



[Edited transcript]

KAN Qian

Good morning, and good evening to those in China. Welcome, everyone, to the sixth session of our Modern Chinese Literature online book club. I am KAN Qian. I'm Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University and also Head of Chinese in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. Today's session will be facilitated by Emily, and Nicky, and I'll introduce them briefly in a minute.

We are delighted that the author WU Ang is able to join us today for the discussion, and we also have Emily Jones here today, she's a founding trustee of Paper Republic. Also, we have Nicky Harman here, she translates fiction from Chinese into English. So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Emily.

Emily Jones

Thank you, Qian and thank you to everybody for joining today. It's great to see lots of you. I'm going to keep my section really brief because I know we all want to spend quite a bit of time discussing WU Ang's great story - ably translated by [Kelly \[Zhang\]](#)- but before I do, I want to give you a little bit of background into Paper Republic.

Nicky and I are two of the trustees and members of the management team from Paper Republic. We are a charity based in the UK and we're focused on helping everybody discover more great Chinese literature in English translation. We do that in a number of ways: we have a [website](#), which has a fantastic [database](#), which lists our authors, their works, their translations and their translators, as well. So there's a great kind of active knowledge on our database. And we also have a [guide to contemporary Chinese literature](#), which has got some fantastic essays at the start talking about different aspects of Chinese literature, as well as an edited guide to different authors, all modern and contemporary and working out of Chinese today. I would really encourage you to go and have a look at our website and explore the wealth of resources there.

One thing that we do and take great pride in doing is make short stories, fiction, some poetry and also some nonfiction available free to read on our website. We've had a number of series over the years, everything is on there, and you will be able to find it really easily. Over the summer, we commissioned translations of [six stories all based around the theme of food](#), and got a real feast of tales all taking a different slant on China, on people, on life and love, and on food that are up on our website and available for you all to read in English. WU Ang's story is one of those and there are other stories on there, for example, there's a story by Hong Ying called [Food and Memory](#), which is set in 1960s Chongqing, and it's got lots of family meals and memories and spice. There's a couple of tales that are set in Taiwan: we have [Taste Test](#) and also [The Bug Princess](#), which looks at three really different women from three really different parts of society. They come together, they chat, and they share tales and insect snacks as well, so there's a real wealth of stories and I'm sure something that

will please you, so please do take a look. I would just encourage you to really explore Paper Republic, see if you can find a new love, a new author whose work you really like.

You can also follow us on Twitter and on Facebook, and if you can please think about [donating](#). I know times are really tricky, but we put all of the money that we receive towards funding more translations of short stories. Thank you for those of you who have supported in the past.

So now, I'm going to hand over to Nicky, who's going to do a super brief intro to WU Ang and then let WU Ang speak herself. Over to you, Nicky!

Nicky Harman

Hi, everyone, it's really good to be here at one of these book clubs again. I don't want to say very much about WU Ang because WU Ang is here and it would be great if she talks about herself, and KAN Qian has already said something about her, but I would just like to say that this is not her first appearance on Paper Republic, because the Read Paper Republic series includes non-fiction as well, and we published a series of writing about [the Covid epidemic and the experience of Chinese writers](#), some of which was fiction and some of which was non-fiction, and I think it would be great if WU Ang could tell us more about her contribution to that particular series, which was [From Writing Workshop to Covid Response Team: Su Volunteers Diary](#). I think one thing that I very much appreciated about the translation of that work is that three different translators - who happen to have been my students on the Summer School - translated it together, which was great. I'm very much in favour of co-translation, and also I think it provided them with a brilliant opportunity to work together and talk to each other. We really wanted someone to translate WU Ang's *Winter is Coming* and so we asked Kelly [Zhang] to do it and she did a fantastic job, so it's great that she's able to be here today.

So, I think we should pass straight over to WU Ang. Are we going to ask WU Ang to say a few words?

Emily Jones

We are!

WU Ang

Okay, thank you. *This story is Winter is Coming*. Maybe I should talk more about the background that inspired me to write it. At the very beginning, I noticed from Internet bloggers a girl who lived in Qingdao, Shandong Province. She lived alone in a not so big apartment, she had a cat, and worked in a company during the day. The blog is all about when she comes back to the apartment and starts cooking for herself. She enjoys her food while she watches some very popular TV programmes with the cat at her side, keeping her company. I think the girl is so lonely; every day she stays alone all by herself. Nobody visits her. She cooks for herself, just one person. That is very typical for young Chinese people's lifestyle nowadays, especially in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. I have many students who study creative writing with me, and they all talk about their lives. They are all single people, not many of my students get married, they don't have big families or kids. So that made me think about this short story and the food delivery apps that deliver individual meals to single people's homes for dinner or lunch. I thought there must be some dangers about people being alone when some delivery guy comes to your home and you are single, especially if you are a girl at home alone. This was the inspiration for the story. So, that's what got me started on writing the story and I wanted to set it in Qingdao, but I haven't been to Qingdao and I haven't lived in that city, so I just did some research online about the residential area, the ocean, the street I mention in the story. It's on the Internet, but I haven't been there. After I finished the story, I gave it to a friend who had lived in

Qingdao for many, many years, another girl. She read it and said it was exactly what it was like in Qingdao, so I'm happy I did the research and it all seemed fine!

It's a sad story, I think, all about loneliness. It's not only the girl that's lonely, but also the guy who delivers the food for her, he also seems so lonely. They have no communication, they don't talk to each other, they just have some strange relationship together, staying in the same apartment, but the girl is gagged so she cannot speak with him and he just cooks alone for other girls who order take-away food. I think the loneliness continues with other girls; the loneliness is everywhere in this city, in this ocean. That is sad. When I was writing it I thought it must be set in winter, for the cold of winter, the grey colours and the ocean blown by the wind. I think the colour in this story was inspired by a very famous film director, Theo Angelopoulos (1935-2012). The colour is exactly from his movie. So if you can imagine the story in your mind, you can always feel the ocean from the apartment, even though the apartment is very far from the ocean. And you can feel the fog, not so white, not so grey fog and the cold temperature and the wind coming in to the apartment to stay with the lonely girl. So that's basically the background. Thank you.

Emily Jones

Thank you Ang, that's fantastic. I've just been trying to find some photographs because I studied in Qingdao already.

WU Ang

Oh really?

Emily Jones

Oh, so long ago... I was trying to find a photograph, but I can't find it. But when you were saying grey skies, we arrived in Qingdao in January and it was so cold and it was so grey, and yeah, the sky was grey, the sea, the ocean was grey, and that is such a perfect memory of my first time in Qingdao. It does get much better in the summer I hasten to add! it's a lovely place to be, but it is grey in the winter. Hopefully you can see some questions. We shared them online before the session, and these are really a prompt for you, you don't We don't have to stick to them, but hopefully they sparked some interesting thoughts. And there's lots of themes in the background that WU Ang shared just now about loneliness, being on your own - through choice or not, winter, the ocean, food: lots of great themes to pick up on from the story. So I would invite you all to use the chat box if you want to type a comment or a question or just simply come off mute and put your camera on and share some thoughts and questions with everybody.

WU Ang

And the first one is very right, I think, all the hints about how lonely and alone the girl is. I don't think it's only about many years ago, it's also about the situation nowadays in China. Typical Chinese young girls always seem not to have a goal for the future, they don't have a lot of hope for the future, especially as they have to be so hard-working in China. In China we call it 9-9-6 九九六, 9-9-6. That means you work from 9 in the morning to 9 at night six days a week. It's hard work and everybody has to work like that. And probably by the time you reach thirty-five you already face the danger of being fired because you are too old already. I think it's ridiculous that people are only about thirty-five years old and they are already called an old person and have to be fired from a company. So, they don't have much hope of happiness in their daily lives. It's not about themselves, it's about the whole society. I think the trend nowadays is that people's lives are always like that. So hard-working and to have no happiness. It's very difficult. All my young students complain to me that it's so

difficult to fall in love with anybody. It's so difficult to find anybody to have a very close relationship with, especially if you want to live with another person. You have to face so many burdens and so many fears, especially if you don't have much money. People start to give up falling in love, I think. They give up having close relationships, they give up having a family. They just stay alone, usually renting a place, or they buy an apartment far away because it costs less. I think loneliness is a situation that's not only caused by your personality; people with all kinds of personality have to face being alone. You have to have things delivered because you are out all day. You don't want to cook because you have to work so hard in your daily life. So she is particularly like this. Yeah.

Emily Jones

So there's a question that has just been put into the chat box by Lee, and Lee's asking you why did you use the divorce as one of the girls' fears? Is that about the fear or is that about the fear of being alone, or is that something else?

WU Ang

I think divorce is a typical relationship difficulty nowadays, especially for young people. They made it very easy to get married and it's very easy to get divorced nowadays. They decide everything so quickly and without deep thought. SO the girl in the story is divorced and maybe her husband, her ex-husband, beat her, because the girl talks to her mother and says she is a survivor and that's it's much better that I remain alive and not stay with him. I think it's dangerous for people to control their emotions in a relationship. So, is that okay as an answer?

Nicky Harman

I find the way you describe this pervasive loneliness is incredibly powerful. I want to add something or raise another aspect of loneliness, especially for women, and I think this will resonate with Western readers a lot less because there have been a number of cases about women who are alone, being attacked and hurt because they were alone. So that's why, I confess at this point, I drafted the first question, but that's why I've raised the question about does lonely always have to mean vulnerable? Because she is vulnerable to being hurt. Because in fact, that's what happens, that there's probably no way she could have avoided it. What you said about loneliness is kind of rather different about what I was thinking when I was reading the story. What I got when I was reading the story was, Oh, God, she was so vulnerable and this horrible thing has happened to her. There have been so many other cases of women being hurt, abducted, injured, killed, and so on. So, what do you feel about the fact that as a woman she's very vulnerable, and is hurt because the man is out to get her? Was that very much in your mind? Or was it just incidental?

WU Ang

It's very difficult to describe my feelings about the situation the girl faces, because you could say the girl is unlucky, right? And she made a wrong decision by letting the guy come into her apartment to help her make the furniture, because it's difficult for a girl alone to get it ready for the apartment. I think it's not only about being unlucky. The situation is much more like – when you are lonely and hopeless maybe you will have to ask for help from anybody just passing by, right? Especially in such a cold winter! Maybe you think any person coming close to you will warm you a little better. Especially if you come home so late and are in an isolated situation like her. So, I am very understanding of the girl. Maybe she made a wrong choice but I don't think she should be blamed. Can you guys understand what I mean?

Emily Jones

I think it's so interesting. There's a question about when did you first feel fear for the girl. I'll answer it from my perspective: when I started to read the story, I didn't immediately see her as vulnerable, I saw her as strong, as having walked away from something bad, as having set up a life on her own. Then there's a little moment when she gets the first delivery and it's iffy, because how did it come so quickly? And it's just left outside the door and she can't hear his feet. It was, I think, for me that moment where I was thinking, Oh, she might have been strong to walk away, set up her own life, but actually, there is this vulnerability that Nicky spoke to. So, I think it's a really clever story, because it just softly gently takes you through these different feelings and changes. It shifted my perspective, from strength to vulnerability, but in a brilliantly careful way. I wonder what other people here today, think about that. Kelly says that she feels the same as Nicky about the trauma and the vulnerability because she is a woman and because she is on her own. Do other people have thoughts about that?

KAN Qian

When I first read the story, I felt exactly the same way as Emily, that first delivery and it arriving so quickly. So that instantly set the alarm kind of, oh, somebody's going to have a ... and then she opened the door a tiny gap, that was so cleverly described as well. So, you felt the same kind of preparing for something bad going to happen. From that point onwards, I was kind of anticipating something happening.

You mentioned that you had never been to Qingdao so I'm just curious why you chose Qingdao as the setting for your story - any particular reason?

WU Ang

I never really want to use my own experience when I'm writing one of my short stories or novels usually because I think not all the stories are only about myself, so I find this way of working very good. For example, I may never have been to a city but I still write about it as a background. Alaska, I've never been to Alaska, but I still wrote a short story about Alaska using Google Maps, by research, by talking to people who have been there or lived there for many years. I think it's a good way to explore your experience second-hand, and it's a very good way to make you feel excited when you are writing. You feel it's about a new situation and new people who live there, and you can imagine anything happening. It's open, you know, an open space. It just made me feel excited it happening in Qingdao, I don't know why. Maybe because it's very near the ocean and it's in the north of China, not the south. So, in winter it must be very cold and with water, the feeling of the ocean, and the colour, and I think that suits my story, feeling lonely and cold, people hopeless. That's why I chose the city.

KAN Qian

Thank you very much, that's so interesting. Now you've explained it I can understand.

WU Ang

Thank you!

KAN Qian

I'm just fascinated by the inclusive ending. Because when I first read it - my colleague as well - we just thought, Oh, have we not got the whole story? Then we realised, you're meant to be like that.

So, it'd be very interesting to hear other people in the audience today, what everybody's guess was, what they think the ending might be.

Michael

It's Michael. Well, yes, of course. I think we were all surprised that the story finished so abruptly, and I tried to work out what might happen, and I thought that this guy was probably going to do the same, one after another, to other girls, try his luck, and that was just his way - partly for his business. I mean, he gained some trust, I suppose, by the reputation he might have of providing a very good meal, and then he just uses the base that he has in one girl's flat to contact others. So, it became a means of doing business. Whether it was actually a satisfaction to him in any other way, I can't tell; it may have been a perversion. I'd also like to add something which is partly connected. It reminded me of this personal story, but it wasn't with a girl it was my father, who was already in his late 80s. He was alone at home and some intruder in his late teens, a young chap, just came in through the back door and my father was surprised. This chap asked if he could have a cup of tea so my father made him some breakfast and he sat down at the table. Suddenly, he attacked my father with a kitchen knife, which he took out from the drawer, and after that, it was a terrible scene. He just wanted money. He took money from my father - he actually happened to have some in some cash on hand, and then went from room to room, tied up my father rather like the girl with all those tapes on over the mouth; I don't have to go into detail. My father eventually escaped by jumping out of the top window - which is on the first floor from his bedroom - and had a big fall. It was also about November, cold in England as it is now, but I think even colder because there was freezing frost and he managed to crawl to the next-door garden, where he was rescued eventually but in a very bad state and had to go to hospital. He was flown to hospital in a helicopter and was treated for about six months from which he recovered miraculously, surprisingly, but only for another year because he was so weakened. But anyway, this sort of scenario of the scene was familiar and terrible to me. But of course, the personalities are different because this guy in the story obviously chose what you described as a vulnerable girl or any other girl perhaps who perhaps trusted a man delivering food. I'll leave it at that.

Emily Jones

I'm so sorry to hear about your father's experience. It's shocking when you hear about things like that, but you did raise a really interesting point at the end about trust that you put in delivery drivers. It's really interesting that she trusts both the furniture delivery man as well who refuses to help her, as well as the food delivery man who treats her so badly.

Teresa in the chat has asked about the man's motivation and what does he gain by doing this to her? I don't know if anyone has any thoughts around that?

Lee

Could it be control?

Emily Jones

Just the desire to control another person do you mean Lee?

Lee

Yeah.

Nicky Harman

Maybe WU Ang could say something about what you had in mind when you wrote the male character?

WU Ang

If you guys noticed, the guy delivered the food the first time so quickly, that's why. I think he's already in this building, maybe – probably. Maybe he's just downstairs in another apartment with another girl maybe. I have no idea about how he delivers the food so quickly, in just a few minutes, right? I think for the girls, maybe he's just a psycho, he never thinks a lot about ... he doesn't want sex with all those girls, maybe, he just wants to stay with the girl in the same apartment and use the kitchen and use their apartment space for another delivery. I don't know. I think it's very interesting to leave this man's character to be very changeable. His personality, his goals, why he does such activities is changeable, and it's possible to make the readers think about it a lot. For a woman, it's very difficult to understand a man, in our lives. Sometimes I just feel so confused about why guys think that way, why is talking to each other so difficult. So, in China, young girls always say, 'I need a translator when I'm talking to my boyfriend.' It's so difficult to understand; it's like they use a different language. They mind they think in is so difficult for communication. I think it's good to make the guy a bit ... you never really understand him in this story. Okay.

KAN Qian

I was thinking could he be a bit psycho, could it be that he was feeling very lonely as well? He wanted someone to be there whilst he was cooking? But then it's difficult to explain why he would tape her mouth if he was lonely. He probably would like to have some conversation, but that he taped her mouth that could be that he was worried she might scream and get all the neighbours to come to rescue. So it's all very inconclusive I guess, leaving readers to ponder all those questions.

Emily Jones

Lee, as you have come off mute, you posted a question in the chat, I wonder if you wanted to ask yourself?

Lee

Oh, about using her literature? WU Ang, how do you feel when you find out that people use your literature to study both Hanyu and Hanzi?

WU Ang

I myself never try seriously to write in English, but I started writing in two writing centres, in Boston University, in Boston City, a city in the US, for about two years. My teacher wanted me to write in English sometimes, and I never really finished one. I just gave up after I started a short story; it's so difficult for me. I wanted to come back to China and continue my Chinese writing. So, I think it's good if people can use my literature as a way to learn Chinese, and to know about China nowadays because my stories are always about daily life in China now. I have the emotional connection with such

stories, I can feel those people breathing, their feelings inside, their emotional part, their deep, deep, pain. So, I think it's a good way for people for other people to learn by reading my stories. It's a good way to understand or know something about China.

Nicky Harman

I think one of the things I most admire about this story is the way you've given a picture of contemporary China, and contemporary Chinese men. It's incredibly vivid and it's very immersive, you can really get into it, because you can really get a picture of China, China today, certain people in a certain place. It's very engrossing; once I started reading it, I didn't want to put it down until I'd finished.

WU Ang

Thank you. I hope so. Thank you.

Emily Jones

We have a few minutes left. I wonder if anyone who hasn't asked the question so far. If they would like to ask a question or a comment, please do join in.

KAN Qian

If nobody asks, I have a question which I've been thinking about because in all the previous sessions we had, the story was translated by a native speaker of English. And I think this is the first one, which is translated by a bilingual - Chinese is the first language for Kelly. So I'm just wondering from your own experienced translators, from the translator's point of view, what are the pros and cons for a Chinese story being translated by a native Chinese translator?

Nicky Harman

Is Kelly there?

Emily Jones

I thought maybe Kelly was there because I just thought she came off mute.

Kelly Zhang

I feel personally, I do have a connection to the story itself, because I am from the same province where the story is based, so I can visualise it as well, in my mind, but also, WU Ang's language is so immersive that I'm sure every reader can also immerse themselves. And so I feel being able to immerse myself in the story really helped me to translate it. It wasn't hard and difficult, in a way, because it just seemed natural, I could picture in my head, I could just sort of let the language flow. But I do feel, sometimes I'm maybe reading it from that close perspective, maybe sometimes I am not - I have my own way of interpreting the story. Perhaps I'm not seeing certain things, that I'm not seeing because I am from that culture. I feel that I'm able to be close to the writer, or perhaps - you know, we all have our different perspectives, and maybe my interpretation is not what the writer has in mind there and then in listening to her, I feel like yes, there is some of that as well. So, but anyway,

it is coming from my interpretation of the text. I think every translator brings a piece of themselves into that. And that's why translation is a secondary creative, creative process itself.

Nicky Harman

Kelly, this is a really interesting question. Kelly, can I ask you, do you regard yourself as truly bilingual? Or what would you say is your mother tongue or do you think you have two mother tongues?

Kelly ZHANG

It's hard to say at this point, because I have been using English on a more regular basis daily in terms of the time and then the number of years of my life the English has succeeded Chinese, but Chinese is my first language you know, communication instruction etcetera. So I think I do have that is more ingrained to me than if I were acquiring it later in life, extensively, even if lifelong. So I think there is a difference. Maybe my also my thought pattern; I think it is still more like a Chinese. I don't know how to really explain that. When I see things, I mean, you know, that worldview paradigm may still be a strong influence, because I acquired the language, the Chinese language, first and I my worldview was formed by that.

Nicky Harman

That's such an interesting answer, and as I teach Chinese, I think it shows how the old saying that you had to translate only into your mother tongue it's much more complicated than that, and I've now met quite a few Chinese who have very complicated and deep-going relationships to both of their languages. And I'm sure that's true of other languages as well. It's just not as simple as saying you must always translate into your mother tongue. You produced this really brilliant translation. I wasn't the editor, but I don't think it ever occurred to me reading your translation, actually, you'd grown up in Chinese rather than growing up in English. So, you've clearly got hugely, wonderful skills in writing in English and in both languages.

DENG Shaomian

Nicky, can I say a few words? I'm a translator and I'm also translation teacher, and also, I'm a Chinese teacher. I work for The Open University. I just want to add a perspective on whether you translate into your first language or your second language, I think it all depends. I've lived here for many, many years, I also lived in China for my first thirty years. In my experience it depends on what you are talking about. All the new things you learn, for example, all the things I learned in this country, for example, let's talk about computer. When I was in China, there was no computer at all. So, what is the software, keyboard? All these things - or mortgage? These things, I prefer to speak English because I'm more fluent. English is my first language because I didn't even have this language in China. But all the things that happened in my first thirty years, I still prefer to speak in Chinese, for example, food items, you know, so it depends what you talk about.

Emily Jones

I completely agree. My mother is French, and she always says she can't be a grown-up in France anymore, because she left when she was 20, or 21. And she can't talk about screws or DIY or having a job, or anything grown-up in France. She can talk about food and family and memory and childhood. So for her, language is so complex, and your relationship with language is so complex, but for her, she

has different modes of being and then she picks the language that fits best with her mode of being. I think it's a lovely way to think about it. Lovely, lovely.

Lee Payne

Being a Chinese language student, I have a great sense of pride when I can recognise Hanzi, especially like I said earlier, from Wu Ang's literature, using that to learn from. From a translation perspective, it does give you a sense of pride as a Chinese student.

Emily Jones

I think that's really true, Lee, really true. We are almost out of time. Qian did you want to move on to the next last slide? Thank you everyone for the conversation. That's been brilliant.

KAN Qian

I just want to use this opportunity to announce our forthcoming events. Our next book club, we haven't decided the date yet, but it will be early 2024. Further details will be on our website, which is here, the Confucius Institute, Open University if you go to the event page. Our next public talk is on the 8th of December, on the topic of the Chinese Labour Corps, China's doomed effort to regain territorial integrity during World War One, by documentary filmmaker PENG Wenlan. Many of you probably know about her, she used to be the host of Sunday English in China in the 80s. I was growing up learning English with her, actually, but now she's based in the UK and she's made lots of interesting documentaries for the BBC. And her voice you'll probably recognise; she's been the voice-over for many documentaries for the BBC. So that event is already on [Eventbrite](#) and you're all very welcome to come to the next talk, it's a very fascinating topic. She's done a big project and has got very interesting personal stories to tell.

Thank you to all our facilitators for a very interesting discussion. Thank you, WU Ang again, for making it today.

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