

# Building paradise: A mission for Translation Studies

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I have no idea if we are constructing a new paradigm for Translation Studies, and I have even less of a clue about what such a paradigm might look like, if only because initial ignorance is the condition of true novelty.

The claimed attempt, though, is of interest in itself; it might tell us something of our shared frustrations and desires. So let's see.

Translation Studies, I suggest, is a Western discipline that is furtively trying to de-Westernize itself. I think the discipline spread out on the coattails of the Western translation form, disseminated across the globe at roughly the same time as railway tracks, also Western. There is little need to document the dissemination in detail: it is adequately signaled by those who would reflect on or seek to recuperate something of the prior, non-Western thought. Trivedi (2006: 116), for instance, notes "the absence of the practice and perhaps the very concept of 'translation' as it is understood in the West, in the early history of Indian literature." Tschacher (2011: 27) observes that "[u]p to the eighteenth century, South Asian Islamic literatures seem to offer very little evidence of 'translations' in the narrow sense, as renderings of particular texts or passages thereof in the medium of another language." Sakai (2013) summarizes: "Prior to the eighteenth century, in Asia all sorts of methods were applied, but nothing that was like translation." And so on.

Precisely *what* spread out is a little more difficult to attest, but I have elsewhere proposed that the Western form comprises two fundamental elements: use of the "alien-I" (the translator cannot occupy a linguistic first person while translating) and a presumption of quantitative invariance (if the start text is longer, the translation is presumed to be longer as well). Those two technical maxims could always be transgressed, but they generally combine with assumed language crossing to encourage a presumption of accuracy, to a much greater degree than the various traditional modalities of re-telling and adaptation that generally preceded the Western form.

More interesting for the future, though, are the various claims that we should be going beyond that form. Here I am not talking about the myriad endeavors to study something more than translations: we are told to look at cultures, norms, ethics, technologies, reception, performance, emotions, narratives, sociological

formations, psychologies, creativity, censorship, politics, power, more power, and virtually anything else that someone somewhere has ever wanted to talk about, in a series of petty and ultimately vacuous non-disciplinary “turns” that dizzyingly change our moving backgrounds like disposable stage settings. Instead, here I am talking about attempts to rethink the very form of translation itself, or the translative act as such. Such a pretension might be on the level of Lu Xun’s arguments for “stiff translation”, or the very different claims of *Skopos* theory that something more than accuracy can be required, or indeed the debates in the Soviet Union for and against “formalism”, which were fundamentally between linguistic and literary approaches. It is from this latter encounter, by the way, that Translation Studies itself may have been born, so as not to choose between the two established disciplines. Yet we are no longer there.

Among Western-trained scholars, mostly American, there is increasing awareness that the constraints of the Western form are fundamentally repressive, based on a regime of authority and control that can be traced back to the history of Christianity, Roman property law, copyright conventions, imperialism, and positivism (here I conflate claims by Robinson, Tymoczko, and Venuti, surveyed in Pym 2011). The non-Western is thereby variously called upon to bring in alternatives to all those things.

On the other side, as much as there is another side, we can find attempts to nationalize resistance to Western imperialism. Liu Miqing (1990/2004: 236), I learn, claimed that “the basic paradigm of Chinese translation theory should start and end with our mother tongue – Chinese,” so Western models based on morphology should be replaced by Chinese models based on semantics.

One problem with such comparisons is that we are no longer entirely lined up on two sides like opposed football teams, as can be seen in this volume: Guo Yangsheng moves between Canada and China, Douglas Robinson is in Hong Kong, and the non-Western authors herein are by no means shunning Western references. There is, I suggest, a developing intercultural space in which the provenance of ideas is becoming less important than their capacity to help solve the problems of the present, and perhaps those of the future. This can be seen not only in our own community of scholars, but also in the social groups for whom we work, and indeed for whom translations are carried out. And there, I suspect, might hide a key for future thought about translation.

New technologies open new possibilities, few of the options being obligatory. For one, the technologies enhance our mobility, and thereby the mixing of our communities. This means the boundaries crossed by translation are increasingly not from one geopolitical space to another, but within and across communities of shared interests. These may be professional: doctors communicate with doctors, lawyers with lawyers, and so on, and all these actors may be within the one multilingual community. At the same time, some technologies are radically democratizing translation, to the extent that everyone has access to free online machine translation, even when they have no idea of how to use it productively. So the translating and translation-using cultures are now not just professional: to rush the argument, translation is involved in all adult language learning, in all presentations of the self across cultural divides, and thus in the very conditions of multilingual

cooperation, from the governance of the state to the everyday arrangements of multilingual family life. In a word, translation is working within our societies, not just between them.

This change, highly variable in its effects and possibly limited to urban spaces, is furnishing the most severe social challenges of our day: the pressures of immigration, the rights of asylum-seekers, the reactionary hatred from sedentary cultures, deep unspoken resentment on all sides, leading to countless acts of violence and retribution, to the extent that, in many places, one suspects the mixing is simply not working. At the same time, the most serious underlying problems “only” concern culture and communication; they can be addressed through education and training, in a generation or so. And if we can locate skills and techniques able to facilitate cooperative communication such multilingual spaces, then we will have moved a few steps towards a society in harmony with its technologies, and with itself.

If some of those techniques and skills can be identified as extending translation, Translation Studies must be involved in the building of social paradise.

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