

Interviewee: **Jerry Schmidt** (UBC)

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SG = Shi Guang | JS = Jerry Schmidt

## **Qing Poetry, Translation Principles and Literary Theory: An Interview with Professor Jerry Schmidt**

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### **Abstract:**

Starting off with Professor Jerry Schmidt's looking back at his own academic career which was greatly influenced by lots of outstanding scholars and is full of delightful surprises, Shi Guang and Jerry Schmidt discuss a series of problems concerning the research status of Qing poetry both in China and the English-speaking world, basic principles of translating traditional Chinese literature, and literary theory's impact on Sinology or China Studies. Professor Schmidt also shares his research plans for the future.

**Keywords:** Qing poetry, translation, literary theory, Sinology, English-speaking world

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**SG:** At the very beginning, I want to know what makes you stay and insist on the traditional Chinese literature research area? You mentioned, in one previous interview, that you hesitated to choose Indology or Sinology as your life-long occupation when you were a student.

**JS:** For a long time, I was interested in learning foreign languages, particularly

as vehicles for culture. In high school, because I'm of German descent, I taught myself German and got some phonograph records to learn the language and then I started learning other languages. By the time I finished my high school courses, I thought I wanted to try and learn a really difficult language, so I thought Chinese was one of the hardest languages to learn and then I started studying Chinese. When I was studying German earlier, I became interested in German poetry and read Goethe, Schiller and other classical German poets. I got really interested in poetry, I never had that passion for poetry when I attended our English classes in school, but I really began to enjoy reading poetry. And then when I was studying Chinese at the University of California, Berkeley, I found a set of phonograph records and texts for the *Tangshi Sanbai Shou* (Three Hundred Tang Poems 唐诗三百首) with an English translation. Every night before I went to bed, I would read the original Chinese text to see if I could recognize the Chinese characters. If I didn't know the characters, I looked them up in a dictionary and then I read through maybe one poem if it was a short one, so I got really interested. Because I was born and raised in the countryside in the United States and I really loved living in the countryside, I was particularly drawn to "*Tianyuan Shiren*" (pastoral poets 田园诗人) and "*Shansui Shiren*" (landscape poets 山水诗人), you know some poets like Wang Wei 王维 (701?-761).

Then I read more and more poems as time went on after I got more knowledge of Chinese, but one thing I was struck with all along was how little we knew. Just listening to my teachers' lectures and hearing them speak and then going to the library looking for what had been published in English so far, I realized there were lots of things that Western scholars had to study and I also suspected that there were lots of things that Chinese scholars had to do too, and although they studied way more than we did. It still seemed to me that there are a lot of unknown periods. And as I went on, what really inspired me was that when I was looking through the stacks there at University of California, Berkeley, I found a book titled *Songshi Xuan* (Anthology of Song Poetry 宋诗选), however now I can't remember the name and author of this book, because that was a long time ago. At that time I thought this book might not be very interesting because all my teachers had told me that I didn't need to read "*Songshi*" (Song poetry 宋诗), because "*Ci*" (Chinese lyrics 词) is the most important form of that dynasty. I thought, well, okay, I was going to try it anyway. Then I took it back to my room where I was living at that time and started reading it. I felt like a whole new world opened up to me, because it was totally different from "*Tangshi*" (Tang poetry 唐诗). I was fascinated by it, because for example, a lot of the Tang dynasty's poets were very pessimistic, sometimes

like “*Wubing Shenyin*” (make a fuss about nothing 无病呻吟), but I found that Song dynasty’s poets were very humorous and loved life and it really appealed to me as I felt these poets were speaking directly to me and had a genuine love for nature, such as Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (1037-1101). So I began to wonder if, you know everybody held the belief that “*Songci*” (Song lyrics 宋词) was the only thing interesting in the Song dynasty and thus they ignored “*Songshi* (poetry of the Song Dynasty)”, there was something wrong with the way in which they were doing research. And then, at that point, if I wanted to explore periods after the Tang dynasty, maybe the Song dynasty should be the first to consider, but I should go right down to the Qing dynasty and even to the “*Minguo*” (Republic of China 民国) and read all this and see what poetry written in classical Chinese was like during these periods. Maybe there is nothing, because everybody tells me there is nothing or very little. However, after my experience with the “*Songshi*”, I’d better not believe everything people told me.

Then I did this and I just kept on doing this. Some of the other things that I discovered when I was doing my MA at UBC was that I became interested in Han Yu’s 韩愈 (768-824) poetry. When I mentioned the name of Han Yu, his “*Guwen*” (classical prose 古文) was commonly mentioned. However, I found his poetry was much more interesting than his prose works. In fact, I found it was absolutely fascinating, because a lot of things in it reflected his black humor and his very dark view of the world. It seems that so many things in his poetry were very similar to what I read in 20<sup>th</sup> century Western literature, such as the works of Franz Kafka (1883-1924). I thought how was it possible that Han Yu in the Tang dynasty held views similar to Kafka in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so again I started to wonder, because when I talked to most of my teachers, they would say, oh, Han Yu, actually, he was not very attractive as a poet, he wrote a not-very-interesting combination of prose and poetry. However, I trusted my own feelings. Maybe I was wrong or my taste was bad, but that is when I started, I just kept going on and on.

I got particularly interested in the Qing dynasty, because every time I read “*Qingshi*” (Qing poetry 清诗), I found the works very interesting and creative. One of the first writers who made me interested in Qing Poetry was Huang Zunxian 黄遵宪 (1848-1905). I became interested in him at first, because he wrote a lot about oversea life, about places in San Francisco, England and so on. I found it was fascinating to see my own culture through these poems from the viewpoint of somebody else from a different culture. It was utterly fascinating, because they could see many things that possibly escaped me. Huang talked about some of the dark periods in American history, such as the anti-Chinese movement in California, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I found all of these were fascinating. So, it just went on like that. One

of the nice things is that when I came to China, I always found somebody, although not so many, say that, “oh I also love Han Yu’s poetry”, or someone say “oh, Huang Zunxian was a famous diplomat and political reformer, and he also wrote some very interesting poetry”. So, I felt that the whole way of thinking about classical poetry in China was changing, particularly the younger scholars I talked with, even some of the older ones.

A scholar who really influenced me a lot, who has unfortunately already passed away is Qian Zhonglian 钱仲联 (1908-2003), I met him in Suzhou University. His student Ma Yazhong 马亚中 was teaching in this university too. Qian Zhonglian specialized in poems of the Qing dynasty, he told me that there were works of many important authors which I should read, so on and so forth. That conversation really got me excited because I just saw this huge field that would probably take me two or three lifetimes to research. In other words, it is something that I enjoy doing and will keep me busy. That’s basically how it happened and I started to read works of these different authors.

Right now, I’m studying poetry of Shanghai during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I’m also interested in learning more about Huang Zunxian’s life in the United States. No one has written detailed articles about it, they just used few things that Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) and Huang Zunkai 黄遵楷 (1858-1917) wrote, but most of what they said is wrong. I knew it after I conducted some detailed research. For example, the date which was recorded by Huang Zunkai and then copied by Liang Qichao, of Huang Zunxian arriving in San Francisco was supposedly the same day the U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. It was wrong, and it took quite a bit longer for the U.S. to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act. Of course, that’s the really interesting thing that you could imagine being Huang Zunxian, as a Consul General and hearing about this anti-Chinese movement and seeing its effect on the local Chinese there and what effects it had on those Chinese who wanted to travel to the United States from Canada or directly from China. There was a debate about this bill going on in the United States Congress, involving the U.S. President of that time, Chester Arthur. It took months for it to be passed. At that time, the news was changing every day and finally the President of the United States had to decide whether he should sign the bill or not. You can imagine Huang Zunxian sitting there in his office every day, reading the English newspapers and contemplating what was going on. Every day there was a different story and you can imagine the stress and anxiety in his mind, because he could see all the terrible things right there in San Francisco in California. At that time, he had to deal with these things but he didn’t know what the U.S. government was going to do. Its policies, just as I say, kept on

changing, and there were new rumors every day. It is so different from the story that Liang Qichao told us, that is, when Huang Zunxian arrived America, the bill had been passed and he got to work furiously to combat it. However, that was totally wrong, because what he did was much harder. He was waiting there in suspense, not quite knowing what he should do, because he had no idea what the U.S. government was going to do. That's the real story and you might admire Huang Zunxian even more if you read the real story. Of course, I want to talk about the actions taken by Huang Zunxian when the bill was passed, rather than some rumors that Liang Qichao or Huang Zunkai passed on. That's a really interesting story. I think it is one of the most exciting things.

At that time, Chinese children were not allowed to study at California's public schools, and they were excluded entirely. Huang Zunxian, with the help of Consul Frederick Bee (1825-1892), who was an American, was able to force the state of California to allow Chinese children to attend public schools. I think it was an amazing victory, considering the fact it was done by just two men using the court system. Bee had received legal training and he knew how to use it. If Chinese paid taxes, why shouldn't their children be allowed to attend the public schools? They had paid their taxes, so it was totally their right. It was legal but they weren't allowed. It was also a very dangerous situation, because there were lots of people who would like to kill Huang Zunxian. He even had a poem written to Frederick Bee for his life being saved on one occasion. So, you can imagine the pressures and the difficulties that he had during his three years in the United States of America. That's an amazing story. I bet there are lots of books about Huang Zunxian, but unfortunately, they all repeat the same stories told by Liang Qichao and Huang Zunkai, which are totally wrong. I once read the original American newspapers and some of Huang Zunxian's unpublished writings and UVic's collection of Huang Zunxian's letters. All these items provide a very different picture from what you can know in his poems, including my earlier book about Huang. At the time I wrote it, I had no knowledge of those other available materials. You leafed through the newspapers of San Francisco day by day, as Huang Zunxian himself once did, and you can get a real picture of what he was thinking and what he was doing in those days. So, it is really a fascinating story.

Recently, I have been strongly interested in Huang Zunxian's predecessor, Chen Shutang 陈树棠. I just finished an article, which is going to be published in *Qingshi Luncong* (Tribune of Qing's History 清史论丛), a journal in Beijing. Chen Shutang was the Consul General before Huang Zunxian and he's also quite interesting. However, he is totally unknown in China, and there are just two short articles about

him written by people who attempted to discuss his career in Korea after he left the United States of America. In fact, he was a really important person in Shanghai. He wasn't a poet, and I tried but failed to find a collection of his poetry. He knew, however, a very famous poet at the time and now called Jin He 金和 (1818-1885). I was so happy to see that because it's widely accepted that Jin He was really an outstanding author who hasn't been studied fully. There is a section in Ma Yazhong's wonderful book on Late Qing poetry, but there is a lot more that should be done in the future. Of course, Professor Tsung-cheng Lin 林宗正 is also doing work on him. It will be good to see more studies on Jin He, because he's really an outstanding author.

**SG:** I heard that Professor Lin intends to translate Jin He's poems for the English-speaking world. I think this will be very useful for both Chinese and Western scholars.

**JS:** Yes, I believe so, it is very important to have English translations and studies on Jin He. Maybe someone might say he is not even interested in Jin's poetry, as it deals with the whole Taiping Rebellion, his own experiences and experiences of other people. However, it is utterly fascinating. Once you start to read his poems, you can't stop. It is great that someone wants to translate his poems, however, the problem lies in the fact that translating his poems is not easy, although, luckily, he didn't write poem in a style that was full of allusions, like Huang Zunxian.

**SG:** Let's talk about your research method. I know when you wrote your book about Huang Zunxian, in order to make clear a place name, "*Piao Di Sang*" (飘地桑), which is mentioned in Huang's writings, you spent a long time driving along the west coast of North America.

**JS:** Yes, it was a very interesting question and finally I was sure this place was Port Townsend. Now, it is a small place, but at the time, people thought it was going to be the terminus for the railway from the eastern United States to the Pacific coast. So, it was a place under great development, people speculated in real estate, just like Vancouver, or bought land with the hope of making money. Unfortunately, the government of the United States changed the plans, and they made Seattle rather than Port Townsend the terminus. But at that time, Port Townsend was a major seaport. People would go to Victoria from Port Townsend, and they would also use it as the very first stop in California. So, it was a very important place. Huang mentioned it several times, but I could never figure it out when I saw its Chinese name "*Piao Di Sang*". Finally, after I looked at the coastline when I drove along a couple times back and forth to California, it occurred to me that this must be the place, and Port Townsend was the only place that fit. You have to use your own imagination to

do this, and you need a passion for getting the story right.

I just hate quoting the words from someone else, such as Liang Qichao who got it wrong. For example, another story told by Liang was that the first day that Huang was in the United States, a whole band of Chinese were arrested for violating the so-called Cubic Air Act. According to this act, a certain amount of cubic feet of air was required per person, and if people lived in a place that was too crowded, they would be put into jail. Huang went to the San Francisco Jail, which was crowded with Chinese prisoners. Then, he told the policeman in charge that he was breaking the Cubic Air Act, because the jail was even more crowded than where they had been living before. According to the story reported by Liang Qichao, the police officer released all of those Chinese prisoners. I just don't believe this story, since I read all the newspapers from that period, and this story wasn't mentioned at all. At that time, a police officer doing anything kind for Chinese would be reported in the newspapers. People would be very critical and say that this police officer is not doing his duty and is being too kind to these people. The newspaper reporters frequently called Chinese "pagans", because most Chinese weren't Christians. If a Chinese consul general came and told a police officer to release Chinese prisoners, it would never happen. It made a nice story but it wasn't true. Liang always tried to overstate the real situation. In many times, he did not have evidence or look into the materials carefully, that's why some mistakes were made. However, unfortunately, all of us made the same mistakes in all books about Huang Zunxian and they give a false picture about what things were really like, which was a lot more difficult, because no one released those Chinese prisoners, and Huang constantly agonized about what was going to happen before the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, and after it was passed, he tried to deal with it. Because one of the big problems with the Act was that it was very ambiguous; for example, Chinese merchants were allowed to go to the United States and do business, but workers and laborers were not allowed. What was the difference between a merchant and a laborer? Sometimes it was very hard to determine if a person selling vegetables on the street was actually a merchant or a laborer. So, there were always court cases involving Chinese citizens, and Huang had to deal with them, feeling obligated to help these people get lawyers and follow the course of their court cases and try to provide material and evidence to help out those Chinese who had been arrested. Some jails were very dangerous places where Chinese would be mistreated. Huang had to provide solutions. It was a horrible and stressful job, terrible burdens were on him, but he did whatever he could and had a number of dramatic successes.

**SG:** I also read your book about Zheng Zhen 郑珍 (1806-1864) and knew that

in order to have a better understanding of Zheng Zhen, you personally went to Guizhou Province. This research method really required a lot of time and energy. What is the meaning of this research method for you?

**JS:** I think that when you attempt to figure our things written in the Qing dynasty or the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, you really have to go to the local place for a number of reasons. First of all, you meet people and scholars in the local places, many of whom know much more about the subject than people in Beijing or Shanghai. When I went to Guizhou, I met Huang Wanji 黄万机, who wrote *Zheng Zhen Pingzhuan* (Critical Biography of Zheng Zhen 郑珍评传), and Long Xianxu 龙先绪, who wrote the commentary to Zheng Zhen's collected poems. Both of them are really knowledgeable about Zheng Zhen. Long Xianxu just published a new book, and he was there collecting various titles and gave bibliographic information about Zheng Zhitong 郑知同 (1831-1890), the son of Zheng Zhen. Zheng Zhitong was also an outstanding poet, although not as great as his father. Besides, he was an excellent scholar of "*Wenzi Xue*" (philology 文字学). If I hadn't gone to Guizhou, I would never have met either of these men or visited the places that Zhen Zhen wrote about. I went right to his town and actually, I found his grave. I got some incense and made wine offerings to him. At that time, I found it very moving. I had a very emotional experience there, which certainly helped me finish the project. This project was a very hard one. It took a lot of work, and there were so many things I had to talk about in that book which I normally wouldn't have to worry about before writing a book on Chinese poetry. Just one example, Zheng Zhen wrote these wonderful poems about inoculating his grandson for smallpox. I had smallpox vaccinations myself when I was a little boy, but I didn't really know much about this disease and what was happening. But I realized that if I wanted to understand Zheng's poem, I had to do a lot of research on smallpox to figure out what he was actually writing about. I had to know this, because Zheng himself was very knowledgeable about medicine. His father was a "*Ru Yi*" (scholar-doctor 儒医) and he himself read a lot of medical books too. So, you have to do this extra reading. There is a lot of work to do, but it's certainly worthwhile.

**SG:** From Professor Chen Shixiang 陈世骧 (1912-1971), Yu Dacheng 于大成 and Li Qi 李祁 to Professor Ye Jiaying 叶嘉莹, you met so many outstanding scholars when you were a student. Can you talk about their influences on your research respectively?

**JS:** I never had any idea what I was getting into when I started studying classical Chinese literature. The first person who really inspired me was Yu Dacheng, who later became the Dean of Arts in National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan.



He came from Shandong Province, China and was one of the most energetic and knowledgeable teachers I ever met. He had a great sense of humor. He helped me to read the complete collections of poems of Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365?-427) and Xie Lingyun 谢灵运 (385-433). I was lucky, because there was a Stanford Center in Taiwan at the time and some of us had one to one classes with Yu Dacheng. What was more important is that I could see how he read and interpreted poems. He would talk about the allusions in these poems and the sources of verses and things that I hadn't thought about before. I was just amazed at how much he knew, I never realized that a Chinese scholar could know so much, or have such a tremendous amount of knowledge in his mind. That was the thing that just astounded me, I never had a teacher like that when I was in the United States or in Canada.

When I came to UBC, I was lucky to have Li Qi as my teacher, who wrote beautiful Chinese poems and was also quite knowledgeable about Western literature. She was sent to England due to the Boxer Indemnity and she was interested in Wordsworth's poetry and thus translated all of his Prelude into classical Chinese. At first, I thought that was a strange thing to do, but later I realized it is a beautiful translation and captures the spirit of Wordsworth. She had great sensitivity for poetry and also was happy that I was doing things that weren't completely conventional. For she was kind of rebellious herself in various ways. So, I appreciated that she was open-minded to things that I was doing.

I also was lucky that I had one-to-one classes with her when I was at UBC.

And then Professor Ye Jiaying. At the beginning, I was a bit nervous when Ye "laoshi" (teacher 老师) came, because I knew she had published many books on "Ci", and although I thought I'd like to read more "Songci", I was much more interested in "Songshi". I was afraid that she would tell me to do research on "Songci" for my Ph.D. dissertation and I couldn't quite imagine that. But when I started talking with her and told her that I was interested in studying Yang Wanli 杨万里 (1127-1206), she said there was no problem in that way and she gave me a lot of really valuable suggestions when I was doing that thesis. She was also extremely knowledgeable. When I read some allusions, which were difficult to me, I took them to her and she could identify that kind of thing immediately.

Of course, I should also mention Professor Qian Zhonglian, he was so open-minded and welcoming to me. When I was in China many years before, a lot of scholars sort of hesitated to have too much communication with foreigners, because they thought they might get into trouble. But Professor Qian was never concerned about that. Every time I went to Suzhou University, he would invite me into his

home and have a discussion with me for hours. I learned so much from him. He had such a huge amount of knowledge of classical Chinese literature, which was one of the reasons why I ended up studying Zheng Zhen. At the time, I was preparing a book about Huang Zunxian, and he said Huang was a really interesting poet but there were other poets possibly even better than Huang. He listed their names and Zheng Zhen was one of them.

I heard something about Zheng Zhen from professor Yu Dacheng who was very interested in poetry other than Tang poetry, he had done a lot of reading besides “*Tangshi Songci*” (Tang poetry and Song lyrics 唐诗宋词). He suggested some authors at that time and Yang Wanli was one of them, and Yang later became the subject of my dissertation. He said you had better read his poems. They are quite humorous and very imaginative. So, I started to read his poetry when I was in Taipei. At the same time, he said there was another author I should study seriously, that is, the Late Qing poet Zheng Zhen, who was one of the most outstanding authors in Chinese literary history. I had never heard of him before that time. He told me “Zhonghua Shuju” (Zhonghua Book Company 中华书局) just published his works and suggested me to buy a copy. He said I could leaf through it now, although I probably couldn’t understand it, because it was too difficult right now for me to read. I could do nothing but just keep it. I had that book on my bookshelf for many years, and then finally I decided one year I had better write something about this man. It was still difficult to read his works, but then I by chance I got an email from somebody who said Long Xianxu had published his commentary on Zheng Zhen, and if I wanted it, he would send me a copy of it to me, and he did it. I looked at that copy and thought this was exactly what I needed. With it, I could proceed to write my book. So, these people mentioned above really had significant influences on me and helped me to complete what I was doing then.

**SG:** It seems that what made you choose Zheng Zhen and Huang Zunxian as research subjects is a series of unexpected occasions.

**JS:** Yes, unexpected things. Huang was the most studied of all the Qing poets when I came to UBC, I mean 1960s-1980s. He had aroused interest because of his participation in the reform movement of the late Qing. There were various selections of his works and, of course, there was Qian Zhonglian’s detailed commentary on his poems. So, he was probably the best studied poet of all those late Qing poets, that’s why he was a bit easier to study than others. As for Zheng Zhen, at that time there was no research on him in China or here. There are still a lot of outstanding Qing poets who have no detailed commentaries on their poems, which is a great shame. I don’t know now how many people are able to do that, it’s a really difficult

task. With computers, it's maybe easier in some ways, but having it all in your head, the way like Qian Zhonglian, is a lot easier than fooling around with a computer. I discussed this with Qian, he said, as to identifying allusions, it helps that I've memorized so many books, but at the same time I have to make associations. That's not easy, because sometimes one allusion has connections with many other allusions. Qian himself, unfortunately, didn't know how to use computers, he had no technical knowledge at all, but he realized how useful it could be. I think he's right. There are few scholars as learned as Professor Qian or Ye "laoshi". If children can be trained and immersed in the traditional cultures when they're small, there is still hope, but it's very hard in the present education system. I mean children have so much pressure to take exams and do well in math and English, they can't really concentrate on classical Chinese.

On the other hand, when I talked with Qian, he told me he regretted that he didn't know English well enough and that he couldn't go overseas. At that time, he thought there probably was quite a bit of interesting material about Huang Zunxian, maybe in foreign libraries or in San Francisco. By the way, that's another reason why I went into this topic. I thought there was a good point to Qian's words. I think if he knew all these interesting materials I found, he would have been delighted. Another thing he mentioned to me is that he thought that perhaps Huang had a diary; he had heard about it but never found it. I've never been able to find it either, but I hope someone will, because it would be such an amazing diary. I found Qing-dynasty diaries are so fascinating to me. There's a scholar named Zhang Jian 张剑 in Beijing, who published one wonderful book about Mo Youzhi's 莫友芝 (1811-1871) diary and he used this diary to write *Mo Youzhi Nianpu Changbian* (Detailed Chronicle of Mo Youzhi 莫友芝年谱长编). It has very fascinating material about Mo Youzhi, who was Zheng Zhen's closest friend. For me, it is particularly interesting to see what life was like back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the things that I like most in this diary is Mo's first visit to Shanghai where he visited various technical institutions, factories and so on. You can find detailed descriptions of what he saw and how impressed he was, and then he left his own son in Shanghai at the "Jiangnan Zhizao Ju" (Jiangnan Machinery Manufacture General Bureau 江南制造局) to learn technology and calculus, which were something new in China at the time. It's just really interesting to read, you can get a really comprehensive picture of what a scholar's life was like. Mo was a knowledgeable person who was really concerned about Chinese future. These people like Mo and Zheng were not just scholars, they loved their country and wanted to help it become better and improve the living conditions of the people.

Zhang Jian is a very industrious scholar and did a tremendous amount of work on his book about Mo, he had to visit so many different libraries to find fragments of the diary, because the diary of Mo was never published as a whole, a little bit here and a little bit there, and then he put it all together. It gives you such a detailed picture of Mo's life. There's still so much to be done in Qing poetry, there are a lot of poets needing to be researched carefully. The whole Ming Dynasty is basically unexplored in the English-speaking world. I don't think there's any other literature in the world like Chinese literature. For example, in English literature, there's so many books about Shakespeare, but there are so many outstanding authors in China. That's a good thing because it keeps us busy.

**SG:** The next question I want to ask is about your translation. I noticed that for all your published books, the translated works are a huge part of them. Could you talk about your ideas and methods when you translate traditional Chinese literature?

**JS:** Translation is more of an art. When I was in China years ago, I gave a talk and then one of the graduate student asked me something about translation. He said you must get a lot out of reading books about the theories of translation and I said, quite honestly, I have tried not to read too much about the theories of translation. I was being humorous, I mean, I should read about it. Translation is about your feelings towards the work and of course your skills in handling the target language. My skill is not very good but at least I try hard to make sure my English translation can give the reader a feeling similar to that of the original poem. Translations, I think, are important, because in many cases they're the only contact with Chinese literature and its cultural tradition. In UBC, we have Asian Studies Department, we have students studying China, India or other countries. Some of them don't care about anything except the particular country that they're studying. Sometimes, they just ignore anything outside of the West or European traditions. I think that's really a great shame and they're depriving themselves of a good deal of pleasure and of models that they can compare and which maybe can increase their own understanding of Western culture.

In my view, having some knowledge of Western culture can help someone studying Chinese culture, and having some knowledge of Chinese culture or Indian culture can help us understand our own culture too. We're still living in a world that has, at least in the university, a Western bias. This bias, hopefully, will be changed, but it's been a long time since things are like that. For example, it seems that Asian Studies Departments haven't changed much, which is a great regret. I believe that having the translations available at least makes that more possible and that's one reason why I really am interested in translation. We talked about a lot of Chinese

poets which have never been translated, such as works of Zheng Zhen. Before I did that book, there's a few translations here or maybe very little was done, and even Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798) too. Arthur Waley's book on Yuan Mei has some wonderful translations, but except for this book, there was very little. Like Huang Zunxian, I thought it was particularly strange. When I worked on Huang and his poems, I talked to some Western historians studying late Qing, but they weren't interested in Huang, because he wrote poetry and historians shouldn't be interested in poetry which isn't a proper form of historical material. I found some Chinese saying that, even though China has the tradition of "*Shishi*" (poetic history 诗史), it's very strange that these foreign scholars of China couldn't understand the connections. In fact, Chinese poets frequently wrote about historical events and their experience of particular events. If you want to understand the "*An-Shi Zhi Luan*" (An-Shi Rebellion 安史之乱), you should read Du Fu's (717-770) poetry.

**SG:** I notice you often use the word "enjoyable" to describe your ideal translation, could you talk about the exact meaning of this word?

**JS:** It's something that probably can only be explained from an individual view. If you read a translation and it holds nothing valuable to you, then it obviously has at least failed you. Maybe you're the reason for this failure, but in many cases, the reason is the translation. You should have some sort of emotional response to the translation. It doesn't have to be joy necessarily, if it brings you to tears, that's good too. If it makes you laugh, that's good too, or if you feel like your spirit is lifted or opened up in some way, that's good too. I think the problem with a lot of Chinese poetry translations into English is that they read sort of like Chinglish, strange English. This kind of translation tries to follow the exact syntax of the Chinese original poem. You just can't do that, it doesn't work from the standpoint of a reader, unless the reader wants to use the translation as a crib to understand the original Chinese, then that might be of some use. So, I don't think that's a right approach for translation.

**SG:** When I listen to your words, I just remember a very interesting fact. The Chinese government organized many scholars to translate Chinese classics into English, but it seems that the effect is not very good. What is your opinion of this phenomenon?

**JS:** I think the problem is that translating something into a language that is not your native language is very difficult. There are very few people who can do that well. Although those translations are readable, generally they are not very moving. I can't do translation like my teacher Professor Li Qi did, translating Wordsworth into Chinese, because it would be a total failure. I don't even want to give it a try,

because I know that it couldn't be compared with the beauty of the original in English. I think some of the translations published in China are very good, for example, *Rulin Waishi* (The Scholars 儒林外史), translated by Yang Xianyi 杨宪益, is a quite beautiful translation. He did it well, because he knows both English and Chinese very well. But most of these translations don't work very well as translations. The best thing is a collaboration, I think, between a native English speaker who also reads classical Chinese but maybe doesn't have to know it with a profound knowledge and a Chinese scholar who knows English and is also able to put Chinese into English or whatever target languages. Some really knowledgeable scholars in China really know the text well, so we can discuss the difficult parts with them when translating Chinese literary works. However, at the same time, it's very hard to arrange this kind of collaboration, although I think that could be a very fruitful path to follow. It's very hard to arrange, because, you know, getting two scholars together to work on something is even harder for a government. Governments have no idea about who's available or who might be interested in it or who has the time to do it or something like that. So, it is very hard teamwork. If the Chinese government can make more opportunities available in terms of funding things like this, it might work well. But I am not sure how useful it will be, you've got to have the right people working together, and selecting the right people is very important. What happens is that those people who have the best connections with the government tend to get the projects although they might not be the best people to complete them. I mean that this is not just a problem of the Chinese government, for all governments share the same problem. So, that could be a really major difficulty.

**SG:** Someone says poetry is lost in translation, do you agree with it?

**JS:** I don't totally agree with that; I mean there are some translations which really do capture the essence of the original works.

**SG:** Will you encourage your readers to read original texts?

**JS:** Maybe translation is a bad substitute but it is still a substitute. Most readers in the West don't have time learn Chinese, especially classical Chinese, and they will hopefully be encouraged to read good translations. After all, translations help us understand each other. After I published my book in English about Qing poetry, I got quite a few emails from students who said "oh I read your book on such-and-such and I'm interested in doing this", they asked me for suggestions about their work. There was a young scholar Bibiana from Roma University, I saw her in Shanghai this summer and she was actually working on Jin He. She said that she had got interested in it because she was reading something I had written, which made me quite happy. I've also had other people writing such things and saying that

they could read something and also wanted to study other aspects hopefully related to my research. I think that's one of the things that translations can do, to make it easier for someone to get into the topic. I mean the number of people doing research on classical Chinese literature, unfortunately, isn't that large in the West right now, but there are more and more students becoming interested in this area every year. Some of them certainly have been influenced by me and something in my works or by some other scholars in this field. The research of Qing poetry is a new thing but it's developing quite quickly. I've noticed that more and more things are written in China and more and more graduate students are doing related dissertations, this is a very pleasing beginning and I'm not the only person responsible for that. I've just played a very minor role in it. People like Qian Zhonglian and his students in China have greater impact on this. I think it's a great shame that Qing poetry has been ignored for such a long time. With the May Fourth movement, everything was re-defined. When I was in China a few years ago and talked to some young high-school student, they asked me what I was doing. When I said I was studying Qing poetry, they looked at me with amazed faces, all they knew was "*Mingqing xiaoshuo*" (Ming and Qing vernacular fiction 明清小说).

**SG:** In my opinion, this phenomenon perhaps is the result of the idea "*yidai you yidai zhi wenxue*" (a particular genre for a particular period 一代有一代之文学).

**JS:** Of course, this idea has the very pernicious influence on our understanding of the history of Chinese literature. "A particular genre for a particular period", that was certainly strongly influenced by earlier Western writings, but the idea has been totally forgotten in the West. Only people who study the history of Western criticism pay some attention to it, while this idea controls the whole public education system in China from university down to grade school. Its control in the university starting to crumble, although in grade schools and high schools it is still prevalent. This kind of idea is deeply influenced by Darwin's theory. The followers of this approach attempt to create a scientific theory of literature, which is one of the craziest things I ever heard of. I mean, what is scientific literature? It was also strongly influenced by the racism and nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was something that dominated the thought of a lot of people at that time. They thought that modern culture was a creation of white people, anybody who was different must be inferior and they should all obey what white people told them to do.

**SG:** Here we move to another question, I notice that you use the word "terra incognita" for a few times, but I am not sure if it is French or Latin. Why did you choose this word to describe the research areas you intended to study and why did you choose to do your research in "terra incognita"? As we all know, exploring the

“terra incognita” is really difficult because there are not so many research resources for you.

**JS:** This is a common Latin expression used in English, and it means “unknown land”. It is a great shame that younger scholars don’t study Latin anymore and the school system stopped teaching it, because classical Western culture is also very rich. So many things created by the Romans are still influencing our daily life, such as ideas, systems and aesthetic concepts. As for the difficulties, we encounter in “terra incognita”, I was lucky, because when I became interested in Zheng Zhen, someone published his poetry’s commentary. This situation was similar to what happened when I attempted to write my book about Huang Zunxian. Another important thing is that China started opening up at that time, which made it possible to go to China and learn from Chinese scholars. You know, for a long time, it was impossible to go to China. I was lucky I could seek assistance from a lot of excellent Chinese scholars, such as Qian Zhonglian etc. So that was good fortune for me.

**SG:** I frequently wonder about the research situation for Qing Dynasty poetry in the English-speaking world, could you tell us your impression of it?

**JS:** It is certainly much better than before and more and more people are working on it, but it’s certainly still considered to be marginal. Most scholars studying classical poetry still tend to concentrate on the literature of the Tang dynasty or writings of the pre-Tang era, so when I attended conferences, it was hard to find academic conferences about later poetry. There was a time in Germany a few years ago when almost all of us were working on poetry from the Qing Dynasty or the Republic of China which were written in the classical language, but such conferences are rare. The number is certainly increasing, and I think it will continue to increase too, because there are so many things that can be done and people are desperate to find new PhD topics. It’s true, it’s more challenging but it’s much more fun to write the first PhD dissertation about something that nobody has ever done before. It’s very exciting for being the first one. I think that’s an experience that a lot of Chinese students have now. When I talk to professors about who is doing what, I get the picture that there are more and more people working on the Qing dynasty’s poems. The situation here is similar, but it’s more limited in North America, it’s moving along and I’m sure that within the next 50 years or so, we’ll have some sort of more complete understanding of the Qing dynasty.

**SG:** We talk so much things about Qing dynasty’s poetry, I am curious, for you, what’s the most important and attractive part of Qing dynasty’s poetry?

**JS:** There are a lot of attractive things in this area, one of these things which I didn’t expect is a kind of spirit of rebellion and questioning of tradition. For exam-



ple, I read Yuan Mei's poetry, and the way he questioned tradition was unexpected. In one of his passages where he said that if we looked at *Lun Yu* (The Analects 论语), we realized that very little was actually written when Confucius was alive and that it is very hard to know what the book really tells us about Confucius. That's like a Christian in Europe saying that if we look at the Bible, we can't really know very much about Jesus. It's a very dangerous thing to say, if you had said that in early Europe, you probably would have been burnt on the stake. China was more tolerant, but it still could be dangerous to question the classics an orthodoxy. Yuan Mei was not afraid of saying things like that. I found this quite exciting. The spirit of rebellion, of not following ancient models and trying to do something new is very attractive to me. It is also a common thing that I find in Qing poetry at least from the Qian Long 乾隆era, I suspect there's a lot more in the early Qing period. I need to do a lot more reading and further study, but I just found so much in the 19th century now. I don't know if I can get out of the 19th century very easily for quite a while, but there are just so many interesting things to study.

**SG:** Have you ever imaged to drink with your research objects or to be their friends?

**JS:** I would like to carry their books around and be their "shutong" (a boy serving in a scholar's study 书童) . I know maybe I am not really anything more than that, but I would certainly like to sit at the table where they are talking about their work over the same period and be able to hear their conversations. I probably wouldn't be able to understand it, but I think if I'm living in that part of the universe, I'll be able to understand any language I want to understand and that would be very nice. I think Zheng Zhen must have been a really likable person. He was a wonderful father, you see the way he treated his son, even though his son sometimes didn't behave very well. He was a wonderful husband, he didn't have any concubines, he didn't patronize prostitutes as far as I know and he loved his wife. You can see it from his poetry, he loved his wife dearly and he wrote some really wonderful poems about her. I don't think he ever did anything improper. Zheng Zhen seemed to be wonderful to his friends, he did so much to help people, so I wouldn't mind meeting him sometime in the future. Of course, he also would be a good teacher, just like some of the teachers I had but even better, because he was able to write all these wonderful creative poems.

I've gone to Shatan 沙滩, hometown of Zheng Zhen, and I saw his tomb and I saw it needed some weeding. I think probably his descendants go there about once a year. There were many farmers nearby, and I borrowed one famer's "*Lian Dao*" (sickle 镰刀) and went there to do a little bit of weeding and to make some offer-

ings to him. I just found the whole experience so pleasing because finally I could do something for Zheng Zhen, even though he didn't live inside the tomb, I was still happy to show my respect and love. That's a really moving experience. I even felt his presence there, although I regularly didn't believe in such things, but I did feel a kind of presence of him when I was doing it, so maybe he was there. I wasn't really quite sure whatever produced that feeling, but it certainly inspired me to continue to do work on his poetry. Back then, people in Guizhou were so friendly and so helpful, maybe because it was place with not so many foreigners. They seemed to be very eager to help out anybody who went there, and of course the fact that I was interested in a local person was another reason. I would be happy to go there again.

**SG:** When you prepared to publish your book of Zheng Zhen, some scholars suggested you to use Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) or Pierre Bourdieu's theory to research Zheng Zhen. You disagreed with those suggestions and insisted that it was not proper to subject Chinese literature to Western theories. However, my question is the "modernity" is also a Western term, why did you choose it as your book's keyword and what is the exact meaning of this word in your book?

**JS:** What I found about Zheng Zhen and his followers was quite surprising. I didn't expect to see it back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for a lot of these things struck me as being modern, but I couldn't understand what were the sources of that and I couldn't understand what were the resulting effects. So, when I did some reading about Western theory of modernity, I discovered that some scholars we tended to be very rigid in their use of theory. They have a certain theoretical approach and they tend to use that to force everything into the same mold. I think this kind of approach is a dead end and probably more harmful than helpful. However, one idea about modernity theory that I found attractive suggests that we cannot really talk about modernity as a universal, but rather we should expect modernity to differ from culture to culture. There may be some common points, one of which is the doubting and questioning of tradition. I think that if we look at the development of the modernity of a culture, we would find that highly likely. If you are going to become modern, if you need to change with the changing world, you have to abandon parts of the tradition, and there is no way of getting away from that. So, I think there is a Chinese modernity different from a Western modernity. I believe this is a very useful idea. It is necessary to look at materials about the theory of modernity and to understand what they suggest. At the same time, I want to protect my freedom. I think that it would be very bad if I just choose one particular modernity theory and stuck with that. This is what has occurred in recent years, a lot of people sticking in their studies with a particular literary theory or something taught by their teachers or learned

by themselves in their earlier research. They have adhered to that for a long time. I think you must have an open mind, as I said, I don't want to say that my research would be motivated by theoretical constructs, but it does not hurt to look at them if they seem to have some connections with what you are doing.

**SG:** Could you talk about your opinion about the theoretical research tendency in Sinology and China studies?

**JS:** At least, we should question the obsession with contemporary literary theory that seems to rule a lot of the writing about literature nowadays, not just in the West but even in China. I have the feeling that at least some scholars in China prefer to read literary theories written by some French authors (e.g. Derrida) or something like that rather than reading the *Shi Pin* (Critique of Poetry 诗品) or the *Wenxin Diaolong* (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons 文心雕龙) or similar works. I think that all of them are certainly worth reading, but I think if you go to extremes in either way, you are more likely not to serve your readers very well.

**SG:** Some scholars, like Grace Fong 方秀洁, Li Wai-yee 李惠仪 and Qian Nanxiu 钱南秀, in the English-speaking world use the theory of feminism to research traditional Chinese literature, which refreshes our idea of poetry history, you also did some research on Yuan Mei's female disciples. What's your opinion of this research trend?

**JS:** I think it's great. It allows us to have communication with those authors whose works we have never read before. Some female authors are even better, because they wrote wonderful poetry. It's a shame to exclude them from the authors you want to read just because we think females should not write. If we read their works, we will discover how good they are. Professor Fong has done some very valuable work in that area, but I have not done much in this area. However, I did work on Yuan Mei's female disciples. In my book about Zheng Zhen, I considered that Zheng Zhen's sympathy for females and the importance he gave females in his writing are strong points of his modernity. I think that certainly is something occurring in a lot of cultures, becoming the modern age gives increasing importance to females. In this case, I think Zheng Zhen saw this, partially because he loved his mother so much. I mean his mother was basically the foundation of his family, those people who wrote about him said that without her there would not have been a Zheng Zhen. That is because his father was a doctor, but he would not accept money for any medical treatment he provided to patients, and, thus, he had a meager income. The only way through which his father could keep his family alive was by farming, which did not pay very well. His father also liked drinking, but he was not as economically productive as his mother was. His mother spent all the time spin-

ning, weaving, and looking after the household, and making sure that everything was done well. So, women were really important in Zheng Zhen's family. In a lot of his poems, particularly those poems from the Taiping period, you will find that the most heroic people described in the poems are frequently women, and the men are frequently inferior to them. This may reflect the reality of the age, because in such a period of distress and warfare, women may have been able to cope with that better than men, although men were tougher and better fighters, but women knew how to survive and keep their family members alive. The research of scholars like Grace Fong is very useful and can give us a more complete picture of the Qing dynasty.

We really need to understand the evolution of Chinese society and of the family in the Qing dynasty. This is something that I was struck with when I studied Yuan Mei. He slept with his grandmother until he was a teenager and she died of old age, he was greatly influenced by his grandmother and mother. His father was away most of the time because he worked for various officials as an assistant. I think a lot of families at that time were dominated or controlled or kept together by women. The idea of the patriarchy probably is incorrect, particularly for women families. I noticed these changes, the relations between men and women seemed to be changing, more and more people, like Yuan Mei, had female disciples, which was not possible before. Zheng Zhen taught his own daughter how to write poetry and later his daughter became an excellent poet. Women were considered important. They could receive education and do whatever they wanted. Anyway, they could do a lot of things which only men were allowed to do before. That fact was acceptable, suggesting the family and the whole society had changed. Almost all of the historians have talked about the conservatism of Chinese society and the backward status of women. However, from these real examples, that view doesn't seem to fit the widely accepted narrative. I think a great deal of research still needs to be done.

**SG:** We talk about theory a lot in China studies, whether in China or the West, and we are more theoretical in our approaches. How can we use theory in a proper way?

**JS:** I think that's a good question, but also a difficult one to answer. We certainly shouldn't just turn around and ignore theory. For example, when I talked about modernity, I read a fair amount of material on that question to get some ideas as to what people were thinking about modernity-related questions. Some people are studying China specifically, while others, even if they are not interested in China, attempt to study the whole question of modernity in general. I always hate to read books based on nothing but theory. Those books might miss a lot of things and are not very useful to most readers. Another thing that I talked about in my book on

Zheng Zhen was the question of science and technology, which I suppose I could have related to theory, but I discovered a number of times in the Qing dynasty, particularly in the case of late Qing authors, that authors were frequently interested in science and technology. In some cases, Western science and technology were introduced to them at that time. In many cases Chinese science and technology were important. This was a tendency going back to at least the Song Dynasty. Some of the things were quite startling. For example, Zheng Zhen wrote poems about pollution problems. I was so surprised when I read that, because it is like things that I was reading back in the 1960s. I noticed the poems in which he wrote about the smallpox vaccination of his grandson, which was something I didn't think anybody ever wrote about earlier in Chinese literature. He also identified some of the major problems of technology. He said our technology could be used to improve people's lives which is an important idea, but he also correctly pointed out how technology could be used by the wealthy to make themselves wealthier and to make the poor even poorer. He pointed out the problems of what could go wrong with technology. For example, he saw the lead mining in Yunnan Province where there was terrible pollution from the mining and refining of lead ore, all the trees had died and most of the animals had disappeared, the people there were subject to lead poisoning, providing images of a really terrifying future. I found all this quite surprising, because I hadn't read anything like it, in Europe at the time, even though the pollution was even worse in Europe. I was quite surprised when I saw it in China, in the 19th century. It's sort of theoretically pre-industrial, but in fact, it's pretty much like a modern industrial country.

Back to the theory question, I would agree that one should use whatever is helpful, if Western theory provides useful models and information, that's fine, but you should not become obsessed with it. You have to keep some sort of balance. It is also very important that you definitely have to understand Chinese theory. If you're studying an author, you have to find out what the author wrote about his or her own poetry and the poetry of other people. I think that that sometimes gives you some of the most valuable insights for understanding authors and things that they wrote or their friends or contemporaries wrote. If you ignore that, your research can't be done in a satisfying manner. All I want to do is use whatever theoretical model I need, whether from the West or China. The theories of Chinese literature are mainly found in "*Shihua*" (poetry talks 诗话). There is a theory that can be extracted from the critics' comments, it reflects a certain approach to poetry, and there are different ways of expressing ideas. Chinese don't tend to like orderly treatises, but I think you can certainly understand the way that the poets read poetry and what

they thought good poetry was by reading their comments. They may not state this in such an orderly and organized fashion as a Western critic would have in the 19th or 20th century, but it still has great value. If we ignore that, I think we're ignoring a really important part of the author.

**SG:** Could you talk about your research plans in the future?

**JS:** That all depends on how long I will live, I want to do a lot of things. First of all, I'm working on my Shanghai project, trying to understand more about what happened in Shanghai in the 19th and early 20th century. At the time, Shanghai was a center of influences from outside and also was a center of a dynamic Chinese culture. It is quite fascinating to see what was happening there and the reactions of people born in Shanghai and many people who went to Shanghai particularly during or after the Taiping rebellion, people like Jin He. I'm particularly interested in Yuan Mei's grandson, Yuan Zuzhi 袁祖志 (1827-1898?) who was a fascinating person and I've been doing work on him for a time, I might even do a book about him. I haven't made up my mind on that, but that certainly would be one way to comprehend the literary traditions in Shanghai during his lifetime. Also, I want to fully understand what Huang Zunxian did in the United States, I've got a lot of materials on his activities, many unstudied things from newspapers and I just need some time to go through it all. I have written a seventy-page article about Chen Shutang, Huang's predecessor, which probably will eventually be the first part of a book. The first article about Huang will discuss things from the time when Huang arrived San Francisco up to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The second one will deal with what Huang Zunxian had to do after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. I did publish one article about how Huang helped the Canadian Chinese. These two things above are what I intend to do right now. I certainly would like to do research on more poets of the Qing dynasty. But like I said, that all depends on time and health.

**SG:** Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate that you gave me so much of your time to do this interview, I gained a lot from our conversation. I hope you can keep healthy and I'm looking forward to reading more of your academic writings in the future.

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### **Author Profile:**

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