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## The Babel Fallacy Fallacy: Against the Lack of Interest in and/or Hegemonic Blindness to Translation in Premodern China

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The Babel Fallacy Fallacy:  
Against the Lack of Interest in and/or Hegemonic Blindness  
to Translation in Premodern China<sup>1</sup>

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How do translators *from* a language write about the history of translation *into* that language? Do translators accentuate or deemphasize differences between the languages they translate from and translate into, and what do their choices say about their belief in translation? Joseph R. Allen, who has translated poetry from Bronze Age China as well as contemporary poetry from Taiwan and mainland China, and written cogently and compellingly about translation, presents an interesting case (see Waley and Allen 1996; Allen 1993; 2005; 2019a). In a recent article, Allen rejects the idea that translation had importance in premodern China, raising a host of related issues in the process. Elucidating the problems these issues bring up quickly leads into a discussion of the oppositional stance of translation studies and the history of sinology's desire to isolate China epistemologically, the history of China's communications with its neighbors, and allegories of translation written in previously denigrated literary forms such as fiction and vernacular literature. For such reasons, his article "The Babel Fallacy: When Translation Does Not Matter" is worth discussing in detail.

"In early China, translation was like socks: very useful but not very interesting," writes Allen. "Translation was an instrument of critical change but not an object of critical attention," he explains. "This is an early and nearly complete form of the invisibility of translation, an invisibility brought on not by hegemonic blindness but by an inherent lack of interest" (Allen 2019b, 135). Does he mean that

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Chinese literati had a lack of interest in translation, or is he saying that translation in China was inherently uninteresting? Calling translation “an instrument of critical change but not an object of critical attention” implies the former, but he implies the latter when he states elsewhere in the article that in “classical and early imperial China, translation did not matter for religion, it did not matter for literature, and it did not matter for philosophy” (122). Was translation irrelevant to the development of these areas of Chinese culture, then, or did the doyens of Chinese religion, literature, and philosophy simply believe translation to be irrelevant? By describing this “inherent lack of interest,” is Allen not demonstrating his own hegemonic blindness?

What is the difference between “hegemonic blindness” and “lack of interest,” anyway? Allen has elsewhere defined hegemony as “not tyranny, which engenders resistance, but rather [a cultural assumption] ... where accommodation and cooptation maintain the power relationship” (Allen 2008, 241, citing Gramsci 1971). What is the difference between individuals finding something uninteresting and individuals not being able to find something interesting because of their existence within a cultural assumption or hegemonic ideological regime? More pertinently, to what extent do we as scholars accept the blindnesses of the cultures and eras we study, and to what extent should we try to see through or around them? Allen’s allusion to the “invisibility” of its object (see Venuti 2008) is part of his argument that translation studies is “fundamentally European”: “Translation studies, in all its forms,” he says, “is European because the problematic of translation is a non-Asian (or at least a non-East Asian) construction” (117). Is demarking China as categorically distinct from the West a productive way to combat or rescue our scholarship from Eurocentrism?

The relationship between hegemony and lack of interest is connected to translation’s relevance to broader movements of cultural and intellectual history — connected, that is, not through their manifestations in the object of study itself but through what the scholar sees or doesn’t see. In light of a fuller understanding of the history of translation’s impact on Chinese literature and culture, Allen’s acceptance of translation’s purported “lack of interest” to premodern China looks like his projecting his own lack of interest in translation onto China, which serves also to isolate China from much of the rest of the world. In contrast to Allen, I assert that ancient translation *did* matter to Chinese religion, literature, and philosophy, and the job of the translation studies scholar is to see how it mattered, even or especially if early Chinese literati did not.

Allen’s statement that “translation did not matter” is perhaps most curious with respect to Chinese religion, considering that Buddhism could not have spread in China without translation. The standard histories of translation in China spend considerable time detailing the centuries-long period in which Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese from Sanskrit, Pāli, and other Indic languages — so important a period that the most thorough English-language collection of writing about translation from China even subtitled its first volume *From Earliest Times to the Buddhist Project* (Cheung 2006; see also Ma 1995; E. Hung and Pollard 2011, 370–72). And not only Buddhism proper: Stephen Bokenkamp argues that Lingbao Daoism might “accurately (and productively) be seen as but one of several Chinese adaptations of Buddhism. Other adaptations include Buddhist devotional literature, Buddhist scriptures written in China, and even the very act of translation itself” (Bokenkamp 2004, 327). Nor has this period been excluded from or ignored by Western translation studies not focused on China: Jeremy Munday’s widely taught *Introducing Translation Studies* discusses the translation theorizing of Buddhist translators from Indic languages into Chinese, Dao’an 道安 (312–385) and Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344–413) (Munday 2016, 33–36). When Allen does in fact discuss Buddhism and its impacts (133–35), he says “there is not one classical Chinese essay about translation, only prefaces to translated works” (134). But this not only ignores Dao’an and Kumārajīva, it also acts as if Walter Benjamin’s “*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*” (1969; 2012) was not itself a preface to a translated work.

As for literature “proper,” the impact of Buddhism on court poetry is immeasurable — though several have found ways to measure it. Li Xiaorong 李小荣 has pointed out that Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), who took part in early medieval translation workshops (*yichang* 譯場) rendering Buddhist sutras into Chinese, not only had “deep interest in comparison between Sinitic and Indic languages” 对中、印语言之比较也有浓厚的兴趣 in his “Semantic Interpretations of the Fourteen Sounds” 十四音訓敘 (Li 2017, 135), he elaborates on how his poems give expression to the teachings of monks Zhidun 支遁 (314–366) and Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) (“Xie depicts the religious vision of imagining the ‘landscape of this shore’ on which we are physically situated as the landscape of ‘the other shore’ (of the Pure Land of Buddhism), so as to eliminate the boundary between the two” 谢客实际描摹了把自身所处“此岸山水”想象为“彼岸”山水（佛国净土）的宗教玄想，旨在消除二者的界限 (138)). Victor Mair and Tsu-lin Mei’s “Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody” demonstrates that tonal prosody in Chinese poetry was born out of an “imitative process” (Mair and Mei 1991, 388) vis-à-vis long

and short vowels in the poetry of Indic languages; my *Organization of Distance* (2018) extends these findings to argue that many of our assumptions about premodern poetic “Chineseness” are in fact born out of translation. There are many examples beyond Buddhism, as well. As Elling Eide wrote, “There is no reason not to believe ... that Li Po [Li Bai 李白 (701–762)] could compose in a foreign language, and there is at least one poem (no. 945) by Li Po himself with a similar suggestion. It would be strange if the Lis did *not* know Turkish or some other foreign language after living for a century in Central Asia” (Eide 1973, 389). Medieval Chinese literature was much more multilingual than many have given it credit for.

Additionally, scholars have posited translation much, much earlier in the Chinese literary heritage. Allen writes that “in terms of its main literary culture, China operated in a barely interlingual world up until at least the sixteenth century” (133). But Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) describes “the earliest pigeon-like pidgin recorded in the archives of the Chinese language,” a “Song of the Viet” 越人歌 recorded in Liu Xiang’s 劉向 (77–6 B.C.E.) *Garden of Persuasions* 說苑:

濫兮拊草濫予昌桓澤予昌州州湛州焉乎秦胥胥漫予乎昭澶秦踰滲悒隨何湖

which even came with a translation into standard Chinese:

What eve is this eve, ho?  
 Adrift amidst the River Qian (variant: A boat drifts amidst the Qian)  
 What day is this day, ho?  
 That I share a boat with the Prince  
 Conceal me in my shyness, ho,  
 I say naught for I’m shy  
 Such stupor in my heart and never will it die, ho,  
 That I may know my Prince  
 A tree is on the mountain, ho, branches on the tree,  
 My heart delights at you, ho, and here you know not me.

今夕何夕兮 塞中洲流 今日何日兮 得與王子同舟  
 蒙羞被好兮 不訾詢耻 心幾玩(同頑)而不絕兮 得知王子  
 山有木兮木有枝 心悅君兮君不知

Xi Chuan also mentions the song "Streams of Chi-le" 敕勒歌, from the North and South dynasties (420–589), about which no one has determined whether "the oblique metrics of its singers were in Sienpian, the Chi-le language, or else in Turkic" 其歌唱者斛律金究竟唱的是敕勒语、鲜卑语, 还是突厥语, 没人说清楚过 (Xi Chuan 2012, 1; 2010, 261–62). Similarly, Chen Sanping has made the case that Mulan, of the canonical "Ballad of Mulan" 木蘭辭, "was not even Sinitic or Hàn Chinese to start with, but came from a nomadic and Turco-Mongol milieu" (Chen 2012, 41). Then there is Eduard Erkes, who, writing in 1939(!), posited that the *Jiuge* 九歌, collected by Qu Yuan 屈原 in the *Chuci* 楚辭, were not composed in Chinese or literary Sinitic as we understand it:

In my opinion, Ch'ü Yüan's real work consisted in translating these songs from the native language of Ch'u, which was still spoken in his time and was not a Chinese dialect but an entirely different idiom belonging to the Tai group of the Indochinese languages, into Chinese. That line adapted them a little to the taste of an educated Chinese-speaking public, especially by toning down the erotic character of the poems which was surely no less outspoken than it is everywhere in popular songs of this kind, is of course also more than probable. (Erkes 1939, 196)

Along these lines, *Elegies of Chu* translator (forthcoming) Nicholas Morrow Williams has pointed me to arguments that the *Chuci* were "translated from local dialect, on the model of how the early Japanese classics were the product of a complex attempt to represent spoken Japanese with kanji," and "that the titles of the main poems are in reverse order because of influence from Chu dialects" (Williams 2019; see Kurosu 1999 and Gong 1995). "To be clear," Williams wrote me, "I find the specific evidence they use unconvincing, but there does seem to be *something* like that going on." To me, these articles argue not only for a broadening of our conceptualization of translation in Bronze Age China, but also for consideration of translation's relationship to areas of inquiry Allen takes as closed (such as

the constitution of one Chinese language as opposed to various topolects, or the relationship between xeno-Sinitic writing and non-Sinitic spoken languages).

And philosophy? Looking at how “citation as translation,” or rather the role of citation of an ancient classic in acts of translation, Haun Saussy has shown how the *Zhuangzi* helped translate foreign concepts into the normative Chinese tradition (Saussy 2018). Likewise, Victor Mair has hypothesized that the *Laozi* was in some ways a Chinese translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. These examples and more require something of a redefinition of translation. As Mair puts it,

By no means am I implying that the “author” of the *Tao Te Ching* sat down with a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in hand and proceeded to translate it into Chinese. The fact that both texts evolved from oral traditions precludes such a simplistic scenario. ... The most probable explanation is that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was transmitted to China in the same fashion that it was initially transmitted within India — by word of mouth. (Mair 1990, 145)

Both the *Laozi* and the *Gītā* date to what Karl Jaspers called the “axial age,” roughly from 800 to 200 B.C.E., when “the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously” — and, Jaspers says, “independently” (Jaspers 1954, 98). No one has determined how much or how little cross-cultural contact there may have been then to be sure about claims of independence, influence, or translation. Nevertheless, Mair’s reframing of translation beyond simplistic scenarios should stand, even if the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Laozi* did emerge separately. The greatest relevance for translation on Chinese philosophy, then, may be how it raises the philosophical question of what translation is in the first place.

And this is perhaps where the conversation gets more interesting, as the philosophical reinvestigation of what translation is leads back to the philosophical question of whether translation’s being uninteresting is any different from hegemonic proscription against finding translation interesting, and whether the scholar should adhere to or write against such hegemonies. I will proceed with a detailing of Allen’s segregation of sinology from translation studies, followed by a counter-argument about translation and translingual practice in premodern China, before calling for a translation that could, I think, help redirect some of the thinking that separates premodern China from translation.



## THE BABEL FALLACY FALLACY

Titled "The Babel Fallacy," Allen's article begins with an analysis of the importance of the Biblical myth of Babel, where God makes humanity speak different languages to prevent people from building a tower that would reach heaven (Genesis 11:1–9). As Allen points out, the myth of Babel "is reimagined both explicitly and implicitly in a wide range of canonical works in translation studies: from the title of George Steiner's magnum opus, *After Babel* [1975], to ... Friedrich Schleiermacher's 'On Different Methods of Translation' [1813, 2012]" to "Jacques Derrida's 'Des tours de Babel' [1985] ... and in Phillip Lewis's complex reply to Derrida [2012]," and even "after the 'cultural turn' in translation studies of the 1990s," including Emily Apter's *Translation Zone* (2006), Vicente Rafael's "Translation, American English and the National Insecurities of Empire" (2009), as well as "the usually iconoclastic David Bellos ... in his 2011 'Afterbabble: In Lieu of an Epilogue'" (118–19).

The problem, for Allen, is that China doesn't have a Tower of Babel myth, not even a proper equivalent. So,

When George Steiner says, "No civilization but has its version of Babel" (57), and David Bellos says, "Translating is a first step toward civilization" (337), one has to question their use of "civilization" as a standard. And when Edith Grossman says, with the assurance of someone who works in European languages, "Where literature exists, translation exists" ([Grossman 2010,] 33), we must say, "Perhaps not." (122)

In place of a Babel myth, Allen argues, Chinese culture has a longstanding interest in transcription as a unifying factor:

The claim of the continuity of the Chinese language, both diachronically over millennia and synchronically across the central plain, has been often overstated, but that myth of continuity is certainly Babelian in its power, if opposite in effect, and it is also culturally overdetermined. Like the story of Babel, this myth of linguistic continuity appears at every turn in Chinese cultural discourse, especially in regard to writing ... (121)

Here Allen is arguing for China as difference, or at any rate China as different from the West — and it is a failure of its inclinations toward diversity for translation studies to continue to be so focused on Babel when China represents a case outside the Babel paradigm. For all its purported interest in border-crossing, Allen claims, translation studies as a discipline ends up parochial. For all that translation studies might translate, he argues, it is not translating enough, not doing enough to incorporate Chinese “difference” into its models.

Allen frames his critique as aimed not at tearing translation studies down, but at helping it reach its heights. I am sympathetic to his making room for Chinese interest in transcription within the purview of translation studies; he could also look into Andrea Bachner’s *Beyond Sinology* (2014), which makes the relevant point that “theories of mediality and cultural difference themselves have to work in and as translations or, indeed, transcriptions” (217). Because without this awareness, his proposal for expanding translation studies ends up denying translation as it took place in premodern China, as well as translation’s polysystemic contribution to the Chinese culture (see Even-Zohar 1990). Moreover, it misunderstands the context and political impetus behind the works of translation studies he cites as emblematic of Babel’s centrism. This is where Allen is in an ideological muddle.

The prime example of his muddle is his attempt at an ideological critique of translation scholarship for what looks like an overdependence on the Babel myth. “The myth of Babel, with all its recyclings and implications, has been naturalized to the point of near invisibility, rendering the basic assumptions of translation studies ‘God given,’ if you will” (119). But:

Specific historical and cultural conditions generated the myth of Babel, and its global reach is allied with the spread of the Judeo-Christian Bible, both as faith and as literature (Belloc, 7). In fact, the translation of the Bible in its many forms, from the Septuagint to the Chinese Union Version, is, by this logic, not only a consequence of, but also an attempt to negate God’s punishment. (120)

China, Allen hopes, could offer a perspective outside one that takes these specific historical and cultural conditions for granted:

What if the Ancient Middle East had not experienced its collision of languages and script systems — Sumerian, Akadian, Babylonian, Elamite, Assyrian, and Egyptian? Would there have been a need to account for the dissemination of the languages and nations of Noah's people? Or what if God were not so closely identified with the Word? Or what if humankind were not filled with hubris and had not fallen from grace? Would interlingual translation then have become less a problem of the human condition and more a mundane practice, like other forms of intercultural commerce? In other words, what if there had been no Babel, place or condition?

There was an ancient world that manifested those hypothetical conditions, and it was a world at least as culturally complex as the land of Yahweh. That was the land of Yao. (120–21)

The problem with these questions is that while the Babel myth explains why humanity speaks many different languages, it also represents, as I read it, at any rate, translation as counter to God's will — as Allen points out in his phrasing of "an attempt to negate God's punishment." To translate is to rebel against God.

Discussions of the myth of Babel exhibit a similar tendency toward rebellion; translation scholars who discuss translation alongside their analysis of Babel Tower mythology tend to do so with an awareness of power relations. From Allen's own quotations (118–20): "the Hebrew God 'imposes and forbids translation'" (Derrida 1985, 170); "But this idealized vision of America [as monolingual] requires that there be a Babel to vanquish and overcome, again and again ... there is America only if there is Babel. But this also means that there can be no America when there is Babel" (Rafael 2009, 14–15); "The ultimate power with which the Western translator of the holy scriptures has to contend is therefore God Himself, and the power He has is not just a power of life and death, but a power that goes even beyond death itself and can give salvation or damnation" (Lefevere 1998, 19). Certainly these scholars and theorists have their own blind spots, but the stakes of their argument are a fight against a power — which can seem almost godlike at times — that declares translation to be impossible and enacts publishing regimes such as those in the United States where translations account for an infinitesimal number of books published and literary translators are likely to go unnamed and underpaid. Such

powers have even declared translation heretical: John Wycliffe (c. 1328–1384), who translated the Bible from the Vulgate into Middle English, was posthumously declared a heretic, and his corpse was exhumed and burned; William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536) was convicted of heresy and strangled to death, his body burnt at the stake (and then the King James Version plagiarized his translation of the Bible); in 1991, Ettore Caprioli and Igarashi Hitoshi 五十嵐一 were stabbed (Igarashi to the death) for translating Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* into Italian and Japanese (Weinberger 2009, 180). This is why, I think, Allen says that the “strongest advocates of translation studies want to make interlingual translation a universal heuristic of humanity: the need and ability to translate is what makes us human, as opposed to godly” (120). *Opposed to godly*.

Now, there is more to be said about how discussing translation in terms set by the myth of Babel's ascent toward heaven represents translation as utopian, and how that utopianism might not be the best way to construct translation, or to conceive of it (see my forthcoming work on translations of place names in Hong Kong arguing against the purported utopianism of translation). These are perhaps ironies along the lines of Allen's observation that “the translation of the Bible in its many forms ... is ... an attempt to negate God's punishment.” I sense an underlying atheism in Allen's argument, and an attempt to offer China as a paragon of an atheistic civilization (“Both the Hebrew and the Chinese traditions had taboos on the names of the divine, the Hebrew god and the Chinese emperor” (143)). Well, I'm an atheist myself. But to frame China as atheistic or theistic by definition, either in contrast to or commensurate with the Judeo-Christian West, quickly runs into problems. I have in mind arguments such as Pauline Yu's that “indigenous Chinese philosophical traditions agree on a fundamentally monistic view of the universe,” in contrast to “Western allegory,” which “creates a hierarchical literary universe on two levels ... only one of which has ultimate primacy” (Yu 1987, 32, 21). As Eric Hayot points out, this means “no ‘super’-natural beings” at all (Hayot 2011, 97). Even overlooking the plethora of supernatural beings in early China, to try to describe China in terms of its purported lack of supernatural beings is still to describe it in terms of supernatural beings. Allen's attempt to discuss China in opposition to what he called the Babel Fallacy still discusses China in terms of Babel: Allen's attempt to get beyond a Western centrism only reifies the centrism of the West.

Allen's position seems to be born out of the history of East–West encounters, comparison, and translation. Interestingly, this is tied up with the mythology of Babel itself: as Ho-fung Hung has written,

Jesuit missions to the East, starting with Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), needed to reconcile what they were learning about China with “biblical chronology.” Since “the beginning of Chinese history can be dated back to 2952 B.C.,” or about the “time of the Noadic flood, which was believed to have occurred in 2957 B.C. according to the church’s interpretation of the Bible,” the Jesuits argued that,

given the thousand-year continuity of the Chinese language, it must be the primitive language of the human being, or the *Lingua Adamica*, some Chinese must have stayed home and not gone to construct the faraway Tower of Babel, and hence not undergone the confusion of tongues.

Therefore, “given the great antiquity of China, its ancient texts must be the purest manifestation of God’s Will” (H.-F. Hung 2003, 258). This is ridiculous, to us, and Allen probably intends his opposition to translation studies’ infatuation with Babel to represent a similar *reductio ad absurdum*.

The problem is, however, that there seems to be no more “outside” to Babel as a reference point to translating China than there is to Allen’s attempt to discuss China as an alternative to the Babel Fallacy without mentioning Babel. If Allen’s position is rooted in the history of East–West encounters, so is Yu’s and those like hers, as Haun Saussy has argued in *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*: “debates about Chinese ‘allegory’ are a new version, a translation into literary-critical language, of a quarrel as old as the missionary beginnings of European sinology” (1993, 36). Specifically, Saussy is referring to the Chinese Rites controversy, which took place as a debate between Ricci and his successor, Nicolò Longobardi (1559–1654). As Saussy explains, whereas Ricci wanted to accommodate Christian doctrine to Chinese culture and language, Longobardi argued that “Catholic theology could be communicated to the Chinese only in a language free of Chinese associations, which is to say without being translated” (37), because of Chinese people’s endemic “failure to distinguish between spirit and matter” (39). “Longobardi’s reason for writing was to stop translation at its source” (39), Saussy writes. Allen ends up doing the same (for Allen’s own thorough and positive review of Saussy 1993, see Allen 1995).

## TRANSLATION AND/OR TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE

Allen's stopping translation in China at its source is not the same as Longobardi's — he just argues that translation in classical and early imperial China did not matter for religion, for literature, or for philosophy. "Of course, translation (or interpretation) existed in the ancient Chinese world as did other forms of cultural intercourse," he says, "yet, judging from the historical record, which is naturally elite and canonical, there was little intellectual stake in those translational moments" (122). The problem here, then, is that, with the words "naturally elite and canonical," he naturalizes — in his own phrase, "to the point of near invisibility" — the elite and canonical view of Chinese culture as self-contained and self-sufficient. Contrast how Allen writes about premodern translation into Chinese with how others have. Xi Chuan writes,

that Buddhism was largely Sinicized after its entry into Chinese is an uncontested fact. No one has ever heard the expression 'overall Indianization.' From this can be seen the strength of ancient China's self-complacency.

佛教进入中国以后被大大地中国化也是不争的事实。没听说过“全盘梵化”的说法。由此可见古汉语强大的自足性。(2012, 2; 2010, 263)

Allen, on the other hand, writes:

although Buddhism was an extremely important cultural force throughout East Asia, especially in China and Japan, and depended directly on a series of translation projects, first into Chinese and then beyond, that did not result in the practice of translation becoming a concern in mainstream intellectual life. (135)

This is where he makes his point about the "early and nearly complete form of the invisibility of translation ... brought on not by hegemonic blindness but by an inherent lack of interest." It is a curious *kōan* 公案 how translation did not matter to Chinese religion, while also making Buddhism an

extremely important cultural force throughout East Asia. Even more curious how it was not hegemonic blindness that kept translation from becoming a mainstream intellectual concern.

This is where it becomes unclear whether Allen is saying that premodern Chinese elites had an inherent lack of interest *in* translation, or whether *he* simply finds translation in premodern China inherently uninteresting. This is where Allen's ideological attempt to offer an alternative to what is Eurocentric in translation studies melds with his own ideological blindness to translation, manifested in an unquestioning acceptance of premodern Chinese attitudes and ideologies about literary importance. So, for instance, though he actually provides a decent thumbnail history of translation into Chinese and consideration of its issues (123–35), citing Martha Cheung, Rachael Lung, and Eva Hung, he comes back to his assertion that since these were “mercantile and diplomatic moments of translation, conducted by bureaucrats ... no one seems to have paid those translational moments much mind” (122). That may have been the case, but why should today's scholar accept their denigration of other peoples and their languages?

Allen's acceptance of premodern literati's denigration of translation operates by narrowing the scope of translation (in contrast to arguments such as Victor Mair's, above, to broaden it). A few instances from Allen's history of translation in China can demonstrate. Though “no one seems to have paid those translational moments much mind,” he notes that the “earliest information on translational activity in China is from the first imperial history, *Shiji* [史記] (Records of the Grand Historian) by Sima Qian [司馬遷] (145?–86 B.C.E.), which chronicles the Chinese ancient world from the mythological period to the first century B.C.E.” (123). Yet this does not interrupt his characterization of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) as “a pervasively monolingual world.” The era was, he says, “a period of intense hermeneutical work that stands shoulder to shoulder with contemporaneous work on the Bible,” producing “the world's first intra-lingual dictionary, the complex etymological *Shuowen jiezi* [說文解字] of 121 C.E., which became a standard for centuries to come.” But “almost no person involved in these great cultural projects was even vaguely bilingual (if we accept the assumed unity of Chinese topolects), and the core texts remained completely untouched by non-Sinitic materials” (125). For a direct counter to Allen's depiction of the Han dynasty's lack of interest in its borders, see *Savage Exchange* for Tamara Chin's depiction of “Han imperialism, Chinese literary style, and the economic imagination” (Chin 2014, 306). But why accept the assumed (read: asserted) unity of Chinese topolects in the first place? The

function of asserting this unity is to deny the diversity that translation negotiates (consider the 2018 article by Song Xinqiao 宋欣橋 arguing that Cantonese cannot be a “native *language*” [or “mother tongue”] 母語 because it is a “dialect” [or “topolect”] 方言). The *Xunzi* 荀子, in fact, describes just this kind of negotiation: “Villages in distant places with different customs followed along with” the names set by the central powers “and so were able to communicate” with each other 遠方異俗之鄉，則因之而為通 (trans. Hutton 2014, 236). Allen is conflating his ideological dismissal of translation with that of early China’s elites.

Allen’s resistance to translation can also be observed in his description of *xeno-Sinitic*, or how written Chinese became used in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, where Chinese was not a spoken language (or, was not the spoken language for the majority of the population). He refuses to think of this in terms of translation. He explains that “throughout most of the Chinese imperial period, all written communication in East Asia was carried out in the lingua franca of literary Chinese,” which eventually produced “the so-called mixed script systems of East Asia. But that script change was entirely one-way: unlike the intense linguistic and orthographic interchange of the ancient Babylonian world, the extensive literary contact with Japan and Korea had little effect on the Chinese system” (130). I do not find it odd that the language of the empire is more influential, to use the terminology of world-system theory, on the periphery than the language of the periphery is on the imperial center. The ideological failure is to take this as a given, rather than to question what this says about the power of translation — Korean and Japanese literati translating their first-language thoughts into literary Chinese — and its denial, or the wish of some to see this as something other than translation.

Here we reach the ideological urgency of expanding our conceptualization of translation, to better understand the ways that the functions of translation have taken place around the world and in different times. When discussing *Kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓讀, or the gloss-reading of classical Chinese with Japanese grammar and pronunciation, Allen says: “*kundoku* did not constitute an interlingual translation as such but did form one of many types of translingual practices that are so characteristic of East Asia” (132). This is in fact a debate among scholars working on Sino-Japanese literature and the Sinosphere: Wiebke Denecke has described how the “Chinese script ... enabled a multilingual East Asian ‘world without translation,’ unifying various Chinese dialects or languages that were mutually unintelligible in speech, but identical in writing” (Denecke 2014, 205; see also Wixted 2018). But



Matthew Fraleigh, looking at *kundoku* alongside early Japanese translations of Dutch, concludes that Japanese users of *kundoku* did indeed consider it translation, as it was “a kind of ‘translationese’ that preserves as closely as possible the diction and structure of the original” (Fraleigh 2019, 6). Timothy Billings’s extraordinary introduction to his critical edition of Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* (Billings 2019) also serves as background reading on the necessity of expanding our understanding of translation proper — as well as the inextricability of *kundoku* to the history our understanding of Chinese-English translation.

It is also important to note that while there was indeed a Sinosphere, there were also civilizations dealing with China and translating its writings outside of Chinese characters: the Tangut Empire 西夏 (1038–1227), for instance, introduced its own script, according to Imre Galambos, as an effort “to curtail the dependence on the Chinese (and possibly Khitan) scripts,” to govern and run a functioning administration without implying “some form of subordinate relationship with China” — while also signifying “that the Tanguts were no longer barbarians who had no writing system of their own, which was a common cliché in traditional historiographical works when describing China’s uncivilized neighbours” (Galambos 2015, 279). And yet immediately after the introduction of their new script, “the Tanguts partially replicated the extensive world of Chinese texts in their own language” (257). A narrow discussion of “translingual practice” should not be deployed to argue against China being engaged in translation before the modern period.

But what about “translingual practice,” which Allen calls “so characteristic of East Asia”? The term “translingual practice” is an allusion to Lydia Liu’s book of that name (1995), which brings an awareness of translation studies to bear on her reading of Chinese literature in its turn toward modernity. Liu defines translingual practice as “the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to ... the latter’s contact/collision with the guest language” (26). But what is the difference between “translingual practice” and *translation*? What are the stakes in making such a distinction? There may be, at times, the necessity to differentiate interlingual translation from the overarching category of translingual practice, of which it is an iteration. But insofar as Allen’s purpose from the beginning of “The Babel Fallacy” is to mark China’s difference from the Biblical West, to insist on its “pervasively monolingual world” and keep it, as I’ve written elsewhere in a related context, “sacrosanct, clean, and

understandable” (2018, 114), it would make more sense to consider translation in terms of translanguaging practice, and discuss the ways in which translation did take place and did impact ancient Chinese literature, religion, and philosophy. Rather than trying to build another tower beside the Biblical Babel, such a consideration would involve dismantling it and reconstructing it differently.

## JOURNEYS TO THE WEST

Allen’s attempt to dismantle the paradigm of Babel prevents him from building it differently with respect to China. The theoretical outline of this problem appears in his attempt, discussed above, to move away from a Christian framework while ultimately recasting Longobardi’s position in the Chinese Rites controversy of the Jesuits. But these theoretics play out practically, too. Allen has a hard time acknowledging the importance of translation in imperial China because he remains focused on a Western-centric problem of modernity, which ends up making certain languages visible in their interaction with and impact on Chinese, and other languages invisible.

In terms of “its main literary culture,” Allen writes, as quoted above, that “China operated in a barely interlingual world up until at least the sixteenth century.” The sixteenth century is when the Jesuits came to China and introduced at least some literati (Li Zhi 李贄 [1527–1602] met Matteo Ricci, for instance) to European intellectual culture, mostly through exposure to Latin. But understanding translation, and its roles and its impact, in premodern China does not only require asking into the definition of translation, but also the languages we acknowledge when looking at that history of translation. Allen’s handling of one scholar’s work shows him acknowledging a particular blind spot, then proceeding as if he had not noticed that he was not noticing things:

Carla Nappi is excavating and explicating important translation activities of the Ming-Qing period (primarily between the languages of Manchu and Chinese) that have fallen out of most histories of translation in China, including my own. For this period our attention has habitually been drawn mostly to the early intersection of China and Europe. (133)

Indeed it has: in Hung and Pollard's entry on the history of translation into and out of Chinese in *Routledge*, they focus on a "second wave of translation activities" related only to "Jesuit missionaries who arrived in China in the late sixteenth century" (E. Hung and Pollard 2011, 373). "When Nappi finishes her work," Allen continues,

we will have new insights into how prevalent and important translational activities were in this period, particularly those of the teacher and literati translators. Yet, on the basis of what I know thus far, most of that work will be about translation in the lower registers of the literature. (Allen cites Nappi's forthcoming *Illegible Cities*; see also Nappi 2015)

Why, though, devalue the "lower registers," especially when to do so reiterates the erasure of "translation activities of the Ming-Qing period (primarily between the languages of Manchu and Chinese) that have fallen out of most histories of translation"? What is the form of consciousness that proposes that literature's lower registers and the translation taking place there cannot impact registers considered higher at any given moment? Does Allen take for granted a category of high literary culture and its self-satisfaction because his attention remains bound to, and by, early modern European encounters with China?

The registers of literature and the languages we consider important change from era to era. Early articles by scholars of what has been called the New Qing History were largely appeals for historians of the Qing to learn Manchu as well as Chinese (Crossley and Rawski 1993; Rawski 1996); now knowledge of more than one of the Qing empire's official languages is not unheard of. Once longform fiction was a denigrated art form in Chinese literature; then Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) published *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* 中國小說史略 (1923a; 1930b; 1964) and Pearl Buck lectured on the form for her Nobel Prize lecture (1939), and historians of Chinese literature began to take the genre seriously. I would like to wrap up, then, by calling for a new translation of a work of literature that is now highly canonical but which was once considered of a lower register, from the end of what Allen calls China's "barely interlingual world" of the sixteenth century: *The Journey to the West* 西遊記. One of the best ways to

advance an argument about literature, after all, is to produce a translation that actualizes its reinterpretation.

*Journey to the West* embodies translation, and I would like to see a translation that highlighted its indebtedness to and embeddedness of translation. The book features Sun Wukong 孫悟空, the “monkey king,” who, as Hera Walker (1998) demonstrates, is a Chinese reincarnation of the Hindu monkey deity Hanumān (she also acknowledges native Chinese elements to Sun Wukong’s character). The main plot involves Sun’s trip to India with the personified pig Zhu Bajie 豬八戒 and the celestial general Sha Wujing 沙悟淨 in the service of their master, Tripiṭaka 唐三藏, to bring the sūtras of Mahāyāna Buddhism to China. Tripiṭaka’s name, both in Sanskrit as it’s often given and in Chinese (*sanzang* 三藏), refers to the “three baskets” of the Buddhist scriptures. The character Tripiṭaka is based on the Tang-era monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (fl. c. 602–664), and the bare outline of *Journey to the West* follows *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* 大唐西域記, Xuanzang’s record of his travels through western China and central Asia between 626 and 645. And in addition to traveling, Xuanzang was a translator (he translated — or wrote? [Nattier 1992] — the *Heart Sūtra* 心經 [*Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*]). *The Journey to the West* allegorizes translation (see Cai 2018).

A new translator would have options for how best to re-allegorize the text’s allegorizing of translation into the translation. It could be a new selection, along the lines of Arthur Waley’s *Monkey* (1942) or Anthony Yu’s *The Monkey and the Monk* (2006), or perhaps Julia Lovell’s in-progress abridged translation, *Monkey King* (2021), highlighting translational episodes in the text (including the pilgrims’ adventures in non-Chinese lands). Or, since a full translation has not appeared in English in decades (see A.C. Yu 1977–1983 and Jenner 1982–1986), a complete translation of *Journey to the West* might be able to re-allegorize the narrative through paratextual mechanisms such as a critical introduction or translator’s afterword, outlining the prehistory of the text and how this prehistory traces a trajectory of translation, from Hanumān to Xuanzang and beyond. It could also explain how the pilgrims’ being given, once they make it to India, *blank* sūtras as the true Mahāyāna scriptures indicates not only Chinese Buddhism’s avoidance of fixation on transcription and the fetishization of the written word (not to mention an interest in reaching an illiterate population), but also a sense that translation in some ways represents *śūnyatā*, or the “emptiness” of an intrinsic nature witnessed in reincarnation, in textual transmission, as well. There is no true and immutable text, and the mutations of translation show

*śūnyatā* at work, just as it is at work in the transmission of *dharma*. This would offer a different way than Allen’s of distinguishing Chinese from attitudes toward language and translation found in the Bible.

But re-allegorizing *The Journey to the West* as about translation would have to take place not only through paratexts, but through methodology. As I detail in “Mediation Is Our Authenticity” (2019), a good translation brings out the cultural translatedness of its source, accounting for what Monica Zikpi has called “the original’s particular historical life, its pre-textual and extra-textual ways of being as well as its mutable material transmission and dynamic interpretive reception” (Zikpi 2016, 20). In the case of *Journey to the West*, it could also bring together translingual practice or translation in its expanded sense with interlingual translation proper, resolving whatever lingering differences they have by incorporating the former into the latter. Such a methodology of translation is all the more urgent with a text that allegorizes and embodies translation as *Journey to the West* does.

This approach to translation would contrast with Allen’s own divided practice as a scholar and translator. Whereas as a translator he is bridging gaps between cultures (though at one point he says that trying “to write the poem that [he] thought the poet might have written if he had written in English,” as he was, was “the imperialism of translation” [Allen 1993, xi–xii]), as a scholar he pushes China — especially *ad fontes* “early China,” prior to “contamination” by change and exchange — further away from his target culture and its beliefs in translation. This may elevate his own labors as translator, though it also protects him from blame if his translations fail at some level. After all, he’s trying to do the impossible!

But translation is not impossible. It happens all the time. It even happened in China, and it mattered — and it matters — that it did.

## LAST WORDS

Allen is a good translator. But in “The Babel Fallacy” he states that his argument

should challenge the assumption that high levels of literary production, whether measured in quantity or in quality, are necessarily related to translation in any form. It is not true that where there is literature, there is translation. (142)

The assumption Allen is challenging has been expressed by Ezra Pound: “A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations; or follows it” (Pound 1954, 232). It may be impossible to prove — which must explain Pound’s “perhaps” — but it is nonetheless a belief that for many translators underpins our work, and without which we have even less value: if poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, as P. B. Shelley put it, then translators are the unacknowledged legislators of poetry.

Testing assumptions is always a good thing, but given the importance I have demonstrated of translation to Chinese literature — and how a broadening of our notion of translation also requires a broadening of Chinese literature beyond its definitions and restricted “registers” — the conclusion that “it is *not* true that where there is literature, there is translation” itself remains unproven. Not only does such a statement devalue the work of translation and translators’ contributions to the literatures of their target cultures (stunning enough, when coming from a translator), it does so by relying on its own assumptions of an ontological separation of China and the West. Other translators, of course, have also sequestered China from translation — Ezra Pound himself comes to mind, as his “China Cantos” show Chinese imperial history “punctuated by constant barbarian threat from the north and west as well as from within in the form of Buddhist and Taoist dissenters from Confucian orthodoxy” (Byron 2016, 34; he continues: “In contrast ... Pound’s focus in the final cantos is displaced from the Emperor’s court to the rural southwest, where the non-Han, non-Confucian Na-Khi culture in Yunnan Province serves as a model of a provisional *paradiso terrestre*”). But denying the importance of the translation that has taken place in China devalues the contribution that translation and translation studies can make.

The ontological separation of China and the West is often motivated by a desire to protect China from cultural encroachment. But this is doomed to backfire, as in many ways the separation serves as a delimiting, a limitation. Returning to the issue of translation mattering for Chinese religion, a better model is Robert Sharf’s argument against the “reified entities” of “‘Indian Buddhism’ and ‘Chinese culture’” that buffer tropes either of “the Buddhist conquest of China” or “the Chinese transformation of Buddhism.” Opposition to such reification nevertheless leads Sharf to a target-oriented presentation of the impact of translation: the Chinese “encounter was with a Buddhism already signified if only by virtue of being rendered, through an often convoluted process of translation and exegesis, into the native tongue,” he says (Sharf 2005, 10, 19). With such attention to translation and the translational or

translingual activities that push against its narrow definition, translators, too, can work more explicitly against such reified entities as China and its others. Through translating, we can find translation in China, and we can then translate that translation into our translations, as well.

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