

yuan liang 原谅

forgiveness is a chinese
character i do not remember
how to write. you would imagine
it would be grounded on the
heart radical, somehow, or associatively
somewhere the glyph for water
in all their dot-dashy morse remorse.
i play 'sounds-like' in this charade
and the second character
reminds me of a different-toned shower,
though i am informed this term
only applies in southeast asia
where we shower too much anyhow.

it is the first word i struggle with
the most, whether the heart
belongs there or not. in my sloppy accent,
it echoes that most-abused
of chinese poetic tropes—the moon,
it invokes that hoary chestnut by faye wong
or was it teresa teng?

they tell me forgiveness
is written the same simplified
or traditional, but i do not
believe them. when i trace out
their template there appear to be
missing lines, as if a brush landscape
was replaced by a sound byte, it sounds
like *round, bright*, and why do i always return
to this gaping blank, the moon?

perhaps if the birth order of my two unequal
languages were swapped, i could substitute,
as if by accident, *forgetfulness*
for *forgiveness* instead.

weak translations for the wee hours

看开

look, with an open heart. to open one's eyes.
to look open. to look at an opening. to look
things open by bloody-minded eye power
alone. look, it is open. i want to see it open.
you have an open look. open, so we can look
at it. let us look out of the box - an opening
in the ideogram 开 for opening gives you
升, which is to rise. to see the sky unfurl
in front of you like a new flag, like a
scroll opening before a tyrant, like a girl
taking off her skirt, but you must not

放在心上

to put on top of, like a paperweight.
or to put on the top of a list, prioritised.
to put above in a list. to place presence
above. to put down, in this case, on.
to put in, but on the top shelf. to place
for safekeeping with the person at the top
of your heart, who does not appear in
this phrase. a paperweight is matter,
matters, has weight. a heart does not.

watercolours

ekphrasis after Lim Cheng Hoe's *Singapore River* (1962)*

the city behind could be yours or mine
or any given poet's but for the boats.

lim cheng hoe floats a dream of a lone bumboat
front and off-centre, his brush not fully loaded,

the sharpest line in frame tethered to the clearest
water, which is also unpainted.

but behind the boat and boats, she is awash
with morning, yawning into the bokeh.

she is not fully in focus, she has spilled her coffee,
she is washing herself while we brush faint

fingers, wet-on-wet, she paints without numbers,
she moves behind the ombre slumber, dressing

like someone with history. i promised to
close my eyes and where i squeeze them

there are penumbras of colour. our water is
a reflection of our sky, which is also a wash.

there are two people on that boat,
neither on the near shore or farther. They

have stepped out of focus into the circle
of confusion. my line is not fully loaded either.

*Singapore River (1962), Lim Cheng Hoe. Watercolour on paper, 33 × 43 cm.
<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/.../art.../P-0450/singapore-river>

Exegesis

The first two poems, “yuan liang 原谅” and “weak translations for the wee hours”, are explorations of the practice of translation that confound traditional literal conveyance of meaning. In “yuan liang 原谅”, the speaker begins by saying he “do[es] not remember how to write” the words for forgiveness—wandering through ideogrammatic and sonic translations that break down across geographical boundaries, even becoming mispronunciations that invoke cultural non sequiturs. At the end, the poem questions memory, and language itself, as a viable medium for meaning and ultimately for forgiveness.

The second piece, “weak translations for the wee hours”, focuses on obsessively breaking down the Chinese ideograms of two phrases—“看开” and “放在心上”—while at the same time compulsively riffing on a few words in their literal English translation, “open” and “put”. In these “translations”, the language is tortured for meaning and wrung on the rack till it surrenders an oblique confession—but what are we to do with it?

The final piece is a more straightforward, ekphrastic response to a watercolour piece by Lim Cheng Hoe that hangs in National Gallery Singapore, which should be referred to

in tandem. Ideas appear on a blank canvas—a city, which is a specific city because of the scene. The poem revolves around the language of painting, but also of photography; a painter, naturally inviting an audience; boats at the beginning, and a boat at the end—art as an extended metaphor for life or love is a well-worn trope, but as the speaker of the poem claims, “my line is not fully loaded either”.

Biography

Joshua Ip is a poet, editor and literary organiser. He has published three poetry collections with Math Paper Press, won the Singapore Literature Prize for his debut collection, sonnets from the singlish, and placed in three different categories of the Golden Point Award. He has edited six anthologies, including A Luxury We Cannot Afford and the SingPoWriMo series. Most recently, he is co-editing with Tammy Ho Lai-Ming a collection of twin cinema poetry from Hong Kong and Singapore. He is working on a graphic novel, Ten Stories Below. He is the founder of Sing Lit Station, a literary charity that runs community initiatives, including SingPoWriMo, Manuscript Bootcamp, poetry.sg and several workshop groups.