CHAPTER 6

On Chineseness and the Trope of Translation in Experimental Literature

This study has set out to survey representative cases of what I have designated as experimental Chinese literature. In the introductory chapter I delimited the term “experimental” to describe works that tap into various technologies in foregrounding their materiality. Such materiality, as we have seen, is manifest in the corporeal substance of the linguistic or other semiotic matter at hand and in the embodied features of literature as artefact. But what about the other keyword—“Chinese”? How Chinese is experimental Chinese literature? How viable is the notion of Chineseness in the context of material poetics? These questions are central to the epistemologies of reading; they are especially pertinent to the articulation of the glocal in contemporary writing practices, in an age where the local and the global are engaged in a perpetual dialectic.

Chineseness is a much problematised notion in the study of modern Chinese poetry. With its generic affiliation to classical Chinese poetry—the embodiment of elite culture in imperial China—modern Chinese poetry has since its very beginning been burdened with a perceived loss of authenticity, a “recurrent anxiety about the lack of Chineseness” (Yeh 2008b, 13). This motif of identity “loss” or “lack” stems from a purist perspective on writing as representation, which views such poetry as inherently “Western” in terms of its form (free as opposed to regulated verse), language (vernacular and Europeanised syntax), and imagery (partially imported from the Western poetic repertoire).1 This view exhibits a fetishism with cultural authenticity that hinders

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1 See, for example, Li Rui’s 李銳 criticism of avant-garde Chinese writers, discussed in Yeh (2008b). Such reification of Chineseness is not restricted to poetic discourse. Huang (2009) observes that critical commentaries on Shakespearean adaptations for Chinese film and theatre are often premised on an essentialised Chinese culture (and an essentialised Shakespeare as well): “these obsessions with Chineseness that mystify China are as pervasive among the artists as among the critics, both in and beyond the Sinophone world, who participated in the production of China as a mythic Other in Shakespearean performances” (38). Rey Chow argues that this “habitual obsession with ‘Chineseness’” is a symptom of a “historically conditioned paranoid reaction to the West”—an effect of “past victimization under Western imperialism”, turned into “a narcissistic, megalomanic affirmation of China” (Chow 2000, 5). For her critique of Chineseness as a self-serving narrative in modern literary and cultural studies, see Chow (2000).
productive inquiry into the potential translational space between two or more states of identity, which are themselves not in stasis. It also betrays a definition of Chineseness in the negative: to be Chinese is to be non-Western; this equation renders Chineseness as no more than an empty signifier that continually points back to its phantom self with reference to a negated, yet inexorably pervasive, Other.

The obsessive faith in Chinese authenticity in literature can be released or diverted by considering two questions in tandem: first, “Why should poetry written by Chinese people in the Chinese language have to be Chinese beyond these two features?” (van Crevel 2008, 444); and second, “What is modern [rather than Chinese] about Modern Chinese Poetry?” (Yeh 2008b, 16) Let us look at each of these in turn with respect to experimental Chinese literature.

Chineseness is not an inescapable notion when it comes to Chinese literature; in the context of experimental writing, even the term “Chinese literature”, depending on how it is defined (based on such criteria as language of composition, ethnicity of the author, cultural resonance, place of publication, etc.) can sometimes turn into a misnomer. How “Chinese”, for example, should we consider Pink Noise to be? Other than the facts that the author is a Taiwanese (albeit one who has spent much of her time in France) and the book was released in Taiwan, one would be stretched to impute much Chineseness to the work. “Bilingual” might work as a tentative descriptor insofar as two languages are involved, but that can also be slightly misleading in suggesting a neat demarcation between the two languages. As discussed in Chapter 2, the mode of production in Pink Noise is conceived to deprive the book of a definitive linguistic affiliation: recall that through machine translation, Hsia Yü’s English source poems generate their corresponding Chinese translations, which in turn become the basis on which the English poems are fine-tuned; the fine-tuned English texts then generate another version of Chinese translations, and so on. This feedback mechanism is the most radical aspect of Pink Noise, as it creates a terrible but perfect linguistic dilemma: for the first time in contemporary “Chinese” poetry, we are reading unreadable Chinese-language poems with reference to their English originals (which by and large make better sense than the Chinese translations), when in fact the two sets of text are already constitutive of each other through intertwining loops of revision.

The status of experimental Chinese poetry as a self-contained cultural site is also complicated by Chen Li’s method of writing. Although Chen’s poems are indisputably Chinese-language texts, their presumed Chineseness is mitigated by the poet’s transcultural sensibility. We have seen, for instance, that Chen overtly borrows structural concepts from the poems of authors he translates, notably Neruda, and incorporates these into his own writing. His method of