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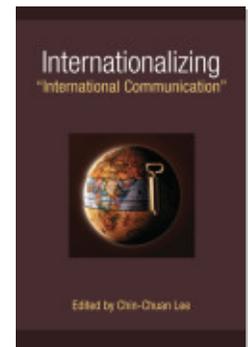
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Translation, Communication, and East-West Understanding

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As human beings, we are all born in medias res, that is, in a particular social, historical, and political environment with a particular language and a culture already in place before and after us. That pre-given environment and our upbringing determine the native language we speak, our social customs and cultural values, our basic points of view, our horizon of understanding, and our sense of belonging or identity. Such predetermined elements obtain in individual lives as well as in social fabrics, in the positions taken and choices made by individuals, groups, communities, and nations. That is to say, all human beings start out to be terribly parochial. The wonderful thing about being human, however, lies precisely in the capability to transcend our self-enclosures on the individual level and to go beyond the social enclaves on the level of communities and nations. Parochialism and cosmopolitanism, nationalist tendencies and cross-cultural openness are forces that contend constantly, and human life is always a process of negotiation that tries to keep a delicate balance.

It is almost "natural" to tip the balance toward the parochial, while the cultivation of a cosmopolitan spirit and openness of the mind requires a lot of effort. Border-crossing in languages and cultures is indeed a distinctly human act, an indication of a person's level of education and ability, and therefore of his or her social standing. This is true not only of a person in our time, but has been true almost since time immemorial. Those who

can translate different languages and thereby help others get out of their linguistic and cultural cocoons are endowed with a special talent, and were even thought of in earlier times as in possession of some sort of a magic power. Translation has always served to make communication possible. If we consider the Greek assimilation of elements of Egyptian culture, the Greek and Roman interrelations, the contribution of Arabic scholarship to the Latin Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the introduction of Buddhist texts from India to China and East Asia, we realize that translation was happening very early in human history, and that it has always played a significant role in the expansion of knowledge, the conceptualization of the world, and the development of human civilization.

The notion of the world has developed gradually as human knowledge increases. In ancient times, the idea of the world was limited geographically, linguistically, and culturally. In the part of the world we now call East Asia, the concept of *tian xia* or "all under heaven" was a Sinocentric world with the Chinese language and culture as major sources of reference, which hardly had any knowledge of or contact with Europe. The early European concept of the world, on the other hand, was largely influenced by the biblical understanding of how Noah and his descendants populated the different parts of the postdiluvian earth. The medieval European *mappa mundi* or the T-O map had only a very rough idea of the world with Europe on the left side, Africa on the right, and Asia on top of the T. What was thought of as Asia was a vague idea of India. It was Marco Polo (1254?–1325?) in the late thirteenth century with his famous travelogue that expanded European knowledge of the world and provided information for many of the place names and their locations in the East. For example, the well-known Catalan map (1375) evidently used Marco Polo's book as a major source of information. As John Larner (1999, p. 105) remarks, Marco Polo gave Europe "an amazing gift, a geographical treatise of a vast extent and complexity, an unparalleled opening of horizons." Marco Polo left Venice as a young man, following his father and uncle to China as merchants. The China he came to know was under the rule of Kublai Khan as emperor of the Yuan dynasty, namely a Mongolian empire that provided him with very little opportunity to get in contact with the majority Han Chinese and their culture. That may explain why there are so many things that modern readers identify as typically Chinese—for example, Confucianism, writing brush and calligraphy, tea drinking, chopsticks, women's bound feet, the Great Wall of China—are hardly observed and commented on by Marco Polo, or not mentioned at all in his book. Some have thus questioned the

veracity of his account (Wood, 1995; Yang, 1999). For Europe, then, as Larner argues, Marco Polo's significant contribution lies in the discovery of the world, the increase of geographical knowledge to include East Asia.

For cultural encounters between the East and the West, it took another three hundred years to start in earnest when Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), another Italian, went to China as a Christian missionary in the late sixteenth century. When Ricci and the other Jesuit missionaries arrived in China of the late Ming dynasty, they found a country with a long history, a thriving economy, a sophisticated culture, and a rich intellectual tradition. The Jesuits realized that they could not simply declare that the Chinese had no culture, offer to teach them the spiritual truth of the revealed religion, and convert tens of millions of them into Christians overnight. So they adopted the so-called accommodation approach in their missionary work: they learned the Chinese language and tried to find concepts and terms in ancient Chinese writings that might be used to translate Christian ideas, and presented themselves as learned scholars from the West, trying to impress the Chinese emperor and the literati-officials with the latest European science and technology. Ricci wrote his Christian doctrine in Chinese, *Tianzhu shiyi* or the *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, and translated the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese in collaboration with Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), a high-ranking official at the Ming court and one of the most important Christian converts. The Jesuit "accommodation approach" and the translation activities they engaged in certainly had a religious agenda and ultimately aimed to convert the Chinese to Christianity; at the same time, however, these were also significant efforts at cross-cultural understanding at a time when the East and the West first came into contact and tried to find some common ground for understanding and communication.

The Jesuit fathers also introduced Chinese culture, particularly Confucianism, to Europe. In numerous letters, treatises, and pamphlets, China became quite well known among European intellectuals through the mediation of Jesuit missionaries, whose interpretation of Confucian moral and political philosophy made a strong impact in Europe, drawing attention from such leading philosophers as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Voltaire. If Marco Polo initiated an "unparalleled opening of horizons" in medieval Europe, Matteo Ricci and his followers certainly further opened those horizons and deepened European understanding of China and the East. In material culture, imported Chinese goods such as porcelain, silk, wallpaper, furniture, and the art of gardening already created a craze for

things Chinese in Europe during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, an infatuation with what was thought to be Chinese in European imagination, or what is known as chinoiserie, which, as Hugh Honour (1961, pp. 7–8) argues, "may be defined as the expression of the European vision of Cathay."

The significant presence of China in Europe, however, was not limited just in material culture and popular imagination, but also, and perhaps more important, in the area of cultural influence and social implications. The Jesuits' positive representation of China as a well-governed country, based on natural theology, helped many European thinkers of the Enlightenment to reflect on secular culture, meritocracy, and civil service based on a system of civil examination. The secular orientation of Confucianism suggested to Enlightenment philosophers the separation of church and the state, an important concept for the modern nation-state. The examination system through which learned scholars were recruited and assigned government offices was extremely attractive to intellectuals in Europe, where social mobility was severely limited under the hereditary system of aristocratic lineage. As Adolf Reichwein (1925, p. 26) argued many years ago, the eighteenth century was the time of the first "metaphysical contact" between China and the West, and philosophers such as Leibniz and Voltaire found in China and Confucian philosophy "a vision of happy living such as their own optimism had already dreamed of." Indeed, Reichwein (1925, p. 77) declares, "Confucius became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Only through him could it find a connection link with China." The enthusiasm about China and Confucianism can be seen in Leibniz's (1994, p. 51) spirited proposal that the Europeans "need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology." For Leibniz (1994, p. 45), it was almost a divine plan that China and Europe should have developed such different but equally great civilizations at the opposite ends of the world "so that as the most civilized and distant peoples stretch out their arms to each other, those in between may gradually be brought to a better way of life." Thus, with very different agendas and ideological orientations, the Jesuit missionaries and the Enlightenment philosophers all believed in, and promoted, mutual understanding between the East and the West.

That cosmopolitan spirit, the idea that different peoples at great distance from one another with very different cultures and histories can understand each other and be brought together to form a common human-

ity, had a major influence in eighteenth-century European thinking. For the Enlightenment philosophers, the positive image of China as a country built on reason rather than religious faith had important implications for the secularization of European life. The Catholic Church, however, saw the secularizing tendency as a threat and did not appreciate the Jesuit presentation of a pagan country and a pagan culture in such a positive light. Shortly after Ricci's death, a heated debate known as the "Chinese rites controversy" flared up within the Catholic Church in the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, in which the doctrinaire purists condemned the Jesuit "accommodation approach" for giving too many concessions to the language and culture of a pagan people. Whether Chinese converts to Christianity should be allowed to continue performing the rites of "ancestor worship," or paying homage to Confucius in the Confucian temples, became hotly contended issues. There was also the terminology debate, namely, whether the Chinese language could have terms to translate the Christian concepts of God, angels, and the other spiritual truths. In his study of that rites controversy, the French sinologist Jacques Gernet presents the purist argument that the Christian spiritual concepts and terms are indeed untranslatable into a pagan language like Chinese and, more fundamentally, they are not even conceivable in the Chinese mind. The Chinese converts had no real understanding of the truth of Christianity, and "where they appear to speak of our God and his Angels," as Gernet (1985, p. 33) quotes the Franciscan father Antonio de Caballero saying, "they are merely aping the Truth." Niccolò Longobardi, another purist opposed to Ricci's views, claimed that "the Chinese have never known any spiritual substance distinct from matter" (Gernet, 1985, p. 203). Eventually, the Jesuit "accommodation approach" was considered unacceptable, and the use of Chinese terms for translating God and other such concepts was forbidden; "the terms Heaven (*tian*) and Sovereign on High had to be condemned," as Gernet (1985, pp. 31–32) observes, "by Pope Clement XI in 1704 and 1715." What comes out of the Chinese rites controversy is thus a dichotomous view of China and Europe that sees the East and the West in a set of opposite concepts, terms, categories, and values.

Such a dichotomous view created in "the missionary beginnings of European sinology," as Haun Saussy (1993, p. 36) argues, still influences modern Western views of China. For example, seeing the Chinese rites controversy as a cultural conflict, Jacques Gernet (1985, p. 3) basically agrees with the Catholic purists and traces all the difficulties the missionaries encountered in China to a fundamental difference—"not only of different intellectual

traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought." In his idea of the distinct "modes of thought," Gernet was probably influenced by Marcel Granet's (1884–1940) *Pensée chinoise* (1934), which described the "Chinese way of thinking" as fundamentally different from that of the Europeans and was in turn influenced by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's (1857–1939) concept of the collective *mentalité*, which, according to Lévy-Bruhl, each people of the world had as a distinct "way of thinking." Gernet not only agrees with the purist view of the East-West dichotomy, but he gives that dichotomy a metaphysical foundation on the level of thinking and language, for he emphasizes the fundamental difference between China and the West as a sharp contrast between the Chinese and the Indo-European languages. "Now, a model of a language more different from that of Greek, Latin or Sanskrit cannot be imagined," says Gernet. He describes Chinese as a language without proper grammatical distinctions and therefore without the capability to express abstract notions, for "there was no word to denote existence in Chinese, nothing to convey the concept of being or essence, which in Greek is so conveniently expressed by the noun *ousia* or the neuter *to on*. Consequently, the notion of being, in the sense of an eternal and constant reality, above and beyond that which is phenomenal, was perhaps more difficult to conceive, for a Chinese" (Gernet, 1985, p. 241). For Gernet (1985, p. 244), language and the mode of thinking are interconnected, and the sharp contrast with Chinese "confirms Benveniste's analysis: the structure of Indo-European languages seems to have helped the Greek world—and thereafter the Christian one—to conceive the idea of realities that are transcendental and immutable as opposed to realities which are perceived by the senses and which are transitory."

Here we find a number of themes that are later picked up by other Western scholars, notably François Jullien, who in his many works reiterated in different ways the same dichotomy between Greece and China. He argues that "China presents a case study through which to contemplate Western thought from the outside" (Jullien, 2000, p. 9). This is his invariably repeated argument, which comes out rather clearly in the title of his book *Penser d'un Dehors (la Chine)*, in which he declares that the only way for an European to "go beyond the Greek framework" is to take a voyage that is "China-bound," because Chinese is the "only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European" (Jullien & Marchaisse, 2000, p. 39). Jonathan Spence (1998, p. 145) once remarked that to set up "mutually reinforcing images and perceptions" of an exotic China "seems to have been a particularly

French genius." That kind of exoticism, however, is certainly not limited to the French. Developing further the ideas of mentalities and modes of thinking, the American scholar Richard Nisbett (2003, pp. xvi–xvii) sets up a sharp contrast between all Westerners with all Asians: "Human cognition is not everywhere the same. First, that members of different cultures differ in their 'metaphysics,' or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world. Second, that the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly. Third, that the thought processes are of a piece with beliefs about the nature of the world: People use the cognitive tools that seem to make sense—given the sense they make of the world." In such a dichotomous view, all "Westerners" and all "Asians" think differently between them, but within the West or Asia, people think uniformly in one particular way. That is indeed another feature of the East-West dichotomy, namely, differences between cultures are overemphasized, while differences within the same culture are minimized. The absurdity of this particular view lies in the incredibly large concept of homogenous "Westerners" and "Asians," who are neatly set up as opposites without internal differences. Even more influential theoretically is the general tendency in contemporary Western scholarship toward an overemphasis on cultural differences and distinct identities. We may think of Jacques Derrida's (1976, p. 90) idea of *différance* and his claim that logocentrism is exclusively Western, or Michel Foucault's (1973, p. xv) image of China as an incomprehensible *heterotopia*.[1] All these constitute an intellectual environment that makes East-West comparative studies difficult, if not impossible, and if there is any effort at comparison at all, the emphasis is likely to fall on their differences much more than on any kind of similarities, shared values, or affinities.

Like the doctrinaire purists in the "Chinese rites controversy," some modern scholars view the Chinese as materialist without spiritual understanding, their mode of thinking concrete rather than abstract, and their outlook immanent rather than transcendental. Of course, not every sinologist subscribes to such a dichotomous view, but some do and they have exerted a noticeable influence on the way China and the Chinese are understood in the modern West. Again, like the doctrinaire purists in the "Chinese rites controversy," those who see the East and the West as opposites emphasize the untranslatability of concepts and terms, and the incommensurability of cultural values and ideas. "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." These lines by Rudyard Kipling, the poet of the British Empire, are sometimes cited out of context to articulate the idea of cultural incommensurability between the East and the West. To

quote Gernet (1985, p. 239) again, in the Chinese language it is "so difficult to express how the abstract and the general differ fundamentally, and not just occasionally, from the concrete and the particular" that it became, he declares, "an embarrassment for all those who had, in the course of history, attempted to translate into Chinese concepts formed in inflected languages such as Greek, Latin or Sanskrit. Thus, linguistic structures inevitably pose the question of modes of thought." Gernet made this claim despite the fact that Buddhist sutras in Sanskrit were translated into Chinese many centuries ago, but probably he would regard all Chinese translations of Sanskrit as nothing but distortions and corruptions, in which the pure essence of Buddhism was forever lost. This is a clear example of how those who see East and West as opposites would deny the possibility of translation in spite of historical and textual evidence, and how the dichotomous view powerfully influences their self-imposed "mode of thinking." Typically, the concept of untranslatability is a denial of communication that flies in the face of historical facts and textual evidence, for the purist insistence on an unadulterated essence is not concerned with the actual translation of texts, not even the actual cases of untranslatable words or terms, but the impossibility of understanding and communication on the level of conceptualization, the incommensurability of mentalities or mental categories.

Among modern critical theories, Thomas Kuhn is probably the most famous in proposing the incommensurability of different paradigms, which made a great impact on the study of philosophy, social sciences, and the humanities in general far beyond his original purpose of discussing the historical changes in science, or what he calls scientific revolutions. Kuhn argues that scientific revolution is a rupture, a complete breakthrough, the rise of a new paradigm that displaces the old, and that different paradigms are totally incommensurate. Scientists operating under different paradigms do not speak the same language; indeed, the paradigmatic change is so great that "after a revolution," says Kuhn (1970, p. 135), "scientists work in a different world." For quite some time in the 1970s and after, Kuhn's concept of radical incommensurability was borrowed to discuss cultures and traditions and became highly influential. Such borrowing had certain consequences that were not all that positive, because it fed the dichotomous view and, as Lindsay Waters (2001, p. 144) puts it, offered the "justification for a resurgent tribalism." In the humanities and social sciences, Kuhn's widely circulated idea became "a perversion of incommensurability," "the key idea that legitimates an identity politics that insists on the impossibility of thinking across groups." In its most militant form, "incommensura-

bility legitimates a blinkered, absolutist, nonpluralist relativism" (Waters, 2001, p. 145). Such social consequences are certainly unintended, but even for the history of science, the concept of incommensurability is surely an exaggeration, because scientists working under different paradigms, for example, the Ptolemaic geocentric view and the Copernican heliocentric view, could quarrel over and debate important issues precisely because they understood what the other side was proposing as the center of the universe. Debate is also communication, and it certainly presupposes a language in which different views and their very difference can be expressed.

In his later years, Kuhn retreated from his concept of radical incommensurability famously proposed in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, but he still insisted on the concept of untranslatability. He admits that when scientists working under different paradigms meet, they may indeed share most terms and much of the same language, but they understand certain terms they use very differently. On the one hand, Kuhn (2000, p. 36) allows a common language, and the problem of understanding is thus reduced and limited. "Only for a small subgroup of (usually interdefined) terms and for sentences containing them do problems of translatability arise." Thus, incommensurability is localized as a linguistic problem, "a claim about language, about meaning change." On the other hand, however, the semantic change of terms can be so drastic that Kuhn (2000, p. 93) considers old and new terms to be untranslatable. "Incommensurability thus becomes a sort of untranslatability," he says, "localized to one or another area in which two lexical taxonomies differ." But the difficulty of translation, as Hilary Putnam (1990, p. 127) argues, "does *not* mean that there is no 'common language' in which one can say what the theoretical terms of both theories refer to." As a concept, untranslatability is a pure construct, for in reality translation, however difficult, partial, or imperfect it may be, has always worked to make human communication possible.

Translation does not have to engage two languages, because even understanding in the same language, as George Steiner (1975, p. 47) argues, is already translation, while inter-lingual translation is just a "special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language." Steiner uses the term "translation" in a broad sense to mean any cognitive or communicative act. "Any model of communication is at the same time a model of trans-lation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance" (Steiner, 1975, p. 45). Translation across languages can provide a model because it most clearly poses questions of communication. "On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly

intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually . . . *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*" (Steiner, 1975, p. 47). Thus the purist concept of untranslatability is a denial of communication, a concept that pulls back toward parochialism, that is, toward the "natural" tendencies of inertia and ethnocentrism. "The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign," as Antoine Berman (1992, p. 4) argues, "is diametrically opposed to the ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole." Indeed, the concept of untranslatability is based on nothing but that narcissistic desire of cultural and linguistic purity, the ethnocentric illusion that one's own language and culture are unique, superior to, and incomparable with any other.

In a narrow and restricted sense, we all know that certain words and expressions may indeed be untranslatable because what exists in one language may not exist or may not have a close equivalent in another. Many idioms, puns, set phrases, jokes, and technical terms are in this sense untranslatable, but that technical problem often finds solution in transliterations and loan words. This is in fact not the unique problem with translation, for the growth of language itself has always been a case of catachresis, that is, a process of borrowing from the existing vocabulary to signify what is new and unnamed, what Steiner calls "transfer of significance." This is true especially of abstract notions and concepts. As Giambattista Vico (1999, p. 76) observes, the "property of the human mind is that, when people can form no idea of distant and unfamiliar things, they judge them by what is present and familiar." He further points out "the fact that in all languages most expressions for inanimate objects employ metaphors derived from the human body and its parts, or from human senses and emotions" (Vico, 1999, p. 159). This seems to be the common principle of etymology and semantic growth in all languages, that is, to use a familiar term to signify something unfamiliar, based on some kind of a relation between the two, the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar. In an ancient Chinese text, the appended words to the *Book of Changes*, we find a remarkably similar formulation of the same principle, where it is said that the ancient king Pao Xi invented hexagrams by observing the configurations of heaven and earth and by imitating the pattern of traces left by birds and animals on the ground. "By taking hints near at hand from his body and farther away from external things, he created hexagrams to make

the virtue of gods comprehensible and the nature of all things known in signs" ("Zhouyi zhengyi" [The correct meaning of the Book of Changes], 1980, p. 86). This is later understood as the way in which Chinese scripts are created as well. That is to say, language and its vocabulary are largely metaphorical; they grow by borrowing from their own stock, as it were, by transferring the meaning of one word to another. Words are taken out on loan not only between languages, as in translation, but within the same language as well. That is the reason why George Steiner, as we have seen above, emphatically asserts that "*inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*" (emphasis in original). Understanding, translation, communication—all these acts of cognition are efforts to make sense of an original at a remove, to interpret something from the past in our present moment, and therefore acts of using one expression to signify another, but not the purist fantasy of reproduction of the original.

In a famous essay on translation, Walter Benjamin (1973, p. 70) emphatically states that "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them." Benjamin is speaking on a metaphysical level rather than the level of technical considerations of translation as practice. Deeply rooted in Jewish mysticism as well as German philosophical idealism, Benjamin conceives of translation not as a mere rendering of an original foreign work, but as the attempt to articulate what no work in the original can articulate, what he calls the intention of all languages or the "pure language." As Berman (1992, p. 7) comments, Benjamin's idea of the task of the translator "would consist of a search, beyond the buzz of empirical languages, for the 'pure language' which each language carries within itself as its messianic echo. Such an aim, which has nothing to do with the ethical aim, is rigorously metaphysical in the sense that it platonically searches a 'truth' beyond natural languages." In Benjamin's own words, it is this "pure language" that links all languages together. "Languages are not strangers to one another," he remarks, "but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" (Benjamin, 1973, p. 72). What all languages want to express is a deep intention, "the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structure—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions" (Benjamin, 1973, p. 74). To put it in a clear way, Benjamin insists on the translatability of languages because human communication is rooted in the very nature of all

languages and their shared intentionality. To affirm translatability is thus to affirm that things, values, and ideas in different individuals, social groups and cultural traditions are essentially commensurable, that it is possible to have understanding and communication across barriers of languages and cultures. In making comparisons and finding equivalents between what is alien and what is familiar, and in bringing what is foreign to our own range of knowledge, translation expands our minds and bridges linguistic and cultural differences.

But when the differences are between the East and the West, is translation still possible? My argument so far has of course tried to give a definitely positive answer, but as long as the dichotomous view of cultural incommensurability and the overemphasis on cultural difference exert a considerable influence on scholarly discourses, East-West studies still face great challenges. As we move into an increasingly globalized world in the twenty-first century, however, things are changing rapidly, the physical as well as the psychological distance between the East and the West is diminishing, and East-West studies are emerging as a burgeoning new field of study in social sciences and the humanities. The critique of Eurocentrism and any other kind of ethnocentrism has prepared the way for a truly open horizon and the possibility, as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006, p. xvi) argues, of a new kind of cosmopolitanism, a strongly committed moral sense "that each human being has responsibilities to every other." The social and intellectual climate now seems to have changed favorably for East-West studies. Translation, as I said earlier, has always worked in various degrees to make human communication possible, and in our world today with East Asian economy and culture on the rise, East-West studies are drawing more attention in scholarship internationally, and may finally have a chance to gain better cross-cultural understanding and communication. The challenge of acquiring adequate linguistic skills and in-depth knowledge of both Eastern and Western traditions is quite daunting, and it constitutes another challenge for engaging in East-West studies. Given such challenges, it is certainly no easy task for any scholar to acquire sufficient linguistic skills and cultural knowledge to engage in serious work in East-West studies, but that is definitely a task worthy of our effort, a new area of study to which we shall feel proud to make significant contributions.

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NOTE

1. I have argued against such exoticization of China and East-West dichotomies in my works: see Zhang (1992) for a discussion on Derrida's critique of logocentrism; Zhang (1998, chapter 1) for a discussion on Foucault's idea of China as *heterotopia*.