

THE REVIEW

'JUDD APATOW OF CHINA' BACK WITH NEW BUDDY FLICK

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In centenary of his birth, Dylan Thomas' poetry finds new life in Chinese translation

Death shall have no dominion

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In Dylan's footsteps

As the centenary of Dylan Thomas' birth approaches, Gary Jones assesses the Welsh poet's legacy and looks at a bid to bring his words to the mainland



The house in Laugharne where Thomas spent the last four years of his life.

Dylan Thomas never visited China during his short lifetime. The Welsh poet and writer – most noted for his innovative, rhythmic use of words and intoxicating imagery – did, however, refer to the country in a revised version of his *Reminiscences of Childhood*, which he read aloud on radio in 1945, and again in 1953, the year of his death.

“I was born in a large Welsh town at the beginning of the Great War, an ugly, lovely town – or so it was and is to me – crawling, sprawling by a long and splendid curving shore where truant boys and Sandfield boys and old men from nowhere beachcombed, idled and paddled, watched the dock-bound ships or the ships streaming away into wonder and India, magic and China,

countries bright with oranges and loud with lions ...”

The “ugly, lovely town” Thomas spoke of on the BBC’s Welsh Region Home Service was Swansea, where the revered scribe – author of haunting poems *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* and *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, and the polyphonic “play for voices” *Under Milk Wood* – was born 100 years ago on October 27, 1914. And, finally, his dream-like musings of a journey to China appear scheduled to become an after-life reality.

Many cultural events have been arranged for the centenary of Thomas’ birth, including a non-stop, 36-hour “Dylathon” of his writings – timed to end on the hour of Thomas’ birth – at Swansea Grand Theatre. Readings will be made by the likes of Prince Charles, actor Ian McKellen and former Wales rugby captain Ryan Jones.

Earlier this year, however, in a less star-studded but similarly groundbreaking event, a low-key academic visited Swansea on a mission to produce the definitive guide to the writer’s oeuvre in Chinese. Professor Wu Fusheng has now translated 25 important and representative pieces of Thomas’ work. A book is scheduled for release in 2015.

“Personally, I like Dylan Thomas’ handling of the English language and poetic conventions to create his unique style of poetry,” says Wu, 55, who grew up in Tianjin and today is a professor in the Department of Languages and Literature of the University of Utah in the United States.

“I find his description of nature



very beautiful, and his pantheistic, poetic vision or representation of life and death – the ‘process poetics’ – very moving,” he says.

After attending Tianjin’s Nankai University, Wu headed to the US in 1990 to obtain his doctorate in comparative literature. Thomas, by contrast, was disinterested in formal studies, leaving school at 16. Many of his pieces of poetry, however, appeared in print while he was still a teenager.

Heavy with symbolism and dabbling in surrealism, Thomas’ creations, though refined in their craftsmanship, were always tricky to pigeonhole, and Wu insists they still pose “intriguing issues” for English-Chinese translation. “Thomas deliberately challenges and even violates the norms of the English language in his poetry, making his poems difficult and obscure even to English readers,” he says.

“But in poetry, obscurity and uncertainty sometimes can create multiple meanings, which add to the depth of the poems in question. In Dylan Thomas’ poetry, this is particularly true because he loves to use puns. Unfortunately, a translator must often choose one possibility

out of several, thereby limiting the scope of the poems. Thomas’ poetry exposes in acute ways the limitations of translation.”

During Wu’s time in Wales, he visited Thomas’ birthplace in Swansea, a humble, semi-detached, red-brick house of the writer’s family at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, where he lived until he was 19, and created many of his finest compositions.

There, Wu read aloud, in Putonghua, excerpts from Thomas’ poetry, including *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, for an invited audience. “It was really an inspiring experience,” Wu says. “I saw the room where he wrote many of his poems, and his father’s study where he often hid himself as a teenager.”

Wu found his sojourn to the Welsh fishing village of Laugharne, where Thomas, his wife and newborn son lived a hand-to-mouth existence in the late 1930s, especially poignant. “There, overlooking Thomas’ ‘heron priested shore,’” says Wu, “listening to his recorded reading of *Poem on His Birthday*, which is one of his last poems, written there, I came to a much better understanding of many of his works, especially *Over Sir John’s Hill*



Dylan Thomas' grave (left) in the churchyard of St Martins, Laugharne, in Wales. The interior of the wooden shed (above) in Laugharne where Thomas wrote much of his work. Thomas (below) as he looked in 1946. Photos: Corbis



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WU FUSHENG, PROFESSOR AND TRANSLATOR

(also written there, in his 'writing shed', by which I found myself fixated for quite some time during my visit), one of my favourites and a moving meditation on the process of life and death."

Professor John Goodby at the Department of English at Swansea University, and a world authority on Thomas' work, was instrumental in bringing Wu to Wales, and has been working with the Chinese educator in an advisory capacity.

Goodby, whose most recent books on Thomas are *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* and the centenary edition of *The Complete Poems of Dylan Thomas*, believes Thomas' work breaks down the barriers between "high" and "popular" art, making his "profoundly satisfying, provocative and beautiful" use of language as relevant today as it has ever been.

"In a world in which politicians, businessmen and administrators are busy trying to reduce language to dead, jargon-ridden discourses, he reminds us that we are all capable of using it for very different ends, or – perhaps best of all – for no end, purely for imaginative play," says Goodby. "When Thomas begins a

poem, 'Once below a time', we think, 'Yes, why not 'below', rather than 'upon'?"

Swansea-based antiquarian book dealer Jeff Towns has spent four decades keeping the poet's legacy alive, and even has the closing lines of Thomas' poem *Fern Hill* tattooed on an arm ("A 60th birthday present from my wife," he says). The self-styled "The Dylan Thomas Guy", Towns has personally aided individuals as diverse as Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg, illustrator Ralph Steadman and even Prince Charles gain knowledge of Thomas and his writing.

"Throughout his life, and even more since his tragic early death, he has continued to reverberate with popular culture," says Towns, citing Thomas' influence on singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, and how the poet made the cut to appear among the montage of faces on the iconic cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album. Other famous fans include presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, rocker Mick Jagger, silent-era clown Charlie Chaplin and actor Pierce Brosnan (who has a son named Dylan Thomas Brosnan).

In the years before his death, aged 39, Thomas acquired a reputation – which he actively and enthusiastically encouraged – as a hard-living drunk and a hell-raiser. Dying young, while on a tour of poetry readings and talks in New York, resulted in the creation of a James Dean-like myth around the writer. (The post-mortem examination, however, provided a less glamorous version, the primary cause of death being pneumonia, with pressure on the brain and a fatty liver as contributing factors.)

While Thomas is celebrated as one of the most accomplished poets of the 20th century, that semi-fictional image of the doomed romantic has often overshadowed the genius of his writing. "I think there will always be two Dylans: Dylan the great poet and writer – the words on the page – and then Dylan the larger-than-life character who packed so much into his 39 years," says Towns.

Goodby also accepts that the cult of Dylan Thomas has often eclipsed his achievements. However, that fact had a peculiar but positive result in keeping his literary legacy alive. "All

of his work remains in print because of the legend, and the large general readership means there is always a chance that some will seek to go beyond the wisecracks and the tales of drunkenness and debauchery," Goodby says.

Some of Thomas' poems have been translated into Chinese in the past, but Wu's translations will be accompanied by critical annotations and explanations, offering genuine insights into Thomas' life and character, and a more rounded portrayal of the writer. "These features will be of great help to the Chinese readers to appreciate this great but difficult poet," Wu says.

"The legacy of Thomas' work is complex and profound," Goodby says. "He had a major impact on later English-language poets ... and because his poetry deals with the universals of conception, birth, love and death – unlike most British poetry, which tends to be empirical, inward-looking and provincial – he has had an impact beyond the Anglophone world, too – in Germany, France, Poland, Argentina, South Korea, West Africa and, hopefully soon, in China." thereview@scmp.com