Poetry, Aesthetic Truths, and Transformative Experience

There are well-known arguments for having the experience to represent possible phenomenal states—such as having the experience of seeing color. One classic argument proposed by F. Jackson is called the knowledge argument (1982). This argument is based on a thought experiment about a super scientist named Mary. She grew up in a black and white room and knew all the physical facts, stories, and testimonies about color, color vision, and brain. There were no physical facts that she did not know. When she decided to leave her room, she experienced something red for the very first time. She learned something new: what it is like for her to see red. Alternatively, we could say that she learned a new perceptual truth through her experience of having the brain states that realize experiential redness in her. This thought experiment seems to suggest that learning all physical facts about color, color vision, and the brain is not sufficient for Mary to know what it is like for her to see red. Jackson argues that Mary did not know what it is like for her to see red until she left her room because her experience of seeing red is crucial for her to understand what it is like to see red.

In Transformative Experience (2014) and papers (2015a, 2015b, 2015c), L.A. Paul shows that the argument for having an experience in representing those phenomenal states can be extended to cases in which we are trying to represent the outcomes of life-changing decision—for example, deciding to have a child. She (2015c, pp. 513-514) first argues that unlike the experience in the super scientist Mary case from the philosophy of mind, the experience involved in a life-changing decision, changing us profoundly and fundamentally, does not involve a mere qualitative or subjective feel. Moreover, unlike the super scientist Mary (2014, pp. 9-10), we are simply ordinary people and must rely on the current best science and our limited experiences when we make a decision. Paul (2015c, pp. 514-515) then argues that in most ordinary cases, the experience is necessary for our ability to represent and imagine the nature and character of the outcomes of such a decision. Specifically, a life-changing experience can be transformative.

There are two ways in which an experience can be transformative. An experience is epistemically transformative if it teaches you something you could not have learned without having that kind of experience (2014, p.10). For example, when ordinary Mary, who lives in a black and white room and knows color experience only through contemporary science and her friends’ descriptions on the outside, sees color for the first time, she has an epistemically transformative experience. An experience is personally transformative if it changes your subjective value for what it is like to be you and changes your core preferences about what matters (2014, p.17). For example, when an ordinary person experiences a horrific physical attack, her sense of herself and core preferences will be substantially revised. Her experience is a personally transformative experience. Other experiences, such as a person having her first child (2014, pp. 71-94) a congenitally deaf person receiving a cochlear implant and a congenitally blind person (2014, pp. 56-70) having retina surgery are both epistemically and personally transformative experiences.

There have been many interesting and thorough discussions about the decision-theoretical implications of transformative experience. In these deliberations, the cases of transformative experiences involve important and life-changing decisions—for example, deciding to have a child, to change one’s gender, to receive a cochlear implant or to have retina surgery. As Paul mentions

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1 Paul (2017, draft) suggests that Mary learns a new truth rather than a fact. The truth-fact distinction is made to avoid a controversial claim about the existence of non-physical fact. In the literature on black-and-white Mary thought experiment, some people (e.g. the early Jackson) claim that Mary learned some new fact (or a kind of non-physical information). This fact wasn’t included in the physical facts that Mary learned in her black-and-white room. In this paper, such a distinction is adopted. Moreover, truth here is not in the strong propositional sense, which refers to a set of propositions. Rather, truth is close to a cognitive sense, which emphasizes the act of conveying notions and ideas perceptually (e.g. visually and aurally) rather than just a set of notions and ideas itself.
(2015a, p. 475), many real-life experiences, which could be transformative and influence a person deeply and fundamentally, do not depend on or involve a significant decision. For instance, a transition from childhood to adulthood, especially physiological change, does not depend on choosing to undergo the experience. Moreover, in many real-life experiences, the transformation is extended in time and happens slowly through small and gradual changes. There is not a unique deciding point where the transformation takes place. All the changes happen gradually and collectively lead to a dramatic transformation.

Among real-life experiences, there is a distinct kind of experience that has not yet been investigated and discussed—learning a new language. For the experience of learning a new language, one type of experience seems especially interesting: the experience of the individuals who grow up with one language and then learn another language by moving to a country that speaks the language. And the experience of growing up with a European language and learning to speak an Asian language seems can be particularly intriguing. When native English speakers learn Chinese, for example, what language-specific and cultural-specific truths do they perceive and how does the experience of learning the language and the culture can transform their perspectives and core values?

My research aims to address these two questions through a detailed, philosophical analysis of a case. The case I focus on is native English speakers learning to understand and appreciate classical Chinese poetry through their first-personal experiences in learning the Chinese language and culture. Why this case? First of all, Chinese is radically different from English, linguistically and experientially. The Chinese language has its distinct tonal pattern, writing system, grammatical structure, and semantic content. The experience of speaking the non-native language Chinese is different from the experience of speaking your own native language English.

Second, classical Chinese poetry has some distinct aesthetic qualities that originated from the Chinese language and its cultural context. These qualities are rarely seen in English. For instance, the musicality of a poem is based on the distinct tonal patterns of the Chinese characters and the tonal rules of the particular kind of poetry. The grammatical brevity and the multiple semantic correlations between Chinese characters generate a distinct balance of conciseness and richness.

Third, unlike taking poetry as a highbrow art in the western culture and engaging with it in a relatively small circle, Chinese poetry culture is extremely vibrant. Classical Chinese poetry is widely practiced in different ages, social, and gender groups. From toddlers to adults, from authorities to ordinary folks, from men to women, people learn to read and recite classical Chinese poetry for thousands of years. Also, the themes of classical Chinese poetry are particularly broad, including but not limited to nature, society, history, humanity, and emotions. People use poetry to express their thoughts and emotions from the most common scenarios in their daily lives to the most formal settings.

Through my case study, I argue that the experience of learning Chinese can be epistemically and personally transformative. To argue for my thesis, firstly, I start by discussing a classical Chinese poem Spring Scene by Du Fu (699-759AD) and giving the poem a linguistic and aesthetic analysis. As one of the most influential poets of Tang Dynasty, Du Fu has the extraordinary skills in creating all verse forms of his time. He also records the turbulent times of the decline of the Tang dynasty through his poems with superb linguistic complexity and aesthetic quality. Spring Scene was one of his representative works and written in A.D. 757 after the capital Chang’an fell into the hands of the rebellion army during the An Lushan Rebellion (A.D. 755-A.D. 763). The following is a word-for-word translation of the poem.

<p>| country | broken | mountain | river | remain | 国破山河在 (guó pò shān hé zài) |
| city | spring | grass | wood | thick | 城春草木深 (chéng chūn cǎo mù shēn) |
| feel | time | over | shed | tear | 感时花溅泪 (gǎn shí huā jiàn lèi) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hate</th>
<th>separation</th>
<th>bird</th>
<th>startle</th>
<th>heart</th>
<th>恨别鸟惊心 (hèn bié niǎo jīng xīn)</th>
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<tr>
<td>beacon</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>span</td>
<td>three</td>
<td>month</td>
<td>烽火连三月 (fēng huǒ lián sān yuè)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home</td>
<td>letter</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>ten thousand</td>
<td>gold tael</td>
<td>家书抵万金 (jiā shū dǐ wàn jīn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>scratch</td>
<td>even</td>
<td>shorter</td>
<td>白头搔更短 (bái tóu sāo gèng duǎn)</td>
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<tr>
<td>simply</td>
<td>be about to</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>able (to hold)</td>
<td>hairpin</td>
<td>浑欲不胜簪 (hún yù bù shèng zān)</td>
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To unpack the linguistic complexity of the poem, I analyze its tonal pattern, syntactic structure, semantic contents, and the intellectual tradition the poem belongs to. On the basis of the linguistic analysis, I then explore the aesthetic quality of the poem by focusing on its four distinct aesthetic properties: (1) the musicality based on the tonal pattern; (2) the balance between the syntactic conciseness and the semantic richness; (3) the multiple levels of symmetry, including the syntactic, semantic, and tonal symmetry; and (4) the emotions expressed through the poet's description of the deplorable situation of his country.

After giving a linguistic and aesthetic analysis, second, I show that some important aesthetic properties retain in the Chinese language and cultural context and that they are difficult to replicate in English translations. These aesthetic properties include but are not limited to the four properties mentioned above. I argue that they are difficult to be replicated in English translations because of two main reasons. First, those aesthetic properties are unique to classical Chinese language and culture. Second, they need to be perceived through both one's understanding and appreciation of the poem in the original language and cultural context. The following is an English translation of the poem and a commentator's response.

In fallen states, hills and streams are still there.
The city is in Spring, grass and leaves abound.
There are tears on the flowers, who feel the times
Birds startle my heart, they too hate partings
The beacon fires have been linked for three months
A letter from home is worth a thousand pounds
My grey hairs are scratched even shorter
Soon it will not be enough to hold my cap.

Quan Tang shi (Complete Shi Poetry of the Tang), 7: 224.2404

A commentator responds as follows.

"Reading this translation, an English reader may not find the kind of poetic greatness that he or she has encountered in, say, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or Keats. There is no profound philosophical or religious contemplation, no astonishing insights of imagination, no dazzling display of poetic diction...Du Fu's Spring Scene deserves no less acclaim. The poetic greatness of Du Fu is of an entirely different kind. To appreciate it fully, we must go beyond the English translation and find out how the poem was composed and read in the original. (Cai, 2009, p. 162)"

After showing the difficulty in replicating some aesthetic properties in English translation, third, I propose that the relevant aesthetic truths about those properties need to be fully understood and appreciated through one's subjective, first-personal experience of learning the Chinese language and culture, as opposed to appealing to English translations alone. The aesthetic truths I talk about here do not assume the existence of a platonic aesthetic reality. The conception of aesthetic truths has both the normative and the subjective component. More precisely, the normative component is specific to the classical Chinese language and culture. That means the sort of normativity in the
poetry case is based on the specific language and culture tradition. It does not assume any strong platonistic sense of being correct. The audiences of the poem just have to understand and appreciate it in a language-specific and culture-specific way so that they could fully understand and appreciate the distinct aesthetic truths. Moreover, the subjective component of the aesthetic truths is also specific to the classical Chinese language and culture. Due to the distinct language and culture exemplified in the poem, plus the salient differences between the poem in the original form and its English translations, the audiences need to understand and appreciate the poem through their first-personal experience of learning the language and culture. In this way, they could fully grasp the aesthetic truths.

Fourthly, I argue that just as Mary’s color experience (F. Jackson, 1982) can be epistemically transformative (L.A. Paul 2014), so too an English speaker’s experience of learning Chinese can be epistemically transformative. Recall Jackson’s case. Mary knows all the physical facts about color, color vision, and the brain, but she has never left her black-and-white room and seen red. When she decides to leave her room, she learns something new: what it is like for her to see red. The new experience of seeing red suggests that learning all the physical facts about color, color vision, and the brain are not sufficient for Mary to learn what it is like to see red. When Mary leaves her room, she does not learn some new physical facts. What she learns is a new way to understand the physical facts. She learns the facts by having them presented to her in a new way under the subjective mode of presentation. Mary’s perceptual learning comes from her new experience. We can say that she learns a new perceptual truth through her experience of having the brain states that realize experiential redness. Similarly, in the ordinary Mary case, she learns physical facts in a new way too. The perceptual truth that the ordinary Mary learns comes from her experience.

Now consider the poetry case. Suppose an English speaker knew the theoretical facts about classical Chinese poetry, including the rules about the tonal pattern, syntactic structure, semantic content; the intellectual traditions different poems belong to, and the kind of emotion expressed through a poem. Suppose she also knew that there were differences between the poem in the original language and the English translations. She learned all these facts through a thorough handbook of classical Chinese poetry in English, but she hasn’t learned the Chinese language or the culture yet. Due to the language and culture barrier, she would not fully understand and appreciate classical Chinese poetry only through the English translations and theoretical analysis. She would need to learn Chinese so that she could fully understand and appreciate the poetry. The language barrier in the poetry case is like the black-and-white room in Mary’s case. Mary needs to leave her room and see red through a new experience. Likewise, the English speaker needs to break the language and culture barrier through her experience of learning the language and culture.

A further question is what exactly does the English speaker learn when she learns the Chinese language and culture? Does she learn new theoretical facts? Suppose that she is brilliant and learns all the theoretical facts about classical Chinese poetry through the handbook. She also knows that the translations of classical Chinese poetry are not perfect and that some aesthetic properties are simply lost or transformed into something else in the translations. When she learns the language and culture, I tend to say that she does not learn any new facts. What she learns is a new way to understand the theoretical facts. Specifically, in the poetry case, she would learn those facts by having them presented to her under the subjective mode of presentation. For instance, she learns classical Chinese poetry by understanding the tonal patterns, the syntactic structure, and the semantic content in Chinese. She learns poetry by appreciating the aesthetic properties of a poem—such as the musicality, the balance of conciseness and richness, and the multilevel of symmetry, in Chinese and the relevant cultural context. Just like Mary, whose perceptual learning

\footnote{See Paul (2017, Draft)}
comes from her new experience, the English speaker’s aesthetic learning also comes from her new experience. Mary learns a new perceptual truth through her experience of having the brain states that realize experiential redness in her. The English speaker learns new aesthetic truths through her experience of understanding, appreciating classical Chinese poetry in the original language and cultural context.

With considerations about the aesthetic properties and the analogy between the poetry case and the Mary case, I now propose that just as Mary’s color experience is epistemically transformative an English speaker’s experience of learning the Chinese language and culture is epistemically transformative. Recall the discussion on transformative experience. Just as Mary undergoes an epistemic transformation when she sees red, the English speaker undergoes an epistemic transformation when she learns Chinese. The English speaker learns what it is like for her to appreciate the aesthetic properties, including the tonal pattern, the syntactic structure, the semantic contents, and the emotions encapsulated in the classical Chinese poem. She learns the aesthetic truths through her experience of learning the Chinese language and culture. Without having that experience, she might not fully learn those truths.

Besides the epistemic transformation from not knowing to knowing what it will be like to appreciate the aesthetic properties in classical Chinese poetry in a general sense, the epistemic transformation also arises from not knowing what it will be like to appreciate the aesthetic properties in the particular classical Chinese. As a language, classical Chinese changed throughout history. Classical Chinese poetry also changes from dynasty to dynasty. They have different genres, meaning that different poems have different rhythm and rhyme patterns and that the same characters have different meanings. The experience of appreciating the particular rhythm and rhyme in the particular classical Chinese, plus the experience of appreciating the rich meanings of the classical characters and their concision in form, generates a special, epistemic relationship between the learner and the language. What it is like to stand in this relationship is something a learner could not have known before having the experience of appreciating the aesthetic properties in classical Chinese. She could not have fully learned what it would be like to have the lived experience of appreciating the distinct aesthetic properties. She could not fully learn the relevant aesthetic truths without mastering the language and culture to understand poetry in classical Chinese. The epistemic transformation in the poetry case is analogous to that in the Mary case. Before having the experience of seeing red, Mary could not know what it is like to stand in the relationship with that particular color. By having the experience of seeing the particular color or having the particular experience, Mary underwent an epistemic transformation and learned what it would be like to have the lived experience of seeing red.

Last, I argue that the experience of learning Chinese can teach one to express thoughts and emotions in a language-specific, culture-specific way and thus the experience of learning the language can be personally transformative. The experience of perceiving the relevant aesthetic truths is temporally extended. Such experience evokes emotions and leads one to appreciate culture and changes in life. As the English speaker learns more aesthetic truths about classical Chinese poetry, she could experience more epistemic transformations, and those transformations can scale up to a level of personal transformation. For instance, as she learns more about the language and culture, she can learn more aesthetic truths through reading, appreciating, and writing different genres of classical Chinese poetry. She could develop her interests in other art forms related to classical Chinese poetry—such as lyre-playing, chess, calligraphy, and painting. Those art forms have unique aesthetic properties. As she learns more about the language and culture, she could learn more aesthetic truths and understand them more deeply through her experience of practicing and appreciating those art forms. The truths she learned could mold her temperament, cultivate her taste, and eventually shape her personality. As she learns more truths, she could undergo more
epistemic transformations. Moreover, she could also develop her interests in Chinese culture and cultivate a desire to experience the culture in a deep, personal way. The upshot is that the experience of learning Chinese could allow her to learn different aesthetic truths initially, to motivate her to experience different cultures, and to encourage her to choose to live a life that she could never imagine before. The accumulated epistemic transformations can scale up to a level of personal transformation.