

The AALITRA Review  
A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION  
No. 10, May 2015



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Website: <http://aalitra.org.au>

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To cite this Article:

Qi Lintao. "Review of Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day* (trans. Allan H. Barr)." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 10 (Melbourne: Monash University, May 2015): 25-27.

Review of Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day* (trans. Allan H. Barr)

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Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Translated by Allan H. Barr. Melbourne: Text, 2015.

———. *Diqi tian*. Beijing: New Star Press, 2013.

Yu Hua is representative of the avant-garde writers of the 1980s and 1990s in China. Born in 1960, Yu published his first novella in 1983. Many of his prize-winning novels, including *To Live*, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* and *Brothers*, have been translated into more than twenty languages. *To Live*, written in 1993, was adapted into an eponymous film by the internationally reputed Chinese director Zhang Yimou in 1994. As *To Live* touches upon the politically sensitive topics of the Great Leap Forward Movement and the Cultural Revolution, Zhang's film was banned in China, which helped both the novel and the film to reach a broader international audience. The novel subsequently won Italy's Premio Grinzane Cavour in 1998 and France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2004. Some critics such as Wang Damin contend that the 1998 Italian prize established Yu as an internationally recognized writer. It was said that before Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2012, Yu was the best known Chinese writer in the Western world.

Yu's most recent novel *The Seventh Day* was released in 2013, seven years after his last novel, *Brothers*. With Yu's reputation, his publisher received over 700,000 orders from bookstores across China by simply forecasting the release of his new book. When it was finally published in June that year, *The Seventh Day* topped the sales charts of amazon.cn within 24 hours. *The Seventh Day* is an absurdist work inspired by the Book of Genesis. It opens with the following inscription in both English and Chinese: "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made." The protagonist of the novel is a middle-aged man named Yang Fei, who was born on a moving train. Lost by his mother through the round hole in the toilet floor onto the railroad track, Yang was adopted by a switchman. The novel tells the story of Yang Fei's experiences in the seven days after an unceremonious death. Being unable to afford the expensive cemetery, he becomes a solitary drifting soul without a burial plot. Yang's life is reconstructed in the novel through flashbacks interspersed between stories.

Material desire permeates the novel. Yang Fei's beautiful wife married him for love, but later divorces him to marry a promising businessman. The moment she hugs Yang Fei goodbye, she tells him, "I still love you". When she meets Yang again after their death, she says similar things, "I married twice, but only had one husband – and that was you". The seemingly ironic reiteration of love in the novel is a powerful accusation of the maddening pursuit of material desire in the real world. In an acquisitive society, material gains transcend life and death. In *The Seventh Day*, the migrant worker nicknamed Mouse Girl "committed suicide by jumping off a building, distressed that her boyfriend had given her a knockoff

iPhone 4s for her birthday instead of the real thing”. Even in their afterlife, the deceased are described as vying with each other in their funeral dresses, urns and burial plots.

Not all kinds of insanity in contemporary China can be accounted for in terms of wealth. *The Seventh Day* also describes controversial forced demolitions, corrupted officialdom, rough-and-tumble hospitals, and the wretched living conditions of the underdogs, among others. A love-making couple is removed forcefully from their bedroom to a truck so that their home can be demolished for a development program to go ahead. Another couple is buried alive in their home due to a similar forced demolition scheme, leaving their eleven-year-old daughter behind. Bodies of twenty-seven infants and fetuses are dumped into a river as medical refuse by a local hospital, and the person who reports this to journalists dies shortly after in a mysterious car accident. A husband is sentenced to death for murdering his lunatic wife, but his wife returns home several years later. All kinds of tragic events that have taken place in China in recent years and hit the headlines, are incorporated into the novel in one way or another. So if what I recount here looks fragmentary, that is probably the same impression you may get from *The Seventh Day*.

For that reason, the novel, though widely read, received fierce criticism. Many a critic labelled it a “news skewer”, gathering many headline stories into one collection. Indeed, no character in the novel, even the protagonist, is fully developed, if compared with those of Yu’s earlier novels such as Fugui in *To Live*. *The Seventh Day* reads more like a series of loosely connected short stories. No wonder some comments held that Yu is overdrawing on the credit earned from his earlier works: the “failed language” of this novel represents none of the cleverness of *To Live*; had the novel been written by a lesser-known author, it would have had no chance of being published. Yu Hua is nevertheless ignoring these criticisms. He defends *The Seventh Day* as the most representative of his overall writing style, adding that he will not read reviews until they get rational.

Despite the accusation of its being “Yu’s worst novel”, *The Seventh Day* was listed among the “top 10 books of 2013” by *China Daily*, the most influential English-language newspaper in China. I read the book with tears and laughter, because the preposterous stories, told with ingenious sarcasm, are often very real. Yu said that “*The Seventh Day* is a true absurdist novel” and he is surprised that “many Chinese readers consider it a work of realism”. Nevertheless, absurdity and realism are not diametrical opposites. The absurdity of the novel is best demonstrated by the author’s fantastic design of making a dead man his protagonist, a perspective that enables Yang Fei to align the propagated “truth” in the real world with the first-hand “truth” from those directly involved. The realistic aspect, needless to say, lies in the fact that almost all stories in the novel have their real-life counterparts.

The English translation is admirably crafted by Allan H. Barr, who also translated Yu’s debut novel *Cries in the Drizzle*, his essay collection *China in Ten Words*, and his short story collection *Boy in the Twilight*. Barr’s translation is lively and sparkling. It reads fluently and smoothly without effacing the Chinese otherness. Expressions such as “the fresh flower gets stuck in a cowpat” and “the scabby toad gets to eat swan meat” are easily comprehensible and memorable in English, but remain authentically Chinese in form and meaning. Not surprisingly, the impression I have from reading the translation is comparable to reading the Chinese original in terms of literary style and emotional effect.

The Chinese original has inscriptions from *Genesis* in both Chinese and English. Considering that not all Chinese readers are interested or able to read English, Yu's inclusion of English may betray that in writing up *The Seventh Day*, the target readership he had in mind includes international audiences. Interestingly, Barr's English translation excludes the inscriptions from *Genesis*, making the connection between the Biblical inspiration and Yu's narrative structure implicit. From the perspective of the target readership, Barr's translation provides a good read to anyone who wants to gain some insights into the tragic life of ordinary people in contemporary China. Barr's translation not only renders the Chinese text accessible to English readers, it also has the potential to improve the rough language in *The Seventh Day*, which Chinese readers find uninspiring. In the same vein, those social events that local readers dismissed as collections of headline stories may be interpreted as super-realistic by an international audience viewing them through a different lens.