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Transnational (Il)literacies: Reading the "New Chinese Literature in Australia" in China

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Ancient Chinese culture is to serve the purpose of contemporary culture and foreign cultures are to serve the purpose of Chinese culture.
—Mao Tse-tung

The transnational "turn" in Australian literary studies was the subject of lively critical debate at the time my colleagues Alison Broinowski, Paul Sharrad and I in 2008 embarked on the ARC-supported project "Globalizing Australian literature: Asian Australian writing, Asian perspectives on Australian literature." Robert Dixon's 2007 essay "Australian Literature—International Contexts" charted the development of Australian literary studies from the cultural nationalist phase of the early years through to "the *inter-* or *trans-national* perspectives that have emerged in a number of humanities disciplines since the 1990s" (24), and outlined his proposal of a research agenda for "a transnational practice of Australian literary criticism" (22). In an earlier paper, Dixon had advocated the need for scholars of Australian literary studies to be able to read languages other than English and be more aware of non-Anglophone traditions. In relation to the study of Henry Handel Richardson he writes: "We can only begin to understand this greatest of Australian writers if we are prepared [. . .] to think beyond the boundaries of both the national and the literary—beyond the boundaries, in fact, of Anglophone culture" ("Boundary Work" 41). Also in 2007, David Carter, in "After Postcolonialism," speculated on the future of literary studies beyond the postcolonial moment of the 1990s, suggesting that it would be closely attentive to "Australia's long history of interdependence in imperial and global networks" and "to the circulation of cultures beneath and beyond the level of the nation" (119). He offered the following list of themes for this new direction in literary studies: "Australian modernity or cosmopolitanism, transnational cultures, critical race and whiteness studies, Asian-Australian identities and diasporas, material print cultures, and [. . .] studies of Indigenous modernity" (119). Ken Gelder, in setting out his version of a research agenda for Australian literary studies in 2005, acknowledged the transnational turn while at the same time raising concerns about its application to Australian studies and Australian literary studies: "We can wonder how easily, and in what ways, the national and the transnational can sit together: and this is the second predicament for our sub-discipline, especially important when we think of Australia 'in the region' or when we think in terms of globalization." Examining recent research projects awarded Australian Research Council and other funding, he observes that "we can at least see that the national as a category does indeed—for better or for worse—retain a great deal of cultural, political and commercial force" ("Notes" 2005).

As organizers of the 2008 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference, the Wollongong team decided to focus on this articulation between the transnational/global and the national in Australian literary studies, hoping that the papers would shed further light on these debates, at the same time enriching the theoretical arguments underpinning our own project. We were not disappointed. The conference papers (many of which subsequently found their way into the special issue of *JASAL* for 2009, "Australian Literature in a Global World") ranged from readings of individual writers and works from cross-cultural and transnational perspectives to astute, often highly critical evaluation of the transnational debate and its applicability in the context of national literary paradigms. Graham Huggan, for example, in "Globaloney and the Australian Writer," argues that while sweeping statements about globalization have invaded debates about the national literature, they have in no way loosened the cultural nationalist grip on the discipline and its institutional foundations: "The basic argument driving the whole will be that cultural nationalism continues, despite increasingly regular announcements of its demise, to provide the ideological bedrock for debates about the future of Australian literature; and, more provocatively perhaps, that it continues to generate significant globaloney of its own." Despite his skepticism, Huggan argues for greater recognition of the transnational circulation of Australian literature: "Australian literature isn't *everywhere* (how could it be?) but a sizeable part of it is *elsewhere* than Australia, and

this particular recognition of its dispersal, which should at least provide some kind of safeguard against perceptions of its diminishment, can only be to the good." Lydia Wevers, focusing on her own experience of reading Australian literature from across the Tasman, ponders the way particular readers do (or do not) frame their reading through a sense of its national affiliations. Professional readers often have a vested interest in the nation as a cultural category and their own role in its protection:

> All literatures have their coteries, but in the case of small national literatures like Australia's and New Zealand's, coterie-dom and cronyism go with the territory—the publishing networks, editorial influences, marketing teams, literary agents, writers and reviewers are connected, and it is not hard to arrive at the idea that something called "Australian" or "New Zealand" Literature is a special club, with rules and obligations, prefects and third formers. (Wevers 2009)

Wevers's point, however, is that, unlike professional readers, "the reader who knows what she likes" is not normally guided by national loyalty in her reading choice or reading experience. Michael Jacklin's paper in the same issue, "The Transnational Turn in Australian Literary Studies," presents a survey of the transnational debate (including many of the papers mentioned here) in order to comment on the curious absence of reference to non-Anglo Saxon writers and writing, or to multicultural literary studies, within the recent critical conversation:

> Throughout most of these papers, in fact, research into the transnational dimensions of Australian literature appears to be mostly assigned to mainstream literary studies, meaning that attention will continue to be directed towards the works of Anglo-Celtic Australian writers, in English, or possibly, with regard to overseas circulation and reception, to the translations of these works. In other words, although the scope and reach of Australian literary studies may expand as the discipline goes global, there is no accompanying assumption that the corpus, or the canon, of Australian literature will be radically altered. (Wevers 2009)

More recently, Philip Mead, in his chapter of *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009), entitled "Nation, Literature, Location," confidently refers to the current critical paradigm as "post-national Australian literary studies" (551). Although he acknowledges that "a discourse of 'nation' will always be with us" (550), he believes it has largely been displaced by the twin and complementary concerns with, on the one hand, "transnational comparisons and contexts," and on the other, "rereading of the local" (551). Nevertheless, his argument, a version of a claim common to much globalization theory ("glocalization"), while supported by his overview of recent critical work focusing on local or regional geo-cultural categories, begs a number of questions related to the different modalities by which the nation survives as an epistemological, institutional, as well as cultural signifier within local/global discourses. Ken Gelder's latest foray into the transnational debate, published in *JASAL* in 2010, is more interested in reading practices as ways of framing Australian literature. His paper, "Proximate Reading: Australian Literature in Transnational Reading Frameworks," surveys a range of methodologies from different modes of "close reading" to the "distant reading," which to Franco Moretti (2000) is the means by which readers approach "world literature" or literature drawing on social and cultural contexts with which they are not familiar. Gelder's notion of "proximate reading," which "relies on the reader's negotiation of relationships between origin and destination," is posited as a way of conceptualizing what readers actually *do* in the process of transnational meaning production: juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar; constructing and deconstructing equivalences, similarities and differences with varying degrees of precision; moving in and out of different interpretive frames.

For scholars engaged in different modes of transnational critical practice, following these debates has been enlightening as well as, on occasion, frustrating. It has been heartening to see these concerns, with which many of us have lived for a long time, move into the mainstream and even take center stage in conversations about Australian literature. Questions of whether, why and how Australian literature is, has always been, and/or will always be transnational have been analyzed with insight, as has the role of the nation as a cultural category at different moments in the development of the discipline of Australian literary studies. The niggling doubt is, paradoxically, directly linked to the quality of the arguments. The very fact that it is those readers and critics Wevers might call the "prefects" of the exclusive club that is Australian literary studies (the most respected specialists, the "usual suspects") who have been prominent in the debate, also means that it is *their* "rules and obligations" which have informed it. It means that the distant or proximate transcultural readings have been proposed or performed by readers who are also the best *close* readers in the sense that their expertise in the area of Australian culture and literature informs their argument at several levels. It means that much of the critical energy has been devoted to demonstrating that canonical Australian writing has always been transnational, and some to comparative transnational readings, whereas other dimensions of transnational literary studies, in particular the distant or proximate readings discussed by Gelder, have been analyzed but not performed for the simple reason that these readers know Australia and Australian literature far too well to position themselves at a distance. The reason why the focus on reading practice, alluded to by many but specifically addressed by Wevers and Gelder, has, to me, proved the most useful part of the transnational debate, has less to do with whether or not the nation figures prominently in the reader's mind and more with the kinds of transnational *literacy* that are brought to bear on the reading experience. Huggan refers to Spivak's call for the "transnational literacy" required to understand new forms of global or "world" cultural production**,** but implicit here, and more explicit in Gelder's essay, is an awareness that transnational literacy often goes along with an at-most semi-literate (or, to the expert, even

culturally illiterate) reading of one or several of the elements of the cultural transaction.

My argument is that the globalization of Australian literature also entails the inclusion into Austlit conversations of readings that will be so different from those of the experts that they may appear as simple misreadings. As teachers and scholars of Australian literature we have all been in situations when we have felt called upon to explain to overseas students or conference presenters why we think their reading doesn't work: it is based on inaccurate information about the contexts that informed the text's production. But our eagerness to correct such readings may also mark the limits to *our* transnational horizon. Can such readings nevertheless be "right" within a different reading framework, or, if factually incorrect, can they still be culturally productive? In his contribution to the 2008 ASAL conference, Nicholas Jose warned against the ready dismissal of readings informed by what we may deem inappropriate cultural frames: "Different cultural contexts generate different textual readings that are valuable for just that reason." His argument, made in relation to different readings of Australian literature presented by Chinese scholars at different moments in their country's troubled history, brings me finally to my own small example through which I hope to demonstrate some of the complexities involved in literary categorization and meaning production across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries: the reading, in China, of work by Australian writers of Chinese descent.

Chinese Australian writing, or diasporic Chinese writing in Australia, has been recognized as an important and growing category within Australian literature since the 1990s, and has already generated a sizable body of literary criticism (see for example Lee M. 1998, Khoo 2003, Lee R. 2006, Broinowski 2003, Ommundsen 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, Madsen 2009). In China, its critical discovery is even more recent. With the ascent of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, a new openness to foreign cultures (including literature) replaced the tight control on foreign influence that had characterized most of the Mao era. This soon resulted in a near obsession with Western (especially American) culture. At the same time, and primarily for economic reasons, the large overseas Chinese diaspora became increasingly interesting to the Chinese government. Culturally, the diaspora was seen as an opportunity to promote China abroad but at the same time regarded with suspicion: China's unique sensitivity to negative portrayal means that the cultural production of the diaspora is carefully scrutinized and some of it even banned from China (the work of Jung Chang, for example). Successful overseas writers, if they are not overly critical of their (or their ancestors') homeland, are claimed for Chinese literature. The study of overseas Chinese literature got under way in the 1980s, initially focusing on Chinese American writers. By far the most popular is Maxine Hong Kingston; others who have received considerable attention are Amy Tan, Frank Chin, Gish Jen, Ha Jin and Qiu Xiaolong. In more recent years, these have been joined by others, and gradually, interest in diasporic cultural production also outside of the US has grown.

Australian writers have never figured prominently within overseas Chinese literature. The reasons for this are complex. Australian literature as a whole remained largely invisible for a very long time, dwarfed by the dominant traditions of the US and the UK (for detailed discussions of the study of Australian literature in China, see papers by Ouyang Yu and Wang Guanglin in this issue). In China, the perception of Australian culture as an oxymoron frustrated efforts to promote the country as anything other than an exporter of primary produce. The persistent prejudice by which Australia is portrayed as a second-rate Western nation—attractive for its clean air, beaches and comfortable living, but inferior to the US and Europe in the cultural stakes—has been difficult to shift. Chinese Australians, and by extension, Chinese Australian writers, are tainted by the same image, somehow regarded as less successful than those who have made it to the main centers of Western culture. Moreover, Chinese Australian writers have often been regarded as difficult, dull, or simply too different and culturally unpalatable to rank highly with publishers and translators or on the syllabi of university courses. For such reasons, although the most natural "home" for Chinese Australian writing in China would be within the category of overseas Chinese literature, the majority of teachers and critics working in this area have rarely looked to Australia when making their choices of texts to translate, analyze or put on university courses: having had little or no exposure to the writing themselves, they see little reason to make the effort to know it better. In fact, what interest there is in Chinese Australian writing—and it is gaining momentum—instead comes from within the networks of Australian studies and Australian literature in general. It is largely the work of individuals, cultural "ambassadors," both Chinese and Australian, who have worked persistently to promote Australia, Australian writing, and Chinese Australian writing. From the initial "Gang of Nine" who studied Australian literature at the University of Sydney in the late 1970s (see Jose; also Wang in this issue) to Nicholas Jose himself and a number of other Australian academics who have assisted in establishing centers for Australian studies, to writers who have toured festivals or spent time as writers in residence at universities and other cultural institutions, the nodes of cultural contact multiply and networks of dedicated scholars and teachers come into being. Increasingly important in this context are Chinese scholars who after studying and living in Australia have returned to China, bringing with them an interest and varying degrees of expertise in Australian literature. Qian Chaoying, for example, lived in Australia from 1992 to 1995, working as an editor of Chinese language newspapers and magazines while writing a PhD on Chinese Australian literature. He now teaches and conducts research on the topic in China. Lili Ma completed a PhD at James Cook University, and after returning to China has continued her work as a teacher and critic of Chinese Australian writing. Ouyang Yu, while still a resident of Australia, travels regularly to China for teaching and research and publishes in Chinese as well as English. His work both as a scholar and creative writer is well known within the Australian studies scholarly

community in China. With many more opportunities for academics and research students to visit Australia for shorter periods (many sponsored by the Australia China Council), transnational contact is gaining pace, as are the activities of Chinese networks of Australian studies and Australian literary studies.

An important point to note is that the category of Chinese Australian writing in China is substantially different from the one we know in Australia.[2] In Australia, most readers only have access to texts written in English (or, as in a few cases such as *Maidenhome* by Ding Xiaoqi, translated into English), and by far the greatest part of the critical literature is concerned solely with English language work. Academic readers in China read these texts, but they also read Chinese language writing, which constitutes a surprisingly large body of work. Brian Castro, Hsu-Ming Teo, Fang Xiangshu, Ouyang Yu, Beth Yahp and William Yang have received critical attention based on English language texts. Some authors have been translated into Chinese and so are available to a wider readership: Brian Castro (*Birds of Passage*, *After China*, *Shanghai Dancing*), Li Cunxin (*Mao's Last Dancer*), Hsu-Ming Teo (*Love and Vertigo*) and Lillian Ng (*Silver Sister*). But a large group of writers have published work not available in English. Only a few of the writers in this group would be recognized by Australian readers: Sang Ye, Tian Di, Bi Xiyan, Ouyang Yu, Liu Xirang, Shen Zhimin, Leslie Zhao (Zhao Chuan), Shi Guoying, Huang Yonglian, James Chang, Julia Chang-Hsia, Zhang Dianzi, Jiang Jingshi, Liang Qiyun, Huang Yuye (Xin Shui, Laurence Wong), Huang Huiyuan (Li Shu), Bing Fu, Zhuang Weijie, Fang Langzhou, Tao Luoyong, Wu Li, Li Wei, Yi Fu, Liu Ao (Liu Xirang), Zhang Wei, Liu Guande, Huangfu Jun, Ding Xiaoqi, Ying Ge (Liu Yingge), Yan Lihong, Yan Tiesheng, Wang Hong, Lu Yanglie, Zeng Fan, Hai Shuhong, Tang Jiyu, Da Lu, Jiang Jianning, Zhong Yazhang, Li Mingyan, Cai Zixuan, Lin Da (Kang Ning), Xin Qianbo, Xu Jiazheng (C.C.Hsu). Many of these writers, it should be pointed out, are not considered "literary" enough to be the subject of academic literary criticism. That, however, may not be the only reason they are not receiving much critical attention. The scholarly community in China has, on the whole, proven itself to be rather orthodox in its choices, and in the case of literature produced outside China, would normally focus on texts and writers who have been sanctioned by scholars in the country of the text's provenance. It is not a little ironic, perhaps, that while claiming overseas Chinese writing as Chinese, teachers and critics in China nevertheless look to the diasporic writer's host country for a "tick of approval" before admitting him or her into their own literary canon. When it comes to *reading* the texts, however, Chinese readers and critics feel less bound by critical practice in the writers' country of residence.

As is the case with most Australian literature published in China, promotion relies heavily on recognition in the form of major prizes, or on best-seller status in Australia or, even more importantly, outside Australia. Brian Castro, who has been a difficult author to sell in China, is promoted as the winner of major literary awards. This "sales pitch" is not dissimilar to that employed by Australian publishers, but international comparisons are bolder: just as *The Thorn Birds* is promoted as the Australian version of *Gone with the Wind*, so Castro's *After China* was claimed as "a contemporary *Arabian Nights*," Hsu-Ming Teo has been called Australia's Maxine Hong Kingston, and Beth Yahp Australia's Amy Tan. The cover blurb of Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo* reads: "This book has sold over one million copies in South-East Asia and is gloriously on the bestselling list for creative writings in English by overseas Chinese." The overtly commercial nature of promotion practices signals a major shift in the Chinese literary industry over the last two decades: while literary worth and cultural relevance always have been and always will be important, they are now being used and measured not only for their intrinsic value but also for their potential to translate into commercial gain.

A category of overseas Chinese writing that has enjoyed considerable popularity in China since the 1980s is known as "overseas student literature." These texts are generally written by mainland Chinese students who have traveled to the West for educational purposes, mainly to learn English. The texts have been used by readers hoping to travel overseas as their introduction to the various cities and countries and the opportunities for study and work offered to Chinese. They thus function as guides for would-be overseas students and aspiring migrants, but individual stories offer detailed insight into the lives of their writers and the wider community of students and recent migrants. Most of the texts are autobiographical, but many turn into more fully developed literary narratives featuring a number of characters and complex plot development. Disillusionment features prominently in this genre: having embarked on their overseas adventure full of hope and fuelled by an obsession with the West common in China in the 1980s and '90s, the students encounter difficulties of various kinds. Educational institutions do not live up to their expectations; opportunities for work are limited and they are forced into lowly paid jobs that stand in the way of their educational success; the host community (including the diasporic Chinese community) treats them with hostility or indifference; hopes of changing their status from temporary to permanent residents are dashed. Australia has produced a large number of such texts in Chinese, with titles often indicative of frustrated aspirations: *My Fortune in Australia*, *Australia: Beautiful Lies*, *Staying at the End of the World*, *Having a Foreign Woman as My Wife*, *Awakening in Australia*, *Lost in Australia*, *Gold Dream in Australia*, *The Green Card Dream*, *Born to be a Concubine*, *The Eight Eccentrics in Sydney*, *Bleak Sydney*, *Melbourne Doesn't Have Tears*, *Parrots in Paradise*, *The Story of Migratory Dragons*, *Lost Humanity*. Though popular, overseas student literature is not a genre generally considered to have great literary value. An entry in a Chinese dictionary reads: "the works in this genre are relatively weak in artistic sensibility and expression and most manage only to describe superficial phenomena or are full of too many ideological beliefs. Rarely are there any profound works" (cited in Ouyang, 79). Work currently under way by scholars both in Australia and in China is set to challenge this view in the case of some texts associated with the genre.

While it is true that the majority of these authors do not aspire to high literary status, it is also true that generic classification can be misleading and that a number of such texts deserve greater recognition both as important social documents and as literature.

Academic criticism of Chinese Australian writing in China to date has been concerned primarily with writing in English. Critics often favor a comparative perspective. Wang Guanglin, in his book *Being and Becoming: On Cultural Identity of Diasporic Chinese Writers in America and Australia* (2004), compares the Australian writers to the better-known Americans. His focus on identity is similar to that of Western critics, but he does not shy away from pointing out the cultural shortcomings of some of the Australian criticism. Nicholas Jose, for example (in spite of his status in Australia as a China expert), is among those accused of having a rather stereotypical knowledge of China: "they think they are in a better position as an authority to interpret Chinese culture [. . .] As a result, diasporic Chinese writers are always appreciated, like a racial fetish, as an Other and remain in their marginal status" (256). What I think we can observe here is the desire to provide a kind of corrective, supplementing but also pointing out cultural limitations in the Australian commentary on this body of work (and frequently in the literary texts themselves). It is this kind of reading that makes diasporic writing a particularly fertile ground for the study of transnational literacies: categories such as "Chinese," "Australian" and "Chinese Australian" will not only have different meanings to different readers and critics depending on their own cultural positioning, but the texts themselves will be variously embedded in such categories. Ambiguously positioned between nations and cultures, they are texts that may be the subject of very different close readings at the same time as they are ideal candidates for Gelder's proximate reading practice of ongoing negotiation and reframing.

National loyalties and national sensitivities figure prominently in comments on individual texts. Australia as a national entity and cultural category is considered by some critics, but generally more as an example of a Western nation than one with distinct cultural characteristics. Knowledge of Australia is mostly factually accurate but superficial, and just as Australian criticism stands accused of stereotyping China, so its Chinese counterpart produces examples of an Australia gleaned from personal experience, tourism guidebooks, and perhaps from overseas student literature, rather than from detailed knowledge of history and culture. China and the Chinese loom much larger in the criticism: representation of Chinese by diasporic writers; memories of and attitudes towards China; modes of "Chineseness" adopted by writers and characters; the host culture's attitude towards and treatment of its Chinese visitors and citizens. Echoes of the vastly different views on overseas Chinese that have informed Chinese policy at different moments in the country's history persist and in some cases shape the reading in ways that to an outsider may be surprising. The starkest examples of this were found in two contrasting readings of Ouyang Yu's novel *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*. Ding Yongjiu, in an article entitled "Ouyang Yu's Representation of Chinese Australians in *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*," portrays the novel's protagonist as a successful Chinese abroad, an illustration of what the open policy of recent decades set out to achieve:

> As a scholar, he wins respect from both cultures. His looks and actions regain him cultural respectability as well as masculinity.
>
> Dao Zhuang possesses qualities that are shared by all cultures, and this means that he is no different from anybody else in the most basic sense. Hence he cannot be classified as "Other."
>
> The tendency to cling to Chinese culture is expounded as the plot unfolds. Among the oldest and most magnificent in the world, Chinese culture is a precious heritage for all mankind.

To Australian readers, this reading seems to be based on a novel very different from the one we have read, in which (most of us would agree) the protagonist portrays himself as a failure and regards both home and host country with disillusionment bordering on despair. While it may be tempting to dismiss the reading simply as wishful thinking on behalf of the critic, we may also want to consider some of the circumstances in the portrayal of the character as well as in the contextualization of the reading that combine to produce this interpretation. The category of the nation certainly exercises considerable influence over the reading in examples such as these, as, arguably, it has done in the reception of Ouyang's work in Australia.

A very different interpretation of the same novel informs Wang Labao and Zhao Hongmei's article "Exile's Return: On Home-Resentment in Ouyang Yu's *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*" (2005). No longer the cultural ambassador, the author is here cast in the role of traitor to his home country, putting down China in order to ingratiate himself with his adopted home:

> In his recent novel *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, a work about an exile's return, Chinese-Australian writer Ouyang Yu betrays a dangerous resentment against his homeland. Catering to the mainstream population of the author's adopted culture, the book speaks of China and its people in all the abusive extremities of Orientalism.
>
> The novel, by its very tone, begins with contempt and ends with hatred.
>
> [Ouyang Yu] needs to attract readers from mainstream Australian society and, to win their recognition and merge into mainstream Australian society, he needs to reshape his cultural identity. For this reason, it is a natural choice to meet their expectations and tastes.
>
> Ouyang Yu is not the only writer of Chinese origin who longs to integrate with the mainstream society to which he has migrated and to be accepted by the mainstream society by uglifying (his) homeland in his work.
>
> Since the 1990s, migration has become an important

> branch of world literature but it is not always the kind of patriotic literature we prefer to read and it does not always represent the third world literature, either.

My reason for quoting at some length from this paper is not merely to point out discrepancies between this reading and the ways in which Ouyang's novel has been read in Australia, although these are obvious: few Australian readers would conclude that the author of *Slope* writes in order to "integrate" into or "be accepted by" mainstream Australian society. But differences in interpretation here point to similarities in the reading positions adopted by critics in China and Australia: just as Australian readers have been offended by Ouyang's portrayal of their home country in his poetry and fiction, so their Chinese counterparts display their sensitivity to negative representations of China, interpreting this as an attempt to flatter the host nation. Ouyang, it would seem, has the unique gift of offending home and host nations equally, but readers, depending on their own national affiliation, will be selective in how they choose to take offence.

While the examples cited here demonstrate that different cultural literacies can produce conflicting readings that easily translate as *illiterate* in different contexts, I want to conclude with a transnational reading that clearly shows the value of cross-cultural perspectives in the elucidation of diasporic texts. Qian Chaoying, who has lived in Australia but now teaches in China, brings to his reading of Chinese Australian literature his extensive knowledge of Chinese intellectual traditions and is thus able to illuminate aspects of the texts that would not normally be available to Australian readers and critics. In his book *The "Death" of a "Poet": Metaphor of an Era* (2000, parts of which are summarized and translated in Qian, "Death" 2001), Qian argues that death is a major preoccupation in recent Chinese Australian literature (the others are residence, work, gambling and sex), and traces this theme through Chinese cultural history, from Confucius' refusal to discuss death to a fascination with the subject in post-1980s Chinese literature. The theme is read as continuous with current trends in China and at the same time as "an expression of cultural psychology, linked to the anxiety of identity which occurs in the encounter with another society" ("Death" 229). Qian's strength is his ability to locate this writing (he is one of the few Chinese critics to comment on both Chinese and English language texts) within Chinese culture, in relation to migrant experience in Australia, *and* in the context of Western cultural trends and theory. He offers astute comments on the paradox faced by many recent Chinese migrants: "to be a 'proper' Chinese, you have to go to the West, but once you have gone to the West, you are no longer a complete Chinese" (235). Studies currently under way (among them the PhD theses of Huang Zhong and Huang Dan associated with the Wollongong project) take their inspiration from this approach and thus promise to bring to the study of Chinese Australian writing perspectives that will significantly enhance our understanding of the cross-cultural and transnational contexts of production informing the work.

This admittedly small and selective sample of Chinese readings demonstrates that transnational critical practice does not leave the nation behind; on the contrary, much of the critical energy is invested in debating national loyalties and sensitivities, and in assessing the modalities within which the national categories that participate in the particular transnational exchange that is diasporic writing are juxtaposed and played out against each other. In light of the more extreme examples of cultural nationalism that surface in this writing (in Australia as well as in China), one may find oneself longing for a day when critical practice has become truly "post-national," but there is little to indicate that this will happen any time soon. On the other hand, the institutional construction of an Australian national literature has clearly benefited the study of Chinese Australian writing in the sense that interest has been fostered within Australian studies networks in China, and from there is growing into the wider networks of comparative diasporic writing. The growing interest in Chinese Australian writers among students and young scholars was much in evidence at the recent conference "Transpacific, Transnational and Translational: Australian Literature in the Age of Globalization" at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign (October 2010). Women's writing and Indigenous writing have taken over from writers like Patrick White as the research topics of choice for the current generation of postgraduate students, and diasporic writing also figures high on their agenda. "It bridges the gap," one PhD student told me, "and provides an entry into Australian literature where our cultural knowledge is relevant." To a reader of Chinese Australian writing who will never be able to fully "bridge the gap" in terms of transnational and translingual literacy, this interest is particularly heartening. While most Australian-based critics remain monolingual, it may be that these are the scholars who in the future will bring the greatest transnational literacy to the reading of diasporic writing. There will be national and cultural blind spots, and our reading of each other's culture will always be proximate, but there will also be insights that only such approximations can afford. ❑

NOTES

[1] Research for this paper was conducted by the author in collaboration with Dr Ouyang Yu, who located, classified and translated sources in Chinese language. The observations in this paper are based on his bibliographic research but also on numerous interviews with Chinese scholars. I also want to acknowledge the input of PhD students Huang Zhong (Frank) and Huang Dan (Rachel), whose work on Chinese language Australian writing has greatly added to my understanding.

[2] It should be pointed out that most of the research on which this paper is based was carried out in mainland China. Hong Kong and Taiwan present different scenarios which will not be discussed in detail here.

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