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Bridging culture gap with literature

Translator introduces Chinese classics to U.S.

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Long before Xian Ye left his native China, he got to know a couple of Americans.

Their names were Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner.

Ye never actually met the two famous authors. But they spoke to him through their books, Ye says, introducing him to another world and a new way of thinking.

Now, Ye wants Americans to make a similar discovery, only in reverse.

"For many people here the China they know is very limited. Chinese food, that's probably all they know about China and maybe Chinese toys and shoes in Kmart," says Ye, who lives in Dumont.

"But Chinese literature and Chinese art. There isn't enough."

To change that, Ye has embarked on a venture that, ironically, would have been impossible in China, where freedom of expression is limited. He has gone into business as a publisher.

Ye's company, Homa & Sekey Books, could never be mistaken for a mega-publisher such as Random House. Its headquarters are in a spare bedroom in his house, Ye is the only full-time employee, and he spends the workday padding around in slippers.

But the former teacher has great aspirations, and the first fruits of his efforts may be coming soon to a bookstore near you.

Ye entered publishing two years ago after a career in academia. A professor in southern China, he enrolled at universities in Canada and the United States in the early 1990s to earn a master's degree in business administration.

Afterward, he took a job at Dover Business College in Paramus, teaching computer applications and accounting. But Ye says his first love has always been literature — back in Shanghai, he wrote his college thesis on Hemingway — and he started looking for a way to turn his interest into a career.

At the end of 1997, he began working in his spare time as an agent, helping Chinese publishing houses secure translation rights to American books.

One of his first jobs was to sign a deal for the Chinese publication of "The Night Lives On," which recounts the lives of those who survived the sinking of the Titanic. Ye's plan was only to serve as a go-between, but once the deal was signed the publisher asked him to do the translation work.

He spent the entire month of April last year submerged in Titanic trivia. The result is a 265-page volume sporting a title in bold Chinese characters, above the faces of Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet on its cover.

That project and other work securing deals for publication of American books on everything from photography to cooking persuaded Ye to leave his teaching position in March and turn the business into a full-time job.

But, convinced by his success as an



Xian Ye, who immigrated to the United States from China, has started a publishing company in his Dumont home to familiarize Americans with translations of Chinese literature.

DON SMITH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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agent and with encouragement from his wife, Weiwei Fang, Ye took the next step and decided to go into the publishing business himself.

"She said to me, 'What's the point of coming to the U.S. if you can't do everything that you can't do in China,'" Ye says.

For Ye, the great plus of life in the United States is the freedom of expression. But one of the great disappointments is to see how little Americans know about what China has to offer.

Most Chinese, for example, know about great Western writers, from William Shakespeare to Faulkner. The translation of "The Call of the Wild" by Jack London is a perennial favorite in China, he says.

But ask Americans if they know Tang Xian Zu — who Ye calls the Chinese Shakespeare — and they're mystified.

"I want to bring the best of the

Chinese culture and literature to America for people to appreciate," he says.

"These are the great treasures of China, and in a sense, they are undiscovered."

Ye hopes to make that discovery easier, by making the books available in English. His company recently published the first such volume, "Flower Terror: Suffocating Stories of China," by Pu Ning, an 82-year-old author whose works have long been censored by Communist authorities. The book of fictional short stories are based on Pu's experiences during China's Cultural Revolution.

Ye also is working to translate an autobiographical novel being written by Huang Xiang, a dissident poet who sought political asylum in the United States and lives in Tenafly.

But Ye says he does not consider himself a political activist. He just wants to publish books worth reading. So Ye also plans a series called The Great Love Stories of China, novels based on classic Chinese folk tales and dramas. The first will be based on The Peony Pavilion, a Chinese opera by Tang, the so-called Chinese Shakespeare.

On one level, such stories are just a good read. But they also could introduce Americans to a people they know little about, Ye says.

If you don't believe it, ask Ye about the time he met Ernest Hemingway.