

**Ouyang Yu, *The Kingsbury Tales*.** Blackheath, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008. 102 pp. ISBN: 9781876040826 Price: not given.  
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**W**hy do Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* still represent an appropriate twentieth-century narrative framework with the Australian literati is anybody's guess? Christina Stead with her book *The Salzburg Tales* (1934) only very loosely followed Chaucer's structure, where the 'pilgrims' attending the Salzburg Summer Festival are in real and mythical settings motivated by their various social backgrounds, cultural and musical tastes. And now there is Ouyang Yu with his "verse novel" (15) *The Knightsbury Tales* and his intercultural/ transcultural travellers between China and Australia, a book that is "no match / For The Canterbury Tales" (15). Pilgrims are always a good opportunity to bring together people from various walks of life, a cross-section of society, which is also the case with Yu's multicultural and multiethnic Melbourne, where he lives part of the year while away from his home country China. Almost each poem featured in these 'tales' juxtaposes China and Australia, their relations and the poet's own life caught up in the precarious migrant web of time and place. Almost each poem explores the various characters in present-day Australia, wives, concubines, lawyers, diplomats, students, professors, factory workers, mental patients and foreign visitors, each from a colonial and post-colonial point of view, many presenting historical and non-historical figures from the time of the First Opium War (1840) to our very present.

Yu's first programmatic poem in the collection makes it clear right at the beginning that the poet/the narrator is a cheeky and most versatile Chinese-Australian (or the other way around) trickster, whose art goes undisputed through the whole book: he chose the novel form to be written, "For novel readers / To get novel grant(s) / At the moment" (16). Perhaps the guess mentioned earlier is not all that unusual if one considers the fact that *The Knightsbury Tales* in Chaucer's format, including the rhetoric, lowbrow and bawdy

elements, are really the reflections of Ouyang Yu's own life story, himself an intellectual, cultural (and political) pilgrim down under, which represents a cross-section of society and Chinese-Australian cultural relations. Cultural translation, transformation and the fact of being caught up between cultures are the main themes in *The Knightsbury Tales*: his intellectual estrangement in the new environment made him for a long time feel a total stranger, as he says in an interview, and he "had to kill /himself/ spiritually in order to gain a new life linguistically, culturally and spiritually". The newly found freedoms in Australia and its democracy (which he punningly calls "demoncrazy") soon made him disillusioned in the everyday routine of unfulfilled expectations and turned him into an angry poet, employing an acerbic, funny and very political poetic style, which most critics of his work have noted. Anger can, however, also represent a new beginning and it has indeed given rise to his impressive literary production to date (poetry, fiction, non-fiction, literary translations into Chinese), which is unique in Australia's contemporary literary landscape.

Yu came to Australia from China in 1991 to study Australian literature. He obtained a PhD from La Trobe University and established himself in Australia as a poet, fiction writer and translator who has received several literary prizes. As a translator of some of the major Australian texts into Chinese he acts as an important cultural mediator between the two countries. As a counterpart to the leading Australian cultural review *Overland*, he established *Otherland*, Australia's first Chinese-English literary journal. He is a Professor of Australian literature and Director of Australian Studies centre in the English department at Wuhan University in China. As he divides his time between Melbourne and China, his dividedness is very central also to his literary experience. The poems are thus a literal (and literary) site of collision between the two cultures, Chinese and Australian. The language he uses clearly illuminates this process: funny and laden with suggestive sometimes cacophonous references, Yu uses Australian English to explore all the poetic potentials of the differences, similarities and parallels between Chinese and English in a distinctly Australian context, using many Chinese words as well. As the poet John

Kinsella writes in his introduction to the collection, Yu through his rhetoric of "devastating images" creates a new language and new poetry altogether: "A new Australian poetry, a new Chinese poetry" (8).

Yu wrestles with sexual desire and love, both poignantly enticing, the former sometimes touching upon the perverse and Chauceresque bawdy ("Ms Cui's Tale", 31-2). The poet is also trying to deconstruct the negative (hetero)stereotypes that had been created in Australian literature, where they were essentially demonised, made look dirty and sinful: many Chinese names employed in the past contained the word "Sin" with the allusion of sinfulness amongst the 'heathen' Chinese. He takes as a cue for "Two *Bulletin* Tales" the 14/4/1888 short story entitled "Mr and Mrs Sin Fat" by Edward Dyson, published in the ('male') *Bushman's Bible The Bulletin*. He does not see much change since then, however, himself going through the same kind of prejudice-based publishing ('female') policy as he imagines the Chinese went through more than a hundred years ago:

But hang on and listen to my other male newspaper story that happens today  
 In which this female editor emails to say, in her response to the submission  
 Of something I wrote: 'I'm afraid we can't place this piece'  
 I wonder if the then male editor of the male newspaper had said something similar  
 Or in a more honest Aussie manner: I'm sorry, 'Mr Sin or Mr Fat  
 But I'm afraid we can't place this piss as we are full (of shit) till the end of 1888' (20).

In "An Aboriginal Tale" (21-2) Yu directs his rage over racism at the novels *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow my Country* by Xavier Herbert, which he finds excruciatingly anti-Aboriginal in constructing the image of the ignoble savage:

Last night I thought of photocopying the pages where Suvitra  
 Is killed, raped and eaten by the Aborigines in *Poor Fellow My Country*  
 And mail them to him but, in the end, I gave up on the thought,  
 putting the book away Never to be read again (22).

The twelve clusters of 'tales' in the verse collection under review here (e.g. Historical Tales, Artists' Tales, Philosophical Tales, Wuhan Tales, The Empire Tales), there are also Migrants' Tales. These

poems, which always contain clear political implications, reflect all the multiethnic diversity of Melbourne's Kingsbury area: "In Kingsbury, English is not the only spoken language / Chinese, for example, is one of the many spoken, and written as well as read / Languages" (58). Ouyang Yu is throughout very funny, anti-consumerist, and as a person split between two countries and civilizations, at the same time anti- and pro-Australian and Chinese as well, accepting the best of both worlds. The first of his "Wuhan Tales" speaks about the speaker's own (intellectual) defection back to China from the Australian Western 'demoncrazy', because of his disappointment with some aspects of Australian 'repressiveness' as regards the humanities (and scholars like himself who cannot get a proper job), as he claims in an interview.

Yu's poems are the reflections of a displaced poet who translates his life experience into two systems, a poet of the in-between, split between two (non)homes, where Home is stripped of its spatial dimension. In his poem "An Oz Tale", which reads like a companion piece to A.D. Hope's iconic poem "Australia", a desert country from which "prophets come" as Hope would have it, Yu describes Australia as

a land of mental darkness  
 Where the core values are metallic...,  
 a non-home kept there for you to return to, again and again  
 Oz, Oz, Oz / Oi/ly, Oi/ly, Oi/ly (96),

a land where no prophet is in sight. Despite the stark accusations of Australia's "mediocrity kept alive as a national treasure" (96), the poet still laments his departure and expresses yearning for the land every time he leaves it left behind: he dwells just as ambivalently in his affective allegiances to "her, him" as does Hope in his famous poem. Ouyang Yu's verse is all but light and easy on the senses: yet it makes one alert to the ethical and political ramifications of the contemporary Australian cultural condition. A powerful new Australian poetic, a read not to be missed.