3

'It Can't Be All in One Language':
Poetry in the diverse language

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Premise

In this chapter I aim at exploring multilingual works by poets of Chinese descent, whose experience, and actual use of language urge us to reconsider the concept of language as unitary and of translation exclusively as an object. The idea is to verify notions of language diversity, translation, nontranslation, antitranslation, self-translation, which inevitably impact our understanding of Chinese, Sinophone, and hyphenated literatures.

On the background of a nationalist agenda – be it from the PRC or the UK – I will first outline the monolingual paradigm which treats a writer's native language as a solid indication of their nationality, and the writers themselves as members of one language community only.

With reference to contemporary multilingual poetry by writers such as Mary Jean Chan, Sarah Howe, Theophilus Kwek, Laura Jane Lee, Cynthia Miller, Jay Gao, Victor Yip (and many more in mind), I will then try to detail how multilingual poetry specifically pursue the tensions inherent in the monolingual paradigm, undermining it through a certain use of languages.

I will discuss two main issues. Firstly, I'll look at the multilingual poem as a way to clarify hierarchies and power relationships among the languages employed. Secondly, I will explore some of these poems as ensuing a new aesthetics that stimulates certain reactions from the reader. I will argue that the multilingual aesthetics defined by some of these texts can be compared with the modernist aesthetics that employs other language(s) to "make it new"; while some other texts have a different motivation, aiming at highlighting and also work across difference in language, gender, race, identity and place. Drawing from theoretical propositions indicated by Jan Blommaert, Naoki Sakai, and Yasemin Yildiz, I will study how this new aesthetics defines a multiple linguistic entity that is impossible to homogenize, demanding translation as its reading framework.

Multilingual Poetry and the National Language

Languages – plural – divide. Hence the need for translation. While many theorists take as an implicit starting point the fact that national languages are unitary, well-defined by an outer border, and therefore liable to be exchanged through translation, I here wish to challenge this assumption, by looking at the work of poets of Chinese descent who write in more than one language at once.

In her 2012 book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, Yasemine Yildiz argues that monolingualism is a condition no longer sustainable. It relates to European nation building in the 18th century, when it had the aim of fixing a cultural identity to serve the purpose of the modern nation. We currently live in postmonolingual times, she argues. On a similar line, Naoki Sakai asks "Is language a countable, just like an apple and an orange and unlike water? Is it not possible to think of language, for example, in terms of those grammars in which the distinction of the singular and the plural is irrelevant?" (Sakai 2009,73). Jan Blommaert argues that multilingualism – by which he means that repertoire of language varieties, accents, registers, genres, etc., needs to be studied as a matter of capital importance, it "should not be seen as a collection of 'languages' that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of specific semiotic resources" (Blommaert 2010, 102), defining "stakes for language in society", "social barriers and gateways for social mobility", and regulating through language (138).

Most of us agree that Chinese, as all national languages, is constitutively multiple and heterogenous,[1] and that the question of monolingualism (as its opposite multilingualism) can be thought of as an artificial construct. Yet it is under the scheme of the exclusive partitioning of the national language, and its discriminatory border, that multilingual aesthetics developed

[1] Historically, "modern Chinese" was officialized in 1932, following the fall of the Qing dynasty, the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, and the numerous attempts to unify the diversity of spoken and written languages and speeches that were thought of as unintelligible to each other. As Lau Kin-chi, Hui Po-keung and Chan Shun-hing remind us, "the so-called Standard Modern Chinese normalized the incorporation of Europeanized syntax and diction and other hybrid elements in the contending discourses of the building of a national identity, the quest for modernization, and the promotion of class struggle and revolution" (Lau, Hui and Chan 2001, 254). Modern Chinese was therefore thought of as a tool to produce transpersonal intelligibility, since linguistic multiplicity breaks the connection between sound and sense. In the historical contingency of the imagined community of the Chinese nation, among other nations, language diversity was to be rejected, because context-bound, and thus representing an obstacle to citizens' integration, and flawless knowledge in that community. In the mid-20th century, Mandarin Chinese was chosen as the official language of the People's Republic of China, through a process of compulsory education in the whole Chinese State. For a fascinating discussion of the essential role played by the foreign in the production of national languages, see Berman (1984).

by poets of Chinese descent is usually discussed. To be sure, an increasing number of scholars recognizes the difference between a work written in one language and a multilingual work. Notably, Rebecca Walkowitz argues that some contemporary works are "born translated" and should not be analyzed under one single linguistic category (2015). Steven Kellman, working on translingualism, asks the important question on what difference does it make to the writer and the reader to write in more than one language (2020, 5). Nevertheless, when exploring the works of poets of Chinese descent, their multilingualism is often somewhat minimized, prioritizing one language over another. Yulia Dreyzis attributes this attitude to the "enclosed, self-centered system" of Chinese poetic tradition, for which "it seems impossible to imagine a bilingual poet working simultaneously with two languages". Dreyzis refers to Rey Chow, according to whom "the habitual obsession with 'Chineseness'" is a "reaction to the West" and to "past victimization" (Dreyzis 2020, 491-492). While noticing a recurrent attitude, and proposing an agreeable argument, Dreyzis, however, inadvertently emphasizes the Chinese element of multilingual poetry, entitling her essay "The Quest for Bilingual *Chinese* Poetry: Poetic Tradition and Modernity" (italic added).

I will look at the ways migrant poets from the (ex) colonies of Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore dramatize difference among languages, so as to understand the kind of difference at issue between the languages employed, their hierarchy and status, and thus scrutinize the ways linguistic bordering intersected with and intervened into political and social bordering, and vice versa.

The key issue of course is not so much how many languages are present in a multilingual poem, but the relationship between them. In particular, whether a language is considered as standard, and another as a minority language; whether standard languages are seen as dynamic fields or are denied historical contingencies, whether one language is acquired in the family, and another in the classroom, whether migration results in a change of language and what that entails at the level of affects, etc. Along the way, I hope to plant some pointers to go beyond such an important recognition of the power relationship among languages and look at some of these poems as statements to the reader.

"Scrupulous Travesty" is a poem from the collection *Travesty*, by Jay Gao.[2] Gao here

[2] Gao is a poet, fiction writer, critic and translator based in Edinburgh. His debut poetry pamphlet is *Wedding Beasts* (2019), to which followed *Katabasis* (2020), awarded a New Poets Prize.

uses procedural digital-language techniques in order to rewrite the ancient Chinese book of divination *Yijing* 易經. The exagramme *dui* 兌 in the poem generates unfit, highly opaque translations, something that dislocates English and seems to confirm untranslatability, while also portraying a culture of spam:

> The time allocated for running scripts has expired
>
> duì
>
> 兌
>
> "Open"
>
> Other variations include opening "the joyous, lake" up and "usurpation"
>
> Both its inner and outer trigrams are
>
> The time allocated for running scripts has
>
> expired.
>
> duì) open = (The time allocated for running scripts is
>
> now.) marshland.
>
> … (Gao 2022)

Gao's multilingualism includes machine language of technological maloperation, as well as pinyin, Chinese characters, foreignizing English, and Wade-Giles, his writing showing translation as ineffective and full of gaps, exacerbated by the incongruous layout. Gao seems to indicate that in a multilingual community, whether or not a language prospers or decays depends on the social habits of its speakers, and on whether or not proficiency in a particular language implies socioeconomic benefits.

Cynthia Miller's "Glitch Honorifics"[3] appears like a three-dimensional poem, in which the poet explains Chinese honorifics, as in a glossary formed by a series of boxes, slightly overlapping each other, without compromising legibility. The honorifics in question are given first in a non-standard transliteration (presumably to mark it as Hokkien) and then in non-simplified Chinese characters. To that, follows a personal explanation of the terms, which draws from the poet's personal and familial background. In a note appended to the poem,

[3] Cynthia Miller is a well-reputed Malay-American poet, whose poem "Glitch Honorifics" appeared in her 2021 debut poetry collection *Honorifics*.

Miller explains:

> Like Heptapod B from the film *Arrival*, I wanted to visualise the entirety of a concept, past and present at once. Central to the plot is Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a theory of linguistic relativity that asserts language literally shapes how you see the world… The Hokkien that my family speaks is a Southern Chinese language, originally from Fujian, that incorporates Bahasa, English, Mandarin, and a smattering of other dialects like Teochow and Hakka. It's a local Rojak dialect, from a colloquial Malay phrase meaning 'mixed', and would probably be incomprehensible to someone from the mainland. The unease lurking behind both 'Honorifics' and 'Dream Opera' is a frustration that I can understand a little but not speak, and therefore find no entry into that world. Easier to exist in an uprooted 'elsewhere.' (Miller 2020)

Similarly, Hong Kong poet Laura Jane Lee[4] uses Chinese characters and transliterations, as in the poem "爹 deh" (father):

> you gave me my name:
> *chu ching*,
> *clear pearl*
> which in your heavy farmer's accent
> sounded like
> *suu ching*
> *lost-it-all*
> (Lee 2020)

Such a multilingual strategy that conflates Chinese characters, translated, for the benefit of the monolingual reader, both into *pinyin* and into English, by apposition, creates a visible internal tension. These trilingual texts point in two directions: on the one side they wish to legitimate the language of privacy and on the other side they avoid relegating it into absolute difference, through the use of translation into English. These single words constitute brief exchanges of a Chinese and a Chinese deviant pronunciation, simulating cultural verisimilitude, soon disrupted by the translation into English.

Are the Chinese characters in these poems sufficient to call them Chinese, or, better still, to call them Sinophone poems? What does the use of italic imply?

The persona in Laura Jane Lee's poem receives her name from her father, an identity

[4] Laura Jane Lee was born in 1998 in Hong Kong and currently lives in Singapore. She writes in English and Cantonese. Miller is also the founder of KongPoWriMo and Subtle Asian Poetry Collective, and the author of the pamphlets *flinch & air* (2021), and *chengyu: chinoiserie* (2020), published under her former name Rachel Ka Yin Leung.

that she not only needs to translate, but that she also sees as misinterpreted by the interpretation of the standard language. The Sinophone transliterations distinguish the characters in their not standard usage. Standard Chinese and mother tongue develop pidgin and creole languages, world Englishes, code-switching and code-mixing, borrowing, interference, etc. But in Laura Jane Lee's poem, standard Chinese is brought into the poem's linguistic repertoire through the misinterpretation of the father's minor language, while the transliteration of the characters remains non-standard. The evocative, affective quality of the name Clear Pearl is disrupted by the inaccurate and diminishing translation of standard Chinese. Without even physically being in the text, standard Chinese is however the language of authority, it is official and normative.

Theophilus Kwek's poem "Dead Man Savings Won't Go to Wife"[5] portraits strangeness by a defamiliarizing translation of Chinese idiomatic segments given in italic: *yijianrugu* 一见如故 (*your first glance was that of an old lover's); biyishuangfei* 比翼双飞 (*wings touching as we flew); qianjinmaixiao* 千金买笑 (*for my smile); aiwujiwu* 爱屋及乌 (*I loved the house and the crows that nested there); zhiyinnanmi* 知音难觅 (*one who knows my voice is hard to find).* At the end of the poem we learn that these segments are given as "loose translations of Chinese idioms for love."

I see this kind of multilingualism as working in a modernist fashion, that is "to make it new," a challenging practice of linguistic defamiliarization, borne out by the aim of revolutionizing literary language. We can find this defamiliarizing use of multilingualism in Pound's poetry, and more generally in modernism's literary theory. For the modernist writer, multilingualism consists of several artistic languages (e.g. plastic and sonorous), and different forms of expression and linguistic approaches; and it is aimed at counterbalancing the inaptitude of verbal language to match and change the world. Pound deliberated that no single language is quite enough and that "it can't be all in one language" (Pound 1975, 583), hence the need of different languages and of different modes of expression to be used comprehensively so as to achieve a more thorough understanding of reality. Thus, the

[5] Theophilus Kwek, "Dead Man Savings Won't Go to Wife", in *Moving House* (2020, 15-16). Kwek is a writer and editor based in Singapore. He has been shortlisted twice for the Singapore Literature Prize, and won the New Poets' Prize for his pamphlet *The First Five Storms*, published in 2017. He is also the author or many essays on migration and citizenship.

modernists' use of translation and multilingualism had the specific aim of innovating literary language.

Whether they use italics or not, these poets write in a multilingual format. Where do we draw a line with the foreignness of a language? How can we resolve to call these writing just "Sinophone," or "English," or "Chinese"? Sakai's words keep lurking into my mind: "the unity of a language is represented always in relation to another unity. It is never given in itself, but in relation to another", "nothing starts until we come across the foreign" (Sakai 2009, 83).

Nontranslation

The relatively recent experimental practice of leaving words untranslated and unexplained in literature creates a multilingual aesthetics that was defined by Apter (2003) as "nontranslation" and that can work as a form of resistance to or accommodation of alterity.[6]

The poetry collection *Flèche* (2019), by Mary Jean Chan,[7] has its title and those of the sections in French. The title in French could induce the readers to think that the book is in that language, but when they open the book, they will soon recognize that the language used is mainly English, with some Chinese. The poet early on explains the use of English as due to the postcolonial condition of the persona. In the "Preface," we find a footnote, in which 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. Further down the volume, at a glance, we can see a few Chinese characters embedded in English sentences, like in "Written in a Historically White Space (I)":

[6] As Emily Apter discusses in relation to Spitzer's multilingual writing, the multilingual text is a nontranslation that "is not an argument against translation per se but, rather, a bid to make language acquisition a category imperative of *translatio studii*. A profound respect for foreignness as the sign of that which is beyond assimilation within language itself". Emily Apter (2003, 278).

[7] Mary Jean Chan was born and raised in Hong Kong and currently lives in Oxford, where they also work as senior lecturer in creative writing at Oxford Brookes University. Their collection *Flèche* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019) won the 2019 Costa Book Award for Poetry, and was shortlisted in 2020 for the International Dylan Thomas Prize, the John Pollard Foundation International Poetry Prize, the Jhalak Prize and the Seamus Heaney Centre First Collection Poetry Prize. In 2021, *Flèche* was a Lambda Literary Award Finalist. Chan's poems have been translated into multiple languages, including Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Galician, Greek and Romanian. Part of the observations made on Chan and Howe, below, are also published in another essay of mine: Cosima Bruno, "Translation in a Multilingual Context: Six Authors Writing the City", in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature in Translation*, ed. Cosima Bruno, Lucas Klein, Chris Song (London Bloomsbury, 2024).

> 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)

At a more minute reading, we can notice that while the English here functions as basis, morphologically, syntactically, and grammatically coherent, the Chinese characters have all specific meanings of otherization, that is a collision between the subject and the intended monolingual reader: "skin" (皮膚), "Chinese" (中文), "colonialism" (殖民主義), "English" (英文), "language" (語言), "mother tongue" (母語). Analogously, the title of the collection, as well as of its three sections—"parry", "riposte" and "corps-à-corps"—are all French terms used in fencing to indicate duelling techniques. As 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, English, French, mother tongue and language of Empire.

We can conclude that the French and the Chinese words in *Flèche* do not have the purpose of just marking different languages for the sake of portraying a multilingual context—that could be done by using any Chinese character or French word. For Chan, multilingualism is there to mark a differential identity. Writing in English is the result of a power relationship, where the colonized uses the language of the colonizer. But English is not just a matter of necessity; it is the medium to build her struggle and talk back to the colonizer:

> "Let us be honest. Had I not learnt 英文 and come to your shores, you wouldn't be reading this poem at all." (Chan 2019, 43)

Which is Chan's mother tongue? In postmonolingual fashion, and under the guidance of Blommaert, Chan's multilingual battle can be considered as having no mother tongue, even though she states she dreamt in her mother tongue. All languages used are languages of translation, in relation to which the subject is positioned further out. The co-presence of these languages marks the untranslatable space between the states of being of the persona, and grounds their critique of differential power relations. French, English, and Chinese can

mediate or be illegible according to the linguistic proficiencies of the readers; for both reader and writer, however, language becomes cause of slippage and instability. 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 their Shanghainese mother who migrated to Hong Kong, are invariably marked with social, political and racial alterity:

> Your spot given
> To a *worker's child*
> (Chan 2019, 51)

The heteroglossia of the fragment "worker's child," marked with italic to indicate they are voiced, subvocalized fragments, from the "foreign" language of Maoist speech, emphasizes alterity. This is the native language from which Chan also departs. Chan's native language is not their mother's Shanghainese. Their native language, the language they were exposed since childhood may be Cantonese, or the equally colonizing standard Chinese and English. To borrow Yildiz's words, we can state that Chan's collection situates itself in the "postmonolingual condition", "writing beyond the concept of the mother tongue". At the same time, Chan also engenders a "postmonolingual mode of reading" which is "a mode of reading that is attentive to both multilingual practices and the monolingual paradigm" (Yildiz 2012, 21).

Chan transposes the friction among colonizers' languages in her border-crossing poems. They use English as a language acquired by birth into a colonial social setting, marked by a dynamic of economic and/or cultural power relationship. English is not the mother tongue, but it is learned through education, migration, and travel. Their poetry not only reflects a certain social condition that is multilingual (the migrant author happens to be writing and living in the translingual environment of a multilingual city), it also entertains a one-to-one discussion with the reader.

In a colonial context, the desire for language possession, for close-to-native proficiency of English, places the premium language as capital, in Bourdieu's terminology. This is visible in Eric Yip's "Fricatives,"[8] which reveals a different type of multilingualism, operating

[8] Hong Kong poet Eric Yip speaks Cantonese and Mandarin, and write in English. He was the youngest National Poetry Competition at 19, as the author of "Fricatives", written while studying at the University of Cambridge. Eric Yip, "Fricatives", *Varsity* 21 April (2022), https://www.varsity.co.uk/arts/23534.

by absence:

> To speak English properly, Mrs Lee said, you must learn
> the difference between *three* and *free*.

Yip construes alterity within a monolingual text, while also playing with the word "free", which may be read as bearing extra meaning from the perspective of a colonial language.

From her mixed cultural background, Sarah Howe[9] plays with orientalism in her collection *Loop of Jade* (2015), which takes Jorge Luis Borges' 1942 essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" as its interface. John Wilkins was a 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*. Borges lists 14 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 14-category structure as allegedly had the *Emporium*, presenting autobiographical yet fantastical poems full of orientalist images that define a liminal incantatory world of real and imagination, as childhood memories and transmitted family stories usually do. In the poem "Crossing from Guangdong", for example, translational processes overlap generations, places and worlds, where the Whitehall and the Cenotaph are found in the streets of China.

Howe's is a multi-layered meaning in constant flux, continuously translated, with no path connecting the particular to the universal, the known to the unknown. Her Cantonese mother's tongue and her Shanghainese grandmother's tongue entangle with each other. The Cantonese in:

> *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 doesn't understand.

[9] Howe was born in Hong Kong in 1983 to an English father and a Chinese mother, who migrated to the UK when Sarah was seven years old.

Languages, texts and places are continuously crossed and translated, without pretense of an exchange, or an orderly resolution. This is effectively articulated in the poem "(I) Others," which starts with a quotation from the 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.
> *
> From *castus* to *chaste*, with a detour for *caste*.
> *English*, 廣東話, *Français d'Egypte*, מאַמע־לשון: our future children's skeins, carded.
> *
> …
> The spiralling path from *Γένεσις* to *genetics*. Language revolves like a ream of stars.
> (Howe 2015, 46)

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 – an apt figure for the simultaneous, multiple national and linguistic identity portrayed in multilingual writing.

Written mainly in English, the poems are liberally inclusive of many languages, repeatedly repositioning the reader as inadequate and outsider, generating a critical distance from dominant ideas and truth claims about culture and language, nation, history. Howe seems to remark that personal experience and affect is impossible to convey, it cannot translate into a language of truth, instead it can only conduce to the classification of stereotypes. Her use of multilingualism here is ontological, ethical and aesthetic. It works as a continuous, viral, defamiliarizing, and yet essential translation. She borrows and refutes texts (Borges, Chinese songs, Pound), showing that cultural difference can become commodified in a late-capitalist system in which these discourses circulate.

I consider the aesthetics defined by these latter texts as having a slightly different purpose from that one encountered in Kwek, Lee, Miller, and Gao. I find these texts bearing a stronger ethical weight towards changing, updating, and upgrading the monolingual reader.

Final Remarks

I contend that we must continue to define these works as "multilingual", without prioritizing any of the languages used. I also contend that we can use translation as our reading model.

Calling these texts "Sinophone" only mitigates the problem of the monolingual paradigm and of the unitary national language, because the Sinophone still looks for an identifiable language in relation to nationality, regional or cultural origin. So, despite the opening up to linguistic diversity in the notion of Sinophone, multilingual poetry does not belong to a single system and needs to be considered on a broader linguistic scale, which recognizes languages as operating in relation (often in discordance) with each other, and not in isolation from each other.

The dynamic alternating national languages in multilingual poetry are usually not examined as acts of translation from one language into another.[10] But if not translation, what does the switch from one language to another entail?

Translation begins from an attitude of perceptiveness and responsiveness to something that addresses us and cannot be ignored. As Susanne Klinger states in relation to post-colonial writing, "source and target language come into contact – and often merge with one another – not only in the process of creating the text but also in the reality portrayed in this text, as this reality constitutes itself an arena of past and ongoing translation" (Klinger 2013, 113). This act of translation reaches beyond the model of an exchange between two monolingual systems of two unitary languages. It involves forms of transposition within a linguistic system, or between idiolects as well as between languages. This model of translation foregrounds the presence of one language within another, not to smooth over its differences but to emphasize both its particularity and its ability to engender new stories and new readings.

The excerpts above are from multilingual poems because from the start the poets present different proportions of languages in the same textual space. They complicate the global hegemony of the dominant language English, by way of a translative act that accounts for their different proportions of languages. If monolingual translation can be thought of as a bridge that takes a national language or national culture to another in temporal and spatial sequence, the multilingual text cannot be thought of as a bridge, but as a translation that

[10] In fact, Reine Meylaerts laments the fact that multilingual writing constitutes a blind spot in translation studies (2010, 227-30).

continuously switches between one or more linguistic nations, alternating themselves in the same textual space, at the same time. In precisely their linguistic asymmetry and inequality, these multilingual poems can convey the irreducible heterogeneity of linguistic and cultural situations, in which translation can never simply be communication between equals. Although still expressing a desire for the capital of English, translation in the multilingual text demystifies, rather than mystifies the dominant language.

Multilingual poetry does not signal exhaustive translatability or transparency, like we would find in monolingual translations, rather it conveys partial opacity or illegibility of writing in multiple languages. The reader of the multilingual text either knows the languages the text is written in or knows one language and not the other. For the latter kind of reader, the multilingual text may feel defamiliarizing, but, I argue, not necessarily alienating. To such defamiliarizing text the reader may react with curiosity towards the portion of text she does not understand, or she may succumb to ignorance. In each of these cases, however, reading the multilingual poem is for the reader a moment of realization, in the cognitive comparative processing of different languages, which we may call "translation."[11] As Blumczynski (2016, 40) reminds us, quoting Berman: "It is the drive to translate that makes the translator a translator… This drive may arise of its own or be awakened by another person" (Berman 2009, 58).

In the multilingual text, we find not a relationship between a multilingual translator and a monolingual reader, but something, instead, like the multilingual writer and reader as translators.

These multilingual poems show a kind of linguistic relativism that allows us to see others and, within some limits, to communicate with them. In this way it reassesses our ethnocentrism, by adding (rather than substituting) more than one culture, more than one material structure, as well as emotional sphere, in other words, more than one symbolic system. Even if the English-language persona superimposes itself on all the others, or if we cannot retrieve an *original* unitary persona, in the multilingual poem there are the seeds of other languages, idioms that are private and public, forms of experience that present not one but two, three, four personae.

[11] Brian Lennon argues in favor of this understanding of the reader of what he calls "strong bilingual or plurilingual text" (2010, 75).

The multilingual poem thus discredits the authoritarian impersonal truth of a national language in its claimed accessibility to all, posing the question: how do those who do not share the same language declinate and communicate their own experience? It is through a language that shows the relation to other languages, that is in a multilingual language.

In the cracks of multiple language-worlds, we find not the transparency of the monolingual translation, but multilingualism *in translation*. As Lennon considers, in the multilingual text "translation is already, and in advance, denied - but also, in an important way, already performed" (2010, 74).

Multilingual poetry ensues complicated relations of proximity to and distance from the writing languages. From the perspective of the writer, multilingual poetry is often produced by migrants and exiles, with a translingual experience and actual multilingual use of language. Performing multiple speeches, rubbing deviant against standard idioms, these multilingual poems constitute a dynamic form of cultural porosity that communicates at the elusive point of discontinuity (Sakai 2009, 72), mistranslation, and incompatibility. These multilingual poems mark cultural difference, incorporating a variety of languages, they represent different centers of power, including forms of vernacular, familial, standard and vehicular languages, as well as translation and transposition of literary references and myths, single words, sentences, or brief segments of dialogues.

I have started by looking at the kind of multilingualism used in these poems: what languages (French, English, Mandarin, Chinese familial vernacular, Hokkien, Hebrew, Cantonese, Maospeak); what kind of markers (italic, in-text translation, pinyin); what kind of words; what status, what accent and form? Along the way, I have distinguished two kinds of aesthetic use of multilingualism, to conclude that these texts radically change the way the reader shares and develops knowledge. Here we are not in presence of a specific decoding of a message contained in a visible text and reformulated in another language. We are instead in presence of a process that complicates and facilitates intercultural relations and the transmission of knowledge.

Thus, translation in this chapter has been conceived as a practice of writing and reading with many implications for views of culture, and personal and collective identity.[12]

[12] Readers less familiar with this conception of translation and wishing to find out more, can consult comprehensive studies on this by Ricoeur, Blumczynski, Hermans, Tymoczko, Geertz, Gentzler and more.

We can recognize in all of these works similar thematic preoccupations arising from a multilingual consciousness in the intercultural space of migration. These writers live in translation, as their multilingual life experience is embedded in their writing, and their crossing national languages is emotionally involved in a form of self-transformation.

Language is translational, and translation is not just a text but also a necessary process of the diverse society that generates interpersonal relations with who is not us, and for whom we may feel fascination, suspicion, conflict, hostility.

These poems are multilingual in their internal linguistic diversity. Reading them together makes them doubly multilingual, because they enact the differences between Chineses, as well as their individual differences from the standardized national English language.

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