

# EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE: THE TRANSLATIONAL HARMONY IN *MOTHER'S TONGUE* BY THE FORMOSAN INDIGENOUS POP DIVA ABAO AS A METAPHOR FOR DEMOCRACY AND INDIGENEITY IN A SETTLER SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT:** The Formosan Indigenous diva Abao has developed a distinctive Paiwanese-language pop over the past decade through translation. A language shift from Paiwanese to Chinese since the 1980s has made translation a necessary condition for Abao to sing in Paiwanese, but on her award-winning 2019 album *Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭 it was also a source of creative inspiration. Interlingual translation features both in the title, where a Paiwanese word is juxtaposed with a Chinese phrase meaning 'mother's tongue', and in the lyrics and subtitles, which are in Paiwanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, or English. Intersemiotic translation features in the music videos, in which the lyrics are translated into dance; in the title track, the lyrics are translated into sign language first. The translator-performers sing, sign, and dance simultaneously, not just serially. The result is not a cacophony but a harmony that can serve as a metaphor for democracy and indigeneity in a settler society.

**KEYWORDS:** Taiwan; Minority Translation; AV Translation; Music Videos; Embodied Song

## 1. Introduction

This article is a case study of Formosan Indigenous pop diva Abao's award-winning 2019 album *Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭 from the perspective of translation. Interlingual translation features in the album title, in which a Paiwanese word is juxtaposed with a Chinese phrase meaning 'mother's tongue'. It also features in the lyrics, and Abao's album is most obviously a case of the interlingual translation of endangered minority language pop song lyrics. As a result of a language shift from Indigenous languages like Paiwanese to Chinese (the language of the settler majority) since the 1980s, Indigenous divas of Abao's generation rely on interlingual translation to produce Indigenous-language pop.

A Mandopop star before she became known for Paiwanese pop, Abao had a powerful motivation to switch to singing in Paiwanese, to raise its visibility and give people a way to learn it. People were listening to Luis Fonsi's *'Despacito'* (2017) without knowing what the lyrics meant; maybe, she thought, they would listen to her songs if she wrote some in Paiwanese. She was right. She has been richly rewarded at the Golden Melodies, Taiwan's analogue to the Grammys. As an entertainer, she has been able to reinvent herself. She remains a household name.

In Abao's latest album, however, translation is not simply a means to the end of singing in Paiwanese, but also a creative inspiration. In the MV (music video in Taiwanese Mandarin) for one song, 'Tjakudain 無奈' (meaning 'How I wish I could'), Abao and a male hip-hop artist DJ Didilong engage in a bilingual duet, where he sings in Taiwanese and she in Paiwanese. Hoping to woo her, he tries translating his attraction from Taiwanese into Paiwanese and from hip hop to R&B; in the climax of the song, the pair simultaneously sing

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different lyrics in different languages to different melodies, lyrics which can nonetheless be interpreted translationally. In the MV for the title track, the singer's lyrics are simultaneously translated not just interlingually in the subtitles but also intersemiotically into Taiwan Sign Language (TSL) and modern dance. In all the MVs, the lyrics are simultaneously translated intersemiotically into video imagery. While the process that produced the songs was temporal, and therefore had to involve serial translation, the product has the effect of simultaneous translation. When everything everywhere is playing all at once, to adapt the title of the 2022 Michelle Yeoh movie, one might expect a cacophony, but the result is actually a harmony that can serve as a metaphor for democracy and indigeneity in a settler society. I will spell out how in the concluding discussion. Next, I turn to a literature review that informs the research questions I ask about Abao's album and the methods I use to answer them.

## 2. Literature review

Abao has attracted attention among scholars in or from Taiwan in terms of language revitalization (Huang, 2022) and cultural resilience (Lin and Lu, 2024). In my previous study of another Formosan Indigenous-language pop singer (Sterk, 2022), in which I argued for an institutional understanding of the popularity of such music, including Abao's, and proposed the category of 'pedagogical translation' (that teaches listeners words in another language), I reviewed the literature on the role of translation in the production of Indigenous minority-language hip hop. Scholars outside translation studies from Mitchell (2000) to Przybylski (2018) have contextualized the sub-genre in terms of the history of colonization and contemporary indigeneity.

Within translation studies, Klaus Kaindl's 2005 study of the plurisemiotics of song translation is extremely useful for the interpretation of Abao's MVs, even though Kaindl was studying the translation of songs rather than the role of translation in original song creation. While he only lists four sign systems in his subtitle, namely words, music, voice, and image, he also incorporates dance (p. 254) into his analysis. Using references from the descriptive and manipulation schools of translation theory, he developed his plurisemiotic approach by casting a wide net, drawing on Pierce and Jakobson as well as Levi-Strauss and Bakhtin. He also incorporates insights from (multi)cultural studies and (multi)media studies. The former gave him a feel for the inequality of cultures in a world in which minority musics are commodified into "world music" (p. 251). The latter gave him a sense of the difficulty of assigning authorship to "multiple texts that are inextricably linked up to the institutions and social settings of musical production and reception" (p. 241); it can even be hard to identify originals and translation, as contemporary production practice "renders obsolete the idea of a notated, originary text as the starting point for translation" (p. 242). Although his conclusion, that it is the song translators who domesticate who tend to score hits (p. 246), is hardly surprising, the analysis itself is excellent. He points out, for instance, a number of instances of "disjuncture" (p. 252) where visual, audible, or legible semes might undermine each other, creating an "ironic" effect (p. 254).

Kaindl found “no translation-relevant analysis” (p. 251) of MVs in the year YouTube was launched. Fourteen years later, Rebecca Johnson devoted a section of an encyclopaedia article to interlingual translation of lyrics from “music videos” (2019, pp. 419-421) on the platform. When she turned to intersemiotic translation (pp. 426-429), however, her citations show that Kaindl’s original article had not aged a bit.

Naturally, Scholars who focus on one sign system can go into more detail. Low’s ‘pentathlon’ approach (2005), of singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme, for instance, is tailored for the translation of lyrics. With a focus on imagery in MVs, Hanke (2006) looked at “an aesthetic, expressive practice of translating the infinite possibilities of mutating, hybrid sounds into images that travel across time and space” (p. 325, cited by Johnson, 2019, p. 427). Scholars of translation have also looked at the relationship between voice and music and dance, including the way that “dance is itself a physical translation – a translation of the dancer’s body through space” (Smith, 2003, p. 33). One mode of signification that Kaindl did not consider, because of the nature of his objects of study, was translations of songs into sign language, which Mark Harrison discussed in terms of ‘sign covers’ (2013).<sup>1</sup> Harrison was contributing to a major development in audiovisual or media translation studies kicked off by Díaz Cintas, Orero, and Remael (2007), who promoted ‘media for all’. Accessibility remains a major theme in recent work in audiovisual or media translation studies (see Greco and Romero-Fresco, 2023).

In proposing ‘embodied song’, Vicky Fisher (2021) unites sign-singing with “a range of non-acoustic features such as gestural body movements and dance” (p. 2). She writes that her research “goes beyond the translation of lyrics, by combining poetic sign language with other bodily movements to embody the para-linguistic expressive and musical features that enhance the message of a song” (p. 1), but she clearly construes translation broadly in referring, for instance, to “translating the ‘feeling’ into movement” (p. 12). To understand how information in one sign system might translate into another, she builds an elaborate “grounded cognition framework” (p. 1), but the semiotic parallels seem intuitive: a fall in pitch can through an iconic homology get (p. 14).

In describing a song as a ‘gestalt’ (p. 2), Fisher broaches the final issue for this literature review, the effect of simultaneous translation that a contemporary MV for a pop song, particularly one that includes bilingual singing, can produce. Simultaneity is of course a basic concept in interpreting studies. Strictly speaking, a simultaneous interpreter interprets what he or she hears after a delay of a second or two, but it is also obvious that any simultaneous interpreter is listening, cognizing, speaking, and spontaneously gesturing (Zagar-Galvão, 2009), all at the same time. So it was surprising to me when, with the duet between Abao and DJ Didilong in mind, I went looking for literature on simultaneity in bilingual pop duets and found nothing. There is some literature on consecutive or serial singing in bilingual songs. Minority-language recording artists often sing the verses in the majority language and the chorus in the minority language (Sterk, 2022; Przybylski, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> A popular example of a sign cover that postdates the publication of Harrison’s article is Ruby’s interpretation of Joni Mitchell’s ‘Both Sides Now’ for her audition in the film ‘CODA’ (2021).

Discussions of ‘bilingual duets’ are of songs that follow the same pattern, of switching languages for the chorus. For instance, Sinik sings the verses of ‘*Je réalise*’ in French, then James Blunt sings the chorus in English (Le Nevez, 2008). But one of the distinctive features of music is that simultaneity, including verbal simultaneity, can be a virtue. Unlike in normal conversation, which descends into cacophony when two or more people are talking at the same time, in a work of music, two singers can sing different lyrics in different languages to different melodies at the same time, with harmonious effect.<sup>2</sup>

The option of simultaneity is why ‘code switching’ is inadequate as a theory of what is going on in bilingual songs. In their article on the topic, Davies and Bentahila discuss a number of fascinating examples of “the atypical use of translation to create linguistically heterogeneous texts” (2008, p. 249), thereby “breaking down barriers: the barriers between languages themselves, between song genres and between audiences” (p. 268) or, conversely, “producing effects such as alienation and exclusion” (p. 247). But their approach needs to be qualified, and not just to accommodate simultaneity. The motivations for code-switching into or out of an endangered minority language may range from breaking down barriers to exclusion, but not everyone will be capable of it. Hence, one cannot assume that “[c]ode switches within a song may ... be seen as deliberate artifices, whose authors consciously imitate the patterns used *in naturally occurring code switching*” (p. 251, italics mine). Code switches into a minority language in a song may be aspirational, reflective not of the actual situation but of one in which everyone in the community can speak the mother tongue.

Code-switching studies has clearly embraced the realization that people can multitask simultaneously in different channels for different sign systems, or even different channels for the same kind of sign system. Rudolph Troike wrote, “For speakers in code-switching mode, the evidence shows that the brain is in fact encoding the same message simultaneously in both languages, in parallel channels” (2008, p. 145). Given that code-mixing is used for code-switching within an utterance, perhaps ‘code juxtaposition’ can be used for the situation in simultaneously bilingual pop songs such as Abao and DJ Didilong’s ‘Tjakudain 無奈’.

### 3. Objects of study, research questions, and method

With the MVs for Abao’s 2019 Paiwanese-language album *Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭 as my objects of study, my research questions are:

1. How did interlingual and intersemiotic translation figure in the production of Abao’s MVs<sup>3</sup> and with what motivation?

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<sup>2</sup> A popular monolingual example is Snoop Dogg and Anna Kendrick singing ‘Winter Wonderland’ and ‘Here Comes Santa Claus’ in *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to Abao’s MVs with the understanding that an MV is a collective effort. Rather than trying to tease out individual contributions, particularly by the MV directors Tseng Wei-yu and Huang Chia-wen, I assume Abao has partly authored them and authorized them in their entirety.

2. What is the significance of serial and simultaneous translation in Abao's MVs in a settler society?

My method for answering these two questions is 'hermeneutic', based on semiotics. Pierce's tripartite typology of signs, namely symbol, icon, and index, applies equally well to verbal and visual systems. Pierce didn't just invent a typology of signs, he also proposed a theory of the contextual interpretation of signs in relation to other signs. As Jakobson put it, "the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign 'in which it is more fully developed', as Peirce, the deepest inquirer into the essence of signs, insistently stated" (2000, p. 114). I find Jakobson's own tripartite typology (2000, p. 113) of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation perfectly serviceable; a language like Paiwanese is a special kind of semiotic system.<sup>4</sup>

To access the authorial intention behind a given sign, I watched a number of 'paravideos', including a promotional interview, a 'making-of' video, and a series of language-learning videos. I also conducted a mediated e-mail interview with Abao through her assistant Superman and asked TSL teacher Ting Li-fen questions on Facebook Messenger. To understand audience reception beyond my own idiosyncratic response, I looked at YouTube comments, though these have to be understood in the larger context of Taiwan society and culture, past and present.

#### 4. Abao and her album '*Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭' (Mother's Tongue)

Abao was born in 1983 in Taitung County in southeastern Formosa, the main island of Taiwan, also known as the Republic of China. She grew up in a Paiwan village, where the Paiwan were one of the nine groups of 'mountain compatriots', as Indigenous peoples were called at the time. At the time, the government was still trying, under martial law and a monolingual national language policy, to forcibly integrate into a single Chinese nation different constituencies in Taiwan's multicultural society, including speakers of Austronesian languages such as Paiwanese whose ancestors had settled Formosa from about five thousand years ago and speakers of Taiwanese whose ancestors had settled the island from about four hundred years ago.<sup>5</sup> Back in 1983, Paiwan cultural practices were discouraged, as was the use of Paiwanese. Although Paiwanese was forbidden at school, it was used in church, and like most of Taiwan's Indigenous people Abao is Christian; she grew up Catholic. But the use of Indigenous languages in church only delayed a language shift. By the 1980s, Indigenous children like Abao were shifting to Chinese all over the country.

The year after Abao was born, the Alliance of Taiwan Aborigines launched the local Indigenous movement, and by the time she was ready to graduate from primary school,

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<sup>4</sup> Kaindl has more recently (2020, p. 60) criticized Jakobson for seemingly denying that a language was also a semiotic system. He has switched to a terminology of mode, medium, and genre. The problem with those terms is that even AV translation theorists use them interchangeably with sign system (Pérez-González, 2014, p. 120).

<sup>5</sup> Taiwan's settler population is more complicated than just the Taiwanese. Hakka settlers arrived during the Qing Dynasty, and Mainlanders arrived with Chiang Kai-shek after 1949.

martial law had been lifted and the first stages of an Indigenous policy, which can be described as an attempt by the ruling party, the Kuomintang, to pivot to democratic politics, were being implemented. The term ‘mountain compatriot’ was thereby purged, as was the national language policy. Abao became officially Indigenous in 1994. In 1997, her people the Paiwan were recognized as Indigenous. With official recognition has come state support for Indigenous languages and cultures. There are now weekly classes in elementary schools for languages like Paiwanese, and cultural expression is encouraged as part of government programs to support Indigenous livelihoods. However healthy such cultures are in multicultural Taiwan, the languages are not. Most people of Abao’s age – she is forty-three years old at the time of writing – do not speak their ancestral language fluently, particularly if they left home to pursue higher education, as Abao did. Abao went to nursing college in Taipei, but never worked as a nurse. Instead she became a pop star. She formed a duo with a Mandopop singer named Brandy.

Abao’s mother had been a pop star in the era of vinyl records. Itinerant producers used to visit churches in Indigenous villages like Abao’s and scout out local talent. That was how Abao’s mother was discovered. Under the stage name Wang Chiu-lan (王秋蘭), meaning ‘royal autumn orchid’, she released an LP in the 1970s. On it she sang in a combination of Chinese, Japanese, and Paiwanese, though most of the Paiwanese lyrics were non-lexical vocables.

At the time, the production of such music was purely market-led. In the 1990s, the indie record company Wind Records released CDs with less commercialized Indigenous music in a musicological attempt to represent traditions. A decade later, when Abao & Brandy won a Golden Melody for best vocal group in 2004, the government had begun to encourage the production of Indigenous-language pop music. An Indigenous recording-artist award was added in 2003, and an Indigenous-language album award in 2005. The additions did not make the Golden Melodies entirely fair; there were best male and female recording-artist awards for both Chinese and Taiwanese. But the added awards were steps in the right direction, and government initiatives: the Golden Melodies, Taiwan’s Grammys, are awarded by the Ministry of Culture.

With the growing acceptance and even embrace of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan society, Abao decided early in the 2010s to reinvent herself as an Indigenous(-language) singer. Abao 阿爆 is her stage name and an allusion to her hair (or wig) style; an ‘afro’ is literally ‘explosive head’ (*bàozhàtóu* 爆炸頭) in Chinese, where the word for ‘head’ can also mean ‘hairstyle’. While continuing to use Abao, she started introducing herself as Aljenljeng Tjaluvie, her Paiwanese name, or as A-jeng-jeng (阿仍仍), a Chinese transliteration of her Paiwanese personal name Aljenljeng. She also started covering her hair with a scarf to make herself look like a shaman.

Abao has, to date, released three Paiwanese albums. The first was an album of traditional Paiwan tunes recorded with her mother in 2014. Two years later she released her first Paiwanese pop album, which won the Indigenous-Language Album of the Year award in 2017. The tune for the R&B-themed title song ‘Vavayan 女人’, meaning ‘woman’

or ‘women’, was written by another Paiwan singer named Matzka, who has highlighted his Indigenous heritage without singing in Paiwanese, and the album also features percussionist Arai Soichiro. On December 30, 2019, Abao released her latest album *Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭, and this time she swept the Golden Melodies, winning not only the Indigenous-language album of the year but also Album of the Year and Song of the Year awards, the highest annual honours. The secrets of her success included high production values, the participation of the producer Dizparity, and stylistic diversity: ‘Thank You’ is gospel, ‘Tjakudain 無奈’ is a combination of R&B and hip hop, and ‘Kinakaian 母親的舌頭’ is electronica.

Abao was initially worried her mother might not be able to accept her plan to make Paiwanese pop, but this was not the case: her mother, in fact, participated enthusiastically. She is credited on the MVs as co-lyricist. Abao and her mother composed the lyrics in a combination of Chinese and Paiwanese. Abao mostly composed in Chinese; her mother translated Abao’s lyrics into Paiwanese and suggested her own Paiwanese lyrics, which she then translated into Chinese. When her mother taught her the Paiwanese pronunciation of the lyrics, Abao had difficulty distinguishing between voiced and unvoiced unaspirated plosives like [k] and [g], not surprisingly: the relevant distinction in Chinese is between aspirated and unaspirated unvoiced plosives like [k] and [k<sup>h</sup>].

One motivation for the use of Paiwanese on the album was language revitalization. The lyrics of one song, ‘1-10’, seem designed for use in a language classroom, as shown in Figure 1. The contents of the song are sweet slices of daily life for young people in a Paiwan village.



Figure 1. 3 stands for sweet potatoes in ‘1-10’

Figure 1 shows how the subtitles were done. Centred the bottom the Paiwanese line, which represents the words Abao sings, sits atop a line of Chinese translation. Based on my

subtitles/CC settings in YouTube, the soft-coded English translation appears centred slightly below the middle of the screen.

The Song of the Year at the Golden Melodies in 2020, ‘Thank You’ was dedicated ‘to all of my angels’, including nurses during the pandemic but also the ancestors whose totem poles figure so prominently in the MV.<sup>6</sup> The lyrics were composed and translated pedagogically (Sterk, 2022). Listening to the chorus, you cannot help learning two Paiwanese ways of saying thank you, *maljimalji* and *masalu*, through the use of rhythm and rhyme. The sentence in the soft-coded title in Figure 2 never appear in the song.



Figure 2. The climax of the chorus of ‘Thank You’

What Abao and her backup singers actually sing, in two rhythmically identical lines, is:

thank you thank you thank you  
*maljimalji masalu*

The ‘palatalized l’ in *malji* and *masalu* as the ‘agent focus’ form of *salu*, meaning ‘to believe’, are two of the issues that Abao addresses in ten YouTube videos dedicated to the vocabulary and grammar of the Paiwanese lyrics from the ten songs on the album.

But language revitalization was only one motivation for the translation that made the album possible. As the following analyses of two singles on the album show, translation broadly construed was also a creative inspiration.

#### 4.1. ‘*Tjakudain* 無奈 (How I wish I could)

According to the online Paiwanese dictionary, *tjakudain* is a phrase: *tja* means ‘we’ and *kudain* means ‘can’t’.<sup>7</sup> The Taiwanese translation is *bô-nāi* 無奈, ‘How I wish I could’. This sentiment is explicitly expressed by Abao in the song, in reply to a boy’s attempt to woo her.

<sup>6</sup> The MV was shot in the Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in the village of Kapiyan, which is located in Pingtung County, across the mountains from Abao’s home village.

<sup>7</sup> <https://e-dictionary.ilrdf.org.tw/pwn/search.htm> (Accessed: 14 July 2025).

Rebuffed, he ends up feeling the same way. The official English translation is: 'What can we do?'

Abao identifies as a Paiwan woman in the song, and her would-be loverboy is Taiwanese culturally and linguistically. Taiwanese was the language of the ancestors of over two-thirds of the people of Taiwan, and it is still widely spoken today; but a shift from Taiwanese to Chinese that began under martial law, under the same national language policy that suppressed languages like Paiwanese, is ongoing. Although it is spoken by millions, Taiwanese is, like Paiwanese, an endangered language. In this duet, Abao was making common cause with a singer from a broadly similar sociolinguistic background.

DJ Didilong 李英宏 was born in 1986 in Taipei County. Like Abao, he achieved his first success in Mandopop, as a member of the band Rock the Party 大囍門, which won the same award as Abao had won with Brandy in 2004, for best vocal group, in 2010. Like Abao, DJ Didilong switched to his ancestral language for a solo album in 2016. He was nominated for album of the year, best Taiwanese-language album, and best Taiwanese male recording artist in 2017.

The MV for 'Tjakudain 無奈' begins outside a nightclub in Taipei. In a moment of love at first sight, Abao and DJ Didilong see each other across a crowded square. They make eyes at each other and obviously agree to meet again; the MV cuts to an indoor space, and the protagonists have changed outfits. They flirt by smiling at each other and teaching each other dance moves. She would love to keep seeing him, she sings, but she is Paiwan, from the hills, and he is 'Plains'. Her reason for rejecting him is egregious in a local context. Most Indigenous people in Taiwan are open to interethnic relationships or even marriages; in fact, Abao herself married a Han Taiwanese photographer in 2017.

At any rate, the climax of the song is a simultaneous bilingual duet between the would-be lovers about whether they are different and in what cultural respects. One moment of this duet is shown in Figure 3.

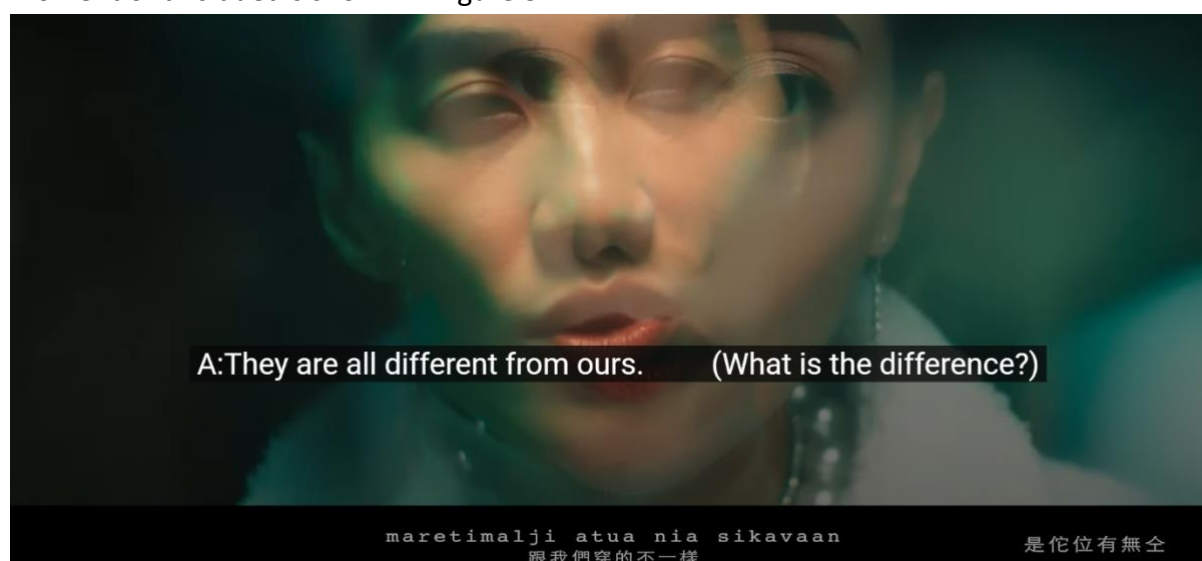


Figure 3. Simultaneous bilingual singing in 'Tjakudain 無奈'

The soft-coded title is Abao's statement with DJ Didilong's simultaneous response in brackets. The hardcoded subtitles at the bottom are in Paiwanese and Chinese, while the hardcoded subtitle at the bottom right is in Taiwanese, the language in which DJ Didilong is singing. The visuals of DJ Didilong and Abao are layered, as a graphic translation of their simultaneous singing. In this particular still, DJ Didilong is in front of Abao, but at other moments she is in front, as a way of suggesting the back and forth of their dialogue. Abao has just mentioned his shirt and shoes, and now she asserts that his attire is different from hers, while he asks what the difference is. This exchange is absurd; Abao is wearing fashionable threads in this scene, not traditional robes. She goes on to cite their difference in skin colour, which she fears her father will object to; DJ Didilong wonders what difference skin colour should make.

DJ Didilong pulls out all the stops by crossing over from Taiwanese to Paiwanese. First he rhymes *djavadjavay*, Paiwanese for 'hello', with *liáu-kái* 了解, Taiwanese for 'get to know you better', which is what he hopes to do by visiting her village. He goes on to demonstrate that he has done his homework: he can now guess her father's taste in alcohol, whether it is 58% Kinmen-brand sorghum wine or Paolyta-B, so he can bring the right gift when, or rather if, he visits her parents' home.<sup>8</sup> When he realizes the situation is hopeless, he crosses over for a second time, rhyming *dja kudain*, 'we can't', with *lí m̄ tah-ìng* 你毋答應, 'you won't agree', an example of what Jeff Hilson (2013) has called 'homophonic translation'. Both crossovers can also be understood as indexical translations on the level of semantics: saying hello can mark the start of getting to know someone, and the reason why 'we can't' is that 'you won't agree'.

While the fruit translates the flower – DJ Didilong wants to give Abao 'the prettiest flower' – the flower of love does not bear fruit in this song. It implicitly does in the title track.

#### 4.2. 'Kinakaian 母親的舌頭' (Mother's Tongue)

According to the online Paiwanese dictionary, *kina* means mother and *kai* speech; and the *-an* at the end of *kinakaian* is a 'locative focus' suffix. Literally, *kinakaian* is 'the place of mother speech' or 'where mother speech is'. The word is glossed in Chinese as *mǔqīn de shétóu* 母親的舌頭, literally 'mother's tongue', which is actually a translation of the English idiom. 'Mother tongue' is usually calqued as *mǔyǔ* 母語, literally 'mother language', which seems more abstract. Of course, if 'tongue' in 'mother tongue' simply means 'language', then it is just as abstract. But it is possible that the 'tongue' in 'mother tongue' is a metonym; the tongue is an organ of speech. Along with the lips, it is one of the two most visibly mobile of the speech organs, and the hardest to learn to use to speak a foreign language fluently. Abao commented that learning Paiwanese was like physical exercise in

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<sup>8</sup> One audience member on YouTube found DJ Didilong's mention of alcoholic gifts entirely relatable: "I am Plains and speak fluent Taiwanese, while my wife is Bunun and speaks her ancestral language less fluently. This song perfectly illustrates Plains-Indigenous love; there are so many difficulties to overcome. But now my parents-in-law drink red wine with me."

that she had to use her ‘tongue muscle’ in unfamiliar ways. Her literal translation of ‘mother tongue’ into ‘mother’s tongue’ draws attention to the tongue’s mobility in speech. Such mobility is translated into other modes of movement in the MV.

The MV opens with a shot of a squirming infant, a highly mobile human who has just started learning to control his or her organs of movement for communication, not just lips and tongue but also arms and legs. Adults are similar to infants with respect to languages they do not know, like Paiwanese for most of the audience. To learn to speak such languages, they have to use their whole bodies in unfamiliar ways. In other words, there is a basis for audience identification with the infant. Like anyone, the infant has a natural repertoire of movements that might be put to work in communication, as suggested by the top-left still from the MV in Figure 4.

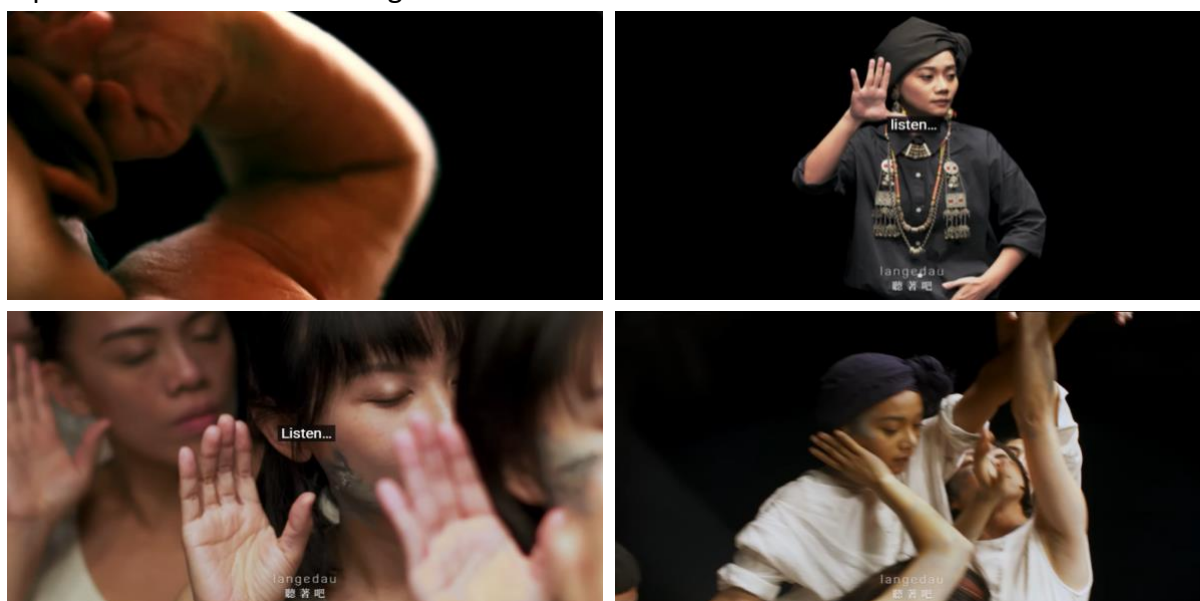


Figure 4: ‘Listen’ in Paiwanese, Chinese, English, TSL, and modern dance

The top-right still shows Abao playing the role of a Matriarch, a representative of Paiwan tradition, including the Paiwanese language, which she is teaching to anyone who will listen. You cannot see her tongue in the still, but you can see her lips move around that moment of the MV. You can also hear her sing the word for ‘listen’ in Paiwanese, read the word in the subtitles in Paiwanese, Chinese, and English, and watch her sign the word with her right hand. The TSL sign itself could be a symbol in Pierce’s sense, or an index or even an icon. That is, it could be arbitrary, it could mean ‘ear’ because the hand is placed by the ear, or it could be shaped like an ear or an extension of the ear; in the ‘making of’ ‘paravideo’, Abao jokes that she looks like Dumbo while making the sign. The translation of the sign into the three languages is unambiguously iconic, based on semantic similarity. The bottom-left still shows a line of dancers making the same sign as the word for ‘listen’ is simultaneously sung and subtitled. The dancers are in the same situation as the baby: they are learning the language by imitating the Matriarch. They may be dancing the same sign in the bottom-right still; one of the dancers has her hand next to the Matriarch’s ear.

It is significant that the Matriarch is with the dancers in the bottom-right still, because of the content of the verse that precedes the exhortation to listen.

*inika sun napacun tjanuaken,*  
even though you've never heard of me,  
*ljakua a ku varung i tjanusun...*  
my faith and belief are with you...

In the chorus the Matriarch makes a case for why the tradition is worth learning:

*azua tja kinakaian,*  
our language is there, so natural,  
*bulay aravac aia...*  
it is so beautiful

In the MV, the word for 'our' or 'we' is signed as it is simultaneously sung and subtitled, as shown in the top-left still of Figure 5 below.



Figure 5. 'Our' in Paiwanese, Chinese, English, TSL, and modern dance

The problem from the learner's perspective is that the utterance is more than one word, and one cannot know for sure which word the sign is a translation of, or vice versa. That is why TSL consultant Ding Li-fen did a word-by-word TSL cover video, showing that the sign is an inclusive circular motion made by a downward pointing index finger, in the top-right still. The dancers in the bottom-left still are making the same sign. Whatever kind of sign this is, it is also translated iconically, based on semantic similarity. Even though they are not pointing downwards, the dancers make the same sign with their bodies by forming a circle in the bottom-right still, in which the baby appears in the arms of Lin I-chin, the founder of

the modern dance troupe who helped make the video. The singing voice and the subtitles are no longer simultaneous translations of the sign. The effect is not one of disjuncture in Kaindl's sense; no irony is intended. The effect is rather a sense of everything everywhere all at once. Once it is processed sequentially, the Matriarch's message is understood as a gestalt, as in Figure 6.

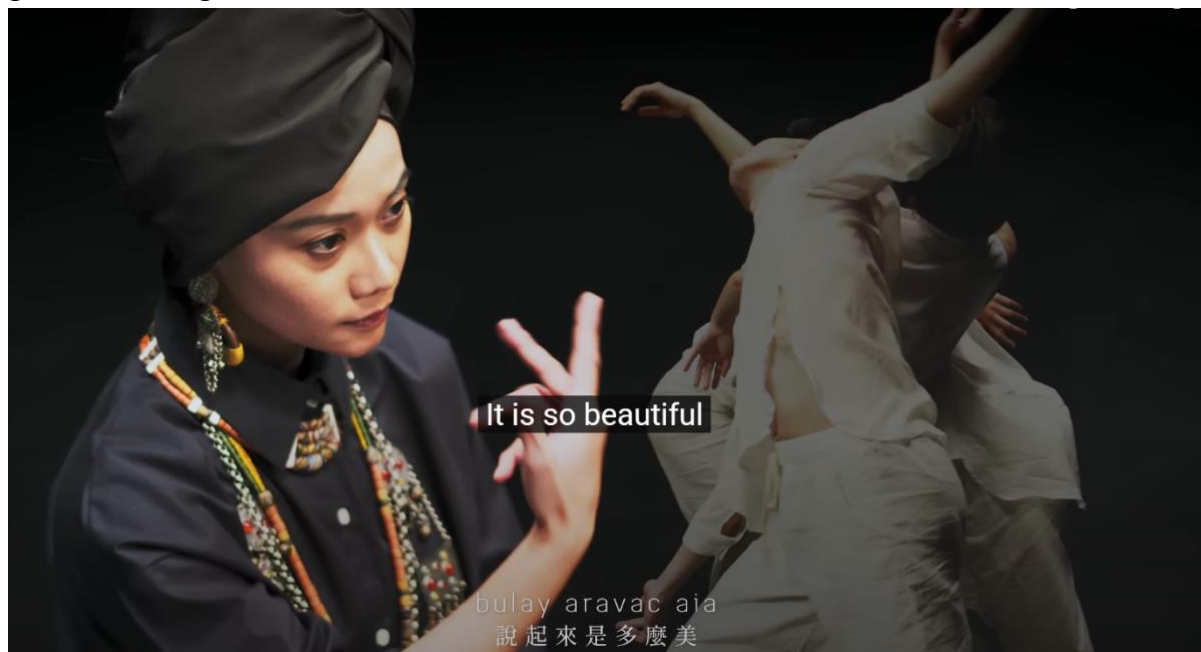


Figure 6. Simultaneous singing, signing, and dancing as a gestalt in 'Kinakaian 母親的舌頭'

The still shows how the scene has been divided through editorial layering into two spaces, a space of signing and a space of dancing. The Matriarch makes the sign for 'natural' (not 'beautiful', according to Ting Li-fen) as she sings it in her space, and the dancers dance the same sign in their space.

Abao joined the TSL teacher, Ting Li-fen, and the modern dance teacher, Lin I-chin in a 'parallel' space, a 'making-of' video that offers insight into the ways in which translation inspired the creation of the MV. Entitled 'Translating the words that my old lady (or mother) says (or said) together' (一起翻譯老媽說的話), the video makes it clear that there *was* an original, the lyrics that Abao and her mother composed. The lyrics were not, of course, original in the sense that they appeared *ex nihilo*. Abao's mother was a *bricoleur* (Kaindl, 2005, p. 242), drawing on preexisting resources, the words in her language, as was Abao, who adapted a traditional tune into the chorus.<sup>9</sup> Once the lyrics were ready, they were translated into TSL by Ting Li-fen, who taught TSL to Abao, and the TSL translation was relayed into dance by Lin I-chin, who performed the dance with her Bare Feet ensemble.

In the video, Ting Li-fen describes the role of body language in sign language in terms of 'non-manual signs' (非手信號), drawing a semiotic parallel between what signers and dancers do with their bodies in space that can serve as a basis for translation between the

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<sup>9</sup> Kaindl acknowledges Dick Hebdige for applying these terms to the study of popular music in his 1979 book *Subculture*.

two sign systems. Inspired by German dancer and choreographer Pina Bausch, Lin I-chin adopted an iconic approach to the translation of signs into dance moves, with what Fisher called “greater use of three-dimensionality and whole-body movements” (2021, p. 15). Lin refers, for instance, to ‘using the legs to speak’, as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Speaking with arm and hand (Ting Li-fen, left) and leg and foot (Lin I-chin, right)

This particular translation of a TSL sign into ‘limb language’ did not make it into the video, but nonetheless represents an attempt by Lin I-chin to ‘create a common language with Abao’, a language that can then be used, through translation, to create multilingual, multimodal, and multimedial works of art.

Abao did not, however, make ‘Kinakaian 母親的舌頭’ simply for art’s sake. In the final section of this article, I inquire into the significance of her album in a settler society context.

## 5. Discussion

The preceding analysis has partly answered my first research question: How did interlingual and intersemiotic translation figure in the production of Abao’s MVs and with what motivation? The motivation for their production must have been overdetermined, involving the profit motive for some of the parties involved, including Abao. Abao started out as a Mandopop singer, and while she has reinvented herself as a Paiwan(ese) singer, her songs remain mainstream. In a sense, she has domesticated the Paiwan tradition by combining elements of it with popular musical elements.

Her album, however, should not be dismissed as an exploitative example of ‘world music’, where Paiwan tradition was mined, refined, and minted. In an interview she gave to *CommonWealth Magazine*, Abao said that making music, including MVs, in a language that is usually invisible in contemporary Taiwan society, thereby making it more visible, and giving people a way of learning it, made her feel useful. Singing in Paiwanese also made her feel connected to her mother and other family members of her mother’s generation. As matriarchs, they are all representatives of Paiwan tradition, on which foundation Abao has been building not just her professional image but also her personal identity. These comments flesh out her personal motivation.

They also suggest an answer to my second research question: What is the significance of serial and simultaneous translation in Abao’s MVs in a settler society? The result of the

serial translation process that produced Abao's MVs was a harmonious simultaneous translation in the MVs. This translational harmony can serve as a metaphor for democracy and indigeneity in a settler society. Translation, as Nicole Doerr argued in *Political Translation*, can be a way of "deepening democracy" (2018, p. 8). It seems to me that deep democracy can be discussed in relation to Abao's keywords, visibility and learnability. Marginal groups in any democracy have a right to be visible in social representations like the circle of dancers in 'Kinakaian 母親的舌頭', and able to express themselves by translating their perspectives into terms that other groups can try to understand. Conversations between groups in any society can obviously be serial, but once in a while, a consensus can form, as at the end of 'Tjakudain 無奈'. This particular consensus was not what everyone wanted, but at least it is based on mutual respect.

In her interview with CommonWealth, Abao commented that if people find an unfamiliar language like Paiwanese intimidating, they can at least understand rhythm and melody. Music then opens a door to learning the language, and translation can get you through the door. Learning, in fact, can be thought of in terms of translation. Being slightly different, every repetition in the learning process is a kind of translation. At first we tend to repeat what we have observed, learning serially. When we get better at mirroring (Fisher, 2021, p. 8) a model's movements, we can 'repeat' in real time, learning simultaneously. Learnability develops on accessibility. By making her MVs with a Taiwanese singer, a TSL signer, and a modern dancer, Abao was not only giving Deaf people a chance to appreciate the title track or people who do not understand Paiwanese and Taiwanese or even Chinese to appreciate all her songs. She was also giving all sorts of people a chance to learn a new language, or two or three.

Translation is finally a metaphor for indigeneity in a settler society. For First Nations, indigeneity is a relation not just with settlers, but also with traditions that are embodied physically in elders or spiritually in ancestors. Paiwan people today are in some sense consecutive translators of that tradition, because the elders or ancestors preceded them in the world. But in 'Mother's Tongue' the past is present. The Matriarch sings from some unknown point in the past, and people in the present listen and interpret, but then she joins them in the present. For people who believe in angels, the translation of tradition is also simultaneous. This idea might have given Abao some consolation when her mother Wang Chiu-lan died in 2021, aged 66, as might one of the lyrics that she and her mother created for the title track: *Ijakua a ku varung i tjanusun*, my faith and belief are with you.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the playlist for the 'Kinakaian 母親的舌頭' language-learning videos.

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