

# Translation of Human Existence in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*

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## Abstract

In *Sour Sweet*, Timothy Mo tells a story about a Chinese family's struggle in the UK. After experiencing a series of cultural conflicts, among the three family members Chen, Lily and Mui, only Lily achieves a delicate balance. After defining the process of establishing oneself in a new environment as a kind of translation, this paper applies André Lefevere's thoughts to study the three characters' different responses to the cultural conflicts, analyzes how different strategies adopted affect each character's translation, and explains why does or doesn't he/she translates himself/herself successfully.

**Keywords:** *Sour Sweet*, cultural conflict, translation, poetic, ideology.

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## INTRODUCTION

The English word "translation" comes from *translatio* in Latin, which in turn is transformed from *transferre*: *trans* means "through" and "across", and *ferre* has the meaning of "to carry" and "to bring". Therefore, from the etymological point of view, the word "translation" means "carrying across" and "bringing across" (Kasperek, 1983). In fact, besides the Latin etymology *translatio*, Greek *metapherein*, German *Übersetzung* or even French *traducteur* all "suggest movement, disruption, displacement", so "translation" is not only an interlingual process but to also an entire problematic. "Translation" is "a set of questions, perhaps a 'field'" (Niranjana, 1992).

When translation is considered as a "field", then it can not only take place between different languages, but also includes the behavior of crossing the boundary at any level. "In its broadest sense, translation means cross-cultural understanding" (Rubel & Rosman, 2003). This becomes more obvious in the context of diaspora literature. Maxine Hong Kingston depicts five episodes concerning living among cultural conflicts in *The Woman Warrior*. The last sentence of this novel is "It translated well" (Kingston, 1989). As the ending words, this sentence has encapsulated the whole book and reinforced Kingston's argument: one had better maintain equilibrium among cultural conflicts. In the novel's last part, Kingston uses Ts'ai Yen as a metaphor for her own project. Literally, "It translated well" means that Ts'ai Yen's "Eighteen

Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" has been translated well from "the savage lands" to the Han. Metaphorically, on one hand, Kingston compares herself to Ts'ai Yen, she is also a "translator", like Ts'ai Yen, who "translates" Chinese culture and American culture to each other, to her readers, so she hopes she can "translate" well; on the other hand, she also implicitly suggests a way to all the other people who share the same matter with her, living among cultural conflicts, should "translate" themselves and "translate well" to survive in these cultural conflicts.

Here, "translate" is different from the word we commonly use. Normally, when we translate, we say or write the words we have heard or seen in another language which is different from the original one. But now, "translate" has been conferred with another meaning, and the subject to be translated is no longer a lifeless word, but a flesh and blood person -- diaspora. The word "diaspora" comes from the Greek *diasperien*, where *dia* corresponds to "across" in English and *perien* means to sow or scatter seeds, and is therefore used to refer to people leaving their native land for reasons such as emigrating or exile (Braziel & Mannur, 2003). As a representative symbol of transnationalism, "diaspora" refers directly to the boundary issue (Tölölyan, 1991). Experiencing two or more different cultures, diaspora writers often describe the struggle between the cultural conflicts.

In their works, there appears to be a cross-cultural movement that transcends ethnic boundaries,

embracing the current cultural stream of ‘the new internationalism’ ... which represents a significant cultural development in literary works that are closely related to postcolonialism and postmodernism (Li, 1994). Diaspora literature concerns issues of crossing the boundaries of nations, languages and cultures. In this sense, diaspora literature echoes the above-mentioned etymological meaning of “translation”, and it could be considered as a platform to research the relationship between translation and human existence.

### TRANSLATION OF THE CHENS

Like Kingston, Timothy Mo is also grouped as a diaspora writer. He was born in a family with different cultures in 1950. His mother is a Welsh-Yorkshire, while his father is a Cantonese-Chinese. Since his childhood, Mo accepted both Chinese and English education. He lived in Hong Kong till he was nine years old. There he attended first the Convent of the Precious Blood, which is a local Chinese medium school run by Cantonese nuns, and then he studied at the Quarry Bay international school where the medium of instruction is English. At the age of ten, Mo immigrated to the UK. After his secondary education at Mill Hill School, Mo went on to read History at Oxford. After graduation, Mo worked as a journalist at London for different publications which includes *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Statesman* and *Boxing News*. Mo did know the conflicts from his own experience.

Since the publication of his first novel in 1978, Mo has written seven books so far. Many of his works are concerned with the clash between two different cultures. Especially in his second novel *Sour Sweet* (1982), which has been awarded the Hawthornden Prize and adapted into a film, Mo reflects the conflict between traditional Chinese values and contemporary English values by telling the story of a Chinese family. At the very beginning of *Sour Sweet*, Mo sets the background:

The Chens had been living in the UK for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new. They were no longer missed; Lily had no living relatives anyway, apart from her sister Mui, and Chen had lost his claim to clan land in his ancestral village. He was remembered there in the shape of the money order he remitted to his father every month, and would truly have been remembered only if that order had failed to arrive (Mo, 1983).

Facing this cross-cultural ambivalence, the three main characters, Chen, Chen’s wife Lily and Lily’s sister Mui, adopt three different ways to establish themselves in this alien land. Chen strongly adheres to the Chinese values; he “is incapable of responding to a new culture” (Rothfork, 1989). Mui adapts to the

English culture quickly; she’s “subsequent rapid acculturation” is in contrast to Chen’s conservation. Lily is also traumatized by the culture shock, but she finds a middle way between the Chinese culture and the English culture; “she is point of balance between the old and the new, largely personified by Chen and Mui” (Rothfork, 1989).

These three ways offered by Mo in *Sour Sweet* represent the common ways that taken by most postcolonial writers when they “explore the experience of individuals caught between their local and imperial cultures” (Li, 1994). Either inclines to one culture or blurs the boundary and synthesizes them. Sharing a similar opinion with Maxine Hong Kingston, Mo also appreciates the latter one which is represented by Lily in *Sour Sweet*. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston compares the struggle between two cultures to translation; if one can translate himself well, then he can live among the cultural conflicts in the most comfortable way. In *Sour Sweet*, Lily does a better translation than Chen and Mui, so she finally gets the balance in this cultural shock.

To some extent, Chen, Lily and Mui all more or less translate themselves in this cultural conflict. But why does only Lily make a successful translation? This question is related to the matter of manipulation. In his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, André Lefevere expounds how literary translation is manipulated. There are two main factors that manipulate the literary translation, “ideological constraint” and “poetological constrain”. “Ideology” means “what society should (be allowed to) be”; “poetic” means “what literature should (be allowed to) be” (Lefevere, 2004). A successful literary translation should deal well with the ideological and poetological currents. This principle not only works in literary translation but also can be applied to the translation in cultural conflicts. Literary translation is the translation of words between two languages; translation appointed here is the translation of humans between two cultures. As we know, language is a part of culture; so if translation against language is affected by ideology and poetic, let alone translation against culture. Thus human translation is controlled by ideology and poetic; a successful human translation should do well on both sides; one should make appropriate choice about what kind of person he wants to be and how to deal with the native and foreign ideology.

### 1. Translation of Chen

Chen regards himself as “an interloper” and feels like “a gatecrasher who had stayed too long and been identified” (Mo, 1983). There is no tangible reason to feel like that, because no one has ever assaulted, insulted or humiliated him. But Chen could sense it, feel it “in his bones”. That is to say, poetically speaking, Chen wants to be the same kind of man as he used to be, he will not change himself to adapt to this

new environment, and he thinks he doesn't belong here. So he "felt at home yet not at home. He had been more comfortable rootless" (Mo, 1983). Chen doesn't want to change himself because his aim of coming to London is to earn enough money and then go back home. On day, when the Chen family goes to the beach Chen find a ship with a telescope. He passes the telescope to his son Man Kee and tells him "It is a special little ship for people like us, Son. It is very little and very old but it is the ship that will take us all back home when we are finished here. It will take you to your homeland, Son, which you have never seen" (Mo, 1983). So Chen doesn't want to translate himself, and he even inculcates his poetic into his son's mind.

In terms of ideology, Chen doesn't give the English ideology any chance to influence him. At first they live in Chinatown and he works in a Chinese restaurant; when he decides to start his own restaurant, he chooses an "isolated" place which is "hidden away from the rest of the world" (Mo, 1983). Chen doesn't contact the English without necessary, he doesn't like them can calls them *gwai lo* which means foreign devil, and he wants an ideological enclave. When he needs money to take care of his aged father in Hong Kong, he doesn't ask the English for help, but takes a risk way that he borrows money from the Triad, a Chinese criminal gang, because Chen and the Triad shares the same ideology, *hsiao* (filial piety). Chen's poetic and his response towards foreign ideology result in his unhappiness in London and finally he is killed by the Triad. Clearly, Chen's translation is unsuccessful; strictly speaking, Chen refuses to translate himself and he has never translated himself. Chen's unfulfilled translation makes him a victim in this cultural conflict.

## 2. Translation of Mui

Taking the opposite way to Chen, Mui wants to be an Englishman and she renounces the Chinese ideology quickly. At first Mui is also tortured by this cultural conflict, after arriving at Chen's place she "had hardly left the house since then, behaviour which was beginning to disquiet not only Lily but also her brother-in-law as well" (Mo, 1983). But Mui finds a good way to deal with this problem; she watches TV and learns the English culture from it. With the help of TV programs, "she eased her way into a new life inch by inch." Noticing Mui's change, "Chen was unable to connect this young woman with the shrinking creature who had sat next to him all those months ago" (Mo, 1983).

Mui finds a model for herself, a Hong Kong widow, Mrs. Law, who has a new life in England at her middle age. Mui admires the life Mrs. Law has, and she even makes her baby live with Mrs. Law instead of living with the Chens. Mui is eager to assimilate into the English culture; she welcomes the English ideology. When Chen and Mui are worried about their son Man Kee's education, Mui opposes Lily's plan to teach Man

Kee Chinese boxing and suggests that Man Kee should be sent to an English school instead of a Chinese school. When she knows that Chen wants to open a restaurant she is the most enthusiastic one to this plan; she "egged her sister and brother-in-law on to move far faster than either wanted." After opening, Mui also deals with the foreign customers and can even remember every customer. She loves the English culture, when Christmas comes she suggests: "why don't we have a holiday at Christmas when English do?" (Mo, 1983).

Gradually Mui becomes an "anglist", she helps the Chens buy a car and do business with the English. She also knows the English law well; she tells the Chens to pay taxes and buy insurance because "the English police-force is the finest in the world" (Mo, 1983). She even becomes a "shameless English girl"; she indulges in premarital sex and gets pregnant. In the end, Mui opens her own business, a fish and chip restaurant; unlike Chen's Chinese ideology, Mui borrows money from Mrs. Law and applies to the bank for a loan. Finally Mui gets her citizenship, and the UK becomes her "home". Mui's poetic and response to the English ideology is on the contrary to Chen. She wants to translate herself, but she over-translates. Her translation doesn't offer her a bridge cross Chinese culture and English culture but fuses with the latter; Mui fulfills her "English Dream" at the expense of her identity.

## 3. Translation of Lily

In *Sour Sweet*, Mo presents Lily "as a model in the process of cultural adjustment" (Li, 1994). On one hand, Lily is as conservative as her husband Chen. She doesn't make contact with the *gwai lo*, because she thinks Chinese people are superior to the foreign devils. When Mui disagrees with her and inclines to the English ideology, she is annoyed, "Lily could hardly believe this" and thinks that "Mui had just gone too far this time. What a traitor she was to her family!" (Mo, 1983). She sells food to the English, but she never remembers their faces, instead just refers to customers as foreign devils, bears and pigs; she also criticizes them because they are shameless in her eyes. Like Chen, Lily also doesn't accept the English values. She ignores the English laws; she doesn't intend to take a driving test or pay taxes, she still holds the Chinese ideology that "tea money" works.

On the other hand, Lily is also flexible. When the Chinese values don't work she tries to change in order to adapt the English environment. Lily concocts herbal draughts for Chen according to her father's recipes, but the ingredients are not available in the UK. "In a great impoverish tradition, worthy of the host country, Lily stuck to the originals where she could and where this as not possible she included something she considered similar (i.e. carrot for rhinoceros horn)" (Mo, 1983). The food, "Spare-ribs", made by Lily and

sold in their restaurant is also a mixture of Chinese food and Western food. So in Lily's poetic, she has the latent inclination to translate herself to suit the new ideology; she also wants her child Man Kee can enjoy a balance in this cultural conflict, so she sends Man Kee to an English school as well as a Chinese school.

At the end of this novel, Chen is killed by the Triad and Mui marries Mr. Lo; the two persons who used to accompany her all leave her. After experiencing so much conflict and tension, Lily feels that "a stone had been taken off her and she had sprung to what her height should have been." She no longer suffers from this cross-cultural shock, because "she had found a balance of things for the first time." Finally Lily successfully translated herself; her translation takes a relatively longer time than Chen's and Mui's. Different from Chen's resistance and Mui's "going to the center at once," Lily veers "to the extremes and then finding the still point of equilibrium" (Mo, 1983).

## CONCLUSION

The cultural conflicts triggered by diaspora is inevitable, and the collision between different cultures will create cultural hybridity. The importance of hybridity lies not in tracing the two original cultures, but in the "third space" it brings, which "enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford & Bhabha, 1990). The third space "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha, 1994). *Sour Sweet* represents the third space and concerns appropriating and translating the original culture in the process of diaspora (Ho, 2000). When Chen, Lily and Mui, who are in the same situation, face the cultural conflicts and make the translation between two cultures in the third space, they adopt different translation strategies that result in their different fates.

Lily can make a successful translation because she "fit in with the dominant... ideological and poetical currents" (Lefevere, 2004). Poetically, she neither refuses to change, like Chen, nor over-changes, like Mui; ideologically, she neither stubbornly adheres to Chinese ideology, like Chen, nor totally assimilates into English ideology, like Mui. In *The task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin claims that there is a matter of translatability and untranslatability (Benjamin, 1923); in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, J.C. Catford divides untranslatability into two kinds: linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability (Catford,

1978). According to Benjamin's and Catford's thoughts, only when a translator solves the problem of translatability and untranslatability can he make a successful translation. In terms of Lily, during her translation, Lily deals well with the cultural translatability and untranslatability; she translates the translatable part while keeps the untranslatable part, thus only she attains a balanced outlook.

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