Yang Hao in Conversation: Writing, Translation, and the Changing World

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Guests: Yang Hao; Mark O'Connell; Nicky Harman; Michael Day

Moderator: Prof. Peter Arnds

Location: Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation, Trinity College Dublin

Peter:

Diablo's Boys is Hao Yang's first novel to be translated into English, and earlier this year she also published a new short-story collection in Chinese, *The Long Slumber (《大眠》)*, two stories from which have already been translated. Hao has been recognised by *The Irish Times* as an important new voice in Chinese literature. So let me begin by asking you: what are the central themes of your writing? And what connections do you see between the two books you've published this year?

Hao: Thank you, Peter, for the introduction. And thank everyone for coming tonight. And I also want to say a warm welcome to the two ladies from Chinese Embassy here in Dublin. Thank you for joining us tonight. And let me start with *Diablo's Boys*.

So the Chinese version of Diablo's Boys actually came out in 2021, just after the pandemic. And I finished it while I was in Beijing during the lockdown, almost two to three years. So the whole process of writing it is a kind of shaped by isolation and during that time I thought a lot about things like the stagnation of the world and also within such a world we somehow all become children.

And to borrow the novelist Milan Kundera's words, 'our lyrical age has been prolonged'. And *the Long Slumber*, the Chinese name is *Da Mian* was published in Chinese just this May by People's Literature Publishing House, 人民文学出版社. And it is a collection of short stories, or I'm not sure whether I'm using the short stories in the correct way in its Euro sense. They are more like pieces, fragments, or prose writings. And personally speaking, I feel like they are more like an extension of my own lyrical age. Because everything is uncertain, but just within that kind of meaninglessness there is still some meanings.

And I felt like that this slumber is a cave I built for myself because my life has been always moving and changing. I'm moving between Scotland, London, Dublin, and Beijing. And also I'm moving between changing and traveling. So just within the cave of literature world I've got my own temperature. I can maintain that temperature and I finally find a place to write things. And I want to say something about the cover because you can see from Diablo's Boys the cover image actually from the artwork of a Chinese contemporary artist, Pu Yingwei. 蒲英玮 He has just held his exhibition last month in Bion, France. I chose his artwork because that image, I think, could present some of my writing ideas. The writer with no fixed face, with no gender, with no nationality, and with no clear identity. So that's all I want to say about my writings.

Peter: *Diablo's Boys* is a very interesting text, I find. First of all, it's written in a very beautiful style of translation. (Hao: Translation is very good.) Translation is absolutely poetic and very beautiful. But what I found very interesting is that it combines virtual reality. It blends virtual reality with what we call reality. Sort of going in and out. It reads like a computer game, which it represents. And the reader sort of also becomes a player in this computer game. That seems to be a rather new type of genre. Am I wrong about that? There's other books in other cultures that you've come across where

this sort of happens. That virtual reality penetrates the narrative to such an extent.

Hao: I don't think I'm creating a new genre of literature. I think literature already exists there. So I think I'm just telling reality of our world. People might question about that point because they think reality is just realism. You should review the real life of every people or every society, every class. But I think I'm just writing **another layer of reality**. We live in such a world. Our world itself is just a mixture with so-called reality and so-called virtual reality. So I think it's just the truth of our world today.

Peter: Thank you. That begs the question, what do the translators do with this kind of narrative? What are the challenges of translating that to English from Chinese? I'm very interested to know what particular challenges there are in translating Chinese literature to English. In translation studies, we talk about processes like foreignization versus domestication. Can you address that a little bit?

Nicky: I'll start with the scariest bit of the novel from my point of view. The computer game which opens the first chapter, the game between the boy, Suwei, and his tutor, Li Wen, I found that absolutely terrifying. I had never played or even watched anyone else play a computer game. How was I supposed to translate it? But thanks to my good friends here, we all worked together on it.

More seriously, I actually found it a fascinating and really engaging process, translating this novel. I mean, it's beautifully written. It's entirely contemporary. It's set in China, but you wouldn't say it had a fantastic amount of local colour. It's contemporary in the sense that any reader of English is going to understand what's going on. There are the inner conflicts of the two main characters. Let's not forget the mother, who is this figure lurking in the background. So really, three main characters. That's the boy's mother.

And I found it challenged and taxed me as a translator. But in the best of ways, there weren't a whole lot of historical references. So I didn't need to go back and see how such and such a political campaign has generally been translated or referred to. It just is a pure, lovely narrative story, which is so much fun to get into. And it's so edgy. There's a lot of internal narrative. I mean, those are all generalizations. Anyway, over to Mike.

Michael: Yeah, I think that pretty much verifies my experience, too. This was a little challenging at first, to get the right translation approach for Yang Hao's Style, because a lot of times the sentences seem to be going multiple places at once. So we usually try to break things down so that we know, what is this saying, and then reproduce it. I mean, that's a pretty natural thing to think that translation is. But her work challenged that for me, because you realize that that's incorrect. You want to build a maze for people to get lost in, which is part of the joy of wondering, what's around that corner, where am I at now? Maybe I don't know, but that's actually become something fun.

So to have the quality of going multiple places at the same time, to play a little bit with the reader, that's a lot of fun to be on either end of that game. She's very good at playing with your head, I think. As we got into this text, you have to reproduce that playfulness and that sense of joyfully getting lost. You're not going directly from point A to point B. You can take a lot of detours. You might eventually get to point B. Maybe you'll get to F or Z, or somewhere outside the alphabet in some Chinese character. Who knows? I think it pushed us creatively. It was a lot of fun to work on.

Peter: Mark, a question for you. The affinities between your work and Hao's, do you see things that are similar? You've worked on post-humanism and trans-humanism, which is sort of your world as well a little bit, right?

Mark: Certainly in my first book, there's some crossover. It's interesting to hear you talk about the distinction or lack of a distinction in your mind between reality and virtual reality. I'm very interested in that, both in terms of a subject to think about and to write about, but also I think reality and

fiction are very murky.

That's kind of a big topic for all of my work, is trying to pick apart the kind of tricky distinctions between reality and so-called reality and fiction, and also between non-fiction and fiction as forms. I was really interested, especially in *Diablo's Boys*, I was thinking a lot about how the sort of video game world, and I'm interested to hear that you, it's quite obvious from the book that you know this sentiment and that you have been a gamer, but it's not something that comes into literature all that much, or literary fiction.

There's lots of sort of intertextual kind of, it's a long tradition, kind of intertextual play between fiction and poetry and theatre and in film and so on, but it's very interesting to see you do this with video games. It's not something I personally have seen before, so that was really interesting to me, as somebody who also has a son who spends, I would say most of his waking hours when he's not in school is when he's playing video games, so that distinction is very murky to me in my house as well.

Peter: Well, since you're writing about gaming, there's an interesting theory there by Jan Huizinga, a Dutch theoretic who wrote this book Homo Ludens, the playing human, the human plays, and the theory is that games or play, that play was there before culture, so in that sense your book is kind of, picks up on a very ancient tradition, a very ancient ritual, but it is of course also a novel that sort of reflects a globalizing trend among young people.

And this takes me to this term, world literature. By having been translated, your book is joining the ranks of world literature, because world literature is tied to the act of translation. Translation opens windows to the world, foreign languages do, literature does in general, so these are sort of doors that open up, and world literature is a term that Goethe created in the early 19th century in the 1820s in his conversations with Eckermann, and then Eckermann published his conversations in 1835, 1837, and so the term world literature became established.Goethe actually did talk about Chinese literature at the time, he said he is so happy that he can read Chinese literature and Persian literature, that he can read world literature, and he specifically mentioned Chinese and Persian literature in translation. So this idea of world literature, I don't know, maybe you can address this a little bit, the translators, how you see that, since your book has now gone to the Irish stage of literature, and of course this is the city of literature, so it's very well placed here.

Hao: Actually, I've learned my German at Goethe Institute in Beijing for three years, so it's very interesting you bring this topic up, and I think what's more interesting here, happening with our world, is that our world is becoming flat, more and more flat, but each person lives in their individual world as well, and literature absolutely circulates more widely through translation, but this has also created a new kind of stereotype, I mean, it is as if to be recognized internationally, a good work from Asia should carry a certain sense of taboo, I mean, it should be repressed or written under pressure, mostly under gender issues or political issues, but I think the real difficulties of world literature today is not from those kind of political issues or so-called censorship, because the world is changing, and world literature is changing, and we are changing, Asia is changing. I think the real issues grow just within literature itself, it's like how we define reality, how we define realism, and how is the stereotype of a story should be like, or even a good writer should look like.

Mark: I think it's really interesting, it's something I think about quite a lot in terms of my own work, I mean, my first two books had nothing to do with Ireland. And the kind of work that I did then and still do isn't really legible within the context of Irish literature, in the way that, say, someone who comes to your work looking to get a certain idea of Chinese literature or China is probably going to be confounded pretty quickly. My own work didn't really read as Irish literature, and I find that sort of interesting, it's not a deliberate thing on my part, but yeah, I think what most of us do is non-fiction, not really being part of the Irish literary tradition and so on, but these ideas of what

constitutes a national literature are so kind of, quite restrictive actually. **(Peter**: It's like someone who's trying to get away from the national.) I had no idea that the concept of world literature was coming from a man himself.

Hao: Yeah, it's the same situation with my first book, **the Novel Noir**,黑色小说. People Just arguing, oh, you set your story in London, so how could it be called a Chinese writing, but it's Chinese writing because that's the author, me myself, is a Chinese, I'm writing my own individual experience.

(**Peter**: It's a story of migration essentially, which we have a lot these days, right?)

Hao: I erased the migration background as well, so I'm just setting a few blocks, another kind of labyrinth I make up, so that's what I called the real issues just happen within literature itself. That's all about how you create your own story, how you fabricate your own writing, it's not about your identity or your political background or those things, and also I think Mark raises a very good question about how to define fiction and non-fiction because you see today many good novels, you can't really define they're fictions or non-fictions, so the boundary is blurred. But I think good literature should be blurred.

Nicky: Could I go back to your window metaphor, because I've used it many times when I talk about people ask me why I translate, and to me it's a real joy to think I'm opening a window for readers, and I feel incredibly privileged to be able to do that, to be able to take language that they can't read and produce a version that then they can read. The other side, is it a coin, but anyway the flip side of that is that, I think you mentioned this, that if people know nothing or little about a country and they're reading a novel, they may treat that novel as kind of sociology or treat it as society, and I find it very frustrating. Someone says to me, oh is that really how women live in Beijing, referring to a particular novel that I translated. Well no, I mean yes, but that's not the point, it's a novel, please read it as a novel, don't read it as reportage, but I think that that changes as people read more fiction and non-fiction about a country and a culture. Whenever I want to try and put myself in the shoes of those people who make annoying remarks, I think about literature translated from Arabic, which I've read, I've picked up, it's a completely strange culture to me, and I try and read that as literature, but inevitably I see myself reading it as in some way a portrait of that society, so I realize I'm guilty of the same thing.

Peter: Can I just ask, what are some of the distinctly Chinese paradigms or things in your novel? It's a question for everyone. We talked about how it's not particularly Chinese, but there must be something that is distinctly Chinese.

Hao: Maybe translators could answer that, because I can't discern what is typical Chinese.

Michael: There is, I think it's pretty rooted in Beijing and experiences of children in wealthy families.

Nicky: But it's very easily understandable, the background is very understandable, it's bang up to date, it's very contemporary, because life in Beijing is. You get a lot of Chinese novels where they reference the political, social changes of the last 100, 150 years, because those are deeply embedded in the experiences of consciousness of Chinese people, their writers, their parents, grandparents. This is not like that, it is really bang up to date, but bang up to date in China.

Mark: It's also very interesting that, obviously, video games, and one video game in particular, is such a central part of your book, and video games are kind of a truly global culture, if you want to call it that. I mean, there's almost no need for translation in video games. Of course, the text does need translation, and presumably good translation, but, I mean, when you play video games online, you're playing with people who are trying to communicate with you.

Hao: Worldwide, yeah. It's like the mutual or common experience everyone shares. I think it's just about good and evil, all those things. The basic human nature. (Mark: Yeah, it's the knowledge of all

time.)

Peter: So this is also a bildungsroman, right? This is another term that was used, especially in the context of Goethe and his early novels, minimized as Mandel, The bildungsroman is a German term for a coming-of-age story. But this is also, when I was reading your novel, I was reminded of this genre, because obviously there's a trend nowadays in contemporary literature to parody the 19th century bildungsroman, to turn it on its head and make it an anti-bildungsroman, or a misformation bildungsroman, where there is no development. And it could be argued for these boy characters, the boy especially, that there is no development, right? Or I'm playing the devil with that.

Hao: I haven't thought of that when I was writing. **(Peter**: Stunted though, because of the gaming.) Yeah, I just feel like everybody has become children in our time, and everybody could go back to become children again. So that's why I chose boys instead of another title. If I can choose another title, I would say it's a little bit falling back or something like that, because it's about the stagnation of the world and why the world stops developing. And the development of the world has become another problem for human beings as well. So I don't think they are growing up, because they don't want to grow up. They just want to stay in their time capsule they made it for themselves. But one child could make that, and one child couldn't. But in the end, they all failed.

Peter: And that seems very typical of contemporary literature when it comes to the coming-of-age story. Which also brings me to the question, which you had for me, whether I think that literature can still change the world. So I'm turning that over to you now. Does literature have this impact? And does translation have this impact? That's a very big question.

Nicky: One of the things I most like about translating from Chinese is the range of voices. Which ones will change the feelings of the reader in English and which won't? I don't know. And some of them are more overtly political than others. I mean, I know quite a few translators from other languages into English, and the Russian ones in particular are doing something much more consciously political by choosing the writers that they translate, say, also Ukrainian writers and so on. I mean, this whole world out there of literature is just waiting to be translated. If only we could persuade publishers that they really need to do more of it.

Peter: Speaking of the political, any political messages in your literature?

Hao: In my own opinion, I think literature can change the world. It's an illusion. So that's why I think all the political issues in literature is illusion and delusion we made for ourselves as well. So that's what I said, that the widespread of literature worldwide perhaps created a new kind of stereotypes as well because that will make our focus more on the political issues, like a political poetry of the novels, but not the literature within the novel. So I'm very cheered up by this year's Nobel Prize laureate, Laszlo, because he's a kind of revolutionary within literature itself, but not that politically figure.

So I think today we're talking about political issues in literature just because it's a much safer way because it's not an offense to the readers. I think today, readers and writers, both sides, they have become more cautious or more strategic. They just avoid that risking something uncertain or unknown. But I think one side of writing or one side of literature should risk those unknown or uncertainties. So I just want to give the power of fictions, the power of imagination, back their freedom, free from everything, from politics, from gender, and from nationality, from everything. I want to trust that power again. So that's what drives me.

Hao: Can I ask a question for Mark? Mark, you and I are from very different languages but I see many similarities dealing with human violence and also the coming age. Do you think we are still writing from the same traditions or do you think we are already a part of a shared imaginative space?

Mark: That's a really interesting question. I can see what you mean by the shared preoccupation. I

find it hard to think of myself in writing within or out of a tradition at all. It's not to say that I'm not, it's just that I probably have been in a blind spot as to what that tradition is. As I said earlier, I'm not sure that I really exist comfortably within an Irish literary tradition although there are probably ways in which people could argue that that's true.

One way of thinking about the preoccupations that seems to me that we both have a very similar interest in the all pervasiveness of technology and a loneliness and social atomization within that contemporary space. That's certainly something that I see in your work and I think it's certainly in my book about transhumanism and my collected work as well. The loneliness of hyper-connected capitalism is a big thing for me and I can see that in Diablo's Boys for sure.

Hao: Thank you very much. I feel like if a writer from different languages or from different countries, if they try to get rid of the so-called tradition of their own literature, we have to risk the unknown, like the stereotype of fiction or non-fiction or stereotype of politics issues or stereotype of gender issues or stereotype of the so-called short stories should be like all these issues. But we have to take that risk.

Mark: I think that's one of the wonderful things about translation and reading work in translation is, especially as a writer, you often stumble across things and are surprised by... I always think of it as like hidden influences. You discover a writer you've never come across before and you're like, this is almost an influence that I didn't know then, that you've got to share as part of your work.

Peter: Intertextuality. Julia Kristeva talks about the universe of text, a subconscious influence.

Mark: Speaking of personality, one of the things that I see in your work that is probably to some extent present in my work is a lot of body kind of horror, like sort of abjection. And the stories that I've read, certainly it's there.

Peter: I also think of the theory of cyborgs, Donna Haraway. Your work, as well, about to be a machine, obviously, to be glued to these computer games. They were glued also to our cell phones these days to the point that when we were walking and just constantly looking at the cell phone, it's become part of our body. Another type of hybridity here between the machine and the human on top of the generic, the genre hybridity.

Maichael: Doesn't that play a role in breaking down boundaries between cultures when you can instantly have a connection across the world? Culture almost becomes meaningless or you're carrying your own cultural bubble with you all the time. I think that's something that the concept of world literature and non-world literature, what does that even mean? It seems like everything is either just literature or everything is world literature.

If we're all carrying our own cultural bubbles around with us that are connected to everything and disconnected from everything at the same time. But it seems that whether it's literature, whether it's world literature, whatever it is, that still plays a role. They can connect people. That's still communication. There's some form of connection there. Even in an extreme state of weirdness where culture is being broken down before our eyes.

Mark: I have a technical question or a question of technique for both of you, for Nicky and Michael. I'm just curious about the process of working together on this book. What was the division of labor? How did you... Was it back and forth? I'm just curious how it worked. Have you collaborated with people in the past. It's always different. Every collaboration has a different logic.

Michael: It was split roughly in half, but it wasn't like Mickey did the first half and I did the second half. We tried to make the splits seamless. We just split it up in random places.

Mark: It certainly doesn't read like the work of two translations.

Michael: That's good. We didn't want it to. Also, for me, trying to do this in British English, I can do it about 90% right by myself, but there's some subtleties that I'm not going to get that we had to go over. Words surprisingly have different kind of... Even if it's not in the dictionary, they can have weirdly different uses and different subtleties that we had to go over. I'm glad that it was fairly seamless.

Nicky: It was really a great experience being able to translate this with you. It is not an easy novel to translate because there's a lot which is not entirely clear and I think you spoke about this at the beginning. You have to tease out what is going on in Yang Hao's head and then you have to recreate it in English, but you can't make it too... (**Michael**: It's not one concrete thing always.) You can't make it too clear. You've got to maintain the mystery. You've got, in a sense, to clarify it in your own head and then put it back into its slightly difficult-to-understand state. There were also little bits where I was scratching my head. So I said, what do you mean?

Michael: I just think they try to make their ears scratch their head, which is usually... We're trying to resolve everything, but sometimes I'm tossing that ball back to you. You figure it out. But that's the fun of it too. You've just got a ball tossed at you and you've got to decide what to do. I think that's kind of fun and unexpected sometimes.

Hao: Sometimes I've got the same feeling when you translate those short stories because I think I use a little bit different style writing these short stories.

Michael: With these, yeah, but some of the other ones in the collection, I think you did take a different approach. I did feel that way about the two that I've translated, but you definitely have branched out more and maybe there's some that don't quite feel as much like that. You're being a little more straightforward on the surface, but still...

Mark: When you're translating someone who is as fluent in the target language as Hao, is that a benefit? In this case, it is because she's very understanding and helpful.

Michael: It could go both ways. She's incredibly great to work with. Of course, if they know the language and they have all kinds of feedback and some of it's wrong and some of it's too picky, that can be another thing but certainly that hasn't been our situation.

Nicky: It's been a very good experience because we can actually discuss things. I will do the novel because that's my job, but I have heard translators from Scandinavian languages say that it has been their experience sometimes that the author seems to think that they could have done it better. On the other hand, if they've given over the novel to be translated, that is something they have to accept. That hasn't been my personal experience ever, I'm pleased to say, but I think it can happen. If you've got an author who's very used to using English. They take issue.

Peter: Some authors work very closely with the translators. Gunther Grasse, who always had a reunion every year with his translators from various countries, and Milan Kundera worked very closely with his translators. You must have done that too, to an extent, right?

Hao: It's very interesting actually witnessing the process, the procedure of translating, because it's like translating, sometimes he steals the content of my writing, and it has turned it into another form of my writing. Still keeps some tones, but language very different.

Peter: What about fidelity? There's this notion in translation studies of faithfulness to the original text, and some translators just throw that to the wind. Ralph Mannheim translating the Tin Drum by Victor Grasse just took a whole lot of passages because he didn't want to translate. Did you do any of that?

Michael: I think we had every sentence that was in the original. I think we've both had that. Every sentence has a sentence in it.

Hao: I think both Nicky and Mike, they just entered into my kingdom. That's the rhythm. They keep the same rhythm as myself. That's really good.

Nicky: I think it's very dangerous when translators think that without the agreement of the author or at the very least with the editor. Maybe the author is dead, so sometimes you can't ask the author. But to start chucking stuff out because you don't like it is...

Peter: There are interesting scenarios. I translated one novel from Switzerland, and the translation was published, but the original was never published. What does that do to the whole process?

Nicky: I've done one like that too where it hasn't been published in Chinese and probably won't be.

Michael: I translated a couple of these stories before that book came out in Chinese. It may have been published before the Chinese one was too.

Hao: You are right. I remember. Actually, *The World Map*, translated by Mike, was published before the Chinese version came out.