

Leo Tak-hung Chan Western Theory in East Asian Contexts

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Review of Leo Tak-hung Chan (2020). *Western Theory in East Asian Contexts. Translation and Transtextual Rewriting*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, xi + 226 pp.

In the field of translation studies there are still several ongoing debates about the meaning of translation itself and the role it has in crossing different cultural spheres. In particular, despite various forms of translation being practiced among different languages, there has been little contribution in English that devotes scholarly attention to practices of translation outside the anglophone world.

Inserting itself in the broader discussion about the categorisation of texts as *translations*, *adaptations*, or *imitations*, Leo Tak-hung Chan's book *Western Theory in East Asian Contexts. Translation and Transtextual Rewriting* (2020) proves to be an essential addition to the ongoing debates. In particular, by focusing on examples of the above mentioned practices in the cultural exchanges between China and Japan, it allows for an important new perspective in the field. The book aims at re-evaluating non-western practices of adaptation and imitation – often overlooked by critics in the western context – and tries to put them in conversation with such practices and theories in the West.

The three main parts of the book are preceded by the Introduction and Chapter 1. The introduction, before presenting a short overview and the general structure of the book, briefly introduces the debate concerning the transtextual rewritings of translation, adapta-



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tion and imitation. The author understands them as “discursive phenomena” (1) and positions them within the framework of free translations, which stands in contrast to the more loyal rendition of a text. According to Chan, it is important to shift the understanding of the three concepts seeing them as related and embedded in a network of fluid relations, rather than defining them as belonging to strictly separated categories. Translation, adaptations and imitations re then positioned in the flows of cultural exchanges and power relations between China and Japan, acknowledging the unavoidable cultural centre that China represented for the region. This discussion is continued in Chapter 1, where various differences and similarities between translations, adaptations and imitations are analysed. In particular, the chapter contextualises the still existing negative opinion associated with adaptations and imitations as derived from the western idea of originality supporting the concept of authorship, developed in the eighteenth century. Starting from the acknowledgment that the faithful translation of a text is a western concept brought to East Asia around the nineteenth century, the chapter concludes with the positioning of translation, adaptations and imitations on a spectrum, where they blur seamlessly into each other. Furthermore, the book inserts itself in the lacuna existing in the field of translation studies often omitting non-western translation histories and histories of translations between two non-western languages. As Chan recognises that “the idea of faithfully translating literature (out of respect for the original author) is very much a modern Western product” (6), he also ponders: “[c]an East Asian translation realities sit comfortably with Western theory?” (6).

To try and answer this question, Part 1 moves to explore practices of free translation that domesticate the original source texts. The first chapter in this section - Chapter 2 - focuses on three free translations of Aesop’s fables in Qing China, produced between 1840 and 1903. Chan argues that these three texts exemplify different translation methodologies and are also emblematic of the translators’ goals. According to the author, in many cases, free translations originated from the lack of competencies in the target language - i.e. Chinese - but they could also be a way of responding to the specific cultural and historical context in which they were produced. For example, English Diplomat Robert Thom produced a highly Sinicised translation - from English to Chinese - as the text was aimed at language learners. On the other hand, Lin Shu’s exoticised version of the *Fables* was a way to alert the readers to the Chinese social and political crisis at the time. Therefore, Chan concludes that

[i]ronically, none of the translations were meant only for consumption as children’s literature, the adaptive mode unveils the intended target audience. (56)

Another free translation is discussed in Chapter 3, this time in relation to the concept of *ya* (mostly understood as ‘elegance’). This concept – seen in opposition to the idea of ‘faithfulness’ (*xin*) – has been used to justify more ‘aestheticised’ translations, as in the case of Lin Shaohua’s translations of Murakami Haruki’s works. According to the author, Lin’s translations of Murakami are not faithful to the original, they are rather a way of domesticating the text for the Chinese reader. Lin adopted a strategy of Sinicisation and domestication embedding modern language in a more classical Chinese prose, and this was done “as an act of re-creation” (68). From this, Chan ponders the legitimacy of aestheticising a source text through translation and considering “Lin’s assertion that his renditions are faithful to the spirit rather than the letter of the source text” (72) and wonders who can decide what the ‘true spirit’ of the text is.

In Part 2, the analysis moves to adaptations and their theoretical definitions, both in the western and East Asian context. Chapter 4 is a lengthy and detailed account of the developments and evolutions in the field of ‘adaptation studies’ in western practices, from a series of the most notorious poststructuralist thinkers, to the more recent ‘transcultural turn’ in the field. This is counterbalanced by Chapter 5, where the author investigates three examples of adaptations – a Japanese adaptation of a Chinese story, a Taiwanese adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and adaptations of western novels in China – through the concept of *transmittability* suggested by Ha Kim-lan, and the idea of *transculturation* that “refers to adaptive alterations that enable the transfer of cultural content to a different milieu as a text is rewritten” (96). In Chapter 6, the topic of adaptations is further developed to include also adaptations that not only cross cultural borders, but also develop across different medias. This is the case of the Japanese manga *Hana yori dango* (1992-2004), which has been adapted into several drama and anime versions across Japan, Taiwan, China, and South Korea. Therefore, in this global context, adaptation does not only denote a change in content to match the target audience, but also the modifications necessary to a text to make it cross different medias.

Part 3, the last part of the book, deals with the last of the three forms – imitation – and opens with the historical discussion, in Chapter 7, of practices and perceptions of imitation in the West. From the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* to the Renaissance, “which saw a more in-depth theorization of imitation as a mode of rewriting” (133), to the most recent and new connections with translation studies. Chapter 8, on the other hand, moves to East Asian traditions of imitations, by looking in particular at two Japanese practices: *kanshi* poetry and the tradition of *yomihon*. Both these traditions represent examples of borrowing of Chinese themes, plots, characters to produce new texts, and therefore, they signal the important cultural ex-

changes between the two countries at the time of the production of these works. Concurrently, they signal changing perceptions of what was foreign - Chinese - and what was typically Japanese (151). In a similar manner, Chapter 9 discusses Chinese adaptations of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1960s Hong Kong. Despite the difficulty of the source text, Chan discusses three of such examples that might be motivated by a desire to learn style and narrative techniques or to respond to a general interest on the stream of consciousness used by Joyce. The last chapter - Chapter 10 - focuses once again on Japanese imitations of Chinese original source texts, but this time looks at imitations through the use of parody and pastiche to create new cultural products. The example taken is the one of *Journey to the West*, of which Chan mentions six different Japanese imitations - including of course the most well know: *Dragon Ball* (1984). The main focus of these imitations seem to be a fun approach to a classical Chinese text, that include "elements of play" (196) and imply as switch to a "low-brow medium (manga)" (196).

In the conclusion, the author goes back to the initial question of the book: can western theories of translation be applied to the non-western context and traditions? Chan reiterates the importance of this approach to encourage a new perspective on translations and textual reworking outside of the western context, especially as a way to start devoting a much needed attention to translations, adaptations and imitations produced outside the West. The author, however, falls short of answering this question. The chapters dealing with western theories of translation are in fact often disconnected entities from the following chapters devoted to the more in-depth analysis of texts. The discussion of theories and practices in the West is extremely detailed and precise, but it is difficult to see a clear connection to the study of intertextual exchanges in East Asia. The textual analysis appears to be more in contrast to the theoretical chapters, and even though the author argues that

existing Western theory enriches our understanding of these cases [those presented for the analysis] but only with a more comprehensive model of translation can we explain some of the subtleties of translational interaction between China and Japan, (199)

this more comprehensive model is not introduced; nor is introduced a more thorough discussion of translation, adaptation and imitation theories produced in a non-western context.

Nonetheless, the book is a captivating reading in its attempt to reassess practices of translation, adaptation, and imitation in a non-western context. It must be noted that, despite its fluent style and effective account of theories and texts, the author does refer to topics and theoretical approaches that would probably be more familiar to

an expert scholar; as a result it could become a challenging study for a novice or an undergraduate student. Yet, by addressing issues of adaptations and imitations of texts moving in the cultural sphere between China and Japan, the book skilfully highlights issues of power and how its fluctuations influenced the cultural and literary exchanges between the two countries. *Western Theory in East Asian Contexts. Translation and Transtextual Rewriting* is indeed an effective reading for those who work or are interested in debates about translations, but it could also prove fruitful for those students or scholars working on Japanese and Chinese cultural productions as it could provide further perspectives in understanding cultural flows and exchanges.

