

***PROUST, CHINA AND INTERTEXTUAL ENGAGEMENT: TRANSLATION AND
TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUE BY SHUANGYI LI***

Proust, China and Intertextual Engagement: Translation and Transcultural Dialogue,
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Even before the publication of *Proust, China and Intertextual Engagement: Translation and Transcultural Dialogue*, the work of Shuangyi Li on Proust and China was already on the radar of Proustian scholars around the world. In a 2011 conference held at the University of São Paulo, Marion Schmid referenced it as an example of the fertility and dynamism of the Proustian field in the UK. This promising project became a book (recently awarded with the 2019 Anna Balakian Prize) that reaches beyond the field of French Studies.

Proust, China and Intertextual Engagement is a study that deals with a vast array of concepts, references, corpora and languages in order to provide a prismatic vision of a core problem: how can we understand the main traits of the reception and recreation of *La Recherche* by Chinese translators and writers? Within this core problem, the author makes some strategic choices that allow him to maintain the broad scope of his subject (Proust and China) while being conceptually and methodologically precise. In particularising his objects and promoting the framework for a more detailed analytical approach, Shuangyi Li allows the reader to feel relatively comfortable even though some of the themes covered in his book might be entirely original or unfamiliar to some readers.

Dealing with such a large and complex topic, Li had to make some delicate choices. The first of these choices regards his conceptual tools. The importance of *translation*, *intertext* and *transcultural dialogue*, as the main notions guiding the book, is highlighted from the onset by the title. What the title is not able to make clear is that, firstly, each of these three concepts are *equally important* in the text and, secondly, they suggest a progression within the book, starting with a focus on translation and moving towards the idea of transcultural dialogue. This triad creates the basis for the interpretation of the many aspects and stages of the Chinese reception of Marcel Proust. Like links in a chain, these concepts are, at the same time, distinct and attached to one another, firmly placed but also part of a larger mobile structure.

As readers, we are challenged to keep track of this subtle and sometimes blurred interaction, but equally are reminded to focus on one of those notions at a time. In his analysis of the Chinese translations of *La Recherche*, intertext and transcultural dialogue appear to support the understanding of the textual and ideological dimensions of the translational process. In his account of intertextual engagement of mainland Chinese authors with *La Recherche*, he shows how they depended on translations and dialogues between French and Chinese cultures. In analysing the more complex case of the transcultural dialogue established between François Cheng's and Proust's work, we are also invited to draw on (or contrast with) the first two stages of the study and to think of translation, intertext

and transcultural dialogue as the threads of a compactly weaved history of cultural connections.

Another important aspect of this book is the choice of its corpus. Consisting mainly of Chinese translations, the work of three mainland Chinese writers (Wang Xiaobo, Yu Hua, Wei Hui) and that of a Franco-Chinese writer (François Cheng), the corpus also bears a triple nature that somewhat mirrors the triple conceptual basis we have discussed.

The structure of the book, however, does not reflect that triple nature. Instead, the work is divided into two parts. Part One analyses the sometimes misguided and reductionist, but mostly interesting, reception of Proust by mainland Chinese translators and writers. Shuangyi Li interprets those productions in detail, but always against the wider backdrop of China's socio-historical context. For him, the fact that this reception provides 'limited understandings of Proust work *per se*' (115) reveals a hasty appropriation of external cultural references. This limitation, he argues, not only is linked to the broader Chinese modern cultural landscape and its 'impatient cultural ambition (...) to be integrated into the world literature network' (116) but also contributes to an important process of reinterpretation of Proust's creations (119).

Part Two focuses on a different perspective regarding Franco-Chinese cultural interactions. Here, François Cheng's case becomes the centre of the study. Cheng's writings seem to epitomise the contrast between mainland Chinese reception and that initiated by the Chinese diaspora in France. Cheng's peculiar position is in this sense intelligently underlined by the bi-folded structure of the book. His work occupies a large portion of Li's analysis, and for good reason: Cheng's interactions with *La Recherche* produce more complex and powerful creative outcomes. Cheng is simultaneously aware of (and tries to transcend) both Chinese and French receptions of the work, advancing not only new perspectives of *La Recherche* and new creative engagements with Proust in *Le Dit de Tianyi*, but also new 'positions in the literary field' (237).

Proust, China and Intertextual Engagement integrates an analysis of different objects (that is, translations and literary texts) into a coherent narrative, leading to a thesis on how to interpret the overall process of Chinese reception of Proust. Through the different translations, and intertextual and transcultural dialogues, we are able to sense an *evolution* of the contacts between Proust and China. Progressively, but not linearly, as the understanding of the French author became more rich and creative, the interactions between the work of Proust and Chinese literary actors seems to become more complex and profound as well.

Certainly, we can disagree with some of Shuangyi Li's choices in this study. We can ask, for instance, if important aspects of translation analysis were not left aside. When a large part of the discussion around the Chinese translations is consigned to the topic of the language of sexuality, we might feel that problems like memory, literary creation, narrative voice or phrasal rhythm could have been more thoroughly analysed. They seem equally important and would also be able to produce important insights. Reading Li's fine and detailed analysis can sometimes make us lose sight of some other important aspects of the corpus.

But these are inevitable disagreements that do not overshadow the overall power of this work. Its merit lies in its capacity for articulating the methods of Translation Studies,

Cultural Studies, Literary Theory and History within a profound investigation that illuminates both the work of Proust and that of Chinese writers and translators. This capacity for expanding our knowledge of both sides of the comparative equation is maybe one of the few golden rules in the field of Comparative Literature, where consensus is rare. Shuangyi Li provides us with a potent intellectual telescope with which we can observe the complex network linking Proust and China.