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A Conversation with Nicholas Jose on His Writing and Translation¹

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Nicholas Jose is an Australian author best-known for his fiction and cultural essays. He was general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009) and has written widely on contemporary Australian and Asian art and literature. In 2002-05 he was President of Sydney PEN. He was Visiting Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University, 2009-10, and is an adjunct professor with the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. He was Chair of Creative Writing at The University of Adelaide 2005-08, where he is now Professor of English and Creative Writing. He co-translated *The Finish Line* by Sang Ye (1994) and *The Ape Herd* by Mang Ke (included in *Poems for the Millennium*, 1998). He co-edited *Picador New Writing 4* (1997).

Linxin Liang (LL): Nicholas. You are very well-known as an Australian scholar-writer-translator. Can you share your educational and career experiences?

Nicholas Jose (NJ): I grew up in Adelaide, South Australia, and graduated from the Australian National University in Canberra with a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in 1973. I then studied as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, where I was awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy in 1978. I returned to Australia as a lecturer in English at the Australian National University, from 1978 to 1985. I went to China in 1986 where I taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University and East China Normal University in 1986-87. Late in 1987 I was appointed Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, a position I held until the end of 1990. After that I worked as a writer in Australia and eventually returned to academic life, first as Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, 2005-8, and then as a founding member of the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University, 2005-2011. During that time, I also taught at Harvard, 2009-11, as Visiting Chair of Australian Studies. I returned to the University of Adelaide in 2012 where I am now an Emeritus Professor. I was also Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, UK, from 2013-16.

LL: As a scholar, you have published extensively in the forms of books, book chapters and journal articles. What's your opinion about how young scholars conduct their studies?

NJ: Modes of scholarly writing and research have changed considerably since I published my first articles on English and Australian literature four decades ago. Changes include the use of internet searches and online material which provides shortcuts in seeking answers to detailed scholarly questions. Literary scholarship has also been influenced by new theoretical concerns and ideological positions. In other ways its scope has narrowed, partly because of pressure to publish articles, making ambitious, large scale projects that develop over many years less easy to achieve. I am proud of the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature, of which I was general editor, but it was a hugely difficult team project. Close to my own areas of interest has been the coming together of literary scholarship with creative writing, giving a more personal tone to literary interpretation and more consciousness of tradition or context for

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creative writing. I hope scholars do not become too specialized or too superficial in what they attempt in future.

LL: I agree with you entirely. Well, you have done a very good job. Some scholars argue that our studies should integrate international horizon with the local features. What do you think of this matter?

NJ: I agree that this is important and has potential to reveal new understandings. The local is always an immediate context for both the making of literature and how it is received. But the local never exists in isolation, especially for readers who are influenced by writers from all over the world, often in translation. This interaction is most exciting when other languages and literary traditions are involved, and when expansive historical frames are considered.

LL: Yes, that's true. At the moment, which courses do you teach? What advice do you give to your students who are interested in writing and Chinese literature?

NJ: I teach courses in which creative writing students respond to Chinese literary texts in English translation. I always advise students to look for the point of contact, to find the point where a work of Chinese literature, even when it is read in translation, seems to connect with something in their own experience, including their own reading and writing experience. This will sometimes involve a re-interpreting or re-writing of the Chinese original.

LL: Yes, I believe that your student will benefit a lot. How did you develop an interest in studying Chinese language, literature and culture?

NJ: I became interested in studying Chinese when I was studying English literature at Oxford in the 1970s. At that time China was relatively isolated from the Western world and I became interested in what Chinese literature and culture might contribute to an enlarged understanding of human creative practice, including contemporary.

LL: Yeah, Chinese literature and culture, as a valuable heritage, play an important role. The same is true of other literatures and cultures. I know that you have spent a period of time in China. What's your impression of China?

NJ: China is too large and various to sum up in a few impressions.

LL: Indeed. At the same time, you are also a prolific writer, who has written widely on contemporary Australian and Asian art and literature. Could you give us some information about it?

NJ: I have written fiction set in Australia, contemporary Australia and its past. I have also written about Australian literature and art, including Indigenous storytelling that goes back many thousands of years in different forms. I am interested in the art produced by artists and writers of Asian background in Australia. This has become a more dynamic phenomenon in recent years. There is an important creative energy in Australia that is making something new by drawing on Indigenous and Asian life and experience and thinking.

LL: That's great. Does the experience of teaching have a beneficial effect on your writing? What are the effects?

NJ: It helps make me aware of the emotions that matter in writing, and sometimes the literary techniques that can make those emotions real and forceful.

LL: Yes, the relationship among them is mutual complementary. You have published seven novels, in which there are four about Chinese stories. Why do you choose to write some novels

about Chinese stories? Is there something special or unique in your novels?

NJ: The influence of China has been enormous for me—my 5 years’ living and working in China, my study of China, my continuing friendships with Chinese people, and my awareness of the contribution of China directly and indirectly to Australian life and culture. The Chinese stories in my books are all stories that connect to Australia in some way. That certainly makes them special and unique.

LL: Yes, certainly. *The Red Thread* was written by you in your recontextualizing of *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*. Can you introduce us about your work?

NJ: *The Red Thread* is set in China in the year 2000 with Chinese and non-Chinese characters, including a young Australian woman who is an artist. She is introduced to *Fu Sheng Liu Ji* by her Chinese lover and they come to believe they are reincarnations of the loving couple in the original book—which is missing its ending. My novel imagines an ending for them.

LL: Well, that sounds very interesting. I am reading this work. Could you please tell us something about what first attracted you to Shen Fu’s work, *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*?

NJ: I love the hybrid literary quality of the original. It is part-memoir, part-love story, part poetry, part the reflections of a connoisseur of Chinese art and literature. It is a uniquely Chinese form—casual, flexible, intimate. It is mysterious in being unfinished or incomplete. Its scale is significant too—at the other end of the scale from the grand, heroic, tumultuous scope of Chinese history. It is a book by and about an individual.

LL: *The Rose Crossing* is another work from you. What inspired you to write this novel? Have you received any feedback from the general readers and the publishing house? And what did the success of this novel bring to you?

NJ: I was inspired by the discovery that most modern roses involve a cross between a Chinese rose and a European rose and that this happened, possibly, on an island in the Indian Ocean in the period before Australia was settled by Europeans. That ‘rose crossing’ at the end of the Ming dynasty seemed to me like a symbolic story from the pre-history of Australia. Readers have found this a provocative revelation, a tall tale. It is the most widely translated of all my novels and has attracted repeated interest from filmmakers.

LL: Well, that’s great. Who are the writers that you are also interested in? What is it about these writers’ works that attract you most?

NJ: Among Chinese writers I also like Shen Congwen, for some of the same things that I like about *Fu Sheng Liu Ji*: the intensity of detail and the formal fluidity. I like that in Lao She too. I like many Australian writers, especially the poet and novelist Randolph Stow. I like Joseph Conrad. I like Willa Cather. I like the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier.

LL: They are very famous. And what have these benefited you for your writing?

NJ: These writers all work across cultural boundaries. They are ‘transcultural’ writers in that way. Their work is rich in intensity of evocative detail, often bittersweet, with a kind of ambiguity about human possibilities and limitations.

LL: Yes, that’s true. As a translator, could you talk something about your translated or co-translated works?

NJ: I have translated only occasionally, to make work available in English by writers I admire.

LL: I know you co-translated *The Finish Line* by Sang Ye (1994) and *The Ape Herd* by Mang Ke (included in *Poems for the Millennium*, 1998). Could you tell me a little bit about what first attracted you to Sang Ye's and Mang Ke's works?

NJ: Mang Ke is a wonderfully grand, passionate and eloquent poet—hard to translate. Sang Ye has one of the sharpest eyes of any observer I know, backed up by knowledge, curiosity and compassion. I wanted his impressions of Australia to be available.

LL: During the process of co-translation, how did you work with other translator(s)?

NJ: It's a long time ago. For Mang Ke's work I collaborated closely with a native Chinese speaker who is also a good writer. For Sang Ye's work I collaborated with my colleague Sue Trevaskes who knows Sang Ye's writing better than anyone. In each case we developed our way of working in response to the particular project. We sat side by side as we worked.

LL: I believe that those were some memorable experiences. And what is the most difficult problem for you in translating Chinese writer's work?

NJ: Chinese is rich in idioms that cannot be translated literally. It also has its own formulas and patterns. Very often the translation will look like a total rewriting—but that is sometimes the best way to do in English what the Chinese is doing in Chinese.

LL: Well, yes. Throughout the translation process, how do you think of the guidelines for translation?

NJ: There need to be guidelines at the start. These can be developed by trying some different things in draft form. Once settled, the guidelines are needed to give shape or coherence to the translation. This is especially true of poetry.

LL: Indeed, for poetry translation, it's important to follow some guidelines. What skills or qualities do you think are needed for a translator?

NJ: Linguistic versatility—the capacity to adopt different language masks or voices according to need. Collaboration is a very good way to do it, as it brings two to the process, rather than just one.

LL: Yes, you are right. What do you think of the relationship or difference between writing and translating?

NJ: At one level there is great similarity: a writer is attempting to transcribe thoughts, feelings, images, sensations. So is a translator. A translator is more constrained, but has a strong guide in the original.

LL: I agree. The literature from China or other non-English-speaking countries is probably one of the least translated literatures into English. How do you feel about it? Do you have any suggestions for dealing with the current situations?

NJ: It is a great failing and a great loss that Anglophone literary culture is not very active in translation and is nowhere near as engaged with Chinese literature as I would hope. The situation is changing slowly. I can only ask Chinese writers, translators and literary scholars to be patient and to help as much as possible.

LL: Thank you for your suggestions. At last, would you please introduce your current work or future plan about writing and translating?

NJ: I have a few different projects. I hope to complete a new novel that is about a woman seeking justice for the death of her husband. I hope to write some essays, partly biographical, about Australian poetry in the mid-20th century, when modernism and other traditions were in tension. I would like to improve my Chinese and do some more translation!

LL: Well, I'm looking forward to whatever you do in the future. Thank you so much.

NJ: I'm glad we can have a conversation, thanks a lot.