A Conversation with Sinologist Charles Laughlin on his Translations of Chinese Literature

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This is a conversation with sinologist Charles Llaughlin on his translations of Chinese literature where he expresses his perspectives based on translation practice, shedding light on overseas translations of Chinese literature.

Charles A. Laughlin is the Ellen Bayard Weedon Chair Professor of East Asian Studies at the University of Virginia. Laughlin received his B.A. in Chinese Language and Literature from the University of Minnesota in 1988, and his Ph.D. in Chinese Literature at Columbia University in 1996. His publications include *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience*, (Duke, 2002). *Contested Modernities in Chinese Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Hawai'i, 2008). Laughlin's translations have appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* and Zhang Er and Chen Dong, eds., *Another Kind of Nation: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Poetry,* and Ma Lan's 2023 bilingual collection, *How We Kill a Glove.* He also co-edited and contributed to the introduction and translations in *By the River: Seven Contemporary Chinese Novella*s (Oklahoma University Press, 2016).

Meng Hua (MH): Charles, thanks for accepting the interview. Let's begin with when and why you started studying Chinese?

Charles Laughlin (CL): It is much easier to answer when (September 1983), than to answer why. I had wanted to learn Chinese for some years before I went to college, because I had been interested in Tai Chi and early Chinese philosophy, and while reading about them (in English, of course), I encountered Chinese characters and became fascinated with the writing system. I also began to wonder whether the English translations I was reading of the Tao Te Ching and Zhuang Zi were missing something, so the prospect of reading Chinese philosophical texts in the original language inspired me. There were many other factors involved, but I think that's the primary reason.

MH: Chinese literature does not seem to encounter accessibility in the United States. Is that true from your translating and publishing experience? What is the current situation of Chinese literature in the United States?

CL: Access and popularity are two different things. A great deal of Chinese literature has been translated into English already, and the pace has accelerated a great deal since I was young, but it hasn't had much impact on mainstream readers for a variety of reasons. The main thing is that these translations have traditionally been published by academic (university) publishers to use as teaching material at universities, so those versions don't usually make it to commercial bookstores. Secondly, more and more literary works (especially novels) are being published by commercial publishers and are available at bookstores, but they are often mixed together with all the other novels of the world, and so a reader would have to know which authors they are interested in reading in advance in order to find them. There is no "Chinese literature" section in bookstores. Third, there is little discussion of Chinese literature in the mainstream

media, although this is changing somewhat due to the associative nature of the internet and social media—you can be drawn into a subject you don't know about because of what someone you follow says, or a link that may appear. The reason there hasn't been a great deal of interest generated in Chinese literature until recently may be that Americans are not that interested in literature in general, and also they seem less interested in reading things translated from foreign languages, as opposed to being written in English in the first place. Thus, many of the most popular books about China are not literature, and they are written in English originally, by either Chinese or American authors. There is a major exception to all of this, however, in Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem*. The entire trilogy is enormously popular in America, and I am fairly certain that Liu is the most well-known Chinese author among Americans.

MH: Your undergraduate degree is in literature, your master's degree is in philosophy and literature, and your doctoral degree is in philosophy. In your opinion, what is the relationship between philosophy and literature? Will the change in direction in philosophy bring about a shift in literary creation, reading, criticism and even translation?

CL: Your question is based on a misunderstanding. The English name of the doctoral degree for any subject is "Doctor of Philosophy"; "Ph.D." Is an abbreviation for that. The Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) represents the coursework done after the Master of Arts (M.A.) in the pursuit of a Ph.D. I have not placed particular emphasis on the study of philosophy during graduate school, although I did take more courses in Philosophy in college than I was required to. As to the relationship between philosophy and literature, that is something I do like to talk about. I believe that literature is an all-purpose discipline; literary works contain philosophy, economics, politics, history, and potentially every area of human endeavor. I think that is what attracted me to it as an approach to learning about China, and it is one way I explain its value to my students. I don't really have an answer for the last question, as I don't know of any change in direction of philosophy. Philosophy is a highly specialised field in America and probably most people don't even know what its direction is presently.

MH: In the study of Chinese contemporary literature, you have paid great attention to Chinese reportage and biographical literature. Does that mean American readers prefer to read such documentary literary texts about China?

CL: I don't choose my subjects of study based on what I think American readers would be interested in. For what it's worth, I choose what to research based on my own intellectual response to the research that has already been done by others. Sometimes it's because I'm inspired by the work of one or two scholars. More often it is because I feel like something interesting I have noticed has been neglected by other scholars in the field. Another reason is that in teaching, or giving conference presentations or lectures, I learn that people are interested in some particular area I have touched upon, and so I explore that area further. That is how I got into studying the informal essay (*xiaopin wen*) from the early 20th century; it came from the enthusiasm some of my PhD students showed while I was teaching the subject. It's also how I arrived at my current research projects on desire and emotion in revolutionary literature and images of aging in Chinese film. You mention biographical literature, but that has not been my focus; I only presented one short paper on biographical literature at a conference in connection with my project on the informal essay.

MH: As a translator, what are the reference standards for you to choose translated works? Will you refer to evaluation systems in Chinese cultural contexts such as Lu Xun Literature

Prize and Mao Dun Literature Prize? The first novella titled *The Beloved Tree* is written by Lu Xun Literature Prize winner Jiang Yun.

CL: I have done little translation since the novella collection *By the River,* and I did not choose the works included in it; they were chosen by Professor Liu Hongtao at Beijing Normal University. Professor Liu and Jonathan Stalling at the University of Oklahoma (where it was published) invited me to assemble a group of translators to translate the works. I like the novella form and I am not widely read in contemporary literature, so I welcomed the opportunity to do the most translating I have ever done for one project (I translated three of the seven works). I had not heard of Jiang Yun, Li Tie, or Xu Zechen (the three authors I translated) before the project, though I had heard of Wang Anyi, Han Shaogong, Chi Zijian, and Fang Fang of course, whose works were translated by colleagues I recruited. I like all the works in the book, but I also think they are probably not easy for most Americans to relate to, and the book has not done well as far as I know. Some of my friends teach out of it for their classes though.

More generally, all the translations I have published so far were assigned to me by others, and I have not yet translated something I chose myself (except for passages in my scholarly work). I would like to translate Mao Dun's *Eclipse* trilogy (*Vacillation* has already been published in English by David Hull, but Disillusionment and Pursuit are still not translated), and novels by Fei Ming like *The Life of Mr. Nobody* and *After Mr. Nobody Took the Airplane,* because I think they're important literary works and probably good reading for lovers of literature. They would also be a good contribution to teaching material in Chinese literature.

MH: One further question about the collaboration, did you refer to your wife's advice in translating the work because she is a Chinese writer?

CL: Yes, of course, I often need to ask her questions about the meanings and usage of Chinese words, her advice about what to read, and even what to translate. Like me, she is a fan of Fei Ming, so we agree I should translate him, but I have three other books to write before I turn back to translation. Ma Lan is not only a writer, but she is also a writer I translate. I have translated more poems by her than any other poet, and we published the bilingual volume, *How We Kill a Glove*, last year with Argos Press, in 2023.

MH: How long did it take you to finish the translation of three novellas in that book?

CL: That's a good question; I don't really remember. I believe it was several months, maybe a year or more. It depends on whether you include revisions based on the feedback from the copy editor, which also took a long time (2–3 months).

MH: As a professor-translator, what is your view on the issue of whether fidelity to the original should be given the top priority in the translated text? And how do you do in the translation of novellas?

CL: I think people who do a lot of translating (I also teach a class on literary translation) don't find it useful to think about "fidelity" as most people might think. Precise accuracy to the semantic meaning of every word often results in bad English writing style; this has been a problem with academic translations of literary works for many decades. Oddly, some of the earliest translations from a century or more ago are just as good or better than newer ones. The most important improvement in the translation of Chinese literature has been the emergence of

younger translators like Eleanor Goodman, Lucas Klein, Eric Abrahamsen, Canaan Morse, Ken Liu, Joel Martinsen, and Jeremy Tiang, who themselves have literary training and talent and publish their own original works of literature. To translators like this, fidelity to the original work is necessary but not sufficient to the success of the translation. The translations they do of Chinese literature are works of English literature in their own right, and they will surely stand the test of time better than most of the old-school academic translations. Julia Lovell, who has translated all of Lu Xun's fiction, is technically an academic translator, but she also happens to be a talented writer, so her Penguin Books edition of Lu Xun will remain the standard of quality for a long time.

I do want to say something more about fidelity, though. Although I think pursuing precision and accuracy from word to word is foolish, that doesn't mean I think translation should be a completely free rewrite of the original. In my own translation practice, I like to look at the grammatical structure of the sentences and the style of the writer and try to find ways to use English to approximate the same feeling the Chinese gives me as a reader. Sometimes I say: the original author is already a translator: they have some vague thoughts and feelings, and their original act of putting them into words is a translation (from non-words into words). Thus, I am not translating the text left by the author, but instead I try to find ways to capture those original thoughts and feelings, and translate them into English, together with the author, rather than after them.

MH: Do you have a specific audience in mind when you are translating?

CL: I translate into American English (Julia Lovell translated Lu Xun into British English). Apart from that, I assume my reader will be someone who already appreciates literature. Apart from that, I let the text guide me, and I'm not going to change the tone or sophistication of the text to try to accommodate a certain kind of reader. The goal is to find the author's voice in authentic and idiomatic American English.

MH: What challenges do you encounter when translating a Chinese novella?

CL: I had some trouble with certain local foods, as I had never heard of them or tasted them before. Also, articles of clothing. Xu Zechen's story "Voice Change" has a character in it who is a schoolteacher in a small town. The narrator says he wears a "*li mao"* which, according to the regular dictionary definition is a "top hat," a very formal hat that European and American men used to wear with a tuxedo, and is generally not worn anymore. I asked the author about this and, using pictures, eventually figured out that what he was talking about was what we call a "fedora," the typical wide-brimmed hat that Western men wore with suits throughout most of the 20th century, which is much more common and fits the historical context better.

Another problem I have to be careful of is dropping out phrases or sentences, especially if they are important, as the editors will not usually discover it. But these problems are not peculiar to the novella. Novellas are sometimes very long so, like full-length novels, they are daunting to the inexperienced translator. On another level, an issue with novellas is that it is hard to get publishers to publish them, as opposed to novels – a single novella is too short for an individual book, so they have to be published together with other novellas. This is one of the reasons we all felt publishing *By the River* was important.

MH: You once said you do not like either footnotes or endnotes. In Xu Zechen's "Voice Change" and Li Tie's "Safety Bulletin", you did not provide any notes. However, in Jiang Yun's *The Beloved Tree*, you added 11 endnote and what for?

CL: I only provide notes when I think the reader has no way of knowing what the text means, and I have no way to smoothly embed an explanation in the text. In *The Beloved Tree*, there were many historical and cultural references that American readers would not understand, and I used notes to explain them. This was not the case in "Voice Change." I would never try to completely avoid notes altogether, but the fewer there are, the more pleasant the reading experience is.

MH: What strategies did you adopt to deal with cultural loaded expressions, for example 刘备跨下的"的卢"(Liu Bei's jinxed horse)、 心较比干多一窍（Her mind more agile than Bi Gan）、饿死不食周粟（starve than to "accept grain from Zhou"），and etc.? Do you make sacrifices to reach a certain level of fluency?

CL: Every phrase deserves special treatment. I don't have a policy that I apply generally. I sometimes like to put set expressions in quotation marks or italics to signal to the reader that they are not ordinary language. If a literal translation is unintelligible to an average American reader, I will consider adding a note. However, if I'm choosing a text to translate, I usually will not choose a text that I feel requires a large number of notes. From a publishing and reading point of view, having to refer to notes when you are reading a literary work is disruptive to the reader's enjoyment.

MH: In translations of various kinds of wine in *The Beloved Tree*, by what ways did you get the knowledge of "Hua'er Jiu (花儿酒)" "Zouma Hua (走马花)" "Man kou Hua (满扣花)" "Loushang Lou (楼上楼)"? Did you have deep conversations with original writers?

CL: Not a deep conversation. I believe I exchanged some emails with Jiang Yun to check my impression of the terms she is using here, but she includes physical descriptions of the differences in the text itself, so my only challenge was what words to choose to translate the terms. As long as the reader can picture the difference between the different wines, it doesn't really matter what I call them.

MH: It seems that you prefer to use pingyin style to cope with units of measurement, like 11 丈（eleven zhang），noun phases with Chinese characteristics, like 炕（kang）、汾阴（Fenyin sui）and why?

CL: It's important to remind readers that translation is not a direct or mechanical process, so when certain terms provide challenges because of conceptual gaps across cultures, I sometimes use the pinyin romanization to draw attention to this distance, and use various means to explain such terms. In the case of units of measurement, as the editor of the book I can explain the equivalents of traditional Chinese units of measurement at the beginning of the book, and then use the romanized unit names in the text (converting them into metric or English units would often lead to odd, fractional numbers). Otherwise, I would use notes. If I prefer the Chinese terms, it's in the interest of not distorting the meaning. As for *kang,* there is no English equivalent, so if I don't romanize it, it would be very complicated to describe. There are

actually a number of English translations of Chinese fictional works that refer to the *kang,* so readers familiar with it from other works need no explanation.

MH: In the process of poetry translation, how do you enable the verses to sound perfectly natural in English both in the rhyme and the form while transmitting the meaning and context correctly, like"晓来谁染霜林醉，总是离人泪(What dyed the frosted forest red at dawn? In the leaving man's tears / the trees drown)"?

CL: First of all, even experts at poetic translation generally avoid trying to rhyme, as it's much more difficult to find rhymes in English than in Chinese, so it deeply disrupts other aspects of prosody in the translation. In modern Chinese poetry, rhyme has also often been discarded anyway.

People have different strategies with premodern poetry to suggest the rhythm, and I approve of using such methods considering the strict structural requirements of those forms. I remember I had a course in college on traditional Chinese poetry that was taught completely in English with translated works, but we learned aspects of traditional Chinese prosody had assignments to write English poems in the style of Tang regulated verse or modeled on other poetic genres we had read, and had assignments in which we had to write English poems in imitation of traditional Chinese poems.

MH: You once said that the translation of foreign literature cannot be considered in the promotion in American universities, so many competent professors and scholars have no time to care about the translation work. Do you think can we consider finding a group of qualified translators among Chinese literature students? There are a certain number of graduate students in Chinese translation programs in the United States, but why are there so few engaged in literary translation after graduation?

CL: Given what I have said about the younger, more talented translators, I am not too worried about this problem. It is true that a published literary translation is not considered as important as a scholarly monograph is for the purpose of promotion, but it would be an exaggeration to say that it "cannot be considered" in promotion. If a scholar has published popular or influential translations, their colleagues and institutions certainly would not ignore that. But I would hope that with many non-academics coming into the translation market, and more different kinds of places to publish translations (online journals and websites, for example, in addition to printed books and literary journals), the translation of Chinese literature does not have to rely so much on the efforts of academic scholars who do not necessarily have literary talent (and shouldn't be expected to).

There are extremely few "translation programs" in the United States, and they are not mainly focused on literary translation, but business and legal translation. However, there are important Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in creative writing programs and short-term residencies for all kinds of translators, including professional translators and academics. These programs not only provide guidance from experienced literary translators and the opportunity to devote time to exploring the theory and practice of literary translation, but also facilitate connections to literary publications, prize competitions, and the community of literary translators and even authors of the source language.

MH: In your opinion, What makes for a qualified literary translator and what are sound relationship among the translation and publication of Chinese literature, the public reading of Chinese literature, and the teaching and research of Chinese literature in universities?

CL: I'll start with the last part: I think the teaching and research of Chinese literature in universities is in a good situation, and has potential to evolve further if given enough space in the academy. The Chinese literature classroom in the U.S. is still the place where the most Americans are exposed to Chinese literary works, and it's a good place because this can be accomplished under the guidance of a knowledgeable professor.

I think academic scholars are decreasingly likely to play a role in who is considered a qualified literary translator. As the translation of Chinese literature, this will increasingly be determined by publication success and literary awards, which are now including more prizes for translated literature. Looking at it this way, it will increasingly be determined by the literary quality of the English translation. The more successful translations of Chinese literature are in the literary market, the more they will be read, and the higher their stature will be in world literature. Academic professors respond to success in the literary market, so for example, most of us are teaching Liu Cixin and other science fiction writers now, so literary success will increasingly affect what is taught in Chinese literature courses.

MH: Do you think the low status of translation leads to the low social status of translators and undesirable translation income, which will further affect the enthusiasm of translators? What is the social status and income of American translators of Chinese literature in the social class?

CL: I wouldn't say translators have low status. Literary translation is generally not considered a profession in the U.S. Its practitioners are usually people who have other professions – some are literary authors, some are college professors, some have professions that are unrelated to literature. Readers are scarcely aware of their existence – their names often do not appear on the cover of books they translate.

Like other forms of translation, to a large extent, literary translation is compensated by the word, at higher rates than other forms of written translation. Well-known translators may be given contracts that compensate at considerably higher than market rates, especially when translating important works and authors. That being said, I think it is unlikely that anyone aspires to make a living entirely on literary translation. Literary translators I know, however, are dedicated to what they do, and will often translate works as a labor of love even without expectation of compensation.

MH: How do you negotiate with publishers? Do they care about closeness to the original language more or to the target language more?

CL: I think you are referring to editors. There are at least three kinds of editor involved with the publication of literary books, two of which are employed by publishers: acquisition editors and copy editors. The other kind are people who propose book projects including multiple works by (sometimes) multiple authors. Such editors may themselves be literary translators or academic professors like myself in the case of *By the River.* Normally the third kind will negotiate with publishers' acquisition editors to secure a book contract (often this will be done through a literary agent). If the contract is signed, the acquisition editor passes the translator or

academic editor along to copy editors (there may be other project managers or editors along the way). The role played by the copy editor is in my experience very important. Although they often do not read Chinese, they mark up every page of the translation manuscript with suggested changes (for better English style) and often challenging questions when the editor is not able to fully understand the translation. Just as I cherish the opportunity to work with collaborators in translation, like the American poet Martine Bellen in translating Ma Lan's poetry, I find these questions and this input to be extremely helpful and important in my own translation practice. I don't know whether award-winning literary translators working through agents have similar experiences, but I imagine they might be different.

MH: Do you have any suggestions to improve the translation and reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world?

CL: The more Chinese literature enters into the U.S. literary scene (publishing and prizes), the more influential it will become among American readers. This is something that relies on the continued efforts of translators as well as professional and amateur critics' podcasts, blogs, and contributions to major literary appreciation social media platforms like Goodreads. It will also help to have editors of world literature textbooks for high school and college to include more Chinese works, helping better familiarize general readers with Chinese literature. Adaptation of Chinese literary works into film and television, which we have already seen in the case of works by Eileen Chang and Liu Cixin, also exposes the broad public to the worlds created by modern Chinese writers.

MH: What plans do you have for future translation projects?

CL: As I mentioned before, I continue to translate Ma Lan's poetry, and would like to translate certain Republican Period works like Mao Dun's *Eclipse* trilogy of novellas and Fei Ming's novels.

MH: What advice do you give to your students who are interested in Chinese language and culture?

CL: I encourage them to think about and communicate what they like about Chinese literature and what special things it offers to American readers. This may not always be the same as what Chinese readers value about their favorite or most revered writers and works, but it is essential to clarifying what Chinese literature has to offer American readers, which will help expand and give direction to the American reception of Chinese literature.

MH: Professor Charles, thank you for sharing your experience on Chinese literature translation and your perceptions of literary translation. We are looking forward to more of your works.

Bibliography

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