

***MODERN CHINA AND THE WEST***  
**EDITED BY PENG HSIAO-YEN AND ISABELLE RABUT**

*Modern China and the West: Translation and Cultural Mediation*, Peng Hsiao-yen and Isabelle Rabut (eds). Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. \$182.00. ISBN: 9789004270237.

Reviewed by Qian Liu, Beijing Normal University

The relationship between modern China and the West has for a long time been a debated issue in academia. It has been generally agreed that modern Chinese culture and literature received much inspiration from Western culture. In the past, scholars from both China and abroad approached this issue from different perspectives, some examining the Chinese reception of foreign literatures, while others focusing on the way modern Chinese literature contributed to world literature in general. This volume mainly continues the path of the former approach and engages with the problem of how modern Chinese literature and culture absorbed and appreciated Western literature and culture, particularly via the conduit of translation.

*Modern China and the West* is the second volume of a book series published by Brill titled 'East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture,' edited by two renowned scholars of world literature, Zhang Longxi and Wiebke Denecke. It collects twelve papers presented by scholars from the U.S., Taiwan, France, and Singapore, at an international conference in Paris in 2006. One major feature of this volume is that it places translation at the centre of intercultural exchanges and negotiations, regarding translation as an important form of cultural mediation. The role of transnational organizations, such as the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, established in 1922 to foster Sino-European dialogues, in cross-cultural interactions has been brought into focus in this volume, together with the emphasis on individuals. This then leads to the central concern of this edited volume: while institutional powers regulate and influence the way individuals carry out translation activities, is there room 'for individuals to exercise their free will and to what extent are they allowed to do so?' (1) This central concern links the topics of various chapters in this book, from discussions of transcontinental intellectual cooperation during the interwar period (1919–1937) to the studies of individual translators such as Ba Jin (1904–2005) and Eileen Chang (1920–1995).

Three sections comprise this volume: 'translators and cultural actors as mediators,' 'translation as a shaping force,' and 'transcultural negotiations.' Chapters form meaningful dialogues with one another. For instance, in the third section, both Zhang Yinde's and Peng Hsiao-yen's chapters deal with the Neo-Sensationalist School in Shanghai. While Zhang examines the school of writers as a whole and examines the way they equated 'creative language with the physiognomy of the metropolitan city named Shanghai' (8), Peng traces the travels of a single scientific text and its final reception by one Neo-Sensationalist writer. For readers who wish to know about the overall picture of translation activities in modern China, Nicolai Volland's chapter on translation as a profession and Françoise Kreissler's chapter on transcontinental organizations, which facilitated Sino-European

dialogues during the interwar period, offer a broader view. Modern Chinese writers who have not often been studied for their role as translators are given their due place in this volume, such as Angel Pino's study of Ba Jin and Joyce C. H. Liu's study of Tan Sitong (1865–1898). As for individual translators who have been well studied in the past, such as Eileen Chang and Yan Fu (1854–1921), they receive fresh treatments in the contributions by Shan Te-hsing and Max K. W. Huang, whose discovery of new historical materials broadens and enriches our understanding of these two translators. Although Chang's role as a translator has received an increased scholarly attention over the past years, Shan's examination of Chang's cooperation with World Today Press in the 1950s and 1960s, which was supported by the United States Information Service, provides us with a fresh perspective to look at Chang's translation activities. Huang's discussions of Yan Fu's introduction of John Stuart Mill's liberalism into China shed light on Yan's active engagement with Millsian ideas, and his efforts to combine it with Confucian values. Huang's chapter reminds us that Yan Fu is not only a translator of Western ideas, but also an active and creative political thinker. Moreover, the book's contributions cover a wide variety of genres, including Hong Shen's (1894–1955) plays in Xiaomei Chen's chapter and modern Chinese poetry in Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao's chapter. Pin-chia Feng's study of Amy Tan (b. 1952) may seem at first somewhat out of place with the other chapters, but since it deals with the way Amy Tan draws her inspiration transnationally, it might as well be considered a kind of 'transcultural negotiation'.

In general, this edited volume approaches the issue of modern China's interaction with the West via the significant conduit of translation. In itself, this approach constitutes an insightful methodology. Many of the chapters present important and newly found materials concerning translators and transnational organizations, such as Pino's study of Ba Jin's translation activities and Huang's study of Yan Fu's treatment of liberalism. Needless to say, the collection and meaningful presentation of newly recovered materials is in itself a remarkable contribution to the study of East-West cultural exchanges. Yet I would like to raise a few points concerning this volume's treatment of these materials to illustrate some methodological issues.

In Peng Hsiao-yen and Isabelle Rabut's introduction, they state that the similarities and differences between the original and the translated works are less 'at issue' than 'the routes and detours through which connections, or disconnections, are made, and through which transformations take place' (1). In other words, they consider how foreign texts entered Chinese culture to be more important than the transformation the texts themselves underwent. This point of view is of course in itself a valid one, yet it would have been more sound had the editors provided us with a more solid reason why the transformation of the texts is less at stake. \

As a matter of fact, if we want to properly look at the agency of individual translators in cross-cultural contacts, the transformation of the texts is a topic we can hardly leave aside. While empirical studies of transnational organizations may seem to us as meaningful and important in its own right, the study of an individual translator's 'free will' can hardly be convincing without the researcher's vigorous engagement with the translator's purposeful alteration of the original texts. In this volume, for instance, Pino, in her detailed account of Ba Jin as a translator, does not seem to address fully the changes Ba Jin made to the

original texts. Even when she occasionally does so, she uses judgmental wordings such as ‘plagiarism’ (46) and ‘misappropriation’ (47). It gives us qualms when a translator’s creative engagements with the foreign texts are blatantly and straight-forwardly dismissed as ‘plagiarism,’ rather than discussed and examined for the cultural and personal factors that brought about these textual differences. This then brings up a larger question: how do we address the issue of individual agency in cross-cultural interaction?

Peng Hsiao-yen’s chapter on the textual travels of Jean-Henri Fabre’s *Souvenir entomologiques* reaffirms the importance of the above mentioned question by stating that ‘in the case of cultural translation, the translating agency or individual free choice, though inevitably defined or conditioned by “forms of institutional practices and the knowledge/power relationships,” plays a key role in the selection of a particular text’ (276).

Her study of this traveling text offers a fine, albeit at times lengthy, example of studies of such kind. It is, ultimately, by examining in detail the various transformative stages of a single text that we get to observe what was altered by the translators and for what reasons. Therefore, in studies on translation, we should not only avoid simple factual build-up of the translator’s activities but also be cautious of making any value judgments on the translator’s decisions.

In sum, this volume collects well-researched chapters that reflect the newest scholarship, and in this way, it is a meaningful contribution to the field of translation studies and modern Chinese studies. There are occasional typos and errors, which is a minor fault. For instance, there is an entire line with no spaces in between the words on page 289, though fortunately this does not happen often. For researchers of twentieth-century China-West cultural exchanges and the history of translation in modern China, this book is a must-read, as its chapters are mostly firmly grounded in primary sources and are generally convincing and well-written.