

The Comics Grid

Interpretation and Translation in Guy Delisle's *Shenzhen*

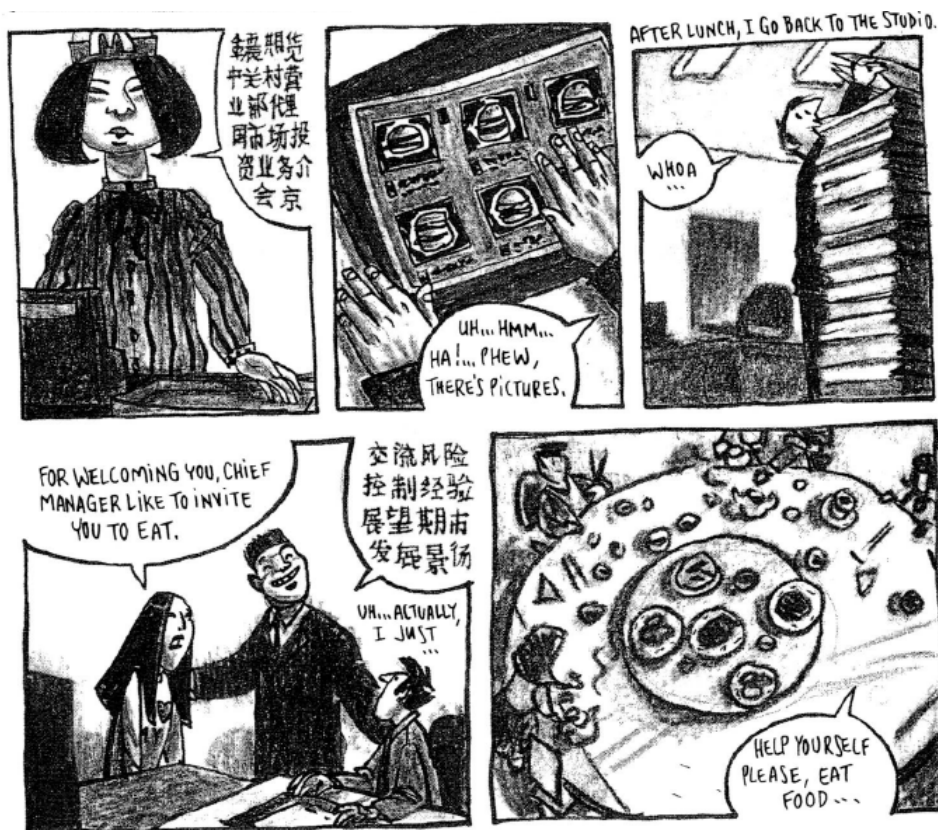
By Jonathan Evans On July 16th, 2012

As a piece of travel writing describing [Guy Delisle](#)'s trip to China as an animator, *Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China* (2006) is readable in relation to translation as a practice and as a metaphor. The text can be read as a form of cultural translation (Asad 1986), representing elements of Chinese culture to a Western audience.

In this article, I am interested in how the text shows interpreting – or the translation of spoken utterances – taking place in the narrative. I focus on scenes where the process is made visible by being called into question. Throughout the text, there are moments when the narrator (called Delisle in the story [Delisle, 2006, 28]) has Chinese speech or text translated for him. As he remarks, although he knows his co-workers, ‘without a translator [*sic*], we cannot communicate’ (67, 2).

Without access to an interpreter, the narrator is reduced to hand gestures or drawings to try and explain himself. This can lead to humorous situations, such as when the narrator, despairing at his hotel's floor clerk's attempts to call the elevator by repeatedly pressing the button, decides not to intervene, as he says ‘I'd explain my point of view, but I don't see how with hand signals’ (36). He is reliant on the intermediary of an interpreter to communicate anything beyond his needs or wants. The interpreter is therefore in a position of trust, which is a common portrayal of interpreting (and translating) in fiction (Delabastida and Grutman 2005, 23). It also corresponds to interpreters' positions in actual intercultural communication.

The first scene of interpreting in the story appears early on. Delisle has returned from ordering a meal in McDonald's when his boss invites him to lunch. These two events show how translation is highlighted by being problematized.



Delisle, G. (2006) *Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China*, trans. H. Dascher (London: Jonathan Cape, 11, 3-7)

The server in McDonald's is shown speaking Chinese: her speech bubble consists of Chinese characters, which it is assumed the English speaking (or, in the un-translated version, French speaking) audience cannot read. Unlike languages using the roman script, Chinese is not phonetic: the sounds of the words cannot be guessed from the characters alone. When the narrator speaks Chinese in a later restaurant scene, he speaks in a roman script, transliterating the Chinese characters: he points at his neighbour's food and says 'Yi ge' [one of] (30, 4).

Interestingly, later in the story, when he is more comfortable with his environment he is shown speaking in Chinese characters: '你好' [ni hao; hello] he says in response to a co-worker's greeting (112, 7). While neither 'yi ge' nor '你好' are explained, an Anglophone (or Francophone) audience can read the sounds of 'yi ge', making the phrase appear less opaque. The Chinese characters in the interpreting scene reinforce the perception of difference, foregrounding the narrator's lack of understanding.

The chief manager also speaks in Chinese characters, but the interpreter offers an English version of his speech. She speaks in the third person, 'Chief Manager like to invite you' (11, 6), deviating from recommended interpreting practice (Jacobson 2009, 64). Her English is also unidiomatic and incorrect. For example, there is a lack of definite article before 'Chief Manager' and 'like' should be 'would like'. Her speech shows negative transfer (Toury 1995, 275) from the grammar of the Chinese

source, hinting at her lack of ability in English, which is also questioned later when she does not answer a simple question correctly (Delisle 2006, 14, 1-3).

The text also suggests a reversal of causality through the positioning within the panel of the two utterances: the interpreted utterance is placed on the left of the Chinese utterance, making it appear to happen earlier (or simultaneously) as it will be read first by an audience reading from left to right. All these features serve to highlight the lack of trust the narrator has in the interpreter.

In another scene, the narrator is shown explaining how a sequence of animation needs redoing, followed by his question 'Understand, yes or no?' (25, 3-4). Seven panels show the discussion between the interpreter and the Chinese animator, in Chinese characters. There is a panel where no character speaks (26, 2), before the narrator asks 'So? Understand?' (26, 3) to which the interpreter replies 'Yes... No problem' (26, 4). The pause between the two panels shows the narrator's doubt that understanding has taken place, due to the quantitative difference between the narrator's initial question and the Chinese discussion that follows.

As [Anthony Pym](#) has noted, translations are expected to be quantitatively equivalent to their source texts (2004, 87-109). This quantitative equivalence is at best a problematic concept, as Pym notes, because different means are required in each language to express information (2004, 88). However, when an utterance is significantly longer or shorter than its source, suspicion is aroused, questioning the trust placed in the interpreter.

Despite these representations of interpreting which show it as problematised, the graphic novel also portrays interpreting as an invisible, functioning process.



Delisle, G. (2006) *Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China*, trans. H. Dascher (London: Jonathan Cape, 139, 4)

In this panel, for example, the narrator is talking to an animator through the interpreter. The interpreter's speech is idiomatic and correct, showing none of the signs of suspicion that appear earlier in the book. The normal functioning of interpreting in this scene suggests that the narrator has accustomed himself to the process, no longer distrusting his interpreter or questioning her abilities. However, the scene shows how the narrator does not understand Chinese humour: the linguistic barrier is removed but cultural barriers remain.

The portrayal of interpreting in *Shenzhen*, then, is always of a partial process. At the beginning, the narrator distrusts the process of interpreting and it is hinted that something is missed. Later, the novel shows how interpreting, and by extension translation, can only provide a limited understanding of the narrator's Chinese interlocutors. He is separated from them by more than a language barrier: a cultural difference also needs to be negotiated.

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