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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 Zhang Yinde's in-depth study is the first substantial publication in the French language devoted to twentieth century Chinese literature, both in its diversity (the People's Republic, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the May 4th era, socialist realism, genre literature), and with a focus on theoretical and historical aspects. The 24 chapters which make up its three parts are a mine of information, accompanied by a complete glossary of characters and an index allowing targeted access. A sizeable bibliography provides encouragement for further reflection. We are not aware of any better introduction to the work of Yu Hua or Li Ang, to Chen Ran's feminine literature, or to the literature of "roots" than these texts, which contain all the information necessary for the layman (biographical information, an overview of translations into French, long extracts in impeccable French translations of previously unpublished works), as well as a mass of supplementary information for the more informed reader, in particular reasoned and commented references to primary and secondary Chinese sources. Aimed at both a specialised and a general readership, the book combines general surveys with thematic and monographic studies, such as the detailed analysis of the grotesque in Mo Yan or of

heterogeneousness (of genre, of voice and of language itself) in a “dictionary-novel” by Han Shaogong.

- 2 As the sub-title of the book states, the main thread is the question of the relations between (borrowed ?) modernism and (Chinese ?) identity, which is tackled in the introduction and the first part. The author adopts a resolutely different approach from the (Chinese-)American consensus in the field, which untiringly asserts the pre-eminence of notions such as (post)modernity and identity, thus frequently overstating concepts which the literary texts on the contrary seek to deconstruct. The first part analyses through several examples how the opposition between modernity and tradition has been politically manipulated. One chapter shows that the establishment of a socialist-realist canon “with Chinese characteristics” put an end to a long struggle to capture the “myth of May 4th” by definitively excluding “cosmopolitan” writers and placing the others under the aesthetics of “national forms”. Another text devoted to contemporary theories of “Chineseness” takes apart the truly Maurassian discourse of some contemporary theorists of post-colonialism in China, such as a critic who asserts that China experts may well learn Chinese but that calligraphy “requires the penetration into the spirit of our culture, which flows in our blood”¹. The juxtaposition of the two arguments discreetly suggests that both the Maoist and the “post-” discourse share the same theoretical grid, the latter often allowing the former to find its place in long-term history as the expression of an unchanging Chinese identity. Two chapters, devoted to the Chinese edition of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and to the translation into French of proper nouns in Chinese novels, just as thoroughly question the theoretical constructs of untranslatability and of translation as inevitable betrayal.
- 3 Since the contrast between modernity and identity is so often manipulated, one must return to the works themselves, in order to draw perspectives which are less simplistic and closer to the texts. The second part of the book takes the reader from the late-Qing Francophone writer, Zeng Pu, to the novelist Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), by way of Lu Xun and Guo Moruo. Step by step the “modern break” is deconstructed, pushed off into the future, or conversely thrown back into the past, and its reality questioned. Thus Zeng Pu, even before May 4th, echoes, in *Flower on an Ocean of Sin*, the historic crisis which allows the courtesan Caiyun to gain the upper hand in European diplomatic circles over the Mandarin Jin Wenqing, although she is merely his concubine. However, she does not become a patriotic heroine, nor an emancipated woman fighting for freedom in the spirit of May 4th, but remains on the margins of history, ensuring just retribution for the sins of her husband from a Buddhist point of view. Lu Xun also is seen as symptomatic of a modern crisis deprived of any historic break. Quoting Wang Xiaoming’s characterisation of Lu Xun as the “Moses” of Chinese modernity (which incidentally echoes recent political readings of Kafka), Zhang Yinde shows that the narrators of “Diary of a Madman” and of “The True Story of Ah Q” must both acknowledge in disabuse the disjunction between individual rebellion and Chinese collective destiny, as did Lu Xun, whose readers were confined to the urban intelligentsia. Finally the analysis of Eileen Chang’s *Love In A Fallen City* shows that a traditional attitude or the claim to modernity can be mere masks in a love game played out against the backdrop of the modern cataclysm represented by war. The unattainable modern break, forever referred to but never achieved, dissolves into a continuum of individual positions confronted with history.

- 4 The dichotomy between modernity and identity which serves—in the plural—as the subtitle of the book, is thus put into perspective : just as the modern break at the beginning of the twentieth century cannot be pinned down, so the renewal of “identity” at the end of the century fragments into individual literary projects. Be it in Yu Hua’s construction of an ethical point of view on collective history, in which Zhang Yinde perceives the influence of Proust’s approach to time, or in the literary collage of quotations from *A Dream of Red Mansions* illustrated by Jia Pingwa in *The Fallen Capital* and by Bai Xianrong in “Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream”, Zhang Yinde’s readings underline the primacy of fictional devices which articulate literary references and social discourses in a singular construction. The best example is no doubt Gao Xingjian. The analysis of the Nobel Prize winner places him beyond the dichotomy between China and the West in his flight from political oppression and from any literary form conceived as national, borrowing food for fictional reflection in turn from Aragon, Brecht, Zen Buddhism, or from the many Chinese local traditions. Zhang’s study of how Gao articulates “escape”, a recurring thematic figure in his works, and “territory” in *One Man’s Bible*, underlines how Gao constructs a subjective reflection on exile (leaving behind him not only his country, but all dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion), which is at the time situated in a “globalised” or “deterritorialised” sphere of literature. This sphere comes into being with the existence of a Chinese-speaking world outside of China, and, beyond that, of a “denationalised” concept of literature. The novel thus dismisses the postures of both testimony and political commitment, inviting us to understand Gao’s texts as a critical reflection on the May 4th tradition, which runs through the Chinese literature of the last century.
- 5 One might wonder to what extent this project, which seeks to define itself outside territorial dichotomies, is likely to constitute itself as an autonomous aesthetic programme. From this point of view, if Gao fictionalises, in *Soul Mountain*, the impossibility of returning to one’s native village, to tradition, it is because the individual is caught up in the violence of history, from which even his native village is not exempt. While Gao’s literary project can be read as the search for an individual posture in the turmoil of this violence, his quest for an impossible identity which rejects cultural determination may rather be seen as part of an existential quest with different implications in his two novels. One might wonder in this respect whether the totalising form of *Soul Mountain* (a totalisation made possible by the author’s play on pronouns) is a form of critical response to the fragmentation of reality which is the ultimate justification for Lu Xun’s ethical refusal to resort to any other form than the short-story.
- 6 These debates are echoed in the conclusion of the book, entitled “Chinese literature and comparative literature”, in which the author ponders the articulation between literary analysis and cultural comparisons. Referring to François Jullien’s project to formulate a comparison between Chinese and Western thought in terms of an alternative rather than a juxtaposition, he encourages his reader to exercise scepticism when confronted with essentialist definitions of “Chinese” and “Western”. If literature has an opinion to be voiced in this debate, it is that of the singularity of fictional projects, which configure ancient and recent history, as well as the geography of the Chinese world or “world literature” in their own way. This plea for a “reoriented” study, centred on individual writers, without ruling out transversal connections, is both fertile and surprising in a theoretical context dominated by “post-” theories. Thus

the line of investigation may well lead back to the modernity, in the singular and without any “post-”, of Chinese literature. As well as highlighting the constant gap between China and Europe pointed out by Gao Xingjian in his essay “Belated modernism and contemporary Chinese literature”, the texts by Bai Xianyong or Gao himself testify to the vitality of the modernist project which entrusts literary forms with the configuration of violent and chaotic reality, whereas a growing proportion of European literature seems to be striving to definitively cut literary forms loose from history.

NOTES

1. Xu Zhangren, quoted on p. 84.