

Q & A: Wu Ming-Yi

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Editor's Note: To bring the input of the man himself to bear on the feature topic, we conducted a Q & A with Wu Ming-Yi, in writing. The following is his response to a few questions we had for him on being worldly and non-worldly.

Ex-position (shortened as EXP hereafter): As indicated in our call for papers, this feature topic was intended to reflect on the now thriving program of world literature. Its champions have been assertive about what they take as an indisputable fact, that is, all literature is world literature. The truth is, since a defining keyword of this program is “circulation,” it is difficult not to read commercial overtones into its (promotional) discourse. It is difficult not to notice how its core vocabulary is amenable to the capitalist logic of expansion, freedom of movement, and openness of the market.

We hope to call attention to writers who do not have such a world in mind in their creative process. We would like to see if there are writers who are not concerned about stepping outside their place of origin, literally and figuratively.

It is probably counterintuitive to bracket you and your work within this framework of discussion, given the status you have, well deservedly, earned abroad. What we propose here is that you reflect on the proposition of our feature topic as a writer and as a scholar: How would a writer’s awareness of—or anxiety over or expectations toward—“the world” affect his or her self-positioning?

More importantly, we welcome any critique and questioning of our premise.

Ex-position, Issue No. 41, June 2019 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201906_(41).0008

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Wu: Each writer has had his or her own experience in approaching literature, and in my view that is a rather unique process. Because of this, the history of a writer's growth is no less important than the texts per se—or perhaps we may say that a writer's reading history is a fascinating text in itself.

I was born in a country with a censorship system, so for a long time I only read things the government allowed us to read, and could not access literary works freely until after the lifting of martial law in the country. Masterpieces of the Chinese-speaking world, such as the works of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen and those of Taiwanese writers like Lu Heruo and Weng Nao, came into my life much later than translated literature.

As I was advancing in my reading of literature, the world literature series of the local publishing houses Chih-wen (Zhiwen) and Laureate (Guiguan) influenced me tremendously, while Chinese-language literature exerted less influence. It was not until I started to take writing more seriously that I returned to Chinese-language literature, but even then I neglected “history” as a context for my reading. That whole process had to do with the production of literature, but on the other hand, it was also a result of the country's monitoring mechanism.

For a multilingual writer, it is perhaps normal to translate in one's head and to imagine what kind of rhythm and ambiance readers in another language might gain from their reading. The truth is, in Taiwan's literary history, as critics have pointed out, various kinds of nonautonomous or involuntary “brain translation” (*naoyi*) have always existed. During the Japanese colonial rule, writers had to write in Japanese, whereas under the Nationalist regime, because of the language ban, writers had to translate Japanese into Chinese in order to publish. As for writers of my generation who speak Taiwanese as their mother tongue, myself included, they are obliged to translate Taiwanese into written Chinese, adopting the literary lexicon of the “model writers” ratified by the Ministry of Education. This is a compulsory process, a forced choice, even an unconscious choice at times. As Professor Kuei-fen Chiu suggests in her article “Taiwan's Literary Production under the Driving Force of Translation,” for postwar Taiwanese writers, in addition to the act of “brain translation” mentioned above, modernist writers have had to “translate” Western literary theories for their own use whereas nativist writers have had to “translate” into Chinese the historical memory and the mother tongue they lost, in order to redeem them.

As I see it, this is even more true for aboriginal writers, who in their linguistic translation/transformation are forced to fit their soul into the shell of another culture, as it were, because their languages differ from Mandarin Chinese much more than Taiwanese does. The fact that they write in Chinese also bespeaks their

wish to have their works circulate in another literary world.

Of course, I know that the recent trend of world literature you mentioned is not defined in this way; the context of translation at this moment may be something of a commercial nature, or result from literary exchanges (some of these exchanges are made possible with the intervention of the nation). And it is little surprise that at some point in their career writers take note of such a process, just as Taiwanese writers of my generation could at a certain stage see their creative judgment somewhat affected by literary awards organized by newspapers which promise prize money and fame.

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I think it's very likely that an writer, before he can build some confidence as a writer, gets influenced by the various works he reads and by other writers, and this is true even for nature writing, a genre that doesn't appear to fit into conventional categories of literature. For example, Wang Jia Siang's (Wang Jiexiang) early works were deeply influenced by Aldo Leopold whereas Liu Ka-Shiang (Liu Kexiang) has been much inspired by the note-taking style of naturalists. On the other hand, Taiwan's science fiction writers have been influenced by the sci-fi classics they have read.

As far as I'm concerned, contemporary literature is now confronted with a world of fast transmission of information and a world where readers show an exceedingly high level of knowledge, so it is hard for any writer who has been exposed to this phenomenon to stay aloof. It is inevitable that all forms of art are to circulate, autonomously or nonautonomously, outside of the system the creator belongs to. The way a writer faces "the world"—his awareness of it, his anxiety or expectations, etc.—will surely affect his self-positioning.

EXP: The Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro has talked about the way in which his imagined readership might affect him as a writer. He said before that as he began to go on book tours and travel more and more, he began to think about whether his writing could be translatable. The following is an excerpt of an interview:

Let's say the imagined reader is a Norwegian—and so, immediately a lot of things that I might write go out the window. I think, I can't make local references to things in London that would be incomprehensible to the guy in Norway; I can't make too many puns or use that line I was so proud of just because the words are so neat and come out so beautifully and appropriately—I can't quite be so proud of that, because by the time it's translated into Norwegian, it's not going to have that surface gloss to it.

So I have to really ask myself, "Does the line have substance? It's not just

a clever line, is it? Does its value survive translation?” (Wong 316)

This was him speaking in 2001. He has in fact made similar remarks more than once (see, for example, Adams). In recent years, academics are noting and responding to this new development in novelistic writing. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, for instance, frames her understanding of contemporary fiction in light of what she calls “born-translated novels,” citing Ishiguro, along with J. M. Coetzee, as an important case in point.

What do you make of this? Have you ever had similar experience—or do you think the situation Ishiguro describes is, too, becoming a problem for you?

Wu: For me, writers must target someone as their “addressee” when they write. As Umberto Eco puts it, “The only things that writers write for themselves are shopping lists, which help them to remember what to buy, and then can be thrown away. All the rest, including laundry lists, are messages addressed to somebody else. They are not monologues; they are dialogues” (29). From the perspective of interpretation, as a work encounters different readers, it is unavoidably to be “translated” by them. While their “translation” started with the text, it is only natural that they would fell trees and level the ground in this fictive forest in order to build their own imaginary constructions.

I started to notice this not because of the readers, but because of veteran translators. Unlike writers in the past, who might not know their works were translated into foreign languages, writers of my generation are fully aware that we are being translated, and may even discuss translation strategies with the translators. For instance, when he was translating *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*), my English translator Darryl Sterk would draw maps and discuss with me the geography of the island of Wayo Wayo. He would ask me if the name Wayo Wayo had any linguistic significance, and he even made a contrastive study of the Wayo Wayo language used in the novel to see if everything held together. The French translator Gwennaël Gaffric asked me whether the biological terminology in the novel had any special meaning in terms of gender (because in French words have gender); the Italian translator Silvia Pozzi asked me if I meant one fisherman or more than one in the story; and the Japanese translator Amano Kentaro inquired about the form of the architecture, and so on.

Of course, when culturally specific words or ways of writing are involved, discussion may not lead to anything fruitful. For instance, how do you translate Taiwanese, which can be presented in Chinese characters just like Mandarin Chinese? If the original text contains phonetic transcriptions, should the

translator provide them too, and how? In such cases, I'd ask the translators to decide on their own translation strategies.

As a result of such discussion, I do ponder these questions from time to time, but I rarely change the way I write because of these factors. When a novel can be translated into different languages, whether or not something is translation-worthy or translation-friendly is really a secondary question. For each language has its own logic of expression.

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EXP: You talked about Shawna Yang Ryan on several public occasions. She is in a way another example of “the Pride of the Nation”—the literary edition. But on the other hand, it is also debatable whether her work is not an effective packaging of the “Taiwan” identity tailored to American readers. So, is it fair to say that we are given (primarily) these two options? At one end, Taiwanese writers should hold on to their creative integrity and need not cater to the readers and the market—and should just wait for good translators to help bring their work to the world. At the other end, we should welcome those works that are created with the outsiders (such as the Norwegian reader in Ishiguro’s case) in mind.

Wu: What I meant when I mentioned the example of Shawna Yang Ryan was that Taiwan literature ought to incorporate these writers’ works into the interpretative framework of “the literature of Taiwan.” This is not a literary discourse that takes ethnic/national lineage as its starting point; it is rather because the authors (or their relatives) have had their Taiwan experience, and because they have written about Taiwan from their own perspectives. Other writers who live abroad, have emigrated or taken foreign nationalities, and who are able to create works in two languages, including Higashiyama Akira (a.k.a. Wang Zhenxu), Wen Yuju, and Li Kokomi, are all worthy of attention. What kind of interpretative system should Taiwan literature adopt when approaching these people’s writings? This is something to be reckoned with by researchers of literary history.

But things are different from the perspective of the writer. Every writer faces this problem: my writing is conditioned by my personal experience as I grew up, by my reading, my knowledge, and the way I view things. Something like “horizon,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s words. When one writes within this horizon, he can probably compose no more than three books. . . . After that, it’s either inspiration running dry, or repetition.

If a writer wishes to have a long career, the most important thing is to broaden his horizons, enrich his life experience, and develop imagination accordingly. It’s like making a lonely interstellar journey, with no company to count on except for

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the texts one reads. The point of that whole journey is therefore not to become a lonesome king, but to carry out a spiritual exploration. As I often comment, in our time, the essence of writing doesn't just consist in the work of examining one's soul; it also lies in developing and enriching the soul. When a novelist finishes a novel that transcends his personal experience, he always feels relieved and gratified, as if he has made a step outside the confines of his own life.

In my opinion, all these writers who seek to expand their Taiwan experience and write about Taiwan-related issues have this aim in mind. Their Taiwan experience may not be as long in temporal terms as writers who live in Taiwan, but shines brightly nonetheless as they look back to the history of their lives, especially when they live in foreign lands and use foreign languages.

I'm hard-pressed to believe that some writers explore certain subject matters purely out of an exhibitionist impulse. Or maybe I should phrase it this way: I think that if anyone does so, he loses his status as a creator, and becomes nothing but a wordmonger.

EXP: Your essay collection on photography, *Fuguang (Above Flame)*, which came out in 2014, is quite a distinct work. On the one hand, it seems that we can grasp your view on literature through the lens of your view on photography. David Der-wei Wang names it a philosophy of objectivity (*jiwulun*), based partly on the aesthetic movement which emerged in Germany in the 1920s, "New Objectivity," which you discussed in *Above Flame*. As Wang nicely puts it, the Chinese word *ji* denotes an array of senses: "the present moment," "to come near," and the conjunction "that is" (Wang VI-VII). In addition, the Chinese translation of New Objectivity, *jiwu*, also evokes similar concept-images as *embodiment* and *immediacy*, all suggesting a desire to approach the object, to have zero distance from the object.

On the other hand, there also seem to be tensions, if not contradictions, between literature and photography: the photographic camera, arguably, has some kind of universality, and images are generally understood to be a mode of expression that requires no translation. This makes photography quite different from word, apparently.

While some critics have drawn attention to what they call the visuality in your writing, they are speaking primarily of your "descriptive ability." Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to your "photographic word."

How do you understand the way a writer "sees the world"—"see" in a most literal sense?

Wu: The writing of *Above Flame* was sheer chance. It began with me having a

writer's block writing *Danche shiqieji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*). To better portray the war photographer character in the novel, I started to read photographers' biographies. The first one was that of the famous war photographer Don McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour: An Autobiography*. It then entailed a long list of books and countless stories about photography—I would stay in the National Library Annex for hours, completely and utterly immersed in the reading.

In the reading process, my own trajectory as a photographer and my own photo works popped up in my head and started to dialogue with those photographers' stories; what my body had experienced and what had been observed through the gaze of time stood face to face with those stories, exchanging looks with those histories of photography, those photographic images, and those photographers' experiences. I ended up sorting out a thread for my writing: I'm not intending to speak of a "history of photography." Attentive readers would notice that what I try to show is nature observed via the means of photography. That is to say, the massacres, the beauty, ethics, and philosophy of land that mankind sees in nature with a different observing tool are no longer the same, and have become more complicated and divergent, challenging the viewer himself. For instance, I mentioned in one of the essays that it is when the polar bears have to survive harsher and harsher living conditions that people discover even more stunning "beauty" in their sadness and helplessness; that energy-saving promotional poster featuring a polar bear that many people have on their walls becomes all the more ironic.

As for the immediacy of photography, just like "sensory" art forms such as music, it is true that comparatively speaking photography requires little translation in order to be understood. As James Elkins puts forth in his work *Pictures and Tears*, it seems more difficult for art forms that require translation to move readers (or viewers) to tears. After all, even if the readers all use Chinese, they still need "translation" when they read written texts, because writers would use similes, metaphors, and symbols, and these are like layers upon layers of hindrance.

"Slowness" is a characteristic of literature, and "intimacy" is a quality conveyed between author and reader via the mediation of the text. It is very difficult for a reader to discuss a text with someone who has not read it. Even if both have read the same text, they still need to check with each other if their textual understanding is the same. This is particularly evident as far as poetry is concerned.

The process in which a writer conveys with words the world he "sees" is also slow. It's like holding a candle with a dim flame to try to get a glimpse of every detail in the towers of Notre Dame of Paris. It is a process where a soul strives to get close to another soul, or another world.

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What's more, the view of a writer is different from that of the camera; sometimes the writer has to add historical contexts so as to see why the destinies that unfold under his pen come to be. The novelist reveals a little, and conceals a little, and then he realizes during the process of writing that there is no seeing through life and destinies.

Today, thanks to social media and the Internet, every day we seem to be “watching” the world change. Things change so fast that, when placed in contrast with the experience of limited and partial “viewing” in our real life, immense temporal gaps arise. The human mind has never watched the world with so many pairs of eyes and in so many layers, and this brings panic and a sense of helplessness. And after we've seen so many people's lives (via images), it's ultimately our own life—which seems so long—that we must face.

When I write, I try to shut out all these eyes, including my own, and just let the fictional characters in my novel “watch” on my behalf. Sometimes, they end up “seeing” for me the worlds I myself have never seen.

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