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Speaking from “in-between”:

Jennifer Wong and the Translation of the Self

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Introduction

The Sinophone world is hardly a monolithic entity through which different communities across the globe represent a univocal interpretation of “Chineseness.” Its first and well-known conceptualization by Shu-mei Shih takes the variety of Sinitic languages into account and emphasizes the multilinguality of the Sinophone in terms of sound and script (Shih 2011, 715). Shih also extends the borders of the concept to the “localization and creolization” taking place in specific areas where a Sinitic language overlaps with a foreign one (2011, 716). In more than a decade of debate, the concept of “Sinophone literature” has been widely discussed from many different perspectives, although it still seems impossible to come up with a final and perfectly satisfactory definition, by specifying exactly what one should include or exclude from this “category.” Sinophone literature, as part of the Sinophone, still represents an entanglement of concepts such as that of ethnicity, race, nationality, and language ideologies (A.D. Wong, Su, and Hiramoto 2021), which can be modulated according to the perspective from which a certain study is conducted. Twenty-five years ago, the Lebanese writer and member of the *Académie française* Amin Maalouf stated that a language “has the peculiarity of being at once an identity-defining factor and a tool of communication,” representing “the pivot of cultural identity,” just as “linguistic diversity” represents “the pivot of any diversity” (Maalouf 1998, 153). Therefore, the use of language can always be traced back to a certain interpretation of one’s identity and, in the case of Sinophone authors, it can transcend the borders of Sinitic languages and take the form of a foreign language mixed—at some point—with elements deriving from the individual’s mother tongue. The nuances coded in language are particularly relevant when studying literature and, within the study of literature, they are exceptionally noteworthy when shifting the focus from prose to poetry. In this chapter, I will delve into the issue of Sinophone poetry in English by analyzing Jennifer Wong’s collection 回家 *Letters Home* (2020b). The author’s composite identity, voiced through her “other” tongue, provides a reflection on language that leads to a unique vision of the in-betweenness characterizing her own experience as a migrant woman from Hong Kong.

The Sinophone and Foreign-Language Writing

Although the debate about what can be considered "Sinophone literature" is still far from settled, finding a solution should not be considered a utopian dream. Chinese authors writing in foreign languages have been categorized in different ways, based on their own personal histories and their specific use of language. Scholars from the P.R.C. have mainly analyzed these works from a cultural or a linguistic perspective. On the one hand, foreign-language writing can be considered the quintessence of multiculturalism (Ni 2013) and these writers' peculiar location—at the margins of both their homeland and their adoptive country—is seen as a privileged position from which they are able to open up a channel of communication. On the other hand, their works juggling with linguistic hybridization have been analyzed as products of unique interactions between an individual's "soul language" and his or her "tool language" (Huang 2008, 50-51). The problem of harmonizing the idea of a Chinese literature that can no longer be limited by geographic borders and confined to the use of Sinitic languages has been brought to the forefront by Jing Tsu and David Wang (2010), as well as by Yinde Zhang (2014), who has underlined the need to take into account the real polyphony behind a "global" or "transnational" Chinese literature. Although the task of defining a cartography of such a wide and multifaceted concept seems impossible, one must keep in mind that it is only when it is used as a method—and not as a category—that it can prove most useful (Codeluppi 2020, 21).

Analyzing and comparing different manifestations of Sinophone literature, in Chinese as well as in other languages, is a fundamental practice that enables us to fully grasp its composite character. Sometimes, different languages overlap in a single author's mind, as is the case with writers—usually migrants—who choose to express themselves in their "other tongue": a practice which Steven Kellman has termed "translingualism" (Kellman 2019, 337). As Ha Jin 哈金 (b. 1953) explains in his famous essay "Exiled to English" (2013), the choice of abandoning one's mother tongue for another language is never easy or painless. And when an author's bond with their homeland is particularly strong, they quite frequently choose to let their "mother tongue" show through their foreign-language texts, enriching their literary creativity by means of linguistic hybridization. This phenomenon generates a cross-linguistic text that can be analyzed through a precise framework (Yao 2003), in order to locate the cultural echo of migration as it is expressed in an author's language.

Jennifer Wong: A Synthesis of Three Minorities

Jennifer Wong is an interesting example of a bilingual author who experiments with language to represent the complexity behind a migrant's identity. She was born in Hong Kong in 1978 and emigrated to the United Kingdom as a college student. She completed her education with a PhD in creative writing from Oxford Brookes University, where she currently holds a position as Associate Lecturer, combining her academic career with her talent for poetry. She has published three collections of poems (2006, 2013, 2020b) and a pamphlet (2019), all dealing with her experience as a migrant, and conveying her special flair for languages. Her latest work, 回家 *Letters Home* (2020b) —the title itself is a sublimation of her linguistic creativity—earned her the "Wild Card Choice" award by the Poetry Book Society. On her personal website Jennifer Wong herself has clarified that this collection encapsulates the migrant's experience, expressing the ambivalent feelings caused by the overlapping of motherlands and mother tongues with foreign places and languages, as well as by an imaginary journey "back home":

> In 回家 *Letters Home*, one returns to the complexities of being between nations, languages and cultures. Intersecting multiple borders of history and place, these poems examine what it means to return home, and whether it is a return to a location, a country or to a shared dream or language.[1]

One of the most interesting traits of Wong's poetry is her way of playing with language, which is a feature she shares with other authors of similar background, such as Sarah Howe (b. 1983) and Mary Jean Chan (b. 1990). By expressing her message in a language that mixes English with Mandarin, Cantonese, dialects, etc., Jennifer Wong stimulates the reader, who is supposed to find a way around her codifications and put together a translation of his or her own (Huen 2022).

Besides writing poems, Wong also engages in academic research on the theme of identity in Chinese diaspora poetry. She has published a number of interviews and studies (J. Wong 2022, 2020a, 2018, 2017), as well as a recent monograph (J. Wong 2023), in which she specifically tackles the issue of home and identity in the context of Chinese migration. Her critical perspective toward these themes makes 回家 *Letters Home* an even more interesting work, a testimony to the reality of "being in-between," not only physically but also – and more importantly – culturally and linguistically. Published in 2020, 回家 *Letters Home* is a collection narrating – across five sections – the experience of a migrant girl, who recounts the beauty and hardship of finding herself in a foreign land, while remaining connected to her homeland. Wong defines herself a poet and a translator

[1] https://jenniferwong.co.uk.

and, as it is clearly shown by the title of the collection, her work can be regarded as an example of "translingualism." In Steven Kellman's words,

> [T]ranslingual authors are better equipped than isolinguals to step outside the prison-house of language – or at least of L1 – and to make us aware of the factitiousness of verbal constructions. Translingual texts are often metalingual in their self-consciousness about their own linguistic medium, the way they make language itself strange. (Kellman 2020, 12)

I have chosen to focus on Jennifer Wong because of the intersections between her choice to write in English – which can ultimately be regarded as an act of self-translation – and her personal history, which puts her at the crossroads of three minority categories, namely Hong Kong literature, migrant literature, and foreign-language writing. 回家 *Letters Home* contains the essence of the author's "in-betweenness" and in the following analysis I will explore three main themes through which Wong expresses her experimental creativity: the migrant's condition, the maternity metaphor, and the connection between distance and resistance. I will also apply Yao's taxonomy (Yao 2003) to underline the linguistic devices that embody Wong's hybridity, and eventually bring forward the cultural implications of her translingual practice.

The Migrant's Condition

回家 *Letters Home* includes many insightful representations of migration, which provide different examples to voice the complexity and the composite nature of such an experience. The poem "Diary of a Miu Miu Salesgirl" offers an interpretation of the phenomenon seen from the eyes of a young girl that finds herself stuck with a language that has somehow been imposed on her:

> I am wearing a crêpe-de-chine dress
> and suede stilettos that do not belong to me.
>
> I'm carrying nothing but my lies
> and my L'Absolut lipstick, red as a warning.
>
> I am rather good at this smiling game,
> speaking Mandarin to the customers.
>
> The trick is to flatter them, flattered as they
> already are, being wives of the nouveau riche
>
> from a changing China.
> […]

In our home country we would never

have met, but here I have touched their waists,
know their bra sizes and their children's names […]
(J. Wong 2020b)

This poem is not specifically hybrid, since Wong does not incorporate any language other than English, except for a few loanwords or misspelled names. Nevertheless, the reflection on the use of language is still powerful, as she describes how Mandarin constitutes a bridge to communicate with the social group that represents a specific category of Chinese migrants in Europe. Nonetheless, the lyrical "I"'s mother tongue is presumably Cantonese – like Wong's – therefore, she portrays how the language she speaks puts her in an undesirable position. Although she speaks fluent Mandarin, she does not consider it her mother tongue; the need to hide her true native language and speak Mandarin for the sake of her job feels almost suffered.

In the following poem, "Dimsum at Joy King Lau," Wong describes a rather common experience for a Chinese migrant: eating at a Chinese restaurant abroad, in this case in the United Kingdom.

As soon as we sat down you said:
I'm open to anything
except chicken's feet.
And please none of those slippery cheung fun rolls,
sea cucumber or jellyfish!
Secretly I *know* what you're
missing out on. As usual
we ordered *Chinese tea*:
a brew unheard of.
You devoured the spring rolls
and crispy squid with gusto, leaving
untouched the divine *xiaolongbao*.
[…]
For dessert,
they gave us sliced oranges:
our red bean soups are too sophisticated
for your palate. In the background
we could see the lit-up eyes
of the golden phoenix, this Chinatown
dotted with lanterns and too many
shops selling iPhone covers.
Nothing is authentic
except what we are missing.

(J. Wong 2020b)

As it seeps from the poem, the main feature of the meal is its fakeness, and the choice to use the original name in pinyin to describe the Shanghainese dumpling feels like an almost desperate attempt to preserve the tiniest bit of authenticity. The words that have seeped from Mandarin and Cantonese into the English text serve as an immediate obstacle – although one rather easy to overcome – for the Anglophone reader but, more importantly, they also constitute an example of "cross fertilization" (Yao 2003, 364). In the context in which they are used, these words are stripped of their original meaning – "Chinese tea" is a brew "unheard of" – and come to symbolize the "translation" of Chinese food into English culture.

Although autobiographical influences seem rather strong, Jennifer Wong in her collection does not limit her focus to her own personal experience, but tells many other stories of migrants – not only from China, but also from other countries, and with a variety of different backgrounds. Yet, all these narratives succeed in portraying the perpetual tension characterizing the migrant's condition and the pressing need for a compromise, which must be achieved in both language and behavior. Nonetheless, the author does not paint a negative picture of migration: as she describes in this excerpt from the poem titled "Anser Anser," her vision remains poetic.

> Year after year we'd do this: migration
> being so natural to us; we know
> we can never give up our strong ties
> and memories either here or over
> there, that the idea of not returning
> is as excruciating as of leaving.
> See the V shape we spell in the sky, before we scatter.
> (J. Wong 2020b)

Wong uses the metaphor of the graylag goose to represent migration as a sort of innate condition. This nature generates contrasting feelings that constitute the subject's purest nourishment.

The Maternity Metaphor

Another major theme that Jennifer Wong addresses in 回家 *Letters Home* is maternity, which can be considered one of the most authentic human experiences. Being so closely related to the natural, almost animal, part of a human being, maternity pervades every aspect of one's mind and body,

including language. In the following poem, "Postpartum Vinegar," the perspective of giving birth leads the lyrical "I" to connect with her cultural background by reviving old Hong Kong traditions:

> Elephantine in the ninth month,
> I'm the butcher's wife from the Ming dynasty
> hunting for fresh pig trotters
> in the local Morrisons.
>
> Too busy to chill out in Starbucks
> with the NCT yummy mummies,
> I'm preparing my ginger recipe:
> one portion sweet, two portions sour.
>
> Make it not too early nor too late.
> In a house spiced with memories
> I indulge in my tribal ways,
> singing to my baby in the womb the classic tune
>
> > 紅雞蛋 豬腳薑 hong gai dan, zhu geuk geung,
> > 八珍甜醋分外香 Pat Zhen Tim Cho fen oi heung!
>
> […]
> Baby daughter, get ready for England!
> (J. Wong 2020b)

The author's connection with her motherland takes the shape of a nursery rhyme she sings in her head in Cantonese. The use of characters associated with the transcription of the Cantonese pronunciation – which however is hybridized with Mandarin *pinyin* – produces a foreignizing effect on the readers, tricking them into believing in the alleged mystical powers of this Chinese custom. Linguistically speaking, the author performs a peculiar act of "code-switching," which is a form of what Yao defines as "transplantation" (Yao 2003, 368). Indeed, Wong inserts elements from her own cultural tradition rather abruptly, and by adding the transcription of the pronunciation, she almost fakes the intention to mediate between the Cantonese nursery rhyme and the English poem, without actually providing any tool to overcome potential incomprehensibility (Yao 2003, 369). What might come as a surprise is the fact that the tune quoted is actually the commercial for a widely known brand of vinegar sold in Hong Kong. Therefore, despite Wong's manifest desire to refer to Hong Kong traditions explicitly, she does not stop at the level of cultural evocation, but recreates a play on language that can fool inexperienced readers. Another linguistic device that

reveals Wong's linguistic hybridization is the metaphor of the "butcher's wife from the Ming dynasty." By dropping such a reference, the author evokes a particular image that is strictly related to Chinese tradition in a rather casual way; therefore, she provides an example of "grafting," a device that has the purpose of establishing "the terms of [her] ethnic culture" (Yao 2003, 367).

The second poem which the author devotes to the theme of maternity is titled "Daughter," and is largely autobiographical. This poem is an imaginary dialogue with a newborn, to whom Wong speaks in Cantonese, even though the baby cannot understand her:

> You arrive in the year of the ram,
> a month after the royal birth.
>
> The kindest thing that has happened
> in my side of England.
>
> Remember the Chinese proverb:
> we are of the same bone and flesh
>
> indebted to each other
> since the beginning.
>
> My little bird, do you know
> love is where you come from?
>
> If one day you look for
> my childhood, you will find
>
> it lies elsewhere, in a country
> with no alphabet,
>
> but here and now, what I feel
> is the clasp of your tiny fist,
>
> the heave of your small chest.
> *Ka wai, or hai nei gei ma ma,*
>
> *gung gung por por dou hou gua ju nei*
>
> and I know this undulated speech
> makes no sense to you and jars the ears,
>
> but baby, this is what I can give.
> The rest is your journey now.

(J. Wong 2020b)

Here the author once again performs an act of "transplantation," as she chooses to report the Cantonese pronunciation by means of a non-conventional transcription, creating a foreignizing effect and making it challenging to understand even for a native Cantonese speaker. As a result, the bar of language tricks is raised, increasing the cryptic nature of the thoughts that Wong, as a migrant mother, decides to express by means of her personal tongue. Even if the interpretation of these lines was not as important for the poem as the presence of Cantonese itself, Wong still makes the reader perceive a distance which reproduces that which the lyrical "I" feels towards her daughter, with whom she shares some DNA, but not the same nationality or mother tongue.

Distance and Resistance

The concept of distance represents another main theme in 回家 *Letters Home*, and is strictly related to that of resistance. As a migrant, the author is likely to perceive the distance separating her from her motherland, but as a Hongkongese, she also feels the urge to resist the increasing influence of mainland China that has marked the recent history of Hong Kong. In particular, in this poem titled "Metamorphosis" she addresses the changes that Hong Kong has undergone since the handover, starting from the educational and linguistic consequences of the new "cultural re-colonization," namely the appearance (and disappearance) of certain content in children's textbooks and the shift in the cultural connotations of the language one speaks:

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

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

[…]
I wonder how a city
can outgrow the country,
whether going home is still an option.
(J. Wong 2020b)

Clearly, the author is referring to the cultural transformation that Hong Kong has been experiencing since the handover put an end to its colonial history in 1997. The protests that have shaken this contested territory in recent years have left a deep mark on its people, to the point that even language and its nuances have gained new meanings. It is interesting to note how changes in language end up affecting one's idea of "home." This is not a new concept in Wong's literary production[2] and in this poem we witness a shift from the feeling of rejection she expressed in *Goldfish* (J. Wong 2013) to a sense of loss, which leads the lyrical "I" to open up to the possibility that her home may already have become unreachable, lost in the linguistic invasion from the mainland. Another poem addressing the fate of Hong Kong is the one titled "Truth 2.0," in which the lyrical "I" openly refers to the "Umbrella Movement" of 2014, expressing how her people's resistance is able to reach her across the distance between her homeland and the country she resides in:

1.
Incoming: *I smell tear gas everywhere.*

2.
Imagine there are no countries.

3.
Once upon a time I lived in a place where the metro was never late.
Everything ran like clockwork, and it was so safe you could walk
to Tsui Wah for a bowl of wonton noodles at midnight.

4.
There's no word in the dictionary for this.

[…]
7.
Since June, my screen time has increased by a hundred and fifty
percent. I go to the news as soon as I wake up and right before
going to sleep, concerned something might break out again when

[2] See Ho (2017).

I am out in the supermarket or picking up my daughter.

[…]
12.
A mosaic of dreamers despite the rain. Despite the heavy rain.

13.
人在做。天在看。

14.
The world will never forget.
(J. Wong 2020b)

The description of the increased screen time stresses the anxiety of the migrant, who can only follow the protests from afar. Nevertheless, the distance does not prevent the lyrical "I" from speaking directly to those involved in the riots by addressing them in Chinese – code-switching once again – by quoting the popular saying: "The heavens are watching people's actions." Moreover, the reference to the impossibility of finding an appropriate word in the dictionary is an overt expression of her disappointment at the traumatic events that occurred in those years. In "A Chinese Teapot," Wong extends her reflection to recent Chinese history and compares the impossibility of finding a rationale for what has happened to the bewilderment of not knowing how to use tenses in a language that is not one's own:

> Say we can't find the right tense for certain years in our lives. Say nineteen ninety-seven. And nineteen eighty-nine. (J. Wong 2020b)

The references to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 and to the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 are associated with the different use of tenses in Chinese and English. As stated by Kellman, "different languages orient us differently in space and time" and, as a result, they produce a "very different sense of history" (2019, 343). In this case, linguistic hybridization and translingualism give way to a kind of incommunicability that, despite all efforts, cannot be overcome even in the "in-betweenness" experienced by the migrant.

Conclusions

In Steven Kellman's words, "switching languages is a way of inventing a new self" (2019, 341), and Jennifer Wong provides an example of how translingualism can represent a way for a migrant to

connect with her homeland by means of actual interaction between her mother tongue and her other tongue. The three minorities she embodies – Hong Kong literature, migrant literature, and literature in foreign languages – are masterfully represented in 回家 *Letters Home* through her linguistic creativity, which produces poems showing different degrees of linguistic hybridization. In my analysis I have shown how the complexity of being "in-between" is reflected by the many facets of Wong's language and how her polyphonic poetry can be regarded as an adjustable tool of interpretation that stimulates the reader and introduces him or her to the complex condition of being a Hong Kong migrant female author. Depending on what theme she wants to address, Wong conveys a more or less cryptic message, using different languages and transcription methods.

By exploring the themes of migration, maternity, and resistance as they are represented in the collection, I have underlined how the use of specific devices such as "cross-fertilization," "transplantation," and "grafting" enables the recreation of a hybridized self in translation, conveying all the tensions and doubts that fill a migrant's soul. Nonetheless, Wong's reflection on language reaches a deeper level when the use of a certain code becomes a metaphor for the cultural value it represents, and becomes particularly interesting if seen from the perspective of Sinophone literature. The author's mother tongue, Cantonese, symbolizes a sort of heritage which the lyrical "I" is trying to pass on to her baby, despite the difficulties of having to face pregnancy and maternity in a foreign land. On the contrary, the representation of Mandarin is often loaded with negative connotations, as it is depicted more than once as the language of consumerism and oppression. These two languages are both part of Wong's "Chinese self" and they are intertwined with her "foreign self" not only linguistically but also symbolically. They possess a power that, depending on the context, can either strengthen the influence of the author's ethnic background *vis-à-vis* the English culture in which she lives or trigger a clash between her Chinese roots and her Cantonese personal history. In Wong's case, the choice of adopting a foreign language to write poetry and of juxtaposing and hybridizing it with one's own linguistic heritage engenders a creative turmoil that is especially effective in emphasizing the importance of any linguistic choice, no matter how small, and hence in representing language as a perpetual act of resistance.

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