

**Institution: Birkbeck, University of London**

**Unit of Assessment: 30 History**

**Title of case study: Transforming international conceptions of Chinese culture through a literary historical perspective**

### 1. Summary of the impact

Dr Julia Lovell's authoritative research in Chinese culture and history from 1800 to the present day has made a significant impact in three main areas of cultural life. Communicated to a range of academic and non-academic audiences in successful books, particularly in her prize-winning book *The Opium War* (2011), press articles and radio interviews, her work has influenced international media and public discourse on Chinese cultural history; promoted translations of Chinese literature, particularly with Penguin Asia's successful translations of significant Chinese authors; and improved the quality of the UK's cultural engagement with China.

### 2. Underpinning research

The ongoing impact of Dr Lovell's work is underpinned by research published since her arrival at Birkbeck in 2007. *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China*, an authoritative volume aimed at a broad (academic and non-academic) audience, published by Picador (Ref 1), offers a new study of the Sino-British Opium War (1839-42). It explores the conflict from both Chinese and British sides, and the impact it has had on the subsequent century and a half of China's relations with the West. Based on rigorous primary, archival research, the book traces the process by which the Opium War subsequently took on a potent patriotic symbolism in China. It examines the continuing influence of the Opium War's historiography in the contemporary People's Republic, where discussion of it remains a highly sensitive nationalist issue. It also draws attention to current British historical amnesia about the war, posing questions about the importance of the opium trade to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British empire and about the politics of public memory in the UK concerning the recent imperial past.

The political, economic and social changes experienced by China over the last century have been mirrored by transformations in the literary realm (Ref 2). Lovell's work as an historian is central to her work as a translator and critic of 20th-century Chinese fiction, to her understanding of modern China's anxiety to win cultural recognition from the West and to her contribution to international translation and publishing (Ref 6). Lovell's translations of canonical modern authors of the 1920s-40s and of leading contemporary writers, including *Lust, Caution: Short Fiction by Zhang Ailing* (Ref 3) *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* (Ref 4), and *The Matchmaker, the Apprentice and the Football Fan: More Stories of China* (Ref 5) are embedded in her research which situates mainland Chinese fiction of the past hundred years within broader cultural, political and social developments. Her article "Finding a Place: Mainland Chinese Fiction in the 2000s" (Ref 2) extends this project by examining the creative responses of different generations of writers to contemporary China's metamorphoses.

This research and concomitant translation work has established her as a leading expert on modern China and literary politics in the West, and as a prominent cultural broker between Chinese writers, editors and critics, and Anglophone publishing, media and reading publics. It has complemented her historical writing by making directly accessible to general Anglophone readerships key primary works of modern Chinese literature (which can be read both as works of literature and as historical documents), and by strengthening dialogue between Chinese and Western reading and writing communities.

## Impact case study (REF3b)

**3. References to the research**

1. Lovell, J. *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London, Asia, Australia: Picador, 2011 (hard back); 2012 (paperback))
2. Lovell, J. '[Finding a Place: Mainland Chinese Fiction in the 2000s](#)' *The Journal of Asian Studies* Volume 71 / Issue 01 / February 2012, pp 7-32
3. Lovell, J. (co-translator, editor) *Lust, Caution: Short Fiction by Zhang Ailing* (London: Penguin, 2007)
4. Lovell, J. (translator, introduction) *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* (London: Penguin, 2009)
5. Lovell, J. (translator, editor) *The Matchmaker, the Apprentice and the Football Fan: More Stories of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013)
6. Lovell, J. 'Chinese Literature in the Global Canon: The Quest for Recognition', in Jing Tsu and David Der-Wei Wang eds., *Global Chinese Literature* (Brill, 2010) (Peer reviewed volume)

**4. Details of the impact****International media and public discourse**

Lovell's book, *The Opium War*, achieved sales of over 30,000 copies between September 2011 and 31 July 2013 (Source 6) and has been particularly successful in India (Testimonial 1). It was shortlisted for the 2012 Orwell Prize, long-listed for the 2012 Cundill Prize in History and won the 2012 Jan Michalski Prize. As a Picador blog announcement noted, 'Julia is the first writer to win this prize with a work of non-fiction.' Isabel Hilton, one of the judges, commented on the relevance to the modern world of her subject, saying: "The Opium War continues to influence attitudes and relations on both sides, as China struggles to define itself, and the world struggles to decide what it thinks of China." (Source 7). The book was widely reviewed nationally and internationally including in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Literary Review*, *The Independent*, *The London Review of Books*; internationally its coverage included Hong Kong's *The South China Morning Post*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Times of India*, and *Business Standard*. In India, for example, a former Indian Foreign Secretary writing for *The Statesman* called it a 'compelling read' which 'goes to show that fact is often more exciting and compelling than fiction' (Krishnan Srinivisan, August 2011). Another reviewer in India, in *New Delhi Business Standard*, wrote, 'In contrast to many in the growing tribe of Western commentators, Lovell has provided an analysis that is both entertaining and dispassionate, making the book an invaluable contribution to recent writing on China.' (August 2011). It was also covered in broadcast media in the UK (for example, on Radio 3's Night Waves), Hong Kong and India. (Source 8)

Her research on China's cultural history has led to innumerable invitations to lecture at museums, exhibitions, schools, literary festivals and historical societies internationally including London's National Maritime Museum and the Army Museum, the Hong Kong Royal Geographical Society, University of Oklahoma, the Hong Kong Literary Festival, the Beijing Literary Festival and the Shanghai Literary Festival, and the India International Centre at Delhi (Source 10). She is a regular speaker at Asia House, London's premier venue for Asia-related events. In March 2013 she chaired a screening and discussion of the film *The Revolutionary* attended by a large, non-academic audience. Its former director of cultural programmes writes: 'I invited Dr Lovell to speak or moderate at a number of events due to her comprehensive knowledge of Chinese history and literature, and deep, nuanced understanding of China's relationship with the West. ... Part of the mission of Asia House is to encourage understanding of Asia's cultures and history and Dr Lovell helped us achieve this through her excellent contributions to cultural programmes.' (Testimonial 2)

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

Dr Lovell's comment and review articles on Chinese history, culture, politics and economics in publications such as *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *Die Zeit* have raised awareness of China and Chinese history among non-specialist audiences. She is regularly invited to participate in BBC radio discussions, such as *In Our Time*, on Chinese history. In December 2011, she participated in a public debate in *BBC History Magazine* on the British Empire, exposing the historical amnesia surrounding Britain's role in the opium trade and the nationalistic sensitivity attached to this episode in China. The Chinese media have also shown extensive interest in her research (for example *China Daily*) and she receives regular correspondence in response from scholars, writers and readers inside and outside China. (Sources 8 & 10)

Directly as a result of her book *The Opium War*, in July 2013 Lovell was commissioned to act as historical consultant to a four-part drama series provisionally entitled *The Opium Wars*, a collaboration between Mammoth Screen Limited and the BBC. Her consultancy services include offering extensive advice to the screenwriter on the history, protagonists and locations of the war, reviewing the script and treatment, and advising during the filming process.

**Literary translation**

To use Lovell's expertise, Penguin Classics recruited her as an advisor on bringing works of modern Chinese literature onto their canonical list. This collaboration has led to Penguin's commissioning of eight new modern Chinese classics, dramatically increasing the accessibility of Chinese literature to a non-specialist, Anglophone audience. The publisher writes: 'For a publisher like Penguin Classics, the balancing act is to produce general trade editions with academic integrity. Translations must be readable yet accurate, and I would say that in the Chinese arena, Julia is without question among a very, very small group of academics able to successfully treat both sides of this equation.' (Testimonial 3)

Her role in bringing significant Chinese writers to the attention of English language readers is recognized by leading American China history specialist, Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom, in his review of *Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* (2009) for *Time* magazine (07/12/2009): 'Lu Xun was a towering figure in Chinese letters who deserves to be much more widely read outside his homeland. This affordable volume comprises an engaging introduction by translator Julia Lovell, ... These are arguably the most accessible renditions yet of such famous stories as "The Divorce", "New Year's Sacrifice" and the eponymous tale of Ah-Q (the opportunistic, inept, sometime participant in the 1911 Revolution). Together, they give Lu Xun his best shot to date of achieving renown beyond the Chinese world. If it succeeds in this, the book could be considered the most significant Penguin Classic ever published.' (Source 9)

Dr Lovell co-designed a pioneering course on Chinese-English Literary translation, funded by the Arts Council, the Australian Government, Penguin Books and China's General Administration of Press and Publishing, involving delegates from China, the UK, US and Australia. The first large-scale international venture to bridge the considerable gap between Chinese and Anglophone publishing and knowledge production, the project was praised by both the Chinese and UK governments as a key cross-cultural platform for individuals working between Anglophone and Chinese cultures. 'Having her able to join us in developing it was extremely important. This was a state-level project, organized in partnership with the General Administration of Press and Publications, and Julia's participation was critical to its success, both in terms of credibility (an international level of faculty, the best in the industry) and expertise (sharing experiences and expertise with early/mid career literary translators from Chinese and English language backgrounds)' (Testimonial 3). The course also provides a model replicated in other countries, according to the consultant managing the project: 'As a result of this course in China, the British

Centre for Literary Translation went on to adapt the Summer School model for courses in Egypt, Qatar and Indonesia, and is looking at further developing courses in India and Brazil.' (Testimonial 4)

### Cultural engagement

Several cultural organisations have asked Dr Lovell to help them build exchanges between China and the English-speaking world. The British Council recognised her expertise and influence in modern Sino-Western cultural interactions, when it invited her to serve as an advisor in spring 2012 as it prepared to host China as market-focus at the London Book Fair. She helped mediate sensitivities concerning the public representation of Chinese literature: in the selection of writers to be invited; in serving as an interface between the Chinese delegation and their British hosts; and in chairing public events at the Book Fair. The former director of literature writes, 'When the British Council started working with literature in China in earnest in the run up to the London Book Fair 2012 where China was the Market Focus country, Julia was an essential resource, academically/culturally with her historian's eye but also as a guide to contemporary Chinese writing in her role as one of the most eminent literary translators from Mandarin.' Following the Book Fair, Chinese officials chose the British Council as their preferred partner for literary projects in the UK. (Testimonial 5)

She is regularly invited to speak on Chinese culture and literary history at English PEN events, highlighting the engagement of her research activities with contemporary political issues. Most recently, she was involved in planning and chairing the 'China Inside Out' conference at the Free Word Centre in London, in 2012, which drew together a varied group of mainland Chinese and exiled writers and commentators on China.

She is establishing dialogues with school students in Britain and Asia (such as the United World College of Southeast Asia) about the legacies of empire and politics of public memory.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

#### Testimonials:

1. Former Head of Publicity and Promotions, Pan Macmillan, India
2. Former director of Cultural Programmes, [Asia House](#) (factual statement)
3. Managing Director, Penguin China (factual statement)
4. Literature Officer, Arts Council England (factual statement), supplied with: Evaluation Reports of Chinese-English Literary Translation Course (CELT) Years 1 & 2 Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China (16- 23 March 2008 and March 15-21, 2009)
5. Former Director of Literature at the British Council (factual statement)

#### Other sources of evidence

6. Book sales: *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (Picador): sales report available on request
7. [Jan Michalski Prize](#) 2012: and for Hilton's comment on the [Picador blog](#) and [The Guardian](#)
8. A media file containing international reviews and press coverage can be provided on request.
9. Review by Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom in [Time](#) magazine, 07/12/2009. A full version can be made available on request.
10. A correspondence and invitations file is available on request.