Foreword to the Special Issue on
Weng Nao and Wu Yung-fu

Kuo-ch’ing Tu

Weng Nao (1910-1940) and Wu Yung-fu (1913-2008) were Taiwanese writers active during the 1930s. Although the periods of their literary creativity did not last long, approximately only three to four years, the works they left behind carry a certain significance in the history of Taiwan literature. Both writers are introduced here together not only because the time they were active in Japan closely reflects the contemporary literary trends, but also because, as writers the characteristics of their works are often distinguished as “influenced by the Japanese New Sensualist School.” We would like to look into these two aspects in more detail.

First of all, let’s understand the backgrounds of these two writers. People in general know little about Weng Nao’s life. According the biographic chronology compiled by Sugimori Ai, he was born in 1910 to a farming family named Chen and was adopted by the Weng family at the age of five. In 1929 at the age of twenty, he graduated from Taichū Normal School and taught at elementary schools until 1934, when he went to study in Japan. It is said that he was registered in a private university and lived at Kōenji, Tokyo with a forty-six-year-old Japanese woman. His essay “Tōkyō kōgai rōnin-gai—Kōenji kaiwai” [The Vagarant Town in the Suburb of Tokyo—in the Kōenji District] lets people imagine the life and feelings of a Taiwanese literary youth from the colony in the 1930s, wandering about as a vagrant in a suburb of Tokyo. His life in Tokyo has been a subject of study by Huang Yu-t’ing, a Ph.D. student of comparative literature at Tokyo University. Weng Nao’s literary activity in Japan lasted only three years (1935-37), during which he had contact with the members of the Taiwan Geijutsu Kenkyūkai [The Society for the Study of Taiwanese Arts] and its publication Formosa [Formosa] and participated in the activities of the Tokyo branch of the Taiwan Bungei Renmei [Taiwan Literary Art League]. He published his essays, translations of English poems, stories and critiques in Taiwan Bungei [Taiwan Literary Art] and Taiwan Shin-Bungaku [Taiwan New Literature]. Because of his romantic temperament and debauched life style, he did not have a close relationship with other Taiwanese writers and, after several years wandering in Tokyo, died at a time and of a cause unknown.

Wu Yung-fu was born in 1913 in Puli Township, Nantou County and went to study at Nagoya Fifth High School in 1929 at the age of seventeen. He later entered Meiji University to study literary arts. In 1932 when he was twenty, he joined with Su Wei-hsiung, Chang Wen-huan, Wang Pai-yuan and others in organizing the Society for the Study of Taiwanese Arts, which launched the publication of the magazine Formosa the following year. Wu Yung-fu’s literary activities in Japan also lasted only about three years (1933-35), with his poems, stories, and plays published in Formosa. After he returned to Taiwan in 1935 when he was twenty-three, he worked as a reporter for the Taiwan Newspaper Office and joined the Taiwan Literary Art League
established by Chang Shen-ch’ieh and Chang Hsing-chien, with his works published one after another in *Taiwan Bungei* [Taiwan Literary Art] and *Taiwan Bungaku* [Taiwan Literature], edited by Chang Wen-huan. In 1967 at the age of fifty-five, he joined the Li [Banboo Hat] Poetry Society as a member. In 1980 at the age of sixty-eight he founded the Wu Yung-fu Criticism Award, and passed away in 2008 at the age of ninety-six.

Both Wu Yung-fu and Weng Nao were active in creative writing in Japan for three years, during 1933-35 and 1935-37 respectively, with Wu followed by Weng. Regarding their works, it has been generally maintained that they were influenced by contemporary Japanese literary trends, especially the New Sensualist School. Therefore, a review of the literary circles in the mid-1930s in Japan will be helpful for our understanding of the background of these two Taiwanese writers’ creative writing at that time.

In the history of modern Japanese literature, “Meiji” (1868-1911), “Taishō” (1912-1925), and “Shōwa” (1926-1989) are often the concepts used to periodize the history of literature. In fact, fiction or literature is inevitably closely related with politics, society, customs, and thoughts. Generally speaking, after the Great Earthquake of 1923, there were two new literary journals on the rise: *Bungei Sensen* [Literary Front] and *Bungei Jidai* [Literary Age], both launched in 1924, representing proletarian literature and literature of the Neo-Sensualist School respectively. It was a turning period in the history of Japanese literature. The conflict of these new literary trends became the headspring of *Shōwa* literature, developing into a confrontation between revolutionary literature and artistic revolution, as well as a challenge of the new generation against the old. In the early *Shōwa* period, these two trends gradually divided into two rival influences in literary circles as proletarian literature vs. modernist literature. On the other hand, the end of the Taishō period saw the rise of popular literature and the beginning of another confrontation, that between pure literature and popular literature. In short, literature of the early *Shōwa* period is characterized by its complexity, with confrontation and overlapping of diverse literary trends, such as literature for life’s sake vs. literature for art’s sake, new generation vs. old generation, bourgeois literature vs. proletarian literature, and pure literature vs. popular literature.


Setting the creative activities of the two writers against the background of the Japanese literary circles at that time, we can see that their works possess a double character, leaning either toward the school for life’s sake or the school for art’s sake, toward reflecting the realities or depicting individuals’ feelings, but they never went to the extreme of one or the other side. Therefore, saying “the road of pure literature of the Neo-Sensualist School that he [Weng Nao] took was an extreme in opposition to the road of proletarian literature that Yang Kui took” is not exactly true. Weng Nao’s “Remaining Snow” and Wu Yung-fu’s “Head and Body,” (which reminds one of Yokomitsu Riichi’s “Atama narabi ni hara” [Head and Belly], both are stories dealing with ambivalence of values, especially between the imperial metropolis and the countryside at home. Such indecision when you have to make a choice inadvertently set an example for later works by Yang Kui in his “Shinbun haitatsufu” [Newspaper Carrier] and Wang Ch’ang-hsiung in his “Honryū” [Strong Currents] dealing with the imbalanced cultural conflicts and emotional complications between colonial Taiwan and Imperial Japan. Wu Yung-fu’s early works in poetry and drama showed a tendency toward aesthetic taste, such as “Suisenka” [The Daffodil], “Jūgoya” [The fifteenth Night Moon] and “Zangetsu” [The Lingering Moon at Dawn], and his fiction, in addition to describing troubled love’s emotions and psychological responses, includes a story translated as “Merry-Go-Round of Desire,” which delineates the dark side of human nature clouded with scheming and dishonesty. Wu Yung-fu’s work expresses pungent social criticism and indicates that in his early creative exploration he was drifting between realism and aestheticism. This story served as a precedent of social realism as seen later in the works of Wu Cho-liu “Choutong” [The Stink of Money] and “Gonggou” [Meritorious Dog], satirizing politicians taking bribes and fleecing the people. (These two stories have been translated and published in this journal, No. 15, July 2004.)

Regarding the characteristics of these two writers, it had been maintained that “they have been much influenced by the Japanese Neo-Sensualist School.” As remarked by the critic Chang Heng-hao in his preface to Weng Nao, Wu Yong-fu, Wang Changxiong heji [Collected Works of Weng Nao, Wu Yung-fu and Wang Ch’ang-hsiung], “In his viewpoints and expression, Weng Nao was more interested in exploring the human inner world than observing the external world of realities, as his fiction is full of Modernist sensitivity, psychological analysis, and Symbolist technique…. The road he took was the pure literature of the Neo-Sensualist School, art for art’s sake.” As for Wu Yong-fu’s works, he said, “With regard to technique of expression, like Weng Nao in general, we can easily find influences from the Neo-Sensualist Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari.”

As to the characteristics of the Neo-Sensualist School, it is understood that the technical characteristics include: 1) art for art’s sake (art first, pure literature, aestheticism), 2) describing cities and cosmopolitan life, 3) use of monologue, 4) writing with stream of consciousness, 5) detailed description of the characters’
psychological activity and sensation. (“Sanfa jingguan de yinxing—huaisi Wu Yung-fu xiansheng de ‘wenxue zhi lu’” [The Ginkgo Tree Shining with Quiet Light—In Memory of Wu Yung-fu’s “Road to Literature.”] by Mo Yu). However, the characteristics such as pursuit of art, description of urbanity, use of monologue and stream of consciousness, and psychological description are the common methods of expression that had been used by the newly risen arts or avant-garde literature since the twentieth century, not limited to the Neo-Sensualist School, nor were they particular writing skills excelled in by writers of this school alone. In fact, the greatest characteristic of the Neo-Sensualist School lies in its appealing to the senses in verbal expression.

As we know, the Japanese Neo-Sensualist School was originated in October 1924, when the magazine Bungei jidai [Literary Age] was jointly established by Kawabata Yasunari, Yokomitsu Riichi and a dozen other rising writers. Influenced by the avant-garde literature produced by European writers after World War I with the sense of civilization in crisis, as well as stimulated by the devastation caused by the Tokyo Great Earthquake of 1923, which had no less effect than a war, the Neo-Sensualist School in Japan became one of the avant-garde Modernist schools of art against Naturalism, Realism, and traditionalism. Although the consciousness of crisis in terms of anxiety, desperation, and horror affected Japanese writers of the Neo-Sensualist School much less than European writers, the Japanese did reveal the Buddhist view of transiency and Oriental nihilism. Things in the world change constantly, and in this life full of uncertainty, what man can grab is only the present, the moment, and what man relies upon is not memory or dreams, but feeling. Their works appeal to the senses and intellect, and in creative expression they pursue novelty and strive for manipulation of language characterized by the so-called “decoration of emotion.” With a refined and acute sensibility, Kawabata never failed to keep a consciousness of the method of the Neo-Sensualist School in his creative writing.

The particular feature of the Neo-Sensualist School lies in its appealing to the senses. “Feeling” or “sensation” is the expression of the subjective, touched off by intuition, which deprives nature of its external surface and penetrates the thing itself,” namely, “it is the material expression of the sensual experience touched off by the purely objective.” (words of Yokomitsu). In other words, the specific feature of the Neo-Sensualist School lies in its grip of the object in an objective, sensual, intellectual, and unimpassioned way. The reason Kawabata was considered “a thinker who artificially turns emotions into an ornamental design,” and his first collection of works Kanjō Sōshoku [Ornaments of Emotions] was considered “a flower made by the blade of a razor” is because in his works there is a cold, intellectual “unimpassioned lyricism.” Such “unimpassioned lyricism” is a dominating note going through Kawabata’s literature.

According to the understanding of the particular quality of the Japanese Neo-Sensualist School explained above, we can hardly find in the works of Weng Nao and Wu Yung-fu the typical Neo-Sensualist verbal expressions, such as “After going through the long tunnel across the border, the bottom of the night became white” (Kawabata Yasunari’s Snow Country) and “The super-express loaded with passengers ran at full speed, and the small stations along the railway were blotted
out like pebbles.” (Yokomitsu Riichi’s *Atama narabi ni hara* [Head and Belly]). Therefore, the works of the Taiwanese writers Wen Nao and Wu Yung-fu of the 1930s and their relation to the Japanese Neo-Sensualist School is a question that merits further scholarly exploration.

As explained above, Weng Nao wrote six short stories altogether. Four of them have been translated from Japanese by Dr. Lili Selden and published in this journal: “Remaining Snow” and “The Singing Clock” (#19, July 2006), “A Love Story before Dawn” (#20, January 2007), and “Scamp” (#22, January 2008). In this special issue, we have published “Old Gon” and “Poor Old Rui,” thus Weng Nao’s complete works, except for the novella, *The Town with a Harbor*, have been turned into English, thanks to Dr. Selden’s hard work, devotion, and contribution. Wu Yung-fu wrote stories only in Japanese during the Japanese period. We selected three representative stories for translation in this issue: “Camellias,” translated by Professor Bert Scruggs, University of California at Irvine, and “Black Dragon” and “Merry-Go-Round of Desire,” translated by our co-editor, Professor Robert Backus. We are also very thankful to Professor Chun-ya Hsu for sending us copies of Weng Nao’s poems and the story “Poor Old Rui,” both published in 1936 in Taiwan Bungei (Taiwan Literary Art), Volume 3, No. 2.

This journal was launched in 1996 and has published twenty-six issues as a biannual for thirteen years. Each issue focuses on a theme to introduce Taiwan literature from various perspectives, including the following:

“The Study of Taiwan Literature: An International Perspective,”
“Aboriginal Literature in Taiwan,”
“The Nativist Voice of Taiwan Literature,”
“Literature and Social Concerns,”
“Urban Literature and the Fin de Siècle in Taiwan
“Travel and Visiting One’s Homeland,”
“Taiwan Literature, Nature, and Environment,”
“Taiwanese Folk Literature,”
“Children’s literature in Taiwan,”
“Women’s Literature in Taiwan,”
“Taiwan Literature and History,”
“Taiwan Literature and Folklore,”
“Lai Ho, Wu Cho-liu and Taiwan Literature,”
“Taiwan Literature and Hakka Culture,”
“Taiwan Literature and the Ocean,”
“Mountains, Forests and Taiwan Literature,”
“Taiwan Literature during the Period of Japanese Rule,”
“Taiwan Literature and Home-Longing,”
“Taiwan Literature and Childhood,”
“Taiwan Literature and the February 28 Incident,”
“Myths and Legends of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan,”
“Special Issue on Yeh Shih-tao,”
and “Special Issue on Yang Ch’ih-ch’ang.”
For the uninterrupted publication of the journal for thirteen years, the content of each issue falls into five categories, and the total number of items translated and published is as follows: 40 critiques, 87 essays, 129 short stories, 252 poems, and 46 critical studies.

Translation and publication of Taiwan literature in English is an arduous task and the road ahead is long, requiring collective efforts and team work with a long-term plan to achieve the goal we set for the journal: Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series is published with the purpose of introducing to English readers voices of Taiwan literature from recent publications in Taiwan, namely, Taiwanese writers’ and scholars’ viewpoints on their own literature. This is to promote a better understanding and effective knowledge among scholars abroad of the current state and tendencies of literature as it has developed in Taiwan, as well as to enhance the study of Taiwan literature from international perspectives.” In view of the importance of this task and so many Taiwanese writers and their excellent works awaiting translation, from this issue on the journal will be published by the US-Taiwan Literature Foundation, a nonprofit public benefit corporation, for the purpose of developing an institution to carry the research, translation and publication of Taiwan literature in the English language and of promoting a better understanding and effective knowledge of Taiwan literature by providing reading and teaching materials to public libraries and schools, and through cultural and educational activities.” Under the auspices of the Foundation, we hope to carry one step further the task of English translation and publication of Taiwan literature so that it will be continued along with the development of Taiwan literature itself for generations to come. Your continued support for the journal as well as the unfailing assistance from the translators and scholars in the past more than a decade will be essential to make the journal move on and will be greatly appreciated.