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Of 'Invincible Spears and Impenetrable Shields': The Possibility of Impossible Translations

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**Of ‘Invincible Spears and Impenetrable Shields’:
The Possibility of Impossible Translations**

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Of 'Invincible Spears and Impenetrable Shields': The Possibility of Impossible Translations¹

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Abstract

Beginning with a consideration of the logical and illogical notions of impossibility, the paper examines two kinds of contradiction: the categorical and the dialectic, especially as it relates to the Chinese word *maodun*. Theoretical absolutes are pitted against realistic relativities; abstract strictures are examined in conjunction with concrete improbabilities. A brief survey of the phenomena of "impossible" translations follows - translations which are theoretically precluded but realizable in reality. The phenomena of translations of James Joyce's *Ulysses* – surely one of the texts that would be considered "impossible" to translate - belies the theoretical assumption that precludes its rendering into other languages. This yields a dictum which constitutes a *maodun*, not a contradiction, on translation: the more impossible the text the more it demands translation, the more imperative that it be translated. Sometimes the translation of a text is the only surviving version of a text - its only *nachleben*, in Walter Benjamin's formulation. For example, the Septuagint conveyed the text of the Bible for nearly two millennia before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948. Other, more recent examples are cited (and solicited).

Our excursion into the Chinese notion of *maodun* (矛盾) begins, of course, with the story from the Han Feizi (韓非子), which tells of: "a 'man from Chu' who is vaunting his wares, saying: 'My shield is so strong that nothing can penetrate it.' Then he vaunted his spears and said: 'My spears are so sharp that they can penetrate anything'. Someone said: 'What if we used one of your spears against one of your shields?'" To which there was no

¹ Presented as part of a series, "The In's and Out's of East-West Translation and Adaptation", organized by David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, April 15 2005.

reply, because a shield that is impenetrable and a spear that is invincible cannot co-exist in the same universe.”

楚人有鬻盾與矛者，譽之曰：「吾盾之堅，物莫能陷也。」又譽其矛曰：「吾矛之利，於物無不陷也。」或曰：「以子之矛，陷子之盾，何如？」其人弗能應也。夫不可陷之盾與無不陷之矛，不可同世而立。

This is the Chinese version of the Aristotelian Law of Non-Contradiction, in which “it is not possible for A and ‘not A (-A)’” to be both true” — which has been axiomatic in Western thinking ever since Aristotle.

Yet, the Chinese phrase *maodun* (矛盾), which alludes to the Han Feizi story, couples the “invincible spear” and the “impenetrable shield” together. In its strict logical sense, *maodun* identifies a contradiction, and hence the impossibility of two phenomena, one contravening the other, to co-exist, as in 自相矛盾 meaning “self-contradictory”. However, in another, and more common usage, *maodun* points to paradoxical or contradictory events that, far from being impossible, are routinely familiar as in 矛盾百出 meaning “the paradoxicalness of things”. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Mao Zedong’s 1937 seminal essay, “On *Maodun*” (矛盾論), where he talks not about impossibilities, of things that cannot “co-exist in this universe” but about possibilities, of events and phenomena that, though contradictory, are very real.

The problem of translating *maodun* as “contradiction” begins with the first paragraph of the standard rendering of Mao Zedong’s “On *Maodun*”. If we can compare the versions side-by-side, we can see that *maodun* is translated both as “dialectics” and “contradiction.”

<p>事物的矛盾法則，即對立統一的法則，是唯物辯證法的最根本的法則。列寧說：「就本來的意義來講，辯證法是研究物件的本質自身中的矛盾。」列寧常稱這個法則為辯證法的本質，又稱之為辯證法的核心。</p>	<p>The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of <i>the unity of opposites</i>, is the basic law of materialist dialectics. Lenin said: “Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradictions in the very essence of objects.” Lenin often called this law the essence of dialectics; he also called it the kernel of dialectics.</p>
<p>矛盾 contradiction 辯證 dialectics 對立統一 <i>the unity of opposites</i></p>	<p>矛盾 = 對立統一 contradiction \neq <i>the unity of opposites</i></p>

There is a crucial and seminal problem with this translation, of rendering *maodun* as “contradiction.” *Maodun* can mean “contradiction,” which designates a condition, in which one of two contradictory entities can exist, but not both; but, clearly, in this context, *maodun* does not refer to the non-existence of two mutually contradictory entities, but to their *co-existence* (對立統一), “the unity of opposites”. In the first case, *maodun*

refers to an impossibility; in the second case, *maodun* designates phenomena which seem anomalous and paradoxical, but which are, in any case, quite commonplace.

The importance of this crucial distinction in the polysemy of the Chinese word *maodun* — a polysemy missing in the English word “contradiction” — becomes clear in the next passage:

<p>如果我們將這些問題都弄清楚了，我們就在根本上懂得了唯物辨證法。這些問題是：兩種宇宙觀；矛盾的普遍性；矛盾的特殊性；主要的矛盾和矛盾的主要方面，矛盾諸方面的同一性和鬥爭性；對抗在矛盾中的地位。</p>	<p>If we can become clear on all these problems, we shall arrive at a fundamental understanding of materialist dialectics. The problems are: the two world outlooks, the universality of contradiction, the particularity of contradiction, the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction, the identity and struggle of the aspects of a contradiction, and the place of antagonism in contradiction.</p>
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I maintain that the Chinese makes perfect sense and may even be obvious and commonplace, whereas the English is total gibberish.

Western logicians have recently come around to an appreciation of the reality and the validity of non-Aristotelian notions of truth assertions. In an article on “Paraconsistent Logics,” Graham Priest and Koji Tanaka (not so incidentally, an East-West team) observe:

A most telling reason for paraconsistent logic is the fact that there are theories which are inconsistent but non-trivial. Clearly, once we admit the existence of such theories, their underlying logics must be paraconsistent.²

This leads to the formulation of the notion of “true contradictions” — which would, in classical logic, appear to be a null-category, an impossibility like “the barren woman’s son.” An example of a true contradiction would be the liar’s paradox: “This sentence is not true” — a statement which is simultaneously true and untrue, because if it is not true, then it is true, and if it is true, then it’s not true. A term, derived from Heidegger, “di-aletheia,” has been coined for truths that seem to — “paraconsistently” — contradict each other. Dialetheism,³ according to Graham Priest, is “a statement, A, such that both it and its negation, -A, are true. Hence, dialeth(e)ism is the view that there are true contradictions.”⁴ Priest observes that, despite the orthodoxy of the Aristotelian Law of Non-Contradiction in the West, there have been a few “dialetheists”: namely, Nicholas of Cusa, Meinong, but most prominently, Hegel and his successors,

² Graham, Priest and Tanaka, Koji. “Paraconsistent Logic.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2004 Edition). Ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2004/entries/logic-paraconsistent/>>.

³ The word coined by Graham Priest and Richard Routley (later Sylvan) in 1981 (see Graham Priest, Richard Routley, and Jean Norman, eds., *Paraconsistent Logic: Essays on the Inconsistent*, Philosophia Verlag, 1989).

⁴ Graham, Priest. “Dialetheism.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2004 Edition). Ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2004/entries/dialetheism/>>.

Marx and Engels. But he maintains that “Dialetheism appears to be a much more common and recurrent view in Eastern Philosophy than in the West,” and that “Contradictory utterances are a commonplace in Taoism” — an observation that would be corroborated by anyone familiar with the Taoist canon. Priest, however, does not mention Mao, who — paronomastically — was the most influential dialetheist of *maodun* in the twentieth century. Another logician identifies “Conflict without Contradiction” — yet another aspect of *maodun* — and posits “Noncontradiction as a Scientific *Modus Operandi*.”⁵

Contradiction vs. *Maodun*⁶

Mao Zedong’s famous essay of February 27, 1957, 關於正確處理人民內部矛盾的問題, is translated by Roderick MacFarquhar as “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” — which reduces a subtle analysis of history into a logical exercise. Mao clearly distinguishes two kinds of *maodun*, only one of which resembles the Western notion of contradiction. The contradiction “between the enemy and ourselves” — these he called, “antagonistic contradictions” (MacFarquhar’s rendering);⁷ the other involves “contradictions among the people,” which he characterized as “non-antagonistic contradictions.” These formulations make no sense, since the strict meaning of contradiction, we recall, is that

⁵ Paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, Massachusetts, August 10-15 1998. April 4 2005 <<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Logi/LogiFaus.htm>>.

⁶ This section is adapted from my “A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Modern and the Postmodern.” *Other Modernisms in an Age of Globalization*. Ed. Djelal Kadir and Dorothea Löbbermann. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C., Winter 2002. p.119-132.

⁷ This sentence betrays the arbitrariness of English grammar: “contradiction” in the first part of the sentence is at odds grammatically with “contradictions” in the second part of the sentence. The singular refers to a type of contradiction; the plural refers to instances in either of the two types of contradiction adduced. Of course, in the original Chinese, there are no such anomalies.

two contradictory propositions cannot both be true, cannot both exist. Yet, “the enemy and ourselves” constitute distinctly inescapable realities, no matter how adamant the attempt of one to eradicate the other. Yet, the notion of *maodun*, however illogical on the surface to Western analysts, is an enormously complex yet mundane idea in Chinese thinking, useful in the most ordinary conversations as well as the most profound analyses of life and history. It emphatically does not embody a logical flaw, but reflects a phenomenological reality.

Indeed, *maodun* encompasses many of the more elusive and seemingly self-contradictory formulations of postmodern thinkers, who would otherwise appear whimsical and irrational. Robert Wasson, for example, is a promoter of *maodun* in his version of postmodernism when, in his analysis of the counterculture of the sixties, he observes that writers like Iris Murdoch, Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon “are skeptical of modernist notions of metaphor as a species of suprarational truth that unifies *paradoxical opposites*. . . ” (quoted in Bertens, 33). *Maodun* is precisely the “paradoxical opposites” that Wasson speaks of.⁸ Ahmad reveals an understanding of *maodun* when he criticizes Fredric Jameson for clinging to an oppositional model for three mutually exclusive worlds: “one could start with a radically different premiss,” Ahmad writes, “namely, the proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one. . . ” (103). He suggests “that the different parts of the capitalist system are to be known not in terms of a binary opposition but as a *contradictory unity*” (103). *Contradictory unity* is but another version of *maodun*.

Too many discussions of Chinese postmodernism, it seems to me, are ultimately derivative and imitative: they try to shoehorn Chinese realities

⁸ Western grammar is recalcitrant here, because *maodun* is singular, but what it refers to involves a plural.

into provincial Western theories, like Cinderella's stepsisters trying to fit their unbound feet into the glass slippers. Instead of occupying themselves with the "cultural *logic* of late *capitalism*," which is, by now, a dated and dessicated subject, Chinese scholars and scholars of China ought to be considering "the cultural *illogic* of late *communism*" — a world where, anomalously, communists and capitalists co-exist and communist millionaires and billionaires are no longer rare curiosities, ideological impossibilities; where Chinese socialism and its failures, ironically, have provided a huge low-wage work force to fuel the appetites of transnational capitalists; where the interests of Chinese nationalism, conversely, are increasingly served by an insatiable appetite for foreign investment; where a Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong, has been developed to demonstrate the viability of a territory that is, paradoxically, both China and not China ("One Country, Two Systems").

A proper understanding of *maodun* is not merely a pedantic clarification, for it will resolve the unnecessary *incomprehensions* that bedevil U. S. *apprehensions* (both its fears and its grasp) of Chinese policy and Chinese behavior. A few years ago, an Assistant Secretary of State, James Kelly, betrayed his ignorance of *maodun* when he saw China's tendencies towards globalism *and* intense nationalism as "contradictions. . . that make it difficult to predict the future course of our relationship."⁹ To view a *maodun* as a contradiction is to see something real as something chimerical, to see something that makes sense as not making sense, to see concurrent competing truths as *non sequiturs*. These seemingly contradictory phenomena are contemporary versions of the *maodun* that Mao Zedong spoke about, and which ordinary Chinese recognize as a fact of

⁹ *South China Morning Post*, vol LVII:132, May 14 2001, p.19.

life. Contemporary China illustrates neither modernism nor postmodernism, but rather a *maodun*-ism far more interesting than the cultured “pearls” produced by Western China-watchers who see China merely as a pale shadow of the West.

The study of modernism is now, it seems to me, an exhausted endeavor; the analyses of post-modernism have also become stale and arid. What I would like to see is the start of a much more fecund and fascinating field: the study of *maodunism*!

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