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'The foreigner lives within': rereading Ming Cher's rewritten *Spider Boys*

Abstract:

Ming Cher's *Spider Boys* is an energetic and long-neglected novel set at the cusp of Singapore's nationhood. Written by a Singaporean expatriated to New Zealand, the novel was first published in New Zealand in 1995, and was republished in Singapore in 2012 with substantial changes to its idiom and sentence patterns. I read the novel as a foreigner, the first edition before I moved from New Zealand to Singapore for five years, the second following my departure. This paper investigates how the changes in language in the second edition alter this 'insider's' account of 1950s Singapore for an 'outsider' reader, and how foreignness conditions my readings in relation to those of other readers. From this reading position it is possible to discover some of the ways that 'the foreigner lives within' the text, to adapt Julia Kristeva's formulation. This presentation attends to the differences between the two editions of *Spider Boys*, and the ways that the text's engagement with foreignness as both a thematic and linguistic effect presage its own fortunes in revision.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

In 1995, Ming Cher's novel *Spider Boys* was published by Penguin Books in New Zealand and by William Morrow and Co. in the US. Set in 1955, it's the story of children and teenagers who grow up fighting spiders on the streets of post-war, pre-independence Singapore. The youths' irrepressible activity at the fringes of an adult world of gambling and gang activity is narrated in a unique and contested English creole that is often described as Singlish, but which does not display many of the more recognised features of Singlish. In 2012 the book was republished by Epigram Books in Singapore, after an editing process which changed almost every sentence: the narration was rewritten in Standard English, while much of the dialogue was converted either to Standard English or to a more familiar version of contemporary Singlish.

I read (and reread) the novel as a foreigner, the Penguin edition before I moved from New Zealand to Singapore for five years in 2009, and again alongside the Epigram edition following my departure. My initial reaction to the revision was one of shock at what felt to me to be a kind of violence done to the original text – a text which I had very much enjoyed for the freshness of its language and idiom. When I tried to put my reaction into words, though, I found the illusion of a neutral reading position dissolved more quickly and thoroughly than it usually does through the work of critical writing. It became impossible to engage my response to these textual versions without also accounting for the specifics of my own readership. This paper is an attempt to fold that accounting into a discussion of the circumstances and content of the book's versions.

Exotically non-standard

Ming Cher was born and grew up in Singapore, and as an adult worked across Asia-Pacific in construction, the merchant navy, retail and farming. He had been resident in New Zealand for almost twenty years when he wrote *Spider Boys*. Its idiosyncratic speech and image patterns reflect his biography: according to the blurb of the first edition he 'is fluent in Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian and Vietnamese, [though] in none of these languages does he read or write.' The voice of narration in the novel appears to register the idiom and syntactical patterns of his multiple languages, blended and transposed into English. One of the most visible transpositions of idiom and speech patterns is from Hokkien, but there are others, including accretions of Singlish and New Zealand English. A source-map for the narration's linguistic patterns may be possible and is planned as the subject of future collaborative research, but my interest in this paper is in the book's poetics as affected and created by its life as a read and edited text.

According to an interview conducted at the time of *Spider Boys'* first edition, its narrative voice closely reflects Cher's own speech patterns. Cher in this interview comments on a freedom of expression he experienced in his written engagement with English:

> English is a language which shouldn't be so precise in books. You don't expect other characters to be so good in English. I just write the way I felt it was right, that's all, and let them be the judge (Koh 1995a: 32).

A brief example of the narrative voice from the first edition should convey some of its effects. This scene has two children, visiting an abandoned garden at night during the Hungry Ghost Festival. Events are about to take a terrifying turn, but for the moment it's peaceful:

> "Check it out later." Sachee switches his rabbit eyes back on the pond waving silvery currents by light breeze, disturbing the tranquility, beautiful to both of them dreaming about breeding pet fishes. And draw them to oneness by the scene before them, which has floating water lilies carpeting half of the pond around.
>
> A second gust of winds brought some cempaka flowers down from the tall trees. When this very sweet-smelling flower falls, it release its best smells.
>
> Sachee sniffs. "Smells nice," he said. "Maybe Big Mole like it?" Delightly and scramble toward a cempaka fallen on top of a patch of floating water lily on the pond. He pushes away the water lily, deeper to reach his flower (1995: 126).

This is how the same passage appears in the Epigram edition:

> With the reflection of the moon on its surface and water lilies carpeting half of it, the pond looked calm and beautiful. …
>
> "Check it out later," Sachee decided, and turned his attention back to the pond, dreaming about breeding pet fish. A light breeze sent a silvery ripple across the water surface. The two boys felt united in front of the nighttime scene.
>
> A stronger gust of wind brought some cempaka flowers down from the tall trees. When this very sweet-smelling flower fell, it released its best aroma. Sachee sniffed the air delightedly. "Nice smell," he said. "Maybe Big Mole will like it?" He scrambled towards one of the flowers that had fallen on a patch of water lilies and reached out for it (2012: 144).

A number of characteristic qualities of the first edition's narration are evident in this excerpt, including tense instability, irregular preposition use and dropped pronouns. There's also an enstrangement of idiom that has the capacity to revitalise dead metaphors, as in the use of 'rabbit eyes'. The order of ideas seems impressionistic, created by moment-to-moment attention to sensory data rather than by familiar grammatical hierarchies. The irregularities are leveraged towards effective control of the rhythms and pace of sentences and paragraphs, both for musicality and for tension. Take, for example, the rippling vowel rhythms of 'floating water lilies carpeting half of the pond around,' or the suggestion of movement towards promise (and danger) in the last sentence: 'He pushes away the water lily, deeper to reach his flower.' This last sentence invokes both an internal and external development, and like the use of an omniscient focalization (the boys dreaming together, drawn to oneness) foreshadows a crisis of consciousness that will develop later in the scene, where one of them passes out and enters a cosmic, inner-consciousness/out-of-body experience. The revised version, by correcting according to conventions of grammar

as well as perspective, loses this subtle foreshadowing, as well as much imagistic and musical effect that creates and resonates the book's webs of meaning. The water lilies no longer float. The boys are not drawn to oneness, they merely feel united.

The editorial changes made to this passage, and similarly throughout the book, are symptomatic of a complex diagnostic history that attends the book's narrative situation and its reception. As first published, the impressionistic effects of the first edition's narration often approach stream-of-consciousness, yet across the novel as a whole the narrator is extradiegetic and, as noted, omniscient, moving without restraint through different character's thoughts and sensations and beyond them. It is eventually apparent that this narrator has been implicitly translating the represented speech (and thought-speech) of characters throughout, though the cues to this are few. This situation becomes most clear as late as page 109 of the Penguin edition, where a British security chief is described speaking 'in English', and one of the primary characters, Yeow, is unable to understand him. The reader can from this point on be sure not only that the narrator is outside the story-world he describes, but that the language he uses to describe it is from outside that world too, part of the necessary artifice that provides narrative access to its chosen audience of readers of English.

These formal specificities of narration intersect in complex ways with the marketing and reception of the novel, and the subsequent decision to revise it into entirely different language. British academic Anthea Fraser Gupta (a Singapore resident for about 20 years) argues in a 2000 essay that despite indications of a translating narration, the marketing of the Penguin edition implied it was written in the language the characters would have used. She ascribes this implication to the blurb's note that it is 'written in the street-slang English that is one of the author's native languages'. Gupta observes the historical unlikeliness of these characters speaking English at all:

> Although in the Singapore of the 1990s English is widely heard in all social circles and is a plausible language of play (and criminality), this was not the case in the 1950s, when Chinese children playing in the streets would have been more likely to use a range of Chinese dialects (especially Hokkien and Cantonese) and would have used principally Malay in speaking to non-Chinese. Cher, therefore, is in the position of using English in settings where a reader familiar with Singapore would expect other languages to have been used (2000: 152).

Gupta acknowledges that the narrative does not in fact claim to represent the language of the street-kids directly, but her point about the effect of the marketing (combined with the subtlety with which the narrative flags its actual situation) is well taken. Many of the reviewers of the first editions respond to the novel as though it were making a claim of direct linguistic representation, referring to Cher as mining 'the abbreviated, hard-edged local street slang' (*Publisher's Weekly*, 1995) and 'the hybrid dialect of Singapore street youth' (Jay McInerney, William Morrow blurb, 1995), and affirming what they take as both the authenticity and exoticism of that language. Arguably there is a distinction between the blurb claim that the 'street-slang English' is one of the *author's* native languages, and the assumption that this particular language is an established Singaporean variant; this is a fine distinction, though, and does not carry into most of the early reviews.

Arguably the most significant of the first edition reviews, in terms of the history of the novel's publication, is the one that appeared in Singapore's major (state-owned) paper, the *Straits Times*, written by Koh Buck Song, a poet and fiction writer who was at the time the paper's literary and domestic politics editor. (Koh went on to a career in corporate communications, both for the Singapore Economic Development Board and as a consultant, focused on Singapore's global image and positioning.) Koh's review appeared alongside a substantial interview he conducted with Cher, and it dwells at length on the issue of the authenticity of the book's language. Koh comments that this 'is not exactly fluent Singlish but a rough translation from Chinese dialect', and then occupies most of his review with assessing how it fails to accurately represent contemporary Singlish. The accompanying interview, Gupta notes, contains cues that to a local audience identify him as an outsider to Singapore, pointing up the Westernised order of his publishing name, his use of the third person to discuss 'Singaporeans', and exotic details of his lifestyle in New Zealand. In the review's conclusion Koh outlines the concerns that he sees will be at stake for certain of his readers:

> The publication of *Spider Boys* under a major imprint comes out of a recent trend in the West to pay more attention to minority cultures, such as the Glasgow of Howard Kelman's Booker winner last year, *How Late It Was, How Late.*
>
> It is also part of a larger politically correct reaction against the centuries-old domination of the Dead White Male. Exotic is "in", from beauty pageants to books, and Ming Cher's good timing has put Singapore on the world literary map.
>
> His idiosyncratic English will, however, worry the anti-Singlish purists, who were warned about this recently. The gates have opened, and more such writing will come through – sooner rather than later (1995b: 32).

Although the headline ('First S'porean to be published by Penguin') and much of the interview appear to celebrate Cher's publication, the review evokes fears that the publication is not an achievement at all, but an instance of shallow and short-lived patronage by the West that will propagate inauthentic perceptions of Singapore, its history, culture and language. Even worse, the last paragraph seems to suggest, international affirmation of the text may countermand local efforts against Singlish – which would later consolidate as the government's 'Speak Good English' campaign – attempting to bolster the use of Standard English across the country to advance Singapore's economic and cultural standing.

Gupta's essay, appearing five years later in the journal *Language and Linguistics*, amplifies Koh's doubts and concerns about authenticity and effect. Gupta begins with the assertion that she

> [does] not want to give the impression that authenticity, of whatever sort, is to be positively evaluated – a search for authenticity at the expense of all else can sometimes give the impression that fiction is indistinct from sociology (2000: 150).

Nonetheless, she bundles a negative assessment of the novel's authenticity with other deprecatory assessments. Gupta acknowledges that the narrator is translating the linguistic world of the story, yet goes on to enumerate a set of diagnostic features of

contemporary Singlish and their absence in *Spider Boys'* narration. Like Koh, she does not see the narrative specificities as exempting the text from this kind of assessment. Nor does she engage with the question of Singlish evolution or how the Singlish of the 1950s, if it *were* represented here, might differ from that of the present day. Instead she identifies Cher's narrative language as a 'learner variety' of contemporary Standard English. She questions its aesthetic purpose ('The non-standard features of the narrative …appear to be motiveless in artistic terms' (163)), and the validity of its appearance in print:

> The editorial decision was ostensibly based on the assumption that the book was written in the English the author 'spoke on the streets of Singapore', and that it was therefore a variety of English *that had a right to be used as a medium of literature.* I have argued, however, that the pattern of non-standardism is not the one which characterises Singapore colloquial English, and the the novel does not reflect a setting where English of any variety would have been used (2000: 164, my italics).

Like Koh's, Gupta's critique emphasises that this book has been written for a non-Singaporean audience (Cher's son and the international Western reading public), and suggests that this consciousness has had a formative effect on language use that distances it from a local readership: 'With its imagined non-Singaporean readership, the language is at once exotically non-standard and yet devoid of the local features that would present comprehension problems to a foreign reader' (2000: 162). The imagined presence, particular identity and power of the foreign reader extends to an editorial role in Gupta's account, which speculates that

> [t]he absence of a correlate [for Cher's language] in the community suggests that the mixture of features results from contributions being made to the final text by more than one person, presumably by Cher and by one or more editorial hands (2000: 160).

Between the suspicion of editorial debt, the arguments of inauthenticity, and the attribution of publication success to 'good timing', Koh's and Gupta's responses establish and systematically dismantle hopes of a cluster of integral relations binding author, narrative voice, story and place in mutual ownership which might secure the text's value. Instead these relations register dislodgement, displacement, an estrangement visible in the inadequacy of substitute affiliations. Where the Penguin blurb associates *Spider Boys* with '*Lord of the Flies*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*', Koh's review retorts that the novel 'lacks some of the terror of William Golding's moral tale, the violence of Anthony Burgess' futuristic fantasy and the humour of Roddy Doyle's 1993 Booker winner, respectively' (1995b: 32). These affiliations, though they may have done their intended work of helping to secure a Western audience, when read from the position of the long-left home may indicate that the text is now both foreign and not foreign enough.

Language apart

It seems contiguous with this dissolution of relations that the Singapore state broadcasting corporation, Mediacorp, could in 2009 broadcast a TV series it had developed called 'Fighting Spiders', with no declared input from Ming Cher. Set in

the 1960s, the series depicts a group of street kids who prepare for a grand spider-fighting tournament, surrounded by poverty and gang bullies: here is something very like *Spider Boy*'s story, but without its awkwardly visible narratological differences. The problems of authorship and narration are resolved by the absenting of the author from the story's construction and of the narrator from its representation. This is not to say that foreign influence is removed from this story; rather the foreigner is assigned to an unambiguous position as ally, defender and consumer of an approved version of the local, as one sees in a very early scene which has the son of a British police officer rescuing the spider boys from a local bully, before the British and Singaporean boys pledge allegiance to each other (*Fighting Spiders*, 2009).

Epigram's 2012 republication of *Spider Boys* retains Ming Cher as its nominal author, but it is similarly based on the assessment that the book's narration is unworkably problematic. Epigram's website explains that 'Spider Boys has been re-edited to not only retain the flavour of colloquial Singapore English in the dialogues, but also to improve the accessibility of the novel for all readers by rendering the narrative into grammatical Standard English.' An account by Jocelyn Lau, the editor who undertook the rewrite, is provided:

> When I first began the daunting task of re-editing the original edition of *Spider Boys*, published in 1995 by Penguin Books, New Zealand, I had to decide how to go about making the book more accessible to readers—both international as well as Singaporean and Malaysian. For me, not only was the use of tenses in the narrative and the dialogues inconsistent, but the depiction of the 'street slang' was not wholly accurate; I found it taxing to read beyond even the opening paragraphs.
>
> The work involved 'regularising' the narrative so it conforms to standard English, and also retaining as much of the colloquial flavour in the dialogues as possible; this was so that readers from our part of the world would identify more closely with the language they use in informal banter, as they certainly would with the life in Singapore in the 1950s portrayed in Ming Cher's novel (Lau n.d.).

The concern with international reception is somewhat surprising, given the warm reviews of the first editions. Even those reviews quoted on Epigram's site celebrate, in particular, the language of the original version: 'In Ming Cher's hands, the hybrid dialect of Singapore street youth becomes uncannily evocative and poetic,' wrote McInerney; 'Ming Cher's jagged English pulls no punches,' wrote Peter Hedges (Epigram books, n.d. 'Spider Boys').

In the new edition itself, an introduction by poet and playwright Robert Yeo provides greater congruence, discussing the rewrite in terms of the meanings offered to a local audience. Yeo quotes the critic Rosaly Puthucheary to explain his view that the problem with the 'mixed linguistic situation' in the first edition is due to Cher's long absence from Singapore. In Puthucheary's words, 'There is a need to know what English sounds like before it can be represented. This is rather problematic for writers who live away from Singapore' (Yeo, 2012: viii). Again the narration is described as failing a requirement to reflect back the present linguistic specificities of a contemporary local audience, but the problem is resolvable, and apparently resolved, on the basis that story and narration are divisible: 'Language apart,' writes Yeo, 'there

are merits in the novel which warrant this new version,' including the authenticity of represented events, to which he attests. With this and other plot and setting-based affirmations given, Yeo goes on, somewhat optimistically, to draw a close to debate about the book's language: 'I hope enough has been said about the linguistic choices facing the writer in English who presents non-English-speaking situations and places, enough for the reader to move on to focus on other fictional characteristics' (2012: xiii).

But such radical editorial intervention, conducted after the original publication and therefore in the public view, exacerbates the questions of authorship and ownership. What is the author's relationship to the new text, and to the intervention? In an interview on Epigram's website, Cher expresses gratitude for the new edition on several counts, including its potential to generate interest in a sequel to follow *Spider Boys* (*Big Mole*, slated for publication with Epigram in 2015). Cher praises Lau's meticulous work, not in revising the language, but in correcting place and street names for historical accuracy. And with some poignancy, he remarks on the fact that the book has never been published in Singapore before. 'It has been successful in the US, in Australia and New Zealand, and in Italy. It is the subject of many university courses on Asian writing in English but, really, has been looking for its true home for almost twenty 2 years' (Epigram Books, n.d., 'Spider Boys: Interview with Author Ming Cher').

Foreign reader, foreign writer

Gripped by the belief that a narrative *is* its narration, and finding myself unable to 'move on to other fictional characteristics', this is the point at which I feel the need to account for my own positioning as a reader of the texts and their sociolinguistic context. Reading Epigram's *Spider Boys*, I feel determined to mount a defence of what it replaces, what it endangers by replacing, in spite of the endorsement of the author. But to what degree is my appreciation of the Penguin edition, my desire to defend it, an enactment of the very Western patronage that Koh identifies? Cher's narrative, as published in New Zealand, my homeland, is a foreigner's tale of an exotic land, and I am a member of its target audience. To borrow a comment from Claire Vaye Watkins' recent article on literary pandering, 'Of course you love it. It's *for you*' (2015). Like many Western reviewers, I took the narrative voice on first reading to be representative of English as it is spoken in contemporary Singapore. To my ear it had – and still has – both the convincing force of a living language, and the beauty of frequent surprise, whether made by blended source languages or by deftly worked 'error'. It is also not so close to English as I speak it that it generates uncanny effects. It was not until I began discussing excerpts from *Spider Boys* with Singapore students within the context of the creative writing class that I learned it did not exactly mirror their speech, and that they too were encountering an 'other' voice in its narration.

Julia Kristeva writes that 'the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in

himself.…The foreigner comes in when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unnamable to bonds and communities' (1991: 1). To read this novel as a foreigner requires acknowledging my own 'hidden face' in its editorial treatment. Not only do I perform a version of the projected 'international' reader, but, as an expatriate creative writing professional, I am enmeshed in the post-colonial, or perhaps neo-colonial, industries which mediate 'voice'. Accordingly, I enter this discussion with circumspection. This reading position may make it easier to speak of and for certain of the novel's disowned contents, alongside other kinds of readers and readings, but it also seems helpful to attempt to acknowledge the distortionary conditions and effects of reading as this kind of foreigner.

Kristeva engages the problematics of hearing the foreigner's voice – or lack of voice – in *Strangers to Ourselves*. At one point she pastiches the reaction of the comfortable native to the foreigner's linguistic quirks:

> Your awkwardness has its charm, they say, it is even erotic, according to womanisers, not to be outdone. No one points out your mistakes, so as not to hurt your feelings, and then there are so many, and after all they don't give a damn (1991: 15).

This exoticising and infantilising tolerance is possible precisely because the foreigner's political power is circumscribed in their second home; they do not have the citizen's rights to engage with the polis. *Spider Boys* does not in any apparent way engage with New Zealand topicalities and frictions, and perhaps this contributes a certain pleasurable weightlessness to the New Zealand reader's experience of its language. 'Your speech has no past and will have no power over the future of the group,' writes Kristeva.

> Your speech, fascinating as it might be on account of its very strangeness, will be of no consequence, will have no effect, will cause no improvement in the image or reputation of those you are conversing with (1991: 20).

Similarly, as a New Zealand reader of the first edition *Spider Boys*, and even as an expatriate in Singapore, I am and was minimally invested in the concerns for representational accuracy that appear in Koh's and Gupta's critiques. Indeed, I don't believe that such representation is the necessary work of fiction, but then it is not my culture and history, nor my use of English, that is invoked in Cher's work. I might not have much warm feeling for the kind of nation-as-enterprise interests that help to shape Koh's reaction, but a broader sociological consideration must allow these are not the only interests at stake. Singapore is a nation whose physical and linguistic landscapes have been subject to extremely intensive modernisation since the period in which *Spider Boys* is set. In this context historical fiction faces intense demands. The novel itself ends with a version of 1961's Bukit Ho Swee fire, a disaster which cleared forever one of the city's largest remaining kampongs, making way for the now ubiquitous Housing Development Board apartment blocks. Singapore's few tiny remaining kampongs exist now almost exclusively as tourist attractions. Meanwhile, the use of Chinese dialects has greatly diminished in response to government campaigns promoting the use of Mandarin and English. Whatever the spatial and linguistic realities of the place that Cher remembers and invokes through *Spider Boys*, it is now quite thoroughly gone.

With that said, Singapore readers do not form a bloc for whom representational accuracy and the poetics of hegemony are the necessary response to sociolinguistic and historical concerns. Editor of the *Singapore Review of Books*, Lim Lee Ching, responded to the Epigram publication with a searing dual review of the first and second editions. He applauds the first as

> the rare Singaporean novel that resists an appropriation of, and absorption by, predictable historiographies surrounding colonialism, the Second World War, national identity, censorship, etc., that make up the checklist of narrative responsibility (2013).

This resistance is grounded, he suggests, in Spider Boys' improvisational linguistic inventiveness, through which 'meaning and meaningfulness [emerge]'. In this sense, Cher's language might be usefully considered as a highly individualised form of what Anne Pakir calls 'glocal English' – English which grapples with the need for a sense of linguistic *eikos* or home, and which registers the 'inevitable "pluricentricity" of English' in its contemporary diasporic contexts. Pakir notes that 'implicit in the term 'glocal', which is a word blend of 'global' and 'local', is the idea that even as the world's people embrace globalisation, they resist it to some extent' (2007: 48).

Lim's review decries the loss of this distinctive linguistic individuality – its resistance of both global and local duties of familiarity – in the Epigram edition of Cher's novel:

> Unfortunately, by making this radical change to the novel, all that has been achieved is to bring attention directly to those issues of (language) identity, censorship, 'responsibility' that are really not the province of this novel (2013).

In such a response, which embraces the first edition for its 'enduring contribution to the cultural consciousness of the country,' Cher's novel might be seen to have 'come home', answering the author's hopes for reception both through and against the static created by the revised edition. Lim's commentary will not shoehorn the novel into national service, though: 'The language that pervades *Spider Boys*,' he writes, 'embodies the authenticity of its own world rather than that of a version (idyllic or otherwise) of Singapore.'

'To be deprived of parents—is that where freedom starts?' asks Kristeva.

> Certainly foreigners become intoxicated with that independence, and undoubtedly their very exile is at first no more than a challenge to parental overbearance. …Eventually, though, the time of orphanhood comes about (20).

When Cher comments that his text has been 'has been looking for its true home for almost twenty 2 years', the pain of this orphanhood seems concomitant with the freedom he celebrated in 1995 as he generated an international audience from within that 'own world', a speech-community of one: 'Writing world is very freedom life,' he commented in the *Straits Times* interview. 'You are free to go anywhere your thoughts want to go' (1995a: 32). To go is one thing and to return another, and for *Spider Boys* republication in Singapore has come at the cost of acute compromise to the book's linguistic singularity. With the first editions long out of print and now replaced by a different book of the same name, it seems all the more important to offer critical recognition and discussion of the text both in its original form and as part

of a composite text that includes each of its versions and their combined circumstances.

As Lim notes, and as the book's language itself attests, the first edition *Spider Boys* exceeds or escapes nationality in important ways, and to this degree it is a book which remains foreign in all its homes. Lim stops short of acknowledging thematic significance or intent in this textual position, though, when he suggests that the issues of '(language) identity' raised by the rewrite are not the province of the novel. While it's true that language is for the most part kept out of focus at the level of plot, certain plot elements speak to the book's linguistic conditions and history in ways that I would argue must be acknowledged within its gestalt.

At the first level of content, the novel is full of orphans and near-orphans surviving on their wits and innovative capacities – the spider business itself is precisely that. The strength of this theme is part of what makes the language seem so apt to the story; it is analogous to the characters' lively improvisations of lifestyle. These improvisations are not without their risks. Protagonist Kwang, whose father has died, supports his family through spider-fighting while his mother, Yee, lives elsewhere as a domestic servant. But Yee – perhaps mirroring one of the harsher faces of the state – is not appreciative of Kwang's efforts; she is a violent disciplinarian who would prefer he take a more conventional path. Indeed, she would also like him to learn proper English:

> When his mother, who hates spider, is at home he will pretend to study hard, reading any English word that comes to his mind. "A—boy, C—dog…! B—orange." Anyhow before a book to bullshit his mother who can't read and write in any language. For she will look please to leave him alone (1995: 3).

Kwang relishes 'freedom from mother's rule' in her absence. Ironically, the particular flavour of this relationship and motif is considerably dulled by the rewrite, as though Yee had a hand in it. The first chapter, 'In the House of Mother Rule' becomes 'Mother's Rule', eliminating the institutional, dynastic sense of oppression. 'Fucking mother's cunt,' Kwang curses when looking at his unhealed cane wounds; in the Epigram edition this becomes the anodyne 'Fuck', which not only removes the viscerality of the curse, also removes its genealogy as a translation of a specifically Hokkien phrasing.

Three of the novel's climactic events can be seen as offering further analogies for the book's linguistic situation, and indeed, for its own fortunes in revision. Though it's anachronistic to read them this way, the parallels make a certain kind of sense if the book and its story emerge from the same nexus of authority, individuality, language and place. Read as metaphors, they sketch out the available possibilities for interaction between these elements. The first occurs when Yee returns to the novel at the climax of the 'Spider Olympic Games', auguring a return of parental dominion that will be fatal for the young subject's chances at freedom and success; Kwang's altercation with his mother leads to his prize spider being injured, and his sure win at the games is endangered. Though the spider loses a leg, however, Kwang goes on to win the games regardless and to sever the connection with his mother, achieving independence at the cost of the relationship. Without imposing autobiography on the

text, one might see here an affective parallel of Cher's own narrative and the exile of his book, if these are understood as versions of the self-orphaning severance that Kristeva describes.

The impression of disfiguring (or refiguring) loss is echoed in the Ho Swee Hill/Bukit Ho Swee fire, for the reader who is aware of the changes to geography and lifestyle that followed the historical event. The novel ends with the fire in mid-blaze, so within the novel the full impact of this loss is left to the imagination. Yet the depiction of the fire is characterised by the air of acceptance that is perhaps familiar from Cher's commentary on his novel's revision. No character expresses distress, panic or grief – rather the fire offers amelioration, clearing the way for a peace between the novel's main antagonists. It seems that in this instance the loss of the old and idiosyncratic, as represented by the burning kampong, might lead to better times, with both participants in the conflict able to stay, albeit in different territories.

Perhaps the most suggestive of these schematics, which I here explore as metaphorical without asserting that they are necessarily intended that way, develops around the character Big Mole, an orphan whose only known name derives from the mole on her face. When a doctor offers to remove the mole gratis, Big Mole gratefully accepts. The blemish is removed and Big Mole is able to go on to an easier life without regrets, though in the scope of this novel she keeps her name. It will be interesting to see how the character and events around her develop in the book's planned sequel, which also takes her name. Indeed, it will be interesting to see how the voice of this sequel treads the territory between the 'freedom life' a younger Cher expressed linguistically and the remodeled landscape of his novel's blemish-free return.

Spider Boys' revision was undertaken with clear intent to appeal to a certain portion of its audience – those of the Singapore and international audience who would prefer its language to be familiar and/or authentic in the sense of representing a currently recognisable linguistic reality. If the change to make this so leads to the loss of defining aspects of the novel's identity, as I argue it does, it is important to acknowledge that there are aspects of the book's plot that foreshadow this development and draw our attention to the autonomy, value and pragmatism of such a peace-making decision. To read the book's events in this light is to argue for significance of these narrative turns within the meta-narrative of the book's own life. Such a reading both yields to the loss of the first edition text, which no longer exists as 'the' *Spider Boys*, and affirms its essential place within a narrative containing its own multiple versions.

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