

What's in a Name?

Translating Proper Nouns from Chinese:
Dorothy Tse's 《鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩》 and
its Italian Translation as a Case Study



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My *name* is Alice, but—'

'It's a stupid enough name!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?'

'*Must* a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully.

'Of course it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: '*my* name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.'

Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking-Glass*, Chapter VI

為人取名字是一種輕便的，小規模的創造。

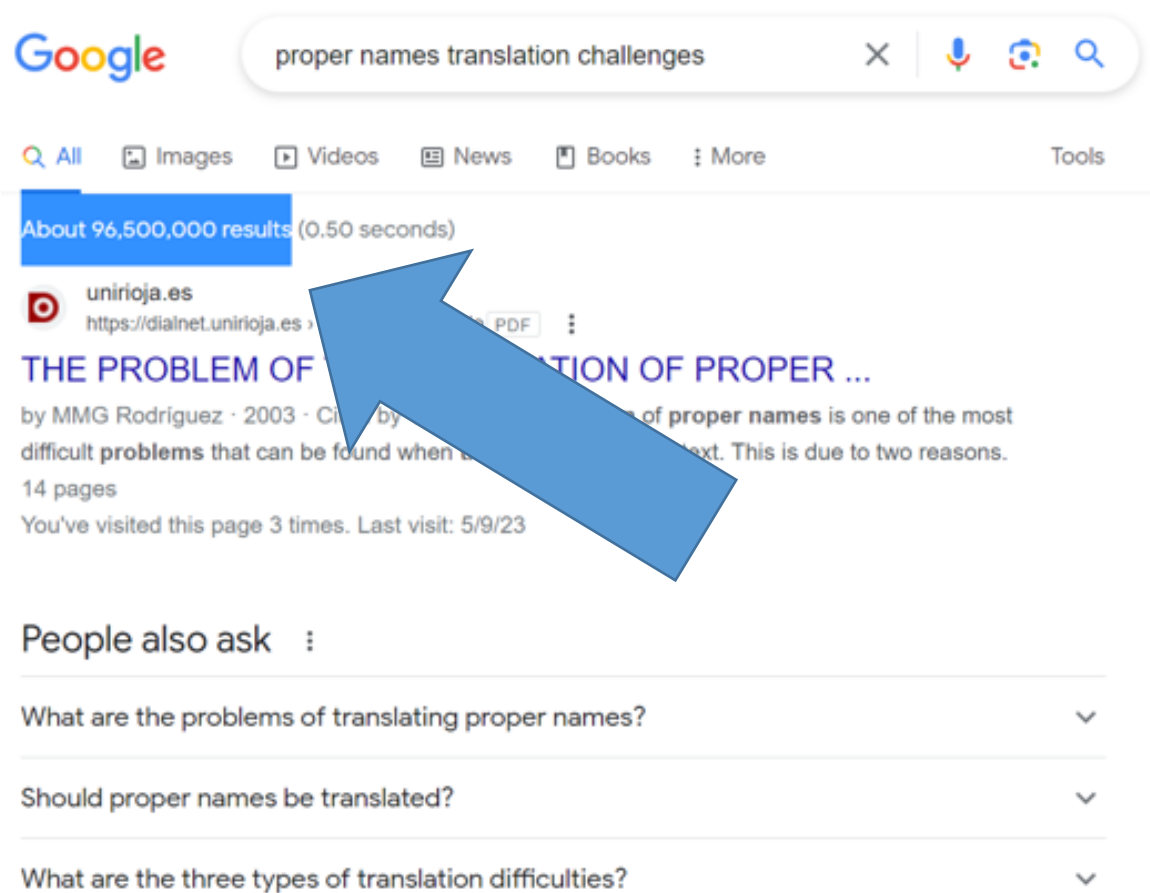
(To give someone a name is a practical, small-scale act of creation.)

張愛玲 - Eileen Chang, 1944: 必也正名乎 [What is necessary is to rectify names]

What will I discuss today?

- **Rationale of the study**
- **A wee bit of theory:**
 - ❑ At the intersection of two fields of studies
 - ❑ What are proper names?
 - ❑ What are the theories behind their (un)translation?
- **Presentation of my case study:** Dorothy Tse (謝曉虹) and her novel *Owl-ish* (《鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩》)
- **Proper names in the novel:**
 - ❑ Their explicit and inferred meanings
 - ❑ Their Italian translation
- **Concluding remarks**

Why am I interested in this topic?



A screenshot of a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "proper names translation challenges". Below the search bar, the results show "About 96,500,000 results (0.50 seconds)". The first result is from "unirioja.es" with the URL "https://dialnet.unirioja.es". The title of the document is "THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION OF PROPER ...". The snippet below the title reads: "by MMG Rodríguez · 2003 · Cited by ... of proper names is one of the most difficult problems that can be found when ... text. This is due to two reasons. 14 pages You've visited this page 3 times. Last visit: 5/9/23". A large blue arrow points from the text "Challenges faced when translating Dorothy Tse's novel into Italian" in the adjacent list towards the search results. Below the search results, there is a section titled "People also ask" with three questions: "What are the problems of translating proper names?", "Should proper names be translated?", and "What are the three types of translation difficulties?". Each question has a downward arrow next to it.

- Varying approaches to translating proper nouns in Chinese and Sinophone literature
- Challenges faced when translating Dorothy Tse's novel into Italian
- Widely recognized complexity of proper noun translation (as evidenced by search results)

Theoretical framework

- At the intersection of two disciplines: *Translation Studies* and *Onomastics*
- According to Salmon (2006):
 - ❑ Translation unit (TU) = minimum textual fragment that cannot be broken down into translatable sub-elements (你叫甚麼名字)
 - ❑ A good translation works when each target TU functions the same way the source TU did for the source audience
 - ❑ Natural languages consist of TUs (mainly formulaic language) rather than single words

The meaning of “meaning”:

- ❑ A mental response to external stimuli. It is variable, related to the contextualized experiences stored in the recipient's mind
- ❑ Shaped by explicit and implicit factors
- ❑ The meaning of a word never entirely determinable w/o a reference context

What are proper names?

A proper name or noun (PN) “is the name of a particular person, place, organization, or thing. Proper nouns begin with a capital letter.” (Collins Dictionary)

- PN, like all other words, are significant elements
- PN can have multi-level evocative potential, connected to different groups of speakers
- Meaning of PN emerges through activation of all concomitant levels, such as:
 - ❑ Etymological (美英, 南京, 雲南)
 - ❑ Phonological/Orthoepic/Graphic (黎明 Li Ming or Lai Ming?, 澳門 Aomen or Ou Mun?)
 - ❑ Morphological (妮婷)
 - ❑ Geo-ethnic (such as the surname 馬, or the toponym 纳家户)
 - ❑ Intertextual (金蓮)

What are proper names?

- Desemanticization of etymology linked to the reinforcement of the semiotic value of the PN.
- As the PN ceases to be similar to a common name, it becomes more of a sign (e.g. 香港, 清華大學, Chinese surnames).
- In literature, the act of naming someone, something or somewhere is never casual.
- We can evaluate their presence considering:
 - ❑ the contribution to characterization (they are used “in some cases to anticipate the drawing of a character or even make it unnecessary”. [Garcés, 2003])
 - ❑ (intertextual) allusions

What are the theories behind their (un)translation?

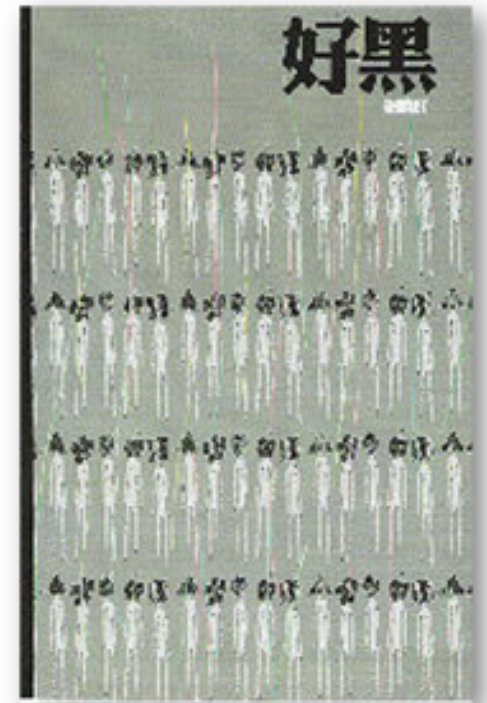
- “The translation of names is often assumed to be a process of transliteration, where letters and the sounds they constitute can be directly transplanted or accurately converted from one language to another with little or no ambiguity”. (Tsai, 2014)
- Aixelá (2000) proposes strategies that tend to:
 - ❑ preserve the original name
 - repetition
 - orthographic adaptation
 - semantic translation
 - extratextual gloss, intratextual gloss
 - ❑ substitute it
 - ideological adaptation,
 - limited neutralization, absolute neutralization,
 - naturalization,
 - Discursive creation
 - omission

Presentation of the case study

謝曉虹, alias Dorothy Tse (1977)



- ❑ Poet, fiction writer, and translator from HK
- ❑ Professor of Creative Writing at HKBU
- ❑ Notable works:
 - ✓ *So Black* (好黑, 2002): Short story collection
 - ✓ *Owlish* (鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩, 2020): Novel
- ❑ Style: Blends magical realism, dystopia, and surrealism
- ❑ Themes: alienation and complexities of modern society
- ❑ Insights into modern urban life, especially in HK



Presentation of the case study

《鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩》

- ❑ A “whimsical satirical tale” in a transformed version of HK.
- ❑ 鷹頭貓(Eagle-headed cat): defies categorization.
- ❑ He speaks in a cryptic language, quotes from the Bible...
- ❑ Prof Q: Disillusioned teacher in a culturally deprived city.
- ❑ He falls in love with a ballerina doll
- ❑ Complexities of a failed love affair.
- ❑ **Unique naming system reveals a hidden world.**
- ❑ References to Western literary and artistic works.
- ❑ **Themes of apathy, alienation, desire, corruption, and bureaucracy.**
- ❑ Vivid portrayal of HK's peculiarities, cultural aspects, real events.



What type of proper names can be found in the novel?

- ❑ **Charactonyms** (either in full or only the initials): humans, toys, undefined...
- ❑ **Toponyms**: all fictitious places that either clearly symbolize a real place or suggest a specific place/atmosphere
- ❑ **Names of institutions**: universities
- ❑ **UNIQUE NAMING SYSTEM REVEALS A HIDDEN WORLD.**
- ❑ Examples of charactonyms: 鷹頭貓、教授Q、瑪利亞、愛麗詩、多麗根
- ❑ Examples of toponyms: 摩根地、維利亞、剎難
- ❑ Examples of institutions: 維利亞大學、孤舟大學

Charactonyms

- ❑ **鷹頭貓**: literally “Eagle-headed cat”, inversion of the characters for “owl” (貓頭鷹) → in Italian, inv. of the 2 syllables of the word for owl “gufo” → **FUGO** (also the idea of “flight, escape” → fuga) [SEMANTIC TRANSL.]
- ❑ **教授Q**: translated as **PROFESSOR Q**. (metaliterary ref. to Ah Q, with whom he shares some features) [SEMANTIC TRANSL. + REPETITION]
- ❑ **瑪利亞**: transliterated as **MARIA**. She is described as having almost mystical perfection, a saintly grace (e.g. p.75: *Maria, seduta sulla panchina del belvedere, con un'espressione stoica sul suo bel viso senza un filo di trucco, agli uomini della comitiva sembrava una Madonna*). [ORTOGRAPHIC ADAPT.]

臉，在那些同行的男人們看來，她的神態確實就像聖母瑪利亞

這天，當不施脂粉的瑪利亞坐在山腰瞭望台的石凳上，露出了一張寡慾者的亮麗的

Charactonyms

- ❑ **愛麗詩**: the ballerina from the title (Ngo-lai-si). At first: “Alice”, but then became **EILISH** because of p.219 (*Dici che ti chiami Eilish. «Come Elise di Beethoven o come Alice, quella che attraversa lo specchio?».*) [ORTOGRAPHIC ADAPT.]
- ❑ **多麗根**: the first doll Professor Q becomes obsessed with. Cantonese pronunciation (Do-lai-gan) → becomes **DOLLYGIRL** [ORTOGRAPHIC ADAPT. + SEMANTIC TRANSL.]

你說，你叫做愛麗詩。

女孩問你：「是貝多芬的愛麗詩，還是在鏡中世界的愛麗詩？」

P.219

Toponyms

- ❑ **摩根地:** the place where the action takes place, that corresponds to HKSAR.
 - ✓ English: “Nevers”.
 - ✓ Italian adapts the English [DISCURSIVE CREATION] by dropping the “S”: **NEVER** (which, in turn, reminds us that it is a fictional world as in Neverland by J. M. Barrie)
- ❑ **维利亚:** this is both Never’s core area and the metropolis, thus corresponding to both HK island and GB.
 - ✓ It is the Sinophone transliteration of Queen Victoria’s name, minus the “cto” → **VIRIA** [ORTOGHRAPIC ADAPT.]
- ❑ **刹難:** country across from Never (PRC).
 - ✓ Play with Buddhist terminology (ksana 刹那 *saa_t-na*, “split-second”) and the English toponym “China”.
 - ✓ In Italian → word play is kept by merging the two words: “Ksana” and “Cina” → **KSINA** [ORTOGRAPHIC ADAPTATION + DISCURSIVE CREATION]

Institutions

- ❑ 維利亞大學: literally the “University of Viria”, but it could be misleading (which Viria?) → **UNIVERSITÀ DELL’IMPERO** [DISCURSIVE CREATION]
- ❑ 孤舟大學: literally the “Lone Boat University”, but it doesn’t work in Italian, because of its Academic naming tradition (Univ + place name). It has become: “**UNIVERSITÀ GU ZAU**” with “ovvero ‘**della giunca solitaria**’”. [SEMANTIC TRANSL. + ORTOGRAPHIC ADAPT. + IN-TEXT GLOSS]



Concluding remarks

- ❑ Translation of proper names from Chinese requires going beyond the translate/transcribe divide.
- ❑ Case-by-case translation choices: consider surface and inferred meanings, author's intention, and TL naming practices.
- ❑ Consideration of author's provenance and language of reading aloud is crucial for accurate transliteration.
- ❑ Translating Sinophone literature into Italian presents unique challenges and opportunities.
- ❑ Steppingstone to larger project on the uniqueness of translating Sinophone literature (vs. ChinLit) into Italian.

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