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That certain cut: towards a characterology of APWT

Abstract:

The essay charts the history and goals of Asia Pacific Writers & Translators since its beginnings in 2005, noting how the association has evolved to incorporate creative writing pedagogy and, importantly, literary translation. It draws on linguist MAK Halliday's discussion of the 'characterology' of Mandarin Chinese to ask whether a literary community such as APWT might also have a 'certain cut' identifiable in the features and effects of the new writing that emerges from the interactions of participating practitioners as they cross boundaries and challenge limits. The essay argues that the mission of APWT is transformative and ongoing and needs greater advocacy. Examples cited include the work of Michelle Cahill and Eliza Vitri Handayani and the Dalit/Indigenous Australia special issue of *Cordite*.

Biographical Note:

Nicholas Jose has published seven novels, including *Paper Nautilus* (1987), *The Red Thread* (2000) and *Original Face* (2005), three collections of short stories, *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (a memoir), and essays, mostly on Australian and Asian culture. He is Professor of English and Creative Writing at The University of Adelaide, where he is a member of the J M Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Translation – Asia Pacific – Chinese fiction – Literary communities

As the organisation now known as Asia Pacific Writers & Translators (APWT) passes its tenth anniversary, it's an occasion to celebrate and reflect. From a start with seed funding from Griffith University in 2005 for an informal network known as the Asia-Pacific New Writing Partnership, and a memorable first meeting in Bali in 2007, 'in a thatched hut in the middle of a rice paddy', on the fringes of the Ubud Readers & Writers Festival, as the history has it, APWT has evolved.¹ Some of the founders and early participants have stayed involved and their vision, determination and effort have been integral to the association's survival and achievements: Nury Vittachi, Xu Xi, Butch Dalisay, Robin Hemley and, indispensably, Jane Camens, to name just a few. The ten-year mark was heralded by holding the annual gathering in mainland China for the first time, thanks to the hospitality of Professor Dai Fan and her colleagues at Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU), who have played a key role in establishing Creative Writing in the Chinese academy, in English to begin with, and in Chinese now too.² That's a reminder, again, that writing happens *in* language, but also *across* and *through* languages, in varieties of English, Chinese and countless other languages in Asia and the Pacific and around the world. One of the important changes as APWT has developed over a decade has been the incorporation of translators—Asia Pacific Writers *and* Translators—who combine with editors, publishers, critics, scholars, teachers and students into the whole wonderful cast.

In 2008 APWT met in Delhi for an inspiring discussion called 'Writing the Future', graciously hosted by the Indian Institute of Technology under the brilliant direction of author and scholar Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair. 'Writing the Future.' It sounds utopian, looking back. We were the future then. Today our concerns are focused on a present that is turning out to be more complicated than was predicted ten years ago, requiring different, perhaps more urgent, responses. The environment surrounding APWT has changed, causing APWT to change as it seeks to be relevant and useful. There is beauty in such flexibility, or, to put it in stronger terms, APWT exists to find new ways to engage with what is going on—whether as chameleon, migratory bird, canary in the coalmine, or the frog who manages not to be boiled alive. That necessary capacity for re-invention comes with the territory. Network, organisation, association, incorporation, part festival, part club, part annual get-together, all of those things and never entirely any one, moving around (from a current Australian base), partnering with the academy when it suits, while remaining run by members who are writers and translators themselves, APWT has a unique profile and formula. Along the way it is able to take on board widely different versions of what writing and translating might be in relation to Asian and Pacific communities in today's world, with all the variety and richness of custom and new possibilities and pressures.

Yet this same shape-shifting, so attuned to the times and the places from which APWT comes, makes it difficult to explain, not only to external agencies and funding-bodies, but even to ourselves. Who are Asia Pacific Writers & Translators when we get together? What do we do? To approach an answer, let me borrow the title of an article published by the distinguished linguist Michael Halliday in 2014 in the journal *Functional Linguistics*. That particular issue was given to me by its editor, Professor Chang Chenguang, dean of the School of Foreign Languages at Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU), where the journal is produced, when I visited on an earlier occasion and I am grateful for his kindness. Quite fortuitously it provided me with a key for what I'm trying to say about APWT. Michael Halliday, born in 1925 in Leeds in Britain, lived in China in the 1940s where he worked with some of the country's great linguists at a time of radical upheaval. He was at SYSU in 1949 when Guangzhou was officially

‘liberated’ after the Communist victory. Later he settled in Australia where, now in his nineties, he continues his work as an emeritus professor at the University of Sydney. Halliday maintains strong links with SYSU where there is a library named in his honour. That’s where I found the first issue of *Functional Linguistics* and Halliday’s article, entitled ‘That “certain cut”: towards a characterology of Mandarin Chinese’, in which he distils a lifetime’s work on China’s many languages to attempt a description of Mandarin. A ‘certain cut’ is an old-fashioned phrase, referring to the cut of a piece of clothing, such as a man’s suit, that gives it its distinctive character and quality. Halliday responds to the feeling many people have that a particular language has its own special feel or character, its unique way of construing human experience and making the world. He remembers the American linguist Edward Sapir, writing in 1921 that each language has ‘a certain cut’ and aligns this with the notion of ‘characterology’ advanced by the Prague school linguist Vilém Mathesius in 1928. Halliday writes: ‘the idea of the “certain cut” is very appealing; it is, so to speak, the limiting case of a typological grouping—ultimately, every language is the only exemplar of its particular type. The challenge is, to make this certain cut explicit: can we identify it, or is it simply ineffable?’³

Something similar might be said for the literary productions of a particular language, or the literature of a particular community. Does APWT, for example, have a ‘certain cut’ that can be described? By identifying ourselves under the banner of Asia Pacific Writers & Translators we recognise a potential commonality across all our differences. Is it possible to identify that? Or is the relevant ‘cut’ here less the cut of an item of clothing than the cut and shuffle of a pack of cards? Or a different kind of cut again, as the mixing and interaction happen, a cut and splice, a cut and paste? What APWT enables is not defined only by geography or language or ancestry or ethnic background. Rather it is the new creative modes that come in the varying combinations of such factors, the new forms of practice and expression that move beyond the given categories.

Can a literary idea have a ‘certain cut’? To show you what I mean, let us consider the example of the Chinese novel. Let me ask you to select the best twenty-five Chinese novels of the last century, as *Time Out Beijing* did in a recent survey of experts. That list includes novels written in Chinese by Chinese, living and dead, with one author from Taiwan, but none from Hong Kong unless we count Zhang Ailing/Eileen Chang. It includes novels written in English, and one translated from French, by authors with Chinese background, such as *The Vagrants* by Yiyun Li. It includes novels about China written in English by non-Chinese, such as *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck and *Empire of the Sun* by JM Ballard. It includes short stories. Number one on the list is Lu Xun’s *The Real Story of Ah Q and Other Tales from China* (an accompanying image identifies Julia Lovell’s translation for Penguin Classics).⁴ *To Live* by Yu Hua comes in at number two, *Love in a Fallen City* by Eileen Chang at number three and *Red Sorghum* by Nobel prize-winner Mo Yan at number four. It becomes apparent that the list of best Chinese novels of the twentieth-century is limited to books that are readily available in English, as if they could not be rated as top works if they had not made it in translation. Or maybe *Time Out Beijing* has its own constituency in mind. Nevertheless, the list is fascinating for its relaxed sense of what a Chinese novel might be, both in its inclusiveness and its limitation. On one hand it appears that anyone can write a Chinese novel, if it’s about China. It doesn’t have to be conventional in form or content. On the other hand, many important writers from the Chinese world are left out. Shen Congwen is missing, for instance, perhaps because his wonderful stories of West Hunan are not

what a reader whose idea of the novel derives from the English tradition of fiction would call a novel. The point is that things are open to redefinition, and how necessary that is.

The origins of APWT are associated with the Hong Kong International Literary Festival, which began in 2001, and the Man Asia Literary Prize that arrived in 2007, both signalling a new awareness of creative writing in the region from the vantage point of Hong Kong. At that time Nam Le, with his prizewinning short story collection *The Boat* (2006), was the pin-up boy for storytelling that expressed imaginative mobility in an Asian context and a new kind of literary cosmopolitanism. Literary festivals have proliferated across the Asia Pacific region since the mid-2000s and writers from the region have come to be included in literary festivals everywhere. Publishers large and small are active in promoting the flow of new works and support translations in many directions. Asian nations have been guests of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in recent years and world sales have resulted. The situation is far healthier than it was a decade ago in terms of the presence of writing from Asia and the Pacific in the global literary marketplace.

And yet. The Man Asia Literary Prize was discontinued partly because it was felt to be no longer necessary. Asian authors are eligible for other, grander prizes, such as the Booker, which are not limited to authors from Asia. In its early iteration the Man Asia Literary Prize was open to work that had not yet been published, at least in English, which provided an opportunity for the discovery of work by authors who were not already known. Later it changed to work that was already scheduled for publication in English, which meant that the books shortlisted were mostly already being groomed for international exposure. In that way the prize made less of a contribution to developing a new literature of the region and for the times than was originally envisaged. The last Asian author to win the Booker prize was Aravind Adiga in 2008. He was a controversial choice as I discovered when I spoke at 'Writing the Future' in Delhi that year, partly because of his moving around. It was a reminder that a major international win can have a different meaning back home, that there are distinct literary constituencies and that emergence as an author is seldom simple. It was pleasing to see Madeleine Thien shortlisted for the 2016 Booker Prize for her novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. As someone who lived through the events at Tiananmen that are revisited in the latter part of the book, I found the narrative not only convincing at a documentary level but moving and gripping as a human story. It's a Chinese novel that is written in English, saying things that are not easily said publicly in China, particularly about the uncomfortable continuities between the Cultural Revolution and June 4 1989 and the fate of those involved, embodied in Thien's characters. It was disappointing that the novel did not win the Booker Prize (it has won many others). For all the praise it garnered, it remained something of an outlier in the field. I wonder if that's because it's a work from and about an actual world (as opposed to a fantasyland) that has not yet found a place in the literary imagination of Anglophone readers. If that's the case, it's to our detriment. It's dangerous that a distant, opaque view persists of such an important presence in today's world.

APWT's mission is ongoing. The visibility of the translator and the inclusion of works in translation is a real improvement. Korean author Han Kang and her translator Deborah Smith, for example, shared the Man Booker International Prize in 2015 for the novel translated as *The Vegetarian*. This is partly as a result of advocacy by the British Centre for Literary Translation and related organisations, sometimes in partnership with APWT. BCLT's workshop model was put into practice in China, with support from

Chinese authorities and Penguin China, achieving good results. New writers were introduced to a larger readership, thanks partly to better translations. Slowly the confidence to explore what might be possible has increased, and the interest in working experimentally across languages has grown. A fine case is the special issue of the online poetry journal *Cordite*, based in Australia, where the work of contemporary Indigenous Australian poets has been translated into some of the non-English languages of India. The project *Literary Commons: Writing Australia–India in the Asian century with Dalit, Indigenous and Multilingual Tongues*, co-ordinated by scholar and translator Mridula Chakraborty, brings into dialogue two flourishing sets of present-day traditions. Here is Seemantini Gupta’s Bangla version of Ali Cobby Eckermann’s poem ‘Penelope Rae Cobby (The Stolen Child)’:

দরজার গোড়ায় জড়োসড়ো হয়ে দাঁড়িয়ে, আমি

অবশ্বাসী আন্তনাদ, আমি

গাড়ির মধ্যে জবুথবু, আমি

বসিাদরে রহস্য-স্পর্শ, আমি-ই।

যে কাঁথাটুকিখনও ব্যবহার করা হলো না, আমি সৈ

বা খালি, ধুলো-জমা পরোমবুলটোরটা

টডে বিয়ার ভর্তি ওই খালি বিছানা

আর নীরব চোখে নীরব অশ্রুধারা।

কোনও বাচ্চার হাত পড়েনি, এমন সব পুতুল

ককেহীন কোনও জন্মদনিরে পার্টি

বা নামহীন কোনও মুখ

‘কনে’, এই প্রশ্নরে মধ্যে লুকনো ফসিফসিানি।

আমি সই পাপ, যার কোনও পরতিরাগ নই

আমি সই অনুচ্চারিত ভরসনা

আমি সই বদেনা, যার কোনও শেষ নই

আমহি সেই শিশু, কলঙ্ক গলি খয়েছে যাক।

I am the huddle at the door

I am the sound of disbelief

I am the awkward in the car

I am the mystery touch of grief

I am the baby blanket never used

The empty pram that gathers dust

The empty cot with teddy bears

The silent tears in silent eyes

I am the toys without a toddler

The empty birthday with no cake

The empty name without a face

The whisper lost within the why

I am the sin that lies unsolved

I am the unsaid glance of blame

I am the hurting unresolved

I am the baby lost by shame⁵

The solidarity among Indigenous writers across the region and with Indigenous peoples everywhere, many with shared histories and continuing experience of colonisation, is one of the most important dimensions of the Asia Pacific space, an empowering legacy that reveals and inspires in many directions. To speak of translation is to speak of more than words. The lived experience of successive generations in changing, increasingly connected parts of the world demands translation into new forms of expression and new media—expression that insists on the freedom to move, to communicate with others across boundaries, including online.

One of the most exciting examples recently is Eliza Vitri Handayani's novel *From Now On Everything Will Be Different*. The author wrote a version in Bahasa and then produced her own English version, published by Vagabond Press in 2015. As the title declares, this taut and intense novel depicts a moment in a society, and in two lives, when the hope that everything can be different is real, when it partly happens, a revolution experienced through the lens of a photographer, a young woman who, as author, offers us her own new writer's voice: 'This time she breaks into his world with an envelope of photographs.'⁶ Handayani's commitment as a writer is continuous with her work as translator and also as advocate for freedom of expression, witness the campaign she started for *Banned Literature in Translation*.⁷

At the heart of APWT, then, rather than external categorisation, are the ideas generated from the act of writing itself, through conceptual and aesthetic approaches, internal, dialogic, experimental, continually changing. A shared strength is the connection of writers to environments and histories of transformation, of political, religious and ethical conflict, with negotiation between tradition and modernity often intimately experienced through family and the changing perspectives of different generations. A shared experience of mobility, social and economic, with movement between one culture and another, including displacement, desire, migration and exile. Damage control, Gayatri Spivak's term, is one name for this. Elsewhere I've conceptualised it as an aesthetic that is also a form of ethics and politics: mundane, of the moment, meditational; showing movement of mind, and between m/other tongues, and across media; involving re-interpretation of measure and scale; multiple, manifold.⁸ Including making merry. Including mischief-making. Some of these characteristics are contradictory. They don't need to be resolved.

When I spoke in Delhi in 2008 it was about 'orphan tales' and the possibility of belonging nowhere and everywhere. Now, in relation to the gathering in Guangzhou in late 2016, I feel the need to add the word 'revolution', taking the cue from a world in turmoil. Revolution is a memory and a prospect that informs our writing, however ambivalently. The work of writing for APWT is about bearing witness to overturning, a turning around.

The stories in *Letter to Pessoa*, the debut collection by Indian-Australian poet Michelle Cahill, create a set of avatars, or other selves, as the Lisbon writer notably did. Some of the stories are set in Asia or have Asian characters. Others take the form of letters to famous writers. 'What ships are docked within us?' the speaker asks in the title story.⁹ One of the best stories is told in the language of a cat from Nairobi who finds its way to London. Later a narrator describes herself as 'a whole made up of parts'.¹⁰ An excess of multiplicity drives this writing, as it is also compensation for a multiply disrupted past. A long story called 'Borges and I' pays tribute to the power of a book to change the past by opening a 'wormhole' in time. The writer is an 'emissary from the future', with revolutionary intent.¹¹ The world turns.

Literature mostly starts in a local context, with local production, dissemination and response. From there a constituency is built and expands outwards. Literature exists in that community of transmission. It becomes available through reviews, discussion, criticism and debate. It has its audience and its supporters. That happens in communities everywhere. But it seems to happen less across the different literary cultures in the Asia Pacific region, and less between the Asia Pacific region and the rest of the world, and that, regrettably, is part of the characterology of APWT too. The network came into existence to change that and it remains a work in progress. We don't read our own work

enough, for any number of reasons, partly practical, partly attitudinal. We don't advocate enough for the work we are producing. We don't write criticism or engage in debate enough, or create the opportunities for others to do so. Through APWT we recognise a rich and significant potential. We are part of a community of participants. We are the literary constituency we need. Those of us who wear academic hats are in a strong position to demonstrate the impact and engagement that are becoming a necessary measure of research value. That is what APWT has always been about.

I like the idea of the innovative cultural space in Guangzhou created by artist Chen Tong to maintain his own eclectic interests. Upstairs Libreria Borges, a bookstore with a special dedication to the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet and related French avant-gardists and downstairs an archive of usually inaccessible Chinese video art drolly called the Video Bureau. Here is where the blind librarian of Buenos Aires turns up in Canton, to use Guangzhou's old name. Borges had a thing about China. One of his greatest stories is called 'The South', referring to the south of Argentina where a man who comes from the city is killed in a knife fight in a kind of death wish. The story tells the revenge of the South on the North, where the killer is a gaucho with Chinese features and the dead man is European. Is the southern man from Canton? Is that South also this South? Is the South of China our South too, as it joins to Australia and many other parts of the global South through centuries of migration? In another story Borges wrote that Canton is 'where the river of the Water of Life spills into the sea.'¹² The Pearl River delta flows out generously and reaches other shores. That confluence—in writing, reading and exchange—is part of APWT's character too.

Endnotes

¹ <https://apwriters.org/about/mission-history/>

² <https://www.thechinastory.org/2015/02/creative-writing-in-china/>

³ Michael Halliday, 'That "certain cut": towards a characterology of Mandarin Chinese', *Functional Linguistics*, 2014, 1:2, 4-23. P.4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2196-419X-1-2>

⁴ <http://www.timeoutbeijing.com/feature/36226/The-best-Chinese-books-of-the-last-century.html>

⁵ <http://cordite.org.au/content/poetry/dalit-indigenous/>

⁶ Eliza Vitri Handayani, *From Now On Everything Will Be Different* (Vagabond Press, 2015), p.7.

⁷ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1726829124/banned-literature-in-translation>

⁸ <http://mascarareview.com/writing-asian-poetry-in-english-by-nicholas-jose/>

⁹ Michelle Cahill, *Letters to Pessoa & other short fiction* (Giramondo 2016), p.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.40.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.135

¹² 'Averroes' Search', translated by James E Irby, Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* ed. Donald A Yates and James E Irby (New Directions New York 1964), p.151

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