

On Construction and Transference: *Landscape* from the *Himalayan Journal* in Pictogram Translation

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Abstract: This study investigates the metaphorical relationship between language and image of Xu Bing's *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* (1999). The reflection has raised on the same origin history of Chinese calligraphy and painting, specifically, exploring the connection of language and image in a semiotic sense. The ambiguous relationship in the Chinese history between language and image formulated the invention of the pictogram which embraces the mobility of the innermost spirit of one's soul tarrying in the space outside language, at the same time out of the image. The translation from the form of language to image induces a contemplation of cultural dyslexia. The area that graphemes (i.e. symbols, characters and letters) dominate a role in the manifestation of the reality, as well as pictograms' direct use of the signifier and the signified. The fluidity of *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* will be analysed in regard to Gaston Bachelard's concept of word space in *The Poetics of Space* (1964) and Walter Benjamin's translation account. Benjamin's translation theory is a 'living thing' and the 'kinship of language' will be further discussed throughout the mental entity of pictogram in Xu's *landscape*.

Keywords: graphemes, pictogram, landscape, emptiness, translation

Introduction

In *The Poetics of Space* (1964), Gaston Bachelard imagined the structure of a house in a linguistic sense concerning different spaces as a poetic dynamic and entity of its own, e.g. drawers, corners, garret, cellar, etc. The ontological implication has begun from the observations in mundane environments when objects around the living surroundings are being seen as a 'living thing'; he expressed the existential qualities as furniture that "a living creature fills an empty refuge, images inhabit, and all corners are haunted, if not inhabited". (x) By contemplating the matter of inhabitation space, the linguistic structures are formulated as if a word is a room, a language is a house, a transition or space between words is a corridor, and a negotiation stage for languages is a road. Whereas in the concern of a room and a house or a word and language, it is driving towards a depending relation of its own morphology. From Bachelard's observation of the structure of the house and language,

"To go upstairs in the wood house is to withdrawn, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words" (166).

The concept of a word is like the structure of a house, travelling through a cellar and garret; the universal norms are living on the ground floor level where languages share common logic with others, engaging in a 'foreign exchange'. The exchangeable languages embodied a nature that similar to a 'foreign commerce'; the exchangeability itself embraces a notion of common value. The action of 'translation' gives birth to transitional unit of exchange, as the nature of gold in currencies or joints in bodies. It serves as a 'corridor' of common space to associate rooms,

and living for the purpose of actualising rooms. Internally moving from the sense of arcades, becoming intervals to intervene space between words. The descending level is contemplating in the area more than word between word, the conventional describable languages are facing its undecipherable ‘word-to-word’ basis to a ‘sense-to-sense’ acquisition. The semantics of the unnameable of one language to another becomes an interference of translation, the uncanny milieu constructed a menace from the space outside language. The usage incapability of words has consequently arisen into an inevitable cultural dyslexia.

To engage in the manner of language lost, the absence of decipherable words leads to a scatter and suspension. The spatial rhythm on paper has changed to the discernment of sense. On the mental being of language, Benjamin (1916) declared an existential condition of language in *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man* that “this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language” (117). Nothing is communicable through the condition of language, as Benjamin further explains “what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured... all language contains its own incommensurable” (Benjamin, 317). The condition of language is uniquely integrated infinity as an abyss under the ‘common sense’. Dwelling in the transition between languages is one thing while thinking in the transition between language to an image is another; but one thing is the same which is an association of signs, precisely building a relationship between the signifier and the signified. Of what consideration does ‘language’ has to be constructed, and in what way could successfully read or misread the ‘words’ into ‘images’? Thinking in the relations of everyday domestic surroundings, between one language to another is a room across the corridor to reach the other; whereas for language to transcend into an image is to get out of the house to transit through a road to another. In *The Task of Translator* (1923), Benjamin proposed the concept of the “kinship of language” (255) which differs from our immediate association of mother language, e.g. Latin influences English; instead, the kinship of all languages is that they are all ultimately trying to describe the world around them. All languages share the same purpose of describing a certain relationship in the world, but the only difference is that their languages are achieving their goals differently. Based on the premise that the relationship with the world is the kinship between languages, there is a question of how the “images inhabit” after. The scrutiny of languages in Bachelard’s construction of the house aroused my curiosity on the transiting nature beyond the space between language, but in the realm of three matters, that is — language, image, and meaning. In other words, is to seek hermeneutical movement in the realm of art discourse.

I. Nothingness and Emptiness in the Cultural Ruins

The communication of the relationship with the world around you is talking about a knowing of locality, by which construction of self-referencing can be played out accordingly. Etymologically, in Latin, from one thing *trānsferre* [transferring] is taking something from one place to another. (Chesterman, 5) The process of the exchange of languages exudes implications of replacement and abolishment. The fear of being lost in translation is a fear of alienation and a fear of being in displacement. In the space of corridors and roads, the space of liminality entered a condition of ‘in-betweenness’. *Limens*, implies a notion of a ‘threshold’ that is dwelling in the transition and a waiting room. Thinking in a sense of linguistic structure, the corridor between language and image is in the infinity abyss of ramifications and inventions. In the unknowing transition of languages and images, of whether cultural dyslexia goes into linguistic ruins and constitutes to a state of nothingness? The confrontation is a feeling of “cultural dyslexia if not amnesia” (T. Ames, 61); the disintegrating transition is an encounter with the linguistic ‘ruins’ which threatens our feeling of security and faith in a shared common sense. In the linguistic ‘ruin’ between cultural differences, there is a notion of ‘nothingness’ which means such nothingness is differ from the concept of emptiness.

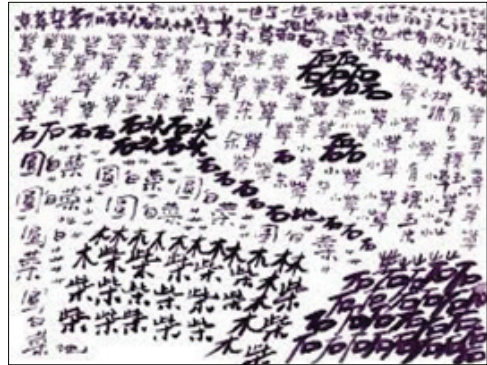
To think in the logic of art in the course of translation, the matter of nothingness is being seen differently with the state of emptiness. In the translation in cultural discourse, there is a question of how important understanding is, and whether misunderstanding would go into ruins and eventually become a part of emptiness. Regarding that, Gadamer replied “the work of art distinguishes itself in that one never completely understands it... an artwork is never exhausted. It never becomes empty” (35). In the liminal transiting condition, an aesthetic appreciation is bottomless that serves the multiplicity and unshakable identity. The interpretation of an artwork is inexhaustible. In the matter of language, image, and meaning, where the nothingness constitutes, of what qualities are unable to be translated by words but could only be achieved in the method of the image? In the transition of language to image, what degree of ‘ruin-ness’ in words contributes to the creation of the image; in this situation, whether the ‘nothingness’ sits on the language or the image. Nothingness is an entity, while emptiness is a content of nothingness. In the measure of ‘emptiness’, we do not measure the emptiness of the container but rather its fullness.

II. *Landscapes from the Himalayan Journal* (1999)

Within this image–language framework, Contemporary Chinese printmaker Xu Bing (1955–present) created a series of *Landscapes* Chinese ink paintings. *Landscapes*, as the title indicated, is a ‘landscape image’ that Xu Bing purposefully made in the format of ‘script’. This series started when Xu travelled to the Himalayas in Nepal in 1999. The genres of calligraphy and painting shared identical tools — ink and brush. There is an ambiguous tendency between calligraphy and painting that irresistibly emerge simultaneously. Yet, the history of calligraphy was long before the creation of the concept of ‘painting’; until the Song Dynasty, painting came into light which closely allied with the form, technique, and aim of calligraphy. The elevated position of calligraphy reviewed the importance to consider writing in the course of painting construction and becoming. In the *Landscapes from the Himalayan Journal*, Xu embraced the notion in Chinese culture that “calligraphy and painting have the same origins”. There is a reflection of whether language or image captures the pictorial meaning of the world, of which part it becomes displaced to construct another. The sketches of the sceneries are depicted with Chinese characters, and objects in the landscape such as wood, tree, forest, stone, etc. The words wood [木], woods [林], and forest [森] form the transgression of shades, of lighting, of the quantity of wood in the expression of itself; the word ‘woods’ [林] constitute from two ‘wood’ [木木] while putting three ‘wood’ together convey the meaning of forest [森]. Concerning the *Landscapes from the Himalayan Journal*, the evolution progress of calligraphy and painting contribute to the concept of pictographs where the lines of literal language and image become blurry and vague; at the time when the translation of one another become language transparency. An idea of a pictogram merges the concept of language and image, a symbol is created in the ambiguity condition between the visual and the linguistic element in a schematic way. Symbol such as wood [木], and its plural woods [林], and forest [森] are performing a logo–graphic order of writing systems that are fundamentally based on the ideograms. In the internal translation from image to language, one of the important elements is instant and clear recognition. The transmission of pictograms is through a sense-to-sense basis, which hereby the image comes before the use of language. The association of image becomes a trap for language, that a house is trapping a room.

III. On the Forgetfulness of Language, Image, Meaning

Chinese Philosopher Wang Bi (226–249 CE), known by his courtesy name Fusi 輔嗣, is considered one of the most important interpreters of *Daodejing* [English: *Scripture of the Way and its Virtue*]. In his commentary *Elucidating the Images* [ming xiang], he contributed to the hermeneutical explanation of the relationship between language [yan], image [xiang], and meaning



Xu Bing, *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* (1999)

[yi] to formulate a Chinese understanding of the construction of language and the becoming of image; the role of language and image are revealed as follow:

“An image expresses meaning; words clarify the image. To do full justice to meaning, nothing is as good as image; to do full justice to an image, nothing is as good as words. Because words arise from image, we can explore the words as a window on the image. And because the image arises from meaning, we can explore the image as a window on meaning. Meaning is given full account with an image, and the image is articulated in words. Hence, words are whereby we clarify the image. In getting the image, we forget the words. The image is whereby we hold on to meaning. In getting the meaning, we forgot the image.” (54)

The translation of such pictograms requires ‘common-sense’ between the sender and receiver, then so to make an agreement on which signifier could be used to signify, and therefore to proceed into a certain meaning. The context of the pictogram communicates a ‘hidden guide’ to the viewer, it provides a direct linkage to the actual object or image in the world. Symbols and signs are also known as semiotic entities, however, their properties are different. The concept of the sign is relying on the action, for example for who is communicating; meanwhile, a symbol is a common association in reality which been previously accepted, thus, serving as a perceivable representation of reality. It requires an extraction from the surroundings, elements such as a form of object and structure of a word, which in the *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* is a form of Chinese square-word structure. The use of the ‘squareness’ is not a ‘using’, instead, language is being seen as an element or medium in which human live in. Through the exchange of words, the meaning of things in the world becomes more present. Thus, binding actual objects and our everyday language together.

The actual objects are hence filtered through the lens of balanced square structure; the orthography of the pictograms dissolves a part of cultural dyslexia, specifically, in the area that graphemes, (i.e. symbols, characters and letters) dominate a role in dyslexia’s manifestation. The component strokes and parts have assembled the likeness with the reality, standing still with a ‘character’. The languages and images are overlapping their subject possession of two realms of experience, they are ultimately communicating towards the same goal which is to set their relationship with the world around them; yet, the methods are different. With an aggregated translation of visual and linguistic elements, two forms of knowledge are repositioning the reality at the horizon of a ‘felt reality’. The kinship of ‘giving an account of’ something or ‘relating to’ something constructs each other linguistically. The *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* exudes a fluidity sense of words, the bold or delicate depiction of stone [石] captured the scale in the landscape where the drawing lines are created in mobility. The mobility of the landscape is the innermost spirit of one’s soul that is a living force in itself. The mobility is a temporal structure of being moved. In *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal*, the mobility of the Chinese

square-word 'pictograms' is tarrying in the space outside language, at the same time out of the image. With the incorporation of language and image systems of thinking, one encounters another of both the writer and reader are actively involved as feeling beings; and both simultaneously develop a cultural schema. The imagery element in Xu's *landscript* is a translation of reality rather than a configured world's representation. It provides a more rhetorical explanation as an affective linguistic constituents. The 'lines' of *the landscript* translated the incarnation of the divine spirit, embodying the language as a living thing and creating an intimate relationship with the world outside us – our nature.

VI. Translatability of Mental Entity

In regard to Benjamin's concept of 'translation' is a living thing (256) that translation does not die depending on a certain viewer. By saying 'living thing', is namely "pertains to any organism or a life form that possesses or shows the characteristics of life or being alive" (The Characteristics of Life). The crucial characteristics of living things are comprising organised structure, requiring energy, adapting to changes in the surrounding environment, responding to stimulation and being capable of growth, movement, reproduction, and eventually death. It requires those from the source text, and that is Xu's observation of the landscape reality in the situation of *landscript* in 1999. Translation can be seen in a very broad sense that a way of seeing requires a certain degree of 'translatability'. The light of the Himalayan landscape travels into the retina, the light-sensitive cells detect the coming of light, and therefore activated the reflection system to recognise colours; that is another form of construction and transference. Bringing the devoid meaning into Benjamin's account where questioned the necessity of understanding in the work of art, "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic' is the cause of another characteristic of 'inferior' translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content" (253). The 'inferior translation' here is pointing to a loss of essence in the realm of art, where the main concern of language transmission is not in the content but the 'poetic' gesture that conveys a specific form of life, zone of meaning, or a social conscious – which bring the translation's 'mental entity' into the light. To translate a source text as a form of art is to concern the 'mental entity' of the self-expression, Benjamin asserted "mental entity it is the direct expression" (64) and that "all expression insofar as it is a communication of mental meaning" (64). The mental entity of translation becomes an authority of its translatability.

The importance of language is not solely in the consideration of understanding, instead, it emphasises the concept of referencing. Thinking in a referencing structure allows language to order according to the world around you. Languages itself does not have a speaker that "it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being" (316), which replied to what I raised early on "communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity" (64). The language 'mental entity' constitute a propensity of the living thing, which draws on the condition of expansion and compression in an organism. The organised structure is responding according to the simulation of the 'around' [relationship around you] in order to reproduce itself in another language, such translation essence is its mental entity that allows the pure language to breathe. The living being that communicated in the language "cannot be externally limited or measured" (317), it contains an infinite unique constitution and its incommensurable. To perceive translation as a living thing is to see language as such as the mental being of a human. It conveys a displacement of 'time', 'space' and 'spirit' that are distant from reality, luring the spectator to be a 'feeling being' where the mental entity lies.

The incommensurable language concerns its characteristic as a living thing, where the reproduction live force has driven its singularity to a plurality of generations. As a living thing, it travels across one's host to another until its decays in the linear spatial limitation of life. One thing that it cannot escape, that is to linger in the world which hereby is a world of language.

Such living existence is not actualised by language, indeed, it is living in the language itself. I am such living thing that exist in the language journey and losing track of life in a crossroad translation, crawling on street looking for momentary ownership. I wonder how many seconds is there a regeneration of me, maybe a new genetic code of an evolved organism, which spatial and time I am following after. On thinking translation as a 'living thing', therefore must be a moment of birth and death in the realm of language. Of what can make a language die, the logic should be the same as the 'living thing', that is to suspend or stop the life drive of man – that is reproduction. For a 'living thing' [i.e. man and its language], to reproduce is a necessary tendency of survival. Here I mean survival not as an individual singular condition, instead, such survival is being thought of in a transitional sense of plurality. The 'thing' [i.e. living thing] here is 'living' generation after generation of a reoccurrence of its appearance, which such 'thing' works the same by inserting the thought of words or biological lives. Such transitions generate the 'after' of the previous, but no one is less than the other. A dynamic of survival is seen as its own time, where each generation takes its power of spatial and time to a choice of regenerate, accelerate, or decelerate as it wishes.

VII. Conclusion

A conceptual bond is created in the exchange of language and image translation, which in the case of the *Landscape from the Himalayan Journal* will be the cultural influence of calligraphy and painting. The metaphorical relationship between language and image is conceived in a semiotic sense. The function of the pictogram leading a role in the reality manifestation, the pictorial structure has dissolved a part of linguistic ruins and cultural dyslexia between cultural translation. An exercise of fundamental lostness is required in the process of translation that a part of the culture will be lost whilst some part will be regained. A certain degree of disabled mindset is necessary for reading between displaced languages with knowing disjunctures and gaps do exist. In Xu's landscape, it invites a hermeneutical moment within the aesthetic experiences. The space between words emerges the association of images, every transaction is a way of seeing the world differently or expressing in a particular way. In pictogram itself is a translation between the visual eye-to-object contact and the language, opening up the dynamics of metaphor formation and transcending into a new realm of theoretical and semiotic conceptualisation.

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