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# Broken Chord: Sounding Out the Ideogram in Marilyn Chin's *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*

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This essay examines Marilyn Chin's revisionary work on the aural, visual, and racial aspects of writing the lyric in the "Broken Chord Sequence" from her *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002). Addressing the interventions of the American modernists and Asian American activist writers in the relationship between the Chinese ideogram and the lyric in English, the lyric voice created by Chin is both divided from the unity of the self and palpably distinct from the other, linguistically enacting the condition of the immigrant, who not only lives as a foreigner within the boundaries of her adopted country but also creates the past as a foreign space by assimilating a second culture. The ideogram first became a poetic strategy in English in the work of Ezra Pound, which played upon the foreign to express the native self. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park, David Leiwei Li, and others note, Pound's adoption of the ideogram constitutes a particular problem for Asian Americans, especially Chinese Americans, whose native language has been made American, troubling both assimilation and ethnicity. Chin's exploration of sound in the previously silenced ideogram develops the possibility of translating the aural and visual effects of the ideogram. Chin adapts a form of traditional Chinese wordplay that operates through association by sound into a poetic device that hovers between English and Chinese, between writing and speaking. Through figures such as the broken chord and an *ai* that represents love, loss, a way of perceiving, and the self, Chin articulates the complex relationship of the always foreign self to the lyric. While the difficulty of voicing the *I* is a problem fundamental to the lyric, the tension between *ai* and *I* is specific to the border between English and Chinese, an aural answer to the Imagist appropriation of the ideogram. The displacement of metaphor to the border between Chinese and English, like the *I* existing on the border between Chinese and English, articulates and obscures the ghosted manifestation of the diasporic subject.

### Ai, Ai, Ai, Ai

Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong named their 1974 anthology of Asian American writers *Aiiiiieee!* in the spirit of protest. Fronted by the brown and yellow image of a screaming man resembling Chinatown-Hong Kong-Hollywood native Bruce Lee (deceased only the year before), the anthology verbally and pictorially stages a stereotypical image of an inarticulate Asian man erupting with mysterious aggression. Drawn out—literally—with three *Is* and five *Es*, punctuated for emphasis, the cry “aiiiiiieee!” is the “picture” of the “yellow man,” “more than a whine, shout, or scream”; “it is fifty years of our whole voice,” declares the preface. But it is also the voice given to the Asian American by the radio, the cinema, the television, the comic book, and the “pushers of white American culture,” a single utterance chosen to encompass being “wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering,” a cry of adaptable amplitude and expression (F. Chin, Preface ix-x). “Aiiiiieee!” is an invented voice, a battlecry in the Babel of Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American writers assembled or recovered in 1960s and 1970s America, these disparate voices necessarily united in order to be heard. It is the despised, recognizable, and expected expression of the yellow man in white popular culture, yet it is also the measure of his discontent phrased in the idiom of the understood. Metaphorically and linguistically, the diphthong articulates a multiplicity of tones in a space not fully excavated for their expression.

Despite its parodic bent, *Aiiiiieee!* “turn[s] a dying cry into a shout of resistance and triumph” (Shawn Wong 91)—like the “very stereotypical bamboo lettering” (93) marking the volumes of “Asian” literature hunted out by Wong and Chin in bookstores in early 1970s San Francisco before there was a recognized difference among “Asian,” “Asian American,” and their imitations. The name is a sign imposed on Asian America through the crude approximations of mainstream American culture that becomes the means by which its members recognize and elect themselves. “Aiiiiieee!” is overwritten: it is more vowels than can be sonically depicted; its line of increasing vowels makes up for the long silence of its contributing voices by being hypervisible but unreadable, alien, and wrong. “Aiiiiieee!” has no pretensions toward translatability; it is before and beyond its originating tongues, and its primitive and hyperbolic expressivity underscores its fulfillment of a specific market demand. As Shawn Wong describes the cultural moment, “There was only one voice that was being published—you had to be angry or in jail or from the ghetto” (94-95).

“Aiiiiieee!” and *Aiiiiieee!* mark a difference in presentation from

*AION* (1970), generally acknowledged as the first Asian American literary journal, the front and back matter of which presents not only the Anglicized title but also the character 全 in calligraphic strokes, as well as a translation: “unity.” While “Aiiiiieeee!” portrays the internal chaos of stereotypical self-identification, *AION* strives for a kind of legitimacy through legibility, compiling verse, essays, interviews, drawings, and photography to support its political aims. The editorial in the first issue declares, “As Asian Americans, we have been conditioned by stereotypes imposed upon us by the white middle class and have internalized the consequent insecurity and confusion. Dependency upon these values and standards has caused an absence of self-knowledge and its complementary fear and paralysis” (5)—in other words, in order to mobilize politically, Asian Americans must first recover the self. The same stance is elaborated within its pages in the militant diatribe of Red Guard party founder Alex Hing, who exhorts his readers to “become Asians” and “fight because that’s what Asians are all about” (9, 11). However, even as he proclaims firearms training “necessary to survival,” he urges fellow Asian Americans to “learn our native tongues and put our knowledge of it into practice in the community” and cautions that “without painstaking study we will not be able to properly analyze our situation and develop the proper strategy and tactics for it” (11). Simply put, the battle for Asian America is linguistic as well as martial; the necessary preparation involves the past and the ability to speak it as well as an overt means of aggression. But speaking within the broad category of the “Asian American” would have to remain in English—the potential misattribution of *AION* to the Greek *aion*, meaning “eternity,” stands in counterpoint to the frustration of the moment, the dislocation of the East, and the desire to gather the assorted diaspora of ancestral homelands (who have, on their own territories, mixed blood, languages, and writing systems) into a movement.

In contrast to Hing’s and others’ depictions of the Asian American movement as an affirmation of Asian masculinity, Maxine Hong Kingston argues that the way the Asian American woman negotiates her relationship with the present and the past, the homeland and the adopted country, better embodies the complexity of the Asian American condition; in *The Woman Warrior*, she writes, “There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues!” (47). Though she rejects the oppression of her native self-address, the narrator cannot comfortably occupy the secure individuality of the American *I*, asking, “How could the American ‘I,’ assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?” (166). As Martha J. Cutter puts it, the narrator’s inability to translate between the traditional *I* of the

woman-slave or the confident American *I* results in a “lack of ‘I’ identity” (49). The problem is a matter of speaking, and the word that gives the most trouble is the one that locates the self in the world and gives the speaker the power to name herself.

Nevertheless, the problem Kingston illustrates is not limited to the feminine. Frank Chin, despite his overt disdain for Kingston, also refers directly to the Chinese character for *I* and its etymological justification for the untranslatability of Chinese selfhood into American terms:

The ancient form of the character looks like a coat of arms. Like every coat of arms, the Chinese *I* means “I am the law.” This is the first person pronoun of the language of “life is war, and we are all born soldiers.” Unlike the personal pronoun *I* in the languages of the West, the Chinese *I*, *me*, and *we* do not descend from the mysterious syllables *Yahweh* and do not mean “praise God.” The Chinese *I* is not an act of submission to a higher authority but an assertion of the Confucian ethic of private revenge. (“Come All Ye” 38)

Frank Chin’s etymology suggests that the means for the recuperation of the *I* must come in the form of resistance, yet, as Kingston suggests, an Asian American *I* needs to negotiate between *slave* and *soldier*. The “woman warrior” of her title might be one possible synthesis, but it is one that, according to Frank Chin, “rewrites the heroine . . . as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization” (3). Kingston’s revision of the myth of Fa Mulan disrespects the present and the past in Chin’s view; as he writes, “losing touch with China did not result in Chinese Americans losing touch with ‘The Ballad of Mulan.’ It was and is still chanted by children in Chinatowns around the Western hemisphere.” Chin cites the poem in full in Chinese and then translates it into English (4-6), using it to point out Kingston’s defection to the orientalist perspective and to reaffirm an essential Confucian ideal: “all of us—men and women—are born soldiers. The soldier is the universal individual” (38). Yet it is not as “soldiers” that the Chinese in Chinatown maintain their continuity with the past and the East. It is, instead, through chant that children mark their territory in the West, a connection that is poetic, not geographic, the power of which Chin unconsciously acknowledges in his alliterative formulation.

In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin articulates one of the fundamental questions of the writer, “as whom does he write?” in terms of a spatial displacement that manifests in the writer’s choice of language. This choice is “an act of betrayal” for the migrant writer who composes in the language of his adopted country, a strategy that “alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energy towards another language” (31).

The question is perhaps even more significant for the second generation writer, Frank Chin's "real" Asian American, who writes under the weight of a history and a culture not immediately accessible to the senses or individual memory. The issue of reclaiming the *I* finds its formal equivalent in the Asian American writer's negotiations with poetry, especially the lyric, the genre that spotlights the individual against a relative absence of narrative. Sunn Shelley Wong describes early Asian American activist poetry as "speech-centered, democratic in terms of subject matter, and characterized by informal diction and direct reference to the service of class-, race-, or gender-based oppositional politics," against a mainstream American "modernist legacy that upheld complex formal structures, impersonality, irony, and intellect as the benchmarks of legitimate poetry" (291). More critically, Garrett Hongo describes the Asian American activist voice as being as exclusive a demographic as the mainstream, representing:

an urban, homophobic male educated at a California state university who identified with black power and ethnic movements in general; he wrote from the perspective of a political and ethnic consciousness raised in the late 60s; he was macho; he was crusading; he professed community roots and allegiances; he mocked Eurocentrism and eschewed traditional literary forms and diction in favor of innovation and an exclusively colloquial style; and, though celebrated in the Asian American "movement," his work was widely unrecognized by "the mainstream." (xxxix)

However, Timothy Yu suggests that Hongo's *The Open Boat* (1993), the first Asian American poetry anthology collected by an Asian American, might swing too far in the direction of the mainstream, replacing the "avant-garde, highly political paradigm of 1970s with a focus on individual, lyric subjectivity" and making "ethnic" poetry recognizable by content rather than form (104).

Though Yu includes Marilyn Chin among the writers of the "MFA mainstream of the 1980s and 90s," her poem "That Half Is Almost Gone," despite its apparent resemblance to the mainstream free-verse lyric of personal epiphany, explores the question of identity formally in the homonym, recasting the problem of *I* as specific to writing and necessary to metaphor (*Rhapsody* 17-19). The speaker has "forgotten the character for 'love,'" the character that corresponds to the repetitions, "*ai, ai, ai, ai*" (5, 9). The context that would make *ai* comprehensible in Chinese is also gone: the forgetful daughter obscured in the "cloud[ed] . . . vision" of her aging mother (14), the daughter's love emigrated to a marriage to "a Protestant West Virginian" (15). The mother's repetition of the line "You are a Chinese" shifts from accusation to uncertainty, the difference only in

emphasis, and ends with the inversion, “Are you *not* Chinese?” Throughout the interrogation, the daughter remains silent; the questions appear to need no response, only context (“My mother was adamant.” “My mother less convinced.” “My mother now accepting” [11-13]). Rather than draw the speaker and her mother together, this context distances, creating monologue out of citation. By the end of the poem, the speaker admits, “I have problems now even with the salutation” (23). Yet this salutation is neither a spoken greeting nor a declaration of love. The act of writing a letter prompts her recognition of loss, implying the unwritten salutation, 親愛的媽媽 (*qing ai de ma ma*, “Dear Mother”), that familiarly opens a letter home. The poem emphatically absents the character (愛), mechanically and ideologically distancing the speaker from her native language. In other words, the love lost is a formal and cultural love, the love cached in shared idiom. This love, implies the speaker, exists before and essentially underlies individual feeling and expression; the loss is not merely a “character” but an entire mode of being and communicating.

However, whereas the speaker of “That Half Is Almost Gone” has “forgotten the character for ‘love,’” Marilyn Chin remembers and instructs, including it in a footnote to the poem, as well as explaining its etymology: “the semantic radical for this character is the character for ‘heart.’ A slash goes straight through the heart” (105), thus making the Chinese visual and aural allusions legible even to those who do not know the language. Writing *ai* without the ideogram opens the meaning to “more”—*ai* is “more of a cry than a sigh” (9), not only the forgotten word for love but also its inverse: the sound of suffering, loss, and pain. By losing “the character for ‘love,’” the speaker may have lost the specificity of *ai*, but, by feeling her linguistic loss also as a plenitude, Chin elaborates on the use of these puns, the loss of love (愛) replaced by a cry of pain (*ai!*); the loss of the character for love is a loss to the eye, its cultural and psychic loss a loss of the *I*, and also perhaps a loss of the aye, the enfranchisement of self-identity. But *ai* also reveals a problem embedded in the names and contents of *AION* and *Aiiiiieee!*, the sufferings of love, loss, anger, and pain intertwined with the complicated relationship to *I*. By staging an *I* and an *ai* specifically affiliated with writing, Marilyn Chin addresses what it means to be not only an Asian American speaker but also an Asian American writer, a problem particularly poignant in the writing of the lyric, the genre most marked for its predication on the individual. By insisting on the reincorporation of sound into an ideogram made silent both by modernists and Asian American activists, Chin stages another kind of recovery for the ideogram that refracts the Asian American into a specificity unacknowledged by conditions of the 1970s. Her reclamation develops another

stance for the Chinese American poet that acknowledges and revises the interventions of the modernists and activates another relationship between the two languages.

### American Apparition

Josephine Nock-Hee Park writes that the Asia imagined by the modernists has “significantly influenced Asian American poetry, both as an onerous burden and as an opportunity for literary experiment—whether through or against its forms” (4). With Ezra Pound’s editing and publication of Ernest Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” and Pound’s own volume *Cathay*, containing landmark translations of Li Bai, the writing of an American modernist poet was famously credited with “invent[ing] . . . Chinese poetry for our time” (Eliot 14). While Fenollosa’s hypotheses on the ideogram have been dismissed, the romanticized idea of the Chinese ideogram and the attention to Tang dynasty Chinese poetics clearly shaped the Imagist movement in poetry promulgated by Pound and others, of “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” of visual intensity and verbal economy (Pound, “Retrospect” 3). However, as David Leiwei Li notes:

Ezra Pound’s creative use of the Chinese ideograph is a modern example [of “Chinese prejudice”]. . . . In this way, China, whether represented by its language, culture, geography, or any other feature, is detached from its own history and made to conform to American orientalist discourse, ultimately compensating for occidental desires. (47)

American modernist orientalism complicates the work of Asian American poets—as Park puts it, “Asian American poetry is missing a past precisely because modernism ultimately troubles [its] existence” (129).

Though his orientalism is often traced to his sojourn in London in the 1910s and his editing of Fenollosa’s papers, Pound’s early exposure to China occurred in his parents’ house in the suburbs and in the museums of Philadelphia, a special brand of “Philadelphia Orientalism” arising from his parents’ interest in missionaries to China and the merchants, collectors, and sinologists assembled in the city since the eighteenth century: “on Fernbrook Avenue in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, the young Ezra Pound encountered his first Chinese object: a Ming dynasty vase” (Nadel 12-14). The moment is as burdened with potential as a viewing of John Keats’s Grecian urn. The Ming vase, shaped by contact with international trade and overseas exploration and fired for export to the West (He Li 207-08), is the exotic, the unfamiliar manufactured for common consumption,



and, like Keats's "still unravish'd bride" (1), its "silent form" (44) invites "overwrought" (42) sounding of its "flowery tale[s]" (4) and unheard melodies, and the strangeness of its "mad pursuit" and "struggle to escape" (9) are domesticated by the artfully foreignizing lens of the young poet's eye. The situation replays in the galleries of the British Museum, with its Chinese paintings cached in a city in which the mountains and waters conjured in ink refer to no familiar landscape but merely intransitively evoke. Silenced and decontextualized, the image and the eye become fast partners in generating an *I* that takes refuge in the palpable surface of the concrete visual expression. As Pound has explained, phanopoeia is what translates. Taken by other critics to mean either imagery or the shape of the poem on the page, to Pound as a viewer of Chinese poetry, they coincide in the ideogram.

The ideogram has become the touchstone that reveals those that peruse it by their allegiances to poetics and the realities of the Chinese language (Saussy 2). Stylized, ornate, poised temptingly on the edge of obscurity and legibility, hinting at the primordial, to those accustomed to the phonetic, which subdivides and encodes the aural, the Chinese ideogram invites the fantasy of a purely visual language that respects the wholeness of and retains a material connection to the thing itself. As with the hieroglyph, the ideogram seems by its archaism and accessible technology to reveal the fundamental methodology behind the human impulse to represent and express, when the proximity and immediacy of the ear were ceded to the distance and endurance of the eye, when thought might be thoroughly externalized and separated from its thinker, a language that can persist without speakers and communicate across dialects. Augmenting and perpetuating this vision is Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," edited and published by Pound in 1919, which has been revered as "perhaps the only English document of our time fit to rank with Sidney's *Apologie*, and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and Shelley's *Defence*" (Davie 33) and condemned as a "small mass of confusion" (Kennedy 25). Though George Kennedy's scathing critique exposes much of Fenollosa's arguments for the ideogram's representation of "things in motion, motion in things" (Fenollosa and Pound 46), its grammar of natural phenomena, and its pictographic etymologies as mere fancy, the impression of Fenollosa's essay on the poetry of Pound and other American poets of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. Pound discovered the foundation of his ideogrammic method in Fenollosa's etymologies: the "Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of

things” (*ABC* 19). He instructs, “Get your ‘red’ down to rose, rust, cherry if you want to know what you are talking about. We have too much talk about vibrations and infinities” (“Immediate Need” 78). More than the juxtaposition of fragments or a materialist commitment to the senses, the ideogrammic method seeks to construct resonant structures to create multidimensional metaphors without the limiting copula.

Through Imagism, Pound envisions a poetry that cannot be lost in translation—that in fact thrives by its translatability. In other words, Pound’s endeavor is the conscious writing of what Owen calls “world poetry,” the kind of poetry that exists *between* translation, not bound to its native idiom but redolent with the sense of the foreign. But does Pound achieve such placeless poetry? His most famous Imagist poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” is an urban haiku that capitalizes on the juxtaposition of natural and timeless images with the transitory materiality of the city. Though it is neither a translation of a Chinese poem nor overtly orientalist in subject matter, Park uses the poem as her titular reference to the modernist relationship with Asia, a poem that clarifies the Imagist technique at the same time that it detaches itself from any true Asian origin, relying instead on content from the Paris underground. As with other examples of “successful” assimilation, the poem is necessarily alienated from the memory of home:

In a Station of the Metro  
 The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
 Petals on a wet, black bough. (1-3)

Critics have given attention to the word *apparition*, the poetic deviant among mostly monosyllables. Meaning both a ghost or specter and the sudden appearance of something, a manifestation, *apparition* suggests both the haunting of an absent thing and an unexpected presence—the viewer is alone and not alone, just as the faces distinguish themselves and recede into the mass of the crowd. Ralph Bevilacqua claims that Pound’s knowledge of French informs his usage in the poem: “In French apparition can and often does carry the special meaning of the way something appears to a viewer *at the precise moment it is perceived*” (294). Coming from the same root as *to appear*, *apparition* refers us clearly to the image, its potency or its power to mislead. In intimating both ghostliness and the phenomena of presence, *apparition* still names the Asian American condition, even as “In a Station” distinguishes itself as a hybrid and thus fundamentally American poem; Anne Anlin Cheng writes, “shuttling between ‘black’ and ‘white’—the Scylla and Charybdis between which all American immigrants have had to ‘pass’—Asian Americans occupy a

truly ghostly position in the story of American radicalization” (23).

Yet at the same time that “In a Station” crystallizes the transnationalism of the Imagist manifesto, it is masterful melopoeia: the rhyme of *station* and *apparition*; the sibilance of *station*, *apparition*, *faces*, the anticipation of *petals* in *apparition*, the assonance of the open *O*s of *metro*, *crowd*, and *bough*; the punctuating cadence of the spondaic triplet “wet black bough”—all heighten the hiss and crack of wet branches, the round vowels like rounded petals, faces, or drops scattered across a darkened background. Even the shapes of the letters matter: the short, curved letters against the wiry ascending and descending lines of tall letters illustrating the discrete and uneven sequence of the crowd in cramped architecture. Pound may have been striving for the clarity of the image, but the poem’s impact also relies on the unified effects of its particular English music and orthography.

Critics often cite T. S. Eliot’s claim that “Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time”; they have also followed him in noting that Pound’s influence works both ways, that his translations are “translucencies: we think we are closer to the Chinese than when we read, for instance, Legge,” but at the same time, in future years, Pound’s work “will be called (and justly) a ‘magnificent specimen of XX<sup>th</sup> century poetry’ rather than a ‘translation’” (14-15). Robert Kern argues that Pound’s influence on orientalism and modernism is reciprocal; not only did “Pound modernize . . . orientalism . . . he orientalized modernism” (155). The difference lies in Pound’s technique. While earlier translators, and even Pound’s contemporary Arthur Waley, had translated Chinese poems into “verse that is essentially and thoroughly British,” thus “mastering” it by translation, Pound’s strategy in *Cathay* found him “defamiliarizing . . . English,” creating phrases such as “At fourteen I married my lord You,” “she the rejoicer of the heart,” and “lady of the azure thought,” which “sound . . . like an idiom translated from a foreign language” (Kern 4, 162, 186-87). The strangeness of the resulting language “allow[s] . . . the reader to participate in the speaker’s sense of loss” (Kern 188). At the same time, Wai-lim Yip shows that Pound’s translations of Chinese poetry aided his modernist effort “to use no involved syntax, no archaic diction, and no inversions.” Though translating “The Wanderer,” the single European outlier in *Cathay*, invites transcribing archaisms implicit in the Old English, the absence of linguistic associations between Chinese and English left Pound free to use the most contemporary language in the Chinese translations (Yip 56-57). The strangeness of the new and the strangeness of the foreign therefore coincide in the exercise, tempering the strangeness of the foreign with the common language, advancing contemporary poetic diction within the

loosened expectations of the foreign. If to translate is always to lose, to write in an altered English is to make that loss felt. Made foreigners in our native speech, we are forced to confront the foreigner in the self, the loss in all expression, even as the marginal, agrammatical, and asyntactic become normalized within the poetic idiom. As Jonathan Culler claims for apostrophic address, strangeness is a device that announces poetic utterance (142). The strangeness of Pound's translations makes the foreign native and the native foreign, ultimately producing a poetry that claims transnationalism, even as in retrospect it is nativized as American Modernism.<sup>1</sup>

### Sounding Out

To speak of the native hardly makes sense when describing a poet such as Marilyn Chin. Instead, as with other migrant writers, the range of her wandering invites geography to supplant biography. Chin was born in Hong Kong in 1955 and emigrated to Portland, Oregon, with her family at a young age; she remains on the west coast of the United States, teaching at San Diego State University. These coordinates are replicated wherever the poet has left her mark.<sup>2</sup> Location matters. "In America, I'm always reminded of my difference," Chin remarks in an interview with Calvin Bedient (12); any Asian American can tell you that the question always arises: "Where do you come from?" Though she reads modern and classical Chinese and speaks Taishan, Cantonese, and some Mandarin, she writes in English. "By about third grade, English had taken over as the mother tongue," she has said. "I don't know the nuances of the Chinese language well enough to write in it. One has to live in a language to be able to write poetry that has its own music, its own vocabulary, and its own code" (Prince). Writing as a Chinese American, she therefore approaches the Chinese language from the outside, as the lost original, describing English both as the "adopted" tongue and that which "take[s] over," a choice and a necessity if she would continue to "live."

Chin's third collection, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, was published in 2002, five years after the handover of Hong Kong and forty after Chin left its borders for America, but Hong Kong's topos and history still permeate the work. The volume is dedicated to Chin's deceased mother and grandmother. The poems are elegiac, sampling blues, balladic quatrains, free verse as modes of expressing loss. An anxiety about and dislike of the figure of the father is palpable in many of the pieces. Chin admits in an interview with the *Indiana Review*, "In my poems, I can't seem to forgive my father's betrayal: can't forgive both the Confucian/patriarchal world that created him and the Western capitalist world for corrupting him. I

blame both worlds for his destruction and the destruction of my mother” (116). The problem she cites is the immigrant’s problem, the consequences of tradition and assimilation. These worlds that destroy are also Chin’s worlds, the worlds from which Chin draws her poetry and creates her identity. She emphatically gives the book to mothers, not fathers; nevertheless, the epigraph she chooses by William Carlos Williams suggests otherwise: “The stain of love / Is upon the world / Yellow, yellow, yellow” (“Love Song” 5-7). Williams, the modernist American poet from Rutherford, New Jersey. Williams, who railed against Eliot’s Eurocentrism and who made his personal mission the construction of an “American” voice through the keen celebration of the local. Williams, Pound’s friend and contemporary, wrote “A Love Song” the year *Cathay* appeared and three years before Fenollosa’s essay on the Chinese written character was published. The lines that Chin selects, ending in “Yellow, yellow, yellow,” hint at rhapsody, at rapturous repetition, but “the stain of love / Is upon the world” as curses and judgments come, darkly prophetic, inevitable and past. We might note that she does not choose the affirmative “Yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow! / It is not a color” (Williams, “Primrose” 1-2); instead the ponderous sticky yellow “stain of love” that “eats into the leaves” (“Love Song” 8), “smears” (9), is dark and “honey-thick” (14), finally “spoil[s] the colors / of the whole world” (17-18). A yellow of brooding sensuality, desire, defilement that retreats from “not a color” to “spoiling the colors / of the whole world”—Chin’s poems would be that yellow that overwhelms and annihilates, not the yellow that illuminates and reflects substance and the nasty cost of its certain presence, not light, nor a fey “disinclination to be / five red petals or a rose” (Williams, “Primrose” 22-23).

Even if the book argues for a literary rather than a literal father, the corporeal father drips and seeps and stains the leaves through. The troubling promiscuity of the father in “Hong Kong Fathersong” (Chin, *Rhapsody* 44) imprints itself on the speaker as he “prowls” “Victoria Peak,” “Furama Hotel,” the “Red Orchid Room,” “Happy Valley,” “Macau,” “Cat Street,” “Wanchai”—a tourist’s litany of Hong Kong (1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 15). Assiduously “follow[ing]” her father as he ranges from whoring to gambling to the black market and home again, the speaker learns as well as she teaches, ending with the demand:

I won’t tell the Uncles that you’ve been bad  
 if you pay me a hundred dollars.  
 A hundred *American* dollars, dear Father,  
 a hundred *American* dollars. (17-20)

The threat of blackmail tinges Chin’s literary promiscuity, her use of the

“colonial language” of English to mingle confessional lyric with modernist pastiche, African American blues, oral verse, and Tang Dynasty Chinese poetry (*Rhapsody* 6). The combination provokes uneasiness, suggesting both the contaminating influence of her father’s licentious drifting and the necessity of American dollars, the currency that matters more than the “lost ten Hong Kong thousand” (9), whose diminished value is implied in the fracturing of the numeral. In authority and exchange, to benefit from the muscle of American currency, monetary or linguistic, is also to agree to be dominated, to contribute to and benefit from the postcolonial overwriting of nativity, to agree to the othering of the self in order to consume the products of its own exploitation. Though Chin’s speaker mourns the demise of the pure maternal, Chin herself is as enthralled by the vices and devices of colonial influence as the “bad” father. English, the language that “had taken over as the mother tongue,” is that which sustains the poetry—not language, but second language. Chin has said, “For a poet, it’s very important to have a second language. Having two literary histories gives you more ammunition to work with” (Prince). But even while *poiesis* can be understood as a process of creation, Chin’s remark is attentive to the lyric power to destroy; the second language charged with creation is also unavoidably complicit in devastation.

Marjorie Perloff declares the elision of the lyric *I* the marker of the postmodern dissolution of the individual and thus that which separates postmodern poetry from the romantic and modern lyric (12). However, Chin’s poetry largely appears in the familiar mode of the confessional lyric. Although perhaps not indicative enough of the dissolved ego to be postmodern and too conventional to be *avant garde*, as Kingston and others suggest, for an Asian American woman, voicing the lyric *I* might actually be a radical act. That is, by deliberately using the voice of the “self-centered, unitary, autonomous Cartesian self”—the lyric *I* as the Emersonian sayer-namer-sovereign—to articulate the multicultural, bilingual, gendered self, Xiaojing Zhou argues, Chin is creating an assimilated *I*, a pluralistic ego engaged in a “mutually transformative encounter” (3-11, 74).

Such an ego is by its nature melancholic, unable to align with the voice it assumes, speaking always as more and less than itself, the lights and angles from multiple perspectives chaotic next to the Apollonian ideal of the Western lyric. Chin’s lyric *I*, as Zhou and Perloff would have it, is postmodern from within. Chin recognizes this cruel mathematics—she has said, with Whitmanian generosity, “The ‘I’ in my poems has multiple layers; the ‘I’ always represents something greater than the self. . . . [It] has more than one identity, shifting within the poem,” but also, “I think Chinese Americans sometimes feel like empty pronouns. I feel this burden

of history, and although I've arrived on the shores of safety, the burden of history is so compelling that the 'I' in the lyric poem seems empty. The 'I' can't stand by itself; it has to have archetypal significance. . . . That's what I yearn for: the collective pronoun" ("Interview," *Bedient* 10). She begins "How I Got That Name," "I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin. / Oh, how I love the resoluteness / of that first person singular" (1-3), yet that resoluteness, even that first person singular, eludes her. Overflowing and empty, the *I* is everything but the private self; it carries a "burden of history" that extends beyond personal memory, perhaps past memory itself, but its layers are disrupted by the depth charge of the universal. The act of naming becomes problematic; to universalize means to unname ("I tried to universalize her by not naming her" ["Interview," *Bedient* 8])—to reduce the particular and historical to pronouns that do not then have an antecedent. If "she" is unnamed, who or what am "I"?

Yet the lyric speaker as exile is implicit in the lyric. Orpheus descended into hell to retrieve the irretrievable—the dead—and in this underworld sang his most compelling lyrics. The speaker of Li Bai's 靜夜思 ("Quiet Night Thoughts") projects individual loneliness, isolation, and nostalgia without ever uttering "I." The poet as seer and maker is only half the story: what loss or distance moves the self to compensatory utterance? For the writer as migrant, the self is defined by its distance from home, from the impossibility of returning intact or the same, perhaps even divided from the desire to return at all. A writer such as Chin, whose voice depends upon this distance, is by nature melancholic, neither-nor. The melancholic's relationship to language is such that she is aware of its artifice; this is also necessarily the situation of the migrant shifting tongues. What is overtly enacted in the migrant is nevertheless universal. Language produces the foreigner within—the instrument by which we conduct our own translation, our entry into the world of shared meaning at the expense of making our own consciousness foreign. The difference for Chin and other Chinese poets writing in English is that English, whether a first or second tongue, holds the Chinese speaker at a greater distance from home; it is, in fact, the language of the displaced. "The colonial language is English," Chin writes (*Rhapsody* 20), phoneticizing Chinese to make it legible to her English-speaking readers, but in other poems splicing in characters, visualizing the strangeness that Pound created with syntax in *Cathay* and similar juxtaposition in the *Cantos*. However, while Pound imports the foreign, Chin allows her submerged original language to surface. If Chin is right about English, to speak it as a Chinese American might also be to perform her own subjugation; to divide Chinese characters into Roman letters might further divide the self from its essence and from its homeland, creating

colonist and native in the fluency of the second tongue. The migrant writer therefore dwells in a linguistically split condition; even to spell out “Marilyn Mei Ling Chin” loses the structure, tone, and order of her original name, and yet, it is in these terms that she also faithfully represents a divided or distanced self.

The title of the book, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, demonstrates a similarly split condition. As an allusion to George Gershwin’s 1924 jazz concerto, *Rhapsody in Blue*, Chin’s title, she explains, is “a double appropriation: A Chinese American poet referencing a Jewish American composer referencing African American blues—but, of course, with European orientation. This speaks a lot about what it means to be American” (“Interview” 2004 115). In other words, to be American is to be in a state of reference and therefore to be defined by relation to a hierarchy of otherness, to be cathected to difference even as those differences are lost through incorporation. From the title poem to the three poems called “Blues on Yellow,” *Rhapsody* remains faithful to the lyric’s original relationship to song. The nine poems of the “Broken Chord Sequence” are among these, taking the form of ballads or hymns. The name of the sequence calls attention to the aural, visual, material, and emotional qualities of the poems; musically, a broken chord is the playing of harmonic notes separately rather than simultaneously, but a chord is also a geometric figure, a straight line binding two points of a circle, a string to be played upon or built with, a harmony of colors, sounds, or ideas. The alliance of *chord* to *feeling* is explicitly designated; definition 2b of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads, “Of the emotions, feelings, etc.: the mind being viewed as a musical instrument of which these are the strings.” Unlike the instantaneous harmony of a straightforward chord, the harmony of a broken chord is implicit, its wholeness established by unifying experiences of past with the present, dependent on recognizing where the measure starts and ends. In other words, to hear a broken chord as a chord requires a sense of history, a knowledge of the key in which its components form a relation, a training of the ear to count and sustain sound after the vibration itself has gone still. A broken chord in *Rhapsody* also draws up jazz, which plays within the limits of rhythm and tonality, hinting at dissonance without crossing over into noise. Jazz tilts on the edge of fracture and damage, the same edge, to the Western ear, that Asian modes and instruments strain or exceed.

The chord returns us to Fenollosa, who declared, “metaphors, especially Chinese, are like a chord in music, planes of striking” (141). Yet, though the simile Fenollosa appropriates for the metaphor is auditory, Fenollosa’s understanding of the metaphorical quality of Chinese writing, like his reduction of the Chinese written character to its pictographic



component, is visual. Fenollosa's complaint, "Languages today are thin and cold because we think less and less into them. We are forced, for the sake of quickness and sharpness, to file each word to its narrowest edge of meaning" (55), and his subsequent arguments for the fulsomeness of the Chinese character are dependent on his claim that the Chinese character visibly preserves its etymology, demanding a tribute to history with each stroke of the pen, and resonates with images set in relation to each other, first in words and then in phrases, producing poetry as a derivative of orthography: "We cannot exhibit the wealth of nature by mere summation, by the piling of sentences. Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase, pregnant, charged, and luminous from within" (Fenollosa 57-58). Like metaphor—and like Fenollosa's Chinese character—the musical chord is formed not by summation but relation. Yet despite Fenollosa's euphoric description of the harmonic properties of the Chinese written language, he fractures it himself, breaking off and discarding the aural from the visual, imagining a voiceless poetry mutely miming at the eye. If written language is entirely fragmented from speech and sound, it may have been effectively "outered," but how are we to manage the complete transference of the word to the world when the contacts have been severed and the vibrations that remain are ultraviolet?

Chin's "Broken Chord Sequence" alternates between the anecdotal and the ritualistic, interspersing the mundane details that scab over the wounds of death or abandonment with intimations of the numinous: "Buddha's eternal dawn," the "river of God," the "cups for libations." But the spiritual is curiously barren, even as Chin invokes it: the flowers on the altar are "straw," the ritual pain or disfigurement of "Mother's burnt forehead" is quietly accepted as "her finest hour," the ghostly voice of her "grandfather" qualified by the "dop[ing] up with morphine," her meticulously carved "bottle-gourd of dreams" is stopped by her father's endless rejections of her ever more elaborate recipes for calabash. Even the arrival of "September," of "another" bus seems impossible under the terms of her vigil, the futile wait for "eyelids to fold over," "my prince on a white, white steed," "the dead to reawaken." "I must make my leap of faith," announces the speaker at the close of "Get Rid of the X," but, as in "Hospital Interlude," we cannot help but suspect the leap will fall short, that, once again, she will fail to "find the exit" (*Rhapsody* 39-48).

In "How Deep Is the River of God" (*Rhapsody* 46), the speaker crosses line by line through a litany of apparently religious and cultural references: Ezekiel's Old Testament vision of a "river" (1), the Buddhist monk's "robe" and "bowl" (4), Native American coyote and condor totems (5-6), a generic

“pilgrimage,” and the river “full of martyrs” (4). The only thing the river cannot hold is “our love for Mother” (2). “Poetry is a vast orphanage, in which you and I are stars” (3), the speaker says, revealing that the vastness of our love for mother is correlated with her absence—suggesting furthermore that all the associations of literature, the great heritage of allusion, are abandoned children. “You” and “I” are only characters in the theater of apostrophe, embodied as actors embody roles to illuminate a relation and then leave it behind, petrified in the limits of utterance, when the poem has ended. The orphanage implies that “you” and “I”—the marked relation of self and other—distanced from “mother,” are infinitely mobile, infinitely adaptable/adoptable, even as they are forever abandoned. The mourning of mother that persists in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* turns on this condition: replacement is both the most and least annihilating of strategies. If “you” and “I” are translatable, have we survived the loss of mother, or have we conspired in matricide? Do these martyrs and totems—these numerous figures for faith—reside in apposition or competition? Chin’s answer lies in her treatment of the last image of the poem, which begins with a sound—the crying of ospreys.

Chin closes the poem with a reference to the *Shijing*, or *Book of Odes*, a book which, though secular, has been claimed to “occup[y] a . . . place in ancient Chinese culture . . . comparable to that of the Homeric epics or the *Bible* in the Western world” (Zhang 84). The “Guan Ju” is the first poem in this book, the earliest Chinese anthology of poetry, and it reads:

關關雎鳩 在河之洲 窈窕淑女 君子好逑	guan guan ju jiu zai he zhi zhou yao tiao shu nü jun zi hao qiu	<i>Guan guan</i> cry the ospreys On the islet of the river. The beautiful and good young lady Is a fine mate for the lord.
參差荇菜 左右流之 窈窕淑女 寤寐求之	cen ci xing cai zuo you liu zhi yao tiao shu nü wu mei qiu zhi	Varied in length are the water plants; Left and right we catch them. The beautiful and good young lady— Waking and sleeping he wished for her.
求之不得 寤寐思服 悠哉悠哉 輾轉反側	qiu zhi bu de wu mei si fu you zai you zai zhan zhuan fan ce	He wished for her without getting her. Waking and sleeping he thought of her. Longingly, longingly He tossed and turned from side to side.
參差荇菜 左右采之 窈窕淑女 琴瑟友之	cen ci xing cai zuo you cai zhi yao tiao shu nü qin se you zhi	Varied in length are the water plants; Left and right we gather them. The beautiful and good young lady— Zithers and lutes greet her as friend.

參差荇菜	cen ci xing cai	Varied in length are the water plants—
左右芼之	zuo you mao zhi	Left and right we cull them as vegetable.
窈窕淑女	yao tiao shu nü	The beautiful and good young lady—
鍾鼓樂之	zhong gu yue zhi	Bells and drums delight her. (P. Yu 380) <sup>3</sup>

The “Guan Ju” is one of the most well-known and frequently explicated poems in the Chinese literary heritage, with Confucius supplying one of the first comments about it.<sup>4</sup> The poem takes the form of quatrains with four words to a line. It is suffused with repetition and aural effects: the lines rhyme and repeat, weaving images of reeds, birds, women, and men with assonance, alliteration, and tone. As with most Chinese poetry, the poem does not easily yield a narrative. The language creates ambiguities of numbers, tenses, parts of speech, and agency, producing the linguistic equivalent of a frieze or a narrative icon: everything happening at once and always, all the figures in the poem isolated from each other and all the action isolated from a definite agent, making the subjects all objects, subject to the readers’ rearrangement and interpretation, able to act on each other only by implication and evocation, without the heat of touch.

Owing to the inherent linguistic indistinctness of actions and figures, the commentary of the last 2500-odd years has often been described as allegorical, reading the figures as symbols of particular political persons, historical events, or models of conduct—in short, devising solid fables from the mistiest of premises.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the only lines of the poem that fit the Western concept of a complete clause (that is, a subject-predicate construction) are those regarding the natural images, beginning with the first line, “*Guan guan* cry the ospreys.” The ospreys, whose cry names the poem, are the *xing*, the initiating image that provides a figurative setting for the remaining poem (and, indeed, the rest of the volume); they appear in the line and then retreat behind a moving picture of plants and humans. Ospreys are fish-eating raptors found by calm, ice-free rivers, lakes, and coasts throughout the world (Newton 34). These and other characteristics have been used to justify all manner of readings. For example, ospreys’ tendency to mate for life is projected onto the human figures. Yet it is their particular call, rendered with the character 關 (*guan*), meaning, “to close” or “relation,” that opens the poem. This distinct rendering of the osprey cry has received curiously little attention, particularly because the osprey, though a bird of prey of some size, does not cry in a way remotely approximating the open call of 關關 *guan guan*.

The osprey cry features centrally in Daniel C. Dennett’s essay, “Quining Qualia”:

Suppose . . . that I have never heard the cry of an osprey, even in a recording, but know roughly, from reading my bird books, what to listen for: “a series of short, sharp, cheeping whistles, cheep cheep or cheuk cheuk, etc; sounds annoyed.” (Peterson, 1947) (or words to that effect or better). The verbal description gives me a partial confinement of the logical space of possible bird cries. . . . Then one day, armed with both my verbal description and my binoculars, I identify an osprey visually, and then hear its cry. So *that’s* what it sounds like, I say to myself, ostending—it seems—a particular mental complex of intrinsic, ineffable qualia.

Dennett uses the osprey cry heard once as an example of the practically ineffable—that is, an apparent evocation of qualia, the inexplicable, intrinsic, private, immediately apprehensible “way things seem.” He then proceeds to dismantle the osprey cry’s ineffability as a property of its singularity as experience; in other words, as an inexperienced listener, he is neither able to extrapolate the sound of that osprey cry to an ornithological generalization of what ospreys sound like nor able to ascertain what range of stimuli would produce that psychological response in himself. Dennett expresses his argument that any apparent qualia can be dismantled through the continuous refinement of experience through his fifteenth and final “intuition pump,” the plucking of a guitar string:

Pluck the bass or low E string open, and listen carefully to the sound. Does it have describable parts or is it one and whole and ineffably guitarish? Many will opt for the latter way of talking. Now pluck the open string again and carefully bring a finger down lightly over the octave fret to create a high “harmonic.” Suddenly a *new* sound is heard: “purer” somehow and of course an octave higher. Some people insist that this is an entirely novel sound, while others will describe the experience by saying “the bottom fell out of the note”—leaving just the top. But then on a third open plucking one can hear, with surprising distinctness, the harmonic overtone that was isolated in the second plucking. The homogeneity and ineffability of the first experience is gone, replaced by a duality as “directly apprehensible” and clearly describable as that of any chord.

In other words, sensation is complex to a point that approaches but does not intersect the region of unassailable ineffability; repetition and division can dispel the illusion of qualia by allowing the subject to develop modes, parameters, and vocabulary for assessment. His emphasis on the harmonic interval reprises his earlier discussion of the osprey (“Would a cry that differed in being only half an octave higher also be an osprey call?”), suggesting that all discrete experience can be separated like a chromatograph and then strike the psyche like a tuning fork, producing broader resonances

once repetition has trained us how to listen.

Dennett's choice of ospreys and chords may be coincidental; however, qualia are another way of stating the problem of the lyric *I*, the subjectively perceiving entity that the lyric purports to articulate, whose uniqueness makes the speaker individual and whose limitations are determined by the bounds of the universally human. The idea that repetition "quines," or denies the existence of qualia suggests that the act of becoming a lyric speaker, that is, the necessary repetition of the lost moment, is that which breaks the chord, creating audible and intelligible (to the self, to the other, and to the self-as-other) harmonics even as the unity and uniqueness of the moment are destroyed. The action is some inverse of reading: armed with "binoculars" and "verbal description," the singularly experienced sound becomes one in a chorus line of listening.

The question remains, however, what function 關關 (*guan guan*) should serve—it does not, like the Peterson guide cited by Dennett, allow us to recognize a previously unheard birdcall. Rather, *guan guan* provokes an image as incongruous as the twittering of crows, though it might be considered an aural stylization of birdsong, unspecific to ospreys.<sup>6</sup> Translators tend to see the word as onomatopoeic, either reproducing the noise phonetically ("Kwan-kwan," "Guan! Guan!" "Kwang-kwang," "kuan kuan," or "Gwan! Gwan!") or sidestepping effect for narration ("A l'unisson crient les mouettes," "Merrily the ospreys cry," "The ospreys clang," "Waterfowl their mates are calling," "In harmony the ospreys cry," and so on). Only Waley and Pound attempt to find semantic purpose for the character, abandoning all pretense to melopoeia for "'Fair, fair,' cry the ospreys," and "'Hid! Hid!' the fishhawk saith," respectively (Minford and Lau 72-97). Edward L. Shaughnessy argues that the bird call in the "Guan Ju" ought to be read as a sound effect that motivates meaning:

Strange though it may seem that the crying of an osprey could evoke the image of a nubile girl, we can begin to see in it something of the intellectual consciousness of the time. Elsewhere in the *Shi jing*, as in later Chinese culture and in many other cultures as well, the image of the fish signifies sexual fertility. Knowing that the osprey is a fish-eating bird, it is not hard to see that this is a poem concerned with the hunt for a sexual partner. Indeed, the sound of the osprey's cry, as written onomatopoeically by the poet, confirms this, 關 *guan* means "to join, to bring together." The poet heard the osprey calling out: "Join, join." (337)

However, the choices made by Pound and Waley are clearly derived from the later portions of the poem, the image of the maiden as beautiful and secluded—in other words, their translation stands the impulse of the poem

on its head, frontloading the birdsong with narrative import rather than reconstructing a system of stimulus and evocation. The result both mimics translation's dependence on preexisting text and the implied wholeness that it threatens or supplements.

Chin's version both translates and alters:

*Guan guan* cry the golden ospreys, in the borderlands we cry.  
Our little eggs, little eggs grow into big ospreys

To lay little eggs again, *guan guan*.  
Our miasma will ooze through the suburbs and gobble up their minds. (7-10)

The first phrase is very similar to Pauline R. Yu's translation from Bernhard Karlgren's literal gloss; its source is immediately recognizable. However, unlike any of her fellow translators, Chin inserts the modifier *golden*, incorporating Williams's sticky yellow, the "miasma" of the last line "ooz[ing]," consuming, and overwhelming as the "stain of love." Chin moves rapidly beyond translation into a story that pursues the ospreys that drop out of the Chinese poem, eliding the story of the people. Instead, the juxtaposed figures are the gods—and "you" and "I" the luminaries of the lyric. "We" cry this incoherent character, *guan*, dwellers not on the equally distant and central isle in the river, but from the unequivocally far "borderlands," making no pretense of selective mating, spreading vegetally, budding like hydræ to invade the bourgeois periphery of the "suburbs."

Chin here follows the translator's convention of using pinyin, *guan guan*, for her osprey cries, though elsewhere in the volume, in the title poem and in "To Pursue the Limitless" (*Rhapsody* 85), she does not hesitate to use characters. The difference is, like Pound and *apparition* in "In a Station of the Metro," the positioning of *guan* on the edge of two languages. Chin is aware that *guan* is more than sound effect, that it veils the character 關 in the same way that Marilyn Mei Ling Chin also encodes Chin's "authentic" or "original" name in the globally accessible claim of phonetics, making it possible for her to both name and unname herself, to specify herself as both an individual and a universal being, to become the author of her name, even as it fails to name her. Translation from Chinese to English seems to colonize by setting definite relations between the inherently ambiguous; here, the relation remains open because of Chin's other uses for Chinese and her insistence that its sound and etymology remain vital even in translation.

Yet this openness is achieved at a cost. Any wordplay threatens the language from which it originates, revealing the arbitrary nature of the sign even as it celebrates some humor or slip of coincidence, some joy of

the cloistered world of words that needs no correspondence to or interaction with the world, except within the accord of a culture. For the play of Chin's translation to be meaningful, she is compelled to footnote—to acknowledge its obscurity in her chosen language—and to fracture the poem with commentary in order to supply allusive continuity. At the same time, she alludes to another high modernist's assiduous annotations of his work: Eliot's footnotes to *The Waste Land*, an icon of modernist pastiche and melancholic fragmentation. But the recognition she creates in footnoting is only the recognition of translation—a mode of replacing, supplementing, or altering the original. Chin herself breaks the chord—the poem has everything to do with what is absent and irretrievable. *Guan guan* therefore becomes an elegy to the untranslatable, a melancholic refrain that repeats the sound of the original but not the sense.

Timothy Yu asks whether ethnic poetry has a form. The poems in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* occupy a variety of traditions, of blues and ballads, oral forms, and folk forms, referencing the importance of the African American experience and literary pioneering to other ethnic American literatures and also referring to the *Shijing* in Chinese. Though Chinese poetry has interpenetrated American poetry since the modernist interventions of Ezra Pound and others, the missing element of the ideogrammatic method is sound, especially the way sound governs Chinese metaphor (for instance the well-known associations of fu 蝠 [bat] and fu 福 [luck], si 四 [four] and si 死 [death], traditional symbols for luck and loss). The visual is also far more entwined with sound than is acknowledged in Fenollosa's analysis of the ideogram. By carrying sound across languages, Marilyn Chin reverses the modernist silencing of the ideogram, echoing Pound's *apparition* and invoking a traditionally Chinese mode of making sense in her poetry. The poem "To Pursue the Limitless" plays on this technique, noting the flimsiness of "dainty aphorisms" but pointing out the constant peril of misunderstanding, from the merely humorous and homonymic ("To (二) [two] err is human / To (五) [five] woo is woman" [34-35]), to the common but fatal mishearing of tones ("*Mái ma Buried mother* / *Mài má Sold hemp* / *Mǎi Mǎ Bought horse*" [36-38]), to the ultimately decentering loss of identity ("You said *My name is Zhuang Mei* / *Sturdy Beauty* / But he thought you said *Shuang Mei* / *Frosty Plum*" [40-43]). At the center of the poem is the "Chinese paradox," "美言不信 信言不美"—"Beautiful words are not truthful / The truth is not beautiful" (23-26)—a reproachful inversion of Keats's dictum that demands a more critical inspection of what image and wordplay reveal and conceal and which language plays the theme to the harmonic of the other.

## Notes

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1. Robert von Hallberg states that Ernest Fenollosa's essay and Pound's translations "changed American poetics by undermining the authority of prose syntax—the conventional rules for connecting words and thoughts—not only for his generation but for at least two more" (129). Furthermore, these translations created a conventional style of postmodern "world poetry": "Chinese poetry is presented to English readers boldly stripped of temporal and spatial sources—a kind of nude. . . . When this style of translation prevails, as it did in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, native poets, ever covetous of authority, write poems in a nude style, as Merwin did. Even contemporary Chinese poems, Stephen Owen explains, are now written in an austere pseudomodernist style for the translation market" (199).
2. See Marilyn Chin's author profiles on the Web sites for Norton, Kore, and Milkweed Press and her faculty profile at San Diego State University.
3. The pinyin is provided to give a sense of the aural texture of the poem; it is from Chinese-Tools.com, 11 Sept. 2009. The English translation is by Pauline R. Yu after Bernhard Karlgren's gloss, but it should be noted that where she assigns agency and numbers, none are specified by the poem (e.g. line 9 could be literally rendered, "wish/wished/wishing without getting"). In general, figures and actions are segregated by line. See Wai-lim Yip for a discussion of the syntactic necessity of agents and directional words in English poetry.
4. "The master said, 'In the Kuan chu there is joy without wantonness and sorrow without self-injury'" (Confucius III.20).
5. Pauline Yu's essay contains a summary of the interpretive tradition of the "Guan Ju," which reads the poem as a critique of certain Zhou dynasty monarchs, praise of other Zhou dynasty monarchs, guidelines for decorous courtship, an account of the difficulty of selecting a proper mistress for one's mate, and so on.
6. The tenth definition offered by the Kangxi dictionary for the entry 關 is "the sound of birds," though whether this precedes and thereby supplies an allegorical soundtrack for the "Guan Ju" or proceeds from its phenomenon is unclear.

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