

Reading Chinese Novels in the West

Bertrand Mialaret

1. Is Chinese literature part of the « soft power policy »?

During the 20th century, one should not forget the tight relationships between Chinese intellectuals and national politics: the ambivalence towards Western influence and values, the international status of China and the desire for recognition have been important elements.

A good example is the “Nobel complex” as described by Julia Lovell (1), which “reveals pressure points in a modern intellectual entity not entirely sure of itself”. This type of complex, the dominance of cultural industries from the West while the economic world- wide position of China was rapidly developing, were the basis of a cultural “soft power” policy.

It is not in our scope to analyze this policy but it is useful to realize that the book industry and literature are part of it. The imbalance of copyright between China and the West has been a permanent subject of frustration for the authorities. Ten years ago, one book was exported for every 17 that were imported; the ratio is now one to 3,3 (2). It is significant that these statements are made by Liu Binjie, the head of the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAAP), who explains that “Chinese books being exported will describe the country in an objective way”.

China has the largest publishing industry in the world, certainly in terms of volumes (even excluding pirated copies), number four in terms of value and second only to the US if purchasing power parity is taken into account. On top of this, it is an expanding market and mainly consumed by young people, contrary to the situation in the West.

Chinese authorities have taken some measures to support the sale of copyrights, the development of translations and the publishing of Chinese literature in translation. This policy has received much less coverage in Europe than the fast development of Confucius Centers.

China Book International (CBI) project www.cbi.gov.cn has been established in 2006 by the GAAP and the State Council of China. The project, based on a list of recommended books, established by Chinese publishing units, is meant to promote the sale of copyrights with the possible support of subsidies. The CBI also develops the contacts between Chinese and foreign publishers and attendance to international book fairs.

In 2009, the Frankfurt Book Fair, with China as a guest of honor, has been a subject of heavy controversy. Not only with regards to the role of the GAAP, organizing and controlling the Chinese delegation, but also concerning the difficult dialogue with a rather aggressive German press, especially after 铁凝 Tie Ning, chairwoman of the Chinese Writers Association, declared that censorship did not exist in China. Nevertheless, a grant of half a million euros has been given by the GAAP to develop translations into German.

Promotion of Chinese literature in translation is also organized by Chinese universities (anthologies by Tsinghua University) and publishers (Foreign Language Press).

More interesting is the agreement between Beijing Normal University and the University of Oklahoma, which is publishing the magazine *World Literature Today* and managing a major literature prize: the Neustadt (won in 2010 by the poet 多多 Duo Duo). The bi-annual academic journal *Chinese Literature Today* has already published two issues, financed with a million USD from Chinese authorities, which are also promoting the translation of a ten volume series of contemporary Chinese novels.

Although very positive, these developments are unlikely to change the position of Chinese literature in the English speaking world.

2. The three per cent phenomenon

Translation in the UK/US represents less than 3% of books published (less than 1% for fiction) and for Chinese literature, a much lower figure.

Americans are culturally centred and certainly this has more impact than the question of foreign languages. One American out of five has “some knowledge” of foreign languages via his parents, his neighbours, his education. But the strength of American culture is overpowering.

Clearly, Chinese style novels are difficult to accept for the general public: slow pace, little action, lack of strong characters... More important, the references are certainly not clear to the Western audience; there is a very strong culture gap. As explained by Luc Kwanten who is heading the largest agency in Shanghai (3): “It is difficult to find writers whose books have what I call legs, which means that they can travel abroad and be easily picked up by foreign readers... In most cases, Chinese books require readers to know a lot about the country before they can understand the books”.

This is possibly why books with clear stereotypes and exoticism, generally by Asian-American writers, top of the sales list. Translation is a major issue and American/British publishers are in general not in favour of translations. They speak few foreign languages and certainly not Chinese. This situation makes the selection process more difficult: they have to rely on reviews by one or several outsiders and then ask for sample translations; this of course takes time.

Many publishers also believe that translations do not appeal to readers and do not sell. Consequently they do not put the name of the translator on the cover or even do not mention that the book is a translation.

In fact, translations have proven to have less profit potential for the publisher: “There’s not been a single Chinese book that’s made it into the best seller’s list in the West in recent years... Lack of profit makes Western publishers reluctant to take up Chinese translations.” (3)

They also are more complex and time consuming (relations with a foreign author and a translator) and need different marketing: the writer, not speaking English in most cases, is generally of little help with the media and the promotion of the book.

Different types of best sellers in China and Asia have found their way to British/American publishers. *Shanghai Baby* by 周卫慧 Zhou Weihui is a typical case: a beautiful writer, a sex scandal in a novel with a German lover, a book censored and withdrawn from the distribution. The book was first translated in 2001 in France where it sold very well. A translation from the Chinese into English by Bruce Humes was also published. It took a long time for publishers to get interested in this book which caused a major buzz in China.

The *Wolf totem* by 姜戎 Jiang Rong (pen name) is another interesting example. This novel is the biggest success of the book industry in China (4 million copies sold, possibly 16 million copies pirated); only the *Little Red Book* by Mao Zedong performed better! (4)

Penguin bought the rights for 100 000 USD (a record amount) and asked Howard Goldblatt to translate it.

The book has obtained the first Man Asia prize in 2007; a heated and interesting political debate in China and Europe went on for months. Wolfgang Kubin went so far as to speak of fascist literature! But the sales of the book were highly disappointing (estimates are only 10,000 copies in the UK!).

Also it should be mentioned that publishing Chinese novels abroad seems also for some major publishers like HarperCollins or Penguin, a sort of public relations exercise with official authorities in order to obtain green lights to develop their business in China.

Films are for publishers a major issue and a good enough reason to publish a book in translation. The success of many of 张艺谋 Zhang Yimou’s films have helped to bring Chinese

literature to the attention of international readers, especially *To Live* by 余华 Yu Hua or *Raise the Red Lantern* by 苏童 Su Tong.

A film gives the publisher's marketing department confidence in the possible success of the book. The film by Zhang Yimou *The Flowers of War*, recently released, concerning the Nanjing massacre in 1937, will be a strong support for two novels by the Chinese-American writers 严歌苓 Yan Geling and 哈金 Ha Jin. Let's hope that the same will happen to *Under the Hawthorn Tree* by Ai Mi, to be released in January 2012, and to the film by Zhang Yimou.

Censorship helps, whether political or moral (as in *Shanghai Baby*); but publishers, at least in Europe, consider that it is a "has been" marketing tool and they no longer systematically mention difficulties with the authorities on the cover. Moreover, a censored book is not a guarantee of quality!

In some cases, the support of dissident groups in the West can be of value not only to the writer, but also to his books. This seems to be the case with 廖亦武 Liao Yiwu, whose books were strongly supported; he fled from China to Germany a few months ago.

Overall, a number of themes are considered "positive" by publishers: "good" topics are: Mao Zedong, the sufferings during the Cultural Revolution, memoirs during difficult times, prisons and camps. Modern urban China life is not deemed interesting, nor is the young Chinese generation, which in many respects is not very different from youth in the West. Novels should be exotic or ethnic like *Right bank of the Argun* by 迟子建 Chi Zijian, under translation by Bruce Humes.

The risk is to develop a sort of Chinese "fast food" that is deemed acceptable to Western readers. What is Chinese literature? Is it *The Song of Everlasting Sorrows* by 王安忆 Wang Anyi, where publishers wanted to cut the first forty pages "because nothing happens", or is it *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by 戴思杰 Dai Sijie, originally written in French, which has been a major success (as a book and as a film), but which is constructed like a European novel?.

In the interviews, this has been considered a difficult subject and some admit that to be a bit closer to a Chinese writer who speaks some English has helped a decision to publish.

The three per cent figure is a major topic for translator (from Spanish) Edith Grossman (5); she is not optimistic about the future, "I don't believe that this will change soon since almost all publishers... make their decisions under enormous pressure to be profitable". In the US, small independent publishers devoted to translations have difficulties to survive and have insufficient marketing or distribution capabilities; the only specialist of the Far East was, for some years, Hyperion East with its editor Will Schwalbe.

These small publishers stress the importance of reviews for literature in translation and regret that reviews are often written by academics or historians who tend to highlight the socio/historical interest of the book above the literary quality.

One translator in the US has had a major impact: Howard Goldblatt. He has translated some forty Chinese and Taiwanese novels; he is sometimes better known than the writers he is translating! In an interview by colleague Andrea Lingenfelter (6), he discusses criticism:

"I believe first of all that, like an editor, the translator's primary obligation is to the reader, not to the writer. I realize that a lot of people don't agree... but I do think that we need to produce something that can be readily accepted by an American readership."

Consequently, in some cases, major changes are for him acceptable. This has been the case for sixty pages in the *Wolf Totem*, with 莫言 Mo Yan's *Big Breasts, Wide Hips*, with the *Cell phone* by 刘震云 Liu Zhenyun (which has just been released). (7)

Mo Yan says "It's not my novel anymore, it's yours. It's got my name on it and my copyright but it belongs to you." Is that a good enough reason for significant alterations not acceptable to

most translators? The 2005 release of Mo Yan's novel was the translation of a abridged edition (240 pages) while the excellent French translation in 2004 by well-known translators Noël and Liliane Dutrait is an 825 page book!

The question is: does it make a difference to the quality of the novel? Michael Berry, scouting to find a publisher (8), or Philippe Picquier, who published *The Song of Everlasting Sorrows* in France, both agree that without the first forty pages that American publishers were asking to cut, the novel changes significantly.

Anyhow, everybody agrees that Chinese novels are poorly edited: "Editors are held in such low regard in China. They're no better than copy editors." (6)

Finally, the international reputation of H. Goldblatt is such that three of his translations have won the Man Asia prize in four years: Jiang Rong, Su Tong and 毕飞宇 Bi Feiyu... this is an unprecedented achievement!

3. There must be a solution

Are Chinese-American writers part of the solution? Excepting major writers like Ha Jin, 李翊雲 Yiyun Li or Geling Yan, many of these writers are producing "Chinese Fast Food", exotic novels or memoirs geared to the American public.

A good post can be found on the web "How to write great American-Chinese novels" (9).

As the author points out, the risk is that Chinese-American writers "simplify history, reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes".

Others underline that the American public will consider all Sino-American writers as Chinese, just the same as Yu Hua or Mo Yan.

But for publishers, there is a lot of difference: no translator, no extra problems or costs. On top of this, these writers can be "persuaded" by publishers to eventually change their books (much more easily than with a Chinese writer living in China!) Finally, they can support the promotion of their books without difficulty!

Many efforts are made to develop translations: university publishers, especially Columbia and Hawaii, play a very important role.

Their selection process with peer reviews is different from commercial publishers and they try to select what is culturally important and can be part of their backlist. They also sell to the general public and not only to students or academics. They adapt their prices to commercial levels and sell via general distribution or Amazon. They are generally successful via university contacts in being reviewed by the media.

The quality of their selection and of their backlist is quite impressive, especially Columbia's, featuring a great collection of literature from Taiwan which is on par with what Isabelle Rabut and Angel Pino are publishing in France.

The translators of university presses are well known: we have mentioned Michael Berry, many names should be listed and the claim by some commercial publishers that there is a shortage of quality translators is not correct, especially as efforts are made to develop talents.

Training is important and is handled by university programs and training in China.

Associations of translators, conferences, web sites also play a positive role.

Translators active with www.paper-republic.org, a group of native English speakers, mostly living in China, have played a very active role in promoting Chinese literature abroad to publishers and to the general public

In many cases, translators complain about the level of fees they receive. It is true that the "hourly tariff" of a translation which needs months is generally quite low and in some cases, royalties are not even included. Therefore, translation grants are important. The National

Endowment for Arts plays a role in the US. In the UK, it is not clear what will happen in the future with the Arts Council. Other grants are provided by the Chinese CBI or by some American foundations. The most effective program is with Taiwan and can cover the cost of the translation.

Translations into English is key as it is a gateway language; generally other translations follow. It is a reference for the sale of rights. This can happen in other countries and it is clear that the success of a book in France is an incentive for Latin countries to buy it but also in some cases for the UK.

The dominance of English creates the danger of translations directly from English; this happens already in some countries which perhaps do not have really qualified translators from the Chinese.

Another difficulty is the policy of international publishers willing to launch a book in many countries at the same time; this can be understood when the launch is supported by the success of a film but is certainly not optimal for the quality of the translation shared between several translators.

4. Publishing in France

The French are certainly less culturally open than what they think or claim to be but nevertheless, translation represents 15% of total sales and a higher percentage with literature which represents 25% of the total market.

Prices for new books are fixed by the publisher and printed on the cover; discounts can only be given two years after the release of the book. This helps to maintain a very important network of independent bookshops (25% of the total market) which are active in promoting literature.

Three active publishers that specialise on Asia/China are a big asset. The largest, "Editions Philippe Picquier", was created in 1986 and has published around 900 titles on Asia. For Chinese literature, Philippe Picquier has been a strong supporter of 阎连科 Yan Lianke, Bi Feiyu, Su Tong, Wang Anyi ... and also 老舍 Lao She. "Bleu de Chine" specialized on China, publishes four novels yearly and is now a unit of the publisher Gallimard.

Two major publishers, "Le Seuil" and "Actes Sud" have a strong interest in Chinese literature (and for "Actes Sud", Taiwanese). Isabelle Rabut and Angel Pino for "Actes Sud" and Anne Sastourne for "Le Seuil" have created a strong backlist with translations of Yu Hua, Chi Li, Mo Yan and 高行健 Gao Xingjian. In total, one can estimate that twice as many Chinese novels are published in France than in the United States...!

Translation grants by "Centre National du Livre », which can cover 60% of the cost of the translation, help a lot, and the quality of French translators is well known in Europe.

In 2004, following a year of cultural exchanges between France and China and the release of numerous translations, the Paris Book Fair, developed a strong interest in Chinese culture and literature. The present situation is perhaps slightly less positive: the economic crisis in Europe, the impact of China on unemployment and some political issues (Tibet, censorship) play a role.

Professors of Chinese culture underline also that their students seem less interested in literature, especially modern literature. Few academics work on these subjects; they prefer socio-economic areas of research. There is a strong interest in Chinese philosophy: the lectures given on Confucius and "*The Analects*" for three years in a row by Professor Anne Cheng are attended weekly by 400 people.

Nevertheless, in France, Chinese literature is a niche market; Japanese novels have a much greater visibility, although the language barrier is the same.

This brings us to question the overall quality of Chinese novels, even if such a global approach does not make much sense. The question of censorship, and more importantly (according to

阎连科 Yan Lianke) self-censorship, surfaces regularly in the media even if censorship nowadays has little in common with what it used to be.

Comments suggest that writers are not concentrating on the language and the literary quality but are playing the marketing game looking for success with their Chinese readers.

The statements by sinologist and German translator Wolfgang Kubin can be discussed; sometimes he tends to promote, as in Frankfurt, writers who are also politicians (Tie Ning), or poets who he translates. I also find his approach too elitist, positioning poetry and style as the centre of all culture, but he makes a few interesting points: contrary to the generation before 1949, writers do not speak foreign languages and for some of them have only limited knowledge of world literature. It is true that some readers outside China are more interested in the sociological aspects of Chinese literature than in the literary quality. It is also correct that many books by young writers “are from a narcissist and egocentric generation, that of the one child policy who has for himself two parents and four grandparents”. (10)

Some of his statements are quite excessive but as Yu Hua says (11) “what is interesting are the rather hysterical reactions of the Chinese media... Concerning literature, China has still a small provincial complex.”

We should remain optimistic, quality sells: Philippe Picquier was mentioning that “*Les jours, les mois, les années*” (年月日 *Nian yue ri*) by Yan Lianke, a beautiful “classical” novella (not yet translated into English) is selling more than *The dream of Ding village*, a more spectacular censored novel on blood selling and AIDS!

5- To be published, you have to be over fifty!

Most writers published outside China are over fifty; the number of young writers is very limited: they write about the young generation from the cities and not about peasants in the countryside or the Cultural Revolution. It is quite true that they are self-centred; products of the one child policy, they did not live the difficult period of the 70's or the 80's and some people consider that they have nothing to say!

Also sometimes, quality is questionable, because the books are written in a few months or weeks and with hardly any editing. Publishers being reluctant to take risks with well-known writers, it is difficult to imagine that they are going to support younger and relatively unknown writers.

Moreover, short stories, which are often written by young writers, are not very popular with publishers and generally do not sell well. Even if publishers feel that this generation can be of interest, it is more a sociological interest which they do not want to mix with literary quality. Consequently, they are more than reluctant to publish anthologies of works of this generation.

On top of this, things change fast, some of these writers, even though promising, stop writing after one or two books; there is no follow up...

韩寒 **Han Han** is a torch bearer; this “super star” is 29, a best-selling novelist, amateur race car driver, top Chinese blogger. He is a high school dropout and refused to join Fudan University or the Chinese Writers Association. Top earner among writers, he is financially independent.

In 2010, he was, according to the American *Time magazine*, the second most influential personality in the world; this pushed official dailies in China to downplay this situation and created quite a controversy.

His blog (12) has been viewed by 400 million people and is sometimes “harmonized” by censorship. He can be witty, funny and tackle real issues even if he plays brilliantly with the rules; very critical of authorities and abuse of power, he does not touch very hot topics nor challenge the monopoly of power by the Communist Party.

In July 2010, he launched a 120 page magazine (priced 16 *yuan*), classified as a book (to avoid the far stricter censorship for magazines) after long negotiations with the authorities. The content was more literary than critical and has slightly disappointed some of his followers. 500,000 copies were sold, but number 2 was pulped; end of the story!

Only his first novel has been translated and only into French (13); it was written when he was eighteen. This situation is hard to believe: if Han Han was a young American, publishers around the world would compete to publish him! Finally, a few weeks ago, two books have been bought by Simon & Schuster in the US to be translated by Allan Barr: a collection of essays and a novel, a road trip 1988, *I want to talk to the world*.

In the post 80 generation, we have to mention 郭敬明 Guo Jingming, Han Han's arch rival in terms of royalties. He is 28, more a pop star than a writer but one of his novels *A city of fantasy* has sold 1.5 million copies in 2003. Love and money are the main topics; he is not interested at all in politics and only claims that he wants to be successful in business which is the case as his magazine sells half a million copies.

安妮宝贝 **Annie Baobei** is 37; she was a bank employee and started in 1998 to post short stories on the internet with great success. Then she began working as an editor for the most popular literature website in China (www.rongshu.com). Her novel *Padma* has sold 600,000 copies and some translations of her short stories can be found on the Internet.

冯唐 **Feng Tang** is a very different personality; he is 40, a doctor in gynaecology, with an MBA from an American university. He has been a partner in Hong Kong with McKinsey, the management consultancy and has worked there for a big corporation. Two of his novels (*Everything Grows* and *Given a chick at 18*) have been translated into French (16). They are semi-autobiographical; it is about youth, student life and sex. Contrary to 慕容雪村 Murong Xuecun, he considers that censorship is part of the package and has to be accepted.

Murong Xuecun is 37. He is certainly outside China the most famous of his generation. If not for the Internet, he would still be selling cars in Chengdu. In 2001, he published on the Internet *Leave me alone, a novel of Chengdu* which has been translated into French by Claude Payen in 2006 and recently published in Australia (14). An interesting novel about money, cynicism, a rather desperate quest for love and friendship.

Recently, Murong Xuecun has investigated a fraudulent pyramid-selling organization and published a book which received the 2010 People Literature Award. But he was not allowed to deliver his speech which is a very interesting document on censorship (15), with a very straightforward conclusion: "Why does China not have great writers? Because they are castrated during their first years."

In total, very few young writers are translated and known outside China; some translations are coming in the near future (李洱 Li Er, 盛可以 Sheng Keyi...). But with the Internet, the situation might change dramatically.

Conclusion: is the Internet the future of Chinese literature?

The most interesting development in the last ten years has been the impact of Web literature.

Thousands of writers, amateurs or professionals are directly publishing on specialized platforms on the Web. Readers have free access. Success will oblige readers to pay a very small fee to be able to access the following chapters of the serialized novel. Proceeds are split equally between writer and platform. The most successful novels are then published as books which turn out to be a by-product!

Figures are staggering: 480 million Internet users in China, 195 million connect to online literature sites. 1.5 million writers are involved with 4.1 million fiction novels that are accessed by 70 million unique visitors every month.

Shanda Interactive Entertainment, a Chinese corporation, listed on the Nasdaq, controls the seven most popular literary web sites; one of them, 起点 Qidian, is among the 30 most visited sites in China... We will not analyse further the fact that today, 120 million mobile phone owners use them to access novels on the move!

All Chinese writers I have interviewed (Yu Hua, Bi Feiyu, Yan Lianke, Mo Yan...) consider that this is a major development. Very few people are interested in Europe or in the US. These novels are not translated, they are not considered to be literature!

We will have to wait for the coming subsidiary of 盛大 Shanda in the US to start promoting some translations online and in the future translations of novels by well-known writers...

This type of web sites and the development of eBooks/eReaders will dramatically change the industry and the role of editors and publishers. The limits between eBooks and Web literature will probably become less clear in the future, especially if piracy is kept under control.

These technological innovations, the development of what is now called “self-publishing” (17) and the possible impact of subsidiaries in the US of Chinese media companies such as Shanda, can be a major opportunity for the development of Chinese literature in the West.

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Bertrand Mialaret, born in Paris (France) in 1944. Studied law, public government and political sciences. After some years in government administration in Algeria and in France, he joined a multinational corporation. After different positions in France, Morocco and Holland, he was appointed chairman of the subsidiaries in Egypt and later on in Malaysia. Moving back to France as chief financial officer, he took over after some years the financial responsibility of the international Telecom division with several commercial and industrial operations in China and Asia. After leaving this company, he was elected chairman of a non profit organization “Couleurs de Chine” devoted to support the schooling of thousands of children of Miao and Dong villages in Guizhou (China). An avid reader of Chinese literature in translation for many years, he has been reviewing Chinese novels for Rue89.com, the largest independent Internet daily in France. More than a hundred posts on Chinese literature can be found both in French and English on his blog www.mychinesebooks.com.

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Jennifer Crewe, editorial Director of Columbia University Press.

Rebecca Carter, is an editor of fiction and non-fiction at Harvill Secker in London.

Chen Feng, manages the Chinese novels department with Editions Philippe Picquier.

Noël Dutrait, professor at Aix en Provence (France), is the well-known translator of Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian.

Nicky Harman, lives in the UK and has translated Xinran, Han Dong and Yan Geling.

Philippe Picquier manages Editions Philippe Picquier in Arles (France).

Angel Pino, is professor at Bordeaux University (France) and translator.

Isabelle Rabut, is professor of modern Chinese literature at INALCO (Paris); translator and editor of a series of Chinese and Taiwanese literature with Actes Sud.

Anne Sastourné, is editor of Asian literature with the publisher Le Seuil in Paris.
Bruce Humes is a translator living in Kunming (China); he has helped with contacts.

Foot – Notes

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