Australian Literature in China

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More than 30 years ago, when I started my journey of translating Australian literature, Professor Hu Wenzhong, who had already made a great contribution to Australian studies, told me that Australian literature was still an untouched area in China, and he encouraged me to devote myself to this area and make a contribution. Professor Hu was telling the truth: before the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people might have some ideas about American literature, British literature, Russian, German, French, or Spanish literature, but people knew little about Australian literature. At that time only Henry Lawson and some of his short stories were known to Chinese intellectuals, for instance, The Drover’s Wife, Send Round the Hat and The Loaded Dog. We knew the bush and the mateship of bushmen described by Henry Lawson. To the majority of ordinary people, the only things associated with Australia were the kangaroo, parrot, koala and emu. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese literature was criticized, and many classics were forbidden. Needless to say, Australian literature, even Henry Lawson, was quite out of sight.

Now, more 30 years have passed, what’s the current situation of Australian literature in China? As everybody knows, the relationship between our two countries is getting closer and closer. China and Australia have been cooperating in various areas including the economy, business and culture, and particularly in education. More and more students from China now are studying in universities and colleges in Australia. Australia is not far away from us anymore, and Australian people are not alien to Chinese people anymore. People in China are eager to know more about Australia. Since 1988, more than 30 Australian Studies Centers have been set up across China, from the south to the north and from the east to the west.

Not all these centers are specialized in studying or introducing Australian literature, but there are many people who have worked on translating and introducing Australian literature to Chinese people. There are universities, like Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai's East China Normal University, Renmin University, Anhui University, Suzhou University, Qinghua University, and Inner Mongolia University have courses on Australian literature, where many students got their master or PHD degrees studying Australian literature. Obviously these people are pioneers in exploring the relatively uncharted territory of Australian literature. Also many students have come back to China after graduating from universities or colleges in Australia and have made great contributions to the introduction of Australian literature to China too.

Therefore, nowadays in China, people not only know Henry Lawson, but also Patrick White, Alan Marshall, Miles Franklin, David Malouf, Peter Carey, Colleen McCullough,

From books written in different styles and describing different periods of Australian history, Chinese readers have come to know how Australians built such an advanced country with their courage, wisdom, passion and hard work. In 1997, Professor Huang Yuanshen wrote and published *A History of Australian Literature*, in which he introduced the development of Australian literature from 1788 to 1996. This book draws a big picture of Australian literature for Chinese readers. In 1999, the *Macquarie English-Chinese Bilingual Dictionary* was translated and edited by Professor Wang Guofu and published by Suzhou University Press. This dictionary has become an essential reference for Chinese people who study Australian literature. By 2012, Shanghai Translation Publishing House published 10 books of Australian contemporary literature works. People's Literature Publishing House published “Kangaroo Books” and “Kola Books”. These two series include at least 20 books. All these achievements indicate that Australian literature has been more widely introduced in China than ever before.

But, this doesn’t mean that Australian writers are as well known in China as Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, Romain Rolland, Balzac, Tolstoy or other foreign masters. American literature, English literature, Russian literature and European literature have been studied in China for at least 150 years, and are still in a dominant position. During the past 150 years, a great amount of western literature has been translated into Chinese, and those books are the windows through which many Chinese people view the outside world. It is less than three decades that scholars have paid any attention to the translation and introduction of Australian literature, and there are few scholars researching in this area even now. To those who like *The Thorn Birds or Schindler’s List*, the reason is not that they like Australian literature, but because they like the touching story itself.

Now, with the development of market economy in China, the translation and study of Australian literature have been shadowed by American and British literature once more. Many great works that have significant impact in Australia are unable to find a market in China. It seems that we’re living in a time when market decides everything. No reader means no market,
which also means that Australian literary works have little chance to be published. If some works are published, the print run is small, usually around 5000 copies, which have very little influence on 1.3 billion Chinese people. Only 500 copies of my translation of The Oxford History of Australia (1942-1988) were printed by Beijing Publishing House in 1993, yet I had spent two years translating it. 20 years later, it is unavailable for new generations of teachers and graduate students trying to form an understanding of Australia. The other day, I found that a library in Beijing had photocopied this book and is selling it on line. Each copy costs 55 yuan RMB, which is much more expensive than my translated version. That is to say, there are still many readers that want to read this book. I hope that one day it may be reprinted. As a translator who has devoted everything to the translation of Australian Literature, I definitely want more people to read and appreciate my work.

In this situation, the motive for translating and introducing Australian literature is not great. I fully understand the people from publishing houses when I stand in their shoes, as they are doing business. They can’t afford to lose money for publishing books, including books from Australia. So the situation for translating and publishing Australian books in China has become more difficult, and the people who want to introduce Australian books to Chinese readers are in a dilemma. The publishing house can choose what kind of books to publish for the greatest profit, but a translator who loves Australian literature has little choice. He can’t give up what he loves with heart and soul just because he will lose money...

In 1991, I spent 2000 yuan to have Brian Castro’s Birds of Passage published, because I like this novel very much, and I believe it has great significance to Chinese readers. I printed 1000 copies, but only 200 copies were sold. Each copy cost 2.5 yuan, so I lost 1500 yuan. To put that in context, at that time my salary was 300 yuan per month. As a result, Birds of Passage flew every where in my room. Here and there, on my bed and on my shelf, on the floor and on the window sills, my birds could do nothing but look at me silently and gloomily. But I have no regrets at all. I was joking with Nicholas Jose in Beijing in 2005, that there is only one fool in China, and his name is Li Yao. Actually there are many fools like me. Without such fools who put their pay at the bottom of the list of the things they consider, our mission can’t be accomplished and the mutual understanding between Australian and Chinese people can’t be deepened. We must stick to the path that we have chosen, because it is important for our friendship and understanding to be deepened and strengthened. Even though we have experienced many hurdles in translating, introducing, and studying Australian literature, we will continue on our mission. I firmly believe that with the warm feeling for Australian literature and for Australian people, and with help and support from both the Chinese government and the Australian government, we can accomplish this mission.

Recent years I have been interested in Australian children's literature. Sponsored by
Australia China Council, the University of West Sydney and I worked together in 2010 to select and translate 10 Australian children's books, including well-known classics such as *Dot and Kangaroo* by Ethel Pedley, *Tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* by May Gibbs, *Seven Little Australians* by Ethel Turner, *Blinky Bill* by Dorothy Wall, *The Muddle-Headed Wombat* by Ruth Park, as well as books that reflect contemporary Australian's life such as *Storm Boy* by Colin Thiele, *I Own the Racecourse* by Patricia Wrightson, *The Story of Tom Burnad* by Jane Burke. Unfortunately, due to limited funding, only 5 of those books were published by People's Literature Publishing House. Those 5 books became very popular in China since published, and Chinese children learned what had happened in that distant and unfamiliar land in the past 100 years through those books. I will keep doing my best to make the remaining 5 books published as soon as possible, and introduce more books into this series of books being called "Kola Books" in China.

From 2006, with the help from Professor Nicholas Jose, I started research and translation of Aboriginal Australian literature. My translations *Benang from the Heart* by Kim Scott, *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright, *Who Am I* by Anita Heiss have been published in the past several years. These books expanded Chinese readers' understanding of Australia. But Australian Aboriginal literature has not been introduced to China systematically so far, and to most Chinese readers this is an unfamiliar field. In fact, Australian Aboriginal literature is such an important part of Australian literature, it would be a big loss if it is ignored. Now, I am working at an Indigenous Australian Chinese Translation Series, co-edited with Dr Sandra Phillips from Queensland University of Technology. We have selected 6 Australian Indeginous books, both fiction and non fiction, They are *Mullumbimby* by Melissa Lucashenko, *ruby moonlight* by Ali Cobby-Eckermann, *Purple Threads* by Jeanine Leane, *Talking about Celia ...* by Jeanie Bell, *Am I Black Enough For You?* by Anita Heiss, and *Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester* by Yami Lester.

We shall translate and publish these books in 2 years. I believe this Indigenous Australian Chinese Translation Series will be welcome in China, and will deepen the mutual understanding of our two countries.

Australian government provided great help on introducing Australian literature to Chinese readers. Without their financial subsidy, some of my translations couldn't be published. Three of my translations, *The Ancestor Game*, *The Red Thread* and *Carpentaria* were awarded by Australia China Council since 1996. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wrote a preface for my translation of *Who Am I*. This is not only a great honour for myself, but also a big support and encouragement for all Chinese scholars who are working on Australian study.

The above is a brief introduction about Australian Literature in China. I sincerely hope to get your criticism and comment.
Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age

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