

# World literature, global culture and contemporary Chinese literature in translation

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**Abstract** The starting point of this article is the concern shown by Chinese writers, academics, and cultural officials in regard to the status and reception of contemporary Chinese literature. One factor often overlooked is the necessity, at this moment in history, for Chinese literature to be translated for the global market. The relative success of contemporary Chinese literature in French, German, and Japanese markets is evidence that the Anglophone market is resistant to foreign literature in general; the relative success of traditional Chinese literature, from Confucius to the 19th century, even in the Anglophone markets is evidence that English-language readers are not prejudiced against Chinese-language literature in general. From these premises, the article looks at ways in which the translation of Chinese literature and its publication for readers outside China can be improved.

**Keywords** Contemporary Chinese literature · Global culture · Literary translation · Traditional Chinese literature in translation · Contemporary Chinese literature in translation

The word ‘culture’ is open to many definitions and shades of meaning, one of the simplest referring to any activity or product related to the arts.<sup>1</sup> The concept that

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<sup>1</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture*, London: Fontana, 1981, pp. 10–14 for a discussion of the developing meanings of the word ‘culture’ within the realm of sociology; see also below note 6.

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cultural products and activities have multiple potential uses and users is a logical extension. In contemporary China, the state's approach to culture has been in many ways indistinguishable from its approach to other commodities produced within its borders: it decrees itself responsible for controlling both cultural production and distribution (the degree of control varying at different periods since 1949), although it has never been able to establish control over its consumption.

One Chinese cultural product that occupies a remarkably high level of official state attention is literature, and fiction in particular (whether the Chinese population at large shares this attention, which in some periods amounts to an obsession, is unlikely). This article focuses on how state officials may use, or wish to use, literature to enhance China's national identity domestically and internationally and to extend its global soft power. It examines literature as a medium over which the state can to a large extent exert control through the processes of writing, publishing, promotion and distribution.

Policies in regard to this control have been in effect since the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In addition to a ministry of culture in the national government, the Communist Party of China has its own cultural departments, and both are supported by government and party units at provincial and local levels. Since the beginning of the present century, while there has been some relaxation in regard to censorship and other forms of control over literature, political and cultural figures have expressed intensified concern over China's image in the world, and consequently over the role of Chinese culture in fashioning this image. At the same time, literary scholars, writers, publishers and readers, some of whom are themselves prominent political and cultural figures, have found room for negotiation and manoeuvre. In using literature to extend China's soft power globally, its promoters have a range of interests that may or may not coincide.<sup>2</sup>

This article begins with an account of a 2010 conference in China on the theme of the global nature of contemporary Chinese literature. Drawing on these discussions, it proceeds to analyse the multiple and variable meanings associated with terms such as 'world literature' and 'global culture' or 'global literary culture' and suggests that the resulting vagueness may have negotiating advantages to the different parties involved in the production and promotion of contemporary Chinese literature. The paper then moves to the question of translation in extending the reach of contemporary Chinese literature around the world: it summarises recent evidence on the failure of contemporary Chinese literature in global literary culture, indicates some areas of misunderstanding in regard to its global reception, outlines measures that could be taken to promote literary translation within China, and notes the role inevitably played by chance and contingency.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph S. Nye, who originally developed the concept of soft power in 1990, claimed in an essay for *Foreign Policy* published in April 2013 that China and Russia failed to understand how to handle it. Soft power was first mentioned in a speech by Hu Jintao in 2007 and has now become a widespread concern in China. See [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/29/what\\_china\\_and\\_russia\\_don\\_t\\_get\\_about\\_soft\\_power](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/29/what_china_and_russia_don_t_get_about_soft_power).

## The issues under discussion

The story begins in October 2010, when I took part in a major conference in Beijing on the theme ‘The global nature of contemporary Chinese-language writing’ [*Dangdai Hanyu xiezu shijixing yiyi*].<sup>3</sup> It is generally acknowledged that major conferences on Chinese culture tend to be organised around issues of current concern in China’s domestic and international policies; this holds true for conferences on literature.

The theme of the 2010 conference was contemporary Chinese literature as a global phenomenon. Participants were invited to consider the apparent mismatch between China’s economic power in the twentieth-first century and its cultural influence across the world. A secondary and related theme was even more painful: the contrast between the limited success of Chinese literature abroad and the strong presence of Western literature in China (‘Western’ here primarily referring to countries where English is either the native language or a widely-used secondary language).

The importance of these themes can be gauged from the conference’s high-ranking support. The main sponsors were Peking University and Renmin University, along with Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao tong University, and some of the major literary journals. The principal conference organizers were Chen Xiaoming from Peking University and Wang Ning from Tsinghua University, both highly regarded scholars with international reputations. It was attended by a large number of scholars, literary editors, cultural officials, and writers from all parts of China. A small number of Chinese scholars from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the United States and Australia, along with two non-Chinese scholars, were also invited to present papers.

Topics that kept reappearing included China’s obsession with the Nobel Prize and Chinese writers’ lack of knowledge about the rest of world. The role of translation in international cultural transactions was given space, but much more attention was paid to foreign literature translated into Chinese than to translation from Chinese into other languages. A small number of diasporic Chinese writers writing in English or other languages were discussed as sources for inspiration; it was recommended, for example, that party and government policy makers regard their inclusion within ‘contemporary Chinese literature’ as a useful strategy towards global outreach.

The programme’s wide range of topics and perspectives was matched by the openness of its participants towards further study and debate. At the same time, some topics were evidently out of bounds. Literary quality, for instance, was raised only indirectly, such as how quality can be assessed.

The most conspicuous absent topic from the conference programme was censorship. This was a matter for regret, since it would have been of interest to discuss its prevalence and mode of operation in present-day China compared with the recent past.

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the Confucius Institute and the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney for having made it possible for me to accept the invitation.

Another absence was related to periodization. The term ‘contemporary’ was not defined but appeared to refer to the period from around 1990–2010, but there was no mention of that particular year before 1990 as the significant marker for the beginning this period although no specific marker was given for the circumstances behind the periodization. It was also inconceivable that the international success among youthful rebels in the late 1960s and early 1970s of cultural revolution products, such as Mao’s little red book, revolutionary model opera or Hao Ran’s fiction, would be given mention.

Finally, there was no mention of the fiasco that resulted from China’s selection as the featured country given special prominence at the 2009 Frankfurt Book Fair, just a year earlier than the conference and therefore fresh in people’s memory. The world’s most important trade fair in publications, the Frankfurt event was attended by publishers of Chinese literature in translation, ranging from the transatlantic English-language Penguin to the PRC’s Foreign Languages Press (FLP). Little seemed to be achieved from this widely publicised initiative, however. On the contrary, the political outrage expressed by the protests made by Chinese dissidents abroad at their exclusion from official events produced headlines around the world that were mostly critical of China’s policy towards writers and suspicious of writers who had chosen to stay in China.

From the lavish scale of the conference events and its silence on certain topics it could reasonably be assumed that the conference had generous background support at high levels of the party and government, that China’s perceived failure in soft power was taken very seriously at these levels, and that the poor reception of contemporary Chinese literature abroad was a problem that needed thoughtful debate. The conference manifesto also clearly implied that it was not simply a scholarly gathering to consider recent research but was expected to deal with matters of cultural policy and their implementation.<sup>4</sup> Participants were being encouraged to propose ways in which contemporary Chinese literature could extend its reach and become better understood globally. They were addressing not only their fellow academics but also Chinese writers, the literary magazines and presses that published their work, and party and government officials in cultural departments.

Since it emerged in the formal papers and the discussions that broader policy views were more widely accepted than the more conservative ones, it also seems reasonable to assume that in this respect the interests of the academic participants were broadly in agreement with their non-academic supporters; that is, the conference backers represented a comparatively liberal faction within party and government ranks. What remained unclear during the proceedings was the extent to which the conference participants were willing to express their perceptions of their factional interests. In some respects, these interests may have differed from the interests or expectations of their backstage supporters.

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<sup>4</sup> Given the long-standing controls over academic life in the PRC it may seem naïve to expect a high-level conference to be other than policy oriented. However, there was a brief period in the 1980s when this control was significantly relaxed. Although contemporary Chinese scholarship is again more independent than in previous decades, the tendency for PhD dissertations on contemporary culture to take the form of policy documents dates back to the 1990s.

Although honoured to be invited, I was initially uncertain about attending this conference because of its policy orientation. On the other hand, the conference themes are important not only to writers and scholars in China but also to teachers, scholars and readers of Chinese literature around the world. So I accepted the invitation and presented a short paper but declined to submit this paper for publication in the conference proceedings.

Over the next 3 years the conference theme has remained a constant preoccupation for discussion with many colleagues.<sup>5</sup> Above all, I remain most grateful to the organisers for having invited me to take part and to all the participants for making it a thought-provoking and stimulating event. The debates were serious; the presenters were passionate; their proposals were vehemently endorsed or rejected; and good humour still prevailed on the conference floor and at conference events. The questions and reflections they put forward continue to figure as major issues in research on modern Chinese literature and its translation.

## Interpretations

Definitions in Western cultural studies tend to be subjective, variable and transient. None has the force of law: all scholars are free to create their own definitions. In principle, the widest possible range of definitions of cultural terms in academic debate is a welcome manifestation of diversity. On the other hand, for practical purposes, most researchers find it advisable to take a more selective approach. Here, I prefer to avoid existing explicit definitions and instead refer to ways in which terms circulate in general public discourse with idiosyncratic interpretations.

The title of this paper consists of three key terms: world literature, global culture and contemporary Chinese literature in translation. Each term seems to be clear in both Chinese and English, and it is commonly taken for granted by literary scholars and critics that they know what they mean. In academic debates, nevertheless, these terms have been defined in widely different ways, and these varied interpretations can have a substantial impact on the way people talk and think about them.

### World literature

An example of the variability of interpretations is the term 'world literature'. The concept of *Weltliteratur* [world literature] originated in early nineteenth century Germany to refer to a new trend: making works from other countries familiar to local readers through translation into German in order to revitalize German literature. Shortly afterwards, Goethe introduced an additional meaning by

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<sup>5</sup> Occasions when I presented earlier versions of this paper include the World Conference on Sinology at Renmin University of China in November 2012. This early and short version, translated into Chinese, is to be published in *Shijie Hanxue* [World Sinology] in 2013.

A more recent version was presented at 'Chinese Literature Re-imagined: A literary festival of texts, images and ideas', sponsored by the Confucius Institute at the Victoria University of Wellington in association with the New Zealand Centre for Literary Translation, August 2013.

advocating *Weltliteratur* as an international reciprocal exchange of literature to promote better mutual understanding among nations. Yet another concept of world literature arose in twentieth century Germany, in which foreign literature was translated in order to boost a national claim to universal culture: in a kind of literary imperialism, Germany became the owner of *Weltliteratur*.<sup>6</sup> What is common in all of these meanings is the implication that the works of fiction, drama, poetry or essays that constitute world literature are of high quality.

By the close of the twentieth century, the expression ‘world literature’ had become subject to widely differing interpretations. The simplest meaning, ‘all the literature in the world’, is admirably clear, but it has been rejected as too broad. The term has also been glossed as ‘literature that can be read in many countries’, ‘literature that is read in many countries’, or ‘literature that should be read in many countries’. A non-specialist definition still in general use is ‘literature of high quality that deserves to be read across the world’, which highlights the question of quality; another common definition that is rarely made explicit is ‘literature not in English that is read in translation in the UK & US’. Less frequent than any of these is the meaning ‘all the translated literature in the world.’

Academic definitions of world literature in the 21st century have become more complicated but are mainly based on concepts related to quality or universality. A common drawback is that they tend to support the author’s predetermined objectives. That is, research on what constitutes world literature may be shaped by a priori definition, rather than the definition arising out of the research.

Despite this range of meanings, it would generally be agreed among academics and the wider reading public that Chinese literature is, always has been and always will be part of world literature, regardless of the status of its writers, the efforts of past and present Chinese governments to promote it, or the history of nation-states and global interactions.

In practice, this consensus is overlooked among contemporary Chinese writers, critics, scholars, cultural officials and other interested parties. What concerns them is something quite different: the *status* of Chinese literature in the world, and especially the status of contemporary Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. It may seem that the research objectives in addressing the *status* of Chinese literature in the world can be addressed fairly precisely. The research questions include whether status is determined by quantitative measures, and, if so, what are these measures, who determined them and how are they applied; or by qualitative measures, and, if so, what are they and how are they determined and applied.

It would still remain a question whether policy makers, informed by precisely targeted research, would be able to produce policies that improve the status of contemporary Chinese literature in the world.

Meanings of the term ‘literature’ whether in English or Chinese have also changed over time. Many scholars will be familiar with the distinction drawn by Tolstoy in the nineteenth century between literature and non-literature as distinct

<sup>6</sup> H. Essmann, ‘*Weltliteratur* Between Two Covers: Forms and Functions of German Translation Anthologies’, in K. Mueller-Vollmer and Michael Irmscher (eds), *Translating Literatures, Translating Cultures: New Vistas and Approaches in Literary Studies*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1998, pp. 149–163.

from good literature and bad literature.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, these distinctions are erased in common usage in many cultures, as ‘literature’ is commonly understood even by literary scholars as ‘good literature’, or ‘serious literature’ or ‘true literature’, while the distinction between good and bad literature is considered unscientific, out of date and of no relevance to scholarship.

The research problem here is that some literary works are in practice excluded from critical attention without that exclusion being explicit. The dominant works in world literature (using the simple definition offered above) are mass-market bestsellers, fiction with only slight claims to literary quality. An example is the US novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown. It was said to be the fastest-selling adult book in history, had sold over 80 million copies by 2011, has been translated into 44 languages, and its author appeared in *Time*’s list of the 100 most influential people of 2005.

More recently, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), an erotic novel by British author E. L. James, first appeared as an e-novel and then was picked up as a paperback.<sup>8</sup> It is the first instalment in a trilogy that dwells on descriptions of sexual practices involving bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism. By the end of November 2012 it had sold over 60 million copies worldwide and has set a record as the fastest-selling paperback of all time. James herself has been named as the world’s richest author of 2013.<sup>9</sup>

It is hardly necessary to add that the critical reception of both of these best-selling novels has been mixed and that their status as ‘literature’ is contested by many ordinary readers as well as literary professionals.<sup>10</sup>

The question is whether the participants in the 2010 conference would be willing to consider the *Da Vinci Code* or *Fifty Shades of Grey* type of bestseller as literature: do they adopt an inclusive approach or do they instinctively exclude overtly commercial writing. There is a tendency among literary scholars in Europe and America to be inclusive, maintaining that the boundaries between genre fiction and literary fiction have never been absolute. If so, then their inclusivity also needs to be explicit and accompanied by some indication of opinion in regard to quality. For example, if the *Da Vinci Code* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are classed as literature it could also be made clear that they are bad literature (actually, terrible literature).

This strategy is in principle available in Chinese literary circles although it is usually ignored. It would certainly be in the interest of some writers and scholars to negotiate with cultural officials (some of them fellow-writers) the advantages of a practical and theoretical distinction between literary status and commercial fame as well as the need to choose between them. On the whole, it is likely that both academics and writers at the 2010 conference would prefer the term literature to be

<sup>7</sup> Williams deals briefly with the same issue with the key word ‘art’ rather than ‘literature’; see *Culture*, pp. 124–125.

<sup>8</sup> *Fifty Shades of Grey* made the transition from a fan fiction e-book to print through an obscure Australian agency, according to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25–26 August 2012, News Review, p. 6; see also a reprint from Guardian News & Media in SMH, 8–9 September 2012, News Review p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/fifty-shades-author-tops-writer-rich-list-20130813-2rtd0.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the review of *Fifty Shades of Grey* by Andrew O’Hagan in the *London Review of Books*, 19 July 2012, p. 29.

applied only to socially and morally responsible writing and not to works that are primarily commercial. They may in fact be reluctant to join in promoting works for overseas distribution that in their eyes don't count as literature.

Publishers and cultural officials may take a different view: a Chinese *Da Vinci Code* could go some way to extending China's soft power and for that reason alone qualify as world literature. In either case, it seems that the criteria for what does qualify as literature (or good literature) and what does not would need to be explicit. The problem lies in trying to formulate these explicit criteria. If made explicit, they may not be a matter of general agreement. Further, it may not be in the long-term interests of literary scholars and writers to be wholly explicit in what they would consider to be the defining characteristics of literature—a task that raises many sensitive issues as well as having defied the best efforts of literary scholars, writers and critics over the centuries. It may suit some interests to acknowledge that the boundaries between elite literature and commercial literature (including genre fiction) are fuzzy; it may suit others to insist on the distinction. So the question of what is meant by 'literature', or 'good literature', is left vague in China as elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, occasions such as the 2010 conference may, behind the scenes, prove to be venues for negotiating some of the factional interests involved.

### Global culture

A recent extension of the term 'world literature', 'global culture' links two concepts.<sup>11</sup> First, the word 'global' implies that technological progress has enabled a kind of rapid or even immediate international impact that intensifies knowledge and awareness of other people and cultures across the world; secondly, the word 'culture' implies that this kind of global impact applies in artistic and creative products as much as in commerce or manufacturing. Terms like 'cultural (or creative) industries', introduced in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are widely accepted as non-problematic descriptions of economically important sectors of national or global productivity. The impact of global culture appears most obviously in the cinema and popular music aimed at a youth market, and where the former association of the word 'culture' with high levels of artistic and intellectual endeavour has been weakened.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to these two cultural products, literature is resistant to globalization: whether popular, middlebrow or elite in design, literature's reliance on language transformation for world circulation alters the original product effectively beyond recognition. Some readers shun translated literature precisely because it is a re-

<sup>11</sup> A starting point for the academic use of this term is Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, globalization and modernity*, London: Sage Publications, 1990. See also Gordon Mathews (ed.), *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for home in the cultural supermarket*, London: Routledge, 2000 and Diana Crane et al. (eds), *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Since Williams's study of 1981, the term 'culture' has become more inclusive, a collective term for the arts including popular arts and entertainment; the original meaning of refinement or cultivation is absent from this usage. For further discussion see Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity*, pp. 1-16 and Crane, *Global Culture*, pp. 1-19.



created product in a way that non-verbal forms such as music, painting and to a large extent cinema are not. Despite this obstacle, there is nevertheless in existence a body of texts that fall within the category of 'global literary culture'.

The re-positioning of literature away from the category of 'world literature' to merely a sector in 'global culture' highlights not only the factor of translation but also the varieties or levels of literature that can be included under the heading of culture in its current non-*é*litist meaning. The most prominent phenomena in global literary culture are in the form of popular and middlebrow fiction, often but not always first written in English. Whereas 'world literature' may be regarded as 'literature of high quality that deserves to be read across the world', the literature featured in global culture is more likely to be novels that appeal to the widest possible audience. The confusion between middlebrow commercial fiction and highbrow serious literature that seems to require endless repeated elucidation in definitions of world literature has become largely irrelevant in regard to inclusive global literary culture.

Apart from the general features associated with globalization, the global reach of literary works is primarily due to the international consolidation of producers and distributors: publishers and booksellers, including both print and online. In addition, increasing world travel and migration by writers and readers have meant that both writers and readers of contemporary literature, especially but not exclusively Anglophone, may be accounted almost as much global citizens as they are national subjects. With both producers and audiences thus mutually engaged, much of what is written and read is already effectively globalized and marketed beyond issues of quality.

A different perspective on global culture arises from the situation of writers who are not from a major Anglophone culture: China is a good example. What does it mean for Chinese writers to produce world literature, or literature with a global reach? Does it mean to write for a vast and unknown readership, or is there a kind of universal humanity that can be reached? Is it to write with a deliberate absence of local colour or with a deliberately exotic colour? Attempts by writers to create a literary product that everyone around the world can understand are risking the creation of a literature that no one in the world is interested in reading. The rewards, on the other hand, to a national culture as well as to the writer, are substantial enough to encourage a risk that carries little penalty for failure.

In short, it could be claimed that Chinese literature, past and present, is part of both world literature and global culture: the problem of its reception arises from questions of its status, how its promoters are willing to present it, and how its writers grasp issues of universality and local colour.

### Literary translation and contemporary Chinese literature in the world

The third term in the title of this paper, contemporary Chinese literature in translation, may seem uncontroversial and unambiguous, and compared to terms like world literature or global culture it is relatively ignored. What constitutes 'world literature' or 'global literary culture' must include translated literature, although this may be seen as merely a technical point of difference between an original text and its translation. My concern is the neglect of the role of translation

in the promotion and reception of contemporary Chinese literature around the world.

The anxiety experienced in Chinese literary circles and among promoters of Chinese soft power is based on solid evidence. According to figures quoted in a 2011 report in the *China Daily*,<sup>13</sup> the last translated Chinese novel to sell even reasonably well in the English-language market was Wei Hui's sensationalist tale of modern sex in Shanghai, *Shanghai Babe*, published in the UK in 2001: this is said to have sold over 300,000 copies. Within a year, I can report from personal observation in the UK, copies had started to appear in second-hand bookshops, and it is no longer to be seen in bookshops. The novel shocked many domestic readers and was probably banned for a brief period, but the scandal was not enough to boost its overseas readership to bestseller status.<sup>14</sup>

Huang Youyi, secretary-general of the Chinese Translators Association and also vice president of China International Publishing Group (which runs the Foreign Languages Press), probably knows more about publishing Chinese literature in translation than anyone else. According to Huang, 5,000 copies of a Chinese book in English is a 'break-even' figure for the FLP; any book that goes beyond 10,000 copies is considered a great success. Only the Chinese classics enjoy such sales; translations into English of modern literature does not reach even these low figures.

One of the complications about world promotion campaigns is that what attracts local readers does not necessarily do well overseas. Jiang Rong's 2004 novel *Lang tuteng* [Wolf totem] sold over four million copies in Chinese but failed to sell in translation. This was despite the facts that its publisher, Penguin, is one of the world's biggest literary publishers; its translator, Howard Goldblatt, is the best known contemporary translator from Chinese to English; and the translated version won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007.

Other industry representatives cited in the *China Daily* report say that no recent literary book from China has made a major impact in the UK: 'none appear in the top 250 new books published in 2010 and probably none in the top 2,500.' According to another industry insider based in Hong Kong, 'Among the new titles being published in the upcoming fall season by 100 independent presses based in the US and UK. There are (only) 17 books translated from Chinese out of well over 500 in translation.' Only one of these books is by a contemporary author; the others are re-translations of Tang dynasty classics and a "definitive" Confucius.

Confucius does well in contemporary China and abroad.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary Chinese literature does not. Works critical of China by Chinese authors published

<sup>13</sup> Chitrallekha Basu, 'The slim years' in *China Daily* 15/07/11):[http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2011-07/15/content\\_12908228.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2011-07/15/content_12908228.htm).

Similar points are made by Bertrand Mialaret in 'Reading Chinese Novels in the West', *Chinese Cross Currents*, vol. 9, no. 2, April 2012, 42-57. I am grateful to Yves Camus for referring me to this article.

<sup>14</sup> McDougall, 'Discourse on Privacy by Women Writers in Late Twentieth-Century China', *China Information*, 2005, vol. 19, no. 1, 97-119; see pp. 102-103.

<sup>15</sup> News of an institute devoted to the propagation of traditional Chinese culture in the outside world has been announced under the title 'Globalization of Chinese culture becomes hot topic'. The institute is headed by Yu Dan, Beijing Normal University professor and celebrity promoter of Confucius in contemporary China. See [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2013-08/06/content\\_16873894.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2013-08/06/content_16873894.htm).

outside China sell more copies than fiction by Chinese authors published in China, whether or not they offer overt criticism of contemporary Chinese society. The most popular post-1949 book about China by a Chinese writer is *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang [Zhang Rong] written in English and published in the UK in 1991; it sold 10 million copies worldwide and was translated into 30 languages; and it is still being sold, read and studied. Its success reinforces the impression that English-language readers welcome or least don't object to books that are critical of contemporary China.<sup>16</sup>

A final example is from my personal experience. In 2011 I spent five weeks as a fellow of the Santa Maddalena Foundation in Tuscany. The founder and director, supported by a small staff, personally selects the fellows for each session. Most of the fellows have been European or American, along with a smaller number of writers and translators from countries across the world. None of them have ever been from China. Knowing this, I had set out with the aim of using my stay there to arrange for an invitation for Chinese writers.

The director, her staff and the fellows were a very literary group of people: all of the novelists spoke a minimum of two or three languages, they were obsessive readers as well as writers, they included people from different parts of the world, and several of them were keen admirers of modern Japanese literature. When it came to Chinese literature, however, there was almost total ignorance: no one who was resident during my stay had read any work of Chinese literature. Two writers based in London knew about Ma Jian's 2008 novel *Beijing Coma*, published in English in the UK; and two people had read *Wild Swans*. Even the director's huge library of books in English, French, Italian, German and other European languages contained only four books related to China: *Wild Swans*; *The Crippled Tree* (1965) by Han Suyin; *Four Hundred Million Customers* (1937) by Carl Crow; and *More Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1970) by Harold Acton.

The director was at first enthusiastic about inviting a writer from China but on reflection decided it was not after all a good idea: she didn't know herself, by work or by reputation, any contemporary Chinese writer; the paperwork would be too burdensome for her small staff; and because of the nature of the foundation it was important that the fellow would be a contributing member of a small community of writers speaking one or more European languages. As it soon became clear that no mainland novelist of good reputation was able to speak any European language well; had a good body of work published in a European language; and had some experience of living abroad or of living in the remote countryside with little means of escape.

From this experience, I believe it unlikely that any Chinese writer will be invited as a fellow of the Santa Maddalena Foundation over the next few years. On the other hand, I am quite sure that the succession of other writers during the next few years will resemble the batch I knew: that is, they will be unaware of the fiction, poetry

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<sup>16</sup> A recent world poll on attitudes towards China in regard to its human rights record, published in *Human Rights Journal* in July 2013 shows largely negative attitudes in most countries apart from the Middle East: <http://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2013/07/international-opinion-of-chinas-human.html>.

and drama by Chinese writers that is increasingly available in translation in one or more European languages.

The lack of interest as illustrated above does not come as a great surprise. The evidence is still that Chinese literature, and especially contemporary Chinese fiction, does not get bought or read by English-language readers. An interview with Penguin management by the Hong Kong *Sunday Morning Post* in September 2012 included many positive sentiments but no real promise of better prospects in the near future.<sup>17</sup> The reasons for this gloom can be endlessly debated, but instead of doing so, it may be more useful to consider how contemporary Chinese literature may become better accepted.

### Strategies and negotiations

Despite the changes to the PRC model of a planned economy that have taken place since 1979, policy makers still operate within a centralized system that relies heavily on planning. It might therefore be thought that PRC policy makers are in a strong position to adopt and implement policies to extend the PRC's soft power on the basis of its rich literary culture. Can strategic planning secure a place for contemporary Chinese literature in the world?

There are three ways in which contemporary Chinese literature can become better known outside China. One is to persuade Chinese people to write in Japanese or a European language. Frankly, I don't see this happening any time soon. Wong Bik Wan, a Hong Kong writer, includes a translation into English by her husband alongside her own most recent novel in the same volume<sup>18</sup>, while this is a welcome experiment, it is unlikely to initiate a new trend. Wong's fiction appeals to a relatively small audience, and not all spouses are competent translators. Again, the combination of English and Chinese texts is not in the same category as the output of successful Chinese writers in English like Lin Yutang or C. Y. Lee (author of the 1957 novel *Flower Drum Song*). Few contemporary Chinese writers have the ability to produce, from their own hands or others', a translation in time for it to be published alongside the original text. The only Chinese writers who are successful in writing in another language are those who are domiciled in another country, such as Gao Xingjian [writing in French in France or Ha Jin writing in English in the US].<sup>19</sup>

A second avenue might be to persuade more people outside China to learn written Chinese to an advanced level. In the last few decades there have been enormous advances in this regard, and it is very encouraging. However, contemporary literature is only one of many subjects for students of Chinese, and

<sup>17</sup> 'A world of difference when publishing on the mainland', interview by Hannah Xu of John Makinson, chairman and CEO of the Penguin Group, Gabrielle Coyne, CEO of the Penguin Group Asia Pacific, and Jo Lusby, managing director of Penguin China, *Sunday Morning Post*, 9 September 2012, p. Books 13.

<sup>18</sup> Wong Bik Wan, *Mori jiidian* [Doomsday Hotel], Hong Kong: Tiandi shutu, 2011; English translation by M. Klin. I am grateful to Wong Nim-yan for drawing this book to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> Questions of nationality are also involved as well as country of residence. The increasing complexity of the mixture of language, ethnic descent and domicile provides ample ground for global research.

mastery of written Chinese at an advanced level is still a rare accomplishment for foreign learners. The number and influence of global readers of literary Chinese texts will grow but will not in the near future become substantial.

The third way is through literary translation: there is no escaping this challenge.

At this point it seems appropriate to return to a definition of world literature suggested earlier: world literature is translated literature, and translated literature is world literature. This definition has an honorable antecedent: it goes back to the concept of world literature formulated by Goethe. In addition, literature in translation is in practice what is often meant by world literature. There is no other way in which most people in most countries can read the literature of other countries.

The translation of contemporary Chinese literature into English over the past three or four decades, whether by Chinese or non-Chinese translators and whether published inside China or abroad, has not been a great success. Little has been translated; the works selected for translation have not necessarily been welcome to translation readers (especially Anglophone readers); marketing has been limited; and there are serious shortcomings in translation quality, even in published translations from reputable presses.

Given these failures, it is quite shocking that the PRC literary world, including writers, scholars and officials, pays little attention to literary translation as an intellectual and creative activity with huge transformational power. It was also disappointing that the topics listed for the 2010 conference did not include translation as the vehicle by which contemporary Chinese literature could spread throughout the world. It could even be said that the conference's main objective should have been to promote research into the status of *Chinese literature in translation* as part of *world literature in translation*.

In this context there are two points worth considering that are not in dispute but are often overlooked.

One is that traditional Chinese literature in translation has been a highly regarded part of world literature not just for decades but for centuries (as for instance acknowledged in the *China Daily* report cited above). There appears to be little readerly or publishing bias against translations of traditional Chinese literature.

Second, whereas translations of contemporary Chinese literature have not been well received among Anglophone readers, translations from Chinese into other languages—German, French and Japanese, for instance—are more successful. Contemporary Anglophone readers are, generally speaking, resistant to translated literature from any culture, with isolated outbursts of enthusiasm for exceptional literary movements or works. The popularity of modern Japanese fiction by writers such as Kawabata Yasunari (writing in the 1930s to 1960s) and Mishima Yukio (writing in the 1950s) was to some extent due to a well-designed and well-funded post-war UNESCO initiative, while the Latin American fever that possessed America and Europe a couple of decades later may have been in part due to the surge in Hispanic migration to the US and the growth of Hispanic Studies. There were special circumstances in both cases, and literary merit was also a major factor. Also notable is that in both cases a whole group of writers from the country or area concerned shared the benefits.

Some individual works achieve world success without supporting circumstances. An example that captured global attention apparently quite by accident is *Sofies verden* [Sophie's World], a 1991 novel by Jostein Gaarder written in Norwegian; in 1995 it was translated into English and other languages, and has since sold more than 30 million copies. It did not lead to increased world interest in Norwegian literature, however, and there are no explanations for its singular and isolated success. Stieg Larsson's crime trilogy, starting with *Män som hatar kvinnor* [Men who hate women, 2006; translated into English as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2008] had sold 15 million copies in the US by 2011 and is still a big seller. It also gave a boost to other Scandinavian crime writers who now reach readers and television viewers across the world.

Breaking into the Anglophone market is difficult but it is not impossible, either for a group of writers or for one writer alone. These examples are also evidence that world bestsellers, including fiction translated into English, do not necessarily come from the world's most powerful and populated countries.

These points taken together undermine the myth that contemporary Chinese writers face unfair discrimination in global literary culture. Mo Yan's award of the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature may put an end to such beliefs; it has certainly given rise to much debate and speculation. Coverage of the award in the Swedish press focused on the personal predilections and activities of the Swedish Academy's members and the likely pressure from China on them; among English-language scholars of modern Chinese literature, the debate had more to do with the literary quality of Mo Yan's fiction, its relation to works by other contemporary Chinese writers, the author's dealings with the Chinese state, and the quality of the English translations. (The quality of Swedish and other translations, despite their importance to Academy members, drew little attention.) Most of these issues had also arisen when Gao Xingjian was awarded the prize in 2000. Some observers maintain that one or both awards were at best a compromise, at worst a capitulation, and in any case a disappointment. What is undisputed is that Mo Yan's award counts as a victory for China's soft power; whether it is a breakthrough for further Chinese literary success is not assured.

In short, despite Mo Yan's personal success, the current position is far from ideal from the perspectives of Chinese literary scholars, critics and writers, teachers of Chinese domestically and abroad, and non-Chinese readers globally. It is worth considering ways in which agents of the Chinese state at different levels could try to change it, with or without encouragement from overseas.

To begin, there is a role for both government and commercial agencies in China: they could commission more translators to translate more contemporary Chinese literature, more editors to edit them, and more publishers to publish them.

National scholarships and awards to literary translators and literary translations could encourage more translators to enter the field.

Literary critics and reviewers could do more in evaluating and publicising literary translations.

Educators could encourage literary translation for its own sake as well as a means of language acquisition.

Academic research could provide data, analysis and reflection on literary translation from Chinese into other languages and from other languages into Chinese.

Finally, the academic field of translation studies, which includes studies of individual translators and studies of individual works in translation, can also promote better translation. (Although translation research has not been much of benefit to literary translators in the past, this is no longer the case. For example, greater awareness of the possible range of choices has encouraged literary translators to have more confidence in their translation practice.) An even greater achievement of translation studies is the attention given to the impact of translated literary works on their host culture, a subject that until recently has mostly been ignored. Most literary writers, however, pay little attention to this field, even when they are translators themselves.

Chinese writers could increase their own world readership by becoming literary translators themselves, from English and other languages into Chinese: Lu Xun is an obvious model. The more familiar that Chinese writers are with non-Chinese writing, the greater the likelihood that they themselves will attract non-Chinese readerships. At the very least, Chinese writers may come to understand and value their translators.

These and other measures have been attempted by university programmes in translation studies and by publishers like the FLP; some are currently being attempted by foreign publishers like Penguin; and some are just items on a personal wish list. The most promising initiative is the recently announced grant to the Chinese Writers' Association to fund translation of Chinese literary works.<sup>20</sup> However, the lack of attention given in most quarters to the translation of contemporary Chinese literature suggests that drastic change will not happen soon. What can be hoped for is small but steady progress, either within the state structure as a whole or on its fringes.

Within the uncertainty and vagueness surrounding the whole issue of literary success, there is plenty of room to manoeuvre, and negotiation based on the factional interests of writers as against presumed state interests is possible. The web magazine *Paper Republic*, devised, written and managed by non-Chinese people living in China, has been allowed to promote the profession of literary translation, and there seems no reason why a similar resource could not be posted by Chinese translators or translation publishers. So what are the Chinese authorities doing? Even if state policy-makers instituted strategies such as those listed above, what chance do they have of success? And what are Chinese writers doing—what can they do—to promote literary translation?

### **The role of chance and contingency**

Future research should help find answers to many questions. Which works and authors are being selected for translation? Which translators and translation

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<sup>20</sup> No official announcement was made of this decision, but the news began to circulate in late August 2013 that awards will be made by September 30 and application forms became available in mid-September.

publishers are carrying out the work? What kind of market forces are in operation? Which non-literary and non-cultural events affect the selection, translation, publication, marketing and reception of contemporary Chinese literature in the rest of the world? Is there evidence that strategic planning could strengthen the impact of contemporary Chinese literature outside of China?

At present there is simply not the research to allow more than guesswork to answer these questions, despite their importance in regard to national policy. The record of national or other official bodies in carrying out the selection, translation, promotion and distribution abroad of contemporary Chinese literature is poor. The achievements of the FLP in Beijing are impressive, but the failure of its twentieth century publication of modern Chinese literature in translation was recognised by the FLP in the 1990s. In recent years the FLP has begun to publish literary translation again, but on a modest scale and in competition with other commercial and academic publishers.

Commercial publishers can be successful in commissioning, publishing and selling works to appeal to a mass readership. Commercial publishers, however, are also far from infallible, as witness Penguin's publication of *Wolf Totem*. Academic translation, like state-sponsored translation, offers accuracy but tends to suffer from poor marketing; it may sacrifice readability for academic purposes. Individual translators acting on private agreements with writers can be creative and imaginative in their own language but may need help with understanding Chinese and may also lack expertise in finding publishers.

In summary, neither governmental agencies, commercial or academic publishers or individual translators are uniquely fitted to set about this task. If it were possible to plan for success, national or world, then surely everyone would have discovered by now how to do it. No matter how dedicated the planning or skillful the strategy, chance and contingency rule: the examples of world bestsellers given above stand as evidence.

My own experience as a translator repeatedly illustrates the role of chance. The first modern Chinese writer I translated, He Qifang, was chosen for me by my academic supervisor through his interest in He's post-1949 academic studies. My translation of He's earlier poetry and prose was published by Queensland University Press because I happened to know the husband of one of its editors. Several years later, a young woman in China read my He Qifang translations, and through her I became acquainted with Bei Dao. So it could be said that it was my academic supervisor in the 1960s who led to me translating Bei Dao's poetry and fiction in the 1980s.

Another example relates to my translation of Ah Cheng's three 'King' stories into English. At first it was difficult to find a publisher, but the translation was eventually commissioned by a British publisher who had read Ah Cheng's work in French translation. It was not a success in terms of sales, but ten years later I was asked to revise it for US readers for publication by a New York literary press. In other words, writers who narrow their horizons by aiming only for US publishers and translation by a small number of Anglophone translators limit their chances of world readership.



## Conclusion

Conferences on literature, such as the one described at the beginning of this article, are themselves cultural products that can be used by a variety of parties for a variety of ends.<sup>21</sup> They allocate blame and praise among literary products, determine to some extent their success or failure, articulate national sensitivities, and draw attention to what is not articulated as well as to what is.

The 2010 conference was not itself an exercise in extending soft power beyond China, since the participants were mostly Chinese people living in China, but its orientation was in line with party and government policies. The conference also demonstrated that issues too sensitive to be discussed in such a forum included censorship, literary quality, negative responses to official overseas promotions and a widespread receptivity outside China to writing that is critical of contemporary China. By drawing Chinese writers, publishers and cultural officials into academic conference debates, it also created opportunities for negotiating policies or promoting strategies to raise the status of contemporary Chinese literature around the world, whether competing in the commercial market or aiming for cultural influence. In underestimating the role of literary translation, however, participants turned their backs on a major resource for global outreach.

Without expert comparison with other kinds of cultural products such as painting or music, it cannot be argued convincingly that the failure abroad of contemporary Chinese literature produced in China is due chiefly to translation issues, but this possibility is worth investigating. It is at least feasible that one way to improve China's global literary status is to promote with vigor and imagination the translation of contemporary Chinese literature. The success of commercial fiction in uninspired translation can have an impact on world opinion, but in the long run high-quality translation of high-quality fiction or poetry may be a more lasting way in which to enhance status.

Otherwise, the most obvious way in which the Chinese state could vastly improve the status of contemporary Chinese literature in the world is by abolishing literary censorship. It would not automatically make all Chinese literature better. However, it would result in the virtual disappearance of the mainland's main challenge to its global literary reach: dissident literature, which at present has privileged access to world media. Without censorship, dissident literature as a category would likely fade away and die.

The term 'world literature' still conveys a sense of élite producers (writers, translators and publishers) and consumers (professional and non-professional readers) who aspire to literary quality, while 'global culture' hardly differentiates between fiction and pop songs. Some of these élite producers and consumers have invested heavily into perpetuating their own status; officials charged with promoting soft power may not consider it relevant to consider any distinction between the two terms. In the end, the distinction between world literature and global literary culture is not terribly significant. Its main purpose here is to highlight the confusions surrounding the implications of terms like literature and culture. The confusion in

<sup>21</sup> See Williams, *Culture*, pp. 61–62.

turn offers space for concepts of fuzzy logic in cultural discourse, making it possible to exercise discrimination without dogmatism. If Chinese academics and writers whose income is partly or wholly supported by the state wish to pursue the goal of world literature (assuming undefined but nevertheless high expectations of quality), this is surely a worthy use of state resources. Equally, if officials and other interested parties pursue the goal of eminence in global culture without concern for more than audience appeal, this is also a valid use of state resources. Both can be preferred, especially by non-Chinese readers, to the previous state of affairs where neither quality nor audience appeal figured highly in national goals.

Evaluations of cultural products are subjective; they fluctuate without apparent cause. A good translation of a well-written novel may lead to international critical acclaim, while a poor translation of a badly written novel may be wildly successful, even if critics dislike it. It may all be down to chance. The haphazard working of literary fame may be unwelcome to planners, but it may also bestow a lucky opportunity on an individual writer (and even a lucky translator).