

# Promoting the Study and Writing of Chinese Literature in the UK: An Interview with Professor Frances Weightman

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## Abstract

In May 2024, Dr Jane Qian Liu interviewed Professor Frances Weightman from the University of Leeds to explore the origin and missions of the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing. During this interview, Professor Weightman talked about the significance of promoting contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, the benefits of small-scale in-person discussions, and the use of translation and writing competitions in cultivating linguistic and cultural exchanges. She also shared many fond memories of the Centre since its founding a decade ago. The interview ends with a discussion of the unique position of the Centre in the UK discipline of Chinese Studies.

**Jane Qian Liu:** First of all, thank you so much, Frances, for accepting my interview. My first question is about the Centre for New Chinese Writing. Could you tell me about the origin of this Centre?<sup>1</sup>

**Frances Weightman:** Thank you very much for suggesting the interview. The Centre started in 2014. It originated with funding from the AHRC [Arts and Humanities Research Council] for a project that was called Writing Chinese: Authors, Authorship and Authority. We were under the White Rose East Asia Centre funding. The White Rose East Asia Centre was a large project, a collaboration between Leeds and Sheffield on East Asian studies. It was funded by AHRC, covering all areas of East Asian studies. In 2014, they suddenly gave a second call for a second tranche of funding for which we needed specific projects.

I had not long come back from my second maternity leave, and I was looking for a project which I could do predominantly in the UK because of childcare and

1 This interview is one of the research outputs of the National Social Sciences Fund Major Project “Archival Work and Study on the Overseas Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature (1949-2019)”. Project Number: 20&ZD287.

family responsibility, so I was looking for something new. Previously I'd worked on premodern fiction, and specifically at Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*, looking at authorship and ideas of the author from that. I'd also started to look at prefaces and how authorship was performed in authorial prefaces, as in the *zixu* to works of fiction.

So when this call came through, which had a very short deadline and needed to involve public engagement, with both a new, original focus and yet fitting into our new research agenda, I thought, why not look at paratexts and prefaces to contemporary fiction? I didn't think much more of it than that. We put a few things together about a project, and then I had a meeting in London before the deadline with Nicky Harman, who was a former Leeds graduate. I hadn't actually met Nicky before this point, and we had a meeting in a Pizza Express near King's Cross.

It was just great. Suddenly it was the first time that I really realised how engaging with practitioners rather than just purely academics could genuinely invigorate your research because I was talking in kind of vague abstract terms about ideas of authorship or what might be meant by a preface and so on. And then I was suddenly realising, well, actually, a lot of the ideas that I've got are rather hollow and lacking in substance without an injection of what really happens. And it doesn't mean that you're doing down your research in any way. It's the opposite. It means that you're genuinely connecting and collaborating with people who are actually doing the work within the literary circuit.

So of course we came up with loads of ideas because Nicky always has loads of ideas. Then we filled out this project on authors, authorship, and authority, put it in, were awarded a modest amount of money (around £14,000), and we started off from there. We were basically looking at ideas of new or less well-known authors, thinking about, "Could we use some of the money to bring some authors over? Or if there were any authors in the UK, could they come and do talks?," and how we could think about combining that with some more academic ideas and theoretical ideas on authorship.

Through Nicky's contacts, I was aware that the author Chen Xiwo was doing a tour because Nicky had translated his book, *The Book of Sins*. He was there with his publisher, Forty-six. So we contacted them, and they were able to come to Leeds at a time when we could also launch the project, and so we started off with Chen Xiwo as our first author, and it was a really great activity. We then moved on with Yan Ge. We had a workshop with Yan Ge and Nicky, a translation workshop, and it went from there.

When the AHRC funding ran out, we then decided that we needed to have

something more than just a project. So in 2018, we put in an application to become a research centre. After we had got all the requisite permissions from the university, we then called ourselves a centre and have moved on from there. We were also awarded a follow-on funding grant for public engagement and impact for a year in 2017.

**Jane Qian Liu:** This journey sounds very exciting! So what is the main aim that you hope to achieve with the events in the Centre?

**Frances Weightman:** The Centre has got two strands. One is more the research-focused strand and one is the public engagement/impact strand. On the public engagement strand, we are kind of unashamedly wanting to help promote contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, with what constitutes “Chinese” interpreted broadly.

On the research side, we want to focus more broadly on ideas of authorship, academic studies, and understanding of Chinese literature, but very much trying to bring the theoretical and practical together. So we were really working against a system and a cultural context where the understanding of Chinese literature and translation in particular was very limited. It’s very limited to either classics, which very few people read but were maybe aware of, or tropes like the Cultural Revolution memoirs and things like this.

I vividly remember a colleague of mine teaching a contemporary Chinese literature and translation course in Edinburgh. She said that one of the mature students in her class had said to her that she was at home and her daughter had found her crying, and the daughter, who was about three or four, said, “Oh, Mummy, are you reading Chinese stories again?” It is just this idea that it’s all very tragic or there are certain tropes, which are always there. Of course, that’s true of a lot of Chinese literature, but I felt that there was this large number of very exciting new writers that were very popular within China and had an awful lot to give and a lot of potential possibly in the market, but more importantly, just as for ideas in the West as well. So that was really where this kind of genuine desire to promote cross-cultural understanding came from, if I can say that without sounding too pretentious.

**Jane Qian Liu:** It really makes a lot of sense because I also genuinely believe in the meaning of promoting contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, and I think it’s so valuable that you share this as well.

**Frances Weightman:** We can talk about politics, we can talk about international situations and all the rest of it till the cows come home. If I can sit in Leeds and read a story and laugh or cry, and somebody in Shanghai or Chengdu can sit and read the same story and laugh and cry, then we can achieve something mean-

ingful with literature—there’s a level of that reader response and that kind of level of engagement and understanding and connection that I don’t think you can get through many other means. And that is so important, especially at the moment with everything that is going on internationally with the rising levels of hate crimes and discrimination and all of this. Sometimes we need to forget the politicians on both sides, forget the macro picture, and I know that sounds very naive, but if we can get back to that, what makes us human, and what makes British people human, and Chinese people human, and people from Singapore human, we can begin to rethink how we live together in the world.

It sounds very naive, I know, but I’ve decided to just go with it and embrace it because I do think it’s really important.

**Jane Qian Liu:** I think that reminds me of Pheng Cheah’s idea of the worlding of world literature where he argues that instead of looking at globalisation, which really focuses on politics and economics, the “world” in world literature should be something, as you said, that is shared and that is higher intellectual communication, which I think is exactly what this Centre is doing that is so valuable. So my next question is, over the years that you have run the Centre, have you observed any changes in people’s understanding and attitudes towards Chinese literature? It may not be that many years, but is there anything that you noticed in the past six to eight years?

**Frances Weightman:** There seems to be a more general understanding of China on a more superficial level. In the past, I think that the number of people who had any interest in China—I’m obviously talking about British people without Chinese background—tended to be smaller, but the people who had an interest in China tended to have a sort of a deeper understanding, if you like. Whereas I think now, because of the changing political situation, China is no longer seen as a kind of an unusual exotic thing to be interested in. But if you look at the popular media, it’s often seen more as a threat or seen more as something to be slightly concerned about or scared of or not quite sure how to connect with.

Nowadays people in the UK are more likely to say they have some knowledge about China than they were a decade ago, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that there’s any genuine understanding, so I would say there’s probably more superficial understanding for audiences.

**Jane Qian Liu:** Are there any memorable moments that you can recall in the past events, which reflect the audience reactions to Chinese authors and their works? You have run so many events here.

**Frances Weightman:** Yes, I think we’re up to about 100 author events in Leeds

now. Back to the very first event, Chen Xiwo. I would say Chen Xiwo's work is very explicit and shocking and can be quite graphic, and disturbing. As I mentioned, we basically invited him to set off our Centre before we knew much about him and certainly before I'd read his book. I was then a little bit concerned, and I thought, "My goodness, is this going to be misogynistic or inappropriate?" because it was quite sexual.

When he came, he was the loveliest man, and he was just so completely different from the person in the audience's minds had they imagined who had written this book. And he was there; he just giggled. He's got a story, which is called "Wo ai wo ma," which is a really disturbing story about a paraplegic sleeping with his mother, disturbing on so many levels. But his attitude towards it was he told us this lovely story about how he lives with his family and how his elderly mother had found the book and said, "Oh, I want to read it." He grabbed it off her.

He didn't speak a word of English, he wasn't a very charismatic speaker in some ways, but he had this lovely persona about him that seemed to fit so badly, so at odds, with his writing that it made the live event a wonderful success. Because, firstly, it underlined the importance of events, and it underlined the way that actually a live event with an author gives you another level of understanding. It doesn't mean that they are correct. They don't have the sole authority, but it does add to your understanding. It's like a video of a song, and you get another level of engagement with the text.

There was a lot of laughter, which is a great thing, in terms of cross-cultural understanding as well, because if somebody from one culture can make a joke and somebody from another culture can laugh at it, you've already got a connection there where you've got so much unsaid of mutual understanding because in order to find something funny, you have to have so much unfunny, normal, standard stuff in common. So it was really great, and we had Blackwell's doing a bookstall there, and they said that they completely sold out of all his books. They said they'd never had such a successful academic event. The audience was only about forty people, so it wasn't huge, but everybody who was there was really engaged. So it was our first event, but it was very successful.

**Jane Qian Liu:** This sounds really interesting. It is also a fascinating example of how the author's real image in life may be at odds with the image he presents in his books, which really shows the importance of having the event. Now I'm going to move on to something a little bit different. So can you tell me about the competitions organised by the Centre?

**Frances Weightman:** So we started doing translation competitions. One of

the things that we decided after talking to a lot of translators was that there was a need for mentorship of new translators. We have lots of people who study language but don't necessarily have that. Even if they study translation at university, they don't necessarily have that pathway as to how to get from something done within the academy to actually being published. So we decided to launch the Bai Meigui Translation Competition, named after the White Rose East Asia Centre, which was what our Centre originated from. The term also has proved very useful because it avoids us using this very problematic Chinese/Sinophone—whatever term—and allows us to be as inclusive as we possibly want, and if people want to think it is referring to Zhang Ailing, they can, if they want to think it's referring to the English civil war, they can, or they can just imagine the flower, and not think any further about it. And if the White Rose funding people want to think it's referring to them, that's great too. So that's why we used it. We've now done nine translation competitions, three of which have been open exclusively to school kids, secondary school kids—that can be UK school children who are learning Chinese or Chinese school children who are learning English or whatever.

Our first one was on Dorothy Tse, a fascinating and original Hong Kong writer. It was a prose piece, and the joint winner of that competition was Natascha Bruce, who has gone on to do all sorts of things. She has credited her whole career to winning Bai Meigui, which is really sweet of her. She and Dorothy have worked on various projects since then. In fact, they both came and did a joint residency with us just before COVID in 2020, for a month. The other person who was the joint winner of that was Michael Day who was one of the judging panellists in our last competition. So since then we've had competitions focused on poetry, on Taiwan writing, one on crime fiction, and on reportage. And three children's competitions, open to high school students. For these children's competitions, we choose a picture book which the kids have to translate into English and the prize for the winner is to get it published, as a bilingual picture book. Our first winner was a bilingual translation of a work by a Beijing author Meng Yanan translated by Jasmine Alexander. We have it as an English picture book, but then at the back we have the Chinese as well so that people can use it as something to help with translation. We felt that there was a real market for parents—either parents of Chinese background or parents who wanted their kids to learn Chinese—who wanted this sort of bilingual short stories and picture books.

I feel picture books are really good materials for translation and for kids because they can get so much from the pictures even if they find the Chinese characters difficult. They can look at the pictures, they can learn, think about the context,



they can be really creative in their translation. All three of our winners have had some Chinese heritage. It's interesting because in a lot of my work with schools, children with Chinese heritage in the UK, in terms of Chinese language learning, are such as a bit of a problem—maybe “problem” is too much—but it is slightly difficult because you don't know where to put them in terms of language learning. Do we make an A level in Chinese that's aimed for people who've already got Chinese as a native language or do we not? How do we deal with this issue? Whereas actually I feel like we need to be completely rethinking that. We've got people, we've got teenagers in the UK who've got this amazing resource of having two languages, maybe not completely fluent, especially perhaps not in Chinese, but they have got an understanding of both, and they are performing cross-cultural understanding and translation every day for their families. And what better people to be translating for their younger siblings than that because they've got that ability to do it. So that's been a really exciting revelation. The last two [Children's competitions] we've run it jointly with the Singapore Book Council's Asian Festival for Children's Content, and they've had an event there to launch the book and so on, which has been good and has also encouraged more young people from Singapore to enter.

**Jane Qian Liu:** Do you get many submissions every year?

**Frances Weightman:** For the main translation competitions, I think we've got eighty-eight for the first four competitions or something. It was weird. It was exactly the same number, very different people. For the children's ones, it's fewer, but I think maybe around about forty, but it was from a wide range of backgrounds as well, some from the UK. When we've run it jointly with Singapore, we tend to get about fifty-fifty from Singaporean schools, or schools in East Asia, and in the UK. So it's not masses, but the quality that we've had has been very good.

This year, for the first time, we've just launched a creative writing competition. We've never done that before. So we had an event two weeks ago, called Writing Hong Kong. We had a research discussion, presenting our research journal's special issue on Writing Hong Kong, with a keynote presentation by Prof Gregory Lee from St Andrews, along with our editor Jenny Wong and the York-based HK author Kit Fan, and Karen Cheung, who is based half in Hong Kong and half here. So alongside the research roundtable, we had author readings, and then we launched this competition, which is open to anybody who's currently based in the UK, who has Hong Kong family connections, or previously lived in Hong Kong. It's for people who haven't published a significant piece of creative writing in English about Hong Kong before. And so, Jenny and Kit and Karen are going to judge it, and it's open now. So they can write a poem or a short story or anything else that they would like

to. I have no idea how that goes. We will see.

**Jane Qian Liu:** That sounds very exciting!

**Frances Weightman:** Yeah, it is exciting. It's a whole new thing for us, but it would be quite fun, and we'll publish the winning entries on our site, and the winners get vouchers to attend Arvon creative writing workshops.

**Jane Qian Liu:** My next question is, in what ways do you support aspiring or emerging writers of China's literature? Obviously, the competitions you talked about already offer them significant support, don't they?

**Frances Weightman:** We have a monthly book club, which has a featured author each month. So if there's anybody who has a new book that's coming out in English translation or a new book in Chinese and has a short story in English translation, and it's somebody who we think is an important author or who more importantly somebody else tells us they think is an important author and persuaded us of it, then we will feature them for that month. So by featuring them, we do an overview of their work on our website, and we upload a short story or an extract of a novel in Chinese and in English for people to read with links to find out more about them. So we have that as a way of helping to promote and publicise their work.

Everything is of course down to funding, but if people are able to come over to the UK or to Europe, we'll do everything we can to have an event with them here. Occasionally we will be able to bring people over, but it does obviously always depend on whether we can get funding for people or not, as we don't actually have a budget ourselves. Another thing we do, where we do invite people over as much as possible is for our book reviewers' network. We have a book reviewers' network of about fifty or sixty people now. So that involves collaborations with publishers, where the publishers send us books, and we send the books out to the reviewers blind.

We set this network up because at our first annual symposium, one of the findings that came out from the publishers was that one of their major obstacles to promoting Chinese literature in translation was the lack of reviews and the lack of digital presence. And they said that for example they're trying to sell *Shanghai Baobei* or something like that, and the only reviews that they've got are from some old male professor in Yale—with no offence to any male professor who may be that—but it's not the target reader. It's not the target readership, so we try to make it get as broad a section as possible of people to review books. We've got 200 reviews now on our website. We send a book to somebody, and they have to send a review of about 1,000 words, within a month, and then they can keep the book.

So we have that reviewers' network, and then we've had three residential week-



ends for the book reviews so far. This is coming back to your question about what we do for authors. As well as including their books in that, for the residential weekends, we invite a maximum of ten or twelve reviewers to Leeds for the weekend, and we choose four featured books, which we ask them to read in advance. And then we try and get the authors and all the translators of the books to come as well. So we have this really nice weekend where it's set up as like book club discussions. We have small tables of four or five of the book reviewers. All the book reviewers have to prepare their discussion points and come to the weekend ready to discuss the books. But then the author will join them to talk about the books, and the authors move around the tables or the translators. We don't get all the authors, but we usually get two of the authors and two translators. Then they have to produce reviews within a month. It's a lovely opportunity for readers to really engage with the authors and has proved popular with everyone.

We had one in May on crime fiction, and we had Qiu Xiaolong from America come over. He is obviously normally used to huge events, but I think he genuinely enjoyed it and was just like, "No one normally does this"—it was that really small-scale engagement with people. Zhang Yueran was with us from Beijing as well, and the translator Jeremy Tiang, and it was lovely because you just don't normally get the opportunity to talk to people at that level. These are people who are just interested, the reviewers are just interested in reading and books, and the authors are able to engage properly with these new readers.

Of course, it's very, very small scale, but I firmly believe the most valuable things are done in a small groups because that's then what sticks with you, creates some memories, and then you go and talk about it to other people. So for me, anyway, that's what it is, but it's more difficult to persuade funding organisations that you want to apply for several thousand pounds for an event that involves fifteen people, but hopefully we're gradually making that case.

**Jane Qian Liu:** That sounds fascinating. I think we're running out of time. If I can ask you a final question, how do you position the Centre within the UK discipline of Chinese Studies?

**Frances Weightman:** When we set up as a Centre, we had to obviously make a case, and one of the things that we needed to make a case for was, were we providing something unique, or what were we doing, were we in competition with other places, and so on. We got a lovely letter of support from Michel Hockx who basically said there's nowhere else in the world that is doing something like this, and we were very happy.

We were very conscious of wanting to have something outside of London. The

London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle, obviously, when people from China come over, there's an attraction to doing London, Oxford, Cambridge. It's very difficult to persuade people to come further north. And so I would say that we started off by saying that we wanted to become the Leeds centre for Chinese literature in the north of the UK. We've since ditched the north of the UK. We just say in the UK or maybe, bigger. But I think that it is really important. So much happens in London, so many events. It's wonderful, vibrant atmosphere. But it's a different sort of atmosphere at events up in Leeds. The authors who've come here have often commented on the fact that it is a very different kind of atmosphere and that it's a different group of audience—they might be smaller but more engaged.

On an academic front, we launched a research journal two years ago, the title is *Writing Chinese: A Journal of Contemporary Sinophone Literature*. It's an open access journal by White Rose University Press. We are just about to do a second special issue on technology and literature. Our last special issue was on Hong Kong writing. We are trying to make sure that every issue we have has at least some work which is translated from Chinese. We have keynotes and, original research articles. We have a mentoring scheme for early career researchers or PhD students. Articles still have to go through a full peer-review process, but if we go through the peer-review process where the idea is, then after the peer-review process, you get paired with somebody and allocated with a mentor who can help you if needed in addressing the comments. I just feel like sometimes when you're just starting out in your career that the reviewer 2 comments can be pretty devastating, and if you've just finished your PhD, you've no longer got a supervisor to help. And you're suddenly stuck there thinking, "I've just been given this list of feedback, and where do I go?" So it was to try to address that.

Research on Chinese literature otherwise in the UK at the moment, is a bit patchy. There are some places, which do some excellent work. I don't think there's anywhere else that does the combination of the public engagement and the research that we do, or at least not on the same scale. We are getting increasing numbers of references to our Centre in academic writing, which is nice to see as well. They are not always from people we know. I came across something in a book that was published in China about our Centre being sort of a weathervane for Chinese literature in the UK. So I feel like we have managed to build up a decent reputation, which, given that we don't have any specific administrative support or even a budget, is quite pleasing. And our PhD students and community is really special and really positive. Some of them are doing brilliant work, and the way they support each other is really admirable.

**Jane Qian Liu:** That was fascinating, and I do believe that the Centre is a very unique and important presence in the UK field of Chinese Studies. And I think with that, we come to the end of our interview today. Thank you so much for taking the interview.

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**Author Profiles:**

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Frances Weightman is Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Leeds. She is the Founding Director of The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing (<https://writingchinese.leeds.ac.uk>), editor-in-chief of *Writing Chinese: A Journal of Contemporary Sinophone Literature*, and is currently writing a monograph on Chinese children's authors.

Jane Qian Liu is Associate Professor in Translation and Chinese Studies at the University of Warwick. She has published in English and in Chinese on modern Chinese literature, translation studies, and comparative literature, including *Trans-cultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899-1925* (Brill, 2017).