

# Gestures Without Words, Words Without Gestures: Ethnographic Artists as Translators

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I am going to examine the aesthetic expression in transcultural artworks using a diasporic social groups' representational perspective based on the consideration of social identity. In this investigation, I consider a sense-to-sense visual translation as a method of cultural interpretation by analysing four Chinese Contemporary ethnographic artworks in a circular narration manner. Actively consider the re-narration and reconstruction from the word-to-word literature in international dialogues, the misunderstanding, and the untranslatable of the cultural representation reality into the account. The artistic expression acts as a continuous dialogue of diaspora identity and an invitation to further communications that are out of the motherland.

**Keywords:** Identity, representation, diaspora, artistic expression, cultural translation

## Introduction

“This representation of hidden significance through an embryonic attempt at making it visible is of singular a nature that it is rarely met within the sphere of non-linguistic life.” (Benjamin, 255)

In this essay, I am going to examine the aesthetic expression in transcultural artworks using a diasporic social group's representational perspective. By taking the realm of translation and representation of social identity into the account, I am focusing on cultural translation as a reconstruction in the pre-existed narration of the word-to-word literature. Whereas in this investigation, I consider a sense-to-sense visual translation as a method of cultural interpretation. Under this condition, I will analyse four artworks in a circular narration manner. To start with, I will examine *Asian Field* (2003) by British sculptor Antony Gormley which is currently showing in the Hong Kong M+ Museum with a notion of 'standing on shared ground: the ethos behind'; following with Chinese Contemporary artist Wang Gongxin's *Swinging Grey* (2021) and *Dialogue* (1995) in the show 'In-Between' of London White Cube in 2021 as a reading under an emerging transcultural condition. Lastly, the *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997) by Chinese Contemporary artist Chen Zhen will be taken into consideration for international dialogues, the misunderstanding, and the untranslatable of the cultural representation reality. This essay acts as a dialogue of diaspora identity and an invitation to further communications that are out of the motherland.

## Artistic Expression as a Cultural Representation

In *The Task of Translator* (1923), Benjamin put forward a fundamental premise that “translation is a form” (Benjamin, 255). In the discussion of the concept of 'form', he further raised a response that “the appreciation of a work of art or an art form” (Benjamin, 253), by which means translation does not act as a secondary derivative of art in a literary sense but an artist expression itself. The form of translation is distinct from machine translation, instead, Benjamin metaphorically declared translation is an afterlife of the original source which “could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living” (Benjamin, 256) undergoing a change. Hereby, translation is being seen as a 'living thing; thus, to think about translation is to contemplate the logic of the 'living

thing'. By definition, living thing "pertains to any organism or life form that possesses or shows the characteristics of life or being alive" (Plochmann, 1953) which coincide with the characteristics of requiring energy, adapting to the surrounding environment, responding to stimuli, and having an organised structure. To think in the logic of a 'living thing', there is a necessity to scrutinise the condition of life and death. For a living thing to live within its lifespan is thinking in a singular implication, whereas to think in a social plurality sense is to investigate the passing of 'generations'. In a literal translation, the living force will be going through a re-'generation' in a word-to-word consideration; whereas in the realm of the intangible cultural translation, the consideration of sense-to-sense will be taken into account. There is an inextricable relationship between language as a 'living thing', based on the premise in the mental entity of human beings "communicate itself in language and not through language" (Benjamin, 315).

To declare an inherent relationship between languages and living things is essential to progress a further discussion on ethnographic artwork as a representation of transcultural identity. The reason for analysing artistic expression as a form of cultural representation is to articulate intangible feelings which could only be transmitted in a sense-to-sense simulation. Benjamin expressed his argument on visual representation accordingly, "this representation of hidden significance through an embryonic attempt at making it visible is of singular a nature that it is rarely met within the sphere of non-linguistic life" (Benjamin, 255). Based on the above premises, I will analyse the below artworks in a sense-to-sense gesture which I focus on the translation as a language 'form' of its literal content.

### Standing on a Shared Land: The Ethos Beyond the Field of Asian

Anthony Gormley (b.1950) is an international British sculptor, known for his installations and sculptures that dwell in the relationship of space and human physical bodies. Gormley expansively connects the feelings of empathy and universality, reflecting the forms of existence that transform in temporalities, cultures, and places. In 2003, Gormley created a huge scale installation piece *Asian Field* which approximately includes 200,000 clay figures that encapsulate the concept of collective ethos. In Gormley's installation series of Field, *Asian Field* (2003) is the sixth field that corresponds to the previous. Between 1991 to 1993, Gormley created the previous five fields which are *Field (American)* (1991), *Amazonian Field* (1992), *European Field* (1993), *Field for the British Isles* (1993) and *Horizon Field* (2003). Regarding the previous fields, *Asian Field* (2003) acts as an Asia voice to stand its ground in a shared land knowing the large population in China, contemplating the rapid growth of popularity in China. The joint effort of a British artist and engages individuals in the Chinese community to allow the installation to step on a transcultural stage. The material of the clay starts with the vital elements in the earth, which are minerals, water, and sand then transformed the shape through hand contact by a huge group of people. Each person was supplied with a lump of soil,



Fig. 1. Gormley, *Asian Field* (2003)

a pencil for engraving eyes, and a water container. Every clay maker was allowed to improvise freely under three simple guidelines: 1. Each sculpture should be hand-scaled; 2. Able to stand on its own; 3. Two eyes are facing the front and looking above the horizon.

Accordingly, *Asian Field* (2003) raised three existential questions for the makers and audiences to reflect on their representational identity by asking – "what are we", "where do we come from", and "where are we going"? (Hong Kong M+ Museum) It offers a sincere dialogue in artistic collaboration, body contacts, and communal co-production

between the makers and the viewers. Inviting more than 300 people from Guangdong Province (Thaddaeus Ropac) to make more than 200,000 clay sculptures exude two main implications, which created a joint message from the Chinese community to formulate a collective force and represents a huge overpopulation reality showcased through the vast territory. See Fig. 1, the eyes of human clay figures that are looking up to the sky, as if the figures are contemplating, exploring, and thinking about the development of humanity. All the clay makers were not invited to participate according to their age; thus, hundreds of villagers will be across three generations. Gathering the villagers to be equally participated irregardless of age limits and immersed in the clay-shaping experience. It carries a notion of ethos that passes through generations from grandparents to parents, and parents to their children. The artistic expression captured the transmission of language like the transmission of seeds, as Benjamin mentioned in *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man* (1916) “from one language into another through a continuum of transformations” (Benjamin, 70). Through the same instructions, 200,000 handful clay figures are created in a transformation gesture and a continuum of change by the transitions of human contact. The idea of artistic expression as a portrayal of language is resonating with Gormley’s thoughts in his early creation life, that he once said:

“I used to think that the great thing about sculpture was that, like Stonehenge, it was something that stood against time in an adamant way, and was an absolute mass in space. Now I try to use the language of architecture to redescrbed the body as a place.” (Anthony, 16)

The eye of the hand-sized figures are looking upon the sky is translated into architectures that stand still with the Chinese language in its bodies. They become bodies that are able to transmit the meaning in language. In Benjamin’s definition of ‘translation’ is a “living thing” (Benjamin, 256) that will not end its life hinging on a particular viewer. It has its own time and space to transform into something new. In Chinese saying, that is a *qi* cosmology that sets out as the traditional Chinese culture interpretative context. *Qi*, which is known as a vital energy that permeates the universe that has to do with air and breathing. It is a crucial element for a living thing that resonates with the necessary existence of water, minerals, and sand in the earth. In Gormley’s interpretation, the physical body “is not a subject but rather an instrument he uses to ‘investigate how his own conscious experience [sensation, emotion, thought] occurs in the physical world’ “ (M+ Museum). The construction of each clay figure becomes ‘an instrument’ to scrutinise the interconnection of the makers and the makers’ perceived world, i.e. China. It inherently owns a tendency to perform as a vessel for its consciousness, feelings, and memories. The exploration of the inherent self and the existential condition of being-with-the-world.

With all heads up to the sky, it represents society’s busy interactions and performing the lack of distance between individuals. During the time of artwork making in 2003, China was implementing the One-Child policy that had been long started in 1980 and ended in 2016. Mullen (2021) indicated that the policy was strictly imposed with punishment including forced abortion and violators’ fines as a measure to control the rapid growth of the population and resources distribution. Reflecting the critical atmosphere in the society during that time, actively conveys the idea of meaning transmission through a clay reproduction manner; it further reflects in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) that “history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains aftereffects which can be easily achieved only with a changed technical standard – that is, a new art form” (118). The *Asian Field* (2003) opens a discussion beyond the ‘Asian’ narratives, but a social engagement with Gormley as an international artist to include a cross-cultural encounter for ‘the other’ in the contemporary art scene; highly concerns the matter of ethos, national identity, and cultural authenticity of the nation. Serving as a representation method to anticipate and intimate to reach a realisation of cultural identity, reversing the normal rhythm of artwork and the conventional art gaze. The *Asian Field* (2003) marks as a homecoming; letting Chinese soil return to its land, asking for shared responsibility in the future. The clay sculptures stand on the shared ground with all the Chinese villagers, the intimate and authentic hand-to-hand contacts reconstructed the universal soil into its own custom, origin, and territory.

### 'In-Between' the Liminal Land of the East and the West

The state of 'in-between' is a state of liminality; liminal spaces, acknowledge as a state of transition. The word 'liminal' is transformed from *limens* in Latin, which implies a meaning of 'threshold' – namely "a place of transition, waiting, and unknowing" (Ali, 4). It is in the situation of being caught between two worlds, leaving the known world and going to another. To think in the liminal does not implicate a paralysis state; instead, it examines the both notion of the unfixed and the fixed, generating a constantly shifting memory and idea. It is interesting to contemplate the 'in-between' identity on the subjects of migration and translation, which is to consider the nature of all. Migration refers to the "movement from one part of something to another" (Oxford Dictionary), whilst translation means "the process of moving something from one place to another" (Oxford Dictionary). Migration is seeking movement in a geographical sense while translation is inspecting its position in the domain of language. The former is moving from a familiar territory to an unfamiliar land, reversely, translation is converting the unfamiliar language into the familiar. The relationship between translation and migration is in a reverse contrast; however, they are also exchanging in one thing which is the nature of transition – breaking through the liminal space.

In 2022, Chinese artist Wang Gongxin was showing numerous installations in the London Mason's Yard White Cube under the title of *'In-Between'* in response to his transcultural identity reflection. Through his experience as an ethnographic artist that moved from China to the United States in the late 1980s (White Cube), Wang started to formulate a synthesis by reconciling two different regions. Influenced by Japanese writer Tanizaki Junichiro's essay *In the Praise of Shadows* (1993), the two different perspectives on the matter of light that has drawn Wang's interest to further explore the essence of cultural identities. In *In the Praise of Shadows* (1993), Tanizaki raised a conflict between a cultural foundation of westernisation versus orientalism, comparing the traditional and the progression of modernity by elucidating the sphere of skin colour, construction, architecture, paper, painting, etc. Tanizaki wrote the comparison of light and shadow romantically, "cutting off the light from this empty space they imparted to the world of shadows that formed there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament" (20-21). The 'empty space' is what he sees metaphorically said as a shadow, full of 'mystery' that the dim shadow could possibly surpass all the ornaments. Tanizaki's thoughts on the cultural perspective on light is undoubtedly an influential piece for Wang's creation. Wang further carries on this cultural consciousness and investigates the matter of shadow and light which East Asian culture is embracing the subtle and shadow, while the West culture is searching for illumination. The complexity of adapting new forms of living aroused a new perception, and the way of seeing colours was one of them. The journey of the East [i.e. China] and the West [i.e. United States] is a perceptual journey in the colour black, grey, and white

in Wang's artistic expression. It is in a liminal of cultural adaption, searching for a cultural translation in a 'new mundane' living environment.

Wang presented the installation *Swinging Grey* (2021) in the exhibition *'In-Between'*, it is a kinetic installation that explores the changeable and indeterminate conditions of both perceptual and physical. See Fig. 2, there are two three-dimensional glowing light bulbs are hanging down from the ceiling, both inserted with a video camera. They swing across two pools of water, one dyed in white and another pigmented in black. The surrounding environment was

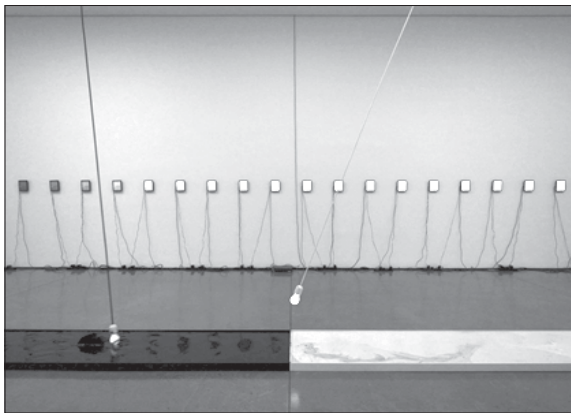


Fig. 2. Wang Gongxin, *Swinging Grey* (2021)

illuminated when the light bulbs were skimming across the pools. The camera so to capture the instant moment of one's tiny amount of colour splashing to the another and merging with 'the other'. The activity of liquid exchange of the adjacent water has delivered a notion of ownership, change, stability, the perceived and the perceiver. The authority of colour has been taken away at an exceedingly slow pace, but eventually black and white will be combined into two pools of grey; no one will remain unchanged in its colour. There is a multi-state between colour shades, that a certain definition of identity would no longer serve, but the flow and flux of an inter-dependent transformation of one land to another.

In *The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin (1923) has replied on the reciprocal relationship in languages, that "it cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realising it in the embryonic or intensive form" (118). In the "hidden relationship" of languages, which hereby the 'language' is expressed as the distinction of colour, and what drives into the "hidden relationship" is what Benjamin called the 'kinship of language'. The 'kinship of language' that he mentioned is differ from the traditional imagination of mother language nor the likeness between languages; accordingly, it is not the discussion on the likeness of colours in *Swinging Grey* (2021). What Benjamin is discussing about it actually all the languages are intending to do the same thing; "all supra-historical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a wholean intention"(72) which is to develop a relationship with the world around them. The colour black and white in *Swinging Grey* (2021) appears as a contrast as well as a visual dependency, the blackness is making the whiteness formulates as a whole, so as the reverse. The representation of identity is performed in various forms of gesture that do not set off the medium to present. In the word per-form, etymologically, per- implies "through" or "by means of" (Oxford Dictionary). Thus, by saying perform is to say 'through the means of' form. Whether by linguistic forms in word-to-word or artistic expression in the visual form are also recognised as means that drive towards to ultimate goal – that is to develop a relationship with the world around you.

In the liminal space of diasporic identity, there is a cultural gesture of loss and gain, promise and disappointment. Gaining more of the opposite pool is also losing the equal amount of liquid in your own land to progress on the cultural exchange. During the exchange activity of the 'greyness', there consists a certain degree of hidden risk. The metaphorical value of light bulbs and water not only serves as the translation ground but also a bear of risk with the explosive dangers of water and electricity. Only an equal amount of water exchange would sustain a balanced water level for both pools. Thus, to ensure a moderate level of water and electricity contact, which acts as a reminder in the air of globalisation, and a potential warning of the cultural erosion and monopoly taking place.

### **From Square to Round: The Eternal Misunderstanding**

Dining Table, implied a sense of family union that associates with gathering and discussion. The space of the dining room is seen a stage of everyday family drama, unfolding daily interactions with the people that you have developed intimacy with. It establishes connection and communication between the family members as a reaffirmation of family identity. Responsively, Japanese writer Fumiko has delicately suggested in *The House Without a Dining Table* (1979) that the dining table is "the plight and the sentiment of the disjointed family" (Fumiko, 140), each table functions as a unit for the family to eat together in order to formulate as a symbol of a 'familiar togetherness'; it additionally emphasises that the dining table is the best indicator of the emotional and natural content of family relations. To contemplate the discussion on a dining table in a transcultural context is to think about formulating a 'negotiation' through discussions.

The table entails a temporality of human interactions and dialogues from the passage of time; in the case of Wang's concern that will be a constant conversation between the East and the West, carry on his metaphorical black and white colour as dimmed shadows and glowing illumination respectively. *Dialogue* (1995) is another installation work in the 'In-Between', made with a rectangular



wooden table, metal water container and motor. Entering the first room of the ‘In-Between’ just as entering the living room, *Dialogue* (1995) is the first piece that catches your attention in a quiet way. The whirring discussion between lightbulbs is continuous on a long metal table holding black pigmented water that overflows all over the table’s surface (see Fig. 3). Two lightbulbs are hanging down from the motorised machine at the ceiling, slowly dipped into the black ink before it rises reversely again. Soft and calm ripples are created that precariously pressurise the water towards the edge of the table. The movement of two lightbulbs is as a Chinese idiom “dragonfly touches the water (qīng tíng diǎn shuǐ)” (Tang, 440), specifically speaking, it should be “dragonfly skimming over the water surface and light touching it (from time to time)” (Tang, 440). In Chinese culture, the dragonfly carries a meaning of transformation, opportunity, and adaptability while the action of the ‘dragonfly touches water’ denotes a superficial but lack of deep understanding. The dialectic duality of the black table and two lightbulbs in *Dialogue* (1995) performs as the shadow of the East and the illumination of the West. Positioning the action of ‘touching water’ is reflecting the tension of cultural understanding, and resonances with the risk of *Swinging Grey* (2021) between the resisting nature of water and electricity.

The colour narration is coinciding with *In the Praise of Shadow* (1993) that “the cleanliness of what can be seen only calls up more clearly thoughts of what cannot be seen. In such places the distinction between the clean and unclean is best left obscure, shrouded in a dusky haze” (5). The depth of ink has drawn on the cultural density, beyond the surface of ‘dragonfly touches water’ to a historical reference as Tanizaki commented,

“the ink would not have been this bluish colour but rather black, something like India ink, and it would have even made to seep down from the handle into the brush” (8). The profundity has concealed the hidden language of a culture, lingering between the fragments of the revealed and the concealed of reality. In the encounter of international politics, there is a potential of cultural translation that a certain aspect of meaning is irresistibly losing its way. The customs, gestures, and interaction body languages are to a certain extent untranslatable through a word-to-word structure.

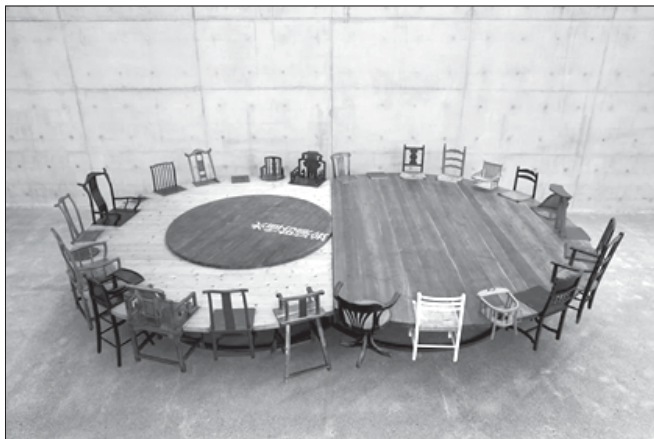


Fig. 4. Chen Zhen. Round Table – Side by Side (1997)

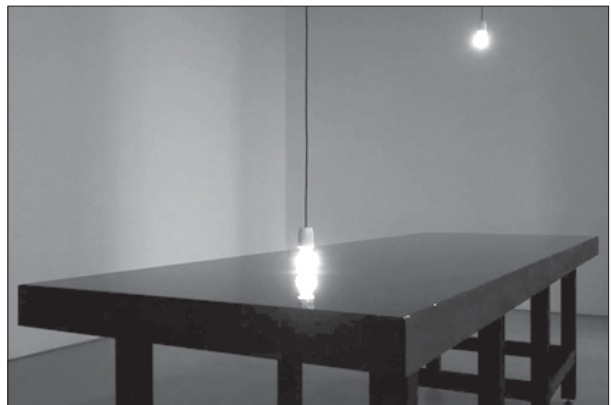


Fig. 3. Wang Gongxin, Dialogue (1995)

Through the immersive feeling from a visual simulation, the meaning has reunion as a whole, finding its losing fragments to reform a new understanding and narration. To talk about cultural translation is concerning more than a matter of linguistic structure. Culture critic Boris Buden (2006) asserted that cultural translation transcends “a purely linguistic horizon and becomes a cultural and political phenomenon” that “provokes on reader’s side a certain feeling of strangeness, impression that they are confronted with something foreign” (Translate Eipcp). In the

liminal of 'greyness', there exudes a fear of alienation between two territories – the colour white, and the colour black. Imaginatively attack the formidable cultural barriers, at the same time open a liminal space as a bridge for different territories.

To contemplate on the cultural structure is to think about the shape of culture, in the context of a square table or a round table could contain. The *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997) is constructed by Chinese-French conceptual artist Chen Zhen, created with 28 different styles of found chairs over two massive round tables to emblem an international leaders' enactment and meeting (M+ Museum). There is a turntable on one of the tables, bearing the concept of sharing in Chinese eating culture; the turntable is boldly engraved 'eternal misunderstanding'. The two round tables are connected under an implication of different cultures' emergence. The roundness of the table metaphorically represents as unity, wholeness, and harmony, wishing the conversations on the round table are a harmonic pleasure. In 1950, Mao Zedong has introduced the law of Agrarian Reform (Moorhouse, 2022). The implementation of this law has made the private ownership of land into a shared mechanism, the atmosphere of collectivisation was strongly promoted. The round shape entails a notion of collective sharing and roundtable talks, of whether thinking in a square table and round table or different designs of chairs are composing a dialogue structure of the 'cultural negotiation'. Although with the cooperation of two round tables, the 28 mismatched chairs are hinting a fundamental non-negotiable that every seat implies a different perspective of seeing. In Chen's exile experience, he began to be aware of the shocking cultural differences in the void betwixt the West and the East. In the journey of migration, he tried to create a connection between different cultural forms of knowledge in the two societies' structures.

By transforming the intangible codes of language into tangible chair forms, *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997) has revealed the fundamental divergence of chair designs, that is the construction of social structures. The motto of this artwork 'eternal misunderstanding' was engraved on the table as a reminder to the viewers, bearing the promise and disappointment of cultural exchange and the irresistible untranslatable. Each found chair is seen as a representation of identity, such as a mediation chair, a high table chair, etc. Undoubtedly, there must be an identity of the mediation chair that the high table chair fails to achieve, or the function of children's chair would never be completable with a wheelchair. The aim of showcasing differences is not to compare one better than the other, but an acknowledgement of an 'eternal misunderstanding' to overcome across geographical limits. *Round Table – Side by Side* (1997) represents a connotation of unity and conversation between cultures; however, the chair style differences interrupt the connotations, losing a clear unity that we are accustomed to. The lostness of language is a diaspora condition which our bodies are living inside, in a space where we are perpetually lost. The expression disability is a form of cultural dyslexia which differ from amnesia, it is not a forgotten memory but an embracement and reminder of the unknown.

From a table with four edges and shape angles to a table with one shared curve, the roundtable talk united a various of diversities in ethnic, religious, linguistic, and ideological to overcome our differences. It further raised a question – does negotiation requires a complete understanding? The answer could be answered in the implication of cultural translation that Buden (2006) stated, to think in cultural translation is not "facilitate the communication between two different languages and cultures"; instead, it is "building one's own language – build the nation" (Translate Eipcp). The differences of the chairs 'side by side' one and another is not viewing as an eternal comparison, but to make a connection though the non-resemblance. In order to accomplish that one must learn from the other to advance your own culture; therefore, to build one's own language, and eventually the nation. The cultural difference created a distant glimmer, a potential glow is an identity transformation that requires a time of waiting and exploring to reveal the hidden gems in language.

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