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Can We Say an Ear of Cabbage: On Translating Wordplay in Xi Xi's Poetry

Jennifer Feeley

Wordplay poses a thorny challenge in the art of poetry translation. In order to remain “faithful” to a playful source text, the translator often must be “unfaithful” to its semantic meanings and syntax, thereby further destabilizing the notion of translation equivalence, if such a thing exists to begin with (Delabastita 1996, 135). Translators have three options. They can ignore the wordplay and regularize the text in the target language, at the expense of the tone and spirit of the source text; they can attempt to translate the wordplay, at the expense of what the source text literally says; or they simply can decide not to translate any poetry that contains wordplay and avoid the problem altogether. While it may be tempting to dismiss translating wordplay as a futile endeavor and opt for the first or third option, if one believes that poetry translation is an *art* and not merely a mechanical *act*, it is imperative to bring as much of the poem into the target language as possible—including wordplay. Translating wordplay is a reminder that literary translation is a form of creative writing that requires originality and artistry.

In this essay I explore the process of translating wordplay in the poetry of renowned Hong Kong author Xi Xi 西西 (b. 1937), using four poems from her and my bilingual collection *Not Written Words* (2016) as case studies.¹ As one of the most innovative and playful

1 Xi Xi's birth year has previously been listed as 1938. In 2016, she found out that she was born in 1937.

poets writing in Chinese today, Xi Xi uses wordplay as a rhetorical device, often for humorous effect. As these poems are thus rooted in specificities of the Chinese language, translating them may seem impossible. However, rather than writing them off as “untranslatable,” I take the stance that they inspire the translator to conjure up creative solutions in English. I begin by categorizing types of wordplay and techniques commonly used to translate wordplay and then turn to four poems from *Not Written Words*, identifying, explaining, and analyzing the strategies I have used to mine the potential of English to recreate Xi Xi’s language games—which exude a love of language through their very subversion of it—in a new linguistic and cultural environment. In doing so, I wish to encourage readers and translators to unshackle themselves from rules, assumptions, and conventions, and to use the potential of poetry and of language at large to the full.

Types of Wordplay & Translation Strategies

As Meri Giorgadze observes, “According to its form, wordplay can be expressed in ambiguous verbal wit, orthographic peculiarities, sounds and forms of the words, in breaking [...] grammar rules and other linguistic factors” (Giorgadze 2014, 271). It can be based on phonological, graphological, lexical, morphological, or syntactic structures, or a combination thereof (Delabastita 1996, 130–31, Giorgadze 2014, 271). In a special issue on wordplay and translation of *The Translator*, Dirk Delabastita defines wordplay as “the various *textual* phenomena in which *structural features* of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a *communicatively significant confrontation* of two (or more) linguistic structures with *more or less similar forms* and *more or less different meanings*” (Delabastita 1996, 128, emphasis in original). This definition, which for Delabastita is synonymous with punning,² focuses on the

2 Whereas Delabastita appears to regard wordplay and puns as interchangeable terms, Giorgadze considers punning to be a subcategory of wordplay. Giorgadze also identifies other forms of wordplay, such as spoonerisms, malapropisms, wellerisms, onomatopoeia, and palindromes (Giorgadze 2014, 271–72). Additionally, she points out that while ambiguity may be a feature of a pun, not every ambiguous word or phrase qualifies as a pun (273).

ambiguities that arise when formal similarities between words or phrases generate multiple meanings or interpretations, but it does not necessarily account for all types of wordplay across all languages. Delabastita highlights linguistic structures such as homonymy (identical phonemic and graphemic representations but different meanings), homophony (identical phonemic representations but different meanings), homography (identical graphemic representations but different meanings), paronymy (similar but not identical phonemic and graphemic representations), polysemy (identical phonemic and graphemic representations and contiguous meanings), and idioms, acknowledging that these categories may be insufficient to encompass the ways that wordplay is used non-Western languages (Delabastita 1996, 128–31).

In the same special issue, focusing on Chinese, Seán Golden devises a “tentative taxonomy” of Chinese polysemy and rhetoric (Golden 1996, 284). His taxonomy is informed by ancient Chinese texts, and I will only summarize the categories that I find applicable to translating wordplay in Xi Xi’s poetry. First, Chinese characters can stand alone “as a monosyllabic lexeme, or as a dependent morpheme in multisyllabic compounds,” thus rendering each individual character inherently polysemic and holding the potential for multiple meanings. Second, many characters “perform a variety of syntactic functions,” acting as various parts of speech. Third, there is only a “small number of phonemes in Chinese,” which increases the possibility for homophony. Fourth, one encounters punning based on the “complex interplay” between the graphic quality of the Chinese character and the semantic meaning it represents, or what Golden terms the interaction between etymological and chirographic punning. Finally, characters often are polysemous through allusions or historical references that are “compressed into a single keyword” and “based on intracultural ‘tags’” (Golden 1996, 284–85). He further notes that wordplay based on onomymy (proper names) and toponymy (place names) is hard to distinguish from other semantic elements as there is no upper- or lower-casing in Chinese; the translator into English, however, needs to make decisions about—and can avail herself of the possibility of—capitalization, as I discuss

later in this essay.³ Additionally, it is common for authors to combine multiple wordplay techniques into a single work.

Giorgadze synthesizes previous scholars' scholarship to introduce a new classification of puns (and, by extension, wordplay) based on lexical ambiguity (in which a word has multiple meanings), semantic ambiguity (in which a sentence contains an ambiguous word or phrase), and syntactic ambiguity (in which a word has multiple meanings and interpretations because of its structure). Lexical-semantic puns include phenomena such as homonyms, homophones, and polysemy. Structural-syntactic puns denote phrases or sentences that can be parsed in multiple ways. Giorgadze's third category, structural-semantic puns, includes idiomatic expressions and words or concepts that have "an inherently diffuse meaning" (Delabastita 1996, 273–74). Drawing on Golden's essay, I would add semantic-graphic punning as a fourth category that refers to the interplay between the visual qualities of a text and its semantic meaning.

Below, I will review the process of translating wordplay in four of Xi Xi's poems, "The Merry Building" 美麗大廈, "A Striped Tiger in a Thicket of Green Grass" 綠草叢中一斑斕老虎, "Crab Canon" 螃蟹卡農, and "Can We Say" 可不可以說. Each poem contains a different type of wordplay. At the heart of "The Merry Building" is the confusion resulting from homophony and paronymy, with the poem taking advantage of the limited number of phonemes in Chinese. At the (literal) center of the concrete poem "A Striped Tiger in a Thicket of Green Grass" is a visual pun based on the interplay between the semantic meaning and graphic quality of a single Chinese character. "Crab Canon" is rife with puns based on polysemy, homonymy, and syntactic ambiguity. The fourth poem, "Can We Say," dramatizes, interrogates, and parodies the semantic categorizations of Chinese noun classifiers and their corresponding head nouns.

Delabastita identifies eight techniques that can be used to translate (or not translate) wordplay, which I outline below (Delabastita 1996, 134). As he uses "wordplay" and "pun"

3 Golden's other examples are not directly relevant to the poems discussed in this paper, though some may be relevant in translating other poems by Xi Xi.

synonymously, his strategies all have “pun” in their names. Because I agree with Giorgadze that puns are a subset of wordplay, I have amended Delabastita’s terminology, changing “pun” to the more generic “wordplay.” Here goes:

1. **WORDPLAY** → **WORDPLAY**. A new form of wordplay is created in the target language that replicates the wordplay in the source text. I break this down into **WORDPLAY** → **SIMILAR WORDPLAY** and **WORDPLAY** → **DIFFERENT WORDPLAY**, and **SINGLE-FORM WORDPLAY** → **MULTIPLE-FORM WORDPLAY**.
2. **WORDPLAY** → **NON-WORDPLAY**. The translator ignores the wordplay.
3. **WORDPLAY** → **RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE**. The translator replaces the wordplay with a related rhetorical device that aims to reproduce its effect, such as repetition, alliteration, rhyme, paradox, or irony.
4. **WORDPLAY** → **ZERO**. The portion of the text containing the wordplay is omitted in the translation.
5. **WORDPLAY ST** → **WORDPLAY TT**. The wordplay is translated literally, almost inevitably losing its effect.
6. **NON-WORDPLAY** → **WORDPLAY**. The translator introduces wordplay in the translation where there is no wordplay in the source text. They may choose to do so to compensate for wordplay that is lost elsewhere in the text or for other reasons.
7. **ZERO** → **WORDPLAY**. The translator adds new textual material that features wordplay.
8. **EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES**. Paratextual information is used to explain wordplay: introduction or preface, footnotes and endnotes, afterword, etc.

Any of these eight techniques may be combined (Delabastita 1996, 134). In translating the four poems discussed below (and other poems in *Not Written Words*), I employ a variety of them. In all four poems I rely on **EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES**, describing the source-text wordplay in my introduction and/or in the translator’s notes at the end of the book (Feeley 2016, xi–xxii); this extra information is unobtrusive and does not interrupt the reading process, and the

reader can skip it if they want. In all four poems, I also use WORDPLAY → WORDPLAY and the subcategories I divide this into. Other techniques I use include ZERO → WORDPLAY, NON-WORDPLAY → WORDPLAY, WORDPLAY ST → WORDPLAY TT, and WORDPLAY → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE. As Delabastita remarks, for critics and translators who privilege the source text, these methods may be unacceptable due to the modifications in meaning and structure that inevitably occur, as well as “when a new contextual setting has to be created for the target-text wordplay to come to life” (Delabastita 1996, 135). However, in translating Xi Xi’s poetry, not translating the wordplay leads to even greater loss, which is why I have wanted to create a new environment, even as this compels me to challenge what frequently goes unquestioned as “the primacy of the original” still today—or, precisely because this allows me to do so.

Translating Homophony and Paronymy in “The Merry Building”

“The Merry Building” (literally “The Beautiful Building”), which shares a title and has an intertextual relationship with her novel of the same name, hinges upon a lexical-semantic pun based on the near-homophony / paronymy of the first half of the name of the building where the speaker lives, *meili* (in Mandarin) / *meilei* (in Cantonese) 美利 and the adjective *meili* (in Mandarin) / *meilai* (in Cantonese) 美麗, which means “beautiful.”⁴ Moreover, both compounds have *mei* 美, which means “beauty” or “beautiful,” as their first character. In the novel, the building is described as dilapidated, and thus the juxtaposition with its “beauty” generates the pun.

When I set out to translate the poem, I thought that the official English name of the building, *Meili / Meilei dasha* 美利大廈, was the Murray Building, and found myself tasked with finding a word that is (near)homophonous and graphically similar with “Murray” and is a (near)synonym for “beautiful.” (I hesitated to change what I assumed was the English name of the building, as it is a real place name.) Through RhymeZone, an online rhyming dictionary with a feature for finding homophones or similar-sounding words, I stumbled upon

4 See Xi Xi 1990.

“merry.” While this is semantically not an equivalent of *meili* 美麗, it is close enough to reproduce the wordplay, including the contrast between the derelict building and its erroneous description. Moreover, “Murray” and “merry” are paronymous: they are pronounced similarly (but not identically) and share similar (but not identical) spellings. So: WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY. Here is the poem in full:

The Merry Building

You keep on sending letters
 To the wrong address
 The place where I live
 Is named the *Murray* Building
 Yet over and over, you write
Merry

But I'm delighted, you might even say I'm merry
 So I don't correct you
 And furthermore
 You're a poet
 Merry
 Seems to be your wish for me

A very Merry Building
 Ho ho
 From now on let me be oh so romantic
 Under the warm late afternoon sun
 Filled to the brim
 It's easy living
 Always smiling
 Always dreaming
 Something merry
 Must be nesting in the beams of my home

美麗大廈

你寫信來
仍把我的地址寫錯了
我住的地方
叫美利大廈
你寫的卻是
美麗

但我是歡喜的
所以不更正
而且
你是詩人
美麗
是你的祝福

美麗的大廈
啊啊
讓我從此就浪漫起來吧
在西曬的窗下
擠迫的空間
從容地生活
常常微笑
並且幻想
美麗
正在我家樑上做巢
(Xi Xi 2016, 28–29)

Aside from WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY, I also have employed ZERO → WORDPLAY here: while the line *dan wo shi huanxi de* 但我是歡喜的 might literally be rendered as “But I’m happy,” I take advantage of the meaning of “merry” to add an additional playful phrase: “But I’m delighted, you might even say I’m merry” (a change of which Xi Xi approves and which fits the tone of the poem). And there is NON-WORDPLAY → WORDPLAY, where I capitalize on the association between “merry” and Christmas in English and render *aa* 啊啊 as “ho ho,” anticipating “oh so romantic” in the next line and echoing the musicality of the Chinese source text

that is rich in *a* sounds (*dasha, a a, ba, xia*).

The poem is about mistaken names, and it is fitting that, more than a year after *Not Written Words* was published, I learned that the building to which Xi Xi refers in the poem and novel is probably *not* called the Murray Building in English but rather ... Merry Mansions.⁵ True serendipity, but this beautiful, merry mistake will also present a problem if there is a future edition, when I will be faced with the challenge of finding a word that sounds and is written similar to “merry” that is a synonym for “beautiful.” Of course, I am facing the challenge already, albeit in private—until I wrote this essay.

Semantic-Graphic Punning in “A Striped Tiger in a Thicket of Green Grass”

Whereas the wordplay in “The Merry Building” is primarily based on sound, “A Striped Tiger in a Thicket of Green Grass” is a concrete poem that plays on the visual components of Chinese characters.

fir fir pine pest cypress parasol butterfly buzz elm paulownia
 brush brush bud brush dove brush wood brush brush brush hiss brush brush grass brush kite brush tree brush
 brush wood brush poplar brush bluff cave grove brush grass brush flea brush bluff brush fox brush bird brush
 brush brush brush bug brush bluff cave cave bluff cave brush bud cave brush wood cave
 brush bluff ant brush chirp brush wood brush chirr cave cave bird cave worm brush wood brush
 brush bluff ant brush wood brush tree brush it sit deep gr brush brush wood brush worm brush bud brush
 brush grove brush brush wood brush brush brush bud brush brush bird brush bluff brush chirp cave cave brush

綠草叢中一斑斕老虎

杉杉松 蝗栢 梧蝶 蟬 榆桐
 艸艸花艸鴿艸木艸艸艸虺艸艸草艸鳶艸樹艸
 艸木艸楊艸山岫林艸草艸蚤艸山艸狐艸鳥艸
 艸艸艸蟲艸山岫岫山岫艸花岫艸木岫
 艸山蟻艸蟀艸木艸蝻岫岫鳥岫蟲艸木艸
 艸山蟻艸木艸樹艸王艸艸木艸蛭艸花艸
 艸林艸艸木艸艸艸花艸艸鳥艸山艸蟀艸岫艸

(Xi Xi 2016, 72–73)

In concrete poetry, much of the poem’s effect is conveyed through visual means. Here, the poem’s “tiger” is represented by the character *wang* 王, which means “king.” However, the wordplay has less to do with the semantic meaning of the word and instead emerges

5 I am grateful to Dorothy Tse 謝曉虹 for bringing this to my attention.

from the juxtaposition between the word and its graphic properties, as the character is thought to resemble the stripes on the tiger's forehead. The tiger is thus "hidden" within the word, prompting readers to decode the poem by focusing on the character's visual characteristics instead of its meaning. (As a clue to guide less imaginative readers, the source text has the character in bold.)

In recreating this poem in English, a literal translation of "king" would lose the interplay of the semantic and the visual, and privilege the semantic. I considered using uppercase "I," which looks similar to 王, minus the medial horizontal line, but its appearance would be font-dependent and I was concerned that it might be misleading to readers (though I did enjoy the added bonus of the "eye of the tiger"). I toyed with the possibility of using a series of dashes, but that felt too obvious and frankly a little boring. Moreover, it wouldn't help me to retain the interplay of the semantic and the visual.

Months after I had set aside the poem in frustration, I heard Huang Yunte speak on anagrams and paragrams in his poetry that take advantage of the visuality of English as one might do for Chinese. Inspired, I started anagramming "striped tiger" and "a striped tiger," determined to embed the animal within an anagram. There are websites that will automatically generate anagrams for you, but I ultimately chose one I created on my own, "it sit deep grr." I hesitated over the lack of subject-verb agreement, but violating this rule—of a system often said to distinguish human beings from animals—adds to the primal feeling of the poem; besides, many of Xi Xi's poems rebel against grammar conventions. Moreover, "grr" complements the onomatopoeia in other parts of my translation. Whereas the wordplay of the source text is based on the interplay of chirographic and etymological punning, the pun in my translation is **WORDPLAY** → **DIFFERENT WORDPLAY**: it is anagrammatic and avails itself of the graphic features of English. But in both instances, the tiger is hidden in a language puzzle where visual and semantic elements play off of one another.

While recreating the visual pun was my main objective, I wanted to do right by the poem's sound as well, in addition to replicating other visual features. The "tiger" is surrounded by various flora and fauna, with many words repeated throughout the poem. Visually, the number of characters with the grass, wood, and insect radicals is

overwhelming. When the poem is read aloud, one hears the repetition of not just words, but also sounds like *cao* 艸, 草 (variants of “grass”) and *zao* 蚤 (“flea”). To reproduce this soundplay and visual wordplay in my translation, I use paronymous words such as “brush,” “bud,” “bug,” “brush,” and “bluff” that look and sound alike to create a similarly dizzying effect. With the exception of some of the trees and the butterfly in the first line, each word in the English translation is monosyllabic. In some cases I used onomatopoeia to this end: “buzz” instead of “cicada,” and “chirp” instead of “cricket.” The poem is a mouthful to read out loud in Chinese, and I have made a mouthful of it in English.

Finally, it is worth mentioning one last visual aspect of the translation. In the source collection, the poem is one of two texts (along with another concrete poem) that are printed horizontally from left to right, with all other poems printed vertically from right to left.⁶ To make my English translation legible, due to the length of the lines, it was necessary to print the English poem sideways, so that the reader is forced to turn the book in order to read the poem. This solution has had the unintentional, welcome effect of marking the translation in *Not Written Words* just as the poem is marked in the Chinese collection.

Lexical-Semantic and Structural-Syntactic Puns in “Crab Canon”

“Crab Canon” is built on composite wordplay techniques. Xi Xi creates various puns based on lexical-semantic and structural-syntactic classifications, exploiting homonymy, polysemy, ambiguous syntactic structures, and the ability of Chinese characters to stand alone as individual lexemes or to function as dependent morphemes in multisyllabic compounds. The poem is brimming with ambiguity.

Additionally, it abounds in internal and end rhymes, calling to mind the musical origins of the central image. A crab canon is a musical arrangement in which a melody is superimposed on itself and reversed in time. In poetry, it is a palindromic text that can be read backward as well as forward, often with opposite meanings. Xi Xi, however, takes the term literally and makes it a poem about

6 See Xi Xi 2000 (143).

crabs—at the same time as giving it the formal features conventionally associated with a crab canon. After the poem’s midpoint, the lines repeat in reverse, and the mirroring aspect of the crab canon is highlighted by a reversal of the positions of the crabs.

Crab Canon

c'mon c'mon come 'n dance the crab canon
 white crabs in front
 black crabs behind
 red crabs to the Left
 green crabs to the Right
 foot to foot, hand in hand they stand
 zig-zig-zag, sidle 'n slide
 one two three four five
 once I caught a crab alive
 councils convene inside
 protesters stampede outside
 Left foot Right foot Left foot Right
 apple pie apple pie love at first bite
 which pie in the sky has the sights that delight?
 c'mon c'mon come 'n dance the crab canon
 in the spirit of humanity
 it's your civic responsibility
 the pros and cons of cons conning pros
 little miss pint-size
 early to rise
 off to the square to where the slogans flare
 c'mon c'mon come 'n dance the crab canon
 off to the square to where the slogans flare
 early to rise
 little miss pint-size
 the cons and pros of pros conning cons
 it's your civic responsibility
 in the spirit of humanity
 c'mon c'mon come 'n dance the crab canon
 which pie in the sky has the sights that delight?
 apple pie apple pie love at first bite
 Right foot Left foot Left foot Right

protesters stampede outside
councils convene inside
once I caught a crab alive
one two three four five
zig-zig-zag, sidle 'n slide
foot to foot, hand in hand they stand
green crabs to the Left
red crabs to the Right
black crabs in front
white crabs behind
c'mon c'mon come 'n dance the crab canon

螃蟹卡農

來吧來吧來跳螃蟹卡農
白螃蟹在前
黑螃蟹在後
紅螃蟹在左
綠螃蟹在右
腳碰腳，手牽手
之字路，橫著走
一二三四五六七
七六五四三二一
門內開會
門外示威
左右左右左右左
蘋果派蘋果派味道真好
哪一派的大廈風景較好？
來吧來吧來跳螃蟹卡農
人道精神
社會承擔
正反正反正反正
小小姑娘
清早起床
提著標語上廣場
來吧來吧來跳螃蟹卡農
提著標語上廣場
清早起床
小小姑娘

反正反正反正反
 社會承擔
 人道精神
 來吧來吧來跳螃蟹卡農
 哪一派的大廈風景較好？
 蘋果派蘋果派味道真好
 右左右左右左右
 門外示威
 門內開會
 七六五四三二一
 一二三四五六七
 之字路，橫著走
 腳碰腳，手牽手
 綠螃蟹在左
 紅螃蟹在右
 黑螃蟹在前
 白螃蟹在後
 來吧來吧來跳螃蟹卡農
 (Xi Xi 2016, 88–91)

In this poem, several types of wordplay work together to create a playful, musical poem that is open to several interpretations. Firstly, there are polysemic puns such as *zuo* 左 “left” and *you* 右 “right” that can refer to political ideologies as well as physical directionality. Through WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY, in order to enable both meanings, I turn to upper- and lower-casing (a feature that Chinese lacks) in “Left” and “Right.” There are also homonymic puns, for instance *in pingguo pai pingguo pai weidao zhen hao / na yi pai de dasha fengjing jiao hao?* 蘋果派蘋果派味道真好 / 哪一派的大廈風景較好？, literally “apple pie apple pie the taste is really good / which [political] faction’s building has the better scenery?,” where Xi Xi takes advantage of the homonym *pai* 派 which can mean “faction” or “pie.” Again, through WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY, my translation reproduces this pun by exploiting the homonymy of “pie” in English. Aside from its denotation of the food item, “pie” also is part of the idiom “pie in the sky” for something that is unattainable. While as such, it originally still denotes the food item, the idiom as a whole has taken on a lexical structure where the meanings of the

individual words no longer tell the whole story. Thus, the pun is based on the meaning of the phrase in its entirety, making “pie” and “pie in the sky” not just polysemes but also homonyms. While the semantic meaning of 派 as a political faction is lost in my translation, the same type of wordplay is retained, and the uppercase L and R in “Left” and “Right” may compensate for this loss. Additionally, my translation of “apple pie apple pie love at first bite” also adds a pun on “love at first sight” where there is none in the Chinese, through SINGLE-FORM WORDPLAY → MULTIPLE-FORM WORDPLAY.

Moreover, the poem contains syntactic structures that can be parsed in a variety of ways and also are palindromes. For example, in *zuo you zuo you zuo you zuo* 左右左右左右左 and *you zuo you zuo you zuo you* 右左右左右左右, one must decide how to parse the words. *Zuo* 左 and *you* 右 can be stand-alone lexemes meaning “left” and “right,” but they can also form the compound *zuoyou* 左右, which means “nearby” or “approximately,” but also “to control,” among other things. In “Left foot Right foot Left foot Right” and “Right foot Left foot Left foot Right,” while I have preserved the polysemy “L/left” and “R/right,” these other meanings have vanished. On the other hand, “left” and “right” also have additional homonymous meanings in English. For “left,” these include the simple past tense and past participle of “leave”; and for “right,” they include “just” or “proper,” “correct,” “suitable,” “convenient,” “satisfactory,” “entitlement,” and other meanings. Also, “left and right” and “right and left” are idioms meaning “in all directions.” My translation emphasizes what I believe to be the most salient meanings, without blocking out others. With the addition of “foot,” I forge an intertextual relationship—in Lawrence Venuti’s words—with Dr. Seuss’s *The Foot Book*, a children’s book that seeks to convey the concept of opposite through depictions of different kinds of feet; this addition boosts the musicality of the translation and inscribes new interpretants onto the text.⁷ The aural and oral qualities of the Chinese text are reminiscent of children’s rhymes and playground songs, and the allusion to Dr. Seuss accentuates this in English. Here, WORDPLAY → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE recreates the soundplay of the source text, and WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY

7 For a discussion of forming new intertextual relations through translation, see Venuti 2009.

preserves its polysemy.

Wordplay continues even more conspicuously in the lines *zheng fan zheng fan zheng fan zheng* 正反正正反反正 and *fan zheng fan zheng fan zheng fan* 反正反正正反反. Like *zuo* and *you*, *zheng* 正 and *fan* 反 are stand-alone lexemes that also combine, in the compounds *zhengfan* 正反 and *fanzheng* 反正. By itself, *zheng* can mean “straight,” “upright,” “proper,” “main,” “principal,” “to correct,” and “exactly” among other things; *fan* means “contrary,” “reverse,” “inside out / upside down,” “to reverse,” “to return,” “to oppose,” “against,” “to rebel,” and “instead.” The compound *zhengfan* means “pro and con,” “positive and negative,” “inside and outside,” and “reversible,” and *fanzheng* means “con and pro,” “anyway,” “anyhow,” and “to come over from the enemy’s side and shift one’s loyalty to the side of righteousness.” Moreover, as with *zuo* and *you*, the lines made up of *zheng* and *fan* are seven characters in length: how should we parse them? Should one see monosyllabic stand-alone words here, or compounds, or both? If one reads for compounds, *zhengfan zhengfan zhengfan zhen* leaves one with a single stand-alone *zheng*. And that’s just one of various permutations one can project.

As a translator, my task is to recreate as many of the meanings as possible, along with the playfulness. As with “Left” and “Right,” I enable what I believe to be the most salient interpretations, “pro and con” and “con and pro”; like *zheng* and *fan* / *fan* and *zheng*, they can be stand-alone lexemes as well as dependent morphemes in a compound. As stand-alone lexemes, they have multiple meanings. Aside from meaning “in favor of,” “pro” can also mean “proponent,” intimate consideration for a particular matter, or be shorthand for “professional.” “Con,” in addition to than meaning “opposed to,” also can refer to an argument against a particular matter; and it can mean “to study carefully,” “to commit to memory,” “to direct the steering of a ship,” “to swindle,” “a lie or exaggeration,” or “one who swindles,” and be shorthand for “convention.” My translation takes advantage of the homonymy and the rich polysemy, and of the fact that, just like the Chinese *zheng* and *fan*, the English *pro* and *con* can perform multiple syntactic functions: “the pros and cons of cons conning pros” and “the cons and pros of pros conning cons.” These are not perfect palindromes, but the wordplay remains intact, and the meaning of “con” as to “swindle” echoes an anger directed at the

political establishment exuded by the source text. While my translation does not convey the meaning of “just” for *zheng*, elsewhere my translation of *you* as “Right” also brings this meaning into the poem. As such, in addition to WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY, one pun can compensate for the loss of one of the meanings in a different pun within the same poem.

While the above examples of lexical-semantic and structural-syntactic wordplay form the crux of my negotiation of “Crab Canon,” I would like to touch on two other features that are central to the poem. As noted, the crab canon is musical (sub)genre, which Xi Xi emphasizes through the numerous rhymes and off-rhymes that punctuate the poem. My attempts to preserve as much of the rhyme and rhythm as possible have entailed slight changes, in a couple of instances inspiring me to introduce new intertextual relations to the poem, as with *The Foot Book*. For example, in trying to replicate the rhyming palindrome couplet *yi er san si wu liu qi / qi liu wu si san er yi* 一 二 三 四 五 六 七 / 七 六 五 四 三 二 一, one hits a stubborn roadblock: “one” and “seven” don’t rhyme, and the two-syllable “seven” messes up the rhythm. Eliminating “seven” does not solve the problem, as there is no numeral that perfectly rhymes with “one.” Inspired by the playground feel of the source text, I searched for English-language nursery rhymes about numbers and stumbled upon “One two three four five / once I caught a fish alive”—which happens to have the variant “once I caught a *crab* alive,” and knew I had struck gold. Thus, in addition to translating the soundplay into a rhyming couplet in English through WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY, I have introduced an additional pun into the English version, through NON-WORDPLAY → WORDPLAY.

Whereas “The Merry Building” and “A Striped Tiger in a Thicket of Green Grass” are largely contingent on one type of wordplay, the Chinese “Crab Canon” avails itself of homonymy, polysemy, phonological structures (soundplay), and syntactic ambiguity. I have used multiple techniques to recreate this wordplay, mining the richness of English to create additional puns and different types of puns to compensate for the “losses” that poetry translation is charged with by those who are stuck in a linear-hierarchical vision of the art.

Semantic Relations in “Can We Say”⁸

The last poem discussed in this essay, “Can We Say,” not only pushes the limits of language but directly confronts semantic-syntactic rules, calling into question the pairing of noun classifiers and their associated head nouns. By “mismatching” nouns and classifiers, Xi Xi challenges and defamiliarizes linguistic categories, encouraging readers to think about language and representation in new ways.

Cognitive semantics, which regards language as a reflection of human cognitive processes, illuminates the relationship between Chinese sortal classifiers and their corresponding nouns. Understanding how humans categorize things and concepts in order to make sense of the world that language represents is pivotal to understanding human cognition (Tai 1994, 480; Tai and Wang 1990, 35; Lakoff 1987, 5–6). Chinese classifiers are based on a conceptual structure that reveals a semantic relationship, based on function or physical attributes, between the classifier and the head noun (Her and Hsieh 2010; 527, Tai 1994, 479; Tai and Wang 1990, 37–38).⁹ For instance, one of the classifiers for fish is 尾 *wei*, which literally means “tail.” As linguistics scholars Her and Hsieh observe, this classifier highlights “an essential property of the entity the noun denotes; in other words, it does not impart any information to the noun that it does not already have. For example, having a tail is part of what necessarily makes a fish ... The classifier clearly adds no information to the phrase and merely identifies this essential property, tail” (Her and Hsieh 2010, 543). Thus, in the nominal phrase *yi wei yu* 一尾魚, literally “one tail [of] fish,” there is a semantic relationship between the classifier *wei* and its referent, as having a tail is one of the permanent physical qualities of a fish.

Sortal classifiers are common in only a few languages, but most if not all languages have mensural classifiers or massifiers, also known as measure words (Tai and Wang 1990, 39), in phrases like “a *pound* of sugar,” and “a *cup* of flour.” While sortal classifiers are only used

8 My discussion of “Can We Say” has benefited greatly from insights that linguistics scholar Yang Xiao-Desai has shared with me over email, though any mistakes in this analysis are solely my own.

9 For an in-depth examination of these cognitive categories, see Tai 1994 (484–89).

with count nouns, mensural classifiers are used with both mass nouns and count nouns. Unlike sortal classifiers, however, they do not convey any characteristics inherent to the corresponding head noun, but instead bestow “an additional property to the noun, a property that is accidental and thus not a necessary part of the entity denoted by the noun” (Her and Hsieh 2010, 543). Moreover, they indicate a temporary state, whereas the qualities reflected by sortal classifiers have a permanent connection (Tai and Wang 1990, 38). In “a box of pencils” or “a box of apples,” there is no intrinsic relationship between the meaning of the word “box” and its contents, and being in a box is not a permanent or inherent attribute of pencils or apples.

Sortal classifiers are emblematic of a unique type of semantic categorization in the Chinese language, a process that seems arbitrary only in those instances where “the original salient conceptual basis has become conventionalized, with semantic motivation buried in oblivion” (Tai 1994, 491). A single noun may be preceded by various sortal classifiers, each drawing attention to different salient perceptual attributes of the noun (Tai and Wang 1990, 46–50). For example, the sortal classifier *duo* 朵, which can mean “flower” or “earlobe” by itself, is often paired with the words *hua* 花 “flower” or *yun* 雲 “cloud,” emphasizing the roundish shape of the objects denoted by these nouns. If a different sortal classifier is used, as in *yi pian yun* 一片雲, literally “one piece / stretch [of] cloud,” a different characteristic of the cloud is profiled, in this case thinness and flatness. Similarly, *yi tiao yu* 一條魚 highlights the long, slender shape of the fish—rather than the fact that fish have tails, as in *yi wei yu*.

According to the prototype theory of categorization, in which human imagination is central, members of a particular category may be prototypes that are considered “typical” of that category, or they may be natural or metaphorical extensions of that category (Tai and Wang 1990, 36, 40–42; Tai 1994, 482–83). As such, sortal classifiers can be used not only to classify “concrete visible objects or entities but also entities which are invisible and abstract” (Tai and Wang 1990, 42). Various applications of sortal classifiers thus represent extensions of their prototypical classifier use through conceptual mapping between semantic categories. “Can We Say” dramatizes this extension, to appreciable rhetorical and often humorous effect.

Can We Say

Can we say
an ear of cabbage
a cake of egg
a flock of scallions
a singularity of ground pepper?

Can we say
a fleet of birds
a fluting of coconut tree
a helmet of sunlight
a basket of cloudburst?

Can we say
a grove of lemon tea
a pair of Popeyes
a dressing down of ice cream soda
an ovum of Ovaltine?

Can we say
a bloom of umbrella
a bouquet of snowflakes
a bottle of Milky Way
a bottle gourd of cosmos?

Can we say
an excellency of ants
a caucus of *cucarachas*
a hamlet of hams
a sandwich of heroes?

Can we say
a head of academic deans
a clutch of regional inspectors
a stable of generals
a tail of emperor?

Can we say
may imperial dragon eye fruit foresee good fortune
may your beard grow long, long live dragon beard candy?

可不可以說

可不可以說
一枚白菜
一塊雞蛋
一隻葱
一個胡椒粉？
可不可以說
一架飛鳥
一管椰子樹
一頂太陽
一巴斗驟雨？
可不可以說
一株檸檬茶
一雙大力水手
一頓雪糕梳打
一畝阿華田？
可不可以說
一朵雨傘
一束雪花
一瓶銀河
一葫蘆宇宙？
可不可以說
一位螞蟻
一名甲由
一家豬羅
一窩英雄？
可不可以說
一頭訓導主任
一隻七省巡按
一匹將軍
一尾皇帝？
可不可以說
龍眼吉祥
龍鬚糖萬歲萬歲萬萬歲？
(Xi Xi 2016, 10-13)

By transgressing the rules for pairing classifiers and nouns, Xi renounces the salient perceptual qualities that are normally profiled in the head nouns in question, achieving multiple effects. First, she discourages, and even prevents, readers from categorizing the head nouns according to linguistic and cultural conventions. Instead of the normal *yi ke baicai* 一棵白菜 to denote a head of Napa cabbage, she replaces the classifier *ke* 棵, which is used for small spherical objects, with *mei* 枚, which is used for objects such as coins, medals, and stamps and by itself can refer to a stalk or a shrub. *Mei* is an unanticipated, “incorrect” classifier that calls attention to the shrub-like appearance of the cabbage. Second, this accentuates properties of the head noun that might normally go unnoticed, thereby producing a metaphorical effect. For instance, *yi shu xuehua* 一束雪花, literally “a bundle [of] snow flowers,” emphasizes the “flower” component of the Chinese compound word for “snowflake,” by pairing the noun with a classifier that would normally be used for a bunch of flowers. Similarly, *yi duo yusan* 一朵雨傘, literally “a flower [of] umbrella,” describes the physical aspects of an umbrella as resembling a flower, with the handle as the stem and the top part of the umbrella as the petals. Third, the poem forges imaginative connections among linguistic categories. For example, *yi jia zhuluo* 一家豬糞, literally “a household [of] pig,” highlights associations between the written form of the classifier *jia* 家, comprised of components that mean “roof” and “pig” and as a classifier often used for families or businesses, and the semantic meaning of the corresponding head noun, “pig.” Fourth, the poem achieves humorous effect, conveys sarcasm, and interrogates, criticizes, and rejects conventional hierarchies and distinctions. Xi Xi pairs an ant and a cockroach with classifiers that are normally used as honorifics for humans, and people in positions of power, including a general and the emperor, with classifiers normally used for animals.

Most of the classifiers in the original Chinese version of “Can We Say” are sortal classifiers. These are not common in English and almost invariably lack semantic equivalents in English, which puts them in danger of becoming invisible in the target text, and presents the translator with multiple challenges. To begin with, she must find a solution to keep them visible, as there can be no wordplay without them. Then, she needs to replicate the mismatch of the classifier-

noun pairings. Finally, she needs to reproduce the creative conceptual mapping of the source text in order to achieve similar rhetorical, often comedic, effects.

Although English is not a classifier language, it does use several types of classifier constructions, including unit counters (“a piece of paper”), fractional classifiers (“a quarter of the pie”), number set classifiers (“thousands of people”), collective classifiers (“a gaggle of geese”), varietal classifiers (“a kind of wine”), measure classifiers (“five pounds of flour”), arrangement classifiers (“a row of lockers”), and metaphorical comparison classifiers (“a slip of a girl”) (Lehrer 1986, 111). My translation draws on these constructions, incorporating nominal phrases that follow the format of “a [classifier] of [noun(s)].” As collective classifiers are among the most common ones in English, inevitably, a singular noun in the source text frequently becomes a collective noun in my translation. While in this poem, too I rely on WORDPLAY → SIMILAR WORDPLAY and WORDPLAY → DIFFERENT WORDPLAY and on EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES, along with WORDPLAY ST → WORDPLAY TT and WORDPLAY → NON-WORDPLAY, I additionally employ various sub-techniques, as detailed below.

I start off with an obvious mismatch of classifier and noun in order to signal to readers what the poem is about. For *yi mei baicai* 一枚白菜, I am fortunate that English does in fact use a classifier for cabbage: “head.” To indicate the mismatch, I use another classifier from the semantic domain of the body, “ear,” as in “an ear of corn.” This disrupts the conventional categorization process, as (near)native English speakers know that “an ear of cabbage” is incorrect and that “head” should be paired with “cabbage” and “ear” with “corn.” To a certain extent, it also highlights certain features of the head noun, as Napa cabbage is not round like a head and in fact might bear a greater relationship to the shape of an ear; but I’ve dropped “Napa” for the sake of rhythm.

Second, I endeavor to reproduce the metaphorical effect of profile features of the head noun that otherwise would not be salient in a normal classifier-noun pairing. Returning to the above examples, for *yi shu xuehua* 一束雪花 I offer the somewhat literal translation of “a bouquet of snowflakes.” While the pun on “bouquet” and “snow flower” is absent in English, snowflakes can certainly be imagined as

small flowers, and given their materiality, collecting them into a bouquet seems futile. Likewise, I render *yi duo yusan* 一朵雨傘 as “a bloom of umbrella” to draw attention to an umbrella’s resemblance to a flower in bloom. In the second case, as in many others, this process has entailed inventing new classifiers in English. Meanwhile, some puns naturally cross over in translation, as in “a bottle of Milky Way.” The Chinese word for Milky Way, *yinhe* 銀河, literally means “silver river,” and “a bottle of silver river” accentuates a liquidity that serendipitously conjures up an association with milk.

Third, I aim to replicate Xi Xi’s innovative conceptual mapping within and between various linguistic categories. Returning to the phrase *yi jia zhuluo* 一家豬糞, I devise a classifier that has some sort of porcine connection, “a hamlet of hams.”¹⁰ Similarly, in *yi wo yingxiong* 一窩英雄, literally “a nest of hero,” the Chinese phrase links the classifier “nest” with a component of the word *xiong* 熊 that refers to a particular, short-tailed bird. To keep all the nouns the same and only change the classifiers, for creating a pun on “hero,” I write “a sandwich of heroes,” in an allusion to the hero sandwich.¹¹ (If I had chosen to keep the classifier and change the noun, I might have come up with “a nest of birdbrains” to achieve a similar effect—and in a poem written in response to “Can We Say,” I have done just that [Feeley 2015].) One finds similar wordplay in phrases such as *yi mu abuatian* 一畝阿華田, which literally means “one fifteenth of a hectare of Ovaltine” and is a pun on a written component of the transliterated name of the chocolate malt drink, *tian* 田, that means “field.” My translation emphasizes the reference to egg in the drink’s English name with an “ovum of Ovaltine,” and it recently occurred to me that “an Oval Office of Ovaltine” might be even more entertaining and visually stimulating.

The final effect I attempt to achieve in my translation is the

10 Credit goes to Melissa Anne-Marie Curley for “hamlet,” which I then paired with “hams.”

11 Coined in New York City in the late 1930s, the term “hero sandwich” is a synonym for what also is known as a submarine sandwich, grinder, or hoagie: a giant Italian sandwich consisting of a small loaf of bread filled with various cold cuts, vegetables, and cheeses. The sandwich allegedly received its moniker from a food critic who considered it a heroic feat to eat something so large.

lampooning of hierarchies and the blurring of the division between humans and animals. Whereas Xi Xi uses honorific classifiers normally reserved for people to refer to ants and cockroaches, I find similar terms in English, resulting in “an excellency of ants / a caucus of *cucarachas*,” employing the Spanish word for “cockroach” that is known by many English speakers to preserve the connotations of dialect of *yuezha* 甲由. As for mocking people in positions of power such as academic deans, inspectors, and generals, there are numerous collective classifiers for animals in English, leading to phrases such as “a head of academic deans” and “a clutch of regional inspectors.” The phrase *yi wei huangdi* 一尾皇帝, literally “a tail [of] emperor,” however, was tricky. I kept the emperor singular, as generally there is only one emperor at a time. As I mentioned earlier in this article, by itself, *wei* can mean “tail,” but it is used as a classifier for fish—and in English, the typical collective classifier for fish is “a school.” I considered using the phrase “a school of emperor” but worried that “school” might evoke the image of an emperor sitting in a classroom. However, the bigger issue was the need to preserve the “tail,” for two reasons: as a contrast with the “head” in “a head of academic deans,” and for its aquatic connections. In Chinese mythology, the dragon is associated with water as well as with the emperor, and this allows linkage to the closing lines of the poem about dragon eye fruit and dragon beard candy. Though it sounds strange in English, this strangeness is at home in a poem that defamiliarizes language throughout.

As before, a linear-hierarchical vision of poetry translation demanding a check mark for every pun in the source text would take us nowhere. Instead, I have strived to maintain the poem’s humor and imaginative qualities. For example, “a dressing down of ice cream soda” does not convey the wordplay of the Chinese, where a classifier that can be used for beatings is mismatched with a transliteration of the word “soda,” with *da* 打 meaning “to hit” or “to beat”—but the comedic effect and striking (pun intended) visual imagery are there for the readers of the translation just like they are there for the readers of the source text.

Conclusion

In poetry translation, exclusively aiming for so-called equivalence—long controversial in translation studies but stubbornly present in everyday discourse—is not effective, especially when wordplay is a central quality of the source text. The translator has many more tricks up her sleeve. In translating Xi Xi, I have made my choices, and others will make theirs—in reading and hearing my translations, or writing and speaking their own. Xi Xi’s poetry allows, encourages and positively *invites* multiple interpretations and hence multiple translations. In her novel *Mourning a Breast* 哀悼乳房, she writes:

But don’t assume that I am searching for the ultimate, perfect translation. I am not. There’s never a fixed and eternal “absolute spirit” in books. Translations are interpretations, and the same text holds the possibility of multiple interpretations. Each interpreter can thus proclaim “Madame Bovary is me,” and no one will object that there are too many Madame Bovarys [...] Dare I say that it is impossible to have a sole, absolute version of a translation, whether now or in the future?

但別以為我在尋找一個最終完美的譯本，不是的。書本裡從來就沒有一個既定而垂之永久的「絕對精神」。翻譯就是傳聞，同一文本有多重傳聞的可能，每一個傳聞者都可以說，「包法利夫人就是我」，包法利夫人並不嫌多。。
。。我是否可以說，現在或者將來也不可能有唯一，絕對的譯本呢？(Xi 1992, 302; my translation)

One may take Xi Xi’s assertion a step further and argue that just as there is no sole, absolute version of the literary work in translation, there is no fixed equivalence between languages and cultures. If the static and naïve utopianism ideals of “perfection” and “absolute fidelity” are taken off the table, the translator is free to open her mind to the limitless possibilities of recreating what she believes to be the essence of the poem in its new linguistic and cultural environment, while never losing sight of the source text. I have transformed Xi Xi’s poems, but the impulse to interrogate, play, enjoy, and think again persists as it travels into English.

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