

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Poems of Mya Kabyar, Tin Nwan Lwin & Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw* translated from the Burmese by Violet Cho and David Gilbert (Vagabond Press, 2014).**

There is an established narrative about Burmese poetry from the central plains of Myanmar. It begins with written inscriptions from the eleventh century and develops into court verse: the first surviving poem being a cradle-song written in 1455 in honour of Princess Saw Shwe Kra of Arakan. A range of traditional forms continued to be used down to the final imposition of British rule after 1885. During the 1930s, the ‘university wits’ created a more modern style of writing, hoping to broaden the subject matter of traditional literature and deepen its psychological content. When Burma became independent in 1948, many of these new trends continued to be popular but writers also sought competing models in Soviet as well as in US and English writing. Following the army coup in March 1962, the *Printers’ and Publishers’ Registration Act* of August 1962 required that copies of all books and magazines be examined by the Press Scrutiny Board, usually after publication. Explicit guidelines issued in 1975 forbade the publication of anything detrimental to the Burmese Socialist Programme, the ideology of the state, the socialist economy, national unity and the rule of law. A further army coup in September 1988 led to the installation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, after 1997 the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC) and the imposition of even stricter censorship regulations. The laws were slightly modified but not removed in August 2012.

Contemporary Burmese poetry has been well represented in an outstanding recent anthology *Bones Will Crow* (ed. and trans. ko ko thett and James Byrne, Arc Publications, Todmorden 2012). The present volume, *Poems of Mya Kabyar, Tin Nwan Lwin & Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw*, is also translated from the Burmese language. However, these three authors are not ethnically Burmese. Mya Kabyar (born 1974) is a member of the Chin ethnic minority in western Myanmar, who has lived in Yangon since 1994. Tin Nwan Lwin (born 1955) is a poet of Shan State origin who has lived in Myitkina, the capital city of the Kachin State, northern Myanmar, since the 1970s. Kyaw Zaw is Karen, an ethnic minority group in southern and southeast Myanmar; a former member of the insurgent Karen National Union and women’s activist, she is now based in the United States. They belong, as Cho and Gilbert suggest, to ‘the counter-narrative of Burmese poetry [which] takes account of oral literature, non-Burmese languages and writers in the periphery of the country and the diaspora’ (page ix).

The two poles of Mya Kabyar’s writing are the Chin Hills and ‘the city’. His sense of nostalgia for the Chin environment, culture and identity is very strong. The hills are beautiful: a place of rivers, mists, trees, upland rice, rice wine, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, flowers, and even snow: in Winter, ‘at the mountain range/ the snow is laying its eggs/ with a sense of white longing/ blowing forcefully into my chest’ (‘to the snowy mountain range’). They are rich in wildlife, and especially birds – the poems make frequent references to coucals (a bird in the cuckoo family) and hornbills (the state symbol). The hills are a site of ‘stories, music/ blood and sweat’ (‘our stone inscriptions’). They are an ancient setting for human rights, which ‘were in my grandfather’s village before I was born’, and, in fact, ‘not just human rights/ the forest spirits and the mountain spirits/ have spirit rights/ we’ve lived together’ (‘old Chin man’). But the hills are under pressure: ‘shifting cultivation, soil erosion/ deforestation exacerbated/ streams dried out/ biodiversity drying out/ rare orchids rarer’ (‘panorama of hornbills’). The people too are under pressure: ‘poverty at 73%/ consciousness fading/ an overseas influx/ where in the world/ blooms for our Canaan?’ (‘panorama of hornbills’). The innocence of those who remain is suspect. The poem entitled ‘unbelievable story’ recounts that, ‘the story begins/

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“a long, long time ago/ for the sake of the Chin people/ an honest Chin”, and the immediate response to this claim is that ‘the children stand and shout: don’t believe it! don’t believe it!’. The longest poem, ‘Chin’, admits:

... Chin people are hospitable
but not all Chin can be hospitable
Chin are honest
but not all Chin can be honest
Chin live in the hills
but not all Chin can live in the hills
Chin are faithful
but not all Chin can be faithful
Chin are trusting
but not all Chin are simple
most Chin are hill people
but not all Chin reject urban culture.

The inevitable consequence is, as the epigraph to the first poem suggests that, ‘if we follow the greater coucal/ we arrive in the city’. The poet describes himself as ‘Chin/ or ... nearly Chin, an authentic fake’ (‘the last discovery’), and the Chin who fly to the city – for food, education, or for no reason at all – are also false; they are ‘coucals/ that cannot fly’ (‘greater coucals’). Or, as the title of one of the poems graphically suggests, ‘Chin in stone’.

Tin Nwan Lwin deals with a hard world of technology: ‘in the factory/ in the paddy field/ on the platform/ in the market/ on the road/ in life/ there are poems’ (‘discovering a poem’s place’). The first of his poems presented here, ‘sweat in the nest of minerals’, describes a mine in negative terms: ‘no sun/ no moon/ no stars/ only darkness’. The work is perhaps important (‘for us it was noble’, someone comments) but the end of the poem is only: ‘sweat on the mountain/ sweat underground/ sweat/ sweat/ regain strength beside loss’. The same hardness colours his fondness for trains and cars – ‘white cream/ ready for a race/ Toyota Hilux/ Nissan Pajero/ step up to the starting line/ amidst fog/ Myitkyina-Hpakant/ cars’ journey a ceremonious cycle’ (‘prominent labyrinth’). And even people: ‘a curlicued sarong/ yin pon blouse/ a thinly painted face/ Daw Thi’s thanaka*/ wearing jasmine’ (‘magazine readers’, *a skin care product). Rivers appear – Maykha, Malika, Irrawaddy – they are good for making beer and getting drunk (‘drunken confluence’). Modern society has no room for the soft world of Mya Kabyar’s nostalgia.

Each of these writers has been a political activist. Mya Kabyar helped found the Chin Progressive Party and is a member of its Executive Committee. Tin Nwan Lwin was heavily involved in the pro-democracy uprising of 1988, against the dictatorship of General Ne Win. Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw’s poetry is shaped by a feminine perception of the politics of rebellion, shared with her family. The men fight; women support them and provide for the bare decencies of civilised life in refugee camps: ‘blackboards/ chalk/ papers of poems/ amidst tiny stars/ a jasmine/ flowers pure’ (‘her’). They grieve: ‘revolutionary, patriotic son/ if you see the rebel tell him/ his sick mother has died/ the whole village/ turned to ash’ (‘a poem of flimsy rhyme’). But they are also steel: ‘a woman lacking tears/ doesn’t cry on set/ doesn’t cry behind the scenes/ too used to casualties/ a rebel wife/ my mother’ (‘rebel venom’). Khaing Mar too is nostalgic for an alternative nation that is being slowly destroyed by money and military force, but in her case the situation allows no positive outcome: ‘a disease/ without medicine/ just exiled life’ (‘paint drop’).

The Asia Pacific Poetry Series is a major opportunity for readers to enter into the complexity of the emotional worlds of our surrounding region. Cho and Gilbert's own political commitment is a strong driving force behind this present anthology. (Cho is herself a Karen journalist and activist living in exile.) The translations are spare and sharp: in 'nine branches of literature/ life is united/ many children/ born familiar/ poetry .../ poetry .../ poetry ...' (Tin Nwan Lwin, 'giving birth to children').

Harry Aveling