

Translation as Trope in Early Modern Chinese Science Fiction

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Abstract

Chinese science fiction is entangled with translation from its very beginning. The emergence of the *kexue xiaoshuo* 科學小說 genre during the late Qing was the byproduct of *fin de siècle* China's condition of semi-colonial encroachment by the iron hand of the European colonial powers. Fostered by translation as a practice of “productive distortion” that led to the hybridization of forms and ideas, this genre thrived at an exceptionally productive crossroads of Chinese history, in that it intercepted some of the major concerns at the core of “the discursive construct of the Chinese modern.” Yet as the multiform circulation of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* at the turn of the century clearly shows, conventional notions of source and target, derivation, *emulation* and productive distortion itself fall short of properly articulating the modalities of imbrication between foreign texts, local renditions, and autochthonous writing during this period. By looking at Lu Shi'e's systematic (yet never acknowledged) reference to *Looking Backward* in the proto-science fictional novel *New China* (1910), this paper argues for a more plastic understanding of translation and its role in the shaping of early Chinese science fiction. Here translation not only emerges as a practice that is bestowed upon a text and leads to its “re-authoring” in another language, but also as a trope or rhetorical strategy in the active hands of the author.

Keywords

productive distortions, Edward Bellamy, Lu Shi'e, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, *New China*, science fiction genre