

**Book Review: *The Organization of Distance: Poetry, Translation, Chineseness*, by Lucas Klein, Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. 298, hardback, €49/\$59**

Lucas Klein's *The Organization of Distance* is a carefully researched and well argued response to the central question 'is translation something done *to* the Chinese poem, or is it rather done *through* the Chinese poem (p232)?' Klein's positive answer to this question not only shifts our thinking about Chinese poetry and translation to the processes of foreignisation and nativisation that are already activated in poetic creativity and interpretation themselves, but also demonstrates that the 'Chineseness' and translatedness of Chinese poetry are co-emergent and interdependent, in modern and contemporary Chinese poetry *as well as* far back in premodern eras such as the Six Dynasties and especially the Tang. I emphasise 'as well as' because the book's most important aim – in my view also one of its most intellectually engaging and exciting aspects – is to close the perceived schism between premodern and modern China, also posited as various binaries of classical Chinese poetry versus modern vernacular poetry, 'authentic' Chinese tradition versus Western-derived and translational modernity, Chinese literature-in-itself versus Chinese literature-in-translation.

Klein sets out his argumentative points against these rigid conceptual frameworks in the introduction, starting with a comparative reading of Gary Snyder's 'Axe Handles' and Xi Chuan's Chinese translation of Snyder, then moving on to discuss Bei Dao's allusion to Chinese literary history. The 'transplantation' (p2) of poetic traditions is not only horizontal but also vertical, as 'poems organize their distance from the foreign as well as their distance from the Chinese past' (p8). This claim is then unpacked in much detail and from varying viewpoints in the book's five chapters, divided into two parts: one focusing on modern Chinese poetry (chapters 1 and 2), the other on classical Chinese poetry (chapters 3 to 5). More specifically, chapter 1 examines Bian Zhilin's poetics of 'dual translation', arguing that Bian's poetics is both Europeanised and 'antiquitized' (p29) (meaning Chinese antiquity, of course); but more importantly, it actively and self-consciously transforms European and Chinese traditions. Chapter 2 considers Yang Lian's ethnographic poetics and ideogrammic method (à la Pound but also contra Pound), demonstrating how Yang's exoticisation of the native – i.e. casting an auto-ethnographic gaze on Chinese history and foreignising the present into the past – negotiates the political and historical distances between two understandings of 'Chineseness': 中文性 ('linguistic Chineseness') and 中國性 ('nationalistic Chineseness'). Starting from chapter 3, Klein first

reflects on how regulated verse (律詩), seen as the paradigmatic form of classical Chinese poetry, in fact originates from Buddhist poetry and Indian sound patterns, incorporates Buddhist images and exotica (e.g. the bodhi tree and mirror-stands) and increasingly nativises them. This argument is particularly illuminating since it 'pushes against the [...] bias' (p127) in some sinological studies that desires purity in premodern Chinese culture and tends to see Indian influence in a negative light because it subtracts from the originality and autochthony of Chinese literature, making the latter the recipient rather than influencer in the 'foreign trade' (ref. Wellek) of literatures. Chapters 4 and 5 each focuses on two canonical Tang poets: the historically concerned Du Fu and the hermetic Li Shangyin. The poems examined here are not translated poetry, nor obviously incorporate translated elements such as 飛花 in reference to the Sanskrit *pat* (p146) and 祇洹 Jetavana (p143). Klein maintains that they nevertheless are translational because Du Fu contributes to the further nativisation of the regulated verse by using parallelism in his reflections on different figures in Chinese history, and because Li Shangyin's uninterpretability lies in his 'embodiment of translation' (p194), produced by his carrying across the estrangement between his poetic personae to the relation between his poems and their readers.

Reading *The Organization of Distance*, I particularly enjoyed Klein's meticulous and philologically sensitive readings of individual poems, and his unravelling of knotty critical points, for instance his clarification of the misunderstandings of Pound's relation to Chinese ideograms (chapter 2), and above all the notion of 'Chineseness'. Despite all the problematic connotations and conceptual baggage of this term, readers do not need to have any knee-jerk reaction to it, for Klein clarifies that 'Chineseness is not an essence, but a process' (p230), and presents a battery of responses to possible objections to the term by thoroughly discussing the very fluidity, 'emptiness', disputed character, and politicised uses of 'Chineseness' itself. Besides being a study that is solidly situated in Chinese studies, the book also engages with an impressive range of theoretical strands and debates about translation, comparative literature, world literature, and critical methods. It is also important to note that Klein straddles both premodern and modern Chinese poetry masterfully, tracing connections between canonical Tang poetry and 20thC and contemporary poets. To bring the ancient (not the proto-modern or early modern eras such as 17-19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and modern together in cross-period examination – especially when the study of Chinese literature (and of literature in general) is entrenched in the specialisation of periods – is not only demanding but also urgently necessary, for it is so far

surprisingly insufficiently done. I heartily agree with Klein on criticising the tendency 'to occlude the ways in which China had been engaged in international and cross-cultural interaction long before modernity, [and to] take modernity for granted as the epistemological framework with which we in the West are most comfortable' (p231). There is still much work to do to bridge the discursive rift between the premodern and modern, not only in Chinese studies, I would add, but in arts and humanities in general, for has not Bruno Latour's powerful argument in 1991 that 'we' (especially the 'Western' we) have never been modern already revealed the overstatedness of modernity and our presentist-orientated epistemological foundations?

Simultaneously, I may offer some thoughts on a few points that leave something to be desired. Although the footnotes are extremely rich in bibliographical references and offer much complementary information, some rather long notes that engage with argumentative points tend to fragment and distract from the reading experience. I wonder whether some footnotes could be put in the main text, given the interest and importance of their content (e.g. note 32 on 'disorientalism' on p10), while some others could be shortened (e.g. note 30 in chapter 3, p124). Klein's critical references, which are wide-ranging, learned, and well-integrated into his discussion, on very occasional points, however, feel superfluous to the Chinese primary texts in question: I'm thinking of Benjamin's 'pure language' on p145, which is an elusive and inadequately articulated concept (not by Klein but by Benjamin), and of a few platitudes of the not-so-smart critic Susan Sontag (on p194), which are far less illuminating of Li Shangyin's esoteric poetics than Klein's own articulations. On the other hand, while reading chapter 3's fascinating analysis of Indic echoes in early medieval and medieval Chinese poetic form and sound patterns, I would have liked to see where Klein thinks Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong* fits into this, especially given *Wenxin*'s chapter on 聲律 and Liu Xie's Buddhist upbringing. Finally, I also find the criticism (p10-11 in particular) of Stephen Owen's views on modern Chinese poetry somewhat harsh, while missing one important point that Owen makes, for Owen's objection to Bei Dao/Obscure Poets includes two points: that they are derivative of Euro-American modern poetry and therefore not Chinese enough (this view being duly addressed already); *and* that they write bad poetry. We may, of course, contest the latter view, but the problem it poses concerns the aesthetic quality of poetry and aesthetic judgement, which cannot be solved altogether by criticising Owen's 'disorientalism'. We cannot deny that modern and contemporary China has not produced – at least has not been perceived (by the Chinese as well as western sinologists) to produce – poets of similar stature to Li Bai, Li Shangyin, and Su

Shi. Why? To address this question, – including whether this question is posed in the right way, – I believe that challenging stereotypical notions of Chineseness and tradition are only a partial answer.

The book's merits mentioned above and the compelling questions it raises outweigh by far the minor reservations I have cited. Apart from learning much by reading the book, I found myself prompted to think harder about several important issues. One is the notion of 'Chineseness', which, before reading the book, I regarded as a moot point about which nothing much more could be said. Klein's discussion has changed my mind, and made me think of how 'Chineseness' translates into Chinese. Though Yang Lian's 中文性 and 中國性 offer two possibilities, these terms sound highly unnatural and forcibly divide the bundling of different aspects of being 'Chinese' in the English expression. Thinking grammatically, the nominalisation of adjectives by adding the suffix -ness in English when translated into Chinese typically takes the form of either adj.+度 ('the degree to which something is ...'), e.g. hardness '硬度', blackness '黑的程度', or adj./noun+性 ('the quality of being ...' or 'disposition towards ...'), e.g. truthfulness '真實性', correctness '正確性'. The Chinese nominalising suffixes therefore clearly imply that there are different degrees of, say, hardness or correctness, since the 硬度 of something could in fact be very low (i.e. very soft). It struck me that perhaps this could appropriately provide an understanding of 'Chineseness' as 'the degree to which something is Chinese or sinicised', or 'the disposition of something towards sinicisation', which complements Klein's argument that 'Chineseness' is a result of the foreignised/foreignising and nativised/nativising criss-crossing and appropriating each other.

Another concept Klein's book highlights and approaches in a refreshing way is translation. I see Klein engaging with two modes of translation: 1) the narrower sense of translation as 'turning from one language into another' (OED) (including self-translation, as in Bian Zhilin's case), which is operative in chapters 1 and 2, and to some extent in chapter 3; 2) a broad and more submerged sense of translation that returns to the term's etymology (*translatio*), as 'carrying across', 'transference from one place, time, or condition to another', 'rendering in another form', which frees the concept of translation from strictly linguistic reformulation. This mode provides the methodological backbone of chapters 4 and 5. I find this second mode of translation both more interesting and open to debate than the first mode, for it

offers a wider semantic stretch for 'translation' and suggests that translation overlaps significantly with 'reception' and 'reappropriation'. It certainly enables and supports intra-cultural and intra-lingual comparison, e.g. representing classical Chinese in the modern vernacular (as Klein mentions) and recognising this representation as translational, or considering how later writers reappropriate and rewrite earlier literature that they have culturally inherited. Perhaps it also felicitously expands the understanding of 'translation' to include intercultural cross-referencing and the incorporation of originally foreign elements that have become utterly nativised. I am tempted to think of translation in this sense as 'writing that engages with alterity', except that probably all writing is such already. Do we need to draw some boundaries on the metaphorical extensions of translation to keep it still operating as a concept and an activity that differ from 'writing'? Here I can only throw out this question for further thought.

*The Organization of Distance* also points towards many further directions of research, for instance, what more can be said about the connections between Sanskrit *kāvya* (especially its famous *mandakranta*) and medieval Chinese verse metre? how/whether the classical Chinese poetry written by Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese literati relates to a translational Chineseness? to what extent and in what ways we may read early Chinese poetry (pre-Buddhist or not yet significantly influenced by India) as translational, and what kinds of Chineseness were at work in these early periods? These questions once again attest to the thought-provoking character of Klein's book.

To conclude on a few technical but nonetheless important details, the book is rather charitably priced for a hardcover academic monograph, and the cover image is an excellent choice. Although at first sight the artwork featured on the cover reminded me of Zaha Hadid's neo-futuristic architectural structures (I'm thinking of Port House, Antwerp), once you know the artwork is Zhan Wang's *Artificial rock no.10*, you realise its production methods and concept are extremely appropriate for the book's reflections on melding tradition with modernity, the ec-centric (foreign) with the familiar (native). Klein's beautifully presented and eloquently written book offers much to all readers interested in poetry, translation, Chinese studies, and Comparative Literature.

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