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Writing Translation (Stories)

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Some stories take a lifetime to understand. It has taken me a lifetime to understand that translation is reading and writing, just as is research. All my life I have been devoted to reading and writing without realising that the pleasure I receive from translation and research was simply an extension of these things. What follows is an account of how I translate, what I choose to translate, and why I translate. You the reader will have your own stories; here are three of mine.

The first of these three stories, or case studies, describes a translation that first appeared as an accompaniment to research rather than translation for its own sake. The second story arose directly from translation, and the research elements were secondary. The third describes a translation that met an urgent need; the research articles about the work appeared later, were not designed for a larger audience and never reached it.

Much was different about these translations, all published within seven years: each was written in a different part of the world; each needed a different kind of exegesis; each found different publishers; each appealed to different readers; and two of them reached more readers than any of my other translations. The commonalities and differences are not in themselves of particular interest but suggest that translators can have different reasons for what they choose (or are chosen) to do, and unexpected links can emerge.

The writers themselves had a few things in common: all wrote poetry that was published, two also wrote fiction, and one wrote mainly polemics. Two were born in the provinces but all based themselves eventually in Beijing; all experienced revolution, of a kind; born respectively in 1893, 1912 and 1949, their ages overlapped; only one is still living.

I have in the past written recommendations for what literary translators should do. Here, I don't want to give advice or criticise other people's theories or practices: I'm only summarising my own literary translation over a period over 50-odd years. It is based on experience rather than theory, although theories may be created around them and about them. You may notice I make an effort to avoid the words I, me and mine.

Narratives

Paths in Dreams

My first full-length published translation was the 1976 Paths in Dreams: Selected Prose and Poetry of Ho Ch'i-fang.[1] It consists of translations of poems and essays by He Qifang 何其芳 from the first seven of the author's books, published between 1936 and 1945. Later versions of these poems and essays published in China in 1956 as *He Qifang xuan ji* 何其芳选集 [He Qifang's selected works] underwent editorial changes that I preferred not to adopt. Apart from *Paths in Dreams*, I've written two further articles on He Qifang, and, much later, translated a handful of his poetry written and published between 1957 and 1975.[2]

My translation history didn't start like this, of course: the first of my translations was for a 1965 dissertation on the Tang poet Du Mu, the subject (but not the poems themselves) chosen by my supervisor. Up until then, as an undergraduate, I wrote my translations with a pen on paper: drafting, crossing out, rewriting the whole page as it became illegible, and so on. But I loved it. It was partly because the poems themselves were quite short, and I could easily bear to make endless amendments and corrections for each poem in turn. It was also such great fun to test the English words, leafing through dictionaries and thesauruses, trusting my responses and then rewriting yet again after a couple of days.

I believe my obsessional approach to translation began like this, the physical writing and rewriting, searches and research. It seems to me that obsession and translation are mentally related, each strengthening the other. I'm sure there are some highly gifted translators who dash off finished translation with minimal effort, and I'm certainly familiar with translations that seem never to have passed the first draft stage. The pleasure that writing, rewriting, translation and re-translation gave me

[1] Publication details of my book-length translations are listed under Primary sources in References.

[2] For translations of He Qifang's poems written between 1957 and 1975 see Hsu Kai-yu, ed., *The Literature of the People's Republic of China* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 527–533, 669–671; 931. The two essays are "European Influences in the Poetry of Ho Ch'i-fang", *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, vol. 5, nos 1 & 2 (December 1967) & "Memories and Metamorphoses of a Thirties' Intellectual: A Study of He Qifang's 'Old Men' (Lao ren)", *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, vol. 3 no. 1 (January 1981).

without much conscious thought a determination to continue into postgraduate studies, with scarcely a break between the one and the other.

It also came as a relief that the MA stipend was more generous than my undergraduate scholarship, which had to be supplemented by part-time work as a waitress and house-sharing. I was able to afford more living space and also acquired a typewriter. Even more valuable was the gradual acquisition of university office space and the ability to spend a longer working day there. My second dissertation, on He Qifang, became altogether a more elaborate affair, and on completion after two years it was a great relief to pass it over for professional typing by the sister of my teacher and colleague Mabel Lee.

He Qifang (1912–1977) was born in Wanxian 万县 (now Wanzhou 万州区), the first commercial port on the Sichuan side of the Yangtze River Gorges. As a student of philosophy at Peking University 北京大学 [Beijing daxue] in the early 1930s, his solitary life was interrupted by Japanese attacks on north China, but following a brief few weeks in his hometown he returned to Peking. Here he established a literary reputation for his delicate, romantic and wistful imagination. His best-known work is a long poem, "Yuyan" 预言 [The prophecy], thought to result from an unhappy love affair but also inspired by Paul Valéry's long poem "La Jeune Parque" [The young fate].

He Qifang's dream-like existence did not long survive his need to earn a living. Teaching first in Tianjin 天津 and then in Laiyang 莱阳, Shandong, he was exposed to the joint ills of local poverty and Japanese aggression. Declarations of his new awareness characterise his Laiyang poems of 1936–1937 that rejected his former heroes Byron and Baudelaire in a style that owes much to T. S. Eliot. By the time he returned to his hometown in mid-1937, he had become aware of the social, political and national problems then facing China, abandoning European poetry to engage in political battles over the role of writers and literature in the current crisis. After some months of indecision, he travelled to Yan'an 延安 in 1938, where he declared his support for the Communist Party of China. Following the 1949 revolution, He Qifang spent the rest of his life in Peking, where he served as the director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 中国社会科学院文学研究院 until the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

My supervisor, A.R. Davis, had suggested that I move to modern Chinese literature for my MA dissertation, taking He Qifang's poetry as my subject. He'd expected my focus to be on He Qifang's politicised post-1949 writing, but instead, I was drawn to his 1930s poems. Like He Qifang, I was fluent in French, less so in German, and fascinated by European literature generally, and I recall long hours in the library reading the same authors that he had read at Peking University library. The dissertation itself was completed in 1967, after which I took a six-month break at the newly created post of oriental librarian at the university's Fisher Library. The next step was to pursue a PhD, again on modern Chinese literature but without a primary focus on poetry and translation; it was followed by a two-year postdoctoral position during which these two dissertations were turned into books.

The novelist and publisher Michael Wilding, a personal friend, and Harry Aveling, a specialist on South East Asia and literary translator, had set up the series Asian and Pacific Writing at the University of Queensland Press. It was my very good fortune that a revised version of the He Qifang dissertation was published in this series in 1976.[3] Although the Cultural Revolution was then moving towards an end, I was unable to contact He Qifang to inform him. (I wonder if he'd heard about *Paths in Dreams* or even saw a copy before he died the following year.) Thanks to China's Foreign Languages Press (FLP), however, I was able to meet his widow, Mou Jueming 牟决鸣, in the early 1980s and pass on the modest royalties owed to her as well as copies of the book, and later met the extended family still living in Wanxian.

The long decade of the 1960s and early 1970s was for reasons I then little understood a difficult time in my personal life; reading and writing, translating and researching, were my escape. He Qifang was a subject with whom I could identify, through the dramatic turns in his life and writing from the 1930s into the turmoil of the 1940s, and thence the interrupted tranquillity leading to the end of his life. I don't recall changing my translation style to match these changes but adapted my text to what I read. If this sounds naïve, then it accurately reflects my experience of translation, then and still. Although I had no such ambition in mind at the time, *Paths in Dreams* became the first in a series of research-related

[3] See Michael Wilding, "Adventurous Spirits" in *UQP: The Writer's Press 1948–1998*, ed. Craig Munro, University of Queensland Press, 1998, pp. 84–100**.** Wilding praised the works in this series, including my own 'splendid anthology' (p. 96); the series was also praised by D'Arcy Randall, self-described as its 'chief paper-pusher' (p. 115). I have no record of any reviews.

translations with indirect relevance to me personally. What I never expected, however, was that *Paths in Dreams* would repeatedly reappear in my life.

Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks

In 1976 I moved from Sydney to the United States where I took up the post of research fellow at what was then called the Harvard Center of East Asian Studies. One day I happened to be sorting papers in the basement of the Harvard-Yenching Library when I noticed a rather tattered pamphlet with a thoroughly familiar title but a totally unexpected imprint of 1943. Correspondence with Michael Wilding back in Sydney urged me to translate this remarkable treasure, which remains the most widely cited of my translations. Whether literature or politics dominated this choice I am unable to say.

My parents, my sister, and at least two of my uncles and aunts were members of the Communist Party of Australia, and politics was secondary to literature as I grew up. My father, quitting Scotland as a young man, had decided that the Party offered the only hope for working people—which we were—and became a full-time Party organiser. My mother, eldest daughter of a prominent unionist, for several years worked at the Party bookshop in Sydney, where I used to go after school. Perched in a corner, I'd pick out Russian books I barely understood, such as Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Alternatively, as a junior cadre in the Party's youth section, I'd go upstairs where I'd plunge into meetings and other activities such as dance and drama. In 1958, with my parents' consent alongside my own naïvety, I left Sydney for the People's Republic of China.

My stay at Peking University, studying Chinese language and politics, only lasted a year and a half, but with few distractions I learned fast. At first overwhelmed by full-time language study along with classes in modern Chinese history, economics and politics, my own experiences as well as what I was being taught in class nonetheless cast doubt on what I was learning. Twenty years later, my *Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* appeared in print. It's dedicated to my mother, who'd died two years earlier. For its English publication, I'm indebted to Harriet C. Mills, whom I'd met at Harvard.

Mao's *Talks* is one of its author's most famous writings, reprinted and circulated in uncountable figures in China and the rest of the world. A slightly edited version of Mao's opening and closing speeches delivered in Yan'an in north-west China in May 1942 was first printed in the Yan'an newspaper in May

1943 and appeared as a separate pamphlet later the same year. In 1953 the text was revised for republication and thereafter translated into languages across the world. Only limited access to original version was readily available in China until recently and it is still rarely cited, while the differences between the two versions is even more rarely acknowledged. In effect, it disappeared until the 1970s. It is now regarded as an historical document of relevance only to scholars.

Given the unfamiliar version of this text, its translation required a substantial amount of paratext. The introductory quotations from Paul Valéry and Cao Pei were designed to suggest a tone of mutual disdain between literary authors, a characteristic of the *Talks* I was impatient to stress. The "Introduction", under the title "The Yan'an *Talks* as Literary Theory", notes that despite its undoubted importance in modern Chinese literature and history, the *Talks* had never been analysed primarily as literary theory and criticism. The translation of the original edition was an appropriate opportunity to draw attention to its literary significance rather than its political or historical importance.

Appendix 1 draws attention to the major changes (i.e., those that survive translation) from the first edition to the 1953 version. Some of these changes (e.g., the punctuation and length of sentences) are minor, and many are more careful and exact descriptions or terminology. Of greater interest are those which appear to be due to a more elevated use of language, a politer form of reference or even a more cautious understanding of political significance. For example, '*pigu*' 屁股 [arse, bum] is replaced by '*lichang*' 立场 [stand, standpoint] and '*siren*' 死人 [dead people] is replaced by '*guren*' 古人 [the ancients]; 'cultural army' becomes 'workers in revolutionary literature and art'; 'the masses' language' becomes 'a great deal of the masses' language'; 'workers, peasants and soldiers' becomes 'workers and peasants'; 'literature and art' becomes 'raw materials of literature and art' and so on.

The *Talks* has been subject to such minute investigation and inflated discussion that it hardly needs summary. On the other hand, too little attention has been paid to the literary theories that Mao Zedong had presumably acquired during his youth, possibly during his term as a librarian in Peking. Somehow, Mao was ahead not only of his Chinese contemporaries but also of his later critics in the West in his discussion of literary issues. For example, Western-influenced Chinese critics and writers assumed for themselves an urban, cosmopolitan élite status from which to address an élite (or potentially élite)

audience; Mao, on the other hand, proposed relative harmony between traditional élite culture and its accompanying popular culture.

Even more unexpected is Mao's early exposition of an intuitive reception theory, presumably derived from his own observations, which only appeared fully-fledged in literary studies in Western countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This feature faded in his 1953 revised version, which veers more sharply towards the brutal authoritarian judgements of its time.

Taking up the challenge of translating a highly politicised treatise on literature from what I believed to be a reasonably distanced perspective, I initially focussed on straightforward verbal issues. It was only when I undertook what seemed a typically academic task, i.e., a list of the changes between the two versions, that I became aware of how the author's voice had changed much more than merely differences between the introductory speech and the much longer summing-up in which he turned on the writers he'd found lacking in loyalty and reality. More drastically, Mao was no longer a rebel leader pushing fifty in a remote and barren countryside with a ragtag collection of amateur intellectuals among the soldiery under his military and political command: he'd become a mature statesman and undisputed leader of one of the world's largest countries. Being fifty-odd years younger than Mao and not responsible for anyone's fate but my own, I was free to sympathise with his wit, perspicacity and self-assurance, and to relish the task of presenting a relatively unknown side of his character.

He Qifang was one of these 'amateurs', apparently assembled to debate questions of literature and politics but still fumbling with how to suit the new and frightening realities of a country in wartime; he had little experience of politics but was willing to listen to those who spoke with loud confidence. Like most of his literary comrades, he was persuaded to leave behind his favourite writers and instead accompany the troops roaming in the desolate and dangerous countryside. Once committed, whatever the private anguish, He Qifang stuck to the new line, only to lose direction and fall with so many others in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. It was hardly just a coincidence that around the time that Mao rewrote the version of his *Talks* to be published in 1953, He Qifang also revised his early poetry and essays for publication the same year: he'd always been sensitive to his surroundings, but there would have been external pressures as well.

For the most part, Mao Zedong's rulings on literature and culture are no longer routinely cited even in China: their interest now is mainly historical. The same can be said of a handful of translations I made of the kind of poetry that was being written in the closing years of the Cultural Revolution and immediately after. In the years I spent at Harvard, a highly political atmosphere dominated the Chinese wing of East Asian studies. While it was sheer coincidence that I happened on Mao's pamphlet at this time and place, to some extent it also echoed the prevailing atmosphere.

Mao's *Talks* may still be of interest in considering how literary theories can be understood and misunderstood in the vicissitudes of a nation under threat of survival. From today's perspective, the situation in China and around the world is again troubling. Efforts to differentiate shades of meaning in both literary theory and political practice as a reminder of the complexity of both still seem relevant to contemporary discourse.

Notes from the City of the Sun and Waves

It's been only recently that I realised it was He Qifang's poetry that led me to Bei Dao 北岛. In 1980, when I was living in the US, I received a letter from a young Chinese woman living in north China who had read *Paths in Dreams* (I never found out how she obtained a copy). After my arrival in Beijing to work at the FLP, my husband and I were able to visit her; she in turn arranged for her fiancé, who travelled regularly to Beijing, to introduce Bei Dao to us. We met Bei Dao in May 1982 at our apartment in the Friendship Hotel, the housing for foreign employees for the FLP and other state organs. It was only then we learned that both of us worked at the FLP.

'Bei Dao' was one of several pennames adopted by the underground poet Zhao Zhenkai 赵振凯 during the 1970s. Literally 'north island', it identified the author as a lone, isolated figure stranded in a hostile northern region. His parents were from Zhejiang, but he was born and raised in Beijing, and the penname has a deeper reference to his alienation from the society around him. When we first met, he was in his early thirties, diffident but composed. Although both He Qifang and Bei Dao lived in Beijing in the 1960s and 1970s they did not know each other, and there was no easy social connection during the Cultural Revolution years whereby the disgraced elder man would have had contact with the rebellious youth. He Qifang did not live long enough to become part of the flowering of literature that followed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the period in which Bei Dao first circulated his poetry in handwritten form among underground networks.

Unofficial visits to the Friendship Hotel were forbidden to Chinese people, although it was relatively easy to evade surveillance (for instance, arriving in a taxi). By an odd coincidence, however, Bei Dao worked as an editor at the Esperanto section of the FLP, one level below my office in the Books section, so we could meet informally on the staircase between our two floors. This convenient arrangement lasted for about a year, after which complaints were made and our personal contact became more complicated.

Bei Dao's poems had already achieved an enthusiastic underground and then unofficial readership throughout China, most recently from the new work he posted on the Democracy Wall in Beijing in the late 1970s. From our first meeting, he'd bring me handwritten copies of some of his best-known poems, and the same evening I'd sit down and begin to translate them. At first, I felt under no particular pressure to circulate these translations; on the other hand, I always made a point of introducing Bei Dao's work to sinologists from different countries who might also translate and/or publicise it. One of the first was Wolfgang Kubin, a dedicated sinologist, translator and poet who became one of Bei Dao's close friends; in the following year, visitors included Göran Malmqvist, who came to play a huge part in Bei Dao's life. There were many more. This agreeable situation began to change with the gradual onset of the campaign against 'spiritual pollution', which grew ever more threatening in the lead-up to its open declaration in October 1983. Within a few months, I was preparing the first ever book-length collection of Bei Dao's poetry in any language.

The heightened campaign against spiritual pollution had made it imperative to protect not only Bei Dao's work but also the writer himself and his family. To this end, I and others began to make strenuous efforts to secure the poems' translations in the US and then Europe. I started with a selection of poems under the title of *Notes from the City of the Sun: Poems by Bei Dao*. Thanks to Edward M. Gunn, another friend I'd met at Harvard, it was published by Cornell University China-Japan Program in 1983, and a revised edition appeared the following year.[4]

The translations in this selection are from the author's handwritten copies for me, based on his original manuscripts or versions that had appeared in unofficial or other relatively obscure publications.

[4] See McDougall, "Bei Dao's Poetry: Revelation & Communication", *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 1 no. 2 (Spring 1985), pp. 225–52.

The Cornell edition was especially designed to be low cost and to include the Chinese texts, in order to reach readers in China. After the campaign collapsed the following year, Bei Dao's fame spread ever more widely across China, and after further translations in many languages from 1984 on, he became the first 20th century Chinese poet to achieve a worldwide audience outside of Mao Zedong.

One of the issues raised in the introduction is the translation of the phrase *menglong shi* 朦胧诗: my preferred translation then and now is 'a poetry of shadows', abbreviated as 'shadow/shadowy poetry/poems/poets'. The word *menglong* (the two characters both written with the moon radical) describes the dim light shed on a moonlit night. It conveys two distinct messages in this context: that the meaning of the poetry itself is half-hidden, unlike the strident official literature that was still the only other choice; and the symbol of the moon is strikingly opposed to the verbal and pictorial 'sun' (i.e. Mao Zedong) that still dominated Chinese literature and art as well as its politics. Initially, the common translation of *menglong shi* was 'obscure poetry', appropriate enough although clumsy; the main problem was the corresponding term 'obscure poet', a description which by this time was becoming out of date. (A newspaper cartoon at the time showed an MC standing by a microphone introducing a figure who appeared as a mass of short pen strokes, unidentifiable as a living human being.) Within a few years, another translation emerged that soon became dominant: 'misty poetry' and 'misty poet'. I still consider this an unfortunate choice: the original describes a quality of light, not of water, and the word 'mist' as a symbol conveys little sense of semi-concealed meaning and significance.

Bei Dao's fiction has been comparatively neglected. The first collection of his stories in any language appeared under the title *Waves: Stories by Zhao Zhenkai*, co-translated, compiled, introduced and edited by me in 1984 and first published by the Chinese University Press in Hong Kong in 1985; a revised and expanded edition appeared the following year with an additional story.[5] It may have been a mistake to separate these stories from his poetry by using Zhao Zhenkai, his legal name, and the British edition of *Waves* in 1987 appeared under his usual penname as a poet, Bei Dao. It was followed by a

[5] See McDougall, "Zhao Zhenkai's Fiction: A Study in Cultural Alienation", *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1984), pp. 103–30). At the time of writing, the collection *Waves* consisted of six stories; a seventh, "13 Happiness Street", was added to later editions.

paperback edition in 1989, a revised North American edition in Hong Kong in 1990, and a Chinese version published by the Chinese University Press.

The title story in *Waves* is Bei Dao's first and longest work of fiction, a novella with the same title "Bodong" 波动 [Waves], co-translated by Susette Ternent Cooke and me.[6] First drafted in 1974 and revised in 1976, 1979, 1981 and 1984, its narrative technique, moral sensitivity and social understanding, makes it one of the most innovative stories from China from the 1970s and 1980s. The plot, to a large extent revisiting the lives of people known to the author, evokes the day-to-day life of educated Chinese men and women struggling to survive in 1970s China, for whom even the 1950s were tarnished by injustice and suffering.

Bei Dao's fiction has attracted less attention than his poetry, perhaps because he has not continued to write and publish in this mode. For the translator, the main technical problem lies in differentiating the voices of fictional characters. This was particularly evident in "Waves", where five characters take turns in first-person narration. I knew of no authority to whom I could appeal for advice. It was at this point I found useful the technique of reading my translations aloud, a habit that I eventually adopted for all my translations. Otherwise, I crossed my fingers, hoped that close translation would be the most effective tactic, and continued to read as much contemporary English fiction as I could lay my hands on when I travelled outside China.

The Hong Kong editions of *Waves* in English and in Chinese formed a bond between Bei Dao and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where the writer eventually took up full-time residence following years of travel in Europe and America. Works by Bei Dao along with his colleagues now form an official archive at the Chinese University Library, where most of his early manuscripts are lodged and digitized.

Notes from the City of the Sun was followed in 1988 by a more formal presentation of Bei Dao's poetry, *The August Sleepwalker*. Nearly one half of the contents had been published in *Notes of the City of Sun* and were accompanied here by an additional fifty. The poems are not dated but range from 1979

[6] A "Translators' Note" in the 1986 edition details how the translation was shared and also thanks the assistance given to us by Chen Maiping, Leonella Liu, John Minford and Zhu Zhiyi.

to 1986. With this collection, Bei Dao became the first PRC writer whose poetry in English translation was published by a major British publisher, Anvil Press Poetry; it is now on Carcanet's list.

By this time, translations into most European languages and also Japanese had made Bei Dao a world-famous figure who also became a spokesperson for political and cultural change in China. He had become a strong candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature in the mid-1980s; this honour has evaded him, but many other foundations and universities around the world have continued to recognise his international standing.

It is fair to claim that Bei Dao's poetry is translatable, since its most striking features are its powerful imagery and significant structure. The images are mostly derived from natural and urban phenomena as familiar to readers outside China as within, not particularised as specific names of places, people or local commodities. The structure of the poems is similarly based on universal geometrical or logical patterns, and the language and the whole does not rely heavily on a particular vocabulary or special musical effects. The surface texture of the poems is therefore not significantly lost in translation despite inevitable shortcomings. Beyond the semantic level are the poem's basic concerns. Although directly inspired by immediate problems in the author's own life and environment, their interest to foreign readers does not lie primarily in the political role they have sometimes assumed in contemporary China but in their grasp of human dilemmas present in varying degrees in all modern societies.

The reaction to publication of *The August Sleepwalker* was overwhelming: one of the most encouraging was its selection as one of the best books of the year in the 1985 annual review in the *Times Literary Supplement*. I have also been present at many readings over the years in either Chinese, English or both, to enraptured audiences in Europe and Hong Kong. The most memorable occasion was a reading in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, for which the translation department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong had booked one of the largest halls on campus (it still ended up with standing room only). Bei Dao read a poem in Chinese followed by me reciting the English translation, while both versions appeared on the screen behind us. The reading finished with a warm embrace between the two of us (it had been a long time since we'd last met). The audience went wild with applause. Another reading was held some years later at the City University of Hong Kong, this time in Chinese only. The reception was just as

enthusiastic, and the sight of the long stream of students queueing up to have their copies signed was awesome.

Not everyone has agreed with my Bei Dao translations. One young critic, for example, claimed that the word 'beloved' was 'archaic', a revelation that came as quite a surprise. On the whole, however, the reviews have been favourable, and *The August Sleepwalker* has itself been translated into several languages. Most welcome have been innumerable requests to include the poems in anthologies of all kinds for a wide variety of readers. Of all my translations over a period of some fifty years, *The August Sleepwalker* appealed to the widest range of readers in and beyond China.

At Harvard, I'd translated a handful of officially released poems published in the early 1970s; later, following a visit to Hong Kong in 1976, I'd also translated and written about the new poetry and fiction then gradually appearing on the mainland and given wider publicity in Hong Kong. Known as 'scar literature', this effusion of anger and hope was bracing but not in itself immediately able to establish new standards for a more nuanced literary movement. It wasn't until I began reading poetry and fiction by Bei Dao and his fellow 'obscure' writers that I became aware of a truly exciting new literary movement dating back to the early 1970s. The rest of my time at the FLP was spent translating old hacks (including Guo Moruo 郭沫若) during the daylight hours and returning to the Friendship Hotel in the evening eager to put into English the most authentic Chinese poetry I'd read since the days of Wen Yiduo 闻一多, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 and He Qifang.

Commentary

As I've been writing these three stories, I've become aware of the relationships—personal, academic, literary and political—that led me to write the translations and arrange their publication. The first thing that emerges is that each of these works has had a personal association for me, so that I put a lot of work into getting them into publication form and also writing about them to draw out what I saw as their significance. They also seem to have come my way more or less by accident or coincidence.

The freedom of choice as to who to translate (or not to) seems to be the most common single factor in my translation history. Apart from my three years at the FLP, I've not needed to translate to support myself or my family, to win fame, or for that matter to achieve any other particular goal, and I've never regretting taking on any of my translations. The three cases described above took place in

three different countries, were written at different times, and differ widely in the audiences their writers had expected, but like all of my (non-FLP) translations, each appealed to me for reasons that at the time at may have been fairly obscure or even capricious.

Another surprising discovery, one that I made only a few years ago, is the way in which translation from Chinese into English grew into an obsession. For as long as I can remember I've been an obsessive reader. Our local municipal council had a library conveniently located between each of my primary schools and home, where the librarians very kindly allowed me to assist with basic duties such as shelving books. When my family moved to Corrimal, a suburb south of Sydney, I was not so well provided for, although there was free access to the bookshop in the Party rooms where I worked on Saturday mornings. During my first spell at the University of Sydney in 1958, I would visit the main branch of the City of Sydney public library network, then housed at the mid-city Queen Victoria Building, as my source of academic books, instead of the intimidating old Fisher library at the university; if I picked up non-academic books there, all the better. In 1958–1959, I became a dedicated borrower at the Peking University Library, recording in a special notebook the titles and authors of all the books I found in its well-established English section that He Qifang would have visited.

After returning from China in 1959, I took a full-time position in our local Wollongong library, where I learned the basic arts and crafts of being a librarian and borrowed as much from their collection as I could carry home. When eventually I moved back to Sydney in 1961, I was a lot bolder: all the books in the University of Sydney's main library were now at my disposal, the stacks open for inspection and browsing every day for almost unlimited hours. Perhaps an obsession with books might be a necessary condition for literary translation. Now that printed books are rapidly being taken over by online texts, I assume that translators will cope beautifully but expect that actual books and the libraries to store them will continue to be a translator's treasure.

It was while translating poetry by He Qifang, Mao Zedong and Bei Dao, amongst others, that I became aware how these writers were influencing my own thoughts and emotions. This influence seems in hindsight almost inevitable in literary translation, especially poetry. I was even on the side of the youthful rebel Mao Zedong in his remote military base, challenging the sensitivities of the intellectual and writers who sought his leadership, but somehow able to imagine his dramatic transformation into

the leader of one of the world's biggest country. Bei Dao's works in turn revivified a tendency to embrace freedom from authoritarian government as the heart and mind's highest value. In different ways and to different effect, these writers' words on a page became blended with the remnants of my own beliefs.

Moving from one country to another over four decades hardly influenced my choice of material and the manner in which I translated it: these moves cover from Sydney to Peking, back to Sydney, then to London for a year, then to Cambridge Mass, from there to Peking/Beijing again, on to Oslo, thence to Edinburgh, more briefly on to Hong Kong and finally back to Sydney, where I expect to spend the rest of my years. Around the world, friends and colleagues have helped prepare and edit my translations, suggest publishers and in other ways offer support. Nevertheless, improving my translation was never a reason for finding a new place to live in. Both push and pull set me roving but translation was not part of either of these.

In some cases, however, the actual circumstances of different locations mattered a great deal, as in excavating Mao's pamphlet at the Harvard-Yenching library while experiencing at second hand the rise of new poetry in Beijing. Sydney had been a fine place to start an academic career and where social contacts with writers led to publication. Harvard was even better for building lifelong friendships with other researchers, shaping my writing even if the institution wasn't an encouraging place to translate contemporary Chinese poetry. In Beijing, by contrast, the opportunity and the stimulus to translate and to choose what to translate were remarkable. Oslo, where I first acquired a computer, was primarily a place for teaching translation and consolidating work that was already underway; Edinburgh was where I returned to my most long-lasting and devoted project, the correspondence between Xu Guangping and Lu Xun. Hong Kong, thankfully, was like Beijing a place where it was possible to find, through friends and colleagues, the most engaging local literary work to translate.

I hadn't applied to work at the FLP because I wanted to hone my translation skills, just as it wasn't for academic reasons that I'd applied for a visa to the US in 1976. Quite simply, in 1980 I was looking for paid employment plus reliable care for our infant son. Since neither my husband nor I were US citizens, our status there would always be shaky, and it didn't seem likely or even desirable for me to get a job teaching Chinese at a US university. Nor was I keen on the idea of teaching English at a Chinese school or university. However, both of us were curious about the new wave of political and literary experimentation we'd witnessed coming out of China. We knew that the FLP was employing foreigners,

and I regarded myself as competent to reach the standards as shown in FLP publications. So, I wrote to the Foreign Experts Bureau in Beijing to apply for a full-time job as a translator.

By the time I left Beijing in 1986, European universities were starting to take seriously the new phenomenon of translation studies as a teaching subject, mostly for postgraduates, in its own right. Translation studies became increasingly popular in the UK, especially among foreign students. As far as I could see, however, university-based translation studies, which has become a respectable academic pursuit, has not done much to encourage and improve literary translation itself. Translating literary works is not dependent on these structures any more than a university education makes a literary writer superior to one whose main education may have been in factories or advertising agencies.

Some studies on translation tend to assume that all translation is literary translation; more recently, others assume that there is little or no difference between literary and other kinds of translation. Only a minority suggest that literary translation differs in some fairly crucial ways from translations of non-literary materials. Clarity and accuracy would be essential in political and historical writing; neither are necessarily obligatory in literary translation except in particular circumstances (although translators of living writers should take particular care for self-protective reasons). In regard to contemporary writing, it is not inescapably the case that knowing the writer makes a good translator a better one.

It seems rarely to be clear who should get the credit for literary translations that sell well and/or receive critical praise/blame: it may be the translatee who is responsible, it could be the translator. Perhaps only when several translations of the same text can be compared that enough evidence exists for praise or blame.

As suggested above, my choice of authors is often erratic, but some patterns also emerge. Bei Dao, for instance, was not the first person I've translated who was at the time alive, but he was the first I met before I decided to translate his work; he was also one of the few who introduced me to his fellow writers and his family. Nevertheless, almost all of the writers whose work I've translated have been friendly and helpful even when the actual amount translated is minimal (Tie Ning springs to mind).

It's not the case, obviously, that I've accepted all invitations from writers, publishers or institutions, or that all relationships with any of these have been positive. While it's a special pleasure to

develop a solid working relationship with people whose poetry or fiction you are translating, it can also have drawbacks. I've had a range of such relationships and despite the elation that can arise from a strong personal bond, on the whole I don't see it as necessarily desirable. It makes more sense for the text to be your focus, not the person; and reliable advice can be obtained elsewhere. That said, it's just common sense as well as ethically desirable that the author should always be respected.

The whole process of choosing and accepting what or whom to translate between 1964 and 1984 seems to have been built around accident rather than ambition. I accepted He Qifang at my supervisor's recommendation (in those days, one could hardly do otherwise), but what I chose to translate was my decision and not his. I'd never entertained any ambition to translate political texts, but the discovery of the first printed version of Mao's Talks represented a rare opportunity in the politicised atmosphere of Harvard's East Asian Research Centre; it was only later that I realised its relevance to my own understanding of literary theory, and a somewhat reprehensible desire to defend Mao from his critics. I initially accepted the obligation of reading Bei Dao's poems as the result of an odd coincidence, but it soon became a wholly deliberate choice in regard to their translation, its publication, and my own drive for explanatory research to understand and disseminate them.

In practice, there is usually a mixture of motives for undertaking any particular translation: in regard to Bei Dao's poetry the circumstances were especially complex. I was aware that although poetry had lost its primacy as a literary form in most English-language countries, it was still a vital part of political and social communication in China, and it was vital for this urgency to be transmitted in its presentation abroad. On the other hand, while a commissioned translation (whether from the Commercial Press in Hong Kong or the FLP in Beijing) did not originate from any personal motive, it did not deserve to be left with merely cursory attention: at minimum, it would still be of intellectual interest.

So much for background. Turning to the mechanics of translation, I've always been reluctant to add footnotes to literary translation, especially for poetry. In *Paths in Dreams*, for instance, short essays on He Qifang's life and writing appear before or after the relevant poems and essays; Mao's *Talks* has a long introduction and several appendices; and in the first publications of Bei Dao's poetry and fiction, there are brief introductions plus research articles separately published in an academic journal.[7] I think

[7] Chen Maiping later became my co-translator of Bei Dao's post-1989 collection *Old Snow*.

these strategies happen to have worked quite well in these three instances, but later experiments probably overestimated readers' patience.

I've sometimes wondered whether in regard to disseminating an understanding of Chinese literature, which is more effective: translation or research? A foolish question, for who can measure the result of either. It seems incontrovertible to me that translation is a tremendously valuable aid to understanding a literary text, and I'm tempted to claim that it is a necessary one, but there is no way to compare and test such an assertion. It seems so obvious that translating aids the translator in developing an intimate comprehension of both language and literary texts, whichever language is being read in whichever literary work. Any perceived barrier between translation and research is artificial and illusory: both are writing, and in both cases the words are the words of the writer.

My main worry in translating has been about finding the appropriate tone for different literary forms (poetry, essays and fiction) and for different writers (male/female, old/young, urban/rural and so on). Apart from the influence of spoken or written Chinese that affects all translators of Chinese literature, I've also been used to hearing Swedish more or less daily and at one point also Norwegian: both would have influenced my written English but perhaps not so that most readers would recognise. It helped in that most of the poetry I translated was rather formal, as also Mao Zedong's forceful answers to people he saw as his opponents. The more serious problem has been with dialogue in contemporary fiction, since my informal English comes in Australian, American and Scottish varieties.

Outside of teaching, translation for me has always been from Chinese into English. There have been occasions when China and Chinese literature, language and culture seemed to possess my whole mind and will, English taking a secondary position. Such passages never lasted long. I've also been asked what I've learned about translation over the past decades, but someone else might be a better informant. I can't tell whether my translation style has changed with the years, and, if so, whether change was for better or for worse. Translation studies has become much more sophisticated over the past thirty or forty years, but I am still convinced that like literature itself, there is no corresponding formula for choosing which literary works to translate or how to translate them.

The issue of co-translation with friends, colleagues and professional editors is not particularly relevant to the three cases described above. On the other hand, I've always owed a lot to friends and

colleagues, first in Sydney, then at Harvard, Edinburgh, Hong Kong and back in Sydney again. Although I initially sought explanations from Bei Dao about translating his poetry and fiction, it was not necessarily particularly helpful, and I soon turned to his close friend Chen Maiping 陈迈平. Maiping's English was much better, but more importantly, he had an intuitive response to the poems themselves. (Chen Maiping later became my co-translator of Bei Dao's post-1989 collection *Old Snow*.) Contemporary fiction has been the most difficult literary genre for me to translate. It helps to be living in the same place as the author but in a country as large and diverse as China, I'd come across expressions and objects for which even a shelf of dictionaries falls short: once I had to ask a native speaker to draw me a picture of a cooking vessel from which I could manufacture a verbal equivalent. Again, the kinds, extent and quality of co-translation vary so greatly it becomes difficult to summarise.

There's much I've witnessed and even taken part in for which I feel fortunate beyond words, but even more that saddens and shocks. I should never forget that my good fortune in obtaining in the 1960s and 1970s copies of the original works of Chinese poetry and fiction from the 1930s and 1940s, and then also more recently post-CR writing, was to a large extent due to the misfortunes of Chinese writers and their readers, especially those who sold their precious collections of new writing at that time directly or indirectly to Hong Kong booksellers during the 1960s and 1970s, and those young writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s who dared to pass on or sell their work to eager buyers from abroad. As for the last few decades, it's been Hong Kong that's served as the location of brilliant new writing in Chinese. At present, its future is uncertain.

Looking back now, what would I wish for translators of modern Chinese literature to achieve? I am grateful that my translation readers have mostly been professional researchers or students in Chinese literary studies and in sinology in general. It's a different kind of excitement when it appears that some of these translations have skipped national and linguistic boundaries. A poem by Bei Dao in my translation, for instance, has appeared in a prize-winning novel; a poet (about whom I know little) has inserted my name as Bei Dao's translator in a line in one of his poems. It would be a great pleasure to find that more people across the world get to know and care about Chinese literature, as books by Chinese authors in translation achieve a more adventurous welcome across the world. In the meantime, I remain confident that translators will surely discover the whereabouts of the literature they would seek to translate, and that readers will respond to these translations with equal confidence.

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