

HOMEWARD BOUND TRANSLINGUALISM: (RE)TRANSLATING DAI SIJIE'S AUTONARRATION

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Abstract: Migrant authors writing in foreign languages are one of the most tangible effects of the ongoing globalization of contemporary Chinese literature. Dai Sijie, Chinese émigré writer and film-maker, chose the French language to voice his narration of China. Soon he became an example of how the presence of multiple cultures within an individual can result in self-hybridization. His first novel *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* (2000) is based on Dai Sijie's own experience of banishment and tells the story of two youths whose re-education is strongly influenced by Western novels banned in China. But what happens when a literary text born as a translingual and transcultural work is translated "back" into its language (and culture) of origin? Is the mediation performed twice or undone? How does this process affect the author's representation? This article will answer such questions through a comparative analysis of the novel and its Chinese versions (published in the P.R.C. and Taiwan), by focusing on the linguistic and cultural (re)translations. The "world literature fever" stresses the centrifugal force pushing literature from China to the West, yet globalization is a circular movement that sometimes implies the homecoming of a "Westproof" Chinese literariness.

Keywords: Re-translation; Dai Sijie; Hybridization; Translingualism; Autonarration

TRANSLINGUISMO PARA CASA: A AUTONARRATION (RE) TRADUZIDA DE DAI SIJIE

Resumo: Os autores migrantes que escrevem em idiomas estrangeiros são um dos efeitos mais tangíveis da globalização da literatura chinesa contemporânea em curso nos dias de hoje. Dai Sijie, escritor e cineasta



emigrante chinês, escolheu o Francês para expressar sua narrativa sobre a China. Em pouco tempo, ele se tornou um exemplo de como a presença de várias culturas dentro de um indivíduo pode resultar em auto-hibridização. Seu primeiro romance *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* (2000) baseia-se na experiência de Dai Sijie durante seu exílio e conta a história de dois jovens cuja reeducação foi fortemente influenciada por Romances ocidentais proibidos na China. Mas o que acontece quando um texto literário nascido como um trabalho translinguístico e transcultural é traduzido de volta em sua língua (e cultura) de origem? A mediação é realizada duas vezes ou é anulada? Como esse processo afeta a representação do autor? O presente artigo responderá a essas perguntas através de uma análise comparativa dos romances e suas versões em chinês (publicado no P.R.C. e Taiwan), com foco nas (re) traduções linguísticas e culturais. A “febre da literatura mundial” enfatiza a força centrífuga que empurra a literatura da China para o Ocidente, mas a globalização é um movimento circular que às vezes implica o regresso a casa de uma literariedade chinesa “à prova de oeste”.
Palavras-chave: Re-tradução; Dai Sijie; Hibridação; Translinguismo; *Autonarration*

1. Globalization, Translingualism, and Translation

The ‘liquidity’ of the concept of Chinese literature in the global context, which has been extensively discussed during the last decade (Rao; Tsu and Wang; Shih; Shih, Tsai, and Bernards; Pesaro and Zhang), allows us to establish countless connections between its articulations, and to analyze and compare them on the basis of the fact that they exist beyond territorial borders. “Global Chinese literature” – as defined by David Der-wei Wang and Jing Tsu – potentially encompasses any work that could somehow be defined as “Chinese,” since no universal definition of such a concept has been formulated. Broadly speaking, any work containing any form of Chinese identity could be included within this pseudo-category,¹ and comparative studies of its articulations prove most effective when they take multiple linguistic environments into account. It

¹ I define it a “pseudo-category” since the broadness of the concept makes it useless as a category *strictu sensu*; it is only when used as a method of research that it can prove most fruitful.

cannot be denied that translation is the primary means of interaction between a “globalized” Chinese literature and world literature. Indeed, in one of her most famous works, Spivak states that “translation is [...] not only necessary but unavoidable” (Spivak 21). This is not only true as far as the circulation of literary works is concerned: translation sometimes also plays an important role with respect to literary creation, as in the case of authors writing directly in foreign languages. This means acknowledging the complexity of the interactions between literature and translation, by taking into account not only the works translated from the author’s mother tongue into foreign languages, but also more peculiar cases. These can encompass, among others, works that have been self-translated to avoid censorship or to directly address a foreign readership, works relying on adaptation through translation in order to export an author’s message on the international stage, or works originally conceived as self-translations and subsequently re-translated into Chinese by the authors themselves or by other translators. These are only some examples that show how translation nowadays constitutes the practical medium for literary works to be created and circulated at a truly global level.

This paper analyses the cross-cultural circulation of the work *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, written in French by the migrant Chinese author Dai Sijie 戴思杰 and published for the first time in 2000. It examines in particular the work’s translations into Chinese and its main aim is to investigate what happens when a literary text that was originally conceived as a transcultural work is translated “back” into its language (and culture) of origin. Obviously, in translation, perfect transfer is an unrealistic goal. Indeed, “as the text guards its secrets, [translation] is impossible,” continues Spivak (21). Nevertheless, it is by means of this imperfect correspondence that literary works become translanguaging. In this context, this adjective shall be employed not to define authors juggling with multiple languages, but rather as the capability of Chinese literary works to convey messages modified according to the language-culture they are addressing.

2. Visions of a Globalized Chineseness

When investigating Chinese literature from a global perspective, the issue of the globalization of culture must be taken into consideration. The quintessence of Chinese culture, so-called “Chineseness,” has proved to be a problematic concept. Sometimes it has even been considered an “empty term” (Kuehn, Khan, and Pomfret 174). The variety of possible interpretations of such a debatable term has led to the emergence of a tangle of contrasting positions that hold Chineseness to be a key factor not only as far as culture is concerned, but also with respect to economic and political areas. While, on the one hand, the rejection of the concept of diaspora has erased the hierarchy between center and periphery, on the other hand it has emphasized the impossibility of a neat definition of transnational manifestations of Chinese culture. Behind the idea of a global vision of Chinese literature there lies a sort of globalized Chineseness, although it should be understood not as an abstract and standardized theoretical construction based on ethnicity, but rather as the concrete and unique manifestation of the composite identities of individual subjects.

The variety of languages involved and the complex intertwining of diverse cultural identities caused by diasporic phenomena has paved the way for a rethinking of the concept of Chineseness. Its pluralization admits the possibility of multiple “Chineseness-es” corresponding to an equal number of Chinese identities (Chow 24). Recent studies have taken the concept of Chineseness farther and farther away from the sphere of culture, by stressing its economic and political significance in various areas like Taiwan, where it serves as a vehicle for political ideology and hegemony (Chun 32). Yet, other scholars have stressed its implications as far as literary translation is concerned (Klein). In this entangled area of research, the ultimate trace of the subject’s transnational character would appear to lie in a sort of “post-Chineseness,” which is fundamentally disengaged from ethnic categories (Shih). The case we have chosen to analyze within this varied scenario is an example

of transnational Chineseness that is rooted in cultural hybridity but evolves into something more by means of translation. Dai Sijie and his novel exemplify how migrant literature can be targeted to introduce Chinese culture to the French public, by adopting specific strategies. Subsequently, these strategies change in order to allow the text to be re-contextualized in its culture of origin, resulting in a peculiar cocktail of cultural hybridization, linguistic adaptation, and international commercialization.

3. Dai Sijie and *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*

Dai Sijie was born in 1954 in Chengdu, Sichuan province, from a family originally from Putian, Fujian province. As his parents were doctors, in 1971 he was sent to the mountain area of Sichuan, where he was re-educated in a village belonging to the prefecture of Ya'an until 1974. After the end of this period spent as a *zhìqīng* (educated youth), in 1977 Dai Sijie enrolled in university and a few years later left China for Paris, where he specialized in the art of cinema and began his career as a director. In 2000, he published his first novel, *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, written in French. It quickly became a best-seller and was later made into a movie (2002) shot in Mainland China and directed by Dai Sijie himself. The novel is largely autobiographic and offers a fictional portrayal of the author's experience as an "educated youth". Because of its strong autobiographical inspiration, it could be defined as an attempt at *autonarration*, in which personal experience and literary creativity constantly overlap.²

² This word echoes the term *autofiction*, which was first used by Doubrovsky in 1977 to define his novel *Fils* with a similar meaning. However, in order to define a novel an example of *autofiction*, absolute homonymy between author, narrator, and protagonist is required. Dai Sijie's novel escapes this rule, as the protagonist is not named after the author. Yet, this concept can be employed to highlight the ambiguity of the two textual forms involved, i.e. autobiography and the novel, and the variation in the precision of the details, which are sometimes fictional, sometimes referential (Vilain, 5-7).

As a migrant writer, Dai Sijie has become one of the icons of Sino-French cultural hybridization. A representation of China based on his transnational perspective and tailored to a French audience has been the *fil rouge* of his creative production, including both his novels – five in total – and his films. Studies on *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* and the author's literary production, such as those by Tang, Chevaillier and McCall, have mainly focused on the connection between the two cultures concretely expressed in this works. Although some studies have focused on the author's use of language, one of the aspects of this novel that have yet to be investigated is the effect it produces after being translated into Chinese. This process implies a transformation in the nature of a text that aimed to explain and promote Chinese culture to the French public. Once the novel is brought back to its culture of origin and to the author's mother tongue, its function is overturned.

Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise tells the story of two youths, Ma and Luo, who are forced to leave Chengdu and undergo a period of re-education on the *Phénix du ciel* (Phoenix of the Sky), a mountain in Sichuan province. The discovery of a suitcase full of forbidden books, owned by an intellectual friend of theirs, opens their eyes to Western literature, changing their perspective on the world in which they live. French literary classics provide a tool which allows them to face the challenge of educating a beautiful young seamstress, with whom they build a relationship at the crossroads between friendship and love. Through the accurate description of their voyage into literature and feelings, Dai Sijie remembers his own first-hand experience of re-education, which marked him for life. The fictional work resulting from the process of recollection after many years abroad is, therefore, a twofold trip in time and space. The process of translation into Chinese, unlike the other translations, is indeed peculiar because it affects not only the perception of the cultural references contained in the novel, but also the representation of the author's displaced subjectivity, which is indeed distorted once the reader's perspective is reversed.

In order to analyze how the peculiar Sino-French character of the novel is altered through its back-translation, we have compared the two Chinese-language editions of the novel: the first was published in Taiwan in 2002 (*Ba'erzhake yu xiaocai Feng*), the second one in the P.R.C. in 2003 (*Ba'erzhake yu Zhongguo xiaocai Feng*). Neither has been translated by the author himself, so they constitute an excellent example of how Dai Sijie's migrant Chineseness is construed and received by a "foreign" Sinophone readership. The full text of the novel was published in both versions, and no significant signs of censorship have been found. Therefore, the two Chinese translations should be regarded as two equal and comparable examples of translation strategies, which were not manifestly affected by political factors. The author unquestionably stresses the intrinsic Chinese character of the story, which is conveyed through an emphasis on language as well as through cultural references. His aim is apparently to highlight not only the peculiarity of Chinese culture vis-à-vis that of his foreign readership but also an underlying sense of strangeness. This feeling primarily affects the migrant author and it is reflected in the novel through a similar strangeness perceived by the protagonists. Such displacement, deriving from the experience of migration and banishment, is strictly related to the perception of identity. Indeed, according to Emmanuel Fraisse the concept of identity conveys two meanings: the fact of being identical to oneself, and the sense of belonging to a group. This dual meaning is also reflected in the novel, where the author's hybrid identity is expressed in three ways: through the emphasis on his Chinese origin, through an effort to establish contact with the French readership by means of an identification with French culture, and through the description of the underlying strangeness depicted as the disorientation felt by the *zhiqing* after they have been thrown in a completely new context.

4. Bringing out Chinese Identity

The Chinese features of the story are first clarified through the description of the context of the Cultural Revolution, which is illustrated by stressing the peculiarities of its lexicon. Indeed, the author chooses to translate literally the terms belonging to the language of that period and to highlight them by using quotation marks aims, so as to underline the unique character of a sociocultural context widely known in China but probably unfamiliar to many French readers. Clearly, once translated into Chinese, these terms are brought back to their original language, and their linguistic peculiarity loses its *raison d'être*. The strategies adopted by the translators are sometimes different, but the key issue is that the quotation marks are generally retained, even though they become superfluous for a Chinese audience, since the “linguistically foreign” depiction is no longer such. Consequently, what was at first conceived as a means to emphasize the Chineseness of the story, by foreignizing the text,³ becomes a marker of how Chineseness is represented for a foreign audience, stressing the documentary value of the translations.⁴

Besides the historical contextualization of the plot, Dai Sijie employs another strategy that presents a unique feature of the Chinese language as a foreign element to French readers: an elaborate and fundamentally orientalist description of the Chinese writing system. Whenever the author dwells on this aspect, he betrays an intention to attract the French readers' attention by conveying an exotic image of his own mother tongue. For example, he describes the Chinese translation of Balzac's name by stressing the charm of the Chinese characters and describing the feeling they naturally convey, without actually showing them:

³ “Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language.” Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Routledge, 1995, 20.

⁴ See for example *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, 13; 14; 16; 148; *Ba'erzhake yu xiaocai Feng*, 12; 14; 135; and *Ba'erzhake yu Zhongguo xiaocai Feng*, 5; 7; 128.

[...] Ces quatre caractères, très élégants, dont chacun se composait de peu de traits, s'assemblaient pour former une beauté inhabituelle, de laquelle émanait une saveur exotique, sensuelle, généreuse comme le parfum envoûtant d'un alcool conservé depuis des siècles dans une cave (*Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* 2000, 71).

[...] [T]he four characters – very elegant, each composed of just a few strokes – banded together to create an unusual beauty, redolent with an exotic fragrance as sensual as the perfume wreathing a wine stored for centuries in a cellar (*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* 2002, 52).

While this technique might produce a satisfying result in most languages, the same cannot be said about Chinese.⁵ Indeed, while on the one hand Dai Sijie's memory of the Cultural Revolution could only originate from a Chinese-language environment, on the other hand the use of French leads him to foreignize his recollection in order to meet the expectations of a Western readership. Once translated into Chinese, the description loses its attractive power, inverting a mechanism that does not seem to work properly in the author's mother tongue. The author employs a similar strategy when describing the protagonist's signature, yet without explicitly saying his name: Ma Jianling 马剑铃 (Dai 2000, 138). Once again, when translated into Chinese, the mysterious aura the author tried to create around the signatures disappears, forcing the translator to reveal the concealed identity of the characters that composed them (Dai 2002, 126; Dai 2003, 119). Consequently, the author's extensive self-orientalism (Chevaillier 2010, 71) succumbs to the rules of the target language, neutralizing the foreignizing effect and substituting it with a redundant and pedantic description of the names.

⁵ For the Chinese translations see *Ba'erzhake yu xiaocai Feng*, 65; and *Ba'erzhake yu Zhongguo xiaocai Feng*, 58.

5. Coping with the France Factor

In *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, one of the most interesting expressions of the displacement which the protagonist feels with respect to his dwelling place consists in a surprising identification with the foreign characters of the French novels he reads, and with the lands where they used to live. Indeed, the reference to Balzac's works serves as a pretext for Dai Sijie to create a cultural reference for the French readership (Jia, 80), but it can also be regarded as a symptom of the hybrid identity lying behind the author's fictional recollections. The use of the French language to depict the remoteness of France while at the same time expressing Ma's emotional closeness to the foreign world creates a combination that cannot but be erased in translation. In the Chinese texts, the attempted domestication through the mentions of the classics of French literature rather results in further foreignization. For example, the reference to Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* (Dai 2000, 72-4) is not equally familiar to a Chinese reader who is "foreign" to the Western literary tradition: therefore, any effort to revive the memory of the lands described in the reader's imagination is destined to failure. As a result, in the Chinese translations what emerges is not the imaginary proximity, but the perception of a geographical and cultural gap, emphasizing the reader's distance from the literary universe evoked by the protagonist (Dai, 2002, 66-8; Dai 2003, 59-61).

Furthermore, Dai Sijie employs another strategy of mediation that reveals his French side, namely the use of intertextuality to create a bridge between the two cultures. The novel is intertextual at many levels, and countless mentions are made of the French classics furtively read by the protagonists.⁶ Not only do these

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the intertextual nature of *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* see Fritz-Ababneh, Dorothée. "L'intertextualité dans *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* de Dai Sijie." *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 77 (2006): 97-113.

provide a familiar element for French readers, making them more likely to develop a sense of empathy towards the characters, but they also constitute an example of identification with the foreign country. Since this process is carried out by the Chinese subject, this can be regarded as another reflection of the author's own experience, adding more personal taste to his *autonarration*. The titles of the literary masterpieces appearing in the novel serve as landmarks that catch the French readers' attention by means of a spontaneous cognitive association. In this sense, they act as domesticating elements, intended to draw the Sino-French plot closer to French culture. Nevertheless, the same effect cannot be achieved in the Chinese translation, where the reader is incapable of reacting to such stimuli in the same way. Indeed, Dai Sijie is metaphorically situated halfway between the two poles of Chinese and French culture; hence, any attempt to get closer to the French audience translates into a metaphorical double leap that the Chinese reader is expected to take. For instance, a scene in the last chapter describes the protagonists' drastic decision to burn his books after the seamstress' departure. The list of titles, followed by a quotation from *Madame Bovary*, constitutes a revealing example of this strategy:

Trois autres allumettes allumèrent simultanément les bûchers du Cousin Pons, du Colonel Chabert et d'Eugénie Grandet. La cinquième rattrapa Quasimodo qui, avec ses anfractuosités osseuses, fuyait sur les pavés de Notre-Dame de Paris, Esméralda sur son dos. La sixième tomba sur Madame Bovary. Mais la flamme fit soudain une halte de lucidité à l'intérieur de sa propre folie, et ne voulut pas commencer par la page où Emma, dans une chambre d'hôtel de Rouen, fumant au lit, son jeune amant blotti contre elle, murmurait : « tu me quitteras... » Cette allumette, furieuse mais sélective, choisit d'attaquer la fin du livre, à la scène où elle croyait, juste avant de mourir, entendre un aveugle chanter :

*Souvent la fraîcheur d'un beau jour
Fait rêver fillette à l'amour* (Dai 2000, 219).

The next three matches made a funeral pyre of Cousin Pons, Colonel Chabert and Eugénie Grandet respectively. Then it was time for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with Quasimodo hobbling across the flagstones with Esmeralda on his back. The sixth match dealt with *Madame Bovary*. But the flame refused to set fire to the page where Emma lies in bed with her lover in the hotel at Rouen, smoking a cigarette and murmuring 'you'll leave me ...'. This final match was more selective in its fury, choosing to attack the end of the book, where Emma, in the agony of death, fancies she hears a blind man singing:

*The heat of the sun of a summer day
Warms a young girl in an amorous way* (Dai 2002, 165).

On translating this passage into Chinese, the two translators chose two different approaches: the Taiwanese one added to the translation of the characters' names their original transcription in Roman letters, whereas the Mainland Chinese one omitted the names in French. This changes the reader's perception both visually and cognitively:

另外三根火柴同時點燃了《邦斯舅舅》、《夏倍上校》和《歐也妮·葛朗台》的火刑柴堆。第五根火柴燒上了鐘樓怪人(Quasimodo),他一身鼓凸的怪骨頭,背上揹著愛斯梅拉妲(Esmeralda),在《巴黎聖母院》的石板路上奔逃。第六根火柴則落在《包法利夫人》身上。可這把火在瘋狂之中卻突然浮現了片刻的清醒,它不想從愛瑪(Emma)在盧昂(Rouen)旅館床上抽煙的那頁開始燒,那時愛瑪年輕的情人正依偎在她身旁,喃喃說著:「你會離開我……」這根火柴狂怒卻有定見,決定燒向書的結尾,直接燒向愛瑪臨死那一幕,那是,愛瑪覺得有個瞎子在唱歌:

晴朗天的氣息清新
常讓小女孩幻想愛情 (Dai 2002, 198).

另外三根火柴同時點燃了《邦斯舅舅》、《夏倍上校》和《歐也妮·葛朗台》。第五根火柴抓住了鐘樓怪人卡西莫多，他拖著他雞胸駝背的身軀，背著他心愛的姑娘愛絲米哈爾達，逃亡巴黎聖母院前的街石。第六根火柴落到了《包法利夫人》上面。但是，那火焰就在它自身的瘋狂中，突然來了一次清醒的歇息，不願意從這一頁開始燒，那時分愛瑪在盧昂城一家旅館的房間裡，躺在床上抽煙，她年輕的情人蜷縮在她的身邊喃喃地說道：「我想死你了……」這一根火柴，憤怒又有選擇性，挑選了全書的結尾發起進攻，在那一幕，愛瑪臨死之前，以為聽到了一個瞎子在唱：

小姑娘到了熱天
想晴朗想的心酸 (Dai 2003, 192).⁷

Moreover, it is worth specifying that the passage quoted from the novel does not exactly match the original French text of *Madame Bovary*, which does not read “la fraîcheur” (the coolness), but instead “la chaleur” (the heat). The Taiwanese translator did not correct the quotation, keeping the idea of freshness, *qingxin* 清新, whereas the Mainland Chinese one substituted it with the quotation from an existing Chinese translation of *Madame Bovary*, which reads *retian* 熱天. Consequently, in both translations the literary quotations originally conceived as domestic elements became foreign ones, and the Taiwanese version seems even more unfamiliar due to the semantic shift of its re-translation.

6. Dealing with Strangeness

The attempted mediation between China and France does not erase the fundamental clash which the novel intends to express: this

⁷ For consistency reasons, in this paper I have used full-form characters (*fantizi*) even when the quoted texts were first published in simplified characters.

is not only personal, but also general, and based on cross-cultural and cross-language representations of the other. The sense of strangeness that pervades the novel represents such a conflict as it is concretely embodied in the experience of the *zhijing*, who are forced to migrate to the Phoenix of the Sky in order to be re-educated. Dai Sijie exemplifies the cultural differences between the protagonists coming from the city and the local villagers through the contrast between standard Chinese and local dialects. In one particular scene, for instance, the author shows the protagonists' difficulties in communicating with the old miller in standard Mandarin, which they choose to adopt to disguise their Sichuanese origin. Ma and Luo refer to Beijing by employing its current name, *Pékin*, which the man does not understand (Dai 2000, 85). Subsequently, the author transcribes the dialogue, quoting the distorted names appearing in the conversation, *Péping* and *Bai Ping*, to recreate the baffling result of incommunicability. This peculiar effect is not reproduced equally in both translations: the Taiwanese one shows an effort to recreate a similar exchange, as it stresses the old miller's incorrect pronunciation by employing a wrong character (Dai 2002, 77-78), whereas the Mainland Chinese translator simply employs Beijing's ancient name, *Beiping*, toning down the lively conversation (Dai 2003, 71). In fact, the latter choice seems rather incoherent with the general macro-strategy of the translation, which tends to preserve the key elements of the cross-language representation, presumably for the sake of its documentary value. In addition to the local linguistic differences, in one particular occasion even Western languages, which in theory should be perceived by Ma and Luo as "foreign," are represented as naturally associated with the two "re-educated" youths. This is the case with the scene where the two protagonists meet the little seamstress' father who, sensing their urban and hence foreign origin, tries to address them in English to comment on the boy's violin, saying: "Way-o-lin" (Dai 2000, 35). This peculiar formulation evokes the transcription in *pinyin* and its sudden appearance in the French text destabilizes the reader, creating a false linguistic connection that stresses the protagonists'

strangeness vis-à-vis the rural population. The effect is preserved in the Chinese translations, which, however, reproduce it with two different strategies. In the Taiwanese text, the syllables are converted into the Chinese characters *wei - ou - ling* 威—歐—令 (Dai 2002, 30), whereas in the Mainland Chinese one the Roman letters of the original text are simply transcribed to emulate the character's mispronunciation of the English (Dai 2003, 25). In both cases, however, the texts provide a distorted signifier that requires an effort from the reader in order to identify the signified. Therefore, a brief explanation, either in brackets or in the form of a footnote, was added to clarify the reason for the odd quotation: a choice that ends up enhancing its *foreignness*.

7. Conclusion: Global Translingualism and Geographically-Significant Images

In the novel *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, the contrast between Western culture and the China of the Cultural Revolution goes beyond the expression of the “civilizing” role of French literature (McCall). Indeed, the text concretely expresses the intertwining of French and Chinese discourses, brought about by the author's transnational identity (Thorner). Dai Sijie's memory of the Cultural Revolution, while originating from his personal experience, is a condensation of his cultural hybridity. Through the process of translation, the text crosses this cultural distance, dropping its primary aim to represent the author's interior clash but gaining cross-cultural significance. By stripping the fictional memory of its intrinsic Sino-French dualism, the text is thrown into a different context of cultural influences that modify the perception of distance represented in terms of cultural gaps. Moreover, the transnational nature of the text simplifies the task of de-fetishizing the *native/original* version. Indeed, it would be impossible to establish whether the Chinese-language memory prevails over the French-language narration of the same memory, and it would be a critic's arbitrary choice.

This comparative study of the two Chinese translations of *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* has investigated how its transnational Chineseness, coded in a French text, has been transferred “back” into the Chinese language and culture. The results have showed that this happened *by contrast*, generating effects that are different from, or even opposite to, those which Dai Sijie achieved in his original novel. Concretely speaking, the foreignizing strategies designed to stress the fundamental Chinese character of the plot have been either neutralized or reproduced for a referential purpose, depriving them of their original power. On the contrary, those elements meant to domesticate the novel, by offering the French readership some transparent cultural connections, once translated into Chinese, have produced a foreignizing effect. Nonetheless, beyond this cultural dichotomy there lies the sense of non-belonging generated by the author’s hybrid identity. The foreignizing devices aimed at expressing the implicit feeling of strangeness experienced by the banished characters, which are strictly connected to Dai Sijie’s personal experience, have been faithfully reproduced in both the Chinese-language versions.

Francesca Orsini points out that Pascale Casanova, when speaking of “world literary space,” adopted a perspective that was essentially Eurocentric, often referring to the *periphery* by contrast to the European *center*. In the case of hybrid identities and migrant authors, especially ones who have chosen to write in a foreign language, it is no easy task to identify the center and the periphery. On the one hand, the strategy of analysis in contemporary Chinese literature has been to try and overcome national and linguistic borders in a crescendo of deterritorialization; on the other hand, works like *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* show how reterritorialization through translation is no less important in terms of cross-cultural circulation. The particular language/culture into which the novel has been translated has affected its general purpose. Consequently, while the novel can be considered translangual, each and every one of its language-specific codifications should be taken into account as alternative images. Orsini (346) proposes the

term “significant geographies” to underline the importance of the local dimension in the evolution of authors and genres that are still considered to reflect a global perspective. Analogously, it could be said that these *geographically-significant images* of contemporary Chinese literature are at once *placeless* and *place-specific*. After overcoming the narrowness of local perspectives and embracing the global dimension of contemporary Chinese literature, it is perhaps time to focus on those areas where the two connect, filling theoretical gaps with geographically defined practices.

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