

Modern Chinese Literature Book Club Session 4, 24 March 2023

Backflow River by Jia Pingwa

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Edited Transcript

KAN, Qian

Welcome, everybody. This is our fourth session of Modern Chinese Literature Book Club. Today's session, we're going to focus on Jia Pingwa's story [Backflow River](#), translated by Nicky Harman. I'm KAN, Qian. I'm the UK Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University, and I'm also Head of Chinese in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Emily first.

Emily Jones

Hello, everyone. Thanks for joining us today, I'm going to keep this intro to [Paper Republic](#) quite brief, because we have plenty to talk about when it comes to Jia Pingwa. I'm going to hand over to some experts on him in a minute. But just to say, do feel free if you are interested in Chinese literature to sign up for our newsletter, read some short stories follow us. And if you can, and I know times are difficult and increasingly so at the moment, but please do consider small [donation](#) to us as a charity we really appreciate every penny. We put it all towards funding new series of translated stories.

So that's it for me. And thank you for joining today. I'm going to hand over to Dylan now to talk a little bit about Jia Pingwa.

Dylan Levi King

Sure, thank you very much. But before I begin, I'll say the first time that I read Jia Pingwa, I came across a book in a used bookstore. It had no cover on it, just an old shopping supermarket flyer around the cover. And the book was back behind the desk. I picked it up - a friend who was with me recommended that we look for one of Jia Pingwa's books - took it home and opened it on this completely fantastical, amazing novel that mixes language from 200-300 years before, and absolutely cutting-edge language for its time in the 1990s. That book was banned. That book, when we read it, couldn't be published after its first time in 1993 until 2009 when it was republished. But that is to say Jia Pingwa's writing is much more exciting than his biography, which proceeds like any Chinese writer's biography. He was born in the 1950s, he likely couldn't have gone to university if not for getting lucky by being assigned to a production team building a dam. When he was there, some of the cadre noticed he was very good with his calligraphy, very good with his quotations of classical

poetry, and with his storytelling, so he was recommended to go to Northwestern University in Xi'an. And when he got there, he used everything: the stories he had been told by his mother when he was a boy, stories that he had taken from his father's old books. His father, unfortunately, in the 1960s was branded a 'rightist' and spent a long time away from the family. But he left his books there. And at Northwestern, he started developing into a writer under this strange late cultural revolution period where everything was sort of breaking down with the rules about cultural revolution writing and socialist realism. And he was just there, he was in the right place at the right time.

He became an editor at a literary journal attached to the university and began publishing stories. Those first stories if you look at them, they're not very good. They read very stiff and uninteresting, sort of like you would imagine Chinese literature in the late 1970s before everything gets exciting. But everything did get exciting. And he published that amazing novel called *Ruined City* or *Fei Du* (废都) and that catapulted him to literary stardom. It sold a million copies. It was an unheard-of smash hit, and it disappeared within a year. It couldn't be republished the reasons for that are usually said to be its shocking obscenity. It's about a writer who falls in love with the girlfriend of an aspiring writer. There's a lot of sex in the book. Jia Pingwa has a trick in the book where he deletes the sex scenes and leaves a little space where he says the author has deleted such and such many characters from the thing. That was the power of it. All the readers would imagine all the filth that was going on, in those supposedly deleted characters. The people who were in charge of the culture of bureaucracy must have had particularly filthy imaginations because they banned the book almost as soon as it came out. Now for any other writer that might have spelled the end of their career, they might have shuffled off to a desk job editing books about opera masks, but not Jia Pingwa. He published a string of follow-ups to that book about life in the city, toning down only slightly the eroticism.

He had his next big hit in early 2000s, he came back on the scene with a book called *Happy Dreams*, which was translated for Amazon by Nicky Harman, and with a book in 2005, called *The Shaanxi Opera*, which we are going to put out a translation of this year. And that's when he sealed his legacy. His stature in China's is equal to Mo Yan, it's equal to anybody. I think it's above Mo Yan, in my opinion, but he hasn't really been translated as much as Mo Yan, not even close. Until 2016, when Howard Goldblatt translated *Ruined City*, there was only one novel, translated in 1988 called *Turbulence*. So, for all that time, 20 years, you couldn't read Jia Pingwa. Now there's been a flood of books. There's *The Lantern Bearer*, came out in 2017, translated by Carlos Rojas, there was *Happy Dreams*, as I said, *Broken Wings* is another novel that Nicky Harman has translated. There's *The Mountain Whisperer*, which was put out by Sinoist. Sinoist has just put out his latest novel, which is called *The Sojourn Teashop*, and we have a book that I did with Nicky, coming next year. So, there's now a big opportunity to read him in English and catch up with what's been going on for the last three decades in China.

Emily Jones

Nick, did you want to say anything about Jia Pingwa at this stage?

Nick Stember

I did want to say that the first time that I came across Jia Pingwa coincidentally enough was on *Paper Republic*, and it was a post that Dylan had written. So, Dylan had written I think this is back in maybe 2008. Dylan had written something about how much he loved - I don't think it was *Fei Du* - I think it might have been *Qing Qiang* [*The Shaanxi Opera*]. And I remember very clearly, you said that the 'cod classical' ... I didn't know what the word 'cod' meant in that context. I looked it up and that was my introduction to Jia Pingwa was from Dylan and I got involved with Jia Pingwa, more personally in 2016, around the same time that the Goldblatt translation of *Fei Du* came out because Jia Pingwa was interested in trying to get more people interested in his work. And so he asked me to help him promote some of his work. So I helped set up a website, which I can share, called [Ugly Stone](#). And so there's more information about Jia Pingwa's background and some of the translations. I think it needs to be updated; some of the translations that Dylan mentioned aren't on there yet, so I need to add those. But I think, I mean that the thing that really struck me about Jia Pingwa, I remember one of the times that I met him, he said he likes to tell lots of stories, as many Chinese writers do, but Jia Pingwa is especially known for his storytelling. And I remember he told a story about ... he went to an event - and for people who don't aren't familiar with Jia Pingwa he speaks with a very thick kind of Shaanxi accent, right? So, there's this very thick accent - they're famous for it. He doesn't try to make himself more intelligible to people who don't speak that dialect of Chinese. And somebody said to him at the end of the event said, '张老师, 请讲普通话 (Zhāng lǎoshī, qǐng jiǎng pǔtōnghuà), sounds like, 'Jia should please speak standard Mandarin', speak, literally, normal Mandarin, normal Chinese, normal speech. And Jia Pingwa says, '只有普通的人会讲普通话 (zhǐyǒu pǔtōng de rén huì jiǎng pǔtōnghuà)'. So: 'only normal people speak normal Chinese', which I always think is just the classic kind of Jia Pingwa riposte, right.

He's a writer I think that sometimes gets misunderstood as being, you know, this kind of a Chinese writer who's really authentically from Shaanxi, but I think, as Dylan was kind of alluding to, a lot of his works really deal with this contrast in the city and the countryside. And I think one of the things that's always important to remember about Jia Pingwa is that he really is from the countryside and he thinks himself in the countryside. And I think kind of there's a lot of pain and kind of alienation at the heart of a lot of his stories. So I think that it's something that even if we think about him within a Chinese context, there are readers who are from the countryside themselves who often find Jia Pingwa a writer that they really identify a lot with, and they find that his stories really speak to them, and their own experiences over the last, you know, 30 years of 改革开放 (gǎigé kāifàng - economic reform). But I think this story in particular - as Nicky will be probably telling us very shortly - has a lot to say about the 1980s and 1990s, and even into the 2000s, up to the present.

Emily Jones

Thank you, it's fantastic to have you both here today and speaking with such enthusiasm about your enjoyment of Jia Pingwa's writing, I'm going to hand over to Nicky, who's going to just introduce the story that we shared in advance of this session, and which she translated.

Nicky Harman

Thank you very much, Emily. Thank you, everyone. I'm very enthusiastic about this story, but I can't say that I chose it. In a sense, it chose me. In 2012, 2013, there was a translation competition run in China, or from China, where anyone who wanted to try out a translation could choose from a list of authors and their list of stories. And they could translate into a number of different languages. So, it was a truly international competition. Anyway, I saw there was a Jia Pingwa story, and this was it. It did happen to be absolutely the longest one of any of the stories on offer, but I was determined to do it. And me and *Backflow River*, we won. We won that part of the competition, the Chinese to English bit, which was wonderful and a great accolade. And I've always been very pleased with that. But when I was actually translating the story, it was different things that engaged me. It's an incredibly vivid account through the eyes of the kinds of people who lived it, of the 80s and 90s in this area of China, how they received the reforms, how they took advantage of them. It's actually the rise and fall of a particular couple and I was particularly attracted by Shun Shun, the woman of the couple. And I think, whatever some people say, I think that Jia Pingwa is actually very good on female characters. And Shun Shun is a very complex character and it's really worth reading her in this story very carefully. What they do is, they're in a coal mining area. They gradually, through a lot of hard work, they start by selling coal and they buy coal mines, then they become extremely rich, then everything goes belly-up. And they end up losing everything that they had. The man goes off to have his cancer treatment in town, Shun Shun stays in the countryside. But although they're parted, she doesn't forget him. And all sorts of interesting things happen to her. And of course, there's the thread of the story, which is the fertility of the countryside around them, and her infertility, and how she deals with it. So, I really like it. I really hope that people have picked up on that in reading the story and we could perhaps talk a bit about that today. There are lots of other interesting characters, as well. Each one painted incredibly meticulously, and they're - some of them - very funny, but it's Shun Shun I particularly liked. Okay.

Emily Jones

Thank you, Nicky. Well, we're going to stop talking and hopefully hear some reflections or questions from everybody on the call today. When you signed up, we put some questions on the Eventbrite page, which I've just shared here. And I'll just recap on them briefly. That's not to say that we're going to quiz you on each of them in turn, they are thought starters prompts for discussion. But it'd be really interesting to hear your thoughts on these questions or on any other topics.

So the first one is around *Backflow River* and how it's the story of that opening up and development of the economy and society in China, a rags-to-riches and then back to rags again story, as Nicky was saying. Are there any small details that stand out to you in particular.

Shun Shun - and Nikki has spoken about this already - so how important do you think she is? How we read and engage with the story, what would it be like, as a story if she weren't there?

And then thirdly, that story, subplot, around Shun Shun's infertility, and how that develops over the course of the story and how - again, picking up on what Nicky said - did you pick up on that as you were reading it? Did you follow the references? And do you understand what she did for her husband? So those are some questions there. I'm sure you may have other

thoughts to add to these, feel free to come off mute and ask the questions or pop them in the chat.

Dylan Levi King

I would love to share one thing that I noticed. If you read Jia Pingwa enough, you start to notice places where he repeats himself. In almost all of his novels and all of the stories he'll return again and again to these ... like the mole, the mole on the penis of Liben. Moles on the genitals appear in *Ruined City*, there's a mole on the labia of Tang Wan'er in that book. That is also in a book called *Remembering Wolves*, it appears again. The part about ... this is all sort of a theme unfortunately ... but the donkeys' penis being cut up for a meal. That donkey penis meat or Tiantian row appears in countless Jia Pingwa's stories. Even the idea of the river flowing backwards.

Nick Stember

I'd say also the fly is another leitmotif that appears in other stories. There's a great [essay by Carlos Rojas about the flies' eyes](#) in Jia Pingwa's stories.

Dylan Levi King

Yeah, that's a really wonderful piece to seek out. Carlos Rojas, I think is not a very good translator, but just he's a brilliant academic writer and reader. That 'Flies' Eyes' is a beautiful piece of academic writing. But also the river flowing backwards. appears in *The Mountain Whisperer* or *Lao Sheng* (老生). That's another motif that appears there.

Emily Jones

Thank you, Dylan. In the chat, some people are talking about having read them, some in Chinese and in English, some in just the translation. It'd be interesting to hear if anyone's happy to put some thoughts in the chat or to come off mute to tell us whether you enjoyed story.

KAN Qian

Emily, can I just read out an email actually sent to me by Dr Yip who used to teach translation at Leeds University. He couldn't attend today so he sent me some of his reflections and he wants me to read them out for him. So, he says:

To my mind, the beauty and worthiness of the story lies in its honest and truthful documentation of people's private, social, and political lives in that particular historical period. Getting rich was suddenly the dream and pursuit of most people in those days, when the country opened up, and private enterprises simply sprang up: the spirit of the times, as it were. This story, Backflow River, is almost a true rather than fictitious story. It reflects the ways of the society at that time. The nouveau riche sought political security by bribing and rubbing shoulders with politicians. They sought social support through sponsoring or making donations to schools and

educational institutions. Superstition was no longer taboo and was tolerated and increasing in people's thinking or practice. Sex too turned into a commodity, which could now be more openly talked about and privately transacted.

So I'm just reading a bit of his email. I will let other people speak or come back a bit later.

Emily Jones

Thank you. I like that point about how it reads almost a true story. It does feel very genuine.

Nick Stember

When I was reading the story, I was thinking a lot about Yu Hua, I was thinking about 兄弟 xiōngdì and the story of the 李光头 Lǐ Guāngtóu right, and 宋刚 Sòng Gāng, so there's kind of these two brothers who have or stepbrothers who have very different experiences of the reform and opening that we kind of have a similar device in this story, right? So we have Laoben and Liben. Right, so Liben being like, 'Raising Capital', it's like literally his name, right? Laoben, is missing all of these opportunities, right? He's just focused on his ferry and kind of not really looking for the opportunity to do anything else. And then eventually, the society passes him by, which seems like a very nice kind of tie-in with the metaphor of this variable flow, right, that the river is flowing, or society is flowing, forward for some people, but for other people, it's kind of moving backwards, they're going back into poverty and that things are getting much worse, maybe for some of the people in the countryside especially that they don't have as good a situation as they had even during maybe the Cultural Revolution.

Dylan Levi King

Right, this is a type of story that nearly every modern Chinese writer does. It's the story of reform and opening to present basically. It's something that Jia Pingwa doesn't do so often. So, it's interesting to see what he brings to it. This sort of 'from rags-to-riches-to-rags-again', story, almost functions, like I said, like a legend for Chinese writers, various Chinese writers to tackle. It's interesting to see how he does it.

Emily Jones

Do you think, Dylan, that he does it differently? That he has a different slant on it.

Dylan Levi King

Yeah, I think it's realistic, and it's true and whatnot. But I think there's very clearly other things going on, which is, you know, tagged right away by the river flowing backwards. The idea that there's something wrong, there's something unhealthy, unsettled in the countryside, which I mean, it's connected to, perhaps to the infertility of our main character here as well.

Nick Stember

I was thinking too how Laoben it's so he's so associated with the river, right? That his character, and the whole thing about how his son, Song Yu, right was after the fish jumped into the boat. So, his son is somehow of the river in the same way as Laoben, which reminded me a lot of ... there's a story I think, probably very familiar with this Momotarō, the 太郎 *Tailang* is the Japanese story about the boy who comes from the peach. But in China, there was a story that was even more famous called 玉童 *Yutong*, about a little boy who comes from a 莲花 *liánhuā* from a lotus flower. A fisherman finds him, and then it into different things about it. It's kind of a myth from northern China that Jia might have been riffing on a little bit in this story.

Emily Jones

Nicky, when you did the competition, had you read the story before? Was it completely new to you?

Nicky Harman

No, it was totally new to me.

Emily Jones

What did you think when you first read it?

Nicky Harman

I thought, oh, my God, I cannot envisage this geography. I just found it incredibly ... it's very important to have an image in your mind of what the countryside looks like, you know, the arid land, not just the coal mines, but the gullies and, and the cliffs and so on. When this works, it comes out in the translation as something kind of smooth and effortless. I hope that it has come up as smooth and effortless, but it was extremely effortful because I hadn't been to that area. I spent an awful lot of time looking on YouTube, for geography videos about what that area might actually look like, how they were walking, how the mules were being driven to and from the villages laden with coal and so on. And of course, the colloquialisms, the dialect, that was all quite difficult. So that was my first feeling, but once I'd waded through the difficulties then I was very taken with the characters. At least some of the characters. I've spoken about the woman Shun Shun. I think not all the characters are equally engaging. Some of them do come across a slightly 'documentary'. It's a real-life tale of real-life people. But some of them I think, are emotional, or a few are really emotionally engaging, which is, as it should be with fiction. He's not writing a work of sociology, or geography. He's writing a story of people, people's hearts, their feelings, how they lived through those experiences. So, I became very engaged with it. Once I got over the difficulties of understanding. After all, it was a long time ago, I hadn't done very much, I hadn't read very much by Jia Pingwa and I hadn't translated very much at that point. So, I found it quite challenging at the beginning.

Emily Jones

Sounds worth the effort? There's a comment in the chat in response to the question around what she does for her husband, and perhaps I'll just read it out and see if people agree with it. So:

Shun Shun, is an ideal wife, the ideal traditional Chinese woman, humble, obedient, and the fact that she sends Anran to take care of her husband is what an infertile wife will, should do for their husband. So, find a younger woman for their husband, while maintaining their marriage.

KAN Qian

I find it quite interesting she gave that woman the name Anran because that's the name she wanted to give to their future daughter, if they were going to have a child. So that showed she was a very emotional woman, with a lot of dreams to have a child. It's quite sad that she's infertile.

Nicky Harman

I've read this story or given this story to other people in England, in Britain, before and I found that they didn't really pick up on what Shun Shun was doing. It may be very traditional, but it's not immediately obvious to someone who doesn't come from that tradition. Why is she sending this young woman? Why is it very important to her? And I think it's quite subtle. And I think that the references to the infertility of the flowers is also quite subtle. But for anyone Chinese, it's probably extremely obvious. And possibly from the point of view of a translator, I could have - if I had translated this immediately for publication, which I didn't, because I translated it for a competition - I might have wanted to put in something about that in a translator's afterword. But on the other hand, you don't want to give too much information because you want people to pick it up on their own. It's hard to get the balance. You don't want to spoil the plot. You want the words to speak for themselves. But you don't want to go completely over readers heads either.

Nick Stember

So there's also that bit at the end about the hen's eggs. That's obviously also referring back to this fertility thing.

Kan Qian

There's a question Nicky for you in the chat.

Nicky Harman

Yes, that was the one I was reading. Just now. 'Culturally loaded words'.

KAN Qian

I mean, for example, I saw you, you didn't translate 'kang' you just put the Pinyin there, you know, the hard bed in Shaanxi Province. Was that a conscious decision?

Nicky Harman

Yes, it was a conscious decision there. And the same would be true of 'Guanyin' or as sometimes spelt with a 'k', 'Kuanyin'. But I would spell it 'Guanyin'. There are certain words which readers are more or less familiar with now. And readers do learn, readers have been reading stories translated from Chinese for many years, and not everyone will necessarily know exactly how a 'kang' is made. But they know that it's pretty easy to go and look it up if they want to know more details. It's obvious from the story that it's a bed. But the business about heating from underneath, okay, maybe they wouldn't get that, maybe they would roughly you know that. And sometimes, if you put in too many glosses and add too many details, it distracts from the main thrust of the story. 'Guanyin', I could have translated as 'Bodhisattva', but then you're translating a foreign word with a foreign word so I think I would rather just leave it as Guanyin. You know, anyone who's been on websites where they sell antiquities from China will have seen Guanyin. So people ... there's an awful lot that readers roughly know what it means. And then there are other practices like 刮痧 guasha, which actually is quite difficult. And then you're left with a decision: do I put in a gloss? You're not allowed to put in footnotes, footnotes are an anathema to all editors. If it's really important, you could put it in the translator's afterword or foreword. So, there are all sorts of different ways of dealing with the culturally-loaded expressions, we shouldn't ever underestimate the reader. Readers actually do know, have picked up quite a lot.

Nick Stember

I was gonna ask you Nicky, what's your feeling about when you translate the names of characters? Because I think sometimes that falls in that same category where it's ... I always find it really helpful when I read a story in Chinese, after reading a translation, to know what the characters' names are in Chinese because I think it hints at certain things, like the Liben thing. And I was also thinking Shun Shun, maybe you could translate her name. The literal meaning of her name is 'easy come easy go'; she made a bunch of money, and then she kind of loses her husband, right. So...

Nicky Harman

I think 10 years ago, I wasn't as brave as I am now and I was slightly affected by the fact that I was doing it for a competition. I knew that feelings run very high about translating names. I did translate 'Dumbo', because I thought it was such an easy one to translate. But in 'Shaanxi Opera', in 'Qin Qiang', there are something like over 100 characters, and we translated every single one. We had a lot of fun translating them. And the thing is Jia Pingwa actually gives the names to his characters and he has been quite open about this: they have a meaning for him, they're part of the imagery of the story. He doesn't just randomly choose names, he chooses names, which have a meaning for him. So that kind of justified us in what we did

with 'Shaanxi Opera'. Also, we thought with a story which had so many characters, none of the readers would have a clue who was who unless we translated them, or as this story only has a few important characters.

Nick Stember

Yeah, I was thinking a lot about ... because there's a translation of *Jin Ping Mei*, by David Todd Roy, where he actually ... because *Jin Ping Mei* is the same thing. It's also one of Jia Pingwa's favourite books, probably for obvious reasons. But he does the same thing where he translates ... you have all these names that are supposed to be jokey kind of homophones and puns or whatever and he uses the name in Chinese, so put it in Pinyin. But the first time he uses it, put in quotations what the name means. So, if he was using this, he would say 'Liben' and then say, 'Raving Capital' in quotations, or use it like as a nickname. So work it into the story a little bit.

Nicky Harman

Yeah, I would probably do something like that, if I was translating it now. And there are lots of different ways of glossing. Or you can say so and so referred to X and use the Pinyin, and indicate that they know the meaning of the name. There are different ways of getting around it, so long as you don't interrupt the flow of the story, I think, ultimately, a piece of literature is a piece of literature and you should try hard to keep the flow.

Emily Jones

There's another comment in the chat picking up on ... going back to the questions around Shun Shun, and how she deals with her infertility and an interesting comment now, before we'd been sort of suggesting that she sends Anran to her husband for her husband's sake, and the comment is perhaps suggesting that maybe she did it for herself as well, which, I guess, speaks to the fact that the story can be read in different ways. And because Jia Pingwa is not spelling everything out for people, it's allowing you to think about people, characters' motivations and decide for yourself.

Nicky Harman

I do really like this character of Shun Shun, and every time I read the story I get some new insight, something that I - even though I translated it - I may have missed it first time around. So, I think it's very, very subtle.

KAN Qian

Can I ask something? In the Chinese language, there are lots of sentences without subjects, you know, which makes it ... it must be so difficult for translators. You have to work out from the context whether it refers to her or her husband, or they. So one place - I was reading the story last night, and I read your translation as well - is when this other woman was asking Shun Shun about her husband not coming home to sleep. Why is he not coming back? Yeah.

And then she said: 这么大年纪了, 还想那事? hème dà niánjile, hái xiǎng nà shì . And then, later, straight after that, she sort of said to herself, 'why is this woman asking me this question?' And Nicky translated that as 'he is too old to be asking for it'. So, Nicky translated it as referring to her husband: he's too old to be asking for it, he hasn't asked for it in ages. And I thought that referred to a general question referring to 'we are all getting old', you know, at our age, we are not thinking about that. But then the second half, I really think she's talking about herself: 'I have never asked for it'. Because previously in the story, she was always a bit reluctant. But Dr Yip, thought even the first half should be 'he is too old to be thinking about it'. Because he feels that otherwise, what follows doesn't make sense. Doctor Yip thinks that she refers to herself: 'I am too old to be thinking about it. I've never asked for it'. Otherwise, the second part about her trying to defend her husband a bit. laughing it off, wouldn't make sense. So, I just wanted to say that translating all those sentences without subjects, do you find that difficult? Trying to figure it out?

Nicky Harman

Yes, that was because - you were kind enough to forewarn me of the comment you were going to make - the rhythm of the spoken language in this story is difficult to me. I mean, it is local country people. And looking at what I've written in the English, or looking at it again, after you emailed me, I thought, yeah, of course, it can't be the way I translated it, because then we have the additional sentence: 'But men and women are different, said the woman and Shun Shun wondered why she was bringing it up'. I mean, it's difficult to get into the minutiae when people are only reading their copy of the translation and listening. It is really difficult. And it's part of the challenge of translating dialect. If you think about being with those people in a room, quite apart from the fact that you might find that accent really difficult to understand, as I do actually find Jia Pingwa - well, when he was talking, quite difficult to understand - but on the other hand, if you're in the room, listening to people having that conversation, it would be much easier to figure out who is referring to who, because you'll have all the other clues that come with conversation: body language, who's looking at who as they're speaking, and so on. When you've just got the word on the page, it really can be quite difficult. This book, sorry this story, was published in a bilingual edition in China and there was an editor who went through it quite carefully. She didn't pick it up, so that's a pity, because editors are there for a good reason. If you have a good editor, that's exactly the kind of thing they can say: 'Hang on a moment, that doesn't quite logically follow. Are you sure you mean that?' But yeah, so, thank you, for making that comment, it is really interesting, because it brings up a whole load of issues about translating dialogue, about how the editor can pick up slight confusions, and, and so on.

KAN Qian

Thank you, thank you, Nicky. Also, I guess, for us language teachers, you know, it makes us much more aware of teaching this sort of language structure, sentences without subject. Thank you.

Nick Stember

I was gonna say that I was teaching translation for the first time last year and I originally started doing the kind of the standard thing where you just had people come to class and they read a sentence and then translate it. But I found that that wasn't very productive, because many students now have Pieco. And so they can just have it on their phone and they can translate as they go. So, what I found was much more effective was to pre-translate, to give them a set text and say: 'Okay, come to class, and tell me what you had trouble with for this passage', you know, 400 characters or something like that. And I would translate it myself ahead of time so I would also have some thoughts I could share. But the thing that was embarrassing about that is that I'd, share it with the students and once you've translated something, it's really hard to see it a different way. So, you translate it, you think, 'Oh, this is what it means' and then you're talking about it with the students or whoever and they say: 'Oh, doesn't this actually mean something different?' And you realise, maybe in the moment, that it does mean something different. So, it's quite embarrassing sometimes, because you're working with students, you want to be able to be very kind of all-knowing and say: 'Oh, I know what this means', but actually, sometimes you get that kind of question where Google will suggest something that actually makes much more sense as a reading. But I don't think it's just Chinese. I think that happens when we read in English too; that people will just misread things and then assume that you understand what the author is saying. And somebody else points out that you're wrong.

Nicky Harman

Well, while Xiaomi has asked - actually, it looks like it's just a message to me, but I'm going to share it anyway - can I share what I like about Shun Shun. I suppose it's not exactly what I like about Shun Shun, it's about what I like about the way Jia Pingwa describes her. I like the subtlety. I like the numerous different clues. I love the funny bits, about the fact that she can't wear high heels. I totally sympathise. So, I love the details that he's picked up. It's not particularly liking her as a person: if I met her, I might not like her as a person, it's... I love the way he describes the subtleties, the ins-and-outs of her character.

And there's another question from Hannah Shu: 'main strategies when translating culture-specific items'. I think we all ought to have a go at that. I've said something about it and I think my main message is, there are numerous different ways of translating, or not translating culture-specific items. You can actually leave it in Pinyin, if you think the audience will understand it. Would any of the other translators like to say something about culture-specific items?

Dylan Levi King

I think it depends on the kind of work, for definitely this one in particular. To some extent, he's also doing anthropology. In his work, he's recording things that that will be unfamiliar not only to a foreign reader, but to somebody who lives 300 kilometres to the east. Many of the things he's describing wouldn't sound good if they were translated, like various local foods or religious practices, or terms in local opera, things like that. Of course, editors don't always agree with this approach - that's the big problem - that is to leave it in Pinyin and then slide in a little explanation. Of course, as Nicky said, if I added footnotes the book we just translated 'Shaanxi Opera' would be twice as long because it would have footnotes

explaining every single cultural reference. But those are forbidden nowadays. Of course, with a more modern work, you know, if you're translating like a post 80s writer who's describing Shanghai, their life there, the culturally specific items are fewer, and they're easier to find some equivalent for. But I think with Jia Pingwa, it's really nice to leave those things, so that they serve the same purpose in the translation that they do in the original text.

Nick Stember

I think there's some situations where doing a more domesticising translation can be really helpful, or at least really fun. I was thinking about this particularly in the story 钱钱肉 qián qián ròu. I think I've translated in the past as like 'coin meat' or something or 'coined beef', because it's supposed to be the chin is supposed to look like a coin, right? Because you slice the donkey penis and it's hollow, like a coin with a hollow in the middle. So, there's definitely a visual joke there, in general. But then I think also, if you're using it over and over again, you know, then 钱钱肉 qián qián ròu , 钱钱肉 qián qián ròu every single time you have to say 'coined beef' or 'coined meat'. I think it gets very confusing and 啰嗦 luō suo (nagging), I have to use that over and over again. So, I think glosses are fun, but they're not as useful sometimes if you have to use a word a lot. But yeah, I think it's tricky. I was also thinking ... because sometimes the other issue we run into when you try to domesticise too much ... that it also kind of goes the other direction where you become almost orientalising. I was translating a poem the other day and it was something about 四海 sì hǎi, and I just kind of impulsively translated it as 'the four seas' but somebody's like, 'why don't you just say, 'all around the world or 'all around', right? Because that's a much more literal meaning of 四海 sì hǎi . Nobody reads the high in Chinese and thinks 'the four seas right'? So

Nicky Herman

I mean, that's what I love about translation. There are so many different approaches to it, and you might do it one way one year and then if you translate it again, decide on a different solution.

David Levi King

Our solution for the '钱钱肉 qián qián ròu' was 'donkey medallions', after the first mention where he describes he sent somebody to look at the best donkey penises and they pulled them out of the freezer. So you know what we're talking about and then it's 'donkey medallions'. I think it's quite good. I'm sure Nicky came up with that where there's medallions of meat, but also it sounds like 钱 qián.

Nicky Harman

Yeah. I'd forgotten that we had it again. Yeah, no, I like 'donkey medallions'.

Emily Jones

I'm just curious, because I know we've got a few superfans in the room with Nick and Dylan and I wonder what your favourite Jia Pingwa novels, story is. Might just be interesting to hear that from you guys before we close.

Nicky Harman

I loved *Happy Dreams*, Gaoxing (高兴), I just loved it. I thought anyone can empathise with the plight of migrant workers. And it was nice and contained and not too culturally specific, I thought very engaging and appealing.

Dylan Levi King

Well, my favourite translation into English would be *Happy Dreams* as well. I think it's a book that's really suited for translation. With the language that it uses and the context of trash collectors in Xi'an, it's very suited for a snappy modern translation. I think that's the best translation. In second place would be *Broken Wings*, which is a translation of a book called *Ji Hua* (极花), which is about a young girl really, who was trafficked to the countryside and forced to marry a disabled man who lives in the village. That's probably the best book, that's a book that was controversial, as well when it came out in the original and I think Nicky did a really good job with it. Very difficult language. Very tough language in that book, and I think she did a very sensitive, wonderful job with it. Some of my favourite Jia Pingwa books haven't and probably never will be translated just because they're too old or they're not particularly interesting to the people who are picking his books. The books that came out after *Ruined City* are really interesting. There's a book called *White Knights*, [*Bai Ye* (白夜)], which is another urban novel that is centred around the story of a Buddhist parable of a young man who goes to hell to save his mother, and about a performance of that opera in the present. I really also love a book called *Remembering Wolves* [*Huainian Lang* (怀念狼)], which is sort of an autobiographical book about ageing and about the loss of vitality of people who move to the country - sorry, who move from the countryside to the city. Those are my favourites. And, as well, I love some of his early short stories. There's one I love called 人极 *rén jí*, like *Human Extremity*, which is a story from the late 1980s, which is also about fertility and about male-female relationships. Much of my favourite stuff will probably never be translated. Unfortunately,

KAN Qian

We only have a few minutes. Nick can you be quick, please?

Nick Stember

They're very quick. I also think that *Happy Dreams* is probably the best introduction to Jia Pingwa. It's an excellent book, excellent translation by Nicky. And the title I think is also brilliant to translate it as *Happy Dreams* because the Chinese is just *Gaoxing* (高兴), right, which is very weird to have a book called just 'happy' in English. But I think *Happy Dreams* is

a great, great choice. Personally, my personal favourite Jia Pingwa for a short story would be *Chou Shi* (丑石), Ugly Stone. It's a very short one. I have a translation that I put up on the Ugly Stone website, which is where I got the name from, that I can share in the chat. So thank you guys. This was great.

KAN Qian

Now, I just would like to thank Nicky, and Dylan, Nick and Emily. Thank you so much for a very interesting and just fascinating discussion. Nicky's translation, I must say, I was so impressed. It was just the choice of words and the tone of voice. It's apart from that one bit I kind of disagreed with. I think the whole piece was just excellent. Thank you so much.

So, our next club session will take place in July. We haven't fixed a date yet. And we're still deciding which story, but the details will be posted on Eventbrite. So if you follow the [OU Online Confucius Institute](#) and also on our event page of our website, we'll give all the details. And finally, if you want to join our mailing list, please email online-ci@open.ac.uk.

So I'll end the session and thank you again to everyone who came to this session and contributed in the chat. Thank you!

[End of transcript]