

Revealing the Multiculturalism of Singapore Literature

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Yeng Pway Ngon. *Poems 1: Rebellion*. Translated by Alvin Pang and Goh Beng Choo. Singapore: The Literary Centre, 2010. 37 pages. ISBN 9789810860226.

Re-reading the six poems of Yeng Pway Ngon (b.1947), that were published between 1967 and 1970, in their English translation here is akin to revisiting the poet's rebellious youth and the literary challenges he confronted when he encountered the social degeneration of an urbanized society in a newly independent state. By the 1970s – an exceptionally fruitful decade for him – Yeng, still only in his 20s, had already found the full force and intensity of his poetic voice. A Singapore Cultural Medallion winner in 2003, Yeng has since become one of the most significant, prolific and renowned contemporary writers (as novelist, essayist, playwright and poet) writing in Chinese in Singapore.

In these six translated poems, Yeng openly confronts in rapid cadence, his self-negation and desolation in “Aria”; deliberately detaches himself and depicts his sense of isolation and social alienation in “Café”; laments in the 150-line poem “On the operation table” the loss of individuality in commercialized modernity; concretizes the emotional estrangement of nameless men and unfamiliar buildings in “Edifice”; ridicules the senselessness and absurdity of paid phone entertainment in “Telephone booth”; and finally, “In the tomb”, he exposes the emptiness and soullessness of a zombie-like city. To express compelling social concerns like these, his poems fuse modernist language and realistic themes, as well as the imaginative and the descriptive with the narrative. Yeng's frequent transitions of scenes and cunning shifting of viewpoints together with his poetic allusions are consequently subtle and difficult to grasp. For instance, parallelisms are widely employed to suggest uniformity and relatedness in the description of café scenes: “some jabber”, “some sip”, “some smoke”, “some do nothing” and so on (pp. 8-9), and in the enumeration of metaphors of life: “a balance sheet”, “slot machine”, “prayer”, “necklace of proverbs”, “cold nose of a horse”, “face of a saint”, “endless testing”, “endless cheating”, and so on (pp. 14-15). Yet at the same time, Yeng juxtaposes, augments, negates or contradicts these parallels in remarkably fierce

succession, drawing readers to the fine line between reason and ambiguity, and pushing readers to the extreme margins of interpretation.

Probably because of such exacting demands on the translator's interpretive skills translation of these poems have not appeared till now, some 40 years later—although Goh Beng Choo, Yeng's wife and an accomplished translator, has been with the poet all this while. Despite being quite overdue, the translation by Pang and Goh has done justice to the excellent Chinese text, being both delicate and modulated, capturing the individual style and tone of the poet's voice, as well as his craft and insights. Pang and Goh not only translate, but also trans-create, as and when appropriate. When caught between sound-patterning, meaning-patterning and eye-patterning, they occasionally deviate from the original in order to better suit the rhythm and semantic patterns of the English language. For example, in the poem "Café", the four descriptions (in parentheses) of Anthony discussing the morning weather and Maria pretending to be joyous, are exactly identical in the Chinese text, but are skilfully varied in the four English versions, portraying a knotty and thoughtful multiplicity of poetic styles (pp. 8-11). Furthermore, while retaining the colloquial tone of the original, the translations also manage to be intensely lyrical.

In his speech at the launch of *Poems 1: Rebellion*, Yeng regretted that while "Singapore is a multi-cultural society ... there is little interaction among writers of different languages."¹ His translator, poet Alvin Pang, has elsewhere also wondered, "Have we been missing out, perhaps for decades, on a larger creative commons of insight, artistic innovation and divergent perspectives simply because we haven't made enough effort to listen to each other?"²

The work of introducing Singapore Chinese literature to English readers (and conversely, the literature in English to Chinese readers) is still, even in such a multicultural and multiracial society as Singapore, in its infancy. Any translation of Singapore literatures, especially a volume of poems of such fine quality, is thus a genuine contribution to the novel, but growing process of inter-cultural interaction which can reveal the multicultural wealth around and amongst us.

¹ Yeng Pway Ngon. 2010. "Yeng Pway Ngon's speech at the launch of Poems 1 [Rebellion] at The Arts House", in *The Literary Centre*, http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=166048620102897 (accessed 29 Aug 2011).

² Pang, Alvin. 2011. "Reclaiming Literature for Singapore", In *S/pore: New Direction in Singapore Studies*, <http://s-pores.com/2011/06/reclaiming-literature-for-singapore/> (accessed 26 Aug 2011).