Perspectives

The Trans-L/National Ethos and Ethnos of *Tangut Inn*

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Let's say the imagined reader is a Norwegian—and so, immediately a lot of things that I might write go out the window. I think, I can't make local references to things in London that would be incomprehensible to the guy in Norway; I can't make too many puns or use that line I was so proud of just because the words are so neat and come out so beautifully and appropriately—I can't quite be so proud of that, because by the time it's translated into Norwegian, it's not going to have that surface gloss to it.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, eds., Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro

[A]lthough English literature has become the most obvious sign of transnationalism, it is continuously haunted by its historical—and disciplinary—location in a particular national ethos *and* ethnos.

Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality"

He remembered a senior wise in phrenology asserting that [his wife's] ancestors must've come from Quanzhou: "It was the fourteenth-century precursor of New York City. The very centre of the world. Your wife is surely of Arab

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descent. Her (greenish hazel) eyes, complexion, and ro-man nose look uncanny on a Han-Chinese face."
Luo Yijun, Tangut Inn *(my translation)*

The paradox about Kazuo Ishiguro's speculation on the *translatability* of his writing lies in the intriguing possibility that, in the era of globalization, the imagined Norwegian in question may know the simulacra of London better than he does his local township. There is indeed an economic dimension to Ishiguro's seemingly aesthetic speculation. The fact that his imagined reader has the option to purchase a Norwegian edition of, say, *Never Let Me Go*, in the first place has exposed Anglophone literature's hegemony in a global market: as a commodity, it is strong enough to not only maintain mobility in the *transnational* supply chain but also promise profitability to Norwegian publishers' investment in their localized versions.

Ishiguro's speculation on translatability (as well as the imagined Norwegian reader) seems to have culminated in his writing strategy, which strips sentences down to nothing but "substance" so that their "value survive[s] translation" (Shaf-fer and Wong 180). Such a strategy—by no means uncommon in the contempo-rary scene of *world literature*—has been shared by his fellow novelists (Haruki Mu-rakami, for example) and triggers Diane Mehta to express her concern: "By writing for an international audience, will authors cleanse their prose of the cultural pecu-liarities that enlighten, fascinate, and move us? Imagine Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* without the provincial protocols of courtship in 19th-century Hertford-shire" (76).

Mehta's concern finds an echo in Rebecca L. Walkowitz's summary of recent debates over the "new world literature"—to wit "literature that circulates outside the geographic region in which it was produced" (216)—wherein she warns us of translation's catalytic capacity to accelerate "*cultural homogenization*," not only be-cause "readers will learn fewer languages," but also because "texts written for trans-lation will tend to avoid vernacular references and linguistic complexity" (216). Yet Walkowitz also reminds us not to readily demonize translation:

> In truth, as Emily Apter, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, and Martin Puchner have shown, the effects of translation will depend on what is being translated and on what happens when translated books are read. Moreover, the meaning of these effects will depend on how we evaluate sameness and differ-ence: do we assume, for example, that *homogenization* is always a negative out-come? (216; emphasis added)

In response to Walkowitz's apologia for translation and her question regarding homogenization, I find the entry 1.b. for "homogenize" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* quite illuminating: "To subject (milk or another emulsion) to a process by which the suspended *globules* or droplets are broken up into smaller ones and *distributed* throughout the *liquid*, so that they have no tendency to collect into a cream" ("Homogenize"; emphasis added). This specific denotation helps us connect translation to its homogenizing effect through a metaphorical analogy: translation is a process that liquifies and mobilizes literature in the global sphere of neoliberalism.

The discursive trajectory through Ishiguro's imagined Norwegian to Walkowitz's contemplation of translation and its homogenizing effect has spiraled down to Luo Yijun's two-volume monsterpiece *Xixia luguan* (*Tangut Inn*), which has been partially translated into English (by me) under the title of *Tangut Inn*. In contrast to Ishiguro's (absence of) style that has been designed, as he himself puts it, to "survive translation," Luo's idiosyncratic prose—packed with puns, portmanteaus, convoluted syntax, and collages of extended metaphors—had been widely regarded as untranslatable. However, let's not forget Emily Apter's bold thesis that the line of demarcation between *translatable* and *untranslatable* has been eliminated: "Instead of fixating mournfully on the supposition that nothing is translatable (the original is always and inevitably lost in translation), translation studies increasingly explores the possibility that everything is translatable" (226). If Apter's thesis that "everything is translatable" is meant to reflect "an ideal of informatic commensurability—with promiscuous commutations made possible through a common code" (227), then "untranslatability" seems, at least to me, a lazy excuse to leave *Xixia luguan* untranslated.

In an era where even DNA sequences can be translated and encrypted, the genuine reason for Luo's oeuvre to remain virtually untranslated may have less to do with untranslatability than with *unmarketability*. In other words, Luo, unlike Ishiguro, may have never felt the need to run a translatability test with an imagined Norwegian when he writes, because he "senses there's precious little chance to map Taiwanese literature as world literature" (Luo and Zhuang 45; my translation). On the one hand, Luo's pessimism is justifiable in that Taiwanese literature has long been on the periphery of the global book market, yet, on the other hand, it is such marginalization that grants him paradoxical artistic liberties. Locally famous yet globally anonymous, Luo has a large enough Sinophone reader base that allows him to remain not only aesthetically uncompromising—or, if you prefer, self-indulgent—but also neglectful of an international literary translation market into which Taiwanese novelists have yet to venture. However, it would be quite wrong

to say that Luo's scope fails to transcend Taiwanese locality or that the concept of translation is extrinsic to his creative process. On the contrary, the very fact that Luo deploys magical realism to craft *Xixia luguan* (as well as his other works) reveals several aspects to the dialectics between the first language and translation, as well as between nationality and transnationality.

First off, during his formative years as an emerging novelist, he was an avid reader who consumed, "like a word-eating ogre," the unauthorized Modern Mandarin translations of such Latin American novels as *Cien años de soledad* and, by "transcribing blocks of words," internalized their narrative techniques (Luo and Zhuang 38, 39; my translation). Exposed to foreign literatures through such a physical reading process and the mediation of poor-quality translations (mostly published before Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization and therefore unregulated by international copyright), Luo has developed a unique style that is defined by labyrinthine syntax and sometimes ridiculed as an accented *translationese*. As for this peculiar trait of translationese that is intrinsic to many postwar Taiwanese modernist fictional writings, Luo has reflected on Taiwanese novelists' uncanny encounters with world literature and how such encounters set them apart from mainland Chinese writers:

> There were times when I met mainland Chinese and tried to explain to them why Taiwanese novels are "so difficult to read," but they seemed interested only in [works by] so-called "mainlanders." . . . Taiwanese fiction was forced into modernism during its evolutionary process, and my fellow postwar generation and I learned the dialectics between self and other by immersing ourselves in Western, Japanese, and world fiction—which had indeed been a very steep learning curve for us. . . . I feel that top-notch novelists in Taiwan are in a beans-bursting-out-of-pods state and have an extracellular *free-flowing exchange* of data memory with world fiction. (Luo and Zhuang 58; my translation and emphasis)

This reflection brings out the second aspect to Luo's deployment of magical realism: Tunick the Tangut and his fellow weremuntjacs' aspiration for Tangutexit in *Xixia luguan* functions as a political allegory of Taiwan's national identity crisis and will to self-determination.[1]

Similar to Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian who used Spanish—to wit,

[1] The term "weremunjac" has been coined after "werewolf" to translate "羌人" and "Tangutexit," punning on Brexit and Grexit. This is the solution I prefer to "de-sinicization" or "barbarization" for the translation of "脫漢入胡."

the colonizers' language—to forge a fantastic representation of his motherland, Luo—a second-generation mainlander whose father arrived in Taiwan during the Great Chinese Diaspora of 1949—cannot but rely on modern Mandarin as a *father* tongue when he writes, yet at the same time he is keenly aware that modern Mandarin, not only for many Taiwanese but also for ethnic minorities in mainland China, is the colonizers' language that, to borrow Simon Gikandi's phrase, promotes the myth of "national *ethos* and *ethnos*" (633). Luo once told me, jocoseriously, in a coffee talk that he conceived *Xixia luguan* upon meeting an amateur phrenologist in mainland China who asserted his Tangut descent. The message behind this amusing anecdote is worthy of scrutiny: the Tangut were a "prominent tribal union living under Tuyuhun authority and the only contemporary Eastern Eurasian pastoral nomads who spoke a Tibeto-Burmese language" (Skaff 38), yet the dynasty they founded is commonly recorded in history as Xixia, an appellation that betrays Sinocentrism and fails to preserve the Tangut tongue: the geographical attribute "xi" (western) suggests the Tangut Kingdom's peripheral position in relation to the Song Empire's centrality, whereas the nomenclature based on the modern system of Hanyu Pinyin bears zero resemblance to the medieval Tangut speech sound.

In this vein, Luo's decision to construct his grandiose narrative around Tunick, the *soi-disant* last Tangut, forces him to face the conjoined problems of translation and transnation, not only because he cannot but channel the historical Tangut people and their structure of feelings through the mediation of Sinocentric accounts, but also because their descendants have been homogenized into the *ethnos* of the People's Republic of China and disciplined by its *ethos*. In other words, the disappearance of the mysterious Tangut Kingdom results from a large-scale transnational migration and its consequent boundary enmeshment, while the offspring of vanishing Tanguts can only vaguely remember the distant disasters of holocausts and exodus through the translated and distorted fragments from the official history of their ancestors' enemy, from whom, ironically enough, they themselves have become inseparable.

Yet Luo, with his signature quirkiness, locates Tunick upon the decadent cityscape of *fin-de-siècle* Taipei and names him after an American photographer famous for massive nude shoots. Better yet, the *mise-en-scène* of Tunick's Tangut stories flaunts a baroque mélange of historical fragments, paparazzi snapshots, and parodies of global mass culture:

> Lady Yeli, Tunick said, indeed reminds us of the tall lean Nicole Kidman and her impossibly coltish legs. Imagine this: our sulky king was staring at her with

> Tom Cruise's sapphire eyes, scolding her in their gauze tent, "Don't you dare lift me into the air while we're doing the thing," while Nicole—oops, Lady Yeli I mean—was pushing our naked king upwards with her sleek legs and pedaling his belly like riding a bike. (Luo, "The Uxoricide" 11)

Here, Tunick's juxtaposition of Tangut history and tabloid gossip may help shed light on how Luo conceptualizes the dialectics between original works and their translations: not so much a provider whose works are to be translated and exported as a receiver of imported and translated information, Luo may feel less anxious than Kazuo Ishiguro, who seems constantly plagued by his concerns about translatability, and better tolerate the reuse, misuse, or even abuse of his works.[2]

In a nutshell, Luo's perception of translation and translatability may be closer to James Joyce's than to Ishiguro's. By creating the linguistic chaomos of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce has simultaneously cancelled the possibility and mediation of translation, because non-native English readers with different mother tongues are likely to decode different messages out of the same passages. Thus, Wakese may be the precursor of Netlish, which, as Apter puts it, challenges "norms of literacy, literateness, and literariness" because of the Internet's "indulgence toward ungrammaticality and *outsider aesthetics*" (226; emphasis added). Similarly, Luo's *translationese* functions as an archive that preserves translated segments of heterogenous information and promotes the plurality of *ethoi* and *ethne*.

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[2] However, it would be quite wrong in thinking that Luo has never envisioned translations of his works, as he has indeed confided to me his wish: "It would be great if you could manage to translate *Xixia* into English *à la* Salman Rushdie."

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