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## The Epistemological Dilemma of Translating Otherness

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Résumé de l'article

Le présent article examine les difficultés d'interprétation de la rencontre avec l'Autre en traduction, plus particulièrement lorsque la subjectivité du lecteur cible intervient dans la constitution discursive de l'identité dans le texte source. En envisageant la façon dont les lecteurs anglophones de Singapour interprètent les identités dans les oeuvres littéraires chinoises qui font appel à une forte conscience chinoise, j'adopte le cadre éthique binaire de Berman pour analyser la négociation entre le Moi et l'Autre en traduction. Je postule qu'une éthique positive est possible dans la mesure où les lecteurs chinois anglophones se placent dans la peau de l'Autre dans leur propre langue. En revanche, le fait que le même groupe de lecteurs envisagent leur identité de Chinois anglophones comme le Moi à la lecture de l'Autre chinois entraîne une éthique négative. Ces deux positions contradictoires donnent lieu à un dilemme épistémologique chez le lecteur cible, dilemme qui pose la question de la négociation de l'identité en traduction dans le contexte de Singapour, du fait que la disposition culturelle des lecteurs chinois anglophones pèse sur leur réception de l'Autre culturel en traduction.

# The Epistemological Dilemma of Translating Otherness

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article examine les difficultés d'interprétation de la rencontre avec l'Autre en traduction, plus particulièrement lorsque la subjectivité du lecteur cible intervient dans la constitution discursive de l'identité dans le texte source. En envisageant la façon dont les lecteurs anglophones de Singapour interprètent les identités dans les œuvres littéraires chinoises qui font appel à une forte conscience chinoise, j'adopte le cadre éthique binaire de Berman pour analyser la négociation entre le Moi et l'Autre en traduction. Je postule qu'une éthique positive est possible dans la mesure où les lecteurs chinois anglophones se placent dans la peau de l'Autre dans leur propre langue. En revanche, le fait que le même groupe de lecteurs envisagent leur identité de Chinois anglophones comme le Moi à la lecture de l'Autre chinois entraîne une éthique négative. Ces deux positions contradictoires donnent lieu à un dilemme épistémologique chez le lecteur cible, dilemme qui pose la question de la négociation de l'identité en traduction dans le contexte de Singapour, du fait que la disposition culturelle des lecteurs chinois anglophones pèse sur leur réception de l'Autre culturel en traduction.

## ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the interpretive difficulties arising from the encounter with the Other in translation, specifically in the case where the subjectivity of the target text reader is implicated in the discursive constitution of identity in the source text. In contemplating how Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers could interpret identities in Chinese literary works that invoke a strong sense of Chinese consciousness, I adopt Berman's binary ethical framework in analysing the negotiation of Self and Other in translation. I posit that a positive ethics will be achieved if Anglophone Chinese readers position themselves as Other in their own language. On the contrary, a negative ethics ensues if the same group of readers embrace their identity as English-speaking Chinese as Self in the process of reading the Sinophone Other in the texts. The two conflicting positions create an epistemological dilemma on the part of the target text reader, thus raising the question of how identities can or should be negotiated in translation in the Singapore context, given that the cultural disposition of Anglophone Chinese readers is brought to bear on their reception of the cultural Other in translation.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

dilemme épistémologique, éthique de la traduction, rapport idéologique à la langue, identité culturelle, recherche du Moi dans l'Autre  
epistemological dilemma, ethics of translation, language ideological relation, cultural identity, Self-Othering

The singularity of the 'who' is not the individuality of a thing that would be identical to itself, it is not an atom. It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other...

(Derrida 1989/1991: 100-101)

## 1. Identifying the Issue

This article interrogates the potential interpretive difficulties arising from the encounter with the “Other” in translation, specifically in the case where the subjectivity, or “Self,” of the target text reader is implicated in the discursive constitution of identity in the source text. The notion of Otherness is, of course, not new in itself, having become rather fashionable in the literature on cultural studies in general and postcolonial studies in particular. Extant discussions on Otherness and its implications for the determination of cultural identity, however, are often predicated on the dichotomous relation between Self and Other across two distinct national, linguistic and cultural contexts. The present contribution departs from the norm by presenting a case of literary translation which foregrounds the tension between cultural identities within the singular context of the ethnic Chinese community in multilingual Singapore. By locating my discussion against theoretical expositions on the ethics of translation and with reference to the language power relations in Singapore, I seek to propose what I would call the “epistemological dilemma” in the reading of Singapore Chinese literature – in particular, works dealing with the theme of the Chinese identity crisis in Singapore and thus loaded with a Chinese identity consciousness – in English translation by Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans.

The basic problematic underlying the present study is that bilingual texts, a product of translation, often create the optical illusion of “equivalence” for readers, especially when they are presented as parallel texts in *en face* bilingual editions. The apparent textual symmetry between two language versions of a text often masks dissonances that are inherent in the interpretation of the identity value expounded in the source text from the perspective of the target text reader, who is embedded in the target language and culture. This may at first come across simply as an issue of cultural relativism that inhabits all translation, but the phenomenon that concerns this article is much more specific in nature. Here we are dealing with the case where the subjectivity of the target text reader is at stake, that is, the identity of the target text reader is involved in the construction of identity in the source text and represented as the alterity, the cultural Other, vis-à-vis the Self that is interpreted from the perspective of source text readers.

Let us now locate this problematic in the context of this article. In the mid-1980s through the 1990s, there emerged a dominant theme within the realm of Singapore Chinese literature that concerns itself with the declining status of Chinese language and culture among the younger generations in contemporary Singapore society. Literary works that centre on this theme often express a lamenting attitude towards the increasing pervasiveness of English language and Anglo-American culture and the consequent marginalisation of Chinese language and culture among the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore. This literary phenomenon can be traced to the cultural politics of language in multilingual Singapore (more in Section 2 of this paper). In 2001, the Department of Chinese Studies of the National University of Singapore published a bilingual literary anthology titled *Droplets* carrying the theme “The Contemporary Crisis in Traditional Chinese Culture among Singaporean Chinese” (St. André 2001: 11), in which several works in Chinese were translated into English. In line with the theme of the anthology, most of the anthologised Chinese writings focus on the theme of the Chinese identity crisis in Singapore, “portray[ing]

a Chinese-speaking community extremely concerned with the relationship between language, race and cultural identity” (St. André 2001: 17), and playing on the constructed, diametrically opposed relationship between Anglophone (i.e., predominantly English-speaking) Chinese Singaporeans and Sinophone (i.e., predominantly Chinese-speaking) Chinese Singaporeans. As will be explained later, one of the primary target reader groups of this bilingual anthology consists of Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans, and since the latter are often construed as the cultural Other in the Chinese source texts, this complicates the interpretation of identity in translation on the part of Anglophone readers.

This article problematises the relationship between the target text reader, the translation and the source text by suggesting that language ideological relations may come to bear on the interpretation of cultural identity in translation. My central research question is: how can/should an Anglophone Chinese Singaporean reader begin to understand the cultural identity of the Chinese-speaking Other (i.e., the “real” Other in the sociolinguistic context of Singapore) through the lens of translation, when the former is in fact the Other within the fictional discourse of the source text (i.e., the “discursive” Other)? In other words, in light of the language ideological relation between English and Chinese in Singapore, can the cultural Other be read in its own terms, and what are the consequences of such a reading? In engaging with these questions, we are inevitably treading the terrain of ethics and philosophy. I will further contend that the problem at hand is epistemological in nature, as it deals with the nature of our knowledge of the Other through the mediation of translation, and this eventually determines our knowledge of Self. In the following sections, I will first provide a brief survey of the sociolinguistic situation in Singapore as a background to my discussion. This will be followed by a formulation in Section 3 of the central problematic of this article in terms of the ethics of translation and a tracing of the target readership for the bilingual anthology *Droplets* in Section 4. In Section 5, an example text from *Droplets* will be used to illustrate the proposed problem, which will be discussed in more theoretical terms in the final section.

## 2. The Sociolinguistics of Multilingual Singapore: A Brief Survey

Singapore is a multilingual society with four institutionalised official languages, namely, English, Mandarin (Chinese), Malay and Tamil, the latter three being referred to as the “mother tongue languages.” The institutionalisation of the four official languages is a cornerstone policy to maintain social stability in Singapore. The Singapore government’s stance on language policy and planning since the nation’s independence in 1965 has been to foreground multilingualism and multiculturalism through the promotion of bilingualism in English and a mother tongue language in mainstream educational institutions (cf. Kachru’s 1992 notion of “English-knowing bilingualism”). In line with the purpose of this paper, this brief survey focuses specifically on the language relations between English and Chinese.

As Simpson (2007: 389) points out, a critical examination of the language policy and its implementation in Singapore reveals the way in which English is privileged over the mother tongue languages. As the *de facto* lingua franca, English is the working language in all sectors of the society and the sole medium of instruction at all

levels of education (Rubdy, McKay *et al.* 2008: 40). In addition, English is also the language of intra- and inter-ethnic communication, the language for the expression of national identity as well as an international language (Tay 1979: 91-95). Or, as aptly described by Anne Pakir, the key roles of English in Singapore are:

- 1) *utilitarian* (being used as a communicative tool between locals and foreigners in trade, industry, law, administration, education and the media);
- 2) *unifying* (the common language among different ethnic groups in Singapore); and
- 3) *universal* (being used in both private and public domains such as family, friendship, education, employment, daily transactions, government and law).

(Pakir 1998: 96)

The English language has been – and still is – accorded a high degree of importance by the Singapore government by virtue of its dominant status in the international global economy and its neutrality in respect to the other (ethnic) languages in Singapore. The choice of English as the working language therefore fulfils two pragmatic roles: it is at once the language of economic survival and the common linguistic denominator transcending the barriers of the various ethnic languages in Singapore. Mandarin Chinese, on the other hand, is until relatively recently construed primarily as the symbolic embodiment of traditional Chinese culture and values that constitutes the cultural ballast of the Chinese community in Singapore, serving the needs of intra-ethnic communication as well as the formation and maintenance of a Chinese identity (Wee 2003). In general terms, language ideology in Singapore is constructed on the basis of a division of labour between English and Mandarin (cf. Wee and Bokhorst-Heng 2005: 165), with the former serving as the linguistic instrument of economic development and the latter as the repository of Chinese culture.

As a consequence of this functional-ideological divide, English has increasingly overshadowed Chinese in the sociolinguistic landscape of Singapore. This has led to a generational shift toward the predominant use of English as the home language among young Chinese Singaporeans, as opposed to the use of Mandarin Chinese and Chinese dialects (Singapore Ministry of Education 2004: 22),<sup>1</sup> to the extent that English has become the only language spoken confidently for many young Singaporeans (Lim and Foley 2004: 6), including Chinese Singaporeans. In more recent history, as the dominant status of English had become obvious, the Chinese community in Singapore were increasingly concerned that the Chinese-educated and predominantly Sinophone Singaporeans would be severely disadvantaged in seeking employment as compared to the English-educated and predominantly Anglophone Singaporeans. Such concerns were further exacerbated by the fact that Nanyang University, the first and only Chinese-speaking university in Southeast Asia and the symbolic fortress of Chinese language and culture in Singapore, was merged into the English-medium National University of Singapore in 1980. This move sounded the alarm among members of the Chinese community, who interpreted the event “as another worrying sign that Chinese language was being increasingly devalued” (Simpson 2007: 381). Besides the university merger, another important source of the sociocultural insecurity experienced among Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking Singaporeans in the 1980s was the conversion of all schools to English-medium schools, a movement that began in 1984 and was completed by 1987 (Bokhorst-Heng 1999a). The eventual conversion of all mainstream schools in Singapore to English-medium institutions

was taken to be a symbolic end of Chinese education in Singapore, with Chinese being relegated to the status of a language subject in schools.

The dominance of the English language over the Chinese language is discernible across various stratas of contemporary Singapore society, resulting in an identity crisis among the Sinophone Chinese community, which is basically a sense of cultural insecurity among the Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking community about the government's commitment to the status and standard of Mandarin (Bokhorst-Heng 1999b). It is a fear that Chinese language and culture would be undermined and may eventually be eradicated from the linguistic landscape of Singapore in face of the hegemony of English. In the psyche of the Sinophone Chinese community in Singapore, Chinese and English are ideologically-polarised languages. While Chinese is the heritage language of ethnic Chinese and carries with it millennia of traditional Chinese cultural values, English is the language of foreign (read: Western) culture; it is an Other, and one stereotypically associated with such negative attributes as materialism and decadence. As a result of this psyche, members of the Sinophone Chinese community in Singapore feel increasingly threatened by the dominance of the English language and its associated negative values and the consequent attrition of the Chinese language and its associated traditional values in Singapore society. It is against this socio-psychological backdrop that the identity crisis experienced by the Chinese community in Singapore had become one of the major themes in contemporary Singapore Chinese literature, especially in the 1980s. The bilingual anthology *Droplets*, in which works from this time period are collected, is a case in point.

### 3. Formulating the Dilemma: The Ethics of Difference

In considering the ethical aim of translation, it might be apt to start with the French theorist Antoine Berman, whose ideas could find their roots in the German tradition exemplified by, among others, Humboldt and Schleiermacher. To Berman, the ethics of translation “consists of bringing out, affirming, and defending the pure aim of translation as such” (Berman 1992: 5), “pure aim” being defined as the aim of receiving “the Foreign as foreign” in translation (Berman 2004: 277). This means that in order to be ethical, a translation must enable the foreign text to be read in its own terms, as opposed to being read within the cultural framework of target text readers. In this connection, Berman (1992) proposed two kinds of translational ethics: a *positive ethics*, which is a theory of non-ethnocentric translation that respects the foreign text in its own right, and a *negative ethics*, which is a theory of ethnocentric translation that assimilates the foreignness of a source text into the translating culture. To Berman, a “bad translation” is one which “carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work” (Berman 1992: 5). Translation should rather be a “trial of the foreign” in two senses: it should “open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness” and, at the same time, disassociate the foreign work from its own language ground (*sol-de-langue*) (Berman 2004: 276). In his seminal essay *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign*, Berman (2004) criticised the ethnocentric, annexationist and hypertextual methods frequently adopted in translating literary texts, resulting in different kinds of textual deformations. He posited that these deforming tendencies – which constitute what is called the “negative analytic” of translation – all too often cause the target text to deviate from the essential aim of

translation, which is to reveal the alterity of the foreign culture through the target language. In response to this state of affairs, Berman advocated a “positive analytic” of translation to counteract ethnocentric forces in translation through the use of literal, word-for-word translation, which is believed to “respect the original in its radical alterity” (Hermans 2009: 98).

Utopian as Berman’s ideas might seem, they do have significant ramifications for translation theory in the English-speaking world. Berman’s theory was taken up by Lawrence Venuti, who makes a convincing case for his claim that English-language translation in Anglo-American cultures is often not a “trial of the foreign” but an ethnocentric domestication of the foreignness in a source text (Venuti 2008). Under the ethnocentric ideology in Anglo-American cultures, translation often assimilates the source text into a rhetoric and stylistics familiar to the target text reader, thus becoming not only foreign to the foreign original but also conceptually subsumed into the new readership’s universe. Ethnocentric translation is thus a textual realisation of a negative ethics of translation, which aims “to bring back a cultural other as the recognizable, the familiar, even the same” (Venuti 2008: 14), thus contradicting the requirements of a positive ethics of translation, the aim of which is “to reveal the foreign work’s most original kernel, its most deeply buried, most self-same, but equally the most ‘distant’ from itself” (Berman 2004: 276). It is against this theoretical underpinning that Venuti advocates the strategy of foreignising (or “defamiliarising,” as some scholars prefer, see Hermans 2009: 99) in literary translation, a more sophisticated extension of Berman’s literalism, exploiting “all the registers of English, including anachronisms and slang, to inscribe difference in the translation itself, leave on the text a translator’s imprint...” (Hermans 2009: 99; cf. notion of abusive fidelity, Lewis 1985). In general, foreignising is perceived as a form of resistance to the ethnocentric and homogenising conventions, the latter realised through the widespread adoption of a fluent strategy in translation practice in Anglo-American cultures (Venuti 2008).

The approaches of Berman and Venuti (and, if one may add, of Spivak 2004; 2005 as well) point in common to an ethics of difference in translation, that is, the foregrounding of the alterity of the foreign culture in a source text by manipulating the target language so as to prevent “the imposition of the conventions and values of the translating culture on imported texts, with the effacement of their cultural difference as a result” (Hermans 2009: 98). Both theorists postulate a *We/They* or *Self/Other* dichotomy (often based on national grounds) and propose a technical, linguistic-based solution to the problem of the homogenisation of otherness. This article is not so much concerned with the textual manifestations of Otherness in translation, as with the interpretive problems associated with Otherness in translation. While for Berman and Venuti, domestication “prevents an engagement with cultural difference because foreign texts, whatever their origins, are uniformly pressed into homely moulds” (Hermans 2009: 98), I propose that the prevention of engagement with cultural difference can also result from the interference of language ideological differences with the interpretation of identity on the part of target text readers. In such situations where epistemological issues are involved, the problem cannot be technically solved by the use of resistive translation strategies.

The primary texts we are dealing with in this article are Chinese literary works that deal with the theme of the Chinese identity crisis in Singapore and which hence



evoke a strong Chinese consciousness. It has also been mentioned that in works with such thematic concern, Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans are often constructed as a foreign entity, the cultural Other. In contemplating how Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers could interpret their own identity in Chinese literary works that invoke a strong sense of “Chineseness,” I adopt Berman’s binary ethical framework in analysing the negotiation of Self and Other in translation. I posit that a positive ethics will be achieved if Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers of the English translations of the Chinese texts in question attempt to interpret the Sinophone Other as Self (thus “putting themselves in the shoes” of the Other) and themselves as Other in their own language, i.e., English. On the contrary, a negative ethics ensues if the same group of readers perceive themselves as Self in the process of reading the Sinophone Other in the texts. Both of these epistemological positions are problematic: on the one hand, if a positive ethics is to be achieved, Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers will have to compromise their own identity in an ironic act of “Self-Othering,” that is, the act of reading themselves as the discursive Other in translation. On the other hand, if the same group of Anglophone readers attempt to read their own identity as Self and that of Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans as Other, the purpose or, to borrow the functionalist term, “skopos” of the translation will be defied. This impasse leads to a theoretical interpretive dilemma on the part of the target text reader, thus raising the question of how we should go about reading the cultural Other in translation.

#### 4. The Target Readership

As this paper interests itself with the problem of interpreting literary texts in translation, it is pertinent that the issue of readership be addressed. The textual material in focus here is the bilingual anthology *Droplets*, which was introduced in the first section of this paper. In the introduction to this anthology, the editor states that one of the objectives of the anthology

is historical, aiming to collect together the works of several authors from the 1980s, all of which deal with the at times sensitive topic of the status of Chinese language and culture in Singapore....The collection thus aims to document the importance of this particular question for *the Chinese-speaking community in Singapore*, which was dealt with directly or indirectly by many contemporary authors, by bringing them together. (St. André 2001: 15, my emphasis)

From this quotation one can determine that the Sinophone Chinese community in Singapore constitutes the target readership of the original Chinese pieces collected in the anthology. Who, then, are the target readers of the English translations of these Chinese works? The editor explains to his readers that

there were at least two groups being targeted: *adult Singaporeans who could not read Chinese*, and therefore do not have access to or even knowledge of a large body of literature written by their fellow-Singaporeans on an important contemporary issue, and school children currently learning Chinese in secondary school. For the first group, we hope that reading these stories, essays, and poems will provide the opportunity to learn how *Chinese-speaking Chinese* in Singapore felt (and, in many cases, still feel) about the changing nature of Singaporean society roughly between independence and 1990. For the second group, we hope that the stories may encourage students to perse-



vere in their study of Chinese at least through their A levels, if not at the university level. (St. André 2001: 15-17, my emphasis)

We are concerned only with the first group of readers identified in the quotation above, as the second group (i.e., secondary school students learning the Chinese language) is aimed at for pedagogic purposes and is thus not immediately relevant to the discussion at hand. The “important contemporary issue” mentioned by the editor refers to the “contemporary crisis in traditional Chinese culture among Singaporean Chinese” which, I have mentioned, is established as the overarching theme of the anthology (St. André 2001: 11). We are told that one of the two target reader groups of the English translations in the anthology consists of non-Sinophone adult Singaporeans. And who are these non-Sinophone Singaporeans? The editor does not give us a direct answer, which is nonetheless inferable from the sociolinguistic context of Singapore. We have noted that the target readers of the source texts and their translations in *Droplets* are respectively identified as “the Chinese-speaking community of Singapore” and “adult Singaporeans who could not read Chinese.” The former group would, rather obviously, refer to the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore. However, recalling the sociolinguistics of Singapore outlined in Section 2, particularly the fact that English has become the only language spoken confidently for many young Singaporeans (Lim and Foley 2004: 6), one finds that the Chinese-speaking community in Singapore is not congruent with the ethnic Chinese community of Singapore. Rather, the reader group “Chinese-speaking (Chinese) community of Singapore” is only a subset of the ethnic Chinese community of Singapore, its counterpart being “the English-speaking (Chinese) community of Singapore.”

I would suggest that the English-speaking or Anglophone Chinese community in Singapore constitutes the principal target readership of the English translations in *Droplets*. The most important clue lies in the editor’s statement that the anthology seeks to offer “adult Chinese Singaporeans who could not read Chinese” the chance to understand “how Chinese-speaking Chinese Singaporeans felt (and, in many ways, still feel) about the changing nature of Singaporean society roughly between independence and 1990” (see quotation above). Here it is important to note that in the phrase “Chinese-speaking Chinese Singaporeans,” the word “Chinese-speaking” is marked when seen in juxtaposition with the phrase “Chinese Singaporeans.” One who is unfamiliar with the language situation in Singapore might at first find this an apparent redundancy, for it seems superfluous to specify the language spoken by a *Chinese* Singaporean, which, according to an intuitive (read: naive) understanding of the relation between ethnicity and language, would seem all too obvious. The use of the word “Chinese-speaking” in modification of the phrase “Chinese Singaporeans” points to the sociolinguistic fact that there are many Chinese Singaporeans (especially of the younger generation) who are not predominantly Chinese-speaking but predominantly English-speaking (Lim and Foley 2004: 6). Based on the markedness of the word “Chinese-speaking” in the phrase “Chinese-speaking Chinese Singaporeans,” and with reference to the power relation between English and Chinese in Singapore, I would argue that the linguistic community labelled as “Chinese-speaking Chinese Singaporeans” evokes the linguistic community in diametrical opposition to it, i.e., English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans, and discursively establishes these Anglophone Chinese as the primary target readers of the English translations of the Chinese texts in the bilingual anthology.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that Malay and Tamil-speaking Singaporeans – who too technically fall under the category “adult Singaporeans who could not read Chinese” – are excluded from the target readership of the anthology. Rather, Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans are here positioned as the *main* group of target readers, the identification of which is essential for my reading of an example text (in both its original form and translation) from *Droplets* below. Thus, based on paratextual evidence from *Droplets*, it may be posited that the primary target readers of the original Chinese texts in the bilingual anthology are Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans, while those of the English translations are Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the polarised linguistic and cultural identities of the projected target readers of the Chinese texts and their English translations have crucial implications for understanding how translating interacts and interferes with the interpretation of identity.

### 5. Translating Chinese Identity into English: A Case Example

This section illustrates my thesis with a case example from *Droplets*: Wong’s *Fenshu* (*Burning Books*) (Wong 2001). In this story about the alienation of young Chinese Singaporeans from traditional Chinese culture, Wong activates the stereotypical, dichotomous relation between two generations of Singaporeans with conflicting cultural affiliations, whereby members of the younger generation are inclined towards the English language and Anglo-American culture, while their senior counterparts from the older generation are always nostalgic of their traditional Chinese roots. This dichotomy is in fact not uncommon in the writings among Wong’s contemporaries that deal with the theme of the Chinese identity crisis. As the story opens, we are told that the protagonist Junrui is forced to burn his precious collection of Chinese books as he prepares to move in with his daughter and son-in-law. There is purportedly no space to store these Chinese books in his new home, the lack of physical space being metaphoric of a modernising society in which Chinese language and culture have a diminishing “space” for survival. Significantly, the Chinese books that are about to be burnt are mostly canonical works in Chinese history, literature, philosophy and philology whose titles act as cultural signifiers to evoke in the reader of the Chinese source text a sense of identification with and nostalgia of traditional Chinese language and culture. In the following scene depicting the protagonist’s burning of his books, the author lists a whole range of classic works in Chinese Studies to foreground the identity of the protagonist as a proponent of the Chinese language and culture. The published English translation follows the original text:

- (1) 那一套《十三经注疏》和《二十四史》快要烧完了，君瑞赶快从盒子里抽出《古声韵学大全》、《说文解字》、《中华文史论丛》等，抛到火堆里去。 [...]

火势较大后，君瑞又丢了几部书进去：《中国哲学史资料选辑》、《古史辨》、多本的《中国文学史》、《文学批评史》……。 [...]

五四以来的书本多如汗牛充栋：几套现代中国文学大系、鲁迅全集、巴金文集、艾青诗集、曹禺剧作集、冰心、丁玲、郭沫若、于梨华、白先勇、余光中……等人的作品，太多了。君瑞噙住眼泪，心痛地把它一古脑儿地抛进烈火中。

(Wong 2001: 176-179)

*The whole series of Notes to the Thirteen Classics of Confucianism and the Twenty Four Histories had almost finished burning. Junrui hurriedly took out The Complete Collection of Classical Phonology, the Origin of Chinese Characters, the Series of Essays on Chinese Literature and History and so on from the box, and threw them into the fire. [...]*

*When the fire was bigger, Junrui again threw a few more books into it: The Selected Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Questioning Ancient History, and the multivolume sets of the History of Chinese Literature, History of Chinese Literary Criticism...[...]*

*There was an immense number of books since the May Fourth Movement: some series of Modern Chinese Literature, the complete works of Lu Xun, the collected works of Ba Jin, an anthology of Ai Qing's poems, the selected plays of Cao Yu, works of Bing Xin, Ding Ling, Guo Moruo, Yu Lihua, Bai Xianrong, Yu Guangzhong... – there were too many of them. Junrui held back his tears and painfully threw them all into the burning flames.*

(Translated by the author)

The profuse listing of literary works written in Chinese recalls the kind of cultural attachment experienced by Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans, as represented by the protagonist. To borrow Tymoczko's (1999) term, the deliberate naming of canonical Chinese works and particularly the act of burning such works are metonymic of a cultural predicament that is poignantly familiar to the source text readers, whom we have identified as Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans. Specifically, this scene foregrounds the marginalisation and possible eradication of Chinese literary culture in contemporary Singaporean society. The interpretation of the cultural signification of the Chinese titles and the act of burning them does not pose an interpretive problem to the target readers of the original Chinese text, who may be assumed to share this sociocultural context. The implication of a common context for interpretation is that the cultural identity embodied in the protagonist and espoused by the author as Self is in alignment with that of Sinophone Chinese readers, who read Chinese language and culture as the "We" culture.

The same scene in English translation, however, cannot be presumed to recall any relevant context for Anglophone Chinese readers, who are probably much less familiar with the (translated) Chinese titles as compared to their Chinese-speaking counterparts, apart from a select few who are academically trained in the discipline. Anglophone Chinese readers may therefore be unable to capture the cultural implications, or the metonymies, evoked in the source text via its English translation. Tymoczko points out that such metonymies render the translation of texts, particularly texts from marginalised cultures – which Chinese culture is in the context of contemporary Singapore – a daunting task:

The way in which a literary text represents metonymically features of its literary system and ultimately features of its whole culture is what makes translating a text of a marginalized culture so difficult...But aside from the question of politics, it is in large measure the lack of familiarity with the metonymic aspects of the literary texts of marginalized cultures that makes it difficult for the audiences of dominant cultures to integrate marginalized texts into their canons, irrespective of any linguistic or even ideological barrier. What happens when the audience doesn't understand the metonymies – when the audience doesn't understand the literary signals, the form, the genre, the culture? What happens in short when a translator has to tell a new story? (Tymoczko 1999: 47-48)

In our context, pertinent questions that may be raised include: what kind of reaction or response can we expect from Anglophone Chinese readers to the Chinese book titles and the protagonist's act of book burning? How does this reaction/response compare with that of Sinophone readers of the original Chinese text? I would contend that the switch in languages from Chinese to English via translation effects a reversal of indexicalities, that is, what is familiar (thus representing Self) to Sinophone Chinese readers could conceivably be foreign (thus representing Other) to Anglophone Chinese readers. Hence, the canonical Chinese titles in English translation could be read as signifying the cultural Other rather than of the cultural "We," and the act of burning Chinese books could accordingly be interpreted as being symbolic of the marginalisation of the cultural Other (which, from the perspective of the Anglophone "We," would be unproblematic) rather than of the cultural "We." The English translation can thus be said to be metonymic of the original Chinese text in the sense that it only partially represents the original; the metonymic associations of the cultural signifier (the book titles) and symbolically meaningful act (the burning of Chinese books) may not be intact in the reading of the literary piece in English translation.

One might argue that the same issue would arise if the Chinese text were translated into the language of another national culture, say, French, German or Italian, as French, German and Italian readers would similarly have restricted access to the sociocultural context evoked by the source text. This means that the problem will have lost its specificity to the Singapore context. While I concede that similar problems may also ensue from a French, German or Italian translation, I argue that the translation of the text into English specifically for Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers presents a paradox that does not exist in translations into other languages. The reason for this is that the target reader of the translated text in question is not ideologically neutral; his/her identity as an Anglophone Chinese Singaporean is implicated in the language ideological constitution of the original Chinese text, stereotypically construed as the cultural, negative Other in opposition to the cultural "We" (i.e., Sinophone Chinese Singaporean), of whom the protagonist is exemplary. When this Chinese text is translated into English for Anglophone Chinese readers, the discursive Other in the story becomes a cultural "We" from the perspective of the target text reader, and vice-versa. This reversal of indexicalities in turn causes a potential interpretive problem: how should Anglophone Chinese readers interpret their own identity in respect to that of the protagonist in the text? Should the identity of Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans, as represented by the protagonist, be interpreted as Self, as readers of the original Chinese text certainly do, or should it instead be seen as Other, deriving from the cultural perspective of Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans in the real world?

Thus, the interpretive problem faced by Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers has to do not only with a lack of understanding of the "metonymies" of the source text; all readers of all translations will be inflicted with such "lack of understanding" to varying degrees and in fact, it is this lack which makes translation necessary in the first place. This is a more complex case whereby the cultural disposition of Anglophone Chinese readers in the real world is brought to bear on their interpretation of different identities that present themselves in the literary text. Let us take a look at another passage from Wong's story. This passage is similar to the one quoted

earlier, except that this time the author makes a list of books written in English – which, we are told, are spared from the flames:

- (2) 窗口边的大书桌上, 堆叠着另一批约10%的“幸运”书本: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Complete Works of William Shakespeare, An Anthology of American Literature, Caxton Junior Classics, Puffin Classics, Classics of Children's Literature, Horror Stories, 500 Stories for Bedtime, A Guide to Business and Social Letters.....这些书还是女儿女婿在他们未曾搬去永安花园时买的呢!

还有几部英文版的中国古典小说如: A Dream of Red Mansions, Water Margin, Monkey God, Romance of the Three Kingdoms等, 女婿要把它们保留下来, 说要寻根。

君瑞暗想: 或许这棵原本甚为壮硕的根, 已经快要被砸烂, 必须重新再去追寻。

(Wong 2001: 180-181)

*Another stack of “lucky” books amounting to 10% of the total quantity were piled on the writing desk beside the window: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Complete Works of William Shakespeare, An Anthology of American Literature, Caxton Junior Classics, Puffin Classics, Classics of Children's Literature, Horror Stories, 500 Stories for Bedtime, A Guide to Business and Social Letters.....*

*There were also several English editions of Chinese classical novels: A Dream of Red Mansions, Water Margin, Monkey God, Romance of the Three Kingdoms among others. His son-in-law wanted to keep them, saying he wanted to return to his roots.*

*Junrui thought to himself: perhaps those roots, which had originally been very big and strong, had almost been crushed to death and one needed to search for them once more.*

(Translated by the author)

In the original Chinese text above, the English book titles (cf. the Chinese book titles listed earlier) are a foreign intrusion. In terms of language, English takes the position of an embedded language in a Chinese text; in terms of content, the English titles are of books that represent Anglo-American culture in general (except those listed in the second paragraph, which are Chinese classics in English translation). The author quite clearly intends these English titles to represent both linguistically and culturally an Other to Sinophone Chinese readers. Here the linguistic position of English as an embedded language and its discursive position as Other in the fictional world are in agreement with the language ideological disposition (defined here as one's inclination in respect to language values) of these Sinophone readers, for whom Chinese represents the Self and English the Other. This agreement ensures a coherent interpretation of cultural identity on the part of the source text readers. In the English translation, however, the English book titles blend into the surrounding text and lose their textual alterity. In addition, most of these titles would come across as rather familiar to Anglophone readers. What is intended to be linguistically and culturally marked in the original text now becomes unmarked in translation; in other words, in translation “the linguistic elements that signalled Otherness in the original run the risk of having their indexical meaning reversed and being read as ‘familiar’ signs of Sameness” (Grutman 2006: 22). The books listed in the passage, including those written in English and the English translations of Chinese classic novels, are intended to estrange the Sinophone Chinese reader of the original text, but ironically turn into readily recognisable icons to the Anglophone Chinese reader of the English

translation. There is therefore a rupture between the linguistic positions of English in the original text, where English is the foreign language of the cultural Other, and in the translation, where English is the dominant language of the text. There is further a discordance between the discursive position of English as representing Other in the Chinese story on the one hand (and which remains so in the translation), and the language ideological disposition of Anglophone Chinese readers on the other.

The two excerpts above illustrate that in travelling from the source to the target text, the identity functions of the Chinese and English book titles are reversed, resulting in potential discontinuities in reception. In the next and final section we will consider the dilemma that confronts an Anglophone Chinese Singaporean reader in interpreting Chinese identity consciousness. In their reception of Chinese identity in translation, can or should Anglophone readers perceive signifiers of Chinese language and culture as representing Self and those of English language and Anglo-American culture as representing Other, when indeed the reverse would presumably be the case in their own cultural experience? Or should they instead relegate Chinese cultural signifiers to the status of alterity, and instead interpret signifiers of their own Anglophone identity as “familiar signs of Sameness”? What implication does each of these positions have for an ethical consideration of translation in a multilingual society, in which complex language ideological relations are at play?

## 6. The Dilemma and its Implications for Translation

The case of *Fenshu* is not an isolated one. As already mentioned, many works by Chinese Singaporean authors from the 1980s play on the theme of the Chinese identity crisis, displaying a deep concern about the diminishing importance of Chinese language and culture among younger generations in Singapore.<sup>3</sup> This literary phenomenon presents an epistemological challenge to translation when examined against its intended purpose and target readership. To recapitulate, one of the primary objectives or *skopos* of editing and publishing the bilingual anthology *Droplets* is to allow Anglophone Chinese readers in Singapore to understand the cultural predicament of their Sinophone counterparts, which would in turn foster intercultural communication within the Chinese community in Singapore. Within the fictional world of the Chinese authors, however, Chinese as a language and culture represents Self, while English is relegated to the position of a foreign entity with negative attributes; in other words, Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans are often construed as an Other vis-à-vis Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans. Here the subjectivity of the target text reader is implicated in the discursive constitution of identity in the Chinese source text. Through the example given in the previous section, I hope to have shown how this might complicate the reading process through the projection of two possible reading stances.

In confronting the translation of a text with a strong Chinese identity consciousness, an Anglophone reader has one of two options, in line with Berman’s ethical dichotomy outlined earlier. (While I am fully aware that Berman’s concern was with the specific strategies employed by the translator, it is my contention that the same dichotomy may be used to illuminate the cultural interpretation of translations on the part of the reader.) The first option complies with what Berman termed “positive ethics,” that is, the Anglophone reader perceives himself or herself as the cultural



Other, in alignment with the perspective of the author of the original Chinese text and his Sinophone Chinese readers. It is through this reading perspective that the foreignness of Chinese consciousness in the original text can be read in its own terms, without being assimilated into the language ideological frame of an Anglophone Chinese. That is to say, Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans must put themselves in the shoes of Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans in order to know – not only on an intellectual level but also epistemologically – the nature of the Chinese identity crisis. The problem is that Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans are themselves construed as the Other in the story of the original text, often cast in negative light as perpetrators of the marginalisation of Chinese culture in Singapore. Thus, Anglophone Chinese readers would have to see themselves as Foreign in their own language in order to understand the Chinese predicament from the point of view of the Sinophone Chinese Singaporean. This first option, which leads to a positive ethics, would inevitably result in a paradoxical act of self-Othering, whereby the reader has to relegate his/her Self to the position of the discursive Other, in order to allow the real Other (i.e., the Sinophone Chinese community) to emerge in its own terms without the adulteration of Anglophone identity consciousness.

The second option is for Anglophone Chinese readers to embrace their identity as Self, thus retreating into their own cultural position – their comfort zone – of a predominantly English-speaking Chinese Singaporean. However, this would at the same time mean the relegation of the Sinophone Chinese (and therefore of the protagonist in our example text) to the position of Other, a foreign entity existing at the margins of Self. As the readers' own language identity now supercedes that espoused in the text, the reading of the story is now filtered through an Anglophone identity consciousness, possibly leading to the suppression of the strangeness of Chinese identity consciousness in the text (cf. Berman 1992: 5). This interpretive position is an instantiation of an ethnocentric reading stance, which "brings back" the cultural Other (Sinophone Chinese Singaporeans) as "the recognizable, the familiar even the same" (Venuti 2008: 14). This can be seen as an interpretive, as opposed to a linguistic, form of domestication, wherein the reader of a translation, rather than the translator, enacts violence on the source text by interpreting the differences of the foreign text within their own ideological framework, thus reversing the indexicalities present in the source text. Through this reading strategy, the cultural Other does not emerge in its own terms; rather, "[w]hatever difference the translation conveys is now imprinted by the receiving culture, assimilated to its positions of intelligibility, its canons and taboos, its codes and ideologies" (Venuti 2008: 14). If this reading position is adopted, the *skopos* of the translation, which is to enable the Anglophone Chinese reader to know about the cultural crisis faced by Chinese-speaking Chinese Singaporeans, would arguably be compromised, since the target text readers are essentially interpreting the identity of the Sinophone Other within their own cultural frame.

My reading of Singapore Chinese literature in translation could perhaps be said to be deconstructive in some sense, to the extent that two conflicting facets of a text are revealed to expose a certain contradiction and hence instability in meaning. One difference though is that while deconstruction works from rhetorical elements that reside within the text, my focus is on the reader's interpretation, which essentially lies outside the text. Another difference is that while deconstruction deals with instability in respect to signification, my concern lies with the instability associated with



the function of translation, that is, whether or not Anglophone Chinese readers are able to appreciate the cultural situation of Sinophone Chinese readers by subscribing to the latter's identity. In view of the two opposing options delineated above, I propose that an epistemological dilemma is involved in the reception by Anglophone Chinese Singaporean readers of literary works that espouse a strong Chinese identity consciousness in Singapore. The reader chooses one of two reading positions, both of which are problematic: while the first option leads the Anglophone reader into the ironic act of self-denial, the second compromises the very purpose of translating the text. The reader is, theoretically speaking, stranded between two ends, remaining ambivalent as to how the cultural Other should be received. The immediate question would then be whether some kind of middle ground can be negotiated, the possibility of which I do not foreclose. One might argue, for instance, that our Anglophone Chinese readers may feel a degree of empathy for and hence identification with the point of view embraced in the original Chinese stories, especially since the physical and cultural world evoked in these stories is familiar to readers of both the originals and the translations – Chinese Singaporeans in both cases. This would mean that, insofar as the target text readers are drawn into the stories, the two reading positions are not necessarily irreconcilable.<sup>4</sup> Having said that, one needs to be reminded that we are not dealing with target text readers who are external to and therefore detached from the source text and its associated sociohistorical context, for example, a British or American reader who happens to be interested in Singapore Chinese literature, accessing it through its English translation. The specific target readership on which this article focuses prompts critical reflection with regards the plausibility of adhering to the cultural assumptions of Self while fully embracing those of the Other, when the former is implicated in the ideological thrust of the source text. In this situation, the attempt at identification with the cultural Other is made challenging, if not quite untenable, given that the Self of the Anglophone Chinese reader is not a neutral entity standing outside the ideological frame of the source text. Rather, this Self is fully entrenched in the source text as the Other, involved in the story as a hegemonic culture in opposition to a marginalised identity that the author of the Chinese text so cherishes.

The epistemological dilemma outlined in this article has implications for rethinking the bridging function that translation is so often assumed to play in intercultural communication (for instance, the bridging function underlying the line “we hope that reading these stories, essays, and poems will provide the opportunity to learn how Chinese-speaking Chinese in Singapore felt...about the changing nature of Singaporean society...” St. André 2001: 15). The potential impasse faced by Anglophone Chinese readers in their interpretation of identity illustrates how the cultural Self of target text readers may interfere with their reception of the cultural Other in translation, and possibly compromise the purpose of the translation. How can cultural identities then be negotiated in translation when Self and Other are implicated in each other? The question, fundamentally philosophical in nature, might require a philosophical resolution. For this, we could perhaps seek recourse to Derrida, who has dealt extensively with the subject of the Subject. My preceding discussion is based on the assumption – an assumption reinforced by the works collected in *Droplets* – that the Self and Other are singular and mutually-exclusive entities. What if, from the very start, we entertain the idea that Self and Other cannot exist as concepts in

their own right without the opposite other? The quotation from Derrida at the beginning of this article tells us that the identity of a subject is not atomic in its constitution; its existence is premised on what it excludes in its own definition. Expounding on Derrida's ideas on this topic, Davis explains that

the 'subject' of writing (such as a translator or author) does not exist as a sovereign solitude, a pure singularity that deals with others or with texts fully separate from him or herself. Rather, this 'subject' *becomes* as a relation to systems of difference, which make thinking meaning and 'self' possible in the first place. The 'subject,' then, participates in generality. In order to think of ourselves as discrete and singular, we must draw boundaries that exclude what we are *not*. That which is excluded in the constitution of the 'self' is, of necessity, both 'wholly other' to the self and the condition of the self's identity. (Davis 2001: 91, emphasis in original)

Just as the subject of writing is not a singular entity in and of itself, the subject of reading, i.e., the reader of an original text or of a translation, is itself a composite construct constituted by the identities of both Self and Other. It thus follows that the subjectivity of the reader of a piece of translation cannot but be inherently haunted by the shadows of the cultural Other. If we accept that the cultural Other is the condition for the existence of the cultural Self, the two reading positions I have proposed could then perhaps become parallel rather than conflicting positions, such that Anglophone Chinese readers can embrace Self and at the same time internalise the identity of Other which is part of this Self. This, I think, would however remain a philosophical rather than practical reading position.

#### NOTES

1. A 2004 survey commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Education (2004: 22) suggests that the number of Chinese students entering Primary One who speak predominantly English at home has risen from 36% in 1994 to 50% in 2004. This implies a corresponding fall in the number of young students who speak predominantly Mandarin or other Chinese dialects at home. It is also reported that parents with higher education are likely to use English with their children at home rather than Mandarin. According to the survey, it is recognised that this trend of young children having little exposure to Chinese at home will continue and this is further reflected in the declining use of the Chinese language among younger students in their communication with siblings or friends.
2. This claim is also supported by demographic data. Ethnically, Singapore is a predominantly Chinese society, with the Chinese constituting about 75.7 percent of the population (Statistic Singapore 2006). This demographic imbalance implies that the category "adult Singaporeans who could not read Chinese" will almost certainly need to include "adult *Chinese* Singaporeans who could not read Chinese," i.e., Anglophone Chinese Singaporeans. The alternative would be to suggest that by "adult Singaporeans who could not read Chinese," the editor is referring primarily to the Malay and Tamil populations in Singapore. This is not a likely situation, given that the two minority ethnic groups together constitute less than 25% of the population.
3. To cite another example, Zhang Hui's *Wangzhongren/Entangled in the Net* (Zhang 2001) is a story about a Chinese-language teacher who struggles to handle her administrative work in school using English, a language with which she is unfamiliar and which she is in the course of learning. The story then describes her "problem student" who has a strong interest in her Chinese-language classes but is strongly prejudiced against the English language and has deliberately failed to sit for the English paper during the end-of-year examination. The entire story revolves around how the Chinese-language teacher tries to convince her problem student Ang Ah Tee about the importance of English in Singapore. The Chinese-language teacher has the following monologue that is particularly interesting: "How could Ang Ah Tee be so mischievous? The whole of Singapore knows the importance of English. What future could one have if one scores zero in English?" This statement is unproblematic to the English-speaking target text reader, who of course must agree that the English language is important in Singapore. However, in the original Chinese story, this statement

is made from the perspective of a Chinese-language teacher who is herself struggling with English but yet is forced to come to terms with the language under pressures from the demands of her work. Through the story of the teacher's own stressful experience with the English language and her attempt – ironically as a Chinese-language teacher – to convince her student of the importance of English, the author imbues in the source text a deep sense of despair and tension on the part of the predominantly Chinese-speaking community in Singapore who is forced by social circumstances to acknowledge the dominance of the English language, but is struggling to come to terms with it fully. This theme of the story is fully encapsulated in the last two lines of the text: "Something seems to be vibrating right in front of her, transforming the clean sheet of typing paper before her into an enormous net / She actually sees herself and Ang Ah Tee endlessly struggling amidst the net..." Thus, the story is not superficially about a Chinese-language teacher who accepts the importance of the English language in Singapore society and encourages her student to learn the language well. It is indeed about how the English language has become "an enormous net" encompassing the predominantly Chinese-speaking community in Singapore, who are pressured into learning the language while resisting it psychologically (the latter mentality is exemplified by the problem student who refuses to take the English-language exam paper). In this sense, English is still construed as a cultural "Other" from the perspective of the protagonist in the Chinese story, despite the fact that its importance is being explicitly acknowledged. The interpretation of the Chinese texts in English translation by Anglophone Chinese readers ends up with a dilemma: is it plausible for such readers to see the English language as "an enormous net" as does the author/protagonist when it is the very language in which they are competent? If not, to what extent can the target text reader understand the "foreign" in the text (Sinophone Chinese community) on its own terms?

4. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this important point.

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