I have become interested in the way in which the Anglo-American imagination has seized on certain terms and concepts from Chinese as being key indicators of the essence of Chinese culture or ‘Chineseness’, just as footbinding for women and wearing a queue for men were once singled out as physical markers of being Chinese. In the history of translation between Chinese and English, I have chosen three concepts for discussion in this paper today: guanxi, lian/mianzi, and xiao. These three concepts are all well-known in Chinese, if perhaps not always clearly defined, and certainly most Chinese would recognize the importance of at least one of them, xiao. They are also all firmly associated in popular English-language discourse with China, in their various guises. Xiao has crossed over in an act of equivalence as ‘filial piety’, mianzi/lian has crossed over in the calquing of one idiomatic expression “to lose face” and the invention of another, “to save face”, while guanxi has crossed over in both transliterated form (guanxi) and a number of equivalents, including ‘connection’ and ‘network’. All have had a considerable ‘afterlife’ in translation, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s term, and in this paper I will trace the history of those afterlives and reflect on what their differing fates might be able to tell us about translation as part of a process of constructing intercultural meaning.

After completing his PhD in comparative literature at the University of Chicago, James St. André spent a year in Taiwan doing postdoctoral research on translation history. His first teaching position was in the Chinese Department of the National University of Singapore, where he spent six years before accepting a joint appointment in East Asian studies and translation studies at the University of Manchester, where he teaches history, theory and practice of translation. Recent publications include articles in The Translator, TTR, and Translation and Interpreting Studies, as well as two edited volumes, Thinking Through Translation with Metaphors (St. Jerome 2010) and, with Peng Hsiao-yen, China and Its Others: Knowledge Transfer through Translation, 1829-2010 (Rodopi 2012).