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英glish 影fluence: Ouyang Yu's bilingual and self-translated poetry

Abstract:

How can the innovative spirit of a poet catalyse the breaking of traditional artistic conventions and engender a transformative effect within the realm of poetry? Ouyang Yu is one of the pioneers of English–Chinese bilingual poetry and self-translation in Australia. As a translingual and cross-cultural poet who has long been active in Australia and China, Yu's linguistic and poetic experiments show a passion for innovation and a rebellious spirit. This article explores Yu's bilingual poetry by drawing on a new classification method which distinguishes four subtypes of English–Chinese bilingual poetry according to the extent of integration of the two languages: 1. intra-word/character bilingualism; 2. intra-phrase bilingualism; 3. intra-sentence bilingualism; and 4. cross-sentence bilingualism. In this system, either language could be the carrier language and the other the inserted language. This method fills a longstanding gap in the field by comprehensively and explicitly defining the boundaries of mixing these two languages within the genre of poetry. The article also explores Yu's poetry self-translation by focusing on his advocacy for the freedom of re-creation when translating one's own works, which includes the retention of the hieroglyphic attributes of Chinese characters in English, as well as Yu's innovative "direct translations".

Biographical note:

Yue Shi is a postgraduate from the University of Melbourne with a Master's degree in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing. As an author with over a decade of experience in poetry, creative non-fiction and short fiction, she has been mostly dedicated to English–Chinese bilingual poetry, self-translation and AI-human collaborative poetry creation within the last few years.

Keywords:

Ouyang Yu, English–Chinese bilingual poetry classification, poetry self-translation, cross-cultural poetry, Australian poetry

Introduction

Although the mixing of languages in poetry is not new (Forster, 1970) and it continues to be a widespread phenomenon in several cultures (Wilson & Gerber, 2012), bilingual writers and self-translators have long been largely neglected in literary history and translation theory (Hokenson & Munson, 2007). In contrast to monolingual writers and readers who take language for granted, some bilingual writers celebrate migrant or diasporic cultures by taking their cross-cultural identities as a source of power rather than concealing or erasing them (Wilson & Gerber, 2012). Despite the fact that they may still be considered something of an anomaly (Niaz, 2021), these practitioners transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries to occupy an ampliative re-creation space. Ouyang Yu is one of Australia's most active practitioners of bilingual poetry and self-translation; a Chinese–Australian poet, novelist, translator and academic. He currently resides in Melbourne and writes in both English and Chinese, and has been the author of 148 books including poetry, fiction and non-fiction – in which the English and Chinese works are approximately equal in number. This article will focus respectively on Ouyang's bilingual poetry and self-translated poetry. I contend that an innate drive for innovation has propelled Ouyang's extensive and ongoing exploration of bilingual practices. The article aims to dissect, through detailed and in-depth textual analyses of Ouyang Yu's works, how the robust impetus of innovation could impact a poet's works and achieve disruptive artistic effects.

To examine Ouyang Yu's bilingual poetry, when the genesis and the poet's creative motivation have been combed, this article proposes a new classification method which divides English–Chinese bilingual poetry into four subtypes according to the extent of language integration: 1. intra-word/character bilingualism; 2. intra-phrase bilingualism; 3. intra-sentence bilingualism; and 4. cross-sentence bilingualism. In this system, either language could be the carrier language and the other the inserted language. This method fills a long-standing gap in the field by comprehensively and explicitly defining for the first time the boundaries of mixing these two languages within the genre of poetry. Ouyang's poetic works were cited and closely read under each category to lucidly illustrate this approach. Within this framework, the readers will be shown how the poet uninhibitedly stretches creativity to its limits within his intimate artistic sphere.

When exploring Ouyang Yu's self-translated poetry, the article focuses on his advocacy for the freedom of re-creation when translating one's own works, which includes the retention of the hieroglyphic attributes of Chinese characters in English, as well as Yu's innovative "direct translations". Furthermore, the article also posits that an inherent sense of "self-censorship" motivates Ouyang to legitimise the modifications and enhancements in his self-translations, ensuring they align more closely with the original creative concepts.

Genesis of a personal innovative spirit: About Ouyang Yu

Ouyang Yu was born in 1955 in Huangzhou, a city in central China. He was sent to the countryside to work in 1973 due to the "Down to the Countryside Movement" [1] policy. In 1979, when he was 24, he got into the Wuhan Institute of Hydraulics (later merged with

Wuhan University) to complete his Bachelor of English and American Literature. In 1989, he received a Master of Australian Literature from the East China Normal University in Shanghai. In April of 1991, after a two-year teaching period at Wuhan University, Ouyang arrived in Australia to start his PhD at La Trobe University, where his thesis was on the image of the Chinese in Australian literature. Most articles about Ouyang Yu [2] describe his life after graduation as him working as a translator while getting on with his prodigious literary output. What is always omitted is the fact that he had tried to get a position at an Australian university but failed after being shortlisted several times because his English was not good enough (Liang, 2012). After feeling what he describes as “linguistic racism”, he decided to take up a career of freelance writing in a fit of pique – taking the “hardest” and a “non-theoretical” way (Liang, 2012). Although he later taught intermittently at both Australian and Chinese universities for many years, the frustrating experience is still worthy of attention because it can be deemed as the beginning of “a complex engagement with a society that both welcomes and rejects him” (Ommundsen, 1998, p. 596). This partly leads to his alienation from Australia, which also partly accounts for his subsequent linguistic and poetic experimentation in the spirit of rebellion.

To date, Ouyang’s writing output has been stunningly prodigious. Apart from books, Ouyang has also published thousands of poems and works of other genres in magazines, newspapers, websites, podcasts and various media worldwide. His first novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, won the 2004 South Australian Festival Award for Innovation in Writing. His third novel, *The English Class*, won the 2011 NSW Premier’s Award, and his 14th collection of poetry, *Terminally Poetic*, won the Judith Wright Calanthe Award in the 2021 Queensland Literary Awards. Ouyang’s poetry has been included many times in the Best Australian Poetry collections from 2004 to 2016. He was shortlisted for the Writer’s Prize in the 2021 Melbourne Prize for Literature and won the Fellowship from Creative Australia in 2021.

Ouyang Yu also founded the literary magazine *Otherland* 原在 1994, Australia’s only Chinese literary magazine. After several years of paper publications, this magazine has now been transformed into a digital publication on its WeChat public account [3]. In collaboration with the magazine, Ouyang founded a WeChat “smashing poetry group” in mid-2017, providing a forum for writers from China and the rest of the world to post poems anonymously and comment on each other’s work (Yu, 2023). In this active group, Ouyang has worked frequently as a mentor for emerging poets, fostering an experimental ethos in defiance against stereotypical and hypocritical poetics [4].

As a cross-cultural bilingual poet who has long been active in Australian and Chinese literary communities, Ouyang Yu has exerted influence in both countries. In Australia, he is known as a relentless critic of the country’s racial discrimination and “hypocritical multiculturalism” and as an ethnic minority writer; in China, he is depicted as a cold-eyed critic of modern China from overseas (Zhang, 2015) but also acclaimed for his experimental poetry and pioneering spirit. He has also received attention as a model for the study of transnational writing. To quote Huang Yuanshen, a Chinese scholar and the author of *A History of*

Australian Literature, as well as Ouyang's postgraduate supervisor:

Ouyang Yu is one of the few Australian writers with a cross-cultural career who is actively engaged in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic creation. His works highlight the tension between individuality and community, poetry and mundanity, modernity and tradition, and are inherited, transformed and critical of Chinese traditions, as well as challenging and reflecting on Western society and culture. (Huang, 1997, p. 486) [Translated from Chinese by the author]

Ouyang Yu's Chinese fellows and readers have labelled him "anti-academic" (Bei Pei, 2021), "the eternal other" (Zhang, 2015), and "a self-exile" (Zhang, 2015). Impressions including "an avant-garde poet" and "the angry Chinese poet" (Ommundsen, 1998) are familiar to many Australian peers. Interestingly Ouyang himself considers the "angry" label inaccurate. He believes that such a simplistic and crude way of consistently labelling people reveals the short-sightedness and arrogance of Australian literary criticism in the face of a complex cultural and linguistic phenomenon (Zhang, 2015).

Anyone who wants to figure out a solution to identity anxiety and spiritual exile in Ouyang Yu's works would probably be disappointed. They might be surprised to find out that most of Ouyang's poetic intentions, if not all, are disturbing, provocative and angry rather than committed to discovering an antidote. On one hand, his ambivalent feelings about China and his hometown are disturbing and subversive: "I never felt I was a Chinese when I was in China. It was only after I arrived in Australia that I was made to feel that I had to be Chinese" (Liang, 2012, p. 29). On the other hand, Ouyang seems to be "shaking his adopted country out of its complacent sleep" (Ommundsen, 1998, p. 596), considering that many of his pungent and blunt poems and critiques target not only Australia's insidious racism but also the "self-serving literary editors, critics and academics" (Ommundsen, 1998, p. 596). Ali Alizadeh points out that according to Ouyang Yu, "a migrant is separated not only from his/her country of birth but also from the body, and that any attempts at repatriation or assimilation are ultimately futile ... because the body, the initial host of the soul, has been abandoned by the wandering spirit" (Zeng, 2019, p. 426).

Nevertheless, one of the two-sided alienation's benefits is that the conflict-ridden identity has fostered a nascent and boundless creative space structured by a bicultural system. In this extra space which seems lonely but encourages him to roam freely, he playfully employs the otherwise majestic cultural boundaries as decorating laces to formulate a distinctive poetic identity, with English and Chinese languages like two knitting needles. More importantly, the mixing of the two linguistic and cultural codes allows him to amplify his multicultural identity, thus, to a certain extent, dissolving the marginal identity imposed on him. At the same time, bilingualism raises the threshold of access to his text, which dislocates the concept of "immigrant" – that is, the reader, rather than the author, becomes an expatriate seeking guidance and acceptance.

Overview of Ouyang Yu's bilingual poetry

Few people would deny that poetry is a highly condensed literary genre and that its artistic effects are very dependent on its unique linguistic features and cultural connotations. As Harmsel and Bakker (2010) argue, the complex mix of elements that combine and interrelate in a poem is too unique to be moved or altered, otherwise the sense of the poem will change. In this respect, poetry is naturally brittle and inherently rejects an intercultural context. Bilingual poetry – poetry that weaves together two languages in one poem such that each language is integral to the overall effect of the poem (Niaz, 2021) – necessarily involves complex linguistic and poetic changes. For many perceptive bilingual poets, the identity of the intended readership, the threshold of reader patience, and the balance between poetic expression and comprehensibility are all issues that warrant in-depth exploration. Yet things can get even more complicated when the weaved languages include Chinese and English – the former is ideographic (using symbolic writing symbols to record words or graphemes) and the latter is phonographic (using a small number of letters to record speech sounds in the language) (*Ideographic Myth*, n.d.). The differences in written form and auditory perception between the two languages may lead to a reading experience punctuated by interruptions and chaos, regardless of the reader's fluency in both languages. The result may be that the reader perceives the poem as a condescending provocation, feeling manipulated or belittled.

Apparently, this worry is not factored into Ouyang Yu's bilingual practice in most cases. In his decades of bilingual writing, he seems seldom to consider what Nadia Niaz claims “whether, when and to what degree materials such as glossaries, transliterations, full translations, and discursive explanations are provided” (2021, p 35). During the self-immersed exploration of breaking the linguistic and cultural boundaries, Ouyang has rarely put much ink on attempting to draw the reader closer or retain them even though his exploration, showing deep creative sincerity. If we adopt Nadia Niaz's statement that the multilingual writer is in constant conversation with the text by choosing when and how to switch between languages (Niaz, 2021), we can also poetically describe Ouyang's bilingual experimentation as a conversation between his mouth and his own soul. His free and unconcerned shuttling between English and Chinese clearly aligns with what Leonard Forster acknowledges: some writers use different languages as simple tools appropriate to certain definite purposes, analogous to the different stylistic levels within any one language (Forster, 1970). Ouyang has his own words to confirm this:

It really doesn't make much difference whether in Chinese or English. I am completely fluent in both languages, but I think certain themes or things are more appropriate and relevant to be written in Chinese (or English). I think it also depends on my state of mind, on whether I'm in an English or Chinese state of mind at the time. In terms of the language itself, some things can really only be expressed in either Chinese or English. (Wang, 2009, p. 192) [Translated from Chinese by the author]

It can be deduced that Ouyang Yu's selection of a particular language or linguistic blend is either guided by the natural expressive norms inherent in that language or culture, or mirrors his own mental state during the creative process. This interpretation is far from Rita Wilson's consideration that bilingualism can “invert the power relationship between the languages by inscribing one within the other” (Wilson & Gerber, 2012, p. 57). Nor does it corroborate

Mendieta-Lombardo and Cintron's argument that the bilingual writer expresses a voice for their people and attempts to establish a linguistic link with the audience for identity and solidarity (Mendieta-Lombardo & Cintron, 1995). On the contrary, this article asserts that in most instances of Ouyang's bilingual practice, the reader's status is not particularly important and sometimes even dissolved to nothing. This could be demonstrated through his bilingual poetry anthology *Flag of Permanent Defeat*, in which Chinese language and English language elements are extensively fused, but the author offers no explanations or translations to help the audience understand the writing. Ouyang's bilingual poetry proclaims with a carefree attitude that it is he who picks the reader rather than the other way around, and the reader contingent that is ultimately chosen is clearly a very small one that is fluent in both English and Chinese and has a high level of forgiveness for the constant breaking of normal reading expectations. This attitude needs to be understood in the context of the spirit that animates Ouyang's writing career: "I don't need a confidant or a reader ... I would rather my poems are written to the point of being completely unpublishable in this life" [5] (Yang, 2012, p. 35).

As Ouyang himself recalled, his first bilingual text is a diary entry he wrote on 3 May 1980, when he was undertaking his bachelor's at the Wuhan Institute of Hydraulics:

何是我的目? 回去的路上, 我问。to be a learned man! 是他的回答。啊 to be a learned man! 我从前是多么想啊。可是现在, 做一个有学问的人就够了。把自己的书变成一个或把自己变成一个呆子? 我不要! [6]. [Excerpted from the article "Self-translation and bilingual writing as a transnational writer in the age of machine translation" written by Ouyang Yu in February 2023. Immediately following the diary excerpt, he goes on to say:]

Up to that point, eight months after my first English classes at the university, my diary entries had begun to mix Chinese and English, without me realising that this would become a major feature of my poetry thirty-five years down the track. (Yu, 2023, para. 5)

What we can draw from this is that when Ouyang Yu first started to write bilingually years ago, it was simply because English came into his life and naturally mapped into his writing without any particular intent – especially considering that his first bilingual work was a diary entry. Although Carol Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model typically labels language conversion in bilingualism as "marked", emphasising a conscious motivation, this thesis argues that in Ouyang's work, the conversion is often driven by an unconscious impetus. In addition, the poet's sincerity deserves attention when he takes bilingualism as the preservation and representation of self, language and environment. As Ouyang himself says, as a bilingual poet, he believes that if the Chinese language is poetic, English is equally so, and he would rather maintain the dignity of both rather than only one (Yu, 2007). Later, when Ouyang Yu gradually entered into a broader and deeper space of English (precipitated by his MA and PhD studies and migration to Australia), he began his more comprehensive and ongoing bilingual production. The following research will go deeper into specific texts to analyse his explorations.

Ouyang Yu's bilingual poetry in four subtypes: A new classification method

So far in this field, most academic research on English–Chinese bilingual poetry appears to be still in its general and superficial phase, leaving a large theoretical void in terms of the basic classification. Illuminated by Ouyang Yu's bilingual poetry, this article proposes a classification method that distinguishes four subtypes of English–Chinese bilingual poetry according to the extent of the integration of the two languages: 1. intra-word/character bilingualism; 2. intra-phrase bilingualism; 3. intra-sentence bilingualism; and 4. cross-sentence bilingualism. These four subtypes follow a linguistic perspective from “micro” to “macro”. In each type, either language could be the carrier language and the other could be the inserted language. This classification method clearly defines the degree, extent and boundary of English–Chinese bilingualism from the perspective of language integration, fills a theoretical gap in this field and for the first time provides a basic framework for future studies of English–Chinese bilingual poetry.

Intra-word/character bilingualism

For this type, bilingual intermingling occurs within an English word or a Chinese character, such that the smallest semantic component of the language is broken. This can be deemed as the maximum degree of bilingualism and the greatest challenge for the reader. The following poem by Ouyang Yu can be an illustration:

“Letters and characters: 4 for a start”

影 fluence	shadow
英 glish	heroic
A 美 rica	beautiful
Leba 嫩	tender

(Yu, 2019, p. 66)

In this poem, the poet adapts four English words – “influence”, “English”, “America” and “Lebanon” – by replacing one of the syllables of each word with a homophonous Chinese character. In the first adapted word, “影 fluence”, the Chinese character “影”, which sounds like “/in/” and means “shadow”, replaces the first syllable of the original word “influence”. So, “影 fluence” still sounds like “influence” but has an extra meaning of “shadow”. Similarly, the second Chinese character “英” sounds like “/ɪŋ/” and actually means “heroic” or “English”. Thus, “英 glish” has the same sound and meaning as “English” while it contains an association with “heroic”. “美” in the third line sounds like “/me/” as the syllable in “America” and means “beautiful”; the sound of “嫩” in the last line is /nən/ as the syllable “non” in “Lebanon” and has a meaning of “tender”. In this poem, the poet makes English a carrier language and inserts Chinese elements into it, so that the English words’ visual integrity is destructed while their sounds are preserved. In this process, the text derives amplifying connotations from the inserted Chinese characters. A similar approach can be found in another poem “Miss Takes Taken”:

Don't be 累 [7] zy

Or 雷 [8] zy

番人 [9] ners never learn

they really are 人 [10] ner

Some like to play skytrue

Which is, of course, not my 菲 [11] vourites

(Yu, 2019, p. 190)

It's worth noting that the above poems can be deemed as sound poems because the poetic can only be reflected in its phonetic effect but not in the written form. That is, the disruption in the written style of mixed Chinese and English makes it challenging to understand the text without the ability to articulate the Chinese characters. In the other direction, Ouyang has also practised at the "intra-character" degree with Chinese as the carrier language while English acts as an insertion:

“木又寸”

木 tree 又寸

木又 tree 寸

T 木 r 又 e 寸 e

木又 tree 寸

木 tree 又寸

木又寸

(Yu, 2019, p. 179)

The title “木又寸” is three radicals splitting from the Chinese character “树” which means “tree”. The three radicals – “木” [12], “又” [13] and “寸” [14] – are meaningless when they are combined into a phrase, but they provide the visual effect of a thickened or split “树”(tree). Every line of this poem is a repetition of it, with the English word “tree” inserted in different locations. The written textual visual effect of the whole poem is like a grove full of trees (树) with various thicknesses. Different from the previous two, this poem can be deemed as visual because its poetic effect can only be acquired from the written text, while its sound is meaningless.

According to the research done so far, an interesting finding emerges: my conclusion is that it is the carrier language rather than the inserted language that determines whether the text is ideographic or phonographic. Similar examples can be found in Ouyang's other bilingual experiments, which this article will not delve into for the time being, but this finding is well worth more in-depth study in the future.

Intra-phrase bilingualism

When zooming out a little, we direct our attention to the phrase level – two languages mix within a phrase while out of character. For Chinese, a “phrase” that contains two Chinese characters mostly equals just one English word because the two characters are always used together to form an independent semantic unit. For example, “**简**” is one word which means “simple”, and the single characters “**简**” or “**单**” have similar meanings and are false if either is used alone in expression. We can examine the following example for illustration:

“Or”

Jane [15]

Or

简[6]dan

Jan 淡 [17]

Or

减 [18] dane

Jian 胆 [19]

Or

简[20] damn

...

(Yu, 2019, p. 138)

In this poem, there is an invisible and invariant element that ties together all the changing elements across lines – the sound of the Chinese word “**简**”(pinyin is “jiandan”), which means “simple”. Every line is a repetition of the sound of “jiandan”, while the original component, either “**简**” or “**单**”, is constantly replaced by other homophonous Chinese characters or English words. Through these replacements, the poem is continuously acquiring proliferating meanings or poetics. There are many other examples of this type of bilingualism in Ouyang’s linguistic experimentations, such as “Two 宰 **简**[21]”, “磨刀 whore whore” [22], “loud 天 [23] / word 天 [24] / chant 天 [25] / chin 天 [26] / yin 天” [27], and so on. In fact, with an understanding of Ouyang’s humour, one might discern that the poem’s implication is playful and akin to a sly wink from the author: “Even if ‘simple’, I can make it very un-simple” [28].

Intra-sentence bilingualism

Beyond the scope of phrase yet within a sentence, bilingualism expands into a deeper variation with greater linguistic and cultural connotations. The title of the poem below, “ing” – the suffix

of verbs in present continuous tense in English – suggests that the poem is related to an underlying theme of significant linguistic divergence between the two languages:

“ing”

夜 [29] is 香 [30] ing 桂 [31]

桂 is 叶 [32] ing 叶 [33]

叶 are 水 [34] ing 水 [35]

水 is 白 [36] ing 夜

我 [37] am 我 ing 你 [38]

你 are 你 ing 月 [39]

月 is 人 [40] ing 石 [41]

石 are 云 [42] ing 夜

(Yu, 2019, p. 44)

The first thing to state here is that there is no verb tense in Chinese, nor is there a difference in the linking verbs corresponding to different subjects. This poem may represent an overdue linguistic experiment, aligning with the global trend towards linguistic convergence: integrating English linking verbs and the present continuous tense into Chinese contexts. With the carrier language being Chinese, the English linking verbs “am”, “is” and “are”, as well as the suffix “ing”, intersperse into the lines in corresponding locations. It is also worth mentioning that this poem employs a classical Chinese rhetorical technique called “真” (pinyin “ding zhen”, meaning thimble), which means that the same character is used at the end of one line and at the beginning of the next line to modify the sound and rhythm of the two lines. One instance is “桂” at the end of the first line and the beginning of the second line. The other examples are “叶”, “夜”, “水”, “你”, “月” and “石”. Moreover, the last character of the poem is “夜”, which is also the first character of the poem. In this way, the whole poem has a music-like, coherent and fluid sound.

Cross-sentence bilingualism

When bilingualism extends beyond individual sentences in poetry, it transcends mere linguistic meaning and engages in a form of poetic intertextuality, creating layers of interconnected textual significance. In this case, the integrity of the sentence is preserved and the reading experience is relatively intact. Such an approach even opens up a part of the access to the monolingual reader: the group who has been denied access in the previous three forms of bilingual styles. The following poem demonstrates this well:

“漪 [43] / ripples/ lianyi” [44]

的湖面，出~~的~~三三角角形形，色~~的~~淡的，因~~为~~很~~重~~重，很~~情~~地不肯离去，就更
 淡淡淡淡了，雨，尚未下下来，不~~远~~与~~之~~相平行的，是另一个短短的三三角
 角形形。湖周的~~的~~有必要描述~~的~~不必了。 [45]

Ripples were there, not knowing someone is writing about them, not even aware tense
 ought to be a grammatical requirement, they lay, the way they lay or lie, instant after
 instant, in myriad changes, like a piece of symphonic music, being played inaudibly

Yu, you xia xialai le, tianqi buleng bure, jish zai biechu yijing daxue fenfei de wukong
 buru, huo zhishao zai dianshi tianqi yubao bofang de tupianshang, na limian pai de
 doushi mili de renying he jihu kai budong de che, zhyou boyinyuan chuan de xiang
 chuntian [46]

...

(Yu, 2019, p. 90)

Corresponding with the title, the three stanzas are respectively written in Chinese, English and pinyin (the standard system of romanised spelling for transliterating Chinese). The three stanzas have separate and different contents, although they're thematically related to each other. In this poem, bilingualism shifts from fragmenting linguistic coherence to weaving a rich tapestry of intertextual connections and poetic complementarity, enriching the reader's experience. Points to note here are that in the second stanza, the author deliberately mixes tenses to create a grammatical error in order to match the content that the ripples are "not even aware [of the] tense". The concept and application of tense is more profoundly comprehended within this bilingual framework, revealing the complexities of language that might otherwise be overlooked. The creative employment of pinyin, as in the third stanza, functions as a bridge that links the visual effect of English and the meaning of Chinese. Therefore, the poem illustrates the intricate dynamics of cross-sentence bilingualism, highlighting its capacity to enrich the poetic when it transcends the initial fusion of languages.

Ouyang Yu's poetry in self-translation

A famous quote attributed, but to my knowledge not actually traceable, to Robert Frost, states "Poetry is what is lost in translation." Harmsel and Bakker state in "The Translatability of Poetry" that to translate poetry is to "express the sense of a poem in another language" (2010, p. 59). But immediately afterwards in the article they introduce a few instances to illustrate that there are some elements or components in poetry that are next to impossible to translate; such as rhyme, puns, rhythm, meter and elements of specific cultural connotations. In this sense, poetry is often untranslatable. Yet the reason to quote these remarks here is not to argue against the necessity of poetic translation. Instead, this article proposes attaching importance to the poetic possibilities when poetry crosses cultures and languages. While certain loss is known to be unavoidable, what can be newly created – we may call it "re-creation" – needs to be explored.

Even though the possibilities of poetry translation have already challenged theoretical boundaries, the situation can get even more complicated when it is combined with self-translation, a creative practice that has long been marginal and controversial. Self-translation, as Hokenson and Munson (2007) articulate, is the bilingual text authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and translate his or her texts from one language into another. The debate around self-translation is often concerned with how many rights and freedoms the self-translator is entitled to. This involves the textual deviations, complementarities, omissions, interpretations and compromises that arise when poetry confronts linguistic boundaries. Furthermore, a conventional translator is in dialogue with the text, whereas the self-translator is more likely to be in dialogue with the original creative concept. The product of the latter could be something that the author intended to express but is not actually conveyed in the first composition. In this way, self-translation has a reasonable probability of turning into an interpretation of the original creative intention in another language while deviating from the source text. Additionally, for unconventional forms like sound and visual poetry, or those integrated with other art forms, what rules determine the limits of translation? Furthermore, since the banner of “the death of the author” held by deconstructionism from the late 20th century has given sufficient grounds for the independence of the text, it seems pointless to struggle with the self-translator’s authority of interpretation. Therefore, this article doesn’t attempt to enter into a conversation about whether the difference between conventional translators and self-translators is to be celebrated or to be cautioned against. What can be certain, at least here, is that the self-translated version has a reason to be the closest version to its original creative intent.

The practice of Chinese–English poetry self-translation has been demonstrated by a variety of approaches. Yu Kwang-Chung (1928–2017), a famous Chinese poet, believes that self-translation should be faithful to the existing text by proposing “truth transmission” and “limited creation” (Li, 2012). He argues that the difference in the line length between the source text and translation should be no more than three words and that the word order, rhyme and style of poetry should be retained to the greatest extent. In contrast, Ouyang Yu holds a very explicit flag of the opinion that the self-translation of poetry should be more faithful to the poetic concept. Contrary to what Robert Frost says, Ouyang creatively proposes that poetry is what is gained in self-translation and advocates for the freedom of re-creation in self-translation. He believes what is written in one language is never too perfect to not be translated, which allows the freedom to betray himself as much as he likes and however and whenever he likes (Yu, 2007). This confirms an instinctive tendency towards anything innovative that he has shown in his poetic and linguistic experiments.

Nevertheless, in addition to the creative spirit, another reason for his advocacy for re-creation in self-translation is what he calls “self-censorship”. As he states, when it comes to the translation of his own poetry, he would unconsciously assume the role of a censor who passes judgment and makes culturally and politically appropriate decisions (Yu, 2007). Under the impact of “self-censorship” consciousness, Ouyang gives legitimacy to the modifications and complements in the translation more appropriate to the original creative concepts. In this case, re-creation connotes an escape from the constraints of the source text and a closer

“山 [49] 重 [50] 水 [51] 复” [52]

repeated mountains
repeated waters

repetitious mountains
repetitious waters

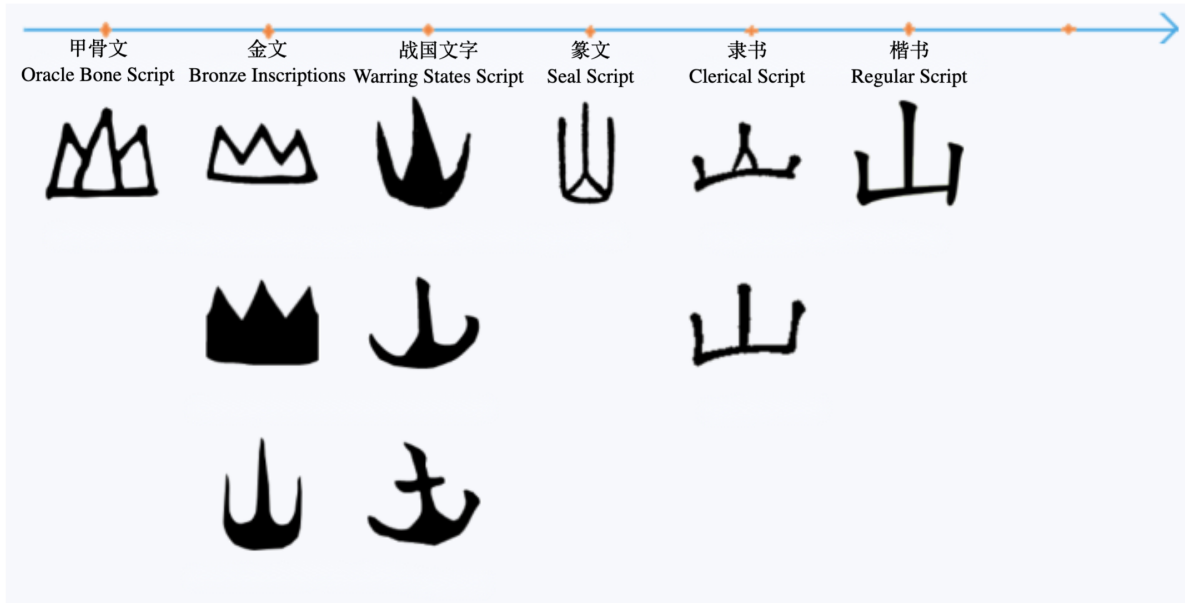
repetitive mountains
repetitive waters

mountains repeating themselves
waters repeating themselves

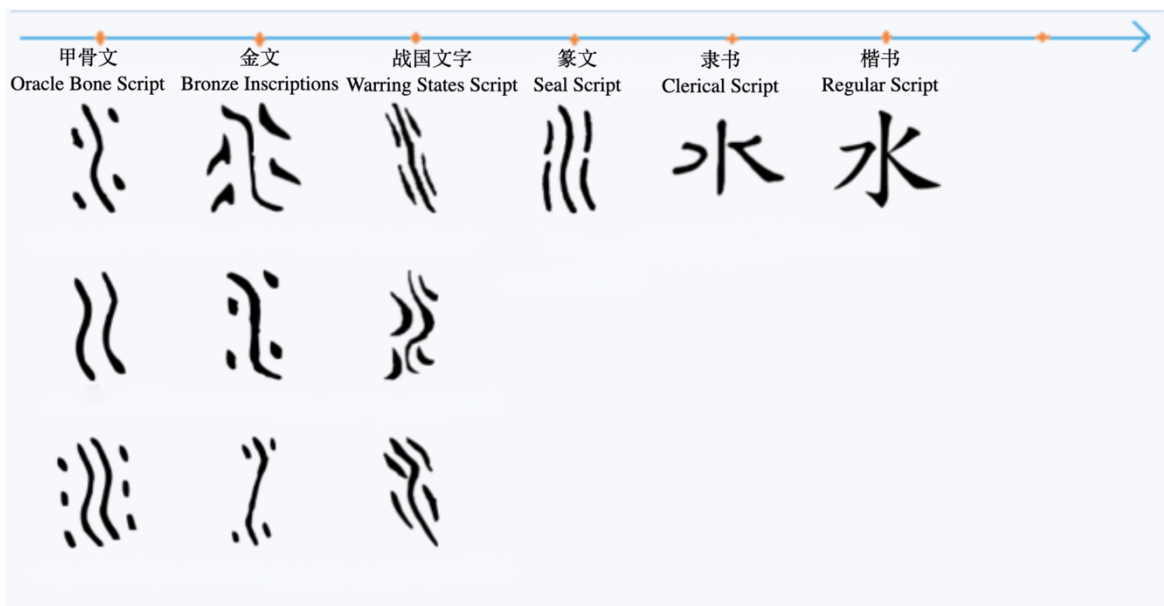
MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM
WWWWWWWWWWWWWW

(Yu, 2019, p. 15)

This is also a self-translated poem because all the lines are translations of the title “山重水复” in different expressions. This oft-quoted idiom in Chinese is originally excerpted from a Chinese classical poem [53] and literally means “mountains repeated waters repeated”. It is a metaphoric expression of a temporary frustrating situation in which a certain thing has difficulty finding its way out. This poem accentuates and exaggerates a sense of oppression by repeating different translations of the idiom. In the last stanza, instead of employing the Chinese characters “山” and “水”, which themselves are pictographs (as shown in Pictures 2 and 3), Ouyang Yu uses the letters “M” and “W” to convey the figurative image of mountain and water. “M” resembles the shape of a mountain, while “W” resembles the reflection of a mountain in water, thus forming the imagery of mountain and water reflecting each other, which is a very typical poetic scene in Chinese classical poetry. Coincidentally, “M” is short for “mountain”, and “W” stands for “water”.



Picture 2: The etymological evolution of the character “山” (mountain)



Picture 3: The etymological evolution of the character “水” (water)

Another innovative notion in Ouyang’s theory and practice of self-translation is that of direct translation. He says, “I have always insisted on the need for direct translation, the need for the original ‘juice’ and taste, the need to ‘import’ imagery and sense context directly into the target language” (Yu, 2022, p. 293). In doing so, he introduces Chinese expressions into English by preserving their literal meanings:

你买了皮蛋你买了你买了生姜你买了黄瓜

[The poet’s self-translation is—]

You’ve bought skin eggs lead raw ginger and yellow melons. (Yu, 2019, p. 178)

The “real” translation of the Chinese text should be “You’ve bought century eggs, lead, ginger and cucumbers”. In this sentence, the direct translation is reflected three times in the self-translation: “皮蛋” (century egg) literally means “skin egg”; “生姜” (ginger) literally means “raw ginger”; “黄瓜” (cucumber) literally means “yellow melon”. An English monolingual reader might be confused by the import of the baffling expressions, the “false” translation attempts essentially knocking at the cracks between the two languages that can’t be ignored, and the proliferating connotations that have been a reminder of the poetic vitality of self-translation.

In terms of a larger overall structure in self-translated poems, Ouyang has likewise retained a large margin of freedom regarding re-creation. Let’s take the following poem as an example:

“夜”

墨尔本的冬夜
八月
印歌的印
在一天盖地的狂中
人一直立
然后扑地死去
我赫然
从草径上抬
又灯光
从城市的眼皮上滑落

“Untitled” [self-translated by the poet]

winter
one august night in Melbourne
a newspaper printed all over with poetry
stood up suddenly
in a wild gust of wind that swept between the sky and
the earth
and died then and there

i looked up in astonishment
from the grassy path
to see the orange lights
once more slide across
the eyelids of the city

(Yu, 2019, pp. 34–35)

[For comparison, the article provides here a translation by the author, which is more “faithful” to the source text]:

“Night”

Melbourne’s winter night
 August
 a newspaper printed all over with poetry
 in a wild gust of wind that swept between the sky and the earth
 stood up like a person
 and then died then and there
 I, in astonishment
 looked up from the grassy path
 saw the orange lights once more
 that slid across the eyelids of the city

What we can draw from the comparison is that the “unfaithfulness” of the self-translated version is mainly manifested in the following aspects:

- The title is untranslated. “夜”, the title of the source text, means “night” but is turned into “Untitled” in the self-translated text.
- All the nouns and verbs are preserved but mostly reassembled in a different order.
- All initials are lowercase.
- There is an extra line break in the middle of the poem.

Neglecting the deviations, the imagery of the self-translated version has not changed much from the original. This poem is an illustration of how the writer conveys poetic concepts across languages without being bound by literal fidelity. If we go back to the topic of the poetic concept, at least in the case of this poem, we may conclude that the poet’s linguistic expression comes in different ways when using diverse languages to engage in dialogue with the creative subject within oneself.

Conclusion

At a time when identity anxieties associated with mobility consistently challenge the order that globalised societies are trying to re-establish, it is essential that we appreciate and explore the possibilities of creative practices and artefacts born of intercultural contexts. Ouyang Yu, with his relentless pursuit of innovation, self-fidelity and acute critical sensibility, is a brilliant example of such possibilities. As a translingual and cross-cultural poet who has long been active in Australia and China, Ouyang Yu’s bold linguistic and poetic experiments show a passion for innovation and a rebellious spirit. He transcends cultural boundaries and constantly breaks linguistic limitations, employing bilingualism as a flexible tool to expand the poetic space. Ouyang Yu is undoubtedly the most avant-garde pioneer in the field of Chinese–English bilingual poetry and self-translation. This article discusses his bilingual and self-translated poetry by exploring specific texts’ theoretical foundations and close readings. To explore bilingual poems, the article proposes a new classification system that distinguishes four subtypes of bilingualism according to the degree of language integration. The system not only

structures Ouyang's abundant works but also provides a distinctive classification method for future research. In poetry self-translation, Ouyang prioritises the liberty of re-creation, allowing for "creative deviations" from the source text. Except for the innovative spirit, his re-creation in self-translations also stems from "self-censorship", which reflects his commitment to preserving the original creative concept rather than adhering strictly to the existing text.

Ouyang's work in bilingual poetry and self-translation seeks to explore the fullest extent of poetic expression across cultures and languages, embodying and actively engaging with an adventurous spirit of innovation. This spirit is vital for both the present, marked by multicultural exchange and integration, and the future, where artificial intelligence's rise signals a shift towards a more complex ecosystem that challenges anthropocentric views. It is the innovative spirit that forms the bedrock of human literature and thought, ensuring the ongoing vitality of human society.

Notes

- [1] The "Down to the Countryside Movement" was a policy instituted in China between mid 1950s and 1978, which declared certain privileged urban youth be sent to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from the workers and farmers there.
- [2] The articles can be seen in the bibliography.
- [3] The latest issue of *Otherland* 原稿 < https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MVqMkH1Qjh34nqgou2p_rA >
- [4] As a member poet of this group, the author of the article has received criticism and comments from Ouyang Yu. He is often defiant against cliché, empty lyricism, false expressions and flashy rhetoric, and he insists on promoting a spirit of innovation.
- [5] Translated from Chinese by the author.
- [6] Translation: "Where is our goal? I asked Zhou on the way back. to be a learned man! It was his answer. Ah to be a learned man! I used to want that so much. But now, is it enough just to be a learned man? Just turn your brain into a library or turn yourself into a nerd? I don't want this!"
- [7] (pinyin is "lei"), meaning "tired". "累 zy" sounds like "lazy".
- [8] 雷(pinyin is "lei"), meaning "thunder". "雷 zy" sounds like "lazy".
- [9] 番人(pinyin is "fan ren"), meaning "foreigner" or "ethnic minority". "番人 ners" sounds like "foreigners".
- [10] 烦(pinyin is "fan ren"), meaning "annoying". "烦 ner" sounds like "foreigner".
- [11] 菲(pinyin "fei"), meaning "flower's beauty or fragrance". "菲 vourites" sounds like "favourites".
- [12] 木(pinyin "mu"), meaning "wood".
- [13] 又 (pinyin "you"), meaning "again".

[14] 寸 (pinyin “cun”), meaning “inch”.

[15] 单 (pinyin “dan”), the second half of the word “简单” means “simple”.

[16] 单 (pinyin “jian”), first-half of the word “简单” meaning “simple”.

[17] 淡 (pinyin “dan”), meaning “light” or “slight”.

[18] 减 (pinyin “jian”), meaning “minus”.

[19] 胆 (pinyin “dan”), meaning “gallbladder”.

[20] 剑 (pinyin “jian”), meaning “sword”.

[21] “Two” sounds like “屠” (pinyin “tu”) which means “killing”. “屠宰场” (pinyin “tu zai chang”, adapted to “two 宰” meaning “slaughterhouse”. “Two 宰” *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu, p. 173.

[22] Adapted from the Chinese idiom “磨刀霍霍” (pinyin “mo dao huo huo”) meaning “Sharpening the butcher knife”, in which “霍霍” sounds like “whore whore”. From “Two 宰” *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu, p. 173.

[23] “loud” sounds like “老” (lao) meaning “old”, and “天” (tian) means “sky”. The phrase means “My god!” From “天”, *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu.

[24] “word” sounds like “我的” (wo de) meaning “my”. The phrase means “My god!” From “天”, *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu.

[25] “chant” sounds like “苍” (cang) meaning “dark blue”. The phrase means “My god!” From “天”, *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu.

[26] “chin” sounds like “晴” (qing) meaning “sunny”. The phrase means “sunny day”. From “天”, *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu.

[27] “yin” sounds like “阴” (yin) meaning “cloudy”. The phrase means “cloudy day”. From “天”, *Flag of Permanent Defeat* by Ouyang Yu.

[28] This is imagined by the author of the article.

[29] 夜 (ye) means “night”.

[30] 香 (xiang) means “fragrant”.

[31] 桂 (gui) means “sweet osmanthus”.

[32] 风 (feng) means “wind”.

[33] 叶 (ye) means “leaf”.

[34] 青(qi) means “green”.

[35] 水(shui) means “water”.

[36] 白(bai) means “white”.

[37] 我(wo) means “I”.

[38] 你(ni) means “you”.

[39] 月(yue) means “moon”.

[40] 人(ren) means “people”.

[41] 石(shi) means “stone”.

[42] 云(yun) means “cloud”.

[43] 漪(lian yi), means “ripple”.

[44] This is pinyin of 漪. See note 43.

[45] Translation by the author of the article: “The lake, at this moment, appears as a long triangle with a pale hue. The hue is even lighter because the haze is thick and heavy and refuses to leave in a relentless manner. The rain has not yet fallen. Not far away, parallel to it, is another short triangle. Is it necessary to describe the trees around the lake? The trees say: No need.”

[46] “The rain, again, came down. It was not cold or hot, even though it had snowed pervasively elsewhere, or at least on the pictures shown on the TV weather forecast, which were filmed with misty figures and cars that could barely drive, and only the announcer was dressed like spring.” – Translated by the author of this article.

[47] “魚”means “fish”.

[48] “漁”has the verb meaning of “fish”.

[49] “山”(shan) means “mountain”.

[50] “重”(chong) means “repeat”.

[51] “水”(shui) means “water”.

[52] “复”(fu) means “repeat”.

[53] The poem is “游山西村”(you shan xi cun), written by Lu You, a poet of the Song Dynasty.

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