



**To cite this Article:**

LI HAO. "Translation of Contemporary Chinese *Literature in the English-speaking World: An Interview with Nicky Harman*", *The AALITRA Review*  
Volume 4, 2012, 24-31.

[aalitra.org.au](http://aalitra.org.au)

Australian Association for Literary Translation

# Translation of Contemporary Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World: An Interview with Nicky Harman

LI HAO

Nicky Harman is a well-known London-based Chinese-English literary translator, who has been doing the job for more than ten years. Her major works include *K: The Art of Love*<sup>1</sup> by Hong Ying,<sup>2</sup> *Banished!*<sup>3</sup> by Han Dong,<sup>4</sup> and most recently *Gold Mountain Blues*<sup>5</sup> by Zhang Ling,<sup>6</sup> which was published at the end of 2011. Beyond her work in translation itself, she is very active in promoting Chinese literature to the English-speaking world. She helped to develop Paper Republic, a website aimed at making Chinese authors and Chinese-English translators visible to Western publishers. She is the Chinese-to-English Workshop Leader of the International Literary Translation Summer School administered by the British Centre for Literary Translation, and she organizes bimonthly book club meetings in London, reading contemporary Chinese fiction and discussing translation techniques and theories with other translators. Recently she gave up her job as a lecturer in Scientific Translation at Imperial College London and became a freelance translator. This interview was conducted after the annual Awards Ceremony of *The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize* in London in May 2011.

## *Translation of Chinese Literature in the English-speaking World: The Current Situation*

*Li Hao (LH):* Why did you decide to leave your teaching job at the Imperial College and become a full-time freelance translator?

*Nicky Harman (NH):* I'm fully aware that as a freelancer you can never guarantee that you'll have enough work. But one thing I realized was that I wanted to do as much literary translation as I could. I have fewer financial commitments now and a very supportive husband, so I thought it was time for me to take a leap into the unknown. It's quite an unpredictable business, and whether you can actually make a living out of it, well, some people do, but many people don't. They just do it as a sideline. I thought now it's time for me to stop doing it as a sideline. That means not only doing the translation, but also talking about it to people, running courses about it, and committing myself completely to Chinese to English translation.

*LH:* Are there many translators working full-time?

*NH:* No, not many people work as full-time translators from Chinese to English. I know one, Howard Goldblatt.<sup>7</sup> In a way, that inspired me, though my decision was personal. I know a few Chinese to English translators who really try to fit in as much as they can, but they do need to do other work.

*LH:* What role does translated literature play in British literature? Do you think Chinese translated works are an important part of it?

---

<sup>1</sup> Hong Ying, Nicky Harman and Yiheng Zhao, *K: The Art of Love* (London: Marion Boyars, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Hong Ying is a Chinese writer and poet, best known for her autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Han Dong and Nicky Harman, *Banished!* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Han Dong is a Chinese Avant-Garde poet, essayist, novelist and short-story writer.

<sup>5</sup> Published simultaneously by Penguin Canada and Atlantic Books (UK).

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Ling is a Canadian-Chinese writer.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Goldblatt is a research professor at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA. He is a translator of numerous works of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, including *Wolf Totem* (2008) by Jiang Rong and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2008) by Mo Yan.

NH: That is a very good question since we are here today at *The Independent* Foreign Fiction Festival. On the face of it, the answer is very little. But if you dig a little bit down below the surface, you'll find that some languages are becoming incredibly influential in translation, like French, Russian, Italian, and Latin American writings. Most of them are European languages. As for Chinese writers, I think it's a slow process for them to enter the English literary world. One major reason is that Chinese writing is very different. It's not so much that it's untranslatable, but the writers and readers have different concerns. Many Chinese writers focus on life in the countryside, because that's been important in Chinese culture. It's less appealing in the industrialized West. There's a growing and very interesting trend of overseas writers like Zhang Ling and Yan Geling,<sup>8</sup> who maintain every link with China, win prizes in China, write in Chinese, but actually don't live in China. Their styles of writing have subtly taken on some of the concerns that Western readers look for in writing. I'm not saying that they've become Westernized, but I think that they are rather more outward-looking in their writing style, so it's easier for them to appeal to Western readers.

LH: So you think it's very important for Chinese writing to appeal to Western readers? Don't you think it's much more important for them to remain different?

NH: I don't mean Chinese writing should try to appeal to Western readers. But if they want to be popular in translation, there's got to be a sense of cultural oneness, or shared concerns. You might ask why that should matter to Chinese writers. Why should they change? It's an interesting problem to argue about. But I'm certainly not saying that Chinese writers should change in order to appeal.

LH: Considering the current situation of Chinese-English translated literature, what has been done to raise its profile? I remember you used to talk about Paper Republic, which is a very good website, not only for translators, but also for publishers and readers.

NH: I can only talk about what has happened in the UK. Newspapers like *The Independent* and *The Guardian* have done quite a lot. And arts organizations like the Arts Council in England have given money. If you give money you make lots of things possible. Eric Abrahamsen,<sup>9</sup> who is the founder of Paper Republic, and I spent a whole year working on the website, and we put in many hours, far more than what we got paid for, and developed it. It's very successful as a website and far more influential than it used to be. There was a period when I was working almost full-time on it. That could not have been done without getting any payment.

LH: So Paper Republic is getting more influential in the UK. Are there many publishers coming to the website looking for information?

NH: I would say it is becoming more influential all over the world, because it's a website. More and more publishers are going there, either to look for what books might be available or to look for translators. This was always something that we hoped might happen, that the website would lead publishers to translators. And it did: I got a commission when someone looked at my profile on Paper Republic, and the same happened to Anna Holmwood.<sup>10</sup>

LH: I know you are Anna's mentor in Chinese-English translation. Would you say something about this program?

NH: Yes, I was her mentor on a very good scheme run by the British Centre for Literary Translation, which is a part of the University of East Anglia, and The Translators' Association. That is another initiative which has done something to improve the situation of translators. So you see many things have happened since I started translating ten years ago. But it's a slow process.

<sup>8</sup> Yan Geling is an American-Chinese writer whose most famous novels include *The Banquet Bug* (2006) and *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (1996).

<sup>9</sup> Eric Abrahamsen is a Beijing based Chinese-English translator.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Holmwood has an MA from Oxford University and SOAS, University of London. She has been working as a freelance translator since 2010.

### ***Translation Technology and Literary Translation***

*LH:* Since you used to teach scientific translation to MSc students at Imperial College, do you think literary translation is similar to that? Is literary translation more of a talent or a skill? Can it be taught as technical translation?

*NH:* I think there are certain issues in Chinese to English translation which cross over between technical and literary translation. There are certain issues of style, which affect any kind of translation from Chinese. I would say it's both a skill and a talent, and it helps if you love your own language as passionately as you love the other language. So, yes, it's a skill which can be taught and which you have to work on very hard. But on the other hand, if someone doesn't have a 'feel' for language, and they are not prepared to work on it, then I don't think they are likely to be good literary translators.

*LH:* Did your teaching have any influence on your practice of literary translation?

*NH:* Yes, in a minor way. In a sense it made me analyze just what it was about Chinese which made it difficult to render into English, not from the grammar point of view, but from the style point of view.

*LH:* To what extent does translation technology influence literary translation?

*NH:* Very little. Perhaps only when you need to make your terminology consistent in a very long work. Translation technology programs are sophisticated forms of database, which enable you to remember how you translated certain words or sentences before, and remind you to do it the same way the next time, so that your translation is consistent. Now that I'm getting to do longer and longer works, I find it necessary to remember just how I translated a certain term. Having said that, I don't use a database myself because a database is such a complex thing and I worry about it crashing and losing my translation. But what I do do is create a simple glossary and add to and consult it as I go along. The other main function of translation technology programs – to reproduce the same or similar sentences in a repetitive text – is really irrelevant as basically you're not going to get repeated sentences in literary translation.

*LH:* Even if there are repeated sentences in literary works, they may have different meanings in a different context. Do you think so?

*NH:* Yes, I do.

### ***Translators and Their Role in the Industry***

*LH:* Who are the translators working on Chinese-English literary translation? Do they all have related academic backgrounds?

*NH:* Some do, but most come from very varied backgrounds and some have special areas of expertise, like film subtitling, and so on. If you look on Paper Republic, you'll see where they come from. Some do consultancy work as well as translation. Another is a journalist, and likes translating sci-fi. So you get different people from different backgrounds. In London, there's Julia Lovell,<sup>11</sup> who's an academic. One problem is that as a UK academic, your translation work is rarely recognized or valued by your institution, but she still does it because she's committed to it.

*LH:* Do you think translation theories are important for translators to learn?

*NH:* To a certain extent, yes. Personally, I think that translation theory has enriched my outlook on translation. For example, Christiane Nord<sup>12</sup> talks about honoring the intention of the author. What was the author's intention when he or she wrote that? I find that's a very useful

<sup>11</sup> Julia Lovell is a lecturer in modern Chinese history and literature at Birkbeck College, University of London, and also a translator of contemporary Chinese fiction.

<sup>12</sup> Christiane Nord is the former chair of Translation Studies and Specialized Communication at the University of Applied Sciences, Magdeburg, Germany. She is the representative of the second-generation Skopos theorists in translation studies.

concept. For example, if you have a Chinese author who you know is trying to be funny, then you must make that paragraph funny because that's the author's intention. So rather than focusing solely on the actual words of the text – though they are of course important – it's important for the translator to consider the author's intention.

LH: So you think it's important for translators to communicate with authors if possible?

NH: That's ideal. I have had very fruitful working relationships with authors. Either they check the whole book from beginning to end, or chapter by chapter. Of course that assumes that they understand enough English to read your translation. On the other hand, one of my favourite authors, Han Dong, doesn't understand English, so I can't consult him.

LH: Do you think translated literature has its own life in the target culture? Is it independent from the original work?

NH: Yes, I think it does. Translated literature is like a son or daughter and the original work is the mother or father, if you like. It has an independent existence, but it couldn't have existed without the mother or father.

LH: Do you think the "son" or "daughter" should be different in some ways in order to appeal to the target readers since they are in a different world and the target readership is always different from the original?

NH: I don't know. Personally I've never done what is called "rewriting". This is particularly common with children's books. A friend of mine in Nanjing translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Chinese, and she was asked to rewrite it. Actually when I compared her version to the original, I discovered that she hadn't "rewritten" it very much. She carried lots of original concepts and words over, even though they were very "English".

LH: Do you think the translators play an important role in the whole industry?

NH: In Chinese to English translation, yes. One reason is that most publishers and editors can't understand Chinese. They are very dependent on the translator, unless the authors are able to present themselves sufficiently well and convincingly.

LH: So translators do a lot of work in addition to translating itself.

NH: Yes. Chinese to English translators do. They sometimes have to be promoters, and agents as well, often without payment.

LH: Do publishers and editors interfere with the work?

NH: "Interfere" sounds negative. But editors can improve a translation too, by polishing it. I try not to get too possessive about "my" words, and in fact I've been lucky with my translations. Either almost nothing has been changed, or editorial changes have been largely positive. Even with my newly translated work *Gold Mountain Blues* by Zhang Ling, which is pretty long, they didn't cut it. I was happy with that, because I feel it's such a well constructed story that it shouldn't be cut.

LH: I've noticed that in Britain, there are far more women translators than men. What do you think are the reasons? Is it because women are better at languages or because it's a part-time job?

NH: I have no idea. On the whole, in humanities subjects there are a lot of women, but I don't think it has anything to do with women's different abilities. It's also not because it's a part-time job because many translators I know work more than full-time. I really don't know the reasons.

LH: How do you choose the works to translate?

NH: I'd love to say that I choose the best writing and publishers pay me to translate it! But on the whole it's not true. I realize I'm not very good at selling my personally preferred authors. Some of the authors I most admire probably won't ever be best-sellers in the West. So, mainly,

I translate what publishers offer me. And how they choose their books can be a bit random and down to personal contacts. After all, there are so many books in print in China.

LH: So you think your standards are different from publishers' standards? What are your standards then?

NH: I'm very aware that I don't really know how publishers choose books. After all, I'm not a publisher or an agent. My standard is that the work must be well-written and well-crafted. And it must appeal to me personally.

LH: I remember in our last book club meeting you mentioned that Han Dong is a good author because his language is very simple.

NH: Yes, his language is apparently simple but incredibly carefully chosen. It's clear but in a really beautiful way. He is very subtle and ironic. He has very much his own style but it's interesting that he greatly admires certain authors who have been translated into Chinese like Raymond Carver and Kafka.

LH: I also remember you mentioned that authors like Yu Hua<sup>13</sup> wrote a lot of "crap", is that right?

NH: No, I don't mean "crap" in the sense that he wrote rubbish. He wrote a lot *about* "crap", much of his language is what we call scatological.

LH: So you think that's quite different from the Western style of writing?

NH: Yes, I think so. I think on the whole Western writers don't tend to write very much about things like toilet functions, the way that Chinese writers, especially men, do.

LH: So you won't choose writers like Yu Hua to translate?

NH: I wouldn't say that at all. It's fine that he wrote about "crap". Han Dong writes a lot about "crap" as well. I just regard that as a theme or a style. It's the quality of their writing that counts, while the theme can be anything.

LH: Do you think works related to women are more attractive to publishers?

NH: Perhaps, but I think it also very much depends on the writing and the story.

LH: I've also noticed that publishers seem to be more interested in political issues in China, so books related to the Cultural Revolution and so on are more popular.

NH: I think that's really past. I think most publishers don't expect to get yet another book about the Cultural Revolution now. There was the "Wild Swans"<sup>14</sup> effect, which meant that lots of writers got their memoirs from that period published.

LH: But you think it's not the case now?

NH: It was the case about twenty years ago, but we have moved on a bit. We've realized that China is a more complicated place.

LH: But Han Dong's novel *Banished!*, which you translated, is also about the Cultural Revolution, isn't it?

NH: Yes, it was set in the Cultural Revolution, but it really was about other things. It was about a boy growing up, about his relationship with his father, about a writer's relationship to literature and politics. It had a lot to say about those things. It wasn't a "misery memoir", not at all. It was actually quite funny.

LH: Why hasn't the novel been published in the UK? Why aren't the publishers here

---

<sup>13</sup> Yu Hua is one of China's best-known novelists, whose major works include *To Live* (1993) and *Brothers* (2005, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, published in 1991, is a family history recounting the hard lives of three female generations in China by the Chinese-British writer Jung Chang. The book has been translated into 30 languages and sold over 10 million copies.

interested?

NH: Well, I did try very hard to get publishers interested. Perhaps publishers in the UK go for something that really grabs the readers' attention, like Yu Hua's *Brothers*.<sup>15</sup> Han Dong's book is much quieter, and much more subtle.

LH: So the situation has changed but not much, is that right?

NH: It has changed, but yes, China and the West are still two very different worlds, in literary terms.

LH: Since Chinese to English translators play a very important role in the translation industry, do you think some of them may take the opportunity to manipulate the translated works?

NH: "Manipulating" implies "rewriting" and changing. I can't see that happening without the writer and the publisher being involved at the outset.

LH: Do you think translators greatly influence the choice of works to be translated?

NH: We translators would love to think that we've influenced the choice, but very often it's completely random. It can just be because the author is in the right place at the right time, or speaks English, or the publisher has been told about a single author.

LH: Do you think translators should be creative in their translation?

NH: I think they have to be. Unless they are creative, they are not honouring the intentions of the author. If the author wants their writing to be emotionally engaging, and uses a particular style of language to get that over, then you've got to do the same. Since Chinese as a language is so different from English, you have to be creative.

LH: So you think the translators shouldn't put their subjective intentions into the translation project, as did the Canadian feminist translators, is that right?

NH: That's a difficult one. I very much sympathize with the theory and practice of the feminist translators. I've never actually been in a position to carry it out myself. I think it would be fascinating to do, but I haven't done it. The most subversive I get is to make someone female when the original Chinese doesn't specify a gender but the English requires it!

### ***Personal Experience as a Translator***

LH: How did you cooperate with Henry Zhao<sup>16</sup> in translating *K: the Art of Love*?

NH: Henry had done a translation himself, but that was a translation by a non-native English speaker, which was not appropriate for publishers. It just wasn't English enough. So then I translated the book and he acted as a kind of mentor. It was my first novel, and he checked each chapter as I did it. That's one kind of collaboration.

LH: When you say it wasn't English enough, do you mean if the translator is Chinese, his or her language may be too foreignized for English readers to accept? Is it a rule that translators should always translate into their mother tongues?

NH: That's the general rule, and I think that's pretty important for Chinese to English translation. You've got to consider the reader of the target language translation. Why should they read a book that's written in poor English? And it doesn't do the original writer justice either.

Going back to collaborative translations, there are many different kinds. I've done very interactive collaborations with Chinese people who've been interested in literary translation, and we actually sat down and debated the text and produced the translation together. That's

---

<sup>15</sup> Yu Hua, Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas, *Brothers* (New York: Pantheon, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Henry Zhao is a scholar in Comparative Literature and a translator of many works by Hong Ying, the Chinese novelist and poet.

very creative but it's also time-consuming.

LH: Like the China Fiction Book Club you organize bimonthly here in London?

NH: Yes, the Book Club, where we do collective translations, though not for publication. And I also did a short story together with Pang Zhaoxia, a Chinese teacher here in London. She is a very good person to work with, always helping me to see some of the underlying meanings.

LH: Do you think collaboration is the best model to do Chinese to English translation?

NH: I enjoy it but I wouldn't go as far as to say it's the best model. It might inhibit you as an individual translator, interrupt the flow if you know what I mean! Also sometimes you're not given enough time. I like discussing my translation with others, but I do need to be given enough time by the publisher to do that. At the very least I'd like a Chinese person to have checked it, because we all make mistakes.

LH: Do you think there is a gender difference in the language of translation?

NH: I don't think so. But I know a Chinese female writer Xue Xinran,<sup>17</sup> who strongly believes there is, and she always wants a woman translator. I can't quite see where the differences lie between men and women translators. I think there are far more differences between American English and British English.

LH: You've translated some works by female writers and some by male writers. Have you noticed any gender differences in their languages?

NH: No. It entirely depends on the writer.

LH: Do you find women's works or the female characters in the works easier to identify with?

NH: Sometimes. In my recent translation *Gold Mountains Blues*, I think Zhang Ling, the author, has done a fantastic job of creating a matriarchal figure, telling her story from her girlhood to her old age. She is a very complex and sympathetic character, more so, to me, than her husband.

LH: In the translation of *K: The Art of Love*, what do you think of the two main characters Julian and Lin?

NH: I didn't particularly feel I was drawn to either of them. What I liked in *K* was that I thought Hong Ying had done a great job in describing just how an upper class young English male writer would perceive and react to 1930s China.

LH: Do you think Lin in the book appeals to the western readers as an erotic oriental woman?

NH: Perhaps. I was satisfied in the way the character was drawn. In a sense the book is about Julian rather than about her.

LH: Do you think this novel is feminist in a certain way? Some people think it's a story of a May Fourth new woman's sexual liberation.

NH: No. I think that to find it feminist I would have to find her a more engaging character. I didn't find myself drawn to her.

LH: Do you think there are stereotypes of Chinese women in the West?

NH: Yes. You can see that through the eyes of Julian Bell. And I'm quite sure there are still Western men who would just love the idea that oriental women are compliant, attentive, delicate, not too dominating, etc.

LH: Do you think translated literature will strengthen these stereotypes?

NH: I don't think so. I really don't see that as the main problem. Actually what I see as the

---

<sup>17</sup> Xue Xinran, also known as Xinran, is a British-Chinese writer, whose major works include *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* (2003) and *China Witness: Voices from a Silent Generation* (2008).



main problem is that Westerners know so little about China, and it takes them a long time to learn.

*LH:* Do you think the stereotypes will influence translators in their translation of the image of women?

*NH:* Personally, I can only speak for myself. No. I translate what's in front of me. I'm not in the business of creating a different slant on a work. That comes back to the author's intention. I'm the servant of the author.