

On the Translatable Properties of Transnational Parenting

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Out of the profuse 31 million YouTube channels, I encountered one that became the center of my thesis research. I wanted, or rather needed, to explore the act of translation. From one language to another, it has been an integral shadow of my mundane since the age of twelve when I moved to the United States from Taiwan. It is an automated two-way process that operated smoothly until I became aware of the geopolitical implications behind both the *langue* and *parole* in language. Dynamics exist inherently in a system structured upon a power imbalance, and to be a facilitator in this liminal space means a straddling and mastering of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls Double Consciousness on a globalized, postcolonial, and diasporic level.

Kinukuro is a vibrant Taiwanese YouTube channel owned by two career creatives, Kinugawa and Kurokawa, hence the channel title *Kinukuro*—a combination of their names. Despite the Japanese etymology, the two communicate mostly in Taiwanese Mandarin. They embody eclectic video game characters as they play, voice-acting and stage-commenting. One particular series of videos intrigued me, in which the duo plays an indie novel game made in the U.S., titled *Butterfly Soup*. Kinugawa has reached out to the creator of the game, Brianna Lei, to provide the Mandarin translation of the game as a volunteer. The result is a fascinating rewriting of Lei's story.

Kinugawa does not only translate the text from English to Mandarin, she also reformulates culturally specific content to fit Taiwanese sensibilities. For example, a line from the original English says, “[Diya] was also insanely athletic. There were rumors that under her shirt, she had a six-pack.” Kinugawa translated these two sentences into: “Diya’s athletic nerves

are abnormally well-developed. [I] heard that she even has six-pack muscles.” The phrase “under her shirt” has been edited out of the Mandarin version. I suspect it may be too erotic as a description, invoking an image of a naked body under the shirt. While the topic of teenage bodies is not explicitly taboo in Taiwanese culture, it can be considered inappropriate. Such is the kind of translation Kinugawa accomplished to bring *Butterfly Soup* to a Sinophonic audience.

Realizing Lei’s Taiwanese American heritage was an epiphanic moment. In the triangle of postwar transnational Taiwanese identities, *Kinukuro* represents the millennial generation of those who never left Taiwan while Lei represents the contemporaneous counterpart whose progenitors found new homes in North America. As the third point of the said triangle, I insert myself as the purgatorial immigrant whose privileges enable a bird-like seasonal migratory pattern that accords to school semesters.

As I continued to analyze Kinugawa’s translation, I became aware that I was analyzing a transcultural framework of a Taiwanese identity-umbrella. The more subtle differences in values and judgements I encounter, the more overlapping similarities reveal themselves. Lei’s notably broad range of Asian American racial representations, for example, were an element that *Kinukuro* did not recognize. On the other hand, an effort on Lei’s part to make the point that Japanese subculture is highly influential to Asian American youth culture does not get lost. It communicates so well to the Taiwanese that it barely needed contextualization, in addition to the linguistic translation. The work I do, then, is translating what Kinugawa has translated into Mandarin back into English with my interpretations of how and why is it significant. I also translate the commentary between Kinugawa and Kurokawa from Mandarin into English in order to close-read for their insightful social commentary.

Lei wrote a Taiwanese American character whose story most viscerally struck both Kurokawa and me. In the story, Noelle, a second-generation Taiwanese character, has a blistering fight with her mother. The argument ensues as she caught Noelle chatting with her friends on the computer instead of doing work. In response to Noelle's talking back, her mother spats, "You ungrateful child! The whole reason we came to America is so you could live a better life. We made so many sacrifices for you!" The narration continues, "[Noelle's mother] hovers over her shoulder for a few more minutes to verify that Noelle is doing work." In her internal dialogue, Noelle thinks to herself, "Don't you have anything better to do[?] Oh, that's right, you don't. Because you have no friends or hobbies and live vicariously through me."

Tiger parenting is not an uncommon narrative amongst both the local and diasporic Asian cultures. However, the term reconfigures a set of intricate ethical guidelines specific to history and culture into an ugly beast-like amalgamation of a stereotype. It promotes an orientalist novel understanding of the parent-child relationship based on a brand of progressive Western ethnocentrism that has not garnered enough critical examination.

I think Kurokawa likely agrees with me. Upon encountering the argument between Noelle and her mother, she comments, "Oh god, oh god... In fact, this is completely what happened in my home. A lot of Taiwanese parents are like that, I feel. And I suspect the author has parents like this. She *is* Taiwanese. She is Taiwanese American." Kurokawa have parents like this. I have parents like this.

Western commentators feel comfortable reviewing the notion of "tiger parenting" as "extreme", "relentless", and "brute-forced". Yet I ask: how does a mother have friends or hobbies when she comes to the U.S. alone with her child, ill-equipped with subpar English, like my

mother? Why could she not achieve what she wanted for herself so that she must live vicariously through her child? What are the concrete sacrifices she has made so that her family may go through the racist, classicist, xenophobic, and humiliating process that is immigration to the United States of America? How does a Taiwanese mother who grew up in 1960s Taiwan, when the annual per capita income averages to 182 U.S. dollars, compared to the U.S. counterpart of 4353 dollars, not demand her children of class ascension upon immigration? How does she not emphasize the importance of education which most likely leads to a professional career that means economic independence, when she had to suffer under the traditional patriarchal structure that deprived her of her own career as a young woman full of potential?

I was in Noelle's place not so long ago, condescendingly judging my own parents without contextual considerations of their behaviors and beliefs. However, in learning to study cultures of which I am the outsider, I have also learned to look inward at my own culture with a pair of eyes that are hopefully less sanctimonious. Kurokawa's inclusion of Lei's diasporic identity as her construction of a transnational Taiwanese ethnosphere perhaps reverberates such sentiment. Although Kurokawa's mother may not have had the added pressure of immigration, my line of inquiry should have delineated the root of such parental motivation as something deeper in the cultural psyche.

I believe Lei did not write the story to criticize mothers who parent this way; instead it sends a message to a definite audience, "You are not alone in this experience, past or present." Both Kurokawa and I, across the chasm of time, space and background, through mediation of different vehicles, received this message loud and clear. This, is a potent case of translating the Untranslatable. I elect to be included in this multiplicity of Taiwanese identity as a political

choice. Albeit creating an expansive container like this may always risk the erasure of compelling dissemblences, it also occupies the boundary-crossing potential of coalition nation-building. If tangible cultural collective does exist, then it certainly necessitates an visionary imagined community enabled through the work of translation.