

ESSAY

“You Are No Darker Than I Am”: *The Souls of Black Folk* in Maoist China

SELINA LAI-HENDERSON

How do we as scholars of transnational US literary studies understand W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) outside the historical and racial context of the United States? Anyone who is familiar with the text will agree that it primarily focuses on the unique condition of African American existence or, as Du Bois himself puts it, “the strange meaning of being black” at the turn of the last century (“Forethought”). But to what extent is this “black” experience historically, nationally, or even racially bound? An exploration of the Chinese translation of *Souls* in the context of 1959 China reveals how fluid these historical, national, and racial boundaries are, and how the complexity of such fluidity also goes beyond the limits of mere cultural negotiations. Situated in the critical formation of Afro-Asian engagements during the Bandung era and Du Bois’s historic visit to China in the spring of 1959, *Souls* was pivotal to China’s reassertion of what it means to be “black” on the global stage of proletarian revolution.

SELINA LAI-HENDERSON, associate professor of American literature and history at Duke Kunshan University, is the author of *Mark Twain in China* (Stanford UP, 2015). Her work has appeared in *MELUS*, in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, and in edited volumes on Langston Hughes and Mark Twain published by Cambridge University Press. She is writing a monograph, “You Are No Darker Than I Am’: Afro-Asian Crossings and Imaginaries,” that interrogates complex shifts of Afro-Asian discourses across the literary and cultural landscape of late Qing China through the Maoist era.

In exploring the reception of *Souls* in China, my goal is not to interrogate the accuracy of the Chinese translation of Du Bois’s work or the extent to which the translator attempts to grapple with the precision of Du Boisean blackness. Rather, I am intrigued by the movement of the discourses of black internationalism across a transpacific universe governed, otherwise, by the inevitability of difference and contradictions, if also mistranslation, such as the problematic 1959 Chinese rendition of *Souls*. Such “articulations” of discord, as Brent Hayes Edwards aptly puts it, and the ability to resist or escape translation—or, more precisely, what he alludes to as the untranslatable *décalage*—give voice to the “strange ‘two-ness’” of

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Afro-Asian engagement (*Practice* 15). If it is through translation, dissemination, and reformulation that “discourses of internationalism *travel*” (7), then examining Du Bois’s seminal work in China and in translation is not only a fruitful but also a necessary practice in teasing out deeper implications of the kind of transracial possibilities envisioned by both Du Bois and Maoist China on the transnational stage of Afro-Asian solidarity.

To understand why *Souls* mattered to Maoist China, we first need to recognize the context in which China engaged with world literature in the framework of socialist proletarianism during the Bandung era. If the historic Bandung Conference in 1955 released what Richard Wright characterizes as “tidal waves . . . of natural forces” with its unprecedented effort to empower African and Asian nations to rewrite a colonial history through self-determination, it also presented China with a powerful platform for promoting its own brand of socialism (439).¹ In radically refashioning Marxism as neither industrial nor Western, Mao’s so-called Third World model attracted urban proletariats and peasantry across global nations of color who looked to China as a potential leader in rewriting the world racial order.

The literary front was crucial to what Nicolai Volland terms China’s “socialist cosmopolitanism.” China’s cosmopolitan outlook, Volland explains, was rooted in the collective “as the agent of cosmopolitan cultural practice” and “an emancipatory ideal” that subverted “the existing world order.” By empowering subalterns who had long been excluded from the “cosmopolitan celebration of the world,” China situated so-called Third World literature at the heart of a cultural hierarchy that had hitherto placed the West at the forefront of cosmopolitan thought (13).² In foregrounding voices rooted in the history and experience of decolonization, China’s “literary diplomacy” set out to represent peoples and communities that had largely been rendered invisible in the cosmopolitan theater of literary remapping.

At the outset, *Souls* does not seem to fit in the literary framework described above. It is not essentially proletarian, nor is it socialist. Du Bois’s

intellectual language prefiguring his notion of the “Talented Tenth,” in particular, also seems to go against the grain of the proletariat philosophy of writers and artists having to “conscientiously learn the language of the masses,” as Mao advocated in 1942 in his famous speech “Yen’an Forum on Literature and Art” (“Talks” 69).³ Nevertheless, beyond these incompatibilities is an evolving internationalist vision shared by Du Bois and Mao that reflected the desire to topple global white hegemony by means of a transnational alliance among the darker races of the world.

In this respect, the 1959 Chinese translation of *Souls* was both timely and central to China’s cosmopolitan project. Not only was the text seminal to the literary and political career of an iconic figure who had tremendous influence in the political sphere of Afro-Asia, “the souls of black folks” was a subject matter of increasing interest to China since its visible presence in the Bandung Conference. In asserting influence in the neighboring so-called Third World countries through the discourse of joint victimization, China viewed Du Bois’s work as a powerful tool for fostering an understanding of Afro-Asian engagements and, critically, for writing its own history of semicoloniality into the Du Boisean text of black consciousness. The “souls” that Du Bois describes, in other words, ought not to be confined to folks of African descent but should include those from East and Southeast Asia. Because *Souls* is critical to the understanding of the flow of “black folks” not only in the transatlantic sphere but also transpacifically, the text finds expression in China’s literary imaginary and self-positioning in the decolonized space of Afro-Asia.

Likely the *first* translation of *Souls* in its entirety in Asia at the time, Wei Qun’s Chinese translation of Du Bois’s work, 黑人的灵魂 (*Heiren de Linghun; Black Man’s Soul*), was published by Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe (People’s Literature Publishing House), weeks after Du Bois’s high-profile tour of China in April 1959.⁴ Belatedly, the translation was a critical response to the singular statement that Du Bois writes in the “Forethought” to *Souls*, that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” The “understated

insistence" of the "color line" problem, as Paul Gilroy argues, tightens "the relationship between nationality and transnational political solidarity" (127). This link becomes recognizable in the beginning of chapter 2, when Du Bois extends the premise of the color line to "Asia, Africa, and the islands of the sea" (*Souls* 23). Here, Du Bois ascribes the deformation of black lives in the United States to a much broader, *global* phase that points to the urgency of transracial solidarity among the globally oppressed. Barely three years after *Souls* was published, Du Bois would amplify the global dimension of the color line by highlighting Asia as an important ally to the "brown and black races" after Japan shocked the world with its victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 ("Color Line" 34). That Du Bois's "famous color line concept always included Asia," as Bill V. Mullen remarks, is nevertheless "the most overlooked aspect of Du Bois's most hallowed formulation" (*Afro-Orientalism* 2).

While Du Bois's fascination with Asia as the "fraternal twin" to the African and African American struggles had certainly undergone complex transformations, in his final years he imagined China to be a utopia that had no place for racial injustices and class exploitation (Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* xii). When Du Bois first visited China, in 1936, it had seemed to him a "riddle of the universe" with its rich history of civilization and yet inability to rise above white imperialism ("Yellow Sea" 84). Now, more than twenty years later, on both of his trips, in 1959 and 1962, China had transformed into nothing short of a "miracle" that seemed to have all the answers to the global problems of economic disparity and color prejudice ("Vast Miracle" 195). As I argue, Du Bois's changing consciousness of China offered a robust testimony to the country's emergence from victimhood to a state of counterhegemonic power—a narrative that finds subtle but clear expression in the Chinese translation of *Souls*. This narrative, however, becomes problematic when we ask such questions as these: How did the translator, Wei Qun, translate and reappropriate the specificities of the "strange meaning of being black" in a way that resonated with an audience who was unfamiliar with black

experience? Given the limits of Maoist China, where religious beliefs were vehemently suppressed, in what ways did Wei Qun appropriate the concept of souls? At a time when individual expressions or singular authorial voices were frowned on as bourgeois indulgences that undermined collective statehood, to what extent did the translated text mitigate the sense of self-consciousness and black subjectivity that permeates the pages of *Souls*?

In probing these questions, the discussion ultimately unravels the contradictions and misapprehensions of Afro-Asian solidarity as we examine the ways in which the Chinese translation approaches the historical and cultural nuances of Du Bois's work. Even though Wei Qun's text gestures toward China's effort in facilitating the mutual understanding of Afro-Asian historical sufferings, the ownership—if also distortion and reappropriation—of blackness that the translator assumes essentially reveals China's larger political goal of representing the darker races of the world. Likewise, Du Bois's visit coincided with an ongoing radical social and economic reform launched by Mao in the name of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). The event had led not only to economic catastrophes but also to a famine that would eventually take the lives of tens of millions—a fact that neither Du Bois nor his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, ever acknowledged in their glorious praises of China in the years to come.⁵ Du Bois's fascination with China also invites parallels to his early fascination with Japan and support for Japanese imperialism in China just a year shy of the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). In what follows, I would like to briefly revisit these historical moments before delving into the actual translation, since they are instrumental in furthering our understanding of the context and the ways in which Wei Qun translated Du Bois's work.

"You Are No Darker Than I Am"

In her posthumously published account, the American journalist Anna Louise Strong captures the intriguing first encounter between Mao, who was sixty-six years old, and W. E. B. Du Bois,

then ninety-one, in Mao's summer residence in Wuhan on 14 March 1959: "[Mao] moved swiftly, with energy and even buoyancy. He seemed not only very fit but unworried, almost in a joking mood. He expressed surprise at Dubois' color and held his own hand to compare color, saying: 'Who could tell which of us is the darker? You are no darker than I am'" (492). Strong, who rose to international prominence with her wide coverage of communism in the Soviet Union and China, eventually made China her permanent home until her passing, in 1970. In recounting what marks a pivotal point of Afro-Asian engagements, Strong emphasizes that the meeting between Mao and Du Bois was the "first interview granted to any Americans since Mao had left Yanan more than a decade earlier" (491). Mao's striking first remark, "Who could tell which of us is the darker? You are no darker than I am," suggests an interesting discourse of joint victimization between the so-called yellow and darker races of the world. While Mao's surprise at Du Bois's light skin tone might seem reasonably genuine, the immediacy of his statement conveys solidarity with his guest based on a shared history of oppression in the global theater of racial capitalism. To the minds of both, the reformation of the existing global racial order was urgent but possible only with a worldwide revolution in which the proletariat was to take central part. What underlies Mao's remark is not only the implication that color is a requisite for such an alliance but also the legitimacy of the claim that China's "darkness" is comparable to that of Africans and African Americans, established through measurements of historical sufferings.

The frame of comparative racialization that Mao used to ascertain China's nationhood is, in fact, a radical refashioning of the discourse of race in late-nineteenth-century China. As national anxiety escalated over the collapse of the late Qing dynasty and amid threats of Western encroachment, Chinese intellectuals were prompted to reconsider notions of citizenship and national identities through reframing the global racial order. Racializing China, as Frank Dikötter and Jing Tsu have discussed at length in their works, was then

taken by such leading figures as Kang Youwei, Tang Caichang, Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Zhang Binglin to be an urgent task to prevent the demise of the "yellow" race. Rather than align the Chinese with the globally oppressed, however, reformers sought differentiation from the "black" and "red" races as the ultimate pathway to China's survival. As Dikötter observes, Tang remarked that "yellow and white are wise, red and black are stupid; yellow and white are rulers, red and black are slaves; yellow and white are united, red and black are scattered" (81). While touring the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i), Liang urged his fellow Chinese not to fall into the fate of the "red" Indians, who "were not even aware of their extinction" (qtd. in Dikötter 75). Kang made clear that the inferior races had to be either cleared out or blended with the superior ones for a peaceable "One World" to be achievable (qtd. in Dikötter 89).

Lin Shu and Wei Yi's Chinese translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) in 1901—the first American novel translated into Chinese in its entirety—served precisely this purpose. "Must we the yellow people touch those dead stalks?" Lin exclaims in the preface, likening black slaves to "withered stalks" who had long been "paralyzed" by American slavery. Depicting the "gross abuse" suffered by Chinese laborers in the United States, Lin warned the Chinese to avoid being "poisoned" by the "venom" of the American empire, lest they inherit the horrible fate of the black slaves (qtd. in Tsu 57). Instead of seeking Afro-Asian solidarity, Lin's message foreclosed such an imagined possibility. As modern China sat at the crossroads of the discourses of race, class, and nation, it would undergo a drastic shift in its perception of race in the decades to follow.

Retrospectively, Mao's depiction of China's emergence from victimization in the earlier decades would find useful expression in Du Bois's *Autobiography* (1968), in which Du Bois describes the transformative views of the country that he developed during his three trips there. Recalling his first visit, in 1936, Du Bois marveled at China's significant historical accomplishments, but the pervasive foreign encroachment there also repelled him.

Shanghai, in particular, "was the epitome of the racial strife, the economic struggle, the human paradox of modern life." The "greatest city of the most populous nation on earth," he remarks, was mostly "owned, governed and policed by foreign nations" (45). The disturbing history of American slavery was brought home to him when he saw an English boy about four years old ordering "three Chinese children out of his imperial way on the sidewalk of the Bund; and they meekly obeyed and walked in the gutter. It looked quite like Mississippi" (45). In contrast, Manchukuo, then a puppet state under Japanese occupation from 1932 to 1945, was "nothing less than marvelous" (qtd. in Kearney 204). Du Bois was impressed not only by Japanese industrial modernization there but also by its rule over what appeared to be a happy Chinese populace. Three years before his visit, Du Bois publicly expressed frustration toward China and Japan. Chiding the two nations for fighting each other when they should treat each other as kin, Du Bois urged them to get together: "Arise and lead! The world needs Asia!" ("Listen"). The disturbing migration of the US color line to interwar China that Du Bois saw during his first trip further prompted his approval of Japan's imperial role in China, which would help a rising Asia counter white imperialism—a position Du Bois continued to favor even after the Nanjing Massacre (1937), one of the most brutal genocidal events of the twentieth century.⁶

Twenty-three years later, Du Bois visited China again with his wife at the invitation of Guo Moruo, the head of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and Soong Ching-ling (also widely known as Madame Sun Yat-sen), the soon-to-be vice chairperson of the People's Republic of China. The country that he once characterized as "licking the European boots that kicked her" had now, before his eyes, transformed into a miraculous site ("Forum"). During their carefully orchestrated ten-week tour, the Du Boises were greeted by Premier Zhou Enlai and a number of Chinese dignitaries, who accompanied them on visits to villages, factories, schools, colleges, lectures, and a series of events. Du Bois's ninety-first birthday was also made a national

holiday in China. Despite an ongoing famine caused by agricultural and industrial reform that wiped out a significant portion of the country's population, the China that Du Bois saw was inhabited by the perfect union of "a happy people" working collectively for the state. What is "the secret of China in the second half of the 20th century?," Du Bois asks ("Vast Miracle" 191). As he recalls learning about Chinese history and how he "had it explained to [him] stripped of Anglo-Saxon lies," he goes so far as to exclaim that "no depths of Negro slavery in America have plumbed such abyss as the Chinese have seen for 2,000 years and more" (192).

Du Bois's sheer conviction of China's capacity to lead is premised on the country's understanding of "Negro slavery," which resulted from its long historical sufferings and phenomenal emergence from white oppression. But this conviction also requires bypassing China's troubling domestic turmoil and exploitation of the discourse of "common suffering" to its political advantage in the subaltern space of Afro-Asia. At the time of the Bandung Conference, African nations remained skeptical of China's intentions in the so-called Third World geopolitical sphere. As Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, China increasingly relied on the African nations' support to garner international influence; the twenty-six African votes that China obtained eventually enabled its entry to the United Nations in 1971 (Gao 66; Shih 158). Securing influence in developing countries also helped China avoid criticism for its position against Taiwan's claim to independence and Tibetan revolts against China's imposition of its ideology there.

If we juxtapose Du Bois's narratives of his first two trips to China, his support of the Maoist model is, in fact, not dissimilar to his previous endorsement of the Japanese vision of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." The term, as A. J. Grajdanzev explains, was "a slogan to combat the enmity of the Chinese and other peoples who, by force of arms or by threat of force, were included in this sphere" (311). The Japanese attempt to secure a pan-Asian base and China's Afro-Asian vision have, of course, vastly different historical, racial, and political repercussions. But the binary lens

through which Du Bois viewed the two—white hegemonic power and the globally oppressed—impeded him from thoroughly recognizing the nature of interracial tensions and neocolonial maneuvers behind the façade of these discourses of transracial engagements. The ironic ways in which Du Bois resituated his earlier impressions of an exploited Shanghai in the overarching framework of Mao’s “Third-Worldism” would find articulations, both literally and figuratively, in the Chinese translation of *Souls*.

Souls was not the first work of African American literature translated into Chinese. The poetry and essays of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen, among others, preceded it into Chinese translation before the Second World War. Their works were featured in such prominent Chinese literary journals as *Les contemporains* and *Wenxue* throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁷ Langston Hughes’s visit to Shanghai in 1933 also sparked a wave of literary conversations and translation of Negro literature in the Chinese literary community.⁸ The attention that African American literature had garnered over time eventually resulted in the translation of lengthier works, such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, in 1947. Often viewed as providing a powerful voice against US imperialism and capitalism, however, African American literature remained vastly underpublished. The translation industry in pre-Maoist China was more invested in promoting works by canonical writers than by writers of color, who were largely placed outside the literary establishment. By the late 1950s, however, as the Sino-Soviet split was drawing close, the Chinese literary scene would begin to foreground works by Afro-Asian and African American writers in order to realign itself with other global nations of color. This is especially true after China’s participation in the first conference of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1958, where the Chinese delegates, including Guo Moruo, met Du Bois for the first time.⁹

The Tashkent conference had a significant impact on China, which increasingly saw literary

production as a crucial means for asserting its own voice. Soon after Tashkent, the Chinese journal 译文 (*Yiwen*; *Translation*) was renamed 世界文学 (*Shijie Wenxue*; *World Literature*) and started featuring an increasing number of works by African, Asian, and African American writers. The old title, *Yiwen*, as Volland explains, “ultimately indicates a unidirectional process of linguistic transfer that privileges the source over the target language and culture. Once the PRC moved away from ‘learning from the Soviet Union,’ the project of one-way translation became problematic” (166). All this is to say, while China’s increased identification with the plight of colonial Africa and Southeast Asia might have led to an appreciation of Du Bois’s work, it had also, as I illustrate below, eroded Du Bois’s voice and the fundamental meanings of *Souls* itself.

From *The Souls of Black Folk* to *Heiren de Linghun*

At the time of its original publication, in 1903, *Souls* sent shockwaves through the US literary and political communities with a singular voice that addressed the turn-of-the-century “Negro problem.” Articulating the historical and “spiritual strivings” of people of black descent, Du Bois’s work rewrote the national vocabulary of race at a time when African Americans were continually denied equal access to education, political participation, and the social and cultural spheres in post-Reconstruction America. Fifty years later, in 1953, the Blue Heron Press in New York published the fiftieth anniversary Jubilee edition of *Souls*, on which Wei Qun’s Chinese translation was based. While Du Bois kept changes in this edition to a minimum, he allowed two amendments to the preface that were crucial to the context in which the Chinese translation took shape. First, the preface features Shirley Graham Du Bois’s remarks on the truth, timelessness, and authenticity of her husband’s work. Given the context of the Du Boises’ purposeful visit to China in 1959, Shirley Graham Du Bois’s voice was timely because it accentuates the mutual relevance between *Souls* and China: “Fifty years have passed since this book first

appeared. . . . Today the whole world is being called to account to its dark peoples" (3). Second, in this edition Du Bois attempts to appeal to an audience that was sympathetic to socialist and communist thought, admitting in the preface that the 1903 version had not adequately addressed "the tremendous impact on the modern world of Karl Marx" ("Fifty Years After" xiv).

Not surprisingly, Du Bois's self-reflective remark was warmly welcome by Chinese critics at the time. Tu An, for example, calls Du Bois an "exceptional peace warrior," who had long dedicated himself to "black liberation, human progress, and the defense of peace." Depicting Du Bois's body of work as an "exposé of the nature of American imperialism" (130), Tu's views were shared by Li Dunbai and Huang Xingzhi, who characterize Du Bois as a key critic of American racial capitalism at home and abroad. Having pointed out Du Bois's earlier "limitations and false views," particularly his belief in higher education as a critical pathway to the future successes of African Americans, Huang and his fellow critics were now enthralled by Du Bois's conviction that Maoist proletarianism was the ultimate cure for global racial and class conflicts (Huang). Likening Du Bois's "victory" in rising above racial oppression to Mao's own coup in overcoming hardships by means of sheer determination, Li Dunbai draws a parallel that permeates the Chinese translation of *Souls* (21).

While Du Bois's amendments to the preface reframed *Souls*, key passages remained intact and resonated just as boldly half of a century later. In the "Forethought," Du Bois offers his readers the following message: "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." The Chinese translation would modify this passage so that it aligned with the amendments to the preface. As Du Bois explicates the troubling experience of being black as a turn-of-the-century "problem," he does not make clear that the "darker" races in Asia are part and parcel of the color-line

formulation until the beginning of chapter 2, where he writes about "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (23). In the Chinese edition, Wei Qun translates "the problem of the color-line" in the "Forethought" as "the problem of the color-line between white people and people of color," elucidating to his readers that they, too, are affected by the twentieth-century color-line (3). Likewise, Wei Qun addresses his reader as "尊贵的读者" ("honorable reader"; 3) instead of using the direct translation, "温柔的读者" ("gentle reader"), which is, in Edwards's words, more "implicitly framed as white American" (Introduction xv). "Honorable reader" is not only more commonly used in addressing Chinese readers, it also puts readers in an esteemed position as they are invited to experience "the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive" (Du Bois, "Forethought")—an experience that ought to resonate with them as fellow strivers, throughout the history of China's semicoloniality, in the face of white imperialism.

As *Souls* unfolds, Du Bois alludes to the persistent trope of the "Veil" throughout the text to signify the racial divide between the black and the white worlds. "Leaving, then, the world of the white man," Du Bois remarks in his "Forethought," "I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls." In Wei Qun's version, "I have stepped within the Veil" is translated as "我跨进了帷幕内的世界" ("I have crossed over into the Veil"; 3). The translator's choice of "跨进" ("cross over into") instead of "踏进" ("step into"), however subtle the difference between the two, conveys a stronger sense of overcoming travails than does the original version, suggesting that stepping into the Veil is itself an ultimate act of self-determination. In the same paragraph, Du Bois remarks on "[v]enturing now into deeper detail" as he "in two chapters studied the struggles of the massed millions of black peasantry" ("Forethought"). "[V]enturing now into deeper detail" is translated as "大胆地进行更深刻细致的

分析” (“boldly venturing into deeper detail”), instilling once again a deep sense of the speaker’s autonomy (3).

Wei Qun’s portrayal of Du Bois as a daring figure illustrates his perception of Du Bois as a tireless warrior who has battled white oppression for over ninety years. But it also reflects the broader trend of socialist literature that aims at giving expression to self-determination in ways that empower nations, communities, and voices that have long been caught in “the periphery of the transnational cultural landscape” (Volland 15). Since Chinese readers themselves are on Du Bois’s side of the Veil, the text positions them as heroic players in overturning the global racial order as a collective. Such a tweak in the tone of the narration, however, inevitably diminishes the cultural specificity of insurmountable hardships facing African Americans, resulting in an interpretation that prioritizes triumphs over struggles in the early pages of Du Bois’s work.

Du Bois’s use of the Veil in the first chapter continues to present itself as a translation challenge in the Chinese version. To cite an example, the Veil’s metonym, “second-sight,” is translated in a way that deviates from what is communicated in the original passage: “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world” (Du Bois, *Souls* 16). Wei Qun translates “second-sight” as “透视的能力” (“the ability to see through”; 3), oversimplifying Du Bois’s complex concept of the Veil as encompassing the “warring” twoness inhabiting “one dark body” in the American world (16). Double consciousness, in Edwards’s formation, is “at once a deprivation (an inability to see oneself except ‘through the eyes of others’) and a gift (an endowment of ‘second sight’ that seems to allow a deeper or redoubled comprehension of the complexities of ‘this American world’)” (xiv). In this articulation, Wei Qun’s understanding of the African American “ability to see through” strips the complex dual layering of the Veil, emphasizing its gifted nature in enabling one to see through the world of human suffering and cruelty.

Not surprisingly, Wei Qun’s effort to foster an understanding of Du Bois’s “twoness” among Chinese readers soon also falters because of various fundamental translation errors and distortions. In the first paragraph of chapter 1, Du Bois begins:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town. . . . To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (15)

Even though much of the paragraph is well translated, Wei Qun misses the mark with the crucial statement, “How does it feel to be a problem?,” which he translates as “为什么这会成为一个问题?” (“Why has it become a problem?; 2). In the original version, Du Bois articulates the historical dilemma of black existence, which had long been viewed by white America as a “problem” to be eradicated. While the sharp irony of the statement is expressed in the form of a question, its reappearance at the end of the paragraph further emphasizes the ignorance and condescension of the asker. In erasing the subjectivity of the narrator, the translated version, “Why has it become a problem?,” immediately leaves the readers wondering what exactly the problem is. As Wei Qun lets go of the word *feel*, he also wipes out the emotional weight of the narrator, as well as the deep sense of insult that Du Bois’s narrator conveys in the original passage.

That said, what Du Bois communicates at the beginning of the second paragraph, “And yet, being a problem is a strange experience” (15), is translated accurately as “And yet, to exist as a problem is a very strange experience” (2), suggesting that Wei Qun might have in fact understood Du Bois’s articulation of the “problem” of being black from the start. If the “mistranslation” was indeed intentional, Wei Qun’s reconfiguration of the question as “Why has it become a problem?” would be his way of decentering the human dimension of the

problem itself, emphasizing instead the historical context—that is, the fact that the practice of slavery and racial injustices in Western worlds are the root of said “problem.” While the shift in the message serves China’s political goal in propagating the inhumanity of white imperialism, the translation paradoxically warps the fundamental meanings of being black that Du Bois relays in the original version. As Wei Qun’s text undermines the centrality of the black self, it also fractures Du Bois’s formation of the “souls” of black folk.

Whether Wei Qun’s mistranslation was intentional or not, it ultimately reinforces what the Chinese state considered to be the danger of celebrating the individual self as the agent of cultural practice and production. The transnational circulation and production of world literature, in the Maoist framework, was to be rooted in the elevation not of the individual but of the collective, and the collective’s “self-appointed representative—the socialist state” (Volland 13). For these reasons, identities of individual writers and translators were often masked and grouped under a single pseudonym—“Wei Qun” itself is likely an alias—a practice that would become prevalent during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Yoon 242).¹⁰ Aside from reinforcing ideological censorship, collective translation minimized the subjective voices of cultural workers, whose sole purpose was to serve the state and whose roles were otherwise likened to what Ma Shikui characterizes as “translation machines” (“Fanyi” 139). Going against the grain of the Chinese socialist collective, Du Bois’s distinctive voice is therefore to be avoided at all costs. In the instance of the translation above, by submitting Du Bois’s subjectivity to the socialist reframing of collectivity, what otherwise gets viewed as a bourgeois indulgence of the subjective self is transformed into a collective state of consciousness.

To frame Chinese readers’ reception of Du Bois’s work in the ideology of collective virtue, Wei Qun has made telling alterations to the frequent occurrences of the term *souls*. In the original version, the Du Boisean notion of souls articulates an experience shared by all black people: whether as individuals or as a collective, they all live in the

“throbbing human soul” (Du Bois, *Souls* 109), as personified objects (“the soul, of the Jubilee songs” [142]) or in historical terms (“Lo! The soul to whose dear memory I bring this little tribute” [164]). In the translated text, instead of repeatedly using “灵魂” (*linghun*, the Chinese equivalent of *souls*), Wei Qun resorts to a range of variants, including “心思” (“thought”; 3), “脑汁” (“brain”; 33), “心灵” (“heart spirit”; 87), and “人” (“people”; 91) for reasons that speak to the ideological framework in which religion was placed in Maoist China. By the late 1950s, as Ian Johnson tells us, “Mao embarked on a series of wildly radical policies that suppressed most religious activity” (26). Because of the deep religiosity behind the notion of *linghun* and its intricate relationship to the concepts of the afterlife in the history of Chinese religious thought, in avoiding the term Wei Qun aims at grounding Du Bois’s work in a secular manner dedicated to celebrating communist political control and economic reforms.

In chapter 1, for instance, Du Bois explains “double consciousness” as a sense “of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (16–17). In the Chinese version, “of measuring one’s soul” is translated as “衡量自己的思想” (“of measuring one’s thought”; 3). The switch from “soul” to the more graspable element of “thought” once again undermines the richness of *soul* and the sustenance of the doubly conscious black self. Later in the chapter, Du Bois remarks on the dilemma of the black artist who lacks creative space and opportunities to portray the beauty of his people in a world that fails to appreciate black aesthetics: “The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist” (18). Instead of translating “the soul of the black artist” as “黑人艺术家的灵魂” (“the *linghun* of the black artist”), the translator uses “黑人艺术家的心中” (“the *heart* of the black artist”), emphasizing the earthly component of the living body rather than the more abstract form of existence associated with *soul* (5). Even though the metonyms of *soul* (“thought” and “heart”) that Wei Qun uses in

these examples adequately capture the substance of the inner self, they fall short of encapsulating the multiplicity of black voices, lives, values, and beliefs that are otherwise tied to the trans-spatial and trans-temporal garment of black unity.

Understandably, *linghun* is used only in passages with direct religious references, such as the epigraphs of chapters 6 and 14 and most of chapter 10, which depicts the history and “characteristics of Negro religious life” (142). Even as Du Bois describes the “soul-life of the slave” in the context of religion in chapter 10 (141), Wei Qun translates “soul-life” as “精神生活” (“spirit life”), expressing a kind of human faith not bound to any frames of religiosity (163). Similarly, where Du Bois describes the “soul of the Sorrow Songs” at the end of chapter 1 (11), the translator uses “哀歌的精神” (“spirit of the Sorrow Songs”) to minimize the religious symbolism of nonliving objects (11). Du Bois’s early emphasis on the “greater souls” of the Veil in the “Forethought” likewise is replaced by “比较伟大的人物” (“greater human character”) as the translator personifies the Veil at a more material level (4). The Chinese translator’s aversion to *linghun* also leads him to leave out the biblical tropes to which Du Bois reaches as he reflects on the anguish of double consciousness in the face of imperial violence and on the opportunity of seeing through the Veil to a promised land of spirituality shared across the continents.

Ultimately, the translator’s decision to substitute *soul* with these variants accentuates the Maoist frame of thought. The word “精神” (*jingshen*; “spirit”), in particular, is symbolic in the Chinese vocabulary of nation building at the time. Steeped in revolutionary thought, *jingshen* was a term that Mao frequently used to connect notions of self with the nation in an effort to foster the unbreakable bond between “民心” (*minxin*; “heart of the people”) and national rejuvenation. That China’s long historical struggle to overcome oppression would not have been possible without the unfaltering resilience of its people was a message running throughout Maoist China. In addressing the second plenary session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in

1956, Mao famously places “the spirit of proletariat revolution” at the core of “human spirit” (Mao, “Jianku Fendou”). Grounded in the material reality of revolutionary China, it was a “spirit” that also transcends time and space in giving voice to the nation’s identity as a collective. That is to say, while the Chinese translation of “souls” into “heart,” “thought,” “spirit,” and “people” aims at dissociating the living from the deceased, it also grounds one’s earthly existence in Maoism, which is the *singular* guiding principle of the nation’s soul life.

“China Is Flesh of Your Flesh and Blood of Your Blood”

Nineteen days before meeting with Mao, on 23 February 1959, Du Bois was elated that his ninety-first birthday was made a national holiday in China. Celebrating with over one thousand students and faculty members at Peking University, Du Bois spent that afternoon speaking “to the people of China and Africa and through them to the world” (“China” 199). His address, as David Levering Lewis tells us, was also to be “broadcast to Africa” (705). The intellectual in exile spoke with “no authority, no assumption of age or rank,” Du Bois remarks; “[o]ne thing alone I own and that is my own soul” (“China” 199). Marveling at the impressive rise of China to the world stage, Du Bois encouraged the “Dark Continent” to turn away from the West (200) and instead seek political and economic collaboration with “the rising sun” of the East (199). In the second half of the speech, Du Bois tells his African audience, “China is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. China is colored and knows to what a colored skin in this modern world subjects its owner. . . . China does not need American nor British missionaries to teach her religion and scare her with tales of hell. China has been in hell too long, not to believe in a heaven of her own making” (201).

In advocating political ties between African nations and China, Du Bois portrays China as the promised land for the globally oppressed. The counterhegemonic powerhouse that he envisions as

emerging from Afro-Asian collaborations radically disrupts the idea that the West is the center of the globe by remapping the periphery as an empowering site of knowledge and economic production. Political and economic partnerships aside, Du Bois accentuates a spirituality shared across African nations and China by pointing to the detrimental role of Western religious imperialism in the historical forging of a racial-capitalist hegemony. Du Bois's remark that "China is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood" takes the biblical notions of flesh and blood out of the context of Leviticus 17.11, resituating them in the transnational space of Afro-Asia not defined by any framework of Western religions (*Dictionary*). In figuratively delineating a genealogical makeup shared by the Chinese and African peoples in terms of "flesh" and "blood," Du Bois calls for the unity of "souls" under China's third-worldist proletariat revolution in replacement of all things Euro-American.

As Du Bois remained faithful to his belief in an "[e]ternal China" until his death in 1963, he seemed willing to look past the realities of the Chinese famine behind the veil of his happy political tourism ("I" 24). In promoting China onto the pedestal of world leadership, Du Bois also resorts to what Mullen characterizes as "quasi-mythic renderings of colored empires" (3). The ways in which Du Bois describes the "wonders of the Asian world" during his 1959 visit, in particular, "often employed an ecstatic or prophetic voice" (Mullen and Watson xx), glossing over xenophobic racism in China itself in the ensuing decades. While the Du Boises' visits had inspired similar meetings between Mao and the African American civil rights leaders Robert F. Williams and his wife, Mabel, in 1966, and between Zhou Enlai and the Black Panther Party leaders Huey Newton, Elaine Brown, and Robert Bay in 1971, the era was also characterized by a wave of antiblack protests in China. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, racial violence against black students broke out on university campuses and in public spaces in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Nanjing with minimal police response or delayed state intervention. At the tail end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, while American

literature continued to be frowned upon as morally corrupt and often referred to as "poison ivy," African American writers were labeled with such racial epithets as "black chimpanzees" (qtd. in Phoenix Media).¹¹

Notwithstanding these interracial tensions, China offered black intellectuals and civil rights leaders a transformative platform to engage with alternative notions of freedom and democracy, just as the Du Boises' visits brought to the fore the crucial role that African American history and literature played in China's literary remapping. Even though Du Bois and his Chinese counterparts imagined a solidarity vexed by mutual misapprehension, *Souls* in translation played a pivotal role in negotiating and fostering multifaced visions of blackness on the transpacific stage of racial reimaging. Behind the richness of transracial crossings ultimately lies the potency of translation in articulating necessary *décalage* in ways that fortify transnational unity. If indeed there is one work that fruitfully unearths the complexities and paradoxes of these crossings through its transcendence of space and time, the color line and politics of language, *The Souls of Black Folk* is that text.

NOTES

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1. The Bandung Conference took place in April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, and was cosponsored by the governments of Indonesia, Burma, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. With representatives from twenty-nine countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the event amplified the need for self-determination, racial equality, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation among these newly independent and nonaligned regions during the age of decolonization. For a more in-depth discussion of the conference and Richard Wright's encounters during his visit, please see Roberts and Foulcher.

2. The term *third-world literature* was coined by Jameson in his contentious essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986). Jameson's reading of "third world" texts as "national allegories" was criticized for being too general (69). Ahmad, for instance, retorts that "there is no such thing as a 'third-world literature' which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge" (4).

3. Du Bois communicated the idea of the “Talented Tenth” in an article published in *The Negro Problem* (1903), in which he emphasizes the importance of higher education for African Americans (“Talented Tenth”). He believed that the top tenth of the black population would become leaders of their race in arbitrating social change that would follow from Black Americans gaining civil rights.

4. I searched for information about the name Wei Qun to no avail. It is likely a pseudonym, suggesting that the Chinese translation of *Souls* was the result of collective efforts to represent the Chinese state.

5. The estimates of the death toll vary from twenty to fifty-five million. The famine has been discussed in Wu Jinglian and Ma Guochuan’s *Whither China?*, Felix Wemheuer’s “Sites of Horror: Mao’s Great Famine,” and Frank Dikötter’s *Mao’s Great Famine*, among others.

6. Du Bois would revise his position much later, in 1957, in his semi-fictional autobiography, *The Black Flame, a Trilogy*.

7. See Li Xilao for his discussion of the Chinese translations of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s work.

8. See Lai-Henderson for the details of Hughes’s visit and the discussion of race in the Chinese intellectual scene at the time.

9. After Bandung, a number of literary and cultural initiatives were formed, including the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization, which was founded at a conference in Cairo that began in late December 1957 and that also gave rise to the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau. Guo had started corresponding with Du Bois in the early 1950s as the vice president of the World Council of Peace, in which Du Bois had a visible presence.

10. As Ma Shikui explains, translators during the Cultural Revolution were disguised under names such as 齐干, 齐戈, and 共工 (“Qi Gan,” “Qi Ge,” and “Gong Gong,” all of which mean “working together”; “Wenge” 68).

11. The minister of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Lu Dingyi, for example, was one of those who depicted African American writers as “black chimpanzees”: “American literature has fallen to the state of erotica, hooligans’ dance, and the domination of the portrayal of black chimpanzees. Capitalist philosophy, social science, literature, and art have become completely corrupt” (my trans.; qtd. in Phoenix Media).

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Abstract: How do we as scholars of transnational US literary studies understand W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) outside the historical and racial context of the United States? Anyone familiar with the text will agree that it primarily focuses on the unique condition of African American existence or, as Du Bois himself puts it, “the strange meaning of being black” at the turn of the last century. But to what extent is this “black” experience historically, nationally, or even racially bound? An exploration of the impact of the Chinese translation of *Souls* in 1959 China reveals that the fluidity of historical, national, and racial boundaries goes beyond the limits of mere cultural negotiations. Situated in the critical formation of Afro-Asian engagements during the Bandung era and Du Bois’s visit to China in 1959, *Souls* was pivotal to China’s reassertion of what it means to be “black” on the global stage of proletariat revolution.