



**To cite this article:**

Ma, Shan. "Blackfella Whitefella Chinese Translation." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 20, (December 2024): 86-91.

[aalitra.org.au](http://aalitra.org.au)

Australian Association for Literary Translation

## *Blackfella Whitefella* Chinese Translation

SHAN MA

Freelance translator and interpreter

*Blackfella Whitefella* is a rock song written by musicians Neil James Murray (1956-) & George Djilaynga (also known as George Rurrumbu Burarrwanga, 1957-2007)<sup>1</sup>, recorded by their Aboriginal rock group Warumpi Band, and released in 1985 as part of their album *Big Name, No Blankets*. The Warumpi Band was Australia's first rock act to sing in an Indigenous Australian language (Bisley).<sup>2</sup>

This iconic song is one that marks the history of the Aboriginal Rights movement and is often referred to as “an anthem for the reconciliation movement in Australia” (Reconciliation Australia). The song is so powerful and direct, making the audience feel as if they are being spoken to personally and not just in general, urging them to contribute to the Aboriginal reconciliation cause (Ballantine). The song has inspired the documentary film *Blackfella/Whitefella* by Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and a picture book project in which children around Australia were invited to illustrate the meaning of the song. In 2018, as part of Triple M's “Ozzest 100”, the “most Australian” songs of all time, this song was ranked number 82. And countless well-known musicians have performed this song on Australian and international stages since its release (Wikipedia).

To translate this song's lyrics, I followed Peter Low's suggestion (79) to take into consideration five aspects of lyrics translation for singing purpose, namely singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm, and rhyme. Low also urges translators to aim at achieving a high overall score across all five criteria without giving undue emphasis to one criterion over another.

Given the rap nature of this song, I decided the translation should keep the informal and colloquial style of the ST (Source Text). Adding a non-syllabic suffix “r” (儿) to some of the nouns (retroflex suffixation) has that effect, which is a common feature in spoken language in Northern China, particularly in the Beijing area. And it also helps with rhyming. Therefore, where possible, a “儿” is added to the noun at the line ends in the TT (Target Text), particularly for words like “哥们” (bro/mate) or “姐们” (sis).

The special meaning of the term “Blackfella” is noted in the translation. It is both Australian English and Aboriginal Australian English, referring to Indigenous Australians, in particular Aboriginal Australians (Delbridge etc.). It is a derogatory term originally used by White colonisers and has been reclaimed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, but it may still offend if used by people outside that group (Penguin Books). “Whitefella” is an expression that derived from Blackfella, suggesting the speaker is a Blackfella or is at least respectful of the Blackfella speech.

“Blackfella” might be translated as “黑人兄弟” (black brother) or “黑人哥们” (black mate/bro) in Chinese. However, both terms in Chinese usually refer to African people or African Americans, as there are no readily available terms in Chinese for Indigenous Australians specifically. To highlight the difference, I chose to translate the term as “黑色的

---

<sup>1</sup> George Rurrumbu Burarrwanga was a Yolngu man, who lived in North-Eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.

<sup>2</sup> Acknowledgments: Comments and suggestions by the reviewers and the editor, Professor Hélène Jacomard, have helped to improve the quality of the manuscript. Mr Hui Jin and Dr Jinyue Wang offered valuable helps in the manuscript revision process. The author is very grateful to them.

哥们儿” (black-coloured mate) in Verse One: “colour” is mentioned specifically in the lyrics (“*It doesn’t matter what your colour*”), and “哥们儿” is informal and colloquial. Accordingly, “Whitefella” is translated as “白色的哥们儿”. In Verse Two, however, I used “黑种的哥们儿” (black-race mate) to parallel with “黄种的哥们儿” (yellow-race mate), as yellow-race people are called “黄种人” in Chinese (rather than “黄人” or “黄色的人”). Considering that the theme of this song applies to more than Indigenous Australians (see discussion below), this variation in the translation of the term “Blackfella” is compatible with this general implication.

Translation variation also happens for the same Line 6 of both Verse One and Verse Two, “*With different lives in different places*” — it was translated literally as such in Verse One, but “生活在各处唸不同的经文儿” (Live in different places and study different (religious) scripts) in Verse Two. The reference to people’s different social economic lives in different places has already been translated in Verse One, so this variation is both acceptable and preferable, as it couples with the reference to “religions” in the next line in Verse Two. The use of polysemy “种” with three different meanings at different places in Verse Two (*race* in Lines 1, 2 & 5, *type* in Lines 2 & 3, and *brave* in Line 4) is also unique to TT, making the lyrics interesting and stimulating to the audience. The switching between different meanings of “种” is natural in the target context, and compatible with the source context as well.

The song has a clear Indigenous Australian focus, and promotes Indigenous Australian rights. Neil James Murray spent a long time living with Indigenous people before writing this song; George Djilaynga (aka Rrurrambu) was Aboriginal himself; and the debut performance of this song was by an Aboriginal band. But the song is not limited to Aboriginal rights only; it also aims to promote reconciliation in Australia in general, calling for the solidarity of brothers and sisters around the world to fight for racial equality and social justice. Given that understanding, I chose to translate the term “family plans” in the four-line chorus generally as “四海一家” (the whole world is one family), rather than literally as “大家庭计划”.

“*Stand up and be counted*” is the “trope” of this protest song<sup>3</sup>. Three times in a row in the chorus, these commanding verbs are sending a very clear and powerful message, urging people to stand up and openly declare their support to the reconciliation movement. It is translated as “站起来勇敢表态” (stand up and bravely declare your position). “勇敢” (bravely) is added here to encourage people to do the right thing (openly supporting the reconciliation course), although it might be a difficult thing. Courage/bravery is not explicitly mentioned in that trope in English, but it is implied: “to make your opinions known even if doing so might cause you harm or difficulty” (Cambridge Dictionary). The Chinese expression “表态” means to make your opinions known, but it does not have the implication that doing so is difficult and requires courage, so “表态” alone does not have the same strength and moral imperative represented by “Stand up and be counted”. The added adverb “勇敢” here will make up that missing part, therefore this explicitness is justified.

It is worth noting that, as a non-native speaker of English, at first I treated “stand up and be counted” as two separate phrases, and translated them as “站起来, ‘算我一个’” (stand up, and ‘count me in’). It was only when a reviewer shared his research on these phrases

---

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to compare “*Blackfella, Whitefella*” with Bob Marley’s famous song (1973) “*Get up, Stand up for your rights*” (see <https://zh.myfavouritelyrics.com/bob-marley-the-wailers/get-up-stand-up/> for a Chinese translation). Both are powerful protest songs that address social issues, but the latter has a more confrontational and revolutionary tone, whereas the former is more conciliatory, promoting harmony and unity between different races. Despite that, due to historical context, power dynamics, fear and ignorance, and disruption caused by change, the racial reconciliation movement still faces tremendous challenges and resistance, and supporters need great courage to participate and persist in the cause. That is why “Stand up and be counted” is repeatedly called here.

together that it dawned on me that these five words together are actually a set phrase, and “算我一个” (count me in) is not an adequate translation here. “算我一个” can be for anything in social gatherings, but it does not have the bravery element entailed in that set phrase. Thus, it was revised accordingly.

This experience suggests to me the existence of potential “blind spots” in translation practice in general. To mitigate translation risks (Pym & Matsushita), translators should only spend time and energy investigating content that is important, unfamiliar, or appear unnatural. When a literal or obvious translation of a ST appears to be straightforward and natural, AND fits the context well at the same time<sup>4</sup>, as “站起来, ‘算我一个’” did in this case, translators tend to choose that “obvious” translation without questioning. When that “obvious” translation is actually inadequate, however, that mistake becomes a “blind spot” or “unknown unknown”, hard for the translator to identify. Unless one researches it consciously, which is unlikely due to its unknown feature, this “blind spot” probably can only be avoided if the translator happens to know both languages/cultures at the native-speaker level at the same time. In my case, for example, “算我一个” appears obvious and fits the context well; barring deliberate research, only a true master of both languages and cultures would understand the real meaning of “stand up and be counted”, and pick up the inadequacy of the “算我一个” translation as well. If the translator knows only one language well, they will miss either the real and full meaning of the trope, or the inadequacy of the translation “算我一个”; and in both cases, mistakes are unavoidable. Even if two bilingual translators from different cultures work side-by-side, as is recommended in commercial translation, both know the other’s language well, but neither is a true master of both languages and cultures, the above point may still escape their radar. In my case for example, assuming we have Ms Wang, who is a native Chinese speaker and knows English well enough to understand “stand up” and “be counted” separately, but not well enough to know “stand up and be counted” is a set phrase. Also we have Peter who is a native English speaker and knows Chinese well enough to understand that “算我一个” means “to join the group”, but not well enough to understand that it doesn’t have the “bravery” element implied in the set phrase “stand up and be counted”. Then when Ms Wang and Peter work together to translate this song, “算我一个” is likely to appear natural and fit the context for both of them. For them, the inadequacy of “算我一个” is a blind spot (the unknown unknown). Therefore, it would not come to their mind that they need to investigate the meaning of “stand up” and “be counted” combined (for Ms Wang), and the implication of “算我一个” (for Peter), or check them with each other explicitly. Then that mistake escaped with neither’s notice.

It is necessary to point out that “translation blind spots” exist beyond the vocabulary or language domains. To understand the nuances and appreciate the hidden implications in the source text, and to choose the proper translation rendition in the target text, one needs to know the cultures, histories, and the pragmatical arrangements of both languages well. For example, without understanding the resistance and challenges faced by supporters of the Indigenous Australian Rights movement in the 1980s when the song was composed, one might not appreciate the implications and necessities of that trope, “Stand up and be counted”, which is too heavy for a social phrase like “算我一个” to carry in the Chinese translation. This suggests that the “blind spots” are personal, and different people may have different blind spots. Thus, we all need to endeavour to improve our understanding of other’s cultures continuously. Only in that way, can we gradually reduce the areas covered by the “blind spots” for ourselves.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese idiom “望文生义” means to “look at the text and assume its meaning”. The case discussed here is to “look at the CONTEXT”, not just TEXT, and assume its meaning. Or “望上下文生义” in Chinese.

Given the rapid development of AI and its applications in language models, it would be interesting to see whether the current AI knows both English and Chinese languages and cultures well enough to pick up the error and avoid this particular “blind spot”. For that purpose, I took my translation of this song to ChatGPT-4o, the latest AI Language Model (LLM) available on the market at the time this paper was drafted, but changed “站起来勇敢表态” to “站起来, ‘算我一个’”, and asked it to review and comment. ChatGPT-4o’s only suggestion was to use “我” (“I”) to replace “俺” (another word for “I”, used mainly in Northern China) which I used initially, and it did not see any other issues in my translation. Only after I pointed out that “算我一个” is inadequate here and explained why, ChatGPT-4o admitted the oversight and agreed with me. Assuming ChatGPT-4o has got the native-level understanding of English and its cultures, one may conclude that at the time this paper was drafted it had not yet obtained, or be trained at, the same level of mastery of the Chinese language and culture.

The song *Blackfella, Whitefella* is almost forty years old now. At the time of its release, the challenges and resistance faced by supporters of the Aboriginal Rights movement were very common and often severe. While the severity of challenges and resistance has generally decreased since the 1980s, significant obstacles remain for those who support Indigenous Australian rights. The movement has seen progress, partly due to the influence of this and other songs of similar nature, but there is still a long way to go to achieve full racial equality and social justice. In other words, forty years on, the song is still relevant and resonates with us. It is my hope that the translation of this song will contribute to a better understanding and deeper involvement of the great cause of racial reconciliation and social justice by the Chinese-speaking communities around the world.<sup>5</sup>

## Bibliography

Ballantine, Elise. *Black Fella, White Fella*. <https://prezi.com/pwcfgosqn8dm/black-fella-white-fella/>, accessed 16/1/2024.

Bisley, Alexander. “Blackfella/Whitefella by Warumpi Band – Australia’s seminal reconciliation song”, *The Guardian*, 14/4/2015.

“Blackfella”, *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackfella>, accessed 15/1/2024.

“Blackfella/Whitefella”, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackfella/Whitefella>, accessed 15/1/2024.

Delbridge, A., Bernard, JRL, Blair, D., Butler S., Peters, P., & Yallop, C. *The Macquarie Dictionary (3/E)*. The Macquarie Library, 1997.

Low, Peter. *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts*. Routledge, 2017.

Penguin Books. *Australian Slang*. Penguin Random House Australia, 2008.

Pym, Anthony, Matsushita, Kayo. “Risk Mitigation in Translator Decisions”, *Across Languages and Cultures* 19, 2018, pp. 1-18.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese translation of the song discussed above is singable, but due to licensing issues, its music scores cannot be shown here.

Reconciliation Australia. *National Reconciliation Week*.

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/national-reconciliation-week/>, accessed 28/6/2024.

**Blackfella, whitefella**

Lyrics & Music: Neil James Murray & George  
Djilaynga

Translation: Shan Ma

Due to licensing issues, the English lyrics of the  
song cannot be shown here. However, they can  
be viewed on the following website:

[http://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/warumpi-band-  
blackfella-whitefella-1](http://lyrics.lyricfind.com/lyrics/warumpi-band-blackfella-whitefella-1)

黑色的哥们儿，白色的哥们儿

词曲：Neil James Murray & George Djilaynga

译文：马山

黑色的哥们儿，白色的哥们儿，

不论你是啥色的哥们儿，

只要你是真正的哥们儿，

只要你是老铁的哥们儿。

各个种族的不同哥们儿，

在不同的地方过不同的日子儿；

不论你是哪里的大腕儿，

咱都得换个不同的活法儿。

如想成事儿，要更多的哥们儿；

如要挽救，要更多的姐们儿。

你可是挺身而出表态的那位哥们儿？

你可是与我并肩高呼的那位姐们儿？

你可是随时出手相助的那位哥们儿？

你可是理解“四海一家”的那位姐们儿？

黑种的哥们儿，白种的哥们儿，

黄种的哥们儿，任一种哥们儿。

不论你是啥种的哥们儿，

只要你是有种的哥们儿。  
各个种族的不同哥们儿，  
生活在各处唸不同的经文儿；  
不论你进的是什么教门儿，  
那船到沉时谁也没门儿。  
如想成事儿，要更多的哥们儿；  
如要挽救，要更多姐的们儿。

你可是挺身而出表态的那位哥们儿？  
你可是与俺并肩高呼的那位姐们儿？  
你可是随时出手相助的那位哥们儿？  
你可是理解“四海一家”的那位姐们儿？

站出来，站出来勇敢表态！  
站出来，站出来勇敢表态！  
站出来，站出来勇敢表态！  
你可是挺身而出表态的那位哥们儿？  
站出来，站出来勇敢表态！  
站出来，站出来勇敢表态！  
你可是随时出手相助的那位哥们儿？  
你可是理解“四海一家”的那位姐们儿？