

Late-Qing translation (1840–1911) and the political activism of Chinese evolutionism

Kuan-yen Liu

This chapter analyses interconnections between the task of translation and the agendas of reform and revolution in late-Qing (1840–1911) Chinese political and intellectual culture. I begin by offering in the first section an overview of how translation was connected with enlightenment projects and political agendas in each stage (1840–1860, 1860–1894, and 1894–1911) of late-Qing China. I then examine translation in post-1894 China in the second section with an emphasis on the role of translation in the shaping of intellectual culture, the appropriation of translation for political actions, and the identity and self-assumed duty of the translator. The third section uses the transformative translation of evolutionism in post-1894 China as a case study to reveal how political mobilisation in nationalist, reformist, and revolutionist agendas served as a filter through which Western ideas were selected and re-created. I conclude by re-evaluating the strong implication of political activism in post-1894 translation and Chinese evolutionism in terms of Talal Asad’s theory of ‘cultural translation’ (1986), Lydia H. Liu’s theory concerning the ‘agency’ of the host language (1995), and Godfrey Lienhardt’s theory pertaining to the ‘further potentiality’ of the translator’s language and thought (1954) in the fourth section. By linking translation history, textual studies, intellectual history, and political history, this chapter aims to contextualise and theorise the agency of the Chinese language to transform Western thought in the meaning-making process of translation. At the same time, I develop a framework for Chinese conceptions of political activism that provides crucial historical context for related chapters in this volume (see Chapter 28).

The history of translation in Chinese history can be divided into three phases: (1) the translation of Sanskrit texts of Buddhism from the second century to the eleventh century (Tso 1990); (2) the translation of Latin texts of European canons from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century (Tsien 2009: 2–6; Zou 2011); and (3) the translation of European and North American texts from the mid nineteenth century to the present. The second phase was terminated owing to the ban on Catholicism and the expulsion of Jesuit missionaries from China. It was after the Opium War between Britain and China in 1840 that the Chinese re-started to accept what they deemed as ‘*Xixue* [西學 Western Learning].’