

A Golden Heart Swinging Between English and Chinese

Chinese female bildungsroman and transnational writings

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Abstract: This article is an interview with YanLi, a famous bilingual writer, who shares her experience in bilingual writing, and also gives her views on the issues of foreign translation of Chinese literature, Chinese and Western cultural exchange, translation teaching and the female bildungsroman of Chinese migrant writers. It is quite enlightening for the project of "Chinese literature going abroad" and translation teaching and research.

Interviewer's Note: YanLi is a bilingual writer who was born in Beijing. She went to Canada in 1987, and now she has been teaching in the University of Waterloo since 1997. In the same year, she joined the Writers Guild of Canada and served as Vice-President of the Chinese PEN Association of Canada from 2002 to 2007. Her first book, *Daughters of the Red Land*, was nominated for the 1995 Canadian National Book Award for New Fiction and later it was translated into Chinese. She is also the author of the English novel *Lily in the Snow*, the English essay *Along the Silk Road: Essays on Chinese Culture* (co-edited with Brandt and Miller), and the Chinese-English book *Selected Readings in Chinese Literature*. She is the first woman of Chinese descent to receive this award.

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Ling Jiang: Hi, Yan Li. We know that your first book, *Daughters of the Red Land*, was written in English, but why didn't you consider writing it in English instead of your native language?

Yan Li: I was already in my 30s when I went to Canada in 1987, and my country had already left a deep mark on me. Being in a new country, facing all the unfamiliar things, I missed my homeland and my relatives. At the same time, the dramatic changes in my environment have also made me rethink my past experiences, and I have begun to feel the urge to put them into writing. China in the 1980s was still an enigma to Canadians, especially to professors in the university, who were intensely curious about China. And as the first graduate student from China admitted to the history department at the University of Windsor, I immediately became their good helper to help

them to know China. I worked tirelessly every day on various occasions to answer their questions about China. Gradually, I got the idea to write down my past experiences in English to help them understand me and China. I didn't even take the TOEFL exam when I went abroad. I sent several articles I published in China Daily to the schools I applied to study abroad, and they gave me a full scholarship directly. And after living and studying in Canada for several years, I was fully capable of writing in English.

Jiangling: The book *Daughters of the Red Land* has won you several honors and has been selected by several universities in the U.S. and Canada as a teaching reference book for studying modern Chinese history.

Yan Li: I think the first reason is the authenticity of the work itself and the universal values it embodies. The novel is based on my real life, and it describes the confusion, torment and anxiety of small people in a tumultuous social environment when they are faced with various complicated and intricate choices, which shows the complexity of human nature on the one hand, and highlights people's pursuit of dignity, good life and life values on the other. True feelings have the power to touch people's hearts, and the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty is the basic and common demand of human beings, which has no racial or national differences. Secondly, I believe that the orientation of the readership determines the mode of thinking and the choice of writing language in my writing. In the case of *Daughters of the Red Land*, for example, it was a book I was going to write for an English-speaking audience to help them understand China, so I took the differences between Eastern and Western values into account in my writing. This is especially important. Take Ah Q as an example, unlike Chinese literature, which mocks and criticizes him, Western readers show more compassion and sympathy for his suffering. Unlike Chinese readers who are happy to see the "Zhongshan Wolf" killed, Western readers' reaction is: "Huh? He was tricked into a sack and killed? That's terrible!" Therefore, in the process of creating *Daughters of the Red Land*, I always keep in mind that the readership is English readers and I have to consider their value orientation. Secondly, since Chinese and English are two very different language systems, I also had to pay attention to the standardized, concise and logical characteristics of English, as well as using a clear and fluent language style, so the book met the aesthetic needs and reading habits of English readers, and was easily accepted.

Ling Jiang: Later, you translated *Daughters of the Red Land* into Chinese by yourself, that is, "*Red Floating Pimples*", in which there are changes in structure, plot and details. Professor Li Weiping of Shanghai Foreign Language University named your unique translation method as "Innovative Translation". What do you think of it? Why do you choose this approach?

Yan Li: I agree with Prof. Li Weiping's statement. I believe that a literary work written in one language for a specific readership, which is not suitable for the readership of another language in terms of expression. On the basis of faithfulness to the main idea of the original text, the text and structure should be reworked. The so-called "Innovative Translation" means that we do not have to stick to the limitations of the original language. This approach gives me a broader scope of thinking and imagination, as well as more freedom to create. I also took the opportunity to make up for and improve the regrets left by the original work. This kind of re-creation by myself was also out of a fear that the work might end up in an unrecognizable state if it was done by others. When I tried to translate the other English novel of mine "*Snow Lily*" into Chinese, I deleted some of the characters and kept

only the main structure of the original text for rewriting. But after I finished the manuscript, I found that both the characters and the plot were so far removed from the original that I renamed the book "*Under the Sea*".

Ling Jiang: Was it difficult to translate the work you write in English into Chinese?

Yan Li: Not really. Writing in my native language is much easier and more interesting in terms of language and expression. Because the Chinese characters themselves are visually pleasing, and it is also a very enjoyable process for the writer. It is also a technical process that is easy to handle when it comes to adding and deleting the materials. I have a thorough understanding of the cultural backgrounds of both readers. When translating "*Daughters of the Red Land*" into Chinese, I felt that the biggest challenge came not from the textual or technical level, but from the spiritual level. I was in my early thirties when I wrote the English version, and that work reflected my outlook on life and my understanding of the world at that time. By the time I translated the Chinese version, I had already lived in the West for a long time, and had passed the age of maturity, and had tasted all the roles I should play in life. At that time, when I looked back at the path of life, I felt that the English version had many flaws. For example, after the English version came out, many readers reflected that they really liked my realistic portrayal of complex human nature because the characters in the book were full of contradictions and there was no perfect humanity. But years later, as I matured, I had a deeper experience of the complexity of human nature, and at that point I was not satisfied with the original English version. However, because the book is strongly biographical, many of the materials in it come from the painful experiences of family members, relatives and friends, and if we further explore and explore the complexities of human nature in the work, we will inevitably bring harm to our friends and relatives. Therefore, in the process of translating and writing this book, I was often caught in a spiritual struggle: should I pursue new heights in literature and art? Or should I give up everything for the sake of my family? I finally took a compromise, but it still brought me endless trials and tribulations. Perhaps this new ordeal will inspire my future creative work.

Ling Jiang: I noticed that at the end of "*Daughters of the Red Land*" you describe your hometown in two simple sentences: "Everything in the small city looked old and sluggish. Time might have slowed down its pulse here." But these two sentences are expanded to 500 or 600 words in "*The Red Floater*". Why is there such a big difference?

Yan Li: The change of details is due to the consideration of the two different readerships, which is an inevitable addition and deletion in the process of "translation and writing". This was even more obvious when I translated my other work "*Lily in the Snow*" into Chinese. When I wrote "*Lily in the Snow*", I had to take into account the characteristics of the English readership, so I used only a hundred words to describe the heroine's nightmare of being chased and insulted by bad guys in the dark. But when translating into my native language, I did not have to worry about the many differences in language, culture and values, and I let my thoughts wander in the familiar cultural atmosphere. As a result, the hundred or so English words were expanded into 2,500 Chinese characters.

Ling Jiang: When it comes to the foreign translation of Chinese literature, some experts believe that Chinese culture going out is a national strategy, and translating Chinese literature is one of the ways to realize Chinese culture going out. Over the years, the Chinese government has made a lot of efforts and attempts to promote the foreign translation of Chinese literature. What do you think of it?

Yan Li: Is there a standard for assessing the impact of Chinese literature overseas? I think it's actually very simple. Just go to a local library and see how many Chinese books are in the collection and how many times they are checked out. In recent years, the Chinese government has prompted the translation of Chinese literature to Canada, but with little success.

First of all, we have to ask ourselves this question: How many people have a strong interest in the culture and literature of others? In my early years, I studied journalism, and there is a common sense in journalism: the average reader is only interested in familiar people and events. Were it not for China's rapid development over the past few decades, which has affected the lives of people in other parts of the world, outsiders would still not be interested in Chinese culture, let alone Chinese literature. Most ordinary Canadians still know little about China, and they know something like "Chinese food is good", "I heard there is a Great Wall of China", and "A Chinese guy won the award, but I haven't read his work." Chinese Canadians make up less than 4% of the population, and among them, the second generation has largely lost the ability to read and write Chinese, and many have lost the ability to even hear. Those who read Chinese works now are limited to a small circle of first-generation Chinese newcomers. To expect foreigners to learn Chinese and then appreciate Chinese literature is unrealistic.

Second, because of the limited ability of writers familiar with the current situation in China to create works in foreign languages, foreign translations of Chinese literature can only rely on translators, and the current reality is that a large number of translated works cannot effectively enter the vision of readers of other nationalities. This is also caused by a number of reasons. From the perspective of Chinese literature itself, one of the major characteristics of Chinese novel writing is that it unfolds along many branch lines with complex character relationships, especially represented by the chapter and verse novels of traditional Chinese literature, which is composed with hundreds of characters. English readers, on the other hand, are used to linear structure novels with one main character, one family, throughout. So they would find a great comprehension barrier in reading Chinese small. I tried to translate and publish *Married to the West Wind* into English back in 2005, but it was rejected. The publisher thought that every story in the book was wonderful, but the big number of characters was not prominent. Secondly, the Chinese people have 5,000 years of history and culture, not to mention the idioms used in the work are enough to keep foreigners confused. These idioms are simple and concise, yet profound and timeless. They are familiar to Chinese people, but completely unknown to English readers. In the process of translation, if the translator cannot make a simple and clear explanation of these idioms, English readers will slowly lose their interest in reading. Third, Chinese novels lack fluency and compactness, often a pot of flowers or a river can write a paragraph, and English readers will feel bored.

There is another reason that cannot be ignored. The Canadian publishing industry is very competitive. There is a

small purely literary publishing house that publishes nine books a year, while receiving nearly a thousand submissions, relying on literary enthusiasts to screen them. So the difficulty of introducing Chinese literature to Canadians is evident.

Ling Jiang: How do you think we can better translate and introduce Chinese literature and Chinese culture abroad?

Yan Li: I think it is a good thing for China to promote Chinese culture to go abroad, and to provide some help to translate Chinese literature through economic means at the national level, so as to expand its influence. However, we should not be too hasty in spreading our culture, and we should not just focus on the translation, but also on the acceptance of the other side. I think that the real outreach of Chinese culture depends fundamentally on the ability of the Chinese nation to communicate with the world in various fields and the enhancement of its discourse. At the same time, we also need to understand that what we really need is not a curious eye, but a heartfelt appreciation, not a spectator, but an admiration. If you want to export Chinese culture and Chinese literature effectively, the first thing is to have a truly competitive traditional culture and popular culture first, and make your own stuff bigger and stronger first. Others will take the initiative to approach you and learn from you. At present, the domestic side should make more efforts to cultivate a large number of high-quality literary workers and translators, who on the one hand should have solid traditional cultural skills to be competent in understanding and absorbing the outside world, and at the same time should have a sharp mind and broad vision, and be good at drawing nutrients from different cultures. Since I became the director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Waterloo, I have not only organized the regular programs such as "Peking Opera Performance" and "Dumpling Wrapping", but also carried out a number of diverse and informative activities. We have added Chinese literature courses, developed bilingual teaching materials, and established a Chinese language library to inspire and cultivate the interest of the younger generation, and to encourage children of Chinese descent to inherit the splendid culture of their country and pass it on. In October 2017, we invited Professor Li Weiping, Director of the Academic Committee of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Shanghai International Studies University, to give two academic presentations entitled "The Reception of Western Modernist Literature in China" and "Joyce and China", which aroused great interest among Canadian scholars and students. I also led my students to give two lectures on "Western Modernism in China" and "Joyce and China". Not only that, I also led my colleagues to set foot on Chinese soil to experience first-hand the brilliance of Chinese culture and the prosperity of the country. "My Canadian colleagues learned to play Tai Chi in Lu Xun Park in Shanghai, experienced the Hutong culture in Hou Hai in Beijing, and had in-depth exchanges with young students at universities such as Peking University and Shanghai University. They all said they had a good trip and had a new understanding of China. The Chinese nation is an ancient nation, with a glorious history of 5,000 years and valuable cultural deposits, and we overseas Chinese feel proud of this because this is where our roots are. We are honored to share our country's bright culture and flourishing development with the world.

Ling Jiang: In recent years, translators have achieved fruitful results in translating Chinese literature, such as

Ge Haowen's translation that helped Mo Yan win the Nobel Prize for Literature and *Three Bodies* winning the Hugo Award for the best full-length novel, and Liu Yukun's contribution.

Yan Li: First of all, translation is a hard work and an extremely complicated one, requiring a lot of time and energy from the translator, which I myself feel very much when I translate my own works. Although I have a deep appreciation and understanding of Chinese and Western cultures, and I can freely manage bilingual creations, when dealing with the translation of certain specific parts, even when translating my own works, I go through a lot of pushing back, rebuilding and polishing, which is very brain-burning. For more translators who are engaged in professional translation, they face an even greater challenge, which requires not only familiarity with the writer's unique personality and writing style, but also a full grasp of the cultural context in which the writer lives, the demands of which can be imagined. From this point of view, translators deserve a lot of respect. However, I believe that the value of a work is determined first and foremost by its own nature, and that the literary nature of the work, its humanity and its universal values are the most important. The role of the translator is to help the work to be disseminated in foreign lands, to add to it. The two are distinct and complementary. As a writer, I think it is better to explore one's own imagination and use one's own keen insight to write works in one's own style, rather than being swayed by the market, let alone concentrating on the translation itself.

Ling Jiang: In recent years, some experts have proposed to adopt the method of collaborative translation between Chinese translators and foreign translators in the foreign translation of Chinese literature.

Yan Li: I am in favor of this approach. At present, in order to achieve good translation, both Chinese and foreign translators are indispensable. It is very difficult for someone to have such a thorough understanding of both languages and cultures. There are times when people from different cultural backgrounds can translate some words in a superficial sense, but they are unable to really convey the subtle meanings within, because their experience cannot make them understand the characters of all strata of a society.

Ling Jiang: In recent years, the domestic translation profession has developed rapidly and nurtured a large number of translation graduates, but according to the relevant survey, only a small percentage of graduates are actually engaged in translation-related work. Meanwhile, in the face of the challenges of artificial intelligence, what aspects of the teaching of domestic translation majors do you think should be focused on the cultivation of students?

Yan Li: I think there is still a lack of truly qualified translators in China. A good translator must be immersed in two languages and cultures for a long time, and have a fairly high sensitivity to language and culture. Therefore, I think that domestic schools and overseas schools can jointly run schools or students can independently apply to study abroad, so that more and more translation majors can have the opportunity to step out of the country and experience the collision of different languages and cultures first hand. In addition, the teaching of translation majors in China must not neglect the teaching of Chinese language, because the ceiling of foreign language

learning is the mother tongue, so we must not lose sight of this. It is important to cultivate students' enthusiasm for Chinese language and culture as well as to improve their Chinese literacy. Chinese characters are a precious treasure left behind by our ancestors, and they should be treated with reverence. As for the challenges of artificial intelligence, I think it is more like opportunities. From the history of human society, every great change is a risk but also an opportunity. Artificial intelligence will certainly replace most of the human labor, but only to replace the "machine like people". If you are engaged in simple, reproducible, repetitive labor, it will be replaced sooner or later. But literary creation is a unique, original, irreproducible human labor that cannot be replaced. As for translation, machines can replace the relatively single skill in translation, using relatively less human intelligence than the part, so that people can free up more energy to engage in more creative activities. The era of human-machine dance is coming! We should learn more about machines, plug in the wings of machines (technology), and continue to develop innovation, especially cross-linguistic and cross-cultural talents, should continue to improve the efficiency of work with the help of machines.