

# Translation and Ideology in the Integration of National Literature into World Literature: A Dialogue with Professor Peter Hajdu

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**Editor's note:** Peter Hajdu is a senior fellow of the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the chief editor of *Neohelicon*, a major international journal on comparative literature studies. He does extensive research in the fields of comparative literature, theory of literature, and classical philology. His major publications include 6 books and more than 100 papers. Dr. Meng Xiangchun, representing *Language and Semiotic Studies*, had an interview with him, discussing national literature, world literature, translation and ideology. In order for the interview transcript to be more readable, it has been revised and polished to some extent.

## *Abstract*

In their dialogue, Peter Hajdu and Meng Xiangchun focus on the integration of national literature into world literature and the roles of translation and ideology in the process. Peter Hajdu's major ideas include: 1) the selection of a foreign piece of literature mostly depends on the target culture's demands, of which the reception of Petőfi Sándor's "Liberty and Love" is a good example; 2) it is usual that smaller literary communities translate from another smaller community's literature what already had a success in a major market. Peripheries do not communicate directly, but via a center, and this practice also reinforces the privileged position of the center; 3) the hermeneutic circle may help us understand domestication and foreignization in translation. We understand something strange though the familiar and complete strangeness cannot be understood. Therefore it is theoretically possible that making something more familiar helps one understand its otherness; 4) Readers of translated

contemporary Chinese literature tend to be particularly interested in the representation of social reality and political/ideological issues; and 5) Mo Yan's works travel well because they also make use of various Western literary traditions. Meng Xiangchun puts forward a theory that he tentatively terms "the theory of translation dynamics" or "translation interactology" and it will focus on how the numerous factors and considerations in translation act on one another within the target/source language and across languages. Within the framework of translation dynamics, he offers a descriptive parallel comparative 7W approach to integrated translation studies by juxtaposing the 7Ws of the original and target texts and identifying/decoding the nexus among these Ws vertically (of both the original text and the target text) and horizontally (within the same text), the 7Ws referring to "in what context for what who says what to whom in what way with what effect and feedback".

**Keywords:** *national literature, world literature, translation, ideology, translation dynamics*

### Question 1

It's great to have this opportunity to continue our discussion on the integration of national literature into world literature and the roles of translation and ideology in this process. I hope that our dialogue will focus on the four key words: national literature, world literature, translation and ideology. Let me start by referring to a fellow citizen of yours: Petőfi Sándor, whose short poem titled "Liberty and Love" (which reads "Liberty and love/These two I must have./For love, I will sacrifice my life;/For liberty, I will/Sacrifice my love.") has found wide acceptance in China and its Chinese translation by Lu Xun was included in high school textbooks nationwide. Howard Goldblatt states in very explicit terms that translation is not the ideal way, but the only way, for national literature to make its way into "world literary production". What is your comment? And how can national literature written in less influential/international language gain international visibility?

### Answer 1

The Chinese reception of Petőfi is a very good example. He is the national poet in Hungary. An average Hungarian knows several of his poems by heart and is fairly familiar with his life story. He is so important that his oeuvre challenges literary historians because of the very strong interpretive traditions: it is difficult to tell anything of him, because everything seems so evident. But this particular poem has never been in the center of the Hungarian canon. It is rather regarded as a minor poem. Let me describe the context of its creation. In 1847, when Petőfi was 24 years old (entering adulthood according to the law), he decided to publish his *Complete Poems*. For this volume he wrote an introduction, in which he refuted the criticism his poetry had received in the five years of his career as a poet. In the last phase of editing, however, for one reason or another, he decided not to include the introduction and replace it with a motto, namely a suddenly written, untitled, six-line poem,

which became known as “Liberty and Love”. This poem is too short to be regarded as really significant in the Western or in the Hungarian tradition. It appears in the Hungarian school textbooks too, but it is rather read as a nice little something (not even a real poem, only a motto), which smoothly summarizes the two main topics of Petőfi’s poetry.

As a Hungarian, I am happy to know that the poem is so important for China, but it also teaches me the lesson that the selection of a foreign piece of literature mostly depends on the target culture’s demands. I am not saying that “Liberty and Love” is not a brilliant poem. It is. It is very concise, and its dialectical logic, its transparent measuring of the greatest values of human life makes it quite effective as a credo. However, in the Hungarian literary system, we do not appreciate either brevity or transparency so much. What we really appreciate is detailed, sophisticated elaboration. (That is why Westerners tend to have troubles in understanding how a haiku can be regarded as great poetry.) In this case, the poem has intrinsic merits that are much more appreciated in a foreign culture than in its own. They are its merits undeniably, but they made it more successful somewhere else. I believe in translation and in international circulation of literature. But I do not really think that a given culture can decide what to “export”. When in the socialist period Hungarian institutions made plans for foreign translations of Hungarian literature and provided translations, they were not successful abroad, because the selection reflected the Hungarian needs for literature, and it was not identical with the target cultures’ needs. The source culture can offer a variety of literary products, but cannot control the reception and the selection elsewhere.

### **Question 2**

Yes. The source culture can manipulate the selection of literary pieces, but its selection, reasonable perhaps, is by no means a safe guarantee for those pieces’ reception in a different cultural context. I believe whether a literary work can have global repute or find international acceptance has as much to do with the quality of the work *per se* as with the language in which it is written. In addition to its advanced science and technology and economic strength, the English-speaking world has tremendous cultural influence, discourse power, manipulating/dominating mass media, and more importantly, language predominance—the centrality of English among the world’s languages. Therefore, the non-English-speaking world has translated and will translate, willingly or otherwise, far more literary works from the English-speaking world than the other way around. Personally, I do not endorse the idea of cultural ranking—cultural influence ranking is justifiable though, nor do I see much quality imbalance between the literature of the non-English-speaking world and that of the English-speaking world, but I do see some sort of “power imbalance” underpinning literary exchanges across national/language boundaries. What do you think?

### **Answer 2**

This is a very complex and difficult question. First of all, I would like to emphasize that a

global evaluation depends also on a third factor: the demands of the global audience. But it is true that the chance of a brilliantly written English book that is not interesting outside a little local community (e.g. in one particular island of Caribbean) is rather small, since it is necessarily part of the English literary tradition, which is of global scale *per se*. It can much more easily happen that a work produced in a small literary/linguistic community does not offer anything important outside that community, however great it is in its own context. It is also possible that the criteria of literary greatness are sophisticatedly elaborated in a given culture, but others cannot or will not learn or adopt those criteria, therefore they cannot appreciate the translations, even if the translations are able to meet those criteria in a different linguistic environment.

Having said that, however, I do not want to deny that power relations (in the broadest sense of the word) are important for the global circulation of literature. One of my favorite Hungarian prose writers wrote in an essay that the value of a national literature should not depend on its greatest achievements, but on the average production. There was only one Shakespeare, so we should not either measure English literature by him, or compare other nations' greatest poets with him. And any nation can have one genius. That is what he said, but I am not convinced that great literature can be written without a living, rich tradition. Therefore I think the chances to have great literature may be bigger if the market is bigger, if more people are involved in writing, editing, publishing, reviewing and reading literature. I speak only of chances, not trying to imply that the more numerous a nation is, the better literature it creates. Of course not. It depends not on numbers of people, but on the invested (first of all intellectual) capital.

As a European I do not really like your dichotomy of English and non-English, but I have to admit that it is correct. In Europe, French and German also have privileged positions, but not globally. However, we should also speak of the triangle of reception: it is usual that smaller literary communities translate from another smaller community's literature what already had a success in a major market. Peripheries do not communicate directly, but via a center. This practice also reinforces the privileged position of the center.

### Question 3

That practice implies two cycles of opposing nature, one being virtuous and the other being vicious; the peripheral tends to remain peripheral and the center central in any given period of time. It may be a blessing for national literature to become world literature, both for individual credit and national prestige. Paradoxically, however, national literature, already a part of world literature just as a nation is a part of the world of nations, has to *become* world literature via translation. Critics seldom, if at all, ask "whose world" it is or what the distinction between "world literature" and "the world of literatures" actually is. So, for me, "world" literature, to some extent, implies "predominance of the the West and particularly the English-speaking world", which, in turn, means some sort of "inequality". What is your interpretation of the word "world" as in "world literature"?

### **Answer 3**

You are probably right about dominance if we take the notion of world literature in the meaning of a global canon, since canon is related to dominance. Even here I have some doubts: different nations have different canons of world literature, and they are also less monolithic in themselves than one might think. However, I prefer David Damrosch's concept of world literature, which is not based on selection, but on communication. He thinks that every time a piece of literature is read outside its original (national, linguistic, cultural) context, world literature happens. Translation has a crucial, but not an exclusive role in such mediations, since the reading can both happen in translation or in a foreign language. When I, as a Hungarian, am reading a Hungarian book, I do not make it world literature, however great I find it. But when I read a Chinese book in translation or a classical Latin poem in the original, they become world literature, even if I think they are bad. This notion does not imply evaluation, therefore it is fair. Dominance, however, can be a factor here too, as it is usually the case with the affairs of humans. The biggest literary market has a privileged position of making world literature, and the most popular second language has the best chance to supply material for foreign language reading. Nevertheless it is a good thing if people read literature in foreign languages, and also if they read translations.

### **Question 4**

There has been appreciable, constant effort for Chinese culture and literature to "go global". A large proportion of the effort is institutional, by which I mean it is usually initiated, managed, sponsored and supervised by governmental organizations. Most, if not all, of the selected pieces are from among ancient or modern literary canon. But the Western world, or, more precisely, the English-speaking world, seems to be suspicious of the legitimacy of such selection, because many Westerners have almost instinctual distrust in any government, and even the idea of government. Consequently, most of the institutional initiative, supposedly free from political impulses or ends, to promote Chinese culture and literature overseas fails to appeal to the Western readership as expected. There is no doubt that the reasons are very complex, but do you see any ideological reason there?

### **Answer 4**

Governmental, institutional initiatives, as you emphasized correctly, will promote a canon. What I do not believe in is the possibility of an official canon being "free from political purposes". Of course we are suspicious about a preselection made by those in power. Why do they want to provide us with Chinese reading? Is it because they want us to have a good time? Those in power usually are not so altruistic. Or they want us to know better, to understand and like China? That is probable, but in this case they will select for us literary pieces that describe China as pretty likeable. Maybe there is even better literature, which is not offered to us through such official channels, exactly because their image of China is

more complex, more problematic, or more interrogative. The official canon is made with a purpose, and it is biased. There are topics that an official selection will hardly include but Western readers are quite interested in. If such topics are missing, that makes the whole selection suspicious.

This is, however, only a partial explanation. I have to mention again that the source culture can hardly decide what the target culture needs. Through a long period (roughly from 1867 to 1990) Hungary also tried to fund spreading Hungarian literature abroad, and the governmental programs were unsuccessful. The idea was that we know what is valuable in our literature, so we only have to explain to everyone why it is so great. But we could not explain, because we could not teach all the premises of evaluation in our literary system, and we could not teach the complete context. Since 1990 many Hungarian writers became rather successful abroad, and they did not rely on state promotion. Not only contemporary writers, but also earlier ones have achieved success outside Hungary. Sometimes we agree with the foreign appreciation of Hungarian literary products, but sometimes Hungarian scholars have no idea what is liked in some books abroad. What travels well, is not our canon, not our selection. We can offer a rich set, but it is the buyer's right to decide what (s)he wants to pick.

### **Question 5**

That reminds me of an English proverb: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." I think ideology may be the single most influential factor following literary/aesthetic value and it can make or mar a particular literary work in a culture. In many cases, other factors being equal, ideology may rise to become the primary reason for a literary work to be translated into another culture. This may be the case with the translation of many Russian or former Soviet Union writers in China, including A. Tolstoy, Gogol, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov, Alexander Alexandrovich Fadeyev, Nikolai Alexeevich Ostrovsky, to name but a few. Interestingly, you have described in a paper of yours the translation of the Four Great Classical Chinese Novels in socialist Hungary. Do you think there is any ideological consideration for the Hungarian government's sponsorship of the translation? And what is your assessment of the translation activity *per se*?

### **Answer 5**

The best period for translations of Chinese classics was in the early 1960s when the relationship between China and Hungary was quite friendly. Later, however, in the 1970s, it became cold or hardly existent. Of course, the friendly relationship was part of the reason why the state sponsored the translation of the Chinese classics. And it is also important that during the good years the would-be translators could easily get books from China. In the 1970s it became extremely difficult to have Chinese books in Hungary. But this is only a part of the ideological background. I think it is more important that the government was really serious about the cultural program of cultivating the masses,

and they wanted people to have access to world literature. World literature for them necessarily meant a socialist canon of world literature, and China as a friendly socialist country had to provide a substantial part of that canon, but not only because it was a friendly socialist country.

Let me give an additional detail to my paper you mentioned. The first edition of the Hungarian translation of *Water Margin* (published in 1961) claims to be a complete translation. And it is: the complete translation of an edition of 1954, published in the People's Republic of China, which contains the Jin Shengtian edition, namely the first 70 chapters of the text, except the last 3 or 4 pages, whose omission results in an open, more optimistic ending. This optimism obviously had its ideological reasons for the Chinese editors in 1954. But the Hungarian translator may have used this edition merely because that was available in Hungary. In the introduction he wrote that the Jin Shengtian edition is the most popular in China. I do not know. But in 1977 he published an extended translation, which contained a summary of chapters 71 to 119, the complete chapter 120, and the translation of Jin Shengtian's passages omitted from the 1954 Chinese edition. We can say that in 1977 it was not so important to adhere to the Chinese ideological requirements any more; therefore he could use a different kind of original. But we can also say that he wanted to be more accurate philologically, maybe because in the meantime he had the opportunity to get familiar with a less biased edition, and offer his readers a more profound knowledge of the classical text.

### **Question 6**

In that paper of yours, you also mention the issue of “double domestication”. As you have noted, the abridged Hungarian versions of *Hongloumeng* (*The Dream of Red Mansions*) and *Jinpingmei* (*The Golden Lotus*) are based on German translations, hence “double domestication”. Obviously, such “double domestication” means increased readability on the credit side but necessarily further divergence from the original on the debit side. In other words, for readers in general and English-speaking readers in particular, the more “foreign” a translated literary work is, the less likely it is accepted. This also means that oftentimes the success of a translated literary work in the English-speaking world may be possible at the sacrifice of its “nationality” or localness. In contrast, Chinese readers have much more tolerance for, and even expectation of, “foreignness” of translated works than their Western counterparts do. This being said, a question naturally arises: how can the translator reconcile, say, the “Chineseness” of Chinese literature and the “universality” of world literature?

### **Answer 6**

I did mention double domestication as one of the possible explanations. But to be fair we have to admit that many readers want to learn something of a foreign culture through reading literature. When we decide to read a novel created in a culture we are not familiar with, we hope that we acquire some knowledge of it. Familiarity can be as attractive as

otherness. The problem is that the targeted knowledge may be coded in the framework of an unfamiliar literary tradition. However open we are to the otherness of a literary culture, it can be problematic that the different coding undermines our efforts. We do not know how to learn from a radically strange literariness. Abridging may contribute to the familiarization of a text, but the formal familiarization may also help show us the otherness. It is similar to the hermeneutic circle: we do understand something strange through the familiar. Complete strangeness cannot be understood. Therefore it is theoretically possible that making something more familiar helps one understand its otherness.

*Honglouloumeng* and *Jinpingmei* may be successful in Hungary not only due to double domestication but also because they are most similar to Western novels. They are the latest ones of classical Chinese novels, and they are actually contemporary with the beginnings of the European novel. They do not look like short story or tale clusters as *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin* or the *Journey to the West* do. But I have to admit, that *The Scholars* by Wu Jingzi, which is rather highly appreciated in current literary criticism, and which goes back to the same period as *Honglouloumeng* and *Jinpingmei*, and which has a complete, direct Hungarian translation, never could achieve similar success.

*Water Margin* also had a Hungarian translation made from an abridged German edition. However, that text seems more alienating than the later direct translation. To give one single example, the indirect translation gives *pagoda* as the equivalent of *tǎ*, while the direct translation renders it as (the Hungarian equivalent of) tower. I call the first strategy alienating since it obviously creates an exotic, alien world also on the level of vocabulary. The direct translation leaves it to the reader to realize that towers may have characteristic local shapes there, but denotes them with the same word as European towers could be called. So it is difficult to tell how the dynamics of familiarity, otherness, and the interplay of three languages and literary traditions actually work. We can analyze special cases, but they hardly result in finding general rules.

### Question 7

It may be interesting and significant to map out a network of translation dynamics. In fact, I want to construct a theory which I tentatively term “the theory of translation dynamics” (*fanyi donglixue*, 翻译动力学, or translation interactology, *fanyi hudongxue*, 翻译互动学) and it studies the way in which actors/agents in translation act, react to and interact on each other and the way in which these actors/agents, in isolation or combination, realize, define or determine translation in all possible senses and respects within the target language and/or across languages. Within the framework of translation dynamics, a descriptive parallel comparative 7W approach to integrated translation studies can be established by juxtaposing the 7Ws of the original and target texts and identifying/decoding the nexus among these Ws vertically (of both the original text and the target text) and horizontally (within the same text), the 7Ws referring to “in what context for what who says what to whom in what way with what effect and feedback”. It must be emphasized that each

and every W here can be broken down into many sub-categories or types of factors among which more specific relationships can be possibly identified or established. In translation studies, the theory of translation dynamics and the 7W approach it necessitates are compatible with many translation theories and models, contain and can generate many research questions, and make possible more complete and integrated translation evaluation. In translation practice, the approach can help the translator better weigh and balance the many factors and facts involved in translation. I think synthesis and holism in translation studies are as important as analysis.

### **Answer 7**

Your theory and your 7W approach are very original and sound quite promising. In translation studies in the West, analysis is always valued, but synthetic and holistic thinking, which is equally important, seems to be underrepresented. Interconnectedness and synthesis in translation studies cannot be emphasized too much.

### **Question 8**

Thank you. Let's move on to the reception of Chinese literary works in the West. Inevitably though understandably, the West seems to have many misconceptions of contemporary Chinese literature. It is agreed that the literariness of literature should outweigh its ideology, intended or not, and other elements. But, when it comes to the reception of contemporary Chinese literature, things seem to be complicated and frustrating. Some Western critics take contemporary Chinese literary works merely as political texts or mirror-image representations of China's fundamental realities from sociological, historicist, political and even "pathological" perspectives. Do you identify such a situation or trend?

### **Answer 8**

I more or less understand the frustration. However, we'd better take into consideration a couple of features of current literary scholarship and cultural exchange in general. Let us start with scholarship. Thirty or twenty years ago, many major scholars were convinced that literature is mostly self-reflecting and its connection with reality (if any kind of reality exists at all) is very complex and sophisticated. The Marxist term of mirroring became ridiculous. With various trends of criticism, however, the viewpoints of social reality, social experience, implied or criticized ideology became dominant again. Therefore an interest in the political/ideological aspect of literary texts is legitimate now.

And why do people read contemporary Chinese literature? There is no generally applicable answer to this question, of course. Different readers have different motives, and one actual reader may have several motives too. But it is probable that one of the major reasons is the drive to know something of China, a huge country that suddenly became a major player in world economy and politics. China is a country that looks "strange" some way, and that challenges the general Western belief in many aspects. It is a puzzle, which

readers want to solve. Therefore readers of translated contemporary Chinese literature tend to be particularly interested in the representation of social reality and political/ideological issues.

So I find this bias of interpretation understandable, but I also agree with you: interpretations that take into consideration the Chinese literary tradition and focus also on the special aesthetics of the literary artworks are much more desirable.

### **Question 9**

No serious discussion of the reception of contemporary Chinese literature overseas can afford to overlook Mo Yan whose works haven't been translated into more than 40 languages. However, it comes as a surprise that what is most controversial in the West about Mo Yan's Nobel Prize is none other than "his political stance or lack of it". For example, Nobel laureate Herta Müller denounces Mo Yan's winning as a "catastrophe" and Salman Rushdie labels Mo Yan as the government's "pastry" simply because Mo Yan does not have a political posture as they have expected. Many other critics, including Modal Trigger, Peter Ford, John Updike, Dylan Suher, Jerry Yang, Perry Link, Johanthan Yadley, Christian Thomas, to name but a few, basically follow the same paradigm. Why is the impulse to politicize literature so hard to resist?

### **Answer 9**

Herta Müller really experienced the life in a very oppressive social environment, namely Ceaușescu's Romania, and she knows well how oppression affects life and that censorship and self-censorship can have a cramping, devastating effect on literature. For East-Europeans it is difficult to avoid looking at the communist China through the eyeglasses of our historical experiences, which almost necessarily puts politics in the center. But the recent developments of Western literary criticism also tend to politicize the literary interpretation. In such a context, non-politics is also politics: who does not criticize the system explicitly, supports it implicitly. Not stating what is wrong suggests that everything is alright. It goes without saying that it is not how I usually read literature. Actually I think that too direct political focus makes a piece of literature too narrow and prevents it from having an enduring effect on generations of readers. From a more elevated viewpoint on politics, which is not so current, not so anchored in the historical moment, I do not find Mo Yan lacking political stance. And I do not only mean *Frog* with its anti-one-child-policy attitude, but also other, less outspoken works. *The Republic of Wine*, although it represents a fantasy landscape in the style of magical realism, describes a more or less Chinese world, in which the main question, I think, is the dignity of the human body and the human life. If this is not a prime political question, I do not know what is.

### **Question 10**

The whole publication and marketing mechanism of the West seem to favor, among other things, post-Mao "family tragedy" type of novels or non-fiction works of the same nature

such as *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Zheng Nian and *Wild Swan* by Zhang Rong. This also applies to Chinese literary works in translation. It seems that works by “dissident” authors are more likely to attract critical attention and market success. Gao Xingjian’s *The Soul Mountain* may be a good case in point. The Chinese “exile” poet Bei Dao was again nominated as a candidate for Nobel Prize in literature in 2014. From a critic’s point of view, what kind of Chinese literary works may interest Western readers? And what kind of works are worth translating?

### **Answer 10**

It is always a challenge to meet a different literary tradition. A challenge can be both inspiring and frightening. It is interesting because one has the opportunity to learn something new, but it is also difficult, because one does not know which of their interpretive routines one can use and which one should not. One wants to learn something about China and its culture, but must be cautious not to confuse realistic representation of strange social practices with strange literary conventions or a different kind of fantasy. “Dissident writing” is rather familiar for westerners: it is a general presupposition that good literature is always already subversive. Therefore I guess that those works have the best chances with the Western audience that tell them something about China they do not know but in a not completely unfamiliar literary form.

### **Question 11**

As you may have known, translated works only account for about 3% of all the books published in the USA annually, and the percentage of translated Chinese works among the 3% is really insignificant. By contrast, more than 50% of the books published in Germany are translated works. As for China, though there is no statistics, yet the proportion of translated works to the totality of publications must be very high, as we can see it. How do you interpret this situation?

### **Answer 11**

On the one hand, I really appreciate cultures that are so open to the others’ cultural products that translations share a significant cut of the book market. I really interpret it as a symptom of openness. On the other hand, it is also impressive if the inner literary production is so massive that they hardly need translations. The USA data, however, may be a bit misleading, since the literary production in English is already a global phenomenon. British literature does not need to be translated, nor Australian, etc. A huge amount of foreign literature may appear in the market without translation.

### **Question 12**

Most of the contemporary Chinese literary works in translation that are reviewed highly in the West are done by Western translators (sometimes with their Chinese collaborators). Most critics in China encourage the translation into the translator’s mother tongue and

discourage the translation into the translator's foreign language. More and more Western sinologists, scholars or professional translators are involved in translating China, though the number is still small. What do you think of this trend?

### **Answer 12**

A translated work, if it wants to be successful (and by success I do not mean financial or market success, but possible effect on the readers' minds), must be a good work in the target language. A bad translation of an originally good work is a bad work, which cannot perform the task of good literature. Therefore it is obvious that translators should write in the language that they know the best. Of course it does not mean that there cannot be many exceptions. There are many bilingual people, and we know many writers from the history of literature who were able to create great literature in a foreign (second or even third) language. This is, however, rare. Translation needs a creativity that is unusual in a second or third language. I do not say it is impossible that Chinese people learn a foreign language so well that they can be good translators into that language. I only say that it needs immense energies, a long time, and they actually have to live in a foreign linguistic environment for a longer period. Therefore it does not usually happen. But your question seems to imply some doubt about the scholarly character of Chinese translations. With the Chinese texts we have the extra problem of the literary tradition. When translating from one European language to another, the problem is mostly linguistic. We transpose from one language to another, but the differences of culture or literary traditions are not so big. However, even contemporary Chinese literature is embedded in a different (and huge) literary tradition, and a translator needs to know that tradition. Therefore scholars tend to have better chances to be good translators than people who just know the language. And I still have not mentioned the translations of classical Chinese texts. For that we really need academics. In Hungary we see a huge difference between the older and the younger generations of sinologists. As far as I have been informed, the older ones (with few exceptions) do not speak Chinese well, but they know a lot about the classical tradition and ancient Chinese culture. The younger ones speak well and know a lot about contemporary China, but they are not real scholars who could do quality research in Chinese literature. Therefore the younger ones cannot translate literature. For that we still need scholarly abilities.

### **Question 13**

You mentioned that you attended a conference on Mo Yan in China several years ago. How do you see Mo Yan's international success? Do you think it is possible for more Chinese literary works to be received overseas via translation?

### **Answer 13**

First of all I think that Mo Yan is a great author, which is probably the most important factor of his success. I also have the impression that his works travel well. Why is it

so? Because from the viewpoint of poetics, they are embedded in the Western tradition too, or to put it in another way, they make use of various traditions of world literature. This statement does not intend to undermine their Chineseness (although I read that his Taiwanese critics tend to dislike his not so much classic language). But the poetics is very familiar to the global readership while they may know more about China too. I suppose this is not unique. It is rather the result of the recent openness of Chinese cultural life. People who consume global cultural goods want to consume and will produce culture which is not exclusive or old fashioned in a closed traditionalism. Some will call this deterioration and a loss of national heritage, but I think it is a good thing.

#### **Question 14**

My very last question is about the English translation of Mai Jia's *Decoded*, a "red mainstream" work by a former PLA soldier and writer. It is included in "Penguin Classics" and is reviewed very positively in the English-speaking world. Can this move be interpreted as a sign of softening ideological consideration in literary selection across national boundaries?

#### **Answer 14**

I would not go so far. The favorable reception of one work can have special reasons that should not lead to rush conclusions. As far as I can see this work is a rather sophisticated piece with no obtrusive ideological content. China's history and importance is a central feature in it, but the rich mathematical and cryptographic details make it strange in the genre of spy fiction. This "strangeness", however, is somehow familiar. Who is the writer, who used rich detail (although not math and cryptography, but chess and entomology etc.) to create quite original works, and became one of the most canonized post-modern novelists? Vladimir Nabokov. I am not saying that Mai Jia and Nabokov are similar or equally great. I am only saying that Nabokov may provide Western readers with an experience on the basis of which Mai Jia can be appreciated as a writer, while they still can be fascinated about the special content of the otherness.

#### **Question 15**

Thank you very much for your input. I'm looking forward to our further discussions on a wider range of topics about culture, comparative literature and translation.

#### **Answer 15**

The pleasure is mine.

**(Copy editing: Alexander Brandt)**

#### **About the authors**

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