Event one: (A → B: A bad translation makes a ‘bad’ cross-cultural approach.)

The translational process generates interstitial spaces. According to Walter Benjamin’s theory about untranslatability, the slippage between the object of the sign (the denoted object of a word) and the mode of intention of the sign (the socially interpreted meaning of a word) is produced during the translation.\(^1\) Even though equivalent words are found in the target language, the cultural and social context assigned in the original words cannot be fully translated. The translated text is always invented as the new like the afterlife. Homi Bhabha develops Benjamin’s theory further as he believes that this afterlife is born in interstices and in ‘the middle of’.\(^2\) By interpreting the afterlife as being ‘embryonic, anticipated, imminent,’ Bhabha concludes that the new ‘emerges in the midst of the making’.\(^3\)

Bhabha and Benjamin’s arguments about untranslatability and the afterlife suggest an interruption of the intercultural engagement. When language is perceived as the form that summarises and represents a particular cultural practice, translation becomes an event in which two cultural communities make contact with each other. Translation highlights cultural difference through the linguistic difference between the languages, while bridging this gap. In opening remarks made by Andre Aciman\(^4\) to Bhabha’s lecture, *Translation and Displacement*, Aciman states that the importance of translation is in its ability of connecting We and They in a relationship that dislocates us from our world and relocates us to the world perceived by others.\(^5\) Hence, while untranslatability suggests a permanent difference between two cultures, the afterlife is pointing to an in-between cultural place where this gap is possibly reconciled.

Benjamin and Bhabha’s acclaimed new can be perceived through another type of translational means—the phonetic translation. This kind of translation engenders a different type of intercultural engagement, as phonetic translation produces a different kind of

---

\(^1\) Bhabha, “In the Cave of Making”, Under “Preface,”.
\(^2\) “Homi Bhabha: Translation and Displacement”.
\(^3\) “Homi Bhabha: Translation and Displacement”.
\(^4\) When Andre Aciman gave this speech, he was the director of The Centre for Humanities, Graduate Centre of City University of New York and the coordinator of Critical Theory Certificate Program.
\(^5\) “Homi Bhabha: Translation and Displacement”.
misunderstanding and miscommunication. It encloses a unique cultural in-between space and provides a different dynamic of forming the relationship between We and They.

The propositional scenario: It’s neither Chinese nor English.

Work title: The National Anthem of AO-SSU-CH’UI-LEE-A
Medium: HD video in length 2’28”.

In this scenario, a Karaoke video is created for the Australian national anthem, titled Advance Australian Fair. The lyrics shown on the screen are the result of a continuum of two phonetic translations between English and Chinese. Firstly, the English words in the original lyrics are translated into the Chinese characters in terms of the matching sound. Then, the translated Chinese is turned into phonetic syntax written in Wade-Giles phonetic marks. Consequently, under the impression of singing in Chinese, the participant, in fact, follows the animated text on the screen and pronounces the distorted sound of English lyrics. In a symphonic tune that ends with the sound of a cheering and hand clapping crowd, this karaoke video transmits the overtone of a carnival spirit and acceleration of an exuberant atmosphere. Channelling a cheerful mood, the video asks for the participation. (Fig. 2)

---

6 Wade-Giles system is a Romanization system for Mandarin Chinese and widely used by English speakers to pronounce Chinese words.
The process of two phonetic translations creates rupture in the constitutional structure of language. These openings are structural in comparison to the translational interstitial spaces in Bhabha’s arguments. In this Karaoke video, the Romanised Chinese leads to Chinese characters that indicate English words. The once coherent structure of language, which is constituted with the linguistic elements-written form, pronunciation and meaning, is disjointed and partially replaced. The languages, relative to their conventional style, are perceived as fragmented. For example, the written form of the English language is removed and replaced with the phonetic, Romanised Chinese. The English language is only detected through the articulation of the Romanised Chinese, and it is then that meaning is conveyed. Whereas, the Chinese language, without its radicals and denotation, is only apprehended like a ghost through its Romanised form.

In the fragmentation of these languages, the Romanised Chinese becomes a new hybrid linguistic form that signifies both linguistic value systems. According to Roland Barthes, ‘language is a social institution and a system of values’.\(^7\) Language, is not only valorised by the grammatical rules of writing and speech, but also ascribes values to the social conventions. Language is ‘a system of contractual values’,\(^8\) as Barthes defines. These two sets of values are seamlessly bound together as a whole in the operation of a language. By replacing the written form of one language with another, the phonetic translation breaks the correlation of assigning these two values. The translated text is ruled by the grammatical value of one language and the social value of another one. For example, the Romanised Chinese syntax is produced according to the Latin linguistic rules. For people who are familiar with Latin linguistic systems, the pronunciation value of Romanised Chinese is comprehensible. Additionally, as Romanised Chinese denotes Chinese characters, people who know Chinese may also access the corresponding meanings. There is a limitation to accessing the full set of values in both constitutive language groups. This binary value can only be transpired through the articulation of the translated text.

\(^8\) Ibid, 82.
By reflecting two language value systems, this hybrid linguistic form is the sign that signifies two cultures and indicates a unique relation between the two. The cultural groups connect, not only as original text and translated text, but also as the original and the mimic. It is a self-centred intercultural relationship. Under the guise of self-removal, the refusal to go beyond the notion of *Us* is the objective of mimicry. The mimic is a new presentation of the original, a branched-out new identity, rather than a secondary double. Adopting the position of the mimic is a self-centred approach; in that while it may appear to be for your convenience, it is in fact for my convenience. The real purpose of that project produces an ambivalent image of the Other.

In this Karaoke video, the two-overlaid phonetic translational processes make this passive interest of contacting the other shared across two cultural groups. The interchangeability between the original and the mimic, undermines the traditional hierarchical power structure in the mimicry and renders the phonetic translation as the strategy of creating a temporary commonality to overcome the cultural difference—'I mimic your tongue so that you could understand me for now'. The desire to connect and relationship with the imitation are both dismissed after the articulation and the translation are accomplished.

Bhabha suggests that the misunderstanding of the meaning of the translated word can be an advantage, through the act of signification, to a disadvantaged class of people.\(^9\) Due to the slippage in different types of the arbitrariness of the sign, the commanding power attached with the original text is not delivered to the translation subject and becomes dysfunctional. Although there is no meaning exchange in phonetic translation, a linguistically recalcitrant force transpires in the divergent communicative relationship between the original and the translated. In the discussion about the colonial mimicry, Bhabha describes that ‘a recalcitrance (the mimic) that coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power...poses an immanent threat to both the normalised knowledge and disciplinary powers.’\(^{10}\)

---

\(^9\) Bhabha, “In the Cave of Making: Thoughts On Third Space”, under “Preface”.

\(^{10}\) Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.
In this work, the Australian national anthem, performed through karaoke, is an exoticised reproduction of the anthem. By producing the ‘close-enough’ copy of the original, the mimic reduces and diversifies the master’s originality. While the karaoke song reverses the formal and authoritarian representation of Australian identity, it recharges the patriotic spirit in an entertaining environment. The fulsome celebration of the Australian identity and patriotism in this video work suggests sarcastic disbelief and protest. In fact, the work becomes a foil to the Australian nationalism embedded in the national anthem.

On the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website, it states that the Australian national anthem should be performed in English. By performing in accented English, read from Romanised Chinese, the question is raised: Are the lyrics in the video still considered as English? And if not, in singing the song is the performer enacting a seditious act?

In this Karaoke event, the cultural position of in-between is acquired via the bodily experience of participating with the karaoke. The translational intercultural relationship is only activated through the action of singing. During the reading and articulating, the participant delivers a translational process in situ, interpreting the language on the screen into a different language. While the action of singing is merging with the translational activity, the participant is experiencing a split in their action of singing. The distortion of the lyrics impels the participant to experience the singing through three disjointed actions: reading, articulating and listening. The disjointed actions open a time and a mental space for the participant to think and implement the action of translation. The difficulty of recognising the syntax on the screen, forces the participant to give attention to what they read, say and hear. In the process of resolving these three actions, a kind of sense is worked out between them. In a split second, ideas about language, translation and, subsequently, cultural identification are brought into question.

While the participation reifies the idea of in-between, it expands the content of the Other/new. The participative component confers the new contingency and incommensurability. The participant’s diverse responses to the Karaoke video and their idiosyncratic performance constantly renew the presentation of this work and contextualise the provoked discussion about the in-between cultural position.

©2017 Siying Zhou