About halfway through ‘The Moving Target’, a workshop on Chinese poetry and translation convened by the authors of this report at Leiden University on 1–2 June 2018, Nick Admussen said he found the community represented here to be inspirational to his work as a translator, a scholar of Chinese poetry, and a thinker on and through translation. As a recent example he mentioned the Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese double (JMLC, issues 14-2 and 15-1, edited by Maghiel van Crevel), with papers presented at Lingnan University last year 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 Yu Sha and the ensuing correspondence with the author—who did not consider it a mistake, “Translators through their libraries”, Joseph Allen said after Eleanor’s paper. But it is equally true that translators translate, 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.

The weird third thing

Report on a workshop on Chinese poetry and translation

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on translation, in mainland China today. Rui Kunze (University of Trier) traces the various cultural translations of Liao Yiwu’s poetry into English and German, in a tight entanglement of literature and politics that starts with the suppression of the 1989 Protest Movement in China and extends to a complex dynamic engendered by publishers, prize institutions, and prestigious cultural figures, revealing the difficulty of communicating trauma between East and West. Maghziel van Creveld (Leiden University) shows that Chinese-to-English offers a fascinating case study for the genre of the multiple-author translation anthology, because of continuing tumult on the Chinese poetry scene, foreign readers’ unfamiliarity with this poetry, and profound changes in the positionality of anthologists in the early twenty-first century.

Fig 2: Pop-up exhibition of unofficial poetry journals from China. Photograph by Erik Weber.

There is much to unite these arguments and more to interlink them, within and across the sections. If the key concepts identified above and the groupings that emerged from the workshop share any underlying themes, these include a resounding affirmation of what we know about binaries in the humanities: they usually don’t work. This is not unrelated to our plans to organize the contents of the book under the three section headings outlined above. As in Daolism, where it is the three that gives birth to the ten thousand things—after being engaged by the two and the one and, before that, the Dao—in our volume’s title a triplicity also produces a myriad: poetries + translation + Chinese.

The move to push past binaries, then, explains the title of this report, “The Weird Third Thing”—which will hopefully metamorphose into the volume’s introduction once the revisions are in and the manuscript is ready for submission. The specifics of the Weird Third Thing come from an anecdote Jenn related during one of the roundtable sessions. In the “Mamma Mia” episode of the American sit-com 30 Rock, 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 (is it Mamma Mia?—hence the episode’s name) in which the true father will be revealed. What happens, however, is neither all-libilating rejection nor all-healing embrace. Instead, it turns out Jack’s real dad . . . needs a kidney transplant. And guess who is looking to . . .

Isn’t there always some weird third thing—not least when dealing with translation?

A collection of Chinese and Anglophone poets’ “in mutual translation”, edited by Yang Lian and W.N. Herbert, is called The Third Shore, and as Tara Coleman reminds us in her paper, for Walter Benjamin the meaning of a word exists in a third space beyond (but not above) the two languages that meet in translation. Translation’s proximity to translation troubles our reliance on simplistic affects of love or rejection. We are not sure which of our categories—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 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 relinks translation to Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’ and the ‘in-between’ of postcolonial theory, and it articulates our approach: exploratory, in progress, embracing of uncertainty, and nimble, mobile. Thirdness also means there is more than a simple ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, with obvious, immediate relevance to translation. What extent is the role of the scholar of translation to judge translations right or wrong—technically, ethically, or otherwise? Can a translation wrong a person or party, and can it be right if it does so? 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 audiable 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? Our questions are not uncommon in the field of translation studies as it turns to ethics and aesthetics, but we see the Daoist weird third thing producing its myriad before us. This stuff explains the full name of our book, which we intend to call Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs, after a suggestion by Jacob when we were brainstorming titles.

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, then, our subtitle signals polyvalence, a multifacetedness that insists that the binary would be one of the wrongs. Or, there is no one correct or ‘right’ translation, even if there may be no and to wrong translations. This is not to say that we do not critically assess translations, but we do so with the awareness that we are at some level doing it wrong ourselves if we fail to recognize that the exploration of translation’s uses is as interesting, and as important, as the exploration of its antilogies. 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”. We see this to be that weird third thing.

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