Cultural Translation and Creative Misunderstanding in the Art of Wenda Gu

David Cateforis
One of the major Chinese-born avant-garde artists of his generation, Wenda Gu (b. Shanghai, 1955) began his career as part of the ’85 Movement in China, relocated to the United States in 1987, and achieved international renown in the 1990s. Since the late 1990s Gu has spent increasing amounts of time back in China participating in that country’s booming contemporary art scene; he now largely divides his time between Brooklyn and Shanghai. This transnational experience has led Gu to create numerous art works dealing with East–West interchange. This paper introduces and briefly analyzes two of his recent projects, *Forest of Stone Steles—Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry* (1993–2005), and *Cultural Transference—A Neon Calligraphy Series* (2004–7), both of which explore creatively certain problems and paradoxes of attempts to translate between Chinese and English languages and cultures.

A full understanding of these projects requires some knowledge of the work that first gained Gu international recognition, his *united nations* series of installations, begun in 1993. The series consists of a sequence of what Gu calls “monuments,” made principally of human hair fashioned into such elements as bricks, carpets, and curtains, and combined to create large quasi-architectural installations. Comprising national monuments made from hair collected within a single country and installed there, and transnational or “universal” monuments made of hair collected from around the world, Gu’s series uses blended human hair to suggest the utopian possibility of human unification through biological merger. At the same time, many works in the series, such as the iconic *united nations—babel of the millennium* (Figure 1) feature unreadable scripts based on English, Hindi, Arabic, and ancient Chinese seal script, which symbolize
the reality of linguistic and other cultural differences that continue to divide humanity.³

The largest pseudo-characters in this united nations monument are synthesized from elements of ancient Chinese seal script and English letters; they are hybrid characters that evoke the cultural fusion brought about by globalization. Wenda Gu is fascinated by the ways in which globalization, with its emphasis on transnational exchange in every sphere of human activity, necessitates translation between different languages and cultures, often resulting in misunderstanding. The artist himself cultivates cross-cultural confusion by using both the names Wenda Gu (in the West) and Gu Wenda (in Asia), while his imperfect English leads him to commit frequent misspellings and grammatical mistakes. Turning this situation to his advantage, he sees such misunderstanding as a positive force, declaring: “Only through the misunderstanding can we create the new!”⁴ On this basis Gu conceived of an ambitious long-term
project paralleling the united nations series: Forest of Stone Steles—Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry (Figure 2), which employs a process he calls “Complex Chinese-English Translation” to create new “post-Tang” poems in Chinese and English out of the Tang originals and their English translations.5

In contrast to the united nations series, which seeks to transcend cultural specificity, and even the notion of biological difference as a marker of culture, as it aims at universal inclusiveness, the Forest of Stone Steles series is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions, which it creatively transforms. Inspired by the famous Forest of Stone Steles Museum in Xi’an, which displays thousands of steles spanning Chinese history, Gu’s work comprises 50 hand-carved and engraved slate steles, each weighing 1.3 tons, and 2,500 ink rubbings made from their surfaces. After several years of planning, a team of expert craftsmen under Gu’s employ in Xi’an produced the steles and rubbings through traditional methods beginning in 2000. The completed series was displayed in November 2005 in a grand installation at the OCT-Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen.6

Whereas traditional steles stand upright, Gu’s are horizontal, evoking the toppling of tradition and referencing death through their resemblance to tomb slabs.7 Historical steles typically bore engraved epitaphs, imperial or official inscriptions, historical records, philosophical or literary texts, or examples of the writing of famous calligraphers. Departing from such precedents to introduce an alternation between languages, each of Gu’s steles and rubbings presents a series of poetic texts in Chinese and English that switch between vertical and horizontal formats to signal the alternation between cultures.

To help the reader follow the description of the stele layout, I reproduce here both the word-processed starting point (Figure 3), which presents all of the texts horizontally, and the rubbing of the corresponding finished stele (Figure 4), which presents the texts in alternating vertical and horizontal orientation. The first text is
a classic Tang dynasty poem in its original Chinese form, presented in a vertical column at the upper right, based on a viewing position from the bottom, short end of the stele. Characters in Gu’s own calligraphy introduce the poem, which is engraved in characters that emulate the printed Fang Song typeface. The second text, presented horizontally in engraved Times New Roman typeface, is an English translation of the Tang poem by the American poet Witter Bynner, from his 1929 collection *The Jade Mountain*. The third text, presented vertically in large characters in Gu’s distinctive calligraphy in the stele’s center, is Gu’s retranslation of Bynner’s English back into Chinese on the basis of sound rather than meaning: it is a transliteration rendered through Chinese characters whose Mandarin pronunciation approximates the sounds of Bynner’s English. The result is a bizarre surrealist text that Gu calls a “post-Tang” poem. The fourth text is Gu’s retranslation of the post-Tang Chinese poem into English on the basis of meaning, which makes the absurdity accessible to English readers. It is again presented horizontally and engraved in Times New Roman typeface. The fifth text, vertically engraved in the Fang Song typeface (found only on the stele and not in the word-processed version), is a Chinese “footnote” explaining Gu’s unique translation process.

The alternation in the steles between Chinese and English texts and between vertical and horizontal textual formats reflects the artist’s transnational experience of moving back and forth frequently between the United States and China. So too does Gu’s “Complex Chinese-English Translation” process, which uses the transliteration of English into Chinese to create new meanings. This method springs from the common transliteration of Western brand names into Mandarin through the use of characters whose pronunciation mimics the sounds of the Western language. Mandarin being rich in homophones, there exist numerous possibilities for
transliterating the same Western word through entirely different characters. This can produce a nonsensical string of characters used simply for their sound, as in 麦当劳 mai dang lao for McDonald’s, which means “wheat should toil.” Careful transliteration can sometimes create a wonderfully appropriate new meaning in the target language, however; Coca Cola, for instance, is transliterated as 可口可乐 ke kou ke le, meaning “soothes the mouth and brings joy to the drinker.”

Gu’s use of the process in the Forest of Stone Steles is closer to the first example in its creation of absurdity, essentially mocking serious attempts to translate poetry such as Bynner’s. This can be seen by following the sequence of texts devised by Gu for stele no. 2 (Figure 3). Following the original Chinese, the second text is Bynner’s translation of Li Bai’s poem “In the Quiet Night.” This is followed by Gu’s transliteration of Bynner’s words into Mandarin, here given in pinyin, the current standard romanization system for modern Chinese:

```
sou bu lai tu, e ge li ling, ang ze fu de a fy mai bai de, ku de zei er,
hai fu bing e,
fu luo si da re di. le fu ting mai se fu, tu lu ke ai fang de, za da wa shi
meng lei ti,
xing ke yin bai ke e gan, ai shao sha, deng li ao fu hong.10
```

Read aloud in Mandarin, these sounds mimic those of Bynner’s English words but make little sense in Chinese. The final text is Gu’s free translation of the nonsensical Chinese “post-Tang” poem back into English.

The laughter provoked by the post-Tang poem is fitting; Gu’s work is basically a form of creative play. Philosophically, it seeks to demonstrate that while meaning can be translated, culture (such as a poem) cannot; the attempt to translate culture always results in misunderstanding, and often in absurdity, which is nevertheless creative in its own right. In other words, translation engenders creative transformation.

The steles also display Gu’s creativity as a calligrapher in their central columns of engraved characters, evoking the traditional carving of master calligraphy in stone to preserve it for posterity. Analysis of the distinctive features of Gu’s calligraphy is beyond the scope of this paper; I will simply note that his style incorporates elements of ancient script styles (seal and clerical script) which give it a bold, archaic flavor. The use of the steles to produce ink rubbings, traditionally meant to reproduce and disseminate prized calligraphy, reinforces the connection of Gu’s writing to that of honored calligraphers of the past. Through these references Gu presents his own calligraphy as worthy of preservation, admiration, and perhaps even induction into the canon of great Chinese calligraphy. But the absurd
content of the writing itself defends Gu against charges of hubris; he can claim that he is only kidding and that the impressive historicizing presentation of his writing is only meant to throw its literary lightness into relief.

Around the time he was completing his *Forest of Stone Steles*, Gu embarked on a complementary project that he came to call *Cultural Transference—A Neon Calligraphy Series*. Reproduced here are two of the five works in that series, subtitled *University of Pittsburgh* (Figure 5) and *Sotheby’s* (Figure 6). In both of them, Gu employs the same creative process of “Complex English-Chinese Translation” he developed for the steles, now taking as verbal starting points the names of a Western institution (University of Pittsburgh) and of a corporation (Sotheby’s), written in small yellow roman neon letters in the top register. Both signs present in their center register large outlined red neon characters in Gu’s own calligraphy that transliterate the sounds of the Western names into Mandarin Chinese. In the bottom register, we find new English poems that Gu created by translating the Chinese back into English. “University of Pittsburgh” becomes “shinny [sic] neon flows on colourful silk green china treasure pavilion” and “Sotheby’s” becomes “simple thoughts green temple.”

These neons take a very different verbal starting point than do the steles—a modern institutional or commercial name rather than a classic Tang poem, which through Gu’s translation process yields much shorter new Chinese and English texts that can be consumed quickly. And these texts are rendered in a very different medium: colorful glowing neon rather than somber engraved steles and ink rubbings. These features connect the *Neon Calligraphy* series to the modern urban commercial environment rather than the classical Chinese past—to the bustling street with its punchy advertising language rather than the hushed museum or library. Gu intends his neons to translate “the
ancient treasure of calligraphy” into a glamorous contemporary medium. He seeks thus to rejuvenate an art long central to Chinese culture that in Gu’s view has lost much of its popularity, especially among the young. Appropriating a commercial medium for a cultural purpose, Gu’s neons advertise calligraphy (his own calligraphy) as an art form, investing it with a level of importance similar to that claimed for it in different terms by the engraved steles and ink rubbings.

Gu exercised considerable ingenuity in creating the Sotheby’s neon, which he made independent of any commission, during the buildup to Sotheby’s first-ever New York auction of contemporary Chinese art in March 2006. He broke the company’s name down into the fragments presented on four separate plexiglass-backed panels: so/the/ by’/s; transliterated these as 素思碧寺 su si bi si; and then translated the characters as “simple thoughts green temple.” The neon presents these elements in horizontal rows, while a fifth panel at the right bears a vertical line of characters and a seal serving as Gu’s signature. In its medium and format, Gu’s neon strongly resembles a commercial sign of the sort commonly seen in a Chinese street—a sign including English alongside Chinese as a way of attracting English-speaking customers. The concluding large character (寺) of Gu’s neon highlights the similarity of its layout to a Buddhist temple sign. Consistent with the commercial connotations of its medium, Gu’s neon also resembles a shop sign, or the four-character signs posted on the lintels of Chinese homes to invoke such benefits as happiness, longevity, or prosperity.

Gu’s English translation of the central Chinese is straightforward save for its rendition of bi as “green” rather than its standard definition as “green jade.” Significantly, unlike the nonsensical “post-Tang” poetry in the Forest of Stone Steles, the English verse at the base of the neon demonstrates genuine poetic accomplishment. “Simple thoughts green temple” features a pleasingly simple grammatical structure—adjective, noun, adjective, noun—with a symmetrical arrangement of syllables in its four words (two, one, one, two) and approximate rhyme between the opening and closing ones (“simple,” “temple”), creating an overall effect of symmetry, harmony, and enclosure. All of this is aptly associated with the idea of a temple (Chinese and Western temples often being symmetrical in design). “Simple thoughts” suggests a meditative mental state, appropriate for a temple, while “green” generates associations with spring, new life, environmentalism, and the color’s supposed calming psychological effect, resonant with the idea of a temple. But Gu says he chose green for its American association with cash. He may even have used the character bi for green because it is a Mandarin homophone of 币 bi, meaning “money.” For Gu, “green temple” means “money temple,” which skews “simple thoughts” toward a simple focus on profit, which is the raison d’être of Sotheby’s. Yet the placid and contemplative quality of Gu’s verse is antithetical to the financial frenzy of the overheated mid-decade art market stoked by Sotheby’s auctions, allowing...
us to read an ironic divergence between the values of Sotheby’s and the new Chinese and English poems Gu discovers in its name through cultural transference.

These complementary projects by Wenda Gu, *Forest of Stone Steles—Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry*, and *Cultural Transference—A Neon Calligraphy Series*, offer rich aesthetic and intellectual rewards. The first strongly references and playfully reworks classical Chinese cultural elements (poetry, steles, calligraphy) in dark and weighty engraved stone slabs and austerely beautiful black-and-white ink rubbings. The second, while also glorifying the Chinese tradition of calligraphy, draws its inspiration from contemporary advertising and commercial signage, its electrified neon tubes glowing with alluring light and color. Unitig the projects is their shared conceptual basis and use of the Complex Chinese–English Translation process to harness East–West “misunderstanding” as a force for new creation with its own cultural value and resonance—Wenda Gu’s signature artistic contribution to the long and tumultuous relationship this book addresses.

Notes
3. Gu also sees these unreadable scripts in philosophical terms inspired by his reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein. “In general,” he writes, “the miswritten language symbolizes ‘misunderstanding’ as the essence of our knowledge concerning the universe and the material world. Yet, the pseudo-scripts help us reach infinity and eternity by imagining the universe which is out of the reach of human knowledge (language).” Gu, “face the new millennium,” 39.
7. For an illustration of ancient Chinese tomb slabs bearing epitaphs, see *Translating Visuality*, fig. 9, 43.
8. I specify Mandarin because while all literate Chinese read the same language (*hanyu*, meaning the languages of the Han Chinese, all of which use *hanzi* as the written script), they speak it in several different dialects, of which Mandarin, the official language of the People’s Republic of China, is the dominant one. Speakers of different dialects will typically pronounce the same character differently even though its written form is the same.

10. I am grateful to Janet Chen for this translation of Gu’s Chinese characters into pinyin.

11. So, too, does Gu’s recent modification and gathering together of his rubbings into exquisitely crafted books, based on the tradition of the model book, commissioned by emperors from the Northern Song dynasty forward to preserve and disseminate historic inscriptions and artistically significant calligraphy; see Allen Hockley, “Past and Present in Wenda Gu’s *Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Dynasty Poetry*,” in *Wenda Gu at Dartmouth*, 87–95.


13. While Gu’s neon works were inspired by Chinese urban street signs, they may also be considered within the context of avant-garde neon art that emerged in the West in the 1960s, when artists such as Chryssa, Keith Sonnier, and Stephen Antonakos adopted the medium for linear geometric and minimalist abstractions, while others such as Joseph Kosuth, Bruce Nauman, and Mario Merz employed neon-lettered words and numbers in the arena of conceptual art. More recently, younger Western avant-garde artists have embraced neon as a medium for writing, among them Tracey Emin, who has replicated in neon her own handwritten pronouncements (e.g., *I Kiss You*, 2006), paralleling Gu’s use of neon to translate his own calligraphy.


16. Because Gu has broken down the name Sotheby’s into fragments that comprise actual English words (“so,” “the,” and “by”) and because of the relationship of these words to those below them on each panel, it is possible to read the English in this neon vertically, panel by panel (essentially ignoring the Chinese characters in the middle), to yield “so simple the thoughts by greens temple.” This is a result Gu did not intend, demonstrating the degree to which his verbal art, like all poetry—and any cultural text for that matter—opens itself up to creative response by the reader. I am grateful to Elizabeth Schultz for pointing out to me this possible reading of Gu’s work.

17. The Chinese characters (谷氏楷典) may be translated as “Mr. Gu’s canon of regular script”—a reference to Gu’s distinctive style of calligraphy, which the artwork advertises (as do all of Gu’s neons). Readers of Chinese will note that the third neon character in the column, 楷 kai, meaning “regular or model (script),” has been creatively refashioned by moving the left, “tree,” radical to the top according to a process Gu developed for the *Forest of Stone Steles*, briefly explained in his essay, “Forest of Stone Steles,” 291. For further analysis see Cateforis, “Calligraphy, Poetry, and Paradoxical Power.”

18. I thank Rachel Voorhies for this observation.


21. I am grateful to John James Kennedy and Hong Chun Zhang for this observation.