

What I Learned Translating Wu Ming-yi's *The Man With the Compound Eyes*

Darryl Sterk

Wu Ming-yi (吳明益)'s novel *The Man With the Compound Eyes* (《複眼人》, 夏日出版社, 2011) is a well-plotted ecological catastrophe narrative structured around a central symbol that, in a manner reminiscent of James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009), combines myth and media technology, in the figure of a man with compound eyes. The novel develops an idea from an earlier short story of Wu's, also entitled "The Man With the Compound Eyes." In the story, there is a butterfly preserve installed with a myriad video cameras. Each camera represents, in a static fashion (because the cameras do not move around like living creatures), the perspective of a single organism. A central computer compiles the video footage from the cameras into a multi-perspectival super-image for tourist consumption. One day, however, a video engineer goes wandering in the park and meets a man with compound eyes, taking the story into the surreal terrain. At any rate, the meaning of the metaphor is not hard to seek: the man with compound eyes is a figure for Nature from the perspectives of all the creatures that compose "Nature." The short story initially seems to make a comment on the commodification of nature by the tourism industry, but at the end we witness the destruction of the moon to promote agriculture in Siberia: the emphasis shifts towards the damage human beings inflict upon

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nature in the name of “development.” This shifted emphasis characterizes the novel as well.

In the novel, Wu Ming-yi deals with the effects of “development,” both local and international, on Taiwan’s east coast. Locally, he treats the Hsuehshan (雪山) Tunnel and the Chiang Wei-shui (蔣渭水) Memorial Freeway (北宜高速公路). This road has already had a huge impact on the economy on the northeastern county of I-lan (宜蘭); fields of green from photographs taken half a century ago are now covered in buildings. The road will be extended south to the east coast city of Hualien (花蓮) in the next couple of years. Internationally, Wu imagines the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a swirling soup of trash thousands of miles across in orbit around Hawaii, gathering into a floating trash island and crashing into Taiwan’s east coast, a little bit north of Hualien. Most of the main characters in the novel spend the rest of the story trying to clean up the mess. Their clearance efforts are in vain, yet the ending is upbeat, and the perspective of the man with the compound eyes is transcendent, somehow impervious to development’s deleterious effects: no images of anthropogenic detritus ever appear in the man’s screen-like compound eyes.

This, then, is a novel for our time, very much in tune with both the cult of video technology and the cult of Nature; it should appeal to both technophiles and biophiles. It refracts issues of global concern through a fascinatingly novel metaphor. Perhaps these were among the reasons why Gray Tan (譚光磊) decided to try to market it to a publisher that could help it reach an international audience. In the spring of 2011, local literary rights manager Gray Tan, founder of the Grayhawk Agency, began moving forward with his plan to bring Taiwan literature in translation to the world. He commissioned translations into Spanish, English and French of excerpts of *The Man With the Compound Eyes*. On the recommendation of a former teacher of mine, Michelle Wu (吳

敏嘉), who knew of my interest in environmental and aboriginal issues, Mr. Tan asked me to translate the English excerpt over the summer. In the fall of 2011, he sold the British English language translation rights to the publisher Harvill Secker. Shortly thereafter Vintage Pantheon was named as the novel's American publisher. I was thrilled when asked by Harvill Secker to undertake the translation of the whole novel. I immediately set to work, and had a very rough first draft ready by the end of January, averaging about ten thousand characters a day. I spent the next ten months revising and refining the translation, part time when I was teaching during the spring and fall, full time over the summer, which I spent translating "on location," on the east coast. In the course of translating the novel I learned a great deal. Much of what I learned I find difficult to articulate for one reason or another, but I can offer the following reflections on what the experience of translating the novel has taught me, about Taiwan's east coast, about myself and about translation.

What I Learned About Taiwan's East Coast

The narrative line of *Man With the Compound Eyes* moves, roughly speaking, north to south down Taiwan's east coast. It begins in a cave, which the reader later discovers is a dig for a tunnel, modeled on the Hsuehshan Tunnel from Taipei to I-lan. It ends three hundred pages later en route to the Alangyi (阿塹壹) Trail, in the south of Taitung (臺東) County in southeastern Taiwan. I followed the plotline south as I translated. Along the way I tried to recreate, as much as possible, the events of the novel in my own experience.

In the novel, for instance, one of the main characters is a rock climbing fanatic who falls to his death trying to 'blind climb' his way down a cliff without equipment in the middle of the wilderness in the middle of the night (though not before he engages in a long dialogue with the man with the

compound eyes). I was not about to die for my translation, especially since dying would hardly make the translation any better. And I have never had a hallucination, so meeting the man with the compound eyes did not seem to be in the offing. But I could certainly go rock climbing, and would have to do so to understand several quite technical paragraphs in the novel. I joined a group of friends and headed for the most famous rock-climbing site in Taiwan, the Dragon's Lair of Longdong (龍洞) in northeastern Taiwan. I put on the special climbing shoes and a climbing harness. With a belayer below to catch my fall, I started up the cliff; and made it about two thirds of the way up, until, exhausted and inexperienced, I slipped. I knew I would only fall a few inches but it was still unnerving. I kept going, slipped again, then announced I was giving up. Happily, I was so far up that nobody could hear me, and I managed, after a brief rest, to make it the rest of the way to the top. I was so proud of myself that I tried a second climb along a more difficult route. This time I got stuck for fifteen minutes before finding a way out and up. In the process I got a sense of the intellectual interest in rock climbing, and was captured on camera in a series of heroic poses.

Moving south, in the novel, the floating trash island crashes into Taiwan's east coast to the immediate north of H. City, which I decided to translate as Haven. I guessed this was the Seven Stars Bay or Qixingtian (七星潭), just north of Hualien City. Thus, when I was revising the translation of that incident, I sat myself down on the pebbles, felt the spray of the surf on my face, and tried to recreate the scene in my imagination, the better to render it in English. I tried to imagine myself as a journalist covering the story of the trash tidal wave, and as a poor resident of a fictional Polynesian island – Atilé'i – who gets washed up on shore. In the novel the trash covers the coast. Crews are sent to clear the coast, but every high tide brings in more trash. There is no trash

along Seven Stars Bay, which is a popular tourist destination, but, sad to say, trash is generally ubiquitous all along the east coast. There is trash everywhere in Longdong, for example. A hop skip and a jump from where I was posing heroically is the ugly sight of litter. Half of the mess has been left by climbers and divers and other visitors to Longdong, while the other half is from fishing vessels. Maybe bits and pieces of the Great Pacific Trash Vortex washes up on these shores. Feeling a combination of self-righteous and helpless, I picked up what I could, just like the clearance crews in the novel do their best to clean up the mess left by the trash tsunami. There was just too much for one person to handle, and the vast majority of people do not feel obliged to clean up things they have not personally thrown away.

In the novel, after the main characters give up on clearing the beach, they head into the deep south to a place in Taitung County called “Deer Meadow,” (鹿野) specifically to a spot called the Forest Church (森林教堂). Two banyan trees serve as the natural entrance to the Forest Church: Heaven’s Gate (天堂之門). The banyan trees appear to walk, because the aerial roots they dangle eventually touch the ground, become prop roots, and hold the parent tree up. Over time the trees appear to lumber along on innumerable legs. The Forest Church in the novel is run by a Bunun aborigine (布農族) called Anu as an ecotourist venture. It turns out there is actually a township in Taitung County called Deer Meadow, and so when I got there I started asking the way to the Forest Church. Nobody had heard of the Forest Church, but they had heard of a place called the Forest Museum (森林博物館), located halfway up a mountainside on the other side of the Beinan River (卑南溪) and run by a Bunun businessman named Aliman. And it was only a bike ride away. Maybe because I was half dead by the time I made it up the mountain, witnessing a pair of banyan trees at the entrance to what seemed like hallowed ground was an

overwhelming experience. 'The Forest Church really exists!' I thought. I went on to meet Aliman and have many further adventures. But that was definitely the highlight of the trip. Marks of civilization mar Taiwan's east coast, but it is still a sublimely beautiful place.

What I Learned About Myself

As I headed south along the East Coast, I was more and more affected by the environmental concern and misanthropy of Alice, one of the novel's narrators. Partly this was because I share this concern and even to some extent this sentiment, but also because I thought that to translate the novel well I had to let myself be possessed by it, to share its passions and obsessions. So when the characters in the novel pick up garbage along the coast, I picked up garbage along the highway; when they complained about government corruption I complained about state ineptitude; and when they bemoan the taste of the typical tourist – who might even prefer to watch butterflies on a screen rather than hiking up to a butterfly preserve – I gnashed my teeth at the superficiality of the ecotourism industry. In one scene in the novel, several characters visit a creek to observe Moltrecht's tree frogs (莫氏樹蛙). The creek is near a resort that seems to be based on the Meiliwan (美麗灣) resort in Taitung County, just south of Dulan (都蘭), which local Amis aboriginal groups (阿美族) have been protesting. One character, a writer named M, who seems to be one of the author's fictional avatars in the novel, just cannot understand why people would want to visit a resort, a superficially beautiful place, when there are so many interesting things nearby. I cannot understand why anyone would want to visit a resort, either, but unlike M I had little understanding of the interesting things nearby.

I knew the first thing I had to do was inform myself about Taiwan's

biodiversity, about the tree frogs of course, but also about wild boars (山豬), muntjacs (山羌), brittle stars (陽燧足), hermit crabs (寄居蟹), snakebark tree ferns (蛇木), Moltrechti's tree frogs, and moon-gazer stag beetles (望月鍬形蟲), midnight sheen stag beetles (漆黑鹿角鍬形蟲), and many more. I knew the second thing I had to do was get back to nature. This is a major theme of the book. It appeals to the Romantic child of nature in every reader. And the more I translated and the farther south I got the more offended I became by everyone's it-goes-without-saying attitude towards modern industrial civilization. Why, I wondered, do human beings have to live in an artificial environment of their own creation? Of course, all organisms participate in creating the environments in which they live, but not out of concrete. The closest most people living in a big city like Taipei get to nature is a city park, a safe, predictable space. A friend of mine's baby daughter cried the first time she crawled on grass; for the first nine months of her life she hadn't had any experience of the stuff. For the most part, we live in completely artificial environments. The interior designers among us make the indoor spaces we inhabit pleasing to the eye, and architects make them interesting from the outside, to the extent that we pay attention to the way our cities look. As for how they sound, you need to install soundproof windows in Taipei to get any peace and quiet, which you immediately tend to fill up with music or television; and when you go outside you hear the continual howling of motorcycles. If this is civilization, I had to get away from it.

But that's the thing about nature: it can be very unpleasant. It is lovely when you are watching an audiovisual selection of appealing scenes of nature, but not so nice when you add the mosquitos, the monkeys, and the heat and humidity. There I was, trying to get to sleep in a tent near the beginning of the Alangyi Trail, the place where *Man With the Compound Eyes* ends. I was dreadfully

uncomfortable. I was also worried about snakebite – the aborigines I met on the way to my improvised campsite told me there were snakes and I'd better stop and share a beer and some betelnut with them. And so, in the end, the translator who tried to get back to nature soon realized his own fragility on the edge of the wilderness. To finish the translation, I would have to return to civilization.

What I Learned About Translation

When I told the author I was going to revise the translation of the novel “on location” he very graciously indulged my wish to visit him at National Dong Hwa University (國立東華大學), where he teaches Chinese literature. He took me bird-watching at the estuary of the Mugua River (木瓜溪). The estuary had a view of the local pulp and paper mill, which reminded me of the scenes in the novel where the main character Alice reminisces about spending one winter in college with her grandmother in a west coast fishing village, a popular bird-watching spot until pulp and paper mills begin polluting the water. We saw a Mongolian plover with a broken leg, which Wu Ming-yi took to Taipei for treatment; sadly, the bird passed away soon after arriving at the animal hospital.

Wu Ming-yi was not about to spend the summer riding down the coast with me. But he did very graciously answer all the questions I e-mailed him when I was translating the novel. This was the first time I had ever had the opportunity to consult with a writer as I undertook a translation. I went a bit overboard. For the excerpts I translated in the summer of 2011 I asked over a hundred questions. When I was revising the translation in the summer of 2012 I asked another several hundred questions, on average one per page of Chinese. And to my surprise almost none of the author's responses made any difference to the translation. This is not meant as a criticism of the author, who provided

excellent explanations! It is rather the confession of a neophyte translator who was not quite ready to climb up the cliff on his own. For instance, at one point in the plot, Atile'i gets trapped in a mudslide when he is making his way up a mountain path. The slide traps his *jiao*, or leg. Yet, as all Chinese to English translators know, *jiao* could also be legs. Chinese does not have to specify singular or plural, which seems very strange to speakers of languages like English where number is inscribed in inflectional morphology (leg+s), but is actually quite liberating. If the number of legs is not the point, then why even mention it? English writers do not have a choice; Chinese writers do. At any rate, I asked the author whether both or only one of Atile'i's legs were trapped under the mud, and the author responded that he had not really thought about it when he was writing, but that either way was plausible, justifiable, and imaginable. In other words, the task of imagining how the scene should look was up to me, as long as it was supported by the text. The writer had in a sense cross-examined me by asking how I saw the scene.

Translation is, for me, an experience of communion; but the kind of communion one experiences in translation, and in reading in general, is solitary. The most important thing I learned about translation and the task of the translator while working on the English version of Wu Ming-yi's *The Man With the Compound Eyes*, is that the translator is ultimately on his own.

