PANDEMIC EMOTIONS: TRANSLATING FEELINGS FROM THE FUTURE IN CHEN QIUFAN'S "CONTACTLESS LOVE"

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Abstract: The importance of emotion for crafting a literary text is well-known, but what happens to these emotions once the original text is translated into another language? This article explores the interplay between emotions and literary translation by focusing on contemporary Chinese science fiction writer Chen Qiufan's short story "Wu jiechu zhi lian" (Contactless Love, 2022) and its English translation. The plot revolves around the protagonist's fear and worry about the COVID-19 pandemic, envisioning a future in which the virus is still present and Artificial Intelligence helps humanity to deal with it. By applying the theoretical framework of Affect Studies to narratology, this article will identify the main strategies adopted by the English translator and analyze their impact on the description of emotions in the target text. Indeed, while the influence of "affect" on literary texts has been widely explored, the same cannot be said for their translations, especially when they involve a process of translation from Chinese into a Western language. This study contributes to the understanding of how emotions are represented in literary texts and their translations, emphasizing the narratological impact of such choices.

Keywords: Chen Qiufan; *AI 2041*; translation of emotions; affective narratology; Chinese science fiction.

1. Introduction

It is clear that emotions constitute a fundamental component of the architecture of literary works, acting at various levels, from the author and the reader – who are the only two real people involved in the communicative process – to the narrator and the various characters. Nevertheless, the emotional aspects of the text only began to be properly taken into account in literary analysis at the beginning of the 21st century (Hogan 2016), not least through the development of the field of Affect Studies, whose theories can also be applied to the sphere of literature. In parallel, Affect Studies have provided an effective approach to the study of various translation-related issues. These mostly include studies related to the translation process, following the latest trend in Translation Studies toward the "humanization" of translation (Pym 2009). This trend foregrounds the translator's role as a decision-maker (Koskinen 2020: 7), illustrating how it is affected by the emotional component.

This article intends to fill a gap in studies concerning the interactions between emotions and the translated text by exploring the potential of Affect Studies when applied to literary translation from Chinese. I will focus in particular on a short story by one of the most famous contemporary science fiction authors, Chen Qiufan 陳楸帆 (b. 1981). I will analyze his short story "Wu jiechu zhi lian" 「無接觸之戀」(Contactless Love) (2022b) from the collection titled *AI 2041: Yujian shi ge weilai xin shijie* AI 2041：預見 10 個未來新世界 (AI 2041: Ten Visions from Our Future) (Chen and Lee 2022) and its translation into English, to show the impact of translation in the rendering of emotions of a particular kind, namely ones expressed through characters' bodily reactions.

2. Chen Qiufan and His Work on Emotions

Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆, also known by his pen-name Stanley Chan, was born in Shantou, Guangdong province, in 1981 and has been publishing sci-fi short stories since 2004. Today, he is considered one of the most prominent science fiction writers from China and is the author of over thirty publications, including short stories, novellas, and novels. He has also been awarded with many national and international prizes, such as the Nebula Award and the Galaxy Award (Chen).

One of Chen Qiufan's favorite themes is climate change and mankind's role in causing and remedying it, as can especially be seen in his two novels *Huang chao* 荒潮 (Waste Tide) (2013) and *Lingtan Zhongguo* 零碳中國 (Net-zero China) (2022a). *Huang chao* is Chen's debut novel, an eco-thriller whose plot revolves around the rivalry between gangs of terrorists operating on Silicon Isle, an extensive e-waste demolition site. *Lingtan Zhongguo* is his latest work – a children's novel in which the protagonist travels through time to the year 2060, when Xi Jinping's net-zero pledge has been fulfilled, and carbon neutrality has finally been achieved. Throughout his work, Chen Qiufan sets out precisely from emotions in an effort to make a difference by drawing attention to the problem of climate change and its potential solutions. The author himself has stated in an interview:

> Our world is full of urgent climate problems, and each one is hard to solve. I tried to seek answers in my science fiction writing, but the more I learn about it, the more difficult I find the questions are, and in the end I think we have to go back to imagination, love, and empathy sometimes. We need compassion to realize the urgency of the climate crisis and realize that all of us are victims of climate change. We need to unite and act up to make a change. (Kan 2022)

A few studies have been published on Chen's view of environmentalism (Healey 2017) and a post-human future (Judy 2022). One study in particular has analyzed one of his short stories, "Mai" 霾 (The Smog Society) (Chen 2010) from the perspective of emotions (Codeluppi 2022). In this work, the author treats the topic of air pollution through the lens of human psychology, showing not only the effects of smog on the psyche, but also the effects of the psyche on smog, describing how pollution can actually be caused by the citizens' state of mind.

In this article, I intend to explore the issue of emotions in Chen Qiufan's literature by extending my analysis to the impact of literary translation. I will do so by focusing on the short story "Wu jiechu zhi lian" 「無接觸之戀」 (Contactless Love) and on its English translation by Emily Jin (Chen 2021), included in the English version of *AI 2041* (Chen and Lee 2021). For unspecified editorial reasons, the English translation was published one year before the original Chinese version, which in turn was first published in Taiwan and only later in the PRC. [1]

The book is an interesting work stemming from Chen's collaboration with Lee Kai-fu, a scientist and businessman who is an expert on Artificial Intelligence. *AI 2041* provides an overview of various types of AI applications in future life, condensed into ten short stories set in 2041. It thus combines Chen's literary talent with Lee's science-based explanations. "Contactless Love" depicts a scenario in which COVID-19 and its variants have become part of everyday life, and in which the application of Artificial Intelligence in the medical field has made such great strides as to allow the constant monitoring of physical conditions and the real-time exchange of data, as well as the automatic formulation of ad hoc treatments based on individual patient parameters. The main character, Chen Nan, is a young woman who was traumatized as a child by the pandemic, which killed her grandparents. Since then, she has developed an ever-increasing phobia, so much so that she has not left the house for the past three years, confining herself to working from home and doing chores and errands with the help of a team of robots. In this context, she embarks on a love affair with García, a young Brazilian man who, after two years of waiting, decides to fly to China to meet her, without her consent. Aware of her psychological block, he stages a fake hospitalization for complications due to COVID-19 as soon as he arrives at the Shanghai airport, thus driving her out of her fortress through fear for the life of her beloved.

Studies analyzing people's emotional reactions during the pandemic predictably reported that the most frequent feelings related to COVID-19 were

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1 The Italian edition, translated by Andrea Signorelli, was published in 2023 by Luiss University Press with the title *AI 2041: Scenari dal futuro dell'intelligenza artificiale.*

fear, anxiety, and worry (Li *et al.* 2021: 2). These emotions are significant elements in Chen Qiufan's short story, which, despite its romantic title, is actually an anxiety-inducing account of Chen Nan's journey to the hospital and all the complications arising from her total isolation during the previous years, the most serious being the absence of a subcutaneous chip required to access various places, including the hospital.

3. Emotions and Affect Studies

As stated by Hogan, research in the domain of affect can be divided into two main orientations, namely "affect theory" and "affective science" (Hogan 2016). While the former orientation is mostly found in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, the latter is essentially based on cognitive science, which breaks emotion down into distinct components.[2] It can be said that affect theory is generally more diverse in its approaches, also due to the fact that it has been developed in dialogue with Cultural Studies, whereas diversity in affective science is still limited to the field of cognitive sciences. The distinction between the two is not always neat, and hybrid approaches are sometimes preferred. Generally speaking, affective science provides a more structured account of emotions, rigorous and empirically supported, while the same cannot be said of affect theory, mainly due to its derivation from psychanalysis (*ibid.*). According to affective science, an emotion is essentially a feeling; nevertheless, it comprises several components, including the *eliciting conditions* (in this case, the content of the imagination), the *phenomenological tone* (i.e. how it feels to have the emotion), and the *attentional focus* (Hogan 2011: 57).

The framework I chose for the following analysis aligns with the orientation of affective science. I will adopt for my exploration Hogan's definition of "emotion", which reads as follows: "an emotion is the activation of some motivation system, prototypically an activation of relatively brief duration – an "episode" – with a complex set of specifiable components" (Hogan 2016). I will concentrate on one specific component of the emotional episodes described in the text, namely the *physiological outcomes*, which are part of the phenomenological tone and emphasize emotion as a body-related experience. This is especially coherent with the context of Chen's short story, since the latter describes the protagonist's perception of everyday life in the aftermath of the pandemic as a series of bodily reactions. Starting from these premises, in the following section I will compare selected excerpts from the source and target texts in order to highlight the impact of translation on the reconstruction of emotions, revealing a potential shift in the perception of pandemic-related feelings from one text to the other.

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2 For more in-depth studies on affective science and affect theory see Davidson, Scherer and Goldsmith (2009); Sander and Scherer (2009); Gregg and Seigworth (2010); Seigworth and Pedwell (2023).

4. Analysis

4.1. Expansions

A close reading of the original text and its English translation shows that one of the most common strategies adopted by the translator when dealing with the description of an emotion is to expand the Chinese text. This expansion varies in range and scope but, broadly speaking, it constitutes a device by which the translator is able to include additional information that helps the Anglophone reader to visualize the effect of the emotion described.

The first example concerns Chen Nan's use of AI in her everyday life and, more specifically, AI's interaction with her body:

> 智慧枕頭監測到睡眠中的陳楠呼吸和心率都有些異常，便用輕柔震動和音樂將她喚醒。(Chen 2022b)

> When it sensed <u>an unusual breathing pattern and Chen Nan's quickening heart rate</u> during these nightmares, Chen Nan's smart pillow would wake her up with a gentle vibration as soft music played. (Chen 2021)

In this case, the translator's intervention is rather small, limited to the slight change of the phrase "*xinlü* […] *you xie yichang*" 心率 […] 有些異常 (irregular heart rate) to "quickening heart rate". By specifying the impact of a nightmare on the character's heartbeat, the translator improves the visual effect of the description and, at the same time, draws attention to the precise effect of the nightmare on the character's vital signs.Another example of this expansion strategy can be found in the description of the beginning of Chen Nan's journey to the hospital. Her fear of contact is a major obstacle in her choice of a means of transportation, because crowds have become unbearable for her:

> 一想到在地鐵和輕軌上要和那麼多活生生的人類在密閉空間裡擠那麼久，<u>陳楠就覺得快要窒息了</u>，毅然決然地否定了公共交通方案。(Chen 2022b)

> The mere thought of being trapped in the confined space of the subway with dozens of other living humans <u>made Chen Nan's chest tighten with anxiety</u>. (Chen 2021)

The original Chinese text states that, when thinking about taking the subway, "*Chen Nan juede kuaiyao zhixi le*" 陳楠就覺得快要窒息了 (Chen Nan feels like she is about to suffocate). The English translation instead reads "made Chen Nan's chest tighten with anxiety", introducing new elements that are not present in Chen's description. In this case, it could be said that the translator happens to clarify the link between the emotion (i.e. anxiety) and the precise physiological reaction (tightened chest), instead of stopping at the description of the choking sensation without pointing out the feeling from which it originates.

One last example of the strategy of expansion is presented in the final part of the story, where Chen Nan is finally about to hug her boyfriend García. It is evident that Chen Nan's anxiety intensifies just before the embrace, triggering a physical reaction.

加西亞進入了一公尺圈，震動變成了刺耳的警報聲，在藍牙耳機中單調地循環著，刺激著陳楠的耳膜，<u>讓她心跳加速</u>。哪怕她心裡清楚，隔著雙層密閉防護服，這個擁抱不會造成任何傷害。這種恐懼積累得太深、太久，已經成了她身體本能的一部分。(Chen 2022b)

Garcia entered the one-meter radius, past the safe social distance. The vibration became a piercing alert that buzzed monotonously through her Bluetooth earbuds. <u>Her heart rate quickened. Her chest tightened</u>. Her fear of contact had persisted for so long that it had become a part of her. <u>But she held her ground firmly. I'm safe, she murmured to herself</u>. With two layers of protective suits in between her and Garcia, this hug wouldn't harm anyone. (Chen 2021)

In the original text, there is only one bodily reaction, namely "*rang ta xintiao jia su*" 讓他心跳加速 (making her heart rate quicker). Nonetheless, the English text adds a second effect – "Her chest tightened" – together with another sentence describing Chen Nan trying to reassure herself. The additional reference to the protagonist's chest once again brings the reader's attention to a specific area of the human body, providing a further tool to identify the physiological outcome of the emotion, hence medicalizing Chen Nan's perception.

4.2. Specifications

Although the most frequently used translation strategy is that of expansion, it is sometimes adopted together with other strategies in order to better convey the meaning of the text. Other examples of strategies that modify the reader's perception in the translation are the use of specification and the modification of similes.

The following passage narrates Chen Nan's feelings upon discovering that her boyfriend's illness was actually feigned – only a trick to make her venture out of her fortress. This time, the predominant emotion is neither anxiety nor fear, but anger:

「你這個渾蛋！」
陳楠一聲怒吼，打斷了加西亞自以為是的辯白。
「……你不知道我有多擔心你，你居然把這當成遊戲……」陳楠低下頭，<u>渾身開始發抖</u>。她在哭，但她也不知道為什麼自己要哭，「你為什麼要這麼做？為什麼要騙我！我恨你！」(Chen 2022b)

"*You bastard!*" Chen Nan buried her head in her hands. <u>Her shoulders trembled</u>. Tears fell from her eyes, but she couldn't tell what had made her cry again. "I was so worried about you…and here you are, treating this like a game! Why on earth did you do this to me?" (Chen 2021)

Aside from the translation of the dialogue, whose extent and order differ in the English text, one micro-strategy is particularly significant in this context, namely the specification regarding the act of shivering. While the Chinese text states that Chen Nan's whole body started to tremble, "*hunshen kaishi fadou*" 渾身開始發抖, the English translation seems to zoom in by identifying the specific source of the

trembling – her shoulders. This kind of intervention increases the accuracy of the description from the perspective of the body, almost emulating a medical report.

The excerpt quoted below, instead, describes the moment in which a Covid case is discovered at Chen Nan's workplace, and the required safety procedures are implemented:

> 全副武裝的醫護人員衝進辦公室噴灑消毒劑，強行帶走陳楠身邊的同事。這似曾相識的場景，讓她當場臉色煞白、心跳過速、癱倒在地，隨即被送入隔離病房接受觀察與心理治療。(Chen 2022b)

> However, when the medical team, dressed in full protective suits, rushed into her office to disinfect the place and take everyone to the quarantine station, a sudden wave of déjà vu overwhelmed her, <u>triggering her PTSD</u>. Trembling, she fainted and fell to the ground, <u>her face as pale as chalk</u>. (Chen 2021)

The source text employs two sentences to describe Chen Nan's reaction to the sight of the medical team, namely "*lianse shabai, xintiao guo su*" 臉色煞白、心跳過速 (face pale like a ghost, tachycardia). The target text does not dwell on the character's increased heart rate, but interprets her reaction as a consequence of post-traumatic syndrome, thus translating it as "triggering her PTSD". The simile that compares her complexion to the color of a ghost, instead, is not translated into English in its original form. The reference to the supernatural is replaced by a more realistic image: "her face as pale as chalk". The combination of these two strategies suggests an underlying intent to medicalize the description of Chen Nan's emotions, pushing the reader's interpretation toward a more scientific approach.

4.3. References to Blood

Consistently with the tendency to add medical details, the English translation repeatedly introduces references to blood that are not present in the original text. For example, when Chen Nan gets a fake microchip, the alarm of the building goes off and she finds herself experiencing an anxiety attack:

> 陳楠<u>臉色一白</u>，<u>心跳加速</u>，太陽穴處的血管突突跳動。 (Chen 2022b)

> Chen Nan's face went <u>bloodless</u> at once. She could feel the veins in her temple begin to throb. (Chen 2021)

The Chinese text describes Chen Nan's reaction by commenting on the color of her face, "*lianse yi bai*" 臉色一百 (face turning white), and on the rhythm of her heart, "*xintiao jia su*" 心跳加速 (heart racing). The English version skips the reference to her heart rate and replaces the visual description of her complexion with a reference to its biological cause, namely the decrease in blood flow, translating the sentence as "Chen Nan's face went bloodless at once".

Another example of this strategy can be found in the following excerpt, which describes the moment in which Chen Nan receives a message on her cellphone informing her that García's condition is rapidly deteriorating:

終於，她發現那是數位病歷的推送通知。她只掃了一眼，便像遭了電擊般彈坐起來，掩面痛哭。(Chen 2022b)

A new notification. Garcia's digital medical record.
The moment her eyes landed on the message, her blood turned to ice. (Chen 2021)

The original text describes Chen Nan's reaction as a sudden electrocution, "*zao le dianji ban*" 遭了電擊般 (as though she had been electrocuted), causing her to sit up immediately. This simile is completely erased in the English translation, which provides a less dynamic description. Indeed, not only does the translator avoid any mention of the protagonist's bodily manifestation of surprise, but she also replaces the depiction of Chen Nan's face covered in bitter tears, "*yan mian tong ku*" 掩面痛哭, with a different metaphoric description of paralyzing fear: "her blood turned to ice". Once again, the addition of a reference to blood shifts the reader's focus from the external depiction of the emotion to the internal processes of the body recording the onset of a sudden feeling, therefore stressing the physiological reaction.

5. Impact

The example and the micro-strategies described above indeed contribute to the recreation of a precise effect on a broader level. So, what is the impact of the "translated emotions" on the target text? And how do they affect the reader's perception? We may conclude that the translator's choices result in an excessive medicalization of the emotions described in the original text, leading to a general sense of detachment. Although the original Chinese version already presents a sort of science-based explanation for Chen Nan's emotional ups and downs, the English translation puts even more emphasis on the medical aspect of the description of her emotions, leading – paradoxically – to a colder and more disconnected portrayal.

Adopting a well-known distinction of structuralist origin, it may be argued that this effect does not have any impact on the story (*histoire*), i.e. the "chain of events" (Chatman 1978: 19), but affects the discourse (*discours*), which is "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated" (*ibid.*). More specifically, it affects the reader's cognitive perception and modifies their mental associations in relation to COVID-19. In other words, what was originally expressed through a series of descriptions of physical manifestations of emotions is, more often than not, translated into a pseudo-medical explanation of the "symptoms" such emotions give rise to.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I have investigated the influence of literary translation on the description and hence perception of emotions. I have analyzed Chen Qiufan's short story "Wu jiechu zhi lian" 「無接觸之戀」 (Contactless Love), focusing in particular on the translation of the *physiological outcomes* of the protagonist's emotions as described in the text. A close comparative reading of the source and target texts has revealed four main micro-strategies adopted by the English translator, which I have grouped into four sections: "expansions", "translation of similes", "references to blood", and "specifications". A comparative study of these strategies has revealed that their general impact on the English translation is a tendency to over-medicalize the emotional episodes described in the literary text.

In his work *Affective Narratology*, Hogan states:

> Phenomenological critics have pointed out that we tend to "concretize" our stories. That is, we tend to fill in details that have no basis in the discourse. […] The complication comes from the fact that I have different degrees of awareness of my imaginations, and these affect my willingness to attribute those imaginations to the story. (Hogan 2011: 101)

What Hogan describes as a natural cognitive process may have influenced the translation process in Chen Qiufan's case. It is possible that the impulse to "fill in details" first originated in the translator's mind and subsequently came to be reflected by the target text.

Studying how emotions are represented in Chinese literary texts and their translations is important because it involves more than just lexical or syntactical changes. In the case of translations from Chinese to Western languages, the changes involved are difficult to quantify and qualify in the same way as it is possible to compare two texts in languages that are closer to each other. In this case, the translation of the physiological response to emotions also has an impact on the narratological level, as it affects the discourse and particularly the representation provided by the narrative voice.

In line with the theme of the story and the collection, the inclination to objectify emotions is accentuated in the translation. The translated version offers an even more clinical depiction of the protagonist's experience than the original. This disparity can be attributed to divergences in the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic between two vastly different contexts, namely China and the United States. These have been documented, for instance, by a comparative study conducted in 2022 on the perception of the pandemic in the two countries:

> There are fundamental differences in terms of attitude and perceptions regarding COVID-19 between American and Chinese subjects. Chinese subjects had higher personal risk perception, social risk perception, and concern about COVID-19 than American subjects. Chinese subjects also had higher preventive behavioral intentions than American subjects. (Zhang, Liu and Jun 2022: 10)

The act of translating emotions in this case results in a text that, by acting on a cognitive level, ends up exacerbating these differences by adapting the protagonist's perceptions to the cultural context of the target language.

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