

Lyrical Experiments in Sinophone Verse

Time, Space, Bodies, and Things



Edited by
Justyna Jaguścik
Joanna Krenz
Andrea Riemenschneider

Amsterdam
University
Press

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11. “I Sing of Flesh”: The Rhythm of Mu Dan’s Self-translation

Simona Gallo

Abstract: Almost buried beneath the prominence of Mu Dan’s extraordinary career as a scholar, poet, and translator lie twelve poems, first composed in Chinese during his youth and later rendered into English, by means of which he earns his place among the large ranks of the Sinophone self-translators. Remarkably, in his ambitious tightrope walk between languages and lyrical identities, Mu Dan places poetic rhythmic and melodic dimension in the role of a counterpoise between the body of the poem(s) and that of its author, while keeping balance between translating and rewriting himself. His sound-based poetics of self-translation reveals an attempt to reassert lyricality and authenticity, in the framework of Chinese translingual and translational modernity.

Keywords: Sinophone, self-translation, Mu Dan, rhythm, lyrical modernity

呵，光，影，声，色，都已经赤裸，
痛苦着，等待伸入新的组合。

Ah, light, shade, sound and colour, all stripped naked,
Pantingly wait, to merge into a renewed combination.
(Mu Dan, “Chun” 春 / “Spring”)

Translating the Self in Modern China: A Tightrope Trope

The prodromes of the heteroglossic, heterogeneous identity of contemporary Sinophone literatures in the “postmonolingual era” (Yildiz 2012) can be traced to the polyphonic, polymorphic ethos of China in the first half of the twentieth century. Such traces are not merely rooted in what Michelle Yeh

has called the “Chinese Renaissance” (2016, 152) but, rather, are entrenched in that eagerly creative atmosphere in which translingual practices, in Lydia Liu’s words (1995), underpinned a whole modernization project, since exophonic writing, alongside translation,¹ is itself a political act (Wright 2016, 139). In such a heteroglossic and well-trodden literary milieu inclined toward cultural dynamism and hybridization, self-translation also played a crucial part, countering monolingualism and enhancing a cultural attitude toward difference.

As a phenomenon occurring in every era and area of the world (Hokenson and Munson 2007), self-translation equals cultural dynamism and hybridization: it postulates the metamorphosis of its authors in translating subjects and translated objects at once, as well as the “reinterpretation of the original and the creation of a new original” (Cordingley 2013, 83) that pictures an intimate mediation between the understanding of two languages, cultures, and literary universes. Understood both as a process and a product (Grutman 2020, 514), it represents both the interliminal space of the difference and a movement to transcend that difference (Gallo 2022a, 3), therefore a bridgework—if not a tightrope walk; that is to say, an extravagant wandering between the self and the other(s).

Quite conspicuous in the much-discussed contemporary Sinosphere, in the frame of the modern Chinese literary scene, the phenomenon of self-translation can be regarded as a cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic trope. “Modern Chinese writers have been practicing self-translation almost since the beginning of modern Chinese literature itself,” Dylan K. Wang highlights, “and have formed a century-old tradition with its own particularities and *raison d’être*” (2023, 398). But who are those writers of which modern Chinese literary history abounds? What are the particularities of their self-translating practice? And what is the *raison d’être*?

Despite modern Chinese literary history being a fertile ground for both self-translation studies and Sinophone studies, the body of literature devoted to this practice and its authors, aside from a few eminent figures such as Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 and Lin Yutang 林语堂, still appears ungenerously thin.

This chapter will attempt to tackle this paradox of the conspicuous absence of academic discussions of self-translation in Sinophone literature by exploring the whimsical crossover between words and sounds, shapes and forms, styles, and lyrical identities performed by the modern Chinese poet Mu Dan 穆旦 (1918–1977). As a privileged interpreter of English and Russian

1 The terms “exophony” and “translingualism” (Kellman 2000) relate to writers who write in a language other than their primary one.

Romantic poetry into the modern Chinese lyrical arena, what was Mu Dan relying on in the hermeneutic constitution of his own translingual lyrical self? Where did he find solid ground? My answer is: in the rhythmic profile.

As I will attempt to prove through my analysis that in the hazardous process of self-translation, Mu Dan mandated the poetic rhythmic and melodic dimension as the role of a counterpoise between the body of the poem and that of the author, as a pivot to recreate and reassert lyricality—thereby overthrowing the “anti-poetic” tenor, as I will further explore below. At stake—beyond necessary attention to the text and Mu Dan’s *poïesis*—is the self-translating experience in its relationship with translational Chinese modernity.

Poetic Self-translation, or the Whimsical Crossover

Almost buried beneath the prominence of Mu Dan’s extraordinary career as a scholar, poet, and translator² lie twelve poems, first composed in Chinese during his youth and later rendered into English, by means of which he earned his place among the large ranks of what Grutman (2013) defines as “occasional” self-translators. The exceptionality of his experience is advised by at least three aspects, the first and foremost being the miniature dimension of this translingual body, composed of a miscellany excerpted from a poetic work consisting of around a hundred compositions. The second relates to the selection made by the poet/self-translator, listed below in chronological order—as they appear in his collected poems, *Mu Dan shiwenji* 穆旦诗文集 (2006):

1. “Wo” 我 (1940) / “Myself”
2. “Chun” 春 (1942) / “Spring”
3. “Shi bashou” 诗八首 (1942) / “Eight Poems”
4. “Shi” 诗 (1942) / “Poems”
5. “Chufa” 出发 (1942) / “Into Battle”
6. “Chengshu” 成熟 (1944) / “Maturity”
7. “Qi” 旗 (1945) / “Flag”

2 Upon his return from the University of Chicago, where he dedicated himself extensively to translation work, he translated twenty-five volumes that now canonize him as a privileged interpreter of Pushkin, as well as Byron, Blake, and Shelley, overshadowing his poetic work consisting of around a hundred compositions that, in their own way, fight against the violence of the contemporary world and the absolute domination of science and the economy (Jin 2004, 6).

8. “Ji’e de Zhongguo” 饥饿的中国 (1947) / “Hungry China”
9. “Yinxian” 隐现 (1947) / “Revelation”
10. “Wo gesong routi” 我歌颂肉体 (1947) / “I Sing of Flesh”
11. “Baoli” 暴力 (1948) / “Violence”
12. “Gandi zhi si” 甘地之死 (1948) / “Upon the Death of [Mahatma] Gandhi”

The nature of this compact anthology itself seems to disclose Mu Dan’s attitude towards his own work, since all twelve self-translated poems were produced in his early career, when the young writer was establishing himself on the Chinese literary scene, and received the greatest recognition in the literary landscape. The first phase of lyrical creation, the most substantial, is also where his most interesting contribution to the modern literary scene can be found. Appearing between 1945 and 1948, Mu Dan’s first three collections of poems were the result of a “venturesome experimentalism” (Jin 2004), imbued with Western modernism and cross-pollinated by convention-defying language that has even been described as “anti-poetic” (Pesaro 2011).

Literary gambling might also define Mu Dan’s poetics of self-translation—and this is where the main feature of his self-translating practice resides. Experimentalism is, of course, an intrinsic facet of the self-translation of poetry, giving it its peculiar status in the domain of self-translation studies, as it incarnates a particularly demanding practice wherein the self-translator must act as a “third” subject interposing himself or herself between writer and reader, as Wanner has put it, “not only to create a poetic text in a non-native idiom, but to reproduce an artistic concept that has already received a concrete shape in the native tongue by re-creating it in a different linguistic medium” (2020, 6; see also Gallo 2022b). The poet/self-translator negotiates with their creative vein and the mimetic function embedded in the ethics of translation while gambling with words, playing a “game of correspondences” (Eco 2003, 83) in which, inescapably, they must concede. As Eco suggested in *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (Saying Almost the Same Thing):

At best, in translating, one says almost the same thing. The problem of “almost” obviously becomes central in poetic translation, to the point of such ingeniousness that “almost” becomes something absolutely different, another thing that is indebted to the original, I would say, morally.³ (277)

3 My translation from Italian.

If the imbalance is indeed constitutive of the activity of self-translation, which is charged with psychological and linguistic otherness, a counterbalancing force exists to sustain the author on his tightrope walk. By undertaking a comparative reading of the "first" *en face* of the "second originals,"⁴ I will survey how Mu Dan relied on the rhythmic profile of his texts, to (re)create his poems in his other language.

Textual Analysis: A Few Introductory Words

My survey of Mu Dan's lyrical attitude in his self-translating practice engages in a close reading of the English body of poems compared to their *baihua* 白话 versions, which already reveals a sound-based poetics. Mu Dan's effort to preserve the same number of lines and stanzas is conspicuous, as is his approach toward maintaining the semantic values and the overall aesthetic quality. It is true that self-translation embodies both the most creative expression of translation (Santoyo 2013, 30) and the most effective legitimization of authorial power. As Rainer Grutman and Trish Van Bolderen (2014) remind us,

In addition to being allowed to act on behalf of the original writers who make up their other persona, self-translators are often seen to have much more leeway in the decision-making process of translation. Instead of the mere wiggle room (begrudgingly) granted most modern translators (i.e., since the early twentieth century), self-translators are routinely given poetic license to rewrite "their" originals. (324)

In view of the fact that poetry self-translation (as in all translation) entails loss—first and foremost, metric and prosodic features are inevitably dissolved—and also demands a certain degree of creativity, I steer clear of the fallacious logic of measuring symmetry as a declaration of faithfulness. Likewise, I rebuff the focus on the distance between the two versions as a statement of authorial freedom. On the assumption that rhythm represents

4 A concept considered a traditional claim in Self-translation Studies. "By routinely identifying self-translations as the work of the original authors, without accounting for any of the nuances in terms of personae alluded to above, the author's authority is transferred metonymically to the final product, which thus becomes a *second original*" (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2014, 374, emphasis mine). It should be underlined that, although the theoretical framework of self-translation appears problematic and is still under discussion, it is clear that the concept of the *original* is "far more fluid than in other kinds of translation" (Bassnett 2013, 20).

a core aspect of Mu Dan's poetics of self-translation, I instead try to shed light on a range of strategies adopted by the author in his quest for new rhythmic gist, while keeping balance between translating and rewriting himself.

Breaths and Ligatures

When observing the poems from the angle of their textual distribution, a first remark can be made regarding the author's approach to metric ligatures, which extends in three directions according to varying needs to remold the lines for lyricity. The first is exemplified by "Upon the Death of [Mahatma] Gandhi" (Gandi zhi si 甘地之死):

于是被一颗子弹遗弃了, 被⁵
这充满火药的时代和我们的聪明,

...

Thus, by a single shot deserted, by
The powder-loaded age and our wit,

...

自然给出而又收回: **但从没有**
这样广大的它自己, 容纳这样多人群,
(Mu Dan 2006, 279)

Nature gives and takes, **but never**
So much herself she spread, providing to such thronging multitudes.
(Mu Dan 2006, 281)

As evidenced by lines 9–10 and 24–25, quoted above, the poet's skill in weaving words in both languages materializes in an accurate transposition of both semantic and syntactic patterns, as well as the rebound of the emphasis on specific elements that create a hiatus—namely *bei* 被 with “by,” and *dan cong meiyou* 但从没有, paralleled, in turn, with “but never.”

A further direction can be detected in an excerpt from “Poems,” where the self-translator prioritized the pulsation of the composition over full syntactic adherence:

5 Any formatting in the text is not part of the original version and is employed here as a means of emphasizing elements that are functional to my analysis of the poems.

我们没有援助，每人在想着
他自己的危险，每人在渴求
荣誉，快乐，爱情的永固，
而失败永远在我们的身边埋伏，

它发掘真实，这生来的形象
我们畏惧从不敢显露；
站在不稳定的点上，各样机缘的
交错，是我们求来的可怜的

幸福，我们把握而没有勇气
(Mu Dan 2006, 94-95)

We are so helpless: each one broods
His own perils, each one seeks
Fame, love, and secure happiness,
While besetting us in treacherous Failure

Which discloses Reality. A true symbol
We fear. We strive not to have it revealed.
Dancing on a pinpoint, knitting uncertain
Lines of Chances, this is our pitiful

Though craved Luck. We harbour with love, ...
(Mu Dan 2006, 96-97)

Just as in the Chinese version of *Shi* 诗, the first two spaces of breath are anticipated by the repetition of "each one," and rest on "broods / His own perils" and "seeks / Fame." As the line proceeds, we read "love, and secure happiness," instead of "happiness and secure love" (*kuaile, aiqing de yong gu* 快乐, 爱情的永固), an adjustment that enhances sonorousness with the final words of the preceding lines ("broods," "seeks," "happiness"). Through closer observation, it can also be inferred that Mu Dan drew inspiration from his own first version, in which the terms *keqiu* 渴求, *yong gu* 永固, and *maifu* 埋伏 assert a rhythmic circularity at the tail of the lines.

More accommodations occur in the distribution of words, still prompted by a melodic rationale. That is the case in "Lines of Chances," and "Though craved Luck," relocated at the beginning of the last section of this excerpt, generating symmetry at the head of the lines via the repetition of a three-word phrase, isolated by a caesura and a comma and imitating the proportion

enhanced in the Chinese by the disyllabic terms *jiaocuo* 交错 and *xingfu* 幸福. Also worth noticing is the ingeniousness of the word “Failure”:⁶ a novel accent on the concept is conferred not only by the dislocation of the word in final position,⁷ but also by its capitalization, an artifice only made possible by the resources of English.

The reinvention of emphasis is, in fact, an attribute of Mu Dan’s self-translating practice, as the first stanza of “Maturity” (Chengshu 成熟) also punctuates:

每一清早这静谧的市街，
不知道痛苦**它就要来临**，
每个孩子的啼哭，每个苦力
他的**无可辩护的沉默**的脚步，
(Mu Dan 2006, 100)

At break of each day this placid street
Awakens, unconscious of coming agonies,
For the cry of a child, the silent
Unarguing steps of a coolie treading, ...
(Mu Dan 2006, 101)

Encircled by an enjambement and a comma, “Awakens” gains new weight in line 2, thus resulting in a new intonation. Likewise, the prominence of the adjective “silent,” encircled by two *de* 的 in the first original, is reinvigorated by its redeployment in enjambement in the second original.⁸ Also effective is the chiasmus in line 33 of “Hungry China,” gained in self-translation because it is absent in “Ji’e de Zhongguo” (饥饿的中国):

为了争取昨天，**痛苦**已经付出去了⁹
(Mu Dan 2006, 233)

To alleviate **pain**, **pain** has been suffered
(Mu Dan 2006, 239)

6 In place of *maifu* 埋伏, rendered as “craved.”

7 Previously embedded in the Chinese version, being *shibai* 失败 the second word of the same line.

8 From a semantic point of view, such a shift reverberates distinct images: on the one side, the figure of the “coolie” (*kuli* 苦力), and on the other one, the silence of the “leisurely and resigned steps” (*wuke bianhu* 无可辩护).

9 Literally: “In order to struggle for yesterday, pain has been spent.”

By means of a masterful "reshuffling of cards," the self-translator therefore re-modulates and reconstructs the *tempo* of reading, while acting on the poetic signified.

Steps and Counterpoints

That rhythm represents a core aspect of Mu Dan's poetics of creation, if not the hallmark of its poetics of self-translation, is confirmed by the frequency of the repetition as a rhetorical figure of order. Repetition, in the form of anaphor, provides a steady foothold in "Violence" (Baoli 暴力), whose pentastich four stanzas based on semantic contrasts create rhythm through the extension and contraction of breath:

从我们今日的梦魇
到明日的难产的天堂,
从婴儿的第一声啼哭
直到他的不甘心的死亡:
一切遗传你的形象。
(Mu Dan 2006, 264)

From today's dreadful nightmare
To the painful descension of Tomorrow,
From the newborn babe's first cry
Down to its unconsolated death,
Everything takes exactly after your image.
(Mu Dan 2006, 266)

From a microtextual perspective, the architecture of the words dictates the pace of reading, proven by "Wo gesong routi" (我歌颂肉体) and its "double."¹⁰ From the first few lines:

我歌颂肉体: 因为它是岩石
在我们的不肯定中肯定的岛屿。

¹⁰ While composing "I Sing of Flesh," the poet cannot aim for overlapping solutions, thus here he forgoes the parallelisms easily generated in Chinese through repetition and synthesizes them into different expressions: "the suppressed" and "the downtrodden" in line 3 replace *bei [yapo] de* 被[压迫]的 and *bei [roulin] de* 被[蹂躏]的, respectively. Additionally, the double *youxie ren de* 有些人的 in line 4 is condensed into "by some" and "by others." In line 5, the author abandons the parallel and contrasting structure of the comparatives *he [shen] yiyang [gao]* 和[神]一样[高] (as high as) and *he [qu] yiyang [di]* 和[蛆]一样[低] (as low as), preserving only the antithesis on the semantic level.

我歌颂那被压迫的，和被蹂躏的，
 有些人的吝啬和有些人的浪费：
 那和神一样高，和蛆一样低的肉体。

(Mu Dan 2006, 275)

I sing of flesh: because it is the rock,
 A projection of **certainty** in a sea of our **uncertainties**.

I sing of the suppressed, and the downtrodden,
 Miserably hoarded by some and sadistically spent by others,
 The lofty as God, and wormy low **flesh**.

(Mu Dan 2006, 277)

The pace of reading changes all the more so when repetitions serve both lyrical and semantic purposes, such as in the long poem “Revelation” / “Yinxian” (隐现)—a masterful representation of pain and redemption in which the succession of cadenced formulas is meant to evoke a litany:

现在，一天又一天，一夜又一夜，
 我们来自一段完全失迷的路途上，
 闪过一下星光或日光，就再也触摸不到了，

...

一串错综而零乱的，枯干的幻象，
 使我们哭，使我们笑，使我们忧心

...

给我们有一时候山峰，有一时候草原，
 有一时候相聚，有一时候离散，
 有一时候欺人，有一时候被欺，
 有一时候密雨，有一时候燥风，
 有一时候拥抱，有一时候厌倦，
 有一时候开始，有一时候完成，
 有一时候相信，有一时候绝望。

...

主呵，我们衷心的痛惜失散到哪里去了

每日每夜，我们计算增加一点钱财，
 每日每夜，我们度量这人或那人对我们的态度，
 每日每夜，我们创造社会给我们划定的一些前途，

(Mu Dan 2006, 243)

Now, day after day and night after night
 We come from a section of road completely lost
 Once flashing **starlight or sunlight**, then out of touch [with us]

...

A series of complicated, dry broken images,
To make us weep, to make us laugh, to make us worry

...

Give us **a time for** mountains, and **a time for** plains,
 a time for meeting, and **a time for** farewell,
 a time for deceiving and **a time for** being deceived
 a time for rains, and **a time for** winds
 a time for embrace, and **a time for** boredom
 a time for beginning, and **a time for** end
 a time for faith, and **a time for** despair.

...

O Lord, where gone our sincere regret for this?

Day and night, we calculate to accumulate a little more wealth,
Day and night, we consider the personal opinions of this one or that,
Day and night, we plot a future that the community has already set for,
 (Mu Dan 2006, 254–55; 261)

In these lines, the cornerstone of this poem is the chant-like rhythm imbued with religious sentiment. Mu Dan carefully preserves this attribute and strives to recreate it in the English version, primarily through the iteration of “to make us,” “a time for,” and “day and night, we,” generated by the Chinese text in the first place¹¹—but also in recourse to other rhetorical figures committed to the reiteration of sounds, such as the alliteration in “starlight or sunlight” (*xingguang huò rìguāng* 星光或日光), which I will return to later.

The substance of the rhythmic profile is attested by several other rhetorical devices drawn from the English lyrical tradition, of which the translational author makes full use to provide more efficacious intonations. In this respect, a noteworthy reflection arises when “Into Battle” is juxtaposed with “Chufa” (出发), a poem that first appeared on May 4, 1942, in the renowned newspaper *Dagong bao* (大公报) as a tribute to W. H. Auden:¹²

11 With *shi women* 使我们, *you yi shihou* 有一时候, and *mei ri mei ye, women* 每日每夜, 我们.

12 As highlighted by Zhang Qiang (2019).

告诉我们和平又必须杀戮，
 而那可厌的我们先得去欢喜。
 知道了“人”不够，我们再学习
 蹂躏它的方法，排成机械的阵式，
 智力体力蠕动着像一群野兽，

告诉我们这是新的美。因为
 我们吻过的已经失去了自由；
 好的日子过去了，可是接近未来，
给我们失望和希望，给我们死，
 因为那死的制造必需摧毁。

(Mu Dan 2006, 85)

Point us to peace and we—a slaughtering go,
 Order us to love first what we hate the most.
 For it is not sufficient to adore the Human
To crush it we learn. In mechanic formation,
 Let body and mind take beastly motion.

And tell us to appreciate it. Suddenly we know
 The flower we kissed is ours no more.
Gone are the old days, but nearer to future;
Give us vision and revision, give us death,
 To destroy the work of death we venture.

(Mu Dan 2006, 86)

Corresponding to the first half of the poem, these two stanzas offer anaphors, internal rhymes, assonance, and the paronomasia of “vision and revision,” inspired by *shiwang he xiwang* 失望和希望 (disappointment and hope, literally). Moreover, “Into Battle” displays the author’s fondness for creative rhythmic solutions that are even more suitable to English, such as the frequent use of anastrophe—as in “To crush it we learn,” “is ours no more,” and “Gone are the old days,” which cannot be accommodated in Chinese. In addition, “to love first what we hate the most,” in the second line of “Into Battle,” recreates the antinomic arrangement, while the consonance of the counterpoint bestows a new sonorous identity—demonstrating yet again that the rhythmic profile stands as a core reference in Mu Dan’s tightrope walking or lyrical gambling with words.

Tones and Sounds

Laying all the cards on the table, the self-translator accepts risks and makes compromises, as the following lines from "Shiba shou" (诗八首)/"Eight Poems" bear witness:

风暴, 远路, 寂寞的夜晚, [fengbao, yuanlu, jimo de yewan]
 丢失, 记忆, 永续的时间, [diushi, jiyi, yongxu de shijian]¹³
 (Mu Dan 2006, 79)

Tempest, long journey, and the lonely **nights**,
 Non-existence, remembrance, and the never-ending **time**,
 (Mu Dan 2006, 84)

In the face of a quite obvious and yet almost unavoidable loss, that is, of the dense visual pattern accorded by the Chinese characters, sonic effects operate as a counterbalancing device. For instance, the addition of two "and the" before the third element of each line ("nights" and "time") means losing the asyndeton, but it reinvigorates the cadence. Moreover, a new melodic effect is produced, with the assonance between the sound (*ai*) occurring in the two closing words.

The (counter)strategy of creating chords and correspondences also operates with sound figures at the word level, where the relationship between morphemes and phonemes is carefully crafted. By way of example, the opening line of "Spring" puts forward consonances with an onomatopoeic effect:

In the grass the **green flames** flicker,
 (Mu Dan 2006, 76)

While the Chinese poem "Chun" (春) relies on different assonances:

绿色的火焰在草上摇曳,
 [Lüse de huoyan zai caoshang yaoye]
 (Mu Dan 2006, 74)

A similar situation is suggested by line 16 of "Poems," where a powerful onomatopoeia is introduced through alliterations and makes the sigh of the wind quite palpable:

13 The transliteration in the poems is always mine.

But **what weary winds whisper** among its pillars!

(Mu Dan 2006, 96)

In “Shi” (诗) however, Mu Dan favors assonance that evokes a melancholy:

在它的栋梁间却吹着疲倦的冷风!

[*Zai ta de dongliang jian que chui zhe pijuan de leng feng!*]

(Mu Dan 2006, 94)

In the “game of correspondences” put forth by self-translation, the author does not surrender the losses imposed by the intrinsic needs of each language, as the close reading of lines 1–2 and 12–13 of “Qi” (旗) and “Flag” brings to light:

我们都在下面，你在高空飘扬， [*Women dou zai xiamian, ni zai gaokong piaoyang,*]

风是你的身体，你和太阳同行， [*feng shi ni de shenti, ni he taiyang tongxing,*]

(Mu Dan 2006, 117)

Underneath are we all, while you flutter in the sky

Stretching the body with the wind, with the sun journeying.

(Mu Dan 2006, 118)

The rhyme in the Chinese text is supplanted by alliteration (w in “we,” “while,” “with,” “wind”), assonance (i in “underneath,” “we,” and “journeying”), and repetition (“the”), so that a similar paradigm is arranged. When the impossibility of re-proposing a corresponding melodic pattern is acknowledged, different strategies are put in place to re-model the rhythmic profile. This occurs, for instance, with the poem “Myself,” which offers an English version of “Wo” (我), one of his most famous pieces:

从子宫割裂，失去了温暖， [*wennuan*]

是残缺的部分渴望着救援， [*kewang; jiu yuan*]

永远是自己，锁在荒野里， [*yongyuan; ziji, huangye li*]

从静止的梦里离开了群体， [*meng li; qunti*]

痛感到时流，没有什么抓住，

不断的回忆带不回自己， [*huiyi, ziji*]

遇见部分时候在一起哭喊, [yujian]
 是春恋的狂喜, 想冲出樊篱, [chunlian; kuangxi, fan li]
 伸出双手来抱住了自己 [ziji]

幻想的形象, 是更深的绝望。 [huanxiang, xingxiang, juewang]
 永远是自己, 锁在荒野里, [ziji, huangye li]
 仇恨着母亲给分出了梦境。 [muqin, mengjing]
 (Mu Dan 2006, 38)

Split from the womb, no more in warmth,
An incomplete part am I, yearning for help,
Forever myself, locked in the vast field,

Separated from the body of Many, out of a still dream,
 I ache in the flow of Time, catching hold of nothing,
 Incessant recollections do not bring back me.

Meeting a part of me, we cry together,
 The mad joy of first love, breaking out of prison,
 I stretch both hands only to embrace

An image in my heart, which is deeper despair,
Forever myself, locked in the vast field,
 Hate mother for separating me from the dream.
 (Mu Dan 2006, 39)

The intrinsic rhythm is first implemented by the lines, often interrupted by a comma cadencing the breath of the reading. Completing the framework are a repetition ("Forever myself, locked in the vast field") and two anastrophes ("an incomplete part am I," "do not bring back me"), and the proximity of sounds in lines 10 and 12. Finally, the enjambement between the third and fourth stanza replaces the reverberation of *ziji* / *huanxiang de xingxian* 自己/ 幻想的形象 with an echo of an action, "to embrace," thus conveying a new glare to the image. Mu Dan reveals his ambition to capture the flavor of the composition, attempting to say "almost the same thing," while shading it in varying tones.

Conclusion

What emerges from the comparative reading of the twelve first and second originals is a poetics committed to tone, counterpoint, breath, and pace. Facing the “problematic necessity” embedded in self-translation (see Weinberger 2000, 39), Mu Dan does not fall into the trap of simulating the first original, while at the same time he resists the temptation to grant himself the absolute auctorial freedom to rewrite. Rather, in the face of the proverbial “loss” that occurs in translation, he used rhythm as a counterbalancing device, so as to produce self-standing poems—second originals, that is—while preserving a refined and delicate agreement between his two creative sides. His focus on the rhythm, or what Benedetto Croce described as “the soul of poetic expression, and therefore poetic expression itself” (1937, 183), then led to “a reversal, or at least a downplaying, of the hierarchy that normally favors the original over the translation, with neither version taking precedence” (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2013, 324).

To a certain extent, Mu Dan preferred to recreate what his poetry *did*, before what it *said*—to echo Meschonnic (1995), whose ideas about the ethics and politics of translation are grounded on the critique of rhythm (2007) and can be applied to Mu Dan’s poetics self-translation.

Tackling the issue from a broader perspective, though, what is the legacy of Mu Dan’s self-translating practice? In David Der-wei Wang’s words, “to what extent did [Mu Dan’s self-translating experience] contribute to the global circulation of modernities?” (2017, 3).

On the one hand, his concise experience contributed to shaping the poetics of translation in modern China, even its poetics of creation, through transaction. The value of engagement with foreign literatures is reasserted both by means of the first originals—in their “modern” and yet “deferential-to-lyricality” forms—and of the product of self-translation, which does not claim to be derivative, but original itself. The self-translating practice hence represents a product of a cross-cultural translation, bringing to the fore a spectrum of linguistic, cultural, and literary transactions, along with the author’s wish for self-renewal by incorporating otherness(es) into identity. On the other hand, in so doing, Mu Dan himself decided to give the world a taste of modern Chinese poetry, therefore making it a global phenomenon. At the same time, he was stressing the translingual and transcultural nature of Chinese literary modernity—a foretaste of the contemporary Sinophone.

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