

Experiments in the Reception of Chinese Poetry: A multimedia, trans-cultural approach

Claire Huot and Robert Majzels

The 85 project is a poetic exploration into the way one language — in this case Anglo-Canadian-American English — perceives and receives another — in this case Chinese. The project combines translation and poetic composition to produce a series of multi-media visual art installations.

The Ethics of Translation

85 is grounded in an approach based on contemporary philosophical theories (Lévinas, Derrida, Ouaknin) that return to the roots of Judeo-Greco-Christian (sometimes termed Western) civilization. This approach to language, to the world, the self, and to the other is open-ended, nonlinear, materialist and ethical. In the context of economic and cultural globalization, translation has become a critically charged terrain for the interaction of the self and other. The 85 project, informed by avant-garde and current translation theories (Jakobson, Benjamin, Pound, Venuti, Spivak), explores the border between translation and original creation. The aim is to apply a non-mastering ethical view of the translator's task: "rather than reducing the foreign text to dominant cultural values in English," the translator seeks to achieve "an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text" (Venuti, *The Invisibility of the Translator*, 81).

From Classical Chinese Poetry to Multi-media Contemporary Art Works

The 85 project began with a series of translations of the Hebrew *Torah's* Song of Songs, before engaging with classical Chinese poems dating back to the Tang Dynasty (7th-10th C.E.), including a series by the lesser known female poet Xue Tao; a series of colophons by the enigmatic ink-brush artist and hermit Bada Shanren (17th century C.E.); and a series based on the infamous Little Red Book, *The Quotations of Chairman Mao*.

The work of translating and transforming Chinese poems into visual poetry in English involves a painstaking process moving from the original Chinese work into poems of 85 letters in English. These highly condensed translations are designed as visual poetry, resulting in radically contemporary works that are faithful to the spirit and texture of the originals without being literal. The visual text art has taken numerous forms on a variety of media of different sizes and textures, including a series of large visual poems printed by ink-jet on xuan paper (27" x 54"), smaller sized posters, printed traditional funeral or ghost papers, transparent acetates, graffiti stencils, and a book containing all five series of poems.

We have videotaped and continue to videotape people (children, poets, students, academics, and people from a variety of walks of life) reading the visual poems.

Because of the density resulting from the limitation of 85 letters, the absence of spaces between words and the alignment in rows of the letters, the poems are difficult to read. The videotaped readings document the difficult negotiation of the reception in English of the Chinese. These faltering, hesitant performances are projected alongside the visual works in installations sometimes in traditional exhibition spaces and sometimes in less traditional public spaces. As visitors move through the installation, working out the texts for themselves and echoing the struggles of the videotaped performances, they may be prompted to reflect on the ethical issues inherent to translation, the face-to-face of different cultures, and the porous borders between translation, creation and reception.

The transference and translation process has more recently taken yet another direction with the addition of Nathan Tremblay to the 85 team. Tremblay has extracted unique sets of spatial coordinates from the 85 letter poems to produce generative algorithms, which he then uses to create three-dimensional diagrams. Based on these images, he constructs sculptures that can serve as benches. As a result, in yet another translational process, three-dimensional objects are created from a culturally perceived two – dimensional format. The 85 poems have become furniture on which viewers of the poems can recline.

A Multi-media Installation

The 85 project when all its components are gathered together constitutes a multi-media installation that combines several disciplines, including poetry, translation, performance, visual art, digital programming, sculpture and video in an integrated artistic practice that contributes to the gradual erosion of disciplinary walls and fosters dialogue between scholarly research and artistic practice, and between the divided art forms. The 85 project not only makes available to sinologists and literary scholars new translations of classical Chinese poetry, but it offers audiences a participatory experience, as they view the hanging works and projected videos, sit on benches that are also poems, and perform their own readings.

What happens when we come face to face with the Other? Do we simply translate the foreign into familiar terms, stressing the commonalities and replacing what is alien or strange with our own references and sensibilities? Or do we acknowledge what is different, and recognize the other can be equal to us without being the same? Do we consume the other culture and come away unchanged, or do we allow our language, culture and selves to be transformed forever, stretched to include new forms and meanings? The answer depends on our willingness to do the hard work of reading. The 85 project enacts that negotiation in all its difficulty and beauty. This encounter with China, Chinese culture and the Chinese language is particularly pertinent at this historical juncture, in the era of globalization. How will the West receive, and engage with this new superpower of the East?

The 85 project deploys a radical translational methodology, which raises important issues about the relationship between author and source text on the one hand, and

translator and target language on the other. Historically, the standard approach of translation practitioners has been highly content-focused. Translators have worked to normalize the original text so that it appears to have been written in the target language and context. 85 proposes a creative engagement with the source, which opens up English and Anglo-American culture to the spirit and sensibility of the original in surprising and engaging ways.

Rabbinical Thought: What is a Book?

The project is an outgrowth of research Robert Majzels began during work on his third novel, *Apikoros Sleuth*. The form of that novel was based on the structure of the Talmud, which consists of a central text called the *Mishna* — purported to be a transcription of the oral teachings of Moses — surrounded by columns of rabbinical commentary accumulated over centuries. The Talmud is a polyvocal, relentless pursuit of truth and justice in the full knowledge of the impossibility of ever entirely attaining the goal. The philosophical approach and methodology of Rabbinical Thinking, best illustrated in the Talmud and in some factions of the Kabbalist tradition (Abraham Abulafia in particular), is a materialist, metonymical, rhizomatic hermeneutic. This open-ended, nonlinear worldview, dating back to the beginnings of the Judeo-Greco-Christian tradition, has been historically repressed, often with well documented brutality. And yet, as Susan Handelman and others have argued, the rabbinical approach resurfaces periodically, in a variety of subversive cultural undercurrents as varied as the picaresque, satire, the avant-garde, the absurd, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and the postmodern.

In *Le Livre brûlé*, Marc-Alain Ouaknin attempts to define the essence of what constitutes a book. To do this, he returns to the Talmud (*Chabbat* Treatise), wherein the rabbis remind us that, on the Sabbath, work of any kind is strictly forbidden. Even if one's house is on fire, one is forbidden from intervening to save it on the Sabbath. However, if there is a holy book in that burning building, and even if that book is damaged, so long as it contains a minimum of 85 letters, the book must be saved.

Why 85? To answer this question we must first recall that the Torah in its ancient scroll form contains no vowels, no punctuation, and only the occasional space between words. The passage that appears in the King James version of the Bible as Chapter 10:35 and 36 of the Book of Numbers, and begins "Whenever the coffer was to travel... " contains 85 letters. In the Torah scroll, that passage is unique in that it is isolated from the rest of the text by spaces and bracketed by two backward *nunim* (the Hebrew letter *n*). According to the rabbinical sages, those two backward letters are meant to identify the enclosed passage as a book in itself. A book placed within the book, and out of its place. These two letters, which are not letters (because backward), are meant to indicate that the passage must be removed and replaced where it belongs. And where does this book in transit belong? That is something we will only know in the "Time of the Messiah," i.e. an arguably imaginary future when all mysteries will be solved, a time that is always yet to come. The backward *nunim*

are the trace of an erasure of the very passage they enclose. The book is at once written and unwritten, out of its place and in it. Displaced. By this metonymical manoeuvre characteristic of Rabbinical Thinking, we arrive at the question of what constitutes a book? And the answer turns out to be 85 letters!

The argument is not purely formal. The content of the passage in question concerns the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Law that Moses brought down from Sinai, the law that governs all meaning. The passage stipulates that the Ark must remain mobile, always ready to travel. To ensure its portability, the poles of acacia that flank the coffer must never be removed. This perpetual movement of the Ark is a metaphor for the continual movement of meaning.

This then is the essence of the passage in Numbers, which the sages have deemed a book, and indeed, the essence of what we call a book in general: that, on the condition that it contains a minimum of letters (85 according to the rabbis), it generates meaning endlessly. The Book is neither object, nor text, nor reader; it is the relation between them. By its non-synchrony, the Book produces a surplus of meaning. As it moves, it moves us. Reading breaks open the contents of The Book.

Language in continuous movement is, of course, also the essence of poetry. By its concentrated combination of letters and words, poetry generates shades and layers of meaning. With this in mind, Robert Majzels decided to imitate the form of that passage in the Torah, to attempt a series of poetic and creative translations, restricting himself to 85 letters and eliminating word breaks. This process, this whittling down of language, results in works of concentrated effect, works in which each individual letter achieves its own sacred presence on the page. Restraint, reduction, erasure paradoxically open up the text to possibilities. The letters are physical bodies in space, spinning like great winged wheels in the air, combining, breaking away and recombining.

Majzels began by applying this constraint to translations of Hebrew verses in the *Song of Songs*, a text which is simultaneously wildly sensual and radiantly mystical. As he examined the resulting 85 letter poems, something else appeared: echoes that implicate the reader by slowing him or her down, stressing the value of letters and relations between them and, as the eye hesitates over the continual textual enjambment, allowing for slippage of meaning. Several of these poems were published in the New York based *No, Journal of the Arts*.

Mandarin Perfected Sentences

When Dr. Claire Huot — a sinologist and professor of Chinese language and culture who served as the Cultural Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy to the People's Republic of China in Beijing — read Majzels' poems, she pointed out two things. First, that the texts were at once poems and visual works of art, with echoes of the *Lettrist* movement of the 1940s and its efforts to materialize language. She also noted the many connections with Chinese culture in the theoretical foundations of

the 85 project. The two began to collaborate in applying Majzels' translational technique to Chinese poems of the Tang dynasty.

Chinese, of course, is one of the oldest surviving languages on our planet, and one that (not unlike Hebrew) regards writing as a system autonomous to speech and constitutive of the world around us. Many of the classical Tang Dynasty poems, including those of poets better recognized in the west such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Wang Wei, are written in the poetic form known as *juéjù* or perfected sentence. Perfect because an extreme condensation of feeling, sound and vision, limited to 20 characters — a character is a monosyllabic word — and strictly regulated in tones, homophony, imagery and contrasting metaphors. They are works of concentrated energy with an open-ended view of the world gorgeously compatible with the ancient texts of the Hebrew tradition, and entirely in tune with a postmodern contemporary sensibility.

Unfortunately, historically, translations of Chinese poetry have been marked by extreme domestication, turning the poems into long lines of lyric sounding more like Shakespeare or Wordsworth. On the other extreme, some translations have truncated Chinese imagery into a pidgin English reminiscent of Peter Sellers' version of an Oriental sage.

By returning to the ancient rabbinical philosophical outlook at the heart and origin of Western civilization, the goal of the 85 project is to come face to face with — but without mastering — the Far East in the Chinese poetic tradition. In that sense, the use of the 85 constraint is more than a mere formalist trick. While the project has roots in the Avant-garde tradition and the experiments of the Oulipo group, the 85 constraint on the poetic translation and the visual play of the design are not arbitrary constraints, but rather grounded in a philosophical and ethical concern.

Claire Huot has produced new and carefully detailed etymologically informed translations of each character in a series of seventeen Tang Dynasty poems. Her translations reveal not only the strict denotative meanings of each character-word, but also the connotations evoked by the radicals and phonetics contained within the individual character, as well as allusions to homonyms, which are extremely important in Chinese poetry. Robert Majzels has worked and whittled each of these long translations into 85 letters.

Restricting the translation to exactly 85 letters actually approximates the limitation of 20 words in the original Chinese. The absence of spaces between the words and design in which the letters are aligned from right to left and top to bottom results in a materialization of the letters that reflects the Chinese sensibility to characters. But the visual resemblance is not a re-presentation. Neither in form nor content have the translators sought a one-to-one reproduction of the original.

China has a long tradition of etching the great works of calligraphy into stone. That monumental look and feel of the stele is what gave Majzels and Huot the idea for the

visual design of the Tang Dynasty 85s. These Tang Dynasty poems were printed on a commercial ink-jet printer on handmade *xuan* paper imported from China. The typeface is Linotype Janson Text (1985), a serif typeface influenced by Dutch Baroque style and erroneously named for Dutch punch-cutter and printer Anton Janson, but actually created by Tótfalusi Kis, a Hungarian punch-cutter in Amsterdam in 1685. Kis also produced Greek and Hebrew typefaces for use in polyglot bibles. Linotype Janson Text was prepared under the supervision of Adrian Frutiger, based on Tótfalusi Kis's original design and on Hermann Zapf's Linotype machine version.

Bada Shanren: the Artist as Misshapen Melon

The same process was applied to the colophons on a series of works by 17th century ink brush painter Bada Shanren. Bada Shanren's particularly unique style, which constituted a radical break with traditional Chinese painting of preceding centuries, is still startlingly contemporary. In contrast to the traditional imaginary landscapes spiralling up from tiny stick figures on the ground into heaven piercing mountain peaks, Bada Shanren inked tiny intimate animal figures eyeing each other and the observer, or solitary irregular rocks, lotus plants mired in mud and viewed from below, or misshapen melons. Bada Shanren is one of those reclusive figures of whom there is a long tradition in China. Disappointed in the politics and ethics of his time and unwilling to bend or compromise (in fact, forced at times to flee and hide) he chose to retire to a life of solitude and privation. Bada Shanren dedicated himself to his melancholic and acutely self-reflexive work tinged with only an occasional trace of bitterness, a strong dose of self-deprecatory humour, and without the slightest hope of recognition. In fact, it took several generations before his work was discovered and its greatness recognized. Today he is considered a precursor of modern painting in China.

The design of the 85's based on Bada Shanren's works is very different from those of the austere, monumental Tang poems. Like the Tang based works these are printed on long *xuan* paper approximately 60 inches high; however, the Bada Shanren 85's are lighter, decentred and float on the surface of the paper. They capture the spontaneous movement of the artist's brush and composition. Each piece reflects the proportions and placement of the particular colophon and ink brush figures in the original work. Whereas Tang poetry is frequently translated into English, very little of Bada Shanren exists in other languages. Even the two world-renowned experts, Barnhart and Wang, who produced the catalogue *Master of the Lotus Garden: The Life and Art of Bada Shanren*, acknowledge that they are unsure of their translations. Bada Shanren's *oeuvre*, both words and iconography, is enigmatic. With the support of a SSHRC grant, Huot and Majzels travelled to China to meet with scholars of Bada Shanren's work, and to see the original works in Beijing, Shanghai and Nanchang.

The Vermillion Poems of Xue Tao

Classical Chinese women's poetry is even less well known in English than is the work of Bada Shanren. For many years the only reference was a single 1972 volume, *Women Poets of China*. More recently, several excellent academic works on Chinese women poets have been published (*Gendered Persona and Poetic Voice: The Abandoned Woman in Early Song Lyrics*; and *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns*). These poets are actually not well known in China either. In the standard collection of *300 Tang Poems*, only one woman is included. In addition to drawing inspiration from the very different perspectives of these women poets (often Buddhist nuns or courtesans), the 85 project aims to introduce these lesser known works to sinologists and Western students of world poetry. Xue Tao lived and inked her poems on vermilion paper of her own making in Chengdu, Sichuan between the years of 768-832 C.E.. Today, Zhai Yongming, a poet based in Chengdu, is doing important research on classical women's poetry. Huot and Majzels met Zhai Youngming in her hometown of Chengdu, and learned about her research on classical poets such as Xue Tao and Yu Xuanji (c. 844-871), as well as her own poetic and visual work. The 85 series based on Xue Tao's poems is printed on a bamboo green colour background, with the Chinese text in vermilion, and the 85 English letters slightly off centre.

Chairman Mao's Little Red Book

The fifth series of 85's is based on the Little Red Book of "Chairman Mao's Quotations." The Little Red Book and the Bible are the two most published books of all time. Since the 85 project began with translations of the latter, it seems fitting that it culminates with a series of works based on the former. Everyone in China is familiar with Mao's Quotations, and older generations know much of it by heart. The relationship of the Chinese people to Mao Zedong, aphoristically expressed in the slogan "70% achievements; 30% mistakes," is more complex and nuanced than the off-hand condemnation in the West. His role in freeing China from foreign domination and feudalism is undeniable. His political writings, poetry and calligraphy are still the subject of study. Chinese artists, many of whom did their time in the rural re-education campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, have adopted a dual approach to Mao in their work, often parodying the slogans and socialist-realism of that revolutionary period, but never without a note of affection and recognition. The 85's based on Mao's Little Red Book are composed in that spirit, printed in a series of 50 copies on 80 lb. gloss coated text sheet, 18.75" x 10". The background is the pink colour of the paper on which Mao Zedong's calligraphy has been preserved. In these 85's the text runs left to right, as Mao's modernization of Mandarin advocated; the letters are contained in boxes reminiscent of Chinese exercise books; and the typeface is FF Quadraat Sans, a postmodern Baroque font designed by Dutch designer Fred Smeijers, and released by FontShop International in 1997-8.

Reading as Performance

These then are the five series of poems in 85 letters that constitute the 85 Project. As mentioned above, the 85 project requires one further step in the process: videotaping people reading the 85s aloud. The result is not the sort of poetry reading performance one generally expects. This performance is rather an enactment of the difficult reception of the Chinese language and culture into English. These readings are marked by stuttering, echoes, reversals and repetitions. The eye hesitates over the continual enjambment; meaning slips, stumbles, multiplies. The reader is implicated in the work as she or he is forced to slow down, to recognize and enact the value of individual letters and relations between them. The performer seems to be learning to read all over again; in fact, the reader is writing.

When these performances are projected alongside the large format printed poems, the resulting multi-media work crosses boundaries, moving from text to visual art to video to installation, from Chinese to English, and from author to translator to poet to performer to audience. The combined installation is a staging of the meeting of East and West, and an enactment of the complex, multiple collaboration between all these actors required to engender a work of art.