

February-March 2016
Hang Seng Management College Talks on Culture & Translation
John Minford, Thursday February 18, 3 pm
Formation, Bildung, Self-cultivation for Translators

Themes

Translation for Culture

How translation feeds into and across the world's cultures, the lifeblood enabling understanding between cultures.

Culture for Translation

How culture — cultural literacy, cultural resonance, self-cultivation — feed into the practice of translation.

My 4 Saturday-evening public lectures this year will look at four examples of great translators from Chinese, what I call the **British lineage**, and will draw from them lessons that we as translators, teachers and students, can learn.

What I am advocating for us all is the humanistic, liberal tradition of translation, based on a grounding in world culture, on an openness to the study of culture and literature. Over thirty years ago, I said more or less the same to a meeting of the Hong Kong Psychological Society:

'Can we devise a translation curriculum for Chinese students that will grapple with this problem of cultural understanding?' (*Bulletin of the Hong Kong Psychological Society*, July 1985, p.49.)

In 2002, I also wrote a year-long course for the Open University of Hong Kong on this very subject. I am happy to return to that theme today.

Formation. I have recently come to call this humanistic approach to translation training by the wonderful French term 'formation', a broad-based and thorough approach to education and training.

Basic Questions. What is translation? What is culture? Some thoughts. George Steiner, *After Babel* (1975) — translation is the meshing of two different world images, of two different patterns of human life.

Translation is a form of cultural travel, the transmission and transfusion of culture, of experience, of life. To be able to do this, the translator must swim in the sea of other cultures, must taste their flavour 趣味, must live and breathe it.

This exploration is the adventure of translation:

'Translators [of the Elizabethan age] went about their work with the same ambitions [as the explorers], discovering new **realms** of literature, and bringing home new

treasures of human thought.'

— Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation* (1968), p.40.

'In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from its culture at his peril.'

— Susan Bassett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (1980), p.14.

'English literature lives on translation, it is fed by translation; every new age is stimulated by translation, every allegedly quiet age is an age of translation.'

— Ezra Pound

The Realms of Gold

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer by John Keats (1795-1821)

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

What are some of the **cultural references** in this poem?

Homer, the Iliad, the Odyssey, Chapman, the translator

Herschel, the discovery in 1781 of a new planet Uranus; Cortes and the Spanish discovery of South America

Other roots of Western Culture: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus Christ

LINEAGES of Translation

What is a lineage, and how is it connected to the concept of self-cultivation or 'formation'? The role of the teacher (e.g. Confucius), the master and apprentice, as in Peking Opera. It is a Tao 道, it is kungfu 功夫, thorough training and practice. 'Go home and translate.'

The Jesuit Lineage

The Oxford Lineage

Balzac & Fou Lei

The German lineage Richard Wilhelm

The Tao of Translation

'Formation', Self-cultivation, 修養, 功夫

Fou Lei 傅雷, dedicated translator, giving advice in the 1950s to his pianist son Fou Ts'ong 傅聰 wrote:

I hope that now you can sustain your general level of *self-cultivation*; if you do, I have no doubt that you will soon reach the summit. One can clearly sense from the recording that you have matured in every way; your true artistic purpose has finally emerged, something I've been hoping to see for many years. I am so happy. I place more importance on this than on anything else. That you can now master an entire piece of music shows that your art has gained in depth, that your artistic soul has grown stronger and more expansive, and that your whole personality and outlook have broadened.

— 傅雷家書

As I add in a note to this passage, Self-cultivation, *xiuyang* 修養, is the process that has been at the heart of all Chinese philosophy, ever since the very early classic the *I Ching* or *Book of Change*. It forms the core of the traditional Chinese art of life, and is the means by which the individual can attain harmony with the Tao, with the underlying spirit of the cosmos.

Bildung is a similar term, linked to the German tradition of self-cultivation, a process of both personal and cultural maturation. This maturation is described as a harmonization of the individual's mind and heart and a unification of selfhood and identity within broader society. It involves the shaping of the human being with regard to his/her own humanity as well as his/her innate intellectual skills. It refers to a process of **becoming** that can be related to Existentialism, a lifelong process of human development, rather than mere training in the acquisition of certain external knowledge or skills. It is a process wherein an individual's spiritual and cultural sensibilities as well as personal and social skills are in the process of continual growth. *Bildung* is seen as a way to attain greater freedom through a higher level of self-reflection.

The Ultimate Aspirations of Translation

This may all sound rather daunting. But it is actually a source of the greatest pleasure and enrichment, because translation, like any art, is part of the mystery of transformation, and of the life-giving communion between human hearts and minds. 人同此心, 心同此理。It makes the world a more healthy and liveable place. In the words of the poet Walter de la Mare (1873-1956):

'In a wider sense, all human experience, all communication between humans, is translation. Only by insight and by divination can we pierce inward to the citadel of the mind and soul [of another person]. We can only *translate* their touch, their

gestures, words they use, the changing looks on their faces into terms of our own consciousness and spirit.' (from *Desert Islands*)