
Landscape in Motion: Wu Ming-Yi's Novels and Translation

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Gary Tan, founder of the Garyhawk Agency and the man who has succeeded in presenting Wu Ming-Yi's *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*) to an international readership, once proudly claimed, "This is the first time in history that an English prestige publisher purchased the copyright of a Taiwanese novel. . . . The English book market has been the most difficult market for translation all over the globe, and we can hardly believe we made it with only one attempt."¹ Tan insisted on finding someone "local" to translate *The Man with the Compound Eyes* into English, and Darryl Sterk, a Canadian scholar working in Taiwan at the time, appeared to be a perfect choice. The success of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* made a case for "exporting" Taiwanese literary works, which had long been considered marginalized on the map of world literature. Wu's novel was able to showcase what Taiwan could bring to international readers, that is, according to the prominent American writer Ursula K. Le Guin, "a new way of telling our new reality, beautiful, entertaining, frightening, preposterous, true . . ." (Le Guin).² The rhetoric in Le Guin's statement suggests one of the reasons why *The Man with the Compound Eyes* appeals to an international readership—it is precisely because the novel depicts "our new reality," namely, a global concern, an ecological catastrophe-to-come from which no one can stand aside. In this light, the citizenships as well as the languages that have been separating people in the world must be suspended if not discarded outright, since everyone has contributed to the environmental disaster—so now everyone has to suffer the consequences.

¹ Except for the quotes from *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, all translations are mine (including references, interviews, and reports in newspapers or magazines).

² Le Guin's comment appears on the back cover of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*.

In the story of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch crashes into the east coast of Taiwan, and this draws international professionals and media to Hualien. In this case, Taiwan comes under the spotlight not because it has something distinctive to offer, but because of chance. This chance, nevertheless, integrates Taiwan into the global topography, proving that the island of Taiwan is an indispensable part of the world map and demonstrating that this is precisely “our new reality.” Like a dark corner suddenly illuminated by a flashlight, Taiwanese creative writing is now made to appear on the international book market, whose appetite is always affected by the operation of translation. It therefore makes sense to scrutinize how translation relates to Wu Ming-Yi’s writing at both extratextual and intratextual levels.

In the essay “Wu’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and the Worlding of Environmental Literature,” Shihhuah Serena Chou argues that Wu, as a non-Western writer, “appropriate[s] and transform[s] Western imagery and scientific theories to reinforce the cultural legitimacy of [his] positions.” The way Wu adopts Western vocabulary to modernize and globalize the local (in this case, Taiwan) is, as Chou argues, “a process of cultural adaptation and translation.” To put it more carefully, if Wu can gain worldwide recognition, it is because he consciously adopts numerous Western elements in his writing, including references to American nature-writing classics, vocabulary from Euro-American eco-criticism, and sometimes excerpts from Western literary works or lyrics of pop songs.³ Some titles of Wu’s works, such as *So Much Water So Close to Home* (2007) and *The Land of Little Rain* (2019), directly borrow and translate from Raymond Carver’s and Mary Austen’s books, respectively.⁴ Under the same titles, however, Wu’s original creative works are independent and distinct from the earlier Western works.

Wu’s case is exemplary for what Rebecca L. Walkowitz calls “born-translated novels.” As Walkowitz observes, translation plays a vital role in creative writing nowadays, not only because the need for and the circulation of translation has reached a point where the speed and the amount of translation production are unprecedented, but also because translation has come to be an indispensable part of contemporary novelistic writing. To put it simply, “born-translated literature

³ In another article, titled “Sense of Wilderness, Sense of Time,” Chou elaborates carefully how “wilderness” as a Euro-American concept has a great impact on Wu’s delineation of modern Taiwanese nature writing.

⁴ Wu directly uses Mary Austen’s book title, translating it into Mandarin as the title of his own creative work (*Ku yu zhi di*). However, in the translated title, Wu plays on the double meaning of *ku yu*—it means the scarcity as well as the superabundance of rain. In a similar fashion, Wu takes Raymond Carver’s novel title *So Much Water So Close to Home* as the title for another work (*Jia li shuibian name jin*).

approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is . . . a condition of their production” (4). Translation is always already there when writing begins—that is, without translation, the text cannot be/become. One notable feature of born-translated novels is that they are “refusing to match language to geography,” which means they “occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time” (6). To unhook “who uses the language” from “where the language is used” is to disturb any assumption of national literature, native readers, and, above all, monolingualism in the age of globalism. The internal multilingualism in born-translated novels, Walkowitz argues, transcends the assigned language registers and in turn renders the bond between a language and the users of that language who form a nation an “imagined” bond. “Once literary works begin in several languages and several places, they no longer conform to the logic of national representation” (30). Born-translated novels are open to a heterogeneous range of readers who are possibly multilingual; in this case, translation works all the time along with writing as well as reading.

Walkowitz’s argument seems promising and convincing, and yet, in an interview Wu makes it explicit that “to depict the reality of life in Taiwan, writers must use multiple languages such as Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and sometimes even including aboriginal tongues. This is how Taiwanese literature distinguishes itself from Chinese literature.”⁵ The uniqueness of Taiwanese literature as a national literature is precisely its multilingualism since the use of multiple languages is common in Taiwanese everyday life. Wu not only purposely demonstrates how ordinary the use of multiple languages is in Taiwan, but also insists on presenting “Taiwan’s linguistic polyphony” so authentically as to ask specialists in various linguistic fields and translators to check the accuracy. This is especially manifest in the postscript of *Danche shiqieji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*) where he states, “The reader will certainly be aware of the multiple uses of language in this novel. I have to consider how to express this unique language use to get the reader into the story. Meanwhile, I also hope the reader can be enchanted by the essence of language. . . . It is terrifying and pitiful to imprudently make all languages appear the same. I also believe that only continuous writing and narrating make possible the rediscovery and revival of those charming elements in languages” (387; my translation). At this point we witness how Wu’s novel is not only “born-translated” but also “born-collaborative.” To ensure that his novel could present linguistic multiplicity

⁵ See “Interview with Wu Ming-Yi: Insufficient Translation Funds in Taiwan.” The interview was conducted by Maximilian Kalkhof, translated from German into Mandarin by Günter Whittome, and published on the website of *Goethe Institut*.

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accurately, Wu consulted with such experts as the village's elderly in an aboriginal tribe, professors of Taiwanese Hokkien, specialists in the Japanese period, editors, agents who commission translation, and translators (including those working in English, French, and Japanese), and asked them to read his manuscript before its publication. The English translations of most of Wu's novel titles and chapter titles are already listed alongside the Chinese ones when published. This year Wu was invited to the Festival Atlantide in France (2019), where he was given the chance to talk to French readers and writers. What is intriguing is that while Wu considered it a precious opportunity to promote Taiwanese literature, the artistic director of the festival, Alain Mabanckou, declared that this year the organizing team invited three writers from different countries in order to demonstrate a "literature without borders."⁶

A paradox is now beginning to surface. The position of Taiwanese literature is ambiguous in the discourses mentioned above. Walkowitz's idea of world literature nowadays, presenting itself as born-translated, is meant to demonstrate that the boundary between national literatures, once clear-cut, is now blurred. And yet, as we can see in Wu's case, the national traits of literature persist. Wu appeals to Taiwanese writers to expand their world vision and reach an international readership without abandoning the distinctiveness of Taiwanese culture. Even though Taiwan's linguistic multiplicity seems to disturb the naïve monolingual assumptions about nationalism and cultural identity, in this case, the uniqueness of Taiwanese culture, namely, Taiwan's linguistic multiplicity, is to some extent essentialized. Multilingualism in Taiwan functions as a local characteristic, which makes a "difference." It must be noted that essentializing the difference is precisely the scheme that binds the local with the global. The paradox where Wu's writing, with its local color and cultural nationalism (built on linguistic multiplicity), contradicts its easy access to world literature—literature without borders—is in effect not paradoxical at all. The insight of Naoki Sakai in his essay "Civilizational Difference and Criticism" cannot be overemphasized: "Far from contradicting one another, cultural nationalism and globalization supplement each other" (198). Even though Sakai's argument does not directly address the issue of world literature in the age of globalization, it exposes how futile it is to believe that the local is resistant to the global; on the contrary, the local and the global are complicit, both founded upon the assumption that the distinction between the West and the Rest persists; hence "we are still captives of the old cartographic and civilizational

⁶ See the video "L'écrivain taïwanais Wu Ming-Yi, invité du Festival Atlantide à Nantes" posted by Taiwan en France on its Facebook.

imagery of the globe” (198).⁷

As is well known, discourses in cultural translation provide abundant analyses to accent the asymmetrical power relation in any form of translation and the manipulative nature in the production of translation. Susan Bassnett, for example, makes it clear that “a study of the processes of translation combined with the praxis of translating could offer a way of understanding how complex manipulative textual processes take place” (123). The manipulative textual processes refer to how a book is selected for publication, for translation, and how it is promoted; moreover, the role of the editors, publishers, and patrons is substantial. The production of translation involves various elements; any popular, widely circulated book (in the material sense) can be attributed not only to its literary and artistic quality but also to other strategies external to the text. In line with Bassnett, André Lefevere also argues that “the process resulting in the acceptance or rejection . . . of literary works is dominated not by vague, but very concrete factors . . . such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation” (2). One could conveniently find support from cultural translation discourses to argue that literary works produced on the peripheries must undergo a manipulative process of translation in order to get access to the global market, and that this process always involves power struggle. The political implications in such discourses correspond to the unsettled relationship between the local and the global, the particular and the universal, and the national and the world in a geopolitical sense. Nevertheless, I want to call attention to Sakai’s warning: “we are still captives of the old cartographic and civilizational imagery of the globe” (“Civilizational Difference” 158). To further develop this line of thinking, it is necessary to dismantle the conviction that the configuration of the world is solely demarcated by borders between nations. Geographical locations define the political relation between nations in the world system, and this global cartography constitutes the way we talk about world literature.

The significance of recognizing how the metaphor of “borders” affects our understanding of the world and of translation is beyond dispute. If world literature today strives for literature without borders, doesn’t it clearly show that our concept of literature is built on borders? Isn’t there a cartography implicated in such views? Following this conventional understanding, the concept of translation commonly refers to the act of transferring. As Maria Tymoczko notes, “the English word *translation*, which comes from the Latin word *translatio*, mean[s] ‘carrying across’”

⁷ Careful elaboration on the complicity of universalism and particularism can be found in Sakai’s monograph *Translation and Subjectivity* (1997).

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(115). Etymological interpretation of the word *translation* justifies and even intensifies the metaphor of borders in our views of translation, which “shape understandings of cultural processes and of cultures themselves” (Tymoczko 139). In this way, culture(s) appear territorial; translation is meant to carry across, interfere, disrupt, or transcend the presumed borders. Although this seems to make a persuasive case and account for how Wu’s writing successfully transfers something local to the global, I suggest that we would better understand Wu’s writing and its relation to translation in terms of topography rather than the geopolitical mapping of the world. Nature has been a prominent theme for Wu, and in his works one may certainly sense that nature as such has agency, and that its movement is ceaseless and unpredictable. We need a new way of perceiving nature as overwhelming energy instead of an entity. This new way of perceiving presents us with “landscape in motion” not only because the relative positions between nature and human beings vary while nature is in movement, but also because humans in nature constantly change their position for viewing the landscape.

To explore the connection between Wu’s fictions and translation, it is not sufficient to simply examine the extratextual facts. The politics and tactics involved in trading copyrights or sparking global interest in the process of translation indeed contribute to the circulation of books; however, these factors have little to do with what is inside Wu’s text. If Wu makes substantial efforts to make visible the distinctive features of Taiwanese literature to the world, it is not because the writer wants to assert that there exists an irreducible difference between national literatures or that such a difference is fundamental. What distinguishes Wu’s writing is the charm of nature—it is the mountains, the ocean, the seashore, the rivers, and the surroundings including various ethnic groups living together on this land, animals, insects, and other beings/non-beings that compose the landscape, all of which invite multiple perspectives. It is the topographical delineations in Taiwan that characterize Wu’s nature writing. The landscape is unique in the sense that it is not only the depiction of a specific place; it is the composition of all kinds of beings and surroundings, and, most of all, of all kinds of sensations. When J. Hillis Miller tries to articulate the connection between philosophy, literature, and topography, he argues, “The landscape is not a pre-existing thing in itself. It is made into a landscape, that is, into a humanly meaningful space, by the living that takes place within it” (21). Despite its arguably anthropocentric view, Miller’s statement points out the fact that the landscape refers to a relationship between nature and living beings. Moreover, the landscape does not just involve the sense of sight; the landscape involves, in Gilles Deleuze’s words, “a bloc of sensations,” that is, “a pure being of sensations” (Deleuze 169). This is what Yu-lin Lee insightfully suggests

in his monograph *Nizao xin diqiu* (*The Fabulation of a New Earth*). For Lee, Wu's unique writing style is founded upon the rhythms of the river, the ocean, and the lakes, and his writing "intends to grasp a being of sensations that is nonindividual and to capture the pure landscape that is rid of history" (18). Lee explores how writing intervenes in nature and what writing has to do with the landscape in the sense that writing does not simply represent or depict nature as a pre-existing entity.

A Deleuzian understanding of the landscape thus sheds new light on the relationship between man and nature: "man absent from but entirely within the landscape" (Deleuze 169). It reverses what is commonly believed, that is, that human beings perceive the landscape; on the contrary, "they do not perceive but have passed into the landscape and are themselves part of the compound of sensations" (169). In line with Lee's Deleuzian interpretation of Wu's writing, I would like to further the idea of landscape in Wu and demonstrate how translation flows through the landscape. I take an example from *The Man with the Compound Eyes* to concretize how translation is involved with the transformation of landscape.

In the novel, the female character Alice owns a seaside house, designed and built by her husband's own hands. When the Sea House is finished, there is a series of typhoons, causing the collapse of the coastal highways. Slowly but surely, the sea level is rising. "In no time," the sea "had arrived on her doorstep" (54). Later, with another violent earthquake, the house "appeared to be floating on the sea" (56). While the landscape keeps changing, the distance between the human and nature is also changing. Nature, which seems distant from human beings, can be suddenly as close as the doorstep. Alice is about to abandon the house as well as her own life after her husband Thom, an avid climber, goes missing in the mountains. Nowhere can Thom be found in the rescue; later, Alice is determined to look for him after she meets a young islander from Wayo Wayo, Atile'i. The encounter of Alice and Atile'i is fascinating in that it is a scene with a constant flow of translation. But it is not simply the process of learning and gradually mastering a new language that affects them. The following scene astutely depicts something singular about translation:

In talking to Atile'i I've noticed that he often seems to repeat greeting queries. He keeps asking me . . . a question that may mean, "Is the weather fair at sea today?" . . . you're supposed to reply, "Very fair." Sometimes when the weather isn't fair at all, when it's raining and the waves are watching the island coldly from afar, Atile'i will still smile and say, "The weather at sea today is very fair." (179)

Atile'i feels humiliated if Alice does not reply as expected. Alice is puzzled by the way he greets her, asking him:

"Even if it's *raining as hard as it is now*, you still have to reply in this way?"

"Yes."

"*Even if you don't feel like replying?*"

"Yes."

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. . . Following a silence of ten waves, Atile'i asked me another time, "Is the weather fair at sea today?" . . . I don't know why, but right at that moment we both began to cry. (180)

The use of language here is not meant to reflect, express, or represent one's state of mind or emotion at the moment. Alice would later know, through translation, that she is not only learning a new language but also acquiring a novel way of perceiving the sea, the scenery, and the landscape in motion. After Atile'i explains how Wayo Wayo islanders hold funerals, Alice decides to go on a journey in search of the place where her husband lost his life. For a long time, Alice and other people fail to locate the spot, so they cannot help but believe he mysteriously remains lost somewhere in the mountains. They can't find the body precisely because they are blind to the fact that the landscape is never steady; everything in nature moves, even if it is as hard as the rock, as hard as the mountain. The cliff that Thom climbed and fell from "never used to exist . . . it only appeared after the earthquake due to fault displacement. The mountain was split asunder, the cliff made manifest" (Wu 273). Alice eventually "sees" the landscape and finds where Thom met his end, but this is possible only because she has met Atile'i. After they arrive at the spot, it suddenly begins to rain really hard. A touching, gripping scene is presented here—Wu neither reveals how Alice and Atile'i each feel at the moment nor depicts how Atile'i consoles the widow. With the rainwater flowing in and down the hollow beneath the cliff, their only dialogue is as follows:

"How is the weather at sea today?" asked Atile'i calmly.

Alice did a double take for a few seconds before replying, in a voice as fine as drizzle, "Very fair." (274)

It matters little whether they are actually in the mountains, not at sea, whether it is raining heavily, whether the sentence accurately signifies the factual circumstances. Alice has changed the way she perceives the world through Atile'i's influence;

Atile'i's way of using language affects how Alice sees and feels. This is how translation works—that is to say, with her new way of using language, Alice's interaction with Atile'i no longer represents reality, and instead she becomes capable of perceiving a whole new landscape that has never existed, a landscape she has never seen before. The disjunction between Atile'i's greetings and the actual circumstances is parallel to the fault displacement of the mountains. With the displacement, a transformation of the landscape appears. In a similar fashion, translation disrupts the signifying function of language and, at the same time, may bring magnificent scenes that affect our perception.

Wu mentions his special interest in the act of “seeing” in a recent interview. The novel *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is inspired by the unique optics of insect compound eyes; with these eyes insects see the world in a way that is foreign to human beings. Wu states, “nowadays everything in the world seems visible, but in effect it is not. The point is that we didn't really open our eyes. We didn't really ‘see.’”⁸ Alice's encounter with Atile'i reveals how the landscape in motion is involved with both the subjective perception of the characters and the objective change in nature. Translation in this case plays a vital role. For a long time, the conventional understanding of translation has derived from the metaphor of borders and the mapping of the world. Recent translation studies propose other metaphors such as “waves”; taking translation as a wave suggests that “translation is essentially a dynamic process” and “what moves is not content but energy” (Kershaw and Saldanha 142). Ubaldo Stecconi, too, proposes a new semiotics-based analysis of translation by analogizing translating to a wave; I think this metaphor can help us better grasp the connection between the landscape in motion and the working energy in Wu's nature writing. Based on Stecconi's proposal, I would pose one more question for discussion—the workings of flow or waves are motivated by differences of height or intensity. If translation is understood as a wave, it flows when there is difference. But the difference is not essentialized or fundamental. The difference is caused by nature, an overwhelming energy, constantly changing the landscape, making perceptible what is imperceptible. With this energy working ceaselessly, the delineation of topography is also in constant transformation. This might help us to move away from the unending debates about the local and the global in the geopolitical sense and bring us to a whole new landscape.

⁸ “Interview with Wu Ming-Yi: I Thought I Had Gone Too Far” by Liang Xin-yu.

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