



Upper School Summer Reading 2021 Guidelines and Guiding Questions

Only translations can expand the literary horizon, open doors, and knock down walls.

- Jhumpa Lahiri

Once again, all Upper School students will be reading the same selection for summer reading. This year's main text is a slim volume titled [*19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*](#), compiled and with additional commentary by Eliot Weinberger. The core of this text is a single four-line poem by the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei, presented in its original Chinese script, transliterated into pronounceable English, and then translated into English, French, Spanish, and German by over two dozen different poets and translators. Weinberger's commentary focuses on the act of translation, what is gained or lost across the different versions, and how readers encounter this poem in notably distinct ways depending on the individual, sometimes idiosyncratic, choices of each translator.

This year the summer reading collaboration is between the English and Language Departments. The primary theme upon which discussion and assessment for this year's text will be focused is, naturally, *translation*. In addition to reading and discussing the poem in English classes, students will also explore the mechanics, methodology, and even metaphysics of translating a poem from one language (Chinese, French, Spanish, Latin) into another as part of their coursework studying world languages.

A second text is also required for this year's Summer Reading: Matthew Zapruder's [*Why Poetry*](#), which offers detailed insight on how versified communication stands apart from all other modes of human discourse. This book will supplement the Wang Wei text, but also be used more extensively in English classes this year, as part of a special emphasis on the genre of poetry during the 2021-2022 school year.

Guiding Questions

1. In addition to Wang Wei's original script, why do you think Weinberger includes a transliteration of the poem on p.7? For readers unfamiliar with the Chinese language, what is gained from being able to pronounce the words of the poem?



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2. On p.9 a word-by-word translation of the poem is offered, with multiple choices for some words. Using this methodology of translation as a guide, would you feel comfortable / confident in producing your own version of the poem?
3. Why do you think Weinberger selected this Wang Wei poem in particular? Are there any features of it that make it interesting to analyze across multiple translations?
4. What are some consistencies and some differences that you notice across translations as versions of it appear over time. Do the more recent versions contain any notable elements missing from the earlier translations?
5. Does the translator's nationality or gender (though most represented here are men) make any difference in how the poem is translated? In particular, do those from Wang Wei's native China take a different approach to the poem than those who are from Western countries and who approach the poem as a second language?
6. Select the version of the poem that is most readable, interesting, or appealing to you. What is it about this translation that stands out? Is there any other version of the poem that you would feel comfortable saying that your choice is objectively superior than in terms of translation?
7. If you are able to read one of the versions in a language other than English (including the original Chinese, but also German, Spanish, and French), try working through your own translation of the poem into English. Is there any word or phrase that is particularly challenging to translate from this poem?
8. What aspects of translation does Weinberger focus on in his commentaries for each version of the text? Do you strongly agree or disagree with him about a point he makes for any particular translation?
9. Who is the intended audience of this text? Aside from students assigned to read it for school, who else might seek out a text that considers multiple versions of a single passage or snapshot of translation?
10. Reflect on the phrase "lost in translation"; having read this single poem now in multiple versions and across languages, do you feel like you have a full sense of Wang Wei's purpose in writing the poem? Is there any aspect of the text that you feel is ultimately unknowable because you are reading it in translation?