

The Writer of Tales: Hans Christian Andersen as a Cultural Bridge-Builder

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Abstract The article discusses the potential for intercultural exchange to be found in Andersen's fairy tales, particularly the so-called "art fairy tale", or, as it is most commonly called in English: *Kunstmärchen*. The typically Danish national characteristics described and often ironically exposed in tales like "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep" are only one of Andersen's trademarks. These tales transcend national borders, containing more universal motifs, including the motif of love. But Andersen's tales have a wider appeal in the age of globalization, as the author points out. The Chinese have been deeply inspired by the tales, especially those that deal with philosophical, ethical and existential issues. Frandsen comments that ancient Chinese wisdom and culture is based on examples rather than on systematic metaphysics, and this may be one reason why most Chinese adults know tales like "The Little Mermaid", "The Story of a Mother" and "The Little Girl with the Match Sticks". A joint research project between the University of Southern Denmark and Fudan University, Shanghai, is ongoing and this will certainly be an occasion for furthering common Danish-Chinese research on Andersen.

Key words Cultural bridge building; globalization; China.

The Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, who lived from 1805 to 1875, is a literary world figure. Translations of works by him have been registered in around 150 languages, which place him in a league of his own among globally known writers. Hans Christian Andersen's collected works include most literary genres: novels, poetry, plays, biographies and travel accounts — and many of these works have been translated into a number of languages. There is, however, a particular genre he himself developed on the basis of the classical folk tale, namely the subclass of the "kunsteventyr", often referred to in English by the German term "*Kunstmärchen*" to distinguish this literary form from fairytales, which stem from an oral tradition. It is this genre in particular that has given him a unique position in world literature. Hans Christian Andersen published stories belonging to this genre for the first time in 1835 under the title *Eventyr, fortalte for børn* (*Tales, Told for Children*). This brief narrative form was to become his special, brilliant contribution to literature, and during his life he wrote a total of 168 tales and stories. We normally refer to them as "Andersen's fairy tales", but far from all of them have the form and construction of a classic

fairytale, and for that reason they could just as well be referred to as magical or life-philosophical stories.

The strange thing about writers who made such a considerable international impact is that they can often also be conceived as highly national in their mode of expression. This is the case with Hans Christian Andersen. In Denmark we perceive him as a writer who precisely captures a Danish tone and who depicts something that is highly Danish. In tales like “The Ugly Duckling” we can recognise types and agree that that’s the way we are in our small country. It is even an unfortunate distinctive national characteristic of ours, we feel, that we do not realise what an ugly little duckling can potentially become. In the tale “The Little Match-Girl” we tend to read social conditions into it which we know existed at Andersen’s time in the major cities. In “Little Claus and Big Claus” we recognise the Danish rural landscape with its small villages and irritating clergymen — indeed, we recognise traits that we in Denmark consider quintessentially Danish.

In the tale “The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep”, Hans Christian Andersen tells a good-humoured story of the two porcelain figures that stand on a table in the fine living room and that fall in love with each other. But they cannot have each other, for the old Chinaman wants to give her to General-Headquarters-Hindquarters-Gives-Orders-Front-and-Rear-Sergeant-Billygoat-Legs, who rules over the large, dark table-linen chest. He wants to have her and put her in the chest, for he already has a whole collection there. The old Chinaman, who is also made of porcelain, is able to nod, so he has the ability and the power to give her away. The couple in love fortunately manage to run away, down from the table, out of the narrow living room, up the chimney and out into the wide world. But up here, under the huge open sky where the universe is close, the small shepherdess is seized with fright and she bitterly regrets her flight. She dare not stay here. It is too silent, too vast and too empty:

Overhead was the starry sky, and spread before them were all the housetops in the town. They looked out on the big wide world. The poor shepherdess had never thought it would be like that. She flung her little head against the chimney-sweep, and sobbed so many tears that the gilt washed off her sash. “This is too much,” she said. “I can’t bear it. The wide world is too big. Oh! If I only were back on my table under the mirror. I’ll never be happy until I stand there again, just as before. I followed you faithfully out into the world, and if you love me the least bit you’ll take me right home.”¹

With great difficulty, they crawl back to their place on the table under the mirror and notice that in the meantime the old Chinaman has got broken. For he became so het-up at their flight that he tried to do more than just nod, fell down and broke his porcelain neck, which means he is now unable to nod any longer. And the delightfully logical Andersen touch here is that now he cannot nod ‘yes’ any more. If he can’t nod, he can’t nod yes — as we do in Danish — and he is thus unable to give away the shepherdess. And so “the little porcelain people remained together. They thanked goodness for the rivet in grandfather’s neck, and they kept on loving each

other until the day they broke.”²

This short story contains a moral that is typical of many of Andersen’s stories, the good principle and mercy always win the day for the person who seeks with an honest heart and open mind, not as a ‘happy ending’ but as a greater power of mercy and will to do good. The two small porcelain figures who are in love have to go through many trials and tribulations, but they end up in their place in front of the mirror once more. There is an ironic finesse here, for it was precisely this place and the order it represents that they ran away from, but when they return home things have changed into a new order despite everything. Their flight out into the wide world brought about the change that the old Chinaman got broken, so he could no longer stand there nodding with his alleged right to decide the fate of the shepherdess. The narrative also assimilates, in ironic fashion, elements from the great classical love stories to be found in European literature, from *Tristan and Isolde* and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* up to Andersen’s own age, when Romanticism swept like a wave through European literature. But Andersen’s fine little room with its chimneypiece also contains ironic side-glances and comments on the established bourgeoisie of his own age and on bourgeois habits in Copenhagen, where people possibly talked about living with the heart, about leaving the stiff life and distancing themselves from the rigid forms of upper middle-class existence, but who actually did not dare gaze into their inner longings or out into the universe when all was said and done. It is thus possible to read the tale as an ironic exposé of a rigid and therefore porcelain-heavy bourgeoisie that is governed by burdensome traditions.

It is possible to read Hans Christian Andersen’s tales in so many different ways. That is precisely the greatness of a writer of his calibre — that there are many layers and many possible interpretations. We are well aware of this, of course. Andersen’s art contains many facets, just as we know that new versions and translations of Andersen in other languages — other European languages, for example — must have linguistic depth and consistency, for otherwise some of the gold in the artistic treasure chest disappears.

Another highly interesting aspect of an authorship which has been disseminated worldwide and been translated into so many languages is this: What aspects of the works and the artist are actually profiled and emphasised in the various translations? Or, to put it another way: What kind of a Hans Christian Andersen has evolved in most parts of the world? Is he one and the same person for a Dane, a Chinese, an American and a Brazilian? The answer has to be paradoxical: he is naturally both the same and not the same, for the art of his narratives is a meeting place, but the cultural preconditions and experiences of readers to meet in Andersen’s artistic idiom differ.

We have touched on a rather large issue here. How is a work to be translated or composed afresh, so that it transforms the artistic content from one language to another one? One place where this question has been dealt with is in a discussion of translations in the work *Hans Christian Andersen: Between Children’s Literature and Adult Literature*.³

A further possible question is: How does Andersen’s artistic universe link to the cultures where his works have been able to land as beautiful swans? What strands of a

cultural and intercultural nature exist that are joined together when works of genius are read by enthusiastic readers in cultures which otherwise might seem to be extremely diverse? What inter-national and inter-human element is there in the work of this great writer?

This is an extremely relevant question in an age where the globalisation of the economy, production and media reality is bringing us much closer to each other on the world stage than ever before. Economic and cultural globalisation opens up an enormous potential for greater contact and interaction between peoples than ever before, but at the same time globalisation also runs the risk of our misunderstanding each other and each other's intentions. Economic development creates globalisation, but only as something external — economics can never bring out real understanding between peoples. Art, narratives and literature can do so, however. They have in fact done so for quite some time, for Hans Christian Andersen is read and read aloud all over the world. So it is particularly relevant to ask: What potential do these tales and stories have? And that is why we should also ask: What kind of a Hans Christian Andersen do a young Dane and a young Chinese respectively meet and come to love?

Researchers from the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) and from Fudan University in Shanghai, China, are right now preparing a major project in which differences and similarities will be examined and discussed in the ways Hans Christian Andersen is perceived and read in Denmark and in China. It was the world's largest stage, the fantastic, fairytale-like world exposition in Shanghai, EXPO 2010, that gave us the idea, for the Danish pavilion with the statue of The Little Mermaid proved a great attraction for millions of Chinese who were eager to greet the symbol of the writer many of them feel is a part of themselves.

When one travels or works in China as a Dane, by the way, one discovers that it is nice to be able to say that one comes from Andersen's home country, Denmark, and, what's more, from his native city, Odense. This immediately creates an interest and friendships. Young and old Chinese alike know of the writer and can immediately refer to a number of his tales. Hans Christian Andersen is even probably the best-known foreign author in China. He outdoes William Shakespeare, for example, although the latter is also well known, since classical European literature, art and culture are particularly well known and respected in China.

All children — in the central part of China at least — read tales and stories by Andersen, partly because a number of them feature as permanent and syllabus material in compulsory school textbooks. And partly because Chinese people often say that they love these stories because they can recognise something in them and find a mirror in them for emotions and experiences they are familiar with.⁴ It is said that while an average Dane can immediately recall the title of 10 of Andersen's tales, a Chinese can probably recall at least 20.⁵ Part of the explanation for Andersen's colossal importance for modern Chinese is probably because the founder of the Chinese People's Republic, Mao Zedong, was personally very fond of Andersen and Andersen's tales. It was during his rule that Andersen was presented on a wide front to the people as a source of learning and insight. Perhaps Mao recognised a corner of his own life story in Andersen's. He too was of humble origin, but later achieved fame and honour.

In a large number of national cultures where Hans Christian Andersen's tales and literature are known, he is exclusively known as a writer for children. This influences actual translations and the way Andersen is launched and treated. The large range of his artistic expression is reduced to child's eye level, which excises significant parts of his sharp irony and profound humour. In the United States, it is typical, for example, that Walt Disney has long since clad the tales in a gleaming media reality, in which the little mermaid has become a sweet sea princess who lives in a golden kingdom with playmates and friends deep down in a beautiful realm at the bottom of the ocean. In Scandinavia and, for example, Germany we see Hans Christian Andersen as being much more than just a writer for children. The special thing about his genre, the *Kunstmärchen*, is precisely its ability to encourage awarenesses that can be read as imaginative fancies by children, but which contain profound awareness of mental and existential issues for adult readers.⁶

In China, Hans Christian Andersen is read and perceived as a storyteller who definitely writes for children but who is also a great purveyor of wisdom, who is capable of depicting life stories and paths of destiny at many levels, and who thus writes for people of all ages. Here the perception is similar to the Danish one, but in many other ways the codes for the understanding of the great writer differ considerably.

So it is interesting that the Hans Christian Andersen they know and love in China is not necessarily the same as the writer we celebrate in processions and on festive occasions here in the duckyard of Denmark. It is hardly surprising that the illustrations in the Chinese editions of Andersen's works follow the Chinese tradition. At first glance, Danes may feel that they look like Disney figures, in far too bright and glaring colours, because we are used to a particular way of illustrating his tales that derives from the Romantic era. The Chinese way of depicting Andersen's tales expresses something else. Or are we mistaken? Perhaps it is quite simply the way imagined universes are portrayed in a Chinese tradition? In Denmark, we cultivate and know Hans Christian Andersen as a literary figure via the special profile of his face and tall, gangling figure — and his top hat. We tend to focus on the writer, the icon, the loner or eccentric. The Chinese cultivate the writer or the literary genius less, concentrating rather on the characters in the tales. Here they find examples of an animated nature, a personified and conscious animal world that has a sounding board in ancient Chinese folk culture — and they find a multitude of human life stories and destinies.

There would seem to be a tradition for a multi-philosophical approach to existence underlying the Chinese mentality and way of thinking, a tradition that differs without a doubt from a classical European concept of *Bildung*, which builds on the particular conception of the individual as a centre. It may be of significance for the widespread appeal Andersen has in China that in his writing — and thus in his view of life — he did not allow himself to be limited by unambiguous explanations. Many Chinese seem to base their existence as human beings on a wide spectrum of narratives and stories that can have a more or less religious or philosophical significance. Perhaps there is an element of Chinese consciousness and culture that has to do with the good example, or the power and precedence of the good story. Hans Christian Andersen supplies this in his stories with their stressed moral or ethical point. The

history of Chinese philosophy is perhaps based to a greater extent than the European on the idea of a multiplicity of examples rather than a systematised metaphysics. Wisdom, superstition, arithmology and traditions often seem to operate on an equal footing with logic and rational solutions in a Chinese cultural context, so it could be that Andersen's imagined universe can have significance here. These are questions that cannot be briefly formulated or answered. But Hans Christian Andersen's writing and his self-presentations are a fantastic "place" to meet for serious discussions of what is at stake in a cultural universe that cuts across so many other borders, since in a common understanding of the greatness of a story or a storyteller a bridge has already been built.

It is fantastic, for example, that most adult Chinese know "The Little Matchstick Girl", "The Story of a Mother", "The Little Mermaid" and many more stories by Andersen, which are highly popular. Indeed, Hans Christian Andersen's entrancing tales and stories actually build a bridge of possible conversation in that way between a people and a mentality in a small northern European country that looks like a mere drip from the Scandinavian nose and the population of the huge People's Republic of China. Tales, myths, stories, literature, art all contain a greater and much deeper potential for conversations and meetings between peoples than anything else. Economic, political and business agreements are carried out with the rational part of the brain — and there is a time and place for that too. But stories and literature call for the heart and the imagination, so here there is a basis for an understanding that is much more profound. Hans Christian Andersen thus constitutes a fantastic bridge between Danish culture and Chinese culture. It can perhaps be a bridge that enables conversations to take place about so many other topics of common humanistic interest.

In such comparisons of the ways in which we meet the works there lies a marvellous opportunity for culture discourse. It is such a discourse we wish to open up and it will, among other things, come about as the result of a research cooperation now being established between researchers at SDU and Chinese researchers at Fudan University in Shanghai. We will ask about each other's Andersen and points of intersection. Who is he for us? What aspects of the writer and his works do we wish to profile and emphasise?

The cooperation will be launched at a shared conference or workshop which is expected to be held at Fudan University in autumn 2011. A circle of invited Chinese professors and researchers will meet with a circle of colleagues from Denmark, with Andersen and Andersen's importance as its theme. There will be readings and discussions of selected tales and, in addition, discussions of the cultural icon and Hans Christian Andersen's importance in Denmark/Europe and China respectively. The gathered researchers will also try to prepare the design of a survey aimed at a slightly wider circle of readers of Hans Christian Andersen. What qualities does the Chinese reader find in Andersen? And what qualities does the Danish reader tend to emphasise?

This research work, apart from contributing to the knowledge of the fairytale figure of Andersen, will also be able to help build a platform for further cooperation between Danish and Chinese researchers. The wonderful works of Andersen are a fan-

tastic, positive place to arrange to meet for a dialogue about artistic values, literary quality and ultimately existential issues.

Notes

1. Andersen, Hans Christian, “The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep”, trans. Jean Hersholt < [www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The%20Shepherdess%20and%20the%20Chimney-Sweep) >. < [www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The Shepherdess and the Chimney-Sweep](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The%20Shepherdess%20and%20the%20Chimney-Sweep) > .
3. Johan de Mylius, Aage Jørgensen, and Viggo Hjørnager Pedersen. eds. *Hans Christian Andersen: Between Children's Literature and Adult Literature* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2007) 275 – 408..
4. During a short stay at Fudan University, Shanghai, in autumn 2010, I was asked — in a quite non-academic way — by at least twenty young people I met at the university on in the city's parks what they knew and liked about the writer Hans Christian Andersen.
5. Cf. Eric Messerschmidt, head of the Danish Cultural Institute, Beijing.
- 6 Johan de Mylius, *The Price of Transformation. Hans Christian Andersen and His Tales*. Høst & Søn (Copenhagen 2005). Jens Andersen, Andersen. *A Biography*, I-II, Gyldendal (Copenhagen, 2003).

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