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Book review: Translation and Literature in East Asia: Between Visibility and Invisibility

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BOOK REVIEW



Translation and literature in East Asia: between visibility and invisibility, by Jieun Kiaer, Jennifer Guest, and Xiaofan Amy Li, London, Routledge, 2019, vii + 120 pp., GBP £44.99 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-8153-5827-5

This is a relatively short yet intellectually dense and fecund book on literary translation in East Asia, co-authored by three scholars covering respectively China, Japan, and Korea. The central line of inquiry across the chapters revolves closely around the issue of (in)visibility in Translation Studies most famously announced and initiated by Lawrence Venuti more than three decades ago. Through specialist case studies from pre-modern China and Japan as well as contemporary Korea, the authors are able to make a number of highly original claims that not only finely nuance some conceptual dichotomies in literary translation (e.g. visibility vs. invisibility, domestication vs. foreignization), but also modify and challenge our conventional (and predominantly Western?) assumption of literary translation as primarily a one-directional and single modal exercise of meaning conveyance. Importantly, a good amount of the material in the book stresses the mode- or medium-sensitive interaction and translation among East Asian languages (e.g. varied presentation format that blurs the boundary between translation and commentary, creole-like co-appearance of logographs and phonetic script). This volume stands thus as an exemplary addition to the promising new book series *Routledge Studies in East Asian Translation*, of which two of the co-authors now serve as the editors.

The book is conveniently divided into three chapters according to each co-author's area of expertise. The first chapter by Xiaofan Amy Li explores the intra- as well as interlingual translations of one of the four Daoist foundational classics *Zhuangzi* (4th-3rd century BCE), written in classical Chinese and in notoriously obscure style. Both historical and modern Chinese readers rely heavily on various (sometimes competing) commentaries (and in fact, the commentaries of the commentaries) to access *Zhuangzi*. The appearance of commentaries alongside the original text entails a multilayered interpretive reading experience that is already palpably translational. Quite tellingly, even when full-blown translations of *Zhuangzi* into drastically reformed modern vernacular Chinese started to appear in the late twentieth century, the original text has always been kept fully visible and such translations have never been intended to replace the original. The classical language and style of *Zhuangzi* are "foreign" to modern Chinese readers in the diachronic and temporal sense, yet its persistent presence and systematic inclusion in modern Chinese translations make such "foreignness", somewhat paradoxically, much less noticeable. Such translations function effectively as a more coherent and enhanced form of commentary, and the "fluency" of the translated texts does not make the translators invisible (as is the case in Venuti's configuration).

Having outlined some textual indeterminacies, ambiguities, corruptions, and idiosyncrasies of *Zhuangzi*, Li then compares a number of interlingual translations of *Zhuangzi* (mainly into European languages). Instead of dwelling on the difficulty or insufficiency in dealing with the so-called "untranslatables", especially in relation to the strategies of foreignization and domestication, Li strongly advocates *comparative* readings of multiple translations, as "each translation may then show alternative facets of interpretations that gives a fuller picture of the special term" (26). In cases of textual corruption and inconsistency in the original, both intra- and interlingual translators may change the existing text to "restore" a certain "original" coherence, thereby achieving "higher translational fidelity" (29). Li's examples and suggestions mark a

notable departure from many translation studies scholars' resolute insistence on making visible the foreign on ethical grounds (e.g. Venuti and Spivak).

Jennifer Guest's second chapter on the premodern Japanese glossing, adaptation, and reception of the classical Chinese poetry by Bai Juyi ties in nicely with Li's previous observations on the tradition of commentary as (in)visible forms of translation. Many of Guest's discussions revolve around *kundoku*, which is, as the author quite densely explains:

a semi-standardised system of gloss-based reading and writing that allowed Classical Chinese texts to be read as a distinctive style of Japanese while continuing to visually reflect the source language—and conversely allow the creation of “classical Chinese” written texts that adhere in some degree to shared regional standards but are firmly rooted in Japanese language. (50)

Much like the Chinese commentarial tradition and the modern Chinese intralingual translation of classical texts, the original text is kept in view to enhance the notion of authority. Moreover, the so-called “original text” is in fact an intrinsic and therefore inseparable component of *kundoku* writings that embody a complex “interpretive system or ecology in which translation is positioned, often invisibly” (57).

Guest insightfully advises against applying our conventional, narrow understanding of translation as meaning transfer between two discrete languages to premodern Japanese writing, because it obscures the complex creole-like linguistic realities as well as the “mode-sensitive” interaction between writing and speech in translation. For instance, educated Japanese readers were able to understand Chinese logographs but might not at all be able to converse in Chinese. Quite often, as Guest's analysis of Bai Juyi's poem “The Lingyuan Lady” illustrates, texts appearing Chinese were carefully annotated to be adapted and performed in distinctly Japanese ways.

In comparison, Jieun Kiaer's final chapter on modern literary translation between English and Korean exploring the issue of *invisibility*, sets itself quite apart from the periodic focus, generic concern, and even argumentative style of the first two chapters. Kiaer focuses on the “speaker-hearer sensitive” particularity of the Korean language. The choice of grammatical constructions and rhetorical styles in Korean is essentially dependent on the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the listener, and this applies even to the simplest sentences in English (e.g. “It's raining”) (82). Because such interpersonal relationships are often unknown or unknowable – hence invisible – in the English text, the translator is required to creatively engage with, and grammatically (re)configure, diegetic characters' relationships according to age, gender, class, intimacy, and so on in Korean, which significantly overshadows the original author's intentions. Conversely, from Korean to English, nuanced interpersonal relationships are often concealed and become invisible to Anglophone readers; and it is therefore at the translator's discretion to use creative methods to reveal such relationships. For these reasons, Kiaer proposes to conceive of translators as co-creators of literary texts in a “gradient model of translation” (93), in which the source text (ST) author's meanings and those of the target text (TT) interact and are negotiated in a kind of continuum.

These three chapters have convincingly argued against any facile conceptual framework in literary translation that discusses the issues of visibility and invisibility in absolute oppositional terms. Instead, we should be more attuned to the space *between* them, and conceptualize (in) visibility in relational terms, taking account of linguistic differences as much as affinities, variable modalities (e.g. writing and speech), and both diachronic and synchronic perspectives (e.g. on the notion of “foreignness”). On the whole, this volume makes an invaluable contribution in diversifying our current discourses in Translation Studies by bringing in fascinating literary examples from East Asia. While Chapter Three provides a helpful overview of the

linguistic problems in modern Korean-English translation, engaging with notable theories such as Halliday and Matthiessen's functional grammar; Chapters One and Two have mounted two compelling cases that challenge a conventional, narrow understanding of translation by renegotiating translation with a wide range of literary concepts and phenomena, such as inter- and paratextuality, reception, adaptation, and the commentarial tradition. These concerns would of course also be of vital interest to scholars working in Comparative and World Literature.

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