

University of New Hampshire  
**University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository**

---

Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Scholarship

Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

---

6-1-2012

# "Literal Translation" and the Materiality of Language: Lu Xun as a Case

Wenjin Cui

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*, [Wenjin.Cui@unh.edu](mailto:Wenjin.Cui@unh.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/lang\\_facpub](https://scholars.unh.edu/lang_facpub)

---

## Recommended Citation

Cui, Wenjin. "Literal Translation' and the Materiality of Language: Lu Xun as a Case," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*. 6:3 (2012).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

Wenjin Cui

## “Literal Translation” and the Materiality of Language: Lu Xun as a Case

**Abstract** With his insistence upon the literal rendering in Chinese of foreign texts, especially regarding syntax, Lu Xun’s understanding of “literal translation” strikes a rather distinct note in the modern Chinese literary scene. The intention behind this method, namely, the aim to “retain the tone of the original,” reveals a generative conception of language that takes language as not just the bearer of the already existent thought, but as the formative element of thought that has meaning in itself. This paper seeks to delineate the structural constitution of the materiality of language as grasped by Lu Xun. By comparing the notion of the “tone” to Wilhelm von Humboldt’s notion of the “inner form of language” and situating it within the genealogy of *qi*, as well as tracing its link with Zhang Taiyan’s idea of “*zhiyan*,” I will attempt to reveal the philosophical and historical basis of Lu Xun’s principle of “literal translation” and its significance for Chinese literary modernity in general.

**Keywords** literal translation, materiality of language, tone, inner form of language, *qi*, *zhiyan*

---

### Introduction

“Literal translation,” in its proper sense of the fidelity to the letter of the original, does not fare well in the modern Chinese literary scene. It is generally held that good translation should strive not for faithfulness to the words and sentences of the original, but to resemble its style and spirit. While many discredit the notion of “literal translation” altogether and instead openly advocate the principle of “free translation,” others merely pay lip service to it, with their claim to fidelity barely holding ground when the existent linguistic norm is in danger. The debate between “literal” and “free” translation in most cases thus turns out to be a false duality. The closeness between the two camps was noted by many who were

---

Wenjin Cui (✉)

Department of East Asian Studies, New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA  
E-mail: cwenjin@nyu.edu

involved in the debates,<sup>1</sup> and some scholars have suggested that because the difference between “literal” and “free” translation is only one of degree, it would be better to simply get rid of this dichotomy altogether.<sup>2</sup>

The general tendency to interpret “literal translation” as occupying an inferior position on the same continuum as “free translation” even extends to the work of Lu Xun, who ardently advocated the principle of fidelity to the letter throughout his literary career. Some, it is true, do come to the defense of Lu Xun’s literalness and recognize the fact that, through this method, Lu Xun intended to introduce new modes of expression to foster the growth of Chinese language. Such a justification, however, often goes no further than merely affirming the radical attitude towards his native language that Lu Xun held in contrast to the conservative attitude of the others. As such, Lu Xun’s “literal translation” is still assigned to the category which strives to better fulfill language’s function of imparting meaning. So long as this is the case, then, literalness, posing a direct threat upon the very comprehensibility of the text, turns out to be almost inevitably disturbing. Unsurprisingly, the defense is often followed by a backlash that disclaims the actual realization of this principle in Lu Xun’s translation practices.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me, however, that “literal translation” as practiced by Lu Xun is categorically different from both “free translation” and the half-hearted versions of “literal translation.” What distinguishes Lu Xun’s position from the latter is not merely that he takes a more radical stance towards the growth of language in relation to thought, but that he has come to the recognition of the materiality of language that is irreducible to meaning. His conception of language as not just the bearer of the already existent thought, but as the formative element of thought that has meaning in itself, in my opinion, captures well the historical nature of language that it has assumed in the modern era. It is only when perceived in this light, as I will attempt to demonstrate, that we can truly appreciate the

---

<sup>1</sup> By Shen Yanbing, Chen Xiyang, Ai Wei, Lin Yutang, for instance, *Fanyi yanjiu lunwen ji*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wang Hongzhi, *Chongshi “xin da ya”*: *Ershi shiji Zhongguo fanyi yanjiu*. Also Cf. Zhang lihua, *Xiandai Zhongguo “duanpian xiaoshuo” de xingqi: Yi wenlei xinggou wei shijiao*, ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> A typical example can be found in Yuan Yidan, “Shilun *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji de wenzhangxing*: you Zhou Zuoren de ‘fanyi wenti guan tanqi.’” The second section of this article starts with the appreciation of the principle of “literal translation” by the Zhou brothers, yet suddenly turns to question the gap between such translation ideal and “the norm of *wenzhang*,” and to argue that the principle of literal translation is barely realized in their translation practices. Interestingly, the article chooses Zhou Zuoren rather than Lu Xun as its major object of study. For Zhou Zuoren indeed follows a different path in his translation practice, and even in some of his theoretical formulations, than that of “literal translation.” Yet it certainly fails to recognize that this is hardly the case for Lu Xun.

significance of Lu Xun’s “literal translation,” and thereby a fundamental facet of the understanding of language in modern China.

---

## Two Key Elements of “Literal Translation”

The first time Lu Xun adopted the term “literal translation” to characterize his translation method was in the preface to his translation of a work by Japanese theorist Kuriyagawa Hakuson: “The sentences are largely of literal translation, and I would also like to retain the tone of the original. But I’m a layman to Chinese grammar, [I] thus have to presume that there are quite a few sentences in it that violate the grammar rule.”<sup>4</sup> The remark of the desire to “retain the tone of the original” is familiar enough, as Lu Xun had at several points lamented how the “abruptness” of Chinese made it unfit to translate the “elegant” style of the original.<sup>5</sup> It is apparent that this aspect still occupies a prominent position in his consideration of translation here. At the same time, it becomes coupled with the aspect of the sentences, to which the term “literal translation” is unambiguously attached. The relationship between the two is not yet exactly clear. Judging from the word “also” by which they are connected, it seems that the preservation of the “tone” is an additional goal besides that of the sentence structures. The pivotal importance of the aspect of sentences is highlighted by the second part of the quote, where Lu Xun’s admission of his seemingly involuntary violation of grammar rules may be construed as a conscious defiance. Immediately after the quoted line, Lu Xun gave a special explanation about the usage of the particle 底 instead of 的 to connect the adjective and the noun when together they form a noun phrase, or for adjectives when they contain certain suffixes in the original; this literal rendering of certain morphological features of the foreign language can surely be taken as an extreme case of such “literal translation.”

About a year later, in the postscript written to the translation of another of Kuriyagawa’s books, Lu Xun made the following statement: “The sentences are still of literal translation, just like what I’ve always been doing; I’ve also tried hard to retain the tone of the original, and mostly have not changed even the order of the words and sentences.”<sup>6</sup> Aside from the apparent similarity to the previous quote, there are also significant differences here. First, Lu Xun

---

<sup>4</sup> “*Kumen de xiangzheng*: Yinyan” (Symbol of angst: Introduction), in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 10. All the translations of the Chinese texts in this paper are mine.

<sup>5</sup> “Chibian yizhe fuji” (The translator’s note on “At the pool side”), “Yu de bei’ ai yizhe fuji” (The translator’s note on “The sorrow of the fish”), “*Taose de yun*: Xu” (The pink clouds: Preface), *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “*Chu le xiangya zhi ta*: Houji” (Leave the ivory tower: Postscript), *Ibid.*

retrospectively traced “literal translation” as the method he had always been using. While it might indeed be the description of what he was doing before, the fact that here he is conscious of this method is not insignificant. Second, turning the negatively stated fact of the violation of grammar rules into a positive assertion of being faithful to the word order of the original, Lu Xun explicitly presented his method as a means that serves to “retain the tone of the original.” It is worth noting that this idea, as can be seen in his subsequent remarks on translation, became a rather consistent position he held.

These elements, then, are the two crucial points of Lu Xun’s “literal translation”: the literal rendering of the syntax (including relevant morphology) of the original, and the aim to “retain the tone of the original.” While both of these two points require further interpretation, I would like to start with the more concrete one: the literal rendering of the syntax.

This method is indeed, as Lu Xun claimed, what he had always been using. In the preface he wrote in the 1920 re-print of the translation work of his early years, *Anthology of Foreign Fictions*,<sup>7</sup> Lu Xun remarked that “its sentences are stiff.” This is a clear awareness of the effect that literal rendering of the syntax created. Another comment he made on his first major translation, the colloquial-styled *Worker Shevyrev*, apparently made the issue even clearer: “except for a few places that I couldn’t do otherwise,” wrote Lu Xun, “I’ve tried to translate almost word by word.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, it might be more accurate to say that, from Lu Xun’s early attempt at “translating without losing the spirit of the original”<sup>9</sup> to the formation of the principle of “literal translation,” the aspect of syntax had gradually come into focus. In fact, Lu Xun had also developed his translation method in other ways. For instance, in his translation of the *Anthology of Foreign Fictions*, he followed the principles of transliteration for proper nouns and utilized western punctuation marks.<sup>10</sup> Later, for his translation of *Pink Clouds* and *Little John*, he developed a much more sophisticated method of translation for the names of people, plants, and animals.<sup>11</sup> Another more significant aspect has to do with Lu Xun’s almost ascetic attitude towards the usage of words. His demand of “literal translation” at the level of words could be clearly seen in the acknowledgement

<sup>7</sup> “*Yuwai xiaoshuo ji: Xu*” (*Anthology of foreign fictions: Preface*), Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “*Yi le gongren sui huiliüefu zhihou*” (*After the translation of Worker Shevyrev*), Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “*Yuwai xiaoshuo ji: Xu*,” Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “*Yuwai xiaoshuo ji: lüeli*” (*Anthology of foreign fictions: Some rules of translation*), Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “*Taose de yun: Ji juzhong renwu de yiming*” (*Pink Clouds: On the translation of the names*), “*Xiao Yuehan: Dongzhiwu yiming xiaoji*” (*Little John: Some notes on the translation of the names of animals and plants*), Ibid.

that “the diction is austere”<sup>12</sup> in his preface to the translation of *Anthology of Foreign Fictions*. From many of his later discussions of translation, we find the same unrelenting attitude towards existent rhetorical norms when it comes to the matter of choosing appropriate words to render foreign texts.<sup>13</sup> However, among various aspects of “literal translation,” the issue of syntax eventually stood out, as can be seen in the two pivotal quotes analyzed above. Actually, it became the focus of all the important critiques on translation Lu Xun made thereafter.<sup>14</sup>

Why, then, is Lu Xun so keen on the literal rendering of the syntax? To answer this question, I’d like to turn to the other element that is attached to “literal translation” and which is taken as the purpose of the literal rendering of the syntax, that is, the aim to “retain the tone of the original.” Given that the “tone” indicates something beyond the communicative level of language, Lu Xun’s claim might actually bring to mind the principle of “free translation,” which emphasizes the style and spirit of the original and contests the mere referential function of language. Moreover, both are aware of the fact that the closer one follows the letter of the original, the further away is the effect produced. The difference between “free” translation and Lu Xun’s “literal” translation, as it at first appears, seems to be simply that they have chosen different ends of the same formula. Rather than giving up the aspect of the letter in pursuit of the so-called “spiritual resemblance,” as is usually done, Lu Xun has insisted on the literal rendering of the letter despite the “obscurity” or “sluggishness and redundancy” which ensues. This is certainly not a matter of competence.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that Lu Xun knows very well how to translate “smoothly,” as can be seen through several examples he gives of his own translation methods as compared to translations done in a smoother manner.<sup>16</sup> Defying this preliminary requisite for “free translation,” Lu Xun has simply taken the opposite direction.

Yet upon closer examination, such comparison turns out to be based on superficial grounds. The “tone” that Lu Xun tries to retain is essentially of a different nature from the style or spirit that the advocates of “free translation” have in mind. Insofar as the style or spirit towards which the principle of “free

---

<sup>12</sup> “*Yuwai xiaoshuo ji*: Xu,” Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, “Guanyu fanyi: Gei Qu Qiubai de huixin” (On translation: A reply to Qu Qiubai), in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 4; “‘Ti weiding’ cao” (Sketches of “title undecided”), Ibid., vol. 6.

<sup>14</sup> See “‘Yingyi’ yu ‘wenxue de jiejixing’” (“Hard translation” and “the class nature of literature”), “Guanyu fanyi: Gei Qu Qiubai de huixin,” Ibid., vol. 4.

<sup>15</sup> The question of Lu Xun’s actual proficiency in translation can indeed be raised, yet it should not be confused with the theoretical question, and is certainly less important in general.

<sup>16</sup> See “*Xiao Yuehan*: Yinyan” (Little John: Introduction), in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 10; “*Xiandai xinxing wenxue de zhu wenti*: Xiaoyin” (Some issues on the new trend of modern literature: Little introduction), Ibid.

translation” strives is detachable from language, it belongs to the realm of meaning, albeit the expressive aspect of meaning. The disregard of the letter in favor of the style or spirit is made possible precisely because language is taken as the servant of meaning. The investment in the expressive value of language merely serves to convey something beyond it. Nothing, of course, shows this point better than the following saying that is often heard from the camp of “free translation”: the goal of the translator is to write in the same way as the author of the original would have written in the language into which he is translated. The premise behind this statement—that the author could have written the same thing in the same way in another language—clearly betrays the supplementary role which language is assigned in relation to thought.

The “tone,” on the other hand, is the intrinsic quality of language itself which is irreducible to meaning. In Lu Xun’s emphasis on the “tone,” language is not taken as merely a tool of thought, utilized to impart already existing ideas, or to invoke some spirit with its expressive capacity. Rather, language is granted an autonomous life of its own, with its own specific character and shape, with the ability to recreate itself. It is precisely this irreducible materiality of language, one might say, that Lu Xun tries to capture with the term “tone.” Although this recognition by no means denies the link between language and meaning, nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish the expressive power of language as such from the expressive power of language in service of thought. What Lu Xun has intuitively grasped, in my opinion, is not incomparable to the idea of the “inner form of language” as developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), which epitomizes the core of a modern conception of language in the west.

---

### **“The Inner Form of Language”**

Humboldt’s philosophical investigation of language is based on the premise that language is not, as an end product, the “designator of objects and instrument of understanding,”<sup>17</sup> but the formative activity that, arising out of the natural disposition of man, orders the flux of sense-impression and spontaneous mental activities into thought. This generative conception of language marks a radical break from the rationalist idea of language that dominated the classical age. Rather than taking language as a set of verbal signs that, by mere convention, is labeled to the mind which exists independent of it, Humboldt asks the question of how sound and thought are linked together. According to Humboldt, internal

---

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, 48.

intellectual activity is “intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a union with the verbal sound,”<sup>18</sup> without which it is incomplete. The articulated sound, on the other hand, runs parallel to the mental ordering of the world in its regularity and sensuousness. It is only through the vocal organ that thought is arrested and externalized, while sound is also constantly elevated by the animating principle of the mental power into the expression of thought. The mutual permeation between the two series, the synthetic procedure through which sound becomes the bearer of thought, is defined by Humboldt as the inner linguistic form. As the third term between the signifier and the signified, to borrow the Saussurian terminology, the inner form of language radiates the light and warmth of ideas into the articulated sound and lends “expression to everything that the greatest minds of the latest generations strive to entrust to it.”<sup>19</sup> For Humboldt, this “wholly internal and purely intellectual part of language is what really constitutes its nature.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the most significant consequences of this generative understanding of language is the association between language construction and the mental development of the human species. For Humboldt, the form of language always expresses a peculiar spiritual character, always embodying a “world-view.”<sup>21</sup> Not only is this the case for individuals, but, more importantly, also for different nations and cultures. A famous example, of course, is the identification of Sanskrit and Chinese as two extreme forms of language which reflect two different spirits of races. While he makes a careful distinction between judgments of the mental capacity of nations and the perfection of their languages in relation to thought, Humboldt consistently stresses the role of language in advancing the mental development of a people.

It comes as no surprise, indeed, that Humboldt would become one of the major proponents of literal translation. The fidelity to the letter of the original, he claims, is “one of the most necessary tasks of any literature,” and this is “above all because it increases the expressivity and depth of meaning of one’s own language.”<sup>22</sup> Since a “word is more than just the sign of a concept,”<sup>23</sup> but is itself a kind of “ideal form” that is “filtered through the mind,”<sup>24</sup> the enrichment of the language is also the enrichment of the mind, and ultimately, the nation. Humboldt is well aware, of course, of the fact that such fidelity is unable to

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, “From the Introduction to His Translation of *Agamemnon*,” 56.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.



“attain the peculiar beauty of the original”<sup>25</sup> and unavoidably deviates from the original. Yet this contradiction only leads him to stress the importance of the preservation of the “foreign flavor”<sup>26</sup> and to warn against any attempt to embellish the translation with decoration.

Returning to Lu Xun, it should not be far-fetched to say that his persistent emphasis on retaining the “tone” of the original is essentially driving toward the same direction. The underlying rationale beneath this endeavor, as Lu Xun makes explicit in his famous debate on translation with Qu Qiubai, is precisely that language is in itself the embodiment of thought. When he claims that the looseness of the existent Chinese language reflects the looseness in the manner of thought of the people, it expresses in a critical manner the necessity of the growth of the language for which “the incorporation of new modes of expression”<sup>27</sup> through “literal translation” provides a vital channel. It is certainly also the same conviction that has led him to deplore the “tone” of the classical language, which he is unable to cast off in his own writing,<sup>28</sup> and to defend the “vigor” and “freshness” of the language of the common folk.<sup>29</sup>

Perceived in this light, the unusual attention Lu Xun paid to the aspect of syntax also becomes understandable. In Humboldt’s comparative study of different languages, syntax is granted a higher status than word-formation, for its “logical arrangement, its clear discrimination, the accurate portrayal of its relationships one to another, constitute the indispensable foundations of all expressions of mental activity, even the highest.”<sup>30</sup> In particular, as the logical nucleus of syntax is the relation between the subject and the predicate, it is syntax that turns “what is thought [of] as merely capable of conjunction” into “reality,” and conjoins “being” with concept.<sup>31</sup> To put it more plainly, as the unity that is formed in syntax “depends more exclusively on the ordering inner form of the sense of language,”<sup>32</sup> compared to individual words, syntax better expresses the way in which we order the world. A simple example might help demonstrate the close relationship between syntax and inner linguistic form here. Take two sentences: (1) “The snow is white” and (2) “The whiteness manifests itself in snow.” Both sentences intend the same object: the white snow. The inner

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>27</sup> Lu Xun, “Guanyu fanyi: Gei Qu Qiubai de huixin,” in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., “Xie zai *Fen* hougian” (To write after *The Grave*), Ibid., vol. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., “Menwai wentan” (Thoughts on literature by a layman), Ibid., vol. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 128.

linguistic sense, however, as reflected in the syntax, i.e. the distribution of roles between subject and predicate, is different. In the first case it is the snow that has whiteness as its attribute. In the second, the abstract entity of the color is only manifested in the snow as its accidental predicate; this whiteness could also manifest itself in different predicates, such as white paper, or a white cat.<sup>33</sup> We are reminded, of course, of Lu Xun’s famous insistence on “behind the mountain the sun went down” 山背后太阳落下去了 over “the sun set behind the mountain” 日落西山.<sup>34</sup> While the second translation better conforms to the linguistic norm in Chinese, as Lu Xun explicitly states, it deviates from the original by putting the center upon “the sun” rather than “the mountain.” It is certainly also worth noting that sentence structure is the very first thing that advocates of “free translation,” or half-hearted supporters of “literal translation,” would be ready to change in their pursuit of a “good translation.” Indeed, as Walter Benjamin points out in “The Task of the Translator,” his well-known essay which essentially belongs to the same tradition as Humboldt, “a literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility.”<sup>35</sup> It is only when the materiality of language itself is recognized that syntax can assume such a pivotal place in translation. For while the literal rendering of the syntax of the original does no service to the reproduction of meaning, it is yet the most essential element for the growth of the “inner form of language.” Unsurprisingly, Benjamin would take the literal rendering of the syntax as the primary means by which pure language could shine through.

---

## “Tone” as the Immanent Articulation of the World

On the other hand, a fundamental distinction must be made between the “tone” that Lu Xun discerns in language and Humboldt’s “inner form of language.” The difference pertains to the understanding of two different cultural traditions. The “inner form of language” stands in contrast to matter which, as noted above, includes both sound and the spontaneous mental activity before it becomes thought. An ontological gap separates the two: without form, sound and the inner

---

<sup>33</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Mikhail Iampolski for supplying me with this wonderful example, and for directing me to read Humboldt in the first place. In regard to the particular significance of syntax for a generative understanding of language and Humboldt’s contribution to it, Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*.

<sup>34</sup> Lu Xun, “Guanyu fanyi: Gei Qu Qiubai de huixin,” in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 78.

thinking are amorphous and unintelligible. The “tone,” in my opinion, should be coupled with *qi* (vital-breath). Tone’s relationship to *qi* is not that of transcendental formalization, but of immanent articulation. The Chinese term perhaps reveals this relationship more clearly, as “tone” is written as *yuqi*, literally “linguistic vital-breath.” It might be said that the “tone” is but the linguistic specification of the all-suffusing *qi* which runs at it upstream. In this sense, and in the same manner in which for Humboldt the inner linguistic form is comparable to the ideal form in the act of artistic imagination, it really runs parallel to “*wenqi* (literary vital-breath),” an idea that is central to classical literary criticism and that, as we shall see, is rather fundamental for Lu Xun. Indeed, as both notions seem to feed upon the same kind of mechanism, a detour into the region of *wenqi* might help clarify the evasive meaning of the “tone” for which Lu Xun offered very little explanation.

The understanding of literature in terms of *qi* in Chinese classical literary criticism more or less follows the direction that Cao Pi 曹丕 initiated with his famous claim that “*Wen* is determined by *qi*; *qi* has its own mode of limpidity and turbidity, and can’t be reached by force.”<sup>36</sup> It is basically a concretization, in the realm of literature, of the more general philosophical association between the world of *qi* and *yan* (speech). One of the most important philosophical sources of this tradition is certainly Mencius’s “Gongsun Chou: Shang,”<sup>37</sup> an eloquent piece in which he discusses how to foster *qi* as a way to distinguish different kinds of *yan*. This long genealogy is also not limited to discussions that explicitly use the term *qi*. Liu Xie 刘勰, for instance, took up Cao Pi’s idea under the rubric of “*fenggu*,” and retrospectively traces it back to the tradition of *feng* that, according to him, crowns the six kinds of poetry in the *Book of Songs*. The somewhat more concrete definition he gives to *feng* is worth quoting: “it is the source of affection, and the sign of will and *qi*.”<sup>38</sup>

Like many other concepts in classical literary criticism, *wenqi* has something rather hazy and indeterminate about it. Cao Pi doesn’t seem to even attempt an elucidation of its specific content. The line quoted above is followed merely by an analogy to music which basically reiterates its meaning; besides that, he simply uses it as a descriptive attribute to characterize his contemporary literati. Although Liu Xie does connect *fenggu* with a whole array of other notions, such as *qing* (feeling) and *ci* (words), and gives a much more elaborate depiction of its various modes, his account is still by no means analytic or definitive. Throughout the tradition, in fact, while there exist many sophisticated elaborations of the idea,

---

<sup>36</sup> Cao Pi, “*Dian lun: Lun wen*,” 158.

<sup>37</sup> Mencius, *Mengzi yi zhu*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Liu Xie, “*Wen xin diao long: Fenggu*,” 513.

they all to various degrees share the same kind of evasiveness that marks their predecessors. In this regard, the following remark by Guo Shaoyu in his well-known article “An Analysis of *Wenqi*” is rather indicative: among the eight elements—*shen* (spirit), *li* (reason), *qi*, *wei* (flavor), *ge* (format), *liu* (meter), *sheng* (sound), *se* (color)—that Yao Nai 姚鼐 identifies in *wen*, the first four are relatively more difficult to comprehend, and “among these four, the boundary of *wenqi* is especially confusing. To say *qiji* (the natural pattern of the world) would be close to *shen*; to say *qiyun* (the spiritual resonance of breath-energy) would be close to *wei*; to say *jingqi* (the vital energy) or *yuanqi* (the primordial energy) would be close to *li*.”<sup>39</sup>

To make such a judgment of *wenqi*'s indistinctness, however, is already presupposing the perspective of a different mode of thinking. In fact, overwhelmed by the western tradition of thinking that privileges logical conceptualization and which carries with it a whole bag of distinct literary categories, many modern interpreters strive to formulate a more systematic account of *wenqi* and often categorize it under the rubric of style. The aforementioned article by Guo Shaoyu is a typical example of this tendency. While recognizing that the meaning of *wenqi* is really multifarious and fluid, Guo eventually narrows it down and interprets it as essentially a counterpart to the western notion of style. In another important article on *wenqi*,<sup>40</sup> he even explicitly criticizes its ambiguity in classical literary criticism as a result of the fact that traditional literati love to be mysterious about it, and judges the value of its different accounts according to their different degree of concreteness.

But is the vagueness surrounding *wenqi* really a flaw on the part of Chinese thought? Should we get rid of its fluidity and interpret it merely as style? In any case, it seems to me that the attempt to carve up the notion of *wenqi*, and in particular, to confine it to the purely psychological and formalistic aspect of the text, drains the very source that makes it fecund and prolific. The merit of the notion of *wenqi* lies precisely in that it keeps unseparated the primordial force of the world and its materialization in different “downstream regions,” be it the individual disposition, the state of mind, the character of different eras and places, the unifying principle of *wen*, or the intonation of sounds. *Wenqi* is neither the ontological determination of the appearance of things, nor the psychological quality of the mind that is incarnated in language; rather, it is the mobilizing, distilling force that runs through the individuated diversity of things and which is

---

<sup>39</sup> Guo Shaoyu, “Wenqi de bianxi” (An analysis of *wenqi*), *Zhaoyushi gudian wenxue lunji*, 115.

<sup>40</sup> Guo Shaoyu, “Zhongguo wenxue pipingshi shang de ‘shen’ ‘qi’ shuo” (On “*shen*” and “*qi*” in the history of Chinese literary criticism”), *Ibid.*

actualized by human speech. As such, it cannot be objectified through abstraction and construction, but can only be invoked by piling up different facets of its concrete figuration, by constantly tracing and modifying its route of unfolding. Ultimately, it is through the employment of a correlative mode of delineation that *wenqi* is elucidated. The most immediate expression of this is certainly the series of pairs, such as limpidity and turbidity, *feng* and *gu*, which dominate the short pieces of both Cao Pi and Liu Xie, as well as its account in classical literary criticism in general. Rather than psychological grouping of various styles of the more essential conceptions of the world, the correlative depictions of different kinds of *wenqi* are in themselves the articulation of the nature of things. Pushed to its full extent, one might say that *wenqi* “varies as fundamentally between empty and full as the world varies between appearance-disappearance, emergence-submersion, manifestation and withdrawal.”<sup>41</sup>

At first sight, the understanding of *wen* in terms of *qi* seems to be rather remote from Lu Xun’s literary thinking, which generally operates under the reign of western literary categories. If we look closer, however, it becomes clear that it has in fact persisted as the mode of thought which underlies his western outlook. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> while Lu Xun has introduced a gap between literature and reality—and in this sense reached the very heart of the western tradition of representation—it would be wrong to think that his acceptance of the emblematic notion of the “symbol of angst” of this tradition amounts to the understanding of literature as the atemporal formalization of primordial chaos.<sup>43</sup> The “angst,” as Lu Xun conceives it, is not the amorphous, chaotic mass of things before they are formed by the subject; rather, it essentially belongs to the vein of *qi* that is the flowing energy of the world.<sup>44</sup> Correspondingly, literature is not the subjugation of the world of chaos by way of symbolization, but an act of remembrance that depicts the world in its state of flux. In Lu Xun’s literary world, to remember is not to “make the past ‘present’ by resuscitating it,”<sup>45</sup> to shine life

---

<sup>41</sup> Here I am borrowing François Jullien’s interpretation of Chinese classical painting in his excellent book *The Great Image Has No Form, On the Nonobject through Painting*, 230.

<sup>42</sup> In the first chapter of my dissertation which I am currently writing.

<sup>43</sup> Lu Xun took this idea from Japanese literary theorist Kuriyagawa Hakuson, whose book *Symbol of Angst* he translated in 1924. (It may also be worth noting that it is for the translation of this book that he first brought up the idea of “literal translation,” as discussed in the beginning of this paper.) The way in which Kuriyagawa Hakuson builds up the notion generally follows the western tradition, and especially reminds one of Nietzsche’s classic model of Apollonian-Dionysian dualism. I discuss this point more extensively in my dissertation.

<sup>44</sup> Here one can certainly hear an echo of Han Yu’s idea that *wen* is the outcry of things under the state of suppression.

<sup>45</sup> François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, On the Nonobject through Painting*, 5.

forth in ever brighter light against the shadow of death, as in the western tradition of representation, but to evoke the past in the air of loss surrounding it, to mingle presence on the same plane as absence, to animate it by way of concealing and covering. It is precisely in this structural nonseparation between “symbol” and “angst,” in the correlative way in which the “angst” is figured, one might say, that Lu Xun is still situated within the tradition of *wenqi*.

The significance of the notion of *wenqi* for Lu Xun can be seen more clearly in the works of his youthful years, when the search for the new in foreign lands was still conceived as concordant with the aspiration to the “renaissance” of his own culture. Lu Xun’s understanding of literature at this early stage is well captured in the notion of the “voice of the heart,”<sup>46</sup> a term that is steeped in classical sensitivity. The direct source of this expression is the much quoted line by Yang Xiong 扬雄: “speech is the voice of the heart; writing is the picture of the heart.”<sup>47</sup> While it is also inspired by the affirmation of the creative power of absolute spirit in European Romanticism, the notion of the “voice of the heart” brings to mind more immediately the archetypal idea of traditional Chinese thought that poetry is the expression of the will 诗言志. Just as Lu Xun’s glorification of the unbounded freedom of the individual subject is inseparable from his calling for the rebirth of the nation, the purely volitional, subjective aspect of “voice of the heart” is truly a resonance of the pulsation of the external world, of the vibration of the whole universe. The notion of *shensi* (spiritual resonance), a related term Lu Xun took from Liu Xie, confirms the same mode of thinking. It is in this sense, I believe, that Japanese scholar Kiyama Hideo makes the claim that the “voice of the heart” is related more to the Confucian moral-political reading of voice and the Daoist cosmic order of vitality than to the Christian tradition of God’s voice.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, it is crucial to note that Lu Xun’s calling for the “voice of the heart” is marked by a strong consciousness of the historical present which is the quintessential character of modernity, and by the inherent contradiction between the will to be modern and the impossibility to escape from history.<sup>49</sup> Although the search for the new is still claimed to be “incited by the yearning for the ancient,”<sup>50</sup> the bent of time has clearly turned toward the future. The iconoclastic stance was soon to find its full expression in the two-pronged ethical

---

<sup>46</sup> Lu Xun, “Moluo shili shuo” (On the power of Mara poetry), in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Yang Xiong, “*Fa yan: Wen shen*,” 160.

<sup>48</sup> Kiyama Hideo, “‘Wenxue fugu’ yu ‘wenxue geming’.” It should also be noted that Kiyama Hideo’s interpretation has been a major inspiration for me.

<sup>49</sup> Paul de Mann has a wonderful account of the inner logic of modernity in “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” *Blindness and Insight*.

<sup>50</sup> Lu Xun, “Moluo shili shuo,” in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 1.

demand that everything should be subjected to the preservation of the life of the present, and that one has to be the father of the future man. As he eventually found an expression for the modern sense of history in the famous notion of “*zhongjian wu* (existence in-between),” which asserts the great transitional existence of all things, Lu Xun also firmly established, in the realm of writing, the poetics of remembrance that takes up the task of re-vitalizing the flow of time by turning the present moment into a battlefield between remembering and forgetting. No longer neutrally participating in the universal process of transition, writing is now a radicalized locus of intervention that seeks to modulate the flow of history.

---

### **Zhengming, Zhiyan and the Historicity of Language**

If we might claim that Lu Xun essentially aspires to capture this elemental force of vitality in his literary writing, then it could also be said that it is the same kind of vitality that he is driving toward in his persistent pursuit of the “tone” of language. The sense of the unity between language and literature is clearly felt in the notion of the “voice of the heart,” although Lu Xun generally uses it in a metaphorical manner to represent literature. We may be also reminded that Lu Xun began his literary career with the endeavor of recreating the language itself. As for the “symbol of angst,” there is perhaps no better expression of it than the moment in “Hanging by a Thread” 颓败线的颤动 when the old woman who, consumed by the despair brought on by the convergence of all the experiences of the past, could only “utter the humanly and the beastly, the non-worldly, therefore wordless words.”<sup>51</sup> The correspondence between language and literature here is so deep that, indeed, one could say that the same “angst” passes through them.

Literature is, through its medium, an art of language. As such, the rhetorical and stylistic configuration of language is always an inherent component of literary creation. The unique combination of sound, shape and meaning of Chinese characters, in particular, has earned language an unusual role in the Chinese literary tradition. The Tongcheng School (*Tongcheng pai*), the dominant literary trend during the time when Lu Xun first formulated his literary ideas, is doubtless a major example of this tradition. It is not in this vein, however, that we should place the notion of the “tone.” Rather, the significance of Lu Xun’s perception of language in the Chinese cultural tradition has to be understood by tracing its historical link with Zhang Taiyan’s advocacy of Xiaoxue (study of

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 2.

language), the culminating idea of the Hanxue (philological study) tradition that emerged in the last dynasty of China.

The primary import that Zhang Taiyan granted upon language in his attempt to preserve the essence of national learning is essentially rooted in the Confucian tradition of *zhengming* (rectification of names), which holds language as in itself the embodiment of the moral and political order through the appropriate naming of things in the world. While *zhengming* had always been advocated in the Confucian tradition, at least after the collapse of the Jingxue (study of scriptures) school of Han Dynasty, *ming* was generally taken as an instrument of thought rather than a bearer of intrinsic value. It was only with the rise of the Hanxue School in the Qing Dynasty that major attempts were begun to investigate into the meaning of words themselves. Zhang Taiyan’s call for the return to the root of *wenzi* (written words) is the culminating result of this specific tradition. It is certainly worth noting that the enterprise he embarked upon was a direct response to the profound cultural and political crisis brought on by the encounter with the west. The major challenge of *zhengming*, indeed, was how to translate the numerous western texts that were surging into the Chinese cultural scene.

Based on the understanding that the adherence to the primary meaning of *wenzi* is the ground of *zhengming*, Zhang Taiyan developed a coherent conception of *wen* that places the substantive quality of language over its more decorative, stylistic derivations. The departure of this well-known idea of *zhiyan* from the orthodox understanding of *wen* that was promoted by the Tongcheng School at the time is quite clear. Rather than judging the value of *wen* according to its rhetorical and stylistic sophistication, according to its *qiao-zhuo* (refinement), Zhang Taiyan proposed a different standard of *ya-su* (decorum) which is based on the correct usage of the primary meaning of *wenzi*.<sup>52</sup> One might say that there are two different kinds of decorum involved here: that of Tongcheng School, which is centered on the rhetorical and stylistic effect of language, and that of Zhang Taiyan, which boils down to the substance of *wenzi* itself. Incidentally, it is Zhang Taiyan’s principle of establishing *wen* on the basis of the substantive meaning of *wenzi* rather than its derivative refinement that formed the ground of Lu Xun’s early practice of “literal translation.” While the Tongcheng School places the value of the decorum of *wen* over the fidelity to the letter, as can be seen in the almost canonical formula of “fidelity, smoothness, decorum”<sup>53</sup> put forward by Yan Fu, Lu Xun defies such rhetorical norms of

---

<sup>52</sup> For a more substantial interpretation of Zhang Taiyan’s thought, Cf. Kiyama Hideo, “‘Literary Renaissance’ and ‘Literary Revolution’.” Also Cf. Wang Feng, “Liu Shipei wenxue guan de xueshu ziyuan yu lunzheng beijing.”

<sup>53</sup> Yan Fu, “*Tiyanan lun: Yi liyan*” (Evolution and ethics: Principles of translation), in *Yan Fu*



language and takes instead the individual word as the basic unit of translation.

On the other hand, Zhang Taiyan's endeavor of returning to the root of *wenzi* and of re-constructing the world of *wen* on the basis of *zhiyan* is imbued with a strong sense of history. While he ardently promoted the use of the primary meaning of *wenzi*, Zhang Taiyan also readily admitted the fact that the disease of language, namely, the departure of words from their original identity with things, accompanied the development of words at the very beginning of history. This disease, he says, is simply unavoidable.<sup>54</sup> Compared to the ideal of the ancients, which Confucius upheld in his condemnation of the confusion of the language of his time, Zhang Taiyan's advocacy of "renaissance" simply strikes a different tone. Indeed, as Kiyama Hideo points out, by pushing the traditional understanding of *wen* further, Zhang Taiyan has in a way reached a point of self-critique and relativization of this tradition. Both the heavily historical investment of his investigation of language and the incorporation of many alien elements, especially his investigation of the logical dimension of language instigated by his contact with western thought, are still constrained by his strict adherence to the immutable rationales of Confucianism. Yet it would not be hard to imagine that this deeply dynamic system could at any moment be set into motion. In any case, Lu Xun was able to discover a correspondence between the return to the ancients and the search for the "new voice." This was soon developed, as his formulation of the principle of "literal translation" clearly demonstrates, into a generative conception of language that is no longer attached to any specific moral and intellectual order, but which instead seeks meaning in its own historical unfolding.

Concerning the fact that language in the modern time "has resumed the enigmatic density it possessed at the time of the Renaissance," Michel Foucault makes the following remark: "But now it is not a matter of rediscovering some primary word that has been buried in it, but of disturbing the words we speak, of denouncing the grammatical habits of our thinking, of dissipating the myths that animate our words, of rendering once more noisy and audible the element of silence that all discourse carries with it as it is spoken."<sup>55</sup> If we keep in mind the differences between the western tradition and the one to which Lu Xun belongs, this passage seems to be a perfect characterization of the path upon which he has embarked. And for this mission, it is certainly the act of "literal translation" that has played the most vital part.

---

*Ji*, vol. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Zhang Taiyan, "Qiu shu: Zhengming zayi" (Qiu shu: Various meanings of the rectification of names), in *Zhang Taiyan quanji*, vol. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 298.

## References

- Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1988.
- Cao Pi. “Dian lun: Lun wen.” In *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* (An anthology of literary criticism in Chinese history). Edited by Guo Shaoyu. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979, vol. 1.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Guo Shaoyu. *Zhaoyushi gudian wenxue lunji* (An anthology of Zhaoyushi treatises on classical literature). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983.
- ed. *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* (An anthology of literary criticism in Chinese history). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*. Edited by Michael Losonsky. Translated by Peter Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- . “From the Introduction to His Translation of *Agamemnon*.” In *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Edited by Rainer Schulte & John Biguenet. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Jullien, François. *The Great Image Has No Form, On the Nonobject through Painting*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Kiyama Hideo. “‘Wenxue fugu’ yu ‘wenxue geming’” (“Literary Renaissance” and “Literary Revolution”). In *Wenxue fugu yu wenxue geming: Mushan Yingxiong Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sixiang lunji* (Literary Renaissance and Literary Revolution: A collection of essays on modern Chinese literature by Kiyama Hideo). Edited & translated by Zhao Jinghua. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004.
- Liu Xie. “Fenggu.” In *Wen xin diao long* (The literary mind and the carving of dragons). Edited by Fan Wenlan. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1958.
- Lu Xun. *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete anthology of Lu Xun). Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005.
- Mencius. *Mengzi yi zhu* (Mencius, with translation and annotation). Edited by Yang Bojun. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960.
- Schulte, Rainer & Biguenet, John ed., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Wang Feng. “Liu Shipai wenxue guan de xueshu ziyuan yu lunzheng beijing” (On the intellectual source and the debate background of Liu Shipai’s literary ideas). In *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu xiandaihua jincheng erbian* (The second collection of modern studies on Chinese literature). Edited by Chen Pingyuan. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000.
- Wang Hongzhi. *Chongshi “xin da ya”*: *Ershi shiji Zhongguo fanyi yanjiu* (Reinterpreting “fidelity, smoothness, decorum”: A study on 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese translation). Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1999.

- Yan Fu. *Yan Fu ji* (An anthology of Yan Fu). Edited by Wang Shi. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986.
- Yang Xiong. “*Fa yan: Wen shen.*” In *Fa yan yishu* (*Fayan*, with annotation). Edited by Wang Rongbao and Chen Zhongfu. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987.
- Yuan Yidan. “Shilun *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji* de wenzhangxing: You Zhou Zuoren de ‘fanyi wenti guan tanqi’” (On the *wenzhang* nature of *Anthology of Foreign Fictions*: Starting with Zhou Zuoren’s “genre principle of translation”). Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao (Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture, Nanjing Normal University), 1 (2007): 54–61.
- Zhang Lihua. *Xiandai Zhongguo “duanpian xiaoshuo” de xingqi: Yi wenlei xinggou wei shijiao* (The rise of “short stories” in modern China: From the perspective of genre formation). Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2011.
- Zhang Taiyan. *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (The complete anthology of Zhang Taiyan), vol. 3. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985.
- Zhongguo fanyi gongzuozhe xiehui *fanyi tongxun* bianjibu ed., *Fanyi yanjiu lunwen ji* (An anthology of translation studies). Beijing: Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 1984.