

A Murmuration of Diaspora

Teresa Chan

Migration and adaptation are things I share in common with other living creatures on Earth. Hong Kong, where I was born and grew up, has important and vulnerable wetlands that provide necessary stopover and wintering habitats for tens of millions of waterbirds. Moving to Canada feels forcefully like a habitat loss, and I must migrate for survival.

As a non-native English speaker, I struggle to communicate in Canada every day. I have social anxiety, but I find comfort in nature—taking a walk and watching different birds come and go. I do not know what the birds are saying, but I feel a sense of connection. I found myself moved by Indigenous singing, whether during my stay in Taiwan or Canada, even though I do not know their languages. That has inspired me to explore non-verbal ways of communicating and to reconfigure my sense of self.

A Murmuration of Diaspora (呢喃：驪歌) explores the natural and cultural significance of birds through a theatrical art presentation, including staged photography and sound performance, alongside paper-and-ink art and public engagement. The project reflects East Asian cultures and worldviews, as well as the religious upbringing, education, and experiences of displacement that have shaped my perception.

A murmuration is a flock of common starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), also known as European starlings in North America, flying in synchronized waves. This species is native to Europe and West Asia, and winters in North Africa and the Middle East. The common starling is known for being highly vocal and adaptable. Introduced to Canada, it is now regarded as an invasive species, which can be seen as a metaphor for non-Indigenous settlers. There is no one single, agreed-upon explanation for the complex murmuration behaviour. This reminds me that humans cannot be omniscient and should acknowledge the limits of human understanding, staying humble as part of nature.

I became a birdwatcher in university. Every birding adventure left lasting memories in my life, whether in Asia or Africa. Before moving to Canada, however, I had never been to North America. I had longed to see a murmuration, and finally, I got a chance to witness one in downtown Toronto. Starling murmuration usually occurs shortly before sunset in late fall. This fascinating phenomenon marks the seasonal changes of the year.

The Murmurer (低語者) is an installation and performative work. I created a performative persona (They/Them) with birdlike features to juxtapose differences and contradictions as an inseparable togetherness: human and non-human, security and freedom, wish and reality, and nature and culture. The bird-person persona wears feathers made from rice-paper strips for writing wishes. During the Japanese Star Festival (Japanese: Tanabata; Mandarin: 七夕) in July, people write their wishes on paper strips known as *tanzaku* and hang them on bamboo branches. It is the time to pay respects and remember friends and

family members who have died. In Chinese ancestral worship, paper strips are burned as offerings known as joss paper (Mandarin: 祀紙). The paper feathers are light, yet they carry weighty wishes.

The handmade birdcage helmet nests various symbolic meanings open to interpretation. For me, it is about the suffering and mindfulness of a practitioner (修行者). *The Murmurer* “vocalizes” through body movement and percussion instruments—the live sound performance at the opening is designed to create non-verbal dialogues and to celebrate ephemeral encounters with the audience.

The Murmurs (呢喃) is an abstract “drawing” that depicts a flock of birds in the sky, created by repeatedly stamping *Hiragana* (Japanese phonetic characters) while praying the mantra from the *Lotus Sūtra*—*Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō* (Mandarin: 南無妙法蓮華經; Japanese: なむみょうほうれんげきょう). My parents taught me the *Lotus Sūtra* when I was little.

In November 2025, while I was preparing my work for the *Diaspora Climate* exhibition, Hong Kong suffered its deadliest fire in years, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. Stamping the seven words from the mantra in sequence became a daily practice of mourning and prayer that lasted for months, to address my feeling of hopelessness about what was happening in my life, in my hometown, and in the world. During a murmuration, each starling responds to its seven nearest neighbours. Seven is a special number in Buddhism. I embodied it through the seven-word mantra and the origami birds.



Teresa Chan. *The Murmurs* (呢喃). Digital image. 2025.

The Ripples (驪歌) are created through *Suminagashi* (Japanese paper marbling) to represent the spreading of water/sound waves that carry all murmurs, wishes, and blessings. I am drawn to the philosophy of eternal recurrence as articulated in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I also draw inspiration from the concept of *samsāra*—the endless cycle of rebirth driven by karma, and from *enso*—a circle symbol of wholeness and completion in Buddhism, both of which have profoundly influenced me. Concentric circles, the cyclical and rhythmic workings of nature, and the perception of all things as an interconnected whole are my primary motifs for expressing struggle and quiet resilience.

Welcome to our murmurations!

— **Teresa Chan**

She/Her

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