Li, Shuangyi. "Vernacular imagination and exophone reconfiguration in Francophone Chinese diasporic literature." *Vernaculars in an Age of World Literatures*. Ed. Christina Kullberg. Ed. David Watson. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 223–250. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501374081.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:11 UTC.

Copyright © Volume Editors' Part of the Work © Christina Kullberg and David Watson 2022.
Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).
You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Vernacular imagination and exophone reconfiguration in Francophone Chinese diasporic literature

Shuangyi Li

In the Introduction to this volume, Kullberg and Watson outline the multiple meanings and implications of the notion of the vernacular, which can be variously understood as a localized, indigenous language; a literature written in such a language; an aesthetic strategy; a mode of reading; a sensibility; a form of oral mediality, in addition to other meanings. Such wide-ranging notions of the vernacular demand a geopolitical, cultural, and critical contextualization to reify its theoretical relevance while helping to yield new insights into the epistemic reality as well as the creative potential of a particular context. This chapter sets out to explore the vernacular in francophone Chinese diasporic literature written by first-generation migrant writers, such as François Cheng (1929–), Dai Sijie (1954–), and Shan Sa (1972–). Franco-Chinese literature on the whole may still occupy a relatively marginal place in today's world literary scene, despite some of the texts' availability in multiple languages and the individual global commercial successes, such as Dai's *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* (Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress). However, it has been widely promoted in the francophone, and, to some extent, sinophone spaces of articulation, and it has enjoyed the highest French and Western institutional recognitions, from the *Prix Goncourt des Lycéens* (Shan), the *Prix Femina* (Cheng, Dai), and the *Grand Prix de la francophonie* (Cheng), to the Nobel Prize for Literature (Gao Xingjian).¹

To some, my attempt may seem rather unorthodox, as this particular group of writers' works are often conceptualized as exophone literature, literature written

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the different external and internal factors that may have contributed to this varied promotion and reception of Franco-Chinese literature in the anglophone and francophone world, see Chirila 2012.

in languages other than the author's native one, as signaled by the prefix "exo-" meaning "outside." The notion of exophony first and foremost highlights these (originally) Chinese writers' non-nativeness to French, a(nother) cosmopolitan language, which has become their dominant language of literary creation. In addition, exophony may be seen as etymologically associated with exoticism, which, in those writers' works, is palpably expressed through a desire to revisit, thematically, aesthetically, and historically, their native land and culture through the fictional medium of literature.

Linguistically, exophone literature, which embodies a displaced articulation of cosmopolitanism through diasporic mobility, may appear to be the exact opposite of vernacular literature, which is often "willed" to be written in an indigenous language that is seemingly rooted in, and confined to, a relatively small, local culture and topography. Yet, this apparent opposition does not preclude the vernacular from featuring as a theme, manifesting as a variety of genres, and emerging as a sensibility in Franco-Chinese exophone novels.

To clear some epistemological ground, "vernacular" is the English word that is customarily employed to translate the word *baihua* 白话, "plain, unadorned language," in the Chinese context, referring to variable forms of *written* language that are close to the spoken form of Chinese, mainly in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structure, but not pronunciation. *Baihua* is contrasted with *wenyan* 文言, "literary language," also known as Classical Chinese, which is a highly codified—according to some ancient texts—written language that is largely divorced from speech. Historically, speakers can read both *baihua* and *wenyan* texts according to the pronunciation of their own spoken language variety. *Wenyan* enjoyed an unchallenged cultural prestige. As a written cosmopolitan language, *wenyan* became and stayed the *scripta franca* of the elites of East Asia up until the twentieth century and the vehicle of transnational education (Denecke and Zhang 2015: viii). It is worth stressing that both writing traditions, each assigned a distinctive set of social and political roles, coexisted in China for thousands of years. While most writings demonstrated varying degrees of mixtures between Classical and vernacular Chinese, each tradition historically followed its own path of evolution. Therefore, the difference between Classical and vernacular Chinese is "not just a matter of diachronic change, as between Old English and Modern English"; rather, it is "a distinction between two separately structured linguistic media" (Mair 1994: 708). Further, their working relationship may be best characterized as that of translation. The unification between the spoken and written forms of language then became *the* goal of the radical language reform during the New Culture Movement, from the mid-1910s to the 1920s, led by the

May Fourth intellectuals, which resulted in the creation of *modern* vernacular Chinese. Interestingly, as I will later demonstrate, some of the linguistic and cultural dilemmas and struggles faced by May Fourth intellectuals, as well as their stylistic and aesthetic inventions, are shared by the featured exophone writers. Subsequently, from 1949 to 1979, the drastic political movements following the establishment of the People's Republic of China led to another major transformation of the modern vernacular Chinese, decidedly marked by lexical, syntactical, and even semiotic differences from those employed in other regions of the sinophone world.

This development of modern vernacular Chinese is registered as a theme in exophone novels, such as in Cheng's *Le Dit de Tianyi* (1998) (*The River Below* [2000]) and Shan's *Les Quatre Vies du saule* (1999) (*The Willow's Four Lives*).² Meanwhile, Dai in *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* seeks to reenact the long-standing Chinese cultural ritual of vernacular storytelling. The author's vernacular imagination reaches its apotheosis in *Par une nuit où la lune ne s'est pas levée* (2007) (*Once on a Moonless Night* [2009]), as he fictionally elaborates on a lost, indigenous, mystical language that leads to the creation of a global linguistic network through the polyglottal protagonists' tortuous cosmopolitan journey.

In this chapter, I will first clarify the epistemic confusion when we employ the English word "vernacular" in the Chinese historical context to describe the variable forms of close-to-speech written language, and by extension, certain genres of literature thought to be closely associated with the "vernacular" language—genres that I seek to expand on conceptually in this chapter. Yet, this epistemic confusion and ambiguity becomes a source of inspiration for Franco-Chinese writers, exemplified through their exophone novelistic reconfigurations. It is precisely through such epistemic confusion that they are able to exercise their vernacular imagination across time and space, expressing a vernacular sensibility beyond the vernacular language(s).

Chinese vernaculars and vernacular literatures

There are generally two kinds of written Chinese "vernacular." The historical or old-style written vernacular has its roots in folksongs, early translations of Buddhist texts, and written supports for oral storytelling. However, it was

² Shan's text has not been made available in English, the translations of the passages from this text are mine.

later associated with a genre and/or function of fiction writing particularly popularized during the Ming (1368–1662) and the Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, commonly known as the “Chinese vernacular novel.” Although this written vernacular Chinese is linguistically contrasted with the aforementioned *wenyan* or Classical Chinese, most *vernacular novels* demonstrate a varying mixture of the two or were written “in some intermediate language between Classical and vernacular”; their language was by no means straightforwardly “colloquial.” Additionally, “the author’s or editor’s preface, if there is one, is always in Classical, even though it is addressed to the same reader” (Hanan 1981: 10). To complicate the matter, these novels are actually called “classical vernacular novels” 古典白话小说 or even just “classical novels” 古典小说 in China. These are “classical” not because they are written in Classical Chinese or *wenyan*, but because they exemplify an old literature in terms of language, style, and themes, in contrast to *modern* Chinese literature developed since the beginning of the twentieth century. These linguistic and cultural specificities indicate that the vernacular does not have a fixed and stable referent, and it needs to be understood as a relational term and used always in a contextualized manner. The vernacular can operate as a conceptual as much as *translational* matter on multiple fronts. It is noteworthy that the actual legitimate use of the written vernacular Chinese was generically confined to novels, plays, and songs, and socially limited, reserved, for instance for non-official purposes. It was never promoted to seriously challenge or replace Classical Chinese—not until the early twentieth century, when the modern or new-style vernacular Chinese was born.³ Therefore, certain literary or cultural practices, especially those often seen as located outside the Western framework, are described as “vernacular” through translation for reasons that may well be different from its referents, connotations, and assumptions within Western traditions.⁴

Modern vernacular Chinese was the result of a radical language reform (or, indeed, revolution) violently pursued by May Fourth intellectuals during the

³ Such cross-cultural terminological confusions caused by translation have led some scholars to advocate for the abolishment of the English designation “Chinese vernacular fiction,” adopting directly the Chinese term *gudian xiaoshuo* instead (Tong 2014).

⁴ Comparing the vastly heterogeneous notions of the vernacular across the European, African, Chinese, and Arabic contexts, Shaden M. Tageldin brilliantly tackles this problem by suggesting “a *minimal commensurability and maximal difference* between the *vernacular* and its non-Europhone translations, for their imagined equivalence often founders on broader epistemic grounds that transcend the strictly linguistic” (2018: 116; emphasis in original). However, such a commensurability and difference will be again readjusted in the Franco-Chinese novelistic articulations examined in this final chapter.

New Culture Movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. The political agenda behind this envisaged linguistic “modernity” or “modernization” is reflected in their resolution to unite the spoken and written forms of Chinese, so that this new national language-to-be could be better suited to accommodate and engage with the new scientific realities and global cultural orders, pioneered but also intrusively dominated by the West. In the meantime, May Fourth intellectuals were inspired by the recent Japanese language reform during the Meiji period (1868–1912), which was part of the modernization and Westernization that had rapidly transformed Japan into a major international power. To this end, some core reformers, such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, advocated for a total abolishment of Classical Chinese,⁵ only to realize that the old-style written vernacular Chinese they were so set on elevating could hardly fulfill the reformative purposes without some drastic standardization, due to the varieties, and refinement, because of its profound entanglement with Classical Chinese. Against this backdrop, the translation of foreign works into vernacular Chinese (from Western languages as well as Japanese) became an indispensable way to raise the literary prestige of the new-style vernacular. Translation itself became a site of linguistic, aesthetic, and stylistic experimentation, which was epitomized in the use of what we now call “translationese” (or *fanyiti* in Chinese) that directly impacted those writers’ making of modern vernacular Chinese.⁶ The result was an “awkward mixture of styles” (Chen 1999: 78) that neither sounded nor appeared “vernacular,” and the scholar Shu-mei Shih goes so far as to argue that this new “vernacular” language “might in effect be as alien to the ordinary reader as *wenyan*” (2001: 71). Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” (1918) may be regarded as the first instance of modern Chinese fiction written in this vernacular.

Thus, we may relate the process of modern Chinese vernacularization to Sheldon Pollock’s formulation of the “cosmopolitan vernacular” that undoes “the local/global dualism,” for the vernacular of an “indigenous” culture is “produced in the course of long-term translocal interactions by the very same processes

⁵ In fact, some reformers, such as Qian Xuantong, even suggested abandoning the Chinese writing system altogether in favor of a Western-style phonetic script, several forms of which had already been invented and put into practice, particularly by earlier Western missionaries in China (Norman 1988: 257–65). One of the obvious advantages of a phonetic script was that it could help unify and standardize the pronunciation of this national language-to-be.

⁶ “Translationese” designates the deliberate use of unidiomatic language in a translated text. As Laurence Venuti adds, “what is unidiomatic in one cultural formation can be aesthetically effective in another” (2008: 98).

that produce the global itself” (1998: 31).⁷ Accordingly, if we reverse this line of enquiry, we may see Franco-Chinese writers’ exophone writings as linguistic, aesthetic, and stylistic attempts to express and embody a kind of “vernacular cosmopolitanism”; that is, the outright global and transcultural outlook of their literary works is both linguistically and diegetically mediated through the writers’ vernacularizing as well as exoticizing imaginations.

Modern vernacular in Cheng’s *Le Dit de Tianyi*

The protagonists in Cheng’s *Le Dit de Tianyi* were born in the 1920s. By then, the New Culture Movement was technically approaching its end, and the protagonist Tianyi and his male poet companion Haolang represent a new generation of Chinese intellectuals who were yet to live through the profound consequences of and the changed critical reactions to, this movement, including its languages, literatures, and cultures in general. This generation was confronting new socio-political realities complicated by the Sino-Japanese War (1937 until 1945), the intermittent Chinese Civil War (1927 to 1949), and the ever-growing Soviet influence throughout these periods.

A few years Tianyi’s senior, Haolang, who “knew both classical and modern Chinese literature” (Cheng 2000: 51),⁸ is portrayed as the protagonist’s literary initiator. However, in the early stages of their friendship, Tianyi notices that Haolang’s vocational interest was drastically shifting to Western literature, thanks to the substantial boost of translation activities following the New Culture Movement, as well as Lu Xun’s strong advocacy for reading such literature:

In the twenties, and all through the thirties, the Chinese had translated prodigiously, “right and left” so to speak, chaotically, and with mixed results, for many translators worked not from original texts, but from Japanese or English versions. All the same, a trend had begun. Hadn’t Lu Xun, in 1925, with all the weight of his authority, advised a young reader to forge ahead and read “as few Chinese books as possible and as many foreign books as possible?” (Cheng 2000: 51–2)⁹

⁷ Note that Pollock’s focus is on the vernacularization in pre-modern southern Asia. Nevertheless, his persistent calling for the local/global dualism to be “historicized out of existence” is still applicable here and should inform our theorization of the vernacular more generally in this volume.

⁸ *connaissait aussi bien la littérature chinoise classique que moderne* (Cheng 1998: 80).

⁹ *Dès les années vingt et tout au long des années trente, on avait abondamment traduit, “à tour de bras” pour ainsi dire, dans un grand désordre, et de manière inégale; car beaucoup le faisaient non à partir de l’original mais de versions anglaises ou japonaise. Toutefois, le mouvement était lancé. En 1925, Lu Xun, avec tout le poids de son autorité, ne conseillait-il pas à un jeune lecteur de lire résolument “le moins possible de livres chinois et le plus possible de livres étrangers”* (Cheng 1998: 81).

Lu Xun is also famous for his literary experimentation with translationese (Wang 2013: 134–7), which epitomizes the Chinese vernacularizing process of the time. Tianyi describes his encounter with a contemporary translation of the Gospel of John in the following passage: “[I] soon find myself transported elsewhere, disoriented. Will I ever be able to figure out the message of this translation into an odd idiom, which is Chinese without being Chinese, a language with puzzling neologisms, a syntax at times wobbly, a rhythm that is jerky?” (Cheng 2000: 251–2).¹⁰ Translation activities intensify even more later into the war period, as the presence of Western allies, particularly the British, Russian, and American, facilitate another introduction *en masse* of Western texts to China, as Tianyi remarks: “We pounced on everything that appeared, poetry and novels, plays, essays, without neglecting any author, including those from northern and central Europe” (Cheng 2000: 52).¹¹ While translation accelerates the process of vernacularization, Haolang is seen to be constantly preoccupied with the renewal of Chinese poetic language.¹² As a self-proclaimed disciple of Lu Xun, Haolang largely shares the preceding May Fourth intellectuals’ radical discourses on Chinese language and culture, whose past must be torn asunder and whose present and future are to be salvaged and reborn through Westernization and modernization, as he resolutely asserts:

I am strongly on the side of Lu Xun ... If we are to be reborn, we shall be reborn. If we are to disappear, let us accept becoming ashes; perhaps from them something else will be born of which we know nothing now. For the moment, salvation comes from elsewhere, from abroad. And first, from the West ... Yes, we must have this drastically different other, to shake us up, to tear out the degenerate, rotten part of our roots. Without the enrichment of new blood and new knowledge [*lumière nouvelle*], how do you expect us to recognize properly amid the great hodgepodge of our heritage the values that must be retained? Strangely enough, it is after reading all those Western works that I am beginning to see our own culture more clearly. (Cheng 2000: 62–3)¹³

¹⁰ *je me trouve soudain déporté ailleurs, passablement désorienté. Parviendrai-je jamais à déceler un message au travers de cette traduction au langage étrange, qui est du chinois sans être du chinois, avec ses néologismes déroutants, sa syntaxe parfois bancal, son rythme qui heurte?* (Cheng 1998: 362)

¹¹ *Nous nous jetons sur tout ce qui paraissait, poésie et romans, pièces de théâtre et essais, sans négliger aucun auteur, y compris ceux de l'Europe du Nord et de l'Europe centrale* (Cheng 1998: 81–2).

¹² *le souci de renouveler le langage poétique* (Cheng 1998: 96).

¹³ *Moi, je me range résolument du côté de Lu Xun ... Si nous devons renaître, nous renaîtrons. Si nous devons disparaître, acceptons de devenir cendres, d'où naîtra peut-être quelque chose d'autre que nous ignorons. Pour le moment, le salut vient d'ailleurs, de l'étranger. Et en premier lieu, de l'Occident ... Oui, il faut bien cet extrême autre pour nous secouer, pour nous arracher à la partie dégénérée, pourrie, de nos racines. Sans la fécondation de sang nouveau, de lumière nouvelle, comment veux-tu que nous accédions à l'authentique vie, qui seule en réalité nous permettra de repérer avec discernement, dans tout le fatras de notre héritage, les valeurs qu'il faut garder? Curieusement d'ailleurs, c'est bien après avoir lu toutes ces œuvres occidentales que je commence à y voir plus clair dans notre propre culture.* (Cheng 1998: 96–7)

Haolang's elaborate assertion clearly articulates May Fourth intellectuals' aspiration for a modern Chinese reincarnation of the ideas behind the European Renaissance (*renaître*) and Enlightenment (*lumière*). Hu Shi, most notably, "perceived the *vernacular movement* to be the major feature of the European Renaissance and the strongest basis for his invention of the Chinese Renaissance" (Zhou 2011: 46, italics in the original). The determination to be "reborn" through "ashes" strongly echoes Guo Moruo's important vernacular poem "Nirvana of Phoenix" 鳳凰涅槃 (1920). Such an aspiration illustrates what Shu-mei Shih calls May Fourth Occidentalism, which "effectively inserted the West into the Chinese cultural imaginary as the arbiter of cultural capital, and ultimately of symbolic power." For May Fourth intellectuals, "the locus of cultural power" was "an alien Other that was to be welcomed with open arms to replace the old self and usher in its rebirth. 'Western learning' was no longer an external category, but was incorporated for the 'enlightenment' of the self, becoming an internal category" (2001: 130).

However, as a member of the post-May Fourth generation, Haolang also shows a critical sensibility to revise his predecessors' radical stance against traditional Chinese language and culture. He cautions against "blindly" (*aveuglement*) embracing the West and re-interrogates the question of whether his predecessors' absolute approach would entail the loss of an authentic Chinese self, voice, and soul: "Who are we? What is this very old, moribund country called China? Where is its soul? What is its destiny? And for us what is the proper creative *path* [*voie*]? By turning our eyes in another direction, won't we go astray? Unless we are already lost, and lost with us all inner *voice* and all true worth?" (2000: 62, my italics).¹⁴ In a way, Cheng's exophone creative strategy addresses such an embrace of the West and many of Haolang's questions here. The French homophonic formulation of *voix-voie*, as seen in this passage, is key to understanding Cheng's translingual and transcultural enterprise. "*La Voie*" (the Way) is the French translation of the Chinese "dao" of Daoism (or Taoism), which means both "to walk/the way" and "to say/the speech," hence semantically joining the French word "*la voix*" (the voice).¹⁵ And the dynamic between the

¹⁴ *Qui sommes-nous? Quel est ce pays trop vieux et moribond qu'on appelle la Chine? Où est son âme? Quel est son destin? Et quelle est notre propre voie de création? À force de tourner le regard ailleurs, n'allons-nous pas nous égarer? À moins que nous ne soyons déjà perdus, et perdues avec nous toute voix intérieure et toute valeur authentique?* (Cheng 1998: 96)

¹⁵ For another instance of Cheng's novelistic elaboration of *voix-voie*, see Li 2017: 192–3. Incidentally, this should further inform us about the French title of the novel: *Le Dit* [saying] *de Tianyi* is thus also the *dao* of Tianyi.

two notions does not stop at the level of wordplay. Haolang writes the following poem at the end of his remark:

When nostalgia overwhelms you
Drive it off, to the far horizon.
Wild goose cleaving the clouds
You carry in you the dead season
Frozen rushes, charred trees
Bent low beneath the hurricane.
Wild goose that need not tarry
Free now for flight, or death...
Between natal soil and welcoming sky
Your sole kingdom: your own call! (Cheng 2000: 64)¹⁶

This is one of Cheng's own poems directly composed in French; however, in this fictional context, it is supposed to be written in modern vernacular Chinese. Here, the vernacularity of Haolang's "new poetic language" is conveyed through *style*. The poetic imagery of the wild goose 雁 is not exactly "modern"; in fact, the wild goose is one of the most recurrent motifs in Classical Chinese poetry, which can be traced all the way back to the earliest Chinese anthologies, such as *Shijing* (ca. 600 BCE) and *Chu Ci*. However, its modern identification with Chinese intellectuals' complex feelings of hesitancy, struggle, disorientation, determination, homesickness, and nostalgia is famously celebrated by another May Fourth poet Wen Yiduo, particularly in his vernacular poem "Lone Wild Goose" 孤雁 (1922). Haolang's poem may feel as if it is taken directly out of Wen's twelve-stanza poem. In other words, Cheng effectively rewrites a modern vernacular Chinese poem in French and through translation.

Meanwhile, Cheng's French poetic rendition of the wild goose is redolent of Mallarméan symbolism. In Mallarmé's "*Le Cygne*" (The Swan), the magnificent *cygne*, a French homophone of *signe* (sign), is trapped in a frosted wintry lake and strives to "break free woebegone," "dismissed to futile things" (Mallarmé 2006: 66–9).¹⁷ In comparison, Cheng's *oie* (goose), a near homophone of *voie* and *voix*, is determined to break free of its nostalgic past and leave its native soil for the far horizon for survival, following its own voice ("*ton propre cri*") and

¹⁶ *Quand te submerge la nostalgie / Repousse-la vers l'horizon extrême / Oie sauvage fendant les nuages / Tu portes en toi la morte-saison / Roseaux gelés arbres calcinés / Ployés en bas sous l'ouragaon / Oie sauvage délivrée des haltes / Libre enfin de voler, ou mourir ... / Entre sol natal et ciel d'accueil / Ton royaume unique: ton propre cri!* (Cheng 1998: 97)

¹⁷ "*qui sans espoir se délivre*"; "*parmi l'exil inutile*."

vocation (from Latin *vocale* meaning “to call”).¹⁸ As a poet, Cheng repeatedly claims to adhere to the Mallarméian tenet of the “Orphic way of poetry” (Bertaud 2011: 237). Haolang’s poem is more than an allegory; it is intended to evoke the profound predicament and fierce self-determination of Chinese intellectuals on the threshold of global modernity in the twentieth century. French symbolist poetry was indeed a very important source for the making of Chinese poetry in modern vernacular, which developed forms and contents that are distinct from what we now call “Classical Chinese poetry,” including genres such as *shi*, *ci*, *qu*, and *fu*.¹⁹ The Chinese symbolist poetry that rises to prominence during the wartime period of Haolang’s left-wing literary writing adds politically and socially engaged content and tone to their French inspirations, which lean towards aestheticism and also explicitly link poets’ personal commitments to national crises.²⁰

Just as the character Haolang aspires to the “enrichment of new blood and new knowledge” and “salvation” from the West (Cheng 1998: 96–7; 2000: 62–3), Cheng revisits his native culture through his adopted French, creating a new poetic language that is at once vernacular and cosmopolitan. Here we find a good example of what, in the title of this chapter, I referred to as “exophone reconfiguration” of “vernacular imagination.” Quite ingeniously, through such an exophone execution, Cheng is able to not only create a synchronic, translingual experiment (e.g. *voix-voie-oie* vs. *signe-cygne*), but also make a diachronic reconnection—via French—between a fictional modern vernacular Chinese poem and Classical Chinese diction, imagery, and discourse. In other words, Cheng’s exophone performance further dramatizes the vernacularity of modern and contemporary Chinese and Chinese diasporic literature as a site of polyvalent translation, from language to genre, across time and space.

¹⁸ It is worth pointing out that the whole novel also begins with a mysterious and mystical calling voice, a “*cri*”: “*Au commencement il y eut ce cri dans la nuit*” (In the beginning there was the cry in the night) (1998: 3; 2000: 15).

¹⁹ Up until the twentieth century, “poetry” composed in vernacular, with no explicit formal concerns over rhymes and prosodies (*yunlü*), was simply not considered poetry. In fact, it was only around this time that we could start to talk about the genre of poetry in Chinese, *shi*, which formerly only referred to a specific kind or genre of “rhymed writing” (*yunwen*) from the Tang dynasty (618–906) (Hockx 2016: 3–19).

²⁰ For a short overview of the influence of French symbolism on modern Chinese poetry, see Hockx 2016: 13, 155–8. Interestingly, in the meantime, classical Chinese poetics and writing at large also come to haunt contemporaneous Western modernist literary imaginations. For more recent discussions of this topic, see Bachner 2014: 57–89 and Bush 2010.

Politicizing the vernacular in the early history of the PRC

Just as the literary expression of modern vernacular Chinese reached its dominant status and was starting to mature after two to three generations of “making,” in the 1950s it experienced another major political reform—and for that matter, “cultural revolution”—which, practically speaking, lasted until the death of Mao in 1976 and the Economic Reform and Opening Up from 1978. Whereas the kind of modern vernacular advocated by previous May Fourth intellectuals was chiefly a product of an urban and cosmopolitan literary scene, implemented by and for educated, cultural elites, this new phase of vernacular development, starting in the 1940s and remarkably guided by Mao’s notorious talks at the Yen’an Forum on literature and art in 1942, was “predominantly rural, aimed at a mass audience and modeled on indigenous literary techniques” (Huters 1984: 55). While earlier May Fourth intellectuals like Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu pushed for a radical break with the past and a general adoption of Western systems and cultural values, Mao actually “warn[ed] against chopping up history and [led] the writers back to the China of yesterday and the day before yesterday” (Fokkema 1965: 27). However, regarding literary expression, the new doctrine geared the modern vernacular towards the creation of “simple language literature in a form the ‘common folk of China’ was used to hearing” (Fokkema 1965: 27). The theoretical idea is perhaps most succinctly captured in Ho Ch’i-fang’s words in 1962, commemorating Mao’s *Yen’an Talks*:

In form, the new works, in varying degrees, have a national and mass style. Nourished by Chinese folk and classical literature, and written in the vivid language of the working people, their form is no longer foreignized or strongly intellectualized, but is one that appeals to the masses of the Chinese people. As a result, their influence and impact is the broadest and deepest of any since the new literature inspired by the May Fourth Movement began.

(Quoted in Fokkema 1965: 33)

The foremost challenge faced by modern vernacular Chinese literature during this time was that “it must serve the new radical politics (or policies within specific temporal delineations), and the language and literary works must, at all time, express and propagate policies instead of personal feelings and experiences” (Zheng 1993: 13, my translation). T. D. Huters further explains that the political and social circumstances aggravated by the Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War of the 1940s, fought between Nationalists and Communists, “put literature and writers into a position of almost total dependence upon

politics” (1984: 56). Indeed, even those writers of the May Fourth tradition seemed to acquiesce to such political functions of modern vernacular language and literature, reflecting a radically changed readership and audience. This ideology was implemented in absolute terms after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

The new round of language reform or revolution no longer revolved around the opposition between Classical and vernacular Chinese; it aimed to unequivocally define, create, prescribe, and impose a collective, highly transparent form of literary language that would suit the purposes of proletarian revolutions, while recklessly eliminating and expunging all that may be interpreted as decadent, feudalist, corrupted, bourgeois, and, in a word, anti-revolutionary. Many of these accusations were precisely directed towards earlier May Fourth intellectuals’ works. The Soviet revolutionary and political discourses, from vocabulary and syntax to theme, genre, and style of argumentation, exerted a major influence on the Chinese language and literature of this time (Zheng 1993: 13–14). This complex and drastic linguistic development from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s entailed a qualitative distinction between the modern vernacular Chinese of the PRC and that employed across the sinophone world (Zheng 1993: 13–14).²¹ As far as the new literary doctrine is concerned, Fokkema authoritatively concludes:

it must be viewed as a genuinely new phenomenon indissolvable into constituent parts. It is neither dependent of [*sic*] foreign influence, nor the natural outgrowth of indigenous traditions. Not being Soviet, Western, or traditional Chinese, it is a new, unprecedented species.

(1965: 276)

Fortunately, contemporary Chinese literature since the 1980s has largely come well out of the shadow of this political framework for literary creation. However, mainland Chinese writers who have lived or partly lived through the preceding phase of the PRC continue to creatively engage with the “formalized”²² or “formulist”²³ political language that permeated everyday speech and was strictly

²¹ I should mention that it was also during this time that traditional Chinese characters were simplified, the pinyin system and the use of punctuation were firmly established.

²² This is informed by Michael Schoenhals’s study of the language in Chinese politics. “Formalized” here refers to a particular quality of linguistic “impoverishment.” The politically dependent literary language of the time was also “a restricted code, one in which options with respect to formal qualities such as vocabulary, style, syntax, and trope are far more restricted than in ordinary language” (1992: 1).

²³ “Formulism” 公式主义 was initially used in the 1930s to refer to “fiction that advanced its ideological message in an overtly mechanical or schematic fashion” (Anderson 1990: 62).

imposed on literature of the time. In a similar vein, Franco-Chinese writers, whether or not they have had direct experiences with the first three decades of the PRC, have also demonstrated a keen interest to revisit and imitate the almost absurdly politicized vernacular language, themes, and writing. Yet, it is in the exophone space of articulation, essentially through translation, that they are able and willing to creatively engage and play with such stilted discourses as a cosmopolitan literary style in their novelistic fabric.

Revolutionary vernacular in fiction

François Cheng, Dai Sijie, and Shan Sa have all written about the first three decades of the PRC, especially from the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962) to the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), in their fictional works. Only Dai had first-hand experience with (parts of) this period. As an educated urban youth, he was deemed pro-bourgeois and sent down to the countryside by force to learn from peasants and workers (1971 until 1974), which autobiographically informs his novel *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*. As literature becomes subordinate to politics (upon Mao's proposition), the ubiquitous, politically informed and imposed Chinese language of the time becomes a discursive and literary trope that these writers frequently employ in their translational storytelling for a cosmopolitan readership.

The most obvious example is the incorporation of Maoist sayings and political slogans into the novelistic fabric. They can be direct quotations introduced by the phrase "the President (or Chairman) says":

"The more man power we have, the stronger we are" (Cheng 2000: 218);²⁴

"Study, study some more, keep studying" (224);²⁵

"Be both 'red and knowledgeable'" (224).²⁶

This simple and plain form of language radically erases the traces of the seemingly "awkward" language and style promoted by writers following the May Fourth tradition. It exemplifies the "pure and healthy language" suited to "the propagation of the truth to the masses."²⁷ Schoenhals duly observes:

²⁴ *Plus on a de bras, plus on est fort* (Cheng 1998: 315).

²⁵ *Étudier, encore étudier, toujours étudier!* (324).

²⁶ [*Soyons*] à la fois 'rouges et experts' (324).

²⁷ These expressions are taken from a contemporaneous issue of the *People's Daily*, translated by Schoenhals (1992: 14).

During the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” language formalization was in every respect taken to its extreme. “One sentence of Chairman Mao’s,” Lin Biao declared, “is worth ten thousand of ours”. Between 1966 and 1970, this meant that the “ten thousand” alternative sentences that an individual in the past might have chosen from to express himself or herself now had been reduced in number to “one”—and not just any “one” sentence, but one that Mao was already on record as having uttered.

(1992: 19)

As the historian continues, one must show sufficient loyalty to Mao “in everything we say” in order to be socially and politically acceptable. This entailed all kinds of dialogues framed in Mao-quotes that may appear comical to us today, such as “Serve the people. Comrade, could I have two pounds of pork, please?”; “A revolution is not a dinner party. That makes 1.85 yuan altogether” (19).

Indeed, Dai’s *Balzac* begins with such a dialogue. The two protagonists Ma and Luo, “city youths” (2001: 4),²⁸ have just arrived in their designated mountain village for “re-education.” No one in the village has seen a violin before, which the village headman soon considers to be a *jouet bourgeois* (“bourgeois toy”) and should therefore be burnt. Luo explains that it is a musical instrument and hastily suggests that Ma can play a Mozart sonata to prove it. By then, Western music has been banned in China for some years. Of course, these illiterate villagers, characterized as “primitive” by Dai, know neither Mozart nor sonatas. The only way to save the violin and the protagonists’ dignity is to relabel and reframe the Mozart sonata within an acceptable and appropriate revolutionary discourse:

At that instant the glint of the vigilant Communist reappeared in the headman’s eyes, and his voice turned hostile.

“What’s the name of this song of yours?”

“Well, it’s like a song, but actually it’s a sonata.”

“I’m asking you what it’s called!” he snapped, fixing me with his gaze.

...

“Mozart ...” I muttered.

“Mozart what?”

“Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao,” Luo broke in.

²⁸ *garçons de la ville* (2000: 9).

The audacity! But it worked: as if he had heard something miraculous, the headman's menacing look softened. He crinkled up his eyes in a wide, beatific smile.

"Mozart thinks of Mao all the time," he said.

"Indeed, all the time," agreed Luo. (Dai 2001: 5, *italics in the original*)²⁹

The formulation "*Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao*" is obviously intended by Dai to mimic and mock the stilted and fixed form of revolutionary discourses of the time. The content may seem playfully meaningless, but the formulation functions as a significant speech act or performance utterance; in Austinian terms, the *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* dimensions of the formulation are highlighted in this context. The illocutionary refers to the intentional and conventional force of the speech act, the "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (Austin 1962: 99). Luo's "meaningless" yet conventionally required formulation is *said* in an attempt to *save* the violin and *win* acceptance. Meanwhile, the perlocutionary refers to the consequential effects of the speech act "upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" (101). This is exemplified by the village headman's reaction to the formulation in the end, when his "look softened." In fact, I would argue that this notion of performance utterance is key to the understanding of the new development of the Chinese vernacular language of the time in politics, literature, and everyday speech at large, however impoverished it may seem.

Of course, the literary engagement with this vernacular goes beyond Maoist sayings and simple slogans. Franco-Chinese writers have tried to illustrate in French how this highly formalized and politicized Chinese vernacular comes to shape individual consciousness and thought processes. This is most extensively explored in the third episode of Shan's *Les Quatre Vies du saule* (1999) (*The Willow's*

²⁹ *Illico, une vigilance de bon communiste réapparut dans les yeux du chef et sa voix se fit hostile:*

—*Comment elle s'appelle, ta chanson?*

—*Ça ressemble à une chanson, mais c'est une sonate.*

—*Je te demande son nom! Cria-t-il, en me fixant droit dans les yeux.*

...

—*Mozart ..., hésitai-je.*

—*Mozart quoi?*

—*Mozart pense au président Mao, continua Luo à ma place.*

Quelle audace! Mais elle fut efficace: comme s'il avait entendu quelque chose de miraculeux, le visage menaçant du chef s'adoucit. Ses yeux se plissèrent dans un large sourire de béatitude.

—*Mozart pense toujours à Mao, dit-il.*

—*Oui, toujours, confirma Luo* (Dai 2000: 12–13).

Four Lives), where a male high school student follower of Mao narrates in first person his passionate but ultimately fatal experience at the start of the Cultural Revolution. The narrative language is decidedly marked by the formal qualities of contemporaneous political discourses. Consider the following passage:

I went from school to school to *kindle the fire of the Revolution*, and I exchanged ideas with the students. I took part in the rallies and *debates organized by the Central Committee* of the Cultural Revolution. I was received by the spouse of the President at the Fisherman's Pavillion. Full of energy and enthusiasm, she cheered us on and passed on *greetings from the great Helmsman*. I fought against those who tried to show contempt for the *greatness of our ideology*. How could I make my mother understand the *necessity and glory of such violence*?

Together with some fellow classmates, the *missionaries of Maoist thought*, we would travel all over China in search of great adventures. *Magical friendships* were established among Red Guards. It was the *flame* that shot up from our emotions heightened by the events, the *warmth* that comforted the heart of the *wandering soldiers*. (My translation and italics)³⁰

Those highlighted expressions, however empty, formulaic, and slogan-like they might sound to us today, are representative of the literary works of the early years of the PRC. They are constituent of “what in the eyes of the state count as ‘appropriate’ formulations,” of a forceful discursive framework, which a “PRC citizen must employ,” relate or refer to for both political protection and influence. As Schoenhals further explains, such expressions are what “a writer should employ to qualify as ideologically ‘in step with the Party center’” and what “a speaker should use in order not to risk accusations of heterodoxy” (14).

In terms of narrative styles, literature of the early PRC, which Shan's episode aims to imitate here via French, is often characterized as “revolutionary romanticism combined with revolutionary realism”—another guiding principle for artistic work instituted by Mao. The “revolutionary romanticism” here is understood, not as “subjective whims, fantasy, love or imaginary freedom”

³⁰ *J'allais de lycée en lycée pour attiser le feu de la Révolution; j'échangeais des idées avec les étudiants. Je participais aux manifestations, aux débats organisés par le Comité central de la Révolution culturelle; j'étais reçu par l'épouse du Président au pavillon du Pêcheur. Femme énergique et fanatique, elle nous encourageait et nous transmettait les salutations du Timonier. Je me battais contre ceux qui cherchaient à bafouer la grandeur de notre idéologie. Comment pouvais-je faire comprendre à ma mère la nécessité et la gloire de cette violence?*

Avec quelques camarades de classe, missionnaires de la pensée maoïste, nous sillonnâmes la Chine à la recherche de grandes aventures. Des amitiés magiques se nouaient entre les gardes rouges. C'était la flamme qui jaillissait de notre sensibilité aiguisée par les événements, la chaleur qui réconfortait le cœur des soldats errants. (Shan 1999: Kindle)

but “as a power to envision and to create alternative narratives and to project different images of the world, provoking the audience to identify with those visions and to participate in their realization” (Wang 2016: 239). In many ways, it is the ideologically transparent political language, “a tool of coercion available to anybody” (Bloch 1975: 9), that empowers the teenage narrator-protagonist (who is among the first to join the Red Guards) to argue against and “re-educate” his surgeon father and to project a larger-than-life image of himself:

But, Dad, you’ve forgotten the class struggle and the threat that poses to the socialist regime! If we don’t eliminate the counterrevolutionaries, the country will never be at peace and we’ll be able to build nothing. Please understand the urgency of the situation! ... Your pessimism is dangerous! Our President has written to the Red Guards at the Tsinghua University Middle School to cheer them on in their battle against impurity. (My translation)³¹

Les Quatre Vies du saule as a whole consists of four seemingly unrelated love stories, each taking place in a different historical period, chronologically spanning from the Ming (1368 to 1644), through the Qing (1636 to 1912) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), to contemporary China. The “weeping willow” is reincarnated as a female character in each episode, as if the eternal soul of a woman is “condemned to chase love, century after century” (back cover, my translation). Through such a mystical and transhistorical narrative, Shan showcases Chinese linguistic and literary (r)evolution in French. Of course, it is neither her goal nor technically possible to demonstrate the exact differences between Classical and modern vernacular Chinese in her exophone writing. But this highly politicized form of Chinese vernacular development in the mid-twentieth century provides Shan with a stylistic and aesthetic opportunity for a varied and imaginative exophone reconfiguration through translation.

Very few scholars today would value the quality of the blatant political propagandist literature of the first three decades of the PRC, composed in a radically impoverished vernacular that was supposed to absorb and reflect the language of the common folk of China. As Bonnie McDougall decidedly concludes: “[the quality] was mediocre to downright bad. There was hardly a single work of written literature produced in the 1950s and early 1960s that had

³¹ *Mais, papa, vous avez oublié la lutte des classes! et la menace qui pèse sur le régime socialiste ! Si on n’élimine pas les contre-révolutionnaires, le pays ne sera jamais en paix, et on ne pourra rien construire. Comprenez l’urgence de la situation! ... Votre pessimisme est dangereux! Notre Président a écrit aux gardes rouges du lycée annexé à l’université de Qinghua, pour les encourager dans leur combat contre l’impureté* (Shan 1999: Kindle).

a genuine claim to literary distinction” (1984: 280). Even in China today, such stereotyped language would in all likelihood meet with contempt or be used for ironic purposes.³²

Yet, Shan’s translation of this vernacular into French and her transformation of it into one distinctive narrative and discursive style actually produce a certain literary effect, albeit with a self-conscious sense of humor and irony. For one thing, this narrative and stylistic incorporation may well be aimed at a certain Western horizon of expectations, as the French readership is likely to be curious or superficially passionate about anecdotes from “Red China.” For another, such an incorporation is also consistent with Shan’s broader exophone literary agenda, as she reveals in an interview, “I hope that this French language is written in such a way that, through this language, we perceive the Chinese language. And this is perhaps what characterizes the style of all my books” (cited in Croiset 2009: para. 19, my translation).³³ Therefore, revisiting and recreating this particular form of modern Chinese vernacular through French signals a political, stylistic, and aesthetic adventure that intentionally raises the cosmopolitan and exotic outlook of Shan’s literary expression.³⁴

Exoticisme in the francophone context, as Charles Forsdick acutely argues, has more nuanced implications than the anglophone use of the notion, which is largely overshadowed by colonial discourse and the persistent workings of “imperial nostalgia” in the twentieth century (2001: 25). Influential francophone thinkers from Victor Segalen to Edouard Glissant notably engage with the concept of exoticism in order to reconfigure “more open models of cultural interaction in which all actors are valorized, cast as both representer and represented, knower and known” (2001: 23). Franco-Chinese writers’ linguistic and literary experiments are situated largely—but not exclusively—outside the postcolonial context. In Shan’s case, there are certainly inherent ambiguities in her literary agenda in relation to exoticism. Is she superficially recycling Chinese cultural and political clichés to please her francophone readership and produce more marketable types of “global works”? Or is she herself looking for an alternative aesthetic possibility by intentionally rewriting and renewing clichés in a

³² Nevertheless, an extensive collection of such literature in a variety of genres has been made available in English; see Hsu and Wang (1980).

³³ *J’espère que cette langue française est écrite de telle manière qu’à travers elle, on aperçoit ce qu’est la langue chinoise. C’est peut-être ce qui fait le style de tous mes livres.*

³⁴ I should point out that this whole episode of the Cultural Revolution disappears completely in Shan’s own rewriting of the novel “back” into Chinese. For a detailed discussion of the Chinese version, see Li 2018: 122–4.

language and culture other than her native ones, embracing a cultural hybridity that appropriately reflects her own intellectual, artistic, and life trajectories? Such ambiguities, as Forsdick rightly concludes, “are linked closely to exoticism’s persistence as a concept reflecting the inevitable ambiguities of contact between different cultures” (2001: 25–6).

From vernacular genres to an imaginary vernacular

The texts examined up to this point have illustrated a great variety of manifestations of what might count or can be related to the notion of *the vernacular* in the Chinese context, from the historical development of specific kinds of (mainly written) language, through their associated literary and political expressions and articulations, to their fictional representations in diasporic Chinese (or French exophone) literature. The notion of the vernacular may be as fluid and unstable as that of *genre*. In order to discuss “vernacular genres” more productively, some conceptual refashioning is needed. It would be particularly helpful to follow Wai Chee Dimock’s formulation of genre as “not just a theory of classification but, perhaps even more crucially, a theory of interconnection. *Kin* is every bit as important as *kind*” (2006: 74). Genre, for Dimock, is an open category, a fundamentally cumulative and thickening process, as she invokes it:

less as a law, rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsolete system, a provisional set that will always be bent and pulled and stretched by its many subsets. Such bending and pulling and stretching are unavoidable, for what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight, in some unknown and unpredictable direction.

(2006: 73–4)

In many ways, this chapter is dedicated to retracing and reconstructing a contingent vernacular *kinship* or “family” network “at various distances” (2006: 75) among a number of linguistic and literary products, developments, and phenomena in the Chinese and Chinese diasporic context. It reaches across and beyond our traditional, narrow, and stable classification of vernacular language and literature as *kinds*, eschewing dichotomies such as old-style vs. modern vernacular Chinese and the Ming and Qing vernacular novel vs. modern vernacular poem.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will continue to trace and expand this kinship network by exploring the exophone representation of the literary and artistic productions decisively articulated through the increasingly politicized and formalized modern vernacular Chinese from the 1940s to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Those productions have a limited number of prescribed thematic preoccupations.³⁵ Taxonomically, those specific vernacular genres include not only novel and poetry but also performing arts such as revolutionary theater, film, and song.

Scholars conventionally use the word “form” rather than “genre” to articulate the literary and artistic concerns of this period, due in large part to Mao’s agenda of creating “national forms” 民族形式.³⁶ As Wang Xiaoping rightly points out, by elaborating on “form,” which in this historical context has a specifically Marxist dialectical relation to “content,” Mao “essentially changed the term from an issue of literary genre or style to one that pertained to the political realm” (Wang 2012: 189). No matter how vague and unspecific those “national forms” were initially, one thing was always clear to Mao: they must have proletarian origins and must engage with and mobilize “the broad masses, especially (and predominantly) the peasants who constituted more than 90% of the population” (185). Against this backdrop, traditional and native folk art and poetry as well as popular ballads and ditties became major sources for the “national forms” that were expected to help create a “revolutionary culture” and “forge a hegemonic cultural-political nation as a ‘class nation’” (184). Again, different from the vernacular development during the New Culture Movement led by May Fourth intellectuals, this political phase of vernacularization of language and culture was propelled by the fierce antagonism between the cosmopolitan, urban, bourgeois elites and the indigenous, rural, proletarian masses.

This vernacular tension is at the heart of Dai’s novelistic conception of *Balzac*. The novel is saturated with literary and artistic examples of “vernacular genres.” Depressed by the prospect of being incarcerated in this remote mountain village for the rest of their lives, Luo sings a revolutionary tune to cheer himself up, and Ma tries to accompany that on his violin—a distinctly urban and Western musical instrument. However, Ma (the narrator) quickly remarks: “It was a Tibetan song,

³⁵ These themes include the Communist revolution up to 1949, the land reform experience, the Chinese Communist participation in the Korean War, the socialist reconstruction of the country, and the continuing need for a socialist education of the masses (Crevel 1996: 15).

³⁶ However, I should clarify that Mao did not initiate such a pursuit. Debates around “national forms” had already started in the 1930s, and Chen Boda was the first to propose the term (Wang 2012: 185).

which the Chinese had reworded so as to turn it into a glorification of Chairman Mao" (2001: 17).³⁷ Adapting and remaking indigenous folk cultural sources in order to serve the new political and revolutionary agenda is an ideologically required literary and artistic practice of the time. And these are the kinds of songs that Ma hopes one day to be accepted by a regional propaganda committee to play, so that he may be able to leave the "primitive" village and rejoin the city.

Similarly, in order to be sent back to the provincial capital of Sichuan, the fellow sent-down youth nicknamed Four-Eyes (or le Binoclard) is asked by his poetess mother to publish in an official journal devoted to revolutionary literature "a number of popular ballads, that is to say sincere, authentic folk songs full of romantic realism, which Four-Eyes would collect from the peasants on the mountain" (2001: 59).³⁸ Later when the mother comes to the village to fetch Four-Eyes, she is very proud to announce that her son "has assembled a collection of splendid peasant songs, which he has adapted and modified. The editor-in-chief has shown great interest in the words" (78).³⁹ Those mountain ditties are actually collected by the protagonists Ma and Luo from an old miller who does not appear to understand Mandarin. In order to draw him out, Ma disguises himself as a Communist official from Beijing on a political and literary mission and pretends not to understand Sichuanese, while Luo acts as his local interpreter. This often-commented passage draws our attention to the oral and performative aspect of the vernacular language, such as local dialect, and genre, which is further dramatized in the film adaptation (2002) of the novel by Dai himself.⁴⁰ Viewers of the film can also hear actual examples of both revolutionary songs, like "Chairman Mao's Red Guards" sung in Mandarin, and supposedly indigenous mountain ditties, such as the old miller's riddle song sung in Sichuanese.

One of the two protagonists' more pleasant tasks assigned by the village headman is to retell, in front of the whole village, the stories of the films they have been sent to watch in a bigger town nearby to put on a *cinéma oral* (oral cinema show, 2001: 18). Not surprisingly, only propagandist films are screened, such as

³⁷ *C'était une chanson tibétaine, dont les Chinois avaient changé les paroles pour en faire un éloge à la gloire du président Mao* (Dai 2000: 28).

³⁸ *des chants populaires recueillis in situ par le Binoclard, c'est-à-dire d'authentiques chants de montagnards, sincères et empreints d'un romantisme réaliste* (80).

³⁹ *a recueilli des chants, les a adaptés, modifiés, et les paroles de ces magnifiques chansons paysannes ont énormément plu au rédacteur en chef* (107).

⁴⁰ Deppman (2010: 141–6) and Bloom (2016: 153–4) comment extensively on the language politics of twentieth-century China reflected in both the novel and the film.

the North Korean melodrama *The Little Flower Seller* (1972). During these days, foreign-language films are conventionally dubbed in standard Mandarin with “perfect” pronunciation and enunciation.⁴¹ It is made crystal clear in Dai’s film version of *Balzac* that the two protagonists are required to translate and retell the films they have watched in the local Sichuan dialect so that they can be better understood and appreciated by the villagers, including the Little Seamstress.⁴² It is therefore interesting that although the novel was originally written in French, Dai decided to shoot the film primarily in Sichuanese, his native or “vernacular” tongue, in order to return to a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude while flirting with the contemporaneous official vernacularizing developments of languages and genres.

However, the most exciting development of the novel (and film) is when the two protagonists start to performatively recount the stories of the forbidden Chinese translations of French and Western novels they have stolen from Four-Eyes and secretly read, while repackaging them as stories from Communist countries, such as Albania.⁴³ The two protagonists are then seen to transform the genre of nineteenth-century French novels, such as those by Balzac and Dumas, through standard, written Mandarin into local “vernacular” language and performance. Furthermore, Dai, through both textual representation and filmic *mise en scène*, consciously engages with the well-established Chinese cultural tradition of storytelling, known as *shuoshu* 说书, literally “book-telling,” a performance genre through which the *historical* Chinese vernacular (as opposed to Classical Chinese) is used and developed.⁴⁴ Therefore, Dai’s complex novelistic and filmic conception not only bridges the sometimes radically different notions of the vernacular in the Chinese context but also further nuances the concept of exophony that I have examined throughout this chapter. Not only does it demonstrate the spatio-temporal exotic appeal (“exo-”) and the specifically aural-oral quality (“-phone”) of the vernacular; it also develops a distinct literary

⁴¹ In fact, this also applies to Chinese actors who speak with accents (Shih 2007: 2).

⁴² To be clear, most sinophone speakers would have to rely on subtitles to understand the film, as Sichuanese is by no means readily intelligible to Mandarin speakers. For an in-depth study of the translational process in the novel and that between the novel and the film, see Li 2019.

⁴³ Albania decided to side with the PRC during the Sino-Soviet split (1956–66).

⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of “book-telling” in *Balzac* as well as some images of storytelling from the film, see Li 2019: 363–5. For a general introduction to the centuries-old Chinese tradition of storytelling, see Børdahl 1999: 1–14.

aesthetic that renegotiates the relationship between bilingualism and diglossia cross-culturally.⁴⁵

The politically prescribed vernacularization increasingly intensified and imposed after Mao's *Yen'an Talks* encountered resistance, even within the Communist Party. The Marxist poet and critic Hu Feng (1902–1985), a serious follower of the May Fourth tradition, was the most representative figure. He was openly concerned about “formulism” and “vulgar Marxism” as early as the 1930s. His literary theory, which stresses the centrality of the writer's subjectivity to the creative process, “was taken as a political act that not only threatened some of the basic ideological tenets of the emerging Maoist doctrine but also disrupted the CCP's efforts to gain control over writers and, more generally, the individual” (Denton 1998: 2). His advocacy for modern free verse, for example, is a direct challenge to the idea of “national forms” (Hung 2017: 586). In 1955, a nationwide anti-Hu Feng campaign was launched and the critic, together with many members of his “clique,” were incarcerated. Then, during the Cultural Revolution, Hu was taken to a “re-education camp” in Sichuan.

As a historical figure, Hu also features in the Franco-Chinese novels in question. In Cheng's *Le Dit*, the anti-Hu Feng political campaign directly affects the protagonists' destinies: Tianyi's male companion Haolang is sent to a labor camp because he has previously published some poems in a journal edited by Hu (1998: 240; 2000: 167). Hu's horrific experience at River Lu camp in Sichuan, as a *criminal de la pensée* (“thought criminal,” 2009: 146), receives extensive fictional treatment in Dai's *Par une nuit où la lune ne s'est pas levée* (2007). In Dai's fictional treatment, Hu is made insane by the circumstances at the camp, as shown, for example, when he is seen arguing with an invisible Mao and scared of papers. Meanwhile, Hu also has an extraordinary encounter with a fictional French Orientalist named Paul d'Ampère, a fellow prisoner who has not only been naturalized as Chinese but is also the father of the mixed-race protagonist Tumchooq. D'Ampère has come to China to research on the lost, mystical language of Tumchooq (hence his son's name). Tumchooq (meaning “bird's beak”) is said to be one of the ancient and spiritual languages through which Buddhism was initially transmitted, in Pali and Sanskrit, into China. This immediately becomes a subject of passionate discussions between a delirious Hu and an obsessive D'Ampère. Here, it is perhaps worth reminding

⁴⁵ While bilingualism refers to two distinct languages such as Chinese and French, diglossia generally refers to “two or more varieties of the same language” (Ferguson 1959: 325). The former is often discussed within the category of psychology; the latter is seen as the former's sociological counterpart (Fishman 1967: 29).

ourselves that early written vernacular in China (as opposed to Classical Chinese) was significantly developed through “the earliest translations of Buddhist texts into Sinitic, starting from the second century of the Common Era” (Mair 1994: 709–10).

With fictional evidence, Dai initially presents Tumchooq as the indigenous language of a desert kingdom to the western region of China, along the Silk Road, buried in sand, which disappeared in the third century (2007: 159; 2009: 112). The overall narrative of *Par une nuit* revolves around the tortuous uncovering and deciphering of an ancient Buddhist manuscript written in Tumchooq, which has been torn into two parts. Through D’Ampère’s cross-cultural journey, Tumchooq’s peripatetic search for the manuscript, and the female French protagonist-narrator’s personal and emotional entanglement with Tumchooq (language and character), this lost, indigenous, spiritual, and mystical language quickly comes to be associated and intertwined with a variety of world languages: English, Chinese Mandarin, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Pali, Burmese, Bambara, and Hebrew, spanning Europe, Asia, and Africa. Thus, Dai’s imaginary vernacular allegorically reveals the fundamental, long-term translocal interactions between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, constituting a fictional “model instance of cosmopolitan vernacularism” (Pollock 1998: 7). Again, Dai’s novel demonstrates complex negotiations among various notions of the vernacular on multiple levels, from languages to genres, from history to politics, in and beyond the Chinese context.

This chapter set out to use a rather unconventional primary literary corpus, francophone Chinese literature, to examine the issue of the vernacular in the Chinese context. The focus is on the exophone literary representations and reconfigurations of the different phases of the development of modern vernacular Chinese language and literature, which are nevertheless informed by a much longer historical process in China. This deliberate exophone approach also presents an opportunity to expand our understanding of the vernacular beyond the theoretical premise of regional, indigenous, or even national languages, while helping to reveal the kind of cosmopolitanism inherent in the vernacular. As my analysis has shown, while francophone Chinese writers’ literary engagement with the vernacular, from languages to genres, from politics to sensibilities, seems to be well grounded in empirical history, the literary works themselves—different from the literary works they consciously imitate and represent—do not directly contribute to the development of modern vernacular Chinese *per se*. For Cheng, Shan, and Dai, the vernacular is not their linguistic, literary, or cultural destination; rather, it signals a conceivable departure for an informed

imagination that is to be reconfigured in their exophone writings. This form of vernacular imagination is not oriented towards finding or building a seemingly organic regional or national language, literature, identity, or conveying any sense of nostalgic return. On the contrary, it aspires to get outside the regional or national conceptual framework, with a sense of exoticism at times, and works towards a future literary expression that undoes the local/global dualism in a new age of world literature.

References

- Anderson, M. (1990), *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962), *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bachner, A. (2014), *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bertaud, M. (2011), *François Cheng: Un cheminement vers la vie ouverte. Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée*, Paris: Hermann.
- Bloom, M. E. (2016), *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas: Absent Fathers, Banned Books, and Red Balloons*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Børdahl, V. (1999), "Introduction," in V. Børdahl (eds), *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China*, 1–14, Surrey: Curzon.
- Bush, C. (2010), *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chen, P. (1999), *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheng, F. (1998), *Le Dit de Tianyi*, Paris: Albin Michel.
- Cheng, F. (2000), *The River Below*, trans. Julia Shirek Smith, New York: Welcome Rain.
- Cheng, F. (2002), *Le Dialogue: Une passion pour la langue française*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Chirila, I. D. (2012), "La Littérature transculturelle franco-chinoise où comment réinventer la République des Lettres," in R. Silvester and G. Thouroude (eds), *Traits chinois/Lignes francophones: Écritures, images, cultures*, 67–83, Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
- Crevel, M. (1996), *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo*, Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Croiset, S. (2009), "Passeurs de langues, de cultures et de frontières: la transidentité de Dai Sijie et Shan Sa, auteurs chinois d'expression française," *TRANS: Revue de littérature générale et comparée*, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.336>.

- Dai, S. (2000), *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Dai, S. (2001), *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress: A Novel*, trans. I. Rilke, New York: Anchor Books.
- Dai, S. (2008), *Par une nuit où la lune ne s'est pas levée*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Dai, S. (2009), *Once on a Moonless Night*, London: Random House.
- Denecke, W. and L. Zhang (2015), "Series Editors' Foreword," in J. A. Fogel (ed.), *The Emergence of the Modern Sino-Japanese Lexicon: Seven Studies*, vii–ix, Leiden: Brill.
- Denton, K. A. (1998), *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Deppman, H.-C. (2010), *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction and Film*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Dimock, W. C. (2006), *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dong, H. (2014), *A History of the Chinese Language*, London: Routledge.
- Ferguson, C. A. (1959), "Diglossia," *word*, 15 (2): 325–40.
- Fishman, J. A. (1967), "Bilingualism with and without Diglossia; Diglossia with and without Bilingualism," *Journal of Social Issues*, 23 (2): 29–38.
- Fokkema, D. W. (1965), *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence, 1956–1960*, The Hague: Mouton.
- Forsdick, C. (2001), "Travelling Concepts: Postcolonial Approaches to Exoticism," *Paragraph*, 24 (3): 12–29.
- Hanan, P. (1981), *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hockx, M. (2016), "Introduction: The Making of Modern Chinese Poetry in the Twentieth Century," in M. Hockx (ed.), *The Flowering of Modern Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from the Republican Period*, 3–19, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Hsu, K.-Y. and T. Wang, eds (1980), *Literature of the People's Republic of China*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hung, R. Y. Y. (2017), "Time Has Begun: Hu Feng's Poesis in Socialist China, 1937–50," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 44 (3): 579–93.
- Li, S. (2017), "Transcultural Novels and Translating Cultures: François Cheng's *Le Dit de Tianyi* and *L'Éternité n'est pas de trop*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 53 (2): 179–99.
- Li, S. (2018), "Translingualism and Autoexotic Translation in Shan Sa's Franco-Chinese Historical Novels," *Essays in French Literature and Culture*, 55: 115–31.
- Li, S. (2019), "Novel, Film and the Art of Translational Storytelling: Dai Sijie's *Balzac Et La Petite Tailleuse Chinoise*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 55 (4): 359–79.
- Mair, V. H. (1991), "What is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 29: 1–31.
- Mair, V. H. (1994), "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53 (3): 707–51.

- Mallarmé, S. (2006), *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDougall, B. S. (1984), *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Norman, J. (1988), *Chinese*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pollock, S. (1998), “The Cosmopolitan Vernacular,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 (1): 6–37.
- Schoenhals, M. (1992), *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shan, S. (1999), *Les Quatre Vies Du Saule*, Paris: Grasset.
- Shih, S.-M. (2001), *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shih, S.-M. (2007), *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tageldin, S. M. (2018), “Beyond Latinity, Can the Vernacular Speak?” *Comparative Literature*, 70 (2): 114–31.
- Tong, C. (2014), “Foreignized Translation and the Case Against ‘Chinese Vernacular Fiction,’” *mTm*, 6: 81–97.
- Venuti, L. (2008), *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London: Routledge.
- Wang, B. (2016), “Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism: *Song of Youth*,” in K. A. Denton (ed.), *The Columbia Companion of Modern Chinese Literature*, 237–44, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wang, J. (2013), “Fanyi wenxue, fanyi, fanyiti 翻译文学, 翻译, 翻译体 (Literature in Translation, Translation, Translationese),” *Contemporary Chinese Writers Criticism* 当代中国作家批评 2: 129–137.
- Wang, X. (2012), “From ‘Use of Old Forms’ to ‘Establishment of a National Form’: A Re-Evaluation of Mao’s Agenda of Forging a Cultural–Political Nation,” *International Critical Thought*, 2 (2): 183–96.
- Wong, T. C. (2011), “The Original Evolutionary Nature of Chinese Vernacular Fiction,” *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 15 (1): 57–64.
- Zheng, M. (1993) “Shijimo de huigu: Hanyu yuyan biange yu Zhongguo xinshi chuanguozuo 世纪末的回顾: 汉语语言变革与中国新诗创作 (An End-of-century Review: Sinitic Language Reforms and Chinese New Poetry),” *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 (*Literary Criticism*), 3: 5–20.
- Zhou, G. (2011), *Placing the Modern Chinese Vernacular in Transnational Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.