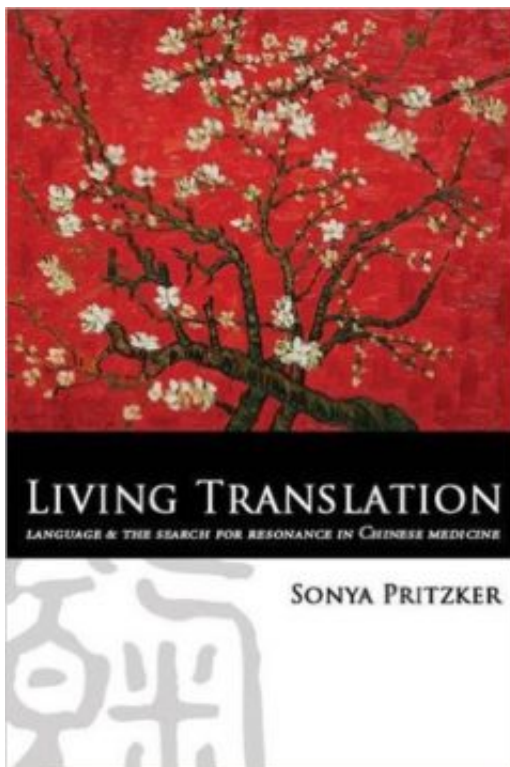


<http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u-s-chinese-medicine.html>

Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine

2016-10-21 05:00:04

By Miao Jenny Hua



[Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine](#)

by [Sonya E. Pritzker](#)

Berghahn Books, 2014, 228 pages

Chinese medicine names at least five components to the spiritual part of the embodied self, corresponding to each of the five organ-systems. The *shen*-spirit is associated with the heart, the *yi*-spirit with the spleen, *po* with the lungs, *zhi* with the kidneys and *hun* with the liver. These are not just technical jargon; each “spirit” has distinct connotations in everyday life. But how does one capture such subtle variations with actionable precision

in the context of clinical Chinese medicine in the United States?

This is the kind of daunting question that Sonya Pritzker's *Living Translation* addresses with exquisite ethnographic detail. Denying from the start that she is providing a how-to guide on translating Chinese medicine, Pritzker instead portrays the variable ways in which translations are enacted (2). With an eye to the world-making effects of practice inspired by Annemarie Mol (2002), "enact" is a capacious enough verb for Pritzker to capture translation as multiple modes of making lived equivalences. An ongoing process from monographs to conferences, classrooms to clinics, theoretical arguments over translation are never fully settled and clinical remedies in translation are rarely neatly reductive.

In the early twentieth-century, "Chinese medicine" was constituted as a defensive response to the discrediting advances of modern science and biomedicine in China (25). In the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese medicine was swept up as part of the New Age Movement in the United States, eventually achieving widespread institutional recognition as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Rather than having to constantly demonstrate its compatibility with scientific medicine in the modern Chinese context, U.S. Chinese medicine has engaged in a broader countercultural critique against the professional power and dehumanizing technologies of biomedicine. Translating specific Chinese medical terms is situated within a moral landscape of medical pluralism that take on different articulations on two sides of the pacific, where science is pitted against spirituality and authenticity in different terms. Chapter One of the book provides a cogent overview of the moral struggles and conundrums that translators and practitioners of Chinese medicine face in the United States.

Pritzker then devotes the next two chapters to review the textbooks and monographs that have most crucially influenced Chinese medical education in the United States, interspersed with interviews with translators. Chapter Two surveys different ideologies of language and translation surely familiar to translators and linguistic anthropologists while making for a good introduction for non-initiates. A dip into the literatures on Chinese medical translations readily shows how vociferously translational decisions are contested. One translator Pritzker cites, based in China, panned the erudite work of an Anglophone translator as perpetuating "Oriental folklore" in the guise of fidelity to tradition (Xie et al. 2005). Such controversies pivot around the social imaginaries through which Chinese medicine has been constituted and daily practiced, drawing on different moral landscapes of science and spirituality.

The second half of the book are based on 24 months of fieldwork at a school of Chinese Medicine in Southern California, where, having

undergone similar training, Pritzker considers herself often in the position of a native ethnographer (5). She recorded interviews and classroom conversations, which were painstakingly transcribed using Jefferson system of notation in an effort to preserve real-time pauses, dialogic interjections, laughs and intonations. Drawing on linguistic anthropological theories, the ethnographer analyzed the transcripts for instances of competing ideologies of language and translation. The result is that there is an evidential rigor to the way in which Pritzker portrays translational practices in ethnographic text. Following a relatively consistent cohort of students throughout her fieldwork and asking them to revisit some of the conversations they've had about translation along the way, Pritzker's fieldwork is exemplary for its consistency and detail.

One conversation Pritzker recorded with a student named "Julia" makes repeated appearances throughout the book. Earlier in her career, Julia expressed exasperation after a lecture about "*qi*," complaining that trying to translate key concepts seems to inexorably descend into rabbit holes only to ultimately concede, "*qi* is *qi*" (128). What's the point in delving further or providing more precise glosses? For Pritzker, this sort of statement is iconic of a whole network of ideologies about the arbitrariness of language as opposed to the universality of medical knowledge. Words are abstractions of ideas at best, a distraction from the truth at worst (58-59). Who cares what you call it: "*qi* is *qi*."

Ambivalence about translation, denial being one extreme, is pervasive not only at the school for Chinese medicine, but also among those who translate Chinese medical ideas as a literary vocation. Returning to engage with textual translations in Chapter Three, Pritzker juxtaposes several keystone English-language monographs on Chinese medicine to discuss how *qi* has been translated as "life force", "vigor of motion," "energy," "the very basis of the universe's infinite manifestations of life," or "a pictogram of steam rising from rice as it cooks" (123). Most author-translators leave *qi* untranslated, instantiating an ideology of linguistic incommensurability. Even still, they differ as to how to render *qi* in print – capitalized or not, italicized or not.

These chapters draw upon a rich literary and philosophical tradition to expound on how "living translation" takes place at the intersection of hermeneutics and embodiment – as an intertextual and interactional event – whereby linguistic alignments figuratively and pragmatically weave together a complex itinerary within the horizons of social life (147). That is to say, definitions are not ever simply equated as terms with abstract references in practice, although dictionaries often perform such ideologies of linguistic unity and commensurability. In Pritzker's view, inscriptions in books are but one stop in a larger conversation that does not get transcribed. Dictionaries are the distillations of extended phone or

epistolary conversations, lifelong disagreements, and standardization movements toward achieving greater political recognition for Chinese medicine. Even so, books can disclose these larger conversations of which they serve as accessible tips.

So in what larger conversations is *Living Translation* embedded? Pritzker's extended ethnographic consideration lends to a distinct theory of translation – with layovers along the way in continental phenomenology and hermeneutics. This brings us to the book's central theme: embodying evidence, equivalence, and especially *resonance* as highly valued moral goods of translation. "Resonance" is also a translated term; Pritzker defines it early on as *ganyin*, or "the connection between practitioner and patient" (8). There are other translations of *ganyin* and circumlocutions of "resonance," but the gloss Pritzker provides, "embodied equivalence," is I think felicitous for accentuating the performative dimensions of its concrete constitution. This turn to "resonance" as the valuable outcome of translation marks a significant departure from literatures in science studies, which tend to emphasize consensus as translation's primary end.

Resonance is highly sought after precisely because it *promises* to bring about mutual understanding. Far from conclusive, living translation intensifies "a search for the self, a search for wholeness, spirituality, for authentic, effective practice, and for a language that addresses the real needs of patients" (7). Pritzker specifically thematizes the search for resonance as a mode of clinical action in Chapter Six, describing a clinical encounter students partake in alongside one of their most compelling instructors. A sequence of translational deciphering and extended discussion between teacher and students produce a complex clinical picture of a patient seen in the clinic for "anxiety" (181-4). The group deemed that the patient could be afflicted with PTSD as her pulse manifested a dispersion of *po*-spirit and shock to lung-*qi*, all of which is consistent with an autonomic reflex gone awry. Rendering diagnostic decisions in translation weaves together initially discordant medical theories through local negotiations and revisions. Tentative equivalences are made with the force of embodied commitment. Anything but arbitrary, embodied resonance is the stuff that composes therapeutics.

Appropriately, Pritzker concludes the book on an appeal to further the search for a more resonant language: "it is my hope that the ethnographic story of living translation presented here can further contribute something toward healing the divide between 'scholarship' and 'practice' at the level of language in the translation of Chinese medicine in the United States" (191). In the end, the "search" that precedes "resonance" remains most resonant.

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AMA citation

Hua M. Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine. *Somatosphere*. 2016. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u-s-chinese-medicine.html>. Accessed October 21, 2016.

APA citation

Hua, Miao Jenny. (2016). *Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine*. Retrieved October 21, 2016, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u-s-chinese-medicine.html>

Chicago citation

Hua, Miao Jenny. 2016. Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine. *Somatosphere*. <http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u-s-chinese-medicine.html> (accessed October 21, 2016).

Harvard citation

Hua, M 2016, *Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine*, *Somatosphere*. Retrieved October 21, 2016, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u>

s-chinese-medicine.html>

MLA citation

Hua, Miao Jenny. "Sonya E. Pritzker's Living Translation: Language and the Search for Resonance in U.S. Chinese Medicine." 21 Oct. 2016. Somatosphere. Accessed 21 Oct. 2016.<<http://somatosphere.net/2016/10/sonya-e-pritzkers-living-translation-language-and-the-search-for-resonance-in-u-s-chinese-medicine.html>>