

# Mediating through Translations from Hillsong Megachurch to the Hills Chinese Community

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## Abstract

Hillsong Music is a popular brand of Contemporary Christian Worship music, whose musical sound influences countless denominations in multiple countries. The global distribution of the songs has expanded into 17 different languages, which includes Mandarin translations by the Hillsong 华语 team. Before discussing the external distribution of these translated songs, this article explores the unique community of Chinese diaspora congregation members attending “Hills Chinese,” a Mandarin and Cantonese run service within megachurch Hillsong Church's Sydney campus. This is where most of the translations team are located and serve weekly. Within my ethnographic research, I propose that the congregational musicking engaged by the congregation's leaders and the Hillsong 华语 team mediates between their ecclesial identity of being a Hillsong service and their cultural identity as the Chinese community in Sydney. The music localisation (or contextualisation) process applied by this group to Hillsong worship songs is reviewed with wider implications for this music producing megachurch. This article argues that the focus or attention of publishing houses should be on the recipients of translated songs; thus, in the case of translations, shifting focus to the non-western voices within this predominantly English-speaking megachurch.

## Introduction

Sydney-based megachurch Hillsong Church was started by Brian and Bobbie Houston (Riches & Wagner, 2012). Amidst the growth, a little-known Chinese community was formed and runs as the sole non-English speaking worship service at the main

campus. Today, "Hills Chinese" represents two (Cantonese and Mandarin) worship services hosted on the Sydney Hills site. The translated materials (including songs) are distributed internally within Hills Chinese but are also distributed externally to the broader transnational Mandarin-speaking audience in other churches through Hillsong's global distribution channels. This practice is indicative of Hillsong's "one house many rooms" ecclesial model, as demonstrated in Tom Wagner's (2014) study on the same sonic experience and brand across Hillsong's global campuses. While literature and media has focused much on the popular Hillsong church and music brand (e.g. Evans, 2015), little attention has been paid to these non-English translations or congregational flows within the literature. Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*, the translation team for Mandarin, has not appeared in studies about Hillsong Church or megachurches in general, until this paper.<sup>11</sup>

This article presents the account of the Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*'s translation work in Hillsong's large congregation space, and how this has contributed to the building of the Hillsong Chinese community. Hills Chinese community is arguably linked with Hillsong through congregational musicking (Small, 2011) in the church's two language services. This article reviews the megachurch worship practices of Hillsong from the perspective of the Chinese community leaders, asking how a translated song is used in navigating their cultural identities and experiences within Hillsong Church. Music contextualisation, as Swee Hong Lim (2017) suggests, becomes indicative of the Chinese community's ability to adapt the Hillsong sound (Riches, 2010; Wagner, 2014), by using Chinese expressions and idioms within their translation process. This article proposes that the focus or attention of the Hillsong publishing house (as well as others who produce translated songs), should be on the recipients of translated songs, and thus should shift to the non-western voices in this predominantly Western megachurch.

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout the article, I will be using Simplified Chinese, indicative of Hillsong 华语 's focus on the Mainland Chinese market, and the use of Pinyin, which is the phonetics to pronounce the Chinese characters. Pinyin will be used throughout the paper for educative purposes. Note that *Huayu* represents the shared language across Chinese heritage people *Huaren* 华人 across the globe.

## Literature and Context

### ***Hillsong Music Australia and Music Distribution***

Hillsong Music, an iconic brand of Contemporary Christian worship music produced by Hillsong Church, is now studied globally: both as a marketing brand and a congregation, but also now a global movement (Evans, 2006; Riches, 2010; Wagner, 2014). The production of the songs involves various translators across these global campuses, who provide this “resource” for language needs within Australian services and also Hillsong’s various other global congregations (Riches, 2020).<sup>12</sup> Tim Whincop, head of Hillsong Music Australia (HMA), suggests they seek “influence over sales.” Distributing music and resource allows churches to do “music differently” (Edwards, 2020). This is indicative of Hillsong’s contribution to “contemporary worship”, motivated towards seeker-friendly sounds (use of current and innovative sounds such as Hillsong United), appealing to youth ministry (currently Hillsong Yong and Free), and the “contemporary person” in western culture (Lim & Ruth, 2017).

Regarding Hillsong Music's global multilingual distribution, Whincop suggests in his interview:

A lot of remote places around the world were singing our songs in English when they don't even speak English ... Hillsong now releases translated sound recordings of its songs in 17 different languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Arabic, Italian, German, and Swedish. (Edwards, 2020)

The solution to the apparent inaccessibility becomes the drive for Hillsong (and other English worship song distributors) to translate into local languages.

The overall intention is to maintain the original English lyrics' integrity while aiming for the best quality translation. Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* operates from their context within the Hills Chinese community and also utilise their connections to transnational Mandarin-speaking communities (Yin, 2007).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Hillsong’s leadership prefer the term “resource” to indicate the non-market significance these songs and albums hold.

<sup>13</sup>The transnational community refers to the diaspora’s connections (the 1st and 1.5 generation) to their home country, i.e., the team members within Hillsong who have family members back in Mainland China and still travels frequently. See Yin, 2007.

## ***Use of Translated Worship Music and Practices in Chinese congregations***

In discussion of translated worship songs within Chinese communities in general, there needs to be recognition of the history of translated congregational music already within the Chinese church's tradition. It is difficult to separate out the Western influences embedded within Church music traditions in China, though the church in China was established before the "western" missionaries entered (Wong, 2006; Yong, 2008).<sup>14</sup> Translated hymns accompanied the protestant missionary movements entering China during the 1800s, outlined in Fang Lan Hsieh's (2009) account of Chinese Christian Hymnody. Her work documents the historical process of translations, as well as how hymn translators wrestle with the dimensions of 文理 *wenli* (the poetic nature of Chinese) and 白话 *baihua* (the colloquial nature of the language) (Charter & DeBernardi, 1998; Hsieh, 2009). These are parameters that the Mandarin translators still face today.

English songs translated into Mandarin are still used transnationally (within China and the diasporic communities across the globe), continuing the use of "western" songs within the broader repertoire in Chinese church worship. Even Mandarin songwriters, such as the American-based group 赞美之泉 *Zanmeizhichuan* (Streams of Praise) arguably still write and produce songs inspired by western conventions and melodies in order to resource Chinese churches transnationally (Wong, 2006).<sup>15</sup> Another popular Taiwan-based band 约书亚乐团 *Yueshuya'yuetuan* (or Joshua Band in English) continues to translate popular contemporary worship songs, which includes Hillsong worship songs.

Swee Hong Lim, a postcolonial liturgist, suggests that music contextualisation is indicative of musicking worship practice within the Chinese church (Lim, 2017). Worship music in Chinese churches, as proposed by Lim, happens in three song-phases: (i) *adopted* songs as imported resources of Western music that help a faith community (Lim, 2017, p. 5); (ii) *adapted* songs that embrace local expressions in a Western frame (Lim, 2017, p. 6); and (iii) *actualised* songs that draw inspiration from local culture away from Western conventions (Lim, 2017, p. 6). Chinese diaspora groups including Joshua Band and Streams of Praise mentioned above are considered 'adapted' in Lim's typology due to their use of western hymns and conventions.

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<sup>14</sup> There is a wide variety of work that recognise the existence of Christianity before "Western" missionaries entered, but this paper will highlight two authors I already draw upon.

<sup>15</sup> A comprehensive account was provided by Connie Oi-Yan Wong in her dissertation.

'Actualised' songs include the works from 吕小敏 Lu Xiaomin, a reportedly illiterate peasant woman who has authored 1000 plus "indigenous" Canaan hymns 迦南诗选 *jianan'shixuan* (Sun, 2012). The question is where the current practices of Hillsong Church and members of Hills Chinese fit in this model.

## **Ethnomusicology, Christian congregational Music and Localisation**

Alongside Lim's typology, in this paper I draw upon Congregational Christian Music studies (CCM) (Ingalls et. al., 2016; Porter, 2014). CCM facilitates an interdisciplinary study of congregational musicking that provides space for cultural approaches to music (as stated, via ethnomusicology) but also the integration of theological insight.<sup>16</sup> CCM studies occur across genres: from hymnals to contemporary worship song (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 2). As described by Ingalls, Landau and Wagner, CCM studies allows the "interplay of the musical creator's intentions, performance contexts" in "music styles" and "meanings of song texts" (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 4), and in this case the interplay of performance and theology (or the performance of theology).

When discussing the translation practices of the Hillsong Chinese community, I draw further on CCM's approach to music localisation. The concept of music localisation presented by Ingalls, Reigersberg and Sherinian's volume encourages a review of Christian congregational musicking noting its cultural settings. Studies of music localisation within CCM studies tend to focus on musicking "shared across spatial and cultural divides; some linked to past practice, some innovative - and make them locally meaningful and useful in the construction of Christian beliefs, theology, practice or identity" (Ingalls et. al., 2018, p. 15). It is important to note that for many, Christian music translation is a colonial West-to-East enterprise. I have explored the nuances around this in my forthcoming publication for Australasian Pentecostal Studies (Chan, 2021). However, here I seek to position the work of the Hillsong 华语 Huayu as localised Christian music-making displaying "practices that do not fit neatly within the model of either indigenisation or its converse, assimilation" (Ingalls et al., 2018, p. 12). Examination of music localisation allows the focus to be primarily not on the distributor or distribution process but on the local community and the musicking

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<sup>16</sup> Ethnomusicologist Mark Porter suggests Ethnomusicology is a means to be able to study congregational music within the lens of its culture, i.e., Contemporary "western" Christian congregational music within Western Art Music. See Porter 2014

process. This is crucial as it is the community within Hills Chinese (both leaders and using feedback from attendees) who eventually choose and decide the usefulness of the practice, or in this case, the translated song, within their group.

## Theology behind Translations and Worship Practices

Missiologist Lamin Sanneh (2009) suggests that the translation of the Christian message is both missiological and theological. He proposes that Christianity is a *translated religion*, using the historical expansion of Christianity through vernacular translation eventually adopting the culture (such as the early church's use of Hellenistic Greek). The theological understanding of other cultures as a destination of God's salvation and kindness is vital, focusing on those who receive or hear the message (Sanneh, 2009, p. 32).

Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong provides basis for applying Sanneh's translatability to ethnomusicology and musicking. Yong suggests the continual interface of gospel and culture from its beginnings, sees the growth of Christianity move beyond its western-centric focus (Sanneh, 2007; Yong, 2014).<sup>17</sup> Translations, are still an interaction of the Christian message and culture (vernacular language). Yong in his work with ethnomusicologists in *Spirit of Praise* (2015) suggests that *musicking* in Pentecostal contexts is indicative of oral tradition. Music within congregations is used to theologise on the ground level. Other elements of worship that Pentecostal churches focus on is embodied experience within their worship service (Miller & Yamamori, 2007), alongside the importance of space, leadership, and congregational elements (Albrecht, 1999). This paper recognises that the translators (within their Pentecostal context) view the songs as experience and translation beyond simply linguistics. Rather there is a mediation of the other elements of space, leadership, and message that is packaged with the song.

## Research Methodology and Design

My research primarily draws on ethnomusicology, using examples of "fieldwork at home" amongst Chinese music, with studies such as Stock and Chiener's work in Taiwan with 南管 *Nanguan* musics, studying musical practice as an insider to the

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<sup>17</sup> Engaging with Sanneh's translatability allows Yong to discuss a focus on a possible Asian American focus on evangelistic theology.

environment and culture (Barz & Cooley, 2008; Stock & Chiener, 2008).<sup>18</sup> This method allows me to use my practice fieldwork as, first, a practitioner within the Hills Chinese community (where I have been a worship pastor and volunteer within the team for 8.5 years). Second, I am a 1.5 generation Chinese-Canadian (immigrated to Canada and familiar with both the Canadian culture and my Hong Kong background) fluent in English, Cantonese and conversational Mandarin (Kim et al., 2003; Yong, 2014).<sup>19</sup> For this task, the discipline of Ethnomusicology provides the possibility for exploring the performance of music but also its examination as a cultural artefact (as in reviewing performance within its lingual, social, and cultural context) (Nettl, 2015). This field itself has changed from studying cultural music at a distance (from a western perspective) to allow for researchers' ability to study cultural musicking via participation within various social dimensions, with ethnography's focus on local narratives and perspectives (Nettl, 2015, p. 10). This is here applied (not least to myself as one of the translators who partakes in congregational musicking) to allow me to observe the team's reflexivity as translators negotiate their migrant realities, cultural backgrounds, and megachurch context.

Ethnographic methods use fieldwork (participant-observation and interviews) involving the researcher within CCM studies to observe "on the ground" from the congregational level the musical practices within the church. I conducted my ethnographic research over a period of one year during my MTh as a participant within the Hills Chinese music and translation team, with a view to finding the use of translated Mandarin worship songs and how they are localised by the users (here the leaders and the worship team members). This larger study focused not only on the translation process but also on the reception of the songs within three Sydney-based Chinese congregations (Chan, 2021).<sup>20</sup> As this study focuses upon one site (a Pentecostal megachurch), the ethnographic data will be discussed in relation to theological concepts drawn from missiology and Pentecostal theology to analyse? the ecclesial aspects of the songs (Fiddes, 2012; Haight & Nieman, 2009).

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<sup>18</sup> Though the context may be different, I would argue that fieldwork at home still applies in an Australian Chinese diasporic setting.

<sup>19</sup> I was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to Canada when I was young. However, I am 1.5 generation as my community growing up was 1<sup>st</sup> generation Chinese immigrants. I am still in touch with the Chinese culture from the Hong Kong perspective, and now in Sydney I am married to a 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrant from Mainland China. However, my language ability allows me to understand songtext, but with research limitations, I am limited to English academic sources. For more on 1.5 generation see Kim et al, and also Yong's theological text on Asian American evangelical theology.

<sup>20</sup> Author's forthcoming article focuses on the wider scope of three Sydney based congregation's use of the translated songs.

Participants who were interviewed as represented in this article were selected leaders of the Hills Chinese Community (two services that run from the Hillsong main campus site in Sydney), as well as the translations manager of Hillsong Music, and various members of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* team (also volunteers within Hills Chinese). The following outlines the cultural context of each participant:

**Figure 1: Participant Demographic and Context**

<b>Name<sup>21</sup></b>	<b>Region of Origin</b>	<b>Description of role and cultural context</b>
Huang	Mainland China (also currently located)	Involved in both translation and production of translated Mandarin songs
Chen	Mainland China	Translator; involved in Hills Chinese service as a congregation leader
Tan	Malaysia	Translator and congregation leader; involved in the Hillsong Chinese ministry since the early 1990s, originally from City Christian Life Centre, and involved with the Chatswood service
Xu	Mainland China	Translator since 2010, and involved in the Chatswood now Northshore service, works with the Hills Chinese team
Tsai	Taiwan	Translator since 2019 Hills Chinese service worship team member
Jun	South Korea	Korean translator since 2011; employed by HMA as the Translations Manager since 2016.
Service Pastor 1	Hong Kong	Service pastor of Hillsong Hills Chinese and part of the Eldership of Hillsong Church
Service Pastor 2	Hong Kong	Service pastor of Hillsong Hills Chinese
Yuen	Mainland China	Worship leader in Hills Chinese for over 30 years

<sup>21</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for anonymity for the participants. These names identify with the person's heritage, with phonetics that are closely identified with the heritage of interviewee: Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Mainland China. For this paper, there is no need to particularly assign a Chinese character to their name, so the Pinyin will be used with no characters (an English transliteration is used).



Ying	Taiwan	Involved with Hillsong church and also attended the Hills Chinese service.
Lo	Taiwan	Involved with Hillsong church and also attended the Hills Chinese service.

A further necessary delimitation: while this paper discusses practices of translation within congregational musicking, I do not focus on the linguistic aspects of the song translation process, but instead the song as a product of the process in context of ecclesial musicking. I also acknowledge various complexities when discussing Chinese diaspora or migrant groups which may not be examined in full here. For example, Ben Dumbauld's (2012) ethnomusicological research within a Chinese American Church highlights that worship practices can differ within one church due to a combination of generational and cultural differences. However, this paper will not focus on the generational aspect. Hills Chinese represents first and 1.5 generation Chinese communities in a specific context within an English-speaking megachurch in Hillsong. Within this community the Mandarin language needs were the same across generations.

## Ethnography and Findings

### ***Jun as the Translations Manager of Hillsong Music***

My ethnography starts with Jun as the leader and facilitator of translations within Hillsong, a member that works internally within the operations of HMA's distribution to 17 different languages. Most significantly, Jun works to create a space for the different language groups, including Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* (personal communication, January 25, 2019). Jun's work sets the framework from which translators operate, as she oversees the different language translation teams for HMA. It is also significant that she represents a non-Western voice within the church and oversees the various opportunities for translation work, but especially for Asian language translations, as a Korean translator herself. Her insights as a Korean first-generation immigrant in Australia, as well as a translator and church member, contribute to her understanding of the translation process and product. Jun's work to expand the translation work to Asian languages has only been recent (compared to the previous focus on Spanish and

other European languages), though translation into Mandarin occurred since the outset of the Chinese service at Hillsong.

To Jun and many of the translations team, the songs produced by Hillsong church are products of the heart of its culture. That is, these songs are seen as God-given or "anointed".<sup>22</sup> Given the spiritual weight the team place upon the songs, Jun suggests:

By introducing what is being given to our church, even though it was primarily in English, my passion is to carry that heart and spirit into our language. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

As leader of the translations team, Jun assumes the responsibility for ensuring official translations carry the same "heart and spirit" as interpreted by the church while still carrying the message forward in other languages. However, here Jun recognises various limitations to the translation process in operating from an English repertoire. While there is an array of "resources" that Hillsong produces, Jun suggests that not all songs should be used in its language services or translated for other churches:

We consider whether it is singable in the congregation/church setting; not all the songs are fit to sing in church services. Just like we don't sing all the Hillsong United songs or all the Young and Free songs in our [Hillsong] congregations, there are certain songs that are more fit [for] worship services, and there are some songs that have same impact when you listen to it. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

This comment reflects upon the variety of music produced by the bands of Hillsong and notes that certain melodies and arrangements within songs are used differently across these various musical groups of Hillsong.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, not all songs are considered suitable for multilingual congregational use across all languages. For example, Jun notes the positive impact of one of Hillsong's 2018 songs, "Who You Say I Am" (Hillsong Worship, 2018), as a strong example:

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<sup>22</sup> Inferring a Pentecostal understanding of a Spirit-empowered nature of worship.

<sup>23</sup> These three different musical groups within Hillsong represent three different sounds, where Hillsong Worship caters to a more "congregational" sound for churches, Hillsong United a more creative and innovative sound, and Hillsong Young and Free, which is catered to the current youth's taste (the youth demographic is unspecified, but likely more American and Australian preferences).

We hear testimonies about how, especially the younger generation, they are restored from depression, restored, a strength from the translated line itself about us being a child of God... our identity comes from Christ. From one of the testimonies I heard, when our Chinese translations is sung in China, there are a lot of young people impacted. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

名份称已赐给我 *mingfen'niyicigeiwo*, meaning "You have given me identity", provides a powerful declaration in Chinese, and is more direct than the English lyrics "I Am Who You Say I Am", a phrase seldom heard within the Chinese context. However, she admits that more continual connections and feedback from the Chinese churches and communities are welcome.

### ***The Hills Chinese space***

Translated Mandarin songs are essential to the Hills Chinese service to maintain the "one house many rooms" model within the service. To provide a similar or the sonic sound (Wagner, 2014), it requires careful translation of songs into Chinese to facilitate similar congregational musicking within Hills Chinese as in the rest of the church. Following translation, the Hills Chinese leaders contextualise music within each space (teaching, connect groups, celebrations) to assist the community. The space is a Hillsong space (English-speaking predominantly), but the leaders would also emphasise that they are distinctly Chinese as well.

The Hills Chinese pastors are from Hong Kong, which allows them cultural familiarity with the Chinese diaspora community they serve from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and other Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking backgrounds. The pastors are aware of the needs of the Chinese-speaking diaspora community, creating space for them to grow spirituality:

Language-wise, culture-wise, and in a Chinese community in an English Church, we [create] a community model that people can feel connected, feel encouraged to use their gifts. The Chinese community can be there for anyone wanting to be connected to a smaller congregation, that can use their language to express their spirituality and grow. (Hills Chinese Pastors, personal communication, January 19, 2020)

Tan, a fellow lay pastor who has worked with the Lees in the early years, recalls his experience with serving the Chinese community to Hillsong:

Without providing a Mandarin-speaking service, or Cantonese, they [the Chinese community] wouldn't have a chance of experiencing serving God or sharing their testimony. Without the translations or opportunity for them to go up [on the platform] and share something, sharing communion or sharing a giving message or testimony they would have missed out a lot. (Tan, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

Without language access, the attendees from the Chinese community lack the usual participation Hillsong attendees have in the English service (often referred by the congregants as the main service) via ecclesial practices such as serving, testimony, communion, and understanding the teaching.

Ultimately, the pastors created a worship space within Hillsong that is distinctly Chinese, in which language plays a significant part. The service strategically moved (from a bilingual Mandarin-English service) to a monolingual (Mandarin) service in 2017, and eventually leading to the second Cantonese service in 2021.

Their emphasis on language creates a space for the Chinese community while connecting with the larger church in the megachurch model. They explain that:

[the Chinese community] would have the same experience as a westerner, in our next-door Convention Centre, experience the worship. The Chinese people have the same experience. Bring it to a level of experience of what the Australian congregation is experiencing. The lyrics, the music, the anointing. (Hills Chinese Pastors, personal communication, January 19, 2020)

At Hillsong, singing common songs contributes toward maintaining the same experience in each room and carrying that same "anointing" of worship across the many rooms (Evans, 2006, pp. 100-101).<sup>24</sup> Here the translated worship song acts as a mediator of the presence of God, but also in situating Hills Chinese as a "room within the house" of Hillsong. However, this simultaneously provides a space to

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<sup>24</sup> The anointing of the music is understood by the pastor, to be the Holy Spirit coming to power amongst the congregation (as identified by Evans in his discussion of "the Hillsong Anointing.")

accommodate the congregants' cultural identity. For instance, from my observations as a practitioner, the Hills Chinese weekly sermons and preaching are often catered to draw upon cultural values and metaphors, with setlists of translated songs chosen to "resonate" with the congregation. The pastors continue to learn what values and topics the congregants want from their church, its team and other community members. For example, this community together observes Chinese holiday celebrations such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival through specialised performances of songs as well as evangelistic messages, and community events catering to these events and their cultural themes. To the pastors, Hills Chinese is a space of intercultural exchange with the English-speaking culture found within Hillsong. In this way, the pastors created an intentional space for the Chinese community to the Hillsong ecclesial practices outworked in the Chinese language.

### ***Understanding the context of the song***

As outlined in the previous section Chinese pastors and leaders were pivotal in starting this ministry and space for this cultural community, and the translators who work on the song and message within the worship service work towards this aim but also ensure that the ecclesial heart of the songs is understood through this cultural lens. Therefore, the following section will detail the importance of the song translators in creating the synergies with megachurch culture. With the strong emphasis on worship songs and the ecclesial unity within Hillsong, largely it falls to the work of translators to correctly translate existing songs that can contextualise well for Mandarin speakers. Both localisation and adaptation is considered essential within the Hills Chinese space.

Song translators within the church understand the role songs play within its vision and teaching but also in voicing the needs of the congregation. Here Chen, member of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*, suggests:

"A song written by anyone [in the church], reflects the vision of the church, [but also] their personal revelation, and it reflects what they think can help the congregation or whoever is singing it."

(Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

As a guideline, the translation must reflect both the songwriter and the church. This reflexivity of the songwriter and church intention

cannot be lost in translation when moving into a new recipient language. Chen continues:

"We are not meant to recreate something completely new, but rather carrying that same vision, same understanding and even revelation a lot of time and be faithfully reflecting that in our translation." (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

To maintain an understanding of the original intent and vision, Chen emphasises to the team that they must experience the song as used in the congregation first (meaning to partake in congregational musicking before attempting to lead it via translation). Therefore, the team members of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* mostly experience the songs first within the English church services participating along with the congregation. This is true for all except the external members who act as cultural informants providing feedback from the Chinese mainland. Xu, for instance, who has been a Hillsong congregation member since 2008, responds:

"I think it helps to understand the culture of the church and how the church and how the composers in this church would usually express their thoughts and lyrics."<sup>25</sup> (Xu, personal communication, January 31, 2020)

Similarly, Tsai, a newer member of the team, is an international student attending Hills Chinese, who also shared his experience of being a part of the wider Hillsong environment. He compares this with his insight as a recent outsider:

Being here in Hillsong, it allows me to understand more in translations. There is more access to this information. If today, I was in another church, then I do not have this environment. The access to this information is not there. This comparison may be less. (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

Here Tsai emphasises the process of musicking together that forms the Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* process. Engaging the song's original context and experiencing its reception within the congregation and by the Hillsong leadership is important. Thus, while the song can move freely, the theological message, according to the translators, should

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<sup>25</sup> Culture is not mentioned as the sense of nationality or ethnicity, but rather discussing the organisational and leadership culture of Hillsong Church.

not be detached from its original meaning or the subsequent meanings derived from the ecclesial setting.

Furthermore, some words and concepts can only be understood by those who are also congregants; that is, there are symbols and metaphors laden with meaning only within the Hillsong setting. For example, Tan explains how the message of the song may be "preached from the pulpit" before a songwriter pens it into music. He provided a specific example with the word "seasons," that he understood the congregation to be holding a particularly laden theological message regarding timing or a period of waiting that is allowed by God:

In Chinese translations, "seasons" is understandable, but you tend to use it as a period of time, rather than the word. So, we need to make a choice to say either seasons or a period of time.

[But here] the word seasons is going to appear more and more in our preaching, in the way we are stating [it], in the way we are singing our songs ... Seasons [has] become an acceptable term in Christian circles now. (Tan, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

Tan's example here also illustrates how the translation process determines which aspects of the original context are kept. Chen describes another example *So Will I*, which in her view epitomises the "freshness" that is unique to the Hillsong songwriters within lyrics and melodies:

This song was a huge surprise for me. We managed to translate it. I didn't think it was going to be so singable. I didn't think people will actually use it in their worship. Because it was so wordy in a way, and the translations was very poetic. However, the feedback I got so far people loved it. Because of that beauty and "freshness", it carries in its lyrics, in its melody as well. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

The "freshness" that Chen describes is a unique or poetic way of language that is not usually found in CCM, at least in the view of the translators, and especially in the Chinese language. These metaphors and images of the environment had not been used often within the Christian context or applied to Christian spiritualities; therefore,

the translators found there were no traditions or language to draw upon, at least within the Chinese Church. The translation of the song “So Will I” 我也会 *woyehui* provides an example of these metaphors used (Hillsong UNITED, 2017):

All nature and science

自然与科学

zi ran yu ke xue

Follow the sound of Your voice

都来跟随祢的声音

dou lai gen sui ni de sheng yin

The lines above speak of the authority of God over nature and science, a line not often found even in English lyrics (perhaps due to the theological implications), let alone in Chinese hymnody. The theological meaning and understanding of the context here fed into the translators' choice, and because of the “freshness” of the discussion of nature and science for instance, the translators ensured the level of unique wording is kept even in the Chinese expression (through 自然与科学 *ziran'yu'kexue*).

### ***Translators' role to mediate***

Within the Hills Chinese community, the pastors and, most importantly, the translators aim to mediate the original song within context to their recipients in a way appropriate to the culture. The recipients in this case include both the Hills Chinese community and the transnational Mandarin community to whom the translations are distributed. Many of the team and leaders used the term “sharing” for this process of making translations available. They understood the song as an Australian ecclesial and theological product that they translate back into Chinese culture, thereby contributing to the song, as described by Xu:

You come across a good song that resonates with you that you think it's good, that you think it's going to help more people resonate with the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit ... it's a tool for other people to get closer to God. You don't have to use this tool, but if you think this tool is good, you would want to share it. (Xu, personal communication, January 31, 2020)

However, in their translation process, what matters most to the Hillsong 华语 is their focus on the recipient or the contextualisation process.



While the Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* team is comprised of those attending the megachurch, there are also team members who act as cultural consultants outside of the congregational setting to ensure relevance to the transnational community. This ensures the wider Chinese church communities have a say in this process. For example, Huang, a translator who works with Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* overseas, describes translation from the recipient's perspective:

With Worship Leaders and people in China, when it comes back to translation, a lot of those resources they are looking for are in English ... when people's hearts get moved by those lyrics, they want to sing it in their own languages ... it's that freshness, the message that's being said, in those songs is something they haven't gotten too much of before. (Huang, personal communication, November 17, 2018)

The recurring notions of "freshness" here indicates that recipients in China want something contemporary that they do not have already in Chinese. Tsai continues this notion in his thoughts, drawing from his previous insight as an outsider:

I think it opens our eyes because each of our cultures only has a limited worldview. We don't have as large of a view as we have imagined. So other than our language and culture, it's important to understand other views, other cultures in worship. (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

Tsai sees a difference between the worship expressions in English versus Mandarin; an effectively translated song successfully bridges the two cultures and can therefore be framed as a cultural exchange from his perspective as a Mandarin speaker.

Whether from a personal conviction or the desire for cultural exchange, language differences often become a challenge to address. Here there were varied responses across the translators:

In English there are many words...usually express[ed] using difference phrases, different ways. You don't just use one word, to describe the differences. Especially when there are a lot of words that describe feeling in the lyrics. Then it will be difficult. There are differences in the language. Where in Chinese, you don't describe

your feeling in certain ways. (Xu, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

I [use] the indicator as what Mandarin songs are already out there, and how they do it, and refer to that. If we are producing something, lyric-wise, close enough to those, I know it's going to work. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

The issues raised here by the translators pertain to the words available in the Chinese language to express what was originally written in English, that is, the expectation to translate directly or phrase-by-phrase. However, Chen focuses her team on Chinese cultural conventions through her application of the *XinDaYa* Chinese criteria of translations applied from her training in Mainland China:

信 *Xin* is faithfulness – to see whether you are faithful to the original text.

达 *Da* means accuracy – whether you accurately reflect the meaning or the meaning behind it.

雅 *Ya* means elegancy, which is the ... higher-level goal to reach. It reflects whether or not we can keep the rhyme, whether we can polish the sing-ability. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)<sup>26</sup>

In this model, 信 *Xin* and 达 *Da* attend to the original Hillsong song-lyric as text. At the same time, 雅 *Ya* requires a higher level of poetry and elegance achieved with a clear understanding of Chinese cultural tastes. This convention allows for evaluation of translated songs into the culture, and ultimately the focus is upon the recipient Chinese language (Gu, 2010; Hermans, 2003).

When the song is translated well, the congregation can engage. Yuen, a worship leader in Hills Chinese since the 90s, notes the power of effective translations from the feedback received:

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<sup>26</sup> My language ability as the researcher unfortunately has limited access to text on *XinDaYa*, and such only has access to the sources that are available in English text regarding translation studies. I recognize there are a significant number of texts, but this paper focuses on the ethnographic data that shows Chen's use of the concept. Gu's and Hermans's texts were among a few that I could access which helps explain the philosophy behind *XinDaYa* as a model and concept.

Now we have moved to all Mandarin, I find it's easier to really 感动 *gandong*.<sup>27</sup> The quality of the Chinese becomes closer, accurately representing the song. Secondly, words can reach listeners. There are two areas: Accuracy and 感动 *gandong*. (Yuen, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

The improved contextualisation within this Mandarin-focused strategy affects the congregation, and Yuen has received feedback that it creates a deepened response in worship. The term 感动 *gandong* here means to illicit a deep response. An example of this is found in the song 破碎器皿 “Broken Vessels” (Hillsong Worship, 2014), one which Yuen often chooses within leading worship:

Empty-handed	But not forsaken
一无所有	祢却不离弃

一无所有 *yiwusuoyou* is an idiom meaning "there is nothing to my name", followed by 祢却不离弃 *niquebu'liqi*, "You (God) have not left me".<sup>28</sup> Paired together these concepts reflect Chinese poetry as well as the theological notion that, "with nothing to our name, God is still with us". Changing the two idioms from the English "empty-handed" to the Chinese "nothing to my name" is the attention to accuracy Yuen appreciates. Of course, the choice of wording for this translation is determined by the process: the use of idioms and cultural conventions to portray a level of poetic-ness to best fit Chinese cultural poetic expectations and sensibilities.<sup>29</sup>

## The use of the Translated Song and Purpose

While the Hills Chinese community navigates their space within the Australian megachurch context, they also consider the larger global church and wider Chinese community they can "influence". The translators in Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* were aware of the social contexts to which they provided translated songs and continued to wrestle with both the Australian ecclesial setting and the Chinese cultural needs. Chen suggests 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai* as a compelling reason why these Hillsong translations are so popular and links this to the yearning and openness for songs that

<sup>27</sup> Where the people are touched and moved in their heart.

<sup>28</sup> It would be good to note that in Chinese (according to the translator's response), it is stronger to name God rather than to leave it ambiguous as "but not forsaken", which in English does not explain the subject being God

<sup>29</sup> The author also acknowledges that translations is contested within song translations. While there could be other preferences in the translation's accuracy, this specified translation in Broken Vessels was the meaning that works for the participant and the community interviewed and observed.

are initially in English. 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai* is a phenomenon where people (in the younger generation) are infatuated with the foreign. Understanding Chinese culture means recognition of these trends, according to Chen. Tsai responds when asked on the usefulness of the song to the context in which he translates:

"Would anyone *want to sing it*? If I like a song, I would want to translate it into Chinese. I would be 感动 *gandong* [moved], but I wonder if anyone would sing it because I know the original context." (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

On an individual level, Tsai's response notes that he is emotionally moved (感动 *gandong*) by the music. However, he wonders if all Hillsong songs are suitable for the Chinese culture, something that the team will not know until they have tried to translate them.

However, I would highlight in this article the continual effort of the translations team to ensure that their efforts extend beyond simple mechanical translation. The translated song ultimately is intended to build the community attending Hills Chinese. The song is contextualised to this context and eventually, it is assumed, the congregation will write songs in Mandarin on their own (Lim's third song phase of actualisation). Chen, with her framework of translations and despite recognising 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai*, responds:

Translations were *never meant to be the end*, meant to be a channel, meant to be something in between ... that creativity being inspired, being stirred up in them, for them to have a platform ... A lot of it I see translations as a practice, as a warmup, before they do their own thing. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

In other words, in her view, the translated songs should inspire creative songwriting in the Chinese language, in line with Lim's discussion to bring musicking towards actualising songs. Returning here to Chen's notion of "freshness", she believes this attribute also should inspire new ideas. Perhaps the same notion of "influence" mentioned in the earlier mentioned interview of Tim Whincop, the influence of Hillsong here really is that "music is done differently", but in this sense, a possibility of a new local sound could arise after the translated resources have been heard.

## Further Discussion

This article's purpose was to account specifically how the Chinese community navigated the necessary reflexivity of existing as a cultural community within the megachurch Hillsong Church through their musicking practices as observed within the process of song translation. The translators mediate between Hillsong's songs catered to an English speaking community and adapt the song (Lim, 2017) towards the use within the Chinese congregation through careful selection of Chinese expressions. The eventual goal of the translators is to see the worship songs become actualised expressions, which come directly from the Chinese congregations.

Musicking happens first as translators participate in the congregational "performance" of the larger English services of the church. I proposed that a second layer of musicking happens as the song translators select songs to be translated into Mandarin and propose ways of negotiating the varied meanings, as they feedback with the other leaders and congregation as well as members such as Yuen. The implications of the translated song here go beyond the congregation's mere ability to sing together but the translators described a tension between the song as brought by the individual, as well as the wider ecclesial identity (both megachurch Hillsong and as appropriated by Hills Chinese). They described this as sharing the same Hillsong "experience." Translation was used as a vehicle to enhance participation in the megachurch but also to reinforce their cultural identity as a Chinese diaspora community living within Sydney. The interviews noted two aspects as important to this process, an accuracy/alignment to Chinese literature in translation and agreement between Chinese/English worship expressions that enhances the experience of worship. Ultimately, translations, as suggested by Sanneh, served to bring the interface of the church message and practice, and the recipient culture. What makes the difference is how much care is given to the recipient (Sanneh, 2009).

Returning to the literature, Amos Yong, a Pentecostal theologian, suggests that especially in the Pentecostal congregation, musicking can allow for *theologising* through cultural themes, and worship practices can show unity and diversity of cultural identities (Riches, 2015; Yong, 2015). This process of adaptation to actualisation suggested by Lim makes the difference between simply adapting what is western and foreign with Chinese cultural conventions, to what is written as fully indigenously Chinese (Lim, 2017). Here the practice of the translators shows a

transnational connectedness to Chinese communities within, but also outside of, Sydney, and even to groups within Mainland China. The translators show evident effort to maintain integrity towards the Chinese culture, within the process of translating Christian megachurch songs. In interviewing the translators, two key questions emerged: a functional question, "is a song translatable", and a more important philosophical one, "*should* a song be translated?". Musicking with the song becomes the negotiation of all these functions. [The translation of songs, musicking, and the outworking on the localisation process here in this space is indicative of the formation of the Hills Chinese identity to be in unity with Hillsong while remaining diverse.](#)

Do megachurches such as Hillsong aid or hinder this process of building the Chinese Christian community? First, it is essential to note that the church's evangelistic and missional nature exhibited in Hills Chinese is made possible because autonomy is given to the relevant leaders who choose to serve their community. The Hills Chinese pastors drew upon the megachurch Hillsong's buildings, people, message, and worship songs provided to create a belonging (ecclesial identity) for the diaspora Chinese community. Within this space, the leaders work with the translations team to build and honour their heritage (cultural identity). While Wagner, for instance, suggests that the church is united through a "single globalized sonic experience" (Riches & Wagner, 2012; Wagner, 2014, 2017), I believe here the potential of the localised space at Hills Chinese becomes important.<sup>30</sup> Here it can be different, yet still Hillsong. The act of translation becomes essential for the community's aims. This musicking is not simply "transporting" the same structures but acknowledging that the Hills Chinese space allows for a new localised product that draws together both the ecclesial and cultural. This has important ramifications for both ecclesiology as well as missiology.

However, it is important to note that the megachurch structure within Hillsong can, of course, also hinder the actualisation and localisation process for the community's musicking if not made aware of the larger forces. To start with, the "global" Christian music market still prioritises English as an originating language. 崇洋媚外 *chongyangwaimei* within China, as Chen describes, captures what is potentially a western hegemony: that the Chinese churches, at least the younger generation, want the western songs. Wagner's ethnographic work from the London campus explored the Hillsong Sound, observing the single sonic experience, or the same aural branding,

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<sup>30</sup> The discussion of the market brand and sound of Hillsong has been discussed extensively through Riches' and Wagner's work, as a non-exhaustive example.

replicated throughout the church campuses (Wagner, 2014; Riches, 2010). When global music markets and evangelistic motives combine, this becomes counteractive to the localisation process given the western-centric dominance favouring the English-speaking practices (the Hillsong setup of music). With 崇洋媚外 *chongyangwaimei*, and the favourable “contemporary sound” that appeals to the youth in China, would there be demand for an actualised song?

In his discussion on Pentecostal and postcolonial missiology, Amos Yong warns against the “zealous” language of Pentecostal global evangelism, suggesting highlighting the grassroots movement within the “locality of the convert” (Yong, 2017). While I do not presume to have a solution, this shows how highlighting the locality and contextualisation work of the translations team and the Chinese community leaders become vital. The mediation or reflexivity of the translator becomes more essential to countering the homogeneity in worship practices.

Such connections have already been currently established not only in the Hills Chinese community but also transnationally. Further feedback and research from Chinese congregations on the use of the translated song are still needed, both in academia and also in practice. But with a local service within Hillsong that is already working towards actualisation (as proposed by Lim to be musicking directly from the indigenous culture rather than borrowed conventions), the hope is that greater localisation or contextualisation will occur in future endeavours (Lim, 2017). At the very least, the diasporic community within Hills Chinese is situated within the adapted song process in their translations.

To conclude, the Hills Chinese community is unique within the Hillsong Church organisation. However, the Hills Chinese service and the translations team's influence spread transnationally, working with outside members. The account of Hills Chinese within Hillsong may have implications on how this can be modelled within other megachurches. This especially has implications on their cultural practice spaces and to the broader discussion of other Chinese congregations towards the usefulness of the translated song to their construct of ecclesial and cultural identity.

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