

Book Review: *Translation on Display: Multilingual Texts in Multimodal Museum Space*, by Min-Hsiu Liao, London Routledge, 2025, pp. 188. \$152.00 (hardback) ISBN 978-1-032089914-5.

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Museums serve as custodians of a nation's cultural heritage, entrusted with preserving and showcasing objects that hold deep historical and symbolic significance. These treasures help shape and express a society's cultural identity, resonating across borders and generations. A key aspect of this mission is translation, which ensures that heritage sites are accessible to global audiences. For international visitors, translation is essential to understanding the cultural and historical context of exhibits. In recent years, museum translation has gained attention within Translation Studies, with scholars adapting both linguistic and cultural perspectives, though few dedicated books exist. One notable work is Min-Hsiu Liao's *Translation on Display: Multilingual Texts in Multimodal Museum Space*, which blends Translation and Museum Studies. This book offers insights from a Translation Studies professor focused on museums, filling a gap in this emerging interdisciplinary field.

Liao has consistently demonstrated exceptional insight and creativity in her previous works (Liao, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2023) and has been highly influential in the field of museum translation. She has successfully applied both semiotic and linguistic approaches in her earlier research, and this book is no exception. Although she explicitly states at the outset that the concept of cultural translation is excluded—a perspective that has gained significant attention in recent years—the book offers a compelling exploration of other key aspects. Structured across seven chapters, the book presents a thoughtfully organized progression of concepts: beginning with an introduction to translation in museums, moving to museum objects, then to interpersonal and affective dimensions, followed by museum space, then addressing the role of museums in

urban contexts, and finally implications for the integration of museum and translation. This well-sequenced arrangement ensures that each chapter builds on the previous ones, providing readers with the necessary conceptual groundwork before introducing more complex ideas.

In the opening chapter, Liao discusses evolving views on translation in Museum Studies. She highlights two key concepts: “translation in museums” and “museums as translation”. These notions shape distinct research trajectories and establish boundaries within the field. Similar distinctions have been emphasized by other scholars, including Neather (2024), Rizzo (2022), and Sturge (2014). Previously, Liao (2015) noted that most museum translation research focused on interlingual issues like equivalence and quality. However, in this chapter, she emphasizes that the focus has since shifted significantly toward viewing the museum itself as the act of translation. However, she maintains that the main thrust of her book remains within the realm of translation in museum settings. She also presents the spatial viewpoint that underlies the book’s structure.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive analysis of text-image interaction and verbal-visual relations, drawing on influential models—most notably the groundbreaking framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), whose work, though not exclusive to museums, offers valuable insights applicable to the field. The chapter also discusses different label types and references the significant contribution of Serrell (2015), an esteemed museology scholar. By contextualizing these theoretical models with real examples, Liao enhances reader comprehension and offers practical guidance for curators in crafting effective labels and situating objects based on key principles such as Saliency and Informational Value.

Chapter 3 explores the interpersonal dynamics between museum visitors, objects, and texts. Emphasizing affective practices, it examines how visitors’ emotions are shaped through interactions. This chapter introduces Appraisal Theory—a relatively underexplored framework—as a critical lens for examining how language communicates personal judgment and emotional resonance within museum settings. This chapter highlights Liao’s uniquely creative and thought-provoking perspective on museum practices. Her examples are engaging, particularly her discussion of the Ama Museum in Taiwan, which commemorates the experiences of comfort women. A powerful curatorial choice involves placing audio recordings of survivors at a level where visitors must bend down to listen. While this positioning could be seen as making the

voices less accessible, Liao interprets it differently: bending to hear the voices becomes a symbolic act of respect toward the women's suffering. This insight reflects her broader argument that curators can shape subjectivity and meaning through spatial arrangement and subtle evaluative cues. Her originality and sensitivity are especially evident throughout this chapter, making it a standout in her work.

Chapter 4 explores objects and their accompanying labels not only as entities with their own existence, but also in relation to the spaces they inhabit and interact with. The chapter introduces key concepts such as spatial discourse analysis, geosemiotics, and materiality. Liao approaches materiality not only within the context of museums but also in other fields—such as the translation of religious texts—highlighting its growing relevance in Translation Studies as an emerging area of inquiry. In this chapter, Liao examines how translation can be represented both as a material object and as a material process within these spatial environments.

Chapter 5 begins by exploring museum visitors, focusing on their learning, behavior, and overall visiting experience. Liao then presents a previous case study examining how English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking visitors perceive audio guides. The central theme of this chapter emphasizes the significance of the visitor experience itself, beyond just the museum texts and other exhibits.

Chapter 6 begins by introducing the concepts of first, second, and third space. Liao opens with the emerging trend of studies that explore the relationship between translation and the city, framing cities as “translational” spaces. The chapter then explores the theory of geocriticism, providing a fresh perspective on the spatial and literary dimensions of place. Another notable concept discussed is the creation of translational memory, adding depth to the understanding of translation in urban contexts. To clarify and exemplify these ideas, Liao conducts a case study on a city in Taiwan, illustrating how the chapter's theoretical notions are applied in practice.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the book, exploring the significance of Translation Studies within museum contexts and why this intersection matters. Liao highlights the reciprocal relationship between the two disciplines, noting that “translation studies, traditionally focused on linguistics, have only recently begun to engage with non-verbal semiotics. Conversely, museum studies have long incorporated non-verbal semiotics and are now starting to pay more attention

to linguistic aspects” (p. 168). She ultimately encourages researchers in the field to consider semiotic elements, even when their primary focus is on linguistic aspects.

One of the most commendable strengths of this book lies in its genuinely interdisciplinary approach. By drawing on frameworks and references from a wide range of fields—including Museum Studies, Fine Arts, Tourism, Linguistics, Applied Psychology, and Cultural Geography—the book offers a rich and layered perspective that speaks to both specialists and readers from adjacent disciplines. This multidimensional engagement allows the author to effectively explore the complex nature of meaning-making in museum contexts. Equally impressive is the author’s consistent use of authentic case studies, real-life museum examples, and original photographs, which together add depth and credibility to the discussions. Many of the museum labels are presented not only in their source language but also with literal translations, making the content more accessible to readers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This underscores the book’s commitment to relevance for an international readership. The book also demonstrates a well-crafted narrative structure. At the end of each chapter, the author thoughtfully introduces the theme of the following chapter, allowing for a smooth conceptual transition and sustaining the reader’s engagement throughout the volume. This structural cohesion enhances the overall readability of the book and reinforces the logical progression of its arguments. Another notable strength is how each chapter focuses on a specific theme or mode, while maintaining awareness of the broader multimodal context. What distinguishes each chapter is the shifting emphasis on particular elements, while others remain subtly in the background. Altogether, these features contribute to a well-balanced, insightful, and engaging work that not only advances scholarly discourse in museum translation but also provides valuable methodological guidance for future research.

Despite the book’s many strengths and valuable contributions, there are a number of areas that could benefit from further development. These comments are offered with the intention of expanding the book’s horizons, particularly for newcomers to the field of museum translation. One notable limitation is the book’s deliberate exclusion of cultural translation. The author clearly states that her focus lies in verbal translation, and she acknowledges that research into cultural translation in museums is currently expanding—an evolution from earlier museum translation research, which largely emphasized verbal translation. However, given this

acknowledged shift in the field, the decision to exclude cultural translation entirely feels like a missed opportunity. A dedicated chapter or even a substantial section on this topic would have significantly enriched the book and positioned it as a more comprehensive reference for scholars seeking emerging perspectives and innovative directions.

Additionally, while the author states that the book encompasses a variety of spaces—exhibition venues, galleries, heritage sites, castles, and memorials—many of the examples are drawn predominantly from museums and heritage sites. The inclusion of more examples from art galleries or memorials would have offered a richer, more varied picture of translation practices across different spatial and cultural contexts. Moreover, the linguistic scope of the examples is relatively narrow, focusing primarily on Chinese and English. While this reflects the author's expertise, the inclusion of other language pairs would have broadened the book's appeal. In Chapter 2, the discussion of labels, drawing on Serrell's (2015) framework, is insightful and well presented. However, given the importance of label types and their functions in museum communication and translation, it would have been helpful to introduce additional label types. For instance, citing alternative classifications such as those in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (1993) could have provided readers with a broader perspective.

Furthermore, there are moments—such as on page 27—where labels are discussed without specifying their types or features, which may limit the practical utility of the discussion for those working with or studying museum text genres. Finally, there are a few instances where terminological consistency could be improved. For example, in Chapter 5, the term *cognitive map* is introduced and even emphasized through quotation marks (p. 118), signaling its conceptual significance. Yet on the following page (p. 120), the same concept is referred to as a *mental map*. While both terms are related, such shifts can cause confusion and potentially disrupt the reader's understanding.

In conclusion, *Translation on Display: Multilingual Texts in Multimodal Museum Space* offers a timely and valuable contribution to both academic scholarship and professional practice. By highlighting the central role of language in shaping museum experiences, the book fills a critical gap in Museum Studies, where verbal interpretation has often been overlooked despite the field's longstanding engagement with themes such as exhibition design and visitor interaction. Through its interdisciplinary lens—drawing on Translation Studies, Tourism, Heritage, and Cultural

Studies—it not only enriches theoretical discourse but also equips readers with practical insights. By examining meaning-making across different spatial scales, the book advances analytical tools that are highly relevant to scholars and practitioners alike. Its practical orientation makes it a particularly useful resource for translators, curators, and museum professionals who aim to enhance accessibility and cultural communication in museum spaces. Ultimately, this work serves as a much-needed bridge between disciplines and will inspire further research and innovation in both Museum and Translation Studies.

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