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Transnational Dialogues: Children's Literature Across Borders

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This feature series of transnational dialogues, two-way interviews between academics and/or practitioners in different countries, has been developed in line with our Journal's aim to facilitate and enhance dialogue across borders whether geographical, disciplinary or professional.

We are very grateful to our Features Editor, Helen Wang, for facilitating this series.

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A Conversation between Zhao Xia and Helen Wang

In 2019 – 2020, Dr Zhao Xia, an established academic and translator who specialises in children’s



literature and literary theory, was a visiting scholar at Cambridge University. Dr Helen Wang is a prolific translator of Chinese children’s literature and in 2017 won both the Chen Bochui International Children’s Literature Award, and the Marsh Award



for Children’s Literature in Translation. Together with Anna Gustafsson Chen and Minjie Chen, Helen runs the website and blog [Chinese Books for Young Readers](#).¹ Owing to the pandemic, Zhao Xia and Helen were not able to meet in person. Instead, on 2 October 2020, they interviewed each other on Zoom. The interviews were transcribed. Below is an abridged version. (A Chinese version of the interview has since been published in separate articles by Zhao Xia in the Journal of Literature and Art² and Zhejiang Writers³.)

Part 1: Zhao Xia interviews Helen Wang

ZX: I'm interested to know more about you. For some time in China, everyone in the field of children’s literature in China was asking “Who’s Helen Wang?” We knew she was the translator of *Bronze and Sunflower*, but when we tried to find out more information on Chinese search engines there wasn’t very much. Then I managed to find an interview with you, in English, but I’m still very curious. Like your major is archaeology, right?

HW: My BA was in Chinese, at SOAS, and my PhD was in archaeology, at UCL.

ZX: When did you start to think about yourself as a translator?

¹ Helen and Minjie have also published a recent overview of translated children’s literature from Chinese: Chen M., Wang H, (2021) “Chinese Children’s Literature in English Translation”, in Ye Z. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Chinese Language Studies* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

² 汪海岚 Helen Wang, 赵霞 Zhao Xia. 关于中国儿童文学翻译、创作与接受的对谈 [Interview on the translation, creation and reception of Chinese children’s literature]. *Wenyi bao* 文艺报, 11 Feb. 2022.

³ 赵霞 Zhao Xia, 汪海岚 Helen Wang. 关于中西儿童文学及其批评交流的对谈 [Interview on Chinese and Western children’s literature and its criticism]. *Zhejiang zuojia* 浙江作家, Issue 6, 2021.

HW: My first translations were some short stories and essays published in the early 1990s. In those days there was very little interest or feedback, and it was understood that if there was any money, it would go to the Chinese authors, not the translators. I needed to earn a living, so I started working at the museum, had a family, did the PhD. When my children were older, I started looking at translation again, and, crucially, met up with Nicky Harman. We set up the China Fiction Book Club, and a group of us would meet to talk about books we had read. It was through one of those meetings that I came to translate Shen Shixi's *Jackal and Wolf*. It was my first book length translation, and again there was very little feedback. I told my local bookseller who bought two copies of *Jackal and Wolf*. A few weeks later I went back to the bookshop and bought one copy, and a few months later I went back and bought the other. I was the translator, the marketer and the purchaser! That was in 2012, the year China was guest of honour at the London Book Fair. In the summer of 2013 Walker Books was looking for someone to translate *Bronze and Sunflower*, and Anna Holmwood kindly gave them my name.

ZX: How long did it take for you to translate the whole book?

HW: It usually takes me several months to translate a book. I start by making a very rough draft, to keep track of the plot and keep everything in place. Then, I go through it again very closely, and revise and revise and revise, until I think it's the best I can do. The editor(s) then go through it, and we'll work together on the final version. It can take one to two years between submitting the translation to the editor to seeing the book in print.

ZX: I always think that a book, especially a work of literature, could be judged fairly in its original language. But for a literary work translated into another culture, in another country, that's a different matter. It doesn't follow that if the original is good, the translation will be good too. There's a risk: you never know what's going to happen. In China, I've witnessed a lot of translated literature, and I can say that translation can also kill a work of literature. It was really a stroke of luck that you translated the children's classic *Bronze and Sunflower*. When I read your translation, I felt it was a kind of re-invention of this novel, it was not simply a case of trying to convey the content in this Chinese children's book in English. As a translator, you need to apply more than just knowledge of the language. You need a very deep inner feeling for literature in order to touch the inner meaning of every word, because, especially in a literary work, when you feel the words, it's very different. As for translating a whole book, well, I

think translation is really very difficult. And for communication between literature works in different cultures, the translation can be so deciding.

HW: Thank you. Some people call translation recreation.

ZX: Yes, re-invention or recreation. There are different branches of translation theories. Some say that you should translate very directly, that you should do a kind of hard copy of the original language, and not change anything of the original language, but I think that's impossible. As soon as you translate, a transformation takes place. You can't avoid it. For literary translation, I won't accept this hard copy theory. A good translator of literature is always an inner writer, an excellent writer. When I read your translation in English, it was so interesting to be drawn into the words of another language system. I was reading the original story, but in words which stirred up associations and experiences connected with my reading of Western literature. When I read *Bronze and Sunflower*, I caught a hint of Charles Dickens, perhaps because of the river, or the flavour of the language that you used. Cao Wenxuan's style of narration is somewhat poetic, lyrical and slow, and reminds me of Charles Dickens! I think the reader's own experiences make such associations inevitable. I'm curious to know whether you like Dickens or not?

HW: It's a long time since I read Dickens! wasn't thinking at all about him when I translated *Bronze and Sunflower*. Actually, I try not to get absorbed in English novels when I'm translating because I don't want to be influenced by the English author's style; I'd rather come to the source text fresh, and try to put what the Chinese author is saying into English as closely and as genuinely as I can.

ZX: Did you translate it because you loved the story, or were you merely taking on the responsibility of being the translator?

HW: I liked the story, and during the translation and editing stages, I liked it more and more each time I read it. To me, that's a good sign, because with some books you get to the point you can't bear to read them again.

ZX: I can feel it between the lines of your translation. You can always feel when the writer's, or translator's, emotion is inside the words, inside the language.

HW: I think you have to have some kind of connection with the work you're translating. It's like reading a book for pleasure – there are some books you like, and others that you don't want to engage with. I've turned down several translation projects because I didn't think I was the right person to translate a particular book.

ZX: Could you give an example?

HW: I'm hesitant to do this... but maybe it's helpful to know? The most recent example was *I Want to Be a Good Child* by Huang Beijia. It's a well-loved classic in Chinese, and Huang Beijia writes beautifully. But the title of that book was so wrong for me. In retrospect, I was too judgmental, because Nicky Harman has now translated this book as *I Want to be Good*, and it's delightful.

ZX: Huang Beijia also writes for adults, and her children's books have a high level of literariness, both in terms of the language and the story, and the feeling of life in the experiences she writes about.

HW: Nicky has also translated another novel by Huang Beijia, *The Flight of the Bumblebee*.

ZX: Oh, that's her newest one! It's about war. We had a seminar about this novel at my university. For the last ten years Fang Weiping [expert in Chinese children's literature] has been presiding over a series of seminars on children's literature criticism, where we speak candidly about works by well-known authors of different generations. Participants voice their opinion: how the book could be improved, if there is an important matter concerning the author; if an issue is limited to one book or to the whole field. She has written a number of excellent children's books, including "Through the Eyes of a Child" (*Tong Mou*), which lies between her adult literature and her children's literature. It's like a composition of several short length novels, each with its own young protagonist. I think the breakthrough of this book is that you see that not all childhood stories end in happiness, just like in real life. You see that to some extent in *Bronze and Sunflower*, which has all kinds of disasters, but finally there is a happy ending. There's always that romantic colour inside every disaster...

HW: You think *Bronze and Sunflower* has a happy ending?

ZX: At the end there is a separation. But, remember, Bronze starts to talk! A kind of miracle has taken place. The message is that growing up is a better direction. I think that makes it more appropriate for a

younger audience. In “Through the Eyes of a Child” you see life is not like that. Life can be really miserable, and sometimes you can be miserable all your life. But still, you’re going to live, you need to keep on, you need to do something, and we see that in this miserable life sometimes children, or young adults, flourish like fireworks in the sky, perhaps only for a moment or two, but they flourish. And you realise that even the most miserable life, or miserable environment, cannot control or lock down your life totally. It's written quite poetically, and has a special flavour. Maybe you could consider this book?

What are the challenges in translating Chinese children’s books into English?

HW: There are lots of challenges! The first thing is to try and understand what the author is trying to do and say in the story. I will never have the same life experiences as an author I am translating. It’s the same as if you and I looked at the same painting, we would see different things, because we bring to it our own personal experience, our knowledge and our ignorance. So I try to translate the words that I see on the page. I do a lot of dictionary-checking. In *Bronze and Sunflower*, the language is so vivid at times that I looked up all kinds of expressions and took a very interesting journey through Chinese literature. I was curious to know what Cao Wenxuan had been reading at the time he wrote the book. When I asked him, he said Western philosophy!

In his stories about the countryside Cao Wenxuan mentions a lot of plants, and Shen Shixi (China’s King of Animal Stories) writes about different animals. Some plants and animals aren’t commonly known in English, so I’ll search online for pictures of them, and their Latin name, then try and find the name in English. If the English translation is, say, “Chinese spider”, I’ll try to find another name, perhaps a local name or a folkname. If there’s no English name, then I’ll either use the Chinese name or devise a name that will resonate with the reader without drawing undue attention and spoiling the flow of the story.

Food can also be challenging to translate. In the novel “Because of Dad” (因为爸爸 by Han Qingzhen 韩青辰) there are a lot of famous dishes from Nanjing. I’ve never eaten these, so I looked them up to see if there was a good English name already, and when I couldn’t find one, I scrolled through images of each dish, working out what they are supposed to look and taste like, searching for

recipes to find the key ingredients and how to make them, and reading comments about them. Then, I had to decide what to call the dishes in English. Food names are so difficult to translate. That's why there are so many mistakes and funny names on restaurant menus.

ZX: Even if you had eaten them, it would still be difficult!

HW: I was trying to determine the defining characteristic of each dish, maybe a particular taste or a certain look, or a special local ingredient - or a dish with a specific association, perhaps associated with two people who are in love, or something like that. It was a really interesting process, but it took a long time!

ZX: I can understand because in Chinese literature there is a kind of phenomenon of depicting the dishes. It's very special, particularly for those places that are well known for a particular food, or food system - it's not just one food, it's a food system. There's a certain rhythm in the name of the dish - usually four-characters, sometimes three - and there's beauty in the form. The way the names of dishes are put together is not just depicting the dishes, it's also playing with language. When you read you engage mentally, and when you come across the names of these dishes, you have a bodily reaction - at least, that's true for Chinese readers. So it's become a phenomenon in literature. I love this too - it looks beautiful and it's tasty in your mind too.

I'd like to ask more about the reception of Chinese children's literature in the English-speaking world. I heard from Lucia Obi, of the International Youth Library, in Munich that it was only after Cao Wenxuan won the Hans Christian Andersen Award that his work started to be translated into German. I wonder whether there was a similar impact in the English world? I wrote an article exploring Cao Wenxuan's translation and publication, and the influence of Cao Wenxuan's children's books in foreign countries, especially in the western world. But I'm still not very sure about the influence and the reception of translated Chinese children's books in England and the English world.

HW: It's difficult to say much about the reception because once a book is published, unless somebody reviews it or draws attention to it, it can seem that nothing much happens. Cao Wenxuan's novel *Dragonfly Eyes* is coming out in English in January, then there will be two of his novels in English, and some of his picture books. It's a tiny percentage of the works of this prolific author. But most people

haven't heard of him. One of the difficulties is low visibility. Where do people see his books? Most parents don't know very much about the children's book world.

ZX: I know that. In China many follow the prizes.

HW: The only places that most people, I mean non-specialists, see children's books is in a bookshop, library, or school. The people who buy books tend to be adults, not children. And we can't expect children to ask for books they don't know about. The books that become bestsellers are usually ones that get a lot of exposure - through reviews, advertising, marketing, and word of mouth. But a book needs that initial visibility if it's going to grow.

ZX: Can I ask, will a book like *Bronze and Sunflower* earn money or lose money in the book market in the UK?

HW: That's really a question for the publisher. Publishers have to consider the extra cost of translation, and perhaps additional editing. Even when they apply for translation grants, it takes time to put the application together, and if they are lucky to get a grant, they may have a limited time in which to publish before the grant expires. Translation grants aren't necessarily the publishers' normal way of working.

ZX: Can I ask about your personal opinion, your impression, of contemporary Chinese children's literature?

HW: There are some fabulous picture books now. When my children were little, I used to try to get Chinese picture books to read to them. That was in the 1990s and early 2000s, and I found there would sometimes be a strange mix of violence and sweetness. It was very uncomfortable because I didn't know how to deal with it. But that was almost twenty years ago, and the only book I've had that feeling with recently is Bai Bing's book about the bullet.

ZX: You mean "The Flight of the Bullet" (*Yi ke zidan de feixing*)? Where the bullet flies through the air and can't stop. It keeps missing people, and finally it hits a tree to avoid hitting a mother?

HW: In the past, when my children asked me to read Chinese children's books, I would interpret into English and comment on the story as I read. I had to do that, for example, when my son's favourite

book was “Black Cat Police Chief” (*Hei mao jingzhang*). I had to be careful with those books because although the Black Cat Police Chief went after the baddies, he did things that would be unacceptable from an English police chief - like revving up his motorbike, shooting a dove, and blasting the ear off a rat. Then there was the cartoon of the praying mantis, where the female eats the male after mating. I was constantly having to comment as I read, and had to insist that he never took the book into school. His teacher actually asked me what he was reading at home, because of the action (fighting) scenes he was drawing at school. But that was 20 years ago, and Chinese picture books are more balanced now. There are some wonderful picture books coming through, although sometimes the pictures can seem stronger than the story. It may simply be that the storytelling is different, but if it's not satisfying, it's like eating food that doesn't quite taste right.

ZX: “The Flight of the Bullet” was selected as a White Raven. I remember, it was a new picture book, which dealt with a special topic that was new for children's books, especially picture books. Usually in picture books we talk about sweet, romantic, happy things, or at least something familiar that connects directly with our everyday life. But this is a picture book of philosophy, it's trying to transfer a concept – it's not depicting real life, but talking about violence. A bullet is a symbol of the violence of killing, maybe of war, and the book's written in a fairy tale kind of way, so I can totally understand your feeling towards this book.

HW: It's a book that confuses my brain, because I don't know to deal with it. I showed this book to friends and family, and they didn't know how to deal with it either. This book has sparked a lot of conversations and good discussions.

ZX: You've also translated *I Am Hua Mulan*. What do you think about this picture book?

HW: The story of Hua Mulan is a classic. And it's international, thanks to Disney - whatever you think of the film, people know the name and the story. It's interesting to see this treatment of the story by Qin Wenjun, who's another prolific writer, and hugely popular in China, although not much of her work has been translated into English.

ZX: Qin Wenjun is an excellent writer of Chinese children's literature. She's especially well known for her series of stories about a boy called Jia Li – *Nan sheng Jia Li* – written in the 1990s. In my opinion,

she's the leading writer of children's novels about contemporary urban childhood life. Previously, we saw a lot of stories about rural children and rural childhood. And because urbanization is a process, sometimes it was hard to imagine the life of a boy who's been in an urban setting since birth, never mind a bourgeois boy. His life is quite different from that of children who lived in rural areas before moving to the city, who had to adapt and find a way of surviving between the differential of their original life and then urban life. The children in Qin Wenjun's books live a life of abundance. They enjoy their lives. Sometimes they are quite indulged by their parents: they feel able to push the boundaries, not like the children who always keep within very rigid limitations. Qin Wenjun is a leading writer in depicting this kind of childhood in China and in making a kind of protagonist mode for modern urban children in China. That's what she is most well-known for – the comfortable urban childhood.

HW: You asked about reception. Sometimes I think there is a disconnect between what children in the UK know about China from the news - the Beijing Olympics, the technologically advanced China, the way China has dealt with the corona virus – and the traditional China in the books that they see. The landmark icon of China for them may be the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, and yet the books they see in school may have old pagodas and temples. I wonder how they link the two: contemporary city life and traditional China. At the moment there seems to be an emphasis in China on enjoying the traditional life, enjoying history, celebrating the achievements of the past – China in the Tang dynasty, or other dynasties – all the highlights. I don't know how children manage with all the different aspects of China. Where does the Belt and Road fit in? Where does the Silk Road fit in? The First Emperor? It's a lot to get your head around, so in some ways, the more books there are the better. One thing that doesn't happen in English translations of Chinese books is that we don't get series of books like Yang Hongying's *Diary of a Smiling Cat* in 20-30 volumes, *Charlie IX and Duoduomo* in over 30 volumes, and Shen Shixi's series of animal stories. We're lucky if even one book in a series gets translated, but that doesn't have the same impact as a whole series. In China translation happens much faster, and if you like one book, you can read the next one and the next one.

ZX: Next time maybe you could translate a book about urban life in China. For a long time it was Chinese children's books, and adult literature, about rural life that were more likely to be translated into English. The truth is that there are many writers who had a rural childhood, so they can write very

vividly about their own rural childhood experiences, or about another child protagonist in a rural area. We have excellent novels concerning rural childhood, but there are also children's novels concerned with urban life and urban childhood in China, and these have a history now of twenty years or more, even thirty years in a big city like Shanghai. There have been three decades of a very modern urban childhood in China. These novels have quite a different flavour from, say *Bronze and Sunflower*. They're more representative of contemporary Chinese childhood. I hope that foreign readers won't only read about rural childhood in Chinese children's books. A child's life in the countryside is full of poverty, it's very hard to get the basic needs of life. If they can read some stories about urban life, they'll learn about Chinese children who are carefree, full of fun, creative, bold, and rebellious. Not always overtly rebellious – you know that in the Chinese tradition you need to respect your elders, so the children in the stories don't rebel overtly, but they find ways around social conventions. Sometimes they're very clever. Sometimes they outsmart the adults, including in ways that are helpful to the adults. I think this kind of spirit is influenced, to some extent, by imported children's literature from the west, like Pippi Longstocking, and you find it mixed with contemporary life, the real life of urban children in China now. I hope that, through translation, this kind of children's literature writing aesthetic, and this kind of Chinese childhood, can be known by western readers. This kind of depiction of urban childhood in China is quite real, and reassures me that we can have hope in childhood, even in a very pressured environment. Sometimes it's very hard for children to survive in the current living environment, and in the current educational environment. But you can still find that spirit of childhood – a kind of life where we are not afraid of anything, or we can shoulder a burden in a childlike way. That's quite amazing, and I think it's a very important part of childhood, especially the Chinese childhood. In rural stories, many children become adults at an early age, concerned with issues about survival: how to earn money, how to get food for the family, how to share the family burden. They are still children, but they behave and think like adults. In urban children's literature, children are children. We need both kinds of books in translation to make the picture of Chinese children's literature complete.

PART 2: Helen Wang interviews Zhao Xia

HW: Zhao Xia, what is your life story?

ZX: My life is really simple and straightforward! I was born in a village by a lake – actually, I wrote about my childhood in a collection of essays for children, “My Lake” (我的湖). I grew up, and went to primary school and secondary school. Then I was enrolled at a teacher training school, to train as an elementary school teacher. So, during the three years that should have been my high school years, we learned about everything - Chinese language and literature, maths, music, painting, physics... - because we never knew what kind of teachers we would be!

Finally, I had a chance to enrol at university. Two students each year had the chance to enrol. I went to Zhejiang Normal University. I got my BA in Chinese language and literature, and my MA in children’s literature, after which I was an editor of the journal “China Children's Culture” (《中国儿童文化》) for four years. Then I pursued my doctoral degree at Zhejiang University, located in Hangzhou, one of the top three universities in China. My doctoral research was in Literary and Arts Criticism, and my dissertation was about contemporary Chinese children’s culture. Then I went back to Zhejiang Normal University as a lecturer, then associate professor. It was just step by step to where I am now!

I became a children's literature researcher, and now I’m also a part-time writer. Did I tell you I published a picture book this year? The title is “An Ant’s Walk” (一只蚂蚁，爬呀爬). I wrote the text, and the illustrator is Huang Ying, who was the original illustrator of the first edition of Xiao Mao’s story *The Boy and the Frog*, which you translated. When I try to write children's literature it gives me an even deeper feeling of literature, and when I turn back to my research – to the books, and the phenomena I want to observe, talk about, and explore - I feel I have a different, deeper feeling of what literature should be, of the meaning of literature, and what literature can do for the individual, for children, maybe for everyone.

Becoming a children's literature researcher happened quite naturally. I did well during my undergraduate years, and was asked whether I would be willing to do an MA. I took the chance, and became a student of Fang Weiping. Actually, I started learning with him in my fourth year of

undergraduate studies, because once the MA was in sight, I wanted to get in touch with this field, to learn about children's literature, and try to write something about children's literature. I spent the following three years doing the MA. And then I got a job that was connected directly to this field. So, I just stepped in and kept going. Over time, that wonderful thing happened, where you look back and can't see the entrance any more. It's good luck, and such a good feeling, when that happens, when you find something you love to do. But, I have to say that for many years I questioned the use of literature in a world where people are more interested in how much you earn in a year. What use is reading literature when you should be getting qualifications to get a good job and a decent salary? But, the longer I am engaged in this field, the more I love it – not only children's literature, but all literature.

HW: You've been in Cambridge for a year. What have you been researching?

ZX: It's been a strange year [because of COVID-19], but I've enjoyed it a lot. My research project is funded by the National Social Science Fund of China. The title is "Research on Modern Western Children's Literature Theory and Criticism 当代西方儿童文学理论批评研究".

HW: Is this your individual project, or part of a larger project?

ZX: It's just me. I applied for the project on my own and I got it, but I've been interested in this subject for over a decade. In 2008, I got a scholarship from the International Youth Library, in Munich, for another project, and during the three months that I was there, I found some journals of western children's literature study. I started reading them, and got absorbed. I realized as I was reading that I was witnessing the development of contemporary western children's literature criticism from its very early beginnings to a quite mature stage, from the 1970s to about 2007. It was quite a shock to see how childish it was at first, and it was interesting to see it develop and mature over forty years. It started with simple reviews that were very impressionistic, saying something like "I think this is good for a child" or "the protagonist is depicted in a vivid way." I watched it mature decade by decade, and saw it absorb all kinds of resources from the outside world and try to grow up. It was fascinating to read, and see the process, the history, so I wrote some articles about it at that time. After a while I realized I had written enough articles to be able to publish a book on western children's literature theory and criticism. The title was 思想的旅程 "Journeys in Thinking: a critical study of western

children's literary theory and criticism", published in 2015. I wanted to take this research further, so I put together this current project. I've learned a lot from this study, not only about the process and history of contemporary western Chinese children's literature theory and criticism, but also about how we can learn from previous experience in the field - for example, how children's literature can grow and be part of a bigger context, in particular the greater context of literary criticism. Often, people think that children's literature is easy, and that talking about it is easy too. It seems everyone is able to judge whether a book is nice for children! And it's not like the literary classics that need explanation before you can understand them – you know, like *Waiting for Godot* – because in children's literature, the stories are quite straightforward, or at least they seem to be. I've really learned a lot about the western history of children's books: how to talk about children's books from multiple perspectives, and to articulate this in a critical and academic way. Sometimes you need to learn how to talk about literary works in an academic way first, before you can go beyond that and talk about different things or deeper questions that may be buried inside the field. I think Chinese children's literature criticism is also trying to pursue the academic way, and we can borrow from the western experience. Learning about western children's theory and children's literary theory myself, I've learned a lot about how to read a children's book. At first, I found all the theoretical terms and theoretical ideas and concepts so cold, but at the same time I never realized you could read a picture book like *Rosie's Walk* so profoundly! Sometimes I talk about this book with my undergraduate students at the university. I ask them to read the book first, and when they say it's easy, I ask them to analyze it. I use theoretical terms to lead them into the depth of the text. The students balk at the idea (as I had), but then they get absorbed, just like me! You discover that beside the apparently simple language and the easy-looking pictures, there are so many cultural and literary codes inside a simple story like this.

I think this is also a very significant part of the meaning of research in literature. By doing the research, we can review the hidden meaning, significance, and code inside the text. By reading a book from a theoretical perspective, not just in an impressionistic way, I now know much more about how to read a children's book, and how to understand its particular cultural, lingual and literary background and context.

Within the simplicity of children's literature there is always something very profound, and it's as profound as any other kind of literature. I've spent a long time trying to convince myself, deep in my heart, trying to find a way to prove to myself that children's books are as profound as any other books, that the best children's books are the best books, but also in a very special way, in their own way. I think I have achieved that, at least for myself, and I can now confidently say that the best children's books are the best books. It's fun, and fulfilling to do research about children's books - there is a charm that you can only find in the best literature. And there are things that you don't find in adult literature, feelings you can only find in children's books. I didn't start out with any grand ambition to say that by researching children's books we can do some great cause for the nation or for children around the world. That was not my motivation - I did all this for myself. I needed to convince myself that reading and researching children's literature is important, and meaningful, because only if it was significant for me would I believe that it could be significant for others.

Also, with the western children's literary criticism research that I am doing now, I feel it's like the Chinese saying 旁觀者清, 當局者迷 [you can see more clearly from the outside]. I've been looking at western terms, literary theory and criticism, its development, history and contemporary status as an observer. I got absorbed, and was shocked by its development. I can still feel the shock! But I found that doing theory and research this way also allows us to talk about some problems, some of which might be serious. I've talked about these problems with colleagues here in Cambridge, and found that some of them have the same feeling. For example, for the last two or three decades, and especially since the early 2000s, people doing children's literature research in Cambridge have focused almost all their attention on cultural studies. Cultural studies is important for children's literature study, and it's so inspiring for decoding any kind of children's texts, both historical and contemporary - it's a major contribution. But the more I read about these theories on criticism, the more I learn about literature. And the more I understand about children's literature, the more I feel that there might be a problem in conducting or promoting these cultural studies so extensively. This approach cannot cover the entire spectrum of children's literature study. Some researchers say that it's very bad for you to get absorbed in a children's book because you will be shaped by it, and you will never be able to read it critically. But

I question that, because by thinking and researching in that way we lose the very special and unique power of literature.

Maybe many of the texts in children's books, especially the traditional ones, are in need of reflection according to contemporary perspectives, including feminism and racism. This is true even for many classics, like *Alice in Wonderland*. Even so, we cannot discard the pleasure of reading children's literature, of reading literature. So we need to find a way through. This is a very big challenge that children's literature research is facing in the west. But in China, it's the opposite! We pay a lot of attention to aesthetic analysis, to the aesthetic feeling of the texts in children's books. Many people would say that a good book is one that touches them deeply. I think there's a danger in that opinion as well, and that children's literature research in China needs to learn from its western counterparts that there are multiple perspectives for reading children's books besides the pure and aesthetic ones. By reading a book from different cultural perspectives, maybe we will have a more profound or more mature judgment of that book, and that could be very helpful. In recent years, there has been controversy in China over books by Cao Wenxuan, Yang Hongying and Shen Shixi. I think the root of the problem may be that we talk about a children's book from a single perspective. We need to look at children's books from multiple perspectives, not only the artistic perspective or the cultural perspective, but to mix them together, and then re-evaluate the books. We can't turn away from any of these perspectives – it can be problematic to read only from a romantic perspective, but if we study only from a cultural perspective, that can also lead to serious problems.

HW: I'd like to ask about your experience with your foreign colleagues in Cambridge. You've mentioned cultural studies and aesthetic studies. Do you find that you're interested in discussing the same things, and do you find the discussions interesting?

ZX: That's a good question. It depends. You know, if I'm talking with you or Frances [Weightman], who are interested in Chinese children's literature and have direct contact and communication with the field, then it's a different kind of discussion. When I communicate with researchers here in Cambridge, it depends on the extent of their interest in Chinese children's literature. Take Joe [Sutlif Sander], for example, who you met recently. He's very interested in Chinese children's literature, and he has quite a number of Chinese and Asian-background graduate students. Joe and I have been discussing the

picture book *A New Year's Reunion* (团圆), and he's planning to write an article on this picture book, so we talked about western theory, western criticism, and Chinese children's literature. When talking to other colleagues, most of the topics of conversation concentrate on western/English children's books – picture books, children's novels and theory and criticism. But we can speak on the same level because he can read the book in English and I've already done some research on western children's literary theory and criticism, and at least I know a part of it. When we talk, we can have quite a good dialogue. Fang Weiping told me that he sent you some articles I've published already – of conversations I've had with Joe, with Professor Karen Coats, Director of the Cambridge children's literature research centre, and with [Blanka Grzegirczyk](#), who's researching post-colonial children's literature criticism at Cambridge. Because of the pandemic, I was unable to do more face-to-face discussions with colleagues there. I attended some of their lectures, but didn't get to meet all of my colleagues in person. The articles we sent you were essentially online discussions, except the one with Joe, which we did in January, just before lockdown.

HW: Will you publish those discussions in English?

ZX: Probably just in Chinese.

HW: It seems a bit sad if you only publish them in Chinese, because then English readers won't get to read them at all.

ZX: A number of editors in China have invited me to publish a book of talks with foreign colleagues, and one editor has suggested we publish a bilingual edition. But that would take time, so I'm still considering it.

HW: I'd be interested to read your discussions with Joe, Karen Coats and Blanka Grzegirczyk! Sometimes, when people are discussing things from very different starting points, the questions are interesting – the approach is different, the interpretation is different and the way the conversation develops can also be different. I wonder how much people in the English-speaking academic world know about Chinese children's literature? Even to read preliminary conversations with somebody who is an expert in Chinese children's literature and is interested in aesthetics, and literary and art criticism – a conversation that is quite simple or general for you - might be an excellent introduction for people

here, enabling them to read something in their own language and to learn what you are doing and realize where you are going with the field. Even if it's a lot of work, it would be worth doing.

ZX: The focus of my project is more single direction. The aim is to try and take the experience of the development of the western children's literature theory into China. That's why I want to have these articles published in Chinese. I translate and publish them as soon as possible because I think all these topics could be very inspiring to Chinese researchers and readers, and also to writers. As for the other direction, to introduce Chinese literature theories and criticism into the western world, maybe some people are interested to know a little bit about children's literature research from another country, but my impression is that because of the language block, I would say that this interest is really very limited. I think this is like most communication between China and the western world. For years, in China, the old cultural fields, including literature, have been absorbing a kind of nutrition from their western counterparts. Maybe we still need time, to wait for the western world to get interested in things from China – I mean, to get interested in Chinese literature and Chinese literary research, and Chinese children's books and children's literature research still needs time. There is an imbalance in communication. I hope I can do a little bit to help, but I'm not sure we can do much with this imbalance at the moment because the language block is really a big block – a blockade!

HW: What would be the best thing to do about this?

ZX: Promotional activities are very important for promoting literature and also for cultural communication. But deep in my heart, I think that outstanding translations of excellent Chinese children's books would be the best way to introduce Chinese children's literature to the foreign or western world. Lucia Obi [at the International Youth Library, Munich] told me that you have been to the library to check the Chinese children's books – the White Ravens – to see which books you might be interested in translating. I think you are dealing with your translation work not as a routine translator, but as a very responsible translator. And you are a very talented translator. It's very hard for Chinese children's books to find such translators. In previous years, before any Chinese writers had won the Nobel prize for literature, we were always talking about translation because it is so important. Without translation you will never know anything about Chinese literature and Chinese children's literature. And with translation, it is not guaranteed that you will love Chinese children's literature, but

at least you will know more about it. So much depends on the translation. So the translator's role is very, very important. I think the best way is to choose the best Chinese children's books and to try to translate them.

Liu Haiqi's "Summer of Pigeons" (*You gezi de xiatian*) is one of the best children's novels in recent years in China. It's a new novel, in my opinion it's one of the best novels dealing with rural childhood in the last decade. Liu Haiqi is a writer I know and admire. In recent years he gave up the burden of publishing and now has time to totally engage with his own writing. This story is very good – it's connected with his own childhood experience, especially the language and the experience that the language conveys, which is so real and touching. And there is a special flavour of rudeness – I call it aesthetic rudeness, because a child sometimes feels the world with a kind of rudeness. Children don't have an exquisite, delicate kind of language to deal with this world. Liu Haiqi catches and depicts this feeling very vividly. I love this story! Another book that I regard very highly is "I am an Idiot" (*Wo shi baichi*) by the Taiwanese writer Wang Shufen. It's not so much a novel as a collection of stories told from the perspective of a child who's mentally handicapped, and labelled and regarded by others as an idiot. There are so many children's books published every year in China, but only a few excellent ones. That's the case everywhere, not just in China. So choose the best ones and translate them. I believe that with your translation maybe those books will attract attention, or will let foreign readers, at least foreign researchers, feel that Chinese children's literature is pursuing, or has already, a unique aesthetic of its own. It's difficult to talk about the language itself, but even after translation, they should be able to see the level of language, and the story, the way we think about childhood, the way we understand childhood and, ultimately, the way we understand humanity. In the last ten years, I think Chinese children's literature writing has gone very deeply in that direction. Although we can find only a few works like that, it's still very important. We are also seeing a rewriting of history in children's novels, like Huang Beijia's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. In the past, we only had heroic writing. There was always a child in the story who could do everything – he could singlehandedly fight off a group of enemies! Nowadays writers are trying to find ways of telling children about history, to work out how to talk with children about history and war. Although it's a very cruel history - war is so cruel – we cannot conceal the non-heroic aspects of history from children, and we shouldn't lie to them about history.

War isn't romantic, but still, there is something inside war besides hate. We hate war, but sometimes we have to engage with it, and decide what to do. And how should we look at different kinds of war? How should we understand the people in those wars, and the children in those wars? I imagine these books will be a rich subject for a western researcher who's interested in Chinese children's literature. If people have time to read the best children's literature works that have been published in recent decades in China, I think they will get quite a different picture of China, Chinese childhood, Chinese culture, and Chinese children's literature.

Editor's update: the series of interviews Zhao Xia mentions on p.98 above has now been published in book form:-

Zhao Xia (et al.) 赵霞(等). 《一切无不与童年有关——剑桥儿童文学对话》 [Everything is related to childhood: conversations on children's literature in Cambridge]. 中国少年儿童出版社, 2022.

