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**Translation and the
Production of Knowledge(s)**

The Battleground of Translation: Making Equal in a Global Structure of Inequality

Lydia H. Liu
(Interviewed by James St. André)

Introduction

This conversation took place by email, over a period of approximately eleven months, starting in February 2016 and ending in December of the same year. The choice of Lydia H. Liu as interviewee and James St. André as interviewer may seem unusual, given that they are both specialists in East Asian Studies, and *Alif* is a Cairo-based journal that features articles in Arabic, English, and French—but not in Chinese, the main focus of Lydia Liu’s work. In addition to the growing importance of China and the Chinese language on the world stage, the rationale for this choice derives from the seminal nature of Lydia Liu’s work and its relevance to the theme of this special issue. In a series of highly influential publications that examine different aspects of the way ideas, theories, discourses, and modes of representation circulate and acquire new meanings as well as legitimacy in different cultural and historical settings, Lydia Liu has demonstrated the centrality of translation to any critical reflection on modernity and the circulation of knowledge. The implications of her work extend well beyond East Asia as a geographical region and East Asian languages as currencies of cultural exchange. The exchange illuminates how to make sense of translation, leave some familiar modes behind, analyze translation beyond semantics, explore supersigns, revisit the logic of equivalency, highlight sense and nonsense in translation, expose the conundrum of “gender” and the conditions of the universal.

Interview

James St. André: Since one of your books is entitled *Tokens of Exchange*, and the call for articles for this special issue of *Alif* begins by stating that its “point of departure . . . is that knowledge is ‘produced’ rather than ‘discovered,’” and that “translation is a core mechanism for the production and circulation of all forms of knowledge,” I would like to begin by asking your views concerning the terminology used in discussions of translation and knowledge. Traditionally, in fields such as the history of science and technology, if researchers speak of translation at all, it is usually as a means of “transmission” of knowledge or the “transfer” of expertise. In the current call for papers, the editors deliberately chose two rather different terms, “production” and “circulation”; in a private conversation, Mona Baker also mentioned “construction” and “creation” as possible alternatives.

In the introduction to my edited volume, *Thinking through Translation with Metaphors* (2010), I argued that the work of Lakoff and Johnson in linguistics and Black and Ortony in the history of science should alert us to the ways in which metaphors can, and often do, predispose or even predetermine how we conceptualize translation. To what extent do you think the terminology used to date has determined the parameters of the possible for the study of translation and knowledge? Given the choice between a communicative (transmission), transportative (transfer), commercial (circulation/exchange), industrial (production), and religious model (the latter creative, if we take the Biblical story of the creation of the world as the ur-text for the way in which we think of creation in English today), which do you think is most helpful? And how do you see some of the terms you yourself have employed—in particular “translingual practice” and “tokens of exchange”—intervening in the process of imagining the role of translation, not just in China or East Asia, but in general?

Lydia H. Liu: Reflecting back on my own work, I realize that I almost never use “transmission” or “transfer” when talking or writing about translation, except perhaps to critique them. I prefer “production” and “circulation” and, as a matter of fact, I put the word “circulation” in the subtitle of *Tokens of Exchange* (1999) to analyze the processes of translation in global circulation.

It is interesting that you brought up the history of science and technology as an example where knowledge or expertise is typically viewed as “transmissible” or “transferrable.” We encounter this terminology almost everywhere, don’t we? Is it because people regard these processes as a kind of translation, metaphorically speaking? Or is it because translation itself relies on the metaphor of transmission or transfer to function? The often cited Latin root *translatio* for the English word “translation”—meaning “carrying over” or “transfer” (of relics)—embodies this metaphorical doubling very well. But should the Latin etymology be allowed to determine the concept of translation when so many other languages engage in linguistic exchange or in the discussion of this concept, if not the word itself? What if these languages do not happen to share the Latin etymology?

And there are further complications: Even if we look toward a non-European language for illumination, how do we know that we are not engaged in a futile exercise in etymologies through translation? When we try to approach the concept of translation from another language, how do we know that we are not looking at the mirror image of something thoroughly familiar and already translated? Finally, will semantic exercises in multiple linguistic registers ever exhaust the meaning of translation as a concept? These questions compel us to maintain a philosophical distinction between concept and word.

You see that there is a full range of issues that go together as an entangled set in your question: *translation*, *knowledge*, *metaphor*, and so on. Perhaps it will be easier for me to address them one at a time before treating them as a set. I suspect that the question you raise here is less about terminology than it is about a common enough slippage among concepts, a very interesting slippage though, that is responsible for the entangled set. In spite of ubiquitous conceptual slippage and its inevitability, I suggest that we embark on a thought experiment by focusing on translation as a historically determined concept and try to examine its conceptual makeup and boundaries—such as the presumption of the translatable or untranslatable—in the discursive traditions to which both the theory of translation and its practice may be traced. Does this apply to the conceptual mobility of translation, its multiplicity and

entanglement with other concepts? I think so, because no concept can possibly exist by itself, or independently of the discursive traditions that make the concept legible in the first place.

Back to the book *Tokens of Exchange* that I edited in the late 1990s (1999). There, I wrote in the introductory essay that the positing of translatable/untranslatable within the concept of translation is often a displaced struggle—displaced onto metaphysics—over the reciprocity of meaning-value among historical languages. I raised the following questions in the book: First, how does the circumstantial encounter of cultures (including conquests) produce and contest the reciprocity of meaning-value between their languages? (Notice that I used the words “produce” and “contest,” not in the sense of industrial production but in the Foucauldian sense of knowledge production.) Second, how does reciprocity become thinkable as a problem when predominantly unequal forms of global exchange characterize the material conditions of that exchange?

Now, allow me to amend and revise the above in light of my current thinking on the logic of equivalency. In my view, the logic of $X=Y$ is indispensable to the concept of translation—the same logic governs the internal structure of metaphor as well—but I want to raise a further question here: How does the logic of equivalency simultaneously enable and conceal the structure of inequality in the act of “making equal” through translation or through semantic coupling? It seems to me that this one is more difficult to tackle than the questions I raised in my previous work, and I don’t mind giving it a try. After all, we are supposed to raise some challenging questions about what we mean when we bring two or more things together for the purpose of comparison or translation. Incidentally, the relationship between comparison and translation needs to be unpacked as well, if we find the time.

In any case, I have long felt that a new conceptual framework is needed for an imaginative engagement with the study of translation because translation troubles not only the study of language, literature, philosophy, or cultural anthropology but also cuts across other disciplines and fields. In molecular biology for example, as I have shown in my book *The Freudian Robot* (2010), the concept of translation that has been used to conceptualize the

biochemical processes of DNA and RNA is ubiquitous—unquestioned and always under-theorized. The mobility of this metaphor in the hands of scientists and social scientists has outpaced our ability to think clearly about what we mean by translation, much less come up with a method to analyze the discursive behavior of this idea across the disciplines. In short, there is a great deal more at stake in this discussion than worrying about linguistic commensurability or incommensurability in translation. The stakes are raised higher in international politics where nations battle one another at multiple fronts, including that of translation.

But numerous obstacles stand in the way of an open and imaginative engagement with what is at stake in the study of translation. These include the familiar mental image of translation as verbal transfer or communication or the presumed priority of commensurability or incommensurability among languages. Let me mention two of the obstacles to which you allude in your question: (1) the communication model of translation and (2) the theological model, or what you term the “religious model” of translation.

What’s wrong with these models? The first model implies an instrumental, distorted, and impoverished view of language as a tool for communication. The second model insists on the *adequatio* of meaning in translation as if the promise of meaning or its withdrawal among languages is the only possible thing—blessing or catastrophe—that could happen to translation. For many years, the field of translation studies has largely stayed in the shadows of these models, where questions about translatables and untranslatables are repeated *ad nauseam* as if they were new questions. Frankly, I find these familiar models intellectually unproductive and very frustrating; and I have criticized the persistence of their logocentric assumptions by taking philology, linguistics, theology, the philosophy of language, and cultural anthropology to task in my books *Translingual Practice* (1995) and *The Clash of Empires* (2004), as well as in a recent article: “The Eventfulness of Translation” (2014). I believe that the logocentric assumptions in the communication model and the theological model are still very much with us today. They constitute the discursive traditions in which the field of translation studies operates, with its time-honored preoccupation with translatables and untranslatables, and with “transfer” or “transmission,” and so on.

James St. André: Your answer raises several interesting issues that I want to respond to briefly, before proceeding to the next question. First, I certainly agree with you that we should not allow etymology to determine how we use concepts in the modern world, specifically the term “translation” in this instance. Rather, we need to be aware of the etymological background in order to be able to see when and where it is at work in our use of terms. I’ve just finished an article arguing that both the etymological roots of the word “translation” and its rough equivalents in several languages, as well as many of the more common metaphors for translation, predispose us to regard translation as a solitary act rather than a collaborative process. That’s just one example. I think there are many ways in which the weight of historical usage presses down upon us; it’s something we need to be on guard against constantly. Your later remarks on the communication model and the theological model are also good examples.

Your question regarding equivalence—“How does the logic of equivalency simultaneously enable and conceal the structure of inequality in the act of ‘making equal’ through translation or through semantic coupling?”—is an intriguing re-imagining of what, for many people, remains fundamental to the idea of translation. Despite the fact that some recent work in translation studies argues that we need to go beyond equivalence, I am not sure such attempts have been very successful, except in the limited area of adaptation and recreation; once we start talking about translation “proper,” equivalence is always there one way or another.

Your question seems in a sense to be Foucauldian, since speaking of inequality inevitably brings to mind issues of power, the discussion of which of course has been an important contribution of postcolonial approaches to translation. Theoretically, one should be able to speak of inequality without value judgment, but in practice, when speaking of people, languages, and cultures, the concept always seems to become entangled with such issues. So who compiled those first dictionaries and comparative grammars is vital. In China’s case, first the Jesuits and then later the merchants and Protestant missionaries start from an assumption of their language(s) as the measure and Chinese as the measured, with the latter all too often found wanting. I’ve discussed this

phenomenon in respect to Du Halde and other early writers on Chinese: Whenever these writers compare Chinese to a European language, difference is almost always put down to a lack on the part of Chinese—of sounds, of tenses, of grammar, of “modern” terms, etc. (see *Translating China*).

Going back to your wish to discuss your concept of translingual practice as an attempt to move away from equivalence, to what extent do you think that your intervention in this area has been successful? In other words, do you think that translation studies as a field has accepted those ideas, and/or what do you think about other people’s attempts to “move beyond equivalence” as we seem to hear periodically? If the logic of equivalency enables and conceals structures of inequality, does this suggest that there are entrenched interests that resist such moves, or is resistance to the idea more diffuse?

Lydia H. Liu: Thank you for pressing these questions. They prompt me to speak more about what I regard as the larger stakes in the practices and theorizing of translation, larger in the sense of both the temporal-spatial eventness of translation and its irreversible impact on the languages involved. Before getting to my main point, I should confess that translation studies isn’t something that I do or care much about and, in fact, translation would probably not have interested me as a problem had it not been forced upon my attention through its larger ethical, social, political claims or—how should I put it?—had translation not been relevant to our understanding of the psychic sources of social and political life in language. I would like to give you an example of bilingual treaty making in the Opium Wars, one that demonstrates the temporal-spatial eventness of translation and its irreversible impact on languages, since I have always been fascinated by bilingual treaty making as a political problem. I suspect that there are comparable instances in diplomatic transactions between the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire, although my ignorance of the Arabic language prevents me from making a meaningful connection with the work of historians from that part of the world. I have no choice but to limit my examples to East Asia and hope that other scholars will help build further connections.

In the course of British colonial conquests of Asia, the question “Who was the barbarian, comparatively speaking?” would seem an easy one to determine. The encounter, however, was riddled with epistemic ruptures and difficulties. Some of the difficulties derived from the reversibility of the subject position of enunciation in the discourse of the classical standard of civilization, making it almost inevitable to see oneself in the mirror of the other. That reversal would render the figure of the barbarian doubly precarious in the actual encounter and might shatter the mirror of recognition, producing something like “the English barbarian” in an Asian language. This is exactly what happened in the Opium Wars.

If we read the Sino-British Treaty of Tianjin signed in 1858, we are bound to encounter a clause in Article 51 that says: “It is agreed that, henceforward, the character “*i*” 夷 [*barbarian*], shall not be applied to the Government or subjects of Her Britannic Majesty in any Chinese official document issued by the Chinese Authorities either in the Capital or in the Provinces.” I have italicized the phrase in the above since this is how the translation is written on the actual page. It comes as a three-fold semiotic chain: the Roman letter “*i*” transcribing the sound or pronunciation of the word, and the written character 夷 itself along with its English equivalent “[*barbarian*]” in brackets. Which of the three terms—the Roman letter for the sound, the written Chinese word, or the bracketed English word—was taken as the original? And which was the translation?

The answer seems to lie in Article 50 of this treaty. To prevent ambiguity from arising, the British authority took the precaution of inserting Article 50, preceding the ban of 夷, thus:

[I]t is understood that, in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese text, the English Government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the *correct* sense. This provision is to apply to the Treaty now negotiated, *the Chinese text of which has been carefully corrected by the English original.*

I have italicized these words because they appear to describe the manner in which the character 夷 was translated or “corrected by the English original” for Article 51.

Indeed, which is the original and which the translation? How does one distinguish the one from the other? If the English word *barbarian* in Article 51 is the original that is poised to authorize all translations, it simultaneously appears in the text as the translation of the Chinese character 夷. There is something odd about it, isn't there? For it suggests that the English word is at once the original and the translation, a perfect circle of semantic closure from which the character 夷 can find no escape. The question we must put to this circularity is NOT whether 夷 really means “barbarian” or not—did it have a choice?—but rather how the semantic equivalence got established between the two terms in the first place and why.

In the events leading up to the first Opium War, the British officials began to allege that the Chinese called the foreigners “barbarians,” although we know for certain that the Manchus and the Chinese did not speak English and addressed the British and other foreigners merely as “i” 夷 in their own tongues. The British grasped the meaning of 夷 through their interpreters and heard “barbarian.” Instead of gloating over the British inferiority complex, the officials of the Qing dynasty found it difficult to comprehend why this word 夷 became offensive to the British and tried to convince them that the word did not mean what the British took it to mean. The controversy was by no means a trivial matter because the legal ban enacted by Article 51 was the source of so-called Chinese xenophobia, a story that persists to this day in our history books.

The bracketed English word “barbarian” in the legal ban guarantees the semantic stability and respectability of the translation of the word 夷 in the Sino-British Treaty of Tianjin. That bilingual/bilateral treaty forced the Qing officials to recognize the “correct” sense of the word 夷 or any other Chinese words by the authority of the English original. It turns out, however, that the English sense of 夷 was by no means singular, for there was a prior “original” that must be dissolved or dethroned by the new sense before the process of authorization could run its course. For more

than a hundred years, the British East India Company in Guangzhou had equated the character 夷 with another English word, “foreign,” up to the early 1830s in the majority of the company official documents. It is this sense that was documented by the first Protestant missionary in China, Robert Morrison, when he compiled and published the *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* in 1815-1823. But on the eve of the first Opium War, this earlier sense became inadequate and had to be replaced by “barbarian.”

In the course of researching my book *The Clash of Empires* (2004), I tried to document the morphing of the character 夷 from “foreign” to “barbarian” in translation until I found myself developing a new concept beyond semantics to help analyze how new meanings arise in the host language through translation. The concept I developed was the “supersign.” This is not an isolated concept but part of a translanguing analytics that I have been working on for more than two decades in an attempt to move away from equivalence as a problem of translatables or untranslatables. It does not mean that equivalence would cease to exist in my analytics; on the contrary, equivalence becomes an interesting problem only insofar as it marks the place and function of the supersign in translation.

Let me explain what I mean by supersign. The supersign is not a self-contained word in any known languages but a heterolingual signifying chain that cuts across the semantic fields of two or several languages through translation, as in the case of “i”/夷 [*barbarian*]. I found this concept enormously productive in my archival work on bilingual treaty negotiations, because it leaves behind the metaphysical obsession with semantic equivalences among languages. What it does is allow the analyst to identify the bonding of heterolingual elements through a mobile process of translation that typically renders that process invisible. We have seen how Article 51 enacted a ban on the character 夷 by authorizing precisely such a supersign that puts a set of graphic concoctions in motion—“i” transcribing the pronunciation + the original character 夷 + “[*barbarian*]”—although the supersign never announces itself as such. As evidence of its success, the ban has since chased 夷 out of circulation, for this character is no longer part of the living Chinese vocabulary. It is as dead as any obsolete word you can find in a dictionary or in archives.

One might object that Article 51 is an extreme case and that there must be other cases of translation that embody more harmony than coercion. Well, I am a believer in world peace but I have also learned that war and peace are not that far apart. If the logic of equivalency is true and cannot be willed away, the multiplication or subtraction of cases will not invalidate the logic itself. So let me elaborate on what I mean by the logic of equivalency below, where I confine myself to three main points.

First, it will be helpful to conceptualize the logic of equivalency as a transcendental category. When a translator embarks on a work of translation, she has no choice but to allow the logic of equivalency—X in language A is or is not equivalent to Y in language B—to govern the languages she works with. Even when she makes a claim of untranslatability, she cannot assert the negativity without subscribing to the logic of equivalency in the first place. Here is the philosophical proposition I have been trying to make in my work: *The logic of equivalency must be conceptualized as a transcendental category of equation that produces the same and the different in a ceaseless movement of resignification.* It does not mean that there will be equivalents among languages; it simply means that the logic permits the translator to distinguish what's translatable from what's not translatable between the languages she or he works with.

Simply put, we are accustomed to attributing whatever renders a multiplicity of linguistic systems commensurate or incommensurate to some preexisting similarities or differences among languages. The question driven by my proposition is: How can we even identify similarity or difference without having already engaged in the prior act of comparison and translation according to the logic of equivalency?

This brings me to my next main point. Namely, the logic of equivalency comes either marked or unmarked. In mathematics, that logic is always marked by the little exotic signs mathematicians have invented. Interestingly, in math, it's not the numerical value but the equation, function, and other operative signs that truly matter. When mathematicians state that X and Y are in a relation of equivalency on the set of real numbers, what are they saying or, rather, doing? They are manipulating signs like “=,”

“<,” “≤” and could only ignore these little signs at their own peril, for the little signs determine the relation of equivalency that brings X and Y together in the first place. By the same token, the values of X and Y would be unthinkable outside the relation of equivalency established by the little signs. These signs of equivalency mark the logic of equivalence as a system of signs in math.

In speech or verbal translations, where the rigor of mathematical thinking is not called for, the signs of equivalency are necessarily suppressed—except perhaps for the copula in some languages, which is a different story—yet the logic of equivalency rules all the same. The unmarking of the logic gives the translator precisely the flexibility and freedom to manipulate the sense of a word by inventing supersigns in the manner I analyzed above.

This amounts to saying that the logic of equivalency not only reigns in math but also extends to other realms of cognitive activity as well. All translators work between languages A and B and cannot cease to make them commensurable, yet there seems no transcendental linguistic point available from which a translator may determine the *adequatio* of her translation between the languages and there are no positive signs whatsoever to mark the logic of equivalency as such. Please note that I am not trying to resurrect an old metaphysical or theological conundrum about the whereabouts of meaning or to evoke Walter Benjamin’s somewhat naïve hypothesis of pure language (*reine Sprache*). With due respect, I am afraid such insights fall short of helping us work through the most thorny issue in theories and practices of translation; namely, how people manage to bring different languages into a relation of commensurability through the miracle of “sense.”

My quibble with Benjamin and other Western theorists of translation comes down to this: Why would they rule out nonsense as a problem of sense when most translators engage in a concerted effort to exorcise nonsense from the process of translation? The determination—with lots of paranoia—to get at least some “sense” across the babbling tongues is prevalent and universally observable. That ought to tell us something about the psychic constraints of our intellectual endeavours as we try to theorize translation.

Well, I am not going to take the discussion too much in that direction in this short interview since I have already treated the

question of sense and nonsense in considerable detail in one of the chapters of *The Freudian Robot* (chapter 3, “Sense and Nonsense in the Psychic Machine,” 99-152), in which I found Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze to be among the few exceptional thinkers in the twentieth century who were willing to take risks with the place of “nonsense” in “sense.” Here, let me stick to the logic of equivalency in verbal translations, where the translator is always conditioned a priori—consciously or unconsciously—by the posited linguistic equivalency or the lack thereof with which she must work.

To extend my discussion a bit further, I am tempted to say that the unmarked logic of equivalency reigns in the structure of metaphor as well—a subject that interests you, James, greatly—just as much as it does all of us who try to think about language in translation. Metaphors do not require an explicit act of equation to establish the fact of commensurability between two articulated terms. When I say that I want to “open a discussion” in English, this “opening” does not compel the same action as does a statement such as “open the window.” Although there is no explicit act of equation between this “opening” and that “opening,” the metaphor is capable of projecting one verbal state onto the other, making them similar and joining them into one. It is the poetic imagination that holds the fictional equivalents together without having to rely on external signs of equivalency as mathematicians do in their manner of reasoning. This often results in the multiplicity of $X=Y$ being fused in a single metaphor. Imagine language itself being an elaborate system of metaphors that cannot but give rise to poetry.

For that reason, the richness of the topic of metaphor deserves a separate discussion that could extend vastly beyond what I can touch upon in this interview. After all, human languages may avail themselves of the infinite possibilities of figures of speech, flights of the imagination, metaphoric as well as metonymic associations, and so on. Again, what fascinates me the most is the unmarked logic of equivalency that reigns within the structure of metaphor. Perhaps this can help us think through the endless morphing of the multiplicity of $X=Y$ in translation as well.

With that, I believe that I am getting at my third and last point, which has to do with the possibility of practicing translation in a creative manner that can push against the tyranny of seman-

tic equivalences and release a multiplicity of new meanings. The work of translation is always difficult. I myself am a translator and I know how exasperatingly difficult the work can sometimes be, especially in poetry translation. Translators are compelled by the logic of equivalency to approach their task as if the difficulty lies in the availability of linguistic equivalents but always seem to end up translating the untranslatable by some other means.

James St. André: This brings up a related issue, that of the translation/creation of a feminist discourse in Chinese, which was one area I was hoping you could say a few words about, as I think this would be of interest to many readers of *Alif*. Specifically, how would you characterize the creation of a discourse about gender in Chinese, and to what extent has the issue of feminism as a concept that is translated from the (decadent bourgeois) West been a factor? Might there be similar issues with Arabic?

Lydia H. Liu: This is a relevant issue indeed. To give an example, when Rebecca Karl, Dorothy Ko, and I began our translation of the essays in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* from Chinese to English (2013), we tried to be very careful with the familiar category of gender in English for fear of sliding into conceptual traps. Our exercise in translation quickly turned into theory making in the sense that we were forced to interrogate “woman,” “gender,” and other feminist concepts through the lens of Chinese concepts in translation. Among the feminists we translated was He-Yin Zhen, the editor of the first anarcho-feminist journal in Chinese, entitled 天義報 (Natural Justice, 1907-1908).

The familiar slogan for the Chinese feminist movement is *nannü pingdeng* 男女平等, the standard translation of which is “gender equality” (in legal status, access to education, right to vote, social benefits, and so on). From early on in the translation process, however, we were struck by how He-Yin’s notion of *nannü* 男女 exceeded and resisted facile rendition into “man and woman,” “gender,” “male/female,” or other familiar English concepts. We found ourselves making difficult decisions about what to do with *nannü*. That, in turn, inspired our own theoretical work on gender itself as a translingual practice.

At one point, we thought that reading *nannü* as a kind of

“gender” had the advantage of assimilating He-Yin Zhen’s work into the discourse of twentieth-century feminism familiar to Anglophone readers, but it would ensnare us in conceptual traps. Translating *nannü* literally word for word—*nan* 男 for “man” and *nü* 女 for “woman”—into two or several English words “man and woman” or “male/female” is equally unsatisfactory because the literal rendering could contradict He-Yin Zhen’s theoretical project, which takes *nannü* as a single conceptual mechanism—used as both noun and adjective—that, she claims, lies at *the foundation of all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction*. These abstractions and markings apply to both men and women but are by no means limited to socially defined men and women. In the end, we decided to allow *nannü* a full range of semantic mobility wherever contextually appropriate—“gender,” “man and woman,” or “male/female”—or just leave it transcribed in Roman letters as *nannü*. That decision was based on our understanding that the issue was not so much about the existence or non-existence of verbal equivalents as it was about the translational precariousness of all analytical categories as they passed or failed to pass through different languages and their conceptual grids.

As translators, we tried to make sense of the analytical valences of *nannü* as a category in Chinese and English. To maintain interpretive openness, we determined it would be wrong to begin by asking whether the concept of gender or woman existed in a non-Western language, neither would it be fruitful to ask if the category of *nannü* existed in English. The issue at stake was not linguistic incommensurability, for it would be self-contradictory if we were forced to rely on English to make an argument about incommensurability in the very act of translation. Rather, we understood our challenge to be to put He-Yin Zhen’s category in comparative terms, and, in so doing, question *not only* the Chinese usage but also theoretical categories used in the English language.

Our undertaking was, therefore, a double-pronged process. First, it required us to focus on the analytical and historical valences of *nannü* in the Chinese language and in He-Yin Zhen’s writing. It involved, in particular, taking into account the translational inventions of neologisms and supersigns in He-Yin Zhen’s own time when the Chinese language, yet to be codified into its

modern form, was open to transformation by foreign languages (as you know, the scope of that transformation had been the focus of my study in *Translingual Practice* in 1995). The difficulty we encountered in trying to translate *nannü* and other key concepts was fully matched by the fluidity experienced by He-Yin Zhen's own generation when they worked with an influx of neologisms and novel syntaxes derived from Japanese, English, Russian, French, German, and other foreign language mediations.

The difficulty of making epistemic leaps across languages aside, we were careful not to reduce an intellectual problem to the incommensurable differences between a Chinese term and an English term, or to a problem of influence of the West over China. While negotiating this slippery semantic slope, we were faced with a second challenge; namely, how NOT to let the concept of gender slip back in to serve as the hidden or naturalized English sense or reference in our own practices of translation. So, instead of creating equivalents across Chinese and English, we tried to tease out the theoretical resonances within the spaces opened up between *nannü* and gender, or any other such categories in feminist theories, which have always passed back and forth through a multiplicity of global languages. For us then, *to acknowledge linguistic proliferation and discursive multiplicity in the global making of feminist theory was to allow the analytical categories to play against one another and illuminate the limitations of each term in its historical interconnectedness to other terms.*

We concluded that the historical valences of gender as a conceptual category in contemporary feminist theory must itself be reevaluated in a comparative light, including Joan W. Scott's pioneering study in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986). We asked whether a category that purported to analyze history should remain itself ahistorical. He-Yin Zhen's concept of *nannü* might indeed lead feminist theorists around the world to rethink gender as a category through a translingual engagement with other feminist traditions from other cultures.

James St. André: The constructed nature of equivalence is perhaps most obvious when that construction proceeds through the invention of a new sign in one of the languages, either through borrowing

or calquing. I am thinking of the term *guanxi*, which is moving into the English language in a relatively restricted field of knowledge (first anthropology and then business studies). While the adoption of the term in business studies may be mere facile fashion, in anthropology there is evidence that it is being used to rethink the centrality of kinship for the discipline itself. It's nice, therefore, that you take my question about gender traveling to China and turn it around to talk about *nannü* in English translation, a move which reminds us that although gender as a conceptual category in English seems natural to us today, it in fact emerged at a particular historical and social moment in twentieth-century Anglo-American feminism.

But to move on to my final question, I have just read your article on universalism and human rights (2014), and I'm wondering how your discussion of equivalence in this interview intersects with the discussion of universalism in that article, especially given that you end the article on an optimistic note in relation to the success of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, even though you mention earlier that the Chinese member of the drafting committee, P. C. Chang, failed to find a workable equivalent to the concept *ren* 仁 ("two-man mindedness" by Chang, "the plural human" in your rendering). And returning to your concept of the supersign, I'm wondering whether human rights is a positive example, as opposed to the negative example of "barbarian"?

Lydia H. Liu: I am happy to conclude our interview on a note of universalism. This is one of the key questions I have tried to address in the article to which you refer, which is titled "Shadows of Universalism: The Untold Story of Human Rights Around 1948." My article analyzes the politics of universalism surrounding the multilingual making of one of the best-known documents of the postwar period at the United Nations: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Although translation was not a central concern when I first wrote the piece, I did reflect on how it might shed light on the conditions of the universal.

Human rights has been asserted and contested by many, and its universalism is almost always pitted against cultural relativism, particularism, or other such contraries of which the so-called Asian Values debate on human rights in the 1990s is a prime example. When critics call human rights "Western val-

ues,” they uniformly adopt a stance against universalism by taking refuge under one of its contraries. How can we go about analyzing the universalism of human rights in the making of UDHR without automatically falling into one of these conceptual traps? That was the essential question I posed to myself when I delved into the UN archives for the years 1946-1950.

What did I discover in the archive? Among other things, I found that, in the making of UDHR as well as of the two important Covenants that constitute the International Bill of Rights, universalism was a wager that precipitated the discursive mobility of ideas and texts across languages and philosophical traditions. Among other things, this work put a multiplicity of meanings in motion and opened them to an uncertain future, more often than not, an uncertain political future.

P. C. Chang’s important role in the Drafting Committee of UDHR has not drawn as much attention as some of the other core members in current scholarship. In fact, he was the Vice-Chair of the Drafting Committee, working alongside the Chair, Eleanor Roosevelt. His contribution was a great deal more than the introduction of the Confucian concept 仁 to Article I of UDHR. To be sure, Chang rendered that concept as “two-man mindedness”—not “benevolence,” for good reason—and in my view, his translation gestured toward “the plural human” (my rendering) as opposed to the “individual” as the ground of human rights. One must read the Chinese version of UDHR, however, to get the full Mencius version of the idea! I say that not because the English translation “conscience” in Article I is a bad equivalent of 仁 but because the processes of translation raise the question of how the universal is conditioned by competing philosophical and linguistic demands.

One of my arguments is that the creation of UDHR involved multiple languages and multiple philosophical traditions at its inception, such that it makes no sense to either adulate it or dismiss it as a Western document. May I state the obvious? UDHR is a UN document made by delegates from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and others, so calling it a Western document is a factual error. Next to the Bible, UDHR is probably the most translated text in the history of mankind and is currently available in 500 languages, including sign languages. These languages all

contribute to the universalizing of the document, and conversely each of the translations carries the text across the vast linguistic network of historical and philosophical associations specific to its own language. For that reason, I always advise my students to read UDHR in as many languages as they could master, and this is the only way they can reactivate the competing universals that went into the making of UDHR back in 1946-1948.

Indeed, competing universals were what Chang and the delegates from the Third World tried to introduce into UDHR. Their precarious wager on universalism in the UN debates was simultaneously a rejection of cultural relativism and particularism as a colonial ruse. The Session of the Third Committee at Lake Success in November 1950, which I also analyze in my article, makes it clear why universalism—not cultural relativism—was the position they fought hard to hold on to. This was when Belgium, France, UK, and the United States wanted to pass a colonial clause to exclude non-self governing peoples (a euphemism for the colonized “barbarians” under the *sacred trust of civilization*) from the application of human rights, and did so on grounds of cultural relativism.

P. C. Chang’s speech on the floor of the General Assembly suggests that cultural relativism could be traced to the classical standard of civilization—one that ranks all societies on the hierarchy of civilized, half-civilized, barbarian, and savage—that emerged in colonialism. He argued that this notion of civilization legitimized Europe’s imperial expansion and colonial rule but it could no longer justify itself after the two catastrophic World Wars. Chang then called on the United Nations to reimagine the ground of moral universals for the future, one that will trump the classical standard of civilization. For the first time, the Third World nations forced the classical standard of civilization into a confrontation with the universalism of human rights.

You ask if “human rights” should be taken as a positive example as opposed to the negative example of “barbarian.” Well, wouldn’t you agree that these two have become inseparable from each other due to the classical standard of civilization when Belgium and the colonial powers strove to exclude the so-called “barbarian” and “semi-barbarian” societies from the application of human rights? This is the sort of historical articulation I iden-

tify in my article as the discursive structure of human rights. Of course, there is always the danger for the universalism of human rights to be instrumentalized—as it has been since the Carter administration in the 1970s—and degenerate into an American standard of civilization. The danger has been real, and that could lead to the abdication of the moral vision of its original architects, including P. C. Chang. So you see I am not that optimistic about the discourse of human rights, but I am convinced that, to use the last sentence of my article, “it is up to us and future generations to determine how we are going to make sense of the plurality and openness of this universal text,” or any other text in translation.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to review the ground of my earlier theoretical work on translation and to share my current thinking with the readership of *Alif*.

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