

4.3 Strange Beasts of Translation: Yan Ge and Jeremy Tiang in Conversation

Transcript

Emily Hyde

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Emily Hyde, one of the hosts and co-organizers of this season of Novel Dialogue. On this podcast, we bring together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work: how they're written, read, studied and remembered. This season is centered on translation, both in theory and in practice, and so we're bringing together novelists, translators, and critics in a wide range of conversations.

Today we have Yan Ge and Jeremy Tiang, two writers who work in and across Chinese and English. Yan Ge was born in Sichuan in China in 1984. She is a fiction writer in both Chinese and English. Her first short story collection was published in China when she was 17, and she's the author of 13 books, including six novels, and she's received numerous awards, including the Maodun Literature Prize for Best Young Writer. She was also named by People's Literature magazine as one of the 20 Future Literature Masters in China. Two of her novels have been translated into English, *The Chili Bean Paste Clan*, translated by Nicky Harman, and *Strange Beasts of China*, translated by Jeremy Tiang. Yan Ge started to write in English in 2016, and her debut English language story collection, called *Elsewhere*, will be published in 2023. She currently lives in Norwich, in the UK, with her husband and son.

Jeremy Tiang has translated over 20 books from Chinese, including *Strange Beasts of China* and most recently *Rouge Street* by Shuang Xuetao. He also writes and translates plays, and his own novel *State of Emergency* won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2018. Jeremy was the London Book Fair's Translator of the Fair in 2019 and earlier this year served as the Princeton University Translator in Residence and as an International Booker Prize judge. And it's the International Booker Prize that is intended to honor both author and translator. Jeremy lives in Flushing, in Queens.

Welcome to you both.

Jeremy Tiang

Thank you, thank you for having us, Emily. Thank you to Novel Dialogue.

Yan Ge

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be able to do anything with Jeremy like a conversation. It's just--

JT

Yeah, it's always deeply delightful to be in conversation with you, so I'm really excited for this.

EH

Well, this is perfect because at Novel Dialogue we hosts kind of back slowly away at this point and turn things over to our guests. So, Jeremy, I'm going to turn things over to you, though I'll probably pop in now and again with questions. So where would you like to begin? What's something you've wanted to ask Yan after working on her novel *Strange Beasts*?

JT

Well, for a conversation about translation, it seems appropriate to begin with language. So yeah, I'm really interested in how language functions for you. You've written many books in Chinese. You've said that your latest novel involves generous helpings of Sichuanese, which is similar to, but not exactly the same as, your native dialect of Pixianhua. You've also spent time in the US, you've lived in Dublin and have been described as an Irish writer, and now you're in the UK having completed an MFA at the University of East Anglia and you're writing in English. So that's quite a range of languages and influences, and I'm curious as to how all of this feeds into your writing process.

Yan Ge

Thank you, Jeremy. This is probably one of the best questions I've ever been asked. You know, sometimes you really want it—it's like questions, like good questions, really opens up, as like a portal to kind of help me really in that sense to explore myself. So this is definitely one of those questions, but also, and I'm also saying it is probably very challenging for me. I think I'm probably kind of by nature somebody who's very sensitive towards and kind of susceptible of different languages like voices and songs around me. And I think the reason like when I was writing in Chinese, like I, not very quickly, but I think soon enough that I discovered and decided to begin to write in dialect, which was something that was rather unsettling to me. Like this was when I was maybe 21, 22 years old and I thought it was such a, like, now thinking back it was probably something very natural and I think it's something that has to be done for me. But at that point it felt really unsettling and kind of rebellious to kind of stop using Mandarin because I think it's the way we were taught, especially as kids is to speak, to learn Mandarin. It's a sign of being a good student to be more advanced, be more cultured.

So I think it was a bit scary for me to kind of decide to include Sichuanese and then eventually Sichuanese became like the main language of my Chinese writing and I think it is really because my sort of sensibility, maybe, like with the language that I just could not, it's almost like I'm a little, I don't know, like an animal or something kind of very intuitively, I think I just cannot tolerate having the characters talking in language that doesn't seem natural to them. And I think it's pretty much based on, because of this similar logic, that later when I was living in Dublin, although I really never quite planned to kind of write in English. In fact, I kind of pretty much resisted this idea of bringing English into my literary world, I kind of feel this is like the last ground I'm holding, that at that point I think I had been kind of living in English for quite a long time, not long time, long time, maybe in my world. I say three or four years, but I would still be kind of like, no, no, no, my literary world has to be solely Chinese, but I think naturally it was through a similar thing, like when I was writing a particular thing that I realized in a very similar fashion many years ago when I discovered that I cannot have the characters in my story speaking Mandarin and they had to speak Sichuanese and I had to go with that decision. And similarly in this case I realized I could not write this story, this essay in Chinese and I had to do it in English because that only felt natural, feel kind of organic to me. And so that, and then I had to kind of—

So I suppose it is really quite impulsive in that in every kind of decision making point where I decided I have to switch language, it's almost like the outer force has like cornered me and I had to change, I think in each case it seems like. Although kind of looking back, it's kind of like it is kind of inevitable because I think changing a language really has everything to do with one's change of identity, and I think it is really because, I'm sure you would resonate with this more than anyone else I know in person, is that the changing of identity really requires a different way of expressing yourself. I think that, I think maybe different artists would choose different means to express that fluidity, that kind of turbulence, and their shifting, changing of the identity.

And for me, I think the method I chose, I picked up with something, you know that I used all the time, which is the language, and then I changed that. I think it's just my way of expressing that.

JT

Yeah, I think that's really well put. It's kind of a feedback mechanism where speaking and writing in a different language turns you into a different person, but also becoming a different person requires you to use a different language. And I'm really interested in what you said about fluidity. Because I think there is this conventional idea that a language switch kind of is a one way change, right? That there's this image of Yiyun Li or Xiaolu Guo deciding that they will only write in English and not Chinese or Jhumpa Lahiri deciding she will only write in Italian and not English from now on, whereas you're much more hybrid or, well, fluid. You don't so much switch languages as accumulate languages, and it feels to me from what you were saying and from your writing, that it's more like these languages, these modes of expression are tools you have in a case. And you're acquiring more of them and you're deploying them as required by the particular story that you're telling at that moment. Does that feel like an accurate summary of your process?

YG

Yeah, I mean that is absolutely true and in a sense this fluidity and as you were describing that, like bringing up the writers names, all of whom really inspired me and I really admired, you know, I think so much of what I decide to do with my writing were more or less kind of nudged and encouraged by all those writers you just mentioned. But also I was thinking about this sense of like abandoning one language and picking up the other and thinking how much of that, or, I don't know if that's necessarily true with each individual writers, because maybe they're still kind of thinking about, I don't know, but like, this is how we, like general public, kind of decide to perceive that. I think so much of that is built on this concept of this idea of binary. And it's recently, I've been thinking a lot about, you know, the language, how that determines how you think. And I think it's precisely in this world where we can see, kind of Anglophone world, where English is the dominating language and we think about all of those as kind of sense of Occidental values, in a sense, we think about things kind of, kind of, I'm very afraid of making this grand statement, like the narrator *Strange Beasts* does.

But I think this sense of values, like how we perceive the world precisely it's kind of, it's like a linear progressive time concept, and it's this is kind of a rigid sense of binary and I think it comes from the, maybe the Greek idea where we have to, you know, how we find truth is we peel off, we kind of disregard, we discard what we consider as the fake, and we then discuss the truth, but then the idea of discovering the truth and peeling off the fake is kind of the establish of this binary. And in a sense if you choose English you have to abandon Chinese because one is truth, one is false.

But I kind of think in the Chinese way of thinking about it, it's quite, time could be quite circular. And in this sense I always believe, especially kind of like, you know, through the translation of *Strange Beasts of China* and then me reading the translation, I think I'm learning so much from that old me that really reminded me of how so many things are kind of like, it's really going, I don't know, like spiral or like a circular. And also in this sense of how truth is being discovered, I think I really like this story. I'm gonna bring up Confucius. I apologize for bringing up Confucius as a Chinese, which is kind of such a cliché. But in this sense of truth and how Confucius thinks. I don't agree with Confucius on a lot of things, but this thing I thought that actually kind of influenced me so much is that truth is inhabiting in so many different elements. And then this metaphor he uses is "The moon is reflected in 1000 rivers." In that sense, there's this fluidity in truth. Like we do not want to kind of throw away the fake, the fake part of things is every part regardless of being fake or being authentic. And there was, that has truth embedded in it, and we just need to go to different places to discover different versions of truth that's been hidden in this particular object. And there could be a lot of different things. So I think I'm really buying into this sense of truth, of truth being in, truth as the moon being reflected in 1000 rivers. So I think in that sense I am a collector.

JT

Right, yes, language helps us to communicate, but it can also fix thoughts and ideas because we have to put them into words, which takes away some of their fluidity. I really love the idea of truth being reflected in 1000 rivers because in a way that describes the whole process of how *Strange Beasts of China* structures itself as a novel. The protagonist is an unnamed cryptozoologist who makes it her life's work, or at least her life's work at the moment, she probably has many pursuits in her life, but having forsaken science for literature, she makes it her work to track down individual beasts and study them and write about them. And what she finds in every case is that society has provided these very rigid definitions of who these beasts are and what they do and how they function, only for her to discover that actually the truth is far more complicated and nuanced than that, and she has to go in search of what is underneath these rigid classifications. And her fixed idea of the world slowly crumbles, right? We perceive these easy binaries because that allows us to make sense of the world. But the further she digs, the more she explores, the more she realizes that it really isn't that simple.

So the novel kind of reveals itself. We discover the world at the same time as your protagonist discovers it. And I know that for you, there was an element of that in that you wrote it as a serial novel, and so each chapter was published individually. So you were in a sense also discovering it at the same time as us and kind of locking in earlier decisions that you had to abide in later. Looking back now, how does that feel? This whole process of discovery, discovering a novel in real time, at the same time as your readers.

Yan Ge

It is something that can typically, that would typically be done by a very young person, I think is, it's just quite hubristic in that sense. And I could not even begin to imagine like now I would take on a mission like that because that means you're so confident, although you're like only starting from the scratch, like the first sentence of chapter one, you are certain you'll be able to produce a chapter every month and also you would not be able to go back to change the previous chapters and whatever you've written there and been having published. So it's like this great sense of confidence that you're very sure, like I think I must have mentioned to you that when I was writing *Strange Beasts* and quite often, it's kind of

like this very funny synchronization that's me and the author is pretty much the same to the female protagonist in the story who's being chased by her editor and I was then being chased by my editor, asking me to hand in the new chapters. And very often I would kind of delay that until last minute and he'd be calling me like enraged and saying, we've got all the other things ready and we're like we have empty pages waiting for you, this is going to print, you have to give it to me tomorrow, and only then I'd sit down and quite often it's like throughout one night. So I just kind of begin maybe after dinner like 7, 8 and then I just write the whole chapter, like the whole story, and like then send it to him like tomorrow, the next day morning.

Which is really a terrible way of going about things. I feel so sorry about like my editor, I kind of feel he probably had to put up so much and also like that sheer energy, and also it's almost it's like this great, it's like this sense of a delirium, almost like, you know. So you have to plug yourself, plunge yourself into that, and then allow yourself to get lost completely. And also to not be afraid of producing terrible things. I think I probably have produced like terrible bits in this novel. It's kind of like this, it's like a fever dream, I think, in many sense.

JT

Alright, first of all, I'm once again tremendously envious of your rock'n'roll lifestyle, Yan. When I was 21 I was staying up all night writing essays for university like a nerd. And here you are producing these amazing chapters, which A: I don't think they're terrible at all, I think the whole book is brilliant, but also assessments like terrible seem beside the point because, as you say, this really is a fever dream. And when I have a fever dream, I don't know if that's a good or bad dream. You kind of just experience it. And that, in many ways, is the only way to go through *Strange Beasts of China*, or 异兽志, you just let it happen to you.

Which I think seems like a good juncture to now let it happen to our listeners. Let's do a little bit of a reading from the book. So now Yan is going to read in Chinese, and I will read the same paragraphs in English. We're going to read from the chapter "Sacrificial Beasts." Firstly, the little bit at the opening, which is similar to the opening section of all the chapters where the classifications of the beasts are given. The same ones that may or may not be subverted later in the chapter.

YG

Yes, so I'm going to read at the very beginning of Chapter 3 in Chinese.

“舍身兽性忧郁，喜高寒，远古时在山巅可见。其身形高大，肤黑，眼微蓝，唇薄，耳垂修长，呈锯齿形。其余若常人。”

JT

“Sacrificial beasts are melancholy by nature, drawn to high places and low temperatures. In the distant past, they could be found on mountain peaks. They are tall and dark-skinned, with pale blue eyes and thin lips. Their earlobes hang low, and have a sawtoothed edge. In all other respects, they are like regular people.”

And could I say reading that out, I am jealous of the brevity and compression of Chinese. Like, oh no, I have to unpack all of that into much longer English sentences. Whereas Chinese, particularly the

classical Chinese register that you were using, Yan, really allows you to pack in all these descriptions into just a few short phrases.

And from a little later in the chapter, we're going to read a conversation between the unnamed protagonist and her niece Lucia, who has just encountered a beast.

YG

“但小路佳不懂这些，她还是个小女孩，见我，哭哭啼啼，扑我怀中，叫：“小姨。”我心也碎了，忙拿黑森林蛋糕出来哄她开心——她爱我，我也爱她。她说：“你知道吗，我看见它死了！”我抱她小脑袋，柔声说：“有生命的东西都会死。””

JT

“Beastly families were a mystery to me, but I genuinely felt that when it came to humans, families were a great institution, like the roots of a tree. They gave you life and sustained you, and even when you died, you stayed rooted. Lucia didn't understand any of this. She was still a little girl when she saw me she howled and flung herself into my embrace. “Auntie,” she sobbed. My heart shattered and I quickly produced the Black Forest gâteau I'd bought to cheer her up. She loved me, and I loved her too.

She said, “I saw it die, you know.”

I held her little head and murmured as tenderly as I could, “Everything that lives must die.””

I particularly love this passage because in most contexts, that would be really quite a dark thing to say to a child. But in this novel, it feels exactly right. Because that's the world we live in, where existence itself is precarious. You never know what's around the next corner. There's really, for such a dreamlike novel, quite a lot of death in it. And yet these deaths are just part of, not even the price of existing. They're just part of the fat of existence, and everyone accepts that this is the world of strange beasts.

YG

Yeah, yeah. Just listening to you reading that just made me really emotional because that little girl in the story, whose name in Chinese is Lu Jia is my actual niece like, well, her name would have like different characters, but it's the same pronunciation. And she was born the year, like about six months after my mom died. So then I think I, when I was writing this story and I kind of brought in this little character, really thinking about her and she as a baby, and I think I put a lot of love into that character because I think I was very, I was really moved when she was born, like in a way kind of seeing the continuity of life.

But like just today I was talking to my family and so she's in the last year of high school now. She's preparing for her college entrance examination, and I just suddenly thought like this is like a flashback having that paragraph being read out and realizing at that point she was that small, she was actually smaller than that, that was like my imagined more grown up version of her when I wrote that and now she's about to go to college and it's just crazy, just to put it like, you know, the passing of time when you put it that way, like, especially like measured by a young person, it just seems so dramatic.

JT

I mean that, yes, the passage of time is remorseless. And yet I'm really interested in how, in a way, the translation of this book was a kind of revisiting for you, 15 years after you wrote it. And normally when I'm able to work with a living author, I do try to get to know their voice and try to get to know them. Because I think authorial voice is always filtered in some way into the text, and that helps me to ground myself. But in this case I was sort of triangulating from the version of you I know now and the version that I thought I saw in the text, and trying to find the right voice in between those two places. And I guess my question is, if you were writing this book now, how would it be different?

YG

First of all, I don't think I would, it's funny, I don't think I would allow myself to write a book like this now. Which is quite sad actually, just to, because I read that, read your translation and this was maybe in 2020 is it when they came out with *Tilted Axis*, and then I was really quite shocked by, because I pretty much had forgotten most of it and I read it, I was pretty shocked by the story. Like couldn't quite believe that I actually wrote that and then I did ask myself, would I be able to write something like that? I think I would totally censor myself. Not in the sense of like, because I like, accidentally I said that word and I knew everybody would be like immediately quite alert like oh what she's going to talk about?

It's not that, it's how as you get older or kind of as you become more quote unquote "sophisticated" as a writer, you wanted to, you kind of, you know you wanted to, integrate yourself into this literary body, which is quite often like serious, socio-realistic and maybe quite male dominating. And I very soon like after that actually adopted this quite, like a male narrative voice, which then kind of made me quite, not quite, relatively more successful in China. I think it was because I then had this pure kind of a male voice, like narrative voice, and then people were quite amazed by, that it's produced by me. And I felt quite happy about it, about like being able to trick them.

So it I kind of, I really see, especially through rereading this book and how we were all kind of affected and in a way maybe oppressed by the existing system, and that system is not established by us, especially, I think, you know, when I was writing *Strange Beasts*, I was a young woman. I wasn't saying like I was being, and you know, I was like a privileged person, like a college student and everything, but it's kind of, it just teaches me how, you know, you thought you were like a free spirited writer and you thought you were like expressing yourself freely, but it's not, really, because you have all those ground that represents power that is around you and you try to climb on top of that, or you try, you see that and I think, see that is what, again that is how, and it's how we were taken into kind of those kind of closed system and I'm like kind of envisioning this as like, you know, I'm like this person when I was writing *异兽志*, *Strange Beasts* and like outside of that enclosed circle and knocking the door. And then maybe at one point the door kind of suddenly opened and then I was dragged in and the doors shut close behind me and then it's almost like, yes, you were then taken into the high literature system and but then you were also kind of imprisoned. Because you've accessed the system and you are now have to stay in the system and it's really hard now for me to break out of that system that I'm now part of, to kind of allow myself to write something like *Strange Beasts*, because now I'm part of it and I kind of, you know, I'm totally kind of, I've been kind of marinated in those kind of values and to think of what is good literature we have to, you know, be like socio-realistic and so on so forth and including like your prose style, how your, et cetera.

But yeah, and but then like I read *Strange Beasts*, like I said, like about two years ago, like your translation, it's like a wakeup call. I was like oh yes, that was, I was able to do that because I was genuinely free. And that really got me thinking, actually, yeah.

EH

I have a question about power and tradition and you know, the canon of literature, probably because I'm an English professor and that's what I teach, you know, is like to watch out for that, but also to enforce it. So I was just wondering, especially with the way that you've been talking about the place of *Strange Beasts* in its you know original Chinese form and then to its return in English. Do you think of the novel differently in English than you do in Chinese? Specifically the novel form, because Chinese has its own long history of the novel form. And I know right now you're writing in both. You're writing a Chinese novel, you're finishing a Chinese novel, but you're writing short stories in English. So I just wonder if there's something different in the way that you write a Chinese novel in particular, as opposed to how you might fit into those systems of power and literary prestige in English.

YG

I, well, so I don't know if I'm, like, fully qualified to answer this question, because I've, I haven't written a novel in English. So but if I could just talk, if I could just talk about, like, the general sense of writing fiction in Chinese and writing fiction in English, I do think, like notice, I notice this myself, is that I was able to write a lot of things or kind of explore via my fiction a lot of subject matters in English that I, it's not like I did, I couldn't, it's because it just wouldn't ever occur to me "that is a literary topic." And I think the reason for that, I think, I definitely have talked about this somewhere else, so I feel bad for repeating myself, but I thought it was quite important. I truly believe that Chinese, not in a sense of Chinese versus English, but in a sense of one's native language versus one's second language, is that the native language is always heavily infused with the patriarchal structure, and typically for a woman, I think there were certain words and phrases, characters I quite often would have negative and stigmatizing connotations that were associated with a female feeling or a female you know, it's associated with like female body or like your periods or a lot of things, like the bad things. And then I think when using, when kind of bring up words or phrases like that in your native language, it kind of gives you this kind of bodily sensation, it kind of almost paralyzes you that you couldn't just bring yourself to explore further because you cannot. Or I don't know if you can, but like, I would never want to write in Chinese a story about, say, having periods because the word period in Chinese would be quite loaded for me because I know like rationally you recognize that, but still you couldn't really. So I think there was like this, obviously, I think there are definitely other aspects of, but this is the first thing I discovered.

So then I think when I write in English, say my story collection would have a number of stories that were quite womanly, like that were, that kind of explored kind of female aspects of like experience, body, etc. And I felt quite free in that sense because I'm not saying there's no stigma being attached to those things in English. It's just I couldn't feel it because it's my learned language and so then, I thought this was such an amazing thing actually for me to be able to be like more free. I know lots of people have said that when they talk about like writing a second language and it's definitely that sense and I think it comes from one being completely disassociated with the like the cultural and social context of the language but only kind of using it as like a linguistic tool. So then it's kind of, I imagine myself being quite naughty, like being kind of like a rascal when I write in English because, I'm kind of like this smear on the wall because I really don't care. Whereas in Chinese you know, you're kind of like, you're heavily, you're

kind of burdened, not even--On the one hand, that's your heritage, on the other hand, it's like a burden. You're trying to move forward with all those like thousands of years of like cultural context and then it's very hard I think for me to move more swiftly. Whereas in English I definitely think I'm more, I'm much more changeable, which I don't know if it is good thing, I think I'm much more experimental. I allow myself to do things that might seem to be quite grim.

JT

Well, earlier, earlier Yan, you were talking about the dominance of English, and I think you're right that we can't treat English as just another language, right? Because it's such a hegemonic language to be writing in or to be translated into. It kind of pulls you into this world of, yeah, I'm uncomfortable with the term "world literature," but I guess that's what we're using for now. So, like with world literature, you're like, what do any of these books have to do with each other, other than that they were all written away from the Anglophone centers of power and some often not in English, right, so that's a flattening effect. But it is seen as necessary in order that they can be studied or marketed in conjunction or so that they're easily classifiable.

YG

Yeah, yeah, I think it must be very, sort of like a really difficult and different practice as a translator in particular, like from Chinese to English because, it's kind of, you know, it's bringing voices and story from a very, you know, marginalized place and into the so-called center. I feel bad for saying this, but it is the reality because I don't think, from all the translators I've worked with or have had conversations with, only English translator or the English publisher will say you have to come to meet the English reader, because, you would never hear somebody else saying you have to come to meet the Hungarian reader or, you know, that was never, you kind of pretty much get to present your text as it is, where like it's the translator's personal choice rather than here, you'd always hear that you have to come to meet the English reader. Because the English reader is not ready to move an inch.

Sometimes people would ask me and why don't you translate your own work? And I would just say really, I am not able to. Because I think it's such a, yeah, I don't really know how, how do you do it?

JT

I mean, I wouldn't translate my own work either. I think having another voice, another interpretive lens is like, that's an experience I hugely enjoy, both as a translator myself and as a writer who has been translated. And I'm all about like collaboration and hybridity and I think if you can bring another voice in as the translator of the work, why wouldn't you do that rather than essentially re-writing a book, just using a different one of your voices. So I would always, yeah, I would always opt for the translator.

YG

That's so interesting that you talk about like using a different kind of voices. Yeah, I was thinking about in terms of you know translation like world literature or like translated literature and versus say English literature and I think it is really such a privilege to have this particularity. Like when you're in a different country and your particularity, your individuality, were completely taken away from you because that is a privilege, and you just don't have that privilege anymore. You just live in this general sense, it's like a

general Chinese person, a general Chinese, a general East Asian woman who walks on the streets of Dublin.

And I think in the way, in that sense, me writing in English is me writing back towards this sense of universality, this generalization, because literature is what it is, is to emphasize, is to magnify the particularity of each individual life and experience, no matter how transient that might be. And I think that in that sense is really me kind of punching back, writing back to that sense of this general East Asian woman, walking on the street of the—

JT

Well, I just want to say that I was lucky enough to read an advanced copy of Yan's amazing short story collection *Elsewhere*. And it encapsulates everything Yan was saying about pushing back against the labels that have been put on her as a so-called Chinese writer or Asian writer, or immigrant writer. There's a kind of, in the best possible way, a gleeful recklessness in the way it smashes everything you might expect of a book from someone with these labels, and it's completely unclassifiable.

EH

I actually have a question about English for Jeremy. So, the Queen's English in particular. So, your own prize-winning novel is called *State of Emergency* and it's about families involved with leftist movements kind of throughout the second-half of the 20th century in Singapore and in Malaya. And it's written in English, but the kind of the opening romance that kind of sets the plot in motion is between a Chinese speaking young girl and a young man from Singapore who is mocked for speaking pretty much only the Queen's English and she teases him for not speaking Chinese. So I mean a general version of the question is something like, even if you're writing a novel in one language, how do you or how did you incorporate this, these kind of undercurrents of Chinese? But, you know, a more political version of the question connected to what Yan was just talking about is, you know, especially like how do you incorporate other languages when you yourself are writing in, you know, you're writing in English, which has this history of dominance and hegemony in Singapore and globally too.

JT

Yeah, I think as someone who was born and grew up in Singapore, but who has also spent most of my adult life outside of Singapore, I feel doubly in between, I suppose, in that when you're in Singapore, English is the dominant language just because we were a British colony and because we have four official languages, but English is the common one, so that's the working language that gets used a lot. So, as a writer, it happens to be my own dominant language. But it's also the language that makes most sense as a medium of communication. But at the same time, when you live in Singapore, English might be the working language, but it's never exclusively English, like the other languages seep into it. And so I feel they seeped into my writing into a very organic way, like where it made sense to use the word for a different language, I would just use that. Like if you have, say, a yu char kway for breakfast, I would call it a yu char kway and not a fried dough cruller or whatever because no one calls it that.

So, I don't think that is necessarily a need to make yourself legible to the outside gaze. And it's not like everything has to be cut up into bite sized pieces and made consumable. I think we can accept as readers that sometimes, even though many things are catered to the English speaking world, sometimes it's good to be brought outside of that and to experience the momentary discomfort of not

understanding and making that journey because ultimately that broadens and enriches the experience to be taken outside of yourself, which is, after all, ostensibly why we read, is it not?

EH

That is a beautiful place to end. It is why we read and why we teach and why we write as well. So, as always, we close episodes of Novel Dialogue with the signature question. So this is shared across all the conversations that we're having this season about translation. And it's a question for you both because you both work across two languages. So, I think why don't we start with Jeremy, so here it is: is there a word or a concept that you consider untranslatable or very, very difficult to translate?

JT

I mean, I have said this before, so I'm now repeating myself. But I'm going to go ahead and do that: all words are untranslatable. Like no words mean the same thing even to the same individuals speaking the same language, let alone two individuals speaking completely different languages. What I imagine when I say the word market or farm is going to conjure up completely different images and associations to someone living in a different country where markets and farms are completely different, and I think the same is true for actions and nouns and emotions and everything. So translation is the process of trying to find the closest equivalent between these very different states of being. Words themselves are just our ways of trying to pin down these impossible to articulate swarms of meaning in our heads. So yeah, the fact that we can communicate at all, let alone across different languages, is a kind of miracle.

YG

But then in the sense, in that sense of untranslatability of like any language, I think, it's maybe why I write fiction because to me, fiction is the picture. I'm not answering the question now. It's because language is inadequate, according to Wittgenstein and Confucius, and to express the meaning, we need to set up the picture and Confucius says we need to set up--I don't, why do I call Confucius all the time, I'm sorry--we need to set up the image because only by rendering meanings, the language into the image could we comprehend the real meaning and I think that is why I write fiction. Because to me, fiction doesn't need to, you know, make a statement because it's not an essay. It does not necessarily need to say anything, but it's kind of a self-contained organic, hopefully, image. And that is what I want to say, I think. In that sense, I'm totally agreeing with Jeremy.

JT

Well, I don't know if this is audible, but my cat is yowling outside the home office, and in a way that is the pure untranslatability, right? She's just expressing pure need or pure emotion, and you couldn't put that into words. But I kind of think all communication is like that. She just is more direct about it.

EH

I love that.

So I'd like to bring this to a close by thanking you both for this sharp and really refreshing conversation. I think it's a real model for sort of the warmth and friendship that can come when you have a writing life. So thank you, Jeremy, and thank you, Yan.

And as always, we are grateful to the Society for Novel studies for its sponsorship, to Public Books for its partnership and we'd also like to acknowledge the support of Duke University. Hannah Jorgensen is our graduate intern and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer.

Novelists from past seasons include Chang-rae Lee, Teju Cole, Sigrid Nunez, Tom Perotta, and Ruth Ozeki. And we have many more conversations about language, translation and novels coming your way this season. So from all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening and if you liked what you heard, please rate and review us wherever you get your podcasts.