The professor, the publisher, the writer: three interviews

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Abstract
Yu interviews Professor Huang Yuanshen about how and when did he start getting interested in Australian literature and was there any Australian literature accessible in China at the time when he studies English language and literature. Among others, Yuanshen tells who else interested him among other Australian writers apart from Henry Lawson.

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Interview with Professor Huang Yunnan at Shanghai Institute Of Foreign Trade
(e-mail 7 February - 2 March 2010)

Ouyang Yu: How and when did you start getting interested in Australian literature? Was there any Australian literature accessible in China at the time when you studied English language and literature?

Huang Yunnan: There was hardly any. The Chinese version of Diplomats which came out in 1960s [James Aldridge, 1949] was introduced as a book of thematic significance to the then pro-Western government, rather than for its Australian relevance and literary value, and its Australian author, being hardly useful in political propaganda, gradually sank into oblivion in China. In 1979, I was at the University of Sydney for an MA program under the supervision of Professor Leonie Kramer who assigned Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” for us to read. It helped to kindle my interest in Australian literature, and I had the impression that here was a great writer and a great literature worthy of my academic pursuit, perhaps for a lifetime. Hence my later career has been linked with Australian literature, which had seemed so remote to me in my young days.

OY: When you went to Australia in 1979, did you go alone or as a group?

HY: As a group. In fact we were a group of 9 scholars, later known as “Australian Gang of Nine” for their individual and collective contribution to language education and literary studies in China.

OY: Did the group go to Australia with the intention to study English language and literature? And was it funded for that purpose?

HY: Yes, because it was a teacher-training program on exchange basis, which means that same number of Australian teachers were being sent to China, funded by the Chinese government.

OY: You must have been introduced to a number of Australian writers, but why was it Henry Lawson who impressed you in particular?

HY: A great writer can write about an experience that is in some sense unique for people in a particular environmental context and is universal, in terms of feelings, for anybody who has had a similar experience. The bush life in “The Drover’s Wife” was new to me, but her precarious existence and its consequences provoked in me anxiety for my helpless wife and children left behind in China. I gave an overall review of Henry Lawson and his work in my MA thesis, and I made up my mind then to introduce to Chinese readers this Australian writer of international caliber who, I believed, should be part of my long-term plan of teaching Australian literature in China. Professor Leonie Kramer and Brian Kiernan supervised my thesis.

OY: Apart from Henry Lawson, who else interested you among other Australian writers?

HY: Patrick White, Peter Carey, Morris Lurie, Judith Waten, John Morrison, Miles Franklin, Alan Marshall, Randolph Stow, Henry Handel Richardson, Thomas Keneally and some years later, Alex Miller and Tim Winton, some of whose works I have translated into Chinese.

OY: Now, something quite apart from this. Many people who come to Australia from China these days stay on to get their Permanent Residency instead of going back to China, forming part of what is now known as the Australian-Chinese community. When you came to Australia, did it ever occur to you to stay on in Australia to pursue further studies in literature or otherwise?

HY: It is interesting that people of our age bracket and of our academic status hardly thought of the possibility of staying on in Australia for either purpose you have mentioned, although personally I was kindly offered a job by a friend with a horticultural firm, and free accommodation. We were all aware that our future was in China where our expertise in foreign language and literature would be duly regarded, while in Australia it would inevitably turn into a disadvantage.

Besides, the implicit and pervasive racial prejudice that I read of, noticed and felt was there when I was made me all the more determined to come back to work in China where I would be equally treated at least in race.

OY: Can you give me an example or two of racial prejudice from your personal experience? Also what did you read in Australian literature that showed the signs of racism in those days?

HY: Once on a summer morning I was taking a stroll not too far away from Bondi Junction, followed by my growing dog which, with a mild disposition of showing affection indiscriminately, somehow started to bark suddenly at a jogger passing by. The jogger stopped and asked furiously, “Whose dog is this?” I didn’t want to get involved in what might easily develop into an unpleasant scene. So I said, “Look, it is my neighbor’s dog, not mine. I’m only a visitor from China.” With this, I thought I could get myself away now. But no, the jogger did not let me go. He threw the following remark at me, like a dagger, “If it is your dog, I’ll kill it.”

As to signs of racism, you can easily find them in early literary works of, for example, Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin and some other writers.

OY: Did you immediately start teaching Australian literature on your return to China at the end of your studies at Sydney University? If so, what did you teach?

HY: No, although I wished I could do so. Shortly after my return from Australia, I proposed teaching Australian literature but it was vetoed by the Chairman of the Department as a minor literature which should come after many other literatures in importance. It was only after my repeated offer and my personal academic influence that two years later I succeeded in standing to teach Australian literature by offering a course of reading in selected Australian literary writings, arranged chronologically from the authors of colonial period to the present-day writers, covering almost all the major figures, works I have translated into Chinese.

I think it was 1983 when I started, as an optional course, with a small number of 14 students, who were joined almost every year by other interested students until the classroom was not big enough to accommodate them. I remember that the biggest number was 120. In teaching I’ve so far got no financial support whatsoever from Australia.

OY: Did you at the same time begin translating and introducing Australian literature in Chinese? If so, who did you translate? And why is it that you did it for it in the context of Australia or otherwise?

HY: Yes, I did. I started to translate short stories, those by, for example, Henry Lawson, Vance Palmer, Hal Porter, Judith Waten, John Morrison, Peter Carey, Morris Lurie, Tim Winton and some other writers. And then I shifted to the translation of novels and published the Chinese versions of My Brilliant Career, I Can Jump Puddles, Wake in Fright, Landca Brayford, To the Island, Shallows [ready for publication at the time of interview]. Here there was (and still is) hardly a market for Australian novels.

OY: How did you get them published? Was what the circulation of each title, and can you name a few? What was the acceptance, popular and critical, of those stories and novels in those days?

HY: Perhaps you have to know our particular system of publication to understand why a book without a market could still be published in China. All the publishing houses are state-owned and although financially they are supposed to survive on their own, government subsidy is always available for the publication of books with small print-runs but a value not matched by other books. Such is the case with some Australian novels. 1000 copies of My Brilliant Career (now subsidized by the government) were printed, and the publisher gave half of the copies to me as remuneration for my translation. I Can Jump Puddles was a little better, for the publisher did not make me sell any copy of the book. Apart from [Colleen McCullough] The Thornbird, Australian novels do not sell well in China. And there is hardly any critical response to the Australian novels I have translated. I leaned towards realistic works in my translation because of personal likes as well as of the general demand on the part of the reader.

OY: How do students respond to the Australian writers? Do they have any favorite authors or works that you can mention?

HY: My students are interested in Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” for its vivid description of the inhospitable bush environment and its universal moral message expressed through Biblical allusion, notably the image of the snake and the warnings related to the Holy Writ. White is another favorite author for students on account of, among other things, his peculiar language which calls for much intellectual effort to comprehend its hidden meaning, his unique idiosyncrasy of finding the extraordinary behind the ordinary, which often gives his writing the quality of poetry, and his anti-hero treatment of his characters.

OY: How many MA students have you since successfully supervised and what areas of Australian literature have they covered?

HY: I’ve lost count. I started from 1987 on to take one or two graduate students each year and did not stop until 2009. Their theses have covered a number of Australian writers such as Patrick White, Martin Boyd, Susannah Place, Christina Stead, Miles Franklin, Henry Lawson, Thomas Keneally, Randolph Stow, Peter Carey, Elizabeth Jolley and some other writers.

OY: When did you start taking PhD students? What are their main areas of interest?

HY: In 1998. Their areas of interest vary, ranging from literary theory to some aspects of Australian literature, the eccentricity of Patrick White, the issue of national identity in Keneally’s
OY: Is it Australian writing of interest to your students, PhD or MA, as well as to yourself?

HY: Australian writing is gaining growing attention in Australia. But in China it perhaps has to wait until it has a much higher place in Australian literary field because, in terms of Australian literary studies, we are just in the beginning stage and it is only natural that our focus is to, for the time being, on those major authors and literary trends. However that day will not be far off, in fact I already gave a special mention of your name and contribution in my A History of Australian Literature published in 1997.

OY: What's the funding situation like in regard to teaching, translating or research projects that you have so far been engaged in? Do you think it's important to you in the promotion of Australian literature in China?

HY: Australian funding greatly helps to promote Australian studies in China. Take my own case. I've been funded several times in translation and research. My Lucy Binyon (Martin Boyd, 1946, translated by Huang) was not accepted by the publisher until it was subsidized by Australia-China Council. Australian funding for a research project on several Australian writers enabled my PhD students to go to Australia to collect data.

OY: What is the current situation in China in an economic climate not particularly congenial to the growth of literature? And what do you think can be done to promote Australian literature in a more vigorous manner?

HY: I believe the world-wide economic recession does not really affect Australian studies in China today which depend more on academic devotion to a "minor literature" than on possible financial support. At present, we need more scholars committed to the study of Australian literature, young blood to carry on with what people like us have done. I also think it's important to promote a country's literature which will not be easily turned away by multitudinous material temptations. That is also why I've invested so much effort in the PhD program and I'm pleased to see that so far it has succeeded.

OY: In a Chinese situation dominated by English and American literature, is Australian literature fighting a losing battle or is it gaining ground, in terms of student recruitment, the book market share, and its future?

HY: I think it's neither. If we look at the issue objectively and acknowledge the place of Australia in world literature, we should be happy with the attention currently given to it in China, which is partly due to the continuing effort made by scholars like us. It is hardly possible for Australian literature to become a major critical or commercial concern in countries other than Australia.

OY: What is the current situation involving the teaching, research and publishing of Australian literature throughout China?

HY: In those three areas it is still those scholars in their forties or so with doctoral degrees that are most active, and very often the universities which boast such scholars are doing better than others who might have a longer history in Australian literary studies. In terms of contribution to the promotion of Australian literature (measured by how much has been done in teaching, research and publication) in the last few years, I believe the Shanghai Foreign Language and Trade which has five scholars with PhDs in Australian literature comes first, followed by Peking University, East China Normal University (ECNU), Anhui University, and Beijing Foreign Studies University. Given the importance of Australian literature in world literature, Australian literature has now gained its fair share of attention in China.

OY: What about the publishing situation regarding translated works or scholarly articles on Australian literature, as compared with ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago?

HY: The publication of translated works and scholarly articles very much depends on the quality of the book/article and the translation. For example, in the last few years six of my eight PhD students have published seven articles in Australian literature journals. This is a relatively high number. I consider the current situation in terms of the production of books or articles of Australian relevance is much better than several decades ago, thanks perhaps to the endeavor of scholars over several generations.

OY: You are the editor of Australian Studies Center at ECNU as well as vice president of Australian Studies Association in China (ASC). From your point of view, has the ASC been playing an important role in promoting Australian literature in China?

HY: ASC in China did play an important role in promoting Australian literature, but now the role is declining. For one thing, its attention is divided among a lot of subjects, with its focus shifted to such areas as economy, finance, trade, industry, agriculture and so on, and the domain of literary studies is more or less out in the cold; for another, ASC, as a whole, needs powerful and devoted leadership to reorganize and rejuvenate the research force and be more actively engaged in conferences, symposiums, special columns and scholarly publications, rather than doing something just to get more publicity and more funding.

OY: What's the current situation for academic exchange between Australia and China? Have you been back to Australia since you finished your MA studies at Sydney University?

HY: In academic exchange, I believe things are much better now, just judging from the fact that young scholars, some of whom used to be my students, are shuttling between China and Australia frequently, a welcome sign of improvement in cultural exchange between the two countries. Such things were inconceivable in our days when China still remained in obscurity and Australia seemed, to many, hardly approachable with a stack-up air and an attitude of condescension. Since I finished my MA program at Sydney University in 1981, I've visited Australia several times and found that nothing particularly impressed me in the sense of change. Unlike China, Australia is always more or less a country moving ahead with slow but sure steps, and content with a quiet self-contained life that it hopes will not be disturbed by the outside world.

OY: What is the role of individual scholars counts in the promotion of Australian literature in China? Collectively, perhaps something should be done to enhance the numerous Australian studies centers, many of which are in fact not very active. Australian subsidy should go to the very few centers which are really doing well, instead of being indiscriminately spread over all of them.

OY: I note that you are one of the few Chinese scholars who occasionally write in English and get articles published in Australian journals. I'm not sure to see a lot in English by other Chinese scholars of Australian literature. What do you think is the main reason for this?

HY: It can be accounted for in many ways, but the major reason, if I may say so, lies in the fact that most Chinese scholars are not quite ready yet theoretically and linguistically to exchange independent critical views with their Australian counterparts. In this area, perhaps we have to work harder.

The Publisher

Interview with Wei Xingzong, Deputy Director, Shanghai Literature and Arts Publishing House, Shanghai (22 July 2007)

Note: Shanghai Literature and Arts Publishing House took up Australian literature in the early 1990s, publishing a number of Australian comics and writers.

Qiong Yu: After gazing leafing through and open up, 1978, there seemed to be a break in this practice. Can you comment? Wei Xingzong: Just as you said, Chinese publishers came to know about Australian literature quite early but it was not systematic or comprehensive. It was sporadic and scattered, and didn't reach the Western market, and did not go well. We are Jones' agent for her subsequent books. Sales of the Australian poetry collection that you took responsibility for editing and selecting are also fine. So far, we've printed about 5000 to 6000 copies, selling Writing Program, hosted by Wong Anry, from the Shanghai Writers Association. But generally speaking, compared with literature like English, French, Italian. Even American literature, Australian literature has not found an identity in the minds of Chinese readers.

OY: What do you think is the reason?

WX: In my opinion, on the one hand, there is not enough systematic research and introduction. In regard to bringing stuff in, it's hard to say. In fact, in recent years, the world of Chinese publishing has been very energetic in importing foreign books. Take our house. We now import over 30 titles each of years, and we will like to make that over 50. If you provide over 50 titles per year, the market can gradually be developed. We cooperate more with European countries, like the Netherlands, the United States and Germany, and we have imported a lot of their literature. We have also imported a lot from some Asian countries, mainly South Korea and Japan. As for Australian literature, now that Oceania has been counted as part of Asia, our hope is to include it in the future.—after all, this is the only country in the territory of Asia that has a blood relationship with Europe or the closest to it, with its geographical position in the southern hemisphere. So, it is very unique, plus the fact that the relationship between Australia and China, and particularly with Shanghai, is quite close. So we would like to do more.

OY: Over the years since the early 1990s, as many as thirty or forty Australian Studies centers have been established throughout China, and many students have been awarded higher degrees in this field. So, the research is quite extensive. You talked about small nations in Europe that are on a par with Australia. Why do Chinese people hardly ever look toward the Southern Hemisphere?

[Weis describes Dutch and Spanish government subsidies for publication of their nationals' books in China. Agents in Barcelona since the Hispanic readership world-wide, and many Hispanic writers are influential in China. The same is true for Italian writers.]

OY: You talked about having published a number of Australian books, such as the ones by (C)lare Jones, recently. Two years ago, you put out a collection of contemporary Australian poetry in translation. Can you talk about the sales, influence and financial support in relation to these books after their publication?

WX: It's okay. The market response to Jones' books was fine: close to 10,000 copies for each title. Through her books, people began to realize that there are writers with European blood who are deeply rooted in Australian life. It can be said that her pen was full of European ink, while writing about an Australian life. When I met her I found she had a good personality, strong qualities of business, which is mainly funded from our part and the others do well. We are Jones' agent for her subsequent books. Sales of the Australian poetry collection that you took responsibility for editing and selecting are also fine. So far, we've printed about 5000 to 6000 copies, selling微信 search 'Wang Anry' from the Shanghai Writers Association. But generally speaking, compared with literature like English, French, Italian. Even American literature, Australian literature has not found an identity in the minds of Chinese readers.
Quite well, and we've nearly run out of copies. The poetry in it is quite unique. In Chinese, readers are very changeable in that there are more unique texts are the better, the opposite. Poetry readers have thoughts and tastes that are different from those of other readers. We used to be scared of publishing poetry collections, whether Chinese or foreign, and collections of essays. However, two to three years ago, we began publishing some poetry, on and off, with quite fine results.

QY: You have been focusing on importing fiction, haven't you?
WX: That's right. In China, resources involving big-name writers in foreign countries are shared by a number of traditionally strong publishers. It's all written on the beat. We also hope to get a number of big-name writers so that we can produce brand-name works. That would be really fantastic.

QY: Subscriptions for publication have been available, in Australia too, and financial support. As long as there are proper publishing houses willing to publish the books, there will be money. However, it seems that you haven't considered this for some years.
WX: If one wants to introduce Australian literature, including Australian culture, to Chinese readers, through Chinese publications, with promotion on a large scale, I have a suggestion. Apart from the government making it easier to do a number of subject with the amount of funding that is necessary, I think what is most of importance is that the Australian side can organize two or three copyright agency companies whose main function is to introduce Australian books, music, and culture to three countries, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, that are strong in publishing. China, at present, is the biggest publishing country in the world in terms of publishing, in excess of 250,000 titles, or seven billion copies every year. So, this figure is far ahead of the first four great nations, USA, Germany, and Japan. The four nations are about the same, publishing 80,000 new titles per year, and one third of what is published in China, or a bit less than that. Professional copyright agency companies should move on this. As long as the Chinese government's policy is to improve the relationship between China and Australia, and to make the Australian culture and literature more widely known, the government should back this initiative.

QY: But wouldn't the other two also have the same problem?
WX: Yes, but they had big American or Japanese agencies coordinating it, thus making it possible for those companies to make the initiative. This is why I think, to put it brutally, if Australian culture wants to be transmitted across the world, it needs to have an agency that can play a coordinating role, exercising this responsibility for the whole country. In China, in the publishing world, there is absolutely no problem with importing foreign titles at all. There's no problem with the money. There are sensitive issues in China, but there are no problems in Australia, and all of them, under the Chinese government supervision. I think, if the Australian government is really keen on promoting Australian culture to Chinese-language readers, what urgently needs to be done is to organize a number of people who are able to speak the Chinese language to form an agency company to launch a powerful promotion project for Australian culture. After all, the number of Chinese-speaking people in China is close to 100 million, whereas the number of people who can speak English is beyond 400 million, not yet 700 million. So Chinese language users are in the majority. But of course this is something that will change overnight.

QY: Just now, I talked about Australian-Chinese writers writing in Chinese. I have written that in English, and then I have written a collection of stories, and then I have written a novel. In this way, I think, after a number of years, Australian culture as a whole can be established by step by step among Chinese readers.

QY: Within Australian literature, there is also the Australian-Chinese part. Basically, the overseas Chinese in Australia is divided into two categories: those writing in English and those writing in Chinese. In relation to the Australian-Chinese, you've done Bi Nian, but I'm not sure if there's anyone else. How do you look at this aspect of the literature?

WX: In relation to Australian-Chinese writers writing in Chinese, the most influential one in the last decade or so is Mi Fongtian in Australia by Bai Guoqian. It appeared in the mid-1980s Shanghai when large numbers of Shanghai Chinese moved to Australia to live. The most representative work of that period. Tens of thousands of copies sold with four to five reprints, selling really well. At that time, the level of Chinese literature, in my opinion, wasn't really high. In retrospect, more than a decade later, this work seems quite flat, not very profound. However, in the climate of feeling in those days, there was a great need for such a work to powerfully summarize the situation. So, that was well done. At the time, in Chiao, among those who were overseas, similar works were produced, big and small, such as Nantes of Beijing in New York, Nantes of Taipei in Shanghai, and My Fortune in Australia, creating quite a big wave. Until nowadays, the others, My Fortune in Australia remains unmentioned. This is a great pity. I heard that there was a company wanting to do it but it did not involve shooting scenes overseas the process was complex and the cost would be high.

QY: Well, I must say we are interested but we are not familiar with it. In China there is a perception that such kinds of autobiographies are not part of a national culture but are about one individual's success. In Australia, as long as you become wealthy, you light people's eyes up. So, personal histories of struggle are often sought after in Asia.

WX: The Australian government is keen on putting in the money, however, they'd like to know if you have ever met with any difficulties in relation to grants. Is there any need for help? For example, when you receive heaps of forms, all in English, do you need help with that?

QY: In accordance with the procedures of the Western governments, they all give you forms to complete, getting you to keep ticking. To my way of thinking, thinking, if the Australian government wants to do things without complicating the matter, I think they can simplify their methodology. They should do follow-up research on Chinese publishers. That is, over time, when they find that a particular publisher has done a lot of work and that it is quite good in terms of trust and honesty, they can rate such publishers. I have a few more suggestions. First, Australian culture, among Western cultures, is a Western one that has strong Asian features and Asian characteristics. And, I think, Australia should take advantage of this moment when Asia is on the rise by doing a lot of significant work, such as holding expositions, running seminars, publishing books, and also promoting Australian films and TV works by way of introducing it to Chinese readers and audiences and deepening the knowledge of Australia among Chinese readers, Chinese people. In regard to these aspects, I think, Australian government should stop doing things in a fragmentary manner, handing out bits of money. They should have a unified coordinating organization to do all these projects together, treating cultural exchange between Australia and China as a great challenge. You can divide these into two categories of publishing, performance, film, and TV, as well as exhibition. And an agency organization should coordinate everything.

QY: (Ouyang asks, at an example, about how a book by Marguer is published compared to one by Gail Jones.)

WX: The main thing, in my opinion, is planning. My impression is that the importation of Australian culture to China is so huge, so that professional publishers like us find it hard to get to the essence of it, not to mention readers. If you are clear about the essence, and if you come in with great writers, many more will follow. In the future, we'll then set up a number of standard-bearers among Australian writers, saying which ones they are and how their works are valued, including comments from big European and American newspapers, such as The New York Times and The Times. This will attract Chinese readers and guide them.

QY: After the interview with Zhao Chunlai (Leau Zhao), Shanghai (24 July 2010)

Ouyang Yu: When did you start creative writing?
Zhao Chunlai: When I was a student, I wrote poetry and things, but purely for myself. It wasn't till just after I arrived in Melbourne [in May 1988, when Zhao was 20] that an Australian-Chinese family asked me who I'd like to have things written in Chinese for publication in his small community-based magazine. He was a Hong Kongese who didn't really know what's what, and he asked me if I could write some stories involving love and things, I just created it as work and made money. Zhao had studied painting at an arts college in Shanghai. After taking English classes in Melbourne for six months he enrolled at a photography study college. In the second semester of 1989, after the June 4th events in Tianennamen Square, he left the college.

As a result of doing this magazine, I got to know [people] and also went to Sydney. That's the main reason why I stopped studying and left the school. But of course June 4th was also a reason, as after that you were allowed to discount your studies. You could just renew your visa year by year. Another reason was that I found studying in Australia very difficult, working as you studied, and you could hardly concentrate. You felt you lost more than you gained.

Then I met someone called Zhang, a Cantonese. He was a non-professional but he was in high spirits and wanted to publish a magazine, so I did write for it, called Tangmen [Chinatown] (Chinatown). I was basically editor-in-chief of the magazine because this Cantonese person knew nothing about it. I knew the local Chinese newspapers such as hanzong hao (Chinese Herald). So, on and off, I wrote small stories for them but these things were not enough to make a living. [In Sydney, Zhao worked in graphic design and advertising, but he left the company in the late 1990s.]

People paid attention to things we wrote and there were television interviews (SBS) as well as newspaper interviews (Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend), quite a lot. Writing gradually became something I'd got used to doing nothing to do with living, nothing to do with making a living. In around 1995 I began taking writing seriously because I won a number of prizes, including the first prize for fiction from silk kaush (The Independent Daily) that had been newly published. Then, that year, I won the first prize for prose in zhongguo ribao (Central Daily) in Taiwan. My feeling was that we exchanged enough for these little things in Australia with our time and our youth. We should return to things that we originally had wanted to do. So you had a feeling that you were seriously doing something, not just part of a weekend activity involving friends.

ife in Australia, Zhao edited a self-funded collection of stories by eight writers, Xiu ha guai (Eight Eccentrics of Sydney, 1999).
In 2002 I got an Asialink residency for two months in Taipei and two months at Peking University. Asialink also had a program, involving a tour with some other organization, that was different from the kind of residency we got, called "Australian Writers Tour", coming to China or going elsewhere. Their people would contact me and I'd receive writers who arrive in Shanghai, basically, it was entirely in my own name, using money from my own pocket, giving them an introduction. However, the literature tour later came to an end.

CO: Can you tell me which writers you received?

ZC: Can't remember. [In Ouyang's prompting, Zhao then mentions Alex Miller, Joan London, Doris Pilkington (Ngui Gaminima), and Tim Flannery. Other Australian visitors he recalls, not on the writers tour, included Nicholas Jose (Zhao Si), Vor Induyk, and Gin Jollane.]

CO: From your point of view, do you think this tour, or these writers as representatives of Australian literature, have had any impact in Shanghai?

ZC: I think it got better in the last two years. But in the first couple of years when these writers came, such as Alex Miller, he didn't have his books here on the mainland, nothing available. He just gave a talk or went somewhere to give a report. In actual fact, the impact, if any, is minimal. For example, at the talk organized by Chen Hong at East China National University, I really don't know who was coming, they hadn't read any of the work. Later on, this situation improved slightly because the ones who came all had cooperation with Peoples Literature Press; they ran a series there. Doris Pilkington had a film, [Rabbit-Proof Fence, Christine Olsen, 2002] which was shown in an Australian Film Festival in Shanghai for a week, with all the tickets sold. I didn't end up getting one.

CO: Can you say something about your residence at Peking University and in Taipei?

ZC: I was at the International Artists Village in Taipei, and I did a play, cinco de mayo (Face[s] in the Toilet) in 2003. I came back to Shanghai. I gave one talk, but I didn't my own thing at that time. The film I made was titled tianxia joyou su un de yanzhi (There Are Endless Dinners under Heaven). Asialink of course was useful, giving me help.

CO: And producing direct results. Can you say something about this con tai han (Grass Stage Theatre, founded 2005), what's its artistic purpose? Is it somehow hooked up with the market?

[Zhao refers Ouyang to a dialogue between himself and journalist Bo Xiaoxia in a pamphlet about Grass Stage and also states (small shop, a play directed by Zhao)]

ZC: Generally speaking, though, Grass Stage consists of a number of non-professional players who have not received professional training in drama, ordinary people from all walks of life, who gathered together. We were trying to enlighten people, to make some advance, by getting ordinary Chinese people to express their thoughts and to explore public issues in public and on stage.

CO: When you talk about public issues, which ones?

ZC: Expressing their views on the society, and of course that must involve politics, and a democratic tendency, a movement. To put it simply, in a place like mainland China, you are not allowed to have a political party or political gatherings. Drama, then, provides us with a link similar to these. We're all together. We can discuss things that are directly related to life, society and politics.

CO: You are not like the participants as you have an Australian-Chinese background. Do any of your performances and plays have anything to do with Australia?

ZC: Basically nothing to do with Australia.

CO: Why not? You are an Australian-Chinese-

ZC: I went to Australia even before I turned 20 and when I left I was 20-something. Australia has had a great influence on me spiritually. The way Grass Stage exists today is a result of that influence, such as fair-go, fairness, equality between people. You can directly and freely express what you would like to express, discussing the politics of your country. If you want to talk about influence in terms of direct relationship to Australia, not sure. If I've got an Australian role in my plays, no, there are no such things. We are in China, talking about Chinese things in a Chinese environment. But I think the influence is huge. It's the way I have of looking at things.

[Zhao describes the plays presented by Grass Stage. Their international topics and participants do not include Australia.]

CO: As an Australian-Chinese, have you ever dealt with the Australian dream?

ZC: Very seldom because, you see, Ouyang, there is a severance. I don't have much contact with the literary world of China, either. I started off as a painter. So, before I went overseas, I dealt only with the world of arts. To this day, when I am in Shanghai, I am still much more like engaged with the visual arts circle than with literature. When I came running back I had nothing much to do with the writers of fiction here. On my return to China, I turned to drama. In Australia, I came into contact with friends like you, writers, even people like Zhou Si [Nicholas Jose], and Beth [Yalip]. However, I never had any experience with drama. As a result, when I am in Shanghai, I know no one from Australia who is doing drama.

OY: There seems to be quite a lot of coverage of Grass Stage in China. As far as I know, there is any coverage of you in the Australian media?

ZC: No. [A long pause] I must say that they are really not too—or I'm not sure who's giving attention to such things. The people working in the consulate responsible for cultural work all knew about my work but they don't really care about it. I think they prefer to be associated with the well-known high-profile people. However, in fact, there is something really I am not happy about. Asialink will contact me and see what I can do for them but they never take my work. In their reports, I was only mentioned once, as this Shanghai writer Zhao Chun. Prior to that, I had reiterated to them that they must note the fact that I am an Australian.

CO: We know that when Australians go to China or to the other parts of the world they often get financial support from the Australian government. Have you, first of all, considered applying for funding from them? And have you put in an application but ended up not getting it?

ZC: In the past, in relation to my literary activities, I did apply to the Australia Council for money, and I got it. When I started doing drama, basically did not apply. The reason why I do not trust them is that I feel that as a migrant Australian, an Asian-Australian, we had to create stories just in order to get the money, trying to link our stories to the mainstream white English-style culture of Australia, trying to achieve some sort of communication with that. That I say is that I am in Shanghai and I only have a link in spirit but no relationship like that and I don't want to support that kind of relationship. So you say you'll do something that is completely to do with the Chinese countryside, I don't believe that the Australian Council will give me money, because they won't think that this has anything to do with Australia.

CO: You are in fact criticizing them as being narrow-minded.

ZC: I'm certainly critical, including the fact that the work I've done here is not seen or that they do not see my work done here, all for this reason. If I were a white Australian, the work I have done here would be looked at by the consulate in a different way. It's not as if they have no contact with me; they know what I am doing. They have never accepted any invitations to attend my performances. I don't have any expectations for them to fund me; at least they can pay some attention. Apart from other transactions they've had with big banks, and this is another one. I hope they pay more attention to the migrant [ordinary] things that are not that high-profile.

CO: When you talked to universities about drama, did you only talk about your own experience or did you combine the things you learned in Australia, or Australian literature?

ZC: I ran two courses at the universities, one being the history of contemporary Chinese literature up to the late 1970s to the present. And the other course was on drama, not on theory but on practice, on experimental theatre. No direct relationship with Australian literature.
OY: As an Australian-Chinese writer, what sort of position does Australian literature occupy in the minds of ordinary Chinese readers in comparison with the literature of the so-called Eight Powers’ literature? [Bagou liumian (Eight Powers) are the nations that had colonies in China in the early nineteenth century: USA, UK, Germany, France, Russia, Austria, Italy, and Japan.]

ZC: In most cases, Australian literature is quite unfamiliar to people. English, American and French literature, I think, may have greater influence. There are two things to say. One is that literature is not just literature. It is probably a reflection of the combined cultural level of a nation. For example, Western countries like UK, USA and France, the level of reception of their culture in China as well as in the rest of the world is very high. We think that they are very civilized countries, Australia, to a large degree, is not generally considered to be a very culturally prosperous nation. We are more aware of Australia as a country rich in natural resources, agricultural resources, and mineral resources. We don’t normally say that Australia’s drama or literature is wonderful; it does not have that cultural positioning. This of course, would affect its literary influence. It’s possible that Australian writers may need...Literature is not as influential as before.

OY: You mean Australian literature?

ZC: Literature as a whole. Literature in the classic sense has been fragmented into pieces. Blogging, internet-writing, and other kinds of genres and subgenres have arrived. So, however much you want to expand its influence, literature in the classic sense is a difficult issue in itself. Not only Australian literature, but Chinese literature itself is on the decline compared with the 1980s and 1990s. Its influence is decreasing instead of increasing.

OY: In the promotion of Australian literature in China there is a major component of Australian-Chinese literature. As an Australian-Chinese writer, without mentioning Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies as that was published in Taiwan, you’ve published at least four titles in mainland China, including your photographic collection. As far as you know, are there any other Australian-Chinese writers who have books published in China? We have somehow always felt that even when you went to America and wrote Native of Beijing in New York, and we have someone who went to Tokyo, someone by the name of Cao Guolin, who wrote a book called Names of Shanghai in Tokyo, and two more. Then, these works created waves with the TV drama adaptation, and had a great influence. Now, in Australia—

ZC: That’s why I talked about “so-so influence”. Some books are published and selling well. [Zhou lists his publications since his return to China: a novel, Going to Europe with You, and a book of art history, Shanghai Abstrack Story. He mentions writers with Australian connections including Da Lu, whose book, It’s Not Easy to Make a Bit of Money, was reprinted The Man of Sydney; Sheng Zhihong; Wang Xiaoyu; and Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), now one of the menju yaqi (beautiful women writers). He mentions critics with Australian interests: Qian Chuyi, Zhu Dake. He knows the work in English of Australian-Chinese writers Brian Casero, Beth Yeh, and Tom Choo, but only because of his experience in Australia. He has been twice to the Shanghai International Writers Festival, and renewed his relationship with Australian writers there.]

OY: But the Festival is limited to small circles of foreigners, and has little to do with mainstream culture in Shanghai.

ZC: To strengthen the link and to create an impact, what do you think can be done?

OY: They can’t create an impact because it is held in a very expensive hotel and most Chinese people can’t afford it. For the locals, they find that this is an English thing, it’s you foreigners hlah-blah-blah away.

OY: So they don’t have any interest.

ZC: A different way of communicating.

OY: Do you think if there is any significance in this promotion of Australian literature in China?

ZC: [Long pause] Let me say this to you. Let’s not talk about operationality. We only talk about the experience. Take the world of art here. We always give support to the overseas funding organizations, and so on, for activities held in China. This support does not just go to their own countries. The Italian foundation does not just give support to Italian working here. It can also support a Chinese writer or some other writers. For example, the British Council supported me, not because I am English. Actually, this is the second time I received support from the British Council.

OY: As a Chinese writer or as an Australian writer?

ZC: As someone from China, someone working in China, I must say that this has nothing to do with Australia, but is necessarily related to China. If I lived in Sydney today they might not have supported me in doing this. In Hong Kong, there was an International Education Theatre Congress of Australia Congress in 2007. It was a big event. The British Council gave support to five people doing drama in China, and five from UK, funded them to go to Hong Kong to attend this conference. And I was one of them. This year, 2009, Manchester International Festival ran something that was also supported by the British Council, called International Talent Camp. They selected 10 people from all over the world, to be paired with 10 people from UK, including producers and artists, putting people they thought were coming together for a week, involving talks, seminars, and visits to the theatre together, and so on. They were hoping through such an activity that, in the long run, Manchester International Festival would create an impact internationally, through these people. And at the same time they were also hoping that they could build a base on which producers and artists from other countries could establish a relationship with their counterparts in the UK. But of course they were also exporting their culture and exporting their influence.

OY: Compared with Australia, there’s never been anything—

ZC: I can’t say “never” but I know that Australian government has done very little in promoting the local culture. Australia can do an exhibition on Aboriginal arts in Shanghai Library. As you put it just now, directly promoting their culture in another country. But they do not do things as I described—

OY: What suggestions do you have for the Australian government in relation to the promotion of Australian literature in China, Asia and even in the rest of the world, not just talking about in China? What do you think is lacking or should be improved?

ZC: To be frank, with people like us working in China, we have formed a great impact, relatively speaking. If our country, Australia, can give people like us more recognition, the influence is already there. But of course they can spend more money, translating Sydney’s things or bringing stuff from Melbourne’s art museum here. They can do that, and that’s one aspect. However, in another aspect, there are already a lot of things here. This can also show people that Australian culture is not a fixed model. It has contemporaneity, it has creative energies, it has something especially active. My feeling is that the whole operation of cultural things is a very official culture. Some people think it’s been fragmented.

OY: You mean the Australian operation?

ZC: The whole cultural thing, the level of contact, and the methodology, is very official. It is thus inevitable that this kind of thing can’t go far. The way official culture works is that you consult the Chinese government, the Chinese government gives you a suggestion, and you adopt it. You feel that there is no other choice than to go with them. So foreign writers come and meet with writers from the writers’ association, give talks at the universities, and then go to the library to do some sort of activity. But the way the consultancies and cultural agencies intercede in cultural circles in Beijing or Shanghai is completely different. It is very natural, very free, it’s an engagement in culture in a non-official way. I have a plan to go to Africa, probably next year, with support from funding organisations in Belgium. They get the money from the state for their projects. This will create something cultural very slowly, creating an impact, not something official. Things from Australia that I have seen are very officially mediated.