

The Harbin Files

Preface to Chinese Edition

The email message from Li Yao headed “Translation of your *Secrets and Spies*” took me completely by surprise.

It arrived in June 2007 while I was in Melbourne for a couple of weeks, working on a project. Returning late in the cold damp evening to the house where I was staying, there was nothing I wanted to do but go to sleep. It had been a long day and I was exhausted from a workshop on film ethnography, a subject completely new to me, followed by a melancholy Russian movie. Still, I thought I should check whether there were any emails which might affect the next day’s program so I jumped onto the computer to scroll through the headers. My eye stopped at the email with the intriguing heading from a Li Yao at an obviously Chinese email address. I opened it immediately.

Quickly scanning through the polite salutations, the sentence “Now I am translating your *Secrets and Spies*”, leapt out at me.

What did he mean, he was translating my book? Who had given him permission? My sharp reaction reflected my tiredness.

I was even more perturbed when I read that he had already contacted a publishing house in Harbin and hoped to finish translation of the book by the end of the year! How dare this person, whom I did not know, do all this without my permission! My mind flashed back to several emails I had received from China offering quick translation deals after I had presented a paper at a conference in Harbin a few years earlier. I was very wary that it was better not to have one’s work translated into another language at all, than translated badly.

This email was different. It was written in correct and polite English. The mysterious Li Yao mentioned that he was a friend and translator of Nicholas Jose, a writer I knew and had talked to recently. Moreover, in his last sentence, Li spoke of wanting to meet me in Australia to discuss translation and publication, including royalty. I felt

reassured that my proprietary rights were being acknowledged. Still, how and when such a meeting might take place remained unclear.

Calming myself, I read the email again from the beginning and focused on a sentence I had previously missed:

“(The book) was recommended to me by the Ambassador's wife 2 years ago. But I have been very busy and this project had to be postponed until now.”

Slowly, it all came back to me. While in Beijing exactly two years earlier, I had visited the Ambassador, Alan Thomas, a former colleague from my days as a diplomat. Complimenting me on my book, his wife, Sally Borthwick suggested that it might be of interest to Chinese readers. She told me about a Chinese professor who specialised in translating Australian authors – Patrick White, Tom Keneally and Nicholas Jose were but a few she mentioned. Did I want her to pass a copy of *Secrets and Spies* to him? I leapt at the opportunity! It had long been my dream to have my book translated into Chinese as so much of the story revolved around my family's life in Harbin over 60 years.

Before I left Beijing, I gave Sally a copy of the book for the Professor – I even inscribed it to him by name. But back in Sydney, with work and other pressures, I completely forgot to follow up what had transpired. Now I knew.

By now my earlier apprehension had transformed into impatience. How and when could I meet Li Yao in Australia?

I found the answer in an email which had arrived earlier that day from none other than Nicholas Jose, whom Li Yao had mentioned. Nick, a writer and academic had served as Cultural Counsellor in the Australian Embassy in Beijing in the late 1980s and continued to foster artistic links between the two countries. Li Yao had emailed him asking if he knew me and had my contact details because he was translating my book and wanted to meet me when he visited Sydney in August during a tour to various universities and cultural events in Australia.

Now I was really excited! I typed an immediate reply to Li Yao saying how delighted I was to hear from him and here began our correspondence.

Over the next couple of months, Li Yao encouraged me to write the additional postscript chapter I had been thinking about for some time to update on developments that had transpired since the book was first published. He also suggested that we include more photographs in the Chinese edition, especially those taken in the 1930s as these seemed to attract interest in China.

As the time for Li Yao's arrival drew near, I emailed him inviting him to dinner after our meeting and mentioned that my parents, both fluent Mandarin speakers, might join us. Li Yao accepted, adding that he would bring some fiery Dongbei spirit for my father as a memento of the cold Chinese north from which we came.

Our meeting with Li Yao was memorable. A man in his early sixties, he had lived through half a century of change and upheaval in China and was a true cosmopolitan intellectual. Our conversation ranged across a range of subjects – from the intricacies of translating and publishing books in China to our common roots in China. Li Yao was surprised to hear from my husband Andrew that his family had been amongst the 1200 Polish Jews who escaped the Holocaust on visas issued by the Japanese diplomat Sugihara and found refuge in Shanghai. He was fascinated by Andrew's online/web history of the Jews in Shanghai, *The Menorah of Fang Bang Lu*. We learned how Li Yao had chosen to specialise in Australian literature as a young scholar at the University of Inner Mongolia in the 1980s, after being given Patrick White's *Tree of Man* by a visiting Australian teacher. Since then he has translated and published over 20 Australian books, many by our most celebrated writers.

When my parents arrived, the conversation switched to Mandarin as they exchanged stories with Li Yao about their lives in China. This was a joy to behold as there is nothing that makes my parents more animated than speaking the language in which they specialised as young students of the newly formed Oriental Studies faculty at the Harbin Polytechnical Institute in the late 1940s. It also underscored my deep regret that I had not learned Chinese when I had the chance. It emerged that my parents and Li Yao had quite a few things in common. All three of them worked with languages –

my parents as technical interpreters in Chinese and Russian; Li Yao as a translator of English and Australian literature. Born in Huhhot in Inner Mongolia, Li Yao was also from the north of China and shared their love of spicy northern food.

The reminiscences continued over Peking duck, *jiaozi* and other delights at our favourite Chinese restaurant. As we were finishing desert, Li Yao and my mother remembered their favourite Chinese revolutionary songs, humming the tunes softly. When it came to the famous opera, *Bai Mao Nu* (the White Haired Girl), they burst into song and sang a few verses in unison. This was followed by a lively rendition of a few Russian songs that had been popular in China in the 1950s, including *Katyusha* and *Moscow Nights*, which Li Yao sang in Chinese and my mother and I simultaneously in Russian.

I had the pleasure of seeing Li Yao again a few more times before he left Australia – at a lecture he gave on Australian Literature in China at the University of Western Sydney and again in Melbourne just before his departure. It was a real privilege to meet and get to know this gentle scholar, whose deep commitment to translating Australian authors has been so vital in introducing at least a small percentage of Chinese people to Australian literature, culture and history. This has been at the expense of the financial return and fame that Li Yao would have received had he chosen to translate American works. I am deeply honoured that Li Yao thought my book worthy enough to spend time on and I treasure the friendship that we have built through this process.

As you will read in the Postscript, since its publication, my book and the tale it tells of the little known community of Russians that once lived in Harbin and China has continued to connect me with a web of extraordinary people across continents and generations. Li Yao is one of them.