British Chinese Writers and the Practice of World Literature: A Roundtable Discussion

Hongwei Bao (University of Nottingham)

Nicky Harman, Li Yan, Jane Qian Liu (University of Warwick)

Bingbing Shi (University of Oxford / University of Freiburg), and Xinran

Recorded by Yuqing Zhang (Beijing Foreign Studies University)

Abstract

Chaired by Dr Jane Qian Liu, this roundtable brings together writers, translators, and scholars, including Dr Hongwei Bao, Nicky Harman, Li Yan, Dr Bingbing Shi, and Xinran. It took place at the University of Warwick on 18 June 2024, exploring the intersections of multilingual literary practices, translation, and emerging translation technologies. In the first half of the session, participants share their experiences of multilingual writing and their understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese literature in the UK publishing industry. Li Yan likens different languages to distinct melodies, highlighting how linguistic variation shapes literary expression. Xinran calls for the development of a new generation of British Chinese translators fluent in both Chinese and English. Nicky Harman proposes co-translation with established professionals as an effective approach to introducing emerging translators to the field. The second half of the discussion focuses on the interplay between academic research and creative writing, as well as the influence of artificial intelligence on literary production and translation. The session concludes with a shared recognition that, despite rapid technological and industrial shifts, literature's capacity to evoke emotions and foster cultural understanding remains vital and irreplaceable.

Keywords: British Chinese writers, multilingual writing, literary translation, UK publishing industry, artificial intelligence

Liu: I would like to start our conversation today by looking at the connection between languages as a medium of creativity and creative writing. Can I start by asking our writers and poets: In which language or languages do you write? Do you feel that your writing is different when using different languages and in what ways?

Yan: At first, I wrote in Chinese and had my poems translated into English. Later, I started to write in English, but Chinese often influences my writing. Languages are like different melodies; the same instrument can produce different sounds.

Xinran: All of my books are written in Chinese. One reason for this is that my interviewees speak only Chinese. If I translate their words into English in my mind while recording their stories and life experiences, much of their character, my emotional connection to them, and important cultural nuances are lost.

It is worth trying to write in English, but in my opinion, what really matters is what you write. I am a journalist, and I have been interviewing and reporting in Chinese since the 1980s, when I started my radio show. I think it is very important to show who these people are and what they experience. China is vast, so people living between the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, or in the eastern and western regions, are completely different. You can hear or feel the differences in their [spoken] languages and body language. It is important for me, as a journalist, to record this. I also think that my writing is for future generations, particularly for Chinese people. China is changing rapidly, and I want future generations to be able to listen to their parents' or grandparents' stories. There are already a lot of academic and fictional works about China, but in my view, it is essential to capture people's stories about their love, losses, and daily experiences. I would say that my writing is Chinese because I have a Chinese soul.

Liu: To what extent is writing a personal thing to you when you are writing in diaspora, away from China? Do you sometimes feel that you are writing or speaking for the Chinese people, or Chinese culture in general? If so, how does that influence your writing?

Shi: As part of my doctoral studies, I engage in both creative and academic writing. My creative writing is very personal. I have noticed that my experiences in the UK and the cultural differences I encounter have a significant influence on my writing. For example, when I write in Chinese, I often feel the need to incorporate elements of my life in the UK, which sets me apart from other young writers in China. This cultural influence affects me subconsciously. I do not see myself as writing to represent Chinese people or Chinese culture in the UK. Rather, I aim to explore universal themes such as emotions, relationships, and the challenges faced

by our generation. Despite this, I show and explain unique aspects of Chinese life in both my creative and academic works, in order to help English readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of my experiences.

Bao: First of all, I am an academic, and I conduct research into China's queer history and culture. In the past, I primarily wrote for an academic readership, believing that my research is crucial for the Chinese queer community, a group whose history is often overlooked or rendered invisible. I have been documenting community histories as non-fiction in the past two decades. However, in recent years, especially since the pandemic, my writing has gradually shifted towards personal reflection and expression. This personal focus resonates with people who share similar experiences, such as those in the Chinese diaspora or in queer communities. My creative writing has therefore gained a social significance. Research has always been an important part of my writing. Most people who grew up in China may be familiar with stories like "Chang'e 嫦娥" and "Qu Yuan 屈原," but the feminist and queer aspects of these tales are often excluded from mainstream interpretations. I believe it is important to reinterpret these canonical and classical texts. I am particularly inspired by the British poet Carol Ann Duffy, whose innovative and unconventional retellings of British fairy tales and literary classics have greatly influenced my approach to traditional Chinese culture.

Liu: How do you find the translation process of your works? What is your relationship with your authors like?

Harman: Here's an interesting anecdote. When I was translating Xinran's *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, I found some horrible stories in that book, particularly about women who had given birth and then abandoned their babies, or had their babies taken away. I translated it, and some months later, Xinran said to me, 'I was really worried about you. How could you bear to translate those horrors?' I thought, 'Oh, I never thought of it that way.' I think what happens when I am translating—as a translator—is, I hover somewhere above it, and it rarely affects me personally.

I have only occasionally cried over my texts, and this usually happens when I go back and read them. At the time of translation, I was objective—not consciously objective—but I was treating it as a translation task. Anyway, after Xinran made that comment, I went back and looked at the published edition of our book and thought, 'How did I translate that? That is so sad and so horrible.' I had a strong emotional feeling, but I did not have it until the task was completed. Maybe the translation process is a kind of dual process. The first part is the objective task of creating a new version of the work in English, and then the emotions come after-

ward, especially if it is a moving, touching, or profound work. One hopes, of course, that the readers will go straight to the emotions—we want them to feel the emotions and be moved. However, the actual process of translation did not move me to tears at the time; it did only afterward.

I want to say something else about the process of translating the work of a living author. It is so important to have someone to discuss with. Xinran has always been really helpful. For almost everything I have translated, her feedback is positive and constructive. I do think it is wonderful for a translator to have a living author who is prepared to engage and offer feedback. Almost all of the authors I have worked with have been really helpful in this regard. I think, as a translator, two people are important in my translating life. The first is the author, because only the author can help you puzzle out certain things—I might understand certain words, but I do not understand why they are put in that order, or the logic behind them. The author can help with that. The second is the editor. Having a good editor is a wonderful thing, because they are your best reader—your first reader of the English version.

Liu: Thank you very much, Nicky. I think you just touched upon something really interesting. You mentioned that you felt moved to tears after finishing the translation. One of the Chinese translators from the early Republican period that I study is Lin Shu. There is a famous episode about his translation process. When he and his collaborators were translating *La Dame aux Camélias*, they were so touched that they had to stop and cry before they could continue translating. This has led me to believe that translators can be very emotional during the translation process. You mentioned that this is not usually, but do you feel that it depends on the writer or the writing style? Do you feel more sympathetic with the writing that personally resonates with you?

Harman: Not really. I think I am always deeply engaged in the translation. Maybe it is my British upbringing, but I do not let the emotions come out until after the translation is completed. The same goes for laughter. You can translate really funny and amusing things, but I might not laugh at the time. I usually laugh when I go back and read my "fifth" revision, but I cannot speak for other translators.

Liu: What do you find most challenging or rewarding about translating Chinese literature?

Harman: There are all sorts of ways of approaching it. There is the strictly linguistic level; the languages are so different. Just yesterday, I was translating a single clause by the 1930s woman writer Ling Shuhua 凌叔華 (1900-1990), and I came up with twenty different versions, and I was still not satisfied in the end. This is partly because of her writing style, but the linguistic challenges are significant.

However, if you look at the positive side, the rewards are immense. You can open a completely new world to readers. There is a danger in that—you do not want your readers to think, "Oh, I am reading it as a kind of sociological report on China. This is the way Chinese women live," or whatever. If I am translating a novel, I hope it works as a novel. I do not want it to be reviewed as a work of sociology or politics. Overall, there are huge rewards in translating Chinese literature, as you present a new world to readers who have never read anything like it before. The variety of writings produced by Chinese writers is fantastic. There are a lot of them, and they write incredibly varied stuff. On the whole, English-language readers have no idea that this world exists. In fact, the Sinophone literary world encompasses many different worlds: mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia—anywhere people write in Chinese. I want readers to be excited by that, and that is why I do it.

Liu: What do you think is the impact of Chinese literature and culture in the UK and the West in general? How has this changed since the pandemic? What role do UK publishers play in this process? Do you feel publishers tend to have certain expectations of Chinese literature published in the UK?

Shi: I have only had one experience working with UK publishers. During this process, I found that UK publishers do have certain expectations. For example, in recent years, Chinese sci-fi has become a label for contemporary Chinese literature. I remember that publishers asked me to include more short stories in the sci-fi genre because they believed it would attract more English readers. Additionally, Chinese internet literature is becoming more popular, and some publishers are trying to introduce internet novels and short stories [to English-speaking markets]. I think genre is becoming an increasingly important factor influencing the publication of translated Chinese literature.

Xinran: I completely agree with what Nicky and others have said about translation. An improper translation can be a kind of murder of the Chinese language and Chinese literature, as it can convey the wrong image and distort the original work. My late husband was a literary agent specialising in Chinese writers. Many of you might know that he represented authors like Yu Hua, Ma Jian, and Xiaolu Guo. He always emphasized that a good translator not only needs to understand Chinese but also be an excellent writer in English, in order to accurately convey the meaning and emotion of the original work.

However, I have noticed a significant challenge [in working] with UK publishers. At international book fairs, it is disheartening to see that only a small percentage of their publishing plans include works in languages other than English. Even

when there are good translations, they do not always fit into their plans. Another issue is that Western publishers tend to sign author contracts rather than contracts for individual books, and this differs from the practice in China. Therefore, if a Chinese author has multiple contracts [with different publishers] in China, they might be refused by a Western publisher. I have also faced difficulties with the promotion of my latest books. Today's authors need to be active on social media, which I am not familiar with.

Additionally, UK publishers often prefer native English speakers to translate Chinese literature into English, believing that they better understand cultural nuances. This is a barrier for many talented Chinese translators. My charity is working to promote Chinese translators and break this cycle by proving that they can produce high-quality translations.

Harman: I am not too surprised that UK publishers prefer native English speakers for translation, as this is a common practice. However, many young people in the UK with Chinese heritage write excellent English and are truly bilingual, which is fantastic. They often translate for Paper-Republic, and I know how good they are. The ultimate benchmark for publishers is that the translation reads well in English, with all its complexities and nuances. However, it is important to recognize that many bilingual Chinese [translators] can achieve this.

Despite this, publishers often feel more secure with familiar names, and this makes it difficult for new translators to break in. At Paper-Republic, we are trying to mentor new translators because they are the future. Publishers have a responsibility to consider the quality of the translation, rather than just the translator's background. Co-translation can be a great way to introduce new translators to publishers.

Another important point is the type of translation—novels may require a different grasp of the English language than non-fiction works. I wish publishers were more informed about Chinese literature and could recognise the talent of new Chinese translators and the quality of their works.

Liu: In this era of social media, what do you think is the power of literature? Do you think books, novels, and poems still have the same enchantment for younger readers, as they had for those of us who were born and educated in a different era?

Bao: In recent years, there has been a boom in young people engaging in poetry, partly inspired by the hip-hop and rap culture in the US. For example, in Nottingham, a UNESCO city of literature, there are numerous poetry groups and multiple open-mic nights. I recently attended the Nottingham Poetry Festival and saw many young people involved. There has always been a perceived difference

between page poetry and spoken word poetry, but in spoken word poetry, we see young poets finding their own voices and using social media to amplify them. Social media offer new ways of publishing and performing poetry for young people for whom access to traditional modes of print publishing is difficult. One can post a poem in a single Facebook message or share a performance video on Instagram. In a way, social media has played a significant role in spreading poetry among young people.

Yan: Regarding traditional venues like pubs, they are not just places for socialising but also for poetry readings and music. In Irish pubs, for example, you might hear folk songs and poetry, like "On Raglan Road" by the great Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh and "Down by the Salley Gardens" by the renowned W. B. Yeats. This intermingling of poetry and music happens regularly, making it a vibrant part of daily life. In London, where I live, there are numerous sessions throughout the week dedicated to poetry and music. People of all generations join these gatherings, capturing and sharing moments on social media. To answer your question, literature and poetry remain vital. In fact, they are part of people's daily lives, often fulfilling a weekly ritual for many.

Harman: I would just like to add that I do not know exactly how many young people are reading, but I do have one statistic from a couple of years ago. The greatest increase in readers of translations is among young people aged 18 and upwards. This enthusiasm among young people for translated literature is great.

Liu: How do you negotiate between being a writer and being an academic? How do you find the two practices different?

Bao: When I first started publishing poems, I used a pen name because I wanted to separate it from my professional identity as an academic. However, it was very confusing, even for myself, to use two names, so I eventually gave up the pen name and used my real name. For me, being a writer and being an academic are not contradictory because my research is about Chinese queer culture and my poems are about Chinese queer experience. In fact, many of my poems are informed by my research. My poetry collection *The Passion of the Rabbit God* shares many topics and themes in common with my scholarly monograph *Queering the Asian Diaspora*: the former is an individual expression of the queer diasporic experience, and the latter is the historical and social contexts of such an expression. I feel that I am writing in two different modes—one mode is for the need of the community, while the other is for my creative expression.

Shi: As I am still in the early stages of being both an academic and a writer, I have a feeling that these are completely two different ways of life. These two modes

of writing are very different for me, and I have not yet found a way to balance them. This year, I need to finish writing my dissertation, so I have had to stop writing short stories. I hope to resume creative writing once my dissertation is complete.

Xinran: What do you think about AI, specifically ChatGPT? Do you believe this technology will replace the role of translators in the future? If your answer is no, could you please explain why?

Harman: I sometimes use ChatGPT for research. For instance, I was translating a novel, which involves many descriptions of costumes and arias of Kunqu opera. I asked ChatGPT about specific parts of the opera singers' costumes, and it was really useful. Nevertheless, I had to double-check the information. I have found ChatGPT quite useful as a kind of research assistant, on occasion. However, there were times when it could not answer my questions.

Bao: When ChatGPT came out, I did some experiments with it. I asked it to write a sonnet about a particular topic, which it did quickly. I was impressed because all the rhymes and rhythms were correct. But the contents are extremely boring, impersonal and uninspiring. I thought to myself: 'I should do things that ChatGPT cannot do, or cannot do well.' This realisation pushed me to focus more and push further on creative writing, emphasising unique, subjective, and personal expressions.

Liu: Since the development of ChatGPT, AI, and machine translation, those of us in translation studies are often asked about the future of our discipline. Despite the growth of machine translation, I absolutely agree with everyone that the creativity, subjectivity, and emotions involved in the process of translation can hardly be replaced by machines. Emerging technologies bring us both challenges and opportunities. Sometimes this makes certain tasks easier, especially the more technical parts which is why we teach our students to make use of technologies and machine translation. Yet we remain critical of the outputs they produce.

Author Profiles (in alphabetical order):

Dr Hongwei Bao is Associate Professor in media and cultural studies at the University of Nottingham, where he serves as Director of Research in the Department of Cultural, Media and Visual Studies and Director of the Centre for Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. His research focuses on queer studies, Chinese studies, and independent cinema. He is the author of *Queer Comrades* (2018), *Queer China* (2020), *Queer Media in China* (2012), *Contemporary Chinese Queer Perfor-*

mance (2023) and *Queering the Asian Diaspora* (2025). In addition to curating film festivals and editing book series, he writes poetry, short stories, and stage plays in both English and Chinese. He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Higher Education Academy.

Nicky Harman is an award-winning literary translator of Chinese fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Her translations include works by authors such as Jia Pingwa, Xinran, and Yan Ge. She works for Paper-Republic, a non-profit literary website registered in the UK. She has played a key role in promoting Chinese writing to English-language audiences. She has received numerous awards for her work, such as the 2020 Special Book Award of China and the 2015 Mao Tai Cup People's Literature Chinese-English translation prize. She is widely respected for her contributions to cross-cultural literary exchange.

Li Yan is a bilingual poet active in the UK since the 1990s. Known for his experimentation with poetic form, he creates works that blend cultures, languages, and styles. His poems, often featured in *BrushStrokes* 聚言集 (*Juyan ji*), stand out for their inventive structures, evocative imagery, and diverse themes. As an avant-garde poet, Li Yan has played a key role in shaping the contemporary British Chinese literary landscape and continues to inspire younger generations of multilingual poets.

Dr Jane Qian Liu is Associate Professor in translation and Chinese studies at the University of Warwick, where she also serves as Head of the Translation and Transcultural Studies Section. Her research focuses on modern Chinese literature, translation history, and transcultural exchanges in the early twentieth century. She is the author of *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899-1925* (2017). She also writes short stories and novellas in Chinese and English.

Dr Bingbing Shi is a scholar of contemporary Chinese literature and media. She received her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 2024, with a dissertation titled *Branding History: Literature-to-Screen Adaptations and China's Cultural Memory of the Second World War*. She is currently developing her dissertation into a monograph and pursuing a second book project on the multimodal translation of feminist writings in China. She has edited *The Book of Beijing* (2023).

Xinran is a British Chinese journalist and author. She gained prominence in China as the host of the radio program *Words on the Night Breeze* 輕風夜話 (Qingfeng yehua; 1989-1997), which focused on women's stories. After moving to London in 1997, she has published many widely read works, including *The Good Women of China* (2003), *Sky Burial* (2004), and *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother* (2010). Her works have been translated into over thirty languages. In 2004, Xinran founded the charity The Mothers' Bridge of Love 母愛橋 (Mu'ai qiao).

Dr Yuqing Zhang is a Lecturer in the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation at Beijing Foreign Studies University. She holds a PhD in Translation and Transcultural Studies from the University of Warwick. Her doctoral thesis examines the reconstruction of suspense in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Chinese translations of Sherlock Holmes stories as well as the cross-cultural communication between China and the United Kingdom in this period. Her other research interests include translation history, crime fiction and twentieth-century Chinese literature.

Funding Statement:

This interview is one of the research outputs of the National Social Sciences Fund Major Project "Archival Work and Study on the Overseas Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature (1949-2019)". Project Number: 20&ZD287.