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OUTBOUND TRANSLATION: COGNITION, MULTIMODALITY, AND CIRCULATION

Introduction: Translation and the Life of Literary Works Across Languages

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When a literary work crosses linguistic borders, its viability hinges on considerations that extend well beyond semantic accuracy alone. A phrase rendered with philological precision may fail to resonate if its typographic presentation alienates target readers, just as a culturally rich metaphor may collapse without the support of editorial paratexts. These distinct moments of transfer, traversing the textual, multimodal, and sociological dimensions, demonstrate that translation is not a static retrieval of meaning, but a generative negotiation of difference. Building on descriptive and systemic approaches in translation studies and extending towards recent cognitive-multimodal syntheses, this issue contends that the critical question today is no longer whether translation “adds” to a national literature. Rather, it answers the question of how translation actively constitutes world literature: by managing the politics of representation and enabling readers to apprehend otherness without flattening differences.

Against this backdrop, the evaluation of translated literature can no longer be confined to linguistic and textual perspectives alone. A genuinely comprehensive approach accounts for micro-level choices of diction, rhythm, imagery, and punctuation; meso-level infrastructures of publishing, prizes, libraries, digital platforms, and paratexts; and macro-level discourses of cultural policy, national self-imagination, and the geopolitics of knowledge. Such an approach necessitates methodological pluralism. While concepts like fidelity and equivalence remain relevant, they acquire greater explanatory force when brought into dynamic conversation with readability, multimodality, dissemination, and reception. Interdisciplinary perspectives, drawing on information theory, cognitive linguistics, social semiotics, and diffusion studies, have already been proven instrumental in expanding the theoretical apparatus we use to describe and evaluate translation.

The present special issue, “Outbound Translation: Cognition, Multimodality, and Circulation,” responds to this expanded agenda by reconciling two underlying imperatives that are often treated in isolation. First, it scrutinizes the cognitive and multimodal dimensions of the craft, tracing the minute decisions regarding phrasing, imagery, typography, and punctuation through which literary forms are refracted for target audiences. Second, it addresses the equally decisive issue of circulation and dissemination: how translations become visible, how they reach readers through concrete channels, and how their perceived value is amplified or attenuated by networks of translators, editors, critics, platforms, and communities. Considered together, these perspectives encourage us to conceptualize translation as both a situated process of meaning-making and a socially embedded product.

For Chinese literature, the challenge lies in navigating the asymmetry between robust domestic production and uneven global reception—a challenge that is simultaneously conceptual and practical. Conceptually, long-standing debates about directionality and the so-called mother-tongue principle invite reconsideration in light of current institutional realities and publishing ecologies. Practically, scholarship calls for sharper tools to assess textual effects, including the handling of fuzziness and metaphor, as well as for systematic attention to the multimodal resources that shape reading. Furthermore, circulation and dissemination merit theoretical elaboration with the same rigor that we bring to textual analysis, identifying the features that make a translation adoptable, legible, and durable across cultures. The articles gathered here approach these issues from different perspectives, forming a mutually illuminating constellation. Collectively, they yield critical insights into current problems and future trajectories of the translation and international dissemination of Chinese literature.

Tan Zaixi opens the discussion by interrogating the question of translation directionality as it relates to China's outbound literary translation. The mother-tongue principle, endorsed internationally since at least the 1970s, postulates that translators work “inboundly”—so to speak—into their native language to ensure idiomatic naturalness and cultural nuance. Historical experience, ranging from Buddhist sutra translations to modern literary transfer, lends weight to this prudential guideline. Yet contemporary outbound translation from Chinese often proceeds through translators whose first language is Chinese, a reality shaped by institutional imperatives, training pipelines, and global publishing constraints. Tan neither rejects the mother-tongue principle nor regards prevailing practice as a mere aberration. Rather, he reframes directionality within a broader imagological and institutional framework: outward translation participates in crafting a nation's textual self-image for foreign readers, and that self-image is negotiated across translators, editors, publishers, and publics. The practical response is not doctrinaire rule-making but collaborative design: co-translation, native-speaker revisers, bilingual editorial pipelines, and training regimes that cultivate complementary strengths. Through this careful synthesis of principle and practice, Tan demonstrates how outbound translation can be both linguistically and culturally responsible as well as geopolitically astute, thereby enhancing the visibility of Chinese literature in the international arena.

While Tan repositions directionality in a collaborative ecology, Shao Lu offers a methodological innovation designed to address the perennial difficulty of dissecting stylistic effects in translation. Her article proposes to operationalize fuzziness, an essential resource of literary meaning that modulates tone and invites interpretive latitude, by drawing on Claude Elwood Shannon's concept of information entropy. Instead of treating “fuzzy” or “fuzziness” as a nebulous category, Shao estimates the uncertainty profile associated with readers' construals of selected expressions in the source text and in competing translations, comparing texts in terms of the resulting entropy values. The approach does not seek to supplant expert judgment; but to refine and systematize it through measurable evidence. By demonstrating how strategies such as particularizing, paraphrasing, or zero-translation shift the entropy signature of a passage, Shao provides a transparent and replicable means of discussing degrees of divergence that matter aesthetically. The implications are concrete. In pedagogy, entropy-informed exercises can assist students in noticing and managing indeterminacy; in editing, qualitative reviews can be triangulated with measured profiles; and in scholarship, hypotheses about stylistic transfer become testable. Shao's work exemplifies a constructive importation of formal tools into literary studies, methodologically modest yet

practically potent.

Yu Yajing turns analytical focus to a defining yet often undertheorized feature of literary discourse, namely deliberate metaphor. Drawing on a corpus from Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning works, Yu develops a fine-grained typology of imagery adjustments that encompasses expansion, narrowing or refinement, and supplementary elaboration, and argues for what she terms communicative-cognitive fidelity. When a metaphor is deliberately deployed to direct attention and invite a specific perspectival uptake, the translator's primary task is to sustain that directive force rather than to replicate surface images whose cultural grounding may impede comprehension or distort the intended effect. Through detailed case analysis, Yu reveals that calibrating scope and specificity can preserve rhetorical salience across languages. Generalization may lower cultural barriers without flattening meaning; refinement can align expectations in the target language; and carefully chosen elaboration can stabilize intended readings. The guidance that follows is practical and clear: translators are positioned to diagnose deliberateness, articulate the image's communicative function, choose adjustments that maximize functional isomorphism, and draw on paratexts when needed. In this account, fidelity is measured not by literal imagery but by the success with which readers are invited to perceive as the original text intended.

Wu Yixuan's contribution foregrounds the multimodal character of literary style translation. Through a case study of Bi Feiyu's *Massage* and its English translation by Howard Goldblatt, she illustrates that meaning is conveyed not only through lexis and syntax but also through typographic, punctuational, and layout features. The analysis is attentive to the minutiae by which a translation re-pragmatizes the text for Anglophone readers. Italics may substitute for quotation marks to signal estrangement in a way that accords with English typographical conventions. Lineation and paragraphing can clarify shifts in register, as with embedded verse or interior monologue; and punctuation can modulate cadence and tension by distributing pauses and phrasal emphases differently. The implications of this study are both methodological and normative. To be faithful is sometimes to substitute across modes, capturing function rather than mimicking form, so that the affective contour and narrative pacing are maintained. For translators and editors, Wu's argument underscores the value of planning typographical and spatial decisions from the outset, treating house style not as an afterthought but as a resource for meaning-making.

Concluding her multi-level inquiry, Wan Haiyan returns us to the macro-level issues raised by Tan, while shifting the analytical focus to circulation and reception. Adapting Everett M. Rogers's *Diffusion of Innovations* to the dissemination of English translations of Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning novels, her framework distinguishes dissemination breadth, which concerns visibility and access across channels, from dissemination depth, which is defined by sustained reader engagement and institutional validation. On this basis, Wan classifies titles into performance tiers and, crucially, identifies the innovation attributes that shape adoption in specific ecosystems: relative advantage, compatibility with target interpretive frames, perceived complexity, trialability through previews or audio samples, and observability via visible communities and platform paradata. High-performing titles, she demonstrates, couple strong visibility with low barriers to initial encounter, multimodal availability (print, e-book, audio), and paratextual and platform-mediated scaffolding that facilitates adoption without over-explaining. The model is candid about the gap between textual merit and dissemination outcomes while offering a transferable vocabulary and set of priorities for designing, evaluating, and sustaining translation projects over time.

Collectively, these articles outline an integrated research and practice agenda that integrates

textual analysis, multimodal design, and circulatory dynamics. Tan reminds us that outbound translation is never merely technical; it is imagological, culture-political, and ethically consequential. Shao demonstrates that phenomena often deemed ineffable can be described with precision, allowing measurement to serve judgment rather than supplant it. Yu shows that fidelity can be defined in cognitive-communicative terms, guiding principled adjustments at the image level. Wu expands the field of attention to include visual and material choices that co-produce meaning. Finally, Wan compels us to treat dissemination as an object of design, where adoption depends on visibility, access, and social proof as much as on textual excellence.

Several areas merit further scrutiny. First, translation directionality is effectively reconceived within collaborative ecologies. While the mother-tongue principle remains a vital baseline, institutional realities in China call for flexible arrangements that pair native-speaker stylists with source-language specialists, employ co-translation supported by iterative revision, and, where appropriate, engage sensitivity readers. Second, the development of metrics should proceed with epistemic humility. Entropy-based profiles of fuzziness can be informative when they sharpen claims and make assumptions explicit. Future studies might triangulate such profiles with eye-tracking, response-time data, or reader-report instruments to examine how typographical and punctuational choices shape processing effort and affective response. Third, multimodal design should be integrated from the outset of translation planning. Decisions concerning italics, quotation practices, paragraphing, and the layout of embedded genres can be effectively codified in proposals and style sheets rather than improvised late in production. House styles at presses and journals can assist by articulating guidelines that make functional aims explicit.

Furthermore, dissemination calls for sustained strategic orchestration. If we accept that international circulation is not an epiphenomenon but a constitutive element of world-literary formation, then translation projects might productively include observability strategies (advance copies, curated review ecosystems, partnerships with book clubs and podcasts), trialability mechanisms (open-access excerpts, audio samples), and compatibility scaffolding (maps, timelines, selective notes) adapted to the expectations of target readership. Data-literate monitoring that tracks library holdings, course adoptions, reader reviews, and citation flows can inform adjustments across the life of a translation. Finally, the ethics of cross-cultural understanding remains central. Efforts to enhance reception should not efface distinctive cultural textures. The task is to enable recognition without reduction, preserving strangeness where it matters while providing readers with cues sufficient to engage it.

Equally imperative is the need to engage with the rapidly evolving landscape of AI-assisted translation. Large language models are already routinely employed for tasks such as terminology mining, concordance queries, and first-pass drafting. Their output, however, requires human editorial judgment precisely where this issue places its emphasis, including the management of fuzziness, the handling of metaphor, and the orchestration of multimodal cues. Here there is significant potential for synergy with the metrics and frameworks discussed above, for instance through entropy-guided post-editing or data-driven monitoring of dissemination, provided that such uses remain aligned with the disciplinary commitments that animate literary translation. These include attentiveness to voice, responsibility to communities of meaning, and a refusal to treat literature as merely transferable content.

Literary circulation remains asymmetrical across language systems. How should we address asymmetries of knowledge and influence between dominant and dominated literary systems?

What is the nature of literary translation if not an art of travel, one whose outcomes depend on craft, institutional mediation, and readers willing to be imaginatively displaced? Should “untranslatability” be understood as a theoretical impasse or rather as a provocation to refine practices and broaden canons? Moreover, given English’s entrenched role as a global lingua franca, how can English translations resist the tendency toward homogenized expression and instead foster authentically heterogeneous literary repertoires? It is, of course, impossible to address these questions exhaustively in a single volume. Yet the works collected here, through their rethinking of directionality, modelling stylistic uncertainty, recalibrating metaphor, attending to multimodal form, and designing for diffusion, offer valuable analytical frameworks and methodologies for future inquiry. They also underscore that translation is at once a disciplined craft and strategic practice; it is an art that moves because many hands make it move.

It is our hope that the discussions presented in this issue will stimulate further studies and substantive debates. If taken up by scholars, teachers, translators, editors, and publishers, the perspectives offered here can contribute not only to ensuring the quality of individual translations but also to the breadth and depth of their reception. In so doing, they may facilitate a more visible and resonant place for Chinese literature within global literary circuits.

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