

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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# Translation in a Multilingual Context: Six Authors Writing the City

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This chapter addresses contemporary directions in Chinese migrant literature produced in London by six writers of Chinese heritage: Mary Jean Chan, Sue Cheung, Sarah Howe, Jennifer J. Lee, Nina Mingya Powles, and Yilin Zhong.<sup>1</sup> I contend that these texts invoke translation as their writing and reading method. In the first instance, they represent translation as a theme, embedding processes of micro and macro translation that involve questions of identity and power in relation to language and to the sociocultural context. Their migratory character and inner cognitive experience cross and outline borders, include and exclude, and are translational in nature because, finally and most importantly, through multilingualism they require the reader to perform an act of translation. Their heteroglossia complicates the monolingual reader's responsiveness to the text, thus entailing a broader conception of translation, which is not so much intended as an object, or a specific decoding of a message contained in a visible text and reformulated in another language, rather, it is a translational phenomenon and experience, directly pertaining to the affective and the political.

For these writers arriving in London in the 2000s, from various geographical regions, and from various personal backgrounds, the city is the actual scene of writing. With its potential of cultural pluralism, London is a multilingual city where intermingled heterogeneous cultural crosscurrents reconfigure communal discourse, through translation, imagination, and memory. As a space intersecting languages, topographies, and histories, the city allows us to engage with translation (be it cognitive, textual, or oral) as a daily experience across all walks of life.<sup>2</sup> In the world of these writers, translation both breaks and highlights the barriers of language, appearing entangled with citizenships, precarious work, race, gender, and linguistic hierarchies, away from a romanticized cosmopolitanism and closer to a sustained effort to stretch and adapt to function across difference.

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<sup>1</sup>A prior contribution of mine to this topic of research was published in 2017, under the title of "Writing in London: Home and Language in the Work of London Writers of Chinese Descent." In that article I looked at the work of seven authors of Chinese descent: Stephanie Dogfoot Chan, Anna Chen, Con Le, Hannah Lowe, Jin Meiling, Jennifer Wong, and Yang Lian (Bruno 2017).

<sup>2</sup>London is a convenient place to explore translation and literature because it has the largest number of immigrants among all regions of the United Kingdom. However, Chinese migrant literature from less explored places, including small towns and rural areas, would equally make a fruitful avenue of research and offer an important contribution to contemporary Chinese literature.

The authors selected in this chapter have all successfully entered the Chinese-British world of letters, with different priorities in terms of language used, literary form, and readership addressed. Reading them together highlights the spatial and temporal mobility of language and enhances, by complicating it, our understanding of Chinese literature, translation, and literature of the city across various genres. In the contemporary symbolic exchange of cultures, languages, dialects, random fragments of texts and speeches, reading these texts together can help redefining literary forms, through practices of translation, creolization, and multilingualism.

Upon first analysis, these works show translation as both a privilege and a predicament crucial to these multilingual texts, an intellectual and creative practice of resistance against the notions of English as a lingua franca and the British letters as essentially monolingual. In fact, these works can temporarily resolve the watershed between national languages and literatures, presenting themselves as models of “continuous” micro and macro translation, and circulation in the international space. All of the selected works are partially if not completely autobiographical, all of them feature aspects of heteroglossia, and all illustrate the translational processes that accompany migration and understanding the world from the perspective of an outsider. As we will see, the world under scrutiny is not just London, one of the places of arrival, but also the places from where they set sail, the places of their families, and further places that may have intersected their life journey.

I will start my exploration with Mary Jean Chan, born in Hong Kong in 1990—a “*Chinese with English characteristics*,” as she sardonically remarks (Chan 2019, 10). Educated in Hong Kong and the United States, Chan settled down in London, where she published her debut poetry collection *Flèche* (2019). Chan subsequently moved to Oxford, where she currently lives and works. The title of the collection, as well as its three sections—“parry,” “riposte,” and “corps-à-corps”—are all French terms used in fencing to indicate dueling techniques. As a general framework of the collection, fencing sets a text world in which two persons of the same sex synchronically duel with one another, providing a consonant setting for both the theme of queer lovemaking (further emphasized by the double entendre created by the homophony between *flèche* and *flesh*), and that one of the intercultural translational battle, where the body is site of the border and boundary between I and you, Chinese and English, mother tongue and language of empire. The collection opens with a “Preface” constituted only by a list of five points, of which number four states:

4. There are many reasons for my writing in your language. Ask your government, ask mine.\*

In the footnote attached to this point, the poet refers to the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, which stipulated the cession of Hong Kong to the British Empire as a Crown colony, in the aftermath of the First Opium War. So, from the very first pages, the collection positions itself in the framework of postcolonial writing, of the (ex)colony talking back to the empire—a reclaim that is stated again in the poem “Written in a Historically White Space (I)”:

The reader stares at my 皮膚 and asks: why don’t you write in 中文? I reply: 殖民主義 meant that I was brought up in your image. Let us be honest. Had I not learnt 英文 and come to your shores, you wouldn’t be reading this poem at all. Did you think it was an accident that I learnt your 語言 for decades, until I knew it better than the 母語 I dreamt in?

(Chan 2019, 43)

Here Chan makes crucial statements on the commodification of postcolonial writing—which in her view is bound to the use of English, on the marginality of her literature in her mother tongue, and the problem of translation for her putative audience. It is a continuous back and forth, where the Chinese words may be seen as minute translations within the macro translation of the English text. The relatively recent experimental practice of leaving words untranslated and unexplained creates an interlingual aesthetics that can work as a form of resistance to or accommodation of the aesthetics of alterity. In Chan’s case, I think that the ventriloquism of such code-switching is a way to map out the space between the states of being of the persona and grounds her critique of differential power relations. English and Chinese can mediate or be illegible according to the linguistic proficiencies of the readers; for both reader and writer, however, language becomes the cause of slippage and instability. As the language of the empire, of the dominant center, English is fraught and needs to be appropriated or challenged by the writer. On the other hand, English is also the language of freedom and love; it is the means through which the subject can escape predetermined cultural positioning and facilitate the encounter with her self:

My desires dressed themselves in a hurry of English to avoid my mother’s gaze. How I typed “Shakespeare”, then “homoeroticism + Shakespeare” into Google, over and over. My mother did not understand the difference between English words, so she let me be.

(“A Hurry of English”; Chan 2019, 12)

*in which language?* My mind was tuned to  
two frequencies: mother’s Cantonese rage,  
your soothing English, inviting me to choose.

(“Notes Towards an Understanding”; Chan 2019, 39)

Language is the token that gives access to or shuts the body out of “conditional spaces” (Chan 2019, 63). Chan’s cartographies, like those of her Shanghainese mother who migrated to Hong Kong, are invariably marked with social, political, and racial alterity:

your spot given  
to a *worker’s child*  
how you left a decade later  
for the colonised city  
...  
and the citizens racist  
your Shanghainese accent not fit

(“let me know”; Chan 2019, 51)

The echo of racial discrimination from her mother’s experience of migration amplifies the poet’s experience of dislocation and discrimination, both at home and in diaspora. To resist and resite, Chan redeploys English and Chinese, in a *corp à corp*.

The poetry of Nina Mingya Powles (b.1993) uses Chinese and Maori as the languages of self-enquiry, and nature as the site of coexistence and multiplicity. Born in Wellington, Aotearoa, of mixed Malay-Chinese heritage, Powles currently lives in London, where she published her second

poetry collection *Magnolia* 木蘭 (2020a). Powles's poetry has an ecstatic dimension, contemplating nature, places, food, memories, and the unattainable "faraway love." In her poem "Maps/地图," boundaries and lines are reconstrued and rearranged by the skillful hand that makes origami flowers out of tube maps (Powles 2020a, 15). The poem "Magnolia, jade orchid, she-wolf" displays a naturalist attention at naming and describing species:

Her name means *magnolia*, yet in the Disney movie cherry blossoms fill the screen. ...

Mùlán: 木兰 (simplified) or 木蘭 (traditional). Composed of 木 which means *wood*, and 蘭 which means *orchid*. Not to be confused with the similarly pronounced mùláng, 母狼, *she-wolf*. ...

Mùlán, yínxìng, xuánlíngmù.

*Magnolia denudate*, *lilytree* or *yulan magnolia*. Native of central and eastern China. Petals curved like swans' necks, with faint lines of blood around the roots. This species is called yùlán, *jade orchid*.

In the country where I was born, the trees are a different language. A language I am trying to learn. Karaka, mānuka, kowhai. Karaka, mānuka, kowhai.

(Powles 2020a, 77–9)

Powles's languaging, her multilingualism and effort at naming taxonomically for one-to-one equivalence combines with the experimental practice of inverting the use of italics, which also sheds epistemological doubt, while granting nature otherness. This is "proud heteroglossia" in action, having the goal of not just destabilizing the English tongue but also of showing how varied the natural world is, describing the limitations of knowledge, and breaking down generalizations that confuse magnolias with cherry blossoms.<sup>3</sup> The autonomy of nature, the flowers and trees, fosters curiosity and wonder, all expressed in the sentence "a language that I am trying to learn," followed by words in Maori.

Powles recognizes in London a city torn by contradictions, a place in full crisis and also one of great potential as an alluring elsewhere:

London is no utopia, but some days I can't let it go. Even now, even as the days shorten. Even now, when museums and art institutions have slashed their workforces, leaving empty galleries filled with empty artworks. Even when I sat in an evening Mandarin class in a building near Euston with ten people who all admitted they voted for Brexit (they revealed this sneakily, eyes lowered but smiling). I can't let go of my dream-version of London, the one my love first showed me through his eyes three years ago, his dream of a beautiful and chaotic city (a flower market, a poetry library, swimming ponds, the ghosts of ancient rivers running underneath us) which later became ours.

(Powles 2020b)

<sup>3</sup>To complicate things further, the name Mulan of the original Tuoba ballad has probably nothing to do with magnolia or any other kind of flower. Chen Sanping states: "In conclusion, it is difficult to determine with certainty the original form of any ancient Tuoba word found in a language that has been extinct for over a millennium. Even so, it is fairly safe to infer that the name Mulan once belonged to the same 'stag/bull' word group in the Altaic family" (Chen 2005, 40).

The history of migration is a history of encounters and translation at different levels and at different degrees. But what happens when communication fails and the dialogue stops? The porosity of Chan's and Powles's places is nowhere to be found in Zhong Yilin's 钟宜霖 work. Zhong was born in 1976, in Beijing. She graduated in drama and literature from the Beijing Central Academy of Drama. Zhong started writing literature at a very early age. She arrived in the United Kingdom in 2002, enrolling in a master's program at the University of Warwick. The author of several books, spanning across all major genres (poetry, fiction, drama, essay),<sup>4</sup> during her years in London, Zhong has primarily focused on writing about the life of the Chinese community in the city. Her novel 《唐人街》 (Chinatown; 2015) was first published in a special issue of the Chinese journal 《收获》 (Harvest) dedicated to works by overseas Chinese. Written in Chinese, it is based on the life and work experience of a number of Chinese migrants who Zhong became acquainted with while living in the Chinese neighborhood of London's Gerrard Street. Because of its focus on illegal immigrants, and of the kind of characters and stories, it is in my view strongly reminiscent of Hsiao-Hung Pai's *Chinese Whispers*, an undercover report on "Britain's hidden army of labour" (Pai 2008).

Zhong laments that the lives of many a Chinese migrant in the United Kingdom has remained untold and finds it extremely puzzling that overseas Chinese authors' eyes are most likely fixed on China, rather than on the country where they actually live.<sup>5</sup> She quotes from Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 (1893–1976) 《在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话》 (Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art; 1942), advocating that the Chinese migrants, silent subaltern individuals, are well worth featuring as protagonists of literary works, and

[t]he life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich and fundamental; they make all literature and art seem pallid by comparison; they provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their only source. They are the only source, for there can be no other.<sup>6</sup>

Her acknowledged literary models include works of world literature that she defines as "revolutionary" (Zhong 2015, 195). In particular she finds a favorite in the British-Trinidadian Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, whose travelogue *An Area of Darkness* and the novel *Miguel Street* were sources of inspiration for two of her novels: 《伦敦爱情故事》 (London Love Story; 2010) and *Chinatown* (literally, "Street of the Tang people"), respectively (192, 195). Like *Miguel Street* so *Chinatown* is a collection of linked brief stories, presenting about twenty characters gravitating toward a specific place. The book counts thirteen chapters, an epilogue entitled "People with

<sup>4</sup>*London Single Diary* (2009) is a novel in the diary format, spanning three years of Zhong's life experience in the city. Its sequel, *London Love Story* (2010), soon entered the top 10 of China's Amazon best-selling books. Zhong also published a collection of poetry. *Dear New York* (2016) is her first novel in English.

<sup>5</sup>She mentions Chinese American writers such as Ha Jin and Li Yiyun writing in English about China's topics (Zhong 2015, 212), although, in fact, Ha Jin's *A Free Life* (2007) is a long novel on the experience of a Chinese family arriving in the United States. She comments that Lin Yutang's *Chinatown* (1948) cannot provide a predecessor to her *Chinatown* because it was not based on personal experience. Lin Yutang's novel was translated into English as *Chinatown Family*, narrating the experiences of the Feng family in the hostile environment of 1930s America.

<sup>6</sup>The entire text of Mao's "Talks" is available online, see Mao (1942). Quotation is from Zhong (2015, 213).

a story,” an appendix “Notes on writing *Chinatown*,” and a postscript entitled “*Chinatown*, an imagined Chinese community.”

The narrator is a woman from Beijing on her second year of a master’s program at a university “outside London,” looking for accommodation in London, where she can write her dissertation. After a first viewing, she goes to see a second option that is a spacious room in a house in Chinatown. Each room in this house is rented to other Chinese migrants. Each chapter introduces the story of a different character, all linked together by the space of this house, located in Chinatown, a smaller city within the London urban environment. Most of these small characters, by their small and insignificant lives, migrated to London from rural China. Many arrived initially with a student visa but then, unable to continue their studies, joined the underworld of London Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> They share accommodation, observe Chinese customs, continue to speak Chinese, eat Chinese food, and socialize with other Chinese. They remain on the fringe of law and history, in spite of their location in the center. English remains an unattainable language for them, and although the protagonist can speak and write English, and indeed she functions as the translator of the house, she nevertheless does not feel comfortable talking to British or even to other migrants in London (Zhong 2015, 71). Such a sense of linguistic insecurity also affects the job market and the social life available to them, conjuring up their little signs of nostalgia and belonging. *Chinatown*’s London is portrayed as a city sectioned by race, while the white British remain disconnected, and are often referred to as the 鬼佬, the foreign devils. Many times, the author provides explanation of English terms, or direct translation of words and phrases. The incommensurability of foreign culture, bolstered with elements of British hostility, negative stereotypes, and in some cases, inaccessibility of the foreign language, results in the Otherization of British white society and in the characters’ willy-nilly isolation from the world around them. Chinatown becomes here an almost independent, self-contained, compartmentalized ethnic community both claustrophobic and reassuring. The narrative pace is slow, actions inconclusive, stories unresolved. All the characters arrived in London with a purpose, a dream or an aim, but then need to resolve to plan B. Only the narrator is, eventually, in the very last pages of the novel, released from Chinatown and able to move on to the world outside. Zhong Yilin’s political representation encloses the immigrant in her own culture and idiom, thus denying access to power. The weak proficiency in English confirms English as capital, thus becoming an expression of the immigrant’s lack of citizenship.

Literature of migrant Chinese writers in the 2000s does display a very distinctive complex of issues associated with adaptation and low social status in the country of arrival, even though the wave of emigration of the last few decades is not motivated by the same unambiguous political or economic reasons as the former generation of migrant authors of Chinese descent. In fact, migration in the twentieth century was principally a consequence of closed borders and the divide between East and West; today’s departures take place in the context of a completely different global culture and the contemporary nomadic life. These latter departures are often motivated by curiosity, study, independence, and artistic fulfillment on the world scene.

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<sup>7</sup>The main characters include the narrator, from Beijing; Xiao Di; Chunsheng; Ah Guang; Zhang Lai; Apple (Lü Ping); Ah Lang; Mingming, from Shenyang; Lao Zhu, from Fujian; Ah Wei; Lao Wei and his wife Xiao Lin, from Jiangsu; Ah Qi, from Beijing; Ah Bao, from Dongbei; Ah Chang, from Fujian; Ah Lun; and Ah Qing and his wife, from Fujian.

Zhong Yilin describes migration as an economic postulate, one that grew increasingly utopian as the years went on. Her characters can in theory always return, was it not for numerous obstacles, including citizenship, an unprivileged non-European passport, financial costs, reputation, and so on.

The principal tone of migrant literature from the Hong Kong poets is entirely different. Thematically, it encompasses transculturation, rejection of stereotypes, and a detached attitude toward any permanent definitions.

Giving the perspective of a second-generation Chinese-British, Sue Cheung's *Chinglish: An Almost Entirely True Story* (2019) is a novel constituted by diary entries and scribbled drawings illustrating the vicissitudes of the protagonist Jo Kwan, spanning three years, from the end of July 1984 to late August 1987. Jo Kwan is a thirteen-year-old Chinese British-girl, who, after a few years in Nottingham and some more in Hull, moves with her parents to Coventry, where the family has bought a Chinese takeaway. The novel is almost entirely set in Coventry, featuring the protagonist's witty observations about her childhood spent in a Chinese takeaway, amid the identity issues and the racist and bullying comments of her schoolmates. Toward the end of the story, when Jo successfully applies for a course at the London College of Fashion, London becomes the promised land, the mirage of a better independent life. All Jo dreams of is forging her artistic career and being free in London. The last entry in the diary features Jo finally leaving for London. But for Sue Cheung too London is no dream. As the author later writes in *The Big Issue*, in the late 1980s, aged seventeen, she left Coventry for London, the big city, where after a series of unfortunate turns, in her last year at college, she ended up homeless, penniless, and pregnant. Having nowhere else to go, she first lived in a squat in King's Cross with her boyfriend, signed on for benefits, and eventually managed to be transferred to housing association accommodation in Acton. With the help of some of her relatives, she completed a Higher National Diploma and found a good job and a house of her own.

The diary format and the use of Chinglish bring to mind another novel, written in London by the migrant woman writer Xiaolu Guo: *A Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Guo's title works as a metaphorical shorthand for the various linguistic and other forms of interaction and misinterpretation that unfurl between the narrator (a Chinese young woman who has only basic knowledge of English) and the foreign world she tries to understand. But while Cheung looks both at her family and at her UK-Coventry-London environment from the perspective of a young woman who finds herself in between, Guo takes the British as her principal focus, mocking stereotypes of Englishness.<sup>8</sup> Both in Cheung's and Guo's works, the reader can enjoy a two-sided split, a process of other-ing that is also self-ing, in which culture-specific differences concern many spheres of life, but need not to be perceived as exclusively negative. Thus, whereas in Zhong we confront the perspective of the migrant directly transplanted in Chinatown, in Guo the focus is slightly larger, being one of the migrant in the British environment of London. Finally, Cheung's perspective

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<sup>8</sup>Guo's *Dictionary* can perhaps be read in the Chinese literary tradition of 筆記小說 (miscellaneous notes and trivial anecdotes), ranging from "records of anomalies" 誌怪 and "tales of the remarkable" 傳奇 to anecdotes on historical events or characters, and diverse aspects of everyday life. An example of mocking stereotypes of Britishness is provided by the character of the "alternative," left-leaning, English boyfriend, who combines this with "vegetarianism" and his predilection for *The Guardian*.

is directed mainly toward her own migrant family, and the lack of communication between the protagonist, who hardly speak any Chinese, and her immigrant parents and grandparents, who can hardly speak any English:

In other words, we all have to cobble together tiny bits of English and Chinese into a rubbish new language I call “Chinglish”. It is very awkward.

(2019, 10)

These three novels all deal with the key problem of communication, which amplifies the protagonists’ sense of being at odds with their extended societal context. Adapting Gloria Anzaldúa’s statement about code-switching in a Hispanic American context, “while I still have to speak English or Chinese when I would rather speak Chinglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”<sup>9</sup>

The characters in the works of the three poets are consistently different, since their experience in their old and new homes are of estrangement but not of loss.

Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (2015) offers a deceptively Orientalist portrayal of her Chinese heritage from her current location in London. Born in Hong Kong in 1983 to an English father and a Chinese mother, who migrated to the United Kingdom when Sarah was seven years old, Howe first published her poems in the form of a pamphlet in 2009, under the title *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia: Poetry*, then in the collection *Loop of Jade*.

*Loop of Jade* takes Jorge Luis Borges’s 1942 essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” as its interface.<sup>10</sup> The John Wilkins in the essay’s title is the seventeenth-century philosopher, who attempted to devise a universal scientific language, based, according to Borges, on an ancient Chinese taxonomy of animals, entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*.<sup>11</sup> Borges lists fourteen taxonomical categories allegedly discovered by the translator Franz Kuhn, and concludes that all attempts at describing the universe through one language are arbitrary and futile. Howe adopts the same fourteen categories, from (a) to (n), as the structure of her collection, which presents starkly autobiographical yet fantastical poems full of Orientalist images<sup>12</sup> that define a

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<sup>9</sup>The original sentence reads: “while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (Anzaldúa 1987, 59).

<sup>10</sup>Borges’s essay has received much attention by the scholarly world. Michel Foucault, for example, stated that was of inspiration for his book *The Order of Things*. George Lakoff also commented on it in his *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, and so on. In “The Myth of the Other” (1988), Zhang Longxi in turn critiques Foucault’s comments.

<sup>11</sup>Wilkins and other scholars of his time were taking up Francis Bacon’s argument about the difference between the Chinese characters, which he saw as *real* as things and notions, and the European alphabetic writing systems, which he saw as *nominal* as letters and words. For a discussion of Bacon’s and other scholars’ theories of Chinese characters, see McDonald (2002).

<sup>12</sup>Some of which may include jade, black lacquer, moonlight, lotus, rice, Mah Jong, bamboo grove, emperor, Son of Heaven, wok, silk, joss-stick, willow, cicada, chinoiserie, intertextual elements from *Madame Butterfly*, Mao Zedong, Confucius’ *Analects*, *The Gateless Gate*, Xu Bing’s *A Case Study of Transference*, and transliterations from Cantonese and Chinese characters. It is perhaps useful to look at these as markers of “self-mythologising,” in adoption of the author’s own description in her essay “1. To China: That Blue Flower on the Map” (Howe 2016).



liminal incantatory world of real and imagination, as childhood memories and transmitted family stories usually do. In the poem “Crossing from Guangdong,” translational processes are able to cross generations, erase distances and connect worlds:

Something sets us looking for a place.  
 For many minutes every day we lose  
 Ourselves to somewhere else. ...  
 Tell me, why have I come? ...  
 ...  
 ... still-dark streets of the English  
 quarter, the funereal stonework facades  
 with the air of Whitehall, or the Cenotaph,  
 but planted on earth’s other side.  
 ...  
 Old stories tell that if we could only  
 get there, all distances would be erased.

(Howe 2015, 2–5)

Places in our memories are not restricted to particular boundaries, but meaning continues to be multiple—London, Beijing, Datong, Hong Kong, Macau, Arizona, the Yangtze River—all studded with memories, images, stories, and of course, sounds and voices. It is a multilayered meaning in constant flux, continuously translated, with no path connecting the particular to the universal, the known to the unknown. The persona’s “strange pilgrimage to home” (Howe 2015, 3), a home that “you can no longer see” (5), the place of her Cantonese mother’s tongue and of her Shanghainese grandmother’s tongue entangle with each other:

*Yut, ye, sam, sei.* ...  
 ... I hear  
 again your voice ...

(Howe 2015, 3)

And an old woman met by chance on a bus in Datong could have well been her grandmother, who she never met, speaking in a dialect she does not understand.

Languages, texts, and places are continuously crossed and translated, without pretense of an orderly resolution. The very uttering of the word *mother* requires the “longest and most empty pause” (Howe 2015, 16), because, as Borges indicates, trying to see particular categories in a universal vein may well deny to the other the possibility of self-representation. This is effectively articulated in the poem “(I) Others” (46), which starts with a quotation from Genesis and carries on reflecting on the matter of genetic inheritance:

I think about the meaning of *blood*, which is (simply) a metaphor  
 and *race*, which has been a terrible pun.

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From *castus* to *chaste*, with a detour for *caste*.

English, 廣東話, *Français d'Egypte*, וישראל-עממא: our future children's skeins, carded.

\*

...

The spiralling path from *Γένεσις* to *genetics*. Language revolves like a ream of stars.

The poem further refers to Gregor Mendel's universalistic theories of inheritance, which immediately evokes the risk of Mischlinge Laws, while "ream of stars" is a luminous image describing language as emanating in somewhat parallel ways. Howe borrows and refutes texts (Borges, Chinese songs, Pound), her translation paradoxically showing that cultural difference can become commodified in a late-capitalist system in which these discourses circulate. Thus, as Rey Chow echoing Jameson states (Chow 2010, 48–54), stereotypes are inevitable and "fundamental to the representation of one group by another" (49), but what is important is "the power behind their use" (54).

This excursion ends in a circular way, with the autobiographical essay of Jessica J. Lee 李潔珂, who was born in Canada in 1983 to a Welsh father and a Taiwanese mother. She arrived in London from Canada to undertake her doctoral research in environmental history and aesthetics, obtaining her PhD in 2016, and settling down with her husband in London for a few years. Her first book *Turning* (2017) is a touching landscape memoir narrating her attempts to swim in a different German lake every week for an entire year, with the goal of healing from emotional trauma. But even though the book's chief setting is the North German Plain around Berlin, *Turning* has a wandering nature, from Canada, to Scotland, to Wales, to Germany, and of course, London:

London was home: not simply because it had been home with my husband, but because it was something I chose and chose again. In all the years I had been away the magnetic grasp of the city hadn't disappeared. None of the other places felt like that: it felt as though the other places were things that just happened to me. I was born in Canada, I was sent to Berlin, all of accidental. But I wanted to be back in London – amidst the greying streets and the frowning commuters – and I wanted to be near to the Heath again.

(Lee 2017, 161–62)

As for Powles, Chan, and Howe, for Lee too writing is motivated by an enquiry that does not relate uniquely to herself but stretches back to her mother and grandmothers. Lee reflects on the concept of home and belonging, a narrative again conveyed through language, as when she recalls the voice of her mother, speaking in Chinese:

I think of this. Of the language I lost and those I've gained. Of the places that have reshaped who I am and where I find home.

I remember the sound of my mother walking through the door at the end of the day. “我回来了” “*Wo huilaile*” – one of the refrains in Mandarin that she repeated, as if speaking to no one. I've always thought this meant “I'm home,” but I've learned that it means only, “I'm back”, or “I've returned”. But “回”, “return”, the small box tucked safely within another box, is a kind of

comfort. The origin of the character is in a spiral, referring to a kind of regularity, the rotation of coming and going. Home as the place you return to. ... Return. Home is as much in a language as it is in a landscape.

(Lee 2017, 9–10)

And yet, after returning to London, her elective home, actively chosen, the narrator considers:

London had changed in my years away. I didn't remember it being so expensive, or needing to work quite so hard to get by. Places that had seemed alive and interesting some years earlier had begun to feel sterile and empty, despite the crowds ... I'd left before the cuts had hit deeply and returned to find things different than I remembered ... For the first time, I felt adrift in London, like I wasn't where I was meant to be. This place I'd sought out, the home I thought I was coming back to had disappeared.

(Lee 2017, 169–70)

Like for the other women writers explored so far, Lee's migration means she is far from home, yet she is also at home in (an)other place(s). Analogously, Lee's languaging, like languaging in Chan, Cheung, Howe, Powles, and Zhong, includes sustained translation, occupying more than one language at once.

Translation and migration constitute vexed approaches to literature because they invite the reader to map their worlds differently, imagining a language and a space defined by the absence of another, constantly pushing the boundaries of time and space.

Reading these works through the prism of translation highlights the discursive interactions between writers, their life and their environment. London constitutes a meeting point, a homing location that is approached from an array of ways and linguistic resources that are distinctive from writer to writer, their personal histories of migration and languaging. A homing location as unfixed as their point of departure, multilingual London interrogates and destabilizes literary geographies defined along monolingualism and national literatures—whatever those might be. Here literary traditions are reinvented, and borders and communities are imagined and performed through the social and ideological constructs of languages in movement. These writers' translations at various levels and degrees work as a “transformative practice that contributes to the creation of a social space where the form, function and meaning of linguistic and semiotic signs are transformed and combined to create new subjectivities, identities and ideologies” (Mazzaferro 2018, 6).

Chinese, with all its various accents and dialects, constitutes a substantial portion of the linguistic varieties spoken in London. But one of the most striking features of these works is to be found in their linguistic varieties: not just English, French, German, Yiddish, Chinese, Greek, or Maori, but also a vernacular variety of Chinese that is often restricted to domestic, family use, and a more official variety used to impart orders or interact with the world. This is visible in Chan, Zhong, and Cheung, as well as in the use of pinyin and Wade-Giles and a mixture of both in Lee. Such a heteroglossic, multilingual labyrinth that is affectively and symbolically entangled with race, gender, culture, place, and identity challenges both the concept of English and Chinese as unitary and continuous linguistic realms. Literature by migrant writers is full of voices, words gained and words lost, words written, but especially orally transmitted, memory-loaded sounds, world-traveling words.

At the same time, London is already other words and other places too, claimed by different migrant groups. The dynamic encounter between these writers and London may be limited by time and space, but it produces literary maps of intersections with other places and literatures that enrich and complicate the comprehensive picture of Chinese, Sinophone, world, and transnational hyphenated literatures. As we have seen, such an encounter can produce narratives of London as a contact zone, where writers can share a multivocal scene. It can also produce narratives of London as a scene of separation and conflict, in which migrants, as minorities, must always proceed from a reassessment of their own heritage. The translation practiced in these works can be of a cognitive kind, or can work at the written level, but especially at an aural one, where the sounds of languages can be familiar or unfamiliar, and thus linked to affects.

The migratory journey of these women<sup>13</sup> writers is rooted in colonial history, but there are more interactions than just the center-periphery one. For this younger generation of writers, literary models include more diverse world authors, and other hyphenated writers like themselves. As Powles writes, she “never envisioned being a part of ‘British poetry,’” but even if she “first felt alone, peering in from the outside,” she feels she is not alone now with many other world writers “here filled with faraway love” (Powles 2020b).

All of these writers have obtained some kind of recognition, even though not everyone participates in the global discourse to the same degree.<sup>14</sup> I argue that the focus of these women writers on certain elements of communication plays a role in terms of power relationships. Starting from a situation that could be thought of as structurally disempowering, translanguaging processes of cross-cultural interactions constitute a source of empowerment for these authors.

Naturally translation, book reviews in mainstream newspapers, online circulation, grants, residencies, awards and other kinds of recognition and support from British foundations, publishers, agents, bookstores, and literary organizations are all essential to these writers’ challenge of the literary canon and their inclusion in the literary networks of the world.<sup>15</sup> And yet, although Chinese

<sup>13</sup>The number and gender of London writers of Chinese descent may acquire significance in the political, social, and cultural picture emerging from their writing too. Thus, the exclusive focus on women writers can point to other fruitful avenues of research that I have, however, no space to pursue here. It must also be pointed out that Mary Jean Chan currently identifies as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns. However, while writing and publishing *Flèche*, Chan identified as female and used she/her pronouns, so I preferred to use that pronoun in my analysis of her work.

<sup>14</sup>Chan’s *Flèche* won the 2019 Costa Book Awards, it was chosen as a Book of the Year by *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, and *The White Review*, and has been shortlisted for the Swansea University Dylan Thomas Prize to boot. Founding editor of the small press Bitter Melon, which focuses on Asian diaspora poets, Powles won the Women Poets’ Prize (UK) in 2018, the inaugural Nan Shepherd Prize for Nature Writing, and the *Landfall* Essay Competition in 2019. Zhong Yili’s *Chinatown* made the top 10 on Amazon China. Cheung’s *Chinglish* won The Diverse Book Awards, Young Adult category. Guo Xiaolu’s *Dictionary* won the prestigious Orange Prize. Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (2015) won the T. S. Eliot Prize and *The Sunday Times*/PFD Young Writer of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Jessica J. Lee’s *Turning* was among Best Books of 2017, selected by National Post, and among the *Die Zeit*’s Best Books of the Year; its was named a Notable Book by the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Awards, and was longlisted for the Frank Hegyi Award for Emerging Authors.

<sup>15</sup>In the epilogue to *Chinatown*, Zhong Yilin recounts that the novel took a more definite shape as a book, when in March 2005 she met with a friend of hers, Shi Tao—the then vice president of Amazon China—who encouraged her to complete and publish these stories (Zhong 2015, 191). Soon after receiving her award, Sue Cheung stated: “We were known as the ‘silent minority’ but with incredible awards like this representing all, I hope others will be encouraged to join in getting our voices heard” (Cheung 2020).

British writers constitute one of the fastest growing groups in the United Kingdom, they are also one of the least visible in the long tradition of London portraiture, being excluded from the grand narrative of Britain and China. These writings remind us that the city is made of people with their meandering histories of relations.

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