The Forked Tongue of Chinese-English Translation at MSU (Mandarin-Speaking University?), circa 2015

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**Abstract**

The Michigan State University's 2014/15 'Year of China (The China Experience: An MSU Exploration of Arts and Culture)' envisaged a variety of cross-cultural events. This article samples the discursive and symbolic contact arising from such ventures through looking specifically at Chinese-English translation in novels and film captions. The coming of the Chinese, both the people and their language and culture, is seen to necessitate code-switching in communication between the guests’ Mandarin and the host society’s English - the lingua franca of globalization. The article argues and demonstrates that such translation is fraught with slippages and occlusion; diametrically opposed narratives are produced according to whether the object or the event is seen from the Sino-centric or U.S.-centric perspective. Despite the good intentions of cultural negotiation to elucidate, linguistic code-switching turns into an encryption, a forked tongue that ‘unspeaks’ what it alleges to translate from or into.

**Keywords:** translation, code-switching, bilinguality

Purely by chance, I first stumbled upon my home institution’s mysterious engagement with the ‘Year of China (The China Experience: An MSU Exploration of Arts and Culture)’ in an August 2014 funding request by Michigan State University Museum to mount the photograph exhibition ‘Seeing China.’¹ This Museum request confirmed a November 2013 invitation from the MSU Federal Credit Union Institute for Arts & Creativity at Wharton Center to participate in the planning of a joint performance by the Guangzhou Acrobatic Troupe and an American
modern dance company in the 2015-2016 season ‘as Michigan State celebrates China that year.12 These initiatives turned out to coincide with Broad Art Museum’s ‘Future Returns: Contemporary Art from China,’ Wharton Center’s Shen Yun Performance,3 and a host of on-campus activities. The coordination amongst myriad university units and committees was bound to be a Herculean effort but, in this case, befuddlingly low-key, without any fanfare associated with a university-wide celebration. In normal circumstances, such university-wide campaigns would be quite visible through the student newspaper and social media, blazoned on banners across campus, such as the 2014-15 Project 60/50 celebrating civil and human rights. By contrast, the Year of China may transpire without many of its faculty and students noticing it. Surely due to difficulties of organizing a gargantuan university bureaucracy, the unintended result was a Janus-faced initiative that appeared to throw a big party in appreciation of Chinese constituency, while avoiding any pushback of China-bashing in the rust belt notorious for Japan-bashing of the 1980s. One of the casualties of Japan-bashing was Vincent Chin, mistaken for a Japanese and bludgeoned to death by two laid-off automobile workers in Detroit in 1982.4

No doubt silly paranoia over an organization’s unwitting forked tongue, but in the year of our Lord 2015, we shall not have the year of the Goat after all, but of the Dragon, to celebrate the bounty the dragon’s sons and daughters have brought us. Indeed, the number of mainland Chinese students at MSU has grown exponentially in recent years, totalling sixty-one per cent of international student population in 2013, which collectively contributed $250 million a year to the local economy.5 No one can deny that with their enviable purchasing power, these dragon seeds have helped revitalize an MSU long plagued by economic woes in the new millennium. To rephrase Eugene O’Neill’s play set in a bar of broken dreams and alcoholics, ‘The Chinaman Cometh’ to prolong the life of MSU, an increasingly Mandarin-speaking university in terms of Confucius Institute course offerings and the Beijing accent of flocks of Chinese students flitting across campus. This foreign influx to sustain American institutions of higher education is nothing new, having already been ridiculed at USC (University of Southern California as University of Southern Chinese), UCI (University of California, Irvine as University of Chinese Immigrants), and elsewhere. Lansing’s local newspaper has also reported on the unfamiliar ways of young Chinese nouveaux riches driving BMWs, paying cash for mansions in posh neighbourhoods, and one mysterious Chinese student group boasting
of monopolizing all Oriental grocery stores in East Lansing and the adjacent Okemos. There was some bad press, though, such as an alleged MSU ‘Chinese student gang’ calling itself Chengguan after mainland China’s municipal control agency. Some gang members were accused of an assault and two admitted that their Infiniti and Mercedes-Benz did sport Chengguan stickers resembling police badges. In the fashion of, for instance, Beijing municipal agents’ blue shield-shaped shoulder insignia, these badges showed four bold Chinese characters ‘City Control Law Enforcement’ in the centre, capped by ‘East Lansing’ in English rather than ‘Beijing,’ a demonstration of creative bilingualism or a bug-like whim jumping species. Negative media coverage aside, such general flaunting of wealth has, arguably, underwritten area prosperity, specifically, foreign import car dealers, housing markets, restaurants, retail stores, and, of course, MSU itself. Now that it is upon us, Middle Kingdom upon Middle America, this paper focuses on their discursive and symbolic contact through Chinese-English translation in novels and film captions used in MSU classes, in museum exhibition labels, in music performance programs, and in flyers and online materials. Off campus, Chinese restaurant and grocery store signs, menus, foodstuff displays, and cinema line-ups represent a continuation from university life to everyday pop culture.

The coming of the Chinese, both the people and their language and culture, necessitates code-switching in communication between the guests’ Mandarin and the host society’s English, the lingua franca of globalization and the main reason for Chinese students to venture here in the first place. Yet the code-switching in instances cited above leading up to and throughout MSU’s Year of China suggests that rather than unmediated data or knowledge transfer, such translation in fact encodes, scrambles the source language of Chinese or English so much so that it well-nigh switches off potential cross-cultural dialogues. The source and target language may not even overlap much in certain instances; the translation is fraught with slippages and occlusion, consciously or not. In the worst case scenarios, Chinese students and the English-speaking public come to decode separate versions of things from documentary titles, museum exhibition labels, and music performance programs, a process that represents the object or the event from the Sino-centric versus U.S.-centric perspective, producing diametrically opposed narratives. In search of parallel, equal, and mirroring cultures through side-by-side translation, each linguistic group finds what it wishes to find—no different from google searches: China’s uniqueness or America’s incommensurability. Despite the good intentions of cultural
negotiation to elucidate, linguistic code-switching turns into an encryption, a forked tongue that ‘unspeaks’ what it alleges to translate from or into. Rather than coexistence and complementarity, Chinese-English translation is the site of contestation of two MSUs: within an English-speaking MSU are secreted pockets of Mandarin-Speaking Undergraduates with very deep pockets.

The pitting of two MSUs in supposedly one entity conjures up the image of a forked tongue, a duality stemming from the same root. Translation, by definition, hinges on that shifting indeterminacy. In the vein of Platonic-Germanic romantic philosophy, Walter Benjamin pontificates that ‘The Task of the Translator’ is to seek out pure language, a metaphysical intention beyond words since ‘all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages’ (p. 75). As the meaning of words resides in ‘emotional connotations,’ which a faithful translation could never hope to cover, a translator should aim instead at pinpointing the essence of language. Thus, Benjamin concludes that ‘Meaning is served far better – and literature and language far worse – by the unrestrained license of bad translators’ (p. 78). In the name of ‘translational license,’ Benjamin appears to sanction MSU translations’ unspeaking of the original tongue. Yet Benjamin’s highfalutin, mystical musings of the oneness behind all beings fall far short of MSU’s here and now. Rather than the highest of spiritual intentions, the forked tongue targets political expediency and springs at times from linguistic inefficacy.

In lieu of a German theorist, what transpires when the Middle Kingdom meets the Midwest evokes the quintessential transformer-trickster Monkey from the eponymous sixteenth-century classic by Wu Cheng’en. Arthur Waley translated the fantasy of a Tang dynasty monk Tripitaka traveling to India to acquire Buddhist sutras, under the protection of his half-deity, half-demon disciples of Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy. The story crystallizes the very notion of cultural translation, as Tripitaka, a historical figure, not only physically journeyed to India but also learned Sanskrit and translated the scriptures into Chinese, in part inaugurating Buddhism in China. Monkey himself boasts of the magic power of seventy-two transformations, plus the ability of self-cloning by plucking and blowing on his body hairs, literally, breathing life into them. Monkey personifies the restive energy, the irrepressible gusto of a modern China and its citizenry dispersed (self-splitting?) to the four corners of the world. What is fun and game to a child-like Monkey has morphed, in China in Ten Words (2011), into the common practice Yu
Hua relegates to *Huyou*, translated as ‘bamboozle’ in accordance with the Chinese original’s euphemistic tone to veil the suggestion of ‘deceit, treachery.’

In his terribly abridged translation, however, Waley took great liberty in revamping (bamboozling?) the original. One example would suffice. At the outset of Tripitaka’s journey west, a hunter saves him from the tiger’s mouth, literally. Yet a hunter’s diet ill fits a vegetarian monk. To remedy that, the hunter’s mother and wife undertake considerable pains: The mother ‘asked her daughter-in-law to take down the smaller pot, heat it to burn off the oil grease, brush it a couple of times, wash it repeatedly, and then put it on the stove. She put in half a pot of boiling water, then dumped it. She took some leaves from the mountains to boil for tea and soup. Then she used grains and millet to make a pot of rice. Then she prepared and cooked dried vegetables. She put two bowls on the table’ (Wu, p.133, translation mine). This long passage detailing an elaborate ritual of cleansing is reduced to one word ‘salad’ in Waley’s translation (123). As erudite as he was, Arthur Waley would have been keenly aware that average Chinese do not enjoy raw vegetables called salad, not today and definitely not in the Tang dynasty. Such revisionist translations continued in Howard Goldblatt’s selective rendering of the Nobel laureate Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* (1987, 1993), Karen S. Kingsbury’s and Julia Lovell’s translations of Eileen Chang, just to name a few noted examples in modern Chinese literature. To be fair, translation is exhausting, largely unappreciated work, and revisionism occurs not only between two languages, but between two genres within the same language, evidenced by Zhang Yimou’s filmic adaptation of *Red Sorghum* (1987). Even in the closest of professional and personal relationship, such as that of Yu Hua and Allan H. Barr’s *China in Ten Words*, the translation is still not above some transposing and editing.

Given that both sides – Monkey’s hairs and Waley’s heirs – are still game in this cross-cultural ‘paraphrasing,’ what has given me pause at MSU may not seem so out of the ordinary. MSU Journalism professors’ documentary *Imported from China* (2013) on the upsurge of Chinese students was what first alerted me to the unwitting doublespeak. The documentary interweaves interviews of Chinese and American students, MSU and Lansing school administrators and student parents. It chronicles Chinese student life and local reactions. Tensions flare between roommates from different backgrounds and behaviour patterns. While Chinese students see their expensive cars as gifts from their parents to allow their sons and daughters away from home to ‘feel secure,’ local resentment erupts in the spray painting of
Fig. 1: *Imported from China* (2013), from Google Image
such cars at Cherry Tree Apartment parking lot where many Chinese reside. Ironically, the gifts create a sense of insecurity after the vandalism. The documentary also alludes to the USC double homicides of Chinese graduate students in their BMW, which occurred on April 11, 2012.

The film’s DVD case, as well as the YouTube and social media advertisement, for that matter, is a shot inside an airliner prior to takeoff (fig. 1). (This is in fact a film still from the very beginning of the documentary.) In the foreground blocking over four-fifth of the image is a canvas backpack, its flap located right at the centre showing a sewn-on leather patch. Instead of Levi’s jeans or other name brands, the logo is split in half: the top half printed with ‘IMPORTED FROM CHINA’; the bottom its supposed translation ‘zhongguo chuko’ (中国出口), separated by a line of aerial wake from two airplanes flying in opposite directions. ‘Zhongguo chuko,’ however, means China Exports and is expressly not the English title, which should be ‘zi zhongguo ruko’ (自中国入口), hence violating the traditional four-character idiom format and the Chinese self-image, to which I will return. Since the documentary filmmakers are Americans, they may have relied on others for the Chinese title, resulting in an unconscious sleight of hand in naming. The Chinese title begins to make sense with the top one fifth of the image, which is a peek over the backpack at a cabin-full of dark-haired young Chinese putting their luggage into overhead bins, apparently en route to the New World for study.

The dual titles allow English speakers to gravitate to Imported from China, which happens to be at the top of the split logo and more prominently displayed. The American subjectivity and Western gaze are ensconced in the distance of witnessing and surveilling the very first step Chinese foreign students take to be in ‘our’ midst. That the beginning of their long journey from there is otherwise unknown to Americans increases the sense of an all-seeing eye. Not to mince words, the viewpoint resembles Panopticon surveillance, launched from behind the backpack, an invisible fourth wall, as it were, catching the Chinese subjects unawares, without any of them looking back. The all-seeing eye remains unseen, omniscient, studying goods from afar. A Foucauldian control seems to be challenged somewhat by the three lines of ever-larger fonts below the split logo: ‘In the next 100 years, we are linked together. / Whether we like it or not, / we are linked together,’ which are the very last words of the documentary. The three lines are an intensification not only through repetitions but also through the swelling
fonts, which match, one imagines, the rising voice and emotion. But if the ‘we’ in the reprise is English-speaking hosts, it intimates a resolve to work together, given the symbiosis of Chinese capital and American higher education, or more broadly, the symbiosis of the two superpowers. There is an odious ring, though, of American xenophobia from Walt Disney’s *The Aristocat* (1970). The duplicitous, marauding twin Siamese cats intone, in the ‘Oriental’ pentatonic scale, no less: ‘We are Siamese, if you please. / We Are Siamese, if you don’t please. . . If we like, / we stay maybe for quite a while.’ Repetitions of foreign invasive species threaten homeland security, in Disney’s wholesome magic kingdom then and once again now. The silly, nursery rhyme-style ‘if you please’ and ‘if you don’t please’ harden into ‘whether we like it or not,’ a warning of sorts. The subliminal message of us versus them informs both the control of a Panopticon gaze and the danger of the next century of co-dependency.

By contrast, Chinese viewers - mostly on-campus Chinese students in the documentary’s debut - would no doubt zoom in on the sole Chinese characters at the very centre of an English-only ad. The four Chinese characters of 中国出口 establish their first impression: their story is being told and, more importantly, told from a Chinese angle, implicit in the Chinese title *China Exports*. That these four words are besieged by English words compounds the sense of isolation, echoing the marginalized image of Chinese passengers near the edge of the poster. *China Exports*, furthermore, stresses the active agency of the point of origin, not that of the place of destination, i.e., the U.S., inherent in the English title *Imported from China*, where the passive voice downplays China’s role. Note that the airplane is yet to take off, so the Chinese students remain on Chinese soil, about to be exported. This fact elicits varying responses. On the one hand, Americans tend to view the young passengers from a distance, say, from the U.S., because they by and large do not share the experience of studying overseas for four years or longer, in spite of American college’s overseas exchange programs for considerably shorter periods of time. On the other, Chinese students at MSU would not only identify with those passengers going through what they have gone through not so long ago but they may wax nostalgic over fellow countrymen still on home soil, with their humanity or Chineseness intact, prior to depreciation as merchandise or as ones whose sole purpose is perceived by the host society to be the consumption of merchandise. In the history of Asian diaspora in the U.S., the documentary’s title harks back to the somewhat commercial term FOB, the unflattering slur against new arrivals who are likened to goods ‘fresh off the boat.’ But an earlier moment of
hurt is often repackaged into a badge of honour and identity in ethnic consciousness. To wear one’s shame on the sleeve suggests owning and in control of that painful memory.

It is but natural for the eye of English speakers to bounce off those four Chinese characters, which crystallize the unfathomable, hence exotic, otherness of the subject matter. Simply put, Chinese words are unreadable, their meaninglessness intensifying Oriental inscrutability. This invokes the title *Imported from China*, as if foreign substance is taken into America’s body politic, assimilated or not. The oral-digestive metaphor is amazingly apt, as I indicated that *Imported from China* should be rendered ‘*zi zhongguo ruko,*’ (自中国入口). ‘Ruko’ means ‘enter mouth’ or import, whereas ‘*chuko*’ means ‘exit mouth’ or export. Both terms intersect the human body with body politic, a body’s eating and consumption of food with a society’s trading and consumption of goods. Accordingly, Chinese students would be immediately taken by the affective, ethnocentric power of *中国出口*, literally, ‘Middle Kingdom exit mouth (export).’ While ‘China’ sounds to Chinese ears unfamiliar, alienating as a name given by the West after the First Emperor of Qin (Ch’in in the Wade-Gile Romanization), Chinese see themselves as connected more closely to the Han dynasty succeeding Qin. Furthermore, the name *zhongguo* (中国 Middle Kingdom) strikes a chord with those holding the belief of Chinese centrality. What to Americans is the nonsensical ideogram 国 (*guo* or Kingdom) is instinctively given the meaning of stereotypical, Oriental meaninglessness. By comparison, 国 to Chinese readers comprises a piece of jade (玉) inside a protective square, which takes the very shape of *ko* or mouth (口). Hence, for Chinese students at MSU, that precious jewel is out of the mouth, out of the body: they are the jade devoid of its proper context, which is China itself, and no longer as prized. (Incidentally, the quintessentially Romeo character born with a piece of jade in his mouth is Jia Baoyu or Jia Precious Jade in the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*. ) This may smack of Ezra Pound’s poetics of the splitting of Chinese ideograms in *The Cantos* (1915-62), but verbal associations are powerful undercurrents running just below conscious cognition. A case in point: if the simplified script, 中国, is replaced by the traditional script, 中國, mainland Chinese students trained in simplified scripts may be put off by rather than drawn close to their motherland, now looking different with a defamiliarizing name. This is exactly how someone accustomed to traditional scripts would feel looking at the uncanny jade locked inside a Chinese box. The identification with the four Chinese characters
is further countenanced by the poster’s smattering of the Chinese communist national colour of red and the five stars from the national flag. Given the empathy, Chinese students, who are by definition bilingual, read the three lines of swelling fonts below the logo as bespeaking Chinese determination to stake a claim to the New World, a collective will to power consistent with the post-Mao China’s social Darwinism.

In terms of museum exhibits, one wonders about the need for bilingual translation at all on a practical level. Museum-goers who are Chinese students are all bilingual, otherwise they would not be able to attend MSU. English labels alone suffice to introduce the artwork, so long as keywords such as artists’ Chinese names and artwork titles are retained in parentheses to clarify Romanization of a language fraught with homophones. It would be beneficial, in fact, to challenge Chinese students to decipher English labels without the accompanying Chinese ones. The reverse cannot be said for American visitors, only a tiny portion of who are proficient in Chinese. In other words, the practical function of Chinese labels remains unidentified, which has led to unequal pairings of translations. Broad Art Museum exhibits have bilingual labels, except certain kinds of artwork when it first opened; MSU Museum exhibits originally planned to have labels ‘presented in both English and Chinese. The English labels will be translated by a MSU student intern who is majoring in Chinese and minoring in Arts and Culture Management.’

Given the complicated task of cross-cultural mediation, professional translators with native fluency in the two languages are called for. The MSU Museum labels did not pan out the way it was announced online and in intramural communications. Judging from the few Chinese characters for the exhibit, including the nine characters for the title ‘Seeing China: Photographic Views and Viewpoints,’ it is just as well that Chinese translation was not attempted. In point of fact, individual photographs in ‘Seeing China’ did not come with explanatory labels at all in the first few weeks of the exhibition, except each photographer’s general artistic statement, all in English and untranslated. Weeks later, bare bone English labels comprising the subject, place, and year showed up on post-it notes below the photographs.

To sum up, bilingual labels are not required insofar as practical audience reception is concerned. Their uneven existence throughout two museum exhibits testifies to that, or bilinguality would characterize every single label right from the start. If half of such Chinese-English translations are Greek to the majority of visitors, then the cause of such displays must
be sought elsewhere, namely, ideologically and emotionally. The adjunct curator of ‘Future Returns’ is Chinese and, conceivably, the labels are constructed in Chinese and rendered subsequently in English. Contemporary artwork from China, likewise, are created inside China and transported here. So it is fitting that bilingual pairings adorn all the artworks, yet this hypothesis is self-defeating as certain artworks come with English labels only in the early stages of the exhibition. Rather, these selective pairings manage to accomplish the appearance of an equal partnership, when the bulk of guests would be drawn to English only. The reason for bilinguality lies in the impression of an equivalent, comparable Sino-U.S. relationship, which is both ideological and affective—how an ethnocentric subject believes and feels. A Chinese would be pleased by the presence of his/her native tongue, although that part of the labels serves hardly anyone else in the room. A psychological return consummates itself in the home language. On the other hand, quite a few Americans would be reassured by half of the labels that escape them, their liberal, cosmopolitan impulse assuaged, ironically, by enigmatic expressions from an enigmatic Orient. Dig a hole to China is a childhood game reprised compulsively in adulthood because the dark half, the shadow self, lies within America’s own heart.

Exhibition labels, to be sure, are instrumental to any museum experience. Michael Baxandall in ‘Exhibiting Intention’ contends that museum exhibitions involve three players: ‘makers of objects, exhibitors of made objects, and viewers of exhibited made objects’ (p. 36). Insofar as the mediator in between is concerned, ‘[w]hat the [exhibition] label says is not in any normal sense descriptive. It does not cover the visual character of the object. To do so would involve an elaborate use of measurements and geometrical concepts and reference to the representation elements, and would in any case be otiose, since the object is present’ (p. 35). As a result, Baxandall defines the museum experience as ‘the contact in the space between object and label,’ which is an ‘intellectual space in which the third agent, the viewer, establishes contact between the first and the second agents … the word label [denotes] the element of naming, information, and exposition the exhibitor makes available to the viewer in whatever form’ (p. 37). That form at MSU’s exhibits entails Chinese-English translation labels, markedly complicating the three-way relationship Baxandall posits. The fourth element of Chinese language labels intensifies that which already exists in many exhibits of foreign cultural objects, namely, Romanized proper nouns, or even foreign scripts, in parentheses
amidst English language labels. When the common museum practice is to retain proper nouns and keywords in foreign language and gloss them in English, MSU exhibits appear to put far more weight on the Chinese language explanatory remarks. Yet for most museum-goers at MSU, the fourth element of Chinese labels may just as well be the Stanislavsky fourth wall. They expressly do not explain; an English speaker simply sees through them. The objects are then twice removed, shrouded in visual as well as linguistic mystique, elevated to a quasi-independence from the exhibition context at MSU for English language viewers. Discursively, this must be how a new empire presents itself, on its own terms and in its own tongue.

Broad Art Museum’s ‘Future Returns: Contemporary Art from China’ exhibition runs from October 30, 2014 to March 3, 2015. The title of the exhibition is called in Chinese: ‘Weilai de huiguei: laizi zhongguo de dangdai yishu’ (未来的回归: 来自中国的当代艺术). A subtle change occurs between the Sino-English titles, raising the spectre of perspectives. ‘Future Returns’ comprises a subject and a singular verb, both words abstract and ill-defined, denoting amorphous temporality and spatiality: a time future is to double back to somewhere and/or some point in time. The undisclosed riddle is answered in the subtitle, whereby Chinese contemporary art stands in for the future. Reminiscent of the 1980s series of films Back to the Future, the English title smacks of sci-fi a-chronology. The Chinese title ‘Weilai de huiguei’ (未来的回归), by contrast, stabilizes the volatile futuristic tenor in that it consists of one single subject, literally, ‘the return/retrocession of the future,’ or ‘the future’s return/retrocession,’ which, combined with the subtitle’s allusion to China, suggests that Chinese contemporary art folds both future and tradition onto itself. This implication of tradition arises from the word choice of ‘retrocession’ (huiguei), a term used in such nationalistic catchphrases as ‘return to the motherland’ (huiguei zhuguo) and ‘return to the mainland’ (huiguei dalu). Hong Kong and Macau have retroceded from Britain and Portugal to China in 1997 and 1999; Taiwan is pressured to do so in the foreseeable future. Indeed, psychic retrocession manifests itself in a nostalgic homecoming for Chinese visitors to the exhibit. All such rumination on bilingual titles is a moot point when it comes to posters at MSU’s International Center and elsewhere on campus. These posters practically reverse the proportion of the two languages. ‘Future Returns’ is the only line of English, flanked by large Chinese characters, some fine print on Broad Museum buried at the lower right-hand corner. Even the exhibition dates are in Chinese; English speakers must make an educated guess as to the month and day. Most English speakers
would be stumped by the poster’s utter inexplicability, a large dose of mystique for sure, but quite ineffective as advertising.

‘Future Returns’ is divided into three sections, although the logic of the division eludes many guests: ‘Culture and Re-Mapping’; ‘Reality and Possibility’; and ‘Future and Imagination.’ A wide range of art pieces - sculpture, painting, photograph, installation - in the first two sections are adequately translated, the last section of ‘Future and Imagination,’ however, not at all, with only English explanations when the show first opened. ‘Future and Imagination,’ harking back to the keyword in the overall exhibition, ought to provide a bang and a finale to the museum experience. Instead, the five videos in ‘Future and Imagination’ are documentaries, short features, and performance arts without bilingual titles and explanations. Miao Xiaochun’s ‘Restart’ (2008-10) is a computer-generated short that runs 14:22 minutes. He Yunchang’s ‘Wrestling with 100 People’ (2001) records in 12:41 minutes the artist doing exactly that with a long queue of challengers. He’s ‘Dialogue with Water’ (1999) shows the artist hung upside down holding a dagger barely touching a running brook, which lasts 11:23 minutes. Geng Yi’s ‘Barking’ (2014, 20:27 minutes) documents Beijing’s stray dogs in a bleak, ruinous cityscape, including open-air dog meat markets. Zhang Yanfeng and Zhou Gang’s ‘Big Wuhan City’ (2014, 15 minutes) captures a city in transition with all its abjection and degradation. The five pieces are given diverging presentations. Miao’s computer-generated short occupies the largest screen across a whole wall with the sound blaring out of the amplifiers right at the entrance to this collective space recessed like a den, where viewers can sit and enjoy. To the side are two tiny computer-sized monitors where He’s performance art pieces are displayed, with no sound. By entering into a deeper compartment, a dimly-lit cul-de-sac, two medium-sized screens facing each other at odd angles play ‘Barking’ and ‘Big Wuhan City,’ with two headsets, one for each documentary. However, the headphone for ‘Barking’ had remained mute in the several visits I paid to the museum. Without the headphone, visitors would be bombarded by Miao’s soundtrack for ‘Restart.’ China’s imaginary future as well as lived reality at present evince preferential treatment in a hierarchical structure, there as well as here thousands of miles away.

Without accompanying Chinese labels as in all the other artworks, these five avant-garde, transgressive, and disturbing videos rife with animal cruelty and inhumanity seem assuredly banned in China, hence designed for Western consumption. In the museum’s overall layout,
they are positioned away from the other exhibits. Ascending the narrow stairs, visitors reach the second floor to view ‘Future Returns.’ They would instinctively follow the contour of the stairs into the inviting open space of large display rooms bathed in natural and semi-natural light. Only the most contrarian and agoraphobic would reject the architectural design and make a sharp left turn into the dark corner where ‘Future and Imagination’ resides, where it appears secreted away from the exhibition proper. A foyer of sorts precedes the recess into ‘Future and Imagination,’ a foyer equipped with a bank of computers on what appear to be children’s games over the construction of Chinese ideograms and other signs. That setup of fun and game further augments the sense that visitors are now taking leave of the exhibition. Of course, the dark hole of a space may be owing to the dim lights required for video showing. Architecturally, Zaha Hadid-designed Broad Art Museum resembles several pieces of scrap metal crushed together and then unfolded and recycled. The Museum thus comes with multiple sharp angles for outside looks rather than display space inside. Relegated to one such corner, ‘Future and Imagination’ proffers a nightmarish vision of what has come to pass, an exclusive viewing of China’s dirty linen hung out to dry. This airing of dog eating and ecological-socioeconomic degradation are unlikely to be met with general Chinese approval; consequently, those directly involved may have opted to recede from view, from any visible role in Chinese-language exhibition labels. On a return visit on 5 February 2015, I was delighted that Chinese-language labels were added, which proved either the makeshift nature upon the exhibition’s inception or the subsequent pressure to make the exhibition labels consistent.

During Broad Art Museum’s October 30, 2014 opening ceremony of ‘Future Returns’ exhibition, MSU student group, The Silk Road Chinese Orchestra, performed twelve traditional pieces with traditional musical instruments. Its program opens to a list of the dozen pieces on the left verso page and a brief explanation of instruments on the right recto page. The titles of the twelve pieces on the left are bilingual and arrayed in two columns. In striking red, each of the twelve Chinese titles is itemized against an otherwise all-black program. Take for instance the first title: ‘好日子 [Hao rizi, A Fine Day], 2 min, 40 sec.,’ which the right-hand column simply translates as ‘Orchestra,’ presumably an orchestral piece employing all instruments. The second title confuses even more: ‘火把节恋歌 [Huobajie liange], 5 min,’ which is rendered as ‘Liuqin+Percussion, Andrea+Howie,’ presumably a duet and the first names of the two musicians. Liuqin and other instruments are explicated on the right recto
page of the program. *Huobajie liange* in fact means ‘The Love Song of Torches,’ but the accompanying English translation merely details the kinds of instruments and performers. The Chinese titles are neither translated in the right-hand column nor Romanized - the Romanized brackets are provided by me. This may well be a sign of linguistic incompetence and failure of imagination, i.e., the inability to conceptualize from the viewpoint of non-Chinese. An infelicity with English does seem to mar the program, as ‘Instruments’ on the recto page lists randomly, not in alphabetical order, eleven or so instruments. The instrument *Hulusi* for the eleventh piece on the verso page is not explained at all on the recto page. Likewise, certain instruments that are explained do not show up on the verso page; one has to conclude that they belong to the orchestra instead. This shoddy, amateurish program belies the professional look of the troupe in bright red, well-tailored *qipao* (women’s long robes) and black Western suits and ties.

The flawed program, however, derives as much from rhetorical ineptitude as from cultural reluctance, indeed aversion, to imagine. Chinese insistence on the supremacy of its language eerily simulates American self-centeredness of brazenly expecting non-English speakers around the world to acquire English in order to communicate with Americans. (Curated by Americans, MSU museum’s ‘Seeing China’ may have felt compelled to make an effort at translation to avoid that perception, only to be scrapped in the end.) A superpower’s sense of superiority is contagious, shared by the erstwhile *The Ugly American* (1958) and by the expanding Chinese ‘soft power,’ contemporary art and traditional music included. Even the irony of Chinese students sojourning in U.S. institutions of higher education does little to inspire the Silk Road Orchestra to become a two-way road linguistically. On the contrary, that irony may have deepened ethnocentrism over Chinese characters, eye-catchingly red yet baldly unglossed, all unadulterated in a purist sense. This cultural high ground is a throwback to post-war American exceptionalism. Whatever the cause, the Chinese titles in red are utterly divorced from the sea of English words in black on the program: the Chinese titles remain codes inaccessible to English speakers, ‘whether we (they?) like it or not.’

This overestimation for the host community’s linguistic capability has played out locally. For several months after its relocation to Trowbridge Plaza at Harrison and Trowbridge, the grocery store 大华 (*Da Hua*) displayed its sign in Chinese only, the English name ‘Greater China’ not added until much later. Among the hassle of moving a business and its stock, to
have two English words - Greater China - painted on the store sign should be the least of one’s worries. As a business, this oversight clearly had little effect on sales from Chinese clientele. Arguably, English-speaking customers would not have been able to tell that Greater China had moved to the crossroads until the English title was up. Likewise, since its opening in 2013, the Korean restaurant 大長今 near campus, at the intersection of the area main drag Grand River Avenue and Bogue Street, calls itself exactly that. 大長今 or Dae Jang Geum (대장금 in Korean) is the title of the 2003 Korean TV series on traditional Korean cuisine featuring Lee Young-ae, wildly popular throughout Asia and Asian diasporic communities. The Chinese characters used on the storefront ought to be intelligible to East Asian customers from China, Korea, and Japan, all three countries drawing from the traditional script of the Chinese language. It would be a test of courage, though, for Americans to venture into a restaurant with an unknown name. Not far from the Korean restaurant at the end of 2014 was a construction site for new student apartments. Two billboards advertised the hip logo and contact information of the company (‘eL The Element’), while ‘Now for Leasing’ was prominently displayed in English and in Chinese respectively. On Michigan Avenue on the other side of the campus, Midtown Apartments advertised their rental property through the logo ‘MIDTOWN 家,’ with a brief explanation online that the company included the Chinese character ‘home’ to ‘start a conversation with our community about the value of engaging international students.’ Midtown Apartments were clearly targeting Chinese students, or the ‘conversation’ would have had to be in Hindi, Korean, Russian, and so forth to be truly international and multilingual. ‘MIDTOWN 家’ is euphemistic business-speak: neither is it situated in Midtown Manhattan nor home to Chinese-speaking students. In local newspapers and media, foreign import cars, realtors, and other businesses have consistently resorted to English-Chinese ads, less for the perception of an equal Sino-U.S. relationship, as in the case of campus museums, than for profits from Chinese students.

On the MSU campus, a recent event also highlighted the parallel tracks of Chinese students and the university community at large. Throughout October and November, 2014, Chinese students had manned tables at Wells Hall lobby and near the Rock with drawings of a huge heart scribbled with, in Chinese, Feicheng wurao (If no sincerity, then keep away), a four-character idiom frequently used in China’s dating agencies and advertisements. More
importantly, it is the title of a hit Jiangsu TV dating show since 2010. Such concerted efforts, including MSU Chinese Student Association web site, paved the way for China’s Singles Day on 11 November 2014, the largest e-shopping day on Alibaba and Chinese cyber commerce. Amongst MSU’s Chinese students, it was less a day of shopping frenzy than a Valentine’s day when single males and females, symbolized by the four ones in the date, met, commiserated, and befriended one another. Since on-campus promotion had been conducted exclusively in Chinese, English speakers, sincere or not, were automatically kept away from this Chinese Valentine’s. Contrary to the nineteenth-century ghetto of Chinatowns eking out a living, new ghettos are shaping up in our midst, resembling luxury high-rises with 24-hour concierge and affluent gated communities that bar other races and linguistic communities. China’s Singles Day on the MSU campus encouraged dating and mating with one’s own kind.

Michigan State University Museum’s exhibition ‘Seeing China’ runs from January 19 to August 30, 2015. The ‘Seeing China’ exhibit includes six photographers capturing The Forbidden City’s trees, the Great Wall through the polluted haze, Guangzhou’s traditional neighbourhoods threatened by gentrification, The Three Gorges Dam, the ‘Emperor’s River,’ a canal linking Beijing and Hangzhou, and Luis Delgado’s *Cuentos Chinos Attributed to Dr. Achoo*. The exhibit of contemporary photographs is contrasted with historical stereographs by James Ricalton and others. The exhibit’s publicity brochure comes with a vertical heading of ‘The China Experience: An MSU Exploration of Art and Culture,’ topped by a red Chinese-style square seal inscribed in ancient seal script 文化術藝 (wenhua shuyi, namely, Culture Art). Beyond the fact that ‘Art and Culture’ is reversed in translation, the phrase ‘shuyi’ also inverses ‘yishu’ (art). Certain ancient texts do use ‘shuyi,’ but it refers to ‘exegesis of classics, skills or craftsmanship, oracle and divination’ rather than ‘art’ per se. The designer of this vertical logo for the exhibition may have been overly cavalier regarding the proper word order of classical Chinese, i.e., top to bottom and right to left. Therefore, the seal is presented from left to right, which would match the word order of ‘Art and Culture.’ This arrangement runs counter to the practice of seal carving and traditional Chinese scripts, though. The confusing transposition of shuyi, furthermore, amounts to turning topsy-turvy the English spelling of ‘art’ into ‘tra.’ Upon the opening of the exhibit, shuyi has been changed back to its proper order, yishu; however, the four words remain going from left to right and hence ‘culture art.’ The seal and its ancient script are decorative, nearly extraneous to ‘Seeing China’ for Western eyes,
which by and large find the Chinese language unintelligible, let alone the bizarre seal script. Ironically, the subject matter of China and its language lapse in the exhibit’s heading or logo into ornamental wallpaper; ‘Seeing China’ fails to see its own emblem for what it really is.

Apparently unconscious of the forked-tongue effect, the two MSUs have been talking past in more cases than to each other in this ‘live streaming’ of Chinese-English translation in 2015. Given that ‘In the next 100 years, we are linked together,’ let us progress to a dialogic, heteroglossic cacophony of many tongues as in the proverbial Cantonese many-mouthed bird; let us resist the temptation to regress into either the biblical, duplicitous snake or the wrathful God of vengeance. To seek the harmony amongst the exhibited object, its label in English, and its label in Chinese - or amongst China, America, and the translation in between - is a task not only for MSU’s ‘hidden’ agenda\(^{12}\) for the Year of China but also for Beijing’s open agenda for China’s century.

Notes

1 See e-mail to the author on ‘Re: Delia Koo Grant Application, July 2014,’ from Asian Studies Center on 6 Aug. 2014.
2 See e-mail to the author on ‘Re: China Project Wharton Center Invitation,’ on 18 Nov. 2013.
3 Shen Yun Performing Arts group presented two shows on 11-12 February 2015 at MSU’s Wharton Center. Shen Yun is famously the artistic arm of Falun Gong, a religious sect banned inside China as a subversive organization and its followers allegedly persecuted by the communist government. Uncertain about the university politics behind the Year of China activities, one is struck by the precarious balancing act of official positions from Confucius Institute and other entities, on the one hand, and of potentially dissident groups, on the other.
6 An assault at an Okemos Karaoke bar by the alleged ‘Chinese student gang’ on Jan. 31, 2014 and the ensuing trial were widely reported in newspapers and media. See Michael Kransz’s ‘An Alleged Chinese Gang Beating’ and Kevin Grasha’s ‘Chinese Gang at MSU?.’ The latter source detailed that ‘two witnesses … admitted being members of the MSU student Chengguan group. One is a mathematics major who drives an Infinity [sic]. The other, a finance major, drives a Mercedes-Benz. It
is not uncommon for the university's nearly 4,000 Chinese undergraduates to drive luxury vehicles.'
Ironically, on Sunday, February 8, 2015, fourth-fifth of the front page in Lansing State Journal featured MSU President and her ten-year accomplishment (Lindsay VanHulle’s ‘A Statewide Vision’), while the remaining one-fifth, a single left-hand column, was devoted to Kevin Grasha’s report on the ‘case surrounding “chengguan” group’ (‘Answers Elusive in MSU Bullying Trial’). The juxtaposition of MSU President and Chengguan eerily implies two MSUs - one official, the other underground and covert. Ryan Sequanda reported in the MSU campus newspaper, The State News, on June 16, 2015 that one of the accused, Meng Long Li, a 25-year-old MSU alumnus, was found guilty of assault with a dangerous weapon and assault and battery on June 4. He faced up to four years in prison.

7 See Matthew Miller’s ‘East Lansing's burgeoning Chinese population.’

8 It is significant that Allan H. Barr’s translation of Yu Hua’s China in Ten Words retains the ten Chinese phrases, with the ten two-character Chinese phrases and their single-word English translations arrayed on the book cover, the table of contents, and the chapter heading. When the book concludes with ‘bamboozle,’ a coinage that is unique to contemporary China, Barr even embeds the Chinese original within the opening of that chapter, something he has refrained from throughout the previous nine chapters. Barr is far from deploying Chinese as an exotic ornamental design so often found in Chinese-English layout; rather, Barr suggests that much of the original phrase eludes English translation, the very existence of the foreign phrase testifying to that.

9 Michel Foucault explicated J. Bentham’s notion of ‘Panopticism’ in Discipline and Punish, 195-228.

10 See ‘Re: Delia Koo Grant Application, July 2014,’ an e-mail to the author as well as Seeing China’s PDF publicity brochure.

11 The Rock is a boulder in front of the Auditorium along Farm Lane. MSU students take turns painting the Rock for various upcoming activities and causes.

12 The only public announcement so far came in the form of an MSU College of Arts and Letters electronic newsletter on January 23, 2015. Among ‘News and Events,’ there was a line on ‘MSU China Themed Year to Run February 2015 to August 2016,’ but without further elaboration of specific programs. Intriguingly, the Year of China was rephrased as the China Themed Year, and the duration was pushed back and lengthened to eighteen months. To date, there was no university-wide publicity other than this e-memo within the College of Arts and Letters.
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