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Lessons from East and West in François Cheng's *Le Dit de Tianyi*.

François Cheng's reputation as "[un] passeur de culture" is founded on his wide-ranging work, carried out over fifty years, as a poet, translator, scholar, calligrapher and novelist which has brought Chinese culture and beliefs to the attention of a francophone audience.¹ This achievement, recognised in 2002 by the Académie française, unites his creative sensitivities and his knowledge of sinology through the medium of French. He embodies an opening out to other artistic, cultural and spiritual spaces, "vers d'autres représentations de l'étant", thus making his translingualism an all-pervasive, lived reality.² It was initially through his translations into French of poetry from the Tang Dynasty, considered to be China's golden age, commentaries on Chinese pictorial arts and translations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French poems into Mandarin that he demonstrated an ability and a desire to pass between languages and cultures.³ Such cultural mediation is also prominent in his first novel *Le Dit de Tianyi*, the subject of study here, which reveals ideological aspects of Chinese culture learnt and conveyed by the protagonist, Tianyi, who goes on to observe French life as he studies art in that country and elsewhere in Europe during the 1950s.⁴ Since the notions of passing "between" and passing "on" are intimately linked for Cheng, and Tianyi is recognised as his

¹ Véronique Porra considers that Cheng occupies "la position idéal-typique du 'passeur de culture'" and refers to two articles in *Libération* and *Le Figaro Magazine* which also describe Cheng as a cultural mediator (see "François Cheng: le 'passeur de culture'" in Porra, *Langue française, langue d'adoption. Une littérature invitée entre création, stratégies et contraintes* (1946-2000), Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2011, pp. 147–152 (p. 148 and p. 149)).

² Véronique Brient, "François Cheng, la pensée chinoise au cœur d'une écriture poétique française", *Travaux de littérature*, 22 (2009), 483-494 (p. 483).

³ Cheng has published the following on Chinese poetry and painting: *L'Écriture poétique chinoise. Suivi d'une anthologie des poèmes des T'ang* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), *Vide et plein, le langage pictural chinois* (Paris: Seuil, [1979] 1991), *L'Espace du rêve, mille ans de peinture chinoise* (Paris: Phébus, 1980), *Chu Ta, le génie du trait* (Paris: Phébus, 1986), *Souffle-Esprit* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), *Shitao, la saveur du monde* (Paris: Phébus, 1998), *D'où jaillit le chant* (Paris: Phébus, 2000), *Et le souffle devient signe* (Paris: Iconoclaste, 2001), *Le Dialogue* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), *Toute beauté est singulière* (Paris: Phébus, 2004).

⁴ François Cheng, *Le Dit de Tianyi* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

literary double, the novel may be regarded as a literary testament in which the author bequeaths his Chinese heritage to his country of adoption.⁵

Since the publication of *Le Dit de Tianyi* in 1998, Cheng's translingualism shows mastery of both the genres of poetry and the novel, moving between the "primary unit" of the "individual, irreducible word" in poems and the more instrumental use of language through the invention of plots and characters in his prose.⁶ After a number of significant experiences, he felt that the most appropriate form to convey "ce trop-plein de 'tranches de vie'" would be the novel since it constitutes "une forme capable de les [tranches de vie] recevoir et de les transformer en quelque substance plus durable, plus significative", in comparison to poetry which may capture "l'essence des choses", but leaves other "éléments vécus [...] étalés dans le temps".⁷ In this way, Cheng deemed that, for this particular purpose, "la poésie n'est pas suffisante" and that the novel is able to "atteindre une réalité plus vraie que la réalité".⁸ Moreover, Cheng was always determined that he would progress to "ce genre littéraire majeur", as he wished to become part of "la longue tradition française du roman d'analyse, qui va [...] de *La Princesse de Clèves* jusqu'à Proust".⁹ The novel does indeed prove to be the most suitable medium in which to evoke the major events in China during the twentieth century, whilst foregrounding Tianyi's gradual and difficult initiation into both life and art, and allows the depiction of those "éléments vécus" to do with cultural knowledge. For instance, throughout the first part of *Le Dit de Tianyi* (titled *Épopée du départ*), the narrator introduces the idea of the intrinsic relationship between poetry, calligraphy and painting, thus transmitting an

⁵ Porra, for example, describes Tianyi as "porteur de traits autobiographiques" (p. 148). Daniel-Henri Pageaux, too, identifies biographical links in *Le Dit de Tianyi* which associate the author and the protagonist, meaning that, for him, the novel has aspects in common with confessional literature. See "*Le Dit de Tianyi* de François Cheng: un roman de l'artiste?", *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 2, 322 (2007), 223-233 (p. 228).

⁶ Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln, US: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), p. 11.

⁷ All quotations here are from Cheng, *Le Dialogue*, p. 75.

⁸ François Cheng interviewed by Gérard de Cortanze, "François Cheng: 'il ne faut pas me prendre pour un sage'", *Le Magazine littéraire*, 487 (2009), 96-101 (p. 100).

⁹ Paul Sabourin, "D'une double culture à l'unité académique, entretien avec François Cheng" *Travaux de Littérature*, 19 (2006), 446-456 (p. 452).

awareness of these traditional art forms to readers who may not be familiar with Chinese culture. He shows how Chinese art is inscribed in the thought and culture of that nation and, as we shall see towards the end of this study, suggests the possible, mutually enriching encounter between Chinese and Western art. Whilst acknowledging two different visions of the world, Tianyi comes to a symbiotic understanding of them, based on “une méditation sur l’homme, sa condition, sa place dans l’univers”.¹⁰ The novelistic form enables this gradual revelation and conveys the learning along the way that led to it.

The emphasis in *Le Dit de Tianyi* on educating the reader is uncontested by critics and scholars, some of whom have considered it as, largely, an account of artistic apprenticeship, “un roman de l’artiste”, or in the mould of the archetypal “roman de formation”, the story of an individual’s personal development.¹¹ In addition to describing aspects of twentieth-century Chinese history, it also comprises elements of a love story thus taking it beyond any single category,¹² but its pedagogical characteristics are recognised as dominant, principally as a function of the concerns of the narrator, and warrant a more systematic and sustained study than has been carried out so far. While Tianyi undergoes the process of learning, the narrator provides insight into how and what Tianyi discovers in clear stages which are neatly contained in a tripartite narrative structure. In the first stage, he learns about the key forms of Chinese art, leading to an ideological and artistic identification with ethnic identity and an awareness of the best aspects of artistic practice in his own culture. His encounter with Europe in the second stage extends his horizons to Western painterly traditions, notably, and marks the beginning of a synthesis of cultures and artistic styles within him. In the third stage, Tianyi attains

¹⁰ Madeleine Bertaud, “L’ardent face-à-face / des présences entrecroisées, François Cheng”, *Travaux de Littérature* 21 (2008), 501–518 (p. 502).

¹¹ For discussions about the didactic nature of the novel, see in particular Pageaux (2007) and Luc Fraisse, “Le statut de l’écrivain dans *Le Dit de Tianyi* de François Cheng”, *Travaux de Littérature* 20 (2007), 183–195. It is also worth remembering that François Cheng was committed to teaching, having held a post at the Centre de linguistique chinoise, then at the University of Paris VII and the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales.

¹² According to Pageaux, it is “une œuvre qui brouille tout type de classement. En cela elle est au sens premier du mot inclassable et elle invalide toute étiquette que l’on serait tenté de lui apposer” (p. 223).

independence and creates his own, unique work of art, giving him confidence to embark on another artistic endeavour, one for which he has not received any training and which he never completes but passes on to the narrator as another type of bequest.

It is this clearly delineated progress from emulation to independence that makes certain parallels with Experiential Learning Theory come to mind, since Kolb's theory depends on incremental phases, going from concrete experiences to observation and reflection, then to abstract conceptualization and finally reaching active experimentation. It is possible that interesting correlations between the novel and this educational theory may be found upon investigation, especially because both have their basis in experience. Also, ELT has become widely accepted internationally as a holistic approach due, mainly, to its "integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour".¹³ These elements will allow Tianyi's development to be seen in an extensive way but, admittedly, not necessarily from the perspective of its expression in fiction, a drawback to be mitigated against by considering the relationship between literature and theory during analysis. Furthermore, although these elements may implicitly contain a cultural dimension, it would be useful to supplement discussions of ELT with more specifically culturally-orientated theories, particularly when Tianyi is rediscovering his own heritage and is then exposed to foreign influences. In the first instance, considering current debates about cultural learning will enable a discussion concerning identity formation during the initial stages of Tianyi's ethnic and artistic apprenticeship, and will act as a reminder of his points of reference when he comes into contact with European culture. As his place in the world changes and his identity becomes more fluid, he does not forget his cultural identity due to continual dependence on his cultural knowledge. What he learns about Chinese poetry, calligraphy and painting will provide a firm

¹³ David A. Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 21.

position from which to view Western aesthetics, as we will discover from analysis of these three art forms, and will lead to a fruitful interrogation of the ways in which the narrative, conveying memories of experiences, frames processes of subjectivity and identification. Acculturation theory, in the second instance, has been used in the Educational Sciences to explore experiences of cross-cultural learning in a foreign country relating, in particular, to questions of integration and adaptation, and thus appears to be a potentially useful framework with which to view Tianyi's study trip abroad. Whilst acknowledging at the outset that all three theories on learning are drawn from the Anglophone world and so come with their inherent limitations when applied to Sino-French production, it is felt that they nevertheless reveal some beneficial insights into Tianyi's progress when this is considered in a linear (Western) way. Subsequently, it will be suggested that a circular conception of Tianyi's learning experiences, reflecting Chinese philosophy, is revealed at certain points and offers resistance to both Anglophone theory and to the straightforward application of theory to literature. It is hoped that the two sets of approaches, when combined, convey the spirit of Cheng's own assimilation of West and East.

Part I of the novel establishes cultural learning as a transgenerational movement through the narrator's account of Tianyi's apprenticeship of Chinese artistic heritage. National and familial narratives about processes of doing and practices of learning contribute in a substantial way to Tianyi's formation of identity, supporting the act of thinking backwards and forwards in time and thus allowing him to make sense of the past while creating his own future. Such activities with an emphasis on cultural and community heritage are seen by politicians, policymakers and educationalists to lead to greater individual well-being and social cohesion. In this way, shared historical experiences reveal a set of social values and interconnecting

subject positions which promote a sense of belonging.¹⁴ The prestige associated with poetry, calligraphy and painting attaches a high pedagogical value to the learning of these traditional art practices, in turn instilling national pride in the practitioner. These arts are not separated from each other in China and, as becomes increasingly clear in Part I, have a quasi-sacred status, connecting human beings and gods.¹⁵ The serious artist must become accomplished in each medium, not only in order to join them up, but also to attain the spiritual: “un artiste s’adonne à la triple pratique poésie-calligraphie-peinture comme à un art complet où toutes les dimensions spirituelles de son être sont exploitées : chant linéaire et figuration spatiale, gestes incantatoires et paroles visualisées”.¹⁶ This triumvirate of words, brushstrokes and images is frequently illustrated in *Le Dit de Tianyi* (henceforth *DT*), in which we learn that in order to be called an artist and to see the vocation into maturity, one must live and breathe it. The artist’s training is aesthetic, certainly, but also existential as Tianyi remarks: “Je suis venu ici pour apprendre la peinture. J’affronte un métier qui ne s’apprend pas: exister” (*DT* p. 213). Art constitutes a way for mankind to approach the mystery of life from the inside, to know how to recognise and represent the essence of things and to achieve osmosis with the universe. In other words, in China, “l’art et l’art de la vie ne font qu’un”.¹⁷ From this point of view, then, cultural learning encourages the exploration, on the one hand, of the internal cognitive processes of the protagonist and, on the other hand, of his practical action in the real world.

The following sections will examine the elements of each traditional art form – poetry, calligraphy and painting – passed on in the narrative as instances of new knowledge, first-hand

¹⁴ These are the main arguments put forward by Douglas McQueen-Thomson, Paul James and Christopher Ziguras in *Promoting mental health and well being through community and cultural development* (Melbourne: Globalism Institute, 2004) and by Jean S. Phinney, Gabriel Horenczyk, Karmela Liebkind and Paul Vedder, “Ethnic identity, immigration and well being: An interactional perspective”, *Journal of Social Issues* 57:3 (2001), 493–510.

¹⁵ The motif of “reliance” runs through Diane de Margerie’s article on several of Cheng’s works and is used to reveal links not only between the Chinese and French cultures, but also between art forms and the spiritual. See “L’art et la vie selon François Cheng”, *Magazine littéraire*, vol.429, 2004, 28-29.

¹⁶ Cheng, *L’écriture poétique chinoise*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Cheng, *Vide et plein*, p. 12.

skills or technical instruction. Through their evocation of conventional themes, figures and ways of thinking, each medium offers a model to imitate, at an early ontogenetic stage, suggesting that cultural rudiments are required before graduation to artistic autonomy, a premise which may or may not be true in Tianyi's case. More certain is the observation that the correspondence between life and art constitutes a major point of learning in each domain.

Poetry, a favoured artistic medium for more than three thousand years, enjoys a particularly privileged status in China, as confirmed by Anne Cheng: "L'esprit le plus raffiné de l'art chinois s'est perpétué à travers la poésie."¹⁸ Even if *Le Dit de Tianyi* does not reveal the complex aspects of Chinese poetic language, it attempts to convey, at least, a flavour of it with translations of classic poems scattered throughout the text, such as verses from Du Fu (*DT* p. 70) and Wang Wei (*DT* p. 392), well-known poets from the Tang dynasty (618-907), as well as poetry by Qu Yuan (*DT* p. 128). This is in addition to presenting the reader with one of the main characters who is a poet, Haolang, and his own translated compositions (*DT* p. 97, p. 328, p. 386). Elsewhere, the novel reprises some significant themes of the classic poets thus allowing access to the Chinese poetic imagination, while at the same time demonstrating a renewal of this art form as it is applied to Tianyi's experiences. The figure who withdraws from society, for instance, appears twice, initially as the Taoist monk whom Tianyi encountered in his childhood and who announced his imminent departure (*DT* p.28), and then as the hermit-painter retreating to the mountains. In both cases, the physical withdrawal from the world of human beings is intended to lead to spiritual enlightenment. Another conventional trope of Chinese poetry is that of the master, a fundamental personage in Chinese culture, who chooses a disciple prepared to receive the flame of spirituality, someone who is able to pass it on in turn. He represents the social context of learning and his didactic pedagogy, or "scaffolding" as

¹⁸ Anne Cheng, *Le roman et la vie. Sur les coutumes séculières de Chine*, translated from Chinese by Noël Dutrait (Paris: Editions de l'Aube, 1995), p. 12.

cognitive scientists call it,¹⁹ leads to “imitative flexibility” and the beginning of the pupil’s innovative application of what has been learnt.²⁰ Tianyi is aware of this “sign of the father”, remembering the Chinese saying which states that when the disciple is ready, the master will appear. He adds that the youth who is not ready will pass by the master, while the one who recognises the master will stop to receive his teachings (*DT* p. 160). This millennia-old relationship becomes reality when Tianyi meets the hermit-painter, receives instruction from him about his painting technique and heeds advice about the necessity of understanding his own traditions before looking at outside influences. He is encouraged to visit the Dunhuang caves in North-East China, at a point on the Silk Road where religions and cultures came into contact and where, over 1,000 years, Buddhist art appeared. It is only by studying and appreciating “ces trésors du passé” (*DT* p. 161) that he will be in a position to experience those of a foreign culture, according to the master. Moreover, through this mouthpiece for cultural learning we are told that the relationship between the disciple and master extends over three periods of time – the fortuitous encounter, the fruitful exchange and the inevitable separation: “un maître s’impose à un disciple, lui donne tout, puis s’efface pour que le disciple devienne lui-même” (*DT* p. 167). In the course of his meanderings in China, Tianyi is thus introduced to poetic figures passing on national narratives and revealing systems of signification which encourage him to identify with historical experiences and cultural values. By understanding the figures of the hermit and master, he acquires knowledge of group-specific beliefs and practices that increase his affiliation to the social group that is Chinese artists.

With calligraphy, Tianyi begins his apprenticeship as a painter, guided by his father who teaches him how to use the brush properly and arrange pictographs spatially to create visual rhythm. Playing on light and darkness, calligraphy forms the basis of Chinese painting,

¹⁹ Cristine H. Legare and Mark Nielsen, “Imitation and Innovation: The Dual Engines of Cultural Learning”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19:1 (2015), 688–699 (p. 695).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 688.

as the hermit-painter explains: “Commencer par la calligraphie, continuer par le dessin qui permet de maîtriser la technique du trait, puis s’attaquer à l’art de l’encre pour aboutir enfin à une composition organique” (*DT* p. 161). A description follows of Tianyi, intrigued by the ritual preparation of ink, dwelling on its creative power and wondering at the meticulous, systematic dilution of the density and colours of the ink. The scene depicts the spiritual preparation of the calligrapher who must interiorise his vision in every detail,²¹ before transposing it stroke by stroke onto paper: “plongeant mon regard dans le liquide [...] je vis apparaître la vision de la montagne nuageuse que j’avais capté le matin même. Sans tarder, je me mis à dessiner” (*DT* p. 23). The emerging brushstrokes show their essence as well as the internal unity of the drawn object, once reconstituted. Tianyi’s concentrated efforts on this ritual convey not only his deep psychological engagement with the task, but also his awareness that careful preparation for ink painting has an affiliative function. He has adopted a social learning bias that coheres him to a particular cultural community and allows him to become a competent member of it.²² This initial phase of Tianyi’s education shows his immediate experience of interacting with the ink, getting the feel of it on and off paper, and then applying it. It corresponds to the first mode of Kolb’s learning cycle, concrete experiences (CE), which relates to understanding the task at hand. Concrete experiences serve as the basis for observation and reflection (RO) for Kolb and we also witness this relationship in the early part of Tianyi’s apprenticeship when he notices that calligraphy requires a perfect mastering of the brush since any touching up is impossible: the energy, “chi”/“qi” (氣), guiding the hand which traces the strokes in the process of recreating the world must not be interrupted. This is why Tianyi refuses to remove a line in the middle of the blue area surrounding the figure of Yumei in her portrait. Recognising that every movement of the brush is significant, he prefers to

²¹ The corresponding term, “i”, from Chinese pictorial art designates “idée, désir, intention, conscience agissante, juste vision”, according to Cheng, *Souffle-Esprit*, p. 18.

²² For more on the functions of ritual in social group behaviour, see Legare and Nielsen, p. 691.

interpret this unexpected mark as either a shooting star or the flight of a lark (*DT* p. 382), rather than as a technical imperfection. As Tianyi advances in his learning of calligraphy, he develops an intimacy with nature, an osmosis which is explained by Cheng in another work: “En pratiquant cet art, tout Chinois retrouve le rythme profond de son être et entre en communion avec les éléments.”²³ If Tianyi shows such care and veneration during his copying of Buddhist verses and litanies, it is because calligraphy reinvigorates signs with their original and sacred breath and eventually permits communication with the spiritual. With this demonstration of sensitivity, there is evidence of reflection being turned into practice and of understanding being transferred from the inside to the outside, which implies that the next phase of Kolb’s learning cycle, abstract conceptualization (AC), is bypassed since this would mean keeping knowledge on the cognitive level. Tianyi uses his intuitive judgement to retain a mistake, instead of dogmatically applying the principles of calligraphy, thereby showing a deviation from accepted practice but also a sensitivity to the meaning of his creation.

As another departure from the linearity of his formal education, Tianyi does not wait until he has acquired proficiency in calligraphy, a pictorial form of writing, before he attempts his first significant painting, a bust of Yumei. Rather than imitating a particular style or relying on learnt precepts, he gives free rein to “une force inconnue” (*DT* p. 60) which guides his hand and produces, trait by trait, his “vision intérieure” (*ibid.*). The resulting portrait seems to be a success: Tianyi is pleased with the way he captured Yumei’s gesture of throwing back her hair and the subject herself is surprised to see her face and expressions rendered so faithfully (*DT* p. 61). Already competent in practice, equivalent to the final stage of active experimentation (AE) according to Kolb’s model, he is nevertheless encouraged by the hermit-painter to return to traditional painterly techniques, such as the portraitist method of “trois couches et cinq points” (*DT* p. 214), in other words, the importance of centring in drawing which takes into

²³ Cheng, *L’écriture poétique chinoise*, p. 16.

account the three dimensions and the five points of the body (head, two arms and two legs). Also as part of this regression to the first mode of learning, he is advised how to portray the essence of an object rather than emphasise exterior details, so as not to risk disrupting “le mouvement global, de rater l’unité de l’ensemble” (*DT* p. 381). Indeed, the hermit-painter suggests how Tianyi might truly see an object and paint its essence by means of four stages of vision: “voir” – seeing the exterior aspect, “ne plus voir” – denoting the state of obscurity before the vision, “s’abîmer à l’intérieur du non-voir” – getting lost in its internal properties, and “re-voir” – the stage of illumination where the person seeing is at one with the object (*DT* p. 162). It is then possible to see by means of “l’œil de Sapience”, or Third Eye, and penetrate aesthetically the mysteries of the world. Having been reminded of the portraitist technique and the basics of observation, Tianyi has returned to the beginning of the learning cycle, as though his painting of Yumei was simply a premature, though heartfelt, artistic expression. As the discussion of the Third Eye demonstrates, he lingers for a while on the level of abstract conceptualization and considers other examples of primordial notions of Chinese pictorial terminology. For instance, the unfinished is defined paradoxically by Cheng in his collection of essays *Souffle-Esprit* as “[la] forme suprême de l’accomplissement”.²⁴ Referring to the blanks left in a painting to be filled in by “Wu” (无), the concept denotes limitlessness or the potentiality of metamorphosis inherent to any object. Space, opened up, allows ascension to the world of the gods, with any apparent incompleteness persisting only in thought. In fact, Tianyi has already, intuitively, learnt not to overwork a painting and not to fear leaving a blank space, having understood that Yumei’s portrait need *not* be finished: “bien que le tableau fût inachevé, je sentis [...] que je devais m’arrêter et qu’il ne fallait plus rien ajouter sous peine de tout gâcher” (*DT* p. 61). The narrator is conveying here the idea of Chinese painting as Vision; for instance, that vision of Yumei which Tianyi transposes into a fresco in the carpenter’s

²⁴ Cheng, *Souffle-Esprit*, p. 176.

workshop and in front of which Haolang can find nothing else to say but: “C’est cela” (*DT* p. 382). It is this second portrait of his friend, painted after her death, having visited Europe and been sent to a labour camp in Northern China, that Tianyi views as the apogee of his life experiences, rather than of his education, and considers that he always had within him, as confirmed by the spontaneous first portrait. Significantly, that first portrait led him to conclude that painting was his preferred art form, a choice which was more about recognising fate than finding a vocation (*DT* p. 98), more about expressing an inner necessity than exercising a particular profession. While the person undergoing the process of learning normally acquires a skill and/or knowledge which transforms something objective into something subjective, our protagonist inverts this process by consistently drawing upon what is inside him to create an object of art.

From the preceding analyses, it is evident that Tianyi does not necessarily need to learn from the past in order to paint in the present, though cultural learning does help to consolidate the exchanges between the two temporal positions and allows him to attribute meaning to artistic processes and to the content of his paintings. The capacity to think between points in time encourages Tianyi to see how history relates to his life, raising questions about the cognitive architecture of memory and its consequences for his subjectivity. Cultural history and historical consciousness, in this way, “play a role in the mental household of a subject”, and the resulting narrative, conveying a mixture of experience and self-realisation, helps the individual to place himself “in a way acceptable to [himself]”.²⁵ Such an orientating function is evident in *Le Dit de Tianyi* since it serves, in part, as a literary representation of historical memory with, for example, the recollection of the rituals and cultural mores of Tianyi’s community and, more specifically, of Taoist beliefs. These are centred on the understanding of the universe as “un gigantesque réseau d’engendrement et de circulation”, called Tao, or the

²⁵ Rüsen, p. 87 and p. 85 respectively.

Way.²⁶ According to Cheng in *Souffle-Esprit*, chapter XLII of the *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi, the acknowledged founder of Taoism, defines Chinese cosmology in terms of a unitary and organicist conception of Creation where everything is held together and connected.²⁷ The middle way, or “le vide median”, allows yin and yang to circulate, interact and transform. It is the mediating breath between two opposing elements, associated with heaven and earth respectively.²⁸ Tao represents the nostalgia of origin towards which every follower of Taoism dreams of returning, “taraudé, presque dès la naissance, par la nostalgie du Ciel. Il passe toute sa vie à cultiver le détachement, à se rendre léger, à tendre vers des régions aériennes comme vers un rêve originel [...]. Dès ici-bas, il fait corps avec le Tout” (*DT* p. 30). This ultimate quest for unity and totality is what Tianyi pursues when he says “je peindrais ma fresque à moi. C’est ainsi que je rejoindrais tout” (*DT* p. 235). He intends to create an artwork which will express his internal preoccupations and reconnect him with Yumei and Haolang, thus re-establishing the three-way relationship between the fictional embodiments of the middle way, yin and yang. Time is perceived as circular, demonstrated in one way by the changing configurations of the relationships within the trio: from a harmonious threesome in Part I of the novel, they become divided in Part II since Yumei and Haolang form an amorous couple which leaves Tianyi alone, then the pairing of Tianyi and Haolang dominates most of Part III until the presence of “l’Amante” is felt again. Any new cycle involves a change which is both felt in advance (due to resemblance) and unexpected (because transformed): “Un cycle se termine; un autre commence, qui a l’air de suivre le même parcours mais débouche sur autre chose” (*DT* p. 327). In another example, the cyclical movement of the return to original unity

²⁶ François Cheng, *Le livre du vide médian* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009), p. 7.

²⁷ Cheng, *Souffle-Esprit*, p. 162.

²⁸ In his essay *Le Dialogue*, François Cheng explains: “[...] on distingue trois types de souffle qui agissent en concomitance : le Yin, le Yang et le Vide-médian. Ce dernier, un souffle en soi, est là lorsque le Yin et le Yang sont en présence. Il est indispensable ; c’est lui, lieu de circulation vitale, qui aspire le Yin et le Yang et les entraîne dans un processus d’interaction et de transformation mutuelle. [...] La pensée chinoise, convaincue qu’un sujet ne peut l’être que par d’autres sujets, a compris la nécessité du Trois, seul capable de prendre en charge le Deux tout en le transcendant” (p. 87).

and of the continual transformation of creative energy is explained by the master-figure of Professeur F. During a crossing of the Yangzi, he observes the work of the artisans, making objects out of the clay from the river banks: “Par leurs actes cent mille fois répétés, ces artisans perpétuent un mouvement circulaire, qui répond fidèlement au mouvement de la rotation universelle. Mouvement apparemment monotone mais chaque fois renouvelé, subtilement différent” (*DT* p. 151). Interpreting this act of creation, Tianyi reflects that something is made out of nothing which then gives rise to the two, then to the multiple – manifold clay objects in this case:

Ces mains nées de l’argile originelle, qui ne sont autres qu’argile, un jour se sont pourtant mises à malaxer et à façonner cette même argile, à en faire quelque chose d’autre qui n’avait jamais existé auparavant, qui était l’emblème même de la vraie vie [...] l’argile [...] eût gardé de quelque humus originel suffisamment de désirs virtuels, lesquels n’auront de cesse qu’ils ne se soient accomplis. (*DT* p. 151)

The strong spiritual imagery conveys Tianyi’s realisation that through art and its products human beings can connect with the universe and therefore act as the mediator between heaven and earth.

Learning about Chinese thought and artistic traditions means that Tianyi has been involved in a process of historical identification, searching for knowledge to establish his sense of self. But whilst he is keen to learn more about the influence of some cultural aspects on his art, such as Taoism, he challenges the assumption that his identity is fixed by a pre-existing set of characteristics. This is especially true when he considers himself not to conform to “l’idée qu’on se fait d’un Chinois” (*DT* p. 199), to the myth of some “essence” shared by all members of a race, nation or ethnic group. The models he is expected to follow belong to the respected, ancient arts, those of high culture, like the Ming vases to which Tianyi, in an ironic tone, compares himself during a soirée in Paris (*DT* p. 198). Placing value on certain traditional

practices and Taoist beliefs has played a part in reproducing – what could be called – an elitist culture.²⁹ In this light, Tianyi's apprenticeship could be seen as a reminder of social conventions or institutions that are engaged with culture and power. However, there is more textual evidence to show that Tianyi does not simply accept the ideological discourses and practices that contribute to his sense of belonging. In fact, it will be argued in the final section of this study that, during the course of his trip to Europe in Part II ("Récit d'un détour"), he deconstructs them.

If the role of collective memory is to stabilise identity, then the influence of Western culture threatens to have a destabilising effect, though Tianyi is not adverse to this and even sees his exposure to the foreign in a positive light, as "un système de résonances réciproques, où rien n'est indépendant, où tout se correspond, se suscite et s'appelle".³⁰ Even before leaving for France, he feels an affinity with certain European art works, whether translations of Gide and Rolland Romain, or Dvorak's symphonies which sound to him as familiar as some Chinese compositions: "Curieusement, cette musique si lointaine, si 'étrangère', me fut d'emblée proche, aussi proche que certains morceaux chinois anciens" (*DT* p. 92). Meanwhile, in painting, European artists of the 14th-16th centuries remind him of the Chinese masters of the 8th-11th centuries, and the paintings of Van Gogh speak to him personally: "je me sentais proche de Van Gogh [...]. Son œuvre résonnait en moi comme un appel fraternel" (*DT* p. 98). Intellectual sensitivity and affective sensibility combine to produce a personal conviction to open up to the foreign, rather than being the result of an externally imposed lesson. The emotional response elicited relates to a totally natural aesthetic and existential development. Once in Europe, a correspondence of both possession and dispossession is established between Tianyi and Rembrandt. He sees himself in the latter and even recognises people he knows (like

²⁹ This is not a surprising stance given the author's own admittance to l'Académie Française in 2002, the bastion of French cultural life.

³⁰ Brient, p. 484.

mother and sister) in the paintings: “Entrant dans l’univers intime de Rembrandt, je ne m’attendais certes pas à pénétrer dans le mien propre [...] les créatures du Hollandais investissaient mon champ imaginaire, me révélaient les images des désirs et des rêves dont mon inconscient était habité” (*DT* p. 223). In addition, Tianyi admits that he has never felt as in touch with Chinese painters of the Song and Yuan periods as in the museums of Florence and Venice (*DT* p. 232). Clearly, personal experience forms the basis of cross-cultural learning for Tianyi and the development of his skills as a painter depends on his assimilation, to a certain extent, of both Chinese and European practices. This is evidenced again in the way the Loire is described, seemingly coming straight from a traditional Chinese landscape painting: the harmony between the countryside and architecture along the Loire remind him of the Chinese technique of “jiehua” which opposes “les lignes géométriques des habitations humaines et l’environnement naturel, tout en les mariant dans une symbiose parfaite” (*DT* p. 267). Tianyi’s retention of a strong ethnic identity while also identifying with various aesthetic aspects of European societies points to an integrated (or bicultural) identity, according to recent models of acculturation.³¹ It is recognised that acculturation is a two-dimensional process which takes into account both the “preservation of one’s heritage culture and adaptation to the host society” and the fact that these dominant features “are conceptually distinct and can vary independently”.³² As Tianyi demonstrates, he does not necessarily have to renounce his origins in order to adapt to life in Europe. Interestingly, as his national identity – his feelings of belonging to, and attitudes toward, China – wanes, his ethnic identity is amplified. He becomes close to other Chinese immigrants in Paris, listens to their stories, commiserates with them about their menial jobs and understands their homesickness, all ways which show evidence of shared values, commitment to an ethnic group, strong self-identification and kinship. Tianyi,

³¹ See in particular John Berry, “Psychology of acculturation” in John Berman (ed.) *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 37 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) pp. 201–234; and John Berry, “Immigration, acculturation and adaptation”, *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46 (1997), 5–68.

³² Phinney et al, p. 495.

himself, undergoes personal hardship in the form of poverty and ill health, as well as experiencing loneliness, meaning that his “detour” is as much a quest to find out his strengths and weaknesses, thereby discovering the contours of his identity, as an artistic apprenticeship. His decision, as he emerges from this period of lows, to resume painting with ink is seen as a return to origins, but with a significant modification since he is defining his own terms rather than adhering to any externally-imposed lessons: “Je crois qu’à partir de ce moment-là, je commençai à entendre ma voix, à trouver ma voie” (*DT* p. 262). Such a cyclical transformation, which is both similar and different to a previous state of being, arises from an inner conviction and depends on the symbiosis between Chinese and Western influences which continues after his return to China in Part III (“Mythe du retour”).

Continuing on the path of a natural evolution, Tianyi learns that it is necessary to pass through the experience of the Other (“détour”) in order to be able to appreciate the qualities of one’s own culture (“retour”). In other words, it is only by being familiar with Chinese art forms and then through contact with Western painting that Tianyi succeeds in developing his own understanding of the art form and finishes by producing his unique fresco, the second portrait of Yumei. The colour blue is used to great symbolic effect in it since, as well as appearing in the scenes of the adoration of the Buddha in the Dunhuang caves and representing the “non-manifest” of the Taoist Way, blue is associated with the Madonna in Western iconography and thus adds a touch of the sacred to Yumei’s image. Christian symbolism, especially since the Renaissance, has associated blue with truth, peace and virtue, while in China the colour represents immortality, so that both traditions combine to depict what Tianyi perceives to be Yumei’s essential characteristics and their enduring friendship, whether on earth or in heaven.³³ The resultant symbiosis of East and West is desirable in Haolang’s opinion too

³³ Blue does not stand for one of the five elements in Chinese culture, suggesting that it has, for Tianyi, mainly artistic saliency here. These elements are wood, fire, earth, metal and water which correspond, respectively, to the colours green, red, yellow, white and black.

because the renewal of art forms can only be attained when the best of the two worlds come together: “le salut vient [...] de l’Occident [...] pour [...] nous arracher à la partie dégénérée, pourrie, de nos racines [...] c’est bien après avoir lu toutes ces œuvres occidentales que je commence à y voir plus clair dans notre propre culture” (*DT* pp. 96–97). Complementing the spiritual triangle of Earth-Man-Heaven, a three-way relationship on the level of art is presented here and shows the creation of a new learning experience: Orient-Synthesis-Occident. Regarding the first component, there is the return to sources with Tianyi meeting the hermit-painter who insists on the importance of tradition: “la tradition [...] prépare à la vraie rencontre avec un autre, à l’affrontement sans se perdre [...] dans la mesure où ils connaissaient la meilleure part de leur propre tradition qu’ils étaient à même de reconnaître la meilleure part de l’autre” (*DT* p. 165). A second return to tradition is apparent in the adventure of Dunhuang, but it is a tradition already mixed up with Indian art, given the spread of Buddhism from India to China around the fourth century AD. Then comes the confrontation with the Outside, in the form of Tianyi’s study trip to Europe, and finally the creation, via synthesis, of the best of the two cultures and of the artist’s own sensitivities: “Tu dois donc te préparer, afin d’affronter un autre grand art et parvenir à une vraie création qui soit à toi” (*DT* p. 165). Only at the end of this process is he ready to confront “une peinture très différente de celle qu’il connaît, devant laquelle il ira de l’incompréhension à la *rencontre* et à l’échange”.³⁴

The portrait represents the culmination of Tianyi’s cross-cultural learning, which has been interpreted as comprising irregular crossings between Kolb’s stages of learning: at times moving predictably from concrete experience through to observation and reflection, and at other times jumping forwards to active experimentation – the final mode – and then back to reflection. However, Tianyi’s other major artistic output, his life story, which is different to the one constructed by the narrator and which is brought to the fore again in the last section of the

³⁴ Bertaud, p. 511.

novel, is not so easily read in the light of ELT or, indeed, of any prescriptive model. *Le Dit de Tianyi* and the exchange between East and West portrayed ultimately in it are, we are told in the preface, the result of the narrator's attempt to collect together and edit Tianyi's life story which he wrote, supposedly, on scraps of paper in an asylum after he went mad following the violent death of Haolang at the hands of the Red Guards. Tianyi took instinctively to writing, as an act of mourning, without any proper preparation or training and in a frenzied manner which contrasts with the careful development of his skills as a painter honed over three decades. With his paintings destroyed, he replaces the visual with the verbal and produces his "dit", a creation which emanates wholly from his inner being or, more precisely, from the depths of despair. Its lacunae, chronological inconsistencies and narrative imperfections are filled in and corrected by the narrator who also imposes a strong pedagogical slant, making the final account – the novel itself – an orderly progression towards the protagonist's painterly accomplishment. It is, perhaps, too regulated and constructed, too easily interpreted in a mostly straightforward and linear way. However, Tianyi's scribbles constitute a much more intuitive and untutored creation which does not lend itself to the application of theory. Cheng, then, puts into sharp focus "la différence entre une pédagogie reçue de l'extérieur et fondée sur des modèles établis, et une vocation naissant du plus profond de soi et actualisant un devenir".³⁵ In other words, as a writer, rather than as an artist, Tianyi surpasses pedagogy: "créer, c'est sortir de la classe pour s'éveiller au monde".³⁶ Moreover, although the lessons learnt have been the focus of this study, we should not diminish the evidence found of "l'impulsion imaginative et l'alchimie des mots" which counter instances of didacticism throughout the novel and are made most apparent in the last eight paragraphs.³⁷ Here, the direct intervention of the narrator reminds us of the literariness of the work and that it is a translingual reinvention of a classic of modern Chinese

³⁵ Fraisse, p. 189.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

³⁷ Yinde Zhang, *Littérature comparée et perspectives chinoises* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), p. 122.

literature, namely Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* (1918), which presents the diary entries of a paranoid man preceded by a foreword written by another fictional persona. Cheng thus draws on China's imaginary in another way, creating as he does so another symbiotic link to his adopted language.

Tianyi's written creation, since it reinforces literality rather than pedagogy, signifies an interruption in the line of development from ethnic identification through to cultural exchange by showing how Tianyi doubles back on himself, in a circular way, reverting to the beginner stage of a writer's trajectory. A change has occurred in the individual, but it does not result in increased knowledge or improved ability, indeed no discernible alteration is produced. In *Vide et plein. Le langage pictural chinois*, Cheng introduces the *Livre des transformations* (*Huashu*), the foundational text of Taoist philosophy reputedly dating from 930 BC, which states that three types of mutations operate: "mutation non changeante" corresponding to "le Vide originel", "mutation simple" indicating the regular movements of the cosmos, and "mutation changeante" concerning the evolution of individuals.³⁸ Two of these are evident in the conceptualisation of human evolution in which time moves both in a linear motion provoking "mutation changeante" and in a circular motion towards "mutation non changeante".³⁹ Following this thinking, Tianyi makes progress as a painter, with some leaps forwards and backtracking which nevertheless involve a definite evolution in ability, whilst experiencing "mutation non changeante" as an inexperienced writer who does not learn to improve his skills either on the job or after it. His Chinese identity and his love for Yumei and Haolang are fixed constants marking his being-in-the-world during both types of mutation. All in all, Tianyi's "dit" reveals an organicist understanding of life that cannot be separated from Chinese beliefs

³⁸ Cheng, *Vide et plein*, p. 68.

³⁹ Ibid.

and cosmology, with its circular movement further represented by the narrative structure of the novel which ends where it began, with Tianyi in an asylum.

Over the course of this study, the idea is confirmed that some distinct lessons are conveyed by the narrator concerning Tianyi's consolidation of cultural learning in terms, firstly, of national traits, and secondly, of European culture. Initially, the traditional Chinese art forms of poetry, calligraphy and painting are shown to interconnect and embrace the dialogue between nature, the vital energies and human relationships. The spiritual, aiming to convey the totality of the universe, is thus seen to be at the centre of Chinese aesthetics. When Tianyi leaves his familiar spatial, temporal and ideological settings, he becomes distanced from national narratives and embarks on establishing new relationships between past and present, memory and identity. Rendering acculturation theory into a concrete form, the novel then becomes a site of interaction where two ways of thinking, Occidental and Oriental, can find harmony and osmosis in the same piece of writing. This Sino-French production involves a negotiation between times and cultures in which Tianyi opens himself up to the world and to an enriching, transformative encounter, or as Bertaud calls it, "le fructueux *échange-change*".⁴⁰ Mirroring this outward movement, the study has gone beyond the limitations of Kolb's model, and thus of Western theory, to include Chinese philosophy, an expansion which leads to the conclusion that Tianyi's artistic development may be viewed as a series of circular mutations shaped by both personal and collective circumstances. These mutations have occurred when Tianyi has felt an interior impulse towards change, rather than having received instruction from the outside via some master, friend or educational principle. The protagonist is, in this way as well as in others mentioned at the start, similar to the author who felt impelled to write about

⁴⁰ The full quotation from Bertaud refers to François Cheng: "Entre son fond chinois indestructible – 'sa propre meilleure part' - et 'la meilleure part de l'autre' – cet Occident qu'il a fait sien et qui lui a permis de se ré-enraciner, à la fois dans une terre et 'dans l'être', François Cheng n'a cessé de pratiquer le *dialogue*, le fructueux *échange-change*" (p. 517). The two embedded quotations come from Cheng, *Le Dialogue*, p. 83 and p. 79 respectively.

his life experiences. For François Cheng, the choice to write a novel in a foreign language confirms not only his mastery of French and socio-cultural integration, but also his place in the francophone literary field. *Le Dit de Tianyi* could then be considered as the manifestation of another type of learning, undertaken by the author, since its narrative of the self, constructed for a foreign audience, serves as the culmination and expression of the translingual artist's accomplishments.

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