

Kah Bee Chow 海龜

# 海龜

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Hey have you found a regular manicurist yet?

Can you tell me what the encounter usually feels like for you? Is it usually wordless?

Do you feel cared for, nursed?

Hi! I'm trying to figure out if you're high or if we really did talk about manicures,<sup>1</sup> Anyhoo no. I have to fly to HK to do my nails cos it's beyond shit in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> 2) I prefer the word silence. Which is generally how I like those in service 3) Yes. But probably because I tip big

J was overseeing a French fashion house in Vietnam at the time and the only person I knew who had his nails done regularly. It struck me as a kind of care which required a certain precision and proximity<sup>2</sup> – a microsphere of intimacy. I can vaguely recall what it feels like to have my sister paint my nails, this sense of a familial kind of love, the way chimpanzees groom each other to show affection. In most cases, there are limits to reciprocity in the brief encounter between nail technician and client. Perhaps the parameters of this transaction are also its own comfort. I think of how performed servility becomes muscle memory over time, how it writes as your default algorithm, calcifies into your bones – I think about how you stay steadfastly alive. I wrote to J because a friend had invited me to have a show on her fingernails. I was trying to come up with an idea but I got stuck on how every nail salon I came across here were staffed by people who looked like me. Familiar. Let's not make this a false equivalence.

In the past year, I had started translating dialogue to subtitles for a filmmaker shooting in China. Sometimes I would come across a word that could sound like another four, that could mean exponentially more. One way I tried to narrow things down was to look at how the

characters were formed, often this detective work went nowhere but I kept at it. For me, etymology usually means tracing a movement between countries, between languages, the way a word has traveled and shifted through time, sometimes placing a word within a family or finding long-lost relatives – honing in on a way of seeing things, a way of looking at things. With Chinese characters, one might trace the lines and strokes of a character – the formation arranging, re-arranging through systems, compounds, phonetics, abstraction, association, leaps of imagination: its meaning and form traveling with an elasticity some would accuse of being primitive. Here, it feels as though each single stroke, each radical, each component might betray a way of seeing, at times a logic, a narrative, a belief system, a relation to the cosmos all at once.

The Chinese word for fingernail is [指甲], [甲] being the character for nail, or shell – the grouping of the characters for nail, bone and script [甲骨文] refers to the oracle bone script, the earliest form of Chinese writing inscribed on animal bones and turtle undershells. These bones were vehicles for divination, heated to form cracks, lines coded from the ether, decoded by shaman to Emperor. We began writing because the world confounded us. The harvest froze, one early morning you left the house and you never came home. The line is a threshold where ghost/s in the shell may empty out. Writing is a query. It's this: ?<sup>3</sup> An interface between this world and the Other world.

On the last day you were alive, I was translating by your bed – straining to hear from my cheap headphones and balancing my laptop on a plastic lid. I was supposed to keep you cool, place clean cold towels on your skin at regular intervals. The ceiling fans barely seemed to crawl, the heat felt like an entrapment, a throbbing fever in my brain. Freelance with even greater intensity. At the foot of your bed, on the patient sheet, the word: D O A – it means prayer in Malay, for a second I thought : dead on arrival. But no, D is for Date. Date of Arrival. Acute Bed. A cute bed. A few rows over, a man is shouting for his father to be admitted into intensive care. He shouts, it is filled with "orang putih" (white people). He shouts, if his father

stays in this ward, he will die. He shouts, we are all his children. He makes demands. His anguish is palpable. In a way, we all had so little to *do*. Even if his outbursts were directed at those who could also *do* nothing, I admired his rage – where one could only concede to futility, he simply refused. All I could do was watch you breathe and get back to work.

The earliest Chinese character for turtle is a pictograph of the animal, as though it were turned on its side and laid on the ground. Through its evolution, the creature has outstretched limbs sometimes in profile, at times appearing as though flattened from above, the recurring consistency is an encasing with a cross marked through its centre to indicate its shell. The character would recognizably depict a turtle for over two thousand years until the simplified version is introduced in '56/'64, reducing 16 strokes [龜] to a mere 7 [龟]<sup>4</sup>, discarding anatomy, retaining its distinct armoury. The turtle's curvature and armour resonates with the ancient Chinese perception of [天圓地方] 'round sky, square earth' proposed by Kai Thien cosmology. A domed vault enclosing our atmosphere, heaven is a protective membrane from the infinite void.

The turtle is losing its shape, the earth colonizing the sea. Penang Island has long been likened to a turtle owing to its irregular shoreline – one can make out its head protruding from the North, four gnarly feet seemingly extended from its stubby body. I was told as a child that "this is why Penang is a good place to be," the teacher said as he pointed to a map – then I had thought to myself, I can't believe he expects me to buy this, as the logic etched into my brain for life. These days, feng shui experts are warning us that the island is in danger of losing its turtle shape.

"Turtles are auspicious animals and a symbol of longevity. The coastline should be not be altered through land reclamation as this will affect Penang's prosperity,"<sup>5</sup>

The island's jagged edges are expanding from the South, the East, the North East, 4000 approved hectares later, the turtle will cease to be. Multiple new

islets, bloat of sand and granite.  
Soon, high marbled gleaming shells,  
penthouse living housing no one nothing.  
They say the ghosts of turtles haunt these  
coasts where they once laid their eggs, coins  
in their passages clinking in the night.

[The souls of the dead, perhaps formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick. ]<sup>6</sup>

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- 1 The perceived relation between Vietnamese migrants and nail salons was first cast in the '60s with actress Tippi Hedren's visit to a Vietnamese refugee camp in California, eventually bringing her manicurist, Dusty, to teach the women nail technology. This would go on to have a ripple effect on the industry. "The language barrier was the initial reason nails were an attractive option for refugees as they only had to learn a few phrases of English to get by." Morris, Regan "How Tippi Hedden made Veitnamese refugees into nail salon magnates" [3 May 2015] <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32544343>  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32544343>
  - 2 In the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong employed a strategy of proximity to neutralize the effect of American artillery and air power. One such tactic was named "Hug them by the belt buckle" – or to get in so close to the U.S. troops that firepower could not be used, for fear of killing and wounding their own hence the fight would be man-to-man, with improved odds for the Viet Cong. <http://www.historynet.com/ia-drang-where-battlefield-losses-convicted-ho-giap-and-mcnamara-the-u-s-could-never-win.htm>
  - 3 Lispector, Clarice (2012) *A Breath of Life* New York: New Direction Books p.6
  - 4 In his 2009 call for a return to the traditional, long form Chinese script, Pang Qilin bemoaned, "that the simplified ten stroke version dispenses with the logographic component of "heart" in love – thereby leaving love heartless, Pan lamented – has significantly impaired the expressive and aesthetic content of the Chinese logographic system... This latest call for the reunification of simplified and traditional scripts reflects the greatest known divide in the modern Chinese language. The two orthographies, associated with the communist and nationalist split in the late 1940s have come to symbolize more than a half-century's political unease." Simplification has been an integral part of communist state planning, traditional script by and large the mainstay of the diaspora. Jing Tsu, (2011) *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*, U.S.A : Harvard University Press, p.3-4
  - 5 Geomancy expert Lee Cheng Hoe continues, "Penang folk have been enjoying peaceful and steady growth and we should keep it that way." <http://www.pressreader.com/malaysia/new-straits-times/20160823/textview>
  - 6 Nabokov, Vladimir (1957) *Pnin*

Kah Bee Chow  
海龜

26. august – 19. Oktober, 2017  
Fernisering fredag den 25. august kl. 17 – 19

På sin første soloudstilling i Danmark kredser kunstneren Kah Bee Chow om, hvordan dyr og mennesker bebor og skærmer sig mod en omskiftelig verden.

Udstillingstitlen 海龜 består af to kinesiske skrifttegn, der kan oversættes til havskildpadde. I mange oprindelsesmyter optræder skildpadden som et fundament; den bærer verden på sit skjold.

I den malaysiske ø-by Penang, hvor Chow er opvokset, siges øens konturer at tegne en skildpadde, der beskytter byen. Men en type afskærmning mod verden er ved at afløse en anden. Byen er begyndt at brede sig ud i vandet. En film, som Chow har optaget på stedet, dokumenterer, hvorledes dyrt boligbyggeri rykker kystlinjen og altså øens konturer.

Kah Bee Chows installation udgør et landskab, der er formet af skjolde og læskærme så som en iglo og beboet af abstrakte figurer afledt af forskellige skabninger fra pingviner til spørgelserne fra videospillet Pac-Man.

Kah Bee Chow (f. 1980) er opvokset i Penang, Malaysia, og Auckland, New Zealand. Hun er uddannet fra Konsthögskolan i Malmö, hvor hun også er bosat.

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