

# Book Reviews

*The Organization of Distance: Poetry, Translation, Chineseness.* By Lucas Klein. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 298 pages. ISBN 9789004375376.

Lucas Klein's work, in this book and elsewhere, embodies translation. He traverses gaps that seem unbridgeable to many — between China and the West, modern and premodern, literary theory and translation studies, sinology and comparative literature. In addition to his acclaimed translations of contemporary poets like Xi Chuan 西川 and Mang Ke 芒克, Klein has established himself as one of the most lucid and provocative scholars of China-related translation to appear in the last two decades. His essay “Our Daily Bread” (2018) examines a single word, *mantou* 饅頭, to present a mini-course on the problems of equivalence in translation. His article “Strong and Weak Interpretations in Translation Chinese Poetry” (2017) provides a field-defining framework for understanding the varying distances we attempt to bridge in translation. His work on such varied topics as Nobel Laureate Mo Yan 莫言, translator Burton Watson, and Tang-dynasty (618–907) poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 are all compelling contributions to disparate subfields as well as to translation studies.

*The Organization of Distance* synthesizes many of Klein's interests into one coherent thesis. Stated simply, this is: translation is not only something done *to* Chinese poetry, but *through* it as well (22, 233). That is, the “Chineseness” of Chinese poetry is the result of ongoing processes of nativizing and foreignizing source materials that come from abroad or from China's own long history. Translation, according to this framework, occurs along two main continuums: sources and processes. Sources may be foreign (requiring horizontal translation) or historical (requiring vertical translation). Processes may seek to adapt the source text to the norms of the target culture (nativizing) or to render the source text's differences visible in the target culture (foreignizing). This theoretical framework allows Klein to deconstruct the idea of an essentialized “Chineseness” that exists in isolation from temporal change and intercultural influence, an idea that has been promoted at various times by both Chinese and foreign actors.

The core of the book, in which Klein applies this framework, is comprised of five chapters, divided into two parts. Chapters 1 and 2 are focused on modernist poets Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000) and Yang Lian 楊煉 (b. 1955), while Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the emergence of classical regulated verse (*lüshi* 律詩) in the late 480s and its use by Tang poets Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) and Li Shangyin (813–858). In itself, this combination of modern and premodern materials is a commendably bold move. The risk in combining materials from both periods is to make sweeping generalizations or fail to acknowledge the historical situatedness of the poems. Klein avoids this by grounding each chapter in detailed close readings of six to eight individual poems, sometimes devoting entire paragraphs to the problems posed by a single word. His readings are invariably sensitive, unflappably bold, and unmistakably erudite. Though there are a few missteps in the premodern chapters, we should commend the ambition.

Klein's major thesis, that translation happens *through* Chinese poetry as well as to it, is on its firmest footing in the modern chapters. Here we have abundant evidence of what Bian and Yang (themselves both translators) thought they were doing in both local and global contexts. Bian wrote poems that he called simultaneously “Europeanized” (*Ouhua* 歐化) and “antiquitized” (*guhua* 古化)—integrating native and foreign elements into a powerfully coherent whole that forced Chinese poetics to confront the estrangement of its own past. Bian's hybrid classical-vernacular formalism distinguished him from contemporaries like Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931), who attempted a wholesale import of western Romanticism. Yang consciously drew on Ezra Pound's “ideogrammic method” (itself loosely based on a misunderstanding of Chinese writing) to compose an ethnography of Chinese writing that places different cultures in paratactic juxtaposition (109). Yang's ideogrammic epics, such as *Concentric Circles* and *Yi*, look so deeply at the foreignness of China's distant past that they invert to become investigations of the political present. His “ethnography of the present alienates [the present] from itself by translating that present into the past” (95). In both cases, Klein relies on the poets' abundant paratextual writings to convincingly argue for the centrality of translation to modern Chinese literature, and then traces the dynamics of this theme of translation.

Premodern literature is a more difficult object, however. It emerges from a world at farther remove from our own. There is far less premodern

material (including paratextual) that survives, forcing anyone writing on it to greater degrees of speculation. Moreover, the poets under consideration in Chapters 4 and 5—Du Fu and Li Shangyin—were not multilingual translators like Bian and Yang, but Tang literati who worked exclusively in classical Chinese and never practiced or theorized on translation. For these reasons, *The Organization of Distance*'s premodern chapters are less amenable to being integrated into the book's thesis on translation.

Chapter 3 is on regulated verse, often considered to be the paradigmatic form of classical Chinese poetry because it uses a unique feature of Chinese (its tones) as its organizing principle. This chapter is an attempt to pursue the theoretical implications of tonal prosody's probable foreign origins. As proposed by Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 in 1934 and refined by Tsu-lin Mei and Victor Mair in 1991, the very idea to sort Chinese characters into two tonal classes and make their alteration the basis of poetry likely comes from attempts to approximate the Indic meters of Buddhist chants in the last decades of the fifth century CE. Klein takes this well-grounded hypothesis and pushes it further. Regulated verse did not just have *foreign origins*, but retained palpable *foreign associations* that poets over the next three centuries would occasionally “reactivate,” conveying a kind of “cultural unconscious” (128). Klein argues that it was for this reason, for example, that proto-nationalist and anti-Buddhist Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) disdained regulated verse.<sup>1</sup> The foreign associations only wore away in the late eighth century.

The next two chapters build on the possibilities opened up by regulated verse's supposed foreign associations in the Tang. Chapter 4 argues that it was Du Fu who “nativized” the form by writing regulated verses “about the strength of the literary canon and the continued relevance of Chinese antiquity” (173) and series that symbolize the process of nativization (185). Chapter 5 then argues that Li Shangyin's themes of miscommunication are an “exploitation of form [that] draws so much attention to itself that it ends up estranging and re-foreignizing” the regulated verse form that Du Fu had nativized (193).

The problem with this premodern section is that its fundamental premise is a flawed one: there is no evidence that regulated verse retained any trace of foreignness in the Tang dynasty. In fact, much evidence suggests that it became a widely accepted, “nativized” form long before Du Fu. The earliest writers of regulated verse were indeed Buddhist practitioners at the Southern Qi 齊 (479–502) court, and I find convincing

the hypothesis that they established the form in 488–489 to approximate the euphonic effects of *śloka* meter in Buddhist chants. But the popularity of regulated verse spread quickly. For the Qi and the following Liang 梁 (502–557) dynasties, at least fourteen poets have surviving poems that follow tonal regulation. Two of the major poets of the mid- to late-sixth century, Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581) and Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), wrote large amounts of regulated verse, representing seventeen and fifty-seven percent of their respective extant poetry collections.<sup>2</sup> Court poets continued working in this genre into the early Tang. Writing regulated verse became part of the Tang’s official civil service examination sometime between 679 and 684 CE (about three decades before Du Fu was born), at which point the genre flourished, and a rulebook and anthology soon appeared.<sup>3</sup> Two early seventh-century poets, Shen Quanqi 沈佺期 (d. ca. 713) and Song Zhiwen 宋之問 (ca. 656–712), helped popularize regulated verse well before Du Fu.

Another shaky bit of evidence for regulated verse’s perceived foreignness is Klein’s hypothesis that recent-style poetry (*jintishi* 近體詩, a kind of regulated verse) would have had an “immediately audible” difference from other poetry because it was chanted or sung in a manner influenced by Buddhist song (139). The scholar cited in support of this point, Ren Bantang 任半塘, indeed wrote that recent-style poetry could be a “sung poetry” (*shengshi* 聲詩), but he did not mean that *all* recent-style poetry was sung and that other forms were always recited in a different manner. He was referring to a group of 154 specific tunes to which poems mostly written in regulated meters were set, which would gradually evolve into the genre of *ci* 詞 (song lyrics) by the tenth century—tonal regulation in itself does not mean that a poem would have been sung.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is little basis for the idea that regulated verse had an auditory foreignness in the Tang.

Another problematic aspect of the premodern section is the fact that Klein occasionally reads more polysemy into a poem than it merits, especially in the Li Shangyin chapter. While Li’s difficulty and hermeticism are well-known, Klein goes a step further than other critics. For example, on pages 216–218, the author analyzes the first couplet of Li’s “Yesterday” (*Zuori* 昨日). In Klein’s translation, this reads:

昨日紫姑神去也 Yesterday this Purple Maiden Goddess went away  
今朝青鳥使來賒 This morning the bluegreen bird should have come instead

Klein describes the multiple meanings of the couplet's final character, *she* 賒, as "buy or sell on credit," "delayed," and a particle "indicating completion," saying that there is a "lingering multiplicity" here which "reasserts the poetic, anti-prosaic element of the couplet, and again language splits in two." But in fact, *she* is definitely used here in parallel with *ye* 也 as a final particle, albeit one that indicates the imperative mood, interchangeable with *sha* 啞.<sup>5</sup> The line should then be translated as "Come this morning, you messenger bluegreen bird." This also fits much better with the *aubade* theme of the poem that Klein rightly points out later. I do not mean to say that Klein's analyses are invariably misleading, even in this poem: his exegesis of lines 4–6 brings alive the interplay of sight and sound, motion and rest, celestial and terrestrial imagery that makes the poem such a powerful one. However, to take these lines as an allegory of ambiguity and miscommunication is to stretch them beyond their limits.

Nevertheless, *The Organization of Distance* offers inspired readings of many individual poems. Du Fu's "Gazing at the Mountain" (*Wang yue* 望嶽) comes under especially good treatment, as Klein contrasts the poem's internal dynamics (parallelism, rhyme, prosody) with the moralizing commentaries heaped upon it, and shows how the attempt to provide a source for every character in Du Fu's poetry is part of a nationalistic construction of a single, unbroken "Chinese tradition" (155–162). The reading of Li Shangyin's "Opulent Zither" (*Jin se* 錦瑟), its overabundance of meaningful references, and the way it has been understood as an *ars poetica* is also illuminating (186–193). The problem is that if regulated verse no longer had foreign associations at this point, then the main theses to which these brilliant readings are put fall apart. The dynamics here are not the foreignization and nativization of translation. Instead, we are left merely with erudite commentary on Tang poems.

But *The Organization of Distance*'s merits certainly outweigh its faults. The introduction's theoretical framework will surely be a contribution to translation studies, the modern chapters are as astute as they are powerful, and the conclusion on the role of transformation in the construction of Chineseness carefully articulates the political implications of the book. Even in the premodern chapters, when we remove the problematic framework of regulated verse's foreignness, we still have provocative readings of more than a dozen Tang poems, summarizing and challenging traditional commentaries while making reference to *Hamlet*, Italo Calvino, François Cheng, Theodor Adorno, and Gustaf Sobin. More scholars would do well to work as ambitiously as Klein in this book, to

write across the gaps of China and the West, modern and premodern, sinology and comparative literature—gaps that can only be bridged by translation.

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## Notes

- 1 Han Yu's extant poetry collection suggests that this disdain was not as strong as it seems: it contains 54 regulated octaves, 107 regulated quatrains, and 14 *pailü*, amounting to 175 poems, or 41 percent of his entire collection.
- 2 Statistics come from Chen (2009, 35).
- 3 The precise date at which regulated verse became part of the exams is a matter of some scholarly dispute. For an overview of the various theories, including the tomb epitaph that fixes it to the date range given, see Tang (2014, 22–41). The early guidebook of regulated verse is Cui Rong 崔融 (653–706), *Tangchao xinding shiti* 唐朝新定詩體 [Newly established poetic style of the Tang court]. The anthology is *Zhuying xueshi ji* 珠英學士集 [Anthology of the Pearl Scholars], on which see Jia (1996).
- 4 Ren (1982, 57) gives specific examples of regulated verse that would not have been sung.
- 5 See *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, “*She*” 賒, definition 16.

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