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Filling in the blank: towards a semiotic account of poetry translation

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Abstract: Poetry is often seen as the ultimate challenge for a literary translator. Why it is so and how in reality translators manage to accomplish this feat remain to be explored. This article contributes a new way of understanding poetry translation by re-theorizing the practice with reference to the concept of blank-sign. In the light of the blank-sign, we see poetry as a genre rich with meaning-charged blank-signs and poetry translation as a “blank-filling” endeavour to seek relevance for the poem in the target sociocultural context while craftily leaving its overall poetic “blankness” intact for meaningful reading and contemplation. We illustrate this idea with the Spanish translation of two contemporary Chinese poems, with a focus on discussing the challenges with regard to communicating the culture-laden images and the intertextual connections in the original poem. Based on our preliminary findings, we highlight the value of the study of blank-signs in poetry translation and the need for translators to draw insights from cross-linguistic analysis to inform their practice. This semiotic account offers insights into how poetry translation can be alternatively conceptualised and has implications for practitioners involved in poetry and translation.

Keywords: poetry translation; blank-sign; relevance; Chinese–Spanish translation

1 Restoring what gets lost

Poetry translation has been an act imbued with an air of futility and despair, as in the scornful remarks by poets like Robert Frost, who has reportedly said that poetry is what gets lost in translation. Why this is believed so and how the many translated poems have come into being nonetheless warrant our attention. Lamenting on the marginality of poetry translation, Venuti (2011: 128) noted:

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To translate a poem, then, regardless of the language, culture, or historical moment, has often meant to create a poem in the receiving situation, to cultivate poetic effects that may seek to maintain an equivalence to the source text but that fall short of and exceed it because the translation is written in a different language for a different culture. The poem that is the object of translation inevitably vanishes during the translation process, replaced by a network of signification – intertextual, interdiscursive, intersemiotic – that is rooted mainly in the receiving situation. Hence, poetry translation tends to release language from the narrowly defined communicative function that most translations are assumed to serve, whether the genre of their source texts is technical, pragmatic or humanistic – namely, the communication of a formal or semantic invariant contained in the source text.

Seen against the definition of translation in its general sense, the above exposition underscores the unique features of poetry translation and the distinctive character of a poetry translator. Most noticeable is the agency involved in the practice, as expressed forcefully by such wording as “create” and “cultivate”. Rather than bowing to the principles of faithfulness and accuracy, poetry translators are allowed or even encouraged to wield their imagination and verbal creativity to transform the source text into something they deem appropriate and desirable. As such, they are responsible for “transplanting the poetic seed” (Bassnett 1998: 58) as the poetics of the new text comes largely from the artistic labour and genius of its creator. Then, there is the demise of the source text in the process of translation and the birth of a new one situated in a complicated meaning-making network, which is conditioned by the target culture. This meaning-making process takes place at textual, discursive, and semiotic interfaces and entails a series of adaptations and accommodations. The result of this process is a deviation from the communication-based aims of translation, which serves to convey the form and meaning of the original. The relatively “fixed” nature of the source text tends to foreground the communicative model of translation. That is, the message is in place and waits to be recoded into another language. The translation of poetry, however, breaks away from the fixed matching of linguistic forms and meanings and seeks a new interpretation beyond the received understanding of what translation means.

Though poetry translation seems to be an adventurous exploration, those who venture to try the daring often face an inescapable situation – the dismay and frustration with “maintaining an equivalence” that hardly exists in the different linguistic and cultural disconnects they work to bridge.

This being so, what renders poetry translation a dismal practice in the first place? What happens underneath the linguistic surface when a poem is being translated? And what measures can one take to increase the chance of what one creates being accepted as a proper translation of the poetic work? In this article, we discuss the possibility of re-theorizing poetry translation from a semiotic perspective. Rather than engaging in the debate on the truth and validity of the practice, we
try to describe the features of the genre of poetry in semiotic terms and what possibly leads to a condition where two pieces of work in different languages can be regarded as translations of each other. We will then illustrate the theoretical arguments with examples of translating contemporary Chinese poetry into Spanish, with a focus on the potential challenges with regards to restoring the culture-laden images and the intertextual connections in the original poem. Based on evidence from the literature and practice, the discussion is meant to offer insights into alternative ways of looking at poetry translation and to provide implications for practitioners engaged in poetry and its translation.

2 Poetry translation under a semiotic lens

The tendency to view the text as a sign imbued with linguistic, literary, and cultural meaning and significance (Popović et al. 1981) lends a semiotic perspective to literary studies, with its potential to explore the depths of the “artistic text”. Among the diverse literary genres, poetry distinguishes itself for its devotion to exploiting the artistic dimension of language. By taking advantage of the full range of semiotic resources of a verbal structure, a poem communicates its meaning and value in a creative, efficient manner. This communication involves interaction and restriction at multiple levels – phonetic, lexical, syntactic, discursive, prosodic, and typographic (Greene 2012; Jakobson 1980; Jakobson and Pomorska 1988 [1980]), which makes it a product of an almost serendipitous act of putting together “the best words in the best order” (Coleridge 1836: 45, emphasis original).

Based on a thorough analysis of the multilevel constraints at work in the poetry translation, Atã and Queiroz (2018) put forward a laboratory metaphor that frames the poem as a site for experimenting with new combinations and patterns in seeking the optimal solution to a semiotic “problem”. Such an experiment was successfully conducted on the Portuguese translation of John Donne’s “The Expiration” by Augusto de Campos (Atã and Queiroz 2018). Semiotics as a theoretical lens was applied to the analysis of the Turkish and French translations of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130, and the various tendencies were sorted into fields of signification, including meaning, peri-meaning and meaninglessness (Öztürk Kasar and Tuna 2017). In his explanation of the translation of Paul Celan’s Holocaust poetry, where the “ineffability of nothingness” posed a challenge to translators, Torres-Martínez (2019) proposed the approach of semiotic translation and underscored the role of iconicity and indexicality in understanding the process of poetry translation. In practice, semiotics has been integrated into the assessment of poetry translation (Dastjerdi et al. 2008, 2011; Pallavi and Mojibur 2018). For instance, a hybrid semiotic model was proposed and tested with the English translation of Iranian poetess
Forough Farrokhzad’s “Another Birth” to capture the pragmatic features of the poem in translation (Dastjerdi et al. 2011).

In a brief summary of the previous proposals and models dealing with poetry translation from a semiotic perspective, we see an overall consensus on the complexity of the process and shared uncertainties concerning the quality of the product. The many facets of poetry remain to be exposed under the semiotic lens to reveal the patterns in which linguistic signs are arranged within and across individual pieces of work. In addition, the difficulties and challenges in poetry translation have been exemplified in cases involving a variety of languages, yet these cases were mostly between English and a local language, which was typically an alphabetical language. Additional evidence from languages other than English, especially that involving alphabetical and non-alphabetical languages, is expected to shed new light on the old discussion.

3 Blank-signs and poetry

If we borrow the Saussurean dyad, we will know that the sign is the result of the association between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 1974, 1983). Such established associations are vital to meaning-making in daily communication. We rely on them to ‘mean what we mean’, which, in a semiotic sense, could be interpreted as to ‘direct the addressee’s attention to what conventionally the words of our utterance are associated with’. This meaning-making mechanism is so naturally built into the quotidian details of our communication that we tend to take it for granted. Nonetheless, it is likely that we are less aware of the pervasiveness of a specific type of sign – one that is seemingly missing the key elements (i.e., the signifier, the signified or both) in comparison with the established signifier-signified association. The sign has been variously defined and described by scholars (e.g., Cameron 2011; Jakobson 1984; Rotman 1993; Sebeok 2001; Tanaka-Ishii 2017). Instead of being absent, the missing signifier or signified is vague, undefinable, variable and unspecifiable, which gives the sign an “empty” or “floating” appearance. Void as the sign may seem, it is not devoid of meaning. On the contrary, such a sign can be meaning-ful, in the sense that its “emptiness” opens space for indefinite possible readings inferable from its context. And as such it gains “power” via its objectified manifestations in words and objects (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994).

A more up-to-date interpretation (Wang 2021) expands the idea even further and argues that all linguistic signs have the potential to be “void” with absent signifieds in specific contexts. However, the distinction between typical ones and atypical ones needs to be drawn on the ground that a typical void one has three properties (Wang 2021: 136) quoted as follows:
1. The borderline of the void is a closed contour, or the void is restricted to a specific period of time, or the representation of the blank-sign is clear and definite;
2. The information transmitted by the neighbouring substantial sign strongly influences how the void is interpreted;
3. The general context strongly influences how the void is interpreted.

We learn from these three criteria that a typical void sign is identified by its discursive surroundings. That is, its reading is delimited by the spatiotemporal features of the context, which clarifies and defines what it constitutes. Its interpretation is shaped by the typical substantial signs that surround it. To use an analogy of sculpting here, the typical void signs are like the parts of the material chiselled away, leaving the voids against which we see the carved-out features of the finished piece of work. They are absent in a material sense; nonetheless, their contour is marked and their presence is defined by the surrounding parts of the same material. They become visible when we pay attention, and, in some cases, when they draw attention to themselves.

In the current study, we draw from the blanket term of a “blank-sign” (referred to as “the void” in the quoted excerpt above) proposed by Wang (2021), which, as showcased above, considers “blankness” as a matter of degree. We find this inclusive definition of a blank-sign applicable to cross-disciplinary studies of verbal and non-verbal communication and has special relevance to the discussion of poetry translation. In the following sections, we explain how poetry as a literary genre can be perceived in the light of a blank-sign and what happens within, across and beyond the linguistic signs when a poem is being translated.

3.1 Poetry as a genre rich with blank-signs

Poetry is a discourse where linguistic signs are arranged in a manner which denies its character as a readily interpretable product and which denies that its author makes a deliberate effort for his or her creation to convey a definite message. This inherent vagueness and indeterminacy make poetry a literary genre marked with blankness – little is said; much is left unsaid, which, as the reader would find out for themselves, is indicated or suggested in one way or another. The representation of the unsaid is what serves to create the blank-signs, in this case, integral parts of the poetic work that contribute to its meaning-making and significance. To use the aforementioned analogy again, the visible details of the sculpture pop out thanks to the physically invisible parts the artist hides from its viewers. For a poem, the visible details are limited, and readers’ attention may shift onto the invisible. In this case, the blank-signs call attention to themselves. Since blank-signs derive their meaning
from the context with varying degrees of fluidity based on the presence of the signifier and the signified (Wang 2021), we could identify three types of typical blank-signs in poetry.

1. Blank-signs marked by lexical vagueness, which defies a straightforward reading, creating a “black hole” in understanding;

2. Blank-signs marked by syntactic deviations from the norm of the written discourse, creating a “poetic flavour” unique to the genre;

3. Blank-signs arising from the overall structure and stylistic features of the poem, creating a personal or categorical identity for the author or the type of poetry.

We encounter the first type of blank-sign when our reading of the poem is interrupted by the author’s specific wording the meaning of which seems particularly opaque. Though one may argue that all words in a poem are not meant for easy reading, we refer to instances where the author’s lexical choice deserves a close analysis and where the lexical vagueness affects its surroundings, i.e., creating a black hole in the understanding of the poem. Unlike when we bump into a new word in a book or newspaper – dictionaries will not help much in solving the mystery for the meaning of the specific word is very likely unregistered in the standard references.

Dissimilar to the first type, where the signifier is visibly represented, the second type of blank-sign features a deficit syntax where the blankness is created by the absence of the signifier – the linguistic parts constituting syntactically valid sentences, which becomes our perceived norm of the written discourse. Of course, poetry is not meant to be read in sentences, yet our comprehension of the linguistic signs has been influenced somewhat by our habitual processing of information moulded in such grammatical forms. Therefore, this feature of “brokenness”, among others, gives readers a different reading experience and creates a unique character that distinguishes poetry from other literary genres. As O’Sullivan (2010: 59) nicely put it in an essay entitled “Broken on Purpose”, where he sees serialized television drama as a poetic enterprise:

This prosodic art, unlike the art of nonserialized fiction, calls attention to itself as an array of parts; it is the art of fracture, of separation, and it is the art of the energy required to stitch together those pieces, just as the art of poetry requires a persistent process of breaking and reconnecting sounds, lines and stanzas.

The third type of blank-sign arises from the structural and stylistic features of the poem. Not all poems look or sound alike. Specific structures and styles are adopted as a result of the author’s preference or an entrenched poetic tradition. This type of blank-sign differs from the previous two types in that it is associated with the holistic impression of the poem and the overall effects it creates. Thus, it considers the poem
in its totality as a blank-sign. Since there is no explicit representation of the structural and stylistic features of the poem (visible perhaps only to sensitive readers), nor are there definite interpretations for these formal and stylistic features, we might construe this third type of blank-sign as one missing both the signifier and the signified. To justify its validity, we resort to the criteria of this type of “doubly blank” sign: it is detectable thanks to the demarcation of its borderline, and it is laden with meaning that can be flexibly interpreted (Wang 2021: 135). First, the poem accurately defines its borderlines by the patterned or systematic use of specific features that identify a style unique to the author or to the poetic form. The form of a poem may seem loose and random, but the poem is not shapeless in the sense that it is structured with the fingerprint of its author or the label of a poetic tradition. As such, blankness arises from the author’s habitually abandoning certain elements or conforming to the prescriptions of a particular poetic frame. Meanwhile, the meaning of such stylistic characteristics is flexible and open to interpretation. In literary studies, the stylistic features provide valuable clues for readers to go deeper to explore the philosophical, ontological, epistemological and psychological significance the poem carries.

These three types of blank-signs, though each at a specific level, are interconnected and subject to the hierarchical constraints within the poem (Atã and Queiroz 2018). Hence, we may conclude that poetry is a genre with no shortage of meaning-charged blank-signs. The fact that poems probably invite diverse subjective interpretations more than any other literary genre lends evidence to this observation.

A poem deviates from everyday speech by its lexicon and grammar and as such generously creates blank-signs laden with symbolic and emotional meaning. Such a deviation gives a distinctive unfathomable character to the genre, which, though enigmatically appealing, might have also dampened its popularity among the general readership. In some highly creative cases, the deviation can be radical, creating multiple blank-signs that turn the poem into a puzzle. Upon first reading, readers might be baffled, for instance, by Dickinson’s lines quoted as follows:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels – twice descending
Reimbursed my store –
Burglar! Banker – Father!
I am poor once more!
(Dickinson 2016: 27)
In this two-stanza poem, the narrator speaks of her (we use the gendered pronoun here since the narrator could be speaking for the poet herself, yet this reading is but one among the many possible readings) personal experience of painful loss, as the opening lines reveal to us, half-concealingly, though, that the narrator has lost her loved ones to Death ("I never lost as much but twice,/And that was in the sod."). The image is painted with the narrator standing before the door of God begging for the return of her beloved ones ("Twice have I stood a beggar/Before the door of God!"). Her begging was probably answered as the angels came to compensate for her loss ("Angels – twice descending/Reimbursed my store –"). Yet, she ended up being deprived again of her love and in anguish and despair she called out the name of God ("Burglar! Banker – Father!/I am poor once more!").

Although the vocabulary of the poem is generally reader-friendly, the meaning of certain words remains to be elucidated. These include such common words as "door" and "poor" as well as the less-anticipated diction like "reimburse", "burglar" and "banker". These count as Type 1 blank-signs, which can cause a major hindrance to comprehension. With regards to the syntactic deviations, the conveyance of the message is paced by the breaking of the lines and the ordering of the stanzas, which, compared with full grammatical expressions, appear to be missing certain parts, hence, Type 2 blank-signs that give the piece its poetic look. For instance, the inverted line "Twice have I stood a beggar" is more likely to be expressed as "I have stood twice (as/like) a beggar" in quotidian speech. Aside from the short lines that leave much space for contemplation and imagination, the use of dashes, which is often seen as the poet's signature style, inserts in pauses and breaks that disrupt the flow of the lines. The intensive use of dashes in the second stanza foregrounds the absence of sounds, with each word uttered haltingly as if the speaker summoned up her strength to speak them. Similar to the pause in theatrical performance, where the absence of speech helps create the rhythm of the play (Teodorescu-Brînzeu 1984), the dash-length pauses within and between the lines carry a unique beat to the poem. Delicate as the poem appears, the minimal words it contains convey strong and complex emotions, which resonate differently with different readers. Its irreplicable structure and features (e.g., the absence of a title, the lavish use of capitalization and dashes) identify the poem as characteristic of the author – the left unuttered sets its borders clearly against the scarcely yet artfully uttered, which challenge readers to think, hence, a Type 3 blank-sign carrying a distinctively Dickinsonian style.

Examining poetry through the semiotic lens of blank-signs leaves readers with the freedom of interpretation as they can make wild guesses about what and how much sense a particular blank-sign should make by drawing upon their imagination and experiences. This wilful endeavour seems to intimidate the authority of the author who creates the blank-signs in the first place and as such claims the right to authentic interpretation. Nevertheless, although it is the author who determines the
meaning and message to be conveyed to the readership, i.e., how the work should be read, it is the individual who engages the work that unpacks its meaning and message at the receiving end and thus determines in actuality how it is read.

3.2 Poetry translation as a blank-filling endeavour

As hinted in Venuti’s (2011) quotation at the beginning of this article, poetry translation differs from other translation practices mainly in that the communication builds around uncertainty given the formal or semantic variants – or the blank-signs – in the source text. Central to effective communication of the poem is making the source text relevant to the target context. To achieve this, the translator needs to tackle the blank-signs at different levels by first reading them properly before putting them in the target language, thus filling in the blank so as to make them accessible to the target readers. Meanwhile, one needs to refrain from being over-considerate by filling in too much of the blankness, which is essential to retaining the poetics of the work.

Consider, for instance, the following piece by Chinese poet and playwright Ma Zhiyuan (1250–1321) in the Yuan Dynasty.

天净沙·秋思
枯藤老树昏鸦，
小桥流水人家，
古道西风瘦马。　　
夕阳西下，
断肠人在天涯。

Readers may intuitively notice the blank in the first three lines, where the poet spoke in syntactically dangling phrases arranged in three groups of equal length. The juxtaposition of the nominal phrases “枯藤” (‘wither vine’), “老树” (‘old tree’), “昏鸦” (‘dusk crow’), “小桥” (‘small bridge’), “流水” (‘flowing water’), “人家” (‘house’), “古道” (‘ancient road’), “西风” (‘west wind’) and “瘦马” (‘lean horse’) creates a sequence of blank-signs where the syntactic normality is violated by the absence of expected verbal or propositional phrases to indicate the state, action or the position of the entities being listed. This forms a contrast to the remaining two lines, which present one entity with its corresponding action or state (“夕阳西下”; “断肠人在天涯”). To contemporary Chinese readers, the poem provides a smooth journey as the diction is plain and simple and the vocabulary shares much of its modern usage and connotations. Hence, the Type 1 blank-sign may not be discernible to local readers. Since
most school-educated local readers are familiar with the poetic form of ci, the Type 3 blank-sign may not be obvious, either. Comparatively speaking, the Type 2 blank-signs marked by the absence of obligatory syntactic parts in modern Chinese grammar seem to be the most prominent in the poem. Such an assumption may account for the fact that this poem is frequently quoted in school lectures as an example of yan-jian-yi-feng (‘saying much with little’) with the use of brief yet image-rich language.

To illuminate the process of poetry translation in the light of blank-signs, we demonstrate how this poem can possibly be translated into English. From the glossed lines below, we notice a few mismatches in the word-by-word alignment that could present a challenge in the translation.

| tian-jing-sha | qiu-si            |            |
| sky clean sand | autumn thought(s) |            |
| 1             | ku-teng           | lao-shu    |
| wither(ed) vine(s) | old tree(s)     | hun-ya,   |
| 2             | xiao-qiao         | liu-shui   |
| small bridge(s) | flow(ing) water  | ren-jia,   |
| 3             | gu-dao            | xi-feng    |
| ancient road(s) | west wind       | shou-ma.  |
| 4             | xi-yang           | xi-xia,    |
| sunset        | westward sink(ing) |        |
| 5             | duan-chang        | Ren        |
| broken bowel  | person/people    | PREP (in/at/on) |
|               |                   | zai        |
|               |                   | tian-ya.   |

In this poem, what appears most interesting to Chinese readers seems to be the Type 2 blank-signs, as we have been claiming. Yet, how the same poem may appeal to its target readers – in this case, English-speaking readers with little knowledge or experience in reading Chinese poetry – is a different story. Owing to the differences in ethnolinguistic background, English readers may find some literally translated Chinese expressions exotic. One example is “断肠人” (lit. ‘bowel-broken person/people’) in the last line. Though the phrase “断肠” (lit. ‘broken bowel’) is widely used

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1 We adopt a broad definition of poetry in this article to include various types of poetic forms in classical and modern Chinese literature. The quoted piece here belongs to the category of ci (also known as chang-duan-ju, lit. ‘long-short-sentences’) in the tradition of classical Chinese poetry. The ci poetry is characterised by a prescribed structure consisting of lines with unequal lengths and relatively fixed rhyme schemes and tonal patterns based on the name of the musical air (e.g., tian-jing-sha).

2 This poem is selected for the national Chinese language and literacy (yu-wen) textbook, Grade 7, compiled by the country’s Ministry of Education (MOE).
in classical Chinese poetry and prose and is still in active use today, referring to one’s experience of extreme distress or grief, it is fresh to English speakers whose thinking of the poem may be jolted by such an expression that conjures up gruesome images. Therefore, the lexical vagueness in the original Chinese text as perceived by target English readers creates a Type 1 blank-sign that may impede proper understanding. With regards to syntactic deviation, the juxtaposition of nominal phrases possibly remains a Type 2 blank-sign to English readers. Moreover, additional indeterminacy comes from the absence of number-marking devices in the Chinese nominal phrases. Since number is not a prominent category in Chinese grammar, nominal phrases often appear in a ‘bare-noun’ form without any functional markers (Rullmann and You 2006). Though Chinese readers would not find anything missing or equivocal in expressions like “枯藤” (‘wither vine’), “老树” (‘old tree’) and “小桥” (‘small bridge’), they can only tell intuitively whether the entity being referred to is singular or plural, and probably not with absolute certainty. Likewise, they do not seem to be bothered at all by the absent tense and aspect markers as well as the polysemous prepositions in expressions like “xi-xía” (‘westward sink’) and “zai” (in/at/on), which would likely appear confusingly vague to English readers. This almost gut-feeling judgement is built into the native-speaker instinct of the Chinese language. To English-speaking readers, however, this general lacking of what is grammatically obligatory in their native language would be unacceptable, giving rise to a number of new blank-signs at the lexico-syntactic interface. Finally, at the structural level, would English readers find such an imagist style overly abstract and elusive? Is there a need for translators to supply something to make the Type 3 blank-sign a little more readable without compromising its poetics?

The following two attempts demonstrate how translators may differ in their endeavours to fill in the blankness when dealing with the blank-signs in the poem.

Version 1

Sunny Sand·Autumn Thoughts

Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows;
Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows;
On ancient road in the west wind a lean horse goes.
Westward declines the sun;
Far, far from home is the heartbroken one.
(trans. Yuanchong Xu)³

Version 2

Autumn Thoughts

Withered vines, old trees, crows at dusk;
A small bridge, flowing water, a few houses;
An ancient road, a lean horse in the west wind.
The evening sun sinking in the west—
A heartbroken traveller still at world’s end.
(trans. Sherwin S. S. Fu)

Despite the subtle differences in the rendering of specific diction (e.g., “枯藤”: ‘rotten vines’ vs. ‘withered vines’, “人家”: ‘a cottage’ vs. ‘a few houses’), the two versions used similar vocabulary. In particular, the Type 1 blank-sign “断肠” (‘bowel-broken’) was rendered into ‘heartbroken’ by both translators. This semantic translation gives meaning and relevance to the phrase by filling in the culture-induced blankness. The shared lexical choices notwithstanding, the two versions differ conspicuously in dealing with the Type 2 blank-signs. For one thing, the blankness arising from the overall absence of grammatical markers was not filled with perfect consistency. For example, the translators had different judgements on the number of the “人家” (‘a cottage’ vs. ‘a few houses’) and the tense and aspect of the “夕阳西下” (‘Westward declines the sun’ vs. ‘The evening sun sinking in the west’). For another, the translator of Version 1 made a serious attempt to fill in the blankness in between the nominal phrases by connecting them with location-specifying prepositions and action/state-denoting verbs (e.g., “Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows”), whereas the translator of Version 2 did not try as hard, leaving most of the nominal phrases as disconnected as they were in the source text (e.g., “A small bridge, flowing water, a few houses”). As for the overall blankness of the poem, both translators added scaffolding to fill in some of the elusive gaps clearly present in the poem, created partially by the poet’s succumbing to the formal constraints of ci (viz. each line needs to be filled with a prescribed number of characters). For instance, the last line (lit. ‘bowel-broken person/people PREP (in/at/on) sky edge’), though meaningfully brief and key to understanding the message of the poem, did not say much about the heartbroken. In Version 1, the translator rendered it as “Far, far from home is the heartbroken one”. By supplementing the image of home, this translation helped readers visualise a wanderer tormented by homesickness, which might be echoing the “autumn thoughts” in the title. By comparison, a somewhat different image was restored in Version 2, where “A heartbroken traveller still at world’s end”

was more likely to be associated with a lonely traveller who, on an odyssey-like journey around the world, got stranded in despair.

How these two versions compare is a question to ponder. As demonstrated in the English translation of the Chinese poem “Autumn Thought”, aside from personal tastes and preferences, readers endowed with different language-specific instincts are likely to have different standards and thresholds as to what appears to them as a blank-sign and, upon encountering the same blank-sign that bewilders all, may have different responses. What appeal to native readers of one language as an interesting alien blank-sign might be perfectly routine and unremarkable to native readers of another. What literary readers versed in one language applaud as dazzling wit and wordplay might be disdained by readers bred in another literary tradition. Each of the two English versions showcased above would find its appreciative readers. For instance, those who see beauty and harmony in patterned rhymes may find Version 1 pleasant and soothing, whereas those who have an interest in haiku-styled poems may favour the vague and sketchy Version 2. Therefore, to ensure that the translated work sits well with the readers, the translator’s challenge is to identify the potential blank-signs in the poem and communicate them effectively to its target readers. More often than not, this is not done in principled ways but rather using a combination of knowledge, experience, trained intuition and educated guesswork. The result is but one of the possible renderings of the original that is tailored for a particular readership.

In this section, we reapproached poetry as a literary genre in relation to blank-signs. We explained where blank-signs can be found in a poem and how they could influence our reading. We then re-theorized poetry translation as a blank-filling process where translators work to seek relevance for the poem to target readers by filling in the blankness created by linguistic and cultural differences as well as differences in literary traditions and reader expectations while taking care not to damage the overall blankness to retain its unique poetic form and style. In the following section, we showcase how this idea works in the translation of contemporary Chinese poets’ works into Spanish, the discussion of which has been scarce in the literature.

4 Translating contemporary Chinese poems into Spanish

In this section, we illustrate the translation of poetry between Chinese and Spanish, two seemingly distant systems in terms of language, culture and literary traditions. The two poems to be discussed below were selected respectively from collections of
poems by Xiao Hai (1965–) and Yu Bang (1976–), two celebrated contemporary poets in China. The translation was the result of years of collaborative efforts between the first author and a Spanish native-speaker poet-cum-professor in literary studies. The translated collections were published by the leading scholarly publisher Editions and Publications of the University of Lleida (Edicions I publicacions de la Universitat de Lleida).

4.1 Transplanting a culture-laden image

One challenge in translating the Chinese poems into Spanish lies in the treatment of the names of local plants, which were used not infrequently by the poets. Below is a piece titled “Bee” by Xiao (2019: 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Chinese Characters</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Spanish Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>蜜蜂又出现了</td>
<td>mi-feng you chu-xian-le</td>
<td>bee again appear-ASP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>河谷知道</td>
<td>he-gu zhi-dao</td>
<td>river valley know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>这不是同一只蜜蜂</td>
<td>zhe bu-shi tong-yi-zhi mi-feng</td>
<td>this NEG-BE same one CL bee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>而春风中油菜花</td>
<td>er chun-feng you-cai-hua</td>
<td>but spring wind rape flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>野荠花也知道</td>
<td>ye bu-zhi-dao</td>
<td>wild shepherd’s purse flower NEG know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One prominent Type 1 blank-sign arising from the meeting of the two languages in the translation of this poem is “野荠花” (ye-ji-hua, lit. ‘wild shepherd’s purse flower’), which in the source context carries the connotation of spring and its fertility that is unique to the Chinese culture. The flower of the shepherd’s purse is conspicuous in the spring in rural Jiang-nan (lit. ‘South of the River’, a geographic area in China that is located right to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, which is known for its bountiful land). The established symbolic association between the flower and spring has been reinforced by its recurring image in classical poems. For example, Bai Juyi (618–907) of the Tang Dynasty in a poem titled “Spring Wind”, wrote “荠花榆
荚深村里，亦道春风为我来”（shepherd’s purse blossoms and elm seeds in the serene village, know also that the spring wind comes for me’). Xin Qiji (1140–1207) of the Song Dynasty sang similar odes to the flower as in “春入平原荠菜花，新耕雨后落群鸦”（‘spring arrives in the plain where shepherd’s purse blooms, after the rain a flock of crows landed on the newly ploughed soil’) and “城中桃李愁风雨，春在溪头荠菜花”（‘while the peach and the plum blossoms in the city are dreading the wind and rain, spring is with the shepherd’s purse flowers by the stream’). In addition, known for its clean, earthy taste and refreshing aroma, the shepherd’s purse has been widely used in local cuisine, making the main ingredient in soup and stir-fried dishes. Rural born and bred, the poet spent much of his pre-adult years in the countryside, so the wildflowers were symbolic to him in more ways than one. The deeply rooted cultural significance aside, he treasured fond memories of the flowers as symbols of his hometown and childhood.

To local readers, who share the linguistic and cultural background with the poet, the rich meaning of the sign of the shepherd’s purse is accessible, whereas to target Hispanophonic readers it remains blank. Therefore, there arises a need for translators to transplant the culturally meaningful herb into the target Spanish soil, which, though not entirely foreign to the plant, does not accommodate it as readily as the Chinese soil. The herb is called “bolsa de pastor” in Spanish, yet this name is hardly known to native speakers who do not share the cultural association between its flower and spring or the habit of consuming the herb. To common readers, such a linguistic sign is as blank as any other fancy name of the flora and fauna that they have not bothered to study yet. In the Spanish translation below, the blankness is filled by adding an explanatory note “bolsa de pastor: capsella bursa-pastoris, una hierba silvestre común en China” （‘shepherd’s purse: capsella bursa-pastoris, a common wild herb in China’）illustrated with a picture of the plant. Supplying a combination of textual and visual information, this paratextual detail serves to fill the void of the linguistic sign to make it accessible to its target readers. Nonetheless, such a void leaves the poet’s personal attachment to this special herb unilluminated. This partially filled blankness creates the opportunity for readers to explore between the lines the poet’s nostalgic sentiments in subtle evidence such as “vuelve a aparecer” （‘reappear’）, “no es la misma” （‘it is not the same’）and “no lo saben” （‘they do not know’）.

Abeja

La abeja vuelve a aparecer.
El valle es consciente de que no es la misma
que la del año pasado.
Las flores de colza en la brisa de la primavera no lo saben,
ni las flores de bolsa de pastor*.
4.2 Re-establishing intertextual relationships

Contemporary poets in China often build connections between the past and the present by alluding to classical texts. We read a typical such piece by Yu (2023: 28):

* bolsa de pastor: capsella bursa-pastoris, una hierba silvestre común en China.
(Xiao 2019: 11)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>纸做的白马，你的孤舟。</td>
<td>paper made white horse your lonely boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>缓缓穿行其间。时而停下。</td>
<td>slowly walk through its middle now and then stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>浊酒之杯，放下又举起。</td>
<td>turbid wine cup put down and raise up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>每一片树叶，从高处凋零。</td>
<td>every leaf from high place wither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>哀愁的祭坛，一朵停云。</td>
<td>sorrow altar one CL still cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>在头顶徘徊，从未离去。</td>
<td>overhead hover(ing) never leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>你从渺小的群山走出来，一直走。</td>
<td>you from little mountain(s) walk out keep go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>一直走，走到永久那么久。</td>
<td>you keep go PREP forever so long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The poem straightforwardly addresses Du Fu (712–770), one of the greatest poets in ancient China. The title of the poem “草木深” (‘grass tree deep’) alludes to Du Fu’s famous line “国破山河在， 城春草木深” (‘nation broken mountain river exist, city spring grass tree deep’) from the poem “Spring Gaze” (春望),⁵ which is also alluded to in Line 6 “夺取帝国的草木之心” (‘capture empire’s grass tree’s heart’). The phrase “草木深”, if translated literally, might evoke the image of a deserted place where

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⁵ The full poem reads: 国破山河在， 城春草木深。感时花溅泪， 恨别鸟惊心。烽火连三月， 家书抵万金。白头搔更短， 浑欲不胜簪。The country shattered, mountains and rivers remain./Spring in the city—grasses and trees are dense./Feeling the times, flowers draw forth tears./Hating to part, birds alarm the heart./Beacon fires for three months in a row;/A letter from home worth ten thousand in gold./White hairs scratched grow even shorter—/Soon too few to hold a hairpin on. (Translated by Pauline Yu) accessed at http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_600ce_dufu.htm.
plants have run amok. Due to a lack of background knowledge concerning the poem and the poet that is shared among local readers, target Hispanophonic readers may probably fail to establish the intertextual relationships and get confused over the many details with allusive significance. We find links and resonances with the poem “Spring Gaze” in such wording as “眼泪” (‘tear’) in Line 1, echoing “感时花溅泪” (‘feel times flower sprinkle tears’) in “Spring Gaze” and “烽火” (‘beacon’) in Line 4, echoing “烽火连三月” (‘beacon fire lasting three months’). Moreover, additional intertextual connections are built with symbolic images in Du Fu’s other poems. In Line 9, “孤舟” (‘lonely boat’) connects itself with the same image in the poet’s other well-read works, e.g., “亲朋无一字，老病有孤舟” (‘relatives and friends sent not a single word, aged with disease on a lonely boat’) from the poem “登岳阳楼” (‘Ascending Yueyang Tower’) and “丛菊两开他日泪，孤舟一系故园心” (‘chrysanthemum shrubs open twice with tears, lonely boat tied up with a single line to my hometown heart’) from the “秋兴八首” (‘Eight Poems for Autumn Meditations’) series.

The decision as to whether and how to fill in the blankness left by the gap in the readers’ background knowledge to recover the intertextual relationships is crucial to the understanding and reception of the poem. Although one may feel compelled to account for all the explain-worthy allusions and teach readers everything they need to know to interpret every single word properly, doing so would punctuate the experience of reading a poem with snatches of lecture note-taking, which may not be appreciated by all readers. The Spanish translation reads as follows:

Ciudad abandonada  
-Al poeta Du Fu*

Tus lágrimas se mezclan con el río turbulento,  
eres una flama resistiéndose a apagarse en el agua.

Tu frente arrugada lleva impresa la vida militar olvidada,  
el fuego de otro tiempo.

A una edad avanzada, te retirás a vivir entre los robles,  
ete apacigua la naturaleza del imperio.

Tus pupilas marrones reflejan la tierra invadida,  
la población muerta, los caminos cercados de flores y esqueletos.

Montas solitario un caballo funeral de papel blanco,  
te detienes para contemplar las escenas, reanudas el trote.

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6 This poem selected for the MOE complied national Chinese language and literacy textbook, Grade 8.
Levantas la copa de vino de nuevo,  
caen las hojas marchitas desde lo alto.

Sobre un altar fúnebre,  
una nube se detiene y no pasa nunca.

Te alejas de las montañas y sigues caminando,  
sigues y sigues caminando, para siempre.

*Du Fu: poeta de la dinastía Tang.  
(Yu 2023: 29)

It is noteworthy that the translation did not fill in all the blanks created by the intertextual links in the source text. Nor was all blank-filling conducted in the same manner. The predominant one blank-sign “草木” (‘grass tree’) is filled in the title by rewording based on the image of a deserted, run-down place overtaken by plants: “ciudad abandonada” (‘abandoned city’). This filling practice differs somewhat from the measure of information scaffolding discussed in 4.1, where the local herb is made relevant to target readers by retaining the exotic image and explaining its significance. In comparison, the image of dense vegetation in the title of this poem is buried into a semantic translation that derives from Du Fu’s original line “城春草木深” where the image was first inspired. Similar to the explanatory note added to the local herb, the asterisked name of the poet Du Fu is given a very brief introduction: “poeta de la dinastía Tang” (‘a Tang Dynasty poet’). Minimal as it may seem, this note presents a crucial clue for unpacking the interwoven intertextual relationships in the poem. This minimized interruption helps maintain the flow of the reading experience. Curious readers who become interested in the poem may search and explore for themselves further information that they need to discover the intertextual intricacy of the text.

The same blank-sign “草木” (‘grass tree’) in Line 6 is treated differently, where the abstruse line “夺取帝国的草木之心” (‘capture empire’s grass tree’s heart’) is rendered as “te apacigua la naturaleza del imperio” (‘you are appeased by the nature of the empire’). Here, the image of the foliage is abandoned, and in its place is a hypernym “la naturaleza” (‘nature’). This meaning-based substitution reduces the vagueness of the blank-sign by narrowing the intertextual gap between the original and the historically situated text.

More invisible in the translation is the image of “孤舟” (‘lonely boat’). In Line 9, the blank-sign laden with intertextual references is reduced to a connotational signification, as the modifier “lonely” is retained without the modified “boat”. The two images within the line “纸做的白马” (‘paper-made white horse’) and “你的孤舟”
(‘your lonely boat’) are made into one: “Montas solitario un caballo funeral de papel blanco” (‘lonely you ride a white paper funeral horse’), with the poet travelling on his solitary trip towards the end of life. This seemingly radical change is meaningful in two ways. For one thing, there is value in consistency. Using one image instead of two offers a less confusing and more comfortable reading than the obscure alternative readings of the meaning-laden “lonely boat”. Compared with travelling by water, the idea of travelling by land is also in better alignment with the rest of the poem, which ends with the image of the poet walking from the mountains and that he keeps going on forever (“你从渺小的群山走出来，一直走，一直走，走到永久那么久。”).

For another, the translation of the symbolic blank-sign “纸做的白马” involves the explication of the implied meaning of death by inserting the word “funeral”, which in the original line is conveyed by the cultural connotation of the image of a “paper-made white horse”. As part of the Chinese funeral tradition, paper-made structures and objects are burnt to offer transportation, food and money for the afterlife of the deceased. This cultural tradition is largely unknown to the target Spanish readers who may have very different experiential knowledge about similar-looking practices (e.g., the burning of paper mache puppets at Las Fallas). Therefore, the insertion of a “funeral”, though looks redundant to local readers, fills in a blank vital to understanding the tone of the poem for its target readers. In a certain sense, the explication of death also addresses the blankness left by the erased image of the “lonely boat”. That is because, the sign, as Du Fu used in his multiple poems, is interpreted as conveying a feeling of impending death, e.g., “老病有孤舟” (‘aged with disease on a lonely boat’).

This example gives us some idea about how a balance can possibly be struck between blank-filling and poetics-maintaining, as previously noted as a crux in poetry translation. In a closer look at the blank-signs discussed in the example, we may notice that they differ in their contribution to the meaning of the poem. Some blankness in the poem is more locally relevant than others the relevance of which goes beyond the lines in which they appear. Moreover, some of the globally relevant blank-signs may be ingeniously designed by the poet as an “invisible thread” running through the various signs that constitute the entire text. In dealing with the different blank-signs, the translator may refer to this distinction and restore the meaning of the locally relevant ones such as the image of a “paper-made white horse” to aid smooth reading, whereas leaving the globally meaningful ones like the “grass tree” and the “lonely boat” with some blankness unfilled to retain the delicate poetics in the original work.
5 Concluding remarks: beyond a comparative perspective

With borrowed insights from the theory of the blank-sign, we propose that poetry is a literary genre rich with meaning-laden blank-signs that invite multiple interpretations. Challenges lie not only in dealing with the inherent blank-signs in the source text but also in dealing with additional blank-signs that arise from the divide between language systems and/or contextual differences. As a result, translation works to selectively fill in the blankness inherent in the original work while addressing the blankness potentially construed by the target readers, hence, blank-filling as an adaptation to the social, cultural and historical context of the target text.

Along this line, what makes poetry translation a daunting practice may have something to do with what was referred to as a “comparative perspective” (Wang 2021: 133), that the blank-sign identified and interpreted in the source context may not be construed in the same or a comparable way in the target context. Admittedly, what appears to be a blank-sign to speakers in one language may not be detected as such by speakers in another language due to the differences in their linguistic background and metalinguistic awareness. We need to reckon in this regard that the identification of blank-signs takes an internal or emic perspective as the judgement is based largely on the perception and experience of native speakers. It is true that we want an unambiguous decision as to whether a case of interest is a blank-sign or not, and as Wang’s (2012) example of Chinese numerals (e.g., 一本书 vs. a ∅ book) shows, the native-speaker perspective seems to serve conveniently for the interpretations of certain cases. However, it fails to take into account, as Wang (2021) suggested, the hidden risk of subjecting a double or mixed standard in cross-linguistic analysis. And for this reason, such a comparative perspective is discouraged in the study: “If in the study of blank-signs a comparative perspective is adopted, it is very likely the identification of blank-signs would go out of control and countless types of blank-signs would appear as more and more languages are included in the comparative study” (Wang 2021: 133).

Paradoxically, however, a comparative perspective is what translators naturally adopt in approaching their work. It is by constantly making comparisons between the source and the target language and weighing different possibilities that they make decisions on diction, syntax and other aspects of the translated text. Therefore, although subscribing to a comparative perspective may lead to chaos in the cross-linguistic identification of blank-signs, a derived etic perspective based on comparison might be conducive to understanding the scenario of poetry translation. By comparing different blank-signs at different levels in the source and the target text, translators can become aware of the blankness that needs to be filled to facilitate a
scaffolded understanding of the text by target readers and to increase the chance for the translated work to be accepted and appreciated.

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