



Queerness as Translation

Mary Jean Chan

ABSTRACT

In this essay, Mary Jean Chan explores their relationship to English and to multilingualism, having been raised bilingually in Hong Kong until the age of eighteen. Through exploring their relationship to (queer) literary texts including William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo's *Measures of Expatriation*, Chan charts the evolution in their thinking in relation to language, translation and queerness.

KEYWORDS

Poetry, multilingualism, language, English, Chinese, translation, queerness, gender, race.

The pronouns for he, she, and it are phonetically the same in Cantonese (my mother tongue), as well as in Mandarin Chinese and Shanghainese (my mother's mother tongue). As a multilingual speaker, the notion that I would check someone's use of my pronouns only makes sense within an Anglophone context. I am exploring new words and ways of being: most recently, what it might mean to be non-binary. I identify as queer, in all senses of the word in English. In Chinese, there are other names, ones which I seldom use, because those words and their specific connotations do not evoke the ways in which I have become – and am still becoming – queer. This discovery takes place within language, rooted in the tongues I speak.

During my PhD, I came across these lines by the Martinican poet, novelist and theorist Édouard Glissant in his *Caribbean Discourse*:

If one continues to compel the Martinican child to have a French experience in school and a Creole experience at home, the process of collective irresponsibility that afflicts the Martinican community will be reinforced. The principle of multilingualism increases the child's learning capacity because he is free from the kind of dissociation that emerges as inhibitions, complexes...

I have written elsewhere about growing up in Hong Kong just as the colonial era was drawing to a close, but I am only beginning to plumb the effects this has had on my psyche. I was seven when Hong Kong was officially handed back over to China as a Special Administrative Region. As the last British governor Chris Patten waved a ceremonial goodbye aboard the HMY *Britannia*, the city I was born and raised in assumed its postcolonial identity. As a student at an Anglican school founded by British missionaries from the age of six till eighteen, I accepted the implicit rules of this historic institution – which only began to change incrementally in the years after the British left. The primary school entrance exam (a written test administered in English to a group of overwhelmed six-year-olds, followed by a lengthy interview with the junior school Headmistress) had impressed upon me the gravity of the situation. I began tutorial lessons at the age of seven with Ms. Laity, a retired English teacher who had taught at an international school in Hong Kong for most of her career.

I remember sitting in her apartment on Friday evenings, completing grammar exercises, answering her comprehension questions, then – my favourite part of our two-hour meetings – the chance to read a story I had chosen from her overflowing bookshelf. I recall sounding out the English words phonetically, the book usually too hard for me to fully comprehend, but Ms. Laity would read aloud with me, correcting my pronunciation and explaining any difficult words whenever necessary. I enjoyed her calm demeanour and gentle approach, and particularly relished playing with her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel as she poured me English breakfast tea (with milk) and offered me shortbread (always Walkers) during our short breaks.

*

What might my relationship to English have to do with my relationship to queerness? Since English was a colonial language, I had always equated a better grasp of English with “success”. English was rooted in linear time – the longer I worked at it, the better I would get, and the more “successful” I would become. That simplistic mentality ensured that my English did improve rapidly as time went on, but I was also facing a quandary in terms of the self-discoveries I was making in this increasingly familiar tongue.

To this day, *Twelfth Night* (1995) remains my favourite Shakespeare play, because it provided me with my first glimpse into the multiplicity of queer desire. The way it was taught during the HKCEEs – a rough equivalent of the GCSEs – ensured that the play remained firmly within accepted normative boundaries. The gender-bending was explained by my English Literature teacher as a consequence of the twelfth night of Christmas, during which the “normal” social order was turned upside down for a day of fun and revelry. The play's ending, where all couples engage in heterosexual marriage, does lend itself somewhat to this socially conservative reading.

However, I could not help but read the text queerly – there was Viola/Cesario who had fallen hopelessly in love with Duke Orsino (whilst wearing her dashing military uniform), and their passionate conversations about the true nature of love made me question who it was I found myself increasingly drawn to – Viola, Cesario, or both? Sir Trevor Nunn's brilliant film adaptation of *Twelfth Night* brought all these characters vividly to life: the passionate courting of Olivia by Viola/Cesario was a scene that mesmerized me for months, and the tenderness with which

the sea captain Antonio treats Viola's twin brother Sebastian made for palpable homoeroticism on screen.

In order to make sense of these emergent feelings, I subsumed my queer desires into linear time, and made them an integral part of my ongoing quest to perfect my grasp of English. If reading more Shakespeare made me a better student of English, then I could read about queerness without compromising who I was at the time: a good student of English Literature, and a dutiful child who wanted to please my parents. This was a delicate and emotionally difficult balance to maintain: a precarious way of living as a closeted teenager in Hong Kong.

Eventually, a kind of splitting emerged: for every five books I read in English, I read one book in Chinese. The ratio gradually widened. As a form of compromise, I diligently read classical Chinese poems set to strict rhyme and meter, often committing multiple poems to memory at a time as I savoured their soothing cadences. Even then, poetry (in both English and Chinese) provided an emotional anchor within the flux of my life which kept me sane.

Years later, during my time at university in the United States, I discovered a poet whose visionary work would change my life. Adrienne Rich became the writer I turned to for a sense of self, poetic inspiration and solace. Her collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (Rich 1993), first published in 1978, kept calling me back to the redemptive possibilities of language. Crucially, Rich's poems asked me the questions I had been avoiding all my life. One of those was a simple line, in one of her love poems, in which she asks: "What kind of beast would turn its life into words? / What atonement is this all about?" (Rich 1978: 28)

At the time, her words struck a chord in me, because they made me realise how much of my life had been about atoning for a perceived failure. In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, queer theorist Jack Halberstam contends that from both a Lacanian and Marxist perspective, lesbian desire is doomed to "failure" within a patriarchal, heteronormative and capitalist system, since it is associated with values of "non-conformity, anti-capitalist practices, non-reproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique," in contrast to the supposed "sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption" that

characterises heterosexual relations. Rich's work was a powerful antidote to the overwhelming shame I felt as a result of having failed so miserably at being a straight, cis-gendered woman, so I read her poems and essays diligently and slept with her books on my bedside table. I still remember the first time I saw two women holding hands, walking across the lush campus lawn. I couldn't stop trembling on the sidewalk, out of sheer relief and a hesitant joy.

*

Since coming out in 2012, I have begun to feel increasingly able to gradually reconfigure my relationship to language – how multilingualism offers a profound way of understanding the complex historical, political and social contexts that have shaped who I am as a person and poet. I have begun to read more literature in Chinese, and to enjoy Chinese texts translated into English, such as the anthology *Jade Ladder: Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, edited by W.N. Herbert and Yang Lian (2012) and *Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni*, translated by Eleanor Goodman (2014), as well as texts that offer me new ways of understanding translation as something that is inherently political and historically complex, such as Don Mee Choi's *DMZ Colony* (2020).

As I learn more about the politics and poetics of translation, I am curious about what can or cannot be translated, and what the ethics of translation are. I am also curious – on a metaphorical level – about what has become newly possible in the translated text of my life, and what meanings I might find in the source text of my past. I am attempting to reject binaries and polarities, and am beginning to marry the parts of myself I had compartmentalised and kept apart so well during my young adult life. Nowadays, I am eager to re-read and re-write my life as an ongoing poem, but no longer in linear time. Linear time suffocates; it forces the now into the future and refuses any meaningful engagement with the past. I want, instead, to inhabit a state of play – a form of playtime – where time dissolves and there is only being, breath, and the myriad of languages we allow ourselves to inhabit and speak.

In November 2017, I flew home for the Hong Kong International Literary Festival, and spent an afternoon discussing my thoughts on Anglophone poetry with an American poet who had been living in Hong Kong for a few years. Before the event, we met up for lunch. This time, despite opening up to someone I didn't know well, I felt a bit less torn

between being here or there, closeted or queer. On the day of the reading, I was surprised at how at ease I felt. There were friendly faces in the crowd, attendees of all nationalities who had decided to spend their Sunday afternoon at a fringe poetry event. I felt that day, in that sun-lit café, as though I had finally been given permission to simply be – to play with languages the way a child might – as if language itself was a safe place in which to roam.

That year, I was also knee-deep in a poetry collection by Vahni (Anthony Ezekiel) Capildeo called *Measures of Expatriation* (2016), a book that has come to mean so much to me, as it bears new fruit with each re-reading. In particular, I felt drawn to “A Fan Museum”, a prose poem consisting of five discrete sections, which constitutes the first part of the collection’s “Five Measures of Expatriation”. The text animated in me the desire to read queerly. In the poem, the speaker places an overwhelming focus on their own body, how the body’s relationship to the space it finds itself inhabiting produces a site of conflict and forced negotiation. Capildeo’s speaker navigates this fan museum as a space wherein obstacles to the queer body abounds – “The doorway into the main space was without a door but blocked by a wrought iron trellis...”

What is normally a space of welcome – the doorway – becomes a normative object to be navigated with care. In a movement that might be described as queer, the speaker observes the doorway, stating that: “I edged past it and straightened myself out.” I read this act of “straightening oneself out” as a queer gesture, one which calls attention to the straight lines inherent in the Fan Museum’s architectural design as a normative space. The speaker tries to vocalize this discomfort in deviating from the straight line: “I had a strong, irrational aversion to making a left or right turn.” Having navigated the doorway which was blocked, the speaker desires conformity, but also recognizes a deep-seated, unconscious urge to make “a left or right turn”. The body’s refusal to turn, to move queerly off the straight line, is indeed an “irrational aversion” that troubles the speaker’s consciousness.

Beyond the doorway, the speaker is faced with a series of objects: “two identical mirrors”, “[a] clock”, and a “small cabinet”. Apart from being challenging to navigate, the room the speaker inhabits is also vertically rendered as inhospitable to the arrivant, who finds the “...small cabinet had been affixed to

the wall just too high for [their] comfort, at average adult Scandinavian reach.” The speaker’s racial background begins to crystallize in a moment of naming the norm for which ordinary everyday objects have been built: the “Scandinavian”. The speaker is clearly an outsider amongst other outsiders, as they observe the sound of their own voice in a foreign space: “Hello!” My voice reverted to a kind of Trinidadian that it had never used in Trinidad: a birdlike screech that would carry over a wrought metal gate (painted orange) across a yard with frizzle fowls and the odd goat”.

In the above scenario, the speaker experiences a profound sense of disorientation. This is a sense of disorientation I have felt as a queer person growing up in Hong Kong, and as a queer person of colour living in the UK. In the wake of COVID-19, the rise of COVID racism towards East Asian communities in the UK, US and elsewhere has heightened my sense of what it means to be racialised as East Asian and perceived as (gender) queer. During these tumultuous times, the power of language to empower or inflict harm comes to the fore: how we might respect another person’s truth by using their preferred pronouns, or how transphobic rhetoric might incite hatred towards already marginalised and vulnerable groups. The poets I love and admire work within and across languages in ways that honour the potential of literature to heal these social divides, thereby allowing us to envision the world anew. In an op-ed for *The Guardian* [1] published on World Poetry Day in March 2020, I wrote:

“I turn to poetry for its propensity towards truth, its tensile strength, and its insistence that language can, and must be, the bridge that connects us all during these difficult times.”

A shorter version of this article first appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 2018.

ENDNOTES

[1] Chan, M. J. (2020) The Guardian [online]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/mar/21/mary-jean-chan-language-must-be-the-bridge-that-connects-us-> [14 May 2022]

REFERENCES

Capildeo, (A. E.) V. (2016) *Measures of Expatriation*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

Choi, D.M. (2020) *DMZ Colony*. Seattle: Wave Books.

Glissant, É. (1989) *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated by Michael Dash. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Halberstam, J. (1993) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Herbert, W. N., and Yang, L. (2012) *Jade Ladder: Contemporary Chinese Poetry*. Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books.

Rich, A. (1978) *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Shakespeare, W. (1995) *Twelfth Night (Wordsworth Classics)*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

Wang, X. (2014) *Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni*, translated by Eleanor Goodman. Brookline: Zephyr Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Jean Chan is the author of *Flèche*, published by Faber & Faber in 2019 and Faber USA in 2020. *Flèche* 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 won the 2018 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2017 and 2019, receiving an Eric Gregory Award in 2019. Chan was guest co-editor with Will Harris at *The Poetry Review* in Spring 2020, and co-edited *100 Queer Poems* (Vintage, 2022) with Andrew McMillan. Chan was a Visiting Writer at the Nanyang Technological University Asia Creative Writing Programme in Singapore for Summer 2022. Chan currently serves as Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Oxford Brookes University. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Chan lives in Oxford.