

A “Spiritual Journey” Through the “Middle” Kingdom: Travel and Translation in François Cheng’s Translingual Novel

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In 2000, the French academician François Cheng wrote an additional preface in Chinese for the Chinese translation of his French-language novel *Le Dit de Tianyi* (Prix Femina 1998),¹ where he describes retrospectively the process of his literary creation as a “spiritual journey” (心路历程), the kind of journey that is shared by all great works of literature, from Chinese classics such as *Chu Ci* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* to the Western canon such as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Ulysses* (Cheng, 2009b, p. 2). He then regretfully questions if it is still possible for such a “spiritual journey” to take place on “this land of hardship cracked open by turmoil” (这片动荡而裂开的难土) (ibid.). The phrase “great works of literature” may sound obsoletely Platonic today, but it expresses, as Richard Rorty argues, “the hope for a

¹ The original French title, which literally means ‘Tianyi’s saying’, has been rendered rather differently in English as *The River Below* (2000) by Julia Shirek Smith. Unless otherwise specified, the English quotations from this novel will be based on this translation. Where I see in the English translation a significant morphological or lexical departure, the French original words and expression will be provided in parenthesis. Not all of Cheng’s works are available in English. Where the published English translation is unavailable, I will translate the text myself with references to the French original. For greater clarity in in-text citations, this primary text will be abbreviated to *The River*.

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religion of literature [and art in Cheng's case], in which works of the secular imagination replace Scripture as the principal source of inspiration and hope for each new generation" (Rorty, 2005, p. 275). By "this land of hardship", Cheng means not only the planet we all inescapably inhabit, but also more specifically "that self-proclaimed 'Middle' Kingdom" ("中"國). He subtly puns on the historical name of China to suggest to the Chinese readership a time-space for spiritual journeys, or at least for the spiritual journey that has taken place in the novel. The "Middle" Kingdom here does not imply, as it used to, China as the centre of the world; but rather, a *decentred* China. It points to a metaphysical space of relation in which China can dynamically engage with multiple planetary cultural forces (but currently dominated by the West), and where there could be "transcendence" for all parties. This space is characterized as a kind of "essential emptiness" in-between according to Cheng's Daoism-infused conception of the *vide médian* ("middle void", or sometimes rendered as "median void" or "middle emptiness" by different English translators). In a nutshell, Cheng conceptualizes the *vide médian* as a third type of Daoist *qi* ("air" or "breath") which has the power of pulling the yin and the yang into positive interaction, "with a view toward a mutual transformation, as beneficial for one as for the other" (Cheng, 2009a, p. 66). This transformative process signals a spiritual exaltation and a form of ceaseless transcendence.² As I gradually unfold the various layers of travel and translation in the novel, it is crucial to keep in view Cheng's broader intellectual and artistic enterprise of cultural transcendence.

In terms of both structural design and narrative arrangement, the notion of journey is fundamental in Cheng's conception of *Le Dit*. Depending on the critical angle, *Le Dit* can be generically categorized as autofiction, *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman*, romance, historical novel, adventure story, travel writing, memoir, and so on. The generic indeterminacy, blurring and blending, or hybridity,³ brings to the forefront profound *frictional* qualities in

² For an interesting exposition on the problematic of approaching the Western notion of transcendence from the perspective of Daoism and, by association, Zen Buddhism, see Braak (2012).

³ There are scholars who oppose this description of Cheng's novel as "hybrid." Chu Xiaoquan (2014), for example, argues for a holistic approach,

the novelistic fabric of *Le Dit*, between myth and reality, between ethnography and imagination, and between fact, fiction, and reflection. In fact, the generic border-crossing itself is a literary embodiment of Cheng’s physical and intellectual journey in life and in fiction, which constantly calls for movements of understanding on the reader’s part.

This chapter proposes to concretely examine a variety of travel motifs in Cheng’s translingual novel, and how they function as a consistent structural and thematic frame, in which different literary generic qualities and traditions dynamically interact with each other. Drawing on theories of cultural translation, initiated notably by Homi Bhabha, I additionally argue that these travel motifs ultimately create a liminal space where both European and Chinese literary and artistic traditions are set in motion towards a planetary possibility of cultural transcendence.⁴

Temporal and Spatial Movements of Travel

To begin with, the tripartite structure of the novel – “epic of departure”, “a turn in the road” (“*récit d’un détour*”), “myth of return” – is already redolent of a Western travel writing tradition going back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, which recounts, in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs’ words, ‘an epic journey’ and ‘episodic adventures’ that “offer a blueprint for romance, indirection, and danger of travel as well as the joy (and danger) of homecoming” (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 2). Tianyi’s journey spans through much of the turbulent twentieth century (1925–1968), from wartime China (Sino-Japanese War and Civil War) to post-war France and

especially in the light of Cheng’s Daoist vision. However, I am not so much concerned with the *generic definition* of the novel here. For me, the hybrid characterization of the text is aimed at a variety of critical frameworks in our reading.

⁴ By “planetary possibility” I mean to evoke Spivak’s conception of “planetaryity” as a way to “overwrite” globalization. Whereas the latter implies the “imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere,” “the planet,” Spivak argues, “is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (2003, pp. 72–73). I make a critical connection here between Spivak’s ‘planet’ and Cheng’s ‘land of hardship’, thereby putting Cheng’s “transcendence” in relation to the idea of alterity.

back to a radically changed Communist China. Significant geographical displacements also take place within China and Europe with different motives.

Time and movement are essential factors behind Tianyi's physical and psychological growth. Both growth and transformation are, of course, defining notions of Bildungsroman (Beer, 2000, pp. 97–103) and its subgenre Künstlerroman. Despite the innumerable Eastern mysticism-infused philosophical digressions, the narrative of *Le Dit* is firmly rooted in our historical sense of time. Many chapters—including the first and the last, as well as the prologue—typically start with a date. The novel begins with a sentence that carries biblical overtones, which is then immediately followed by an event date, a historical duration, and a personal date of birth, “in the beginning there was the cry in the night. Autumn 1930. China with its five thousand years of history, and I with almost six years of life on earth, for I was born in January 1925” (*The River*, p. 3).⁵ The growth of the protagonist as well as other main characters, constantly interacts with historical events. The images of naked and raped women from the Nanjing Massacre carried out by Japanese soldiers in 1937 are a shocking revelation to Tianyi, in particular the relationship between beauty and evil in the light of human sexuality and cruelty (ibid. pp. 27–31). The literary vocation of the poet Haolang—known as l'Ami—is deeply shaped by the cultural and political movement launched by revolutionary left-wing writers such as Lu Xun and Hu Feng during the 1920s and 1930s, who advocate a devoted study of exclusively “foreign” literature and a radical rupture from “burdensome” classical Chinese literary traditions (ibid. pp. 51–52, pp. 62–63). The protagonist's vicissitudes after his dystopian return to China in search of l'Amante and l'Ami⁶ are profoundly affected by catastrophic historical events such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), the Three Years of Natural Disasters (1959–1961), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The closing chapter of the novel begins again with a date—“Autumn 1968”—which

⁵ For a brief analysis of how biblical overtones are intertwined with Daoist imagery in the opening passage, see S. Li (2017a, p. 201).

⁶ The etymological and morphological ambiguity of “amant(e)” (“lover”) and “ami” (“friend”) is not quite played out in English.

marks the arrival of the Communist Red Guards at Tianyi and Haolang’s labour camp in the Great Northern Wilderness (*ibid.*, p. 406). Indeed, this interlacement between personal stories and historical events in Cheng’s novelistic fabric is self-referentially announced by the protagonist himself, as he reflects on Haolang’s ardent writing of “minor events” (“*petites histoires*”) towards the end of the novel: “But are there any minor events? Isn’t every minor event tied up with major ones? His personal history was so tied up with history on the grand scale that the two came to be hopelessly entangled. In his struggle for survival, he ended up forgetting the only weapon he possessed: writing. Now he has found it again” (*ibid.*, pp. 257–258).

The precisely stated, linear temporal progression is countered by a circular, or even pendular movement⁷ through space and place, which crosses, challenges, and transcends both geographic and cultural borders. Tianyi embarks on a return journey between China and Europe, and his loose bulk of unfinished personal writings are then brought back to France and rearranged by a narrator who has allegedly “translated” them from Chinese into French and turned them into the book we are now reading. Further still, this fictitious “pseudotranslation” (Toury, 1984)⁸ was subsequently translated into Chinese with a new Chinese preface signed by the author—as opposed to being written by a fictional narrator—and has been overwhelmingly received by the

⁷ Theorists of travel writing such as Ottmar Ette (2003, p. 39; 43) make a hermeneutic distinction between circular and pendular movements. Generally speaking, the former implies “the improvement of the knowledge about the Other” that is “bound to a gain of knowledge in the country of origin of the traveler”. In comparison, during the latter pendular movement, “the images and spaces do not melt together; they constitute hybrid bodies that subvert clear borderlines between one’s own and the foreign space”. Interestingly, the protagonist Tianyi and the author Cheng seem to occupy these two different theoretical positions. The epithet we usually attribute to Cheng—the *passeur* (between Western and Chinese cultures)—is particularly relevant to the pendular movement of understanding here.

⁸ Cheng’s second novel *L’Éternité n’est pas de trop* (2002), translated in English as *Green Mountain, White Cloud* (2004), also purports to be a reconstruction of a lost book written and brought back by a French Jesuit missionary from China.

Chinese readership.⁹ In a word, the text, both within and outside the narrative, travels in translation.

Moving through Mountain-Water

There are also micro-movements through which the human agent appreciates and interacts perceptively with natural landscapes, resulting in episodic transformations in the protagonist. Cheng's recurrent word-image approach to natural landscapes and phenomena constitutes another significant travel motif in the novel, which is deep-rooted in the classical Chinese traditions of both pictorial art and travel writing. The two most celebrated natural landscapes in *Le Dit* are mountains and rivers. Indeed, Cheng reminds us in his theoretical writings that "mountain" and "water" constitute the Chinese word for "landscape", *shan-shui* 山水 ("montagne-eau") (Cheng, 2006 [1989]).¹⁰ Linked to the Chinese cosmological order of yin-yang, mountain-water embodies the concept of duality which entails the perpetual, mutual transformation of the two entities, as Cheng (2014, p. 90, my translation) clarifies in his calligraphic work: "Here are the two great earthly entities brought together, paired and complementary, the mountain incarnate the principle of yang, and the water the principle of yin. Without relief and difference in altitude, water would not flow; without the nourishment of water, the mountain would dry out. The mountain and water are profoundly joined together". In *The Analects*, Confucius famously employs the analogy of mountain-water to moralize about the human virtues of intelligence and kindness: "The wise delight in water; the humane delight in mountains. The wise move; the humane are still. The wise are happy; the humane live long".¹¹

⁹ But the last part of the novel where the author openly criticizes the severe mismanagement of the Communist regime during the Cultural Revolution has met with state censorship in mainland China. In a way, the fictional narrator of the preface has almost predicted such an operation by the Chinese government.

¹⁰ I should add that "water" and "river" share the same character 水 in classical Chinese.

¹¹ Cheng translated this saying from Chinese to French himself. The English translation here is provided by Burton Watson. See Cheng (2006 [1989], p. 168); see also Watson (trans.) (2007, p. 45)

Moreover, the Chinese “mountain-water” is almost always accompanied by mist or cloud. In effect, it is the movement of the cloud that animates the mountain and the river and puts them in a dynamic reciprocal relation, just as the essential “middle void” (*vide médian*) energizes the vital breaths (*souffles vitaux* or *qi*) of yin and yang.¹² According to Cheng, this visual and symbolic representation of the *souffle* as the cloud in mountain-water paintings has fascinated classical Chinese artists and aesthetic theorists for more than a thousand years. To demonstrate this fundamental philosophical underpinning of classical Chinese landscape painting, Cheng has gathered together a rich body of Chinese theoretical writings on pictorial art from the Tang (618–907) to the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, translated them into French and turned them into an anthology which he entitles *Souffle-Esprit* (literally “breath-spirit”) (1989). These writings will leave their marks on Cheng’s novelistic depiction of Mount Lu. But before we move on to Cheng’s passage in the novel, let me cite the following examples from *Souffle-Esprit* that pinpoint the relationship between mountain, water, cloud, and breath in classical Chinese landscape painting:

(From Jing Hao [855–915]) In order to convey the real physiognomy of a landscape, there should be harmony between the *vital breath* and the *formal structure*. In addition, one should know how to observe and distinguish the *multiple elements* that constitute a landscape. As for the mountain, a pointed summit forms a *feng* [peak], [...] A path that moves through the mountain creates a *gu* (valley). Where the path reaches an impass is a *yu* (ravine). A watercourse that runs through a ravine is called *xi*. (Cheng, 2006 [1989], p. 115)¹³

(From Guo Xi [1020–1090]) The mountain has watercourses as its arteries, trees and herbs as its hair, mists and clouds as its expression. Thus, the mountain owes its life to the water, its beauty to the trees and herbs, its *mystery to the mists and clouds*. [...]

¹² Cheng elaborates on this Daoism-informed ternary thinking on many occasions (Cheng, 1991, pp. 58–61; 2006 [1989], pp. 162–163).

¹³ Cheng translated all these passages himself from classical Chinese to French. My English translation is based on Cheng’s French translation. The emphases in this and the following passages are mine.

Those who are learning to paint landscapes should not go about things otherwise. They must bring themselves close to mountains and water and let the spirit [of mountains and water] penetrate them entirely. A real landscape must be seen both *from afar* so that we can capture the lines of force, and *from close quarters* so that we can draw from the substance. The atmosphere of the clouds which *animates* a mountain landscape is not the same in different seasons [...]. (pp. 117–119)

(From Tang Dai [1673–1752]) The clouds are born out of the mountain's womb. Incidentally, this is why we call the rocks (of a valley) *roots of the clouds*. Indeed, around the rocks, *water and breath are mixed together and they give birth to clouds*. The first state of the clouds is called the *lan* [ascending vapour]. [...] In painting, there is cause for making a distinction between clouds and mists. For clouds, we can differentiate stable clouds, moving clouds, crepuscular clouds, etc. For mists, there are differences among light mists, morning mists, evening mists, etc. The faintest state of clouds is called *ai*; the *ai surrounds the tops and the peaks in the distance with an aura*. The most condensed state of clouds is called *wu*: the *wu* makes everything *blurry and elusive*. (ibid., p. 133)

(From Shen Zongqian [1736–1820]) We should attend to the creation of depth in the painting. The composition should include at least three planes. [...] We should not forget to handle carefully the *intermediate spaces of emptiness across the painting, in the form of clouds or watercourses, in order to facilitate the circulation of the breath*. (ibid., pp. 139–140)

Let us now examine how Cheng incorporates these theoretical observations into his novel:

Two and a half years had passed since the night of the cry. I now lived with my parents in our home for years to come, a humble cottage at the base of Mount Lu, in northern Jianxi [*sic.*] Province, not far from the Yangzi River. [...] ‘Mists and clouds of Mount Lu,’ so famous they had become proverbial, referring to something *elusive and mysterious*, a beauty hidden yet bewitching. With their capricious, unpredictable movements and their never-fixed hues—pink or purple, jade green or silver gray—they turned the mountain magical. *They developed amid Mount Lu's countless peaks and hills; then, lingering in the valleys or rising toward the heights, they maintained a constant state of mystery*. At times they

dissipated abruptly, revealing to the human eye the mountain in all its splendor. With their silkiness and their scent of moist sandalwood, these clouds and mists resembled a being both fleshly and unreal, a messenger come from elsewhere, who might *converse with the earth* for a minute or for hours, depending on his mood. *Some bright mornings* they stole silently through shutters and entered the dwellings of men, caressing them, *surrounding them, gentle and intimate*. Should anyone try to grab hold of them, they would move off as silently as they had come, out of reach. *Some evenings the heavy mists rose and met up with clouds in motion*, producing moisture and bringing showers; the pure water would pour into jars and jugs the villagers set out under their walls. With this water they made the best tea around. Once the downpour had ended, the clouds broke up rapidly, and under clear skies the highest mountain would be briefly visible. The surrounding hills in no way detracted from the mysterious lofty beauty of this peak, which, unobstructed, reflected the diffuse evening light and displayed its fantastic, dangerously towering crags crowned with a vegetation no less fantastic. Meanwhile, the clouds, re-forming in the west, would turn into a wide, slack sea, *on whose waves floated the setting sun like a dream ship gleaming with a thousand multicolored lights*. And very soon the summit would be draped in a mauve mist, becoming invisible once more. As was indeed appropriate, since this was the hour for Mount Lu’s daily journey westward to pay homage to the Taoists’ Lady of the West and to greet Buddha. At that moment, the universe appeared to disclose its hidden reality: it was in perpetual transformation. What was apparently stable melted away into the moving; what was apparently finite sank into the infinite. There was no fixed, final state. And is that not the real truth, since *all living things are but condensation of the breath?* (*The River*, pp. 5–7, my italics)

The striking lexical similarities and shared conceptual formulations—such as the mountain-water-cloud relation and the quality, movement, and typology of the mist/cloud—between the aforementioned theoretical texts and this Mount Lu passage may even run the risk of diminishing Cheng’s literary originality. However, what we can clearly discern in this example is that both linguistic and cultural translations are inherent in Cheng’s creative process; in fact, they largely define Cheng’s translingual aesthetic. Cheng is one of the “remarkable number of translinguals” who

“have been active and important as translators, brokers who position themselves between the language of an author and the language of the reader”—importantly—“as if these projects were an extension of their own translanguing program” (Kellman, 2000, p. 32).

Yet, there is a significant contextual difference: whereas those theoretical texts aim to give technical instructions to artists, the Mount Lu passage is attributed to the intuitive perception of a young protagonist in nature at the moment of artistic initiation, of finding his artistic vocation (in the etymological sense of “inner calling”). The presence of a receptive human agent in the landscape, who is inspired (again in the etymological sense of “breathing in”) and makes his first attempt to use the “magical power of brush and ink” (*The River*, p. 9) to establish a relation—a “physical communion [communion charnelle]” (*ibid.*, p. 6)¹⁴—between nature and man, is crucial to our generic acknowledgement of the novel as a *Künstlerroman*.¹⁵ Furthermore, rather than “intellectual”, it is the “sensuous” experience of the human agent through the landscape that gives rise to the quality of travel literature in the classical Chinese tradition.¹⁶ To this end, in addition to “mountain-water”, Cheng introduces another closely related Chinese aesthetic concept—“sentiment-scenery” (情景)—that explicitly puts man in relation with mountain-water:

It is with these two great entities [mountain-water], with their respective virtues, that Chinese literati liked to identify the two tendencies of their sensibility [yin and yang]. This conforms to an important notion of Chinese aesthetic, that is, the *sentiment-scenery*. This notion points to the interpretation of human spirit and of the living universe, through which all authentic artistic creations take place. (2014, pp. 90–91, my translation)

¹⁴ The French adjective “charnel” is repeatedly used in the novel to describe man’s relation to natural phenomena. It echoes strongly with Pontian phenomenological discourse, e.g. “la chair du monde”, and Cheng (2009a, p. 11) also describes himself as a “slightly naive phenomenologist”.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of Tianyi’s artistic initiation and vocation, see S. Li (2017, pp. 154–176). For a broader treatment of *Le Dit* as a *Künstlerroman*, see M. Bertaud (2011, pp. 165–186).

¹⁶ This remark is informed by Yu Guangzhong’s formulation of “landscape journal”, see Yu (1983, cited in Hargett, 2016, p. 113).

J. M. Hargett (2016, p. 113) duly observes that classical Chinese travel literature typically adopts a cinematic-like word-picture approach to places, places authors “want readers to ‘see’ by *reading a text*”. The critic continues:

In its Chinese context, “place” refers to a particular environmental setting with identifiable traits, such as a distinguishing name, special topographical features, and/or specific historical, cultural, and literary associations. Traditionally, the Chinese attached great value to such places. “Space”, on the other hand, is a larger construct, abstract in nature. Imagine a giant tableau, onto which is inscribed a cultural construct that includes all places, their unique characteristics, and the relationships among them. As travellers move across and through the giant tableau, they perceive both how individual places are unique, *and* how they all ultimately assemble together into some sort of unity [...]. (ibid., pp. 113–114)

Hargett’s insightful comment on the spatial configuration in traditional Chinese travel writing describes almost exactly the progression of the Mount Lu passage. The protagonist arrived and settled at the foot of Mount Lu with his family. His account of the natural beauty of Mount Lu begins with a proverbial name (“mists and clouds of Mount Lu”) immortalized by the verse of the classical poet Su Shi from the Song dynasty (960–1279). It then goes on to elaborate the way the “capricious” cloud that animates and transforms the various topographical features of the mountain (“countless peaks and hills”, “the valleys”, “its fantastic, dangerously towering crags”, “vegetation”, “the diffuse evening light”, “the summit”), and the way the cloud through its different forms affects the local inhabitants. This paradisiacal scenery stimulates the protagonist’s imagination of a certain Daoist divinity or the Buddha of the West.¹⁷ Finally, Tianyi understands this “giant tableau”, where everything is changing and nothing is fixed, in the light of the Daoist cosmogony (“all living things are but condensation of the breath”).

To reaffirm the distinctive quality of travel writing in *Le Dit*, it may be helpful to compare the Mount Lu passage to that of a

¹⁷ As I will expound soon, in ancient China, ‘the West’ generally refers to today’s India.

“real” travelogue on Yellow Mountain by China’s greatest travel writer Xu Xike (1587–1641):

From time to time a dense fog would move in and move off. When the first bank of fog moved in, nothing could be seen. Looking out towards the various heights of Lotus Flower [Peak], most of them were enveloped in fog. As I alone ascended to Heavenly Capital [Peak], when I moved to the front of it the fog would retreat to the back of it, and as I crossed over to the right, the fog would then exit from the left. As for the pines, they were still twisted and upright, sweeping this way and that. The cypresses, although as big as a [man’s] arm, all clung flatly to the surfaces of rocks in the manner of lichen. On such lofty mountains the wind is formidable, and the foggy mists come and go as they please. Looking at the various peaks below, at times they appeared [out of the fog] as emerald isles, while at other times they were completely enveloped in a silvery sea. But looking further down the mountain, I beheld a completely different view: there the sunlight glittered brightly and brilliantly. (Cited in Hargett, 2016, p. 121)

As can be seen, the visual details of this scenery are strikingly similar to the Mount Lu passage. The amorphous presence of the moving cloud, mist, or fog, largely guides the narrator-protagonist’s—and by extension, the reader’s—perception of the visual appeal of the landscape. There is a strong tendency to describe the “actions” of individual topographical features, such as the vegetation, rocks, and peaks, in anthropomorphic terms. In fact, some of their imagery, like the sea and the sun, is so closely related that one could seamlessly complement the other: the “emerald isles” were thus “completely enveloped in a silvery sea” [“a wide, slack sea” in Cheng’s version] on whose “waves floated the setting sun like a dream ship gleaming with a thousand multicolored lights” [“there the sunlight glittered brightly and brilliantly” in Xu’s version]. However, there is arguably a slight difference in the intention of the two accounts. Whereas Xu’s first priority is, as Hargett stresses, “*narration of the journey*” (ibid.)—hence the spatial precision of the traveller’s route—Cheng is visibly keen to engage in the Daoist philosophical discourse which will later inform Tianyi’s artistic vocation.

Apart from Mount Lu, Tianyi’s travel itinerary and wandering destiny, as well as his intellectual and artistic development,

are strongly identified with a number of well-known rivers: from the Yangtze River which fostered Daoism to the Yellow River that cradled Confucianism, from the Seine which embraces and protects the cultural heart of France to the Loire that has “fashioned an entire tribe of fine-featured, bright-eyed, levelheaded folk” (*The River*, p. 185), the list goes on. The protagonist describes himself as the “child of the river” (*ibid.*). At the end of the novel, Tianyi compares his life journey to the water in the river, it evaporates, turns into clouds, and falls as rain back to the source of the river like the “circulating breath [...] at the Great Return”: “we have gone from river to river to this last river. The loop of destiny ends here, of that we are certain” (*ibid.*, p. 277). The cross-cultural and spiritual significance is thus conferred on Tianyi’s geographical and topographical displacement (Fraisie, 2010, p. 639). It is worth mentioning that Cheng actually first intended to employ “là-bas le fleuve” (“there the river”) as the title of the novel, which was rejected by his editor due to its dearth of literary resonance for French readers. If the mountain—lofty, rock-solid, unchanging, finite—embodies the yang principle, Cheng expatiates on water/river—the yin *par excellence*—to express, to borrow Fraisie’s words, “the infinite in the finite” and “the incomplete in the complete” (*ibid.*, my translation). This should add to our understanding of Cheng’s “spiritual journey”, a journey that is far beyond the human individual’s growth and transformation.¹⁸ In this respect, the river for Cheng is readily comparable to the sea for Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad (Beer, 2000, p. 217), and all the more so for Nietzsche (Gillespie & Strong 1988).

River landscape in Cheng not only becomes “the point of departure” and the “staging of theory”, it also establishes a cross-cultural network, a model of comparison, which stimulates “movements of understanding and mediation that [...] are passed

¹⁸ It would be difficult for an article of this length to explore Cheng’s fascination with various rivers in the same way we did for Mount Lu. However, it must be stressed that there is indeed a long tradition of the so-called “river diaries” since the Song dynasty, which describe lengthy trips along rivers. These river diaries “helped to establish the prototype of the literary travel diary in traditional China, which proliferated during the subsequent Ming and Qing dynasties” (Hargett, 2016, pp. 118–119).

to the reader” (Ette, 2003, p. 33). It is on the Yangtze River, just before he leaves for France, that Tianyi listens to a certain Professor F. explain the river “as a symbol of time” in the Daoist tradition:

...we sail through the native region of our beloved Laozi. As you know, he is the founder of Taoism. He developed the concept of the Way, the irresistible universal movement driven by the primal Breath. [...] And yet, if we look at the river as we are now doing, it appears to be heading in a straight line toward its destruction, whereas the Taoists say the Way moves in a circle. [...] So what has given us the idea that the irreversibility of time’s imperious order can be disrupted? Enter the middle Voids inherent in the Way. Breaths themselves, they impart to the Way its rhythm, its respiration; most important, they allow it to effect the mutation of things and to return to the Origin, the very source of the primal Breath. For the river, the middle Voids take the form of clouds. The river, with its origin in the Way, takes its appropriate place in earthly order as well as in the heavenly. Water evaporates from the river, condenses into cloud, falls back into the river as rain, feeding it. (*The River*, pp. 129–130)

This teaching later inspires the protagonist to creatively apply a Daoist reading of Proust’s fluid conception of time:

An explanation I would remember in France upon reading *In Search of Lost Time*. Differing with Proust, I might have written: “In search of time to come.” The law of time, for me at any rate, in keeping with what I had just experienced with the Lover [l’Amante], was not based on the accomplished, the finished, but on the postponed [*différé*], the unfinished. I had to pass through the Void and the Exchange. (ibid., p. 131)

Similarly, before deciding to return to China, Tianyi spends his last days visiting the Loire with Véronique, retracing its source; and the protagonist thinks of his childhood experience of discovering the Yangtze River with his father: “The man in exile who contemplated the vast landscape, was he not the child of Asia who had gazed upon the River Yangzi with his father and who had gone up other rivers, to other sources? Then and now, it was the same discovery: a long, wide river begins as a tiny trickle of water buried under impenetrable grass” (ibid., 187).

Surrounded by “foreign” landscape, Tianyi seems to become ever more conscious of his “revised” theoretical position:

Upriver to the source. Would it be the beginning of a new life? Or the end of another? That time is cyclical and that each new cycle brings changes both foreseen and unexpected was an old theme, an integral part of my vision, and I no longer doubted its validity. [...] In this foreign country, now a new person, by an act of will couldn't I cut the roots of the past, untie the most inextricable knots? Cut the roots? Maybe. Since man is merely a creature gliding over the surface of the earth, an animal the culture hands a few tried and true ways, is he really so deeply rooted that he can't imagine being transplanted? (ibid., pp. 187–188)

The Daoist cyclical vision of river as time still holds true for Tianyi. However, a new theoretical issue of “route” and “root” is raised in this foreign land. Thus, to echo Ette's remark, “the theory of the landscape turns into a landscape of theory” (Ette, 2003, p. 33).

Quests for Knowledge and Love

Tianyi does not, of course, move through mountains and rivers simply out of aesthetic pleasure or theoretical reflection. His cross-cultural return journey is indelibly marked by the notion of quest. While Tianyi's departure for Europe under a governmental study grant can be perceived as a quest for knowledge, his resolute return to a much altered, dangerous China to join his loved ones, practically declining a romantic invitation to stay in Europe, is reminiscent of Odysseus's homecoming quest for Penelope in Ithaca after twenty years away. The title of the final part of the novel, “myth of return”, seems to encourage such a reading.¹⁹

The quest for “Western knowledge” is a key *twofold* travel motif in the novel, which puts cross-cultural history in dialogue with the present. Prior to Tianyi's journey to Europe, he has voluntarily followed a Buddhist Chan master and received careful instructions on Chinese painting and calligraphy. The Chan master

¹⁹ But “myth” here can also be understood in the vulgar sense describing something that did not happen and is untrue, since the author himself did not return to China in reality.

subsequently recommends Tianyi to Professor C., who is seeking recruits with the skills to work at the Dunhuang Caves, a Buddhist archaeological site which can be traced back to the fourth century and was rediscovered in the twentieth century. By introducing Dunhuang to the narrative, Cheng naturally invokes the *topos* of the Silk Road, as Tianyi depicts: “Dunhuang was in the far western region of China, in the modern province of Gansu, on the old Silk Road” (*The River*, p. 112). In ancient China, “the West” is generally used to refer to today’s India. It is by this road that Buddhism was first indirectly transmitted from India to China, and for centuries, especially from the fourth century onward, Chinese Buddhist monks made pilgrimages along the Silk Road to the “Western regions” (西域) in order to obtain sacred Buddhist scriptures. From around the fifth century, the prosperous city of Dunhuang “began serving as a place of exchange between China and the outside world as well as a stop for Buddhist pilgrims” (*The River*, p. 112).

One of the best-known pilgrim monks is called Xuanzang from the early Tang dynasty. His legendary travel to India (AD 626–645) in search of Buddhist knowledge is a milestone in Chinese religious history. After his return to China, he devoted himself entirely to the translation of hundreds of Buddhist texts directly from Sanskrit to Chinese.²⁰ He organized sophisticated, large-scale “translation forums” (译场) for collaborations and significantly advanced contemporaneous Chinese translation theories (notably from the dominant ‘literal’ or ‘simple’ *wen* style) (ibid., p. 7).²¹ Moreover, at the Tang Emperor’s politically motivated request, Xuanzang authored *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (大唐西域记) (AD 646) which provides an unprecedentedly comprehensive account of an allegedly 128 kingdoms (Ji, 1990 [1985], p. 112) along the journey, elaborating on their geopolitical and social aspects. The popular Chinese idiom *xitian qujing* 西天取经 (pilgrimage to the West for Buddhist Sutra)

²⁰ For detailed calculation of the “rolls”, the “fascicles”, and the “volumes”, see Ji (1990 [1985], pp. 6–7).

²¹ For a schematic comparison between early Chinese and Western translations of religious texts and how they consequently influenced thinking on translation in each tradition, see Bassnett and Lefevere (1998, pp. 12–24).

derives from this historical event, which is now generally used to mean “learning from the West”. The transhistorical comparison between Xuanzang and Tianyi, and by extension, Cheng, becomes all the more compelling if we remind ourselves of Cheng’s other career as a literary translator of ancient Tang poetry from Chinese to French, and of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Michaux from French to Chinese.

The Chan master explicitly draws Tianyi’s attention to the analogy between China’s profoundly consequential encounter with Indian thought and art centuries before and that between China and the West today:

Didn’t our masters of the eighth through the eleventh centuries assimilate Indian art? Because they were steeped in their own living tradition, they could absorb outside influences without renouncing their own world. The more familiar they were with the finest in their own tradition the more easily they recognized the finest in another. I’m telling you this because you, you will have to face what is different. Once this war is over, I think it inevitable for China and the West to encounter each other on a deeper level, especially since the West is so free and so receptive to outside influences, even Asian. (*The River*, p. 111)

In studying the turbulent migrant, transcultural experience of Jean-Christophe from Romain Roland’s eponymous Bildungsroman, Tianyi himself becomes aware of the exigencies of ongoing dialogues for intercultural transformation:

With all its dramatic events, the tumultuous history of Jean-Christophe, seeking fulfilment through three cultures—German, French, and Italian—inspired every one of us at a time when we too aspired to metamorphoses. We knew that, after its long dialogue with India and Islam, Chinese culture had reached a point where the West was an essential voice and could not be ignored [*plus qu’essentielle, incontournable*]. (*The River*, p. 53)

However, the kind of spiritual knowledge which defines Tianyi’s quest is not Buddhism, or any particular theological enquiry per se. As has been argued elsewhere, “Cheng’s true religion is art.”²²

²² This is a crucial connection between Cheng and Proust in the light of the former’s self-proclaimed “*démarche proustienne*”. For an extensive exploration of this literary relation, see S. Li (2017a, pp. 153–219).

A fundamental epistemic contribution of Tianyi's cross-cultural journey is the consistent construction of cultural and artistic "parallels" and "equivalents" that bridges our understanding and appreciation of both Western and Eastern cultural heritages. The discussion of the protagonist's learning about one particular artistic medium—painting, calligraphy, literature, theatre, or music—is typically provoked by an encounter with something epistemically new in one culture, then compared and contrasted with what the protagonist already knows about that medium in another culture. The respective theory and historical development are then fleshed out. The actualization, cross-fertilization, and blending of, and the constant re-negotiation between two different cultural traditions, result in a kind of transcultural, intermedial aesthetic epitomized by the novel itself. Cheng firmly believes in the "primacy of the arts in spiritual life" and "he understands the highest and most sacred achievement of art as creating 'dialogue'—dialogues between cultures, art and nature, self and other—aiming at 'transcendence' and universal harmony" (S. Li, 2017a, p. 199).²³ If time and movement are crucial to the protagonist's physical and psychological growth, cross-cultural exposure and contact, as well as intellectual and artistic training, signal moments of transformative epiphany, which profoundly shape Tianyi's (and by extension, Cheng's) migrant identity, highlighting his liminal disposition with regard to cultures. There is a clear parallel between the physical and the inner in Tianyi's journey.

The departing quest for Western knowledge is complemented by a return quest for love. Whereas Tianyi's journey to the West conveys a clear sense of geographical destination, his home-returning is portrayed paradoxically as a myth-infused "downward", meandering, and seemingly perpetual journey of a transient nature. To be reunited with his loved ones is to be home; the return to the "root" effectively becomes the continuation of another "route". As in mythology where "our world has always been a middle earth, with different forms of experience above and below it" (Frye, 1990, p. 216),²⁴ Tianyi's return journey shows a palpable

²³ In this section of the book, I offer many concrete examples with detailed analysis of Cheng's 'comparatist' approach to the arts.

²⁴ This idea of "middle earth" should add to our understanding of Cheng's formulation of the "Middle" Kingdom discussed in the introduction.

sense of *vertical* movement, echoing the myth of Orpheus and that of Dante. Tianyi returns to China after l’Amante’s calling (‘Return! [...] Here you are at last! Here we are at last!’) (*The River*, p. 188), only to find out, like Orpheus looking back at Eurydice near the threshold of the underworld, that l’Amante is lost forever. Instead, he learns of the survival of l’Ami and decides to undertake another journey to join l’Ami from the South to the Great Northern Wilderness (北大荒) of China. At the beginning of the final part, Tianyi remarks: “to rejoin the Lover [l’Amante]! [...] I know that returning to an altered, unrecognizable China will be a veritable descent into hell” (*The River*, p. 191). Towards the end, after rejoining l’Ami, Tianyi says: “I am accompanying my friend on his journey through hell” (*ibid.*, 256), like Dante in Virgil’s company through the nine circles of hell. Resonating with Orpheus’s turning of passion to boys after his eventual failure to retrieve Eurydice, Tianyi’s reunion with l’Ami quickly develops into a kind of homoerotic companionship.

The myth of Orpheus is explicitly compared to the Buddhist legend of Mulian, “just as when my mother died, I think of the Buddhist legend of Mulian in hell. Mixed into it now is a European legend, that of Orpheus” (*ibid.*, p. 191). Tianyi learns about this legend from the wall painting at the above-mentioned archaeological site of Dunhuang. It recounts how the devout Buddhist Mulian descended to the underworld, facing a thousand trials to free his deceased mother’s soul. The earliest source of this Buddhist legend is indeed found in the Dunhuang Caves. It is generally suspected to have a certain Indian origin, but there is not yet any concrete evidence. The Buddhist story of Ksitigarbha, one of the four principal bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism, shows a diegetic similarity, i.e. the descent to hell, and this latter legend is also depicted in the Dunhuang Caves.²⁵ The apparent, and in many ways, surprising emphasis on “filial piety” in the Buddhist tale of Mulian is in all likelihood due to the influence of Confucianism in China (Bary and Lufrano, 2000, pp. 93–95). It can already be regarded as a *sinicized* version of the “original” myth, an exemplar of cultural translation and amalgamation between ancient

²⁵ For an introduction and analysis of the manuscripts found in Dunhuang, where these legends were first recorded in China, see Mair (1989).

India and China. Therefore, in comparing the myths of Mulian and Orpheus, Cheng, again, subtly draws the analogy between China's two historical encounters with the "West". Cheng's fascination with myths in his "comparatist" approach to cultures may be best explained in Tianyi's following words:

Since my stay in Dunhuang and my visit to the Campo Santo of Pisa where I saw the frescoes of the Master of Death, [...] I have come to believe that *only a mythic vision* allows mankind to assume control of what cannot be fully verbalized. Who among us can claim to take the measure of real life, to know how deep it sinks its roots, how far it extends its branches? (*The River*, p. 259, my italics)

Travel as Translation

Historical progression, geographical displacement, landscape appreciation, cross-cultural encounter, personal quests, artistic pilgrimage, and transhistorical analogy, these are essential components of Tianyi's—and to some extent, the author's—journey, inner and outer, in space and in time. They constitute the most recurrent and important travel motifs in the novel, each establishing a "layer" of structure. My approach to these issues combines the critical angles of Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman, and travel writing. Because of the deliberate fictionalization and imaginative reconstruction of the narrative, *Le Dit* may not count as a "real" piece of travel writing in its strict definition.²⁶ However, as has been explored, not only is the novel saturated with the above-mentioned travel motifs, some of the novel's particular methods of observation and enquiry are directly informed by established travel literature, especially in the classical Chinese tradition, creating a palpable transcultural intertextual presence.

The relationship between travel and translation is brought to prominence in Cheng's translingual creative practice.²⁷ In general

²⁶ For a snapshot of the debate on the problematic definition of travel writing, especially in relation to the factual and the fictional, see T. Youngs (2013, pp. 3–5).

²⁷ The theoretical relation between travel and translation has been extensively studied by scholars in both travel literature and translation studies. See J. Clifford (1997), M. Cronin (2000), and L. Polezzi (2006).

terms, travel writing is a "translating genre insofar as each individual experience is transformed into collective reservoirs of knowledge or at least will be set into relation with them but also because cultural forms of expression of the Other as foreign have to be rendered into the language of one's own" (Ette, 2003, p. 26). Both travel and translation are "frequently seen as metaphors of mobility and flux" (Polezzi, 2006, p. 175). In *Le Dit*, this relationship is made all the more compelling—the novel fictionally "stages" a sophisticated theory of such a dynamic relationship. Cheng's fictional exploration of the notion of translation goes far deeper than the "apparently general application" of the term "used for comparison in a strategic and contingent way" (Clifford, 1997, p. 39),²⁸ which says little more than the mere etymology of "translation" as "carried across". I have extensively quoted Cheng's work of translation from classical Chinese to modern French to demonstrate the author's sensitivity to the bilingual textuality and bi-cultural reality in his novelistic fabric, which entails a heightened self-reflexivity. *Le Dit* is not an ordinary travellers' tale about the foreign land told in his or her native tongue, it is a *mise en scene* of a migrant's liminal self-positioning between two cultures through languages. Tianyi is not simply a traveller who constantly crosses national borders; rather, he is, like Cheng, a cultural *passer* ("ferryman") or commuter who linguistically translates, epistemically transforms, and spiritually transcends his own individual experience of *migrance*.²⁹

The "liminality of migrant experience", "the migrant culture of the 'in-between'" and the "space of the translation of cultural difference *at the interstices*" are of course defining characteristics of Homi Bhabha's (1994, p. 224, italics in the original) influential formulation of "cultural translation" beyond the strict linguistic

²⁸ Clifford's rather vague employment of the term "translation" in the context of travel writing has met with serious criticism from scholars working in translation studies (Cronin, 2000, pp. 102–104; Polezzi, 2006, p. 175).

²⁹ I draw on Caroline Quignolot-Eysel's (1999) astute French formulation of *migrance* (in the context of migrant women's writings): 'à la fois migration et errance, souvent souffrance mais, au bout du compte, renaissance dans la jouissance'. The ideas of ultimate 'renaissance' and 'jouissance' through his translingual creative practice are all-pervasive in Cheng's (2003) inaugural address at the Academie française.

medium. Much like Cronin and Polezzi's objection to Clifford's loose, metaphorical use of "translation" for travel writing, critics of Bhabha's concept of cultural translation—which employs Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as a prime example—also voice serious reservations about calling it "translation", as it "does not involve two texts, or even one text, and certainly not more than one language" (Trivedi, 2005). In this respect, Cheng's version of cultural translation, a kind of "theory as fiction", quite rightly addresses the critical problem by attending to both the metaphorical and the linguistic notions of translation. Indeed, other than the number of Chinese texts that have been identified as the "sources" of Cheng's linguistic and cultural translation, critics have also duly observed how this translation process has visibly affected Cheng's creative use of the French language, creating a style unique to Franco-Chinese writers (Croiset, 2010; Li, 2017b, pp. 191–193). Perhaps even more significantly, while fictionally putting travel and translation in a multifarious relation, Cheng also assumes a certain ethical responsibility for cultural representations, which is why he self-consciously adopts a "comparatist" approach to even the smallest cultural details, makes cross-cultural analogies, and creates liminal spaces in which differences and power relations can be constantly renegotiated.

For Cheng, in-betweenness, liminality, or interstitiality, seems to be the *sine qua non* of cultural transcendence through exchange, as he asserts: "True transcendence, paradoxically, is located in the *between*, in that which bursts forth most intensely when decisive exchange between beings and Being takes place" (2008a, p. 18). Travel and translation produce narratives crossing borders. But the travel motifs and the idea and practice of translation in *Le Dit* do not in fact presuppose or posit a journey—be it metaphorical or literal—from A to B; rather, they aim at a linguistic and cultural reorientation of both A and B *towards* a C that is always in the process of becoming, "à venir" ("to come"), and "dans le différencié" ("differing and deferring").³⁰ Indeed, Cheng's configuration of self and other in relation to the idea of transcendence is

³⁰ These two phrases are borrowed from Tianyi's reflection on Proust's conception of time mentioned earlier. Here it is cited from the French original to highlight the poststructuralist vocabulary (*The River*, p. 192).

recognizably in line with other well-established poststructuralist thinkers’ works,³¹ from Derrida’s “deconstructive” openness for new meanings (Stoker, 2012, p. 20), to the ethical acceptance and negotiation of one’s own boundaries with the other in Luce Irigaray’s formulation of “horizontal transcendence”,³² and finally to Gayatri Spivak’s (2003, pp. 72–73; 2015, pp. 290–292) theory of “planetarity” which points to a strong sense of alterity, a kind of fundamental intention towards the other. In sum, what we can see in Cheng’s *Le Dit* are both an embodiment and an allegory of travel and translation, which signal fundamental human interaction that inspires informed imagination and provokes lateral thinking about cultural representations, simultaneously engendering something “new” and recreating something “old” for a planetary possibility of cultural transcendence.

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³¹ For a brief introduction of Cheng’s intellectual training and active participation in the structuralist and poststructuralist debate in France in the 1980s, see S. Li (2017, pp. 129–130).

³² For an argument on Irigaray’s horizontal transcendence as self-limitation, see A. Halsema (2008, pp. 822–823).

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