Before the Light: A Discussion with Ian Rowen on the Making of *Transitions in Taiwan* and Translating Narratives of the White Terror Period

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ABSTRACT

How can literature shed light onto the violence of the past? More specifically, how does Taiwanese literature in translation participate in shaping narratives of recollection of the White Terror Period in light of Taiwan's contemporary commitment to transitional justice and global positioning as a defender of human rights? In this interview, Coraline Jortay discusses these questions with Ian Rowen, the editor of *Transitions in Taiwan: Stories of the White Terror*. This anthology of short stories was published in the spring of 2021 as part of the Cambria Literature in Taiwan Series, in collaboration with the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, the National Human Rights Museum, and National Taiwan Normal University. The conversation touches upon the making of *Transitions in Taiwan* in the context of contemporary narratives of the White Terror Period and transitional justice initiatives, and broader issues of positionality in translation and geopolitics.

KEYWORDS

Translation; Taiwan; transitional justice; White Terror; Taiwanese literature; island studies

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How can literature shed light onto the violence of the past? More specifically, how does Taiwanese literature in translation participate in shaping narratives of recollection of the White Terror Period in light of Taiwan's contemporary commitment to transitional justice and global

positioning as a defender of human rights? We discuss these questions with Ian Rowen, who is an Assistant Professor of Sociology, Geography and Urban Planning in the School of Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Ian Rowen's research deals broadly with the cultural geography of travel and protest, with some of his more recent work focusing on transitional justice initiatives in Taiwan. He is also the editor of *Transitions in Taiwan: Stories of the White Terror*, an anthology of short stories published in the spring of 2021 as part of the Cambria Literature in Taiwan Series in collaboration with the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, the National Human Rights Museum, and National Taiwan Normal University.

Coraline Jortay (CJ): *Can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself and how this book happened?*

Ian Rowen (IR): I first visited Taiwan in 2000 after an undergraduate Junior Year exchange program in Hong Kong, where I first started studying Chinese. That was, of course, the year when Chen Shui-bian was elected president against all odds. In Hong Kong, many of my hallmates were Taiwanese. Many of my Mandarin teachers were Taiwanese as well. And it was striking to see the enthusiasm and excitement for some, or for others shock and dismay, that this election season engendered in what had otherwise seemed a politically apathetic period in Hong Kong, at least for my fellow students at Chinese University of Hong Kong—of course that sentiment dramatically shifted in the following years, as I learned when I visited that campus again in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement. Seeing Taiwan's sense of hope and possibility and political participation, however from afar, made me want to go spend some time there. I visited for a week in the summer of 2000, promptly fell in love with the place, and went back to Taiwan in 2001 to study Chinese intensively at the International Chinese Language Program of National Taiwan University. After that, I spent three more years working in Taiwan and then three more years after that ~~in~~ in China before a stint in the Philippines. In 2010, as I began graduate studies in Geography, when it came time for me to choose a research subject, I designed my fieldwork in large part to get me back to Taiwan. I thought an interesting angle might be seeing Taiwan through the eyes of Chinese tourists. I had worked in 2006 as a tour guide within China, and from taking Europeans and Americans around the country, I could see that tourism was a powerful cultural and political technology for mediating international relations. By the time that tourism had opened from China to Taiwan, its strong political instrumentality was very clear. This wasn't merely about selling a new travel product, there

was a real political end game for many of the players. So, as I developed my geography postgraduate project, it seemed to me that tourism would be a way to think through the changing China-Taiwan relationship as well as Taiwan's own changing subjectivities in ways that lent themselves to very colourful fieldwork. In this process, I found myself in Taiwan in 2014 on a Fulbright fellowship, at the right time in the right place to witness some truly historic events. One week before the Sunflower Movement started, we Fulbrighters had an audience with President Ma who had been championing tourism as his marquee success in warming what he called cross-strait relations with Mainland China. During this audience, someone in my group asked him a question I had insisted we raise about the CSSTA…

CJ: That's the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement that was soon to prompt the Sunflower Movement…

IR: Exactly. We asked him how it might affect Taiwan's media space. Tourism, of course, was also a major component of that trade deal. He either misunderstood or dodged our question, and the way he handled it made the local news, as reported by Storm, an online outlet (Chiu 2014). A week later, the Sunflower Movement broke out, at which point I climbed a ladder into the occupied Legislative Yuan and became an action researcher within that epochal event. That was a transformative moment for Taiwan and redirected so much of its cultural production. I don't think a book like *Transitions in Taiwan*, that we will discuss in a minute, would have been commissioned or funded by government agencies were it not for Sunflower and the radical electoral and other shifts that ensued. That shift also included transitional justice commissions and a whole raft of cultural initiatives supporting this reorientation. So with this, my research as a graduate student and later as early career faculty considered not only tourism as a geopolitical practice, but Taiwanese social movements as a form of geopolitics. That latter part is not something that happened by design-- joining a student occupation of the legislature was certainly not part of my dissertation prospectus. I was of course concerned that I might be asked by my funding agencies, and who knows else, what I was doing there, but they had indeed vetted in advance that I planned to conduct research on cross-strait relations, and there was of course no better place to be doing that but the Sunflower-occupied legislature. Later, after the electoral shift, President Tsai announced during her inauguration speech the formation of a Transitional Justice Commission. She also made a highly publicised apology to Taiwan's Indigenous people. Based on analysis of these speeches, I co-authored the first English language piece about Tsai's project with my sister Jamie Rowen, who is a legal scholar and

specialist on transitional justice at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. We argued that Taiwan's incipient Transitional Justice Commission was not solely about domestic consensus-building or about redressing past traumas. Rather, it was inscribed within a larger geopolitical project which institutionally and symbolically performed an adherence to human rights, democracy, and rule of law. This would serve to align Taiwan with potential allies and perform further political distinction from China. For sure, it was certainly also a domestic project meant to tackle serious and unresolved traumas. Indeed, the arduous work of redress and exoneration for the wrongfully accused was still undone despite previous efforts including building 228 memorials throughout Taiwan, offering small amounts of financial compensation to victims, and implementing changes to textbooks. In this sense, President Tsai was absolutely addressing a domestic imperative through which she was also keeping together the fractious forces who had backed her, including her Democratic Progressive Party and the cagier deep green camp. But beyond this domestic component, there was a regional aspect vis-a-vis China as well as an international agenda to set an example in the practice of human rights and democracy. Eventually, my study of transitional justice led to this book project.

Insert *Figure 1: Ian Rowen, Inside Sunflower Movement 20 March 2014. Ian Rowen. Photo by Ian Rowen.*

Insert *Figure 2: Cambria Press, Transitions in Taiwan Book Cover. 2021. Cambria Press.*

CJ: Is this how you came to meet the General Editor for the Literature from Taiwan Series at Cambria Press? Could you tell us more about your collaboration with her and with the National Museum of Taiwan Literature in shaping the direction that the book was taking?

IR: It was soon after I had published on transitional justice that I happened to meet the series editor, Professor Nikky Lin of National Taiwan Normal University. She asked me if I would be interested in translating Sung Tse-lai's *Rice Diary*, which deals with exploitation in the agricultural countryside and which ended up being the longest story in this book. Having done film translation but not much literary translation, I felt a bit out of my depth but the story seemed interesting and doable, so I agreed. Then, a couple of months later, Nikky extended the ask to see if I would be interested in editing the whole book. This required collaborating with a set of very distinguished translators and penning an introduction to the volume, which she said I was qualified to do based on my work on transitional justice. Similar to *A Son of Taiwan:*

Stories of Government Atrocity, an earlier volume in the same series (Goldblatt and Lin 2021), my book was meant to take aim at the White Terror in light of newer transitional justice initiatives. Both volumes had White Terror or 228 themes and were sampled for translation from the four-volume Chinese-language anthology *Past to Present: Selected Stories of the White Terror in Taiwan* (Hu and Tong 2020). However, the stories in *A Son of Taiwan* dealt somewhat more directly with 228 and were written by authors from an older generation. There's something of a temporal and generational jump between both projects…

CJ: Yes, the stories in *Transitions in Taiwan* seem to mostly tackle the psychological consequences of the White Terror, and how the generation that grew up under this period coped with the stress, emotional and psychological violence, and unbending political structure. Relatedly, many of the stories struck me as highly structured in their form, be it around time with the unrelenting passing days of the *Rice Diary*, the constrained spaces of the vignettes of *The Taste of Apples*, or around keywords and language as a tool of oppression and freedom with the lessons of *Dixon's Idioms* (Huang 2021: 165-96). I really loved the latter and the astute observation that 'language holds history within it' (178). In a sense, this line really speaks to this project and the role played by literature in retellings of history and memory transmission. I was recently part of a similar project in French translation *Formosana: Histoires de démocratie à Taiwan* (Gaffric 2020). That is *Formosana: Stories of Democracy from Taiwan*, edited by Gwennaël Gaffric as part of his Taiwan Fiction collection. We also worked in collaboration with the National Museum of Taiwan Literature. Strikingly, both books look back on the White Terror and feature some of the same stories while taking different editorial directions. *Formosana*, for instance, focuses more intently on stories of democratization and takes a broader view from the Japanese colonial period, the White Terror, through to the Sunflower Movement and beyond. Having yourself worked on the Sunflower Movement and transitional justice in your academic work, I was wondering if you could elaborate on the place of your book within broader issues of cultural translation for the Anglophone market, and the venues for publishing translated literature from Taiwan?

IR: My sense is that there's a bit more scope in English for more specialised or focussed volumes due to the growing quantity of Taiwanese literature available in translation. The Taiwan Series at Cambria Press is supported by several different Taiwanese government or government-supported agencies, including the National Museum of Taiwan Literature. In the case of my volume and the one that immediately preceded it, we were also supported by the

National Human Rights Museum. In this light, I believe these projects can be read partly as soft power campaigns to increase Taiwan's visibility in the cultural sphere with readers and scholars. This is true not only in the high culture realm of literature, but also with other forms of media that have received additional budgetary support from Tsai's administration. The new international media platform Taiwan+, for instance, has some excellent staff and a large budget to produce video content. All of this could be seen as part of Taiwan's campaign for visibility *as* Taiwan. That is, not as *Taiwan Republic of China* but simply as *Taiwan*. This support is coming, I believe, from fairly high levels, including the Department of Culture which is certainly backing these projects financially and tapping on very capable people. Our series editor, Nikky Lin, has been the chair of the Department of Taiwan Culture, Languages and Literature at National Taiwan Normal University. These are people in a position to be shaping narratives both within Taiwan and on behalf of Taiwan's representations overseas, and *Transitions in Taiwan* may be part of such a story.

CJ: It's also interesting how, on a practical level, broader industry trends in different countries play a role in shaping these narratives. What always strikes me in the United States or the United Kingdom for instance, is that academic publishers tend to be much more on board for publishing translated literature. In French, that is seldom the case. University presses generally do not publish translations, which tends to push most projects towards commercial publishers and creates a different market altogether for translated fiction.

IR: I think there are some benefits and drawbacks to both approaches. To place literature by Taiwanese authors in a little slot called 'Taiwanese literature' is in some ways to circumscribe its potential audience to those who may already be interested specifically in Taiwan or in the region. Whereas something that can happen in trade presses is the presentation of an international author and their work as representative of world literature. Some writers would rather not be pigeonholed by their nationality or working language, but rather be recognised as practitioners of literature first and foremost.

CJ: Definitely. On that note, it is important to consider publishing trends together with the individual agency of actors who can, as you said, shape narratives, literary and otherwise, of Taiwan abroad. For instance, the French market owes a lot to individual translators and editors such as Gwennaël Gaffric with L'Asiathèque for fiction, or Marie Laureillard with Circé for poetry. Their efforts over the past decade were instrumental in bringing Taiwanese literature

into the public eye. But coming back to country-specific publishing trends, Taiwanese literature in France has also interestingly benefited from the huge wave of interest for island literature that arose from contemporary Icelandic fiction in the mid-2010s. Then, literature from Mauritius for instance, or Taiwan, very much surfed that wave of popular interest, I think. Did you notice the same thing for English?

IR: It is fascinating to hear that island studies have been a selling point for Taiwanese literature in French translation. I have not seen it so much in Anglophone literature, but 'Island Studies' have certainly been deployed over the past couple of decades as an academic configuration. There have been a variety of islands studies or island-related research initiatives supported in large part by Taiwanese funding agencies over the last couple of decades. They have engaged not only in Southeast Asia, but also with New Zealand and elsewhere in the Pacific to promote Taiwan as its own origin point of cultural production, and one that is not bound necessarily to East Asia, much less China. But I have seen it more in academic research collaborations than in literature.

CJ: While we are talking about target audiences and how books are presented for certain markets, I wanted to ask you about the title and book cover, which features a striking painting 'Before the Light' (2001). The painter, Ou Young Wen, also fell victim to the White Terror. What was your input in those editorial choices, and how do you see them resonate perhaps not only with the series, but with your other artistic and creative projects on the cultural history of Taiwan?

IR: Nikky was the one who suggested that painting for the cover and I embraced it quickly, not least because the image of flowers behind barbed wire very much captured the sense of beauty in the face of oppression that many of the stories conveyed. Of course, flowers also have huge resonance with Taiwan's successive waves of social movements, which have been symbolized by white lilies, sunflowers, or even strawberries. I did have some design input in suggesting that we add some degree of transparency on the red stripes of the cover. It balances out the colours and give the impression that something is shining through, which ties back to the kind of mediating role that a cover plays both as the face of the book, but also in covering up the stories submerged within. This image also informed my initial suggestion for the book title, which was *Before the Light: Tales of the White Terror*. That came in part from the title of the painting, and in part from the last sentence of the first story, *Long, Long Ago There was an*

Urashima Taro (by Chu Tien-hsin, translated by Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt). When the protagonist finally realises what has been happening to him and his family, he 'wailed, like his childhood self after listening to the story on that evening long ago, before the light was turned on' (p. 49). Nikky liked the idea very much, but the suggestion was vetoed by Cambria which wanted 'Taiwan' in the title. They felt that it would be more sellable this way to university and institutional libraries. Something about 'transitions' was also slotted in due to the transitional justice angle and the White Terror thematic that informs much of the book. So, we ended up with a more anodyne title in a sense, as *Transitions in Taiwan* could almost refer to any period, but then, so does the temporal ambiguity of an idea like transitional justice, in a way. I still feel that *Before the Light* would have been a much more evocative title and done more honour to the cover artist.

CJ: You mentioned a little bit earlier how this role as an editor also brought you to work with distinguished translators. Being a translator yourself, how was it working from the seat of the editor this time? How has your vision of translation evolved from your early work in film subtitling to this project? I would venture that having done film translation must have helped in the attention to concision in language that it requires. Do you see a connection there?

IR: Yes, film translation certainly does help to train one's voice. In the case of my film translations, I was fortunate in many cases to be working with the directors, sometimes straight in the editing room, where I could get much more immediate feedback than is possible with literary fiction. Another major difference between film and literature is that the necessary directness and brevity of film is both a constraint and an impulse to creativity, whereas literature allows more space for thoughts to dilate. Being relatively new to literary translation, I had perhaps a greater pull towards accuracy. For example, when I translated Sung Tse-lai's story, I felt a sense of obligation to the writer to romanize his characters' names in Hokkien Taiwanese, both because of their location in rural Yunlin, but also because of the writer's own commitment to Taiwanese romanization when he was in a political position to exercise that. That's the kind of thing I might not have worried about so much on screen, where I would also think about how to minimise the number of characters per line and might even pick a romanization system accordingly. Furthermore, the other translators were all much more experienced than me, many of them coming from a background in literary studies or having translated several prominent works. Therefore, I felt that my interventions into their modes of translation should be to catch either glaring errors or simply to offer alternative, more elegant

phrasings (to my eyes at least) that might not come as obviously to someone too deeply immersed in their work. And different translators, in part based on seniority and fame, were more or less amenable to adopting some of those suggestions. The hardest part was finding someone to help me edit the story I translated myself. I ended up leaning on a friend of mine in Singapore, who was doing a degree in translation and who also is a Hokkien speaker. And that really helped in catching some errors of my own. The hardest part about being an editor, I think, was that I wish there was more editing of my own work. Also, not being a literature scholar, I felt that I had to dive more deeply into the scholarship, particularly Sylvia Lin's work which helped me frame my introduction. I found those things thrilling and challenging all at once. And they made me also rethink how my own process in my role as an editor is itself a form of action research, in that I am shaping narratives that will be used to make sense of the Taiwan story. As someone who did not grow up in Taiwan, who is not a Taiwanese citizen, whose parents did not live through this period and so on, I feel an enormous sense of responsibility in telling these stories with as much sincerity and humility as can be mustered.

CJ: Thank you for raising this. You explained earlier how, as an academic, you come from a background in cultural and political geography and that many of your academic projects are indeed grounded in action research and participant-observation. Would you say, as you have just hinted at, that translation could be seen as a form of action research or participant observation? How do you see the convergences between these approaches and this book project?

IR: I absolutely agree that translation in a reflexive mode, especially if one is taking notes throughout, could quite easily be recast as a mode of action research, participant-observation or even auto-ethnography. I suppose it is not realized as such a project until it is written down, before which it is merely a mode of relentless reflexivity. Being a US citizen in a position of mediating Taiwan's historical trauma in the interest of whatever geopolitical project is currently underway is a very fraught position. It is something that has honestly plagued but certainly informed the ways in which I conduct reflexive action research, be it during the Sunflower Movement or among Chinese tourists in Taiwan. The relationship of the United States with Taiwan is incredibly complicated, and I am acutely aware of the implications of my in-betweenness, not by seeking a neutral in-between place that I could occupy, but that noting that there is no possible in-between that could be neutral. I was born and raised in the United States, I have spent much of my adult life in Taiwan, but I do not claim to speak for or represent Taiwan. When I was within the Sunflower-occupied legislature, I volunteered for the

movement's translation and foreign media team. But at no time did I speak for the movement. I put questioners, press or otherwise, in touch with other people. I was an intermediary in a sense, a translator in a sense, and not intending to speak on behalf of anyone. Of course, any ethnographer, or translator for that matter, knows that such an effort at unmediated or uninflected communication is never quite achieved. And within *Transitions in Taiwan*, I hope that that sense of tension and indeterminacy has been conveyed and makes it even more intriguing.

CJ: It's a very important point. And it ties back not only to questions of international relations and geopolitics, but also of translation in and of itself. Just a few months ago, the outcry and debates around the translation of Amanda Gorman's work into Dutch (see for instance Marasligil 2021) proved yet again that the literary translation community needs to give more thought and care to questions of positionality in translation. I think in both instances, be it bringing into the spotlight the stories of transitional justice in Taiwan or be it in the act of translation itself, it's hugely important to reflect to reflect on our own positionality and the role we play as translators and academics.

IR: Indeed. The stories of this book would be as amazing as stories, with or without the transitional justice initiatives that underpin their propagation. But strikingly, they might not be published in this form, find their audience in this way, or be received as stories of transition, were it not for these broader geopolitical concerns.

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