5 Embodiment in the Translation of Chinese Poetry

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Abstract

This essay advocates for the concept of embodiment in the translation of (Chinese) poetry to challenge what the author calls the equivalence icosis, founded on dated yet dominant assumptions of objective method and the clean interoperability of different languages. Looking at Jennifer Feeley's translations of Xi Xi, Austin Woerner's of Ouyang Jianghe, and Ming Di and Jennifer Stern's of Liu Xia, the argument conjoins embodiment with present-day manifestations of poetry's transmedial and political potential.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, embodiment, icosis, equivalence, digital turn, media studies

Equivalence

Much of translation theory, both with regard to Chinese poetry and in the larger field, has long moved away from the structuring narrative that translations are transpositions between interchangeable languages, that translators can or should be transparent, and that there is a particular method of translation that is objectively preferable to all others. Already in 1995, Lydia Liu could confidently say that “the idea that languages are commensurate and equivalents exist naturally between them is, of course, a common illusion that philosophers, linguists, and theorists of translation have tried in vain to dispel” (3). That illusion seems to persist today under the influence of the habits of translators, the expectations of readers, and the power of institutional structures that remain invested in a small number of overlapping ideas concerning cultural unity and linguistic interoperability. This essay will attempt to reconceptualize these three influences as

outcomes of a long effort to construct a globalized and translingual poetics, and set them against new and continuing efforts to engage in embodied translation, a set of practices that emphasize performances over texts, bodies over essences, and ethics over epistemes.

Lucas Klein follows Lydia Liu by arguing that modern Chinese, in contradistinction to classical or literary Chinese, participates in an “international economy of the super-sign,” a relatively stable relationship with other languages arising from a shared economic and social order (2017, 12, 14). Between modern languages like Chinese and English, Klein argues, poetry can be translated more directly and with greater transparency, involving what he calls “weak interpretation” (10-20). In part, he says, this is because of the construction of “conventions and norms becoming taken for granted” (37). The passive voice in “taken for granted,” however, deemphasizes the immense, concerted effort it takes to construct and propagate the conventions and norms of modern language, and allows the power politics of the undertaking to remain implicit. Norms that feel “congealed” and “naturalized” (37) were *made* so by the labor of translators with a particular set of ideological practices and goals in a process that we now often euphemize as “globalization” (Robinson 2014, 51). Rather than seeing the conventions of the super-sign as inert, already-produced tools, Liu’s original formulation of the concept was a critique of what she calls a “linguistic monstrosity” (2004, 13), a hidden colonization of terms by distant powers that represents an imperial struggle over the power of signification.

The underlying ideologies that have motivated the production of naturalized norms in translation have changed over time. What makes the norms powerful is not the strength of their ideology but the way in which various ideologies can share the benefits of a consensus about linguistic equivalence. Klein does not endorse the globalization he observes: he simply believes it has shrunk the distance between modern languages in a way that should make translations more measurably equivalent to source texts. He quotes Eliot Weinberger: “A translation is based on the dissolution of the self. A bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator” (2017, 17-18). Almost a hundred years ago today, from a different ideological underpinning, Walter Benjamin made the argument that “the tremendous and only capacity of translation” is to “regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux” (1988, 80), and use the differences between languages to pierce through to an underlying, transcendent stratum. During this process, the specificity, instrumentality, and necessity of extant languages fades; the resulting translation is not an interpretation of an original text by a translator, but a pair of texts that are twinned by their common relationship to an underlying

system, and are best printed in parallel, so that readers can most directly read the equivalence between source and translation. Even though Benjamin's "quietly mystical" (Yao 2002, 2) belief in pure language is not common in contemporary translation studies, the parallel printing of texts that it advocates is surely valorized by the norms of contemporary translators, including Klein.

Belief in equivalence, as well as subscription to the value of equivalence in translation, is on constant display in the texts and paratexts of the translation of contemporary Chinese poetry. Praising Steven Bradbury's translation of Hsia Yü, Rajiv Mohabir writes: "Preserving or transposing the sonorous quality of Taiwanese Chinese into English, Bradbury realizes [Hsia] Yü's extraordinary wordplay" (2015). Mohabir is not a speaker of what he calls "Taiwanese Chinese"¹ – one sees in the unsure moment of "preserving *or* transposing" the belief that whether the music is directly recognizable from the original or has been reproduced with difference, there must be some structure of equivalence at play. The sentence also reaches towards the substrate in a palpably Benjaminian way: even if the Chinese sounds have not been reproduced in English, the "sonorous quality" has. From a different ideological standpoint, Matt Turner criticizes Austin Woerner's translation of Ouyang Jianghe's 欧阳江河 "Notes toward a Fiction of the Market Economy" for privileging audiences over the "artifact" of the poem, writing that "even when all we have to read is 'the poem itself,' whether or not one can read the original text, the reading subject is interpellated by the same ideological actors which informed the artifact" (2016). Turner's position extends Klein's observation that globalization has created a shared experience from which translational equivalence can be drawn by arguing that in this case, it *should* be drawn.

As a translator myself, I also participate in tropes of equivalence. My essay "Errata" insists that a line of my translation is in error even though the poet and a professor of translation both argue otherwise (2017b). I felt that the line was in error because, in the words of the poet Ya Shi 哑石, my translated line "appears to conflict with the surface of the original text": it is not traceable or defensible via a one-to-one relationship with the source poem. For this reason, even though my version has its own representational and affective rewards, and Ya Shi prefers it to other options, the translation still presents itself to me as a

1 To this listener, Hsia Yü has the ability to emphasize, suppress, or alter the regional accent of her Mandarin Chinese, and her lexical choices are similarly flexible. Any commentary should also take into account the French and English in the collection, as in "She sleeps as deeply as a pair of sabot" (Hsia 2014, no. 40).

mistake. I feel that my readers generally see interlingual equivalence as a good thing, and irreducible interlingual difference as unfinished work. I may have my own feelings about the attitudes of this audience – “Errata” is largely about the origins and value of what is *not* equivalent in a poetry translation – but my assessment of the audience’s expectation remains quite stable and simple. Mohabir likes a translation and speaks his appreciation in terms of equivalence; Turner dislikes a translation and asks for more equivalence; when I translated a poem in an unequivocal way, I had the impulse to make a public apology.

Following Douglas Robinson, I interpret the habitual discourse around interlingual equivalence as a particular kind of icosis, which he defines as a “regulatory circulation” of “evaluative affects,” a constantly refreshing method of judgment that rewards certain normative behaviors and normative beliefs (2013, 298; 2014, 51). Robinson coined the word “icosis” from the Greek term *eikos* (εἰκός) ‘plausible’, and means it to represent the system of intellectual and institutional habits by which we determine whether or not a translation is plausible (2014, 42). An icosis is not conceptually stable, and it needs no particular philosophy. I suspect that some editors of translation presses or journals, when reading Jenn Marie Nunes’s translations of Yu Xiuhua 余秀华 in this volume, would be unable or unwilling to say that they were bad work, or that the translator didn’t understand the source texts, or that the translations weren’t enjoyable to read; they would instead say something like “this isn’t the kind of thing we do,” that the work violates a sense of category, a sense of belonging that determines what counts as translation in the first place. Maghiel van Crevel points out the strength with which some theorists and translators resist the use of translation as a metaphor for certain kinds of cultural activity, and glosses that resistance as an insistence on the “real deal” of “interlingual (literary) textual operation” (2017a, 248–249). I submit that the source of this position is not a theory of “real” translation but a *sense of it* that arises from group habitus. Moving forward, I will call this the “equivalence icosis,” the group feeling that translations are, can only be, or should exclusively be built from linguistic equivalence, and the more direct, the better.²

Whether or not it is politically or aesthetically desirable, identifying the equivalence icosis does not make it disappear or even diminish its current popularity. Seeing it as a consensus shaped by economic, political, and cultural contexts instead helps scholars and translators react flexibly when

2 Van Crevel’s assessment that resistance to alternate definitions of translation comes from a sense of “ownership” (249) is a good reminder that mastering an icosis has institutional, social, and economic rewards. To many scholars and translators, they are well worth “owning.”

those contexts change. The regulatory habits of the equivalence icosis have created a functional system: dictionary work, the retention of word order, the preference for grammatical similarity between source and target, and the authority of demonstrable commensurability as part of a shared habit based on a feeling of plausibility all work together to educate audiences, marshal resources, and incentivize intercultural study and reading, among other positive effects. Concretely, a translation that can be traced to a dictionary and matches noun for noun, verb for verb, sentence for sentence can be safely marketed to monolingual audiences as an authentic translation. Such a translation can be funded and taught by institutions and defended by invoking the discourse of equivalence as this is visible in the translation's trail of documentation and justification.

However, when we understand the discourse of equivalence not as a superior translation ideology but as one possible way – that is currently widely accepted – to organize and interrelate writers, translators, critics, institutions, and readers, this creates the space for imagining alternative icoses, new habits by which to engage with translations that frustrate expectations of equivalence. These translations already exist; by surveying them, what this essay means to do is think through some regulatory and categorical perspectives by which non-equivalent work can be identified, assessed, and ultimately, valorized. Implicit in this project is the fear that the equivalence icosis in some cases reinforces globalizing processes that ignore or suppress the specificities of non-imperial languages, the writing of alterity and the alterity of writing, and the importance of contexts to texts.³ After all, to use the international order of the super-sign is to strengthen the international order of the super-sign. What other orders are possible?

Embodiment

If the equivalence icosis can make the translator transparent, encourage “weak interpretation,” and look past or behind extant languages in search

3 I realized at the workshop in Leiden that I have been working on these questions for several years. In 2014 I wrote a review of Eric Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* that suggested that every literary world is comprised in part of the reader's sense of its authorship, i.e. its context; in 2016 I outlined how Bing Xin's 冰心 translations of Tagore used concepts of “faithfulness” to suppress his biblical language, turning a meaningfully anti-modern poetics into modern prose poetry. My contribution to the 2017 *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* special issue on Chinese poetry and translation described the way in which international poetry festivals foreground the performance of translators, and advocated that festivals add translations into local vernaculars and dialects.

of a “pure” language, then a reasonable alternative should insist on the presence of the translator, put reperformance in the place of interpretation, and focus on the bodily sensuality of both spoken and written language. The Bible translator Henri Meschonnic begins his work of translation theory not with epistemology – how we can know a work in one language through another – but with ethics. Without an ethics of translation, he says, “a typical blur appears ... this generalized essentialization of language, of poetry, of germanity that put the whole of translating into understanding” (2011, 35). In the place of this generalized blur, Meschonnic advocates for a kind of translation that is constantly responsible to the movement of human bodies, one that begins in rhythm and sound and ends in the politics of intersubjectivity. Language, he says, does not reside in the sign or the system of signs: rather, “the sense of language implies the sense of rhythm, the sense of body-in-language continuum” (2011, 66). Accordingly, the poem is not simply a document to be decoded and explained, it is “the transformation of a form of language by a form of life and the transformation of a form of life by a form of language” (2011, 68). The poet moves their mouth, their hands, and something happens in language; the listener perceives that language with their body and it affects them thus. Translation of poetry should therefore create “discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm” (2011, 71). The interpretation of signs falls by the wayside as “it is what a text does that must be translated; more than its meaning, its power, its affect” (2011, 69).

This embodied approach to poetry translation is, it must be said, just as utopian and transcendental as Benjamin’s search for a pure language. Robinson points out Meschonnic’s evasion of the question of the subjectivity of the translator (2014, 43), and his resort to mystical ideas of poetry that draw together the translation and its source text. Ultimately, the idea that a word can be spoken that will reliably or predictably transform a body is a tenet of faith, not a truth to be embraced to the exclusion of other possibilities. The value of Meschonnic’s ideas arises instead from the variety of extant translation practices that are situated, justified, and encouraged by his desire to see translation as an equivalence not of words or languages, but of movements performed by and inside bodies. These practices have the power not just to produce new and diverse versions of poems, but to allow for the translation of poems that the equivalence icosis rejects as untranslatable, and to engage in political and social behavior that the equivalence icosis forbids. Translational equivalence as it is conventionally understood is an interaction between static texts: Meschonnic’s embodied poetics instead

specify and individuate translations as performed texts that are inseparable from physical and social contexts.

A clear, highly self-conscious example of a Chinese-English poetry translator pursuing Meschonnic's type of translation poetics is Jennifer Feeley, whose translation of Xi Xi's poetry, *Not Written Words*, won the 2017 Lucien Stryk Prize. Feeley's translations make consistent use of assonance and consonance, rhyme and near-rhyme, and visual and sonic patterns. She writes that "it is imperative to bring as much of the poem into the target language as possible – including wordplay" (2017, 45) and that "I wish to encourage readers and translators to unshackle themselves from rules, assumptions, and conventions, and to use the potential of poetry and of language at large to the full" (46). The rules and assumptions she sets herself against are indistinguishable from the specific preferences of the current equivalence icosis, which prefers syntactical and semantic identity over other types of correspondences (45). In the introduction to *Not Written Words*, Feeley describes her process in this way: "Where she creates semantic dissonance, I respond with similarly jarring phrasings ... where she revels in rhyme, repetition, and aural wordplay, I strive to incorporate such sound devices, though at times this decision results in slight shifts in word choice" (Xi Xi 2016, xxi). Where the reader of the source text is jarred, the reader of the translation is jarred: if the sensation of the source text has a pattern, there should be a pattern in the translation. This is a version of Meschonnic's "prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm."

The embodied translation of Xi Xi's poetry is not, however, simply a shape in language performance, and the ideal that drives it is not exclusively a new idea of fidelity. The source texts themselves seem to call for embodied translations, as in the poem that gives the collection its title, "What I'm Thinking of Is Not Written Words" (我想到的不是文字).⁴ What the speaker of that poem *is* thinking of is "actually a certain woman's temperament" (Xi Xi 2016, 32-33). The claim of this woman's particularity appearing alongside just one specifying and embodying detail – the bare fact of her gender – calls to mind the title of Xi Xi's story "A Woman Like Me" (像我这样的一个女子). The title introduces a layer of distance: the story is not about *me* but

4 I believe that intentionally foregrounding Xi Xi's call for language outside words helped editors and readers inside the equivalence icosis to accept and reward Feeley's ludic, inventive translations: through the title and introduction, she makes precise equivalence seem impossible, and her innovations seem like necessary technical adjustments in the face of overwhelming challenge.

the kind of person who is similar to me. Both the story title and the poem insist that what is under discussion is not women (a concept) but a specific woman (the inhabitant of a body). Xi Xi's poem contains the lines “我相信生命/永远比文字超脱/比文字活泼” (I believe that life / Will always be more transcendent than words / Livelier than words) (Xi Xi 2016, 33), and this surplus, this quickening of a gendered body, is what Xi Xi is thinking of. It therefore seems reasonable and meaningful that Feeley's translation of the poem is in excess of the text of the poem, that it reaches towards a particular woman's “temperament” through wordplay and soundplay that are Feeley's own.

The need to perform an often-unspeakable difference from the dominant adheres to the body of Xi Xi's poetic speakers: they are women in an all-too male language. Feeley's translation, an English utterance of Chinese language, has a similar kind of alterity. Barbara Godard writes, “The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator” (1989, 50). Because the thing Xi Xi is thinking of happens inside an individual woman and outside language, Feeley's English version can, in Godard's sense, be double: “the echo of the self and the other, a movement into alterity” (1989, 44). In this sense, the willingness of the translator to be other than the author signals and reperforms an alterity necessary to the author's text. This difference represents not a unity between translator and artist, or an equivalence between source and translation, but a united front, a shared project.

Participants in the equivalence icosis might point out that an embodied ideology of translation validated through a shared politics of alterity requires no minimum connection between the source text and the translation, that one could claim any text is a translation of another. This criticism would stem, however, more from the still-nascent state in which the icosis of embodied poetics finds itself than from a lack of connections between embodied translations and their sources (consider translations created in the early history of the equivalence icosis: without a good dictionary and a set of bilingual speakers who had come to a consensus about how languages were related, how would you know that a translation was equivalent?). What is missing is a set of habits by which to confidently judge a translation that operates on a different authority than that of equivalence, and this lack is temporary. Many important contemporary translations connect to their sources through bodies rather than texts and through reperformance rather than parallel equivalence, and they have provoked the translation

community to ask questions of judgment and plausibility. These are icotic questions, and their answers will build an alternative to the present regime of translations.

Feeley's most concrete act of embodied connection is her habit of checking with Xi Xi to validate an interpretation or context (Feeley 2015, 73). This act of personal authentication is common across contemporary translation, as an epistemological tool: Andrea Lingenfelter says her first-hand experience of poets' lives gives her an "educated intuition" (2017, 73) that helps her understand texts. But Feeley gets more than validation of equivalence from her interactions with Xi Xi: she also receives "approval" (2017, 52), Xi Xi's permission to experiment, reconceptualize, and invent in particular ways. Whether or not the translation is a faithful or precise transposition of its source's language, Xi Xi consents to having her work represented in this way. In Meschonnic's term, this is an embodied translational process that starts with ethics. It asks not whether the translation is correct, but whether it is right or wrong to produce.

This habit of validating and verifying translations is more radical, and more deeply contrary to the equivalence icosis, than it seems. Austin Woerner's introduction to *Doubled Shadows*, his translation of Ouyang Jianghe, begins with what we might call Meschonnic's (or Xi Xi's) temptation:

It is tempting to imagine that, as a translator working directly with a living author, one might be able to circumvent the written words entirely and delve straight into the author's imagination, digesting the work back into its basic inspirational impulses and reassembling it, alive and breathing, in one's own language.

(Ouyang 2012, xiii)

Note the biotic metaphors: digestion, assembly, liveliness, breath, re-embodiment. Although Woerner and Ouyang are not as consistently interested in sonic play as Feeley and Xi Xi, what Woerner is dreaming of is "not written words" as well, and he sees a potential path towards translation in direct collaborative work. Accordingly, he spent weeks in discussion and debate with the poet, at one point translating and retranslating the dynamic drafts of a single poem as Ouyang wrote and revised it (Ouyang 2012, xix). These experiences do not comfortably reside in any archive from which equivalences can be drawn. Verbal, ephemeral, and social, they reveal not a pure language but an impossible-to-grasp plurality of lived connections between writers and translators, writings and translations. This is why, perhaps, Turner criticizes Woerner for ignoring the artifact

that is the poem: the study of textual equivalence cannot see or judge the validity of a translation informed and shaped by an atextual or extratextual relationship.

Part of the complexity of the Woerner-Ouyang relationship is the way in which it opens the possibility to transform power relationships between poet, translator, and reader. Woerner's work on *Doubled Shadows* seems to have begun as early as 2009, when he was twenty-two. Rather than a situation in which an author's text is raw material with which a translator constructs or invents equivalences – rather than an icosis in which most people produce translations according to an order outside the control of the poet – Ouyang's ideas about translation and his instructions about how to translate were, in some ways, a dominant force that shaped *Doubled Shadows*. In his introduction, Woerner describes Ouyang explaining that the poem "Our Hunger, Our Sleep" (我们的睡眠, 我们的饥饿) is "a string quartet, with four main characters – bat, rat, man, leopard – in the roles of violins, viola, and cello. In each stanza one or more of these characters appears in solo or duet; from stanza to stanza they enter and exit, relationships constantly shifting" (Ouyang 2012, xvii). This drastically changes the way we read the translation, for example in the first part of section four:

We in our sleep have invented birds,	人在睡眠中发明了一些飞鸟,
invented song, invented pure	一些好听的叫声, 洁白的
white feathers. But birds	松弛的羽毛。但它们只是
are just the party line on flight:	关于飞行的官方说法。
the bat has no residence in light . . .	而蝙蝠没有白天的住处.....

(Ouyang 2012, 69)

We can assess the translation through equivalence, and see difference there: "song" for 好听的叫声, literally "good-sounding animal call," the elimination of 松弛 'limp' as a descriptor for feathers, and the difference between "residence in light" and the more literal "daytime residence." All these can be easily explained by the information in Ouyang's description: 叫声 'call' in the original clearly refers to birdsong, and the extra concepts might be sacrificed to keep l. 2 trim. Inserting "limp" between "pure" and "white" would change the rhythm of ll. 2 and 3, as the original had just two adjectives ("pure white" in Chinese being a single binome). Exchanging "light" for the more equivalent "daytime" in l. 4 adds a rhyme to the poem that makes it more songlike. These are all ways of handling what was described as a "string quartet"; the result should feel musical. But what about the Chinese text's first character, 人 or (in Ouyang's description) "man"? Does "we"

appropriately represent “man”? Is the quartet structure Ouyang describes intended to be audible – should the word itself appear, as it usually does with the leopard, bat, and rat, or is it a conceptual structure? The first section of the poem has none of the four words 蝙蝠 ‘bat’, 老鼠 ‘rat’, 人 ‘man’, or 豹子 ‘leopard’, although human beings appear in it as 侍者 ‘servants’. If “servants” is to be interpreted as the entry of the viola, the “man,” then “we” could easily stand in for 人. The interaction with the poet dominates the interpretation of the translation. Those of us trying to judge the translation find ourselves reading Ouyang’s paratextual commentary as closely as we do the text itself, ruing both the fact that most of his instructions to Woerner went unrecorded – what if he gave a specific instruction not to translate 人 as “man” or “people” in this case? – as well as his habit of speaking in metaphors, parables, and riddles.⁵

The power structure of this kind of relationship, taken to its extreme, could very well end in a translator who becomes transparent in an entirely different way from the translator of equivalence. Living with the artist, participating deeply in the artist’s conceptual and physical world, and subject to the artist’s decision and revision, a translator could become a kind of second-language tool wielded by the poet. Alternatively, according to the specific dynamics of their relationship, Woerner could have affected Ouyang’s attitude towards, or even his writing of, the Chinese-language poem – the translator’s activity destabilizing our assumption that the source text is the origin of the translation. The sense of the two parallel undertakings, namely Chinese composition and English recomposition, that result in a trustworthy set of interlingual equivalences would shatter into a series of contingent, interpersonal relationships that could create diverse forms of coherence between source and translation. Rather than a source text being used as raw material to help construct a globe-spanning system of equivalences, and the translator acting as an agent of a transnational order, a translation could be validated and judged according to the strength of the consensus between artist and translator. These lived connections have the potential to change the power relationships that affect the author-translator dynamic, including the structural inequities that exist between European languages and less globalized and capitalized languages. This would please

5 See, for example, the interview between Ouyang, Woerner, and Sierra Nelson where Ouyang describes the translation process as an English-language reader chasing a woman up a staircase, only to find out that the woman’s face is a full head of braided hair, and that she looks the same from the front as from the back. Then he bursts into laughter, having irreversibly destabilized reliable tropes of equivalence (Nelson 2009).

the scholar who first introduced Ouyang and Woerner: Lydia Liu, critic of the imperial “monstrosity” of the super-sign (Nelson 2009).

Because they are so dynamic and unpredictable, historically and socially contingent social relationships are shifting ground upon which to base a translation. They also give translations new social and political roles. *Empty Chairs*, a translation of the poetry of Liu Xia 刘霞 by Ming Di 明迪 and Jennifer Stern (the pen name of poet Jennifer Kronovet), summons the body of the poet in its very title. Liu Xia’s husband Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 was in prison when he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, and the prize was awarded to him as the virtual occupant of an empty chair. During his incarceration and after his death, Liu Xia was placed under house arrest and until summer 2018 she was prevented from traveling freely or speaking to the media (in July 2018, she was flown to Berlin and she must now live in exile, with little hope of return). The plural “chairs” in the English title of the collection groups Liu Xia’s chair, and Liu Xia’s house imprisonment, with the injustices experienced by Liu Xiaobo.⁶ The translators’ afterword makes the volume’s undertaking quite clear:

We are fueled by Liu Xia’s absence to make her work as alive and potent as it is in the original Chinese so that her absence becomes a presence. We want her readers to feel the weight of her silence through her powerful voice. We want her readers to long to sit with her as we do ...

(Liu 2015, 115).

Here, poetic presence and the way in which the shape of words moves bodies stand in for physical presence; as the poem stands in for Liu Xia, so the translation stands in for the poem. Implicit in these imaginative collocations there is a collaboration between the work of translation and the long struggle for the release of Liu Xia. A 2015 reading of *Empty Chairs* was held by PEN America, and in August 2017 Liu Xia’s imprisonment became their featured advocacy case.⁷ Their advocacy campaign was a mixture of links to direct political action – a petition, a request to call ambassadors and senators⁸ – and translated poetry. As the translators of *Empty Chairs* propose, the poetry was included to turn Liu’s absence into a presence,

6 The translated collection’s title comes from a 1998 poem by Liu Xia, written long before the image of Liu Xiaobo’s empty chair would come to represent his incarceration by the state.

7 The reading was on December 1 at Bookcourt in Brooklyn, NY. PEN’s advocacy case file for Liu Xia is available at bit.ly/2VG2FRa.

8 The core petition resides at bit.ly/2ItMORX.

and motivate readers to work on her behalf, to “long to sit with her” as one would with an imprisoned friend. As Meschonnic says, the poem is a method by which the actions of the reader come into a relationship to the actions of the poet.

The politics of bodies in the translation of *Empty Chairs* are intertwined both conceptually and practically with the politics of undertakings like the PEN advocacy campaign: PEN America and PEN China published poems from the collection before it appeared in print (Liu 2015, front matter). This concern with the body of the artist provokes translation ethics and aesthetics that are substantially different from those of the equivalence icosis. Unlike Xi Xi or Ouyang Jianghe, Liu Xia has a stripped-down, straight-talking aesthetic: her poetry is clipped, direct, and intense, using a great deal of white space and the slowness of the short poetic line. The translators of *Empty Chairs*, however, insert large quantities of punctuation, create interlinear effects in English that rethink aural lines as visual ones, and suppress some idiomatic effects that are Chinese-only. These choices appear intentional and are stably repeated over the course of the entire collection, for example in the first stanza of “One Bird Then Another”:

Back then,
we were always talking
about the bird. Not knowing
where it came from – the bird,
the bird – it brought us
warmth and laughter.

我们
在很早以前
就常常说起那只鸟
不知道来自哪里的鸟
我们兴致勃勃
它给我们带来了笑声

(Liu 1995, 2-3)

This runs counter to Klein's preference to “respect the physical order of the source text” (2017, 9). The changes are not, however, mistakes, and are not arbitrary: the translation differs from the rhythm of the source text in a particular, directed way. Where the Chinese uses the end of the line to create heavy and carefully timed pauses, making each line a single phrase spoken in a single breath, the English breaks up some lines with caesuras, and strengthens the sense of enjambment by, for example, cutting lines between verb and object (“talking / about the bird,” “not knowing / where,” “it brought us / warmth”). Where the source signals its ritual slowness in the brevity and conceptual emptiness of the first two lines, the translation compresses that empty space and applies it later in the stanza to break up clauses that make up complete lines in the original. The number of lines remains the same, but the English distributes them more evenly. The

rhythms of the Chinese are, in some cases, available in English, although they are uncommon. Compare my translation below:

We
 long ago used to
 talk about that bird constantly
 that bird whose origins we didn't know
 we flourished in fascination
 it brought us the sound of laughter

This translation is not holistically better or worse, but it does retain the single-breath line, requiring the bodies of those who recite the translation to perform a rhythm closer to the source text. Although Ming Di and Stern's translation is deeply embodied, Meschonnic's focus on rhythm does not dominate the particular nature of its embodiment.

What is at play in the translation of "One Bird Then Another" is instead an attempt to transpose the emotional and political affect of the poem into the lives of English audiences. Liu Xia's poetics are highly recognizable in Chinese, based on a premodern tradition of one-breath lines broken by strong, unpunctuated lineation as well as a modernist interest in negative space. Those poetics are *not* presently standard in English – a respected contemporary poet in the Anglophone world would rarely, for example, leave "We" on a line by itself. Ming Di and Stern's version instead cuts its lines to create a visual emphasis on a line's final word ("talking," "knowing"), as well as a brief expectant hush into which the next line rushes. This rhythm is much more current in Anglophone poetry, for example C. D. Wright's opening couplet from her poem "Personals": "Some nights I sleep with my dress on. My teeth / are small and even. I don't get headaches" (2002, 78). The hardness and strangeness of "teeth" opens multiple possibilities for the next line, and because the first line ends with an incomplete clause, it pitches the reader forward.

That anticipation and resolution is a powerful affective structure in English poetry, deployed quite intentionally in Ming Di and Stern's translation between lines four and five, where the expectation that each ensuing line will travel or change is lightly upended by the way the poem drapes a repetition across the line break: "the bird, / the bird." These line breaks enliven points at which a more equivalent translation of the original would sound flat and prosaic. In my more equivalent translation, the excerpt's last line is less successful than Ming and Stern's translation, which moves more by hanging a space between "brought us" and "warmth and laughter."

The focus in *Empty Chairs* on extant affective structures in English – rather than the introduction of new ones – follows from the physical and political goal of the translation. Poems that make readers feel something are more likely to motivate their engagement in direct political action; poems that provoke affective response are more likely to create bonds of affinity between poet and reader. PEN America used Ming Di and Stern's translations to strengthen their campaign, something that might not be true for a set of poems that tried to educate readers into inhabiting unfamiliar rhythms or structures whose emotional color was not immediately clear. As the translators say in their note, they are “attempting to bring the poems into an English that creates a sense of absence” (Liu 2015, 118). The translations do not attempt to create new English, but access a preexisting tradition of English free-verse rhythm whose lineation practices have an embodied, sensory effect. The paradoxical way in which this project succeeds is clear from a 2015 review in *ZYZZYVA* magazine:

We sense [Liu Xia] in the Chinese text that lies adjacent to the English translation – the monolingual reader can follow line breaks and stanza length and engage in the visual form of each poem. And Liu Xia suggests that she, too, sees herself as embodied in her writing. “I’m a philosopher who thinks / with my body ...,” she writes in “Rant,” “the body / of spirit whose language is / poetry. I am prosody.”

(Luan 2015)

I submit that the monolingual reader's senses are engaged in this case not by Liu Xia, but by the selection of “an English” from the Anglophone tradition by translators who react to and care about the position of Liu's body. This is an embodiment that does not require, or even allow, the reader to “follow line breaks” in the original, but produces its physical effects through local, traditional means. The prosodic body of Liu Xia's written Chinese is not as present as it could be in *Empty Chairs*: rather than bend their resources to meticulously reproducing the effects of her craft, the translators worked towards maximizing the translations' circulation and visibility, to raise her chances of going into exile in order to escape relentless oppression at home. The choice to Anglicize and localize Liu's poetics was a humane and practical response to her political situation; the need to Anglicize was yet another cost of Liu's long arrest. By provoking this Anglicization, the power of the state again succeeded in a small way in making Liu's poetic bodies – the seat of her philosophy, her prosodic identity – more invisible and less autonomous, more recognizable and less radical. When we assess

Empty Chairs, the question of equivalence fails to engage in this life-or-death struggle for the space in which to speak. Anglicization or localization, word order retained or sacrificed, none of these elements seem meaningful outside their ethical relationship to the corporeality of poets and readers.

Transmediation

My interpretation of Liu Xia's prosody, specifically the way she performs single lines without pause, has a source outside the Chinese text of *Empty Chairs*. Like many interested parties, I've seen her read her poetry on YouTube.⁹ The digital turn promises to shape and intensify both the equivalence icosis and the embodiment icosis now under construction: rather than a set of concordances and identities carried around by highly trained specialists, it produces the system of the super-sign as a massive, ever-expanding database open for use by translators, readers, and critics at all levels of erudition and initiation. Machine translation, at least in its current iteration, reflects the equivalence icosis in a particularly straightforward form: services like Google Translate have no power to identify words that are identical between languages, but instead predict which words will be accepted as so by readers. It still falls to trained translators to create the system of the super-sign, but as the interpretations of digital tools become more firmly rooted in transnational consensus, it seems more and more likely that interlinguistic equivalence will feel increasingly real, and the translator will feel increasingly distant and predictable. The impact of digital transmission on the embodiment icosis will be similarly substantial, and will center around the power of transmediation to represent, extend, and shape the sensory effects of poetry.

Poetry has always worked in multiple media, and moved across media, from spoken word to song to text and back again. In its most ancient form it is, as James Joyce later said of the printed newspaper, "verbivocovisual" (Ford 2013, 450). Its shifting nature and its sensory multiplicity have taken shape after shape: the phonograph record of the famous poet speaking, the face-to-face reading, poems printed on the sides of buses, bridges, and buildings. Digital technologies allow the verbal (the printed word), the vocal (the sound of the word), and the visual (images associated with the word) to be circulated simultaneously and in new combinations. All the embodied translations listed above feature illustration: *Not Written Words* has Xi Xi's own drawings of cats on the cover, the introduction to *Doubled*

9 Also posted by PEN America: bit.ly/2ItUJ1z.

Shadows has a cartoon exchange between artist and translator that uses spatial metaphors to describe unwritten words, and *Empty Chairs* has several of Liu Xia's famous photographs of tormented dolls. Digital technology makes the image equal to the word in ease of printing and circulation; online, where poems are increasingly circulated as .gif or .jpg images, texts already feel like, and are used like, photographs. This makes it easy to mix embodied translations with original art. Lines and shapes affect the eye of the reader in translation just as Meschonnic's ideal of rhythm hopes to affect the ear, and eventually the body. Any future embodiment icosis will privilege mixtures of original texts, translations, and untranslated media: rather than giving us a sense of the text's meaning, embodied translations will be meaningful by engaging our senses in multiple ways.

Poetry in translation is becoming increasingly multimedial; it is also becoming transmedial. In many cases today the poem *becomes* an image or a performance in video, and this makes techniques and tactics of embodiment unavoidable. Speaking about "battlers poetry" 打工诗歌 written by Chinese migrant workers, van Crevel writes that "just about every representation of battlers poetry I have seen begins with extensive reference to the world behind this poetry rather than the words in it" (2017a, 280), and talks about battler poetry's particular focus on people, migration, and context as the foundation of an enterprise of cultural translation. Battler poems and battler bodies are always multiply translated from countryside to city, from dialect to standard Chinese, from the working class and into the literary establishment (251-253). This must be one reason that the genre has found a meaningful home in transmediation: in Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 and Wu Feiyue's 吴飞跃 documentary *Iron Moon* (2015), audiences can hear the voices of poets, see their contexts, briefly experience the stultifying rhythms of their labor, and examine their abused bodies. Poetic texts as they are recited over the backdrop of these sounds and images are vastly more embodied than print texts alone, and this is likely why battler poets and editors engage so intentionally with film as a medium. It is also why these transmedial texts provoke critical and readerly anxiety. In his review of the film, van Crevel records the sense of some people in Chinese poetry circles that Qin "is building personal fame and wealth on the backs of the migrant workers whose interests he claims to have at heart," and a resistance to the film's claims of "authenticity" (2017b).

Anxiety over the transmediation of poetry is deeply related to the underdevelopment of the embodiment icosis in translation studies. Nobody believes that poets should not perform while sound and images play in the background, or that a translator should refuse to post an image of a page of their translation

decorated by their author's doodles or designs. We simply have not agreed upon a means for judging which of these undertakings do and do not represent worthwhile cultural and cross-cultural reproduction. In the previous section, I outlined three important qualities of recent embodied translations: that source texts and translations share an alterity that is in surplus of their printed text, that translators are in personal contact with the artist, and that a translation reacts to or engages with the social or political project of the artist or source text. These map quite neatly onto a prospective ethics – which Meschonnic argues should be the heart of the poetics of the body – that could serve as an icosis for embodied translations as well as transmediations.

First, is there something in the text that requires extratextual viewing or hearing? Is the poem in its context substantially different from the poem in its text? Poems are embodied to different degrees, and it seems appropriately attentive to accept that works by poets like Xi Xi, Yu Xiuhua, and Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 care about and are engaged in the interaction between poetry and the body.¹⁰ It is this quality, and a translator's sense of it, that might signal whether a text is plausibly open to embodied translation or transmediation.

Second, has the translation been produced with the consent of the poet, and how does the translation react to the poet's preferences? Our current institutions of copyrights are baldly insufficient to allow real consent of the translated. Highly transnational artists like Ouyang Jianghe have networks of supporters and friends who can backtranslate, recommend, and assess on behalf of the poet. The precarious situation of battler poets, by contrast, exposes them to manipulation, whether by filmmakers, publishers, translators, or others. If embodied translation is missing an institution, it is one that can provide every poet or rights-holder an understanding of their translator, translation, and potential audience. The attitudes and opinions of artists and rights-holders, as well as their interactions with translators and publishers, should then be made available to scholars and later translators. Just as the equivalence icosis allows translators to transparently and intentionally violate equivalence in any number of ways – the current trend against translating rhyme is one example – the embodiment icosis could also permit the principled evasion or opposition of writerly consent. To do so, however, those who assess the plausibility of translations must be able to see and understand the nature of that consent. An archive of

10 Liao Yiwu is an especially good example: see Rui Kunze's chapter in this volume. In his essay "Recitation," he writes, "Am I named Liao Yiwu? No, I am not named Liao Yiwu, I am a flesh-and-bone body with the written symbol 'Liao Yiwu' pasted to it" (1997, 47). In the same essay, he also reflects at length on the ethical challenges of poetic performance.

the interactions between poet, translator, and editor could serve the same function as a parallel printing of source text and translation: rather than forcing translators to make interventions or undertake conflicts in secret, an archive would make ethical decisions visible to readers and strengthen trust between reader, critic, poet, and translator.¹¹

Finally, perhaps most importantly, when creating an embodied translation or transmediation, we should have to ask: do the politics of the translation collaborate with the politics of the text? Does the translation move bodies through culture in a way that cooperates with the text's effect and affect? The equivalence icosis has produced a broad, multinational set of relationships between words in many languages, and a method of assessment by which those relationships can feel real. Embodied translation has the potential to produce relationships of political solidarity, and an icosis of embodied translation could make shared translinguistic and transregional identities feel as solid and meaningful as a lexical equivalent in a dictionary.¹² As was true for the equivalence icosis, work to produce translinguistic solidarity through embodied translation will be subjective, collective, and intercultural, and it will take place over generations – with each culture in a translation pair coming to understand the possibilities and challenges, the ideologies and practicalities, of the other.

Translators and theorists have long shared a consensus that translation has always been an overtly or covertly political act, and not simply an operation of linguistic signs. As the digital turn reconnects the translation of poetry to the body and its performance, there is no better time to make a translation's effect on bodies an overt topic for assessment, and to formally ask whether a translated text is *right*, rather than correct.

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11 Happily, a Chinese Literature Translation Archive is currently being built at the University of Oklahoma, collecting correspondence between author and translator among other translation-related documents.

12 Literary historians often accept this proposition more easily than translation theorists. After reading Liansu Meng's essay in this volume, one finds it hard to put time into measuring how equivalent Chen Jingrong's translations are to Baudelaire's source texts. Their accuracy is simply not the most important question she asks about them. Instead, the essay asks: were the translations influential? Did they move the translator? In what ways did they affect audiences?

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