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September 2014

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA LOVELL: TRANSLATING LU XUN'S COMPLETE FICTION

Baorong Wang

The following is the edited transcript of an interview with Julia Lovell, whose English translation of modern China's preeminent writer Lu Xun's complete fiction—*The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*—was published by Penguin Classics in November 2009. The interview was conducted in Dr. Lovell's office at Birkbeck College, University of London, on June 9, 2010, by Baorong Wang, then a visiting academic at the adjacent SOAS on a University of Hong Kong travel grant. It was originally intended for the interviewer's doctoral dissertation on Lu Xun's fiction in English translation. With a handful of translated books to her credit, Julia Lovell has emerged as a major translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, a field relatively neglected by Western Sinologists. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, for example, observes that "Julia Lovell's are arguably the most accessible translations yet of such famous stories as 'The Divorce,' 'New Year's Sacrifice,' and the eponymous tale of Ah-Q . . . they give Lu Xun his best shot to date of achieving renown beyond the Chinese world."¹

Initiation of the Project

Baorong Wang (BW): You speak very good Chinese. When did you start learning Chinese and how?

Julia Lovell (JL): I started to learn Chinese in 1996 when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge University. I learned it with a lot of face-to-face teaching, just in a standard way, practicing speaking, writing, and reading. And all my language teachers were Chinese or Taiwanese.

BW: How do you gauge your command of the Chinese language?

JL: It goes up and down, basically. When I am in China, it's much more comfortable. But when I leave China, I find it deteriorates very quickly.

BW: According to a webpage, you've spent "extended periods of time in China." Where did you stay then and what did you do?

JL: It depends on how you define "extended periods of time." I've never spent longer than four months in China. Normally I stayed about three to four months, mainly in Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, doing studying and researching.

BW: Did you translate Lu Xun's stories because you wanted to or because Penguin asked you to do that?

JL: A combination of the two. It struck me as very worthwhile and I thought it was time to retranslate Lu Xun because he was such a canonical figure in modern Chinese writing. And also Penguin Classics was very receptive to the idea of bringing modern Chinese writings onto their list. We decided that it would be good to translate some modern Chinese authors onto the Penguin Classics list. And the publisher suggested Lu Xun first of all. So I agreed.

BW: So you have good relations with the publisher? Did you do some translation work for Penguin before Lu Xun?

JL: Not directly for Penguin. Before Lu Xun I first did Han Shaogong's [韩少功] *A Dictionary of Maqiao* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2003], which is the winner of the 2011 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature.² Then I did Zhu Wen's [朱文] *I Love Dollars and Other Stories of China* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006] and Yan Lianke's [阎连科] *Serve the People!* [New York: Grove Press, 2008]. After *I Love Dollars* came out in 2006, Penguin bought the paperback rights in 2008. I did not know Penguin very well before then, but it's been wonderful to work for them.

BW: How many Lu Xun stories did you read when you were an undergraduate at Cambridge University?

JL: Just four or five stories, "Tomorrow," "Medicine," "The Real Story of Ah-Q," and "Kong Yiji." I like them best among Lu Xun's stories because I think they are very powerful.

BW: Did you find the stories easy when you first read them in Chinese?

JL: Oh, very hard. But I had a very good book, a sort of Lu Xun reader compiled by Dim Cheuk Lau [Lu Xun Xiaoshuo Ji: Vocabulary, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1987]. It has the original text on one side and some vocabulary with pinyin and English annotations on the other side.

BW: Are you a specialist in Lu Xun studies? Do you think a hard and profound writer like Lu Xun should be translated by a specialist?

JL: No. Many people devote their whole lives to researching Lu Xun. I'm certainly not a specialist in Lu Xun. I like Lu Xun very much and I've read a lot of secondary works on him, but I'm not a specialist. I think anybody with a decent linguistic, literary, and historical sensibility in Chinese can translate Lu Xun. I was asked to do Lu Xun and it was something that I very much enjoyed doing. Each translator has their own priorities. I had in mind that I wanted to bring Lu Xun to a wider audience.

BW: Do you mean your translation would not reach a big audience if you were a specialist in Lu Xun, like William Lyell?

JL: I think translation is a very personal process, and each translator brings different skills to it. Specialists in Lu Xun can do an excellent job because they see so many details. But I think all sorts of translators can do a good job. I mean the translator has all sorts of responsibilities—to the original text, to the target reader, and to the publisher as well. So there are lots of things translators keep in mind. But whether they are specialists or nonspecialists, there will always be lots of demands.

BW: Did you anticipate the difficulties involved in the job?

JL: I knew it was going to be very difficult. It turned out to be a longer project than I thought it would be because Penguin wanted to create a unique book. Originally I was thinking of just doing some of Lu Xun's stories. But my publishers thought it would make the book more unique if we could have all his short stories—three collections plus the classical Chinese piece "Nostalgia"—in one place. I didn't expect it to be such a big book when I first talked to Penguin about it. But at the end I was very happy because it is the first time that all of Lu Xun's stories have been collected together in a single volume.

BW: Why did Penguin decide to bring out a new translation when earlier versions by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang [hereafter "the Yangs"] and by William Lyell [*Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990] are still available?

JL: I think there are two reasons. First, it is valuable to do new translations sometimes because language changes. And attitudes to language also change with time. Of course the previous English translations of Lu Xun were very fine works. They were models of excellence that I held in my hands as I translated. The other reason is that Penguin was committed to getting Chinese writers onto their list. The Penguin Classics list has quite a lot of reach, I suppose, in the market. Penguin is an influential publisher. Most people in Britain have heard of Penguin Classics and they use Penguin Classics selections to influence their own reading choices. The previous Lu Xun translations have been published either by mainland Chinese publishers or by American academic publishers. So it was hard for these publishers to reach general readers.

BW: What do you mean by "general readers"?

JL: Those people who won't have heard of Lu Xun normally. If you study Chinese literature, you will have heard of Lu Xun and you know his name and you can just look for translations of Lu Xun. But if you are just an interested general reader and you want to know a bit more about Chinese fiction, you won't know Hawaii University Press [Lyell's publisher] or the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing [the Yangs' publisher]. The great virtue of Penguin Classics is that everybody has heard of Penguin Classics and it is a good way to bring Chinese literature into the publishing mainstream.

BW: Who are the primary readers of your translation? Do you think it can also reach Chinese learners of English? They may buy the book to learn English or Chinese–English translation.

JL: My translation is targeted at interested general educated readers in Britain, America, and Australia. As for the possibility of its reaching Chinese students of English, I've never thought of that, because if I were to learn a foreign language, I would always read books written in the original language.

BW: Are Lu Xun's stories read in Anglophone countries as a sociohistorical document or as fictional works?

JL: Very often people pick up a work of literature to understand more about the period in which it was written. But you have to talk to individual readers because you can never predict what they will get out of it. Some readers have unique life experiences even though they were brought up in Britain whereas Lu Xun grew up in China. They will feel that there are some similarities about their family backgrounds. So it's very hard to generalize.

BW: Has the book sold well since it came out last November? Have you received any feedback on your translation?

JL: I think it's been selling well. The publishers were surprised how well it sold. It sold more than they had expected. I haven't had any complaints about my translation for anything.

The Translation Process

BW: How long did it take you to complete the entire translation?

JL: It took me about six months of intensive hard work, but that was spread across a year and a half. I was on sabbatical leave researching a book at the same time. There is a time conflict issue, certainly. But translation does not count toward my research, so I have to research at the same time as I translate.

BW: Had you translated any Lu Xun stories before you took the job? Did Penguin set a deadline for submission of your translation?

JL: No, I started from nothing. There was a deadline, but they allowed me to change it, because I was very keen for one of my teachers to read it for me and to check the Chinese against the English to look for mistakes. So I needed extra time.

BW: Who was that teacher?

JL: Professor Bonnie McDougall, the outstanding scholar and translator of modern Chinese literature. She did a really amazing job. I'm so grateful to her.

BW: Did you enjoy total freedom throughout the translation and publishing process?

JL: Oh, total freedom. But as is a usual publishing practice, before the manuscript got into print there was a copyeditor named Sarah Coward who went through the manuscript and made suggestions about certain rules of presentation; for example, how you should write foreign words. She also had suggestions about re-expressing certain things if she thought I was not expressing things as elegantly as possible.

BW: Did Sarah Coward check your manuscript against the Chinese original?

JL: No, that was what Bonnie McDougall did. I also asked two Chinese friends to check the English against the Chinese. I mentioned their names, Vicki Yu-yun and Saiyin Sun, in the "Acknowledgements" of the book.

BW: So the publisher did not try to change your translation?

JL: No, they didn't, but sometimes they would, through a copyeditor normally, suggest how to improve your work. And luckily I had a wonderful copyeditor. She did all sorts of things for me excellently.

BW: But copyeditors don't care whether the English keeps close to the Chinese or not.

JL: No, they don't know, because normally they don't know Chinese. That's why I had Bonnie McDougall to look at the manuscript for me against the Chinese original.

BW: Before Lu Xun you had translated Zhu Wen, Han Shaogong, Yan Lianke, and so forth. In what ways is Lu Xun's style different from these contemporary writers?

JL: Lu Xun was writing in the 1920s–1930s and the other writers were writing in the 1990s or after 2000. So certainly there is a big difference in language. Lu Xun's is sort of *banbai banwen* [half-vernacular, half-classical]. Well, not exactly *banbai banwen*, but there are mixed expressions, as I understand there is some classical Chinese in the text, whereas contemporary vernacular Chinese is very different.

BW: Which one, contemporary Chinese writing or Lu Xun's, was more fun to translate?

JL: I don't think "fun" is the right word for translation because you need patience. It's interesting, very stimulating, though. But in terms of translating Lu Xun and the others, it's interesting in different ways. Lu Xun is fascinating to me not just because he is one of China's founding modernist authors, but also because his stories make angry complaints about the poverty, injustice, and political violence that have scarred his country for much of the past 100 years. I think Lu Xun's is an angry, searing vision of China. He used black humor very often, and translating him was never relaxing. I'd say that translating contemporary Chinese stories is much more relaxing. They are interesting especially for the things they tell us about today's Chinese society and life.

BW: Did you feel greater pressure when translating Lu Xun?

JL: I think so because Lu Xun has been translated before. People would compare my work with the earlier translations. And Lu Xun is so well known; everybody feels that they know Lu Xun, I think. Whereas someone like Zhu Wen or Han Shaogong, I was one of the first people to translate them into English. So there was much less to compare with, I suppose.

BW: The Yangs said that they "felt more at ease" translating Lu Xun than they did contemporary Chinese writers. When working on the latter they often had to delete sentences they found "ungrammatical and circuitous."³ How did you feel about these writers?

JL: I felt freer when I was translating Zhu Wen, Han Shaogong, and Yan Lianke, because the authors are alive. If I said to them, "I think I need do something slightly freer with this in English, for this won't work in literal translation. Can I do something that will keep close to the spirit of the original but is not quite literal?" They would say, "Of course, that's absolutely fine. Translation is a creative process." With Lu Xun, I didn't dare to do that, because I was worried about what my readers would say. And Lu Xun is not alive for me to ask whether I can change his work.

BW: Did you meet with more, harder problems when translating Lu Xun?

JL: I think translation problems are everywhere, basically, particularly if you are working from Chinese into English. These two cultures are historically developing in isolation from each other and are linguistically very remote from each other. There are often historical and literary references that you have to be creative about how you explain to the reader.

BW: Did you meet with some problems in understanding the original text? How did you tackle them?

JL: Yes, certainly, but I have quite a lot of Chinese friends whom I can ask for help. They are specialists, researchers in Chinese literature, or native speakers of Chinese. So there are lots of reliable people I can ask. I mean they are reliable for a lot of these comprehension questions. For example, if a Chinese friend was translating Charles Dickens, I would be able to help them, because I read Dickens when I grew up. A native speaker who's grown up in a literary tradition is going to have a lot of knowledge.

BW: But people read one and the same book for different things, so they often get different things out of it.

JL: Of course. If there was something really complicated, I would take two or three interpretations and then make my own decision.

BW: What other help did you look for?

JL: I consulted some reference books. And sometimes the previous translations helped as well.

BW: The latest edition of the *Lu Xun Quanji* [*The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2005] had already come out before you translated Lu Xun's fiction. Why didn't you consult this new edition?

JL: I consulted Bonnie McDougall. She said the 1981 edition was a very good one, because the footnotes there were very useful and it corrected some of the mistakes in the earlier ones. And the 1981 edition was very easily accessible for me and I felt it was enough for my purposes. Sometimes you don't need everything; you need enough to be thorough and rigorous.

BW: Did you let the 1981 edition decide for you when you were not sure about what the Chinese original says?

JL: Yes. But in some places I did compare it back to the 2005 edition. In fact one of my readers, Saiyin Sun, compared my translation to the 2005 edition to make sure that there were no discrepancies. But there were relatively few instances of that; there were very few uncertainties in that respect. The problem was not with the edition, but with my linguistic understanding. My understanding was limited, so I needed help to understand the Chinese original better.

BW: You acknowledged in the book [p. vii] that you "have benefited greatly from access to earlier translations of Lu Xun's work," especially the versions by the Yangs and William Lyell. Did you consult some other previous versions?

JL: No. I think two previous translations to consult are enough. I mean for my other translations I almost had nothing to consult.

BW: Chi-chen Wang [王际真], the acclaimed Chinese-American scholar and translator of Chinese literature, translated eleven Lu Xun stories into a smooth and fluent American English in *Ah Q and Others: Selected Stories of Lusin* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1941]. His work leans toward fluency, "often at the cost of habitually contracting and reordering the sentences."⁴ I find that you adopted a similar approach to translation when rendering Lu Xun's fiction.

JL: I've heard of Wang's version, but life is short. There is already a lot of work to translate and to consult two other versions as well. Again I feel you don't need everything; you need enough to be rigorous and informed.

BW: In which ways have the Yangs' and Lyell's versions benefited you?

JL: They benefited me in linguistic ways to help explain those points I haven't understood perfectly. And it's also very interesting and stimulating to see how other people have done it, though I chose to do it in a slightly different way.

BW: What is the actual way you translate?

JL: I do a first draft; I polish it until it is English that I think is elegant. And then if there are any specific points, I ask my friends to help me with specific things I do not understand well, or consult the previous versions to see how they have understood it. But I did not consult the other versions before I wrote down my own translation, because that would be very dangerous, running the risk of being influenced by other people's style. I mean, I read them years ago, but I did not remember them at the time of my own translating.

Translation Principle and Strategies

BW: In "A Note on the Translation" you said [p. xlv] you had attempted to "enhance the fluency of the text . . . without compromising overall linguistic accuracy." But accuracy and fluency are two conflicting demands for the translator. Which aspect did you give priority to?

JL: They were both important for me. I tried to treat them as equally important.

BW: You also said in the same place that you "have slightly simplified a handful of lines in the original Chinese." Doesn't this go against the principle of translation you just mentioned?

JL: There were only a couple of places where I had to simplify things a bit because the references were so specific that they would require too many footnotes. One example was the beginning of "The Real Story of Ah-Q," where I had to simplify slightly. But otherwise I tried to stick to the original as faithfully as possible.

BW: You just said that Lu Xun uses a lot of historical and literary references and that the translator has to be "creative" about how to explain these to the reader. How did you do this?

JL: I don't like using footnotes very much in my translations. If there is something that I feel English readers need notes straightaway, I will add a few words into the text, because I feel that is closer to the reading experience of the Chinese reader. The Chinese reader would read something and know exactly what it is straightaway. But the English reader needs the notes straightaway. They don't want to flip to the back of the book, or even to the bottom of the page. But I do this only if it can be done relatively unobtrusively. If it really is so complicated, then you know a note is required. And the great thing about Penguin Classics is that they encourage you to use endnotes. So if there was something that I did want to give more information about, I could do that with an endnote.

BW: Lyell supplies copious footnotes in his translation. I feel these footnotes give his version a scholarly aura and the English is rather dense. Can I say that the way you handled the cultural references is a reversal of Lyell's?

JL: Not exactly. I know background information can be important, but I did want to make readers feel that they could read this as a work of literature, as a story, that they need not study China for years in order to understand this. I wanted my translation to work on several levels: I wanted it to be useful for scholars, but also I wanted it to be accessible to people who have no Chinese or know little about China.

BW: Do you share David Hawkes's observation that "reading a heavily annotated novel is like playing tennis in chains"?⁵

JL: I think translators need to give their readers freedom, basically. Readers who want just to read the translation as a story should be able to read it as a story. And that's why I think endnotes are a good thing, because if people really want to go to the back of the book, then they can.

BW: Lu Xun has a penchant for using dialect in his works. Do you know the Shaoxing dialect sometimes employed in his stories? Do you think dialect merits a translator's special attention?

JL: No, I don't know the Shaoxing dialect. And I made a decision not to bring dialect into my translation at all. I think it is very difficult, because dialect is the most vernacular, one of the most natural forms of speaking. But often the most natural, colloquial forms of speaking are the hardest to translate, because you literally cannot find equivalences to them—you cannot find an equivalent target language or dialect. A dialect is unique, so you have various options. For example, you could try putting it into an English dialect; for example, Welsh or Cockney. But that struck me as problematic, because then you are suggesting something else to your readers—you are suggesting that these characters are not Chinese, that they are from London, Wales, or Yorkshire, when they are just not. I think you have to rely on the register to imply that these people are country people.

BW: So most translators would prefer to normalize or standardize dialect?

JL: Not necessarily, but I sometimes prefer to. It was very different, though, when I translated *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, which is a dictionary about the dialect of Hunan Province. There I used different techniques, a very literal technique of translating those dialect words, but the main body of the text I still translated into standard English. I think it's risky to try to translate dialect into dialect, so I prefer not to do that.

BW: Did you consult someone who knows the Hunan dialect when you translated Han's novel?

JL: Yes, Han Shaogong, the author himself, helped me a lot. Otherwise it would not have been possible to translate his dialect-filled novel. That was a real challenge, and it was my first attempt at Chinese-English translation.

BW: Translation techniques aside, I think the problem lies in the fact that many translators often do not know that the author is using dialect.

JL: I'm sure I didn't get everything at all because I am not a native of Shaoxing. But each reader takes what they can take from a book. And you know this book is my Lu Xun, I suppose. A different translator would have done things in a completely different way. So I can only try to produce a Lu Xun that I can produce.

BW: As Lu Xun often uses dialect for special purposes—say, humor, irony, characterization—I think you should at least tell your reader that the author is using dialect to mean something special.

JL: Again it depends on the reader of each story. You have to remember that I am trying to present this book to the general English reader. I think a lot of Chinese writers and critics often do not realize how *marginal* Chinese literature is outside China. It's very difficult to find readers for Chinese writing outside China. And what I really wanted to do was to try to produce, hopefully, a fluent book that would be relatively accessible to English readers. While I wanted this to be an authoritative version, I did not want to distract readers with too many footnotes. I wanted to produce a book that tells them something about imperial and Republican China, but it is also a book that they can read as a story. They can read it for the characters, the life problems and so on, which requires very serious, engaging sort of reading. But each translator will do a different job; each translator will have different priorities. That was my priority. But I'm sure I could have done it better.

BW: Are you suggesting that translators' personal backgrounds can influence the way they treat dialect in the original text?

JL: Yes, exactly. If I were a native of Shaoxing, I would have had different priorities, because I would have been very attached to my native place. I would have focused on the Shaoxing element of it.

Comments on the Yangs' and Lyell's Versions

BW: What is your general impression of the earlier versions by the Yangs and Lyell?

JL: I think they are very fine pieces of work.

BW: But stylistically they are vastly different from each other. Don't you think so?

JL: Yes. Lyell is trying to be more colloquial, I think, whereas the Yangs are more classical in tone. Their English is more classical sounding. But translations are individual pieces of work; translations have a lot of individual creativity in them.

BW: Which version do you like better?

JL: I think I like both versions equally, but for different reasons. Some stories I think the Yangs do better and some others I think Lyell does better, so each of them has their own strengths.

BW: "Some stories"? Can you specify them?

JL: I cannot remember. Well, probably in general I slightly prefer the Yangs' version.

BW: Which version was more helpful to you as a re-translator of Lu Xun?

JL: They were equally helpful, because as I said before I was only looking for linguistic help from them. I never got any stylistic ideas from them because that would be too dangerous. Stylistically I did not try to imitate the Yangs or Lyell at all. I did my own translation in my own style. I did not consult them at all while I was forming my own translation style. It was only after my style was in place that I looked at them to clarify linguistic points.

BW: Kirk Denton notes that American readers of the Yangs' version "have long lamented the stiff and formal feel of the language."⁶ What is your comment on this?

JL: I think the Yangs' version still reads very well. And many teachers of modern Chinese literature in British and American universities are still recommending the Yangs' translations to their students.

BW: How do you compare your version with the Yangs' in terms of the English language?

JL: The Yangs' is the Yangs', so we have different styles. But compared to Lyell's, I think we have probably quite similar linguistic principles. My style was closer to the Yangs' than it was to Lyell's.

BW: The Yangs tried to represent Lu Xun's style, widely recognized as simplicity, compactness, and trenchancy, in their translations. Do you think a translator should try to keep the original style?

JL: You have to be faithful to the tone, certainly. It's part of style.

BW: What do you think is Lu Xun's style?

JL: If I had to use one word, I would say "angry." That is a measured anger, disciplined anger. When people read Lu Xun, the first thing they say is that they feel he is a very angry writer. That is also how I felt when I read his stories.

BW: The Yangs' version has a number of editions published by the Foreign Languages Press through the early 1950s to 2002 [bilingual editions in the Echo of Classics Series]. Some of them were subsequently reprinted in Britain and America; for example, *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun: Call to Arms and Wandering* published by Indiana University Press in 1981. Why did you consult their four-volume *Selected Works of Lu Hsun* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1956–1960]?

JL: That's the one I happen to possess.

BW: But Volume 1 contains only eighteen stories selected from *Call to Arms*, *Wandering*, and *Old Tales Retold*.

JL: You see I didn't need to look at the other translations of every story. I only looked at them when there was a specific linguistic problem in a specific story. By the way, I also consulted their separate volume entitled *Old Tales Retold* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961]. But I am sorry that this item is not included in the "Further Reading."

BW: Before your complete translation appeared, only the Yangs had translated all eight stories in *Old Tales Retold*. Compared with *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*, the collection has been much less translated into English. What do you think are the reasons?

JL: I would say the quality of writing of the collection is more uneven. Some of them are very good, but some of them are not so good. Lu Xun himself said in the preface to *Old Tales Retold* that sometimes he becomes "facetious." And there are a lot of local political references unpalatable to Western readers. So to a Western eye some of those stories are very successful, and some of them are not so successful.

BW: Lyell includes copious footnotes in his translation, noting in "Introduction" [p. xlii] that a translator should seek to win as wide an audience as possible for the translation by attracting readers unfamiliar with Chinese history and culture. Do you think Lyell can achieve his aim?

JL: It depends on the readers. I know people who prefer to be able to read a work of literature without having to look at the footnotes all the time. And there are some instances of Lyell's translation, for example, the first page of "New Year's Sacrifice," in which there is a very long footnote. I think that can be intimidating to the reader. They look at this page and would think, "In order to understand this page I have to read this large footnote as well." That would send a message to the reader that they cannot understand or enjoy this work of literature unless they have this footnote's-worth of knowledge about China. I think that is not necessarily true with Lu Xun. I think Lu Xun is a more universal writer than that. But every translator goes about in their own way, so I won't criticize. I think Lyell's motives were brilliant and his translation provided a great service, so I applaud his attempt.

Discussion about Lovell's Translations

BW: Lu Xun is known for writing in a clear, lucid style. But I found you tend to use big words in your translation, producing a somewhat flowery style.

JL: I don't know. I don't have objectivity about it. I think that's just how style develops.

BW: I also found that you tend to contract or reorder the original sentences, thus slightly altering the original style. Just one example from "New Year's Sacrifice": "冬季日短, 又是雪天, 夜色早已笼罩了全市镇." Your translation is: "Another snowy winter's night fell early over the town" [p. 166]. Surely it is very fluent and reads very fine. But you removed "冬季日短" [winter days are short] and grouped the three things "冬季," "雪天," and "夜色" into one phrase: "another snowy winter's night."

JL: Right, but whether it is precisely Lu Xun in the original Chinese or not is of no use to the general English reader, because they don't love Lu Xun for his original Chinese because they've never read Lu Xun in the original Chinese. They have no reason to love Lu Xun's original Chinese style. What really matters, I think, is that you have to persuade them that this is an author whose power is universal, who can be translated into English. I found from my own experience of translating several Chinese authors that the English version is always a bit shorter, less wordy than the Chinese, and that it is better when it is shorter, particularly for contemporary Chinese writing, which is often very verbose and needs to be made more economical to work well in English.

BW: But you said earlier that Lu Xun's language is very different from that of those contemporary writers you have translated. These sentence portions are so short and terse that I feel as if reading classical Chinese. But you still contracted them slightly.

JL: Yes, a little, I admit.

BW: In an earlier interview you said "where Lu Xun used classical Chinese to make a contrast with the vernacular elsewhere, my translation style for these excerpts became less comfortable, more stilted."⁷ But I found this treatment not consistent throughout the translation. For example, at the end of "Brothers," Wang Yuesheng uses four classical literary references—"兄弟怡怡," "杳如黄鹤," "五体投地," and "鹪鹩在原"—apparently to show off his erudition. But in your translation "五体投地" is omitted while the other three are paraphrased [see pp. 182–83]. Could you explain this?

JL: Those idioms are also used in contemporary Chinese. Chinese has a different relationship to clichés and sayings than English. In Chinese it's often far more acceptable to use these sayings, while in English if you use this sort of construction it would sound very clichéd and unnatural. I read a translation of Qian Zhongshu's *Weicheng* entitled *Fortress Besieged* [translated by Nathan K. Mao and Jeanne Kelly, Indiana University Press, 1979] in which a lot of Chinese idioms are translated literally and then are given a footnote. Chinese idioms are very colloquial. You say them and everybody knows what you mean. If you translate them literally and then add a footnote, it is exactly the opposite of the effect in Chinese. It is the same problem as dialect. These are purely colloquial expressions that sound natural in speech. And finding equivalents for them in English is the hardest thing, I think.

BW: But there is a marked contrast between the classical and the vernacular in Wang's speech. I mean Lu Xun deliberately portrays this character in this way.

JL: Yeah, there is a contrast, but Wang Yuesheng is not a central, sharply drawn character in the story. He is a little vaguely sketched, whereas in "Kong Yiji" I did deliberately make the English more archaic because Kong's use of classical constructions is so important to his persona.

BW: You mean Wang's classical language need not be translated closely because he is a minor character?

JL: Exactly. Because Kong Yiji is central to that story and the contrast in register is part of the characterization in the Chinese, it was important to represent that stylistic contrast in the English, whereas in "Brothers" the price would have been too high in terms of fluency.

BW: I have doubts about the way you handled a number of difficult places. For example, you translated "叉麻酱," a homophonic pun suggesting "play mahjong," into "'moh-jang' [sic]" [p. 104]. Why did you use this symbol "[sic]"?

JL: There is a misspelling in the Chinese, isn't it? They are using the wrong characters. *Sic* is Latin for "it should be thus," so it's telling the reader that this is a misspelling, but it is a deliberate misspelling. That's what *sic* means. It means my misspelling is a deliberate misspelling.

BW: Lu Xun is also known for using malapropisms to expose the characters' illiteracy and ignorance. How did you try to tell the English reader that the author is using them intentionally?

JL: I'd say it is hard to do that. I think in "A Passing Storm" there are some instances of this, where some historical references are deliberately mangled, and I tried to leave them like that.

BW: I found some typical instances in "The Real Story of Ah-Q," for example, 崇正 [chongzheng] for 崇禎 [chongzhen], 柿油党 [shiyou dang] for 自由党 [ziyou dang]. *Ziyou* and *shiyou* don't sound very much like each other in Putonghua, but in the Shaoxing dialect they are pronounced exactly in the same way. So they can be called "dialectal puns."

JL: I think the joke comes over with the Mandarin pronunciation too, because the words *shiyou* and *ziyou* look quite similar. But this does not matter for English readers because they don't know Chinese. I think the important thing here is to get the idea of the joke over in the English.

BW: I noticed that you supplied a footnote to 柿油党, which is rendered as "Persimmon Oil Party" [p. 115]. But you translated 崇正 as "the last emperor of the Ming" [p. 108], which reads as 崇禎皇帝 if back-translated, thus cleverly evading the difficulties involved in translating this wordplay. In "The Lamp of Eternity," 梁武帝 [Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty] is mistaken for 梁五弟 [the fifth son of the Liang family] by an illiterate character. The sentence containing this wordplay 那灯不是梁五弟点起来的么? is not seen in your translation [p. 208]. Did you deliberately omit it and why?

JL: Yes, I deliberately omitted it because I thought a literal translation would make the passage too heavy as it would require a footnote.

BW: Finally, there are several places where I think you probably got it wrong. For example, 孙子才画得很圆的圆圈呢, appearing at the end of "The Real Story of Ah-Q," is open to interpretation, because 孙子 [grandson] is sometimes used as a curse word in northern Chinese dialects. The annotation given by Lu Xun himself is "If my grandson were here, he should be able to draw perfect circles."⁸ Unfortunately, you translated the sentence as "Only idiots can draw perfect circles" [p. 121].

JL: But doesn't 孙子 here mean "stupid child"; that is, "Only stupid children can draw perfect circles"?

BW: No, not "stupid children," I am afraid. According to Lu Xun's annotation, this should be understood as Ah-Q's very last attempt at winning his notorious "moral victory" right before his death.

JL: In that case, I consulted three persons, and Bonnie also asked people about that, and I used their answer. You see I always tried as hard as I could to get the correct answer, but it sounds like I missed it here.

BW: This "circle" problem is really tricky. The Yangs, who are widely known for their accurate translations, also rendered it into "Only idiots can make perfect circles" [1981, p. 110]. And Lyell did no better with his translation "It would take a real jackass to draw a nice round circle anyway" [1990, p. 166]. What a pity that you all treated 孙子 here as an insulting word for a stupid person! I think you would not have got it wrong if you had known Lu Xun's own interpretation.

JL: You're right. Probably if I do another edition I can improve on that.

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3. Qian and Almborg, "Interview with Yang Xianyi."
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5. Hawkes, "Preface."
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