



Seymour Mayne, *Cusp: Word Sonnets*, trans. Lin Wang, Montgomery, Alabama, Dixie W Publishing Corporation, 2022, 119 pp.

Reseña de acceso abierto distribuida bajo una [Licencia Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#). / Open access review under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/3fhzrj77>

Cusp: Word Sonnets (2014) is a poetry collection by Seymour Mayne, a professor of English language and literature at the University of Ottawa and one of the leading figures of the “word sonnet”. The collection is divided into two main sections, “Crossroads” and “Wind and Forest” and composed of a total of fifty-six poems, each of which is full of profound emotional and philosophical reflections. In July 2022, Dixie W Publishing Corporation released a bilingual English-Chinese edition of this book, which was translated by Lin Wang, an associate professor at the School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Hubei University of Arts and Science (China), who is specialized in English literature and translation theory. It was during one of her study visits to Ottawa, Canada, that she was inspired to translate *Cusp: Word Sonnets* into Chinese and to introduce the word sonnet, an experimental variation of the traditional sonnet, to the Sinophone world.

Seymour Mayne, the poet, was brought up in the heart of one of Montreal’s multicultural immigrant neighborhoods (Mayne, 2021). From an early age, Mayne began reading poetry in a wide range of languages and has been putting his poetic impulse into practice since the late 1950s, when he was a teenager. He shows no signs of slowing down after more than six decades of writing and currently has over seventy publications to his credit (Frye, 2020). Throughout his writing career, he has pursued concise and resonant forms that pack a wealth of suggestion and feeling into their few lines (Mayne, 2021). Along the way, he encountered Imagism, Japanese *haiku*, and *Pirkei Avot*, and later, one of his friends then introduced him to the realm of the word sonnet.

The first word sonnet was published by the American poet Brad Leithauser in 1985 (Rykov, 2021). A “miniature” version of a sonnet, the word sonnet, a concise fourteen-line poem with one word per line, which also usually has visual effects (Mayne, 2022, p. ii), is a successor of and innovation on the Shakespearean sonnet. Due to its visuality, there truly is a strong

correlation between this variant and “concrete poetry”, as the latter usually encompasses all manner of shaped, typographically complex, visually self-conscious poetic works.

Concrete poetry has also been described as “visual poetry”, “pattern poetry”, “shaped poetry”, etc., and its development tells a lengthy and fascinating story of an ongoing human wish to combine visual and literary impulses and to tie together the experiences of these two areas into an aesthetic whole (Higgins, 1987, p. 3). Concrete poetry dates to 2700 BC, when Egyptian scribes recognized the linguistic meaning of the visual arrangement of their hieroglyphics (Drucker, 1996, p. 39). Perhaps the earliest concrete poems were the spiral-shaped texts on the “Phaistos Disk” from 1700 BC. Recognized visual poetic works, however, did not appear until the 4th century BC, in Greek manuscripts, and almost all of them deal with religious subjects and may have served some kind of mystical or magical function (Higgins, 1987, p. 5). From ancient Roman times to the Middle Ages, these poems were known as “pattern poetry”. But it is worth noting that in the latter period, writing was largely controlled by monks, who simply wrote for the sake of creating a special “calligraphy” in their manuscripts.

The genre also developed in England yet is often also deeply rooted in religious themes and seems to always hover on the fringe of literary discourse rather than being regarded as a serious poetic form. Ancient Chinese reversible poetry (*huiwenshi*, 回文诗) suffers the same fate. An example is the Six Dynasties female poet Su Hui’s (苏蕙 c. 359-?) famous *xuanjitu* (璇玑图), which uses language as “pictorial material”, to achieve arbitrariness in both the starting position and the order of reading under the premise of an overall “figured poetry” (Xiaofan Amy Li, 2022, p. 208), which makes reading it highly intriguing. But it is precisely for this reason that reversible poems were regarded as “literary diversions” and banished to the marginalised “miscellaneous genres” (杂体) (Métail, 2017, p. 10), and therefore rarely studied until the 1980s.

In the 17th century, with neo-classicism pursuing the rigor and clarity that were in vogue, concrete poetry gradually faded out of European literature. But at the turn of the 20th century, Futurism, initiated by the Italian poet and literary theorist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), came to view the mission of art as exploring the unknown and expressing the impulses of human consciousness. Futurists boldly revolutionized poetic language with typography of diverse sizes, colors, and shapes. At the same time, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) invented the “calligram” to

transcend text and verse, using language-crafted images for powerful visual impact. Even more noteworthy is the fact that Apollinaire and other poets established visual poetry as a movement; it merged with Dadaism, Surrealism, Concretism, etc., propelling the genre forward. With the continuous global development of concrete poetry, several outstanding poets have also emerged in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as Fu Luo, Li Chen, Bing Zhan, etc., and their works have contributed to a gradual shift towards concreteness in Chinese poetry.

A daring innovation, the word sonnet takes literariness and visuality into account all at once, thereby aiming to revitalize modern poetry. Despite its brevity, the word sonnet is in no way inferior to the traditional sonnet in terms of depth of content and emotional expression. Given that the breadth of human short-term memory usually ranges from five to nine items, the word sonnet skillfully takes advantage of this relative cognitive limitation, enabling readers to easily appreciate and deeply understand the content in a short time by integrating poetry with images, contents with forms, instead of sticking to literal expressions.

Mayne's *Cusp: Word Sonnets* has many of the defining characteristics of the word sonnet, yet each poem adheres to the traditional reading sequence, creating a vertical, diachronic spatial arrangement. Thus, the reading experience remains fundamentally one-dimensional. Nonetheless, the shape of these poems, like a vertical line, serves to reinforce their themes, which, in most cases, are symbolized by various images. For instance, one sees the boundary between "night" and "morning" in *Cusp*, the overflowing "line-ups" awaiting "security checks" in *For the Birds*, the sprawling length of a "carpet" in *Magic Carpet*, and the stuffed bookshelf in *The Study*, making each poem strongly graphic in its visual impact.

Due to the very artistry of the seemingly simple "word sonnets", the restriction on the number of words and lines in each of them, and the differences between English and Chinese (Mayne, 2022, p. viii), Wang's translations often appear to deviate from the source text. According to Wang, her translation strategies aim to reproduce the meaning and rhythmic beauty of the original. To capture the characteristics of the poetic style presented in *Cusp*, Wang partially applies "creative treason" to her translation. A key term in literary translation, creative treason, first proposed by the French literary sociologist Robert Escarpit in 1958, is an invariable form in translation (Escarpit, 1987, p. 137). Subsequently, this term was introduced and discussed in a systematic manner by Tianzhen Xie, who believes that there exists "incongruity between the goal of literary translation and its actual

result” which owes much to the visuality and the vividness of literary language, the historical and cultural elements of language, and the life experiences of language users in each context (Xie, 2023, p. 45). In literary translation, the work of the translator is a kind of recreation which, akin to creation in the source language, carries consequential and independent value with it (Liu, 2013). Moreover, “creativity” refers to the translator’s initiative and artistic talent in interpreting and reconstructing the source text. “Treason” in this context does not imply arbitrary deviation from the source text but rather signifies transcending the constraints of absolute fidelity and objectivity and recognizing the inherent limitations of translation. This “disloyal” translation, marked by “creative treason”, not only demonstrates the translator’s style as an artist, but also promotes exchange and mutual understanding among different cultures.

Xie (2023, p. 47) argued that “creative treason is especially prominent in the translation of poetry”. This is due to the unique nature of this genre, particularly the word sonnet, as it is a literary form whose “highly condensed form is inextricably linked with its content”, which poses a dilemma for translators: to preserve the content at the expense of the form, or vice versa. Furthermore, according to Xie (2023, p. 49), excellent translators “have their own principles and aims in literary translation”.

Wang endeavours to adhere to the principle of consistency and to preserve as much as possible the metaphors and the defining feature of “fourteen lines”, aiming to faithfully capture the beauty of language and the images presented in the source text. Given the differences between English and Chinese and the distinctiveness of the word sonnet, namely, fourteen lines with one word set for each line, Wang acknowledged the need to consider translating an English word into a Chinese character with an equivalent or similar meaning in certain instances, whereas in others, she found it more appropriate to translate it into a two-character word (sometimes three or more) in Chinese. A case in point is seen in Mayne’s poem *Way*:

Source text	Translated text	Back translation
Be	如	As
as	风	wind’s
persistent	一般	
as	不屈	persistence
the	不挠;	
wind;	勿让	will not let

let	任何	any
no	岩石	rock
rock	或	or
or	树木	tree
three	阻挡	thwart
thwart	你	your
your	前行	ahead
way	之路。	way.

(Mayne, 2022, p. 12)

This poem is dedicated to Amanda Zamuner, a translator, for her persistent determination and fearlessness in research. Wang translated “way” as “路”, “wind” as “风”, an English word corresponding to a Chinese character. However, she opted for “树木” for “tree” (whereas a simpler single-character equivalent would be “树”) out of consideration for the rhyme scheme, that is, to rhyme “树木” with “之路”, which does not merely mirror the rhyme between “tree” and “way” due to their similar ending phonemes, but also conforms to the disyllabilization of Modern Chinese. Another good example can be found in *For the Birds*, where the phrase “security checks”, with each word occupying one line, is translated as “安检”, a commonly used abbreviation for “安全检查”, which neatly fits into a single line, to ensure the accuracy, simplicity and fluency of the translation.

In addition, function words including “of”, “and”, “that”, etc., and the infinitive “to” have no practical meaning while occupying a line in the poem. To make maintain meaning and form and to create the same visual effect for Chinese readers as for English readers, Wang makes a trade-off, having no alternative but to “discard such empty words”, “look for more appropriate ones to compensate for this ‘missing line’” (Wang, 2022, pp. iv-v, viii-ix), and reconstruct the poems according to the norms of written Chinese.

In translating *The Study*, Wang noticed that the original poem consists of a prepositional phrase and an imperative sentence, whose subject, “you”—the addressee—is not usually expressed. In translation, this “missing” subject must be added according to Chinese syntactic rules. So, Wang adeptly adjusted the sentence structure by transforming the prepositional phrase “With new paint on your walls” into a subject-object construction, i.e., “你的墙壁涂了新漆” (Your walls are coated with new paint) (Mayne, 2022, p. 10). The rearrangement avoids any potential lack of clarity that may occur when

the English imperative sentence is translated into Chinese. It is also in line with the Chinese way of speaking in terms of directness and clarity by putting the subject at the beginning of the sentence, as is the case in the poem *Gong*:

Source text	Translated text	Back translation
The	锣	(The) gong
shock	在	in
of	他	he (his)
the	心	
gong	中	heart
in	引	
his	起	causing
heart	的	
that	惊愕	shock
set	激	(that) set
off	起	off
the	最后	
last	的	(the) last
vibrations!	颤音	vibrations

(Mayne, 2022, p. 30)

In this poem, there are three instances of the definite “the”, a preposition “of”, another preposition “in” and a conjunction “that”. Like the preposition “off” in “set off”, none of these function words carry any notional meaning in Chinese, and forcing their retention in the translation would go against the habits of Chinese expression. Therefore, by “omission” and “amplification”, Wang deleted these words that lack an immediate equivalent or a similar function word in Chinese and creatively added the phrase “引起的” (brought about), which explicitly emphasizes the causality between “gong” and the feeling of “shock”.

It suggests that the sound of “gong” directly leads to the feeling of “shock”, lending the translation vivid images and appeal. Wang’s approach ensures that most lines of the translation retain a single character, aligning with the characteristics of the word sonnet while maintaining the fluency and conciseness of Chinese. Additionally, the technique of amplification is also reflected in the translation of the poem *Message*:

Source text	Translated text	Back translation
This	这	This
is	是	is
the	身体	body
body's	的	's
message:	信号:	message
am	我	I
slowly	在	am
giving	慢慢	slowly
up	放弃	giving up
but	但	but
not	还	yet
ready	没	not
to	准备	ready
surrender	投降。	(to) surrender.

(Mayne, 2022, p. 78)

Due to the limitations on the number of lines in a word sonnet in the source text, Mayne presumably had to omit the subject “I” and imply its presence using “am”. However, given the significant grammatical differences between the two languages, “am” lacks a direct Chinese counterpart and fails to function as an effective reminder of the subject or personal pronoun. Wang’s creative treason through the addition of “我” (I) makes up for the absent sentence element and allows Chinese readers to experience more directly the inner struggle and resistance of the “I” figure as he or she is gradually giving up.

Errors of translation, i.e., “mistranslation”, do occur in literary translation. According to Xie, “mistranslation...in many cases” is “unintentional creative treason”, which results from “the translators’ insufficient knowledge of the source language” (Xie, 2023, p. 54) and is usually a barrier to cultural or literary exchange. In Wang’s translation, imperfections are inevitable, and mistranslations lurk within its pages. A case in point is the poem *5485 St. Urbain Street, Montreal*, in which Mayne uses the withering of the two leading trees that adorn autumn with their changing hues—“the ash” and “maple” (the certainty stems from the fact that the shape

of the entire poem resembles both a straight highway and a towering tree)—to profoundly and subtly express his anxiety and lamentation over the relentless destruction of natural environments by human activities. Due to cultural differences and the complexity of language transfer, Wang inadvertently mistranslated “the ash”, which refers to the ash tree, as “灰烬”(ashes), and “maple” as “枫叶”(maple leaf), which not only weakens the natural images in the original poem but also distorts, to a certain extent, the deeper meaning that Mayne had intended to convey. Furthermore, despite Wang’s claim that she preserves the major characteristics of “fourteen lines” (2022, p. iv, viii), the poems *Giving* and *Winds* occupy fifteen and sixteen lines respectively, thereby violating the basic principle of word sonnets.

Nonetheless, mistranslation can also be done with purpose as, for instance, in the poem *White Angel*:

Source text	Translated text	Back translation
What	这	This
manly	是	is
blessing	多么	so
is	有	
this:	男子	manly
to	气概	
rise	的	
up	祝福:	blessing
and	像	as
expire	死亡	death
like	天使	angel
a	一样	—
white	飞升	rising up
angel?	并	and
	逝去。	expiring.

(Mayne, 2022, p. 54)

Mayne dedicated this poem to Howie Osterer, a baseball player from Ottawa who passed away from a sudden illness while umpiring a youth baseball game in Israel. The poem captures the heartbreak scene, “there he was... under a white sheet, in his umpire uniform” (Egan, 2014) and suggests

a peaceful transition, as if Osterer had expired like an angel in the purity of “white” and ascended to heaven. Xie (2023, p. 46) argues that “when a literary work in one language system is ‘transplanted’ into another, the translator must reproduce the source text’s artistic effects by identifying and using linguistic devices that arouse an identical or similar response”. Recognizing that Chinese readers might be unfamiliar with the poem’s context, not to mention its profound undertones, Wang made a creative decision, “betraying” the source text by intentionally mistranslating “white” as “死亡” (death), instead of being confined to its literal meaning. Her “treason” was not arbitrary but strategic, aimed at effectively conveying the emotional resonance to Chinese readers. By replacing the symbolic “white” with the more direct and emotionally charged term “死亡”, Wang bridged the information gap, emphasized the tragic nature of Osterer’s passing, and invited Chinese readers to experience the grief and sorrow that the poem evokes.

To conclude, Wang’s translation embodies a synergy between unaltered “faithfulness” and creative interpretation of the source text, often referred to as “creative treason”. The “disloyalty” of her translation is not a disrespectful or unrestrained free-for-all; rather, it stems from her deep respect for the source text and shows her pioneering spirit. Despite the presence of minor, inconsequential errors, she preserved the images and emotions of the poems while adapting them to the linguistic conventions and aesthetic preferences of Chinese readers through flexible translation strategies. The bilingual edition of *Cusp: Word Sonnets* exemplifies how translators can be both craftsmen of language and faithful transmitters, bridging two cultures and enabling readers to share the universal appeal of literature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Humanities and Social Science Foundation of the Ministry of Education (China) [Grant No. 23XJC740002].

REFERENCES

Egan, Kelly (2014). “Egan: Life, death of Howie Osterer: baseball and crossing home.” Retrieved on February 6, 2024, from <https://ottawa>

citizen.com/news/local-news/egan-life-death-of-howie-osterer-israel-and-baseball-touch-home-plate

Frye, Ronald P. (2020). “Book Review-Perfume: Poems and Word Sonnets by Seymour Mayne.” Retrieved on January 16, 2024, from <https://www.ottawajewishbulletin.com/arts-culture/book-review-perfume-poems-and-word-sonnets-by-seymour-mayne>

Higgins, Dick (1987). *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. State University of New York Press.

Drucker, Johanna (1993). Experimental, visual, and concrete poetry: A note on historical context and basic concepts.” In K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker (Eds.)m *Experimental-Visual-Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s* (pp. 39-61). Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449374_006

Li, Xiaofan Amy (2022). A Post-Orientalist Turn: Pascal Quignard, Michèle Métail, and China.” In Zong-qi Cai and Stephen Roddy (Eds.), *The Western Reinvention of Chinese Literature, 1910-2010: From Ezra Pound to Maxine Hong Kingston* (pp. 195-222). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004515031_010

Liu, Xiaogang (2013). Creative treason: A hermeneutic perspective. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 18 (1), 156-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2013.12015510>

Mayne, Seymour and Spoturno, María Laura (2021). The word sonnet: A distillation: A conversation between author Seymour Mayne and editor and translator María Laura Spoturno. *Tusaaji: A Translation Review*, 8 (1), 66-75. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1925-5624.40425>

Métail, Michèle (2017). *Wild Geese Returning: Chinese Reversible Poems* (Trans. Jody Gladding / Introd. Jeffrey Yang). Chinese University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2n7q3w> ; <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.52508>

Robert Escarpit (1987). *Wen Xue She Hui Xue (The Sociology of Literature)*. An Hui Wen Yi Chu Ban She.

Xie, Tianzhen (2023). *Introduction to Medio-Translatology*. Peking University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-1268-1>

YUANJIE SONG

Southwest University of Science and Technology, China

songyuanjie0224@163.com

<https://orcid.org/0000.0002.9985.1563>

KE DENG

Southwest University of Science and Technology, China

Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

dengke2014@swust.edu.cn; dengke@bfsu.edu.cn;

<https://orcid.org/0000.0002.9985.1563>