

**A transnational poetics of place: identity, otherness and the meaning
of home in the poetry of Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, Bei Dao, Hannah
Lowe and Sarah Howe**

by Jennifer Wing Sze Wong

Oxford Brookes University

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Abstract

My project examines the relationship between the experience of otherness, poetic expression and the writer's negotiation of home in the work of contemporary poets of the Chinese diaspora through critical examination and creative practice. It aims to redraw current accounts of contemporary poetry from 1980s to the present day, to derive new knowledge about the idea of race and the impact of a multi-ethnic environment on contemporary poetics, taking into account relevant criticisms about identity politics from postcolonial and cultural theories. In particular, the project explores the challenge of articulating otherness in terms of language(s), history(ies) and culture(s). Through close readings of significant contemporary poets of Chinese diaspora including Li-Young Lee, Marilyn-Chin (both US-based); Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe (both UK-based), as well as Bei Dao (China-based), I analyse how a writer's poetic language is reshaped by his ethnic and socio-historical environments, and examine the reimagining(s) of home among contemporary Chinese diasporic poets. I also connect these readings and theorising with the development of my own creative portfolio.

The project includes: (i) a 30,000-word critical commentary based on research and comparative study on the above contemporary poets, focused on the representation of otherness, self-identity and home; (ii) a poetry collection inspired by the themes, images or poetic language of these authors, revealing a spectrum of otherness and the meaning of home, as well as the poet's conflicts between leaving, returning and translating home; and (iii) one-to-one interviews with these authors on their perceived notions of home, identity, and literary influences. In doing so, I explore and situate my work and identity as a poet within the Chinese diaspora.

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Introduction

The rift between the self and its true 'home'

Edward Said defines the concept of exile and its impact on one's identity as an 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home [...]'.¹ Born in Hong Kong and having spent my formative years in that former British colony and very Chinese city before coming to England to pursue my studies, I am no stranger to the 'unhealable rift' between myself and my native place. I find it difficult to escape from the longing for a 'true home', even though my departure from home is not an enforced situation. Home is a place of origin where personal history and longings reside, where self-identity begins. I find it impossible to write creatively without revisiting or re-imagining, in the back of my mind, the place(s) where I would call home. Equally, I can hardly ignore my perpetual experience of otherness or foreignness that arises from the conflicting cultures and values I acquired in the East and the West.

As one travels from one place to another, an individual's new knowledge and encounters modify her perception of the world and engagement with it, giving rise to new versions of identity. Above all, identity is rooted in the individual's memory and familial ties. By identity, I refer to the individual's affirmation of values, ideologies and perceived relationships with the world, which combine to render a sense of sufficiency and truth.² Philip Gleason's 'Identifying Identity: A Semantic History' provides an excellent overview on the definition of the term 'identity', tracing it to the Latin root *idem*, meaning the same, a term in use since the sixteenth century, and the 'perennial mind-body problem in philosophy since the time of John Locke.'³ This definition highlights the possibility for the individual who straddles different places or homes to retain his or her sameness. According to Erikson, an identity comprises both

¹ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books 2001), p.173.

² These values, ideologies and perceived relationships with the world—which together offer a sense of distinctiveness—are the outcome(s) of one's encounter(s) with history and the environment, and a by-product of one's upbringing and imagination.

³ Philip Gleason, 'Identifying Identity: A Semantic History', *The Journal of American History* 69.4 (1983), p.911.

the core of an individual's being and their communal culture. We can understand identity to be a process in which the self is constantly interpreting himself within and beyond a communal culture, longing to be different yet accepted.⁴ Moreover, with the effect of globalisation and more frequent border-crossing movements between nations, identity is often articulated in terms of identity crises, in the context of immigration and emigration experiences, where one's identity arising from 'membership in groups that have suffered oppression on the basis of gender, race, class, or sexual preference is a major area of investigation.'⁵ My interest lies in investigating how the specificity of life experience such as migration—one's encounter with or attempt to assimilate a different culture—can impact on the perceived identity of a writer and his or her work.

James Clifford discusses the cohesiveness of the 'routes and roots' contained within a diaspora. He identifies the possibility of appreciating identity formation as a 'matrix of experiences' within which individuals traverse different territories.⁶ Clifford's approach of understanding diasporic identity in terms of bi-directional journeys, offers a creative, interactive paradigm to locate oneself in relation to personal, social and historical encounters. Moreover, the cultures of place(s) are also constantly revised by the individuals who engage with these places.⁷ In understanding transnational identity, Tölölyan's proposition that 'diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' articulates the interplay between transnational identity and time, the socio-historical and the communal imagination.⁸ Such transnational experience is not only articulated through the shift in locations but through inhabiting different temporal realities through imagination, creating a community that is at once both imaginary and real, both temporal and spatial, both local and transnational.

Other than the liberating effect of transnational, (re-)imagined

⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p.22. See also Gleason, p.911, p.914.

⁵ Gleason, p.929. See also Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, *The Columbia Dictionary of Literary and Cultural Criticisms* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁶ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.257.

⁷ Mills suggests that 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both.' C Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination* (London: Penguin, 1970), p.3.

⁸ Khachig Tölölyan, 'The nation-state and its others: in lieu of a preface', *Diaspora* 1.1(1991), p.5.

communities, the rise of diaspora consciousness as a result of transnational communities and exchanges has added complexity to the way people comprehend the idea of place, or one's sense of locality. This has resulted in 'the growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity and collective social movement' or a collision of historical space and imagination. As Vertovec remarks, 'sustained real time and intensive practices of transnational communication, affiliation and exchange' make it possible for migrants to 'maintain and act upon particularly strong senses of connection to people, places and senses of belonging associated with their places of origin.'⁹ Moreover, the widespread use of technology, digital and social media have allowed these imagined communities to become interactive and to resemble more of an actual, local community, while on the other hand the virtual reality and the presence of a networked society makes the perception of distance more unreal than ever before.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'diaspora' refers to 'people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland', with the words 'diasperiein', 'disperse', coming from 'dia' (across) and speirein (scatter). Tracing its origin to the Jewish Diaspora, the definition has also been extended to mean 'any group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin; the dispersion or spread of a group of people in this way.'¹⁰ It also refers to 'the state or fact of having been dispersed from one's homeland or point of origin.' In fact, this border-crossing recalls the meaning of transition from one place to another in the word 'transnationalism'.¹¹

In his introduction to *Diasporas*, Stéphane Dufoix highlights the term's reference to displacement, its function in relation to the 'maintenance of a connection with a real or imagined homeland', and the issues raised about 'voluntary or involuntary migration of people to their spatially free floating existence.'¹² In other words, Dufoix compares the diasporic experience of immigrants with that of exiles and refugees. He

⁹ Steven Vertovec, 'Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation', *International Migration Review*, 38.3(2004), p.977.

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). <<http://www.oed.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/52085>> [Accessed 1 June 2018]. In defining this term, the *Oxford English Dictionary* also traces it to the body of Jews living outside the land of Israel, or the dispersion of the Jewish people beyond the land of Israel.

¹¹ See also Footnote 10.

¹² Stéphane Dufoix, *Dispersion: A History of the Word Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p.28.

also points out an important aspect of diaspora, in that the word cannot be the same each time it is used, because there is simply no word to express the individual-specific diaspora. In my thesis, I will argue for a dual understanding of diaspora, as the diasporic individual shares affinity with a real or imagined community in terms of their origin, rituals, cultural practices, values and/or experiences in border-crossing. In other words, individuals belong to a real community from which they are descended, a place of origin where their family come from, but at the same time there is an imagined community—which may be located far away and may include memories of or fantasies about the place(s) in which they identify with. So on the one hand, they reflect on their origin or communal culture. On the other, they realise that the specificity of their own diasporic journeys or personal histories, the experiences and knowledges they gained in border-crossing, the changes in their friendships and social connections, their feelings of belongingness or displacement straddling the places, are not fully translatable.

The *Oxford Dictionary's* definitions of 'home' convey the multiple dimensions of home that go beyond a fixed residence, encompassing one's heritage and feelings of belonging towards one's family or place of origin.¹³ Therefore, the definition of home highlights the fact that home is not just a physical location where one lives, but also means certain affiliations or belonging, a powerful configuration of personal experiences and memories that impact on one's identity.¹⁴ Avtaḥ Brah's idea that home is 'a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' suggests the semi-fictional quality of home for the diasporic individual.¹⁵ In her definition, Brah captures the dimension of home as an emotional need that reverberates and transcends the physical location. Moreover, she points out that diaspora is an active and collective process, 'a confluence of narratives as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory.'¹⁶ Building on her

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://www.oed.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org>>. [Accessed 1 March 2018]. The definitions of home include: 'a person's own country or native land'; 'the country of one's ancestors'; 'the place where one lives or was brought up, with reference to the feelings of belonging, comfort, etc. associated with it', to 'the family or social unit occupying a house.'

¹⁴ By identity, I refer to its nature as a process that is 'located' in the core of an individual as well as in the core of one's communal culture. (See Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton 1968), p.22.)

¹⁵ Avtaḥ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.192.

¹⁶ *Cartographies*, p.183.

argument, I emphasise that the diasporic poet has a need to articulate, rework and respond creatively to the diasporic state—be it a first-hand experience or that of the family—as it is the only way to locate oneself in relation to histories, cultures and homelands. Moreover, taking into account David Damrosch’s definition of world literature,¹⁷ a writer’s recreation of their diasporic experience may influence that of another, within the same generation and across generations, on a local or transnational scale. This implies that writers of the same or similar ethnicity may be more readily influenced by works by other writers of that ethnicity, as they attempt to seek meaning in their diasporic experience from those with whom they identify a real or imagined sense of affinity.¹⁸

On a linguistic level, Agnes Heller’s powerful description of home as a place where ‘no footnotes are needed’ sheds light on the idea of home as a common language.¹⁹ ‘Going home’ should mean: returning to that firm position which we know, to which we are accustomed, ‘where we feel safe and where our emotional relationships are the most intense.’²⁰ In other words, home is experienced both inside and outside oneself, it is both spoken and unsaid, both possessed personally and shared. In the Chinese language, home also means family, and there is a common belief one’s family relationships reveal the individual’s integrity or ability to interact socially and politically.²¹ This correspondence between the meaning of home and family can be traced back to the sayings of Mencius (c.371-289BC) and Mozi c.470-391BC). Understanding this helps us appreciate the intricate, almost inseparable relationship between the concepts of home and the family in these writers’ works.

Instead of discussing authors in the same locale, I adopt Jahan Ramazani’s discourse of transnational poetics, which offers an ‘enmeshment’ paradigm where poetry is perceived as a place where the

¹⁷ According to David Damrosch, ‘world literature’ is defined by its access and circulation. Damrosch writes: ‘A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as a literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. A given world can enter into world literature and then fall out of it again if it shifts beyond a threshold point along either axis, the literary or the world.’ See David Damrosch, *What is world literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.6.

¹⁸ *Cartographies*, pp.208-210.

¹⁹ Agnes Heller, *Aesthetics and Modernity: Essays* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), p.208.

²⁰ Agnes Heller, *Everyday Life* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p.239.

²¹ *Xinhua Zidian* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017).

local and the global intersect, a space that transcends national and cultural barriers.²² Ramazani raises the possibility of appreciating poets based on the articulated cultural hybridity of their texts and the poetic ‘citizenship’ that results from such hybridity.²³ Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as an ambivalent, in-between space that harbours ‘productive capacity’ and rests on ‘the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity[.]’²⁴ However, I am also wary of this use of hybridity which is fundamentally anchored in racial differences and colonial discourses. To fully appreciate the pervasiveness of hybridity in an increasingly globalised, modern society, I follow Robert Young’s argument that hybridity can be organic or intentional, and is characterised by a disruption, a forcing together of the dissimilar, or a symbolic act of grafting even if it is derived from the racial categories in the past, and has an antithetic nature.²⁵ In other words, there is something curious and exotic about the unfamiliar or impure state or appearance that makes it unsettling.

In my project, I include and compare poets of Chinese ethnicity from different birthplaces, based on their ability to interpret the significant dimensions of home, cultural heritage and identity. These poets are chosen for analysis and creative dialogue because: (i) I lived in Hong Kong for over 25 years before relocating to England, and have experienced a sense of displacement and conflicting sense of home in perceiving myself and where I belong; (ii) my poetry is influenced by contemporary Chinese-American poetry because, compared to England, there is a more prominent history of Chinese diasporic writing in America; (iii) I observe an evolving engagement with the question of Chinese diasporic identities and cultural hybridity in contemporary English poetry, such as in the works of Sarah Howe and Hannah Lowe; (iv) Bei Dao is a relevant Chinese diasporic poet whose mother tongue is Chinese and has lived in exile for decades in the West. This method of comparative studies captures the Chinese diaspora from different cultural perspectives.

Derived from the Greek word *ethnikós* which means gentile, foreign

²²Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p.9.

²³ *Transnational Poetics*, p.48.

²⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.38.

²⁵ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (London: Routledge, 2005) p.4, p.24.

or heathen, ethnicity denotes nationality or place or origin, and usually refers to one's status or membership arising from 'common descent, or having a common national or cultural tradition.'²⁶ According to Werner Sollors, the significance of ethnicity lies in the construction of contrast, naming or name-calling.²⁷ The term therefore implies being seen as the other or the exotic outside one's shared group of solidarity. In understanding ethnicity, an individual also interprets his or her position with reference to generation(s). According to Sigrid Weigel, ethnicity is a term 'at the threshold between emergence and continuation [...] between origin and memory', where the representative of a generation is a 'witness of history.'²⁸ In doing so, I highlight the tension between home and identity as an inevitable condition of cultural hybridity and migration, whether experienced first-hand or as part of their family history.

A transnational spectrum of diaspora poetry

In my discussion, I examine a transnational spectrum of leading contemporary poets of the Chinese diaspora across communities, whose works articulate the unsettling experience of otherness. Ramazani's transnational framework guides these readings through 'circuits of poetic connection and dialogue across political and geographical borders and even hemispheres' and highlights the cross-cultural 'confluences in poetry.'²⁹ Specifically, I investigate the poetics of homeland among these poets by situating their poetic language within their socio-political and linguistic environments, and analyse their common grounds and stylistic differences, in order to define how my poetry emerges or departs from these grounds.

Based on Steven Vertovec's definition, diaspora emerges as a form of consciousness layered and malleable with its 'multiplicity of histories, communities and selves.' Diaspora is an 'adaptive strength' that arises from the 'fractured memories' of the diasporic people.³⁰ In my project, I

²⁶ See *Oxford English Dictionary*. <<http://www.oed.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/64786#eid5295519>>. [Accessed 1 June 2018].

²⁷ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1986) p.28.

²⁸ Sigrid Weigel's "Families, Phantoms and the Discourse of 'Generations' as a Politics of the Past: Problems of Provenance – Rejecting and Longing for Origins" in *Narrating the nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, edited by Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), p.142.

²⁹ *Transnational Poetics*, pp.x-xi.

³⁰ Stephen Vertovec, 'Three meanings of Diaspora, exemplified among South Asian religions', *Diaspora* 6.3 (1997), <<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/diaspora.pdf>>. [Accessed 7 May 2017].

include authors whose parents are both Chinese and those who have only one Chinese or a half-Chinese parent, precisely because the relevance or connectedness of their fractured memories and consciousness are not necessarily proportionate to their racial identity. I include Hannah Lowe—born in England to a Jamaican-Chinese father and a British mother—because her work *Chick* (and to some extent *Chan*) deals directly with the reimagining of home culture and the diasporic identity via the fractured memories and migration narrative of her family.

Diasporic poets: an overview

Born in Indonesia to Chinese political exiles, Li-Young Lee followed his family and emigrated to America, where his father worked as a Presbyterian minister. Lee's works, particularly *The City in Which I Love You*, centre on his family's migration and his own Diaspora identity through lyrical language and distilled imagery. His poetry captures his nostalgia for home and the tension between his American and Chinese cultural inheritances.³¹

Born in Hong Kong, Marilyn Chin moved to Portland, Oregon in the US with her parents when she was a young child. Her collections, especially *Rhapsody for Plain Yellow* and the latest *Hard Love Province*, offer a 'fusionist', feminist poetic language and imagery that amalgamate Chinese and Western poetics. Her poetry adopts the voice of the ethnic minority where humour is used as a way of disguise and self-defence, while her representation of the female body as a site for fulfilment and independence challenges racial and cultural stereotypes of Chinese female identity.

Both poets are well-known in the West—particularly in the US and the UK—for capturing their bi-culturality and the poetics of exile. Within contemporary literary criticism, the poets are interpreted within the context of contemporary Chinese-American literature vis-à-vis other Chinese- or Asian-American writers, and not read more widely in terms of their significance as diasporic literature.

³¹ These include mainstream American anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* edited by Jahan Ramazani et al, as well as Asian-American anthologies such as *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* edited by Garrett Hongo.

Having lived for over a decade in the UK, I have also been considerably influenced by contemporary British poetry, particularly by the works of Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe, as they explore the role of their (partial) Chinese ethnicity or ancestry, cultural hybridity and multicultural heritage. Drawing on memories of her Chinese-Jamaican father who emigrated to England in the 1940s and her own childhood growing up in a multicultural area in London, Hannah Lowe's collection, *Chick*, presents home as a poignant idea, as both the poet's route to her identity and roots of a faraway, reimagined home.

Born to a Chinese mother and an English father, Howe conjures an intimate and complex narrative of cultural crossings in her collection, *Loop of Jade*. Her search for personal identity is imbued with a sense of history and an adventure with poetic language.

In representing family history as constantly re-negotiated and re-imagined territory, these poets suggest new possibilities of narrating and translating home and the feeling of otherness. Lowe's poetry is more colloquial and emphasises accessible language and forms for the reader, while Howe's writing is steeped in tradition, experimental forms and self-mystification. Through close readings, I also examine the issue of class in deconstructing and complicating the relationship between racial discourse and poetic language.

In addition to the above authors, I broaden the question of cultural identity to include a comparative reading with the work of Bei Dao (Zhou Zhenkai), a Beijing-born diasporic poet who experienced the Cultural Revolution. I include Bei Dao to shed light on the significance and representation of exile in his poetry. Writing in Chinese, he is often perceived as a forerunner of Chinese 'misty poetry', a genre of literary and social significance in the post-Mao era. Bei Dao went into exile in 1989 because of his alleged involvement in the Tiananmen student protests in China. His unique background as a dissident poet in exile and the translations of his work into English have increased his influence in both China and the West. He has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Laureate in Literature. In Chapter 4, I will outline how my poetry is inspired by his exilic imagination in articulating destabilised identities and the

healing power of memory.

Contextualising Orientalism and double consciousness

I adopt an inter-disciplinary, transnational-focused approach that incorporates cultural, sociological theory on identity and the problem of representation; interrogate the narratives of diaspora and home as transnational spaces; and explore the issue of ethnicity and double consciousness within the context of postcolonial theories. Criticisms of place and ethnicity in contemporary African-American and Asian-American literature tend to focus on the socio-historical experience of the black community, and perceive race primarily as a struggle of the minority against colonial oppression. W. E. B. Du Bois, whom Marilyn Chin cites as an influence on her work, emphasises the conflicting ideals that exist within an ethnic minority's consciousness:³²

It is a peculiar sensation, a double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one body[.]³³

While Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness' has specific relevance to the history of African-American experience, it offers a way to understand the question of identity by engaging with the liminality of transnational space as opposed to locating identity within the fixed boundaries of nation-states. The concept also sheds light on the complexity of belonging and kinship, in which an individual experiences conflicts or doubt within himself as to where he belongs or with whom he identifies, in relation to as well as beyond his place of origin.

An important issue on the subject of diasporic poetry is the question

³² Appendix 1, 'Interview with Marilyn Chin', p.174.

³³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (London: Archibald & Constable Co., 1905), p3.

of exoticism, which affects the perspectives of both writers and readers.³⁴ In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said discussed the concept of the Other as the exoticised and culturally hybrid subject. Nevertheless, Said's theory about the Other is broadly based on the Middle East diaspora, and offers a rather polemical, fixed East-West power relation where the East is constantly being threatened by the West and vice versa, a perspective that needs to be updated to understand contemporary diasporic poetics. According to Homi Bhabha, the demography of the present 'internationalism' refers to 'the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasants and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees.'³⁵ While postcolonial perspectives are useful in understanding the relationship between diasporic space and the perception of otherness, I am wary of oversimplifying self-identity as a site of oppression against the colonial aggressor. In engaging with the meanings of authenticity and exoticism in the context of 'Orientalism'³⁶, I also bear in mind the danger of over-generalising or dichotomising East-West poetics.

Diaspora entails the possibility or necessity of constructing a home away from home, or to envisage different layers of home and senses of belonging. It is possible to feel at home in multiple places, or to feel belonging in a foreign place. For those who have experienced diaspora, their identities are best articulated through a creative, hybrid use of language. By mapping out how hybrid language and an exilic poetic imagination are related to socio-historical contexts, I highlight how a poet's identity is modified by interaction with their environments. According to Steven Yao, Marilyn Chin's poetics demonstrate how an ethnic minority poet can challenge the assumptions of linguistic transparency and the adequacy of English language as a medium for asserting one's ethnic subjectivity.³⁷ Yao's discussion offers a constructive and accessible

³⁴ In tracing the beginnings of Orientalism, Said points out 'Schwab's notion is that "Oriental" identifies an amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asiatic, which was wonderfully synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal [...].' In other words, 'Oriental' interests, prompted by curiosity, is built on demarcating difference. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2014), p.51.

³⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.7.

³⁶ I am interested in Said's definition of Orientalism in terms of 'the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation. These are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced.' (Said, *Orientalism*, p.58.)

³⁷ Steven Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.268-269.

paradigm for appreciating the different linguistic and formal experiments of Chinese-American poets, but his work has focused primarily on the formal techniques and the performance of identity, rather than the relationship between textual performance and the writer's sense of home.

Locating ethnicity and ethnic minority poetics

Instead of building on a postcolonial-only framework typically adopted for reading contemporary Asian or Chinese-American poetry, I employ Stuart Hall's cultural theory on representation, which offers a bridging framework 'between culture and politics, between the symbolic and the social', specifically the dialectic between culture and power.³⁸ According to Hall, we are all 'ethnically located', and that otherness is largely socially constructed:

We all speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*.³⁹

His discussion acknowledges individual difference among people of the same ethnicity, emphasising the many aspects of 'specificity' of the 'identity-stories', while interpreting identity as a dynamic product of cultural and historical contexts.⁴⁰ Building on his argument, my project examines how a poet of cultural hybridity cannot escape nor embrace his or her own culture and history entirely, as one cannot locate an utopian, 'pure' sense of belongingness within diasporic narratives.⁴¹

In situating ethnic minority poetics, Dorothy Wang's *Thinking its Presence: Form, Subjectivity, and Race in Asian American Poetry* provides a refreshing reading of Chinese-American poetry as minority literature.⁴² Wang argues that the act of reading and interpreting ethnic minority

³⁸ David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.396.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p.222.

⁴⁰ 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p.502.

⁴¹ See also Chapter 4.

⁴² In understanding the term 'minority', I refer to its numerical and political aspects, usually defined by disadvantage or under-privilege, and increasingly identified in terms of one's racial or ethnic group. In particular, it is important to note that immigrants or other diasporic individuals only become members of minority after they travel to or reside in another location away from home. Ellis Cashmore et al, *Dictionary of Race and ethnic relations*, 4th edition (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.242-244.

literature is complicated by the Western reader's inclination to appreciate or 'pigeon-hole' writers of a minority race as autobiographical and 'representative', instead of evaluating the poetry in terms of literary merit:

In the US academy and society at large, the words 'identity', 'identitarian', and 'identity politics' are often automatically conflated. Used synonymously, all three function as a reductive shorthand to refer to an essentializing and unthinking 'identity politics'—almost always regarded, explicitly or not, as the provenance of minorities with grievances.⁴³

This critique draws our attention to the relationship between the diasporic poet and the reader, and sheds light on the phenomenon that the narratives by ethnic minority writers are often read as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts of grievances or racial injustices, as some readers of these narratives are eager to locate the 'identity politics' and are only capable of appreciating such literature as 'an ethnographic window into another "subculture".'⁴⁴ The relationship between the diasporic poet and the reader can also be read in conjunction with Wenbo Sun's argument that Anglophone Chinese diasporic poets over-represent their 'Chinese-ness' vis-a-vis Chinese writers in China as a way to differentiate themselves and justify their existence to Western readers. According to Sun, diasporic poets feel the compulsion to exert their 'Chinese-ness', since the poets who have not left their motherland can experience the immediacy of Chinese history without relying on 'Chinese-ness' to explain their cultural identity.⁴⁵ In effect, the diasporic poets confront their 'marginality' as a new cultural experience and identity, while faced with certain expectations from the 'foreign' readership.

The arguments by Wang and Sun have pointed out the bi-directional relationship between the poet and the reader in terms of interpreting ethnicity and identity. For the diasporic or culturally-hybrid poet, how does he or she articulate or find the right vocabulary to express a diasporic imagination? How is it possible to amalgamate poetics from the East and

⁴³ Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp.12-13.

⁴⁴ *Thinking Its Presence*, p.20

⁴⁵ Wenbo Sun, *Writing in Relativity* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010), pp.4-6.

the West without losing the authenticity of the poetic voice? Shu-mei Shih, a scholar of comparative studies of Sinophone literature, has identified the danger of an ‘over-Westernised’ diasporic literature and the ‘culturalisation’ of ethnicity in an increasingly globalised landscape.⁴⁶ However, through my creative writing and my research on the Chinese diasporic poets, I argue that it is related to the inevitable reflection on authenticity in a culturally-hybrid person’s identity.

Ramazani’s advocacy for the ‘citizenship of a poem’ offers a relevant context for understanding the transnational imagination and the impact of literary influences on a poetic mind.⁴⁷ As Janet Neigh points out, Ramazani’s contribution of a global vocabulary is key for appreciating the cross-cultural production of poetics.⁴⁸

Translating and remapping my diasporic self in poetry

Inspired by the multiplicity of roots and routes, my creative portfolio maps the self within a diasporic imagination in relation to the dynamics between self-identity and the reimagined home, the influence of and resistance to family and home culture, the creative hybridity of a diasporic imagination and the necessity of self-reinvention. In doing so, I adopt David Damrosch’s argument that it is possible to read and appreciate world literature outside the immediate historical and cultural context where it originates.⁴⁹ For Damrosch, world literature can transcend cultural boundaries, and good literature can provide ‘a privileged mode of access to some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin.’⁵⁰ This interpretation suggests that literatures straddling different cultural worlds do not have to be fully translatable to be appreciated. Because of this liminal quality, it can open up new perspectives to understanding the culture of origin.

Author interviews: writing and reflecting on home and identity

⁴⁶ Shu-mei Shih, ‘Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition’, *PMLA*, 119.1 (2004), p.22.

⁴⁷ *Transnational Poetics*, p.25.

⁴⁸ Janet Neigh, ‘Ramazani’s Global Vocabulary for Poetry’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34.3 (2011), p.200.

⁴⁹ By world literature, Damrosch refers to ‘works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or the original language.’ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.4.

⁵⁰ David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (New Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.2.

In addition to textual analysis, I have conducted one-to-one interviews with several chosen poets of Chinese ethnicity, including Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe, to understand the gaps and implications between the representation and self-perception of place and identity. In these interviews, I ask the poets about their values of home and belongingness, their family history and life journeys, as well as their definitions of self-identity. Their responses help to address and locate the tensions between feelings of belongingness (as an insider) and estrangement (as an outsider), between the written self and the unspoken self. To understand the 'otherness' of the diasporic poet from the perspective of those who have not left China, I have interviewed two established poets deeply familiar with contemporary Chinese and Western poetry, Xi Chuan and Eleanor Goodman, and these interview responses are included in Appendix 1.

By grounding my creative portfolio in close readings of the selected contemporary Chinese diaspora poets who engage strongly with the subject matter, I aim to understand and revise current theories on the self-representation of these writers, and at the same time relate my close reading to my own creative practice. In particular, I aim to highlight the significance and necessity of exoticism inherent to the diasporic identity.

Chapter 1: Memory, exile and Oriental selfhood in the poetry of Li-Young Lee

Introduction

Lyrical and introspective, Li-Young Lee's poetry explores the impact of exile, memory and Oriental values on the diasporic individual's self-identity. Taking on a lyric, universal 'I', Lee's poetry articulates the irrevocable sadness and loss in exile, and his hope for a higher, invisible poetic order that transcends racial and cultural divides. While his poetry reflects on his experience of exile with his family from Indonesia to the US, it also emphasises the healing power of memory and a transcendental, utopian poetic order that evokes Oriental spiritual beliefs, particularly Taoist and Confucian beliefs of appreciating and assimilating the world through a receptive self.

As a young boy, Lee and his family moved from one country to another, before settling in America. Lee's particular family past and his father's political exile in Indonesia have contributed to the complexity of Lee's sense of self-belonging. In his work, the self is constantly questioning and returning to the family past. I will analyse the reworking of the family past in Lee's poetic language and imagery based on his major lyrical work, *The City In Which I Love You*, which captures a sense of what Czeslaw Milosz calls 'the literature of nostalgia'—the reaching out to the distant region of childhood as a way to cope with the estrangement from one's own native land.⁵¹ The collection also centres on the possibility of healing brought about by a higher poetic order, as the self undergoes a continued, transformative process of introspection and self-translation.

Spiritual lineage and Confucian beliefs

Born in Jakarta, Indonesia and raised in America, Li-Young Lee is one of the earliest and most prominent Asian-American writers whose works have been recognised within the mainstream American poetry

⁵¹ Czeslaw Milosz, 'Notes on Exile', *Books Abroad*, 50.2(1976), p.283.

canon.⁵² In Lee's poetry, selfhood originates from feelings of love and the longing for home, yet the home represented in his poetry is more abstract and spiritual than autobiographical. It is an open architecture of the mind, rooted in both the past and the present, and is consummately articulated in the title poem 'The City in Which I Love You' ('The City'). This is a lyrical narrative or lament that traces the close-knit relationship between father and the son, and their reconstructed dialogue throughout the years of exile from Indonesia to America. The poem traverses time in a subjective, non-linear manner, in which the rekindled family past gives rise to new meanings and questionings of the self.

In 'The City', Lee registers the impossibility of fleeing from a wounded past ('a bruise /blue in the muscle').⁵³ The poet walks past various places of community that have shut down, and finds himself strangely a guest in his own home (city):

Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches,
swastikaed
synagogues, defended houses of worship, past
Newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated,
The prosecuted citizenry, throughout this
storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
city I call home, in which I am a guest...

Zhou argues that Lee's diffuse lyric persona as a 'guest' allows him to relate to the others without losing the individuality of his self or reducing the alterity of the other.⁵⁴ In doing so, the poet complicates the location of home, because it is not a place where refuge is found. Instead, one is always an outsider. In my interview with him, Lee reveals his concern towards the scapegoating in the world that arises from his family's experience as refugees, but at the same time, he acknowledges that this

⁵² As a Chinese-American poet, Li's poems are (surprisingly) widely anthologised, and have featured in mainstream American literary anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, seventh edition; *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, fifth edition, as well as Asian-American anthologies such as *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* by Garrett Hongo. He is the only Chinese-American poet featured in *The Encyclopaedia of American Poetry*. He was one of the only ethnic minority poets selected in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* from the third edition onwards.

⁵³ *City*, p.51.

⁵⁴ Xiaojing Zhou, *Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2006), p.47.

is not just his own specific story: ‘And yet, when I look at the world we live in today, I see that my family and I aren’t a special case but standard and the majority. Globally speaking, all I see is the sign of the scapegoat.’ This echoes Dufoix’s idea that diaspora is experienced in a personal-specific as well as in a collective manner.⁵⁵

Considering the political incidents in his family past, it is a strikingly potent feature that Lee’s poetry is marked by an absence of direct references to political figures or events. Instead, his poems are lyrical, spiritual narratives of the family and the self, where self-identity is accessed via nostalgia and visions. In his 2000 interview with Tod Marshall, published in *Kenyon Review*, he talks about his role as a poet to ‘deal with the invisible, not the visible.’⁵⁶ He has little or no interest in offering ‘a dialogue with cultural existence’: ‘Culture made that up—Asian-American, African-American, whatever. I have no interest in that. I have an interest in spiritual lineage connected to poetry.’⁵⁷ Contrary to other Asian-American poets who write directly about their immigration experience, Lee’s poetic language is imbued with romanticism, impersonality and spirituality, exemplifying a mode of ‘lyric testimony’, that Steve Yao describes as characteristic of early Asian-American poetry.⁵⁸

What the diasporic mind maps and preserves is not only the memory of the distant homeland but one’s spiritual lineage or routes of the inner being, experiences assimilated into the inner self which—unlike one’s ethnicity—remains invisible: ‘America, where, in Chicago, Little Chinatown, /who should I see /on the corner of Argyle and Broadway /but Li Bai and Du Fu, those two /poets of the wanderer’s heart.’⁵⁹ In his interview with Tod Marshall, Lee explains his interest in quest poetry. What fascinates him is ‘a dialogue with his truest self’, and his ‘spiritual lineage

⁵⁵ Jennifer Wong, ‘Redeeming Desire: A Conversation with Li-Young Lee’, *World Literature Today* (2018) <<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2018/january/redeeming-desire-conversation-li-young-lee-jennifer-wong>> [Accessed 20 April 2018]. For Dufoix, see page 7 of my thesis.

⁵⁶ Tod Marshall and Li-Young Lee, ‘To Witness the Invisible: a Talk with Li-Young Lee’ in Earl Ingersoll and Li-Young Lee, *Breaking the Alabaster Jar: Conversations with Li-Young Lee* (Rochester, New York: BOA Editions, 2006), p.134.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Yao remarks: ‘lyric testimony’ since the 1970s refers to ‘a narrative of ‘personalised history that exemplify racial/ethnic identity as a traumatic condition of either problematic difference from mainstream society or debilitating cultural loss that necessitates an act of recuperation...’. Steven Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.14.

⁵⁹ *City*, p.23.

connected to poetry-through Eliot, Donne, Lorca, Tu Fu, Neruda, David the Psalmist.’⁶⁰ Looking inward at his spiritual lineage across time and across generations, Lee maps along the diasporic imaginary his relationship to the world.⁶¹ By inhabiting the space between the past and the present, the real and the imaginary, he elucidates a poet’s spiritual identity. For Lee, the poet can transcend his place of origin, to claim lineage and refuge in an unnamed elsewhere that he has created through his own writing.

A Confucian view of self

Often, Lee’s protagonists are faceless silhouettes or family members engaged in their rituals, against a dreamy, sweeping and timeless backdrop. His poetics seem to be unusual, considering that anthology editors, critics and poets alike focus predominantly on poetry that is ‘essentially Asian’, i.e those with explicit ethnic markers. Timothy Yu remarks that Lee’s refusal to thematise the categories of ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ is a deliberate act that makes his work more universal and effective.⁶² For example, throughout ‘In the City Where I Love You’, the protagonist—an immigrant who searches for a meaning for the self in a nameless city—comes across people who resemble him, yet none of them is himself. At the end, he finds his way to re-enter the city ‘without retreat or help from history’, a route to appropriate his self-identity by looking inward.⁶³ The poet is haunted by the painful memories of anti-Chinese persecution his family experienced in Indonesia, yet at the same time he denies these memories:

[T]hat man was not me;
his wound was his, his death not mine.
And the soldier
who fired the shot, then lit a cigarette:
he was not me.⁶⁴

The poetics of negation reflects the poet’s sense of alienation and

⁶⁰ *Breaking the Alabaster Jar*, p.127.

⁶¹ See also pages 9-10 of my thesis.

⁶² Timothy Yu, ‘Form and identity in language poetry and Asian American poetry.’ *Contemporary Literature*, 41(2000), p.144 and p.440.

⁶³ *City*, p.57.

⁶⁴ *City*, p.54.

indignation against the injustices of racial or any other man-made divide that segregates people, divides them into the insider and the outsider. In my interview with Lee, he said: ‘Globally speaking, all I see is the sign of the scapegoat. There are scapegoats everywhere on this planet. [...] What can ‘home’ mean to anyone these days except crisis?’⁶⁵ In essence, the search for the beloved in this poetic sequence reflects the poet’s quest for ‘a logic of peace and a science of life’ that transcends nation-state, class, racial, gender and other divides.⁶⁶

Lee’s use of a diffuse, universal self is influenced by the Confucian view of selfhood as the site of creative tension. According to Chen-yang Li, the Confucian notion of harmony is marked by the necessity of a ‘tension’ that ‘follows naturally when it leads to coordination and, further, to cooperation.’ From a macro perspective, Confucian harmony is understood as ‘a cosmic order and a moral value. [...]’ where the self is motivated to adjust his differences with the world and to reconcile conflicts, in order to achieve a moral and cosmic order of harmony.⁶⁷ In his interview with Matthew Fluharty, Lee mentions the multiple selves that contribute to the essence of poetic-ness: ‘There are many selves in me. As I am speaking to you now, I am speaking out of one self, the self that is in conversation. But there is a self that was dreaming last night. [...] Poetry accounts for the many-ness of who we are.’⁶⁸ In other words, poetry is a language that captures the tension arising from fragmentary, conflicting memories and the longing for a more cosmic order of harmony. Through the use of a poetic voice that is at once personal and impersonal, both innocent and knowledgeable, Lee articulates and reconciles the multiplicity of the self in a flux of creative tension.⁶⁹

A receptive, cosmic order where self resides

⁶⁵ Appendix 1, p.169.

⁶⁶ Appendix 1, p.173.

⁶⁷ Chen-yang Li, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (London and New York: Routledge 2014), p.9.

⁶⁸ Matthew Fluharty, ‘An Interview with Li-Young Lee.’ *Missouri Review* 23.1(2000), pp.81-100.

⁶⁹ To some extent, his writing voice sheds light on what T S Eliot calls the ‘surrender’ of the poet and his ‘continual extinction of personality.’ However, since Lee’s lyrical ‘I’ expresses his personal emotions, I find it more akin to the Chinese vision of the self than T S Eliot’s theory of an extinguished self. See T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), Poetry Foundation, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69400>>, [Accessed 10 May 2017].

Lee's poetry is characterised by an open-ended response towards names and meanings, corresponding to the open-handedness in Chinese philosophy and cultural values that is often expressed in delicate, lyrical or opaque language to communicate a transcendental view of the world. 'For a New Citizen of These United States' begins with a poignant image of a moth trapped in the damask, and yet the speaker reassures the reader, saying there is no need for alarm or sadness.⁷⁰ In Taoist philosophy, the soul of the deceased can metamorphose into a moth, and in this way the deceased revisits their loved ones in bodily form. In the poem, 'father-shadow' is described as part of the natural elements in his line of vision, side by side with 'cloud-shadow' and 'wing-shadow'.⁷¹ This image of the moth crystallises what can be seen and what remains unseen, capturing a reality where both the past and the present co-exist, and where the self dwells both *here* and *there*.

Despite his assertion that the rain brings nothing, claiming that he will not speak of the past because he assumes the reader ('you') has forgotten about it, images of his previous home, relatives and familiar home scenes, are scattered throughout the poem:

But you don't remember, I know,
So I won't mention that house where Chung hid,
Lin wizened, you languished, and Ming—
Ming hush-hushed us with small song.⁷²

The passage of time is observed and measured by family habits and memories, such as the way he can tell the arrival of each spring by the scent of his mother's favourite flower, lilac. Naming, or more often the refusal to name, becomes a powerful tool of self-expression and self-censorship. There is a deliberate blocking out of memory or fears by replacing the unnamed with the symbol of flowers, houses, touch and other sensations, as if the poet finds it unbearable to articulate political history outside the realm of personal history.

In addition, although the poem starts with a reminder of personal

⁷⁰ *City*, p.41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *City*, p.81.

history—the death of his father and hence the return of the moth and the ‘father-shadow’, it zooms out to situate this event within the broader context of his social reality, where his family history is merely ‘years in a book of years’.⁷³ In conveying the sensations and emotions associated with the family past, the poet identifies historical events and social history that lie outside his immediate experience but nonetheless belong to the same temporal space, articulating his affinity with families like theirs (‘other families on a crowded / railroad platform’) whose lives are changed forever as they move to a new country.⁷⁴

Opaque poetic language and Taoist outlook

In ‘Of Nonlimited Locality/Identity: Chinese Diaspora Poetry in America’, Benzi Zhang points out that central to the experience of diaspora is a ‘dramatic change in the politics of place, which starts to redefine place beyond the historical opposition of *here* versus *there*, since, to a certain extent, *there* has both emerged and been merged in the very characterisation of *here*.’⁷⁵ Diaspora, then, is a process of mutual translation and interaction.⁷⁶ Within the ‘City’ poem, Lee explores the self and unfulfilled desires in an urban but surreal landscape, where the city is at once the object of desire and yet perpetually out of reach. The feeling of emptiness is embodied in the elusive body of the city, or the lover ‘you’: ‘Morning comes to this city vacant of you. /Pages and windows flare, and you are not there.’⁷⁷ The tone of this poem corresponds with the Taoist pathos, which Wai-lim Yip described in *Diffusion of Distances* as a deverbilized world (‘*wu-yen*’).⁷⁸ In the Taoist world, ‘conscious efforts to generalise, formulate, classify, and order’ will result in ‘restriction, reduction, or even distortion.’⁷⁹ Lee’s opaque poetic language echoes the Taoist belief in open-mindedness where, quoting Zhuang Zhi, ‘the vital force is an emptiness ready to receive all things.’⁸⁰ Such spirituality is commonly adopted by classical Chinese poets such as Wang Wei, where one

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Benzi Zhang, *Asian Diaspora Poetry in North America*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p.5.

⁷⁶ *Asian Diaspora Poetry*, p.56.

⁷⁷ *City*, p.56.

⁷⁸ Yip Wai-lim, *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics* (Berkeley and California: University of California Press, 1993), p.66.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *Diffusion of Distances*, p.73.

does not make a judgment on things but simply receives the world and the relations of objects as they appear.⁸¹

The poetics of elsewhere

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie speaks of the past as ‘a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.’⁸² Assuming universality in the experience of loss, Rushdie argues that the writer who is ‘out-of-country’ or ‘out-of-language’ is inevitably preoccupied with such discontinuity and the sense of being ‘elsewhere’.⁸³ Homi Bhabha refers to such discomfort arising from the gap between the self and its place as an ‘unhomely moment’, a moment that occurs when the borders between home and the world become confused, and how moments like these relate the ‘ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.’⁸⁴ For Lee, the poetic self is restless and filled with unknowing because of this unhomely predicament. While it seeks to flee from the past, it also keeps returning to the past, especially family history, for affirmation.

In his latest collection, *The Undressing*, Lee’s poetic voice becomes even more elusive and introspective, creating a sense of cosmic, spiritual order beyond ethnic experiences and allegiances, and exploring the potency of the unspoken and the invisible.⁸⁵ In ‘Folding a Five-cornered Star so the Corners Meet’, Lee returns to his birthplace, and marks the locale with the imagery of a rice-cake vendor:

I was born in the City of Victory,
on a street called Jalan Industri, where
each morning the man selling rice cakes went by
pushing his cart⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Diffusion of Distances*, p.72.

⁸² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books 1991), p.12.

⁸³ *Imaginary Homelands*, p.12.

⁸⁴ *Location of Culture*, pp.13-15.

⁸⁵ Lee said: ‘I think, in order for us to be more fully human, and in order for us to answer to today’s challenges, the best of East and West are going to have to be fully synthesized. I don’t perceive any natural conflict between East and West.’ Appendix 1, p.172.

⁸⁶ Li-Young Lee, *The Undressing* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), p.48.

In this poem, the birthplace marks the beginning of human consciousness and at the same time it is a place of self-doubt and melancholy. Instead of showing us a glimpse of childhood, the poet conveys a deep sense of loneliness and sadness and suggests that 'maybe it's my father's.'⁸⁷ The couplet 'Five in a bed, and none of us can sleep./ Five in one body, begotten, not made' evokes the image of a family in exile, haunted by fear and insecurity.⁸⁸ Alluding to the stars on the Chinese and American flags, the vision of 'stars' reminds the poet of his dual identity as an ethnic Chinese person as well as an American citizen. Looking up at the 'insomniac' stars, he calls himself the earthbound descendant of stars. Lee's elusive poetic language suggests that his identity is, to a certain extent, inexplicable and forever out of reach.

Conclusion

Lee's articulation of an intimate yet universal selfhood reflects his ability to embed Chinese philosophical and spiritual beliefs in lyric poetry. Fusing philosophy, language play and the invention of new poetic forms, his poetry moves beyond confessional, lyrical poetry to articulate a self that belongs to both the present and the past, the home and out-of-home terrain. Approaching selfhood from a detached, philosophical and transcendental perspective that recalls Taoist and Confucian values, the subtlety of his language and deliberate silences represent a creative tension between suffering and healing, between belonging and alienation. Moving within a process of remembering, omissions and self-knowledge, the poet searches for a universal meaning of home and identity beyond racial and cultural divides.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Lee's use of the lyric and the relationship between the spiritual and the healing self, in *The Undressing*, please see my book review in *Poetry Review*, 108.2 (2018), pp.107-110.

Chapter 2: Marilyn Chin's poetics of protest and the feminist self

Introduction

Fuelled by the Civil Rights Movement and African-American activism in the US in the 1960s, the emergence of Asian-American literature in the 1970-80s was a collective response against ethnocentrism and racial stereotypes. This gives rise to a culturally hybrid voice within the larger American identity, which continues to influence contemporary literature. In the 1970s, Asian-American literary anthologies such as *Aiiieeeee!* edited by Frank Chin and *Roots: An Asian-American Reader* edited by Amy Tachiki, promoted interest in an inter-ethnic imagination, recognising new poetics on selfhood, cultural otherness and informed protest against homogenised culture, as Asian-American writers redefined their identity and allegiance to America via a literature of dissent. It is within this larger socio-historical context that the activist poetry of Marilyn Chin—protesting against power hierarchies—assumes its significance.

Breaking stereotypes, restructuring cultural inheritance

A key characteristic that distinguishes Chin's poetry is her irreverent, precise language that questions history and challenges family and gender hierarchies. Chin's work parodies the individual's desire for independence as well as the constructs of Chinese family life and Confucian values. Such values encompass the respect for or acceptance of traditions and social order and a deferential attitude towards the family and parental hierarchy. Closely related to the difficulty in accepting the family is the dissonant experience of being a double minority in a culture that favours boys and men. In Chin's poem 'The Colonial Language is English', the daughter is aware of the foreignness of English—her acquired language—and the remoteness of the Chinese language. More importantly, she articulates awareness of her difference from the parents who speak Toisan and Cantonese. Despite her allegiance to the mother, 'my mother loved me, I am certain /She molded my happiness in her womb', the poet subverts the mother figure by blaming the mother for favouring the son ('My mother loves my brother, certainly'), while expressing her secretly vengeful attitude towards her brother, willing him to disappear ('I had

willed it in my heart[.]’).⁸⁹ At the end of the poem, Chin portrays the burden of history on the diasporic mind, embodied in the overlapping imagery of the Gold Rush miners and the early immigrants who risked their lives travelling to America by ship, facing the threat of being drowned ‘in the seepage of Sutter Mill[.]’⁹⁰ In my interview with Chin, she admits her allegiance to the Californian social movement, which gave birth to Asian-American literature and writers such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, calling it a ‘sisterhood’.⁹¹ In this interview she connects her own family history with the image of an early Chinese-American immigrant during the California Gold Rush. Moreover, she highlights the influence of her working-class background on her writing, which connects her with the history of the early immigrants:

Unlike Li-Young Lee, I am from working class. My family came from Toisan, that whole generation that needed to get out of Guangdong to go to the US to work. They were the coolies, the working class, who sent money back to China. I am part of the Cantonese American experience. The Cantonese, the rebels! I feel connection with the early immigrants.⁹²

Negotiating the duality of individual and collective history—the symbiotic relationship between family history and the larger, inter-generational labour history, Chin subverts the many forms of racial stereotypes in her poetics of dissent, revealing the underlying ignorance or insecurity of people towards race. At the same time, she reflects on the proximity between her personal history and the history of the working class immigrants, highlighting the relationship between racial stereotypes and class struggles of early immigrants.

Feminist poetics of protest

In *Rhapsody for Plain Yellow*, Chin articulates selfhood through assimilating linguistic differences and reinventing her poetic voice. For example, in ‘The True Story of Mr. and Mrs. Wong’, the prose poem exposes the disgrace of a Chinese wife who cannot bear a son. Without a male heir

⁸⁹ Marilyn Chin, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), p.20.

⁹⁰ *Rhapsody*, p.21.

⁹¹ Appendix 1, p.175.

⁹² *Ibid.*

to inherit his restaurant business, the husband divorces her and marries a foreigner, who bears him three sons:

...He now loves his new wife, whose name is Mrs Fuller-Wong. At first she couldn't conceive. Then, the Good Lord performed a miracle and removed three large polyps from her womb. She bore Mr Wong three healthy sons and they all became corporate tax accountants.⁹³

Compared with the three daughters from his first wife, the three sons that the man has from his second marriage all turn out to be homogenous characters. The married name of the second wife, Fuller-Wong, reminds the reader that the second marriage is an unnatural, culturally hybrid product, as well as an un-idealistic relationship borne out of practical circumstances and needs rather than true longing. The poet compares childbirth to the 'removal of three large polyps', alluding to the abnormality and whimsicality of the second family: not only are the births of three boys unnatural, it is incredible that they all choose to be corporate tax accountants, a profession that brings more wealth than the Chinese father's restaurant business.⁹⁴

By exploring a wide range of personae such as Chinese female immigrants, city workers, mothers, daughters, wives, Chin reveals the dilemmas of Chinese women in diaspora. 'The True Story of Mr. and Mrs. Wong' exposes the inferiority complex of female Chinese immigrants, particularly their struggle to transcend the typical role of a potential wife or lover of men—American men or Chinese men—and their desire to be recognised as independent, self-sufficient individuals. While the daughters are a source of embarrassment for the father and are married off to men with steady jobs, one daughter runs away to Hollywood and becomes a successful sound specialist. Chin's hypothesis that there are avenues of fulfilment for Chinese immigrant women other than marriage emphasises self-reinvention and the courage to rebel against family influence as a way of survival. According to Chin, her 'strident' writing counters that filial obedience expected of Chinese daughters and is a way to talk back to the patriarchy and 'layers of oppression.' I see her rebellious voice as a way of

⁹³ *Rhapsody*, p.55.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

subverting the image of early Chinese immigrant women who were often interrogated severely at and beyond Angel Island, being seen as dependents of male immigrants and often suspected for immoral behaviour.⁹⁵

In 'Horse Horse Hyphen Hyphen', a similar tension exists within the poet's negotiation between her cultural inheritance and social acceptance, her allegiances to her nation(s) and to her family:

I hate, I love, I don't know how
I'm biracial, I'm torn in two
[...]
In a slow hovercraft of dreams
I saw Nanking from a bilge

Some ashes fell on his lap
I'm afraid it's my mother

The protocol is never to mention her
While we are fucking.⁹⁶

Captured through a transgressive, fragmentary form which she subtitles as 'Border Ghazals', the narrator suggests both a longing to be loved and her fear of sexual aggression, a love-hate relationship with the present, as she experiences certain hallucinations from the past in which she recalls the devastating chapter of Chinese history, the Rape of Nanking ('I saw Nanking from a bilge') and her fear against censorship as a writer ('the bad conceit police will arrest you'). The poet's rejection of the father ('Your father is not a car, not a compass and not God') exposes her challenge to authority as well as her rejection of the Confucian notion of the God-like authority of the father. The use of the ghazal form—with its self-contained couplets that do not have to be connected with each other—accentuates the homelessness of a split identity. It also echoes Shirley

⁹⁵ For political contexts and social stereotypes of early Chinese female immigrants, see Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.22, pp.79-80.

⁹⁶ *Rhapsody*, pp.69-71.

Lim's argument that the ethnic woman uses transgressive language to assert her identity away from the site of her own ethnicity, displacing and reinventing herself within the Western ideological context.⁹⁷

Exilic imagination and double consciousness

For Chin, home is not tied down to a single place, but rather can only be re-imagined, and has more to do with emotional anchors than geographical or nation-state boundaries. She said:

Home was where my mother and grandma were. But my mother and grandmother were gone now, and so I feel homeless in many ways, but yet I am constantly traveling.⁹⁸

Keenly aware of her 'homelessness' and her cultural hybridity or multi-cultural inheritance, Chin writes poignantly on the constant return yet rejection of the family. In 'That Half is Almost Gone', the poet speaks with nostalgia of the fading away of her Chinese self. In her thirties, penning her letter to her mother, she struggled with naming the mother, having forgotten the Chinese word for 'dear'. She hypothesises 'a slash' that 'dissects in midair' caused by 'the knife of time' but at that juncture the forgotten emotion returns, as she remembers the word for 'dear', which has the meaning of love in Chinese. Not only does it cement the mother-daughter relationship, it is also a part of her own name and marks her birth. She realises that rejecting her family past is foolish and impossible, something that will only amount to 'a blue void' of motherless-ness. At the same time, she experiences guilt mixed with self-doubt as she ponders on the disappointment of her mother with herself, that she has grown up to become 'Rose Wong's ageing daughter' who has a problem even with her salutation, denoting her complicated, failed relationships.⁹⁹

In 'Hospital Interlude', Chin articulates the irreconcilable loss of the mother, embodied in the metaphor of a road journey and the difficulty in locating an exit. The poem adopts a structure in which each line is repeated once so that it echoes the difficulty of articulation. In this poem,

⁹⁷ Shirley Lim, 'Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature', *Feminist Studies*, 19.3 (1993), pp. 590.

⁹⁸ Appendix 1, p.174.

⁹⁹ *Rhapsody*, p.17 and p.19.

the poet repeats that she cannot retrieve 'the last secret phrases' of her mother. In her nostalgia she wanders through the maze of language, and acknowledges the mother's role as her tutor, as indicated by the line: '*The song is not over /you forgot to tutor me.*'¹⁰⁰ This represents a nostalgic, compulsive return of the dissonant self to the family, filled with feelings of shame, ambivalence and suppressed longing. There is the repeated mention of driving a rented red Miata, and the motif of returning to the hospital, where 'her sickroom was empty'.¹⁰¹ The contradiction between the presence and absence of family, between moving forward and returning, between singing and weeping, signifies the poet's ambivalence towards the family. The 'rented' nature of her car also suggests a sense of unbelonging-ness in America.

The female body: from family reverence to protest

In Chin's work, the female body is visible and sensuous. It is a body of dissent and dissonance, a site where her family teachings and beliefs are put to the test; a place where she encounters the conflicted meanings of her ethnicity and gender. Well-versed in Classical Chinese texts, Chin contrasts the meanings of the body in Chinese and American contexts when using it as a metaphor. In *Xiao Jing*, the classic Confucian text on filial piety, the Confucian Master said: 'The crimes that are addressed by the Five Punishments number some three thousand, and none of them is graver than to be wanting in family reverence.' (五刑之屬三千，而罪莫大於不孝)¹⁰² It also teaches that 'your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins.' (身體髮膚 授諸父母)¹⁰³

Bearing in mind these teachings, her poem 'So, You Fucked John Donne' articulates Chin's conflicted identity as a poet, especially as a woman poet of colour. The metaphor of making love to John Donne and John Keats ('you fucked them all for a song') alludes to the poet's attempt to incorporate or appropriate white power in her language. On one level,

¹⁰⁰ *Rhapsody*, p.40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Henry Rosemont and Roger T Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of The Xiaojing* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), p.112.

¹⁰³ *Family Reverence*, p.105.

such uninhibited display of female desire contradicts the Confucian teaching of preserving and concealing the body. As Dorothy Wang points out, the poet's 'overt' amalgamation of one's mastering of English-language poetry with the sexual seduction of men portrays the process of 'becoming American' as a process of 'sexual, linguistic, and cultural coupling(s).'

¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, by comparing Western or Romantic poetry to a decadent, ill-disposed body, Chin asserts her role as a coloniser rather than the colonised. Moreover, she, a woman poet of colour, can also appropriate the Romantic or Western tradition just like any other white poet, and in the process reinvent a language of her own.

When negotiating the boundary between family relationships and the self, Chin's poetry is often charged with bodily, sexual aggression, thwarted desires and wry humour. For example, in 'Chinese Quatrains (The Woman in Tomb 44)', the grown-up daughter reveals the secret unhappiness of her Chinese mother who was unable to conceive a male child. The rhyming pattern of the quatrain, juxtaposed with an unusual choice of metaphors for a poem on childbirth (e.g. worm, fat corpses), conveys a sense of foreboding. The tragicomic poem dwells on the frustration under patriarchal rule, governed by the traditional Chinese family belief that favours boys over girls:

Baby, she's a girl
Pinkly propped as a doll
Baby, she's a pearl
An ulcer in the oyster of God.¹⁰⁵

The word 'Baby' is a double entendre, revealing the poet's ownership of two languages: while 'Baby' is a typical, everyday endearing term in American culture, here it only expresses the husband's shock and disappointment over the birth of the baby girl. The sub-title for the poem has complementary meanings derived from English and Chinese languages. In English, the word 'Tomb' alludes to the woman's 'womb', while the number 44 is the unluckiest number in Chinese, making it a circulatory pun on the unfortunate mother and daughter who feel unloved in a patriarchal community. Yet instead of simply seeing her own birth as a misfortune, she

¹⁰⁴ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, p.152.

¹⁰⁵ *Rhapsody*, p.24.

questions the benevolence of human nature. The poet offers unusual and grotesque imagery in describing her parents:

The worm has entered the ear
And out the nose of my father
Cleaned the pelvis of my mother
And ringed around her fingerbone¹⁰⁶

The poem draws on the philosophy of Hsün Tzu, who believes that human nature is evil, motivated by gain, and that strife and rapacity will follow if man follows his own tendency (*hsing*).¹⁰⁷ It is as if the daughter has lost faith in her parents as her protectors, and the poem concludes with an emotionally deprived, barter-like relationship between her parents:

She married him for a green card
He abandoned her for a blonde.¹⁰⁸

The barter is practical, necessary and at the same time disillusioning. At the end of the poem, the reader is presented with an abstract image of a female corpse in the tomb, adorned with jewels and gemstones on her face, robbed 'again and again.'¹⁰⁹ As such, her poems are rebellious and revolutionary in subverting the stereotypes of a traditional Chinese family and in speaking out against injustices. This is in stark contrast with Li-Young Lee's work which positions the family as an emotional anchor, and home as a transcendental state of mind where suffering and love meet.

In an interview with Ken Weisner, Chin concedes that the passionate, tragicomic poetic voice is a product of her unsettling family situation: 'we had to laugh deep from our guts to keep from crying. Our situation at home was unbearable. I had a gambler bigamist father, an overbearing grandmother, a grandfather who didn't recognize girls, and a deeply depressed and oppressed mother all under the same roof.'¹¹⁰ Chin's psychoanalysis and self-justification unearth an important area of self-

¹⁰⁶ *Rhapsody*, p.25.

¹⁰⁷ Antonio Cua, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p.376.

¹⁰⁸ *Rhapsody*, p.26.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Ken Weisner. 'Interview with Marilyn Chin'. *MELUS*, 37.3 (2012), p. 225.

identity of Chinese-American women writers: their close relationship with and ambivalence towards the Chinese family, and the effect the family has on their writing.

Redefining racial stereotypes through humour

Chin's poetry is also marked by a bold use of poetic language and symbolism. She is unafraid to expose the artificiality of stereotypes by creating new words and meanings based on those stereotypes. For example, in 'Blues on Yellow', a tale of an immigrant's past, she evokes two stereotypes of Chinese immigrants: the Chinese gold miner who dies en route to digging up a fortune, and the wife whose American dream is lost. There is the repetition of the word 'yellow' to highlight protest, a symbolic colour and a somewhat archaic, racist term to stand for Chinese ethnicity. The cooking in Chin's kitchen focuses on the cracking of an egg, where the yellow 'oozes into the white', a metaphor for the influx of the Chinese immigrants that disrupts the American society. The poem suggests the outbreak of a power conflict, though the cause is not identified. The focus is on the resistance and the unwillingness to surrender:

*If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write.
If you cut my yellow fists, I'll teach my yellow feet to fight.¹¹¹*

As Dorothy Wang remarks, Chin's uses irony to deconstruct 'cultural, linguistic, and racial purity or authenticity.'¹¹² She also highlights the ironic effects of the poet's shifting pronouns.¹¹³ By creating new names and meanings based on stereotypes, Chin offers a hyphenated, counter-language that captures a hybrid imagination. The poet first imagines violence and amputation, and then revenge. The colour becomes loaded with political meanings, and illustrates Steven Yao's argument on Chin's potent and semi-transparent language of dissent:

Chin's verse points consistently to the irreducible specificity of the ethnic (Chinese) cultural heritage that she seeks to represent. In

¹¹¹ *Rhapsody*, p.13.

¹¹² *Thinking Its Presence*, p.139.

¹¹³ *Thinking its Presence*, pp.158-160.

this way, she repeatedly challenges the assumptions about linguistic transparency and the adequacy of English as a medium for the representation of individual ethnic subjectivity in particular that underwrite the hegemonic mode of lyric testimony.¹¹⁴

The subversive part of the poem lies in the daughter's rebelliousness and her wilful desertion of the mother, while reassuring the mother not to be afraid 'to perish', because the Buddha will be compassionate to her. Instead of wishing her mother were safe, the daughter believes that '*your babies will reach the promised land.*'¹¹⁵ Although the situation that causes the separation is uncertain, the imagery of a departing boat may refer to the journey of the immigrant family. It is as if the only way to survive and retain an independent self-identity is to break free from the family.

A transnational, activist language for otherness

Jahan Ramazani has pointed out the importance of recognising the poet's right to claim a 'poetic transnationalism', which allows for poems formed by both 'unwilled imaginative inheritances and elective identifications across national borders.'¹¹⁶ This can be illustrated by Chin's frequently-cited poem, 'The Colonial Language is English', which articulates a Chinese-American daughter's attitude towards both her native Chinese language and her acquired English, the latter referred to as 'the colonial language'.¹¹⁷ Drawing on Taoist texts, she creates her own dialect to represent as well as deny her otherness. Juxtaposing her inherited culture with the disillusionment of the first Chinese-American immigrants who arrived at Sutter's Mill for the Gold Rush, she asserts the freedom she derives from her poetic citizenship:

The Tao of which we speak is not the eternal Tao
The name that we utter is not the eternal name
My mother is me, my father is thee
As we drown in the seepage of Sutter Mill¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ *Foreign Accents*, p.190.

¹¹⁵ *Rhapsody*, p.13.

¹¹⁶ *Transnational Poetics*, p.21.

¹¹⁷ *Rhapsody*, p.20.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In 'Asian American Historiography', Sucheng Chan quotes from Philip Gleeson's argument that the American sense of nationhood is derived not so much from ancestry, language or religion as from a common set of political values and practices, a 'peoplehood constructed primarily on an ideological foundation.'¹¹⁹ Chin sees herself as a participant in 'the whole Asian American movement that started in California in the 1960s and 1970s', inheriting the values and traditions from a 'sisterhood' of the early Asian-American writers from California such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan.¹²⁰ While assuming that immigrants can, in theory, transform and integrate themselves into this ideologically-bound sense of nationhood, Chin's writing reflects the economic and socio-cultural hurdles that immigrants often encounter in this assimilation process, evoking a sense of unreconciled contradictions or inner dissonance. The protest nature of her poetry recalls the Chinese poetry of dissent inscribed on the walls of the Angel Island detention centre against the racial hostility arising from Chinese Exclusion Acts in America.¹²¹

According to Slowik, Chin has a 'fractured sense of culture' and a self-identity that is 'slightly out of joint'.¹²² However, Chin's ability to interpret her immigrant experience by using neologism and subjective terms, serves to assert the poet's belief in the possibility to embrace and merge disparate worlds. More importantly, as David Mura suggests in 'The Margins at the Center', the creative work coming from a poet of ethnic minority descent attests to the 'new relationship between language and the reality it contains', a creative process reflected in Chin's storytelling narrative style and reinvention of subjective language.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Sucheng Chan, 'Asian American Historiography', *Pacific Historical Review*, 65.3 (1996), p.371.

¹²⁰ Chin said: 'I come from an Asian American identity, bearing in mind Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, the early Asian American poets, Frank Chin, who all come from California. [...] It's a whole sisterhood. The whole Asian American movement that started in California in the 1960s and 1970s, from the Gold Rush to the Angel Island immigration history. That's why I feel I have to be in California in many ways because I am attached to that social movement.' (Appendix 1, p.175)

¹²¹ These earliest poems by Chinese-American immigrants were written in Chinese regulatory verse, with four or eight lines per poem, and five or seven characters per line. These verses found on the walls of the centre were often full of sorrow, resentment and bitterness. (*Angel Island*, pp.102-103.)

¹²² Chin, Marilyn, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, David Mura, and Mary Slowik, 'Beyond Lot's Wife: The Immigration Poems of Marilyn Chin, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, and David Mura', *MELUS*, 25.3/4 (2000), p.228 and p.229.

¹²³ David Mura, 'The Margins at the Center, the Center at the Margins: Acknowledging the Diversity of Asian American Poetry', *Reviewing Asian America: Locating Diversity* ed. by Wendy Ng (Washington: Washington University Press, 1995), p.171.

Influenced by the radical feminism and politically engaged poetry of Adrienne Rich, Chin acknowledges the importance of her activist voice: 'I don't quite believe in art for art's sake. I believe there must be a higher order. What we write can change the world. That may sound a little idealistic but I feel it's very important that poetry make something happen.'¹²⁴ Chin's activist verse is empowered by the use of an expressive, humorous female self, fetishised, gazed upon, and yet also a curious onlooker who subverts Western society and culture. In her interview with Weisner, she remarks on her position as a poet:

I believe that as a minority writer in this country, I must be an oppositional force. This is expected of me, no? To shake things up? [...] So, while I have the page, I must rattle some cages.¹²⁵

In other words, Chin sees a necessary relationship between poetry and activism or politics for the minority writer. Chin's perspective on the identity of the poet differs from Li-Young Lee's emphasis on the inward-looking narrative and search for spiritual lineage.

In 'Summer Sonatina', Chin rejects her home teachings on female conduct: how the Chinese female protagonist has been taught by her family to censor her speech in front of foreigners and that she cannot develop any emotional attachments with boys before finishing her Bar Exam. The female protagonist dreams about falling in love with a foreigner, but it dawns on her that there will always be a rift between them. Disappointed by his pretentious knowledge about Taoism and that he has mistaken Haiku for a Chinese literary form, she no longer desires him, and de-romanticises his body in her own racist, idiosyncratic language:

He said, The Tao is untranslatable and the Haiku is dead.
I thought, *pink and swollen, something sad about his body.*¹²⁶

The poem ends with disillusionment, as the girl sees her adopted country at face value: 'fake paradise, imported palmettos.'¹²⁷ She is finally free from romantic notions and bondage, but she is also lonely and aloof.

¹²⁴ Jason Wagner, 'Marilyn Chin', *The Chronicle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p.1.

¹²⁵ Ken Weisner, 'Interview with Marilyn Chin', *MELUS*, 37.3 (2012), p.225.

¹²⁶ *Rhapsody*, p.90.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

The poem is characteristic of Chin's culturally hybrid poetics and double consciousness: on one hand there is her awareness of Taoist philosophy; on the other, she unsettles the reader with an overtly sexual metaphor of the body.

The question of Orientalism

Chin's skilful fusion of the Chinese and Western literary influences and traditions marks a unique poetic voice. However, she has been criticised by Sheng-mei Ma for adopting an over-Orientalist approach. In 'Orientalism in Chinese American Discourse', Ma argues that:

Being products of the West themselves and raised on American twentieth-century popular culture, Chinese Americans frequently conceive of China in the Orientalist way. The very terms they use in defining themselves descend partly from the colonial discourse.¹²⁸

Different from Ma's claim about the Orientalist writing style of Chinese-American writers, I argue that Chin's deliberate use of ethnic markers and caricatures serves to ridicule the diasporic experience. Confident in her shifts between Eastern and Western metaphors and tropes, she employs stereotypes as original devices to establish her spontaneous and expressive voice. Despite her strongly political and feminist voice, Chin's poetry embeds the linguistic and philosophical influences from Classical Chinese literature including poems by Tu Fu, Li Bai, as well as ancient texts by Zhuang Zhi and *The Book of Odes (Shi Jing)*. In my interview with her, Chin indicates her preference for the classical texts to contemporary Chinese poetry – contrary to contemporary Mainland poets such as Bei Dao who follows a more outward-looking poetics arising from the May Fourth movement. By declaring that her 'Chinese-ness' is in the DNA of her poetry, she admits she is 'more Chinese' than Bei Dao.¹²⁹

Despite repeated acts of resistance or denial, the family past one

¹²⁸ Sheng-mei Ma, 'Orientalism in Chinese American Discourse: Body and Pidgin', *Modern Language Studies*, 23.4 (1993), p.105.

¹²⁹ Chin said: 'I preserve some of the Chinese poetry in my works more so than the Chinese contemporary poets, the latter of whom resist the classical tradition and who want to write in their own colloquial language. But I wanted to rediscover the Classical Chinese poetry, the roots of Chinese poetry. The irony is I am more Chinese than Bei Dao.' (Appendix 1, p.175)

inherits is seen as a symbolic part of the writing self:

I was born to a working-class family in Hong Kong and have known hunger and dispossession in my formative years. I shall never forget those scars...I continued to write immigrant hymns long after I became an American citizen, because I and my muse can't seem to leave those people behind.¹³⁰

Compared with Lee's poetry, which upholds the universal humanist values arising from the immigrant narrative, Chin places a strong focus on the storytelling, transforming her deeply-felt border-crossing experiences into humorous, defiant poetics to reveal her double consciousness.

Politicising the diaspora

Following from *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, Chin's collection, *Hard Love Province*, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Prize for tackling racism and promoting diversity, demonstrates Chin's distinctly original and fusionist identity based on her experiments with Chinese and Western poetic forms.¹³¹ In this volume, her poetry moves from the personal and familial realms to bold, universal questions on self-identity and race. The title suggests the individual's return to his or her origin. The word 'province' has a political overtone in that the province belongs to a nation-state, while at the same time 'Hard Love' also indicates that it could be just an imaginary place. In the form of love poems and elegies, the book explores what it is like to come from a foreign country, a feeling of alienation common to migrants. This echoes Walter Lim's claim that contemporary Chinese American literature moves from 'familiar circumscriptions of historical events and political circumstance to the act of thematising China instead of America as the 'geopolitical entity.'¹³²

In 'From a Notebook of an Ex-Revolutionary', Chin contrasts

¹³⁰ Bryan Thao Worra, 'Interview with Marilyn Chin' (2008) <<http://thaoworra.blogspot.co.uk/2008/03/2003-interview-with-marilyn-chin.html>> [Accessed 4 May 2017].

¹³¹ Chin remarked: 'I am creating a fusionist identity in the work by fusing the traditions, which Ezra Pound first tried to claim in the modernist tradition.' (Appendix 1, p.175)

¹³² Walter Lim, *Narrative of Diaspora: Representations of Asia in Chinese American Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.161.

consumerism in America with the burden of history endured by immigrants who have left everything behind. The first few sections of the fragmentary narrative suggest the triviality of one's new social circle ('I dreamt that I was naked save a pair of designer stilettos and was ruthlessly networking at a benefit soiree').¹³³ In his California home, the Chinese immigrant (ex-revolutionary) confesses to his wife his haunting guilt at having sent his own mother to death, alluding to the hostile persecution en masse during the Cultural Revolution when children would accuse parents of 'political crimes' to the authorities ('*History made me do it! History made me do it!*')¹³⁴ Recalling Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Chin evokes the ex-revolutionary's ineradicable memories of a war driven by unjustified hatred and racism:

The ash fell all day today
Fell all day yesterday
Will fall all day tomorrow
From Dachau to Buchenwald¹³⁵

By evoking a bleak, surreal landscape tinged with traumatic memories of war and oppression, Chin depicts those in society who shift between place and displacement, personal and collective history.

In 'Kalifornia', Chin offers an ironic self-portrait of the privilege of experiencing diaspora. Addressing herself as 'you', she congratulates herself as a Goddess with sexual freedom ('You have your fresh lovers') and 'a castle /With a vestibule'), and that anything she pens will be understood as a moment of diaspora, an exotic dialect:

Your poems will write themselves on parchment
Your manuscripts will illuminate
Any moment now
The diasporas will form a new dialect¹³⁶

As Dorothy Wang remarks, Chin's uses irony to deconstruct 'cultural,

¹³³ Marilyn Chin, *Hard Love Province* (New York: W. W. Norton), p.44.

¹³⁴ *Province*, p.45.

¹³⁵ *Province*, p.46.

¹³⁶ *Province*, p.57.

linguistic, and racial purity or authenticity.’¹³⁷ She also highlights the ironic effects of the poet’s shifting pronouns.¹³⁸ Building on this concept, I argue that Chin plays with pronouns to complicate the act of ‘speaking’ and rally against racial prejudices in America. In ‘Kalifornia’, her address to ‘you’ in a half-congratulatory, half-mocking tone creates discomfort in the reader. The poet celebrates her achievement in being recognised by the others for her writing, even though she acknowledges the oppressor’s power over the diasporic poet. She also mocks how the poet’s popularity is achieved through accepting a compromised, subjugated position: ‘They will paint you black /They will paint you white.’¹³⁹ In doing so, she speaks against racial stereotypes by merging the personal with the political.

In ‘Black President’, her rhetorical questions on race and class divides attack the failed logic of racial discrimination:

If a black man could be president
Could a white man be his slave?
[...]
If the terminator is my governor
Could a cowboy be my king?¹⁴⁰

Essentially, she is questioning where she (a Chinese-American woman) stands within the racial discourse, vis-a-vis black lives and other minorities.

While the subject matter is essentially contemporary, Chin uses the Chinese poetic form *dui dui zi*, characterised by strict rhymes, syllabic symmetry and rhetorical questions. Wielding a poetic language that fuses American culture, a re-imagined Far East and the surreal, Chin’s confessional verse reveals the inner conflicts of a diasporic individual who is at once the insider and an outsider—informed by a double consciousness socially, linguistically and politically—and challenges the social inequalities that exist in modern day America.¹⁴¹ In this sense, her poetry represents a

¹³⁷ *Thinking Its Presence*, p.139.

¹³⁸ *Thinking its Presence*, p.158-160.

¹³⁹ *Province*, p.57.

¹⁴⁰ *Province*, p.48.

¹⁴¹ See my review, ‘Walking to Jupiter: the place of the personal for Chinese women’, *Poetry London*, 83 (2016), pp.53-55.

deliberate, politicised poetic language.¹⁴²

Conclusion

Chin's poetics of dissent reveal a subjective and unstable ground where the divided female immigrant self searches for a place to belong, shifting between her allegiance to the family and her desire for self-definition and independence. Reinventing Classical Chinese forms and borrowing from Chinese and Confucian values, while paying homage to her American modernist influences, Chin empowers her narrative with a culturally hyphenated language. Her identity is tinged with ambivalence towards the family and the self's resistance against kinship denominated in ancestry or filial piety, as well as one's need to return to one's origin. The poet reveals her allegiances to America, a place where she establishes selfhood, as well as to her motherland or Chinese culture, which connects her with her family. Her bold and unique assimilation of American literary influences as well as rebellion against ready-made poetics enable her to forge an original, feminist and tragicomic voice. By reworking and mocking racial and gender stereotypes, Chin asserts her poetic citizenship as a Chinese woman, writer and immigrant.

Wielding an activist language that fuses American culture, a re-imagined Far East and the surreal, Chin's confessional verse reveals the inner conflicts of a diasporic individual who is at once the insider and an outsider—informed by a double consciousness socially, linguistically and politically—and challenges the social inequalities that exist in modern day America.¹⁴³ Hybrid in form and voice, her poetry represents a deliberate, non-conformist and politicised poetic language.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Chin said: 'In graduate class in Iowa some of my classmates didn't believe poetry has to be political, but somehow I believe I have to expose these issues.' (Appendix 1, p.177.)

¹⁴³ See my review, 'Walking to Jupiter: the place of the personal for Chinese women', *Poetry London*, 83 (2016), pp.53-55.

¹⁴⁴ Chin said: 'In graduate class in Iowa some of my classmates didn't believe poetry has to be political, but somehow I believe I have to expose these issues.' (Appendix 1, p.177.)

Chapter 3

Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe: multicultural heritage and questions of identity

Introduction

According to Deirdre Osborne, the problem of synthesising Black and Asian into a single category when discussing the value of postwar British literature has blurred nuanced understanding of race, while only those who can be aligned to the ‘white-majority culture and its traditions’ stand a higher chance of being recognised.¹⁴⁵ Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe have achieved some degree of canonicity at a time when postwar British literature saw a rise in immigrant narratives and multicultural voices. Hannah Lowe has been named as one of the Next Generation Poets in 2014 by the Poetry Book Society, while Sarah Howe has won the T S Eliot Prize in 2015 for her debut collection, *Loop of Jade*. Their poetry has raised important questions of identity arising from their multicultural family backgrounds. Their writings have informed my writing, particularly their interpretation of family history and mixed race identity, and their creativity in negotiating between poetry and life writing. Despite their mixed heritage, the two writers are seldom included in Asian-themed poetry anthologies.¹⁴⁶ In the case of Sarah Howe, interviews on her Chinese (or half-Chinese) identity and cultural hybridity did not appear until after she won the T S Eliot Prize, an accolade that highlights her ‘Anglo-Chinese heritage’.¹⁴⁷

Conscious of their partial Chinese ancestry, these poets articulate their experience of cultural hybridity, and how that perception has affected their identities. Because of their multicultural heritage and upbringing, their poetry reflects what it means or feels to self-perceive or be taken as ‘the other’, even though Sarah Howe describes herself more

¹⁴⁵ Deirdre Osborne (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.14-15.

¹⁴⁶ One exception is that Sarah Howe’s poetry has featured in *Hong Kong Eight Poets* (Chameleon Press, 2015).

¹⁴⁷ Petit, Pascale, ‘Chair of Judges 2015 T S Eliot Prize-giving Speech’, Poetry Book Society. <<http://www.poetrybooks.co.uk/projects/47>> [accessed 6 August 2016]. Petit remarks on the ‘exciting and ambitious’ achievement of *Loop of Jade*, bringing ‘new possibilities to British poetry, with her scholarly but intimate explorations of her Anglo-Chinese heritage.’

often as a ‘half-Chinese’ poet compared to Hannah Lowe. Hannah Lowe’s collections, *Chick* and *Chan*, as well as Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade*, have inspired my interest in the approaches to narrating otherness and cultural inheritance. In their writing, family becomes the foreground for revisiting one’s cultural past. It is a place of constant departure, return and ambivalence, from which self-identity evolves.

Drawing on memories of her Chinese-Jamaican father who emigrated to England in the 1940s, and her own childhood growing up in a multicultural area of London, Hannah Lowe’s first collection, *Chick*, is a narrative of family love and regrets. The book focuses on a culturally hybrid protagonist’s unresolved feelings for her family, particularly her disavowal of her father on the grounds of his racial difference. In the narrative, Lowe explores the significance of family attachment and the need to exorcise the past to achieve self-autonomy.

Exploring her childhood years in Hong Kong and her fascination with her Chinese mother’s life before relocating to England, Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* is an elegant, thoughtfully crafted and experimental collection that articulates the poet’s mixed heritage. Born in Hong Kong to a Chinese mother and an English father, Howe spent her childhood years in Hong Kong before relocating to England at the age of seven. Fascinated with cultural hybridity and her Chinese heritage, Howe conjures an intimate and complex narrative of cultural crossings, where questions of personal identity, language and history are intertwined.

According to Stuart Hall, ethnicity is the pivotal point where an individual’s cultural identity and the specificity of his or her own history begins:

[W]e all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as ‘ethnic artists’ or film-makers. We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located.¹⁴⁸

Both Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe explore in their poetry the specificity of their positions within personal and social history, given the

¹⁴⁸ Stuart Hall: *Critical Dialogues*, p.447.

different ways with which they are connected to their birthplace and the homelands of their parents. At the same time, as Hall suggests, their identities are not bound by their particular ethnic locations. Their poetry enhances our understanding of the convergence of self-identification, political positioning and self-representation.

Hannah Lowe: confronting otherness in a multicultural self

Born in Essex to an English mother and a Chinese-Jamaican father, Hannah Lowe's poetry explores the inner conflicts of the multicultural or multi-ethnic self, blending fiction with family history and social reality. Experimental in her play of hybrid poetic forms, imagery and language, Lowe articulates the richness and complexity of multicultural heritage and identity.

The power of Lowe's poetry lies in her use of an accessible and lyrical voice to convey the complexity of identity politics. Katy Evans Bush observes Lowe's 'deliberately informal style' and the visual quality of her poetry.¹⁴⁹ In my interview with the author, Lowe points out her emphasis on an accessible poetic language, and that form has always served as a 'great scaffolding' for her work. 'Dance Class', for example, conveys the unresolved feelings of the protagonist as she confronts her own otherness. Dressed in her ballet costume, the daughter aspires to be part of the clique, 'the best girls', who are gracefully poised as 'poodles at a show'. She is uneasy about her own figure and identity, and calls herself 'a big-footed /giant in lycra'.¹⁵⁰ The dramatic self-portrait or self-parody echoes Judith Butler's argument on the political performativity of gender:

As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act", as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those other hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Katy Evans-Bush, 'Witnessing the Flow: on Hannah Lowe, Matreyabandu, Marianne Burton and Rebecca Goss, new poets immersed in the stuff of life', *Poetry Review*, 104.4 (2014), p.77.

¹⁵⁰ Hannah Lowe, 'Dance Class' in *Chick* (Tartet: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), p.20.

¹⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.200.

An unusual sonnet, the poem adopts a circular structure, connecting the past and the present, the daughter's hybrid self and the father's black identity. The daughter finds it unbearable to see her father—a black man—standing in the foyer, waiting for her to come out from the dance class. Here the class serves not only as a site to contest her identity, but triggers the knowledge of her otherness, as she perceives the difference between her and her peers, as well as between her and her own father. The last line, '*he's the cab my mother sends for me*', exposes her guilt and her wish to renounce her non-white father.¹⁵² According to Susan Stanford Friedman, women's writings from the 1990s onwards reflects a third-wave feminism which moves beyond gender to the 'geopolitics of identity', that accounts for multicultural configurations of race and gender.¹⁵³ Here the image of the female body also moves from a gender-only focus to the dialectics of race and gender.

Understanding the self through rituals

In *Chick*, Lowe uses the food motif to articulate the coherence of a shared culture. Lowe often creates tension through contrasting perspectives, settings and voices. In 'Sausages', the experience of otherness and emotional ambivalence is told through an aloof, detached voice.¹⁵⁴ The husband is not visible in the scene, but his presence is obvious from the concoction of exotic spices, as he cooks Chinese sausages at home. The poet observes the physical closeness of her parents, yet notices the difference between their cultural upbringings. Her father's Chinese cooking is a signifier of his different origin as well as *their* difference from other families in England. Despite the visible signifier, China or Jamaica remain distant places to her because she did not grow up in either of these countries. Understanding that difference, or otherness, of her father and themselves as a multicultural family, and its implication for her own identity, becomes a core narrative in the book.¹⁵⁵ In my interview with

¹⁵² *Chick*, p.20.

¹⁵³ Jane Dowson, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.2 and p.119; Friedman, Susan Stanford, *Mappings: Feminisms and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.3-4.

¹⁵⁴ *Chick*, p.16.

¹⁵⁵ Lowe's eating motif can be compared with that in Li-Young Lee's 'Eating Together'. In Lee's poem, eating with the family reinforces his self-identity as a Chinese person and his inherited culture. In Lowe's poems, the ritual makes her reflect on her identity as both an insider to that minority culture as well as an outsider to it (she perceives Chinese food as exotic). (*From Blossoms*, p.57)

Lowe, she explains her need to reconstruct her place of origin and family history in order to understand herself: 'even though I did not know where Jamaica or China were, or why my dad was from Jamaica or why his dad had come from China, they were always anchors in my understanding of myself.'¹⁵⁶

She exposes the vulnerability of the mother through reimagining her mother's past, 'Her mother told her /not to marry a foreigner. *You always wanted /to be different* she hissed. *Now this.*'¹⁵⁷ There is a curious ambivalence of feelings towards the mother, seeing her both in light of the grandmother's disapproval, and in light of the mother's self-contentment towards her own marriage: 'he is like good food to her.'¹⁵⁸ By comparing her father to food, the poet directs her gaze at the father as if he were an exotic, edible object. This act is symbolic of her subconscious attempt to fetishise the father or to assume her role as a coloniser. Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*:

The construction of colonial discourse is then a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism—metaphor and metonymy—and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary [...] The taking up of any one position, within a specific discursive form, in a particular historical juncture, is thus always problematic—the site of both fixity and fantasy.¹⁵⁹

In the conclusion, the poet imagines her father to take up the submissive position of the colonised, while her mother assumes the dominant position of power: 'Tonight they will eat sausages together /and she will lick the oil and spice /from his hands.'¹⁶⁰ The imagery suggests that narcissistic and aggressive drives are at play in a colonial discourse, enhanced by the processes of fantasy and stereotyping.

In 'A Man Can Cook', Lowe recalls her father's inherited food culture as a 'colonial mixture'.¹⁶¹ The protagonist is curious about his

¹⁵⁶ Appendix 1, p.189.

¹⁵⁷ *Chick*, p.16.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Location of Culture*, p.110.

¹⁶⁰ *Chick*, p.26.

¹⁶¹ *Chick*, p.68.

exotic cooking, yet keen to distance herself from her father and his world:

You at the stove, the air spiced up with ginger,
nutmeg, clove. I know you won't turn round
but I can stand here can't I, watch the fire
[...] You can't turn around,
too busy with your strange colonial mixtures.¹⁶²

The word 'strange colonial mixtures' refers to the father's way of cooking red snapper with Asian spices, which seems to suggest a mixture of Chinese and Jamaican food ingredients. The poet's decision to stand and gaze at her father from a distance, watching his work, suggests an act of 'surveillance'. The line 'I know you won't turn around /but I can stand here can't I, watch the fire' suggests that she sees herself as the agent of power and knowledge, while the father is rooted in his own world and culture, allowing himself to be watched and exoticised.¹⁶³ Therefore, she aligns herself with the white race that defines and gazes at her father. The poet alludes to the uncomfortable curiosity and exoticism associated with perceiving the foreign race, imposing a feeling of complicity onto the reader, who shares the poet's subjective gaze.

Lowe's use of places transforms physical locations into recreated spaces coloured with emotions and re-imagination. In 'Three Treasures', the poet suggests the amalgamation of cultures as if it were a Chinese dish or restaurant.¹⁶⁴ She shifts between different objects and experiences that relate to her Chinese, Jamaican and English heritage:

China in the won-ton skin,
gold songbird on the brittle porcelain,
pink pagoda silk settee
[...]
England for the English in graffiti
on the roundabouts and bus shelters,
Please Sir! on TV

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ *Chick*, p.46.

By naming and bringing together animals and objects from different origins and cultures, Lowe blurs the boundary between them, highlighting her connection with those objects and their exotic qualities. It also encapsulates the 'elsewheres' brought by London's immigrants from different places of origin, representing an 'intercultural space' that contains similarities and differences between cultures.¹⁶⁵ By evoking the foreign through recognisable objects, the poet adopts a tourist's perspective and mocks the attempt to over-simplify culture and race.

The poem ends with her father's refusal to speak his own dialect: 'China in the Cantonese he knew /but wouldn't speak[.]'¹⁶⁶ This suggests that the diasporic individual's alienation is suffered at multiple levels. On one hand, her father's native tongue is an important, defining part of himself and his identity; at the same time it suggests alienation and otherness. Despite his ability to understand the language, he deliberately refuses to speak it in England, resisting being defined and assimilated linguistically, in order to erase his difference from the others. Lowe elaborates on the context for this denial in her interview and the importance of Chinese food (rather than the language) as a cultural signifier:

The thing about my Chinese side in the family is my grandfather, who is a migrant in Jamaica. My dad [...] is not on good terms with his own father. There is a denial of that [Chinese] culture. [...] My dad has learned how to make Chinese food from him, particularly Hakka cuisine, a food I grew up eating. It was a big part of our family life.¹⁶⁷

In the final stanza of the poem, the imagery of a flying origami bird ('China in an origami butterfly, that flew') alludes to the diaspora: those originally from China have left China for 'greener pastures' on the other side of the world.¹⁶⁸ The word 'origami' indicates the contradictory

¹⁶⁵ Lee Jenkins, 'Interculturalism: Imtiaz Dharker, Patience Agbabi, Jackie Kay and other Irish poets' in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* ed. by Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.119. In Jenkins's article, interculturalism is defined as the 'reifying difference between cultures, while eliding difference within cultures.' It denotes 'a discursive space which accommodates differences and commonalities, allowing us to expand the paradigms through which we read women's poetry.'

¹⁶⁶ *Chick*, p.47.

¹⁶⁷ Appendix 1, p.192.

¹⁶⁸ *Chick*, p.47.

directions in diaspora. Just as an origami bird cannot fly, those who leave their own country can never leave their culture behind entirely.

Lowe presents the two cultural worlds she inherits in parallel and constantly draws the reader's attention to the similarity and difference between these two worlds. In 'Poem with a Plantain in it', the poet describes with humour the qualities of plantains—a popular Caribbean food—their resemblance to, as well as subtle differences, from bananas:

Unpeeled, those bright supermarket bananas
have pale and yielding throats,
so different from the plantains
I buy in Brixton market
with their mucky skins
that snag like stuck zips,
their tough and pungent flesh.¹⁶⁹

Lowe conveys the impossibility of finding authentic plantains in London. Their unattractive and sexualised features found in Brixton market ('mucky skins', 'tough and pungent flesh') seem to suggest a racial stereotype. Their resemblance to and differences from bananas reveal the poet's identity as a person of mixed heritage, who almost passes as a British woman but she is not. As Robert Young describes, hybridity is a site where the meanings of sameness and difference become disrupted or exaggerated:

Hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different. In that sense, it operates according to the form of logic that Derrida isolates the term 'brisure', a breaking and a joining at the same time, in the same place: difference and sameness in an apparently impossible simultaneity.¹⁷⁰

The poet contrasts plantains in London (her 'local place') with those in

¹⁶⁹ Chick, p.49.

¹⁷⁰ Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.25.

Jamaica (the ‘real’ home of plantains). Taking into account Young’s argument, the poem articulates the culturally hybrid person’s obsession with the meaning of adequacy and authenticity, despite the impossibility of experiencing absolute sameness or difference.

As Andrea Brady points out, the UK poetry publishing scene is fraught with the ‘problematic tension between writing “authentic” identity poems to buy white privilege’, while conversations about poetry and race in the UK ‘mostly happen by proxy’, leaving the question of segregation in terms of publication to be met by reluctance.¹⁷¹ To a certain extent, *Chick* is an intriguing case where ‘identity poems’ are accepted by a mainstream publisher and where the question of identity is explored powerfully through a lucid, culturally hybrid first-person voice. Compared with Marilyn Chin’s poetics of dissent, however, Lowe’s poems are more concerned with form and craft than the use of irony, much less preoccupied with linguistic play. This difference can be attributed to her ethnic positioning as a British or white writer who has not migrated from her native place, that she sees England as her home even if her self-perception straddles different cultures or places because of her multicultural heritage and upbringing.¹⁷²

In her second collection, *Chan*, Lowe retells the migration story of the early Jamaican immigrants, focusing on the feelings of hope, disillusionments and alienation experienced by those in diaspora through merging fiction with life history.¹⁷³ Using first-person narratives, these poems are re-imagined accounts of Jamaicans who boarded the transatlantic passenger ship, *Armando*, in 1947 to travel to England. Her use of multiple voices in *Chan* functions to ‘corroborate and collide with each other to avoid any one authorial “truth”’.¹⁷⁴ Despite the immigrants’ inferior status, limited means and opportunities, these Jamaican characters on board *Ormonde* speak in iambic verse. By adopting this stylistic measure, Lowe deliberately gentrifies them, silencing their authentic dialects. On one level, Lowe mocks the many unnatural changes

¹⁷¹ Andrea Brady, ‘The White Privilege in Poetry is Getting Worse’, 8 October 2015. <<https://theconversation.com/the-white-privilege-of-british-poetry-is-getting-worse-48516>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

¹⁷² See my article, ‘Interview with Hannah Lowe: On home, belongingness and the current state of Britain’, *World Literature Today*, 2.2 (2018), <<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2018/march/home-belongingness-and-multicultural-britain-conversation-hannah-lowe-jennifer-wong>> [accessed 20 April 2018].

¹⁷³ This sequence, entitled *Ormonde*, was published as a pamphlet by Hercules Editions.

¹⁷⁴ Hannah Lowe, ‘Writing the *Empire Windrush* and *Chan*’ (doctoral thesis, Newcastle University, 2016), p.67.

the immigrants are prepared to make in order to assimilate.

In 'Dressmaker', Lowe highlights the immigrant's dreams for a better home and hints at the unrealistic nature of this imagined future. The superficial change of dress code as the passenger travels from Jamaica to England highlights her ignorance of the destination country, a place where she does not belong and has never lived. She imagines that there she will live a life of affluence: '[n]o more /my threadbare skirt or patched-up pinafore.'¹⁷⁵ Instead, she will wear 'long sleeves, a gathered waist, /one tier of voile, one poplin, double-skinned /for England's winter-time, and the cold sea-wind.'¹⁷⁶ While this highlights an immigrant's eagerness to reinvent her identity and to become local in her new, acquired place, it also reveals the dressmaker's expertise in self-fashioning. The poet sympathises with the protagonist's unilateral hope or naive thought to adopt a new country or culture by dressing in a certain way:

I dreamt myself—on a red bus passing Whitehall,
or walking on the Strand. There was a tea-room
where I wiled away my idle afternoons
and in every scene I wore my dress, bright red
for pillar box and rose [...]'¹⁷⁷

The word 'dreamt' refers to both the immigrant's naive dreams and hopes, as well as the unrealistic nature of assimilation. It also articulates the immigrant's longing to identify herself with a new 'colour'. This echoes Deirdre Osborne's view on the 'harmful ethnic-cultural ghettoisation' and stereotypes-construing terms like 'Black' and 'Colour' in Britain that 'justify' the racial divide.¹⁷⁸

In Lowe's poetry, homecoming is an almost unattainable state, as the diasporic confront their losses and gains. Aptly titled to highlight the complexity of place and belongingness, the poem 'In' offers a powerful narrative on the disillusioned immigrants:

¹⁷⁵ Lowe, *Chan* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2016), p.36.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to British and Black Asian Literature*, p.14.

In *England*, you're in England

In the shop, a rock of last week's bread you carry home
in snow, your slipping soles and god knows how the world
went white like this¹⁷⁹

England is italicised to emphasise the location as a somewhat distant and unreal place for the immigrant, a country that promises a better future. In reality, what one experiences is the harshness of poverty and deprivation, indicated by the stale bread and the slippery shoes in the snow. By beginning each line with the word 'in', Lowe suggests that no matter how hard one tries, the immigrants will never feel truly belonged: 'In the labour queue, ten men ahead the same as you—you're /in, no no, some other fellow's in, new worry rising like the wind.'¹⁸⁰ The poem ends with humiliation, culminating in a scene where the protagonist is beaten up by a fellow immigrant in a pub, in the presence of spectators, signalling the unfair treatment in the immigrant's encounters in a new country: 'the arms you are sinking like a puppet /in.'¹⁸¹ The word 'puppet' suggests his helplessness.

Lowe said: 'When you are diasporic, you have an imagination of those places, which may not have been in any way rooted to reality.'¹⁸² By exploring the fluidity of distance and proximity within her own history, and re-inventing the narrative of Jamaican immigrants as they leave behind their native land for England, Lowe articulates the drifting nature of a diasporic imagination, as it travels from one place to another, and transforms elements of different cultures into a close-knit fabric. Moreover, by problematising memory, self-representation and immigrant narratives, Lowe demonstrates Chambers's theory of writing as 'a constant journeying across the threshold between event and narration.'¹⁸³

In the last section of *Chan*, Lowe's prose poems reveal the poet's reflection on her hyphenated multicultural identity. Written as a response to the birth of her own child, 'Yellow River, Milk River', the poet offers a

¹⁷⁹ *Chan*, p.42.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Appendix 1, p.193.

¹⁸³ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge 1994), p.11.

vivid, striking image of his ancestor, or his grandfather: ‘If you ask me about ancestors I’ll tell you He weighed codfish down with salt.’¹⁸⁴ The reader has the choice of reading the first half of each line in bold, for a narrative on their Chinese ancestors (the collective Hakka community), or the non-bold text on the right hand side of each line, the latter a migration story of the poet’s grandfather who runs a grocery store in Jamaica. Her choice to adopt bold text for the ‘seemingly objective and/or “historical”’ and non-bold text to represent the ‘subjective, personal, unknown, silenced or suppressed’ (non-bold) is a powerful irony to question the reliability of both collective and personal history, and suggests that both versions of history are necessary and supplementary.¹⁸⁵ Hence, the form captures the convergence of history, as memories, culture and meanings are passed from one generation to another.

Sarah Howe: fictionalising the family past and the use of *Chinoiserie*

While Hannah Lowe's poetry centres on the re-imagined life of her father as a professional gambler and a multi-ethnic immigrant, Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* narrates her mother's birthplace and reflects on her own cultural hybridity. It follows closely her first pamphlet, *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia*, published in 2009, featuring 10 poems taken from her pamphlet with minor changes.¹⁸⁶ *Loop of Jade* has the distinct focus of an intimate and imaginative journey as the daughter revisits China, her orphaned mother's native homeland, and reflects on her own identity as half-Chinese. Altogether, the book makes use of poetic narratives, fragments, prose poems and epiphanies to articulate the overlapping territory of personal and collective history, resembling a form of ‘border-crossing’. The narrative begins with ‘Mother’s Jewellery Box’, a poem about her mother’s story:

the twin lids
of the black lacquer box
open away¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Chan, p.62.

¹⁸⁵ ‘*Empire Windrush*’, pp.82-3.

¹⁸⁶ These include some of her well-known poems such as ‘Crossing from Guangdong’, ‘Mother’s Jewellery Box’, and ‘Earthward’ etc.. Some poems such as ‘Innumerable’ and ‘(c) Tame’ and ‘(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’ are new additions.

¹⁸⁷ Sarah Howe, ‘Mother’s Jewellery Box’, *Loop of Jade* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015), p.1.

By opening her mother's jewellery box, the protagonist reveals her curiosity about her mother's past. The poet does not continue to describe the items inside the jewellery box. Instead, she evokes 'a moonlit lake / ghostly lotus leaves / unfurled in tiers' to suggest an elusive, dream-like landscape of her mind, which serves as an overarching setting throughout the book.¹⁸⁸ This setting corresponds to Daljit Nagra's claim about Howe's writing that it has 'crossed the imaginary line between the personal and the political, between the Occident and the Orient [...] between the real state of arrival and the dream state of pursuit.'¹⁸⁹ While Nagra's comment refers to her pamphlet *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia*, her oscillation between these spheres is evident in *Loop of Jade*, as the poet tries to locate her mother's story in relation to the eclipsed family past and her identity.

'Crossing from Guangdong' is a cinematic long poem in which the poet describes her visit to Guangdong, where her mother was born. The refrain 'Something sets us looking for a place' conveys one's longing to search for or to rediscover the place.¹⁹⁰ The exact reason for her trip to China is never pinned down, and the 'place' is not clearly defined. Howe refers to the journey as a 'strange pilgrimage to home.'¹⁹¹ It suggests the function of the journey in addressing some spiritual or emotional need, and creates a paradox of distance between the poet and her home or homeland.¹⁹² The poet paints her destination, Hong Kong, as myth and mystery: '[t]he island rising / into mist, where silver towers forest / the invisible mountain, across that small / span of cerulean sea.'¹⁹³ She connects her mother's childhood ('a screaming / baby') with her own memories of growing up, as though their lives merge in time and space. With its long lines (packed with run-on lines), this heightened poetic form mirrors a person's intimate interior monologue.

Unlike Lowe, whose sense of place is anchored in the immediacy of

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Howe, *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia* (Luton: Tall-lighthouse, 2009), back-cover.

¹⁹⁰ *Loop of Jade*, p.2.

¹⁹¹ *Loop of Jade*, p.3.

¹⁹² Howe spoke of her feelings as an 'outsider' when living with her family in Hong Kong: 'I was always something of an outsider in Hong Kong for those first seven years of my life because of being half-English, half-white, and not speaking Cantonese.' (Appendix 1, p.197)

¹⁹³ *Loop of Jade*, p.5.

her family history and the social reality, Howe's representation of 'place' is ruptured by her etymological approach towards mapping her heritage. In *Loop of Jade*, the poet draws associations between her birthplace, her family, and the representation of Chinese culture and history from a white person's perspective. In the title poem, 'Loop of Jade', the poet portrays her mother's reminiscences about her life in Asia. Fascinated with her mother's stories, the poet becomes aware of the distance between herself and this place where her mother comes from. By labelling it as 'this place', she highlights its foreign nature and the impossibility to identify with it:

I can never know this place. Its scoop of rice in a chink-rimmed bowl, its daily thinning soup.¹⁹⁴

Despite confessing her difficulty to re-enter her mother's past, the daughter re-imagines what it must be like for her mother to escape China. In this prose poem, historical details are interwoven with the personal, and it is the unfamiliar music of Cantonese that brings her back to 'the place'. The mother's memoir is constantly intercepted by fragments of the famous Chinese legend of the butterfly lovers (denoted by italicized text), a style adopted to deliberately blur where history ends and storytelling begins. This literary style highlights the poet's performative self-representation.

Compared with Lowe's deliberate use of the colloquial, many of Howe's poems are allusive and intertextual, a collage of texts and dialects that destabilises meanings and definitions. William Wootten praises Howe's 'considerable stylistic range' and her 'rare ability to write poems that clearly relate to the academic study of literature yet which are not, in the bad sense, academic.'¹⁹⁵ Howe's fascination with destabilised meanings and definitions in her semi-autobiographical poems attain a certain degree of poetic complexity and linguistic difficulty which, according to Sandeep Parmar, 'dodges the uneasy limits of poetic subjectivity' through its skilful shifts between lyric and experimental modes.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ *Loop of Jade*, p.14.

¹⁹⁵ William Wootten, 'On Jack Underwood and Sarah Howe', *Poetry Review*, 105:3, p.89.

¹⁹⁶ Sandeep Parmar, 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK', *LA Review of Books*, (2015) <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/>>. [Accessed 2 April 2018]. Parmar highlights the dynamics between a minority poet's identity and form, and the evaluation of his/her work: 'Mechanisms in place systematically reward poets of color who conform to particular modes of self-foreignizing, leaving the white voice of mainstream and avant-garde poetries in the United Kingdom intact and untroubled by the difficult responsibilities attached to both racism and nationalism.'

In *Loop of Jade*, intimate storytelling is embedded in the complexity of form and stylistics. On one hand, the poet provides an intimate account of a mother-and-daughter relationship, not dissimilar to the popular themes in early Anglophone Chinese fiction such as *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. On the other, the poet experiments with poetic forms, breaking away from the traditional, chronological model of family reminiscences or narration. Martyn Crucefix emphasises the poet's 'readiness to experiment', highlighting the spiritual or philosophical inquiry contained in her poetry.¹⁹⁷ For Howe, the reason for adopting 'gaps and elliptical looping' in the book is to reflect her pondering about family origins in relation to actual places:

I have this uncanny sense whenever I go to Hong Kong or Guangdong that everyone I pass in the street could potentially be my family—long lost cousins, say. The fact that people from that part of the country do look so much like my mother [...] gives rise in me to this sense of generalized kinship with the place that can't quite be pinned down. [...] I probably do have a host of cousins, aunts, uncles, or other relations still living in that part of China, and yet I can never know who they are.¹⁹⁸

Howe's poetry conveys both fascination with as well as resistance to the historical white gaze that exoticises a person of colour. Here, I refer to Pramod Nayar's definition of exoticism, which concerns the portrayal of things or people as 'curios' or the act of collecting the exotic for the museums, where 'one could desire, acquire and display the exotic' but is also aware of or worried about the difference the exotic creates with one's own culture.¹⁹⁹ Several poems are titled as if they are the modern-day entries of Borges's *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a book that classifies animals into curious categories. Such an overarching framework for the collection suggests her curiosity and anxiety towards the idea of *Chinoiserie* and her difficulty in understanding her own biracial

¹⁹⁷ Martyn Crucefix, 'Forward First Collections Reviewed 5: Sarah Howe', 6 September 2015. <<https://martyncrucefix.com/2015/09/06/forward-first-collections-reviewed-5-sarah-howe/>>. [Accessed 6 June 2016].

¹⁹⁸ 'Sarah Howe: the T S Eliot Prize winning poet on the pursuit of identity', *NeueJournal*, (2016) <<http://neuejournal.com/sarah-howe>> [accessed 6 June 2016].

¹⁹⁹ Pramod Nayar, *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p.76.

identity in terms of ‘categories’ and ‘labels’.²⁰⁰ By *Chinoiserie*, I refer to David Porter’s useful definition: ‘Any object, whether of Chinese or European origin, that would have been recognised as being in a so-called Chinese style by an observer at the time.’²⁰¹ In Howe’s poetry, the sense of *Chinoiserie* being evoked has the attribute of being ‘at once alluring and repulsive, charming and grotesque, strange and strangely familiar.’²⁰²

Howe emphasises the significance of exoticism behind borrowing from Borges’s categories to classify her own observations of Chinese culture, saying: ‘Being half-Chinese half-English, I always felt Borges’s passage of wry *Chinoiserie* was somehow describing me.’²⁰³ In my interview with her, she remarks on the problematic notion of authenticity in capturing diasporic experiences: ‘It’s very clear to me that *Loop of Jade* isn’t some sort of dispatch from an “authentic” China, but the record of a writer trying to forge some sort of tentative relationship with a culture that is very much not a given.’²⁰⁴ By framing her questions on identity and her curiosity towards Oriental culture within Western philosophical and literary discourses, she is creating a new performative, ‘fantasy space’ of her own, a poetics of self-exoticism and linguistic hybridity.²⁰⁵

In the collection, personal history is intrinsically linked with the poet’s reflection on the relevance of Chinese history to her self-identity. The poem ‘(j) *Innumerable*’ portrays a young child’s recollection of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, when she witnessed in Hong Kong the people’s protests in support of the Tiananmen Incident (‘toy-box people chanting

²⁰⁰ Howe explained her own understanding of ethnicity, in particular, how she situates herself vis-a-vis a ‘Hong Kong identity’: ‘I don’t think I would call myself a ‘Chinese poet’, as that doesn’t feel like an identity I can lay claim to; ‘British-Chinese poet’ perhaps, but even that feels like an oversimplification. ‘Hong Kong poet’ is another lens through which I’ve begun to consider my work more recently. As a label it feels truer to some extent, if only because Hong Kong’s own identity is so cosmopolitan, so bound up with migration, departure and return. I think Western eyes sometimes don’t appreciate quite how various a category “Chineseness” is.’ (Appendix 1, p.199)

²⁰¹ David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.185.

²⁰² *The Chinese Taste*, p.10.

²⁰³ Sarah Howe, ‘Word Play in Borges and Roethke, fellow-feeling in Pound’, *Poetry Society* <<http://poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/behind-the-poem/sarah-howe-unlocks-word-play-and-punning-in-borges-and-roethke-and-finds-fellow-feeling-in-pound/>> [accessed 6 June 2016].

²⁰⁴ Appendix 1, p.202.

²⁰⁵ Howe’s discussion of the impact of Orientalism and *Chinoiserie* on her work: ‘The fraught fantasy space of *Chinoiserie* - the Orient as imagined by a European willow-pattern plate or a modernist poet ‘translating’ Li Po - became an important entry-point for exploring my sense of racial and cultural in-betweenness.’ (Appendix 1, p.203)

and abuzz'), which did not make sense to her at that point in time.²⁰⁶ The poet surveys her surroundings and realises her parents have brought her to this 'unusual outing' to support an important cause.²⁰⁷ Having set up the scene, the poet highlights a surreal image on the TV screen:

A few days later there were different pictures on the news. A man with two white shopping bags edging crabwise on a faceless boulevard in another city where twenty three years later I would struggle for over half an hour to hail a cab.²⁰⁸

It is worth pointing out that the poet evokes the scene where the student protestor in China challenges the regime by refusing to leave the demonstration site despite the threat of a military vehicle as a memory that returns to haunt her 'twenty three years later'. By placing herself in the scene of action (a demonstration in support of the Tiananmen Incident), this powerful line about the protestor's 'crab-wise movement' in front of the tank articulates Howe's dual consciousness. Having grown up in Hong Kong and England, she is an outsider to the student protests in China, yet her 'participation' via witnessing it on TV has become an ineradicable piece of childhood memory. Her deliberately long sentences coupled with temporal and geographical conjunctions such as 'in another city' (referring to China) and 'twenty three years later' alludes to the 'becoming' of her cultural hybridity: she feels part of the Chinese community that protests against the government, yet at the same time aware of being distant geographically, an outsider to China. The poem ends with a half-question, half-statement on the totalitarian crackdown on student protestors: 'Where they pressed the clumps down, you would never know.'²⁰⁹ While the word 'clumps' allude to the military vehicles used to suppress the student protestors at Tiananmen Square, the pronoun 'they' betrays the poet's sense of alienation from the totalitarian regime of her mother's native land, even if she feels a sense of closeness with her mother's Chinese roots.

In her blogpost for *Best American Poetry* on the use of metaphor, Howe reflects on her identity as a person of mixed heritage and the

²⁰⁶ *Loop of Jade*, p.34.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

impossibility to achieve authenticity with one's writing when the experience of the homeland is partly autobiographic and partly mythologised:

The literary critic part of me suspects this is a naive set of questions to be asking—except that the literary expectations revolving around autobiography and 'authenticity' (I'm thinking now via Graham Huggan's important book, *The Postcolonial Exotic*) seem particularly charged when (female) minority writers are concerned. What I had written in my latter years away from Hong Kong, was it—like the ancestral plains imagined by Denise Riley's homebound Savage—so many 'myths thought up / and dreamed'?²¹⁰

In the article, Howe emphasises her fact-checking research in order to achieve precision with her imagery and the impossibility to reimagine homeland without a degree of licence. She writes: 'My flurry of Hong Kong fact checking had, in fact, exposed the clash between a place in the imagination—the backdrop for one's self-mythologizing—and a place where you might sublet a studio flat for five weeks.'²¹¹ In other words, she is suggesting that it is possible to claim a place or culture as one's own even if one is a guest, a diasporic person, to the place.

On a personal level, I am drawn to her approach in situating the self within an exploratory, dream-like landscape, where reality and fiction overlap. Her work captures one's curiosity towards the family past and the impossibility to know it entirely. This, obviously, is amplified by the fact that her mother was orphaned at an early age and does not know her own parents' story. In 'Earthward', the poet is overwhelmed by the evocative power of the past. She recalls a familiar face that haunts her and reflects on the inner state of restlessness because of the question of authenticity:

more restless still
for being not

²¹⁰ Sarah Howe, 'To China: That Blue Flower on the Map', *The Best American Poetry Blog* (2016) <http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2016/02/i-to-china-that-blue-flower-on-the-map-by-sarah-howe.html>, [Accessed 6 June 2016].

²¹¹ Ibid.

the thing itself.²¹²

Pascale Petit, the chair of the T S Eliot Prize panel of that year, remarked on the imagistic²¹³ quality of Howe's poetry and her adeptness in the use of space in blank verse.²¹⁴ In 'Earthward', the adoption of very short, punchy lines, coupled with substantial space on the page, seems to mimic and recall Chinese poetry translations in Ezra Pound's era. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore what Kayo Chingonyi calls a 'worrying' literary culture:

Poets of colour face a double bind: either they imitate the—predominantly white—canonical writers of the literary establishment, doing a violence to a part of themselves, or they write into or through their heritage and encourage a critical reading that privileges their identity.²¹⁵

By appropriating or translating her Chinese-ness via Western canonical poets such as Ezra Pound, Howe encourages the reader to examine a meaningful tension between word and form, and taps into the question of authenticity or a lack of completeness within a culturally hybrid person.²¹⁶ At the same time, as Romana Huk discusses in 'Gender Crossings', poets of colour such as Patience Agbabi who are more canonical seem to be related to the 'a priori situation of form before content', in which the poet of colour attempts to relocate identity politics to a linguistic or formal expression that is more acceptable or more readily understood by the white readership.²¹⁷

One striking difference between the poetry of Howe and Lowe lies in the representation of class. Howe's use of intertextuality and the mixture of academic and intellectual register in her poetic language combine to

²¹² *Loop of Jade*, p.10.

²¹³ See the definition of 'imagism' in *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Stephen Cushman et al (eds.), *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth Edition (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012) p.674.

²¹⁴ Mark Brown, 'T S Eliot Prize: poet Sarah Howe wins with "amazing" debut', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/11/ts-eliot-prize-poet-sarah-howe-wins-with-amazing-debut>>, [Accessed 6 June 2016].

²¹⁵ Chingonyi, Kayo, 'Worrying the [blood]line of British Poetry: notes on inheritance and alterity', <http://swimmers.london/swim_kayochingonyi_worryingthebloodline.pdf>, [Accessed 2 April 2018].

²¹⁶ For notions of hybridity, see also p.56.

²¹⁷ Romana Huk, 'Gender Crossings' in *A Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature*, p.231.

render a more class-conscious voice. *Loop of Jade* opens with 'Mother's Jewellery Box', suggesting affluence and family heritage. In '(j) *Innumerable*', the poet alludes to her own privileged background in Hong Kong where her family are members of the Hong Kong Jockey Club, a social club for the elite. Other poems such as 'A Painting', '(e) *Sirens*', '(g) *Stray dogs*' and 'The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia', convey a fascination with Renaissance literature, classical myths and the ekphrastic. As for Lowe, many of her poems are set in Essex and culturally diverse districts in London, such as Brixton, Brick Lane, Hoxton and the Canal. The cultural signifiers used in Lowe's poems, such as pub food ('Now That You Live in Hoxton'), Chinese supermarket ('Early Morning Swim'), and Reggae music ('Reggae Story'), suggest a more working-class culture. This difference in depicting class sets up a distant relationship between the writer and the reader in Howe's poems, as opposed to the more immediate relationship between the writer and the reader in Lowe's work.

Conclusion

Despite their different styles of poetic language, Lowe and Howe capture the duality of consciousness in the identity of those with multicultural family backgrounds or mixed heritages. Their works revisit or reconstruct their family past and aspects of Chinese culture they have experienced, exploring what is passed on and what is lost from one generation to another. The use of voice, settings, and linguistic difficulty also highlight the question of privilege in the poet's positioning. Straddling life writing, research and fiction, their writing taps into the condition of culturally hybrid identity: a pressing need to understand or reconcile the family past in order to come to terms with the present, and a grasp of the destabilised nature of one's identity as it is constantly transformed or renewed by memory and imagination.

Chapter 4: Bei Dao: poetry of survival and resistance

Exiled from China since 1989 and writing in the Chinese language, Bei Dao's work examines the distance between self and society, and depicts the mind as a distant, utopian place of conscience and resistance. Combining an abstract, private poetic language with unfamiliar, obscure metaphors, his poetry is often perceived as a forerunner of Chinese misty poetry, a genre of literary and social significance in the post-Mao era of 1980s to 1990s.²¹⁸ By misty poetry, I refer to Li-hua Ying's definition, a genre representing a major literary breakthrough in the post-Mao era, characterised by 'oblique imagery and cryptic syntax'.²¹⁹ The enigmatic quality of the poems taps into the power of hidden meanings. Distinct from the use of the oblique in English poems, the imagistic, elliptical nature of 'misty poems' express 'aspirations for freedom and spirituality', and represents a distinct form of protest literature against 'totalitarianism and ideological tyranny'. Bei Dao's works reflect a new poetics, focusing on the poet's need for survival from feelings of alienation and homelessness in times of exile. His use of refreshing imageries and individualised language articulate his political resistance against manipulated poetic language and government propaganda.

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Bei Dao's metaphorical and surreal language captures the universal through the personal, a poetic language that has influenced my own writing. In his poetry, home is experienced as a matter of time, in which the present brims with memories, while the past holds the key to the future. I am interested in his identity as both an insider and outsider of his own country, which has led him to a self-portrait of double and often contradictory allegiances. Moreover, I am influenced by the subtlety with which he assimilates Chinese and European poetics in the use of symbolism.

Bei Dao has published numerous books of poetry, fiction and essays in Chinese, but to give a more distilled overview and analysis, here I base

²¹⁸ Zicheng Hong, 'The Early Poems of Bei Dao', *Journal of Hainan Normal University*, 1.1(2005), pp.4-10.

²¹⁹ Li-hua Ying. *Historical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p.10, p.140.

my discussion on *The Rose of Time*, the comprehensive bilingual edition of his collected poems edited by Eliot Weinberger.²²⁰ In addition, I supplement my reading with the original editions in Chinese and the first English editions of collections translated by Bonnie McDougall and David Hinton. In this way, I adopt David Damrosch's approach of 'detached engagement', emphasising the dialogue with the work from a distance.²²¹ This approach is based on the notion that we cannot read the work within its original cultural context, but to appreciate how the work 'reaches out and away from its point of origin'.²²² This perspective makes it possible to engage with translated world literature by regarding it as a literature of its own, while taking into account any cultural information that will be relevant.²²³ To do so, I read Bei Dao's work in the context of the Chinese literary scene that suffers from the fears of censorship, in which poetic language evolves constantly to escape from surveillance. Quoting Couppan, in accessing and appreciating world literature, we need to be 'locally inflected and translocally mobile.'²²⁴ I interpret this as the possibility to articulate the particularity of a locality with a poetic language that incorporates one's knowledge of the local and the foreign, such that the place is experienced in a way that transcends the fixity of the place.

Characterised by a timeless, dream-like landscape, Bei Dao's poetry invites the reader into an intimate, personal and morbid sphere of dreams, fears and imagination. In many of his poems, there is the unusual juxtaposition of natural symbols such as the wind, trees, flowers, stones, mountains, valleys, with man-made artifices such as memorials, flags, markets, highways and newspapers. Such juxtapositions of objects from the personal and public realms evoke a space that is surreal, offering a setting where the self can escape from the immediate reality, and to envisage the possibilities of a new and unfamiliar world. Instead of treating natural landscapes as settings, elements from nature in Bei Dao's poems are often imbued with emotions and a sense of agency. For example, in 'Harbor

²²⁰ Bei Dao, *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* edited by Eliot Weinberger. Translated by Yanbing Chen, David Hinton, Chen Maiping, Iona Man-cheong, Bonnie McDougall and Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2009).

²²¹ David Damrosch, 'World Literature, National Contexts', *Modern Philology*, 100.4 (2003), pp.527-528.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Damrosch, 'World Literature, National Contexts,' p.529.

²²⁴ Vilashini Cooppan, 'World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium,' *Symploke* 9(2001), p.33

Dreams’, we are presented with stars that continuously search for their daylight positions in the compass of the sky.²²⁵ In ‘At the Sky’s Edge’, there is ‘love among the mountains’ and ‘patience of the earth’.²²⁶ In ‘Untitled’, the rose is said to sip water or dawn-light via ‘stem-tubing’.²²⁷ In ‘The Next Tree’, the snowstorm is capable of stirring up a lie in the air, an imagery that I interpret as the invisible quality of censorship experienced by everyone in the society.²²⁸ Such animate landscapes set up a strong contrast with the melancholic overtone of his poems, so often filled with death, violence, ill omens and disasters. They also reveal Bei Dao’s poetics as a platform to show the stark contrast between vision and reality, and the mind’s experience of both hope and despair.

In ‘The Rose of Time’, the rose is a symbol of suffering, seen to constantly ‘emerge in disappearance’, and ‘cry in the conspiracy’. It is also a source of metaphysical power and ephemeral beauty, blooming despite the harsh sounding of gongs from the East. In the last stanza, Bei Dao suggests that the rose can inspire a process of awakening or ‘rebirth’, the way a poet can create something timeless by registering a moment of poetic beauty:

in the mirror there is always the moment
this moment leads to the door of rebirth
the door opens to the sea
the rose of time²²⁹

Jacob Edmond interprets Bei Dao’s elusive language as a strategy to expose the gap between text and reality, and to undermine the fixity of the world he seeks to describe:

As the contrasting readings of his work illustrate, allegory not only establishes a correspondence between text and world; it also reveals the gap between the world and our words for it. [...] Instead it produces forms of alienation that stress a continuous process of

²²⁵ *Rose*, p.29.

²²⁶ *Rose*, p.115.

²²⁷ *Rose*, p.125.

²²⁸ *Rose*, p.163.

²²⁹ *Rose*, p.281.

re-presentation and rereading. His work undoes the apparent fixity of its own allegorical relations between text and world.²³⁰

Building on this theory of allegory, it is of particular interest to note that, in Bei Dao's poems, the lyrical 'I' often has no fixity in his location, and implies his sense of alienation as an exile, being both an observer and implied participant in this surreal world. In 'Along the Way', the refrain of 'I adjust the time /so as to pass through my life' suggests an individual of volition.²³¹ However, this lyrical self is also portrayed as a passive, helpless observer of apocalyptic scenes surrounding him: the violent attacks against the tourists, the sudden swarm of bees that pursue the wanderers, the sick baby intoxicated by cigarettes in the mother's womb, and the mysterious appearance of blood on the map.²³² This highlights the poet's experimentation with a self that attempts to narrate history and meaning, and yet is unable to fully engage with nor change his world. This sense of alienation in his poetic language reflects his identity as an exile, burdened by his memory and nostalgia and feeling the distance between himself and his homeland.

Dian Li describes Bei Dao's poetry as 'an exercise in survival, a 'battle of voices, a performance in resistance.'²³³ Li's interpretation of Bei Dao's poetry as a poetics of resistance can be explained in terms of the poet's frequent use of declarative language and a heroic voice. An example is 'Background', one of Bei Dao's best-known poems on identity written in around 1940.²³⁴ The poem articulates the poet's moral dilemma in deliberating his return to his hometown: as he allegedly supported the pro-democracy movement in the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, a 'repentance' or 'confession' from his former political position is necessary for him to be allowed back into the country. In McDougall's translation, the poem begins with a powerful, declarative line:

the background needs revising

²³⁰ Jacob Edmond, *A Common Strangeness*, p.96.

²³¹ *Rose*, p.65.

²³² *Ibid*.

²³³ Dian Li, *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao 1978-2000* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p.2.

²³⁴ See the interview with Bei Dao, *Southern Metropolis Weekly* (2010), <<http://blog.renren.com/share/113186301/5240090640>> [accessed 20 April 2017].

you can return to your hometown²³⁵

Referencing the Chinese original, and taking into account Chinese grammar, the couplet should actually read or mean 'one [you] must revise the background /in order to return to the hometown'. Written in a deliberately impersonal tone that makes it unclear who is asking him to revise his background, the Chinese original conveys a sense of threat that preys on the protagonist's mind, while it also ridicules the impossibility of return, since one's background has already been written. In the first half of the poem, the poet alludes to the small triumphs gained with 'time-shaken words', followed by 'a string of failures' experienced in one's ideological struggle. The poet is also acutely aware of his sense of place being obliterated by 'heavy snow' and the scarcity of time ('pressing toward the clock of old age'). In the second part of the poem, he portrays the exile's partner, an anonymous female figure in a family gathering, a figure symbolic of personal, emotional attachments:

the woman closest to you
always wears the worried look of history
gazes into snowdrift, double space to

darkness in which voles believe absolutely²³⁶

Punctuated by a line of spacing, the anxiety of the passive woman who worries about her husband's exilic life is in sharp contrast with the movement of the hopeful voles. At the end of the poem, the darkness has ambiguous meanings. On one hand, it is a deprivation of light and hope, as people can hardly see through the thick snow, a metaphor for the context of a troubled historical past. At the same time, the voles are used to represent one's instinctive search for light and clarity in a dark place, and the striving against deprivation. This juxtaposition of the self in relation to society corresponds with Vincent Geoghegan's theory on the power of group and individual memories in constructing alternative realities:

These memories provide much of the raw material for the vital utopian dimension of their politics. [...] It thus opens the door for a

²³⁵ Rose, p.137.

²³⁶ Ibid.

utopianism, which is grounded in the historically evolving memories of groups of individuals. The future, in this conception, is not a return to the past but draws sustenance from this past. Memory is the means in the present to ground the future in the past.²³⁷

In analysing Bei Dao's work, one should not overlook the complexity of the self's responsibility and complicity. When asked about his views towards his controversial poem 'The Answer,' which was adopted by student protestors during the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, he remarked:

My feelings about it [Tiananmen Massacre] are complicated because I wasn't there. I wasn't at the Square and students were facing death with my poetry. I even feel guilt that my poems tried to encourage students to die. They sacrificed themselves with my poetry.²³⁸

For Bei Dao, the journey of the self is far more complex and difficult than a purposeful, linear movement. A poem written for his then five-year-old daughter, Tiantian, 'A Picture', captures the poet's love and hope for his daughter, whom he was unable to see for a long time during his exile.²³⁹ Moreover, it is a poem that parodies the distance between a poet and his words. In this poem, Bei Dao imagines his daughter drawing a picture on a warm, beautiful morning, while he is a 'hedgehog in exile / taking with him a few unintelligible characters' who 'has left your painting'.²⁴⁰ The refrain 'how vast is a five-year-old sky' expresses the poet's longing for the innocence of a child's mind and the reference to the pictorial image of his daughter's name 田田, a Chinese character consisting of the pictograms of two windows. He imagines that one opening of the window points towards 'a sun with no clockhands' and the other 'toward your father'.

²³⁷ Vincent Geoghegan, 'Remembering the Future', *Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies*, 1.2 (1990), p.67.

²³⁸ Dian Li, *Chinese Poetry*, p.5.

²³⁹ His wife and daughter were not allowed to visit him in the US while he was in exile, and their family reunion happened only after his marriage ended. [See Steven Ratiner (ed.), *Giving Their Word: Conversations with Contemporary Poets* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p.235]. In his essay 'Daughter', Bei Dao refers to his daughter as 'anchor'. My translation: 'I was separated from Tian-tian for six years, since she was four, and we remained apart until she was ten. When I was in exile, sharpening my skills and knowledge, it is only Tian-tian, my anchor, who could bring me to a halt.' (Bei Dao, *Selected Works of Bei Dao* (Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press, 2012), p.206.)

²⁴⁰ Rose, p.85.

This suggests an individual's sense of place or vision as being split between the past and the future, the family and the nation (with the sun being used as a metaphor for the mother country where she remains). Comparing himself to a hedgehog in exile, he associates his exilic journey with darkness, while the poet is seen as someone who leaves his native place for a noble cause, bringing with him 'a bright red apple' on his journey, a symbol of hope and goodness. In other words, the poem captures the poet's pride as an idealist and dreamer with his uncompromising beliefs, as well as his guilt as a father.²⁴¹

Beyond the camouflage of surreal landscapes and detachment, Bei Dao's poetry aims to expose hidden truths and the power imbalance between self and society. Dian Li refers to this as the poet's 'strategy of mapping out the vanishing self against all alienating forces in contemporary societies, real or imagined.'²⁴² In particular, Li remarks on the 'ideological ambiguity and contradiction' present in Bei Dao's work.²⁴³ In his later poem, 'Black Map', written around the time of his first return to China in 2001, the poet reveals an increasingly ambiguous attitude towards his position in society and questions the ideal or feasibility of a real homecoming. Bei Dao remarked in his interview with *Southern Metropolis Weekly* that the poem is self-contradictory, in the sense that while the titular 'map' is a tool to plot the location, 'black' suggests concealment:

in the end, cold crows piece together
the night: a black map
I've come home—the way back
longer than the wrong road
long as a life²⁴⁴

The poet reflects on his efforts to return 'home', be it a location or an untroubled past, a journey in darkness. In subsequent stanzas, the poet expresses his sadness to see his ailing father whose life is now 'small as a

²⁴¹ 'Though she doesn't show up in my writing often, my daughter Tiantian plays an important role. She is the anchor for my drifting boat and the latent reader that pushes me to write. [...] But I believe that someday she truly will understand. I want to tell her my life stories, including the tears on history's mask, the shattered myths and enemies; and we will travel beyond all this, reaching a way beyond countries; I am there, she is there, along with countless others.' (Bei Dao, 'Drifting' translated by Jody Beenk in Arthur Sze (ed.), *Chinese Writers on Writing* (Texas: Trinity University Press, 2010), pp.141-2.)

²⁴² Dian Li, *Chinese Poetry*, p.5.

²⁴³ Dian Li, 'Ideology and Conflicts in Bei Dao's Poetry', *Modern Chinese Literature* 9.2 (1996), p.372.

²⁴⁴ Rose, p.253.

pea', and is daunted by a realisation that the long years of absence from the family makes him no more than a distant 'echo'. He has also lost his lover, who now 'hides in a wind /swirling with letters', which refers to the fact that an exile can only experience love from the letters he receives from home. The irrevocable loss of his family ties and anchorage culminates in the sense of rejection expressed in the scene where the protagonist stands in a queue at the customs, where there is an unsympathetic small window:

I wait in line until the small window
shuts: O the bright moon
I go home—reunions
are one less
fewer than goodbyes²⁴⁵

In this condensed, unusual run-on sentence, the poet reflects on how rarely he has been allowed to go home and visit his family, and how he is dreading the prospect of death of his ailing father, a 'goodbye' that is final and filled with regret. Here, the poet seeks solace from the bright moon, evoking the Chinese poetic tradition where the moon is often regarded as a muse, and acknowledges that what remains in his mind is a different version of home now. In other words, the return to one's country can also be a journey of getting lost again, since what used to be there has all disappeared and cannot be re-constructed.²⁴⁶ In his essay, 'Under a Foreign Sky', Bei Dao talks about his views on the relationship between place and identity:

To an individual, a city is his centre, irrespective of its size nor its geographical importance. In the same way, the world map published in each country inevitably evolves around itself. [...] After all, having been away for so long, the concept of home has become blurred. Sometimes, when I was driving under a foreign sky, I would be overcome by a sense of uncertainty: where am I? Is this my home? [...] My home is in between different signposts.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Rose, p.137.

²⁴⁶ Bei Dao, *Southern Metropolis Weekly*, (2010), <<http://blog.renren.com/share/113186301/5240090640>>, [Accessed 20 April 2017].

²⁴⁷ Bei Dao, 'A Foreign Sky' (他区的天空), *The Selected Works of Bei Dao*, pp.278-9.

'Black Map' also reflects Maghiel van Crevel's claim that, other than physical exile, Bei Dao has, like his Chinese contemporaries, undergone a period of 'inner exile' or 'exilic retreat into the mind', and corresponds with Bei Dao's own claim that the poet is never at home anywhere.²⁴⁸

Geoghegan remarks that the future draws sustenance from the past.²⁴⁹ For Bei Dao, the utopian longing for a true home where the past and the future co-exist is also evident in his philosophy behind *Jintian*. In an interview with LaPiana, Bei Dao explains that *Jintian* reflects his belief in the writer's power to traverse or transcend places and cultures, and to create an imaginative place free of ideological bounds:

We [*Jintian* writers] are a kind of intermediate territory between China and the outside. There is a dialogue, an interaction with Western culture. Also, we are not Hong Kong, not Taiwan, not the mainland. We transcend all these boundaries. We are also trying to be free of the forces of ideology, which dominated China for so long, and of commercialism, which dominates it now. We have a special place. Also, our journal is cross-cultural. This is a change from Chinese literary journals in the past.²⁵⁰

Exposing the poet's distrust of language, many of Bei Dao's early poems have been termed as examples of 'misty poetry' and have been compared with works by other misty poets such as Gu Cheng and Shu Ting.²⁵¹ These poems are characterised by unusual syntax, run-on lines and inaccessible meanings. 'A Local Accent', for example, articulates one's paradoxical relationship with or distrust of language.²⁵² Written in around 1989 or 1990, at the beginning of the poet's exile, the first-person voice describes the process of practising his mother tongue, Chinese, in front of the mirror, amidst everyday, calming rituals such as making coffee and

²⁴⁸ Maghiel van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, pp. 177-178.

²⁴⁹ Geoghegan, p.67.

²⁵⁰ Bei Dao, 'Interview with visiting artist Bei Dao: poet in exile', *The Journal of the International Institute* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jii/4750978.0002.102?view=text;rgn=main>>, [Accessed 28 November 2016].

²⁵¹ Gu Cheng and Shu Ting are leading Chinese misty poets. For their works translated into English, see *New Selected Poems* translated by Joseph R Allen (NYC: New Directions 1993); and Eva Hung (ed.), *Shu Ting: Selected Poems* (Hong Kong: Renditions 1994).

²⁵² Rose, p.80.

putting on the music. He jolts and arouses the reader's attention by bringing flies into this scene:

I speak Chinese to the mirror
a park has its own winter
I put on music
winter is full of flies
I make coffee unhurriedly
flies don't understand what's meant by native land
I add a little sugar
a native land is a kind of local accent²⁵³

In understanding this poem, it is necessary to appreciate Bei Dao's comparison of his own poetics to film techniques: 'I try to introduce in my poetry the technique of film montage, and by creating juxtaposed images and changes in speed, I want to arouse people's imagination to fill in the substantial gaps between the words.'²⁵⁴ He relies on this poetic technique to stir the reader's imagination so that 'the gaps between the words can be filled'. Here, the strange syntax reminds one of the fixed verse form in a sestina, where the last words of certain lines (e.g. 'winter', 'flies', 'native land') are repeated at the beginning of other lines, a form of poetic echoing that prompts the reader to reflect on the meaning hidden in each word. The juxtaposition of images also suggests the presence of two places that the poet inhabits at once: the immediate land where he is, where he makes coffee and speaks to himself out of loneliness, a new place with 'its own winter' and is 'free of flies', as well as the place he has left behind or is absent from, a distant land with warmer climate.

In describing the imagined insects, Bei Dao offers the curious observation that 'flies don't understand what's meant by a native land'. The poet imagines that, having only lived in one habitat, it is natural that the flies would have no idea what a native land is, unlike the poet himself. On the other hand, the poem's ending moves from the poet's assertion that 'native land is a kind of local accent', and comes to the shocking conclusion

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Bei Dao, 'About Poetry', *Notes From the City of the Sun: Poems by Bei Dao* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Papers, 1984), p.79.

that 'I hear my fright /on the other end of the phone line.'²⁵⁵ The closing couplet appears completely out of context, detached from the sestina-structure, and upsets the reader's expectations, since the poem begins with the poet's self-speech in front of the mirror. However, it is also a powerful evocation of personal memories and hallucinatory fears of censorship associated with that distant, native land, triggered by a seemingly innocent phone call, which mirrors the poet's interior monologue at the start of the poem.

In Bei Dao's work, poetic language is used as an instrument of testimony as well as self-mockery or irony. It provides access to new vision and understanding, but at the same time it cannot be fully trusted. In his dialogue with Steven Ratiner, the poet admitted that 'the most important struggle in China has been who has control over the language.'²⁵⁶ As such, the difficult semantics and obscure meanings inherent in Bei Dao's poetry reflect his search 'for a new language of expression'.²⁵⁷ The poem also suggests a difference between Chinese and Western contemporary poetry in this period, where different cultural environments have led to different perspectives about the meaning of poetry. In 'The meaning of poetry and Chinese contemporary poetry', Wenbo Sun discusses how poets living under an absolutist regime are likely to focus on the logic of living, as opposed to poets living in a democratic society who are more engaged with the meaning of life itself.²⁵⁸ In this sense, the fact that Chinese contemporary poetry is often preoccupied with social reality demonstrates how the language of misty poetry is not so much a choice but an enactment of the social-historical condition of censorship in China, made necessary to evade government surveillance.

While Bei Dao has acknowledged his indebtedness to Chinese poetic

²⁵⁵ Bei Dao, *Rose*, p.80.

²⁵⁶ *Giving Their Word*, p.223.

²⁵⁷ *Giving Their Word*, p.229.

²⁵⁸ My translation is: 'What happens in a society prompts us into thinking. Therefore, it is safe to assume that contemporary Chinese poetry is a product stimulated by the society: without the social changes in 1980s, the outward-looking perspectives that arise from the unfettered thoughts of the collective liberation movement, and the accompanying comparisons with the outside world, forward-looking poetry will not be borne. The competition in the field of misty poetry, the conflict between formalism and colloquialism in poetry, seem to be a controversy regarding forms of language and aesthetics, but in fact they suggest the internal conflicts of cultural perspectives.' (Wenbo Sun, 'The meaning of poetry and Chinese contemporary poetry' in *Writing in Relativity* (Beijing: Peking University Press 2010), p.90.)

tradition and the possibility to respond to the past,²⁵⁹ his literary influences include a range of early-to-mid twentieth century poets in Europe, such as Paul Célan, Federico García Lorca, George Trakl, Tomas Tranströmer and Dylan Thomas. In particular, he feels a strong sense of affinity with Célan, in the way Célan ‘combines the sense of pain with language experiments.’²⁶⁰ Writing in Chinese, Bei Dao’s poetry fuses the use of Chinese misty poetry and declarative language with his appreciation for European poetry such as Celan’s and Tranströmer’s epiphanic, cryptic lyricism.

From natural landscapes to human isolation or misunderstanding, Tranströmer’s poetry engages in a distilled, imagist description of life’s paradoxes and mysteries and conveys a fervent sense of hope; a craft which Tom Sleight describes as the ability to ‘imagine the spaces that the deep then inhabits, like ground water gushing up into a newly dug well.’²⁶¹ Similarly, by juxtaposing images of natural and urban landscapes, Bei Dao’s imagist poetry questions the value of human existence by evoking hope and alienation.²⁶² Technically, Bei Dao characteristically attaches adjectival or adverbial modifiers to the images which effects a Misty character or ‘twist’, disqualifying them from full adherence to Chinese origins and questioning the reader’s first impressions. As Gustafsson pointed out, Tranströmer’s poetry expresses through metaphors a ‘utopia of the moment’, which rests on the premises of ‘a paradise lost’ and at the same time unwavering faith towards a reality beyond oppression.²⁶³ Captured in more violent and apocalyptic images suggestive of oppression, hunger and punishment when compared to Tranströmer’s language, Bei Dao’s poetry

²⁵⁹ Bei Dao remarked: ‘The emphasis traditional Chinese poetry lays on imagery and poetic space is in the end our own wealth...When I do readings abroad, I sometimes feel that Li Bai, Du Fu and Li Yu are standing right behind me...That’s what tradition means.’ (Bei Dao, ‘Interview with Xiaodu Tang’, *World Literature Today*, 82.6 (2008), pp.20-36.)

²⁶⁰ Gabi Gleichmann. ‘An interview with Bei Dao’, *Modern Chinese Literature*, 9(1996), p.390. ‘Of all the poets mentioned earlier, I like Célan best because I think there is a deep affinity between him and myself in the way he combines pain with language experiments. He transforms his experience in concentration camps into a language of pain.’

²⁶¹ Tom Sleight. *Interview with a Ghost: Essays* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2006), p.215.

²⁶² ‘Bei Dao’s imagism [...] has a new life of its own. Although it coincides with the imagist manifesto of absolute freedom in choice of subjects, expression in free verse, and the use of commonplace vocabulary and strong imagery, Bei Dao further challenges the clarity of the poetic pictograms by blurring the images and altering the conventional portrayal of hard and strong images advocated by imagists to form a ‘new image, which I term the “Image Phrase”[...]’ (Chee Lay Tan, *Constructing a System of Irregularities: The Poetry of Bei Dao, Yang Lian, and Duoduo* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), p.81.)

²⁶³ Lars Gustafsson. ‘“The Utopia of the Moment”: The Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer’, *World Literature Today*, 64.4, (1990), pp.596-597.

reveals a utopian ideal that is out of immediate reach but utterly plausible.

In his interview with Ratiner, it is also evident that time is a central theme that underlies his poetry and his world-view as a poet. He claims that democracy is not a sudden revolution. It is 'inevitable' and a slow process, or 'a question of time'. He felt that the people in the West have viewed China in 'oversimplified terms' and have ignored the fact that poetry is more like a 'silent revolution' that enters the consciousness of people.²⁶⁴ With this in mind, one can appreciate his later poem, 'The Rose of Time', as a form of fable and lyrical testimony, since poetry is 'a way of keeping secrets'.²⁶⁵ Set in a timeless landscape where 'bird roads define the sky', the poem is packed with metaphors such as 'a pen draws the horizon' and 'the door opens to the sea'.²⁶⁶ The recurring motif, 'the rose of time', refers to a priceless thing the poet embraces even as he grows old, an object of conviction and beauty that is constantly appearing and disappearing from his horizon. Considering that this poem was written in the 1990s, when the poet is living abroad, it is symbolic of the poet's experience of losing hold of his homeland but gaining new vision in a non-native land. Even without mentioning the poet or placing the poem in any specific political or social context, Bei Dao articulates the power of poetry to transcend time and physical barriers, unlocking the suffering individual from the captivity of exile and the ideology of time.

Conclusion

By employing a distilled, obscure and lyrical language that is deliberately hard to access, and crafting surreal, timeless and symbolic landscapes that are geographically unrecognisable, Bei Dao has created his own purposeful and experimental poetics by assimilating traditional Chinese poetics and Western literary influences. In his poems, he portrays an individual necessity to confront and resist an alienating environment dictated by social and political forces, and expresses the individual's distance from home and society in terms of temporal, ideological and physical boundaries. He also raises questions about the responsibility and idealism of personal choices and journeys. While the self is often positioned

²⁶⁴ Ratiner, *Giving Their Word*, p.231.

²⁶⁵ Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, p.180.

²⁶⁶ *Rose*, p.281.

as a witness to history and estrangement, it is also an active, humanist self in search of utopian truth and visions for the future. Such poetics capture the difficulty of elucidating meanings or sharing one's emotions under an oppressive regime, where words are opaque constructs and language is either distrusted or feared.²⁶⁷ What is gained in the process, on the other hand, is a way to keep and pass on secrets within an introspective, self-preserving language where paradoxical metaphors operate to reveal the complex, contradictory nature of life.

²⁶⁷ Goodman observed the distrust towards language among Chinese-language poets in China: 'Chinese poets today are acutely aware of their language as having been and still being used to political purpose, and that sense of language as being manipulated or 'unclean' (*bu gan jing*) produces a sense of self-awareness and an awareness of the implications of that language, which American poets may not have. [...]' (Appendix 1, p.213.)

Chapter 5: from the close readings to my own poetic practice

As Czeslaw Milosz observes in 'Notes on Exile', the dilemma of a diasporic writer lies in his unsettling identity. On the one hand, the writer faces the threat that his 'knowledge of everyday life in the country of his origin changes from tangible to theoretical'. On the other, there is something expected of such a writer, to derive meaning from and write about his diasporic existence in some way, 'for he must visualise the history and literature of his country as one organism developing in time and assign to his work a function in a movement which leads from the past to the future.'²⁶⁸ Building on these diasporic poets' depiction of or re-imagination of home, I explore one's sense of freedom and captivity experienced as a result of a diasporic condition. In particular, I highlight diaspora as a liberating state of the mind to inhabit two different worlds at once, and be free of both places or cultures knowing I do not and will not completely belong to either of those worlds.

At the 'Race and Reviewing: Panel Discussion and Poetry Reading' organised by Sandeep Parmar and Sarah Howe on 17 May 2018, Kishani Widyaratna, contributing editor of the *White Review*, said that terms like Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) make her uncomfortable because these are not words she grows up with or from her own culture. She also mentioned the importance to encourage and include writers of colour who do not necessarily politicise or exoticise their work.²⁶⁹ To a certain extent, the choice to situate my Diaspora experience outside avant-garde tradition is a form of resistance against exoticism and reflects my unease in being labelled as a BAME poet.

²⁶⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, 'Notes on Exile', *Books Abroad*, 50.2(1976), p.282.

²⁶⁹ Kishani Widyaratna, 'Race and Reviewing: Panel Discussion and Poetry Reading' convened by Sarah Howe and Sandeep Parmar, King's College London, 17 May 2018.

A 'conversation' with ethnic minority poets

Building on David Damrosch's idea that a work of literature has the reverberating power or meaning to influence other writers across time and space, I am interested in a dialogue between my poetry and the works of the poets being studied, demonstrating how diasporic writers often engage with each other's work across time periods or even across different generations, connected with each other via the shared affinity in displacement, racial questioning and cultural hybridity.²⁷⁰

Hannah Lowe's work has inspired me to consider the proximity between personal and collective history, as well as the interaction between the representation of a place in history and in imagination. I have written 'Chung Kiu Love Story' based on the lives of my parents' generation.²⁷¹ In a more personal poem 'Lotus', I recall my maternal grandmother's bound feet as a result of the traditional practice of foot-binding among middle- to upper-class Chinese women to express and preserve their privileged social status.²⁷² For me, my grandmother's bound feet are symbolic of the pain and humiliation also suffered by all the Chinese daughters in a patriarchal society. In 'Daughter', I compare my fate as an immigrant in England with what lies ahead for my daughter, for whom England is her native land, exploring how each family may harbour very different knowledge or feelings of belongingness to their homeland(s). 'Postpartum vinegar-making' celebrates the tradition of 'postpartum rest' for Chinese mothers while it questions how far we can recreate ethnic culture abroad.

Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* has demonstrated the significance of history and language as one grapples with or translates identity. As a response, I reflect on my 'dwelling' in two languages and the importance of my native language in identity formation and artistic creation. For example, 'Chinese Classifiers' highlights the strangeness of the Chinese language to a foreigner and interrogates my identity as an insider to Chinese lan-

²⁷⁰ See Footnote 28.

²⁷¹ Figure 1, p.163.

²⁷² Figure 2, p.163.

guage and culture and at the same time a perpetual foreigner in the English-speaking world. Similarly, 'A Chinese Teapot' conveys my search for the right words to access history, being aware of the difficulty of translating political events in my own native linguistic environment, where certain words or historical events are publicly censored but never erased from memory.

Moreover, in both my close readings of the poets as well as the secondary criticisms about identity, I am drawn to the fact that the political is embedded in the text, whether overtly or indirectly. Dorothy Wang remarks:

[T]o be a member of a racial minority in the United States means that, whether consciously politicized or not, one is always imbricated in a fabric of laws, stereotypes, historical accretion, and popular culture—represented before the fact, as it were. In this sense, no writer of color can remain unwritten by the political.

Reflecting on Wang's assertion that one is always implicated in the political, and Bei Dao's use of secretive, misty poetic language as a way to counter surveillance, I examine the extent with which one can evade or resist the political or resist to be interpreted. For example, 'The mystery of the bookseller' is a piece in which I articulate my conflicted allegiances with my homeland, a location where both my personal history begins and where erasure happens.

Inspired by both Li-Young Lee's use of lyric in 'In the City in Which I Love You' ('City') and Bei Dao's idea of the unspoken in 'A Local Accent', in 'Metamorphosis', I explore the mutation of Hong Kong—my home city—after the handover to China. Despite my nostalgia, there is no language to faithfully re-enter the homeland I have left, since the place has already become unrecognisable. There is no longer a route to return to the colony where I grew up. In 'The Language of Exile', I explore the pain of having to distance oneself from a country where the people are perpetually silenced by reworking Bei Dao's image of underground voles from his poem 'Background'. For Bei Dao, his pursuit of truth and the spirit of democracy comes at a great cost: the necessity of exile from his family and his native land, that predicament mentioned by Said as too 'terrible to experience' despite

its romantic glow.²⁷³ In response to Li-Young Lee's use of food motifs and family rituals, 'At the wet market' explores how homeland can remain close to one's heart despite the distance, where a local place can be transformed into a symbol of universal significance, and articulate a 'sameness' that 'erases all difference.'²⁷⁴

An immigrant as the permanent Other?

Through the reading of the works by Marilyn Chin and Hannah Lowe, I become aware of the identity of the immigrants and how they are perceived as the Other not just because of race differences but also social class. In my portfolio, I draw on my struggles as an immigrant in England as well as explore the feelings of estrangement experienced by immigrants from other cultural backgrounds. In 'Miu Miu Salesgirl', I take on the persona of a young Chinese immigrant who works as a shop assistant in a luxury fashion store in Mayfair where she interacts with an affluent Chinese wife or consumer. Despite sharing the same origin, the fates of these two women are vastly different, and their views of London are also different. The poem examines the hypocritical notion of a post-racial reality where various forms of racial difference and stereotypes are habitually denied. It also exposes the immigrants' struggle for a voice to convey their feeling of exclusion in their adopted homes. In 'Eunice', I suggest an immigrant's desire to reinvent herself to integrate, and her reluctance to speak about her homeland. In 'Edgware Road', I question what will make an immigrant feel at home, how long that might take, and reflect on the impact of social mobility on self-identity.

Locating the self in relation to history and migration

While the authors I study engage with the question of identity through immediate personal history, some of my poems explore the possibility of representing the migration of Chinese people in a broader context, to consider the forefathers of Chinese immigrants, and the relationship between the people and the state. 'Sending Chinese Students to America, 1872' revisits the hardships and feelings of exclusion

²⁷³ *Reflections on Exile*, p.173.

²⁷⁴ Appendix 1, p.170.

experienced by the earliest Chinese students in America, who were sponsored by the government to study overseas and reform the country when they returned. In 'Ba Jin (1904-2005)', I reflect on the life of Ba Jin, one of the most-respected Chinese literary figures whose book, *Home*, interrogates the Chinese intellectual's struggle to make his voice heard in a controlled and feudalistic society, and his insistence on introducing Western beliefs in science and democracy to his homeland. The work also responds to Rushdie's concept of self-translation, a process of change experienced by those who cross a language frontier.²⁷⁵ 'Comrade Xiaoping' is a portrait of Comrade Xiao-ping Deng, the late Premier in China, whose advocacy of open-door policy in China saved the country from famines and catalysed the interaction between the East and the West. Although Deng saved the country's economy, he was also seen as an oppressive figure for suppressing the student protests of 1989. The poem investigates the relationship between Deng's policies and my experience of homeland.

Channeling research into writing

In understanding the relationship between language and identity in these authors' works, I have become fascinated with the process of 'speaking', and the 'mind-scape' of a bilingual individual where two very different rivers of language run in parallel. Born and raised in a Chinese-speaking family, my imagination and knowledge is filtered largely through Chinese.²⁷⁶ I studied in a missionary school where classes were taught mainly in English and studied literature in English, while Chinese (Cantonese) remained the dialect spoken in everyday situations. Therefore, assimilating cultures in different tongues and the act of translation became a part of everyday life. In 'The unbearable lightness of words', I explore a Chinese girl's nostalgia for her lost love and memories of her changing hometown, Beijing, incorporating the visual form of Chinese characters. The female protagonist's urge to teach her foreigner boyfriend the Chinese language and to translate what she knows reveals how the knowledge of a local place, language or culture can be shared but never fully translated.

²⁷⁵ Rushdie said: 'Anyone who has crossed a language frontier will readily understand that such a journey involves a form of shape-shifting or self-translation. The change of language changes us.' Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Harvard University (2002), <http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/r/rushdie_2002.pdf>, p.98. [Accessed 1 May 2017]

²⁷⁶ While Cantonese is my native and predominantly used language, I also speak Mandarin, and particularly did so with my maternal grandmother who spoke only Mandarin. I also use Mandarin frequently when I worked in the government and in corporate communications.

To emphasise how this might happen, in ‘King of Kowloon’, I encode social and political messages in Chinese characters, making them invisible to the non-native speakers.²⁷⁷

In ‘Mountain City’, a sequence straddling Hong Kong and England, I play on the notion of double consciousness, where multiple histories and cultures collide.²⁷⁸ I chose ‘Mountain City’ as the title because Hong Kong people tend to associate Lion’s Rock—the most famous mountain in Hong Kong and the source of inspiration for Roman Tam’s classic song ‘Beneath the Lion’s Rock’—with their affiliation to their home city. I find sequence an ideal form for the stream-of-consciousness narrative of overlapping memories and dreams. The poem responds to Hannah Lowe’s work and explores the matrix of family relationships and kinships, revealing a site of tension where one is always leaving and returning to the family. For the diasporic person, home is a mythic space and home-coming an irreplaceable need.²⁷⁹ As time goes by, the act of leaving makes home a more endearing place than ever before, constantly renewed by imagination, while the rituals back home become increasingly foreign.

I also make use of the surreal in amalgamating history and silences. For example, ‘Bloodlines’ is an ekphrastic poem inspired by the famous artwork entitled ‘Bloodline’ by one of China’s most influential painters, Zhang Xiaogang, whose surreal family portrait features strangely silenced expressions and faces covered by blotches of colour.²⁸⁰ I imagine what it would be like to suffer from a censored memory where certain feelings or experiences can never be articulated. The experimentalism of poetic diction recalls the use of omissions and metaphors in ‘misty’ Chinese poetry.

Maps are an important metaphor for articulating the dynamics of diasporic experiences and arrival(s). In ‘The limitation of maps’, I contemplate the change of my identity as I move from place to place in terms of physical location, political context and cultural knowledge. While there is a way to map out one’s travels, the cartography for one’s

²⁷⁷ See Figure 4, p164.

²⁷⁸ Figure 5, p.165.

²⁷⁹ See Footnote 2.

²⁸⁰ Figure 3, p.166.

ideological values, feelings and beliefs are far more complex. In ‘From Beckenham to Tsim Sha Tsui’, I respond to Stuart Hall’s interview with Kuan-Hsing Chen, in which Hall emphasises that, by being or choosing to be elsewhere, the diasporic individual cannot ‘go home again’.²⁸¹ In other words, the train journey from Beckenham to Tsim Sha Tsui can never happen except in the imagination. Nevertheless, these local places experienced by the diasporic individual in the past and at present are all deeply rooted in the reality of their imagination.

Some poems map the formation of identity in terms of personal and collective history. In ‘Metamorphosis’, I explore my relationship with my hometown and my nation, and whether ‘going home’ is a possibility.²⁸² In ‘Diocesan Girls’ School, 1990-1997’, I respond to Hall’s argument that all of us are implicated in history and are positioned ethnically. Although I did not know it at the time, my education in a British missionary school—where the syllabus included both Chinese and Western history—reflected the colonial history and experience of Hong Kong. Looking back, the silenced subtext—the Cultural Revolution and the ‘recent history’ of the post-Mao regime—is history-in-the-making.

In my portfolio, the proximity and authenticity of the homeland is anchored in its history, myths and memories. In ‘School’, I represent the schoolchildren from under-privileged families in Guizhou, one of the most impoverished regions in China. For them, it is almost unthinkable that they might have an overseas education, but the poem captures the extensive, difficult journey they make in order to attend class in a village school. Despite the physical distance between me and this group of schoolchildren, there is a sense of affinity or comradeship between us because of our shared ethnicity. In this way, I play on the notion of changed perception of distance and proximity that occurs on many levels for diasporic communities, so that the poetry of belonging is no longer based merely on one’s immediate, personal history. In ‘sterna hirundo’ and ‘Anser Anser’, I use the imagery of migratory birds to question the possibility of identifying with two different places at the same time through the flight of imagination.

²⁸¹ Stuart Hall: *Critical Dialogues*, p.490.

²⁸² On one’s options to ‘go home again’, see Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Bodies on the move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora’. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 23.2 (2004), p.193.

Concluding remarks

A spectrum of diasporic subjectivity and authenticity

While postcolonial theories are helpful in locating the representation of poetic selfhood within the binary power relationship between the centre and the margin, such theories downplay the confluences and interplay between history and imagination as an individual participates in the diasporic world.²⁸³ According to David Damrosch, world literature is defined by its mode of circulation and access rather than by geographical location or canon. It has the capacity to transcend cultural boundaries, to move and influence beyond its place or culture of origin.²⁸⁴ I argue that the diasporic poet has an urge to 'translate' to the reader, as he is never quite certain of whether the reader is 'here' or 'there', or in fact both. This mode of self-translation and articulation leads to a heightened sensibility about the gaps and bridges between these worlds. A diasporic writer's identity is marked by his awareness of different places and cultures as well as real or imagined, sustained connections with transnational communities. For a diasporic poet, the text resembles a correspondence with the inner self and with the outside world. Writing is an act of mapping, remembering, re-imagining, and reflects a continual search for a language that can assimilate conflicts and ambivalence.

By setting up a dialogue between the work of the chosen poets of Chinese (or half-Chinese) heritage and my own writing in response to the themes of identity, I establish ways to narrate home as an authentic or imagined space within which one creates or reinvents identity. By comparing the different poetics these chosen poets employ to delineate the boundaries between self, language and one's place of origin, I argue that, instead of a fixed sense of Chinese-ness or Chinese identity, there is a spectrum of shifting identities or diasporic experiences being represented and imagined. Among these writers, identity is shaped by one's nostalgia for and allegiance to the family, as well as one's awareness of otherness.

In Li-Young Lee's poems, home is anchored in family history, rituals

²⁸³ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (eds.), *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p.1

²⁸⁴ Please also see p.9 and p.18 of my thesis.

and one's spiritual lineage. His poetry bridges the past and the present through a circular process of amnesia and nostalgia, where one is forever longing to erase painful memories from one's family past and collective history. Shifting between acts of remembering and forgetting, his narrative of home takes the form of lyric testimony that is at once personal and impersonal, familiar and strange. It demonstrates the possibility of seeing identity in terms of one's spiritual affinity and lineage rather than race, as a journey in search of truth, one that transcends geographical, political and social divides.

In Marilyn Chin's work, the body represents all that an individual inherits from his or her parents, while at the same time it is a territory of independence from the family, or a location where freedom or rebellion begins. It is a site where conflicting beliefs and teachings from the East and the West emerge and interact. Emphasising the continuity between identity, voice and form, Chin succeeds in reinventing a hybrid, feminist and fusionist language of one's own, one that embraces both Oriental and Western poetic traditions, destabilising the border between self and the Other, the coloniser and the colonised.

For poets who write from the Chinese diaspora, their ambivalent or conflicting views about home or homeland arises from the collective memory of suppressed voices and identities. For Lee, Chin and Bei Dao whose world-views are much influenced by Chinese (such as Confucian or Taoist) teachings, their ambivalent feelings about their homeland prompt them to search for a subjective poetic language to free themselves from the trappings of history and silence. At the same time, the specificity of their personal and family histories is embedded in their 'ethnically located' selves. For Bei Dao, a Chinese-language diasporic poet whose voice has been suppressed in a totalitarian regime, his elusive yet utopian language exposes the gap between text and meaning, between dream and reality, between individual and society. Combined with fragmented syntax and pronouns, his imagist, 'misty' language conveys a longing for freedom, and articulates his conflicting allegiances towards the family, the state and his own conscience.

As Sigrid Weigel remarks, ethnicity is a term 'at the threshold between emergence and continuation [...] between origin and memory',

where the representative of a generation is a ‘witness of history.’²⁸⁵ Semi-autobiographical in content and hybrid in form, Hannah Lowe’s poems offer a way to access a culturally-hybrid imagination, raising questions of identity and multicultural heritage through an experimental use of imagery and forms. Her work explores the significance of reimagining home and family by locating them in ethnic, historical migrant contexts, blurring the boundaries between truth, memory and imagination. On the other hand, in Sarah Howe’s work, the question of identity is bound up in a fractured, meditative narrative, refracted through an enchantment with otherness, liminality and hidden meanings, exoticised through the welding of found materials, myths, autobiography and languages.

Responding to the themes and spectrum of voices of these poets, my portfolio explores what it means to dream of a language that reconciles one’s fractured memories and longing for home culture with one’s reinvented, fusionist identity as an individual of double or multiple consciousness. In my work, I represent diasporic knowledge as an act of translation, where one approximates the half-concealed meanings of the untranslated. I am conscious of the influence their respective poetics have on me, as well as the specificity of our ‘ethnic locations’ within the wider Chinese diaspora: the places we come from, our upbringing, formative experiences and socio-political environments. To assimilate multicultural influences, I amalgamate words, texts and found materials to approximate the culturally-hybrid subjectivity. I situate my diasporic journey in terms of both individual-specific experiences and responses to the collective history, where one seeks to translate as well as to remain untranslated. I also explore the extent to which one’s personal history and identity are embedded in the poetic language, and suggest how the creative text is necessarily disrupted by the fear of censorship. In exploring the relationship between poetic language and diasporic identity, I reveal it as a site of coded information and contradiction, where the reader may interpret and generate meanings, even though he or she is not necessarily from the same culture. It is possible for one to remain a permanent Other in the second home or country, given the constant renewal of and doubt towards one’s ethnic identity and awareness via habits, knowledge, moral,

²⁸⁵ Sigrid Weigel’s “Families, Phantoms and the Discourse of ‘Generations’ as a Politics of the Past: Problems of Provenance – Rejecting and Longing for Origins” in *Narrating the nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, edited by Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), p.142.

political and spiritual beliefs.

For the diasporic poet, home is a point of departure as well as arrival. To write about home, one must constantly interrogate the boundaries between self, home, family and history. Home is a site where history and imagination converge. It is experienced both inside and outside oneself, lies in the spoken and the unsaid, both possessed personally and shared. The diasporic is always concerned with the act of articulation or self-translation in order to be accepted. For the diasporic poet, there is never just one single version of home or identity. Instead, it is a multitude of stories or versions of truth, and the coherence lies in the uncertain and organic nature of such narrative. Such awareness of multiple worlds or cultures allows my writing to transcend the place of origin, to generate meaning and universal appeal from the specificity of my narrative, and forms the core of my transnational imaginary.

回家

To my family

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i. the ground beneath

If we were born in the cities we long for, Love—Paris, Prague, New York—
what languages would they have taught us to speak?

(‘Broken Ghazal: Speak Arabic’
by Zeina Hashem Beck, *Louder Than Hearts*)

monarch butterfly

Zhuang Zi said
the man does not know

if he dreams of a butterfly
or is it the butterfly's dream

of a man. It is unclear
who awakens first or from where.

Neither do I
know after all these years

if I am a Chinese girl
who hasn't returned home

or a girl from Hong Kong
who has stayed in England.

It's British summer time
in my living room

but my watch in the drawer
moves seven hours ahead.

The past: is the door still open?
The future: am I a filial daughter,

living so far away from my parents?
The colour of marmalade,

the butterfly of unknowing
pollinates in one world and another.

Diocesan Girls School, 1990-1997

We sing English hymns from the blue book,
as if those songs were our own:
all things bright and beautiful...

We read *Jane Eyre* and *Hard Times*,
and how the pigs oppress
Boxer and Clover in *Animal Farm*.

In Chinese history we follow the roots
of a gingko tree to Spring & Autumn
when Confucius taught his disciples *ren, yi*.

For 'western history', I remember a cartoon
from *Punch*, 1840: China, a gigantic cake
gobbled up by foreign powers.

In poetry, we fall in love with Plath,
her fantasies, her fury against men.
We want to let out our anguish.

Some of us stammer in our own tongue—
it's inferior, we know it.
Secretly, we all love to sing Cantopop.

We dream of going away
to England or America,
and never, never come back.

Chung Kiu Love Story

There she is: dusting again the antiques
with a *gai mou sou*: blue porcelain,
milky snuff bottles, and ivory animals.

When she speaks she fills the room
with her thick Northern accent,
charms everyone with that lilt.

Everything comes from newsagents:
kites, Green Spot Juice, worship goods.
Bus timetables in our hearts.

From my counter of calligraphy scrolls,
I ask her out. 'You look like the singer
Danny Summer.' I'm pleased.

Roasting chicken wings in Tai Tam,
we hum Paul Simon's tune, 'Cecilia'.
She turns eighteen

and John Lennon comes to town,
we wear wide-brimmed
sunglasses and 'trumpet-shaped' jeans.

I don't own anything. Her mother hates
the communists (my father worships Mao).
We are young. Who can stop us?

So we marry the following year,
in Spring. A simple wedding
in a teahouse, without a gown.

King of Kowloon

In your white vest and blue flip-flops,
you wandered about in the fierce sun,

a can of black paint in your hand.
We read your family history on lamp-posts:

your escape from Liantang, your ancestral home,
settling for Pink Shek in Kowloon.

You hailed Wen Tianxiang and Sun Yat-sen,
charged the Queen for usurping your land.

新中國皇 曾榮華 曾福彩
中 英 香港 政府

A self-declared king for fifty years, painting
all over the colony—a city where the British

lived like paradise birds on mid-Levels
and the Chinese sweated, selling meats

in wet markets but Oh the freedom
to march and shout, to do what you did!

Defiance on the lamp-posts,
defiance at the ferry pier.

撐住五十年不變! 高度自治
叉燒 飯碗 撐住!

Your furious characters on the red postbox
kindle in us an identity we have always known.

To Su Li Zhen

- After Kar-wai Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The cure for homesickness
is to resist falling in love
with the city: in my dream you hold
a green thermos filled with *pu'er*,
descend the dark staircase
of an old building,
your tall-collared qipao
a long shadow, a story.

I took a glimpse
of the narrow steps
lit by pale, soon-extinct
kerosene lamps. Six o'clock.
You walked down the staircase
of my building to the noodle stall.
A tropical downpour filled the gutters.

My thoughts shifted from one cigarette
to the next. The smoke curled up, feline.
Soon, all our lives would turn into
beautiful film stills.

Many years after our encounters
in 1960s Hong Kong, you felt the need
to empty your heart of secrets,
whisper into the hollow of an old tree.

Lotus

It's hideous to witness but to
conjure them in your head or
to touch the crushed bones
where history leaves its mark

on soft flesh. The years you have
hidden them, dreaming small,
choosing your steps,
touching the walls for support.

Now since no one is watching
you bend over the lumps in dim light,
discard the yellowed muslin.
They look much older than you

and dying. 'Back in those days
it was about pleasing the man.
A privilege.' Your mother
helped you crush the bones

and tighten the muslin,
while you sat on a stool
and seethed in silence, burning.
Sometimes, in your dreams

you meet the girl who says no,
who is beaten by her mother
for marrying a poor tailor.
But how beautifully she can dance.

Daughter

You arrive in the year of the ram,
a month following the royal birth.

The kindest thing that has happened
in my side of England.

Remember the Chinese proverb:
we are of the same bone and flesh.

We are indebted to each other
from the beginning.

My little bird, do you know
love is where you come from?

If one day you look for
my childhood, you will find

it lies elsewhere, in a country
with no alphabet,

but here and now, what I feel
is the clasp of your tiny fist.

the rhythmic heave of your small chest.
Ka wai, or hai nei gei ma ma,

I know this undulated speech
makes no sense to you.

Listen baby, this is all I can give you,
the rest is your journey now.

School

– In Project Hope, a donation of RMB 200,000 is enough to build a new village school. In the UK, it is a year's tuition fee and living cost for an overseas university student. Since Project Hope began in 1989, over 8000 village schools were built in China.

The building is so plain you don't notice it.
It doesn't have a name. Just a room
with creaking chairs and desks. Dust falling
on half-broken windows. Most of the time
there are no books. They listen eagerly
to the young teacher, relishing every word.

On a school day they'd wash their faces
and comb their hair in pre-dawn darkness,
For two hours they'd walk along a path
that only they know, around them
no signposts, only mountains. Quarry,
sand in the wind, and wild slopes.

Every step is a step away from home,
leads them to a place they imagine,
and the sky slowly fills with light.
When they arrive, they laugh,
and run, their hands scarlet and cold,
their feet sore and blistered.

At noon, they'd queue on the playground
for hard-boiled eggs and steamed rice.
The greedy ones have such an appetite.
The water they drink comes from a well
one kilometre away. Each day the chef
goes to fetch water on his motorbike.

Nine thousand miles from where I am,
on Guizhou's darkening mountain,
the familiar silhouettes of twos and threes,
whom I call my people, carry their satchels
and small hand-torches of hope,
on their way home.

Dreamers

The moon is so close tonight—
I think I have almost touched it.

In small, lonely hours, some houses are
between sleeping and dreaming.

We are living in the year of youth
and wear our straight, black hair down.

We've never been in love.
We think we can leave everything behind.

The evening is scented with chestnut trees;
and tender grass grows imperceptibly.

A small colony of fireflies flicker in
our cupped hands before we let go

oh my god their wings!

sterna hirundo

From April on, we spend our days here,
roosting near the local fishermen's homes,

skimming the bright river for fish, or perching
to preen our black caps, our silvery wings.

They call us sea-swallows because our story
begins with water. With twigs and shells

we make our nests in the marshes, lakes,
on shingle beaches, a raft by the river.

Despite the appeal of staying—long stretches
of open water, fine sand, the familiar—

there is always an inner call,
this urge to travel, to see the world

from entirely different places. Each year,
we look forward to wintering

We can tell it's time to leave
by the wind and the colour of the sea.

ii. speak, silence, speak

Such absence
is possible only in imagination, while
omnipresence may exist in virtual reality.

('Her' by Zhou Zan, *Release*,
trans. Jennifer Wong, *Poetry Review*, 107.1 (2017))

Babble

We can only guess how you navigate
the three languages but 'dum'
is your first word: *to throw* in Chinese.
Keen to show me the concept
you dunk a pack of ham into the bin.

I probably shouldn't switch so often
between languages, calling myself 'Mami',
the Chinese way, and your father 'baba'.
Happily confused, you ask 'Mami' for milk,
but run towards father saying, 'Mama, mama.'

Chinese Classifiers

How do I explain the rules for units?

They are spontaneous: *Cheung* for furniture and flat surfaces like A4 paper while *jet* is for animals and watches. *Lup* for small grains—rice, sand, pearls—or stars; *tiu* for anything slender, from a noodle to a river. You ask why is it *yat tiu* legislation? Why *yat jek egg*? Why *yat tou* movie when *tou* means a rabbit?

How come *gan* is the unit for a room but it is also good for a school?

Why is Beijing more polluted than London and Hong Kong different from the mainland?

How much freedom have you got there?

I tell you I don't know. Someone handed us the rules.

Ba Jin (1904-2005)

'We are youths. We aren't disabled or idiots, and so we must seek our happiness.' (quote translated from Ba Jin's *Home*)

That home in your book 《家》 with its golden roof, was the first warning. A beautiful mansion in the name of Confucian living

家 where everyone has to be as perfect as a porcelain vase. In their damask robes, the parents sit in Qing dynasty chairs made of rosewood, virtuous statues, giving daily lessons of 'four Nos' to the young

非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。

Happy are those who stay silent and notice nothing, feel nothing. Unhappy are those who are young at heart. Cursed are those who battle with the giant.

1923. When you left Sichuan, your *jia*, what were you thinking? 家 is home, or family, or none of those.

But Shanghai was not big enough for you. Four years later, you boarded a ship for Paris. France! A paradise for dreamers. In the Latin Quarter, you wrote in the day, in a flat that reeked of onions, and studied French at night.

Chu Guo. A sad word. A brave word. Who but an exiled youth could write what you did? Who could question our fathers?

We're all leaving our fathers. Fathers who feed the family, fathers who appoint wives for young men. Fathers who put duties on our shoulders. Fathers who rule our land, God in our universe. We are always leaving our fathers.

To read 《家》 in Oxford, seventy years away from the fresh ink of those pages. I see students cycle to their colleges made of dreams and sandstone, to the world they are defiant to change, just like Jue-hui in your book. Their strands of hair catch the gold in the sun.

Bloodline

After Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: Big Family* (1995)

You can tell from our portrait
something is not quite right.
A small contagious bruise spreads

between us: from father to son,
from the son to the mother.
This condition under our skin

has no known cure. Symptoms include
mild fever, night sweats,
amnesia and reluctance

to discuss anything personal.
I never ask my parents about it.
The TV is just white noise.

We camouflage our pain
with our comrade smiles. We keep on
rebuilding our lives as if -

Comrade Xiaoping

'He took 300 million people out of poverty.' - Ezra Vogel on Deng Xiaoping

Like the rest of us, you ran away once:
a dragon year boy who left home at sixteen,
boarded *Andre Lebom* one rainy day on the Bund.
It was 1919: year of the May Fourth,

a page in my history textbook.
In France you were a student until
your money ran out. For five years
it was six francs a day to handle steel,

in the never-ending blast of machines
and furnaces. You couldn't forget how hot
metal felt in those asbestos gloves.
You couldn't forget how poverty feels.

When you went back Mao distrusted you:
you became a factory worker, a cattle herder,
were hunted down by youths with red scarves,
whose eyes blazed with anger.

1977. At the Workers' Sports Stadium
the deafening applause around you.
It was you they worshipped:
a rainbow after a ten-year rain.

For the first time all peasants earned
what they reaped from their own fields.
Gone were the days of the red moon
of starvations outside grain depots.

That iron-curtained summer of a certain year
you turned a blind eye to the people's cries.
Where were you when we looked for you?
One youth fell, then another.

2017. Light years away from your time,
a country shrouded in fog. For the thing
denied them before and now, young people still
dream of going away from home: yours, and mine.

Mystery of the bookseller

It is not easy to believe but when people have to disappear, they just disappear. We nod to the officer at the window and the trick is done. We have a call from God to ensure everybody's health and safety.

The Watchers in baseball caps have been there, every other month. Checking out the catalogue; scribbling notes; taking photographs. That sinister bookshop upstairs with its haphazard shelves. We would have let him go, if nobody steps on nobody's toes.

The Script-writers are a disgrace. A traffic accident decades ago: how boring! Isn't it better to work around a love story? Come up with a videotape of a young Hunanese lady, write a few love letters. An enraged wife, a rape? The Storytellers badly need some training.

The Confessions team has been efficient at producing the handwritten note, to explain how he disappears 'by his own methods'. Give a personal touch. It's hard to understand all that fuss: does it matter how he disappears? By train or by coach?

Next step is to ask the Erasures Department to work on the ending. Their computers are equipped with special keyboards: every button is a key to delete. They will hold a press conference soon, and announce that, in fact, he has never existed.

(Since you live in England, do you happen to have a copy of *that* book?)

The language of exile

In my sleep Bei Dao's voles are there
digging, digging in darkness,
a tunnel deep enough for trains
and wide enough for dreams.

In my sleep I see him, pensive and solitary,
walking in the heart of the question.
He clutches a set of history books,
his eyes brimmed with hope and sorrow.

He is used to departures, but to lose
his daughter for an imagined country?
The woman with the sad face of history
loves him, and has been waiting all these years.

Back home, the ancient bell tower
tolls with its heavy conscience. The night
has no words to offer, only the sound of insects,
and the low echo of a question.

The answer has always been there.

Naming the sheep babies

is to use luck to herd them back
to mother nature, where they belong.

Bless the sheep babies with ideograms
of rolling hills, a loving farm:

hay, beans, and tender grass.
Respect their vegetarian diets.

Born to graze on endless pastures,
Add a sense of movement to their names,

and set them free with the brushstrokes
of leaps and jumps, of galloping horses.

Do not bring them anywhere near
the animals they fear:

cows, dogs and mice,
or their health will deteriorate.

Sheep babies don't cope well with stress,
so spare them from words that suggest

yoke, or anything to do with the heart;
avoid all ominous symbols of altars,

knives, hanging, ceremonial fabrics,
creatures used for sacrifice.

They say sheep year is not particularly
good to have babies,

but if you trust me, and pay for a more
expensive fengshui name,

your baby will grow up rich,
filial and super-healthy.

Lost in translation

Metal detectors and security checks
at each metro station, and banners
saying no flammables or chemicals allowed.
Here cars heed no one, make ruthless U-turns.
Nothing beats *Shunfung Kuaidi*.
The office receptionist phones to say
the shoes you ordered have arrived.
even if they are the wrong size. What can't
be sold on *Taobao*—a husband, a baby?
No YouTube, only *Tudou*: a hearty Northern staple.
Everyone is a director for fifteen minutes.
The so-called internet: a billion fragments of news
and pop songs and videos, like *Milky Way*.
Sheep City Evening News wishes you good evening
and a good night's sleep. But wait, what,
your phone doesn't have *Weixin*?

@aiww #history# #firewall# #language#

In 1984 I broke an antique urn.
Since then I have been breaking
and defacing everything from home

because breaking is the only way
to tell the fake from fake.

In my blue cotton top
and working class flip-flops
I am dangerous as a bee.

Violence in a broken jar.
Violence in my seed.
Violence in my tweet.

They are hoping to catch
all the venomous bees like me
inside the garden walls.

I'm ugly and obvious as a mountain.
The hidden cameras stare at me
with envy, plotting their own escape.

iii. just an immigrant

I say net, but it could have been hair.
I say sky, but it was a handcart of discarded clothes.
i say silent, but the chimney has been speaking in German all winter.

(*'Suddenly, in Sweden'*
Steep Tea by Jee Leong Koh)

Arrival

I.

October 1998. When I first arrived
I did not tell anyone that I had
a ricecooker in my suitcase.
'Believe me, you'll miss rice over there,'
my mother said. At Customs
the officer glanced at the letter
embossed with the college crest:
five yellow birds. 'Why would they
offer you a place at Oxford?'
He shook his head and stamped
limited leave to remain.

II.

Helen's Court was where they put
all the foreign students together
so they'd feel *more at home*.
A bedsit waiting for its tenant:
empty bookshelves; a quaint-looking desk,
a worn-out armchair; a lamp with a green shade.
I opened the sash window and heard
a faint trail of bicycle bells. 'Home,' I said
but it hurt me.

III.

The post-room: a nest of narrow wooden shelves
where all my letters would arrive.
I was the only Wong there:
my parents would be pleased.
Mum told me she went to Ying Kee
to stock up tea leaves, and to Mei Foo
where she knew the best fishmonger.
Her letters were full of questions:
how cold is England's cold?
Should we send more instant noodles?

IV.

Each week I went to Sainsbury's
to improve my English. Walking up and down
the busy aisles, I relished the sound
of each exotic word: courgette, crumpets,
Red Leicester cheese, horseradish.
I smiled. Saying it right is an art.
Here they actually have 'Chinese cabbage'.
At night I'd leave the butter and milk
outside the window to keep it chilled.

V.

On winter days when the sun
went missing, and the familiar ache
rose in my heart, I'd visit Edamame,
a tiny ramen shop on Holywell Street

almost like that ramen place in Yaumatei
that I missed, its wooden screen doors
where people would queue for ages
for a bowl of miso happiness. Sometimes,
in the middle of my lunch at Edamame,
it felt as if my brother was just there
having noodles together,
asking me to repeat after him
the names of his favourite players:
Rooney, Fellaini, Rafael, de Gea.

London

The ash-faced trudge along,
takeaway coffee in their hands,

uncertain how well they have refashioned
themselves. The Queen of Time gazes down

Selfridges's colonnades at the high street traffic
unmoving, and the shops on Oxford Street

are now selling Union Jack boxers.
You shake a globe, watch a city form

and dissolve, lose yourself in a reverie
of all things, but above all,

think of the small animals
buried over the years in the garden,

an Indian summer of barbecue smoke
from other people's backyards. London burns

and grills in its own fat.
We have cheered for Murray,

believe the world is our oyster
and that you can wing it anyhow,

have seen fat banks topple, one by one,
have heard the driver call to passengers,

'this is the end of the line,
all change here all change.'

You, who recline this minute in
your grandmother's armchair cannot

tell when or how the pizza man will arrive
(this plague of flu still leavening the air)

while I, an immigrant, am tired of speaking
and listening in their tongue, have decided

to wander in Bloomsbury, dreaming
in my own language when three

Muslim women pass me by
peering through their niqabs,

as if they have a long story to tell.

Diary of a Miu Miu Salesgirl

I am wearing a crepe-de-chine dress
and suede stilettos that do not belong to me.

I'm carrying nothing but my lies
and my L'Absolut lipstick, red as a warning.

I am rather good at this smiling game,
speaking Mandarin to the customers.

The trick is to flatter them, flattered as they
already are, being wives of the *nouveau riche*

from a changing China. They wear sunglasses
and diamond rings even when they sleep.

At home they play mahjong and drink *longjing*,
dress only in European ready-to-wear:

a tee with velvet trim, Chanel denim jacket
with (real) emerald collar, flip flops lined

with rabbit fur. They always pay in cash.
They have a home in England and also

in other European cities. For them
flying long-haul is more bearable

with a pre-flight Swedish massage,
more worthwhile if they bring home

a Miu Miu bag with the latest buckle.
In our home country we would never

have met, but here I have touched their waists,
know their bra sizes and their children's names,

working in this store in the heart of Mayfair,
where each evening I'd slip out

of the black dress like a fish, go home
with my sore feet, with a free mind of my own.

Sushi bar amnesiac

They like it regimented,
and each night each buttoned-up man

enters through the same curtained doors,
finds himself a wooden seat at the table.

makes green tea from powder,
and pours a small dream of soy sauce,

then sits and waits to count the days
he's got left, staring at colourful plates

shuffling on the *kaiten*. He was young once...
but that's too long ago.

No one wants to be reminded
of the chef's impossibly sharp knife.

and how impossibly old
the chef is, with his bulging eye bags.

He's the other father. He knows
as you enter the skipping heart of Harajuku

for a bowl of comfort,
slurp it down like eternity.

Hamachi, fatty tuna and flying fish roe,
and then your tongue burns with wasabi.

The raw taste in the mouth
echoes the raw condition of your heart.

Office in a Small City

- after Hopper's *Office in a Small City* (1953)

And for one last time today
he will clear his in-tray,
tidy his desk, put all the pens back

in the right places. Compiles
spreadsheets into a neat file
for tomorrow, sales figures

to justify his life.
Those little white lies
you need just to survive.

The window-cleaners are wiping clean
the mirror surface of the building
from the outside, poorly-paid

spider-men, and he tries
to sit back, take in this view
he's ended up with, so carefully built

year by year, one tiny window
in this small city, small enough
to dream and wallow in.

From Beckenham to Tsim Sha Tsui

The next train to Beckenham
departs from platform six.

'We will be offering refreshment service—
tea coffee soft drinks gluten-free cakes

hot or cold sandwiches—
but we won't be serving you

jasmine tea or red bean cakes
cup noodles nor hot wave crisps.'

And I'm still fine with it. After eight years
it's almost home. Now I go via

Brixton Herne Hill West Dulwich
except my train also calls at

Prince Edward, Mongkok, Yaumatei,
Jordan, Tsim Sha Tsui and Admiralty,

the way it used to be, and my mind's
a city of swordlike high-rises, flyovers,

buddhist temples and bauhinia trees
even if some places are gone by now,

and the ferry-dotted harbour
is smaller than it was. And the years

I have lived *here*, have cost me
all those places I once tried to

leave from, am leaving still,
places that are so real

even if they remain invisible
on the colourful map I'm holding.

Edgware Road

There's something magical
about the colours of these streets:
from the golden shell of the casino
to the array of dates and mangoes.

Each shop is a secret inscribed with
beautiful alphabets. I long to know
the name for each embroidered robe,
ornate jug, each piece of golden teaware.

All day, women with shimmering veils
pass by. The streets taste
of grilled meat and fresh bread.
The air lingers with shisha.

Families dining at Beirut Express
where a waiter slices a lamb kebab.
Here the evening lasts much longer.
Everything is halal. I order a *sharwarma*.

A man wearing a keffiyeh
waits at the bus stop.
He looks back. I don't know
how long he has been there.

Postpartum vinegar

Elephantine in the ninth month,
I'm the butcher's wife from Ming dynasty
hunting for fresh pig trotters
in the local Morrisons.

Too busy to chill out in Starbucks
with the NCT yummy mummies,
I'm preparing my ginger recipe:
one portion sweet, two portion sour.

Make it not too early nor too late.
In a house spiced with memories
I indulge in my tribal ways, singing
to my baby in the womb the classic tune
hong gai dan, ju geuk geung
bat chun tim cho fen oi heeeuuunnng!

Black and sweet, strongly-flavoured,
reboil it each day as birth draws near.
The perfect soup to nourish the female body.
Add in the eggs when the baby appears.

Let the trotters immerse and absorb
the ginger in the claypot.
Let the succulent soup bring me
a buddha-faced baby on the luckiest date.

Baby daughter, get ready for England!

iv. Mountain City

The more you think of it
the less there is to miss—
and with a steady hand you empty
the jug in your head— multi-storeys
Bullet lifts flyovers red taxis impatient
narrow-lane traffic and women
in wet markets haggling.

('Home' by Jennifer Wong, *Goldfish*)

Mountain City

*Yau sei sup door nin lic si
Chuen gong zui hau yat gan chuen tong
Yuet kat biu yin ge sun kwong hei yuen
joe yuet kei moon,
but siu yuet kat mai dou gum dou yuen sick*

i.

April is a nostalgic month, a season
of blood red flowers on hero trees.
On Cotton Tree Drive a bride
steps out of the limousine.
A bridesmaid holds the red umbrella

scattering rice. More smiling
in the Botanical Garden. The couple
will kneel before their parents
under chandeliers, offer
a small cup of tea to the family...

Touching the scarlet silk of the bride's
lung-fung kwa, I can't believe each flower,
each animal is sewn in gold.
Why does the suckling pig
blink its cherry eyes?

But tonight this couple will spend
their first night together,
uncertain how it'll all pan out,
having lived with their parents.
It's all about the mortgage.

ii.

I remember how it used to be:
on a quiet Saturday night I'd watch
Farewell my Concubine alone. I can't
get it out of my mind, Leslie Cheung's
lasting joke on April's Fool.

In the corridors of my sleep,
I still hear a metal gate creak
as the neighbour returns, tired,
rain dripping from his umbrella.
Next door a muttering game
of mahjong, a baby crying.

The student at the bus stop drinks Vitasoy,
taps at his phone, his mind plays back
the goal scored in English Premier League.
Next year he'll be sent abroad to study.
He doesn't know what to do with his relationship.

The hawker shouts in Fa Yuen Street

tamagotchi ten dollar ten dollar

[A few years down the road you'll find me
making copies of my former life
to the Borders Agency. All they know
is the counterfeit of lantern streets
in Chinatown, and totally ignorant

about Jin Rong's stories: Dragon Maid
or *Xiu Long Lui*, flying soldiers
who combat on trees, drink sorghum wine,
take shelter in roadside inns
and pay their fare with gold ingots.]

iii.

Was it last month, in Hong Kong,
that I dared you to try the black soup
at the herbalist? We took some time to decide
between *chicken bone leaf* or *ya sei mei bitter tea*.
A worm in the winter, was grass in the summer.

We hastened our steps towards motel signs
hourly available, purely room only.
Have we arrived at 2046?
What secret has Chow Mo Wan buried
in the tree trunk? In 2046 we'll be left with

A city of capsule hotels
and beautiful robots in tears...
I wonder why anyone
would pine for afternoon tea
under the colonial fans of a hotel lobby

Except, of course, it's the mark
of a true *siu lai lai*: served by a moon maid
who brings healing with her magical massages
and postpartum recipes. For the whole month,
the mother is forbidden to wash her hair.

iii.

You *yau hak*, Mr Tourist,
Tsingtao beer and *Lonely Planet*
in your hands, you over-tip our cab drivers.
In times of typhoon, you'll join those who flock
to Star Ferry pier and watch choppy waves

while we stay in, watching TV.
How much do you know about
the yellow river and the Yangtze?
This city often forgets
how Chinese it is. If you walk past

Temple, Woosung and Battery streets,

past the fabric shops, past the fruit stalls
with red lamps, and a million bric-a-brac,
you'll eventually reach Goodrich Hotel.
When it was a colony, those tycoons used to

glue plastic flowers in factories,
queued for rice rations,
lived through the terrible Wanda.
I hardly remember growing up
in these buildings upon buildings,

iv.

Flashy swords, my motherland a memory
of a bell tower in the north;
a drum tower in the south,
then in between, the phantasmagoria
of an Oxford life. But what of returning?

An office overlooking the harbour.
You mouth the same words as everyone else:
team work, social responsibility...
flip open your diary, look for the earliest date
to go on your next vacation.

After six you descend and disappear
into the same streets, fit yourself
into the packed train that carries you
home. That little plot of earth
on the twenty-second storey

with a hint of the sea.
Yesterday, on your way back
from a colleague's funeral,
you took out a silver coin—
bauhinia-faced—to pay the taxi driver.

You knew you couldn't bring it home
whereas Lyndhurst Terrace has always meant
a colourful street of blossoms.
Let us go, let us go to Happy Valley
to place our biggest stake, and never return.

v.

In Lingnan's canteen, flipping a menu
for foreigners, I try to understand
why *Jing Sam Sik Dan* is translated
into 'Steaming Three Kinds of Egg'.
I turn back to my Murakami. So when

will we call things by their real names?
There's no treasure in Cheung Po Tsai's cave.
In Lady Market bazaar, you ask me
how do you distinguish real jade
from fake jade...I say, why does it matter?

The real, the fake, the old or the new.
Why, the minibus destination still reads
Daimaru Department Store, closed down for years!
Can't you see that the New Territories
are growing old? Take a ride on West Rail:

See how many crescent-shaped
fengshui graves dotting the hills,
but do not be afraid, for everyone must drink
the soup from Old Lady Meng
by the river of forgetfulness. You hope

the gifts we burn can reach them all right.
I just hope that the birds in Mai Po
will stay until their next migration.
Across the seas, they're playing
Mathilda, Wicked and *Billy Elliott*.

vi.

In the gardens on Edgware Road, the taste
of meat and shisha linger till late evening;
but last time in Oxford,
the tour guide is still talking about
Bill Clinton's life as a student.

What do they mean, a few years down the road
of feeling foreign, Ahmed's kebabs,
chips with cheese on High Street?
What does it mean to have read
Blake, Fitzgerald and Kerouac;

the punts, the Pimms,
the deer-spotting at Magdalen...
In between all these
is the real thing, just a few coins
to a busking musician.

*That when we dream, some of us dream
of the floating world of Guilin...*

Peaceful city, under the auspices
of a Chinese moon. I remember a poem
by Li Bai, wonder if Chang-e is happy where she is.
In Dragon Year all I can see are pregnant ladies.
I had not thought there would be so many.

Next year they'll be building the bridge,
but for now, let me leave you with the fragments
of a changing city. Promise me you'll read
the unabridged *Dream of the Red Chamber*:
all two thousand pages.

v. remember to forget

Returning to the past
is like walking all the way to Jupiter.
But today
I saw a basket of potatoes.
All at once I was stepping
on Jupiter's burning rings.

(*'Seeing Potatoes'* by Wang Xiaoni, *Something Crosses My Mind*
trans. Eleanor Goodman)

At the wet market

I used to find it barbaric, mother,
but you'd bring me along,
a young girl then, to the market:
a theatre of blood. It pained me

to imagine the shuffling feet,
the croaking pleas, their feathers
shed from their struggles
against the tightening.

I used to find it barbaric to face
that red-faced man in the shop
who gave us the number tag.
His clammy hand. *Forty minutes*

he said, and we walked away
from what took place
under the red plastic lamps
in that squalid cage-house.

I used to find it barbaric:
the taste of *ching yuan* chicken
served with ginger and spring onion
in the family meal, just like

any other family in that city
of high-rise flats and wet markets.
An almost-past life now, contained
in small, distant cubes of light.

Calling the dead

On certain nights they come back,
ghost story fragments lodged in my head
from midnight taxi rides. Almost always
a woman in a red dress, hollow laughter
and a ball bouncing in a playground,
lost souls crossing the misty river where Meng
offers them soup to forget, before their next life.

And those afternoons when my mind would spin
with ominous tales, each school in Hong Kong
a graveyard. We begged for our turn
to go to the loo together, believed ghostly hands
would sprout from faucets to bring us back
to a wartime colony where Japanese soldiers
raced with each other to slash more heads.

The girl from my class kept a scrapbook
of ghost stories: I learnt that vampires
in Qing dynasty robes never hop sideways;
some actors never came back from film shoots;
and careless children disappear with each UFO.
We huddled around a quivering soy sauce dish
to see it move through the Ouija board. *It'd be hard to*

make dish spirits leave. And other myths of the land
of the missing. And my first friend in high school,
our birthdays a day apart, used to scare us
with her palm lines, one line shorter than the rest.
*Now on the other side, what do you think of the place
of the dead? Will I meet you in your next life?*

Sending Chinese Students to America, 1872

Before the boys left, their parents
signed a paper saying
we accept what may happen,
that they may or may not

come back alive. To leave home
at the age of ten, for fifteen years
to America: a frozen landscape
filled with barbarians and pirates.

It took them ninety days
to cross the Pacific.
On the ship they survived
endless rounds of sea sickness.

They went without rice for months,
chewed on bread harder than stone.
The barbarians pecked their cheeks
and put their hairy arms around them.

In satin robes with dangling sleeves
five sizes too big: who could bring them
more fitting clothes? Who in the family
would see them growing taller?

Unable to tuck their imperial braids
inside their small conical hats,
they dared not snip them off,
for that would be treason.

Sometimes the barbarians
tempted them to Sunday church,
a pagan place of worship,
of child-eating monsters and demons.

As months went by, they'd rather
be playing baseball or basketball,
or Chase and Capture in the field.
They grew more fond of this country,

This fable land where miracles happened:
a magic machine for virtual conversation,
and a few years later, a box that played
music from its flower-like sprout. The faces

of siblings and parents blurred. They forgot
their home dialects, but when they
talked about home, they could feel
a pang of hunger: a fifteen-year-long hunger.

Secrets in a Siheyuan

- after Wang Xiaojin

When morning air is still pure and untainted,
and a sliver of the moon can still be seen,
my sister and I take a walk in the garden.
We hear a frog gargling in the lotus pond,
and spot a black crow (I wish I hadn't).
In low voices we talk of father's wish
to take Li Nan as a concubine.
It's inevitable, sister says
a maiden with such watery eyes.

My sister leans towards the cherry tree
to sniff the scented white flowers.
She's so tall now: her satin trousers
hardly cover her ankles.
She's older than me by less than a year.
We used to sit under the same tree,
and taste the freshly-plucked fruit.
To think that she's getting married
and will live without me!

My parents expect I'll marry Zhou Yun,
distant cousin, son of a wine merchant
I've met once—for months
he's been bringing the right gifts
Qingbai vases and *Longjing* tea leaves.
(I wonder if he likes my new fringe?)
He's tall and lean, with no bad habits,
and mother thinks his thick earlobes
are the sign of a well-to-do husband—
if he likes me enough, that is.

up the mountain, down the village

- after Zhang Yimou's *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (2010)

where I found you—
a kind face in the field, a brother
in a place I never belonged.
You showed me the tree
they talked about, whose blossoms
wept soldiers' blood
and each day after digging
we would cycle to catch
the sunset in the fields:
our friendship priceless
in the days of slogans.

But free love would destroy you
or all of us, my mother warned,
The days and months I was kept
under watch, starved of your news,
my life reduced to field labour,
and sleep, and work
to save our family from blame.
I was vigilant in my speech.
Up the mountain, down the village
where we first met, where I missed you.
You said you'd wait until

until the day this madness ends,
until the time to love comes again.
Up the mountain, down the village
where I hid my only possessions:
the warmth of your voice, your hand,
our naïve hope for a better regime.
The promise you kept, and those hero flowers
on the hawthorn tree had grown on me
and lasted ever since we left
our best years in the village fields.

Yangtze

From the west to the east
the river runs its course

where small tourist boats
pass through spectacular relief.

The wind you hear in the valley
is made sublime by the poets.

But the grief from what used to be
the largest cradle of fish and shrimps:

the depth of this water's wrath, devouring
the children and stone age relics.

To tame the water dragon
is as impossible as learning to live with it.

Do not ask me where the white dolphins
belong in the bigger river of things;

I don't want to know what happen
to the porpoises. Please stop asking.

A metallic bit in your tongue

You, who have nothing wrong
with your tongue, do not know us.
You're from a planet where
justice has no other orbit.
You've never read a book
then tried to unlearn it.
For you a deer is just a deer,
and Orwell's farm has no real animals.
I don't blame you. But we have read
Boxer's story and don't even
dare to cry. Reality is too mad,
too close sometimes. Your map
shows every street and station.
You assume every dream or feeling
has a definition. I don't explain
what we, with all the new wealth
of the country, can't buy.
It's an expensive word.
And you, having never endured
the metallic bit in your tongue,
cannot imagine.

Lust, Caution

Mr Yee and Jia Jee met in Shanghai.
Rickshaws, hounds, uniforms, guns.
In the 1940s nothing was permanent,
and family and love, a ration.

Take my body. Take my loneliness.
War, shortages, traitors, guns.
Jia Jee assumed the role of Mrs Mai,
a student temptress for Mr Yee.

Back home, the women played mahjong
 pong pong pong
Then the fall of Hong Kong.
War, curfews, refugees, guns.

Christmas 1941. In Peninsula Hotel
the whole colony surrendered,
like a woman's body, to the shinto soldiers:
their ghostly faces, their cruel hands.

That Christmas when bombs fell

Sold to the enemy and forgotten,
who could ever rescue Jia Jee?
In her cherry blossoms *qipao*, she sang
to Mr Yee. She sang of a country

surrendered, she sang of a saddened body.
She forgot when the war started,
stopped believing it would end.
Homeless, with nothing left but a song.

All hushed on the Western Front

When these farmers from Weihai
saw Shanghai for the first time
they mistook the city for Europe,
only to learn it would take two months

to reach the western front
where they were to fill the gap
of the dead. In Flanders Field
they worked as non-soldiers,

dispatching war supplies at Dunkirk,
digging the trenches, repairing the tanks,
first time they had ever
set foot on foreign soil.

Who'd care that they had gone missing
from that wartime painting in Paris?
To make canvas space for American troops
they were painted over, then sent back home

with the unequal treaty in Versailles
that cost them more dearly than the war.
Outsider to a treaty everyone's part of,
they must accept twenty one demands.

The cession of Confucius's own province
stirred young men to bitterness,
plunged the country into chaos.
What if Shandong had never been lost?

Most never made it home.
As for the repatriates, they traded
their medals for shelter and food.
At least they left Noyelles-sur-Mer.

An engraved Chinese Teapot

Chinese tenses are less obvious, you say. True, there's so much emphasis on history it's hard to realise the present needs a life of its own. We use *lor* for anything that has taken place (that's *liao* or *le* in Mandarin) but it's different from your '-ed' because sometimes we imply the past even if nothing signposts it. I suppose that the past always hovers around even if we don't talk about it. Like it is always *here*, when I write in English, for example, or google words censored elsewhere. This morning, I found in a charity shop a Chinese teapot engraved with 萬壽無疆. I find tenses redundant in the sense that everything exists in the present. Say we can't find the right tense for certain years in our lives. Say nineteen ninety-seven. And nineteen eighty-nine.

vi. Crossings

Skin had hope, that's what skin does.
heals over the scarred place, makes a road.
Love means you breathe in two countries.
(‘Two Countries’, Naomi Shihab Nye, *Tender Spot*)

The unbearably light words on San Huan Lu

*Tell me about your language. Your words are pictures aren't they? I took out a pen and drew on the table napkin: three downward curves: a river. A dot in a circle: the sun. See how four little water drops slide down a windowpane: the arrival of rain. And the crescent shape is the same moon that Li Bai gazed at when he thought of home, one thousand three hundred years ago. Home: a secure place where cattle are kept. *It's so beautiful I could spend the rest of my life learning it.* I even taught you 愛, the character for love. *Too many strokes! I won't remember.**

That was five years ago. We had *Dan Dan Mian* in a noodle shop on Bei 北 Jin 京 San 三 Huan 环 Lu 路. It was the year when I worked in Sanlitun, district for foreigners, embassies and wine bars. You were still in love with me, and my language, my body. The city was never itself again after the Olympics. I wonder where are you now.

Metamorphosis

The change is all so subtle we hardly notice: at first it is just the colour of the postbox or a missing crown on a uniform. We laugh at the promise horse-racing will go on forever. Slowly the textbooks for our children are changing: less on the colony, more on 'the Chinese dream' and unity.

On birth: pregnant mothers crossing the border in haste before due dates. On lifestyle: fewer noodle stalls, more shops of gold. And every day, in Lo Wu, you hear frustrated voices and grating wheels of trolley cases. It's more useful to speak Mandarin when you shop: and swipe Union Pay.

The pop stars are all touring north. Nobody takes news seriously anymore because it is biased however you look at it. Lately there are those who weep for the death of Pokemon. I wonder how a city can outgrow the country, if going home is still an option

Crossing

The officer peers at my place of origin
through the looking glass. Is he helplessly
short-sighted or a big fan of Darwin?

I want to tell him everything I've left behind:
friends, rice-cooker, an AO job
(Jimmy Choos and a chauffeured Toyota);

I want to tell him I've disobeyed
Confucius: have left my parents behind
who will grow old at home.

I've read Chaucer and *Ancrene Wisse*,
can make fish pies (the Mary Berry way).
If I have a garden, I might do some gardening.

He flips through each page of my passport
to check where I've been, before he leans forward:
So, how do you say you look pretty in Mandarin?

Shopping before mahjong

Half of those who bought a home
in London do not live in London.
'They're looking for an address
somewhere exciting in Europe
(or out of Europe now. Sad.)
'Bought without a viewing,'
the agent shakes his head.
'Five thousand swiped from a card
at a sales event in a five-star hotel.
Just like that.' They'd go home
for a cup of green tea and mahjong,
tell their husbands they've bought
something useful for their kids
when they go to study abroad.

The limitation of maps

Maps cannot tell what we're made of.
That we'd least expect ourselves to be meeting
here, talking about CY and Trump over
chilli corn carne and apple crumble
at Brasenose. A decade since we were colleagues.
Oxford is beautiful, you say, eyes radiant
as a stargazer's, a convert to this sandstone
castle in the air. If only I could tell you I once
felt the same, a student who thought
British people lived in houses with rose gardens.

But maps cannot retrace the years
we pored through classified files,
ghost-writers of lines-to-take.
You have never left our people. Here,
on your secondment, we walk in this
college quad too young for us. You tell me
you are still confident about our city's
future, despite what's changed and what hasn't.

Dimsum at Joy King Lau

As soon as we sat down you said,
passing me the menu: 'I'm open to
anything except chicken's feet.
And please none of those
white slippery *cheung fun* rolls,
sea cucumber or jellyfish!'
'They're horrible, I agree.'
Secretly I *know* what you're
missing out on. As usual
we ordered 'Chinese tea':
a brew unheard of in
any teahouse in China.
You devoured the spring rolls
and crispy squid with gusto, leaving
untouched the divine *xiaolongbao*.
Interesting how foreigners
do not care about the 'heat'
in deep-fried food like we do.
'We drink too much cold beer,'
you teased me. You were amused
by the mysterious gesture
I did with the teacup each time
you poured me tea. And of course
we had the traditional dessert of
sliced oranges. In the background
we could see the lit-up eyes
of the golden phoenix. Here's Chinatown
dotted with lanterns and too many
shops selling iPhone covers.
Nothing is authentic
except what we are missing.

Fly, fly, word balloons

By now she's unstoppable. Each morning
she wakes up to a new word. Today it's Peas.
Ba-bees. Which means please
Peppa Pig show on your iPad RIGHT NOW.
Her magic word in the kitchen is 'Painting! Painting!'
pointing at the colours on top of the fridge.
When she finishes her meal, she has a habit
of handing in her plate, shouting 'Finish!'
In a park, she's happy pushing her 'Shooter',
and running, she'd shout at a balloon:
'Boon, ready, sedy, GO!' The other day,
she waves goodbye to Dad in her cool, *Ciao!*
There are words for tenderness too.
The way she pats little Theo's head, 'baby'—
or when she winds down for the night, burying
her head in me, laughing: *milk, milk.*

How do I feel the wings of time, counting
the dresses and shoes she no longer fits?
Or how do I name the way she struggles
to strap her doll to the toy buggy, or
to wear my handbag, longing to be like me?

Anser anser

No, you won't recognise me easily:
I'm as huge and heavy-footed as
my European cousins who graze with me
on brackish coastal waters but, being
a creature of mixed heritage, I share
the same raised knob at the bill
like the swan geese. Sometimes
I was bullied because of my uncertain looks.

When I was small, my mother taught me
that to pin down my ancestry wasn't
half as important as learning how to fly.
We have our free will where to reside.
I'm thankful for God's gift - my grey,
broad wings that glide across the oceans,
my orange beak pointing south - and for
my companions, when winter arrives.

Year after year we'd do this: migration
being so natural to us; that we know
we can never give up our strong ties
and memories either *here* or over
there, that the idea of not returning
is as excruciating as of leaving.
See the V shape we spell in the sky,

before we scatter.

Personal history of soups

You taught me soups. A *lo for tong* takes hours in the kitchen. Pig lung: best remedy for coughs. The swelling and collapsing of a massive pink sac filling the basin. Yellow cucumber and cowpea: nourishes the skin and clears the throat. Chinese courgette and lean pork: dissipates body heat. My brother and I loved your tomato and fish soup. Your own childhood stemmed from the taste of egg flower broth your mother used to make. Coming home: a bubbling clay pot, steam rising from the lid raised by wooden chopsticks. The juicy cartilage between the softened bones. The butcher in England hasn't a clue if you ask for a soup bone. Say that again? The only one I can make nowadays is chicken and carrot, even without fresh *lo gai*. You said that every Chinese woman must know how to make soups to catch a good husband. Except that Alex has never cared because he is a European vegetarian! The hot and sour soup they have here, even in Royal China, is not half as good. It should have seven ingredients. You can't call it hot and sour without *wooden ear* and pig's blood. Not authentic enough. I remember the milky white perfection of golden carp soup in our family haunt: *Qeelin Restaurant*. You kept reminding me to make more soups for myself. To build up my immune system. And also for beauty. Last time I called you to say I cannot find the green carrots. They don't grow here! Each year I think of going back because of the soups.

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Illustrations



Figure 1 Photo of my parents (1978, Guangzhou)



Figure 2 Photo of my mother and grandmother (1990, February)

Figure 3 Zhang Xiao-gang's 'Bloodline Series'
Big Family (1998) (Credit: West Kowloon Hong Kong)

An image has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 4 Calligraphy by 'King of Kowloon' (credit: Andy)



Figure 5

Lion's Rock in Hong Kong (credit: Hong Kong Discovery)



Appendix 1: Interviews with poets

Questions for poets

A. Routes and identity

1. You have travelled to and lived in different 'places'. How do you see the meaning of home and being away? Do you think it has a temporary or permanent impact on your work?
2. Have you ever felt at home with where you are and who you are, and if you do what gives rise to that condition or state of mind? How does the idea of being at home or not at home, or the notion of 'place', change your writing?
3. How do you see your identity as a writer and, in particular, as a Chinese writer? Do you see yourself as a writer of Chinese ethnicity? Should ethnicity be remembered or ignored when readers appreciate your work?
4. Where is/are your homeland(s)? Do you see any relationship between writing and homeland?
5. Does your writing voice change according to your experience or concept of 'here' and 'elsewhere'? Where do you think is the ideal or utopian place to be or where do you belong: is it a real place or an imaginary location?
6. When you write, who do you write for?

B. The idea of place

1. How do you render a place in your mind (where you are at or imagine to be in) and why do you choose to understand 'the writer's place'?
2. Do you see a close relationship between your poetics, the experience of hybridity or diaspora?
3. Do you feel you have to choose between western poetics and Chinese/Asian poetics, and why?
4. You have inherited a multitude of cultures, philosophical beliefs and languages. Born to a Chinese-speaking family and yet writing and reading in English, how does this affect you? Does it create some kind of doubleness in your consciousness and language?

5. Do you ever feel the inadequacy of expressing yourself in that language, especially when you fuse your work with myths, symbols and imagery of another 'place', or in articulating your otherness?
6. Have you ever wanted to write in Chinese? Does it matter?
7. How do you approach the gap of understanding that lies between the east and the west? Is there anything that is lost in translation or unable to be bridged?

C. Influences

1. How do you see the relationship between family and writing? How do you see the response your family have towards your identity and your poetry?
2. How much do Chinese language, philosophy and/or culture matter to you?
3. How do you see the nature and development of Asian-themed anthologies? Do you think this categorisation is helpful or not? Would you like to see any change in the approach towards representing these voices?
4. How is your writing shaped by your reading of other Chinese or Western authors? Who are your favourite authors and why? How do you see the difference between your work and the mainstream Western poets?
5. Are you influenced by Mainland Chinese culture and literature, either in terms of classical or contemporary literature? What kind of writing or authors do you read, or do you feel relevant to your work? Do you feel a sense of allegiance to those influences then and now? And how about diaspora writings?
6. Do you think there is any Chinese-ness among contemporary Chinese poets, including yourself? What do you think it entails?

An interview with Li-Young Lee

(7 May 2017)

Q1

JW: You have travelled to and lived in different 'places'. How do you see the meaning of home and being away? Have you ever felt at home with where you are and who you are, and if you do what gives rise to that condition or state of mind? How does the idea of being at home or not at home, or the notion of 'place', change your writing?

LYL: 'Home' is a word and, like any word, it's subject to a paradox all words seem subject to, a paradox I find interesting for a number of reasons, including its correspondence to certain principles of yin and yang, known to the Chinese as *tai ji*, or the great polarity, and known in the West as The Word, or Logos, the dynamism of polar opposites. The logic of that paradox goes something like this: the fewer definitions a word has, the more defined that word is, the more definition it commands, and the clearer are the meanings attributed to that word, and the less likelihood that crisis surrounds those meanings. But also the less likelihood that subtleties and potentialities might congregate about that word.

On the other hand, the more definitions a word has, the less defined that word is, the less definition that word secures and, subsequently, the greater the number of possible meanings that accrue to that word, the greater the number of subtleties and potentialities that buzz about that word, and the greater the likelihood that crisis attends that word. Of course, I'm thinking in general, and about a word in isolation, and these conditions are mediated by context and use, by a word's entering into relationship with other words. But it turns out, for me, the word 'home' is, on the one hand, not very well defined by a country or place or any particular structure, but on the other hand, that word is the site of immense subtlety, potency, and crisis. Maybe it is for everyone, but I wouldn't know. The fact is, my siblings and I basically grew up knowing that our parents were completely unable to protect us from harm. Whatever 'home' they might have provided for us, God bless them, was completely vulnerable to spontaneous, wanton, and unjustified violence, from which we had no legal or other forms of protections. You see, Jennifer, I was born to scapegoats. My mother and father and the families they came from were violently scapegoated in China, where my parents

were born. After escaping China, my parents started a family from scratch in Jakarta, Indonesia, where I was born, and where my parents found themselves to be the open targets of violent scapegoating yet again, this time with their own children at hazard.

After escaping Indonesia and finally arriving as refugees in the United States, a country at war at that time with an Asian country, we were scapegoated here, in less murderously violent ways, but still undeniably subjected to that particular practice of victimage, from which my parents, being themselves victims, could in no way shield us. So, what might 'home' mean in such circumstances? Everything, except safety. Everything, except security. Everything, except membership that confers privileges or protection. Everything, except a place one may return to for rest or sanctuary. I think that anyone who hasn't experienced being scapegoated would have no inkling of what I'm talking about. And yet, when I look at the world we live in today, I see that my family and I aren't a special case, but standard and the majority. Globally speaking, all I see is the sign of the scapegoat. There are scapegoats everywhere on this planet. We live under the sign of the scapegoat, everyone scapegoating everyone. In fact, I've written a poem about it called "Goat's Head." What can 'home' mean to anyone these days except crisis? Our earth-home itself is suffering massive crisis. Maybe the word 'home' is more important than ever to contemplate. But I can't seem to get my head around it.

Q2.

JW: How do you see your identity as a writer, especially a Chinese writer? Should ethnicity be remembered or ignored when readers appreciate your work?

LYL: It seems to me that your question is possibly, at its root, a question about reading sameness and difference. Now, I'm not sure I have anything clarifying to say about this subject, and I fear that what I do say might only mystify understanding further, but let me give it a shot. I feel that reading sameness and difference(s) is very important. That is, keeping in mind the specificity of an artist, which includes ethnicity, gender, etc, as well as other socio-historically determined categories of identity, only enriches our reading of that artist.

I don't believe, for instance, that reading T.S Eliot in forgetfulness of his race or ethnicity helps me to read him better. It actually deepens my appreciation of him to put him in the context of what all the other white males of his historical moment were doing with their lives. He was writing 'The Four Quartets.' Take some guy like him in every way but one. What was that guy doing? But you see, as in my example, reading difference necessarily means simultaneously reading sameness. Take, as another example, the artist Carmen Amaya. I think understanding her work in the context of her being Roman and born in the slums of Barcelona deepen my appreciation of her, and yet, none of that can completely explain her indisputable greatness as an artist. The facts of her life don't altogether account for her sublimity, her depth, her power. There are many who share her circumstances. She's the same as many. But they're not Carmen Amaya. She's different. There are many privileged sons of bankers who don't become Paul Cezanne. And being homosexual and Spanish didn't not influence Lorca, but neither does either of those facts account for the greatness of his work. Let me also say that I feel there are differences of greater, or even ultimate importance, that we must never lose sight of, even as we keep within our radar the more obvious differences of race, gender, class, etc.

One of those differences of ultimate importance is the difference of poetry itself. Poetry is marked by its difference from other instances of language. If that difference isn't strong enough in a poem, the other differences don't make for interesting enough reading. Not for me, at least. Because there is a sameness that finally erases all differences except the most salient differences, it seems to me. It is a sameness that is so powerfully leveling that it makes all of our talk of differences seem almost (almost, I said) like Chicago criminal gangs squabbling about the nature of their differences in regards to the different colors they fly. That sameness is this: we, all of us are and each and every one of us is a member of one of the most violent, destructive, desirous, disputatious, creative, innovative, loving, tender, hateful, brute, reflective, imitative, cowardly, irrational, reasoning, unconscious, insensitive, and visionary species on the planet. And we have without exception, from the beginning of time, regardless of race or gender or sexuality, maintained our societies, nations, cultures, and human groups by murder, expulsion, exploitation, and ritual violence, as well as campfire songs, stories, and recipes for dumplings. There is no human group that can claim difference from this, our collective anthropological profile. And it is

in the context of this very profile that I believe poetry must be written, not just in the context of our specific profiles.

Q3.

JW: So your father was a Christian and you were brought up in Christian teachings. Is spirituality a very important element in your work and in your expression of identity? Also, the search for meaning in your poetry, the questioning the world as the place to be...I wonder if you have thought of a more utopian place to be?

LYL: Yes, my father was a Christian minister when he was alive. His intense interest in the Judeo-Christian tradition, primarily its literature, *The Old and New Testaments*, seems to me now so clearly motivated and inspired by his lifelong experience of being a victim in some of human history's more violent scapegoating episodes. It's obvious to me now that his reading of the Bible allowed him to see and understand the scapegoating phenomenon, which he as a man and we as a family personally suffered. *The Old and New Testaments* so clearly and movingly depict the history of humanity's natural inclination to resort to scapegoating in order to discharge pent-up hostilities and aggression, and how that tendency even got instituted as the cultural practice from which the very word scapegoating comes, and how that practice is, it can be argued, the ritual of rituals, the seminal ritual out from which all practice of sacrifice, ritual murder, and expulsion grew, as well as the phenomenon that most potently expresses humankind's tendency toward sacrificial and exclusionary thinking, a kind of thinking practiced to this day, a kind of thinking that answers human violence with violence, that uses violence as a way to curb violence, uses war to end wars, and so on. Perhaps it's an objectification of sublimation, I'm not sure.

The genius of *The Bible* is its critique of this development in several different kinds of inter-personal manifestations, beginning with the rivalry of Cain and Abel, moving through the human near-sacrifice of Isaac, the expulsion of Joseph, the formal instituting of the practice of the scapegoat expulsion, war, and straight through and into the scapegoating of Jesus. In this way, the Bible is true, profoundly so. Reading it literally as history seems ridiculous to me, but to read it as my father read it, as a revelation of our human evolution and our struggle with our own violent nature and our denial of

that, our own violent countenance, and the cost of that denial, seems indispensable to me. Especially given the state of the world today. Of course, my father also had a lifelong and deep interest in many Daoist sacred texts as well, including *The Dao De Jing*, and *The I Jing*. In fact, and this might answer some of your other questions regarding East and West and having to choose one, I was noticing something interesting about *The I Jing* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Q4.

JW: Do you feel you have to choose between western poetics and Chinese/Asian poetics, and why?

LYL: First of all, though, regarding your question of having to choose East or West, I don't understand why we have to choose. In fact, I believe we don't have to choose. We do, however, we must, I believe, if we want to live, synthesize the best of both worlds, since both worlds have so much living and necessary knowledge to offer. I don't know from what mistaken sense of loyalty or mis-guided sense of affiliation anyone comes to the feeling of having to choose. Maybe that need itself, that feeling of having to choose, is a residue of sacrificial/ scapegoating thinking, a flavor of thinking that implies or suggests that something must always be expelled, something must always be sacrificed. I think, in order for us to be more fully human, and in order for us to answer to today's challenges, the best of East and West are going to have to be fully synthesized. I don't perceive any natural conflict between East and West. I don't believe, as Heraclitus believed, that some sort of natural conflict and strife must exist between any two potent terms, and that only out of such strife does creation come about. He should have studied *tai ji*, poor guy. His sense of The Logos is one of war and strife. In *tai ji*, the only true creation comes out of harmonious conciliation and reconciliation between equal and opposite powers, which were never dual to begin with.

Which brings me back to the *I Jing* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, two books in humankind's early history, separated only by around 500 years, the Chinese book pre-dating the Roman poem. Both books were originally entitled *The Book of Transformations*, or *The Book of Changes*. Both books are attempts to understand humankind's primordial beginnings. But the Latin book is full

of murder, rape, and suicide, depicting and enacting the very logic of sacrificial thought, while the Chinese book is full of wisdom, compassion, hope, and comfort, giving advice about how to escape the traps of violence and sacrificial thought. One book, Ovid's, while a joy to read and not without substantial rewards, ultimately mystifies the reader by projecting human lineaments onto the divine, thereby obscuring the very divine, primordial processes it seeks to uncover. Meanwhile, the Chinese book, also an absolute delight to study, serves to demystify the reader's confusion about humanity's place in the universe by stripping away all human projections from the face of primordial reality and revealing trans-human, non-species-specific forces at work. Furthermore, it offers ways in which human beings can cooperate and harmonize with these forces in order to evolve toward deeper and more comprehensive modes of being. One is a book describing and enacting the logic of violence. The other is a book describing and enacting the logic of peace.

I'm not suggesting the East is any better than the West. Obviously, the East is as violent and materialistic as the West, and vice versa. I'm just remarking these two specific instances in our collective human literary history, reading their samenesses and differences. And as a way to answer your question of whether I believe in Utopia or whether I want to live in some other world, all I have to say is that books like the *I Jing* and *The Old and New Testaments* convince me that the greatest human mission, encoded in the very fabric of human being, is inextricably entangled with the most meaning and power poetry can possess, and that these principles manifest together, mission, meaning, and power, in concert through that human literary work whose impulse is de-mystification, revelation, and the uncovering of humanity's primordial condition, its unbroken connection to the divine, and its conscious evolution away from violence and death, and toward peace and life.

This difference between literary works, some toward the logic of violence and the science of death, and others toward the logic of peace and the science of life, is another crucial difference for me, more important to me than some of the other differences we've named. This difference, and knowing this difference, and knowing how to read for this difference, is more important to me than all of the other differences: East and West, spiritual and material, mainstream and non-mainstream, Chinese and not Chinese, etc.

These other differences are only important to me to the extent that they help me understand what I consider the supreme and this crucial difference: words that lead to peace and more life, or words that lead to more violence and death.

My allegiance to a logic of peace and a science of life is more important to me than any other allegiance, including home, country, family, race, class, gender, sexual preference, poetic school, you name it. What could any of those words mean if we all kill each other off or destroy the planet beyond repair?

An interview with Marilyn Chin

(24 August 2016)

Ideas of home

Q1

JW: You have been to a lot of places for your writing and residencies, and you have lived in different places: you spent your childhood in Hong Kong and moved to America. How do you see home and being away. Does it have a temporary or permanent impact on your work?

MC: I am very restless. I was born in Hong Kong, raised in Portland, Oregon. I went to undergraduate school in Iowa, and then lived in Bay Area in California. I have lived in California. I then got a teaching position in San Diego. I have been all over. I have lots of friends in Boston and New York City. I have some teaching in a low-residency programme in Hong Kong's City University before it was closed. Now I am in Italy. Any of these places are my home. Simultaneously I am in exile. When I was a child in Hong Kong, I used to think London is my capital. But then I realised I have a different kind of passport: I am not allowed to go to London. We are colonial subjects there, right? Home was where my mother and grandma were. But my mother and grandmother were gone now, and so I feel homeless in many ways, but yet I am constantly traveling. This year I have been to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, New York, Boston and Italy. I might go back to Shanghai where the professor is teaching my work there. I will have a translation in Chinese coming out in BJ, Selected Poems. San Diego and California are lovely places, but I am always moving. I am in exile but the word 'exile' seems negative. Maybe I found I have to move around.

I think home is where mother or grandmother is. I don't think Portland, Oregon is my home, which was where they lived. I don't go back now that they were gone. I don't have children too, therefore I don't feel grounded in any one place.

JW: In fact the travel also generates your writing or inspires you.

MC: I am inspired by travel. I see myself as an international writer, a Chinese American writer but I also want to have a global identity. It's important.

Q2

JW: Going beyond the geographical, I would like to know what you think about being who you are or being at home who you are. What gives rise to that condition for you? How does the idea of place change your writing?

MC: I see myself as a Pacific Rim person. I am a West Coast writer, New York being the literary capital. I come from an Asian American identity, bearing in mind Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, the early Asian American poets, Frank Chin, who all come from California. I am from West Coast, California. It's a whole sisterhood. The whole Asian American movement that started in California in the 1960s and 1970s, from the Gold Rush to the Angel Island immigration history. That's why I feel I have to be in California in many ways because I am attached to that social movement. I am also attached to Hong Kong, somehow I feel I have access to Hong Kong and Beijing and the Chinese experience although I am not totally bilingual.

Unlike Li-Young Lee, I am from working class. My family came from Toisan, that whole generation that needed to get out of Guangdong to go to the US to work. They were the coolies, the working class, who sent money back to China. I am part of the Cantonese American experience. The Cantonese, the rebels! I feel connection with the early immigrants.

Writing and identity

Q3

JW: Do you see yourself as a Chinese writer, and how do you interpret that identity nowadays. Can you clarify what you mean by global identity?

MC: You are interested in Bei Dao...I was born in Hong Kong but write in English. However I studied *Wenyanwen*, Tang poems, and I worked with people like Nie Hualing, I translated Ai Qing's poems - I was one of her first translators - I even translated some of Mao's poems (but didn't publish them). I also translated some from *Shi Jing* (Book of Odes) etc, I love that poetry. I preserve some of the Chinese poetry in my works more so than the Chinese contemporary poets, the latter of whom resist the classical tradition and who want to write in their own colloquial language. But I wanted to rediscover the Classical Chinese poetry, the roots of Chinese poetry. The irony is I am more Chinese than Bei Dao. I am creating a fusionist identity in the work by fusing the traditions, which Ezra Pound first tried to claim in the

modernist tradition. I don't want Ezra Pound to have the last word in Chinese poetry.

Q4

JW: Going back to your interest in the Chinese tradition and the forms. When and where does that come from?

MC: When we were young, we have to memorise those texts from Tu Fu and others! And my grandmother used to carry me on my back and chant to me Chinese poems and sayings. The first kind of poetry I heard was Chinese poetry, and it ingrained in my ear, even though English is my main language. I can hardly read Chinese. The Chinese poem was ingrained in me when I was very young. You can hear the Cantonese language in my work. The Chineseness is in the DNA of my work. I can't divorce it from my work. I can't say I forget it. It's there. Bei Dao's generation was not trained in that tradition. They didn't go to university to study *wenyanwen* or the ancient poetry. They were imitating the West. I tried to read Chinese poetry every day, because I think it's important for my aesthetics.

Q5

JW: Is Tu Fu your favourite?

MC: I like Tu Fu, his later works are so sad and beautiful. I read Li Bai too, and Shi Jing, folk songs and Zhuang Zi. I read the classics more, and for some reason I am not so interested in contemporary Chinese poetry. At some point I wanted to do a PhD in comparative literature but I decided to do an MFA instead. I also loved Lu Xun's prose poems, very delightful, and I translated some of them. I love his work *Ye Cao* (Wild Grass).

Q6

JW: Do you think that translation informs or influences your poetry or your identity?

MC: I translated very early, having worked with Nie Hualing when I was at the international writing programme in Iowa. I worked for her, and that's why I met Ai Qing and Ding Ling. I don't translate so much now. I am now more interested to write my own work.

Q7

JW: I would like to know more about your perceived connection between homeland and writing. would you have a view on this?

MC: I write in English and in this way homeland is in my language. Because I can never be fully Chinese since I can't write in Chinese, and my passport is American, so I am an American writer. If you meet me you can tell I have an American personality, although I will not let go of or forget my Chineseness. I will also be seen as an American writer. But I love the idea of a global identity. People such as Ishiguro is a global writer too.

Q8

JW: Your work has a very international aspect to it. It is very accessible and touches on many universal issues. It's got global awareness. It also deals with racism. Do you have any utopian thinking or consider there is an ideal place?

MC: My globalism. I believe there can be a utopian world where we all get along but, for example, Chinese and Japanese are cousins but there is so much dispute and war. In the Middle East, the Jews and the Christians read the same books, and hate each other. I am an activist writer and I want my work to reveal the struggles of nations or of different races and peoples. Oppression and so forth. I believe in the possibility of a utopian world. In California, you see so much diversity, all kinds of people, compared to e.g. Beijing. I see the possibility in such pluralism. I write about the possibilities of this utopian society. Activist writers are... dreamers! We dream of a better world. I write about the place where we are now. My work is very personal but also politically or socially aware.

Q9

JW: Was it hard at the beginning to be known as a socially conscious writer?

MC: My work is controversial but I think it's healthy. Your work has to cause some anxiety in the reader. It has to have some power to speak to the readers. I can't pretend there is no racism against me. I can't pretend I wasn't bullied. When I first lived in Portland, Oregon there were no other Chinese families in the neighbourhood, so I have to speak out. America has lots of issues to do with racism. There's history of slavery and racism. Historically there's a history of prejudices. I faced it every day as a child, as a girl...I was a very shy Chinese girl and my family are Buddhists, not Christians. We were very different. We here not rich, so there's the issue of class as well. I am a feminist writer too because I don't like the way my mother was badly

treated in the Confucian patriarchal family structure. She was also very isolated in America. I wrote about these because they are personal as well as political issues that matter to me.

JW: These are very bold themes to tackle.

MC: In graduate class in Iowa some of my classmates didn't believe poetry has to be political, but somehow I believe I have to expose these issues. But it's part of my aesthetics.

Q10

JW: Who do you write for?

MC: I write for the best reader possible. I don't want to write down to my reader. Someone who is well-read, possibly knows some Chinese or interested in Chinese poetry. I hope my work will prompt someone to consider or study more about Chinese poetry. It's not a good idea to write down to your reader.

JW: Your new work is complex and demands a lot from the reader.

MC: Sometimes I'd put notes at the back, but in my recent book of poems I decided not to. I want to keep the immediate in the book because it is a book of mourning.

Q11

JW: You have read your work in different parts of the world. Do you find the reception very different among the Asian vs non-Asian readers?

MC: My book of fiction, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, came out in New York from W. W. Norton, but in the UK it came out via Penguin's imprint, Hamish Hamilton. The British girls loved it. Some of them drew the new covers, and they loved the ranchiness and wildness of the girls. Got big reviews in *the Guardian*. So the English readers understood my satire and the wildness. There's also Chinese humour in it, say the image of the fox girl (*huli jing*). All those Chinese trickster figures I got from the ancient tales and transformed them.

Q12

JW: Do you see a strong connection between your poetics and your diaspora experience?

MC: Because in academic we read everything from Said to Spivak, Marx, Hegel etc. But I was also informed by African American women writers, the early writers e.g. Angela Davis. I was also influenced by Bessie Smith, the blues singer when I wrote Rhapsody in Bright Yellow... My African American friends loved it and can hear the blues in it. I brought in Buddhist chants in my work. My aesthetics reflects hybridity and creates a diaspora. I try to merge traditions.

Q13

JW: Do you feel you have to make a choice between Chinese and Western poetics?

MC: When I was young I liked Sylvia Plath. Her imageries moved me. I see the world in images more than in narrative, and images move me.

Because I write in English, my craftsmanship lies in the English language. I need to know Keats, Donne, Shakespeare etc. I need to know the foundation of all that. I have to go back to the history of the sonnet, the English poetry tradition: a rich tradition. The Chinese is different. It is there for my aesthetics, and brings in something different to my voice. English is very important as I have to know my tool. The Chinese aspect also gives me a different world-view, without which I will not be the poet I am. Also, my angst and all my suffering as a child, an immigrant, a woman, a minority person in the US or the world, that suffering or displacement or exile, has taught me something, about being human. I feel I have something to say about racism or suffering, about women or historical trauma or the world. It's a privilege to be a poet. The genre chose me. Poetry is also in our blood: Chinese people love poetry.

Language(s)

Q14

JW: What language does your family speak?

MC: My family spoke Toisan. They escaped from the Mainland before 1949, and they moved to Hong Kong. They came from peasant-like background. I was raised by my grandmother who spoke Toisan, a very ancient language. I see myself as part of the minority tribe. I align myself more with people like Kafka, with his weird dialect. I see myself as an outsider on many levels even if we are Han.

Q15

JW: Do you feel inadequate expressing yourself in English?

MC: There's the issue of stereotype. Sometimes people stereotype me. I was brought up by Buddhist. They don't feel they have to be assertive in this world. But in Western society you are expected to be assertive. You need to speak up. The problem I have in growing up is the problem of duality. When you are at home you are expected to behave like a quiet Chinese girl. But outside home you have to be assertive or you will be walked over. It's more about this struggle, how to manage the world.

Q16

JW: Your writing is very bold.

MC: I was very shy when I was younger. I used to throw up when I had to give a lecture. Now I am used to it now. I was quiet even at undergraduate school. But maybe that's why my work is bold. As a person I am much quieter. It's a way to talk back as a Chinese girl, contrary to the expectations that we should be 'guai' and kind and sweet, and subservient. That's why my work is strident. I am talking back to layers of oppression. There's a lot to talk back.

Q17

JW: Do you ever want to write in Chinese?

MC: There are a few poems that integrate Chinese, such as in my new book such as 'Quiet the Dog, Tether the Pony'. I wrote the poem in Chinese characters first. I want to hear the silences between the words. I didn't use any punctuations. I then translated them, the pauses. There's also a poem, 'To Pursue the Limitless' in Rhapsody that uses Chinese characters too.

Q18

JW: Are you interested in bridging the two worlds, the East and the West?

MC: I am not interested in bridging the two worlds, I am interested in creating a diasporic world. Bridging presupposes two worlds. I want the two worlds to engage and interact with each other, to have a transparency.

Q19

JW: How does your family respond to your writing?

MC: I expose lots of family secrets. I am angry at my father and his behaviour: he is bigamous and has another family, a xiao tai tai. He moved away

from the family and my mother is very sad about that. I am daring in a way. For example my new book is a book about mourning: I have lost two boy-friends, my mother and my grandmother. I am a lyric poet and I can't hide from it. I can't write glowing poems about my father when deep inside I regret things he has done. I still cannot forgive him and I think poetry has to be truthful, like Tu Fu's poetry. I see him as an example, as he is a very truthful and personal poet. Why be a poet when you cannot write about the truth?

Asian anthologies

Q20

JW: How do you see Asian-themed anthologies? Are they good for the writers?

I want to be in any club that wants me. I was included in Rita Dove's anthology, Norton's Modern anthology...It's important to be included. There are some young anthologies who do not want to include us as they'd like to break out on their own. Some women writing and feminist anthologies have also included me. I am an Asian writer, an Asian American writer. It's important to be seen in the world. But yes it is categorisation and marginalisation. It is to say that you are an Asian American poet and not just an American poet.

On the collections

Q21

JW: Can you tell us more about *Hard Love Province*?

MC: *Hard Love Province* is a book of mourning. Some poems are almost Zen-like responses to mourning, emphasizing the poignancy of silences. Each poem yearns to go its own way.

MC: In the book, I want to use classic forms but reinvent them, use them in new ways. There are the haikus but sexualised and talked against the patriarchy in the haiku tradition. In Asia the poets are mostly male! In my new haikus, I speak against that. I love ancient poetry, but I can't rewrite Tu Fu and Li Bai but I can add a new voice to it and give it new meaning. In the new book there's a half-sonnet, 'Black President', a *dui dui zi*. It follows a poetic form in Chinese poetry, and I mix different identities together.

Q22

JW: You use an imaginary location, Hard Love Province.

MC: Province is not the centre, it's an outpost. Taiwan is a province. It's related to exile. I feel like I have drifted to an outpost. This place of sadness is off-centred. It's a very Chinese name. Formosan elegies are written for my boyfriend who died in a plane accident, near Taiwan, and that was in the year 2000. Also Taiwan is a questionable province, which may go back to the homeland. My Taiwanese friends are at a loss now. Hong Kong is also a province. There are these ambivalences that Americans don't understand. The grievances are also about the longing for nation, longing for possibilities and a better world. There are also political longings.

Q23

JW: It's an exciting way to interpret your identity in your work. For example, there's your poem that talks about 'Formosa'.

MC: Yes. Taiwan's old name is Formosa. Most people don't know it. That poem has a Buddhist chant in it: nada nada nada. Spanish and Buddhist at the same time. I am very aware of trying to merge the East and West, my heritage.

MC: Writing takes a long time. The fiction took me 10 years. The book of poetry took me five years. I drafted and rewrote 50 drafts sometimes. It takes a long time to get it right. Poetry is so precious, like embroidery. It's very careful writing.

Q24

JW: Your book has also won the Anisfield-Wolf award for promoting equality and diversity. Is this what your project is about?

MC: I want to write about freedom and oppression and engage with or address world problems. So even though this book is personal, it is also political, and has a lot of manifesto in it. With Ferguson and other problems, these are important issues. I appreciate this award because people value my work throughout my career that speaks against social injustices.

Influences

Q25

JW: Do you have any favourite writers?

MC: I read a lot and the list changes! I am now in Italy so I am reading Calvino's fairy tales. I read different people in different times. I am trying to write more fiction now and I am reading some ghost tales by Pu Song Ling. I think the Asian tales by Pu are so strange and wild. I am writing more stories.

Fiction is a new world to me so I am reading more right now. For poetry, I am going back to ancient tales, the Biblical stories and songs. I am also going back to the long poetic form, fu, and I go back to Whitman. I am trying to change my form and line length, to keep it interesting. I want to create new hybrid forms.

Q26

JW: Are you influenced by any Chinese contemporary literature?

MC: I know other Chinese contemporary writers. I also read Mo Yan. He is interesting. His stories are strange! I also read Lu Xun and Wen Yiduo. For women writers, we all honour Maxine Hong Kingston, and my book *Mooncake Vixen* is a satire on *The Woman Warrior*.

(24 April 2017)

Family and

gender

Q27.

JW: In your earlier poems, such as 'Chinese Quatrains' and 'The True Story of Mr and Mrs Wong', you articulate the traditional hierarchies of Chinese families and the importance of filial piety. How were you affected by it when you grew up? Do you think that your experience of otherness is derived in part from these traditional, Confucian family values?

MC: We all have complicated views about those traditional roles. 'Chinese quatrains' is my subversive takes on hierarchical roles: 'The aeroplane is shaped like a bird /Or a giant mechanical penis. /My father escorts my mother /From girlhood to unhappiness.' I think the traditional norms of the family have destroyed my mother. The crux of my poetry is about speaking on behalf of my mother. My poems are partial critiques of the family system. Simultaneously there is something about the traditional values, such as the Confucian ideal of the benevolent ruler, the individual's moral consciousness and the influence of Tu Fu.

The extended Chinese family is a complicated one with its virtues and problems, and its impact is still felt even to this present day. I have struggled with that system all the time. The family has failed my mother, but she still took it upon her to care for my father's mother. The Confucian value that she set up for herself has made it difficult for her children to break through. My mother's idea of 'guai' is fraught with issues. As I grow older there is

something about the concept of filial piety that strikes me as very unique. Within this system, a person can be punished for taking care of one's parents.

Q28

JW: The grandmother in your poems is a pillar of strength.

MC: She is illiterate but she brought the family out of Communist China in 1949 and bought papers for my father to come to the US. She is the one who makes the important decisions. So there are two matriarchs: a devout mother and a powerful grandmother who is also mother-in-law.

Double consciousness and poetic form

Q29

JW: Living in America, you embrace different sets of values. How does that impact on your writing?

MC: I feel that it has to do with Du Bois's idea of double consciousness: you inherit a set of values at home, and have to embrace another set of values when you walk out of home. You are appreciated if you are more assertive at school. On the contrary, you are supposed to be obedient at home. It's about balancing the two worlds. My poetry is about negotiating many worlds, the past and the present, as well as the East and the West.

JW: Your poetry certainly embraces the past and the present with its complexity of poetic register.

MC: It's a violent country we are in, and I am upset by the news especially on domestic violence. It seems almost universal. The violence cuts through race and class and geographical regions. 'Cougar Sinonymous' is about celebrating the women's bodies. Unlike other art forms, poetry is a genre that is still too decorous. I want to hit the low and high registers. I change my register from one poem to the other.

On womanhood and feminism

Q30

JW: Your work is anchored by a strong feminist language. In *Hard Love Province*, you explore the modern woman's pride in her own sexuality and narrative power in poems like 'Every Woman Is Her Own Chimera' and 'Brown Girl Manifesto'. Is it a protest against the image of a Chinese girl/woman?

MC: I am always fighting against the stereotype of a subservient female. I want to shake up the assumptions about being a Chinese-American woman.

I champion women's and children's rights in the world. The little brown girl is still the most vulnerable person. It's important that I keep those feminist ideals.

JW: Your construction of womanhood is multi-dimensional, embracing and representing the woman's body, her struggles as well as her intellect.

MC: There is always this wild girl peeking through the sagesness. To say something controversial and to disrupt the surface.

Racial identity

Q31

JW: There is a new surge of interest in the issue of race and racism after Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Do you think that poetry has the responsibility of representing the minority and is representation essentially problematic? By combining the narrative of autobiographic (Chinese) immigration with black identity politics, is *Hard Love Province* essentially a book that challenges the denial of (racial) prejudice?

MC: I can't speak for all, but I am pleased to see African-American writers coming to the fore to engage with political issues. When I went to Iowa at the beginning, political poems were not valued. Some of my fellow writers were skeptical about my poems. But I have been engaged with social protests since the seventies and eighties. I aligned myself with the protests of the minorities and the San Francisco Bay protests. I call myself an activist. It's all embedded in my personal history. My activism comes deep from within. On the other hand, I do write all kinds of poems. I was with Henry Louis Gates at a ceremony once, and he told me that I must claim that I am a poet, not just an activist poet, since my work encompasses activist poetry but is also a lot more than that. In terms of the responsibility of a poet, it is important to engage with the social issues of the time and to speak for issues that I am interested in.

Q32

JW: Do you think there are enough activist poets in America?

MC: Right now, because black lives and matters are so important, almost every person of colour has to respond to these issues. But for a long time Asian-Americans don't want to write about being Asian-Americans. A lot of

Asian-American writers are now third generation and of mixed race, and their writings have a different focus.

JW: In your poems you declare that 'we are neither black nor white'. This is meaningful.

MC: The two main issues in American history are slavery and the destruction of native Americans, historical events that have left a profound mark on history. On a more universal scale, I would say that there is the hatred against immigrants. Right now this becomes an urgent issue even in Europe, evidenced in the impact of Brexit. I think that area is under-addressed. There is in particular a discrimination against the model minority (the Asian-Americans), motivated by the fear that Asian-Americans are taking over the opportunities in education and employment. In the same way there is also the resentment against the Chinese taking over the world. These are all current concerns originating from the struggles for power and class.

MC: I echo Adrienne Rich's idea that the personal is political. My poetics is rooted in my personal history, and from there I examine the world around me. I see myself not just as a Chinese-American, but as a global citizen. I care about America but also about what happens in China. I see it as important to engage with the world.

Poetic language and forms

Q33

JW: Your poetic language is destabilized in meanings and offers a fascinating texture. Often, your poems are not that transparent. How do you help the reader decode your messages behind your poems?

MC: Poems are coded with messages and meanings. Back in the London Olympics, the BBC has chosen my poem, 'The Floral Apron', to represent Hong Kong. I am really pleased about that. That is one of my universal poems that people can relate to. King-kok Cheung, who now teaches in Shanghai, is interested in my use of Li Bai and Tang poetry references. Sometimes I like to subvert the poems to engage with the literary past, and to have a conversation with the ancients, while keeping them immediate to the 20th century readers. For years I have taken on the Chinese quatrain form, and blended in influences of the Western quatrains. I guess you can call it a postmodern engagement.

I have accessible poems like 'The Floral Apron' as well as pastiches in poems like 'The Rhapsody in Plain Yellow'. 'The Rhapsody' took me five years to write. I want my readers to be able to access the different levels of meanings in my poems.

Q34

JW: Your poems such as 'Sonnetnese', 'From a Notebook of an ex-Revolutionary' interrogate the relationship between the past and the present, offering a somewhat postmodern, postcolonial reading of history and ancestry. What role does poetry play in understanding or articulating history of your homeland?

MC: In one's oeuvre, one has to engage with the different aspects of poetry. For example, 'Sonnetnese' and 'From a Notebook of an Ex-Revolutionary' are all such provocative parodies. The original title of 'Sonnetnese' is 'Mao's Corpse'. I was teaching in Beijing and I went to see Mao's corpse. I was struck by the aftermath of Mao's era, how the Great Leap Forward has changed history in China forever. I went to a farmer's house and was struck by the Mao posters he has put up all over the house. He thought that Mao has brought progress to the society. At the same time, there's so much anger and grief coming from that era, so I really want to write about it.

MC: I think the Chinese is still grappling with that part of history. Maybe the Western reader will not be able to access those poems fully. I want to embrace my Chinese-ness. I would like to ask is it not possible to use bamboo as an image, just because it is oriental? I think it is possible because I have seen bamboo scaffolding. I don't want Ezra Pound to have the last say on Chinese poetry.

Q35

JW: Your ironies are so successful in capturing both the sad, the sublime and the ridiculous.

MC: It's important to see the absurdity in history. We can't take back those lives, so sometimes we have to engage with the past.

Q36

JW: Would you say that your play on poetic forms is becoming more Westernized in your recent collection? Do you see yourself more as an American poet nowadays?

MC: I don't know how people perceive my work. Poems such as 'One Child Has Brown Eyes' is written for Chinese-American readers. Some poems are more narrative and some are more experimental. I find that poetry is getting more and more relevant to the academic arena. My 'Twenty Five Haiku' was published in *Chicago* magazine. Some people loved it while there are also purists who hated the poem. I have kept the stanzas to 17 syllables but I subverted the frog image. I wrote a Chinese verse entitled 'Quiet the Dog, Tether the Pony', in which I took away all the punctuations. It reads like a Chinese translation but it is also an elliptical, postmodern poem. I took the line from Yeats. Yet it is a very Chinese poem because of the eclipsed pronouns.

Q37

JW: You are brilliant in capturing and welding the familiar and the alien, and your work offers refreshing insights on the power of naming and believing. Often, the coinage of words like 'Cougar Synonymous', 'Fathersong', 'De-territorialized', 'Kalifornia' etc suggests a new way of rewriting place(s), positions and identities. What is your rationale for naming things differently?

MC: I think it's important to reinvent with poetry. It's about making form and contents to work in a spectacular way. I try to challenge myself. I don't like to get too comfortable with a certain kind of poetry. I like to keep experimenting. It's important to love your genre and the possibilities. There's so much to explore for those poets with bilingual and multicultural backgrounds as well.

MC: At the same time, it is hard to place me and my writing in a coherent way. Although I call myself an activist writer, I also play on forms and traditions. I amalgamate poems. I also play with the postmodern narratives, even poems that are more akin to songs and speech acts.

Q.38

(JW) You are a poet and an academic. Do you think that your engagement with the academic world impacts on your poetry?

(MC) I retire early partly because I would like to devote more time to [writing] poetry. The ancients did that too, retreat to the countryside and write their poetry. Being knowledgeable on the theories helps me to be informed about the criticisms to do with poetry. By that I mean theories by the likes of Cixous and Said, and postcolonialist theories. But I never write essays. If I over-analyse, it takes the magic out of the creative process. Being an academic also means that I am very self-critical. I scrutinise each word and I have a hundred draft for some poems.

Influences and writing projects

Q39

JW: What are you reading?

MC: I am rereading Tu Fu, with the resonance about history. I reread Gertrude Stein. I love a very wide range of poetry. As to my favourites, there are T S Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Blake, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, amongst others.

Q.40

JW: Can you tell us more about what you are working on next?

MC: Recently I am writing long, prosaic lines. I try to be very faithful to the poem I am writing of the moment. I want each book to have its own identity. I am thinking of putting together my Selected Poems.

Interview with Hannah Lowe

(29 May 2017)

On home, belongingness and the current state of Britain

Q1

JW Your home culture is a mix of different places. How do you see the meaning of home and of being away?

HL I suppose I haven't grown up in one place and then migrated. I still live very near to the place where I was born in fact. I suppose I have always seen England as my home but more than that, I almost see London as a separate state from the rest of England or the UK. I feel very strongly rooted to the city, to a kind of urban living. In a mixed race household, with parents of different cultures, there's always an awareness of things beyond the local. So even when I was a child, even though I did not know where Jamaica or China were, or why my dad was from Jamaica or why his dad had come from China, they were always anchors in my understanding of myself.

Q2

JW How does the notion of place change your writing?

HL For *Chick*, I never meant to make an announcement of my mixed race identity. All I really wanted to write about was my dad. It's interesting to me. That's not the intention, but funny enough, once I felt there is some acceptance of my speaking on both platforms, it sort of gives me permission to say those things. *Chan* is on mixed race, of passing. I guess these are ideas that influence my writing. It surprised me that people take me as writing about multiculturalism... People must find it an anomaly. In a poetry reading, people are looking at me and considering, could she be Jamaican? Things that I wrote about in *Chick* seem to make me a spokesperson for multiculturalism, which is so far from what I intended.

Q3

JW You talked about homeland, that it is an anchor of some sort even if it is not comfortable territory.

HL One of the reasons why it is not comfortable territory is about appearances. I can't go to Jamaica and announce that I am from Jamaica because I look like the colonised. Nor can I go to China and say I am Chinese. I can't

be accepted on those terms. I am also not Chinese nor Jamaican but British. But that thing about acceptance is such a big thing. It gives me permission to write about it.

Q4

JW Do you think there is an ideal or utopian place where you belong?

HL No. I suppose I just feel this is where I belong, right here. I wonder if there are people who feel much more English than I do. I feel much more ambivalent. It's home because I feel familiar with things here, but politically I don't feel that way. I don't feel that English in that way.

Q5

JW. In your view, how has Brexit changed the people's sympathies or attitudes towards the representation of multiculturalism and immigrant identities?

HL. I think Brexit is a very complicated political event, but I read it as mostly a contest centred on class – the working classes hugely disenfranchised by austerity vs the middle and upper classes, and this mapped out over regions, so the traditional white working class terrains of the North-East for example, pushing against the increasing wealth and cosmopolitanism of the South-east. I don't think many people actually understood what the European Union does, but the idea of leaving Europe, gained enormous momentum, with immigration was figured as a major reason. I also heard an insidious, nostalgic nationalism being articulated in places – the idea that Britain could be restored to the former glory of the Empire. I don't think we, as a nation, have even been shamed about the Empire in the way that say, the Germany has been about Nazi Germany. I was horrified to hear the Empire being regaled in this way.

Multiculturalism was championed by the New Labour government at the end of the 1990s, in a direct contradiction of Thatcher's concept of Britain as a mono-cultural nation. It's never been without its problems, but the sentiment of celebrating Britain's plurality was a good one. In the light of Brexit, I feel quite pessimistic about how Britain may reconfigure this identity, and representations of immigrant identities (in poetry, fiction, film and so on) will be a part of this dialogue. I hope these they will challenge any notion

of monoculturalism, or the propagation of a Britain hermetically sealed off from other nations.

On hybridity and revealing the Chinese side

Q6

JW. The 'Borderliner' sequence of poems in Chan articulates the impossibility to decode cultural hybridity entirely. It is as if one's identity is always evolving based on acquisition of new knowledges. Can you shed light on your use and experiment with the poetic voices in the sequence (eg 'Genealogy' and 'Yellow River, Milk River'): are they meant to continue each other and remap a larger consciousness?

HL. Those particular poems reflect a tension between collection and individual consciousness, something I try to capture by juxtaposing two narratives, using bold/non-bold typography, the meaning of which varies across the poems, but is sometimes intended to signal the tension between narratives that are well-known, seemingly objective and/or 'historical', written in bold text, and those that are subjective, personal, unknown, silenced or suppressed. So in 'Milk River / Yellow River', I retell the public history of the Hakka Chinese, who have migrated far and wide from China, including to Jamaica. In Jamaica, the Hakka people are very proud of the ancestry and the community is tight-knit, prosperous, Christian, quite morally upright. But my own grandfather, who was Hakka, was by all accounts, none of these things! He lived a rather nomadic and financially reckless life, fathered many children by different black women, neglected those women and children. He beat my father so badly my father once held a gun to his head while he slept, but was too frightened of him to kill him. So the poem contrasts these two narratives, the public-historical and the personal-historical, and invites the reader to see the tension there.

The poems are continuations of each other. The same ideas are at work in 'Genealogy', which retells the story of being taken by members of the Chinese Benevolent Association to the Chinese Temple in Kingston and Chinese Cemetery, where members helped me to find my grandfather's grave. This was such a surprise to me, as I hadn't even known there was a cemetery, let alone that he was buried there. But there was a mild expectation that I had

come to pay 'filial duty' to my grandfather, which the poem attempts to complicate by articulating my personal knowledge of him as a man who beat his children and perhaps wasn't worthy of my respect. The tension in the poem is supposed to emerge through speaking this secret knowledge - the fact I can say it in the poem, but certainly not at the graveside.

Q7

JW Have you ever felt at home being where and who you are? If you do, what gives rise to this conviction?

HL I haven't really felt at home in a strong way, maybe just when I was a kid. There is always a constant conflict with myself - this confusion - a filter through which I see most things and the world. Here is where I lived is a very multi-racial space. I move through this space all the time. I know people are making assumptions about me. I never know whether I was meant to reveal my mixed race identity or not. Also, why would you do that? Why would I say to someone that I am part Chinese, and what sort of ground of Chinese do I claim? At the same time I do often feel compelled to say it.

Q8

JW Should ethnicity be considered or ignored when understanding your work?

HL In one sense you don't want to be pigeonholed. In another, these are political concerns. I write about suppressed history on racial transgression, things that people don't know about, and yet are relevant to the present reality. I am interested in writing about ethnicity and race only when it sheds light on the present.

Q9

JW Do you perceive or understand your Chinese roots?

HL The thing about my Chinese side in the family is my grandfather, who is a migrant in Jamaica. My dad is not so in touch with his Chinese side. He sees himself more as coming from Jamaica. He is also not on good terms with his own father. There is a denial of that culture. I am sure my dad can speak some Chinese but he never did. He did not talk about it with enthusiasm. The only thing he showed his enthusiasm was Chinese food. His father ran a Chinese grocery store in Jamaica, like many other Jamaicans, and his

whole childhood is a nomadic existence, from one Chinese grocery to another, with a father is a very abusive to him but also his only parent. My dad has learned how to make Chinese food from him, particularly Hakka, a food I grew up eating. It was a big part of our family life.

On diasporic imagination and writing about the family

Q10

JW In articulating place, do you ever find it hard when you fuse symbols and myths from another place?

HL What interests me about diaspora is not about writing those places that you know or you have been there, but about how you live. When you are diasporic, you have an imagination of those places, which may not have been in any way rooted to reality.

Q11

JW. In Chan, what is your intention for the 'If You Believe' poems in blurring the boundaries between family history and re-imagination, and the gesture of putting yourself on the map?

HL. On a simple level, the intention of those poems is to echo the desire that many people express, to have been alive at a different time, to have witnessed certain moments in history. I wish that I'd been alive to have met Joe Harriott, and in the first poem in the collection, I take the liberty of saying I have, and describing our relationship. And then in other poems of the same title, I do the same with the jazz drummer Phil Seamen and the card magician, Chan Canasta, both cultural figures of the 50s/60s that interest me.

The refrain 'if you believe' is an invitation to the reader to enter these historical fabrications with me, to suspend disbelief in order to experience the pleasures of the imagined encounter. I hope the reader also sees how these encounters might be implausible - the worlds depicted, particularly of jazz musicianship, were typically male ones, and I'm interested in exploring these forms of masculinity. Joe Harriott in particular, was known to have treated women poorly, but in the poem, I deliberately stray away from this characterisation, presenting Joe as paternal. This has no historical legitimacy, and

probably reflects my desire to have nurtured by a creative fore-runner in my family, but also to move away from stereotypical portrayals of jazz musicians.

The final 'If You Believe' poem returns to my father as the point of departure for the whole collection. The poem is intended to suggest a meeting between my father and me, as the first-person narrator, in an imaginary, possibly religious setting, suggested through some of the quasi-religious images and language, and the images of other people 'shapes in the dark' who are also having important dialogues. The specific 'talking' between the father and the narrator, in which he relates the story of his life is of course fictionalised - it is the conversation we didn't have the opportunity to have and the genesis of my research and writing about him.

Q12

JW. In your poems you unravel the magic and dreams rooted in the past: going back to the past to shed light on the present. As compared with your first collection, *Chan* reveals a more collective, historical past where individuals emerge. How do you see the relevance of history in the negotiation of a diasporic identity?

HL. Until recently, the 'old country' has always been my focus. I've been fixated on what my father's life must have been in rural Jamaica of the 1930s would have been like, or what the China that my grandfather left at the beginning of last century was like - so in that sense 'history' is crucial to the negotiation of diasporic identity, and I think plenty of people have written about the 'imaginary homeland' in different manifestations. In writing *Chan*, I read historical texts - histories of Jamaican decolonisation for example, of Jamaican culture and music - books like Ian Chambers's *The Dead Yard*, which gives quite a bleak view of Jamaica I think, but what comes through in this book are the stories of individuals, and I suppose that's always for me where history lifts off the page, when I encounter the individual narratives and struggles of people against their circumstances - and this is what I try to recreate in *Chan*, through various story-telling poems and monologues.

But present day Jamaica is also a focus in *Chan*. I try to capture some of the anxieties I felt in travelling back to a place I had a tenuous claim to, and in going there to ask questions that might not have been particularly welcome.

Both my father's remaining sister and brother are presented as ambivalent to my questions about my grandfather, since there was no love lost between them and their father. Similarly, I wanted to know about the secretive gambling dens that had once existed in Chinatown in Kingston, where he had played Mahjong, but my feeling was that this wasn't a side of the Chinese presence that anyone wanted to show me. I think this is also part of the negotiation of diasporic identity - how do you "return" to a place that you never in fact left, and whose codes and culture you do not have immediate access to? What kinds of belonging can be enacted in these contexts, if there is any belonging at all?

Q13

JW. In poems like 'In' or 'Distressed British Seamen', your poetic representation of England is blended with fiction and reality, hope and disillusionment. How do you see the relationship between nation/state and one's identity? Do you feel there is a necessary attachment and tension of allegiances?

HL. The names of the Distressed British Seamen in *Chan* are borrowed from real people, listed on the Ormonde passenger list, and the term 'Distressed British Seaman' refers to any seaman who find themselves without a ship in a foreign port. In wartime, this might be because a ship has been bombed, but a source I found indicated that in peace time the reasons might be less heroic - 'womanising', brawling, drinking, imprisonment and so on. I became quite fascinated with these possibilities, but also with seafarers themselves, who in some ways lived quite cosmopolitan lives, travelling between continents, working with foreign seaman and often living in very mixed communities in port towns. One of the DBS is in fact called Saeed, an Arabic name. When the first DBS announcers 'I knew black men at Tiger Bay - sea dog /from Cape Verde, Somali skippers. Now this lot / quiz me: England this or England that?' he is saying the Ormonde passengers are not the first black people he's seen, because Britain is already a hybrid nation, and many of the sea-faring communities have a decades-long presence. So in other words, I intended for the fictional seamen of *Chan* have an ambivalent relationship to the nation constructed on white monocultural terms.

Q14

JW How do you approach the gap in understanding between the East and West. Do you think that there is anything lost in translation or can it be bridged?

HL I think we still live in the aftermath of the problematic ideas of the East after Orientalism and postcolonialism, that the East is unknowable in some ways. I think you can learn about any other culture if you put your mind to it. I don't see why the East should be any more remote than anywhere else. The way we access the world: there is so much available at your fingertip. It's been a huge change compared to twenty years ago. I wonder if in China the people think about the West this way, but I doubt it.

On writing influences

Q15

JW What writers do you like?

HL There are the black American writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker; William Faulkner; Caribbean poets like Derek Walcott, and writers who write about immigrant experiences. I have always loved fiction. Poetry comes as a surprise to me.

Q16

JW How did you see your work as different from the mainstream poets?

HL Essentially I have always wanted to write about the underdogs. It's a political thing, to write about the marginalised people. Reading Kerry Young's novel, Pao, has made a crucial impact on me, realising that there are other people writing about such things. There's also Easton Lee, Chinese-Jamaican poet and vicar, whom I have met in Jamaica, with a collection From Behind the Shop Counter, which is about growing up in a Chinese grocery store in Jamaica. And there is a network of other Chinese-Jamaican artists out there, such as Jeanette Kong in Canada who has made a documentary. I feel more rooted among them as community.

An interview with Sarah Howe

(22 July 2015 & 4 August 2015)

On the meaning of home

Q1

JW: What do you think about being at home and being away? If you have experienced it, do you feel it has any temporary or permanent impact on your work?

SH: Home is where my family is. So I suppose it could be a portable concept, when you migrate for a longer tranche of time. Home is somewhere that can come with you. If pressed, I guess I think of England and especially London, the suburbs of London, where I spent the latter part of my childhood, as home. I started writing in earnest about ten years ago, which is also roughly when the thought process that would become *Loop of Jade* began. The catalyst was when I spent some time in America to study at Harvard - it must have had to do with being away, with leaving the familiar. It was the question of belonging and my own position in America, a place I'd never lived before, that engaged me back then. That sense of dislocation took me back to the feeling of being a seven-year-old in Hong Kong preparing to move to a new continent, being told by my parents where my 'real' home was.

Q2

JW: You mentioned being away twice, and that England is now your home. In terms of emotional connection with the place, have you always felt at home where you are or who you are?

SH: I have always felt both inside and outside of places. I was always something of an outsider in Hong Kong for those first seven years of my life because of being half-English, half-white, and not speaking Cantonese. I have to admit I wasn't old enough to be aware of the full strangeness of that predicament, except that I spent those years hearing my mother speak in a language that I don't understand. I suspect that sort of experience gets one thinking about the relationship between sound and meaning, and how easily it is severed. The real jolt was coming to England for junior school, because that was the first time I really had a sense of myself as a 'minority' person, whereas at my previous school in Hong Kong there had been quite a lot of Eurasian children like me. I remember children remarking on my strangeness

as a recent arrival, and not being well-versed in English culture. That was a period of discomfort, and the only time in my life when I encountered racism with any real intensity: the ‘slitty eyes’ gestures and ‘Ching Chong Chinaman’ sung in the playground. At that age, I think I did wish I was wholly white, if only because that would make things easier. I did silly things in a childish effort to integrate, to not stand out. I remember being given a box of talc one Christmas and trying to pat it over my face in an attempt to lighten it, thinking I could blend in better at school. I had a very simplistic notion of how assimilation worked. But I also sensed it was something my parents, and especially my mother, were worried about - that my brother and I would be marked out as different - and so it was also an anxiety I picked up from them.

On identity as a writer

Q3

JW: Do you see your identity as a Chinese writer? Should ethnicity be ignored or taken into account when readers appreciate your work?

SH: This is something I thought about as the book came together, and as I began to contemplate how it might be packaged or marketed. For some time, I had a different title in mind, *Lullaby Too Rough*, from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*: the phrase is quoted in a poem that didn’t make it into the final manuscript. ‘Lullaby too rough’ is still connected with the book’s underlying story, since the phrase comes from the speech delivered by the servant in Shakespeare’s play, who has been instructed to abandon the baby girl, Perdita, on the beach. That scene plays in my mind because of how it chimes with my own mother’s abandonment as a baby in China. I mention this because it shows that at one time I was thinking of a title for the book that wouldn’t include any overt signs of Chineseness. Before the book was published, I could see how much sense ‘Loop of Jade’ would make as the title poem of the collection, knitting together as it does so many of the book’s underlying themes. And yet I was nervous about having such an obvious - one might even say clichéd - ethnic marker as ‘jade’ in the title, because I feared how that would colour readers’ preconceptions about the book. In the event, my editor and I decided that the phrase was, on balance, rescued from cliché by the strangeness of the ‘loop of...’ construction. As a

symbol of inheritance and protection, the jade bracelet I was gifted by my adoptive grandmother as a baby was too potent a talisman to pass up.

On the question of whether I see myself as a Chinese writer, I guess that has to be answered in concert with whether I see myself as Chinese in a larger sense. In lots of ways even my mother is atypically Chinese, even before you get to me. Because she grew up as a tenuously adopted orphan, whose supposed parent would often disappear or melt away, neither she nor I have any extended Chinese family structure, a phenomenon I feel is of huge cultural significance among other families in Hong Kong. I just don't fit into that kind of familial and social fabric, which for my Chinese friends seems such an important element in their sense of self and origin. The question of whether I consider myself Chinese has become one bound up with my writing. After the first few years of being in England, by the time I got to secondary school, I did not think too consciously about my Chineseness at all. I started to think of myself as basically white, although obviously I do straddle the two categories. I am interested in how race is perceived. Sometimes people think I am white, sometimes Chinese, sometimes biracial, but those ventured categorizations are largely beyond my control. But when I travel in China and Hong Kong, I am definitely perceived as a foreigner, for reasons of linguistic incompetence if nothing else. Very occasionally Chinese people in England have asked me if I'm Japanese!

I don't think I would call myself a 'Chinese poet,' as that doesn't feel like an identity I can lay claim to; 'British-Chinese poet' perhaps, but even that feels like an oversimplification. 'Hong Kong poet' is another lens through which I've begun to consider my work more recently. As a label it feels truer to some extent, if only because Hong Kong's own identity is so cosmopolitan, so bound up with migration, departure and return. I think Western eyes sometimes don't appreciate quite how various a category 'Chineseness' is - that to be from mainland China, or Hong Kong, or Taiwan, or Malaysia, each implies very different things, and that's even before you start getting into the diaspora. A Singaporean friend asked me recently why so many of my poems refer to mainland China, its history and myth, when my own background - my mother was born in Guangdong province in the south, but never visited China again after moving to Hong Kong as a baby - is so remote from Beijing and the centralized power in the north. I think my answer would be that my mum always saw herself as part of 'China' as a larger cultural entity,

even as her politics were opposed to the central regime's. I think I picked up that sense of simultaneous connection and resistance from her.

Q5 JW: How you see the relationship between your writing and homeland?

SH: My poem, 'Crossing from Guangdong,' is concerned with what it means to travel back to a place you might, as an immigrant, postulate as a sort of mythical point-of-origin, but where you haven't lived for most of your life. Especially its final section tries to dramatize the dawning realization that no matter how much of a homeland that place is in your mind, no matter how beautiful, the reality simply can't bear that weight of expectation.

Q6

JW: From your experience, is there some utopian or idealized version(s) of place?

SH: I think place is perhaps more susceptible to idealization than people are. I might be quite realistic, even disenchanting, when it comes to thinking about people I'm close to, but place bears a sort of instinctive emotional freight for me, which I've tried both to evoke and resist in my poems. I'm thinking about the roots of 'nostalgia' in the Greek *nostos*, or 'homecoming': it's the same word used of the sea journeys the Greek heroes like Odysseus made in the wake of the Trojan war, trying desperately to return home. *Loop of Jade* is a kind of homecoming. On one hand, the book is concerned with journeys, and especially with the idea of crossing from one place to another: a sort of lateral movement. On the other hand, its poems recurrently evoke the idea of the loop, or circling, which often has more to do with time. The three long poems spaced across the book, 'Crossing from Guangdong,' 'Loop of Jade' and 'Islands,' move backwards in time, beginning with my symbolic pilgrimage to Hong Kong and then looping back in time. 'Islands' is in fact spoken in the voice of a character very like my mother, recalling the places of her childhood.

On poetic language and writing journey

Q7

JW: Is it hard to write those poems in your mother's voice?

SH: I wrote 'Islands' quite early on. These poems are based on conversations I had with my mother, during the evenings, when stories of her childhood came pouring out. I love her very much, but we don't have conversations of that degree of intensity very often, and so those outpourings on her part became quite exceptional occasions for us. Although I had known she was an orphan from when I was very small, I didn't know about any of the specifics of her early life before those late-night conversations in my twenties. Some of the topography of Hong Kong in that poem is based on my own experiences, sensory details of the heat or smell, say, that I inserted from my own childhood memories. So in that sense it is a composite voice, which I think is to some extent unavoidable when writing dramatic monologue: the form calls for a degree of stylization, a heightening of image and register. The trick is, at the same time, not to let the 'poetic' nature of the voice become too obtrusive.

I was quite nervous when I showed her poems like 'Islands' and 'Loop of Jade' for the first time, asking her whether it would be alright for them to be published in that form. We are quite an awkward family, full of silences about important things even at the best of times, so I initially found it quite nerve-racking sharing the poems with her and my father. We've obviously had many conversations on that topic now, but I still don't know what she really thinks about these poems. She did say once that they felt strangely like fiction to her, despite the familiar events and fixtures. I imagine it must be a bit like watching a film of your life - the uncanny feeling that the actors are getting everyone you know slightly wrong. Another challenge was my wish to capture the way my mum speaks: the particular patterns, oddities and hesitations of her English, which come to the fore in the poem, 'Loop of Jade.' I wanted to capture the feeling of someone who is having to stop to translate in her head, then offering up an English word that will do, but somehow isn't quite right.

Q8

JW: When you write, who do you write for?

SH: I suppose my ideal reader would be one who approached the poems with a degree of openness, generosity and the willingness to revisit them more than once. I suppose I usually write to please myself, first and foremost, but in the past my imagined community of readers didn't reach all that far -

mentors, workshop groups, trusted fellow poets, magazine editors (though when it came to imagining those magazines' readerships, I had more trouble). Of course my work won't be everyone's cup of tea, and there's no problem with that, but I would prefer to have faith in the reader and try to earn their trust in return. I work in a range of styles, some of which are more experimental, while others verge on the confessional. In recent years, I started to see this stylistic divide as yet another way in which my sense of straddling two worlds - and not wanting to be too settled or comfortable on either side - plays out in my work.

One last consideration is the extent to which, in the early stages at least, I was writing these poems with an implicitly Western reader in mind. This started to shift, however, in the last few years as I realized that Chinese people, British-Chinese people, Asian people more generally, were starting to turn up at my readings. I found the responsibility of this quite anxiety inducing: the notion that they were seeking out my work because it spoke particularly to them, because it dealt with experiences - experiences familiar to them - that felt unrepresented in the wider culture. I remember I was also quite nervous of being judged unfit to write about Chinese subjects at all, on account of being half-British. In the event, I think this fear spoke more to my own fears than it did to the feelings of those Asian audience members. It's very clear to me that *Loop of Jade* isn't some sort of dispatch from an 'authentic' China, but the record of a writer trying to forge some sort of tentative relationship with a culture that is very much not a given.

Q9

JW: How do you see the relationship between your ethnicity or roots, and your writing?

SH: In the back of my mind, I sometimes thought I should stop writing poems to do with Chineseness, that I should draw a line at some point, for fear of being reductively labeled. There are a lot of poems in the book - perhaps even a majority, though I haven't totted up the pages - that have nothing to do with China at all, but were inspired by medieval Flemish paintings or English gardens. But you might not guess that from reading some reviews of *Loop of Jade*. I know of other ethnic minority poets who have felt the same fear of being pigeonholed.

Q10

JW: How do you see your diaspora or culturally hybrid identity?

SH: As far as diaspora is concerned, I have never particularly felt part of a 'community' of Chinese people in this country, simply because I didn't know that many Chinese people in the UK growing up. I had a couple of British-born-Chinese friends at secondary school, one of whom remains one of my closest friends. The composite monsters of my Borges encyclopedia poems - Sirens, Sphinxes, the 'chimera' mouse that glows green thanks to the jellyfish genes spliced into its DNA - offered a helpful vehicle for thinking about cultural and racial hybridity. What it means to be assigned to categories or grids of identity - categories you might embrace or wish to resist - is what those poems are concerned with exploring.

Q11

JW: What are your views towards Chinese vs. English poetics? Are you influenced by any Chinese poets?

SH: I am not anywhere near as well-read in Chinese poetry as I am in English, though I have read many anthologies and collections by individual Chinese poets in recent years. Increasingly I found I wanted to have access to the poems in the original instead of relying on translations - a dream that remains somewhat remote for me, even since I began studying Chinese in my late twenties. I have just enough Mandarin to follow along happily in parallel-text editions, albeit with constant reference to the dictionary, but not enough to judge the quality or nuance of the translations. Thinking about the points at which Chinese and English poetics have met in the past, *Loop of Jade* grapples explicitly with the legacy of Ezra Pound, and the question of how Chinese culture reached Europe in the age of Modernism. Pound's convoluted process of translating the Cathay poems - via the crib translations of Li Po made by Ernest Felton, who didn't himself speak Chinese, but relied on Japanese scholars to act as intermediaries - the sheer inauthenticity of that process, the un-authoritative nature of his approach, were somehow liberating for me.

The fraught fantasy space of *Chinoiserie* - the Orient as imagined by a European willow-pattern plate or a modernist poet 'translating' Li Po - became an important entry-point for exploring my sense of racial and cultural in-

betweeness. I'm fascinated by moments when you might suddenly glimpse the world through the eyes of an 'other' and be startled. *Loop of Jade* repeatedly stages moments like that. I have on my wall a copy of a woodcut by Hiroshige II whose original I saw once in Japan. It's part of a triptych depicting nineteenth-century London: the artist has heard about monuments like London Bridge and St Paul's, but they become an arched wooden bridge and tiered pagoda respectively, while the English society ladies sport Japanese parasols.

Q12

JW: Do you have any difficulty in articulating in the English language or in articulating your otherness?

SH: I feel very at home communicating in English. My degree of command in English probably demonstrates, to her mind, why my mother did not want to raise me as a bilingual person. Influenced by the scientific studies of the time, I think she was concerned with the possibility that a bilingual education would slow down language acquisition, or harm it overall, leaving me speaking an imperfect or accented English. I think she was afraid that I wouldn't fit into the target culture that she wanted me to be part of - that is, my father's culture. On another level, I don't believe she would ever articulate this to herself consciously, but I think she wanted to protect me from Chineseness in some sense, or at least from the harsher aspects of the culture she grew up in. I have always felt great discomfort or sadness or inadequacy being a part-Chinese person who cannot speak comfortably in Chinese. There is always this sense of loss, and I think it comes through strongly in this book. The book is an artefact designed, in some ways, to try to recover that lost heritage.

On culture and identity

Q13

JW: Are you concerned that there is a gap of understanding between East and the West, things being untranslated. Do you think it is easy or difficult to convey your meanings?

SH: I have always found that it made intuitive sense to me, the notion that human experience is not universal, not straightforwardly translatable across languages or borders –that the Western, or British, or American (and so on)

way of seeing the world is far from being the only way. I suppose my background explains why I should feel like this. I confess to being troubled by the dominance of English as a 'world language'. It's hardly an original thought of mine, but the traditional Anglophone complacency about not particularly seeking out foreign works for translation, not valuing the labours of literary translators, just reinforces that sense of perspectival centrality. It has been an interesting experience for me learning Chinese as an adult and feeling intrigued, even wonderingly estranged, by the stark differences between how English and Chinese treat grammar. This gets us into the fascinating territory of cognitive linguistics, pointing especially towards Benjamin Whorf's contested work on linguistic relativity and the idea that the language you speak shapes your world view, often popularly invoked by that hoary piece of apocrypha about Eskimos' fifty words for snow. As a poet I have some instinctive sympathy for Wittgenstein's suspicion that the 'limits of my language mean the limits of my world', though I recognize that this question is hardly settled among linguists and philosophers.

Where Chinese specifically is concerned, a couple of years back I read Perry Link's *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2013), which revisits George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on conceptual metaphor in various fascinating and innovative ways. For example, he revisits the question of how English and Chinese each express time concepts in terms of space, mapping past and future as up or down - that sort of thing. In the process, Link manages to debunk the longstanding claim that the two languages treat this spatialization of time concepts in fundamentally different ways, revealing the tendency of past Sinologists to exoticize Chinese in this respect. My poem 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' tackles some related ground on the question of Sino-European relations and 'mistranslation'. But at a more personal level, the poems about my mother in *Loop of Jade* are also full of little 'false friends' type moments - like her use of the phrase 'boarding school' to describe the institution in Macau described in 'Loop of Jade' and 'Islands', even though 'boarding school' means something so radically different to English ears, with its associations of elitism and privilege. I spent my childhood watching my mum searching for a word in English, before settling on something I sensed she didn't feel was adequate to describe the Chinese phenomenon at hand - quite possibly because an exact English equivalent didn't exist.

To address your question in broader cultural and political terms, I am much more immersed in English media than Chinese media. I feel the way China is reported here suggests that there might be a continuation of Yellow Peril-type misunderstanding, which sometimes emerges when British people talk about China's emergent power in aggressive, even fearful terms. Thinking back to Niall Ferguson's recent TV series about China, I often found his way of interacting with his Chinese interviewees in that programme objectionable: his tone was so patronizing, even to the Chinese academics he spoke to. Moments like those feel to me like they reveal a continuing gap of understanding.

Q14

JW: I enjoyed your poem 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush'.

SH: Despite my lack of my command or fluency, I have been trying to incorporate Chinese snippets or characters that disrupt the surface of my poems, in an effort to convey there are different ways to understand the world than alphabetically. That poem, 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' is a sort of a meditation on and quarrel with Ernest Fenollosa's famous essay, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. As edited and published by Ezra Pound, it offered a sort of poetics of natural law rooted in the supposed characteristics of the Chinese writing system. My poem opens with a much older version of this same Utopian fantasy, as illustrated by the Jesuits Missionaries of the seventeenth-century and the hopes they projected onto Chinese writing as they encountered it for the first time. Thanks to the visual immediacy of its ideograms, they speculated that Chinese might be the perfect Adamic tongue - the language originally given to man by God, which suffered no gap between sign and referent - thought lost since Eden and Babel. As Umberto Eco has shown, this 'universal language' was a sort of questing beast for European Renaissance thinkers - at different times, other candidates included Hebrew, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, or various South American languages. Indeed, the Borges essay that gives *Loop of Jade* its epigraph touches on the historical search for this perfect language. 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' plays a tricky game with these ideas, on the one hand attempting to evoke this Western enchantment with the magical immediacy of Chinese, while on the other hand debunking it: the scholar-poet does lose his boat after all.

JW: It's interesting how you blend in the idea of enchantment, familiarity and mystery, and to go back to ancient sources or materials.

On relationship between family and writing

Q15

JW: How does your family impact on your identity?

SH: This is an important question for the book. I'd answer this is by talking about the 'loop of jade' that gives the book its name and the symbolic force it holds. It refers to the jade bracelet, sized for a baby's wrist, which my mother's adoptive mother bought for me when I was born. She had it blessed it at the temple at the same time as having my fortune told. As you know, such bracelets are meant to serve as a protective talisman for the toddling baby: the idea is that, should he or she fall, the jade will smash rather than the child being hurt. As an object that had a sort of direct, tactile contact with my family's past (it's practically the only object I have that passed through my adoptive Chinese grandmother's hands) this means I attribute to it some emotive value as an heirloom, despite its relative newness. For me it is a symbol of inheritance – a continuous circle, though one whose very purpose depends on the fact it can be broken– which I think aptly figures my own broken connection to my Chinese heritage. It was given to me by a Chinese grandmother I never really knew, and to whom I wasn't related by blood, because she was the woman who took in my mother as a baby. For me, that jade bracelet points both to the fracture in my family tree and to my efforts to reconnect with some sense of my Chinese ancestry.

Q16

JW: You are aware of this sense of connectedness to the past in addition to who you are.

SH: Yes, sometimes in quite strange ways: I have this uncanny sense whenever I go to Hong Kong or Guangdong that everyone I pass in the street could potentially be my family - long lost cousins, say. The fact that people from that part of the country do look so much like my mother - I sometimes think I see her in the crowd walking through a busy MTR station - gives rise in me to this sense of generalized kinship with the place that can't quite be pinned down. This is partly because the odds suggest that I probably do have a host of cousins, aunts, uncles, or other relations still living in that part of China,

and yet I can never know who they are. I think this feeling has shaped my poetry's encounters with the place.

On influences

Q17

JW: Are there any Chinese authors or Western authors who have influenced you?

SH: Most of the epigraphs in my book are from Western writers, with the exception of Mao and the collection of Buddhist koans - maybe there are more, but I can't remember off the top of my head. This probably does reflect my Western reference points and habits of thought. As for Chinese writers, I'm sure a book like *Wild Swans* has influenced me, as can be seen in a poem like 'Tame,' whose very title is a sort of simultaneous homage and riposte to Jung Chang's unavoidable volume. Xinran is also someone I have read quite a lot, especially on the question of Chinese mothers who have given away children, the twentieth-century and earlier history of that phenomenon. Yu Hua is also very interesting. His novels might well have influenced me in ways I'm not aware of - Zhang Yimou's film version of *To Live* was certainly a touchstone of my twenties, perhaps even more so than the original book. Yu Hua's recent essays in *China in Ten Words* really stuck in my mind-I've read that book several times. His thinking about how the political utterances of Chinese dissidents might need to be evasive in nature, working through metaphor and implication, has been important to me. However, with Chinese writers like these, I'm conscious how a historical moment like the Cultural Revolution looms very large in their work, but is not really a part of my own mother's story, since she was in Hong Kong through those years. And so in turn the Cultural Revolution isn't part of *Loop of Jade's* imaginative landscape except quite tangentially, despite the disproportionately large role that subject matter usually plays in Western audiences' engagement with Chinese authors. Going back to non-fiction about Chinese culture, he's not Chinese of course, but the American journalist Peter Hessler's books have also been very important to me, especially *Oracle Bones*, which treats the excavated layers of Chinese history in a way I think had a noticeable impact on *Loop of Jade*.

JW: You have read quite a lot of Chinese fiction.

SH: I've been trying to, but not managing to get through as much as I'd like. I find it easier to get immersed in the stories and not worry so much about language and the translation, which is what I find when I'm reading Chinese poets in English.

Q18

JW: It is also quite noticeable that your work has been influenced by literature in the West.

SH: Yes, of course, that makes sense. This is particularly so considering the reading and writing I do because of my job as a scholar of English Renaissance literature, immersing myself in Shakespeare, Sidney, Donne and so on. I guess my writing illustrates the extent to which I am embedded in that tradition, but also writing against it in some ways.

Q19

JW: It is an interesting experiment of the poetic voice, even if the materials have to do with your family or personal life.

SH: My poem 'Yangtze', for example, echoes the tropes and landscapes of a Classical Chinese poem - in some ways its stance is that of a parody, albeit an admiring and affectionate one. But the poem also attempts to grapple with the challenges faced by a contemporary China caught up in fits of modernization that often prove traumatic. The clash of poetic styles - or in the case of 'Yangtze', the clash between style and subject matter - is a way for me to explore various thematic questions by indirect means. I thought hard in the last years of writing *Loop of Jade* about whether my work could be accused of indulging in a sort of decorative, exoticizing 'self-tokenisation.' I think it boiled down to an anxiety about not being able to control how the poems would be read, yet not wanting to spell it all out too crassly for the reader. But in lots of ways, this particular worry goes to the heart of the questions to do with identity, politics and representation the book takes it upon itself to explore.

In borrowing their epigraph from the Borges 'Chinese encyclopedia,' that central suite of poems springs from a Western writer's self-conscious exercise in Orientalist projection - and the poems themselves dance a complex

dance of advance and ironic withdrawal. In fact, I've been so heartened in recent months that readers of the book, especially its Chinese readers, do overwhelmingly seem to receive *Loop of Jade* in the way it was intended: neither as an exotic dispatch from an 'authentic' China, nor as a series of Western-imposed clichés, but as a work that troubles at both ideas.

Q20

JW: You have a lot of interest in Chinese classical literature, especially poetry. Who are the writers you enjoy?

SH: I can't say I am a scholar of that area, but I do have a great fondness for the usual-suspect Tang poets. I also absolutely love Eliot Weinberger's *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. It was a revelation to me, and extremely interesting because of the idea that translations need constantly to be re-made for each generation. That book shaped the way I read Classical Chinese poetry. Among modern poets, I was reading for a long time poets like Yang Lian, Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, the Misty Poets, partly because they were - still are - the Chinese poets most prominently available in English translation in the UK. More recently I've been making more of an effort to seek out contemporary female Chinese poets, so a volume like Eleanor Goodman's wonderful translation of Wang Xiaoni's *Something Crosses My Mind* was a god-send.

Q21

JW: Do you think there is any Chinese-ness in your work or the work of other poets?

SH: It's an interesting question, to consider what might link Chinese poets from the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong with those from the diaspora, though I'm not sure I'm qualified to speculate. From my own perspective, there is not really a tradition of British-Chinese poetry to draw on yet. All of us who might be tentatively grouped under that label are such recent arrivals: me, you, Jane Yeh, Kit Fan, and so on. None of the poets on that list was born in the UK. Hannah Lowe was born in England, but her Jamaican heritage also links her to quite another, equally rich strand in the history of Chinese diaspora. The situation in the UK is so different from America, where a whole

burgeoning tradition of Asian-American poetry continues to thrive. It is interesting to think about why that sort of tradition didn't emerge earlier on in Britain, but is only just beginning (I hope!) to put down roots now.

Interview with Eleanor Goodman
(3 July 2014, Sanlitun, Beijing)

On translation and contemporary Chinese poets

Q1

JW: Congratulations on your book on Wang Xiaoni. How does your translation project come about and why do you decide to translate Wang Xiaoni's poetry?

EG: Thank you! At the beginning, I have translated a few of Wang's poems and really enjoyed them. I was translating a lot of different poets at the time, and I wanted to do a book-length project. I wanted to translate a female poet, because women's poetry tend to be more overlooked both in poetry scenes in China and in terms of who got translated. Having read through my lists of women poets, I narrowed it down to Lan Lan and Wang Xiaoni, and I fell in love with Wang's poetry.

She has a wonderful, delicate balance between the personal and the public. She doesn't reveal very much about herself. She is very private as a person and as a poet. She also addressed a lot of social issues that I am interested in.

I got very interested in her history and longevity, because a lot of the poets who came up in the 1980s, even Shu Ting, didn't keep up with their writing, whereas Wang has been steadily producing, be it poetry, essays (*san wen*) or children's books. She has always been producing. In this translated book, it opens with her early poem back in 1985, and ends with her recent poem written in 2011, spanning her career. I am interested to shed light on her arc of development as a poet.

Q2

JW: Do you think this project has given you new understanding on her work?

EG: It definitely did. If you translate one poem, you can gain a very deep understanding of that poem, but you don't necessarily appreciate the poet's larger projects or overriding concerns. The whole project took me around

two years. It was wonderful and frustrating. As I kept translating, it deepened my understanding of her poetry, including poems I translated and published before. That was an unexpected pleasure and discovery. There were also poems that I translated and have not been included in the book, so I gained a strong sense of her as a writer. It changed the way I read her. At the beginning, it's harder to appreciate her...acute social consciousness. I think she understands what is happening in this country and is very interested in it, something that remains true throughout her writing life.

Q3

JW: How do you see the differences between Chinese and English language, and how does it affect poetry translation?

EG: Chinese and English are so incredibly, structurally different: the grammar, the inflections, the ordering... The way a Chinese word can be a noun or a verb. There are lots of things you can do in Chinese that you can't do in English. It can be quite difficult, especially when you don't have the context. For example, in terms of writing voice, it can be in the past or present or even the future tense. So often my way of translating is to add in information or take away ambiguity from the original, which can be frustrating, because sometimes the poet is consciously manipulating ambiguities, in double meanings, so that the lack of clarity of some lines actually carry some emotional weight. In the Tang poetry, you virtually don't find any pronouns, as they are implied, a feature that is carried on even in some contemporary poetry. This will sound strange in English poetry.

In my opinion one of the marks of bad translation is where you have all of these hanging clauses but no subject: often in English it just reads as awkward and uncomfortable because of the way we think. As a translator you have to make a decision about the ambiguity: do I keep it or interpret it? If it is implied, then I will have to add in the implied ambiguity. If it is a deliberate ambiguity, one has to decide whether and how one can maintain that ambiguity. This is quite different from translating French, as you can mimic some of the structures. With Chinese, you are handling a very different material. It is a pleasure as well as challenge, as it gives you a lot of freedom as a translator.

On the identity of a Chinese writer

Q4

JW: is there some kind of 'Chinese-ness' that you can see in contemporary Chinese poetry?

EG: This is a very controversial question which I don't want to wade into that debate for now. On the other hand, from my experience as a translator and from my personal observation in Beijing, I think there is a difference. Chinese poets today are acutely aware of their language as having been and still being used to political purpose, and that sense of language as being manipulated or unclean (*bu gan jing*) produces a sense of self-awareness and an awareness of the implications of that language, which American poets may not have. In the US a lot of the writers trust their language and feel comfortable in that language, and use it as their mother tongue. Whereas in China poets are more suspicious of their own language, especially among the older generation of poets, who are aware their language has been manipulated or abused for various purposes.

On the traditions and influences of Chinese poetry

Q5

JW: you have translated classical Chinese poetry as well as contemporary writings. Having translated both, what new understanding have you gained about the two traditions?

EG: I feel very glad I have started out translating Tang poetry, and read a lot of it, because these poems do lend me a precious perspective towards the argument going on here in the last two decades, the tension among those who think that poetry should draw on ancient poems (*gu shi*) for inspiration, or whether poetry should open up, be able to draw their materials from western sources or literature. One thing that strikes me most is that the active Chinese poets born in 1960s onwards read voraciously and read a diverse range of works, from T S Eliot to Octavia Paz, much more so than American poets. So a lot of their works bear these influences. You can read some works by Chinese writers who are influenced by Szymborska. For example, in the poetry of Wang Ao, a young Chinese poet born in 1970s, who is now in the States. He has a series of poems in the form of *jue ju*, but made contemporary. It's like reinventing the sonnet. Wang's poems as such are allusive and interested in the language and sound itself, and although

they don't read like Tang poems, you can see the Tang poems in them. There's a kind of fracture and it becomes very heated, where some people see themselves in the classical poetry tradition, and others who directly reject that, as well as those who are interested in being receptive to influences.

In my translation work of Chinese poets under the age of 40, I have been struck over and over again by how sophisticated and informed their works are, their excitement with which they embrace translation. It's a wonderful kind of intellectual curiosity and hunger for other possibilities of writing and other traditions. It's very admirable. Moreover, many of these poets have read a lot more of Chinese literature as well as foreign literature. In China, people take poetry seriously. They think it's important and it matters who you are reading. They argue about it. It's heartening.

Q6

JW: So there is a lot of participation and competition.

EG: Indeed. But it's also interesting too that Wang Xiaoni has managed to stay away from these debates. It tends to be true for women poets in general. So it's a very gendered scene.

Q7

JW: Who are the Chinese poets that you like?

EG: There are so many! Zang Di is a wonderful and a very influential poet, and an important critic as well. I am translating a book of his now. He is very different from Wang Xiaoni, in that he is very philosophical. Lan Lan's work is wonderful. She is so lyrical and acute. I also enjoy reading Chen Dongdong, who is very active in the 1980s. On the other hand, the writings of Sun Wenbo, from Sichuan, has the flavour of a lao gan bu (veteran cadre). His style is very expansive and intuitive. Xu Yue is a very promising young poet, with a very unique voice. I also like Yu Xiang, from Shandong, who adopts a very clean and removed writing style, and her work has a lot of strength in it. Also, I like the Hong Kong writer called Luo Feng (Natalia Chan), who is very feminist and very engaged with the contemporary culture.

Q8

JW: Do you think there is a lot of surrealism in Chinese poetry and poetic language?

EG: There is a wonderful poet whom I don't usually mention, Zhang Er... his work can be quite surreal, but it is not European surrealism. It is incredibly Chinese, it is about juxtaposition of things that don't fit comfortably, and reveals a decentered world. Also there is the recent works of Xiao Kaiyu. As you put together his images you seem to experience a sense of fragmentation. Bai Hua plays a lot with surrealism and storytelling. There is Zhang Zao, who unfortunately died from lung cancer a few years ago. With a PhD philosophy and having spent a considerable time in Germany, Zhang's works are beautiful and surreal, but in a more classical sense of surrealism. I also want to mention the late poet, Ma Yan, whose works are amazing. Her poetry feels like you are riding on a roller-coaster, and you can never quite get it all because it is going so fast.

Interview with Xichuan

(9 July 2014)

Differences between Chinese and Western literature

XC: Before 1989, the European writers were keen to experiment in their writings. After 1989, with the collapse of communist power in Eastern European countries, the era brought with it genuine problems that could not be evaded. What she said made me reflect on the difference between literature in the East and West. In the West, there is a constant interest in the experimentation with form and consciousness. Chinese literature, particularly before 1989, was much affected by realism in the West during the nineteenth-century. On the contrary, there was not so much emphasis on experimentalism.

So the Chinese writer challenges not so much against form but against moral judgment. In general, those widely disseminated are the ones who confront the moral boundaries. Of course there are also those who challenge politically. But in my opinion there are not many good writers in this arena. I feel that many writers have done better in offering moral critiques than political critiques.

We have lived in China for a long time. I once talked to an American photographer who did *100 Chinese Faces*. He asked me about the Cultural Revolution. In my travels to other countries, and noticed how many Chinese studies in the West have all depicted the Cultural Revolution as a terrible event. I was a child when it happened, and did not know how the other countries, so there is nothing to compare with. So to me, as a small child, the revolution was as natural as air. Life carried on, with or without the Revolution. Although it was a terrible event, but me and the other kids still played our games or fought among ourselves. There's also life alongside the revolution.

I once spoke with a female poet from South Africa, who said that South Africa is not all just about the Apartheid. She was born in South Africa. According to her, she still carried on with her family life, met with friends and so on, and had a romantic relationship, so there are many other things happening outside the system as well, no matter what the system is.

So this is a way how the West oversimplifies, and distills their understanding of China in terms of symbolic events. We also see the West in the same way. For example, we thought of America in terms of their President, democracy and so on. We thought of the UK in terms of the Queen, the prince, the royals...We don't really know the real life of the British. We always tend to oversimplify. While we are all aware of the many problems in China, I would highlight that the tolerance level of the Chinese people are different from the people in the West.

Moreover, if you live in China, it is almost impossible to expect the country to become like the West. For example, if I give a talk in the US, they will write up a contract for it. In China, they will just give you the money. From these you can notice how different the systems are in the West and in China.

We live in a country where we speak a very different language. Our language uses shorter sentences and leap from one idea to another, whereas English is a language of logic. For example, Shelley's 'Ozymandias' is a poem made up of a very long sentence. This is almost impossible in Chinese. Charles Dickens also likes to use long sentences. While it is easier to escape from logic in Chinese as we do not use so many long sentences. As such, this is a question of language as well as politics. I once wrote an article on the subject of language, in which I analysed the differences between Chinese and English language.

On influences

XC: For example, I have read so many French poets back then, such as Baudelaire, Mallarme, Verlaine, Rimbaud, to the less brilliant poets such as Supervielle. There are also poets who are related to China such as Saint John Perce. These are all early twentieth-century poets. There's also Segalen. From Germany, there are Rilke and Trakl whom I enjoy most. In Spain, I like Garcia Lorca, Aleixandre, and Machado. The most meaningful poets to me are still T S Eliot and Pound. Other than Cathay, Pound has translated the Confucian teachings such as *She Jing (Odes)*, *Great Learning and Zhongyung*. Contrary to Ezra Pound, there's Borges. They are almost opposites, but I like both of them, the works of Borges characterised by its mathematical precision. I almost enjoy many Eastern European literature, such as Borovsky. I have also translated Milosz and the *Book of Conversations* by Borges, as well

as the works by Pound and Gary Snyder. I read and enjoyed many American poets.

Sometimes, I find that I can talk about Western literature with American writers, but on the other hand, they cannot talk about Chinese literature in the same depth. It might have something to do with the speed and scope of our translation work. In China, there is an average of a hundred books of American literature translated into Chinese. On the other hand, only an average of two Chinese books are translated into English.

The works of immigrant writers are much valued in English-speaking countries, such as Salman Rushdie (India), Naipaul (Caribbean), Kazuo Ishiguro (Japan), and Booker Prize winner Ben Okri (Nigeria), Kiran Desai (India) and Arundhati Roy. These are people who write about other experiences and other ways of thinking. Some Chinese writers outside China such as Yiyun Li and Ha Jin (US-based) and Guo Xiaolu (UK-based), have gained much attention.

On diasporic Chinese writers

XC: From my own observation, a Chinese writer who has relocated to America, let's say, can only talk about his country in past tense. For me, I live in the country and have experienced the country's changes in the last thirty years. For the writer who has moved abroad, these dramatic changes are such a distant matter for him. The only information he has about the country comes from the media and the Internet, which is limited to certain topics or contents. For me, who live here, I can observe many other different things over the years. The historical logic cannot be reflected in the news or media contents the diasporic writer received.

On the other hand, I remember a reviewer mentioned that my writing is not based on a brief sojourn, but reflects what one knows from living in a place for a long time.

Typically, a Chinese writer abroad likes to write about the exotic.

A foreigner who comes to China is always looking for an ancient temple because he is a tourist. In fact, if a temple is a famous temple, the temple

would have received a lot of donations and hence would have been renovated. The contradiction lies here. So the way you observe a temple is not to judge the temple by its exteriors, but to tell its history by looking for ancient trees onsite.

There is the risk of a Chinese diasporic writer to write about China from the perspective of a tourist, because of his readership. For example, there has been an article written by a Chinese professor criticising Ha Jin's *Waiting* for eroticising Chinese society because he writes about women with bound feet in a period when that foot-binding practice has been abolished already. So there is the question of readership. A Chinese poet living in Mainland China writes for a Chinese audience, while a Chinese writer who lives abroad are writing for an English-speaking readership. These are different audiences.

JW: Who are your favourite Chinese poets or who are the more representative poets?

XC: In my generation, there are Yu Jian, Ouyang Jianghe, Zhai Yongming and Wang Xiaoni. Younger poets, there are poets such as Lei Binyang, Duo Yu, Zang Di and Chen Xianfa. They have such distinct voices.

JW: What about women poets?

XC: Many Chinese women poets write extremely well. Zhou Zan, Zhai Yongming, Wang Xiaoni, Yin Lichuan, Yu Xiang and An Qi. So there are many.

JW: It is not easy to stand out as a poet in such a big country.

XC: Not easy at all. As an example, there is a population of two million in Wangjing (the district where the interview took place), while there is a population of five million in Denmark. So Denmark is twice the size of Wangjing.

JW: How is it possible to attract the Chinese readers?

XC: There is still of a problem of readership in China: some people are looking at their phones instead of reading books. Moreover, there is also the issue of different types of writers: some are publishing their works online, rather than in print form. So in China, you have to admit that your readership is quite different unless you were a bestseller.

[Parts omitted as outside project scope]

Identity of a poet and contemporary poetics

JW: What role do you think a poet has in society?

XC: Some writers like to write about their hometowns, or family stories, or a certain generation. For me, it's not so much the theme that matters but the way of thinking. I can write about anything. A poet's work in China is to change people's way of thinking, to liberate them from set ways of thinking in the past, and this is also related to the idea of language. A country's change must start from one's way of thinking.

JW: How do you see the contemporary Chinese poetry scene and development?

XC: Nowadays, there are not too many contemporary poets with original, profound thinking. There is still room for improvement in this respect. Many of them are still prone to imitating, quoting or following other people's ideas or other theories. Their thinking does not originate from a reality.

JW: I find that some contemporary Chinese poetry is quite opaque, and there is also a lack of poetry criticisms or theories to analyse these poems for the readers.

XC: That's true. Michael Palmer, an American poet, said that American poets should read more Chinese poetry, although he felt that poets in America are unlikely to achieve that. What he said is quite true.

Li-Young Lee

Born in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1957 to Chinese parents with powerful blood ties and political connections, Lee's mother was the granddaughter of Yuan Shi-kai, China's first republican president. His father once worked as a private physician to Mao Zedong, and was imprisoned for political reasons in Indonesia amidst anti-Chinese sentiments. After his release, the Lee family fled through Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, arriving in the United States in 1964. Lee was introduced to Christian doctrines, classical Chinese literature and Taoist beliefs through his father, a background that underlies the philosophical enquiry in his work. He is the author of *Rose* (BOA Editions, 1986), which won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award; *The City in Which I Love You* (BOA Editions, 1990) which won the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection; *Behind My Eyes* (W. W. Norton, 2008); *Book of My Nights* (BOA Editions, 2001); selected poems *From Blossoms* (Bloodaxe Books, 2007), the pamphlet *The Word from His Song* (BOA Editions, 2016), and his latest collection *The Undressing* (W. W. Norton, 2018). His memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995), received an American Book Award. He lives in Chicago.

Marilyn Chin

Born in Hong Kong in 1955 to Chinese parents, Chin moved to Portland, Oregon with her family during her childhood. She graduated with a degree in Chinese literature from the University of Massachusetts and an MFA from the University of Iowa. She is the author of *Dwarf Bamboo* (Greenfield Review Press, 1987); *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* (Milkweed Editions, 1994), *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (W. W. Norton, 2002); *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (W. W. Norton, 2009), a novel; and *Hard Love Province* (W. W. Norton, 2014), which won the 2015 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. She has won many fellowships and awards for her poetry. She co-directs the MFA programme at the University of San Diego.

Hannah Lowe

Born to an English mother and a Jamaican-Chinese father, Hannah Lowe is the author of *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013), her first book which celebrates multicultural life of London and its environs in the eighties and nineties. It won the Michael Murphy Memorial Award for Best First Collection and was shortlisted for the Forward, Aldeburgh and Seamus Heaney Best First Collection Prizes. She was named by Poetry Book Society as one of 20 Next Generation poets in 2014. Her second collection, *Chan* (Bloodaxe, 2016), is based

on her research in migration and mixed race studies, drawing on the life of Joe Harriott, the Jamaican alto saxophonist who made his name in 1950s London, and Jamaican migrants who travelled from Kingston to Liverpool in 1947 on the SS Ormonde. She has also published a family memoir *Long Time, No See* (Periscope, 2015), a more direct treatment of her father's experiences, bringing a neglected chapter of multicultural London to life. She lectures in creative writing at Brunel University.

Sarah Howe

Born in Hong Kong to an English father and Chinese mother, Howe moved to England as a child. She studied for her BA, MPhil and PhD at the University of Cambridge. Howe's first book, *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015), won the T S Eliot Prize in 2016. She is the founding editor of *Prac Crit*, an online journal of poetry and criticism. Previous fellowships include a Research Fellowship at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, a Hawthornden Fellowship, the Harper-Wood Studentship for English Poetry and a Fellowship at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute. She is a Leverhulme Fellow in English at University College London.

Bei Dao

Born in Beijing to a middle-class family from Shanghai in 1949, Bei Dao (Zhao Zhenkai) studied at one of the top schools in Beijing. As a student, he joined the Red Guards but was later disappointed by the movement's inability to improve the livelihood of the population. In 1969, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, he was sent away to be 're-educated' as a construction worker and blacksmith for 10 years. In 1978, Bei Dao and Mang Ke co-founded *Jintian* (meaning 'today'), a journal that has developed into one of China's most influential literary journals distributed widely both inside China and overseas, featuring a diverse range of contemporary local as well as diasporic Chinese poets. From 1989 onwards, he went into forced exile in both Europe and America, and taught at various universities, while his wife and daughter were not allowed to travel abroad to visit him. In 2007, he ended two decades of exile and returned to Asia, taking up a teaching position in Hong Kong. He is the author of *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* (New Directions, 2010); *Unlock* (2000); *At the Sky's Edge: Poems 1991-1996* (1996); *Landscape Over Zero* (1995); *Forms of Distance* (1994); *Old Snow* (1991); and *The August Sleepwalker* (1990). Despite winning many international awards and being repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature, his works and public appearances are substantially suppressed in

Mainland China even today. While his poetry is written in Chinese, the English versions translated by Bonnie McDougall and authorised by Bei Dao, are available. As a leading poet of Chinese ethnicity who has spent decades in exile, Bei Dao's poetry has been widely read and influenced Chinese writers in China and abroad.

Xichuan (Liu Jun)

Born in Xuzhou, Jiangsu in 1963 and now lives in Beijing, Xi Chuan is one of the most influential contemporary poets in China. He studied English Literature at Peking University and teaches Classical Chinese Literature at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Notes on the Mosquito* (New Directions, 2012), and translation volumes on Ezra Pound, Jorge Luis Borges, Czeslaw Milosz, Gary Snyder and others.²⁸⁶ He has won the Lu Xun Prize for Literature (2001) and the Zhuang Zhongwen Prize (2003).

Eleanor Goodman

Eleanor Goodman is a prolific, award-winning American translator of Chinese poetry as well as a poet herself. She is a research associate at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies and is the author of several award-winning translations of Chinese poetry including *Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems by Wang Xiaoni* (Zephyr Press, 2014), which won the Lucien Stryk Translation Prize and was shortlisted for the Griffin Prize. Her translation on Zang Di's poems is forthcoming in 2017. She has also published a book of poetry, *Nine Dragon Island* (Enclave Publishing House, 2016).

²⁸⁶ His poetry volumes published in China includes *False Genealogy* (1997); *The Gist* (1997), *Poems by Xichuan* (1999); *Me and Myself: Selected Poems 1985-2012* (2013). Titles are my own translation.