

A renaissance literatus in Nanyang: Reading the transcreation of Prof Wong Yoon Wah's poetry

I have always followed Prof Wong Yoon Wah's creative and academic works closely, as their uniqueness, originality and insights never failed to put me in complete awe and thorough admiration. Being a renowned poet and writer who is a prominent pioneer of the school of Modernism in Singapore and Malaysia, Prof Wong is also an internationally recognized scholar in classical literary criticism (such as his analyses of Tang Dynasty poet-critic Sikong Tu), modern literature (his works on Lu Xun and other May Fourth writers) and Singaporean/Malaysian contemporary literature (on the literary development and individual writers). To focus and excel in one of these fields is already a commendable feat for most of us, but Prof Wong's depth and breadth of interests and pursuits elevates him to that of a Nanyang renaissance literati, and allows him to expand to these four specializations, and beyond.

So you can imagine how honoured I was when Prof Wong invited me to write a preface for his book of English poems, translated by the talented Dr. Ng Yi-Sheng, a critically-acclaimed English poet and researcher himself. Thence, you would undoubtedly agree with me that witnessing the joining of prowess by these two poet-scholars in a singular poetry collection would be worth all your time in reading and rereading this.

It is not my first time reading these original Chinese poems by Prof Wong, as I have read his *Poetry Collection of Returning* (重返诗集) in 2014 and *Returning to Malaya* (重返马来亚) in 2017. I still vividly remember how his Nanyang narratives impacted me and

influenced my own writing of *Landmark Poetics of the Lion City* (end of 2017). One of the unique propositions of Prof Wong's poems is his clever blending of historical facts, scholarly criticisms and poetic sentiments, such as the conclusion of his poem "Temasek" (淡马锡变形记):

河边的鳄鱼曾听见
十六世纪
葡萄牙人的大炮
炸毁马六甲的城墙
狮子与古代城市
同时消失在热带丛林里
后来西方历史家
坚持殖民者错误的记忆
莱佛士军官登陆新加坡河口
才发现新加坡
一个海盗聚集分赃
小渔村的神话

Yi Sheng's translation is as follows:

in the sixteenth Century
the riverside crocodiles heard

the cannons of the Portuguese
blast the city walls of Malacca
lions and ancient cities
vanished together into tropical jungles
historians of the West
later insisted the colonists had faulty memories
that Singapore was only discovered
when Sir Stamford Raffles
landed at Singapore River
a pirate gathering his loot
the myth of a sleepy fishing village

Not only does the short stanza above record the Portuguese invasion of Malacca in the 16th Century, and question the demolition of the ancient city by these foreign invaders; it also criticises the biased Western historians for crediting Singapore's discovery to Raffles' "founding" in 1819. When a poem can encompass and navigate such rich historical facts, academic criticisms and poetic sentiments in a single stanza like this, the reader cannot help but fully utilize his left and right brains, reasoning and imagination in his deep reading.

Another intriguing point I observed in this collection is the deliberate use of "transcreation" instead of "translation" by Ng. We could understand his choice to be a more extensive translator's license, which allows him to employ "creative translation" or "translated creativity" while handling such rich original Chinese text by Prof Wong. A case in point could be the last line in the above stanza, where Ng adds the word "sleepy" (although not included in the source) to describe the fishing village and to emphasize its desolateness.

Another case in point is the last poem of the collection, “Return to the Highway” (重返高速公路):

1. E的定义

每一条隐藏在雨林中
弯曲，狭小
童年的黄泥路
被机器怪手与铲泥机
残酷屠杀
流血成河
然后每年整形又变性
强迫延伸拓展
五六线高速公路

是谁铲除方言与原住民的称呼
统一用英文字母
PIE, AYE, CTE, BTE
还有KJE, TPE, SLE, MCE
于是E氏高速家族便在岛上
横霸道行

Note that the English transcreation includes footnotes about Ng's deliberations of what to include and omit. These notes (such as footnote 1), as reiterated by Prof Wong in his preface, are "inseparable blood and flesh of his English translation":

i.¹

the twisted, narrow
yellow dirt paths of my childhood
hidden in the rainforest
are cruelly slaughtered
by excavators and bulldozers
their blood becomes a river
each year they undergo plastic surgery
forced to extend, expand themselves
into five, even six, lines of highways

who wiped out their names in Malay and dialect
and standardized these English acronyms
PIE, AYE, CTE, BTE, KPE
KJE, TPE, SLE, MCE
the "E" family of highways has become this island's
tyrants

¹ Original title: "*the definition of E*".

We clearly see that the word and sentence orders are different in the two language versions. Not only does the final English version better suit English linguistics, but it also reads naturally and coherently. Further, the direct usage of “Malay” instead of aboriginal (原住民) shows the transcreator’s understanding of the context and desire to eliminate ambiguities.

With the two brief examples provided above, I am sure you already have a glimpse of the profoundness and depth of Prof Wong’s poetics and Dr. Ng’s subjective yet thoughtful transcreation. Witnessing the textual aesthetics that transpired in their combination process is a real treat I now share with you. Enjoy and savour!

By Tan Chee Lay

Writer, Assoc Professor and Deputy Head, Asian Languages and Cultures,
NIE, NTU

27 May 2023, Singapore