

Writing beyond the wall: translation, cross-cultural exchange and Chen Ran's *A Private Life*

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Translation need not guarantee the reciprocity of meaning between languages. Rather, it presents a *reciprocal wager*, a desire for meaning as value and a desire to speak across, even under least favourable conditions. (Liu 1999b, 34)

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the global flow of knowledge, nowhere more apparent than in the exchange of ideas between China and modern western democracies. Since the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping introduced the Open Door Policy, China has experienced an influx of western ideas that have been instrumental in the country's emergence on the global stage. At the same time, China's increasing economic and political dominance has spurred a growing interest in modern Chinese culture in the rest of the world, including a desire to know more about Chinese philosophical traditions and cultural practices. Our interest concerns one aspect of this global flow—the translation of Chinese women's autobiographical writing into English. This recent phenomenon has many benefits for Chinese and English-speaking readers; it: enables access to the ways western concepts like individualism, feminism, modernism, democracy, etc. have impacted upon Chinese women's lives and texts; facilitates an exchange of feminist theories and critiques between Chinese and English-speaking audiences; allows aspects of Chinese culture censored 'at home' to be aired in foreign arenas; and makes possible the expression and an awareness of indigenous Chinese feminism for English-speaking readers.

Access to this body of writing raises many decisions concerning cultural translation, among them: whose stories are told and translated, what themes are deemed relevant by western publishers, how the books are marketed to western audiences, how the texts are

received and interpreted once they begin to circulate in economic, ideological and cultural fields distant from their point of origin. In her extensive work on translanguaging practice, Lydia Liu (1995) refers to this as a problem of translation between ‘guest’ and ‘host’ languages.¹ Liu is interested not only in linguistic aspects, but also cultural ones of exchange, including the background of unequal power relations between ‘guest’ and ‘host’ languages, the universalising processes of modernity, as well as problems of difference and incommensurability that affect the reception of Chinese texts in the English speaking world. She defines translanguaging practice as ‘the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of the latter’s contact / collision with the guest language’ (Liu 1995, 26). Liu’s concern is that the translation of Chinese concepts derived from the Chinese guest language when translated into the English host language inevitably entails a loss of ambiguity, difference, and incommensurability. The act of translation itself becomes a site of struggle where meanings are negotiated, often on an unequal terrain where the power structures within the context of the host language can control, manipulate and dominate the processes of translation, dissemination and reception of the guest text. While this paper acknowledges Liu’s insistence on the asymmetrical power dynamics involved in the translation process, it also recognises other possibilities for the expression of alternative Chinese values and beliefs disallowed at home that the process of translation permits.

Keeping these concerns in mind, this paper explores the process of translation asking what is lost when translators excise sections of the original text in order to make the translation more compatible with the knowledge, capacity and desires of an imagined host readership. In addition, we consider the additive potential of the host text. It is sometimes the case that the translation can make certain veiled references, metaphors and textual ambiguities more explicit. Sometimes this decision might be attributed to pragmatic, market-driven motivations, at other times it might arise from more complex political, historical, and cultural considerations. These negotiations of meaning that

¹ Lydia Liu coined the terms ‘host’ and ‘guest’ languages rather than target and original languages, which are commonly used in translation circles. In so doing she registers an unequal dichotomy between the language of reception and the originating language and implies an imbalance of power inherent to the translation process itself. Liu maintains that in the Chinese cultural context, the ‘host’ language carries more weight, in that it is more likely to address the aesthetic standards and cultural expectations of the potential readers (1995, 26-27).

occur in the translation process can reverberate on the critical reception of texts in both host and originating domains with open-ended, incomplete and indeterminate effects.

The English translation of Chen Ran's *A Private Life* provides an ideal point of departure from which to explore these issues. To illustrate the complexities, this paper attends to a short passage of three scant paragraphs that appear in the Chinese edition in a critical chapter about two-thirds of the way into the text. These paragraphs reference (implicitly in the Chinese version, explicitly in the English translation) the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, an event denied by the Chinese authorities and censored from public discussion. In the English translation this section differs in significant ways from the original Chinese text. The English translation eliminates the rhetorical device of a parenthetical break in the narrative and cuts or relocates several paragraphs from the original Chinese version. These alterations may seem slight at first glance. But they substantially change the substance of the original text in ways that both enhance and limit its radical potential. Through an examination of the differences between the Chinese and English editions, the paper argues that the Chinese edition offers readers a more radical text, both (a)politically and philosophically, than the English translation which, while being more overtly politicized, fails to convey the multiple registers of meaning contained within and available to readers of the Chinese edition. Nonetheless, the English translation also offers additive features in an economy of what Liu refers to as 'meaning-value' (1999a, 2), in the transcultural exchange.²

Chen Ran

Chen Ran is one of China's foremost *avant-garde* writers. Her short stories began to appear in literary journals in the 1980s, grounding a reputation for serious philosophical investigations, particularly those concerning women's changing roles and identities. A film, *Yesterday's Wine*, adapted from her novella, 'A Toast to the Past' (*Yu wangshi ganbei*) premiered at the Fourth International Women's Congress held in Beijing in 1995, bringing her work to the attention of an international feminist community. Her semi-autobiographical novel *A Private Life*, first published in 1996, has never been out

² In the introduction to *Tokens of Exchange*, Liu writes that her study 'is centrally concerned with the production and circulation of *meaning as value* across the realms of language, law, history, religion, media, and pedagogy, and, in particular, with significant moments of translation of *meaning-value* from language to language and culture to culture' [ital in original] (2).



of print in China. In 2004, an English translation appeared, and a new, richly illustrated edition, including the artwork of Shen Ling, was released in China.

Chen is especially appealing to western feminist readers, as John Howard-Gibbon, the English translator, points out in his note that introduces the English edition. He describes Chen as ‘a unique and important female voice...[whose] unique

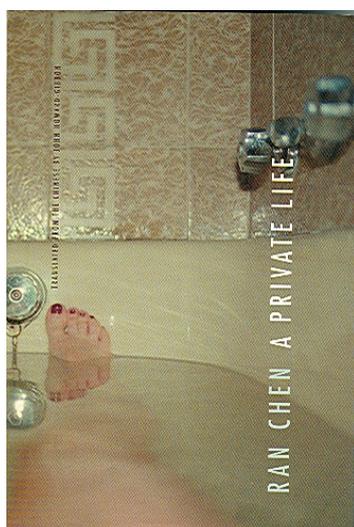
and personal postmodern feminist story has created a different and very challenging image of women within Chinese literature of the 1990s’ (2004, xii, xiii). Her writing is particularly interesting to western feminist readers because it offers an insistent critique of patriarchal relations in China that follows in the disrupted tradition of the proto-feminist writings of the 1920s and 30s, lost during the Cultural Revolution but reintroduced to a contemporary readership.³ Her work is also linked to psychoanalysis and French feminist strands of western feminism, variously read, adapted, appropriated, construed and misconstrued by writers and critics as representative of a “‘translated’ modernity’ in China (Liu 1995, 28; see also Zheng Yi 2004, 53).

In her unique fusion of western and Chinese influences, the themes and style of Chen’s work not only challenge the perceived histories and mythologies of the State, but also provide readers with ‘a genuinely alternative feminist aesthetics’ (Zheng, 2004, 53). Her work, as Zheng notes, contributes to the Chinese feminist landscape ‘a writing of alterity, an attempt at aesthetic otherness, against both the inherited but still dominant male-centered literary standards and the all-consuming post-Socialist cultural market, which constitutes much of this alterity’s critical and commercial misconception’ (62-3). The translation *A Private Life* into English provides an opportunity for new critical conceptions of Chen and Chinese feminism beyond the parameters of the Chinese state.

³ The nature, influence and heritage of the proto-feminist writers of the 1920s and 30s on contemporary Chinese women writers are a matter of critical debate. While their critiques are far more complex than a footnote can allow, Toni Barlow describes the relationship in terms of a ‘discontinuous engagement’ (2004, 9) while Amy Dooling traces ‘startling continuities’ (2005, 2). Wang Lingzhen treats the writing as related but specific to the different politics and historical contingencies of the times (2004, 123), while Zheng Yi finds a heritage marked by different vertical and horizontal relations between early and late twentieth century female writers (2004, 48).

A Private Life

A Private Life introduces reader to an intensely introspective protagonist, Ni Niuniu, in a present temporality, as solitary figure suffering undefined pain and loss, existing in a state of ‘emptiness, estrangement, separation, and longing’ (Chen Ran 2004, 6) in an unspecified ‘old city’ (2) apartment.⁴ The poetic and introspective dialogue of this opening sequence segues into a *bildungsroman* that details Ni’s early history, childhood and adolescence in a time frame that includes the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the Tiananmen Square ‘incident’ of 1989. Chen’s complex, multilayered narrative of childhood and adolescence, remembered as ‘the little disconnected fragments of my past life’ (33), juxtaposes an inner turmoil with an external life narratively marked and structured by death—including that of the protagonist’s mother, neighbour, close friend and boyfriend. This melancholic text builds to a climatic scene in which the young narrator, for no ‘discernable reason at all...[is] struck by a stray bullet from somewhere’ (130). In the *denouement* the character of Ni Niuniu finds respite through the creative act of writing that rescues her from what she experiences as a dissolution of selfhood.



Unlike the original, the English edition of *A Private Life* attaches the narrator’s initial condition of solitude and fragmented subjectivity to the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. This framing begins with the dust jacket description of the novel as a ‘riveting tale of a young woman’s emotional and sexual awakening . . . [that is] set in the turbulent decades of the Cultural Revolution and the Tian’anmen Square incident . . . [and] exposes the complex and fantastical inner life of a young woman growing up during a time of intense social and political upheaval.’ This paratextual introduction, repeated in the ‘Translator’s Note’ (Howard-Gibbon, xii), immediately cues the reader to anticipate a tale of political intrigue that climaxes with the Tiananmen Massacre. This framework emphasizes the political and thus mutes the philosophical undercurrents and stylistic aesthetic experimentation that characterises Chen’s work,

⁴ All quotations are derived from the English version unless otherwise indicated. They have been checked against the Hong Kong Chinese (1998) and Beijing (2004) versions and, unless otherwise indicated, convey an approximately comparable sense of meaning.

although the translator anticipates for the reader a narrative that includes ‘a great number of seemingly disconnected interior monologues, fragmentary recollections, and reveries that flit back and forth through time and space’ (xii). At the same time, the introductory elements frame the novel through a western aesthetic of individualism, interiority, split-subjectivity, political resistance, and liberation through sexuality, typical of feminist coming-of-age stories in the west in the late twentieth century. Thus the host language readership gains access to a multivocal narrative through a western political framework that voices what is silenced in the original text, but also, in so doing, diminishes other radical, philosophical registers of the original.

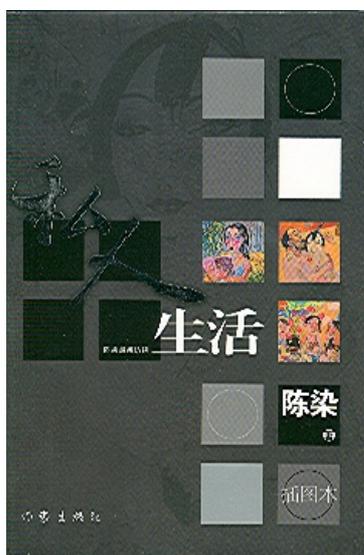
The Chinese language editions adhere to the government’s strict prohibitions against specific mention of the Tiananmen Square ‘incident.’⁵ They make no overt political critique. Perhaps to manoeuvre herself through the web of political censorship,⁶ large portions of Chen’s Chinese version allude to Tiananmen Square without actually or overtly mentioning ‘Tiananmen’, the democracy movement, the student protests, or the massacre. Instead, references are made to ‘the square’ where ‘the significant event’ occurred; the student protests of May and June that ended tragically in the massacre on 4 June 1989 are referred to as ‘that tragic period’ in ‘early summer’ that changed the protagonist’s life. Chen admits, however, in an interview with Huang Lin, that the external event of ‘Tian’anmen’ constitutes the background for this personal reverie.⁷ In the text the narrator explains: ‘The reason my focus persistently returns to the bits and pieces of the past is that they are not dead pages from history; they are living links that connect me to my ever-unfolding present’ (73). The publisher’s dust jacket and ‘Translator’s Note’ of the English edition explicitly frame the narrative against the

⁵ The Chinese Government calls what happened on 4 June, 1989, when armoured troops were sent in to clear Tiananmen Square and quell the student demonstrations, an ‘incident’. The Government has never acknowledged a massacre, claiming that only 23 people lost their lives during the ‘anti-revolutionary riot’. Western scholars, however, estimate that somewhere between 300 and 2700 people were killed and tens of thousands were injured (Buruma 2001, 5).

⁶ With the liberalization of the 1990s writers in China enjoyed more freedom to experiment with new forms of poetic expression, as long as they avoided any direct criticism of the Government or its policies. Critics are divided as to the ‘radical’ nature of contemporary literature and art. Some scholars argue that the state coopts artists and pacifies dangerous cultural forms while others hold that the new freedoms allow for a politics of resistance. Nonetheless, Chen is a rare writer who has dared to challenge the ban on Tiananmen. For a discussion of these issues including reference to post-Tiananmen narratives by diasporic writers, see Schaffer and Smith 2004, 187-222.

⁷ Huang Lin, the editor of *Feminism in China*, interviewed Chen Ran during the Spring Festival of 2001. She provided us with a copy of the interview in April 2005. A portion of this interview was published in 2002 as ‘Wenben neiwai’ [Interview with Chen Ran] in *Wenxue, yishu yu xingbie* [Literature, Arts and Gender], eds Li Xiaojiang, et. al.) Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, Nanjing, 91-102. The section we quote remains unpublished.

backdrop of Tiananmen Square and the summer of 1989. These paratextual elements guide readers to interpret the work as a reflection on the politically infused, post-traumatic after-effects of the massacre. The insertion of specific references to



‘Tiananmen’ in the English edition of *A Private Life*, whether driven by market forces or more nuanced cultural considerations, effectively alters the text as a cultural object and its potential modes of circulation, reception and interpretation.

Chinese and English Versions Compared

In both the Chinese and English versions no overt reference is made to ‘the tragic summer’ until Chapter 15 (of 21 in total), the beginning of the protagonist’s ‘tragic period.’ It is here (and in the next three chapters) that the text

becomes most explicitly political, or rather where the political is enfolded into the personal. Chapter 15, entitled ‘Endless days’, opens with the Tiananmen incident. Written in fragmented prose that frequently shifts between different temporalities, points of view, generic codes and conventions, it textually reproduces some of the repetitive experiential features of deep traumatic memory, replaying remembered images and sounds of a tragic moment as if the event were an enduring condition of life. This section in the English translation of 2004 differs most dramatically from the Chinese versions. In the Chinese versions Chapter 15 opens with a descriptive passage of three paragraphs in which the protagonist describes an incident that happened to her during her third year of university when she was hit by a stray bullet. This narrative ends abruptly and is followed by three further paragraphs *that are separated from the main text by a parenthesis*. It is the parenthesis and the text within it that concerns us here. In deploying the parenthetical device Chen signals a discursive and temporal gap within the text itself. None of the parenthetical material from the Chinese version appears in the English edition in this place, although some of the content is relocated elsewhere in the chapter.

These changes to the English edition may seem insignificant and could be explained simply because of the difficulty of translating the rhetorically challenging material or out of a desire to create a more linear narrative. The three paragraphs enclosed within

the parenthesis do not ‘make sense’ in English. They cannot be rendered logically through the English language. In addition, these three paragraphs, contained in the parenthesis in the original, break the flow of the preceding narrative and mark a shift in the text’s generic codes. They challenge the reader in their conflation of the voices of the protagonist / narrator and the presumed author. In addition they confuse point of view and ask to be read not experientially, as the protagonist Ni Niuniu’s introspective reverie, but as the author’s critical commentary on the writing process itself.⁸ In the English version, the opening passage of Chapter 15 (that describes the narrator’s wounding from a stray bullet) is followed by a progressive, linear description of what happened after the Summer of 1989: the heroine’s difficult university years, her meeting with her lover, Yin Nan, a political dissident whose skeletal figure suggests his involvement in a hunger strike, his exile to Berlin, and her repressed memories of a tragedy that she sublimates into poetry and romance. In the Chinese versions, however, the parenthetical commentary interrupts this narrative sequence, fracturing the linear textual flow.⁹ In the parenthetical material Chen Ran adopts a direct authorial address to the audience, expressing a personal reluctance to speak out against ‘the recent trauma’ in a complex and carefully deliberated choice of words. This section, literally enfolded within the text through the use of parentheses, gives some evidence of the ironic and polyvocal tenor of the text. In what follows we translate the three parenthetical paragraphs missing from the English edition and examine each paragraph in some detail. Our analysis is intended to allow English readers greater access to several stylistic, political and philosophical elements present in Chen’s original text, including: 1) the fusion of western concepts and philosophical perspectives with indigenous Chinese myth and traditions; 2) the elliptical nature of Chen’s references to sensitive issues or tabooed topics in China; and 3) the radical deconstructive playfulness of the text.

The first parenthetical paragraph of the Chinese version opens with a self-deprecating passage that makes reference to the significant event in the summer of 1989 and the

⁸ Zheng Yi describes this conflation between the voices of the narrator and the author as a common technique of contemporary Chinese women’s writing. In a passage that reflects upon Lin Bai’s writing as compared with Chen Ran, she notes a sceptical point of view that entails ‘the overlapping of multiple relational points of view manifested often, for example, in the frequent switch between the narrative role and voice of the first-person narrator, the heroine of the story, and the author’ (Zheng 54).

⁹ The three paragraphs that follow have been translated by Song Xianlin and are taken from the Hong Kong Chinese version, 1998, 155-156. A facsimile reproduction of the paragraphs is included here as an appendix.

possible ‘fallacy’ of the author’s judgements. This opening gambit is overlaid by ‘fate’ and underscored by a detour through the predictions of Nostradamus, attached to the author’s millennial fears of world collapse. Composed perhaps ten years before the 2004 English edition,¹⁰ and written to enfold the voice of the author into that of the protagonist, it translates as follows:

With regard to this significant event, I think I should deliberate until 1999 before expressing my ‘fallacy’; that is, if the apocalyptic prophesy of Nostradamus fails to materialize and this world still exists by then. Now it is still too early, I am still too close to it. It remains a heap of shapeless memories. Just like a huge wave formed on top of an abyss, you must wait till the two clashing currents disperse towards their opposing sides, and the surging white wave subsides. Only then we will be able to rediscover the place of the abyss. In addition, if my pen ventures to dwell upon this space, I fear that my purely descriptive narrative could be falsely read as ‘the story of a heroine’. That would be a most absurd result, because I understand that political storms, like love, can sometimes make people blindly embark on a passionate, insatiable pursuit. I have the right to determine when my life ‘begins’, and where it ‘ends’ (Chinese version, 155).

There are many confounding elements in this paragraph. Chen appears to drop the persona of Niuniu and represents the ‘I’ in the voice of the author of the narrative. The text stops short of commenting directly on ‘the significant event,’ but allows it to be registered through its effects: the shapeless, fragmented memories which clash and collide, like waves above an abyss, gesturing towards an (im)possible future of recovery. Chen signals a fragmentation of subjectivity and also implicates her audience in a space of post-traumatic transition through the shift of pronouns from ‘I’ to ‘you’ to ‘we’. Here, the text mimes something akin to the fluidity of Irigarayan feminine sex/textuality (registered in her famous essay ‘This sex which is not one,’) within a narrative catachresis containing both temporal and spatial elements. Then, after alluding to the remembered event and the narrative through a spatial metaphor of an abyss [‘if my pen ventures to dwell upon this space’], Chen, in the voice of the author, describes the text under construction (the one the reader has before her), as a ‘purely descriptive narrative’. A psychoanalytical reading might interpret this textual manoeuvre as a symptom of deep traumatic memory that is under erasure. In the Chinese vernacular this move could be read as the author distancing herself from any political intentionality, even as she calls attention to it. In this passage Chen sets up a binary that opposes her ‘purely descriptive narrative’ to what it is not: ‘the story of a heroine’. In Chinese language the phrase ‘story of a heroine’ would be understood to

¹⁰ A hint of when this passage was written appears in the English version quite late in the text. In the penultimate chapter, Niuniu, the heroine, whose voice has been conflated with that of Chen, the author, relates that she was thinking about the Nostradamus prophecy of millennial apocalypse in 1992 (200).

refer to the traditional notion of a heroine who stands up for truth, freedom and justice. We read Chen's purpose here, as elsewhere in the text, as being ironic as she disassociates herself from the 'heroic' leaders (*i.e.* of the Tiananmen Square movement).¹¹ While expressing sentiments that might appear to be consonant with the ideals of the student protest movement, and certainly ones that left the author / narrator traumatized by its tragic outcomes, Chen's text focuses not on the political event so much as on a deconstructive feminine consciousness emanating from it. Adopting a position of radical alterity in the text, Chen contains and disengages, while it claims to exceed, the political.¹² Through the images of clashing currents and surging waves over a hidden abyss Chen makes poetic reference to a political turmoil but contains it within introspective memory underscored by the rhythms and impulses of feminine writing that can be attributed differently to Chen Ran, the writer, and Ni Niuniu, the heroine.

The last two complex sentences of the paragraph translated above are altered and appear in another place in the English translation. In the 2004 English edition the whole paragraph is reduced to a simple temporal logic attributed to Niuniu that reads as follows:

In my mind, political events remain a heap of overblown, amorphous memories. They are very much like huge waves that meet over great depths. You have to wait until the opposing currents are finally absorbed into each other, until the frothing peaks finally subside, before you can again discern the depths. Much as it is with love, political instability can encourage the pursuit of blind passions, but as with love, I have a right to choose when I want to be involved and when I want to break it off (English edition, 132).

This translation evades the complexity of the original text, translating it into a banal instance of individual free choice. It avoids the double narrative of Chen as author and Niuniu as narrator; sublates Imaginary fantasies into the logic of the Symbolic; represents the ideas as those of Niuniu, removing the doubling of subjectivities and the textual ambivalence of the passage. The English translation adopts metaphors of linear progress (wait till opposing currents subside), vision and clarity (discern the depths), and reason (in a binary division that juxtaposes the logic of politics to the 'blind passions' of love). It contains none of the Imaginary pulsations of turmoil (clashing currents . . . surging waves), spatial metaphors of the void (the place of origin with the [M]other), multiple subject positions (I, you, we), and references to Imaginary lack (the

¹¹ In another place she writes: 'I was both enveloped in this atmosphere and apart from it. That night of flames had not yet released me' (171)

¹² For more detailed discussions of Chen's deconstructive stylistics and stance of alterity / disengagement see Zheng (2004) and Schaffer and Song (2006).

patriarchal abyss) present in the Chinese version, and indicative of Chen's stance of radical feminine alterity. The English translation rationalizes the political events and relegates them to personal passions, disconnected from the author, or from issues of writing. It simply grants agency to Niuniu's character and her choice of involvements. In this instance, the translation process involves a dilution and reduction of the textual ambiguities and the cultural incommensurabilities of the originating text, an issue of transcultural practice highlighted in the work of Lydia Liu (1995, 26). It also reduces Chen's double-voiced and insistently Chinese text of feminine alterity in a post-Tiananmen era to a western-styled political allegory.¹³

The English version also rectifies the slippage between temporal and spatial metaphors. Chen's odd construction of the last sentence from the Chinese version: 'I have the right to determine *when* my life "begins", and *where* it "ends"' (Chinese version, 155; italics added) requires an ungrammatical translation in English. The translator chooses to rectify this problem with his translation: 'I have a right to choose when I want to be involved and when I want to break it off' (English version, 132). But in removing the ambivalence, the English version also elides the narrative complexity of Chen's statement and reduces the double voice of author/narrator to that of the narrator alone. The 'I' in the Chinese version refers to both the author and to the life of a character temporally and spatially created in and through the narrative of *A Private Life*. That is, Chen, through her writing, can determine 'when my [author/Niuniu—conflating author with protagonist and granting Niuniu authorial agency] life begins, and where it ends.' Chen, as the reputed author, can decide what aspects of 'that tragic period' to leave in and which to omit. She can craft the spatial and temporal dimensions of the text. The original version creates a confusion that allows the author to escape possible political incrimination by the censors by attributing agency to the indeterminate 'I' of the narrator, the 'I' as an indefinite signifier, a sign under erasure. These subtle layerings

¹³ A discussion of the implications of this change exceeds the boundaries of this paper. Zheng Yi provides some direction here, offering a complex and perceptive analysis of 'the creative possibilities' of alterity in Chen's *A Private Life*. She argues that Chen's writing evades the 'doctrinal dichotomy' between 'the personal', (e.g. small/ lesser) as rendered through an introspective 'personal' narrative, and social or historical perspectives, (e.g. large/ national and collective) as rendered through 'serious' literature. She insists that Chen's 'personal' writing is 'anti-allegorical', continuing: 'The allegory Chen refuses to write or allow her heroines to participate in is the all-embracing national collective' (59). In general we are in sympathy with Zheng's argument and her insistent claim that 'Chen is trying desperately but stubbornly to create a place for alterity for marginal beings . . . that cannot be subsumed into the national allegory' (60).

are missing from what becomes the agentic voice of Niuniu in the English translation. It could be argued that Chen's playful subterfuge would almost certainly be lost on English readers. Further, the textual complexity, partially in deference to political sensitivities, would be unnecessary in the host language contexts of the text's reception. But the English translation, in removing or altering the nuanced meanings of the text in this instance, also loses the important multiplication of voices, the poststructural feminine positioning of alterity, and deconstructive elements of the original as well.

The second paragraph that appears within the parenthetical space of the original Chinese version but not the English translation continues the double narrative. Importantly, it evokes the poetically charged and symbolically powerful image of 'a collapsed wall':

At the moment, I continue to lean against a collapsed wall. I don't have the strength in my chest to constantly shout. My voice, like a statue shattered into pieces, still has not regained its mature and deep timbre. For the time being, let's take that wall as a gigantic backdrop—the 'scenery of a broken wall' in the distance. We will move towards it. History will be carved there, on the wall, as a kind of 'immortality' (Chinese edition, 155).

Chinese readers would, no doubt, immediately register the cultural symbolics of a silenced woman leaning against a collapsed wall. The Great Wall, in all its connotations, constitutes the larger historical backdrop against which Chinese history, legend and tradition are measured. Chen, here, writing in the early to mid-1990s, refers obliquely to a wall, one on which Chinese history has been and is still to be carved. The narrator, now silenced but attempting to regain her voice after suffering great trauma, imagines a time in the future, the future anterior, the yet-to-come.¹⁴ In this passage Chen writes a promissory note to the future growing out of events in the present in ways that strongly invoke the past. And, the Chinese text promises: '*we will move towards it*' (155, italics added).

¹⁴ These phrases invoke concepts derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction. Lacan's concept of the future anterior refers to a symptomology and a process of recovery within language in which trauma from the past can be reconfigured from the vantage point of the present that anticipates the promise of a future in which liberation is possible. Derrida's phrase the 'yet-to-come' refers to a haunting from the past—what no longer is; (and) what is not yet. The present then can be understood as a place of a double enunciation, one conjoined in two directions of absence—towards the unrecognised past and the unknowable future. See Lacan (1988) and Derrida (1994). Our invocation of these concepts is consonant with the philosophical and psychoanalytic inclinations of Chen Ran, as discussed in Zheng (2004), and several contributors to the critical anthology, *Criticisms of the 1990s* (Chen Shihe and Yang Yang, eds., 2001) among others.

For Chinese readers, the silence of the wounded female protagonist, which nonetheless portends changes to come, might well conjure up a third intertextual voice, that contained within the famous legend of Meng Jiangnu. This ancient legend concerns the building of the Great Wall under Qin Shihuang, over 2000 years ago. According to the well-known legend, Meng Jiangnu's husband was conscripted by Qin Shihuang (the first emperor of the Qin) on the night of their wedding to build the wall. Hearing nothing from him for five years, Meng Jiangnu suffered bad dreams and embarked on a journey to look for him. Arriving at the wall, she learned that he had died from his enforced backbreaking labour and had been buried beneath the wall. She began to wail for his loss, crying for endless days and nights until her tears caused the wall to fall, revealing the skeletal bones of her beloved. Among other elements, the legend demonstrates that the *yin* power of the woman, often considered weak and inconsequential, can sometimes overcome the *yang* power of the emperor. The cry of one lone female brings down the almighty wall.

Although Chen Ran makes no overt reference to the legend of Meng Jiangnu, her evocation of a collapsed wall on which history will be written both echoes back to the legend and points forward in relation to events of the recent past. Specifically, the protagonist of *A Private Live* struggles to come to terms with a personal trauma, a wounding by a stray bullet, and the loss of her skeletally-thin student protestor boyfriend, Yin Nan, in a narrative set against the backdrop of an unspecified historical event. With the government's silencing of the Tiananmen protest, her voice is like that of 'a statue shattered into pieces.' She has lost her ability to wail. This simile for the narrator voice could also refer to the shattered statue of the Goddess of Democracy, erected in Tiananmen Square by the student protestors and demolished by the state, a symbolic act that marked the end of the democratic movement. Chen references both the legend of Meng Jiangnu and the fallen Goddess of Democracy, whose fates are intertextually linked to the struggles of the protagonist, to underscore the capacity of apolitical elements of Chinese culture, signified in the feminine, to confront the forces of history. This embeds a specifically Chinese feminist critique of patriarchal relations, while also gesturing towards not a renewed engagement with history but a strategic withdrawal into a philosophical stance of alterity. These nuances, however, are lost in the English edition.

Readers familiar with Cixous might also register the rhythms, forms, and substance of Chen's prose as consonant with Cixous' explorations of *écriture féminine*, and specifically her essays in *Coming to Writing* (1991). There she deploys the metaphor of breaking down walls in order to challenge masculine prerogatives, unities and logics. One of Cixous' passions is to 'break down' the wall, 'daring to throw off the constraints, inner and outer' (Suleman 1991, ix). In the flow of her writing, in her dissolution of generic boundaries, in her philosophical deconstruction and critiques of masculine political and libidinal economies, Cixous 'breaks down' walls of many kinds. Chen Ran's writing shares affinities with Cixous' *écriture féminine*, in which knowledge hierarchies that divide political from private life, inner from outer worlds, theory from experience and history from time dissolve.¹⁵ As the paragraphs lost to the English edition indicate, Chen's text challenges self/other binaries and severs the boundaries between narrator and protagonist, the writer and her subjects, time past and time present.

The third and final paragraph under consideration is not missing in the English edition but the content appears elsewhere in the book. In the Chinese original it appears immediately after the aforementioned paragraphs. It is here that the author, in an unusual move, challenges the nature of political life in China:

I used the word 'innocent' earlier because I am a person who is inherently weary of/bored with participating in any activity that is related to politics. The reason why I detest politics is because it very often stands in contradiction to the word 'honesty', a word I have loved all my life. When I was a student, all my exam results for courses in politics were extremely bad. Once, perhaps during my second year at the university, there was a question on a political exam: 'Do you ardently love politics?' I replied, 'not unless I am allowed to lie'. As a result, the leaders of the university¹⁶ subjected me to a protracted lecture. (Chinese version, 155-56)

In this paragraph Chen represents herself to the reader as speaking through the direct voice of the author and expresses a disdain for 'politics', which she juxtaposes with 'honesty'. It is ironic that Chen attempts to distance herself from politics at the same time as she makes an overtly political statement. In the English translation, this irony

¹⁵ Cixous was one of the first French feminists to be translated into Chinese. A number of critics have traced her influence on contemporary women writers, including that of Chen. Subsequent to the publication of the critical anthology *Criticism of the 1990s* some feminist critics have argued that Cixous has been misunderstood, and therefore some (male) interpretations of her influence on Chen's writing also suffers from misinterpretation (Zheng Yi 2004, 53-55), a perspective shared by the author herself (Huang Lin, Interview, 2001).

¹⁶ The 'leaders of the university' are not academics, *per se*, but members of the Chinese Communist Party who oversee the political life of the students.

disappears. The translator changes this double-voiced passage to a recollection by the narrator Ni Niuniu alone.

In both the Chinese and English versions of the larger narrative readers can detect Chen's disdain for politics transposed into other thematic and symbolic dimensions of the narrative. The erotic drive that underlies this transposition relates to the narrative strand that traces the trajectory of the passionate love affair between Niuniu and the political dissident, Yin Nan. At the outset, the relationship is rendered in idealised and loving terms. At one point, however, the narrator expresses another dimension of the relationship—a 'desire to be his prisoner' (145). The epigraph to the chapter reads as follows:

With his eyebrows and his fingers, he attacked me.
He was the house I built out of my fantasies. (130)

Here, the text engages readers in a sado-masochistic reading of 'love' that defines an erotic pull of desire that is as compelling as it is destructive.¹⁷ Chen delivers an attack on women's desires and imaginary relations forged within patriarchy. Those desires can only lead to loss and lack within a masculine economy of desire. The trajectory of heterosexual love, like the political commitments of students at the Square, ends in failure and personal disillusionment. Niuniu absorbs the masculine force of desire within herself and returns, with longing, to the apartment of her friend, Widow Ho, with whom she has formed an intense, eroticised bond, just before terror engulfs the city and a conflagration in Ho's apartment leads to the widow's death.¹⁸ The English version, although attempting in other places to reproduce some of the complex stylistic features of the original Chinese text, maintains a more modernist politics, divorced from other feminist, aesthetic, psychoanalytic or philosophical registers. Even so, the English translation carries a high political charge, but one that contains less reference to

¹⁷ To some degree Chen Ran's critique echoes the criticism of women's powerlessness in traditional society that has been made by other proto-feminist writers since at least the May 4th movement. Dooling discusses this dimension of women's writing in regard to Bai Wei and her conviction that sexual and romantic love entraps women who then become complicit within the structures of power that alienate them. For Bai Wei, as for Chen, romantic love entails emotional and physical bondage rather than personal liberation (134-135). Chen's more radical philosophic position, however, avoids the essentialist reduction to 'the final certainty of the body' that may have characterised feminist writing of the earlier period (Zheng 52).

¹⁸ This passage echoes and defers to the earlier Shanghai writers of the 1920s and 1930s. It also resonates with Irigaray's more recent feminist critique of Nietzsche (1982, 1991) where Irigaray takes Nietzsche to task for his elemental subjection of the feminine in his writings. She develops a theory of fluid feminine subjectivity connected to repressed elemental aspects of feminine embodiment, attached to the elemental forces in nature, divorced from masculine imperatives and idealisations.

Chinese myth, history and traditions and avoids the rhetorical playfulness, the multiple points of view and the deconstructive tendencies of the Chinese original.

Chen's original Chinese narrative, infused with philosophic musings and psychic states of melancholy, gives Chinese readers access to the censored Tiananmen Square event through other registers beyond the political, as defined by the government. Chen reflects on the political incident and transforms its significance into a philosophical stance, what Zheng characterises as a 'poetics of vision' (53), a 'writing against death' (61) that exceeds both the personal and the political and offers a uniquely contemporary Chinese meditation on gendered positionalities in post-Tiananmen China. Stylistically, Chen adapts a feminine deconstructive stance, aligned to the supposedly weak and insignificant *yin* force, to address the wall of Chinese history, to sublimate *yang* authority from the position of an outsider who nonetheless carries the scars of that 'stray bullet.'¹⁹ Like Meng Jiangnu's tears of lament for the loss of her bridegroom to the Emperor, Chen carves her words onto the wall of history. She does so with reference to Chinese history, culture, mythology and contemporary events—infused with reference to Eurocentric discourses from philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminism and deconstruction and transformed by her own poetic vision and embeddedness within but distanced from the currents of contemporary Chinese culture. Of course, Chen's complex stance and vision would be better conveyed in the Chinese editions of the text. The English version, directed towards a western-oriented, feminist and politicised audience, lacks the subtle complexities of the Chinese narrative. Although in many ways respectful of the textual challenges of the original, it nonetheless reduces the stylistic complexities and presents the narrative within the theoretical constraints of western modernism, respectful of the binary divisions between logic and passion, personal and social life, political and philosophical commentary.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we signalled our interest in the translation of Chen Ran's *A Private Life* in relation to Chinese women's life writing. Underlying our analysis is a concern with how translation might affect a number of information flows, including the global flow of feminist theories and critiques; the cross-cultural exchange

¹⁹ We address these dimensions of the text in our article 'Narrative, Trauma and Memory: Chen Ran's *A Private Life*, Tiananmen Square and Female Embodiment' (Schaffer and Song, 2006).

between western and Chinese feminisms; and an awareness in English and modern European contexts of an indigenous Chinese feminism as it emerges on the global stage. This study of the English translation of *A Private Life* has provided an opportunity to reflect on these overlapping processes of exchange as well as issues of meaning-value in relation to one particular instance of translingual practice.

The translation of a Chinese text into English, like *A Private Life*, involves many acts of negotiation—some pragmatic and market-driven, others involving the meaning-value of the text as it circulates within different political, historical and cultural domains. As we signal, citing Liu, in the opening epigraph, ‘translation need not guarantee the reciprocity of meaning between languages.’ These acts of translation entail a ‘*reciprocal wager*’ between guest and host languages and within different contexts of reception (1999b, 34). This paper refers to only one dimension of the translation process where a negotiation of meaning occurs—namely the omission of a brief parenthetical section of three paragraphs from one chapter of the Chinese edition of *A Private Life*. Yet, even that small emendation changes the original text as a cultural object and alters the potential modes of its reception in the host language. Translation from the guest to the host language can result in a loss of ambiguity, difference and incommensurability, as we demonstrate in regard to the stylistic alterations to the three paragraphs under review. In a different context of reception, however, the translation process can offer additive potentials that enhance the generation of new meanings in the translingual exchange, here with reference to aspects of recent Chinese history that remain censored within China and to critical readings of Chen’s radical poetics of vision, both of which can perhaps be best registered in cultural and feminist contexts beyond China’s borders.

In this case, the English translation may limit access to some of Chen’s more deconstructive techniques while also offering new interpretative frameworks for the narrative as received in globalised contexts of reception. The English edition of *A Private Life* joins a growing canon of post-Tiananmen texts, mainly by diasporic Chinese women writers, that build an archive of memory.²⁰ The circulation of these

²⁰ Schaffer and Smith examine several post-Tiananmen narratives by diasporic women writers. They argue that these semi-autobiographical texts of rediscovered selfhood ‘transmit an “impossible memory” to another cultural space...speak[ing] to the rupture affected by the Massacre, the betrayal of youth, the limits of politics, and the interplay of identity and desire’ (2004, 218)

narratives resists the cultural amnesia demanded by the Chinese Government and enables a process of recognition and healing from the trauma of Tiananmen that is both personal and communal. Chen's text also offers a unique indigenous Chinese feminist voice; it prompts new strands of feminist commentary that cannot be reduced to or contained within the parameters of western feminisms. This paper has examined a number of additive possibilities for the reception of translated texts in the lost context. The translation process provides channels for writers to address traumatic memory in multiple ways, for readers in diverse locations to extend diasporic Chinese and cross-cultural feminist communities, and for readers, writers and theorists within China and beyond its borders to communicate across gaps of difference—despite the inhibiting factors of local prohibitions, the universalising pressures of western modernity, and asymmetrical relations of power between guest and host language contexts.

(关于社会政治,我想即使到了1999年我也不会发表我深思熟虑的“谬论”,如果那时诺查丹玛斯的预言宣告破产、这个世界还将继续存在的话。那些东西总是倏忽即变,我不想与它距离太近。它在我面前总是一堆爆满的而不成形的记忆。好像深渊之上所形成的一股巨浪,你必须等到互相撞击的两股水流最终融化到它的对立面里边之后,等到那涌起的白浪最终自身平息下来了,我们才能够重新找到那“深渊”的地方。另外,如果我的笔触在那种地方停留和描摹,我将十分担心我如此纯粹的叙述将会被人误读成一个“女英雄的故事”,那将是非常荒谬的结果。因为我知道,政治风云有时候像爱情一样,也会使人们产生盲目的热情如饥似渴地去追求。我有权力决定自己的生命从何“开始”,而又在哪里“中断”它。

现在,我依然还只是靠在一堵坍塌的墙垣上,我的胸膛还没有足够的力气使我发出连贯的呼喊,我的声音如同一个被打碎了的石像的碎片,还没有恢复成一种熟练而深邃的音色。我们权且把它当做一个远处的巨大的“残垣风景”,我们会走近它,历史将镶嵌在那里成为一种“不朽”。

我所以在前边提到“无辜”二字,因为我是一个天生厌倦参与任何与政治相关联活动的人。我讨厌政治的原因,是因为很多时候它与我终生所喜爱的“诚实”这个字词相违悖。我学生生涯中所有的政治试卷成绩都很糟糕,有一次,大约是在大学二年级时的一次调查试卷中,问道,“你热爱政治吗?”我答,“除非允许我说谎。”为此,学校领导还找我做了长时间的谈话。)

Chen Ran 2004, *A Private Life [Siren shenghuo]*, Beijing, Beijing Writer's Publishing House, 117-18.

This is a facsimile of the three paragraphs as they appear in the 2004 Chinese edition.

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