

Au Pied du Mont des Lettres:

Reading Yu Kwang-chung the Translator (2019) by Shan Te-Hsing

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*Min-Hua Wu**

I. A Glance at Yu Kwang-chung Studies

Yu Kwang-chung distinguished himself with a multiplicity of talents: He was a reputed poet, celebrated prose writer, renowned literary critic, professional academic editor, and respected chair professor at both The Chinese University of Hong Kong and National Sun Yat-sen University. In addition, he was an established bilingual literary translator known for both English-Chinese and Chinese-English renditions. Studies on Yu's Chinese poetry and prose writing have developed significantly in the academia of contemporary Chinese literature across the Taiwan Strait; however, his particular style and idiosyncratic strategy in literary translation, especially in poetry translation, remains yet to be further explored (Shan, "Portrait" 6). To a certain extent, Yu's lifelong enterprise in bilingual literary translation has been somewhat obscured by his multi-talented performances and publications in both creative and academic undertakings, as Shan Te-hsing points out in "The Portrait of a Poetry Translator as a Young Man" (189n1). Yu was such a serious translator that he never ceased to revise his previous translations until the end of his life, across a working lifespan of over half a century. Both Chinese reception and Taiwanese recognition of Yu as an outstanding literary translator has drawn attention to his lifetime experiments on the poetics of literary translation, which according to Yu the poet-translator himself, knows no perfection even in the wake of a lifetime pilgrimage (Benjamin 15-25; Yu 3-4).

* Min-Hua Wu, Assistant Professor, Department of English, National Chengchi University, Taiwan (kevinwu@nccu.edu.tw).

II. A Silhouette of Yu Kwang-chung Translation Studies

Because Shan's book focuses on Yu as a translator, it is of illuminating interest for us to have a glance at the present-day silhouette of Yu Kwang-chung translation studies. In her essay, "Yu Kwang-chung the Translator: A Trinity of Translator, Scholar and Author" (余光中：三「者」合一的翻譯家 Yu Guangzhong: san "zhe" heyi de fanyi jia), Hong Kong translation scholar Serena Jin (金聖華) claims that Yu boasts three different identities in the field of literature: translator, scholar, and author. As a genuine master of literatures, he not only delved deeply into literary studies, but he also developed his unique craftsmanship in literary translation, one that he forged by drawing upon his enthusiasm for writing and extensive knowledge in Chinese and Western literatures. As a translator for more than half a century, Yu translated different genres and styles of works from English into Chinese and vice versa. Yu's careful endeavors in the art of translation resulted in an adaptive comprehension and mastery of the style of a given original work, whose fruits are regarded as "scholarly translation" (學者之譯 *xuezhe zhi yi* [Jin 24]). As a scholarly translator, he could manage to retain and conserve the original sentence patterns while conveying the semantic complexity of the original work in a largely equivalent manner (Jin 31).

Ma Yiu Man (馬耀民) in "The Internal Dialogue of a Poet-Translator: Reading *The Night Watchman*" (詩人／譯者的內在對話：閱讀《守夜人》 Shiren/yizhe de neizai duihua: yuedu *Shouye ren*) highlights the bilingual, parallel text of *The Night Watchman*, regarding the entire work as "an internal dialogue of a poet-translator." He argues that the process of such an internal dialogue involves "negotiation and compromise, exclusion and reduction, and mutual illumination of both the source and target texts" (Ma 140). Throughout the essay, Ma investigates this nuanced rendition of "art of compromise" that is evident in Yu's own self-translated bilingual work. Similar to the scrupulous attention attached to both source and target language literatures, in "Translating Chinese Poetry into English: Yu Kwang-chung's Watermill Craftsmanship" (中詩英譯：余光中的水磨妙功 Zhongshi Yingyi: Yu Guangzhong de shuimo miaogong), Francis K. H. So (蘇其康) probes into the traditional aspects and elements in both Chinese and English literatures. So points out that Yu the poet-translator flexibly and creatively appropriates traditional literary elements to cater to his own poetic essentials in the target language when textual occasions

arise and the poet-translator's inspiration strikes. Thus, poetic license is sometimes claimed by the poet-translator to meet the ubiquitous demand of poetic maneuverability in bilingual poetry translation. In translating his own poems, Yu often exerted his creative authority to meet literary expectations and produce opportune idiomaticities in the target language (So 197).

In "A Relevance-Theoretic Account of Rhythmic Proclivity in Yu Kwang-chung's *The Night Watchman*," Wu Yi-Ping and Chen Li-Yin resort to relevance theory in translation studies to decode the self-translation in *The Night Watchman*. The authors argue that "[b]oth Yu's original and translated poems contain a very delicately designed network of rhymes and resonance. No matter what language Yu writes in, he puts a lot of emphasis and efforts on developing rhythmical proclivity. When the end-rhymes used in the original cannot be reproduced in the translation, Yu instead employs various kinds of rhyme schemes, such as alliteration, end rhymes, consonant rhymes, internal rhymes, semi-rhyme, to redeem the musicality of the translation" (Wu and Chen 122). In other words, the creation of musicality in the translation can help the target text readers to access the shared explicature and implicature, so that the contextual and comprehensive effect of the reading can be attained with minimal processing effort and optimal relevance (122).

III. Reading Yu Kwang-chung the Translator

The solid investigation of 332 pages on the translations of Yu's lifelong career features a unique combination of sense and sensibility—a convergence of intellectual investigations and emotional reminiscences whose density and intensity reminds the reader of Proustian unrestrained longing, as portrayed in his renowned narrative *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In other words, the book not only displays the deployed colorful wings of Yu Kwang-chung as an adult butterfly, but it also harks back to his pre-debut chrysalis, examining his gradual grandeur-bound metamorphosis.

The first section of academic research consists of four papers: "The Portrait of a Poetry Translator as a Young Man: An Analytical Study on Yu Kwang-chung's *Translation from English Poetry (with notes)*," "In the Years of the Cold War: Yu Kwang-chung as a Youthful Brilliant Translator," "Digesting Chinese Nectar to Produce English Honey: Yu Kwang-chung the Self Translator—On Yu Kwang-chung's Self English Translation of his

Chinese Poetry,” and “The Muse in Addition to the Left and Right Hands: On Yu Kwang-chung’s Translation Theory and Criticism.” Modeling itself on the renowned rigorous style of *The Paris Review*, Shan’s second section of in-depth interview comprises three interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Yu: “The Tenth Muse: Interview with Yu Kwang-chung,” “Ploughing and Harvesting: Interview with Yu Kwang-chung,” “A Dignified Wife as a Lifelong Guardian Angel: Interview with Fan Wo-Tsun.” The third section is composed of four prose articles: “Being Both Creator and Master of a Brave New Academic Climate: Reminiscences of my Good Old Days at the Foot of Mount Chih-Nan,” “Associations with the Jadeite Cabbage with Insects: An Alternative Interpretation of Yu Kwang-chung,” “In the Amazing Light Beyond Time: Mourning for the Decease of my Mentor Yu Kwang-chung,” “In Love with Translation and in Pursuit of Endless Perfecting: In Memory of my Mentor Yu Kwang-chung the Translator.” Earnestly enough, the author of the book also prepares two tables in the appendix: a complete chart that lists all the titles of Yu’s translated works chronologically, and a list of foreign names mentioned in the book with their corresponding Chinese translations: traditional Chinese renditions adopted in Taiwan against simplified Chinese renderings used in the Chinese mainland.

In “The Portrait of a Poetry Translator as a Young Man: An Analytical Study on Yu Kwang-chung’s *Translation from English Poetry (with notes)*,” the author not only points out the educational function of the book for the majors of English literature in Taiwan, but he also accentuates the importance of the rich paratexts of the book that cast light on abundant literary learnings hidden between the lines. Repeating a point of the Preface, he states that Yu excelled in poetry, prose, literary criticism, and translation, which the poet-translator jokingly called his “four burrows,” “four trump cards,” and “four dimensions of his writing career” (Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 3). Nevertheless, his extraordinary achievements as a poet and prose writer often eclipse his marvelous performance as a translator, causing people to neglect his exceptional contribution to the field of translation and translation studies (Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 3). In point of fact, for over six solid decades, his translated works have embraced such literary genres as poetry, drama, novel, and biography; of these, his translations of poetry, in particular, have won widespread acclaim owing to their tremendous influence. *Translation from English Poetry (with notes)* (1960) represents Yu’s first collection of English

poems in Chinese translation since 1950. The thirty-seven collected poems are translated alongside the translator's meticulous critical notes with the original poets' brief biographies. Yu's first volume of translated poems not only demonstrates his ability as a translator of English poetry, but it also showcases his early translation concepts and strategies. In rendering poetic lexicons, dealing with poetic lines, representing literary skills, allusions, and conventions, including their cultural and historical contexts, Yu invests tremendous efforts in academic research before he embarks on the act of translating in the Chinese target language. It is with such a serious attitude that he succeeds in promoting English poetry to Chinese readers. As such, *Translation from English Poetry (with notes)*, albeit a debut performance, foreshadows Yu's future career as a devoted translator, translation critic, translation educator, translation editor, and Chinese-English as well as English-Chinese translator, which Chang Chin-Chung (張錦忠) so justly calls "Yu's five dimensions of translation" (47). To the handsome list, Shan adds the title of "translation advocator," and calls it "Yu's six dimensions of translation" (*Yu Kwang-chung* 50). It is Sub-section VI, entitled "Fault-finding in Every Possible Way," that stands out in the chapter of "The Portrait of a Poetry Translator as a Young Man." In this sub-section, the author resorts to his expertise in English poetry, analyzing some "imperfect" aspects in Yu's Chinese translations of certain English poetic lines. As Hsun Tzu (c. 310-237 BC), a pre-Qin Chinese philosopher, argues in his reputed essay, "On Learning," "[a] pupil of a like mind may one day outmaster his master" (青出於藍而勝於藍). Paradoxically, in the case between Yu the master and Shan the student, being outmastered by one's own disciple speaks volumes for the indispensable enlightenment of a genuine master.

In the chapter titled "In the Years of the Cold War: Yu Kwang-chung as a Youthful Brilliant Translator," the author explores Yu's translingual practice during the Cold War era (1945-91). Due to the focus on his distinguished achievements in writing poetry and prose, only a handful of critics have paid proportionate attention to Yu's bilingual practice and the historical conditions of his translations from English into Chinese, and vice versa. However, Yu's translations, along with his creative writings, reveal so much regarding a writer's sensitivity to his cultural, historical, and geopolitical situation, as well as his devotion to what Yu dubs "the Tenth Muse." His poetry, prose, literary criticism, and translation altogether constitute what he describes as "the four dimensions of his writing career," establishing his rightful place amongst the

most eminent contemporary Sinophone writers. This chapter concentrates on Yu's four English-Chinese and Chinese-English book-length translations, namely, *New Chinese Poetry* (1960), *Anthology of American Poetry* (1961), *Acres of Barbed Wire* (1971), and *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1972), published during the height of the Cold War era under the auspices of the United States Information Service in Hong Kong and Taiwan. By discussing the historical conditions, cultural productions, characteristics, and contributions of these four translations, Shan attempts to cast new light on Yu's role as a translator by making use of his bilingual competence, literary talent, historical environment, and cross-cultural resources. Based on Yu's case, Shan investigates the relation between the Cold War and translation industry in Taiwan, exploring how historical conditions influence and are reflected in translation. Yu the translator himself knows how to utilize the special resources provided by such unique circumstances to timely engage himself in the peculiar enterprise known as translation. For example, he joined Stephen Soong (1919-96) in translating representative modern American poems. Their *Anthology of American Poetry* was published by World Today Press, Hong Kong in 1961—a project supported by the US government during the Cold War to propagate American culture.

In the chapter, “Digesting Chinese Nectar to Produce English Honey: Yu Kwang-chung the Self Translator—On Yu Kwang-chung's Self English Translation of his Chinese Poetry,” the author investigates how Yu, as a poet-translator, renders his own Chinese poems into English, probing into the significant textual as well as poetic phenomena involved in Yu's self-translation. Firstly, Shan points out that *The Night Watchman* is not only a selection of Yu's Chinese poetry with Yu's own corresponding English translation, but it bears the peculiar “authority and authenticity” of an original poet (*Yu Kwang-chung* 122, 127). Secondly, the article analyzes both the difficulties and advantages that Yu encounters in the process of self-translating. Yu in his *New Chinese Poetry* reveals the peculiar difficulty in translating Chinese poems into English: “I suspect that some of my translations may seem to sound like English parodies,” and also confesses that in deciding which poems to include in the collection, his main concern resides in whether it is “the most readily translatable” (qtd. in Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 104). The poet himself has advantages in translating his own works, for he knows the meaning of the original text best, and it is impossible for him to misinterpret it; however, since the poet knows the thorough meaning of his poem, he tends to insist on

expressing his poetic intent in the target language, at times in spite of literal and/or literary fidelity on the language level (Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 125). Thirdly, the article takes Yu Kwang-chung's, Yang Mu's, and Ezra Pound's works as examples to illustrate poetic issues surrounding the translatability of poetry rendition, contending that translation amounts to daunting challenges when it comes to rendering poems that outshine others owing to their tonal, intonational, rhythmic, rhyming, and syntactic features in the original language. The fourth part of the article analyzes some of Yu's translation of his own poems, including "When I am Dead," "The Black Angel," "The White Curse," etc. The textual analyses reveal that Yu takes great care to attend to both form and spirit in the target text. If necessary, he would revise the form to retain the spirit (遺其面貌 · 保其精神 *yi qi mianmao, bao qi jingshen* [Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 114]). The next part of the article compares the different translations of Yu's "The Double Bed" by Wai-lim Yip and Yu himself, revealing that Yu's own translation tends to be more lively and audacious, whereas Yip's translation is more reserved and therefore more faithful to the original in terms of line number, diction, and stanzaic structure. The article concludes with Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," claiming that Yu's self-translation endows his Chinese poems with an English "afterlife," a new life of the poet-translator's own that makes his English translation no less beautiful nor less pure and at times even better crafted than the original.

IV. *Au Pied du Mont des lettres*¹

As an anthology of previously published articles, *Yu Kwang-chung the Translator* boasts a rarity of tripartite virtues. Firstly, the section of academic investigation probes into the profundity of Yu's superb artistry of literary translation. Sometimes Shan resorts to a comparative approach that compares and contrasts Yu's translation of an identical poem with those rendered by other

¹ "*Au Pied du Mont des lettres*" (於文山之麓 *yu wenshan zhi lu*) are French words borrowed to signify "At the Foot of Mount Wenshan." The locale where the author, then a Freshman, met Yu, then professor and chair of the Department of Western Languages, National Chengchi University, stands for a destined stage on which the twain was brought to converge on the same path by their shared faith in literature and translation. Because the transliterated term "Wenshan" itself at its best does not embody the critical notion of "literature" as incarnated in its Chinese characters, a crucial notion associated with the meeting locale, it is turned into "*le Mont des lettres*," which signifies "the Mount of Literature" both literally and literarily, a term much more in accord with the latent yet constant motif of the entire book.

translators to bring Yu's optimal appropriation of the English poetry tradition to the fore (Wu 21). As the relationship between Yu the Mentor and Shan the "Telemachus" has in the long academic run metamorphosed into a "brotherly" friendship during the later chapters of Yu's life (Shan, *Yu Kwang-chung* 308), Yu the master sometimes even accepts Shan the disciple's critical comments on some of his translations and revises his book accordingly before it is to be re-published (44-46).

Secondly, the interviews, carried out in the most candid attitude and narrated with an etched memory, abound in anecdotal accounts. The impressive anecdotes range from Yu's personal reminiscences of, and gratitude to, his teachers at National Taiwan University, to his official academic scores at NTU, to Yu's monthly income at National Taiwan Normal University and National Chengchi University half a century ago, to the extremely decent salary that Yu received at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, to Yu's unique English idiom *solitaire* pastime at the dining table, and even to the remotest nomenclatural allusion to the "bizarre" Chinese name, Fan Wo-Tsun (范我存), Mrs. Yu's Chinese official name, a name that her France-educated father gave her in memory of the celebrated and influential philosophical proposition posited by René Descartes (1596-1650)—"*Je pense, donc je suis*" ("I think, therefore I am"). As such, the author conjures up a biographical history of half a century ago, as if it were some sort of antediluvian tale related to the readership of our own time. The interviews not only satisfy the reader's curiosity about Yu the poet-translator and his renowned family of art and literature, but they also unveil cryptic aspects about the lived life of the poet, without which it may be next to impossible for contemporary readers to truly identify with the poet-translator. The life stories shared by both Mr. and Mrs. Yu in the interviews bear witness to the Chinese diaspora around 1949 throughout the Chinese mainland and across the Taiwan Strait. Without the interviews, it would be hard to lay bare a war-besieged diaspora lasting for more than three scores of years, a diaspora that lends justifying power and genuine emotion to Yu's celebrated poems about "nostalgia." Admittedly, Yu's nostalgic feelings tend to be unimaginable and unconceivable to the Millennials born and growing up solely in Taiwan. Indeed, it is understandably challenging for the Taiwanese youth born in the Taiwan of the twenty-first century to sympathize with the poems which lament the poet's miserable refuge from his homeland in China to the outlying island called Taiwan at the ripe age of

twenty-two. While existent academic investigations on Yu's translation largely focus on the "make" or constitution of the poet-translator, Shan, benefiting himself from a serendipitous tutor-disciple relationship *au pied du Mont des lettres* during his good old days at National Chengchi University, not only reveals the character of the poet-translator, but he also undertakes to represent the actual "making" process (*Bildung*) of Yu by harking back to his remote adolescence in China and his brave collegiate life at National Taiwan University. Curiously enough, Shan on the one hand analyzes Yu's accomplishment in bilingual literary translation with solid textual illustrations, and on the other he timely renders Yu's sincere gratitude to his university teachers right at the estuary of his poetic debut as an auspicious Chinese *bateau ivre*. Sincere gratitude goes to them for their respective instruction that altogether contributes to the eventual and eventful making of his own self to be a promising poet-scholar and poet-translator. As revealed in the interviews, a torch was handed down to Yu's somehow fledgling hands some seventy years ago in one way or another.

Thirdly, in the lyrical, emotional, and self-reflective prose articles of the third section looms a cross-generational relay of such a burning torch—the torch of poetry, literature, and translation. Xu Zhimo (1897-1931), the Romantic poet of the Crescent Moon Society, chants a celebrated tune in his beloved poem, "Chance," in which he laments a meeting-parting experience tinged with poetic ease and daring vivacity:

We met on the sea of a dark night,
 You fared on your way, and I on mine.
 Remember if you will,
 But do forget, better still,
 At this encounter the exchanged light. (Xu 433)²

If we draw on the Romantic poem to hallmark the fabulous convergence of the twain, Yu the Mentor and Shan the Disciple, we may concoct something poetic of their own version: "We met *au pied du Mont des lettres*, / You fared on your way, and I on mine." Fittingly enough, Yu the master soon relocated to The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Shan the student moved on to study at National Taiwan University. "Fare thee well!" So Fate had them bid adieu to

² The Chinese-English translation of the stanza is rendered by the author of this book review.

each other soon after their encounter, at the Green Valley of Taipei. The copious texts and rich rare paratexts included in *Yu Kwang-chung the Translator* embody the lingering light exchanged at this chance encounter at the pristine piedmont of Wenshan, a light, albeit pale in our postmodern consumer society, that has been carried down all the way to future generations as an inextinguishable *torche des lumières*.³ As a lifelong teacher on literary translation, Yu once sighs the Great Expectation that he feels shy to embrace for his students: A teacher keeps teaching all his lifetime, but how can he tell: who could finally get the raft and cross the river safe and sound (得筏而渡 *de fa er du* [Shan, “Interview” 186])? Yu has been stationed as an academic beacon light at several reputed universities across the Taiwan Strait; his two-year watch at Wenshan seems to be relatively ephemeral. Nonetheless, in retrospect we could not help but marvel at the heavenly affinity that a torch was indeed passed *au pied du Mont des lettres* (文山之麓).

In his renowned essay, “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) regards translation in the target language as the “afterlife” of its work in the original language (16). In point of fact, as demonstrated in Shan’s profound, exhaustive study that has run the entire gamut of Yu Kwang-chung translation studies, ranging from his Chinese translation, English translation, self-translation, translation annotation, translation critique, translation criticism, translation theorization, translation instruction, all the way to his translation promotion. Such a committed enterprise and conscientious attitude is revealed right after the title page, where the author sincerely dedicates *Yu Kwang-chung the Translator* to his “enlightening Mentor in both literature and translation: Professor Yu Kwang-chung (1928-2017).” In consequence, as a successor disciple in the field of literature and translation studies, Shan Te-hsing, the lifetime good student himself, may in the long run forge himself a name tantamount to the Benjaminian “afterlife” *par excellence* of his beloved Master, Yu Kwang-chung.

³ One of the lingering key tones of Shan Te-hsing’s *Yu Kwang-chung the Translator* is that Yu is not only regarded as the author’s enlightening instructor of literature and translation, but he is also respected as a lifetime model scholar. The core message of Yu as the author’s initial enlightener early at his adolescence is reiterated throughout the book, especially in the third section, where personal prose articles featuring emotional overflowing as well as sincere gratitude add a lyrical mood to the academic research. The French loanwords “*des lumières*” are timely borrowed to hark back to their lexical association with the critical term “*l’Âge des lumières*” (“the Age of Enlightenment”) to highlight the author’s sentimental ambience.

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