

# Translations

“Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.

- Anthony Burgess

## River of Shadows

By *Chen Li*

*Translated from Traditional Chinese by Anisa Maya Dhanji and Amanda Wan*

Everyday, a river of shadows flows from our teacups  
the places marked by the imprints of our lips  
are two banks of an elusive river  
the fragrance of tea fills the room, inviting sleep  
perhaps we drink time,  
perhaps, ourselves  
or maybe our fallen parents at the bottom of the cup

we fish in the muddy bottoms of our cups  
for last year's landscapes  
a jasmine-covered mountain  
muddled petals blooming and falling  
we imagine the cooled river return itself to boil  
dissolving in heat, the darkness dies down little by little

then, seated before the cups that illuminate each other like lanterns  
we drink our tea on the banks high like a dream  
waiting for the water of the tea to become the river water  
waiting for the trees to bear flowers and fruit  
until the moment we reincarnate, like our parents  
becoming a fruit, a flower  
and we retire in a river of shadows



## Translation Process

with Anisa Maya Dhanji  
and Amanda Wan

The movement of time traces its lives through various translations of “River of shadows,” which began as “陰影的河流” by Taiwanese Chinese poet Chen Li (written in Traditional Chinese), became “Fleuve d’ombres” in Martine Valette-Hemery’s French rendition, and is now presented as our English translation, prepared as a collaboration<sup>1</sup>. As we translated, our decisions were guided by our interpretations of time as mapped by the imagery throughout the poem: the “river of shadows,” revealed in the tea that “flows from our teacups” (1), provides a geography for the passage of time, whether embodied in sensory experiences and desires—“the fragrance of tea fills the room, inviting sleep” (4)—or the expectation of fulfillment, as the figures in the poem sit on the riverbanks, “waiting for the water of the tea to become the river water / waiting for the trees to bear flowers and fruit” (16-17).

As we unfolded a geography of time in our telling

of this poem, we worked closely with both the Traditional Chinese and French translations in hopes of understanding how fluidly literature can move through languages depending on thoughtful vocabulary and structural choices. We chose to convey the notion of flow which remained consistent in both of our interpretations of the Traditional Chinese and French translations. In English, we attempt to realize this movement of the river in the way that the figures

drink time,  
perhaps, ourselves  
or maybe our fallen parents  
at the bottom of the cup (5-7)

in anticipation of “the moment we reincarnate, like our parents” (18) and eventually “retire in a river of shadows” (20), the figures themselves becoming time in embodied and reflexive forms.

By invoking “fallen parents” and rebirth into these figures, the embodiment of time through drinking tea becomes a moment of intimacy—shared between the poem’s figures and us, the translators

reading and writing them into English—where the poem itself is a translation in a linguistic sense, but also a translation of the points of time that precede the moment of the present.

On a closing note, structurally, we sought to mirror the rhythm and flow of a river in our choice of line breaks. Where Hemery included a line break in “Chaque jour coule de nos tasses de thé / un fleuve d’ombres” (1-2), we chose to gather the two lines into “Everyday, a river of shadows flows from our teacups” (1) as an expression of the way the river as time seems to weave through the imagination of the poem.

We encourage readers to explore both the original Traditional Chinese and French translations and to interpret them as freely and creatively as we have.

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<sup>1</sup>This English translation is based on “Fleuve d’ombres,” which is Martine Valette-Hemery’s French rendition of the original “陰影的河流” by Taiwanese Chinese poet Chen Li, written in Traditional Chinese.