

Australian Literature and China, Past, Present and Future

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It isn't every day that there is a launch of 10 volumes of Australian literature in Chinese translation. That's without adding that the translations are the work of one man, Professor Li Yao, who is here with us. And that this is only a selection from a much longer list of some 30 Australian books he has worked on, including short stories, children's books, *Secrets and Spies* by Mara Moustafine, *Benang from the Heart* by Kim Scott and *Gould's Book of Fish* by Richard Flanagan. This is a special day. We celebrate our friend Li Yao, whose achievement earned him the Australia-China Council's gold medal in 2008 and an honorary doctorate from the University of Sydney in 2014. Today's event is also part of a wider commemoration. The Australia-China Council is marking its 45th anniversary this year. From the start the ACC has supported literary exchanges between Australia and China including translation and publishing. The Chinese Association of Australian Studies is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. It's 40 years since 1988, the Australian bicentennial year, when the first Australian Studies conference in China was held, hosted by Beijing Foreign Studies University. BFSU is hosting this year's anniversary conference in June. It is a great thing to see the continuity and growth of these initiatives, and to celebrate the many enduring relationships involved.

I helped organise that conference in 1988 and that's when I first met Li Yao. He was working with Professor Hu Wenzhong, the director of the Australian Studies Centre at BFSU, who presided over the conference, on the translation of *The Tree of Man* by Patrick White, which first appeared in 1991 and is the earliest book in the 10 volume series. It was thanks to Prof Hu, and Jocelyn Chey, who is here today, that I was in China then, having arrived in 1986 to teach Australian literature, to write, and eventually in 1987 to be appointed Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing. In meeting Chinese writers in those years I discovered that two works of Australian literature were known, *The Thornbirds* by Colleen McCullough—she too is included in this series—and *The Eye of the Storm* by White, translated by Zhu Jiongqiang. In other words, there was already some context for Australian literature in China. Today I want to recognise that broader context, and all the work in which so many people have played a part. Li Yao himself tells the wonderful story of being introduced to Henry Lawson by his Australian teacher Alison Hewitt in Inner Mongolia in the years immediately after the Cultural Revolution. Ouyang Yu and other scholars have traced the translation of Australian literature into Chinese further back into the Republican period, prior to 1949, while other scholars including Li Jianjun are researching the publication of significant works of literature by mainly leftist Australian writers in the early decades of the PRC as part of a network of Cold War cultural exchange. We know for example that Dorothy Hewett visited China in 1952, under the Australian radar.

The first delegation of PRC writers to visit Australia came to Adelaide Writers Week in 1980. It included the poet, translator and scholar Prof Wang Zuoliang who wrote warmly about the experience. The delegation met Tom Keneally in Sydney, for a memorable harbourside lunch. Again it's good to see Keneally's work included in these 10 volumes. A return Australian delegation to China in 1981 comprised Christopher Koch, Hugh Anderson and Nicholas Hasluck—3 musketeers of varying political colours. In his diary Hasluck records that at their colloquium with Chinese writers and scholars there was more interest in the work of Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wilding than in the earlier socialist realist writers, although the redoubtable Gladys Yang, translator and friend to many Australians, denounced *The Year of Living Dangerously* as 'a decadent book'. Moorhouse visited China with Rosemary Dobson in 1983. His alter ego Francois Blasé produced a hilarious fictional account of what might have gone on in a piece called 'Cultural Delegate'. I don't know if that has been translated. By 1987 BFSU's journal *Foreign Literatures* (Waiguo wenxue) had put out a special Australian issue that included stories in translation by Moorhouse and Helen Garner, and Jack Hibbard's play *A Stretch of the Imagination*, which can claim to be the first Australian play performed in China.

All of which indicates the range of literary interaction between Australia and China over the years. Translations of novels by Gail Jones, J M Coetzee, David Foster and Christina Stead have appeared, non-fiction by Robert Hughes,

Germaine Greer and Eric Rolls, and *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington, and, of course, poetry of many kinds and in many venues. There's a long list of translations published in the journal of the Oceanian Literature Research Unit at Hefei University in Anhui, and Prof Huang Yuanshen, founding director of the Australian Studies Centre at East China Normal University, Shanghai and author of *A History of Australian Literature* (revised edition 2014), produced translations of many classics, books such as *My Brilliant Career*, *I Can Jump Puddles*, *Wake in Fright* and *Lucinda Brayford*. Wang Guanglin has translated *Shanghai Dancing* by Brian Castro, who is also included in Li Yao's collection. The Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts must also be mentioned for its support of these projects over many years.

People often ask why certain books are translated and not others. A number of the authors and titles in Li Yao's 10 volumes have connections with China and that is one principle of selection. Many are prize-winners. *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) won Peter Carey his second Booker prize. Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983), recognised as a pioneering work of Asian Australian writing, won the Vogel prize in 1982. Alex Miller's novel *The Ancestor Game* is another ground-breaking fictional exploration of Chinese-Australian experience and won the Miles Franklin in 1993. *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright won the Miles Franklin in 2007. Its Chinese translation by Li Yao was launched

in Beijing by Nobel-prize winning Chinese author Mo Yan. Alexis was in China for a return visit last month. C. P. Fitzgerald, sometimes known as Possum, one of the great historians of modern China, was invited to Australia from China after World War 2 to establish the Department of Far Eastern History at ANU. His late-life memoir is an account of a journey from a London childhood to Australia via war-torn and revolutionary mid-20th century China and, in its attempt to answer the question that many of us have asked, *Why China?*, a fine contribution to Australian writing. David Walker's memoir *Not Dark Yet* similarly recounts some of the background to his own passionate engagement with Australian Studies in China. My own novels, also included I'm proud to say, arose from the years I spent in China, and my continuing travel between Australia and China, in an attempt to imagine things that perhaps only literature makes possible.

Today's occasion builds on the China Australia Literary Forum that the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University started with the Chinese Writers' Association in 2011 and that has seen many Australian writers meet and converse with Chinese colleagues, and in which Li Yao has played an important role. I'm glad that WSU has supported this project and that today's launch allows Writing and Society to partner with ACIAC under its new director Prof Wang Labao.

We see today evidence of the lively state of Australian literary studies in China, as we also saw last year at ASAL's conference in Melbourne where the theme was 'Looking In, Looking Out: China and Australia' and so many Chinese scholars, young and old, spoke. And where I was delighted to learn of one of the earliest works of Australian literature to be written in Chinese, a novel called *The Poison of Polygamy (duoqidu)*, written and published in serial form in the Melbourne Chinese press in 1909-10. I've spoken a little about the past 40 years today. As for the future, I think we can be confident that the way Australian literature advances in China will continue to surprise us, and to continue to help us, as Australians. New ways of approaching seemingly familiar things extend our capacity to see ourselves as others see us—other people, other cultures—as we struggle with our place in a changing world and learn how better to appreciate and engage in the intercultural action that is happening already, and surely central to this society's future.

Nicholas Jose