

Exploring the Role of Activist Translation in Geremie Barmé’s Practice of “New Sinology”

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Abstract

This paper examines translations and corresponding paratexts published by the Australian academic Geremie Barmé (白杰明) under the banner of “New Sinology” in 2022. It starts by tracing the origins of New Sinology, an activist approach to studying and interacting with greater China that Barmé proposed in 2005 and which Duncan Campbell and Edward McDonald helped define in *China Heritage Quarterly* (2005–2012) and elsewhere. Barmé’s background as an eyewitness to the Cultural Revolution and his associations with Chinese dissidents are discussed as factors contributing to the development of New Sinology, as is the discipline’s locus in Australia and New Zealand, two English speaking countries adjacent to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s geographic sphere of power. This paper subsequently examines Barmé’s translation efforts in 2022, a year of tumult in the PRC. Barmé’s translations of a Chinese expatriate’s reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a Shanghainese man’s furious reaction to the COVID-19 lockdown, and overseas Chinese students’ reactions to the Beijing Sitong Bridge Incident, A4 Revolution, and Ürümqi apartment block fire are examined alongside the extensive contextualizing writings Barmé attaches to these translations. Informed by the writings of Mona Baker and Maria Tymoczko, this paper finds that Barmé’s translations are framed so as to weave translated voices into a narrative of intellectual resistance spanning centuries of Chinese history and discusses the implications of this approach. The article ends with an attempt to use a novel metaphor inspired by sampling-based music production to better understand the nature of activist translation.

Keywords

New Sinology, Geremie Barmé, activist translation, Sinophones, Chinese dissidents, Mona Baker, Maria Tymoczko

1. Introduction

This paper examines recent translations and corresponding paratexts by Geremie Barmé (2022), an Australian scholar known for being the main progenitor of the small but vocal “New Sinology” (*hou Hanxue* 後漢學) movement, a prolific translator and writer, and a prominent critic of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), who is occasionally consulted by journalists in the mainstream press (Adams 2021; Hartcher 2022; Kuo 2020; Perlez 2015) or published there himself. Translation plays an integral role in Barmé’s voluminous publications, the vast majority of which exist to counter narratives promoted by the government of the PRC and to amplify the voices of Chinese dissidents in the PRC and abroad. Attempting to tease out Barmé’s impetuses and *modus operandi*, I begin this paper by tracing the interwoven threads of his personal history and the development of New Sinology. Subsequently, guided by Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar’s (2018) observation that “the most concrete links that connect translated texts with their immediate or larger socio-cultural contexts are their presentational features, in other words, their paratexts” (287–292), I launch into a detailed examination of translations and corresponding paratexts Barmé published in 2022, a year of social and political upheaval in the PRC.¹ I consider how Barmé’s translations may be viewed through lenses provided by Mona Baker and Maria Tymoczko’s studies of activist translation, and conclude by conversing with prior scholarship on translation metaphors to seek out a way to conceptualize the work of activist translation as it is described by Baker and Tymoczko and performed by Barmé.

2. The Origins of Barmé’s Activism and the Creation of New Sinology

Born in 1954, Barmé received his BA in Chinese and Sanskrit from Australian National University (ANU) before traveling to the PRC in 1974, where he studied at institutions including Fudan University and Liaoning University until 1977. Barmé arrived in China in the waning