

# Translation as Mirroring: Untranslatability and How to Deal with It

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I will focus on translation as a cultural appropriation. I argue translation could be a philosophy which has a built-in anxiety for questions, and it could also be a transfiguration *from* and *for* literature, which tries to respond to questions but never intends to fully answer them. When so many people have already discussed either the absence or presence of translation and translators, I would rather focus more on how the metaphor of ‘mirror’ helps us see translation as both absent presences and present absences. In my eyes, the gap between original texts and translation versions, and the attempt to fill in the gap are both beneficial, which contribute immensely to the comprehension of different aesthetics and value judgements. I will put forward some further questions about untranslatability in the concluding part.

*His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created. (Trilling, 1972, p. 25)*

Translation studies have always been haunted by two key questions: Can translations cross borders? Why do we need to read translations? When Auerbach (1969) says, ‘in any event, our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation’ (p. 17), world literature both as a discipline and a practice has demystified itself before us. And in the meantime, we begin to realize that translations play a very important role both in helping us to reach out across time and space to others, and hastening the approach of *Weltliteratur* (World Literature). However, the two questions remain unanswered. This essay will try to respond to the questions by bringing my own observations of translation studies, and Western and Chinese literary traditions into a further discussion, which include the following aspects: something lost and something gained through the loss in translation; translation and the comprehension of other aesthetics and value judgements; translation as mirroring which reflects both ourselves and others; untranslatability and how to deal with it.

## Loss and Gain of Translation

Auerbach once said that ‘the most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist’s heritage is still his own nation’s culture and language’ (Auerbach, 1969, p. 17). As a Chinese, I am deeply enchanted by the exuberant vitality and imaginations embodied in traditional Chinese culture, especially its ancient poetry and philosophical aesthetics. Regarding these masterpieces as not what merely belong to my own nation, I am eager to know how they travel to other parts of the world through translation.

I referred to *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, and noticed that three ancient Chinese philosophers were included in the book under the title of *Early Chinese Literature and Thought*. They are Confucius (551–479 B. C. E.), Laozi (sixth–third centuries B. C. E.) and Zhuangzi (fourth–second centuries B. C. E.). I found out that some translations

could be misleading. I will firstly take Laozi's book, *Daodejing* as an example. Several chapters of the book are chosen in the anthology to represent Laozi's key thoughts, and each chapter is entitled by the first line which begins it. Chapter one is entitled 'The way that can be spoken of'. And the whole sentence means 'if *Dao* can be spoken of, then it is not constant *Dao*'. Firstly, *Dao* could mean 'the way', but is much richer in meanings. It can refer to either the path we walk on, or our modes of behaviour. Most importantly, it reflects a mixture of all the complex and profound meanings concerning how ancient Chinese think about life and death, constancy and mutability, interiority and exteriority. Chapter four is entitled 'The way is empty'. According to my understanding, what Laozi tries to emphasize is not the emptiness of *Dao*, but rather, *Dao* could not be contained within a certain sphere because it could float everywhere; *Dao* should not be embodied by something concrete because it escapes materialization; *Dao* may not be properly described, because it escapes all kinds of definitions in a wise way. 'Emptiness' might mean hollowness, or when used metaphorically, it can refer to someone who does not have enough capabilities to fulfil himself or herself. But maybe what Laozi aims at showing us is not the emptiness of *Dao*, but that *Dao* could be seen as an empty vessel which is filled by profundity, transcendence and the celestial spirit.

The translation of the title of chapter five is also misleading in my eyes. It is translated as 'Heaven and Earth are ruthless'. 'Ruthless' seems to carry with itself a rather negative meaning. For instance, we may describe a fate as ruthless, or we may want to use the word when we refer to a sudden deprivation of something precious from us by an unseen force. However, this may not be what Laozi truly means. What Laozi intends to convey could be that heaven and earth are not ruthless, but rather, impartial and impersonal, and therefore they can distinguish themselves from secular sentiments. Laozi's concept, 'impartiality', differs from philosophical aesthetics embodied in Confucius's *Analects* which focuses on *concrete* benevolence and kindness in a social community. Laozi attempts to jump out of these secular boundaries. He admires *Dao* deeply when it fulfils itself through impartiality and becomes the radiation of *transcendent* love and kindness. Chapter sixteen is entitled 'I do my utmost to attain emptiness'. But what Laozi truly means is 'I intend to attain the utmost *Dao*'. What Laozi emphasizes could be more about a real *Dao* distinguishing itself from *Dao* in common-sensical discourses, and an utmost degree, rather than the *process* of attaining *Dao* as suggested in this translation.

By referring to the above-said cases, I have discovered the loss and gain, the ambiguity, vagueness and incompleteness in translation versions of traditional Chinese philosophy. I want to know whether Chinese readers face similar situations when reading translations of English literature. George Eliot is one of my favourite authors in English literature. I like her *Middlemarch* in particular, especially because of the most beautifully ever-written words in chapter twenty of the book:

Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (Eliot, 2000, p. 124)

I referred to the Chinese translation version published by *People's Literature Publishing House* in 2006:

“在新的真实的未来代替想象的未来时，心头产生一些失望，一些困惑，这并不是罕见的，既然并不罕见，人们也不必为此惶恐不安。接触频繁本身便蕴藏着悲剧因素，好

在它还无法渗入人类粗糙的感情，我们的心灵恐怕也不能完全容纳它。要是我们的视觉和知觉，对人生的一切寻常现象都那么敏感，那就好比我们能听到青草生长的声音和松鼠心脏的跳动，在我们本来认为沉寂无声的地方，突然出现了震耳欲聋的音响，这岂不会把我们吓死。事实正是这样，我们最敏锐的人在生活中也往往是麻木不仁的。”（项星耀（译）：《米德尔马契》. 北京：人民文学出版社，2006年，第188页）  
Xiang Xingyao trans, *Middlemarch*. Beijing: People's literature publishing house, 2006.)

If I re-translate the Chinese back into English literally, it would be 'when the new real future replaces the imaginary future, it is ordinary that people will feel a little bit disappointed and puzzled. Now that it is not unordinary, people do not need to feel upset about it. Our frequent attachments carry some tragic elements, and it is very good that they are not absorbed into people's coarse emotions. I am afraid our heart could not contain these emotions completely. If our vision and perception are so alert to all the ordinary phenomena in life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and it would certainly frighten us to death when we hear roaring sounds in the place supposed to be silent. This is the very fact we face, and the most acute people among us are usually very indifferent'. This translation version in my eyes reveals a completely different George Eliot, and a completely different *Middlemarch* through which George Eliot tries to both crystalize and mystify the subtleties.

George Eliot as I understand her, intends to say human beings may not have enough knowledge to fully absorb the concept of tragedy. Tragic elements could be pervading everywhere, which may include the moment when a newly-wed girl suddenly finds out that marriage is not something she previously imagined. Such is human nature that people will not be startled by something ordinary, and perhaps this is because the coarse emotions and expressions of mankind are not enough to carry the weight of burdens coming from both secular and imaginary world. And if we try to approach too close to some minute details hidden both interior and exterior, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, which will be too much for us to withhold. Those who walk quickly among us *choose* to be stupid towards all the roaring of subtle emotions. And because they get rid of these psychological burdens, they move relatively faster on the track. It is as if I could hear the melancholy, confusion and all the philosophical paradoxes within George Eliot, when she wrote down these words to try to express something inexpressible. The Chinese translation seems to sink all the subtleties into absolutes, which already represent a different narrative.

### Paradox of Translation as that of the Language Itself

I happened to read Berthold Franke's comments on translation in an article entitled 'Why read translations? Or, why there is no borderless literature and why that is not bad at all'.<sup>1</sup> He firstly sees the problems not merely within the sphere of translation, but also literature in general. He begins by talking about previous criticism laid on translations, and then concludes,

If we take the above-mentioned in regard to translations seriously, namely that their unconditional commitment to the source text, their fidelity to the original stands, always under the systematic reservation of possible failure, which means that the only chance of successful translation is the creative handling of this necessary aporia or internal contradiction, then this actually expresses not only the problem of translation alone, but the fundamental dilemma of literature itself.

These words are so powerful that I began to reflect on my own reading experiences accordingly. And I realize that when I read either ancient Chinese philosophy in my mother tongue, or George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in English, in fact I already translate them interiorly and unconsciously, just like how translators have projected their own

interpretations into literary texts and finally achieve a creative rebellion. There is something lost but also something gained through the loss in translation.

Berthold goes on arguing that not only the act of reading, but the act of writing also follows the same logic. Authors may want to use language to carry the weight of something transcendent, ungraspable and profound, but they can never totally achieve that. He compares this always-unachievable to *Paradise Lost* both as a literary term and a reality. He argues,

Paradise, that is the innocence that results from the unity of creature and nature. This unity is lost forever with the fall of mankind, the human being becomes a cultural being, is thrown into civilization and language. And with this language it attempts, again and again and always in vain, to heal this loss.

Lionel Trilling mentions a similar point in *Sincerity and Authenticity* when he observes the phenomenon, ‘down goes the audience, up comes the artist’, as both drastic and paradoxical. He senses something ‘gained through the loss’. Trilling argues, ‘the loss of its Eden of gratified desire brings with it covenants of redemption and the offer of a higher, more significant life’ (Trilling, 1972, pp. 97-98). Likewise, even though the loss in translations and language will be irretrievable, just like the lost paradise, our effort to reconstruct the original texts can breathe into them another sense of life. And any attempt to heal the loss will always be relevant, essential and worthwhile.

Berthold also describes the miraculous moment when readers finally understand most of the magic of literature and say in intense raptures, ‘yes, precisely, that’s it’. All previous ambiguities suddenly dissolve, and literary texts begin to ring a bell. His concluding remarks deem the paradox of literature as that of the language itself. He says, ‘the paradox of literature is the paradox of language – to be both a border and a delimitation, freedom and isolation, a dead-end and a journey into the open, at the same time’. We should therefore embed the paradox of literature in our thinking patterns and behaviours by thinking paradoxically, which can not only revitalize our own literary tradition, but may also help us see translations with more tolerance and respect. Translations could at least enlighten more entryways into interpretations of literary texts, which would be beneficial.

### Translators’ Creative Rebellions

With this new perspective, I revisit the above-mentioned translation versions and they become wonderful examples of creative rebellions and cross-cultural communications. ‘The way’ may not be enough to describe the true essence of *Dao* in ancient Chinese philosophy, but it could also be a depiction of the incarnating process, which helps *Dao* reach out to people living afar more concretely. ‘Empty’ may be a wrong way of comprehending the exuberance of *Dao*, however, deeming *Dao* as exuberant is also my personal interpretation, even though I may share these thoughts in common with several others. Besides, we can also to some extent say, by categorizing *Dao* as empty, it is another wonderful embodiment of the paradoxical elements within *Dao* itself, which could be spiritually exuberant because of being materially empty, and which could be both near and far, present and absent, abstract and concrete, expressible and inexplicable. We never really know what is in a translator’s mind, just like we can never totally understand an author’s original intentions.

I then turn to English translations of *Zhuangzi* (fourth-second centuries B. C. E.). Chapter one is entitled ‘Free and Easy Wandering’. ‘Free’ and ‘easy’ still seem rather westernized in describing the eternal mental bliss *Zhuangzi* tries to convey through his works. However, when I think of ‘free’ not only as a depiction of human rights

proposed by western reformers, but also as a floating spirit which could get rid of all the burdens and shadows, and 'easy' not only used to depict a western lifestyle but also a mental attitude, I feel peaceful. I also feel very grateful that my very reading of this translation version helps me jump out of my own cultural jargons, and then enrich the understanding of both my language and my culture.

Previously I might think of the translation of chapter two of *Zhuangzi*, 'Discussion on Making All things Equal' as a misunderstanding, because in original Chinese, what Zhuangzi emphasizes may be more about how we should *treat* everything in an equal way. He stresses more upon an attitude and a final choice we should cling to, rather than a concrete behaviour as suggested in 'making'. Zhuangzi thinks such an attitude will help deconstruct anthropocentrism and promote harmony among all creatures. But now I think the translation version also makes sense in Chinese contexts, because every effort to *make* things equal will help people eventually to *treat* things in an equal way.

When I now revisit the Chinese translation of *Middlemarch*, I feel peaceful again after I read through the whole book and find that at least key thoughts of the novel remain. It will always be difficult, or in most cases, in vain to translate the style, for instance, when Eliot uses a subtle way, while the translator chooses a style of 'absolute'. However, if we see from another perspective, it is just because 'style' could not travel entirely, needs to be transformed and then fits into a target culture through translators' own observations, that makes the process of translation so valuable, important and creative.

### Translations of Different Aesthetics and Value Judgements

I begin to accept and understand that translations serve as crossroads in cross-cultural encounters, especially when nobody could ever claim to be masters of all existing language systems in this world. It is sometimes difficult to enter into a different value system, and we should therefore be grateful to translators' arduous efforts. Many aesthetics and philosophy unique to a nation are embodied in literary works and thoughts. And it is a translator's responsibility to make people in a target context share the uniqueness. In order to preserve the uniqueness well, translators must never be oblivious to the "otherness" of this language and culture that they are seeking to understand, while at the same time use creative rebellions in a proper way. A distinguished Chinese translator, Xu Yuanchong, exemplifies a translator's creative rebellion to the utmost, and is a master in both Chinese and English. I am particularly fascinated by how he translates the image of moon and wind which are used metaphorically in traditional Chinese poetry, and makes more western readers get to understand traditional Chinese aesthetics and how Chinese aesthetics might also be relevant to the literary traditions of their own.

In Chinese poetic traditions, poets like making use of scenery depictions to convey both subtle and concrete meanings. The image of moon and wind are among Chinese poets' favourites. Poets usually combine the gentle breeze and bright moonlight together in their poems. For instance, in *History of the South* (nan shi), the author uses the image of wind and moonlight to show a spiritual strength, and a perpetual longing for the nobility of mankind. 'Only the gentle breeze could reach where I dwell, and only the bright moonlight could accompany me when I drink wine' <sup>2</sup> (Li, 1976, p. 560). The following examples of ancient Chinese poems focusing on the image of moon and wind are all translated by Xu Yuanchong in the most creative way. I use them as case studies to show not only a translator's creative rebellion, but also how translations help people better understand different aesthetics and value judgements.

A famous Chinese poet, Yuan Haowen in Yuan Dynasty once wrote a poem, *Tune: Man and Moon (Moving to My Mother's East Garden)*, in which he describes the moon as bright and enjoyable, the breeze as light and refreshing.

Hill on hill keeps apart the vanity fair / From this village of bumper year. / I move house to come near / The window-enframed distant hill/ And the pine-trees behind the windowsill. / I'll leave the woods and fields to the care / Of my children dear / So that I may do what I will. / Awake, I'll enjoy the moon so bright; / Drunk, the refreshing breeze so light. (Xu, 2008, *300 Yuan Songs*, p. 2)

In this poem, only the brightness of the moon and the lightness of the breeze can bring to the poet an eternal spiritual shelter. Xin Qiji, a poet in Song Dynasty also combined breeze and moonlight together in his poem, *The Moon over the West River*, to show how lovely a tender night could be.

Startled by magpies leaving the branch in moonlight, / I hear cicadas shrill in the breeze at midnight. / The rice fields' sweet smell promises a bumper year; / Listen, how frogs' croaks please the ear! / Beyond the clouds seven or eight stars twinkle; / Before the hills two or three raindrops sprinkle. / There is an inn beside the village temple. Look! / The winding path leads to the hut beside the brook. (Xu, 2006, *300 Song Lyrics*, p. 365)

A well-known poet, Su Shi, in Song Dynasty, who is famous for embodying a great artistic strength and a magnanimous mind in poetry and art, also refers to breeze and moonlight for a mental comfort. This poem is entitled *Courtyard Full of Fragrance*.

For fame as vain as a snail's horn / And profit as slight as a fly's head, / Should I be busy and forlorn? / Fate rules for long, / Who is weak? Who is strong? / Not yet grown old and having leisure, / Let me be free to enjoy pleasure! / Could I be drunk in a hundred years, / Thirty-six hundred times without shedding tears? / Think how long life can last, / Though sad and harmful storms I've passed. / Why should I waste my breath / Until my death, / To say the short and long / Or right and wrong? / I am happy to enjoy clear breeze and the moon bright, / Green grass outspread / And a canopy of cloud white. / The Southern shore is fine / With a thousand cups of wine / And the courtyard fragrant with song. (Xu, 2006, *300 Song Lyrics*, p. 433)

The whole life may be a perpetual mutability, and people struggle for fame and recognition through their whole life-time. But if there could be something that alleviates the sense of solitude and anxiety, in Su Shi's eyes, nothing could be better than the moon hanging in the sky, or the touch of the breeze which could comb one's hair in the gentlest way. People all around the nation share the very same moon every night, and it can therefore in a metaphorical sense unite solitary people together. The gentle breeze can travel from one side of the world to another, and carries with itself well wishes from people we have not known from far away.

Wei Zhuang, a poet in Tang dynasty, makes use of the image of moon and breeze as concluding remarks for his entire poem, *Farewell to a Japanese Monk*.

The land of mulberry is in the boundless sea; / Your home's farther east to the land of mulberry. / Who would arrive with you at the land of your dreams? / A sail unfurled in wind, a boat steeped in moonbeams.(Xu, 2006, *300 Tang Poems*, p. 131)

When Wei Zhuang waves goodbye to a friend, he borrows the metaphorical meanings of the moon symbolizing 'companion' and 'brightness to drive away darkness', and of the wind symbolizing 'a driving force for the ascendancy', which successfully changes emotions previously ungraspable into an artistic expression both transcendent and concrete. 'The land of your dreams' is added to the translation version by Xu Yuanchong, to rhyme with 'moonbeams'. And this alteration has changed the poem from aesthetics of realism to aesthetics of both realism and fantasy when it reaches its western audience.

In the above-mentioned examples, Xu Yuanchong is faithful to the essence of what traditional Chinese poems intend to convey, and at the same time deliberately deletes

or adds some parts to conform to rhymes in western poetry, such as the use of rhyming couplets. The image of moon and wind depicted in his translations are both fresh and familiar to me, which is due to both his faithfulness and rebellion. ‘Loss and gain’ could therefore not be a haunting problem that translation studies face, but rather, a translator’s deliberate design or creative manipulations. Through Xu Yuanchong’s translation, I feel the strength and beauty coming from both language systems, as well as a tendency for them to commingle. When I read how the moon and wind are embodied in these translations, it also seems to me as if another version of my favourite theme song, *Into the West*, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* were just by my ear.

Lay down / Your sweet and weary head / Night is falling / You have come to journey’s end. / Sleep now, / and dream of the ones who came before. / They are calling / from across the distant shore. / Why do you weep? / What are these tears upon your face? / Soon you will see / All of your fears will pass away / safe in my arms / you are only sleeping. / What can you see / on the horizon? / Why do the white gulls call? / Across the sea / a pale moon rises / The ships have come to carry you home. / Dawn will turn / to silver glass / A light on the water / All souls pass. / ...

This epic song also refers to the moonlight. When the moon casts its dancing light on the water, all fears begin to vanish and pass away. Embedded in the solitude and serenity of the moonbeam, the boundary between reality and dreams is for this very moment blurred. Western poetic imaginations and Chinese traditional poetry commingle at this point, in sharing aesthetics regarding the moon, even though Chinese and western people may refer to the metaphor of moonlight quite differently in other literary texts.

This discovery of the interrelatedness between Chinese and western literary traditions pushes me to reflect upon both with some further thoughts. In ancient China, when many scholars could not express their genuine emotions in a hostile political context, they refer to flowers and grass to convey a perpetual longing for a recognition, therefrom an expression, ‘fragrant grass and the beauty’ (*xiang cao mei ren* 香草美人), is used to show ancient scholars’ noble mind, patriotism as well as inner fear and desire. Some male poets compare themselves to flowers and beautiful women in the subtlest way. In western literary tradition, poets also make use of beautiful and profound metaphors, and Chinese therefore get to know Percy Bysshe Shelley by his *Ode to the West Wind*, and John Keats by his *Ode to a Nightingale*. Metaphors play a great part in shaping aesthetics and expressing the inexplicable. I really like the theme song, *When You Believe*, of the movie, *The Prince of Egypt*. Some of the lyrics indeed ring a bell, and from my perspective connect miraculously with what traditional Chinese poets intend to convey but can never convey to the utmost.

Many nights we pray / With no proof anyone could hear / And our hearts a hopeful song / We barely understood / Now we are not afraid / Although we know there’s much to fear / We were moving mountains long / Before we know we could /.../ When prayer so often proves in vain / Hope seems like the summer birds / Too swiftly flown away / And now I am standing here / My heart’s so full I can’t explain/ Seeking faith and speaking words / I never thought I’d say...

As is conveyed in the lyrics of this song, people pray night after night longing and hoping for a response, although no signs could show a promising future on its way. For me this is like what is conveyed by traditional Chinese poets. They also have a perpetual longing for something unpredictable, and then turn these melancholic thoughts into poems, by comparing themselves to flowers and beautiful women, with a hope that the poems may ring a bell and arouse imaginations in future audience’s heart. In the lyrics of this song, hope is compared to a bird which flies away so swiftly, and people’s hearts could be compared to a song, which we barely understand. In traditional Chinese

poetry, people also like singing and singing out their poems. The rhyme of their poems matches perfectly well with the melody of a song. There is always a beautiful rhythmic melody both within Chinese and western poetic traditions, which helps poets and artists immensely, to change something ungraspable into a musicality when language fails to function.

Ancient Chinese poets like the metaphorical meaning of peach blossoms very much, which they think can convey the beauty and elegance of a girl about to wed, as the sixth poem in *Book of Poetry* (ca. 1000–600 B. C. E.) suggests. Stephen Owen translated the title of this poem literally into ‘Peach Tree Soft and Tender’ (Owen, 1996, p. 34), while Xu Yuanchong translated it as ‘The newly-wed’ (Yan, 2020, p. 8) to make the subtle meaning clearer. Both efforts are very precious and meaningful, and both make great contributions to the further traveling of the poem. To understand a certain culture, we need to know and understand its metaphors. And to depict another culture, it is also very crucial that the translator should *use* metaphors from both traditions well, so that target readers can very quickly gain both something homely and something foreign, which to some extent compensates for the loss in the translation process. And in this sense, a good translator should also be a good writer.

### Translation as Mirroring

With the above-said thoughts in my mind, I now regard translation as a mirroring with translators’ creative rebellion. In *The Story of the Stone*, chapter twelve is about ‘a mirror for the romantic’ (*feng yue bao jian* 风月宝鉴), which literally means a mirror for the wind and the moon. And Cao Xueqin, the author of this novel, also once thought about using ‘a mirror for the romantic’ as the title for the whole book, from which we can see that ‘mirror’ and ‘mirroring’ play a very important part in literary imaginations. But I would like to put it further. From my perspective, ‘mirror’ is not only a metaphor depicted in Chinese and western literary thoughts, but should be the true essence and methodology of translation as well. ‘Mirror’ as a metaphor helps us see translation and other cultural phenomena both more subjectively and objectively, with all the imperfections, ruptures and possibilities.

In Stephen Owen’s book, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Literature*, he depicts the relationship between remembering and what is remembered in the following way:

The imitation is perpetually imperfect and unfulfilled; if it achieved perfection, it would no longer be itself, becoming instead the thing imitated. A similar gap occurs between remembering and what is remembered, but a gap of time, loss, and incompleteness intervenes. Memory too is always secondary, posterior. The force of literature lives in that gap, that veiling, which simultaneously promises and denies access. (Owen, 1986, p. 2)

Stephen Owen aims at illustrating that the present could never be a faithful reproduction of the past. Past experiences as a *mimesis* are ‘secondary’, ‘posterior’, and will always be ‘imperfect’ and ‘unfulfilled’. History itself is with a fictional element. When we attempt to trace back to a historical period, which can always be said to be relevant to our own, but we never truly know how much it is relevant, we are always being subjective. From my perspective, what Stephen Owen says can also help explain the nature and charm of translation. The nature of translation is, although it is a traveling concept and can at least cross borders physically, it will always be ‘secondary’, ‘posterior’, ‘imperfect’ and ‘unfulfilled’. But the charm of translation is, it lives in and thrives on that language gap, that imperfect mirroring, that unfaithful imitation, that veiling, that always-be-unapproachable. The nature and charm of translation could also be that of language itself,



as a way of living, interpretation and survival. As George Steiner puts it, he dedicates his book, *After Babel*, to “all those who love language, who experience language as formative of their humanity. Above all, it addresses itself, in hope of response, to poets. Which is to say to anyone who makes the language live and who knows that the affair at Babel was both a disaster and – this being the etymology of the word ‘disaster’ – a rain of stars upon man.” (Steiner, 1998, p. xviii) Translation studies and aspects of language and untranslatability could not only be a reality we face, but also a metaphor we create.

Poetry and literary traditions are untranslatable to some extent, because language and literature themselves are exemplifications of an author’s own mental maps which could not be fully translated. But poetry and literary traditions are also translatable to some extent due to translators’ sharp observations and exuberant imaginations. Besides, I believe there is always something people from all parts of the world share in common with each other, which could either be artistic talents or poetic imaginations. Understanding poetic traditions and aesthetics in both the West and the East helps me show more respect to translators and their contributions. And understanding translation as a deliberate misuse, appropriation or rebellion makes me demystify as well as living with the mystique in different poetic traditions better. Red Pine says in the introduction to his translation version of *Daodejing*<sup>3</sup> that Laozi<sup>4</sup> ‘redirects our vision to this ancient mirror’ (Pine, 1996). He refers to how Laozi makes use of the image of the moon as an ancient mirror. How wonderful when poetics, imageries, philosophical thoughts and translations all serve as a certain kind of mirroring could be! In Renaissance period, people usually do not see themselves in the mirror, but others. As Debora Shuger tells us, “the majority of Renaissance mirrors – or rather, mirror metaphors – do reflect a face, but not the face of the person in front of the mirror. Typically, the person looking in the mirror sees an exemplary image, either positive or negative.” (Shuger, 1999, p. 22) Since Renaissance humanism is so essential to translation studies and comparative literature as a discipline, we may also want to borrow the metaphorical meanings of mirrors in the period to better reflect on the modern era – how the recognition of others contributes to the cognition of ourselves.

When William E. Cain further reflects upon Shakespeare, theatre and audience, he says, ‘It is out separateness from the characters, the disjunction between them and us, the not seeing and not knowing of their thinking, that paradoxically connects us to them across an impassable distance. We connect through separation’ (Cain, 2017, p. 54). He values more about Shakespeare’s absences and gaps rather than presences and the attempt to fill in the gap. But I would like to misuse it a bit and apply it to translation studies. I advocate both an absent presence and a present absence. For me, an author’s real intention is like an absent presence – the author being absent physically while present imaginarily and psychologically. The author has left traces within literary texts, which shape readers and translators’ imaginations and psychology. And translators’ effort is like a present absence – the translator being always present because he or she must contribute certain subjectivity for practical purposes, while still trying hard to ‘touch the real’ as coined by Stephen Greenblatt, by being metaphorically and psychologically absent as if they wore an invisible cloak. Both the gaps between original literary texts and translations, and the attempts to fill in the gap are beneficial in my eyes. William E. Cain coins a phrase, ‘we connect through separation’, and I would like to coin another. We connect and separate, and then connect again. We connect to show different cultures and value systems can commingle at certain point; we then separate because every culture still has its own unique characteristics which could never be fully translated and had better remain unsaid; we connect again because all those unspeakable things are in fact the real charm and strength of cross-cultural understanding, which will help eventually explain better both the concept and practice of *Weltliteratur* (World Literature).

A distinguished scholar in comparative literature, Zhang Longxi, once wrote an essay based on textual evidence, which draws a connection between how mirrors are depicted in both Chinese and western literary traditions. I would like to take his concluding remarks also as my own:

What a comparative and cross-cultural horizon allows us to see is the wonderful confluence of human imagination beyond the differences of language, culture, and literary convention, while always retaining the specificities of each of the world's languages and literatures in our deep appreciation. Every literary creation is particular and unique in its own way, but isn't it always a great joy to detect and appreciate the inner connections of the human mind and human imagination beyond the endless varieties of literary creation? (Zhang, 2019, p. 612)

Through translation, its loss, gains through the loss, and elements that are untranslatable, we get to hear and appreciate sounds and poetics from another literary tradition, and then most delightedly find something both different from and similar to our own. And when we begin to realize every reading or writing experience is already a translation, we have also been translated, and then most cheerfully choose to engage ourselves more into the vastness of cultural and poetical heritage shared by humankind.

I mostly agree with James O. Young when he concludes his book, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* by proposing that,

In a world where cultures are still in conflict, arguably the world needs more content appropriation, not less. Artists who appropriate from other cultures, and the audiences of these artists, often come to have a greater appreciation of the value of other ways of living. (Young, 2008, p.157)

He also argues elsewhere in the book that 'cultural appropriation endangers a culture, not when others borrow from it, but when its members borrow too extensively from others' (Young, 2008, p.153). When outsiders borrow certain elements from insiders, a mirroring happens. It promotes harmony among different aesthetics and value judgements, enlightens more literary imaginations and poetic talents, while still preserving the uniqueness and subjectivity of each culture well. I propose that we should see translation as such a mirroring, and it functions in the following ways: we understand that there could be reflections of our literary masterpieces; we see others reflected in our cultural contexts; we see ourselves reflected in other cultural backgrounds. These reflections help us understand both ourselves and others, not through imitation, but imagination and communication, with sincerity and creativity, in a wise way.

### Some Further Thoughts and Questions

Shakespeare has become a cultural code for Chinese audiences. And there have already been many researches about translating and adapting Shakespeare's plays into Chinese contexts. As a Chinese, I always wish to know, why Chinese tend to have an excessive reverence for Shakespeare even though the Elizabethan and Jacobean age in and for which Shakespeare wrote his plays are so different from our own. What do we really get, or learn from Shakespeare?

When I was a child, the first Shakespeare's play I knew was *Romeo and Juliet*. But for me and perhaps for many other Chinese audiences, this play is more of a romance rather than a tragedy. I was so impressed by young Romeo and Juliet's passionate and energetic love that I never thought about how Juliet's age could influence our interpretations of this play, the significance of the balcony scene within the entire narrative, and the importance of the fact that Juliet is not Romeo's first lover, whether there could be another ending if the Friar's letter is not held up by the quarantine measures, the

importance of the prologue and how the 1996 film version brilliantly makes use of and dramatizes the prologue, and linguistic interpretations of the play including Juliet's contemplations of 'name': 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?'

In a recent conference about Shakespeare and music, a Chinese scholar mentioned a famous Chinese pop song entitled *Liang Shanbo and Juliet* (梁山伯与茱丽叶). The tragic love of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is among Chinese ancient classic folklores. One version of their tragic story goes like this: Zhu Yingtai dresses herself as a boy in order to go to classes, where she meets Liang Shanbo and falls in love with him. Liang Shanbo's love for Zhu Yingtai awakens the moment when he knows she is a girl. However, due to family relations and many other reasons, they could not be a happy pair. Liang dies first, and Zhu follows him and accepts the sweet doom of death in order to mourn for their love. They later turn into butterflies dancing around every part of the world. And when the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai encounters *Romeo and Juliet*, we may feel blissful that Chinese and western cultures can commingle. However, I notice some unsettling elements in the lyrics of the song. I have found out that the lyrics seem to discuss love *in general* and fail to recognize the particularity of both stories. For instance, the repetitive sentences in the lyrics are "I love you, you are my Romeo. I want to become your Zhu Yingtai," and "I love you, you are my Juliet. I want to become your Liang Shanbo." This may be already too far from what original stories try to convey: Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's strong determinations and beautiful stubbornness, Juliet's poetic and innocent imaginations and Romeo's young and naïve bravery. What is even more unsettling is: are these two tragic stories really comparable? In fact, they may share no similarities apart from merely two facts: a love story and a tragic story. We may say musical adaptations can reflect a composer's personal landscape, which could at once be a borrowing and a creative rebellion. But if what we borrow from *Romeo and Juliet* or *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* is nothing but love in general, does it show more of a reverence and fondness for original texts, or an ignorance and misuse of them? Another question is: is it really ethical, or proper to use pop songs to re-enter or re-interpret Shakespeare's texts? When the form shows an unbearable lightness, how could we carry the weight of the tragedy and profundity of Shakespeare?

I also attended another Shakespeare conference recently, during which a brilliant scholar, Duncan Lees, discussed Chinese audience's reception of Shakespeare. He is still working on the inter-cultural education and what Chinese readers really get from Shakespeare when they have little knowledge of, or maybe do not wish to explore further Shakespeare's contexts. His speech was quite thought-provoking, and at that time I was firmly holding on to the assumption that Shakespeare could be translated and every new translation or adaptation in fact helped Shakespeare have a new life. But now I realize that the real problematic thing is in fact not translations themselves, but interpretations based on translation versions, in other words, interpretations of interpretations. I hope to explore the theme of translation a bit further, not to legitimize every translation in a well-established framework of world literature, not only to discuss the loss and gain in translations and adaptations, but also how to *express* the linguistic and cultural differences for the ultimate purpose of promoting cross-cultural understanding.

A great Chinese scholar, Liu Hao, gives a fruitful and exuberant analysis of Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's contributions to world drama in her paper entitled 'Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu: Their Significance to the Formation of World Drama.' She argues most beautifully that 'to start the new lives of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare in the "world," we may need to embrace the loss of some 'original' flavours as well as the gain of new productivity in their circulation, and remind ourselves of the coexistence of the diverse standards for works that are both part of a national canon and a source for creativity

across space and time.’ (Liu, 2019, p. 21) I do agree with her thoughts, but also want to step a little bit further. For me, the realization of the coexistence could at once be charming and dangerous: charming in a way that we learn to respect people from other cultural traditions holding completely different assumptions, dangerous in a way that this very acknowledgement of the ‘coexistence’ could be another Babel Tower set for human kind, only in a friendlier way.

### A Tentative Conclusion

Maybe, even though the loss and gain in translations and adaptations are inevitable and may show creativity and diversity, we still need to know what and why we have lost or gained in translations, show more respect to the original texts, which I believe could depict a new landscape for world literature. Maybe, we owe a lot to different translation versions, and we will never have the concept of untranslatability without knowing all these translation versions at the very beginning. In other words, we can never identify the problem without creating it. And maybe, a comparative reading of different translation versions will help us deal better with untranslatability, because comparison is also a mirroring, and a philosophy, with absences and presences.

And I also endorse Emily Apter’s endeavour to ‘relate linguistic pluralism (inherent in translation as a liberal art) to a practice of *Weltliteratur* that takes full measures of linguistic constraints and truth conditions in the investigation of singular modes of existing in the world’s languages.’ (Apter, 2013, p. 27) Difficult but worthwhile, I hope literary scholars devoted to philosophy of language, poets or common readers, could value a part of life without losing the whole picture, and also shine some distinctive lights when being among stars.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the keynote address at the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Jaipur BookMark Festival delivered by Berthold Franke.

<sup>2</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> Also, *Taoteching*.

<sup>4</sup> Also, Lao-tzu.

<sup>5</sup> See the second page of *Introduction* of this book.

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