

Traveling Between Languages

Chen Li

0

Language is communication of feeling, thought, etc., through a set or system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, or gestures. Chinese, English, and dialects in Taiwan (Min Nan and Hakka dialects, for example) are languages; music, painting, and mathematics are also languages. While notes and colors are the languages used by composers and painters, words are the language I use to write; while some writers use other systems of words, I write in Chinese.

I also translate works written in other languages into Chinese. To me, translation is a substitute for reading and writing. I'm not an active reader. To translate, I force myself to read more widely or attentively. I am not an active writer, either. Through translating others' works, I get some compensation and stimulation—in translating a work, I mistake it for my own, feeling that I'm writing again; during or after the process of translation, I inevitably acquire some inspiration or dynamic for my writing by getting closer to others' works.

I sometimes feel writing is another form of translation: while writing, I integrate or transform into my works my experiences of reading, translating, or having access to other languages (English, Japanese, etc.; music, painting, etc.)—either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, I, as a writer, travel from language to language frequently.

1

I was born in Taiwan after the Second World War and brought up in Hualien, a small city in eastern Taiwan. My parents grew up in the period while Taiwan was occupied and governed by Japan. Therefore, in my childhood and youth, I spoke Chinese (Mandarin) at school and Taiwanese (Min Nan dialect) at home, and my parents talked to each other in Japanese most of the time. My mother is a native speaker of Hakka dialect, so I could often hear her talk in Hakka dialect with her relatives living in the neighborhood. After graduating from university, I returned from Taipei to my hometown and worked as an English teacher in junior high school. In a class of forty students, there were two or three aboriginal (mostly Amis and Atayal) students. They spoke Chinese just like the other students.

When I studied in the English Department of the National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei, I started to read literary works of foreign writers in the original or in translation, including those of Yeats, Eliot, Rilke, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and some Japanese haiku poets. Since my graduation from university, I, in collaboration with my wife Chang Fen-ling, have translated into Chinese many poems of foreign poets, such as Larkin, Hughes, Plath, Heaney, Sachs, Vallejo, Neruda, Paz, Szymborska—they all have had influence on me. Among them, Neruda's influence seems the most obvious because we have translated at least three books of his poems.

1

In my university days I chose Spanish as my second foreign language and came to take interest in Latin American literature. I was not a good learner of Spanish, but I found Spanish sounded delightful, which motivated me to read Spanish poems. I bought some bilingual (Spanish and English) collections of Latin American poetry; they seemed not too hard to comprehend. In 1978, I set about translating an anthology of modern Latin American poetry. It was completed by 1985. However, not until 1989 was the book published. Included in it (more than 600 pages) are nearly two hundred poems by twenty-nine poets.

Since my high school days, I have enjoyed listening to music. Composers like Bartok and Debussy influenced and inspired me when I was very young. Later, Webern, Janáček, Messiaen, and Berio also became my favorites. After attending university, I started to read books of paintings and appreciate works of many cubist, surrealist and expressionist painters—Picasso, Braque, Dali, Magritte, Ensor, and Kokoschka, for instance. They too play a part in my aesthetic development. In my university days, a school librarian gave me an old issue of *Chicago Review* (a special issue of concrete poetry), published in September, 1967. This issue left quite a deep impression on me and, to a certain extent, contributed to my later writing of concrete poetry.

2

For the past few decades, the Chinese language used by the people in Taiwan has been in many ways different from that used by the people in Mainland China. The differences lie not only in its expressions, accents, pronunciations, and characters, but also in its linguistic “temperament.” In my opinion, the Chinese language used in Taiwan has some sort of vitality different from that used in Mainland China. For one thing, whereas Mainland China made great efforts to wipe off its traditions, started the Great Cultural Revolution, and implemented a simplified form of Chinese characters, Taiwan, under the rule of KMT after the Second World War, advocated “Movement of Reviving Chinese Culture,” continued to use the traditional complex form of characters, and put Chinese classical literature and history on the examination list—the result of the different policies is that people or writers in Taiwan are likely to have a more profound understanding and a subtler perception of “the beauty of Chinese” than people or writers in Mainland China. For another, being an island, Taiwan enjoys more liberal and freer living environments, which enables people in Taiwan to assimilate more naturally and freely diverse elements of language (Taiwanese, Japanese, and English in particular) and elements of daily life to form a more flexible, energetic, hybridized, and colorful language.

Chinese, with its pictographs, monosyllables, homonyms, and characters with multiple meanings or similar pronunciations, has a savor which is rarely found in other languages. A Chinese poem written in traditional complex characters is likely to lose part of the savor if one should transcribe it in simplified characters. Thus, I feel that the Chinese or the Chinese poem I write in Taiwan has absolutely a savor which may be absent in works written by users of other languages or Chinese users in other areas. Judging from what modern poetry of Taiwan has

me. You may say my poem translates Bardin's film. Some reader mentioned on the Internet that there might be some relation between "A War Symphony" and the poem "Ping Pong," written in 1953 by the German poet Eugen Gomringer (1925-). I searched for the poem immediately and found I had never read it before. Yet this poem is very much like a translation version of part of the second stanza of "A War Symphony":

ping pong
ping pong ping
pong ping pong
ping pong

I think this may be regarded as a coincidental encounter of two writers while they are traveling in languages. And such a happy encounter transcends time and space.

3

In 1983, in collaboration with Chang Fen-ling, I translated and published *Selected Poems of Nelly Sachs* and *The Divine Arias: Dante*. Translating works by Nelly Sachs and Dante was a very peculiar experience to me. Before that, I knew nothing about Jewish mysticism, and had little interest in imagined afterlife or heavenly blessing. But translating forced me to read; after reading, I got confused, started to ponder, and was greatly touched. I can never forget the thrill I felt while reading the last few cantos of "Paradise" of *The Divine Comedy*. What great and magnificent imagination! What abstract and pure order! Neither can I forget the peculiar joy I felt when my heart was pierced with Sachs' pure, mysterious, persevering lyricism, even though I am still an atheist. These marvelous imaginations and creations are concerned not only with religion (or one religion), but with all mankind. Besides being realistic, I learn to see things in other ways. To me, translation means conveying concretely and clearly to others the touching experience I have had through reading. And it is a translator's job to transform the experience into a motive force with a clear direction. The translation which enables readers to fully feel what you have felt is a good translation.

Comparatively speaking, Latin American literature can more easily touch the hearts of people growing up in Taiwan. This may be partly because the third world countries are in the similar situation when faced with the impact of Western literary trends. I have always felt the development of modern poetry in Taiwan is actually the epitome of the history of modern Latin American poetry, except that their progress or problems came twenty years earlier than ours. The ultimate question is: how to preserve or manifest the local characteristics in the process of westernization or modernization? Magic realism is the distinct answer Latin America has given. But there is more than one answer, and each answer has its own meaning. No doubt, surrealism allows many poets in Latin America and in Taiwan to have more ways of viewing the world.

Reading and translating Latin American literature teaches me to combine elements of Taiwan with modern or postmodern art. To put this into practice, I appropriate or re-create (or de-create) the myths and legends of Taiwanese aborigines in some of my poems. The following is an example: “A fly has flown onto the sticky flypaper below the goddess’ navel. / Just as the day hammers gently on the night, / my dear ancestor, hammer gently with the unused Neolithic tool between your thighs.” (According to the Atayal myth of the creation, there were a god and a goddess in very ancient times, who were ignorant of love-making until one day a fly landed on the private part of the goddess; the Amis have a similar myth.) Words like “flypaper” and “Neolithic tool” integrate the past with the present, adding to the poem a postmodern interest and making it both legendary and contemporary, tribalistic and erotic.

The first poem I translated of Neruda’s is “Explico algunas cosas” (I Explain a Few Things), taken from *Residencia en la tierra* (Residence on Earth). This poem states the reason for the transformation of his poetic style—because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, his poetry begins to move away from the obscure, hermetic, and fanciful to a clearer and more accessible style. The last few lines are very touching: “You will ask: why doesn’t your poetry tell us / about dreams, about leaves, / about the great volcanoes of your native land? // Come and see the blood in the streets, / come and see / the blood in the streets, / come and see the blood / in the streets!”

As a writer, I think my poetic language and concepts are evidently influenced by my experience of translating Neruda. However, I am not sure whether my poetic language—with Chinese as its tool—is influenced by Neruda’s original poems or by my Chinese translation of his poems. The poetic strategy and ideas in some of my poems indeed derive from Neruda. In 1979, I translated his “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” (The Heights of Macchu Picchu), a long poem in *Canto General*. The theme of death and birth, of oppression and rising, and the idea that poets should be sufferers’ spokesmen have since been deep-rooted in my heart. In this poem Neruda piles up a litany of 72 noun phrases, which inspires me to boldly juxtapose 36 noun phrases in “The Last Wang Mu-Qi,” a long poem written the next year about a mining calamity. Later in the poem “Taroko Gorge, 1989” I apply the technique of cataloguing, listing 48 names of places in the Atayal language, and in the poem “Flight over the Island,” I list 95 names of mountains of Taiwan deriving from different languages. All these can be seen as an extension of Neruda’s writing techniques. But they may also be traced back to another poem in *Residencia en la tierra*: “Como era España” (What Spain Is Like). In the first four stanzas, Neruda describes how he loves the tough land and the humble people of Spain; in the last six stanzas, he lists 52 names of Spanish towns. I didn’t translate this poem because I didn’t think it was successfully written since the names were catalogued in a rather flat way (when the famous English translator of Neruda, Ben Belitt, translated this poem, he omitted the last six stanzas which impressed me). In “Taroko Gorge, 1989” or “Flight over the Island,” I try to make the groups of nouns form a certain dialectic relationship to the other part of the poem. Reading them over is like undergoing a ritual of identity, a return to the native land where different races are reunited. Neruda’s cataloguing, in turn, may

have been influenced by another Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), who listed 190 noun phrases with “Molino” (Mill) as the initial word in Canto V of his 600-line-long avant-garde epic poem *Altazor*.

In *Anthology of Modern Latin American Poetry*, I translate five poems of Huidobro’s. Among them, “Nipona” (Japanese), printed in the shape of a double arrowhead, is the only concrete poem in the anthology. I found it quite interesting the first time I read it.

4

Although I can’t read Japanese, yet I have read and translated some Japanese haiku and tanka through English translation and the original, because there are many Chinese characters in Japanese and because I can always consult my father, who knows Japanese. Reading these Japanese poems inspires me to write about contemporary life in similar poetic forms. The result of such experimentation is my book of three-line poems: *Microcosmos: 200 Modern Haiku*, whose title comes from Bartok’s *Microcosmos*, a musical composition containing 153 piano pieces. Patterning after or imitating senior masters (or using allusions) is in itself part of the convention of haiku. Some of my “modern haiku” are tributes to or variations of classical haiku or other art classics; others are evolved from poems written by senior writers, fellow poets, or myself. Whether they are metamorphosed thoroughly, reshaped, or implanted, traveling in the family of poetry forms the most substantial and warmest link on the lonesome journey in the universe (“Traveling in the Family,” the title of one of my poems as well as of one of my book of poetry, comes from the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade [1902-1987], whose poem of the same title is translated in my *Anthology of Modern Latin American Poetry*). My three-line poems are “Taiwanese” rather than “Nipona.” They manifest the savor of “Taiwanese Chinese”: at once Chinese and Taiwanese, classical and contemporary, just like the island Taiwan, which constantly assimilates and converges all the surrounding elements because of its geography and history. Take for example some poems I’ve read, translated, or written:

Picking chrysanthemums by the east hedge, at ease I see the south mountain. (Tao Chien, 365-427)

At ease he sees the south mountain—this frog. (Kobayashi Issa, 1763-1827)

Resting on the temple bell, asleep, a butterfly. (Yosa Buson, 1716-1784)

Resting on the temple bell, glowing, a firefly. (Masaoka Shiki, 1867-1902)

He washes his horse with the setting sun on the autumn sea. (Masaoka Shiki)

He washes his remote control / with the moonbeams infiltrating / between two buildings.
(Chen Li, *Microcosmos*, I:1)

I wait and long for you: / a turning die in the empty bowl of night / attempting to create the
7th side. (*Microcosmos*, I:14)

A turning die in the empty bowl of the night / creates the 7th side: / oh God, you do exist.

(*Microcosmos*, II:25)

Multiplication table for kids of clouds: / mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains
times trees / equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness... (*Microcosmos*, I:51)

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus / a closet of loneliness equals / a closet of
loneliness. (*Microcosmos*, I:97)

Just as the “frog” in Issa’s haiku defamiliarizes and freshens the perspective of the Chinese ancient poet Tao Chien, I use the “remote control” to translate and update the elegantly lonely life scene of Shiki. Both are resting on the temple bell—Shiki’s glowing firefly vividly stirs the serenity of Buson’s soundly-sleeping butterfly. And in my poems the same die tosses out a different imagination at a different time and space, attesting to the ambiguity of the existence of God or miracles and to the anxiety and fragility of man. The last two poems are written based on “pseudo-arithmetical” formulas. Maybe they could be seen as examples of how modern poetry in Taiwan creates surprise out of the commonplace.

5

In 1976 I wrote a ten-line poem “Footprints in the Snow,” whose title comes from a piano piece by the French composer Debussy (*Preludes*: Book 1, No.6). I attempted to translate Debussy’s musical work into poetry: “Cold makes for sleep, / deep / sleep, for / a feeling soft as a swan. / Where the snow is soft, a hastily scrawled line is left / in white, white / ink, / hastily because of his mood, and the cold: / the hastily scrawled / white snow.” Several composers have set this poem to music; by so doing, they have translated it back into music. In 1995, I wrote another “Footprints in the Snow.” You may say it was a translation version of the previous poem, but this time I used non-character symbols and punctuation marks only:

%
 %
 %
 %
 .
 .
 .

A similar self-translation appears in *Microcosmos*:

Your voices suspend in my room
cutting through silence, to become
a bulb speaking with heat or chill. (*Microcosmos*, II:47)

.....

。

,

(*Microcosmos*, II:48)

The latter poem can be viewed as a translation or visualization version of the former poem. The Chinese punctuation mark “。” (a period) is very much like a bulb which gives off sound in silence or with silence.

Is writing some kind of translation, traveling between languages? Or do all writers create the same work, the pure blankness and the empty fullness overwritten again and again? Recently I wrote a poem “White.” The first half consists of two Chinese characters “白” (white) and “日” (day); the other part is made up of non-characters. After this poem was completed, the paintings of Mark Rothko (1903-1970), an American painter whom I like very much, came into my mind:

白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白白
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日
日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日日

Translated by Chang Fen-ling