

## Yu Cheng-Ta's Task of Translation

—by Hongjohn Lin

When Yu Cheng-Ta was a college student, he already focused his works on identifying the effect of difference arises from the mediation of the same thing. We can also observe this approach of creation in his works that utilize networks and audio-visual juxtaposition. Yu's works reached a personal, private, and even obscene state until he began to use body, language, and culture as the objects of mediation. This state tended to reflect subjective discourses. It represented not only a personal state, but also a state of collective political allegory. The turning point of Yu's approach came in his "Ventriloquists" series created in 2007. The artist set a performative stage, so that he could hide himself behind the images of the foreigners in the video. By whispering words of self-introduction in Chinese to the foreigners, the artist prompted them to introduce themselves in Chinese with foreign accents. In the video works, the artist always wore black clothes in order to blend himself as the black background of the stage, and thereby let the protagonists speak. Apparently, it was difficult for the foreigners to master the real meanings of the Chinese words they spoke, and those Chinese words pronounced by the non-Chinese speakers were often misunderstood by the audience (e.g. "like<xi huan>" was misunderstood as "wash dishes<xi wang >"). The artist offered opportunities to those foreigners to speak, and simultaneously identified the "lexical gap" between meanings, languages, and voices. The title of the series is "Ventriloquists," referring to the person skilled in ventriloquism. The artist attempted to manipulate the speech of the puppet-like foreigners with contemporary image techniques similar to ventriloquism. In history, ventriloquism served the role of providing oracles in ancient times and providing entertainment in modern times. As much as ventriloquists always present the "discourse of the other" through an magical illusions, in psychoanalytic sense the true self is always created in relation to the others. The various intersubjective relationships between "I" and "the other" in works by Yu Cheng-Ta can be seen as an ontological instance where the subject can possibly speak.

The exhibition entitled "Private Foreign Affairs: Works by Yu Cheng-Ta (2008-2013)" held currently at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts is a "survey exhibition" of the artist's career development. The scale and form of this exhibition are also rarely seen at the level of young artists. Chen Kuan-Yu, as the curator of this exhibition, edits and contextualizes the artist's works created during 2008 and 2013. The curator arranges these works according to a national theme. The

curator starts with countries, flags of countries, a world map made up of odds and ends, tone-deaf singing of the descendants of the Dragon, and finally the “crack-up” performance of local situation (“She Is My Aunt”) in the Freedom Square. The curator highlights that the true political subject in translation is not only the political signs and symbols as in flags and anthems, but is the uneasiness of individual life-experience in unspeakable political turmoil. In other words, the political assertion of a split subject is simultaneously a “nation without nationality” in the globe. The entire exhibition functions much as an inter-subjective network revealing in political context. It is a personal strategy for subjective translation, and the works in this exhibition reflect the themes of corporeality, gazing, and desire.

What is worth noticing is that the exhibition “Private Foreign Affairs” does not refer to official “diplomacy” or merely “diplomatic” but with the pun that indicates the “affairs come about when encountering (unfamiliar) foreign situations.” The personal reference here, of course, demonstrates the artist’s life experience. After La Biennale di Venezia, Yu Cheng-Ta works as an artist-in-residence in various countries and exhibit his artworks, many of which are commissioned from foreign lands, namely created when encountering “foreign affairs’. This situation of creation is exactly a state of translation, whose etymon refers to a transfer from one place to another. Accordingly, translation is also a transfer between different systems. The most important thing is not the “appropriate” expression and status of the things being translated in different systems, nor is the conversion between equivalent language systems, but that the most fundamental and unsurpassable difference between systems pre-determines the act of translation as basically a kind of “creation.”

### **A Translator is a Traitor (traduttore, traditore)**

The Italian proverb “traduttore, traditore” best describes the relationship of translation/transference. The Italian pronunciation of these words reminds us that it might be a paronomasia. Obviously, this proverb is a critique of poor translation. However, we might wish to treat the reality demonstrated by the paronomasia seriously. If a translator is really a traitor, what object does the translator betray? If the object being betrayed merely refers to the “original text,” how does the original language system measure the appropriateness of the other language system? How to determine the exterior of the system with the interior of the system? The incompatibilities between different language systems are pre-determined before translation. Or we may argue that translation betrays the communicative competence of language. In other words, translation violates the principle of language as a tool of communication and makes language system no longer

simply composed of carrying and receiving messages. It seems that the betrayal of translation is inevitable. It reveals the exclusiveness and incommunicable feature between different language systems.

In the essay entitled "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin points out that translation refers to a "pure language," and this language is able to identify its difference from the original language system and then coexist with that system. For Benjamin, the "pure language" is a utopian state of language, while translation is able to remedy the deficiencies of the original language system and help the system return to its default status. Benjamin argues, "[l]anguages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express."<sup>1</sup> This interrelationship rests on pointing out the radical difference between languages. This is exactly what Benjamin emphasizes that a translator must preserve the untranslatability between languages. For Benjamin, translation is not concealing identity behind or assimilating into the source language. Translation should demonstrate unfamiliar context, semantics, and rhetoric. This is exactly Benjamin's emphasis on the "transparency" of translation, which means that translation should not conceal and assimilate itself to the source language, but should demonstrate the situation in which it encounters the unfamiliarity of language.

Benjamin cites the words of the German translator Rudolf Pannwitz, "[t]hey want to turn Hindi, Greek, [and] English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, [and] English. [...] The translator must broaden and deepen his own language with the foreign one."<sup>2</sup> In the process of translation, those unfamiliar, weird, and tongue-twisted words and rhetoric serve as the preservation of the untranslatability of language. Benjamin's radical theory of translation is neither consistent with the principles of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" proposed by Yen Fu, nor to emphasize the original meanings of words lost in the process of translation. Benjamin's purpose is to highlight the untranslatability of language through the difference between the source language and that used for translation. By taking the translation of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin as an example, Benjamin explicates that translation is the acquisition rather than the loss of language.

In the turn of the last century, translation became the heated topic in China when the sinophone exchanging with Europe, the United States, and Japan. Many examples and arguments were formulated at this stage. To mention some, Liang Qi-Chao translated "inspiration" into "yen-shi-pi-li-chun," and Liang Shih-Chiu translated "Oedipus complex" into "er-de-pos-cuo-zhong," literal meaning son's wife. Lu

Xun advocated “literal interpretation” and preserved the use of “Europeanized terms.” This advocacy represented his concern with Chinese and this concern was parallel to Benjamin’s conception of translation. Lu Xun wrote, “[p]utting unfamiliar, ancient, and foreign syntax in our knowledge, and then we can expropriate the syntax for our own.” This is exactly the political attribute of translation, namely the translation’s betrayal of the original text. Translation cannot be regarded as a copy of the original text in another language. What translation demonstrates is the “untranslatability” beyond “faithfulness” and “expressiveness.” The various states of translation, such as distorted translation, translation of the meaning, transliteration, reverse translation, random translation, and mistranslation, not only indicate the untranslatability of the original text, but also claim the subjectivity of translation.

Isn’t this the “political attribute” demonstrated by Yu Cheng-Ta as a translator or by his works as a kind of aesthetic “translation?” The artist’s works, such as “Ode to the Republic of China,” “A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs,” “Ventriloquists” series, and “A Practice of City Guide: Auckland,” reveal the absurdness of so-called “official” language through non-standard and accent pronunciation. Besides, The artist’s works indicate not only the impossibility for the original language to become an officially approved standard, but also the political-cultural status of translation. At the peculiar frontline of language/culture, translation/conversion is always altering the existing cultural relations and simultaneously demonstrating the situation of translation as a “discourse of the other.” As a translator, Yu Cheng-Ta uses audio-visual juxtaposition and situational placement, just like a small “medium,” to reveal untranslatable cultural phenomena. Mind you, the word “medium” also carries the connotation of psychic, that is, the person who is able to translate God’s words into the language comprehensible to humankind.

When translation is re-deposited in culture and language system, its “acquisition” refers to the fragments of “pure language,” even if they are provisional. We may see the true colors of translation as a “creation,” namely a rootless state of fragments that takes shape in “between.” In the artist’s works, we observe the development of the “creation” of translation as an allegory. The crudeness and absurdness emerged during conversion/transference are always the “words of the other” that represent the subject of translation. Where is its position? Or, where is the quilting point constantly retroactively refer to? The answer lies in the work “She Is My Aunt.” Why the artist “mediates” the “stranger” who flips out in the Freedom Square as his “aunt” rather than passerby, his neighbor, or any other person? Because the person who is neither intimate nor estranged to ourselves is the ones who

carries the same blood in ties of consanguinity.

**Footnotes:**

1. Benjamin, Walter, "THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR: An introduction to the translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*," translated by Harry Zohn, *Translation Studies Reader*, Lawrence Venuti (eds), USA: Routledge, 1999.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 163.