

Chirila on Bui and Le Huenen, editors (2017)

Bui, Véronique, and Roland Le Huenen, editors. *Balzac et la Chine: la Chine et Balzac*. PU de Rouen et du Havre, 2017, pp. 240, ISBN 979-10-240-0715-1

Ileana Chirila, University of New Hampshire

The trope of China as a remote but fascinating and mysterious country has been recurrent in the French literary milieu ever since Jesuit missionaries tried, during the sixteenth century, to introduce Christianity to the people of the Middle Kingdom. Moreover, France was the first European country to begin the study of China and the Chinese language, in 1711, under the patronage of Louis XIV, and the place where Sinology was created, in 1814, by Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat, the founder of the chair of Chinese and Manchu at the Collège de France. The dynamic of Chinese influence on French literature and vice versa ranges from translations to adaptations, as well as texts “inspired” by the other country, cultural references, liberal depictions of rites and traditions, new poetic forms, and atypical novels. It is not surprising, in this context, that more contributions are added every year to the critical bibliography dedicated to Sino-French cultural interactions.

Considering that Balzac never traveled to China, and none of the stories from *La Comédie Humaine* take place there, what is the association between the two? As noted in the introduction to Veronique Bui and Roland le Huenen’s edited volume, Balzac is the writer who invented the character of the Sinophile. By creating this type in his short novel *L’Interdiction*, he introduced Sinology to the public and reopened, “quatre-vingt ans après Voltaire, la voie des relations littéraires entre la France et la Chine” (17). But this compilation of studies dedicated to the surprising connections between Balzac and China serves as more than an encyclopedic accounting of Balzacian references to the Middle Kingdom, or an analysis of the reception of Balzac’s work in China. The presence of a historian (Jacques Marx) and a sinologue (Muriel Détrie) among the contributors to this volume proves that Bui and Le Huenen, whose expertise is primarily in literary studies, have accounted for the complex intellectual landscape of Sino-French cultural exchanges. Read in succession or not, the chapters by Marx and Détrie reveal links between literature and history, as well as broader cultural conflicts, political changes, and economic concerns in both countries. Although Balzac’s name in the title of the volume might allude to a strict literary cross-examination, most chapters provide a deep cultural and historical context that leads the reader through a myriad of aspects and events, which otherwise would have nothing to do with the nineteenth-century writer. These historical and cultural contexts include the Sino-Japanese war, the influence of Marx and Engels on Chinese literary criticism, the development of “scar literature” after the end of the Cultural Revolution, and Chinese linguistic elements in Japanese.

Understandably, the book’s five sections are not ordered chronologically, but the thematic organization makes it easy to follow the material. The first section covers what was known about China in nineteenth-century France, and describes how and why a specific vision of the far-east country took form in the French imagination. This sets the context for the second section of the book (the most interesting, in my opinion), in which the focus narrows to Balzac’s China. Here, in a painstakingly researched study, Éric Bordas proves through a lexicometric reading that although the Chinese “ne courent pas les rues de *La Comédie Humaine*” (83), they are, by far, the non-Europeans most present in Balzac’s fictional world. There are 113 occurrences of the word “chinois,” as opposed to nine “japonais,” nine “turcs,” twenty-four “américains,” fifty “indiens,” twelve “africains,” and ninety-five “arabes.” In another essay, Véronique Bui and Denis Meyer recount the story of the friendship and reciprocal influence between Balzac and the painter and traveler Auguste Borget, whose album *La Chine et les Chinois* was analyzed by the French writer in a critical work bearing the same title. They lay out the historical context of this relationship and explain why the critical study became more famous than the album, to the point that *La Chine et les Chinois* was attributed to Balzac. Section three focuses on the reception of Balzac’s work in China and Japan, and unveils fascinating details about the first translations of Balzac’s novels into Chinese. For example, Lin Shu did not speak any European language, but was able to “reconstitute” four of Balzac’s short stories by transcribing into classical Chinese the oral translations (hence non-classical) that a team of younger collaborators were performing on the spot from an English version. Section four shifts from the nineteenth century to contemporary times in order to delve into the reception of Dai Sijie’s *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse chinoise* in Japan and Vietnam, and to explore the strategies employed by the translators in the two respective languages. This short section, apparently unrelated to the theme of the book (Balzac is not a character in Dai Sijie’s novel), is justified by the extraordinary reception of the novel in the two countries, which is attributed, at least partially, to Balzac’s fame.

Balzac et la Chine: la Chine et Balzac is an accessible and very attractive introduction to the fertile connections between Balzac and China. There are a few stylistic inconsistencies between the French and non-French authors. In addition, the volume features some repetitive material from one chapter to another, notably exact citations describing the influence of Balzac’s father on his vision of China (95 and 112), or the historical context of the publication of Borget’s album (66 and

114), or description of Borget by Balzac (74 and 105). These minor issues do not take away from the achievements of this book. Bui and Le Huenen's collection of studies will undoubtedly become an indispensable read not only for scholars of Balzac and nineteenth-century literary studies, but also for any researcher interested in Sino-French cultural relations.

Volume: 48.1–2

Year:

- 2019