

The Rhetoric of Cultural Intercourse and Its Discontents:

A Postcolonial Reading of François Cheng's Novels

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In *Postcolonial theory and Francophone literary Studies*, H. Adlai Murdoch and Anne Donadey affirm the close connection between the two by pointing out that francophone studies as “an emergent field within French departments since the 1980s and now a central part of French studies in the U. S. academy” has progressively drawn on postcolonial studies. They define francophone studies as the field that “focuses particularly on the problematics of cultural production and the articulation of cultural identity in former French colonies and by immigrants from these sites living in France.” (3) In the light of this definition, the novels of François Cheng, *Le dit de Tianyi (What Tianyi Said)* and *l'Eternité n'est pas de trop (Eternity Is Not Too Much)* can be considered as works that may lend themselves to a postcolonial reading, for, as francophone literature, they were written by a writer from China, once a semi-colonized country suffering the imperialism of western powers, including France, and who now as an immigrant lives in Paris. To read these novels from the perspective of post-colonialism is, first of all, to analyze them as the writer's “articulation of cultural identity”.

In *Le dialogue (Dialogue)*, a work characterized by an autobiographical touch, François Cheng shows a divided cultural identity on his part, passionately desiring to be transformed by French culture, though not without having nostalgia for his native culture. The first challenge he as an exile has to face is that of living, surviving in a foreign country whose language is totally strange to him. “À un humble niveau existentiel,” he affirms, “l'exilé éprouve la douleur de tous ceux qui sont privés de langage, et se rend compte combien le langage confère la ‘légitimité d'être’” (At a humble existential level, an exile feels the pain of those who are deprived of language

and realizes how language confers the “legitimacy of being” (29).

What makes the situation of the exiled man sadder is his “nostalgie du passé” (nostalgia for the past) (*Le dialogue* 28). He is “déchiré entre la nostalgie et la dure condition du présent, il expérimente une souffrance plus « muette », plus humiliante, qui le tenaille (torn between this nostalgia and the hard condition of the present; he experiences a heart-rending suffering that is essentially more ‘silent’ and more humiliating)” (28). This past cannot be anything other than the Chinese culture he lived before going to France. Although French is his language of creation, the Chinese language, “[m]ise en sourdine, . . . s’est transmuée, elle, en une interlocutrice fidèle mais discrète, d’autant plus efficace que ses murmures, alimentant [s]on inconscient, [lui] fournissaient sans cesse des images à métamorphoser, des nostalgies à combler (muted, . . . has been metamorphosed into a reliable and discreet speaker, indeed a speaker efficacious enough because his murmurs, feeding his unconscious, offers him countless images to transform and a nostalgic emptiness to satisfy)” (8).

.Despite his nostalgia for Chinese culture, he uses French as his language of creation, for he is enchanted by “the great western tradition” and aware of an aesthetic French “here and now”. As he explains:

Indéniable était le fait que je vivais en France. Rien ne pouvait faire que j’eusse ignoré la grande tradition occidentale, que je ne fusse environné de la musique d’une autre langue, que même en rêve, dans mon inconscient, ne vissent se mêler à des murmures maternels des mots secrets mus par une autre sonorité. J’étais, pour tout dire, devenu quelqu’un d’autre, indéfinissable peut-être, mais autre. Il me fallait sans doute m’arracher d’un terreau trop natif, trop encombré de clichés — un terreau. . . qui ne sera nullement abandonné, qui, au contraire, servira toujours de substrat, d’humus —, afin d’opérer une plus périlleuse métamorphose, d’inaugurer un dialogue plus radical (Undeniable was the fact that I was living in France. Nothing could make me neglect the great western tradition, make me forget that I was always in the midst of the music of another

language, that even in my dreams, in my unconscious, some secret words, driven by another sonority, had come to join in the murmurs uttered in my maternal language. I became someone else, impossible to define perhaps. Indeed, I was like another person. Without doubt, I should uproot myself from a fertilized soil too native, too filled with clichés — a soil not to be abandoned for all that, a soil which will, on the contrary, serve as a substrate, a humus —, in order to bring about a perilous metamorphosis, to inaugurate a radical dialogue). (*Le dialogue* 38).

Such is François Cheng's articulation of cultural identity (which is actually a divided cultural identity) in the guise of the theme of cultural intercourse evoked through the metaphor dialogue and the idea of the quest of transformation. He seems to be suggesting the indispensability of this cultural intercourse in “bringing about a perilous metamorphose”, in creating something new, something marvelous in art as well as in life. The same obsession with intercourse between Chinese and western cultures, indeed, with the latter, is discernable in his novels.

Like him, Tianyi, the hero of the novel *Le dit de Tianyi*, is a Chinese in Paris. The author's own diaspora experience seems to carry into his depiction of this character in exile. As strangers in Paris, both feel “the lack of the legitimacy of being”:

À Paris, j'éprouvais pour la première fois mon étrangeté, accentuée encore par mon statut d'étranger. . . . Il y avait, en travers de mon corps, la conscience d'un manque autrement plus radical, un manque, disons, de légitimité d'être. . . . Pire qu'exclu, je me sentais séparé. Séparé des autres, séparé de soi, séparé de tout. Je suis venu ici pour apprendre la peinture. J'affronte un métier qui ne s'apprend pas : exister (In Paris, I felt for the first time my own strangeness, accentuated by my identity as a foreigner. . . . My whole body was permeated with the consciousness of a thorough lack, say, the lack of

the legitimacy of being. More than excluded, I felt separated. Separated from others, separated from myself, separated from everything. I have come here to learn painting. But now I am facing a job beyond my ken: to exist). (212-213)

Like the author, too, Tianyi seeks self-transformation by taking the occidental way. If he chooses the occidental way, it is because, for him, western culture always has an idealized image. Even before he goes to France, Europe was invariably the theme of his dreams:

Appel de l'Occident. Ou plus exactement de l'Europe. Malgré l'atroce drame qui s'y passait, on ne pouvait s'empêcher de l'idéaliser, d'y voir un « sol béni des dieux ». On se familiarisait avec le Rhin et le Danube, les Alpes et les Pyrénées. Et le seul nom de Méditerranée suffisait à faire résonner toute une charge de mythes et de légendes. Oui, au « parfum exotique » de Baudelaire, on ne songeait pas à quelque île des tropiques mais bien à l'extrémité occidentale du continent Eurasie. Ce mot magique éveillait alors dans ma mémoire toute une série de sensations premières, que j'avais éprouvées à l'époque où, enfant encore, j'habitais au mont Lu, cette montagne « colonisée » par les missionnaires occidentaux (The call of the western world. Or more exactly of Europe. In spite of the atrocious tragedy that was happening there, we could not help but idealize her, considering her as the "land blessed by gods". We were familiar with Rhine and Danube, Alps and Pyrenees. And the mere name of Mediterranean was enough to make a large store of myths and legends resound. Yes, the "exotic perfume" of Baudelaire aroused in us associations not of some tropical isle but of the occidental extremity of Eurasia. This magical word would awaken in my memory a series of initial sensations, which I had felt when, still a child, I lived in the mount Lu, a mountain "colonized" by

western missionaries). (91)

The word Eurasia, a geographic term that refers literally to the land mass comprising the continents of Europe and Asia, takes on an aesthetic aspect. A metaphor for him, it stands for all the charm that might be created by an Occident-Orient encounter. The word colonized, being figuratively used here, does not mean what it literally means. That is to say, Tianyi does not see in colonization (the presence of western missionaries in China is an element of colonialism) a condemnable act but a catalyst for a cultural intercourse open to aesthetic possibilities. The mount Lu where he spent his childhood is, therefore, a Eurasia in miniature, having a charm of its own. As he says:

[Les missionnaires occidentaux], fuyant en été la chaleur torride des villes de la vallée du Yangzi, y trouvaient fraîcheur et repos. Bientôt, la montagne fut parsemée de chalets, de cottages, de pavillons, avec en son centre un bourg pittoresque où se mêlaient maisons chinoises et boutiques occidentales (In summer, the western missionaries would flee the torrid heat of the cities in the valley of the Yangzi River to find freshness and repose there. Soon the mountain was sprinkled with chalets, cottages, and villas, with a central picturesque village having Chinese houses intermingled with occidental shops). (33)

The theme of cultural intercourse on the analogy of a dialogue culminates in the comparison which describes the West, as represented by some reputed occidental writers whose works are widely admired in China, as the interlocutor of Chinese culture. *Le dit de Tianyi* depicts an age when the West is present in China with the introduction of its literature translated into Chinese. In the 1940s, despite of social upheavals and the war, a great many Chinese writers are devoted to introducing western literature to their country. In the midst of noises of bombardment and the stench of disease, Tianyi and his friend, Haolang, bury themselves in western novels

and poems. For them, as for the young men of the age, there are two western writers in particular: Romain Rolland and André Gide. It is in the company of “Jean Christophe”, “Prométhée” (Prometheus) and “l’Enfant prodigue” (the prodigal son) that they passed their lonely hours. Through these characters, the French novelists speak to them, encouraging them to carry out their ideal of self-transformation:

L’histoire tumultueuse de Jean-Christophe qui cherche à s’accomplir à travers trois cultures, allemande, française, italienne, avec tous les drames qu’elle comporte nous inspirait, à un moment où nous tous, nous aspirions aux métamorphoses. Nous savions qu’au point où était parvenue la culture chinoise, après son long dialogue avec l’Inde et l’Islam, l’Occident était l’interlocuteur plus qu’essentiel, incontournable. Gide, lui, parle à un Chinois comme ce fils prodigue de retour qui se confie à son jeune frère. Il l’exhorte à puiser en lui-même ses propres ressources, à trouver la ferveur, à élargir le champ de son désir, à oser s’affranchir de la contrainte forgée par la tradition familiale et sociale, ce dont souffrait justement tout Chinois épris d’idéal dans ce vieux pays en décadence (The tumultuous story of Jean-Christophe, who seeks to realize himself through three cultures: German, French, and Italian cultures, as well as all the tragedies inherent in it, inspired us at a moment when all of us were aspiring after metamorphoses. We knew that, considering the situation where Chinese culture was in, the West was the speaker more than essential, indeed inevitable, for the Chinese to listen to after their long dialogue with India and Islam. Gide speaks to a Chinese as the prodigal son, having returned, confides to his younger brother. He exhorts him to draw from himself his own resources, to be fervent, to dare free himself from the constraint forged by familial and social traditions, the constraint which tormented all those Chinese embracing idealism in this old decadent country). (89)

In *L’Éternité n’est pas de trop*, the same theme of cultural intercourse blooms,

evoked through the same image of dialogue. The idea of the dialogue between western and oriental cultures, between Gide and his Chinese readers in *What Tianyi Said* is replaced by the dialogue between a Jesuit missionary and Dao-sheng, a Taoist believer and exile, banished from the town for love of Lan-ying, a woman betrothed to a local influential family, rich but evil. The subjects of their conversation are particularly soul and love. As to the question of the soul, the two have the same opinion as they both believe in the imperishability of the soul, only that what for Dao-sheng is accomplished by Tao is attributed to God, the Savior, by the Jesuit. In Lan-ying's resurrection, Dao-sheng witnesses the power of the primordial Breath while the Westerner sees the glory of God.

However, when it comes to talking about love, the Chinese becomes confused, because most Chinese thinkers ignore this subject:

Why do you always talk about love and loving? It is true that our wise thinkers used such expressions as *jian-ai*, love for all, and *fan-ai*, universal love. They aimed at, above all, social concord and harmony. But between private individuals, instead of saying, "We love each other", we say, "We like each other" (Pourquoi dites-vous toujours : aimer, amour ? C'est vrai que nos sages usaient aussi d'expressions : *jian-ai* (amour pour tous), *fan-ai* (amour universel). Ils visaient avant tout la concorde et l'harmonie pour la société. Mais en privé, entre particuliers, on ne dit pas s'aimer ; on dit plutôt se plaire). (135)

It is, curiously, only by resorting to Taoism that the western missionary finally succeeds in making the Chinese Taoist believer understand what love means:

[S]i nous aimons vraiment, l'amour que nous donnons est plus que nous-mêmes, il nous dépasse. Que, si l'on aime vraiment, on entre en quelque sorte dans une autre sphère. Et dans cette autre sphère-là, sans oublier pour autant qu'on est mortel, on est prêt à croire qu'on peut mourir soi-même, mais que

l'amour ne mourra pas. Au point qu'on peut dire à l'être aimé : « Tu ne mourras pas ! ». . . . Oui, ami Dao-sheng, n'entendez-vous pas de par le monde toutes les voix monter et proclamer : « L'amour ne mourra pas ! Tu ne mourras pas ! » Toutes ces voix convergent pour former une immense Voie. Oui, la Voie, le Tao. Et justement, j'y pense, le Tao en chinois, n'a-t-il pas double sens : chemin et parole, marcher et dire ? Et bien, ne voyons-nous pas qu'en marchant et en disant, tous les êtres aimants ont formé. . . une immense Voie qui exalte la vie et qui dépasse la mort ? (When we really love a person, the love that we give is more than ourselves; it surpasses us. When we really love a person, we enter, in some way, another sphere. And in this new sphere, rather than forgetting that we are mortal, we believe that even though our own physical body can die some day, the love we give will never die, to such a degree that we may tell our beloved, "You will not die!". . . Yes, my friend, Dao-sheng, don't you hear voices from all over the world declare that love will not die and that you will not die? All these voices converge to form a wide, wide road. Yes, Tao is exactly the road. And I think the Chinese word 'tao' has a double meaning: road and speech, to walk and to speak. Well, don't you see that by walking and by speaking, those loving people have constituted an immense. . . road that glorifies life and surpasses death?) (138-139)

Dao-sheng is so much enlightened by the Jesuit's lessons about love that he becomes a man who knows, in the words of the author, "à agir, à convaincre, à attendre, à espérer," a man who knows, "en un mot, à se passionner. . . comme un fou" (to act, to persuade, to wait, to hope, in a word, to have strong passion like a mad man)" (140).

In the rhetoric of cultural intercourse, if western culture represents an ideal, a dream, a paradise, Chinese culture is described as "decadent", indeed, a "constraint" for the youths; if western culture, as represented by Romain Roland, André Gide and the Jesuit missionary, appears to be superior, it is so only in relation to the Chinese readers yet in the bond of tradition and the character Dao-sheng still confused, in search for guide. If western culture is eulogized, Chinese culture has a more or less

negative image. This negative image is no doubt a stereotyped one. Tianyi, for instance, comes from a big traditional Chinese family where four generations live together and where there are injustice and malice arising from the struggles between wife and concubine, between their children. The wife of the second uncle of Tianyi, the woman in power, is depicted as “flanquée d’une pipe à eau dans la main et d’une théière suspendue au bras (flanked by a water pipe in hand and a teapot hanging on the arm) (*Le dit de Tianyi* 39). His fourth uncle is a “fumeur d’opium” (opium smoker), a victim of his own amorous passions (42). The evil of the big family where Tianyi spends his childhood seems to be, in the second novel, bequeathed to the rich family of the “Deuxième Seigneur Zao” (Second Lord Zao), who as the villain in the novel has a wife and two concubines. He is also an opium smoker. His chamber is permeated with “relents d’opium” (the stench of opium) (*L’Eternité n’est pas de trop*) (188). The malicious complicity of the wife of the second uncle of Tianyi, the uncle who rules dictatorially the family, is comparable to that of Fu-chun, a concubine of Zao. All this constitutes what François Cheng describes as the “soil” which is, in his own words, “too native, too filled with clichés”, a soil from which he would want to “uproot himself” but could not after all.

The drastic contrast between the representation of western culture and that of Chinese culture informs the narratology of the novels that, in the guise of the apparent theme of cultural intercourse, emphasize actually the necessity, the urgency of following the occidental way in quest of self-transformation. Western culture is shown to be the model, the center, while Chinese culture takes on the quality of otherness. Tianyi and Dao-sheng’s pursuit of a self-transformation modeled on western culture is possible only insofar as they perceive first of all their position as “other” in relation to this culture and admit, if only unconsciously, that as “other”, their culture is inferior. It is, therefore, only within this kind of reasoning that the words of Romain Rolland and André Gide can be enlightening to Tianyi and instructive to Dao-sheng. By showing how they as the interlocutors of Chinese culture are indispensable for creating a wiser Tianyi and a braver Dao-sheng, both novels confirm the legitimacy of the characters’

being civilized. This draws them closer to colonial discourse. François Cheng's rhetoric of cultural intercourse evokes the idea of crossing the barriers of cultural difference but ends up accentuating this difference.

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