

Translating the Humanities? The Fate of English as an Academic Language in China

Leo Tak-hung CHAN
Lingnan University, Hong Kong
chanleo@LN.edu.hk

Academic research is always circumscribed by language, and in the humanities one wonders how such a thing as universal knowledge can be transmitted beyond language. How does a world in which English is the academic *lingua franca* impact the humanities scholar? It has been pointed out that even science is far from the universal, neutral discourse that it is often assumed to be. How much more so it is for the humanities, which deal with more context-restricted and “personal” issues. Can the humanities scholar survive in a world in which the prevalent and accepted academic language is English, and not one’s mother tongue? And how does translation enter this picture?

Given the linguistic options open to non-Anglophone scholars, there are essentially three categories of academic writings in “translational” terms: (1) untranslated publications in languages other than English, to which Anglophones can have no access; (2) research translated into English by someone who serves as a mediator between the original text and the readers of the translation; and (3) research communicated in English, although the primary materials in another language have actually undergone some kind of translation by the author concerned. In terms of volume, the first category is produced by those who refuse to translate, preferring the indigenous to the universal. The second is by nature collaborative, with a monolingual author being helped by a bilingual translator. The third involves a bilingual author who also plays the role of a “self-translator,” who has emerged prominently in today’s academia. Specific reference will be made in this paper to the shifting importance this third category has assumed in Chinese scholarship in the last decade but the main focus will be on the challenges faced by all non-Anglophone humanities scholars in attempting to publish in English.

Leo Tak-hung CHAN is Professor and Head of the Department of Translation, Lingnan University, Hong Kong. His articles have appeared in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, *Perspectives*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *TTR*, *The Translator*, *Babel*, *META*, *Across Languages and Cultures*, *Linguistica Antverpiensia* and *Asian Folklore Studies*. He has authored or edited 20 books and special issues of journals, including: *One into Many: Translation and the Dissemination of Classical Chinese Literature* (2003; Rodopi Editions); *Twentieth-Century Chinese Translation Theory: Modes, Issues and Debates* (2004; John Benjamins), *Readers, Reading and Reception of Translated Prose Fiction in Chinese: Novel Encounters* (2010; St. Jerome Publishing).