CHAPTER 5

The Translational: Intersemioticity and Transculturality

This chapter explores the idea of the translational in experimental forms of literature. What is the translational, and how is it related to translation as we normally conceive it? At the grammatical level, the word “translational” is the adjectival form of “translation”, as in the phrases “translational imaginary” and “translational ethics”, which I used in the previous chapter. Here the al- suffix marks a genitive relation, so that the same phrases can respectively be rewritten as “imaginary of translation” and “ethics of translation”. “Translational”, however, is not merely a lexemic variant on “translation”. It is a site that is closely affiliated to translation, that is, the textual act of translating, but also exceeds the discursive domain, functioning as a semiotic trope that governs a wide range of textual and non-textual aesthetic phenomena.

Whereas translation denotes a concrete event, the translational works as an abstraction. A translational process is one that can involve an actual instance of translating, but ultimately it is a site of hybridity that exemplifies the traffic and exchange (or the lack thereof) between linguistic codes, semiotic modes, and/or communicative media. A poem that explores the tensions of intercultural identity in a multilingual city, for example, is translational, even though no interlingual transfer may have taken place. First, the intervening Third Space between cultural identities is a theme at the very heart of translation studies (cf. Bhabha’s [1994] cultural translation). Second, in making its thematic point, such a poem may deploy textual devices such as code-mixing, essentially a translational trope which, through the juxtaposition of codes, embodies the flow or blockage between languages and hence negotiates the sociolinguistic or semio-political relationship between them. In this case, the text is translational by virtue of being translingual and transcultural, not because it entails translating—though it is completely possible for translating to figure in such texts as a rhetorical strategy as well.¹ This type of translational text contains cultural-linguistic movements within itself. Chen Li’s “18 Touches” and “And the Bees Are Singing to You Too”, discussed in Chapter 3, discussed in Chapter 3,

¹ For an example from fiction, see Lee (2013, 41–46).
are examples of this. So is Xu Bing’s *A Dictionary of Selected Words from A Book from the Sky*, mentioned in Chapter 4. In the latter piece, the translational is constituted, and concurrently undercut, by phony translation: non-signifiers in one language *pretend to be translated* into non-signifiers in another language within the paratextual frame of a dictionary text.

The translational does not apply only to the interaction between language and cultural codes, but also to that between different semiotic modes and media. In Chapter 3, we looked at how Chen Li’s poems are intersemiotically represented on audio-visual platforms, forming a text-continuum where transcreations perform their source texts across different media. In dealing with the translational in literature, we are interested not so much in the translating of set pieces of text from one language into another, but in how *crossings* of linguistic, semiotic, and medial boundaries are incorporated into the making of literary artefacts. These crossings may be metaphorical, articulating movement between languages, modes, and media without there necessarily being an empirical set of ontological correspondences between one text and another. In this respect, intersemiotic translations exemplify the translational: they emanate from a particular source and implement some form of material transmission, representation, or transculturation (Tymoczko 2007) of this source, without the obligation, so to speak, to account for the point-to-point equivalences between one text and another. Another case in point is the transcultural text, which here refers to the discursively hybrid text made up of tissues of cited material from a prior, foreign source. In each of these cases, it is important to note that the translational does not preclude translating: the two are in a dynamic relationship, where the latter can figure as part of the former, but may at other times be eluded almost completely.

**Case Examples**

This chapter examines a number of case examples of the translational in literary art from Taiwan and Hong Kong. My aim is to describe the specific modalities employed in each of these projects and the semiotic operations that transpire in them, as well as analyse their resultant poetics from the perspective of the translational. My overall thesis is that translation is involved in all of these experimental works as a conceptual trope that affords them a *trans*-element, that is, an immanent quality of inscribing through the traversing, transgressing, and transcending of figurative borders. It is this *trans*-element that gives these works their experimental edge.