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

Eugene Eoyang

eoyang@ln.edu.hk

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/lewi_wp

Part of the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Link to published article: http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lewi/pub_work_info.html

APA Citation


This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies at HKBU Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in LEWI Working Paper Series by an authorized administrator of HKBU Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact repository@hkbu.edu.hk.
Of ‘Invincible Spears and Impenetrable Shields’: 
The Possibility of Impossible Translations

Eugene Eoyang
Department of English
Lingnan University

The author welcomes comments from readers.
Contact details:

Eugene Eoyang, Department of English, Lingnan University, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong.
Tel: 2616-7802; Fax: 2461-5270; Email: eoyang@ln.edu.hk
LEWI Working Paper Series is an endeavour of David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI), a consortium with 28 member universities, to foster dialogue among scholars in the field of East-West studies. Globalisation has multiplied and accelerated inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious encounters, intentionally or not. In a world where time and place are increasingly compressed and interaction between East and West grows in density, numbers, and spread, East-West studies has gained a renewed mandate. LEWI’s Working Paper Series provides a forum for the speedy and informal exchange of ideas, as scholars and academic institutions attempt to grapple with issues of an inter-cultural and global nature.

Circulation of this series is free of charge. Comments should be addressed directly to authors. Abstracts of papers can be downloaded from the LEWI web page at http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lewi/publications.html.

Manuscript Submission: Scholars in East-West studies at member universities who are interested in submitting a paper for publication should send an article manuscript, preferably in a Word file via e-mail, as well as a submission form (available online) to the Series Secretary at the address below. The preferred type is Times New Roman, not less than 11 point. The Editorial Committee will review all submissions. The Institute reserves the right not to publish particular manuscripts submitted. Authors should hear from the Series Secretary about the review results normally within one month after submission.

Copyright: Unless otherwise stated, copyright remains with the author.

Editors: CHAN Kwok-bun, Sociology and Director of LEWI; Emilie Yueh-yu YEH, Cinema & TV and Associate Director of LEWI.

Editorial Advisory Board: From HKBU: Richard BALME, Government and International Studies; CHEN Ling, Communication Studies; Martha CHEUNG, English Language and Literature; Vivienne LUK, Management; Eva MAN, Humanities; Wong Man Kong, History; Terry YIP, English Language and Literature. From outside HKBU: David HAYWARD, Social Economics and Housing, Swinburne University of Technology (Australia); and Jan WALLS, International Communication, Simon Fraser University (Canada).

Disclaimer: David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI), and its officers, representatives, and staff, expressly disclaim any and all responsibility and liability for the opinions expressed, or for any error or omission present, in any of the papers within the Working Paper Series. All opinions, errors, omissions and such are solely the responsibility of the author. Authors must conform to international standards concerning the use of non-published and published materials, citations, and bibliography, and are solely responsible for any such errors.

Further Information about the working paper series can be obtained from the Series Secretary:

David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI)
Hong Kong Baptist University
Kowloon Tong
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 3411-5217; Fax: (852) 3411-5128
E-mail: lewi@hkbu.edu.hk
Website: www.lewi.org.hk
Of ‘Invincible Spears and Impenetrable Shields’:
The Possibility of Impossible Translations

Eugene Eoyang
Department of English
Lingnan University

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.”

楚人有鬻盾与矛者, 誉之曰：「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.”
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。

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>矛盾 contradiction</th>
<th>矛盾 = 對立統一</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>辯證 dialectics</td>
<td>contradiction ≠ the unity of opposites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The law of **contradiction** in things, that is, the law of **the unity of opposites**, 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**.

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:

| 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。 |
| 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*. |

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,

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.”

Contradiction vs. Maodun

Mao Zedong’s famous essay of February 27, 1957, 開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); 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

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. 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

---

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!
Works Cited


_____________. *Hou xian dai zhu yi yu wen hua li lun* [Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism]. Trans. Chan Ming-hsin (Fredric Jameson), Tang Xiaobing. Taibei Shi [Taipei]: He zhi wen shi ye gu fen you xian gong si, 1990.


LEWI Working Paper Series

The LEWI Working Paper Series is an endeavour of LEWI to foster dialogues among institutions and scholars in the field of East-West studies.

Circulation of this series is free of charge. Feedback should be addressed directly to authors. Abstracts of papers can be downloaded from the LEWI web page (http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lewi/publications.html); full text is available upon request.

1. CHAN Kwok Bun (Hong Kong Baptist University), Both Sides, Now: A Sociologist Meditates on Culture Contact, Hybridization, and Cosmopolitanism, English/38 pages, April 2002.

2. Mary Ann GILLIES (Simon Fraser University), East Meets West in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot, English/30 pages, April 2002.

3. TANG Yijie (Peking University), Cultural Interaction and the Bidirectional Option: The Introduction of Indian Buddhism and Western Philosophy into China as Examples, Chinese/14 pages, July 2002.

4. Werner MEISSNER (Hong Kong Baptist University), China’s Response to September 11 and its Changing Position in International Relations, English/15 pages, September 2002.

5. Janet Lee SCOTT (Hong Kong Baptist University), Eastern Variations of Western Apprenticeship: The Paper Offerings Industry of Hong Kong, English/30 pages, October 2002.


7. HO Wai Chung (Hong Kong Baptist University), Between Globalization and Localization: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Music, English/27 pages, January 2003.


9. XIAO Xiaosui (Hong Kong Baptist University), The New-Old Cycle Paradigm and Twentieth Century Chinese Radicalism, English/37 pages, February 2003.

10. George Xun WANG (University of Wisconsin Parkside), CHAN Kwok Bun (Hong Kong Baptist University), and Vivienne LUK (Hong Kong Baptist University), Conflict and its Management in Sino-Foreign Joint Ventures: A Review, English/34 pages, March 2003.


19. 鄭宏泰 (香港大學亞洲研究中心), 黃紹倫 (香港大學亞洲研究中心), 移民與本土：回歸前後香港華人身份認同問題的探討, 共 35 頁, 2003 年 12 月。

20. Victor ZHENG (Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong) and WONG Siu-lun (Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong), Immigrant or Local: A Study on Hong Kong Chinese Identity after Handover, Chinese/35 pages, December 2003.

21. ZHANG Longxi (City University of Hong Kong), Marco Polo, Chinese Cultural Identity, and an Alternative Model of East-West Encounter, English/23 pages, March 2004.

22. CHUNG Ling (Hong Kong Baptist University), The Pacific Rim Consciousness of American Writers in the West Coast, English/18 pages, March 2004.

23. Dorothy Wai-sim LAU (Chu Hai College), Between Personal Signature and Industrial Standards: John Woo as a Hong Kong Auteur in Hollywood, English/27 pages, March 2004.


27. Ramona CURRY (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Bridging the Pacific with Love Eterne: Issues in Early Crossover Marketing of Hong Kong Cinema, English/36 pages, June 2004.

28. WANG Wen (Lanzhou University) and TING Wai (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Beyond Identity? Theoretical Dilemma and Historical Reflection of Constructivism in International Relations*, English/32 pages, August 2004.

29. CHAN Kwok Bun (Hong Kong Baptist University), *The Stranger's Plight, and Gift*, English/17 pages, September 2004.


31. CHAN Kwok Bun (Hong Kong Baptist University) and Vivienne LUK (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Conflict Management Strategies and Change in Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean, and Sino-Taiwanese Joint Ventures in China*, English/38 pages, November 2004.


36. Georgette WANG (Hong Kong Baptist University) and Emile Yueh-yu YEH (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Production: A Tale of Two Films*, English/25 pages, April 2005.


40. CHAN Kwok-bun (Hong Kong Baptist University), LI Xiyuan (Sun Yat-sen University), and Vivienne LUK (Hong Kong Baptist University), *The Cultural Conflicts and Cultural Innovation of Sino-foreign Joint Ventures in China*, Chinese/19 pages, July 2005.
41. CHAN Kwok-bun (Hong Kong Baptist University) and Odalia M.H. WONG (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Private and Public: Gender, Generation and Family Life in Flux*, English/21 pages, August 2005.

42. LEUNG Hon Chu (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Globalization, Modernity, and Careers at Work: Life Politics of Woman Workers in Hongkong-Shenzhen*, English/14 pages, August 2005.

43. CHAN Kwok-bun (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Cosmopolitan, Translated Man, or Stranger? Experimenting with Sociological Autobiography*, English/33 pages, September 2005.

44. CHUNG Po Yin (Hong Kong Baptist University), *Moguls of the Chinese Cinema – the Story of the Shaw Brothers in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, 1924-2002*, English/18 pages, October 2005.

45. Vivian C. SHEER (Hong Kong Baptist University) and CHEN Ling (Hong Kong Baptist University), *The Construction of Fear Appeals in Chinese Print OTC Ads: Extending the Four-Component Message Structure*, English/29 pages, November 2005.

46. 何平 (四川大學)、陳國賁 (香港浸會大學), 中外思想中的文化“雜交”觀念, 共 25 頁, 2005 年 12 月。


48. CHAN Kwok-bun (Hong Kong Baptist University) and Leo DOUW (University of Amsterdam), *Differences, Conflicts and Innovations: An Emergent Transnational Management Culture in China*, English/25 pages, February 2006.


**Submission of Papers**

Scholars in East-West studies who are interested in submitting a paper for publication should send article manuscript, preferably in a WORD file via e-mail, to the Series Secretary’s email address at lewi@hkbu.edu.hk or by post to 9/F., David C. Lam Building, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong. Preferred type is Times New Romans, not less than 11 point. The Editorial Committee will review all submissions and the Institute reserves the right not to publish particular manuscripts submitted. Authors should hear from the Series Secretary about the review normally within one month after submission.