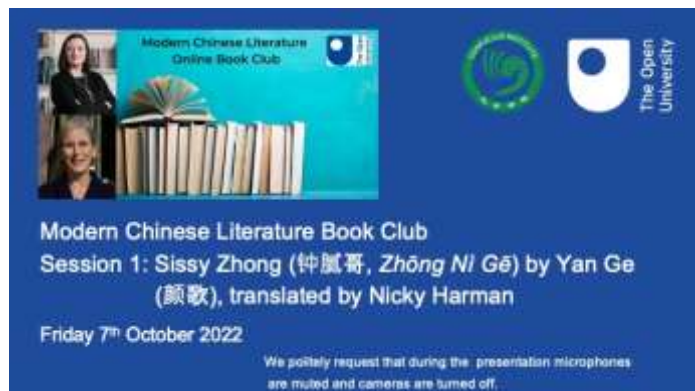


# Modern Chinese Literature Book Club – Session 1 ‘Sissy Zhong’ by Yan Ge, translated by Nicky Harman

Yan Ge 颜歌



[Source of Yan Ge photo: [TimeOut Shanghai](https://www.timeout.com/shanghai)]

**Organiser: Online Confucius Institute at The Open University**  
**7<sup>th</sup> October 2022**

## Facilitators:

- Emily Jones – Founder of *Paper Republic*
- Nicky Harman – Translator of *Sissy Zhong*

## Edited transcript

### Dr KAN Qian:

Good afternoon and good evening to those people in China, and there may be people in other parts of the world joining this session. Welcome!

I'm just going to do a very brief introduction to myself and our facilitators. My name is KAN Qian and I am the Director of the Online Confucius Institute at The Open University, and Head of Chinese in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. It's my pleasure to introduce Nicky Harman and Emily Jones. Today's session will be facilitated by both of them. Some of you may have already read their introduction on the *Eventbrite* page. Nicky is an experienced translator, over the years she has translated many Chinese novels and non-fiction works into English. She is also a trustee of *Paper Republic*, a non-profit publisher of modern Chinese literature. Emily will say a bit more about that. Like Nicky, Emily has also been translating a lot of novels and non-fiction works into English over the years. She is the founder of *Paper Republic*.

In today's session, firstly Emily will give a brief introduction to Paper Republic, and then Nicky will take over and introduce us to the author Yan Ge and the story *Sissy Zhong*. Now I am going to hand over to Emily first.

### Emily Jones:

Thank you, Qian. Hello everyone and thank you for joining us today, we are really looking forward to the conversation.

I am Emily from *Paper Republic* and I'll start the conversation by telling you a little bit more about us as well as about some of the authors we'll be talking about today and in future sessions. We are a charity now, we were founded many years ago, and before my time, in Beijing as a collective of translators, really, who got together and started talking about what's great in translation, what really needs to be translated, what could be translated better, and what we'd really like to see people reading more of in English. And although we have developed and changed over the years, we are a charity now, based in the UK, I think that's still very much true about what we are trying to do.

We want to get as many people as possible reading great books by contemporary writers, translated from Chinese into English.

I guess what we do can be summed in two parts: we work for readers and everybody out there, helping people find out what's there, what's new, what's good to read, what's crying out to be translated, and we also help translators. We're all about encouraging the very highest standard of literary translation. We do a lot of work in terms of mentoring new translators, offering practical guidance and opportunities to practise the craft. More about that in a minute.

One of the great things about our [website](#) is that we have a fantastic database on there with Chinese authors, a little bit of biographical information, a list of books they've written, which is quite easy to search through. You can search by the author's name, by the name of the book, or by the translator's name if you know that. Please do take a look and read through the information, and if you spot somebody who is missing just drop us an email and we'll happily add them to that. We've also got what we call [Read Paper Republic](#), which is a series of stories in translation which is completely free to view. That's a great resource if you are interested in any of the authors we are speaking about through these book club sessions, or indeed in finding out more about Chinese writing in translation. It's a good place to start.



We started *Read Paper Republic* as an experiment in about 2015 when we said, let's see if we can get one Chinese short story published every week for a year, completely free to view. We were absolutely astonished by the generosity of the authors and translators in giving up their time and their work and allowing us to publish it. Based on that success we have done a few different series since then. We've had some stories about singletons in China, such as [Bare Branches](#); we've had some literary non-fiction, some great essays about modern China, such as [A Fortuneteller in a Modern Metropolis](#), which is a great story about a fortune-teller in today's China which I do encourage you to have a look at. In 2020 we published a series of creative responses to the pandemic, which we called [Epidemic](#), and there are a number of stories and poems that are part of that series.

Another thing I wanted to tell you about was a '[give-it-a-go' online translation workshop](#) that we ran. We ran it to encourage people who perhaps hadn't done any translation before, or had but not for a while, to just give it a go, get involved. Altogether, about 150 people worked together to create a brilliant mass prose translation of a story called [Forty Days](#). Deng Anqing wrote it about spending time with his father in quarantine and the feelings and responses that engendered in him. It's fantastic, and as far as I'm aware it's the largest mass co-translation that has ever been done! We're very proud of it.

The other thing we have produced recently, and some of you may know about it, is our [guide to contemporary Chinese literature](#). This is a fantastic resource, including half a dozen essays about different facets of Chinese literature, topics such as women's writing, internet fiction, and it's got a deliberately not comprehensive biography of some of the writers who are writing in Chinese today: it gives a bit of biographical information, also some guidance on the books that are available in English as well. If you are interested in finding out who is working in the field of Chinese literature at the moment, we would say that's a great place to start. You can get a copy directly from us.

In a minutes, I'm going to hand over to Nicky Harman who will talk us through a little bit of an introduction to the author and her story that we will be discussing today, which, as you know, is Sissy Zhong by Yan Ge, and before I do hand over to Nicky I just wanted to say that next time we will be talking about Sanmao's story [Hitchhikers](#), which is featured in [Stories of the Sahara](#), translated by Mike Fu, and we hope that a lot of you will be able to [join us again on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November](#) for that.

If you want to find out more about us, you can sign up for our [newsletter](#) on our homepage. That goes out about once a month and has news about Chinese translation, any publications that have happened – it's a great place to find out what's been going on. You can [read the short stories](#) that I've mentioned, and please feel free to follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). I do know that times are very hard at the moment, but if you can, we are a charity and very much appreciate any [donations](#) that you feel able to give.

And now I am going to hand over to Nicky!

## Nicky Harman:

It's fantastic to be here today with so many of you talking about Yan Ge's writing. Just a few words about [Yan Ge](#), which inevitably are not going to be full enough – she has done so much in her life. To sum up briefly: she was born in 1984 in Szechuan, where she grew up. Her stories mostly focus on small town life, but there's much more to it than that. There are fantasy elements in a number of her stories, and her writing is full of acute comments on human relationships. I think she has a wonderful ear for the things that remain unsaid, as well as the way people actually talk to each other. I felt very lucky to have found this short short story. She describes it herself as a 'vignette' and it really is quite short and she never intended that it would be published and have the kind of profile that it has done. She prepared a number of vignettes for her novel [我们家](#) (Our Family), which has been published as [The Chilli Bean Paste Clan](#). I spotted this one and thought it was absolutely wonderful so some years ago I translated it. In terms of her language, Yan Ge is very interesting because she has aroused a lot of interest among Chinese critics with her use of dialect, and all of her writing contains colourful references, and *The Chilli Bean Paste Clan* certainly contains a lot of colourful rudeness, but this one not so much. *Sissy Zhong* is quite a quiet little story. I'd be interested to hear whether you think the writing and the style actually pins it down very much to being Sichuan or whether you think it could have taken place in any small town anywhere.

I actually discussed the translation of 'sissy' at length with Yan Ge, and looking back at my drafts, I originally translated it as 'softie', but I think, and we both agreed, 'sissy' was better. Because some of you haven't read the story, I'm going to give a very brief summary of what *Sissy Zhong* is about. The vignettes Yan Ge wrote in preparation for the novel – and *Sissy Zhong* in particular – focussed on certain characters in a fictional small town *Pingle* (平乐). *Sissy Zhong* is a boy growing up in the town. He's unusual because he's from a very tough martial arts family, but he is very effeminate, he's definitely an outsider. He gets mercilessly teased by the kids in the town. As he grows up, his father and mother kind of give up on him. He decides he wants to be a hairdresser. The narrator is a young girl, and it's as a hairdresser that she really gets to know him when she's having her hair cut and he's running his own little salon. The fact that she is a child, a child narrator, is quite significant in the story because exactly what kind of a boy, young man, *Sissy Zhong* is, is told through the eyes of a child. So it's never quite clear whether he's gay, transgender; he's clearly effeminate because that's the way she describes him, and he's also an outsider in the town. He has a friend, a young woman, and again it's never quite clear whether she's just an outsider from outside of the town, or whether she's an outsider because she's working as a prostitute. Since this is a girl talking and telling the story, it kind of doesn't matter and it certainly isn't stated. Anyway, as a result of the really intolerable bullying and teasing, *Sissy Zhong* commits suicide. The story ends with the parents, who are heart-broken, in particular the tough-guy father who is heart-broken, expressing his emotions in the only way he can.

I'm just going to finish off by saying that Yan Ge is a particularly interesting writer because she now occupies a significant place in Chinese contemporary literature, but she is now also making a name for herself in English language contemporary literature. She now lives in Norwich, where she has done a creative writing course in English in Norwich, and I believe she is now lecturing and has begun to write in English. She has a novel coming out in English, which she wrote in English, next year. So, she's not only prolific and varied, she's multi-talented and truly bilingual.

Anyway, back to *Sissy Zhong* and I hope we will have a very good and fruitful discussion about this short story.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

*[The discussion that took place afterwards was not recorded for data protection reasons. The discussion topics are below for your information:*

- 1. When did you become aware, as a reader, that there are undercurrents to this tale of an effeminate boy? What is left unsaid (eg the job of the girl in the salon, homosexuality, prostitution)?*
- 2. How important is it that this story is told through the eyes of a child? (This is a device that Yan Ge uses often)*
- 3. Consider how much local colour there is in this story – could it be another country, or any other small town? Does the local colour or lack of it make a difference to your appreciation of the story?*
- 4. Think about *Sissy Zhong's* father: do his feelings to his son change throughout the story and if so, how?]*

## The next book club session is taking place on:

- **Friday 18th November, 13.00-14.00**
- We will be discussing *Hitchhikers* by San Mao
- To register your interest, please visit the [Eventbrite page](#):
- To contact us email: [online-ci@open.ac.uk](mailto:online-ci@open.ac.uk)