



Seminar

SINKWAN CHENG

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Lecturer, University College London (to commence 1 January, 2016)

*Translation and Comparative 'Begriffsgeschichte' of "Right":
A New Historical Method and a New World History*

Thursday, 24 September, 4:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT SINKWAN CHENG

Over the past decade and a half, Sinkwan Cheng has been awarded ten (inter-)national fellowships in various European and North American countries, including an IAS Fellowship at Durham University, a Rockefeller Fellowship and a DAAD Fellowship. She has given faculty seminars and lectures in the United Kingdom, the United States (including Columbia University), the Netherlands, Germany, China, South Korea, Macau and Hong Kong. Cheng has received an Excellence in Teaching Award in a campus-wide competition at SUNY Buffalo.

Cheng is the editor of *Law, Justice, and Power: Between Reason and Will* (Stanford University Press, 2004). Her writings can also be found in *MLN*, *Cardozo Law Review*, *Law and Literature*, *Literature and Psychology* and *The American Journal of Semiotics*, and refereed venues in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada and Spain. Among her articles are ‘Comparative Philosophies of Tragedy: Buddhism, Lacan and Ashes of Time’ (*MLN*, 2008); ‘Civilization and the Two Faces of Law: J.M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians’ (*Cardozo Law Review*, 2003); ‘Ressentiment, the Superego, and Totalitarianism: George Orwell’s 1984’ (*Cardozo Law Review*, 2003); ‘Translation, the Introduction of Western Time Consciousness into the Chinese Language, and Chinese Modernity’ (in A Hartmann & O Murawska (eds), *Representing the Future: Zur kulturellen Logik der Zukunft*, Transcript Verlag, 2015); ‘*Translatio Temporis* and *Translatio Imperii*: From ‘Wenming versus Civilization’ to ‘Wenming as Civilization’ (in C. Armand, V. Bouillet & D. Ten Eyck (eds), *Enjeux et Positionnements de l’Interdisciplinarité/Positioning Interdisciplinarity*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 2014); ‘Terrorism, Hegel, Honneth’ (*Las Torres de Lucca: Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 2013); and ‘*Fremdwörter* as ‘the Jews of Language’ and Adorno’s Politics of Exile’ (in M. O’Neill, *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, 1999).

During her time at SCAS, Cheng will tackle comparative politics by extending Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* method using translation studies. Her findings include how Chinese translations/interpretations of Western concepts have shaped Chinese politics in a particular direction to date. The central concepts she is exploring include ‘rights’ and ‘citizen’.

ABSTRACT

There are two key Chinese translations of the concept of “right” in Western legal, political, and philosophical discourse. Both translations are inseparable from the history of the Opium Wars. My project demonstrates how the Chinese translations of “right” can make interventions into ongoing debates about that concept in the global age. Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* method underscores the intricate relations between semantic history and sociopolitical history. Taking Koselleck one step further, I demonstrate how the Chinese translations and interpretations of “right” are significant not only for understanding Chinese social and political history; they can also shed new light on British imperial history and world history.

So far, commentators on the key Chinese translations of “right”—*li* (理 moral reason) and *quanli* (權利 power and profit)—have stopped at calling them mistranslations. By contrast, I use the “new” semantics that surface in the Chinese translations to probe an important conceptual shift of “right” in the West—that is, the “subjective turn of right” in the writings of the School of Salamanca during the time of Spanish territorial and commercial expansions. I use *li* and *quanli* to draw out the changes in the meaning of “right” in the West, and explore the social and political circumstances accompanying that change. Expropriating Lacan, I demonstrate how the Chinese “mistranslations” turn out to be the truth of the Subject’s message being returned from the Other in inverted form. Or, in the words of the Tang Emperor Taizhong, “The Other as my mirror helps me understand my strengths and weaknesses” (*The Old Tang History* and *The New Tang History*).

The new historical method I develop goes beyond postcolonial interpretation of subaltern's rendition of the master's idea as distortions or creative transformations. Such readings trap subaltern activities in the reactive mode. Instead of making the subaltern's translation a mere (subversive) *parody* of the Master, I highlight how the Chinese "mistranslations" capture important *truths* about the Master which the latter cannot see in himself. In so doing, I aim at liberating subaltern history from one of mere "regional" significance and restore its agency in world history.