

## **Interview with Nicholas Jose, after 'Antipodean China' workshop The University of Adelaide 23-24 November, 2017.**

NICHOLAS: Our first move in the Other Worlds research project is to bring together a group of creative writers, scholars and critics to consider, as I see it, questions of literary relations across space and time, specifically in relation to the here and now, but linking that here and now to the there and then, or when. That's a general formulation. In practice it begins from the meetings of writers and scholars. As part of our routine work we go to festivals, we go to conferences, we meet and we talk, and one way of looking at that is as a kind of world literature in action, that's what we're doing, but it's hard to know what's actually happening there unless you create an investigative framework around it and that's what we're trying to do with this project, with Australia as a centre, because that's where we are.

Australia is a complex space, and fundamental in this project is the recognition that there is Aboriginal Australia, Indigenous culture and storytelling and then there's the literature and the other cultural practices that are a historical legacy of our Anglophone and, broadly speaking, Western background. Though that of course is also changing with increased connection with our region, the Asia-Pacific, and specifically China.

**BEN: Tell us about the title 'Antipodean China' and why you chose it as a rubric and the kinds of things Antipodean China is setting in motion**

NICHOLAS: In most discussions China and Australia form a binary. We talk of the bi-lateral relationship, which is the political relationship between the People's Republic of China and Australia. But more broadly we speak of China and Australia as separate, and that to me seems increasingly not the case. The interconnection between the Chinese worlds – so I'm using that to include Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South-East Asia – and Australia is more and more intense at every level, from people to people, through to trade and politics. There are many people of Chinese background, many Chinese students, many Chinese visitors in Australia. The figure I heard most recently from the Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs was 2 million Chinese, or people of Chinese background, in Australia now, out of a population of 25 million people. So China is part of Australia.

I wanted to find a phrase that made them less separable, and 'Antipodean China' is that phrase. Antipodean is a strange word, meaning diametrically opposite, but also upside down, topsy-turvy, and then specifically referring to Australians and New Zealanders as perceived from Britain. And so it plays with that. Is there an antipodean version of China? Is China an antipodes to Australia? The traditional antipodes of Australia is Europe, but China is now there in the mix. And 'antipodean' has been widely used in discussions of Australian literature and culture to be a descriptor for it. The Antipodeans were a radical art movement in the 1940s, and they keep coming back as an alternative reading of Australia.

**BEN: Before the workshop you hoped we would find peripheral and fleeting relations or resonances. Why did you think it might be important that the kinds of connections be peripheral and fleeting?**

NICHOLAS: I'm interested in the peripheral, the fleeting and the word 'resonance' has become a key word in the workshop as it's unfolded because those things are often out of sight, they are at the margins, but they are there, they are real, and we need to be able to identify them to talk properly about this.

The idea was that people would speak freely from their own perspective, whatever it is, about this difficult-to-define subject, Antipodean China. And we've had writers from Australia, but also from China. We've had translators, we've had scholars and critics. And we've had a group of people who do a bit of all of those things. Either they're Australians who have been to China more than once, who've had work translated into Chinese, have some experience in their intellectual life of China. And we've had some visitors, Chinese poet Xi Chuan, Giusi Tamburello, who's a professor of Chinese literature from Palermo in Sicily and a translator, and Eric Abrahamsen, who is a translator of Chinese literature now in Seattle. But all those people in peripheral ways, at least, have connections with Australia too.

And there's also been a kind of triangulation with Latin America, particularly Argentina, particularly Buenos Aires. That's a fascinating parallel with what we're talking about because, as has been pointed out, the true antipodes of China, in terms of the globe, is Argentina. And this project comes out of another project called 'The Literatures of the South', where we've been looking across those southern latitudes, and particularly bringing Australia and Argentina together. So there's a play with geography. But it's more than a play because these are real places, and we are real people in them as we operate. But I hoped that when people spoke from their particular perspectives there would be these connections, tangential connections to begin with, but things that might actually be real connections. I think there was a lot of that in the discussion.

**BEN: Thinking back to the discussion could you go over a couple of moments that struck you as fleeting, or peripheral, or in some other way resonating with the kinds of ideas you've just spoken about?**

NICHOLAS: Well there was a very interesting comment by Alexis Wright, who is looking back over previous occasions when she has met with Chinese writers. One of the Chinese writers she has met with is a man called Alai who came to Sydney in 2015, and then she met him again in Guangzhou earlier this year at the fourth China Australia Literary Forum. He is usually called a Tibetan writer. He writes in Chinese though, so there's a problem about how he negotiates his ethnic identity, which he's come to find quite oppressive, and so his response to that is to return to the world of his early belonging, and to write about that in an act of recovery which he doesn't want to have labelled an ethnic experience within the Chinese context.

Alexis Wright is a leading Indigenous author in Australia who also writes from her own personal experience, transforming it in a unique imaginative way. So she heard something in what he said, she saw something in what he does that absolutely resonated with her. They talked, they read each other's stuff, they recognised this connection, and, to put it crudely, it was a connection that's happening outside the Western framework of World Literature, or even the high Chinese sense of

the hierarchies in World Literature. It was a chance encounter, a peripheral meeting that resonated for her. So that's for me a very powerful, emblematic example.

But another example was when Gail Jones read a fictional piece called 'The Four Dreams of Lu Xun', the great Chinese writer, that came out of a time when she was a writer in residence in Shanghai and she visited the Lu Xun house museum, and she wrote this piece, which she called a fantasy about Lu Xun. In it she positions herself as 'the foreign writer'. That phrase occurs more than once. And one of the visitors, the professor from Sicily, latched onto that phrase and said why did you identify as the 'foreign' writer? Why were you from the start saying that I'm here on the outside? And Lu Xun is there on the inside? And that connected with a theme that came up again and again of the idea of the inside and the outside, the external observer, and the process of entering, crossing, being the ferry-man going across, which was a metaphor used for translators.

And it connected with what the Chinese poet Xi Chuan said when he was trying to give a very broad-brush sketch of Chinese culture, and he said Chinese culture is an 'inland' culture coming from agriculture. And the oceans are something that haven't attracted Chinese writers, with some exceptions. That there's a sort of wild space to the south, the 'wild South', that you cross oceans to get to. But that's about the extent of the ocean in the Chinese imaginary. It's inland. I think we, in Australia, as settler Australians certainly, have a strong sense of the oceans that surround us. We cling to the coast. We do have a sense of the inland but we call it the 'outback', and it's not agricultural really. And so that again was a kind of a remark that made connections with these sort of antipodal differences that one of the commentators picked up on by referring to Gerard Murnane as an antipodean inland writer. Which he is interestingly. His work contrasts with the work of a lot of other contemporary Australian writers for whom the sea is present. I could mention Michelle de Kretser in that category, or Christina Stead going back in time to *For Love Alone*.

**BEN: Something which worked well was the session on the South alongside the workshop on Antipodean China. Do some of the ways that those different trajectories, or meridians, resonate start to point towards where we might be going with 'Other Worlds' from here?**

NICHOLAS: It stretched the mind to be thinking about both at once, and I think there are things in there that will point to where we go. Your idea of 'meridian' seems very important. The idea of the 'real' South, an 'actual' latitude, which may be literary before it's geographical and historical, but may be all three at once. I think I'm interested in an historical meridian too, which is looking at literature, key moments in literature. I don't quite know the word for them. The Ezra Pound word is the 'indestructible' part. Ben, you're quoting Auerbach, and there's his *Ansatzpunkt*, a kind of entry point into another work from another time and place. There's a very old idea of the touchstone in Matthew Arnold, a touchstone in literature. But there does seem to be something about points, or forms of expression. Not necessarily whole works, and not necessarily expected works, which can be linked in some sort of line. And we've been using Borges in a way as a sign for some of that in this discussion.

**BEN: Going on what you said earlier there seems to be a triangle of sorts forming.**

NICHOLAS: When we bring the translation of Chinese literature specifically into the mix you find something fascinating but also quite odd, which is classical Chinese poetry from hundreds of years ago which has entered English language poetry in the modern period as modern poetry, but will be

read by a Chinese reader completely differently. And that's in the translations by Pound, and later by Gary Snyder, and others influenced by that. Then you get other examples of Classic Chinese literature, or important Chinese literature, that don't really travel, for whatever reason. You get these weird reversals, the example given by John Minford was the novel by Romain Rolland called *Jean-Christophe*. He was a Nobel prize winner early in the twentieth century, a French writer. The Chinese translator of that novel, Fu Lei, is the most exalted of Chinese translators. It's a book which no-one in the Western world reads anymore, but in China it's been continuously read since the translations came out earlier in the twentieth century. And even in the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution, when there was a kind of renewal of thinking, all sorts of young intellectuals read Romain Rolland. So there are these weird curves that happen with translation because it's never a direct process. And we find that with Australian literature. How Australia refracts work from elsewhere, and how Australian books themselves are refracted when they go somewhere else.