

“Queer” in Translation: The Case of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*

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What might it mean to queer translation? The question can be explored along a number of different axes. For example, for much of the history of Translation Studies, otherness was construed in rather narrow cultural and linguistic terms. Gendered otherness was productively explored only in the nineteen nineties; but despite the out and proud sexuality of James Holmes, one of the founders of the field, the treatment of sexual otherness in translation would have to wait. This may have been a legacy of the field’s proximity to those government departments and ministries responsible for international diplomacy and intelligence which for much of the Cold War treated homosexuals as a security risk. Another axis would be to study the role of translation in the gay rights movement. Unlike other nation-based minority rights groups, gay liberationists were internationalist—from the eighteenth century “gay” anthologies included works from every imaginable culture and historical period, and the first non-bowdlerized translations of ancient Greek writings, especially the works of Plato, provided an important counter-discourse to the dominant religious rhetoric associating homosexuality with sin, vice, and decadence (see Baer 2021). Still another axis of queer translation studies would involve tracing queer concepts and cultural formations—and the gay liberation movement itself—across languages and historical periods. Until now, such transnational studies, both in Translation Studies and in Global Sexuality Studies, have focused on the “exportation” or “importation” of a western sexual epistemology, according to which homosexuality is understood as congenital (born not made) and minoritarian (restricted to a discrete portion of the population). Important studies have been carried out of non-Anglophone western cultures that resist that hegemonic epistemology (see Harvey 2003), and of non-western cultures, which have either been colonized by it (see Massad 2008) or which have adapted it to their own purposes, aligning it with their local sexual culture (Boellstorff 2005). Both approaches, however, assume that the western sexual epistemology is fixed and unified before it is subjected to translation. What happens then with an original that not only appears before or during the consolidation of that epistemology but that also exploits the fissures and contradictions in that emergent epistemology—that is, all the queerness of queer? We will explore these questions below in relation to Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* and its translation into French and Chinese.

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

Radclyffe Hall is the pen name of Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), an English poet and author, who also went by the name of John. She is best known for her 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, often described as the first lesbian novel or as a landmark in lesbian fiction. It is the only one of Hall's eight novels with overt lesbian thematics, although there is nothing sexually explicit. Nonetheless, with its theme of female same-sex desire and its defiantly gender non-conforming protagonist, Hall's novel "became notorious, the object of courtroom debate and legal scrutiny" (Whitlock 556). Charged with obscenity, the novel was banned in England until 1944. Far from silencing the novel, however, the trial made it into something of a success-de-scandale in the United States, where it was approved for publication following a lengthy court battle. It was soon translated into a number of European languages.

The novel follows the life and sexual awakening of its protagonist, an upper-class English woman given the masculine name Stephen at birth.¹ An only child, she is quite close to her father and alienated from her mother. Attracted to women from an early age, she endures a series of unhappy relationships. After one, she retreats to her father's study where she finds a book by the German sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebing, believed to be *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which, guided by her father's notations, she discovers that she is an "invert." (Such enlightening encounters with works of sexology are a common motif in early gay and lesbian fiction.) Serving as an ambulance driver in World War I, Stephen falls in love with the younger Mary Llewellyn, who returns with Stephen to Paris after the war where they live together. During their time in Paris, they become introduced to the subculture of inverts, and Mary and Stephen's relationship deteriorates. Stephen determines that Mary is not a true invert and that her time spent in the Parisian subculture of inverts is hardening and embittering her. So, in a gesture of heroic self-sacrifice, Stephen releases Mary so that she can wed Martin Hallam.

Hall's novel has been much discussed by scholars in the fields of gender and sexuality studies as provocatively in-between. In terms of aesthetics, the novel is viewed as situated between modernism and the traditional Victorian novel; in terms of its discourse, between literature and science—not only does it contain the scene where Stephen encounters the work of Krafft-Ebing, the novel was published with a short "commentary" by the British sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis, testifying to the novel's "notable psychological and sociological significance" (n.p.); in terms of politics, between fatalism and emancipation; and in terms of its morality, between its contemporary reception as pornographic and its reception today as unnecessarily chaste (see Green 2003). Rather than read that in-betweenness as a defect, however, Laura Green asks, "Might it be possible to read that in-betweenness differently, as a source of the novel's strength rather than its weakness?" (278).

¹ All references to the novel are taken from the 1932 New York edition, published by Convici Friede Publishers, as this version was searchable. The French translation was done from the 1928 London edition. The Chinese translators do not indicate which version they used.

Another form of in-betweenness in the novel that we would like to read as a strength rather than a weakness is lexical. At the time Hall was writing her novel, the meaning of the word *queer* was in flux; it was becoming more common as a term to reference homosexuals while still widely used to mean ‘strange’ or ‘odd.’ As Marjorie Perloff writes in regard to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s use of the word in the early twentieth century: “Wittgenstein frequently uses the adjective ‘queer,’ although in his day the word simply meant ‘odd’ (or did it?)” (3). Hall exploits the semantic slipperiness of the term in her novel *The Well of Loneliness*, often hailed as the first lesbian novel in English, which, one could argue, has the effect of destabilizing the very foundations of a fixed, minoritarian identity.

Where better to explore that semantic in-betweenness than in translation, especially with a novel like Hall’s, which has been and continues to be widely translated.² As B.J. Epstein and Robert Gillett remark, “Nowhere is the constructedness of gender and sexuality more glaringly evident than when attempts are made to find equivalents in other languages and cultures” (2). But to date only two articles have addressed the novel’s treatment in translation (Zaragosa 2018; Spišiaková 2020), and both focus on issues of censorship—not surprisingly, perhaps, given that the novel was banned in Great Britain. This paper takes a different approach, focusing instead on the semantic in-betweenness created by Hall’s promiscuous use of the English word *queer*, which exploits the polysemous nature of the word at that historical moment. Examining the French and Chinese translations of the novel, with a special focus on the rendering of *queer*, alongside the competing term *invert*, stands therefore to make a unique contribution to the study of queerness in translation and the queerness of translation.

The Queer Use of Queer in *The Well of Loneliness*

According to the Oxford English dictionary, at the time Hall was writing her novel, the English word *queer* had three firmly established meanings. The first usage of queer as an adjective, recorded in c.1523, is: “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious,” while the second recorded usage of the adjective dates from 1567 and is defined as “bad; contemptible, worthless; untrustworthy; disreputable,” a usage that is tagged as obsolete. The first recorded usage of queer as a noun, meaning “rare,” dates from 1826, while its second meaning of “a homosexual; *esp.* a homosexual man,” is the most recent, dating from 1894. The example is taken from a letter by the Marquess of Queensbury to Oscar Wilde, where the Marquess states: “I write to tell you that it is a *judgement* on the whole *lot of you*. Montgomerys, The Snob Queers like Roseberry & certainly Christian hypocrite Gladstone” (emphasis in the original). The usage of *queer* as a synonym for homosexual appears firmly established by the 1930s, at least among queer individuals themselves:

² In addition to the French and Chinese translations discussed below, the novel has appeared in: Italian (1930); Czech (1931, 1948); German (1931); Polish (1933); Japanese (1952); Spanish (Mexico, 1952); Hebrew (1953); Danish (1964); Swedish (2004); and Korean (2008).

1932 W. H. AUDEN in *Rev. Eng. Stud.* (1978) Aug. 294 An underground cottage frequented by the queer.

1936 L. DUNCAN *Over Wall* xx. 277 There was even a little room...where the 'fairies', 'pansies', and 'queers' conducted their lewd practices.

So, at the time Hall was writing *The Well of Loneliness*, the meaning of queer was in flux.

In the critical literature on Hall's novel, the first definition is the one typically acknowledged, as, for example, in this statement by Green: "The words that her neighbors used to describe her as she grows into adolescence—'queer,' 'freak,' 'unnatural'—merely emphasize her inaccessibility to discourse" (282). The fact is, while Hall's repeated use of *queer* throughout the novel would suggest that it plays a compositional or thematic role, she uses the modifier *queer* with great abandon throughout the novel to refer to a host of people and things that could not be construed as queer in the sense of homosexual, but to others that could be. For example, the words *queer*, *queerly*, and *queerness*, which are used 62 times in the novel, refer not only to Stephen but also to her father, the natural world, and so on. Here is a general sampling:

Then back would come flooding that queer antagonism that amounted almost to anger. (11)

[...] or perhaps they would be skimming over miles of blue ocean in a queer little ship with a leg-of-mutton sail, like the one in the fairy story. (21)

A queer mixture, Sir Philip, part sportsman, part student. (22)

The scents of the meadows would move those two strangely—the queer, pungent smell from the hearts of dog-daisies; (28)

There was such a queer light slanting over the hills, a kind of gold glory [...] (31)

And later, how many queer hopes and queer longings, queer joys and even more curious frustrations. (67)

[...] how queer it seemed, there had been a time when her father had actually not known her mother. (83)

A queer, sensitive fellow this Martin Hallam, with his strange love of trees and primitive forests—[Martin is not homosexual.] (92)

"How queer, this old arm-chair has outlived him, an old chair—" (119)

Like the well-worn garment and favourite chair, discipline and order had survived the great change, filling the emptiness of the rooms with a queer sense of unreality at times, with a new and very bewildering doubt as to which was real, life or death. (120)

Her long walks on the hills were a part of this person, as were also the hearts of the wild dogroses, the delicate network of veins on the leaves and the queer June break in the cuckoo's rhythm. (135)

[Stephen's horse Raferty] made a queer little sound in his throat, and his soft Irish eyes said: "You're home, home, home. I've grown tired with waiting, and with wishing you home." (168)

[...] they were a queer lot these French. (266)

From a pond on the farther side of the villa, came the queer, hoarse chirping of innumerable frogs singing their prehistoric love songs. (311)

Not one of them all but was stirred to the depths by that queer, half defiant, half supplicating music. (367)

He's in Paris; it's too queer. (419)

Moreover, even when referring to Stephen, *queer* does not necessarily carry the meaning of homosexual, or at least not exclusively. For example: "It was a queer feeling," referring to her intense love of her family estate of Morton. *Queer*, perhaps, in the sense that she felt the kind of proprietary love for the family estate that one might expect of the male heir, but that is unclear. That being said, in some instances, it does appear to describe gender, if not sexual, nonconformity, as in the following description of Stephen: "A queer-looking girl, very tall, wears a collar and tie—you know, mannish. And she seems just to change her suit of an evening—puts on a dark one—never wears evening dress. The mother's still a beautiful woman; but the girl—I dunno, there's something about her—anyhow I'm surprised she's got a young man" (160). Or in Stephen's description of her tutor: "From the very first moment of Miss Puddleton's arrival, Stephen had had an uncomfortable conviction that this queer little woman was going to mean something, was going to become a fixture" (65).

Because the polysemy of *queer* at this time allows Hall to use it to modify any number of things, queer as same-sex desire finds itself on a continuum rather than as a thing apart. Moreover, the fact that *queer* is used so often to refer to the natural world, as evident in the examples above, supports Hall's repeated presentation of homosexual attraction as no different from heterosexual love, that is, as thoroughly natural:

You insulted what to me seemed both natural and sacred [referring to Stephen's love for Angela Crossby]. (238)

On the contrary, they lived natural lives—lives that to them were perfectly natural. They had their passions like everyone else, and why not? They were surely entitled to their passions? (302)

A strange, though to them a very natural thing it seemed, this new and ardent fulfilment; (317)

They had loved because love had come naturally to them up there on the soft, springy turf and the heather. (357-8)

Hall does not, however, offer an unambiguous celebration of queerness for she introduces a competing term midway through the novel, in Chapter 20: *invert*. The monosemic sexological term *invert*, coined by German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* and then further elaborated by English sexologist Havelock Ellis, who provided a short preface for Hall's novel, has sexological overtones that queer at that time did not have. The term is used a total of 14 times and the related term *inversion*, seven. That *invert* refers to a discrete minority and inversion to congenital homosexuality is underscored by Hall's repeated use of the term in the singular with a definite article, and almost always in negative ways: "the invert": "None knew better the terrible nerves of the Invert"

(154); “And now the terrible nerves of the invert” (185); “the terrible birthright of the invert” (217); “bombs do not trouble the nerves of the invert” (275); “those haunted, tormented eyes of the invert” (393); “the whole truth is known only to the normal invert” (395); “and more pitiful still was the lot of a girl who, herself being normal, gave her love to an invert” (412); and “the haunted, melancholy eyes of the invert” (446). Hall’s construal of the invert draws on contemporary psychoanalysis, as evident in her frequent mention of their nerves, and on eugenics, when inverts are presented as a species: “Monsieur Pujol collected inverts” (388) and “Amazing they are—ces invertis” (389).

Hall’s use of *invert* as a (self-loathing) critique of minoritarianism—in her diaries she refers to herself consistently as an invert, never as queer—is evident in the very unflattering depiction of the subculture of inverts in interwar Paris presented in the novel, by Stephen’s revulsion toward it, and by its deleterious effect on Stephen’s lover, Mary Llewelyn. The fact that inversion enters the novel so late, only when the protagonist and her lover have moved to Paris, construes it not so much as the “truth” of same-sex desire but as a corrupting, worldly knowledge that destroys their romantic idyll. Indeed, Hall’s ambivalence regarding the minoritarian model of homosexuality is evident at the very opening of the novel when she offers both a congenital interpretation of Stephen’s homosexuality—she is born with broad shoulders and narrow hips—and a constructionist interpretation—she is treated as a boy by her beloved father, which leads to her estrangement from her mother. This makes the naming of the protagonist Stephen into an ambivalent gesture: does it confirm her congenital identity or does it contribute to constructing her as male-identified? In this way, Hall queers language, leaving the question open as to whether language labels reality or produces it. At the same time, the semantic ambiguity of *queer* cannot be understood without acknowledging the way Hall contrasts it to the monosemic term *invert*. And so, our analysis of the one French and three Chinese translations will assess the translation of both terms to see how the translators treat the semantic openness of *queer* and the semantic narrowness of *invert*.

The French Translation

The first translation of *The Well of Loneliness* was the French, which was published in 1932 by Gallimard under the title *Le Puits de solitude*. The translator was Léo Lack, the pseudonym of Eva Léonie Lack (1898-1988), a translator, poet, and music critic, who is best known today for her translations of Oscar Wilde, although she also translated Marjorie S. Coryn's *Le Chevalier d'Eon* (1935) and Yukio Mishima's *Thirst for Love* (1982), from the English. Little else is known of the translator, but Hall's novel appears to have been her first published translation. It should be noted that France at this time did not criminalize homosexuality (Tamagne 138), and many works of proto-gay fiction (e.g., the novels of Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen and Achille Essebac) and even gay pornography (e.g., *Pédérastie active* (1907) and *Pédérastie passive: Mémoires d'un enculé* (1911), attributed to P.D. Rast) were published there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While homosexuality was not criminalized in France, the individualism of the French, Florence Tamagne argues, produced a “reticence in regard to associative structures” (138).

Regarding the translation of *queer*, Lack uses a variety of synonyms, thus weakening the effect of Hall’s queer use of queer, which inscribes queer sexuality within society and the natural world (see Table 1).

<i>Le Puits de solitude</i> (France), 1932	Occurrences	Meaning
<i>bizarrierie</i>	24	1. Peculiarity, strangeness, oddness; 2. Whimsicalness, eccentricity
<i>singulier</i>	15	1. Singular; 2. (a) peculiar, remarkable; (b) odd, curious, strange, queer (person, method, custom, fact)
<i>étrange</i>	13	Strange, peculiar, odd, queer
<i>drôle</i>	5	(a) Funny, amusing; (b) funny, curious, queer, strange
<i>curieuse</i>	2	(of things) curious; odd, peculiar
<i>fantastique</i>	1	fantastic; fanciful, imaginary, weird
<i>extraordinaire</i>	1	(a) extraordinary; (b) extraordinary, unusual, astonishing, fantastic; (c) remarkable, outstanding (beauty, success)
omission	2	

Table 1: The translation of *queer* in the 1932 French translation.

That being said, three terms stand out in terms of their frequency: *singulier*, *étrange* and *bizarrierie*, each capturing an aspect of the English queer, used as “odd” or “weird.”

The monosemic *invert*, on the other hand, presents no problems for the translator who renders all fourteen instances as *inverti*. This is not surprising perhaps given that the term was monosemic and had been established in French for some time, as evident in the following instance from 1908:

M. Fonsegrive va même jusqu’à prétendre que la liberté dans le mariage conduit aux pratiques de Sodome et de Lesbos. Tout observateur impartial que la religion ne frapperait pas de cécité

intellectuelle conviendrait au contraire que ces vices d'invertis sont bien plutôt la conséquence des règles étroites auxquelles sont soumises les relations des sexes. (Naquet 58-59)

[M. Fonsegrive even goes so far as to claim that freedom in marriage leads to the practices of Sodom and Lesbos. Any impartial observer that religion would not strike with intellectual blindness would agree to the contrary, that these vices of invertes are rather the consequence of the narrow rules imposed on the relations of the sexes.] (Translation mine-BJB)

Disseminated across a number of lexical choices, however, *queer* cannot function in the French edition as a non-identitarian alternative to *invert*, making invert the dominant reference to homosexuality in the novel.

Queer in the Chinese Translations

Since 1998, three different Chinese translations of Hall's novel have appeared, the first in mainland China, which went through four editions, the second in Taiwan, which went through one edition, and the third, first published in Taiwan, which was subsequently published in mainland China. The first Chinese translation, 孤寂深渊 [The abyss of loneliness], was published by in 1998 by Baihua Editions (百花文艺出版社) in mainland China. It was translated by the husband-and-wife team Zhang Ling and Zhang Yang, who are quite well known and have translated many canonical works of western literature into Chinese. Their translation has been republished by other mainland Chinese publishing houses: Culture and Art Publishing House (2004), Shanghai Translation Publishing House (2011), and Commercial Press (2021). The second Chinese translation, 寂寞之井 [The well of loneliness] was published in 2000 by Fembooks. Founded in 1994, Fembooks is the first publishing house in the Chinese-speaking regions (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland) dedicated to publishing books on feminism, lesbianism, and gender issues. It was translated by Yan Yun, a professional translator, who received an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies from the University of London. The third translation, 寂寞之井 [The well of loneliness], was published by Rye Field Publishing Co. in Taiwan in 2013. It was republished in mainland China by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House in 2019. The translator of this version was Yan Xiangru, who graduated from the French department of the Southern Illinois University in the USA and now works as a professional translator.

It is hard to say why there are so many translations into Chinese. In addition to there being no copyright restrictions on the novel—they had expired in 1993, fifty years after the author's death—its straightforward realism and the delicacy with which it deals with issues of sex and sexuality could be said to align with Chinese literary tastes. It also reflects a certain degree of liberalization in regard to treatment of homosexuality that was taking place at that time in the mainland and in Taiwan. For example, in 1997, the umbrella term “hooliganism,” which was used to prosecute homosexual sex acts, was deleted from the penal code of the People's Republic of China, marking the de facto

decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1998, the first ever gathering of lesbians in China, called the National Women's Tongzhi³ Conference, was held in secret in Beijing, the lesbian activist group, Beijing Sister, was established, and the first lesbian website in mainland China was set up. In 2000, openly gay and lesbian people appeared on TV in mainland China for the first time. From 2001 on, homosexuality was no longer treated as a mental illness in mainland China, but prejudice against homosexuals is still common in mainland China (Ma 2003).

Liberalization occurred much earlier in Taiwan, as evident in the publication of the roman-à-clef 孽子 (*Nieh-tze*), by Pai Hsien-yung, a famous writer in Taiwan who is gay (he came out in 1994). This novel portrays the underworld of homosexual youngsters living in Taipei's New Park. This novel was first published in Pai's own journal *Modern Literature* in Taiwan and the journal *Nanyang Siang Pau* in Singapore in serial form beginning in 1977 and was published as an independent book in 1983. It was published in mainland China in 1988 by the People's Literature Publishing House, a top official nation-wide publishing house. This novel was translated by Howard Goldblatt into English as *Crystal Boys* and published by the Gay Sunshine Press in the USA in 1990. In the 1970s and early 1980s, other writers, such as Lin Huai-min and Li Ang, also wrote gay/lesbian/queer-themed fiction, despite the fact that Taiwanese society at the time was conservative and homosexuality was a very sensitive topic. After the lifting of Martial Law in 1987, democratization and social movements took off⁴. Lesbian and gay theory and politics, queer theory and politics, and feminist theory entered Taiwan at this time (Liou 2005). Many queer-themed novels were published. For example, Chu T'ien-wen, who is female and heterosexual, authored the gay-themed novel 荒人手记 (*Huangren Shouji*), which won the first *China Times* Million Yuan Novel Prize and was then published in Taiwan in 1994; it was translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin into English as *Notes of a Desolate Man* in 1999. The first lesbian social and activist group was founded in Taiwan in 1990, and the first officially registered and recognized gay organization, which was "a gay student organization at National Taiwan University, was formed in 1993" (Liou 128). There were another ten underground (unofficially registered) gay and lesbian student groups at other universities by the end of 1995 (Erni and Spires 2005). In 1996, there was a "collective coming out" in Taiwan to challenge the conservatism and homophobia of Taiwanese society. In 1996, the first Chinese-language gay and lesbian magazine, *G&L Magazine*, was founded. Its circulation reached 40,000 in 2000.

³ *Tongzhi* originally referred to male comrades in the Communist system, but it was later adopted to refer to both male and female homosexuals.

⁴ Martial Law was imposed in Taiwan consecutively from 1949 to 1987. During this period of authoritarian rule, major constitutional rights were denied, including freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. General elections were suspended, and many civic organizations were banned by the Kuomintang government. Many people were imprisoned and executed.

The most striking divergence among the Chinese translations concerns the translation of *queer*.⁵ The first translation renders the meanings⁶ of *queer* with the widest variety of lexical items (see Table 2).

Guji Shenyuan 孤寂深渊 [The abyss of loneliness], translated by Zhang Ling and Zhang Yang, first published in 1998	Number of occurrences	Meaning
<i>Qi guai</i> 奇怪	17	strange; odd; to marvel; to be baffled
<i>Gu guai</i> 古怪	16	strange; weird; eccentric; bizarre
<i>Qi te</i> 奇特	6	peculiar; unusual; queer
<i>Guai</i> 怪	4	bewildering; odd; strange; uncanny; devil; monster; to wonder at; to blame; quite; rather
<i>Mo ming qi miao</i> 莫名其妙	3	baffling; inexplicable
<i>Guai yi</i> 怪异	2	monstrous; strange; strange phenomenon
<i>Guai li guai qi</i> 怪里怪气	2	eccentric; odd-looking; peculiar
<i>Qi yi</i> 奇异	2	fantastic; bizarre; odd; exotic; astonished
<i>Xi qi gu guai</i> 稀奇古怪	1	crazy; bizarre; weird; fantastic; strange
<i>Guai ren</i> 怪人	1	strange person; eccentric
<i>Guai mo guai yang</i> 怪模怪样	1	outlandish; strange-looking; grotesque
<i>Bu zhi wei shen me</i> 不知为什么	1	Don't know why ⁷
<i>Shen qi</i> 神奇	1	magical; mystical; miraculous
<i>Chu qi</i> 出奇	1	extraordinary; exceptional; unusual
Omission	4	

Table 2: The rendering of *queer* in the first Chinese translation of *The Well of Loneliness*.

⁵ Today, *queer* as a sexual identity is often translated as “酷儿” (ku er) in Chinese. “酷” (Ku) is a transliteration of the English word “cool”, and “儿” (er) means son or child. So, in Chinese, “酷儿” (ku er) are cool youngsters. This term, however, does not appear in any of the Chinese translations.

⁶ For the meanings of the Chinese terms, we used the *Mandarin-English Dictionary & Thesaurus* as this online dictionary offers detailed and nuanced meanings, including examples and etymologies.

⁷ The online dictionary does not offer the English meanings of “不知为什么”, so we literally translated this phrase into English.

The third translation exhibits a much greater consolidation of renderings, with 古怪 [bizarre] overwhelmingly in first place (36), followed by 奇怪 [strange, odd] (12). No other rendering is used more than three times.

Jimo Zhi Jing 寂寞之井 [The Well of Loneliness] translated by Yan Xiangru, first published in Taiwan in 2013 and then published in the mainland in 2019	Number of occurrences	Meaning
<i>Gu guai</i> 古怪	36	strange; weird; eccentric; bizarre
<i>Qi guai</i> 奇怪	12	strange; odd; to marvel; to be baffled
<i>Guai</i> 怪	3	bewildering; odd; strange; uncanny; devil; monster; to wonder at; to blame; quite; rather
<i>Guai yi</i> 怪异	2	monstrous; strange; strange phenomenon
<i>Qi te</i> 奇特	2	peculiar; unusual; queer
<i>Guai ren</i> 怪人	1	strange person; eccentric
<i>Bu zhi zen de</i> 不知怎得	1	Don't know why or how ⁸
<i>Qi</i> 奇	1	strange; odd; weird; wonderful; surprisingly; unusually
<i>Yi chang</i> 异常	1	exceptional; abnormal; an anomaly
<i>Gu ling jing guai</i> 古灵精怪	1	weird; bizarre
Omission	2	

Table 3: The rendering of *queer* in the third Chinese translation of *The Well of Loneliness*.

It is the second Chinese translation, published by Fembooks, which demonstrates the greatest consistency in rendering *queer* (see Table 4):

Ji mo zhi jing 寂寞之井 [The Well of Loneliness], translated by Yan Yun, published in Taiwan in 2000.	Number of occurrences	Meaning
<i>Gu guai</i> 古怪	54	strange; weird; eccentric; bizarre
<i>Qi guai</i> 奇怪	5	strange; odd; to marvel; to be baffled
<i>Qi te</i> 奇特	2	peculiar; unusual; queer

⁸ The online dictionary does not offer the English meanings of “不知怎得”, so we literally translated this phrase into English.

<i>Qi yi</i> 奇异	1	fantastic; bizarre; odd; exotic; astonished
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Table 4: The rendering of *queer* in the second Chinese translation of *Well of Loneliness*.

Yan Yun’s translation stands apart from the other Chinese translations, as well as the French translation, demonstrating perhaps an awareness of Hall’s distinct use of *queer* in the original. Whether this reflects the establishment of *queer* as a synonym for homosexual, or the translator’s extended stay in Britain, where she may have been exposed to the term in common parlance, or the general sensitivity of the publishing house to issues of sexuality-specific terminology—or a combination of the three—the translator’s decision to resist lexical variety in rendering *queer* allows the term to represent a non-identitarian alternative to invert.

Regarding the rendering of *invert*, the three Chinese translations reflect a much higher degree of internal terminological consistency, although slightly less than the French, and significant divergence across the translations. The first Chinese translation uses three terms: 性倒错者 (*xing dao cuo zhe*), 11 times; 性倒错的人 (*xing dao cuo de ren*), twice; and 性变态者 (*xing bian tai zhe*), once. All three are pathologizing. The first two refer to abnormal people who have contrary sexual feelings, while the third means a sexual pervert or weirdo. Note the use of 性 *xing*, or “sex” in all the terms. The second and third Chinese translations are quite similar in their rendering. In the second translation, 倒错之人 (*dao cuo zhi ren*) is used 12 times, 倒错的人 (*dao cuo de ren*), once, and 倒错者 (*dao cuo zhe*), also once. All three terms are close in meaning, referring to incorrect reversal or inversion, but do not refer exclusively to LGBTQ individuals. (Note the absence here of 性 *xing*, or “sex”.) In the third translation, 倒错者 (*dao cuo zhe*) is used three times and 倒错的人 (*dao cuo de ren*) is used once. (Again note the absence here of 性 *xing* or “sex”.) Traditionally, the Chinese language did not have the term 倒错 (*dao cuo*). Now, in the Chinese language, the term 倒错 (*dao cuo*) has only one meaning: perversion and the invert. 倒错 (*dao cuo*) represents the combination of two Chinese words, 倒 (*dao*) and 错 (*cuo*): 倒 (*dao*) means *reverse and invert* and 错 (*cuo*) means *wrong*.

And so, paradoxically, the Chinese translations that replicate Hall’s use of *queer* lessen the minoritarian valence of the opposing term, *invert*. Whereas the first Chinese translation, which radically disperses Hall’s use of *queer* among a variety of synonymous terms offers the most minoritarian rendering of *invert*. At the same time, all three Chinese translations replace the protagonist’s name, Stephen, with female names (Yan Yun uses “史提芬”, Zhang Ling and Zhang Yang use “斯蒂芬,” and Yan Xiangru uses “史蒂芬”). (The French translator renders the protagonist’s name as Stephen.) To the extent that “the naming suggests that Stephen Gordon’s ambiguous relation to gender is produced by environmental as well as congenital circumstance” (Whitlock 572), feminizing it removes one of the queerest elements of the novel. As Spišáková argues in regard to the Czech translation,

“removing the distinctly masculine name from the novel and replacing it with a feminine variation, the novel loses a significant part of the potential for a dual reading as a lesbian as well as a transgender narrative” (145).

Conclusion

In her ethnography of global connection, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing attempts to overcome the epistemological divide separating the universal and the particular with the notion of “engaged universals.” The engagement of universals with particular contexts is shaped by various “frictions,” which Tsing theorizes as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (4). When texts circulate globally in translation, they encounter a variety of linguistic and cultural frictions. One of the frictions we have explored in this article is the historicity of words. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out:

All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (Bakhtin 293)

The socially charged life of language ensures that words will live different lives and accumulate different histories in different languages. Even attempts to co-opt the history of a word through borrowing or to erase the historicity of a word by inventing a new term cannot entirely escape history. Neologisms will often carry a valence of modernity or science, and in colonial contexts, borrowings may be read as imperialist or as cultural appropriation.

Evaluating the various frictions that present themselves in these translations of Radclyffe Hall’s very queer novel is a complex task, transcending any simplistic discourse of loss. In fact, perhaps the only example of unequivocal loss involves the decision to feminize the protagonist’s surname, although even that decision may be influenced by how heavily or lightly gendered the target language may be. Most of the other shifts, however, deal with the historicity of concepts and their related terms, requiring a holistic, ecological approach to the translations. While one could argue that neither French nor Chinese has an equivalent to the English *queer*, which can be used—at the specific historical moment in which Hall’s novel was written—in both the general sense of odd or strange and the particular sense of nonnormative in terms of gender and/or sexuality—nonetheless a contrast can be established between more general designations of “odd” and the specific identitarian term *invert*, which the one Taiwanese translator does. At the same time, the close, entangled relationship between early “gay” fiction in the Global North and the science of sexology underscores the role previous translations play in establishing a range of possible equivalents. And so, while the Taiwanese translator displays the highest degree of consistency in rendering *queer*, she displays the lowest degree of

consistency in rendering *invert*, for which a single equivalent term has yet to be established in Chinese. While this may weaken the opposition of queer-invert structuring Hall's English novel, it has the effect of destabilizing, even queering, the identitarian claims of *invert*. These queer translations of *queer*, one could argue, highlight the instability or semantic ambiguity of the original (the meaning of *queer* was in flux at this time) while launching unpredictable trajectories of meaning within different linguistic and conceptual landscapes.

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