

The Reception of Chinese Contemporary Literature in France:

Reflections on Chinese Francophone Literature

The Gospel According to Yong Sheng as a case study

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Abstract

Transculturality seems to have been a constitutive characteristic of Sino-French relations since their establishment. Its first manifestation can be noticed when we look at the French missionaries' ambivalent strategies of the diffusion of Western sciences and of acculturation as a way to evangelize indigenous populations. Nonetheless, this apparently delimited course did not only affect Jesuit personal daily life, quite the contrary they diffused their intercultural experiences to Europe through their accounts and literary productions about China. De facto, Chinese philosophy circulated played a crucial role in the intellectual revolution in Europe during the Enlightenment period, in particular in reflections on good governance (Voltaire, Montesquieu) and the common good. No matter the evolution of diplomatic relations during the XIXth century, China remained an important topic of interest in intellectual circles (Parnassinism, for example) and became more and more known in popular milieus thanks to the development of international news services (colonial context), the birth of photography, the trend of serialized fiction or travel literature published in newspapers. However, politics' influence cannot be ignored so the perception of China could have been greatly distorted under the influence of Nations-states theories, ethnic and economic concerns. Besides, even though sinology developed at that time and presented a certain range of translations (novels, plays, poetry... - mostly classical works), we assume that the most renowned "Chinese stories" were intercultural products, due to Western authors. To put it simply, Chinese current literary productions from the XIXth century to the mid-XXth century were not that much translated in France and did not enable a real cultural dialogue, facing orientalist a priori.

If Chinese literature encountered a new appreciation due to ideological issues and the diffusion of Maoist thought in the post-World War II Europe, the circulation of contemporary works in France started growing since the 80s, mostly with the apparition of a Chinese Francophone literature. The growing interest in China, the exposure of writers, favorable reviews and commercial success, authors' patent opposition to the Communist Party of China's politics... are many reasons which can explain their actual success. Besides, with the choice of writing in French rather than in their mother tongue, these authors made it possible for the French public to get (easily) direct accounts of life in China and to get initiated to Chinese contemporary literature (at least, Chinese literary trends), that has been more and more translated and published since. Paradoxically, abandoning their mother tongue led to a questioning of their cultural affiliation: how to categorize them when they abandon one of the most distinctive feature of a community, here Chinese language, which implies cultural values and enables exchanges between this group members? This question is, of course, open to

discussion; nonetheless, we assume that the premise depending on whether “a French writer will be here [understood] as a writer who uses French to write, regardless of its nationality” seems too reductive in the light of cultural attributes that transcend language. On the contrary, can we strictly consider francophone works of Chinese writers as a tendency of Chinese literature?

Rather than an analysis focused only on the hybridity of Francophone works, we would already highlight the role played by the reader following Ricoeur’s proposition: “It must be said that [a story] does not complete its journey within the enclosure of the text, but in its counterpart: the reader, this forgotten protagonist of structuralism”. This point leads to two comments on the reader’s role: first, linked with Ricoeur’s remark, the interpretative capacities of the reader influence its vision of a story and, somehow, its perception of the author. Secondly, the very existence of an audience, with a specific (personal and collective) cultural background, implies expectations; the author can decide either to respond to it, or not, however this influences in any case its literary production.

From these first considerations, we propose the following approaches for our study:

A first part would explore the socio historical conditions that enabled the good reception of Chinese Francophone literature. Thus, we would propose a brief contextualization of the Sino-French cultural relations and the perception of China during the 60s and 70s, fundamentally marked by the ‘Mao-Spontex’ movement. Afterwards, we would observe the resurgence of the Yellow Peril doctrine in the West by the 80s, emphasized with the Tiananmen Square protests and their repression, which reinforced a conflict of values between a ‘Democratic West’ and an ‘Autocratic China’.

Secondly, we would present a global view of Chinese Francophone Literature (what authors? what works?), its inherent transcultural characteristics and the reasons of its good reception in France, not to say worldwide. This point would particularly return to theoretical positions on the problematic of the authors’ cultural identities, neither totally Chinese nor French; but also literary components such as the representation of the self, thematics, or spatial representations (the duality native country/country of adoption).

Our last point would propose a detailed analysis of Dai Sijie’s latest novel, *The Gospel According to Yong Sheng* (*L’Evangile selon Yong Sheng*, 2019), as a paradigm of Chinese Francophone literature. Inspired by the story of Dai Meitai, the author’s grandfather and one of the first native pastor in China, Dai Sijie narrates the journey of Yong Sheng through China’s XXth century historical and political transformations. Far more than a man of God, Yong Sheng is shown as an avatar of Jesus Christ: son of a carpenter, he first follows the teaching of a female character named Mary in Hanjiang local Christian school, and then goes to Nanjing theology faculty and starts preaching the Gospel through China. Bearing persecutions because of his faith (martyr) during the Cultural Revolution, he is finally condemned to death. With this theme, Dai stages his inherent cultural mixing linked to his familial background and historical cultural exchanges between China and the West. To conclude this segment, we would observe the dual and conflictual literary representations of China and the West that could have been a reason of the novels’ good reception in France.