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My Books Wander the World

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Before starting to write this piece, I counted up all the editions of my work published so far in China and abroad (not including ethnic minority languages within China), and the total came to thirty-five languages and thirty-eight countries. The reason why these numbers are not identical is that English editions have been published in North America (the U.S. and Canada), the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, Portuguese editions in Brazil and Portugal, and Arabic editions in Egypt and Kuwait; while at the same time in some countries multiple languages are in use, so that in Spain my books have been published in both Spanish and Catalan and in India my books have been published in Malayalam and Tamil.

As my books leave China and wander the world, there are three dimensions to their experience: translation, publication, and reading. Within China, I notice, people tend to highlight the role of translation when issues of reception come up, and of course translation is crucial, but if a publisher won't publish the book then no matter how good the translation it's just going to end up locked in a drawer—or stored on a hard drive. And then readers matter, too: if a book is published but readers ignore it, then the publisher's going to lose money and won't want to publish any more books from China. And so translation, publication, and readership form a trinity, each equally vital.

1994 was the first year that books of mine were published abroad—in three countries: France, the Netherlands, and Greece. Now, twenty-three years later, eleven editions of my books have been published in France, four in the Netherlands, and in Greece—still just the one.

In France that year, books of mine were released by two separate publishing houses: *To Live* by the largest publisher in France, and the story collection *World like Mist* by a very small publisher, so small it was practically a family-run business. At the St. Malo Literary Festival the following year, I seized the chance to visit the first of these publishers and met the editor. I was writing my second novel at the time and asked him if he would be prepared to publish it. He shot me a quizzical look. “Is your next novel going to be made into a movie?” he asked. I knew right away it was a dead duck. So then I approached the small publisher. Their response was self-deprecating but equally discouraging: as a small publishing house, they explained, they needed to promote other authors and couldn’t give me preferential treatment. At that point I thought I had no future in France.

But then my luck changed. Actes Sud, which enjoyed an excellent reputation in France, had just launched a series of Chinese literary works in translation and invited Isabelle Rabut, a professor of Chinese in Paris, to be editor. She was familiar with my work, and no sooner was *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* published in the Chinese literary magazine *Harvest* than she asked Actes Sud to purchase the rights, and a year later the French edition appeared in print. After that, Actes Sud published my books one after another and in France I had found a home.

In the Netherlands in 1994, De Geus published *To Live*. Later it went on to publish *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, *Brothers* and *The Seventh Day*. The funny thing is, during all that time I never had any communication with De Geus: I didn’t know who my editor was or who my translator was, perhaps because an agency was handling things. The only Dutch Sinologist I knew was Mark Leenhouts, and he had never translated a book of mine. In July of last year I saw Mark in Changchun and we agreed that I would visit the Netherlands this September. When I asked him the name of my Dutch translator, he said with a smile, “Jan de Meyer.” Jan, he told me, was a

Dutch-speaking Belgian who lived in France. He's quite a character. This April, when De Geus asked him to edit a collection of my stories, he sent me an e-mail. The first sentence read, "You don't know me. I'm the guy who translated *Brothers* and *The Seventh Day* into Dutch." That was the full extent of his self-introduction.

Perhaps my adventures with Greek publishing are even more quirky. Some ten years ago, the Greek publisher Hestia decided to publish *To Live*. We signed a contract and they secured the services of a translator, only to discover that another Greek publisher, Livani, had already released a translation back in 1994. This was news to me: I didn't have a clue who had sold the rights to Livani. So Hestia pulled out of the deal, and Livani sent me a few complimentary copies of their edition. After that, both publishers forgot about me and I forgot about them. It was only just now, as I reviewed my list of publications, that I thought of them.

To find a good translator is very important. My Italian translators M.R. Masci and N. Pesaro, my German translator Ulrich Kautz, my English translators Andrew Jones and Michael Berry, my Japanese translator Iizuka Yutori and my Korean translator Baek Wŏn-Dam all looked around for a publisher only after they had translated a book of mine. In the case of my current English translator, Allan Barr, who first contacted me with the help of Andrew Jones, he translated a collection of my short stories, and it was a full ten years before the book was published. There are not too many people like him, who enjoy translating but don't care how long it takes for a book to appear, because good translators are typically either already well-known or about to become so, and many of them translate a lot of different authors, so normally they "won't release the falcon until they spot a hare"-- they won't start translating until they have a contract in hand. So finding a publisher who's a good fit is even more important.

In France my work has been translated by four different people, but since 1997 Actes Sud has been my sole publisher. In America, too, I have had four translators, and Random House has published all my books apart from the very first one. Having a single publisher handling all your books enables you to publish in a steady, ongoing fashion.

Back in the 1990s, after Michael Berry had translated *To Live* and Andrew Jones had translated *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, both manuscripts kept getting rejected by American publishers. One editor even wrote to me to complain, “Why is it that the characters in your novels feel responsible only to their family, and not to society?” His question exposed a historical and cultural difference between us, and I wrote back to explain that the Chinese state goes back three thousand years; such a long feudal tradition squeezed the life out of individuality, such that the individual had no real agency in a social context—he or she had the right to speak out only within the family. Those two books, I said, told stories that ended in the 1970s; it was later that things changed. Thus I tried to persuade him that my books deserved to be published, but to no avail. They continued to get the cold shoulder right up until 2002, when they came to the attention of my current editor, LuAnn Walther, who helped me gain a footing at Random House.

The key to finding a publisher who’s a good fit is finding an editor who appreciates your work. The first German publisher to publish my books was Klett-Cotta. After publishing *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* in the late 1990s, it published no more of my books and it wasn’t until a few years later that I understood why: my editor, Thomas Weck, had died. My later books all went to S. Fischer, because there is a fine editor there named Kupski. Every time I go to Germany, she makes a point of taking the train to see me, no matter where I am. Often she doesn’t arrive until early evening, and needs to get a train back to Frankfurt before sun-up the next day.

In 2010 I went on a publicity tour in Spain and in Barcelona got together with my editor, Elena. Over dinner, just for fun, I told her the story of my conversation with the editor from the big French publishing house. Her eyes widened and she clapped her hand over her mouth in shock: it seemed incredible to her that such an editor could really exist. At that moment I knew I wanted Seix Barral to continue as my Spanish publisher, even though they had only published two of my books at the time.

Now I should say something about my interactions with readers. Often I find myself fielding this inquiry: “How do the questions that Chinese readers ask differ from those that foreign readers ask?” I am asked this abroad, and I

am asked this in China too. It's a common misconception that abroad I will be asked questions of a social or political nature, but not in China. Actually, Chinese readers ask just as many such questions. Literature carries all within it. When we read in a book that three people are walking this way and one person is walking the other way, that already touches on arithmetic: $3 + 1 = 4$. When we read about sugar melting in hot water, this brings in chemistry. And when we read of a leaf falling from a tree, physics is implicated. If literature can't help but involve math and chemistry and physics, how could it avoid touching on society and politics? But ultimately literature is literature, and whether you're in China or somewhere else, what readers care about most are literary features like characters, outcome, and story. Once people are focused on the fiction itself, I feel there's no difference between the questions asked by Chinese and those asked by foreigners; if there is a difference, it's simply between this reader and that. When we Chinese read foreign literature, what is it that appeals to us? The answer is simple—literature. As I've said elsewhere, if literature truly possesses a mysterious power, it's because one can read a book by an author from a different time, a different country, a different culture, a different history, and there encounter a sensation that is one's very own.

When I interact with foreign readers, not all the topics are so weighty. People will ask, "How does this kind of literary event here differ from the ones in China?"

"In China, the population is huge," I tell them. "More people walk out of an event there than come to an event here."

There's another question I'm often asked: "What encounter with a reader left the deepest impression on you?"

That has to be when I made my first trip abroad in 1995, I tell them. At the St. Malo Literary Festival that year, in a huge tent that had been specially erected for the occasion, I made myself available to sign books. I sat behind a big pile of French editions of my work and watched as readers strolled past, their minds on other things. A few of them did pick up my book and flip through it, only to put it down and go away. After sitting there for ages I was finally approached by two little French boys, one of whom was clutching a

blank piece of paper. Through an interpreter they communicated to me that they had never seen any Chinese characters. Could I write a couple down? This was my first writing engagement ever outside China. I didn't write my own name, of course. What I wrote was: *China*.

Translated by Allan H. Barr