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From Theory to Practice: Translating Ying Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises*

Sunny A. Hendry

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

From Theory to Practice: Translating Ying Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises*

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This thesis analyzes Ying Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises* through the lenses of literary translation, migrant writing and epistolary genres, as well as through critical theory of Chen's poetics in order to inform a translation of said novel from French into English. This theoretical groundwork is accompanied by analysis of the process of the translation, including specifications, methods used, and justifications for translation decisions.

*Les Lettres Chinoises* is Ying Chen's second novel, written in French rather than her native Chinese language. Spanning a fifty-seven letter exchange between Shanghai and Montreal, Chen's choice to write in language other than her first, as well as the themes presented in the novel such as emigration, exile, identity, and Otherness, render Chen's novel ideal for critical discussion in the domain of migrant writing theory.

Translating any exophonic text presents particular challenges for the translator and the analysis of these difficulties enrich both the translation as well as an understanding of the migrant writing genre. Inherent in these challenges is negotiating transparency (foreignization versus domestication) in the translation of cultural traces that speak of other traditions and realities. Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises* is unique among migrant texts however, because she privileges voice through the use of the epistolary genre, a form that bespeaks a 19<sup>th</sup> century Western tradition. Her choice of this genre provides insight into the literary and cultural traditions that shaped her writing and encourage the reader as well as the translator to consider, or rather reconsider, the novel's intent.

*Les Lettres Chinoises* contributes to the migrant and epistolary genres, redefining and enhancing each respectively. Chen's prerogatives as viewed through these lenses are varied: through her three letter-writing characters she reenacts literal and existential exile, creates a space of enunciation through letter writing, all while defining her own poetic style in another language. I negotiated these prerogatives in the translation by creating three subtly distinct and evolving voices for each of the characters. I used existing translations of Chen's works to create consistency in style and accuracy. Included as well are excerpts from my final translation.

Keywords: *Les Lettres Chinoises*, Ying Chen, exophonic translation, migrant writing, epistolary novel, exile, foreignization, domestication

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Lastly, I would like to thank my parents as well as my grandparents who instilled in me a love of this world and have always encouraged me to read, learn, travel, and experience, even if this means that I am that “kite” flying far, far off, wandering down paths they haven’t tread and cannot always follow. Thank you for being the hands that hold my string (and so much more): je me souviens.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: YING CHEN, *LES LETTRES CHINOISES*, AND JUSTIFICATION FOR TRANSLATION

*“Il s’agit de savoir se confondre dans le tout pour cultiver le soi, et ensuite plonger dans le soi pour comprendre le tout.”* (Chen, *Quatre mille marches* 48)

Born in Shanghai in 1961, Ying Chen’s first years were marked by China’s then-nascent Cultural Revolution and she grew up within the walls of its aftermath. With a natural affinity for writing and languages, her “native tongue” might be considered to be that of the written word. Her French studies began in Shanghai, (almost as a matter of chance after having learnt Russian), and continued in Montreal, where she moved in 1989 to complete a master’s degree in creative writing (Stillman 35-6). Her first novel, *La mémoire de l’eau*, started as the thesis for this same master’s program and was written in Chen’s non-native French, establishing French as Chen’s poetic voice. *Les Lettres Chinoises* is her second novel, published in 1993.

*Les Lettres Chinoises* is a contemporary epistolary novel that corresponds to some degree to Chen’s nostalgia for her native Shanghai upon moving to Montreal as an immigrant. *Les Lettres Chinoises* enacts the experiences of emigration and exile through letters written by three protagonist characters: Sassa, who writes from Shanghai; her fiancé Yuan, who writes from Montreal; and their friend Da Li, who also writes from Montreal. Friends from college, Sassa, Yuan, and Da Li recount through letters their respective confrontations with that deep-seated myth that “ailleurs est meilleur que chez nous” (*LC* 129). These confrontations will force them to examine difference and identity in ways that will shape them and alter their relationships.

In what begins as a correspondence between Yuan, freshly arrived in North America, and his fiancé, Sassa, who is still in Shanghai, *Les Lettres Chinoises* follows their attempts to reunite both in Montreal and through the in-between space that is the letters they write each other, words

on a page; it is the story of a love that has been uprooted but not yet replanted, of a love that waits. And somewhere in this waiting is Da Li, Sassa's schoolgirl friend, appearing only to disappear before the novel's end. Da Li has also moved to Montreal to pursue her studies, and Yuan takes it upon himself to be her "protecteur" (LC 39) in helping her settle in. Da Li writes to Sassa about her experiences acclimating to North America, speaking of both her friendship with Yuan and of a "certain someone"—a Chinese friend with a fiancé back home in Shanghai—with whom she has fallen in love.

Though never explicitly stated, the reader, much like Sassa, can only suspect that this "certain someone" is Yuan; the distance between each of the writers widens in light of the tension of all that is not written or said. One lost passport document and an almost love affair later, Sassa's health wanes, Da Li flees Montreal for Paris, and Yuan's letters are forbidden by Sassa (or by her doctor, if we want to believe her). Perhaps expressly so on the part of the author, the novel's first and last seven letters are solely between Yuan and Sassa.

*Les Lettres Chinoises* has been reprinted now three times: the original 1993 version and subsequent 1998 and 2003 editions, which have the same ISBN number (Talbot, "Ying Chen's Evolving *Lettres chinoises*" 126). Though there is an existent translation of the text into English, I feel that a new translation is justified for several reasons. The first is that the existing translation, done by Jyothi Vijay Raghavan for her Master's Thesis in 1995, is based off the 1993 version of the original. A short time after Raghavan's translation, Ying Chen published a new edition of the text, bearing significant changes: of the original sixty-nine letters, only fifty-seven remained. Eliminated from the epistolary exchange are the voices of Yuan's father, his Aunt Louise, and his friend Nicolas. Though Aunt Louise and Nicolas were not correspondents in this exchange, their voices were heard through Yuan's letters. One of Yuan's letters to his father has



been retained in the final version, but the reader never reads the letter from his father that inspired it nor his father's response to it. Some of the original text that was removed for the second version is reintroduced into the third and final version, being assigned to different writers or recipients (Oore, "Les Lettres Chinoises de Ying Chen, un roman épistolaire" 5–6).

I posit that the author may have decided that a new edition was necessary precisely because of discussions and questions that arose during interviews with Raghavan while the latter was in the process of translating. It is clear that Chen reexamined the novel's intent and perhaps continues to do so even now in light of her newer writings, which can be seen as a significant shift from her first two novels. It is possible that her desire to alter *Les Lettres Chinoises* post-publication led her to examine not only the novel's intent but her own as an author as well. Where possible, I search for any justifications that Ying Chen offers for these changes and use them to inform my own translation. Regardless of Chen's reasons, these many changes have rendered Raghavan's translation outdated. Though Raghavan's text remains unpublished for reasons unknown to me, my translation has the end goal of publication.

My translation also serves as a pretext or a means of contextualization for analysis, which will be carried out in the following chapters. Reviewing theory that has not necessarily been examined in light of translation (or perhaps not in light of *Les Lettres Chinoises*), such an analysis will add new depth to that existing theory. This theoretical and critical analysis will pave the way for an analysis of the translation practices employed in mine and other translations of Chen's works. The ultimate example of the relationship between theory and practice is found my final translation itself and thus, while waiting for the end goal of publication to materialize, excerpts from the final translation will make up the final chapter of this thesis.. For the purpose

of the analysis and for reading convenience, I will be employing the abbreviation *LC* when citing from *Les Lettres Chinoises*.

## 2. TRANSLATING OTHERNESS IN LITERATURE

“*All acts of communication are acts of translation.*” George Steiner

Our modern, globalized world is a world in which we are increasingly coming face to face with the Other. This Other embodies difference: a foreign presence, ideology, or culture. In the discussion of literature, the Other is a term used to refer to those figures who are outsiders. Migrant literature is literature of the Other, by the Other, and often transforms the reader into the Other by the rhetoric of comparisons used. In this encounter with the Other, we see and experience difference, certainly, but we also experience similarity—we recognize ourselves; and perhaps no other medium facilitates this encounter between the known and the unknown quite like literature.

The writings of the Other are often concerned with identity. *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972, Chaim Potok), *The Joy Luck Club* (1987, Amy Tan), and *The Kite Runner* (2003, Khaled Hosseini) for example are popular contemporary novels that are appreciated precisely because of their insight into Otherness and questions of identity, though only the latter two authors were marked by the emigrant experience. While it is true that many emigrant authors choose to write in the language of their adopted countries (whether they write about emigration or not), there are cases where their literature and especially non-migrant classic literature (such as Tolstoy or even Hugo), comes to us translated. Oftentimes—for example in the classroom, in critical discussion, and in the bookstores—this fact is not underscored.

It is not uncommon to find ourselves unaware that some of the books we read are translations. The North American reader will find that this fact isn't exactly broadcasted loudly on book jackets; in fact the opposite is more usually the case. Translated literature will always be endowed with Otherness, even if that is not a theme within the work. In our encounter with the

Other, we tend to want to experience a work of literature as it was meant to be experienced: from the author's mouth, mind, and hands to our own. In short, we want Otherness without the mediation of a translator. The translator's invisibility is, in many cases, a selling point (Garayta 38). Whether on the bookshelf, in discussion in the classroom or in reviews, the translation of literature is often perceived as the original product (Grossman 31).

And yet our desire for unadulterated Otherness might be called into question, for in no other branch of translation is the invisibility of the translator so widely discussed and, sometimes, disputed as it is in literary translation. The words "author" and "writer" abound in literary translation theory as they pertain to the translator. Whether the invisibility of the translator signifies the death of the author (Robinson 127) or the birth of a new kind of authorship, literary translation poses unique challenges to the translator and complicates this encounter with the Other.

Literary translation is best defined by its aims, which are linguistic, aesthetic, cultural, and social. These aims collide in unique ways for each author and translator as well as for each work being translated. There is plenty to be said on the subject, but I will limit myself to addressing general principles that I have found relevant to my translation of Ying Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises*. Translation of this novel is rendered more complicated and thus worthy of discussion precisely because of the collision of the novel's themes with the fact that the novel is not written in Chen's native tongue (Chinese) and is an example of what is referred to as "migrant" or "hybrid" writing, which is to say that the original is, in and of itself, already a sort of translation and bears witness to that fact. Furthermore, this epistolary novel has three principal correspondents and thus three potential voices. In order to address these complications, I will first define literary translation and the translator's role generally, contextualizing these

definitions within the field of translation, and then address the intricacies involved with translating Ying Chen's style of writing and specifically *Les Lettres Chinoises*.

Translation has been argued to be not just a transfer of meaning but "as the search for functional equivalence in particular situations" (Melby 207). An integral aspect to undertaking any translation is setting parameters or "specifications" to a specific text, which not only help the translator to apply general translation theories and practices to a specific text, but ask questions of the translator that serve to generate answers to those questions (Hague 257). The audience of the source text and most especially the audience of the translated text are taken into account in mapping out these specifications. The author's purpose is also significant because of the way it may or may not impact the translator's purpose, which is also to be considered. It should be noted that the latter's purpose subsequently may or may not align with the author's.

One of the reasons that the translation of literature is such a unique field is that in order to have functional equivalence, one must first define the function of a translation. Inherent in the query for such a definition is paralleled understanding of the function of literature. One can't define a function for a translation independent of what one feels that literature should do. And that sentiment or definition of both general and specific literary intent can vary from author to author, as well as between author and translator, who may not have the opportunity to discuss intentions. Considerations of the text type and register will also dictate translation choices. In addition to all these specifications or parameters which this paper serves to define, support, and discuss, perhaps the most significant is that of content correspondence, or to which extent the translation will be overt or covert. If the invisibility of the translator is a selling point as Isabel Garayta affirms (37), a covert translation and the resulting suppression of Otherness is a translator's paradox. Where possible, the research I undertake and discuss serves to resolve this

paradox. The specifications stemming from the research put forth in this thesis will be included in an appendix.

In discussing the setting of specifications, or the “planning phase of translation,” Sini Immonen alludes to how Danks et al. contend “that the comprehension of the source text is influenced by what the translator knows about the topic and the writer’s intent” (330). Defining “the topic” is complicated in literature, even more so in this case because the genre serves as a topic, a medium or vehicle for meaning in itself. In the case of *Les Lettres Chinoises* it is a question of the author’s conscious choice to participate in the epistolary genre and perhaps an unintentional participation in the genre of migrant literature. Thus, in addition to formal translation theory, I will explore Chen’s work in the context of migrant and epistolary genres, as well as critical theory on the work itself, to better take these “topics” into consideration and to comprehend the function of the original in order to create functional equivalence.

Edith Grossman, translator of the well-received *Love in the time of Cholera*, offers another definition of the translator’s role as it relates to the author’s intention, saying that “intrinsic to the concept of a translator’s fidelity to the effect and impact of the original is making the second version of the work as close to the first writer’s *intention* as possible” (Grossman 31, emphasis added). Fortunately, Ying Chen has spoken much on her role as a writer. Thus, while still taking into account the critical work and translation theory, I will defer to her words as a sort of final authority to guide my translation choices and revisions.

It is generally understood that translations that occur on a word-to-word level are not considered to be “good” translations; this is one of the reasons why machine-based translation has its shortcomings. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of literary translation. “Translation [...] and certainly literary translation, is so obviously a question not of translating a series of

sentences but of translating a text which happens to consist of sentences among other things” (Holmes 94). These “other things” consist of the context, not only of the words themselves but of the work as a whole as being a product of an author and of language and culture. Romy Heylen defines translation “as a series of decisions and choices rather than as a process of blindly following mechanical rules” (as proposed by Jiri Levy in his essay on “Translation as Decision Process”, where Levy stresses that translation “involves both interpretation and creation”) (15). Heylen then uses the term “cultural negotiation” to define translation (23). Negotiating between a Chinese, French, and epistolary culture will shape the decisions that make up my translation.

Because of the poetics of literature, capturing the voice and style of the author is also an essential element of literary translation and a reflection of the function. Chantal Wright explains that “all literary texts, and some non-literary texts, exist in a relationship of tension between a language which belongs to everybody and a language that is the writer’s own” and explains that this relationship of tension is a manifestation of the writer’s style” (Wright 7). The translator then, as well as the author, sets out to write in a language that can belong to everyone. For the translator this task includes opening the door to a new audience, a new “everyone,” all while keeping with a language that belongs to the author alone. The task of the translator is thus to identify this tension and to reproduce it. This process, only introduced here, will be explored further, particularly in Chapters 3 and 5.

Grossman offers a guiding definition of the role of the literary translator:

For the most fundamental description of what translators do is that we write-or perhaps rewrite-in a language B a work of literature originally composed in language A, hoping that readers of the second language—I mean, of course, readers of the translation—will perceive the text, emotionally and artistically, in a manner that parallels and corresponds

to the aesthetic experience of its first readers. This is the translator's grand ambition.

(Grossman 7)

The universality of Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises* is likely what led to its resounding success and its artistry and emotionality is what drew me to it as a text that I wanted to translate. If I cannot produce a translation that allows the reader to experience an aesthetic experience that resonates with mine, I will have failed in my own aims.

As previously mentioned, culture is a component of that aesthetic experience I want to reproduce, even if it means some resultant lack of comfort for the reader. Speaking of the reader of the translated text, Garayta has said:

Curiously, if this sense of oddness or unfamiliarity does not arise as one reads a text from a familiar yet foreign culture, then the reader would be well advised to ask, "Why not?" She should also try to become alert to how the mediation of translation has robbed her that experience of "otherness"—that is one of the reasons we prize translation—robbed because the familiar but distant has been reduced, for the reader's "comfort" to the identical or the known. (Garayta 33)

The role of a translator would be incomplete if his/her role as a reader went unmentioned. I can only reproduce the aesthetic (albeit subjective) experience that I underwent as a reader myself. In my reading of *Les Lettres Chinoises*, there were times that I felt out of my depths, as though I was grasping for something beyond the words themselves. As a reader of French and especially French literature, there were times in my reading of this particular text when even I experienced the "we're not in Kansas anymore" syndrome spoken of by Garayta. My aesthetic experience then, was one in which this distance—this foreignness—was present, usually subtly and almost subconsciously, but at times explicitly because of some language or even punctuation



used. In addition to the aesthetic experience of distance, Chen's novel, though mostly devoid of charged language, has a deep emotional thread woven by the use of the first person narrative voice and which pulls at the reader.

Garayta speaks further on the importance of contextualizing the source text within its originating culture, stating that doing so helps bring the text "to life as a multifaceted work and will make real the backdrop against which it came into existence" (Garayta 33). This contextualization is particularly difficult for Ying Chen's text because the originating culture is not easily identified. Is it French, Chinese, Montrealais or Québécois? Certainly Chen's choice of genre is influenced by her own French literary culture, her proclivity towards proverbs is influenced by her Chinese culture, and the themes of otherness and exile are a result of the clashing of two cultures: the Eastern and Western and the resulting hybridization.

Similarly, in the search for functional equivalence, while the translator may want to capture the foreignness of the work, part of the cultural contextualization must also account for culture B, or the culture of the new audience or at least the targeted audience, these two possibly differing. Eugene Nida campaigns for a translation that is contextualized by this second culture, and states that a translation of "dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context" (Nida 159). When comparing Nida's prioritization of culture B to Garayta's prioritization of culture A, we are reminded of the translator's paradox alluded to early, as well as a further understanding of the breadth of differences in approaches as discussed in translation theory.

One of the questions driving my translation became how then to achieve a naturalness of expression in a novel concerned with identity—so intricately tied to voice—in a way that would

account for the culture B without suppressing the culture A and thereby depriving the reader of the experience of the foreign so essential in a book which deals with the theme of exile. Nida's insistence that the translator doesn't need to understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context was one that worked in my favor, as both the Chinese language and culture are very foreign to me. The question I was then faced with was whether or not—and how—I might retain traces of the source culture in my translation if this was a culture I was not familiar with. In drafting up my specifications, I knew that the issue of voice (prioritization of culture B) and foreignness (prioritization of culture A) would likely conflict. In carrying out my research, I had hoped to find theory that would justify a clear alignment favoring one or the other. My research only made me more certain that I would have to attempt both. I would have to “find the dynamic equivalent” spoken of by Nida so that the reader could access the characters but also not rob the reader of the experience of “otherness.” How I justified and organized a translation that encompasses both approaches is essentially what this thesis addresses.

Garayta provided me with further insight in executing these goals in her discussion, which parallels Nida's. Garayta distinguishes between what she terms “foreignization” or “resistant translation” versus “domestication” or “communicative” translations to describe how the translator “chooses to bridge the distance between reader and text” (37). The former approach provides the sense of Otherness and corresponds to translators who “value the experience of the foreign and who may see translation as a way of enriching their native culture, literature, and even language, as a route toward cross-fertilization and a desirable hybridization” (Garayta 37). Choosing to not translate things such as street and food names or key concepts embedded in the culture are some of Garayta's examples of ways that these translators “privilege the source language and culture” (37). This approach may result in writing that doesn't sound

“native” because the translators “refuse to mask the fact that this is a translated, foreign text” (Garayta 36). The idea that I could selectively “translate less” was a liberating one; how I made those selections will be discussed in the following chapters.

Domestication is the second approach discussed by Garayta and is nearly synonymous with Nida’s “dynamic equivalence.” Domestication “makes for a more comfortable reading and thereby contributes to the sense of false familiarity mentioned earlier; but it puts the reader completely at the mercy of the translator’s mediation and ultimately deprives them of much of the experience of the foreign” (Garayta 37). Significantly Garayta also addresses the fact that this second approach is favored in Anglo-American publishing, where, as has been mentioned before, the “smooth” English and the translator’s invisibility are an asset (38).

Normally, translation specifications are set with both the client and the reader audience in mind and it is important to recognize that these audiences are not always the same. In the case of this translation, the client would be the potential publisher, who would ideally dictate this aspect of specifications through questions I would present them with. Since that client is not predefined for this translation, I am borrowing from Garayta’s generalizations and assuming that my intended publisher would have similar intentions. I am also using Carol Volk’s translated version of *Ingratitude*, Chen’s third novel and her first novel translated into English, as a guiding model in these decisions for the reason that her translation was taken up by a publisher. I will also keep in mind my equally hypothetical North American reader audience.

### 3. MIGRANT WRITING AND TRANSLATING OTHERNESS

*“Juxtaposition, confrontation, rencontre inhabituelle de signe culturels et d’éléments linguistiques...L’hybridité apparaît ainsi comme un trait caractéristique de la littérature migrante en général et des ‘écritures migrantes’ en particulier”* (Barreiro 69).

#### 3.1 A Survey of Migrant Writing Theory

Ying Chen has been categorized as an immigrant writer and yet has spoken out against this classification as her writing and style have evolved. However, her writing is still characterized by the theme of exile. In the discussion of translation of culture, migrant literary theory is where French, Chinese and emigrant culture meet. This chapter will explore how the classification of *Les Lettres Chinoises* as migrant or hybrid writing allows the translator to use critical theory of these genres to inform translation theory and visa versa.

Beginning in the 1980’s, Québec has been a cradle for migrant or hybrid literature (Barreiro 68). Author Émile Olliver, has called Montreal “un lieu de cristallisation de l’étranger” (qtd. in Barreiro 68). Seen as a crossroads of French, British and United States cultural heritage, Québec, whose motto “Je me souviens” recalls both a collective and individual past, evokes an encounter with the Other as much as it evokes an awareness of change and transformation. Falling in line with Post-Colonial theory in which the formerly colonized seek for a redefinition of identity free from and yet inescapably tied to that of their colonizers, Quebec, and most especially Montreal, also embody the crisis of identity aptly expressed by Sartre: “Je suis possédé par autrui. [...] Autrui detient un secret: le secret de ce que je suis” (431). The identities and texts of migrant writers contribute to the construction of Montreal’s metropolitan identity as much as they are defined by this identity and the plurality of cultures in which they find themselves (Barreiro 69).

Unsurprisingly, Ying Chen's novels have contributed to discussions of migrant writing theory and have even helped to flesh out the multiple facets of the genre as much as her writings have similarly contributed to redefining the Montreal identity. This contribution is inadvertent, however. Ying Chen, for example, doesn't emphasize this cultural identity crisis of the city that embodies many of her themes; she doesn't relate to it or create parallels with it. Her characters are concerned with identifying themselves within this culture but nowhere is it implied that this condition is possibly inherent to a specific metropolitan like Montreal. Chen favors, rather, the individual experience. This is also why she chose the epistolary form in which all narration is filtered through the first person voice and doesn't have to account for everything as an omniscient narrator might.

It is perhaps important to first address terminology. The definition of the migrant writing genre is problematic in nature and in Chen's case there are some theorists who say that she defies the genre in many ways and others who have drawn on her writings to define it. Similarly, critical literature attests to varying terms with equally inconclusive definitions. Though this literature might distinguish between terms such as hybrid, *métisse* or migrant writing, I draw freely from the characterizations of all of these genres by employing the umbrella term of migrant writing (or migrant literature) to refer to these genres, without concerning myself with the varying implications of the terminology. They are essentially synonymous terms that refer to the same reality. Furthermore, Christopher Bolander has surmised that "thanks to its epistolary format, *Les Lettres Chinoises* conforms to both of these definitions" (Bolander 215) and thus I apply the characterizations of hybrid and migrant genres without implicating myself in the thematic nuances between them.

Likewise, it is not the aim of this thesis to place Chen within the migrant writing genre, as it is not in the interest of my purposes as a translator to define or redefine the genre or to dispute the classifications that theorists have attributed to Chen's works. All the same, a brief exploration of the migrant writing genre is worth discussion because, regardless of where we place Chen within the genre and more specifically where we place *Les Lettres Chinoises* within the genre, the themes that theorists have identified in Chen's work can inform my translation. On the other hand, how or whether or not Chen's *Les Lettres Chinoises* belongs in the migrant tradition is a significant question because if that were to be the case, then other translators of migrant texts might benefit from the questions raised in this analysis just as my translation has benefited.

Maude Labelle cites the release of Régine Robin's book *La Québécoise* in 1983 as the dated moment that marks the origin of migrant writing as a genre (Labelle 39). Labelle describes the phenomenon of the emergence of this branch of literature as an awareness of the Other as both foreign and familiar and suggests that this awareness is particular to Québec (39). Definitions of migrant writings came retrospectively with this awareness, aligning themselves to texts that seemed to epitomize the experience of immigrant and writing. Emphasizing the emergence of this "awareness" is significant since, as Bolander attests, migrant writing has in fact been around for centuries even if the "awareness" or emergence of the genre itself is only recent (212).

I will begin by discussing various defining characteristics of migrant literature and then discuss how these might enlighten translation choices. In an article dealing with migrant writing, Irène Oore writes, "les critiques s'accordent pour dire que cette écriture évoque l'ici et l'ailleurs, l'identité et l'altérité, l'entre-deux et le métissage" ("Le Mobile et l'immobile" 74). In its strictest

sense, migrant writing is practiced by an immigrant author (Labelle 38). By the same token, Labelle opens up her definition to include “[des récits] dont les thématiques sont connexes à l'errance, à l'exil, au métissage ou à l'hétérogène. Le danger de cette définition, toutefois, réside dans la banalisation de l'écriture migrante: selon cette acception, tout texte serait migrant (38). Labelle's point is telling, especially in light of the question as to whether or not translating Chen's text could inform translations of other texts. If every text could be considered to be composed of the same themes as migrant literature, then the translation of migrant writing would, as a genre, be no different than translation of other texts or works of literature. However, respecting Labelle's call for caution, I will continue to explore how these thematic facets might weigh more heavily for the translator's decisions in the migrant texts than with any other text, as well as what sets Ying Chen apart within the genre.

In retracing sixty years of the history of migrant writing in Quebec, Clément Moisan et Renate Hildebrand have identified four periods or modes of integration of the Other by the Quebecois literary institution. According to Labelle, they have identified the fourth phase as being the “transcultural” phase, occurring from 1986 to 1997, in which there is “la double rencontre de l'autre et de soi [qui] se solderait par un échange plutôt que par une opposition” (40). As Labelle informs us, this “déconstruction de la symétrie a pourtant un prix: l'indétermination. *S'il* était clair, au début, que l'écriture migrante désignait la littérature pratiquée par un groupe d'écrivains venus d'ailleurs, on hésite maintenant à nommer l'expérience de l'immigration comme premier critère de la migration littéraire” (40).

*Les Lettres Chinoises* belongs to this latter period of migrant writing, if not only due to its chronological placement as to its general resistance to classification within the genre. If indeed the experience of immigration plays less a role in the criteria of migration literature, perhaps then

this same experience should cause me, the translator, to weigh its categorization as migrant writing as playing less a role than the themes themselves as suggested by Chen's writing.

There are a multitude of themes to be found in migrant literature theory as they apply to Ying Chen: use of proverbs, evocation of memory, *va-et-vient*, *l'entre-deux*, the transcultural, "morcellement" or rupture, enracinement (which I will define later in this section), rebirth, exile, and, of course, identity. While all of these themes offer perspective into her writing and into the genre, not all of them are pertinent to translation decisions. Those that reflect her characters and their voices as well as those that affect the aesthetic experience will be handled in the following sections of this chapter.

### **3.1.1 Usage of Proverbs and Aphorisms**

Proverbs and aphorisms make up part of the more unique aspects to migrant writing, distinguishing it from other literary genres. Here it is again helpful to clarify terminology. We read in *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, understanding that the word "maxim" is used as a synonym for "proverb," that "although the two words ['maxim' and 'aphorism'] certainly overlap, they are far from interchangeable...Aphorisms tend to be distinctly more subversive; indeed, it is often a maxim that they set out to subvert" (Gross vii-viii). Though every bit as much a generalization as an aphorism, a proverb then has taken root in the spoken language over time. Proverbs also tend to be terser, and lack an author.

The usage of proverbs as well as aphorisms evokes both a past culture and a past language: a dual "otherness." The relationship between the author of a migrant text, their characters and these proverbs, especially when this is done with the inclusion of the native language, indicate an approach toward that culture and language. Carmen Barreiro for example cites two authors, one who uses proverbs to positively illustrate cultural values and another who



comes to question those values in terms of doubting the proverb and thus the products of that culture (73-4).

Ying Chen's usage of proverbial sayings is fairly heavy handed in *Les Lettres Chinoises*. Not only does Chen have her characters explicitly cite proverbs, but they also reference their parents' words, and—most significantly—write in a style that is very aphoristic. Yvon LeBras designates Chen's style as being “aphoristic,” and as such, one “qui permet de passer du ‘je’ au ‘on’ et à généraliser son propos” (“Écrire autrement au Québec” 147). Chen often ends a letter or long passage with an aphorism: a short, sometimes abrupt summary, whereby she transmits a gem of wisdom or philosophy. These aphorisms are embryonic and have not become yet proverbs and been passed on to the next generation, but Chen's rhetoric is nevertheless authoritative, and these aphorisms often contain moral prescriptions, such as Sassa's words, “les plantes sans racines ne vivent pas” (*LC* 66). This aphoristic style exaggerates the use of the already problematic “on” in terms of translation. I often navigated the translation of “on” by replacing it with “you,” “we,” “everyone,” or “people,” depending on the context. However, when it came to aphoristic content, I sought to retain the foreignness of expression and add temporal distance by using “one,” such as in the tenth letter where Sassa cites the proverb “on ne voyage pas quand ses parents sont en vie” (*LC* 28), which I translated as “one doesn't travel far while one's parents are still alive.”

Chen's usage of actual proverbs is also unique because she has glossed them over, meaning that she puts them in French. This is unique because Simona Pruteanu suggests that “bon nombre d'œuvres migrantes jouent avec deux langues en insérant des proverbes et des aphorismes empruntés à la langue première de l'écrivain. Ces expressions figées sont coupées de leur contexte de provenance et sont insérées dans le texte en traduction littérale même quand

l'expression équivalente existe en français" (91). This, Pruteanu argues, is part of what contributes to the "aesthetic" of migrant writing. He continues, "L'écriture fragmentaire s'avère une écriture qui reste en partie tributaire de ce qu'elle prétend oublier ou laisser derrière" (91). While it may be the case that fragmented writing highlights as much as it effaces the culture it leaves behind, Chen does not use fragmentation to produce this affect. The fact that Sassa is the character that participates the most in the articulation of this culture serves to highlight the culture and most especially her proximity to it. Just as the allusion to the past culture (albeit in a different language) serves to enlarge that culture by contrast, so too does Sassa's individual voice get lost in the voices and philosophies of the Chinese culture. She writes, "En outre, il nous semble aussi que l'aphorisme, par son caractère sentencieux et généralisant, marque aussi le manque d'engagement affectif entre l'énonciateur du message et le destinataire" (Pruteanu 93). More than any other character, Sassa cites the words of others, and her aesthetic expression is especially aphoristic, as when she writes, "Il n'est pas plus facile de quitter son pays que d'y rester" (*LC* 36).

Despite the obvious cultural interpellation that aphorisms engender, especially when explicitly attributed to Confucius dubbed "Master Conman" (whose nickname given by Chen through Sassa is unfortunately a nearly untranslatable and heavily pejorative pun) or the characters' parents, these aphorisms do not strongly contribute to this textual rigidity or fragmentation referred to by Pruteanu; rather the fragmentation is felt, not because the words used in these aphorisms evoke the source language, but because they evoke the source culture. Pruteanu explains how an aphoristic aesthetic serves to produce a fragmentation beyond the textual level:

La poétique du fragment repérée dans ces aphorismes sert aussi de point de départ à une poétique du détachement qui met en scène des générations différentes d'une même famille. La transmission d'une culture pouvant être assumée ou reniée, ces proverbes et aphorismes deviennent de *véritables lieux de mémoire* qui marquent non seulement la distance géographique, mais encore la distance temporelle qui sépare parents et enfants, comme dans ce roman. (Pruteanu 93)

Of Chen's three letter writers, it is Sassa who is the "non-immigrant" character. Speaking from within the source culture, she perhaps more than any other character enacts both the participation and renunciation of transmitting this culture. Any distance, any fragmentation created by the simple insertion of proverbs increases the presence of the Other in the text. Though Chen has already translated the Chinese "Other" and its proverbs, having domesticated them for her audience by putting them in French, these "translations" are still characteristic of her poetic aesthetic, perhaps as much as they are of the Chinese aesthetic.

While it is true that proverbs provide a ideal opportunity for me to favor "foreignization," there is no "hétérolinguistique" (Pruteanu 91) presence that I could preserve and so in lieu of that option I will try to not textually polish Chen's already polished expression of proverbs and let the foreign ideologies evoked by Chen convey the foreign on their own. In the case of their translation, I will err on the side of foreignization.

While I have alluded to the absence of "hétérolinguistique" elements, a likely explanation for this absence is the unamenable nature of the Chinese written language to this aesthetic. Significant, then, is the name of her novel, as well as the artwork on the front cover, as indicative of that culture. She may have not been involved in the process of selecting this artwork, but it is interesting to note that the mark on the book's cover means "poetry." What can be a deceiving

tribute to her native language is possibly, and perhaps foremost, a tribute to her own aesthetic, which is poetic and literary as much as it is Chinese.

### **3.1.2 The Transcultural or “L’entre-deux”**

*“On est toujours à mi-chemin entre le vrai et le faux, avec notre plume comme avec notre corps”* (Chen, *Quatre Mille Marches* 59).

Despite the sparse simplicity of her language, Ying Chen creates a depth of expression in her propensity for this “mi-chemin” (or the “non-dit”), in which the tension of her novels dwells. This tension is exaggerated by the epistolary genre as well as the transcultural elements present because of the immigration her characters undergo. Says Labelle of these elements, “Le récit de Chen intègre la métaphore du déplacement, du jeu entre l'ici et l'ailleurs, entre le connu et l'inconnu” (41).

What emerges for the translator in the discussion of the constant va-et-vient that is carried out thematically as well as textually is, as described by Bolander, “a skillful demonstration of the author's and the characters' struggles to achieve this decentralization by overcoming very polarized socio-political and geographical elements: East/West, China/ America, Shanghai/Montréal. These differences appear painfully irreconcilable [...] In literal as well as figurative terms, there is no middle ground between Shanghai and Montréal“ (229).

Similarly, there is no middle ground for the translator between foreignization and domestication of the text. The text itself is a testament of that. Says Dubois, “Le roman présente ainsi un double regard, un mouvement bi-directionnel, qui va de la Chine vers le Québec et du Québec vers la Chine. Cette prise en considération de deux points de vue éloigne le texte de l'emprise du «texte national» de l'une ou l'autre nation et contribue à l'ouverture de la fiction en lui permettant un regard plus universel” (45).

According to this perspective, the text is neither national neither completely universal. I cannot completely favor foreignization in translation, and yet I cannot completely abandon it either, or else I would lose that tension so essential to this novel, which Pruteanu supports when she says, “[C]’est justement dans ce va-et-vient entre les langues, les cultures et les conceptions symboliques que l’écriture migrante prend sa force et son importance” (Pruteanu 91).

Significantly, this tension in the novel exists between the two source cultures of the novel: Chinese and Québécois as much as it exists between the individual within society (i.e. Sassa isn’t an immigrant but she is nevertheless an exile). In order to retain the tension between those two cultures, I have to find a way to represent each culture while also accounting for an English speaking North American Culture B.

### **3.1.3. “Morcellement” and “Rupture”**

Resulting from this “va-et-vient” between cultures, between the present and the past, and between the geographic “here and there” is a resulting “morcellement,” “fragmentation” or “rupture.” Migrant literature theory is replete with these terms. Much of this fragmentation comes from the previously mentioned usage of aphorisms and the inherent hybridity of Migrant texts, and so I will only deal briefly with the textual implications this might have for a translator.

The exchange of letters and different voices illustrates this theme perhaps better than the manner in which it is considered by migrant literature theorists. More than division of the texts between chapters, each letter’s beginning and ending bespeaks the underlying distance, or rupture, between characters that is inherent in the epistolary genre. Whatever ways this fragmentation is viewed by migrant literary theorists in Chen’s work, in the case of *Les Lettres Chinoises* it only serves to underscore what her choice of genre illustrates. Significantly, as Oore says, “L’échange des lettres mènerait inéluctablement, tragiquement vers le silence ultime de la

rupture et de la mort” (“*Les lettres chinoises* de Ying Chen-un roman épistolaire” 7). That the end of the letters corresponds to the probable death of Sassa is indicative of the importance of this theme. As far aesthetic goes, the taste of rupture is what lingers for the reader at the conclusion of *Les Lettres Chinoises*.

According to Ripoll, the choice of fragmentation “est lié à un rejet de tout ce qui touche à la clôture, à la maîtrise du récit ou à une fin prévisible, ou, autrement dit, “l’écriture fragmentaire, elle, propose une philosophie nomade” (qtd in Pruteanu 95). Though this ambivalence may be a natural aesthetic by-product of migrant writing, it most importantly part of Chen’s conscientious stylistic legacy.

Studying this theme prompted me to see if this fragmentation was present on a lexical or syntactic level as well. More significantly, I wanted to discover if one character’s letters contained generally shorter sentences, or if there were a more concentrated use of commas in another, or even if terms or words that bespoke rupture and exile, were used more in one set of letters than in another. This would have informed how I might distribute this fragmentation. Using text analysis software, I ran each character’s letters through; in this pre-analysis phase, however, I was unable to find any significant trends to encourage further in-depth analysis. While these findings don’t support the difference I had hoped to uncover in the text that would have enabled me to justify differentiation between how I translated each character’s letters, it does denote a stylistic integrity on the part of Ying Chen. Her style, then, is one whose aesthetic is parceled. Dubois comments, “*Les lettres chinoises* mettent en scène un récit ancré dans l’Ici et le Présent. En fait, il s’agit d’un présent morcelé, chacune des lettres possédant sa propre séquence temporelle et son Ici distinct (Montréal pour Yuan et Da Li et Shangaï pour le père de Yuan et Sassa)” (45).

This parsing is arguably manifest in Chen's other novels, however in *Les Lettres Chinoises* it manifests itself in the division of the narrative voice between three voices (as the Father has disappeared from the latest edition). Although the textual analysis itself didn't support my decision to draw on this intentional creation of three distinct "presents," I felt further justified in creating three distinct voices that would exaggerate this rupture and provide a way for the translation to enact the transcultural va-et-vient by assigning somewhat systematically an approach that favored foreignization to the translation of Sassa's letters and more domestication in the translation of Da Li and Yuan's letters.

### **3.1.4 "Enracinement": Images of "le chemin"**

Coined by Robin as cited by Barreiro, the term "enracinement" evokes the ambivalence of grounding one's identity through wandering (74). The image of "le chemin" is often used to represent these themes, which I have used as the bridging theme between that of "l'entre-deux" and exile, the next themes to be addressed in the discussion of migrant writing.

Carmen Barreiro writes, "Les personnages de la plupart des textes migrants québécois évoluent dans l'espace montréalais, qui est souvent la fin de leur parcours d'immigration, l'aboutissement de leur chemin" (74). This is not the case with Ying Chen's characters; not even with *Les Lettres Chinoises* and certainly not with her later works, in which temporal indicators disappear. The space of evolution is neither principally Shanghai nor Montreal, but on the pages of the letters themselves, the in-between, the va-et-vient; walking, not arrival or acculturation, is a theme in *Les Lettres Chinoises*. In fact, if one had to identify the action of the novel, it would be that of walking, waiting, and writing, though the latter is not narrated and the reader only sees the final product and in this way performs the same action of reading as Chen's characters, reading being the final action.

Rue St. Denis and Ni-San Street are the most concrete settings that Chen offers us. Sassa states, for example, that she longs for “une promenade éternelle” (*LC* 108). This is consistent with De Certeau who gives a “preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation” (97-98). The letters are the vehicle and the manifestation of change, with enunciation as the end goal. If this walking is representative of enunciation and the other action of the novel is that of writing, as is manifest by the creation of not just a text but of letters that bespeak their own writing process, the need to favor a translation that prioritizes voice, stylistically speaking, is imperative. In translating Chen’s *Les Lettres Chinoises*, this meant that sometimes a lack of naturalness of expression served to put that desired distance between the reader and the novel’s characters—to remind readers that they were witnesses to, not participants in, this enunciation.

Chen’s characters demonstrate spatially what is evident in her narrative and explained by De Certeau when he writes, “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place” (103). The city, this immense social experience of lacking a place, is an extension of Chen’s theme of exile—what Lorre calls “displacement of the self” and identifies as the theme of Chen’s first three novels—and inherent not to the immigrant but to the individual. For example, the theme of spatial displacement is explored by another native Quebecois author, Gabrielle Roy, whose novel *Bonheur d’occasion* is a far cry from migrant literature but may be said to reflect the post-colonial identity crisis—a different kind of exile. Quebecois Jacques Poulin’s character Pistésimine, who emarks on a journey across North America to reconcile her feelings of being “quelque chose entre les deux” and thus “rien du tout” (Poulin 224) is considered by Cox and Hung to be the mother of the figure of “l’altérité” and “la réalité contemporaine de la société



québécois” (50)—“une nouvelle voix narrative,” one that speaks of “la peine existentielle de l’Autre” (37-8). Speaking of the connection between identity and movement, Cox and Hung write, “La page et la route se rapprochent par le sentiment de liberté et d’infini qu’elle inspire au voyageur qui efface les frontières en quête de son moi” (38).

Perhaps more than migrant literature, Chen’s writing is exile literature, which is manifest in the production of analogous poetics and characters by contemporary Québécois authors who are in fact not immigrants (Cox and Hong 50). Chen’s classification as a migrant writer merits the exploration done by critical theorists and this exploration should include parallels with other genres and writers, because all of these novels take place in the city: “la littérature migrante est essentiellement une littérature urbaine” (Barreiro 74). This says something about the City as a breeding ground for this kind of writing, this metropolitan microcosm in which we are confronted with the Other or in which we come to recognize the Other as ourselves. In today’s modern, globalized world, however, the experience of the City with its multitude of differences is everywhere accessible. This, Chen might argue, makes exiles of us all.

### **3.1.5 Expression of Exile**

What renders *Les Lettres Chinoises* unique in terms of migrant literature is that of Chen’s three main characters, only two are immigrants, strictly speaking. Sassa, the non-immigrant “étrangère,” is in fact responsible for the majority of the novel’s text. Chen’s decision to give voice to an immigrant and a non-immigrant accentuate the distinction that exists or that she perceives between two differing but connected facets of exile. Christine Lorre elaborates on these two dimensions:

One is the exile the immigrant experiences, a part of the process of gradually severing the ties with the native country. The other is the universal sense of existential exile that takes on

many forms and drives the search for origin. While the former may be temporary, the latter is more deeply rooted and is tied to Chen's view of history as repetitive and devoid of finality and progress, which may be traced both in Chinese thought and Western modernism (Lorre 286).

This first aspect of exile, that of immigration, is one in which cultural shock is felt, predominantly by Yuan (Lebrun 21). Speaking of Yuan, Monique Lebrun explains that “au fur et à mesure de son acclimatation, le fossé culturel avec Sassa s'élargit et les liens avec le passé se font plus ténus” (21). Thus this exile, which is experienced by Yuan and Da Li, is one that evolves with the novel's progression. This aspect of exile can be expressed in translation by retaining to a certain extent, the traces of a French and Chinese aesthetic and the subsequent tension between them; for example by not translating certain terms from French and not domesticizing the aphorisms. The challenge in translating will be to have this evolving widening felt by the reader. I have decided to attempt to subtly increase the extent to which I favor a foreign French or Chinese aesthetic in the above situations as the novel's plot unfolds. In short, Yuan will seem to become more French (but significantly North American French) whereas Sassa's “esprit Chinois” will become more evident.

Lebrun concludes, saying that “Chen a voulu ainsi nous expliquer que, pour elle, le bilan de l'exil est positif, surtout en terme de création. Pour elle, l'exil est tant intérieur qu'extérieur” (21). Da Li, though an immigrant, personifies more closely this internal exile. This second, existential aspect of exile, which Lorre contends is “epitomized in the ironical title of her book [*Quatre mille marches*],” seems to be the predominant undercurrent that runs throughout Chen's works, and it is this facet of existential exile that reflects a Chinese aesthetic.

According to Bhikhu Parekh, no culture is a “tightly knit and tensionless whole informed and held together by a single overreaching principle or spirit [...] It is divided along class,

gender, regional and generational lines and is made up of several historically inherited and ill-coordinated strands of thought, each struggling to claim its ownership” (73). This perhaps accounts for a theme of exile that is not, in Chen’s case, inherent to the situation of the immigrant. Of the theme of exile in *Les Lettres Chinoises*, Chen explains, “C’est un livre sur l’exil intérieur et extérieur. J’avais besoin de le faire parce que j’étais très étrangère. Je crois que c’est en réalité mon premier roman, qu’il était dans ma tête avant *La mémoire de l’eau*” (qdt in Bordeleau 217). Chen herself articulates how an external exile↓that of immigration↓also serves as a vehicle of expression for an internal exile that preceded it. In an interview with Chronique.fr, she explains further how her writings are related to exile, “Je crois que je suis dans cette condition depuis ma naissance, depuis le moment où j’ai ressenti la peine de la rupture originelle, du détachement et de la solitude, où j’ai perçu une faille sur mon chemin avant même de commencer. Ce sentiment était à son comble lorsque j’ai quitté Shanghai. Je dois mes livres à cela” (“Rencontres littéraires franco-chinoises”).

If in her later novels concrete points of reference disappear, and if, as LeBras suggests, one might pass from one book to another considering them to make up one single text (“Interview With Ying Chen” 149), we must also consider that the presence of the foreign in the translation doesn’t need to be identified as particularly French or Chinese. We must consider that the author’s intent was to exaggerate the tension between the individual and something far more universal than any one country or people. Thus my lack of knowledge of the Chinese culture does not place me at a great disadvantage as far as this translation is concerned. Recreating a foreign aesthetic to some degree is essential in producing a good translation, but that foreign aesthetic need not necessarily be Chinese or French. Fidelity to Chen’s poetic style and the use

of a more formal register of speech is how I will recreate or retain this more universal foreign aesthetic.

Emile Talbot maintains that Chen's reduction of characters in the novel as well as "subsequent gradual elimination of the cultural contexts in which they function, has produced narratives that increasingly probe existential issues that are universal in their reach" ("Ying Chen's Evolving *Lettres chinoises: An Addendum*" 125). This shift towards a more universal reach needs to be taken into account in terms of the specifications and prior discussion: while foreignization is a priority, the translation should be conscious of remaining too overt or overly alienating the reader and undermining Chen's desire for universality.

Talbot's view is supported by Hong and Cox, who assert that while exile is certainly connected to the experience of immigration, it is more generally connected to the more universal "sentiment de décalage entre soi et la société. Le départ volontaire ou non, déclenche une période de déconstruction et de reconstruction identitaire que traverse l'individu avec sa valise portant le poids psychique et familial de sa vie" (45).

So perhaps migrant literature, as exile literature, is an extension of or even the epitome of identity literature. With Ying Chen this is certainly the case. By privileging the individual, the intimate voice, I can be faithful to this aesthetic, whose guiding principles are the same as those that I will use to reflect the theme of exile.

### **3.2 Exophonic translation**

In addition to the themes explored in conjunction with migrant writing, a discussion on exophonic translation offers more concrete guidelines as to how to incorporate these themes and preliminary translation decisions as well as how to apply and prioritize them.

In identifying that place between function equivalence and the writer's intention, Chantal Wright provides insight into what she calls the "exophonic" translation, which bespeaks the implications for the translator when a "writer adopts a new language," as is the case for Ying Chen. The reasons for choosing a new language as provided by Wright have found their echoes in the discussion of migrant literature and are given by her as follows: "[...] the writer's mother tongue no longer speaks to his or her new reality; [...] the writer has experienced some kind of biographical rupture and feels that this rupture demands literary expression, frequently in a new language" (23). I would posit that both of these reasons resonate with all of Chen's works. This rupture and exile, as we have seen, is a repeating and overlapping motif.

Wright challenges the assumption that "one [can] write in a language which [is] not one's own" (23). Writing in a language other than one's mother tongue, she explains "means that one has already made it one's own and, if it proves unsuitable for one's purposes, that one hammers it and bends it and shapes it until it goes where one wants it to go and does what one needs it to do" (Wright 23). And thus Wright would argue that Ying Chen has made French her own, a sentiment echoed by Chen herself, "L'écriture dans une langue seconde est un travail de Sisyphe mais l'est également la création en général" (LeBras, "Interview with Ying Chen" 151).

While it has been alluded to that an exophonic text such as *Les Lettres Chinoises* poses difficulties because it has already undergone a kind of translation on the part of an author from a native language to a secondary, perhaps a more accurate contextualization of this difficulty would be that the translator has to correctly identify when the author is creating within his/her new language, and then if and how to translate this newly created language. In an interview with Dinah Stillman, Chen speaks of her preference of writing first in French and then "translating" her own writing into Chinese (and all the implied difficulties) rather than the other way around.

Speaking of this process of translation, she admits to sometimes having to change the initial expression in order to approach proximity in meaning (Stillman 36). Thus even Chen has spoken of the need to sometimes make changes to expressions for the sake of meaning.

Understanding that Chen's novel was not written through a process of translation but through the creation of a French that is particularly and conscientiously her own serves as a guidepost in setting my priorities as to foreignization versus domestication; I am not translating French to English as much as I am translating Ying Chen, first and foremost. In addition to drawing on the same stylistic sensitivity when reading any literary text, Wright highlights that exophony is a "phenomenon which meets [...] with a number of preconceptions or assumptions that affect how texts by non-native speakers are perceived regardless of what these texts actually do," and suggests that a translator of the exophonic text should approach the text "with an awareness of which assumptions one should avoid and which expectations might prove fruitful" (25). Her observations are as follows:

1. The creativity of the exophonic writer should not be attributed solely to a process of literal translation from the mother tongue.

2. Seeming ungrammaticalities in exophonic texts should not immediately be attributed to the writer's imperfect command of his or her adopted language.

3. The translator should not be tempted to bridge the "metonymic gap" in the exophonic text. In other words, to let the use of certain words to allow for an "enactment of difference."

4. The translator should be aware that the exophonic writer may push his or her adopted language beyond its communicative function. (Wright 25)

Wright does not side with the Anglo-Saxon publisher's approach of domestication of foreign text, which I am not completely at liberty to do if such a publisher is my proposed

“client.” Nor am I sure that I want to; Ying Chen has resisted labels associating her writing as “migrant,” arguably nearly synonymous with exophonic. In other words, in keeping with the author’s intent, foreignization may not be the prerogative of my translation except when it serves to emphasize the metamorphosis of its characters and the universal condition of exile. I will have many small decisions throughout the translation and in making them I may not always heed Wright’s suggestions, nor all of the other authors’ suggestions mentioned up to the present; however, armed with these final observations to take into consideration, I can be assured that the choices I make are intentional and conscientious, heeding, if nothing else, Wright’s call for awareness. Finally, Chen has said, “l’écrivain est en exil dans la langue [...] Même s’il écrit dans sa langue maternelle, il se trouve assez loin d’elle lorsqu’il s’approche de la langue de la littérature” (*Quatre mille marches* 93). In the discussion of favoring domestication, it’s important to note how Chen herself alludes to the inherent foreignness in the language of literature. This language of literature will need to be addressed as it pertains to translation and serves as the thread for discussion in the following chapter.

#### 4. THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL: TRANSLATING THE LITERARY VOICE

The epistolary nature of *the Les Lettres Chinoises* presents other challenges for the translator. Epistolary novels have the unique function of putting the reader in the same position as the characters themselves (who are also readers), and often serve as a vehicle of self-exploration as well as cultural exploration or comparison of two societies (Lorre 272). In the tradition of Montesquieu's *Les Lettres Persanes*, *Les Lettres Chinoises* allows for an encounter with the Other that is also an encounter with the self, or with the culture of origin. I will be exploring how the choice of this genre best serves Ying Chen's purposes.

The only of Chen's novels belonging to the epistolary genre, the language of *Les Lettres Chinoises* is very literary, despite the "voices" of Chen's characters who live in a modern world that doesn't correspond to this literary formality. At the same time, there is ultimately an intimacy to be found in this language. The entire text is then made up of a dialogue that has been rendered literary; there is no actual narration, so to speak. Thus the presence of these three "narrative" voices is all the more felt and the stakes all the higher in creating an authenticity of voice while remaining faithful to the text. I will be searching to strike a balance between the representation of characters who translate their voices and their thoughts into their writing (letters) in a way that still allows for a reader to be invested in these characters in both an authentic and literary way in keeping with a domesticated publishing standard.

How to render a text modern and appealing to a contemporary North American audience is usually not a question in translation when the text itself was produced in this same modern age. Translators working on older, classical texts must address this issue of modernizing a text, which is a delicate matter, as with time even a contemporary translation eventually becomes or will become dated, at which point the once-contemporaneity creates incongruities between the



source text and future contemporary readers. It is for this reason that translators often choose to retain the language and register of the era in which the text was produced (Pym, “The Translator as Author: Two Quixotes” 74).

And yet Chen’s *Les Lettres Chinoises* present a synonymous dilemma for the translator due to Chen’s choice of genre being one that is associated with the past and that still carries the vestiges of an older tradition. “Le roman épistolaire,” Henri Coulet affirms, “a disparu avant le milieu du XIXième siècle, les essais tentés ensuite, et jusqu’à nos jours, ne sont guère que des curiosités littéraires (17). And yet, Kaló Krisztina, in her study of epistolary novels since the nineteenth century, asserts that those texts that have been produced since the twentieth century attest to more than just a “simple continuation imitative de la tradition épistolaire, mais qu’une partie de ces textes contemporains montrait des spécificité et des originalité au sein du genre” (7). Neither the letter nor the genre, then, is “dead”; these “curiosités littéraires” ensure that the genre lives on through taking on a new aesthetic (such as personal blogs which enact a generalized letter writing aesthetic, for example). A translation of such literary work must similarly take into account tradition and originality within that tradition.

It is perhaps possible to better understand the unique development of the epistolary novel and its own originality in Chen’s case by tracing its development in the Chinese tradition through the integration of European literary movements into the modern Chinese novel. The years from 1915 to 1921 are commonly referred to as the May Fourth period, an intellectual and literary revolution intended to bring about enlightenment through culture. In *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900-1949* we read of this revolution:

In a little more than a decade China hurriedly absorbed literary trends and theories which in Europe took more than a century to evolve: romanticism, realism, naturalism, symbolism,

expressionism, Dadaism and surrealism. [...]The Romantic individualism and subjectivism, its cult of nature and distinct poetic style were quickly accepted because they corresponded to the non-conformist anti-Confucian values represented in Chinese culture by Taoism and Buddhism (Malmqvist 24).

This generation of writers, the “romantic generation, “viewed life not as a prescribed schema, but rather as a process of individual and subjective experiences” (Malmqvist 24). Chen expresses this perspective through the character of Da Li, who writes, “La vie a peut-être un but, mais il n’y a pas d’itinéraire” (*LC* 64). Early modern Chinese short stories took the form of diaries or letters narrated in the first person and manifested an “elaboration of interior monologue,” this characteristic revealing a significant demarcation from Chinese tradition (Malmqvist 25-26).

The May Fourth period represents a departure from the traditional Chinese short story toward a “versatile, effective, short prosaic genre” that would draw on Western models. The adoption of a new model resulted in a rejection of Classical Chinese language. We read also that “May Fourth writers, [...]searching] for new verbal resources to fill the gaps in the traditional vernacular [and] to express modern concepts which were available neither in the traditional vernacular, nor in the classical languages,” turned to foreign languages, “mostly French, German and Japanese” (Malmqvist 25).

Significantly, Chinese social fiction of the 1930’s was generally tragic in nature, its protagonists’ and characters’ psychologies often at odds with “outside forces” (Malmqvist 29). The modern novel played a social and often political role, reflecting a theme of agony of “contemporary” China in the 1930’s, a “China of the backward, stagnating countryside and of a city caught in the tragedy of the world economic crisis” (Malmqvist 29). While I do not account

for the rest of Chen's novels, *Les Lettres Chinoises* expresses this tragedy: Sassa writes to Yuan to remind him of a tale from their Chinese folklore—and it is significant that this tale is Chinese—of a woman turning to stone while waiting for her lover. The exchange of letters in *Les Lettres Chinoises* comes to an end with Sassa's assumed death, one brought about literally by heartache, by the tragedy of loving in an "old-fashioned way." Similarly, Yuan's and especially Da Li's letters speak of the tragic loss of identity inherent in the migrant condition. At the pinnacle of her affair with the Chinese man the reader can only suppose to be Yuan, Da Li writes to Sassa:

Je me préférerais très occidentale, forte, insensible, pratique, voyant dans l'activité sexuelle non pas un rituel mais une tendresse facile qui implique le divertissement, le cadeau, le «voyage », la consommation, l'exercice physique et le rapide oubli. Mais je n'y arrive pas, du moins pas encore. Et je croyais bêtement que les autres ne pouvaient pas sincèrement être ce que je n'étais pas." (LC 115)

Once again, what is assumed to be a reflection of migrant literature tradition is also and possibly firstly a reflection of Chinese literary tradition, one that is heavily influenced by French literary tradition.

The social novel of the 1930's expressed a "compromise between modernity and tradition" and "became the most comprehended and most beloved works of all modern Chinese literature among the broad Chinese readership" (Malmqvist 29). This compromise between modernity and tradition is precisely what makes a translation of Chen's works challenging and worth discussing. In essence, finding a suitable compromise, knowing where that compromise is, is what I seek to do in my translation.

While the movements here certainly precede Chen's own artistic contributions, it is relevant for this analysis that the modern Chinese novel, while seeming old-fashioned to a Westerner, be considered in this revolutionary context. In an interview with Francine Bourdeleau, Chen reveals that Chinese authors even in the 1980's "parlaient beaucoup du mal de vivre, du sens de la vie, de l'absurdité" (9). These themes are reflective of eighteenth and especially nineteenth century romantic sentiments and early twentieth century existential sentiments. The Cultural Revolution brought about access to these texts and themes with a vengeance, and shaped and parcelled Chen's reality: she discovered the Other through these cultural upheavals while simultaneously living within attempts of reconciliation with tradition, all of which colored her writing. We might thus consider that Chen was not meaning to evoke a far-distant literary tradition in her use of the epistolary genre, since these themes were contemporary in China. Her usage of a strong first person narrative was not so uncharacteristic according to the Chinese integration of the previous centuries' literary trends. Nor is her abandonment of her native Chinese to be necessarily interpreted as a rejection of her past culture; this abandonment was merely a way to work around the constraints of traditional vernacular even in the works produced in her own country by authors who were not immigrants. And so while this genre may naturally evoke a deep literary past, for Chen this was a more modern genre and so in my translation I will try to bear that modernity in mind as well as the fact that it speaks to a Chinese culture as well as to a French culture.

All the same, Chen admits that while writing *Les Lettres Chinoises* she read most especially from nineteenth century novels, notably Victor Hugo (Huot 72). Marie Claire Huot identifies Chen's French at the beginning of her writing career as being "français classique" which progressively became "apatride, un français merveilleux et étrange qui fait fi des courants

et des modes” (Huot 72). In either case, Chen’s French cannot be classified as typical, an idea that falls in line with Wright’s assertion that each writer makes the language his or her own.

Huot also tells us that even when comparing Chen’s more recent novels with her first, the use of the passé simple and passé antérieur tenses—“aujourd’hui jugés désuets”—are predominant across her novels, regardless of when in her career Chen is writing. Chen’s target francophone audience would then be subject to the associations inherent in her choice of tense. In the case of *Les Lettres Chinoises*, the absence of a third person narrator eliminates the usage of these tenses from this particular work but it is worth taking these associations into account when considering Chen’s aesthetic. Most notable however, is the description offered by Huot, a native French speaker, of Chen’s French as being “étrange.” If I am to reproduce Chen’s aesthetic, how might I also reproduce this “strangeness,” which is so thematically and syntactically engrained in the text? I will address this question in the following section.

John L. Brown addresses the epistolary art more than he addresses the genre but shares the insight that merely writing letters was an anachronism in the early part of the twentieth century (216). Letters may have seen their literary—and what today would be a pop cultural—heyday, but their popular status is now nearly forgotten. Similarly, the letter is no longer seen today as a practical form of communication. That Chen’s characters write each other letters in a day when telephone calls would be much more practical bespeaks a conscientious decision on Chen’s part in favor of the anachronism of not simply the genre but of the kind of communication inherent in letter writing. We might even surmise that this choice also allows Chen to reproduce this “mal de vivre” caused by the dichotomy of modernity and tradition that the Chinese were still living in the post-Mao period (Bordeleau 216). Brown elaborates on the nature of this communication:

Absence, separation, have very often in the past been a powerful motive for the writing of letters. Today, however, the ache of absence due to distance can be easily overcome by dialing long-distance or by hopping on a plane and rejoining the loved one in a few hours, even though she be on the other side of the world. Perhaps we no longer feel so deeply the pain of physical absence in this modern world of ours. (218)

The choice of the epistolary genre works to convey this pain and Sassa's illness and death confirms the importance of this ache that Chen wanted to portray:

La lettre reconnaît les distances, les écarts, les intervalles et tout en les reconnaissant, elle se donne pour tâche de les effacer [...] La distance géographique entre Montréal et Shanghai, le décalage horaire, l'intervalle temporel entre le moment de l'écriture et le moment de la lecture d'une lettre, tous ces divers intervalles s'ajoutent pour constituer une immense séparation entre Yuan et Sassa (et entre Sassa et Da Li), entre le « je » qui écrit et le « tu » auquel il/elle s'adresse et qui lira la lettre que le « je » écrit. (Oore, "*Les lettres chinoises* de Ying Chen: un roman épistolaire" 3)

Favoring foreignization in my translation while serving to reflect the rupture and exile spoken of in the discussion of migrant theory enhances the distance between the reader and that those narrative voices (in this case Chen's characters), but would not necessarily reflect the distance between the characters themselves. Oore presents the juxtaposing functions that a letter can serve when he writes, "les lettres que Sassa et Yuan échangent [...] illuminent tantôt la réalité de l'absence, tantôt l'illusion de la présence de l'autre, les deux versants de la séparation, qui est l'événement central du roman épistolaire *Les Lettres chinoises*" ("*Les lettres chinoises* de Ying Chen: un roman épistolaire" 4). If separation is the central "event" of the epistolary novel then translating these voices with increasingly pronounced distinctness as has been tentatively

proposed in the previous sections will speak to that event and reflect the distance between characters. Labelle reiterates that “puisque chacun des personnages est narrateur de sa propre expérience, nous assistons à la construction d'espaces et de récits personnels différents, souvent opposés” (44). If each narrator’s experience is different, so too should be their voices in the translation.

Through these various experiences of exile, the temporal distance between the characters remains unchanged while the emotional and cultural distances grow. This translation choice of demonstrating difference will allow me to highlight Chen’s premise that being an exile is not a migrant-dependent condition. It is not even a temporal one: “On est en droit de se demander si Sassa et Yuan n’étaient pas condamnées d’avance, car Yuan tenait à quitter la Chine alors que Sassa voulait rester à Shanghai. Toutes ces questions restent ouvertes à la fin du roman. Dans une tradition caractéristique au genre épistolaire *Les Lettres chinoises* choisissent l’ouverture et l’ambiguïté à la clôture” (Oore, “*Les lettres chinoises* de Ying Chen: un roman épistolaire” 5). This fatalism recalls the tragic nature of Chinese novels as discussed in the beginning of this section and the impossibility of reconciliation of two worlds that only materializes the further we read. Thus at the beginning of my translation there will be subtle differences in Yuan, Sassa and Da Li’s speech, but this difference will be more marked by the end of the novel. I will not favor one voice or the other (which would almost reflect a favoring of one culture over another, of one hero over another), when Chen herself makes no such choice: the impossibility for reconciliation, this tragedy of “l’entre-deux [qui] est alors perçu comme une manière d’habiter la distance et la différence” is what Chen wants us to see and feel” (Labelle 44).

Coulet affirms that one of the prerogatives of the epistolary genre is to invite the reader to identify with the writers of letters, “[à] participer à leurs émotions” (7). This prerogative is again

one of the challenges of translating this novel, because I must reproduce an authenticity of identity and emotion, while also conveying the “strangeness” inherent in Chen’s writing. Fiction doesn’t tell a story, it tells images, feelings and, “dans une lettre, on écrit comme l'on pense ou comme l'on parle, on rend compte soi-même de sa situation actuelle, ce qui fait plus sentir les passions que tous les récits qu'on en pourrait faire” (Coulet 7). An authentic, passionate voice requires that this aesthetic be transmitted in the target language, meaning that certain stylistic and of course syntactical changes must be made.

The letter privileges the voice of the characters, privileges their very presence. Says Coulet of how the letter privileges this voice, “la lettre est [...] une formalité, un exercice de style, mais par là-même elle est plus essentielle que ce discours, puisqu'elle montre que ce que le héros dit de lui-même est encore plus beau que ce qu'en dit le narrateur: le héros est au-dessus de l'image déjà admirable que le récit nous donne de lui” (6). Brown also speaks of the popularity of published correspondences (especially of writers and artists), explaining that this popularity indicates a “public less attracted to fiction than to biography and personal “revelations” (216). The prominence of the authentic personal voice is not only prevalent in Chen’s choice of genre but is also prevalent in reader’s preferences. If this is the case, incorporating this prioritization is especially important in regards to my specifications: the heroes Sassa, Yuan and Da Li exist to the reader only through their voices and thus in order to privilege those voices for the reader I have to make that voice accessible, or more domesticated. However, if what they have to say about themselves is said in a language that seems wrought with rupture and with foreignness, perhaps what this tells the reader is that they are also strangers to themselves. In their tendency to put their observations into proverbs, they seek anonymity. Returning briefly to the discussion of proverbs, LeBras speaks of proverbs as being part of an oral tradition (148). Perhaps Chen’s



choice of the epistolary genre is one that privileges voice and is thus also reflective of this Chinese oral tradition.

In the discussion of voice, it is important to not ignore the literary aspect of letters as being different from the kind of voice one would find reported on in a narrated novel, such as dialogue, for example. Different from that kind of discourse, but also from stream of conscious narration, the voice of a character as read in a letter is still literary. Biographer Richard Ellman, as cited in Brown tells us, “the modern biographer is aware that the letter is itself a literary form, through which writer and recipient play a game of concealment and revelation. What we have to read in correspondence is what is not written there” (216). Even authentic letters play at this, which is to say that even real letters are still literary and that dilute the literariness of Chen’s writing by making it more colloquial is to undermine her choice of genre. Speaking of the writer in exile, Chen writes, “Sa dérouté dans la vie, entre la réalité et la fiction, il la poursuit ici dans l’écriture, entre la langue usuelle et la langue de la littérature. Pour se faire comprendre par ceux qui [...] n’entendent ni ne voient la langue de la littérature, il faut que l’écrivain trouve un équilibre, un juste milieu, méthode chantée par mes ancêtres chinois” (*Quatre mille marches* 92). The “juste milieu” is essentially what I seek in my translation. If I can properly find the place between domestication and foreignization, I believe that my translation can capture Chen’s “otherness” found in exile and also imply that same Chinese aesthetic.

The temptation in the translation of this novel, so dependent on voice, is to domesticate Chen’s writing by shedding off cultural markers. And yet one of the cultures Chen subscribes to, intentionally and not just by arbitrarily (as one might argue of her Chinese or migrant culture), is the literary culture of epistolary novels. The epistolary genre creates literature within the already literary letter: it is a culture where literature and thus style, is king.



## 5. CRITICAL LOOK AT STYLE AND CHARACTERS IN *LES LETTRES CHINOISES*

### 5.1. Ying Chen's Language of Literature

Ying Chen has contributed to discussions in migrant writing almost despite herself, principally because critics view immigrant authors as “a homogenous family, displaying the same themes and historical background,” especially when they share the same country of origin (Silvester 367). As Rosiland Silvester specifies, the weight given to questions of identity or the meeting of two cultures, when and if addressed, varies from author to author. This weight, and perhaps more significantly diverse narrative techniques (tone, structure, imagery and rhythm) distinguish individual writing styles (Silvester 367). Says Ying Chen on her purpose in writing:

Je n'ai aucun message à livrer, aucune particularité chinoise à étaler. Je ne m'adresse pas au monde extérieur, mais m'achemine vers l'intérieur. Je veux simplement me rapprocher du moi, [...] descendre encore et encore dans la profondeur du moi, dans la profondeur de la terre où les frontières ne sont pas tracées, où la langue même n'est plus importante puisqu'on s'approche de l'essence de la langue. (*Quatre mille marches* 67)

In the previous discussion on migrant writing, I addressed the various ways culture might be translated and the respective pros and cons of foreignization; however, as previously alluded to, Chen is not seeking through her writing to be an ambassador of the Chinese culture, she wants to eradicate superficial boundaries and signs of difference. In fact, in speaking of *Les Lettres Chinoises*, she says that were she to redo the book today she would “write more of [cultural] similarities than differences,” thereby undermining the presence of an Other that is culturally embedded (Bolander 229). Since she has spoken so much against her role as a cultural ambassador, I will privilege style to foreignization, and let whatever inherent foreignness of style speak for itself.

In her novel *Ingratitude*, Chen describes a figurative sea, “une mer à jamais étrangère et pourtant familière” (23). Her penchant for dichotomies as well as the previous discussions of other ways in which the text finds itself “mi-chemin” shape my translation and this description serves as a guiding principle in that process. Taking into account Wright’s advice for translators, I will now examine in this section the ways in which Chen has pushed French beyond its communicative function and made it her own. Much of the foreignness in the text, that voice “à jamais étrangère” beyond migrant writing, is inherent to Chen’s style. As Lorre reiterates, “Chen’s novel makes the point of the reciprocity of perspective about otherness: there is no absolute ‘other’; wherever you are, there is always an ‘other’” (Lorre 273). Such a perspective on otherness is evident in her style. One is never “at home” with her writing; she likes ambiguity, and yet her directness of style—honest and sometimes raw—appeals to something more universal, and simultaneously more “familière.”

Concerning her choice of French for her literary voice, Chen is reported as having said, “No matter what the language, one writes the same thing. The importance is not writing in a particular language, but writing” (Stillman 35). This statement reiterates that the principle “language” of Chen’s writing is the language of literature. In Chen’s case, this literary language tends to be more classical than perhaps contemporary. Labelle elaborates on how Chen’s writing, so influenced by literature, differs from other migrant authors: “La langue dans *Les lettres chinoises* est pourtant assez classique si on la compare à celle de *La Québécoise*, roman emblématique de l’écriture migrante” (49).

In a description of her writing that speaks to her style and to the evolution of that style, still nascent in *Les Lettres Chinoises*, Chen shares:

Après environ dix ans de pratique d'écriture, je souhaite retrouver l'état primitif dans lequel j'ai découvert la littérature. Je n'ai aimé la littérature que dans le calme et la solitude. Et du coup, je crois que j'ai trouvé un style qui me convient. Un style peu descriptif, dépouillé à l'extrême, avec une intensité intérieure. J'espère que cela se rapproche de la poésie et du théâtre. [...] Je me préoccupe du rythme, de la musicalité du texte. Je voudrais que chaque phrase, sinon chaque mot, ait un sens double ou ambigu, tout en étant clair et direct. Car c'est ainsi que je perçois la réalité. (qtd in LeBras 150)

Simple (says Chen) and yet poetic; even if her stories are ambiguous, these adjectives seem to represent the most general classifications of Chen's style. I will here explore descriptions and examples of these different styles and what this means for my translation.

Labelle indicates the conscientious role of language in *Les Lettres Chinoises*. "Il y a," she tells us, "beaucoup de passages où la langue est elle-même objet de réflexion. La langue maternelle (le mandarin), la langue apprise à l'école (le français) et le dialecte à usage restreint (le shanghaien) sont autant de sujets abordés dans les lettres qui permettent aux personnages de s'identifier" (48). If Chen uses the language to comment on identity, I propose that she might use style in the same way, or that I might manipulate her different stylistic techniques to exaggerate the different identities or voices of her narrators.

Labelle continues, "Dans *Les lettres chinoises*, ce sont surtout les phrases courtes et les silences qui rendent compte, dans le langage, de la coupure. En effet, les phrases de moins de dix mots composent l'essentiel du roman" (49). These short sentences contribute greatly to the poetic simplicity of Chen's writing and dominate the text. They are also, perhaps, one of several indicators that, if translated literally, would indicate that we are reading a foreign text.

Nigel Armstrong, in his book *Translation, Linguistics, Culture: A French-English Handbook* points to a “greater tendency in French to isolate clauses between full stops” (204). Elaborating, he says that this tendency poses “problems of acceptability in English [because a] dependent clause presented as a sentence has *broadly* a rather pretentious, literary feel in English, while being more widespread in journalistic French and other types of everyday text types” (115). Where the French don’t hesitate to separate ideas into two separate sentences, the tendency in English is that of employing full sentences (Armstrong 116). Consider the following excerpt, from the tenth letter in *Les Lettres Chinoises*, written by Sassa:

Quand quitteras-tu cette vieille dame, Da Li? Que deviendra-t-elle alors? Elle trouvera sans doute une remplaçante. Mais n'est-ce pas pénible pour elle de vivre ainsi dans la va-et-vient des étrangères, de leur étaler sa vie privée et de perdre un peu de dignité? Cela n'est peut-être plus important pour elle. Quand on vieillit, on en est réduit à une vie élémentaire. Pas d'exigence. Pas de fierté. Rien que trois repas. C'est important, les trois repas. On n'a pas peur de trop manger. On mourra malgré tout. On n'arrivera plus à sortir de son nid. On risque d'y mourir. Alors on ouvre grand sa porte. On expose presque toutes les laideurs d'un mourant. On attend le secours. On meurt toujours dans l'attente d'un secours. (LC 28)

This passage illustrates the lucid style so characteristic of Chen as well as the short phrases spoken of by Labelle. Similarly, the usage of the pronoun “on,” builds a universality that culminates in a morbid aphoristic phrase. Most significantly, however, is the cumulative literary tone created by these isolated phrases. Spoken English would link these phrases with conjunctions or commas. Similarly, narrative commentary is sparse. My translation is as follows:

When will you leave that old woman, Da Li? What will become of her then? She'll undoubtedly find a replacement. Isn't it irksome for her to live like that though, with the comings and goings of strangers, laying out for them her private life and losing a bit of dignity with each person, each time? Perhaps that's not important to her. When we age, we're reduced to living rudimentarily. No expectations. No pride. Nothing but three meals. Those three meals are important, too. You aren't afraid of overeating; you're just going to die anyhow. You get to the point where you can't even leave the nest you've built for yourself. And then you may end up dying there. So you throw open your door. You reveal all the ugliness of the dying. You wait to be rescued. We always die while waiting to be rescued.

I have retained, to a certain extent, Chen's isolated sentences in favor of the literary "pretentious" voice Armstrong warns against, as this is literature and not journalism. I have, however, added some conjunctions and commas. Most significantly, I translated the universal "on" in two separate ways, adding more weight in the usage of "we" in the last sentence as well as contributing to the proverbial tone that this "we" provides. Part of the choices made in this particular passage are reflective of its narrator, Sassa, and the approach I have taken to translating her voice, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Isolated phrases serve another purpose in Chen's novel. Labelle explains that "toute une histoire, celle de la liaison amoureuse entre Yuan et Da Li, se raconte en silence. L'expérience des personnages est présentée de façon morcelée et souvent mystérieuse, comme si les mots manquaient [...] Le silence est donc un élément formel important puisqu'il rend compte d'une incapacité à se dire par le langage (49).

Thus as well as manipulating the literariness of the text, I can choose to employ isolated sentences to emphasize the silence—the “non-dit”—which accumulates throughout the novel’s progression.

Chen’s poetics reveal an emphasis of rhythm and musicality in her writing. It is important to note here that rhythm and musicality differ, arguably, between French and English.

Punctuation of course has its role to play in contributing to this rhythm and so I will be taking liberties when necessary to change the punctuation for the purpose of preserving the musicality of the text. In situations where several synonyms are available to me, I will consider words that will enhance this musicality, whether that be through alliteration or syllabification.

The following passage, taken from the fifteen letter and written by Yuan, illustrates the extent to which Chen’s writing is very literary and poetic. While less colloquial and more literary passages can be found in each character’s letters, Yuan’s letters tend to be more poetic when viewed holistically. Sassa, writing him, even alludes to this: “Toi qui écris bien fais en plus des poèmes" (LC 151). The translation below will reveal that even though this is a personal letter, I have decided to retain the poetic voice, pulling from a lexicon that is more literary (thus, scorn, laden).

Chen	Ainsi, ces oiseaux n’ont pas peur d’être invisible ou visible. Même s’ils sont nés dans des ruines ou ont grandi dans les poubelles, ils n’en ont pas honte. Ils ne méprisent jamais leur sort. Ils n’ont pas le temps de mépriser quoi que ce soit, parce que leur vie est courte. Ils se contentent de plonger dans des lumières déroutantes, ont le courage de s’exposer au soleil. Ils s’envolent vers un avenir inconnu, les ailes chargées des poussières du temps et la tête pleine de chansons éternelles. (LC 38-9)
Hendry	Thus, these birds aren’t afraid of being invisible or visible. Even if they are born in ruins or raised in heaps of trash, they aren’t ashamed. They don’t scorn their fate. They don’t have time to scorn anything because their lives are short. They are content to dive into bewildering lights, have the courage to expose themselves to the sun. They take flight toward an unknown future, wings laden with the dust of time and heads full of eternal songs.



My lack of knowledge of the Chinese language and idioms rendered the translation of certain metaphors or images more difficult when compared to the rest of the text. Because “languages differ in the way they perceive and partition reality,” they reveal the differences between the reality of one culture and another (Hatim, Mason 104). In another of Sassa’s letters to Yuan, she writes, “Je vais souvent me promener sur la rue Nanjing. J’aime ces vagues de têtes qui, avec un mélange de chaleur et de froideur, s’élancent vers moi. J’aime cette sensation d’être noyée parmi les têtes qui me ressemblent un peu” (LC 36-7). Although as a French speaker the language as well as the scene Chen describes is clear to me, this description summons, in my case, an image of a wave of disembodied heads moving towards someone and strikes me as being quite strange—almost shocking—even from a poetic stance. I found it difficult to imagine a Francophone using that those words to describe this imagery and even more difficult to imagine an Anglophone employing them. I suspect that this is an example of language partitioning reality in different ways and that this particular language bears traces of a different Chinese reality or associations.

The translation I propose still retains the uniqueness of the image in painting the scene, without evoking any superfluous shock by replacing the literal “heads” with “faces”: “I often go walking along Nanjing street. I enjoy watching the waves of faces that, with a mixture of warmth and coldness, lunge toward me. I like that feeling of being drowned amidst faces that vaguely resemble my own.”

Chen portrays in this passage, as well as in the previously translated passage about invisibility and visibility, the theme of disindividualization, which she addresses later in *Quatre Mille Marches*: “À notre époque d’une extrême désindividualisation qu’on voudrait corriger en recourant, à tort et à travers, au patriotisme, si la littérature doit avoir un sens, c’est justement

celui de cultiver si possible le dialogue des cultures en des dialogue entre des individus, sinon en monologues” (50). It is little wonder then that Chen prefers in all her novels the use of a first person narration, one that favors monologues. This is evidenced in her use of the epistolary genre as well; however, *Les Lettres Chinoises* offers a departure from her other novels in that it allows for three monologues in turn. Chen continues, “Pour un écrivain, vingt voix comptent plus qu’une ou deux voix, et contiennent un matériau d’écriture plus riche et plus authentique. Et on va plus loin [...] Je pense donc que le monde sera peut-être sauvé le jour où on distinguera moins entre les groupes qu’entre les individus.” (*Quatre Mille Marches* 50-1)

Chen’s style in *Les Lettres Chinoises* favors polyphony, a multitude of monologues, which reveal that it is the individual that counts for her. This preference further justifies my decision to create distinction between the voices of each narrator. Significantly, these voices will reflect the transformation experienced by each character, and will be evidenced stylistically because, as Labelle says speaking of the purpose of language in *Les Lettres Chinoises*, “la langue du récit rend compte de la transformation du sujet écrivain” (41). This transformation, or rather these three transformations, will be addressed in the following section.

## **5.2. Critical character analysis**

In this section I will compare and contrast characteristics and even language (when possible) between Sassa, Yuan, and Da Li. In previous sections it has become apparent that a distinction between the narrations of each character lends itself well as a premise for a translation that allows for domestication and foreignization by assigning these different approaches to different narrative voices. Such an analysis prepared me for translating each character’s voice and creating the respective specifications that enables me to conserve foreignness in significant ways and show the transformation of the characters through various degrees of domestication.

Lorre points out that the aspect of love, chance and uncertainty “gives the question of emigration an entirely different dimension, perhaps the most important one to all three protagonists after all” (272). This emphasis illustrates that the cultural aspect, at least seen by Lorre, is secondary to this intrigue or rather that the aspect of love and chance informs the question of emigration. Speaking of the revisions of *Les Lettres Chinoises* and the elimination of certain letters, Lorre quotes Talbot, saying that “the erasure of [...] information transfers more hermeneutic responsibility to the reader while inviting him to focus on more fundamental human pulsions,” thus arguing that these revisions contribute in a shift from story about emigration to a story about the dilemmas of love and identity (272). The aspects of love and chance contribute to the emotional aesthetic of the novel. Significantly, the question of emigration then means something different for each character and shapes their aesthetic differently.

Similarly, as Bolander points out, “the three main characters of *Les Lettres Chinoises*, Yuan, Sassa, and Da Li, represent three different touchpoints with regard to Montréal—one permanent, one second-hand, and one transitory—yet each, in his or her own way, belongs to the tale of the city” (242). Expressed from the viewpoint of Montréal, the city is simultaneously at the heart of, on the edge of, and even completely outside of Ying Chen's story.

If I align the term “domestication” as it pertains to translation with the North American (albeit French speaking) city of Montreal, thereby accounting for my North American targeted audience, and the term “foreignization” with the city of Shanghai, I thus project these terms onto Bolander’s observations, namely that Yuan’s relationship with Montreal (domestication) is increasingly permanent, Da Li’s transitory, and Sassa’s secondhand (whereas her touchpoint with Shanghai [foreignization] is revealed to be increasingly permanent).

Though all the characters originate from Shanghai, it becomes increasingly clear as one advances in the text that they each represent different encounters with the Other. Says Oore, “Les tentatives des personnages de s’expliquer et d’expliquer à l’autre les motivations de leur choix de rester sur place ou de partir, mènent inévitablement vers la conclusion qu’il s’agit de deux visions du monde opposées et de deux modes de vie contraires” (80). These two opposing views of the world are voiced by Sassa and Yuan. I will first analyze these two characters—their vision, voice, style of writing—and then incorporate Da Li, whose voice will express the *entre-deux* as it pertains to translation.

### 5.2.1 Sassa

With the edits that removed Yuan’s father as a letter correspondent, Sassa comes to the forefront as the traditional voice of the past (Talbot 85). Oore summarizes Sassa’s character in one word: “immobile” (“Le mobile et l’immobile” 74). The image she assigns to this word is that of a stone. This image of a stone comes from Sassa’s own words: “N'est-ce pas agréable de devenir une pierre en mourant?” (*LC* 62). Oore explains Sassa’s immobility by her association with cultural traditions and past, saying, “L’inertie de Sassa, son attitude extrêmement réticente devant le départ, font d’elle, selon sa sœur, une femme traditionnelle et démodée, une véritable pièce de musée de par sa rareté et de par l’intérêt « historique » qu’elle présente” (“Le mobile et l’immobile” 80). In the former reprint of the book she is described as “une fille du vieux temps” (Bolander 146). This association of Sassa with the Chinese culture and with the past will express itself in my translation with foreignization in the register but also in the datedness of the language. Sassa’s voice should feel somewhat cold, outdated, to the extent that this is possible without ostracizing the reader.

And yet, Sassa's immobility is perhaps not evident at the beginning, just as it is not evident from the beginning that her health is waning and that she is dying. It isn't until after Da Li has gone to Montreal and told Sassa of the man with whom she is in love that Sassa identifies with the imagery of this stone. Thus she becomes increasingly immobile not simply because of her culture but because of circumstance and so too will my translation increasingly favor foreignization in Sassa's letters, especially after this point in the plot.

“Une pierre” is the image that Sassa relates to. As for the image that Yuan associates with her, in his third letter to Sassa, he refers to her as “ma belle lune” (*LC* 15). In his next letter, he writes:

J'étais autrefois inquieté par cette pâleur, cette fragilité de notre lune qui, souvent assombrie par les nuages, semblait prête à se trop transformer en eau, à tomber du ciel et à mourir sous nos pieds. Parfois, quand j'étais malade, je me demandais si ce n'était pas un peu à cause de cette lune. Ce n'était pas juste. Mais vraiment je ne voulais pas mourir avec elle. J'ai très mauvaise conscience d'avoir refusé de mourir avec notre lune. (*LC* 16)

His previous allusion to Sassa as his “belle lune” makes this metaphor a significant insight into how he views Sassa: pale and frail—dying even.

Da Li first describes Sassa in terms of Yuan's fiancée in the twenty-eighth letter. She writes to Sassa:

Il voit en elle son passé, sa jeunesse, ses valeurs et son pays. Il ne veut pas abandonner tout cela et la faire souffrir. Mais sa bien-aimée souffre, selon lui, malgré son amour ou même à cause de son amour. Elle préfère rester dans son pays, non pas parce qu'elle est plus patriote que nous, mais parce qu'elle a peur. L'Amérique du Nord est pour elle une immense jungle. Elle ne se croit pas faite pour une telle vie. Elle se sent mieux là-bas,

dans sa chambre minuscule, sous la surveillance et les reproches qu'on fait perpétuellement aux jeunes. Elle éprouve très peu de désirs spirituels et matériels. Elle refuse le tout ou rien, s'est habituée à cette sécurité modeste au prix de la soumission et de la bienséance. (LC 73-74)

Because Yuan's emigration to Montreal requires her to move, to choose between past and present, Sassa encourages her friend and her fiancé to pursue their futures but refuses to make her own decisions and even passively remains subject to circumstance and her native, unchanging culture. Sassa's letters were the most difficult for me to translate, especially initially. Admittedly, she is the character who "writes" the most. She is a character who Chen paints as representative of a Chinese aesthetic and this, I believe, is evidenced even in the language of her letters. Sassa embodies the stagnation of the very values she can't abandon. There are many ways that the Chinese culture and past is represented in Chen's text, but in Sassa's writings, the reader is met with ambivalent, realist, and often negative tones in regards to the culture she is associated with and with regards to the Other. Lorre suggests that Sassa's outburst of anger toward exiles and foreigners "reflects her powerlessness in the face of changes that affect her own country and hometown," not to mention the changes that are taking place without her, on another continent. "In contrast, Yuan and Da Li have a much lighter view of what they call exile"(Lorre 274), Yuan viewing it as a migration, Da Li as a leaf. Sassa's letters are fraught with a sense of cruciality and frustration in regards to the question of emigration: her life and energy are tied up in this question. Says Bolander, "Sassa struggles with the idea of "good" freedom as she is witnessing first-hand societal transformation while simultaneously remaining rooted both physically and ideologically in a Chinese past. This conflict takes its toll on her as her health declines and as she comes to the realization that her relationship is coming to an end" (232).

Sassa gives voice to the Chinese people in the seventeenth letter. “Un Chinois peut très bien être avare ou pauvre,” she writes, and then adds, “‘C’est compréhensible, se dit-on. L’argent ne vient pas facilement. Ce n’est la faute de personne. C’est à cause du système.’ Mais un Blanc n’a pas le droit d’être avare ou pauvre. Lui qui a eu la chance de vivre dans un monde plus libre ne peut pas nous ressembler” (*LC* 44). It is possible to see Sassa as an embodiment in several respects of traditional China, or more broadly as any culture or person that resists change: rather than being brought closer together by means of intimate letter writing, the westernization that takes place over the course of the story only widens the rift between Sassa and Yuan, suggesting that the distance between them is more than spatial, more than cultural but most especially temporal with regard to the past (Bolander 231). If the language in Sassa’s letters remains unamenable to domestication, this resistance serves to highlight this resistance of character and her discomfort with the idea of “freedom” and contemporaneity.

Da Li takes up the same metaphor of the moon in the forty-sixth letter, when she writes to Sassa about the events of the night before: la fête de la lune. Significantly, it is in this letter that the allusions of an affair between Da Li and Yuan are the most explicit. The metaphor of the moon in Da Li’s letter is used in a much broader sense and in this letter we see overlapping in what is implied by the metaphor, which makes it possible to equate Sassa to the other referents. Da Li writes, “Nous avons remarqué que la vie ne peut pas être aussi ronde que la lune. Des générations de poètes chinois se consolent en supposant que les êtres chers, mêmes séparés, partagent heureusement en ce jour de fête la même lune parfaite” (*LC* 113). Da Li evokes then the idea that life cannot be circumvented and juxtaposes this observation with the allusion to Chinese poets, a clear allusion to the Chinese culture and tradition, even a literary tradition. Even though Da Li (and through her, Chen) never explicitly equates the moon to Sassa, this letter

suggests that Da Li is talking about both Sassa, the past, and China. She continues, highlighting these ideologies in the processing of countering them: “Mais cette supposition n’a plus de sens pour nous. Nous ne croyons pas que sa fiancée et mes parents regardent la même lune que nous. La lune est partout différente. Et même si nous sommes ensemble, nous avons chacun notre lune. [...] Pour certaines personnes, la pleine lune n'est pas l'occasion de célébrer mais de fuir car elle est signe de Malheur” (*LC* 113).

At this point she begins speaking of how the full moon, in America, evokes “les scènes effrayantes des films américains” and in doing so tries to disassociate the full moon with China and with Sassa. However, she returns to this association, telling Yuan, “Qu'attends-tu encore? Demain, déjà, la lune sera moins ronde” (*LC* 114). She regrets these words because by employing the metaphor in this way, she has made Yuan remember his fiancé, his homeland, which are, like the moon, ebbing in their role in his life.

Oore speaks of the duality created by the “principe masculin et actif, Yang, et du principe féminin, passif, [Sassa]” (“Le Mobile et l’immobile” 75). Labelle elaborates on these paradoxes, also listing those of “le soleil et la lune, le jour et la nuit, la vie et la mort” (43). Stylistically then, placing Yuan’s letters on the scale of domestication and Sassa’s on the other end, with foreignization, is in keeping with these dichotomies.

In relation to language, Labelle writes that “Sassa a peur de la langue étrangère” (49). Labelle later associates foreign languages to a “transformation radicale de l’identité” (49), which suggests that Sassa fears this kind of transformation. Sassa’s language then will not reflect an evolution; but will bespeak a lack thereof, becoming more anchored in a foreignizing approach.



### 5.2.2 Yuan

Contrarily to Sassa, Yuan “[a] toujours peur des gens qui parlent trop bien shanghaien” (*LC* 97). Labelle suggests that “pour Yuan, le dialecte parlé à Shanghai représente la rigidité d'esprit qu'il a voulu quitter et constitue le véhicule des jugements émis par les voisins. C'est un dialecte et, donc, une langue de la proximité” (49). This fear toward a dialect native to his homeland suggests the desire for rupture with that homeland and with that language. Favoring an evolution toward domestication in Yuan's case is in keeping with this perceived desire for rupture.

Yuan's relationship to his homeland and his past is a curious one. While it is Sassa who first calls Yuan “mon soleil” in the third letter (her first), it is Yuan who uses this appellation to create the juxtaposing imagery between them by calling her “ma belle lune” (*LC* 14); “Yuan choisit bien l'identité qu'il veut projeter dans ses lettres, identité précise construite en fonction de sa relation avec Sassa” (Maddox 206). Yuan's identity is defined, then, by his relation to Sassa; she (and all that she personifies), as much as the city of Montreal, is the “other” who holds to secret of his identity. In the fifty-second letter, Yuan uses the metaphor of a kite to describe himself, saying, “Je suis comme un cerf-volant qui vole très loin, vraiment très loin, et dont la corde est entre tes mains. Si tu lâches la corde, où ira-t-il, ce cerf-volant?” (*LC* 135). Like a kite that cannot fly without anything to anchor it, he is defined by where he is as much as where he was; he cannot completely free himself from that past. In letter 36, he writes, “On n'entre jamais deux fois dans la même rivière,” nous a dit le professeur de philosophie. Le passé est une chose. Le passé ressuscité en est une autre. Donc, il est toujours là, notre passé, mort dans nos mains, insaisissable mais indélébile, utile seulement quand on y lit notre destin” (*LC* 94).

Yuan's character is most easily subjected to theories of migrant literature of the "entre-deux" and my translation of his letters will reflect more of a hybridity in style between foreignization and domestication. Bolander, borrowing from Chaim Potok's expression for those who "feel at home everywhere and nowhere simultaneously," calls Yuan a "*Zwischenmensch*, a between-person" (236). The following passage reveals Yuan's approach toward migration:

Tu n'as pas l'air d'aimer cet «exil» qui t'attend. Pour moi, il s'agit plutôt d'une migration, la migration qu'on trouve à chaque époque de l'histoire humaine et chez toutes les autres espèces vivantes. Une migration nécessaire et pas trop douloureuse. Il m'arrive parfois, dans la splendeur des crépuscules, de contempler les volées d'oiseaux. J'admire ces oiseaux qui voyagent à travers l'espace et le temps, construisant partout leurs nids pour chanter leurs chansons. Pour s'envoler, il faut qu'ils sachent se déposséder, surtout de leur origine. Ils ne considèrent pas leurs nids comme leur propriété ni comme leur raison d'être. Voilà pourquoi ils ne connaissent pas la nostalgie ni n'éprouvent de rancune à l'endroit de leur nouveau pays. Au fond, ils n'ont pas de pays, puisque leur cœur simple ne connaît pas de frontières. Et ils sont heureux. (*LC* 38-9)

This passage I believe marks a turning point for Yuan as he is forced to consciously face his condition of exile; "Yuan balise son nouvel environnement, il remet en question ses agissements passés, ses valeurs, ses souvenirs. Il s'adapte, en un mot. Pour lui, le passé est devenu un fardeau" (Lebrun 21). As for translation, traces of the foreign will be minimized from this point on, though the poetics I will keep.

The newer edition of *Les Lettres Chinoises* results in fewer letters from Yuan, with those remaining being more brief, creating an intensity and urgency to his writings (Oore 7). There is "un côté explicite et un côté implicite" to Yuan's identity, "qui demeure dans l'obscurité du non-

dit” (Maddox 207). This “non-dit” is an essential part of Chen’s intrigue and all of her characters participate in this novel in creating meaning between the lines that they write. Here the French aesthetic of isolating between full stops (Armstrong 204) and Chen’s particular style in which short, ruptured sentences are peppered throughout, the text lends itself well to implying through the use of punctuation the significance of silence. As the non-dit takes on a more essential role in the novel’s plot, I consciously do not hesitate to preserve this aesthetic and parallel the role of silences, pauses and punctuation in my translation, especially in Yuan’s letters.

Labelle asserts Yuan’s position of “l’entre-deux,” saying he is “littéralement pris entre deux femmes, entre deux espaces et entre deux temps [...]” (45). And yet, the same might be said of Da Li, as seen in Labelle’s insight as she writes, “Dans la relation amoureuse entre Yuan et Sassa, c'est Da Li qui joue le rôle intermédiaire: elle se place entre les deux et sert d'abord de lien avant de provoquer la rupture” (45). While there are certainly similarities between these two characters, the rupture spoken of by Labelle is voluntary in the case of Da Li and involuntary in the case of Yuan. Just as Sassa defines him, so is it she, and not he, that forces him into complete metamorphosis.

Though a figure of “l’entre deux,” Yuan is very much defined by his relation to his past reality, which often expresses itself poetically. In translating Yuan's letters, I conscientiously use contractions and the word “got” for example, which is more colloquial, to measure his metamorphosis. However, I take particular care to not overly domesticate the poetics that are felt through his letters. Similarly, as discussed, foreignization has two faces in this text: there is the French foreign and there is the Chinese foreign. Domestication could just as well mean Americanization as it could mean Frenchification, or Montrealization. So Yuan’s text will become more and more filled with French phrases, emphasizing the distance between him and

Sassa. It is fair to say that Chen wanted this distance felt: the fact that each letter is marked with the origin of the letter serves as a mechanism of clarification but also reiterates this distance.

### 5.2.3 Da Li

Da Li, on the other hand, is “une femme en mouvement” (Oore 74). In the set of binaries created by Chen, Da Li is the counterpart of Sassa’s immobility. Da Li is identified early in the novel as “une petite boule de verre qui roule facilement.” Writes Sassa about her friend, “Elle avance, elle glisse, elle saute parfois, et elle s’arrête rarement en chemin. Et elle n’a pas besoin de le connaître pour aller jusqu’au bout” (*LC* 18-19). This metaphor is carried on by Sassa: “À vrai dire, qu’est-ce qui peut bien empêcher une boule de suivre sa pente? Je crains pourtant que ce petit bijou gai ne se brise quelque part” (*LC* 19). Although the “non-dit” certainly plays a role in Da Li’s letters, I would like to reproduce to the extent possible, this movement; in my translation, Da Li’s letters will evolve with phrases getting longer. I may choose to combine sentences, replace periods with commas, etc.

Da Li describes herself as “une feuille dans le vent, qui ne connaît pas son itinéraire ni le bout du voyage, que ce soit un jardin en fleurs ou un cimetière” (*LC* 52). We read earlier how Yuan’s happiness comes from this idea of being like a bird, free of country and consequently of difference. Da Li’s comes from her idea of being free from any specific destination, including a culturally embedded fate: “Mais je suis contente. J’ai quitté ma ville natale surtout pour quitter ma mère et abandonner « les armes » qu’elle m’a léguées” (*LC* 52). Curiously enough, Yuan’s imagined happiness—these migrating birds in flight toward an unknown future—is simultaneously associated with Da Li. A few paragraphs later, he turns the subject of his letter to Da Li and says, “Elle chante tout le temps, comme un oiseau” (*LC* 39).

Thus we see the striking resemblances between the characters of Yuan and Da Li, both epitomizing the “entre-deux,” both acting as mobile migrant counterparts to Sassa’s immobile exile. It is significant that Sassa too sees these similarities: she writes to Yuan, “Après tout, elle te ressemble un peu” (*LC* 18-19). It is equally significant that in her metaphor of Da Li as a rolling ball, she offers a caveat in her comparison of Yuan within the context of that metaphor: “Toi aussi tu es une boule, une boule un peu moins lisse à cause de ta nature sensible” (*LC* 19). This distinction marks a notable difference between the two characters in their degree of characterizing the “entre-deux.” As Labelle puts it, “l’entre-deux ne fournit que l’illusion du lien” (45), and when the lack of a “lien” is revealed for all that it is, we see how these characters differ. When Da Li refuses to continue her affair with Yuan, when she refuses to be in this role, hers is still a movement forward while he is left behind, immobilized, still defined by his relation to Sassa; while Yuan seeks for the erasure of boundaries, Da Li’s efforts are more creative instead of deconstructive. Unlike Yuan, Da Li recognizes that erasure is not possible:

Cet « esprit asiatique » dont je me moquais tant a surgi du fond de moi au moment où, après une longue attente, la rencontre rêvée se produisait réellement. Je voyais combien il était étonné de ma réaction. Je lui en voulais toujours d’être trop « chinois » dans ce domaine. Mais tout à l’heure en le repoussant brusquement, j’ai découvert que je ne l’étais pas moins que lui. J’ai tout d’un coup perdu le courage que j’avais cultivé si longtemps. J’aimerais tant faire comme les autres. (*LC* 114)

The rupture she provokes has nothing to do with the migrant condition, but is contextualized by culturally embedded immorality that she perceives in this love triangle: “Nous ne serons jamais vraiment libres. [...] On vit pour des choses rêvées” (*LC* 129-130). LeBras asserts that Da Li is Chen’s “alter ego,” embodying “une célébration de l’errance en soi” (“Écrire

autrement au Québec” 146-7). Speaking of her voice, he continues, “Si le constant va-et-vient entre le présent et le passé, l’ici et l’ailleurs s’impose au lecteur comme leitmotiv des *Lettres Chinoises*, la voix de leur ami Da li, plus discrète peut-être, mais tout aussi présente, se juxtapose à celles de Sassa et de Yuan pour fournir un subtil contrepoint à l’ensemble de l’œuvre” (“Écrire autrement au Québec” 145). If this is the case, these sentiments expressed by Da Li are more in line with existential theory than migration: we might imagine Da Li as Sisyphus, readily descending the hill, and like Chen and her “quatre mille marches.” The true “nouvelle née” of Chen’s novel is perhaps Da Li rather than Yuan: “Si la mort pour Sassa est un pas vers la disparition dont elle rêve, pour Da Li, le départ signifie une espèce de résurrection” (Oore, “Le mobile et l’immobile” 82).

Da Li's writing will be the most poetic but also the most domesticated. Not because she becomes the most American, but because she is the most universal character: First because she believes herself to be, and second because she is liberated from the necessity of trying to be what she is not, although this realization comes in her last letter.

### **5.3 The Translator as Author**

To summarize the proposed application of critical theory that has been addressed up until this point, in my translation of *Les Lettres Chinoises* I propose to reproduce—even create—difference textually that is only evidenced thematically in the source text. It is clear from the above discussion that Chen favors difference because of the space for enunciation that is created by contrast, that she favors duality (ying and yang), and that she seeks for polyphony in her novel. It is however less clear how to distinguish between those different voices she has given life to because of the homogeneity of style. Creating difference within register and voice help to reconcile domestication with foreignization, the migrant voices of “l’ici” with the non-migrant

voices of “l’ailleurs,” the literal exile with the poetic exile, the “mobile” identities and the “immobile.” I create this difference principally by applying strategies favoring foreignization and domestication differently according to the author of a given letter as well as according to plot chronology. In doing so, my “non-authorship” (Pym, “The Translator as Author: Two Quixotes” 80) serves to establish my authorship just as much as any poetic license I take, those poetic liberties as well as my translation choices being intentional thanks to these theoretical studies, producing three intentionally distinct voices of exile.

## 6. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

### 6.1. Translation Before Literary Theory

I became familiar with general translation theory and practices through a translation class I was enrolled in for winter semester of 2012. In the course of the semester, we discussed our readings from Mona Baker's coursebook on translation *In Other Words*. We also had weekly translating workshops, collaborating with other translators of the same language backgrounds, translating French to English as well as English to French.

I translated the first five chapters of *Les Lettres Chinoises* as my final project for this class, before having done any research with regards to literature translation theory and prior to my textual analyses. I began the translation of the next five chapters early on in my research. I have already alluded to the fact that I found Sassa's letters to be more difficult to translate. Responsible for nearly half of the novel's letters (27 of the 57), I wasn't sure if this difficulty was a matter of perception; since she writes the most, it was only inevitable for me to associate difficult passages with her. Regardless of any justification for this perception, feeling that Sassa's letters were more difficult to translate led me to consider each of the writer's letters as belonging to that writer, bespeaking a separate voice. Perhaps not on a textual level but because of the realities they portray, I realized that there was a difference of voice or tone between each of the letter writers. For example, often when reading *Les Lettres Chinoises*, I had to skip to the letter's end to make sure I knew who was writing, but I often suspected rightly. However; the formality of register was consistent throughout her letters, regardless of the writer.

Though I couldn't textually identify differences between the letters of each writer, I decided to treat them as such. In order to keep an integrity and uniqueness to the voice of each character, I translated all the letters by the same author in turn, rather than translating them



chronologically in order of correspondence. In light of my research and chosen parameters, I began translating Sassa first; I suspected that my first translation efforts would be the most rigid, perhaps the most unnatural and hence the most “foreign,” and that I would acclimate to my role as translator/author the more I translated. I next translated Yuan, and finally Da Li. In revising my translations, I then worked backwards; starting with Da Li and ending with Sassa. I had at this point finished most of my analysis and so my first revision resulted in some significant alterations. I did a second revision as well once the letters were ordered chronologically.

## **6.2. Shifting Specifications: Carol Volk as a Monolingual Comparative Model**

After having translated the first ten letters, and before much of the research and remaining translation was under way, I decided to study Carol Volk’s translation of Chen’s *Ingratitude*, published by Farrar Straus Giroux, an American publishing company. *Ingratitude* was nominated for Canada's Governor General's Award and Prix Femina and is Chen’s first book to be published in English. Her success with the original French version was followed by a warm reception of the novel in English. Reviews of the translation itself are hard to come by; as is typical of most translations, reviewers focus on the language of the translation much as though it were the exact language of the original author. However, because the “translation” seemed have proven successful and since the publishing house was an American one, I thought that studying the translation could inform me about what made Volk’s a success, or at the very least viable.

I concluded that the best way to carry out this study was to translate some of the passages myself and then compare them to Volk’s and learn from the contrasts. This proved to be very instrumental in gauging both my artistic liberties as well as foreignization. I drew from the first version of my specifications for *Les Lettres Chinoises* and projected them onto *l’Ingratitude*; specifications that prioritized domestication more than my final specifications do. I have

included several passages comparing Chen’s, Volk’s and my translations. My translations reflect very little revision; I wanted to get to the heart of my unadulterated translation tendencies, which I thought would manifest themselves better pre-revision.

Chen	Ils jettent mon corps sur un petit lit roulant, au milieu d'une salle blanche et sans fenêtres. Leurs mouvements sont brusques. Ils me traitent de criminelle. Quand maman n'est pas là, ils ne dissimulent pas leur dégoût. (9)
Volk	They throw my body onto a rolling cot in the middle of a windowless white room. Their movements are brusque. They treat me like a criminal. When mother’s not around, they don’t hide their disgust. (3)
Hendry	They throw my body on a small bed on wheels, in the middle of a white, windowless room. Their movements are abrupt; they’re treating me like a criminal. When mother isn’t around, they don’t bother masking their disgust.

These passages are fairly similar. I prefer Volk’s “cot” to my more literal “rolling bed.” Our different usage of contractions is interesting: Volk’s “mother’s not” versus my “mother isn’t” seems to evoke a more formal register. My use of the present progressive in “they’re treating me like a criminal” as well as “they don’t bother” I believe contrasts with the more descriptive narration in Volk’s and allows the reader to relate to the narrative voice despite the fact that this narrator is also an observer; each offers a slightly different aesthetic. Translating this passage helped me to be aware of the different ways contractions might be used to portray register and more importantly to be cautious about literal translation as far as terminology is concerned.

Another interesting point is that both Volk and I retained the verb “treat” in our translation of “Ils me traitent de criminelle.” Upon consulting with a French professor, I learned that this collocation actually means “they are insulting me.” The fact that both Volk and I missed this (or perhaps Volk imposed this meaning) highlights the inherent difficulties of translation. It also begs the question as to whether or not Chen herself was aware of the expression behind this collocation.

Chen	En général, ils respectent davantage les déjà-morts que les encore-vivants car, devenus moins humains et surtout moins fragiles, les premiers peuvent acquérir, du jour au lendemain, plus d'intelligence, plus de talent, plus de vertu, donc plus de valeur. Mais c'est différent dans mon cas. Ma mort est une honte démesurée, car je m'y suis condamnée moi-même, j'en ai exécuté la peine moi-même. Ils m'en veulent de ce que je ne les aime pas assez, que je m'enfuis de leur royaume. Ils ne graveront pas mon nom sur une pierre comme ils le font pour tant d'autres. Au contraire, ils s'empressent de m'éliminer de la surface de leur terre. Mais il y a bien d'autres corps à brûler. Sur la voie du néant comme sur toutes les autres, il faut faire la queue. Garder la vertu de la patience. Attendre avec un sourire compréhensif. (9)
Volk	They tend to respect the dead more than the living. By becoming less human, and especially less fragile, from one day to the next the dead are considered more intelligent, more talented, more virtuous, and therefore worthier. But it's different in my case. My death is a disgrace beyond measure because I condemned myself to it, I carried out my own sentence. They're angry with me for not loving them enough, for fleeing their cherished domain. They will not chisel my name on a stone as do for others. On the contrary, they are eager to wipe me off the face of the earth. But there are plenty of other bodies to burn. On the way to the void, just like anywhere else, you have to get in line, remember that patience is a virtue, wait with a smile. (4)
Hendry	Generally, they have more respect for the dead than for the living because, having become less human and certainly less fragile, the dead become from one day to the next, more intelligent, more talented, more virtuous and so are more valued. But in my case it's different. My death is an outrageous shame, because I was the one to condemn myself, I inflicted the pain myself. They hold it against me for not loving them enough, for fleeing their kingdom. They won't engrave my name into stone as they've done for so many others. On the contrary, they'll hasten to wipe me off from the face of the earth. But there are plenty of other corpses to burn. On the road of nothingness as with all others, you have to get in line. Remain patient. Wait with an understanding smile.

Volk's translation is again marked by a more formal register with words such as "therefore." Her choice of wording in some instances was more poignant or evoked more compelling imagery: specifically, her translation of "I carried out my own sentence." I prefer her usage of "worthier" to my "more valued" and also feel that "chisel" seems to evoke more of an action than "engrave." Interestingly, she adds in "cherished" to domain, where Chen indicates none. We both had different interpretations of Chen's "voie du néant" which produces difference imagery; I'm not sure I feel that one is more justifiable than the other, though I do like her use of "void." I retained Chen's punctuation for the last three sentences and feel justified in that choice; I feel that the breaks between sentences enact the waiting they speak of. Additionally, the images

of burning bodies versus burning corpses is quite different; “corpse” indicates that the bodies are already dead, and contextualizes this burning better perhaps than “corpses.” Having studied Volk’s writing in this passage, I appreciated her poetics and thoughtful imagery and carefully chosen words. This appreciation gave me permission to perhaps “interfere” with the text more than I was inclined to.

Chen	Maintenant, en flottant au-dessus de cette fumée d'encens qui donne le vertige, j'apprends que grand-mère a raison, même si les gens ne veulent pas y croire. Ils collent à la vie comme les plumes à l'oiseau sans se rendre compte de l'insignifiance de leur poids. Ils haïssent ceux qui préfèrent débarquer, abandonner une vie qu'ils ne possèdent pas, sauter dans le vide qui, lui au moins, prolonge. Ils les accusent de lâcheté afin de prouver leur propre bravoure. Ils se permettent d'évaluer les morts. Ainsi, d'une époque à l'autre, il y a des morts différentes: pesantes ou légères, héroïques ou lâches, valables ou inutiles, vertueuses ou immorales. La mort est devenue une chose comme les autres auxquelles ils attribuent un prix qui varie selon leur humeur. (11)
Volk	Now, floating over this dizzying smoke of incense, I see that Grandmother was right, even if people don't want to believe it. They cling to life the way feathers cling to a bird, without realizing how little they weigh. They hate those who'd rather set sail, abandon a life they don't own, jump into the void, which at least has the advantage of being endless. They accuse them of cowardice to prove their own bravery. They take the liberty of judging the dead. As a result, the dead are seen differently from one era to the next: heavy or light, heroic or cowardly, valuable or useless, virtuous or immoral. Death has become just like anything else, something to which they assign a price that varies with their mood. (11)
Hendry	Now, floating above the smoke of incense that inspires dizzy spells, I am learning that my grandmother was right, even if people don't want to believe it. People cling to life like feathers to a bird without realizing the triviality of their weight. They hate those who would prefer to take flight, abandon a life that they don't actually possess, leap into the void that, as for itself at least, is expansive. They accuse them of cowardice in order to prove their own bravery. They give themselves permission to evaluate the dead. And so, from one age to the next, there are different kinds of death: heavy or light, heroic or cowardly, valuable or vain, virtuous or immoral. Death has become a thing like any other to which they attach a price tag that varies depending on their mood.

Volk begins with the more powerful “dizzying smoke of incense” and continues in her succinct portrayal of Chen’s imagery with “they cling to life the way feathers cling to a bird,” as well as her less overt “takes liberty” versus my “give themselves permission.” Though I prefer my alliteration with “valuable or vain” as well as the more concrete image of a “price tag,” at this point in the comparative exercise that I started to recognize a pattern and realized the degree

to which my syntax still tended to be very French, making for a more overt translation in ways I hadn't necessarily intended.

What came as almost a shock to me was how foreign Volk's text still was. I don't know what her specifications were as an author or how conscientious of a decision she made to translate at such. But I was liberated, to a certain extent, to realize that there was a place for this kind of foreign translation. In comparing my translation of passages to hers, there were times when I still felt that mine demonstrated my efforts to ride the line between fidelity to the original and naturalness of expression. I also was surprised, even discouraged at first, with how vastly different our translations turned out on some accounts. However the exercise taught me to question my interpretation as a reader more than I previously had done. I began to realize that differences would inevitably be shaped by this interpretation and was reminded that translation, like writing, is a subjective art and to move forward regardless of any lack of refinement. After all, there were enough similarities between our translations to make me feel confident that in essentials we would transmit the same tone as Chen.

### **6.3 Refining the translation: Using Jyothi Raghavan's translation as a sounding board**

In order to assure a quality translation, a translation should undergo five steps: self-checking, revision by a bilingual reviser, monolingual review and editing by someone in the target language, final formatting, and proofreading (Melby, "Structured Specifications and Translation Parameters").

Having access to an existing translation enabled me to compare translations and allowed me to check for accuracy and terminology. In many ways, it allowed me to reenact the kind of discussions that had taken place during translating workshops I had participated in for my translation class. Comparing different translations, we would focus on the different ways a text

had been translated and discuss when and if certain translations were better, comparing justifications. Often, there wasn't a definitive "best" translation; more often than not, we would all tweak our translations, but our final translations still varied by degrees. In translating literature, correctly aligning terminology is less crucial than in technical writing and thus the translator is able to take more liberty with tone so that they are able to reproduce—albeit subjectively—all the elements of the story. Because of the subjectivity involved in this kind of translation, difference between Raghavan's translation and mine were more than inevitable. I used her translation to act as a bilingual sounding board in my own revisions. I had already revised my translation several times before I even read her version, being sure to let time pass between revisions and revising so that my specifications were integrated with some consistency.

I will highlight here some of the ways that reading Raghavan's translation affected my own as well as instances in which, despite the differences, my translation remains unchanged.

In addition to Raghavan's translation being based on an outdated edition of the text, she employs British English, which I found problematic given my perceived North American readership. As English is not her first language, hers is a unique perspective and her choice conscientious: British English bespeaks of a colonized Asia (as well as her native India) and "lends the same exotic flavor to the English translation as the one present in the original French text" (Raghavan 10).

It is perhaps fair to say that neither my American English nor her British English completely speak to the reality of Canadian English, but even if I were to decide to reproduce foreignness in the same way I would not be able to, as American English is all that is available to me. In contrast to Raghavan, my choice of American English, my use of conjunctions and certain collocations, were my mechanism of domestication rather than foreignization. I found that the

reality that the text imparted was foreign enough and sought to create a text that could have as wide of an English-based audience as possible to relate to it, and for that I feel that my American English is adequate.

### 6.3.1. L'Étranger

Both Raghavan and I encountered similar difficulties with the word “étranger.” Because of Albert Camus’s existential novel by the same title, there is already a wealth of discussion about translating this term. I opted to translate it the three common ways one finds it translated in these discussions. I discovered later that Lorre translates “étranger” into the same three words as well: “a foreigner, an outsider, a stranger” (273). I felt that using the various synonyms added depth to Sassa’s words and avoided repetition.

Chen (Letter 10)	C’est un peu vrai, ce qu’elle a dit. On n’a pas besoin d’aller à l’étranger pour devenir étranger. On peut très bien l’être chez soi. Quand on ne se sent pas bien ailleurs, on blâme son exil et on se console avec les souvenirs de sa mère patrie, purifiés et embellis par l’imagination grâce à la distance et au temps écoulé. Mais quand on est étranger chez soi, on n’a aucun espace de retraite. (27)
Hendry	It’s sort of true, what she said. You don’t need to go to a foreign country to become a foreigner, a stranger. You can just as easily be an outsider in the place where you come from. When you don’t feel right being elsewhere, you blame it on your exile; you console yourself with memories of your homeland—memories purified and embellished by imagination through distance and the passing of time. But when you are a foreigner in the very place where you belong, there is nowhere to retreat to.
Raghavan	What she said is quite true. You don’t need to go abroad to become a foreigner. You can very well become one at home. When you don’t like living in another country, you blame it on the fact that you are in exile, and you console yourself with the thought of your homeland; memories of your homeland pass through the prism of your imagination, refined and embellished by the charm lent by distance and time. But when you’re an outsider in your own home, you can find no refuge. (27)

Raghavan takes poetic liberties where I do not and vice versa. For me the expression “chez soi” implied so much more than the word “home” in English. I decided to emphasize the juxtaposition between the exiled state and home, by using the expression “the place you come from” and “the place you belong.” Her liberties seem more language based where mine seem

more meaning based; obviously she captures the meaning, but my whole analysis centered on the subtleties that shaped this novel's meaning and I believe that my translation here reflects that.

### **6.3.2 Register**

Raghavan's translation seems to read on a higher "language level" (13), as she refers to it, in expressing the difficulties in finding an appropriate register. This was also a challenge for me, especially in finding an appropriate starting point and maintaining consistency in the case of Sassa's letters but moving towards familiarity with Yuan and Da Li's letters. I find that my translation tends to employ less formal speech than that of Raghavan's translation; I feel that subsequent reprints and the removal of Yuan's father and the formality of the "vous" used in their letters buttress my decisions on this account. However, there are times when I purposefully avoided contractions or retained a degree of formality, for example when Sassa cites her mother, or with the use of proverbs. In these cases, as well as when Chen's poetic language is more saturated within a letter, Raghavan's and my translation tend to correspond more.

Like Volk, reading Raghavan's translation reminded me to be mindful of the syntax, taking care to not arbitrarily keep French syntax at the expense of readability. In the choice between synonyms, if one didn't sound more poetic, or rhythmically superior, I often chose the one with the less formal register.



Chen (Letter 8)	On est en Amérique maintenant. Il ne peut donc penser à des choses moins élémentaires!  J'habite en ce moment chez une vieille dame qui vit seule. Je dors tous les soirs dans son salon sans payer loyer. En échange, je suis chargée de faire le ménage. Je deviens donc mi-domestique, mi-colocataire. J'aurais pu travailler pour elle à temps plein. Mais je préfère me garder la liberté de sortir de la maison quand je veux. (22)
Hendry	We are in America now. Can't he think of anything less basic!  I'm living, for the time being, with an old woman who lives by herself. Every night I sleep in her living room without having to pay rent. In exchange, I'm in charge of taking care of the house. And so I've become part-maid, part-roommate. I could have worked for her full time, but I prefer to hold onto the liberty of being able to leave the house when I want.
Raghavan	We're in America now. Couldn't he then think about less trivial matters!  At the moment I'm living with an old woman who lives alone. I sleep in the living room every night without paying rent. To make up for it, I do the housework. So I'm part servant, part roommate. I could have worked full-time for her but I prefer being free to go out whenever I want. (23)

Chen (Letter 8)	Et il y a encore plus étonnant. Le matin, avant le lever du soleil, elle cuisine déjà. En poussant des sifflements continuels de sa grande bouche et de son long nez, elle fait des bruits de vaisselle très forts qui m'arrachent au sommeil. (23)
Hendry	And there is an even more surprising phenomenon: in the mornings, even before sunrise, she is already cooking. Going about making whistling sounds through her large mouth and her long nose, she does the dishes noisily, tearing me from sleep
Raghavan	But what's even more remarkable is that every morning, before sunrise, she's busy cooking. Weezing continuously through her wide mouth and long nose, she clatters the dishes so hard that the din drags me out of my sweet slumber. (24)

I realized that, like Chen's original, my translation has more commas. I've decided to keep this however, because to me it feels more like natural speech. There were some choices that Raghavan made that I didn't, that seemed obvious once I saw them: for example, "an old woman who lives alone" and "wheezing." This latter sentence was one that I recall having difficulties translating; the second I read "wheezing," I knew that it was the word I had been searching for. I'll reflect these changes in word choice in my final translation. There is also a difference in the usage of contractions: because this is Da Li's first letter, I have purposefully used them minimally. I also purposefully decided to alter "I prefer to hold on to the liberty of being able to leave when I want" to "I prefer being at liberty to leave when I want," drawing from Raghavan's

more natural sound while retaining still the important word “liberty.” Raghavan’s British English is evidenced in her usage of “din” and “slumber,” and reveals her particular brand of poetics.

### **6.3.3 Accuracy check**

Having access to Raghavan’s thesis was especially helpful on grounds of accuracy. Not only was I able to catch a few sentences or parts of sentences that I had failed to translate (articles, tenses, prepositions that slightly alter meaning), but I was also able to check my reading of the text to hers, and gauge my interpretation against hers. This was especially helpful with letters that dealt with dreams (letters 20, 27, 38) and which tended to be very Chinese in their aesthetic and more esoteric than the rest of Chen’s text. Terms of endearment, which will be discussed further, also presented a challenge. In particular, Sassa at one point refers to Yuan as “mon maître.” I had translated this as “my master” but was reticent because, for me as an American reader, the only way I could interpret that term as having legitimate weight was ironically. However, after reading that Raghavan had done the same and revisiting the idea of substituting it with something else, I decided that there was nothing else for it and that this was an instance of allowing the foreign Chinese aesthetic to seep through the translation.

Raghavan discusses in the introduction to her thesis that she had “translated the word *liberté* as freedom instead of liberty, because liberty, I feel, has political connotations while freedom sounds more personal” (13). I hadn’t made a conscientious decision in translating this word and found that the majority of the time, I had done as Raghavan. In a few instances, I changed some of my usages of “liberty” to “freedom” for the sake of uniformity.

Above all, reading Raghavan’s translation and noting differences made me reevaluate my original decisions. My translation was reshaped by word or punctuation choices that were the fruit of those reevaluations.

#### 6.4 Miscellaneous Problems Taming French:

Sassa often refers to Shanghai as “notre ville.” She does so in letters 12, 17, 35 (twice), 44, and 51. Of the six times she uses this, I retained the literal “our city” in three of the cases, to exaggerate the distance between Sassa and her friends. Otherwise, I found the possessive article too excessive and translated the idea with the word “Shanghai.” Raghavan often translates this as “our hometown,” which I tried to avoid. Da Li uniquely uses “notre ville natale” and “ma ville natale” in letters 17, and 21. I used “hometown” in both of these cases, recognizing that Shanghai is far from a “town” in terms of size but that the emphasis was proximate.

There were expressions that I did not translate, such as “raison d’être” (Yuan) and “Ô ciel!” (Da Li). Not only are these collocations very French and thus difficult to translate, but I felt that not translating them served again to accentuate the French culture that these two characters were being transformed by. That being said, I also left “le mal du pays” has become “le mal du siècle” with a footnote, because of the strong associations with nineteenth century Romantic’s ennui that would be otherwise lost in translation, as well as Chen’s word play. Even though this phrase is found in a letter written by Sassa who is representative of the Chinese culture, since it spoke of a literary tradition that had shaped China, I thought it worth keeping. Interestingly, she evokes again that this “mal” is not inherent in the migrant condition, just as she infers that the migrant condition is one that has been seen in every century.

Both Lebrun and Labelle have pointed out how the author plays with homonymic terms: “L’auteur joue sur les termes homonymiques (« mère » et « mer »)” (Lebrun 19); “[le roman] constitue un récit où l’amour et la mort se jouent en sourdine” (Labelle 40). Unfortunately, what is homonymic in French is often not in English and these subtleties are lost in translation. Perhaps they would merit attention in an introduction or footnote.

## 6.5. Foreignization in Practice

As mentioned in the second chapter, Garayta suggests (37) that in order to preserve foreignness of the source text, the translator may choose to not translate certain things, names, concepts, etc. I thus set about to create specifications allowing for as many of these elements to be preserved as possible. I had added in terms of endearment to this list. However, the obstacle with this blanket approach to preserving foreignness was that there are two “source” cultures: Québec/Montreal and Chinese/Shanghainese. Preserving the French text not only put distance between the reader and the text, but also served to emphasize the physical distance between Montreal and Shanghai. For example, a term of endearment, expressed in French by Yuan or Da Li in their letters to Sassa, serves to emphasize their evolution as French speakers.

Ying Chen spoke French before coming to Montreal. Her characters spoke French before coming to Montreal: In letter eight for example, Da Li writes , “Le fait que je parle mieux le français que l’anglais lui inspire beaucoup de curiosité et une certaine admiration” (23). In translating herself, Chen does not retain elements that highlight foreignization of her source Chinese culture on a lexical level, though there is one marked instance in letter eight where Da Li does say Ni Hoa as the first words of her first letter (22). And yet that Chinese culture does betray Chen. In reproducing the aesthetic experience of the reader, I felt that Chinese elements subtly saturated the text. Perhaps in too much of an effort to align fiction with reality, I found myself wondering if I felt that these were characters who, despite a proficiency in French indicated in Da Li’s letter, “communicated” in Mandarin but whose story had been told or represented in French, or if their language of “communication was in fact French.

It takes a stretch of the imagination to conclude that they actually communicate in French but this is a significant question in regards to the preservation of foreignness. Significant because

I could easily justify keeping in Rue Saint-Denis, whereas Rue Ni-San is actually not the name of the street, but the name represented by a French speaking Sassa. To retain Rue Ni-San underscores Sassa's communication in the French language, but not her source culture. Retaining foreign, yet French elements in Sassa's letters only served my purposes if my goal was to create delocalized foreignness or if I wanted to show a Sassa betwixt and between, a Sassa who is a foreigner even in the place she comes from. While Sassa is certainly this, I felt that she served to represent that Chinese culture—an old, dying way. And so to keep the French in her letters would mean betraying that older way and suppressing a Chinese element. At times, this would be appropriate, however the majority of the time I opted for an approach that reproduced foreignness through register and expression rather than the preservation of French on a lexical and even syntactical level. Similarly, there are several occasions where the three letter writers cite the words of someone else. Depending on the origin of the person they quote, (for example, if someone from back home), I would choose to have these interlocutions free of French.

Conversely, my choice in keeping certain French expressions in Da Li and Yuan's letters is then be dictated by my feeling it appropriate to highlight the distance between Montreal and Shanghai as well as their metamorphoses. I also retain French expressions when I felt that the author was highlighting aspects of the Montreal or Quebec culture in particular, and not just the North American culture, which an English reader would already relate to.

On a stylistic note, because of literariness of Chen's language, the "authentic" voices of her characters that I so strove to duplicate read more like stream of conscious narration than personal communication. For example, in letter forty-one, we read Sassa's poignant narration:

Je suis sortie presque inconsciemment. Il faisait chaud peut-être, puisque ma chemise était mouillée. Sans comprendre très bien ce qui m'était arrivé, je marchais sans arrêt

dans la rue. Le silence de l'après-midi m'entourait. [...] Émue par cette paresse agréable qu'on ne trouve que pendant les journées chaudes, j'ai pensé aux visages anxieux devant les guichets du bureau des passeports. Mais, arrivée dans la rue Si-Nan, mon cœur s'est serré de façon si brusque et si forte que j'ai cru chanceler. Les cris chantaient dans les arbres [...] vibraient dans l'air suffocant. La terre tournait comme d'habitude le jour où j'ai réalisé enfin que j'avais perdu quelque chose d'important. Au fond, il ne s'agit pas du passeport ni de la neige de Montréal. Cela s'est passé bien avant. Une perte dont on s'aperçoit seulement lorsque survient une seconde perte plus évidente. Je t'ai perdu, toi. Oui, je t'ai perdu par un certain après-midi de dimanche à l'aéroport de Shanghai. (LC 107-8)

And so domestication only meant in those cases of steam of conscious style recreating voices that read with a naturalness of literary expression, and not literal communicative expression. Thus, my foreignization of the text was not as systematic as I had originally anticipated, but rather subject to decisions on a more case-by-case basis, depending on the character writing, the tones of their letter, and their narrative mode.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

In my translating workshops before I began the translation of this novel, we often encountered subtleties in the source language that weren't perceived by us non-native speakers. Early on in my research I came across Anythony Pym's article "The Translator as Author: Two Quixotes," which, through the comparison of two translations of Cervante's Don Quixote, addresses the idea of the translator as the author (and his counter article, which suggests the opposite: "The Translator as Non-Author, and I Am Sorry about That"). Because of my experience in a classroom setting with translating, the interpretive and creative functions that a

translator performed predisposed me to feel that Pym had it right, and that not all translations are equal and that as such, the authorship of translators is all the more manifest.

I began this study of translation, migrant, and epistolary theory, thinking that it would help me to impose my authorship of the text in a way that would benefit the North American reader but also prove faithful to Chen's intent. I thought that I would feel that I had a multitude of "authorial" choices before me on every page, not just choices between this word or that but between domestication or foreignization. The truth is, "On n'habite pas un pays, on habite une langue," said Cioran. The language of Ying Chen is one that expresses her reality. At times, it is a reality that is foreign to me, no matter how much I might understand it theoretically. When it came down to it, I didn't feel that I had nearly as many choices in translation as I had supposed I would have: I wanted to interfere wisely, but I often felt that I didn't interfere at all. Of course, a comparison of my translation to Raghavan's would attest to both of our authorships, but even despite any differences or any "poor" translation choices, I still feel that Ying Chen's aesthetic wins out.

In fewer words, I might say that this text and Chen's writing (as Volk's translation is a testament of) simply does not easily lend itself to domestication and that to impose that domestication to a greater degree than I have done would be to take too much authority as an author at the expense of my authority as a reader. Chen's strength as a writer is in the subtle strangeness of her particular brand of French and in her deceitfully simple presentation of an infinitely ambivalent world. As a reader, I was subjected to Chen's reality; even if I wanted to, I'm not sure how I could impose my reality upon hers.

The theoretical research I carried out before and during translation informed me in that essential role as a reader. Not only is my appreciation of the novel and of Chen's writing all the

more heightened for having studied the genres and themes put forth in this thesis, but my translation is marked by it, however subtly. What's more, Chen's writing, though creative, is very conscientious; the fact that she speaks so often about the role of a writer—writes about it even (*Quatre mille marches*)—implies a meta-thematic method. Incorporating the method of theory into my translation is, I believe, part of following in her footsteps. Though my translation is complete, I am not sure when I will feel that it is really finished. The research of theory and the revision-driven practice has prolonged this journey and made it more meaningful, for, as Chen herself says, “l'important est de continuer à marcher mais non d'arriver réellement” (*Quatre mille marches* 36).



## 7. SELECT TRANSLATED LETTERS

I have selected six letters from my final translation to include with this analysis—two from each character—in order to demonstrate the subtle differences between each character’s voice and how those stylistic and syntactical differences become exaggerated over the course of the translation. Rather than present them chronologically, I have arranged them by character, from Yuan to Sassa to Da Li. The first letters presented from Yuan and Sassa’s set of letters are in fact the first letters they write; in Da Li’s case I have included the second letter, as her first letter is discussed in sections 6.3.1, 6.3.2. The second letter by Da Li that I have included is in fact the last of her letters. The second letters by Yuan and Sassa are found towards the end of the novel, and while they are not their last communication, these letters provide insight into the themes of exile, identity and culture discussed in the previous chapters, and discuss as well as enact—through translation—the changes that these characters have undergone.

The inclusion of these letters allows for this analysis to be complimented with the practical—the fruit born of theory. Though only excerpts of the novel itself, these letters nevertheless witness the different tones inherent in Chen’s original text but exaggerated in my translation.

### 7.1 Yuan

#### 7.1.1 Letter 1

Here I am at the Vancouver airport. I need to take a Canadian plane to continue my trip. While waiting for my departure time, I want to reiterate, Sassa, my pain in leaving you. When I climbed into the plane, you were smiling. How could you do that to me, *ma maligne*? How could you not cry at such a moment? It is true that tears wouldn’t console me any. But your mute smile—your knowing and mocking smile—troubled me. It is etched into my memory and has

created pains that will accompany me from here on out on this new path of my life. Is that really what you wanted?

It is useless to explain things to you. You're able to understand everything, support everything, except explanations. And thus you think that it's normal for me to abandon the land that poorly nourished me for twenty years for another end of an unknown world. You even said that you appreciated this kind of vagabond instinct of mine. But you don't want to believe that it's in leaving our country that I am learning to love it more. Maybe you'll think that the word "love" is too strong. However, I could say that today, more than at any other moment of my life, I feel an acute need to acknowledge that I belong to my country. It's important to have a country when traveling. One day, you'll understand all that: when you present your passport to a tight-lipped woman, when you find yourself amongst people you don't know a thing about and whose language you don't speak, and most especially when they endlessly ask what country you are from. If you're going to live in a civilized world, you've got to identify yourself, that's the key.

Yuan,

From Vancouver

### **7.1.1 Letter 52**

You can't begin to understand, *ma cruelle*, the effect your harsh letter had on me. And if you knew—you undoubtedly knew—how could you do that to me? There is such a thing as getting carried away when joking around or...in getting revenge! You know, we had our first snowfall this afternoon. It came softly in the silent courtyard. But it left me indifferent. There was too much pain twisting at my guts, and I didn't have the energy to get out of my chair and go near the window to gaze at the snow whose whiteness is like the whiteness of the envelope of your letter. I was afraid of that snow.

The thing is, we've wanted this snow for a long time. Canada and Siberia became magical lands for us by virtue of the snow ever since it became more and more rare in Shanghai. Ditching class or meetings at the office, we'd wait for hours, but in vain. In the streets or in parks—for snow that still didn't come, despite the weather report. When it finally did come, it didn't stick to the tree branches: there of course wasn't a chance of us throwing full snowballs at each other, of rolling on the soft humidity of a carpet of snow, or of making large snow angels in the courtyard. So we preferred exiling ourselves to Siberia or immigrating to Canada. We dreamt of far-off places. We read stories of Persians who, when crossing over mountains and deserts, had come to China in search of a better life, not realizing that once there they would become a minority needing protection from the majority, a kind of methodical generosity. You see, we had so many things in common back then.

I feel like you've changed. I get the impression from you that you don't like foreigners. You love them in movies or in books. But you don't want to live with them. Once you catch a certain whiff of "foreignness" on me, you desert me. That is why you're leaving me, isn't it, in all sincerity?

But what will become of me without you? I know that I'm in the middle of a metamorphosis that will perhaps get me nowhere. It's not a bad thing, not at all, to live like the Americans. Only, I didn't live all those years in Shanghai for nothing: I'm marked for life. In this case, if I don't stay decisively myself, if I don't try to stay Chinese, I'll be nothing at all. But how can I be myself without you? I'm like a kite flying far off, far far off, and whose string is in your hands. If you let go of this string, where will this kite go?

Yuan

From Montreal

## 7.2 Sassa

### 7.2.1 Letter 3

A letter from you, at last! I feel, now, like lending my nicest dress to my sister, doing a lot of housework for Mother, and spending a good two hours going over my French lessons to please Father. All that in honor of your arrival there. In all this time spent hoping that your journey was a safe one, I nearly forgot the pain that your departure caused me. I am finally relieved of all sorts of fears.

What might I say to you, now that you've arrived safely? "Good luck," perhaps? But I still don't understand what luck you are running after. It seems to me that you have had your luck here, in this county. You have your parents, who have pampered you; your fiancée, who is ready to throw herself into the river Huang-Pu for you; your position at work, which is as solid as a rock; your little private apartment, which is practically free. Of course, you had your difficulties here, as do I, as does everyone. You couldn't really stand the troubling taste of tap water, the suffocating smell of the ever-full buses, your neighbors who knew you better than yourself, your boss who would tap the nape of your neck with her fingers as if you were still a child, etc.

But is there ever good fortune without difficulties, difficulties without luck? Back in college, we learned a French proverb: "Après la pluie, le beau temps": after the rain comes sunshine. Do they have a proverb like that there? Are the people there as optimistic? I would finish up the phrase like this: "And after the sun, comes the rain (or the snow)".

Enough with the proverb, though. For you, I'd rather wish you an eternal sunshine. Hugs and kisses, my sun.

Sassa,

From Shanghai

### 7.2.2 Letter 51

I don't know what I have to forgive you of, dear Yuan. And I don't want to know. However, I understand full well that we cannot live in a world without giving up to some extent, if not completely, the principles and customs of another world. It's the same as how we never managed to translate a Chinese concept into French. Our language teachers taught us that to speak in French you must think in French. The same goes for love.

When we are in love, we write each other letters. You, who are a good writer, you even write poems. Those who don't know how to write sing songs to each other. I told this to my French friend. She looked at me, wide-eyed: "That's lovely, but don't you make love?" In Montreal as in other western cities, I believe, they don't love each other in the same ways as we do here at home. I suppose that if people like each other, they make love from the first day on: if they don't do it right away, it's because they don't love each other enough yet; the day that they no longer make love, they break up. Have I got it wrong? And so I understand why Da Li's friend (has she spoken to you of her friend who she is in love with?) couldn't remain faithful to his long-distance fiancé. He makes love to Montreal and sends letters to Shanghai: living in two worlds, he loves in two ways. I think that's just fine.

So my dear friend, do not go looking for reasons that don't exist if I choose to stay in Shanghai. I prefer not leaving. Because I don't have as much courage as you. I have never really gotten used to this town where I've lived so many years. How could I go out and face a world that is almost completely unknown to me? I have tried to come and join you because I love you. I love you when every day I reread the poems you've written me, in a way that is old fashioned, even in our country,

"You love his poems more than him," my sister tells me.

But, without these poems, what would become of you with your programming commands that anyone can understand? What else is there besides these love poems, which make you unique from the multitude of people that go through our lives? Yet, I realize now that this love will bore you sooner or later. My rational mind tells me that all love ends in boredom in a world where rights are more important than duty, where ties and jewelry are more important than poems and skin and bones more important than smiles.

And so, I am staying here. To be honest, I won't be any happier here than elsewhere. In this city of ours, love dies at a rate that will soon match Montreal's. We, the citizens of a backwards country, are becoming modernized with the rest of the world despite ourselves. All the same, I won't leave this country where we met and which has become unique to me because of your poems. When a love is too sick, you don't move it, in order to avoid complications. You calmly wait for its end, bury it in its birthplace and inscribe poems on its tomb, in its own language.

Sassa,

From Shanghai

### **7.3 Da Li**

#### **7.3.1 Letter 16**

How are you doing, Sassa? Are you feeling better now?

You know, being strong and healthy will be absolutely necessary if you come and live here. Yesterday, a Chinese student came to eat at the restaurant, accompanied by a larger gentleman. They seemed to be discussing something important. Before leaving, the young student took the time to come over to the counter to say to me in Shanghainese, "If I'm not mistaken, you are from the same city as I am? Speaking as a friend, don't wear yourself out. If

you're going to have anything, it's got to be health. So take care not to lose it; North America is a battlefield for the young and strong, and an immense tomb for the old and sick."

And that's one of the reasons I love America. Here, people live on a battlefield and die in a grave. A perfectly normal life, isn't it? I have the impression that back in Shanghai, for lack of space, we live on tiptoes, and when we die, our bodies have to disappear into fire. No stone to represent us, no tomb to hide in. Dead or living, we are perpetually suspended in the void.

I'm now living in the same building as Yuan. He's very helpful. He's like an older brother, kind and serious. Thanks to the recommendation of one of his friends, I now have a job at the campus library. My career as a servant and waitress come to an end today. All this week, the owner of the restaurant has received numerous phone calls about the position. I'm surprised. In this city where there are numerous private houses costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, there are also people quarreling over a job that promises them at most five or six dollars an hour.

Working at that restaurant made me aware of some pretty astonishing things. Apart from the owner's greed and his aversion to taxes and swindlers, there was still the interesting comings and goings of the clientele. What struck me the most was that our clients were incessantly changing girlfriends or boyfriends or wives or husbands, and yet remained strangely faithful to the same dishes when they sat down to eat. They almost always ordered the same thing. That's entirely the opposite of what we do back home. Don't you find, like me, that in Shanghai the people—faithful despite everything—grant themselves more novelty when it comes to the things they order? Could it be that, here just as there, we all need to be bold in one area of life and a little more moderate in another?

Take care of yourself and write me.

Da Li,

From Montreal

### 7.3.2 Letter 50

I've decided to leave, Sassa. I said this same thing in Shanghai, not long ago. It seems like this sentence has been following me around since my birth and will always stay within me. The thing is, I can't stand the death of people and of things. When my grandfather passed away, I was fourteen years old and I took the train for Beijing. I stayed with my aunt for several months to flee the shadow this death had left on my father's face. At eighteen years old, while at the College of Foreign Languages, I nearly abandoned my studies because you were angry with me because I had laughed too much when Yuan had been talking to me. I managed to switch classes; I felt better and the boys, who weren't like Yuan, looked at me. That last year, I told you, "I have to leave," since so many people at that time were leaving without knowing exactly why, but each had a dying illusion that they hoped, by going somewhere more promising, to save, if not to be definitively rid of [...].

However this time I know perfectly well the reason that I'm leaving: I have to leave him and run away from my love for him. He and I will never truly be free: we can't get to the point of being together without feeling guilty. I'm aware of my immorality and he of his betrayal. Neither he nor I can forget the past. Try as we might to leave our homeland behind us, the spirit of Master Conman has followed us here, crushing our simple happiness and complicating life.

Yuan's been angry with me lately. He suspects that it was my letters that discouraged you from coming to Montreal. Do you think that's the case? I mean, I always wanted you both to end up together and for you to be happy. And I never spoke badly of him to you. Anyway, he seems like he's still the perfect fiancé. Despite everything, I'm deeply grateful for what he's done for me. Without him, my stay in Montreal would've been more difficult.



I'll head to Paris in a week. No need to say how much that city fascinates me. You know how all our youth was marked by it: it's kind of because of Paris that we studied French, spent the best moments of our lives conjugating ridiculous verbs, believing that elsewhere was better than home. I know that my stay in Paris won't be easy. It's never easy to come face to face with those things that we've dreamt of for so long. But what can you do about it? We live for that which we've dreamt of.

I'll start taking history classes next spring. If all goes well, I'll go back to Montreal and even Shanghai. I don't know when or how, but I'll come back. I'll come back, just like I told my aunt at the train station after my grandfather's death, just like I said to my mother a few months back at the airport in Shanghai. I'll come back, but first I have to get away. I'll send you word when I'm settled in again, if that is ever possible, of course.

Adieu, Sassa and take care of yourself.

Da Li

From Montreal

**APPENDIX : SPECIFICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION OF *LES LETTRES CHINOISES***

<b>1</b>	<b>Content type</b>	Literature
<b>2</b>	<b>Audience</b>	Principally North American English readers, but generally any English reader, probably unfamiliar with French or Chinese culture.
<b>3</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<p>More overt than covert.</p> <p>While I don't want this to read like a translation, there is a French and Chinese culture inherent in the text that must be retained because the work is all about the challenges of being an exile abroad as well as in one's own country. In order to preserve this foreign tone, the translation will sometimes be more literal and thus more overt.</p> <p>What I want to be covert is the fact that these are supposed to be letters. And while certainly more literary than your average letters, I want to keep the presence of as natural a voice as possible while retaining the poetic style of the author.</p>
<b>4</b>	<b>Subject Field</b>	Literature
<b>5</b>	<b>Source Language</b>	French
<b>6</b>	<b>Volume</b>	23,613 words
<b>7</b>	<b>Complexity and obstacles (origin)</b>	Poetic style, written in author's second language
<b>8</b>	<b>Target Language</b>	English
<b>9</b>	<b>Self-checking/post-editing</b>	Refer to Volk and Raghavan
<b>10</b>	<b>Revision</b>	Including completeness check and terminology check
<b>11</b>	<b>Identification of Steps</b>	Monolingual review, glossary, criteria, thoughts

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