, etc.)."²⁷ And in 2015 Li Zhiting 李治亭, of the aforementioned Committee, published an editorial (punctuated by eighty-eight exclamation points!) claiming that the "New Qing History" ... politically does damage to the unity of China "新清史"..... 政治上危害中国的统一 and aiming to "expose its mask of pseudo-academic scholarship, eliminating the deleterious effect it has had on scholarship in China!" 要揭露它的伪学术面目,肃清它在中国学界所造成的恶劣影响!²⁸ The purported threat to China's unity exists because the PRC considers itself the inheritor of the Qing territory (Mongolia notwithstanding), having overthrown the Republic of China, which had overthrown the Qing—though the leader of that revolution, Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925), had had as

²⁵ For representative academic critiques, see Ping-ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 123–55, and Pei Huang, *Reorienting the Manchus: A Study of Sinicization, 1583–1795* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Series, 2011).

²⁶ See Joseph Fletcher, "Manchu Sources," in *Essays on the sources for Chinese history*, ed. Donald Leslie, Colin Mackerras, and Gungwu Wang (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), 141–46; Joseph Fletcher, review of *Review of Manchu Books in London: A Union Catalogue*, by W. Simon and Howard G. H. Nelson, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 2 (1981): 653–63; Beatrice S. Bartlett, "Books of Revelations: The Importance of the Manchu Language Archival Record Books for Research on Ch'ing History," *Late Imperial China* 6, no. 2 (1985): 25–36; Pamela Kyle Crossley and Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, "A Profile of The Manchu Language in Ch'ing History," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 53, no. 1 (1993): 63–102; Evelyn S. Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1996): 829–50.

²⁷ Mark Elliott, "The Historical Vision of the Prosperous Age (*shengshi* 盛世)," *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 29 (March 2012) (http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=029_elliott.inc&issue=029).

²⁸ Translation taken from David Bandurski, "A Righteous View of History," *China Media Project* (blog), April 22, 2015, (<https://chinamediaproject.org/2015/04/22/a-righteous-view-of-history/>). The Chinese quotation is from an online reprint, Li Zhiting 李治亭, "美国'新清史' 不过是分裂中国的史学标本" [The American 'New Qing History' Is Nothing but a Historiographic Specimen of Splitting China], *Anti-Japanese War Memorial Web* 抗日战争纪念馆, November 17, 2016 (<https://www.krzzjn.com/show-645-40907.html>).

one of his slogans, “oust the Tatars and restore *Zhonghua*” 驅除韃虜,恢復中華, or the Han-dominant culture of the central plains, so the initial vision may not have been to rule over Mongolians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and other peoples now considered “minorities.” But the fact that China sees itself as having the same *lebensraum* as the Qing is not only why it is so adamant about “reunification” with Taiwan (Taiwan has never been under the rule of the PRC, and since 1895 Taiwan has only shared a government with mainland China for 4 years, 1945–1949), it also explains why the Chinese reaction to questions about the unity of the Qing is going to be more vehement than reactions to similar questions of other eras.

Even so, part of the historical value of Nappi’s book is that it chronicles how multicultural and multilingual matters were part and parcel of dynasties earlier than the Qing, as well. That Nappi’s book extends the insights of the *New Qing History* back past the start date of the Qing does not make her study less present-oriented, does not make her argument any less aimed at present cultural conditions. The history she has written of power and the ways that language use conjures and transforms—her definition of a history of translation, quoted above—is a history made urgent by China’s conjuring of language to push aside other languages, China’s conjuring of one people to push aside other people. Nappi has written elsewhere that “the body of a historical ‘China’ is a hybrid and Frankensteinian creation stitched together from many languages, peoples, and empires.”²⁹ This is true of nearly anywhere, I suppose, and others have said something similar about Chinese history, but it is necessary to repeat this message in part because the policies of the current version of China are so vehemently opposed to being seen as Frankensteinian—even as such denial makes them monstrous. But can future studies of Chinese history retain such attitudes if China succeeds in making itself more monolithic?

III. The making of Barbarians

In the first pages of *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia*, Haun Saussy takes on the culturalist ideology of sinology, that the Chinese writing system is a “visible symbol of China’s unity”: “Within China,” he writes, “a unified script; outside it, the need for nine (or infinite) levels of translating.”³⁰ China’s

²⁹ Carla Nappi, “Full. Empty. Stop. Go.: Translating Miscellany in Early Modern China,” in *Early Modern Cultures of Translation*, ed. Karen Newman and Jane Tylus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 220.

³⁰ Haun Saussy, *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia*, Translation/Transnation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 3. The “nine (or infinite) levels of translating” refers to Saussy’s quotation of Zhang Qian 張騫, in his 125 B.C.E. report to Emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝 on the possibility of winning over non-Chinese states via “peaceful means” such as “ninefold translation”—where, as Saussy explains, “‘Nine’ is here a rhetorically vivid substitute for ‘many.’ The hypothetical ‘ninefold translation,’ *jiu yi* 九譯 ... is a bucket-brigade scenario of international communication, the Chinese representative speaking to a bilingual Sogdian, who speaks to a bilingual Bactrian, who speaks to a bilingual Parthian, and so on. Such chains of translation would both spread the news of China and add to its majesty by linking to the centers of other worlds inhabited by people as yet undiscovered” (2–3).

structuralist differentiation gives rise, of course, to “complementary profiles of Self and Other”—though because to “those who know it, of course, China is not all the same,” we have, rather, a distinction between *similarity* and difference, where “the differences are not apt to matter very much to a person inside the circle of Similarity.”³¹ Against this, Saussy’s book asks, “Who exactly are these foreigners whose desire to enter into communication with China, or whose products’ attractiveness to the Chinese, magnetizes their outlandish idioms into a noisy chorus ending at the palace gate? It would be a pity to fold those nine acts of translation into a single concept, even an encompassing one such as foreignness, diversity, or plurality.”³² By examining how China translated the languages and cultures of its immediate premodern cultural others, its “historical neighbors,” *The Making of Barbarians* works not only to redress the presentism or modernity bias of much Chinese comparative literature, it is also arguing against the view of China as monolithic that said modernity bias has reified.³³

Those who have been paying attention to the field will note that this is at once a very Saussy topic as well as something of a self-criticism, or course correction, on his part. Saussy’s early books featured much meta-sinology, much critique of how China was imagined by onlookers from the West (he’s the one I quoted above as an incisive critic of sinology who nevertheless defends it). To be sure, there was sinology in them—“The Western image of China” is not, he argued, “a subject entirely different from the present-day researcher’s good-faith effort to understand the Chinese themselves”—but much of the gist was, as he and his co-editors put it in *Sinographies*, to “be to sinology ... as historiography is to history, a reflection on the conditions, assumptions, and logic of a set of disciplinary and cultural practices.”³⁴ What bridged the two sides was translation, the medium through which cultures and individuals of a given language make sense of cultures and texts of another language. More recently, Saussy has left meta-sinology behind as he has gone deeper into both sinology and translation proper—to argue that China and Chinese have long included and incorporated translation of their own. In 2018’s *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out*, he narrates backward from the modern era to the bronze age to show not only how translations into Chinese have made use of the paradigmatic ancient Chinese philosopher (Zhuangzi is the only Chinese philosopher mentioned in *Sophie’s World*, for instance), but how translation can help solve the problem of *Zhuangzi’s* authorship, in the first place: “what holds the *Zhuangzi* together is not an originating author (even if one trailed by epigones) but a set of procedures, a rhetoric,” he writes.³⁵

³¹ See Saussy 2022, *The Making of Barbarians*, 3.

³² See Saussy 2022, 4.

³³ See Saussy 2022, 9.

³⁴ See Saussy 1993, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, 3; Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, eds., “Sinographies: An Introduction,” in *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), vii. By “early Saussy” I am also referring to his *Great Walls of Discourse*.

³⁵ Haun Saussy, *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out*, Global Asias (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 107. See Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie’s World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy*, trans. Paulette Møller (New York: Berkley Books, 1996), 226.

The chapters of *The Making of Barbarians* cover translation between China and its neighbors in the bronze age and the early medieval period; the extent to which translation existed between Chinese and premodern readers of classical Chinese in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam; the hidden diversities concealed beneath the unifications of Chinese script; and the ethnographic poetry of Song dynasty poet and statesman Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and Qing dynasty scholar Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805). In doing so, they discuss a broad array of debates current to comparative and East Asian literary studies, from world literature and eurocentrism to the cohesiveness of China over time to whether China and the Sino-graphic or “Chinese character sphere” constituted a translation-free zone.³⁶ (“Sinographic” in a different sense from what it means in Saussy’s co-edited *Sinographies*, that is: here it refers to the areas in which classical Chinese was the de facto written language before vernacularization—and, incidentally, where chopsticks are still used as the primary eating utensils).

I would like to linger on his argument about translation and the Chinese character sphere, as I think his point—that focusing on linguistic boundarilessness diverts attention to other boundaries—calls for another answer. So: was translation going on when literati in Korea, Japan, or Vietnam read Chinese and pronounced it in their languages (in Japanese this is called *kundoku* 訓讀)? Rather than say yes or no, I think we need a more flexible notion of translation—one not necessarily based on Westphalian notions or an assumed weddedness between speech and writing for national languages. By analogy, consider the titles of two books I happen to have from the library: *Reading the Maya Glyphs* and *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing*. What can we say about “deciphering” in the second title? The readers of Chinese in the audience might balk at such a word when used, for instance, in the subtitle of Ezra Pound’s *Cathay: for the Most Part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the Notes of the Late Ernest Fenollosa, and the Decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga* (1915)—Why is Chinese poetry deciphered, while poetry in other languages is simply read, then interpreted?—But from what I’ve gleaned from the two books in question, Aztec writing does in fact require decipherment, at least in comparison to the Mayan script, which can be “read” more properly. Does that mean that Aztec cannot be read, as well? There are conceptual overlaps between the two notions, as well as times where we want to make distinctions. To say absolutely that deciphering is or is not reading—to say that reading *kundoku* is or is not translating from Chinese—is to miss the ways specific contexts and our immediate purposes will shape our answers to such questions. Allowing for this kind of indeterminacy, and also that not all the tools of vocabulary we now have are sufficient to dissect the world in ways we might otherwise want, is, I think, fundamental to Saussy’s approach.

Though he has framed his study as a step away from presentism, Saussy makes a point in passing about how “the ‘Chinese cultural sphere’ (including the old zones of settlement and migration as well as jet-age diasporas) is today a zone of

³⁶ He is responding to Wiebke Denecke, “Worlds Without Translation: Premodern East Asia and the Power of Character Scripts,” in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 204–16.

interestingly contested identities. Nowhere is it more so than in Taiwan,” he says,

where the question of how much the locally received ways of living and thinking owe to China implies broad social consequences: Is Taiwan after all a province of China, a colonial dependency, or an offshoot, and does anyone have the will, the ability, or the desire to talk back to the ‘Chinese cultural sphere’ rather than speaking only within it and according to its rules? In what would such a ‘talking back’ consist anyway?³⁷

His mention of Taiwan nevertheless reveals the contemporary subtext of Sinographic Studies. In other words, *Sinographic Studies* represents premodernists’ response to a live question in contemporary Chinese and comparative literature scholarship, namely that posed by *Sinophone Studies*, which has looked into the colonialist deployment of mainland China’s power while asking whether “Chinese literature” and “literature in Chinese” (or in “Sinitic”) are the same, overlap, or are separate categories.³⁸ We are, almost all of us, arguing from the perspective of present cultural conditions, trying to talk back to the Chinese cultural sphere and wondering what such a ‘talking back’ would consist in, anyway.

This suggests that Saussy’s discussion of translation and diversity in and around China before 1850 also implies an understanding of translation and diversity in and around China today. He argues for pluralism, and for global interconnectedness. I agree with these arguments.³⁹ But I worry, too, about what will happen to these arguments in the future, when the cultural conditions that allow for them, even necessitate them, transform. “Massive importation of foreign music occurred under every imperial dynasty,” Saussy writes, but as he knows, not all Chinese eras have been defined by open exchange with their neighbors.⁴⁰ Will the predicted fracturing of globalization mean that we have more need for arguments such as Saussy’s about the intercultural dimension of premodern Chinese culture, or less means to make them?

IV. If Babel had a form

“Is it possible to trace an equivalence,” Tze-Yin Teo asks, in *If Babel Had a Form*, between the “singular languages” of English and Chinese “and all that melts into

³⁷ See Saussy 2022, *The Making of Barbarians*, 60.

³⁸ See, for starters, Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, eds., *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Another inspiration for Sinographic Studies, I think, is East Asianists’ wanting to say something about Sheldon Pollock’s notion of the “cosmopolis,” in *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); thanks to Will Hedberg for this observation.

³⁹ See my *Organization of Distance* and “The Babel Fallacy Fallacy: Against the Lack of Interest in and/or Hegemonic Blindness to Translation in Premodern China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 316 (June 2021): 1–27.

⁴⁰ See Saussy 2022, *The Making of Barbarians*, 55.

their air?”⁴¹ Her subtitle is *Translating Equivalence in the Twentieth-Century Transpacific*, which means that she reads certain modern and contemporary US and Chinese-language writers—her chapters focus on Ernest Fenollosa and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–1995), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Yang Lian 楊煉 (b. 1955)—to show how translational poetry “contests the differentiations of exceptionalism and ethnic typologies in a Sino-US context defined by a long Pacific century of imperialism and reifications of cultural incommensurability.”⁴²

“Translating equivalence”? Teo means to explode and then piece back together the notion of “equivalence” so that she can recast it as non-imperialist, by focusing on how these writers’ networked literary exchanges construct of a new kind of equivalence, based on a poetic form. But to make her argument for a non-imperialist equivalence, equivalence must first be cast as imperialist. Is it? As Teo points out, the idea of equivalence as underpinning translation has indeed “come under scrutiny by postcolonial theorists who point to the unequal systems of capital that create, assign, and arbitrate value through epistemological and material processes of cultural translation.”⁴³ But she does not engage in, or even delineate, these theorists’ arguments: she simply takes it for granted, naming in a footnote the theorists who have done such scrutinizing (“Lydia Liu, Naoki Sakai, Talal Asad, Homi Bhabha, and Shaden Tageldin”) without mentioning the particular works in which their arguments have been laid out.⁴⁴ But what, really, is wrong with Roman Jakobson’s definition of translation as “two equivalent messages with two different codes”?⁴⁵ Does this scrutiny of equivalence make any sense? As I see it, these theorists are trying to argue against claims of cultural commensurability—which are often built on and asserted under unequal systems of power—but have stumbled on “equivalence” in translation. *Equivalence*, however, neither implies commensurability, nor does it mean “equal to”; equivalence refers to things being similar in one key aspect, defined by an equivalence relation, whereas “equal” means that things are similar in *all aspects*. The reason literary translation is difficult (and interesting) is not because semantic equivalence does not exist between languages—because it obviously does—it’s that translators have to handle many vectors of equivalence at once, from the semantic to the rhetorical to the affective, and so on.⁴⁶ The *poetic* is clearly one of these vectors, so we have landed where Teo’s argument takes us. She wants to “surrender *meaning* and suspend its processes of making in order to

⁴¹ Tze-Yin Teo, *If Babel Had a Form: Translating Equivalence in the Twentieth-Century Transpacific* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 5.

⁴² See Teo 2022, 4–5.

⁴³ See Teo 2022, 5.

⁴⁴ See Teo 2022, 169n.15.

⁴⁵ See Teo 2022, 5, quoting Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *On Translation*, ed. R. A. Brower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 233.

⁴⁶ For an example of equality and equivalence, consider Chinese *biaji zui* 吧唧嘴, which is what Mandarin speakers say for “to smack one’s lips.” The word *zui* means “mouth,” not “lips,” and *biaji* can also refer to puffing on a pipe or the squeaking of rubber shoes. So *biaji zui* does not equal “to smack one’s lips,” but they are equivalent.

encode that ethical resemblance as a poetic one.”⁴⁷ But I think she yields too much to certain theorists from the get-go.

The reference to Marx’s phrase about how under capitalism “All that is solid melts into air” (and to Marshall Berman’s famous book of that title) hints at how Teo is constructing her argument.⁴⁸ The title of her introduction is “Equivalence Beyond Value.” She means *exchange-value*, “the broken logic of capitalism that continues to uphold the power of empire and globalization.”⁴⁹ Drawing from Lydia Liu’s chiasmus of “Marx and Saussure ... wherein economics and the structuralist conception of language ... attain a powerful ‘figurative equivalence,’” she posits a *meaning-value* to move beyond.⁵⁰ “Dislodging the old thesis that translation seeks *semantic* equivalents between source and target [languages], I uncover the muted stakes of *nonsemantic* equivalence in loose constellations of sight and sound across unassimilable worlds.”⁵¹

This is all heavy stuff. But her allusion to melting into air also hints at another aspect of her argument, which is her critique of abstraction—appropriately, since “as a conjugation of aesthetic nonrepresentation with the forces of economic and social differentiation under global capitalism, abstraction is also important for its central role in the formation of value and mystification of labor time in the Marxian analysis of capital: in this model, there can be no equivalence—indeed, no translation—without abstraction.”⁵² Perhaps you can see how someone like me might be confused about all this: I believe in translatability and the political power of literary translation, but I am opposed, poetically at least, to abstraction (“Go in fear of abstractions,” somebody said).⁵³ Yet she goes further, critiquing the way Asian studies has applied abstraction to Asia: “In the discursive formation of Asian studies as an area of study, abstraction is the means by which the capitalist logic of value is transmuted into an epistemology of culture, marking Asia as both avatar and exception.”⁵⁴ It has given us “an image of Asianness as an avatar of linguistic and cultural opacity fluent in global capital—the very dream of abstraction itself.”⁵⁵

To me, such statements indicate the extent to which she takes for granted the place of capital in underlying US–China relations, cultural or otherwise, and it also makes me question the efficacy of her vision for translational poetry’s anti-colonialist equivalences. Are the translations of equivalence into something nonsemantic going to help overthrow, or even push back, capital if they cannot communicate with people across their confusion of tongues?

⁴⁷ See Teo 2022, *If Babel Had a Form*, 7.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “*The Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, trans. Samuel Moore, 2nd ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 476; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

⁴⁹ See Teo 2022, *If Babel Had a Form*, 2.

⁵⁰ See Teo 2022, 3. See Lydia H. Liu, “The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign,” in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Globalcirculations*, ed. Lydia H. Liu, *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 13–41.

⁵¹ See Teo 2022, *If Babel Had a Form*, 7.

⁵² See Teo 2022, 13.

⁵³ Ezra Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 1, no. 6 (March 1913): 201.

⁵⁴ See Teo 2022, *If Babel Had a Form*, 15.

⁵⁵ See Teo 2022, 14.

But is the transpacific imaginary always so defined by capitalism? Teo grew up in Singapore, which never took part in China's famous (and infamous) anti-capitalism, but neither does she discuss writers from the heights of China's anti-capitalist period and how they might both complicate the history she traces, not to mention offer other insights onto various futures. In other words, for all of Teo's theoretical density and even inspiring optimism, her argument still runs the risk of naturalizing capitalism and globalization—a dubious move in light of the predicted waning of globalization.

V. Chinese whispers

Chinese Whispers, Yunte Huang writes, “is a deeply personal book of literary studies.” As long as I've mentioned Teo's upbringing in Singapore, why not start with Huang's own infusion of “perhaps too much subjectivity, in the form of anecdotes, memories, and sentiments, into what is supposed to be an objective study of literature”? He has not eschewed disinterestedness “out of solipsism or self-indulgence,” he explains:

Instead, I see myself as a tiny speck in the global, transpacific flows of cultural capital. My personal experience, including my bildungsroman in the English language, my subsequent training in Anglo-American literature, and my work as a literary translator, is part and parcel of what I hereby call a transpacific poetics. It is a geopoetics whose multiple nodes, crisscrossing routes, and palimpsestic inscriptions have, in the past two decades or so, remained as the fount of my imagination, as well as the focus of my research.⁵⁶

And indeed, Huang has played a role much larger than that of a tiny speck in the transpacific poetics whose existence this book argues for and whose history it traces. This is, in fact, the third book Huang has published with “transpacific” in the title, after the scholarly volumes *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2002) and *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (2008).⁵⁷ But his first publication was an experiment in language poetry-influenced translations of classical Chinese poetry, *Shi: A Radical Reading of Chinese Poetry* (1997) (when Language poetry has been criticized for ignoring other languages, and their poetics in translation), and he has published a book of his own poems in English, *Cribs* (2005).⁵⁸ He has also written a trilogy of mass-market books for the US market on American representations of Asians, *Charlie Chan: The Untold*

⁵⁶ See Huang 2022, *Chinese Whispers*, 11.

⁵⁷ Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵⁸ Yunte Huang, *Shi: A Radical Reading of Chinese Poetry* (New York: Roof Books, 1997); *Cribs* (Tinfish Press, 2005). For a critique of Language poetry for ignoring poetry in translation, see Eliot

Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History (2010), *Inseparable: The Original Siamese Twins and Their Rendezvous with American History* (2018), and *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* (2023), as well as edited an anthology of modern Chinese literature in English translation, *The Big Red Book of Modern Chinese Literature: Writings from the Mainland in the Long Twentieth Century* (2016).⁵⁹ And that's to leave out his translations into Chinese, from the selected poems of Michael Palmer to Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*.⁶⁰

Extending from his personal *bildung*, the chapters of *Chinese Whispers* cover a history of Chinese–Anglophone (mostly US) literary (mostly poetic) engagements: Lin Yutang's pidgin “Chinglish” against I. A. Richards's Basic English, developed in China; the “poetics of intangible economy” in the trajectory between Marco Polo's mention of paper money and the intimations of cryptocurrency in Coleridge and Calvino; the “translational poetics” of Pound; abstraction in Stevens as informed by avant-garde poetry, the insurance industry, and Zen, through which Huang then re-reads John Cage; and finally a chapter on Chinese poetics “against the background of digital technology,” which returns to Lin Yutang and Ernest Fenollosa's “poetics of paragram”: the “stark contrast between disembodied information and materialist poetics sets the stage,” according to Huang, for “an instance of breaking down the false dichotomy between alphabetic and nonalphabetic languages.”⁶¹

His topics are sometimes well-worn (Pound's translational poetics, for instance), but Huang's take here is fresh and lively. Nevertheless, a question nags: can his readings, and the texts and intertexts he reads, be sustained into the future? If Huang sees himself as a tiny speck in the transpacific flows of cultural capital, are those flows bound to continue, to run to an all-embracing ocean of possibility, or will they instead be dammed, slow to a trickle, dry up ...? We do not know, of course, but as Huang's readings put a pressure on East Asian Studies to incorporate the comparative and non-East Asian—and to break down the dichotomy between alphabetic script and what Lin Yutang called the “visible symbol of China's unity”—further pressure is put on the longevity of his own readings by other geopolitical and economic pressures that he may not have foreseen. A better model for Chinese literary studies in an uncertain future might yet be found.

Weinberger, “The ‘Language’ Letters,” in *Written Reaction: Poetics Politics Polemics* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 83–96.

⁵⁹ Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); *Inseparable: The Original Siamese Twins and Their Rendezvous with American History* (Liveright Publishing, 2018); *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* (New York: Liveright, 2023); *The Big Red Book of Modern Chinese Literature: Writings from the Mainland in the Long Twentieth Century* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

⁶⁰ Michael Palmer, *瘋子與掃把：邁克·帕爾瑪詩選* [*Madman with Broom: Selected Poems of Michael Palmer*], trans. Huang Yunte 黃運特 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ezra Pound, *庞诗德选：比萨诗章* [*The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound: The Pisan Cantos*], trans. Huang Yunte 黄运特 (Lijiang: Lijiang chubanshe, 1998).

⁶¹ See Huang 2022, *Chinese Whispers*, 13–14.

VI. Intransitive encounter

In such light, Nan Z. Da's *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange*, "a catalog of self-erasing Sino-U.S. literary interactions in the long nineteenth century," is the right book to turn to.⁶² As Da explains, the literary exchanges between China and the U.S. that took place in that era "tend to cancel out, through form or rhetoric or logics unique to literature, the fact that Sino-U.S. exchanges even happened or left long-lasting impact"; her book, she claims, "inaugurates a careful way of reading such self-canceling transmissions—engagements that, measured by positivist assessments of international relations, might as well not have happened—and describes a kind of exchange in which nothing is exchanged."⁶³

What does she mean by that? "[R]eading for intransitivity means acknowledging that at any given moment the available forms of cross-cultural expression are always very finite and that therefore the most conventional and banal examples—examples that seem to conform completely to expectation—will yield interesting deviations."⁶⁴ In particular, her chapters look at Washington Irving's "attempts to incorporate Sino-U.S. intransitivity into his works"⁶⁵; at Ralph Waldo Emerson's "kaleidoscopic" transpacific writings, either "meaningless official rhetorics of exchange," or else "renunciations of exchange"⁶⁶; at "the nonuniform reception of Chinese or American influence" in Yung Wing (Rong Hong 容闳, 1828–1912), diplomat and businessman and the first student from China to graduate from an American university (Yale)⁶⁷; at the gift to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow by Dong Xun 董恂 (a.k.a. Tung sien, 1810–1892), Qing minister of foreign affairs, of a fan inscribed with Dong's translation of a poem of Longfellow's (the first secular poem translated from a European language into Chinese, and long believed to be the first English poem translated into Chinese⁶⁸); at the "literacy and women's rights campaign" of feminist and anarchist revolutionary Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907) "as it carried over into her fiction"⁶⁹; and at two stories by Asian American Edith Eaton (who wrote as Siu Sin Far) about a Chinese American family, for how they "allegorize print culture's efficiencies in changing people's minds and [also] represent the subtle forms of harm that can result from this allegorization."⁷⁰

Amidst such a litany of Sino-U.S. literary interactions, the self-erasure Da refers to consists in their being mere gestures, or instances of formality.

⁶² Nan Z. Da, *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.

⁶³ See Da 2018, 2.

⁶⁴ See Da 2018, 33.

⁶⁵ See Da 2018, 36.

⁶⁶ See Da 2018, 65.

⁶⁷ See Da 2018, 91–92.

⁶⁸ See Zhang Longxi, "Introduction," in *Patchwork: Seven Essays on Art and Literature*, by Qian Zhongshu, East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 13–14.

⁶⁹ See Da 2018, *Intransitive Encounter*, 166.

⁷⁰ See Da 2018, 193.

A “shrinkage in, and conflation between, various types of formality” took place “in the nineteenth century as a result of globalization and transnationalism,” she writes: “With more dinner speeches, photo ops, and mimed interactions in the transpacific world, a certain kind of formality started to move out of view while another began to dominate views of cross-culturalism.”⁷¹ Ultimately,

As forms become artifacts of culture, each and every instance of literary cultural contact further secures the difficulty of describing their true nature, as the archaeology of literary encounter lies waiting to transubstantiate the smallest of these into large networks of consequence ... Each separate instance of exchange could be superficially regarded and logged as a datum of transmission leading to habits of speech and historicization that then paradoxically rule out the possibility of rich but truly superficial contact.⁷²

This different focus on “form” would bring Da’s book into a curious conversation with Teo’s *If Babel Had A Form*, wherein form constructs new kinds of equivalence and transitively “contests the differentiations of exceptionalism.” Da’s book has also been given less than a warm welcome in a review by Haun Saussy: “*Intransitive Encounter* is careful about boundaries, almost to a fault,” he says, explaining that Da “seeks to correct the expectation that literary communication will lead to cultural ‘fusion.’”⁷³ Though he understands that “a merely formal engagement has built into it a kind of ethical respect for the other’s autonomy,” he says that “the Chinese texts cited here are dealt with briefly and roughly ... [which] tells the reader that the Chinese matters dealt with are not foreground, but background,” since “trying for a fuller account of Chinese history and literature would have modified the core arguments of the book, in particular the ‘intransitivity’ Da attributes to the ‘encounter’ with Americans.”⁷⁴ Da offers “evidence of non-connection that needed only to be scratched a little harder to reveal some connection,” Saussy says, and “seems in a hurry to foreclose on the very possibility of the sorts of contacts valued by earlier comparatists.”⁷⁵ These critiques are worth noting, but we should be intellectually capacious enough to accept arguments for both transitive and intransitive cross-cultural literary encounters, as well as to understand that at any given moment there might have been—or still might be—more transitivity on one side or another in any such encounter. We should also leave it an open question about how international formalities do or do not yield significant change (the November 2023 summit between President Biden and

⁷¹ See Da 2018, 6.

⁷² See Da 2018, 6–7.

⁷³ Haun Saussy, review of *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange*, by Nan Z. Da, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 42 (December 2020): 209, citing Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1992), 302.

⁷⁴ See Saussy 2020, “Intransitive Encounter,” 210.

⁷⁵ See Saussy 2020, 211.

Chairman Xi comes to mind as one recent example where the settling of the scale between formality and content remains to be seen).

So while *Intransitive Encounters* may run against the grain of earlier comparative arguments about transpacific influence, it may yet be a harbinger of the kind of East–West comparison we will be seeing in coming years. Yes, translation, as Nappi and Saussy have explained, has impacted Chinese literature and culture, and yes, as Huang and Teo have analyzed, Chinese and Anglophone literatures have engaged with each other in ways that have proven transformative to both. But most translations of Chinese literature into English today seem to be received with polite or benign neglect at best: are there any translations of poetry that have been as influential as Pound’s *Cathay*, or explanations of Chinese culture as popular as those by Lin Yutang were in American of the 1930s? The system of translated literature has to do a lot of lifting within any given national literature to impact its whole polysystem.⁷⁶

What’s more, as Saussy points out in his review, Da reveals in a “dramatic reframing” at the end of the book that her questions have been shaped by her experience as an immigrant, “always on the spot for inadequate acculturation or the loss of native identity, has shaped its questions.”⁷⁷ “I admit,” she writes,

that in writing this book I experienced a profound crisis of conscience. My parents were humanities intellectuals and dissidents who had no future in China after the Communist Cultural Revolution. In 1989, shortly after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, our family was sponsored by a group of American women—artists and writers—who helped us immigrate to the United States and who paid for my father’s postgraduate education ... In light of these beneficences, to write of “intransitivity” seems sacrilegious.⁷⁸

At the same time, the complex of “[i]nfluence and its nonresentful abjuration ... follows the immigrant expat forever”:

It is never possible ... to know whether others are trying to read and make determinations about you, your commitments, your fidelities, and your Chineseness, Americanness, or Chinese-Americanness based on signs of influence ... Immigrants are resentful when others mistake limits of attention, memory, and interest in any encounter or exposure as rejection of a larger body of ideas or cultural practices, or when they mistake intense attention to American or Chinese ideas as evidence of ‘becoming Americanized’ or ‘remaining Chinese,’ or when they, by virtue of having any kind of cross-national experience, are seen as the poster children for the new hybridity of the future. This is all to say nothing of an increasingly precarious environment in China where the sense that affinities to nonnative

⁷⁶ I am referring to Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Studies,” *Poetics Today: International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication* 11, no. 1 (1990): 1–262. See Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems* (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 1999).

⁷⁷ See Saussy 2020, “Intransitive Encounter,” 211–12.

⁷⁸ See Da 2018, *Intransitive Encounter*, 224–25.

bodies of thought must have measurable effects that can be rooted out and extinguished ... lives quite comfortably with the platitudinous language and practice of East–West mixing.⁷⁹

And so we return to the cluster with which we began, politically engaged disentanglements of the China–international culture nexus, through which we try to feel our way forward. Even as China’s relationship with and to the rest of the world continues to change, rooting our scholarship in perspectives based on the immigrant experience—whether that is the experience of a speck in the transpacific flows of cultural capital or an upstream struggle against it—may be the best approach. We respond, as I said above, to the external pressure of our scholarship that is China itself, but we should do so in full acknowledgement of our own cultural in-betweenness, as well as the limitations on the power we can exert.

VII. Conclusion

So, where does that leave us? The authors under review here do not constitute a unified movement, of course, as they are not always in agreement with each other, but Nappi, Saussy, Teo, Huang, and Da do, nevertheless, represent a translation studies-based comparative impulse in Chinese literary and cultural studies, whose coming into formation exerts a particular challenge to customary ways of writing Chinese literary studies and envisioning China. That they work against Chinese studies as traditionally understood by virtue of a transnational vision of China, defined not by the “visible symbol” of its writing system or circumscribed by the centralism of its geographical central plains, and brought about by a recent history of globalization that may be ending—or which, at any rate, is changing—is an irony that might argue against their project, but which also reveals the fragility of the idea of China itself. For all we know, the crises in the PRC may climax within a handful of years, and China as we know it, the China which drives our presentism, may end up looking very different from China today. That version of China (or Chinas) will be held together by another set of beliefs. Though globalization in its current iteration has enough problems for me not to mourn its passing, my hope is that the beliefs that hold together our future Chinas will be able to accommodate and even embody the values of these works of transnational, translational scholarship.

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[doi:10.1017/pli.2024.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2024.8)

⁷⁹ See Da 2018, 225.

Cite this article: Klein, Lucas. 2024. “The Translational Turn and the Dual Pressures on Chinese Literary Studies.” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 11, 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2024.8>