

Let's Talk: Poetry and Art as Rapid Response
Transcription by Jaide Lin

0:00 - 0:14 [Opening background music]

0:15 - 0:25 [Akemi]

Welcome to another episode of Let's Talk, a podcast where we feature individuals and organizations in and around Oakland Chinatown who are working hard to bring our AAPI and Black communities together.

0:26 - 0:33 [Akemi]

By highlighting their stories, we hope to encourage inclusive, intergenerational, and anti-racist perspectives in all spaces.

0:34 - 0:39 [Akemi]

I'm Akemi Chan-Imai, the Program Manager at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, and this is Let's Talk!

0:40 - 1:01 [Akemi]

Today, we are going to hear from Michael Warr and Chun Yu, two poets who teamed up to create Two Languages One Community, which began as a workshop that uses writing and translation to exchange culture and life experiences between African Americans and Chinese speakers. You can learn more about their project at <http://twolanguagesonecommunity.com/>.

1:02 - 1:08 [Akemi]

Joining as our facilitator is Hoi Leung, a curator at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

1:09 - 1:28 [Hoi]

I'm really excited to talk to you, Michael Warr and Chun Yu, because I think we've known each other around 2018 or 2019. And that was such a bookend to our collaborative relationship and also to a lot of things that have happened in the past several years.

1:29 - 1:42 [Hoi]

So it's really a good opportunity for me and for us to catch up with one another and actually reflect on some of the work that has taken place, that we have done together, in this moment in time.

1:43 - 1:49 [Chun]

I'm so glad we can still connect across the ocean here and continue our work together.

1:50 - 2:01 [Hoi]

I cannot emphasize enough that the work artists are doing today are so vital and so important. So I think especially because of that, I'm just really excited to be in conversation with you.

2:02 - 2:15 [Hoi]

I love that we are hosted by the virtual space of Oakland Asian Cultural Center (OACC), and I know this organization has played a very special role in the Two Languages One Community project.

2:16 - 2:24 [Hoi]

I would like to start off by asking what was it like, and how did everything get started? What was the process behind Catching Memory?

2:25 - 2:57 [Chun]

Michael and I met in a poetry reading series by the Friends of San Francisco Public Library, which was hosted by the Poet Laureate Jack Hirschman. And we were both poets invited to the

series. I saw Michael's reading first and then we chatted. He expressed his longtime desire for his poetry to be translated into Chinese, and I write poetry both in English and Chinese!

2:58 - 3:17 [Chun]

So we started first with a personal collaboration between two poets. And through the process we found out how much there is, just by exchanging poetry and translating, that we can learn from each other.

3:18 - 3:31 [Chun]

I translated some of Michael's poems into Chinese and I showed him my English drafts of my poems, and for every sentence we look at and translate there's so much behind it.

3:32 - 4:03 [Chun]

And we both love our communities and we love community work, so we say to each other: Why don't we bring our communities together? So we decided to do a workshop series together, and we reached out to the senior communities around. And eventually, we end up having a workshop for many (actually) community leaders and writers from both sides. And that's how we started with OACC.

4:04 - 4:29 [Michael]

Chun gave a very succinct account of what we went through. But we went through all kinds of different, you know, renditions and variations. And at first we started wanting to work with kids, but then we wanted to specifically work with elders. But we wound up working initially with a community in between the two. And it's been wonderful.

4:30 - 5:00 [Michael]

And so we've put together a project, "Catching Memory." It's a bilingual publication that we've been working on, both prose and poetry, and we're also working on an anthology now that focuses on poetry. And it's African American writers and Asian writers, there's six of [those poems], and those poems will also be bilingual.

5:01 - 5:12 [Michael]

So those are two major publications because the project is to bring the community together through translation, writing (specifically poetry now), and publication.

5:13 - 5:50 [Hoi]

And I do want to ask you a question about translation and the process of really empathizing with each other through the language. So maybe this is more of a question for Chun. It's more like when you first see through Michael's eyes and through his words, whether that is a deeply personal or emotional process or do you feel more like, maybe there's more analytical or scholarly [processes]. What kind of framework do you use when you try to translate Michael's poetry?

5:51 - 6:22 [Chun]

First I want to talk a little bit about how I grew up in China. When I was growing up in China – I grew up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution – and the country was quite isolated from the world, I never saw a foreigner before until I went to college, actually. But Black history was taught in schools of China.

6:23 - 6:49 [Chun]

So as a young child, I knew about Black history in America and what people went through. So I was deeply, deeply compassionate towards the Black people here. And this is the process of also re-learning for me. And also connecting with that part, with that past.

6:50 - 7:15 [Chun]

For example, the first poem I translated of Michael's is called "Black Star." It's about his mother. There, he referred to the word "Shinola," which I did not grow up with. And we had this long conversation. I had to do research on the Internet to find out what that word means to Chinese people now.

7:16 - 7:27 [Chun]

– Because it has to be understood by the readers now. And so– Michael, do you want to read the English version, then I read the Chinese version?

7:28 - 7:52 [Michael]

Okay, so this is "Black Star:"

(Gaynell Warr, 1932 - 2015)

She was called

"Shinola,"

outside her name,

as slight against her

Blackness

by souls lost

inescapably in her dark

Attraction

and blinded by her

Radiance

in the sky.

7:53 - 8:13 [Chun]

黑明星

作為對她的黑的

蔑視，她被

那些失落在她

無法逃脫的

黑色的吸引力中

和被她在天空中

耀眼的光芒

照瞎了眼睛的

靈魂們

外號為

Shinola 鞋油。

8:14 - 8:35 [Chun]

The word “Shinola,” I find out – you know– from the Chinese Internet, is a fashion company now. It didn’t refer to the shoe polish that Michael is referring to. So I had to add the word “shoe polish” after “Shinola” to point out that’s why he’s using it there.

8:36 - 8:39 [Chun]

Yeah, so that’s just one example. And that took – back and forth – quite a while.

8:40 - 8:54 [Michael]

And not only was it a clothing company, but it was a luxury [company] for watches. And until we had that discussion, I had no idea. So I researched that as well when I learned that from Chun and found that it’s the same company.

8:55 - 9:01 [Michael]

The company that produced the shoe polish is the same company that now produces the luxury watches.

9:02 - 9:23 [Chun]

Right! So that tells just with a little short poem like that, what we had gone through and [found] out about the history and current situation [of things]. And now I want to proceed to read a poem I wrote for my mother, which is called “Beauty Lu.”

9:24 - 10:23 [Chun]

This is actually referring to how I see her – how I saw her– when I was a child.

“Beauty Lu”

People called Mama Beauty Lu
Her family name is “Lu”
Her face a smooth oval shape
Her skin a light olive color
Under her eyebrows like willow leaves
Her eyes were bright and clear
As the blue sky above –
Where I never saw a trace of fear or doubt
Where my childhood
Glimmered with a golden lining
In the raging storms of
A tragic revolution, which
She withstood, with
Her beauty and courage–
My haven on earth.

10:24 - 11:01 [Chun]

路美人

人們稱媽媽爲路美人

她姓路

她有著橢圓形的面龐

淺橄欖色的皮膚

在她柳葉般的眉下

她的眼睛如天空般清澈 –

在那裏

我從未見過一絲恐懼與疑慮

在那裏

我的童年發出金色的光芒 –

她以美與勇氣

抵擋著一場悲劇革命的風暴

賦予我們人間樂土。

11:02 - 11:28 [Hoi]

I think what is really special and amazing is that it's not only about the meaning. I think the meaning is only the first step to the translation process, right? It's really about understanding the intents of your fellow writer, and that's how it becomes – and artistic practice becomes very collaborative, just by way of translation.

11:29 - 11:39 [Hoi]

And I want to ask Michael, I mean, what was your reaction when you heard Chun actually recite a translated poem of yours for the first time?

11:40 - 12:15 [Michael]

I was really taken by the rhythm of the language. And there's just two things that have been key to this process that we haven't spoken of yet. One is I'm also an editor, and so I come at it with that perspective. And so when Chun was sharing her poems with me, I was also working with her as an external eye, so to speak, and working with her in terms of my editing opinion. And also we work with images.

12:16 - 12:59 [Chun]

Yeah, image is a very key element to our project. Like my mom, she's a really beautiful woman. People admire her beauty from all sides of the world. And so we also brought that element into our project. When we had the workshop, we asked all of the participants to bring a family photo with them, with their contributed articles, essays, or poems.

13:00 - 13:29 [Chun]

And so that's how we showcase our work. I think both images and languages are very powerful tools for us to connect. And also we talk about the translation work, you know, from English to Chinese. And I write sometimes in English first, sometimes in Chinese first, and I translate the original poems into the other language.

13:30 - 13:46 [Chun]

So, when I write in English or translate my poems in English, Michael is a very important person for me to go to. I make my own choice and then I run it by Michael just to see what he thinks. And we often make the same choice!

13:47 - 14:01 [Chun]

And I have one or two friends that I do this with, so I feel really blessed to have these great poets or editors to work with. It has been really great.

14:02 - 14:29 [Hoi]

I think because I don't have too much access to the behind-the-scenes process, you know, we hear stories about it – it appears to me that there's such a rigor around the way you collaborate with one another, and that you both support each other very fully and that you challenge each other as well. And I think collaborations, even between any artists in general, are extremely hard to come by.

14:30 - 15:07 [Hoi]

I'll kind of segue a little bit into art as rapid response. It's an area that I want to maybe discuss with you both about, because – I was working at the Chinese Cultural Center – you know, we're an arts center and same for OACC as well – and I think there are moments where, for example with the murder of George Floyd and also with the Atlanta shooting, were two very pivotal moments of trauma and sadness and anger for our communities together as well.

15:08 - 15:43 [Hoi]

And at those moments we look for – in addition to COVID impacting the whole world! – In those moments we would look for ways to keep making work, to put our voices out there, and to look for a way to connect with one another. So I want to talk to you two about the process of putting together the Artists Against Anti-Asian Hate; and that was an event that happened on April 10th.

15:44 - 16:01 [Hoi]

And the Atlanta shooting was March 16th, and actually we're coming close to a one year anniversary in remembrance of that day. So would you like to share a little about how that all came about?

16:02 - 16:29 [Michael]

Well, it was a great collaboration! And the thing is, it actually led to an expansion of our vision for Two Languages One Community. And before we even had the conversation with you folks at the center, Chun had raised to me, you know, the idea of responding. And we started talking about how we were going to respond.

16:30 - 16:56 [Michael]

And we came up with this idea of doing these Two Languages One Community projects where we pulled in collaborators. So you know, Hoi, that in addition to your organization being so critical to that event, we pulled in the Museum of the African Diaspora for instance, and we pulled in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and Yerba Buena Cultural Center.

16:57 - 17:31 [Michael]

And there were a few other organizations [you guys have to help me remember them]. And we had a cross-cultural collection of artists as well. And so that to me was really significant, because – as you [Hoi] kind of referred to – we were responding rapidly to the environment that we were in. Where there was this violence against the Asian community, and that we were using our art as a way of pulling the community together. And a key word for that whole period of organizing an event was “solidarity.”

17:32 - 18:04 [Chun]

Right, and I actually came back to San Francisco on (I think it was) January the 30th, I arrived from China – that's the very beginning of the pandemic – and I came back because we had an event scheduled with [the] Chinese Cultural Center on February 15th for the Chinese New Year for our Two Languages One Community Project.

18:05 - 18:27 [Chun]

And that actually brought me back and kept me in San Francisco for two years before I came back again to see my parents. And it's quite a symbolic journey. And we began the Chinese New Year with this, basically a solidarity event, without knowing what was coming our way.

18:28 - 19:22 [Chun]

And when the shooting happened, I told Michael, I said "Michael, we need to respond to this." This – you know – otherwise, I basically couldn't sleep if we [didn't] do anything for this. And to express our solidarity with all communities against such violence. And so we reached out to the Chinese Cultural Center – and thanks to the Chinese Cultural Center for responding so fast! – and then reaching out to so many organizations with this, Michael listed out a few organizations (I think Asian Art Museum [too]). I mean, these are the organizations we have been working with–

19:23 - 20:09 [Chun]

– often with multiple events! During the two years of Black Lives Matter movements and also solidarity against anti-Asian violence. And also, all of the writers and the musicians we reached out to immediately agreed to work with us. We had Maxine Hong Kingston, and Al Young's son Michael Young actually represented him; we had Afaa Weaver, and Genny Lim – two amazing poets from the East Coast and also our own Bay Area. And –

20:10 - 20:11 [Michael]

Tammy Lynne Hall.

20:12 - 20:20 [Chun]

Yeah, and she was amazing! And it was a perfect event. And during a most difficult time.

20:21 - 20:38 [Hoi]

And I remember that day very vividly, too. It was around two and a half hours– nearly three hours – and I think we had nearly [I think] two hundred people in the room. And they stayed the whole time.

20:39 - 20:46 [Hoi, Chun]

And it was tough, but it was very heartfelt, and very necessary.

20:47 - 20:48 [Michael]

Yeah, we need more of that.

20:49 - 20:51 [Hoi, Chun]

Yes! We do.

20:52 - 21:19 [Hoi]

Yeah, we definitely need more of that. And I think even though it was – I mean, the digital divide and everything with COVID – I mean, on top of all of that was COVID, really. And to [kind of] still maintain spaces for this kind of connection is something that [I think] a lot of us are having challenges with, even to this day.

21:20 - 21:36 [Hoi]

Another kind of key moment was, there was a few key works that were translated during this moment, between 2020 and 2021. And so would you like to share a little bit about that and maybe recite some of your [poems]?

21:37 - 22:03 [Michael]

Sure. Again, thanks to an invitation from the Chinese Cultural Center – I know I wrote this poem "To Your Assailant – Who Attacks Us All" and it was a response to the violence. Not just locally but around the world, to the Asian community, against the Asian community.

22:04 - 22:22 [Michael]

And sometimes you have something percolating in your mind, but sometimes it needs a spark. Or some impetus to bring it out of your brain, out of your soul, onto a computer screen or a piece of paper.. And start turning it into a poem.

22:23 - 23:05 [Michael]

And so that request for the project that the Chinese Cultural Center had started was what got me to write this poem. And you also requested that there be a video reciting the poem. And for me, this was very relevant! It came at the beginning of the pandemic, and one of the things the pandemic did for me – as a writer – is I just told myself: Between the attacks against the Asian community and what's going on with the killings against, you know, unjust killings of Black people in the street, that I needed to start responding quicker. I needed to start writing things that I might've normally held onto for ages!

23:06 - 23:16 [Michael]

So this poem here, this is the fastest I've ever put together a poem and shared it with the public, plus shot a video on it! So this is "To Your Assailant – Who Attacks Us All:"

23:17 - 24:41 [Michael]

"To Your Assailant – Who Attacks Us All"

by Michael Warr (Chinese translation by Chun Yu)

(Written in response to violent attacks against Asians during the COVID-19 crisis.)

Do you call yourself God-fearing?

Devoted to "do on to others"?

Does your God condone your violence?

Your ignorance?

Your corruption?

Does your God hate your neighbor?

Like you do?

Does your God share your love?

For Prophets bearing "false witness"?

Fueling your grievance fever.

Do you swallow the lies they regurgitate?

Do you really need a reason?

Are you truly a True Believer

of both God and Golden Calf?

Does the All-Knowing know you?

Do They love you as you are?

Does it matter that They are watching?

Your naked depravity.

Do you pray before you prey?

On innocents in this guilty world?

Do you have your God's blessing?

Or are you as Godless as you seem?

Did your father teach you

to beat, demean, and maim?

Is he proud of your cowardice?
Does your mother say “well-done son”?
Did they train you in backwardness?
To feel bigger in your smallness?
Content with acts of uselessness?
Is your inner bully seething still
beneath your concealed surface?
Are you comforted in your criminality?
Stupefied by “superiority”?
Simply insane? Or lost?
Who are you?

24:42 - 26:39 [Chun]

So here's the Chinese version of it:

致攻擊你們的人

— 他們在攻擊我們所有人（正在進行中的咆哮）

（對新冠疫情中亞裔遭受的暴力攻擊的回應）

你自稱敬畏上帝嗎？

你致力於「己所不欲，勿施於人」嗎？

你的「上帝」寬恕了你的暴力？

你的無知？

你的墮落嗎？

你的上帝像你這樣仇恨你的鄰居嗎？

你的上帝會認同

你的帶著「假見證」

不斷給你的怨憤火上澆油的

所謂「先知」的愛嗎？

你吞下他們反復口吐的謊言嗎？

你真的需要理由嗎？

你是你的神和神像真正的信徒嗎？

你那全知的神認識你嗎？

他們會愛這樣的你嗎？

你在乎他們看著你赤裸的墮落嗎？

在襲獵這個有罪的世界上的無辜者時你祈禱嗎？

你有上帝的祝福嗎？

還是像你看起來那樣沒有上帝？

你的父親教你去攻擊，貶低，和殘害他人嗎？

他會為你的怯懦感到驕傲嗎？

你的母親會說「幹得好兒子」嗎？

他們訓練你倒退落後了嗎？

你卑鄙渺小時感到更強大嗎？

你滿足於自己無益的行為嗎？

隱藏在你的表面下的惡霸還在沸騰嗎？

你在被「優越性」麻木了的犯罪中受到了安慰嗎？

是瘋了？還是迷路了？

你是誰？

26:40 - 27:16 [Hoi]

Yeah, and the recording of this poem in both languages – I remember – was also played during one of our rallies in Portsmouth Square in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. And that was right in the middle of COVID, so we had an invitation for artists to submit audio works as well. So this was playing against the backdrop of people really painting large murals in what was a very contemplative and – I think– healing day. And a day for also understanding, as well, in San Francisco's Chinatown.

27:17 - 27:36 [Hoi]

And I love this conversation because it really tied to[gether] – from the meticulousness of the time it takes to translate a work to how you really had to add, very rapidly, just based on being responsive to the times.

27:37 - 27:38 [Chun]

Thank you!

27:39 - 28:05 [Hoi]

Thank you so much, and also this year's the 140th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act. So I think we're really seeing the robust creative energy that were so necessary really sort of rippling through our current culture right now. And thank you so much, to Chun and Michael, for being such a key part of it and continuing to share your work with us.

28:06 - 28:51 [Chun]

I think we feel very hopeful for the future, and just given how well our work has been received by the general public and so many cultural organizations. And even in the literary world, the journals – many journals we've worked with are opening to accept bilingual poetry publication. The magazines – including Orion, and Poetry Northwest, especially – would feature, actually, our work of the Two Languages One Community, including the poets we're working with this summer in a special issue–

28:52 - 29:16 [Chun]

– A bilingual special issue. So even sometimes a magazine accepts [or] a journal accepts my poem, because they know I'm a bilingual poet, they will ask "By the way, do you have any Chinese versions of the poem?" So we really look forward to the future.

29:17 - 30:01 [Hoi]

Really, I think language access and having more bilingual – or multilingual – content in the arts is something that is so important. And we talk about Two Languages One Community as an opportunity to connect Chinese Americans, also African American communities, that is one bit of social justice work that you are doing. But another piece of it is actually, you know, opening minds in the literary world as well, and increasing the acceptance for bilingual works. So with that, I think we – And I'll close our conversation here because I think that is really an opened-ended sentence. And I think we're all very hopeful.

30:02 - 30:22 [Outro: Akemi]

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30:23 - 30:38 [Outro music]