

WRITING ILLNESS TO HEAL: THE LANGUAGE OF BREAST CANCER¹

ESTHER M. K. CHEUNG
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Hong Kong author Xi Xi began writing in the 1960s. A prolific writer, she has produced poetry and prose ranging from short stories, novels, screenplays, and translations, to literary, film and art criticism and covering a wide variety of settings and themes. Included in her work are aspects of modern city life, identity, gender, illness, re-interpretations of historical and classical stories, and myths and legends of different cultures. Her work exhibits self-reflexivity as both writer and reader. Her growing reputation in Chinese communities has been established through her persistent exploration of new ways of storytelling. Her texts experiment with narrative techniques, interaction between media, and the use of language (e.g. word play, allegory, allusion, metaphor and symbol). Some of her stories have been translated into English. Best known are *My City* (1993), *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories* (1996), *Marvels of a Floating City and Other Stories* (1997), and *The Flying Carpet* (2000).²

Xi Xi was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989. *Mourning for the Breast* (1992) is her account of how the illness tormented her body and mind. The book was praised as one of the ten best books of 1992 by the *China Times* (Taiwan).³ In addition to her personal sentiment, she brings a great variety of subjects about breast cancer and illness into discussion, including various medical treatments, metaphors of illness, and representations of breast cancer in literature and visual arts, to name a few. To date, only some short excerpts of the book have been translated into English and collected in *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories*.⁴ The excerpt entitled “The Body’s Language” translated in this paper is a seminal chapter in her book. It explores the significance of learning how to read the language of the body in a world where too much attention is always paid to the mind and the intellect. Concern for the body is focused on the sexualized body and notion of beauty that

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to a few individuals who have helped me in this research project. My greatest appreciation goes to my Research Assistant Michelle Kwok who helped me to collect data on breast cancer, to compile the literature review on the publications of illness narratives, and to draft the translation of “Body Language.” I owe a lot to Wendy Lam of the Nursing Department of the University of Hong Kong who has kindly shared her research on breast cancer with me. Last but not the least, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who gave me valuable comments on how to expand the scope of discussion on illness to the social and cultural dimension, and Linda Cooke Johnson, the editor of *Studies on Asia*, who has provided precious assistance in copyediting and in the review process of this essay and translation.

² See Xi Xi’s *My City: A Hong Kong Story*, trans. Eva Hung (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, CUHK, 1993), *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories* (Enlarged Edition), with an afterword by Stephen Soong (Hong Kong: The Research Centre for Translation, CUHK, 1996), *Marvels of a Floating City and Other Stories*, ed. Eva Hung (Hong Kong: Research Center for Translation, CUHK, 1997), and *Flying Carpet*, trans. Diana Yue (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2000).

³ See “Top Ten Books of 1992” (in Chinese), *China Times*, January 1, 1993, Book Section.

⁴ See “Elegy for the Breast”, trans Caroline Mason, in *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories* (Enlarged Edition) (Hong Kong: The Research Centre for Translation, CUHK, 1996).

accompanies it. Contrary to these commonly established views, the book confronts the reality of cancer through the writing of illness.

In recent decades, studies in illness narratives, or what is often called autopathography, have shown that such narratives are often critical in nature, expressing a mission to demystify the cultural discourses and metaphors that have constructed illness. This critical direction has clearly come from Susan Sontag's oft-quoted *Illness as Metaphor* even though this work does not fall into the genre of autopathography.⁵ Sontag's comparison of the romantic association that tuberculosis evokes and the demonic connotation that cancer conveys has inspired many breast cancer patients including Xi Xi to write their illnesses. As suggested by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, disease denoting a medical diagnosis should be distinguished from illness, which refers to an ill person's experience.⁶ By extension, we can say that one may not be cured physically but can be healed psychologically. In light of this differentiation, the experience of being ill is then intimately tied to the patient's life history and social context, so is the writing of the illness. In his analysis of the burgeoning work in breast cancer narratives in the United States, Thomas Couser identifies some common features in these narratives. Breast cancer narratives often have a comic plot outlining the obligatory medical scenes that lead to recovery and alternative types of therapies that have helped patients cope with the illness.⁷ Except for a few such as Dorothea Lynch and Elizabeth Gee who died before their narratives were published, the majority of the breast cancer patients write their narratives at a time when they have reached a relatively stable stage. Couser further argues that autopathography has become a subgenre of autobiography through two processes. First, authors integrate illness into their own distinctive ongoing life narratives. Consequently, "the story of an illness becomes the story of a life." In relation to this life-writing process, individual authors either redefine the conventions of the genre by "[transcending] its ready-made formulae" or make use of the familiar conventions to "[probe] other issues."⁸ In many breast cancer narratives, the most intriguing feature lies in each author's unique way of "probing other issues," making use of the familiar conventions of autopathography and the individual experiences of illness. Among the various examples of breast cancer narratives, Audre Lorde's famous *The Cancer Journals* (1980) is a powerful personal account showing how an issue about health is not only medical but also cultural. As a black, a lesbian, and a poet, Lorde explores ways in which the use of prosthesis perpetuates the stigmatization of the gendered body as the mastectomy scar is considered shameful.⁹ Her illness narrative is therefore also a form of counter-discourse, laying bare the various kinds of marginalizing effects that illness has inflicted on a female patient.¹⁰ Writing illness has thus become

⁵ See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

⁶ Anne Haunsker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1993).

⁷ G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 39-40.

⁸ Couser, 43-44. See Dorothea Lynch and Eugene Richards, *Exploding into Life* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986) and Elizabeth D. Gee, *The Light Around the Dark* (Sudbury, Mass.: Jones and Bartlet Publishers, 1992).

⁹ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983).

¹⁰ Couser, 51.

a means for Lorde to launch her activism in politics with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation

Similar to Lorde, Xi Xi expands the scope of autopathography in *Mourning for the Breast* by “probing other issues.” Without doubt, the book provides a detailed account of the writer’s experience of being ill. From the diagnosis of the disease to the different kinds of medical treatments (e.g. mastectomy, chemotherapy, and electrotherapy), Xi Xi, like other breast cancer patients, narrates her experience in a comic plot although the structure of the book is not linear. She shows us that the sick experience is so intertwined with the medical system and cultural prejudices. She criticizes the indifferent medical personnel who may not be sensitive to patients’ feelings and needs, probes deeply the negative associations that cancer evokes, and narrates how friendship has sustained her throughout the difficult process. What makes her illness narrative unique, however, is the way in which she makes connection between her illness and her career as a writer. In an interview after the publication of the book, she explained that it “represents an important phase in [her] history as a writer.”¹¹ She discovers at least three important facts in relation to language and writing. These issues are explored in “The Body’s Language,” the chapter selected for translation in this paper, although they are also addressed in other parts of the book. First, on the personal level, through the writing of this illness narrative, Xi Xi learns how to read the language of her body. In the preface of the book, she emphasizes that the term “mourning” in the title suggests a sense of what is ultimately lost but there is a possibility of “turning toward the future and of expecting rebirth.”¹² Learning the language of the body provides an opportunity of self-healing, in which the writer is able to unmask social myths that are associated with breast cancer.

This issue then brings us to the second problem, which is rooted in Chinese culture, showing how the personal cannot be divorced from the social and the cultural. As writing publicly about one’s illness is not a usual practice in Chinese culture, her illness narrative has provided a means for the reader to challenge the moral and cultural codes that demean and degrade the status of the body. Margaret Lock, an anthropologist of medicine, argues that although the body is a part of both nature and society, to understand illness in specific locations, we need to perceive it as “socially and culturally produced and historically situated.” She further suggests that the language of “emotions in the physical body” and “forms of expression of pain and discomfort” will be available to us through a cultural analysis of ideological assumptions in any given society and location.¹³ Benefiting from a series of studies of Chinese women with breast cancer, Wendy W.T. Lam and Richard Fielding explore the social and cultural contexts of the meaning of illness in Hong Kong in a similar vein. They argue that self-identity linking to social group membership is important for Hong Kong Chinese women; consequently staying healthy and keeping the body undamaged, as

¹¹ Teng Sue-feng, “Start with Treasuring Your Own Body: An Interview with Hsi Hsi,” *Sinorama* (March 1993) 96-98.

¹² Author’s translation, Preface, *Ai Dao Ru Fang (Mourning for the Breast)* (Taipei: Hong Fang, 1992), iii.

¹³ Margaret Lock, “Introduction: Health and Medical Care as Cultural and Social Phenomena,” eds. Edward Norbeck and Margaret Lock, *Health, Illness and Medical Care in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 8-9. See also her other essay, coauthored with Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. No. 1 (March, 1987), 6-41.

strongly emphasized in Confucian teaching, have become obligations to social harmony for Chinese individuals.¹⁴ Due to the relatively collectivist nature of Chinese culture, illness in Chinese communities is not tolerated. Long-term suspicion of disease has produced a pattern of avoiding the sick and a tradition of paternalistic medical health care.¹⁵ The social dimension of health and illness, according to Lam and Fielding, can be revealed in the way some Hong Kong Chinese women “value the breast as a sexual, feminine or even functional feature much less than in western culture.”¹⁶ This culturally specific finding, in their view, challenges a common assumption that women are reluctant to have mastectomy because breasts are generally regarded as important symbols of women’s sexuality in a more westernized context. Chinese women in Hong Kong tend to prefer modified radical mastectomy (MRM) to breast conserving treatment (BCT) in order to avoid a greater chance that the cancer might recur. They view losing a breast as an acceptable trade-off for survival. Moreover, losing the breast can be hidden but the side effects of chemotherapy, e.g. losing hair, gaining weight, and changing in appearance, are visible. For these women, hiding their disease is a way to protect themselves against stigmatization and social exclusion.¹⁷

In the light of this prevalent view of illness, I argue that this kind of stigmatization has had an impact on the practice of writing. Since illness is viewed negatively and there is a need to avoid being seen as different, writing publically of one’s illness is not a common act in Chinese societies. Hiding one’s breast is then associated with refraining from speaking openly about one’s illness. As Xi Xi observes, talking about breast cancer is a taboo and there is a total absence of writing about the illness in Chinese literature. In an apt description, she suggests that “cancer as an illness is a ‘signified’ without a ‘signifier’.”¹⁸ Until recently the same prejudice about illness had long prevailed in western philosophical discourse since the Age of the Enlightenment. *Mourning for the Breast* therefore can be regarded as Xi Xi’s attempt to confront not only the physical illness but also the deep-rooted cultural biases inherent in both Chinese and Western cultures.

Last but not the least, if the body does have a language, one’s own “body-literacy” is developed through the skills of translation and interpretation. Xi Xi argues that as translations are forms of interpretation, one does not expect to have an absolute version of translation. The same goes with the translation of the body’s language. As readers of our own bodies, we are always engaged with the process of making interpretations. By probing these issues about language and writing, Xi Xi finds it possible to distance herself from her illness. We might even say that this kind of distancing allows her to heal, if not cure, through the reflection upon the nature of language and

¹⁴ W.W.T. Lam and R.Fielding, “The Evolving Experience of Illness for Chinese Women with Breast Cancer: A Qualitative Study,” *Psycho-oncology* 12 (2003): 127-40.

¹⁵ Ibid, 129.

¹⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁷ See also W.W.T. Wendy Lam, R. Fielding, and E. Ho, “Predicting Psychological Morbidity in Chinese Women after Surgery for Breast Carcinoma,” *Cancer* 103/3 (2005): 637-46. In the essay, they make a similar argument about the culturally specific nature of illness: “Chinese societies are collectivist, with the individual’s needs subordinated to the family or group. Conformity and ‘normality’ support social harmony, which is a dominant social motive and a core value. Hong Kong Chinese women with breast cancer differ from western women. “Excepting (sic) survival, they express different outcome priorities, including social harmony and role functions” (638).

¹⁸ Author’s translation, see: Xi Xi, *Mourning for the Breast* (1992), 47.

writing. Unlike Sontag, who argues against the use of metaphors, she develops a highly figurative language in her book. She seems to suggest that language is tropic and that figuration is inevitable. In this essay, the physical body is metaphorically described as the “body that speaks.” In another chapter of her book, the military metaphor is mobilized to denote the insidious invasion of the disease into human body. In addition to metaphors, she is also fond of using metonymy. The horizontal shift from reading the body’s language to literary translations of western classics provides the reader with the ability to probe the larger question of interpretation. While Sontag speaks against interpretation, Xi Xi emphasizes the notion of “translation as interpretation.” She demands the possibility of multiple interpretations, acknowledging the phenomena of “misinterpretation” and “retranslation.” This is not a new concept in contemporary literary and translation theory, but it is simultaneously a subtle critique of the absolute objectivity and authority of western medical science. In this regard, what is being mourned for is not just the forever lost breast but also the possibility of fixing on definite, predetermined meaning and interpretation when the body’s language is translated. As a creative writer and a cancer patient, Xi Xi addresses both issues in her illness narrative that has ultimately become the story of the life of a writer.

THE BODY’S LANGUAGE

Xi Xi

Me and my body have been sharing one life together for already half of a century. Over such a long, long period of time, hardly had I recognized that I did have a body. It was taken care of by my mother, of course, when I was small. I had not come to notice its existence even when I knew how to eat, how to walk. It was the skin on my knee that was chafed when I fell down. It was a tooth to be pulled out when I had a toothache. Not until I reached puberty and there came my first time of menstruation that at last I came to know that I had a very close relationship with my body. I had not fallen down, nor felt pain, so how come the bleedings? After a sense of doubt came a scary feeling. I, being a woman, from then on had to be tied to the menstrual blood. For the coming several decades, me and the menstrual blood would not separate from each other.

The first time I came to know my body, I felt a deep hatred. The induction of this sense of detestation in me had little to do with the body itself, but more with the troubles that it brought about. Sanitary utensils produced by advanced technology were not available in my young days, as I was living in an era when the society was not as affluent and prosperous as it is today. I could only use stacks of rough straw paper to absorb the running menstrual blood, but they were not absorbent enough. Not to mention that the rough straw papers were easily broken and became leaky; they were stiff – that was what I hated the most. Even though I rubbed to make them softer, they still chafed the skin between my legs. It was a hard time for me every time the menstruation came. The elders in my family provided me with pieces of long cloth with four thin strings sewn to each of the

four corners, which were traditionally used for women in menstruation. But these pieces of long cloth could hardly hold the straw papers safely, and the briefs were not elastic either, so the straw papers could not always be kept in position. Once, the whole stack of straw papers under my dress fell down. As for the cloth's thin strings, they were twisted and tied tightly around my waist, and sometimes fast knots were made if I was careless enough. It was so hard to untie the knots that I became extremely agitated. I kept on finding other ways myself. I had tried using the sanitary cotton that I could find at home, but a whole big roll of sanitary cotton could be used up for just a few times, and it was so expensive. How many rolls of sanitary cotton could I use? Then, I tried using cloth diapers, like the babies did. I tore a piece of cloth from worn out dresses and folded it into a small piece in rectangular shape. Using these cloth diapers I would feel more comfortable. But at school, I still found it hard to move around, always worrying that my school uniform might get stained. No wonder people said they knew what's going on with those women dressed in black. Times were changing so fast. Women nowadays can dress in white at any time, and can even go swimming at any time. Back then, we could wash the babies' cloth diapers openly, but when we came to wash the blood-stained pieces of cloth, we had to do it covertly, in the fear that that would catch someone's eye. As it was hard to wash the blood stains on the cloth away, so lots of yellowish spots were left behind. I really felt disgusted by just glancing at them, so my hatred for the body grew intense.

As time went by, the hatred I felt for my body gradually dissipated, mainly because women suffered much less with improvements in the sanitary products. Some years ago I took a trip to Mainland China. In a visit to a factory, we had a tea reception as usual, in which the factory director gave an account of the factory's development over the years, and we applauded such routine matters. I learned from the factory director's speech that the factory's benevolent measure for women workers was to offer them an additional quire of straw papers every month. So I came to realize that in this country with a billion people, women were still using rough straw papers. Last year, while my aunt from Mainland China was paying my mother a visit, I took the opportunity to ask her whether the women in Mainland China were still using straw papers. She replied: yes, only those modern young women at work used sanitary napkins. I sighed after learning that. In those years, women in Hong Kong had already used beautiful, silky and white rice papers in this prosperous metropolis of the first class. But in China, the truly rough straw papers that looked like marls and stalks could be found. Even rough straw papers could be very precious things for those in impoverished and remote areas.

Throughout the years, I never had any serious illness, nothing more than the flu or a stomachache, and in recent years, high blood pressure. It was a surprise to me that I got a tumor. The surgical operation awakened me to the realization that I did have a body. Over the years, it seemed I knew only that I had a brain but nothing else; I absolutely had no idea at all of the whereabouts of liver and gall bladder in my body. In fact, I had studied biology at secondary school, but why did I know so little about my body? Perhaps it is because, except for biology classes, there were no health education classes in the secondary school curriculum. And, in biology classes what

we were taught were those things like unicell, gymnosperm, and so on, but nothing really closely related to the body itself. We had health education classes at primary school once a week, in which we were taught how to protect our eyes, ears, backbone, and skin, etc. Then, at secondary school, no courses advised us to protect our hearts, lungs, stomachs, and livers, let alone to pay heed to the illnesses of the breast. It is only in recent years that sex education has been carried out in schools. How strange--once we go to secondary school, we only focus on our minds, and put aside everything in connection with our bodies. All that we learn involves the mind: mathematics, physics, chemistry, languages, history, geography, civic education, and extracurricular reading. All other classes are intended to enrich the mind, and we can only exercise our bodies in P.E. In the past, there were still wonderful exercises at schools like the morning stretches, but nowadays they are cancelled, of course. School education no longer assigns any importance to the health of students' bodies, nor to the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills, or aesthetics. The schools are only working hard to stuff students' brains like Peking ducks, so as to enable them to get a certificate, get a good job, and be yuppies.

After receiving 10 years or so education at school, we all grow into persons who think highly of the mind. And, after leaving school, very often we pursue intellectual nourishment--reading books, going to movies, buying albums of paintings, buying records. All are food for the mind. The teachers never teach us what kinds of food we should buy to eat. No one tells us whether we should or shouldn't drink milk, whether we should or shouldn't eat less salt and sugar. All concerns are focused on intellectual spiritual are magnificent and dignified, while all the things belonging to the body become mean and lowly. Going to a museum to view paintings is a dignified habit, and if in the art exhibition there is a David or a Venus, we consider that it is beauty. However, this kind of beauty seems to be separated from the body and can exist independently from it. It has become spiritual—a thing that is purely spiritual. As for going to a food market, it becomes something that illiterate women and children do. We have a body, but we feel more and more alienated from it. Consider ancient China, the Confucian Six Arts were ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy, and computation. Confucius' disciples had to learn horsemanship, archery, and charioteering. In the Han and Tang dynasties many people were well-versed in both literature and martial arts. Roaming swordsmen were numerous as well. The intellectuals laid stress on taking exercise to keep fit--even the unoccupied Tao Kan moved bricks as a form of exercise. It seemed that it was around the Song Dynasty that China became a society that put more emphasis on literature than on martial excellence. The Jurchen with their excellent horsemanship had successfully conquered all China, but by the fall of the Qing dynasty, the Chinese even did not know how to ride horses.

Ancient Greece has well-known for the “love of wisdom” for ages, and the “love of wisdom” is precisely the spirit of Greece. But other than their fondness of wisdom, the Greeks also cared for their bodies. To them, to be full of wisdom and having a good physique were both of the same importance. Just by looking at the Olympics Games, we can understand that the Greeks placed so much importance on exercise. The philosopher Socrates urged his disciples to grasp the essence

of all kinds of studies, and to “take care of the body” as well. He said, “Everyone of you should observe yourself for your whole life. Try to feel out what types of food and drink, and what kinds of exercises agree with your physique. Also, you should know how to take care of yourself so you can enjoy the pleasure of good health. As you pay great attention to your own body, you know better than any doctor what kinds of thing that suit your physique,

The Greeks thought highly of physical health, and they regarded health care as an art of living. It is not until one manages her own body effectively that she can protect herself from becoming ill and weak. Poor health leads to obliviousness, timidity, bad temperament, madness, and in the end, the weakening of knowledge gained in mind. “Know Thyself,” a motto of Socrates, was inscribed onto the entrance gate of Greece’s Delphi. People nowadays have diverse explanations for the motto, saying that what the philosopher means is: If you only know your own name, in fact you do not know yourself. Only when you realize that you are a human being yourself, will you know what the abilities and functions you have, what kinds of things are suitable for you, and what you should do and should not do. Only when you realize all these, might you then be considered as knowing yourself. Over a period of time, the motto’s meaning has been changed to “know your own soul,” and hardly is there a person who points out that the philosopher’s implication also covers “your own physical body.” In the time of Ancient Greece, wisdom covered the knowledge of sciences and artistry. Philosophy and science were inseparable in early Greece. It was not until the time of Aristotle that these two disciplines became separated. Philosophy was then described as “First Philosophy” and was the highest of all studies in status. In Socrates’ “Know Thyself,” the “self” is referred to as “mind” and “body,” but by the time of Descartes, the “I” in his motto “I think therefore I am” gave rise to an independent existence of the intellect. The “I” refers to the “I” in thoughts, not to the “I” in the physical body, so this “I” can be described as “the mind”. To Descartes, the property of matter is that it can fill space, but it cannot think; whereas the property of intellect or mind is that it can think, but it cannot fill space. Thus these two things are independent of each other. Later, Hegel put forth the idea of “Absolute Spirit”. He believed that the spirit of interpreting the self freely enough is Art; the spirit of manifesting the self reverently is Religion; the spirit of thinking conceptually the nature of self and achieving full self-consciousness is Philosophy. If “Absolute Spirit” is made up of art, religion and philosophy and everything else is degraded and rejected, who will pay attention to their own body then? The mind and the body were separated ever since—the content is taken out from its form; a signified has lost its signifier. Since then, the intellectuals under the influence of this thinking no longer realized that they have a rather important body.

It seems Hegel once said that the reason for a country to become powerful and prosperous is that it has rivals: rivals enable its nationals to consolidate their power to fight against the invaders; rivals enabled its nationals to have a common language. I would not praise virus, of course, but virus awakened the drowsy other half of me. I rediscovered the body of mine that I had neglected. I started learning to listen to its voices.

When one was small, crying was the language of the body. Mother tried all means to guess the meanings that the body spoke. Was it hungry? Did it feel too cold or too hot? Was it bitten by a mosquito? Which part of the body felt uncomfortable? Did it act spoiled? Once it spoke, there would be responses at once, despite the fact that they did not always respond correctly. That was the golden age of the body. Then, as the kid was growing up, the body spoke less and less, only making noises occasionally. Having diarrhea means that you feel cold or have eaten unclean food. Having a fever and a running nose, means that you caught the flu. The body is a firm and strong castle, closely guarded by security troops and detoxification chemical works that can adequately protect it from enemies' invasions. But after all, the body will grow old and it becomes malfunctioning and its military strength weakens.

Think, how many years those oncogenes have been in my body? How many pathological changes have the healthy cells have been undergoing? Well, over at least eight or ten years or so, when I was reading books, seeing movies, and listening to records, the macrophages in my body chased after the cancer cells and swallowed them. And, when I was playing the Pacman (eating monsters) video game, facing a television set and pressing buttons, the T-lymphocytes in my body were attacking the agglomerating tumor cells. But I was totally unaware of that until the immune system failed to cope with it any more, and the tumor in my body grew bigger and bigger. It is the more emergent signal of the body that has been speaking to me: "My troops are fighting back bravely, but the enemies are too fierce to be eliminated totally. We can only besiege them and keep on attacking, but they may break out of the encirclement, spread everywhere and cause trouble. The body is in an alarm mode, "SOS, SOS." I happened to listen to the language of the body, and I gave it a helping hand at once and had the tumor resected. As for the remaining drifting enemies, I hope that the macrophages can be powerful enough to chase after them and then swallow them. Was it too late that the body sounded its alarm? No. It did keep on talking to me at the very early stage, but I did not understand totally what it talked about and I did not pay attention to it either. For instance, why so often had I felt extremely hungry before discovering the tumor? It might be that tumor cells had consumed large amount of carbohydrate in my body, thus lowering my blood sugar? Why were there times when I suddenly felt extremely cold and a shiver ran through me? But I did not go to see the doctor in the end. As for gaining too much weight, frequently sweating, having a fever, and feeling tired, I took such conditions as menopausal syndrome. Never did I realize that these could be the symptoms of some other illnesses.

After the surgical operation and the subsequent radiation therapy, my good tempered body was no longer willing to keep quiet and be pleasant with me. Every part of it kept on murmuring. I felt my feet sometimes weak, sometimes painful, while walking; I felt really tired after only walking a mile; I felt the muscles of my back stiff and numb after waking up; I felt short of breath and top-heavy very often. My body talked to me a lot but I did not get its meanings. Did I have to go to see a doctor? If yes, then almost every day I had symptoms for which I need to see the doctor as every day the body made different types of complaint. There were several times that I did go to see the doctor. A muscle of my body was stiff, which made it difficult for me to walk smoothly, sit

comfortably, and bend down easily. The doctor said: “Nothing serious, you will not feel pain several days after,” and he gave me some anodynes. But I did not like taking anodynes. I used my mother’s traditional way of curing instead. I bought a piece of ointment plaster and I plastered the muscle for one day. To my amazement, I got well.

My body makes noises more and more, as though it has started a revolution inside itself, and is protesting about a lot of things. Does it call for a strike, request for a leave, or fight for special allowances? But I do not know what it really wants. I never had any good conversation with it in the past, and now I can only listen to its talk. But the problem is – what is it talking about? Is the number of white blood cells in my body reduced? Is my body deficient in certain kinds of vitamins or minerals? Communications between people pose a very difficult task, and the communications between people and their bodies are even harder. The body has so many parts and from every part complaints are made. And, there are sub-divisions under the category of body’s language: the bone speaks the bone’s language; the muscle speaks the muscle’s language; the nerve speaks the nerve’s language. Well, ever since mankind built the Tower of Babel, we have found it hard conversing with each other.

After having a tumor, the body has kept on making SOS signals, but even my doctor does not get it, and I totally do not know how to interpret it. I am a “language-illiterate” regarding my own body. At school, very often we also learned languages of foreign countries other than the language of our country. This enables us not to become “monolingual illiterates”. Many people after school is over continue to learn more foreign languages, they hope for nothing more than to communicate with a broader world, to understand other people’s meanings. Understand other people is also a way of helping us to understand ourselves. But, other than doctors, who else could understand the language of the body? As a lover of literature, I do not necessarily read the translation of novels written in English, but I have to rely on the translations of novels of Italy, Germany and other countries. How much of the spirit in the original versions can we comprehend from the translations? Can the translation show the tense in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* appropriately? In the translation of the Spanish original version of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Captain Pantoja and the Special Services*, is the classic written language used or the colloquial language spoken by people in streets and lanes?

Open the Chinese translation of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and you will read the translator so saying: “Having compared the work’s English translation with its Japanese one, I found that there were so many problems in the translations, in particular the English translation in which mistranslations and under-translations were rather common.” In fact, in recent years, many people have pointed out that many translations are full of mistranslations, misinterpretations, under-translations and adaptations. There are not only unconscious misunderstandings, but also deliberate simplifications, and even rewritings. So it seems that for the purpose of understanding the original work more thoroughly, we have to get more different versions of translation for comparative readings, in the hope that there will be someone to re-translate the work, or to simply learn more foreign languages.

Don't guess that I am ever looking for the most perfect translation. I am not. Never is there a predefined and everlasting "Absolute Spirit" in any book. Translations are interpretations. It is possible that there are multiple layers of interpretation of the same text, and each interpreter can claim: "Madam Bovary is me," and we will not consider that there are too many Madam Bovarys. As regards the translations of the body's language, it goes without saying that biologists and doctors are the professional translators, and so their translations do appear to be more scientific and objective. However, looking into the developments of mankind at large, because of the diversity of experiences, prevailing practices and so forth, different interpretations and readings have been generated. We have been benefiting from misreading and re-translation over a long period of time. Can I say that it is impossible to have an exclusive, absolute version of translation, no matter whether it is now or in the future?

What's more, the doctors these days are uneven, some good and some bad, and the moral character and moral integrity are different from individual to individual, so we do not know whether or not they have generated a lot of mistranslations and adaptations. Very often there are cases where one doctor advises the patient to have surgical operation while another doctor says the patient is absolutely all right. No wonder this makes those people with a sick body deeply worried. Fortunately enough, good doctors are in the majority on earth. The doctors who can obtain certification for starting practices have the guarantee of reaching professional standards, and in the meantime, they can keep on gaining hands-on experience of treating patients.

The body can speak. Its language includes sounds and images as well. Its written characters are those signs that are leaving on our bodies. We can discover signs of their images by using electrocardiograms, ultrasonic waves, and X-ray fluoroscopy. The body is indeed an expert in language, and is excellent in expressing itself. We are fortunate enough to have this language expert so then we can live for such a long time on earth. Language is the subject that has concerned most of the great thinkers of the twentieth century, and bringing to light its mystery has become critical to philosophy's scientific turn. We are born with a mouth and two ears – while we are explaining ourselves on and on, it is also necessary for us to be listening sensitively. Don't let our mouth swell too much with words while our ears are shrinking day after day. The earth is a much greater body, I think. It is sending out a lot of language signs, isn't it? If we human beings still refuse to listen to it, sooner or later we will lose the ultimate body of ours on which we depend for life.

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