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Thick Translation, Migrants' Life Narratives and Transnational Literacy: Exploring Chinese Migrants' Place-Making in Modern Australian Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks the conceptual and practical issues of translating migrants' life narratives, focusing on the challenge of untranslatability. Considering the translation of migrants' life writing as both social documentation and historical knowledge production, the paper argues there is a need for a translation approach that combines ethnography, philosophy and cultural semantics. Adopting an empirically established linguistic framework rooted in universal concepts, it illustrates how the philosophical idea 'thick translation', expounded by Kwame Anthony Appiah, can be fruitfully applied to migrant life writing, presenting annotated translations of selected terms that appear in life stories published in the Australian Chinese-language newspaper *Chinese Post* (東方郵報) in its 1994 series titled 'Australia, where is our place?' (澳洲, 我们的位置在哪里?). Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how 'thick translation', supported by a culture-sensitive metalanguage, can help promote understanding of unique perspectives across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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[O]ne thing that can get entirely lost [in translation] is the rich differences of human life in culture. – Kwame Anthony Appiah

1. 'Multilingual Writing in a Monolingual Nation'

This paper delves into conceptual and attendant practical issues concerning the translation of migrants' life narratives. Many migrants to Australia have written about their lives and experiences in their adopted country. These life narratives constitute rich and valuable archives of Australian migration history. However, most of these writings are unknown or inaccessible to wider Australian society because they were not written in English but in migrants' home languages. The anonymity of these life narratives

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reflects the lamentable state of what literary scholar Ommundsen (2018) describes as ‘multilingual writing in a monolingual nation’.

In this paper, we start from the premise that, despite the enormous difficulties in moving ideas and stories across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the act of translation is necessary for the representation of migrants’ experiences in wider Australian society and for achieving transnational literacy. We regard the act of translation as social documentation and production of historical knowledge. We argue that such an act requires concerted effort and collaboration among multilingual Australians. It also demands an integrated approach to translation that can incorporate ‘thick translation’ to represent migrants’ perspectives and viewpoints as authentically as possible. This is because many words and expressions that embody migrants’ perspectives and viewpoints are difficult to carry over into the English language without lengthy exposition. We discuss different contexts that benefit from ‘thick translation’. We propose an approach for operationalising ‘thick translation’ that draws on empirically-identified simple and cross-translatable words, and illustrate how this works through a case study of selected terms that appear in Chinese migrants’ life writing.

The paper is structured as follows: it first discusses the state of migrants’ life narratives in the Australian context, pointing out the crucial role of translation for intercultural understanding. It then discusses the conceptual problem of untranslatability and the need for ‘thick translation’. This is followed by an illustration of how ‘thick translation’ can be applied, using examples taken from reader-submitted life narratives included in the Australian Chinese-language newspaper *Chinese Post* (1994).

2. ‘The Impossible Necessity of Translation’

Publishing migrants’ life narratives presents a dilemma. To put it bluntly, if not written in English, these writings are seldom read and have little impact, or even visibility, in mainstream Australian society. But if written in English, they are hardly read by migrants themselves. To take as an example the writing of Zhengdao Ye, one of the authors. Ye has written, in English, two autobiographical essays about her experiences as a Chinese migrant to Australia. Her 2003 piece was published in an open-access journal titled *Mots Pluriels* and later reprinted in the first issue of the journal *Life Writing* (see Ye 2004). The 2007 article was included in a collective volume *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures* (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007; Ye 2007). Both essays have also been included in the Australian Literature Gateway archived at the National Library of Australia. While Ye is delighted that her two essays are read, studied, cited and used for training in cross-cultural communication, she is aware that they are not read by many Chinese migrants and that the experiences she wrote about may not be representative of most of those Chinese migrants.

There are undoubtedly power dynamics associated with the language in which migrants write about their lives, and along with this, what gets to be ‘seen’ in the public domain. In predominantly Anglophone Australia, English enjoys a status not shared by languages other than English (known as LOTE) or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. English is the unmarked, default language of public representation, occupying a central place in the linguistic world of Australia (Piller 2016; Cheng 2023). LOTE have a conspicuous but peripheral existence, their collective identity being

defined through one shared ‘categorical negation’ – *not* English. Other taken-for-granted terms commonly used in public spaces – such as ‘multilingual’, ‘community languages’, ‘migrant’ (e.g. Ye 2020) and CALD (‘Culturally and Linguistically Diverse’) – all share this implicit reference to a non-English-speaking or non-Anglo background (cf. Shepherd et al. 2021).

Most migrants, even those with high proficiency in English, will continue to write about their experiences in the language they feel most confident in and comfortable about when expressing their feelings and emotions. Because of this, translation is perhaps the sole avenue for migrants’ life writings to be made available to a wider readership. Translating migrants’ narratives then requires conscious, multigenerational collaboration between authors, researchers and translators (Cheng 2023). In this sense, translating migrants’ narratives can be seen as social practice that produces historical knowledge beyond the confines of the source language. Translating migrants’ narratives is a necessary aspect of history making, even though such an act is rare.

But translation is also hard due to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences. The idea of ‘incommensurability’ between linguistic and cultural worlds means that, for many scholars, untranslatability is insurmountable. Perfect translation remains an unattainable goal. The tension between the necessity of translation and the fear of overlooking linguistic-cultural differences is sensitively captured by Wenche Ommundsen. She writes with respect of literary translation that:

On the one hand, it is the *sine qua non* of communication across cultures, a necessary condition for cultural contact and understanding, and for reconceiving a world literary canon beyond the hegemony of Western traditions. On the other, untranslatability is repeatedly highlighted to emphasise the danger of glossing over cultural and linguistic incommensurability, of reducing singularity and difference to a bland cosmopolitan sameness catering to a global (mostly Anglo-American) book market. (Ommundsen 2022: 536)

While we sympathise with Ommundsen, we are also of the view that the issue of untranslatability is not entirely insurmountable. The philosophical idea of ‘thick translation’, expounded by Kwame Anthony Appiah, can be fruitfully expanded upon and linguistically executed. ‘Thick translation’ can promote empathetic understanding of diverse cultural perspectives, and make these perspectives accessible to the public. This is not an easy task, especially given that many of these cultural perspectives lie outside the conceptual realms demarcated by the English language. In the next section, we discuss the idea of ‘thick translation’ and outline our rationale for incorporating this mode of translation in practice.

3. Bridging Cultural Worlds through ‘Thick Translation’

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah first introduced the concept of ‘thick translation’ in a 1993 essay bearing the same title (Appiah 2000). Working in philosophical semantics, Appiah sees a natural connection between translation and the theorising of meaning (p. 418). He distinguishes two kinds of translation – ‘literal translation’ and ‘literary translation’ – based on two categories of meaning he proposed.

Appiah’s categorisation of literal translation is about translating what he calls ‘Gricean aspects of meaning’. He argues that among a community of speakers of a single language, mutual understanding is achieved by recognising each other’s intentions – which can be

accounted for by the Gricean theory of pragmatics. Others' intentions are ascertained through grammar and lexicon instructions, or what he calls 'a structure of mutual expectations about reasons for uttering' (Appiah 2000: 419). 'Literal intentions' are intentions that are conventionally associated with various speech acts within a speech community (p. 421). In Appiah's view, 'barriers to translation' arise when 'literal intentions' are not recognised by speakers from other language communities (p. 421).

Appiah's primary concern is with the other kind of translation – 'literary translation' – where meaning is non-conventional, not governed by Gricean mechanisms and therefore open to interpretation. In this regard, Appiah sees aspects of the activity of translation as no different from the activity of reading; both face the same uncertainties of meaning interpretation. By extension, the right kind of question to ask about how to approach translation should be no different from the kind of question one asks about reading. Taking an educational stance, Appiah argues that just as it is important that an 'answer to the question "What modes of reading are productive?" will derive from an ethics and politics of literary pedagogy' (Appiah 2000: 426), 'we might seek to operate with a correlative notion of productive modes of translation' (p. 427). He proposes 'thick translation' as a productive mode of translation, considering it 'a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching'. He writes:

[A]nd here it seems to me that such 'academic' translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. I have called this 'thick translation'. (Appiah 2000: 427)

For Appiah (2000), 'thick translation' is 'eminently worth doing' because it provides a means of 'understanding the reasons characteristic of other cultures' (p. 427). 'Thick translation' allows us to 'attend to how various other people really are or were', and not lose sight of 'the rich differences of human life in culture' (p. 427). And literary translation through 'thick translation' is literary teaching. A 'thick translation', therefore, is one that 'draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others' (p. 427).

The philosophical notion of 'thick translation' is appealing and it can be fruitfully drawn upon in the practice of translating migrants' life writing. 'Thick translation' is instructive to our translation practice in two ways. First, the ethical and political dimension of the 'thick translation' proposal is inspirational. It connects with our project aim to inform wider society of Chinese migrants' experience as a formative part of modern Australian history. Second, as linguists, we see great potential in combining philosophy, ethnography and linguistics in practice. This is especially the case given there is a well-known school of linguistic semantics, the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach, that has found a solution – or at least a partial solution – to the untranslatability issue.

While the notion of 'thick translation' has been appreciated by theorists of translation studies (e.g. Hermans 2003), it has largely not been put into practice. Hermans (2003) envisages several ways of operationalising it, mostly citing examples of historical texts where 'thick translation' could be usefully applied. However, the fundamental issue of the metalanguage – the language which one uses to represent and understand others – remains unaddressed.

In this study, we experiment with the practicality of Appiah's theoretical proposal, exploring what 'thick translation' of migrants' narratives might look like. We focus on terms that appear in Chinese migrants' life narratives, discussing examples in which the nuances of meaning can be lost in the target language of English.

4. A Cross-Translatable Metalanguage for 'Thick Translation'

When Appiah talks about productive modes of translation, such as 'annotations' and 'glosses', he is in effect talking about modes of explanation that compensate where meaning may be lost in the target text (Appiah 2000). Describing the title of his own paper as using 'the Geertzean vocabulary' (p. 422), Appiah has clearly been influenced by the idea of 'thick description' championed by the ethnographer Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) and earlier philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) (see e.g. Hermans 2003).

If the goal of our study is to represent and understand Chinese migrants' experience from their own perspective, we must also concern ourselves with the question of *in* and *with* what language we seek to explore and represent that understanding. In fact, ethnographers and cultural and social anthropologists have extensively discussed this issue of the metalanguage of representation (e.g. Hanks and Severi 2014). However, it was linguist Anna Wierzbicka who offered a concrete linguistic method for representing concepts and overcoming the 'incommensurable' problem in moving meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries (e.g. Wierzbicka 1992, 2019).

In a nutshell, the linguistic method that Wierzbicka championed builds on an empirically established cross-translatable metalanguage, known as NSM. The metalanguage consists of 65 empirically established universal semantic primes which represent the elementary level of meanings of any language. Any complex idea of any language can be decomposed into these primes and represented by configurations of semantic primes known as explications (see the Appendix for the list of English exponents of these primes; for a detailed exposition of the NSM approach, see Goddard et al. 2023). For accessibility and readability, NSM has also developed the Minimal English approach. Minimal English texts use simple and common English vocabulary in addition to the English exponents of the semantic primes. For example, the meaning of *migrant* in Australian English – which is different from that in other varieties of English – can be explicated in Minimal English as follows (based on Ye 2021, with modification):

Migrant: a person of one kind [category]; people can know about people of this kind like this [knowledge]; people of this kind were not born in Australia, they were born in another country [status]; after they lived for some time in that country where they were born, they wanted to live in Australia; because of this, sometime afterwards, they lived in Australia, not in that country where they were born [changing places]; people in Australia can think about people of this kind like this [perception]: 'they wanted to live here, because at some time they thought like this: 'if we live in Australia, very good things can happen to us, we want this' [attributed motivation]; because they thought like this, they did many things after this [action], they could live in Australia because Australian government said so' [permission]; many people in Australia think about people of this kind like this [attitudes]: 'many people of this kind can't speak English well, many people of this kind can't do much; it is good if other people do many good things for them'.

The underlined text highlights what is distinctive to the meaning of *migrant* in Australian English: voluntary change of place; wanting to permanently settle in Australia; legal entry; non-English speaking; vulnerability' and the positive tone associated with the term (cf. Moore 2016). The explication indicates that the notion of *migrant* in Australian English has Australia as its reference and has both a positive side and a 'dark' side. The positive side is the generally positive connotation associated with the reference of *migrant*; the 'dark' side lies in the more specific connotation that they are non-English-speaking, implying a departure from the English-speaking norm.¹

Over the years, Wierzbicka and NSM researchers have undertaken considerable work to provide 'thick descriptions' for many culture-bound concepts across many domains (e.g. emotion, social relations and sociality) in many languages (see Wierzbicka 1992, 1997; Levisen and Waters 2017. See Ye 2023 for an overview of NSM work on emotion. See also Geertz's comment on Wierzbicka's approach in Geertz 2001: 208–209). The anthropological interest that NSM researchers have shown when approaching the meaning of culture-specific concepts and ideas distinguishes the NSM approach from other linguistic theories. The extensive empirical experience that the NSM approach has accumulated through providing 'thick descriptions' for culture-specific concepts establishes a solid foundation for operationalising 'thick translation'. In the next section, we show how we envisage a 'thick translation' practice that conveys important cultural, societal and historical information that conventional translation often overlooks. We use the terms 'thick translation', 'thick description' and 'annotations' interchangeably. However, it is crucial to note that annotations in our practice serve a fundamentally different function from conventional footnotes in translation. Rather than merely providing background or missing information, our annotations aim to bridge conceptual gaps, offering a pathway towards understanding migrants' cultural experiences from their own perspectives.

5. Understanding Chinese Migrants' Place-Making in Australia: Illustrations through 'Thick Translation'

In this section, we experiment with ways of providing 'thick translation' based on a categorisation of different language points presented in the source texts. We first introduce the collection of Chinese migrants' life narratives, the focus of our study. We also discuss the historical background of the migrant group to which the authors belong (5.1), as it is important to understand the transnational contexts that inform the production of this body of writing. We then illustrate the working of 'thick translation' with eight examples that represent three different kinds of situations in need of thick translation (5.2).

5.1. Historical Background and General Context: New Chinese Migrants and Chinese-Language Newspapers

Between 28 April and 15 June 1994, the Sydney-based Australian Chinese-language newspaper *Chinese Post* (東方郵報 *Dōngfāng yóu bào*) published 36 reader-submitted articles in a series titled 'Australia, where is our place?' (澳洲，我们的位置在哪里？*Àozhōu, wǒmen de wèizhì zài nǎlǐ?*). The Chinese Australians who contributed to the *Chinese Post* series share experiences and stories unique to their generation. The article authors were born in the People's Republic of China (PRC), most growing up

during the Mao era (1949–1976). They lived through the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but also the introduction of the Open Door Policy in 1978, which encouraged foreign businesses to set up and invest in China. In the early to mid-1980s, China's new 'self-funded studying abroad' policy made it possible for a large number of Chinese people to study overseas (Western Returned Scholars Association 2019). Many of the *Chinese Post* series authors had been language students who came to Australia on student visas (known as 语言生 *yǔyánshēng* or 留学生 *liúxuéshēng*). Following the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, thousands of Chinese students in Australia were allowed to apply for permanent residency (Gao and Liu 1998).²

The *Chinese Post* (1994) articles capture the sentiments, experiences and social identities of a significant group in Australia's cultural and migration history. The stories the authors told serve as a rare insight into the life of new Chinese migrants when they first arrived in Australia,³ and give us glimpses of their ideologies, dreams and 'complicated entanglement' in their adopted country.⁴

This body of life narratives is also significant in that it documents an integral part of the formation of multicultural Australia after the White Australia policy was gradually dismantled in the 1960s and early 1970s (Koleth 2010; for Chinese Australians' experiences under the White Australia Policy, see e.g. Yen et al. 2022). The authors of the *Chinese Post* (1994) articles worked in a range of occupations in Australia, the group included an engineer, truck driver, video store owner, director, teacher, calligrapher, writer and artist. Generally, the authors were well-educated and had had coveted stable jobs in the PRC.

However, in the 1980s and early 1990s, there were no community newspapers that catered to a new Chinese migrant readership and owned by new Chinese migrants themselves. The Chinese-language newspapers distributed in Australia at that time were either owned by overseas Chinese (华侨 *huáqiáo*) from Southeast Asia, or were imprints of popular newspapers published in Hong Kong and Taiwan (such as the 星島日報 *Sing Tao Daily* or 自立快報 *Independence Daily*). These newspapers were published in traditional characters. It was not until 1996 that the first Chinese-language newspaper in simplified characters appeared in Australia.⁵ Newcomers from mainland China could only use the existing Chinese-language newspapers to publish their stories. For this reason, even though the migrant group of interest in our study was educated in simplified Chinese characters, their published pieces appeared in traditional characters. As a result, some contributors may have felt that their experience was obscured or 'lost in translation' even when writing and reading about their lives in what was ostensibly their 'native language', as their published stories remained inaccessible to many of their fellow new Chinese migrants in Australia. This is seen in the examples cited in (5.2).⁶

5.2. 'Thick Translation' in Practice

This section elaborates on what 'thick translation' of migrant life writing might look like, discussing three situations in which annotation enriches the translation of the source text. The first kind of situation where annotations are necessary is when English words are borrowed into the original Chinese-language source text, as is the case in Example [1].

Example [1]

我永遠也不會忘記，當我第一次找到一份**waitress**的工作，我的那份欣喜。這份工作我做了兩年，是伴隨著我的**full time**讀書和另一份**part time**工作的。我無需向你表明這其中的艱辛，但我從未間斷過一天，從未有過厭倦或失落感，盡管做**Waitress**並不是我的理想，但我知道只是我理想的一個初級階梯而已。亦盡管我有幾回偶爾機遇的可以有更好的工作，但都因與我讀書的時間相衝突，我不得不放棄。（王曉菁 Wang Xiaojing）⁷

I will also never forget the joy that I felt when I found my first job as a **waitress**. I had this job for two years, along with my **full-time** study and another **part-time** job. I do not need to tell you how much hard work it all was, but I never stopped for even one day, and never felt weary or lost. Although being a waitress wasn't my ideal, I knew it was just the first step toward achieving my dreams. There had also been some fortuitous opportunities which could have landed me better jobs but because they clashed with my study schedule, I had to turn them down. (McLean 2021: 47)⁸

Annotation: The English words '**waitress**', '**full time**' and '**part time**' appeared in the original essay. China in the 1980s and early 1990s was still largely a planned economy where jobs were allocated by the state (even today part-time work is uncommon in China). The writer (as well as Chinese migrants) borrowed these new concepts from English to talk about their daily experiences in Australia.

From a linguistic point of view, it is important to point out that English words were incorporated into the migrants' Chinese vocabulary because these concepts did not exist in the Chinese language at that time. Moreover, the presence of the English words in the Chinese-language sources was not a case of what linguists would call 'code-switching'. There was nothing for these migrants to switch back to in the first place, because there were simply no matching concepts in Chinese. The 'thick translation' approach we employ recognises these conceptual gaps rather than merely treating them as missing information. The annotations for terms like 'waitress' and 'part-time' thus serve to illuminate these migrants' lived experience of encountering unfamiliar social and economic concepts as they began their new lives in Australia.

The second kind of situation where annotations are called for is when a new calque is used in the original text, as is the case in Example [2].

Example [2]

出去‘**消品**’的時候，方向盤后面是我的位置，旁邊是孩子他娘的位置，后排是兒子的位。馬路邊找一個停車的位置。老伴看服裝，兒子奔遊戲機，老頭子買汽車零件，大家都找自己的位置。當然，我這裡說的是通俗意義上的位置，不是偉人‘三十功名塵與土，蒼茫大地誰主沉浮’那種社會的、歷史的位置。（老戴維Lao Daiwei）⁹

When we are out **shopping**, my place is behind the steering wheel, next to me is the mother of my child, and our son's place is in the back seat. I find a place on the kerbside to park the car, then the other half browses clothing, the son runs straight to the video games, and this old man buys automotive tools; everyone is looking for their place. Of course, what I'm talking about is the common meaning of 'place', not in the sense of the kinds of societal and historical 'places' – as in 'at the age of 30, my deeds are nothing but dust and soil', or 'I ask, on this boundless land, who rules over man's destiny?' – mentioned by those great men such as Yue Fei and Mao Zedong. (McLean 2021: 81)

Annotation: The Chinese word for 'shopping' reads '*xiāopǐn*' which literally means 'dissolve/consume goods'. '*Xiaopin*' was a new word created by the writer to express the idea

of ‘shopping’, and the pronunciation of ‘*xiaopin*’ sounds similar to ‘shopping’. ‘Going shopping’, the idea of buying things for leisure, not for necessity, was a new concept to those migrants who came from a planned economy.¹⁰

The annotation provides the contextual information that although ‘shopping’ appears to be a mundane activity in Australia, it wasn’t so in the eyes of the writer. The clever coinage of the Chinese word ‘*xiaopin*’, which aims to match both the pronunciation and the concept of ‘shopping’, conveys a sense of self-cynicism on the author’s part. In the 1980s and early 1990s, most people in China did not own a car. Nor would they have ever thought about driving to a place for shopping. The Chinese word ‘*xiaopin*’ was probably short-lived. Further investigation would be required to determine whether the term was coined by the writer or had certain currency among new Chinese migrants at that time.

The third situation when annotation is necessary is when the original source text includes culture-bound concepts. In this case, annotations can explain not only why a particular form of words is used (as in Examples [1-2]), but also unpack untranslatable meanings of the terms in question. Examples [3-6] illustrate this point: the Chinese terms 西方人 *xīfāngrén* and 洋人 *yáng rén* can both be translated as ‘Europeans’, ‘Westerners’ or ‘foreigners’, among other alternatives.¹¹ Examples [3-4] show that *xīfāngrén* was a common label used by migrants at the time to talk about a specific category of people who are not Chinese.

Example [3]

換一個國家給我的最大啓發是：生活在哪里其實都是差不多的。地理、環境、氣候、文化、習俗這些新宿國與國之間有差異，當然語言就更不同了，但人類基本的生活形態還是很相似的。無論在中國還是澳洲，無論是東方人還是西方人，都是一樣地吃飯、睡覺、做事、娛樂。只不過在中國的娛樂或許是登山，在澳洲就換成了去海灘游泳。想通了，就會心平氣和地面對現實。（施国英Shi Guoying）¹²

Moving to another country has greatly enlightened me: Life is pretty much the same no matter where you live. There are differences between countries in geography, atmosphere, climate, cultures and customs, not to mention their languages; however, the basic lifestyles of human beings are still quite similar. Whether in China or Australia, whether ‘Easterners’ or **Westerners**, we all do the same things – eat, sleep, work and seek entertainment. It is just that you might find entertainment for people in China is mountain-climbing, while in Australia it becomes swimming at the beach. Once you have it all figured out, you can calmly face reality. (McLean 2021: 40–41)

Example [4]

西方人常愛談積極的思維 (Positive Thinking)，這幾乎是所有想成功，或已成功人士中的秘密武器。（陳伊娃Chen Yiwa）¹³

Westerners love to talk about positive thinking. It is the secret weapon of almost every successful person or anyone who wants to be successful. (McLean 2021: 44)

Example [5]

大家都知道幾萬個中國留學生在這塊陌生的土地上生活了幾年，從不會說英語，怕和西方人打交道，到能用英語爭執、交流、甚至通婚，從只滿足於找到一份穩定的

工作，賺點錢，到開始思考我到底將來該幹什麼：從臨時居留，到能在此安居樂業等等。(陳伊娃Chen Yiwa)

We all know that tens of thousands of Chinese overseas students have been living in this unfamiliar land for a number of years. From not speaking English and being scared of having contact with Westerners, to being able to argue and communicate in English, and even marrying Australians; from feeling the satisfaction of just finding a stable job and making some money, to starting to ponder what I should be doing with my future; from temporary residency to settling down here, content with work and life, and so on. (McLean 2021: 43)

Example [6]

中國人又聰明、又勤勞，怎麼會比不上西方人。當時感謝我丈夫在精神上和經濟上給與我的支持，一個月不到，我真的找到了一份很不錯的 **office** 工作。

(陳伊娃 Chen Yiwa)

Chinese people are both clever and hard-working; how is it that they are inferior to and cannot compare with **Westerners**? Then, thanks to the emotional and financial support that my husband gave me, within one month I landed a pretty good **office** job. (McLean 2021: 44)

Annotation: ‘Westerner’ (*xīfāngrén*) was a popular term used in China in the 1980 and 1990s, following the advent of the Open Door Policy. When writers use the term ‘Westerners’ in the original Chinese-language writing, they want to say like this about some people in Australia: these people are people of one kind; they *look like* people who live in countries in the West; people living in the West do many things not as we do things here in the East/in China; they think about many things not as what we think about things; we want to do some things as they do; we want to think about some things as they think about them.

The recurrent use of *xīfāngrén* (‘Westerner’) can give a glimpse into how the new Chinese migrants categorise themselves and other people in Australia. *Xīfāngrén*, which literally means ‘people of/from the West’, was a popular term in mainland China in the late 1980s and 1990s. Being a place-based cultural term, *xīfāngrén* carried the connotation that people in the West have a different ideology and different ways of doing things. The West symbolised many things that the younger generation of Chinese people (to which the migrant group belongs) were aspiring to. It was synonymous with modernity and technological advancement. The cultural ethos in China at that time, reflected in *xīfāngrén*, probably influenced many new migrants in their decision to come to Australia. Examining the historical frequency of *xīfāngrén* (see Figure 1) in the Chinese corpus BCC shows the salience of this term in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

The use of *xīfāngrén* to refer to people in Australia shows the influence of a dominant discourse of division between the East and the West. Even though, geographically, Australia is neither in the East nor the West, it was seen by new Chinese migrants as a Western country in terms of governance. Many Chinese people looked up to the West and regarded it as the representation of modernity, democracy and freedom. These ideals also dominate the collection of life writing. When language students (*yǔyánshēng*) moved to Australia, their use of *xīfāngrén* was usually not about people in the West (Europeans) in general (although Example [4] has this reading) but about locals who *look like* people from the West. Such a usage undoubtedly racialised the white population in Australia and excluded many people who have cultural heritages from other countries as well

检索式“西方人”的频次图

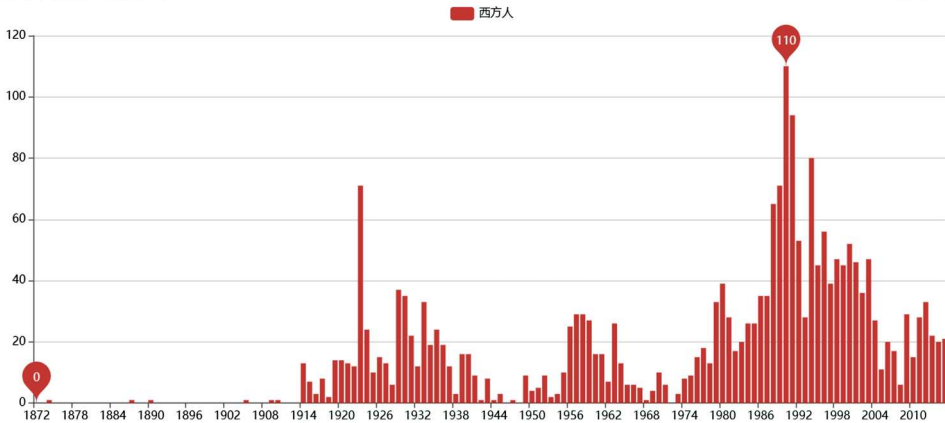


Figure 1. Corpus frequency of 西方人 'xifangren' in BCC, 1872–2015.

as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The ugly truth is that *xifāngrén* identifies the people, in the eyes of new Chinese migrants, that represented the dominant group and held political and social power in Australia.

The second culture-bound concept we discuss is *yáng rén*, illustrated in Example [7]:

Example [7]

我的位置在哪里？總算盼到了‘改革開放’的機會，我趕緊從禁閉幾十年的社會主義的鐵門縫裏擠出來，拖著一只牛皮箱，流落在資本主義的雪梨街頭。要找工作嗎？光識得二十六個字母，洋人們誰能懂得你在嚷什麼。誰叫咱生活在毛澤東時代，學校規定學生只能讀俄語，不準學資本主義的語言—英語。(王亞法Wang Yafa)¹⁴

Where is my place? Finally, the long-awaited opportunity of ‘Reform and Opening-up’ was here. I hurriedly squeezed through the iron door of socialism that had been locked for decades. Dragging my cowhide suitcase, I found myself wandering about in the streets of capitalistic Sydney. Looking for a job? When you know just the 26 letters of the alphabet, the **Australian** won’t have a clue what you are on about. What poor luck that we lived in the Mao Zedong era; the schools would only allow us to learn Russian, and not English – the language of capitalism. (McLean 2021: 78)

Annotation: *Yáng rén*, translated as ‘the Australian’ here, is an old-fashioned term that specifically refers to Europeans. It conveys a love-hate relationship in a mocking tone. It refers to a way of thinking and feeling about people of one kind in the eyes of Chinese people: people of this kind are not Chinese [中国人 *zhōngguó rén*]; people of this kind came from places far, far away from China; they do not look the same as us [*zhōngguó rén*]: their skin is not dark, many of them don’t have black hair; they do things not the same as us, they have many things we don’t have, they do many things we don’t do; they have done very bad things to China in the past; because of this, people can think/say like this: they are not like us, they are not one of our kind.

Yáng rén evokes the physical appearance of a particular group and a sense of love-hate relationship. ‘Love’ in that many things the West possessed were seen as superior; ‘hate’ because several Western countries invaded, divided and weakened China in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911; see Wang 2012). Examining the historical frequency of *yáng rén* (see Figure 2) shows its usage peaked around the turn of the twentieth century:

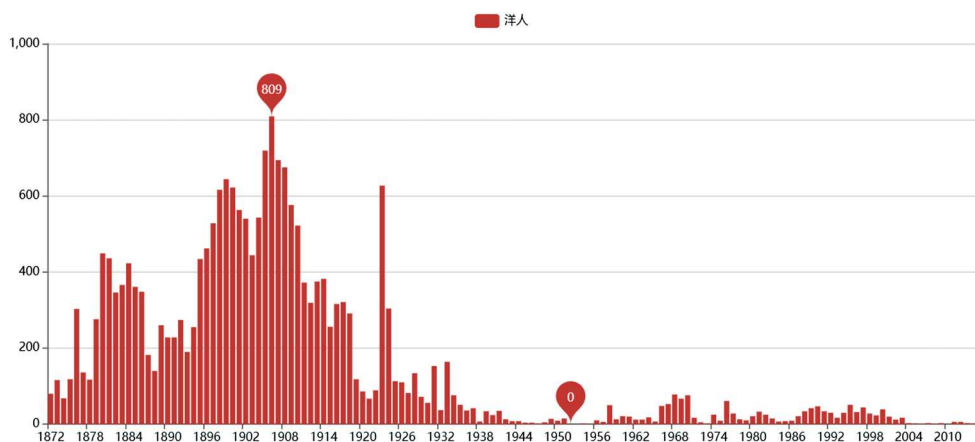


Figure 2. Corpus frequency of 洋人 'yangren' in BCC, 1872–2015.

While the term *yáng rén* is almost obsolete in today's China, the word *yáng* (literally meaning 'ocean') is widely used to describe anything foreign. *Yáng* still conveys the same mocking tone and sense of superiority. An example of *yang* usage is given in Example [8]:

Example [8]

要找到自己的位置？

讀書！！

您可以在澳洲講中國話，吃中國飯，干中國工，生中國兒。

您可在澳洲講英語，娶洋妞（或找洋漢），您可以買洋房，開洋車，出洋游。

天涯何處無芳草，澳洲處處能安身。

位置？

當您能講流利的英語，當您有一份穩定的工作，當您衣食無愁，當您一年一次出國一游，朋友，您還有何求？

中國人一直追求世外桃花式的理想生活。

更贊美閑雲、野鶴般的生活形式。

這些，我們都輕易得到了。(于景Yu Jing)¹⁵

Want to find your place?

Study!

You can speak Chinese in Australia, eat Chinese food, get a Chinese job and have Chinese babies.

You can speak English in Australia, eat Chinese and Western meals, and have an Aussie job.

You can speak English in Australia and marry an Aussie girl (or an Aussie guy). You can buy a Western-style house, drive a foreign car and holiday abroad.

And just as green grass can grow anywhere in the world; you can settle down anywhere in Australia.

Your place?

When you can speak fluent English, when you have a stable job and are not worried about basic living expenses, when you can go on an overseas holiday once a year, friend, what more could you ask for?

Chinese people have always had an ambition for an idyllic life, wanting to live in an imaginary land of joy and prosperity.

Even more lauded is a lifestyle that is unrestrained like the drifting clouds and free like the wild cranes.

All of these, we have already attained with ease. (McLean 2021: 70–71)

Annotation: The Chinese term that has been translated variably as ‘Aussie’, ‘Western-style’, and ‘foreign’ is *yáng*. *Yáng* conveys a sense of peculiarity and foreignness, as well as a sense of envy on the speaker’s part because of things ‘we’ don’t have.

6. Conclusion

In the preface of his book *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia*, John Fitzgerald writes:

Chinese voices are not difficult to find in Australian history. In teaching and writing about Chinese history and politics I have often come across documents dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries written about Australia, some in English, many more in Chinese. Among the Australian personalities mentioned in these sources I have found surprisingly few references to the outstanding figures who feature in English-language works on Chinese-Australian relations ... Nor do these documents dwell at any length on the Australian diplomats, missionaries and businessmen who are said to have built the foundations for bilateral relations between Australia and China over the federation and prewar eras. Chinese-language sources refer overwhelmingly to Chinese-Australian men and women who established their communities in Australia, who built substantial business networks linking Australia and China, who set up Chinese newspapers and magazines in Australia and who joined Australian chapters of Chinese community organisations abroad. These Chinese-language sources offer, I would suggest, a new perspective on Australian history. (Fitzgerald 2007, Preface)

While the period of Australian history our study focuses on is not the era Fitzgerald discusses, we echo what Fitzgerald says about the state of Chinese-language sources in Australia and what such sources offer – a new perspective on Australian history.

Making this new perspective known to the public relies on translation. But conventional approaches to translation may not be sufficient to bridge the divergent viewpoints and historical memories built into Chinese and Australian English. The two languages have evolved to talk about different realities and the historical experiences important to their speakers. As Chinese Australian oral historian Cheng (2023) notes, ‘Not everything in another language is translatable. It may require historical or cultural understanding and lengthy explanations.’ What is deemed as relevant and important to Chinese speakers is vastly different from what is relevant and important to Australian English speakers. Thus, when migrants have used the Chinese language

to talk about Australia, many of them found that there were simply no fitting words and expressions to talk about their experiences in this country. They can borrow English words and expressions to fill in the linguistic gaps. But deeply ingrained geographical perspectives built into a language – along with their associated historical memories and experiences – are impervious to change. In Humboldtian terms, the home language of migrants continues to ‘draw a circle around them’, promoting certain ways of thinking about the people around them. When cultural identity is closely tied to how one sees oneself in relation to others, the inability of these perspectives to be captured in words and expressions in another language contributes to untranslatability.

To fully capture cultural perspectives in the target language, and ensure new perspectives on Australian history are authentically reflected in English, ‘thick translation’ through a cross-translatable metalanguage is indispensable. To quote William F. Hanks, ‘[a]n adequate target language must be functionally capable of self-interpretation through metalanguage’ (Hanks 2014: 17). NSM is such a target language.

Fitzgerald also noted that:

[D]espite abundant Chinese-language newspapers published in Australia and extant Chinese-language archives bearing on the life and times of Chinese Australia, little attempt has been made to fathom the intellectual and cultural history of Chinese-Australian communities through their own eyes. (Fitzgerald 2007, Ch. 1)

This study can be seen as a conscious attempt to understand part of the vast cultural history of Chinese Australian communities through their own eyes. It has demonstrated that combining translation, ethnography, philosophy and linguistics together allows us to approach diasporic writing on its own terms. By working together, these disciplines can promote transnational literacy of diasporic writing in Australia.

Notes

1. It is important to keep in mind that explications are the result of rigorous and in-depth meaning analysis by examining a wide range of contextual usages of the terms in question. They are not just what is in the head of the researchers. It is also important to keep in mind that meaning also evolves. Among the younger generation, there is a trend of using the word *immigrant* where *migrant* is traditionally used.
2. Between 1980 and 1995, tens of thousands of young professionals and students from the PRC, mostly elites in Chinese society, decided to come to Australia. They left coveted stable jobs and overcame many institutional obstacles to make their way to an unknown land. By 1996, most of these new Chinese migrants had settled in Australia permanently, forming one of the largest waves of migration to Australia in modern times. As a result, in 1996 China became one of the five most common countries of birth for Australian residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022a, 2022b).
3. We use the term ‘new Chinese migrants’ to distinguish this group from earlier generations of Chinese migrants who arrived in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, such as those who came to Australia during the gold rush.
4. For the concept of ‘complicated entanglement’, see Ang (2003: 141).
5. However, the title of this simplified-Chinese newspaper, 澳華時報 *Ào huá shí bào* (*Chinese Australian Times*), was written in traditional Chinese characters. This remains the case today. The newspaper publisher was Zhu Minshen (1950–2021). See Li (2010).
6. Some simplified characters are used in the text, which shows the influence of the writers’ language on Chinese-language community newspapers at the time.

7. Biography of Wang Xiaojing: 'Wang is a graduate of English Literature at Macquarie University, and holds a 'Level 3' translation accreditation issued by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters Ltd. (NAATI). At the time of writing, Wang worked as a Chinese secretary at the Aust–China Writers Association' (McLean 2021: 47). The author biographies were included in the original submissions and translated from Chinese into English by Mandy McLean (see McLean 2021).
8. Translations were conducted by Mandy McLean (McLean 2021).
9. Biography of Old Daiwei: 'Old Daiwei attended the Shanghai Normal University Affiliated Middle School. He was a 'sent-down youth' sent to the northern rural area of Heilongjiang during the Cultural Revolution. Daiwei was a truck driver before coming to Australia' (McLean 2021: 81).
10. Although China's major cities are dotted with luxurious shopping malls today, the idea of 'shopping' remains difficult to express. Shopping malls in China, while having similarities to those in Australia, are also different in their function. See Zhao (2024) for an example of the borrowing usage of 'shopping'.
11. There are other terms in the original text that translate as 'foreigners'. For the illustrative purpose of this section, only *xīfāngrén* and *yánggrén* are discussed in this paper.
12. Biography of Shi Guoying: 'Shi graduated from the Faculty of Chinese Language, Shanghai Normal University, and was an editor for 'Pen Club' (*Bihui*), a supplementary column of Shanghai's *Wenhui Daily*, in China. After moving to Australia, Shi had many articles published in Chinese newspapers in Australia, as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the time of writing, Shi was editor of the arts and culture section of the *Independence Daily*' (McLean 2021: 39).
13. There is no biography of Chen Yiwa accompanying her *Chinese Post* (1994) article.
14. Biography of Wang Yafa: 'Wang came from a family of traditional Chinese doctors, studied acupuncture and worked as an editor for Shanghai Juvenile and Children's Publishing House before coming to Australia. He is also a writer of popular fiction and science fiction novels, with works including *Shizong de madui* (*The Missing Horsemen and Their Caravans*) and *Zhang Daqian yanyi* (*The Historical Novel of Zhang Daqian*). At the time this article was written, Wang was a co-owner of Bingdingju Traditional Chinese Medicine House in Summer Hill' (McLean 2021: 76).
15. Biography of Yu Jing: 'Before leaving China, Yu worked in a hotel in Shanghai. At the time of writing this article, he worked as a psychologist in Australia' (McLean 2021: 68)

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Appendix: Exponents of NSM semantic primes in English (v20, 2022)

CHART OF NSM SEMANTIC PRIMES [CONDENSED]								
I~ME	YOU	SOMEONE	WANT	DON'T WANT	FEEL	NOT~DON'T	CAN	BECAUSE
SOME-THING~THING	BODY	PEOPLE	DO	SAY	KNOW	IF	MAYBE	LIKE~AS~WAY
KIND	(HAVE) PARTS	WORDS	SEE	HEAR	THINK		VERY	MORE~ANYMORE
THIS	THE SAME	OTHER~ELSE	HAPPEN	BE (SOME-WHERE)	LIVE	DIE	BIG	SMALL
ONE	TWO	MUCH~MANY	THERE IS	BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	(IS) MINE		GOOD	BAD
ALL	SOME	LITTLE~FEW	MOVE	TOUCH	INSIDE		TRUE	
TIME~WHEN	NOW	MOMENT	PLACE~WHERE	HERE		KNOW I know this someone knows it this someone knows something (many things) about someone/something people can know this [I know that...= it is like this: ..., I know it]		
(FOR) SOME TIME	A LONG TIME	A SHORT TIME	ABOVE	BELOW	ON (ONE) SIDE			
BEFORE	AFTER		NEAR	FAR				

Figure A1. Chart of NSM Semantic Primes.