On First Looking into Keats’ “To Autumn”

By Boey Kim Cheng

It is the end of the tourist season in Leh. The harvest is done, the barley and wheat bound and stored, and the sun has become muted, an incipient chill in the air. From the Shanti Stupa there is a sweeping view of the plains below: the Van Gogh yellow stubble fields, the flat-roofed houses, and Leh in the shadow of the crumbling Shey Palace.

I am walking around the stupa, the scenes of the Buddha’s life unreeling on the four sides. Instead of thinking about the Buddha, I am chanting the famous mantra from Keats: “O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts,” slipping into ‘To Autumn’ as the sun finally clears the eastern rim of mountains and turns everything below to a living gold.

Yesterday in the Jigmet Guest House, while Dorje the ex-Indian army owner was sweeping the courtyard where the flowers were putting on a late-summer flourish, and intoning a Buddhist mantra, the words mesmerisingly exhaled, I found a copy of Keats among the books left behind by the guests. It had the famous profile sketch of the poet by Charles Brown on its cover. It has been years since I read Keats but he has always been there, like an abiding faith that in a strange circuitous way has brought me to this place, on this journey. At fourteen I encountered “To Autumn” and it proved a turning point in my life.

The poem has been seen as a summing up, a culmination of a lifetime’s (brief though it was) enquiry. For me it was my first encounter with Poesy, with a world that seemed so remote and so real, a world to which I knew I was called at once and embraced like home. If I had not written any poem, it would have been a high point just to have read it. The poem was a result of having lived in the world, and a farewell to it; at the same time it was a world unto itself, inhabiting fully its autumnal canvas, richer than any Constable painting. It was elegiac without being an elegy, possessing all the poignancy of the farewell motif in Mahler’s lieder and symphonies, but its pathos is restrained; it carries the weight of a lifetime’s experience and the gravity of death but it also breathes a hard-earned grace and lightness.

Edward Hirsch says that poems that speak to us are like a message in a bottle, destined only for our eyes. “To Autumn” found its way to my lonely shore and changed my life as no other poem has done. My life can be divided into pre-“To Autumn” and post-“To Autumn.” I was in Secondary Two in Victoria School, where the curricular emphasis leaned heavily towards science and maths. In the mid-year examinations I had topped the top class in both subjects as well as in the total average. I was picked out for praise by the form teacher, who having discovered the adverse family circumstances I toiled in, lauded me all the more. I must admit that there was a fleeting sense of triumph in outshining the more privileged pupils, and a perverse pleasure in suppressing any elated response to the praise. But this faded too soon and the emptiness came back. I didn’t quite fit in. Science, maths, technology weren’t quite my calling, and I was beginning to see them as being responsible for the materialistic and despoiled world that I saw around me.

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It was in October that year that "To Autumn" literally drifted like a leaf into my hands. My sister was studying *Rhyme and Reason*, then the curricular poetry anthology for the GCE "O" Levels, and she was leafing through the poems in the upper bunk bed. A few pages had detached themselves from the binding and one landed on me. I read the poem and didn't quite understand what it was. The season was foreign to me and so was the language.

My sister was equally at a loss. I read it a few times and something moved in me. It was starting to say something and I tried paraphrasing it for my sister but it didn't make sense. I couldn't decode the bars of music encrypted in the poem, like an alien radio wave that had beamed its light into my universe. I wrote out another paraphrase which didn't enlighten my sister one iota.

So for the following weeks I carried the poem in my head. It was growing roots that sent a life-altering substance into my bloodstream. There wasn't any Keats in the dim grottoes of the school library (it had a cavernous feel about it, dark worn floorboards seeming to absorb the light from open shutters). This prompted my first visit to the National Library. I was registered as a member and issued four user cards. In the pre-computer days, each book carried an identification card in the insert at the back of the book. There was a certain pleasure derived from watching the adept librarian retrieve your name from the drawers of tightly slotted borrower cards arranged according to due dates. The fingers would flick through the dog-eared edges, till it located the right borrower.

It was a rite of passage, my entry into the adult section. I was crossing a threshold, taking the first step, the beginning of a departure from what I was being schooled to pursue.

There was an Oxford University Press edition of the Complete Poems, a red library binding with the paperback cover of the Severn sketch of Keats glued on the front. Next to it was the Robert Gittings biography with a full portrait on the cover. It was a momentous encounter, akin to meeting the poet in flesh and blood. I had entered a literary world that utterly displaced the faded knowledge of the Tang poets and Lu Hsun I had devoured in primary school. I coveted those books and began searching for them in the bookstores. In those days, besides the Stamford MPH, there weren't many places where you could find non-curricular poetry books. The bookstores on Bras Basah Road had the Oxford editions of Shelley and Wordsworth but not Keats. On a hot Saturday afternoon, I stumbled on the Oxford University Bookstore across from the MacDonald House and Keller Piano. It was on a street of arched and colonnaded shophouses clustered around Penang Lane called the Amber Mansions, and next to it was the thrillingly dissonant and strikingly blue Sivan temple whose *puja* bells were the only spiritual sounds on the commercial thoroughfare of Orchard Road. I knew I had found Keats, one of the rare moments in life when you know exactly what is going to happen next. Strangely the bookstore had swing doors, and the ceiling fans worked feverishly. The books were mostly slightly aged academic texts and the salesgirl seemed lost and lonely in there. In hindsight, the bookstore and the other shops around Dhoby Ghaut must have been served notices to relocate and were wrapping up their businesses. Keats was there, *The Complete Poems* and so was the Gittings biography.

For days afterwards I underlined whole passages, using Gittings's book as a guide. The life and the work came together, and for the first time I felt close to somebody who, though so far away in time and space, became an exemplar, a model of integrity and sensuous thoughtfulness that left me lamenting the death of one so long dead. The mourning period lasted a while, taking me further from the classroom, its competitive stress, the clutches of maths and the sciences. It impressed indelibly upon me the tragic destiny of the true poet. I took the axioms in the letters and poems to heart: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," "What the Imagination seizes as beauty must be Truth." There was very little beauty around me; my family lived in a two-room flat with mahjong tiles clacking and slamming in one of the rooms. But somehow those
words held out a whiff of salvation, a promised land of the imagination that would someday turn into reality.

I forced parallels between my childhood and Keats's, imitated his handwriting and its tilted cursive, and considered using “Junkets” as pen-name when I became famous; this was a nickname coined by Leigh Hunt due to Keats' Cockneyish pronunciation of his name, and used by Keats in a letter to Hunt dated 10 May 1817. I copied out the poems assiduously, just as Keats wrote out his favourite poems for his friends. I read the excerpts from the letters in the biography and recited the axioms on life and writing as my own catechism of poetic faith. Keats' "Vale of Tears" credo became my religion, and still informs the little belief that has survived. "To Autumn," I think, saved me, and that is no exaggeration. I read everything that left a mark on Keats: Spenser, Milton, Chatterton, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt and King Lear. I tried to feel the vertigo Keats felt reading Edgar's description of the drop from the cliff to the heaving sea below. And what would I not have given to watch Edmund Kean on stage as Hamlet?

When I figured out for myself what was happening in the poem, after ploughing through the lines over and over instead of doing my calculus and committing to memory chemistry formulae, I was totally converted. I had been trying too hard to see what it was trying to do – all those infinitives and continuous verbs, clausal chains, the unfolding actions, all the imagery and cadences. Then I started listening and saw what it was not doing. It was not making any point, resisting drawing a moral perspective from Nature which can be deployed in the face of death. It is a poem delighting in the expanded moment of lyric time. It is a moment of pause, of stocktaking and measuring one's finitude against Nature's infinite ability to renew itself. It is impossible not to feel the gentle power of the lyric music and the silence beneath or after.

The poem also started a longing to escape and a revolt against the establishment. What did the poem mean to a boy in the sweltering tropics? The season and landscape were foreign yet they beckoned like home. Mist and mellow fruitfulness. I looked for these things, for evidence to match the poem's realities, to explain why the foreign poem and season had started to mean so much to me. I imagined deciduous shades; the red tints in the angasana and the tembusu and flame of the forest were sufficient to turn them autumnal. The balding sports field was dressed in Van Gogh sheafs of corn yellow. My fevered imagination welcomed the monsoon rains as a boon; the mist and mellowness became easier to conjure. The sparrows flitting in and out of the eaves of the school building and occasionally darting through the classroom, courting death from the ceiling fans, were ethereal couriers from Keats' world. I visualised the lines as my maths teacher scratched out some calculus formula on the board and broke yet another whole chalk. Inside a revolt was brewing. I wrote out "What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth" and pasted it on the wall next to my bed. Instead of the algebraic formulae I was supposed to memorise, I found myself reiterating mantras like “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.” They were huge abstractions and no amount of reasoning could reduce them to comprehensibility. Over and over I recited the melodious lines of the odes, as though the beauty and truth they enshrined would turn into reality. I was practising the art of escape, the deliberate disorientation of the senses that Rimbaud advocates: "I accustomed myself to simple hallucinations: I saw quite plainly a mosque in place of a factory, a drummers' school built by angels, carriages on the highways of the sky, a drawing-room at the bottom of a lake.” I could abolish the whole class, banish my fear of having been found negligent in my school work.

What is the cosine of... The finger was pointing at me.

I fumbled a reply. I who had scored top grades for maths was now hopelessly entangled in formulae and figures, clearly out of my depth in the elite class. There would be fail grades to follow.

After a humiliating admission of ignorance, I dug deeper into the
drowsy poppy fumes. What is that figure in the middle stanza?

*Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?*

She must be an answer, the key to unlock the secrets of this ravishing music. *La Belle Dame sans Merci hath thee in thrall.*

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I began to feel like an outsider in school. Part of me longed to share my discoveries with other souls. I picked out those whom I thought could be lured out of the system. I instigated a club, called *The Green Apples* (that I hoped would ripen like those in the poem) and adopted ”Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty” as our motto. It was a valiant but doomed effort to promote Keats and the arts in a hostile environment. The recruits were coaxed into joining, more out of curiosity than any real literary interests. They were scholarship material, and all would go on to occupy key positions in the navy, army and officialdom. Some of my passion communicated itself to Beng, a future navy commander, who at some stage managed to recite a few lines of Keats and Wordsworth assigned to him. Ken was the intellect in the group who pursued the meaning of each word and line but could not quite appreciate the whole picture. Fong brought his calculus homework to the few meetings and was interested only in Dostoevsky and excited by the discovery that anything was possible.

But they had enough of literature; they had been drilled thoroughly in the answers to the popular questions relating to the GCE "O" Level texts, *Julius Caesar* and *Twentieth-Century Short Stories*. At one stage I thought enlisting some girls would hold the group together and add feminine intuition. We were a boys’ school and the only other talk aside from getting As was girls from the girls’ schools.

I was at the time one of those selected to do a third language and went to a Japanese class twice a week. There were girls there, from different schools. I was attracted to one demure, wan beautiful girl. She and two other dreamy ones I identified as being most likely to aid my cause and invited them to our meeting. It was a fiasco. While I held forth on Keats and the Romantic philosophy and imposed an intimidating reading schedule, the boys were totally focussed on the girls. The futility of my mission became apparent. The group dissolved, the only good result being the pairing of the girls and boys who had better things to achieve than listen to me preaching Keats’s precepts and be converted to the idea that poetry, not maths or science, was going to save us all.

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Inevitably I was summoned to the school office to see the vice-principal. The teachers could not understand how my grades could have declined so drastically. The vice-principal was also our maths teacher, a spry, wiry man, a Chinese Humphrey Bogart, hair combed back and brilliantined. I always admired his gleaming black shoes. He doubled up as a PE teacher and coach for the soccer team. He would be in the same attire – pressed black slacks and white short sleeves, illustrating dribbling and shooting with his gleaming leather shoes.

He was smoking, like my father inhaling so deeply that you could hear the rasp of the tobacco and paper. I noted that he smoked Consulate, a brand favoured by my father.

Now, is there anything troubling you, young man? Your marks for all the subjects have dropped. And you look distracted all the time, especially during my maths class.

Sir, I have lost interest in science and math.

So what are you interested in?
Poetry. I want to be a poet. It came out, though I knew how absurd it would sound.

Can you make a living from that? You can become an engineer, a doctor, a scientist, a successful person, a useful person, as most of your class will be, if you work hard on your math and science. You are not going to get a job as a poet. What will your parents think? They will be very disappointed.

I wanted to tell him about Keats, about my father, the Vale of Tears, Negative Capability, how these insights were more valuable to me than algebraic formulae. Outside on the field the school hockey team had started training. A class monitor knocked timidly on the door and was told to come back later.

You know, there is poetry in math. Look at how it all works out, balances, the harmony, the order. Pay more attention, forget poetry for a while. Treat it as a hobby. You will regret it if you neglect your math, young man.

I am mesmerised; the dragon coil of smoke, the way he flicked the ash into the ashtray, the flaring nostrils as he inhaled, the slight wince of the eyes as the smoke rushed in, all suddenly made him my father's stand-in.

Young man, you are in a top class in a top school. You were a top student not so long ago. Don't let your parents down.

I wanted to tell him about how it didn't matter; my father wasn't there, and Mum was too busy making ends meet to care. It was hard to dislike him. He represented the old world, the way he dressed and talked.

He stubbed out his second cigarette and I knew the interview was over.

I wasn't the defiant sort. I promised to be more diligent, to take the formulae as they were dealt out, without questioning the why and wherefore of each symbol, repressing the urge to yell out at the class that all this blind learning, all the preparations for examinations, all this ambition was worth nothing next to an axiom from John Keats.

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I vowed after reading Gittings' biography to write all the poems I was meant to write by the age of twenty-five and then say farewell to life. But at eighteen, all that went on the backburner, as I was called up for National Service; as soon as I put on the uniform and had my head shaved, Keats and company were banished from my life. The reality was too desolating, crushing; there was simply no place in the army for the imagination. It was too incongruent, the world of the imagination and the deadening routine of the military. In those two-and-a-half years, I don't think I read any poem. It was a sort of limbo, if not an inferno at its worst, and I had to suffer it till it passed. Wilfred Owen and the war poets didn't help; there was no war and camp life took away the capacity to feel, to think and to write. The poetic measures got drowned out beneath the barking orders, the drills, the shooting and shelling, and the numbing repetition.

But Keats and poetry didn't go away totally. They were in a hiding place, waiting patiently like the gleaner in the ode for the day of my discharge and return. The poems were incubating, hidden to survive the war. And when poetry did come back after discharge, it came back in the form of soldiering poems about the army routine, the most unpoetic of subjects. Strangely they were the first real poems I wrote.

So Keats knew better. The last stanza of "To Autumn" is about endurance, living out the duration, outlasting the unceasing succession of frenetic activities in the first stanza. It isn't stoicism or resignation, but something more tentative, fragile. In hindsight,
it was the precious granary of Keats' axioms which sustained me through the army days. Soul-making involves undergoing tribulations, the battering of body and mind: drill, forced march, trench-digging, taking apart weapons and reassembling them in meaningless repetition, denying yourself poetry, having to shut yourself from the imaginary world you had so painstakingly created. Those two-and-a-half years probably made me a stronger person, if not a better poet, though the corporeal and psychological punishment, the interminable boredom is not something I would wish on anybody or voluntarily undergo if I were eighteen again and had the choice.

I finally saw Keats after completing National Service. It was a pilgrimage conceived before the army days. The first stop was the Piazza di Spagna, the Keats-Shelley Memorial House, where Keats died, far from home. In the 1820s, it was the hub of affordable accommodations for the Grand Tourists. Now the broad curved terraces are littered with the romantic young, busking, cuddling and kissing in the spring sunshine. After surviving the importunate attentions of gypsy kids with their pieces of cardboard, a thieving trick well known to the tourist in Rome, my friend Kelvin and I made our way past the boat-shaped Bernini fountain with its lions at prow and stern and entered the shrine.

The air in the Salone was a sombre change from the animated public space outside. There was a huge library, eleven thousand titles in all, including many first editions. The Salone was partitioned into two in 1821, so that Keats and Severn could have three rooms facing the street and the landlady could have three at the back. In the landlady's back room, there was a bust of Shelley, whose affection and admiration for Keats was never reciprocated. That the two most Romantic of the English poets should end up in the Eternal City – their locks of hair here and the bodily remains in the Protestant Cemetery – is a literary miracle that has generated a critical industry. After reading "Adonais," Shelley's elegy to Keats which gestured to his own death in its imagery, I had become enamoured of Shelley and sought to reconcile the two and interpret Keats' antipathy towards his future neighbour-in-death as hiding a deeper affinity. A photograph of myself at fifteen shows a wan young man in a melancholy pose beside an altar set up on a desk. On the wall are cut-out portraits of Keats and Shelley. But while my devotion to Keats has lasted, my Shelley phase has passed and it is with wonder that I look back at the fourteen-or-fifteen-year-old programmatically plodding through all the ambitious didactic works like "Hellas," "Prometheus Unbound" and "Queen Mab."

There were other relics and mementoes: fragments of Shelley's bones, a carnival mask Byron had bought in Venice, the letters of Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, the Browningins, and then Keats' letters, the first editions of "Lamia" and "Hyperion," and the death mask. In 1941, the exhibits were packed and carted off to Montecassino, when it was thought that the monastery would provide a safe sanctuary, if the war should come to Rome.

In front was the Severn room, the sitting room where Severn had slept to be close to his dying friend. There was the life-mask of Keats that Benjamin Robert Haydon did. I could picture Severn standing at the connecting door, watchful, or moving into Keats' room, to warm the supper at the fireplace, above which hung the famous portrait of Keats by Robert Hayden. In the corner of the Keats room was a carved mahogany single sleigh bed (almost like the "Sopha Bed" in the Hampstead House) and adjacent to it the death-mask looked up in a glass case. Above the bed hovered Severn's famous last sketch of his dying friend. There were two casement windows looking out onto the Piazza and the Scalinata, onto the Spanish Steps where the mostly young were in the summer of their lives and loves, all smiles, caresses and kisses. In 1821, instead of Vespas and the amorous and fashionable, there were horses, goats and artists. Keats must have stood here at the window, before the last days, perhaps fingering the lock of hair Fanny Brawne had given him. Fanny, the longing in his heart, the pain of unfulfilled promise, the autumn that had come and
gone too soon.

I recalled the descriptions of his last days, the sweat, blood, the wasting and the night-watch Severn kept. But instead of the struggle, the wrenching wait for the end, it was a kind of serenity that breathed in these two rooms. It exuded the calmness of the ode and the acceptance with which Keats had received the sight of the first drops of blood. It happened after riding on top of a coach in severely cold weather (he could not afford to ride inside). As they were about to retire for the night, Brown noticed his friend was looking very poorly and coughing. Keats held the candle to the drop of blood and said: "I know the colour of that blood; − it is arterial blood; − I cannot be deceived in that colour; − that drop of blood is my death-warrant; − I must die."

It wasn't the musty odour of sanctity that shrines emanate. It was autumnal air, the serenity of the ode having found a permanent apotheosis. I felt him here, the quiet aura, something that I didn't find in Hampstead House which I would visit years later. Something about the eternal stones of this city answering the autumnal colours. Perhaps Keats' Protestant soul had found a home here in a Papist environment. In the few moments in that tiny room, I sensed the suffering, but also the shirking of any heroics, the ultimate test of a writer's life.

It felt strange to return to the siesta mood of the Piazza outside, to the dance of life. We were shoe-stringing it and decided to walk to the Protestant Cemetery with just a rudimentary map drawn by the patrician caretaker at the Keats-Shelley house. Reaching the Pantheon we were hijacked by the members of the Communist Party who exhorted us to march with them. We didn't know what the cause was, but a Che look-alike signalled for us to boost the numbers and started telling us about his travels in Asia. By the time we disengaged from the revolution, we had drifted away from our goal, St Peters looming into view. After regaining our bearings, we were frantic; the afternoon was sliding away, the shadows had lengthened noticeably.

Our spirits lifted when we saw the anomalous pyramid of Caius Cestius. But there was no cemetery in sight. We wandered up and down the cypress-lined street next to the Porta S. Paolo. Admitting defeat we approached an old man inching along arthritically with his cane.

Scusi, dov'e Protestant Cemetery?

There was a faint gleam in his eyes, and gesturing us to follow him, he made towards a door in the wall and pushed it open, the briskness belying the pained steps we saw earlier. Inside was an oasis of quiet: mournful cypresses, tidy lawns and well-maintained graves. Even the sky wore a rinsed blue here. The year before his own death and burial, Shelley had visited Keats and written: "It might make one in love with death, to be buried in so sweet a place." The old man pointed to a commemorative plaque on the wall and then the graves.

The headstone bore a bas relief of a lyre and perhaps the most poignant tomb inscription:

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This Grave
contains all that was mortal
Of
YOUNG ENGLISH POET
who
on his Death Bed
in the Bitterness of his Heart
at the Malicious Power of his Enemies
Desired
these words to be engraved on his Tomb Stone

"Here lies One
whose name was writ in Water.

Feb 24th 1821
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Keats wanted only the phrase “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” The phrase is thought to be taken from Beaumont and Fletcher’s Philaster (“all your better deeds/ Shall be in water writ”). The rest of the inscription was added by Joseph Severn and Charles Brown. Both believed Keats had been wronged by both the critics and the executor of his grandparents’ estate, but it was bitterness that Keats did not express himself. Later they would come to regret the addition.

Next to Keats was Severn’s headstone, with the relief of a palette and brush. Two paces behind rested the smaller stone of Severn’s infant son. Severn had served as the British Consul in Rome for forty years after Keats’ death and had requested to be buried next to his friend.

We were young and fresh out of the army and had two-and-a-half years of pent emotions that welled up now; we sat on a wooden bench, crying silently for Keats, for ourselves, for all the pain that we saw ourselves suffering in the future as rejected artists.

Then two black cats strolled out of nowhere; one spread itself before Severn while the other nuzzled against Keats and lay curled around the headstone.

Our tears stopped. I dismissed immediately the idea of Keats and Severn being reincarnated, but it was impossible not to take it as a sign, a kind of epiphany.

We left, lightened, and strangely at peace with each other and the world. We had forgotten all about Shelley’s grave.

Someone is singing in the fields. In Leh you hear the sound of running water everywhere, voluble rills issuing from the snowmelt. In front a Himalayan magpie bisects the air. A wizened old man in a goncho robe, his tanned face so nobly creased that I want to draw it, greets me with “Julley,” the all-purpose Ladakhi salute, and goes on sweeping the leaves.

In a letter written around the time “To Autumn” was composed, Keats had written: “Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire ‘tis said I once had – the fact is perhaps I have: But instead of that I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power . . . . I want to compose without this fever.” I too have lost the fire, the ecstasy that I felt in my twenties, when each poem arrived. And the faith in poetry, in writing has somehow shrivelled, the faith that it can somehow redeem our lives, help us find our way through the Vale of Tears.

Reading “To Autumn” again, I feel these harvested golden fields take on an emblematic reality. There is a peace that surpasses understanding, in what is around me, in the poem, and in me. It will be a kind of death for me, emigrating, a farewell to what I have known all my life, and inshallah, it will also be a dying into something new. All that is required is ripeness, to use the word from King Lear that affected Keats so much. The poem is a song of farewell, even as it is about the arrival of autumn. Like Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, it prolongs, or rather freezes the moment of parting, and catches life in all its poignant and fleeting beauty.

My debt to the ode and Keats will remain and accumulate and may someday eventuate in an autumnal ode of my own. But in a subtle and inexorable way, I have already begun to discharge the debt. All that I have written, whatever work of value I have done, stems from reading it. All my seasons have been immeasurably enriched by this one poem, and the harvest is not finished, I feel. It has brought me to this place and point in my life, where I stand and gaze at the Stok range ringing Leh, the natural kindness and beauty of the Ladakhi faces, holding the moment a bit longer before I let it go.
This essay is part of an essay collection entitled ‘Between Stations’ which is scheduled to be published by Giramondo later this year.

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About Boey Kim Cheng
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