

Across the Sinophone: self-translation and transcultural encounters

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Abstract

The displacement and the assimilation of another language provides direct access to the “third space” (Bhabha 1994, 157), a fluid dimension where two linguistic and cultural universes coexist in their dialogic power. Enhanced by the intrinsically social experience of the verbal language (Bakhtin 1975), hybridization corroborates the dynamic and polymorphic structure of identity, and produces new real or symbolic imaginaries through the texts (Bouvier-Laffitte 2013, 263-264).

The opportunity of creative re-elaboration of a multilingual and transcultural narrative of identity, inevitably authentic and hopefully free, appears in the process and the product of self-translation, when the individual becomes a “cross-cultural interlocutor” (Cordingley 2013, 1), as well as a translating and translated subject. The topic of self-translation sheds new light on the landscapes of negotiation of a linguistic and cultural plurality, expressed through literary works. Furthermore, it allows to detect and identify unknown transcultural perspectives of communication between the self and the other, in different contexts.

Based on the fundamental assumption that “Sinophone is multilingual, polyphonic, and also poly-scriptic” (Shih 2016, 106), the paper will propose a reflection on self-translation as a cross-lingual and a transcultural practice of self-recognition, by observing some of the most representative authors of the Sinophone paradigm in the West (Shih 2013; Jing & Wang 2010). Specifically, the paper will take into consideration some Chinese-born authors who experienced the process of transculturation (Todorov 1996), and hybridization in the extraterritoriality: their multilingual writing, together with self-translation, may then be interpreted as a chance of disambiguation of an intrinsic duality, beyond the aesthetic or even commercial needs.

These authors dialectically interact with a “second” homeland: The United States, in modern (Zhang Ailing, Lin Yutang) and contemporary (Yan Geling, Ha Jin) times, or the anglophone (Ma Jian, Guo Xiaolu) and francophone (Gao Xingjian, Ying Cheng) Europe, just to mention a few of them.

Distinguished by a nomadic Chineseness and an individual bilingualism (Hamers & Blanc 2004, 6), they productively reformulate their roots (Clifford 1997) by crystallizing a linguistic and cultural plurality in a polyphonic literary language.

With a focus on the literary production of the abovementioned authors, and with a translation approach, the paper aims at identifying several specific paradigms of “going through” the Sinophone, in the context of bilingualism and self-translation as a transcultural and cross-linguistic movement.