



[Edited transcript]

KAN, Qian (Director of the OCI, Open University)

Good afternoon, everyone and good evening to those who are joining in from China. This is the fifth session of our online Modern Chinese Literature Book Club, and in this session, today we're going to discuss 'Seeing Ghosts', written by Chan Ho-Kei, translated by Bill Leverett.

So, today, we're very pleased to have Bill with us, who translated this story, and also, Emily and Nicky are here with us. They will first introduce *Paper Republic* very briefly, and then we'll introduce the author, Chan Ho-Kei and then the story, followed by an interactive discussion and question and answer session.

Bill is an associate lecturer at the [Open University](#). He used to teach the [Beginners Chinese](#) module and now he's teaching a few other English and cultural, exploring languages and culture, and a few other English modules. So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Emily. Thank you.

Emily Jones (Paper Republic)

Thank you, everybody, for joining today and welcome to our now fifth book club session with the Open University. We're really thrilled to have had the opportunity to just talk about great stories that were originally written in Chinese and have been translated into English with you all over the sessions that we've run together. I just wanted before we get into 'Seeing Ghosts', Bill's, fantastic translation, I wanted to take the opportunity to talk to you a little bit about *Paper Republic*.

Qian has already mentioned that we are a UK-based charity, and our focus is on making sure that as many people as possible know about all the wonderful work that exists in English translation, translated from the Chinese. And for those of you who have joined the sessions before, you will know that we've got a [website](#) with a wealth of information or resources on it. But what you may not know if you haven't been looking at the website recently, is that we have just launched a new series of Read Paper Republic, which is called '[Food, Glorious Food](#)'. We've run a number of [Read Paper Republic](#) series over the years, they're all

completely free to read online, short stories, and occasionally literary nonfiction, translated from Chinese into English, and as the title 'Food, Glorious Food' might suggest, the theme this time is around food.

Today, we are launching the third short story translation on our website, which is called '[The Bug Princess](#)', and it's a really fantastic tale set in Taiwan, and a bit of historical fiction, a really interesting view about women and their relationships and lots of mention of really quite exotic foods. I do recommend reading it. There are other stories on the website already and three more to come so we hope that you take a bit of time and enjoy reading them over the coming weeks. There's a real wealth of short stories on there, please do feel free to dip your toe into the stories that we have available. It's a great resource if you want to find out a little bit more about [who an author is](#) or the kinds of things that they write about. And if you are on [Twitter](#), please follow us (@PaperRepublic). We know there's Threads now, but some of you are still, I assume, on Twitter. We've got a Facebook presence as well, and we have a newsletter which goes out occasionally.

And then lastly, I know times are really hard, but if you can we are a UK-based charity, we do try to raise funds in order to fund our translations of short stories, we try to make sure that all the translators and the editors are paid properly for their work, so if you do have a penny to donate, please do consider [donating](#). Thank you very much.

I'm going to leave it there though there's much more that I could say about *Paper Republic*, and feel free to ask us any questions that you might like to in the in the open conversation, but I think important that we move on to talking about our featured author and featured story today. So I'm going to pause and hand over to Nicky to just do a little bit of background. Over to you Nicky.

Nicky Harman (Paper Republic)

I was wondering how to briefly summarise this very talented and interesting writer, and, of course, I realised that the story which Bill translated was part of a competition, run by the '[Bai Meigui Translation Competition](#)', run by the [Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing](#) at Leeds University. He was one of the featured authors and this gives quite a nice, succinct biography of the man, here he is. He's unusual from many points of view: he was raised in Hong Kong, he won the 'Mystery Writers of Taiwan' award for his short stories, and in 2011, he won the 'Soji Shimada Award', the biggest mystery award in the Chinese world. He's unusual, because crime fiction, or mystery fiction, in Chinese is not that common; it's not, say, on a par with sci-fi or speculative fiction. It's very unusual that he's written these novels, translated by [Jeremy Tiang](#) and published in UK by '[Head of Zeus](#)'. '[The Borrowed](#)' and '[Second Sister](#)' are well worth reading, but we've got today, a lovely short piece, which Bill will be able to tell us a lot more about. It's kind of very small and a gem - short in length, but full of interest, and in a great translation by Bill Leverett. So, I'm going to stop there, and hope that we can carry on talking about the story.

Bill Leverett (Translator, Associate Lecturer, The Open University)

Yeah, so let me tell you, for those who haven't read the story, it's very short, you could probably read it in the time it takes me to talk about it. It's, it's basically: a man sits down on

a bench, he's approached by another man who tells him a story, and the story is about this other man, his past as a medium, somebody who sees ghosts and talks to them and can hear their replies. And he did this work - among other things - he did this for the police to solve cases, and he describes a couple of these cases. I should start out by pointing out that when he first appears, he looks like a beggar and the man sitting on the bench sort of dismisses him and thinks that everything he's saying is either a scam or fantasy, or whatever. The old man is lamenting how he's lost his livelihood, and this happened in a particular case, where he explains how he basically fingered the murderer of somebody on the basis of the victim's ghost pointing him out and telling him where the murder weapon was. And so, the accused was sentenced and executed. But then, several months later, it was found that he was actually innocent, somebody else confessed to the crime. So, this old man's credibility was ruined and nobody, nobody believed him anymore and he's now next to homelessness.

It's a very interesting story that he's told the guy on the bench and the guy on the bench is trying to figure out whether or not to believe this, and what would be the point if it were just a story. The old guy gets up at the end and he says, basically, the moral of my story is that you can't believe anybody, living or dead: the dead lie just as much as the living, because the story, the victim of the murder told him - that her husband had killed her - she did this because even though he didn't, she accused the husband because she wanted the husband to die and join her. She knew that he was having an affair with somebody else, and she didn't want this other woman to come in and just take over her place and enjoy the rest of this man's life. So, she lied. And so the old man says, 'Ghosts lie as much as the living. Can't believe a word they say', and then he says, 'So I, I won't try to offer you an explanation of this crowd of ghosts standing behind you. But that fat one there with the messed-up eye, he looks like he'd like to rip you apart'. And he walks away, and then the guy on the bench turns around and sees nothing. But he's scared, because he's a hitman and he has just killed, he's just shot, a fat man in the eye for one of his clients, so it all makes sense to him. And that's the story. So, it's kind of a classic story within a story. The old man is telling the story - that's sort of the meat of it - and then around the edges, you've got the other man trying to figure out whether it's true or false, which I think is a pattern that occurs quite frequently in Chinese literature. I may be wrong, but I kind of see this a lot - stories about other stories and the other stories are not necessarily true, or interpreted in various ways.

We are fortunate in that we have not only my translation, but two other translations from the runners-up. If you follow the link that Nicky provided, you can see the runner-up translations published alongside mine, and you can compare them sentence by sentence. That might be an interesting exercise.

Emily Jones

Thank you so much, Bill. We're going to open up for questions from everybody. While we're waiting, Bill, for people to formulate their thoughts and think about questions, I just wanted to make a comment that my first reaction on reading your translation was how brilliant it was, and particularly because of how natural the dialogue is. I find translating dialogue, very hard work. I find that I have to go through 1 000 versions before anything begins to sound natural. I have to read them out loud to my husband, he tells me it's terrible and I should start again. I wondered if it came more naturally to you or if it's something that you have to work really hard at too?

Bill Leverett

Well, first, thank you for your very kind assessment of my translation. This is one of the first translations I did, really, I came very late to the game. I participated in, I think the third Bai Meigui competition, which was non-fiction. Didn't hear back. I tried again on the fifth and one day, I was just thinking, I was sort of reviewing it in my head and thinking, 'Oh, I messed up that bit, and I made a mistake there, and this is totally wrong', and then I got this email saying I'd won. I was completely surprised. And I wonder if my translation has gone downhill since then.

I don't think dialogue comes naturally to me; I tend to be too literal and stick to the source text too closely, when really I should back off and try retelling the story in English. I did have the benefit of editing this between the time it won the competition and the time it was published, so the version that you're seeing is slightly better, I hope, than the version that actually won the competition, and I doubt the other two runner-up people got the benefit of that. Jeremy Tiang worked with me on editing it. To be honest, I'm not sure I have any advice on writing dialogue. Yeah, it helps if you read it out loud. See how it sounds, imagine somebody, imagine yourself saying that, and say it faster, quicker, more naturally.

Somebody's asked, 'What was the hardest sentence to translate and why?' I did this a long time ago, so my memory is not very good, but I remember spending a lot of time on the bit in the very beginning where he's - it's the cigarette that he has after something and I got the impression - I forget the Chinese phrase - but I got the impression that it suggested a post-coital cigarette. He said, 'after a job' or 'after a bit of work' or something like that, so I was trying to come up with something that would preserve that suggestion, but not make it too explicit. And so, I just put 'after' in quotation marks, I think there were probably other things that I struggled over, but that's the that's the one that I remember.

Nicky Harman

The sign of your success is that the story reads so naturally. It's the first and only story I've read of this author, although I know him as a crime/mystery author. I read somewhere an [interview](#) with him where he said, 'The reveal, at the end is very important to me', - that was him the author. I think it's great the way that the story carries you right through to the end. There's one reveal, which is that the ghost is telling lies, but then there's another reveal, which really catches you by surprise, where the person who's sitting in the park turns out to have a dirty, dark secret as well. So, I think he's very, very skillful at this short story genre.

Bill Leverett

Was he talking about the reveal in this story or about all stories?

Nicky Harman

I think he was talking in general, not particularly talking about this story. I can't even remember where I saw it, but it must have been when I was thinking, 'What am I going to say about him to introduce him in six sentences?', and I found this interview.

Emily Jones

I've read 'The Borrowed', and I would say, based on 'The Borrowed', and this story, 'Seeing Ghosts', it feels like he's really clever at plotting, and almost Agatha Christie-like leading us astray and then a big reveal and a surprise. What you see in this short story is like a little micro version of what you get, with real layers and complexity in 'The Borrowed'. He's an absolute, absolute master at it, I would say.

Bill Leverett

Somebody else says, 'It is very relatable to all cultures and places, an Everyman story, which kind of answers the part of the first question about the location. If you think it's a story that could take place anywhere, in any culture, then the location is not terribly important. The reason I asked this question about the location, is because one of the comments about my translation was - one of the many glowing comments about the brilliance of my translation was - that it was very good at invoking the location, which was Hong Kong, that it sort of shone through. When I read that comment, I thought, 'Oh, it took place in Hong Kong, I didn't know that'. And I lived in Hong Kong for 13 years! But I wasn't thinking in terms of where the story takes place, I was just translating it. And as you look through it, yes, there are clues. One of them, which was just brought to my attention today, is that the bridge that he's sitting next to is described as a 天桥 (*Tian Qiao*), which is a pedestrian bridge over a street, which is very, very, very common in Hong Kong. Not all that common in other places; the fact that there's a marina - or as one of the other translators translated it, a yacht club; that there's a south side of the city where rich people live. Those are all clues. The fact that Hong Kong used to have capital punishment but no longer does. There are a number of clues that it could be Hong Kong, but does it have to be? Could it be Chicago? Could it be someplace in Europe? I'm not sure if anybody else, read it, and immediately thought it has just got to be Hong Kong, or even this has to be China, or some Chinese city. Could it be Singapore? Could it be a city with a lot of Chinese people, Kuala Lumpur or wherever? Is there anything that's uniquely Chinese about it? Every culture pretty much has ghosts, ghost stories of some sort. They're a big part of Chinese tradition, but they don't have a monopoly on it. So, yeah.

Emily Jones

I think I'm with you that there's probably hints in there, but it could be placed in a number of different locations. I feel the same about the time setting as well. I don't know when it was actually written as a story, but it feels like it could be any recentish time, you know, could be now; people trying to find a place where it's okay still to smoke feels actually super modern and contemporary. But equally, it could be a few decades ago.

Bill Leverett

Yeah. The one thing I thought of re-reading it this morning, you have two strangers starting a conversation and one of the first lines is somebody complaining about the government, and I thought, well, that's not modern Hong Kong, that doesn't happen anymore. You don't just

open a conversation with a stranger by complaining about the government. 10 years ago, maybe.

Nicky Harman

I think this question of a popular genre is interesting. My experience of UK publishers is that they always want the *new* popular crime writer in Chinese that's going to make their fortune in English. But of course, there isn't such a thing. The only equivalent genre which does well in China and in the West is sci-fi. And that makes me wonder why. Emily mentioned, Agatha Christie, the way that the clues are built up and then there's the reveal. Perhaps that's not that common anymore, even in crime or mystery writing. In the West, you're more likely to get the psychological crime thriller, where the detective is agonising over whatever terrible crimes they've uncovered, their awful home life and inability to get home to look after their children, so this is a bit different. This is in a more ... an older mould of genre that used to be popular in the West. Is it still popular? I mean, I find it incredibly, enjoyably, readable, but the idea of a popular genre? I don't know if people have thought about that.

Emily Jones

Maybe not, there is a comment in the chat around a character detail that you've added to the first-person protagonist. Did that come naturally as a result of the translation, or did you make conscious decisions?

Bill Leverett

I don't remember making a decision to add something that wasn't there, so I'm not sure what sort of characteristics they're talking about. I was trying to just translate what was there. I guess it would have to be a product of the translation. One thing I did this morning was read through the other two translations and see how they handle different things. It's surprising how different one sentence can be translated, all the different ways. And yeah, in making a choice, in deciding that you're going to find if the Chinese uses some idiom, and you decide to use an English idiom that's related, or maybe there's one that isn't related, it's a completely different idiom but it means the same thing. In making those choices, you are guided by your understanding of who the character is, what the story is, what's happening, if Zhu Zhu would like to elaborate what they feel that has been added, I might be able to give a better explanation of how it came about, but I don't remember specifically deciding to add anything that wasn't already there.

Zhu Zhu (attendee)

Thank you very much and thank you for that reflection, very valuable. I really, really liked your translation. It's such an enjoyable piece to read and I like the story as well. What I meant by 'added character' was that I felt that when I read your translation, the person that I picture in my head is slightly different from the person that I picture in my head when I read the Chinese original. The person that I painted in my head when I was reading the Chinese original was a lot more vague than the one that I could see in my head when I was

reading your English translation. It seems that the English translation has enabled me to picture the person who would be someone in a particular shape, being able to swear, for example. And also, if I look at the Chinese translation, the final revision was fantastic, and your English translation vividly caught that reveal as well, which is fantastic. But there's a different feeling, and both feelings are very good. If I look at the Chinese translation it started with 每逢工作完毕 (mei feng gongzuo wan bi) , and when you see 工作 (gongzu)' or you don't know what the person does, and he seems to be a very ... another person and when you come to the end of the story, you would be like, 'Oh, my goodness, *that's* the job he does'. When I read your English translation and I got to the end, I smiled, because you used the word 'job', and of course, when we talk about killers doing 'jobs', we wouldn't use the word 'job'. So, they echoed each other really nicely, as well, but in a different way. Then in the Chinese one, we don't know anything about the person, and I find it very difficult to picture the person. And in the end, I was like, ah, and being an English translation, I still didn't know what work he does, until I get to the end of the story. But at that point, I could relate his job to your word choice. Perhaps that was an unconscious choice of words in your translation process, but I found it very, very interesting and it was excellent. Yeah, just these two quick thoughts, because I read the two versions quite a few days ago I can't recall all the details I was thinking of. Thank you.

Bill Leverett

Thank you for that explanation. I wonder, you probably read the Chinese first and then the English, that may affect the way that you are visualising the story as you read it, because you already know how it ends. The way that you visualise things, it can be as much about you as about the way the story is told. I frequently find myself, if somebody's telling a story about something happening, say in a house and I'm picturing it in my head and they don't describe the house, they just say, you know, 'in the kitchen' or 'upstairs', the house that I use in my head will depend on the nature of the story they're telling. Is it the house I used to live in? Is it the house I currently live in? Is it my friend's house? If it's a story about a couple having difficulties, it'll be one house. If it's a story about sibling rivalry, it'll be a different house. If it's a story about pets or something, it'll be a ... you know, the house that you set your story in. And the way that you picture the characters might depend on your personal memories and associations. But yeah, the fact that I use 'job' at the beginning and the end, that may have been deliberate. It's so long ago I don't remember, but yeah, it's a good choice, I guess.

Zhu Zhu

Thank you. That was! Thank you.

Emily Jones

That's prompted a lot of comments in the chat, and I think you're right, it depends which one you read first. I read the English first and I didn't pick up on that clue until I got to the end, about the word 'job', and then I just thought that's a brilliant word choice. And some people are saying, they read it and they thought, 'construction worker', some people who

read it in Chinese first maybe thought, 'office worker'. It's obviously prompted a lot of responses from people, which is brilliant.

There's a few comments and questions that have come up in the chat and perhaps if I just take them in chronological order. First was Milan, who asks the question about have you done the exercise of comparing the three translations yourself? What did you find and also, what did you learn from the editing process with Jeremy, and are there any examples that you could share?

Bill Leverett

In terms of comparing the three translations, all I did was read through them and think, 'Oh, that's an interesting way of doing that', or, 'I wouldn't have done that', or, 'This doesn't quite work' or 'That works better', or whatever. So, I haven't taken notes and gone line by line. I liked the one by ... I forget her first name, last name is Moser. I like that one better than the other one. The first one, Kirsten or Kristen, somebody, it seemed a little bit full of slang and idioms some of which were sort of archaic, or not necessarily archaic, but sort of old-fashioned or perhaps pulled from different ... you know, some were a bit British, and some were a bit American, or something else and it just seemed a little bit unnatural to me.

The editing with Jeremy: he didn't actually, if I remember correctly, he didn't actually make a whole lot of suggestions. It was mainly me going through and finding things that didn't quite work. Okay, in the finished translation, the wife that gets murdered is described as a 'bossy cow' and that's something I added in the editing process. In the original, I had something like, 'she was a very arrogant woman'. That's an example of dialogue, because it's the old man telling the story, and I'm thinking, 'Would he use the word arrogant? Would he? He's saying, somebody else described this woman as arrogant, da-da-da-da-da. And I thought, make it something a bit more colloquial and so I used 'bossy cow'. Also, I think it may have fitted the original Chinese better. I don't remember. So that's one of the things I changed. Another one was a mistake that may have been pointed out by Jeremy: 'disposable, lighter'. He uses a disposable lighter to light a cigarette. I had misinterpreted the Chinese and I had put a 'scavenged lighter', because he was somebody who lives by collecting things from garbage cans and reselling, you know, scrap, aluminium or whatever. I thought maybe he's picked up a lighter from somewhere and he uses that. But no, it's just the common Chinese term for disposable lighter. I was confusing, 'disposable' with 'disposed', so I corrected that. There were a number of other things I can't remember. Too many.

Did I learn anything specifically, from that? You learn from every translation you do, every sentence, everything adds to your understanding of both languages, which helps. Do thousands and thousands and thousands of these translations and you will eventually get slightly better at it. Or read other people's translations. Yeah, it all helps. I'm not sure that there are any big, dramatic lessons that I learned from any of this, but I don't think there are any big, overarching things that you need to learn, you need to learn the very specific things about every word in both languages that you're working in: how it's used; what associations it has; what it tells you about the person who's using it; or whatever. You can never stop learning those things. There's an infinite sea of them and they're always changing and they will differ from region to region, so you can never, ever fully understand what you're reading, or what you're writing and how people will interpret it. You can't write for everybody; you're writing, in the end, for yourself, what I understand and how I would tell the story to myself, if

I were sitting across the table from me, and other people will read it differently. So, it's always an imperfect process.

Emily Jones

Thank you, Bill. That's a lovely thought actually, that you can't control how other people read and you can't write for everybody, you have to do justice to yourself and write for yourself. That's a really nice thought.

There is another comment in the chat, which I think is maybe from Lucy or perhaps Qian about Dr. Yip, who can't be here today but has sent some comments. Qian, would you like to share the comments with everyone?

KAN, Qian

Dr. Yip used to teach translation at Leeds University. He's retired now, but he loves translation. He has attended several of our sessions, but today, unfortunately, he can't attend. He's prepared very detailed comments and asked me if I could just read out a little bit, so I'm just going to read out his general comments.

'Bill's translation of the story, as far as I can judge, is most imaginative and successful. No wonder it won first prize. It reads as if it were originally written in English'. Then he went on to say, 'Bill attached primary importance to the rhythm of the translating language', and he feels, that Bill may have used two remarkable techniques. One is to 'under-translate' a little - that's the jargon in translation, so, not reveal every detail - and he actually compared it to the runner-ups. And then the other way is to 'employ a logical replacement'. And then he kind of excuses himself, 鸡蛋里挑骨头 (*ji dan li tiao gu tou*). He pointed out a few places he felt could be done better, which I forwarded to Bill. And two things I'm going to read out that he felt could be translated better, are towards the end. There's a Chinese sentence, which says, 只能呆呆坐在长椅上 (*zhi neng dairan zuo zai changyi shang*), and Dr Yip, thinks that 呆呆 (*dairan*), struck me. Translated originally, Bill said, 'stuck like a fool on this bench', Dotor Yip feels that, 呆呆 (*dairan*) here means transfixed or frozen to the spot. To my mind, it has nothing to do with foolishness. The narrator was seized with fear, rather than with remorse for having done anything wrong.' I thought that was a really good interpretation of that Chinese expression 呆呆 (*dairan*). Mostly, we probably feel in some ways. kind of stuck.

Because of the time I'm not going to read more.

Bill Leverett

I think that's a very valid comment, I probably looked up 呆呆 (*dairan*) and in the dictionary it said, 'idiot', and so I was trying to get some of that into the translation. And really, what it means is to sort of stare blankly, right? Not dumb, but a sort of blankness in your ability to ... in your expression and your speech and your ability to function. And it could well come from fear. So that's an area where I should have under-translated or not been as literal. So yeah, that's a very good comment.

Zhu Zhu

Could I ask a very quick question about the translation of swear words. There are not very many, of course, in this story, but I did notice that one of the words that cannot be classed as a swear word is translated into something that may be able to be classed as a swear word in English. I was just wondering, what is your normal technique when it comes to the occasions where you have to deal with swear words? I know it's not very pleasant sometimes to translate these expressions.

Bill Leverett

I go with naturalness and, as far as I can, faithfulness. So, if it's a swear word in Chinese, I'll probably render it as a swear word in English. I suppose you have to make a judgement about the situation. In English, there are situations where swear words are natural and frequent and not interpreted as swearing, and other situations where you don't say ... there are many things you don't say, you know and it just depends on the contexts: where you are, what sort of situation it is, who's present. You have to make a similar judgement about the cultural context of the story. How shocking would this word be in this situation and try to render that a similar amount of shockingness in the English given that situation. It's a complicated thing, but I don't have a problem with inserting a swear word. I'm not for against. I've read plenty of things that have lots of swear words in them and it doesn't bother me as long as it's helping the story along, if it's realistic. If you watch a police show where there's hardened cops dealing with hardened criminals, there's going to be a lot of swearing and you accept that as something that would naturally occur in that situation. If everybody started speaking, very eloquent, perfectly grammatical sentences with five syllable words, you'd start to think, 'What's going on here?'. If the swearing is part of the story and it's natural, then it's no more offensive than anything else that might be described, the violence or the attitudes of the characters. If one of the characters says that another character described the third character as 'a bossy cow', that's a misogynistic expression, but I don't feel that I'm being misogynistic by inserting it into the story. It's one of the characters, you know? And it's an expression that you hear frequently. If you find it offensive, you'll find it offensive in the story, but you shouldn't be offended, you shouldn't blame me for it, it's a character.

Zhu Zhu

No, yeah, I totally got you. Yeah,

KAN, Qian

I'm afraid we're running out of time so I just would like to show the last slide to tell people what's coming.

The sixth session of our book club will take place in November, but we haven't decided the exact date and the topic yet, but if you follow our [Eventbrite](#), or you can check our [Online Confucius Institute event page](#), we will announce them there. And we are also planning to have two public talks, one by ['Peng Wenlan' \(彭文兰\)](#), some of you may know her, she was really famous in China in the 80s, teaching English, and now she has her own company

making documentaries. And also we will have [Dr Zhao Jingyi](#), who is a Senior Research Fellow at Clare Hall College, University of Cambridge, and also at the [Joseph Needham Institute](#). She has done a lot of work in comparative philosophy, early Chinese philosophy in comparison with Greek philosophers, and she will come to give a talk as well. We haven't finalised the date yet, so please keep an eye on our page.

Thank you very much, thank you all for coming to this session and thank you to all our facilitators: thank you, Bill, Nicky and Emily, and I hope you all have a lovely summer.

Thank you.

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