Mistranslated

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Abstract

Mistranslated is an essay based on my research on the patriarchal structure that is inherent in the translation, and an attempt to challenge them through the perspective of a colored woman with a transnational background. I focus on the cognition of cultural identity that is otherwise a subject of oblivion when living in a homogenous nation. Moving between countries that predominantly share the same racial ethnicity and languages, I began to be categorized with the modifier only after I stepped into dynamics of the diasporic community – America. As my presence of cultural identity becomes increasingly apparent after being positioned in a cosmopolitan society, I try to resolve the confusion made by the irony of the marginalized self living in a ‘broader’ world.

One of my strategies is to go back to language. As much as it has been explored as a field of study, it is prominent that language is the primary tool for not only communication, but also the way to see and understand even the most basic element of the world. The act of translating and the confusion it brings about allow me to draw the connection between my status as an Asian woman and translation, in which they are defined as not of ‘subject’, but rather ‘the other’. This thesis challenges to subvert this canon by blurring the conventions of translation, which ultimately provides different perceptions to each individual based on their experiences.
Introduction

The history of migration from Korea to foreign countries dates back to the Three Kingdoms period, in which the traces were found as a name of 'Shillabang', a residential district built by people of Shilla in Shandong Province of China. While many Koreans who migrated during the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592 were absorbed and assimilated by China and Japan, migration under the protection of the State started when the English-language passports were first issued. It marked the beginning of the official labor migration to the Americas.

It felt like I was destined to be born as a Korean as I follow this chronology of momentous stages of how the communities were formed abroad. I was following in the footsteps of many of my ancestors. First bursted out crying in a maternity ward located in a small city of Korea, then vigilantly walked out of the airplane that landed on Mainland China, then arrived at Tokyo with ambiguous feelings, to now, sitting on the highest seat overlooking the most beautiful scenery of Fleet Library, Providence. My journey has continued as if these transmitted genes hold the initiatives on which destination I move, but only recently have I started to think about the people. People who were able to survive before any contexts are introduced, tacts are accumulated, and most importantly, the possible confusion is explained.

To this day, the population of Korean immigrants across the countries is over 7 million, showing an increase rate of 215% compared to 1990. This statistic alone tells that I am not of rarity, or further implies that discussion on people of such background may be considered banal even. However, similar to the precursors who had to undergo copious amounts of problems and transitions that I could only imagine, it is almost impossible for new generations to avoid the turbulence despite the disparity of socioeconomic levels. This is because the diasporic concerns do not only exist in a repetitive manner, but instead merge, transform, and mutate into new kinds. While the primary apprehension in the past was often economic in nature, the present diasporic communities now face a wider range of concerns, including issues related to cultural identity.

‘Cultural identity’, whether the signifier or signified, always stays in the corner of my head. And as I constantly think about what really is the cultural identity, what my cultural identity is, I cannot help to think about so many other elements that are bound to these two words. Naturally my gender as a woman, and multilingualism intruded in the process of thinking, or more precisely, the process of searching. All of these seem to extend in different directions, but they are all fluidly connected.

To understand the relationship between each of these matters, I will point to my own anecdotes from the first-ever sensation of internal conflict in regards to my identity, followed by the multitude of challenges shaped by the intersection of gender and race, and finally my practice of translating languages from a feminist perspective.
Chapter 1

I moved to Dalian – a small coastal city in China, when I was 7 years old due to my father's business. What I felt was a change overnight by means of unyielding resolution might have been more tentative than I thought, as I vaguely remember the light above the kitchen table was never turned off while the murmur of my parents' conversation faded into my sleep.

Back in the days when we first arrived at Dalian, there were not many foreigners living there. With the lack of any international school and the hope of my mother for a faster adaptation, I was sent to a private local school. In the memory that operates nonlinearly, I have never failed to recall the first year in an environment that I was almost thrown to. I was illiterate in Chinese and did not know how to speak the language, resulting in several embarrassments that were too remorseless for a child to withstand. I often held onto my micturition desire until I could barely sit on the edge of the chair because I felt ashamed how the communication could only be done by a series of gestures – 'raising hand', then, 'pointing at the door'.

I am very fortunate about the nature of neuroscience that children's brain assimilates information indiscriminately and effortlessly. As resilient as these creatures are, I quickly absorbed things I came across and to many people's surprise, I was able to read the sentences in Chinese as I entered the second year. Although there were a few aspects that I only mechanically conform to (mostly due to the traditions of communism), such as the disciplined and coordinated group walk that we have to 'perform' like a military merch even to our way to cafeteria, or the stern posture that we have to maintain during the class, I finished the six years of elementary school as favorably as my Chinese friends.

In the meantime, China's economy had continuously grown at an average rate of 10% each year, being recorded as the highest growth rate in the world. The Intel Corporation, being the first global IT company that broke ground on a chip plant in Dalian, heralded the arrival of the flood of dispatched foreign employees. As we were witnessing the changes first-hand, our family departed the city – my father moved his base to Hong Kong, my mother and I made our
move to Shanghai.

Despite our separation, each of us came to deeply encounter western cultures in the most cosmopolitan places in east Asia. During the most sensitive and formative phase of teenage years, I was more preoccupied with my first experience in an international school rather than the city itself. Amidst the newfound freedom that I have never had in an Asian educational setting, I could sense a perplexity regarding my very identity festered subconsciously within the depths of my psyche.

The international school that I transferred to was an American government authorized institution, meaning that all the curriculum was made under the state standards that the federal law mandates. I was disoriented when I learned in Chinese History class about the ‘Great Leap Forward’, which caused the estimated deaths of thirty million citizens from famine (exceeding the number Hitler had murdered); ‘The Cultural Revolution’ that killed thousands to millions of civilians, and destroyed historic relics and intellectual resources. All of this information mingled with the panegyric on Mao Zedong that I had to memorize each year from the literature textbooks. Although this was not an exact incitement to my inner conflicts, it certainly catalyzed a sort of long term bafflement, or conversely, a conviction that I will be forever confronting truths that lie askew from the expected path, with continuous learning of the beliefs and ideas based on varied cultures. One survival skill I grasped was to shapeshift, which involves calling forth one of many personas enmeshed within myself to adapt to a given situation. It is like a pretense conformity that allows me to relate with nearly every person and every place that I encounter. As a result, I was very much hybridized: one who reads and writes with scholarly tone in English, indulges in popular shows like ‘Suits’ and ‘The Walking Dead’ to keep pace with peers, takes charge of ordering Chinese food when going out for cheap eats with friends, (who, in fact, had no problem without knowing Chinese given the wide currency of English in most parts of Shanghai), and purchases books of my cherished Korean novelists from my home country.

As much as I was living in a bubble full of Third Culture Kids (Ruth Hill Useem, 1950) that everyone was exposed to small realms cultivated by each other from different nations, it was not until my once again migration back to Korea that I truly faced the unhomeliness. My parents have never referred to our status as ‘immigrants’, as if the choice of our last stop never existed in the first place besides going back home. This made me question what defines an immigrant. If the legal documentation is what matters, does one stay as a citizen of a country even if he or she fails to repatriate culturally? Being said, I could not ‘return’ to Korea for many years, where the diversity is not as pronounced compared to the small communities I have lived with. A sense of unpleasant emotion that I designedly hid came up to the surface with a vengeance, which I could only vaguely describe as a type of hatred, and it was towards both myself and the large community as a whole. Thereabout I had an excuse of traveling to Hong Kong to visit my father, who is to this day still living under the status of ‘foreign resident’. With its intricate past that has subjected it to both Chinese cultural traditions and Western influences, Hong Kong satisfied my yearning for nostalgia by reintroducing me with familiar sensory encounters. The smell of piquant spices wafting from local eateries, the sound of diverse tongues intermingling, and the vibrant signage adorned with traditional Chinese characters, although not completely identical, were all parts of senses that contributed in shaping my identity and worldview.

I took a series of photographs about this journey I had for several years of committing to my primary life in Seoul and occasionally visiting my father in Hong Kong. It was a rigorous process of anchoring myself internally, through the lens that is directed towards the people and places I love or connect to. During the trip that I was always accompanied by my father, I went through a transition of feelings from bitterness to empathy, recognizing that we
share the same root of ‘rootlessness’ and loneliness of not being able to belong where we are present. Setting my personal story aside, Hong Kong, while being nostalgic, was also a place that is filled with a sense of loss like the father and daughter. Its expatriate population is one of the highest in the world, with most of them working as white collars including my own father. The houses in clusters on a small apartment belong to locals while the ornate villas in the middle of the mountains are built for foreigners. I explored the developing relationship between father and me, and the irony that lies between us and the city itself.

On the otherside, the photos I have taken in Korea focus more on the ambiguity of my own identity as a native Korean, who has returned to the country after spending the majority of lifetime outside. Referencing the common phenomenon of having difficulty to perceive the path in the darkness, I have produced most of my work under nocturnal conditions. As Nina J Morris (2011) specified that the darkness can force one to question how one's body is in relation to the surroundings by challenging human sense of bodily presence and boundary, I focus on photographing the instant oddity that I extract from the normality when the very scene is covered with darkness, and witness myself being momentarily disconnected to where I exist. In the process of making the series, which is composed of the images all taken in the neighborhood and inside my house, I realized I never lack attention towards what I see. The sudden sense of alienation, however, is something that is inevitable regardless of my level of satisfaction.
Chapter 2

My gender as a woman sprawls as one of many stems from the root of my cultural identity. As I arrived in the United States, the nuances that I could sense while living in three Asian countries disappeared, and instead they are blended as one single feature under the name of 'stereotype'. Stuart Hall, in his essay 'West And The Rest' described stereotype as something that 'become the signs, the “evidence,” by which the subject is known’ to absolute majority. Despite Asian women being fairly large in population with diverse ways of life and cultural aspects, our gender becomes much more highlighted and our features easily become an 'evidence', when the race contributes as an element of minority.

I have been studying feminism prior to moving to America. As much as the field of study was first started in western world, there has been a lot of controversy regarding the application of its theories as part of society. Kwok, in her "Introducing Asian Feminist Theology"(2000), mentioned that earlier feminist theologies had a tendency to universalize the Western women's experiences as if they represented the lives of all women. And this failure to respect difference and the constant incorporation of the Other into one's own perspective are rooted in the social and cultural matrix of colonialism. While I was in Korea, I was aware that the western centrality of knowledge in social science has tended to be indifferent to Korean history or current societal status, but instead has a tendency to fit the reality of ours into western theoretical frameworks. The lack of any natural power and heavy reliance on human resources on a national level, for example, is a history and a prominent feature of Korea that draws a huge line between the contemporary relations between women in Korea and those of other countries. However, the lack of its consideration in internal theoretical studies and blindly following the ideas of the west, has only enhanced the confusion (which I believe is an important step nonetheless). In addition, Lee Eun Son (2007) also criticizes that feminism, which focuses on the experiences and realities of Western middle-class women, has resulted in excluding and denying the reality and history of non-Western women. She points out that Western
feminism is a production of orientalist knowledge, and as a result, Third World women are set up as non-subjective or mysterious beings, ultimately becoming objects of warm discrimination. This “warm discrimination”, which was a word brought up by Lee Sook-in (2007) is rather compassionate, but it implies a recognition of others as inferior beings, and represents Third World Women as victims of their own country's patriarchy – a commonly accepted feminist theory from white middle-class backgrounds.

This mysterious yet submissive image of Asian women can still be easily found in the media. Not soon after my first semester of graduate school began, I found an interesting video on Youtube that was only posted two years ago, titled “Best Asian Countries Which Offer the Best Bride”. It was uploaded by an username ‘iDateAdvice’, which I could identify within a few searches that it is a matching website for white men who are willing to date or marry Asian women. As the video starts, a blonde woman appears on the screen and begins her speech by ‘ranking’ which Asian countries do actually offer the best wife. The video was rather entertaining to me because of the obvious irony that lies behind the content and the speaker, who takes charge in the power structure between Asia and the West, but simultaneously failed to escape from another power structure that ended up making her expose herself to the public, and consequently the possible criticism on the representative. Thus, it is much more complicated when the subject (Asian women) are under the conditions of being involved in multiple relations, between both gender and race. The proliferation of the mail-order bride industry, as being shown from the video uploaded on the largest and most easily accessible platform on the Internet, exemplified that women of color are often fetishized and objectified in the global marketplace and media, which is the very product of reality. These industries not only perpetuate the stereotypes that position them as passive and submissive, but also deprive the subjecthood as an individual. The image of lacking the agency and autonomy that was built solidly throughout hundreds of years, however, has long been challenged by feminist scholars and women artists who resisted dominant discourses of Asian femininity.

Because the appearance of women of color introduced and revealed in the theory was destined to be distorted or stereotyped, one of the most important and difficult steps was to define ‘women’ in the process of resistance. Trinh T Minh-ha, the Vietnamese American filmmaker who is well-known for her research on gender politics, talks about the “white-male-is-norm-ideology’, where people of color are always categorized as ‘non white-male’ and are being separated as those who have the opposite personality to whites. One example of it is that the names such as “third world” or “developing country”, “poor” given to Asian women are operating under the dichotomy that America is the first world, developed and rich. The basis of this western male-centered idea lies in the two-by-two system of division, which, according to Trinh, understands everything as two opposite pairs. The tradition of philosophy and humanities that has described human beings as binary is based on this false belief that there is an authentic and standardized human identity that can define self and others. What goes even further is that, based on this standardized human identity created by predominantly white male scholars, the underdogs are naturally represented and perpetuated as models of the negative aspects of the other. In order to break the substantial rule, the alternative method of writing as an Asian woman that Trinh has suggested is to accord the opaqueness or multiplicity to reveal the truths and thus deconstruct the western androcentric language, in which everything is clearly distinct and dichotomized. (This will be further elaborated in the next chapter) Through the vagueness that she firmly believes, it paradoxically becomes clear that the definition of woman is not something that could be separable in exact opposition of others nor it is required to be a solid form. To borrow her own quote, “Identity has become more a point of departure than end point in the struggle for those who fight for difference”.

My portraiture project, “Asian Femininity” started as a way to reveal the ‘non-identifiable’ aspects of Asian women, as opposed to making a strict distinction from others. I took every picture under the domestic setting, capturing all the members of the household, including roommates and partners, within the same frame as the main subject. I was pointed out that the inclusion of every individual rather blurred the presence of the Asian woman subject, which I want to refute by referencing back to the idea of defining woman that it is an open work of dismantling the already known ‘me’ and at the same
time discovering and denying another self that is newly emerged in the process, and such process inevitably involves the community. The concept of 'house' holds multiple meanings for Asian American and international students, and the people with whom they cohabit can significantly contribute to their development of self-identity as both an Asian and a woman.
Chapter 3

In a letter Dorothea Tieck wrote to Friedrich von Uechtriz, she said “I think that translation is primarily a job for women rather than men, because we are not allowed to express ourselves.”

I vacillated between art school and professional translation school before I started applying for graduate studies. It was the choice between what I am most intimate with, resulting from my background and the bachelor degrees I have in language & literature, and what I have found I am most passionate about. The rapidly growing technology of translation was one of my concerns, where the machine has become so sophisticated that it goes beyond the simple replacement of words. It is no more a surprise that interpreters and translators are on the list of jobs, reported on “UN Future Report 2045”, that are predicted to be replaced by artificial intelligence in twenty years. But aside from the future outlook of the field, I decided on art essentially because how I imagined the thoughts and ideas coming from myself will be left unspoken if I chose the other.

However, throughout my years in RISD, I have experienced that my choice in art is not of a structure that leads to abandonment of the other. The relationship between language and myself paradoxically became stronger as I work towards a ‘thesis-based’ art. The source of inspiration often entangled with my subconscious on languages, and they started to play a powerful role in my process of finding the direction. I began slowly combining the elements of language, especially of its translation, with my own art practices after finishing several projects on Asian feminism.

Drawing the connection between woman and translation first started when I attempted to express the concept of translation without using text. In order to accomplish this goal, I was compelled to incorporate my own bodily movements as part of images, which inevitably included my identity as a woman. The impossibility of accurately translating my intention and fulfilling the viewers’ needs to “read” has surprisingly satisfied me, providing myself with the freedom to avoid certainty, which is normally considered as an error in the principle of translation. This goes back to Trinh’s strategy of writing as women that was mentioned in the Chapter 2, in which she emphasizes the necessity of breaking away from the strictly formed dichotomy originated from the West and the Whites. Based on her theory, it is important to realize that within the framework of language defined by men, it no longer serves as a reflection of reality without distorting reality, and thus the writing should be something that reveals “what has not been known, what has been hidden, and what has been suppressed” (1989). This idea has been exemplified by Trinh’s own movie “Surname Viet Given Name Nam”, where she intentionally place her in position of a translator and collaborator of creation, and emphasizes that everyone in this world is allowed to participate in the meaning-making process, creating spaces for Vietnamese women, including herself, to speak. Her identity as a diaspora Vietnamese woman reveals the difference within Vietnamese women and demonstrates ‘authenticity’ in acknowledging that the identity cannot be integrated into a single coherent meaning. Realizing that even the story of her own identity can be untranslatable, she accentuates the absence of originals or origins in her movie by creating a segmented look. The interviews in the movie, for instance, were taken from a book published in 1982 by Mai Thu Vân, who collected interviews in Vietnamese and translated them into French. Trinh then translated this interview into English and recruited Vietnamese women residing in the United States as actors to reenact her interview. Audiences who are not aware of the fact that the translation was carried out through such a complicated process cannot help but question if everything is in fact a fiction or the stories of their own.

Furthermore, the text as subtitles does not correspond perfectly with image and sound on a one-to-one basis, but instead appear in parallel or overlap, creating points of conflict and divergence. By using these experimental techniques, Trinh’s role as a creator is to open a creative space of meaning through the production that is full of different gaps – real and staged interviews, non-fiction and fiction, Vietnamese and French and English, newsreels and archival images of Vietnamese women, and spoken and written language. The words and subjectivity of Vietnamese women, which have always been captured and defined by the eyes of power such as the West and the patriarchy, emerge sporadically in such an in-between space.
Refusing to be drawn into an opposition between “woman” and “Korean” or between “Korean” and “Korean American”, Cha creates and celebrates a kind of third place, an exile space that becomes a source of individual vision and power. Indeed, far from dropping a specific identity in favor of endless difference, she predicts the breakdown of binaries that are part of the logic of domination. She foregrounds a highly specific cultural context, inserting Korea, Korean women, and Korean Americans into the discourse, thereby opening the space for an individual search for selfhood as well as non-reified, non-essentialized collectivity.
While the content of the “Dictee” shows the expansion of Cha’s identity as an Asian American woman, the experimental style of writing is the most notable feature that raises the question on the power of language. The book includes English usages that are against regular grammar, present-tense descriptions, and simple forms of verbs that do not follow the rules of tense. Above all, Cha uses two languages, non-standardized English and French, to complicate the relationship between languages and internal colonialism. As Trinh points out in “Woman, Native, Other” (1989), to write in “clarity, is a means of subordination, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power… [that] impose[s] an order”, Cha writes the inability to apply general forms to express her in-between-ness, through the practice of fragmented writing, breaking away from precise and traditional writing as opposed to the ‘subordination’.

Translation itself but not as a tool, stretching out from the root of language, has also been formed and developed under both patriarchal and imperial systems. The uncomfortable connection between translation and women is that they are both defined as the realm of reproduction. The status of translation had been perceived as derived and inferior to the original, and as a subordinate tool to imitate and reproduce what already exists. By applying the same strategy of writing as women that were used in both Trinh’s and Cha’s works, I attempted to expose the intricacy of translation as a way to explore the obscurity via non-text translation with my own interpretation of self.

In my project “Untitled (2022)”, I focused on the process of forming an unclear narrative connection between one image to the next that is being operated clearly in my head. It shares a minute similarity in its structure with the photo book “Evidence(1977)” by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel. “Evidence” was one of the earliest photo books that decontextualized the presentation of photography by using the found images from government agencies and research institutions without any explanatory text. Two photographers took the original context of the pictures that are intended for documentation purposes, and rearranged them into their own narrative, which were said to be derived from the evidence within the pictures themselves. The subtle transitions and the linkages easily induce the viewers’ active engagements to find the connection between images on each page.
Similarly, I spent the longest time finding links between images I either produce or found in books. There were cases in which new images were imagined through visually similar clues, such as color or structure of objects, but most of them tried to infer unpredictable things through figurative thinking of the elements that made up the photograph and their meaning. Although these images, which do not explicitly reveal the points of connection, seem to compose a linear narrative through numbers attached, the arrangement of scattering in different spots with the randomness of image itself allow the viewers to create their own interpretation of this sequence of images and objects that presumably operate under certain order or narrative in the artist’s mind. By not giving an answer to its connection, the originality loses its presence and the act of translation ultimately forms the microcosmo that only exists in subjectivity and unique form.

**Conclusion**

Although I am not a writer nor a filmmaker, I would like to address Trinh’s answer to an interview question asking how she would look at her identity as a woman, as a woman of color, as a writer and as a filmmaker.

*The claim of identity is often a strategic claim. It is a process which enables me to question my condition anew, and one by which I intimately come to understand how the personal is cultural, historical or political. The reflexive question asked… is no longer: Who am I? But when, where, how am I?*

The pleasure I found through my senses when I put down the strictly structured language and knowledge system, was later supported by its academic foundation as a field of study among Asian Woman Diaspora. By actively using the intersection points that are formed among the race, gender, and the language, I was able to put the imposition on the viewers rather than actively explaining, and apply such attitude to the social and political realm with the abandonment of dichotomous classification and prejudices of the intellectual point of view.
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