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# THE VOICE OF THE TRANSLATOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD GOLDBLATT

Jonathan Stalling



Howard Goldblatt is recognized as one of the most renowned translators of Chinese literature. He has translated more than fifty books, including novels by the Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan. His other translations include Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife*, Alai's *Red Poppies*, and Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*, co-translated with Sylvia Lin. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and is a member of the editorial and advisory boards of a dozen literary and scholarly journals in Asia and in the West, including *Chinese Literature Today* and *Asymptote*. Furthermore, he is the author or editor of several books and many articles on modern and contemporary Chinese literature and culture.

Jonathan Stalling is an associate professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, specializing in modern-contemporary American and East-West poetics, comparative literature, and translation studies. He is the co-founder and editor of *Chinese Literature Today*. He is the deputy director of the Center for the Study of China's Literature Abroad at Beijing Normal University. His books include *Poetics of Emptiness*, *Grotto Heaven*, and *Winter Sun: The Poetry of Shi Zhi*, which was a finalist for the National Translation Award in 2013.



This interview with Howard Goldblatt was conducted by Jonathan Stalling on November 14, 2014, at The University of Texas at Dallas. The dialogue between the two provides the reader with exciting observations and comments about the misery and pleasures of translating Chinese fictional works into English. Both Goldblatt and Stalling are recognized translators and scholars who contribute greatly to making Chinese literature known in the United States. Goldblatt, who has a deep understanding of contemporary Chinese literature, illuminates the translational processes of carrying the complex fictional structures of Chinese works across the bridge into the language environment of English. The tone of his perceptions takes the reader into the exciting atmosphere of contemporary Chinese writing that has been particularly shaped by writers such as Mo Yan, who received the Nobel Prize in 2012. Goldblatt speaks about foreignization and

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domestication, the sound registers of the Chinese language, the responsibility of the translator to his audience, the tribulations and rewards of moving texts from a source language to the receptor language, and how beginning translators should launch themselves into the art and practice of translation. Goldblatt and Stalling have created a resounding orchestration of communicating the pleasures of bringing Chinese writers to an American audience.

**Jonathan Stalling (JS):** So, Howard, I'd like to start where I think this story so often begins, which is the question of how you first became interested in Chinese. Who was your first teacher? Tell us a little about that first deep engagement with the language.

**Howard Goldblatt (HG):** My path is atypical. I was a college graduate at a time when the question was: what are you going to do now? So I looked around and I decided that I wanted to teach, because that was the only thing I thought I was capable of doing, and I taught for a semester and I said: "You know, I really don't like doing this."

**JS:** What subjects did you teach?

**HG:** Elementary school. I was teaching fourth graders or they were teaching me in ways that perhaps didn't lend themselves well to what I was going to do later, and so I decided that I didn't want to do that, and I realized too late that with Vietnam on the horizon, my number was up. I was going to be drafted. I lived in Long Beach, California, and my father had worked in the shipyards in the war and so I said: "Why don't I try the navy?" And I went down and registered, got accepted into the Naval officer candidate school, went to Newport, completed my four months, and figured for the next three years I'd be on a destroyer someplace or an aircraft carrier. They sent me to Taipei for reasons that absolutely puzzle me to this day. Why did I, out of 300 men, get sent to Taipei? So I went and I had a wonderful time there. My first time out of the country! I was introduced to a culture that was totally mystifying to me. I knew no words of Chinese, I had never studied the language. I did my job, I did a pretty decent job, I think. I learned a few things, but not as many as twenty-one-year-olds ought to learn. I was then sent from Taiwan to a ship. I was out in the Pacific, going to Vietnam, going to all places. When I got to the end of my tour, the government said: "You know, Vietnam is getting hot," and I said: "No, thanks, not for me." They said: "But we need to keep young officers around, so we'll send you anywhere you want to go if you'll stick around." So I said: "Well, I enjoyed Taipei." They said: "We'll send you back." So I went back to Taipei; I was two years older. Something clicked, Jonathan, I have no idea to this day how it happened. I was not a linguist, I was not an Asian specialist. Something happened when I was in Taipei that absolutely turned my life around. Maybe it was the language, maybe it was the culture, maybe it was the place, maybe it was the water. I don't know what it was, but I said: "This is a place that absolutely intrigues me" beyond my ability to understand what intrigue was. I was a slacker, I was a layabout. So I hired a teacher to come to my house and discovered: "Hey, I do this pretty well." And he was teaching me in the sort of way that I think I would teach your son, for example: "Here are the good things to learn, here are the things to say, here are the things that will make you more effective as you walk down the street." Not the sort of things we teach our students now, although that's probably better. In my case it wasn't. I was with a tutor for a year and a half, I guess. I got out of the navy while I was there and went to language school in Taipei. I probably would have stuck around a lot longer, but my father got seriously ill, and I had to come back to the States.

**JS:** What is a language school, can you tell us a little about what these schools were like?

**HG:** It was the Taiwan Normal University's Mandarin Training Center, a small place with a few Japanese students, a couple of German students. One of them was the son of Hitler's Youth

Minister, von Schirach, if you can believe that. I don't know if he was in the same class, the same school. But he was there. And they taught us in a non-scholastic way, but regimented. One class I took used newspapers as texts, and I was reading a specific column, "On the Glass Mat," or something like that, and each week I studied one of those columns. And then I did some elementary and then junior high school textbooks, and I was just as happy as I'd ever been in my entire life. When I came back to the U.S., I didn't know then what to do. I had no academic training, I had never done research, I had never done anything serious in terms of school. So I went to an old teacher of mine at Long Beach State College, where I'd gotten my degree. And he said: "Go to graduate school." "Where?" I asked. And he said: "Anywhere you can get in." So I applied and was accepted at one school, San Francisco State College. I went there and my first teacher, my first real teacher was a man named Kai-yu Hsu, a remarkable man, so I went to see him. He sat me down and he said: "What's your background?" I said: "I can't say; I'm embarrassed to say." He said: "Forget background, what are your interests?" I said: "I'm not sure." He said: "What do you do? What can you do?" I said: "I can speak Chinese." And he said: "Let's hear it." And so I did. He said: "Can you read?" And I said: "A little." "Can you write?" I said: "Not at all." He said: "We'll take you." So I went into his class and I stayed there, got a master's degree—somehow they gave me a master's degree after a year and a half. I stuck around as a teachers' graduate assistant because I was pretty good in Chinese, my spoken Chinese was good. Meanwhile, I was getting deeper and deeper into an understanding of what Chinese letters were all about, and so it came time for me to leave San Francisco and he said: "I think you need to go into a PhD program."

**JS:** In the keynote address at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association annual convention you talked at some length about this traditional method, not uncommon in China, of memorizing poetry. Could you just say something about this early experience with Chinese literary texts, which are, of course, quite different from newspapers and textbooks and the like. Obviously you're known for translations of fiction, but perhaps you can take us into this early encounter with poetry, with its unique sounds and textures.

**HG:** Sure. All of my courses in San Francisco were in the classical mode, and so all of my teachers did only classical work. We read *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* from the early Qing. Then, I read poetry and I read this and that; but Kai-yu, he was a Chinese scholar who had gotten a PhD at Stanford, so he had this Western sense of scholarship but a Chinese sense of literature. I don't know if that makes sense. In his class on poetry he wowed us the first night by saying—all our courses were three-hour seminars at night: "Here is what Chinese poetry sounds like," and he rattled off about fifteen poems from the Tang. Well, the first thing we had to do was to memorize a short poem from the Tang. So we all went back, individual students went back and we memorized poems.

**JS:** This is a five-character-lines poem.

**HG:** Yes, five-character lines, this is a quatrain. This is just the quatrain. And I said: "God, that sounds wonderful!" I mean, I've never done any poetry in my life and the only thing I could recite was this: "The fog creeps in on the little kitten's feet" or "Chicago, pig butcher of the world" or something like that. I said: "This is incredible stuff." "So," he said, "now you do a longer poem." So we went back, and I chose a poem by Li Bai, "Seeing a Friend Off," and I memorized it and we all did the same and then in class we intoned them and then we talked about them. It was a nice experience. Well, years later, Professor Hsu sent me off to Indiana to study under Liu Wu-chi, who was a Yuan drama scholar—my first published paper was on Yuan drama and had nothing to do with modern literature; it had to do with the poetry, the songs of a period drama. Obviously Kai-yu had put that in my head. I went back to San Francisco after I did my dissertation on a Fulbright in Japan, got a job at San Francisco State, my old alma mater, and met

Kai-yu the first day. In the hallway he asked me: “Can you still intone that poem?” I said, yes, and I did the whole thing. “Not bad.” The next day on my desk was a piece of his calligraphy—he was a great calligrapher—with the first five characters of that poem. I mean, I had tears in my eyes—I have tears in my eyes right now [laughter] just thinking about it, because it was one of those gifts that you just say: “This is the gift of a lifetime.” Yet, perhaps five, four years later—I was teaching at UCLA at the time—Kai-yu was there and a terrible storm was there in the North. He lived on—of all places—Paradise Lane. Chinese know you never live on Paradise Lane, it’s too much good; bad has to follow, and the storm washed his house away—he was in the house, they never found him. So I—they called me back—and I spoke at his memorial. I said: “I just don’t know what words to say, he was my teacher, he was my mentor, he was my friend, he was my benefactor,” and then I recited the poem. I have to take a break [laughter]. And you know, I’ve never gone back to poetry, but I’ve never forgotten that and I don’t read poetry very often and I don’t—I guess because I read too much *New Yorker* poetry, and I don’t like it much [laughter], but I always fall back on that Tang and some of the early prose from the Yuan and Song periods and then some of the prose by Liu Zongyuan and things like that, but it’s the sound that gets me in. At some point today, you and I will probably talk about sound, because when I’m translating—one of the reasons I think and if you’ll let me be a little free, free ranging, one of the reasons I think [Mo Yan], the fellow I translate a lot, and I do so well together, is that for him the sound is important and in his work sound is important. When I translate, it’s just naturally important to look at the sound as a distinctively important feature of his writing.

**JS:** This would be a perfect place to jump into a discussion of your work with Mo Yan, specifically how you work with Mo Yan’s sense of sound. Considering his two last published translations, he is clearly an author interested in complex formal structures. In your most recent published translation of Mo Yan, his novel *Sandalwood Death*, he begins almost every chapter with an aria, and in your translation readers encounter these in your formal English translations. In other chapters, we encounter sung portions of the opera interspersed between narrative prose, with the sung lines indicated by italic text.

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** These sung passages unfold in patterns that are often metrical and rhymed and include a lot of vocables that are words that have no meaning, but instead indicate the sounds, the opera instrumentation.

**HG:** Sure.

**JS:** That is to say, the instruments that would have accompanied the “Mao Qiang” or the Shandong folk opera form Mo Yan refers to as “Cat Opera.” So I would imagine that this is the most extreme case of formal aural translation that you have done, or are there other examples? Can you take us into the Chinese and the process of how you create or recreate the effect of sound in another language?

**HG:** That’s a big question, and it’s a question that doesn’t lend itself easily to an answer because the previous, the foremost question in translation is: how do you translate?

**JS:** We did jump in [laughter].

**HG:** You did. We did and we’ll forget the former question because other people deal with it and if you’re a reader of the *Translation Review*, you know that a lot of people deal with that in

very wise ways. It was the most extreme example, without question. And it made me nervous. Fortunately, I was so obsessed with the violence in the novel, that I—my fears of the poetry sort of got pushed to the background until I encountered them after, let's say, the first draft, when I tried to capture meaning. And I went through his preface of—I guess it was an introduction or something—in which he said that—and remember, we don't always accept what an author says [laughter], what I'm going to be doing from here on now. I remember a couple of cases; one when I was teaching in San Francisco, when the great dramatist Cao Yu in his play—I forget—it wasn't *Beijing ren*, it was maybe *Lei yu* [Thunderstorm] or some such; one of his great plays. He said in there that: "In my play, I did such and such and such and such with the character" and I said: "Mm-hmm, did he?" I went back and tried it again and I said: "That guy didn't do it at all." He wrote the introduction and later realized he didn't do it at all, and so he tried to tell us up front: "This is what I tried to do," to get us to think that he had done it; he hadn't done it at all. So, when Mo Yan says things, you know, he's a writer, and so he wants people to accept him on his own terms. And as a fiction writer, I always accept him on his own terms. When he writes prose, I stand back and say: "Now, let's see; maybe it works, maybe it doesn't." In this case I think it does. He said that there were two sounds from his childhood and that they expanded in his life and went into this novel. One of them was the sound of trains. And trains run through this novel and trains are more a motif than a sound—in the novel. But the opera is sound, it's all about sound and fortunately, because of my work with Professor Liu back in graduate school on the Yuan drama—the sounds were what interested me.

**JS:** So your earlier study of Yuan dynasty drama came in handy when translating Mo Yan [laughter].

**HG:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Because in Yuan drama, what was passed down from the Yuan and the early Ming were only the songs.

**JS:** Right.

**HG:** The narrative—that's what the actors did, they put that in as they went along and sort of like in early Shakespearian drama, whatever they felt like saying, they said. And so, when I did my research and when I did my writing and did my work, I worked very, very hard to capture what I thought were the important things as a listener to opera. When you're sitting there the words are going blah, blah, blah, but you hear the sound and rhyme, you hear the emphasis, you hear the metric rhythms and so, when I was working on Mo Yan and this novel, I'd gone through so much of this and I really liked the novel. It's a tough novel to love, but a wonderful novel to like. And then I got to this, to the poetic, the dramatic, the operatic portions. And it's not just at the beginning, of course, later as the novel progresses, it—it integrates more, it's more infused into more . . . and I worked very hard at that and I sang it aloud. You can ask my wife [laughter], I don't—I do sing, well, I used to; but in Chinese, it was more a matter of what is this sound? What does this song mean to me through my ears, not through my eyes? And then when it came time for me to do it in English, then the hard work started. But I think in drama, people who translate Yuan drama or Qing drama run into it all the time. That is the balance of meaning versus metrics, versus form and aurality and all that. And in my view you can throw meaning away and still salvage the aria, but if you throw the song away, you have nothing, there's nothing left. And so, in the sung portions, I wanted to make sure that the meters were right, I wanted to make sure that the rhymes were there. There were times when I captured the same rhyme and when I did that—oh, I loved it.

**JS:** Yes, I encountered these serendipitous moments in several moments throughout *Sandalwood Death*.

**HG:** It didn't happen very often. I mean, the difference between Chinese and English is so vast. And Chinese rhymes so easily and English so badly or with such difficulty that I knew I had to make some serious sacrifices. I think I captured enough of the meaning so that you can't read that aria without knowing what it's about and who's involved with whom. But I would hope that readers would say: "You know, if you say that aloud, it sounds pretty cool." That's what I try to do. Let me give you one instance where I was absolutely thrilled with my work—and I'm often not. I don't reread my work very often after it's published—it scares me—but in a book called *Beijing Doll*, a silly little book—well, maybe better than that—a seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-year-old teenager wrote a sort of fictional memoir. It's the cool, hot, kind of jumpy little novel. And in the novel, there is a section where a principal of her school has written out the rules of the school in a very—in Chinese, it would be called, I guess, doggerel. It's very square, looks like a slab of tofu and each line is the same wrap of characters, same number of everything and all the lines rhyme, every line rhymes. And you have this meaning. So, I said: "This is a challenge." I worked on that for days until I came up with a poem in English that is perfectly square, that has the same number of characters and words on the line and every line rhymes with the same rhyme as in the Chinese. I had to go far afield for some of them. I had to say, like: Bart Simpson's "don't have a cow" and something "ciao," but I got it. And I saw it wasn't such a serious work that I had to worry about it, I think I got the meaning across. It was one of the great pleasures of my translating career because the sound and the jumpiness, the way the poem moved—was really important to me even though it was a crappy poem, you know? It really was, but—

**JS:** I can imagine, for in these moments the languages seem to collect into a shared space, a space between languages, which prior to the translation had not existed. Translation as a sonic/referential interfolding of language, if only for a moment. You know last year, around the time you and Mo Yan were in Sweden at the Nobel ceremony, I took *Sandalwood Death* (the Chinese version) to an opera school in Beijing and had various teachers try to sing the arias and sung lines of the chapter "Divine Altar," because I really wanted to know what the source prosodies sounded like, I really wanted to hear them as they would be performed. I was doing some background research to help my graduate student, Jia Yanqin, who wrote her dissertation on your translations of Mo Yan at Beijing Normal University.

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** To hear these professionals sing them out, to catch these in the ear, as it were, was tremendously exciting. Afterwards, I went back to the English and we tried to match them up and truly, you really could not have done a better job. You captured the flow between the narrator speaking and then the protagonist singing and that is where the pathos of the work lies, in the sometimes plaintive, sometimes furious sound. To my mind, this work is astonishing, and I think your care, your willingness to slow down and craft the English to a point where it recreates these effects is simply incredible.

The machine of this novel works and only works because of this effort.

**HG:** I think so and thank you for saying that, but I guess it's of great concern to me in all my translations of good writers, and that is to pay attention to narrative register. That's a tough one, that's so hard.

**JS:** So many *Translation Review* readers are going to know what that word means—narrative register—but I would still love to hear you unpack it a bit.

**HG:** Well, unpack is another word. [Laughter] We speak at different levels. In terms of word choice and sentence structure, in terms of tonality, in all kinds of ways, we speak, all of us speak,

at different levels. In some languages, like Japanese, it's so formalistically outlined that you do it this way; if you don't, then it's heretical. In Chinese and particularly in a novel like *Sandalwood Death*, that's set in the early twentieth century and deals with characters from so many different social class levels, you have illiterates and highly literate officials. You have the executioner—you have a woman who's not educated and yet she's educated in ways that are important—

**JS:** In other registers?

**HG:** As to other registers, I had to recognize whether or not they exist in the original, because sometimes they don't. With Mo Yan, they do, which means I have to be much more careful in the way I choose to present the articulations of a particular character. I don't know how successful anyone could ever be, from Chinese to English. Mo Yan was writing for a literate Chinese audience who would understand the various levels of the articulation among the characters and the datedness of the early twentieth-century Chinese to a twenty-first-century reader, but I was writing for an American publisher and for an American reader. If I try to get Victorian in my translation, it's going to bomb, it just simply doesn't work because now you have two levels of illusiveness; you have Chinese speaking in English, but not only in English, but in English that no one understands. I tried very hard—I don't know how successful [I] was, and someday maybe I'll go back and look at it in this novel and others to modulate it enough that when the official is speaking to his paramour, who is an uneducated Chinese woman and he is a formally educated Chinese official, their language can't be on the same plane, they cannot be. If they do, it fails. And yet, it can't be so far off that he sounds precious and she sounds vulgar. Then I've lost something. I tried very hard—this novel took me a long time to translate. It took me longer to translate than it took him to write it, I guarantee.

**JS:** Yes, I imagine it would have.

**HG:** It was his longest novel to write. Well, the problem is, he writes them in his head. I'd say it took him—you know, he can write a novel in two months, but it's been ten months, germinating in his head. But it took me a long time, since these kinds of issues slowed me down and there were mistakes and mistranslations—of course there were. And my wife and frequent co-translator Sylvia Lin helped me over most of those, and she was also a great reader, but I needed to say in English, what, for instance, is the difference between saying toilet and privy, for example. I don't know where that came from, but you realize that in one character's mouth it would be this and in another character's mouth it might be the other, and when they say it, one after the other, there is that class difference.

**JS:** Yes. So we're talking about translating idiolects and dialects from the Chinese into English when there's not a similar set of registers in English to work with. Without natural English cognates for these, without sociolinguistic mirrors, if you will, you have to invent forms of differentiation of tone. One of these registers I was hoping you might reflect on a bit is that of Mo Yan's sexual language, which is often coded in his rural dialect. How do you prepare an English reader to encounter this kind of language in a way that might resonate with the way Chinese readers encounter it? When publishing a book for an American audience, do you have to consider modulating the sexual explicitness, for example?

**HG:** Yes, sure. There are some novels I can work with; one Sylvia and I are working on now; it's so contemporary that we can get into the sexual terminology and it will be okay, it will work. And not just sexual terminology, but also other terminology. But back then, one of the things that I found perplexing is that we're not able to move beyond the language of the target language easily and to other languages when only a foreign word works. But we can't do that because



I can't destroy the fragile illusion that this nineteenth-century fellow is speaking English from China.

**JS:** We've talked about idiolect and social registers, but what about formal linguistic dialects?

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** There is a lot of dialect writing in modern and contemporary Chinese fiction in particular.

**HG:** There is a lot of it and you need to go, you need to find out where this person was born and then go there and live for two years, but you can't do that. Obviously lexical hints or lexical varieties—you know, my Chinese, my lexical Chinese is pretty good. My readable Chinese is pretty good. So, if I don't understand it, one of the first questions I ask myself is: "Is this dialect?"

**JS:** Yes. That's what I thought.

**HG:** Often it's not, it's just that I don't know the term. Fortunately, we have dictionaries. One of my foremost linguistic interests, but not abilities, is Taiwanese, I know a lot about the Taiwanese dialect. I don't know it, but I know a lot about it and I know I love the way it sounds and so I'm drawn to it, which spills into my other work. We're working on a writer now, and there's a lot of dialect and it's not just dialect, it's a more repetitive use of the particular term that I know that other places, other writers and other places, don't use. Perhaps it's more idiolect than dialect, but it's used in a way that it becomes dialectical, it becomes a part of speech that is used there, that others may know the term but not use it in the same way. So, if I don't know what the chances are—well, I'm going to look it up to see if it's dialect. If I still can't find it—there are a lot of sources now—and fortunately for me now, but these things were unavailable back then. I mean, Google, Baidu, and all; they'll tell you if it's dialect and then they'll often tell you what it means. And that's good to a point. But, how do you translate it? And when you translate it, do you translate it in a way that it sounds cool, hip, strange, something? Another anecdote, I'm full of anecdotes. Jia Pingwa's work is filled with Xi'an dialect or the Shaanxi regional mountain people dialect, it's just loaded with it. I am puzzled constantly. It's a serious problem for a translator; is it a serious problem in the global sense, in the broader sense of the novel? And the answer, of course, is yes or no or yes and no. It can be, depending upon the novel. And it can be just, you know, just a tic. It's an authorial, an idiosyncratic usage of the word that we use back in our home. And we do see this in Western novels, of course, in the original language; words that we don't know. I mean, we read Faulkner. But I think the Chinese language is so rich, so regionally rich as well as rich in other senses that the authors simply are powerless not to use these words, and it works because most Chinese readers who don't understand it don't care. And I think most English readers who get to it through my translations don't care either. Unfortunately, I care. So, it slows me down, but in the end I try not to be obsessive about getting it all correct. If I can find appropriate slangy or regional or slightly archaic or unusual words that carry that sense, I'll certainly use them. If I can't I won't.

**JS:** So, you often make decisions in your translations that reflect your attention to reader expectations and range of likely responses. I imagine that this sensitivity to your readers, in part, comes from the fact that you are yourself a writer. I think you can often tell if a translator is also a writer because of the way the language links to itself. At one level you are a stylist, but at another level, you are keenly aware of the kinds of cultural difficulties that confront readers of translated fiction. This awareness is perhaps uniquely developed by translators and differentiates them from novelists or poets, who often do not think about these things as much. A translator must become aware of the degree of foreignization one can undertake at the level of structure and content,

whether one can or should force a certain amount of difficulty on the reader and how much to smooth over the differences. You've always had, I think, a willingness to push back against the over-theorizing, the foreignization/domestication dichotomy. I have always thought that your position is one that can be attributed to your literary advocacy more generally, that the first battle is to get literature into translation, the second is to get readers, and historically, these have not gone well, and the odds are still stacked against us. Also, you know the translation world from the inside out, and while editors and publishers may not all be playing on the same side all the time, most share in this ultimate goal (readership). I was thinking maybe you could talk a little bit about this, about whether that reading of your work as a literary advocate might be a way of thinking about translation, your sense of the translator's purpose.

**HG:** Sure. Yes, my philosophy is, briefly stated, that the author wrote for his readers, and I translate for mine. You know, what does that mean? And we start getting into a more philosophical discussion perhaps, but you said that the editors and the publishers are not all on the same team, which is correct. We're not always on the same page—

**JS:** Often not.

**HG:** We're often not on the same page and it's difficult. I mean, obviously, publishers call the shots, editors are more interested in the finished product. But I think I'm doing a disservice, not just to my readers, but to the work, to the author, and to the broader range of Chinese writing if I don't modulate, if I don't interpret, if I don't interpolate, if I don't . . . make it a more accessible text. Now, that doesn't give me freedom, *carte blanche*, to do with it whatever I please, obviously not.

**JS:** Would you say that you hope a text's accessibility to the Chinese audience should mirror that of an English audience?

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** If the author invests in the difficulty, you try to replicate the difficulty, but you're not going to create a cross-cultural difficulty or underline the distance between English and Chinese.

**HG:** Yes, yes. You know, I think that the analogy of the parallel works, but not to the same extent, obviously. You know, there is a Chinese reader and a Western reader; a translated text reader comes with different preconceptions, with different understandings, with different desires, with different needs. But I think that a text, in order to be well represented in the largest possible sense, must make allowances in the micro as opposed to the macro sense. I need to do things to the texts to make them more palatable without dumbing them down. I mean, again, how am I supposed to know what an English reader, an American reader expects, wants, needs from a book? But I think I have a broad sense of what they don't need, and what they don't need is to be force fed a text that would be easily swallowed by Chinese and would stick in the throat of an American or an Englishman or Singapore Chinese, who doesn't read Chinese. To what degree am I not only permitted, but almost required to make sense of a Chinese term, a Chinese paragraph, a Chinese chapter, a Chinese book that will reach an American reader who will then get roughly the same sort of appreciation for the work as literature as the Chinese reader? And of course, theoreticians—and I love translation theory, but it's just not foremost in my mind when I'm working on a translation. I sit back and read it, and listen to it, and talk about it. But when I'm translating, I'm thinking: "What does this mean to me and how has my background prepared me to accept it?" I don't think I can do more, I don't think there isn't a translator who says: "I'm a translator for the American readership." I'm a translator for an American reader and that reader is

very close to my understanding of what literature is and what language is. This is one of the reasons I tell young translators all the time, who read Chinese voraciously, and can't stop reading it: "Stop. Read English, because ultimately, that's what's going to make you a good translator. Your Chinese is good enough now and you've got collaborators and you've got advisors and you've got all sorts of things, but what you really need to do is hone your own abilities to read literature in your own language and then put the Chinese into that as closely as possible." I certainly have tried that—and listen, Jonathan, it's taken me a long time to get there. I don't go back and read my early translations.

**JS:** Actually, I was going to ask a question, considering that you have published so many translations—do you see something of an intelligible evolution either in method or in process? What changes do you see over the arch of your translation career?

**HG:** Confidence, of course. I mean, I'm much more comfortable with what I'm doing. I think I'm doing it well enough that I'm not wasting my time or anybody else's. You know, I've read a lot more and I have a greater sense of penetrating more deeply into the Chinese writer, a sense of what a writer is trying to do. I'm much more critical of Chinese writing than I was before. In this respect I share Mo Yan's view—this is going to kill me, but I'm going to say it anyway. Mo Yan talks about the devolution of the Chinese character, and I see the devolution of Chinese writing. I think it's not as good now as it used to be because not enough care has been taken with the kinds of things that I think Mo Yan and a few others do. And I don't think it's necessarily the writer's fault, if we can ascribe fault, but pressures of publishing, the pressures of sales, the pressures of making the movie out of all of this. Perhaps Chinese is not up to the same standard that I thought I learned at the beginning of my career, and maybe my perspective has changed. But I'm much more willing to use a harder pen on their writing than I was before, simply because I think, "You shouldn't do that; do it this way. This is the way it's supposed to be done." Not because, as some people have claimed, that I'm bringing a Western perspective to it. No, no, no. This is the way I used to read Chinese literature, and you're not doing it that way now. I'm making this sound like it's a big, big deal; it's not. But when it occurs, it's kind of an annoyance. I want to say, I can tweak this in a way that your editor would or you would have if you had been more careful, and maybe this sounds elitist. Often some of my critics say: "He thinks he knows better than the writers what the literature ought to be," and I know I don't. But I know that I have a better sense of what good literature in Chinese, by Chinese, ought to be than some of the people who are creating it.

**JS:** Do you think that this comes from the fact that you have translated a period of modern Chinese literature that does have a high aestheticism and experimental qualities, whereas now we are moving to pop culture and pop literature?

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** With the rise of a larger middle class—bourgeois mass cultural marketplace, pop cultural production has become more profitable than serious literary writing, or you know, writing that takes chances. And so, could it be that, as I think you have argued, Mo Yan actually represents perhaps the kind of popular writer we may not see as much of in terms of sales in the future? In English, after all, high literature (those who take chances) aren't the bestsellers either, right? Instead, romance and mystery novels dominate the publishing marketplace. So is that what you're talking about?

**HG:** Yes. Indeed. You know, it's hard to sell a book in translation to commercial houses, it really is hard. In China, many of these authors sell over a million copies of every book they write, over a million copies. They are multimillionaires at the age of forty. I'm happy for them, I'm thrilled

for them, that's great. Your kids are going to come to America and get a great education; you're going to live well. I'm really happy. But your writing is suffering, and it's suffering because in order to sell a million copies, you have to do things that you should not do. And you know, I guess there is a case to be made for elitism, there is a case to be made for professionalism, there is a case to be made for poverty, and you know, it's a case that's being made less and less often.

**JS:** I think it matters who's saying this. And not just what you are saying, but that you are saying this as a translator, as one of the most prolific translators of Chinese literature of all time. In other words, I think that your opinion on this subject matters in a different way from those of literary critics, for instance. In a way, a translator's agency to choose what to translate (sometimes) is also a way to interact with this marketplace, with the shape of literary influence and taste. Is it not?

**HG:** Yes, we were creating a sort of canon by our selection of which works to translate, and we did tend to translate works that were artistically superior when we could find them, works that were always sort of on the edge. The government looked at them or the censors looked at them with a jaundiced eye. We did choose those over some of the others and so, you know, we choose one author over another, so what? Because that's where we're from, right? That's not the case anymore because there are more translators, there are more works and there are fewer of the works that push these borders out, but there are some people out there, and now the younger writers; some of them are writing very dangerous texts and we love it, right? My agency is virtually null, I think, in China, I don't think anyone listens to me, nor should they necessarily, if I'm telling them what I think Chinese writers ought to do.

**JS:** But at this very specific level—when you are translating—perhaps in your correspondence with the author, if they see it, you're making very specific kinds of suggestions modulated by your own translative choices.

**HG:** I did—we have done that with some of our writers, but other writers, they just don't want us to do that with them. "You just, you do what you want, it's yours" or "Don't do anything." There are a few we can deal with, but there's a language problem. I mean, we can write to them in Chinese, I can write to them in Chinese, but you know, they don't have a sense of what a Western reader expects and that's so alien to them, and it should be alien to them.

**JS:** Yes.

**HG:** I think none of them, most of them, don't speak another language. So they get all of their reading of foreign languages through translation and usually not the best translation. I just learned from someone who represents a writer I've translated in the past—his latest book has been sent to an editor in China, a serious editor who's going to do something and I think that's a great sign. His finished work will be shorter, his finished work will be tighter; will it be better? I don't know, probably. But it will have another agent, someone else would be involved in the creation of this, and you know, I think the Chinese writers tend to feel: "Why should I let someone else take my creative moment?" You know, I can really understand that.

**JS:** This is such a deep romantic impulse, isn't it? Romanticism gave us this idea that writers must be a solo act, a creative genius, independent and autonomous agents who do not need anyone else.

**HG:** Yes.

**JS:** In the U.S. it is also more commonplace for writers to “workshop” their work in small groups as students do in MFA creative writing programs. That is to say, it has become pretty normal to have one’s work critiqued and even revised by one’s peers, not to mention the professional critique of editors, agents, and others. But in China, this cultural method has yet to become common. Interestingly, Mo Yan has now taken on a teaching position at his alma mater, Beijing Normal University, as the director of their new international writing center. So there is a nascent beginning to writing programs in China, but the writing-as-craft idea has yet to really take off. And again this has as much to do with readers as it does with writers. There is a willingness on the part of Chinese readers to consume literature without strong editing.

**HG:** Yes, although one of the beneficial evolutions is that some of these more popular, more famous new Chinese writers are making so much money in China that they don’t need to make the money in the West, and that’s good because they don’t. They just simply never have. But Mo Yan’s works this year sold pretty well.

**JS:** Yes.

**HG:** I remember the day that Mo Yan handed me his copy, a brand new copy of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* at dinner one night in Beijing. And he said: “It’s fresh off the press.” It had been on the market, in the bookstalls in Beijing for two weeks. Someone at the publishing house bootlegged it out—and so, he didn’t get a nickel for any of those and there was a lot of that going on. So if they sold in the West, they got a decent advance. It actually was, you know, monetarily worth thinking about. Now it’s not, now it’s a matter of getting it into other languages, getting it read by a small but important intellectual, literary-minded public in a lot of other countries. So that’s a good thing. I’m glad that they’re rich for their sake and for our sake, because now we can get these things published for very little money and they don’t care.

**JS:** One final question would be: for the beginning translator, what do you think a good place to begin would be? If I’m not mistaken, you began with short fiction, right? I mean, Xiao Hong’s short fiction was the first thing you worked on, right?—Of course, you translated a range of her works, but it was short fiction first, right?

**HG:** It was; it was for magazines in Taiwan and Hong Kong. And I, you know, I urge the beginning translator: “Start small, don’t take on a gigantic project, for a lot of reasons. Maybe you’re not up to it, maybe you’ll get halfway through it and get tired of it, maybe you’ll never get anywhere, maybe nothing will ever happen to it, so get some stories and don’t go to the best novelist in town to get the stories,” because you know, short story writers and novelists—Mo Yan, I think, writes pretty good short stories, but they’re not as good as his novels—are different. Lao She, the great writer, wrote novels, but they weren’t as good as his short stories, I think. So get short things and try to get them published; but whether they get published or not is secondary. I mean, it’s obviously important at some point. But just read, read, read; and then, when you get to be my age, start writing your own fiction.

**JS:** Thank you very much for the interview, Howard.

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