

To know the moon means loneliness

by PingHong Ho

"Write a story, using elements from Chinese culture" to me was one of the memorable assignments during 3 years of high school. I remembered like many peers of mine, I was so obsessed with martial arts novels. So as soon as I heard about the assignment, I immediately decided to write a story about my imagined sword-man and how he become one of the most famous 大侠” from a notorious “二流子”. But wait, how am I going to translate either “大侠” or “二流子”, that's a question I still can't answer now.

I was shocked, for the reason that for so many years of studying English, I am still unable to translate these daily-used Chinese phrases. But soon I conduct this as a conflict between Chinese and English. There are certain words that are "untranslatable." In contrast with English, which is neat and very standardized, Chinese characters have such a huge space of "implications." These "implications" are only known by ones who really know about Chinese culture or ones who have been immersed in a Chinese-spoken environment. These "implications" cannot simply be taught, it requires a vast amount of studying and reading. For example, "江湖" has so many implications. Its direct meaning is "river and lakes", but it makes no sense because it actually means "brotherhood", "a community of martial artists in wuxia stories", "criminal's world" or simply the combination of all of them. How am I supposed to translate it into English, since there isn't even a universal word to describe it?

Why is that? I started to ask myself. Ancient Chinese poetry: Thoughts in a silent night by Li Bai could be a hint:

"床前明月光，疑是地上霜。

举头望明月，低头思故乡。"

Translation:

"A splash of white on my bedroom floor. Hoarfrost?

I raise my eyes to the moon, the same moon.

As scenes long past come to mind, my eyes fall again on the splash of white, and my heart
aches for home."

(Translated by Weng Xian Liang)

This poem by Li Bai is so famous that all Chinese can remember it. Because of this poem, "月" or "moon" in Chinese was given the meaning of "loneliness." , but there are other famous poems about moons. They brought different implications as well. Zhang Ruo Xu made the moon becomes a utopian, flawless emotion. The story of Chang'e originated from the ancients' worship of the stars and moons. These famous poetries created a variety of implications that the word "月" contains.

But when reading the English version, I felt a sense of inharmony or discomfort. Something is missed, I feel. It's always a small detail, as Haeun Son, a student from the University of Pittsburg says. She mentioned "seulpeum", which means "sadness" in Korean "has different meanings [to her]." "English word is a combination of sounds that means 'sadness', whereas seulpeum is just sadness itself" (Son, 3). The meaning of the word "月" in Chinese is far more complex than the English translation "moon". When reading it in English, it's like reading Li Bai's poem without knowing any implications of "月". It doesn't strike me at all, as the English word sadness to Son seems to carry fewer emotions than "seulpeum." The essence of thoughts is missed.

Therefore, it seems impossible to translate certain Chinese words to English, since it is impossible to convey all implications at the same time. As how Amy Tan describes her mother's English: "broken", "limited", and "lack of wholeness", I felt the same way when trying to translate Chinese to English. Thus, like Son says "being bilingual is, in a way, painful" that I will never be able to "achieve that same emotional linkage with the English language." (4) Something is missed in the process of translating.

This feeling, this sense of discomfort of not being able to "translate" my ideas and emotions, can be accurately explained by an old Chinese idiom called "如鯁在喉". It means "like the fish bones are stuck in the throat". You feel like your throat is ready to say something, whereas it's stuck right before the sound is made. I feel like I can explain my ideas in Chinese perfectly, but in reality, I find it impossible to translate them into English. So, a part of myself is hidden. ,some of my entire thoughts can never be known by English speakers. I cannot "achieve that same emotional linkage with the English language" (Son, 4). Therefore, I am "separated", as Rodríguez in his work *Hunger of Memory* says "[I am] the foreigner of the block." He was "reminded by Spanish of [his] separateness from Los Otros, Los gringos in power" (4).

Thus how do I accommodate this conflict of not being able to express myself has become one of the main subjects that I have been thinking about. The separateness I mentioned reminds me of a saying: "my language is my identity", that when I am "separated" from English speakers, it also means my identity of being Chinese is enhanced. I am more clearer finding the difference between myself and English speakers, which is the knowledge of implications missed in the process of translation. And it is the exact reason that "make me Chinese." And the skill to see these implications, to be able to see the complete meanings and the beauty of these square shape characters, become the exact proof of my Chinese identity. Without knowing Chinese culture, those implications cannot be known. Therefore, I stop thinking to really "solve" the conflict. I decide to

accept the conflict, accept the fact that some implications are indeed untranslatable and the sense of discomfort is inevitable, for the fact that it is caused by my language, my identity itself.

Noticing the conflict, allows me to find out the vast amounts of possibilities and implications that a single Chinese character can carry. As Son taught me in her essay: I would not have been able to see the magnificence of Chinese if learning English had not forced me to see the world beyond Chinese. I still remembered the confusion I had when I first encountered untranslatable characters. Though I still don't have the confidence to translate them well, I have been optimistic enough to accept it. I am grateful to be bilingual, it teaches me the beauty of the Chinese language. Moreover, the conflict really helps me to understand the meaning of "my language is my identity", it's a blessing that I can have Chinese as my mother language.

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