

# The Intercivilizational Turn of Translation Studies: An Interview with Professor Douglas Robinson

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## Abstract:

In this interview, Professor Douglas Robinson discusses his new book *Exorcising Translation*, particularly its key term “the cofigurative regime of translation”. He borrowed this term from Sakai Naoki but gave it new significance, using it as a new framework to understand the mutual historical constitution of Asian and European civilizations. Professor Robinson wants to bridge the disconnect between Critical Translation Studies and more traditional Translation Studies, and help us see the value of CTS in enriching TS and comparative literature. He also discusses various issues including pseudotranslation and comparative literature.

**Key words:** Translation Studies, Critical Translation Studies, the intercivilizational turn, cofigurative regime of translation, *Exorcising Translation*

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Liu: Professor Robinson, thank you so much for agreeing to accept our interview. I would like to begin our interview by discussing your latest book *Exorcising Translation*, and then move on to other aspects of your contribution to Translation Studies, if that is fine. *Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation (OCCT)* asked me to write a review of *Exorcising Translation*, and I read it with great enthusiasm. I found it an extremely thought-provoking book on translation theory, and is very revolutionary in many ways. Could you tell us what inspired you to write this book?

Robinson: Actually I didn't originally write it as a book. It was part of a larger project that ended up being too long to publish. It took me a full year to figure

out how to split that project into two parts: the longer part as *Critical Translation Studies*, the shorter (with some new material added) as *Exorcising Translation*.

Liu: A key term in your book is “the cofigurative regime of translation”. As you noted, you borrowed it from the Japanese theorist Sakai Naoki. Yet in your book, you gave this term brand-new significance. Could you tell us about this term?

Robinson: Certainly. Sakai uses it in reference to the “creation” of Japan as a single coherent nation, and Japanese as a national language, in the late eighteenth century: “cofigurative” in the sense that there is a dialogue among a variety of partners, in this case Japanese, Chinese, and Western intellectuals, who collaboratively create a Japanese national culture and a national language through translation. Since that kind of national unity tends to be imposed on the multiplicity of a living community in order to restrict and contain variability, Sakai associates it with what he calls the regime of homolingual address: the belief that the native members of a given national culture “naturally” understand each other and find it impossible to understand foreigners. Since this is all an undesirable illusion for Sakai, he tends to treat the cofigurative regime of translation negatively. I am less inclined to condemn it. I see it as a generative impulse, and explore its functioning between “East” and “West”—in the circulation of ancient Chinese religion/philosophy through the dissident peripheries of Western thought, beginning in the early eighteenth century, and ultimately influencing and informing the move from Romanticism and Idealism through pragmatism and phenomenology to the rise of Heideggerian Occidentalism in China and elsewhere. I resist the notion that Asian and European civilizations are oil and water. I am interested in their *mutual historical constitution* through cofigurative regimes of translation.

Liu: To be honest, I was almost at the final part of the book when the meaning of this term dawned on me, when you wrote, “this is the critical shift engineered by Sakai’s keyword ‘cofiguration’: Orientalism is *cocreated*, in relationship”. Did you perhaps purposely put this clarification to the latter part of the book, so that the reader would have gathered its meaning from earlier examples?

Robinson: I wasn’t sure where to broach that definition, to be frank. I had it early in the book, at first, and tried it various other places, looking for the place where it would seem most intuitively correct. I hope it worked at the end!

Liu: Yes, it worked really well at the end! I felt reassured when that statement proved my earlier speculation of its meaning. On another matter, I found the structure of the book extremely intricate and ingenious. The first chapter lays out the theoretical foundation of the book. The second chapter offers a lengthy illustration of the way civilizational spells work by examining the influence of Nietzsche on Harold Bloom. Then the third chapter provides an analysis of an American scholar's attack on an American translation of the Chinese classics *Laozi*, and it brings us back to the issue of panicked Eurocentrism raised in the preface, and melts the whole book into an organic unity. Is this how you planned to structure the book?

Robinson: This was the structure that gradually emerged as I struggled with the problem of dividing 140,000 words into two separate monographs. I worried that the long chapter on Nietzsche and Bloom wouldn't really fit. It's about "civilizational spells," to be sure—Sakai's term for Orientalist prejudices against "Asian theorists" and other cross-over phenomena between Asia and Europe that seem counterintuitive due to dualistic Orientalist thinking—but there isn't much Asia *or* translation in it.

Liu: I am relieved to hear you say so, for I was worried that maybe I was missing your point somehow when reading that chapter. Although there isn't much Asia or translation in that chapter, the following chapter highlights the theme of the book, and the Nietzsche/ Bloom chapter suddenly made sense.

In this book, you proposed a new turn in Translation Studies, the Intercivilizational Turn. Do you think this new turn signifies the end of the Cultural Turn and thereby takes its place? Could you elaborate on this new turn?

Robinson: I'm not sure about "ends" and "replacements." The Cultural Turn still exists, in many scholars' work. The Social Turn is still going strong. The Cognitive Turn is just beginning to gather steam. I'm really arguing for an *addition* to the list of crucial turns in TS, not trying to reduce or restrict all TS to intercivilizational studies. I do think, though, that the debate over Eurocentrism, which has occasionally become quite heated on both sides, may be directing our attention to the intercivilizational *traffic* in TS—the circulation of Eastern ideas through Western thought and the circulation of Western ideas through Eastern thought. The idea that the West originates everything and China simply borrows and imitates it is extremely depressing to me. I love exploring ways in which Chinese thought has

powerfully influenced my own Western approaches to human social interactions—especially the fact that my somatic theory of culture, language, and translation, which seems so counterintuitive to Western thinkers who are not steeped (as I am) in German Romanticism, American pragmatism, and European phenomenology, is spelled out quite clearly in Laozi and Mengzi, and tends to be taken for granted by average Chinese people who don't know the intellectual history behind their assumptions.

Liu: Indeed. I was deeply impressed when you said you found your intellectual kin in Mengzi. This kind of border crossing is so essential for TS scholars and scholars of comparative literature.

On a methodological level, you mentioned in your book that the reason why people are haunted by civilizational spells, by an impulse to draw lines, between East and West, between self and others, is that boundaries have explanatory power. This is very incisive. Reflecting on my own academic writing, and many academic works I have read, I totally agree with your opinion. However, one still wonders what happens if we really let go of boundaries. How can we begin to discuss questions related to the East, if there is no “East” to begin with?

Robinson: I don't think I advocate letting go of boundaries! I'm interested in border-crossings, transgressions of boundaries, which render the boundaries and categories porous or blurry but do not destroy them.

Liu: I see! Thank you so much. I would like to move on to your writings on Translation Studies in general, if you like. You proposed the term “Critical Translation Studies” (CTS), to include works by Lydia Liu and Sakai Naoki, and of course, yourself, I guess. Could you talk a bit about the essential difference between CTS and more traditional Translation Studies?

Robinson: The whole idea there was that Lydia Liu and Sakai Naoki and others were launching attacks on traditional TS as narrowly and naively obsessed with linguistic studies of equivalence between a source text and a target text in two national languages—which is not universally true, of course, given the massive TS assault on equivalence theories over the last three or four decades, but there is a sense in which it's still mainly true—and TS scholars were simply unaware of this whole other approach to the study of translation. Two groups studying translation,

with a massive disconnect in between. I wanted to bridge the gaps between the two approaches. CTS isn't a term those scholars use to describe their own approach: I borrowed the rubric Critical Translation Studies from Lydia Liu's Columbia website, where she says one of her research interests is "critical translation theory." (I've also, more recently, seen the rubric Critical Translation Studies used to describe a fusion of TS with Fairclough's CDA, Critical Discourse Analysis.) Anyway, as Liu and Sakai theorize translation, it is the pragmatic engagement with other people across felt borderlines that historically has *generated* what TS scholars regard as the "primal scene" of translation: two national languages, the translator mediating between them. At the simplest level, that is the difference between CTS and TS: CTS studies the prehistory to the interlingual encounter that TS studies as reality.

Liu: This is such a concise and incisive differentiation. Indeed CTS is crucial for the deepening and advancement of TS studies. As we know, your own works are very much theory-focused. I read your 2014 interview with Dr. Li Bo of CUHK, where you mentioned that you found traditional text-based Translation Studies to be quite boring. In your latest book, however, you seem to think a bit more highly of this kind of scholarly work, and even combined it with more theory-based studies yourself. Would you agree?

Robinson: I'm not sure what you mean. Which latest book? *Translationality* (2017)? I didn't remember calling traditional text-based TS boring to Li Bo, so I went back and reread it, and didn't find anything like your depiction there. In fact over and over in that interview I discussed the importance of applying theories to intertextual translation criticism, and defended the large number of such textual readings in the book that was just out then, *Translation and the Problem of Sway* (2011). What I did say, though, was that the traditional paradigm of *comparative literature* is based on static comparisons between texts, and that comparatists have been trying to render that paradigm more dynamic by appropriating the dynamic model of TS.

Liu: Oh, I was referring to *Exorcising Translation*, which also came out in 2017. So I probably missed your point. You said, "when you look at the history of translation theory over the last two thousand years, the questions raised have been very narrow. You translate word for word or sense for sense. That's basically it. If that is the tradition of Translation Studies, if that's what you want to get back to, leave me out. That's boring." (247) So you were not speaking against text-based TS, but were speaking against TS that only concerns itself with prescriptive discussions of how to

translate. You were in favour of issues within larger contexts, using interdisciplinary approaches, if I understand you correctly.

Indeed, Critical Translation Studies, and Translation Studies that takes into account the larger picture of the time, are sort of becoming the trend in European and American academia nowadays. However, back in China, discussions of foreignization and domestication continue to fill up the majority of Translation Studies works. Do you think this is the case?

Robinson: I had heard that about MA and PhD theses in the Mainland, a few years ago—that postgraduate students in China were all writing their theses using the distinction that Venuti borrowed from Schleiermacher, because (a) it's a simple-minded binary, which makes it easy to understand, and (b) neither Schleiermacher nor Venuti has any idea what makes a domestication a domestication or a foreignization a foreignization, which makes it arguably “original” to apply the vague distinction to two translations. More recently, however, I heard that Venuti is falling out of favor in Mainland China. This is all at the level of rumor for me, however. When I go to TS conferences in the Mainland, I find hardly anyone talking about Venuti (or Schleiermacher).

Liu: To move on to another aspect of your work, pseudotranslation, in which I take great interest, I read your definition of pseudotranslation in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, and realized that it differs from Gideon Toury's definition remarkably. You defined pseudotranslation as “not only a text pretending, or purporting, or frequently taken to be a translation, but also ... a translation that is frequently taken to be an original work”. Do you think it is necessary to separate a text which has no real origin and is fabricated to look like a translation from a text which is taken to be translations but did not mean to? That is, did authorial intention matter here?

Robinson: I hadn't done a lot of thinking about pseudotranslation when I wrote that encyclopedia entry; I've done more thinking about it since then, especially in the second essay of *Translationality*, where I'm interested in what we might call “metapseudotranslation,” where an author playfully pretends that his or her original text is actually translated from some other language, not in order to hoax anyone, as in Toury's definition, but to play with realistic expectations in metafictional ways. Rabelais uses that device in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; Cervantes uses it in *Don*

*Quixote*, and so on. The idea is that the first-person narrator of the novel is a real person who wrote his or her memoir—in the actual author’s language, like Lemuel Gulliver in Swift’s novel, or in an imaginary foreign language, like the narrator of *Gargantua*.

Liu: That sounds so interesting! I can’t wait to read *Translationality*. Then again about the definition of pseudotranslation, do you think it is necessary to distinguish a text which is taken to be a translation from a translation which is taken to be an original work?

Robinson: I agree with Toury when he says that a translation is anything that people widely regard as a translation. As long as a pseudotranslation is actually taken to be a translation, it *is* a translation—at least pragmatically, for the purposes of definition. Ontological definitions of translation, based on “objective” features that can be univocally distinguished from the features of non-translations (imitations, adaptations, etc.), never work.

Liu: That is true. Just like all sorts of writing, translation is derivative in ways that original works are derivative, let alone imitation, adaptations, etc.

I will now turn to the field of Comparative Literature. In Susan Bassnett’s “Introduction: What is Comparative Literature Today” (Introduction to *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, 1993) she states that “comparative literature has always claimed translation as a sub-category, but as translation studies establishes itself firmly as a subject based in inter-cultural study and offering a methodology of some rigour, both in terms of theoretical and descriptive work, so comparative literature appears less like a discipline and more like a branch of something else.” I am aware that this is a 25-year old quotation, but I am still curious to know if you would agree with this opinion. Do you see Translation Studies as a discipline that can contain Comparative Literature?

Robinson: Sure. Why not. I’m not sure why anyone would want to contain one field inside the other, but if you wanted to make that case, you could, I suppose. The point that I was making to Li Bo was specifically that comp lit was for over a century based on a paradigm of static comparison, and comparatists have more recently turned to TS for a more dynamic account of how texts *get* from one language to another—and the model of translation that comparatists have been mobilizing is a

fairly superficial and boring one. But none of that changes the fact that comp lit has been a high-prestige discipline for over a century, and TS is just now beginning to amass prestige. Translation scholars are still very much the new kids on the block, often working very hard to impress those older kids, the comparatists. Structural comparisons like Susan Bassnett's seem a bit bland in the sociological purview of disciplinarity.

Liu: I like that metaphor a lot. Let's hope that the new kids can succeed in impressing the older kids before too long. This has been really inspiring communicating with you. Thank you so much.

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### Author Profiles

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Douglas Robinson has been one of the world's leading translation scholars since *The Translator's Turn* (1991). His 1997 textbook, *Becoming a Translator*, has been the leading textbook for translation students world-wide for two decades, and has just been published in its fourth revised edition. His 1997 anthology, *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, has established itself as the standard reference work in English for pre-twentieth-century translation discourse. In his more recent work, since moving to Hong Kong in 2010—especially in *The Dao of Translation: An East-West Dialogue* (Routledge, 2015), *The Deep Ecology of Rhetoric in Mencius and Aristotle* (SUNY Press, 2016), and *Exorcising Translation: Towards an Intercivilizational Turn* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)—he has been mobilizing ancient Daoist and Confucian thought for “cofigurative” engagements. He is currently Chair Professor of English at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Jane Qian Liu is assistant professor in Chinese Studies and Translation at the University of Warwick. She has published in English and Chinese about various issues in contemporary British literature, modern Chinese literature, and translation studies, including *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899–1925* (Brill, 2017), “Pseudotranslation, Intertextuality and Metafictionality: Three Case Studies of Pseudotranslation from Early Twentieth-Century China”, *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 27(3), 2019.