Yeats in China and My Own Experiences of Sino-Irish Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

W. B. Yeats was first introduced to the Chinese reading public in the twenties last century, but had not been widely known in China until the eighties, when I myself began publishing my translation of his poems as a starting point of my career as a literary scholar. So far I have published the first and the only critical biography of Yeats written in Chinese and the first and the only Chinese version of the complete lyric poems of Yeats yet published, two new editions of which were later published respectively in Taiwan and mainland China. Some of my writings on and translations of Yeats have got into university and high school literary curricula. Besides, I have written on and translated other Irish poets such as James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice, Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Seamus Deane, Paul Durcan, Tom Paulin, Medbh McGukian, Paul Muldoon, Ian Duhig and Adrian Mathews. In the opposite direction of cultural import, sometimes I also do export work, teaching Irish people Chinese culture including T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

William Butler Yeats is one of the strange names I first met in the *Anthology of Foreign Modernist Literary Works* compiled by Yuan Ke-jia (figure 1) and others in 1981, when I was a first-year student of English at Peking University. The only seven poems of Yeats in Chinese included in that book are labeled "post-symbolist". As I felt, symbolism or post-symbolism was somehow a fashion in Chinese poetry writing at that time, at least on campuses in Beijing. So I began to read more Yeats in the original. At first, I could hardly understand any poem wholly and thoroughly, finding their diction odd and syntax crooked, frustrated even more by the difficulty of so many Celtic and occult allusions. In order to grasp what the poet really meant, I decided to appeal to translation, which I considered and still consider a way of close reading of close readings. By the time of my third year at university, I had already rendered nearly a hundred poems of Yeats into Chinese. Based on this rudimentary work, I also wrote an academic paper on Yeats and as the only undergraduate conferee delivered it at an academic conference before all the faculty of the Department of English.

During the summer vacation that year, I went to a publishing house in my hometown Xi'an and showed my manuscript of *Selected Poems of W. B. Yeats in Chinese* to the literary editors. They seemed to have never heard of the poet's name and rejected my proposal for publication outright. My interest in Yeats, nevertheless, did not fade away. A year later, under the instruction of Professor Yang Zhou-han I completed my highly graded BA thesis in English, which was entitled "Early Yeats: The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland".

In fact, Yeats was first introduced to the Chinese reading public as early as around the 1920's, with his name mistransliterated then as Xia Zhi. His play *The Hour-Glass* in Mao Dun's translation was published in *The Eastern Miscellany* (figure 2) in March 1920, accompanied by an introductory article by the translator on the so-called new Irish literature, namely, modern drama promoted by Yeats and others. His essay "An Enduring Heart" in Wang Tong-zhao's translation appeared in *Fiction Monthly* (figure 3) in January 1921 and four more pieces from *The Celtic Twilight* were to be rendered into Chinese by the same translator and published elsewhere in the following years. They are "Dreams That Have No Moral", "A Voice", "The Old Town" and "The Three O'Byrnes and the Evil Faeries". Wang also wrote some critical essays on Yeats' poetry and drama, claiming that he was a "great poet", "a new romantic". Not surprisingly, in 1923, when Yeats received the Nobel Prize for literature, he was boomingly publicized in the Chinese literary and academic worlds. After that, however, throughout the thirties and forties there were only sporadic translations of Yeats' early poems by different translators scattered in various literary magazines, though he began to enter university textbooks and curricula of English departments. Yuan Ke-jia's BA thesis "An Essay on W. B. Yeats" written in 1946 was probably the first academic paper on Yeats in English by a Chinese student.

During the first thirty-year reign of the communists, Yeats got little mention again in mainland China because politically he was considered reactionary, and only a book of Irish fairy and folk tales collected by Yeats was translated and published by the Children's Press in Shanghai in 1954 (figure 4), while some more Chinese versions of his poems emerged in Taiwan in the early eighties and after, most of their language looking rather awkward judged by the mainland standard even without taking account of their mistranslations. Among them, the most recent version by Yang Mu (figure 5) is especially unreadable. Small wonder that few readers on the mainland had heard of Yeats in the early eighties when Yuan Ke-jia resumed translating and writing on him persistently but slowly.

In 1985 for the first time, on Professor Li Fu-ning's recommendation, I had my translation of five poems of Yeats published in the journal *Foreign Literatures* (figure 6) and another five anthologized in *English Poems* (published in 1988) compiled by Wang Zuo-liang (figure 7). In 1986, Qiu Xiao-long brought out his first Chinese version of selected poems of Yeats in book form (figure 8) and a year later another more voluminous book printed by a different publisher. The latter entitled *Leda and*

the Swan (figure 9) as a volume in a Nobel laureate series sold very well and so quite influential among poetry lovers, but unfortunately, Qiu's translations are full of errors and misinterpretations. For example, he rendered the title of a poem "A Woman Homer sung" as "A female Homer sang" in Chinese, not aware that it is actually an allusion to Helen of Troy and a symbol of Maud Gonne. Since the market usually accommodated no similar things during a short period, I found it even more difficult at that time to get my translation published in book form, though from time to time scattered pieces of it kept appearing in various anthologies and magazines.

Not until 1993 when I had just returned home from a half-year stay in Cambridge, UK, did some publisher come to ask me to translate a book of the complete poems of Yeats, since all the currently existing ones were incomplete. At first they wished Professor Zhao Luo-rui could do the job, who recommended me instead, because she knew well my ability and sustained work on Yeats. I wondered if it was a miracle that the superstitious Yeats himself might believe, since I had just made a pilgrimage to Dublin and Yeats' tomb in Sligo (figure 10) shortly before leaving the UK for home. Apparently, it was Yeats' ghost that chose me as his translator, I would rather believe. The particular difficulty of this task lies in the fact that within a limited space of time I had to supplement my original selection with what had been left out no matter whether I liked them or not. Anyway, this opportunity must be grasped and as a result of persevering efforts, the first and only Chinese version of the complete lyric poems of Yeats yet published came out in 1994 (figure 11), only one third of which was somewhat satisfactory to the translator himself. Coincidentally and fortunately, I even helped the publisher get a financial support for the publication of the book from the newly established Ireland Literature Exchange in Dublin. It was reprinted in two years with a new cover design and the total print run amounted to over six thousand copies.

Since I specialize in poetry in general and now was considered something like an Irish literature expert in particular, when a publisher in Hebei planned to publish the oeuvre of James Joyce in Chinese, the editors invited me to translate his poems. Although I did not like Joyce as much as Yeats, nor did I think so highly of his poetry, I took the chance all the same in order to get more familiar with him. I finished translating all his verse in July 1995 and did not get it published in a single volume until 2002 (figure 12). It is the first and only Chinese version of the complete verse of James Joyce. Five years later, I was invited to deliver a speech at an international conference on Joyce, declaring that I had tried my best to introduce him to the Chinese readers though I did not fully appreciate him.

From August 1997 to August 1998, on a China Scholarship I was doing research at Trinity College, Dublin for my critical biography of W. B. Yeats in process. In my spare time, I enjoyed teaching some Irish friends T'ai Chi Ch'uan, a kind of traditional Chinese martial arts (figure 13). As they were surprised that I should be paid by our government to study Irish literature in Ireland so was I pleased that they were more

serious about and eager to learn traditional Chinese culture than most of my compatriots in China. To achieve a balance between export and import, I also learned a kind of western martial arts fencing at TCD fencing club. Eventually, I took part in a tournament of martial arts in Dublin, performing T'ai Chi Ch'uan and a national novice fencing championship in Kerry (figure 14). I even contributed two articles in English on traditional Chinese kong fu to *Irish Fighter*, a popular magazine of martial arts in Dublin (figure 15).

The 39th Yeats Summer School in Sligo provided me with another chance to visit Yeats Country and dip myself deeper into Irish cultural life. I stayed with a native family in Sligo Town for a week and felt quite at home. The organized activities included learning traditional Irish dancing in a neighbourhood pub besides reading and performing Yeats' poetry and drama and visiting places related to the author and his work. Standing on the void beach of Rosses Point (figure 17), I could not help visualizing the imaginary scene depicted in Yeats' early poem "The Stolen Child":

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;

That was a precise description of what we had experienced ourselves the other day. Some critic said that Yeats showed he himself was an adept fisher by these vivid lines in "The Fisherman": "And the down-turn of his twist / When the flies drop in the stream." So must he be also a good dancer, it seems reasonable to infer. All in all, Sligo is such a beautiful fairyland where no wonder Yeats had drawn endless inspiration. Once you were there, your previous impressions of the dreamlike images in Yeats' early poems would become clear and real objects, identifiable here and there. In a sense, Yeats is a realist as well as a romantic or symbolist.

While I was still in Ireland, a publisher from Taiwan came to find me in Dublin, expressing his wish to publish my translation of Yeats in Taiwan. As we know, simplified Chinese and original Chinese written systems are respectively used in mainland China and Taiwan and books usually need to be republished rather than directly imported from each other. So I selected about one-third from my complete Yeats and revised them carefully against the originals and then sent them to the Taiwanese. In 2000, I received some sample copies of an English-Chinese bilingual edition of selected poems of Yeats from Taiwan (figure 18). As far as I know, the book has been reprinted at least twice later even though there are already several other editions of Yeats' poetry in Chinese popular there. A year earlier, my critical biography of W. B. Yeats was published simultaneously in two slightly different

editions by two different publishers in Zhejiang and Sichuan (figure 19). It is the first critical monograph on Yeats in and by Chinese, being considered to have filled in a blank in the field of Irish studies in China. In 2003, a revised edition of my complete Yeats was published by Hebei Educational Press (figure 20). Once again, I had taken the chance to make as many improvements as possible to my translations. Two years later, however, a private publisher selected at random a handful of pieces from that edition and produced an English-Chinese bilingual edition of the so-called *Carefully Selected Poems of Yeats* (figure 21) but it does not represent me at my best. In the same series as my revised Yeats and published in the same year was also an anthology of 20th-century poetry from English speaking world (figure 22). Among the 394 poems by 128 poets from 18 countries, there are 73 poems by 16 poets from Ireland or of Irish origin, chosen and translated all by myself. Besides Yeats and Joyce, there are also Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice, Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Seamus Deane, Paul Durcan, Tom Paulin, Medbh McGukian, Paul Muldoon, Ian Duhig and Adrian Mathews included. I also contributed an article on Patrick Kavanagh to the newly published second edition of the *Encyclopedia Sinica* (2009) (figure 23).

Since the publication of my complete Yeats in 1994, there have been more and more Yeats' works translated into Chinese by various translators, professional and amateur, famous and obscure. Yuan Kejia's selection of Yeats' poems was at last published respectively by Chinese Workers' Press in 1995 and Taibai Letters and Art Press in 1997 (figure 24). The latter adopted some of my notes. His translations had been refined and polished for many years and so are qualitatively more reliable in comparison with most other products of the same kind. His style is vernacular and a bit loose in form. The Orient Press in Beijing put out in 1996 a three-volume collection of Yeats' works (figure 25) including poems, plays, essays, diaries, memoirs, letters, seemingly comprehensive but randomly chosen and badly translated. The Tri-Union Bookshop in Shanghai printed a collection of Yeats' essays in 1997 (figure 26). Although it is entitled *The Tree of Life* in Chinese, its contents are actually a random selection from two of Yeats' early books of essays *Ideas of Good and Evil* and *The Cutting of an Agate*. In 2005 and 2006, Shanghai Culture Press and Writers' Press in Beijing respectively republished Xi Meng's translation of Yeats' *A Vision* (figure 27), which was first published in 1990 by another publisher. It is a pity that he used the 1925 version instead of the revised edition of 1937. A complete translation of *The Celtic Twilight* was brought out by Jiangsu People's Press in 2007 (figure 28) and the translator acknowledged his indebtedness to my translation for the poetic paragraphs. Last year came out a translation of *The Secret Rose* (figure 29), of which I have not yet seen a copy, just wondering why the title was turned into Chinese as "the secret of rose". Besides the booming and repetitive introduction of Yeats' prose, there are still more (probably young) translators trying their hand at Yeats' poetry these days. I have come across in bookshops or learn of on the internet at least four Chinese versions of selected poems of Yeats, all in English-Chinese bilingual edition, published in recent years. Strangely all of them are entitled "Wei Jian Feng" (figure

30), a somewhat archaic Chinese rendition of the title *The Wind among the Reeds* I first invented in the early eighties and used in my published translation of Yeats poems in 1987 and my contributed article on Yeats to *A Dictionary of Nobel Prize for Literature* published by Dunhuang Letters and Art Press in 1993 (figure 31), and now I suspect that it might be a mistranslation. There are also more and more academic theses and scholarly articles on Yeats but strictly speaking, not very many of them have real or deep insights.

From the very beginning, I have been trying to combine literary study with translation, brooding on the ambition of studying systematically modern poetry in English with W. B. Yeats as the starting point. While I keep revising my translations, I have been also doing research and writing on Yeats in various aspects. Up to now, in addition to my critical biography of Yeats, I have published seven formal critical essays on him including "The Oriental Elements in W. B. Yeats' Poetry" (1996), "The Theatrical Experiments of W. B. Yeats" (1999), "W. B. Yeats' Symbolism" (1999), "W. B. Yeats' Esoteric Philosophy and its Relationship to his Creative Writing" (2000), "The Making of Private Myth: Intertextuality of W. B. Yeats' Work" (2005) and "The Christian Elements in W. B. Yeats' Work" (2008), and several pieces of interpretive writing on Yeats' poems in different journals, newspapers and reference books. I was twice invited to write the chapter on Yeats for college textbooks such as *The New Edition of a History of European Literature* (2001) (figure 32) and a piece of my criticism adopted in 2005 by a teacher's manual for the high school course of reading in foreign poetry and prose as the background information to Yeats' poem "When You Are Old" (figure 33). My study, in turn, has gradually deepened my understanding of Yeats and his works and helped me now and then clear away not a few errors in my translation. The most recent publication of my Yeatsian study is a bulky anthology (figure 34) published last year, containing various kinds of creative writing by Yeats, such as poems, plays, short stories, essays and autobiographies in Chinese. It is a result of the collaboration of five translators, among whom I am responsible for choosing the original texts and correcting all the translations and writing the introduction. Of course, I have revised my version of Yeats once more, though still not completely satisfactory.

My routine work as a research professor at the Institute of Foreign Literature, CASS is to do research and write on and translate literature in English. Occasionally, however, I am also invited to lecture or talk on Yeats at universities and academic conferences. Between 2004 and 2007, I was even appointed visiting professors respectively by the Irish Studies Centres of Jiangxi Normal University and Beijing Foreign Studies University, teaching a formal course on Yeatsian study to the graduate students of English at the former. This time, I just humbly sum up mainly what I have done so far, good or bad, to Irish literature and W. B. Yeats.

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