

CHAPTER 3 I

Translation and International Reception

Selina Lai-Henderson

Anyone who knows of Mark Twain's work has most likely heard of his "Jumping Frog" story. While famous across the United States for its humorous depiction of the Midwest, the regionalism of the text does not necessarily translate outside the country. In fact, about three decades after its publication, Twain was bothered to see what he considered to be a distorted French version of the story. According to Twain, the anonymous translator "has not translated it at all; he has simply mixed it all up." To prove that the translator was wrong about characterizing the story as having "nothing so very extravagantly funny about it," Twain retranslated it back to English to illustrate that it was the French grammar that evaded the American humor. Titled "The 'Jumping Frog.' In English. Then in French. Then Clawed Back Into A Civilized Language Once More By Patient, Unremunerated Toil," the work comprises the original text, the French translation, and Twain's own retranslation (3).

Even though Twain approached the subject largely from a humorous point of view, the "infinite pains and trouble" (3) that he took with the retranslation raises a few fundamental questions: What happens when a text travels abroad? What changes might it undergo in order for an audience of a different culture and who speak a different language to make sense of the text? Are some texts simply untranslatable due to their linguistic and cultural nuances? What kind of gaps can translation fill in ways that bridge linguistic, socio-political, and cultural differences? What are the reasons for Twain's popularity in France, Japan, Israel, Cuba, Latvia, Colombia, China, India, and the rest of the world, even though stories such as "The Jumping Frog" do not appeal to an international audience in the same ways that it does for Americans? Despite the specificities that Twain's work points to in regard to American culture, the American author addresses themes and issues that connect readers from the world over. Twain the so-called quintessential American writer is quintessentially global as he lampoons racial discrimination, oppression

of immigrant workers, and hypocrisies within the world of politics in ways that resonate with readers from *at least* fifty-five countries, in seventy-two foreign languages, and even from contrasting political regimes (Fishkin, “Originally of Missouri” 23). Twain’s work resonates with Germany’s ex-emperor William II, for instance, as much as it does with the writer and father of Cuban independence, José Martí, the famous Chinese author, Lao She, during revolutionary times in twentieth-century China, and the Japanese writer and Nobel Laureate, Kenzaburo Ōe, whose first novel was inspired by *Huckleberry Finn* (Fishkin, “American Literature” 279–93). Indeed, one would be remiss to believe that the power of Twain’s body of work is confined to the United States, or to view his writings as largely American in scope and vision.

As Shelley Fisher Fishkin remarks, writers have been “reading and responding to Mark Twain in languages other than English for at least 138 years” (“American Literature” 280). But it is all the more remarkable, she claims, that “Twain won such a fervent international following when we realize that many readers around the world were often encountering Twain in translations of very mixed quality” (“Originally of Missouri” 22). Fishkin’s observation calls for our understanding of Twain in the global landscape not by how accurately translators translate Twain’s work, but by what Twain has to offer despite and beyond the mistranslation of his work. In the following discussion, I use Twain’s literary presence in China and the Chinese reception of his work as a response to the questions that I raise above. Through examining passages from various Chinese translations of *Huck Finn*, and how translators approached the “N” word, I illustrate the unique position that Twain and his novel hold in helping us understand how US race relations are imagined in different historic moments in China. Given its rich histories in the twentieth century, China provides an excellent model through which we obtain insights into how changes in political paradigms influence larger issues and challenges of translation and international reception more broadly in the world.

Mark Twain was first introduced to China at the turn of the twentieth century. The Chinese late Qing Empire was then at a point of collapse amidst increasing encroachment on its soil from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, Japan, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and France. In order to save the nation from falling apart, various Chinese intellectuals serving in the Qing court such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao urged the Empress Cixi to modernize China through introducing a series of westernizing reforms not only in science and technology, but also culture and literature. They believed in the vast potential of literature in

educating the Chinese public to let go of Confucian beliefs and traditions in ways that they felt hindered their society from moving forward.

As Liang Qichao's "Hundred-Day Reforms" eventually fell apart due to the Empress Cixi fearing over-westernization in China, Liang himself exiled to Japan, where he continued to build transnational bridges between China and the western world through the domain of literature. It was in Japan where he founded the journal *Xin Xiao Shuo* (New Fiction), in which Twain was introduced in 1905. Twain was featured in the form of a picture next to that of Rudyard Kipling under the title "Two British and American Novelists." Liang's choice of putting the two authors together was retrospectively troubling due the opposite views that Kipling and Twain held toward western imperialism. As Kipling infamously proclaimed civilization abroad as the "white man's burden," Twain turned indignant toward US imperialism in the Philippines during the Philippine–American War (1899–1902), and remained an anti-imperialist until his death. That being said, Twain's staunch anti-imperialism was not known to Chinese readers until the 1950s. Chinese critics in the following decades also often addressed Twain's support for the Chinese Boxer Uprising (1899–1901) against imperialist forces in China.

That Twain's initial appearance in a revolutionary Chinese-language journal founded in Japan is crucial in understanding his position within the complex web of transpacific literary politics between the United States, Japan, and China at the time. Since Japan went through a similar modernization period known as the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) half a century prior to China, the well-established western literary canon in Japanese was a rich reservoir for Chinese students and intellectuals who turned to western literature for inspiration. Due to the large presence of Chinese intellectuals in Japan at the time, American literature was initially introduced to Chinese readers through Japanese editions.

The first work of Twain that was translated from Japanese into Chinese is "Cannibalism in the Cars." Published in the first issue of *Xin Xin Xiao Shuo* (New New Fiction) in 1904, the story was translated by Chen Jinghan under the pen name Leng Xue. Two years later, in 1906, Wu Tao translated "The Californian's Tale" also from Japanese into Chinese, and it was published in *Xiu Xiang Xiao Shuo* (Illustrated Fiction). Interestingly, Twain initially came across as a serious writer, because much of the humor was lost in the dual process of translation from English into Japanese, and from Japanese into Chinese. At the time that Twain was introduced to China, American literature was still novel to Chinese readers, and it was often overshadowed by European and British literature.

Japanese and Indian literature, too, surpassed American literature as avenues for translators to turn to. The lack of American works featured in literary magazines such as *Xin Xiao Shuo* and *Xiu Xiang Xiao Shuo* compared to those from Europe, England, Japan, and India was largely due to the belief that the United States had a much shorter span of history as a nation and thus its literary traditions paled in comparison. As Yu Lei tells us, American literature did not gain attention until late 1920s, when more books were published that mentioned the importance of Twain's work (54).

In 1929, Ceng Xubai edited the volume *Meiguo Wenxue ABC (American Literature ABC)*, in which he characterized Mark Twain in the following words: "all of Twain's works carry a double meaning. He says one thing but means something else that is much more profound. He wears the costume of a clown but underneath it is a humanist and philosopher" (92). He believes *Huckleberry Finn* to be a definitive work of Twain's that embodies multifaceted meanings on race, class, and the broken promise of American democracy. Ceng's pathfinding work opened up exciting new ground for American literature in China, of which Twain was an indispensable part. The American author was mentioned in virtually every book and collection that introduced the subject of American literature for the rest of the twentieth century.

Twain's image as a serious writer would change when the famous Chinese writer, Lu Xun, discovered Twain's humor in *Eve's Diary* and had this work translated in 1931. A humorist himself who communicated social ills inherited from the feudalist system in China, Lu Xun found Twain's use of humor particularly poignant, especially in what he saw as the increasing commercialization of the US book industry at the time. He observes that "capitalism in America produces writers who care less about expressing honest individual thoughts than writing for mass readership" (174). Even though American literature to Lu Xun was mostly conformist and that many writers wrote humor for the sake of mass entertainment, he found Mark Twain's style to be exceptional: "Twain became a humorist in order to live, but he imbued humor with bitterness and sarcasm in order to show that he was not satisfied with that kind of life. This little bit of revolt, however, is enough to make the children of New Land [The Soviet Union] laugh and claim: Mark Twain is ours" (174).

That Lu Xun referenced the Soviet Union in the above comment is not surprising at all, given the pervasive influence that Stalinist communism had in China during Lu Xun's time. What he saw in Twain was someone who had the boldness and capacity to satirize what was fundamentally

wrong about his country, in the same way that Lu Xun himself articulated the social ills of China at the time. Lu Xun recognized the universal reach of Twain's work that resonated with an international audience who were untainted by the influence of western capitalism. As Lu Xun recognized the importance of Twain, Chinese translators began to bring Twain's body of work to a wider audience, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 saw the Chinese translations of *The Innocents Abroad*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, *The Gilded Age*, and *Following the Equator*. In addition to Twain's travelogues and novels, a number of his short stories were published in Chinese throughout the twentieth century. "Running for Governor," while rarely read in the United States, is tremendously popular in China, for it lampoons the corrupt nature of the political system in the United States.

Of Twain's work, *Huckleberry Finn* is the most often translated: since its first appearance in 1947, the novel has been translated close to a hundred times. Huck Finn's nonconformity and yearning to break away from traditions spoke deeply to Chinese readers and intellectuals, who were looking for new insights and a new language to redefine China in the age of modernity. Public intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun believed that in order to protect their country from foreign invasion, literature should be used as a political tool to call for national strengthening. Instead of the elite language, *wen-yan-wen*, which is only communicable among the educated class, Liang, Chen, and Lu Xun advocated the use of the Chinese *baihua* (plain language) in literature to reach out to a much broader audience. For this reason, Twain's use of plain American language was particularly appealing to Chinese scholars and readers.

That being said, the biggest challenge for Chinese translators as they approached *Huckleberry Finn* was its use of regional vernacular. When Wu Guangjian edited the first Chinese translation of *Tom Sawyer* in 1934, he acknowledged the importance of introducing *Huckleberry Finn* to Chinese readers, but the challenge of "slang and mispronounced dialect" made it impossible for Chinese translators to do the job right (Li 69). For this reason, the first Chinese translation of *Huck Finn* by Zhang Duosheng and Guozhen contains glaring translation errors – most obviously in Pap Finn's racist tirade toward a wealthy and multi-lingual black professor from Ohio in Chapter 6. The original version of the speech goes:

It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a state in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drew out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all me – I'll never vote agin as long as I live. And to see the cool way of that nigger – why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold? – that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now – that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take a hold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger, and – (34)

As seen from the passage above, Pap does not only speak in a strong Missourian dialect, but also one that conveys illiteracy, drunkenness, and deep-seated hatred toward free and educated blacks. Not surprisingly, Zhang's and Guozhen's edition mistranslated various important details in the passage, distorting the historical legitimacy of black versus white voters:

I think, what kind of country is this? I am willing to go there, if I also have voting rights. But they said, this government allows black slaves to vote. I say, I will never have voting rights. My country will never let me have voting rights – I will never have voting rights for my entire life. I am worse than a black slave. I am going to ask them, how can a black slave hold such power? Do you think they will sell him? Ah, they said he could be a government official for six months – call this a government. (*Wantong Liulang Ji*, 29)

Due to a significant cut of the original passage in the translated version, it appears that Pap is not nearly as angry as he is in the original version. The Chinese readers are not told that Pap actually *does* have the right to vote but was simply too drunk and indignant to do so. Furthermore, Chinese readers might sympathize with Pap because it appears that his country takes away his voting rights, and that he ironically admits being “worse than a black slave.” Pap being a victim in the translated version thereby undermines the tension between white supremacists and African Americans at the time. The distortion of racial tension in this translation is also seen in the complete erasure of the “n-word.” While in the original version, Twain frequently uses that offensive word to highlight its problematic nature, Zhang and Guozhen translated it either into “hei-nu” (black

slave) or “hei-ren” (black person). While it may be possible that the translators avoided using “hei-gui” (black ghost) lest it offend readers, one possible danger is that when reading the Chinese and English versions together, readers might mistakenly think that pejorative term is the way one addresses any black persons in the United States.

Regardless of whether Zhang and Guozhen were aware of the inaccurate translation of the “n-word,” the general Chinese audience themselves lacked knowledge of its historical context, given their lack of exposure to African American literature. In fact, African American literature was not translated into Chinese until Langston Hughes set foot on China in 1933. Hughes’s visit inspired a wave of Chinese translations of African American literature, including works by Hughes, Sterling Brown, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James M. Bell, Jean Toomer, Lewis Alexander, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Shirley Graham Du Bois. Due to the more visible presence of a body of work that examines African American experience in the few decades that followed, translators of *Huck Finn* became more cognizant of the racial dynamics conveyed in Twain’s work.

In 1955, Zhang Yousong’s and Zhang Zhenxian’s *Huckleberry Finn* translation was much more popularly received due to its accuracy in capturing the original meanings of Twain’s work. For instance, the translators appropriately differentiate between how Huck and Pap address African Americans – the former with affection, and the latter with decided hatred. While “black person” and “black slave” are used to translate the “n-word” word in a majority of the text, the “n-word” word in Pap’s speech is partially translated into the Chinese equivalent, “black ghost.” Of the six occurrences of the word, the translators use the more respectable “black person” to describe a “free nigger,” but for others, they use “black ghost,” implying the difference in status between free and enslaved blacks. Tellingly, the year that this successful edition was published coincides with the historic Bandung Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. China’s strong involvement in the Conference and continued effort in fostering an Afro-Asian alliance might be a reason for the translators being more aware of African and African American histories, cultures, and literature overall.

That being said, the regional vernacular that Twain uses in his work, especially that of Jim’s, continued to be a challenge for Chinese translators in the decades to come. There are certainly no equivalents in China to the Southwestern Missouri or ordinary “Pike County” dialect that Twain uses, let alone Jim’s black Missourian dialect. Even though China has

tremendously rich linguistic varieties spoken across the country, a majority of them are not mutually intelligible to one another. Shanghainese speakers, for instance, do not understand Jinan spoken in Shandong due to their different vocabulary, pronunciations, and expressions. How to portray the dialects in *Huck Finn* along with their socio-political connotation presents a truly confounding challenge, but in 1989, Cheng Shi creatively translated Jim's distinctive voice by employing malapropism.

To cite an example, in Chapter 15, Jim is exhilarated to reunite with Huck after the two were separated by the fog:

Goodness gracious, is dat you, Huck? En you ain' dead – you ain' drowned – you's back agin? It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o'you. No, you ain' dead! you's back agin, 'live en soun,' jis de same ole Huck – de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness! (*HF* 103)

Here is Cheng's version of the above paragraph that I translated back into English:

My god, as [is] that you, Huck? You ain't deed [dead] – you ain't drone [drowned] – you're back again? It's too good, this is harsh [hard] to believe, honey, it's too harsh to believe. Laid [let] me look at you, child, laid me feel you. Huck, you ain't deed! You're back again, alive and sung [sound], just thy [the] same Huck – thank goodness, just thy same Huck!

As seen from the above version, the tonal nature of the Chinese language is reflected in how a slight shift in tone completely alters the meanings of the words. Cheng experimentally utilizes this linguistic feature to highlight Jim's nonstandard English by having him speak the wrong Chinese tone throughout the book. While this method is creative, it is quite challenging to follow, since readers have to pause at every occurrence of malapropism to figure out what Jim is trying to say. As Cheng himself explains,

My translation has many inadequacies; first of all is language. Due to the vast difference between the two languages [English and Chinese], the dialects used by Twain are basically untranslatable. Even though European languages are much closer to English, European translators, too, often encountered the problem of translating dialects. In this regard, I can only send my apologies to both the author and the readers. (12)

As one would expect, among the numerous editions of Chinese *Huckleberry Finn*, there are ones that fall short of the depiction of the complexity of race and racism that Twain intends to communicate. The lack of understanding toward the struggles that both Huck and Jim go

through in their search for freedom is especially visible in abridged versions targeting early learners of American literature in middle and junior high schools. Ren Aoshuang's 2003 edition, for instance, condenses Twain's original version of forty-three chapters into twenty-one chapters, omitting important passages such as Pap's tirade against the black Ohio professor and Huck's decision to "go to hell" rather than turning Jim in to Miss Watson. However, despite incidences of mistranslation and simplification of Twain's work, the American author is wildly popular in China. Twain is often considered as a friend of the Chinese for the way he spoke up against the oppression of Chinese immigrant workers in San Francisco early in his career, and for his announcement of himself as a "Chinese Boxer" against US imperialism in China later in his life.

Twain's popularity and relevance in China – indeed also around the world – is a result of the international visions that he acquired through his global travels. His keen eye on world affairs, including ones from as far as China, opens up a fascinating platform through which we understand how the United States is being understood and imagined in the world. Had Twain "vegetat[ed] in one little corner of the earth" all of his lifetime, as he wrote in the conclusion of *The Innocents Abroad* (512), he would not have been able to challenge the prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness that he himself once held before he left his hometown in Missouri. In sum, we would do Twain a tremendous injustice to examine his body of work from an American perspective only. Twain the Missourian, to borrow Fishkin's words, is "of the universe," for he does not merely connect different corners of the United States to the world, but larger regions and communities across the globe.

WORKS CITED

- Ceng, Xubai. *Meiguo Wenxue ABC* [American literature ABC]. Shanghai: Shijie Shuju, 1929.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "American Literature in Transnational Perspective: The Case of Mark Twain." In *A Companion to American Literary Studies*. Ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2011. 279–93.
- "'Originally of Missouri, Now of the Universe': Mark Twain and the World." In *Developing Transnational American Studies*. Ed. Nadja Gernalzick and Heike Spickermann. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019. 19–31.
- Li, Xilao. "The Adventures of Mark Twain in China: Translation and Appreciation of More than a Century." *Mark Twain Annual* 6 (2008): 65–76.
- Twain, Mark. *Ha-keni Beili, Feien Lixianji* [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn]. 1989. Trans. Cheng Shi. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2004.

- The Innocents Abroad*. 1869. New York: Signet Classics, 2007.
- "*The 'Jumping Frog,' In English. Then in French. Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil.*" New York: Harper & Bros., 1903.
- Wantong Liulang Ji* [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn]. Trans. Zhang Duosheng and Guozhen. Shanghai: Guangming Shuju, 1947.
- Yu, Lei. "Minguo Shiqi Ma-ke Tuwen Zai Zhongguo de Wenxue Luxing" [Mark Twain's literary journey in nationalist China]. *Mei Yu Shi Dai* 8 (2010): 54–56.