An *EAA* Interview with the 2018 Franklin R. Buchanan Prizewinner Aili Mu for *Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text*

This is our twenty-second consecutive interview with the recipient of the AAS Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. This year's winner is Aili Mu, who is the Editor and Translator for Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text *(Columbia University Press, 2017). The book presents Chinese short-short stories in English and Chinese, integrating language learning with cultural studies for intermediate to advanced learners of Mandarin Chinese and students of contemporary Chinese literature. Specifically designed for use in upper-level Chinese–language courses,* Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text *offers students a window into China today and pathways to its traditions and past as they gain language competence and critical cultural skills. A review of* Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text *appears on page 71.*

Mu is an Associate Professor of Chinese at Iowa State University. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from the State University of New York at Stony Brook (1996). She teaches courses on Chinese language, translation, Chinese cultural tradition, and China today. Her research focus is on Chinese short-short stories. She is currently working on a project that builds cultural literacy about Chinese civilization through the short-short genre.

Lucien Ellington: *Congratulations on winning the 2018 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize for* Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text. *Readers who are unfamiliar with the book should first focus on the term "parallel" since throughout the narrative, the left page is Chinese and the opposite page is English. You'll, of course, provide depth for this superficial introduction on my part. Please inform our readers about what motivated you to develop a parallel Chinese-language textbook and one that is intended for a broader audience than Chinese-language learners.*

Aili Mu: Thank you very much, Lucien. Allow me to start with my motivation for the book. The talk about integrating language and cultural learning had been going on for decades, but little was done to produce the necessary materials. Before *Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text,* language books were only peripherally concerned with culture, and cultural materials were largely uninterested in the improvement of language proficiency. As students' need for in-depth interaction with China increased in recent years, I felt compelled to do something. It was a task easier said than done. A person usually has native literacy in only one language and culture; the disciplinary divide of language and culture doesn't help produce expertise in both areas. My good luck came with the integration of research and teaching, wherein I discovered the potential of the parallel format.

My research focus is the Chinese short-short genre, and I teach Chinese language and translation. After we translated the stories in my translation class, I brought them to an advanced Chinese class, and the parallel format worked wonders. A quick example: A student had learned about China's "Great Cultural Revolution" in high school, but when the phrase appeared in Chinese in a story, she did not know what to make of it. All she did was move her gaze to the opposite side of the book and she got the answer she needed. The parallel format has inherent potential for student initiative/agency. It allows the book to tap into the existing repository of knowledge and proactively engages cross-references and self-learning. The design of the book provides additional convenience for instructors and guidance for students with such para-textual materials as theme essays, vocabulary/usage lists, discussion questions, and author bios. I hope the parallel format ushers in a new paradigm of integrated learning.

Originally, my "broader audience" had been the students of various disciplinary backgrounds at Iowa State University (ISU). Profound changes have taken place on US campuses. At ISU, more students from technical and STEM—agronomy, engineering, finance, biochemistry, design, space science, etc.—are learning Chinese language and culture because professionals in these fields are already having more everyday contacts with China. A basic cultural literacy in conjunction with appropriate language proficiency will benefit future professionals' interactions with China more than memorizing jargon in Chinese will do. Parallel texts' potential for self-learning in the quiet of student dorms, homes, or elsewhere serves the needs of those who are too busy to get a second major in Chinese. I think this original intent may have to do with the book's broad embrace today—to work for various courses and for people interested in contemporary China and Chinese writing.

For students and scholars of translation and critical studies, the parallel format presents a space of critical scrutiny. I want to quote these lines from the introduction of the book to encourage engagement with both the Chinese and English texts in parallel: "When students start to evaluate, they enter the rich polysemy and indeterminacy of words and meaning; when they do not treat our translation, or anybody's translation, as absolutely authoritative, but rather as a guide and opportunity to create their own meaning, poetry is probably in the making."

Lucien: *As a literature lover, I much enjoyed sampling the Chinese short-shorts genre. Please briefly elaborate upon this form of Chinese fiction and why, other than the modest length of each story, you decided to build your book upon the short-short genre.*

Aili: The average length of a short-short story is about 800 to 1,000 words in English, which makes it easily manageable in classrooms. Students also find the length appropriate as reading assignments or for such class activities as discussion, presentation, skit performance, etc. But the convenient length is indeed only one of the reasons for the book. Mostly written by nonprofessional authors from all walks of life, short-short stories from China offer authentic glimpses of contemporary life. For our educational purposes, as important as the access to contemporary China is the genre's ability to best convey Chinese culture and tradition in transformation. As much as grassroots writers have embraced transcultural non-Chinese in-

fluences, they do not write to represent truth or for the modernization of Chinese culture. With their material subsistence firmly grounded in their land, labor, and the aesthetic joy of work and writing, they manifest and continue the best of the Chinese cultural tradition.

The short length of the stories must be accompanied by the quality of reading experience to make them works of art. The latter is ensured by, among other things, another distinct property of the genre—surprise ending. The effect of the surprise may compound in the cross-cultural setting when our commonsense "Jack shall have Jill" expectation is confounded, when we are surprised that a deceitful woman in our perception turned out to be delightful in the Chinese view, or the principle of equal exchanges loses its value in a Chinese context. The desire to find out why is natural. When such desire motivates the search for the systems of differences and the reasons for the differences, the goal of crossing boundaries is achieved.

Lucien: *I was struck by your remark in the preface on your translation from Chinese to English: "the nature of the parallel format dictates that I must translate the texts more literally than literarily, staying as faithful to the original as possible." Could you elaborate upon your meaning here?*

Aili: A great question! Since a major goal of the book is to facilitate Chinese-language learning, I set myself a standard from the beginning—to minimize the difficulties of learning with as many easy cross-references as possible. I also used the standard as an alert device for myself, against imposing my own views through omission, addition, or embellishments. But in real life, there is no lexical equivalence between Chinese and English even at the level of the word, to say nothing of sentence, paragraph, or an entire work; no translation can be direct transference of a work from one language culture to another. So in the actual process of translation, it was the concerted effort of being literal and literary that made the translation in this volume work. I am most thankful to the first-round reviewers at Columbia University Press. They suggested that I build in a vocabulary list for every story. For Chinese expressions that I had to translate more "literarily" to make the English work, the vocabulary list resolves most of the confusions students may have. For example, neither "drill" nor "sergeant" appeared in the Chinese original, and the sentence was translated as "He has the air of a drill sergeant about him and a voice to match." Once students see the English explanation of the Chinese idiomatic expression in the vocabulary list, they usually get immediately where the phrase "drill sergeant" comes from; they would also have a great experience of creative translation and gain a better understanding of both cultures. At the sentence level, collaborative compromises happened more frequently. To break up, combine, or make changes according to the appropriate protocols of English had been common practice. Take, for example, this sentence in the first story: "we can't blame the kid for acting out." It was a rhetorical question in Chinese with the kid as the subject. The translation departs from the literal deliberately, to call attention to the "acting out" parts in the story and the differences in cultural habits and speech patterns.

Lucien*: I was quite interested too that you deliberately selected three types of writers: celebrity authors, literary professionals who work for government art and literature agencies as writers or editors, and ordinary people from all walks of life. Why this approach?*

Aili: I originally included only two groups of writers. The publisher insisted that at least one-third of the authors be established writers of international repute. Hence, ten of contemporary China's top echelon writers entered the picture. In addition to being frequent contributors to the genre, these writers also represent the genre at its most literary. Their inclusion upgrades the book and its visibility.

The second group is composed of literary professionals unique to contemporary China. They either hold offices in state institutions for art and literature or work as writers and editors for these institutions. I, therefore, named them "writing bureaucrats." Though little-known in the West, they are the pillars of China's large networks of cultural establishments. With ties to the tradition of the scholar-officials of Imperial China, both the institutions and the officials are exerting crucial influence on Chinese society and culture today. I hope that their work will generate enough interest to help start reflection on what we do not have and why when crossing over to different cultures.

The last third constitutes what I call "a cultural phenomenon." Countless nonprofessional writers from grass roots are actively publishing all over China. Hundreds and thousands of short-shorts are in print every year, in literary journals, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, government and office publications, house journals, instructional materials for students, etc., at the local, regional, and national levels. Though nationally known as short-short writers, they are ordinary people from all walks of life: a village leader, government officials, a migrant worker, a retired civil servant, a project manager, public security personnel, a handicapped daughter of a farmer, a business owner, a teacher, and an accountant. As they make their living in contemporary China in professions other than literature, they value writing as an essential part of life. This group is close to my heart because they choose to live for the aesthetic qualities of life; their fiction captures the fundamental sentiments of China today. I want to recommend them to the world because the normalcy of their lives and the insights in their writing underscore an alternative system of value that transcends and transforms the current economic dominance.

Lucien*: Your provision of nine thematic introductions was a great idea, in my opinion, but how do you think these introductions enrich readers?*

Aili: We have done a great job educating students in the theory that views and values are constituted historically and culturally; we have succeeded in making them understand conceptually that it is necessary to suspend judgment when encountering another culture. We have reached a stage where it is incumbent upon us to provide students actual learning materials of different modes of life and thinking, and to train them how to engage differences in real life. To do so, we have to overcome some obstacles.

Conventional wisdom as expressed in "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes" has worked for us for so long that to respect everybody's right to his or her own reading has become normative. Frequent incongruity between the goal of cross-cultural understanding and students' right to their own understanding had led to many impasses where instructors like me were lost for what to do. Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges has given an example of the impasses: as the audience of cultural origin "appreciated the fact that the whale died when it heard the man's cry," the second audience wondered if "there had ever been men who lent credence to any fatal capacity of such a cry."[1] It was irresponsible to dismiss the difference in understanding like this one with "It's cultural." It was wrong for an educator to take the easy way out, i.e., to use the polemics of difference as an excuse not to explore reasons for the difference. In an educational context, to learn what is beauty and why there exists such credence of beauty is more important than what the beholder thinks because, blind to the unfamiliar, the beholder may ignore issues essential to the cultural origin, and our journey of learning gets nowhere. The same blindness can also lead to the polemics of similitude, where superficial analogies are made with hasty associations.

David Der-Wei Wang, Harvard University Professor of Chinese Literature, has reminded us that when we take up an activist posture in a cross-cultural setting, we must remember to learn the system of authentic thoughts that have worked for the culture under scrutiny. Chinese cultural tradition has been developing for millennia. Returning to Chinese formative thoughts for solutions to the impasses, the thematic essays in the book help contextualize the stories in time and space more appropriately and facilitate understanding with Chinese conceptual models and the paradigms of thinking that arose from Chinese experiences. These essays enrich readers' experiences the same way knowing the rules of a game enriches the experience of playing and watching. Functioning as a roadmap to the meanings of the concepts in Chinese tradition, these essays, instead of charting the course of experience, take readers to a new route of refreshing scenes and interpretative horizons for a new discovery of shared humanity.

Lucien*: Most of our readers do not teach, nor are they learning the Chinese language, but many are either quite interested in Chinese history and culture or expected to teach it. Do you have any specific suggestions about how they might benefit from using the English portions of the book?*

Aili: I would say, "Do what you have done—sample and enjoy the stories," or, at least, start with falling in love with the genre and the stories. Passion motivates. The stories in each chapter are deliberately chosen for their differences in style, mood, perspective, degree of difficulties, etc. Once an instructor finds a dozen or so stories s/he feels passionate about, s/he probably already knows how to best use them for his/her particular purpose. I hope that instructors find the discussion questions at the end of each story helpful. Most of them come from my experience of teaching the stories and anticipate student difficulties. The four parts of each chapter—the thematic essay, the stories, the discussion questions, and the author bio—are intersecting/complementing constituents for a good understanding of the theme concept and the stories. Careful reading of the essay at the beginning of each chapter and of the author bio at the end of each story may also help gain basic Chinese cultural literary.

Lucien*: Aili, thanks again for an excellent interview!* ■

NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights,*" in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 40.