

# 4 May 1919: Translation in Motion

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In January 1919, after four years of bloody conflict which had spread round the globe, the victors of the First World War gathered in Versailles to sign a document that would send the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires into oblivion, effectively drawing the borders of a new world. By joining forces with the Allies against Germany in 1917, the young Republic of China had hoped to reassert its sovereignty over those portions of its territory (Qingdao and Jiaozhou Bay, Yantai) that had been placed under German rule twenty years earlier. Unfortunately for China, the Treaty of Versailles attributed those territories to Japan, which, at the time, was also a member of the coalition against the central empires and which had demanded those territories as early as 1915 (Twenty-One Demands). Outraged by what they considered a betrayal – especially since the Chinese government was suspected of having offered the territories up in exchange for the promise of a loan from Japan – three thousand students gathered on 4 May 1919 in Peking before the Tiananmen to express their discontent and their anger towards the pro-Japanese officials. Very rapidly, in spite of the warlords’ attempts to intervene, the nationalist wave, accompanied by social movements, swept over Shanghai paralysing the entire Chinese economy. The movement succeeded in convincing the government to refuse to sign the Treaty of Versailles in June, a decision that, ultimately, had little effect on the Japanese presence in China. Despite this, the student demonstrations marked the emergence of a veritable political consciousness among

the Chinese population, who had seen their power usurped in 1912, after the Republican Revolution, by the autocratic interim president, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱. In particular, the movement served as a soap-box for a plurality of political doctrines, including the left. In fact, the Communist Party of China was founded in 1921 by intellectuals (Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Li Dazhao 李大釗) who had actively participated in the 4 May events.

This nascent political and nationalistic dimension aside, the May Fourth Movement, led principally by an emerging class of young academics and intellectuals, was part of the larger New Culture Movement, which flourished between 1915 and the end of the 1920s. Students, who had been exposed since the end of the nineteenth century to Japanese and Western influences, issued social and cultural demands which included their government's engaging with other nations; they embraced such values as democracy, equality and individual freedom. The Confucian way of life was considered incompatible with the modern era and was rejected in favour of rationalism and science. Classical Chinese, too, was seen as a straightjacket that prevented new ideas from bursting forth, and became unpopular. Instead, the leaders of the movement sought to promote the vernacular language, especially in literature, so that it could be made available to the largest possible audience, a mission which was carried out by such universally known figures as Lu Xun 魯迅, Mao Dun 茅盾, Lao She 老舍, Bing Xin 冰心 and Hu Shih 胡適.

Given the decisive role it played in the construction of the modern Chinese state – an importance that has been recognised officially on both sides of the Formosa Strait – as well as in the literary and intellectual domains, the May Fourth Movement warranted a large-scale international scientific event in its own right. What better time, then, than the year marking the hundredth anniversary of those student demonstrations to organise, not just a cultural commemoration, but an academic conference befitting its imprint on the Chinese psyche? Thus, on May 2-3-4, 2019, an international interdisciplinary conference dedicated to this landmark event of the Chinese nation was organised at the Université de Mons, Belgium (Written Communication Service in the Faculty of Translation and Interpretation – School of International Interpreters, and School of Human and Social Sciences), in collaboration with the East Asian Studies research centre of the Université libre de Bruxelles, represented by Vanessa Frangville and Coraline Jortay, whom we thank for their outstanding support.

The present volume of *Translating Wor(l)ds* is a compilation of five papers presented at this conference which attempt, through various approaches and from various angles, to answer the following question: how can the impact of the intense translation effort made in the early years of the Republic of China best be measured?

Indeed, already at the end of the Qing imperial dynasty, in the 1870s and 1880s, translation was slowly being revived after centuries of stagnation, as China was losing momentum against the colonial powers. The view of the Manchu rulers at that time was to gather Western science without radically reforming the traditional political system. To this end, the learning of foreign languages and the translation of European and Japanese books into Chinese were encouraged in order to unlock the secrets of Western success. Translation offices and schools with foreign advisers were set up in the new industrial facilities, and many words were adapted from Japanese to make Chinese a language capable of expressing all the abstract concepts brought by modernity. Following the Boxer revolt in 1900-1901, the Chinese Empire undertook a radical reform of its education system, which saw the creation of the first Western-style universities. China then began sending its youth to Europe and Japan to study science and new ways of thinking. However, at the time, translation, subservient to economics and politics, had only a purely utilitarian function.

At the beginning of the 20th century, as the country became a republic while sinking into political chaos, intellectual and literary activity was flourishing, peaking in the decade 1915-1925. In the New Culture movement, which flourished from the late 1910s to the mid-1920s in the wake of the events of May 4, translation took on a completely different dimension. As mentioned above, one of the most important aspects of this movement was indeed the conviction that the Chinese language and script needed to be modernised. Traditionally, the great Chinese works of philosophy, poetry and law were written in a complex, concise and archaic language, known as classical literary Chinese, while less noble literature, such as novels or practical books, was written in a language closer to the oral usage, although still affected, called vernacular Chinese. In 1919, renowned intellectuals and writers wanted to rehabilitate this popular literature by abandoning classical Chinese and using only modern written Chinese, based on the contemporary language. Attempts were even made to abolish the Chinese characters and adopt an alphabetical transcription, but this undertaking was unsuccessful. Newspapers, magazines and novels in the modern language flourished; among them, the magazines created by progressive writers played a leading role. *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (*La Jeunesse*) was the first to launch new literary ideas. The ideals of this magazine were the struggle against Confucianism, its ritualism and the old society, the promotion of science and technology, and the establishment of an artistic and linguistic revolution. It was not until 1920 that the Chinese government generalised the teaching of contemporary Chinese in schools; this year alone, more than four hundred newspapers appeared in the modern language. Step by step, the modern language became, in accordance with the wishes of intellectuals, the vehicle for new thinking.

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Gradually, the writers grouped together in areopagi, in which two main currents can be distinguished: on the one hand, a romantic conception of *yishu zhishang* 藝術至上 (Art for Art's sake); on the other, a certain social realism, with literature as a mirror of society and as a tool for denouncing the vices of the regime. The 創造社 Creation Society, whose personalities included Guo Moruo 郭沫若 and Yu Dafu 郁達夫, had the motto "*cong wenxue geming dao geming wenxue*" 從文學革命到革命文學 (from the literary revolution to the literature of the revolution). This academy was rather a group of writers who had joined the romantic movement. On the other hand, the *Wenxue yanjiu hui* 文學研究社 (Society for Literary Research), centred around the *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (Short Story Magazine) whose members included Mao Dun and Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶, had adopted the motto "*wenxue wei rensheng*" 文學為人生 (Literature for Life). Behind this statement lay three messages: the first was that literature should not just be a distraction, because it should make the reader aware of the lives of real people; the second was that the author should devote himself to describing life and its transformation; and the third was that the writer should invest himself in his work, making writing his profession for life. The third literary group of importance at that time was, finally, the poetry circle of the *xiandai pai* 現代派 (Modern School): through his magazine *Xiandai zazhi* 現代雜誌 (*Les Contemporains*), it revealed the talents of great writers, in particular Lu Xun, who denounced the evils of Chinese society through his works, and Yu Dafu, who focused more on the feeling of unease in a period of transition where values were radically changing, but later also great writers such as Ba Jin 巴金, Lao She, Mao Dun or Dai Wangshu 戴望舒. In this thirst for creativity and innovation, new literary styles emerged, mainly from French, Russian and Anglo-Saxon influences. Numerous foreign works (Zola, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Gorki, Swift...) were translated, allowing Chinese writers to draw their inspiration from Western currents. In the span of just over a decade, China hurriedly embraced all the currents and theories that Europe took over a century to produce: Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism; all these influences left a deep imprint on national production. The new Chinese novels written at that time were no longer long epics, but short, incisive short stories, exacerbating social criticism. As for drama, the model of the Peking opera disappeared to make way for a Western-style theatre, under the influence of personalities such as Ibsen. As we can see, translation therefore played a decisive role in the 'renaissance' of Chinese language and literature.

All the contributions included in this book shed new light on certain aspects of this formidable 'wave' of translations and literary renewal that followed the May Fourth movement.

In his paper entitled “Ba Jin, ‘Offspring of May 4th’, Time Bomb and Utopian Impulse”, Prof. Yinde Zhang from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3 focuses on the complex figure and personality of Ba Jin (1904-2005), who is best known for his radical masterpiece *Jia* 家 (The Family, 1933), which chronicles intergenerational conflict between old ways and progressive aspirations in an upper-class family in the early 1920s. In contrast to the revolutionary anarchism, nihilism and libertarianism to which the writer is too often reduced, Yinde Zhang undertakes to highlight the utopianism and cosmopolitanism of Ba Jin, through the analysis of some of his early works such as *Hai de meng* 海的夢 (The Dream of the Sea, 1932) and various essays. In this way, he shows how Ba Jin, through his activism of deconstruction and his emphasis on freedom in all its forms and the power of the imagination, fully embodied the May 4th legacy.

For her part, Prof. Joan Judge from York University in Canada, in her article “The Other Vernacular: Commoner Knowledge Culture Circa 1919”, examines the links and contradictions between two iconic projects of the New Culture Movement: the reconciliation with the ‘common people’ and the construction of a vernacular language. By doing so, Joan Judge attempts to deconstruct the unidirectional narrative that is too often given to the multifaceted May Fourth movement. Focusing on the figure of Hu Pu’an 胡樸安 and his publishing house Kwang Yih Book Co. Ltd. 廣益書局, the author recalls that May Fourth was not only the business of proponents of an all-out Westernisation, but also involved a whole ‘folklorist’ current leaning towards a certain ‘Confucian populism’, as shown by the book *Zhonghua quanguo fengsu zhi* 中華全國風俗志 (Record of Customs throughout China, 1922). This social project to safeguard the authentic heritage of the authentic popular China was also accompanied by an attraction for ‘common sayings’, considered as an integral part of the vernacular Chinese language in the making, as seen through the *Suyu dian* 俗語典 (Dictionary of the Origin of Common Sayings), compiled by the same Hu Pu’an.

In “A Space of Their Voices: (Un)apologies for Translation in the May Fourth Journal *New Tide*”, Michelle Jia Ye from the Chinese University of Hong Kong explores the place and role of translation in the student journal *Xin chao* 新潮 (New Tide), published at Peking University between 1919 and 1922. Focusing in particular on the paratext and peritext (marginalia) of translations, the author identifies two competing types of translations: on the one hand, ‘provisional’ Chinese versions of foreign works, humbly presented as such by young scholars; and, on the other, appropriations of foreign sources, hidden in critical essays legitimising the quest for rejuvenation of the actors of the New Culture Movement. In this way, Michelle Jia Ye illustrates how translation in itself reveals the complexity of the voices in the ‘frame space’ of a journal that contributed to the formation of the May Fourth paradigm.

Addressing the introduction of Western tragedy in China, Letizia Fusini from SOAS University of London, in her paper “Innovative or Rather Traditional? Confucianising Tragedy in May Fourth China”, discusses the plurality of meanings and the semantic evolution of the Chinese term *beiju* 悲劇 (tragedy), originally borrowed from Japanese, around May Fourth. Showing the extent to which this neologism is imbued with Confucian spirituality and traditional Chinese poetics (*bei* 悲 being one of the cardinal emotions identified by Chinese stylistics), the author investigates the extent to which tragedy, a ‘modern’ dramatic form absent from the Chinese tradition considered by the advocates of the New Culture as a powerful tool capable of expressing the social ills of the Chinese people, was in fact received and interpreted by the local audience through the prism of Chinese philosophy rather than through the introduction of Western theories.

Finally, in his contribution named “Agents of May Fourth: Jing Yinyu, Xu Zhongnian, and the Early Introduction of Modern Chinese Literature in France”, Paolo Magagnin from the Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia takes the reverse point of view, asking to what extent translation had enabled the political, cultural and literary upheavals of 4 May 1919 to resonate abroad, and particularly in France. The author dedicates his analysis in particular to Jing Yinyu 敬隱漁 (1901-1931?), translator of Lu Xun and author of an *Anthologie des conteurs chinois modernes* (An Anthology of Modern Chinese Novelists, 1929), and to Xu Zhongnian 徐仲年 (1904-1981), compiler of an *Anthologie de la littérature chinoise. Des origines à nos jours* (An Anthology of Chinese Literature, from its Origins to the Present Day, 1932). Examining the nature, objective and formal characteristics of these two projects, Magagnin seeks essentially to highlight the artistic and ideological stance of the two Chinese ‘agents of translation’ towards the new literary scene, while attempting to pinpoint the influence of this initiative on the foreign readership.

The various contributions in this anthology will undeniably contribute to the discussion on the critical but ambiguous role of translation in the troubled period of May Fourth in China, while opening, at the same time, fruitful new avenues of research.