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### **A Synopsis of the Leeds-Newcastle Chinese Drama Colloquium**

Yu Yuan (PhD student in Translation Studies, University of Leeds)

Under the sponsorship of Newcastle Institute for Creative Arts Practice and the Sino-British Fellowship Trust, Leeds-Newcastle Chinese Drama Colloquium was jointly hosted by University of Leeds and Newcastle University at Newcastle on May 8-9, 2014. The two-day event featured a series of lectures and workshops on how to translate and adapt Chinese drama plays into English and some informed discussions during the intervals.

In the first day, Ms. Wan Fang, a leading Chinese dramatist, novelist and screen-writer, in very plain words, shared with the participants her life story of working in the countryside as an “educated youth” and the encouraging truth that persistence, self-confidence and acquisitiveness in knowledge led to her success on the path of growing to be a professional writer. She

correlated her creative writing with translation by emphasizing the importance of literary translation in delivering cross-cultural literary treasures across nations. She metaphorically proposed translation “should not have done serious harm to stems and roots of the plant so that it can still grow and produces the same fragrance as it did when transplanted to another soil”, and a literary translator “should pursue the maximum artistic value of the original work to the best of his/her ability while maintaining exactness as much as possible.”

Dr Valerie Pellatt from Newcastle University then talked about performability and speakability in Chinese drama translation by referring to one of the MA projects translating Chinese dramas. Thought-provoking and interesting questions were raised as to whether it's necessary to Europeanize the character names in the original scripts. Professor Pellat Justified the necessity of adapting some character names into English on the ground that such strategy can help actors and actresses in the performance to overcome the difficulty of pronunciation brought about by the transliteration, a normal practice of rendering Chinese names. She has raised a very insightful point of taking into consideration of performability and speakability in the drama adaptations. It is questionable to randomly localize some names while retaining others untranslated, though. Once they are adapted this way, it will raise complex issues of matching names to contemporary trends, class, etc.

Following the last two sessions, Catherine Grosvenor from the National Theatre of Scotland gave a talk on her perception of adapting foreign plays into English context. She argued that it is always important for a play translator to put him/her in the shoes of the target audience thinking what they will expect from a play and how they will respond. In the talk, Catherine also came up with a

reality problem that few adaptors have the power to decide which plays to adapt and the importance of imagining the targeted audience and their expectation in the process of bridging the gap between the literal translation of a foreign play and a real piece of performable work that is entertaining. She listed several questions at the end of her presentation and these questions triggered a warm and friendly discussion. Guest speakers and audience enthusiastically participated in the QA session then.

Quite different from the foci of the previous talks, Professor Qian Jun, Chair of Chinese Studies from School of Modern Languages, Newcastle University presented a very exegetic study of the Chinese drama play *Confucius Saw Nancy* written by Lin Yutang, one of the most influential writers, translators and linguists of his generation. Professor Qian interpreted the political appeal and social equality behind the lines that were spoken from the mouth of two historical figures in China history. His findings were substantial evidence that stage performances, as an artistic form, can be manipulated as a weapon against intellectuals of other factions.

The colloquium was also characteristic of a performance of excerpts of *Poison* (You yizhong duyao) by stage@leeds Company, using the recently translated text of Wan Fang's *Poison*. The artistic director and the company look at the issues and challenges facing arts professionals working with translated texts. The audience enthusiastically interacted with the actors after their performance. Ms. Wan commented on the performance and admitted that there should be more work done to facilitate intercultural stage performances.

The second day of the colloquium was devoted to hands-on translation, reading, viewing and discussion of modern Chinese drama, featuring a practical workshop of drama translation in small groups. Ms. Wan Fang acted as consultant/informant on the Chinese source texts. Groups of translators, postgraduates and translation teachers were translating up to one scene of one of Ms. Wan's plays in the form of collective translation. Members of the small group discussed and proposed a translation that they thought was appropriate and then an optimized translation was voted. Feedback was gained from peer groups in the next session of reading translations of plays. This creative practice was inspired by the successful experience of the graduate program of Drama Translation. Drama includes productions in the form of literary texts or for stage performance purpose. On this account, drama translation should take drama plays and stage scripts as two separate subjects of study. The former has a lot in common with other registers of literary texts, except its characteristic dialogues that are rich in the entailment of dramatic conflicts. The latter should be appropriately dealt with by taking speakability, immediacy and communality into consideration in the translating process. As a focus of the current drama translation study, performability requires speakability and understandability of the stage scripts that normally favor short sentences, phraseology, idiomatic expressions and common words while detest uncommon words and consonants difficult to pronounce. At a micro-level, non-verbal symbols in the drama play a more prominent role than verbal symbols. The success of a drama translation lies in whether a translator succeeded in reproducing the non-verbal actions in the play. Thus, key elements like paralanguage, body language and spatial distance that can yield vocal phonemes, gestures and movement are largely responsible for the performability of a play. Take the translations produced in the workshop as an example, we translated the first scene of Wan Fang's play Guanxi

*(Relationship)*. For the stage direction, the group we were in used 14 sentences to translate the 6 sentences in the original. We used active verbs to describe the presence of the actors. For instance, “her pony hair is hanging over her shoulder” to replace the original Chinese in passive voice and the present participle phrase of “gazing upon Ye Hang absent-mindedly”. We used the functionally-equivalent colloquial words to translate dialogues. For example, we used “Hi” and “Hello” to indicate the initial failure of starting a conversation. Based on the natural development of the conversation, we translated “虚伪”(hypocritical) as “come on” to ensure a smooth coherence of characters’ conversations. For stage directions, we realized it is extremely important to figure out how the actors are interacting by induction and simulation so that the exact movement of characters on the stage can be reproduced. However, it is then agreed that such collective translation groups should be led by highly proficient bilingualists who are theoretically well equipped and have drama expertise. “Voting on a democratic basis” sometimes can bring about translations that are in fact technically inviting criticisms.

The colloquium was wrapped up with a round table discussions and feedback from the experts present at the conference.

### **Leeds - Newcastle Chinese Drama Colloquium**

**8-9 May 2014**

Meng-Chian Lee (PhD Student, University of Leeds)

The Leeds - Newcastle Chinese Drama Colloquium was an impressive and inspirational academic event the theme of which was drama translation. The well-known Chinese playwright Ms Wan Fang along with other researchers were invited to discuss some of the possibilities and specific practices of drama translation. The creative concepts of the original author were used to initiate the discussions, and the British scholars also discussed the aspects of their research that address the literary quality, performability and speakability of translated Chinese dramas as well as artistic and literary value of the cultural exchange that comes with translating dramas. In addition, the performance of excerpts from Wan Fang's *Poison* produced by Stage@Leeds Company embodied, and demonstrated a practical example of drama translation.

Wan Fang is a well-respected but humble playwright. Her writing is informed and enriched by her life experience and her works includes precise and vivid observations of people. She admirably describes her work as a process like that of a plant from seed. She thinks that cultivating the talent that drives creativity is the most important thing. As a writer, continuing to learn, to try and to accumulate is what achieves her artistic accomplishments. Her modesty and generous attitude are worth regarding as a good example for young playwrights. On the other hand, Wan Fang also has a unique insight about drama translation. She suggests that a translation work ought to be like transplanting a plant from one land to another and that cultures are like the soil that maintaining the life of the plant, or the translated works. Therefore the quality of a translation work involves the translator's understanding of the

two different cultures. An ideal work of drama translation does not simply relate to the translation of precise expressions, but should also take into account the profound, subtle and emotional aspects of the original work. This perspective, coming from an author are worthy of being considered by both translators and adapters.

The two productions, *Murder* and *Poison*, translated from Wan Fang's plays that were included in this colloquium revealed two different processes of drama translation. Newcastle University's production, *Murder*, was mainly translated and performed by Chinese postgraduates, so there is a tendency towards a more in-depth understanding and interpretation of Chinese style and thinking in this work. A closer interpretation of the original play, this production shows oriental imagery to British theatre audiences. Based on the script translated by Newcastle University students, however, Stage@Leeds Company's *Poison* not only presented a translated work, but the creative process also further incorporated intercultural adaptation. As a British creative group, the students of Leeds University grasped the commonality of human nature to interpret the family relationships and character conflicts of the original play. Taking into account the reception of the audience, the production *Poison* was remodelled with a kind of universal style, including the change of character names and visual elements. The British students played an important role throughout the process of adaptation and performance. In addition, intercultural considerations and transformation have been conducted with British readers' viewpoints. Therefore, the work of Stage@Leeds Company displays more cultural fusion and Western interpretation. Accordingly, the student performances show distinct aspects of drama translation, and explore the possibilities of cultural exchange in drama translation.

One of the most valuable benefits in this colloquium was participating in the actual translation of a work. Wan Fang provided a section of her play *Relationships* (Guanxi) as the material for our group discussions. Discussing and working with the original author was a special experience. The author Wan Fang's descriptions and explanations were very helpful in understanding the original play for the translators, which enhanced the accuracy of the linguistic conversion. Only looking at one section of the original play made it difficult to completely grasp the dramatic actions and motivations of the characters. With explanations from the original author, however, all group members received further clues of the logical arguments that extended beyond the excerpt of this play. Therefore, the limited information did not cause any obstacles for the translators in comprehending an incomplete play.

Furthermore, conducting the translation of the works through group discussion fulfilled effective brainstorming and the combining the translators' different opinions to reach an agreement and strengthen the acceptability of the translated texts. In terms of the group members, every group had a British scholar, which was a good opportunity for the Chinese postgraduates to exchange views about play translation related to character analysis and semantic expression with somebody with different cultural thinking. Group discussion was a great arrangement that offered an interactive space for the cross-national members to search for a balanced perfection in the discussion through comparing and modifying in any way possible. The subsequent reading activity served to assess the readability of the scripts, which was also helpful for the revision of the work.

In short, this Chinese drama colloquium was a rewarding and meaningful activity for me. It not only promoted my understanding towards drama translation, but was also a valuable experience of cultural exchange.

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