

Interview with Yee Heng Yeh



Yee Heng Yeh works mainly as a Mandarin-to-English translator. His poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *The KITTA! Podcast*, *adda*, two *NutMag* volumes, *Malaysian Millennial Voices*, *Strange Horizons*, and was shortlisted in the Malaysian Poetry Writing Competition 2021. His translations of poetry are also forthcoming in *Mantis*. Besides poetry, he writes plays and occasionally short fiction. One of his poems was shortlisted while another was longlisted for the Malaysian Poetry Writing Competition 2021. You can find him on Twitter @HengYeh42.

MMOJ: Could you describe your journey in writing poems: When you started writing poetry? What keeps you writing poems? Do you have any vision of how you see yourself as a poet in a few years?

Yee: I started writing poetry during a first-year creative writing module in university. But I only really got into my stride after graduating: a friend of mine, Joseph Lu, had this idea where we would put together a collection of poetry (which is still in the works)—through that process, I got into the habit of writing and rewriting and thinking about poetry, which has stuck until now. So it is partly out of habit—of looking at the world in a certain way, getting struck by ideas for a poem—but it’s also a way to make sense of this world, this life. It’d be nice if I could somehow make a living through poetry, but mainly I want my stuff to be read. I want my poems to do for people what the poetry of others have done for me.

MMOJ: What are your preoccupations in your poems?

Yee: Time, memory, grief, death, technology, storytelling, dreams, violence, photos... the list goes on. More broadly, I want my poems to always explore a new insight or perspective, to have something to say.

MMOJ: Who are your favourite poets and do they have any influence on your writing?

Yee: My favourite poet is Wisława Szymborska, as translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Barańczak—she’s shown me how to use humour and perspective, how even the free verse creates its own forms. Other current favourites include Yehuda Amichai, Kobayashi Issa, Larry Levis, among others. These poets showed me that clarity and concision of language, which seems deceptively simple but is difficult to achieve, would strengthen a poem more often than not—if an idea is good, it does not need to rely on obscure language.

MMOJ: Do you think about your position as a Malaysian poet writing in English?

Yee: Not particularly—I happen to be a Malaysian poet writing in English, but I don’t necessarily write poetry with any particular reader in mind, except for maybe myself. In terms of the wider community all I can say is that I’m really glad that there are other Malaysian poets out there producing really good work. Also, I wish there were more translations of Malaysian poetry, both into and out of English.

MMOJ: Please choose one of your poems from either *Malaysian Millennial Voices* or *Year of the Rat and Other Poems* and share your experience in writing the poem.

Yee: “Sultan Ismail’s Photographs from May 15, 1969” is an interesting one because I initially wrote a poem about May 13 back in 2017, I believe. Looking back at it now, it wasn’t very good—it had some nice images, but its insight was too general, too commonplace, deeply felt though it may be. I revisited that poem 4 years later, then decided I had to read more, imagine deeper. So I

went through Malaysiakini's 2019 project on the 50th anniversary of the riots, which was where I saw the photographs in question. Now, this was a conceit through which I could write a better poem—the photographs allowed me to focalise these notions of history and future, grief and hope. More importantly, they gave me some access to the perspective of those at the scene then, yet kept me at a distance—it is this contradiction, this seeming futility of retrospection, that became the “theme” of the poem.

Sultan Ismail's Photographs from May 15, 1969

Yee Heng Yeh

It appears the streets had been swept clean
in the aftermath of the aftermath.
Whatever had happened had been doused,
scrubbed down, hidden away in tidy heaps,
sloshed with buckets of water:
burning wrecks, bodies, rubble, blood.
Now nothing was out of place, except
the people, who remained out of frame.

And anyway, if there were people,
they wouldn't have looked into the lens,
that is, looked the future in the eye.
They wouldn't have looked, not yet.
Anything they wanted to explain
would have to be spelled out with silence.
Anything they wanted to remember
could only be transcribed as negative space
before it becomes, sooner or later,
just another part of the picture.

And anyway, it was all in black and white.
So it remains a mere history lesson.
So it was simply the world back then
that had been blind to colour.
So we find ourselves still able to trace
a line through the compass of todays
that easily divides right and wrong.

And anyway, such a snapshot
can only tell us what came to pass
after it had passed. It can only teach us
how to face our own cameras.
However far the story has unfolded
depends on where we began.
What else can a photograph do
but lie to us with its truth?