

The Open University Online Confucius Institute Book Club Session 3

***'Who's speaking Please?'* by A Yi, translator Michelle Deeter**

***'A Message Held to the Flame'*, by A Yi, translator Dylan Levi King**

This is an edited transcript, with some changes made to the order of appearance of some items from those in the video recording to facilitate coherence.

KAN Qian

Welcome, everyone. This is the first public talk and event online this year, and just two days before the Chinese New Year. So, we'd like to wish everybody a very happy Chinese Year of the Rabbit.

Today is Session 3 of our Modern Chinese Literature book club. Today we're going to focus on two short pieces by A Yi, *Who's Speaking Please?* and *A Message Held to the Flame*. The former was translated by Michelle Deeter and the latter by Dylan Levi King. We're very honoured and also very pleased that both of them are joining us today.

I am KAN Qian, Director of the Online Confucius Institute at The Open University and I also am Head of Chinese in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. As I said, this session will be facilitated by Michelle, Dylan, Nicky and Emily. Welcome all. And thank you for being here today. So now I'm going to hand over to Emily.

Emily Jones

Thank you.

Thank you, everybody, for coming in today and welcome. I think some of you may have joined our previous sessions so please bear with me, while I introduce *Paper Republic* for the benefit of those people who might be new to our book club sessions.

We are a charity really focused on Chinese literature in translation: helping people discover it, read more of it, and find out what we all think is so wonderful about Chinese literature. We are focused on new writing from contemporary writers, and as I said, for readers, we're all about making sure that you know what's out there, what's new, what's good to read. We also work with translators, which is all about helping encouraging the highest standards of literary translation. We do a lot of education and mentoring guidance I thought you would be interested in if you have time to have a look at our website.

Some of the stories that we have been sharing through these book club sessions can be found on our website in the [Read Paper Republic](#) section. In there are a wealth of stories that we have collected, commissioned, and been fortunate enough to have been gifted over many years now. It's a real treasure trove. If you're interested in finding out about an author, but you don't really want to commit to a full-length novel, do go and have a look because the likelihood is that there might well be a short story by the author on the site. You can also find out about authors and translations and books through the [database](#) on our website. And if you are interested, we have also got a [Paper Republic Guide to](#)

[Contemporary Chinese Literature](#), which is available as a book also an e-copy, and you can buy that from our website. So ,there's lots of information out there on our website, about Chinese, authors about the stories and writings that they produce, and we are delighted to be featuring two of those stories today.

If you can - and I do know times are hard, but we as I said, we're a charity based in the UK - if you do have the opportunity to [donate](#) a little bit of money to us that we would really welcome. We put all of that money towards funding projects, such as this.

So that's a little bit of background about us, and I'm now going to hand over to Nicky, who's going to introduce our topic of conversation today.

Nicky Harman

Yes, thank you. I'm delighted to be with you all.

I think what I particularly admire about A Yi in his writing is how versatile he is; you have two very different pieces today, the first is almost a vignette of a short story, and then the other a thoughtful essay about the early days of COVID in China. I'd like to encourage you to go to the *Paper Republic* website, and have a look at our [directory of authors](#) where you can find many other short and long pieces that we've translated or that someone else has translated. A Yi has two novels out in English translation, [A Perfect Crime](#) (translated by Anna Holmwood, and published by [Oneworld](#) in 2016, and my own translation of [Wake Me Up At Nine In The Morning](#), also published by *Oneworld* very recently (2022). What brings these novels together is that they're crime based, without being crime novels - they're much more than crime novels and based on his rather gruesome and gory-sounding experience of being a police officer himself. I'd encourage you to explore both his long and his short fiction. Anyway, over to what we're going to look at today, and Michelle, and Dylan.

Michelle Deeter

So I'm going to go off the assumption that everyone has read *Who's Speaking, Please*. A Yi is, as Nicky said, a very versatile writer. I've met him in person, he's absolutely the sweetest person and so sometimes that feels like the exact opposite of some of his more violent stories. It's lovely to translate for someone who's just also a nice person. He's also very well read. So, the one thread that I see connecting Dylan's translation with mine is that there's a lot of references to other books, to a film that's not even a Chinese or an American film, it's Japanese. So sometimes he makes me feel like, gosh, I need to read more to be able to even keep up with him. And that's a feature in my piece, it's quoting a story that still works, is relevant. But it's interesting to have that third culture in there.

I think that's really all I'm going to say I'd rather hear more from you.

Emily Jones

So, over to Dylan now.

Dylan Levi King

Sure. Well, first, I'd like to thank *Paper Republic* and The Open University for inviting me to talk about this story.

In a way, it's a very straightforward piece, there's, there's really nothing that I can tell you, that you would not glean from it, at least on the on the surface. It's a description of the paranoid time at the beginning of the pandemic, this is written in early 2020. So, this is a time when everyone listening to this has their own experience of that time. It's a paranoid but it's an empathetic description. As Michelle says, one of the interesting features of the essay is the links out to other pieces of art. The first one is the film [Battle Royale](#) is a film starring Takeshi Kitano, about students trapped on an island being forced to fight to the death, and also a short story or a novella by Carson McCullers ([Ballad Of The Sad Café](#)), who's a writer from the United States, from Georgia, which is, is also a story of a paranoid community set against itself, to some extent. But that's all I'll say about that. It's a very straightforward piece that I'm sure all of us can relate to, and I'm sure will produce some interesting discussion.

Emily Jones

Thank you, Dylan.

Just in the interest of context, I'm just going to share with you the questions that we put on the *Eventbrite* link, really brilliant questions that Michelle and Dylan suggested as thought-starters and kick-starters, for our conversation today. I'll present both the questions and then we can start the conversation with *Who's Speaking, Please?*

The first question is around the emotions of the story. The man's emotions hit extremes in a short amount of time. And so he starts out by saying, this was the kind of eternal love that transcended history, war, science and technology. And then he says, the distance between them had never been so vast, and we wondered, do you find this realistic, and your thoughts about those emotions?

Michelle's answer

Even though the emotions change rapidly in a short period of time, I think it's believable that a person can go from elation to despair in a short period of time. Even if the reader has not been in the exact same situation before, they can probably still imagine what that would feel like. They might have had a similar experience. The translator needs to have empathy with the characters in the story, but doesn't need to have exactly the same experiences as the characters or the author of the text

Emily Jones

Secondly, some people argue that the best stories to bring into translation have an element of the universal and elements specific to their culture. Do you think that *Who's Speaking, Please?* achieves that? What are the universal elements, and what are those elements that are culturally specific to China? Then thirdly, what do you all think about translating swear words? Is it appropriate? How might you tackle that if you were a translator?

Michelle's answer

The emotions are universal. The city could be any city, since the only description is that it is near the sea. Finally, the relationship where one person is infatuated and the other person does not care as much is universal. The names are specific to Chinese culture, as are the flip-

flops by the bathroom. The fact that most of the elements in the story are universal means it is easy to understand and appreciate the story.

Emily Jones

Third question Is translating swear words appropriate in literature?

Michelle's answer

In most cases I would want to respect the source text. I would only make major changes with the agreement of the author and the publisher. So in this case, I have translated the swear words. Even though we can't be sure who the target audience is for this short story, I think we can assume that the target readers are over 18 and can handle swear words. If they don't like the swear words, they can stop reading.

If I was translating a short story for readers under 18, I might want to change the swear words, or ideally choose a different text to read.

Emily Jones

And then for *A Message Held To The Flame*. Two questions here. So firstly, A Yi cites as allegories for the pandemic, those two paranoid games: one [Werewolves](#), a social deduction game, and the other *Fight to the Death*, that Dylan described from *Battle Royale*. We wondered what games, works of art, films, television, culture evoke for you an atmosphere similar to what A Yi depicts?

Dylan's answer

Okay, so the first question I posed for the discussion was about pieces of art or films or television that evoke the same atmosphere as the period that A Yi is describing. You know, to some extent, I don't really have a have a good answer for the question and that's one reason why I've asked it. But thinking about it, the book that comes to mind, it's a sort of summing up of that early pandemic period that A Yi is describing is Don DeLillo's [White Noise](#), which has just been made into a movie, so it's getting a wider audience. And I think it's been made into a movie because it was such a popular book during the pandemic. But it's about an airborne toxic event. A train passing through town explodes releasing poisonous gas. It's about the paranoia, the fear that grips a small community after that event. I think one book that that IA Yi name-checks is Carson McCullers' *Ballad Of The Sad Café*. I think that's also a good answer here. It's a story that has nothing to do with pandemics or anything like that. It's about small -town paranoia gain. So those are two choices for me, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo. And, and Carson McCullers, *Ballad Of The Sad Café*.

Emily Jones

And then secondly, the essay itself was written very early in the pandemic, when it was really unclear how things might play out. And obviously over the last three years, we've seen no shortage of different takes and epidemiology, late night talk-show segments, lots of different versions and perspectives dealing with the pandemic. We haven't seen any serious literary treatments yet. Is it important that somebody produced the great novel of COVID? And could you bear to read it having lived through it?

Dylan's answer

The past three years, we've seen endless treatments of the pandemic. I mentioned here, talk-show segments and, you know, Twitter threads, and short stories even. But a very serious literary treatment of it has still not materialised. If it has, I'm not aware of it. So the answer might simply be, it already exists, and you just don't know about it. But the question is it important to produce the great novel of COVID-19 and would you like to read it? No, I think this event will be like many others, that direct treatments of it, of things we've lived through, are not particularly interesting. You know, there's no great novel about the events of September 11, but there are many novels that deal with that event, sometimes without even mentioning it. John Updike's last big novel was called [Terrorist](#), and it's his response to that in an 'Updikean' way. DeLillo has also tackled that area too. So, I think the pandemic will produce lots of great writing, and I think it's perhaps keeping so many writers locked down, and people away from their day jobs, and people working from home. I think it'll produce a great deal of literature that evokes the mood and the feeling and the emotions of that time without tackling them directly. There have already been a number of films about - I was just writing an article about Chinese filmic responses to the pandemic - there's been a number of feature films that deal very specifically with events in Wuhan or in China as a whole, and they're all very bad. They're all very bad movies. Much of that is down to the fact that it's a very unpleasant thing to watch that we've already lived through. I think they have value for future generations, perhaps; we can show our grandchildren those films and we can show our grandchildren the big thick book about COVID-19 that will inevitably come out. But I think they're quite tough if you've lived through them; not necessarily that there is some sort of traumatic feeling when watching, but it's just a bit dull if you've soaked up all that news coverage, and soaked up all the takes on it, and you've seen all the images before.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

FUTURE EVENTS

The next **book club session** will take place on 24th March 2023 and will feature a short story by Jia Pingwa.

Details will be posted on Eventbrite (if you follow the OU Online Confucius Institute) and the event page of the OU's Online Confucius Institute.

The next **public talk** is:

Food and wellbeing from the traditional Chinese medicine perspective

Fri 17 Feb 2023 at 13:00 | Eventbrite

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