

220 HOT! SHEN XIN

TEXT BY
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Shen Xin has researched a multitude of topics. These include: the female-only mosques of the Chinese-speaking Hui people; global warming's effects on the culture and economy of Ko Yao Yai, Thailand; commercial DNA testing and results testimonials on YouTube; queerness; sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army before and during the Second World War; diasporas of Tibetan Buddhism in Scotland, Korea, and London; what suffering under capitalism is; their family; the Russian realist painter Ilya Repin (1844-1930); "filming as a sensory experience;"¹ how the strange animals of the Chinese guidebook *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (circa 4th-1st century BCE) may inform the bodily and incorporeal effects of power in knowledge production today; and much more.

Out of these researches Shen creates films, video installations, performances, and events that engage both documentary and fiction. Incorporating television clips, online footage, photographs, reproductions of paintings, and new digital video taken by hand or drone or generated using motion capture software, their moving images are interwoven with sound and text, through voiceover, scripted dialogue, unscripted speech, music, and superimposed titles. These moving images are elastic forms the artist uses across the media in which they work (thereby exceeding the structural and conceptual limits of the essay film).

As Shen has said: "I completely commit to complexity."² In and through this complexity a network can be found, however, that connects their practice to the act of translation, or "translation as a process," which I hope to evidence by focusing on one of Shen's early films and a later video installation.³

The Gay Critic (2015, digital video, 26 min.) draws from renowned postwar Japanese novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956) by Yukio Mishima, who was a queer man who

committed *seppuku* (*harakiri*) in 1970 after his plan to protect Emperor Hirohito in the event of a failed communist insurgency.⁴ Mishima's fictional protagonist, Mizoguchi, is based on the Buddhist priest Hayashi Yōken, who, on 1 July, 1950, burned to ashes the Zen Buddhist temple in Kyoto named Kinkaku-ji, or "The Temple of the Golden Pavilion," in Ivan Morris' translation.⁵

Mishima translates a living person into a novel's protagonist; Shen creates further translations when Vocaloid Oliver sings offscreen (by way of the artist using voice synthesizer software) titled English translations of selections of Mishima's Japanese. Oliver's voice overlays film of subtly homoerotic interactions between working class men in China, queer men at the ocean in Portugal, and dogs dragging around dead prey. He is however often silent; most notably his voice cuts out when English titles read "the Golden Temple." To quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "[figurative language] must work in the silence between and around words," and, in translation, "meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages."⁶ Precisely: "Language is not everything."⁷

In Shen's *Commerce des Esprits* (2018, four-channel digital video installation, 17 min.), one channel represents a person through motion capture software as slightly moving lines. This person speaks to another similarly animated character on another channel, although this second character is silent. A third channel with English titles contains a direct translation of a Chinese voiceover, and a sparse selection of titles in French appear on a final channel.

The texts draw from translations of the writings, foundational to Taosim, of Zhuangzi (circa 4th century BCE). In the English channel and Chinese voiceover, for example, Shen references Burton Watson's Zhuangzi, in which Watson translates the Chinese word *Tiān* almost exclusively as "heaven"⁸—a "term of theolo-



Provocation of the Nightingale, 2017 (stills) Courtesy: the artist, Asia Culture Center Gwangju, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art





226 SHEN XIN

gy,” with its thick occidental and Near-Eastern religious connotations.⁹ “Trying to return to a state of origin,” the artist adopts, for the French channel, Jean François Billeter’s Zhuangzi, a sinologist who translates *Tiān* into *le ciel* (“sky”).¹⁰ Both *Tiān* and *le ciel* can be translated as “heaven,” but the sky specifically belongs to the Taoist cosmology that conceptualizes “separating and connecting light sky [and] heavy earth.”¹¹

Commerce des Esprits is in memory of Shen’s father, who passed away after a coma that lasted for twenty-four days; the artist’s mother reads the Chinese voiceover. The language being translated from is silent. It is the pain experienced by Shen’s father, while the language being translated into contains the pain Shen witnesses and has witnessed. The Chinese and English into which Shen translates the silence are as much emotional and sensorial as spoken and written.¹² Very early in this work an excerpt from the work’s English channel reads:

My attempt to have a dialogue with you is like the process of translation. In this process, the body of language sometimes turns into an avenue for action, and at other times becomes an amalgamation of the senses.

Shen’s process of translation is not about *meaning* but about, in the words of translator Peter Cole, “*making sense*... something that happens along, or under, the skin: a tangential sensation, one that is not rooted in ideology.”¹³ These “constituent parts”—what Shen might call “units”—of translation are “live elements.”¹⁴ Or, to quote Spivak more fully,

It is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation [...] Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words [...] the jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic [...] is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world.¹⁵

Now consider Jean-Luc Godard’s 266-minute essay video *Histoire(s) du cinema*, begun in the late 1970s and completed in 1998—and precisely setting aside questions of artistic influence for those that allow a way to understand the complexity of Shen’s work—which contains, when he is distilling postwar occidental film in chapter 3(a), the titles here in translation from the original French,

A thought
that forms

A form
that thinks

Have “a thought / that forms,” and meaning contracts. Godard voices, in French, this process earlier in the episode:

The Russians made martyr films.
The Americans made commercials.

The English made what they always make:
nothing.

The Germans had no cinema.

No more cinema.

However, “A form”—a *filmic* form—“that thinks” is alive, and Shen—relating to Godard as well as Spivak—has spoken of their interest in what “can’t be reduced to meaning but [is] experienced as alive.”¹⁶ What is more, their methodology—which covers “what is required in understanding, using, [and] translating language”¹⁷ —is “the formation of a system which is an alternative choice and understanding of ‘forms’.”¹⁸

1. Human Poney, “‘I completely commit to complexity.’ Shen Xin on opening up space through the sensory + refusing the definitive,” *AQNB*, 28 July 2017, <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/07/28/i-completely-commit-to-complexity-an-interview-with-shen-xin-on-opening-up-space-through-the-sensory-refusing-the-definitive/>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Communication with artist, 7 April 2019.
4. Henry Scott-Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (London: Owen, 1975), p. 130.
5. Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1994), p. ix.
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 398-399.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
8. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), <https://terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html>.
9. “Ciel,” Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, <https://www.littre.org/>.
10. Communication with artist, 7 April 2019.
11. Daniel J. Paracka Jr., “China’s Three Teachings and the Relationship of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity,” *Worldviews* 16, no. 1 (2012), p. 83.
12. Communication with artist, 7 April 2019.
13. Peter Cole, “Making Sense in Translation: Towards an Ethics of the Art,” in Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky (eds.), *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
15. Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” pp. 397-399.
16. “The Rules of Traction: Shen Xin and Alvin Li in conversation,” *Mousse* 64 (Summer 2018), p. 160.
17. Communication with artist, 7 April 2019.
18. “The Rules of Traction,” p. 159.

Strongholds, 2016 (still) Courtesy: the artist (pp. 224-225, 227)



Warm Spell, 2018 (stills) Courtesy: the artist, CFCCA Manchester, University of Salford, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (pp. 222-223)

