

The Selected Poems of Wenyu Chiang

A Proposal for a Thesis in Literary Translation

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Introduction

Wenyu Chiang was born in 1961, ten years before the first wave of the feminist movement in Taiwan, inspired by the sexual revolution in the United States, arose in 1971. In the mid-nineties the “social transformation of gender issues was initially brought into the public realm” (Turner 238), and Chiang became the chairperson of the Taipei Association for the Promotion of Women's Rights in 1994. In 1998, she co-founded She-Whale Poetry Society, the first female poets’ organization, with the mission to promote feminist poetry and make poetry reform a part of the women’s movement in Taiwan.

As a professor in linguistics who started her poetry career at age 35, Chiang dedicated her first two poetry collections – *Men’s Nipples* (Meta Media, 1998), which won Hsiu-hsih Chen Poetry Prize in 1999, and *Grandmas’ Cuisine* (Fembooks, 2001), from which ten poems won Chuo-liu Wu Literary Prize for Poetry in 2000 – to this cause.

In *Men’s Nipples*, Chiang challenges the passive role of women by asserting that men’s nipples are responsive to sexual stimulation. Thus, similar to how women’s nipples are seen as a sexual organ, manhood is not all about the penis (11). Moreover, through redefining men’s desire, Chiang reminds men that women are ready to see this world, including men’s bodies, with their own eyes, instead of through the terms and vocabulary that standardizes the male body as representative of human experience.

In *Grandmas’ Cuisine*, Chiang shifts from feminist writing to writing about women. Using food as metaphors, she presents the double oppression of colonialism and patriarchy Taiwanese women faced under Japanese rule. Chiang skillfully employs shape poetry and homophone to create the visual impact as well as to juxtapose traditional (male-centered) history with the women’s voice.

Aims and General Description

I will translate 48-60 pages of Chiang's poetry from her two Chinese-language poetry collections, *Men's Nipples* and *Grandmas' Cuisine*. My introductory essay will position Chiang as a contemporary feminist poet, provide the historical and cultural context which is crucial to understand Chiang's poems, and discuss the translation approaches that can best narrow the language gap between Chinese and English.

Conceptual Background

Chiang has published four collections of poetry. Her early works, *Men's Nipples* and *Grandma's Cuisine*, are considered erotic poetry with direct and vulgar descriptions of body parts and sexual intercourse. Some critics question her writing strategy, stating that the use of coarse language may help convey the rebellious message but compromises the aesthetic of poetry (Guo). However, other scholars suggest that Chiang, as one of the first female poets pioneering the new age of erotic poetry, aims at breaking the stereotype of female writing and aspires to establish a new paradigm (Lin 30).

According to Lin (29-49), due to gender discrimination and men's dominance in Taiwanese poetry, female poets consciously or unconsciously developed writing styles that were different from the male poets in the fifties. They wrote beautifully about trivialities, and that resulted in female writings being criticized for being disconnected from the era and society. In the eighties, with the development of the women's rights movement in Taiwan, the right to write and to build women's culture by writing became a feminist goal. As a feminist, Chiang continued to challenge the existing territory of feminist poetry with progressive ideas, wordplay and provocative contents.

There are two propositions in Chiang's early poems: female gaze and writing about women. The title poem "Men's Nipples" demonstrates Chiang's intention to make men an object of the female gaze:

Your size cannot be found from cup A to cup D
It turns out that yours are only in lower case
lying in the counter with a made-up bed
a b c d

...

The lady who is in charge of the men's bra counter
gazes with contentment at
a b c d

the lowercase styles
exclusive to men

As opposed to the bra sizes of A and D, Chiang declares that since men's nipples are smaller, their sizes should be in lower case. The irony in this poem is that men's bodies can also be displayed in a shop for women to view. Similar to the objectification of women, men can be objectified, and women can define men's bra size. Thus Chiang wishes to question the role of masculinity and shatter male dominance in sexual relations.

But her ambition goes beyond this during her term as the chairperson of the Taipei Association for the Promotion of Women's Rights. For fear that grandmothers' stories would never be told again, she collected the stories from the grandmothers who had survived the Japanese colonial era. The fruit of this project is a book called *Grandmas' Tales*, which not only re-constructs history from a feminist perspective, it also encourages the general public to write about women, for the majority of grandmothers in this book are illiterate. Their lives can only be written down with the help of their grandchildren.

Around this period, Chiang published her second poetry collection, *Grandmas' Cuisine*, which links food to women's history and life. The poem "Papaya" exemplifies her goal to include her-story in history.

...
Perhaps, she was a boat
Soldiers lined up like waves
pushing her away from the hometown
Her name was forced to land/register in the battlefield
Every group of ships departing from Zuoying carried on
a journey toward an unknown/juice-feeding direction
...

Each pair of homophones is separated by a slash to reveal the fate of "comfort women," women and girls forced to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers

during World War II. Chiang creates multiple layers of meanings from the words which share the same or similar sound to narrate women living in a repressive regime. Bai, a male poet, comments on Chiang's use of the slash, "...This symbol means both 'and' and 'or'...It becomes Chiang's most salient writing style ...It looks for white from black, discerns mercy from horror, sees rebirth from death, finds youth from old age and extracts love from desire" (Grandmas' Cuisine 180).

Chiang is undoubtedly a feminist poet who writes about women. Yet her attempts to criticize her contemporary political situation are shown in many of her poems as well. She aligns herself with the women's movement in Taiwan; hence her poetry keeps up with the time and is the gateway to understanding women's stories against the backdrop of patriarchy. Therefore, a comprehensive research in Taiwanese history, culture and society during and after Japanese occupation is necessary in order to render her poems into English.

As of now, despite winning two important literary prizes for poetry in Taiwan, none of Chiang's poems have been translated and published in English. Her use of homophone is one of the significant obstacles in this translation project. Thus, to what extent the linguistic features of Chinese can be kept is an essential question. As W. Benjamin noted, "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (77). Although the homophones appearing in the original text may not have their equivalences in English, understanding the intention of the poet and creating the equivalent intention in the translated text will be my translation strategy.

Shape of Project

The introductory essay will include the biographical experiences relevant to Chiang's poetry. The sources of information include published materials, online speeches and public interviews. I will also incorporate the major reviews of her writing, compare her to other Taiwanese female poets, and analyse the significance of her poems in Taiwanese poetry. Since Chiang is considered an erotic poet after the publication of her first poetry collection, I will consider whether or not erotic content is essential to overturning male dominance. I would like to discuss this writing strategy in the context of feminist writing in Taiwan in general.

Chiang writes in free verse. Unlike the aesthetic quality of traditional poetic language, Chiang's diction is straightforward, unembellished but rich in metaphors, wordplay and images built of Chinese characters. As a linguist, Chiang explores and experiments different forms and language styles in her poetry. She utilises homophones to create multiple meanings with the repeating sounds. In addition, concrete poems with strong cultural messages, the use of Taiwanese, a branch of Min-nan dialects spoken by more than 65 percent of Taiwanese, and the exploitation of meanings by combining and deconstructing Chinese characters, are also among the features of Chiang's poetry. Therefore, translatability will be one of the key concerns when I select poems for this essay. I strive to pass on the sound and visual effects along with the meanings to the translated text.

Based on the themes, Chiang classifies each of her two poetry collections into three categories. Hence, I will choose the most representative and translatable poems from each category to make this essay a comprehensive selection of Chiang's poetry that enables a full understanding of the themes Chiang evokes.

Lastly, since the original texts contain cultural-specific items, such as food, dialect and historical events, I will include an appendix to provide additional information.

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