

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND
THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION
Conference Paper

Of Writers and Translators

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The writer is a translator, but the translator is also a writer. The writer authors a text in a chosen language without a blueprint, while the translator uses the authored text as a blueprint to create the text in another language. Both author and translator achieve aesthetic fulfillment through the act of writing, and both hope that their respective texts will be read. The author will of course enjoy the added satisfaction of knowing that his or her creation can be read in another language, that it can transcend language barriers. Theoretically, the translator should also be able to enjoy this satisfaction, because his or her translation too can be used as the blueprint for translations into other languages. Yet, when I signed rights for a Bulgarian translation based on the English edition of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and for a Marathi translation based on the English edition of his *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*, I cannot say that I experienced any personal satisfaction, but I was very happy for the author Gao Xingjian that this was happening.

The authorial writer transforms feelings, observations, perceptions, thoughts, insights, memories, stories and flights of the imagination into a written text. So this act of writing is the *translation* of psychological reality into language, so that it can be shared with another person or persons. The author's act of translating his

or her psychological reality is relatively free, although because writing is a continuing sequence of sentences, the writer's psychological reality can never be portrayed simultaneously, as in the case of a symphony, and the grammar and syntax of the language must be obeyed. Also, the writer must choose a narrative voice, and a genre that best suits what is to be conveyed in the written text. Of course, there are situations in the world where writers and even translators risk their lives by writing, for example in totalitarian regimes, or when ultra-nationalism engulfs the country. But generally speaking, writers and translators hope to share their works with as many readers as possible, and this necessarily depends on publication.

For the writer who writes solely for personal aesthetic gratification it may be hard to find a publisher, and it is likely that many wonderful manuscripts languish in drawers and are eventually lost. At present the market and the might of transnational publishers prevail, so writers are often encouraged to write for readers, that is, to produce bestsellers, especially bestsellers with the potential for being turned into blockbuster movies. Present transnational marketing strategies include aggressive advertising and advance deals with major bookselling chains. Professional translators are often hired so that these bestsellers are not merely national bestsellers, but, released simultaneously in several major world languages, they are international bestsellers.

I am not a professional translator, and I have never accepted a publisher's commission for a translation. I have only translated works that resonate linguistically, intellectually and aesthetically with me. That I started translating the works of Yang Lian and Gao Xingjian is related to China's historical circumstances, and to various chance occurrences. It was also up to me to find

publishers during the 1990s, and that was a time when publishers in the English-speaking world had no interest in publishing Chinese writings, and even less interest in publishing translations of it.

I was a member of the academic staff at the University of Sydney from January 1966 to January 2000, and my teaching and research were largely concerned with late 19th and early 20th century Chinese intellectual history and literature. Unlike in European, Asian and Latin American countries, translation is not regarded as an academic pursuit in the English-speaking world, and, throughout my academic career, translation was denigrated. Nonetheless, I had always enjoyed the challenge of translating Chinese writings, and I would sometimes incorporate these in my teaching materials and research papers. Translation is no longer denigrated in Australia, and, over the past few years, translation courses have in fact emerged. However, these courses are concerned with the study of the process of translation and translation theory, and actual works of literary translation still carry little weight in Australian academia.

The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and exciting writings slowly re-emerged in China, so I included these in my teaching and research. From the mid-1980s Australia began hosting visits by Chinese writers and artists to promote cultural exchange, and the Chinese poet Yang Lian arrived in Australia around the middle of 1988 to take part in the Melbourne Spoleto Festival and the Sydney Writers' Festival. During his stay, he also gave readings at universities and other venues. At his readings, he circulated John Minford's translations to audiences, and then read his poems in Chinese. A formidable and charismatic performance poet, he captivated audiences. John Minford, now Professor of Chinese at the Australian National University, at that time was

Professor of Chinese at Auckland University, and Yang Lian was due to join him there in early 1989.

So it took me by surprise when Yang Lian asked if I would translate two cycles of poems that he had written since arriving in Australia. I told him I was not a translator, and said that he already had John Minford translating his poetry. Somewhat forlorn, he said that John Minford had only recently taken up his Auckland appointment and was too busy. I agreed to look at the poems, and published the translation as *Masks & Crocodile* in the *University of Sydney East Asian Series* in 1990. Following the military crackdown on students in Beijing in the early hours of 4 June 1989, I translated a second book of his poetry called *The Dead in Exile* that was published by Tiananmen Publications in Canberra, also in 1990. In the interim Yang Lian had also given me a handwritten copy of his long cycle of poems bearing the title *Yi* that was inspired by the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*. He virtually begged me to translate it. I liked the work, its conception, and its powerful imagery. I agreed.

By late 1990 I had completed the translation, but for almost a decade I could not find a publisher. However, my translation was known internationally, because it was photocopied and circulated in part or in whole by Yang Lian for his presentations during numerous literary and academic residencies, and at even more numerous literary festivals that he attended throughout Europe, the USA and Asia. He had relocated to London in 1990 and had instantly become a sought-after celebrity poet. In 1999 he won the Italian-based International Flaiano Prize for Poetry and we signed contracts for *Yi* with Green Integer in Los Angeles, although the book did not appear in print until 2002. As I knew nothing about the Flaiano Prize, I checked it on Google. In receiving it, Yang Lian was preceded by

Seamus Heaney (1995), Yves Bonnefoy (1996), Miroslav Holub (1997) and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1998), and followed by Derek Walcott in 2000. Yang Lian was the first Chinese poet ever to receive this prize.

In early 1991, it was together with Yang Lian that I first met Gao Xingjian in his modest apartment in the outer suburbs of Paris. In the course of events Gao Xingjian presented each of us with a copy of his novel that had just arrived from the publishers in Taiwan. I leafed through the book as we sipped wine, ate snacks and chatted. Then, some strange force took control of me, and I found myself asking if he had a translator, and if he wanted me. In a way the 563-page novel *Soul Mountain* had chosen me. Gao Xingjian was startled by my offer, and did not respond for a few seconds. Like so many Chinese writers stranded abroad after the June 4th events of 1989, he was keenly aware that he needed translators. He of course was delighted by my offer.

There was no further discussion. It was a matter of mutual trust. I treated the translation as a mission, but was not able to work on the translation until my term of office as the founding head of Asian Studies ended in the middle of 1993. While translating the novel, mostly on weekends or late at night, I knew that I was working on something important. At the end of 1998, I asked Lyn Tranter of Australian Literary Management to help with finding a publisher. The HarperCollins reviewer said that *Soul Mountain* was not a perfect novel, but it was likely to win prizes, but the report was lost for some months. Contracts were signed in late 1999. Gao Xingjian came to Sydney for the launch of *Soul Mountain* in July 2000, and in less than four months, it was announced that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. HarperCollins Australia had published the book, and at the time of the announcement, Australia and New Zealand were the only

countries where it was available. In the 100-year history of the Prize this was the first time that the Nobel Prize had been awarded for a body of works written in the Chinese language. Gao Xingjian was covered in Nobel gold, and, like his other translators, I was sprinkled with gold dust.

Gao Xingjian had established his reputation as a playwright and a writer of short fiction, dramaturgy and literary criticism in the early 1980s before relocating from Beijing to Paris in 1987. In Paris he was a reclusive writer who earned a living by selling his Chinese ink paintings. When he won the Prize his major works consisted of two novels, a book of short stories and 18 works for the stage, including a mega-scale opera involving 100 performers, singers and musicians. A large number of his works had also been published in French, Swedish and English, and his plays had been staged on all continents, including Australia.

HarperCollins Australia had only purchased the Australian and New Zealand rights to *Soul Mountain* and, right until the Nobel announcement, we could not find a US or UK publisher. The American media world was annoyed that little was known about this Chinese writer Gao Xingjian, apart from the fact that he had written some plays that had caused a sensation when they were staged in Beijing in the early 1980s. The China experts in the USA had correctly predicted that a Chinese writer would win the 2000 Nobel Prize, and for a number of years had been tracking writers with good form, that is, with English translations of their writings. Because the English edition of *Soul Mountain* was released only in July 2000, and, moreover in faraway Australia, Gao Xingjian was simply not on the radar as a potential contender in what was regarded as a big race. In Europe, Gao Xingjian was well known through the French translations of his plays, short stories and novels. I would say that in Australia, he was also well known, because prior

to the Nobel announcement, *Soul Mountain* had sold 4000 copies in less than four months, surpassing the number of copies that had sold of the Chinese edition in a period of ten years. When Gao Xingjian accepted the Prize in December 2000, US and UK editions of *Soul Mountain* of course were on or about to go on the market.

In far away Australia I had no idea that Gao Xingjian had been nominated that year, and I knew nothing about the nomination process. However, I had met the Librarian of the Swedish Academy in Stockholm in 1996, so when the English edition of *Soul Mountain* was published I sent him a copy. I had also met the Librarian in charge of overseas publications from the National Library of China a number of times, and I also sent him a copy. I once spoke to him about Gao Xingjian's writings being banned in China, and he corrected me. He said they are not officially banned, but they can neither be legally published nor sold in China. I have since sent the National Library of China copies of each of my translations of Gao Xingjian's work: another novel *One Man's Bible* (2002), a book of short stories *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2004), and a collection of essays on literature *The Case for Literature* (2006). When I find a publisher for my translation of his second collection of essays *The Aesthetics of Creation*, I will also send a copy to the National Library of China.

By 2000, I had somehow established my credentials as a translator. I have never studied translation theory, or read any analytical writings on translation, but I think I can be regarded as a practitioner of translation. Since then, I have reflected on how I had trained myself in the art of translation, and how I had been drawn to translating the work of these two Chinese writers when translation did nothing to enhance my career as an academic. My knowledge of English and Chinese was entirely acquired in Australia. I grew up bi-lingual, speaking Cantonese and

English, but I was not literate in Chinese. My undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Chinese were undertaken at the University of Sydney. I have never studied in a Chinese environment; such opportunities were not available back then. My undergraduate training was almost exclusively in classical Chinese literature, and I suspect it was this that had developed in me a keen sensitivity to the Chinese language. While studying for my PhD on late 19th century Chinese intellectual history, I had the time to read widely on early 20th century Chinese literature in the context of the intellectual trends that lead to the birth of modern Chinese literature in the second decade of the 20th century. I believe that my interest in translating the writers Yang Lian and Gao Xingjian was sustained by the relevance of their writings to my abiding interest in Chinese notions of the individual.

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