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Compromises in Translating Wu Ming-Yi's Uncompromising Localism

Darryl Sterk

This is a brief meditation by Wu Ming-Yi's English translator on Wu Ming-Yi's approach to writing about his homeland and what it means for translation and world literature. I do not imagine he set out to write world literature, or something that would translate into world literature. As far as I can tell, the international recognition he has gotten since the publication of his *The Man with the Compound Eyes* in English translation has not had any effect on how he writes about Taiwan in the world. He continues to write about Taiwan in the same way, including, without explanation, details that for a local audience immediately evoke the locality of Taiwan and Taiwan localities but which are impossible or at least very hard to translate. The details he includes do not seem like "local color," by which I mean relatively superficial images that are supposedly representative of a place, if a place is viewed through the eyes of a tourist. The details he includes are part of an uncompromising localism that a translator has to deal with without making too many compromises.

The author who writes to be translated may be a myth, but I imagine we have all heard about him or her (Walkowitz). Such an author writes with an international audience in mind. An international audience is not going to be able to understand the local context, so the local context will have to be processed into local color before it can be presented to the literary sight-seer. The telltale sign of such an author's intent is explanations of things that a local audience would never need explained. The expectation of translation is thought to have a generally deleterious effect on a work of literature. In this regard, Alexander Beecroft envisions two possible futures:

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one where we end up with a blandly homogenous “world literature” all produced in English, or designed for quick translation into English; and a more optimistic future where increased globalization leads to more curiosity about other cultures and bigger global audiences for those locally-adapted texts. (Clarke)

The first, dystopic future I would describe as a compromise by a writer of a non-English language with an English reader who is not willing to do any work. In the second, utopic future the writer of a non-European language is uncompromisingly local. Perhaps uncompromising implies too much resistance or militancy. What I mean is that the writer would just write for the audience fluent in the language of his work and familiar with its context, and let the translator figure out how to adapt the work for an, in my case, English reading audience that is curious about other cultures and willing to take the time to untie hard knots of detail. In the rest of this paper I will provide a few examples from *Danche shiqieji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*) to show how Wu’s writing works and how I worked with it.

The example that immediately came to mind for the topic of Wu Ming-Yi and world literature was the light fitting whose shade is plated in “horse-mouth iron—the old-fashioned name for tin” (*Danche* 33; *Stolen Bicycle* 32), a translation of what I thought in retrospect was Taiwanese but which renewed research has taught me is apparently used in Chinese-speaking countries. That it is used in Taiwan means that it is a Taiwanism but not just a Taiwanism, like a species that is found in Taiwan but is not endemically exclusive to Taiwan. One of the lessons of any attempt to investigate local culture is that culture is connections, and if you trace the connections back far enough, you end up somewhere else, especially in a novel about Taiwan’s encounter with global modernity. My literal translation of *ma-k’ou* (*makou*) conveyed the surface of the expression, adding what a local reader would presumably know, that it is a word for tin, actually tin-plating. But where did it come from?

Horse’s mouth sounds nothing like Macao in English, but *ma-k’ou* probably sounds like it in whatever variety of Cantonese was spoken in the Portuguese port at the time. And Macao was where tin, or tin-plating technology, used to come through. So it turns out that “horse’s mouth” is a red-herring. I was reading meaning into what was supposed to be purely sonic. On the off chance that Macao might have something to do with horses, I looked it up. No, it is from Mother Ma-tsu, whom I call Mother Ma-Tsoo throughout the translation, after the pronunciation in Taiwanese. So was I wrong to translate it “horse’s mouth”? I don’t think so. It’s

kind of funny sounding in Chinese, so why not translate it literally into something kind of funny sounding in English?

“Horse’s mouth iron” is about as deep as a typical Chinese reader of the novel in Chinese would have gotten. Translators generally being the kind of reader who likes to dig, I had gone a bit deeper, and discovered the Macao connection, and when I got the chance to revise the novel for a second print run in March 2018, seven months after the initial publication, the editing process of which was rushed, I asked my editor to revise this particular passage, by explaining the connection with reference to the Mandarin pronunciation. It would have been better to make reference to the Cantonese pronunciation, and I am conflicted as to whether the revision was right. Often revisions don’t make things better. In defense of the revision, I could argue that a Chinese reader who wanted to know why it was called horse’s mouth iron could easily look the connection up, while my translation might be the only source for this information in English. I have hardly exhausted the connection. Why did tin or tin-plating technology come through Macao, and how did the term *ma-k’ou* disseminate? It might be time-consuming to investigate, and it was at best peripheral to the task at hand. Though as Wu Ming-Yi well knows, everything is connected, as his metaphors for the idea behind the Net of Indra—such as the man with the compound eyes or the tree the soldiers dubbed Fort Li (*Stolen Bicycle* 340), whose every leaf flashes like a knife (306)—demonstrate, nevertheless, some things are more closely connected than others. The lesson for me is that any local reference, even to Taiwan’s indigenous peoples like the Tsou, is connected in various ways with the rest of the universe—the indigenous people who live in Taiwan today were probably not the original residents, and they brought their languages and cultural practices from somewhere else, probably parts of what is now the PRC—but that in the end nobody can take in that much information, and that one’s focus for the most part has to be local. Human beings, unlike elephants, who will never know the stars are suns (310), can form an idea of the big picture, but for the most part we have to deal with nodes of the universe that are close at hand, nodes that are nonetheless, due to the specificity of any history, representatively Taiwan.

I suppose that sounds quite philosophical, but it seems to me the novel is quite philosophical, and even if one cannot articulate a philosophical idea precisely, it is worth trying. There is an example of this in the novel. The half-Tsou warzone photojournalist Abbas and the narrator have a chat about the basic meaning of the images that a photographer can capture. Abbas’s reply is negative, “shuo shih k’ung-chi-ho ye pu-tui, shuo t’a ch’ong-man yi-yi ye pu-tui” (“shuo shi kongjihe ye budui, shuo ta chongman yiyi ye budui” 說是空集合也不對, 說它充滿意義

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也不對) (*Danche* 155). Reading character for character, *k'ung chi* is literally empty gathering or assemblage, depending on what *chi* (*ji*) means. In mathematics, *k'ung-chi-ho* (*kongjihe*) means empty set. There is no mention of Abbas having any interest in mathematics, so that is probably not what it means. Given the Buddhist ideas that run through the rest of the novel, *k'ung* here is probably partly Buddhist emptiness. I don't know exactly what an empty gathering or a gathering in emptiness is, but it is intriguing, and that is probably how I should have translated Abbas's reply. The whole thing should probably have been: "To say it is an empty gathering isn't right, it isn't deeply meaningful." I am sure I translated it that way in an earlier draft, and, as with any revision process, the changes one makes later on aren't always for the better. In the end, in a tug of war I lost with the editor, it ended up like this: "It's not exactly pointless, but sometimes I feel it's senseless" (*Stolen Bicycle* 152). The editor wouldn't let me change it for the reprint. Seeing it again I started out hating it, and feeling ashamed of myself or at least embarrassed.

But the feeling passed and now I am ok with it. It is good to think with. I don't think the original Mandarin is self-evident, but is the kind of thing one might say to try to articulate what one thinks. Wu's Mandarin, I think, conveys this quality of grasping after profundity, and is at the same time a refusal to compromise in order to satisfy the reader's desire for things to make immediate sense. It is evocative in context. An empty gathering might refer to what Abbas captured in the picture, a group of things that aren't deeply meaningful thus grouped, though that isn't quite it. By raising this as an example here, and baring my translator's soul, I wonder if someone might tell me it's an allusion to something, or that it makes perfect sense in some other context. If so, I might be a bit disappointed. As for the English, senseless is apt for a scene of senseless violence, and might also mean meaningless, referring to Abbas's attempts to capture what he was witnessing, which aren't completely pointless. Pointless, I later realized, connected this node of the text to another, which, it seems to me, is the novel's thesis.

The narrator has a couple of conversations with Uncle Luck, a cross-eyed purveyor of junk, curiosities, lore, and multi-perspectival wisdom who sets out his stand in the market at the Dragon Mountain Temple in Wan-hua, Taipei. Uncle Luck is one of the many characters the narrator meets who helps the narrator *chi-wu* (*jiwu* 即物), to get intimately close to things, alive or dead, real and or imagined, *chi-wu* being David Der-Wei Wang's interpretation of Wu's method (Wang). Uncle Luck teaches the narrator the proper way of regarding things, that even though "things break down, get tossed out, fade away," and even though things are "empty," as the Buddhists say, that's not the *chung-tien* (*zhongdian* 重點) (*Danche* 343; *Stolen Bicycle* 331), that's not why one keeps old things around

and takes good care of them. I added the explanation that emptiness to a Buddhist means “lack[ing] an enduring essence,” which makes sense in context and is a reasonable attempt to articulate the Buddhist wisdom, but I could have added that the lack of a separate self means that one is full of the rest of the universe, the same lesson as we learned considering the translation of “horse’s mouth iron” above. Anyway, *chung-tien* was easy to translate. “Emptiness is beside the point” (*Stolen Bicycle* 349). In other words, Wu gestures in his novel at the profoundest wisdom of Mahayana Buddhism, and then tells us that it somehow comes up short. If that’s not the point, what is? I think Wu tells us what he thinks or what his narrator thinks the point is in Bike Notes VII, when, after mounting a rare Lucky friction lamp on his father’s bicycle, the stolen bicycle of the title, which he has spent years looking for and months restoring, he feels like he is in a holy shrine (332). At any rate, the use of the word “point” in the English translation is another source of consolation to me, as it links the Uncle Luck passages with Abbas’s obscure negative explanation of the motivation or achievement of his war photography. For me it really was a lucky break.

Which brings me to my final example. If Uncle Luck weren’t already Taiwanese enough for you, surely the narrator’s mother is. If you have read the novel you know a lot about her: she’s the girl at the beginning who plays in the field listening to the “no-yellow-belly-oh” birdies (*Stolen Bicycle* 3) and the “fieldclams” (4), and who takes the iron horse she finds lying at the side of the road during an air strike that killed three of her companions in the countryside in 1944 and rides it with her leg through the triangle, hence *sankakunori* (5). You know about her experiences, and about her attitude towards life, as the narrator understands it. Here is how the narrator puts it the first time we hear his voice in the first published version of the translation:

The word for fate in Mandarin is *ming-yun*, literally “life-luck” or “command-turn.” But “fate” in my mother’s native tongue of Taiwanese is the other way round: *ūn-miā*. It belies fatalism, putting luck in front of life, suggesting you can turn the wheel of fate yourself instead of awaiting the commands of Heaven. (7)

Wu’s novel is full of romanized Taiwanese, and I am happy that the editor let me keep most of the romanizations. For the English reader’s benefit, I made the connection between *hó-miā* and *ūn-miā* (12, 16), and then, three hundred pages later, without explanation, used *ūn-miā* (329). In case the English reader finds this mystifying, he or she has only to turn to the explanation on the next page, luck in front of life (330).

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But did I misrepresent the narrator's idea in my initial published translation? When I had the chance to revise it in March, 2018, it seemed to me I did. *Ming-yun* may imply command-turn, but the idea that you can turn the wheel of fate, a Medieval European idea, while awaiting the commands of Heaven, is not in Wu's original text (*Danche* 10). So in the revision I pared it down, though with additional explanation it ended up more verbose:

The word for "fate" in Mandarin is composed of two characters, *ming* and *yün*, each of which is independently meaningful. *Ming* means the life we are each allotted, while *yün* means luck, but also to move and, sometimes, to turn. *Ming* is for a lifetime and has to do with karma, while *yün* is in the moment and has to do with timing. Put the two characters together and you get *ming-yün* 命運, or fate in Mandarin. But in my mother's native tongue of Taiwanese, it's the other way around: *ün-miā* 運命, putting luck in front of life.

Longwinded? Definitely. But I like it. I kept "turn" in there, though in retrospect I also liked the pretty obvious implication of turning the pedals, driving the wheel of a bicycle, to take some control of one's own fate. Is *this* a misrepresentation of the text, or what the narrator or his mother thinks? I don't think so, but based just on this passage it might seem so. *Ming* and *yün* are after all both external to one's own efforts. One receives one's fate, and one can't take credit for luck, like the lucky breaks that gave me the opportunity to translate Wu Ming-Yi's fiction in the first place, and which connected "pointless" to "that's not the point" in the text of the translation. On the other hand, one has to be able to make the most of one's luck, so that if not everything is in your hands, some things are.

That's the point that the narrator's mother makes after her poor son recovers from a high fever. In the middle of the night, father, mother, and the narrator rush on the family *thih-bé* to the family pediatrician Dr. Lîm. The bike gets stolen, but Dr. Lîm manages to bring the fever down. Except the mother thinks that the Holy King, the spirit honored at a temple founded by immigrants from Chang-chou in what is now the PRC, had a hand in it. *Mā ài jîn, mā ài sîn*, she says—it took a man, and a god (*Stolen Bicycle* 24). Wu hadn't spelled it all out in the original (27). He didn't need to, because it is obvious to any local reader that the words for man and god rhyme, whether in the Taiwanese the characters are speaking or in Mandarin. There was no way I could get man and god to rhyme in English—that was beyond my power. But luck was on my side, and I was ready to take advantage: "My mother always gave half of the credit for my recovery to Dr Lîm and half to the Holy King." Lîm and King are a near rhyme.

For me, it's just like what the narrator's mother says: it took a man, me, and a god, perhaps the patron of translators, St. Jerome, a symbol for the unforeseen connections between every seemingly separate thing. Whether the same point applies to Wu Ming-Yi's creative process I can't say, but I think it's a meaningful interpretation of the novel and a way of understanding life.

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