

„ЕЗИЦИТЕ“ НА ЛИТЕРАТУРНАТА ТВОРБА

“THE LANGUAGES” OF THE LITERARY WORK

VIBRATION’S RESONANCE (FRANÇOIS CHENG’S “GREEN MOUNTAIN,
WHITE CLOUD: A NOVEL OF LOVE IN THE MING DYNASTY”)

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ABSTRACT: The work of François Cheng – a writer, poet, calligrapher, essayist, academician of Chinese origin and laureate of the French Francophone Academy is undoubtedly part of the cross-cultural literature of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, when writers and poets from different, in this case Eastern background, like Yoko Tawada, Anna Moï, Amy Tan, Salman Rushdie, Haruki Murakami and others, have adopted the cross-cultural perspective of the migrant, the person who finds oneself in a context in which one begins to make sense of the living world by reading the foreign signs, comparing cultures and traditions, and translating the foreign culture in a particular way.

The term “cross-cultural” literature will be used here in its sense that the writer and researcher G. Chkhartishvili associates with the new cultural phenomenon he calls “androgynous”, “East-Western literature” (Chkhartishvili, 1996).

What, I would argue, is common to these artists is the rejection of the dual *East - West* model of culture, or, in Sánchez’ words, “the challenging of the bipolar models” (Sánchez, 2014, p. 55), the rejection of barriers and boundaries, because the cultures placed on both sides of such barriers are perceived either in terms of their own essential characteristics, or in ways that go beyond the proposed divisions.

KEYWORDS: François Cheng, cross-cultural literature, *East - West* model of culture, “Green Mountain, White Cloud”

The present article explores how these challenges have been addressed in François Cheng’s “Green Mountain, White Cloud: A Novel of Love in the Ming Dynasty” (2004). References in the article are to the English translation of François Cheng’s novel “L'éternité n'est pas de trop, Albin Michel” (2002), which has been translated into Bulgarian with the title “I vechnostta ne stiga” (“Eternity is not Enough”).

François Cheng is an artist interested in the perennial values who combines the old-fashioned sense of dignity with the desire to turn goodness into a universal power: a desire which, as Cheng said in the annual public speech at the French Academy in 2007, is undervalued by the “hedonistic” and “cynical” society we live in. This makes the person who insists on goodness look naïve in the eyes of the others (Cheng, 2007).

The mission of a responsible society and of the writer respectively is to make the desire to be virtuous just as passionately moving as carnal desire (ibid.). In the same speech Cheng drew on Confucian ideas to prove that the desire to be good can be inspired in a beautiful, harmonious and natural way rather than by means of abstract precepts. In his novels, essays and poetry, however, several ideological undercurrents are felt running and intertwining, in lieu of only Eastern ones.

On the one hand, the authentic rendering of Chinese culture, the references to historical realia, relations and other features of the Ming Dynasty, the Taoist ideas and the detailing of the healing powers of Chinese medicine in the narrative of “Green Mountain, White Cloud” prompt an ethnographic reading. For this artist, to write is to turn the spirit into a sign, while “matter, the living being, the body are condensed forms of the spirit” (Cheng, 2002). In this novel as in his other works, Cheng’s perspective is closest to Taoism. In an interview for “Literaturen vestnik” he said: “I have an affinity for Taoism for, as I have been saying, it offers a global, all-encompassing organic system of ideas for understanding the

living world – a world in which all things are connected and supported by the spirit - a fundamental part of being that holds all living things together” (Cheng, 2002).

In another interview for the Russian media, he argued that any beauty which does not have good at its foundation is monstrous. “Beauty which serves death is animated by spiritual monstrosity. Respectively, every face in which goodness transpires is beautiful”. At the same time, in that interview, Cheng looked not only towards Eastern traditions but also quoted Henri Bergson on “grace”, a notion which joins together beauty and goodness (Cheng, n. d.).

As an artist, a writer who has lived in France for decades, Cheng has looked both to the East and to the literature of the West, the meanings which come closest to his own ideas. Going back in search of lost time, the writer, reader of Proust, has been rewriting the past of a culture from an altered perspective. In the words of L. Fraisse on “Le Dit de Tianyi” (“A Tale of Tianui”): this is the Taoist reaction to Marcel Proust, or, in other words, “it is a question of putting on the boots of Proust’s narrator, of readjusting his steps” (Fraisse, 2007, p. 235).

The Western literary tradition has been palpably embedded in Cheng’s works not only through Proust, but also through Romen Rolan, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide and this has been achieved not by repeating, but rather by traversing the literary heritage bequeathed by them. He continues its line, transforming it in a unique manner. This makes the narrative sound distanced from the narrator and grants the author an ontological status as a transformer of time, while his status as a cross-cultural artist provides the doubly reversed perspective.

In search of lost time, one could say, is how the plot of the love story in “Green Mountain, White Cloud” unfolds - on the background of big history reconceived as a personal fate. In the context of socially imposed limitations and time hiatuses the real passion of love is seen as indivisible from the mind. The protagonist is a doctor, a soothsayer, a monastery disciple, who believes that the aim of divination is to capture the most refined form of vital breath. It is in the mountaintop monastery, where he meditates trying to empty his heart and mind, where Dao-sheng realises that he cannot uproot the passion which has sprouted in his heart.

The whole novel becomes a constant overcoming of the limitations imposed on man by time, society, age, the inner moral sense one listens to, etc. Somewhere beyond life’s petty trifles and delusions is the real dialogue with the Other, but it is to a great degree a meditative one, because meetings and partings do not belong to a temporal continuum either. The connection between the monastery disciple and his lost beloved is not so much an earthly one but is rather part of a perfect longed-for world in which to breathe is to love in a manner that looks to the world of the beyond. The world around is seen through the eyes of a man who regards it as a world towards which you strive from the heavens. This explains the marked distance between the narrative and the narrator.

Dao-sheng and his beloved have waited for their real meeting for thirty years, and when the time finally comes, it takes place in a higher dimension, their relationship is constituted as one open towards infinity, uncompleted. But perhaps one of the themes which constantly recur not only in this but also in other Cheng’s novels is that incompleteness is the only possible mode of existence when you strive towards the perfect realisation of love’s desire.

The landscapes in the novel, which change in parallel with human experiences, are constantly understood as part of nature’s vital breath, of the thought of the beloved because, as the narrator says, into the “abounding and brightly colored world, with all its magnificent expanse” we come “seeking one face. Once we have seen this face, it cannot be forgotten” (Cheng, 2004, p. 152). Without it the lover finds neither beauty, nor sense.

The recurring images of the pine tree, the flat rocks, the eagles, the river, which stand for power, harmony, eternity, the resistance to storms - all that is at the foundations of Tao - acquire a symbolic status in the novel.

In this novel love is not only a universal feeling – it breathes life into the universe making it eternal because, as a patient of Dao-sheng’s says, the lover can give more than they have because love is bigger than oneself and all the voices of love in the world “join to form one enormous path. Yes, *the*

Way-the Tao.” And he goes on to add: “To form the Way to true life, love must begin with a promise. It must begin with someone saying, right from the start, as best as we can conceive of it, ‘I love you, and you will not die’” (Cheng, 2004, p. 120).

Dao-sheng is humble and strong, dedicated and loyal. He has devoted his life to a woman, to one love and he has a heart that is full of vacuity. This, however, is not something bad for, as Cheng says, a vacant heart means one that is free of vanity and selfishness (Cheng, 2007).

Lan-ying is also free of vanity. She accepts her fate, unjust as it is, and suffers resignedly, and when the occasion arises, she devotes her life to helping the others and doing good. The novel focuses on what sustains the breath between the two characters.

The story begins when Dao-sheng leaves the monastery and sets out to find the woman he has been in love with his whole life. At the end of the novel he retraces the same path back – tired and despairing, but just then his third eye opens – “the eye of Wisdom, which can stare down the infinite and proclaim” a being together with the beloved which is also the perfect way of becoming part of eternity (Cheng, 2004, p. 212).

Sylvie Parizet has compared the journey from the monastery down to the valley to Orpheus’ descent into the underworld. She observes the similarity in the shared motif of the resisted desire – just as in the Orpheus myth it is crucial that Orpheus resists the overpowering desire to see the beloved woman, in the novel Dao-sheng is not allowed to go to his beloved before she gives him a sign. This connection is further supported by the fact that the novel’s protagonist is a musician and that it is through the violin’s sound that his first meeting with Lan-ying happens (Parizet, 2007, p. 251). Such an analogy, if accepted, evidences the influence of the mythology and literature of European antiquity on Cheng’s works – something he talked about in another speech to the French Academy in 2003 (Cheng, 2003).

The lovers cannot be together – the narrative alternates periods in which they get closer to each other and can communicate, albeit through a curtain as at the time when Lan-ying is sick, or when they fleetingly meet in the market with periods marked solely by the disappointment after another parting, the waiting and the endless patience, periods in which they learn to control their desire and hold silent conversations.

Lan-yin and Dao-sheng cannot be together, do not talk with each other, and because of that everything between them is a symbol and the lover has to interpret every sign: the way in which the beloved has put up her hair, her look and what it reveals about the way she feels. Instead of the people, the signs speak: Lan-yin sends him a piece of embroidery and from that he tries to decipher what she is telling him.

The image of the Milky Way appears in the novel at the points when the two lovers are spatially closest to each other, each on their own life path, and it becomes symbolic of the longing of the flesh; the tenderness of the emotion is painted by means of other symbols: the garden, the dream of watching together the lotus flowers, which clearly is never going to be fulfilled, the moonbeams (“Let me come into your garden like a ray of moonlight” (Cheng, 2004, p. 128), etc. A prominent connection in the novel is the one between the moon and the beloved woman, who associates her intimate life with the moon and its pale light.

The Taoist ideas in the novel, presenting the “yin” and “yang” unity, are related, on the one hand, to the power of the will, the skills of the soothsayer, who brings his beloved back from the dead, the descriptions of miracles performed through the means of the unique Chinese medicine, on the other hand, with the power of the soft feminine beauty, of the spiritual beauty which has captivated Dao-sheng and which, like a fragrance, an echo, a reflection pervades everything he strives towards in his life. It is noteworthy as well that the “yin” concept has been coded in the name of the female protagonist, which in its shortened form is Yin.

Cheng shows his preference for “yin” – he believes that the most wonderful thing in art is the female presence.

“Contrary to the West, which grants greater significance to yang, or to the male energy, to force, to the rule of matter, Chinese thought gives primacy to the female energy. It likens yin to a valley which is simultaneously a space of receptivity, fecundity and change.” (Chen, 2002)

The reader witnesses the intertwining of “yin” and “yang”, which makes it impossible to separate them, the way in which one flows into the other in that scene in which the narrator compares the green mountain to the woman who remains on the shore, and the white cloud with the man who departs on his distant voyage (Cheng, 2004, p. 160). This is, however, immediately followed by the “better reading” which suggests that “the green mountain, the *yang*, is the man, who seems to cry from far off, ‘I’m leaving but my thoughts stay with you,’ and the white cloud, the *yin*, would be the woman murmuring, ‘I’m staying but my heart goes with you’” (ibid.). Significantly, it is this fragment that has been given prominence in the title of the American edition of the novel - “Green Mountain, White Cloud”.

In his work Cheng successfully combines different cultures. The empty median that he associates with a combination of “yin” and “yang”, is perhaps what helps him integrate the significant in both types of culture without making them contradict each other: “It is well known that the spirit depends on the three elements of yin, yang and the empty median. The third element is born out of the other two and is the combination of their best aspects, which allows it to overcome itself and engage in transformation. It is precisely this Taoist idea that allows me to integrate all important elements without this causing any great clashes” (Cheng 2002).

Being well acquainted with the work of Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan and Greimas, he brings together the idea of the empty median between signs and the ideas of semiotics. This makes Cheng a real mediator between cultures - the undercurrents become interwoven while he brings about their mutual symbiosis.

An episode particularly relevant to the topic discussed here is the one with the Taoist disciple and the Jesuits who have arrived from the West and whose lives Dao-sheng saves. They believe in the Lord of the heavens who has created this world and their conversations with Dao-sheng about the salvation of the soul, the Original Sin and the question of why their Lord does not save them from the disease are the point where the Eastern and the Western ideas of the divine meet. The episode, however, foregrounds not so much the differences as the similarities between the Taoist model and the Christian ideas. François Cheng presents in a homogeneous manner the otherwise non-homogeneous Chinese philosophy according to which all things in the universe are organically interconnected and the Breath is the basis of everything - it brings to life and connects all living things. In this way the novel does not put into relief the differences between the East and the West because the Western person posits love as fundamentally essential for the world (“Our native land is wherever there are people we love” (Cheng, 2004, p. 116)). Dao-sheng asserts the same belief. The opposition here is between the love of all, which the Eastern person believes in, and the love of the One whom you love more than anything else even in the face of insurmountable impediments.

“Green Mountain, White Cloud” reads the love story of Dao-sheng and Lan-yin as part of a perennial story of spiritual perfection, of the striving towards one’s other Self. The Prologue to the novel, however, presented as “a narrative within a narrative” based on the records of “the man from the mountain” broadens the thematic scope by adding the motif of the broken line of debauchery. The spiritual parents of Gan-er, the child saved from drowning, son of the Second Lord, make him into a Disciple of good and of the vital energy. In the Prologue the narrator motivates the necessity of immersing himself in books in order to speak about Chinese culture at a conference on intercultural exchange. Thus, indirectly, the descent into the depths of one’s self is perceived as a descent into the native culture, as a quest for that essentially human element in it which resonates with everything we are sensitive to. What is more, the amorous encounter of two hearts is posited as an encounter with Otherness, an encounter with the difference which has always been an obstacle in the dialogue between people.

Have the bipolar models undergone a change in the work of cross-cultural authors like François Cheng? The wager in the earlier cited article by Sylvie Parizet is that an eternity will not be enough for the East and the West to change the way they relate to each other (Parizet, 2007, p. 33). I would not be so certain. The question of Otherness, so very palpable in the European literature from the last quarter of the

twentieth century, is differently articulated by authors like Cheng. If for Sartre hell is other people, in Cheng one encounters the feeling that the self is always an other, to the extent of coming from nowhere – a feeling one finds articulated in “Le Dit de Tianyi” for example (“C’était l’époque où une de ces phrases saisonnières dont la France était friande traînait sur toutes les lèvres: “L’enfer, c’est les autres.” Pour moi, au contraire, l’enfer, je le vérifiais à mes dépens, c’est d’être toujours autre soi-même, au point d’être de nulle part. (Cheng, 1998, p.212-213). The self, coming from the nowhere, belongs neither to the East, nor to the West, it has an ontological status and fills its life journey with the meaning accumulated from one’s most important discoveries, much like one can fill in a hollow bamboo stalk, because: “Your only hope of reaching Heaven is with a full heart” (Cheng, 2004, p. 13).

In his novels, and specifically in “Green Mountain, White Cloud”, François Cheng sees literature and history as offering possible ways for expanding the world, for capturing its breath and continuing it in new ways. In this novel, Chinese traditions and ideas have been interwoven with ideas from the European literary and philosophical tradition, creatively merged in a kind of writing that rejects the repetition of these ideas and traverses them like an endless river, which impregnates the future. Even though Cheng denies the possibility of the complete symbiosis of the two undercurrents, his novels offer ample evidence that the interweaving of the bipolar models is not only possible but also very fruitful.

The artist, in Cheng’s understanding, is always someone else, someone who does not coincide with the component parts that make him up; the artist strives to unveil the mysteries of the world, but their creative output is only an endless resonating with the breath of the world, an image in which the artist dissolves and what has been created goes on vibrating - unique in its ongoing incompleteness.

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