An Interview with Prof. Douglas Robinson on Translation and Translation Studies

Interviewer: Dr. Bo Li
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This interview with world-renowned translation theorist Douglas Robinson tells us more about his academic background, research interests and latest publications. In the interview Prof. Robinson briefly explains his main theoretical frameworks, in particular somatic theory, and talks about his book *Translation and the Problem of Sway*. He also clarifies his criticism of Venuti's binary opposition between foreignization and domestication. Finally, he shares with us his observations on the latest developments in translation studies as well as his suggestions with regard to academic writing and publishing. The interview will give us a clearer understanding of Prof. Robinson's translation theories, and of the current situation of translation studies in the global context.

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道格拉斯・羅賓遜教授訪談

主訪人：李波

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　　本文是對著名翻譯理論家道格拉斯・羅賓遜教授的訪談，內容涉及他的學術背景、學術著作、學術爭拗等；通過對談，他向我們解釋如何解讀他最新的理論成果；另外他也表達了對學術研究方法的看法、對翻譯研究最新進展的關照、對學術寫作和發表的指導意見等。

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Prof Douglas Robinson is a world-renowned translation theorist, and his contribution to the field of translation studies has been widely acknowledged. In August, 2012, he was kind enough to accept my invitation to conduct this interview before he assumed his new duty at the Hong Kong Baptist University.

Bo Li (Li): Thank you very much for the interview. I read the previous interview by Zhu Lin (2009) in the *Chinese Translators Journal*. Actually that interview is focused on your performative linguistics and somatics of translation. Today I would like to ask more about your other books. The first question: how did you enter this field of translation studies? I mean we would like to know more about your educational background and your research interests.

Douglas Robinson (Robinson): I started translating in about 1975. I was twenty years old and I was living in Finland. Actually before I did any kind of professional translation, I attended a summer theatre performance of a play by Aleksis Kivi, Finland's greatest writer from the middle of the 19th century. I loved the play. Actually before I went, I read it in Finnish, and then went to the play and I absolutely loved it. And I translated that. That was the summer of 1975. Then in September that year, I started working as a lecturer in the English department. And there, the secretary often got phone calls from people, from the community, from other departments of Universities, looking for translators. And since my Finnish was good, and I expressed my willingness to do it, they started offering me jobs. I started doing a lot of professional translation, mostly technical non-literary stuff. I did that for six years until I went to the U.S. to take my PhD in 1981, then came back to Finland in 1983 and had to rebuild my client base that I had lost during those two years of my PhD program. My dissertation on American literature was published in 1985. And I started

thinking: maybe I should start studying translation. I really enjoyed translating: could there be anything interesting being written about it? So I went to the library. My university had a translation program that was just then being formed, in 1985; it had been brought in from outside, a former language institute that had a translator training program, a private institute that had been nationalized as part of the University, and as a result we had quite a good selection of books on translation studies. I started reading that stuff and got very interested, especially in George Steiner's *After Babel*, a 1975 book from Oxford University Press, and started writing about it. That has always been my impulse. I read a book that interests me; I want to write about it. So I began working on a book that never was published. It was a bilingual book in English and Finnish. I wrote it in English and I translated my English version into Finnish and I put them on facing pages. It was an experiment, trying to see what happens when you write for different audiences in different languages. That received a bit of local attention. I gave a few seminars on it and things. The local translation scholars were very interested in it but the book proved to be unpublishable, and so in about 1987 or 88, I began to transform that book into *The Translator's Turn*. That was published in late 1990, with a 1991 publication date. And that book turned out to be popular. I thought the book was going to be ignored, basically because it was a rather unusual approach to translation and the field was so small. It was nothing like the work being done on polysystems, later to be called Descriptive Translation Studies. It was nothing like the work being done by the Germans, Hans Vermeer's Skopos approach. So I thought, you know, it was going to be peripheral, but it got picked up, got read by a lot of people around the world. And the excitement of that book basically made me a translation scholar. At the time in the late eighties, I was thinking, I was interested in three different fields: American Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies. I thought that I'd just

alternate, write one book in each field in sequence. But the excitement of *The Translator's Turn* changed all that. And I ended up spending the nineties writing pretty much exclusively on translation.

Li: I read some book reviews published in Chinese and English and some mention that your books are not easy to read, especially for those theories you borrow from neighboring disciplines and areas. What do you think about this comment?

Robinson: I have heard it many times. It's ironic and I'm not really happy about it because I like to think of myself as writing in an understandable way. I like to think of myself as writing the way I teach, so that any undergraduate can understand, but it's not really true. And people who complain that my books are difficult to read, I'm sure, are right. The big problem is that there is a certain kind of semantic compression that becomes possible, or semantic economy that becomes possible when you use theoretical concepts. And I draw heavily on a fairly wide range of figures in different fields. Whoever I'm reading at the time gets into my books, and drawing on their vocabulary allows me to say things much more economically. It's that economy that is the problem. In order to understand that passage or that whole book, you have to have read the other theorists and be immersed in that tradition. I guess one of the problems is that I tend to read quickly and assimilate new fields quickly and sometimes like to think that I work in a new field or subfield with every book. It's exciting for me to move into new fields, to learn the vocabulary, learn the jargon and employ it in effective ways. But then it makes it difficult for people to read me.

Li: Many Chinese translations scholars and students said that it's not easy

to understand your "Somatic Theory". Could you explain that briefly?

Robinson: Well, obviously the way that I develop these ideas draws on a lot of fairly complicated philosophical and even neurological studies that use specialized vocabulary, which makes it difficult. But my experience here in Hong Kong and in the PRC has been that Chinese Translation Scholars typically ask better questions of me than westerners do. It seems to me like Chinese people understand somatic theory much better than westerners do. I didn't quite understand this until I began to study Mencius, Mengzi. I realized that at the core of Confucian thought in general and I think Mencius in particular, there is something very much like somatic theory. The easiest way to understand it is through the Chinese word *xin*（心）. You know, the character is a pictorial representation of a beating heart. So *xin* is often translated as heart. But Mencius says *xin si*（心思）: the heart thinks. So James Legge translates that "the mind thinks". *xin* becomes mind. And I've heard many other Chinese people who speak English translate *xin* as mind. And other people, other sinologists have come to use something like "heart / mind" as a translation for *xin*. That middle ground between thinking and feeling or between heart and mind is precisely what Somatics is all about. And so it seems to me that is why Chinese scholars understand the theory better than Westerners do. The very word *xin* contains the core of somatic thought. And when you add this notion from Mengzi (that *xin si*, the heart thinks or the heart-becoming-mind thinks), it becomes even clearer. Now most Chinese people don't know Mencius obviously. They haven't read the text, but I would think that the notion has nevertheless been carried down through the centuries through Confucian culture. I have read in the work of professor Shun Kwong-loi at Chinese University, one of the world's premier experts on Mencius, that in Warring States Chinese *si*（思）

did not mean analytical thought. It meant thought that directs the attention, and that gives you a sense of what's important. So that, given the choice between the two alternatives, *si* doesn't necessarily analyze the alternatives. It inclines you to choose one or the other. That is the kind of thought the heart is capable of. Certainly this notion that *xin* is the sort of heart that emerges into thinking is absolutely essential to traditional Confucian thought. That is what somatics is all about. That is the core of somatic theory, that there is this emerging out of feeling, of morality, ethics, the kind of directional attention that becomes thought. That is, the notion that the feeling that turns into thinking, or emerges as thinking, guides thinking is at the very core of somatic theory, and at the very core of Confucianism, especially as explained by Mencius.

Li: So in that case, the Chinese Translation of the somatics is better to have a Chinese character *xin* in it.

Robinson: Yeah, I have been told that in Taiwan, it's translated as *shen xin*（身心）, and the mainland translation of *shen ti*（身體） is maybe less appropriate. Including *xin* in the term for somatics would imply the importance of feeling becoming thinking for somatics.

Li: So, talking about your *Translation and the Problem of Sway*. Actually I took a shortcut by reading one review published in the *Chinese Translators Journal*. The reviewer（鮑曉英，2012）raises some criticism by saying that four chapters in this book are contributed to Venuti's interpretant based on his 2008 article while only one chapter for Mona Baker's narrative. Could you explain that?

Robinson: I addressed that in the book. This reviewer got this critique out of my book. I say in the preface, it may seem odd that I've devoted so much attention to Venuti's conception of the interpretant, which he borrowed from Umberto Eco and Eco borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce. Venuti didn't go back to Peirce. He took Eco's concept. Venuti does not get the full historical background that way, but what he does get is pretty interesting. And it turned out to be very complex. I thought what I was going to do was to connect the two, interpretivity and narrativity, and write a balanced book, a balanced number of chapters on the two of them. It didn't work out that way because the interpretant turned out to be so complex. There was so much to do there that it just took over the book. I wouldn't have been able to publish it if I had done an equal amount of work with Mona Baker's book. So I considered leaving the study of narrativity off completely and making it just about Venuti. But I decided, no, there is an important point to be made there. What Baker means by narrativity relies heavily on something like the somatized, the somatic conception of the interpretant that I developed in the book. And one of the things that made the initial discussion on interpretant so long was that I had case studies. I mentioned the article from 2006 that I included in it as Chapter 4. But the really long chapters are Chapter 3 and 5, which are case studies specifically. I wanted to look at the two specific translation histories. So it's not just pure theorizing. We look at some texts also. I think it's a really important aspect of any kind of theorization that you look at practical applications. In Chapter 3, I picked a single translator, Alex Matson, who was Finnish born but raised in England and translated both ways, English to Finnish, Finnish to English. And I look at one specific problem, in his history of translating texts, namely that the text that he loved the most, he translated the worst, and when the source text was something he was rather contemptuous of, he did really

excellent translations. Why is that? This was really an interesting question for me, and I decided to answer it. I got all of his translations and ended up writing 65 pages or something about Matson, because it was interesting. The other case study was that in the 2008 article, Venuti writes about two English translations of Dostoevsky, comparing them, saying of course that one is foreignizing, and the other is domesticating. And Venuti can't read Russian. I can. It would seem rather silly to start making claims by comparing translations from a language you can't read, especially if another prominent American translation scholar can read Russian. So I did a close comparison of the two translations and found them to be very, very similar. I also try to do something that Venuti doesn't do. He doesn't walk you through a textual analysis to say that this is foreignizing and this is not. He just makes broad general claims about foreignism and domestication, or fluency. He doesn't show you in practice how that works. So I went through a page and a half of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* very carefully, comparing the two translations, and did a lot of background textual research. And then I offered some more general theorization of translation, theoretical remarks about studying translation. That was also a very long chapter. With those two long case studies, with my initial theorizing of the interpretant, my reading of Venuti on it, and including Chapter 4 from before ... all of a sudden, it became a book about the interpretant and not much room was left for Baker. But also it seemed to me there wasn't that much more to say about her book ... Well, I could have delved more deeply into narrativitiy, but it seemed to me that with one long chapter on Mona Baker's book *Translation and Conflict* (2006), I did enough to show the kind of direction that future research can take. It was sort of an imbalanced book, but I'm being quite satisfied with the structure nevertheless.

Li: To conclude your criticism on Venuti's foreignizing fluency, your aim, you say, is "to muddy some waters whose clarity has been artificially maintained with chemicals — to undo some theoretical repressions in order to explore some of the concealed and conflicting determinants of our theorizing about translation today." Could you explain this?

Robinson: It's a pool cleaning metaphor. When I was maybe eight or nine or ten years old, my family put a pool in our backyard. And my father then taught me how to keep the water clean with chemicals and so on. If you leave water in the pool, without chemicals, it turns murky; it'll turn green in fact usually; and so that's the metaphor. And I suppose that despite that early training, I have always been more attracted to, intellectually, to muddy waters, murky waters. The distinction between foreignization and domestication is the clear water that I'm talking about: I argue that Venuti maintains this pristine clear distinction by ignoring the complexities. I was looking at the complexities. That is probably the biggest distinction between the two of us: Venuti likes maintaining clarity and I, even though my ultimate goal is clarity and understanding, I don't want to take the easy way there. I want to go through the murk. I want to start by muddying the waters, by bringing in lots of empirical data that make it difficult to make simplistic claims. And then work through that material inductively until some sort of clarity emerges. But the clarity that emerges, because it's so saturated in the murkiness or the muddiness of the empirical detail, tends to be provisional. And I tend to make disclaimers about any kind of theoretical apparatus I set up. That it's purely provisional, just one way of thinking about it. That it doesn't take into consideration this, this, this and this. And somebody would probably need to come in and re-work this framework for it to work better. So I do have a much stronger loyalty, I suppose, to the complexity of the empirical data than

I do to theoretical elegance. My book, *Who Translates?*, has a four-stage hierarchy in it that has been criticized as being too elegant, too simple. It is true. It is too simple. So you know, I do have this impulse to come up with elegant theoretical models that will explain everything. But at the same time, all my suspicions are awakened when things are too clear, too obvious. I should add also that I tell my students that certainty is the enemy of learning. And that my first job as their teacher will always be to confuse them. If you're not confused, you have no motivation to learning, and so, for me, confusion or muddying the waters is an absolutely essential transitional stage to rethinking and thus to learning.

Li: So where are the theories and theorists coming from? If we look at the selected readings of translation theory, it is easy to discern that most of the theories were/are proposed by people outside of the translation studies circle. True, because this new discipline acquired its legitimate identity in the past few decades only. Then, when the discipline is well established through those hard efforts, people start to question and reflect on the border of this discipline. Interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary are the key words for the development of this new area of academic research, while translation, in terms of practice, has been there since the beginning of human communication. And now, it seems to be the time for a return: a translational turn proposed by Doris Bachmann-Medickin (2009). So what is your response to this "turn"?

Robinson: Well, I think it's not entirely true that most of the theories come from outside the field. Certainly, if you would agree that Lawrence Venuti is one of the big names in the field, his work relies heavily on Schleiermacher and Antoine Berman and Berman relies heavily on Meschonnic. To be sure, Schleiermacher was a theologian and a philosopher as well. He wrote his important lecture on the different methods of translation, and Berman and Meschonnic were both literary scholars but also translators ... but, you know, Meschonnic's work on translation, Berman's work on translation, *The Experience of the Foreign*, *L'Epreuve de l'Estranger* from 1984, these are major works in translation theory, and Venuti is continuing that. He had a brief flirtation with Deleuze in *The Scandals of Translation*. I thought it was a really exciting development. I wrote to him, congratulating him on it, saying "I'm glad to see that you're expanding your thinking beyond just the old foreignization versus domestication." He wrote back, saying "Well, there's nothing new here. It's all the same stuff." But you know, by and large, his work has come out of this tradition from within Translation Studies. The work of the descriptivists, DTS, comes out of James Holmes. Arguably, it's a Translation Studies paradigm. There is also a lot of work that draws heavily on other disciplines, especially linguistics. Gutt's relevance theory draws heavily on Brown & Levinson and other studies on Grice's maxims, especially the maxim of relevance. And generally speaking linguistic approaches to Translation have drawn on specific linguistic theories on language. So it's not entirely true that most of the interesting stuff comes from elsewhere. But it's partly true and certainly my work is a good example of the cross-fertilization of disciplines.

It seems to me though that there is implicit in the question a kind of nostalgia for a time when Translation Studies was narrower. And certainly 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. How many times can you argue over whether translation should be sense for sense or word for word? It's just a stupid boring narrow issue. Within a larger context, it can become interesting; and I've done some work in this book (*Translation and the Problem of Sway*) and elsewhere on Nida's dynamic equivalence, which is essentially a psychologization of sense-for-sense translation. Instead of translating sense, Nida says, "You try to translate the effect on a person, on a reader," and that has really interesting radical implication for the study of translation. So in one section of this book, and in my most recent work as well, I am taking Nida's Pure Translation Studies — he draws a little bit on Chomsky, but basically he's the inventor of the discipline, many people would claim, as Nida is rethinking the old sense for sense, word for word debate in terms of dynamic equivalence — anyway, I rethink Nida's approach in terms of the full implications of a *rhetorical* approach to equivalence. If equivalence is determined not by semantic structure but by reader response, that opens up a whole new set of questions, right? And I think a lot of really interesting work in Translation Studies does come out of that kind of close attention to claims that have been unnecessarily restricted by boring people, who are not interested in looking into things more deeply. But obviously, the fact that I've read Aristotle's rhetoric has something to do with my willingness. I've read it closely, and pretty carefully, in Greek and English. That heavily influenced my reading of Nida on dynamic equivalence. But then it seems silly to me to restrict a discipline to the bibliographies of people who are not looking outside the discipline, right? A discipline, especially an inter-discipline like Translation Studies, should be looking at translation in every possible field because almost every field in

the world relies heavily on translation. It's a globalized world where things get translated. If translation is so important in different fields, including very practical fields like medicine or the law and if those fields are relying on medical interpreters, court interpreters, translators of depositions, pharmaceutical inserts and so on, and then we need to draw on a wide variety of disciplines to get out the full complexity of the field of translation. You know, Robert Neather at Baptist University studies Museum translations from Guangdong province? It's a really interesting translation history project. And to do that he's got to work on Museum Studies. I guess I have very little patience for this notion that this is somehow muddying the waters of pure Translation Studies. No. Maybe it is muddying the waters, but precisely, in order to generate a more complex sense of what it means to translate or interpret.

Li: In one of the reviews, an author said that "Dr. Robinson borrowed a lot from linguistics, Literary Studies, ecology, etc.", and "I believe he can learn more from Chinese and Asian philosophy".

Robinson: It's coming. I have this one book manuscript on ecology of rhetoric in Mencius and Aristotle. SUNY Press is taking forever to look at it. The book I just finished starts with this chapter on Hu Gengshen's Eco-Translatology, suggesting one possible direction his movement might want to go in exploring the true implications of ancient Chinese philosophy for an ecological approach to translation. I wrote the piece in 2011, published it in China in early 2013, and when I attended the 4th International Symposium on Eco-Translatology in Wuhan in September of that year they had read my article and several had already begun to explore Mengzi. This is what one sort of research project might look like if eco-translatolotists took their belief in the

studying of translation through ancient Chinese philosophy more seriously. So when this book comes out, the Chinese critics can be happy that I'm learning from the Chinese. But of course they are also pointing out my mistakes.

Li: I hope you would not take this question as an offence. Talking about the theory and its application, I mean, in the Chinese context, if you look at the journals, quite a lot of them are on domestication or foreignization. 5 to 6 out of 10 are of this topic in the first ten years probably of the 21st century. Well, I talked to some editors of those journals. Some of them found that they just repeat everything: the same theoretical framework with different case studies. The ideas behind these articles are the same; meanwhile, I happened to find one article, an MPhil dissertation, from Jiangsu province I think, and the student writes on your theory.

Robinson: Yeah, it seems to me completely understandable that most of the work in Chinese Translation Studies (most of the work influenced by western thought), should be influenced by Lawrence Venuti because the distinction is so simplistic. It's very easy to take it over and apply it to anything, especially given the fact that Venuti himself is so unclear about practical applications, leaving lots of room for enterprising local scholars to apply it to whatever they want and make some minor adjustment to the theoretical framework and they have gotten themselves an original thesis. There is nothing wrong with this. This is what Thomas Kuhn calls normal science. You know Kuhn's argument about Science, that there are two different kinds of Science. There is Revolutionary Science and there is Normal Science. From Kuhn's point of view, everything comes down to the paradigm. The paradigm is an explanation of the facts. In times of revolutionary science, there is no accepted paradigm because the

old ones are being destroyed by anomalies, empirical facts that don't fit the existing paradigms, and so revolutionary scientists generate lots of new theories to explain things. Ultimately one theory is accepted as the new paradigm and normal scientists set about proving it right. The old theory said that science is all about the empirical testing of hypotheses. You come up with a hypothesis and you test it. And gradually you develop a more and more complex sense of nature, the way things really are. Kuhn said yes that's true, up to a point. But you know where hypotheses come from? Hypotheses are based on the existing paradigm. Normal scientists want to prove the paradigm correct. Typically though, because they are using scientific method, they generate anomalies. The existing paradigm is always too simplistic for the facts and so strict. Careful application of the paradigm to empirical facts generates anomalies, and when those anomalies become too many, the paradigm disappears and revolutionary science sets in.

Li: The paradigm shift.

Robinson: That's the paradigm shift, exactly. So what these Chinese scholars are doing with Venuti, taking him as the research paradigm and simply trying to prove him right. That is normal Science. There is nothing wrong with that. It's not something I have a lot of respect for, as a revolutionary scientist. But it is part of normal science. It is fundamentally what Lawrence Venuti himself is doing; he takes over the paradigm from Schleiermacher and Berman and seeks to prove it right, with a slight modification. He politicalizes it a little bit, calls it Marxist dissidence within an American context. But it's basically the Schleiermacherian paradigm taken as the truth, and then his work is simply to prove it right. I was going to call that propaganda but Thomas Kuhn's term for

it would be normal science. It seems to me unlikely in the extreme that large numbers of scholars would work to do the same thing with my work because I'm not establishing a paradigm.

I understand that I am understood in China as a deconstructive translation scholar. To some extent, that is inaccurate, you know, because my grounding in Burke and Bakhtin means that I am really interested in constructive as well deconstructive moves. But to the extent that my first move is always to destroy an existing paradigm as too simplistic, it is accurate to describe my work as at least initially deconstructive. I do want to destroy in order to rebuild and so that is an impulse that is difficult to follow. Right? And, any attempt to reduce my thought to a normative paradigm, I think, will make me a bit uneasy. Because what I'm interested in doing is saying "X says ABC, but that is way too simple. Look at these cases that show how much more complicated real translation is. Let's think about some ways that we can reframe ABC, so that we can account better for these anomalies." That kind of revolutionary science in Kuhn's terms seems to me much more valuable in the long run than normal science. But that is a much a minority view. There is a very tiny minority of people that are interested in doing that. And from the normal scientist's point of view, it is pretty much irrelevant. As long as the existing paradigm works well enough to drive research programs, revolutionary science is an irrelevancy. There is no real reason to read it or know it.

Li: The field does need some, to some extent, the constructive and viable framework to analyze or to apply.

Robinson: Yeah. Definitely. To the extent that the field of Translation Studies is an institutional structure, organizing research on campuses around

the world, normal science is really the order of the day. That's totally true. Most scholars are going to be normal scientists in that sense. They want to find a paradigm they can apply. And domestication versus foreignization is really perfect because it's simple and yet it has academic respectability. It's written in a fairly complex, post-structuralist jargon that makes it not all that easy to access. It's perfect in every possible way. The fact that it is way too simplistic to account for most actual translation histories is really irrelevant because as long as you can make enough claims about whatever your translation history is, using that paradigm to get it published, it's adequate.

Li: In your previous interview by Zhu Lin in 2008, you mentioned that there is no "really impressive development in the last ten years" that is 1997 to 2008. You highlighted the late 1980s and early 90s. And, when you look back to your comments four years ago, do you have some revisions?

Robinson: Yes, the problem with that interview, which was conducted in October 2008, was that I had been out of the field of Translation Studies since about 2000. I wasn't keeping up with it. I was working in other fields. So I felt very uneasy answering claims about recent development in the field. I just didn't know what they were because I was out of touch. I did mention in that interview that I was impressed by and interested in the empirical studies of interpreters, qualitative, ethnographic research into what interpreters do in courts or in hospitals. That is one of the exciting developments over the last fifteen years or so. What I didn't know then was that some time back in the early 21st century, people started talking about the sociological turn that included empirical studies of interpreters and various other things. And what I also didn't realize was that Anthony Pym, whose work I have admired since I read

his self-published book, *Epistemological Problems in Translation and its Teaching* from 1993, was that Pym has always been a sociological thinker about translation. Since the late eighties, he's been doing sociological studies on translation and now he's one of the big, huge, major stars in the field because the field is increasingly sociological. When he first started it, the field was dominated by linguists, and the Descriptivists, the Skopos people from Germany, the Think-aloud Protocol people from Germany and so on were trying to challenge the linguistic orthodoxy without much luck. Over the course of the nineties, the linguists were pretty much destroyed. By the end of the nineties, I was starting to feel uneasy with the dominance of the "cultural turn," so I wrote *Performative Linguistics*, basically transforming myself into a linguistic translation theorist, sort of as an act of dissidence. And I do think the cultural turn at that point was exhausting itself, and the exhaustion took the form of the complete serene dominance of the field, to the point where everybody shared the same values, the same research methodology, etc. And I didn't then know that sociological approaches to the study of translation were even then beginning to be published and were transforming the field in very exciting ways. That is what I neglected to say in 2008 because I didn't know it. One of the really important aspects of sociological studies on translation, especially the last four or five years, has been audio-visual Translation Studies. It's really big. I first heard about it two years ago at the Translation Research Summer Seminar here in Hong Kong at Baptist, when Luis Perez Gonzalez (2009) gave an absolutely brilliant, overwhelmingly brilliant talk, two talks, about crowd subbing, or fan subbing, of videos, which I'd never heard of before. I felt like this ancient dinosaur doing my theoretical work, you know, my humanistic literary-based approach. This new approach was so exciting. I also didn't know in 2008 about Mona Baker's 2006 book. There are some problems with Baker's book. It is not really much about translation,

it's more about journalism with a few examples taken from translation. But the study of the translator's narrativity or narratoriality, the translator as narrator has actually been around for about ten years now and that is also an important research direction that was in place. That was already gathering momentum in 2008 when I made the comment, but I didn't know about it. So since I've come to Hong Kong especially, I have been sort of propelled backed into the Translation Studies field in a major way, with the result that I wrote this book, *Translation and the Problem of Sway.* Actually, I was already beginning to rethink things before I came to Hong Kong. And then my most recent book, which I just finished a couple of months ago, is called *The Ecologies of Translation.* It's this environment here in Hong Kong where Translation Studies is so big. And I know so many people who are doing interesting work in the field. I get invited to give lectures and I go to conferences, I hear all the new research. The first chapter in the new book deals with Hu Gengshen's Eco-translatology, because Hu Gengshen has sort of involved me in his little movement; he invited me to his conference in Shanghai, and again two years later in Wuhan. You know, I've picked up some interesting new ideas and I have reactions to them and things. And so there is an intensification of my thinking about translation that is very heavily grounded in the scholarly community here in Hong Kong and generally in China, because I get invited a lot to the PRC. You know, when I give a talk, I get lots of good questions from the audience. That is a sense that I had actually in 2008 when I did that one week in Beijing and Tianjin, but I wasn't in a position to capitalize on it. There's a lot going on, there's a lot of really exciting ferment in the field. In 2008, I was there for a week and then I went back to the States and disappeared. Here in Hong Kong, it's everywhere around me.

Li: It seems that Hong Kong has transformed you.

Robinson: Yes, definitely.

Li: How do you understand, you know, people are trying to theorize translation history? I wonder if you have noticed this.

Robinson: Theorizing translation history is the most interesting part of translation history for me. I am not really a historian, I'm a theorist and so looking at Translation history in terms of large patterns is much more interesting to me than doing the actual archival research, like you do. But theorizing translation history requires data. So the work you do is interesting to me, precisely as a source of patterns. I can think about patterns and I have done some of the close textual analysis in this book, *Translation and the Problem of Sway*. Chapter 3 and 5 are translation histories and that thus interests me in passing. I have done that work at article length but fundamentally I'm interested in the larger patterns, theories. Whenever I've got invited to a translation history conference, I tend to feel out of place because I'm not really a translation historian. And you know, when I make these claims, people point out to me that I've done this, this and this, stuff that's really translating history as well. Okay, I am a translation historian in a sense, but I don't really feel it. I don't feel the identification. I am a theorist, because actual histories of text being translated from one language to another are the empirical data, on which the field relies. It's extremely important that people do it, but also as a theorist, I feel that you don't want to work purely inductively, because some sort of sub-textual, sub-conscious theory will most likely be guiding your methodology anyway. And so, being aware of theories of translation history, to my mind anyway will make doing the nitty-gritty inductive work involved in translation historical research that much more complicated and more viable.

Li: Susan Bassnett (2011) talks about her experience of serving on editorial boards. The reason to reject many papers as follows: so many of the essays on aspects of translation submitted to journals of literary studies or those devoted to translation reflect an imbalance between the use of translation theory and its practical application. You are member of many editorial boards, and could you share with us your point of view on accepting and rejecting academic papers?

Robinson: I don't know if I have a point of view. It tends to be sort of very article-specific. Every article that I have read for a journal has its own strengths and its own weaknesses and it is sort of like supervising an academic thesis. You take the author's desire, intention, purpose as a given and then you ask yourself to what extent the author achieves that purpose, whether he or she interprets, achieves it well-enough to warrant publication with revision, without revision, etc. or whether it will be rejected. My sense is that the big problem with academic writing tends to be that a lot of people don't really have anything to say. They haven't really done any kind of significant research. They haven't done any kind of significant rethinking of current paradigms. In fact, they haven't done enough reading in general. They've maybe read one article on translation. They think: "maybe I can write about translation!" and so what they write is not saturated in the community of translation scholars. They don't know the field. They haven't been engaging in interaction with various people working in the field and so they don't know how to pitch their ideas. They have no ideas, or, if they do, they don't know how to pitch them in persuasive ways. It's very clear, very obvious when someone is well-immersed in their community, knows the field and knows what's been done and can situate his or her claims in terms of on-going debates. It's also very clear when the person has something to say, research results, the product of significant theoretical work. As I have

mentioned, there is this other tradition, especially in Comparative Literature Departments, where Translation Studies is perceived as hot, and Comparativists want to jump on that bandwagon. And they do have some things to say but their things to say are about Derrida, for example, or Deleuze, or somebody like that, not really something to say about Translation. They have never translated anything before; they don't really think of it as a discipline in which practice and theory are or should be interactive. It's just a way to get published. And obviously, we are in a field that requires publication so there is huge pressure put on everybody to publish, and not everybody really has any business doing academic research. They just happened to get the job, so they are required to publish, and they are pushing themselves. In my experience, they usually hate it.

Li: Many thanks for the interview.

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