MORE THAN A TWO-WAY TRAFFIC: ANALYZING,TRANSLATING, AND COMPARING POLITICAL CONCEPTS FROM OTHER CULTURES[1]

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Let me begin by sketching what I propose to do in this talk and explaining my title. My first published paper was on *min ch'uan* (the power of the people), a concept crucial to Sun Yat Sen's political thought.[2] I began my graduate work in Asian studies, with particular reference to China, where I had once served after learning Mandarin. More to the point, in my recent work on the theory and practice of the translation of political and social concepts, I have discovered that Asian studies have been the site of many theoretical and historical studies of translation as a complex act of intercultural communication.

Although it may seem somewhat perverse to begin a conference on transatlantic dialogues by discussing those better described as transpacific, I shall argue that the issues, methodological and substantive, raised in this body of work in Asian studies, are equally applicable to the subject of this meeting, and add a needed comparative dimension. Perhaps the greatest single difference from South and Central America is that, unlike Asian conceptual transfers from European to non- European languages, New World borrowings and adaptations came from Spanish and Portuguese as used in the metropolitan power to their colonies, and to their later status as independent nations.

A word about my title: many, perhaps most, studies of the circulation of concepts between Europe and the once New World have focused on one side of the exchange, emphasizing European perceptions and conceptualizations. One criticism of this approach is that it denies a voice to all those peoples and cultures perceived and evaluated by Europeans. Can this be remedied? Presumably this might and has been done by studies not only of how non-European societies understood themselves but also of their views of Europeans at home and abroad. These can be reconstructed from Individual diaries, travel books and literary accounts, as well as reports of governmental commissions such as those sent to Europe and North America by China and Japan in the nineteenth century. By using such sources, it becomes possible to chart the circulation of concepts in terms of a two- rather than a one-way traffic. But is this enough?

When we discuss the circulation of concepts, we are apt to do so in terms of whether the transfer from an European text to the translation in another language or setting is an accurate transcription of the original. When I wrote on Sun Yat Sen's concept of people's power, I made just this mistake by concluding that Sun had produced a defective version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's original formulation in the *Contrat Social*. An alternative mode of proceeding, and one which applies equally well to trans-Atlantic conceptual transfers, has been provided by Joachim Kurtz, an editor of the important studies aptly called *New Terms for New Ideas. Western Knowledge and Lexical Change in Late Imperial China.* Kurtz writes:

> Modern Chinese discourses, no matter whether on social or ideological questions . . . are articulated to a large extent in terms that were coined and normalized as translations of Western or Western-derived notions. Yet far from serving as simple equivalents of imported ways of understanding, many terms of foreign origin have unfolded a life of their own in modern Chinese contexts. More often than not, they have acquired new meanings that creatively alter, extend, or even undermine established European conceptions. In order to comprehend the resulting semantic and conceptual differences, historians of thought must pay close attention to the multilayered process of translation and appropriation from which these terms have emerged.[3]

Such analysis of conceptual transfer and change must be placed within the context of intercultural communication under the conditions of radical inequality in the power of participants. Often, as in 19th century China, such translation and adaptation of political concepts

took place amidst unprecedented rapid and violent change, much of it produced by foreign aggression, first western and then Japanese. It became increasingly clear that acquiring modern western knowledge was crucial to Chinese national power and independence. Yet there was no consensus on whether western political arrangements were on the same level of importance to the superior power of foreigners as were their physical sciences and technology. Nor could translators distinguish between political concepts, which were contested in the west, and scientific terms, about which there was relatively little disagreement.

Yan Fu, among the most important nineteenth century translators, became convinced that if China were to survive, it had to adopt western political ideas. In the late 1890s, he began translating a series of works, which although to us may seem unconnected, he thought to form a unified and politically indispensable body of doctrine: T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*; Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*; Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*; J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* and *System of Logic*; and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*. For all of these books, Yan Fu had to create a political vocabulary both by creating neologisms and assigning new meanings to existing words and terms. And to gain and hold his audience, this had to be done in a style at once comprehensible and pleasing to the literati who constituted his audience.[4]

The complexity of this multi-faceted process of exchange and adaptation, as well as the unexpected insights it provided was first analyzed in a pioneer study of Yan Fu which unearthed the reasoning that justified the authors he chose for his canon of essential western theorists.[5] What unified them, he thought, were their respect for wealth and power, both of which had now become essential to the survival of China as a sovereign nation. Thus Yan Fu's grouping of western theorists into a canon derived from his arguably valid understanding of them from a point of view that would not have occurred to those within western political traditions.

I

What I shall now seek to do in this paper is to identify some of the problems involved in applying the analysis of this "multilayered process of translation and appropriation" to what Reinhart Koselleck has called basic political concepts (*Grundbegriffe*):

> As distinguished from concepts in general, a basic concept . . . is an inescapable, irreplaceable part of the political and social vocabulary. Only after a concept has attained this status does it become crystallized in a single word or term such as "revolution," "state," "civil society," or "democracy." Basic concepts combine manifold experiences and expectations in such a way that they become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time. [T]hey are always both controversial and contested.[6]

As a method, this calls attention not only to great theorists, but also to the other sites and media where political controversies are and have been conducted. This includes even those sources sometimes considered to be neutral such as dictionaries, lexicons, and treatises on language and correct usage. First to be discussed will be a brief history of "liberty," and "democracy," two political concepts introduced into Chinese political discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from western sources. In accordance with the methods of conceptual history, these will be treated: 1) as basic political concepts; 2) as always contested; 3) as possessing a long history, including the changing boundaries separating them from near synonyms in both the source and target languages; 4) as often producing political consequences unanticipated and undesired by those coining the term; 5) as deployed not only by major theorists and political leaders, but also by pamphleteers, journalists, and other publicists and propagandists in and out of government.

What happens when the attempt is made to translate the basic political concepts of one society, phrased in its natural language, to another society with an altogether different history, set of institutions and religions, political culture, and language? The barriers to comprehension by both translator and audience are formidable. What is basic to the source polity is alien to the target of the translation, another society, the natural language of which may differ fundamentally from that of the source. So too the manifold experiences and expectations which have shaped the basic political concepts being translated may find little or no resonance elsewhere. Do all these considerations make the translator's task impossible? This is what has been suggested by some theories, based on linguistic or cultural determinisms. Yet it is worth investigating the possibility that a more likely outcome is partial understanding combined with some misunderstanding of what is being translated in a more or less creative

adaptation to the new context. It is here that the "multilayered process of translation and appropriation" in 19th and early 20th century China merits analysis. For given the powerful traditions of an ancient political culture, in which China was the dominant empire and other countries were styled "barbarians," it was not easy for the Confucian elite to understand, much less apply, concepts deriving from political and religious systems so different from their own.

What could, what did western concepts of political liberty and democracy mean to literate 19th and early 20th century Chinese? Even in the West, these were contested concepts, with no single, undisputed meaning, much less consensus on their positive or negative valence. The problem of translation was compounded by the fact that the imported political concepts did not match those previously accepted in Chinese discourse. How reliable were the first Chinese-English dictionaries by English and American missionaries? In one appearing between 1815-1823, "liberty" was rendered in a Chinese phrase meaning "the principle of self-determination." To this were added in another work of 1847, the clarifying terms, "to feel free and comfortable" and "to be left to one's own will." A third dictionary, published between 1866-1869 offered a series of additional synonyms: "self-determination," "unrestrained," "right of self-government," "being allowed to follow one's intentions," "being allowed to act within the law." "Political liberty" was translated as "the right of a state to govern itself."

In these dictionaries, the Chinese characters designating "liberty" were taken from ancient texts which were unrelated even to the political or philosophical vocabulary of their remote period. In 19th and early 20th century China, some of these ancient meanings were still legitimate usage, and thus could easily be confused with western notions of liberty.[7] This was a difficulty created by the Chinese language, the users of which, tended to create replicas of western terms by means of native morphemes often taken from a historically remote period. Elsewhere neologisms could be constructed de novo. Or else, as in early Meiji Japan, the situation could be even complex. For there the translation of western political terms was for the most part done by using Chinese characters.[8]

Yet, despite all the obstacles to understanding western concepts of political liberty, there were Chinese who made the effort to do so. An 1887 newspaper editorial "On the principles of liberty and mutual love in the West" sought to explicate this unfamiliar concept:

> What is called `liberty' in the West, is the fact that the ruler and the people are close . . . ; that above and below communicate . . . . Thus, the so-called matters of state are jointly carried out by the ruler and the common people. . . Now, if the common people are just and respect the laws, if they are cautious and full of self-respect, and fear the punishments, then they will never in their lifetimes have to attend a civil law suit at court.
> . . .; if they indulge in studies and eat meat in the evenings, if they drive around in carriages, innocently gain riches and indulge in peace and tranquillity, then what harm would there be done even to poor and ordinary people? This is called `liberty.'[9]

This might be called a sympathetic partial understanding combined with an approximately equal misunderstanding or incomprehension of the western concept of liberty, which it conflates on some points with democracy. Obviously the author did not connect institutions incorporating elected officials and representative government to political liberty, or see any relation between it and theories of rights enjoyed by citizens. The inherited structures of imperial China still constituted for the writer the paradigm of political organization. After Yan Fu lived in England, he declared that the presence or absence of liberty was what differentiated China from the west: "In fact, all the sages in ancient Chinese history were afraid of the doctrine and therefore never established it".[10] The students who rebelled in the May 4 movement of 1919 knew western concepts of liberty through Yan Fu's seminal translations, including that of J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*.

As for the no less contested concept of democracy, the Chinese were not at first well served by English-Chinese dictionaries written by missionaries distrustful of political democracy in the west. The Morrison dictionary of 1815-1823 stated that democracy "is improper, since it is improper to be without a leader." However, because there was no single term in Chinese for "democracy," Morrison had to use a full sentence to express his verdict: "if it is improper that nobody leads, it is equally improper that a multitude of people govern [in a] disorderly [way]." The 1847 Medhurst dictionary provided additional pejorative definitions: "disorderly administration by many" and "government by the rabble." The 1866-1869 Lobscheid, while offering "government by the people," adds "abuse of power by the common people." Finally, a neutral definition of democracy appeared in a 1902 dictionary: as "control of state affairs by the common people." Now the Chinese word for democracy became minzhu. This, in the Chinese classics, had originally meant "lord of the people." Thus be-

cause of Chinese linguistic usage a potentially confusing neologism was created by giving an ancient name to a modern political regime. Still another source of ambiguity was the use of minzhu to mean the head of a democratic state.

Taken together, these varying uses of the characters now designating "democracy," indicate how significant can be the history and persisting characteristics of a given natural language. Nevertheless, the conclusion of most recent scholarship about the development of Chinese as a language, spoken and written, seem to rule out strong forms of linguistic determinism. Such theories were once used to argue that many forms of knowledge, such as modern physics could not be developed in China because of the language.

Another type of determinism derives its conclusion from the allegedly unbridgeable diversity of cultures and historical traditions. On this view, that best known in the version of Benjamin Lee Whorf, concepts deriving from one society are said to be incommensurable with those of another, and hence untranslatable into the recipient language.[11] However, this striking assertion has not been accepted by linguists. Yet, when rephrased in terms of cultural relativism, such theories continue to attract many adherents. The question of whether acknowledging the diversity among cultures necessarily entails complete cultural relativism is too complex to be discussed here. But a recent book disputing that claim is worth mentioning: Steven Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*.[12] Although I find Lukes's argument persuasive, I shall only mention it before moving on to discuss recent treatments of translation as a historical process.

II

I propose to do by beginning with to an important essay-review, "The Predicament of Ideas in Culture: Translation and Historiography" first published in *History and Theory*.[13] Its author, Douglas Howland, a specialist in Asian studies, uses recent studies of translation in that field to illuminate the central subject of this meeting: how to describe and explain what happens when concepts formulated in one language and political context are transferred to, or imposed upon users of another language with another political culture and set of historical experiences.[14]

Much as does Ephraim Kurtz in the passage previously cited, Howland treats translation and conceptual transfers in terms of the adaptations required by cultural exchanges:

> We now understand translation in a manner quite different from two decades ago. Translation is no longer a simple transfer of words or texts from one language to another on the model of the bilingual dictionary or the bridging of language differences between peoples. Rather . . . translation has become a translingual act of transcoding cultural material—a complex act of communication.[15]

Thus discussions of conceptual transfers by historians involve the differences among natural languages, forms of writing and argument, rhetorics, and structures of authority, as well as the media through which concepts are transmitted. It comes as no surprise that fundamental disagreements separate those concerned to identify and explain patterns of conceptual transfers and to assess their significance for such historical developments as colonialism and decolonization. Howland's essay divides the books he treats into two groups, each with its distinctive focus and mode of interpretation. Such differences he attributes to a contrast particularly significant for those historians dealing with the disparate effects of western colonialism and imperialism on the peoples of Asia.

On the one hand, there were states once strong and centralized, such as China and Japan, which were never completely subjugated, colonized, and ruled by an alien bureaucracy and army. On the other hand, just such subordination was the situation of such peoples as those of the Indian subcontinent, whose concepts and styles of thought derived from long established literary, religious, and philosophical traditions. Also turned into colonies were peoples such as the Tagalog in the Philippines, with largely oral traditions, with no previous experience of a strong centralized state, which were subsequently colonized, and ruled, first by the Spanish Empire, and then by the United States.

This type of colonies has for the most part been studied from the perspective of colonial practices, especially the domination of an indigenous population.[16] Such descriptive and explanatory theories share the view that colonial and imperial powers forced their subjects to translate their native language, concepts, and culture into those of the dominating rulers. Crucial to this interpretation are the concepts of representation and identity. Because subjects are forced by their rulers to use their alien language and representations, the colonial power can construct the identity of those they rule. Thus more or less overtly, the colonized are coerced into perceiving themselves as inferiors, subordinate to their conquerors, and owing obedience to

them. Thus in this type of studies, power is said to dictate the forms of representation and identity. Such works tend to use translation metaphorically, that is as the total process of domination by controlling the way subjects come to understand themselves and their inferior relationship to their alien rulers.

These emphases are either contested or omitted in another group of books treated by Howland.[17] Perhaps because their authors are primarily concerned with 19th and early 20th century China and Japan, or with newly independent states, these books focus less on colonial and post-colonial situations than on the role played by translation in bridging differences among languages, social practices, religions, and political cultures. The paradigm situation is when indigenous agents wish to overcome existing obstacles blocking access for their peoples to western ideas, institutions, science, and technologies.

On which points do these interpretations differ? One school sees colonialism or empire as always producing a conceptual monopoly, with two and only two possible outcomes: either the victims' identification with their masters' language, concepts, and representations, or else resistance entailing complete rejection of them. This view has been criticized by Lydia Liu, who pinpoints "the irony that, in the very act of criticizing western domination, one often ends up by reifying the power of the dominator to a degree that the agency of non western cultures is reduced to a single possibility: resistance".[18] Liu analyzes attempts by native agents to construct new and better idioms for foreign terms: the conditions of possibility for creating new usages based on neologisms and novel linguistic practices. Like Kurtz, Liu stresses the role of creative reinterpretation in the process of translation. Thus, like other scholars emphasizing intercultural communication rather than domination, Liu rejects the common assumption that translation always produces equivalences in the same way as do bilingual dictionaries.

Another characteristic of this second group is their emphasis upon explaining the translation of concepts in intercultural exchanges as a form of action by determinate agents, thus applying to this field the theory developed by Quentin Skinner. Such authors treat concepts as contestable and analyze the functions served by them. Finally, these scholars agree that we understand concepts and their transfers best through acts of comparison—not the comparison of originals and translated versions, but through comparing the uses of whole sets of concepts.

III

I end in the hope that despite my focus on Asian studies, that what has emerged from this discussion are the issues that arise when we seek to chart and explain the full spectrum of possibilities when political and social concepts are transferred from one cultural context to another. Surely this process is what ought to be emphasized in our consideration of transatlantic dialogues. The understanding of translation as a complex, multilayered process of intercultural communication more or less flawed by inequalities of power should alert us to the multiple possible outcomes of agency as exercised even in a colonial or semi-colonial setting. Apparent continuities in the use of political and social concepts between Spain and Portugal on the one side and what began as their New World colonies on the other, may disguise significant alterations in meaning and use.

The history of political concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) can contribute much towards the analysis and understanding of what may happen in such situations. As has been shown, the characteristics of basic political concepts have to be recognized when dealing with transfers between Europe and the New World, the subject of this meeting. Comparative analyses, such as conceptual transfers from western to Asian peoples, will both contribute to and profit from bringing together the methods of conceptual history and the history of translation in various times and settings.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of the opening lecture delivered by Melvin Richter at the VII International Conference of the History of Concepts: Transatlantic Dialogues, Rio de Janeiro, 3-7 July, 2004. This text has also appeared in *Contributions* 1(1):7-20.
2. Melvin Richter (1947), 136-74.
3. Michael Lackner et. al. (2001), 147.
4. See David Wright (2001), 235-255.
5. Benjamin Schwartz (1964).
6. Reinhart Koselleck (1996), 64.
7. Xiong Yuezhi (2001), 69-70.
8. For a valuable and detailed analysis of the linguistic problems of translating Western political and social concepts into Japanese, see Douglas R. Howland (2002), 61-93.
9. Douglas R. Howland (2002), 71.
10. Douglas R. Howland (2002), 72.
11. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956).
12. Steven Lukes (2003).
13. Douglas R. Howland (2003), 45-60.

14. See also the brief but penetrating statements on translation and communication by Kari Palonen (2004).
15. Douglas R. Howland (2003), 45.
16. This group of books includes Eric Cheyfitz (1991), Tejaswini Niranjana (1992),and. Vicente L. Rafael (1998).
17. Lydia H. Liu (1995); Naoki Sakai (1997); Frederic C. Schaffer (1998).
18. Lydia H. Liu (1995), xv-xvi.tanford, 1995), xv-xvi.

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