In “Poetry, Aesthetic Truths, and Transformative Experience,” Min Tang sets out to show that learning a language is both epistemically and personally transformative. What it means for a language to be transformative in these regards can be expressed as follows:

Learning a language would be **epistemically transformative** if it teaches one something that could not have been learned without learning that language.

Learning a language would be **personally transformative** if it “changes your subjective value for what it is like to be your and changes your core preferences about what matters” (1).

Although not explicitly stated, I do not think Tang construes the epistemic transformativity to be settled by the tautological claim that one cannot learn a new language without learning a new language. Rather, Tang uses classical Chinese poetry as a case study in the ways in which learning a language reveals new “aesthetic truths” that could not have been learned without learning the language. She argues from this that learning these new aesthetic truths can compound until they reach the point of personal transformation. In what follows, I will articulate to the best of my ability two of Tang’s arguments for the thesis that learning a language is epistemically transformative. I will make comments and request clarification on some points along the way.

The argument for the epistemic transformativity of learning a language begins by stating that there are certain aesthetic properties belonging to Du Fu’s *Spring Scene* that are difficult to replicate in an English translation. These properties are unique to the Chinese language and culture, so one must understand the language and culture to perceive the properties. Since the apprehension of these properties is what constitutes an aesthetic truth, it follows that one cannot grasp the truths without understanding the language. That is, there is a way of apprehending the poetry that relies on properties exclusive to the Chinese language. I find this difficult to argue with, but I would like clarification on why certain aesthetic properties are unique to classical Chinese. This uniqueness is given as a reason why some properties do not translate well, but it is not clear what makes these properties unique. To secure the argument, the properties need to be explicated in such a way as to show that they cannot be
replicated in English. Once this is accomplished, it can be easily argued that one learns a new way of appreciating classical Chinese poetry by learning the language. As a matter of clarification, I would also like a more in-depth articulation of the notion of an aesthetic truth.

Tang moves on from her argument that certain properties are unique to classical Chinese to arguing that, like Mary the color-blind scientist gains something new when she experiences color, the native English speaker learns something new upon learning the language. The new aesthetic experience gained by apprehending the aesthetic properties teaches the English speaker something new. This is an argument from analogy that relies on Tang’s interpretation of Jackson’s thought experiment. She argues that Mary, knowing all the physical facts about color, does not learn any new fact when experiencing color. Rather, she gains a new way to understand those facts. They are presented under a new “subjective mode of presentation” (4). Now imagine that the English speaker knows all the theoretical facts about classical Chinese poetry, but she does not understand the language. The lack of understanding the language precludes one from experiencing the aesthetic properties that would present the theoretical facts in a way that can reveal aesthetic truths. So, by learning the language, one learns a new way to understand aesthetic facts – this new understanding is the aesthetic truth.

I would like further explication here, because I do not know what it means to have physical facts presented under a new mode of presentation. I am also unclear as to what is meant by “subjective mode of presentation.” The original thought experiment is meant to show that that Mary, the scientist, learns a new phenomenal (presumably non-physical) fact. She learns what it is like to see color, but I am curious about how physical facts can be modified in such a way as to stand in for the phenomenological facts. Similarly, what does it mean to have theoretical facts about classical poetry modified by the new experience? It seems like what is being said is that the English speaker now knows what it is like to experience the aesthetic properties she previously possessed a theoretic understanding of, but this does not discharge the worry of bringing in phenomenological facts. For, one could say that the ‘what it is
like’ to have that new experience is the new fact. One then understands the theoretical facts in terms of this new fact. Can you further explain how your account gets around positing phenomenological facts?

I also do not know whether the analogy with Jackson’s thought experiment is beneficial. It has been argued by some (namely Dennett) that Mary’s experience does not teach her anything new. Learning all the physical facts about color vision trivializes what is gained by seeing color. She would already know how she would react when she was in a specific brain state, what kind of judgements certain colors would cause her to make, and she would immediately be able to discern colors. The problem resides in allowing Mary scientific omniscience, and this trivializes what is learned by the experience. If this argument is sound, then the analogy breaks down. It would not longer be the case Mary does learn something. Your position has the advantage over Jackson’s in having a much smaller domain of facts, and I would suggest using this to show how your position is more intuitively plausible than Jackson’s. For example, there is nothing in the domain of theoretical facts entailing that one would know how he/she would react those the experiences picked out by those facts.

I wonder if you can say more about the decision-theoretic implications of learning a new language? This was an interesting aspect of L.A. Paul’s discussion of child birth, and I wonder if you have any specific thoughts on this relating to language.

To conclude, I have thoroughly enjoyed reading this paper. I hope that I have done justice to Tang’s arguments, and I look forward to hearing her responses.