

# *On Translation, Writing, Elephants, and Stolen Bicycles*

Photos by Dr. Melek Ortabasi  
Transcribed by Molly MacKay



In this generously given interview, author Wu Ming-Yi and translator Darryl Sterk sit down to give *The Lyre* a look into how a novel is born, and then translated. Wu is an award-winning novelist, as well as a literary professor, environmental activist, and artist—to name a few. Sterk has worked for the last half-dozen years with Wu, translating the author’s novels from Taiwanese to English. He has also recently been learning the Indigenous Taiwanese language Seediq. Together, the duo’s latest project titled *The Stolen Bicycle* is a novel to celebrate!

**The Lyre:** What was the most difficult part of the translation process?

**Darryl Sterk:** None of it. I enjoy every single minute of it. There is a process, but it is enjoyable. I translated the first draft in about a week or so. I figured out how to get voice recognition. When I started as a translator, I could translate 1,000 words an hour, because you tend to go as fast as you can to make as much money you can. By the time I got to this project I could translate 2,000 words an hour ... so double! However, if I use voice recognition, I can translate 4,000 characters per hour. So, if the novel is 174,000 so you can get through it in 34 hours. Therefore, it is conceivable that you can translate an entire novel in a week. But it will be rough, and you misunderstand many more things.

**Melek Ortabasi:** I would not call it translating. I would call it drafting.

**DS:** It's drafting yeah, it is rough drafting. You start calculating: "Okay I can make so much money in a week, wow this is a pretty good job," but if that is your attitude you will not do a good job. It is extremely time-consuming, with many revisions—so you must forget about the time and income. You focus on making it as good as you can, making it perfect.

You put it aside once in a while so it's not so fresh. You must come back to it as a reader, get some distance from it so you can see the flaws. The second revision is the most time-consuming and I have a wife who checks the whole thing, and then I go ahead and do it again. Eventually you take the Chinese away, and then you revise in English to make sure the sentences make sense in isolation.

**L:** What drew you to Mandarin as a language?

**DS:** I was interested in investigating the differences in speech in different areas of a country. In English dialects, look at London as an example: every 20 km there is a switch because people want to be different ... people intentionally want to be different. I wished to investigate this phenomenon in other places. Moreover, Mandarin has become my life. I married a Taiwanese woman. In the novel they are talking in Taiwanese, but the novel is translated in Mandarin. This is an imperialist language. With Taiwanese romanization, each church had a different system of language. For hundreds of years, people have been writing in characters. I am trying to learn Taiwanese. I am getting my mother-in-law to teach me. In the novel, I put in as

much romanization as possible. After all, foreignization is about bringing the reader closer to the original and it is integral in drawing a connection between reader and author.

**L:** What is the writing process like for you?

**Wu Ming-Yi:** Firstly, something must happen that inspires me to write a novel. In *The Stolen Bicycle*, the main character in the novel is a writer like myself, but his name is Mr. Cheng. He is writing about himself at a distance, as I am too. I must do research in response to whatever event inspired myself. What inspired myself in this case was that a reader had asked about what happened at the end of a previous novel. There is a bicycle in the previous novel that gets left outside of a public assembly hall in Taipei during the Japanese era. Therefore, the reader asks what happened to the bicycle, and I wrote a letter back to the reader: saying that I will write a novel about the bicycle to answer their question ... and so Mr. Cheng in the story mirrors the same thing. And here is the result!

For the research, it was all about the Taiwanese bicycle industry. Also, there



This author-translator team visited SFU during the 2019 Vancouver Writers Festival.

was this old doctor who told me a story about a chimp who was brought to Taiwan from Borneo. I wrote a letter to the zoo, saying did you have this chimp during the Japanese era, and it was true—they did! In the novel the chimp is in a cage in the elementary school. His name is Mr. Ichiro. One day Mr. Ichiro had a bad day and had to be taken back to the zoo named after a place in Japan: Muyuramu. So, the children had to leave school to go see the chimp. I found the story captivating and I wanted to bring the Taiwanese bicycle industry, plus the chimp story together ... and it snowballed from there!

**L:** It seems like the elephants had a very spiritual presence in the novel. What inspired you to write about elephants?

**WMY:** A part of my research touched on a story about [a] Taiwanese troop. The troop I looked at was getting trained and

used by American military assistance. They captured this elephant from the Japanese—they had trained elephants to do brute labour. So, the elephants could haul things around and do all sorts of things. They capture three of these elephants and end up travelling across the treacherous mountains to Taiwan. For me, this journey seemed like a symbol of Chinese people, their destiny, and their resilient experiences in the Second World War and after. The most famous of these elephants was Li Wong [which] translates to king of the jungle. When the elephants came over the mountains, this reporter was there waiting to interview the troops.

At the time, mainlanders in Taiwan did not all speak the same dialect, so the reporter misheard the elephant's name as Ling Wong, which instead means brimming with life! So, he got renamed and became the star of the zoo, oldest elephant during his day and always brimming with life. To preserve him, when he died, they kept his skin and turned him into taxidermy!

**MO:** Wow! What an interesting story! With that, I think it is about time to conclude this discussion. Thanks so much to the both of you for sharing some of your knowledge with our World Literature group!

Wu Ming-Yi and Darryl Sterk with some of *The Lyre's* executive team.

