

TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION
RECOVERY AND REINTERPRETATION OF THE PAST
IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETY

Mugurel Dan Zlotea
University of Bucharest

Abstract of the habilitation thesis

My habilitation thesis presents the results of research and teaching activities obtained during my academic career, starting with my enrollment as a PhD candidate, in 2006. The main purpose is to show how I combined research with teaching, with what results, and what are my future directions. The thesis consists of five main sections. The first four sections present and interpret what we have been doing, and the last one talks about what will be, based on what has been done so far.

The thesis starts with a preamble in which I briefly present the period before my doctoral studies, necessary to understand the direction I followed later in the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies and the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures, at the University of Bucharest. The time I spent in China was decisive for my training as a sinologist and provided me with the necessary tools to understand Chinese culture deeper. My training as a philologist was defined by my PhD thesis advisor, Prof. Florentina Vişan, who showed me that a solid theoretical base can help me to put the practical knowledge I had gained in China to better and more effective use. Important for the research direction I am currently pursuing are also the two years spent at the Centre for Chinese Studies of the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras (IITM), India, where together with Indian colleagues I turned my attention toward the contemporary Chinese society.

The first section covers my doctoral research related to the translation and interpretation of the concepts of liberty and rights in the Chinese reformist discourse between the late 19th century and early 20th century. The thesis starts from the observations by Reinhart Koselleck that a concept can function as key element in the study of social evolution. The study of a concept can reveal historically layered meanings and their influence upon the society in which it operates, therefore concepts have a dual function, they are both outcomes and drivers of change. In 19th century China,

liberty and rights were two entirely new concepts, introduced into intellectual discourse by reformers who feared that without reforms and under threat from the great Western powers and Japan, China would disappear as a state. The process of translation and interpretation was not easy, which can be seen from the efforts by the Chinese intellectuals to come up with the right words to describe these concepts, before anything else. For this it was necessary to search for the "comparable" (Ricoeur 2005), to identify the possible commune elements that would contribute to the understanding and acceptance of the two new concepts in a very conservative society. I have shown that the process of translating concepts had a double implication, forcing Chinese intellectuals to modify their way of relating to their own culture and to Western culture. The process of translation and equivalence made the reformers aware that mere conceptual import was not a solution to China's problems, and they tried, in the spirit of Chinese tradition, (though not necessarily aware of it), to find the middle way, to identify the space where the two cultures could meet and find the appropriate solutions to the problems they faced. We have shown that Chinese modernity was not a moment of rupture, of discontinuity, despite the anti-traditionalist discourse that stood at the center of the reformist discourse, but consisted in a change of mentality, in the transformation of the epistemological paradigm and the redefinition of the relationship with one's own culture.

The results of my research during my doctoral studies were presented at fifteen national and international conferences and published in six articles and a book based on my PhD thesis.

The second section covers my postdoctoral research. The directions of my research stemmed naturally from my doctoral research, this time focusing more on phenomena in contemporary Chinese society. The most important topic is the reinterpretation and integration of tradition into the political discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There are several likely reasons why tradition has returned to the center of political discourse; on the one hand, it is the use of tradition as a means of legitimation, as confidence in Marxist-Leninist ideology fell sharply after the violent campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, and economic success did not benefit the whole of society, with the peasants and workers, the very people who had stood at the heart of the communist revolution, being the most affected, eroding people's confidence in the Party's ability to solve existing social problems; the appeal to tradition is part of the Party's efforts to secure the support of the masses, but this requires the Party's message to be interpreted and conveyed to the masses in such a way that it can be properly understood; tradition can help shape

the alternative model of government and social organization with which the Party seeks to counteract influences from the West. The findings of the analysis of how tradition is used by the CCP elites, how selected traditional elements are reinterpreted to become relevant in the current social context, and how Party policies and decisions are communicated to the public have been presented at international conferences, in two book chapters published in India, and in six articles, two of which are ISI/Thomson Reuters indexed.

A second line of research is related to translation as a cultural phenomenon or as a tool for manipulating the receiver and constructing the image of the other. I looked at this phenomenon from a diachronic perspective, with the aim of understanding how the act of translation has shaped the Chinese language and society, and on the other hand, I considered translation an instrument of manipulation of the receiver, with the aim of constructing a certain image of the other, an image that corresponds to the ideological profile of the originator of the translation. Over time, translation has been seen either as an act of hospitality in which translators have striven to identify in Chinese culture the elements common to the source culture, as in the case of the translation of Buddhist sutras or scientific texts, or as an act of violence against their own culture, a bitter but absolutely necessary medicine for China's survival, which led to the transformation of the image the Chinese had about themselves, and the change of the self-sufficient Middle Empire, the paragon of civilization narrative, to the humiliated China, unable to survive in a modern world narrative. The results have been presented at national and international conferences and have resulted in a volume on the history and theory of translation in China up to the early 20th century, and five articles, two of which indexed by ISI/Thomson Reuters.

My interest in translation studies is matched by my work as a translator of Chinese literature and history, the subject of the third section of this thesis. The most important translation is that of Sun Zi's *The Art of War* (Humanitas 2023), translated from Classical Chinese. In addition to this, I have translated from Chinese two novels by two of the most important contemporary writers, Yu Hua and Xu Zechen, a book of fairy tales, two volumes of historical essays by Yu Hua and a history of literary exchanges between China and Central and Eastern Europe. I have also translated from English a history of modern China and a book of memoirs by a former member of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution.

My teaching and coordination activity is briefly presented in the fourth section of the thesis. The courses and seminars taught in the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures and, for

a shorter period, at the Faculty of Political Science cover the recent period of Chinese history and culture, with emphasis on contemporary society, the structure of the Chinese language, the history and problems of translation, and Classical Chinese.

The last part briefly covers my future research projects, the possible development of teaching activity and areas of mentoring.

This thesis concludes with a bibliography of the works mentioned in the presentation of my research activity.

Mugurel Dan Zlotea