



Translation and Time: Exploring the Temporal Dimension of Cross-cultural Transfer

Presentation Details

Title of Paper:

Exploring the Origin of the Chinese Language: Zhang Binglin’s Translation and Application of Herbert Spencer’s Evolutionary Language Theory

Abstract:

This paper endeavors to capture the moment at the turn of the twentieth century when a Chinese historicist met a British evolutionist in language. During the 1890s Chinese intellectuals were mostly obsessed with the appeal for vernacularization in the agenda of language reform. In order to counterbalance the call for alphabetic writing and in particular Liang Qichao’s (梁啟超, 1873—1929) Chinese version of “genbun-itchi” movement (言文一致, convergence of speech and writing), Zhang Binglin (章炳麟, 1869—1936), with Zeng Guangquan (曾廣銓, 1871—1940) as the co-translator, serialized the rendition of Herbert Spencer’s (1820—1903) two essays, “Progress: Its Law and Cause” and “Manners and Fashion,” in the reformist journal *Changyan Bao* (昌言報, *Free Expression*) in 1898. Inspired by the British evolutionist’s idea that progress means “a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous,” Zhang Binglin attempted in the translation to make the rule for the uninterrupted development of the Chinese language by identifying the expression of feelings as the origin of language, placing Western philology into traditional Chinese terminology, and, above all, looking for the common “ancestral words” of classical Chinese language. Spencer’s imprint upon Zhang Binglin was such that it persisted in Zhang’s lifelong exploration of the origin of Chinese through his later enterprises, both cultural and political. Altogether, it showcases how the discourse of evolutionism was borrowed and bifurcated towards the making of modernity in China.

Author's Biography:

Huang Ruoze received his Bachelor's and Master's Degrees (2012 and 2015, respectively) in English Language and Literature from the Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China, Beijing. His Bachelor's dissertation deals with Yan Fu's work *Tianyan lun* (天演論) and the modern transformation of Chinese language, while my Master's dissertation is focused on Arthur Waley's translation of *Shijing* (The Book of Songs). From 2015 onwards, Huang started to be studying as a PhD student at the Department of Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, under the guidance of Professor Lawrence Wang-chi Wong. Currently, his main interest concerns the relationship between translation and the rise of vernacular Chinese language since the nineteenth century.