Transcultural Affinities: In Praise of Wang Zuoliang

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Abstract The paper investigates the meaning of the term ‘transcultural’ as its use widens, exploring its relationship with alternative terms, some of which it promises to replace: ‘transnational’, ‘intercultural’, ‘translational’, among other examples. The paper focuses on the application of ‘transcultural’ to literature (reading, writing and interpretation) and creative writing, and also considers what it can mean in relation to pedagogical practice in these fields. It makes specific reference to translation in an interpretative and pedagogical context, on the basis that transcultural inquiry will often be accompanied by movement between languages, cultures and societies. The question is asked: is ‘transcultural’ a description of an attribute of a text, or a framework or perspective for interpretation, experiment and creative practice and inquiry? Is ‘transcultural’ then an agentive position, a way of proceeding that creates new knowledge, partly through reflection and scrutiny into its own processes: hence ‘transculturalism’ as alternative pedagogy with radical implications. Examples will be taken from a range of contemporary literary texts including *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami, *Elizabeth Costello* by J. M. Coetzee, *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright and *China in Ten Words* by Yu Hua—all texts that are marked by transcultural moves and that succeed in communicating transculturally (across different audiences/communities and/or in translation).

Language changes with our needs. In order to describe and inquire into contemporary experience, and the problems and possibilities it presents to people across the world, old terms have gained new currency and new terms have come into circulation. Among these is ‘transcultural’. In this essay I consider the valency of the term in literary studies and with regard to creative writing, weighed against related terms, in an argument for its usefulness. I follow here in the footsteps of Xianlin Song and Kate Cadman in the opening chapter of their edited collection *Bridging Transcultural Divides* (2012) where they trace ‘the notion of the

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"transcultural"' back to the use of the term 'transculturation' by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) in his book *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) (Song and Cadman, 2012 11–12).

Ortiz wrote:

> The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations…. [From Paleolithic Indian to Spanish and African, and later] Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions of the sometime Celestial Kingdom. And each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation….
>
> The concept of transculturation is fundamental and indispensable for an understanding of the history of Cuba, and, for analogous reasons, of that of America in general.[1]

By extension it might also be true for other parts of the world, including Australia, from where I write, and for the mobile, globalising world at large.

The idea of transculturation was taken up by Ortiz's fellow Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904–80) a few years later in *Music in Cuba* (1949), where he describes 'a process of transculturation destined to amalgamate meters, melodies, Hispanic instruments, with clear traces of old African oral traditions', occurring from the sixteenth century on (88). 'Transculturation' aligns with the formulation of 'the marvellous real [*lo real maravilloso*]' that Carpentier proposed at the same time in the preface to his astonishing first novel, *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), inspired, like *Music in Cuba*, by his visit to Haiti, site of the first slave revolution in the Americas.[2] Thus we see that the 'transcultural' concept itself developed from a transcultural situation: the colonial Latin American New World. This makes it one of the few non-Western ideas, as it were, to (belatedly) enter dominant Western discourse, with appropriately interrogative intent. It is comparable in this respect to Gayatri Spivak's use of 'subaltern' or Edward Said's 'contrapuntal', or indeed the well-travelled concept of 'magic realism', which is how Carpentier's idea came to be known in English. In his reading of Ortiz's work, Enrico Mario Santí explains that 'transculturation' responds to a specific sense of 'counterpoint' or *controversia*, meaning musical dispute or debate, in the original Cuban context, where the dialogue is on the surface. By contrast, transculturation is deep, revelatory, dialectical and transformative.[3] To quote Ortiz once more: 'The result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals:

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[1]Ortiz, Fernando, '"Transculturation" and Cuba', translated by Harriet de Onis, in Chomsky, Aviva, Carr, Barry, and Smorkaloff, Pamela Maria (eds.). *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2003. 27.

[2]Carpentier, Alejo. 'On the Marvelous Real in America', translated by Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B. (eds.) *Magical Realism*: *Theory*, *History, Community.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 75–88. The editors' introduction and note discusses the relationship between the various early versions of the term.

[3]Enrico Mario Santí. 'Towards a Reading of Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint*', *Review*: *Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 37:1, 17. 2004.

The offspring always have something of both parents but are always different from each other.' (Santí, 17)

If 'transculturated' is the adjectival form of the noun, indicating the result of a union of cultures, 'transcultural' refers to process. Like Said's 'contrapuntal', which differs from the Cuban 'counterpoint' by introducing an oppositional force that has political and theoretical agency, and like Carpentier's 'marvellous real', 'the heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies', in a world where cultures contend and converge openly and dynamically, the 'transcultural' reflects and inflects the flows of historical reality. (Zamora, 87) Timothy Brennan takes this further when he describes the concept of transculturation as 'a subtle, undisciplined exchange of values in which an entirely new culture is produced', a story 'not so much of mutuality as of reversal' that gives 'the formerly assimilated a conspicuous, almost dominant power'. In the process, he says, following Carpentier, New World intellectuals can see what Europeans cannot, which may explain why they are 'for the most part curiously ignored' in discussions of globalisation, where 'older, often high-German or poststructuralist French, intellectual traditions remain centre stage'.[4]

Other terms that cluster around 'transcultural' in a comparable or related space of meaning include 'multicultural', 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural'; 'transnational', 'translingual', 'translational'; and more, such as 'intercommunal', 'in-between', 'diasporic', 'migrant', 'cosmopolitan', 'international'; and, sometimes, 'global' and even 'world' itself. Each of these words can be more or less useful and precise in definition, nuance and applicability. All have gained currency with the discourse of globalisation over the last quarter-century, where globalisation refers loosely to the phenomena of flows, exchanges and connectedness that have come with late capitalism and new communications technology in combination: new and unprecedented in so many ways, but also not totally new. My intention here is not to fill a paper with fine-grained semantic distinctions, since the meanings of all these terms overlap and blur, but rather to identify aspects or qualities that might enable a more informed and more complex discussion, perhaps with the potential to change habits and practice. I do this by considering 'transcultural' approaches to the practice of reading and writing.

'Transculturation' occurs in the title of an influential book on travel writing, *Imperial Eyes*: *Travel Writing and Transculturation* by Mary Louise Pratt (1992; second edition 2008), which treats 'transculturation [as] a phenomenon of the contact zone', with particular reference to writing.[5] With the popularity of new kinds of travel writing, informed by the insights of cultural studies and post-colonialism, in recent decades, 'transcultural' has acquired a particular application and Pratt's book

[4]Brennan, Timothy. 'Introduction to the English Edition', Carpentier, Alejo. *Music in Cuba*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 41–44.

[5]Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes*: *Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992; second edition 2008), 7–9.

and the term itself are frequently cited in research on travel writing as a form of creative non-fiction.

But first let's take the word apart. '*Trans*-' plus '*cultural*'. '*Cultural*', of course, has become too large and general to talk about very meaningfully, an umbrella word that includes peoples, languages, communities and traditions, yet stands apart, importantly, from the idea of nation or the notion of race. 'Transcultural', then, is a distinctively different term from 'transnational'. '*Trans*-', in any case, is ambiguous. From its Latin etymology it means 'across', 'to the other side', and so approximates to 'cross-' or 'inter-' as prefixes. But 'to the other side' also suggests going 'beyond', as in 'transcend', to pass above or outside the limits. The ambiguity occurs in 'transnational', as in the recent 'transnational turn' in historical and cultural studies, where it means both identifying transactions *between* national entities and looking *beyond* those boundaries to the formation of something new and larger. So, for example, 'world literature' exists beyond the nation, transnationally, but is arguably also comprised of 'national literatures', or versions thereof, often in hierarchically ordered relationship. '*Trans*-' combined with '*cultural*' suggests a more fluid, less structured process that encompasses adaptive re-interpretation and contestation. By contrast 'intercultural', in my usage at least, describes a reciprocal encounter between equivalent existing cultures that leaves both largely unaltered. 'Transcultural' allows for imbalance, disparity and transformation.

Since my interests are in literature I hope to define by demonstration in support of two related claims: first, that much of the best, most acclaimed literary writing today is transcultural, and second, that such writing encourages us to develop transcultural awareness in our reading, interpretation and critical or writerly response. It is an invitation to join an ongoing conversation.

Here is one example of writing that travels well:

> When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along to an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.
>
> I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been someone with news of a job. I turned down the gas, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.
>
> 'Ten minutes, please,' said a woman on the other end.
>
> I'm good at recognizing people's voices, but this was not one I knew.
>
> 'Excuse me? To whom did you wish to speak.'
>
> 'To *you*, of course. Ten minutes, please. That's all we need to understand each other….'
>
> … 'Sorry, but you caught me in the middle of cooking spaghetti. Could you call back later?'
>
> 'Spaghetti? What are you doing cooking spaghetti at 10.30 in the morning?'
>
> 'That's none of your business,' I said. '*I* decide what I eat and when I eat it.' (Murakami 2003, 5–6)

Can you recognise it? Do you know where you are, which culture or language you're in? Yes, it's in English, but is that its original language? Where is it set? We could be anywhere doing the things that many people in today's world can do wherever they happen to be. Cook noodles, listen to music. But that anywhere is built up from quite specific details, references and language. Italian? American? Wherever? Not quite. It is now, or rather yesterday, when the radio was on the bench and the phone had a receiver.

Once we have even quite basic information about the text, we can start to read it differently. Here is a note from the imprint page of this particular edition of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami (or Murakami Haruki in Japanese): 'translated and adapted from the Japanese by Jay Rubin with the participation of the author'. The wording is interesting. Here's some more of what appears on the imprint page of my 2003 UK Vintage edition:

> First published in three volumes in 1994 and 1995 with the title *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* by Shinchosa Ltd., Tokyo.
>
> English translation © Haruki Murakami 1997, 1998.
>
> Alfred Birnbaum coined the term 'wind-up bird' in his translation of 'The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women' included in the collection, *The Elephant Vanishes*.
>
> Haruki Murakami has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work. (Murakami, iv)

This English text, then, is no simple translation from Japanese. It is another authorised version, produced with the author's involvement, in English. With this information we can seek out biographical knowledge about the author which makes our reading different again. Haruki Murakami, leading Japanese and world novelist, is highly proficient in English and has translated American literary classics such as *The Great Gatsby* and the stories of Raymond Carver into Japanese … and he wrote parts of *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, in Japanese, while living in Medford, Massachusetts, where cooking spaghetti while listening to Rossini on FM radio was probably a less remarkable thing to do at that time than almost anywhere else in the world, even at 10.30 am. Further, Rossini's thieving magpie (and if you know the piece, it goes like a clock wound up too fast) prepares the way, in the very first sentence of the novel, for the mysterious 'wind-up bird' of the title—of a work that turns out to be enormous, dark and far-reaching. It goes to the heart of what Japan did in and to China in the Sino-Japanese and 'world' war (1936–45), and the continuing consequences. The invitation to what seems like a recognisable, comfortable global space on page one becomes an entry point into a probing, imaginative reflection of the fate of a nation and its culture, a labyrinthine rabbit hole to go down. To appreciate what Murakami does and how he does it, and to engage with and respond to it, is, for the reader in English, a transcultural education. For the reader in Japanese this will also be the case, but differently, where issues of national history and culture are cast in terms of fiction that pointedly departs from Japanese tradition into a contemporary global style that draws freely on American popular cultural styles. That ability to travel makes Murakami no less popular in Chinese

translation. He lagged behind only J.K. Rowling and Gabriel Garcia Marquez among foreign authors in the millions of yuan he earned in royalties in China in 2012.[6]

My next example comes from the opening of *Elizabeth Costello*: *Eight Lessons* by J.M. Coetzee, published in 2003, the year the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature:

Realism

> There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.
>
> Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.
>
> Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born in 1928, which makes her sixty-six years old, going on sixty-seven. She has written nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism. By birth she is Australian. (Coetzee 2003, 1)

What should we notice first? Perhaps the plainness of the language, in a writer whose work circulates, and is translated, as widely as any living author's. Are those things unconnected? It is not, perhaps, ordinary everyday plainness so much as the exemplary compact clarity of a certain deceptive kind of plain-speaking philosophy. It might not surprise us then to discover, in an acknowledgement at the back of the book, that this chapter, Lesson 1, has had an earlier existence in a high-toned journal of the humanities and social sciences under the inquiring title 'What is Realism?' The opening is designed to tease, perplex, provoke and invite. It is not as simple as it might have seemed, this matter of creating a fictional world for us to inhabit, according to the conventions of realism, and yet the problem is dispatched expeditiously: 'People solve such problems every day.'

Who is this 'we' who want to be 'in the far territory'? The novel begins with the crossing of borders, a transaction given conceptual complexity by the fact that a self-conscious bridge of words is required for it to happen, and re-inforced by the third-person introduction in the third paragraph of a writer, Elizabeth Costello, who is not this writer, and is an Australian, where J.M. Coetzee would be described as 'by birth South African', though at the time of the novel's publication he was living in Adelaide, where he continues to be my distinguished colleague at the University of Adelaide. These signs and moves reveal Coetzee as a transcultural writer in a comparable way to Murakami, within English. Sometimes he turns South African material to transcendent fictions, as in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). At other times he acts as translator himself (from Dutch) or interprets and inquires into South African (including Afrikaans) writing, or Australian writing, or the work of other

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[6]*China Story Yearboook* 2013: *Civilising China*. 415. http://ciw.anu.edu.au/publications/ChinaStory2013.pdf.

writers in translation (from German, from Russian), often in the *New York Review of Books* for a wide and dispersed audience. For Coetzee as a writer of fiction, *Elizabeth Costello* ushers in a phase in which linguistic and cultural settings and registers are shuffled, as in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Sometimes it is as if it has been translated, from Spanish, for example, in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). This effect of the distilled clarity of expression accords with the fugal experience, the successive displacement, that the novel evokes. Coetzee's work reads like a translation for some readers, and although this doesn't make an actual translator's work any easier (witness the critical online commentary on the Chinese translations on *Douban*), it prompts the creation of transcultural imaginaries in response, which are sometimes a means of bringing the work back home.[7] Nor is this literary transculturation random, but, whether with Kleist or Defoe or Dostoevsky, or with an Australian or Hispanic figure, always reaching with urgency for what is new (novel) and yet joined to what has been. A transcultural reading brings these strategies to light.

Let me give a different kind of Australian example, from the award-winning novel *Carpentaria* (2006a) by Alexis Wright. Wright, an Indigenous woman, is a member of the Waanyi nation of the Gulf of Carpentaria (in northern Australia) and has worked for Aboriginal concerns and rights over many years, as well as publishing three novels, short stories and non-fiction. In *Carpentaria* the author's multi-layered language has a special strength in incorporating the oral storytelling of her people. As we read, we hear more voices than one. We are always aware of the spoken Aboriginal presence, which is also an ancestral presence, pushing back against the uniform English of the mainstream. The narrator's voice is the voice that encompasses this world as it gives it being, '*from time immemorial*', the title of Chap. 1. That legal-sounding phrase has political and historical import. It overcomes the British colonisers' convenient fiction that Australia was unoccupied when they arrived, *terra nullius* according to their legal doctrine, no man's land, even when it undeniably belonged to the Aboriginal people. Here the transculturation occurs with the placement of the ancient creation story at the opening of a contemporary novel that tells of a fight over country: 'The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously—if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground.' (Wright 2006a, 1) From the outset perspectives are changing grandly and in ways that draw us in. This language, a new creation, resists the single voice in favour of polyphony and dynamic interplay. 'The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once,' as Wright puts it in her essay 'On Writing *Carpentaria*' (84).

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[7]See, for example, Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *Born Translated*: *The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

> 'I says,' [Mozzie Fishman] says like he is singing, 'we mobs got to start acting locally. Show whose got the Dreaming. The Laaaw.' He liked to empathise. 'The Laaaaw' whenever he was heating up around the ears on the subject of globalization…. All satiny voice, he said it was time now to end our cowtailing after the white people. It was finale time. Hands up. Who we got to follow? The white man, or the Fishman? This was the ultimatum. Well! He made us that wild. Of course, we got no choice - we got to go with culture every time….
>
> The soundwaves coming off the explosion in the aeroplane hangars at the biggest mine of its type in the world, Gurfurritt, were just about as tremendous a sound you could ever expect to hear on this earth. Like guyfork night. Booom! Booom! Over and over. But one hundred times more louder than that. Ripped the lot….
>
> A whirly wind … swirled straight through… it picked up all the trash. All the cardboard boxes, newspapers lying about and oily rags, spirited the whole lot across the flat towards the line of hangars on fire.
>
> It happened so fast when the fiery whirlwind shot into the bowsers and momentarily, lit them up like candles. Well! It might even have been the old Pizza Hut box someone had left on top of one of those bowsers that added that little bit of extra fuel, you never know, for the extra spark, or it would have happened anyway, but the wick was truly lit.
>
> The finale was majestical. Dearo, dearie, the explosion was holy in its glory. All of it was gone. The whole mine, pride of the banana state, ended up looking like a big panorama of burnt chop suey. On a grand scale of course because our country is a very big story. (*Carpentaria*, 409, 411)

This climactic passage, as local Indigenous activists blow up the multinational mine site, demands a close look. The vernacular, warmly rhythmical and marked by oral exclamations such as 'Well!' and 'Dearo, dearie', carries the account. It is grandmotherly in its knowing at Mozzie Fishman's expense as it mimics his inflammatory speech ('The Laaaaw!'), and equally humorous in its expression of collective feeling ('we got to go with culture every time'). But whose vernacular? Australian, yes. Aboriginal Australian, yes. Northern Kriol, in part. Inventive and idiosyncratic, with pun-like caulks, such as 'cowtailing' layered over 'kowtowing' or 'guyfork' in lieu of 'Guy Fawkes', revealing local understandings. There are the intensifiers of spoken language ('one hundred times more louder than that') which overflow standard English, and a related biblical rhetoric ('majestical', 'holy in its glory'), as the event becomes mythic and spiritual, pitting 'country' against 'state': 'our country is a very big story'.

But whose country? There's a central ambiguity here as Indigenous belonging demands precedence over mainstream claims to ownership, where Indigenous belonging is founded on the 'big' continuity and meaning of 'story'. The narrative in *Carpentaria* moves transculturally, giving presence to Aboriginal experience in Australian cultural space. The transculturation here, as in the early Cuban usages, includes the transformative interchange between cultures and communities within a society.[8] The term 'intercommunal' has a specific application here.[9] Even within a

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[8]Wright has acknowledged her debt to Latin American writers, including Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Eduardo Galeano.

[9]See for example Lo, Jacqueline. 'Disciplining Asian Australian Studies: Projections and Introjections', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* Volume 27, Issue 1–2, 2006. 23.

community there will be communities asking to be recognised, represented and given the power of their own expression.

Wright's vision is universal in its transcultural imagination. The passage from 'On Writing *Carpentaria*' quoted above goes on:

> …Where the characters are Indigenous people in this novel, they might easily have been any scattered people from any part of the world who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian–old or new. (84)

This is at once generous and demanding: a reconceptualization. It grows in Wright's next novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), where swan stories from near and far, black and white, converge in a sacred, sovereign homeland. 'What happens when there are conflicting stories,' Wright asks, 'or no story to be found for particular events, or how stories that do not belong can be accommodated….' Her creation challenges the narratives that 'have a stranglehold in the mindset of colonial domination' in an attempt to free readers from prejudice, but that takes work.[10] It requires a transforming imaginative engagement, an act of translation on a grand scale, not into another language but into our own.

Wright's work has been widely translated, including, appropriately, into Chinese, since she acknowledges her Chinese ancestry. Chinese Nobel literature laureate Mo Yan launched the Chinese translation of *Carpentaria* by Li Yao in Beijing in 2012. In finding equivalences for Wright's verbal pyrotechnics the translator transculturates to bring the text home. In the passage quoted above 'chop suey' ('a big panorama of burnt chop suey') recovers its Chinese original, *chao zasui*, while 'cowtailing' loses its suggestion of 'kowtow' in favour of a different animal saying that anticipates the reference to dogs a few lines later: *zai bairen pigu houtou yaoweiqilian*, 'wagging the tail fawningly after the backsides of white people'.[11] The amusing reference to 'chop suey' is a reminder of the exchanges between Chinese cooks and Aboriginal people in northern Australia, almost from time immemorial.

The new formulation that lies outside or beyond normative literary form and style comes into being through transcultural moves. Sometimes it's a word that's untranslatable, as in my final example, from a contemporary writer whose work circulates widely both in Chinese through the Chinese world and in translation through much of the rest, Yu Hua. Here's a sample from the last essay in his recent book, *China in Ten Words* (2012), translated by Allan H. Barr:

[10]Wright, Alexis. *Proceedings of the Third China Australia Literary Forum*, Western Sydney University, 28–29 August 2015. 15.

[11]Wright, Alexis. *Kapengtaliyawan* [*Carpentaria*]. Translated by Li Yao. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. 2012. 332, 334.

忽悠
bamboozle

What is 忽悠?* Originally it meant "to sway unsteadily"—like fishing boats bobbing on the waves, for example, or leaves shaking in the wind. Later it developed a new life as an idiom particularly popular in northeast China, derived from another phrase that sounds almost the same: 胡诱—"to mislead." Just as variant strains of the flu virus keep constantly appearing, 忽悠 has in its lexical career diversified itself into a dazzling range of meanings. Hyping things up and laying it on thick—that's 忽悠. Playing a con trick and ripping somebody off—that's 忽悠, too. In the first sense, the word has connotations of bragging, as well as enticement and entrapment; in the second sense, it carries shades of dishonesty, misrepresentation, and fraud. "Bamboozle," perhaps, is the closest English equivalent.

*hūyōu

Here the translator acknowledges the challenge of such Chinese wordplay by leaving the Chinese *hūyōu* in untransliterated character form, partly on the assumption that some of his readers will know or want to know it that way, but also to highlight the inadequacy of translation of words that acquire an intense but transient signification in a contemporary context. He brilliantly enacts this provisionality in the sentence: '"Bamboozle," perhaps, is the closest English equivalent.' (203) That's debatable, but in any case 'bamboozle' is such an odd English word. Its origin is unknown according to Webster's Dictionary. It has no cognates. It is probably unfamiliar to many people with a high level of English competency. And here it operates almost as a new, even Chinese, coinage for the unique contemporary cultural phenomenon of *huyou*. Something that relates etymologically to the essentially Chinese 'bamboo'? Which it doesn't. And if we can't understand *huyou*, via 'bamboozle', Yu Hua/Allan Barr would suggest, how can we understand the Chinese people who have made this word a new star? By speaking of *huyou* in an English-language context, we show we know. The transcultural move here is to leave the untranslatable as if untranslated, a hole in the text.

My examples are from books I've come across, books I've connected with and like. That raises a question about transcultural reading and writing. How random is it? Or, more formally, what are the processes by which, and the reasons why, some works actively enter the larger conversation and others may not. It seems to involve a mixture of qualities intrinsic to the work and qualities outside it, chiefly the larger need of the times, the historical moment or, more exactly, the moment of what is coming, potentially at least. A word for that is 'affinity'. It occurs, as a term derived

from chemistry and applied to human behaviour, in the translated title of Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtshaften*, 1809). Since Goethe is generally credited with the term 'world literature' (*Welt-literatur*), it makes sense to insert his use of 'elective affinity' into the way it comes about. 'The epoch of World-literature is at hand', he told Eckermann in 1827, 'and everyone must strive to hasten its approach'. In this understanding—and behind Goethe lies Herder, who really deserves the credit here, the formation of world literature is at once elective and dialectical, as successive generations in their various societies go about selectively and self-referentially 'appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes.'[12]

That is the great insight explored by Wang Zuoliang in the essays gathered in *Degrees of Affinity* in 1985 and reprinted this year with additional material by Springer. Some written in the 1940s, most written in the newly opened window of the early 1980s, they offer a profound and varied set of reflections on the workings of affinity between authors and between literatures—we might say, between cultures, or cultural moments—across time and across space. 'Affinity works in all sorts of ways. It is not restricted to any one period, but can cut across centuries.' (Wang, 1)

Wang makes two main points, first that there developed an active, unprecedented, seemingly unlikely affinity between Chinese and European literature in the twentieth century, which he explores from the Chinese side, in terms of China's attraction to 'those elements in Western culture that answered to her needs and aspiration at a particular point of time', when 'confronted with an acute problem of survival' (4–5), a revolutionary moment in which 'even in repulsion there was an attraction of opposites' (5). Second, that Chinese authors brought 'a rare critical sense' to the interaction, grounded in the resilience of China's own long tradition and its resistance to change (5), that was continuous with the critical creativity of the Western authors to whom they were responding, such as the English Romantic poets, the French symbolists, and modernists such as Eliot and Auden, Lorca, Rilke, and Hugh MacDiarmid (1882–1978). MacDiarmid, a communist and Scottish nationalist, wrote in Scots and English. Wang translated his poetry into Chinese. In a poem entitled 'In Memoriam James Joyce' (1955) MacDiarmid wrote 'World-history and world-philosophy/Are only now beginning to dawn', a sentiment that must have chimed with Wang's hopes at the time.

But Wang's prime example is Charles Lamb (1775–1834), whose affinity with dramatist John Webster (1580–1634), demonstrated in his compilation *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived About the Time of Shakespeare* (1808), recovered Webster from two centuries of near-oblivion, making him available to further revaluation and appropriation by T.S. Eliot, whose phrase 'Webster … saw the skull beneath the skin' ('Whispers of Immortality', 1–2) became a touchstone for modernism. In Wang's words, in 1949, 'with Charles Lamb, Webster came into

[12]Eckermann, J.P. *Conversations with Goethe*. Translated by John Oxenford. London: J.M. Dent. 1930. 165–6.

his own. … [N]earest to Shakespeare in tragic intensity … his name is now firmly put back on the map of literature, the name of a major city with its myriad lighted windows and its dark, vicious archways.' (136, 154). The passage derives from Wang Zuoliang's graduate work on Webster at Oxford, which was published in book form in Salzburg in 1975. The city might be either of those, or a Chinese city such as Peking as it was when Wang was a lecturer at Tsing Hua (Qinghua) in the late 1940s, when China's civil war still raged.

In 1937, as the Japanese advanced on Peking, the universities had fled south where, in Kunming, the Southwest Associated University, or Lianda, was set up. 'Conditions were appalling,' Wang recalls of his time there as student and teacher, 'cramped quarters, no proper equipment and, what hurt most, almost no books. But people, particularly the young, didn't mind the hardships too much in the first flush of a national war. There was a wartime camaraderie and a sharpened sense of intellectual quest. The faculty had many noted writers…. The Englishman William Empson gave a course on contemporary English poetry.' (73. Empson is famously said to have transcribed *Othello* from memory.[13]) Wang's Empsonian lineage—another affinity, if you like—continues through the decades that follow, turbulent for both men. The complex energies of the degrees of affinity about which Wang writes flow together with the oppositional energies Empson finds in ambiguity, pastoral and complex words (to allude to the titles of three of his books). Using biography, another Empson title, as I'm doing here, it's possible to see how fugitive yet tenacious affinity can be. 'The first book I translated was written by James Joyce,' Wang recalls in another essay. 'It was *Dubliners*, a collection of his short stories. I did that in the early forties, when I was a young instructor at the Southwest Associated University in Kunming…. I sent the manuscript to a publisher in Guilin. Guilin is the resort city in Guangxi where you see all those strange-shaped hills. One day the Japanese sent their bombers over the city. Parts of the city went up in flames, my manuscript with them.' (129). It was never published.

Wang notes that 'literary traffic is rarely one-way' (8). We are reasonably familiar with the extraordinary influence of classical Chinese poetry on Western modernist poetics. But Wang's concern is in the other direction, the development of modern Chinese creative writing, in which translation of foreign literature acted as a powerful tool. Writing in 1949, he observes that the great Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) 'consciously and deliberately … tries to make the Chinese he employs in the translations read like a foreign language' (32), when he is translating from Russian for example. The foreign influence meets resistance, and a creative fusion can result, as Wang finds in the case of Dai Wangshu (1905–50), the great translator of Lorca:

[13]Haffenden, John. *William Empson*: *Volume 1*: *Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 463, 658 note 84.

> The Chinese language was in a particularly open state when Dai started to translate; there had just occurred a literary revolution of the first magnitude. No revolution, however, could have wiped out at a stroke the classical heritage of a country like China, and that too helped matters…. Thus tradition and innovation meet in a good translation. (127)

Wang finds such happy results in the work of the Chinese modernist poets whom he knew and felt affinity with at Lianda, such as Feng Zhi and Mu Dan, and others such as Ai Qing (father of artist activist Ai Weiwei) and Bian Zhilin, who translated some of Auden's *Journey to a War* sonnets on his own journey towards 'filling a compact literary form of the West with the floodtide of emotion surging on the China front' in 1938–9 (Wang, 72). Transcultural practice is at once the means of renewal and part of what is expressed as a result. The nature of that practice changes, then, according to changing perceptions and positions, as we see today in China's own research in this area. Peng Ping explains in an essay called 'Transmutation of Modern China's Attitude to Western Culture from the Perspective of Translation' how approaches to translation have differed markedly according to changing needs across the 19th and 20th centuries, noting that 'translation tends to play a central role when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature'.[14] The implication, by way of conclusion, is that Chinese ideas about translation are due to change again, as China recalibrates its attitude to the West, and the West changes in response.

I met Wang Zuoliang when I taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 1986. He was the head of the English department and had produced the anthology of English literature from which I was to teach the introductory survey course. It was, to my relief, a familiar version of English literature, not so different to the Norton anthology I had been using in faraway Canberra. The selection, progressive in several senses and designed for close reading and linguistic analysis, showed Prof Wang's lineage, from Empson and I.A. Richards, founder of 'practical criticism', both of whom had worked in Beijing, and from his Oxford training. He gave me copies of his books, *Degrees of Affinity* and, later, *Translation*: *Experiments and Reflections* (1989). I carried those books around, trusting that their time would come, for me, which has happened thirty years later, as the degree of affinity between my own interests and Wang Zuoliang's understanding of the workings of literary affinity has intensified. I pay tribute to his great and lasting contribution here.

To speak from a local perspective for a moment, Wang Zuoliang had visited Australia before I met him, to attend Writers' Week at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1980. In an essay he published afterwards he wrote:

[14] Peng Ping. 'Transmutation of Modern China's Attitude to Western Culture from the Perspective of Translation'. *Intercultural Studies*: *New Frontiers*. Ed. Sun Youzhong. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. 2010. 329.

> Adelaide is a garden city facing the Indian Ocean. It has a river in the centre and green space on all sides. There are extensive vineyards nearby. In early March the summer heat is turning to autumn. The days are bright but not hot, the evenings are cool and fresh, encouraging people to stroll in the leafy streets and enjoy the festival atmosphere.
>
> We—the first delegation from the Chinese Writers' Association to visit Australia—arrived in this beautiful place, known as the 'Athens of the South', in festival season.[15] [translated by Suqin Qian]

In Adelaide Wang met Christina Stead, whom he remembered as 'cultivated, calm, unpretentious and quiet'. She was introduced as 'Australia's greatest living novelist', but said that, living abroad for long periods, she wrote on universal themes and had written too little about Australia itself. On the same trip Wang met poets A.D. Hope and Judith Wright, and many other notable Australian writers, including Tom Keneally and David Williamson. He was looking for the defining characteristics of Australian literary culture.

From the early years of the Peoples' Republic of China (1949-), literary scholars in China had sought a comradely affinity in Australian literature. Both states had newness in common, from a long historical perspective. When academic life resumed after the Cultural Revolution, literary research was allocated by geographical region to Chinese universities and Australia was placed with other South Pacific countries as part of Oceanian literature. This separated it off from Britain and North America. Over time this focus produced a particular understanding of Australian literature as shaped by geographical and historical circumstances with its own distinctive pattern of development. In the essay he produced on his return from Australia, Wang Zuoliang wrote:

> Australian literature is an ideal subject for a literary historian. Its history is both long and not long. The literature of the Indigenous people has a long history, especially the oral literature, and is not well known. The literature in English produced since white people arrived in the 18th century, a period of two centuries, has a short history, perhaps one hundred years. But in that short period there has been a clear development out of the literature of the mother country, England, to a literature of the people with Australian characteristics and features. (1)

This was relevant to the People's Republic in the 1980s, an even younger state than Australia, as it sought to create a new literature from the old. When he discusses world literature, Wang, unlike most other commentators, generally allocates a place for Australia. Perhaps his work on Burns and MacDiarmid gave him an affinity with different dialect locations and different accents.

He met the American poet Robert Bly in Adelaide, and again when he visited the University of Minnesota. Through Bly he was introduced to the poetry of James Wright, with which he felt an affinity. He translated some into Chinese.

At the Adelaide Festival of Arts, Wang saw a modern dress version of John Webster's play *The White Devil* on which he doesn't comment. He is more excited

[15] Wang Zuoliang, 'Experiencing Australia's Festival Atmosphere' [*Aozhou shengjie dangchangguan*], Foreign Literature [*Waiguo Wenxue*], 4, 1980, 1.

by the performance of Brecht songs by Gisela May from the Berliner Ensemble. Through his essay on Australia, and in all his writing, the same intelligent sifting is evident, as he connects with what works for him. Asked about translating Webster in an interview in Australia, he acknowledges that Webster's plays would be difficult to translate, but not as difficult as poems where the language is extremely simple, like some of Wordsworth's: 'the really difficult thing is to translate a folk tale from its original very simple language to the language of a folk tale in Chinese, for instance'. That is the deepest kind of transcultural transaction.

'If you were to ask me, today, what I think "world literature" is,' says award-winning debut novelist Fiona McFarlane, 'I would say that it's a way of reading'.[16] This might convert into Said's 'aesthetic of resistance', where that way of reading becomes a critical, theoretical or creative engagement, as glossed by Marina Warner in *Stranger Magic*, her wide-ranging study of *Arabian Nights*, one of the most potently transcultural of texts:

> Said asks, 'how knowledge that is non-dominative and non-coercive can be produced in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions, and the strategies of power.' His answer was to participate and engage. The word *theoria*, he liked to remind us, means 'the action of observing'; for him, theory was a dynamic activity, not a matter of passive reception. The theorist-critic affects the works he observes, and the works themselves are not self-created or autonomous but precipitated in the crucible of society and history. (322)

Reading transcultural writing is part of our moment in time, part of the social and historical precipitate we are presented with now. One reason why I am attracted to a transcultural pedagogy in literary studies and creative writing is in response to the internationalisation of education at tertiary level, including in the humanities, especially with reference to China's growing participation. This is a substantial case of transculturation in action. As can be seen from the writing samples I've looked at, to communicate transculturally is part of the practice of some important contemporary authors, part of what they do. By experiencing and understanding that, we can discover the possibilities of transcultural inquiry for ourselves as teachers, researchers, and writers.

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[16]McFarlane, Fiona. *Proceedings of the Third China Australia Literary Forum*. Western Sydney University, 28–29 August 2015. 42.

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