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THERE'S A TENSE FOR EVERY ACTIVITY UNDER HEAVEN: STRATEGIES FOR CHOOSING VERBAL TENSES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION FROM CHINESE INTO ITALIAN

As far as the issue of verbal tenses is concerned, translating from Chinese, especially in the case of literary translation, places the translator in a rather different situation from translating from other morphologically richer languages. In most European languages, for instance, verbal conjugation allows both the reader of the prototext and the translator to easily understand the time of the action as it is set by the writer, while in Chinese this positioning can be more problematic and, sometimes, even deceiving, at least for the latter.

In order to give some examples of the problems the translator may have to cope with, as well as of the strategies he may have to adopt when it comes to the treatment of verbal tenses, I have chosen two somehow different works: the fictional narratives Pinzui Zhang Damin xingfu de shenghuo 贫嘴 张大民的幸福生活 (The Happy Life of the Garrulous Zhang Damin, 1998)\(^1\) by Liu Heng 刘恒 (born 1954) and Yingsu zhi jia 噩粟之家 (Opium family, 1993)\(^2\) by Su Tong 苏童 (born 1963).

Liu Heng's The Happy Life of the Garrulous Zhang Damin is built up as a series of episodes framed between two stills of Zhang Damin's own family – one taken from the front in the beginning, one taken from behind at the end of the novel, which gives it the taste, if not the style, of a piece of fiction written for the screen. In fact, shortly after its publication the novel was turned both into a serial and a movie. The chronological structure of these episodes follows an analeptic linear pattern from Zhang

\(^1\) Liu, Heng, 贫嘴 张大民的幸福生活 Pinzui Zhang Damin xingfu de shenghuo, Beijing, Huayi chubanshe, 1998.

Damin's childhood to a certain moment in time, when his family of origin have almost dissolved, and he, his wife Li Yunfang, his six year old son Zhang Xiaoshu and his soon-to-pass-away mother have already moved from the sibeyuan where they used to live to a new flat in a modern condo. As a matter of fact, the whole novel is written like a piece of movie fiction, including lots of dialogues.

The nature of such structure asks for some tense-rendering strategies which I will try to illustrate in some detail.

In the family picture that opens the novel Zhang Damin, his wife and their almost fourteen year old son are shown at a later time with respect to the actual conclusion of the narration, when, as stated above, the boy is still only six. In other words, they are portrayed in a «hic et nunc» frame with no real relationship with the rest of the story, and the passage is to be translated accordingly, using the present tense, at least for the first two sentences:

他叫张大民。他老婆叫李云芳。他儿子叫张树，听着不对劲，像老同志，
改叫张林，又俗了。儿子现在叫张小树。 (1-2)

His name is Zhang Damin. His wife's name is Li Yunfang.

As for the next sentence, 他儿子叫张树, though, in spite of the grammatical formulation being the same as the previous two, it requires the use of a past tense, as the following 像老同志, 改叫张林 is there to inform us that Zhang Shu is not his name any longer, having been (temporarily) changed into Zhang Lin. Now, xianzai 现在, the name of Zhang Damin's child is, in fact, Zhang Xiaoshu. Not that the time noun 现在 is enough to assure that this «picture» is taken in the present, as 现在 might as well be used in a sentence referring to the past, but the time expression last year, qunian 去年 at the head of the sentence 去年他把烟戒了 is, as it sets a past with respect to a present. It is interesting to notice that as far as the two sentences 听着不对劲, 像老同志 are concerned, there would really be no big difference were they translated with «a name that does not sound that well, that sounds like an old comrade's name» or with «a name that did not sound that well, that sounded like an old comrade's name». In both cases the period could not but finish with «so they changed it to Zhang Lin, which is an ordinary name, instead». Yet, at a closer look, in the light of what happens later in the narration (131), only the second option seems to be the good one. In
fact, the reason why at the age of six Zhang Shu has his name changed is that, while watching TV, his father has somehow been struck by a resemblance between a Red Army veteran’s expression and the light in his own son’s eyes, a resemblance which seems to worry him a little, and so decides to go to the local police station to change it into Zhang Lin. On his way to the police station, though, he enters a public toilet, and there he sees the words «Zhang Lin is my son» written on the wall, by the graffito of a wangba 王八, a tortoise, but also a swearword meaning son of a bitch. This is enough to make Damin think that Zhang Lin is a can 慘 «cruel», «fierce», «savage» name, so, eventually, the boy has his name changed into Zhang Xiaoshu once and for all. That’s the reason why a past tense is a better choice for translating 听着对不对劲，像老同志.

As for the sentence 又俗了, I translated it with «which is an ordinary name, instead», not with «which was an ordinary name, instead», for a reason that goes beyond and leaves out of consideration the fact that Lin is still such a common name nowadays as it used to be in the past, in China. In the very first lines of the novel, Liu Heng does not tell that the name Zhang Lin is 慍 can, but su 俗, «ordinary», «common», «popular», instead; this is why I tend to assume that the sentence 又俗了 represents a remark by the author himself, accounting for the simplicity of mind and tastes of Damin and his wife, more than a comment by one of the child’s parents or by both of them. It would be illogical to assume otherwise: why would Zhang Damin or/and his wife decide to change Zhang Lin for Zhang Xiaoshu, had they thought that there was nothing wrong with such an ordinary name as Zhang Lin? It is only more than a hundred pages later that we get to know that what’s wrong with it is precisely that it is such a popular name that you might easily happen to find it associated with the graffito of a tortoise on the wall of a public toilet in Beijing. Translating 又俗了 with «which was an ordinary name, instead» would risk to miss this point, as it may convey the strange idea that the name Zhang Lin was first chosen on purpose for its being ordinary, and then, on a sudden second thought, changed, just because of that, for another name. My translation of the incipit of the novel thus sounds like «His name is Zhang Damin. His wife’s name is Li Yunfang. His son’s name used to be Zhang Shu, then it was changed for Zhang Lin, which is ordinary, instead».
From now on, the narration is divided chronologically into two major moments – before and after Zhang Xiaoshu’s birth –, according to a linear time-pattern that, as mentioned above, goes from Zhang Damin and Li Yunfang’s childhood to when Zhang Xiaoshu is six. From the point of view of verbal tense treatment the translation therefore make use of a wide range of tenses including the simple present for the dialogues, the simple past, the past perfect, the past progressive and the past perfect progressive, besides, of course, different moods such as the indicative, the subjunctive and the conditional.

There is at least one passage, though, that requires special attention as for the choice of the verbal tense to be employed. It is the description of Zhang Damin’s house (15-17), in one of those old-fashioned sibeyuan that during the Mao era were converted from a single family’s dwelling into a segmented multi-family compound. This description follows a long scene (9-15) in which Zhang Damin’s hushuobadao 胡说八道 – talking nonsense – helps Li Yunfang out from her state of depression for having been deserted by her former boyfriend. At the end of this scene, which is grammatically set in the past, after declaring their love for each other, the two of them set out on their journey towards the happy life:

李云芳不治而愈，嫁给了张大民。从此，两个人就过上了幸福的生活了。（15）

Immediately after that, after an extra space between lines, comes the description, which, except for the presence of the deictic 这, which appears three times in the prototext – 张大民家的人管这个填满了的大坑叫...院子。（16）这是汉堡包出油的地方。（17）这个多层的汉堡包掉在地上，掉在城市的灰尘里，又难吃又牙碜，让人怎么能吃它呢！（17） – and might give some evidence in favour of the present tense, does not show any strong morphological sign of this description being set either in the past or in the present, which is quite normal. On the other hand, I guess the time in which it is set does not make any important difference for the Chinese reader either. In translating it into a Western language, though, a choice has to be made between whether to give chronological continuity to the narration by using a past tense, or to give the narration itself a new start – which would also be logical, as that is when Zhang Damin’s search for happiness really begins – by using the present tense, in the light of the above mentioned deictics. The fact is that, once more, as in the case of the sentence 又俗了, having read the whole text
before starting the translation, the translator knows something that the reader will only get to know at page 139, that is to say that the sibeyuan is going to be demolished and Zhang Damin’s family will eventually move to a new condo. In other words, the description refers to something that is not there anymore by the time the story is being told. Thus, I decided to adopt the first solution – to use a past tense – and treat the deictic this as merely indicative of space, not of time.

The conclusion we can draw from the few examples above is that, unlike what happens with translating from narratives written in most European languages, dealing with verb tenses in translating from Chinese ones requires a constant attention to non-verbal and even non-grammatical elements that may be positioned very far from the given narrative segment the translator is actually translating. In other terms, the translator has to keep in mind and constantly verify by several rereadings of the prototext each and every event making up the diegesis, and be ready to review the translation in the light of any detail that comes up from inside the plot.

In the case of Su Tong’s Yingsu zhi jia 罂粟之家 (Opium family), the treatment of verbal tenses in translation is a most important issue, involving the correct rendering of the metadiegetic nature and the deeper meaning of the novel itself. Opium family is part of the works forming the Fengyangshu cycle, Fengyangshu being the imaginary country serving as a background for narrating the decadence of Southern China before the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 and in its early years. As for Opium family, in particular, the narration covers a period that goes from 1930 to 1956. These stories are all characterized by Su Tong’s search for new stylistic techniques and literary devices, which explains why critics see him as an avant-garde writer, and often involve a narrator who frequently shows up not only to lead the reader (you, ni 你) through the story and to explain the motivations behind the characters’ behaviour and actions, but, which is even more important, to assert his belonging to some family clan – the clan of the Liu, in the case of Opium Family (but the name of the clan changes from story to story), and to express his own urge for exploring and rediscovering his ancestors’ histories, as well as his own origins. As a matter of fact, it is hard to decide whether the narrator should be defined as an eterodiegetic or as an omodiegetic one, as, though he has no active role in the
events, yet he actually is one of the characters of the story, a character called «I». As I pointed out some years ago, in this work the Author creates several different temporal levels, which he juxtaposes and alternates in the course of the narration. This technical device is strictly connected to the way «I» tries to rescue from oblivion a universe that disappeared before he could get to know it, by gathering information from those who actually lived the events and survived them, as well as from the old local folks who only heard about them. At the same time, by resorting to this expedient, the narrator can position himself according to different perspectives and various degrees of emotional involvement. This is the main reason why, in order to transfer all of the above contents into the metatext, it is most important to avoid levelling them off by a wrong use of verbal tenses. Unfortunately this has been done both in the English translation (1993) and in the Italian one published (1995), causing the reader to miss the real nature of Su Tong’s literary intention and literary achievement, although the narration content remains basically unaltered. Incidentally, I have to say that this misinterpretation may not be due to the translator, who, at least in the case of the Italian version, seems to be well aware of the the complex narrative structure of the prototext and actually mentions it in the afterword, but, most likely, to editors and publishers who, in the name of the principles of readability, ask for the metatext not to read too weird, in order not to force the reader to make what they judge to be unnecessary efforts to accept it. Besides, at least as far as Italian translations of Chinese literature are concerned, it is not an uncommon practice for publishers to provide the translators with a translation published in some other Western language, and ask them to translate those texts instead of the original ones. This attitude may have heavy consequences on the metatext: firstly, any mistake and any misinterpretation the first translator might have made could pass directly into the final metatext or affect it negatively; secondly, it assumes an identity of grammatical and cultural contents and expressions among languages that is not there at all. Talking of verbal tenses, for instance, we all know that the different segmentation each language operates on the nature of the temporal continuum makes it impossible to merely juxtapose two tenses from two different languages.

But let’s go back to the subject and analyse a few examples that will make my meaning clear.

Here is the incipit of the novel:

仓房里堆放着犁耙锄头一类的农具，齐整整齐地在土墙上，就像一排人的形状。那股铁锈味就是从它们身上散出来的。这是我家的仓房，一个幽暗的深不可测的空间。老奶奶的纺车依旧吊在半空中，轱辘与叶片四结起了细细的蛛网。我印把那架纺车看成一只巨大的蜘蛛，蜘蛛永恒地俯瞰着人的头顶。随着窗户纸上的阳光渐渐淡薄，一切杂物农具都黯淡下去，只剩下模糊的轮廓，你看上去就像一排人的形状。天快黑了。 (36)

The storehouse was full of rakes, hoes, ploughs, and other such agricultural implements, all stacked neatly up against the mud walls like a row of people. A smell of rusty metal came from their bodies. It was my family's storehouse: a deep, dark, unfathomable space. Grandmother's spinning wheel was still hanging there in the air, the wheel and the spools wrapped all around in webs of gossamer. Yanyi thought of that spinning wheel as a huge spider, a spider forever looking down at the tops of people's heads. The sunlight gradually dimmed on the paper covering the window; all the farm implements and other miscellaneous items darkened, leaving only vague silhouettes. Glancing over at them, they did look just like a row of people. It was about to grow completely dark.¹

I think there is no doubt about the fact that the voice describing the warehouse is the character «I»'s, the same character who informs us that this is his family's warehouse: no matter if it is only in his imagination or for real, «I» is inside the warehouse «now», he is smelling the smell of rust coming from the agricultural tools lining up against the wall like people in line, and this is the space his exploration of the past starts from. As a consequence, in order to convey presentness, using the present tense instead of a past tense is required. In this incipit, thus, «I» is inside the warehouse, watching the past resurfacing under cover of darkness. For a comparison between the effect the use of different tenses can have on the reader, let’s take, for example, the sentence:

[...] 演义害怕天黑，天一黑他就饥肠辘辘，那种饥饿感使演义变成暴躁的幼兽，你听见他的喊声震撼着1930年的刘家大宅。 (36-7)

Yanyi was afraid of the growing darkness; as soon as it grew dark, his stomach would growl with hunger. His hunger would turn Yanyi

into an angry little beast; then you could hear his shouts shake the
great house of Liu in 1930. ¹

If, on the other hand, the present tense is employed, as I suggest,
one of the possible translation could be, instead:

Yanyi is afraid of the growing darkness; as soon as it grows dark,
his stomach growls with hunger. His hunger turns Yanyi into an
angry little beast; you can hear his shouts shake the great house of
Liu in 1930. ⁶

The noun phrase 1930 年的刘家大宅 makes the last sentence the
most problematic one to translate (incidentally, I think that «the
great house of Liu in 1930» isn’t the best translation possible),
yet it seems to me to be most significant, as 1930 年 determines
刘家大宅 in a way that conveys a very different meaning from
a sentence like 你听见他的喊声在1930年震撼着刘家大宅, for
instance. In my opinion, in fact, this kind of time determination
is used by Su Tong to relocate the reader in the time when
the once powerful family of the landlord Liu is on the verge of
decaying; in other words, it is there to make the reader witness
the clan’s decadence, more than to merely tell him when the
action took place.

Further evidence of the narration being set in the present
tense is represented by the following example:

坐在红木方桌前喝酒的两个男人, 一个已经老了, 一个还很年
轻。老的穿白绸子衣裤, 脸越喝越红, 嘴角挂满腌毛豆的酱汁。年轻的
坐立不安, 腰间挂着的铜喇叭不时捅到桌上。那是长工陈茂, 你可
以从那把铜喇叭上把他从长工堆里分辨出来 (37-8)

Two men were sitting at a round (sic) amboyna-wood table drin-
king; one was already old, and one was still young. The old one was
dressed in white silk; his face was growing redder as he drank, and
the clear juice from pickled soya beans dripped from the corners
of his mouth. The young one was ill at ease; the ceremonial brass
trumpet hanging on his belt kept hitting the table. That was the
long-term laborer Chen Mao; you could pick him out from the
crowd of workers by that trumpet of his. ⁷

Once again, I suggest that a present tense should be used here,
instead of a past tense. «I», in fact, is watching the scene as if

¹ Ibidem, 170.
⁶ Here I simply modify Duke's translation using a present tense instead of
past tense for the sake of exemplification.
⁷ Ibidem, 181.
he were there: «Of the two men sitting at the square amboyna-wood (mahogany) table, one is already old, while the other is still very young.» Moreover, «I» points out to the reader that he (the reader) can distinguish Chen Mao from the other long-terms laborers because of his *suona*. You might as well say, of course, that «you could distinguish him from the other long-terms laborers because of his *suona*», but that would set an unwanted distance between «I» and the reader («you»), as well as a distance between the reader («you») and the scene. In other terms it would turn the sentence into a purely descriptive one, thus missing its intrinsic metadiegetic quality. Formulas such as 你看去, 你看见, 你看不到, 你听见, 你听不出来, 你听到, 你听出来 are scattered everywhere in the text, and they all prove how strong the Author and «I» wish to urge the reader towards presentness, and this 你可以...分辨出来 does exactly the same.

One of the most revealing passages, in this sense, is:

我听见嘹亮的唢呐声在黎明的乡村吹响，那是1949年末风暴来临的日子。唢呐声召唤着枫杨树的土地和人，召唤所有幽闭的心灵在风中敞开。风暴来临，所有的人将被卷离古老的居所，集结在新的历史高地上。（74-5）

I hear the loud clear sound of a brass trumpet ring out over a village at dawn; it was during the last days of 1949, just before the storm. The sound of the trumpet was calling all of the land and people of Maple Village, calling all of the confined spirits to rise up on the wind.

The storm was coming. Everyone was going to be dragged out of his ancient abode and gathered together on the high ground of a new history. ³

It is noteworthy that in translating 我听见嘹亮的唢呐声在黎明的乡村吹响, as well as in other few occasions, Duke decides to switch to the present tense. Choosing the simple past to translate this sentence, in fact, would not only betray their peculiar metadiegetic essence; it would also sidetrack the reader, who could wonder what was «I»’s role in those revolutionary times, when he really did not have any, since he was not even born then. This passage clearly represents a fictitious, imaginary reconstruction, not a recollection, of the past. The use of the present tense, on the other hand, allows for providing the reader with the right metadi-
egetic perspective, by emphasizing once more the imagery quality of the whole narration and the special role «I» has in it.

In this sense, the conclusion of Opium family is really exemplary, as here «I» and the writer eventually merge into one persona:

作家在刘氏家谱中记了最后一笔。枫杨树最大的地主家庭在工作组长庐方的枪声中灭亡，时为公元1950年12月26日。（93）

The author pens a last remark in the Liu clan’s genealogical record: On December 26, 1950, the biggest landlord family in Maple village was destroyed by a shot from the gun of work team commander Lu Fang. 

What the discussion of the examples above goes to show is that, beyond the written words, in planning strategies for the use of tenses in the metatext the translator may have to pay attention to the whole narrative texture per se, and, as in the case of Opium family, to be able to make out a clear interpretation of the meaning of the prototext in the contest of a certain writer’s organic work by means of an extensive narratological analysis.

ABSTRACT
The translation I’ve recently carried out of Liu Heng’s novel The Happy Life of the Garrulous Zhang Damin has offered me the occasion for some reflections upon the treatment of verbal tenses throughout the translation itself. The beginning of the novel may be seen as a still of Zhang Damin’s own family, taken (as we can realize in the end) after all the episodes making up the main plot have been narrated, while its very conclusion reminds us of Chaplin’s typical fading out, where the main character walks away along a solitary road, turning his back to us. The chronological nature of the events taking place between such visual start and conclusion require some substantial choices as regards the verbal tenses to make use of in the metatext.

KEYWORDS

9 Ibidem, 268.