Imagining History/Writing Late Imperial China

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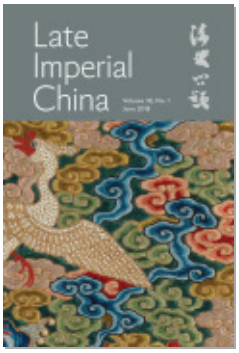

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We can imagine them sitting in a room around a table, enjoying a lazy dinner. The translators, the movers of words, the anatomists of language, the architects of broken and breakable structures. The Siamese interpreter, Women La and his colleagues. Wang Zilong, the student of Mongolian language, and Qoninci, the author of his textbook. (They've come as a couple, though they lived more than two centuries apart.) The Jesuit missionary and grammarian Ferdinand Verbiest. The Manchu teacher and textbook author Uge, and his colleague Cheng Mingyuan. And the Qing poet and Manchu-Chinese translator, Bujilgen Jakdan, accompanied by his quiet collaborator Hai Yu.

Each of them has arrived here from a particular moment in a particular year in their lives. Each has brought a text, a document that represents a crucial point in the history of translation in early modern China; each embodies a means by which translation helped reconfigure, for Ming and Qing readers of various sorts, what a language was and what it was built of. Each work offers a glimpse into the art and craft of the translator: the music of his language, his skill as a cartographer of thoughts, his ability as a navigator weaving through dark waters and leaving landmarks in his wake. He is an illusionist who conjures phantoms into being: ghosts of his own multiple selves that whisper to one another in phrases half-understood, ghosts of the magicians who came before him, ghosts of flowers and beasts and cities and children and libraries full of pages that spin from the ink and the air.

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These men will share their stories by singing or gesturing them into being — in some cases — or perhaps by writing bits of them in Chinese script. Tonight, they are all students, and they are all teachers. They will teach one another how to speak and act like Manchu men, or how to pronounce Mongolian names. They will teach each other how to build structures out of verbs and nouns, how to move their mouths and tongues in particular ways, how to transform classic works of literature into contemporary poetry. At some point in their lives, most of them have called the city of Beijing home. But what is home, for a mover of and in language? And where is home, for a man who spends much of his life in transit? Their cities are not built with walls or streets, they have no rooftops or sitting rooms, no orchards or rivers: instead, these men live in cities of ink and paper, breathing out vowels made of air in round or sharp shapes. Their cities are carved into woodblocks or sounded into gardens and classrooms, inhabited by the artists and pirates of language who helped make them. Theirs are cities legible and illegible — to read them, hear them, speak them is to travel through them, or to find oneself lost within them, or both.

Not all of them wanted this, as they will gradually reveal over the course of the meal. One of them had dreamt of a life in Central America before he was sent to work in China. Another had illusions of spending his middle age as a respected and well-known author, rather than earning what small fame he had by doing work that he considered unworthy of his talents. Three of them were still celebrating their collective luck in securing an adventure that took them to the Ming court, before they were effectively kidnapped by the Ming and told they would not, in fact, be returning home from that adventure.

The languages they worked in had ranged from Chinese to Mongolian to Latin to Manchu to French to Thai and beyond. Some were deeply interested in the work, and for others translation was merely a means to an end: a comfortable job in the civil service, an emperor converted to Christianity, a life spent working for a foreign court rather than a violent death at its hands. We are meeting each of them in their prime. (For some that finds them in early adulthood, and it finds others well into old age).

As dinner concludes, the translators begin to play a game. Each man is to teach the others for a time, and to tell his story using the text he has brought with him. His story must somehow follow the shape of the text. Before the night is over, the men will hear stories guided by a collection of poems, a set of spoken dialogues, a grammar, and a bilingual textbook of historical documents. But first, all but a handful of them sit back, and they listen to the story of a glossary…

…and this is how it begins. Readers of the book I'm currently finishing will begin their journey with me by joining me in a conjuring of translators gathered for a long evening of telling stories about language. It is a book about translation in early modern China. It's not so much a history book, as it is a book about history, and about what it might look like to practice history by incorporating a fictioning process into the historian's craft. Historians are storytellers, and we spin tales with our documents all the time. This book finds me attempting to draw stories out of documents that might not obviously lend themselves to the telling of tales: glossaries and grammars and language-learning textbooks and vocabulary examination papers. And it involves being bold and explicit about welcoming fiction into the art of making historical truth.

To write fiction, after all, you have to learn how to tell the truth. That's not a simple thing and it's not the same thing as stating facts and it takes hard work to look inward and in order to be able to look outward and really see.

Sometimes, though, seeing too clearly can be an obstacle to understanding what we're looking at. Sometimes, in order to understand something anew, we have to unfocus our eyes a little and learn to see differently. For a historian who's trying to jog herself out of conventional ways of reading her documents, learning to unfocus the eyes to see a document anew can be transformative. And for a writer used to making scholarly history with her documents, learning to write fiction with them can be a way of unfocusing the eyes of the mind in order to see those documents in a new way.

I began experimenting with this practice some years ago. I had been working with a Qing Tibetan-language text about *materia medica*, and I wanted to develop a relationship with the text that pulled me out of the routines I had developed as a historian of medical drugs and natural

history in China.[1] When I received an invitation to form part of a human bestiary that was to be performed over the course of several hours at a museum,[2] I eagerly took the opportunity to pluck a phoenix from the text, unfocus my reading eyes, and imagine the pages of the document as the material ecology in which the creature lived, loved, and died.[3] A love story resulted, in which the birds depicted on the pages of the document ate the language surrounding them, laid their names like eggs, and built and destroyed relationships with each other. This was the first time I had mixed fantasy and fiction with a Qing document, and the first time I had shared it publicly, and it transformed my relationship with the text productively enough that I began incorporating fiction work into my regular practice as a historian. Voicing this work aloud and in public was transformative: my language as a writer was distinctly metamorphosed into a part of my body — physically and sonically — and writing and performing short fiction became part of who I am as a historian of China.[4]

But as a historian working with text I am not only a performer, but also a reader. Fiction became a way for me to pay different kinds of attention to my documents, to shake myself out of routine ways of reading them, and to try to read more generously.[5] By the time I started

1. I wrote about this text in "Making 'Mongolian' Nature: Medicinal Plants and Qing Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Harvard University Press, 2017).

2. This was the *Cabinet* magazine event put on at the New Museum in New York City to accompany an exhibit of the work of artist Rosemary Trockel. Each participant chose a creature and we were each given 10 minutes to do what we wanted with that creature.

3. You can listen to me reading the story while seeing the images that inspired it here: *https://carlanappi.com/2013/01/16/read-to-me-2-the-one-who-claws-at-his-names/*

4. Stories do different work when voiced and performed than they do on a page. When reading and performing aloud, there is no hiding the fact that the work is the product of the distinct "I" that is giving it physical shape, and I have come to appreciate and celebrate that.

5. Generous or not, the act of reading helps make a document into itself. To make meaning from a document, we embed it into a larger story. When I read a glossary, or a language primer, or a poem, I'm bringing myself into a conversation with the document and generating the text out of that conversation. My reading of the text is necessarily an act of storytelling, even before I put words about it onto a page. Because of that, what we bring to a text is crucial to the ability of the text to be the material for meaning-making; we are partially responsible for making it into what it can be. And because of *that*, it is so important to read generously. I recently wrote about this in "Metamorphoses: Fictioning and the Historian's Craft," *PMLA* 133.1 (2018): 160–165.

working on the book that begins with the gathering above, I wanted to tell a generous story with documents that don't easily shape themselves into components of a robustly documented social or cultural history. I had early modern exam papers and glossaries, language primers and translation aids, without exact dates or clear authors. I wanted to write a story about them in a capacious voice that spoke from as many parts of me as possible: the Manjurist, the translator, the historian of early modernity, the reader of poetry and philosophy and comic books, the teacher and the student. The result has become a kind of beautiful monster. It has footnotes doing what they're not supposed to do. It brings historical figures back from the dead and asks them to dance and play music and bicker and build imaginary cities and read poetry to one another. Amid all of this, it's doing its best to materialize a process of thinking expansively about what history can be.

Of course, none of this is new.[6] Blending fiction with history has been part of the field for far longer than I have been. And it seems like every month I meet more colleagues in Chinese Studies who are writing fiction or poetry, or making images using paint or photography, alongside their nonfiction work in scholarly history or literature. All of this might seem fairly uncontroversial. On some level, any historian working to draw a story out of documents is engaging imaginatively with them. But things start to get more complicated when we move from considering fiction as part of the practice or process of historical labor, to considering it as part of the final object that the historian produces.

Take, for example, the process of working with Jakdan, the Qing poet and translator briefly invoked above. What we know of him is largely taken from two of his works: a Manchu translation of some of Pu Songling's stories, and a collection of poems that include Manchu translations from Chinese and original verse composed in Manchu or in a combination of Manchu and Chinese.[7] In the poems, Jakdan writes about

6. I recall the excitement in graduate school of discovering the narrative experiments of Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, and others. The blending of history and fantasy with early modern China, specifically, also has a long history. How many of us have been inspired by, and have taught roomsful of students similarly struck by the playful writerly craft and experimental spirit of Jonathan Spence?

7. For the short stories, see *Manchu-Chinese Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Ma. *Manju Nikan Liyoo jai jy i bithe*, Ch. *Man-Han hebi Liaozhai zhiyi*). The main version that I consulted for the book was a 24-volume blockprint edition held in the Rare Books collection

his personal and professional frustrations as a translator, his reverence for Chinese literature and for the natural world, his interests in Daoist and Buddhist figures and ideas, and much more. In my book, I bring him to the front of the room, where the other translators are gathering, to talk about all of this with them. He sings and he strums a lute, he gets tipsy and he naps, he dreams ghosts into the air as he performs his poetry and tells his story. In reanimating him in this way, I'm also trying to bring Manchu poetry to life for my readers. (Indeed, this is the chapter that readers often respond most strongly to—they seem to feel that they connect on some deep level to Jakdan and his songs of growing old, taking stock of a life lived not as fully as it might have been, justifying that life by finding ways to celebrate its mundane elements, and imagining what might come next). I try to be clear about when I'm embellishing the history (the burping, the dancing) and when I'm not (the translated moments from the poems, the descriptions and analyses of what's inside). I use the footnotes as a space to tell a different story, one of my own experiences rendering Jakdan's work in English: here I continue the song of my subject and speak about my choices and experiments translating the translator, and the experiences and inspirations informing that work.

Each chapter of the book takes a different approach to doing this same kind of thing: animating fellow translators to play alongside me in translating their work into a history of early modern China. Each translator opens the room out into a particular year in which they were working: 1389, 1578, 1608, 1678, 1730, or 1848. Once it's complete, readers who open the book and spend time within its covers will be transported into a room full of storytellers with whom they might pause and listen and stay a while.[8] And then they will close the covers and disperse along Jakdan, and me, and our fellow translators. And this is how it ends…

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of the Harvard-Yenching Library and catalogued as *Zefan Liaozhai zhiyi* (Call number TMA 5748 1046a). For the poems, see Jakdan, *Jabduha ucuri amtanggai baita (xianzhong jiaqu)*, Harvard-Yenching Library Rare Books collection, manuscript Ma5237/4147.

8. From the beginning of my career as a historian of China, I've been interested in writing about storytellers: doctors telling tales about the natural world and translating those tales into prescriptions for human bodies; poets weaving themselves and their personal and professional struggles into the fabric of their verse; naturalists attempting to make sense of the cosmos and its metamorphoses. It's somewhat of a cliché, but it's true: many of us historians tend to write about ourselves.

The stars are beginning to hide and the moon is retreating into the brightening sky and the evening has come to a close. The translators gather texts and tidy pages and prepare to depart. They carry their language with them.

How things come apart helps make them what they are. The letters and syllables, words and nouns break down into dust, and the translators and their language disperse like dust disperses, present though invisible in stories to come. These will be stories about how translation helps to make language what it is, as a constantly transforming and transformative way of being in the world. They will be stories about the crucial roles played by non-Chinese languages and their translators in making China what it has been, and what it could be, in time and space. (Stories about how language and its translation create forms of life). And they will be stories about cities — even when they are not about cities at all – and the ways that ink, and sound, and gesture create them.

The translators disperse the way bubbles in foam are dispersed. One at a time, the translators will scatter, closing their eyes and allowing their moments to expand and enclose them, as they dwell in time like pockets of air scattered in cream. They will sink into 1389, or 1578, or 1608, or 1678, or 1730, or 1848, each of those moments having been changed by the evening. (1389 is now a different 1389. 1578 has been transformed by the evening it has spent with 1608 and 1678 and the others). The language they have left behind them is made up of actions and events shaped by translation. The language of tonight's 1578 was a collection of concepts and objects gridded into a landscape. It was the language of glossaries, mapping the contours of conversation or the paper routes of diplomatic exchange. The language of tonight's 1389 and 1608 was a kind of bodywork, a disciplining of the mouth and the breath, and a tool for writing and rewriting history. The language of tonight's 1678 was an imperial instrument used to subjugate and civilize others, a weapon, a source of power. The language of tonight's 1730 was choreography through which a man became a social and ethical person of a particular sort, in a particular place, and at a particular time. The language of tonight's 1848 was a yardstick measuring status and class, a tool for artistic production, and a medium for sensory communion with the natural and material worlds. As the translators disperse, they take these languages with them.

The translators and their words disperse the way clouds disperse, thinning into wisps and threads, blending from one shape into another, and on and on until they disappear. As they dissipate they leave behind a story of translation as a practice of recognition and an art of resemblance. They leave behind a reminder that nothing necessarily resembles anything else, that likeness is not a quality that inheres in words or objects: we create resemblances by paying attention to words and objects in particular ways. And so the translators leave behind a history of translation as a history of ways of paying attention. As the translators disperse, the letters and characters and symbols on the pages of their texts fade like the stars in the night sky. They will be back. But they will be changed over time as the constellations are changed, becoming legible in new ways to mark new forms of power, to celebrate new gods, and to tell new stories.

The translators disperse like crowds disperse: they spread out from the room and drift in different directions. What remains are traces of language and its afterlives and its residues and decompositions. The translators leave in their wake a history of translation as a history of decomposition and of residue, of sense breaking down and words leftover.

The translators disperse the way news disperses, producing a scattered recognition of names and documents and records of events. As they have shared their own histories of naming and its practices — showing one another that translation multiplies names for any object, and that as those names multiply the object is changed in important ways – and they each depart having helped to multiply the names of China and of its language. And in doing so, even if only in small ways, they have helped change what we understand China to be, and what we understand to be its language.

The translators disperse like light disperses. And they take their languages with them. And each language disperses like light disperses, dividing into registers as light divides into wavelengths. And, like light, Manchu becomes a way to see other things, and it becomes refracted into poetry of various sorts, and short fiction, and official memorials, and shamanic texts, and into as many other ways of being Manchu language

as there are ways of being light. And the same with the other languages. And so translation becomes a tool for dispersing language like light: a prism, a pulse, a lens.

The translators disperse like coins are dispersed, thrusting themselves into circulation. Their texts have made language into a kind of currency, circulating terms or sounds or the shapes of a script, a grammar making a currency of imperial structures, a conversation manual circulating gestures, a set of poems circulating allusions and illusions. Others will pick up some of the translators at other times, write their own stories with them, and then offer them back into circulation. What kinds of stories will they be? What new kinds of value will they produce? What happens when words are like coins and glossaries are like banks and a conversation between friends is a form of economic exchange?

The translators disperse like spent soldiers on a battlefield disperse.

The translators are dispersed like seeds in a field are dispersed.

The translators disperse like heat between lovers disperses.

Like a shadow. Like smoke, like mist. The translators fade as a memory fades. As we forget them, we make room for other stories of language and its histories, of China and its translations, of the movements through script and sound and gesture that have created means of moving in space and time. We make room for new stories about ways of being legible and illegible. But now, the stars are beginning to hide and the moon is retreating into the brightening sky and the evening has come to a close. And translators carry language with them. And how things come apart helps make them what they are. And so, tonight, language is made of dust and bubbles and clouds and crowds and news and light and coins and soldiers and seeds and heat and shadow.