

REFLECTIONS

“Sprinkling Death”: Using the Subversive Humor of Mock-Translation in the Classroom

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Abstract:

Four students in the third-year undergraduate course *CHN 3003: Reading and Translating Chinese* at the University of Malta worked together to create a mock-translation of a fast-food menu. This article examines this collaborative task and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses against the theoretical framework of mock-translation, while also taking into account the socio-cultural particularities of the Maltese context. Malta is a small island nation in the Mediterranean and a former British colony. Students at the University of Malta, including those who study Chinese, are often bilingual in English and Maltese (a Semitic language) or another European language. Instructors working in the Chinese-English translation classroom may find the collaborative translation exercise a useful tool for getting students to consider the intersection between theory and practice.

Keywords: mock translation, pedagogy, collaborative translation, mistranslation, literary governance

1. Introduction

At the University of Malta, I teach a third-year undergraduate course titled *CHN 3003: Reading and Translating Chinese*. This study-unit is designed for intermediate-level Chinese learners to be exposed to real-world texts outside of their language textbook. The course entails weekly topics and translation exercises, loosely following the workbook *Thinking Chinese Translation: A Course in Translation Method (Chinese to English)* (Pellatt and Liu, 2010). A translation portfolio, including self-evaluations of their major translations, comprises the final assessment. This article reflects on a task I assigned to my November 2021 *CHN 3003* cohort that resulted in a mock-translation of a fast-food menu in Chinese.

In November 2021, four students were enrolled in *CHN 3003*. They were all Honors students in the Chinese program, so had intermediate levels of Mandarin, and they had become quite familiar with each other. Of the four, three were Maltese and one was Italian (but he had lived in Malta for several years already). Three of the students, including the Italian, were in their early twenties, while one of the Maltese students was in her late forties. The broader Maltese setting, and the dynamics of this cohort, provide necessary context for how the translation task came about, how the group approached it, and how I interpreted their final project.



The translation task stemmed from a lesson on formulaic texts. Pellatt and Liu (2010, pp. 39-51) use the example of restaurant menus in China to show how cultural ideas are often embedded within common formulaic phrases. To round out our discussion on translating restaurant menus, we also analyzed the pervasive mistranslations of menus that are so often photographed and posted online. Known colloquially as “translation fails,” this ubiquitous meme genre can range from quaint or quirky to awkward and embarrassing (See, for example, Korolkovaite, 2017 and Lund, 2018). Such public, often conspicuous, mistranslations spark conversations and the imagination because they leave no trail of linguistic breadcrumbs to the source of the mistakes. Certainly, this idea gave my students food for thought. What would happen if they intentionally produced a mistranslation?

At the end of the above lesson, I assigned an open-ended collaborative translation task to do in two weeks. The four students were to work as a group to create and/or translate something inspired by the examples of formulaic texts, menus, and meme-ified mistranslations shown in class. They were not given specific criteria on what it needed to look like, except that they could use multimedia. Because this would be the only major task in the semester where they might practice translating *into* Chinese (as opposed to Chinese-to-English), I wanted to give them space to have fun with the language skills they had already developed. Likewise, I reasoned that making it a collaborative task would prevent the potential stress involved in them trying to meet an admittedly unspecified standard individually. It would also introduce them to the concept and benefits of collaborative translation.

The open-ended assignment resulted in a mock-translation in Chinese of what appeared to be a menu from Subway®, the well-known fast-food brand that sells build-it-yourself submarine sandwiches. Even given the experimental nature of my assignment guidelines, I could not have been prepared for how amusing, uncanny, silly, titillating, and playful the final product was. (Indeed, it has intrigued me to the extent of writing this article about it!) In their critical evaluation of the project, the students introduced their menu by saying:

“We wanted to be as creative as possible and turn something that we enjoyed eating whilst enjoying each other’s company into this new innovative project. In other words, we decided to translate this menu humorously, containing several innuendoes [sic] and puns. Hence, this is not a menu you would typically find in a fast-food restaurant. Moreover, as a group, we agreed that the translated, or perhaps mistranslated, menu in Chinese should be based on an English menu. This is because a Chinese menu could impact or influence our translations to a point that they do not become our own but, rather, a copy or an inauthentic translation of a Chinese menu. Furthermore, we wanted to include the idea of mistranslations, which is a cultural phenomenon that often occurs in translations from Mandarin Chinese to English and adapt it to our creative project.”

So far, I have used the terms “mock-translation” and “mistranslation” without clarification, but their epistemological differences remain central to this study. As Lawrence Venuti (2016) reminds us, mistranslation is a debatable concept because the idea “not only measures every translation against some chimerical ideal but also denies the right of every translation to be regarded as an interpretation of the original it represents,” (as cited by Hermans, 2019, p. 605). To some extent, therefore, mistranslation is a subjective qualification that depends on one’s stance on linguistic equivalence. For



their part, the students view mistranslation as “unintentional parodying” that can stem from a variety of issues, such as poor command of the target language or an over-dependence on machine translation. Their stance thus takes equivalence and accuracy as the standard and any deviation as a sign of an ill-equipped translator.

In my view, however, the students’ use of humor is what takes their menu into mock-translation territory. Randa Aboubakr (2019, p. 338) defines mock-translation as “an exaggeratedly literal or unidiomatic translation that is used playfully for a variety of ends, such as claiming expertise, investigating foreign sensibilities and mind-sets, and producing new genres in the target culture.” A mock-translation with a satirical purpose would likely dispel some social myth, undercut a political view or policy, or poke holes in a highly regarded ideology. Each misused word or phrase would work to send a clear message, so the sum of it would be greater than its parts. The students’ menu does not quite reach that level of satire. But many of their translation choices show a clear intention to be humorous. While they may not have referred to their menu as a mock-translation, I do think it is an appropriate qualification because of their intentional use of humor. They state:

“In our case, we purposefully mistranslated our menu from English to Chinese to mimic the occurrence of mistranslations that happen unintentionally [...] We knowingly made various “errors” to create a satiric effect through innuendoes [sic], puns, and transliterations. Despite this, several items in the menu can still be understood and inferred because the original format is global in scope.”

In the two quotes above, the students touch on key aspects of this assignment that offer insight into the utility of mock-translation as a pedagogical tool. The first is humor. They name important rhetorical devices—innuendos and puns—that allowed them to be intentionally funny. Jennifer Garland (2010) associates students’ use of humor in the Irish language classroom with linguistic expertise and risk mitigation. Humor at higher levels, she asserts, is perhaps more useful to “mitigate the risks of not having mastered the language at the higher level,” (pp. 34-35). Garland further differentiates mock-translation from other types of humor in claiming expertise because it “takes advantage of local discourse practices” and “highlights both the role of joking in displaying insider knowledge and its use in managing the interactional risks associated with claiming such expertise” (Garland, 2010, p. 40).

Garland’s observations lend weight to the students’ explanation about their choice to work with an English menu rather than a Chinese one. They worried that revising an original Chinese menu might result in “a copy or inauthentic translation.” The process of mitigation that Garland describes can be observed in their reasoning. Rather than potentially misunderstanding or misreading the original text, they opted to create the *semblance of mistakes* one might encounter in a poor translation. Yet by invoking comical misinterpretations, despite being aware of their linguistic shortcomings, they also position themselves as linguistic experts locally (i.e., in the classroom, in our university, and/or across Malta).

Furthermore, the students show an awareness of how their menu aligns with the genre of translation fails while also seeming to tap into an idea that Dirk Delabastita (2019) describes as “fictionalizing translators.” Delabastita attributes the growing use of translation as a theme or a plot device in stories to the inherent mimetic qualities of fiction (p. 190). The students claim that they mimic mistranslations.



In other words, they had a preconception of the kinds of mistakes that someone can make while translating.

Intriguingly, when asked about their menu's ideal readers during class, the students explained that they imagined a fictional scenario wherein Malta had a Chinatown whose resident immigrants needed a Chinese version of a Subway® menu. This made-up scenario shows the students mimicking actual places in the world (albeit not Malta) where large numbers of immigrants form ethnic enclaves that, in turn, might necessitate localized translations of signage. I would argue, however, that the students came up with this scenario in order to fictionalize themselves as translators, as opposed to creating a fictional text as such. Yes, the students recognized the mocking nature of their approach, and they were relatively aware that a translation can draw attention to itself, as often happens when it is used in fiction as a mimetic device. But, as we will see in the discussion below, while satire is at play in the menu, any attempt at underlying commentary generally referred back to the authorial role itself.

2. The Menu Analysis

Figure 1 below shows the final mock-translation that the students submitted. The students produced a composite image based on several Subway® menus available online. Subway® patrons can order from a pre-set menu (the grid of sandwiches in the middle), or custom sandwiches (the step-by-step process on the left). The students took creative liberty with the menus they found online, but their mock-menu contained similar graphic effects and semantic appropriation typical of Subway® menus. In the following section, I analyze the variety of rhetorical devices that the students employ, especially those in the service of humor. The significance of this analysis lies in pinpointing how the students presented themselves as local linguistic experts and how that process might be used in the translation classroom to help students become more aware of their own thinking around translation practices.



点饭跟散步一样:

第一步 你的菜单选择
 脚板·鸡巴比Q·菜脯·一张包

第二步 选择你的面包
 大
 ·马和提种·提奶脯·金蛋

第三步 选择你的奶酪
 美国旗通者切片

第四步 选择你的蔬菜
 西红柿·生菜·青椒·洋葱·葱

不够吗? 我们也有辣蔬菜。你敢吃吗?
 黄瓜·香菜·茄子·墨西哥辣椒

第五步 选择你的调味汁
 没有: 番茄酱·巴比Q·甜末

第六步 把它做一顿饭!
 选择饮料·薯条·选择一边。

鸡巴比Q 350/690 卡	纯蛋 480/980 卡	煎鸡 330/670 卡
8下 €5.75 脚板 €8.75	8下 €5.75 脚板 €8.75	8下 €5.75 脚板 €8.75
高巧提什* 310/690 卡	洒死	辣蛋大刺 (辣/西) 480/980 卡
8下 €5.75 脚板 €8.75		8下 €4.75 脚板 €6.75
土耳其胸 280/580 卡	黑色炸鸡腿 290/570 卡	蔬菜喜悦* 230/480 卡
8下 €5.35 脚板 €7.75	8下 €4.75 脚板 €6.75	8下 €4.50 脚板 €6.00

当地特产

Hobza tal-Malti 马耳他的面包	8下 €6.25	脚板 €9.25
Pestizz 恰壳仔子 (意大利乳清奶酪/豌豆及菜)	€6.25	€9.25
Maqrut 马德那特	€5.75	€8.75
Gaqhaq tal-ghesol 辣蛋火腿	€5.75	€8.75

外加用料

鸡肉	€1.00	€2.00
猪肉片	€1.50	€3.00
额外奶酪	€0.30	€0.60
烤甜椒香肠/柿子椒	€0.50	€1.00
煎蛋	€1.00	€2.00

饮料

七上	€2.10
可口可乐	€2.00
雪碧	€1.50
芬达	€1.25
香橙	€1.75
苹果汁	€2.00

Figure 1. Susway 洒死味 Menu

Knowing that Subway® exists in China as 赛百味® (Saibaiwei), the group laid the foundation for a mocking tone by changing the restaurant name in both Chinese and English. They changed one letter to make a pun in English, resulting in “Susway.” Readers may be aware that “sus” is current Gen Z slang for something questionable or suspicious. Although not a new term according to Merriam-Webster, “sus” has come into new usage since the online detective game *Among Us* started to become popular in 2018. (What Does “sus” Mean?, n.d.) Just as “Subway” and *Saibaiwei* are interrelated linguistically, the students likewise transliterated Susway to 洒死味 (*Sasiwei*) in Chinese. As they explain it:

“We chose Susway as the title, since by only changing one letter we could stress the ‘parodical’ value of our mistranslations. ‘Sus’ is the slang abbreviation of ‘suspicious’ or ‘suspect.’ We transliterated it in Chinese as sasiwei 洒死味 (lit. to sprinkle death flavour), which could definitely be considered a ‘sus’ action.”

In class discussions, the students were clear about how their tongue-in-cheek notion of food being “sprinkled with death” was a Gen Z humor tactic that they employed throughout the menu. Readers might recall that three of the four students can be considered Gen Z; indeed, the mature student noted in class that she often did not understand the humor but “went along with it anyway.” Social critics have noted the frequency with which the post-Millennial generation, also known as Gen Z, indulges in irreverent and dark humor, exemplified by Internet memes because they are considered “digital



natives” (“A Gen Z Humor Guide to Help Keep You in the Loop,” 2022). Authors like Jessica Xu (2020) attribute this “coping mechanism” to Gen Z’s growing disenchantment with social systems, while others like Omid Faramarzi (2019) deem the tendency towards subversive humor a “form of rebellion” that only serves to obscure this generation’s intense competitiveness. Gen Z’s prolific use of dark humor seems to indicate a disjuncture between real-world anxieties and online competencies. A similar parallel can be drawn regarding the use of humor to mitigate perceived linguistic incompetence.

According to Aboubakr (2019, p. 340), a mock-translation “results from the incongruous matching of source and target texts, as well as from deconstructing the authority of the source text, whether real or imagined.” In a similar vein, the students’ sardonic transliteration of “Susway” reveals key patterns that can be found throughout the menu. Most importantly, the puns and innuendo tend to be made first in English. This may indicate a modicum of anxiety from the students about their target language level. Yet the students recognized that for the Chinese name to be similarly humorous, they would need to be intentional in their transliteration of “sus.” They therefore split the word by syllable and used approximate sounds, paired with a coherent meaning, to create a suitable transliteration. Regardless of any feelings of inadequacy on their part, the students successfully claim a level of expertise in transliterating into Chinese.

I have identified four primary rhetorical processes that the students employed for different means in the mock-menu. As noted, the majority can be considered puns or double entendres. These can further be divided into two groups based on their intended effects. The first is “false translations” and the second “thematic translations.” The third, a rhetorical process, which, as ironic as it may sound, are translations that try to be serious. Fourth are the actual mistakes made by the students, who, to reiterate, are intermediate Chinese learners. It must be noted that these last two categories add flair, if not intentional humor, to the mock-menu.

2.1 No have “*meiyou*”

Many of the sandwich names in the grid can be considered false translations. These are instances in the mock-menu of a joke referencing itself by pointing to a pun or mistranslation of the original English wording. For example, the students had learned “tuna” as 金枪鱼 (*jinqiangyu*) and “turkey [meat] as 火鸡肉 (*huoji rou*). Yet in the menu, they used irregular renderings for comedic effect: 顿拿 *dunna* as in “grab immediately” and 土耳其胸 *tuerqi xiong* (i.e., “Turkish breast”). Similar to the silly, sexual innuendo at play in “Turkish breast,” they cleverly mistranslated the name of the barbecue chicken sandwich as 鸡巴比 Q (*jibabiQ*, or more colloquially, “BBQ cock”).

In another example of false translation, the soda 7-Up® is translated literally to 七上 (*qi shang*), even though the other sodas on the menu retain their standard translations. Less literally, but incorrect nonetheless, is the Black Forest Ham sandwich. They render it as 黑色林火腿 (*heise lin huotui*) instead of the more standard 黑森林火腿 (*hei senlin huotui*). At first glance, this seems like it could be an unintentional mistake, but in the context of a mock-translation, it ought to be read as mimicry of the kinds of mistakes that inexperienced translators make.



Such false translations conceal the amount of thought that goes into them. Another rich example can be found in step five on the left-hand side of the menu about choosing one's sauce. The mock-menu reads: 没有: 蕃茄酱、巴比 Q、鲑末 [sic]. Here one might be forgiven for thinking that Susway does not have any sauces until one realizes that the students had substituted the phonetically similar *meiyou* 沒有 for “mayo.” Therefore, the menu supposedly reads (still in classic mistranslated fashion), “Mayo: ketchup, barbecue, mustard.” A lot of mistranslated menus do use punctuation in incorrect and incomprehensible ways, so what we see here is the students playing around with different forms of miscommunication.

2.2 Add a little “spice”

The second process apparent in the mock-menu is what I call thematic translations. Unlike false translations, thematic translations have the effect of highlighting a thought pattern, discourse, cultural practice, or broader perspective. Though they may manifest as a play on words, a bigger idea anchors them within the menu. They are thematic in the sense that they appear to be strange, wrong, or incongruent with the text, but they actually demonstrate an astute understanding of the world on the students' part, especially with respect to their position as Chinese learners.

For example, the original menu contains a “Spicy Italian” sub, which the students translate as 辣意大利 (*la Yidali*), using the standard Chinese terms for both words. But then they add in parentheses 妹/哥 (*mei/ge*, girl/guy) so that the sandwich reads as “Spicy Italian (Girl/Guy).” It would have been interesting to incorporate a real-time cognitive study (*a la Borg*, 2022) during their creation of this menu item to interrogate what the students believed this particular joke was doing. Still, their cognitive association of “spicy” as both a flavor and a personality trait is evident because the idiosyncratic parenthetical calls attention to the joke and, subsequently, to the connotations of Italians, salami, and spiciness. Mobilizing cross-cultural ethnic stereotyping and bawdy innuendo, the students thus try to connect with their imagined Chinese readers.

In a similar case of thematic translation, the students reformulated the white Italian bread from the original menu into 意大李白 (*yi da Li Bai*). Their thinking was that Li Bai's poetry is of “great meaning” (意大) while “Li Bai” sounds phonetically similar to the final syllable in 意大利 with 白 (*bai*, white) added to the end. Yet instead of writing the characters 李白, the students replaced them with a small picture of the poet. The image of Li Bai elicited some giggles among the native Chinese speakers to whom we showed the menu. Evidently, the thrust of the joke does not lie in the students' pun on 利/李白 alone, which could be mistaken as a simple error or typo. Instead, the humor depends on shared cultural information and/or experiences between interlocutors. By exhibiting some knowledge, however rudimentary, about Classical Chinese poetry, the students performed the feat of making native Chinese speakers laugh without embarrassing themselves.

Another instance of thematic translation appears in the section on vegetables in step four. The original menu offers pickles, olives, banana peppers, and jalapeños as an alternative to those vegetables more commonly put on sandwiches. The students take the concept further by again capitalizing on the interlingual and cross-cultural idea of “spicy.” Readers should note the use of phallic emojis. “Pickles”



become simply 黄瓜 🥒 (*huanggua*, cucumbers), “banana peppers” become 香蕉 🍌 (*xiangjiao*, banana), “olives” gets replaced by 茄子 🍆 (*qiezi*, eggplant), and “jalapeños” simplifies conceptually into 墨西哥辣椒 🌶️ “Mexican pepper.” (Note: although 墨 appeared in an earlier draft, it seems to have mutated into 王 by the final version, but it could just be the bold font). The Chinese words they use obviously diverge semantically from the source text. The sexually evocative emojis, however, propel these quazi-translations into the territory of Gen Z humor, thereby making the mock meaning indisputable. By using bawdy innuendo, the students simultaneously divert readers’ attention away from a perceived lack of linguistic skills and claim a level of expertise in cross-cultural, comical communication.

2.3 Fear the “death pastry”

In an ironic twist on the concept of a mock-menu, the students also employ translations (mainly transliterations) that aim to be serious. These tend to be made in the service of rendering a local concept in Chinese. In other words, the students put their Chinese skills to the test to find a suitable transliteration for something with local consequences. Most of these examples can be found in the section called 当地特产 (*dangdi techan*, local specialties). This is also the only section in the mock-menu where no English original or equivalents are used. Instead, the students include the original Maltese names for these products. It may be noted that the Maltese language is the only Romanized Semitic language. Although derived from Sicilian Arabic in the ninth century, Maltese has since borrowed extensively from Italian, French, and English over many centuries of colonization.

Pastizz (pl. pastizzi), a crispy, laminated-dough pastry filled with either ricotta or mashed peas, is probably the most famous Maltese food. They are cheap, plentiful, and filling. The students took the translation of “pastizzi” very seriously as a point of national pride. The result is a transliteration that, despite still being funny, also produces an appropriate translation. The students explain:

“Knowing that finding the appropriate words in Chinese would be very difficult we decided to transliterate it [pastizzi] into Chinese using characters that add meaning and sense to the word, thus coming up with pasitizi 怕死体子 where we made use of the characters pa 怕 (to be afraid) and si 死 (to die) in order to hint that this Maltese delicacy is very fattening and bad for your health and thus in the worst scenario could lead to death, so you should be ‘afraid’ of them.”

Pasitizi 怕死体子 and *Sasiwei* 洒死味 have something in common: they both represent appropriate, acceptable translations while also being funny and ironic. Another example of a serious yet funny translation is how the students translated a local soda called Kinnie® (which appears on every menu in Malta). The students rendered Kinnie® as 苦你 (*ku-ni*) an homage to the soda’s bitter taste that tends to polarize people. *Ku-ni* appears to display an awareness that transliteration from English into Chinese does not always need to keep the same vowel or consonant sound, and that sometimes an indication of what the product is or entails becomes more important (e.g. 皮卡车、麦当劳、可口可乐, to name a few).



In that same section, they translate *Ħobż tal-Malti* (Maltese bread) to 马耳他的面包 with no hint of irony. The other two items are also transliterated, but unlike *pastizzi* or *hobza*, the translations do not give any indication of the food or its ingredients. “Maqrut” (the plural form of “*imqaret*”) are fried diamond-shaped dough filled with date paste. “Qagħaq ta’ L-Għasel,” or honey rings, are a shortcrust pastry shaped into a ring and filled with honey and molasses. As a testament to the influence of the Arabic language and culture, *Maqrut* and *Qagħaq ta’ L-Għasel* originated in North Africa (Anonymous 2009).

Oddly, the students also kept the idea of a 6-inch and footlong for each of these Maltese foods, which is probably the result of the graphic design constraints of this project more than the translation itself. Perhaps these instances where the students refrain from adding a comedic touch reveal their linguistic limitations. If so, the students mitigate the issue by offering befitting transliterations of national foods, which could at least help their fictionalized Chinese reader with the pronunciation of certain Maltese words.

2.4 “Walk the third”

Even though the mock-menu is nothing if not idiosyncratic, there are still actual inaccuracies and mistranslations. For example, it is not clear what the students were doing with the prices, calories, and sizes of the sandwiches. The students use *ka* in the sandwich grid as shorthand for the transliteration of calories 卡路里 (*kaluli*). In typical Chinese menus, however, 大卡 (*da ka*) or 热量 (*reliang*) are used to denote calories, not just *ka* by itself. This might be taken as mistranslation mimicry, but because it contains no point of self-reference, any attempt at a pun is lost.

The way they indicate the length of the sandwiches is also confusing. Subway® famously has 6- and 12-inch sandwiches. Instead of using the standard 寸 (*cun*) for “inch,” the students wrote “6 下” (*xia*, down). This appears to have been a typo or a failure to recall the character 寸 because the students did not realize the error until the feedback session. Likewise, for the 12-inch sandwiches, they used 脚长 (*jiaochang*), a literal translation of “footlong.” Subway® typically uses “footlong” in its branding in the United States, but not always in other countries. Though Chinese consumers would recognize the 12-inch sandwiches, they do not call that unit of measurement a “foot” as such. Considering that readers would need to translate the word back into English for it to have a humorous pretext, this appears to be a case of cultural clumsiness.

One place where the students’ humor does not translate is the step-by-step instructions on how to build a sandwich on the left side of the menu. The students preface the section by claiming “点饭跟散步一样” (ordering food is like taking a walk). The students then proceed to number the sequence as 第一步 (*di yi bu*)、第二步 (*di er bu*), and so on. 步 *bu* here denotes the dual meaning of “step” in English as both a sequential measurement and a corporeal verb. Conceptually, these ordinal numbers corroborate the idea of stepping down the production line at any Subway® shop.

At the third step, however, the students plant a homophonic transliteration where 散 (*san*, walk) stands in for the number 三 (*san*, three) so that it reads 第散步 (*di sanbu*). It is difficult to construe this as a joke because 1) none of the other numbers are similarly altered; 2) unlike the other puns in the



menu, *sanbu* has no silly or incongruous associations in this context; and 3) if *sanbu* merely references the section title, it becomes superfluous. This semblance of a pun therefore strays into the territory of actual translation incompetence, as opposed to mimicking it.

But the ordinal number snafu raises an intriguing question: what role does consistency play in mock-translation? Consider the public signs in China that use odd or incorrect English syntax. Because they have been standardized and can be found throughout the country, their funniness fades and eventually becomes normalized in the eyes of the viewer. A converse parallel might be the countless commercial items in Asia (e.g., stationery, clothing, packaging, etc.) decorated with peculiar English phrasing. With so many examples, they can just as likely be read as misrepresenting the language for the purpose of commercial profit as for actual mistranslation. Consistency in the first instance allows even foreigners to participate in public spaces. In the second instance, consistent inaccuracies add value to the product and consumer experience. Consistency therefore offers easier access to texts so that even the most subliminal satire can draw attention to itself, and audiences can participate in the humor it invokes. Due to the number of inconsistencies (albeit few) in the mock-menu, the students' claims to parody and satire fall short of perceptive commentary.

3. Theoretical Insights and Pedagogical Implications

The students claim that their main goal was to “highlight the occurrence of mistranslations” and to “create a satirical appropriation of a menu.” These two aims bring an important theoretical point to the fore. Aboubakr (2019, p. 339) notes that mock-translation “has the potential to present a mock reproduction of an entire genre.” In my view, by creating a “satirical appropriation” of a singular menu, the students presented the possibility of reading their mock-menu as a mock representation of translation fails as a genre. Such a reading, to continue in the words of Aboubakr, “allow[s] for the emergence of new cultural paradigms where meaning is challenged and reproduced” (Aboubakr, 2019, p. 339).

We need to consider the global processes and practices that make translation fails commonplace as a genre of entertainment. In the spirit of rethinking this genre, I would like to invoke Jing Tsu's (2011) idea of “literary governance.” Literary governance might be defined as the myriad processes and inherent tensions between access to a language and script through orthography and “the continual reliance on a notion of a primary, naturalized linguistic home [...] to support expressions of cultural belonging” (p. 2). According to Tsu, linguistic competence has often been treated as a stamp of authenticity or a right to identity but should instead be treated as a currency and a medium of access. Everyone negotiates their belonging in their linguistic environments through various means (e.g., spelling correctly, using appropriate collocations or prepositions, reading the “right” material, or adhering to specific writing styles, to name some examples). Translation fails exemplify the “incentives of recognition and power” around which literary governance revolves.

Translation fails exist in every linguistic environment. The genre is popular and accessible because such signage appears in public spaces like restaurants, tourist sites, and public transportation. On top of that, they are shared over the Internet and social media. These spaces present perfect opportunities for intercultural mingling and, subsequently, interlingual misunderstandings, purposeful or not.



Culturally, this genre symbolizes access and belonging. Yet, paired with the invisibility of the translators themselves, the humor in translation fails is only accessible if a reader meets certain standards of linguistic competence and cultural understanding. Translation fails momentarily alert audiences to the fallibility of something we all tend to act as experts on yet take for granted: language. And because “bad translations” are not supposed to happen, readers can simultaneously relish the errors while dismissing the linguistic negotiations in which they too participate in daily life.

Literary governance offers a distinct prism through which to view my students’ claims to linguistic expertise in the mock-menu. Their resulting text sits somewhere in the crosshairs among the “irreconcilable rivalries” between language standardization and acquisition on the one hand, and the local, national, and global scales of “literary cooperation” that form our lived contexts on the other (Tsu, 2011, pp. 12-14). To read the mock-menu as a challenge to the entire genre of translation fails means to unveil the work it takes to claim space in any linguistic environment.

The process of creating a mock-translation could therefore be considered a necessary one within literary governance because it allows room to play with the nexus between cultural identity and linguistic competence in a way that the traditional language acquisition classroom cannot. Creativity is essential in the translation classroom, especially when students and instructors come from different socio-linguistic, even generational, backgrounds. My students’ mock-menu reflects their idiosyncratic transition into Chinese speakers in a bilingual, Maltese-English environment. It is spicy, misunderstood, miswritten, and mispronounced. A miscellany of incomplete cultural awareness.

Like the translation fails genre, the Gen Z element in the mock-menu’s language and approach is a cross-cultural phenomenon, which has also by and large been engendered by the Internet and social media. For a budding Gen Z translator, broken translations made by earnest people make sense in a broken world. Mocking the translation fails genre by “sprinkling death” over it not only mitigates linguistic incompetence but also rewrites the rules of literary governance. Rather than aiming for perfection in mimesis, the students mimicked the *imperfect* translator, transforming them into an authentic currency in the translation classroom that might someday be transferred to the commercial world of Chinese-to-English translation.

Can mock-translation turn students into better translators? Yes, I believe so. Jing Tsu prompts us to observe the unspoken terms of engagement for the languages into which we are born as well as those we encounter throughout life. Mock-translation allowed my 2021 cohort to take ownership of their scope for creativity within Chinese. Moreover, mock-translation requires students to take a critical view of texts and their intrinsic purposes. Then, they must get creative. When creating a mock-translation, one must recognize that society regards translation for the access it provides, yet as the translation fails genre indicates, access remains limited, often according to society’s own unspoken rules. To best utilize mock-translation, students need to be given space to have fun with Chinese instead of treating it as a monolithic, ever-moving goalpost. Rather than venerating its distinctiveness, they must be taught how pliable and versatile it can be.

The task I assigned the 2021 *CHN 3003* cohort, experimental as it was, resulted in a balance of agency and performativity that I believe students of translation may find useful. For instructors, the



following questions may prompt students to reflect on the performativity in their own translation choices:

- What is the role of the translator in a mock-translation?
- What, if any, social/cultural/political discourses does your mock-translation speak to?
- What is the most difficult part of doing a mock-translation?
- What happens inside you when you misinterpret on purpose versus when you do so unintentionally?
- What do you learn about translation by doing a mock-translation?

Working with translation fails and/or formulaic texts in the classroom can lead students down fun and informative avenues. Especially when collaborating on translations, students can build their confidence in Chinese while creatively expressing themselves. Difficulties may arise when assessing a task that results in a mock-translation. I handled this issue by having an in-class feedback session, providing time to revise the menu according to my feedback, and assigning a reflective evaluation to include in the final portfolio. In the end, the mock-menu turned out to be one of the 2021 cohort's most memorable translation assignments, and it boosted their confidence for the rest of the term.

Declarations and Acknowledgement:

The representation of and quotations from the mock-menu, as well as its critical evaluation, have been cited in this article with the permission of the four students from the 2021 CHN 3003 cohort.

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