

Eddie Tay, *The Mental Life of Cities*. Hong Kong: Chameleon Press, 2010. 85 pp. ISBN 978-988-99565-8-5.

Eddie Tay's most recent collection continues a poetic journey marked by a carefully wrought volume every five years. Tay's first collection, *Remnants* (2000), drew on two sources: early accounts of Singapore settlement and Tang Dynasty poetry. In his second volume, *A Lover's Soliloquy* (2005), Tay experimented with the longer poem, and drew again on Tang Dynasty poetry through free translations of the work of Li Shangyin. In a series of poems in the later half of the collection, he explored contemporary Singapore as a place of alienation haunted by the ghosts of a past that could never quite be reclaimed in the present. His third collection, *The Mental Life of Cities*, draws fruitfully on his experience of residence in Hong Kong for much of the last decade. As with Tay's previous collections, *The Mental Life of Cities* is divided into thematic sections. The first is a long poem from which the collection's title is taken, further divided into a series of subsections, one of which has been previously published as a separate poem. The second, entitled "Craft or Sullen Art," as the reference to Dylan Thomas suggests, is a series of shorter poems that make a dizzying variety of intertextual references to other poetry: to canonical British writers such as Shakespeare, Ted Hughes and William Wordsworth, Chinese-language poets Gu Cheng and Yu Guangzhong, and Singaporean poet Arthur Yap. The third section, "Self Portraits," focuses more strongly on personal experience and the processes of memory, and includes both recent works and some of Tay's earlier Singapore-based poems written over a decade ago.

While the elements of previous collections are still there – the longer poem, the homage to literary predecessors, the poems of the everyday – *The Mental Life of Cities* gains an extra dimension through its bridging of Singapore and Hong Kong, drawing at times on what Elaine Yee Lin Ho has termed the "biliterate diglossic practice" which characterises Hong Kong poetry (73). Chinese phrases, printed in the traditional characters used in Hong Kong, interrupt the flow of English in the poems; as Tay notes in his preface, such phrases serve as "counterpoints" to the English which predominates in each poem. Yet there is a further element of language of use that Tay does not mention, and yet which seems particularly acute: written Chinese is often either proverbial or extremely simple, and frequently associated with scenes of a memory or of language learning. English and Chinese are not equal, and Chinese frequently becomes not simply an alternative medium of expression, but also site of the painful retrieval of memory. In a parallel manner, Singapore and Hong Kong are not simply transposable equivalents in the poems, but rather a past Singapore is frequently mapped onto a Hong Kong present, often

through parallels between a Singapore childhood and parenthood in contemporary Hong Kong.

This mapping is perhaps most apparent in “The Mental Life of Cities,” the long poem that gives the collection its title. Like Christopher Isherwood, Tay’s persona adopts the role of “a camera/ hunting for metaphors” (2) on city streets: the external environment – and indeed the external self within the urban landscape – are both one-dimensional, consciousness marked simply by registering of impressions, like light falling on a photosensitive film. The “white pages” of poetry, and the “thick forest of words” associated with literary texts, in contrast, offer depth, and these are metaphorically associated with domestic spaces, with reaching out to embrace a partner, or children (6). Hong Kong is present as a physical space: “stained buildings in Mongkok,” “men in business suits in Central” (12), Tay’s relentless urban actors “heading up the escalator from Lan Kwai Fong/ or down, for the trams into Kennedy Town” (30). Singapore, in contrast, is never named, and is represented conceptually, as a “city of pure invention” where books of literary criticism have titles such as “*Responsibility and Commitment*” – a reference to Ee Tiang Hong’s study of Edwin Thumboo, and more obliquely, to Thumboo’s stress on the centrality of nationalism in Singapore literary production (9). Yet poetic practice seems to work against the alienation of the protagonist, who proclaims himself “homesick in the city of my birth” (viii): there are shared sensations, such as the taste of durian, and organic metaphors, originally associated with writing and the family as a site of intimacy, are mapped onto the cityscape itself. The concluding section of the poem reiterates the external restrictions of contemporary city life, yet it concludes by juxtaposing the concrete of the urban landscape to the moon and stars of the Singapore flag.

Tay’s second section is less unified, consisting of a series of shorter poems that all reflect in different ways on the practice of writing poetry. Some, such as “The Love Song of J. Elsie Prunes-Frock,” are parodies which perhaps tend to self-indulgence. Others, such as “My Thought Fox” and “for arthur yap,” pay homage to poets who have influenced the author. The difficulty here is that the poems often have too much work to do. In the first, for example, Tay must not only recall Ted Hughes’ poem, but also explore a very different, and much more domestic scene of writing, in a “shoebox of an apartment,” overcoming the distractions of parenthood. Once the incongruity of Hughes’ natural metaphor is established, the poem is essentially over. The strongest poems, for me at least, are those that deal directly with the process of writing: “climbing up, words,” for instance, in which the creative process is distilled into a series of rich images that border on synaesthesia:

i am mad as a storm to quarrel
and pick words from the floor of my thoughts,

spending hours like honey. (38)

The third section of *The Mental Life of Cities* is to me the best, giving a full illustration of Tay's versatility as a poet. The section includes many previously published poems, a few of which date back some ten years, and also several new pieces, some of which gesture towards prose poetry, in contrast to the tighter verse paragraphs of earlier works. Read as a body of work, the poems illuminate each other. A poem such as "Childhood Games," first published in 1999, seeks some comfort in memories of the unstructured elements of a Singapore childhood against the pressures of social normalisation: the "upgrading" of residence, and the routine of ballet classes and piano lessons. Yet it gains greater depth if read in conjunction with intensely personal poems about Tay's own children's childhoods, such as "Letter to My Baby Daughter Born in Hong Kong," and others which refer to his son, Titus. These more recent poems often recall a Singapore childhood left behind, but it is one their persona can never quite map onto the world of children in contemporary Hong Kong. Tay's son "picks up Cantonese like noodles on chopsticks" in a way that his father will never succeed in doing, mixing this new language with a fluency in English, and recollections of Grimm fairy tales (60). At one point, Tay writes of his children as poems, and this is not simply a romantic conceit. In his most recent poetry, childhood becomes the occasion for a re-vision of the present, because the contemporary urban landscape is seen through a second sight: it thus provides the possibility of defamiliarisation which literary theorists such as Vladimir Shklovsky have maintained is a central function of poetic language. Such defamiliarisation works in two ways: outwardly, in the mapping of Singapore onto Hong Kong as different iterations of modern urbanism and inwardly, in the response of human subjects to these environments. Thus the title of Tay's collection, and perhaps also the fresh perspective it represents. In contrast to much Singapore poetry, it occupies a middle ground: it is neither firmly local, nor broadly cosmopolitan. *The Mental Life of Cities* is about living in two different places at once, a kind of existence made all the more possible by the rapid evolution of information and communication technologies. Such a process of dwelling has three dimensions: the ability to live in two cities at the same time, to experience a present constantly marked by the past, and to have a mental life intimately related to, and yet never fully conditioned by, an urban built environment and its associated routines.

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Works Cited

Ho, Elaine Yee Lin. "Chinese English, English Chinese: Bilingualism and Translation." *Hong Kong Culture: Word and Image*. Ed. Kam Louie. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 55-74.