

Irish Studies in China: The Widening Gyre

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Abstract:

At the furthest reach from Ireland – whether in terms of size or geography or culture – China seems an unlikely place for Irish Studies. Yet over the last few years, Irish Studies has emerged as an acknowledged academic field in several key Chinese universities. This essay looks at the obstacles to Irish Studies in China as well as Ireland's importance, after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, in opening up discussion of such domestic issues as the role of literature in establishing a new national identity. The many unexpected similarities between Irish and Chinese culture have ensured that translations of Irish writers such as Wilde, Yeats, Shaw, Beckett and especially Joyce have played a distinctive role in ushering a newly emerging Chinese nation into its own version of global modernity.

Keywords: China, comparative perspective, identity politics, Irish Studies, translation

At the furthest reach from Ireland – whether in terms of size or geography or culture – China seems an unlikely place for Irish Studies. Yet over the last few years, Irish Studies has emerged as an acknowledged academic field in several key Chinese universities.

These initiatives in Irish Studies may be listed briefly. Beijing Foreign Studies University launched the first (and so far, only) multidisciplinary Irish Studies program in 2007. As a small, elite university originally designed to train diplomats and foreign service personnel, BFSU added the Irish Centre to its other programmes teaching American, Australian, British, and Canadian Studies. Unique to China, however, is this Centre's broad approach to Irish issues as well as its investment in a one-year course in the Irish language. As such, the BFSU Irish Studies Centre has made a significant contribution to Ireland's visibility in China. Two years later, in 2009, Shanghai Normal launched its Irish Literature Research Centre, which includes both undergraduate and graduate courses. A startling part of the program involves an annual two-month festival of Irish culture as well as the production of an entire Irish play: in English. About the same time, a small Centre for Irish Studies emerged in Shanghai Institute for Foreign Trade.

Clearly, what a “Centre for Irish Studies” may mean in a Chinese context differs from university to university. It may mean a real hub of student activities (degrees, diplomas, graduate study, or a journal). Or it may mean – as in the case of the more prestigious universities such as Peking or Fudan – just one or two professors who have an interest in teaching some aspect of Irish Studies. As the experience of Irish Studies in the West demonstrates, such uneven development is often normal for the evolution of what is, after all, a relatively new field in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)¹.

Meanwhile, many other universities routinely teach courses in such authors as Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and James Joyce without assigning them specifically to an Irish Studies program; even though it quickly becomes apparent that such authors cannot be well understood separated from their context. Hence these literature courses often come to include some basic Irish historical and cultural background, although “Irish” tends to be defined within the wider context of the United Kingdom. To reclaim any of these figures as Irish within an Irish context is still a fairly radical act in China. For, up to recently, the only exposure Chinese people have had to Ireland has been through the performances of *Riverdance* (a huge success there) or those of U2 or Roy Keane.

1. *Difficulties of Cultural Recognition*

Other than these international media celebrities, Ireland has suffered a distinct recognition-deficit in China. In part this has to do with the fact that many Chinese people, even those with a university education, simply do not know that “Ireland” exists as a sovereign nation with its own distinctive history. Either they do not know about Ireland at all, or they confuse it with Northern Ireland; with the result that they will then nod knowledgeable with, “Oh yes, I know; part of the U.K.” (a response that tends to infuriate). If one counters that Ireland is in fact an independent republic, Chinese people are apt to become genuinely puzzled. How can “Ireland” be at once an island – and at the same time, only part of an island? Once, in frustration, I explained that Irish diplomats often play on this ambiguity. When they want Ireland to appear large, they play the “all Ireland” (island) card. When they wish to emphasize its independence, they play the “sovereign (but divided) nation” card. In such circumstances, ambiguity can be useful – and no Irish diplomat worth his salt is going to pay the price for sacrificing such enabling double-think.

But not even clever diplomats can overcome the ultimate problem of size. As a nation, the Republic of Ireland is undeniably tiny: with a population about that of a modest Chinese city (e.g. Harbin). Chinese audiences cannot quite grasp the disparity of scale and, when they do, are amazed. “So small, so small”, one woman professor cooed to me, cradling her arms and rocking them back and forth, as if with a tiny baby. “Couldn’t have many big problems”. I tried not to look bemused. Following what had been almost thirty years of the Troubles, the problems of Ire-

land had become global. Although this professor clearly knew something about the Troubles, she had again delegated them to the U.K., without any suspicion of how not only the politics and the economy but the entire social and cultural fabric of the Republic had been nearly torn apart by what was, in effect, an implicit civil war.

Thus the all-Ireland/Republic interrelationship becomes a vital part of explaining Ireland to the Chinese. This made sense to them when presented under the aspect of colonial rule. China too had become colonized by the British, so they related to that part of Irish history with some fervour. Also, from their own experience with the treaty ports such as Shanghai or the British colony of Hong Kong (which emerged as a result of the two Opium Wars of the mid-19th century) they could easily understand how one part of the island had become more aggressively colonized than the rest. As a relatively new republic themselves, the Chinese also proved sympathetic to the bid for independence which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Ireland. And it became possible to explain the tensions within a divided Ireland by pointing to some of the same tensions between Hong Kong and the mainland – although these have become more complicated since the “two countries, one system” governing a newly reintegrated Hong Kong have now been put in place.

Beyond explanation, however, is the concept of Irish ethnicity or race. “Ethnicity” as a category exists in name only in China. The 55 “official” ethnic minorities within mainland China are designated as “national minorities”. What such a category does is bleed the concept of ethnicity of any *ethos* – in the sense of a whole way of life. A “nation” is a matter of bureaucratic administration defined by certain, usually arbitrary, geographical boundaries. An *ethos*, particularly one which has evolved over millennia through the lives of nomadic herders, such as those found in Mongolia or Tibet, involves a particular language, customs, and spiritual beliefs which have become part of their cultural DNA. The fact that Chinese people do not acknowledge such a category goes a long way to clarifying their attitudes towards western regions, for instance. It also goes a long way to explaining their fascination with the concept of the “Irish race”.

2. *Identity Politics, China and Ireland*

However debunked by scholars, the concept of an Irish race as the transmitters of a distinctly Irish *ethos* still haunts most Irish Studies courses – and, frankly, constitutes much of their appeal. The appeal is that of a porous, eclectic identity in a world increasingly obsessed with identity politics. But perhaps these are a reverse side of the same issue: the world seems obsessed precisely because it is going global, with a peaceful displacement of populations never before witnessed in its history. It is estimated that more than 215 million people worldwide now live in a country other than that in which they were born; this population has tripled in 25 years. If this were the population of a country it would be the fifth largest in the world. The Irish diaspora alone is of the order of 70 million and rising².

For the first time, in this generation, the Chinese too are traveling: it is now becoming almost mandatory to send one's only child to the West to be educated, even among families with middling incomes. It is also becoming almost routine for members of the newly wealthy classes to travel to Europe or America for holidays. And Chinese government enterprises are carrying out what has been described as a new kind of capitalist colonialism, in not only financing but providing large teams of their own workers to undertake projects in such places as the Middle East and Africa, thus providing long-term exposure to a very different culture.

As a generalization, the Chinese are very attached to their home-place. They will always tell you where they are from and then launch into praise of it, urging you to visit. But now that internal migration is also a huge factor in the China of today (particularly among the migrant workers, estimated at nearly 300 million or about a fifth of the entire population), people need to evolve some concept of "being Chinese" that will travel. So much more so if one is an overseas student or guest-worker or one of the many Chinese who lives permanently abroad. Thus the concept of a kind of portable identity such as "being Irish" that one can bring along with one is very attractive. And of course the Irish, with their long history of emigration and adaptation, have become pretty much world experts on this issue.

How is it done? An example might be drawn from the career of Robert Hart (1806-1875), a man considered the most powerful foreigner in late nineteenth-century China. According to the editors of his *Journals*, no other outsider during that period "had more sustained influence than Hart, and none enjoyed a greater measure of Chinese confidence" (Bruner, Fairbank, Smith, eds, 1986, 325). Arriving in China in 1854 to work for the British Foreign Service at the age of nineteen, within nine years Hart was then recruited by the Qing Dynasty to become its Inspector General for Maritime Customs. Working from this position (which he was to hold for over forty years) Hart was able to negotiate crucial international agreements between China and the West – precisely because he had become equally at home in both worlds. But what characteristics enabled Hart to work so successfully with both Chinese and Western officials?

First of all, Robert Hart remained in touch with his Irish origins (O'Leary 2009, 26-39). Although Hart's obituary described him as English, Hart was actually born in Ulster and spent his first 18 years in Ireland. Throughout his life, he remained loyal to Queen's College, Belfast, from which he had graduated. Moreover, as Inspector General, he actively sought recruits to the Chinese Maritime Customs Service from his own university and its affiliated institutions, which were then designated as the Queen's Colleges of Cork and Galway. His robust sense of the importance of *guanxi* or "connection" (a marked Irish characteristic to which Hart gave full play in China) led him to make offers of employment to members of his own extended family. Defending his methods, Hart declared that "I have never advanced a worse man over a better; yet, if promotion is due

to one of two men of equal deserts, and one of them is my own flesh and blood, it would simply be unnatural to pass him over" (Wright 1950, 859).

But being loyal to his Irish roots was not always simple. Most colonial administrators had links to the British aristocracy, were members of the established (Anglican) Church, and graduated from Oxford or Cambridge. By way of contrast, Hart was born into a middle-class (dissenting) Methodist family and graduated from a provincial Northern Ireland university. Consequently, from the very first, Hart lived at something of an oblique angle to the heart of the Anglican and Oxbridge landed-gentry Establishment which dominated the British Foreign Service.

On the other hand, as an Ulsterman born and bred, Hart arrived in China with the advantage of already being an outsider at home. As the editors of his journals observe, from the first Hart tended to be a sharp observer of cultural difference, paying great attention to Chinese rules of protocol and courtesy. Central to all was his sense of being Irish. In his first year in China he wrote: "I'm an Irishman – a Paddy in heart and soul" (Bruner, Fairbank, Smith, eds 1986, October 1854). Certainly Hart's sense of his own roots often led him to a certain detachment concerning "the English" – particularly when it came to recruiting officials for the Maritime Customs Service. Writing to his friend Campbell (another Briton) in 1893, he confessed: "I am not in favour of bringing out [to China] any experienced English hand: English are not properly accommodating and they have not enough India-rubber in their composition, and – for success – native wants and native conditions must be studied and allowed for – too parishional, too provincial, too insular are our countrymen!" (*ibidem*, Letter 913, 13 December 1893) In plain language, Hart is complaining that English recruits to China were simply not flexible enough to accommodate to "native wants and native conditions".

In his own position, Hart deployed precisely this kind of flexibility, working deftly between his several avowed identities. Of course, for his public, there were the predictable consequences. As sinologist Jonathan Spence points out, Hart was constantly involved in fending off criticisms of merchants and even British consuls that he favoured Chinese over British interests while enduring the opposite suspicion from the Chinese (Spence 2002 [1969], 120). In fact, the British public were uneasy with what they saw as Hart's tendency to "go native" (as reflected in the *Vanity Fair* cartoon of 1894 which shows him in the robes of a Mandarin high official). Yet Hart himself seemed to sense little conflict between his multiple identities – now including that of being, at least culturally, assimilated to the Chinese (Wright 1950, 173)³.

In one sense, such freedom to create one's own identity is the freedom of exile. Evidence of that freedom may be found in his journals, kept scrupulously during his forty years in China. Both these and his personal letters reveal a singular (perhaps even shocking) ability to assume multiple identities. Hart clearly did not feel that he had to choose among his several identities as British, English,

Irish or Ulsterman. His work in China led him to develop an almost entirely pragmatic view of identity politics, in which his experience as an Irish person proved to be particularly valuable, as in his deployment of the politics of *guanxi*: the way most things traditionally work in Ireland as well. In this ability to work his own personal (and often Irish) networks to mutual benefit, lay the key to much of Hart's success in China (Horowitz 2006, 558; O'Leary 2006, 583-604).

What Hart's career provides is a key to the value both of Irish Studies in China and Chinese Studies in Ireland. For, despite the disparities in size, Ireland and China have multiple issues in common, all of which might be said to revolve around issues of identity. Both are traditional agricultural societies only recently, and rapidly, modernized. Both have suffered under British colonial rule. Both have had devastating famines still held in collective memory (although the most recent, a direct result of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" policies of the 1950s, is still officially suppressed in China). Both Ireland and China are new nations but old civilizations, coping with the disjunctions that that generates. No surprise, then, that identity politics is now central to the new China as well. Precisely for that reason, Irish Studies can help to examine its own concern with "Who is China?"⁴

In other ways, this preoccupation allows Irish Studies within Chinese universities to examine cognate issues otherwise difficult to discuss within the current official constraints. For instance: What does it mean now to be "Chinese" after the many revolutions of the last century? What is the relation of today's China to its own ancient traditions? How can one understand China's relationship with the "Overseas Chinese" – a vast, worldwide diaspora? Or what about the many different cultures (say, between north and south, eastern and western China) which resist the easy homogenization of the "one China" mandate? How can one work around the official fiction that nearly all Chinese (some 93%) belong to something called the "Han" race – clearly a concept worth deconstructing in light of the clear differences of dialect and even language as well as a distinctive *ethos* or way of life between different regions in China.

3. *Looking at China from Ireland*

Looking at China from Ireland can also offer new perspectives on how we in Ireland view ourselves. While Robert Hart constitutes only one example of the many actual historical ties between Ireland and China, his career also provides a valuable lesson in how the notion of "being Irish" was actually deployed within the context of the British Empire.

Careers such as Hart's also help to answer the question: How, if Ireland is so small, does it manage to appear so big? That is, big in its influence, big through its expansion into the world far beyond its actual geographical borders. In part the answer is: through colonization – one that allowed the Irish access across the globe in terms of careers and travel as well as through

emigration. If only for this reason, much more attention should be paid to those Irish who entered the bureaucratic machinery of the Empire, because the British Empire, even in its declining years, has fostered a far larger outreach for Ireland than it could ever expect through efforts of its own.

Secondly, in responding to the question of how Ireland has managed to exert an influence far beyond its borders, it is helpful to point out that, for centuries, Ireland has identified its core culture as being Roman Catholic. Being a member of a world church with a strong central – and ultramontane – control, has also offered Ireland access to many far-flung places in the world, including China. There its missionaries have been active for several hundred years (and particularly in the first part of the last century) before they were banned under Mao's new republic in 1949. Although investigating missionary activity in China has not been encouraged until recently in the PRC, it is clear that Ireland's engagement with the larger world through the Roman Catholic Church has played a significant role in framing Irish global consciousness; as big a role, perhaps, as the Ireland's involvement with the British army or colonial service.

Thus looking at Ireland's relation to China has thrown up entirely new perspectives from which to regard Ireland itself and, with them, new opportunities for research. Several of these were initiated by a book of essays edited to mark Ireland's thirty years of diplomatic relations with China. Under the title of *China and the Irish*, it includes short essays on historical, literary, and cultural issues (McCormack, ed. 2009). One asks, for instance, how was it possible for a traditional music group such as The Chieftains to jam with their counterparts on their historic visit to China in 1983? Another looks at the effect of the writings of an ancient Daoist sage called Zhuangzi (or Chuang Tsü in the old Wade-Giles romanization) on the thinking of Oscar Wilde. A third offers cautionary tales about doing business in China. These are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to exploring the many bypaths of these extraordinary relations.

4. *Looking at Ireland from China*

Even more off-centre perspectives are gained by looking at Ireland from China. After teaching Irish Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University on and off for eight years, one gains very different angles on Ireland's own obsessions. Two instances may suffice.

The first, not surprisingly perhaps, is our Irish entanglement with sectarian divisions. Except for a tiny proportion, Chinese people are not Christian. Most have no concept of "one God" let alone the complexities of a Christian God who sacrificed his only son to redeem mankind from something called "sin" (another concept missing completely from the Chinese vocabulary). Although, under such circumstances, explaining the doctrinal differences

between Catholic and Protestant is pretty futile, the Chinese do understand political differences. So the fruitful approach (as I discovered) is to explain all the sectarian differences under the heading of colonization.

Once back in Ireland and eager to unearth China/Ireland historical connections, I tried to commission a short essay on Irish missionaries in China for the Irish national broadcasting authority (RTE) radio series that was to become the book, *China and the Irish*. It quickly became a nightmare. No one was prepared to do the research and writing about *both* Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries to China. In the end, I had to commission two separate essays (one Catholic, one Protestant) and forcibly marry them. In doing so, what I discovered was that each Church pursued its missionary initiatives in its own idiosyncratic way. The Roman Catholic missionaries were sent out in groups, worked to keep in touch with each other while in China (insofar as that was possible), and reported back directly to their superior at home and eventually to Rome itself. In other words, their organization was highly centralized. The Protestant missionaries, on the other hand, came from many sects – Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian. They went out to China one by one, often did not know what the other missionaries were doing (even within their own districts) and thus were sometimes duplicating efforts. They reported back to their immediate authorities at home, but otherwise were not coordinated. Moreover (and this is the most startling part) each Church exported their own sectarian differences, resulting, within China itself, in two different and distinct terms in Chinese for “the Christian Church”⁵.

Despite such obstacles, a great deal more needs still to be done in this field. Missionaries were often the first point of contact for Chinese people with Westerners. Many of the first initiatives to interpret Chinese culture to the larger world arose from this source.

A second unexpected angle comes from actually teaching Irish Studies in China. As already instanced, teaching effectively about Ireland requires (at least in part) placing its history within that of the British Empire. Yet the impact of the British Empire and its importance for Ireland is one that appears to be neglected in Irish Studies – and only now is beginning to be fully acknowledged in historical studies carried out in Ireland itself⁶.

Considering that Ireland has to date about 700 years as a British colony, to neglect the ongoing effects of their long-standing relationship tends to date a programme in Irish Studies. Perhaps after the first heady eighty or so years of Irish nationalism, Irish Studies could concentrate on the things that make Ireland distinctly “Irish” by opposing these to what seems particularly “British”. But that stage should be long past – or so I thought until I tried to commission a radio piece on the Chinese botanical connection from Lord Rosse of Birr Castle for the RTE as part of its “China and the Irish” series⁷. “The Earl of Rosse?” the head editor queried sharply. “Oh, you can’t invite *him*”. Then, with emphasis: “He’s not Irish!”

“And when did you come to Ireland?” I responded; knowing full well it was in the early 1970s. “The Earl of Rosse’s family came here in 1602. If he’s not Irish, then none of us are”.

After this exchange, I was no longer surprised by stories from the Vice-President of the Royal Irish Academy about the flack she routinely receives about being part of something “Royal” – even though fellow institutions such as the “Royal College of Surgeons,” the “Royal Dublin Society” not to mention the “Royal Hospital at Donnybrook” all share the same designation. But what this all points up – reinforced by the perspective from China – is that we in Ireland are still very adolescent in admitting our debt to our step-parents, even if we chose to think of them as “evil”. Certainly one must ask of current Irish Studies programmes: How many routinely talk (now largely in retrospect) about the damage done by colonization – whether in terms of the Famine or the Troubles – but are reluctant to examine or even speak of the benefits that Ireland has reaped from being a member of the British Empire? Or about the generations of Irish who have worked in the British armed forces or civil or foreign service? Or about the significance of the “London Irish” who, in the late 19th century, launched the cultural initiatives which were to invent an Ireland for the future?

And how many of us who teach Irish Studies are eager to admit how being British as well as Irish enabled our finest writers to enter a long tradition – so as to build on it? Had Oscar Wilde not been British as well as Irish, he would not have had a splendid education at the then centre of British imperialism in Ireland: Trinity College, Dublin. Nor later at Oxford. Nor would he have made the inevitable move to London to make his career as a writer. Nor would he have ever been asked to write a review of a recent translation (from a British civil servant working in China) of an ancient Chinese sage called Zhuangzi (or Chuang Tsü). Without reading Zhuangzi, would Wilde ever have himself written “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891)? Or refined his aesthetic theories of dandyism to such a pitch? (McCormack 2009, 302-321) These are the kind of questions that looking at Ireland through the lens of China may provoke.

5. Translating Ireland to China

Once again, teaching Irish literature in China impresses one with Ireland’s widening cultural impact. In the new China emerging after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Irish writers were among those first to be translated. The role of the translator at this time (and in many ways still in today’s China) is not the humble supporting part of those in the West. For hundreds of years before the collapse of the Qing dynasty, literacy was obtained through literature. The imperial exam system, in place for about 1,300 years, guaranteed a lifetime government post for those who succeeded. After the abolition of the imperial exams in 1905, this connection was disrupted, leaving the literate

few of the Mandarin/scholar class without any automatic access to political or cultural influence. By assuming the role of translators, this class managed to retain their lingering monopoly over literacy and, with it, the social and moral leadership now denied them. Hence control over literature became part of an evolving strategy for intellectuals to establish themselves as a new social class during times of drastic political and social upheaval (McDougall 2003, 2).

Translators thus became gatekeepers for the new China of the new twentieth century. But whom, in a world in which there was about 80% illiteracy, were they translating for? For each other, of course (and there remains keen competition still to be the first translator of a key Western opus – as the translation history of *Ulysses* makes clear). Also for the “literary intellectuals” such as editors, critics, and academics as well (after 1942) as for those politicians and bureaucrats with responsibility for cultural affairs. But most of all, they were translating for the educated youth of the next generation – along with a few elders eager to stay abreast of writing outside China (McDougall 2003, 5).

In analysing the situation in the first few decades of the new China, the translations of Oscar Wilde may be seen as particularly significant⁸. Of course, at the time Wilde was classed as British – therefore eliminating him from the discourse that regarded Irish literature as a distinctive and emerging genre. Despite the fact that copies of his “Soul of Man under Socialism” appear to have been translated into Chinese early⁹, he is not always regarded as politically relevant during the first three decades of the new China. Part of the difficulty is that, as a champion of “art-for-art’s sake”, Wilde was not regarded as a reformer. In the puritanical atmosphere of the New Culture Movement, Wilde’s reputation as a “decadent” (confirmed by the details of his personal life) tended to damage his reputation as a thinker. The exceptions were his plays – and his fairy stories. A translation of *An Ideal Husband* appeared in 1905; Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in March 1918; *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *Salomé* were rendered into Mandarin in 1921 (McDougall 2003, 82). Wilde’s fairy stories proved even more popular. Famous for their simplicity and moral exactness, especially in championing the poor and the outcast and translated as early as 1909, they are still assigned in school textbooks today.

What did Wilde offer creators and critics of China’s new literature? They welcomed his defence of individualism and feminism: *Salomé*, weirdly enough, being regarded as a model for the liberated woman (Wong 2002, 118). They admired the sharp satires on political corruption; above all, Wilde’s exposure of the hypocrisies of a barren conventional morality, and commitment to socialist thinking. But what might be most striking is (according to one scholar) that none of critics “seems to have said that he liked Oscar Wilde’s plays simply because they were funny” (McDougall 2003, 88).

What attracted Chinese translators to writers such as Wilde? In a word – Revolution – not for its own sake, but a revolution which would give birth to

a new nation. In 1915, in a famous article, “On a Revolution in Literature”, the critic Chen Duxiu includes Wilde in his list of literary heroes (McDougall 2003, 77). For him, as for other intellectuals, Ireland’s poetry and drama offered a model for how a literary could lead to an actual revolution. In China what was known as the “New Culture Movement” was crystallized by student demonstrations in Beijing on 4 May, 1919, protesting the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles. It sought to mark the cultural demise of thousands of years of Chinese imperial rule through an intellectual initiative that was both cultural and political. Its leaders, believing that traditional Confucian values had been responsible for the political weakness of China (which in turn led it to be colonized by foreigners before its eventual collapse), called for their rejection together with a selective adoption of Western ideals of science and democracy. To this day, these same views are still powerful in shaping China’s politics and culture. Given this agenda, it was natural for China’s writers to look for inspiration to those writers shaping the new Ireland.

From the avant-garde of the new cultural movement, Mao Dun (1896-1981) was one of the first to draw public attention to the new literary movement in Ireland (Chen 2009, 3). In a 1920 essay entitled “New Writings in Ireland,” he wrote that “while [the Chinese] people were questioning the future and favouring cosmopolitanism, the Irish were paying particular attention to their own history and national traits. The new Irish literature [has] formed a unique school of its own” (*ibidem*). Having acquired a first-hand knowledge of Irish literature, Mao Dun was then able to give a succinct account of plays by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge, pointing out the ways in which Irish plays differed from those of the English. By blending realism with romanticism, he argued, the new Irish literature created a genre quite distinct from mere realism, already on the decline (Chen 2009, 4). Yeats’s plays, in particular, Mao wrote “crystallize in their performance all the thoughts and feelings of the nation of Ireland; Yeats does not pay attention to the surface life of the contemporary Irish. The description is of a spiritual life; using ancient legends and ancient heroic deeds as the material of a script which describes not an ancient, but a contemporary spirit” (Pu 2009, 85). In these aspects, Mao Dun hailed the Irish literary movement as a counter-current against contemporary trends in China.

Other key critical essays were written in this period by Zheng Zhenduo (1898-1958), a founder with Mao Dun and others of the Literary Study Society (文學研究會). These pioneers believed that opening up China to the world meant paying keen attention to translating foreign literature. Zheng’s real preference was for the literature of India and Russia, feeling that their national conditions were similar to those of China. But (having good English) he also noted the impact of the work of Yeats, translated in China since the late 1910s. The granting of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 provided him with the right opportunity. Two essays on Yeats were published in quick succession, in

November and then December of 1923. But he did not stop there. In his own series of essays published in 1927, Zheng introduced Yeats through a discussion of Ireland's long history and current campaign for independence as a context for his writing. In the course of these essays, Zheng evaluates Yeats as "the most powerful figure in the Irish Renaissance" (Pu 2009, 88). That power was exercised not through direct involvement in the [Irish] Renaissance and the National Theatre, but through his poetry – for it was Yeats's poetry that proved a newly-freed Ireland could find a voice of its own. Given his achievements, Zheng names Yeats as "not only the greatest poet of modern Ireland, [...but] one of the greatest surviving poets of the world" (Pu 2009, 89).

Another colleague from the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun (1881-1936) – famous today as the leading figure in the struggle to modernize China – was as keenly aware of contemporary Irish writers and tended to think of them in the same terms. Writing "A Retrospect of Irish Literature" for *The Torrent* in 1929, Lu Xun argued that, under British rule, Ireland had no way to develop its national identity. Hence Irish writers had to create their literature anew, resulting in writing of a unique beauty and militancy (Chen 2009, 4).

By the time that this essay appeared in 1929, many of the alert reading public would already have become aware of new Irish writing. Guo Moruo (1892-1978) for instance, had already translated a collection of Synge's plays which came out in 1926 under the title *Dramatic Works of J. M. Synge*. But Guo Moruo was more than a translator; he was also a poet heavily influenced by Western literature who believed in its political efficacy. In an opening poem ("The Good Morning") of his first book of poetry, *The Goddesses* in 1921, Guo greets "Ireland, the poets of Ireland" (Reed 2009, 92). He follows with a fervent requiem for the death of the hunger striker, Terence McSwiney, in October 1920. Constructed from the newspaper telegrams arriving daily (in Japan, where Guo lived at the time), the poem "Victorious Death" depicts McSwiney as a great martyr of the Irish revolution: "Honoured MacSwiney! / Dear sons of Ireland, / the spirit of freedom will ever stand by you, / for you stand by one another, you are the incarnation of freedom!" (99). It closes with a passionate elegy:

The mighty ocean is sobbing its sad lament,
 the boundless abyss of the sky is red with weeping,
 far, far away the sun has sunk in the west.
 Brave, tragic death! Death in a blaze of glory! Triumphant death!*
 Victorious death!
 Impartial God of Death! I am grateful to you! You have saved
 MacSwiney, for whom my love and reverence know no bounds!
 MacSwiney, fighter for freedom, you have shown how great can be the power of
 the human will!
 I am grateful to you! I extol you! Freedom can henceforth never die!
 The night has closed down on us, but how bright is the moon. (100)

Guo here represents, if at one extreme, the stance of many of China's leading intellectuals at the time. They were aware of the events of Easter 1916 and its aftermath. They also understood the role of literature as a political force shaping these events, referring particularly to certain plays by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, giving impetus to their translation. *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) was to become widely popular in China during the 1930s, performed then both on university campuses as well as in theatres. During this period when the Chinese too saw themselves as fighting for independence, Yeats's play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) was also received with enthusiasm. Perhaps for the same reasons, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and Paycock* (1924) was adapted for the Chinese stage by Zhang Min, a director of note at the time. Under the Chinese title *Zui Sheng Meng Si* [*Intoxicated and Day-dreaming*], it played to packed houses in Shanghai in 1936 (Chen 2009, 5). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, O'Casey's plays became even more ideologically fashionable. Always alert to the wider world, O'Casey reciprocated Chinese admiration, on one occasion in 1958 even writing a letter to the Chinese *Literary Gazette* (*Wen Yi Bao*). In it he praised a Chinese play which depicted the Chinese Red Army's heroism during the Long March – which, he declared, he had followed very closely “so far as Western newspaper reporting could furnish him with any information” (Chen 2009, 5-6)¹⁰.

But during this period only one Irish writer actually arrived in China: Bernard Shaw. As part of a round-the-world trip with his wife, Shaw visited three Chinese cities in February 1933: Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. Chinese audiences already knew of Shaw. Not only had his plays been translated into Chinese from the 1920s onwards, he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, obtaining world recognition. So the Chinese expected a “great man” – but one who was British, not Irish. As such, they welcomed him as a critic of colonial imperialism (at the time, both Shanghai and Hong Kong were under British control). In fact, the audience was torn by conflicting impulses. One faction welcomed that Western influence which they felt would help modernize China. Others remained hostile to their own colonization under the British in particular.

Shaw, for his part, remained himself. He was ironic and amusing, full of opinions but not well informed. On 13th February at Hong Kong University, he advised the students to read “revolutionary books”. At the moment when Shanghai was under Nationalist rule (fighting the Communists), he urged them to “Go up to your neck in communism” (Li 2002, 158). Even the audience's puzzled and angry response did not alert Shaw to how out of tune he was with his surroundings or with the fraught political situation. Worse was to come in Shanghai four days later. There he was greeted by “Hallo Shaw” – a blast from the writer Yang Xing-zhi, who began:

Dear Shaw, why do you come to Shanghai?
To visit us slaves of colonialism?

I tell you: Shanghai is not London, New York or Paris:
 Nor is it a red city like Leningrad.
 The British, American, Japanese, French flags fly proudly in the sky,
 Clearly saying that China is only a colony.
 Do you feel that this is a tragedy?
 I tell you also:
 Your words in Hong Kong are preposterous!
 Youths listening to it will pull their tongues,
 Old people hearing will say “fart”.
 Maybe some will even be rude to you.
 Don't say anything foolish when you arrive in Shanghai,
 This is because we do not know humour,
 And you cannot say anything you like,
 We warn you to keep your mouth shut here, [...]. (Li 2002, 158-159)

Ignoring the advice, Shaw continued to litter his lectures with his own impolitic opinions. In regard to Chinese civilization, for instance, he declared flatly that China and the East do not have a culture, as “culture” refers to human behaviour that can increase happiness. (Even now, nothing is better calculated to infuriate a Chinese audience than a slight on their civilization – the oldest and most continuous in the world today). On the subject of China's future (from 1933 onwards), Shaw was right to prophesy that there was no safe answer as to what lay ahead. Speaking in favour of the collapse of capitalism, he commended the spirit of Marxism as well as the Soviet revolutionary method, finally predicting that China's future would lie under Communism (Li 2002, 167-168).

Despite the prescience of the last remarks, his speech provoked a furore. It fell to that leading light of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun, to spring to his defence. Editing *Bernard Shaw in Shanghai* (1933), a book composed of a retrospective collection of views on Shaw from both foreign and Chinese newspapers, Lu Xun aimed at “presenting a true picture of Shaw and also a picture of the various critics each in his own posture”. “Shaw's arrival has been a disaster,” he began. Yet “Shaw was a great exclamation point” (Lu Xun 1992, 72, 75). For, in provoking controversy in the course of advancing many contradictory views, Shaw's visit did encourage open debate on large ideas. In another essay written in the wake of the visit, Lu Xun states his own fervent admiration of the Shaw who

[...] puts the upper-class folks on stage, but [...] tears off their masks and their finery, and then [...] grabs one by the ear and points him out to the audience saying, “Look, here is a maggot!” He does not give them the chance to evade or cover up. (Lu Xun 1992, 76)

While Shaw may have been exact on the hypocrisies of his own society, he was almost completely blind to the actualities before him in China; proclaiming, for instance, that the China he saw was, despite being at war, a place of peace. No wonder Shaw was disconcerted, while on a brief airplane trip

over the Great Wall, to see a skirmish between Chinese and Japanese soldiers taking place almost directly beneath him.

In sum (as phrased by the scholar who has examined the occasion in detail) Shaw's visit to China revealed two processes. The first set in motion by a Chinese attempt to construe him within their own nationalist and global rhetoric. The second by Shaw's conscious as well as unconscious efforts to evade this construction. The clash resulted from the native ideological construction of his visit set side-by-side with the amorphous "reality" of Chinese life (Li 2002, 158). Its outcome might itself have made a fine Shavian comedy.

6. *Celebrity Writers*

It was Shaw's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925 that helped pave his way to a celebrity reception in the British-controlled ports of China, like Hong Kong and Shanghai. It is true that it was also helped by his reputation as a "socialist" – although, as Lu Xun pointed out, Shaw lived as a wealthy man (Lu Xun 1992, 63). Paradoxically, had he not done so (as Lu Xun also observed), Shaw would not have received the celebrity welcome accorded to him. Still, like Oscar Wilde and Sean O'Casey before him, Shaw rode on a current of that socialist fervour which was shaping the new China – even though, to this day, students often wonder just what "socialism" really means to such Irish writers.

In the case of Yeats, the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 also led to celebrity, as well as to further Chinese translations both of his poems and his prose. His most famous advocate during this period, Wang Tongzha, was the first to translate Yeats's short stories as well as to give an overview of the entire corpus of Yeats's poetry to date in the 1924 essay entitled "Yeats's Life and Works". Addressing the personal life of Yeats in detail, his distinctive mode of creation, his character and ideas, this essay enshrining Yeats as a "World Poet" is still regarded as the high water mark for Yeats studies in China (Pu 2009, 86).

As, in China's eyes, the Nobel Prize for Literature trumps every other qualification, the Chinese often wonder aloud how Ireland could have produced four such winners from its tiny population – when they have, from one exponentially larger, produced so far only two. As today's China is obsessed with brand-names, the Nobel Prize for Literature has been the major means by which Ireland's cultural reputation has been enlarged. In fact, literature remains Ireland's most prestigious export – and, of course, a way of fostering the always implicit project of Irish nationalism.

While world-domination is hardly on the cards, Ireland's literature – particularly as it plays out in China – offers some measure of its influence in, culturally, one of the furthest reaches of the world. For instance, one of the current exports from the Dublin's Gate Theatre has been Samuel Beckett. Up until recently, the only play of Beckett's known in the PRC has been *Waiting for Godot* (1953). It had apparent misfortune of being translated into Chinese

in 1965, just a year before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution¹¹. During that time, as a banned book, it spread like wildfire among the besieged intellectuals (especially after Beckett won the Nobel Prize in 1969). But in the 1980s, following the death of Mao, Beckett's play reemerged, as Chinese dramatists consciously turned to Western models to revive a theatre stagnating under the previous regime's insistence on "socialist-realism".

The event that crystallized Beckett's reputation was the staging of an experimental play by Gao Xingjian – himself later to also win the Nobel Prize – *The Bus Stop* (Lie, Ingham 2009, 132). Loosely based on *Godot*, when the play premiered in Beijing in 1983, it also provided (for those in the know) a kind of shadow premier of *Godot* as well. But, as several critics noted, there were significant differences. Gao's play depicts a cross-section of Chinese citizens waiting at a bus stop to go into the city. While the bus comes, it never stops. During this time, each rationalizes his desire to go into the city – but, at the very end, only one enterprising citizen determines that he will simply walk into town, leaving the rest behind. While their situation might be read as a political reaction to the Cultural Revolution – as reducing China to paralysis – the kind of existential anxieties induced by *Godot* are missing. After all, the citizens of *Bus Stop* all have a stated purpose. One citizen even tries to achieve it. But the two tramps of *Godot* seem purposeless – as *Godot*, unlike the bus, never comes and may probably not even exist.

However, the net effect of *Bus Stop* was to prepare the Chinese audience for the eventual premiere of *Godot*. When it did at last appear on the Chinese stage in 1987 – and subsequently in performances from 2003-2009, perhaps the most memorable being the production by The Gate Theatre from Dublin in 2004 – the response has been (perhaps predictably) mystified. The students to whom I tried to teach *Godot* could not cope (any more than the Chinese translator) with the multiple puns, Hiberno-English idioms, and manifold cultural allusions of Beckett's in English. Particularly disastrous was Lucky's speech, as Chinese students simply had no context (in anything from Aquinas to Synge) to cope with Beckett's parody of Western intellectual discourse. In the end, as I discovered, they coped with it by simply boxing it as "absurd" – which then absolved them of any responsibility of making sense of it. Their sense of frustration was perhaps relieved by the translation of a large number of Beckett plays to mark his centenary in 2006; but, as with the earliest reception of Wilde, few of his Chinese audience found him funny.

7. *The Case of James Joyce*

But of all the Irish writers, the one today most celebrated in China is James Joyce. As a writer, Joyce offers a perfect example of how an Irish writer may use the particular to become universal. First of all, Joyce engages with the English language in a novel way: notoriously, in the "Oxen of the Sun" episode

of *Ulysses* (1922), by tracking its linguistic evolution from its earliest literary sources up to the present. But Joyce's engagement comes from a distinctive angle, through that English emerging in a new dialect within a new world, that of modern Ireland. Being educated through English, he enters the grand tradition of the English novel, but consciously distorts it for his own uses. Once again, the British Empire asserts its imperial force, allowing Joyce to intervene in it as part of his own heritage.

The second way that Joyce extends his reach as a novelist is through his enculturation as a Roman Catholic. Again, as a Catholic, Joyce is able to appropriate the legacy of the shadow Roman Empire. As a world church, Catholicism takes its central administration as well as its traditional language (Latin) from Rome. Although this legacy grants Joyce a philosophy as well as a whole new vocabulary (such as the word "epiphany") for his aesthetic strategies, this is almost totally opaque in China. China is not a Christian nation; it has in fact little or no notion of the transcendental at all. Even more disconcerting is that Christian doctrines such as original sin are simply nonsense for the majority of Chinese. I still recall the shock of a question from a distinguished audience of Chinese Joyce scholars. At the end of the conference, one of the most prominent asked me directly: "Professor McCormack: you talked a great deal about something called 'sin' in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Would you please explain to the audience here – *what is this 'sin'?*"

It is possible that this aspect of Joyce, being so culturally incommensurate, is simply not transmittable. But omitting the most Catholic of Joyce's references only makes more clear what is most transmissible – and this in today's China is not only powerful but cognate. There is first of all, the record of the birth agony of a new, modern state as it moves from the paralysis of *Dubliners* (1914) to the soul-searching of the young Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Both of these texts speak vividly to today's Chinese students, who observe the same suffering and confusion among the writers of the 1920s New Culture Movement, particularly in the work of Lu Xun. In common with these writers, Joyce rejected the stilted formal prose of his English inheritance for the vernacular of this native Dublin. Instead of tales of aristocrats or nobles, he made a hero of a common man who goes about a common life, ennobling the vulgar through mythic echoes. By these means, Joyce charts the emergence of new nation through a new kind of writing, one concentrating on modern urban man, through whom one is meant to read "mankind".

Given the events of these last two decades in the PRC, it is in fact fortuitous that Joyce's writing is emerging only now. 2012 (for instance) marked the first time that more Chinese lived in cities than in the rural countryside. For a novel such as *Ulysses*, an audience of recently urbanized people constitutes in many ways an ideal readership. Just as Joyce's audience would have been, in Ireland anyway, one generation away from their country origins and hence still making their way through the new life of the city, the story of Bloom, as

an ordinary but displaced man making his way through what was once the third city of the British Empire would be immediately recognizable. As would the oral styles of the novel, familiar to readers both in Ireland and China as the style normal for a nation the majority of whom were only recently moving from an oral to a literate or written culture.

If Joyce's writing has emerged comparatively late in China, it is for historically fraught reasons. The record of the last century (at least until the 1980s and "opening up" of China) has been one of invasions, warlords, lawlessness and revolution. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, there followed a devastating famine, in turn followed by the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution – ended only after Mao's death in 1976. Take the following false starts to Joyce translation as exemplary:

First Case: In the early 1940s Wang Zuoliang, a young instructor at the Southwest Associated University in Kunming, discovered Joyce's *Dubliners*. Finding it fascinating, he translated the stories immediately into Chinese and sent them on to a publisher. But before publication could take place, the manuscript was lost in the Japanese bombing of the city of Guilin (Chen 2009, 7). It was not until 1982 that a special issue of *Foreign Literature* devoted to Anglo-Irish Literature included translations of Joyce's short stories "Araby" and "A Little Cloud". Although *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was eventually translated into Chinese in 1975, a year before Mao's death, the first complete translation of *Dubliners* did not appear until 1984 (*ibidem*).

Second Case: Professor Jin Di of Tianjin Foreign Languages Institute first encountered *Ulysses* in 1945 as a young academic (Jin 2001, 22-23). Given only a week to read the copy borrowed from a friend, even without understanding all that he was reading, he recognized it as a masterpiece, particularly in its use of stream of consciousness and internal monologue. Following the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, there began a period of strict censorship of liberal ideas, perceived by the authorities as intrinsically bourgeois and thus against the interests of the proletariat. *Ulysses* in particular was singled out for its "nihilist, philistine and pornographic tendencies" (Jin 2001, 25). Even reading the book clandestinely would have had to be confessed at the weekly meetings in which everyone had to review all their private activities – both physical and mental – which they had been engaged in over the previous seven days. "It would indeed take a determined rebel against the newly established regime", Jin confessed, "to hide such a serious activity as devoting a large portion of one's spare time to reading a bourgeois novel in private" (Jin 2001, 24). Not until the opening up of China after 1978, having been challenged by a friend, did Jin Di actually begin translating. At that time, the only books available to him were a paperback copy of *Ulysses*, a pamphlet of selected readings edited by T.S. Eliot, and a couple of introductory booklets for students¹². The post-war surge of Joyce studies in the West was still unavailable to any scholar in the PRC (Jin 2001, 29).

After the publication of his one translated chapter of *Ulysses*, Jin was reluctant to continue such exhausting work. Not until he came to the United States as a visiting scholar at Yale University in 1982 did it seem feasible, particularly given the encouragement of Professor Mary Reynolds, who gave him 30 books on the author and his oeuvre. “My eyes were opened”, he remarked (*ibidem*). By 1986, Jin felt confident enough to publish a few translated chapters from *Ulysses* (Chapters 2, 6, 10 and part of Chapter 18) for the prestigious journal, *World Literature*, accompanying them with a critical appreciation of the novel together with an extensive study of the author for its first issue (Chen 2009, 7). These proved crucial to an understanding of *Ulysses* for its new Chinese audience.

Yet just as prospects for a publication of the entire book began to appear more realistic, a major blow was dealt by the events of Tiananmen Square in June, 1989. China’s opening up, which had progressed gradually throughout the 1980s, came to an abrupt halt; and with it, hopes for the *Ulysses* project. But a new opportunity emerged from Taiwan, relatively unaffected by the ideological upheavals in mainland China, when the Taiwanese literary publishing house Chiu Ko Publishing Co. offered Jin a contract to complete his translation of *Ulysses*. In October 1993, the first full translation of Volume 1 of *Ulysses* appeared. As Jin Di notes, “It was hailed by the media in Taiwan as ‘the greatest event since the publication of Shakespeare’s works translated by Liang Shiqiu 20 years ago’” (Jin 2001, 54). Received warmly by Chinese critics, the translation’s first printing sold out in one month in Taiwan and to date has sold over 40,000 copies in mainland China.

In 1996, the second volume appeared. But not before another complete text of *Ulysses* was published – in 1995, a year earlier than its competitor – translated by a married couple, Xiao Qian and Wen Jieruo.

Third case: Xiao Qian, born and educated in Beijing, was a journalist as well as a university lecturer who in 1944 became a war correspondent based in England during World War II. With the founding of the Republic of China in 1949, rejecting an invitation of King’s College, Oxford to serve on its faculty, Xiao returned to China. There he was almost immediately condemned by the Communist Party of China and consequently (in his wife’s words) “left out in the cold” from 1949 to 1957 (Wen 2009, 33).

Worse was to follow. In the late 50s, Xiao was denounced as a political “rightist”. “With that label attached to him, [according to Wen Jieruo], he was humiliated for the following 22 years” (*ibidem*); the worst time being during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when he was banished to the countryside. In 1968 Xiao tried to commit suicide. Eventually, through redress as one of the “mishandled cases”, in 1979 Xiao was declared officially rehabilitated. In 1990, although nearly 70 years old, Xiao was approached by a Chinese publisher suggesting that he undertake a translation of *Ulysses*. “For four years”, his wife wrote, “he worked as the driving force and I served as his assistant. We worked like crazy, getting the whole novel translated ahead of Jin Di in the end [...] During those

four years, I worked 15 or 16 hours a day, sometimes shutting myself up in my study for several months running” (*ibidem*). There were other obstacles as well: for, during the early months of the Cultural Revolution, as his wife confesses, “I was caught completely unprepared [...] and [therefore] I failed to preserve Xiao Qian’s large number of notes, commentaries and letters, especially the valuable letters, over one hundred of them, from the English writer E.M. Forster [whom Xiao had befriended in 1941]” (Wen 2009, 34).

Such stories! Such obstacles! And such persistence. Behind every one of the Joyce translations that made it to press are the dramas of China’s turbulent history. These include not only such obstacles as the Cultural Revolution and poverty of reference material (not to say, of encouragement) but a culture of endemic censorship, far worse than that in contemporaneous Ireland. Joyce, in particular, was demonized as pornographic, decadent or nihilistic. Because Marxist thought targets literature as a carrier of cultural values, foreign literature in particular has always to a certain degree been suspect since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Political views also tended to regard Western literature as alien to “true” Chinese culture – or the ideology of the moment. In comparison, the sheer difficulty of translating Joyce’s virtuoso performances of different Englishes proved less daunting than overcoming official opposition to their task.

And politics, as ever in China, was also to play a large part in the reception of Joyce. Knowing this, the translators of *Ulysses* were careful to prepare the political ground beforehand. Jin Di’s 1986 essay for *World Literature*, for example, praises Joyce for creating “an all-round modern man capable of freeing himself from spiritual shackles of all descriptions, daring to oppose external domination and, at the same time, opposing a parochial national hatred directed towards the English as well as towards Jews. Joyce made Bloom a Jew in order to show that, although he was oppressed, he was indomitable” (Chen 2009, 8). Finally, Jin Di extolled *Ulysses* as one of the greatest works of the literary world, as it demonstrated “the selfless love of the common people” and “confirmed the spirit of humanity” (*ibidem*). Similar precautions were undertaken by Xiao Qian (who, after all, trained as a journalist), writing a series of articles describing in detail the 1933 American trial of *Ulysses* which ruled that it was not obscene. If in 1995 China were to ban or censor this book more than six decades later, Xiao argued, China would be looking backward (Murphy 1995). In common with Jin Di, Xiao Qian also contended that the book fitted in with the PRC’s Marxist “progressive” ideals, being both anti-anti-Semitic and anti-imperialistic.

The strategy worked, although the publishers were still nervous. Literature is still regarded as political in China, and censorship over many decades has a chilling effect: not necessarily because of official action (although writers have been persecuted, even executed, under previous regimes) but because official censorship leads inevitably to self-censorship, which tends to paralyze

any impulse towards engaging in innovative and/or ideologically suspect ventures¹³. Translating is perhaps safer than other kinds of writing but it still can be dangerous, as the history of the translation of *Ulysses* vividly illustrates. “We publishers had to be brave to take this kind of risk”, says Li Jingdian, the editor of Yilin Publishing House, in Nanjing. “I never imagined this book would be so welcomed by the Chinese reader” (Murphy 1995). The initial three-volume print run sold out its initial 85,000 copies, to be followed by a second and then a third edition. “I feel that this translation of *Ulysses* signifies that China at last has opened herself not only in technology and science but also in literature”, Xiao declared at the time (*ibidem*).

More than a decade later, in 2011, the translation of the untranslatable *Finnegans Wake* (1939) confirms a new openness in China. Although essays on the *Wake* had been published by Chinese scholars since 1991, no one had dared to take up the challenge of translating it until a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, Dai Congrong, decided to make it serious project. As she points out, this was a risk, as translating now no longer is as prestigious as it once was; and, more seriously, a translated work does not automatically count for academic promotion (Dai 2010, 584). Despite the grave difficulties of translating such a mind-bending text, after eight years Dai succeeded in publishing what she regards as a simplified first version – of the first third of the work – to great acclaim. She was incredulous when the translation became a surprise bestseller in China, its first run of 8,000 copies in one month, reaching number two on a prestigious bestseller list in Shanghai. “At first I felt very surprised, and I feel very surprised now still”, says Dai, “I thought my readers would be scholars and writers, and it wouldn’t be so popular”¹⁴.

8. *The Role of Irish Studies in Today’s China*

The growing prestige of Joyce studies in China as well as an elaborate billboard campaign may have helped. Dai ventures that Chinese readers may appreciate Joyce’s rumination on the cyclical nature of history, the relationships between his male and female characters, and the sheer challenge of interpreting his prose. But the growing popularity of Joyce’s work also signals a new openness to the West and Ireland in particular. As its literary works have become more available to the reading public, Irish Studies is acquiring growing momentum. If, in their first reception of Irish writing, Chinese intellectuals welcomed it as providing models for how a literary revolution could provoke a literal one, the context has now changed. Today, such texts are looked at as examples of how a new nation has found a new voice and, with it, a renewed national pride.

In its present phase, Irish Studies also serves to import a discourse which allows students and scholars to discuss China’s own predicaments. Through indirection, they are exposed to issues such as those surrounding nationalism, censorship, sexuality, gender, colonization, and ethnicity. Thus Irish

writing, and its own history, has been forged into a gateway to the outside world, opening up issues surrounding modernity itself at a moment when, historically, the “modern” is the new universal through which today’s generation aspires to enter the developed world. Having entered that world only in recent generations, Ireland may be seen as providing a map for that journey.

Thus, as more and more translations of Irish writers appear in the PRC, they create their own gyre, widening out across its most literate society. Should we ask: will the widening end in “mere anarchy”? Or, as Yeats predicted in *A Vision* (1925; 1937), will it prove the beginning of a new cycle of world history: one in which the East (including China) emerges as a growing power, both politically and culturally? Should Yeats prove prescient, Ireland and its writers may be seen as playing a distinctive role in China’s newly rising status, giving evidence of how literary revolution can inspire political action – as well as ushering the new China into its own version of modernity and so into the myriad possibilities of its future.

Notes

¹ Following are the current list for Irish Studies Programmes and their professors in the PRC and Taiwan today: Beijing Foreign Studies University, Irish Studies Centre (director Prof. Wang Zhanpeng; Prof. Li Yuan, plus three other faculty members). Peking University (Prof. Zhao Baisheng, Institute for World and Comparative Literatures; Prof. Zhou Xiaoyi, Department of English). Beijing International Studies University, Prof. Liu Yan teaches Irish literature. CASS, Beijing (Prof. Fu Hao, translator of W.B. Yeats at the Institute for Foreign Literatures; Prof. Li Jingkun, a political scientist at the Institute for European Studies). Shanghai Normal, Centre for Irish Literature (director Prof. Pu Durong, undergraduate and graduate students; it specializes in three research fields: Anglo-Irish Literature, Gaelic Literature, and Irish Literature translation and research in China). Fudan University, Shanghai (Prof. Chu Xiaoquan is the Director of the Faculty of Foreign Literature, which includes a detailed Irish Studies module focusing on George Bernard Shaw; Prof. Dai Congrong published the first translation into Chinese of the first third of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* in 2011). Nanjing University (a small centre headed by Prof. Yang Jinzai, Vice-Dean of the Foreign Languages School and editor of the *Foreign Literature Journal*). Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade (Dr Feng Jianming (Séamus), Associate Professor at SIFT and Director of a small Irish Studies Centre; he teaches a masterclass on James Joyce). University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, Sichuan (Prof. Li Chengjian teaches a module on Irish Culture and History). National Taiwan Normal University, Irish studies programme in the department of English (Prof. Zhuang Kunliang, editor for *James Joyce in Taiwan*).

² Cf. *The Irish Times* (2013), “Global Diaspora Forum in Dublin looks at creating opportunities at home and abroad” (May 13).

³ Hart not only spoke fluent Chinese (although it was said, with an Irish accent), but he also had a long-term relationship with a Chinese woman which resulted in three sons. Cf. Li, in Wildy 2003, 43, 84.

⁴ For further elaboration of this issue, see William A. Callahan, chps. 5 and 6 in *China: the Pessoptomist Nation*, New York, Oxford UP, 2010.

⁵ Today Roman Catholicism in China is called *Tiānzūjiào*, 天主教, literally, “Religion of the Lord of Heaven”. The Protestants, arriving later, were called *Jīdūjiào* 基督教, literally “Jesus Religion”, a name they still retain.

⁶ See, for instance, Jane Olymeyer, *How the Irish Became British*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2012.

⁷ Broadcast July – August, 2008. Podcast to be found at: <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/podcast/podcast_chinaandtheirish.xml>. Written version as Brendan Parsons, “Transplanting China to Ireland: Three Generations of the Earls of Rosse”, McCormack 2009, 62-72.

⁸ Following details are taken from “The Importance of Being Earnest in China: Early Chinese Attitudes towards Oscar Wilde”, in McDougall 2003, 75-94.

⁹ W.B. Yeats comments (in 1925) on its popularity with the Young China party; see Beckson, ed. (1970), 396. Montgomery Hyde reports that Robert Ross saw copies of the essay, translated into Chinese and Russian, on sale in the bazaars of Nijni Novgorod in 1908; see Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1976, 381.

¹⁰ Had he lived longer, however, O’Casey might have been painfully surprised by the Mandarin version of his *Playboy of the Western World*. Set in a massage parlour in Beijing, the 2006 production proved controversial when a member of the audience complained about the shortness of the skirt worn by Sha Sha, playing the Sarah Tansey character. Following the complaint, the play was attended by two policemen. A very mild replay of the riots that broke out in the original production.

¹¹ *Dengdai Geduo (Waiting for Godot)* (1965), trans. by Shi Xiangrong, Beijing, Zhongguo xiju chubanshe. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and ended with the death of Mao in 1976. A new edition was issued in 1983.

¹² Cf. Jane Ford (1996), “The Odyssey of ‘Ulysses’ into China: Shannon Center Fellow Publishes Translation of Joyce’s Masterpiece”, <<http://www.virginia.edu/insideuva/textonl-yarchive/96-05-31/6.txt>> (04/13).

¹³ For further analysis, see “Censorship and Self-censorship in Chinese Poetry and Fiction”, in McDougall 2003, 205-224.

¹⁴ “Finnegans Wake becomes a hit book in China”, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 5 February 2013. Dai’s opinion as to its popularity also from this source.

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