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Rewriting English from the Margins: Marilyn Chin's Translingual Poetics

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Abstract

Marilyn Chin's poetic corpus, this article argues, embodies a systematic translingual poetics—a sustained project of rewriting the English language and reconfiguring the American poetic tradition from its sociocultural margins. Moving beyond existing studies of her bilingual techniques and cultural hybridity, this analysis situates Chin within the broader conversation on translingual poetics that has taken shape in literary studies over the past decade, drawing on the foundational work of Steven G. Kellman, Suresh Canagarajah, and Bruce Horner et al., as well as more recent scholarship by Sarah Dowling and Eugene Ostashevsky. Translingualism, understood here as a disposition of openness and inquiry toward language difference, recognizes all language as fluid, emergent, and contested, and provides the essential lens for examining Chin's practice. Focusing on her three core poetry collections—*Dwarf Bamboo* (1987), *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002)—the study traces the evolution of her translingual strategies across three dimensions: the rewriting of literary authority through parody and slanted allusion; the transplantation and subversion of classical Chinese forms; and the material inscription of Chinese characters and *pinyin* as acts of memorial and resistance. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory and King-Kok Cheung's bilingual poetics, the analysis shows how Chin's translingualism unsettles the dominance of Standard English, challenges Orientalist and patriarchal appropriations of Chinese heritage, and forges a new, margin-centric poetic language. Chin's practice, it is argued, can be read as translingualism as method: not merely depicting hybrid identity but actively rewriting the norms of American poetry, thereby offering a concrete case study for reimagining American Studies in a multilingual landscape.

Keywords: Marilyn Chin; translingual poetics; translingualism; Chinese as method; Asian American poetry

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by the resurgent political will to enforce English monolingualism, most notably exemplified by the 2025 executive order designating English as the official language of the United States, the imperative to "mobilize multilingualism as a method" for American Studies has never been more urgent. The call for "Chinese as a method" is a direct theoretical and political challenge to this monolingual hegemony. This paper answers that call by arguing that the entire poetic corpus of Chinese American poet Marilyn Mei Ling Chin (1955–) establishes a deliberate and systematic translingual poetics—a sustained project whose ultimate aim is not to write "about" China or Chinese America in English, but to rewrite the English language and reconfigure the American poetic tradition from its sociocultural margins. This study is situated within a burgeoning field of Chinese American

poetry criticism that has, over the past three decades, gradually moved from a primary focus on identity politics toward more nuanced aesthetic and formal inquiries. As Pu and Li observe in their overview, criticism of Chinese American poetry has evolved through three discernible stages: "identity studies, literary aesthetic studies and philosophical studies" (Pu and Li 2019, p. 620). While foundational works by scholars such as Wang (2013) and Yao (2010) have successfully bridged the gap between aesthetics and politics, Pu and Li note that the critical discourse "has developed in the shadow of Chinese American literary criticism and has not yet formed its own critical paradigms" (Pu and Li 2019, p. 620). The present study responds to this gap through a systematic, form-focused reading of Marilyn Chin's translingual poetics, and it argues that her career-long project offers a concrete paradigm for understanding how ethnic poetry can function simultaneously as aesthetic innovation and political critique.

Chin's work has been the subject of significant critical attention. King-Kok Cheung's foundational concept of "bilingual poetics" and her theory of "slanted allusions" (Cheung 2011) provide a crucial vocabulary for understanding how Chin reformulates classical Chinese texts to produce new, critical meanings that target both Chinese patriarchal authority and American Orientalism. Studies by Wallinger-Schorn (2011) and others have productively explored her cultural hybridity and identity politics. Existing scholarship, however, tends to treat these translingual features as thematic content or as the stylistic signature of individual poems and collections. What remains underdeveloped is an account of Chin's practice as a coherent, systematic poetics with a formal logic of its own. Grounding its analysis in translingualism as its core theoretical basis, the present study responds by reading Chin's three major collections as a single evolving project, rather than as a sequence of discrete experiments.

Chin occupies a distinctive place within this field, and a brief word of context may help readers less familiar with her work. Born Marilyn Mei Ling Chin in Hong Kong in 1955, she emigrated with her family as a child and grew up in Portland, Oregon; she holds a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' workshop, and she taught for many years in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University. Over four decades, she has published the poetry collection *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987), *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002), *Hard Love Province* (2014), and *A Portrait of the Self as Nation: New and Selected Poems* (2018) et al., together with the novel *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009); her work is widely anthologized and is often associated with a feminist, activist, and formally experimental strand of Asian American poetry. What distinguishes her translingual practice from that of many of her contemporaries—including Chinese American poets such as Cathy Song and Li-Young Lee, whose work engages questions of inheritance in more conventionally lyric registers—is the degree to which she treats the Chinese language and the classical tradition as formal material: she does not simply allude to China, but rebuilds the machinery of the English poem around Chinese scripts, tones, and verse forms. It is this systematic, form-driven character that the present study seeks to theorize.

The term "translingualism" was brought into critical prominence by Steven G. Kellman in his 2000 study *The Translingual Imagination*. Kellman defines a translingual writer as one who "writes in more than one language or in a language other than his or her primary one" (Kellman 2000, p. ix), and his work inaugurated a systematic inquiry into this phenomenon across world literature, an inquiry since consolidated and extended in *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translingualism* (Kellman and Lvovich 2021). Building on Kellman's foundational work, scholars in composition studies and applied linguistics have deepened the concept. Bruce Horner et al. articulate a translingual orientation that "sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a

resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (Horner et al. 2011, p. 303). Suresh Canagarajah further theorizes translingual practice as a dynamic, situated process of negotiation and "codemeshing," emphasizing the agency of language users in mobilizing diverse semiotic resources across perceived linguistic boundaries (Canagarajah 2013, pp. 112–14). These scholars collectively challenge monolingualist ideologies and foreground the fluid, emergent, and contested nature of language itself. A parallel conversation has taken shape within literary studies. Sarah Dowling's *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood under Settler Colonialism* (2018) brings Canagarajah's sociolinguistic account into the reading of contemporary poetry, arguing that translingual poetries do not merely display multiple languages but contest the monolingual premises of both the lyric and the state. Eugene Ostashevsky likewise defines translingualism as a "poetics of language mixing and estrangement," stressing that it entails the estrangement of the norms of a single language as much as contact among several (Ostashevsky 2023, pp. 171–72). Brian Lennon's *In Babel's Shadow*, in turn, examines how multilingual literatures unsettle the monolingual paradigm of the nation-state (Lennon 2010). Taken together, this body of work establishes that translingual writing is not merely multilingual: it is a thoroughgoing re-creation of the dominant language from within. Chin's poetry belongs to, and extends, precisely this conversation.

Translingualism, understood here as a critical disposition of openness and inquiry toward language difference, provides the essential lens for analyzing Chin's practice—not as a simple reflection of a "hybrid" identity, but as a dynamic methodology for enacting a transformative cultural labor: rewriting the dominant language itself. The analysis focused on three poetry collections that, taken together, constitute the primary arc of this enterprise: *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987), *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002). Spanning nearly two decades of Chin's career, each volume marks a distinct turning point: *Dwarf Bamboo* establishes the foundational poetics of exile and defiance; *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* deepens the engagement with Chinese classics through parodic rewriting; and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* elaborates fully the visual-material experiments and formal subversions anticipated in the earliest work. Across these collections, the study traces three interconnected dimensions of Chin's translingual strategy. The first is the rhetorical rewriting of literary authority through parody, irony, and "slanted allusion," a practice that evolves from the agonistic defiance of the early work through toward the more dialogic negotiation of the later collections. The second is the formal transplantation and subversion of classical Chinese poetic structures—such as the *jueju* (绝句)—and their hybridization with Western forms like the Blues, producing a new, politically charged poetic idiom. The third is the material inscription of Chinese characters and pinyin as an act of memorial resistance, in which language itself becomes a site of physical and sonic contestation. Read together, the three dimensions reveal a writer who does not merely write in English but actively rewrites it, thereby expanding the boundaries and possibilities of American poetry from the periphery.

2. The Poetics of Parody and Irony: The Evolution from Rewriting to "Slanted Allusion"

Marilyn Chin's translingual project begins at the most fundamental level of literary expression: the act of rewriting itself. Chin deploys parody, irony, and a progressively sophisticated form of intertextual engagement to unsettle literary authority from a marginalized position. That marginalization is at once linguistic, ethnic, and gendered—as a speaker of Chinese in an English-dominant nation, as a Chinese American in a culture that has long racialized her as foreign, and as a woman writing against a patriarchal tradition that has alternately excluded and exoticized her—and it is also, crucially, literary, in that her

formal allegiances fall outside the Anglo-American lyric canon. Her rhetorical strategy, the discussion that follows argues, amounts to a deepening of her translingual methodology: a movement from agonistic disruption toward dialogic negotiation. Canagarajah's conception of translingual practice as a "negotiation of mobile codes" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 8) is instructive here, because "negotiation" captures what is at stake: Chin's engagement with the literary canon is neither unilateral rejection nor passive borrowing, but a dynamic process of confrontation, adaptation, and re-creation. By forcing her English poems and their Chinese classical sources into productive collision, she converts the difference between them into expressive material, and her use of Chinese and Western classics becomes a method for rewriting the very rules of literary allusion.

In her earliest collections, *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987) and *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), Chin's rhetorical strategy is characterized by a direct and confrontational form of parody. The goal is to assert a poetic voice that had been historically silenced by both patriarchal Chinese traditions and Orientalist American appropriations.

Dwarf Bamboo serves as the foundational text for Chin's entire translingual project, establishing a poetics of agonistic negotiation that her later works deepen but never abandon. Rather than a mere stylistic debut, this collection inaugurates an attempt to rewrite English from the margins. The collection's epigraph, a translation of Bai Juyi's lines—"I do not say that their roots are still weak; / I do not say that their shade is still small" (Chin 1987, epigraph)—functions as a translingual manifesto. By transplanting a classical Chinese context of frustrated ambition into an English-language debut, Chin claims the literary authority of the Tang dynasty while simultaneously announcing the fragility of her own enterprise. This gesture enacts what Canagarajah terms "codemeshing" at the paratextual level: the English text does not merely borrow Chinese content but incorporates it as a structural frame for the entire collection, insisting that her "dwarf" poems belong to the same lineage as the master's (Canagarajah 2013, p. 112). In *Dwarf Bamboo*, Chin's translingual poetics emerges not through a single parody of a Chinese classic, but through a linguistic and thematic hybridization expressed across multiple poems. The poem "We Are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra" opens with:

> Today in hazy San Francisco, I face seaward
> Toward China, a giant begonia—
> Pink, fragrant, bitten
> By verdigris and insects. I sing her
> A blues song; even a Chinese girl gets the blues,
> Her reticence is black and blue. (Chin 1987, p. 28)

This passage is a quintessential example of what Canagarajah calls translingual negotiation (Canagarajah 2013, p. 8). It is not—as in a simpler code-switching model—that Chin alternates between two discrete linguistic systems. Rather, she performs a more radical act: she meshes multiple cultural and historical codes within a single English sentence. The phrase "blues song" brings the African American musical tradition into a Chinese American woman's utterance; the pun "black and blue" simultaneously indexes the musical genre and the physical bruise, creating a layered meaning that cannot be parsed by one cultural lexicon alone. Canagarajah argues that meaning in translingual practice "doesn't arise from a common grammatical system or norm, but through negotiation practices in local situations" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 7). Chin's verse enacts precisely this: she does not assume a shared norm between her Chinese heritage and American present. Instead, she negotiates them—bringing a "giant begonia" (a personal metaphor for China) into contact with a "blues song" (a historically Black American form)—and co-constructs meaning through

their friction and fusion. The result is a third semantic space: neither purely Chinese, purely African American, nor purely white American, but a new, situated meaning that emerges from the practice of negotiation itself.

The poem's most translingual gesture is its refusal of a single cultural inheritance:

> What shall we plant for the future?
>
> Bamboo, sasagrass, coconut palms? No!
>
> legumes, wheat, maize, old swine
>
> To milk the new. (Chin 1987, p. 28)

The shift from "bamboo" (the Chinese cultural signifier and title of the collection) to "legumes, wheat, maize" (the agricultural staples of the American Midwest) forms a rhetorical codemeshing that refuses the exotic (Canagarajah 2013, p. 1). More than a language switch, it enacts a strategic re-scripting of semiotic expectations. The reader, primed by an Orientalist tradition that naturalizes "bamboo" as an idealized Asian signifier, anticipates its continuation. Yet Chin performs a violent semantic rupture. She features "bamboo, sasagrass, coconut palms" only to dismiss them with a stark "No!" This negation refuses an entire mode of representation—the ornamental coding of Chinese culture as an aesthetic object for Western consumption. She replaces these staples with "legumes, wheat, maize"—the undecorated agricultural products of the American Midwest. This is a code-mesh between competing value systems: the exotic "other" versus survival and labor. The poem thus redefines Chinese America not as nostalgic belonging, but as gritty, material becoming. The poem's final stanza declares a performative leave-taking:

> Farewell my ancestors:
>
> Hirsute Taoists, failed scholars, farewell
>
> My wetnurse who feared and loathed the Catholics,
>
> Who called out:
>
> Now that the half-men have occupied Canton
>
> Hide your daughters, lock your doors! (Chin 1987, p. 28)

The "farewell" sequence makes the section's central argument: rewriting authority through rhetorical translingualism. The repetition of "farewell" reads less as a lament than as a performative act of severance, and this separation is the poem's decisive rhetorical move: it turns the speaker's back on a romanticized, static Chinese past in order to speak for, rather than from, those buried by history (Zhou 2006, pp. 67–68). Crucially, the content of the farewell itself is a rhetorical code-mesh. The ancestors are named not as "poets" or "emperors" but as "Hirsute Taoists, failed scholars"—a jarring, hybrid descriptor that resists both reverential Chinese historiography and Orientalist curiosity. At the same time, the line "Now that the half-men have occupied Canton" opens onto a multidirectional memory: the "half-men" refer simultaneously to the Japanese invasion of China and the racist "half-man" stereotype applied to Chinese immigrants in America. This single line functions as Rothberg's "productive comparison" (Rothberg 2009, p. 18), articulating Chinese and American histories without reducing one to the other. As Rothberg writes, "comparison, like memory, should be thought of as productive—as producing new objects and new lines of sight—and not simply as reproducing already given entities that either are or are not 'like' other already given entities" (Rothberg 2009, pp. 18–19).

Similarly, "First Lessons" (Chin 1987, pp. 36–37), dedicated to the character "好," inaugurates Chin's translingual material turn—the visible presence of the Chinese character

in the title is a material act of refusal. "The End of a Beginning" (Chin 1987, p. 3) and "A Chinaman's Chance" (Chin 1987, pp. 29–30) further develop this poetics by embedding the trauma of Chinese American labor (railroad construction, the Great Wall) within the very structure of the English poem, forcing linguistic and historical codes into fatal collision. Across these poems, *Dwarf Bamboo* does not simply represent hybrid identity; it actively constructs a new poetic language by treating difference—of language, of history, of form—as "resource for producing meaning" (Horner et al. 2011, p. 304). This collection thus establishes the foundational paradigm upon which Chin's entire translingual edifice is built.

If *Dwarf Bamboo* establishes the foundational agon, *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* systematizes Chin's translingual methodology through what Cheung terms "slanted allusions"—a deliberate, politically charged cross-cultural referencing that simultaneously aligns with and subverts its source traditions (Cheung 2011, p. 45). The title poem of "The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty" (Chin 1994, pp. 46–51) itself acts as a translingual rewriting of authority. The title is drawn from Li Bai's "On the Phoenix Terrace at Jinling," where the line "凤去台空江自流" ("The phoenix is gone, the terrace is empty, the river flows on") mourns the passage of time. Crucially, Chin's title excises the final, resigned phrase, leaving only the stark incompleteness of "凤去台空." This formal excision is the poem's first translingual act: it refuses Li Bai's lyric resolution in order to redirect the lament from dynastic loss toward a specifically Chinese American search for cultural belonging (Zhou 2006, p. 66).

The poem opens with the epigraph 川流不息/The river flows without ceasing (Chin 1994, p. 46). The Chinese phrase "川流不息" means "the river flows without ceasing," but it is not the original line from Li Bai's poem. Chin has replaced Li Bai's specific historical comment with a timeless, universalizing aphorism—a translingual gesture that simultaneously claims and disrupts the original. The collection thus uses both the borrowed title and the substituted epigraph to stage an ongoing negotiation of authority: she claims the Tang master's voice, but only to redirect it.

The poem's final stanza concludes with:

> *The phoenix gone, the terrace empty.*
>
> *Look, Meiling.*
>
> *yellow crowfoot in the pond,*
>
> *not lotus, not lily.* (Chin 1994, p. 51)

The deliberate misidentification of the plant is the poem's most translingual act. This is not "lotus" (a classical Chinese symbol of purity) nor "lily" (a Western symbol of purity). The poem ends without resolution—it refuses to be either fully Chinese or fully American. This refusal performs what Canagarajah terms "strategic incompleteness": "the reader is expected to fill in the gaps to make meaning rather than expecting all the connections to be made self-evident" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 142). At the same time, this "not lotus, not lily" line enacts Cheung's "slanted allusions." As Cheung argues, Chin "tilts" her Chinese references so that "the indigenous expressions acquire another shade of meaning" (Cheung 2011, p. 47). The yellow crowfoot is not merely a replacement for lotus and lily; it is a deliberate misfit—a symbol that resists the aesthetic and moral categories of both Eastern and Western traditions. Wang emphasizes that Chin's use of such irony is not merely a literary technique but an existential weapon against those who would label her a "barbarian" for her cultural impurity (Wang 2013, pp. 116–19). By refusing a single botanical identifier, the poem thus ends not with nostalgia or reconciliation, but with a performative refusal—the most powerful demonstration of rewriting authority from the margins.

The evolution of Chin's rhetorical strategies—from direct parody to "slanted allusion" and finally to "codemeshing" for dialogic critique—is not a random stylistic drift but a systematic methodological deepening of her translingual practice, and it points forward to the formal questions taken up in the next section. This practice answers Canagarajah's call for an orientation that recognizes "language as always performing in contact with other languages and discourses" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 8). Chin does not use Chinese and English so much as force them into contact, generating new meanings from their collision. By treating the difference between her English text and its Chinese source as a resource for meaning-making (Horner et al. 2011, p. 303)—rather than as a barrier to be overcome—she establishes a translingual paradigm for rewriting literary authority from the margins. She does not simply "quote" or "echo" the literary canon; she rewrites the grammar of how a canonical text can be used, transforming allusion itself into a site of translingual negotiation and political intervention.

3. The Politics of Form: Transplanting and Subverting the Classical Literary Forms

The rhetoric of rewriting examined above operates on the level of reference and allusion; this section argues that Chin's translingual practice extends just as deliberately to the level of poetic form. As Canagarajah makes clear, translingual practice involves not only the negotiation of linguistic codes but also the mobilization of semiotic resources, including the formal conventions of genre and text type (Canagarajah 2013, 6). Translingual poetics, accordingly, refuses to treat inherited forms like the *jueju* or the Blues as fixed containers; it recognizes them instead as fluid resources to be strategically reshaped. When Chin transplants the *jueju* into an English poem, she is engaged not in "codeswitching" at the lexical level but in what might be called formal codemeshing: a structural appropriation that challenges the notion that any single cultural tradition holds an "authentic" claim to a poetic form. Such appropriation is a direct instantiation of the translingual premise that language difference is generative rather than obstructive (Horner et al. 2011, p. 304).

Before the radical material turn of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, however, it is crucial to recognize that Chin's formal negotiation was already well underway in her second collection. The title poem of *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* offers a striking early instance of this practice: the mobilization of a non-native poetic form as a semiotic resource, whose structural constraints are simultaneously invoked and violated. The poem's four-part structure mirrors the classical Chinese Lv Shi (律诗, "regulated verse"), an eight-line form with strict tonal and semantic rules organized around four key structural moves: 起 (qǐ, "opening"), 承 (chéng, "elaboration"), 转 (zhuǎn, "turn"), and 合 (hé, "closure").

Chin appropriates this formal logic but systematically subverts each function. The poem opens with a clear 起: "Shallow river, shallow river, / these stairs are steep, / one foot, another, / I gather the hem/of my terry-cloth robe" (Chin 1994, p. 46), establishing a reflective, almost sacred tone. The 承 follows with sensory details: the "Bodhi tree fragrant with josssticks" (Chin 1994, p. 46). Yet the 转 arrives not as a subtle shift in mood but as a jarring incursion of historical violence: "Do you remember the shanty towns/on the hills of Wanchai, / tin roofs / crying into the sun?" (Chin 1994, pp. 47–48). This turn plunges into personal trauma rather than the classical form's transcendence. The 合 then delivers the most radical violation. Rather than Li Bai's classical resolution—"I cannot see Chang'an, and this saddens me"—Chin closes with a deliberate refusal of closure: "The phoenix gone, the terrace empty. / Look, Mei Ling, / yellow crowfoot in the pond, / not lotus, not lily" (Chin 1994, p. 51). As we have discussed, this is not synthesis but strategic incompleteness. Chin has borrowed Lv Shi's architecture but injected content the classical form was never

designed to contain. This early experiment in recontextualizing a mobile poetic code lays the groundwork for the more radical formal negotiations that define *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*.

The formal mechanism of Chin's translingual project is most clearly visible in "Chinese Quatrains (The Woman in Tomb 44)" (Chin 2002, pp. 24–26). Chin's own note identifies the source form: "adapted from *jue-ju*, literally 'cut verse,' four-lined poems, usually seven characters per line" (Chin 2002, p. 105). This declaration is not a neutral description; it is a performative act of formal negotiation. By naming the classical Chinese form as her source resource and then immediately violating its core constraints, Chin enacts a critical recontextualization at the level of structure. The *jueju*'s classical function is restraint and refined closure. The opening quatrain systematically dismantles this:

> The aeroplane is shaped like a bird
>
> Or a giant mechanical penis
>
> My father escorts my mother
>
> From girlhood to unhappiness (Chin 2002, p. 24)

The first "violation" is semantic: the simile of the "giant mechanical penis" introduces a grotesque, modern, sexualized metaphor with no place in the classical form. The second violation is structural: the classical *jueju* typically achieves a 转 (turn) in the third line, often through a subtle shift in mood. Here, the third line ("My father escorts my mother") delivers a narrative fall into a mundane patriarchal ritual. The fourth line ("From girlhood to unhappiness") refuses the *jueju*'s implied 合 (closure); instead, it offers a stark feminist verdict. The sequence enacts what Zhou terms "departures from established cultural and literary traditions" (Zhou 2006, p. 66), formalized through the subverted *jueju*. Chin has not copied the *jueju*; she has transplanted it into a new semiotic environment (Yao 2010, pp. 200–1), where its formal constraints become the very ground of their own subversion. This is envoicing through formal negotiation: the Chinese classical form is mobilized as a mobile code, but its structural expectations are systematically violated to articulate the gender and racial violence the original form was used to suppress.

This formal negotiation extends to the use of number symbolism embedded in the poem's title. As critical commentary notes, the number "44" in the title "The Woman in Tomb 44" is homophonous with "death" (sǐ, 死) in Chinese, encoding a bilingual pun that operates at the level of the paratext. The twelve quatrains ($12 = 3 \times 4$) reinforce this numerological emphasis on death. However, the poem's refusal to name the buried woman's identity leaves her in a state of suspended death—an unclosed subject. This formal resistance to closure parallels Wang's reading of Chin's irony as "a tool and weapon" against those who would reduce the speaker to a single cultural category (Wang 2013, p. 107).

Rhapsody in Plain Yellow represents the fullest realization of this formal translingualism. The collection's opening salvo, "Blues on Yellow," exemplifies a radical hybridization of codes at the generic level. The poem uses the Blues' AAB pattern—a form deeply rooted in African American historical trauma—to articulate Chinese American suffering:

> *If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write.*
>
> *If you cut my yellow wrists, I'll teach my yellow toes to write.*
>
> *If you cut my yellow fists, I'll teach my yellow feet to fight.*
>
> *Do not be afraid to perish, my mother, Buddha's compassion is nigh.*
>
> *Do not be afraid to perish, my mother, our boat will sail tonight.*
>
> *Your babies will reach the promised land, the stars will be their guide.* (Chin 2002, p. 3)

This can be read as something more than an act of cultural appropriation: it is a powerful instance of codemeshing, in which the Blues form—a highly specific and historically saturated code—is treated as a mobile resource that can be strategically recontextualized to articulate a different, yet structurally related, history of racialized oppression. As Yao observes, Chin "unites a frankly activist agenda with a drive toward formal experimentation that reformulates established semiotic and linguistic codes underwriting the very process of (American) 'ethnic' signification" (Yao 2010, p. 37). The characteristic repetition serves not only a rhythmic effect but also to hammer home the pain of racist naming ("yellow"). At the same time, the invocation of "Buddha" and the classical Chinese image of the "boat" (a recurring symbol for poetic subjectivity in Chinese poetry) inserts a specifically Chinese spiritual and literary framework into the form. Chin thus envoices a new, hybrid subject through her choice and negotiation of generic codes: a subject who is simultaneously Chinese, American, and historically conscious. This is not content about Chinese American suffering; it is a formal argument that the experiences of American minority groups can be linked through the negotiated deployment of each other's expressive forms.

This reading finds scholarly support in Cucinella's analysis of the body in Chin's poetry. Cucinella argues that Chin's body "often serves as the visual site of collision or overlap" between cultural traditions, manifesting as a "palimpsest" where "previous experiences remain legible and readable" (Cucinella 2010, p. 82). In the specific case of "Blues on Yellow," the command "teach my yellow toes to write" is thus, in Cucinella's terms, a way of "keeping the material reality of immigration in view" and "render[ing] bodies particularized by time and place" (Cucinella 2010, p. 87). The analysis extends this bodily palimpsest to the level of formal negotiation: the Blues AAB pattern, as a mobile code, becomes the formal vehicle that gives this material body its poetic voice.

Across *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, then, the formal strategies examined in this section amount to a systematic translingual practice. By treating inherited poetic forms—the *Lv Shi*, the *jueju*, and the Blues—as mobile codes to be recontextualized rather than monuments to be revered, Chin challenges the cultural and historical narratives those forms have traditionally served. Her formal experiments are not isolated acts of aesthetic innovation; they are acts of critical formal negotiation that inscribe marginalized experience into the very structure of the poem. The *Lv Shi*'s four-part architecture is appropriated only to be dismantled; the *jueju*'s strict closure is violated to articulate a feminist verdict; and the Blues' AAB pattern is mobilized to argue for structural solidarity between distinct histories of racialized oppression. As Zhou observes, "Chin's exploration of racial and cultural border crossings also involves developing a new poetics that departs from both Eastern and Western poetic traditions" (Zhou 2006, p. 70). By refusing to treat these forms as fixed, Chin transforms the formal structure of a poem into the medium for a new, historically conscious articulation that does not merely describe resistance but performs it at the level of poetic architecture.

4. The Materiality of the Inscribed Body: Language as Archive and Memorial Politics

The rhetorical and formal strategies examined in the preceding sections have demonstrated the progressive deepening of Chin's translingual project. That project culminates in a material turn which represents the logical and most radical extension of a translingual orientation. As Canagarajah defines it, one of the key concepts of translingual practice is that "communication transcends words and involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 6), and that "[a]ll semiotic resources work together for meaning" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 7).

This fundamentally materialist premise—that language is always an embodied, visual, and sonic phenomenon, inseparable from its physical medium—finds its most powerful expression in Chin's inscription of Chinese characters and *pinyin*. From a translingual standpoint, this material difference is not merely semantic but physical: the visual and sonic substance of the language carries meaning in its own right.

The poem "The Half is Almost Gone" from *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* is arguably the most radical materialization of Chin's translingual poetics. Its visual form—the lines of the poem are arranged on the page to form the shape of the Chinese character "愛" (ài, love)—transcends conventional bilingualism. It is not a simple matter of "inserting" a Chinese character into an English text; the entire English-language poem becomes a Chinese character. This is a visual event that cannot be assimilated by a monolingual reading practice.

The poem's content, read linearly, describes a speaker's fragmented memories of a lost mother and a fading cultural identity:

> That half is almost gone,
>
> the Chinese half,
>
> the fair side of a peach,
>
> darkened by the knife of time,
>
> fades like a cruel sun. (Chin 2002, p. 17)

The words themselves express loss. However, the visual form of the character "愛" insists on a simultaneous, material counter-claim. The poem does not just describe the experience of loss; it performs the act of preserving what remains. The linguistic content speaks of erosion, but the visual form asserts physical presence.

This visual strategy resonates powerfully with Keyvan Allahyari's concept of the "archive of bones": Allahyari argues that in the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah, material objects—bones, ruins, the physical landscape—serve as a counter-archive to the colonial archive, a repository of traumatic memory that resists official narratives of erasure and progress (Allahyari 2026, pp. 43–44). Similarly, in Chin's poem, the Chinese character "愛" functions as a material "bone" of a lost or fading cultural memory. The character is not merely a symbol that can be translated into an English equivalent ("love"); it is an object, a visible and palpable trace of a language and a world that is "almost gone." Its visual presence on the page is a deliberate obstacle to smooth English reading. The reader is forced to pause, to recognize the illegible, the unassimilable. This moment of hesitation is the material effect of the translingual act.

This visual fragmentation concentrates, into a single gesture, the translingual premise that language difference is itself generative. Chin does not translate the concept of "love" into English; she materializes its state of being "almost gone" by physically breaking the character itself. Moreover, the exclamation "ai, ai, ai, ai" functions as a bilingual pun: it is simultaneously the English cry of pain and the Mandarin word for "love" (ài). Thus, the poem's meaning is not in the dictionary definition of "愛," but in its very materiality on the page and through the sound.

The severed character "愛" also functions as a materialized act of translingual resistance. It is not merely a symbol of loss; it is a physical trace that registers the violence of assimilatory processes. From a translingual perspective, this "archive" is not a passive remnant but an active, strategic deployment of a semiotic resource. Chin chooses to inscribe the character and to break it in a specific, visible way, to produce a specific meaning. The character is therefore a deliberate act of intervention in the present—a translingual writer's decision to use the materiality of her heritage language to block the smooth, monolingual flow of English, forcing the reader to see, and thus to witness, the loss. The poem does not just

exist in a state of brokenness; it performs the act of being broken, transforming the material object into an argument about the politics of linguistic and cultural survival.

If "The Half is Almost Gone" foregrounds the visual materiality of Chinese characters, "To Pursue the Limitless" from *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* deploys a parallel strategy of sonic materiality through the use of *pinyin*. Here, the translingual act is not visual but aural, performed through a game of homophones and tonal wordplay that creates a sense of linguistic chaos and semantic slippage.

The specific passage in question is:

> Mái mā Buried mother
>
> Mài má Sold hemp
>
> Mǎi mǎ Bought horse
>
> No, not the tones but the tomes (Chin 2002, p. 87)

This sequence is a direct enactment of linguistic precarity. The three *pinyin* phrases (mái mā, mài má, Mǎi mǎ) are nearly identical phonetically, differing only in tone. The "meaning" of each phrase depends entirely on a tonal system that is almost entirely illegible to a monolingual English speaker. The result is a vertiginous cascade of possible meanings—burial, commerce, animal purchase—all of which are connected through sound but not through logic. This is a sonic crisis that mirrors a broader crisis of identity.

Chin's statement in an interview that she fears "losing Chinese" (Qtd. in Moyers 1995, p. 70) provides the key to understanding this strategy. The *pinyin* wordplay is a sonic embodiment of that fear. It is the auditory experience of a subject whose mother tongue is slipping away, becoming a chain of near-synonyms that no longer cohere into stable meaning. The phrase "No, not the tones but the tomes" (a pun on "tones" and "tombs") confirms this: the loss is not merely phonological but historical and literary. The "tomes" of classical Chinese literature are buried, like the "buried mother" (mái mā), in a linguistic graveyard.

However, this sonic chaos is not presented simply as a loss or a lack. It is also a creative act of displacement. The sound game itself produces new meaning. The juxtaposition of "buried mother," "sold hemp," and "bought horse" generates a compressed, almost surreal narrative of dispersal and commodification. In this sonic gulf between two languages, Chin creates a new, fragmented, but emergent form of diasporic subjectivity. The subject is no longer a unified, monolingual self but a displaced and disoriented consciousness that finds its voice not in the stable meaning of a single language but in the chaotic, productive friction between languages. The sonic *pinyin* becomes the soundscape of a new, transnational identity that is built upon, rather than in denial of, its own constitutive fractures.

The sonic event just described is, at its most basic level, a translingual practice of codemeshing (Canagarajah 2013, pp. 6–7). Rather than alternating between English and Chinese, Chin meshes them within a single line, making them impossible to disentangle. The *pinyin* is woven into the poem's linguistic texture rather than grafted onto it; it refuses the monolingual expectation that a poem written in English must only sound English.

This sonic opacity can be understood as the triumph rather than the failure of the translingual project. Chin offers the reader no translation or gloss for the *pinyin*; she compels the reader to sit with the discomfort of not understanding. The effect is an act of strategic recalcitrance, a refusal to make the translingual subject fully legible to the monolingual ear. It is, in Canagarajah's terms, a "negotiation of mobile codes" (Canagarajah 2013, p. 8) that insists on the inherent friction and untranslatability of the diasporic experience. By forcing the reader to confront the sonic materiality of linguistic difference, Chin's poetry moves beyond description and becomes a material act of sonic assertion.

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Chin's poetics culminates in a material turn that is the most radical fulfillment of her translingual project. This materialist turn can be read as a direct response to a specific literary-historical problem. As Hsiao documents, the American modernist appropriation of the Chinese ideogram—most famously by Ezra Pound—silenced the aural dimension of Chinese writing, reducing it to a "purely visual language" that served the Western poetic imagination (Hsiao 2012, p. 196)—an appropriation whose broader transpacific circuitry Yunte Huang has traced in detail (Huang 2002). This modernist intervention, Hsiao argues, left Asian American poets with a "ghostly position in the story of American radicalization" (Hsiao 2012, p. 189). Chin's material practices—the visual inscription of the broken character "愛" and the sonic play of *pinyin* tones—can be understood as a deliberate reclamation of the ideogram's full sensory presence. By insisting on "the reincorporation of sound into an ideogram made silent" by modernists, Chin "stages another kind of recovery for the ideogram" (Hsiao 2012, p. 194), grounding it in the specific, material experience of the diasporic body.

5. Conclusions

This study has traced a coherent and evolving trajectory within Marilyn Chin's translingual poetics, revealing it as a deliberate system of cultural labor rather than a collection of isolated experiments. Across the three interconnected dimensions examined here—rhetorical rewriting, formal subversion, and material inscription—Chin's work progressively deepens a single project. *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987) establishes a foundational poetics of agonistic hybridization; *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994) refines it into a systematic "slanted allusion"; and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002) culminates in the radical material turn of visual and sonic inscription.

This research thus offers a concrete case study of what "Chinese as method" means in practice. By operationalizing Chinese linguistic and literary resources as a critical methodology rather than as thematic content, Chin's poetry exposes the limits of monolingual paradigms and establishes multilingual practice as a constitutive, generative force within American literature. The tripartite model proposed here—rhetorical rewriting, formal subversion, material inscription—offers a critical vocabulary that can be tested against other Asian American, diasporic, and translingual poets. It is important to stress, however, that such an extension would refine rather than originate a line of inquiry that is already well underway: critics such as Yu (2009) and Dowling (2018) have shown in detail how the translingual and experimental writing of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, and others reworks the English lyric from within. The contribution of the present study lies less in proposing translingual method as new than in demonstrating, through a single sustained case, how it can be organized into a coherent account of one poet's career. Read in this light, Chin's practice points toward a broader theory of twentieth- and twenty-first-century transnational poetics—of the kind Ramazani has begun to elaborate—one that treats multilingual practice not as an exception but as a defining feature of literary modernity (Ramazani 2009).

At the same time, the scope of this study entails certain limitations. The tripartite model, while productive for analyzing Chin's systematic project, may require further refinement when applied to poets whose translingual strategies are less linear or more dispersed. The study's exclusive focus on written poetry also leaves open the question of how Chin's translingual poetics might operate in other genres, such as her novel *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009). These limitations point to promising directions for future research: scholars might test the model against a wider corpus of translingual writers, investigate the relationship between poetic and prose translingual practices, or examine how these strategies are received and mediated across different cultural and institutional contexts.

More consequentially, Chin's case returns us to the stakes with which this article began. If "Chinese as method" names a way of doing American Studies rather than merely a theme within it, then Chin's poetry supplies one of the clearest demonstrations of what that method can yield. Her work shows that the critical paradigms so often called for in Chinese American poetry criticism need not be imported from outside the tradition: they can be derived from the formal and linguistic decisions of the poets themselves. To read Chin translingually is thus to recover a mode of literary criticism adequate to its object—one that treats multilingualism not as a supplement to an otherwise monolingual American literature but as a constitutive condition of its making. For a writer from the margins, the act of writing is never merely an act of expression; it is an act of intervention, of rewriting, of re-creation. Chin does not write in English only; she rewrites English itself, and in doing so she expands the formal, thematic, and epistemological boundaries of American poetry and offers a vital critical path for literature in the age of transnationalism.

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