

This article was printed in Language International 6 # 5 (1994). Given the changes that have taken place in China since then, it is mostly of historical interest. It is also posted as a tribute to the openness of the late Professor Ye Shuifu for granting the interview.

THE TRANSLATORS' ASSOCIATION OF CHINA

During a visit to China sponsored by the Daloon Foundation, I had the privilege to interview Professor Ye Shuifu, president of the Translators' Association of China (TAC), and other members of the executive board. Professor Ye Shuifu is a distinguished literary translator of Russian and has translated Maxim Gorki's works into Chinese.

Ye Shuifu: We are pleased with this opportunity to address the international translation community, and I would like to present the situation for translation in China.

Translation has always been important to China, but there are, nevertheless, periods which stand out in this context. The first period was during the Eastern Han Dynasty (A.D. 25-220) where Buddhist scriptures were translated. Another one is found in the 19th century when translation was used extensively for communicating Western science and technology, as well as the literature of European enlightenment of the 18th century.

In this century, there have been three periods. The first one was brief, lasting from 1917-1921 and was characterised by the "New Culture Movement".

The second began after the liberation of 1949 until 1976. In this period there was large-scale translation of foreign work. In very generalised terms, material for study was translated from Russian, but English, French and German were also widely translated and significant emphasis was put on introducing Asian, African and American cultures in China.

The third period began with the 'Policy of Openness' in 1979 where the doors have been thrown open to translation from all foreign countries, including literature from the Nordic ones. Being a literary translator, I would like to illustrate the explosive development in translation work with examples from literature: the period 1947-1979 saw the publication of a total of 200 foreign titles a year. In the period 1980-1989, there were no less than 700 titles a year. In other words: translation activity has more than tripled, and types and national literatures translated have also expanded tremendously. There is also much more modern literature.

There are 20 publishing houses specialising in translated works, ten journals which publish translations exclusively and something like 7,000 people who have editorial functions connected with translated literature.

CD: *How about other types of translation?*

YS: Nearly 30,000 books have been translated from 1978 to 1990. About a fourth of them are works from the social sciences, including scholarly publications, economics, philosophy and encyclopaedias.

The largest number of translators is employed in the natural sciences and technology, ranging from space technology over agronomy to cosmetics. But most of their work is published or used only in internal reports.



The entrance of the building housing the The Translators' Association of China, Beijing during my visit 1994.

CD: *Could you tell me about the Translators' Association of China?*

YS: Yes. The Translators' Association of China was founded in 1982 and is thus a young organisation compared to the activity of translation in this country. Its objective is to unite and organise translators, to support study and research, to disseminate information, to improve professional standards, and to protect the rights and interests of translators and interpreters.

It is the national umbrella organisation comprising 49 corporate members, meaning provinces, cities and the like which are locally organised and arrange regional conferences and seminars. Once every four to five years, there is a national conference which elects a national council.

There are academic subcommittees charged with specific areas, such as literature, social sciences, science and technology, international communication, minority national languages, etc. They usually meet every second year at conferences drawing audiences of 150-200 members.

Our Secretariat, whose daily work is overseen by the Secretary-General, has its offices in China Foreign Languages Publishing and Distribution Administration, but let me assure you that we do not own the place. The Translators' Association of China - and translators in China - are not wealthy.

We publish *The Chinese Translators Journal* which has a circulation of 15,000.

Internationally the Translators' Association of China became a member of the FIT, the International Federation of Translators, in 1987, and I joined its council in 1990. This has made for easier interna-

tional contacts, the closest ones being with Japan, South Korea, Tanzania, Germany and Russia. We have numerous agreements about exchanges and mutual visits. Within the framework of the FIT, we are also trying to build up an Asian Centre with other Asian countries.

CD: You mentioned professional standards. Could you expand on this?

YE: Yes. Despite the general prosperity of translational activity, there are problems with quality. In general, and again limiting myself to literary translation, good writers usually have good quality translators, whereas medium-level writers are often neglected. This is not fair, so TAC calls for improvement in translation work. Accordingly, we pay much attention to foreign translation theory and literary criticism. Schools like feminism, postcolonialism, deconstructivism help to broaden the basis of translation.

CD: Can people make a living from full-time translation?

YE: A few can. But by and large payment for translation work is not so high as to allow so. Most people working in translation have additional sources of income. There are, of course, individual variations.

However, the whole situation is changing: previously literary translation would be relatively well paid, but these days technical translation is more remunerative. In addition, translators working into foreign languages are better paid than those who translate into Chinese.

Even though most translators cannot work exclusively with translation, we do have various levels or grades among translators. Senior translators are thus on a par with full professors and can supervise and assess quality in translation work, and salaries are increased correspondingly. We do not have 'official translators' in the Western sense, but requesters of translation work can turn to 'authorised or licensed units' where all members are qualified to do the work. Here team work ensures quality by means of revision. It is used to speed up work, for articles, government reports, and, occasionally, even literature.

CD: What about interpreters?

YE: They are members of our Association and there is a subcommittee for these important mediators in cross-cultural communication.

CD: Do you distinguish between consecutive and simultaneous interpreting?

YE: No. We make no such distinction in our organisation. Both types may be used at the United Nations or in business negotiations.

CD: How are minority languages dealt with?

YE: There is actually a subcommittee in the TAC which comprises 30,000 people employed in translation work with the minority languages. Some documents are translated into these languages, such as Mongolian and Korean because the language users do not read Chinese. There is a special bureau for

translation and publishing in minority languages.

CD: *According to your information folder on the translation scene in China, there are nearly 1 million people working in translation - in the widest sense of the word - in China. What about the future workers in the field of translation?*

YE: English is taught as the first foreign language at nearly all seats of higher learning in China. There are English departments at most of them and English is usually taught also to graduates in other fields. To give you an idea of the effort involved I can mention that there were 5.8 million graduates 1987-1992. English has always been the first foreign language, but even so it has gained more prominence in recent years. It is followed by Russian, Japanese, and German.

CD: *Do you instigate study programs in translation?*

YE: This is a job for the Foreign Language Departments of the universities, not for us.

CD: *What problems do you foresee in the future?*

YE: Translation work is getting itself established as a profession of pivotal importance in today's society. The shift towards economic concerns, that is, business and industry, will become even more pronounced in translation work. Within the TAC we believe that we can handle the expansion in the fields by establishing new subcommittees.

There is a problem facing literary translation. I mentioned at the beginning that the range of literature has widened. In that context, it is good to see contemporary literature promoted. This situation has changed dramatically now, for in 1992 China signed the Berne Convention about international copyright. Let me stress that we are not against copyright, but copyright cost limits the number of books that are translated and published in China.

I'd like to add a point: It seems to us that people - especially in the Western world - may have the impression that publication in China is a gold mine like so many joint-ventures. Let me be specific: bestsellers can make handsome sales but with our prices of perhaps 5-10 yuan (1/2 to 1 dollar) a book, royalties even for a bestseller running into more than 100,000 are not all that impressive. We are doing our best to solve the problems involved, and there is little doubt that they can be solved by means of bilateral agreements.