

# Reifying Cultural Memory and Violence in Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*

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LOYALTY and torture are accentuated in *Breaking the Tongue*, and reviewers on this novel have commented on the identity politics of the main character Claude Lim.<sup>1</sup> Loyalty involves with whom one identifies, while under the tremendous torture, one suffers from the identification disorientation as *Breaking* shows. Journal articles provide more critical insights into the novel, including how this novel reveals a wartime Malayan Chinese identity, responds to collective identity proposed by the nation, participates in the global book market, and other issues to be tackled.<sup>2</sup> Aside

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\* This paper is a thoroughly revised version of one of my dissertation chapters. It has been reorganized, with the original scope narrowed down and new references updated. I am also grateful to the two reviewers for their precious suggestions.

1. For example, see Christopher Korenowsky's and Lisa See's reviews on this novel. *Kirkus Reviews* keenly points out that "Loh's characters scramble for safety and shuffle commitments and allegiances, endangered everywhere, belonging nowhere;" the episode of the interrogation serves to manifest "a fluidity of identity" in the protagonist, Claude ("*Breaking the Tongue*").
2. Tan Eng Kiong in his dissertation (2007) discusses Loh's novel with a focus on the process of identification of Claude. He revised and published his dissertation in 2013, elaborating on Claude and formation of the wartime Chinese Malayan identity. Focusing on the food metaphor as a commercial vehicle to promote marketability in a global book market, Tamara S. Wagner notes that the metaphor of rojak used in recent Malaysian and Singaporean food fictions is to challenge Orientalism evoked by fusion food. Concerning the representation of torture, Stephanie Athey analyzes Loh's novel in the aspect of space of witness. She contends that representation of torture and the risk emerges from it; however, it is a pity that Athey does not provide much textual evidence to support her observations on representing torture. In 2012, Athey publishes another article to read *Breaking* under the context of post-9/11; she discusses whether torture is a necessary evil. Representation, the very essence of fiction and the main concern in both of Athey's articles, "is a moral problem with political

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from these issues, *Breaking* is prominent in its allusions to cultural memory and depictions of violence.

Set in Singapore in late 1941, the novel begins with monologues of the protagonist Claude Lim, who is detained by the Japanese military police during the operation of Sook Ching and interrogated for the information about the underground anti-Japanese organization. While being tortured, Claude heard more than once a woman's scream from the next interrogation room. As the plot develops, the scream is implied to come from Han Ling-li, a nurse as well as an underground anti-Japanese activist working for the British in alliance with Tan Kah Kee's "Relief Fund," an organization supportive of Chinese nationalism and anti-Japanese activities. What we read in the first five chapters are Claude's monologues to his body, which are intermingled with Claude's imaginary escape to his family life to divert himself from the pain of torture and respond to the Japanese soldier's demand of knowing his past. Besides his friendship with Ling-li, readers also learn that he comes from an upper-middle class Straits-born Chinese family, attending English school and living a British style life as demanded by his father Humphrey. The last chapter focuses on Claude as the survivor of the Sook Ching Massacre and as witness to Ling-li's sacrifice. Claude's witness to the details of Ling-li's suffering is narrated in the untranslated Chinese characters. Apart from serving as a crucial narrative strategy in the last chapter, Chinese characters are placed in juxtaposition to English chapter titles, for example, "Ciphers 代碼," "The Employment of Secret Agents 用間," "Generals 將軍," "Civilians 平民," "Terrain 地形," and "Breaking the Tongue 精忠報國."

This paper attempts to examine how Vyvayne Loh's contemplation on the national identity of Singapore is exemplified through cultural memory and violence that are made tangible in the moment of the national upheaval. Violence in *Breaking* makes possible the representation of trauma and allows readers to experience the cruelty of war. As mentioned above, the theme of torturing has been discussed by other critics. Besides responding to their observations, this paper further suggests that

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consequences" (2008: 14; 2012: 182). Sally E. McWilliams provides a feminist reading of trauma, particularly the insidious trauma separated from the event trauma, in Loh's novel. By examining the narrative strategies to connect Singapore's fall to the trauma it causes, McWilliams attempts to initiate a politics of reading "diasporic Chinese women's literature" (141). She deems *Breaking* "a feminist counter-narrative" to resist against "male-domination, xenophobia, and militaristic power" through nonlinear structure and shifting viewpoints (McWilliams 142). Donna To-Fang Tong contends that the form of nonlinear narrative per se builds up and demonstrates the torturing process, which is the motif of this novel, and invites readers as the witness to the traumatic moment of Sook Ching Massacre. Also focusing on the non-linearity in *Breaking*, Leah A. Milne argues that Loh's experiments with historical accuracy and language reliability challenge readers' expectations for the accuracy and usefulness of historiography, and thus disrupt readers' quest for a complete historical narrative (2). By contrast to the previous critics holding positive view on *Breaking*, Eddie Tay and Philip Holden find Loh's *Breaking* problematic in its reiteration of Chineseness.

violence also serves as the narratological strategy to evoke cultural memory, and the lingering of cultural memory leads to the challenge of building a Singaporean identity while claiming Chinese ethnicity at the same time. References to Chinese culture and Chinese classics constitute the cultural memory in this novel, by which Claude survives Sook Ching, and in the end recognizes and reshapes his identity. Another character, Ling-li, is characterized as the follower of General Yue Fei's legacy of loyalty, strengthening the connection between ethnic Chinese and the Chinese culture. Although such connection incurs criticisms on Loh's reiteration of the national ideology for her remodeling Claude as his ethnicity determines, it also invites reflection on whether Chineseness becomes an unbreakable burden for ethnic Chinese in Singaporean context.

### The Reification of Cultural Memory

BEFORE its independence in 1965, Singapore had been part of the Straits Settlements under the British rule since 1867. After its fall to the Japanese army from 1942 to 1945, Singapore was renamed Syonan by Yamashita Tomoyuki as the new land in the south dedicated to Emperor Showa. The British returned to rule Singapore after 1945 and gradually granted Singapore self-governance. In 1959 Lee Kuan Yew was elected the first Prime Minister of Singapore, then a self-governing state without a governor assigned by the British government. In 1963 Singapore, together with the Federation of Malaya, the Crown Colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah), became part of the Federation of Malaysia. The merger failed in 1965, followed by the separation of Singapore from the Federation. Although it has been said that the separation was the result of Lee's political conspiracy, the rumor faded out as how to survive without any resources became the priority for Singapore. Singapore as a newly independent country has targeted on building its unique national identity from the ashes of colonialism.

Against such a background is the establishment of modern Singapore—Loh's "home."<sup>3</sup> In advance of Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, Loh sets her novel in Japanese Occupation of Malaya,<sup>4</sup> and differs from Aw and Tan in specifying the critical moment of survival—Sook Ching [肅清, ethnic cleansing], employing detailed descriptions of violence. In comparison with Peninsular Malaysia where the populations of Malay and Chinese were almost equal in the 1940s, Singapore has been heavily populated by ethnic Chinese. For the Japanese army, ethnic Chinese

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3. A brief introduction is attached to the novel as an appendix, where Loh claims, "I wrote *Breaking the Tongue* because after living abroad for years, I wanted to write about 'home'; I wanted to write about a country that had deliberately set out to create a national identity from its ashes" (495). The last sentence responds to the grand narrative that has sustained the myth of the establishment of Singapore since Lee Kuan Yew became the first Prime Minister. The narrative of survival has knitted the Singaporean society together.

4. Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012) are all set around the time of Japanese Invasion and Occupation.

sympathized with China and were thus suspected rebels. Three days after Lieutenant General Arthur Percival surrendered Singapore to Japan on 15 February 1945, the Japanese military launched Sook Ching to purge the Chinese from disloyalty and hostility in Singapore. The systematic examination of any suspected Chinese was done through interrogation and tortures. Singapore's fall to Japan has become a collective trauma and memory for Chinese Singaporeans.<sup>5</sup>

The German scholar Jan Assmann distinguishes three kinds of memories—individual, communicative, and cultural memories—each of which respectively corresponds to the dimension of the individual, society and culture. Viewing from the aspects of time, identity and memory, Assmann defines “individual memory” as building upon “inner self” and “inner, subjective time” (109), while “communicative memory” as “social time” and “social self, person as carrier of social roles,” which is the continuation of Maurice Halbwach's contention of collective memory. Although sharing the same characteristic with the collective memory in conveying to a group of people a collective identity, Assmann's cultural memory particularly focuses on a cultural identity (as collective)—the domain of traditions—that Halbwach excludes from his delineation of socialization and communication in the collective memory. For Assmann, the transmission and transference of traditions in cultural memory rely on “monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions,” which serve as reminders for the insider groups to carry and re-embody the shared cultural memory from one generation to another (111).

Memory is certainly about the past; yet for Assmann cultural memory concerns with more than merely the past, but “events in absolute past” in contrast to the history of “recent past” in communicative memory (117). He also points out that the past preserved is not as the original past, “but is cast in symbols as they are represented in oral myths or in writings” (Assmann 113). Assmann's cultural memory centralizes the claiming of that preserved past: “Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours.’ This is why we refer to this form of historical consciousness as ‘memory’ and not just as knowledge about the past” (113). The distinction between cultural memory and historical knowledge lies in the keyword “reclaimed.” The past is reclaimed as our memory does not mean to control it or disallow others to share it, and it is different from knowledge about the past in that the reclaimed past depends on one's empathetic connection to it so that it can be regarded as one's memory. In the light of Assmann's idea of cultural memory, we further examine Loh's allusions to General Yue Fei in the Song Dynasty and *The Art of War*.

For almost every ethnic Chinese, the name of Yue Fei is associated with the fixed image of his mother carving *Jingzhong baoguo* [精忠報國] on his back because his story has been reiterated and passed on from one generation to another through

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5. For example, Tay Boon Hwee's *Tianchou: Xinjiapo rijun zhanling Zhaonan shidai* [*Immeasurable hatred: Shouan under the Japanese Occupation*] (2001) combines victim's hand drawings of what happened to Chinese at that time with his own childhood memories to record atrocities the Japanese army committed then.

children's storybooks, folklores or Chinese textbooks. For Chinese Singaporeans who went to secondary school at least before the 2000s, the story of Yue Fei and *Jingzhong baoguo* was not unfamiliar because Yue Fei's story had been excerpted into Chinese textbooks.<sup>6</sup> The name of Yue Fei has been preserved in the cultural memory for Chinese Singaporeans as a reminder or symbol of loyalty.

Yue Fei is reincarnated in Ling-li, and the antithesis to loyalty—betrayal—is the undercurrent of the inspiring story *Jingzhong baoguo*. Yue Fei fights for his emperor, but because of the scheme concocted by his fellow countryman Qin Kuai, Yue is ordered by the Song emperor to give up the war with the Jurchen tribe. Returning from the battlefield, Yue ends up being decreed to death. The wartime story of betrayal is transformed into Ling-li's story in Singapore's facing Japanese invasion through cultural memory. The title of the novel—breaking the tongue—is also the title of the last chapter. However, on the chapter's title page, the title is not literally translated into Chinese as *duanshe* [斷舌] or *duanyu* [斷語], but as *Jingzhong baoguo*. Scenarios in this chapter show how Ling-li performs her duty and responsibility to serve her nation, meaning China in that context. She told Claude the story of General Yue Fei, paying her dedication to Yue's legacy. Ling-li said, "I've tried always to live by those words. *The Ultimate Loyalty Is to Serve Your Country*" (470; emphasis original).<sup>7</sup> For Claude, Ling-li's courage to hide nothing, "not even her own humiliation," is the way "of generals" (482). Ling-li's uncle, Hong-Seng, carves into the wooden memorial tablet for Ling-li the word, "將"[general] (484). Ling-li, the female general, fails her battle against the Japanese army because of the betrayal of her fellow countryperson, the Fifth Columnist/Miss Competence, who "gets paid for every name she hands in," and "appreciates the respect the Japanese accord her" (91). Miss Competence reports to the Japanese about Ling-li's espionage and feels proud of her files as "the most detailed among South-East Asian Fifth Columnists" (91).

Espionage involves deception and distrust, which is heavily intertextualized with *The Art of War*, another form of cultural memory in *Breaking*. As Philip Holden says, "Loh's first novel uses the recent revelation that the British air force was betrayed to the Japanese by a British officer, Patrick Heenan, to spin a complex tale that

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6. This information comes from my Singaporean friend who remembers reading Yue Fei's story in the Chinese class. His father, who went to the elementary school in the 1950s, also remembers reading the lyrics of *Manjianghong* [滿江紅], lyrical adaptation of Yue Fei's failed attempt to protect his country. This shows that the story of Yue Fei in the Song Dynasty has become a form of cultural memory, passed down in Singapore through Chinese education. I came across another interesting translation and transformation of *Jingzhong baoguo* in an exhibition in the National Library Board in Singapore. The library held an exhibition on past national campaigns in February 2013. The exhibitions were a series of huge posters printed with mimic campaign slogans. One of the posters read *Jingzhong baoguo* with English translation, both printed in white against a black background. The English translation was "Suspicion Breeds Success." Being loyal in the Singaporean context is thus interpreted as being suspicious to others, and serving one's country is interpreted as reaching success.

7. Subsequent references to Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* will appear in parenthetical citations.

exemplifies Sun Tzu's saying, 'all warfare is based on deception'" (2006). Deception is the tactic employed by both parties in war. Claude's grandmother, Siok, is the defender of the traditional Chinese value, eulogizing Chinese folklores, and is also the one passing on Sun Tzu's wisdom to Claude. By resorting to Grandma Siok's teaching during the course of interrogation, Claude transforms himself from an Anglophile local-born Malayan to an atavistic practitioner of *The Art of War*.<sup>8</sup>

The story of Yue Fei in *Breaking* accentuates Chinese Singaporean's cultural memory about loyalty. According to Assmann, "[c]ultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as 'ours'" (113); in other words, cultural memory cannot be sustained without the receivers' empathy to the past, and "[t]his is why we refer to this form of historical consciousness as 'memory' and not just as knowledge about the past" (113). However, I do not contend that a Singaporean story should reclaim a historical event in the Song Dynasty as belonging to Singaporeans, and reclaiming the past does not mean that Chinese Singaporeans' cultural memory ends up a reiteration of Chineseness.

Yue Fei's legacy is weaved into *Breaking* at a particular moment in Singaporean history, and that determines the kind of cultural memory the novel passes on. The cultural memory in *Breaking* reaches back into a past when Song Dynasty was bombarded by northern invaders; a past that is projected to the period of Japanese invasion of Singapore. In other words, Yue Fei's legacy is transplanted into Ling-li in the Singaporean context for Chinese Singaporeans through the narrative of war. Yue Fei and Ling-li both face the national disturbance, the crucial moment of the nation's survival. Sally E. McWilliams suggests that the scene of Claude's witnessing Ling-li's rape "create[s] a form of cultural memory that exceeds the narrative of colonial and nationalist traumas" (155). Different from my interpretation of allusions to Yue Fei's story as cultural memory, McWilliams reads the Japanese occupation and the following brutality exerted on Claude (symbolizing English-educated, rootless Anglophile Chinese) and Ling-li (symbolizing the powerless female body in the narrative of nationalism) as a strategy to establish a counter-narrative to confront the loss of Chinese culture and the loss of control over one's own body. In her words, "Their counter-narrative, in its combination of description and witnessing, is a performance of cultural memory, a reenactment of insidious and event traumas where creativity, language, and the corporeal intertwine to produce somehint more than pain alone can ever produce" (McWilliams 155-56). For Stephanie Athey, "Ling-li's calling upon Claude to return to the torture cell and witness how Japanese humiliates and murders her is to solidify a history that is founded on torture" (Athey 2008: 19). The moment concerning nation's survival is regarded as the liminal space for its nationals to decide to betray as the Fifth Columnist did or to perform ultimate loyalty as Ling-li did. In the appendix to the novel Loh says she attempts to write about home after leaving for so many years (495), and her dedication for home alluding not only

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8. Loh's character, Claude, to some extent is employed as the persona of Lee Kuan Yew, who came from a Baba family, Chinese-rooted but English-educated, and strove to acquire Mandarin and high Chinese culture as a way to consolidate a nationalist Singapore.

to the grand narrative of survival (concerning the Japanese invasion and separation from the Federation), but also to the *kiasu* culture in Singapore illustrated by the Fifth Columnist's desperation for excelling in reporting spies and Humphrey's zeal for becoming an elite Chinese living in a more-British-than-British way of life.

In the novel, Loh employs Grandma Siok, blue-collar workers Ling-li and her uncle to "enlighten" English-educated Claude on Chinese myth, calligraphy, and Peking opera. Although Claude's transformation from an Anglophile to a practitioner of Chinese wisdom and translator of English scripts in the end incurs criticism on Loh's reinforcing the affiliation between Chinese ethnicity with Chineseness,<sup>9</sup> such perspective not only limits itself on the surface value of being political correctness but also abates the contention that the Chinese scripts towards the end of the novel reveal. In the second part of this essay, I will examine how representation of violence in this novel is significant in passing on the cultural memory of Yue Fei's story of loyalty and how blocks of untranslated Chinese are made problematic in representing violence and trauma.

### **The Reification of Violence**

LOH explicitly describes the appalling atrocities committed by the Japanese interrogators, including the details of rapes and torture. The delineation of rapes is so vivid that it challenges reader's taste of reading. However, it also paradoxically attracts readers to turn page after page. As Yi-fu Tuan demonstrates in *Landscapes of Fear*, the demonstration of penalty and torture to the public has a long tradition since

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9. Philip Holden from the National University of Singapore observes the recent flourish of novels about Singapore but published outside it and raises his concern about how these novels communicate with the present situation in Singapore. His main concern for these novels is how they hitch a balance between historical novels and the revisionist history. He attempts to develop a critical view that avoids "a parochial insistence on authenticity" as well as "a dehistoricized recuperation of Singapore" into the more global texts, such as Asian American, postcolonial and diasporic literatures (Holden 2006). Holden considers Singapore to be "a narrated allegorical space," which stands for an "arena" in Loh's novel (2006). The character Claude symbolizes the colonized subject who struggles in this arena to retrieve his cultural root—Chineseness. Claude's conversion—speaking, reading, and writing in Chinese as well as listening to Chinese opera—strengthens the connection between the ethnic Chinese and speaking Chinese. Holden further questions such Chineseness not because of essentialism but because the transformation of Claude from an Anglicized Chinese to a "Chinesenized" Chinese follows the paradigm that the first Chinese prime minister Lee Kuan Yew sets for the new Singapore. Lee based his vision of a new Chinese Singaporean identity on "a re-imagined Confucianism, Mandarin and high Chinese culture" at the expense of vernacular cultures of Hokkien- and Cantonese-rooted immigrants who comprise the majority of Chinese Singaporeans in Singapore (Holden 2006). Such singularized vision for Chinese Singaporean, Holden further criticizes, shows that Loh writes for "North American reading community," presenting a longing for cultural China and reiterating "hegemonic constructions of the present" by responding to Singapore's "racial governmentality" in the late 20th century (Holden 2006).

the Roman Empire. Tuan takes as examples the public killing of slaves in the Roman Empire, public execution in Medieval Europe, and the gallows erected on the country road in the 18th-century Britain to argue that the public display of tortures on the one hand terrifies and brings the public under control; on the other hand, attracts and excites the spectators.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the explicit depiction of the corporal tortures in *Breaking* becomes a spectacle for readers. However, the closer the novel comes to the end, the more details of Ling-li's rape at the hands of Japanese soldiers are written in untranslated Chinese characters. Instead of being vulgar peddling of violence, the language Loh adopts for Claude to witness Ling-li's rape impels us to reflect on the politics of language in the global book market.

Detailed descriptions of violence are crucial to evoke the cultural memory about loyalty because the unbearable torture by the Japanese soldier connects Ling-li and Claude to Yue Fei's legacy and Sun Tzu's wisdom. The memory of the Japanese Occupation for the Chinese community is the memory of violence for three years and eight months. Violence is displayed not only in the explicit depiction of corporal tortures, but also in the language Loh adopts to describe those tortures. Loh is meticulous about Claude's body under torture. For example, Claude is described as "the huddled shape with its one arm splayed, elbow bent at an impossible obtuse angle" (21). The Japanese soldiers "clamp the victim's nails, exert pressure, squeeze" so that "[j]oints are to be manipulated, organs intentionally distended and stomped upon" (69). Rattan switch is used by the interrogator as a means of persuasion: "When it lashes skin, tiny blood vessels coursing the surface rupture, nerve endings are activated" (107).

Violence committed on Claude's body is regarded as a narratological strategy, not just the theme, to remind readers of Yue Fei's story. When Japanese soldiers map out with knife the route of the Japanese invasion of Malaya on Claude's body, Claude's body symbolically becomes the country where he and his family live. The cuttings made by knife on Claude's body can be read as the analogy to the inscription of "The Ultimate Loyalty Is to Serve Your Country" on Yue Fei's back. Yue's mother inscribes the motto of loyalty on her son's back, while Claude shows his loyalty to his country by enduring the cuttings from his right temple, through the crown of his head, forehead, to his left cheekbone (188). The cultural memory of Yue's loyalty to his country is evoked not only through Ling-li's embodiment of General Yue as mentioned before, but also through allusions to the inscription on the body. Despite the torture of drawing knifelines on Claude's face, Claude chooses not to reveal any useful information to the Japanese soldiers. Those knifelines become the reification of Claude's loyalty to his country.

Frequent allusions to severe interrogation techniques can be found all over the novel, but the most brutal torture techniques are centralized towards the end of the novel. Six months after Claude is released from Sook Ching, Ling-li returns as

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10. Tuan delineates the development of public humiliation and execution in Chapter 13 of *Landscapes of Fear*. As he points out, "Public executions succeeded in attracting crowds, but failed to impart their intended lesson" (184).



Claude's dream or as Claude's post-traumatic imagination arising from the girl's scream from the next chamber to reveal to Claude how she suffered the sanguinary rape at the hands of the Japanese soldiers. Ling-li switches between English and Chinese, asking Claude to be her witness because:

Jack can afford to close his eyes. [...] In a few years, it will be over, and he will return to his country, glad and relieved to be home at last. He will be able to put his memories behind him, especially things he *did not see*. It will be as if they never existed. He and others like him will be able to convince themselves of that. [...] 但是你就不同了, [...] You have no other home but here. 你現在應該知道. [...] If you won't remember and record this, who will? This is how our history starts and is transmitted, [...] Witness and transmission of story. 事實的見證和傳述是歷史. (480; emphasis added)

In the next few pages, Ling-li and Claude take turns to describe the details; Ling-li remembers the pain she suffered and Claude depicts the facial features of rapists. Ling-li describes the second rapist in Chinese: “他更殘酷。他的目標是施加痛苦。在被他強姦的整段過程中，我只感到痛苦。他緊捏我的乳頭並且扭擰它們，我感到痛不欲生不停地輾轉反側，之後，他將我翻轉，強姦我。我現在能夠聞到不同的氣味。它是我自己的血和糞的混合味” (482). It is only in this passage that Ling-li's words in Chinese are nearly paraphrased by Claude. After this passage, the interrogation that Ling-li mentions in Chinese is much more brutal, but Claude provides no English translation; instead, he begins to intone in Chinese. When describing the last rapist, both Ling-li and Claude narrate in Chinese. If Loh intends to pass on the story about Ling-li's ultimate loyalty to her nation by enduring extreme agony, considering the U.S.-based readers, why does Ling-li narrate in Chinese without Claude's paraphrases?

### **Episode of Ling-li's Torture in Chinese**

THE almost six-page long Chinese texts used to describe Ling-li's torture would undoubtedly impede English reader's comprehension of the episode. When asked in an interview with Robert Birnbaum about the unknowability of the Chinese texts for English-speaking readers, Loh declares her intention, “This is the point when the book becomes impenetrable to the English reader—almost shuts the door on the English reader—and this is a book about national identity and how that is very closely linked to language, and at that point the natives say you are outside and we are inside” (Birnbaum). I contend that Loh's construction of such an obstacle to be an act of resistance against what is termed by Slavoj Žižek as the symbolic exchange.

The “problematic” passages of Chinese are offset against the mindset of English-language publishers in the U.K. and U.S. Examining why English-only readers would not read books in translation, Hephzibah Anderson suggests that

“[w]ith so many countries in which English is either the first language or a robust second, all of them boasting highly evolved literary cultures, publishers in London and New York are already spoilt for choice. Why would they go looking to territories that present the bothersome burden of translation?” It shows novelists a cruel reality that in order to have their works circulated to the largest extent possible, they have to catch the attention from prominent publishers mostly located in London and New York, and the basic requirement of achieving this goal is to write in English, no matter how brilliant their stories are. As Anderson observes, “English-language publishers have a lamentable track record when it comes to translating great stories from elsewhere in the world.”<sup>11</sup> Such condition and mindset bring to light the exertion of insidious violence that for English-language publishers and readers, reading non-English works is impractical economically. Translation causes another trouble—time and money spent on translation. Besides, when non-English words are used in the narrative, they serve as exotic attractions and must not obstruct reader’s comprehension of the story. If readers’ comprehension is hindered, for example, in reading such a novel as *Breaking*, interpretative justice will be drawn to brilliantly disguise their incapability to grasp the meaning of those non-English words.

In her review of *Breaking*, Julia Lovell praises Loh for her success in conjuring up a historical novel, which showcases her talent for the characterization and the vivid depiction of the setting. Lovell acknowledges Loh’s mosaic representation of “a chaotically fragmented story” but finds problem with the closing part of the novel. As far as the Chinese texts are concerned, “[f]or a reader who does not understand Chinese, this linguistic blockade has no more than a crudely limited shock-value; inducing total incomprehension is a fairly blunt instrument for a writer to resort to” (Lovell). Even for Chinese-speaking readers, this bluntness “adds a discordantly unsubtle last note to a very intelligent and well-crafted novel” (Lovell).

Athey, on the contrary, defends the Chinese passages by rationalizing the inexpressiveness of Chinese characters. She observes the contradictory situation in reading Ling-li’s being tortured to death: “[T]he scene extends the possibility of understanding yet deliberately refuses it at the same time. Translation and comprehension are indefinitely postponed” (Athey 2008: 20). Loh’s choice of using untranslated Chinese characters for Athey is a political intervention. While English-only readers are blocked from the comprehension of this scene, they are compelled to virtually experience the operation of colonial violence on language—which language one should acquire is not determined by his cultural root, but by the social and

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11. Although Anderson also notes that independent magazines contribute a lot to publishing non-English literary works, the quantity and accessibility of these works in translation cause no significant change in the present situation of publication. Otherwise, he would not have to urge those influential publishers to translate works outside English-language world, as he said, “[a]fter all, if it weren’t for literature in translation, we English-language readers wouldn’t know what it is to converse with *The Little Prince*, to be transformed like Gregor Samsa, or to immerse ourselves in the magic realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*” (Anderson).

political context. Claude's being severed from Chineseness and cultivating Britishness shows such colonial influence. Moreover, this "problematic" scene does not serve merely as a narrative device for English-only readers to "see" the colonial violence, "the ways the readers' own linguistic heritage may mark him or her as accomplice or beneficiary of that violence" (Athey 2012: 193). Athey also indicates that even though survivors from torture have post-trauma problem of articulation, they do narrate their experiences in different forms no matter how partial or fragmentary they may be. She notes that "the inexpressibility that matters politically is not the inability to articulate, but rather society's inability to hear and understand" (2012: 188). In this regard, the Chinese characters concerning Ling-li's sufferings exemplify such inability to hear and understand.

Another critic, McWilliams, comments on the Chinese scripts: "While we hope that Ling-li will tell us her story, we quickly realize that the act of translation falls to Claude alone. His contributions, however, do not enact our desire for a definitive translation of Ling-li's words" (156). As far as Athey, McWilliams and other readers incapable of reading Chinese are concerned, Loh does not paraphrase the Chinese sentences in English, a technique that is often used in Chinese American literature so that English-speaking readers can still comprehend the episodes without doing extra work to translate the Chinese characters. In the six-page long conversation between Ling-li and Claude, Loh delegates Claude to paraphrase in English what Ling-li says in Chinese for the first two paragraphs. Even so, Claude's paraphrases only partially translate Ling-li's words. Ling-li tells how she was raped in Chinese, and then Claude, switching between English and Chinese, supplements her accounts by describing the rapist's look: "愚鈍的相貌, 挺高的額頭, 強大的下頷, [...] His face completely screwed up in pain. He is the cleanest of the lot so far, 他看起來甚至好像洗過他的臉. After you—bite him, he is slapped by the commanding officer" (482). Toward the end of their dialogues, both Ling-li and Claude converse in Chinese for almost one page without further paraphrasing their conversation in English.

According to McWilliams, what Ling-li and Claude say in Chinese does not matter; instead, the emptiness of meaning caused by the incomprehension of this one-page long conversation is what McWilliams praises: "The chilling impact of Han Ling-li's torture and death is underscored by the English-only reader's *incomplete comprehension* of her final hours" (157; emphasis added). Her argument presupposes that what cannot be seen and spoken is the source of terror. With such presupposition, the meaning of what Ling-li and Claude say as well as the details of torture have been parried. It is in this evasive interpretation that insidious violence is manifested.

If paraphrases in English are provided, they are provided for the convenience of English-speaking readers so that they can see what repression and torture look like; nevertheless, if readers cannot comprehend the core episode of torture in Chinese, evasions are produced. For example, readers' distance from the heinous details of Ling-li's rape is thought to prevent sentimentalized response. Although McWilliams urges readers to see and interpret pain and trauma, she worries that readers' over-exposure to details of pain may lapse into sentimentalism which consequently negates the critical challenge to what caused the pain. As she contends, pain, undoubtedly,

should be presented to the world, but consideration should be taken to decide how much pain is allowed to be presented. McWilliams points out that “English-only readers are precluded from easily grasping the intricacies of Ling-li’s rape and deathly assault,” which is turned into an advantage because “[t]his opacity in the representation disallows us any space in which to invoke a sentimentalized or pre-programmed response to militaristic rape” (156).

From McWilliams’s viewpoint, the Chinese texts in *Breaking* are interpreted as more a narrative strategy of presenting terror than components of a sentence, each of which is a meaningful signifier: “By denying the English-only reader direct access to both sides [Claude and Ling-li] of the hybridized narration of this trauma, Loh’s text leaves a void only partially filled by Claude’s translation and the reader’s own *empathetic leaps*” (156-57; emphasis added). In other words, McWilliams argues that the void disrupts reader’s comprehension and becomes exactly the embodiment of terror, torture, and trauma, given that the extreme terror and pain are unspeakable. Sustainable as it may seem; nevertheless, it is because of the “void” and “empathetic leaps” that McWilliams’s contention is problematic because it reiterates what Ling-li said about Jack’s turning his back on Ling-li. McWilliams rationalizes the incapability to fully grasp Lin-li’s torture.

Watching others suffering may not promise empathy; however, no empathy will be aroused without watching. McWilliams’s praise of the void in Ling-li’s rape exactly exemplifies an act of turning away, in the same way as what Ling-li speaks of Jack: “Jack can afford to lose his eyes. [...] He will be able to put his memories behind him, especially things he *did not see*” (480; emphasis added). Disagreeing on the devaluation of photography in an age filled with manipulating photos, Susan Sontag insists on the value of visual perception. As she points out, an image is “an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers” (117). There are worries that when fed with numerous images about atrocities and disasters as we are never short of such news nowadays, we eventually feel boredom and emotional paralysis toward these images. Against such worries, Sontag urges: “Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The *images* say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget” (114; emphasis added). If readers cannot read Ling-li’s rape, how can they see it? Likewise, how can her suffering *say* anything to caution readers *not to forget*?

When McWilliams insists on the significance of watching Ling-li’s pain, the reality is that Ling-li’s pain can never be accessed by English-language readers.<sup>12</sup>

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12. I appreciate the reviewer’s reminding me of thinking about who the novel’s readers are. Given that the novel is published in the U.S., I would say the intended readers are first of all readers in Anglo-America. Yet, I do not deny that because of the flow of books in the global book markets, readers of other languages, including those who can read both Chinese and English, also have access to this novel. What I try to deal with in this section of the paper is the untranslated Chinese script in the novel, and the problem caused by

Ironically, what McWilliams calls as “void” becomes the signified.<sup>13</sup> Ling-li’s description in Chinese thus becomes empty signifier. The “illusory” linkage between the signifier and signified allows McWilliams to praise the effect of opacity in Ling-li’s end hours of life—the inarticulate pain of rape.

### The Chinese Passage and Symbolic Exchange

IN “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” Žižek incisively remarks, “Habits are the very stuff our identities are made of. In them, we enact and thus define what we effectively are as social beings. [...] In their very transparency they are the medium of social *violence*” (164-65; emphasis added). Habits are “‘empty gestures,’ offers made or meant to be rejected;” such empty gestures function as hidden rules, determining people to perform “symbolic exchange” so that everyone’s profit within a group would be secured without compromising the surface peace between group members (Žižek 160). Žižek illustrates how symbolic exchange works with the example of making and denying apologies. If someone’s remarks offend others, apologies must be made to the offended for the sake of maintaining the social order. Then the offended is expected to deny the apologies politely, expressing his understanding of the accidental mistake. What counts in the response of the offended is to make the other know that there is no need for apologies. Although eventually no apology is needed, both parties should go through the process of offering and denying the offer of apology. Besides, before making apologies, the offender has already known that his apologies will be proclaimed unnecessary by the other party. Even though both parties know in advance what result the offer will lead to, they still need to go through the process of symbolic exchange of empty gestures.

Žižek thinks that between these two parties, there exists a “symbolic exchange at its purest,” the magic of which is that “although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity” (162). This pact of solidarity determines the habits we rely on to act properly in the society. Anyone who does not follow the tacit agreement would be considered reckless mind.

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English-only critics’ interpretation of it. I present my argument in the context of English-only readers, based on the published English journal articles and book reviews. As for the “Chinese Singaporean victims” mentioned by the reviewer, how does Loh’s novel transmit cultural memory to them, who can possibly read both Chinese and English? For them, they can visualize Ling-li’s suffering with the textual description, and in this way, this novel passes on a story of suffering that the community of Chinese ethnicity in Singapore should not forget. We could say this novel indeed memorizes a key traumatic event in the history of Singapore, and this traumatic event is told largely based on a story of loyalty coming from ancient Chinese dynasty which is not too unfamiliar to Loh’s generation. However, this does not mean that this novel tries to transplant Chinese patriotism to the next generation, as there is no inevitable cause-effect relation.

13. Athey makes the similar interpretation by saying: “When it comes to representing torture, the novel clearly suggests that all languages are contaminated for the purpose of witness” (2008: 20).

As a result, although the offended has freedom to speak out his feeling of annoyance, he has to choose not to speak it lest he is looked upon as reckless. The empty symbolic gesture brings to light the paradox that we think we have the freedom to make choice, but that is actually illusionary because we are prescribed to *freely* make the *necessary* choice. In Žižek's words, "[b]elonging to a society involves a paradoxical point at which each of us *is ordered freely* to embrace and make of it our own choice what is, in any case, imposed on us" (161; emphasis added).

Loh's use of Chinese scripts leads to "incomprehensible stream of sound" to English-only readers (143). In light of the global commodification of cultural difference, diasporic and postcolonial novelists are welcomed to write about their homeland and embellish it with authentic as well as exotic elements, such as dialects, idioms, or words used by natives, only on the premise that their writings cause no trouble to readers' comprehending the episode. Mechanics of symbolic exchange works in a way that writers are ordered freely to employ Chinese words in the novel; however, they need to explain non-Englishness in English. Otherwise, excuse will be made to rationalize reader's incomprehension. Based on the above-mentioned critics' receptions of the Chinese passages in *Breaking* in the previous section, I argue that Loh impedes the tacit understanding between the novelist and readers by manifesting that "incomprehensible stream of sound."<sup>14</sup> More than showcasing of Orientalism, the narrative strategy of using untranslated Chinese texts to describe the core episode of Claude's witness is to criticize the insidious violence in the global book market, where the use of non-English language in Anglophone novels must be presented as elements of exoticism without obstructing readers' comprehension of the episode, or as necessary compromise to embody a peculiar theme, such as the unspeakable terror.

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14. In light of "ongoing 'Anglo-Chinese' cultural syncretism," Sim Wai-chew in "Becoming Other: Literary Multilingualism in the Chinese Badlands" examines Chia Joo Ming's and Vyvyan Loh's experiments with mingled texts of English and Chinese in the critical episode in their novels, and maintains that language strategy can "act as a barrier to discourses of Chinese essentialism and exceptionalism that are themselves retroactive responses to Eurocentric hegemony" (5). Sim highlights the closing sentence "you will require another language" (Loh 489) and interprets "you" as the implied reader in English-speaking community. He suggests that *Breaking*, as published in the U.S., "[is] said to prompt movement beyond monolingualism," and "may be read along one vector of signification as pushing the objectives of the 'English plus' movement" (Sim 9). Contrary to Holden's criticism on Claude's recognizing Chinese culture, Sim regards Loh's novel as challenging language monism, especially in Singaporean context (11). He proposes a metaphor "Chinese badlands" to depict "what postcolonial literary scholars calls a 'metonymic gap', which refers to situations where writers using European languages insert un glossed words or phrases into a text" (12). Such Chinese badland writing is expected to unleash in particular diasporic or postcolonial novelists from being trapped in language-oriented localism (provided that they have nerve to mingle incongruous language with the metropolitan language), and thus to enable them to go beyond monolingualism and perform bordercrossing (Sim 14).

### A Singaporean Story in Broken Tongue

CLAUDE in his dream cuts off his tongue, tosses his tongue away and reflects on the remaining stub: “No miraculous new tongue will sprout in the old one’s place, no regeneration of what has been lost. Only a muteness—at best, a stunted form of speech” (488). In the end, Claude is not described as an overseas Chinese longing for returning to (cultural) China. His dream of breaking his tongue not only symbolizes his resistance to Englishness but also implies his inaccessibility to an “intact” Chineseness. The remaining stub of the tongue also signifies that Claude cannot completely release himself from the colonial influence, under which he tries to learn a new language. The tearing of Claude’s tongue is “both flesh and mind,” through which “identity decomposes and language disintegrates” (Athey 2008: 18). Claude symbolizes the hybrid identity of the immigrant’s descendant in the host land, an identity shaped by both the forefather’s land and the host land. Such a new identity responds to Loh’s quotation of Lee Kuan Yew in the *Front Matter*: “I may speak the English language better than the Chinese language because I learnt English early in life. But I will never be an Englishman in a thousand generations and I have not got the Western value system inside; mine is an Eastern value system. Nevertheless, I use Western concepts, Western words because I understand them. But I also have a different system in my mind” (Loh, *Front Matter*). The allusions to General Yue Fei and Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* are Loh’s response to what Lee called “an Eastern value system.” The theme of loyalty that General Yue’s story accentuates has two meanings when interpreted in the context of Loh’s homage to Lee’s statement. It on the one hand suggests to be engaged with the cultural value (devoting yourself to your country) passed on via cultural memory (in the form of Yue’s story), and on the other hand, it means to serve the country that is now the Republic of Singapore.

The new identity arises from the conflation of the Western language and the “Eastern value system.” This new identity also posits that although immigrants’ offspring have taken root in the new country, no longer diasporic, they exhibit an inclination of what David Der-wei Wang coins as post-loyalist [後遺民]. As Wang puts it, “The so-called ‘post’ not only implies the end of one generation, but also the lingering of that generation. [...] While the loyalist underpins a sign of temporal and spatial dislocation, ‘post’-loyalist dissolves such dislocation, or even revives such dislocation. Both are the fiercest mocking at any newly ‘imagined community’” (25; translation mine). Claude—growing up in an Anglophile Chinese family—is used as a symbol, which together with his acquisition of the Western language and “Eastern value system,” indicates the lingering of British colonialism in Singapore and the earliest diasporic Chinese forefather’s loyalty to China. The remains of both forces—*British Empire* and *Chinese Empire*—confront the definition of the identity of the Republic of *Singapore*.

As a novel with historical consciousness, *Breaking* is concerned with how history has been written and transmitted. Explicit descriptions of corporeal mutilation and rape serve more than as spectacles to allure readers. Loh’s narrative techniques guide readers to experience the torture Claude the Body has undergone and witness

Ling-li's final moment of life. The split of Claude's voice and Claude the Body creates a narrative space for Claude's monologue. By addressing his body as "you," Claude maintains his authority over his body because now the body is listening to himself, instead of the Japanese interrogator. In addition, the employment of the second person point of view compels readers to suffer, move, and act like Claude the Body. The distance between readers and the narrated event is blurred; readers are taken into the scene of torture.

When we read/hear Claude's monologue, we read at the same time these past events [*gushi* (故事)] of Claude, Ling-li, and Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Consequently, it is not Claude but we readers that bear witness to the traumatic period. History needs to be passed on, but how? Rather than a concrete and tangible object for us to access and to locate, history is composed of numerous past events that have been remembered. Ling-li does not address Claude alone; she also addresses us when she says, "If you won't remember and record this, who will? This is how our history starts and is transmitted, [...] Witness and transmission of story. 事實的見證和傳述是歷史" (480).

見證 [*Jianzheng*], witness, is composed of two verbs; first is to see, and the second is to prove and to testify. 傳述 [*Chuanshu*], transmission, is also a compound of 傳/spread and 述/narrate. 歷史 [*Lishi*], history, is pronounced like 歷時 [*Lishi*], chronological and linear order. In Ling-li's words, history is "[w]itness and transmission of *story*" (480; emphasis added). Comparing this phrase with its Chinese version ("事實的見證和傳述是歷史")——歷史 (history) is the witness and transmission of 事實 (fact; emphasis added), we can see the boundary between story/fiction and history/fact is blurred; the two permeate into each other. Claude never truly sees in person how Ling-li is humiliated in the cell next to his; he only hears a woman's screaming. Despite the fact that most critics tend to interpret the woman's scream as Ling-li's (Athey; Tong; McWilliams), we can still regard the scream as belonging to another nameless female detainer, or it can be interpreted as Claude's imagination of the scene of rape from the screams he heard.

The narrator addresses "you" at the end of the novel:

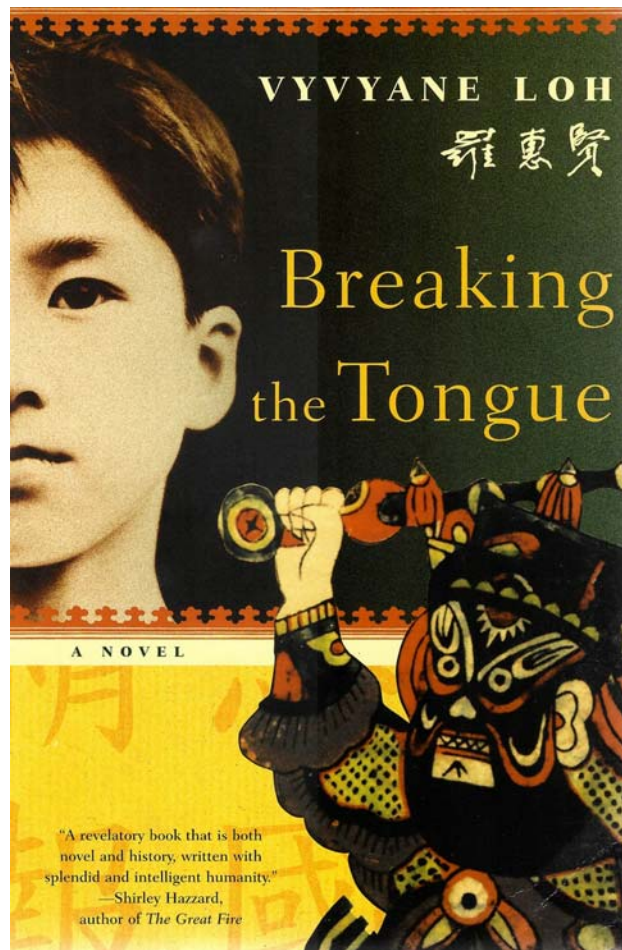
What have you learned? If nothing else, this: That Ling-li is not dead, not really. Words, history, narrative can all be manipulated. And if you don't want her dead, then *it's time to resurrect her, time to defy and outdo the construct once again*, but *this time* you have to be patient. *This time* you will have to out-write death, and for that you will require a lifetime. You will require another language. (489; emphasis original)

Claude's repetitive nightmares about the yellow alligator and Ling-li can be interpreted as post-traumatic stress disorder. Referring to Freud's elaboration on the Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth further analyzes the relationship between the repetitive vision of the traumatic event and survival. Caruth argues that trauma is incomprehensible because when it happens, the mind has not been ready to grasp "a stimulus that comes too quickly;" "the threat



is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*" (62; emphasis original). Thus the repetitive nightmares of the traumatic event are not the unmediated connection to that trauma because that trauma can never be fully known in the first place.

Claude's dreams—in a sense like the act of resurrecting Ling-li—and the reader's choice to resurrect Ling-li exemplify the survivor's living. Survivor's living is regarded as the repetitive attempt to access the "missing" of the trauma; in Caruth words, "the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life" (62; emphasis original). Ling-li's Singaporean story can be recreated in different versions each time when she is resurrected. Her resurrection enables her story to be spread and narrated in the linear flow of the river of history so that the postgeneration of the victims can still be witness. Historical novels move freely between fiction and fact, and hence create an imaginary space to allow the "monster that is history" (Wang 2004) to emerge from the language in Loh's novel.



\* Book cover of Vyvyan Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine how Vyvyane Loh's contemplation on the national identity of Singapore is exemplified through cultural memory and violence that are made tangible in the moment of the national upheaval. Violence in *Breaking the Tongue* makes possible the representation of trauma and allows readers to experience the cruelty of war. Violence also serves as the narratological strategy to evoke cultural memory. References to Chinese culture and Chinese classics constitute the cultural memory in this novel, by which Claude survives Sook Ching, and in the end recognizes and reshapes his identity. Another character, Ling-li, is characterized as the follower of General Yue Fei's legacy of loyalty, strengthening the connection between ethnic Chinese and the Chinese culture. Although such connection incurs criticisms on Loh's reiteration of the national ideology for her remodeling Claude as his ethnicity determines, it also invites reflection on whether Chineseness becomes an unbreakable burden for ethnic Chinese in Singaporean context.

Keywords: *Breaking the Tongue*, cultural memory, violence, Chineseness

## 羅惠賢《斷語》中文化記憶與暴力之具現

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### 摘要

本文探討羅惠賢如何藉由書寫國家動亂時的文化記憶與暴力，來示現她對新加坡國家認同的思考。《斷語》中呈現的暴力情節與細述得以再現創傷，並且讓讀者經歷戰爭的殘酷。「暴力」同時也做為喚起文化記憶的敘事學策略。小說中的文化記憶大量參照中華古典文化，主角柯拉德(Claude)以此撐過日軍施行的「肅清」政策，並在書末重塑他的身分認同。另一個主角伶俐(Ling-li)則是被塑造成岳飛將軍忠義傳統的追隨者，藉此強化中華族裔與中華文化的連結。縱然這樣的連結招致評論者對羅惠賢的批評，認為她單以柯拉德的族裔身分來重塑他的身分認同，是重述國家欲推行的意識型態；但同時也邀請讀者思考，在新加坡的脈絡中，中華性是否已成為華裔身上一個無法斷開的負擔。

關鍵詞：《斷語》、文化記憶、暴力、中華性

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