

**SECOND
SINO-BALKANICA CONFERENCE**

*Sino-Balkan Cultural Dialogue:
Challenges and Perspectives in a Global Context*

Proceedings

Editor in Chief: Antonia Tsankova, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
Coordinators: Neli Nanova, Nora Chileva

Sofia, 2025

ORGANIZED BY
World Sinology Center
Bulgarian Association of Sinologists
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
Embassy of the PRC in Bulgaria

A template designed by Freepik is used for the cover.

© „East-West Publishing House“, 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission from the authors and „East-West Publishing House“.

© Antonia Tsankova, editor-in-chief, 2025

© Neli Nanova, Nora Chileva, coordinators, 2025

ISBN 978-619-01-1694-3

SECOND SINO-BALKANICA CONFERENCE

*Sino-Balkan Cultural Dialogue:
Challenges and Perspectives in a Global Context*

Proceedings



Contents

1. Andrei Radulescu , <i>China-EU Economic Relations: Recent Developments and Prospects</i>	7
2. Teodora Peneva , <i>Economic Relations between China and Countries from Southeast Europe</i>	16
3. Iskra Mandova , <i>Cross-cultural Relations between Tang and Byzantine Empires along the Silk Road</i>	24
4. Donghai Hou , <i>Using Digital Tools to Help Advanced Chinese Learners Acquire Intercultural Competence</i>	35
5. Teodor Valev , <i>Chinese Video Games Localisation – Linguistic and Cultural Challenges (Honor of King and League of Legends Case Study)</i>	47
6. Neli Nanova , <i>Educational and Academic Exchanges between China and Bulgaria</i>	57
7. Asen Velinov, Nora Chileva-Xiao , <i>Chinese Perceptions of the Balkan Region: Stereotypes, Soft Power, and the Potential for Strategic Cultural Engagement</i>	72
8. Latchezara Pravtcheva , <i>China through the Eyes of the West: Between Myth and Reality</i>	83
9. Constantinos G. Polymeros , <i>A Buddhist Sūtra “à la grecque”? Traces of the Hellenistic World in a Chinese Version of the “Nagasena Bhikṣu Sutra</i>	89

10. **Antonia Tsankova**, *Metaphors of SPACE as TIME
in Chinese and Bulgarian Linguacultures*..... 97
11. **Sara Cvetanovska, Liu Yi**, *Translation as Cultural Exchange:
The Dissemination of Chinese Literature in Macedonian* 109
12. **Ivana Gubić, Ivica Bakota**, *From Bruce Lee to Xiaomi:
Knowledge, Perception and Interest for China
among Croatian High School Students* 118
13. **Hristina Teodosieva**, *The (Un)translatability
of Chinese Martial Arts* 132
14. **Ioana Alexia Antone**, *From Empress to Archetype:
Wu Zetian's Feminist Echo in Modern China* 142
15. **Desislava Damyanova**, *Daoism in the Context
of Sino-European Cultural Dialogue*..... 149
16. **Siqi Wu, Yanfeng Hu, Yueting Wang**, *A Novel Attention-Guided YOLOv11
Framework for High-Precision Cantonese
Opera Costume Recognition and Classification*..... 158
17. **Wang Yue**, *Burying Bittersweets and Flowing Fantasia:
Soul Conversations, Condensed Landscapes, and Endless Starry
Nights in Shen Fu's Floating Life at the 2023 BeSeTo Festival* 182
18. **Wang Yue**, *The Whispering of Echoing Air and the Rustling of Leaves:
Madame White Snake in The Legend of Madame White Snake
and Brother Wolf in Хаджи Димитър* 190

1.

China-EU Economic Relations: Recent Developments and Prospects

Andrei Radulescu
Institute for World Economy (Romania)

Abstract:

The EU-China economic relations have recently adjusted, given the consequences of the exogenous shocks – the coronavirus pandemic and the intensification of the geo-political tensions following the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine. For instance, the EU-China bilateral trade in goods declined in 2023 and 2024, while the FDI flows adjusted in 2022 and 2023. In this paper we analyse the dynamic of the EU-China trade and foreign direct investments since the beginning of the 2000s until 2024 by using the databases of Eurostat and Rhodium Group. The results of the analysis point out the potential for the improvement of the economic relations between EU and China in the future, in a complex world context. However, the transformation of this potential into reality is dependent on the improvement of the economic diplomacy, especially taking into account the severe increase of uncertainty after the recent changes in the largest economy in the world.

Keywords: EU-China economic relations, world economy, economic diplomacy

I. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 the world economy entered a period of unprecedented risks and challenges. On the one hand, it is a period of Great Transformations, of the transition towards a New World Order, in a context dominated by the efforts to identify new models of growth and development, and the implementation of the technological progress – the Digital Revolution, and the

Artificial Intelligence Revolution. On the other hand, there is a deterioration in risk perception regarding the relations between the most important economic blocks in the world, especially after the recent changes in the largest economy in the world. Last, but not least, it is a period characterised by a huge gap between the rhetoric and deeds, as reflected by the significant increase in military spending since 2022 and the low allocations for countering climate change.

In this complex and changing world context the EU-China economic relations have recently adjusted, given the consequences of the crisis in Ukraine (the geo-political fragmentation of the world economy) and the long-lasting challenges the EU economy has been confronted with – international competitiveness and regional economic convergence. However, China continues to be a very important economic partner for the European Union: second in terms of trade in goods and fourth in terms of trade in services, according to the European Commission (2024).

In this paper we analyse the developments within EU-China economic relations over the past decades by using the databases of Eurostat and the Rhodium Group. The results show an adjustment of the economic relations between these economic blocks in recent quarters, mainly determined by the developments in the world economy and the structural challenges, with which the EU economy has been confronted. However, there is rebound in the investments of EU companies in China in 2024, as German companies are very interested in the huge development potential of several sectors in China, including electric vehicles, as reflected by China Briefing (2024).

The rest of the paper has the following structure: Chapter 2 briefly presents the recent developments in the world economy; Chapter 3 analyzes the evolutions of the EU-China economic relations over the past decades and Chapter 4 draws conclusions.

II. Recent developments in the world economy

Global macroeconomic climate has recently deteriorated, an evolution mainly determined by the intensifying uncertainty following the changes in the largest economy in the world. According to the statistics of the Federal Reserve (2025) the World Uncertainty Index climbed by the highest quarterly pace since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the last quarter of 2024.

The significant recent increase in uncertainty has a negative impact for the investment climate, which is already affected by the high level of real interest rates (nominal interest rates adjusted by inflation). For instance, the real interest rate on the long maturity (10YR) in the USA (the largest economy in the world, with a

nominal GDP of over USD 29tn in 2024, according to the estimates of the Bureau of Economic Analysis) has recently consolidated close to the highest level since 2007, when the Great Financial Crisis started. We point out that the cost of financing in the USA represents a benchmark for the cost of financing in the world economy.

In this context, the growth pace of the world economic activity has recently deteriorated, as reflected by the dynamic of the PMI Composite index. This indicator is estimated on a monthly basis by S&P Global and reflects the evolution of the new orders, production, employment, prices, and short-term outlook for the manufacturing and services. The indicator declined for the second month in a row in February 2025 to the lowest level since December 2023, as can be noticed in the following chart (Figure 1). In other words, the world economic activity grew in February 2025 by the weakest dynamics since the end of 2023.

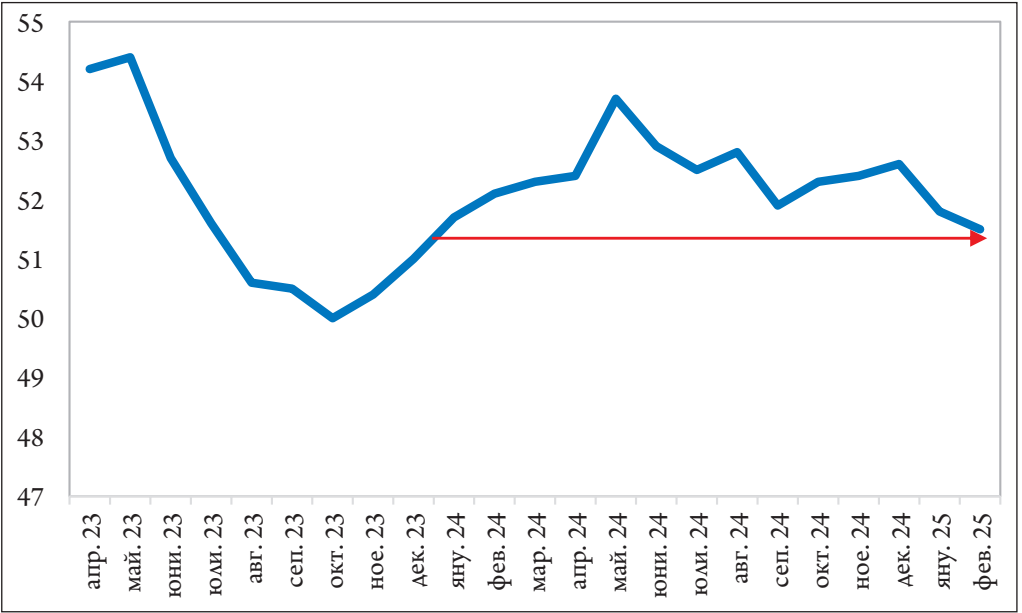


Figure 1. The Global PMI Composite indicator (points)
Source: representation by the author based on data by S&P Global, 2025.

Furthermore, we point out the persisting divergence among the largest economies in the world (USA, China, and Euroland, with a cumulative contribution of around 60% to the global GDP), as reflected by the following chart (Figure 2). In fact, the economy of Euroland (which represents around 85% of the EU economy) has been the loser of the world economy in recent years, in the context of the consequences of the exogenous shocks.

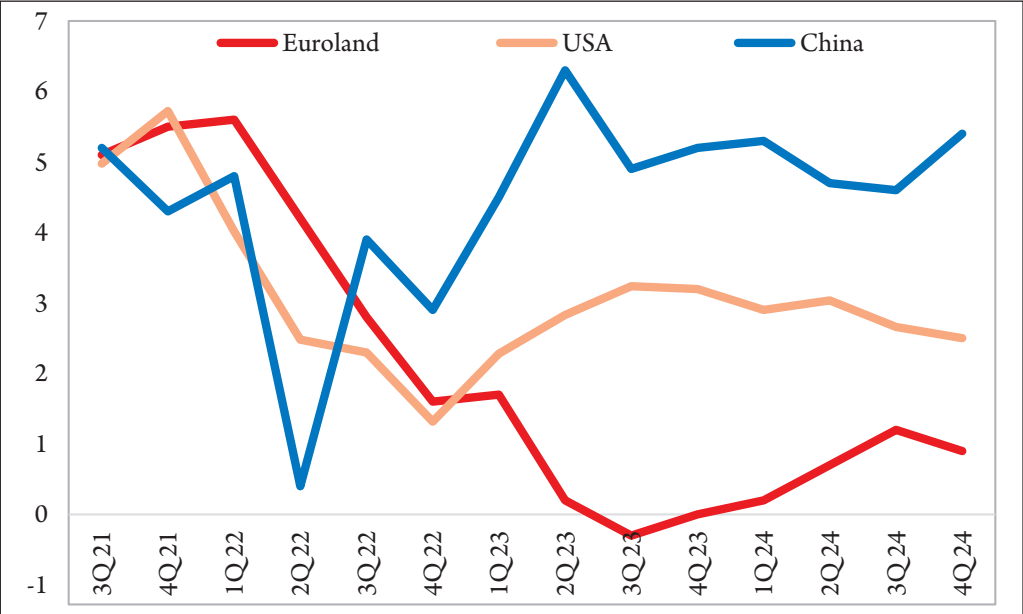


Figure 2. The annual pace of GDP in USA, China, and Euroland (%)

Source: representation by the author based on data by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Eurostat, and National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025.

Last, but not least, we point out the upside risks for the outbreak of new shocks in the world economy, as reflected by the strong upward trend for the price of gold in the recent quarters, outpacing the threshold of USD 3,000 per ounce in March 2025, according to the platform Goldprice.org (2025). These risks also encompass the trilemma of fiscal policy, a concept introduced by Gaspar (2024).

III. The evolutions of EU-China economic relations

The value of trade flow of goods between EU and China presented an upward trend in the past decades, an evolution influenced by several factors, including the entry of China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). According to the Eurostat database, the value of the bilateral trade flows of goods rose by an average annual pace of 9.2% to EUR 732.2bn from 2002 to 2024.

There is an increase in the value of imports of goods by EU from China by an average annual pace of 9.3% to EUR 518.9bn during 2002–2024, as reflected in the following chart (Figure 3). Furthermore, the value of the exports of goods by the EU to China increased by an average annual pace of 8.9% to EUR 213.2bn in the period 2002–2024. Therefore, the deficit of the balance in trade in goods between the

EU and China widened by an average annual pace of 9.6% to EUR 305.7bn during 2002–2024. However, we point out to the deterioration of the trade flow of goods between the EU and China in 2023 and 2024, an evolution mainly determined by the consequences of the global geo-political tensions, including the fragmentation of the world economy.

The cumulative trade flow of goods between the EU and China contracted by 13.3% in 2023 and 1.6% in 2024. The value of the imports of goods by the EU from China diminished 17.1% in 2023 and 0.3% in 2024. Furthermore, the value of the exports of goods by the EU to China contracted 3.0% in 2023 and 4.6% in 2024.

In this context, the deficit of the balance in trade in goods (EU-China) adjusted by 25.3% in 2023 (to EUR 297bn), but expanded by 2.9% to EUR 305.7bn (the second highest level in history, as is seen in the chart below).

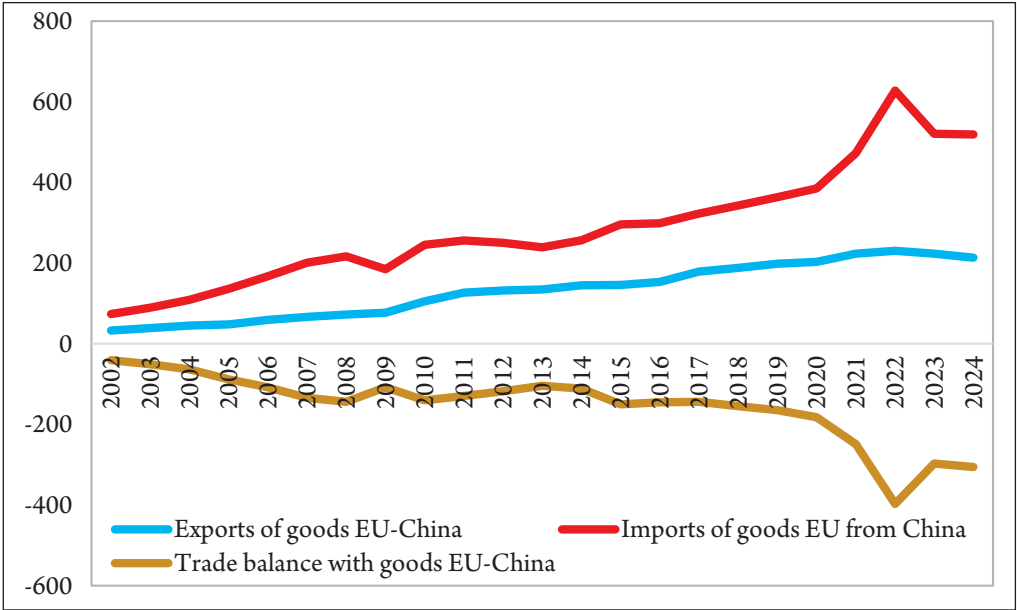


Figure 3. The EU-China international trade in goods (EUR, bn)
Source: representation by the author based on Eurostat data, 2025.

With regards to the EU-China trade relations in services, there is a decline in surplus to only EUR 14bn in 2023, according to the statistics of the European Commission (2024), as can be seen in the following chart (Figure 4). This evolution was mainly determined by the decrease of the EU exports of services to China from EUR 64.7bn in 2022 to EUR 57.3bn in 2023. The value of the EU imports of services from China diminished comparatively less, from EUR 48.3bn in 2022 to EUR 43.3bn in 2023.

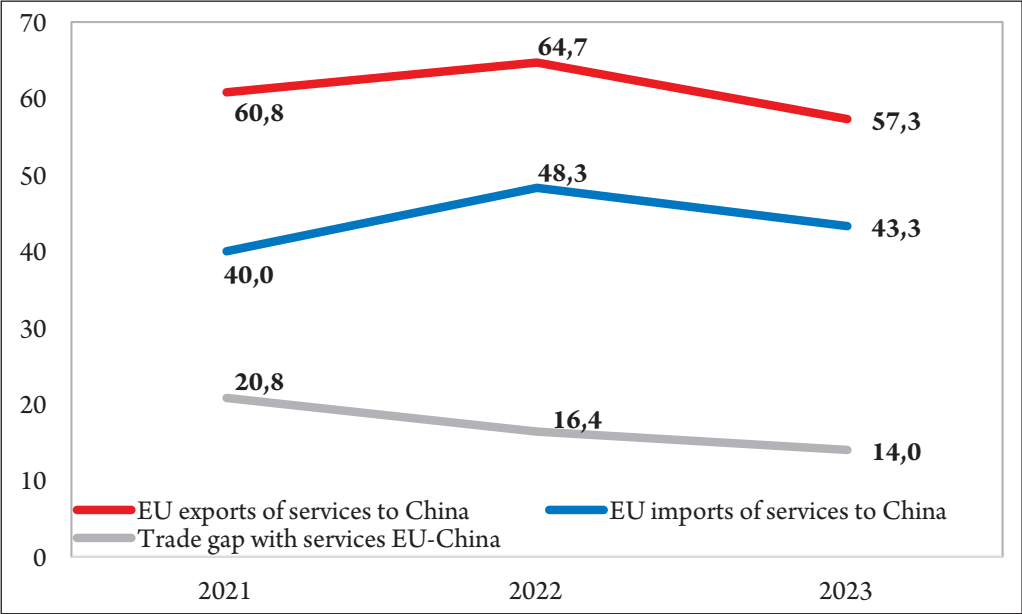


Figure 4. The EU-China international trade in services (EUR, bn)
Source: representation by the author based on data by the European Commission, 2024.

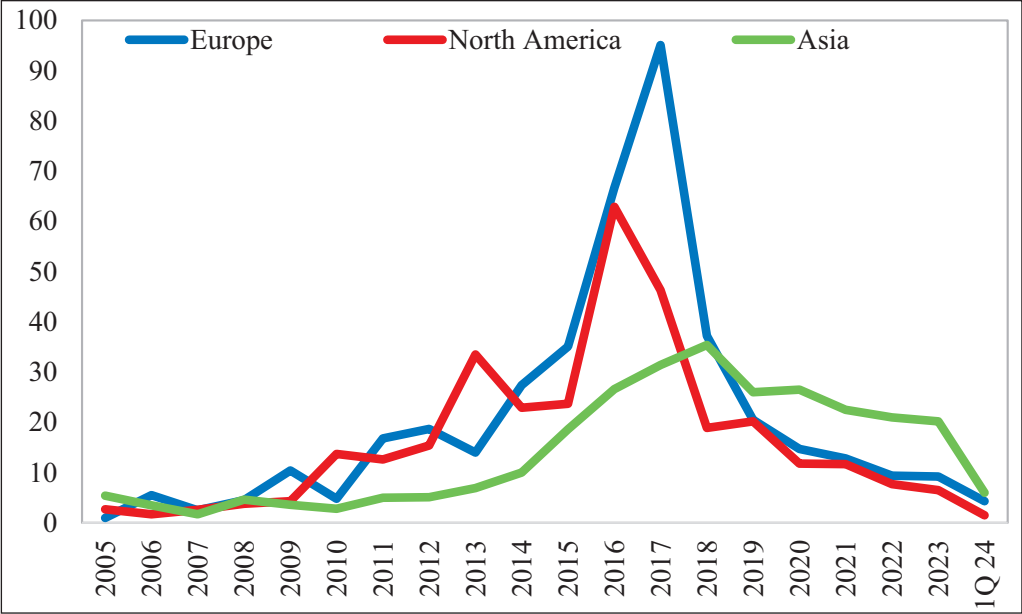


Figure 5. The evolution of Chinese FDI (USD, bn)
Source: representation by the author based on data by Rhodium Group, 2024.

With regards to the EU-China foreign direct investments (FDIs), we underline the fact that the EU used to be the main recipient of Chinese FDIs, taking up 29.4% in the cumulative stock of USD 1.4tn for the period 2003–1Q of 2024, according to data by the Rhodium Group (2024). Following the EU were North America and Asia, with contributions of 23.2% and 20.3% respectively of the total FDIs of China.

However, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic Asia outpaced Europe and the USA and became the main recipient of Chinese FDIs, as can be seen in the following chart (Figure 5).

We point out that Chinese FDIs in the EU intensified after the outbreak of the Great Financial Crisis, with an annual average of EUR 10bn for the period 2010–2023, up from an annual average of EUR 100mn in the period 2000–2009. However, Chinese FDIs in the EU contracted by 10% to EUR 4.7bn in 2023, according to data by Rhodium Group (2024).

The cumulative Chinese FDIs in the EU during the period 2000–1H of 2024 were EUR 144bn, mainly directed to Germany, France, Netherlands, Finland, and Italy, according to Statista (2024), as can be seen in the following chart (Figure 6). However, it is worth noting the recently increasing role of Hungary in terms of attracting Chinese FDIs, recording over 60% in 2Q of 2024.

With regards to the distribution of Chinese FDIs in the EU by sectors one can notice the allocation in the automotive industry (around 77% of the total in 2Q of 2024), in the context of the unprecedented global competition in this sector.

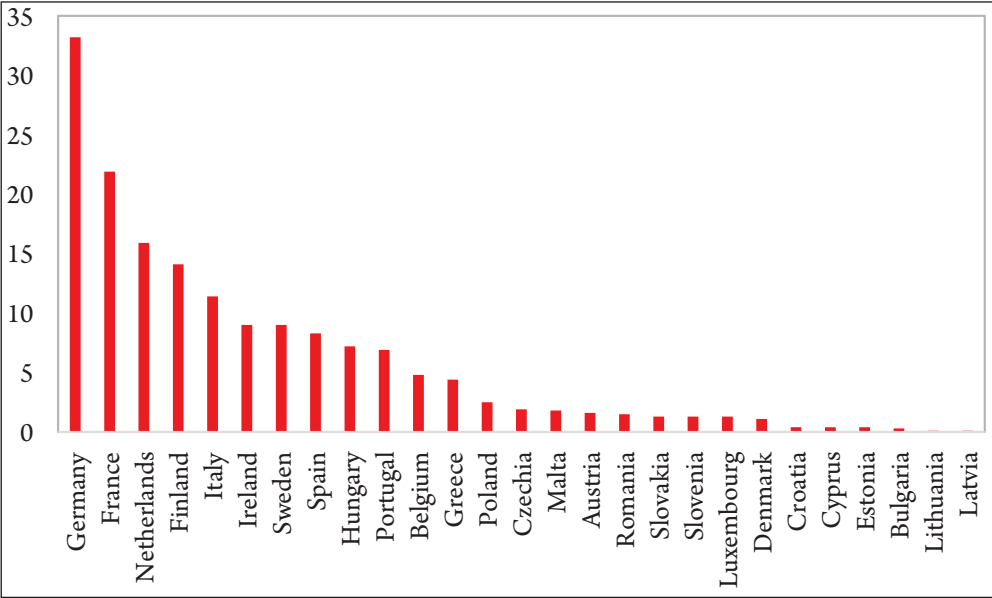


Figure 6. Chinese FDIs in the EU – total for 2000–2023 (EUR, bn)
Source: representation by the author based on data by Statista, 2024.

On the other hand, the FDIs of the EU to China stood at EUR 181bn in the period 2000–1H of 2024, with an increase in the annual average of EUR 5bn during the period 2000–2009 to an annual average of EUR 8bn during the period 2010–2023, according to data by Rhodium Group (2024).

We point out that the value of investments by EU companies in China rose to EUR 3.77bn in 2Q of 2024, the highest level since 3Q of 2022, with a distribution focused on the automotive industry (53%) and consumer products & services (18%). In terms of the distribution by country of origin, in 2Q of 2024 the top places were occupied by Germany, Netherlands, and France.

IV. Conclusions

On the one hand, our analysis pointed out the risks for the outbreak of new shocks in the world economy in the short-run, given the widening divergences and increasing tensions among the largest economic blocks (USA, China, and Euroland). In this context, we emphasize the important role of multilateralism and the potential for cooperation for a rules-based global order.

On the other hand, we point out the potential for the improvement of the economic relations between EU and China in the coming years, as both are confronted at present with the same challenge: how to deal with the largest economy in the world. However, the transformation of this potential into reality is dependent on intensifying the measures in terms of economic diplomacy, which is more important than ever in the past decades, especially considering the recent changes in the largest economy in the world.

In this respect we emphasize the huge potential for cooperation between EU and China in terms of the transition towards a New Economy, based on green energy, digitalisation, and balanced incorporation of technological progress.

References

- Bureau of Economic Analysis (2025). Gross Domestic Product, 4th Quarter and Year 2024 (Second Estimate), available at <https://www.bea.gov/news/2025/gross-domestic-product-4th-quarter-and-year-2024-second-estimate>
- China Briefing (2024). Decoding China's H1 2024 Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Performance, available at <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/decoding-chinas-h1-2024-foreign-direct-investment-fdi-performance/>
- European Commission (2024). EU trade relations with China, available at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en

- Eurostat (2025). EU27 (from 2020) trade by SITC product group, available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ext_st_eu27_2020sitc__custom_15856647/default/table?lang=en
- Federal Reserve (2025). World Uncertainty Index: Global: GDP Weighted Average, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WUIGLOBALWEIGHTAVG>
- Gaspar, V. (2024), Solving the Global Fiscal Policy Trilemma, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/23/imf-fiscal-affairs-global-policy-trilemma-economies/>
- Goldprice.org (2025). Available at <https://goldprice.org/gold-price.html>
- National Bureau of Statistics of China (2025). National Economy Witnessed Steady Progress amidst Stability with Major Development Targets Achieved Successfully in 2024, available at https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202501/t20250117_1958330.html
- Rhodium Group (2024). China cross-border Monitor, available at <https://cbm.rhg.com/>
- S&P Global (2025), Global Composite PMI, available at <https://www.pmi.spglobal.com/Public/Home/PressRelease/f324bb3473ea4fa8bce561623bff6015>
- Statista (2024). Cumulative value of completed foreign direct investment (FDI) transactions from China in EU-27 and UK between 2000 and 2023, by country, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244460/china-cumulative-foreign-direct-investment-to-eu-by-country/>

2.

Economic Relations between China and Countries from Southeast Europe

Teodora Peneva

Economic Research Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Abstract: This article examines the growing economic and geopolitical tensions between China and the European Union (EU) in Southeast Europe, a region that, despite its small size, has become a focal point for Sino-European relations. It discusses the impact of China's "14+1" initiative on trade and investment in the region, highlighting increased trade volumes, a widening trade deficit with China, and different aspects of attracting Chinese investments. The study analyses the region's economic dependence on the EU and the broader implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has led to significant infrastructure development in part of the countries, despite the small investment size and share in total inward investment stock of the countries. The article concludes that Chinese investments have had a positive, albeit modest, impact and that substantial untapped potential remains for future trade and investment growth, despite ongoing geopolitical challenges.

Keywords: Southeast Europe, China-EU relations, trade deficits, foreign investment, Belt and Road Initiative

1. Introduction

Southeast Europe, though a small market of 52.9 million people – 11.8% of Europe's population – and 5.2% of its GDP in 2023, has become a focal point of Sino-EU economic and geopolitical tensions. The region faces persistent challenges like corruption, poverty, income inequality, low labour productivity, and human capital outflow. These issues have become central to worsening Sino-European relations, further influenced by global trade conflicts, China's economic expansion, and

trade imbalances with the EU and US (Zhelev, P., 2018). The growing reliance on Chinese supply chains and US-led decoupling policies have further complicated the landscape.

Before 2012, Southeast European (SEE) countries played a minor role in China-EU relations. Though China had ties with Serbia and Hungary, the region was not a priority. This changed with the 2012 the “China-Central and Eastern European Cooperation” Initiative (China-CEE Initiative), which increased China’s economic engagement. Infrastructure projects have since drawn EU scrutiny, heightening geopolitical tensions and prompting a reassessment of EU policies on China’s influence.

Table 1 below shows statistics on the main socio-demographic indicators of the SEE countries and references to averages of the EU-27 or Euro area, to depict the contrast in the living standards and socio-economic conditions.

Table 1: Main Socio-Demographic Indicators of the SEE countries

Country Name	Population, total	Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	Birth rate, crude (per 1,000 people)	Labour force, total	Unemployment, total (% of total labour force)*	Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)	Gini index	GDP per capita (current US\$)
Reference period	2023	2022	2022	2023	2023	2021	2021	2023
Albania	2745972	1.38	10.1	1376643	10.1			8575
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3429142	1.481	7.75	1366194	10.688	–	–	8638.6
Bulgaria	6446596	1.78	8.8	3131695	4.3	22.9	39	15886
Kosovo	1756366	1.56	12.28	–	12.09*	–	49.40*	5960
Greece	10405588	1.43	7.3	4660090	11.1	18.8	32.9	23401
Croatia	3859686	1.53	8.8	1731721	6.1	18	28.9	21865
North Macedonia	1827816	1.60	9.9	797169	13.2		29.2	8624
Montenegro	616177	1.80	11.4	242927	14.6	20.3	34.3	12221
Romania	19059479	1.81	9.6	8280024	5.6	21.2	33.9	18404
Serbia	6623183	1.63	9.3	3246451	8.3	20	33.1	12282

Source: World Bank

Note: * (modelled ILO estimate), Kosovo population data is for 2021, for unemployment is for 2022.

2. Trade relationships

From a quantitative perspective, China does not rank among the primary trading partners of the SEE countries. Each nation in the region remains significantly more economically dependent on the European Union (EU) than on China, with

European trade accounting for over 50% of total trade in Southeast Europe and an even higher share among EU member states in the region (See Table 2).

Table 2: Southeast European countries and EU Trade Relations

Country	Import from EU, 2024		Export to EU, 2024		Import from EU, 2014–2024		Export to EU, 2014–2024		Import from EU, 2004–2024		Export to EU, 2004–2024	
Unit	Mn €	%*	Mn €	%*	Mn €	%*	Mn €	%*	Mn €	%*	Mn €	%*
Albania	4573	51%	2649	72%	35375	56%	21672	74%	55421	59%	27621	74%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8666	59%	6009	73%	69384	59%	50681	72%	109605	61%	72367	72%
Bulgaria	28461	57%	27523	64%	239305	60%	225714	64%	352879	59%	313657	63%
Greece	43377	51%	27426	55%	336068	51%	213848	53%	608958	52%	318794	53%
Croatia	32699	77%	15665	65%	229493	75%	121192	66%	333323	71%	172194	64%
Montenegro	1776	46%	177	30%	13186	46%	1697	34%	19087	45%	3206	42%
North Macedonia	5586	50%	5982	77%	45706	50%	52020	78%	66074	50%	67538	74%
Romania	90882	72%	66721	72%	718892	73%	558503	72%	1033290	71%	785954	71%
Kosovo	2843	45%	313	33%	19142	44%	1887	31%	26614	43%	2680	34%
Serbia	20222	53%	17512	63%	142858	54%	131360	66%	205209	55%	168601	64%

Source: Eurostat

Note: * % is for share of total import or export of the respective country.

Trade with China accounts for less than 10% of total trade in Southeast Europe and an even smaller share among EU member states in the region.

Furthermore, substantial trade deficits have emerged across the region, exacerbated by the launch of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and the expansion of China's transport infrastructure toward the EU. Analysis of import trends from China indicates that Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have experienced the most significant growth in Chinese imports between 2012 and 2020. Greece, Romania, North Macedonia, and Albania also registered notable growth, albeit slightly below 100%. Bulgaria and Croatia exhibited more moderate import growth, remaining below 50% during the same period. In contrast, Montenegro has seen a decline in imports of Chinese goods.

Table 3: SEE Countries and China Trade Relations

Country	Imports, US mn			Exports, US mn			Trade Balance, US mn		
	2023	2014–2023	2005–2023	2003	2014–2023	2005–2023	2003	2014–2023	2005–2023
Albania*	–	4086	6716	–	515	939	–	-3571	-5777
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1454	9001	13009	20	179	209	-1434	-8822	-12800

	Imports, US mn			Exports, US mn			Trade Balance, US mn		
Country	2023	2014–2023	2005–2023	2003	2014–2023	2005–2023	2003	2014–2023	2005–2023
Bulgaria	2880	18413	28480	1103	8740	11596	-1776	-9673	-16884
Greece	7461	47187	77654	416	6251	8981	-7045	-40936	-68673
Croatia	1378	9598	21851	85	1012	1349	-1293	-8585	-20502
Montenegro	459	2563	3700	3	115	127	-457	-3574	-2447
North Macedonia	1084	6200	8704	112	1046	1545	-972	-5155	-7159
Romania	7310	50983	75479	926	8944	12230	-6383	-42040	-63249
Serbia	4801	28541	39128	1160	4192	4270	-3642	-24349	-34858

Source: ITC

Note: * Albania data for 2023 is not available, data until 2023 is in fact until 2022 for Albania; Montenegro and Serbia data starts from 2006 in the period 2005–2023.

A detailed examination of import structures reveals several key insights. The SEE countries share a broadly similar import composition, albeit with a lower share of value-added goods and a higher proportion of textiles and chemicals. In contrast, Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria import machinery and electronic products at levels closer to global trade patterns. Romania leads the region in terms of import value, growth, and the share of machinery in its overall trade mix (Peneva, T., 2022). The technological sophistication of firms in Southeast Europe generally lags behind that of their Chinese counterparts. While China exports both high-value and low-value goods to the region, the SEE countries predominantly export raw materials. Machinery and electronic components remain the dominant export categories from China to the region.

Regarding exports to China, SEE countries exhibit a marked asymmetry, with persistent trade deficits but still some export growth achieved. Greece and Romania serve as China's most significant trading partners in Southeast Europe, generating the highest trade volumes. Bulgaria and Serbia follow in terms of trade volume, with Serbia notably increasing its exports to China sevenfold since the launch of the BRI. The patterns of import and export dynamics suggest that direct trade exposure to China varies across the region and remains inconsistent. While Chinese trade engagement remains below 10% of total trade, China has emerged as the second or third most important import partner for several SEE countries. Additionally, emerging trends indicate a gradual specialization in the export profiles of individual SEE economies.

Trade exposure to China varies across Southeast Europe and remains inconsistent, though China has become the second or third most important import partner for several countries. Additionally, emerging trends suggest a gradual specialization in the export profiles of individual SEE economies (Zhelev, P., 2018; Peneva, T., 2022; Branzova P., Nestorov N., 2023).

3. Investment

The European Union (EU) initiated its plans and policies towards the SEE region back in the 1990s, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This engagement was initially driven by the objective of promoting peace and stability in the region, with the long-term goal of facilitating the accession of SEE countries to the EU. Over time, the EU has played a pivotal role in shaping economic and political transformations in the region, emphasizing governance reforms and infrastructural development as key conditions for integration.

The EU’s attention to China’s growing presence in the Western Balkans has intensified, particularly following the establishment of the China-CEE initiative. This dynamic has gradually evolved into a central issue in China-EU relations, as Beijing’s economic footprint in the region has expanded through large-scale investment projects. Cooperation between China and the SEE region is primarily conducted within the framework of the China-CEE initiative and the BRI. Many connectivity projects associated with the BRI are concentrated in the SEE region, underscoring the region’s strategic importance in China’s broader economic expansion.

Launched in 2014 by Germany, the Berlin Process aims to drive reforms and economic transformation in the SEE region while strengthening EU influence. It addresses key EU accession barriers—weak infrastructure, economic vulnerabilities, corruption, democratic backsliding, and ethnic nationalism—while countering the rising influence of Russia, China, and Turkey.

In 2018 and 2019, the EU released key documents¹ outlining its strategy toward China. “EU-China: Strategic Perspectives” defines China as a partner, negotiator, competitor, and systemic challenger, highlighting the EU’s increasingly multifaceted approach to managing its relationship with China in various domains, including trade, investment, and regulatory frameworks.

China’s trade and investment policies in third countries, particularly in the SEE countries, broader Europe, and Africa, have gained significant prominence. Chinese investments in the SEE region have contributed to local economic growth, particularly in infrastructure and industrial development (Table 4).

Table 4: Chinese Investment Stock in the SEE countries

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Chinese Investment Stock in the SEE Countries, US mn								
Albania	4,25	6,64	9	3,21	1,8	3,07	1,59	3,2
B&H	1,25	1,26	3,83	4,99	5,5	12,97	16,5	48,82
Bulgaria	138,37	112,79	129,29	120,23	148,06	154,37	149,62	170,23

¹ A joint communication document “Overcoming Eurasia: Elements of the EU Strategy” in September 2018 and “EU-China: Strategic Perspectives” in March 2019

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Greece	6,42	10,12	128,81	256,02	400,38	1758,43	1799,82	1845,01
N.Macedonia	11,11	38,79	132,04	151,83	177,72	160,01	141,8	n/a
Montenegro	2,06	2,06	2,06	3,19	3,19	n/a	n/a	n/a
Romania	227,65	59,45	90,07	42,02	1095,2	1641,61	1889,86	2498,3
Serbia	151,34	59,9	192,25	434,22	711,14	1203,16	2401,53	n/a
Share in Total Inward Investment Stock, %								
Albania	0.10%	0.13%	0.13%	0.04%	0.02%	0.03%	0.02%	0.03%
B&H	0.02%	0.02%	0.04%	0.06%	0.06%	0.13%	0.17%	0.51%
Bulgaria	0.32%	0.26%	0.25%	0.25%	0.29%	0.26%	0.26%	0.30%
Greece	0.03%	0.04%	0.39%	0.73%	0.89%	2.35%	2.21%	1.93%
N.Macedonia	0.23%	0.79%	2.34%	2.50%	2.77%	2.23%	1.99%	
Montenegro	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.04%	0.04%			
Romania	0.32%	0.08%	0.10%	0.05%	0.57%	0.76%	0.86%	1.13%
Serbia	0.53%	0.20%	0.51%	1.09%	1.62%	2.48%	4.52%	

Source: ITC

After looking at Table 4, it is rather difficult to understand concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of these investments and the so-called “high levels of debt accumulation,” given the size of the stock investment and its share in the countries’ total stock investment. The transfer of control over strategic assets or resources is, however, important.

The EU maintains a strategic interest in strengthening its enlargement and good-neighbour policies in the SEE region and the countries neighbouring the EU. This approach aims to enhance the resilience of partner states while ensuring their full alignment with EU values, norms, and standards. The EU’s priorities include critical areas such as the rule of law, public procurement, environmental protection, energy policy, infrastructure development, and competition regulation. To achieve these objectives, the EU requires candidate countries to fully implement legally binding international agreements and prioritize the Enlargement Policy Consultation chapters, thereby accelerating necessary reforms and fostering deeper integration with the EU.

This overarching stance also frames the EU’s position on China’s engagement in the region. The EU’s primary criticisms focus on China’s foreign policy principles, particularly its non-interference doctrine, the structure of its investment projects, and the financial mechanisms supporting them. Analyses by consultants advocating the European perspective suggest that China’s approach to the SEE region mirrors its engagement with developing economies, where infrastructure financing plays a central role.

European critics see China’s interest in the SEE region as driven by its proximity to the EU. The China-Europe expressway, centered on Greece’s Piraeus port, integrates

maritime and land routes, with China COSCO Shipping playing a key role. Goods move via North Macedonia and Serbia to Central Europe, making them China's top regional partners. Expanding links to Adriatic ports could boost connectivity, but their small size and weak ties to major corridors limit their impact. Montenegro, with Chinese-backed rail projects, seeks to strengthen its role in regional transport. China views the Balkan corridor as one of several trade routes to the EU.

From a Chinese perspective, a defining characteristic of the Central and Eastern European countries is their shared historical experience under socialist regimes during the Cold War, with the exception of Greece. The "14+1" mechanism serves as the principal platform for China's collective approach to Central and Eastern Europe, reinforcing its economic and diplomatic presence in the region.

China's relations with SEE countries are shaped by different contexts across individual countries and regions. While China engages with the SEE countries primarily on a bilateral level, it is essential to consider the broader multilateral framework in which these relationships evolve.

Despite productive high-level dialogues between China and the SEE countries, the initiative has not led to significant investments in part of the countries (Table 4). Ongoing tensions between the EU and China, particularly in 2021, may further affect this trend. However, research using a microeconomic approach suggests that, despite unfavourable policies, private investments have had a positive impact in Bulgaria, even though their size and scope remain limited (Christova-Southeast Europeka, I., et al, 2020).

The SEE economies are closely tied to the EU, especially the Euro area, for trade and investment. Serbia stands out, with China as its top investor until 2022. The post-crisis decline in EU investments highlights the need for diversified investment sources. The growth of the "14+1" platform has increased trade and, to a lesser extent, private Chinese investment in Southeast Europe (Wang et al., 2019; Cao H., 2021; Christova-Southeast Europeka, I. et al, 2020). Although this investment has been small and its impact limited, it has provided valuable experience for both regions. As such, there remains considerable untapped potential for the future development of trade and investment relations between China and the SEE countries.

4. Conclusions

The "14+1" platform has contributed to strengthening trade between China and Southeast Europe, improving access to the EU market and increasing trade volumes. However, this expansion has also resulted in a growing trade deficit, and despite rising purchasing power and a population of over 52 million, SEE countries have seen limited export growth to China. While some infrastructure projects and Chinese capital have entered the region, significant investment remains relatively scarce.

This reflects the broader trend identified in the article: while Chinese investments have had a positive but modest impact, substantial untapped potential remains. The perceived rivalry surrounding Chinese investments is often overstated, shaped by ideological perspectives rather than an objective assessment of economic benefits and risks. In reality, Chinese investments exhibit advantageous characteristics, such as stability, flexibility, and a high return on investment, allowing firms to navigate local administrative and business challenges effectively.

Comparative research highlights differences in investment motivations between OECD countries and Southeast Europe, suggesting that while larger economies scrutinise risks more heavily, Southeast Europe have thus far benefited from Chinese investment without significant threats to national security or sensitive sectors.

References

- Branzova P., Nestorov N., 2023, "Geografska kontsentratsiya i geografska ustoychivost na iznosa na pchelen med ot Balgariya." (Geographic concentration and geographic sustainability of honey exports from Bulgaria). *Economic Thought*, 68 (1), 2023, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56497/etj2368103>, 59-72
- Christova-Southeast Europeka, I., Bobeva-Filipova, D., Peneva, T., Kostadinov, A., 2022, "Trade and investment relations Bulgaria–China." Sofia. "Paisii Hilendarski" University Publishing House, 262 pages. ISBN:978-619-202-776-6, DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.30885.99040.
- EU, 2020, "EU-China Trade and Investment Relations in Challenging Times." PE 603.492 – May 2020.
- EU, 2020, "Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union" PE 603.492 – May 2020.
- Lozanov O., et al., 2018, "Development and Structure of the Bulgarian Export After the Country's Accession to the EU." *European Journal of Economics and Business Studies*. September-December 2017, Volume 3, Issue 3.
- Peneva, T., 2022, "Bulgaria's Place in Trade and Investment Relations between China and the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference on "Diplomatic, Economic and Cultural Relations between China and the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe." Volume VII. Faber Publishing House, 2022, ISBN:2603-5030, 154-170.
- Wang, M.L., Qiu, Q. and Choi, C.H., 2019, "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Exports." *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 25(1), pp. 81-99.
- Zhelev, P., 2018, "Bulgarian-Chinese Economic Relations in the Context of 16+1 Cooperation China-CEE." Working paper, no. 24.

3.

Cross-cultural Relations between Tang and Byzantine Empires along the Silk Road

Iskra Mandova

University of Veliko Tarnovo “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” (Bulgaria)

Abstract: Throughout the period of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Western Asia and Europe, as well as the lands of the Middle East were in constant interaction. The role of primary mediator belonged to Byzantium. Through its cleverly conducted diplomacy, Byzantium became a bridge between the East and West and had considerable influence in mediating bilateral ties. In practice, the conquest of the Byzantine Empire was often accompanied by sending religious missions, and thereby the central Byzantium government was able to increase its tangible influence on its political vassal countries. In that period, we can talk about diplomacy in the modern sense of the word. The Empire of the Romans always remained faithful to the Roman principle: *Pacta servanda sunt!* (Contracts must be fulfilled!). Towards the barbaric world, Byzantine diplomacy was carried out in several ways: searching for military allies or proselytes of the Byzantine cause, providing business contacts, maintaining pro-Byzantium groups in strategically important areas, and clearing the roads of Christian preaching.

During the reign of the Tang dynasty emperors, trade between the East and the West was greatly intensified, reaching its peak in the 8th century. If we generally divide medieval cultures around the world into Eastern, Arabic and Western, we can certainly say that all these are less or more influenced by Tang culture. Culture along the Silk Road is in constant circle, and since ancient times intercultural communication has been a common phenomenon, enriching not only Chinese, but all the cultures in the world.

This research shows that contacts between China and Byzantium during this time (7th – 10th Centuries) were not the result of a hoax.

Keywords: China; Tang Dynasty; Byzantine Empire; cross-cultural relations

Byzantine Empire played the role of a cultural transmitter to the West by promoting its civilization beyond the limits of the empire; at the same time, the Tang Empire also transmitted its civilization in the East. Tang China was in a state of cultural bloom and envoys from nearby and faraway countries flocked to China to get knowledge and skills, thus mediating the exploration and the bringing together of two great civilizations – the Tang and the Byzantine.

The Byzantine Empire turned out to be very well-prepared diplomatically during the period of the Middle Ages. Along with the diplomats went the missionaries, a curious group of experienced professionals in the diplomatic department of the government. Most often these were specially trained monks who paved the way for the diplomats and traders. The means of implementation of “propaganda” were the most diverse; special treatises were created and conformed to whether they were designed for Muslims or other newly baptized “barbarians.” Given the religious tolerance of the pagan nations, there were no great difficulties in the realization of the monks’ mission. Their mission was religious, but also political; however, the first one concealed the second. As agents of Byzantine politics, these missionaries delivered valuable information to the *Genikon of Drom* (something like the Foreign Ministry), suggesting that in most cases they had been previously prepared to understand the language of the country to which where they were going. First missionaries “attacked” the rulers, and if they proved intractable, their wives followed. It was always possible to placate a ruler’s bored wife either through sentimentality and romanticism, which was lacking among the barbarians, or through artfully presented gifts. Most often rulers’ wives were staggered by the words of Christ, something unknown in their poor spiritual world. Even in the 6th century, during the reign of Justinian the Great, monks travelled along the Silk Road, and Cosmas Indicopleustes provided evidence of the commercial contacts of the Eastern Mediterranean with Southern and Southeast Asia.²

《拂菻国，一名大秦，在西海之上，东南与波斯接，地方万余里，列城四百，邑居连属。其宫宇柱栌，多以水精琉璃为之。有贵臣十二人共治国政，常使一人将囊随王车，百姓有事者，即以书投囊中，王还宫省发，理其枉直。其王无常人，简贤者而立之。国中灾异及风雨不时，辄废而更立。其王冠形如鸟举翼，冠及璎珞，皆缀以珠宝，著锦绣衣，前不开襟，坐金花床。有一鸟似鹅，其毛绿色，常在王边倚枕上坐，每进食有毒，其鸟辄鸣。其都城叠石为之，尤绝高峻，凡有十万余户，南临大海。城东面有大门，其高二十余丈，自上及下，饰以黄金，光辉灿烂，连曜数里。自外至王室，凡有大门三重，列异宝雕饰。第二门之楼中，悬一大金秤，以金丸十二枚属于衡端，以候日之十二时焉；为一金人，其大如人，立于侧，每至一时，其金丸辄落，铿然发声，引唱以纪日时，毫厘无失。其殿以瑟瑟为柱，黄金为地，象牙为门扇，香木为栋梁。其俗无瓦，捣白石为末，罗之涂屋上，其坚密光润，还如玉石。至于盛暑之节，人厌嚣热，乃引水潜流，上遍

² Tapkova-Zaimova 2011: 29-30; Bakalov 2006: 157-158; Dimitrov 2013.

于屋宇，机制巧密，人莫之知。观者惟闻屋上泉鸣，俄见四檐飞溜，悬波如瀑，激气成凉风，其巧妙如此。

风俗，男子翦发，披帔而右袒，妇人不开襟，锦为头巾。家资满亿，封以上位。有羊羔生于土中，其国人候其欲萌，乃筑墙以院之，防外兽所食也。然其脐与地连，割之则死，唯人著甲走马及击鼓以骇之，其羔警鸣而脐绝，便遂水草。俗皆髡而衣绣，乘辘辘白盖小车，出入击鼓，建旌旗幡帜。土多金银奇宝，有夜光璧、明月珠、骇鸡犀、大贝、车渠、玛瑙、孔翠、珊瑚、琥珀，凡西域诸珍异多出其国。隋炀帝常将通拂菻，竟不能致。

贞观十七年，拂菻王波多力遣使献赤玻璃、绿金精等物，太宗降玺书答慰，赐以绫绮焉。自大食强盛，渐陵诸国，乃遣大将军摩拽伐其都城，因约为和好，请每岁输之金帛，遂臣属大食焉。乾封二年，遣使献底也伽。大足元年，复遣使来朝。开元七年正月，其主遣吐火罗大首领献狮子、羚羊各二。不数月，又遣大德僧来朝贡。》

旧唐书，列传第一百四十八西戎³

Fulin [Byzantium], also called Daqing, is situated beyond the Western seas and Persia and is located to the southeast. Its territory is large, more than 10,000 li⁴, and there are 400 cities united into districts. The palaces and houses are made of crystal and glazed bricks. The Senate, which rules the country, consists of 12 people. When the Emperor goes out, a man with a bag accompanies him. In this bag, ordinary people place a piece of paper with their problems written on it. When the Emperor goes back to the palace, he reads the pieces of paper and decides how to solve the problems. The emperors are not ordinary people; they are elected by the Senate and are only gifted men. If there is a disaster or disease in the country or the weather conditions are not good for crops, the people dethrone the emperor. The imperial crown looks like a bird with outstretched wings. The crown and the ruler's necklace are studded with precious stones, and the emperor's garments are very elegant and beautiful and cannot be open in the front. The throne is decorated with gold, and on it there is a bird that looks like a goose with green plumage. The bird stands on a pillow next to the Emperor, and if the Emperor's food is poisoned, the bird starts to quack. The walls of the capital city are made of stone; they are high and difficult to climb. More than 100,000 families live there, and to the south of the capital there is a vast sea. On the east wall [of the capital] there is a large door, more than 20 zhang⁵ high, covered with gold from top to bottom. Its brilliance can be seen from several kilometers. To get to the Emperor's home, one must pass through three gates that are beautifully etched and reveal unseen treasures. On the arch of the second gate a large golden scale is hung, and at one end there are twelve golden balls corresponding to the twelve periods into which the day is divided. There is also a person made of gold

³ Jiu Tang Shu 1975: pp.5313-5314.

⁴ Unit of measurement for length, equal to 500 meters. 10,000 li = 5,000 km.

⁵ Unit of measurement, equal to 3.3 meters.

of normal human size, and in each time period a gold ball falls very noisily, accurately displaying the hours. The columns of the palace are made of marble, the floor is made of gold, and the doors are made of ivory. The roof rafters are of fragrant wood. There are no bricks but mosaics on the wall, which is so small and shiny and looks like it was made of precious stones. When the hottest days of summer come and people are exhausted from the heat, water is brought to the ceiling. How this is accomplished, no one knows. Even if one stares at the ceiling, one only hears the sound of water on the ceiling. It is flowing so fast along the four eaves of the house, like a waterfall which creates a cool wind; the whole scene is very impressive!

Customs: Men cut their hair and drape clothing over their left shoulder. Women's clothes do not have buttons, and ladies cover their heads with beautiful scarves. If someone collects 100 million [money], that person can reach a higher social status. There is lamb that is born from the earth, and the local people wait for the time to come to this world and build walls around the lamb to protect it so that other animals will not eat it. The lamb's umbilical cord is linked to the soil, and if the cord is cut, the lamb will die. If a man with armor riding a horse and beating a drum frightens it, it will scream, tear its umbilical cord, and go in search of water and grass. People have their hair cut neatly and wear nice clothes. They ride in carts with a white roof; when they get in and get out of the carts, there is a man who beats a drum and another who waves a flag. In their lands, there is a lot of gold, silver, and jewels. There is jade which shines brightly in the darkness, shining pearls, rhinoceros' horns, large mussels, giant clams, agate, kingfishers' feathers, coral, and amber; most of the jewels of the West come from Fulin. Emperor Yangdi of the Sui Dynasty sent people to Fulin several times but, for some unknown reason, they did not get there.

In 17th year of the Zhenguan period [643 CE], the Emperor (Boduoli) sent envoys to the Chinese emperor and offered red crystal, green crystal, and other goods as gifts. In return, they received from Taizong an imperial decree and the finest silk.

The State of Arabs [Dashi] became increasingly powerful and gradually conquered many countries; eventually the big armies of Muawiyah attacked [Fulin's] capital. They signed a peace treaty with Byzantium and were required to pay an annual tax in the form of money and silk. In the second year of Qianfeng [667 CE], the Byzantine emperor sent a gift of opium to the Chinese emperor. During Dazu [701 CE], the Byzantine envoys arrived back at the Tang court again. During the first month of the Chinese calendar in the 7th year of the Kaiyuan period [719 CE], the Emperor sent, through the leader of Tocharians [Tuhuoluo⁶], a gift for the Chinese emperor⁷, two lions and two antelopes. A few months later, other envoys arrived at the Tang court that was headed by a very chaste monk.

Old Book of Tang, Scroll 148, Western armies (fragment)⁸

⁶ Inhabitants of medieval oasis city-states on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang, China).

⁷ During the time the emperor was Tang Xuanzong (712–756 CE).

⁸ Translated by Iskra Mandova and Yan Qiuxia.

In the minds of non-Roman peoples from the East, the Byzantine Empire was a prosperous and rich country with magnificent cities and fertile fields, as can be read from the descriptions in the *Old Book of Tang* (10th century) and *New Book of Tang* (11th century). Of course, Constantinople enjoyed the greatest fame, and often the admiration of this flourishing city resulted in an overwhelming desire on the part of the barbarians to conquer and plunder it. Sometimes the barbarians sought peaceful ways to get to the treasures of Byzantium and, for that purpose, became mercenaries or federati. After the death of Attila, the horrifying Huns offered their military force for sale. Against the rising forces of the Barbarian world, the use of modern weapons was not enough but what was needed was an intelligent political game. Therefore, the studying of Barbarian society became a permanent concern for Byzantine politics. Interest in Barbarians covered a broad register: studying and analyzing their habits, traditions, their religious beliefs and customs, their friends and enemies, their vices and virtues. Special attention was paid to the possibility of bribery. Most of the border tribes received *anona* (a special kind of remuneration) in order to guard the Byzantine borders. Sometimes in the records, due to insufficient knowledge of the Byzantine diplomacy, this practice was called tax payment, which in small nations caused groundless bursts of pride. From the perspective of Byzantine foreign policy, however, through the *anona* or *tribute*, the Empire “paid for the peace,” since it was assumed to be much cheaper than any war. Diplomatic contacts became relatively intensive in the 7th and early 8th centuries. This can be explained by the active engagement of the Byzantine Empire in large-scale conflicts with Sassanid Persia first and then with the Arabs that conquered much of the Middle East. Also, the Byzantine front troops reached the westernmost areas where Tang China had strategic interests. During the 8th and 9th centuries, the international trade of Byzantium still took place mainly in border areas. Especially active in commercial terms were the Bulgarians; the withdrawal of some of their trade privileges in 894 resulted in war.⁹

The translated paragraphs abound with facts and prove the existing relations between China and Byzantium, as well as provide strong knowledge and keen awareness of the Chinese historiographers of that era. The fragment presented here contains much information about legendary and fabulous characters that portray the Chinese idea of the outside world as distant and exotic. The question that arises is: how can we use these texts as a source of historical information and not merely as an example of a fabulously mythological narrative where imagination dominates? There is still the important information that the reports of contacts between Byzantium and China obviously were not the product of fiction.

One of the tomes which had a major role in enhancing the Byzantine interest in “the country of silk” was the work *Christian Topography* by Cosmas Indicopleustes (527–565 CE). He was a Byzantine traveller and writer who was born in Alexandria. It is believed that his intent was to describe the spread of Christianity geographically

⁹ Bakalov 2006: 156-157; Kazhdan, Epstein 2001: 198; Dimitrov 2013.

but, in doing so, he also wrote about China with facts rather than with a cloud of mystery. The information that he gave about the geography and the name of China at that time was truly interesting. He wrote that China was a country that was bordered to the east by sea and that there were two roads to this “country of silk,” a southern (sea) one and a northern (land) one. Furthermore, he commented on the different distances from China to Persia by land and water, a fact that he had probably only heard about from traders because there is no evidence he had gone there personally. In Book II of *Christian Topography*, he referred to China with the named Tzinitza or Tzinista. Whether the origin of both words “Tzini” (or “Sinae” in earlier Greco-Roman authors) comes from Sanskrit or Persian is still argued today.

Another early Byzantine historian who mentioned China is Theophylact Simocatta (approximately 580/585–636/640 CE). In his work *History*, he writes: “Taugast¹⁰ is a famous city (i.e. empire), which is some total of 1500 miles distant from those who are called Turks, and which borders the Indias. The barbarians whose abode is near Taugast (Tabgach/Toba) are a very brave and numerous nation, and without rival in size among the nations of the world.”¹¹ “After the end of the civil war, the Khagan of the Turks agreed with the people of Taugast to ensure peaceful borders on all sides. (...) Cults in this country are statues, laws are fair, and life is prudent. They have a custom that is similar to law that men should not be adorned with golden ornaments even if they possess a lot of silver and gold and have become rich as a result of large-scale and profitable trade...”¹²

We are not sure whether Simocatta’s writings were on the basis of the subsequently strengthened Byzantine interest in Tang China, but western interest was clearly documented in the Tang sources, which go into even more detail.

Diplomatic contacts and the exchange of emissaries were conducted with a high degree of probability during the Byzantine emperors Heraclius and Constant II (642–668) and during the reign of their descendants until Tiberius III Apsimar (698–705), as well as Leo III (717–741). To some extent, this has changed the traditional view of the “closed into itself” and “Barbaric” Byzantine Empire during the so called “Dark Ages.”¹³

¹⁰ The term of Ταυγάστ was found first in *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*. Phonetically, it was derived from Ta-han, i.e., the Great Han, an appellation for the two Han Dynasties by the Huns and other nomadic peoples. With the rise of the Turks in Central Asia and their frequent diplomatic exchanges with the Byzantine Empire in the last half of the 6th century, this term was known and written down by the Byzantine historian. This term, commonly used as a name, was accepted by the various ethnic groups during its westward spread to Central Asia and West Asia, referring to China and to those ethnic groups themselves with a derivative meaning in many cases (Xushan Zhang, *Byzantion* 80: 485-501 (2010)).

¹¹ Whitby 1986: Book 7 (7.1).

¹² Whitby 1986: Book 7 (9.1-4).

¹³ Dimitrov 2013.

Up to now, nearly 50 gold Byzantine coins have been found in China. The earliest ones come from Gratian (378–383) and the later ones from Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078), a period of time that covered more than 700 years. Among the coins found, there were more than a dozen imitations. They were bad counterfeits that were reduced in weight and not at all like the known solidus, semissis, and tremissis.¹⁴ The lightest coin weighed only 0.6 grams. The coins were scattered across China from Liaoning Province, across Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Gansu, Henan and Hebei Provinces all the way to Xinjiang, roughly forming a crescent in northern China. According to some studies, Arab traders from Central Asia were those who carried the golden Byzantine coins from the West to China, but because of a lack of supplies, they were also the ones who produced the counterfeit coins. Lin Ying writes that, except for one gold coin from a 7th century hoard, all the others were found in tombs. During the Tang Dynasty the burial of the dead with a gold coin in the mouth or in the hand became a custom, showing noble ancestry.¹⁵ The Chinese scientist Xia Nai (夏鼐) published three articles¹⁶ on the topic of the coins in which he examined the chronology and epigraphy of the coins and discussed their significance for studying Byzantine relations with China in the early Middle Ages. In general, Dr. Naymark, who made a catalogue of the Byzantine coins, believes that Byzantine gold coins may not have been employed in the local market but, rather, were stored as ingots by the Sogdian merchants.¹⁷

In both Books of Tang, very precise information about the Byzantine emperors and their customs were mentioned, and the information actually corresponded to the truth. Over the past century, a lot of treasures and valuable objects buried in funeral rituals and dating from the period of the Tang Dynasty have been found on the territory of China, demonstrating the links between the East and the West at the time. Due to the limited number of gold coins in China, we conclude that the presence of Byzantine solidi does not show direct commercial relations between the Byzantine Empire and China but rather indirect relations, and that the majority of the coins have entered the country through the Sogdians, Turks, and Arabs¹⁸. It is, however, possible that single original pieces were brought to China during the implementation of the Byzantine diplomatic missions that are mentioned in the Tang records.

In the development of the relationships between Byzantium and the peoples from Central Asia and China, the exchange of envoys was a common occurrence. This practice, of course, was assessed in a different way by each participating country. G. Suprunenko writes that the Kyrgyz and Uighurs, for example, aimed to settle trade

¹⁴ Solidus – 4,55 g, semissis = ½ solidus – 2,25 g, tremissis = 1/3 solidus – 1,52 g (Grierson 1999: 59-60).

¹⁵ For details see Lin Ying, 2004.

¹⁶ Xia Nai 1959, 1961, 1977.

¹⁷ Naymark 2001.

¹⁸ Lin Ying, 2004.

relations and gain support from the Empire, but the Chinese accepted their visits as an expression of dependency and set up one against the other in order to weaken them.¹⁹

The fragments about *Fulin* (the Byzantine Empire) from the Tang dynasty stories contain some fabulous and phantasmagorical moments. Since much of the information was apparently obtained orally by the merchants along the Silk Road, it is quite normal that some of it would be misconstrued and interpreted through the lens of the historians from that period. At the same time, we have obtained accurate information about the Byzantine missions in China during the Tang Dynasty, namely in 643, 667, 701 and 719 CE. In contrast to the thousands of Sasanian silver coins excavated in China, the finds of Byzantine gold coins were limited, as mentioned above. Given this fact, scientists concluded that the presence of the solidus in China might not indicate a direct and frequent connection between the Byzantine Empire and China but, instead, an uncertain relationship. Since Thierry and Morrisson's article of 1994, additional Byzantine coins and studies of them have been published in Chinese, including in the monograph by Lin Ying in 2004. In general, before the 1980s, most scholars considered these finds as evidence for the frequent connection between Byzantium and China, a connection which could be linked with the seven visits of Rum (*Fulin*, 拂菻) emissaries recorded in Tang literature. It is believed to not be an accident that China coined terminology referring to Byzantium and its adjacent lands. Along with *Fulin*, the official name of the Roman/Byzantine Empire, there were also *Daqin* (大秦) (probably referring to ancient Greece, including Hellenistic countries), *Zesan* (泽散) (Alexandria, Egypt), and *Lüfen* (驴分) (an unknown location, perhaps Armenia). There was even a specific term for the title of the Byzantine Emperor, Basileus (*buoduoli* 波多力). According to Zhang Xushan, the term **Fulin** was borrowed from Armenian, where **Rum (Rom)** is **Hrom (Horum)**, of Pahlavi's **Hróm**, but because in the Persian language, an "h" changes to "f," so in Sogdian it already became **From (Furum)**. Hence, in the transcription of foreign words in Chinese, syllables are used rather than single letters, and the consonant "f" is phonetically written as the syllable **Fu**, without any meaning attached to the selected character, and **rom/ rum**, due to the lack of the sound "r" in Chinese, became **lin**.²⁰

Even in the 11th century, the account of Western coins can also be seen in the official history²¹:

The coin of Fulin [possibly referring to the Byzantine Empire or the principality established by the Seljuk Turks] is made of gold and silver. The coin is not pierced [in the center]. On the frontal side is carved the image of Mile Buddha [possibly a misunderstanding for a picture of Jesus]. On the back side is carved the name of the king. The common people are strictly prohibited by law to produce coins.

¹⁹ Suprunenko 1976: 87-89.

²⁰ Zhang 2005; Dimitrov 2013.

²¹ Lin Ying 2005. Solidi in China.

In the mid-6th century the Byzantine historian Procopius included in his history of Justinian's wars a single paragraph on the introduction of sericulture to Byzantium. Quoted, misquoted, and used as the basis for elegant historical fantasies on early industrial espionage or the relationship between Byzantium and China, this remains one of the few pieces of evidence we have for the introduction not simply of silk or weaving, but of sericulture to the West.²²

The transition of the Roman Empire in the 4th century to the newly formed Byzantine Empire not only shifted the center of the Roman world from Italy to the Balkans and Asia Minor, but made the empire a larger consumer and producer of silk, with the difference that Byzantine emperors restricted free access to luxury goods in order to distinguish themselves from the masses and emphasize their different status. The Byzantine capital was the first significant silk-weaving center in Europe. Still in the Cathedral of St. Sofia, built between 532–537 in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, Virgin Mary, as well as the emperors on both sides – Constantine the Great (on the left) and Justinian (on the right), are dressed in long dark-purple silk robes as those of the emperors were slightly lighter in color. The mosaics of the San Vitale Basilica in Ravenna portray Emperor Justinian I and his wife Theodora, also dressed in purple silk robes but with golden brocade threads, proving that silk fabrics have symbolized the rule of authority. The attendants are dressed in drawloom-woven gowns of silk featuring bright colors, possibly of Sasanian manufacture.

In the beginning of the 6th century, for example, silkworms and mulberry seeds were carried to Constantinople by two Indian monks specifically for the Byzantine emperor, and since then they have been planting mulberry trees in the East-Roman Empire. The Byzantine people used these resources to develop the silk industry in a state monopoly and began to produce superior silk fabrics comparable to those of China and Sasanian Persia. At a time when the Byzantine Empire was weak in military terms but rich in resources, silk fabrics were used to strengthen imperial and church power and were a very useful tool in diplomacy. For example, after the Bulgarian Khan Tervel helped Justinian II to regain his throne in 705, the latter sent silk and purple fur to the Khan, along with permission to trade controlled Byzantine goods to express his gratitude.

Foreign silk fabrics were among the many exotic goods imported to China during the Tang period, but only a small part of them was preserved in graves in the Turfan region. Some pieces found in these dry lands show definitely non-Chinese styles and production methods. In the same graves in which silk was discovered, archaeologists find on papers related to silk fabrics produced in Persia, India and Byzantium, which proves that during the 5th and 6th centuries China was certainly not the only manufacturer.

The process and circumstances of spreading of Tang culture along the Silk Road, as well as the distribution of one single commodity, such as silk (gift or traded), have

²² Feltham 2009.

regional specificity. During the Tang dynasty silk itself changes its color, and western motifs are observed: of plants (honeysuckle, grapes, tree of life), of animals (lions, camels, sheep, horses, deer, elephants, pigs), of different gods – shapes and patterns that are obviously not typical of Chinese style and are probably the result of the influence of western culture.²³

The East was ruled by the emperor of China, the country of human beings; the South was ruled by the emperor of India, the country of elephants; the North was ruled by the emperor of steppe empires, the country of horses; finally, the West was ruled by Roman or Persian emperors, whose dominions were the country of treasures. Clearly, coins along the Silk Road were not only currency for long distance trade but also instruments of political propaganda when they bore the image of a ruler. They thus became an expression of different cultures. From Constantinople to Chang'an, people of different ethnic groups once read these coins in their own manner, adding new content to them, and then transferred the coins and new explanations to the next location along the Silk Road.²⁴

References

- Bakalov, G. „Византия – лекционен курс“ [Vizantiya – leksionen kurs (Byzantium – lecture series)]. Sofia: UI “Sv. Kliment Ohridski” (2006), 514.
- Dimitrov, D. „Сведения за Византия в хрониките на китайската династия Тан“ [Svedeniya za Vizantiya v hronikite na kitayskata dinastiya Tan (Records of Byzantium in the chornics of the Tanf dynasty)]. In: *Исторически преглед* [“Istoricheski pregled” (Historical overview)], 5-6/2011, Sofia, 2011.
- Feltham, Heleanor B. Justinian and the International Silk Trade, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No.194, November, 2009.
- He Ru 贺茹, Zhu Hongbin 朱宏斌, Liu Yingying 刘英英. 唐代丝绸之路中外文化交流的特点 Tangdai sichou zhilu zhong wai wenhua jiaoliu de tedian. 山西省运城市 Shanxi sheng Yuncheng shi: 运城学院学报 Yuncheng xueyuan xuebao (2015), 27-31.
- Jiu Tang Shu 旧唐书. Zhuan, Liezhuan 148, Xirong. Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju (1975), 5313-5314.
- Kazhdan, A., Epstein, A. *Византийската култура XI-XII в. Промени и тенденции* [“Vizantiyskata kultura XI-XII v. promeni i tendentsii” (Byzantium Culture from XI-XII CE: Changes and Tendencies)]. Transl. D. Dimitrov. Veliko Tarnovo: Faber (2001).
- Lin Ying 林英. 金钱之旅 – 从君士坦丁堡到长安 Jinqian zhilu – cong Junshitangdingbao dao Chang'an. Beijing: 人民美术出版社 Renmin Meishu chubanshe (2004).
- Lin Ying. “Solidi in China and Monetary Culture along the Silk Road.” In: *The Silk Road*, Vol. 3, No 2, Saratoga, Dec. 2005.
- Naymark, A. “Sogdiana, Its Christians and Byzantium: A Study of Artistic and Cultural Connections in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.” Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 2001.

²³ He, Zhu, Liu 2015: 27.

²⁴ Also there.

- Suprunenko, G. „Из истории взаимоотношений танской империи с соседними северными народами“ [Iz istorii vzaimootnosheniy tanskoй imperii s sosednimi severnymi narodami (Historical relations of the Tang Empire with its neighboring northern peoples)]. In: Научная конференция „Общество и государство в Китае“ Доклады и тезисы [Nauchnaya konferentsiya „Obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v Kitae“ Doklady i tezisы (Academic conference “Society and state in China”: Reports and theses)]. Moscow (1976), 87-93.
- Таркова-Займова, В. „Държава и църква във Византия“ [Darzhava i tsarkva vav Vizantiya (“State and Church in Byzantium”)]. In: *Византия и византийският свят* [Vizantiya i vizantiyskiyat svyat (Byzantia and the Byzantium World)]. Sofia: Prosveta (2011), 474.
- Whitby, Michael and Whitby, Mary. *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* (tr.). New York: Oxford University Press (1986).
- Xia Nai 夏鼐. 咸阳底张湾隋墓出土的东罗马金币 [Xianyang Dizhangwan Suimu chutu de Dongluoma jinbi] 考古学报 Kaogu xuebao, 25, 1959, 67-73.
- Xia Nai 夏鼐. Xi'an tumencun chutu de Baizhanting jinbi, 考古 Kaogu, 56, 1961, 446-447.
- Xia Nai 夏鼐. Zanhuan Li Xizong mu chutu de Baizhanting jinbi. Kaogu, 153, 1977, 403-406.
- Zhang Xushan. *The Name of China and its Geography in Cosmas Indicopleustes*, 2005.

4.

使用数字工具帮助高级汉语 学习者习得跨文化能力

侯东海

日内瓦大学孔子学院（瑞士），中国人民大学（中国）

Using Digital Tools to Help Advanced Chinese Learners Acquire Intercultural Competence

Donghai Hou

Confucius Institute at University of Geneva (Switzerland), Renmin University (China)

Abstract:

This study investigates the impact of digital tools on the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among advanced Chinese language learners. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, the research examines how digital tools facilitate learners' cognitive understanding, affective attitudes, and behavioral skills in cross-cultural communication. The findings indicate that digital tools significantly enhance learners' cultural knowledge, promote positive intercultural attitudes, and improve their ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions. However, challenges such as information overload and the demand for self-regulated learning were identified. The study underscores the potential of digital tools in fostering ICC and provides pedagogical

implications for integrating technology into advanced Chinese language education. Future research is encouraged to explore the application of digital tools across different proficiency levels and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Digital tools, Intercultural communicative competence, Advanced Chinese learners, Cross-cultural communication, Language education

1. 引言

1) 研究背景

在全球化不断深化的背景下，跨文化交际能力（Intercultural Communication Competence, ICC）已成为外语学习者不可或缺的重要素养。特别是对于高级汉语学习者而言，掌握跨文化交际能力不仅有助于语言表达的准确性与流畅度，同时也在实际的跨文化交际场景中起到了关键作用。语言不仅仅是信息传递的工具，更是文化的载体，它承载着一个民族的历史、价值观和社会规范（Lado 1957）。

随着数字技术的飞速发展，数字工具被广泛应用于语言教学领域，极大地丰富了学习资源并拓展了语言学习的环境。在传统的语言课堂之外，数字化学习平台、社交媒体、视频会议软件、语言交换应用等多种数字工具，为学习者提供了更加便捷和高效的跨文化交流方式。日内瓦大学作为瑞士乃至欧洲重要的汉语教学中心，其高级汉语学习者群体具有典型的非华裔成人学习者特征。这些学习者大多具备HSK4级以上的汉语水平，且对中国文化有浓厚的兴趣，部分学习者甚至有过在中国生活或工作的经历。然而，尽管他们的语言能力较强，但在跨文化交际中仍面临诸多挑战，如文化差异的理解不足、跨文化交际策略的欠缺等。因此，如何利用数字工具帮助这些高级汉语学习者提升跨文化交际能力，成为一个亟待解决的问题。

本研究旨在探讨数字工具在帮助高级汉语学习者习得跨文化能力方面的作用，并以日内瓦大学的高级汉语学习者为研究对象，通过实证研究分析数字工具在其跨文化能力培养中的实际效果。

2) 研究意义

在理论层面，本研究基于Byram（1997，2008）的跨文化交际能力模型，结合张红玲（2020）提出的跨文化能力教学参考框架，构建了跨文化交际能力的三个维度：认知理解、情感态度和行为技能。

在实践层面，本研究采用了混合研究方法，结合问卷调查、深度访谈和课堂观察，全面收集和分析数据。问卷调查用于了解学习者的跨文

化交际能力现状和数字工具使用情况；深度访谈用于探讨学习者对数字工具的使用体验及其对跨文化能力的影响；课堂观察用于评估数字工具在实际教学中的应用效果。通过定量与定性数据的结合，本研究旨在全面揭示数字工具在跨文化能力培养中的实际效果。

综上所述，本研究不仅具有重要的理论意义，还具有广泛的实践价值。通过探讨数字工具在高级汉语学习者跨文化能力培养中的应用，本研究为对外汉语教学提供了新的思路和方法，同时也为未来的相关研究提供了参考。

2. 跨文化交际能力概述

跨文化交际能力是指个体在与来自不同文化背景的人进行交际时，能够有效、恰当地进行沟通的能力。Fantini (2007) 将跨文化交际能力定义为“学习者在非母语文化下进行有效、恰当交流的一种综合能力”，强调了跨文化交际能力不仅涉及语言能力，还包括对文化差异的理解和适应能力。李庆本等 (2014) 进一步指出，跨文化交际能力是“来自不同文化背景的人之间的交际能力”，涵盖了语言、民族、宗教、地区和国家之间的交际。这种能力不仅要求学习者具备语言技能，还要求他们能够理解并尊重不同文化的价值观、行为规范和社会习俗。

1) 跨文化交际能力的三个维度

Byram (1997) 提出了跨文化交际能力的三个核心维度：认知理解、情感态度和行为技能。这一框架为跨文化交际能力的培养提供了理论基础，并被广泛应用于外语教学领域。张红玲 (2020) 在此基础上，结合中国学生的实际情况，进一步细化了这三个维度的内容。

- 1) 认知理解维度涉及学习者对不同文化的知识和理解，这包括对目标文化的语言、历史、社会习俗、价值观等方面的了解。认知理解不仅包括对外国文化的了解，还应包括对中国文化的深刻认识，以便学习者在跨文化交际中能够进行有效的文化对比和反思。
- 2) 情感态度维度涉及学习者对不同文化的态度和包容性，这包括对文化差异的敏感性、对不同文化的尊重和开放态度，以及在跨文化交际中的情感调节能力。情感态度的培养不仅有助于学习者更好地适应跨文化环境，还能增强他们的文化自信心。
- 3) 行为技能维度涉及学习者在实际跨文化交际中的表现，这包括跨文化交际策略的运用、文化冲突的处理能力，以及在跨文化情境中的适应性行为。Byram (1997) 强调，行为技能是跨文化交际能力的最终体现，学习者需要通过实践不断提升自己的跨文化交际能力。张

红玲（2020）进一步指出，行为技能的培养需要结合具体的跨文化情境，学习者应在实际交际中不断反思和调整自己的行为，以达到有效的跨文化沟通。

3. 数字工具与语言学习

1) 数字工具语言学习中的应用

Benson (2011: 184) 提到自主学习的概念已成为语言教育研究和实践的主流，他强调技术在促进语言学习中的作用。具体技术工具主要集中在语言学习领域，特别是自主学习技术的使用，并讨论了学生如何利用技术进行自主学习。这些技术工具包括：

智能手机和网站：学生通过智能手机和网站进行自主学习，这些工具帮助他们提高英语能力。

数字语言学习策略（DLLs）：这些策略是现代技术相关的，学生通过这些策略实现自主学习。

2) 数字工具在语言学习中的优势

数字工具在语言学习中的应用具有显著的优势，主要体现在多样化、灵活性和趣味性方面（吴慧霖，2020）。首先，数字工具提供了丰富的学习资源，学习者可以通过在线课程、语言学习软件、社交媒体等多种渠道获取语言输入和文化信息。其次，数字工具具有高度的灵活性，学习者可以根据自己的时间和进度安排学习，突破了传统课堂的时间和空间限制。最后，数字工具通过游戏化学习、虚拟现实等技术，增强了学习的趣味性，激发了学习者的学习兴趣和动力。数字工具在语言学习和跨文化交际中的应用具有显著的优势，能够为高级汉语学习者提供丰富的学习资源和跨文化交际机会，从而有效提升他们的跨文化交际能力。

4. 研究方法

4.1 研究对象

本研究以瑞士日内瓦大学的高级汉语学习者为研究对象，这些学习者均具备HSK4级以上的汉语水平，能够进行较为复杂的语言交流。选择这一群体作为研究对象的原因在于：他们已经具备了较强的语言基础，但在跨文化交际中仍面临诸多挑战，尤其是在文化差异的理解和跨文化

交际策略的运用方面。通过对这一群体的研究，可以更好地揭示数字工具在跨文化能力培养中的实际效果。

样本特征：

- 1) 学习汉语时长：研究对象的汉语学习时长分布较为广泛，从3年以下到5年以上不等。其中，学习汉语3年以下的占10%，3-4年的占25%，4-5年的占35%，5年以上的占30%。这一分布反映了研究对象在汉语学习上的不同阶段，有助于分析不同学习阶段的学习者在跨文化能力上的差异。
- 2) 在中国生活的时长：部分研究对象有过在中国生活的经历，其中没有中国生活经历的占30%，1年以下的占15%，1-2年的占35%，2-3年的占15%，3年以上的占5%。这一特征有助于分析在中国生活的经历对跨文化能力的影响。
- 3) 每天使用手机时长：研究对象每天使用手机的时长分布为：少于3小时的占13%，3-4小时的占35%，4-5小时的占30%，超过6小时的占22%。这一数据反映了研究对象对数字工具的依赖程度，为分析数字工具在跨文化能力培养中的作用提供了基础。

4.2 研究设计

本研究采用混合研究方法，结合定量和定性数据的收集与分析，以全面探讨数字工具在高级汉语学习者跨文化能力培养中的作用。具体而言，研究设计包括问卷调查、深度访谈和课堂观察三个部分。

4.2.1 问卷调查

问卷调查主要用于了解研究对象的跨文化交际能力现状及其数字工具使用情况。对日内瓦大学50名HSK4级以上学习者进行问卷调查，回收有效问卷28份（有效率93.3%）。问卷设计基于Byram（1997）的跨文化交际能力模型和张红玲（2020）的跨文化能力教学参考框架，涵盖了认知理解、情感态度和行为技能三个维度。问卷内容包括：

- 1) 跨文化交际能力现状：学习者对不同文化的了解程度、对不同文化的态度、在实际跨文化交际中的表现。
- 2) 数字工具使用情况：学习者常用的数字工具类型、使用频率、使用目的及其对跨文化能力的影响。

4.2.2 深度访谈

深度访谈（N=5）用于进一步探讨学习者对数字工具的使用体验及其对跨文化能力的影响。访谈对象为问卷调查中表现较为突出的学习者，访谈内容主要包括：

- 1) 数字工具的使用体验：学习者在使用数字工具过程中遇到的挑战、获得的收获。

- 2) 数字工具对跨文化能力的影响：数字工具在提升跨文化认知理解、情感态度和行为技能方面的具体作用。

4.2.3 课堂观察

课堂观察用于评估数字工具在实际教学中的应用效果。研究者通过参与式观察，记录教师在课堂上使用数字工具的方式、学习者的反应及其在跨文化交际中的表现。观察内容包括：

- 1) 数字工具的使用方式：教师在课堂上使用的数字工具类型、使用频率、使用目的。
- 2) 学习者的反应：学习者对数字工具的态度、参与度及其在跨文化交际中的表现。

4.3 研究伦理

本研究严格遵守研究伦理，确保研究对象的知情同意和隐私保护。在问卷调查和访谈开始前，研究者向研究对象详细说明了研究目的、数据使用方式及其权利，并获得了他们的书面同意。所有数据均以匿名方式处理，确保研究对象的个人信息不被泄露。

4.4 研究局限性

尽管本研究采用了混合研究方法，但仍存在一定的局限性。首先，研究样本主要来自日内瓦大学的高级汉语学习者，样本的代表性可能受到限制。其次，由于研究时间和资源的限制，课堂观察的样本量较小，可能影响研究结果的普遍性。未来研究可以扩大样本范围，进一步验证本研究的结论。

综上所述，本研究通过问卷调查、深度访谈和课堂观察，全面探讨了数字工具在高级汉语学习者跨文化能力培养中的作用。通过定量与定性数据的结合，本研究旨在为对外汉语教学提供新的思路和方法，同时也为未来的相关研究提供参考。

5. 研究结果

5.1 高级汉语学习者的特征分析（基于问卷调研）

- 1) 年龄构成：25-35岁成人学习者占比71.4%

- 2) 学习动机: 职业发展需求 (64.3%) > 文化兴趣 (28.6%) > 学术研究 (7.1%)
- 3) 中国经历: 82.1% 具有短期访华经历 (1-6个月)

高级汉语学习者通常以非华裔成人学习者为主, 他们大多具备HSK4级以上的汉语水平, 能够进行较为复杂的语言交流。这些学习者通常已经掌握了汉语的基本语法和词汇, 能够进行日常对话和书面表达。

高级汉语学习者对口语练习和跨文化交际的需求度较高。由于他们已经具备了较强的语言基础, 因此更希望通过实际交际来提升自己的语言能力和跨文化交际能力。高级汉语学习者普遍希望通过与母语者的互动, 了解中国的社会文化、风俗习惯和价值观, 从而更好地适应跨文化环境。此外, 这些学习者通常具有较强的学习动机, 他们希望通过跨文化交际能力的提升, 为未来的职业发展或学术研究打下坚实的基础。

5.2 高级汉语学习者的跨文化交际能力现状

- 1) 跨文化认知理解: 对中国文化的了解程度

研究发现, 日内瓦大学的高级汉语学习者对中国文化的了解程度存在较大差异。约60%的学习者表示对中国历史、传统文化和哲学思想有一定的了解, 尤其是在中国生活过的学习者, 对中国文化的认知更为深入。然而, 仍有40%的学习者表示对中国文化的了解较为有限, 尤其是在当代中国社会、政治、经济等方面。访谈中, 部分学习者提到, 尽管他们通过课堂学习掌握了一些中国文化知识, 但在实际跨文化交际中, 仍然难以准确把握文化差异, 尤其是在涉及深层次价值观和行为规范的场景中。

- 2) 跨文化情感态度: 对不同文化的态度和包容性

在情感态度方面, 大多数学习者表现出对不同文化的积极态度和包容性。约75%的学习者表示, 他们尊重文化差异, 并愿意在跨文化交际中换位思考。然而, 也有部分学习者 (约25%) 表示, 在实际交际中, 面对文化冲突时, 他们感到困惑或不适。访谈中, 一些学习者提到, 尽管他们在理论上理解文化差异的重要性, 但在实际情境中, 仍然难以避免文化偏见或误解。例如, 一位学习者提到, 在与中国人讨论社会问题时, 由于对中国社会制度的理解不足, 导致双方产生了误解。

- 3) 跨文化行为技能: 在实际交际中的表现

在行为技能方面, 学习者的表现呈现出较大的差异。约50%的学习者表示, 他们在跨文化交际中能够运用一定的交际策略, 如倾听、观察、回避冒犯行为等, 从而顺利完成交际任务。然而, 仍有50%的学习者表示, 他们在跨文化交际中常常感到不知所措, 尤其是在涉及文化冲突或误解的场景中。课堂观察数据显示, 学习者在模拟跨文化交际任务中, 表现出较强的语言能力, 但在处理文化冲突时, 往

往缺乏有效的策略。例如，在一次模拟商务谈判中，学习者由于对中国商务礼仪的理解不足，导致谈判陷入僵局。

5.3 数字工具的使用情况

问卷调查显示，日内瓦大学的高级汉语学习者常用的数字工具包括中文联盟、HelloTalk、抖音等。其中，中文联盟是最受欢迎的学习平台，约70%的学习者表示曾使用该平台进行汉语学习和文化了解。HelloTalk作为语言交换应用，也受到了广泛欢迎，约60%的学习者表示曾通过该应用与汉语母语者进行语言交换。抖音作为媒体娱乐平台，约50%的学习者表示曾通过该平台了解中国的流行文化和社会现象。

相关性分析显示，数字工具的使用频率与学习者的跨文化能力呈正相关。具体而言，使用数字工具频率较高的学习者，在跨文化认知理解、情感态度和行为技能方面的表现均优于使用频率较低的学习者。例如，经常使用中文联盟的学习者，对中国文化的了解程度显著高于不常使用该平台的学习者。同样，经常使用HelloTalk的学习者，在跨文化交际中的表现更为自信和灵活。

6. 讨论

6.1 数字工具在跨文化能力培养中的优势：

1) 提供丰富的文化输入和输出渠道：

数字工具为高级汉语学习者提供了多样化的文化输入和输出渠道，极大地拓展了他们的学习资源和跨文化交际机会。通过中文联盟、HelloTalk、抖音等平台，学习者可以接触到丰富的中国文化内容，如历史、艺术、社会现象等。这些平台不仅提供了文化知识的输入，还通过互动功能（如评论、点赞、实时对话等）为学习者提供了文化输出的机会。例如，学习者可以通过HelloTalk与汉语母语者进行语言交换，分享自己的文化背景，同时了解对方的文化习俗。这种双向的文化交流不仅增强了学习者的文化认知，还提升了他们的跨文化交际能力。

2) 增强学习者的文化自信心和跨文化敏感性：

数字工具通过提供真实的跨文化交际场景，帮助学习者在实践中增强文化自信心和跨文化敏感性。例如，通过抖音等媒体娱乐平台，学习者可以观察到中国人的日常生活和社会行为，从而更好地理解中国文化中的行为规范和价值观。访谈中，一位学习者提到，通过观看抖音短视频，她逐渐理解了中国人对家庭和社会的重视，这使她在与中国人交流时更加自信和从容。此外，数字工具还通过虚拟

现实技术，为学习者提供了沉浸式的文化体验，进一步增强了他们的跨文化敏感性。

6.2 数字工具的局限性：

1) 信息过载与分类不明确

尽管数字工具提供了丰富的文化资源，但信息过载和分类不明确的问题仍然存在。学习者在使用数字工具时，常常面临海量信息的筛选难题，难以快速找到适合自己的学习资源。

2) 对学习者自主学习能力的要求较高

数字工具的使用对学习者的自主学习能力提出了较高要求。由于数字工具的学习过程通常是非结构化的，学习者需要具备较强的自我管理能力，才能有效利用这些工具进行学习。然而，并非所有学习者都具备这种能力。访谈中，部分学习者提到，他们在使用数字工具时，常常感到无所适从，缺乏明确的学习目标和计划。此外，数字工具的互动功能虽然提供了跨文化交际的机会，但也要求学习者具备较强的交际策略和应变能力，这对部分学习者来说是一个挑战。

6.3 对教学的启示

6.3.1 教师应如何有效整合数字工具进行跨文化教学

教师在跨文化教学中应充分利用数字工具的优势，设计多样化的教学任务，帮助学习者提升跨文化能力。具体而言，教师可以：

- 1) 整合多种数字工具：结合中文联盟、HelloTalk、抖音等平台，设计综合性的跨文化教学任务。例如，教师可以要求学习者通过中文联盟了解某一文化现象，然后通过HelloTalk与母语者讨论该现象，最后在课堂上分享自己的学习成果。
- 2) 提供学习指导：教师应为学习者提供明确的学习目标和计划，帮助他们有效利用数字工具进行学习。例如，教师可以设计每周的学习任务清单，指导学习者如何使用数字工具完成这些任务。
- 3) 加强互动与反馈：教师应通过在线平台与学习者保持互动，及时提供反馈和指导。例如，教师可以通过社交媒体平台与学习者进行实时互动，解答他们的疑问，帮助他们解决学习中的困难。

6.3.2 如何设计适合高级汉语学习者的跨文化教学任务。

针对高级汉语学习者的特点，教师应设计具有挑战性和实践性的跨文化教学任务，帮助他们在实际交际中提升跨文化能力。具体而言，教师可以：

- 1) 设计情境化任务：结合学习者的实际需求，设计情境化的跨文化交际任务。例如，教师可以模拟商务谈判、文化交流活动等场景，要求学习者在任务中运用跨文化交际策略，解决文化冲突。
- 2) 强调文化对比与反思：在任务设计中，教师应引导学习者进行文化对比与反思，帮助他们深入理解文化差异。例如，教师可以要求学习者比较中西方在某一社会现象上的差异，并分析其背后的文化原因。
- 3) 鼓励自主学习与合作学习：教师应鼓励学习者通过数字工具进行自主学习和合作学习，提升他们的自主学习能力和团队合作能力。例如，教师可以设计小组任务，要求学习者通过数字工具合作完成某一文化研究项目，并在课堂上展示研究成果。

数字工具在跨文化能力培养中具有显著的优势，但也存在一定的局限性。教师应充分利用数字工具的优势，设计多样化的教学任务，帮助高级汉语学习者提升跨文化能力。同时，教师还应关注学习者的个体差异，提供个性化的学习指导，帮助他们克服数字工具使用中的困难。在全球化的背景下，数字工具的应用为跨文化交际能力的培养提供了新的可能性，未来的研究应进一步探索其在不同语言水平和文化背景学习者中的应用效果。

7. 结论与建议

7.1 研究结论

- 1) 数字工具在帮助高级汉语学习者习得跨文化能力方面具有显著效果
本研究表明，数字工具在提升高级汉语学习者的跨文化能力方面发挥了重要作用。通过中文联盟、HelloTalk、抖音等平台，学习者不仅能够接触到丰富的中国文化资源，还能与汉语母语者进行实时互动，从而增强对中国文化的认知理解、培养对不同文化的积极态度，并提升在实际跨文化交际中的表现。数字工具通过提供多样化的文化输入和输出渠道，帮助学习者在虚拟和现实环境中进行跨文化交际实践，显著提升了他们的跨文化交际能力。
- 2) 数字工具的使用频率与跨文化能力的提升呈正相关
相关性分析显示，数字工具的使用频率与学习者的跨文化能力呈正相关。经常使用数字工具的学习者，在跨文化认知理解、情感态度和行为技能方面的表现均优于使用频率较低的学习者。例如，经常使用中文联盟的学习者对中国文化的了解程度显著高于不常使用该平台的学习者。这一发现表明，数字工具的使用频率越高，学习者的跨文化能力提升效果越明显。

7.2 建议

教师应充分利用数字工具，设计多样化的跨文化教学任务。教师应积极整合数字工具，设计多样化的跨文化教学任务，帮助学习者在实践中提升跨文化能力。具体建议包括：

- 1) 结合多种数字工具：教师可以结合中文联盟、HelloTalk、抖音等平台，设计综合性的跨文化教学任务。例如，教师可以要求学习者通过中文联盟了解某一文化现象，然后通过HelloTalk与母语者讨论该现象，最后在课堂上分享自己的学习成果。
- 2) 提供学习指导：教师应为学习者提供明确的学习目标和计划，帮助他们有效利用数字工具进行学习。例如，教师可以设计每周的学习任务清单，指导学习者如何使用数字工具完成这些任务。
- 3) 加强互动与反馈：教师应通过在线平台与学习者保持互动，及时提供反馈和指导。例如，教师可以通过社交媒体平台与学习者进行实时互动，解答他们的疑问，帮助他们解决学习中的困难。

学习者应充分利用数字工具提供的跨文化交际机会，主动进行跨文化交际实践。具体建议包括：

- 1) 积极参与在线互动：学习者应积极参与HelloTalk等语言交换应用的互动，与汉语母语者进行实时对话，提升自己的口语能力和跨文化交际能力。
- 2) 利用社交媒体了解文化：学习者可以通过抖音、微博等社交媒体平台，了解中国的流行文化和社会现象，增强对中国文化的认知理解。

反思与总结：学习者在跨文化交际实践中，应不断反思和总结自己的表现，找出不足之处，并加以改进。例如，学习者可以通过记录跨文化交际中的成功与失败案例，分析其中的文化差异，提升自己的跨文化交际策略。

7.3 总结

数字工具在帮助高级汉语学习者习得跨文化能力方面具有显著效果，其使用频率与跨文化能力的提升呈正相关。教师应充分利用数字工具，设计多样化的跨文化教学任务，帮助学习者在实践中提升跨文化能力。学习者应主动利用数字工具进行跨文化交际实践，增强对中国文化的认知理解、培养对不同文化的积极态度，并提升在实际跨文化交际中的表现。未来的研究应进一步探讨数字工具在不同语言水平和文化背景学习者中的应用效果，为对外汉语教学提供更多的理论和实践支持。在

全球化的背景下，数字工具的应用为跨文化交际能力的培养提供了新的可能性，未来的研究应继续探索其在不同教学环境中的应用潜力。

References / 参考文献:

- Lado, Robert, and C. C. Fries. *Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*. University of Michigan Press, 1957.
- Fantini, Alvino E. „Exploring and assessing intercultural competence.“ (2007).
- Byram, Michael. „Cultural awareness' as vocabulary learning.“ *Language learning journal* 16.1 (1997): 51-57.
- Byram, Michael. *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections*. Vol. 17. Multilingual matters, 2008.
- Byram, Michael. *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited*. Multilingual matters, 2020.
- Benson, Phil. *Teaching and Researching Autonomy*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013, doi:10.4324/9781315833767.
- Benson, Phil, and Hayo Reinders, editors. *Beyond the Language Classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, doi:10.1057/9780230306790.
- Yang, Shu, and Yi-Ju Chen. “Technology-Enhanced Language Learning: A Case Study.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 23, 2007, pp. 860-879, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2006.02.015.
- 吴蕙霖. “浅析基于移动数字平台的语言学习与跨文化功能研究.” *现代教育论坛*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2020, pp. 79-81, doi:10.32629/mef.v3i9.2903.
- 张红玲, and 吴诗沁. “外语教育中的跨文化能力教学参考框架研制.” *外语界*. 05(2022):2-11. doi:CNKI:SUN:WYJY.0.2022-05-001.
- 李庆本等编著. *中外文化比较与跨文化交际*. 北京语言大学出版社, 2014年.
- 余磊. “跨文化交际与数字媒体的融合策略与能力培养探究.” *国际公关*. 14(2024):119-121. doi:10.16645/j.cnki.cn11-5281/c.2024.14.013.
- 许力生. “跨文化的交际能力问题探讨.” *外语与外语教学*. 07(2000):17-21. doi:10.13458/j.cnki.flatt.002150.
- 周杨. “中韩跨文化交际中的语言交际与非语言交际.” *西部学刊*. 20(2023):82-85+93. doi:10.16721/j.cnki.cn61-1487/c.2023.20.017.
- 高一虹. “跨文化交际能力的培养:“跨越”与“超越”.” *外语与外语教学*. 10(2002):27-31. doi:CNKI:SUN:WYJY.0.2002-10-006.
- 彭仁忠, 付容容, and 吴卫平. “新时代背景下跨文化外语教学理论模型和实践模型研究.” *外语界*. 04(2020):45-53. doi:CNKI:SUN:WYJY.0.2020-04-008.

5.

**Локализация на китайски
видеоигри – лингвистични и културни
предизвикателства (казусен анализ на
Honor of Kings и *League of Legends*)**

Теодор Вълев

Великотърновски университет „Св. св. Кирил и Методий“ (България)

**Chinese Video Games Localisation –
Linguistic and Cultural Challenges
(*Honor of King* and *League of Legends*
Case Study)**

Teodor Valev

University of Veliko Tarnovo “St. St. Cyril and Methodius” (Bulgaria)

Abstract: The localization of Chinese video games for Western markets represents an exceptionally complex process that transcends the traditional concept of translation, encompassing detailed cultural, linguistic, and technical adaptation. This process necessitates consideration of deeply rooted cognitive and semiotic differences between Chinese and Western gaming cultures. The present study analyses the primary terminological and linguistic challenges, offering a systematization of translation strategies employed in the adaptation of popular Chinese video games

such as *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) and *League of Legends* (英雄联盟). The article is grounded in functionalist theories in translation studies and the concept of dynamic equivalence, proposing an analytical model for assessing localization effectiveness in the context of video games. The research outlines prospects for future improvements in localization strategies and emphasizes the role of cultural transformation in the adaptation process.

Keywords: Chinese video games, localization, linguistic challenges, translation strategies, cultural adaptation, dynamic equivalence, cognitive linguistics

В последните десетилетия индустрията на видеоигрите се утвърди като един от водещите сектори в глобалната икономика с приходи, надхвърлящи тези на други развлекателни сектори. Според доклад на *Newzoo* (2021) глобалният пазар на видеоигри е достигнал стойност от над 175 милиарда долара, като се очаква този растеж да продължи и в следващите години. Китай, като един от основните двигатели на този растеж, не само че е водещ производител на видеоигри, но и е най-големият пазар за тяхното потребление. С нарастващото глобално разпространение на китайски видеоигри възниква необходимостта от ефективна локализация, която да гарантира успешното им приемане в различни културни и езикови среди.

Локализацията на видеоигри е комплексен процес, който надхвърля простия превод на текстове. Тя включва адаптация на културни референции, интерфейсни елементи, аудио компоненти и дори игрови механики с цел предоставяне на автентично и ангажиращо изживяване за играчите в целевите региони (Chandler & Deming, 2012). Особено предизвикателство се явява локализацията на китайски видеоигри за западните пазари, поради значителните лингвистични, културни и когнитивни различия между китайската и западната аудитория.

Настоящото изследване разглежда лингвистичните и културните предизвикателства при локализацията на китайски видеоигри, като поставя акцент върху превода на ключови термини и използваните стратегии за адаптация. Фокусът е насочен към езиковата двойка китайски–английски, една от най-динамичните в контекста на глобалния гейминг пазар. Чрез анализ на съществуваща научна литература и казуси от видеоигрите *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) и *League of Legends*, изследването се стреми да идентифицира ефективни решения за справяне с типични преводачески затруднения.

Теоретичната рамка стъпва върху функционалните подходи в преводазнанието (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984), които изискват преводът да бъде ориентиран към културните и когнитивните особености на целевата аудитория. На тази основа се предлага анализ на преводачески практики, които съчетават езикова точност с културна релевантност, отразявайки спецификите на игровия дискурс.

Теоретични рамки в превода на видеоигри

Преводът на видеоигри е интердисциплинарна област, която обединява принципи от преводознанието, лингвистиката, културологията и игровия дизайн. Разбирането на теоретичните основи в тази сфера е от съществено значение за ефективната локализация на игровото съдържание.

Функционалните теории, в частност скопос теорията, разработена от Катарина Райс и Ханс Вермеер (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984), акцентира не върху директното съответствие между оригинала и превода, а върху функцията, която преводът следва да изпълнява в целевата култура. В този контекст един и същ оригинален текст може да бъде преведен по множество различни начини в зависимост от това каква е неговата цел (скопос) и какви са очакванията на целевата аудитория. При локализацията на видеоигри тази цел обикновено е свързана с постигане на автентично игрово изживяване, което да бъде в синхрон с културната логика и игровите навици на потребителите. Това налага адаптация не само на езиковото съдържание, но и на културните препратки, хумора, социалните роли и дори на механиките на играта.

Паралелно с функционалния подход теорията на еквивалентността, предложена от Юджийн Найда (Nida, 1964), допринася за разбирането на преводаческия процес чрез въвеждането на разграничението между формална и динамична еквивалентност. Докато формалната еквивалентност се стреми към запазване на структурата и формата на оригиналния текст, динамичната еквивалентност поставя в центъра на превода въздействието върху читателя. При превода на видеоигри именно динамичната еквивалентност намира по-широко приложение, тъй като позволява преводачът да се фокусира върху пресъздаването на оригиналното игрово въздействие, а не само върху езиковата форма.

Локализацията като част от преводаческия процес надхвърля простия превод и включва адаптация на продукта към специфичните културни, лингвистични и технически изисквания на целевия пазар. Това включва промени в графики, аудио, интерфейс и дори игрови механики, за да е сигурно, че играта е подходяща и привлекателна за местната аудитория. Културната адаптация е от съществено значение, особено при превода на хумор, идиоми и културно специфични препратки, които могат да нямат директен еквивалент в целевия език.

Друг подходящ подход е теорията на полисистемите, предложена от Итамар Евън-Зохар (Even-Zohar, 1990), която разглежда превода като част от по-широка литературна и културна система. Според тази теория преводните текстове играят активна роля в развитието на целевата култура и могат да заемат централно или периферно място в нея. При превода на видеоигри, особено от доминиращи култури като китайската за западните пазари, е важно да се отчита влиянието на превода върху приемането и интеграцията на играта в целевата културна система.

Разбирането и прилагането на тези теоретични рамки е от съществено значение за успешната локализация на видеоигри. Те предоставят насоки за вземане

на преводачески решения, които гарантират, че крайният продукт е не само лингвистично точен, но и културно релевантен и ангажиращ за целевата аудитория.

Лингвистични предизвикателства при локализацията на китайски видеоигри

Локализацията на видеоигри от китайски на други езици е особено предизвикателство поради редица езикови и културни особености. Основните трудности произтичат от различията в морфологията, синтаксиса, семантиката и прагматиката, както и от културната дистанция между китайската и западните аудитории. Тези предизвикателства могат да се систематизират в три основни направления: морфологични и синтактични трудности, семантични разлики и културно обусловени езикови елементи.

От една страна, китайският език се отличава със своя аналитичен характер, при който отсъстват ясно изразени граматични категории като род, число и падеж, които са характерни за индоевропейските езици. Това води до значителни затруднения при превода на игрови термини, които в китайския имат една форма, но в английския или балканските езици изискват различни граматични преобразувания (Li, 2020). Например думата 英雄 (yīngxióng, „герой“) няма граматичен маркер за число и може да означава както „герой“, така и „герои“. От друга страна, при превод на заглавия като *League of Legends* или *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) тази липса на морфологични маркери може да доведе до неяснота в интерфейса или в игровите инструкции, ако не бъде компенсирана чрез контекстуална адаптация. На практика преводачите често прибегват до добавяне на пояснителен текст в рамките на интерфейса под формата на допълнителни подсказки, диалогови прозорци или визуални елементи, които конкретизират дали става въпрос за един или за няколко обекта.²⁵ Това решение спомага за избягване на обърквания, които могат да възпрепятстват геймплея и да нарушат игровата логика.

Фиксиран словоред и липса на флективни форми

Китайският език има сравнително фиксиран SVO (подлог–сказуемо–допълнение) словоред, чрез който се изразяват основните синтактични отношения

²⁵ Например в *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀), ако в дадена мисия играчът трябва да се изправи срещу множество противници, в английската локализация към думата „hero“ се добавя допълнителна пояснителна реплика в диалога или описание от типа „Defeat all enemy heroes.“ (Убийте всички герои от противниковия отбор), което уточнява множественото число и елиминира двусмислието, присъстващо в китайската версия.

между участниците в изречението. Поради липсата на флективни форми (напр. за падеж) релационните значения се предават чрез позицията на елементите в изречението, контекста и употребата на структурни частици. Например:

他攻击敌人 (Tā gōngjī dírén) – „Той атакува врага.“

敌人攻击他 (Dírén gōngjī tā) – „Врагът атакува него.“

Разликата в значението се дължи изцяло на словореда, тъй като няма граматични маркери, които да показват кой е подлог и кой – допълнение. В контекста на локализация на видеоигри тази структурна особеност може да породи двусмислие, особено в динамични диалози или инструкции за действия. Например в игра като *League of Legends* кратки изрази от типа 击杀敌人 (jīshā dírén, „Убий врага.“) биха могли да се окажат неясни без визуална или контекстуална опора – играчът може да не е сигурен кой е субектът на действието. В такива случаи преводачите прибегват до уточняване чрез допълнителни пояснителни реплики или интерфейсни добавки като: „You must defeat the enemy.“ (Ти трябва да победиш врага.) вместо просто „Defeat enemy.“ (Победи врага.), за да се избегне амбигуитет.

Семантични различия между китайския и целевите езици

Китайският език е богат на образни и идиоматични изрази, дълбоко вкоренени в културния и исторически контекст на страната. Тези езикови особености често нямат директен еквивалент в западните езици, което създава сериозни предизвикателства при локализацията на видеоигри. За да се избегнат неразбираеми или културно неуместни преводи, преводачите трябва да прилагат стратегии за семантична адаптация, ориентирани към целевата аудитория.

Илюстративен е казусът с героя 李白 (Lǐ Bái) от *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀), вдъхновен от реална историческа личност – прочут поет от династия Тан (618–907). Докато за китайските играчи името носи богати културни конотации, свързани с класическата поезия, за западната аудитория то може да звучи просто като екзотично собствено име без допълнителна семантична дълбочина. Вместо да разчитат на буквален превод, локализаторите могат да се ръководят от целта на превода, като предоставят допълнителна информация в биографията (lore²⁶) на героя или чрез интерактивни диалози, които изграждат културен контекст. Така се постига не само ф-функционална адекватност, но и емоционална идентификация от страна на играча – основна цел при локализацията, която изисква възпроизвеждане на въздействието, а не на формата на оригинала.

В този смисъл изборът на подход следва логиката на скопос теорията и динамичната еквивалентност – вместо да се търси пълно съответствие, фокусът се

²⁶ Обозначава наративната основа на видеоиграта – история, митология и контекст, свързани с игровия свят.

измества към стремежа за културна и прагматична релевантност, способна да пренесе игровото преживяване в нов контекст без загуба на дълбочина.

Полисемия и нееднозначност

Китайските думи често имат множество значения, които зависят от контекста. Пример за това е думата 法师 (fǎshī), която може да означава както „маг“, така и „будистки монах“. В *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) терминът се отнася до героите магьосници. В този случай буквален превод като „монах“ би бил напълно неадекватен. Друг пример е думата 皮肤 (pífū), означаваща буквално „кожа“, но в геймърските среди се използва „скин“ (външен вид на персонажа, англ. skin). Това показва необходимостта от семантична адаптация, за да бъде игровият термин разбираем за играчите.

Проблеми с терминологията

Според Mangiron (2017) един от основните проблеми при локализацията на видеоигри е разминаването между вътрешноигровата терминология и очакванията на играчите в целевата култура. Например 战士 (zhànshì) може да бъде преведено като „warrior“ (войн) или „fighter“ (боец), в зависимост от стилистиката на играта. Неправилният избор на еквивалент може да доведе до объркване относно ролята на героя в играта, което е от изключителна важност, когато героите са разделени според категории.

Културно обусловени езикови предизвикателства

При локализацията на китайски видеоигри за западните пазари възникват специфични езикови предизвикателства, произтичащи от дълбоко вкоренените културни различия между двете аудитории. Тези предизвикателства се проявяват в няколко ключови аспекта:

*Китайски културно специфични елементи,
които нямат директен еквивалент в целевата общност*

Китайските видеоигри често включват елементи от китайската митология, философия и традиционни вярвания, които могат да бъдат трудно разбираеми за западната аудитория. Например в *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) някои герои са

базиран на исторически или митологични личности като 关羽 (Guān Yǔ) – известен генерал от романа „Трицарствие“. За китайските играчи това име носи културен заряд, докато за западните играчи е просто още един персонаж. При локализацията на играта героите често получават нови имена или пояснителни описания, за да бъдат разбрани от чуждестранната аудитория. Това е типичен пример за възникване на нужда от прилагане на функционалните теории.

Различия в начина на изразяване на учтивост и социални роли

Китайският език съдържа разнообразни формални и неформални регистри, които се основават на социалните взаимоотношения. Например в китайските игри често се използват уважителни форми като 大人 (dàrén) – учтиво обръщение към благородник, което може да бъде преведено като „сър“, „велик господар“ или „милорд“ в зависимост от контекста. Ако такива формулировки не бъдат адаптирани правилно, играта може да звучи изкуствено или дори нелогично за западните играчи.

Преводачески стратегии за справяне с лингвистични и културни предизвикателства

За преодоляване на разгледаните езикови и културни бариери при локализацията на китайски видеоигри преводачите прибегват до различни стратегии, които им позволяват да съчетаят вярност към оригинала с разбираемост и културна адекватност в целевия език.

Транскрипция – използва се, когато дадено име или термин носи специфична културна стойност, която би се загубила при превод. Например, името 关羽 (Guān Yǔ), което обозначава легендарен генерал от периода на Трицарствието, често се предава фонетично като Guan Yu, за да запази своята културна и историческа идентичност, вместо да се превежда като „Генерал Гуан“, което би било прекалено общо и лишено от контекст.

Семантична адаптация – прилага се, когато терминът има културно специфично значение, което трябва да бъде интуитивно разбираемо за играчите. Например, терминът 皮肤 (pífū), който буквално означава „кожа“, в игровия жаргон обозначава визуален облик или външен костюм на герой. Вместо да се преведе буквално, той се адаптира като „skin“ – термин, познат на геймърите в англоезичния свят.

Пълна замяна с културно еквивалентен термин – използва се, когато оригиналният термин няма пряк аналог в целевата култура или би останал неясен. Например 战士 (zhànshì, буквално „боец“) често се адаптира като warrior

(войн), тъй като този термин има утвърдена семантична роля в западната игрова терминология и по-добре предава характеристиките на героя.

Преводът на китайски видеоигри изисква задълбочено познаване не само на езика, но и на културната семиотика на изходната и целевата среда. Изборът на преводаческа стратегия влияе пряко върху игровото възприемане и идентификацията на чуждестранните играчи с героите, света и наратива на играта. Затова прилагането на подходящи техники за адаптация е съществен компонент от успешната локализация.

Казуси и примери за локализация на китайски видеоигри

В тази част на изследването ще бъдат анализирани конкретни примери, които илюстрират предизвикателствата и решенията при локализацията на китайски видеоигри.

Honor of Kings (王者荣耀) и *Arena of Valor*

Honor of Kings (王者荣耀) е една от най-популярните мобилни игри в Китай, разработена от *Tencent Games*. При локализацията ѝ за западните пазари под името *Arena of Valor* са предприети значителни промени, за да се адаптира играта към културните и езикови особености на западната аудитория. В процеса на локализация много от героите в *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀), базирани на китайски исторически и митологични фигури, са заменени с персонажи, по-познати на западната публика. Например вместо герои като Ли Бай (известен китайски поет) или Дяо Чан (легендарна красавица от периода на Трицарствието) в *Arena of Valor* се въвеждат персонажи от западната митология и популярна култура, включително герои от вселената на *DC Comics* като Батман и Жената чудо. Тази стратегия има за цел да улесни идентификацията и ангажираността на западните играчи с игровото съдържание. Освен промяната на героите наративните елементи и сюжетни линии са преработени, за да отразят теми и истории, които резонират по-силно със западната аудитория. Това включва адаптация на диалози, мисии и истории на героите, които в оригиналната версия са дълбоко вкоренени в китайската култура и история. Чрез тази адаптация се избягва културният дисонанс и се подобрява приемането на играта на новите пазари. Визуалните и звукови елементи също са модифицирани, за да отговорят на предпочитанията на западните играчи. Това включва промени в дизайна на интерфейса, цветови схеми и музикални теми, които са по-близки до западните естетически стандарти. Например саундтракът на *Arena of Valor* е компилиран с участието на ком-

позитори като Ханс Цимер и Лорн Балф, чиито стилове са познати и ценени от западната публика. Локализацията на *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) като *Arena of Valor* демонстрира значението на дълбоката културна адаптация при представянето на видеоигри на нови пазари. Въпреки че основната игрова механика остава непроменена, внимателната адаптация на културните, наративните и естетическите елементи е от решаващо значение за успешното приемане на играта от западната аудитория. Този казус подчертава необходимостта от разбиране и уважение към културните различия при глобализацията на дигитални продукти.

League of Legends (英雄联盟)

League of Legends е мултиплейър онлайн бойна арена (МОБА), разработена от *Riot Games*, която се радва на значителна популярност както в Китай, така и на западните пазари. За да отговори на нуждите на китайската гейминг общност, играта има отделна сървърна инфраструктура за китайските потребители, управлявана от *Tencent*, която осигурява по-добра свързаност и локализирано съдържание за местните играчи. Това идва и със своите особености. Имената на героите и техните умения често съдържат културни препратки, които могат да бъдат неразбираеми за различните аудитории. При локализацията на играта тези имена и описания се адаптират, за да бъдат по-интуитивни и разбираеми за съответните играчи. Например героят Wukong е базиран на китайския митологичен персонаж Сун Укун (孙悟空). В китайската версия на играта той носи името 悟空 (Wùkōng), което е директна препратка към оригиналния герой. При локализацията за западните пазари името е транскрибирано като Wukong, запазвайки фонетичната близост, но премахвайки тоновете, характерни за китайския език, което улеснява произношението и разпознаването от западните играчи. Тази стратегия на адаптация е от съществено значение за запазване на културната идентичност на героя, като същевременно прави съдържанието достъпно и привлекателно за международната аудитория. Подобни подходи са обсъдени от O'Hagan и Mangiron (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013) в контекста на локализацията на видеоигри.

Заклучение

В настоящото изследване бяха разгледани теоретичните рамки и лингвистичните предизвикателства, свързани с локализацията на китайски видеоигри за западните пазари. Чрез анализа на конкретни казуси като *Honor of Kings* (王者荣耀) и *Arena of Valor* беше илюстрирана необходимостта от задълбочено разбиране на културните и езиковите различия при адаптацията на игровото съдър-

жание. Основните изводи от изследването подчертават значението на функционалните подходи в преводознанието, които акцентират върху адаптацията на преводния текст към целевата култура и аудитория. Идентифицираните лингвистични и културни предизвикателства при локализацията на китайски видеоигри изискват прилагането на разнообразни преводачески стратегии, включително транскрипция, семантична адаптация и културна замяна.

Изследването демонстрира систематизирането на теоретичните подходи и предоставянето на практически насоки за справяне с предизвикателствата при локализацията на видеоигри. Това допринася за по-доброто разбиране на процесите и стратегиите, необходими за успешната адаптация на игровото съдържание към различни културни и езикови контексти.

В бъдещи изследвания е препоръчително да се разгледат допълнителни казуси и да се анализират нови методи и технологии, които могат да подпомогнат процеса на локализация. Това ще допринесе за по-ефективното преодоляване на лингвистичните и културните бариери и ще осигури по-качествено игрово изживяване за глобалната гейминг аудитория.

References / 参考文献

- Chandler, H., & Deming, S. (2012). *The Game Localization Handbook* (2nd ed.). Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Even-Zohar, I. (1990). Polysystem Studies. *Poetics Today*, 11(1), 9-26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772668>
- Li, X. (2020). *Linguistic Challenges in Game Localization: A Case Study of Chinese-to-English Translations*. Shanghai University Press.
- Mangiron, C. (2017). Reception and perception of translated games: An empirical approach. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 25(2), 171-186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2017.1291695>
- Newzoo. (2021). *Global Games Market Report 2021*. <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-report-2021>
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. E. J. Brill.
- O'Hagan, M., & Mangiron, C. (2013). *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Reiß, K., & Vermeer, H. J. (1984). *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*. Niemeyer.
- Tencent Games. (2017). *Localization Strategy for Honor of Kings*. Tencent White Paper.

6.

中国与保加利亚的教育和学术交流

耐丽
保加利亚爱格中文学校

Educational and Academic Exchanges between China and Bulgaria

Neli Nanova
PSS "Evlogy and Hristo Georgievi" (Bulgaria)

Abstract: Educational exchange between China and Bulgaria has a long history, dating back to student exchanges in the 1950s. Those exchanges have significantly increased in recent years and especially after the year 2000. These exchange programs have not only promoted mutual understanding and cooperation between the two sides but have also strengthened cultural, academic, and economic ties. The success of the bilateral relations lies in the extent to which China and Bulgaria develop the cooperation in the sphere of educational and academic exchange.

Keywords: Educational and Academic Exchanges; China; Bulgaria; Summer camps

Brief introduction of the topic and its significance

Educational and academic exchanges between China and Bulgaria fall within the broader context of those exchanges between China and the EU. Educational exchange between China and many European countries has a long history, dating back to student exchanges in the 1950s. More profound development has taken place since

the 1990s and especially the beginning of the millennium. It started primarily in the sector of higher education with the mobility of students and teachers, then moved on to research and teaching collaboration, with a focus on comprehensive strategic partnership (European Commission, 2013), reflected in three pillars, namely the strategic dialogue initiated in 2005, the economic and trade dialogue commenced in 2008, and the “People-to-People Dialogue,” launched in 2012 to improve cooperation in education, culture, youth, and research²⁷.

Educational and academic exchanges have significantly increased in recent years. 53% of international students worldwide come from China and India²⁸. In 2023 there were 200 892 international students studying in China.²⁹ In 2022 there were 1 052 283 Chinese students studying abroad.³⁰ These exchange programs have not only promoted mutual understanding and cooperation between the two sides, but have also strengthened cultural, academic, and economic ties. Through summer camps and semester-long academic exchanges, students are able to experience different educational systems and cultural backgrounds, laying a foundation for their future careers and contributions to society. These exchanges also hold great significance for China’s international education strategy, fostering the joint development of China and Bulgaria in the context of globalization.

Educational and academic exchanges play a crucial role in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation between China and Bulgaria. First, through the interaction of students and scholars, both sides can deepen their understanding of each other’s cultures, histories, and social backgrounds. This direct communication helps eliminate misunderstandings, build trust, and lay the foundation for future cooperation.

Second, educational exchanges provide an opportunity for both sides to share knowledge and skills. Chinese and Bulgarian students, by participating in each other’s academic programs, not only enhance their professional abilities, but also absorb new perspectives and innovative ideas. This exchange of knowledge and experience promotes mutual progress in the academic fields of both regions.

Moreover, academic exchange programs also drive cooperation in other areas. For example, cooperation in education often extends to other fields such as economics, technology, and culture. Through these collaborations, both sides not only establish closer ties but also lay the foundation for more interactions in other domains in the future.

Educational and academic exchanges are an important means of promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, and joint development between China and Bulgaria, helping to build a more solid bilateral relationship.

²⁷ Cai Y., *China-Europe Higher Education Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges*, 2019.

²⁸ Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange,” www.opendoorsdata.org.

²⁹ UNESCO, “Inbound internationally mobile students by continent of origin,” <https://data.uis.unesco.org/>

³⁰ UNESCO, “Outbound internationally mobile students by host region,” <https://data.uis.unesco.org/>

How do these exchanges fit within the broader context of China's international education strategy?

“培养什么人、怎样培养人、为谁培养人是教育的根本问题。”³¹

The fundamental questions of education are: What kind of people should be cultivated? How should people be cultivated? And for whom should people be cultivated?

These questions focus on the core purpose and direction of education. The answers shape the goals and methods of teaching, as well as the values and skills that are passed down to students. Educators and institutions must carefully consider these aspects to ensure that education serves not only the individual development of students but also the broader needs of society.

习近平总书记在全国教育大会上强调：

“建设教育强国是以中国式现代化全面推进中华民族伟大复兴的基础工程。”³²

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the National Education Conference that building a strong education system is the foundational project for comprehensively advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization.

This statement highlights the critical role played by education in the nation's development and in achieving the broader goals of modernization and national renewal. Education is seen as a key pillar in strengthening the country's capabilities, fostering innovation, and ensuring sustainable progress in all areas of society.

Enhancing the international influence of China's education is essential. According to the development of the international situation, China needs to improve its strategy for opening up education, carefully balancing the two aspects of “bringing in” and “going out.” This approach should effectively leverage world-class educational resources and innovation elements to make China a powerful and influential global educational center. China should actively engage in global education governance, vigorously promote the “Study in China” brand, share China's stories,

³¹ Xi Jinping, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects—Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm, 16 October 2022.

³² “Deepening High-Level Educational Openness to the Outside World—Eighth Commentary on Studying and Implementing General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speech at the National Education Conference,” http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5148/202409/t20240919_1151824.html.

spread Chinese experiences, and amplify China's voice to increase the international influence and discourse power of Chinese education. It is also crucial to steadfastly expand the openness of education, in line with the overall national security concept, while ensuring the correct direction and safety boundaries for the opening of education to the outside world.

Expanding international academic exchanges and educational research cooperation is also vital. Participating in these exchanges helps Chinese teachers and students understand the educational philosophies and teaching methods of different countries and regions, broadens their horizons, and cultivates more well-rounded talent with a strong national sentiment, global vision, and professional abilities. This contributes to advancing China's presence in the world and helping the world better understand China. In promoting the opening-up of high-level education, the focus should be on creating robust, multi-directional cooperation mechanisms and facilitating practical, effective international exchanges and collaborations in education between Chinese universities, research institutions, and other entities. Moreover, China should actively integrate into global innovation networks, adhere to international science and technology cooperation initiatives, and prioritize talent development.

Variety of Educational and Academic Exchanges between China and Bulgaria

In May 2024, during his visit to France, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a significant initiative: "Over the next three years, the number of French students studying in China will exceed 10 000, and the scale of exchanges between European youth and China will double."³³ This initiative aims to expand exchanges between the peoples of China, France, and Europe, especially among the younger generation.

To support this, China has established the "Youth Ambassadors Exchange and Study Program," which will integrate high-quality resources from various Chinese universities and regions, enrich educational content, and diversify activity formats. The goal is to provide more high-quality platforms and channels for European youth interested in exchange programs in China.

Through these educational exchange programs, young people from different European countries will have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of courses and practical activities, study and interact with both Chinese and international students, experience cultural diversity, and enhance their intercultural communication skills. The initiative also encourages exchanges between Chinese and European scholars, fostering joint research and talent development in areas of mutual interest.

³³ https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202405/content_6949460.htm

The educational exchange programs include, but are not limited to:

- o inter-university exchange programs;
- o Chinese language courses and short-term courses;
- o internship programs, preparatory courses;
- o winter and summer camps, as well as other exchange activities.

Summer Camp Programs: A Key Channel for Cultural Exchange Between Chinese and Bulgarian Students

Summer camp programs serve as an important platform for fostering cultural exchange between Chinese and Bulgarian students, especially for those under 18 years old. These one-month camps not only provide opportunities to learn Chinese and experience Chinese culture but also open a window for students to understand Chinese society and history.

1. Target Group: Students Under 18

The summer camps primarily target young students under the age of 18, a crucial stage in the development of their worldview, values, and outlook on life. By participating in these programs, students can be exposed to Chinese culture and language at an early age, laying a foundation for deeper international exchanges in the future. Early cross-cultural experiences help cultivate a global perspective and enhance their cultural adaptability.

2. Intensive One-Month Course Schedule

The summer camps typically last for three weeks and feature a compact and well-structured curriculum which combines language learning with cultural immersion activities. Each day balances theoretical knowledge with hands-on experiences. For example, students may attend Chinese language classes in the morning, followed by cultural activities in the afternoon, such as visiting historical sites, practicing calligraphy, learning martial arts, and exploring intangible cultural heritage. This short-term, high-intensity learning model allows students to gain a basic understanding of Chinese language and culture in a relatively short time.

3. Learning Chinese

Language is a bridge for cultural exchange, and the summer camps include specialized Chinese language courses designed to help students develop conversational

skills. Classes are structured according to students' HSK proficiency levels, ensuring appropriate learning challenges. By immersing themselves in a Chinese-speaking environment, students gain insight into daily life and social habits in China. Moreover, language learning deepens their understanding of Chinese culture, as language and culture are closely intertwined.

4. Experiencing Chinese Culture

Beyond language courses, the summer camps emphasize cultural immersion through various hands-on activities. Students participate in celebrations of traditional Chinese festivals, explore Chinese history, and engage in traditional arts such as paper cutting, calligraphy, ink painting, martial arts, lion and dragon dances, Chinese knotting, lacquer fan painting, sand painting, and making handcrafted accessories. These experiences not only expose students to the richness of Chinese culture but also offer insight into the Chinese way of life and value system.

5. Cultural Understanding and International Friendships

The summer camps provide direct interaction opportunities between Chinese and Bulgarian students, enabling them to build cross-border friendships through shared learning and experiences. These connections foster a deeper appreciation of each other's cultures and lay the groundwork for future academic and professional collaborations.

Through three weeks of intensive learning and cultural exploration, students under 18 not only acquire basic Chinese language skills but also gain a profound understanding of Chinese traditions and society. These summer camp programs serve both as an educational initiative and as a bridge connecting the younger generations of China and the Balkan region.

Semester-Long Academic Exchanges

A one-semester study program is a comprehensive learning and cultural exchange initiative designed specifically for Bulgarian teenagers. Through studying and living in China, students can grow in a multicultural environment, enhance their language skills, develop independence, and enrich their personal experiences. This immersive experience helps them gain a deeper understanding of China's history, culture, social customs, and economic development.

Here are the specific advantages of the program:

1. Language Proficiency Enhancement

Students will systematically learn Chinese and rapidly improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. In a real-language environment, they can apply what they learn in class, truly mastering everyday communication skills.

2. Cross-Cultural Understanding and Inclusivity

The program facilitates interactions between students and local Chinese peers, allowing them to participate in cultural activities such as calligraphy, tea ceremonies, and martial arts. This immersive experience helps students gain a deeper understanding and respect for diverse cultures. Through cross-cultural engagement, they will broaden their global perspective and develop a more inclusive mindset toward different traditions and ways of life.

3. Developing Independence and Adaptability

Living abroad for an extended period requires students to quickly adapt to a new way of life and enhance their problem-solving skills. They will learn how to face challenges, which will, in turn, boost their confidence and independence.

4. Academic Advancement and Future Development

Students will study in a top-tier academic environment and gain access to diverse educational resources, laying a solid foundation for their future academic pursuits. Additionally, learning about China's economic development and technological innovations will broaden their career perspectives, providing valuable international experience that can benefit their future professional choices and growth.

5. Friendship and Networking

Students will make friends from diverse cultural backgrounds, building lasting international friendships and a global network. These connections will serve as valuable resources for their future development and international collaborations.

In conclusion, this one-semester study program not only enhances the overall skills and competencies of Bulgarian teenagers but also opens up endless possibilities for their personal and professional growth.

Short term educational exchange for students below 18 years old

A non-degree short-term study program for teenagers under 18 in a university setting offers numerous significant advantages. Although the exchange is brief, this unique university experience helps students enhance their personal growth, broaden their horizons, and lay a solid foundation for their future academic and career development.

Here are the key benefits of such programs:

1. Early Experience of University Life

Engaging in study programs within a university environment allows teenagers to experience the university atmosphere, understand the pace of academic life, and familiarize themselves with campus culture. This experience helps them plan for their future, providing insights into university life and prompting early reflection on their academic and career paths.

2. Enhancing Academic Interest and Motivation

These programs typically offer a diverse range of courses and seminars covering various fields, such as technology, arts, culture, and social sciences. This helps students discover and develop academic interests, sparking motivation for learning and laying a solid foundation for their future academic journeys.

3. Cross-Cultural Communication and Global Perspective

Students have the opportunity to interact with peers from different countries, sharing cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Cross-cultural communication and interaction not only broaden their global outlook but also foster respect and understanding for diverse cultures.

4. Improvement in Language Proficiency

The immersive language environment of a short-term program provides students with opportunities to practice their language skills inside and outside the classroom. Real-life communication situations will significantly enhance their ability to speak, listen, read, and write in the language.

5. Developing Independence and Adaptability

Short-term programs often require students to live and study in unfamiliar environments, pushing them to adapt quickly, develop independence, and strengthen problem-solving skills. This experience helps them approach future challenges with greater confidence.

6. Expanding Social Circles and Building International Friendships

Within the university setting, students can meet peers from all around the world, forming lasting friendships and a global network. These international friendships and connections may positively impact their future academic and professional growth.

7. Improving Self-Management and Time-Management Skills

Studying in a university setting requires students to grasp new knowledge and complete projects or tasks within a limited timeframe. This helps them improve their time-management and self-management skills, preparing them for higher academic challenges in the future.

In summary, these non-degree short-term study programs provide teenagers under 18 with a valuable opportunity for learning and personal growth, offering a positive impact on their future academic careers and personal development.

Training program in China for teachers of Chinese from Bulgaria

2023 marked the 10th anniversary of the “Belt and Road” initiative. This initiative has brought new educational opportunities for international Chinese students, expanding on the foundation laid by the educational exchanges, through which a bridge of mutual understanding and connection was built between the countries participating in the Belt and Road cooperation. The demand for Chinese language teachers is steadily increasing across various nations, thus also leading to a growing shortage in qualified Chinese teachers. Therefore, training local Chinese teachers has become an important direction which we must work towards together in the future.

As a result, through the joint efforts of the Embassy of the PRC to Bulgaria, the Language Cooperation and Education Center of the PRC and Tianjin Foreign Studies University, a training program was organized and in January 2024 local teach-

ers from Bulgarian primary, secondary, and higher education institutions were sent to visit China for a training course.³⁴

Bulgarian-Chinese Forum of Rectors for Cooperation and Exchange

To continue advancing China-Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries' educational cooperation, Mrs. Fu Bo, the Deputy Secretary-General of the China Education International Exchange Association, lead a delegation of 55 higher education leaders and representatives from 29 institutions and visited Bulgaria in October 2024. On October 14, the China Education International Exchange Association, in collaboration with the University of National and World Economy of Bulgaria, jointly hosted the 2nd China-Bulgaria University Presidents' Forum. The Chinese higher education delegation, alongside representatives from over 20 Bulgarian universities, including Sofia University and the University of Veliko Tarnovo, as well as government officials and education experts, gathered for discussions and exchanges.

In her speech, Ambassador Mrs. Dai Qingli emphasized that the Chinese government has always placed great importance on education, particularly in advancing educational reforms and enhancing internationalization. China is committed to cultivating a new generation of young people with both global perspectives and innovative thinking to provide a strong foundation for China's modernization and high-quality development. Bulgaria is an important partner for China in the CEE region. The two countries share a deep traditional friendship and a strong history of cooperation, having recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

³⁴ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4MTA4NzkyOQ==&mid=2719495813&idx=5&sn=7ec458be2cd9fa2da89810f169c32dda&chksm=b876ca538f014345714860ac729e1b226a1893296dadd575d38515bc06db4bee6bbcbd00d4c7&mpshare=1&srcid=0211HPcY48cwBEUwrYD8yvuV&sharer_shareinfo=56a4ab937d97230d5fb745757b040c0c&sharer_shareinfo_first=31e18f5cbec822eae24a24a078aab03a&from=timeline&scene=2&subscene=2&clicktime=1746371110&enterid=1746371110&sessionid=0&ascene=45&fasttmpl_type=0&fasttmpl_fullversion=7712138-en_US-zip&fasttmpl_flag=0&realreporttime=1746371110774&devicetype=android-35&version=28003940&nettype=WIFI&lang=en&countrycode=BG&exportkey=n_ChQIAhIQOM%2FjYPyVwVKfCx4Phw8S9xLyAQIE97dBBAAEAAAAAuaMQGO1UgAAAAOpnlbLcz9gKNyK89dVj02%2F6z4ZNO0AErf%2F6CsbABQrDk8YQ%2BnMMXSkyBsfCe142uQjqVWYgBG4tTo0FnLXAZrDva1TLCg1UzMrbV45vXSULTQCAXH%2BWDCe1VYAX2SW9VUGT%2BM7XjfRRYMY7B4xPUSCtVDWlJWlrlsPyVwVwTTQjFOPdrxccY9XnKS4tRF9IqrBbWL8nsTJBnutl5tzyaw5p4stbMPcl7u2bzaD9zgSWHx6milBnBQUzvj9Y5uTgUXaS8r1zNt7%2B7iwmWKUAVdDQoukuIJyfwW%2F%2BYZ&pass_ticket=vQCUMqW%2F8YJ%2BDEvTvXnAFo36ljGzb27rbAl9pPh1Tyc62BE%2FFz3QrGOw1uTB%2BRp&wx_header=3

The educational institutions and universities from both countries hope to continue to cooperate under the principles of mutual benefit, achieving more results in academic research, talent development, and educational innovation, and opening a new chapter in China-Bulgaria educational cooperation.

Impact of Educational Exchanges

Strengthening Bilateral Relations

Educational exchanges between China and Bulgaria have played a significant role in deepening their bilateral relations across diplomatic, academic, and social dimensions.

Diplomatic Level

Educational exchanges have enhanced interactions and cooperation between the governments of China and Bulgaria. Through exchange programs, more Bulgarian students and scholars have gained a comprehensive understanding of China's policies, culture, and society. This understanding helps eliminate misunderstandings, build political trust, and supports the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Additionally, the cooperation agreements on educational exchange programs further strengthen the cultural and educational ties between China and Bulgaria, promoting stable development in bilateral relations.

Academic Level

Through student exchange programs, academic collaboration, and research exchanges, universities and research institutions in both countries have built strong academic relationships. Many Bulgarian students and scholars have gone to China to study Chinese language, culture, and specialized knowledge, while a significant number of Chinese students have traveled to Bulgaria for studies and research. This two-way exchange promotes the sharing of knowledge and academic ideas. As a result, Chinese and Bulgarian universities are able to jointly enhance teaching quality and achieve innovation and progress in multiple disciplines.

Social Level

Educational exchange programs between China and Bulgaria have strengthened ties between the peoples of both nations, laying a foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation. Students, teachers, and scholars involved in these programs not only experience each other's culture and values through their studies but also build strong friendships in their daily lives. The cross-cultural interactions during these

programs deepen mutual understanding and create strong social bonds, laying the groundwork for future social and cultural cooperation.

The Role of Alumni Networks

One of the key outcomes of educational exchange programs is the formation of a large network of China-Bulgaria alumni, who play a crucial role in advancing the relationship between the two countries.

Alumni as Bridges in Bilateral Relations

Alumni who have participated in China-Bulgaria educational exchange programs often play important roles in their respective fields after completing their studies. Whether in government, academia, or business, they apply the cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication skills they gained during the program to their work, helping to promote cooperation between the two countries across various fields. These alumni act as “bridges” in bilateral relations, deepening mutual trust and fostering cooperative development between China and Bulgaria.

The Importance of “Cultural Ambassadors”

These alumni also serve as “cultural ambassadors” in promoting cultural understanding between the two nations. Through their participation in exchange programs, alumni gain a deeper understanding of each other’s countries and, upon returning to their own nations, actively share their experiences and insights. They help others understand and respect the culture of the partner country. This unofficial cultural dissemination helps improve social perceptions and enhances the emotional ties between the people of China and Bulgaria.

Long-Term Collaborative Platform through Alumni Networks

The China-Bulgaria alumni network provides a continuous platform for contact and cooperation between the two countries. Alumni maintain close connections through regular gatherings, online platforms, and cross-border projects, collectively advancing exchanges and cooperation in academics, business, culture, and other areas. Because these alumni have built strong friendships through the educational exchange programs, they are often more proactive in advancing bilateral cooperation, injecting new vitality into the long-term healthy development of China-Bulgaria relations.

In summary, educational exchanges between China and Bulgaria have played a critical role in strengthening bilateral relations, establishing long-term alumni networks, and advancing cooperation across diplomatic, academic, and social levels. These exchange programs not only enhance students’ personal capabilities but also, through the power of alumni, build a bridge connecting the future development of

both countries. Through the role of educational exchanges as a bridge, China-Bulgaria relations are deepened on multiple levels, laying a solid foundation for sustained co-operation and mutual development between the two nations.

Challenges and Future Prospects

China-Bulgaria educational exchanges face several challenges in areas such as cultural differences, living habits, and other aspects. While visa issues are generally not a major concern, differences in culture and daily life may still affect the communication and overall experience of students and teachers. Below are some of the key challenges and future prospects:

1. Cultural Differences

There are significant cultural differences between China and Bulgaria, including language, behavioral norms, and communication styles. In China, there is often a greater emphasis on collective interests and respect for authority, while Bulgarian culture leans more toward individualism and independence. These differences may affect interactions between students and teachers, student participation in class, and even subtle communication in daily life. To address this, future programs could include cultural training and cross-cultural exchange activities to help students and teachers from both countries better understand each other's culture and reduce misunderstandings and friction.

2. Climate Differences

There is a considerable climate difference between Bulgaria and China due to their geographical distance. For instance, Bulgaria has a temperate climate with distinct seasons, while China has a vast and varied climate, with many regions experiencing both humid heat and cold, dry conditions. Students who are new to China or Bulgaria may face challenges adjusting to different climates, especially during the summer and winter holidays. To help with this, seasonal health tips and support could be provided to help students adapt to the climate more easily.

3. Food Differences

Chinese cuisine and Bulgarian food differ greatly in terms of flavor, cooking methods, and choice of ingredients. Chinese food is rich and varied, but it may be too

strong or difficult to digest for some Bulgarian students. Likewise, Chinese students may need time to adjust to Bulgarian dietary habits. In the future, offering a variety of food options in cafeterias and organizing food exchange events could increase students' understanding and acceptance of each other's cuisines.

4. Adjustment Issues (Water and Food Adaptation)

Due to differences in living environments, dietary habits, and water quality, students may experience symptoms of "adjustment" when they first arrive in a foreign country, such as indigestion or allergies. For instance, China's water is relatively hard, which may affect the health of Bulgarian students who are used to softer water. In the future, suggestions for students to gradually adjust to local food and water quality, along with providing necessary health consultation services, can help ensure a smooth transition.

Cross-Cultural Training

To better adapt to different cultures, students could participate in pre-departure cross-cultural communication and adaptation training, allowing them to understand the destination culture and lifestyle in advance.

Psychological Health Support

Climate and adjustment issues may cause psychological stress during the adaptation period. Providing professional psychological counseling and emotional support can positively aid students in their adjustment process.

Language Training

Language is a key factor in overcoming cultural differences. In the future, language courses could be expanded to not only focus on classroom learning but also through extracurricular activities to help students practice language in real-life environments.

Living Assistance Platforms

Establishing platforms to assist with daily life, including dietary advice and lifestyle guides, could help students better adapt to life abroad. Such platforms could also provide feedback channels, enabling education exchange programs to continuously improve.

In conclusion, to address the challenges in China-Bulgaria educational exchanges, future support systems in cultural and lifestyle adaptation, psychological health, language training, and cross-cultural training can facilitate better mutual understanding and broaden global perspectives for students from both countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, China-Bulgaria educational exchanges play a vital role in promoting cultural understanding between the two countries, fostering cross-cultural talent, and enhancing global perspectives. By continuing to push forward these exchange programs, not only will students be able to overcome cultural differences and adapt to new environments, but they will also grow through diverse learning and living experiences. Based on my personal experience in the China-Bulgaria education exchange program, these initiatives help students build deep friendships in a cross-cultural context, strengthen their identification with each other's countries, and lay a solid foundation for future international cooperation.

By continuing to strengthen China-Bulgaria educational exchanges, both countries will reap long-term benefits. After experiencing these unique exchanges, students will carry the friendship between China and Bulgaria back to their home countries, becoming bridges between the two cultures in their future careers and lives. Continued investment and effort is undoubtedly a worthy endeavor for the sake of this long-term benefit.

7.

Chinese Perceptions of the Balkan Region: Stereotypes, Soft Power, and the Potential for Strategic Cultural Engagement

Asen Velinov

Law and Business Center, Wenzhou-Kean University (China)

Nora Chileva-Xiao

Law and Business Center, Wenzhou-Kean University (China)

Abstract:

From a basis of economic pragmatism, Sino-Balkan relations today involve a growing number of facets, such as historical resonance, cultural diplomacy, and strategic cooperation. This study looks at how Chinese people with university degrees view the Balkan region and its member nations. Perceptions range from obscurity to persistent stereotypes and selective cultural intrigue, according to the results of a qualitative survey that was carried out across several Chinese provinces. Some nations, especially smaller Balkan states, are ignored or largely linked to conflict narratives, while others, like Greece and Turkey, are highly visible because of their mythology, media presence, and tourism appeal. The report highlights important weaknesses in soft power outreach and cultural diplomacy and suggests tactical ways to raise the region's profile in China. This study provides a new viewpoint on China's people-to-people relations with Southeastern Europe and the unrealized potential for cross-cultural interaction by presenting new empirical data and analytical insights.

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, Soft Power, China-CEE Relations, Chinese Perceptions, Cultural Diplomacy, Balkan Region*

Introduction. Historical Involvement: Reverberations of Early Communication

Even though China and the Balkan nations have only recently established formal diplomatic ties, Sino-Balkan relations have a long history. Through the vast networks

of the ancient Silk Road, indirect cultural and commercial ties between China and Southeastern Europe may have existed as early as Ancient Rome and Han dynasty, according to Chinese historical texts and some archeological finds made throughout the Balkans.

One of the first Chinese accounts of the Roman Empire (Daqin 大秦) and its western borders can be found in Yu Huan's *Weilue*³⁵ (魏略, Brief Account of the Wei Dynasty), written in the 3rd century CE. Although the Balkans are not specifically mentioned, Yu Huan (鱼豢) makes reference to areas that might be close to the Black Sea or the eastern Balkans; for example, the term "Northwest Barbarians" (西北诸夷) might refer to Germanic or Danubian tribes (such as the Goths and Dacians).

Fan Ye's *Book of Later Han*³⁶ (后汉书, 5th century CE) builds on Daqin's geography while maintaining a focus on the Near East. West of the Sea (海西) is mentioned, which could refer to the southern coast of the Black Sea (present-day Turkey).

In *Tangshu* (唐书³⁷, 7th–10th Centuries CE), the Byzantine Empire (Fulin 拂菻) territories in the Balkans were described in detail, and later Tang diplomats and Nestorian Christians brought updated knowledge of Byzantine Europe, with mentions of places like Bolisi (波力斯), which may represent Thrace, and Moesia (弥娥昔), which corresponds to modern Bulgaria/Serbia.

Chinese artifacts, including pieces of silk, shards of porcelain, and lacquerware, have been discovered in locations throughout the Balkans, including what is now Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania. These goods most likely arrived in the area via middle-man trade routes that went via the Black Sea, Central Asia, and the Byzantine Empire, whose commercial ports allowed the East and West to exchange luxury goods. On the other hand, items with Balkan or more general European provenance—like glassware and some metal goods—have been found in Chinese tombs, especially those from the Tang and Song eras, suggesting that foreign craftsmanship was regarded with equal interest and importance.

³⁵ Yu Huan 鱼豢, transl John E. Hill (2004), *The Peoples of the West from the Weilue* 《魏略·西戎传》 is a third century Chinese account (239 BC–265 CE). Haixi is mentioned in terms of Roman Empire 大秦: “大秦国, 一号犁靬, 在安息、条支西大海之西。……其国在海西, 故俗谓之海西。有河出其国, 西又有大海。其王治滨侧河海, 以石为城郭。置三十六将, 皆会议国事。其王无有常人, 皆简立贤者。” <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html>

³⁶ In *The Book of the Later Han* 《后汉书》, Haixi 海西 clearly refers to the Great Qin Kingdom (Roman Empire 大秦国 (罗马帝国)), mainly appearing in the *Biography of the Western Regions: The Great Qin Kingdom* 《西域传·大秦国》 and *Biographies of the Southern Barbarians and Southwestern Yi* 《南蛮西南夷列传》: “大秦国, 一名犁靬, 以在海西, 亦云海西国。” “自言我海西人。海西即大秦也。”

³⁷ For Moesia and Fulin (Byzantine) in the Tang Dynasty see *New Book of Tang: Biography of the Western Regions: Fulin Kingdom* (Volume 221) 《新唐书·西域传·拂菻国》卷二百二十一下: “拂菻, 古大秦也, 居西海上。……北直突厥可萨部, 西濒海, 有西海神祠。”

Long before the term was coined, these discoveries attest to the multifaceted and pluralistic character of ancient globalization. The Balkan Peninsula served as a cultural filter between the East and the West and connected the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Europe, even though it was not a central hub in the overland Silk Road network. The transportation of products, concepts, and technologies across continents was facilitated by the Adriatic ports, the Danube River, and the Roman road networks.

Furthermore, Byzantine and Arab historical sources, which frequently served as middlemen in East-West diplomacy, sometimes mention exotic imports from Cathay (an old term for China) that were then reexported through Balkan markets. Modern diplomacy can build on the mutual curiosity and indirect connectivity established by these early interactions, which were neither systematic nor state-driven.

Understanding this common, albeit fractured, history provides a potent counterpoint to contemporary narratives that only consider China's involvement in the Balkans in terms of new political initiatives or infrastructure. Rather, it emphasizes the possibility of revitalizing and reinterpreting ancient exchange patterns, presenting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an extension of an ancient narrative—one of routes, relationships, and reciprocity—rather than as a recent imposition.

Modern global civilization is the culmination of millennia of economic interdependence, technological diffusion, and cross-cultural interaction rather than the legacy of a single empire, culture, or nation-state. In his theory of connected histories, Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997) contends that long before European colonial dominance, overlapping networks of overland and maritime trade connected Asia, Africa, and Europe, forming the early modern world. In *The Great Divergence*, Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) further challenges Eurocentric narratives by emphasizing how, up until at least the 18th century, countries like China and India were economically and technologically comparable to Europe. In a similar vein, in *ReOrient* Andre Gunder Frank (1998) argues that global capitalism had non-Western origins and highlights the importance of Asia in the pre-modern world economy. According to these and other world historians, understanding the modern world requires taking into account the common inventions, migrations, conflicts, and cooperation that bind various civilizations together. Therefore, the history of modernity is not one of one-sided progress but rather of reciprocal connections and interactions that spark various processes and advancements in various places.

As an example, Bulgaria was one of the first countries in the world to recognize and establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China, having done so as early as October 1949. A decades-long relationship based on reciprocal political goodwill was made possible by this early recognition. A framework of strong institutional trust has been demonstrated by the many bilateral agreements that Bulgaria and China have signed over the years, including treaties on legal cooperation, extradition, investment protection, and double taxation avoidance. As evidenced by high-level visits like Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's meeting with Bulgarian officials during the 16+1

summit in Sofia in 2018, the two countries have maintained consistently friendly political relations. Tangible economic exchange is still modest despite this strong political alignment. In recent years, bilateral trade has averaged around \$2.5 billion USD, with Bulgarian exports to China mainly consisting of wine, dairy products, essential oils (particularly rose oil), and some industrial equipment. Although it is growing, Chinese investment in Bulgaria is still small when compared to Serbia or Hungary and is typically concentrated in light manufacturing, logistics, and agriculture.

However, in terms of actual impact, people-to-people interactions between Bulgaria and China have been particularly strong and culturally relevant, frequently surpassing political or economic advancements. Confucius Institutes in Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, provide academic collaboration, cultural activities, and language instruction. While a smaller but noticeable number of Bulgarian students study in China for degrees in Chinese language, international relations, and traditional medicine, hundreds of Chinese students have attended Bulgarian universities. In Chinese cities like Beijing, Chengdu, and Shanghai, Bulgarian folklore troupes, rose festivals, and culinary events have attracted fervent audiences. Even though it is still relatively new, Chinese travel to Bulgaria has shown great promise, particularly in the areas of spa and cultural heritage. These interactions highlight the possibility that interpersonal understanding and soft power are currently the most dynamic aspects of the bilateral relationship, suggesting a promising avenue for deeper engagement based on shared cultural, educational, and personal curiosity interests.

Over the past 20 years, China's involvement in the Balkans has changed significantly, reflecting broader changes in regional strategies, international aspirations, and diplomatic approaches. The relationship, which was initially primarily transactional and motivated by practical economic imperatives, was distinguished by China's investment in resource development and infrastructure, particularly through the BRI. China prioritized access, visibility, and strategic footholds throughout southeastern Europe in this early stage, as demonstrated by projects like port developments in Greece, rail links in Serbia, and highways in Montenegro (Grgić, 2019; Ulunyan, 2021).

The 16+1 Initiative, launched by China in 2012 as a platform for cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), reflects Beijing's strategic intent to engage regions as cohesive blocs, rather than through purely bilateral channels. Originally composed of 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan and post-socialist non-EU states, the format later expanded to 17+1 with the inclusion of Greece in 2019, before scaling back after several withdrawals, most notably Lithuania in 2021, reducing the format again. Although Brussels and Washington have frequently viewed the initiative with skepticism, framing it as a wedge within the EU, it can also be viewed as a practical attempt by China to simplify interactions with a wide range of smaller nations, each of which has limited geopolitical or economic weight.

China suggested a "division of labor" strategy among CEEC members in order to operationalize the initiative, promoting thematic centers in a number of na-

tions: Serbia as a crucial partner in infrastructure and transportation under the BRI, Croatia for tourism, Bulgaria for agriculture, Poland for logistics, Czech Republic for healthcare cooperation, Slovenia for technology and smart cities, and Hungary as the center for finance. The purpose of these thematic platforms was to establish regional value chains, promote cross-border synergies, and give China focal points for sector-specific collaboration. The model made sense from the perspective of a Chinese administrative logic that is used to regional coordination and centralized planning. It was similar to domestic systems in which special areas and pilot zones are assigned to lead outreach or reform initiatives. This strategy, however, ran counter to the political and economic realities of the area. Many of the 16+1 nations lacked the political will or practice to coordinate their foreign economic policies, particularly when doing so might weaken national authority or favor a neighbor over oneself. The spirit of cooperation is frequently undermined by competition for Chinese investment and visibility. Additionally, a number of EU and non-EU nations are included in the grouping (such as Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia), which makes funding procedures, external diplomacy, and regulatory alignment more difficult. The Visegrád Group are geographically and culturally different from the Balkans; the Baltic states also had different strategic priorities, which led to Lithuania's exit from the mechanism and Latvia and Estonia's subsequent distancing.

Changes in geopolitics have been reflected in the initiative's ups and downs. The mid-2010s saw a peak in enthusiasm as a result of China's pledges to increase trade, infrastructure, and funding. However, a number of nations started to voice their dissatisfaction with unfulfilled investment expectations, implementation gaps, and unequal access to Chinese markets. EU institutions stepped up their scrutiny because they were concerned about China evading Brussels. Even so, if the 16+1 mechanism is rethought, it could still be a useful framework. It might develop into a more open, EU-compliant multilateral platform for people-to-people diplomacy, digital economy collaboration, academic exchange, and the green transition—one that is more concerned with inclusive, long-term engagement than with flashy projects.

All things considered, the 16+1 Initiative draws attention to the discrepancy between Europe's disjointed internal structure and China's regional logic of engagement. The format used to provide disproportionate visibility for the Balkans in particular, many of which are still outside the EU. Its future success hinges on readjusting expectations, resolving internal conflicts, and promoting natural regional cooperation outside of the framework of great-power narratives.

However, Chinese policymakers eventually realized the drawbacks of an infrastructure-centric strategy. Even though these initiatives produced quick financial gains and frequently attracted the support of local elites, they did not always result in widespread public support or long-lasting cultural ties. Concerns about debt sustainability, transparency, and China's long-term geopolitical intentions stoked public skepticism, particularly in EU-aspiring nations like Albania and North Macedonia (Malaj, 2024; Montilla-Aguilera, 2024).

Beijing's reputation in the region was further complicated by media narratives in Western Europe that frequently depicted Chinese involvement in the Balkans as a strategic encroachment. China responded by progressively broadening its arsenal and adding soft power and cultural diplomacy components to its outreach in the Balkans. Chinese embassies started to place more of an emphasis on film festivals, language courses, and cultural exhibitions, while Confucius Institutes were founded in Serbia and other regional hubs.

With more Chinese tourists visiting places like Greece's famous islands and Croatia's Dalmatian Coast, outbound tourism has also become a major influencer. According to Parfinenko (2021), tourism is a neoliberal soft power tool in which the act of traveling itself serves as a vehicle for extending familiarity and influence.

The most obvious shift occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when China quickly sent vaccines and "mask diplomacy" to a number of Balkan countries. The public acceptance of Chinese medical aid by Serbia in particular attracted a lot of attention, and pictures of Serbian and Chinese leaders together went viral on social media. Although these initiatives temporarily improved China's reputation, academics like Ushkovska (2023) have questioned whether pandemic-induced goodwill can last in the absence of more in-depth interaction and understanding.

Despite these initiatives, the Balkans' perception of China is still fragmented, underdeveloped, and frequently influenced by antiquated or simplistic narratives. Stević (2020) highlights the importance of situating China's regional outreach within the Balkans' larger ideological and historical framework, as the region has long been a site of great power contestation. Recognizing the legacy of the former Yugoslavia's non-aligned position, local sensitivities to outside influences, and the intricate interactions between ethnic, religious, and cultural identities that influence public opinion are all part of this. The Balkans are seen by the Chinese as occupying a liminal space that is both economically promising and culturally alien.

According to this study's analysis, survey responses from Chinese university students show both interest and perplexity: strong familiarity with nations like Greece and Turkey, but near-total ignorance of smaller nations like Montenegro or North Macedonia. This perceptual imbalance highlights the shortcomings of transactional diplomacy and suggests that more comprehensive, people-centered engagement is required.

China's strategy for the Balkans must go beyond economic calculation and make investments in long-term cultural literacy in order to promote understanding between nations and create enduring partnerships. This entails fostering local collaborations that represent the region's varied identities, interdisciplinary research, academic exchanges, and youth discussions. Local voices and sinologists who are capable of effectively mediating between the Chinese and Balkan narratives should also be included in such initiatives.

In summary, China is embarking on a new phase of its involvement in the Balkans, one that calls for both narrative and financial capital. The area is a complex

cultural mosaic that requires consideration, empathy, and intellectual investment; it is not just a commercial corridor. China should strive to develop true soft power and change both sides' perceptions by engaging in such multifaceted engagement.

Survey on Chinese university-educated people's associations on Balkan nations

Over 300 Chinese university students, recent graduates, and educators from all Chinese provinces, regions, and municipalities—including, but not limited to, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Sichuan, and Tibet—participated in a qualitative survey that served as the basis for this study. Focusing on twelve specific countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey—respondents were asked to share their associations and impressions of the Balkan region. Three associations per nation were gathered using open-ended survey questions, and the data were categorized and interpreted using thematic analysis.

In order to determine what associations and stereotypes Chinese university-educated people have about specific Balkan nations as well as the region as a whole, this paper investigates how they view the region. In what ways do these views coincide or diverge from the actual state of relations between China and the Balkans? And where are the chances to change these stories? This study's goals are both exploratory—charting the current perception landscape—and prescriptive—offering tactics for soft power engagement and cultural diplomacy. This study provides a grassroots perspective that is frequently lacking in literature so far, which focuses on diplomatic initiatives or macroeconomic ties, by utilizing original qualitative survey data gathered from respondents across several Chinese provinces.

By demonstrating how public opinion, cultural recognition, and emotional resonance influence bilateral and regional relationships—and how this perceptual context can be used more purposefully and successfully—it helps to expand the conversation about China-CEE engagement.

According to the survey, seven main thematic categories—food and cuisine, history and politics, geography and places, culture and traditions, well-known individuals and leaders, tourism and scenic beauty, and modern/economic associations—are influencing how Chinese respondents view the Balkan region. Among these, historical narratives, natural scenery, and imagery related to food were the most frequently identified and emotionally impactful themes. The popularity of culinary associations, such as Greek yogurt, Bulgarian rose oil, and Turkish kebabs, indicates that gastronomic soft power is crucial to cross-cultural perception. Similar to this, many of the impressions were grounded in historical allusions, albeit with differing degrees of nuance, such as the Ottoman Empire, Greek mythology, or the Yugoslav wars.

Geographical elements like the Adriatic coast or the blue-roofed vistas of Santorini also became potent visual indicators.

In contrast, very few respondents mentioned technology, current affairs or internationally renowned individuals; modern accomplishments, innovation, and contemporary cultural exports were virtually nonexistent. With the exception of sporadic mentions of the Bulgarian singer Azis or the Serbian president, the “famous people and leaders” category did not gain much traction, indicating a significant soft power gap for many nations in terms of identifiable ambassadors or cultural icons.

Due in large part to extensive media coverage, strong tourism branding, and pre-existing diaspora narratives, some nations—Turkey, Greece, and Croatia—stand out across multiple categories, combining historical depth, touristic appeal, and cultural familiarity. These nations are seen as complex and multidimensional because of their layered associations. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, on the other hand, routinely received low recognition scores for almost every theme, frequently being relegated to “no idea” answers or antiquated geopolitical designations. Their low level of visibility highlights the urgent need for digital outreach and strategic narrative development, particularly in platforms that influence Chinese youth consciousness.

Ultimately, the thematic distribution shows what is missing as well as what Chinese audiences identify with the Balkans. This is a strong argument that cultural diplomacy initiatives need to start focusing on modern identity, creativity, and innovation rather than historical nostalgia or scenic clichés.

Summaries by Country

Albania: Often received blank or “no idea” answers; tangential mentions included coastal towns, traditional instruments, and communist connections. Potential for narrative and ecotourism branding is indicated by low cultural recognition.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Mostly linked to Sarajevo, the Dayton Agreement, and war. Alternative narratives can be found in multicultural history and coffee culture.

Bulgaria: renowned for the Rila Mountains, yogurt, and rose oil. Festivals and cultural goods predominate, but public personalities—aside from somewhat surprising ones like singer Azis—are rarely acknowledged.

Croatia: Known for its football, Game of Thrones filming locations, and Adriatic coast. Its inland areas and historical depth are less well known.

Greece: Well-known for its mythology, Olympics, Santorini, and food. It serves as a model for regional cultural branding due to its diverse associations.

Kosovo: Primarily viewed through the prism of conflict and a precarious political situation. Diversity in geography and culture is still not acknowledged.

Montenegro: Considered a small, war-torn country and sometimes praised for its beaches and natural beauty. There is potential for branding luxury destinations.

North Macedonia: Mostly recognized for its Soviet-style architecture and Yugoslav history. It is recommended to use technology and the arts to revitalize culture.

Romania: Responses ranged from affordability and winter scenery to Dracula tourism. Literature and hot air balloon festivals are mentioned occasionally.

Serbia: Known as “China’s friend,” it is recognized for its president, barbecue, deserts, and Orthodox Christianity. There are close cultural and diplomatic relations.

Slovenia: Overall low awareness, with the exception of picturesque descriptors like Lake Bled. There is potential in the imagery of a “fairy-tale European country.”

Turkey: Multifaceted country known for Istanbul, kebabs, Ottoman heritage, and magic ice cream shows. Should keep reaping the benefits of a robust cultural export strategy.

The information highlights how the Chinese public’s perception of the Balkan region is uneven and fragmented. While some nations—such as Greece, Turkey, and Croatia—have been able to create culturally meaningful identities through a combination of popular media, mythology, tourism marketing, and food, the majority are still characterized by ambiguity, geopolitical baggage, or outright non-recognition. The survey’s sentiment analysis supports this discrepancy: while countries like Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania are primarily viewed through the lens of conflict, post-communist hardship, or political ambiguity, positive associations tend to focus on those that are already incorporated into global storytelling circuits (e.g. Greek mythology, Turkish cuisine, Game of Thrones filming locations in Croatia).

This disparity highlights a fundamental reality about how visibility is created in international discourse: it is driven more by narrative access and cultural penetration, rather than necessarily diplomatic ties or close proximity. In the Chinese context, media portrayals, viral trends, exposure to education, and personal networks frequently act as mediators in the recognition of a foreign nation. Unrepresented nations run the risk of becoming invisible or inaccurately portrayed by long-standing stereotypes, or simply blank spots on the mental map of Chinese youth and educated citizens. This dynamic poses a significant challenge to multilateral frameworks such as 16+1 or Belt and Road diplomacy, as well as bilateral engagement. After all, public diplomacy and soft power rely on public interest, familiarity, and emotional resonance in addition to high-level summits.

However, this perceptual environment presents a strategic opportunity as well as a failure. In a way, nations with low visibility are like blank canvases. These underrepresented nations are free to create captivating, modern narratives that can be adapted to Chinese interests and curiosity, unlike countries that are constrained by inflexible or unfavorable perceptions. Cultural diplomacy can flourish through collaborative media production, visual branding, and localized storytelling; it doesn’t have to rely only on embassies or cultural centers. For instance, eco-tourism influenc-

ers, cinematic landscapes, or music festivals that speak to Chinese youth culture can be used to introduce Albania instead of portraying it as a “former communist state.” In a similar vein, Sarajevo’s multicultural heritage, post-war art, or architecture could be used to reframe Bosnia and Herzegovina’s complicated history rather than having it stuck in war documentaries.

Digital platforms such as Douyin (TikTok), Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and WeChat video channels are becoming more and more influential. They provide the kind of natural exposure that formal channels find difficult to generate. More good has been done to public perception by viral videos of Croatian coastlines or Turkish ice cream tricks than by whole bilateral forums. However, few Balkan nations actively foster engagement with digital subcultures, localized language content, or influencer strategies aimed at China. Today’s soft power is more about emotional micro-interactions, meme-worthy moments, and visually shareable content than it is about national branding, so this is a lost opportunity. Even lesser-known locations can gain significant visibility in Chinese social media ecosystems with the correct visual and emotional approach.

The survey also found a startling disconnect between cultural recognition and economic ties. Although many Balkan states are officially part of China’s BRI or its now-fragmented 16+1 mechanism, the Chinese public is largely unaware of this fact. Beyond vague references to “the Balkans” in BRI maps, respondents demonstrated little understanding of infrastructure projects, joint ventures, or bilateral cooperation. Although agreements may be made at government level, they hardly ever result in compelling public narratives or identifiable outcomes, which suggests a breakdown in strategic communication.

With the exception of a few notable countries with iconic associations, the Balkans continue to be perceived by the Chinese public as being economically nebulous, culturally peripheral, and geopolitically ambiguous.

In order to solve this, Balkan nations need to reconsider how they view China—not as a single audience, but as a multi-layered public with varying generations, interests, and consumption patterns. For instance, university students are more likely to interact with fandoms, visual culture, and lifestyle narratives than with historical anniversaries or official statements. Programs for cultural exchange, green innovation, or tech cooperation may elicit responses from professionals. Additionally, academic institutions can play a key role in changing perceptions through cultural immersion, dual-degree programs, and collaborative research.

In short, although the perceptual terrain may be uneven at the moment, it is not immovable. Even lesser-known Balkan nations can gain significant exposure in China with the correct combination of digital fluency, grassroots storytelling, and focused exchange initiatives. Being understood—and remembered for more than war, yogurt, or the odd football victory—and not just being seen, is the ultimate goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Balkan region is still not given enough credit and is frequently misrepresented in Chinese public opinion, despite its cultural diversity and geopolitical significance. However, this lack of visibility also presents a strategic opportunity: a blank canvas for creating new narratives of exchange, identity, and relevance. Rather than focusing on fragmented or stereotyped country branding, Balkan states should think about collaborating to create a cohesive cultural engagement strategy that targets Chinese audiences.

This strategy should highlight regional uniqueness, shared heritage, and modern creativity. Promoting tourist routes should also take into account geographic proximity. Incorporating regional sinologists, local cultural mediators, and subject matter experts into its public diplomacy frameworks would also help China make sure that its outreach is mutually resonant and sensitive to context. Future studies could expand on this work by comparing Chinese perspectives of other developing regions, tracking public perceptions over time, or testing the effects of media and narrative through experimental campaigns. More than government-sponsored forums are ultimately needed to improve relations between China and the Balkans; genuine, people-centered narratives based on mutual recognition, curiosity, and strategic cultural fluency are needed.

References

- Parfinenko, A.** (2021). *International Tourism as a Neoliberal Practice of Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans*. Actual Problems of International Relations.
- Ulunyan, A.** (2021). *The Initiative 'ONE BELT, ONE ROAD' and the Balkans: The Assessments of the Expert Community and the Media of Central and Eastern Europe (2017–2020)*.
- Trailović, D.** (2021). *Cultural Diplomacy of the People's Republic of China in the Western Balkans: Serbia from a Comparative Perspective*. Kultura.
- Pavličević, D.** (2018). 'China Threat' and 'China Opportunity': Politics of Dreams and Fears in China–Central and Eastern European Relations. *Journal of Contemporary China*.
- Malaj, E.** (2024). *Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China's Engagement in Albania*. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*.
- Montilla-Aguilera, F. J.** (2024). *Analysing Chinese Investment in the Balkan Region: A Threat to the EU*. *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*.
- Stević, L.** (2020). *The Evolution of Chinese Cultural Diplomacy and Its Impact on the BiH Perception of the Belt and Road Initiative and China-CEE Cooperation*. Working Paper.
- Grgić, M.** (2019). *Chinese Infrastructure Investments in the Balkans: Political Implications of the Highway Project in Montenegro*. *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*.
- Ushkovska, M.** (2023). *China's Pandemic-Time Public Diplomacy in the Balkans and the Challenge to the EU's Regional Leadership*. *New Perspectives*.
- Markovic Khaze, N., & Wang, X.** (2020). *Is China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans a Threat to European Integration?* *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*.

8.

Китай през очите на Запада: между мит и реалност

Лъчезара Пръвчева
18. СУ „Уилям Гладстон“ (България)

China through the eyes of the West: between myth and reality

Latchezara Pravtcheva
18th School "William Gladstone" (Bulgaria)

Abstract: The following article gives us a better understanding of the complexity that represents the perceptions and relations between China and the West throughout history. The author explores the methods by which China has been represented and perceived by Western civilizations – from the mystified descriptions of ancient travelers such as Marco Polo to contemporary geopolitical and economic perceptions. The article also brings attention to how these perceptions intertwine with the historical and cultural interactions between the two civilizations and how the understanding of Chinese culture and social structures has developed in the Western mind.

Keywords: China, West, cultural exchange, myths, modernization, economic reforms, Orientalism, imagination, reality

Отношенията между Китай и Запада минават през различни етапи, исторически периоди и отношения. Още от създаването на древния Път на коприната (ок. II в.пр.Хр.) „двете части“ на света започват активно да си взаимодействат. Търговският маршрут, който свързва източната страна със Средиземноморието,

обменът на стоки и културните възприятия стават все по-засилени. Китайската коприна, порцеланът и чаят се запомнят като знак на екзотика и престиж, идващи от Изтока, а западните идеи и технологии също намират своя път към Азия. Със задълбочаване на отношенията се увеличават и конфликтните точки. Опиумните войни през XIX век стават символ на сблъсък между източната и западната цивилизация и на непрекъснатото желание една от двете да надделява над другата, макар невинно чрез преки действия. В началото на XX век, след падането от власт на последната династия Цин, Китай започва да прави опити за модернизация, като се вдъхновява от Запада. Културната революция през 60-те години на XX век затваря страната за външно влияние и допълнително усложнява отношенията със западните страни. Едва през 1978 г. с икономическите реформи на откритост на Дън Сяопин започва нов етап на отваряне на Китай към света и той бързо се превръща във велика политическа сила. Въпреки това балансът между сътрудничество и съперничество, възхищение и критика остава труден за намиране. Вероятната причина е не само възхищението от смелостта и целеустремеността на китайския народ, но и от културното богатство, което притежава, както и от многовековните традиции. Именно тази многопластовост във възприятията е трудна за осъзнаване от представителите на Запада, тъй като по мащабност тя е ненадмината.

Знанията ни за Китай са несъизмерими с онова, което не знаем за Поднебесната, букв. „намираща се под Небето“³⁸. (История на древен Китай 2004: 7-8), затова е редно да зададем въпроса *как източниците определят Китай?*

Според „Енциклопедичния речник на китайската култура“ за Поднебесната е описано следното: *„Общозвестно е, че от четирите древни световни цивилизации само китайската се е запазила до наши дни. Китайската култура е уникално многопластово явление, което се е формирало в продължение на хилядолетия. Днешен Китай е съчетание на древност и съвременност, което е основополагащо за разбирането на китайската култура.“* (Сюй Баофэн, Ли Цзя 2023: 2)

Александър Николов в доклада „Теориите на Съвременен Китай и народите на Китай според „История на татарите“ на Хайтон от Корикос (нач. на XIV в.)“ дава следното описание: *„...средновековен Китай дълго време е енигма за европейците“* и предлага превод на „Трактата за местата“, които се отнасят до териториите на днешен Китай. В глава първа „За царството Катай“³⁹ е описано следното: *„Царството Катай е най-обширното царство, което може да се открие на света и е препълнено с безброй хора и богатства, разположено на брега на морето-океан. (...) В това същото царство Катай има много повече изумителни*

³⁸ Според китайската доктрина Китай се намира в центъра на света, а около него се разполагат останалите владения, на които върховен сюзерен е единственият Син на Небето – китайският император.

³⁹ Китай, от названието Кидан на част от Северен Китай.

чудеса, отколкото в което и да е друго царство на земята. Хората от тази страна са много проникателни и щедро надарени с всякаква ловкост и затова подценяват другите народи във всяко изкуство и знание и казват, че само те, единствени, гледат с двете си очи.“ (Николов 2014: 29-31)

Определението „енигма“ е доказателство за оскъдните познания на европейците за тази страна. Основната информация, с която са разполагали, е била обвита в митове и легенди. Подобни разкази за чудновати земи и необикновени хора намират своето място в един от първите древни паметници, а именно „Каталог на планините и моретата“ („Шанхайдзин“), вероятно създаден около IV в.пр.Хр. – основен източник на изучаващите китайската митология, в който са описани са над 550 планини, 300 реки и различни места.

В „Шанхайдзин“ се казва следното: „Още триста ли на югоизток (има) планина на име Обилна. Въди се животно на вид като (голяма маймуна) юан, с червени очи и червена муцуна, а жълто тяло. Нарича се юнхъ. В царството, където се появи, ще настъпи голям страх. Тук обитава духът Баща Земеделец. (Той) често плува във вировете на (река) Бистра (Цинлин). (Когато) се подава (от водата) и се гмурва, проблясва светлина. В онова царство, където го видят, ще има поражение (във войната). Има девет камбани, те знаят да звучат като скреж.“ (Беливанова 2017: 42)

Въпреки детайлните разяснения за местоположението на конкретните места в Китай, както и при други древни народи, митологичните представи за разнообразни страни и земи не са богато развити. Многократните опити за идентифициране на районите не се увенчават с успех.

Различните царства представят различен тип култура, народност и дори вид хора: „...Царството на Косматия народ е на север (...). На хората там по тялото растат косми. Други казват: на север от чернокраките. Царството на Трудолюбивите е на север от него. Хората там са черни. Наричат ги още дзяо. Други казват: на север от Косматия народ, на хората там лицето, очите, ръцете, краката – всичко е черно.“ (Беливанова 2017: 50)

Според тълкуванията в Царството на Косматия народ има потомци на Великия Ю⁴⁰, а Царството на трудолюбивите е един от островните народи. (Беливанова 2017: 50)

Описанието на Китай като *най-обширното царство с безброй хора и богатства* подсилва представата за тази страна като изключително могъща и просπε-рираща. Впечатленията често се базират на разкази на търговци и пътешественици като Марко Поло, който в книгата си „Милионът“ споделя, че прекарал в Китай 17 години. Той посещава много държави по време на своето пътуване през XIII век. Описанията на Китай са едни от първите детайлни сведения, достигнали до Европа, и оказват влияние върху представата на западния свят за

⁴⁰ Легендарен владетел, който се справил в Потопа и е поставил началото на династичното управление в Китай, като основава първата китайска династия – Ся.

Изтока. Авторът казва: „Но нека сега оставим Камбалук и се опитаме да навлезем в Катай⁴¹, защото искам да ви разкажа за *необикновените неща*, които се намират там.“ (Поло 1986: 129)

Градовете, сред които Ханджоу, Суджоу, Янджоу, Фуджоу и др., са представени като впечатляващи, с монументални дворци, пазари и сложна администрация. Разказва още за феноменално красиви пространства като езерото Сиху, съществуват някои описания, които се отнасят до Великата китайска стена; за различни непознати животни, растения, стоки, идващи във и излизащи от тази страна, споделя информация за порядките и обичаите на хората: „Почти в цял Китай хората пият различно от нашето вино. Правят го от ориз и различни подправки и никое вино на света не е по-добро от това. На цвят е светло, приятно на вкус и от него човек се напива по-бързо, отколкото от нашето, защото се пие горещо.“ (Поло 1986: 126)

Описанията на Марко Поло често съчетават реални наблюдения с легенди и преувеличения. Например в книгата се разказва, че в Суджоу „има повече от шест хиляди каменни моста, толкова високи, че под тях може да мине и галера⁴². По околните планини растат равен и джинджирил; за едно венецианско гресо могат да се купят четиридесет либри⁴³ пресен джинджирил от най-добро качество.“ (Поло 1986: 176)

За град Ханджоу⁴⁴ е представена следната информация: „обхваща периметър от десет мили, има дванадесет хиляди каменни моста, толкова високи, че под повечето от тях може да мине кораб с голяма водоизместимост, а под останалите – средно големи кораби.“ (Поло 1986:177) Макар Ханджоу наистина да е бил проспериращ и изключително красив град, който продължава да се радва на популярност и днес, реалният брой на мостовете е силно преувеличен. Примерът е част от многото, които показват как Марко Поло комбинира реални факти с фантазия, за да създаде един вълнуващ и загадъчен разказ за Китай, който да впечатли и привлече вниманието на европейската публика.

Някои историци се съмняват дали Марко Поло действително е посетил всички тези места или част от описанията му са базирани на разкази на други пътешественици. Независимо от това „Милионът“ остава значимо произведение, което формира представата на Запада за Китай в продължение на векове. Дори и днес, когато знанията за Китай са значително по-достъпни, остава усещането за културна дистанция и сложност, които продължават да предизвикват интерес, но и противоречия.

⁴¹ Тук започва описанието на Катай, тоест онази част на Китай, разположена на север от Жълтата река; южната част се наричала Манджи.

⁴² Военен кораб с платна или гребла с дължина около 50 м.

⁴³ Около 20 кг.

⁴⁴ В книгата е използвано името Куинсай.

Пътуванията на Марко Поло са пример за това как легенди и реалност взаимно се преплитат, изграждайки образа на Китай в съзнанието на европейците. Разказите създават усещането за една непостижима и загадъчна цивилизация. Въпреки че историците оспорват достоверността на някои от твърденията му, „Милионът“ остава траен отпечатък върху възприятието на Китай в западния свят.

Накрая, споделянето, че в Китай има „много повече изумителни чудеса, отколкото в което и да е друго царство“ доказва възхищението и преклонението на западния човек към постиженията на китайската култура, наука и технологии. За сравнение – изобретения като хартията, компаса, барута и печатарската преса се появяват в Европа много по-късно. Изразът „само те, единствени, гледат с двете си очи“ е метафора за това, че китайците се смятат за просветени и мъдри в сравнение с другите, „слепите“, народи.

Едуард Саид разглежда как Западът конструира представи за Изтока като екзотичен и непознат „друг“. Това обяснява защо образът на Китай често е едновременно възхитителен и мистифициран. Модерният лик на Китай е за държава с невероятни икономически постижения и политическа мощ. На тях обаче няма да се спираме тук, защото статията е свързана със споделяне на общи концепции и мисли по отношение на Изтока, както и детайли, свързани с преплитането на митологията и съвремието. В исторически план китайската цивилизация през целия път на своето развитие не спира да поддържа отношения с другите страни и да гради мостове на приятелството. Културният ѝ обмен със Запада оказва значително влияние – китайската култура присъства в западното изкуство, философия, медицина и т.н. Обратно, западното влияние се усеща в съвременното китайско кино, музика, литература и др.

Днес, въпреки глобализацията, Китай продължава да поддържа образа на тайнствена и недостъпна страна в колективното западно съзнание. Думите на Р. Киплинг – „Изтокът си е Изток, а Западът – Запад, и вечно ще бъде така“ вероятно не са съвсем актуални. Както митовите поддържат вниманието и интереса на четящия/слушания и развиват въображението му, така Китай ще продължава да бъде акумулатор на нови знания и открития за Запада.

References

- Arabadzchieva, Maria. *Istoriya na drevnen Kitay* История на Древен Китай [History of Ancient China]. Sofia София: Maria Arabadzchieva Publishing Мария Арабаджиева, 2004. ISBN 954-584-233-4, pp. 7-8.
- Belivanova, Bora. *Hristomatiya po drevnokitaiska literatura* Христоматия по древнокитайска литература [Anthology of Ancient Chinese Literature]. Veliko Tarnovo Велико Търново: Faber Фабер, 2017, p. 42.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Izbrano* Избрано [Selected Works]. Veliko Tarnovo Велико Търново: Elpis Елпис, 1992.

- Polo, Marco. *Milionut* Милionът [Il Milione]. Sofia София: Otechestvo Отечество, 1986, pp. 176-177.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalizmut* Ориентализмът [Orientalism]. Sofia София: Queen Mab Кралица Маб, 1992.
- Xu, Baofeng, and Li, Jia. *Entsiklopedicheski slovar kitaiskoi kultury: bolee 1000 vazhneishikh poniatii* Энциклопедический словарь китайской культуры. Более 1000 важнейших понятий [Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese Culture: More than 1000 Key Concepts]. Moscow Москва: Eksmo Эксмо, 2023.

9.

A Buddhist Sūtra “à la grecque”? Traces of the Hellenistic World in a Chinese Version of the “Nagasena Bhikṣu Sutra”

Constantinos G. Polymeros

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece)

Abstract: This work presents briefly the sutra “Milinda-pañha” (“Questions of Menander”) and attempts to trace some possibly common philosophical elements between it and various ancient Greek sources, with special emphasis on Platonic dialogues. It presents the king-and-ascetic leitmotiv and the notion of soul, spotting some similarities between Greek and Buddhist philosophy. It is shown that some similarities might not be directly bound to Greek philosophy, while others suggest Greek inspiration.

Key-words: Nagasena-Bhikṣu-Sutra, Menander, Buddhism

Two enigmatic men

The *Milinda-pañha*, traditionally translated as “The Questions of Menander,”⁴⁵ is a Buddhist work also known as *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra*.⁴⁶ Inheriting its name from Nagasena, a Buddhist teacher, the text is wrapped in many layers of mystery. As early as 1891, T. W. Rhys Davids pointed out with uneasiness that “the ‘hero’ of that historical romance has not yet been found in any other Pāli or Sanskrit book” –at least to his knowledge.⁴⁷ Later, Waddell resorted to linguistic acrobatics: “Nāgasēna is not improbably a real historical personage.”⁴⁸ Menander, on the contrary, appears also

⁴⁵ Ménandros (Μένανδρος).

⁴⁶ 弥兰问经 (mí lán wèn jīng) or 那先比丘经 (nà xiān bǐ qiū jīng) in Chinese.

⁴⁷ Davids (1891: 476).

⁴⁸ Waddell (1897: 228).

in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma*,^{49, 50} and, in his being a ruler, he had the advantage of coinage: some of his coins refer to his Greek homeland by depicting "the archaistic statue of Athena Alkidemos which stood at Pella in Macedonia."⁵¹ Even so, many shadows of his era remain to be illuminated.

Nāgasena's teacher was allegedly *Dhammarakkhita*, another convert who, according to the *Mahāvamsa*⁵² – the famous national epic of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) – came from *Alasanda*;⁵³ according to traditional literature, this place-name corresponds to one of the numerous "Alexandrias."⁵⁴ After allegedly learning from a Greek Buddhist missionary, it was now Nagasena's turn to teach a Greek⁵⁵: the whole sūtra is about the philosophical dialog between king Menander and Nagasena, leading ultimately to the king's conversion to Buddhism.⁵⁶ To add to the obscurity, the original manuscript is lost and its language is still an object of speculation: perhaps a northern Prakrit dialect or other tongues, such as Sanskrit or Gandhari.⁵⁷

The *Questions of Menander* is largely fiction. For example, just after locus 706c, one reads: "The king thought to himself: 'This śramaṇa is of great wisdom and intelligence'";^{58, 59} but how can an objective narrator know another person's thoughts? It is obvious that the sutra is not an objective "report" in the narrow sense. Researchers such as Derrett⁶⁰ go as far as to conclude that the *Milinda-pañha* presents strong elements from the *Alexander Romance*. In this field, fictiveness is no novelty.

⁴⁹ *Abhidharma-kośa-vyākhyā*. Researchers such as Salisbury (1844: 94) translate the term *Abhidharma* as "Appended law."

⁵⁰ Takakusu (1896: 2).

⁵¹ Jenkins (1968: 109).

⁵² This work is traditionally dated "between A.D. 513 and 531" and consists of "older annals of that island and of the continent of India," while it covers "the period from 543 BC to 357 AD" (Salisbury; 1844: 83).

⁵³ See *Mahāvamsa* 29: 39-40, according to Geiger's (1912: 194) translation.

⁵⁴ Geiger (1912: 194) is yet another researcher to associate the term *Yonas* to the Greeks. About the term *Yonas* or *Yavanas*, which corresponds to the word for one of the three ancient Greek stems, the *Ionians* (Robinson; 1949: 408), I have written in more detail in my work "Plato, Laozi and Other Forms: From Darkness Towards Light"; for the time being, the work is available only in Greek.

⁵⁵ Derrett (1967: 46).

⁵⁶ Works with a similar context of praising the conversion of non-believers appear also in Daoist tradition, such as "The Conversion of Barbarians by Laotzu (老子化胡经)" (Liebenthal; 1955: 52).

⁵⁷ Chipamong – Chowdhury (2001–2007: 68).

⁵⁸ The translation cited in this article is that of Guang Xing, corresponding to No. 1670 (b) in the Taishō Tripitaka (大正新修大藏经).

⁵⁹ Guang (2007: 131).

⁶⁰ Derrett (1967: 38).

Sima Qian's⁶¹ famous account about Confucius visiting Laozi⁶² might not be historic either. Yet the anecdotal character of such narrations does not diminish their value; one has to wonder why such stories spread, even to the point of substituting historical incidents in the collective memory – thus becoming an “alternative history.”

The *Milindapañha* was translated into Chinese, and *Milinda* (Menander) was transcribed as *Mílán* (弥兰). The king did not always occupy the title: we often talk of *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra* rather than *Questions of Menander*. Thus, the interest of the title is shifted from the king's questions to the teacher's answers. The time of translation might be placed in the era 317–420 A.D.; yet researchers such as Derrett⁶³ also speak of an earlier Chinese version, composed around 200 A.D. Takakusu cited Rhys Davids,⁶⁴ who further complicates matters by mentioning a third rendering⁶⁵ and even speculating about a fourth one. Oddly enough, the Chinese translation seems to be closer to the lost prototype⁶⁶ since the extant Pāli text is more lengthy – a rather strong indication of later intervention. Since the authors of the Chinese translation might be missing the historical context of the sūtra, few historical details were preserved. But there are some details that made their way to China and might be striking, especially when it comes to describing Menander. According to the sūtra, Nāgasena and Menander knew each other from a previous life; afterwards, Menander was born “a prince in a country near the sea” (705a).⁶⁷

Menander's reign “must have constituted the main period of stability and consolidation.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, for a certain period of time, his kingdom stretched over “most of northern India.”⁶⁹ Thus, the Chinese translation of this sūtra preserves an idyllic depiction of him. He is illustrated as a model-king, a master of strategy, researcher of every religion in the known world, capable partner in discussions, etc. Menander's oversized literary reflection serves to emphasize the size of master Nāgasena himself. Additionally, although the sūtra generally disregards historical details, it points out that Menander's father “died of a natural death...” (705a),^{70, 71} as if the writer(s) was/were anxious to dispel questions and shadows about legal succession or Menander's

⁶¹ 司马迁 (sī mǎ qiān).

⁶² 史记 • 孔子世家 • 6.

⁶³ Derrett (1967: 43).

⁶⁴ Takakusu (1896: 3).

⁶⁵ According to Khetry (2014: 43) the three Chinese translations were “made respectively in the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries.”

⁶⁶ Guang (2008: 242).

⁶⁷ Guang (2007: 124).

⁶⁸ Bivar (1970: 123).

⁶⁹ Jenkins (1968: 109).

⁷⁰ Guang (2007: 124).

⁷¹ The verb is 寿终 (shòu zhōng), which means to “end in a big age.” It should also be noted that Menander's father is called “father-king” (父王 fù wáng).

methods of ascension to power.⁷² Menander's land is depicted as idyllic, too. The Chinese version holds that the citizens of Sāgala "were dressed with dazzling colors" and especially women "adorned themselves with jewels" and "wore white clothes" (705b). On the contrary, Nāgasena is clad very modestly, just like all Buddhist ascetics.

After taking all literary exaggerations out of the picture, what remains is the image of a philosopher-king, which was the political anticipation of many Greeks: Plato himself became an advisor to Dionysius I, king of Syracuse, in Sicily; moreover, Aristotle was, even though for a short period, a tutor of young Alexander, while Pyrrhus of Epirus was an ardent researcher of philosophy.⁷³ Yet, although many scholars were present in the royal and imperial courts of the time, the attainment of a high competence in philosophy was not always the goal of leaders. In the Hellenic world, one could observe that the model of the philosopher-king came at its peak during the 5th century BC.

The king-and-ascetic leitmotiv

Jorge Louis Borges & Eliot Weinberger⁷⁴ got it right: "A king is a plenitude, an ascetic is nothing or wants to be nothing, and so people enjoy imagining a dialogue between these two archetypes." Indeed, another leitmotiv which is compatible with Greek literature is the contrast between a king and a poor commoner; the figure of a commoner later became that of a philosopher or an ascetic. By all means, it is essentially the same notion. This motive can be traced as early as ca. 300 years before the birth of Siddhartha Gautama: in the *Iliad*, Homer, the father of Greek poetry, depicts Thersites,⁷⁵ a poor soldier, disrupting the counsel of warlords with improper jokes. Of course, having Greek nobility as audience, Homer depicted the daring soldier as an audacious moron. Yet the leitmotiv of a *lumpen*-figure defiantly standing up to royal authority never ceased to exist among the Greeks. One example, although not the sole, is the famous, and probably fictitious, encounter of Alexander the Great with Diogenes the Cynic.⁷⁶

The Chinese version of the *Milindapañha* preserves the format of a philosophical dialog. One could wonder whether this text is influenced by the famous

⁷² Interestingly, this paragraph "does not even appear in the extant Indian version" (Jakobsson; 2009: 509).

⁷³ Plutarch, "Parallel Lives" (Pyrrhus, 8) «...καὶ ὅλως τοῦτο μελετῶν ἔοικε καὶ φιλοσοφῶν ἀεὶ διατελεῖν ὁ Πύρρος...»

⁷⁴ Borges & Weinberger (1999: 49).

⁷⁵ *Iliad*, 2: 212-214.

⁷⁶ See Borges & Weinberger (1999: 49): "'Ask me for anything you'd like,' said Alexander, and Diogenes, lying on the ground, asked him to move a little, so as not to block the light."

Platonic dialogs. The question of Platonic inspiration is a red cloth for researchers; Albrecht Weber “has perceived a deliberate imitation of the Platonic mode,” Albert Foucher also believes that the dialog is “composed [...] in a platonic manner,”⁷⁷ while Winternitz, quite on the contrary, “observes that the device of the dialogue is traditional in Indian letters.”

The way that the dialog of Menander and Nagasena (705c ff.) starts is a little bit remindful of *Cratylus*:⁷⁸ in this Platonic dialog, the two counterparts discuss whether names are natural or conventional. Similarly, in the sutra, the two men discuss the content of words and the relation of the whole to the parts. This philosophical idea of arbitrariness of language – although not necessarily imported from Greek philosophy – appears broader in Buddhism. One cannot fight off the temptation to refer to the first text ever printed,⁷⁹ what is known in the West as *The Diamond Sutra*⁸⁰ – another philosophical dialog which, according to Watson,⁸¹ “is close to the sutras of early Buddhism.” In it, a disciple of Buddha named Subhūti says: “As far as I understand the things that the Buddha preached, there is no way one can describe the highest form of enlightenment with words.”⁸²

But then emerges a big difference. Since the *Questions of Menander* are essentially a manifesto of Buddhist confession, the king’s form is degraded to a side character which serves as an asker and accepts all answers passively. After an answer is given, there is usually no comeback question asking for additional information or demanding to clarify dark corners. On the contrary, Socrates’ questions were so persistent, that Protagoras once even threatened to stop the discussion if his interlocutor would not stop interrupting him. The *Questions of Menander* have nothing of the contrast between Socrates and Protagoras or of the poisonous Socratic irony toward Euthyphron.⁸³ Derrett (1967: 43) was probably right to believe that, by the time the *Questions of Menander* were composed, the acme of the Hellenistic world was long gone. A basic difference between many Buddhist texts and Platonic dialogs is the fact that discussions with Socrates usually end with *aporía*, i.e. feeling of puzzlement; on the other hand, this sutra – though not all Buddhist texts – seems to lead to feelings of certainty and affirmation.

⁷⁷ Foucher (1917: 127).

⁷⁸ *Cratylus* or “On the correctness of names.”

⁷⁹ Chia (2011: 828).

⁸⁰ 金刚般若波罗蜜经 (jīn gāng bān ruò bō luó mì jīng) or simply 金刚经 (jīn gāng jīng).

⁸¹ Watson (2010: 75).

⁸² “如我解佛所说义，无有定法名阿耨多罗三藐三菩提” (rú wǒ jiě fó suǒ shuō yì, wú yǒu dìng fǎ míng ā nòu duō luó sān miǎo sān pú tí).

⁸³ Euthyphron intended to make a lawsuit against his father on the pretext of him abusing and killing a slave, but ended up being exposed for not having the slightest idea of what righteousness is.

On the notion of ‘soul’

Hinduists venerate the notion of *ātman*;⁸⁴ we Westerners are very familiar with terms such as *soul* or *psyche*, too. Even if their content varies from language to language and from science to science, they do have common content. Consequently, a Westerner or a Hinduist might find the Buddhist “negation of *ātman*”⁸⁵ as ground-shaking: but most Buddhists – including Nāgasena – believe that a person is soul-less. From this perspective, *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra* is astonishing, since it hosts two different philosophical points. In the 19th chapter of the *sūtra*, Menander asks about the notion that one could translate as *soul*. Interestingly, the term used in the Chinese translation is simply *human* (人 *rén*); yet it is obvious from the context that the talk is about the essence of our being – consequently Guang Xing’s choice to translate this word as “soul” was all but arbitrary.⁸⁶ In Chinese literary history, translators have played even more dangerous games with fire, translating *ātman* as 身 (*shēn*),⁸⁷ i.e. *body* or even *self*; this term coincides with the Daoist term of 身 (*shēn*),⁸⁸ but does not necessarily render the content of the term to its full extent. In the beginning of his analysis, Nāgasena first asserts that there is nothing observable that could be called a *soul*, and then asks: “What can we call a soul?” (712c) – a quest for definitions which is quite reminiscent of Socratic dialectics. Then, the Indian teacher goes on with a decomposition of possible contents this notion could possess. In short, it seems like the *sūtra* charts the meeting point of at least two cultures: on the one hand, traditional Greek and Indian thought, which invented the notion of a soul, gave multiple meanings to it and sometimes even went as far as to deify it,⁸⁹ and on the other hand, a culture (Chinese) that did not even have an adequate equivalent.

In the aforementioned passage of the *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra*, the Greek king receives what would seem as typically Indian literary answers, based on repetition of motives, in which only one or two terms are replaced. The *sūtra* is not very dialectic in this place. Menander does not explain his own beliefs on the matter of soul. Consequently, one cannot assume safely that he shared views with Platon’s *Phaedo* or

⁸⁴ Since the term *soul* works like a portmanteau, one can say that the Indian term *ātman* could correxpond to *soul*.

⁸⁵ Davids (1903: 587).

⁸⁶ In footnote no. 217 of his translation, Guang Xing expresses the same idea about this term’s context-dependency. He also notes that the corresponding Pāli terms are *vedagū*, *upalabbhati*.

⁸⁷ Liebethal (1955: 52).

⁸⁸ This term appears with equal polysemy in the *Dào Dé Jīng* (道德经), if I am not mistaken, in nine capitals (7, 9, 13, 16, 26, 44, 52, 54 & 66). The delicate matter of similarities between Buddhism and Daoism cannot be enclosed within a footnote. It is enough to state that around 165 AD Buddha was venerated together with Laozi in the palace temple (Chan; 1957: 109).

⁸⁹ *Psyché* (Ψυχή) was also a Greek deity.

Meno. What is certain is that he was aware of the notion's existence. Little can be said in addition about Menander's ideas, because all the weight of the discussion falls on the repetitive examples given by Nāgasena. Although the dialog between the Greek king and the Indian Buddhist is all but a dialog with exchange of arguments, one has to recognize that *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra* cannot be classified as a typically *religious* text; its creator(s) must have had a strong influence from philosophy because neither do they propagate their ideas as an *ad hoc* doctrine, nor do they avoid to discuss any term which is outside their own theoretical system.

A short epilogue

One can see similarities between the Chinese translation and Platonic teachings. Some of them should be attributed to coincidence or, perhaps, the spread of certain ideas in a broad geographical space. Others seem to be easier to attribute to a certain cultural dialog that led to the spread of some ideas to China, at least to the small extent that the *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra* might have influenced Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Historical elements have been mainly distorted by idealization, and the weight of the sūtra has been shifted from the historical to the philosophical context.

References

- Balkrishna Govind Gokhale. "Theravāda Buddhism in Western India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 92, no. 2, 1972, pp. 230–36.
- Bivar, Adrian David Hugh. "The Sequence of Menander's Drachmae." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2, 1970, pp. 123–136.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, and Eliot Weinberger. "The Dialogues of Ascetic and King." *Grand Street*, no. 68, 1999, pp. 48–51.
- Chan, Wing-Tsit. "Transformation of Buddhism in China." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 7, no. 3/4, 1957, pp. 107–116.
- Chia, Lucille. Reviewed Work: "The Diamond Sutra: The Story of the World's Earliest Printed Book by Frances Wood, Mark Barnard." In: *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 70, No. 3 (August 2011). Pp. 828–829.
- Chipamong – Chowdhury, Ven. The King and the Philosopher: Historical and Textual Analysis of the Milinda-Pāṇha. *Buddhist Himalaya*. Vol. XI, Combined issue 2001 – 2007. pp. 67–75.
- Dauids, Thomas William Rhys. "Nāgasena." *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1891, pp. 476–478.
- Dauids, Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys. "The Soul-Theory in Buddhism." *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1903, pp. 587–591.
- Derrett, John Duncan Martin. "Greece and India: The Milindapañha, the Alexander-Romance and the Gospels." *Zeitschrift Für Religions- Und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1967, pp. 33–64.
- Foucher, Alfred (1917). *The beginnings of Buddhist art, and other essays in Indian and Central-Asian archaeology*. Humphrey Milford, London & Paul Geuthner, Paris.

- Geiger, Wilhelm (1912). *The Māhavaṃsa or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. Translated into English by Wilhelm Geiger, assisted by Mabel Haynes Bode. Oxford University Press. London.
- Guang, Xing. The Nagasena Bhikṣu Sūtra. An Annotated Translation from the Chinese Version. *JCBSSL*, Vol. 5, 2007, pp. 116–216.
- Guang Xing: Introduction to the Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*. Vol VI, 2008. pp. 235–251.
- Jakobsson, Jens. “Who Founded the Indo-Greek Era of 186/5 B.C.E.?” *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2009, pp. 505–10.
- Jenkins, Gilbert Kenneth. “Indo-Greek Tetradrachms.” *The British Museum Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3/4, 1968, pp. 108–12.
- Khettry, Sarita. “Social Background of Buddhism in Gandhara. (C. 2nd Century BCE to the Middle of the 4th Century CE).” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 75, 2014, pp. 41–48.
- Liebenthal, Walter. “Chinese Buddhism During the 4th and 5th Centuries.” *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1955, pp. 44–83.
- Robinson, C. A. “The Greeks in the Far East.” *The Classical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 7, 1949, pp. 405–12.
- Salisbury, Edward Elbridge. “Memoir on the History of Buddhism.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1844, pp. 79–135.
- Takakusu, Junjiro. “Chinese Translations of the Milinda Paṇho.” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1896, pp. 1–21.
- Waddell, Laurence Austine. “A Historical Basis for the Questions of King ‘Menander,’ from the Tibetan, Etc.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1897, pp. 227–237.
- Watson, Burton. “The Diamond Sutra.” *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 67–100.

10.

Metaphors of SPACE as TIME in Chinese and Bulgarian Linguacultures

Antonia Tsankova
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)

Abstract: The paper presents through the prism of cognitive semantics and conceptualology the basic models for metaphorical representation of TIME through SPACE in Chinese and Bulgarian linguacultures, as observed in the lexical-semantic layer of the languages. The study addresses the different levels of structuring the space-relevant semantics in the cognitive structure of the domain of TIME. By comparing the models and the structural levels of the conceptualization of the category of TIME through metaphors of SPACE in Bulgarian and Chinese linguistic worldview we can observe the different prospects on the direction of the timeflow and the orientation of the observer, which reflects specific characteristics of the two linguacultures. On the other hand, universal similarities are observed among the studied languages, which may be a product of common perception of image-schematas related to the category of SPACE as means of conceptualizing the semantic domain of TIME, or to some degree they may be influenced by later re-conceptualization or contemporary cross-linguistic and cross-cultural connections.

Keywords: TIME is SPACE metaphors, Bulgarian, Chinese, time line orientation, linguaculture

The categories of SPACE and TIME are basic ontological concepts of human thought, experience and perception, related in their physical, semantic, philosophical and linguistic dimensions. They have also been perceived as the two most important cognitive domains of human thinking, as neither SPACE nor TIME are part of a more basic conceptual sphere, and none of them can be reduced to the other (Haspelmath 1997). A number of studies reveal the interconnectedness of these categories not only at the conceptual but also at the pre-conceptual level, i.e. in the pre-

scientific or naive notions of reality reflected in the archaic linguistic worldview (Tan 2004, Vatova 2012, etc.).

The natural relationship between the ontological categories of TIME and SPACE is usually projected into language by borrowing spatial semantic units to express temporal meanings and relations. This primacy of spatial semantics in relation to the acquired time dimensions is explained by the fact that the natural development in the perception and conceptualization of the basic categories in the archaic worldview moves from real, material and observable objects of reality to abstract and non-substantial concepts, phenomena, categories (Hong et al 2017, Tan 2004, Vatova 2012). There are, however, indications that the opposite metaphorical mapping of the notions of TIME on the category of SPACE can also be found in certain cases, i.e. words denoting time can be used to express spatial meanings, or lexical units expressing a spatial sequence can denote both a sequence in TIME and a sequence in SPACE, without one of these sequences being primary.⁹⁰ Comparative research on typologically different, including rare and archaic languages has shown that, on the one hand, there are certain cultural differences in conceptualizing TIME as SPACE, and on the other hand, the linguistic representation of TIME through metaphors of SPACE is not characteristic of all cultures, especially considering some evidences from ancient linguacultures or contemporary ethnocultural communities that are still on an initial stage of development. Based on such observations, G. Ruseva concludes that the metaphorical mapping of SPACE constructs to the category of TIME may be a product of later re-conceptualization (Ruseva 2022: 261-262), which can be founded on numerically based time intervals and astronomical observations, or influenced by the schematic structure of the calendar and the clock, presenting sequence and intervals of time through spatial order and orientation. (Malokti 1983, Sinha 2014, cited by Ruseva 2022: 252).

Regarding the process of conceptualization of basic categories of human experience and knowledge, in cognitive linguistics and conceptology the idea of *idealized cognitive models* is proposed. J. Lakoff defines five main types of cognitive models – propositional, figurative, metaphorical, metonymical and symbolic. These models characterize the structure of thought (Lakoff 1987), and they are connected, directly or indirectly, through systematic connections with the physical, natural or social experience of man. For the construction of cognitive models, four types of structuring principles are used: propositional structure, figurative structure, metaphorical mapping and metonymical mapping. A combination of several cognitive models is often observed, which Lakoff defines as cluster or complex models (Lakoff 1987: 107–110). According to him, the concepts at the basic level and the image-schematic concepts are the initial material for the construction of complex cognitive models, and the image-schematas are the source of the structures used in

⁹⁰ Such examples have been observed in particular in French (Haspelmath 1997: 142) and Sanskrit, as noted by Ruseva (2022: 250-262).

these models, i.e. they form not only the structure of space as a basic notion, but also the structure of the concepts themselves (Lakoff 1987). In the conceptual sphere of TIME and SPACE, structurally defined and frequently used image-schemas are: CONTAINER, OBJECT, PART-WHOLE, CENTER-PERIFERY, PATH, CONNECTION, CYCLE, FORCE, BALANCE, SUBSTANCE, FRONT-BACK, UP-DOWN, NEAR-FAR, REPETITION, PROCESS, DIRECTED MOVEMENT, etc. (Johnson 1987, Lakoff 1987, Vatova 2012, etc.).

TIME and SPACE are relativized through the prism of the speaker's views on the world (Apresyan 1986, Tan 2004). The anthropocentric nature of the linguistic categories of TIME and SPACE predetermine the important role of the "observer" (the speaker) in the process of perceiving and conceptualizing the possible spatio-temporal dimensions in the linguistic worldview. When TIME is conceptualized through spatial metaphors, the relation of MAN and TIME is usually expressed by two different perspectives: either the experiencer is perceived as moving through SPACE/TIME, or TIME with its events and entities is thought of as moving in relation to the experiencer (Radden 2011; Nuñez and Sweetser 2006, Ruseva 2022: 253).

The category of SPACE in semantic terms usually includes such concepts as place, observer, position, orientation, distance, direction, etc. Temporal meanings describing the category of TIME include semantic concepts such as moment, period, observer, localization, sequence, dynamics in time, etc. The indicated conceptual aspects of the two categories can express different types of semantic characteristics: objective and subjective, absolute and relative, static and dynamic. By comparing the two categories, we observe a lot of identical semantic components that constitute both concepts, which also confirms the grounds for a universal perception of the structure of TIME-SPACE category in cognitive and linguistic terms.

The aim of this study is to present through the prism of cognitive semantics and conceptology the basic models for metaphorical representation of TIME through SPACE in Chinese and Bulgarian linguacultures, as observed in the lexical-semantic layer of the language.

In terms of representation of the category of TIME through spatial metaphors, there are several models described in theoretic and comparative linguistic studies regarding the way different semantic dimensions of TIME are perceived and expressed through language. The two basic types of presenting the direction of time-flow are cyclic (usually associated with the archaic perception of the timeflow) and linear (mainly related to the historical conscience and scientific view on the timeline) (Miheeva 2003, Vatova 2012)⁹¹. Considering the fact that the cyclic sequence of time is typically associated with the perception of TIME as CYCLE, in the current study we shall focus on the second type of metaphorical expression of TIME, i.e. in a linear

⁹¹ About the transition from the mythical to the epic perception of time in Persian culture, see Kostadinova (2021).

sequence, and more specifically on the representation of linear TIME through the notions of SPACE.

As for the linear representation of the timeline, as Haspelmath has pointed out, if spatial notions or expressions are carried over to the category of TIME, there are *a priori* three basic models of metaphorical mapping, because corresponding to the single timeline of one-dimensional time there are three axes of three-dimensional space: the frontal axis (front-back), the vertical axis (up-down), and the lateral axis (right-left). Cross-linguistic studies prove that it is the frontal axis which is overwhelmingly used for this purpose (Haspelmath 1997: 21-22), while the other two models are less evident in spatial conceptualization of the timeflow, although in the case of the Chinese language, the vertical axis (up-down) of time is also widely represented, and is usually given as a typical example for this kind of expression.

From the perspective of the experiential approach in cognitive linguistics, in the conceptualization of the category of TIME through different languages, basic concepts and image-schematic models at several levels are integrated, founded on the cognitive metaphors TIME as SUBSTANCE, TIME as CONTAINER, TIME as OBJECT, TIME as PHYSICAL FORCE (Vatova 2012: 225-276). The spatial orientation of TIME is mainly realized through the cognitive models TIME as SPACE, TIME as MOVEMENT, although more complex patterns of combined image-schemetas are also observed.

Regarding the way TIME is perceived and expressed in language, there has been a distinction drawn between *deictic time*, which is oriented to the reference point NOW, thus defining the categories of PAST and FUTURE (also called A-series, or D-time), and *sequential time*, which includes only notions of EARLIER and LATER, without a reference to the present moment (also called B-series or S-time). Another semantic aspect that can be highlighted within the category of TIME is the notion of duration or time span (T-span) (Ruseva 2022).

In this study, we shall compare the spatial models of time in Chinese and Bulgarian language, including the various semantic elements of localization, directed movement and timeflow, time span, sequence of space/time units, etc.

1. Metaphors representing the cognitive models of TIME as CONTAINER and TIME as SUBSTANCE.

In the Chinese language a number of spatial morphemes are used to delineate the temporal boundaries or mark the beginning/end of a certain period of time. In this model, morphemes with locative meaning are commonly used, as well as prepositions that denote limits, scope, duration of time, or the place of an event within a certain period of time, representing the image-schematas PART – WHOLE, FRONT – BACK, UP – DOWN, CONTAINER, BOUNDARY. For example: 从三点到五点 ‘**from** three **to** five o’clock, 一年内 ‘**within** a year’, 会议期间 ‘**during** the meeting’, 月中 ‘**in the middle** of the month’, 三十岁以下 ‘**below** thirty years

(of age), 十五分钟以上 ‘**above** fifty minutes’, 两个月左右 ‘**about** two months’, 40 岁上下 ‘**around** 40 years (of age)’, etc.

In Bulgarian the temporal models representing a period of time with its definite or indefinite boundaries or localization of a point in time apply quite similar image-schemata, with certain variations. Examples: *от един до три часа* ‘**from** one **to** three o’clock’, *в рамките на година* ‘**within** (a frame of) a year’, *по време на срещата* ‘**during** the meeting’, *в средата на месеца* ‘**in the middle** of the month’, *около/горе-долу два месеца* ‘**about/around** two months’, etc.

Comparing the types of temporal expressions in Chinese and Bulgarian, we can conclude that the metaphor of TIME as CONTAINER is mainly conveyed through the usage of prepositions of space and location that denote the boundaries of time span or the location of an event within a period of time. While in Chinese all the listed meanings are expressed with the usage of spatial morphemes, in Bulgarian we can find some additional elements (e.g. *в рамките на* ‘within (a frame of)’) or combinations of spatial-temporal expressions (*по време на срещата* ‘during (the time of) the meeting’). It is interesting to note that both in Chinese and Bulgarian the meaning of approximate time span can be expressed by spatial morphemes denoting sequence along the vertical axis (up-down), and in Chinese locatives on the lateral axis (left-right) are also applied with the same meaning.

2. Metaphors representing the cognitive model of TIME as DISTANCE, including the reference point of the observer.

This type of model is also related to the concept of SPACE and is mainly represented by the image-schemata NEAR – FAR, the reference point in space being HERE, and respectively in time – NOW, which also prompts the cognitive metaphor HERE is NOW. Associated with these time-and-space correlations are the image-schemata SHORT – LONG, attributed to both spatial and temporal dimensions.

In Chinese the spatial morphemes 进 ‘near’, 远 ‘far’, 短 ‘short’, 长 ‘long’ are used to express temporal meanings, such as: 离国庆节很近了 ‘the National Day is drawing **near**’, 将近两个小时 ‘**nearly** two hours’, 很远的将来 ‘**far** future’, 短时间 ‘**short** time’, 长期 ‘**long-term**’ etc.

In Bulgarian the same spatial meanings are also mapped to the category of TIME, usually through certain derivative forms of the relevant words: *близо* ‘near’, *далеч* ‘far’, *къс/кратък* ‘short’, *дълъг* ‘long’, e.g. *Коледата **наближава***. ‘Christmas is **coming near**’, *близо два часа* ‘**nearly** two hours’, *Лятото е още **далеч***. ‘The summer is still **far away**’, *в **далечно** бъдеще* ‘in the **far** future’, *Срещата беше **кратка***. ‘The meeting was **short**’, *за **късо** време* ‘for a **short** time’, *дългосрочен* ‘**long-term**’ etc.

3. Spatial metaphors representing the cognitive models of TIME as SPACE and TIME as MOVEMENT serve to denote the direction and chronological sequence of/in time, in which regard different systems of temporal trajectories through lan-

guages are observed. As we have noted above, in the present study we shall focus on the linear models of timeflow as being mostly represented by spatial metaphors.

3.1. Within the horizontal orientation (frontal axis) of the timeline, several patterns for representing the course of time are observed and they differ both in regard to direction of the timeline related to the speaker, and in terms of static/dynamic characteristics of the image-schematas structuring the models as follows:

3.1.1. In the timeline, the future is behind the observer, and the past is in front of him. According to data from comparative linguistic studies, this type of time orientation is characteristic of the ancient Greek and Latin languages, it is observed in some native American languages, the Maltese language (Vatova 2012: 242), Sanskrit language (Ruseva 2022: 256-259) etc., and generally reflects the archaic view of the past as a period that we can clearly observe in front of us as having passed through and continuously connected to the present moment, and the future – as a period hidden behind the present and unknown to the observer. Therefore, the observer is traditionally perceived as facing the past, with his back turned to the future that follows him. It is believed that in modern European languages the reverse perspective on the trajectory of time prevails, i.e. the future is ahead of us, and the past remains behind us (Vatova 2012: 242-243), but at the same time the more archaic model of time orientation is partially observed in contemporary European languages, for example in Bulgarian (*преди/предишен* ‘before/previous’, *след/следващ* ‘after/next’), also in English (e.g. *before*, having also the spatial meaning ‘in front of’; *after*, with the spatial meaning of ‘behind’), etc.

This orientation of the timeline is the predominant pattern in Chinese language (Tan 2004), represented by the use of the opposing morphemes 前/先 ‘in front of/before’ – 后 ‘behind/after’ in temporal phrases, e.g. 以前 ‘before’ – 以后 ‘afterwards’; 前天 ‘the day **before** yesterday’ – 后天 ‘the day **after** tomorrow’; 前辈 ‘the old/**previous** generation’ – 后辈 ‘the young/**next** generation’, etc. This productive pair of spatial morphemes in Chinese is used exclusively in such a timeline pattern, in which the observer is turned towards the past.

It should be noted that the temporal meanings of the spatial image-schemata BEFORE – AFTER can be realized without reference to the speaker (denoting S-time), by relativizing events to one another or to a certain reference point, expressing an objective sequence in time, which actually coincides with the natural direction from past to present and future. For example: 吃饭前要吃药, 之后还要喝汤。 ‘**Before** eating, you should take medicine, and **after** that – drink broth.’

In the Bulgarian language the relevant pair of time adverbs is *преди* – *след*⁹², the first of which is derived from the spatial morpheme *преди* (in front of/before), and the latter from the verb morpheme meaning “to follow” (*следвам*), which makes

⁹² This pair of opposite in meaning time adverbs is quite similar in time-and-space semantics and usage with the English equivalents *before* – *after*.

a combined cognitive model of TIME metaphorically presented through SPACE and MOVEMENT. Examples: *да се срещнем преди два часа* ‘let’s meet **before** two o’clock’ / *преди закуска* ‘**before** breakfast’ / *след известно време* ‘**after** some time’ / *след като се прибере у дома* ‘**after** coming back home’. It is interesting to note that the spatial morpheme with a static semantics represents meaning related to the past (which is unchangeable), while the dynamic verbal morpheme represents what’s coming next, following the present.

3.1.2. In the trajectory of time, the future is in front of the observer, and the past remains behind. Apart from the traditional model of the timeline that we introduced above, the image-schemata FRONT – BACK is superimposed on the widespread view of the future as being in front of the observer, related to the idea of the person’s movement forward in space, from where the metaphor is also mapped on to the concept of TIME. This model reflects time as flowing in the direction from the future to the present and passing back to the past. This is the more typical orientation of the timeline in the Bulgarian language, e.g. *Гледам напред в бъдещето*. ‘I look **forward** to the **future**.’ / *Занапред (в бъдеще) ще работим по-усилено*. ‘In the future (from now onwards) we will work harder.’ / *Предстоящите събития ме вълнуват много*. ‘The **upcoming** events excite me a lot.’ / *Загърбвам миналото*. ‘I leave the past **behind**.’ (examples from Vatova 2012: 242). G. Radden notes that this idea is prevalent in Western cultures in general (examples from Radden 2003: 4–5 and Lakoff–Johnson 1980: 41, cited in Vatova 2012: 242).

In the Chinese language, the pair of locatives 前 ‘in front of’ – 后 ‘behind’, used to express the traditional notion of the timeline (described in 3.1.1.), can also be applied to denote just opposite direction of the timeflow. Examples: 前途 ‘perspectives’ (lit. ‘the way **ahead**’), 我们应该永远往前看. ‘We should always **look forward** (i.e. to the future)’. The morpheme 前 ‘in front of’ is also used in some words denoting the present time, e.g. 目前 ‘now’ (lit. ‘**before** the eyes’), 当前 ‘nowadays’ (lit. ‘facing **forward**’), which somehow signals the semantic connection between the future and the present time. In this regard we may also consider the fact that in terms of grammar there is no formal distinction between present and future tense in Chinese – they share the same form, which is the neutral, unmarked form of the verb, and the time of action (future or present) is usually actualized only within the context (Tsankova 2024).

A more common means of expressing the type of timeline with the past positioned behind and the future in front of the observer in modern Chinese is represented by the pair of verbal morphemes for directed movement, related definitely to the position of the speaker: 来 ‘come’ (towards the speaker) and 去 ‘go’ (from the speaker). The notion of TIME is metaphorically presented as a moving entity that comes from the future, passes through the present (the moment of observation) and goes into the past. Examples: 过去 ‘past’ – 未来/将来 ‘future’, 去年 ‘**last** year’ – 明年/来年 ‘**next** year/the year to **come**’, 来日 ‘the **coming** days’, 来代 ‘the

coming generations'; 来晨 'the next/**coming** morning'. We can observe in previous studies a great degree of universal similarity in the usage of verbal morphemes with the generalized meanings 'come' and 'go' to express upcoming and past periods of time in typologically different languages (Vatova 2012, Tsankova 2020, Ruseva 2023, Kostadinova 2025 etc.), e.g. in Bulgarian *идната година* 'the next/**coming** year', *настъпващата пролет* 'the **coming** spring', *отминалата младост* 'the **past** youth'; in English *the forthcoming year*, *the past holidays*; in German *der kommende Frühling* 'the **coming** Spring'; in Russian *приходящий год* 'the **coming** year', etc.

Apart from this type of temporal models, the verbal morpheme 来 'come' in Chinese is used in certain cases to denote a span of time stretching from the past and reaching up to the present moment, e.g. 历来 'throughout (the time up to now)' / 向来 'always (up to the present)' / 近来 'in recent times' / 十年来 'for ten years now'. Similar image-schemata we can also observe in the Bulgarian expression *от десет години насам* 'for ten years now', which shows the trajectory of time from the past to the present, unlike the common usage of the morpheme 'come' to denote forthcoming future event.

3.2. Models of vertical orientation of the timeline.

The vertical model of the timeline with a sequence from top (past) to bottom (future) is quite rarely seen among languages, but it is typical for the Chinese linguistic worldview⁹³. According to some researchers, it corresponds to the widespread idea of time as a waterflow or the "river model" of time, assuming that the image-schemata UP and FRONT have a common ground based on natural experience (Radden 2003, cited by Vatova 2012: 243). Examples: 上个星期 '**last** week' – 下个星期 '**next** week'; 上世界 '**last** century' – 下世界 '**next** century'; 上次 '**last** time' – 下次 '**next** time', etc. In the Chinese language, the semantics of the morphemes 'up' and 'down' have acquired a metaphorical usage in classifying and denoting a hierarchical sequence of position, degree, order, and this model is also mapped to the sequence of time periods. A natural part of this order is the spatial morpheme 中 'center/middle', e.g. 上午 '**before** noon' – 中午 'at noon (lit. **mid**-noon)' – 下午 '**after** noon'; 上旬 '**the first** ten days of the month' – 中旬 '**the middle** (ten days) of the month' – 下旬 '**the last** ten days of the month', etc. These examples show that the spatial image-schemata with a linear sequence UP – CENTER – DOWN can be transferred metaphorically to denote the time line not only subjectively in relation to the speaker, but also objectively, i.e. regardless to the moment of speech, which can also be the case with the image-schemata BEFORE – AFTER.

Regarding the vertical model of timeline in the Chinese linguistic worldview, cognitive research has presented a number of observations and conclusions. An experimental study by Lera Boroditsky on the ability of native speakers of English and

⁹³ In Sanskrit the opposite direction on the vertical timeflow is expressed (Ruseva 2022, Ruseva 2023).

Chinese to perceive a linear sequence of chronologically related elements shows a greater tendency for native speakers of Chinese to assume a sequence in a vertical direction from top to bottom, while for respondents with English as their first language, the horizontal chronological sequence in the direction from left to right has a priority (Boroditsky 2001: 7-22). According to some researchers, the significant presence of the cognitive metaphor of the vertical trajectory of timeline in Chinese language can be explained by the traditional sequence of writing hieroglyphs in text (from top to bottom). This assumption is based on another experimental study on the direction of linear ordering of consecutive events by native English speakers and Arabic speakers, who are known to differ in the direction of writing. According to the results of the experiment, native English speakers compose a linear sequence with a left-to-right direction, while native Arabic speakers are more likely to reproduce a right-to-left order and chronology, which corresponds to the model of writing in the Arabic script. This leads the authors to the conclusion that the line of sequence formed through the written tradition can influence the cognitive models of perception and reproduction of the linear timeline (Tversky et al 1991, cited in Hong et al 2017: 1688-1689).

Comparing the models of vertical timeflow in Chinese with the Bulgarian language, where this model is represented in a significantly more limited way, we can find considerable variations in the perceptions of TIME.

In Bulgarian language, the vertical orientation of timeline is usually represented in models where TIME is perceived as a CONTAINER filled with SUBSTANCE. For example: *от дълбока древност* 'from **deep** antiquity'; *да погледнем в дълбочината на времето* 'let's look into the **depths** of time'; *изплува от миналото* '**emerge** from the past'; *изравям от миналото/от пластове на времето* 'dig out from the **past**/from the **layers** of time' (examples from Vatova 2012: 244). While in Chinese language the past is located above the present and the future, in the linguistic consciousness of the Bulgarian speakers the past is usually situated below the present and is perceived as being "hidden" under the water or earth's surface, thus the future can accordingly be perceived as being located above the present. For example: *Вдигам поглед към бъдещето* 'I **look up** to the future.' *Във висините на времето (в перспектива към бъдещето)* 'in the **heights** of time (in perspective towards the future)' (examples by Vatova 2012: 244).

According to M. Vatova, this point of view is rather based on the experience associated with the metaphor THE UNKNOWN IS ABOVE vs. THE KNOWN IS BELOW. These image-schematic representations of the timeflow can also be related to the cognitive metaphor of "burying" the past "underground," or under the surface of the present (e.g. the idea of the roots of time, the roots of history and human civilization; the family tree etc.) and perceiving the future as something ephemeral, still unattainable, unperceivable like the celestial space. We can assume that the vertical timeline in the traditional Bulgarian linguaculture is also associated with the cognitive metaphors of the earth as a container of the past and the sky as a domain of the

future, while the position of man (i.e. the observer/speaker) on the timeline between these two fundamental realms marks the moment of the present.

Conclusion

Conceptualizing TIME through metaphors of SPACE is a typical cognitive model across languages, including Chinese and Bulgarian. The conceptual structure of the category of TIME is generally perceived as consisting of different levels of conceptualization, predominantly based on cognitive metaphors with a different degree of abstraction and generalization (Vatova 2012). The lower level of abstraction within the concept of TIME is occupied by cognitive metaphors associated with some simple mapping of spacious dimensions to the domain of TIME, such as SPACE and DISTANCE. On this level semantic aspects such as initial and final point in time, duration, approximate timespan, location in time and relative dimensions of time period are mainly expressed by means of spatial prepositions and locative adverbs expressing location mainly on the frontal axis (front – back), with rare appearances also on the vertical (top – down) and lateral (left – right) axis. Such cognitive metaphors are quite common and have to some degree similar expressions in Chinese and Bulgarian. On this level we can also observe some combined models employing spatial with other means of metaphoric expression, representing TIME also as OBJECT and SUBSTANCE. In some cases, doublet forms of spatial and of purely temporal origin can co-exist, following different paths of etymology and semantic conceptualization.

On the level of expressing such characteristics of TIME as the temporal sequence of events, the notions of *before* and *after*, of *past*, *present* and *future* time, as well as the trajectory of the timeflow, we observe considerable differences in expression between Chinese and Bulgarian. First of all, for Chinese language the more typical model of the timeline is the one representing the PAST in FRONT and the FUTURE – BEHIND the observer (the so-called archaic, or traditional model). The vertical pattern of the timeflow, where the PAST is UP and the FUTURE is DOWN on the timeline is also widely employed in Chinese to express temporal sequence, related or not related to the present moment. In the Bulgarian language, however, the predominant model of the trajectory of time is presenting the PAST BEHIND and the FUTURE in FRONT of the reference point. At the same time, both in Chinese and Bulgarian the reverse patterns of temporal orientation along the frontal axis are also quite common, and the locatives denoting FRONT and BACK in both languages can be used to express opposite directions of the timeflow. It shows that in certain cases totally reversed viewpoints on the timeline can coexist in conceptualizing the category of TIME among languages.

Another level of conceptualizing the dynamics of TIME, also related to the domain of SPACE is based on the metaphor of directed MOVEMENT, oriented to the position of the speaker. This is also quite common conceptual model for both languages where the FUTURE is described as moving towards the observer (“coming”) and the PAST as moving away (“going”) from the point of observation – the PRESENT time.

Comparing the models and the structural levels of conceptualizing the category of TIME through metaphors of SPACE in Bulgarian and Chinese linguistic world-view we can observe the different prospects on the direction of the timeflow and the orientation of the observer that reflects certain characteristics of the two linguacultures. On the other hand, we find some universal similarities that may be a product of common perception of image-schematas related to the category of SPACE as means of conceptualizing the semantic domain of SPACE, or they may be influenced to a certain degree by later re-conceptualization or contemporary cross-linguistic and cross-cultural connections.

References

- Apresian, Yury D. Апресян, Юрий Д. „Deiksis v leksike i grammatike i naivnaya model mira” Дейксис в лексике и грамматике и наивная модель мира [Deixis in Vocabulary and Grammar and the Naive Model of the World]. *Semiotika i informatika* Семиотика и информатика. Vol. 28. Moskva, 1986.
- Boroditsky, Lera. Does Language Shape Thought? Chinese and English Speakers’ Conceptions of Time. *Cognitive Psychology*, 43, 2001, 1–22. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1006/cogp.2001.0748>
- Haspelmath, Martin. *From Space to Time: Temporal Adverbials in the World’s Languages*. München – Newcastle: Lincom Europa, 1997.
- Hong, T., He, X. Y., Tillman, R., Zhao, X. R. & Deng, Y. M. The Vertical and Horizontal Spatial-Temporal Conceptual Metaphor Representation of Chinese Temporal Words. *Psychology*, 8, 2017.
- Johnson, M., *The Body in the Mind (The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason)*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Kostadinova, Sirma. When Myth Meets Epos – on the Transition of Perceptions of Time. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Iran and the World in the Mirror of History: Past, Present and Future*. Tehran: Allameh Tabataba’i University Press, 2021.
- Kostadinova, Sirma. Костадинова, Сирма “*Patuvaneto*” *kato realnost i metafora v persijskata literatura i kultura* “Пътуването” като реалност и метафора в персийската литература и култура [“Journey” as reality and metaphor in Persian literature and culture], Sofia: Avanguard Prima, 2025.
- Kravchenko, A. V. Кравченко, А. В. “Kognitivnyie strukturyi prostranstva i vremeni v estestvennom yazyke.” Когнитивные структуры пространства и времени в естественном языке [Cognitive structures of space and time in natural language] *Izvestiya RAN. Seriya literatury i yazyka*, book 3. Известия РАН. Серия литературы и языка, кн. 3, 1996.
- Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

- Liu, Yuehua. Pan, Wenyu. Gu, Wei. 刘月华, 潘文娱, 故韡. *Shiyong xiandai hanyu yufa* 实用现代汉语语法 [Practical Modern Chinese Grammar]. Beijing 北京, 2006.
- Malotki, Ekkehart. *Hopi Time. A Linguistic Analysis of the Temporal Concepts in the Hopi Language*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1983. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110822816>
- Miheeva, Lyubov N. Михеева, Любовь Н. “Yazyikovo Vremya kak Lingvokulturologicheskaya Kategorija” Языковое время как лингвокультурологическая категория [Language Time as a Linguacultural Category]. *Russkiy Yazyik za Rubezhom* Русский язык за рубежом. № 3 (2003): 55-60.
- Núñez, Rafael; Sweetser, Eve. With the future behind them: Convergent evidence from Aymara language and gesture in the crosslinguistic comparison of spatial construals of time. *Cognitive Science* 30, 2006. 401–450. Doi: 10.1207/s15516709cog0000_62
- Radden, Günter. *The Metaphor TIME AS SPACE across Languages*, 2003. URL: <http://www.ualberta.ca/~german/ejournal/Radden1.htm>
- Radden, Günter. Spatial time in the West and the East. In M. Brdar, M. Omazic, V. Takac, T. Gradecak-Erdeljic & G. Buljan (eds.), *Space and time in language*, 1–40. Frankfurt-Main et al.: Peter Lang, 2011.
- Ruseva, Gergana. “Look ahead in the past, look back in the future”: Time is Space Metaphors in Sanskrit. *Figurativity across Domains, Modalities and Research Practices*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2022). 242–270.
- Ruseva, G. Русева, Гергана. *Napred kym minaloto, nazad kym bydeshteto. Idei za vremeto v Drevna India* Напред към миналото, назад към бъдещето. Идеи за времето в Древна Индия [Look Ahead in the Past, Look Back in the Future. Notions of Time in Ancient India] Sofia: Iztok-Zapad София: Изток-Запад. 2023.
- Sinha, Chris. Living in the model: The cognitive ecology of time – a comparative study. In L. Magnani (ed.), *Model-Based Reasoning in Science and Technology. Theoretical and Cognitive Issues, Series SAPERE (Studies in Applied Philosophy, Epistemology and Rational Ethics Vol. 8)*, 55–73. Heidelberg, Berlin: Springer, 2014. doi: 10.1007/978-3-642-37428-9_4
- Tan, Aoshuan. Тань, Аошуан. “Kitajskaya kartina mira. Yazyik, kultura, mentalnost.” Китайская картина мира. Язык, культура, ментальность. [Chinese linguistic worldview. Language, culture, mentality]. Moscow. Москва, 2004.
- Talmy, L. *Toward a Cognitive Semantics – Vol. 1*, Chap. 5. 2000. URL: <http://linguistics.buffalo.edu/people/faculty/talmy/talmyweb/Volume1/chap5.pdf>
- Tsankova, Antonia. Цанкова, Антония “Modeli za izrazyavane na prostranstvena orientaciya na vremeto v kitayskiy ezik” Модели за изразяване на пространствена ориентация на времето в китайския език [Models Expressing Spatial Orientation of Time in Modern Chinese]. *Collection of Papers from the Fifth International Conference on Chinese Studies „The Silk Road.”* Sofia: The NET (2020), 8–23.
- Tsankova, Antonia. Цанкова, Антония “Fakultativnost na aspektualno-temporalnite pokazateli v syvremenniya kitayski ezik” Факултативност на аспектуално-темпоралните показатели в съвременния китайски език [Optionality in Explication of the Aspect-tense Markers in Modern Chinese Language]. Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2024.
- Tversky, B., Kugelmass, S., & Winter, A. Cross-Cultural and Developmental Trends in Graphic Productions. *Cognitive Psychology*, 23, 1991.
- Vatova, M. Вџова, М. “Predstavi za prostranstvo, vreme i dvizhenie v bylgarskiy ezik (kognitivno izsledvane).” Представи за пространство, време и движение в българския език (когнитивно изследване). [Notions of space, time and movement in the Bulgarian language (cognitive research)]. Veliko Tarnovo. Велико Търново, 2012. URL: <http://da.uni-vt.bg>

11.

Translation as Cultural Exchange: The Dissemination of Chinese Literature in Macedonian

Sara Cvetanovska

Institute for Macedonian Literature at

“Ss. Cyril and Methodius University” Skopje (North Macedonia)

Liu Yi

*School of International Chinese Language Education,
Yunnan Normal University (China)*

Abstract: This paper presents the study on the dissemination of Chinese works translated into Macedonian, methodologically based on civilizational exchange and Lasswell’s “5 basic questions” model. It introduces the research team, structure, methodology, and methods, with particular emphasis on reader survey results. Through descriptive, analytical, and empirical approaches, this research discovers reception trends, challenges, and opportunities. The outcomes show that well-designed projects with high-quality translations of well-curated works can enhance visibility and engagement among Macedonian readers, publishers, and translators, ensuring cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: *Chinese literature, Macedonian translation, cross-cultural communication, reader reception, literary dissemination.*

If literature truly possesses a mysterious power, I think perhaps it is precisely this: that one can read a book by a writer of a different time, a different country, a different race, a different language, and a different culture and there encounter a sensation that is one’s very own.

Yu and Allan Hepburn Barr 2011: 61

1. Introduction

Translation plays a central role in facilitating cross-cultural exchange, mediating diverse literary traditions, and promoting mutual understanding between civilizations.

By making literature from one culture accessible to readers of another, translation not only animates the literary world but also builds intercultural dialogue. Equally important is the reception of the translated text, as it reflects how well cultural values and subtleties are conveyed and appreciated. However, despite the increasing availability of translated literature, Chinese literary works remain relatively unknown among the Macedonian readership.

A year or so back, I was invited by the Confucius Institute in Skopje to give a public lecture on modern Chinese literature. This was an opportunity to test the extent of familiarity of Macedonian readers with Chinese writers. When I asked the audience of about thirty people if they were familiar with any Chinese writer from the 20th century, I received only one response mentioning Bei Dao, a poet who received the title laureate of the nation's famous poetry festival, the Struga Poetry Evenings in 2015. This event pointed to a knowledge deficit I suspected: Chinese writers, particularly modern and contemporary ones, are still largely unknown to Macedonian readers. And it is not a wonder since the relatively small amount of titles available in Macedonian are not part of the curriculums and rarely touched upon in any context.

In that sense, the dissemination of Chinese literature in Macedonian translation is thus both a valuable scientific question and a necessary part of broader cultural dialogue. Building on the China-Yugoslav relations and especially following the establishment of direct diplomatic relations in 1993, the Sino-Macedonian cultural, as well as literary exchanges established through translation have gradually developed (Cui, Xi 2016:46). However, limited data on the reception and influence of these translations called for a focused investigation. Given this, the present study seeks to answer the following central question: How is Chinese literature disseminated in Macedonian translation, and what factors influence its reception among Macedonian readers?

To address this, the study examines the availability and accessibility of translated Chinese literature in Macedonian, readership demographics, preferences, and awareness of Chinese literature, as well as the challenges in the processes of production and reception faced by translators, publishers, and readers. By analyzing reader reception patterns, translation practices, and dissemination challenges, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the conditions influencing the cross-cultural exchange of Chinese literature translated to Macedonian.

With this in mind, we conducted the study "Research on the Dissemination of Chinese Translations into Macedonian from the Perspective of Civilizational Exchange and Mutual Learning," as part of the 2023 World Languages and Cultures Research project by the China Center for Language Planning and Policy Studies, registered under the number WYZL2023YN0006. This paper introduces the research team, methodology, and key findings, with particular emphasis on the reader survey results. Through an analysis of reception patterns, as well as the translation, publication, and accessibility issues, the study identifies the challenges and opportu-

nities for fostering deeper engagement with Chinese literature among Macedonian readership.

2. Team

Our team is composed of six, both experienced and emerging scholars, professionally engaged in various segments of Chinese-Macedonian cultural and language relations. It features Professor Liao Wei, head of the Confucius Institute in Skopje; Professor Simon Sazdov, a specialist in Macedonian language, cognitive linguistics, and contemporary literary theories at the Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje; Ms. Chen Qiao, head of the teaching and research section for Macedonian language at Beijing Foreign Studies University; Ms. Liu Yi, a doctoral candidate in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages; Gjore Gjelev, a student of Chinese language and calligraphy; and myself, a Chinese literary translator and scholar of Chinese modern and contemporary literature.

3. Methodology

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the theory of civilizational exchange and mutual learning and Lasswell's "5W" communication model.

The theory of civilizational exchange, based on the 2014 UNESCO address of Chinese President Xi Jinping, underscores the principles of equality, diversity, and mutual respect among civilizations. It emphasizes the enrichment derived from cultural diversity, rejects hierarchical cultural dominance, and advocates for reciprocal exchanges that allow civilizations to learn from each other's strengths (Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang 2014). This framework is particularly relevant to the dissemination of Chinese translations in Macedonian, referencing the interactive and bidirectional nature of cultural exchange.

Lasswell's "5W" communication model provided a structured approach to examining the dissemination process, addressing the questions: Who, What, Which Channel, To Whom, and With What Effect (Lasswell 1948). This model guided the analysis of translation and dissemination practices by focusing on key elements such as the agents involved, the content production, the distribution methods, the audience demographics, their preferences and the cultural impact achieved.

By integrating these frameworks, the study hopes to have achieved a holistic perspective on the dissemination of Chinese literary works within the Macedonian

cultural landscape, combining a macro-level emphasis on cultural dialogue with a micro-level analysis of communication dynamics.

4. Research Methods and Content

This study employs various methods to achieve its objectives. Structured into four main parts, it was built on consulting the data set, collected over time by me, of data on translations of Chinese works available in Macedonian, categorizing them by title, genre, author, translator, publication year, and publisher (Cvetanovska, in print). Alongside this, related media reports and academic works are analyzed to establish a thorough understanding of the broader cultural impact.

The second phase focused on assessing the dissemination status and effectiveness. This included field visits to libraries and bookstores to evaluate availability, borrowing rates, and sales of Chinese translations. Interviews with staff and customers provided additional feedback on demand and preferences, while the readers' questionnaire surveys, distributed both online and through direct contact, gathered data on audience perceptions, reading habits, and preferences. In-depth interviews with translators, publishers and readers further illuminated the dissemination challenges, translation strategies, and audience reception. The third part of the study reflects on the experiences and challenges encountered during dissemination, summarizing key insights to identify areas for improvement.

Building on these reflections, the final part provides actionable recommendations derived from the research to enhance the impact of Chinese translations within the Macedonian cultural landscape. It also focuses on fostering conditions that support translators and publishers in producing valuable, audience-oriented works.

Using an integrated approach combining empirical and qualitative methods, we hoped to establish a nuanced understanding of the dissemination practices and offer actionable recommendations to enhance the conditions ensuring better dissemination of Chinese translations within the Macedonian cultural landscape.

5. Readers' questionnaire

Below I will describe in more detail the readers' questionnaire survey and the results gathered through it. The questionnaire was designed as a self-administered questionnaire and distributed through social media platforms such as Google Forms, Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and Viber, as well as in-person visits to libraries and bookstores. A total of 247 valid responses were collected, and the data was analyzed using SPSS software. The distribution methods could have produced a certain

sampling bias skewing results towards more literate or academically inclined participants, a potential flaw that a future study should try to avoid.

The survey was structured to comprehensively address the key aspects of the dissemination and reception of Chinese works translated into Macedonian and consisted of 21 questions generally separated into four categories. The questionnaire began with demographic details of the respondents, such as age, gender, occupation, and education, to identify patterns among different audience groups. It continued with questions about reading habits, including the frequency of reading, preferred book genres, and familiarity with Chinese literature, aiming to understand the overall literary engagement of the respondents. Another section focused on accessibility and interaction with Chinese-translated works, featuring questions about the languages in which these works were read, the quality of translations, and the channels through which respondents discovered them (e.g. bookstores, social media, word of mouth). To explore the dissemination pathways, the survey included questions about readers' preferred methods of reading books (physical vs. digital) and the role of promotional activities in encouraging their engagement. Finally, the respondents were asked about perceived challenges, such as the availability of high-quality translations, cultural relatability, and awareness of Chinese authors. This offered critical insights into the barriers to disseminating Chinese works translated into Macedonian. With the questionnaire, the team hoped to achieve a systematic structure that would ensure the survey gathered refined data on the inquiry's practical and cultural dimensions.

5.1 Respondents' demographics

The survey showed that the majority of the respondents were women, with 65.4% of the total participants, as opposed to a smaller proportion of men at 34.6%. The gender distribution could point to the active participation of women in the survey and potentially reflect their stronger engagement with literary and cultural activities or greater responsiveness towards the questionnaire.

The majority of readers were aged between 35-50 years (42.6%), representing a mid-life demographic with potentially established reading habits and greater exposure to diverse literary works. The second segment was younger readers aged 18-34 years representing 27.3%, while the remaining respondents were primarily older adults aged 50-65 years (19.0%) and a smaller group aged under 18 or over 65.

In terms of occupation and interest areas, the biggest group (41.1%) reported that they were literature enthusiasts, revealing a strong base of engaged readers with curiosity about new cultural content. Teachers and scholars formed 22.0% of respondents, contributing an academic perspective to the study, while students made up 21.2%. Professionals and freelancers filled out the remaining percentages. The flaw in the design of this question is that it was posed as close-ended, which may have compromised the reliability of the results.

The data indicates that Chinese translations engage a broad spectrum of educated and culturally curious individuals, but significant gaps in accessibility and appeal to younger audiences still exist.

5.2 Reading Habits and Preferences

The survey questioned respondents' reading habits and discovered that 31.0% dedicated 3-5 hours weekly to reading, indicating a relatively high level of literary interest. 27.7% reported reading 1-2 hours per week, and an astonishing 13.6% devoted over 10 hours weekly to reading, indicating a committed sub-group of readers. However, 16.1% of respondents reported reading less than an hour weekly, suggesting a gap in literary habits within the population.

Considering genre preferences, literary novels were the most popular at 26.9%, followed by non-fiction genres like social sciences (21.0%) and arts and lifestyle (19.2%). Philosophy and religion accounted for 16.7%, while academic journals attracted a niche of consistent readership at 10.0%. Respondents also noted an interest in history, poetry, romance, adventure, and humor, indicating widespread and diverse reading tastes. Notably, Chinese works in translation had a relatively smaller readership: only 42.9% of respondents had read such works, underlining the niche status of Chinese literature in the country. This conclusion is somewhat arbitrary because we failed to find or produce results on which to compare the familiarity rate with translated works from other literature traditions.

Popular titles included timeless Chinese classics like *Dao De Jing*, *The Art of War* and poems by Li Bai. Works by renowned authors such as Mo Yan, Eileen Chang, and Li Bai were also mentioned, though modern Chinese literature appeared to have limited reach. Readers were more familiar with philosophical and traditional themes than contemporary narratives, signaling an opportunity for diversification in what is offered in translation.

5.3 Insights into Translation and Accessibility

One of the most important fields of interest in the survey was whether and how respondents accessed Chinese translations and their impressions of the quality of these works. Most readers engaged with translations in Macedonian (63.2%), but many also used English editions (45.3%). A smaller number reported accessing Chinese literature in Serbian, Russian, or other languages. The reliance on English translations underlines both the lack of availability of Macedonian translations of Chinese works as well as the role of secondary languages as intermediaries in cross-cultural literary exchange.

While readers appreciated the effort to make Chinese literature accessible in Macedonian, many raised concerns about the quality of the translations. Direct translations from Chinese were deemed far superior in preserving cultural authenticity and linguistic nuance, but such works were limited in number. The majority of translations available were adapted from intermediary languages like English, leading to potential cultural distortion or loss of meaning. Readers familiar with Chinese culture or language were particularly critical of such translations, citing a lack of faithfulness to the original text. This highlights the need for greater investment in bilingual translators with expertise in both linguistic and cultural contexts.

An interesting finding was that the quality of translation emerged as a decisive factor in the readers' engagement, with over 90.0% of participants considering it crucial or important (63.0% considering it crucial and 30.0% deeming it important, but not decisive). Alongside content and topic, translation quality and publisher credibility ranked highest in influencing reading choices, surpassing factors such as author popularity, price, or reviews. This further reinforces the central role of high-quality publications in fostering readership and trust in Chinese literary works.

5.4 Dissemination Channels and Awareness

The study found that the dissemination of Chinese literature in Macedonian translation was highly reliant on informal and decentralized channels. Word-of-mouth recommendations emerged as the most significant driver of discovery, accounting for 28.7% of cases. Social media platforms followed closely behind, at 23.9%, as an emerging avenue for visibility and engagement. Chinese works were also discovered through bookstore displays or promotional events like book promotions and book fairs. These findings suggest that the reach of Chinese translations is still limited and largely relies on word-of-mouth promotion, pointing to a lack of institutional marketing efforts.

The survey also asked if and how readers accessed these works. Traditional bookstores were the preferred medium for 64.2% of respondents, reflecting a cultural attachment to physical books. The e-book format, though less popular, was accepted particularly among younger audiences. Around 30.6% of respondents preferred a hybrid approach, with both physical and digital copies for convenience and accessibility.

Despite these avenues, awareness of Chinese translations remains relatively low. Less than half of respondents had ever read a Chinese-translated work, and many were unaware of the range of available titles. This could also be a sign of broader structural challenges, including limited visibility in mainstream book markets, insufficient marketing efforts, and a lack of integration into educational or cultural programs.

6. Strategic Takeaways

According to the results of the study, the dissemination of Chinese works translated into Macedonian faces multiple challenges, particularly regarding translation quality, accessibility, and cultural adaptation. As noted by the informants both among the reading audience and professionals, a major issue is the reliance on indirect translation, where many Chinese works are translated via intermediary languages such as English, Serbian or Russian as opposed to directly from Chinese. This approach often leads to the loss of linguistic and cultural nuance, affecting the readability and authenticity of the text. Furthermore, inconsistencies in the transcription of Chinese names and terms further disrupt the coherence of translated works.

Another issue is the limited diversity of available translations. The current selection mainly comprises of classical literature and philosophical texts, with fewer contemporary Chinese works. This narrow range of publications restricts engagement from a wider readership, particularly younger and general-interest readers. Moreover, limited marketing and distribution efforts hinder the visibility of these translations. Most readers discover Chinese titles through word-of-mouth recommendations or social media rather than structured promotional campaigns.

Several strategies are recommended to address these issues. First, improving the quality of translations, particularly those relying on intermediary languages, is crucial. Encouraging direct translation from Chinese into Macedonian and fostering collaborations between native Chinese speakers and Macedonian translators can enhance linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance (Huang 2010:17). Additionally, the nationwide acceptance of the standardized transcription rules for Chinese names and terms would improve consistency across translated works.

Broadening the scope of Chinese literature available in translation is also essential. Introducing a wider range of literary genres, including contemporary fiction and non-fiction, could attract diverse readerships. Given the positive reception of existing translations, further efforts to select high-quality works that align with Macedonian readers' interests would be beneficial.

Strengthening promotional and distribution strategies is another key recommendation. Partnering with local bookstores, libraries, and cultural institutions would enhance the accessibility of Chinese translations. Organizing literary events such as book fairs, author discussions, and translation workshops could further stimulate interest. Digital platforms should also be utilized more effectively, as online book promotions, reader reviews, and targeted advertising increase visibility and engagement.

Finally, integrating Chinese literature into educational and cultural frameworks can ensure long-term impact. Encouraging its inclusion in school curricula would help cultivate sustained interest and appreciation for Chinese literary works, fostering deeper cross-cultural exchange between both language spheres.

References

- Cui Junhong, Xi Xiaolan 崔军红, 席晓兰. “Maqidun hanxue shulüe” 马其顿汉学述略 [Macedonian Sinology in brief]. *Henan keji xueyuanxuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 河南科技学院学报 (社会科学版), 2016, (1).
- Cvetanovska Sara. “Macedonian Sinology Revisited: Historical Foundations, Institutional Milestones, and Translation Dynamics” (In Print). *Sino-Balcanica: Proceedings from the first Balkan sinology conference, Ohrid, August 2023*. Skopje: MANU.
- Huang Youyi 黄友义. “Hanxuejia he Zhongguo wenxue de fanyi-Zhongwai wenhua goutong de qiaoliang” 汉学家和中国文学的翻译 - - 中外文化沟通的桥梁 [Sinologists and Chinese literature translation: The Bridge Between Chinese and Foreign Cultures]. *Zhongguo fanyi* 中国翻译, 2010, (6):16-17.
- Lasswell, Harold. D. *The Structure and Functions of Communication in Society*. New York: Harper & Bros, 1948.
- “Revise the grammatical errors and refine the syntax” prompt. Chat GPT-4o, OpenAI, 14 Feb. 2025. <https://chatgpt.com>
- Yu, and Allan Hepburn Barr. *China in Ten Words*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011. Print.
- Zhang Wei 张威. “Zhongyi wai tiaocha yu fenxi-tigao Zhongguo wenhua duiwai zhuangbo xiaoguo de yixiang jichuxing gongzuo” 中译外调查与分析 - - - 提高中国文化对外传播效果的一项基础性工作 [Investigation and Analysis of Chinese Translations Abroad: A Basic Work to Improve the External Communication Effect of Chinese Culture]. *中国文化研究*, 2011, (3): 195-201.
- Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang 中国政府网. “Xi Jinping zai lianheguo jiaokewen zuzhi zongbu de yanjiang (quanwen) Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhongyang renmin zhengfu yenhui wangzhan” 习近平在联合国教科文组织总部的演讲 (全文) _ 中华人民共和国中央人民政府门户网站 [Xi Jinping’s Speech at the UNESCO Headquarters (Full Text) _ The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China Official Website]. *Www.gov.cn*, 28 Mar. 2014, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-03/28/content_2648480.htm.

12.

From Bruce Lee to Xiaomi: Knowledge, Perception and Interest for China among Croatian High School Students

Ivana Gubić

University of Zagreb (Croatia)

Ivica Bakota

Capital Normal University (China)

Abstract: This paper presents the main findings of a survey on China and China related topics conducted among high school students in Croatia. Based on a random sample of around 200 students, these findings provide a basis for assessing the level and sources of students' knowledge about China, the attitudes they form towards China, and consequently, their interest in learning the Chinese language and about China's culture, society or history. The results of the survey should serve to assess the enrollment pool for Sinology program as well as to help in designing a curriculum reflecting the initial knowledge and key areas of student interest. The findings indicate relatively improved knowledge and favorable perception towards China, which is primarily a result of China's stronger global presence in the past ten years. However, survey also finds that students' initial knowledge and perception does not "translate" to intention to learn Chinese or get acquainted with China related topics. Therefore, the paper in the introductory part provides an overview of local challenges in promoting the study of Chinese language and culture, which are applied in the concluding part where cultural promotion policies of the People's Republic of China are summarily assessed.

Keywords: China, Chinese language, Sinology, cultural strategies

1. Introduction: Chinese cultural cooperation policies and the strategic communication of cultural values: popularization of Chinese language in Croatia and challenges

China's expanding global influence in the 21st century has driven significant growth in its cultural diplomacy. During its "global going out" phase (2002–2008), economic engagement spurred Western interest in China's economic models, business culture, and language. With the institutionalization of foreign policy initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (2012–present), economic cooperation increasingly incorporated academic and cultural exchanges, reinforcing China's strategic presence in Europe and beyond (Lai 2012).

Within such context, China has advanced its soft power through linguistic and educational policies, including through the establishment of Confucius Institutes, media expansion, granting international scholarships, and granting institutional support for launching Sinology and China Studies programs. Over the past two decades, it has transitioned from a relatively passive approach to a proactive, state-driven strategy which integrates economic narratives and technological achievements into its soft power framework (Zheng et al., 2012). The concept of "comprehensive national strength" (*zonghe guoli*) underpins this strategy, blending cultural and ideological outreach with "hard" metrics such as military capabilities and foreign aid. Through this model, China seeks not only to enhance its global image but also to safeguard core national interests—framing its cultural diplomacy within the broader paradigms of sovereign internationalism, territorial integrity, and strategic influence (Nye 2023). On the other hand, the official introduction of the "cultural power strategy" (*wenhua qiangguo zhanlve*) in 2011 and subsequent emphasis on "telling China's story well" (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi*) has also significantly boosted China's confidence in strengthening its own global soft power in the digital field, catering to younger demographics and opening to more entertainment spheres (Wu 2018: 763-770).

Nevertheless, distinct from "decentralized" Western models, China's cultural diplomacy is still characterized by institutional centralization, with the state playing a predominant role in shaping and implementing engagement strategies (Bakota, 2023). While this approach has contributed to China's positive reception in parts of Asia and initially facilitated cultural engagement in Europe (Zheng, 2019; Turcsanyi & Kachlikova, 2020), its effectiveness has been increasingly questioned. Growing concerns over the strategic opacity of China's initiatives, coupled with geopolitical tensions—including its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its stance on the war in Ukraine—have led to a deterioration of public perceptions, particularly in Western countries (Neafie, 2022). Given the centralized nature of China's strategic communication of cultural values, its cultural diplomacy remains highly susceptible

to broader geopolitical shifts, underscoring the challenges of maintaining long-term influence in an evolving global landscape.

Nevertheless, China's efforts to project cultural influence and enhance its global image remain an evolving process. Its cultural diplomacy continues to seek culturally salient elements that appeal to international audiences while assessing structural and contextual constraints in relation to competing global cultural policies.

Within this framework, the promotion of Chinese language learning serves as a strategic instrument for advancing China's broader outbound promotion objectives. However, unlike cultural practices that require minimal prior knowledge (e.g. calligraphy, martial arts), language acquisition demands sustained engagement and structured learning, yet lacks a systematically developed and locally tuned development strategies. This "generalized" approach stems from the absence of an established educational infrastructure in many non-Asian regions, thus impeding sustainable interest for Chinese (language) studies.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in European countries such as Croatia, where, prior to China's global "going out" phase (2004–2012), no formal curriculum for Chinese existed.⁹⁴ Limited historical and geographical ties further contributed to weak exposure to Chinese cultural products and a lack of organic demand for language acquisition. Consequently, China's Ministry of Education and the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC)⁹⁵ have prioritized quantitative expansion—focusing on increasing language course participation and scholarship opportunities—rather than localizing curricula and teaching materials to align with Croatian students' interests (Lakić Parać & Gubić, 2025).

While enrollment data track overall demand, they provide little insight into the motivations behind students' engagement or disengagement with Chinese language courses. The reliance on standardized foreign teaching models further impedes the adaptation of educational content to local needs. In the absence of in-depth local research, policymakers and educators often extrapolate from broader European trends, overlooking country-specific factors shaping linguistic interest.

⁹⁴ At the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, a "free" program in Sinology was first introduced in 2004. Meanwhile, elective Chinese language courses at other universities, as well as in secondary and primary schools, were launched in 2012 under the auspices of the Confucius Institute at the University of Zagreb. In 2024, the "free" Sinology program was officially upgraded to a full-fledged undergraduate degree. For further details, see Buljan, 2024: 3-10.

⁹⁵ In mid-2020, the Office of the International Council for the Chinese Language (Hanban) under China's Ministry of Education—the primary state-supported institution for promoting Chinese language learning and the main sponsor of Confucius Institutes worldwide—was renamed the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (*Yuhe*). This move has been interpreted as an effort to rebrand China's international language promotion in response to criticisms that Confucius Institutes function as "extended arm of (China's) state-driven 'soft power'" (e.g. Urhova, 2024).

Therefore, as a departing challenge of Chinese (language) studies in Croatia, this paper states a lack of a more localized and contextually attuned approach—developed in collaboration with Croatian institutions—that could facilitate more sustainable engagement with the Chinese language. Beyond short-term enrollment targets, such initiatives would foster cultural interactions driven not merely by national interests but by a deeper, more organic connection to Chinese language and culture.

2. Perception of China, the Chinese Language, and Culture in Croatia

The perception of the Chinese language and culture does not necessarily align with the perception of China as a state, a distinction evident in the global reception of other major languages such as English, Spanish, or Russian. Literary and cultural values transmitted through language extend beyond national policies and are shaped by diverse entities, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora, and independent cultural organizations. However, in Croatia, limited historical and geographical ties, weak exposure to Chinese cultural content, and the absence of a well-established educational infrastructure contribute to a strong overlap between perceptions of the Chinese language and those of China itself. This alignment is reinforced by China's state-led cultural diplomacy and the simultaneous expansion of interest in the language.

Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping Sino-Croatian cultural relations, providing insight into broader trends influenced by public policy and media representation (Norranders & Wilcox, 2009). As in many European countries, the COVID-19 pandemic eroded China's previously favorable image in Croatia, underscoring the need for more strategic communication efforts. Unlike Serbia and other regional counterparts, Croatia has seen relatively few studies on public attitudes toward China. One exception is a GfK survey (cited in Pavić, 2018), which identified a shift in perceptions, reflecting a delayed recognition of China as a modern global power. However, this survey—commissioned by the Chinese Embassy in Zagreb—still characterized China as a distant yet influential actor. Respondents associated China with traditional symbols such as the Great Wall and dragons, as well as martial arts figures like Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee. While positive perceptions outweighed negative ones, concerns about the quality of Chinese imports persisted. Notably, half of the respondents expressed interest in learning Chinese, with one-third open to studying in China.

A more recent CEPER (2023) study, conducted during the pandemic, revealed growing caution toward deeper engagement with China across Central Europe, shaped by tensions with the U.S. and the war in Ukraine. However, Croatia stood

out, with 38% of respondents supporting stronger economic ties, ranking it among the countries where economic cooperation with China remained relatively well received. Croatian media portray China in a dual light, both as a geopolitical threat and as an economic opportunity (Pavićević, 2018). Unlike some regional governments, Croatian policymakers have maintained a more neutral stance (Bakota et al., 2023). Meanwhile, broader trends—such as rising distrust toward European institutions (Ipsos, 2024)—may influence future attitudes toward China and other non-European actors.

Most studies on Sino-Croatian relations have focused on political and economic dimensions (Plevnik et al., 2013; Bakota, 2020; Stopić, 2020), often relying on comparative public opinion data from Central Europe due to a lack of domestic research (Chen, 2023). A key gap remains in studies on younger demographics, particularly high school students, and their motivations for learning Chinese within both local and global cultural contexts. Addressing this gap is a central objective of the present study.

Additionally, this research compares perceptions of China with those of other East Asian countries, particularly South Korea and Japan, which have developed strong cultural appeal. While China's global influence has grown, it has not translated proportionally into language-learning interest. A UCAS study (Webster, 2021) found that between 2012 and 2018, Japanese language enrollments in the UK rose by 71%, and Korean tripled—despite starting from a lower base—while Chinese saw only a modest 5% increase. This trend is often linked to the global popularity of Japanese and South Korean cultural exports, which have resonated strongly with younger audiences (Japan Foundation, 2023; Ding & Wu, 2023).

Direct enrollment comparisons are difficult in Croatia, as no university offers all three languages as a study program. However, the September 2024 establishment of the University of Zagreb's first Sinology program—alongside a Japanology program—provides relevant insight. Both programs reached their enrollment quotas of 28 students, yet demand for Japanology was significantly higher. In the summer 2024 admission cycle, 164 applicants listed Japanology among their top 10 choices, with 34 selecting it as their first choice, compared to 85 for Sinology, of whom only 16 ranked it first.⁹⁶ Additional Japanology enrollments at the University of Pula further underscore this disparity.

This trend highlights broader challenges in promoting Chinese cultural content in Croatia and suggests limitations in the non-localized approach to Chinese language education in primary and secondary schools. Without tailored engagement strategies, Chinese language programs may struggle to attract and retain students, limiting China's long-term cultural influence.

⁹⁶ Postani student (2024). Konačne rang-liste za ljetni upisni rok 2024. Available: <https://www.postani-student.hr/Uciliba/Default.aspx> [Accessed 20.11.2024].

3. Methodology

A Google Forms questionnaire was developed to assess Croatian high school students' knowledge, perception, and interest regarding China. The questionnaire consisted of a mandatory introductory section collecting demographic data, including gender, age, high school type, grade level, county (županija) of residence, and settlement size.

The main questionnaire was divided into three sections: The first section included self-assessment of knowledge, an objective knowledge test, and sources of information. Respondents rated their familiarity with China's geography, history, and culture on a five-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree) across seven statements. The objective knowledge test consisted of seven open-ended questions assessing respondents' actual knowledge. For example, the self-assessment statement "I know general information about China, such as its geographical location, population size, major cities, rivers, and mountains" was paired with the open-ended question "Name three countries that share a border with China." Respondents also indicated where they primarily obtained information about China from a predefined list, with an option to specify "Other."

The second section evaluated respondents' views on China through Likert-scale statements and an open-ended association question. Thirteen statements addressed China's culture, products, technology, security, human rights, and other aspects. Additionally, respondents listed three words or concepts they associated with China, capturing dominant perceptions beyond structured statements.

The third section measured respondents' interest in topics such as the Chinese language, history, culture, and martial arts. It included ten Likert-scale statements and a statement assessing willingness to enroll in Chinese language courses, study Sinology, or pursue structured learning opportunities related to China. To provide a comparative context, identical questions on interest and associations were included for South Korea and Japan.

A total of 184 respondents completed the survey between May and October 2024 in several high schools throughout Croatia. The sample included students from different grade levels, with 70.7% being fourth-year students, 11.4% third-year, and 11.4% second-year. The distribution between school types was equal, with 50% attending gymnasium and 50% vocational schools. The gender distribution was 57.4% female, 39.7% male, with six respondents preferring not to specify. Regarding residence, 28.8% of respondents lived in rural areas, 27.2% in small towns with fewer than 10,000 residents, 27.7% in cities with more than 100,000 residents, while the remainder came from mid-sized or large cities with over 500,000 residents.

Response rates for Likert-scale statements ranged from 173 to 184, while open-ended questions on knowledge and associations varied between 118 and 174 responses. Some responses included humorous answers, and at least one respondent likely used AI (ChatGPT). While additional respondents may have consulted the

internet, the majority provided valid, independent responses, ensuring the study's reliability.

Conducting an online survey inherently limits control over respondent behavior. Additionally, no pre-validated measurement instruments were available for this specific research focus. Existing studies, such as *China as Perceived by American Students: Attitudes, Knowledge, and the Relationship Between Attitudes and Knowledge* (Sebald & Milton, 1982), were outdated and difficult to adapt for Croatian high school students in 2024. To address this, a custom questionnaire was developed and tested on a control group of students to ensure clarity, eliminate ambiguity, and minimize fatigue. Statements in the *Perception of China* section were structured around thirteen key categories identified in a 2023 study by Bloom Consulting, covering aspects such as culture, political system, economy, environment, and social values.

Google Forms automatically quantified Likert-scale responses, calculating the percentage of respondents selecting each agreement level. Open-ended *Knowledge About China* responses were manually coded on a 0–3 scale, such as for naming three bordering countries, or a binary 0–1 scale for single-answer questions. Association responses were standardized, for example, merging “Great Wall” and “Great Wall of China,” to calculate overall frequency. For statistical analysis, Jamovi software was used to calculate means, medians, modes, and standard deviations for Likert-scale responses. Additional analyses included Independent Samples T-Test to compare responses by gender or school type and One-Way ANOVA to analyze differences based on settlement size. While these methods were sufficient for the study's objectives, more advanced statistical analysis is planned for a follow-up study.

4. Analysis of Results

4.1. Knowledge of China

Our questionnaire assessed high school students' self-evaluation and actual knowledge of China across geography, history, politics, culture, sports, technology, and entertainment. The first section measured self-assessed knowledge, followed by an objective test to validate these perceptions. A control question on information sources helped contextualize these findings.

The study explored the hierarchy of structured (curriculum-based) vs. unstructured (media-driven) knowledge. Geography, history, and culture aligned with formal education, while sports, technology, and entertainment reflected informal learning. Findings indicate that students feel more confident in school-based knowledge, with 38.8% correctly identifying China's neighboring countries, 26.8% listing historical dynasties, and 32.8% recognizing traditional culture. However, self-assessed knowledge in media-driven topics was lower—only 15.5% claimed familiarity with

Chinese pop culture and 15.4% with sports. Technology was an outlier, with 39% expressing confidence, suggesting greater awareness due to everyday exposure to Chinese technological products.

Objective testing showed a mixed correlation with self-assessments. While 57.06% correctly identified China's bordering countries, 64.13% struggled with dynasties, indicating that knowledge of Chinese history remains limited. Calligraphy was the most recognized cultural element (27.97%), while 36.86% identified China's president. Awareness of Chinese media was particularly low, with only 7.06% correctly naming films or TV shows. However, a larger proportion (33.69%) correctly named table tennis as China's national sport, and 30.97% were able to identify at least three Chinese technology brands, reinforcing the idea that China's global influence in technology is widely acknowledged by students.

Despite media (83.7%) and social networks (76.6%) being students' primary information sources, curriculum-based topics yielded higher accuracy. Notably, technology and sports stood out as exceptions, where informal exposure through digital platforms and global trends contributed to greater knowledge. This suggests that while schools remain the primary source of structured China-related knowledge, digital and media exposure is growing in influence, particularly in technology and sports. The disparity between self-perceived and actual knowledge further emphasizes the role of education in shaping a more comprehensive understanding of China beyond commonly consumed media narratives. Future studies could investigate whether integrating more diverse China-related topics into the curriculum would enhance students' overall awareness and reduce reliance on potentially biased or incomplete media portrayals.

4.2. Perception of China

The second part of the questionnaire examined students' perceptions of China across cultural, economic, political, and social dimensions. Thirteen Likert-scale statements measured agreement levels, revealing both positive and skeptical views across different topics.

Traditional Chinese culture was widely recognized as globally significant, with 47.2% expressing agreement, while 33.1% remained neutral. Chinese popular culture, however, was perceived as relatively unfamiliar in Europe, with 26.8% strongly agreeing with this statement. Female students demonstrated slightly higher awareness of Chinese cultural exports such as music, films, and television series, though overall recognition remained low.

Perceptions of Chinese product quality were mixed: 25.9% viewed Chinese goods positively, while 29.3% expressed skepticism. However, students overwhelmingly acknowledged China's technological advancements, with 73.2% agreeing that China is a leader in innovation. This aligns with the increased presence of Chinese

technology brands in global markets and students' daily lives. Nearly half of the respondents (49.7%) also recognized China as a country of business opportunities, though a significant 36.3% remained undecided.

When evaluating China's safety, 51.4% of students were uncertain about its crime rates. Views on human rights leaned negative, with 37.1% disagreeing that China upholds them, while only 24.7% expressed agreement. These opinions reflect broader international narratives on China's human rights record, often shaped by media exposure.

Responses to China's environmental efforts were divided: 35.2% acknowledged its commitment to sustainability, while 30.7% disagreed. Meanwhile, China was perceived as an attractive tourist destination, with 58.7% of students expressing a desire to visit. This enthusiasm extended to views on Chinese hospitality, with 50.3% agreeing that China is welcoming to visitors.

Responses regarding China's living standards and peacefulness showed a neutral-dominant pattern, with 43.5% and 43.6% of students selecting "neither agree nor disagree." This suggests uncertainty influenced by media narratives rather than firsthand knowledge. The Chinese education system, however, was viewed favorably, with 52% agreeing that it is of high quality and only 11.2% expressing disagreement.

Overall, students demonstrated the most positive perceptions in areas related to culture, tourism, and education, while skepticism was more pronounced regarding human rights, product quality, and environmental efforts. The findings suggest that structured exposure, such as school curricula, contributes to favorable views of China's historical and educational aspects, while global media narratives influence more critical perspectives on politics and social issues.

4.3. Interest in China

The survey results indicate a generally low level of interest in China among high school students, with most responses averaging between 2.15 and 3.36 on the Likert scale, corresponding to "mostly not interested" to "neither interested nor uninterested." The strongest area of interest was Chinese cuisine (3.36), with 31.3% of respondents selecting "mostly interested." Martial arts (27.5%) and technology and innovation (32.4%) also garnered relatively higher interest.

In contrast, the lowest-rated statement was interest in the Chinese language (2.15), with 42.6% of students stating they were "not interested at all." Similarly, topics such as history (25.7% "not interested at all"), popular culture (33.5%), philosophy (31.8%), and working in a Chinese company (33.3%) saw minimal engagement. A striking 61.4% of students expressed strong disagreement with actively learning the language or engaging with Chinese culture through studies, with only 9.1% expressing some level of agreement.

Gender differences were minimal, though female students showed higher interest in traditional Chinese medicine and wellness practices (3.15 vs. 2.72 for males). Interestingly, male students demonstrated slightly more varied responses overall, with greater standard deviations in their answers, which may be linked to the more diverse academic backgrounds of male students (spread across gymnasiums and vocational schools) compared to the more homogenous population of female students (predominantly in gymnasiums). Vocational school students exhibited greater response variation than their gymnasium peers, suggesting that school type may influence the diversity of interests rather than absolute levels of interest.

The survey also compared interest in China with that in South Korea and Japan. Despite the global popularity of South Korean culture, China still holds a slight edge in overall interest. South Korea's highest-scoring topics were language (2.18) and K-pop (2.42), both of which surpassed their Chinese equivalents. However, other aspects of South Korea fell behind China in student interest, likely due to China's longer cultural and economic presence in Croatia.

Japan, however, emerged as the most favored East Asian country among students, with interest levels ranging from 2.53 to 3.42. While still in the mid-range, these figures reinforce anecdotal evidence and university enrollment trends suggesting Japan's stronger cultural appeal. The only areas where China outperformed Japan were in traditional medicine (2.96 vs. 2.89) and philosophy/spirituality (2.54 vs. 2.48), likely due to the widespread association of these concepts with China. The findings suggest that many students view East Asian culture as a broad category, sometimes attributing various elements to China due to limited differentiation between the countries.

Overall, the results indicate that students' interest in China is primarily linked to tangible, everyday aspects such as food, martial arts, and technology—areas that require little direct engagement or deep cultural understanding. In contrast, more academic or intellectual pursuits, such as history, philosophy, or language learning, generate less enthusiasm. This suggests that while Chinese culture is present in students' lives, it remains a passive interest rather than an active pursuit. Furthermore, the data underscores the role of exposure—China's presence in education, media, and commerce sustains general awareness, but does not necessarily translate into deeper curiosity or engagement.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Given the “pioneering” nature of our research in detecting the knowledge and perceptions of Croatian high school students about China, and how this reflects on their interest in learning the Chinese language or engaging seriously with sinological topics, the results and conclusions derived cannot solely be a quantitative interpretation

of the measurements. They are largely dependent on the interpretive contextualization of the relationship between the target group and the subject of the research.

Thus, the interest in China and the Chinese language among Croatian high school students is placed within the broader framework of China's growing global influence and the concurrent strengthening of China's external promotional strategies.

The success of these strategies seems challenging to determine due to both the highly dynamic reception of Chinese cultural content worldwide and the prominent comprehensiveness, centralization, and state-driven communication of cultural influence and the strategic promotion of national cultural values abroad. Unlike the strategies of many other countries, China seeks to comprehensively control its own "export" cultural capital, which, in addition to the image of a technologically advanced, modern country with its own understanding of the political system and global community, includes the promotion of its traditional culture, philosophy, and arts, with the associated skills, as well as the teaching of the Chinese language. The supportive collaborative and institutional infrastructure is evidenced by the number of Confucius Institutes and the growing scope of educational and cultural cooperation that China has established with many European and other countries over the past decade.

However, the initial quantitative phase of promoting the adoption of cultural content, particularly learning the Chinese language, is not always adapted to the specific local demand. As a result, this leads to a weaker or comparatively negligible growth in interest, despite proportional increases in (financial and promotional) investment. This situation is particularly evident when we compare the interest of Croatian high school students in China with their interest in South Korea and Japan. Despite a relative increase in knowledge about China and a more diversified source of information on "Chinese topics," as a result of, among other things, China's stronger global presence, and perceptions that—perhaps surprisingly—do not reflect the controversies present in the media regarding certain issues, Croatian high school students do not seem overly interested in dedicating more time and effort to learning the Chinese language or engaging in sinological subjects.

This result only becomes apparent when compared to the interest in Korean and Japanese cultural content. Although China is perceived as "more interesting" than South Korea based on the expressed average (ranging from 2.18 to 3.01), it falls behind when it comes to language and popular music, where the average values are slightly higher in the Korean case (2.15 – 3.30 for China). This finding is particularly suggestive when comparing the infrastructural presence and investment of both countries in promotional and cultural strategies in Croatia. In contrast to China's strategy of institutional mediation and investment in collaborative institutions for language and cultural promotion (Confucius Institute, Department of Sinology, etc.), South Korea's less localized but more diffuse and commercially driven approach appears to be much more fruitful.

The anecdotal claim that popular culture content communicates more effectively with students than “high” or “traditional” cultural content has been confirmed by this study through a clearer correlation between interest in “lighter” content (such as music, sports, movies) and language interest. This “nexus,” which seems to be a relative unknown for promoters of Chinese language learning, is evident in the fluctuations of interest in “Chinese” categories, particularly when compared to interest in the Japanese and Korean languages. Japan, in almost all categories (ranging from 2.53 to 3.42 on average), leads compared to China, with the only relative decline in interest observed in categories like traditional medicine/wellness practices and philosophy/spirituality, which further indirectly confirms the correlation between “lighter” content and language interest.

In the absence of research measurements within the target group of high school students, this study relies on the statistics of enrollment applications for Sinology and Japanology at the University of Zagreb in 2024 as a starting point for tracking the dynamics of interest in learning Chinese among the general population of Croatian high school students. The difference in the average expressed interest (2.75 for China vs. 2.95 for Japan) and the enrollment choice of freshmen (85/16 for Sinology vs. 169/34 for Japanology) cannot yet constitute an index for tracking trends in interest in learning the Chinese language due to methodological limitations regarding the representativeness of the selected sample. However, it provides a foundational research basis to confirm empirical insights into the non-communicative nature of “traditional” content and the competitive importance of “popular” culture content in promoting the learning of the Chinese language among the Croatian high school population.

Bibliography

- Bakota, I. (2020). “Diamond stage” in Sino-Croatian relations. *Croatian International Relations Review* (CIRR), 26(86), pp. 116-129.
- Bakota, I. (2023). Challenges in China’s outbound promotion strategies: A case study of Croatia. In: *Sino-Balkanica: Proceedings from the first Balkan sinology conference*. Ohrid: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
- Bakota, I., Stopić, Z., Šelo Šabic, S. (2023). Assessing Sino-Croatian Relations: From Diamond stage to Cautious Engagement. In: N. Stekić, A. Mitić, eds. *Dialogues on China*. Belgrade: Institute for International Politics and Economics, pp. 239-263.
- Bloom Consulting (2023). Nation and Place Branding Impact on Place Economies, Technical Report I: What constitutes perceptions about countries and global cities? Available at: <https://www.bloom-consulting.com/journal/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Bloom-Consulting-research-what-constitutes-perceptions-about-countries-3.pdf> [Accessed: 20.11.2024].
- Buljan, I. (2024). Sinologija u Zagrebu: od nedosanjanog sna do redovnog studija. *Književna smotra*, 212(2), pp. 3-10.
- CEPER (2023). North-South Divide in Central Europe on China. *CEPER (Central European Perspectives)*. Available at: <https://cepergroup.com/article/north-south-divide-in-central-europe-on-china> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].

- Chen Xin (ed.) (2023). *How the CEE citizens see China development*. Budapest: China-CEE Institute.
- Deng Yong (2008). *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 270-294.
- Ding Ingong, Wu Yujiao (2023). Determinants of international Korean language promotion: A cross-country analysis. *Heliyon*, 9(10), e21078. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e21078> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Ipsos (2024). The state of democracy (The second wave) *Ipsos Knowledge Panel*. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-11/KP_Democracy%232_%20GLOBAL_FINAL.pdf [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Lai Hongyi (2012). The soft power concept and a rising China. In: Hongyi Lai, Yiyi Lu ed. *China's Soft Power and International Relations*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-20.
- Lakić Parać, I., Gubić, I. (2025). Problem gramatičkog nazivlja u nastavi japanskog i kineskog jezika s hrvatskim govornicima. *Zbornik radova s konferencije Azija u kontekstu: Azija i Jezici*. Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Zagreb.
- Neaife, J. (2022). Anti-Chinese Sentiment, the BRI, and COVID-19: Kazakhstani Perceptions of China in Central Asia In: J.-F. Caron, H. Thibault, ur. *Central Asia and the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, pp. 75-95.
- Norrander, B., Wilcox, C. (ed.) (2009). *Understanding Public Opinion*. Washington DC: SAGE.
- Nye, J. S. (2023). The Rise of China's Soft Power. In: *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition* Singapore: Springer, pp. 97-104
- Pavić, S. (2018). „Kinu ne doživljavamo kao komunističku zemlju nego kao modernu zemlju,” *Jutarnji list*, 8. ožujka 2018. g. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kinu-vise-ne-dozivljavamo-kao-veliku-komunisticku-zemlju-nego-kao-modernu-silu-cak-86-posto-hrvata-podrzava-kineske-investicije-u-hrvatsku-7098078> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Pavličević, D. (2018). 'China threat' and 'China opportunity': Politics of dreams and fears in China-Central and Eastern European relations. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(113), pp. 688-702.
- Plevnik, J., Mesić, S., Jurčić, Lj. (2013). *Kina na Balkanu*. Zagreb: Plejada.
- Postani student (2024). Konačne rang-liste za ljetni upisni rok 2024, 17. srpanj 2024. Available at: <https://www.postani-student.hr/Ucilista/Default.aspx> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- R Core Team (2021). R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing (Version 4.1) [Computer software]. Downloaded from: <https://cran.r-project.org> (R packages downloaded from: MRAN snapshot 2022-01-01).
- Rahman, H., Shehab, S. (2023). Media representations of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the formation of public opinion in Bangladesh. *The Journal of International Communication*, 29(2), pp. 253-271.
- Sebald, H., Milton, G. J. (1982). China as perceived by American students: Attitudes, knowledge, and the relationship between attitudes and knowledge. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 12(1), pp. 29-48.
- Stopić, Z. (2020). Croatia and the Chinese "17+1" cooperation framework. *Croatian International Relations Review* (CIRR), 26(86), pp. 130-154.
- The Jamovi Project (2022). Jamovi (Version 2.3) [Computer Software]. Downloaded from: <https://www.jamovi.org> [10.12.2024].
- The Japan Foundation (2023). *Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021*. Available at: https://www.jpff.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/All_contents_r2.pdf [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Turcsanyi, R., Kachlikova, E. (2020). The BRI and China's soft power in Europe: Why Chinese narratives (initially) won. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 49(1), pp. 58-81.
- Urhova, D. (2024). The Demise of Confucius Institutes: Retreating or Rebranding? *Choice* [online]. Available at <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-demise-of-confucius-institutes-retreating-or-rebranding/> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].

- Wang Yi (2023). Pursuing a Country-Specific Path to Human Rights Advancement and Jointly Promoting Worldwide Progress in Human Rights (S. prosinca2023. g.). Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341793.html [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Webster, P. (2021). Report on Granular Trends in Modern Languages in UCAS Admissions Data, 2012-18. Available at: <https://university-council-for-languages.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/UCML-BA-UCAS-Granularity-Report.pdf> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Wu You (2018), The Rise of China with Cultural Soft Power in the Age of Globalization, *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 8(5), pp. 763-770.
- Yan Xuetong (2014). From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2), pp. 153-184.
- Zhao Yali, Zhou Xiaoguang, Huang Lihong (2010). Chinese Students' Knowledge and Thinking about America and China. *The Social Studies*, 99(1), 13-22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3200/TSSS.99.1.3-22> [Accessed: 10.12.2024].
- Zheng Yongnian, Zhang Chi (2012). 'Soft power' and Chinese soft power, in: Hongyi Lai, Yiyi Lu, eds. *China's Soft Power and International Relations*. London: Routledge, pp. 41-59.
- Zheng Zhenqing (2019). The changing Asian perception of China's rising: A BRI context. In: Jawad Syed, Yung Hsiang Ying (ed.). *China's Belt and Road Initiative in a Global Context: Volume I: A Business and Management Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 21-38.

13. The (Un)translatability of Chinese Martial Arts

Hristina Teodosieva
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (Bulgaria)

Abstract: The use of figurative representations in teaching Chinese martial arts (CMA) is an essential element of traditional methodology, however many metaphors rooted in Chinese culture often may be entirely incomprehensible to a foreign audience. This raises the question of the translatability of these concepts. Three examples of fully translatable figurative expressions, three of untranslatable metaphors, and three borderline cases in the process of teaching Taijiquan, the most widespread and recognizable CMA worldwide, are used to demonstrate the challenges and possible solutions in translating martial arts terminology. While it may not always be possible, the preservation of the original figurative representations serves as a means of bringing Chinese culture closer to foreign audiences – in this case, Bulgarian.

Keywords: Chinese Martial Arts, Translation, Multicultural Communication, Taijiquan, Metaphors

Chinese martial arts (CMA) represent a unique and specific path for the introduction of Chinese culture in Bulgaria. As early as the 1980s, influenced by popular Hong Kong films and growing interest in the East, Chinese martial arts began to be practiced in Bulgaria. Unlike in the field of sinology as an academic discipline, however, within the circles of practitioners of martial arts, there is no requirement for systematic knowledge of the Chinese language and culture.

The initial stage of gathering information about CMA in Bulgaria is eclectic; they are often presented alongside Okinawan, Korean, and even Western forms of combat. Moreover, the sources of information during this period are limited and most often they are the result of indirect translation – firstly through English, Russian, or

German. This leads to the establishment of incorrect ways of translating certain key concepts into Bulgarian.⁹⁷

The most notable example of this is the establishment of the use of “kung fu” as a collective term for CMA instead of “gong fu” 功夫, which means “mastery, achieved through time and efforts.” Another well-known example is the popularization of Taijiquan 太极拳 as “Tai Chi.”

Apart from inaccuracies due to misunderstanding, however, another type of translation difficulty arises. This is the case with figurative representations in the names of techniques in CMA.

Originally in Chinese, the names of the techniques in the training forms of Taijiquan are of two types: descriptive and figurative. Descriptive names are literal: they indicate the specific movement to be performed, such as “Diagonal Step Forward” or “Turn and Kick with Left Heel.” Figurative names, on the other hand, include metaphors, symbols, and comparisons that do not describe the literal execution of the technique but instead refer to an image associated with the characteristics of the movement.

The use of figurative representations in the teaching of CMA is an important element of traditional methodology. Often, at the initial stages of training, comparisons are made between the sensations felt during the execution of certain techniques and something familiar to the practitioners. For example, the basic position for body relaxation and meditation is 站桩 (zhàn zhuāng), which is described as “standing like a tree.” When assuming this position, practitioners are instructed to imagine that their legs are the roots of a tree, while their body is the trunk, calmly resting on a stable foundation. In this case, the comparison is applicable in both Bulgarian and Chinese, as it is sufficiently comprehensible in both cultural contexts.

However, many metaphors rooted in Chinese culture often prove to be completely incomprehensible to a Bulgarian audience. This raises the question of the translatability of these concepts. Several approaches can be taken in such situations. The first, and methodologically the simplest, is to replace the metaphorical representations with a literal description of the movements. The second option involves searching for a similar image within the new linguistic context. Nevertheless, both of these approaches weaken the connection with the original cultural meaning.

An alternative approach is to keep the invariant image and provide additional explanations. However, this can lead to certain problems: (1) if the image is too foreign for the audience, even with an explanation, the intended sensation may not be conveyed, and the practitioner might be overwhelmed with unnecessary information; (2) if the metaphor or comparison has a different connotation in the foreign language, it may continue to mislead the practitioner, even after explanation.

⁹⁷ The present article is a continuation of the topic of the translation and meaning of key concepts in Taijiquan, which I explore in my book *The Language of Taijiquan* (Teodosieva 2022).

The focus of this research is Taijiquan, the most widespread and recognizable Chinese martial art worldwide. Three examples of fully translatable figurative expressions, three untranslatable metaphors, and three borderline cases in the process of teaching Taijiquan will be analyzed. Additionally, suggestions will be offered for how these expressions can be presented in Bulgarian. The examples provided are drawn from two of the most popular training forms of the Chen style of Taijiquan: the Chen Style Old Frame First Routine and the Chen Style Taiji Single Sword Routine with 49 Techniques.

The topic of translating figurative names in martial arts is explored by researchers Alimuradov and Latu in the article “Features of Terminological Nominations: A Cognitive-Semantic Approach (Based on Materials from Chinese and English Martial Arts Terminology).” They divide the components of the terms into core elements, which provide the primary information, and peripheral elements, which are supplementary. Alimuradov and Latu note that “all elements of the terms, both the core and peripheral parts, contain important information, and their semantic content must be accurately reflected in the language of translation” (Alimuradov & Latu 2008: 11). In the present study, while this thesis is generally accepted, it is argued that this is not always possible in the new linguistic context. In such situations, even though part of the original metaphorical meaning may be lost, it is better to provide a descriptive translation that is, however, comprehensible to speakers of the target language.

1. Fully translatable figurative expressions

1.1. 云手 (*yún shǒu*) “Cloud Hands”

“Cloud Hands”⁹⁸ is a fundamental technique in Taijiquan and is sometimes practiced independently as a basic exercise. It also appears in different styles, such as Chen, Yang, Wu, and others.

The metaphor of clouds conveys the idea of softness and smoothness of movement without resistance, and because this image can easily evoke such an impression in Bulgarian, English and Russian, translating the technique as “Cloud Hands” seems appropriate.

Another alternative way of writing this term, which is also pronounced *yún shǒu*, is 云手, meaning “waving hands as if arguing,” where the character 云 denotes “con-

⁹⁸ In Russian this name is translated as „Вращающиеся руки“ (“Rotating Hands”) (Silberstorff 2005: 202) or „Вращение кистей“ (“Rotation of the Wrists”) (Gu 1996: 165); in English: “Waving hands” (Chen 2019), “Wave hands” (Zhaohua 1984: 16), “Clouding hands” (Tang 2023) and “Waving hands like clouds” (Tai Chi Notebook 2016), and also sometimes it is called “Wave hands in clouds.”

fusion, disorder.” This term appears in one of the Taiji classics: “Wang Zongyue’s Taijiquan Treatise, Appended with a Preface and ‘Five Character Formula’” 王宗岳太极拳论后附小序并五字诀, written by Li Yiyu for his student Hao He (Weizheng). In Paul Brennan’s translation, this term is rendered as “Tangling Hands” (Li 2014).

Both literal translations—“Cloud Hands” and “Waving Hands as if Arguing”—do not pose problems for comprehension in foreign languages. The problem here is only related to the question of which Chinese characters are the original ones. Nowadays the variant 云手 “Cloud Hands” is commonly accepted in most sources and Taijiquan schools. In Bulgarian this technique could be translated as Облачни ръце (*Cloudy Hands*).

1.2. 饿虎扑食 (è hǔ pū shí) “The Hungry Tiger Pounces on its Prey”

The 17th technique in the Chen style sword form of Taijiquan is named “The Hungry Tiger Pounces on its Prey.”⁹⁹ The technique starts in a crouched cross-legged position with the sword raised above the head. The sword is first drawn back towards the body and then turn forward, both hands gripping the handle, resembling a tiger pouncing to catch its prey. This image, conveying the sharpness and precision of the attack, as well as the sense of stealth and seizing the right moment, is universally understood. At the same time, however, in Chinese, 饿虎扑食 (è hǔ pū shí) is a fixed phrase of the type of *chengyu* 成语, meaning “to pounce greedily and fiercely on something.” This expression comes from the novel *Journey to the West* 《西游记》 where a battle is described with the lines: 仙人指路，老子骑鹤。饿虎扑食最伤人，蛟龙戏水能凶恶: “The immortal points the way / Laozi rides a crane. / Terrifying like a hungry tiger pouncing on its prey / Fierce like a dragon playing in the water.” (Wu 2006: 第五十一回 《心猿空用千般计；水火无功难炼魔》：26).

The expression 仙人指路 “the immortal points the way” is also used as the name of a technique in the sword form. The novel *Journey to the West* was written in the 16th century during the Ming dynasty, with its publication date noted as 1592. According to the most popular version of the origin of Taijiquan, this martial art was created during the same dynasty by the officer Chen Wangting 陈王庭 (1600–1680), who invented the first and second classical forms of the Chen style without weapons. It is generally accepted that the weapon forms were compiled later, based on existing separate exercises. It seems likely that these names of techniques in the one-sword

⁹⁹ In Russian it is translated as „Голодный тигр бросается на жертву“ (“The Hungry Tiger Pounces on Its Prey”) (Silberstorff 2005: 210), and in English in the book of Chen Zhenglei it is “Tiger Pounces on Prey” (Chen 2003: 257). In Bulgarian the name of this technique could be „Гладният тигър се хвърля към пляката“ (“The Hungry Tiger Lunges at the Prey”).

form of the Chen style may have been influenced by the novel. However, it is also possible that similar techniques were older and had been practiced earlier, thereby influencing the description in the novel.

In this chapter Sun Wukong 孙悟空 asks the Jade Emperor for help against a terrible monster that has kidnapped the monk Xuanzang 玄奘. To confront the threat, Sun Wukong is aided by Vaishravana and his heir Nezha 哪吒, as well as the Lords of Thunder and Lightning. In the Chen style of Taijiquan, the image of Nezha is also encountered, and he will be examined as part of the untranslatable representations.

1.3. 朝阳剑 (*cháoyáng jiàn*) “Turning the Sword Towards the Sun”

This is an initial technique in the Chen style sword form, where the sword is raised from a position behind the back into a forward-facing grip. In the following movement, the sword is lifted above the head and pointed upwards, while the practitioner stands on one leg. „Turning the Sword Towards the Sun”¹⁰⁰ is both a visual image and a direct instruction for executing the technique. The additional association with the traditional Chinese concept of transitioning from passive *yin* 阴 to active *yang* 阳 energy, linked with the Sun, can remain implicit, but the name itself is clear enough in Bulgarian, English, and Russian.

2. Untranslatable Figurative Representations

Some of the terms that create serious difficulties for translation are the polysemous ones. Other such cases are the figurative representations involving personal names of characters or figures that are significant in Chinese culture but less familiar abroad.

2.1. 金刚捣碓 (*jīn gāng dǎo duì*) “The Buddhist Guardian Pounds the Mortar.”

The name of the second technique from the First Classical Routine of Chen style Taijiquan presents significant challenges in translation.

There are two reasons why this expression remains untranslatable: first, the polysemy of the central concept, and second, the lack of correspondence between the

¹⁰⁰ In English the name of this technique is translated as “Face-the-sun sword” (Chen 2003: 257) and in Russian „Обратить меч к солнцу” (*Turn the Sword to the Sun*) (Silberstorff 2005: 210). In Bulgarian the name could be translated as „Обръщане на меча към Слънцето” (*Turning the Sword to the Sun*).

imagery it evokes in Chinese and in other languages. The term 金剛 (jīngāng) can refer to a diamond or brilliant, a giant, a very strong person, a Buddhist guardian, or even the movie character King Kong. It also denotes the Buddhist ritual weapon vajra, which is associated with lightning and diamonds, symbolizing strength and the protection of faith, as a diamond can cut through everything else and is itself unbreakable. However, the full term for vajra is 金剛杵 (jīngāngchǔ), although the last character 杵 (chǔ) alone can mean vajra, as in the expression 韋馱獻杵 (Wei Tuo Offers the Vajra), presented below.

Another possibility is that the name of this technique refers to a “strong man,” as it is interpreted on the website of Kiang Seow 蕭志強 (Seow 2020). Additionally, 金剛 is often translated as “Buddha’s Warrior” or “Guardian with the Vajra.” It may also relate to the Four Guardians of Buddhist Teachings 四大金剛, also known as the Four Great Heavenly Kings 四大天王, each of whom is associated with one of the four cardinal directions. In this technique, Jingang 金剛 could be understood as one of these guardians of Buddhism.

The action 搗碓 *dǎodui* refers to the act of pounding or grinding objects placed in a mortar. In the final movement of this technique, the right leg and right hand simultaneously rise upward, after which they abruptly drop downward, with the fist striking the palm of the left hand and the foot hitting the ground. It is precisely this final part of the movement that resembles pounding in a mortar.

Even though it is not completely accurate, in Bulgarian this name could be „Будисткият пазител удря в хаван“ (“The Buddhist Guardian Pounds the Mortar”)¹⁰¹. But precisely because it doesn’t evoke the expected associations, this technique is usually called directly “Jingang daodui.”

2.2. 哪吒探海 (*nézhā tàn hǎi*) “*Nezha Searches the Sea*”

The image of Nezha serves as a link between Buddhist and Daoist mythology, as well as folk religion in China (民间宗教). He also appears as a character in the novel *Journey to the West*, as previously mentioned. Nezha is a child-deity and a slayer of dragons. The legend of Nezha is presented in 16th-century text “The Investiture of the Gods” 《封神演义》, which narrates that the hero was born in a miraculous way, after his mother carried him for three and a half years during the Shang dynasty. One of the well-known stories about him is how he kills Ao Bing 敖丙, the third son of the dragon king of the East Sea, Ao Guang 敖光 (Xu 2006). This legend is connected

¹⁰¹ In English, it has been presented as “Buddha’s Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar” (Zhaohua 1984: 16), “Arhat Pounds the Mortar” (Chen 2019), and “Strong Man Pounds the Mortar” (Seow 2020). In Russian, translations include „Страж Будды ударяет пестом“ (“The Guardian of Buddha Pounds the Pestle”) (Silberstorff 2005: 202) and „Алмазный силач толчет в ступке“ (“The Diamond Strongman Grinds in the Mortar”) (Gu 1996: 101).

to the phrase “Nezha searches the sea” 哪吒探海. When Nezha was seven years old, he was walking along the river and decided to bathe in it to cool off from the summer heat. His immersion in the waters, however, shook the palace of the dragon king Ao Guang, which angered him. He sent the yaksha Li Gen 李戩 against Nezha, but Nezha defeated him. After that, the third son of the dragon king, Ao Bing, also appeared and was subsequently vanquished.

This expression alludes to the incredible strength of the child-god Nezha and how he unintentionally shakes the entire sea and the dragon’s palace. Furthermore, the expression 探海 (tàn hǎi) in Taijiquan also means to pierce and turn the palm outward, with the stance taken being on one leg.

While the literal translation in Bulgarian „Нъджа търси в морето“ (“Nezha searches in the sea”)¹⁰² is possible, the metaphorical function and instructional meaning are lost.

2.3. 韦驮献杵 (wéituó xiàn chǔ) “The Bodhisattva Weituo Offers the Vajra”

The name of this technique appears in the sword form of the Chen style but is believed to originate from the complex of exercises Yijin Jing 《易筋经》, attributed to Bodhidharma. In this text, this is the name of the first exercise (Wang 2017). Bodhisattva Weituo, also known as Skanda, is a devoted protector of the Buddhist monasteries which safeguard the teachings. His statues are found in temples, often positioned facing the statue of Buddha, and he is depicted holding a vajra.

In Bulgarian, the name of this technique could be translated as „Бодхисатвата Уейтуо поднася ваджра“¹⁰³ (“Bodhisattva Weituo Presents the Vajra”), but again, the metaphorical function is lost, and the name sounds overly unfamiliar in the target language.

3. Borderline Cases

By borderline cases I refer to expressions which, in the translated forms, have a comprehensible meaning close to the original, yet at the same time, some additional allusions of the Chinese phrase are lost.

¹⁰² This technique has been translated into English as “Nezha Searches the Sea” (Chen 2003: 257) and into Russian as „Начжа тянется к морю“ (“Nezha Reaches for the Sea”) (Silberstorff 2005: 211).

¹⁰³ In English, the name has been translated as “Weituo Presents a Pestle” (Chen 2003: 257), and in Russian as „Вэйто ударяет пестом“ (“Weituo Strikes with a Pestle”) (Silberstorff 2005: 211).

3.1. 金鸡独立 (jīnjī dúlì) “The Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg”

The image of a rooster standing on one leg is easily understood, but the associations of bravery and heroism in Chinese culture do not carry over in Bulgarian and in most European languages, in which the rooster has different cultural connotations. Earlier translations have sometimes substituted the rooster with another bird to better convey the intended meaning, as for example pheasant. The second component, 独立, has sometimes been translated as “stands alone,” but within the context of the form, its meaning is “stands on one leg.” Additionally, in English, the phrase has also been translated in a completely descriptive manner.

This technique appears both in the sword form and in the First Classical Form of the Chen style. In Bulgarian, it has been translated as „Златният фазан стои на един крак“ (“The Golden Pheasant Stands on One Leg”) (Aleksandrov 1997: 129), but also as „Златният петел стои на един крак“ (“The Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg”) (Aleksandrov 2006: 113).

In Russian, one translation renders it as „Золотой петух в независимой стойке, левой и правой“ (“The Golden Rooster in an Independent Stance, Left and Right”) (Gu 1996: 220), where the meaning of 独立 has been clearly interpreted as independent. In another translation, the name appears as „Золотой петух стоит на одной ноге“ (“The Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg”) (Silberstorff 2005: 203).

In English, the technique has been translated both literally, preserving the imagery as “Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg” (Chen 2019), and descriptively, emphasizing the movement itself: “Stand on One Leg on Both Sides” (Zhaohua 1984: 18). In this case, the image of the rooster standing on one leg is clear enough and easily associated with the execution of the technique.

3.2. 海底捞月 (hǎidǐ lāo yuè) “Fishing the Moon from the Sea Depths”

In the Taijiquan sword form this name refers to a movement for which this imagery itself is easily understandable, involving the sword thrust low while balancing on one leg. On the other hand, this phrase is also a fixed Chinese idiom 成语 with a metaphorical meaning: striving for the impossible. The phrase is used similarly to “a needle in a haystack,” implying a hopeless endeavor.

However, in the context of executing the technique, the focus is primarily on its visual representation.

In English, it has been translated as “Scoop Up the Moon from the Bottom of the Sea” (Chen 2003: 257), and in Russian as „Достать луну с морского дна“ (“Retrieve the Moon from the Bottom of the Sea”) (Silberstorff 2005: 210). In Bulgarian it could be „Вадене на Луната от морските дълбини“ (“Fishing the Moon from the Sea Depths”).

3.3. 青龙出水 (qīnglóng chū shuǐ)

"The Green Dragon Emerges from the Water"

This technique appears both in the sword form and in the First Classical Form of the Chen style without weapons. The primary challenge in translating here lies in the color 青 *qing*, which can mean blue, green, or black. Alimuradov and Latu argue that green is the most appropriate translation because it is associated with youth as well as reliability. They also note that Qinglong 青龙 is one of the five celestial guardians of the cardinal directions, representing the East and symbolizing spring. Therefore, they suggest, it should be translated as Green Dragon or Young Dragon (Alimuradov & Latu 2008: 12). The technique 青龙出水¹⁰⁴ in Bulgarian could be translated as „Зеленият дракон излиза от водата“ (“The Green Dragon Comes Out of the Water”). Here the color green also carries the same allusion to youth.

This name can be linked to that of the Green Dragon, the protector of the East, implying that the technique is executed in that direction. Additionally, as a water dragon with a fish-like tail and scales, it is naturally associated with emerging from water and soaring straight into the sky – which also serves as an instructional cue for executing the movement, indicating the direction of the strike.

While some of these additional allusions are lost in translation, the core imagery of a green dragon emerging from water remains understandable.

Conclusion

When comparing the names of techniques in the First Classic Form of Chen-style Taijiquan and the Chen-style sword form, it is notable that the proportion of descriptive versus metaphorical names varies significantly. In the “Chen style old frame first routine,” there is an even split between descriptive and metaphorical names, whereas in the “Chen-style Taiji Single Sword Routine,” only 5 out of 49 forms are descriptive, with the rest being metaphorical.

Whenever possible, retaining the original expression when translating technique names of Taijiquan forms should be preferred. Chinese metaphorical imagery often conveys more meaning and allusions than can be provided through direct instructions. Additionally, such names like “the immortal points the way” or “the dragon plays in the water” are easier for the practitioner to remember. While it may not always be possible, preserving the original figurative representations serves as a means of bringing Chinese culture closer to Bulgarian audiences. Especially as an alternative

¹⁰⁴ The name of this technique in English is “Green Dragon Rises from Water” (Chen 2003: 257), and in Russian „Сине-зелёный дракон поднимается из воды“ (“Blue-Green Dragon Rises from Water”) (Silberstorff 2005: 210).

way to connect the two cultures, Chinese martial arts can help deepen mutual interest, understanding, and cooperation.

Bibliography

- Chen, Jifu. *General explanations of Taiji boxing fundamentals* (1930). Available at: <https://brennantranslation.wordpress.com/2019/09/01/an-introduction-to-chen-style-taiji/> [Accessed 30 Jan 2025], 01 Sep 2019.
- Chen, Zhanglei. *Chen Style Taijiquan, Sword and Broadsword*. Tai Chi Centre, 2003.
- Li, Yiyu. "Wang Zongyue's Taiji Boxing Treatise" Appended With My Preface & "Five-Word Formula" (1881) [Accessed 30 Jan 2025]. Available at: <https://brennantranslation.wordpress.com/2013/05/25/the-taiji-classics/>, 25 May 2014.
- Seow, Khiang (萧志强). *Chen Style Taijiquan* [Accessed 30 Jan 2025]. Available at: https://www.chenstyletaijiquan.net/?page_id=88, 21 April 2020.
- Tai Chi Notebook. *Wave hands like clouds* [Accessed 27 Sept 2024]. Available at: <https://thetaichi-notebook.com/2016/05/13/wave-hands-like-clouds/>, 13 May 2016.
- Tang, Hao. *An Analysis of Wang Zongyue's Taiji Boxing Classics and Conceal & Reveal Spear Manual* [Accessed 27 Sept 2024]. Available at: <https://brennantranslation.wordpress.com/2023/11/30/tang-haos-analysis-of-wang-zongyue/>, Nov 2023.
- Wang, Huaiqi. *A Handbook for Twelve Posture Yijinjing*. [Accessed 25 Sept 2024]. Available at: <https://brennantranslation.wordpress.com/2017/11/30/wang-huaiqi-on-twelve-posture-yijinjing/>, 2017.
- Zhaohua, Publishing House. *Chen Style Taijiquan*. Beijing: Zhaohua Publishing House, 1984.
- Aleksandrov, Dorian Александров, Дориян. *Ortodoksalen Taijiquan. Traditsiyata na familiyata Chen. Tom 1*. Ортодоксален Тай дзи цюан. Традицията на фамилията Чен [Ortodoxal Taijiquan. The tradition of Chen family] Volume I. Sofia: Shambala, 1997.
- Aleksandrov, Dorian Александров, Дориян. *Ortodoksalen Taijiquan. Traditsiyata na familiyata Chen. Tom 2*. Ортодоксален Тай дзи цюан. Традицията на фамилията Чен [Ortodoxal Taijiquan. The tradition of Chen family] Volume II. Sofia: Shambala, 2006.
- Alimuradov, Oleg Alimurovich and M. N. Latu Алимуратов, Олег Алимуратович и М. Н. Лату. *Osobenosti terminologicheskoi nominatzii: kognitivno-semanticheskii podhod (na material kitaiskoi I angliiskoi terminologii boevih iskyssv)* Особенности терминологической номинации: когнитивно-семантический подход (на материале китайской и английской терминологии боевых искусств). [Features of Terminological Nomination: A Cognitive-Semantic Approach to Chinese and English Martial Arts Terminology] *Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosi teorii i praktiki* Филологические науки. Вопросы теории и практики (2008): 6-13.
- Gu Liuxin 古, Люсинь. *Taijiquan, stil Chen* Тайцзи-цюань, стиль Чэнь [Chen style Taijiquan]. Moskow: Libris, 1996.
- Silberstorff, Jan Сильберсторф, Ян. *Taijiquan, stil Chen* Тайдзи-цюань стиль Чэнь. [Chen style Taijiquan]. Moskow: INBI, 2005.
- Teodosieva, Hristina Теодосиева, Христина. *Ezikut na Taijiquan* Езикът на тайдзицюен [The Language of Taijiquan]. Sofia: East-West, 2022.
- Wu, Cheng'en 吴承恩. *Xiyouji* 《西游记》 [Journey to the West] [Accessed 24 Sept 2024], Available at: <https://ctext.org/xiyouji/ch51/zhs#n95275>, 2006.
- Xu, Zhonglin 许仲琳. *Fengshen yanyi* 《封神演义》 [Investiture of the Gods] [Accessed 25 Sept 2024]. Available at: <https://ctext.org/fengshen-yanyi/12/zhs>, 2006.

14.

从聖神皇帝到原型： 武则天的女权主义性在现代中国

林妙仪

布加勒斯特大学（罗马尼亚）

From Empress to Archetype: Wu Zetian's Feminist Echo in Modern China

*Ioana Alexia Antone**University of Bucharest (Romania)*

Abstract: Throughout the period of Ancient China, few figures left as incredible a mark as Wu Zetian, the first and only empress of the Chinese Empire during the Tang Dynasty. Her remarkable leadership skills played a pivotal role in China's emergence as one of the world's greatest economic powers at the time, and her ambition for an equal society challenged gender norms, thus setting precedents that would later echo in China's feminist movements. This study draws parallels between the Tang Dynasty and contemporary China by analyzing Wu Zetian's influence on societal perceptions of women's roles. The principal aim is to compare Wu Zetian's strategies for enhancing the status of women with contemporary feminist practices. By deconstructing the values of the typical Confucian empire, this study also strives to explore the progressive recognition of women as important members of the state and intends to put the heroines of antiquity in juxtaposition with modern feminist models. This emphasizes both the continuity and evolution of women's influence across historical and contemporary settings.

Key-words: *Proto-feminism, Wu Zetian, Confuciansim, Daoism, oppression, media, May 4th, feminist theory, He Yin-Zhen, Jin Tianhe*

Introduction

In a feudal society, where Confucianism is the orthodoxy ruling the state and the people, a character like Wu Zetian's is irrefutably likely to spark intrigue and debate. Although powerful women occupy important chapters in the annals of ancient history, they are often mentioned in relation to their spouse, the Emperor. As the only woman who ever managed to impose her own reign throughout the period of the Chinese Empire, it is natural to put in question the impact of a feminine presence in the ultimate position of power. The aim of this study is to try to answer the questions: Can Wu Zetian be considered a proto-feminist? How did her presence impact the following feminist movements in the Chinese society? From observing the different historical sources that outline her character both as a ruler and as a woman, this paper will be putting them in perspective with her current representations in media (books, movies) and, most importantly, with a few feminist theory concepts born during the May 4th movement.

Often described by historians as a “barbarian” and the “usurper of throne,” Empress Wu is, to this day, a central figure of interest in the field of social sciences. Her rise to power was definitely as violent as many others in Chinese history; however, the fact that there was no longer a man in search for the favors of the gods, the natural order of things was irremediably shaken. So, with her going against the patriarchal values of society and becoming a woman in power in mind, is attaching the label “feminist” to the name of Wu Zetian legitimate?

What is feminism? What is proto-feminism?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, feminism is “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.”¹⁰⁵ In the same dictionary, for proto-feminism, the suffix *proto*, which has its origins in Greek, means “first of the similar things to develop,”¹⁰⁶ therefore indicating the pre-existence of certain feminist behaviors in a person or society prior to the official movement.

The beginning of the feminist movement took place in the 19th century in North America, with what is now known as “The Declaration of Sentiments” (Elisabet Cady Stanton 1848).¹⁰⁷ Feminist ideology did not take long to travel the ocean and arrive in Asia, the first attestation of a manifesto in China being in 1906, written by Jin Tianhe. Even though there is no concrete record of a feminist movement during the times of

¹⁰⁵ Online Cambridge Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/proto>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ *History of the Women's Rights Movement*, <https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/>

the Tang dynasty, the changes in people's roles in the society and their relationship with it are attested by other cultural outlets. Daoism, for example, differentiates itself from Confucianism by its rather humanistic approach, bringing men and women on an equal foot (Miller 2017:12). To say that Empress Wu was inspired by the concept of Ying and Yang would be farfetched, since her main interests in terms of religion were Buddhism, an influence stemming from her upbringing, and Confucianism for political purposes (YAO Lu-qin, BAI Xin-xin, LU Jie 2021). However, what is certain is her success in rebelling against the Confucian ideology, especially its positioning women at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

Empress Wu's image in the modern media

One of the first, and most prominent, manifestos was Jin Tianhe's (金天翮, 1873–1947) "The Women's Bell" 《女界钟》 (1903), which deals with the different positions occupied by women in Chinese society.¹⁰⁸ Central to his arguments was the assertion that women have nearly the same abilities as men and therefore granting them access to the education system is a crucial step towards the inclusion of women in society. Jin's ideas were placed within the frames of a patriarchal society still heavily influenced by Confucian principles and thus reinforced stereotypical gender-roles. In that same work he mentions briefly Wu Zetian as a negative example while presenting a series of opinions and recommendations towards the appearance of women. In his view, women's habit of dressing elaborately, wearing jewelry, adopting complex hairstyles and such activities are frivolous distractions from one's intellectual pursuits. According to Jin Tianhe, the correct approach for women would be to cut their hair short, akin to men, and to embrace the risk of "being mistaken for *bhik-khuni*" (a Buddhist nun). Empress Wu comes into this narrative through her past as a *bhik-khuni*, the problem being not in her physical appearance but in her behavior (Jin Tianhe 2013: 224-225).

Through a feminist read of the text one can see that conservative values still arise in discourse on equality, with social issues often restricted to being personal. Purposefully mentioning the only dynastic female monarch with the intent to undervalue the impact she had on the well-being and development of the country by focusing on her "low morals" raises the question of "real liberation" – a very important topic brought up by He Yin-Zhen in her works. Thus, although in his manifesto Jin Tianhe aims to argue that women should be free, he undermines the image of Wu Zetian because of the limitations imposed by the patriarchal system. This historical marker indicates that in the pre-May 4th period, Wu Zetian was systematically por-

¹⁰⁸ *The Birth of Chinese Feminism Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, Edited by Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, Dorothy Ko, Columбина University Press, New York, 2013.

trayed as a “destroyer of rites” and that her method of liberating herself is one which people should fear and not endorse.

The feminist discourse which followed was finally represented by women and the social shift became gradually more empowering. He Yin-Zhen (何殷震, 1884–1920) is especially recognizable for her anarchist feminist interpretations of various social issues faced by women. In her essay “On the Question of Women’s Liberation” 《女子解放问题》 (1903), the principle issues tackled are the question what is the real liberation of women, the promiscuity of women and, most importantly for this study, the matter of women in politics. Just like Jin Tianhe in “The Women’s Bell,” He Yin-Zhen also brings into question the impact of strong feminine figures in history. Her approach, however, is substantially different, as it draws parallels between Western and Eastern politics and actively questions the influence of such personalities in the evolution of the world (He Yin-Zhen 2013: 66). Her reader is prompted to rethink already familiar feminine figures in the context of the newly presented ideas. This rhetorical approach also denotes the writer’s active participation in the deconstruction of an ancient ideology by also putting the basis of a new one – an ideology with roots in understanding historical implications and using critical thinking in order to form one’s own understanding of equality and equitability.

In mainstream media Wu Zetian also stands as a controversial historical figure. In the movie 武則天 (*Empress Wu Tse-Tian*, dir. Li Hanxiang 李翰祥, Hong Kong, 1963), she is portrayed as a sly woman who plans her moves very carefully and takes advantage of people at the court. Her moral portrait outlines a ruler who often abuses her power and sexuality in order to fulfil her desires, and who does not refrain from using violence against both men and women to ascend on the hierarchical ladder.

Could this picture be merely an exaggeration of a woman with a character too strong for a China still following the Confucian rites? Or was she actually a tyrant, with her gender not playing an important role in the ruling process? Moreover, following He Yin-Zhen’s concept of liberation, can an oppressed person be considered liberated if said liberation is offered by the oppressor (He Yin Zhen 2013: 59)? In Wu Zetian’s case, in what measure was her rise permitted and how much was it actually gained throughout her own fight?

A feminist reading of Wu Zetian’s rise to power

It would be an exaggeration to state that her rise to power was an unceasing fight against the patriarchal system. The methods used by Wu Zetian were deeply critiqued by Confucian historians, since she drastically disobeyed the principle of filial piety (孝). In *The Empress Wu* (1955), Australian professor Charles Patrick Fitzgerald recounts an interesting perspective on life at the court. An official pointed out to the Emperor his disagreement with the Empress’ involvement in state affairs: *Now Your*

*Majesty has placed a woman in the seat of a male, contrary to the nature of things, and in consequence the spirit of the earth is frustrated and mountains change their shape. This is a problem; Your Majesty regards it as a lucky mountain, but I, Your servant, see it as ill-omened.*¹⁰⁹

As presented in this paragraph, Wu Zetian's "ill omen" is represented particularly by her gender. As historically recorded, the change in reign was announced by a violent natural phenomenon, with the earthquake leading to the formation of a mountain (Fitzgerald 1955: 119), which seemed to foreshadow Empress Wu's future as an ultimate monarch. Quickly realizing that she could use such an event to her advantage, Wu Zhou, at that point Empress Dowager, created her own dynasty, shocking not only by interfering with the "natural" order of things, but also through her reforms, which brought China to one of its most prosperous periods in history. Regarded through a feminist lens, going against the patriarchal norms and imposing her own liberation could be considered as an actively feminist move. However, does economic development justify her brutality?

Nonetheless, while the bloody process necessary for her ascension (murdering Empress Zhao, a concubine and her child – them being only a part of the victims¹¹⁰) remains heavily frowned upon, it can be argued that Wu Zetian did not act any differently than a man normally would in a similar position. With regards to her ruling competences, her prior participation in political life by administering the state in the name of the Emperor prepared her for her own governing.

Changes in society during the rule of Wu Zetian

In He Yin-Zhen's perspective on women's participation in politics, given her anarchist beliefs, she points out how the problem does not lie only in women obeying men. Since everyone has to obey the government, what is the difference between a man obeying a man and a woman obeying a woman? The situation becomes equivalent and the gender conflict transforms into a class fight (He Yin-Zhen 2013: 66).

In the context of the reign of Empress Wu, implying a class conflict would be anachronistic. The living conditions, not only of women, but of the entire population, improved significantly during her reign – a fact proven by the newly constructed rice banks (which prevented famine), the realization of durable international relations (Wang 2022: 199-237) and economic development. Two of the innovations worth mentioning in this paper are the declaration of a woman prime minister and the statues portraying women in men's clothing while horse riding.

¹⁰⁹ *The Empress Wu*, Charles Patrick Fitzgerald, published for the Australian National University, Melbourne, 1955, p. 119.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Wu Zetian did impose herself to the already existing government. Her wish to grant education to the masses, regardless of gender, positions her in the category rulers interested in gender and social equality: *The Empress was not sparing in the bestowal of titles and ranks, because she wished to cage the bold and enterprising spirits of all regions. Even a wild reckless fellow who said something which she thought apt would be made an official without regard to the normal order of the degrees of rank; but those who proved unfit for their responsibilities were forthwith, in large numbers, cashiered or executed. Her broad aim was to select men of real talent and true virtue.*¹¹¹ Meritocracy was a key characteristic in the process of selecting her closest advisors. This way she managed to surround herself with intelligent people who brought along unbiased perspectives. Part of her careful selection process also to choose people without prior political implications, thus ensuring the forming of a network of trusted counsellors. A distinctive example of a trusted advisor happens to also be a woman: Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉儿, the first woman prime-minister. While she debuted as a concubine, her excellent talent in writing poetry caught the interest of Empress Wu, who then offered her the position of her personal assistant. Their collaboration is portrayed in media (Li Han Hsiang 1963) as a mother-daughter relationship, which further developed with other women entering the court.

Wu Zetian's influence in women's lives is visible also in the archaeological finds from that period. A number of figurines of women riding horses, usually in men's clothing, were found in tombs dating from the Tang period, which could indicate the alleviation of the strictness imposed by the Confucian behavioral norms. If women could ride horses freely at that moment in time, that would mean they were allowed more freedom both in travel and in leisure (Bosen Zhang 2019: 589). The clothing worn while participating in this activity is also important, as it is a factor which indicates the freedom to enjoy comfort and the embracement of practicality, rather than having to wear the usual long clothing which would protect their figure and present them as pure and appropriate for marriage.

Conclusions

Wu Zetian's period as an absolute monarch is a politically very complex period and therefore calls for thorough research in order for its complexity to be fully grasped. From a social perspective, if one considers the points raised in He Yin-Zhen's essays, the answer to the question was Wu Zetian some kind of proto-feminist could be in the affirmative. Wu Zhou represented her contemporary women and even today is a model for ambition and intelligence. A good woman is no longer the obedient and forgiving kind: instead, she goes against the oppressor and uses her power to improve

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.114.

the lives of all people under her ruling. While it can be argued that her methods were unethical, it is important to contextualized the time period in which she ruled in order to understand not only her choices, but also the omniscient double-standard, or in other words, the gender bias.

By portraying the exact opposite of what a woman was expected to be, Empress Wu took upon herself the role of the “rebel with a cause” and brought Imperial China to an all-time high, while also inspiring future generations of women. At the same time, she actively proved how women’s traditionally low place in society was not the “natural” order of things, but the consequence of a society ruled by male figures who reinforce a lack of respect through humiliation and systematic oppression.

References

- Fitzgerald, Charles Patrick, *The Empress Wu*, Australian National University, Melbourne, 1955.
- History of the Women’s Rights Movement*, <https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/>
- Li Han Hsiang 李翰祥, dir. 1963, *Wu Tse-Tien 武則天* (Empress Wu Tse-Tien), Shaw Brothers, Dailymotion video, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6wm3vy>
- Miller, Dessie, “Celebrating the Feminine: Daoist Connections to Contemporary Feminism in China,” *Master’s Projects and Capstones*. 613, 2017. <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/613>
- Peng, Niya, Tianyuan Yu and Albert Mills, “Feminist Thinking in Late Seventh-Century China: A Critical Hermeneutics Analysis of the Case of Wu Zetian,” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 34 Issue: 1, pp.67-83, 2015, ResearchGate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272408409>
- Online Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>
- Liu, Lydia H., Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko (ed.), *The Birth of Chinese Feminism Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*. Columina University Press, New York, 2013.
- Wong, C. Dorothy, “Empress Wu’s Impact Beyond China: Kinship and Female Sovereigns” In: *Transmissions of Buddhism in Asia and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Antonio Forte (1940-2006)*, ed. Chen, Jinhua, World Scholastic Publishers, Singapore, 2022.
- Yao, Lu-qin, Bai Xin-xin and Lu Jie, “Wu Zetian’s Manipulation of Confucianism and Buddhism,” *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, David Publishing, June 2021, Vol. 11, No. 6, 439-442.
- Zhang, Bosen, “On the Change of the Female Status in the Tang Dynasty from the Horse-riding Tomb Figurine” In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (ASSEHR), volume 300, 2018 International Workshop on Education Reform and Social Sciences (ERSS 2018), p. 589-594, 2018, ResearchGate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331335067>

15.

Daoism in the Context of Sino-European Cultural Dialogue

Desislava Damyanova
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridsky" (Bulgaria)

Abstract: Nowadays we live in interconnected societies with very different beliefs, political ideals, moral values and community structures. Considering its leading role in the global world, contemporary China is an example of economic prosperity and growing national confidence. This is due not only to the Confucian system and social ideal, but also to the wisdom of Daoist life philosophy. Our project aims to develop the Daoist thought as a part of the sustainable and at the same time modern Chinese civilization, placing it in the context of identity intertwining between Europe and Asia as a “crossroad of civilizations.”

Keywords: *Daoism, intercultural dialogue, contemporary worldview, hermeneutics*

The Sino-European intercultural dialogue is a rich historical and ongoing exchange of philosophies, ideas, and practices between Chinese and European civilizations. It spans three key phases:

1. Historical exchanges: Early contacts during the Silk Road era allowed for the trade of goods, technology, and ideas. Chinese inventions like paper and silk reached Europe, while European art and science influenced China.
2. Philosophical interactions: In the Enlightenment era, European thinkers engaged deeply with Confucian and Daoist texts, while Chinese scholars encountered European science and religion through Jesuit missionaries.
3. Modern collaboration: Contemporary efforts focus on academic exchange, cultural diplomacy, and shared goals in sustainability, technology, and global governance. Initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and European cultural missions aim to deepen mutual understanding.

Therefore the Sino-European intercultural dialogue represents the exchange of ideas, philosophies, and cultural practices between China and Europe, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. This dialogue encompasses philosophical encounters (e.g. Neo-Confucianism and Enlightenment thought), trade routes like the Silk Road, and contemporary partnerships in fields such as education, arts, and environmental policies. Ongoing initiatives like “One Belt, One Road” promote knowledge-sharing, emphasizing common values like sustainability, human rights, and innovation to strengthen global cooperation. Despite challenges like differing governance models and historical asymmetries, the dialogue emphasizes common goals, promoting cultural appreciation and comparative analysis (inclusive navigation of cultural differences and historical legacies).

The 21st century is shaping up to be the most decisive in human history as we are faced with ecological, political, and social challenges on a scope and severity which the modern world has not seen. The next one hundred years may be humanity’s greatest intelligence test, with our very survival hanging in the balance. What we are witnessing is a convergence of problems once deemed isolated from one another – a convergence wherein environmental, political and social programs become intertwined. Globalization continues to spread, and we face these problems on a new moral and political frontier. There is an opportunity for philosophy to recover in such times – a sentiment reflected in the Chinese etymology of the word for crisis, *wēi jī* (危機), which combines the character for danger with the character for opportunity.

The key to such recovery is an earnest concern not only for their philosophical abstractions but also for concrete problems. We should relinquish the conviction that there is a common meaningful world and recognize the presence of many languages, civil practices and value paradigms. They tentatively dialogue with each other and coexist peacefully or combatively. Considering its leading role in the global world, contemporary China is an example of economic prosperity and growing national confidence and this is due not only to the Confucian system and social ideal, but also to the wisdom of the Daoist philosophy of life. Our project aims to incorporate Daoist thought into the sustainable and modern Chinese civilization, placing it in the context of identity intertwining between Europe and Asia as a “crossroad of civilizations.”

It is generally accepted that both China and Europe are undergoing crucial transformations and philosophy as a way of thinking-and-living is going through deep changes, which challenges our modern theoretical elaborations. The close relation between technocratic and philosophical methods of reconciling the multiple identities is central to the formation of a peaceful ethos of living together in the 21st century. Daoist soft mutuality and interplay between the opposites may play a key role in global community-building policies and the management of contemporary conflicts. What we need now is a mutual engagement of different perspectives and heterogeneous traditions: the inter-cultural dialogue should bring together previously opposing

worlds by the means of an 'open' discourse and a pluralistic approach to the discrepancies.

In this diverse but increasingly interconnected world, we need to find ways of agreement between each other and peaceful co-existence. We must find the optimal conditions for understanding and tolerance between distinct fields of thought, in order to involve them in the process of global civilization. The rapid societal changes which Europe is currently experiencing necessitate a better understanding of the Daoist model as an example of harmonious and peaceful development. The holistic view of the world should overcome the indefinite, often vague and hollow identity – when the 'agents' are not separated from each other by insurmountable differences, there is a possibility for non-conflicting coexistence of more than one viewpoint (the Daoist Way).

The plural values model is initially based on reciprocal recognition with respect for cultural differences. In Hangzhou students of Daoism (as well as Buddhism) approach the philosophy in a hermeneutic manner, employing a critical approach to both its historical development and organizational and doctrinal structures, and paying special attention to its interaction with various aspects of culture. The central goal goes beyond pure academic and theoretical understanding: the creation of a new Daoist hermeneutics which brings ancient concepts into the modern world, enhances traditional ethics, and contributes to harmonious social development. My previous social experience motivated me to make positive contributions to the exchange and collaboration between China and Europe as a part of the global communications, intercultural dialogue and the holistic approach towards "otherness."

In today's globalized world reticence and ethnocentrism give way to dynamic development in comparison with others – not just with neighbors in the region, but with all people who coexist in the local social, cultural and political communities. The challenges confronting this process turned my attention to the comparative analysis of the East and West, as an indirect path to Chinese philosophy. For years I engaged in philosophical speculation of the human nature in Daoist thought, according to the most significant textual source of the Dao-classics – *Zhuangzi*.¹¹² I decided to continue my explorations on the incredible thought and culture of China, especially the Daoist philosophy. In this study I try to advance in the topic of Daoism by well-grounded evaluation of the traditional wisdom and contemporary trends of analysis, following global standards, principles and criteria.

¹¹² My scientific research threw light upon Zhuangzi's understanding of man and explored aspects of Daoist philosophical anthropology, which have not been discussed yet. The analyzed concepts of *shenren* (圣人 – Sage), *shengren* (神人 – Perfected Person), *zhenren* (真人 – True Man), the 'free wandering' (逍遥 – *xiaoyao*), etc. have ancient roots and implicitly philosophical nature.

Brief historical overview delineating three major periods in the development of Chinese religion with reference to its social significance:

- In the first period, lasting from the dawn of Chinese history in the 2nd millennium BC to the end of the Early Han Empire (206 BC–9 AD), traditional faith played an intimate role in social life and the organization of the state.
- The second period, extending from the 1st to the 11th century AD, saw the rise of Daoism and Buddhism as voluntary religions competing for dominance against Confucianism.
- The third period, from the 11th century AD to contemporary times, is characterized by stabilization and government protection over the eclectic system, which is a result of the interpretation of classical religion, Daoism and Buddhism (Neo-Confucianism).

Contemporary Daoist philosophy retains its ancient roots while adapting to modern contexts, blending spiritual practices, ethical living, and environmental awareness. Central to Daoism is aligning with the Dao – the dynamic, ineffable force that governs the universe. Modern interpretations emphasize harmony with natural and societal processes. The key aspects of this worldview and philosophy include: 1) **Effortless Action** (无为 – *wu wei*): This principle, often understood as “non-action,” suggests acting in accordance with the natural flow of events, emphasizing spontaneity and adaptability in daily life. 2) **Vital Energy** (气 – *qi*): Daoism views *qi* as the life force flowing through all living things, encouraging practices like tai chi, qigong, and meditation to cultivate and balance this energy. 3) **Compassion and Simplicity** (朴 – *pu*): Daoist philosophy advocates for humility, kindness, and living a simple life – values which counteract the stress and complexity of modern life.

The introductory discourse and exploration of Chinese wisdom made me aware of the mental layers which form the foundations of this 2000-years old cultural tradition. The means of the analysis was to pay special attention to the understanding of the Way (道 – *dao*) – the reference point in the cultural dynamics of China. The pursuit of practical implications of this study enabled me to exploit Dao as a key to the multifarious and divergent explanations of human nature. The main objective of my scientific research lies in the philosophical synthesis, giving new meaning to ancient values, notions and concepts of humanity based upon primordial Chinese wisdom. The religious atmosphere temporarily removes the participants from their preoccupation with small-group, convention-ridden, routinized daily life and places them into another context of existence – the activities and feelings of the larger community.

There are numerous Daoist mountains all over China; the building or rebuilding of temples sets up an increasingly tourist-friendly infrastructure. I had the opportunity to visit the main Daoist sites and temples in Hangzhou – Fuxing at Yuhuang Shan Gong Yuan, Baopu Daoist temple and the Yellow Dragon Cave. Local Daoists

as well as Buddhists impress with a distinct sense of communal consciousness and an entirely new orientation. In the case of social and economic groups, religion played a prominent part in the life and organization of the traditional Daoist community. No such community is without one or more collective representations in the form of patron deities, the cults of which served as centers for communal religious practices. Thanks to Prof. Chen Yongge, I met with the Chairman of the Provincial Daoist Association of Zhejiang, with the abbess of Baopu Daoyan and with a Buddhist Master near Yongfu Shuguan.

The syncretic spirit of leading temples in every Daoist locality is developed to meet the requirement of community integration as a function of common beliefs. Besides its own main deity, a leading temple usually has supplementary gods, often patrons of different occupations, so that people of various backgrounds find a common center of worship. The Temple of the Fortune Star is located on the top of the Jade Emperor Hill, between the West Lake and the Qiantang River, and is one of the three grand Daoist temples in the province. It was built roughly during the Kaiyuan period of the Tang Dynasty and was initially named Yulong Daoist Courtyard. During the South Song Dynasty, it served as an imperial temple for the royal families. In 1518 Daoist Master Puren Lao enlarged the temple complex and gave it its contemporary name.

During the Yongzheng ruling years of the Qing Dynasty, Fuxing Temple was further expanded to a magnificently great size. The Temple of the Fortune Star is famous for Quanzhen – the Daoist branch in which the practitioners seclude themselves and live a monastic life. The monks let me know that in July 2004 Fuxing Temple was registered as religious institution dedicated for Daoist activities and opened formally to the public in 2008. The Jade Emperor is referred to as the Heavenly God and his status is just below that of Sanqing, the pre-originator of Daoism who governs the three realms, the ten directions, the four-way-born lives and the five ways of recurrent life. He is also the ruler of prosperity, recession, fortune and disaster, influencing everything in the universe.

The Baopu temple is located on Geling Mountain; it is named after the *Baopuzi* – the magnum opus of its founder, the famous practitioner, physician and alchemist Gehong. This Daoist shrine was first named Baopu Lu, or Gexian Nunnery; it has a long history of 1700 years. Master Gehong was once consecrated inside the temple; he was known as a celebrated Daoist from the Dongjin Dynasty who spent most of his life in the study of medicine, chemistry and philosophy. Gehong also believed that we should inherit the cultural treasures of the past and firmly proceed to establish a new Dao custom to help everyone around the world.

The Baopu temple was enlarged in Tang Dynasty and occupied by a high rank official in the South Song Dynasty called Jia Sidao.¹¹³ On the top of the Geling

¹¹³ Most of the remaining buildings were constructed in the Wanli period during the Ming Dynasty, including Red Plum Pavilion, Banxian Humble Cottage, etc.

Mountain stands “chu yang platform” – on the initial day of each month in Chinese Lunar calendar people can step up onto that stage to see the fabulous view of the sun and moon’s co-rise phenomenon. The Baopu temple has been listed into the 21 Dao Temple groups, approved by the State Council in 1983. In 2001, when the West Lake was admitted to the World Culture Heritage association, the Baopu temple and its Dao culture have been written into the list of world cultural heritage sites. Today, under the leadership of national religious policies as well as the senior generations, efforts are made to rebuild the temple. Its main function, besides the worship of Daoist gods and founders, is to serve as an intersection of various mountain trips.

Since Daoism is about learning, cultivating and performing the Dao, the ‘three main’ treasures mean the Way itself, the Classics of Dao and the Masters of Dao. For practitioners, the “Three Treasures” imply Jing, Qi and Sheng, or in other words, one’s essence, vital energy and divine consciousness. These are the spiritual gems within oneself that must be gathered and transformed to attain Dao. For people who are in the process of inner cultivation, such treasures require benevolence, frugality and humility to achieve perfection and spread the Way among others. The diffuseness and specificity of Daoist culture is an interpretative key to the Chinese spirit (the local thought, lifestyle, religious life and society as a whole) (Johnson 2012: 91).

Our study attempted to answer the question: What function did Daoism perform in Chinese social life and organization in providing a basis for its existence and development and through what structural forms were these functions carried out?¹¹⁴ The unifying influence of religion is significant where local cults in every community exist as subordinate bodies to the belief in the supreme power of Heaven, Earth and the Dao. Local Daoist ideology works within this framework – the incorporation of specific religious elements into a national system of classical Daoist thought contributes to the consolidation of the ethico-political order. Religious values are embedded in the traditional moral order and Daoism has become an integral part of communal existence, inseparable from one’s individual life.¹¹⁵

During my field study, I visited many sacred places and temples. In the Zhejiang province, some Daoist cults may be put under the category of fertility rites (agricultural deities), but in Hangzhou they perform the function of protecting and promoting commerce and general prosperity – public as well as private welfare. Local Daoist temples contain trade patrons, typical for urban localities; the God of wealth Zhao

¹¹⁴ There is a large range of functions served by the temples – integration and well-being of social organizations, local community protection, patronizing civic and political figures and responsibility for the general moral order.

¹¹⁵ The integrating function of Daoism, which helps to minimize local and individual differences and to bring about social unity, is important for the consolidation of the moral order, especially in times of chaos when there is a longing for the restoration of social harmony (Hahn 2000: 697).

Gongming is a good example of this. These beliefs express the functional pattern of religious development on the generalized basis of community well-being: they have a distinct emphasis on the common interest and social protection. The deified personalities are symbols of civic, political and traditional values (historical leaders, legendary heroes and festive deities, who control the elemental forces and contribute to the cohesion of the communities in the Zhejiang province).

Patron gods and spirits of crafts, trades and irrigational agriculture nowadays make room for more general cults common to all sections of the county, serving as a spiritual nucleus for integration and prosperity (especially for merchants and businessmen). Monasteries and nunneries as separate categories of religious establishments are now open to the public for worship and accessible to lay followers. There are no secluded residences for Daoist monks and nuns around Hangzhou and its suburbs. The independence and spiritual strength of the major revelatory deity has inspired numerous Daoist monks and nuns as well as male and female practitioners.¹¹⁶ Daoism permeated the wider cultural setting. Chinese historiography, literature and philosophy are under its influence. Modern visions of ecological civilization also bear the features of the Daoist ideal of man returning to nature. Religious symbols, such as dragons, clouds, phoenix, or of the Daoist fairies in art and architecture remain today as a visible trace of the spiritual reflection and expression of ancient beliefs (Chao 2011: 23).

Everywhere in the vast land of China we find monasteries, local shrines, altars and other places of worship dotting the landscape. These places are indications of the cultural significance of Daoism in Chinese society through patterns of social reality.¹¹⁷ The Daoist concept of human nature represents a basic worldview-system, which has strong influence upon the further development of Chinese philosophy. The holistic Chinese view can be achieved only by a person who stands for individual identity and being mindful about the differences – mutual agreement without erasing the divergence. People who share a common theoretical concept of humanity practically realize that it concerns every individual who is called upon to develop and integrate it in his unique and at the same time universal way of life (Dao as individual path) in such a manner as to be able to share with others the same goal, pursuing it by different means.

¹¹⁶ Beyond conventional gender distinctions, members of Daoist monasticism no longer think of themselves as men and women. Instead, they call themselves “Heaven Dao” (乾道 – *qiandao*) and “Earth Dao” (坤道 – *kundao*). Their community makes no difference among male and female ranks, status, activities, or clothing.

¹¹⁷ For South-East China, including Hangzhou, I found data only of major temples. There is another peculiarity – some of the local Daoist shrines are registered under the Buddhist religious association. The general opinion is that in the southern provinces people have more local cults and divinities and the number of temples in proportion to the population is sufficient.

Conclusion. A Daoist Approach to Contemporary European Worldview

Daoist thought highlights the fragile unity of cause and effect – if a person wants to achieve real improvement, he should follow a long series of changes: the values of life are not fixed in a kind of transcendent kingdom but are subject to a constant rethinking and co-ordination with the changing circumstances, with ongoing amendments and integrated innovations. Therefore, the study of Daoism in China as a problem of identity attains dynamic correspondence between the inherited (Chinese literacy and culture – 文 *wen*) and the assimilated (the global multicultural vision). Only this position makes possible the ‘translation’ of ancient Daoist wisdom into contemporary Chinese – the language of today’s most impressive civilization. It is a kind of mental overturn that permits a full expansion of the hermeneutical horizon, not only notional and semantic, but – of living significance (De Bernardi 2010: 203).

In the field of intercultural dialogue Daoist principles are incorporated into global wellness trends, including mindfulness, tai qi quan, and alternative medicine. European and Chinese scholars and practitioners engage with each other’s philosophical traditions, such as existentialism and phenomenology, drawing parallels between Daoist concepts and contemporary thought. To summarize:

- 1. Relativity and Flexibility:** Daoism discourages rigid moral judgments, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living creatures and relativity of all things and events.
- 2. Ecological Sensitivity:** Daoist philosophy emphasizes living in harmony with nature. Modern Daoists often advocate for sustainability, viewing environmental preservation as a reflection of Daoist respect for the natural order.
- 3. Health and Well-being:** Contemporary Daoism integrates traditional practices such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and meditation, focusing on holistic worldview and balance in body, mind, and spirit.

Daoist spirituality provides a framework for mental growth in everyday life without dogmatism. Practices like the “fasting of the heart” (心齋 – *xinzhai*), “sitting and forgetting” (坐忘 – *zuowang*), meditation, refined ritual techniques, and inner alchemy encourage personal development and connection to the cosmos. The new Daoism faces the challenge of preserving its rich heritage while remaining accessible and relevant in an increasingly secular and globalized world. Balancing ancient traditions with contemporary needs requires ongoing innovation and reinterpretation. This synthesis highlights how Daoism continues to inspire and guide individuals and communities in navigating the complexities of modern existence.

References

- Chao, Shin-yi. *Daoist Rituals, State Religion, and Popular Practices: Zhenwu Worship from Song to Ming (960-1644)*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- De Bernardi, Jean. "Wudang Mountain and the Modernization of Daoism." *Journal of Daoist Studies* 3 (2010): 202-210.
- Hahn, Thomas H. "Daoist Sacred Sites." In *Daoism Handbook*, ed. by Livia Kohn. Leiden: Brill, 2000: 683-707.
- Johnson, Ian. "Two Sides of a Mountain: The Modern Transformation of Maoshan." *Journal of Daoist Studies* 5 (2012): 89-116.
- Kohn, Livia. *Introducing Daoism*. JBE Online Books, 2008.

16.

A Novel Attention-Guided YOLOv11 Framework for High-Precision Cantonese Opera Costume Recognition and Classification

*Siqi Wu**University of New South Wales (Australia)**Yanfeng Hu**Putra University (Malaysia)**Corresponding author: Yueting Wang, Shenzhen University (China)*

Abstract: Cantonese Opera is an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage, featuring intricate costumes with deep historical and artistic significance. However, the automatic recognition and classification of these costumes remain a challenge due to their complex textures, diverse colors, and dynamic performance environments. This study proposes an improved YOLOv11-based framework, incorporating FFAnet to enhance the accuracy and robustness of Cantonese Opera costume detection. A high-quality dataset covering ten major costume categories was constructed to support model training and evaluation. Experimental results demonstrate that the optimized YOLOv11 model outperforms baseline detectors, achieving a mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5) of 67%, with recall and F1-score improvements of 20% and 6%, respectively. The model effectively balances detection accuracy and real-time performance, making it suitable for digital archiving, smart costume management, and the preservation of traditional opera culture. This research contributes to the advancement of deep learning applications in cultural heritage conservation by providing an intelligent solution for Cantonese Opera costume recognition and classification.

Keywords: Cantonese Opera, YOLOv11, Costume Recognition, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Deep Learning.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Cantonese Opera was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 and was included in China's first national-level intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. As a significant representative of traditional Chinese opera, Cantonese Opera not only carries a profound cultural history but also embodies an essential heritage of ancient Chinese costume culture (Luo, 2022, p. 16; Guo & Li, 2015; Chung, 2022). The costumes of Cantonese Opera are classified according to strict conventions regarding style, color, and embroidery techniques, each carrying deep symbolic meanings. The costumes assigned to different roles reflect the characters' social status, personality traits, and historical background while playing a crucial role in visual identification during performances.

Early Cantonese Opera costumes were primarily modeled after Ming Dynasty attire, adapted into stage costumes for ease of performance. The standardization of these costumes was driven not only by the practical concerns of saving time and financial resources—eliminating the need to design costumes specific to each production—but also by the necessity of helping audiences instantly recognize the roles and identities of the characters (Zhang Jinmei & Zhang Jinfang, 2012). For instance, the Mangpao (python robe) symbolizes royalty and high-ranking officials, armor signifies military figures, long robes are associated with scholars and aristocrats, while short attire is commonly worn by warriors and commoners, reinforcing their respective social identities and character traits. However, due to the extensive variety of Cantonese Opera costumes, general audiences often struggle to accurately distinguish their classifications. Furthermore, during live performances, factors such as stage lighting, actors' dynamic movements, and costume folds can impact the visual characteristics of these costumes.

Cantonese Opera (Yueju) thrives not only in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau but also among overseas Chinese communities worldwide. It serves as a unique cultural symbol of the Lingnan region and constitutes an integral part of China's rich traditional heritage. As a representative art form of humanity's intangible cultural heritage, Cantonese Opera has encountered various challenges in its long history, including a limited repertoire, a shortage of professional talents, and a constrained audience base. However, the advent of the digital age has injected new vitality into its preservation and development. By transforming distant ideals into reality, digital technologies have opened up innovative methods and expanded expressive possibilities for Cantonese Opera, bridging the gap between tradition and contemporary innovation.

Against this backdrop, the automation of Cantonese Opera costume recognition and classification through computer vision technologies emerges as a crucial challenge for the digital preservation of Cantonese Opera culture. Essential activities in the field of digital humanities, such as preservation, analysis, editing, and modeling, serve as the foundation for this endeavor (Burdick, 2016).

In recent years, deep learning technologies, particularly object detection methods, have made significant advancements in the fields of costume recognition, cultural heritage preservation, and traditional opera studies (Das & Deka, 2024; Yu et al., 2022; Ji et al., 2024). Traditional costume recognition methods primarily rely on handcrafted feature extraction techniques, such as Scale-Invariant Feature Transform (SIFT) and Histogram of Oriented Gradients (HOG). However, these methods exhibit limited robustness in complex environments involving background clutter, variations in lighting conditions, and overlapping costumes (Mao, Lee, & Hong, 2024).

With the rise of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), researchers have increasingly adopted models such as VGG, ResNet, and EfficientNet for costume classification, yielding promising results (Jian-jun, Liu, Shen, Wang, & Dong, 2020; Kuzmichev et al., 2018; Nasim, Mumtaz, Ahmad, & Ali, 2024). However, the recognition of Cantonese Opera costumes extends beyond static costume patterns—it also encompasses dynamic complexities within live performance settings. To enhance both recognition accuracy and real-time processing capabilities, more advanced object detection methods are required to address the specific challenges posed by the Cantonese Opera performance environment.

The YOLO (You Only Look Once) series of object detection algorithms, known for their efficiency, real-time performance, and high accuracy, have been widely applied in costume detection. Previous studies have utilized YOLOv5 and YOLOv8 for costume and fabric recognition, achieving promising results. For example, Sun et al. (2024) employed YOLOv8 and the Single Shot MultiBox Detector (SSD) deep learning model to detect and recognize blue printed fabric patterns while evaluating their performance on a dataset. Ren et al. (2022) integrated ResNet with YOLOv5, optimizing the backbone network to enhance costume classification accuracy.

The latest YOLOv11 introduces optimizations in Dynamic Feature Fusion (DFF), the Adaptive Transformer Mechanism (ViT-YOLO), and Adaptive IoU (AIoU) loss. Compared to YOLOv9, this model improves small-object detection, adapts better to complex backgrounds, and enhances the distinction of overlapping objects (Lui et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024). Therefore, this study proposes an automated classification method for Cantonese Opera costumes based on YOLOv11 and constructs a high-quality dataset to facilitate the digital preservation and intelligent management of Cantonese Opera culture.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve efficient and automated recognition of Cantonese Opera costumes through deep learning and object detection technologies. The specific objectives include:

1. Constructing a high-quality Cantonese Opera costume dataset covering ten major costume categories (e.g., court robes, armor, long robes, short garments, women's costumes, Taoist robes, monk robes, specialty costumes, and celestial costumes). This dataset will ensure diversity and representativeness, enhancing the model's generalization ability.
2. Implementing YOLOv11 for Cantonese Opera costume detection, optimizing the feature extraction module to improve detection accuracy in complex environments such as stage lighting variations, fabric folds, and actor occlusions, thereby enhancing the model's robustness and adaptability.
3. An improved YOLOv11-based framework incorporating the Feature Fusion Attention Network (FFA-Net) to enhance the accuracy and robustness of Cantonese Opera costume detection.
4. Developing an intelligent costume management and recommendation system to support opera performance management, Cantonese Opera digital museums, and cultural dissemination, promoting the digital preservation and intelligent management of Cantonese Opera culture.

1.3 Research Contributions

1. Construction of the first YOLOv11 Cantonese Opera costume dataset: This study systematically collects and annotates Cantonese Opera costume data for the first time, providing a high-quality training dataset. It covers ten major costume categories, supporting intelligent recognition and classification of Cantonese Opera costumes and filling the gap in large-scale dataset construction in this field.
2. Proposal of an improved YOLOv11 costume detection model: The study introduces the FFA-net mechanism to enhance focus on key regions of Cantonese Opera costumes, thereby improving detection accuracy in complex scenarios.
3. Development of an intelligent Cantonese Opera costume management system: This system supports digital archiving of opera costumes, establishes a standardized classification database, and promotes systematic storage and efficient management. Furthermore, it enables intelligent opera recommendations by integrating costume features with character roles, optimizing performance scheduling, improving management efficiency, and advancing the digital transformation of opera performance. Additionally, the system contributes to cultural heritage

preservation by leveraging AI to identify and restore Cantonese Opera costumes, providing technical support for their preservation, restoration, and digital exhibition, thus fostering the sustainable development and innovative dissemination of Cantonese Opera culture.

2. Related Work

2.1 Deep Learning Methods for Costume Recognition

Traditional costume recognition methods primarily rely on handcrafted feature extraction techniques such as Scale-Invariant Feature Transform (SIFT) and Histogram of Oriented Gradients (HOG), as well as machine learning algorithms like Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Random Forest (Lowe, 2004). However, the rich colors, intricate patterns, and diverse styles of Cantonese Opera costumes present significant challenges for computer vision tasks. The high dimensionality and complexity of costume features increase computational costs, potentially leading to feature redundancy, higher computational complexity, and reduced recognition accuracy. Traditional manual classification and feature-based approaches are not only time-consuming and labor-intensive but also struggle to scale efficiently for large datasets (citation needed). In contrast, deep learning methods enable automatic feature extraction, capturing the deep structural features of Cantonese Opera costumes, thus improving both recognition efficiency and accuracy.

In recent years, deep learning has been widely applied to costume image recognition, primarily in the following areas:

CNN-based Static Costume Classification: For example, Ji et al. (2024) employed a CNN combined with keypoint detection and channel attention mechanisms to classify Zhuang ethnic costumes, achieving 91.2% (top-3) and 95.6% (top-5) classification accuracy, with pixel-level accuracy of 90.5%, an average precision of 83.7%, recall of 80.1%, and an F1-score of 81.2%, demonstrating superior performance over traditional methods.

Transformer-based Costume Recognition: For instance, Ma et al. (2024) applied Vision Transformer (ViT) to costume recognition, achieving 97.4% accuracy on a self-constructed dataset and 91.7% accuracy on the HMDB51 dataset while significantly reducing computational costs.

Object Detection-Based Costume Classification: Liu et al. (2023) introduced an improved YOLOv5 model for Chinese opera costume recognition, incorporating Coordinate Attention (CA), Bi-directional Feature Pyramid Network (BiFPN), and Distance IoU (DIoU) loss, enhancing detection accuracy and robustness in complex environments.

Although CNN and Transformer-based models have achieved success in static costume classification, they lack real-time processing capabilities and struggle with dynamic object detection in Cantonese Opera performances. Therefore, YOLO-based object detection models have emerged as a more suitable choice.

2.2 Application of YOLO in Costume Recognition

The YOLO (You Only Look Once) series has been widely applied in various fields due to its efficiency, real-time performance, and single-stage detection architecture. It has been successfully used in fashion detection (Ma et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2021), road and pedestrian detection (Liu et al., 2021), and cultural heritage preservation (Zhang et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2024). Compared to Faster R-CNN and SSD, YOLO offers faster inference speed, lower computational costs, and competitive accuracy in object detection tasks.

2.2.1 Application of YOLO in Modern Fashion Detection

In recent years, YOLO has been widely used for modern fashion recognition, particularly in the fashion industry, personalized recommendations, and smart retail. For example, Chang & Zhang (2022) employed YOLOv5s for fashion style recognition and compared its performance with YOLOv3, YOLOv4, and Faster R-CNN. Their experiments showed that YOLOv5s achieved a mean average precision (mAP) of 98.4% after 100 training epochs, which further improved to 99.1% after 300 epochs, surpassing other models while maintaining a smaller model size and faster detection speed.

Nguyen et al. (2023) applied YOLOv5l for fashion detection and classification, optimizing hyperparameter tuning to achieve a maximum detection accuracy of 93.3% and a classification accuracy of 77.2%.

Yousuf et al. (2019) studied the performance of YOLOv3 and SSD in movie costume detection, constructing the IMDB-Attire dataset (8,000 movie scene images with 60 labeled clothing categories). YOLOv3 achieved an overall mAP of 64.14%, with the top 5 clothing categories reaching 91.29%, outperforming SSD (mAP 44.76%).

These studies validate YOLO's effectiveness in modern fashion detection. However, they primarily focus on contemporary fashion recognition rather than cultural and traditional garments, particularly Cantonese opera costumes, which remain an underexplored area in object detection research.

2.2.2 Research Gap: Challenges in Cantonese Opera Costume Detection

Current research in clothing detection primarily focuses on daily fashion, branded apparel, movie character costumes, and some ethnic or traditional textiles. However, studies specifically targeting opera costumes remain highly limited. As an

essential part of Chinese traditional culture, Cantonese opera costumes present several detection challenges:

1. **Lack of Datasets:** Existing studies mainly rely on DeepFashion, IMDB-Attire, and VITON datasets, which lack Cantonese opera costume samples, restricting the application of deep learning in this domain.
2. **Complex Costume Structures:** Cantonese opera costumes feature intricate embroidery, layered structures, and gold-silver thread craftsmanship. Costumes for different roles often share highly similar visual characteristics, making it difficult for conventional classification methods to distinguish them accurately.
3. **Challenging Stage Environments:** Recognizing Cantonese opera costumes requires adapting to variable stage lighting, dynamic performer movements, and overlapping characters. Traditional YOLO versions struggle to maintain stable performance under these conditions.

To address this research gap, this study improves YOLOv11 with the following optimization: **FFAnet** Optimizes bounding box prediction, improving detection accuracy and stability. **Real-time Detection Optimization:** Enhances Cantonese opera costume recognition, supporting digital opera archiving, costume management, and intelligent opera recommendations.

2.3 Application of YOLO in Cultural Heritage Preservation

In recent years, the application of deep learning in cultural heritage preservation has rapidly expanded, encompassing traditional textile recognition, historical building monitoring, ancient document digitization, and ceramic restoration. Among these, YOLO has demonstrated significant potential in the automatic detection, restoration, and intelligent management of cultural heritage due to its efficiency and real-time capabilities.

In the protection of traditional textiles and costumes, YOLO has been employed for intelligent identification and classification. For instance, Sun et al. (2024) utilized YOLOv8 to detect Nantong blue calico prints, achieving an optimized detection accuracy of 83.36% while reducing computational costs. Liu et al. (2023) applied an improved YOLOv5 model for the recognition of Chinese opera costumes, integrating attention mechanisms (CA), bidirectional feature pyramids (BiFPN), and DIoU loss functions, significantly enhancing detection accuracy in complex environments. These studies indicate that YOLO is highly effective in the fine-grained detection of intricate costume features.

For historical building preservation, YOLO has been primarily used for structural damage monitoring and restoration. Tang et al. (2024) employed YOLOv5 to detect damage in the Shanhaiguan Great Wall, where the optimized YOLOv5m achieved an mAP of 0.801. In video-based seasonal damage monitoring, its mAP

reached 0.877, enabling real-time monitoring and rapid maintenance. Similarly, Mishra et al. (2022) utilized YOLOv5 to monitor cracks, peeling, and other deterioration in the Dadi-Poti tombs, achieving an mAP of 93.7%, outperforming Faster R-CNN and demonstrating YOLO's reliability in structural health monitoring for cultural heritage sites.

YOLO has also been applied in the automated detection of cultural landscapes and gardens. Gao et al. (2024) implemented YOLOv8 for Jiangnan classical garden detection, improving mAP@0.5 by 8.7%, reaching 57.1%. The model was effectively used for the digital preservation of architectural elements, stone bridges, and rock formations. Karimi et al. (2024) employed YOLOv7 to identify damages in Portuguese ceramic tiles, detecting glaze peeling, cracks, and missing tiles, achieving an mAP of 90.7% in missing tile detection, thus providing an intelligent solution for ceramic restoration.

For the preservation of ancient texts and manuscripts, Tang et al. (2022) applied YOLO for the recognition of Shuishu ancient script, constructing the Shuishu_T dataset with 111 character categories. Although Faster R-CNN achieved the highest recognition accuracy (87.8%), YOLO demonstrated superior real-time performance and lightweight deployment capabilities, making it more suitable for automated heritage documentation.

Despite advancements in YOLO's application in cultural heritage preservation, challenges remain in Cantonese opera costume recognition, particularly due to data scarcity, intricate costume structures, and dynamic stage environments. This study proposes optimizing YOLOv11 for enhanced intelligent detection of Cantonese opera costumes. First, the introduction of an FFAnet mechanism will improve the detection of fine costume details. Additionally, a standardized Cantonese opera costume dataset will be constructed, encompassing 10 major categories, including Mangpao (imperial robes), armor, long robes, short attire, and Fengguan Xiapei (phoenix coronet and cape), addressing the research gap in intelligent detection of opera costumes. This study will explore the applications of YOLO in intelligent Cantonese opera costume recognition, digital archiving, and smart management, contributing to the digital preservation and transmission of Cantonese opera culture.

3. Methodology

This study was divided into three different phases. The first phase involved data collection and preprocessing, focusing on building a high-quality Cantonese opera costume dataset through image acquisition, annotation, enhancement, and data cleaning. The second phase used different image recognition models to classify Cantonese opera costumes and used deep learning to automatically classify Cantonese opera costume patterns, shapes, and colors. The third phase attempted to improve the

model to improve accuracy, combining channel attention with pixel attention to efficiently handle uneven haze distribution and extract detail features of different scales and types.

3.1 Data Collection and Preprocessing

3.1.1 Data Sources

Deep learning techniques, particularly object detection methods, have made significant progress in areas such as garment recognition, cultural heritage preservation, and Chinese opera research (Das & Deka, 2024; Yu et al., 2022; Ji et al., 2024). In this study, we classify Cantonese opera costume based on shape, decorative patterns, and color. Using these classification criteria, we constructed a high-quality Cantonese opera costume dataset comprising 1,000 high-resolution images, representing 10 distinct types of costumes. This dataset integrates both visual and structural information, providing a comprehensive foundation for automatic Cantonese opera costume classification and evaluation.

The Cantonese opera costume dataset was primarily constructed from two sources: first, through collaboration with experts in Cantonese opera culture and costume design, we collected costume images from various Cantonese opera troupes and cultural research institutions; second, publicly available resources on Cantonese opera were also utilized to source representative costume images. All images were acquired in strict compliance with copyright regulations and are intended solely for academic research purposes.

To enhance the data collection process, a hybrid approach was employed. The Scrapy framework was used for automated web scraping to extract costume images from publicly available Cantonese opera resource databases. Additionally, collaboration with Cantonese opera experts and photographers facilitated the acquisition of high-quality, high-resolution images through manual photography. Challenges in Data Collection and Solutions:

Lighting Reflection and Shadow Issues → Bilateral filtering was applied to denoise the images, effectively preserving edge details while reducing noise.

Complex Background Interference → Background segmentation algorithms, such as GrabCut, were employed to remove distracting elements.

Inconsistent Image Resolution → All images were standardized to 1024×1024 pixels to ensure uniform input for the model and maintain consistency across the dataset.

3.1.2 Data Annotation

Data annotation was carried out by Cantonese opera experts and costume scholars. Each image was meticulously annotated, including costume categories (e.g., „official robes“, „monk costumes“), costume details (e.g., „dragon pattern on dragon

robes”), colors, and decorative features. To ensure the accuracy of annotations, all annotators had at least 5 years of experience in Cantonese opera culture and costume knowledge. Furthermore, multiple rounds of validation and review were conducted for each annotation, with cross-checking by different experts to reduce subjective bias and errors. During the annotation process, a semi-supervised learning approach was employed, where some difficult-to-annotate images were automatically labeled and subsequently corrected by human annotators. This approach not only improved the efficiency of annotation but also ensured the high quality of the large-scale dataset. Annotation consistency was tested using Inter-Annotator Agreement (IAA), achieving a final Kappa coefficient of 0.92, indicating a high level of data annotation quality.

This study’s dataset includes 10 categories of Cantonese opera costumes, each representing a specific role in Cantonese opera and reflecting the richness of the culture and the diversity of the characters. The categories include: official robes (worn by officials, often featuring bird and beast motifs, with colors such as red, black, and blue); monk costumes (simple designs with subtle colors, rich in cultural meaning); Taoist costumes (featuring specific Taoist symbols, commonly in black, red, yellow, and blue, with decorative Taiji patterns); military officer costumes (distinct military features, often including metal ornaments, shoulder pads, and waist armor, emphasizing strength and authority); female costumes (elegantly decorated with intricate designs such as flowing skirts and embroidered patterns); long robes (worn by scholars and wealthy families at formal occasions, with a dignified design, typically made of silk or other glossy fabrics); specialty costumes (featuring regional or seasonal variations, such as scholar’s robes, wedding attire, and mourning garments); immortal costumes (with a strong sense of mystery, often in light, flowing colors with cloud motifs, typically accompanied by cloud shoulders and capes); Mang robes (signature costumes for emperors and high-ranking officials, featuring dragon patterns and exquisite craftsmanship, symbolizing authority); and short-cut costumes (designed for characters requiring high mobility, with simpler designs that allow for ease of movement). Each costume category not only differs in design but also represents specific cultural and visual characteristics, presenting unique challenges for object detection tasks.

3.1.3 Data Preprocessing

To ensure data quality and enhance model robustness, this study implemented a series of preprocessing techniques, including image preprocessing, bounding box optimization, and feature extraction. These steps were designed to improve model training efficiency, reduce noise interference, and enhance the stability, ensuring the reliability of Cantonese opera costume classification. Specifically, image preprocessing involved steps such as resizing, normalization, and denoising to ensure uniformity and clarity across all input images. Bounding box optimization was applied to refine the placement of key costume features, enhancing detection accuracy. Feature

extraction focused on capturing the distinctive visual characteristics of each costume type, such as patterns, colors, and textures, which are critical for effective classification. These preprocessing steps collectively contributed to a more efficient and accurate model for Cantonese opera costume recognition and classification.

The dataset was initially divided into three subsets: training set (70%) for model learning, validation set (20%) for hyperparameter tuning, and test set (10%) for final performance evaluation. Additionally, to improve model stability and mitigate overfitting, K-fold cross-validation ($K=5$) was employed. In this process, the dataset was divided into five equal subsets, with each subset serving as the validation set in turn, thereby comprehensively assessing the model's generalization capability.

Image Resizing and Normalization

In this study, all images were resized to a uniform input resolution (e.g., 1024×1024) to ensure consistency across different detection models, preserving the original aspect ratio via letterbox padding where necessary. Following resizing, pixel intensities were normalized to stabilize training and accelerate convergence.

Specifically, each pixel value I was mapped to the $[0,1]$ range by subtracting the minimum intensity and dividing by the intensity span, i.e.,

$$I_{norm} = \frac{I - I_{min}}{I_{max} - I_{min}}$$

where I_{min} and I_{max} represent the minimum and maximum values in the original image. In certain experiments, meanest normalization was also considered, subtracting per-channel means and dividing by standard deviations, as derived from large-scale datasets. This unified approach to resizing and normalization was applied consistently across all data samples, promoting fair model comparison, and improving overall training robustness.

3.1.4 Data Augmentation

In addition to resizing and normalization, data augmentation was implemented to improve the model's generalization and robustness to varying illumination, viewpoints, and background complexities. Standard transformations included random cropping (while preserving key target regions), random horizontal flipping, and rotations of up to $\pm 90^\circ$, emulating diverse real-world perspectives. Furthermore, color jitter adjustments (encompassing brightness, contrast, saturation, and hue) were applied to simulate a broad range of lighting conditions. Advanced strategies such as Mosaic were also employed, whereby multiple images were blended into a single training sample. This comprehensive augmentation pipeline ensured a more robust

learning process, particularly when handling the diverse shapes, color, and decorative elements characteristic of Cantonese opera costumes.

Annotation Formatting and Anchor Box Adjustments

To enable a fair comparison across multiple detection frameworks, all annotation files were standardized to a uniform format by converting bounding box coordinates and class labels to a consistent structure. For anchor-based detection algorithms, such as SSD and YOLO variants, default anchor settings were further optimized through K-Means clustering on ground-truth bounding box dimensions, thus generating anchor sizes better aligned with the diverse shapes and scales observed in Cantonese opera costumes. This unified annotation and anchor optimization strategy was essential for ensuring robust performance evaluation, reducing potential biases arising from incompatible data representations or poorly fitted anchor boxes.

Scene processing

In this study, to identify the details of Cantonese opera costumes more effectively in high-noise or strong reflective scenes (such as fine embroidery), we first collected noisy costume images, annotated them, and constructed a denoising training set. Subsequently, deep denoising networks such as DnCNN were used to perform end-to-end learning, striving to suppress noise and weaken light spot interference while not destroying the tiny texture features on the surface of the costume. The formula is as follows:

Given a noisy image y , we record the clean image as x . Assuming that the noise can be represented as n , we have:

$$y = x + n$$

In DnCNN, a deep convolutional network $R_{\theta}(\cdot)$ is used to learn to predict the noise n . Therefore, the output of the network is:

$$\hat{n} = R_{\theta}(y)$$

Where θ is a trainable parameter of the network. The final denoising result can be restored through the residual:

$$\hat{x} = y - \hat{n}$$

During the training phase, if we have paired (y_i, x_i) samples (or directly use the noise truth n_i as supervision), we can use the mean square error (MSE) loss to learn θ :

$$\theta^* = \underset{\theta}{\operatorname{argmin}} \sum_i || R_{\theta}(y_i) - (y_i - x_i) ||^2$$

That is, let $R_\theta(y_i)$ be as close as possible to the true noise $ni=y_i-x_i$. In this way, in the inference phase, if the noise image y is input, the network can output an approximate noise \hat{n} , thereby obtaining the denoised image $\hat{x} = y - \hat{n}$.

After denoising and enhancement, these images are input into downstream target detection models, including benchmark methods such as SSD, Faster R-CNN, RT-DETR, YOLOv7x and YOLOv11x. By comparing the detection accuracy and recall rate of various models before and after denoising, we can evaluate the actual effect of this preprocessing on the recognition of complex details in costumes and provide a basis for subsequent model optimization.

3.2 Deep Learning Model Based Classification

The classification of Cantonese opera costumes involves a comprehensive analysis of decorative patterns, shapes, and craftsmanship techniques. However, the complexity of surface textures, the diversity of artistic styles, and the intricacy of manufacturing details pose significant challenges to traditional classification methods. Traditional handcrafted feature extraction and rule-based algorithms often rely on low-level features (such as edges, color histograms, and shape descriptors), which fail to effectively capture the subtle decorative differences in Cantonese opera costumes, thereby limiting classification accuracy and effectiveness. Meanwhile, machine learning methods such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forests (RF), or k-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) have achieved certain improvements in classification performance but still face limitations when handling the fine-grained structures of high-resolution images of Cantonese opera costumes.

In recent years, deep learning, particularly Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and their extensions in object detection, has made automated classification of Cantonese opera costumes possible. This study employs common real-time object detection models, including SSD (Single Shot MultiBox Detector), Faster R-CNN (Faster Region-Based Convolutional Neural Network), RT-DETR (Real-Time Detection Transformer), YOLOv7x (You Only Look Once version 7x), and YOLOv11x (You Only Look Once version 11x). These models can simultaneously detect multiple attributes of Cantonese opera costumes, such as decorative patterns, object shapes, and colors, within a single image.

3.3 Model Improvement

This study adopts the YOLOv11 (Jocher et al., 2023) model as the infrastructure of our object detection system for Cantonese opera costumes based on several important factors. First, YOLO11, the latest advancement from the Ultralytics team, builds on the well-established strengths of the YOLO series—delivering both high-speed processing and robust detection accuracy. Its advanced neural architecture and refined training strategies have proven effective across a range of complex visual tasks,

which is crucial for accurately capturing the intricate decorative patterns and subtle craftsmanship inherent in Cantonese opera costumes.

Second, YOLO11 represents a significant leap forward in object detection technology. By serving as a cutting-edge baseline, it enables us to further refine and adapt detection strategies specifically for the unique challenges posed by Cantonese opera costumes. Leveraging YOLO11 allows us to address the fine details and diverse visual features of these costumes while benefiting from its strong adaptability and scalability.

However, we are mindful of some practical limitations of YOLO11—particularly its relatively large model size, which can complicate deployment on resource-constrained platforms like mobile devices. This is a critical consideration for our project, as our ultimate goal is to develop an efficient, practical system for the automatic recognition and classification of Cantonese opera costumes. Additionally, when dealing with Cantonese opera costumes, which exhibit intricate textures, diverse artistic styles, and complex structural details, YOLO11 still has room for improvement in accurately distinguishing fine-grained decorative elements. Although YOLO11 performs well in many aspects, further optimization and adaptation are needed for specialized domains such as the visual classification of traditional opera costumes.

To address these issues, we propose an optimized YOLO11 model integrating FFA-Net. FFA-Net enhances feature extraction by refining multi-scale spatial representations and improving attention mechanisms, making it particularly effective for capturing the detailed textures and elaborate patterns characteristic of Cantonese opera costumes. By incorporating FFA-Net into the backbone of YOLO11, we strengthen the model's ability to distinguish intricate costume features while maintaining computational efficiency. This improvement enhances the detection accuracy of various costume types, ensuring a more precise classification of different roles in Cantonese opera. The improved YOLO11 model structure is shown in Figure 1.

In deep neural network model optimization, achieving a lightweight design is a critical goal, especially when deploying models on resource-constrained devices. In the original YOLO11 model, the C3K2 module (based on the CSPNet structure) handles the input feature map by splitting it into two parts and using a traditional bottleneck module for multi-scale feature extraction. However, such conventional bottleneck structures involve multiple convolutional layers and incur high computational costs.

To address these issues, we replace the conventional C3K2 module with an FFA-Net-based module (Xu et al., 2020). Drawing on the design of FFA-Net, our module incorporates a Feature Attention (FA) mechanism that integrates both channel attention and pixel attention. The FFA-Net-based module is shown in Figure 2. Specifically, the channel attention component uses global average pooling followed by convolutional layers and non-linear activations to assign adaptive weights to different channels—thereby emphasizing features that capture rich texture and decorative details. Meanwhile, the pixel attention component dynamically assigns weights to each spatial location, allowing the network to focus on regions with intricate patterns and high-frequency details.

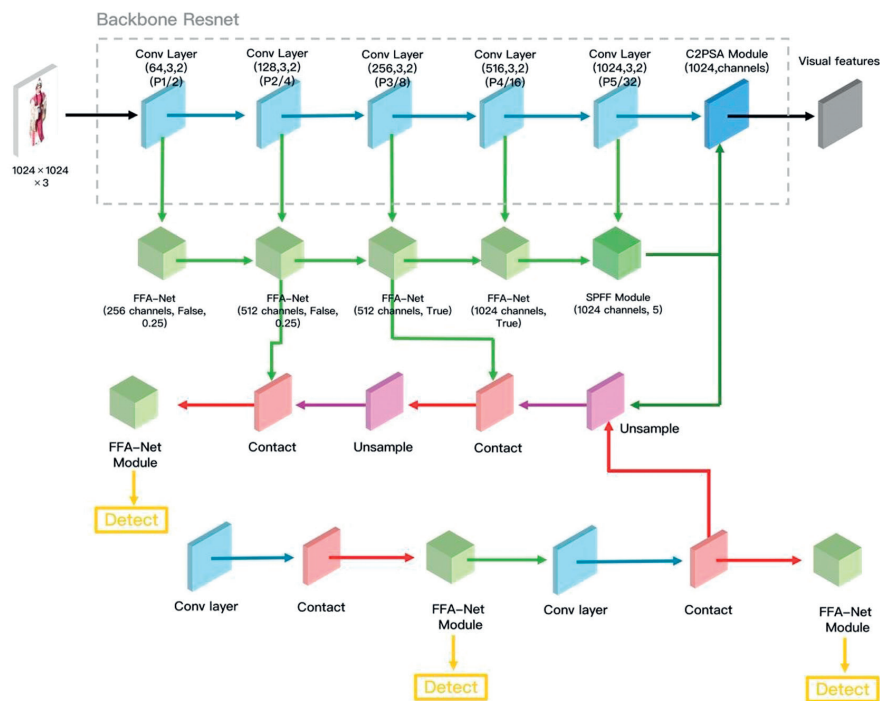
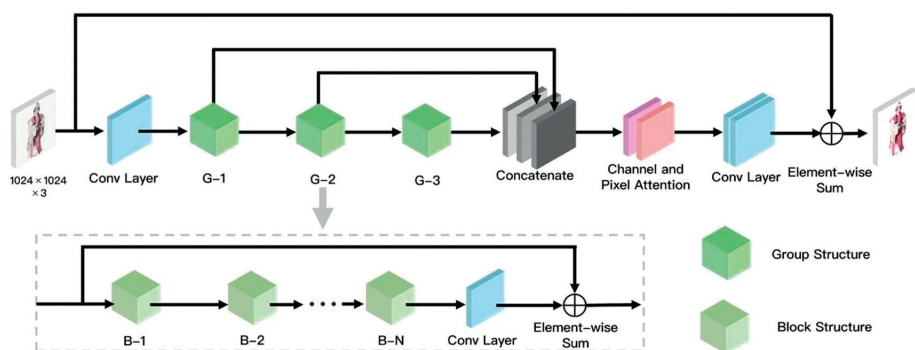


Figure 1. Model structure diagram of YOLO11

Furthermore, by embedding local residual learning within this FFA-Net-based module, less informative or redundant features can be bypassed through skip connections, ensuring that the network efficiently concentrates on salient features. The adaptive fusion of multi-scale features further refines the feature representation while reducing the overall computational cost and memory usage. This design not only results in a lightweight architecture with faster inference speeds and reduced model size but also enhances the model's ability to accurately capture the fine decorative details characteristic of Cantonese opera costumes—an essential requirement for our real-time application in resource-limited environments.



3.4 Evaluation Indicators

To comprehensively assess the performance of YOLOv11 in Cantonese opera costume classification, this study employed a combination of classification evaluation metrics and object detection metrics, ensuring a rigorous and systematic model assessment. The evaluation focused on measuring classification accuracy, detection precision, and model robustness across different Cantonese opera costume style, shapes, and patterns attributes.

1) Classification Metrics (Pattern, Shape, Craftsmanship Style). To evaluate the categorization of Cantonese opera costume attributes, the following metrics were used: Accuracy. Measures the overall classification performance, reflecting the proportion of correctly classified Cantonese opera costume attributes.

$$\text{Accuracy} = \frac{\text{TruePositives(TP)} + \text{TrueNegatives(TN)}}{\text{Total Number of Samples}}$$

Precision measures the proportion of correctly classified Cantonese opera costume features among all predicted instances.

$$\text{Precision} = \frac{\text{TruePositives(TP)}}{\text{TruePositives(TP)} + \text{FalseNegatives(FN)}}$$

Recall evaluates the model's ability to correctly retrieve all relevant Cantonese opera costume attributes.

$$\text{Recall} = \frac{\text{TruePositives(TP)}}{\text{TruePositives(TP)} + \text{FalseNegatives(FN)}}$$

F1-Score. Represents the harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a balanced evaluation, particularly for imbalanced Cantonese opera costume categories.

$$\text{F1 Score} = 2 \cdot \frac{\text{Precision} \times \text{Recall}}{\text{Precision} + \text{Recall}}$$

2) Object Detection Metrics (Bounding Box Evaluation). Since YOLOv11 performs both classification and object localization, it is essential to evaluate bounding box precision using the following metrics:

Mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5:0.95). Measures the model's ability to correctly detect ceramic elements across different confidence thresholds, averaging precision over multiple IoU thresholds (from 0.5 to 0.95). Higher mAP scores indicate higher object detection accuracy for various Cantonese opera costume categories (e.g., Mang Robes, Official Robes, Military Costumes, etc.).

Intersection over Union (IoU). Evaluates the spatial overlap between predicted bounding boxes and ground truth annotations. A higher IoU score indicates more precise localization of Cantonese opera costume patterns, shapes, and color details. IoU is calculated as:

$$IoU = \frac{\text{Area of Intersection}}{\text{Area of Union}}$$

3) Model Robustness Analysis.

Experiments were designed to investigate the impact of data augmentation strategies on model generalization and robustness. Techniques such as Mosaic Augmentation, MixUp, and GridMask were tested to determine their ability to improve detection performance under occlusions, varying lighting conditions, and artistic irregularities commonly observed in Cantonese opera costume.

In conclusion, by leveraging these evaluation metrics and experimental analyses, this study ensured that the YOLOv11 model was thoroughly validated, demonstrating its effectiveness in Cantonese opera costume classification applications.

4) K-Fold Cross-Validation.

To further ensure the reliability and generalization capability of our model, we employed 5-Fold Cross-Validation. The entire dataset was partitioned into five equal folds; in each iteration, one-fold was used as the validation set while the remaining four folds served as the training set. This process was repeated five times, and the final performance metrics were calculated as the average of the results from all folds. This strategy minimizes potential biases from a single random split and provides a robust estimate of the model's performance across diverse subsets of Cantonese opera costume images.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Performance Evaluation

Table 1 summarizes the performance comparison of six detection models on our high-resolution multimodal dataset of Cantonese opera costumes. The table reports the mean Average Precision at 50% IoU (mAP@50), recall, precision, and F1 score. We evaluated the following models: Faster R-CNN, SSD, RT-DETR, YOLOv7x, baseline YOLOv11x, and the optimized YOLOv11 (integrated with FFA-Net, SobelConv, and C2PSA).

Faster R-CNN and SSD both achieve exceptionally high mAP@50 (96% and 97%, respectively) and demonstrate strong precision and recall, reflecting their ef-

fectiveness in detecting complex costume details under sufficient computational resources. In contrast, RT-DETR attains a moderate mAP@50 of 69% and a fair balance of recall (67%) and precision (79%) yet may still encounter efficiency challenges in real-time scenarios. Meanwhile, YOLOv7x and YOLOv11x yield more modest mAP@50 scores (43% and 64%, respectively), albeit typically optimized for faster inference. Notably, the improved YOLOv11 outperforms its baseline counterpart, raising mAP@50 from 64% to 67% and recall from 48% to 68% (a 20% boost), albeit at the expense of lower precision (down 17% to 54%), indicating a deliberate trade-off that improves overall generalization and results in a higher F1 score (60% versus 54%).

Table 1: The performance comparison

Model Version	mAP@50 (%)	Recall (%)	Precision (%)	F1 score (%)
Faster R-CNN	96	92	93	86
SSD	97	91	93	93
RT-DETR	69	67	79	55
YOLOv7x	43	51	29	26
YOLOv11x	64	48	71	54
YOLOv11(improved)	67	68	54	60

The integration of the FFA-Net module, which leverages channel and pixel attention to adaptively highlight high-frequency details and textures—such as embroidery and trim—without relying on explicit edge detection operators; the incorporation of SobelConv, which reinforces explicit edge detection and boundary refinement to significantly reduce misclassifications on complex decorative patterns; and the refinement of C2PSA (Channel-Pyramid Spatial Attention), which enables the model to selectively concentrate on critical decorative regions while suppressing background noise. Combined, these enhancements yield improved feature representation and classification accuracy for intricate Cantonese opera costumes.

Although Faster R-CNN and SSD achieve higher mAP values, their real-time deployment is limited by substantial computational overhead—Faster R-CNN’s two-stage processing and SSD’s potentially heavy backbone—as well as RT-DETR’s higher complexity due to its Transformer-based design. In contrast, YOLOv11 is specifically optimized for lower-latency inference, and with our enhancements (FFA-Net, SobelConv, and refined C2PSA), it achieves a balanced trade-off between detection accuracy and inference speed. This makes the improved YOLOv11 particularly well-suited for real-world, real-time applications, such as live performance analysis and online Cantonese opera costume recognition.

In conclusion, this section presented a comprehensive evaluation of the optimized YOLOv11 model against major baseline detectors. Despite two-stage detectors like Faster R-CNN and certain one-stage methods such as SSD reaching

higher mAP, they often incur slower inference speeds, making them less ideal for real- time Cantonese opera costume detection. The proposed enhancements–FFA-Net, SobelConv, and refined C2PSA–collectively boost YOLOv11’s performance in detecting complex decorative elements while retaining reasonable speed, ultimately better aligning with the needs of digitization and online recognition of Cantonese opera costumes in real-world contexts.

4.2 K-Fold Cross-Validation

To ensure the robustness and generalization capability of the improved YOLOv11 model (integrated with FFA-Net, SobelConv, and refined C2PSA), a 5-Fold Cross-Validation was conducted, with the results summarized in Table 2. The mAP@50 values remained within a stable range of 64% to 70%, averaging 67%, indicating consistent detection performance across different validation splits. The Recall values ranged from 65% to 71%, demonstrating a relatively stable retrieval rate of relevant costume features. Although Precision varied between 50% and 58%, this trade-off reflects the model’s emphasis on reducing false negatives, resulting in a balanced detection strategy. Furthermore, the F1 score fluctuated between 57% and

63%, reflecting a stable compromise between precision and recall. These results confirm that the proposed enhancements effectively improve the feature representation and classification accuracy of the YOLOv11 model for Cantonese opera costume detection.

Table 2: The Result of K-Fold Cross-Validation

Discount	mAP@50 (%)	Recall (%)	Precision (%)	F1 score (%)
1 st discount	66	67	53	59
2 nd discount	68	70	55	61
3 rd discount	64	65	50	57
4 th discount	70	71	58	63
5 th discount	67	68	54	60

4.3 Real-time Monitoring System

A comprehensive evaluation of the Cantonese opera costume detection model was conducted on the test set, measuring classification accuracy for ten distinct categories (100 images). The results indicate that Taoist costumes, Mangpao, Monk attire, and Military officer costumes each achieved a perfect 100% accuracy, underscoring the model’s strong capability to recognize these roles. Meanwhile, Official robes attained a 90% accuracy, whereas long robes, short fight attire, and Female costumes

each reached 80%. By contrast, Immortal costumes and Special costumes showed notably lower accuracies (10%), suggesting either a shortage of training samples or increased difficulty in distinguishing these categories’ subtle attributes (e.g., ambiguous patterns or similar color schemes). Figure 1 shows the detection results of some test set images.



Figure 1. Test set image detection results

In the real-world setting depicted in Figure 2 (the on-stage performance), the system displays bounding boxes and class labels in real time, overlaying them on the video feed. Each bounding box is color-coded according to the detected costume category, allowing users to visually confirm classification outcomes immediately. This setup leverages the optimized YOLO-based architecture, which combines fast inference with robust feature extraction, thus enabling the model to handle complex background elements and multiple costume classes concurrently. Although certain categories (Immortal, Special) warrant further refinement—potentially through augmented training data or domain-specific enhancements—the current results demonstrate a practical and scalable approach for Cantonese opera costume digitization,

on-site costume recognition, and cultural heritage preservation in live or recorded performances.



Figure 2. Cantonese opera costume visualization interface

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The experimental results demonstrate that our improved YOLOv11 model—enhanced with FFA-Net, SobelConv, and refined C2PSA—achieves significant gains over the baseline YOLOv11 and other detection models. Quantitatively, the improved model increased the $mAP@50$ from 64% to 67% and boosted the recall from 48% to 68%, resulting in a 6% rise in F1 score (from 54% to 60%). These improvements indicate that the adaptive feature fusion and attention mechanisms are effective in capturing complex decorative details intrinsic to Cantonese opera costumes.

In the context of real-time deployment, our optimized YOLOv11 model outperforms two-stage detectors such as Faster R-CNN and even some one-stage alternatives like SSD and RT-DETR in terms of inference speed. While Faster R-CNN and SSD may offer higher absolute mAP values under ideal conditions, their computational overhead and slower processing make them less suitable for on-site or live applications. The improved YOLOv11, with its end-to-end detection pipeline

and streamlined architecture, achieves a lower latency, which is critical for real-world scenarios such as live performance analysis, digital archiving, and online costume recognition.

The practical significance of this work extends beyond mere performance metrics. By enabling rapid and accurate classification of Cantonese opera costumes, our model supports the digitization and preservation of cultural heritage. Automated costume recognition can facilitate the cataloging and analysis of traditional attire, thereby aiding museums, cultural institutions, and online platforms in maintaining an accessible digital repository of Cantonese opera history.

Despite these promising results, there remain areas for further improvement. For instance, certain categories such as Immortal and Special costumes exhibited very low accuracy, likely due to limited training samples or subtle inter-class differences. Future work may focus on enriching the dataset with more diverse examples, exploring advanced data augmentation techniques, or integrating additional domain-specific modules to enhance discrimination among similar classes. Moreover, further optimization of the loss functions and attention mechanisms might yield even greater robustness, especially under extreme conditions such as poor lighting or occlusion.

In summary, our study demonstrates that the integration of FFA-Net, SobelConv, and refined C2PSA into the YOLOv11 framework substantially improves detection performance for Cantonese opera costume classification while maintaining real-time processing capabilities. These enhancements not only provide a robust solution for practical applications such as live performance monitoring and online costume recognition, but also contribute to the broader goal of cultural preservation and digital heritage documentation.

References

- Burdick, A. (2016). Digital humanities. Mit Press.
- Chang, Y.-H., & Zhang, Y.-Y. (2022). Deep Learning for Clothing Style Recognition Using YOLOv5. *Micromachines*, 13(10), 1678. <https://doi.org/10.3390/mi13101678>.
- Chung, F. M.-Y. (2022). Safeguarding traditional theatre amid trauma: career shock among cultural heritage professionals in Cantonese opera. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 28(10), 1091-1106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2131878>.
- Gao, C., Zhang, Q., Tan, Z., Zhao, G., Gao, S., Kim, E., & Shen, T. (2024). Applying optimized YOLOv8 for heritage conservation: enhanced object detection in Jiangnan traditional private gardens. *Heritage Science*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-024-01144-1>.
- Gao, F., Yang, Z., Liu, Q., Zhang, Z., Li, B., & Zhang, H. (2024). Enhanced oracle bone corrosion detection using attention-guided YOLO with ghost convolution. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-024-00178-5>.
- Guo, Q., & Li, X. (2015). Integrated Conservation of the Cantonese Opera Art Museum and Intangible Cultural Heritage. *The International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, XL-5/W7, 187-193. <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprsarchives-xl-5-w7-187-2015>.

- Ji, J., Lao, Y., & Huo, L. (2024). Convolutional neural network application for supply- demand matching in Zhuang ethnic clothing image classification. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-64082-9>.
- Jian-jun, S., Liu, A., Shen, J., Wang, N., & Dong, W. (2020). Principles of Pattern Modification of Court Costume in Ming Dynasty in 3D Simulation. *DEStech Transactions on Computer Science and Engineering, cisnr*. <https://doi.org/10.12783/dtcse/cisnr2020/35173>.
- Jocher, G., Chaurasia, A., & Qiu, J. (2023, January 1). *YOLOv8 by Ultralytics*. GitHub. <https://github.com/ultralytics/ultralytics>.
- Karimi, N., Mishra, M., & Lourenço, P. B. (2024). Deep learning-based automated tile defect detection system for Portuguese cultural heritage buildings. *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 68, 86-98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2024.05.009>.
- Kuzmichev, V., Moskvina, A., Moskvina, M., & Pryor, J. (2018). Research on 3D reconstruction of late Victorian riding skirts. *International Journal of Clothing Science and Technology*, 30(6), 790-807. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijcst-12-2017-0192>.
- Liu, Z., Wu, W., Gu, X., Li, S., Wang, L., & Zhang, T. (2021). Application of Combining YOLO Models and 3D GPR Images in Road Detection and Maintenance. *Remote Sensing*, 13(6), 1081. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs13061081>.
- Lowe, D. G. (2004). Distinctive Image Features from Scale-Invariant Keypoints. *International Journal of Computer Vision*, 60(2), 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:visi.0000029664.99615.94>.
- Lui, M. H., Liu, H., Tang, Z., Yuan, H., Williams, D., Lee, D., Wong, K. C., & Wang, Z. (2024). An Adaptive YOLO11 Framework for the Localisation, Tracking, and Imaging of Small Aerial Targets Using a Pan-Tilt-Zoom Camera Network. *Eng- Advances in Engineering*, 5(4), 3488-3516. <https://doi.org/10.3390/eng5040182>.
- Luo, J. M. (2022). *Cultural Tourism and Cantonese Opera*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003157564>.
- Ma, W., Guan, Z., Wang, X., Yang, C., & Cao, J. (2023). YOLO-FL: A target detection algorithm for reflective clothing wearing inspection. *Displays*, 80, 102561-102561. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.displa.2023.102561>.
- Ma, Y., Wang, X., Yuan, J., Zhang, L., Chen, J., Keshu Fen, & Yu, L. (2024). *Clothing Detection Action Recognition Based on Hierarchical Transformer Networks*. 199-206. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ic-csn63464.2024.10793382>.
- Mao, M., Lee, A., & Hong, M. (2024). Efficient Fabric Classification and Object Detection Using YOLOv10. *Electronics*, 13(19), 3840-3840. <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics13193840>.
- Mishra, M., Barman, T., & Ramana, G. V. (2022). Artificial intelligence-based visual inspection system for structural health monitoring of cultural heritage. *Journal of Civil Structural Health Monitoring*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13349-022-00643-8>.
- Nasim, M., Mumtaz, R., Ahmad, M., & Ali, A. (2024). Fabric Defect Detection in Real World Manufacturing Using Deep Learning. *Information*, 15(8), 476. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info15080476>.
- Nguyen, H. T., Nguyen, K. K., Pham T.-N.-Dien, & T.-Dien, T. (2023). Clothing Detection and Classification with Fine-Tuned YOLO-Based Models. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 127-132. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36819-6-11>.
- Qin, X., Wang, Z., Bai, Y., Xie, X., & Jia, H. (2020). FFA-Net: Feature Fusion Attention Network for Single Image Dehazing. *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, 34(07), 11908-11915. <https://doi.org/10.1609/aaai.v34i07.6865>.
- Ren, F., Liu, Y., Gao, P., Madhavi Devaraj, Zhang, J., & Li, H. (2022). Research on garment image classification and detection algorithm based on improved deep learning. *2022 7th International Conference on Intelligent Computing and Signal Processing (ICSP)*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/icsp54964.2022.9778478>.
- Saad Bin Yousuf, Sajid, H., Poon, S. K., & Matloob Khushi. (2019). IMDB-Attire: A Novel Dataset for Attire Detection and Localization. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 543-553. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36711-4-46>.

- Sharma, A., Kumar, V., & Longchamps, L. (2024). Comparative performance of YOLOv8, YOLOv9, YOLOv10, YOLOv11 and Faster R-CNN models for detection of multiple weed species. *Smart Agricultural Technology*, 100648-100648. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.atech.2024.100648>.
- Sun, K.-K., Huang, J.-W., Yuan, Y.-Y., & Chen, M.-Y. (2024). Classification and recognition of the Nantong blue calico pattern based on deep learning. *Journal of Engineered Fibers and Fabrics*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15589250241270618>.
- Tang, H., Feng, Y., Wang, D., Zhu, R., Wang, L., Hao, S., & Xu, S. (2024). Application of Object Detection Algorithm for Efficient Damages Identification of the Conservation of Heritage Buildings. *Archaeological Prospection*, 31(3), 233-247. <https://doi.org/10.1002/arp.1947>.
- Tang, M., Xie, S., He, M., & Liu, X. (2022). Character Recognition in Endangered Archives: Shui Manuscripts Dataset, Detection and Application Realization. *Applied Sciences*, 12(11), 5361-5361. <https://doi.org/10.3390/app12115361>.
- Yin, D., Tang, W., Chen, P., & Yang, B. (2021). Pig Target Detection from Image Based on Improved YOLO V3. *Communications in Computer and Information Science*, 94-104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78615-1-9>.
- Yu, X., Zhang, L., & Shen, M. (2022). Nantong Blue Calico Image Dataset and Its Recognition. 2022 IEEE Congress on Evolutionary Computation (CEC), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1109/cec55065.2022.9870225>.
- Zhang, J., Zhang, Y., Liu, J., Lan, Y., & Zhang, T. (2024). Human figure detection in Han portrait stone images via enhanced YOLO-v5. *Heritage Science*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-024-01232-2>.
- 张金梅, & 张金芳. (2012). 从粤剧《帝女花》看粤剧服饰. 大舞台, 11, 163-164.

17.

《浮生六記》中的靈魂對話、簡約風景與無限 星空：人生的甘苦味與流淌的幻想曲¹¹⁸

王閱
湖北師範大學（中國）

Burying Bittersweets and Flowing Fantasia: Soul Conversations, Condensed Landscapes, and Endless Starry Nights in Shen Fu's Floating Life at the 2023 BeSeTo Festival

Wang Yue
Hubei Normal University (China)

Abstract: This paper examines Luo Zhou's 2023 Kunqu adaptation of Shen Fu's „Six Chapters of a Floating Life“ at the BeSeTo Festival. It explores how traditional Kunqu aesthetics blend with modern innovation to revitalize classical literati themes through a contemporary lens. The production uses condensed landscapes, fluid music, and fragmented time to address love, memory, and existential transience. It exemplifies how Chinese opera can engage global audiences while retaining its cultural essence.

¹¹⁸ Acknowledgement: I am thankful to Professor Kalina Stefanova from National Academy of Film and Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria, who offers me the opportunity to access theatre performance criticism and the greenness of BeSeTo Festival 2023.

Keywords: Six Chapters of a Floating Life; Kunqu opera; BeSeTo Festival; Luo Zhou; poetic dwelling; cross-cultural performance

I. Introduction

The predominant tone of Shen Fu's nostalgic memories is vividly shown through the dreamy colors on stage – a blend of pinkish white costumes and purplish turquoise backdrops¹¹⁹, which seems to be a rather perfect parallel with the cover picture of *Tremors of Love* (Трyсове на любовта) by a Bulgarian writer Dimitor Tomov, depicted in the fiction from page 24 to 25, “The sun had set now, but its radiance still shone from the orange sky and would long fade into the starry August night until – not fading away – it merged with the orange color of the sunrise.” (Сега слънцето бе заляло, но сиянието му още грееше от оранжевото небе и щеше дълго да осветява в звездната августовска нощ, докато – неизчезнало дакрай – се слееше с портокаловия цвят на изгрева.) The orange colour mixing in with the starry night catches, touches, and reflects the brilliance and radiance of love's vibrations. The same effect has been arguably achieved by the fantastic colors of the stage set and costumes layered on top of each other. All of the images and colors are inextricably interwoven, and they are breathtakingly gorgeous, more than scenic, dreamlike, and yet so genuine. And love will not fade, just as the dazzling light will not. As Chen puts it: “The love Shen and Yunniang feel for each other almost leaps off the page. ... They weather the storms that beset their relationship as best they can, but their mutual respect for one another never wavers.”¹²⁰ Shen characterizes the never-ending brilliance of Yunniang, a lady who lives entirely, if not always happily, as Lin Yutang allegedly described to Yunniang as “one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature.”¹²¹ Yunniang is like the brightest star that constantly shines in the twilight sky, residing in Shen Fu's floating life, not only in his dreams, but also in his inner heart, between drunkenness and sobriety, between reality and illusion. In the backdrop of ink wash starry nights, the nighttime promenade of Shen Fu and Yunniang hand in hand leads to a pavilion, being their home in this floating world, onstage and beyond. With the bright moonbeams peering, Shen Fu's crystal dreaming imagination permeates the November evening air of the 2023 BeSeTo Festival.

Kunqu, one of China's oldest operatic forms originating in the Ming Dynasty (14th–17th centuries), is renowned for its lyrical melodies, refined choreography, and integration of poetry, music, and dance. Characterized by its use of bamboo flutes,

¹¹⁹ Please refer to the stage photos of Nov. 11, 2023. at Shenzhen Poly Theatre.

¹²⁰ Chen: “A Beloved Chinese Classic Gets a Weightless Adaptation,” *Sixthtone*, May 18, 2023

¹²¹ Qtd in “A Beloved Chinese Classic Gets a Weightless Adaptation” by Chen Tian, May 18, 2023, *Sixthtone*

percussion, and symbolic gestures, Kunqu traditionally explores themes of romanticism and literati sensibilities. Despite its historical prestige, Kunqu faces challenges in contemporary preservation, often perceived as disconnected from modern audiences.

Established in 1994, the BeSeTo Festival (derived from Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo) promotes cultural exchange among East Asian nations, expanding recently to include European participation. Hosted annually in rotating locations, the festival showcases avant-garde and traditional performances, fostering dialogue between global theatrical practices. The 2023 edition in Shenzhen featured *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* as a highlight, underscoring Kunqu's potential for cross-cultural resonance.

Luo Zhou, a leading figure in contemporary Kunqu, is celebrated for reinterpreting classical texts through modern narratives. As Dean of the Jiangsu Dramatic Literature Academy, her works—ranging from Shakespearean adaptations to biographical operas—blend traditional aesthetics with innovative staging. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* exemplifies her approach, reimagining Shen Fu's 19th-century memoir as a meditation on memory and loss.

II. Thesis and Methodology

This paper posits that Luo Zhou's adaptation transcends mere historical replication, instead constructing a "poetic dwelling" where past and present coexist. Through close analysis of the production's visual, auditory, and textual layers, the study employs methodologies from performance studies and comparative literature to reveal how Luo Zhou negotiates tradition and modernity. References to Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (6th century) and Shen Fu's source text anchor the discussion in Chinese aesthetic theory.

III. Analysis

1. Poetic Dwelling and Condensed Landscapes: Burying Bittersweets in Reality-Shattering Soul Conversations

The opera's minimalist stage design—featuring ink-wash backdrops and floating veils—evokes the literati's idealized "small gardens" described in Shen Fu's memoir. These condensed landscapes symbolize the tension between ephemeral human experi-

ences and artistic permanence. For instance, Act I's dialogue between Shen Fu and his deceased wife Yunniang, framed by a harp's "trickling water" motif, transforms personal grief into a universal meditation on memory.

The idea of "poetic dwelling" is central to Luo Zhou's adaptation of Shen Fu's "Six Chapters of a Floating Life." This concept, rooted in Chinese literary and philosophical traditions, emphasizes the harmony between human existence and the natural world. In the opera, this is manifested through the minimalist stage design, which uses ink-wash backdrops and floating veils to create an ethereal atmosphere. These elements evoke the literati's idealized „small gardens,“ which are not merely physical spaces but also metaphors for the inner world of the characters.

The condensed landscapes in the opera symbolize the tension between the ephemeral nature of human experiences and the permanence of artistic expression. The ink-wash backdrops, reminiscent of traditional Chinese paintings, suggest vast landscapes in a minimalistic form. This technique allows the audience to focus on the emotional depth of the characters rather than being distracted by elaborate scenery. The floating veils, which appear throughout the performance, add a sense of fluidity and impermanence, mirroring the fleeting nature of life and memory.

The harp's "trickling water" motif in Act I plays a crucial role in transforming personal grief into a universal meditation on memory. The sound of the harp, reminiscent of water flowing gently, creates a sense of continuity and fluidity. This motif frames the dialogue between Shen Fu and his deceased wife Yunniang, enhancing the emotional depth of their conversation. The harp's sound, combined with the minimalist stage design, invites the audience to reflect on the nature of memory and the enduring power of love.

Act I is a poignant exploration of Shen Fu's grief and longing for his deceased wife Yunniang. The dialogue between the two characters is both intimate and universal, touching on themes of love, loss, and the passage of time. The minimalist stage design, with its ink-wash backdrops and floating veils, enhances the emotional depth of the scene. The harp's "trickling water" motif, which runs throughout the act, adds a layer of melancholy and introspection. This combination of visual and auditory elements creates a powerful and immersive experience for the audience.

The opera's minimalist stage design and the use of condensed landscapes are deeply rooted in Chinese aesthetic theory. This approach is influenced by Liu Xie's "The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons," which emphasizes the importance of simplicity and subtlety in artistic expression. The condensed landscapes in the opera reflect the literati's pursuit of harmony and balance, as well as their appreciation for the beauty of impermanence. By using these techniques, Luo Zhou creates a modern interpretation of classical Chinese aesthetics that resonates with contemporary audiences.

The minimalist stage design and the use of condensed landscapes have a profound impact on the audience. The ink-wash backdrops and floating veils create a sense of intimacy and immediacy, drawing the audience into the emotional world of the characters. The harp's „trickling water“ motif adds a layer of melancholy and in-

trospction, inviting the audience to reflect on their own experiences of love and loss. This combination of visual and auditory elements creates a powerful and immersive experience that transcends cultural boundaries.

2. Temporal Fluidity and Cross-Cultural Resonance: A Flowing Fantasia Reaching the Poetic Floating Life Realm

Luo Zhou disrupts linear narrative through cyclical time, mirroring Ibsen's exploration of memory in *Peer Gynt*. The recurring image of a bridal veil, drifting across acts, embodies the protagonists' unresolved longing, while the chorus's lament—"Life has an end, but this sorrow will transcend death"—echoes Bai Juyi's classical poetics. Such techniques align with the BeSeTo Festival's ethos, inviting international audiences to engage with Kunqu's emotional depth.

One of the most striking features of Luo Zhou's adaptation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is her use of cyclical time, which disrupts the traditional linear narrative structure. This technique mirrors the exploration of memory in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, where the past, present, and future are intertwined in a continuous loop. In Luo Zhou's opera, the cyclical nature of time is evident in the recurring themes and images that span across the acts, creating a sense of timelessness and continuity.

A key visual motif in the opera is the recurring image of a bridal veil, which drifts across the acts like a ghostly presence. This veil symbolizes the protagonists' unresolved longing and the enduring nature of their love. The veil's fluid movement across the stage mirrors the fluidity of time and memory, suggesting that the past is never truly past but continues to influence the present. This image also evokes the traditional Chinese concept of the afterlife, where the deceased continue to exist in a parallel realm, influencing the lives of the living.

The chorus plays a significant role in the opera, providing commentary and emotional depth through their songs and chants. One of the most poignant moments is the chorus's lament, „Life has an end, but this sorrow will transcend death.“ This line echoes the classical poetics of Bai Juyi, a renowned Chinese poet known for his ability to capture the essence of human emotions in his verses. The chorus's lament not only underscores the enduring nature of love and sorrow but also connects the opera to a broader literary tradition, enhancing its cultural resonance.

The techniques employed in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* align closely with the ethos of the BeSeTo Festival, which promotes cultural exchange and dialogue among East Asian nations and beyond. By disrupting linear narrative and incorporating recurring motifs and classical poetics, Luo Zhou creates a work that transcends cultural boundaries and invites international audiences to engage with the emotional depth of Kunqu opera. The festival's emphasis on innovation and cross-cultural collaboration provides a platform for Luo Zhou to experiment with traditional forms and present them in a contemporary context.

The BeSeTo Festival's mission to foster cross-cultural understanding and cooperation is evident in the reception of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0*. The opera's use of cyclical time, recurring motifs, and classical poetics resonates with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. The recurring image of the bridal veil, for example, is a universal symbol of love and loss that transcends cultural differences. Similarly, the chorus's lament speaks to the universal human experience of sorrow and longing, making the opera accessible to international audiences.

Luo Zhou's adaptation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* represents a significant contribution to contemporary theatre, demonstrating how traditional forms can be revitalized through modern techniques and cross-cultural collaboration. The opera's cyclical structure and recurring motifs challenge conventional narrative structures, inviting audiences to engage with the work on a deeper, more emotional level. This approach not only honors the traditions of Kunqu opera but also pushes the boundaries of what is possible in contemporary theatre.

3. Gender and Modern Critique: The Never-Fading Liveliness of Yunniang in Shen's Nostalgic Memories

While some scholars critique Luo Zhou's portrayal of Yunniang as passive (Chen 2023), this paper argues that the character's ethereal presence challenges patriarchal norms. By framing Yunniang as Shen Fu's co-author in the afterlife, Luo Zhou subverts the original text's male-centric perspective, offering a feminist reclamation of agency.

In Luo Zhou's adaptation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Yunniang's character is portrayed with an ethereal presence that transcends the traditional portrayal of women in classical Chinese literature. Unlike many female characters in classical texts, who are often depicted as passive and subservient, Yunniang is given a voice and agency that challenges patriarchal norms. Her presence on stage is both delicate and powerful, embodying a complex interplay of strength and vulnerability.

One of the most significant ways in which Luo Zhou subverts patriarchal norms is by framing Yunniang as Shen Fu's co-author in the afterlife. This creative choice not only gives Yunniang a voice but also positions her as an equal partner in the creation of their shared story. By doing so, Luo Zhou challenges the male-centric perspective of the original text, where Yunniang is often seen as a passive object of Shen Fu's affection and nostalgia.

The portrayal of Yunniang as a co-author in the afterlife represents a feminist reclamation of agency. In this interpretation, Yunniang is no longer a mere object of Shen Fu's memories but an active participant in shaping their shared narrative. This reclamation of agency is evident in several scenes throughout the opera, where Yunniang's voice and actions challenge traditional gender roles.

A notable example of Yunnian's agency is the conversation between her and Shen Fu about the three "white" poets: Bai Juyi, Li Bai, and Shen Sanbai (Shen Fu). This exchange not only demonstrates Yunnian's intellectual prowess but also highlights her ability to engage with and challenge traditional literary norms. By referencing these poets, Yunnian asserts her own literary identity and connection to the broader cultural tradition.

The portrayal of Yunnian as an active and empowered character resonates with contemporary audiences, who are increasingly attuned to issues of gender equality and representation. By subverting traditional gender roles and giving Yunnian a voice, Luo Zhou creates a character who is both historically grounded and relevant to modern sensibilities. This portrayal invites audiences to reconsider traditional narratives and explore new ways of understanding and interpreting classical texts.

The chorus in the opera also plays a significant role in reinforcing Yunnian's agency. Through their songs and chants, the chorus provides commentary on the action, often highlighting Yunnian's strength and resilience. Their presence adds a layer of support and validation to Yunnian's character, further emphasizing her importance in the narrative.

The feminist reclamation of agency in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* has broader implications for gender representation in contemporary theatre. By challenging traditional gender roles and giving voice to marginalized characters, Luo Zhou sets a precedent for other artists and playwrights. Her work encourages a more inclusive and equitable approach to storytelling, where diverse voices and perspectives are valued and represented.

Conclusion

Firstly, the opera's minimalist stage design and the use of condensed landscapes are central to Luo Zhou's vision of "poetic dwelling." These elements evoke the literati's idealized "small gardens" and symbolize the tension between ephemeral human experiences and artistic permanence. The harp's "trickling water" motif in Act I transforms personal grief into a universal meditation on memory, creating a powerful and immersive experience for the audience. By drawing on Chinese aesthetic theory, Luo Zhou creates a modern interpretation of classical themes that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Secondly, Luo Zhou's use of cyclical time and recurring motifs in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* creates a work that is both deeply rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics and resonant with contemporary audiences. The recurring image of the bridal veil and the chorus's lament underscore the enduring nature of love and sorrow, connecting the opera to a broader literary tradition. By aligning with the BeSeTo Festival's ethos of cross-cultural exchange and innovation, Luo Zhou presents a work

that transcends cultural boundaries and invites international audiences to engage with the emotional depth of Kunqu opera. Through her innovative approach, Luo Zhou revitalizes traditional forms, demonstrating their continued relevance in the modern world.

Thirdly, Luo Zhou's portrayal of Yunnian as an empowered and active character challenges traditional patriarchal norms and offers a feminist reclamation of agency. By framing Yunnian as Shen Fu's co-author in the afterlife, Luo Zhou subverts the male-centric perspective of the original text, creating a character who is both historically grounded and relevant to contemporary audiences. This portrayal not only enriches the narrative of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* but also sets a precedent for more inclusive and equitable representations of gender in contemporary theatre. Through her innovative approach, Luo Zhou demonstrates the power of art to challenge and transform traditional narratives, paving the way for new and diverse voices to be heard.

In conclusion, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0* marks a pivotal moment in Kunqu's evolution, demonstrating how traditional forms can address contemporary anxieties. Luo Zhou's integration of multimedia elements and cross-cultural motifs revitalizes Shen Fu's memoir, positioning Kunqu as a dynamic participant in global theatre. The production's success at BeSeTo underscores the importance of festivals as platforms for cultural innovation, where „poetic dwelling“ becomes a shared language across borders.

References

- Chen, Tian. "A Beloved Chinese Classic Gets a Weightless Adaptation." *Sixth Tone*, 18 May 2023.
- Liu, Xie 刘颢. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. Translated by Vincent Yu-chung Shih. Chinese University Press, 2015.
- Luo, Zhou 罗周. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life 2.0*. Playscript. Shanghai Theatre, vol. 4, 2019.
- Stefanova, Kalina. "The BeSeTo Festival Is Back to Life. In Shenzhen. And in a Splendid Manner." *Arts Exchange Magazine*, 2024.
- Szondi, Peter. *Theory of the Modern Drama*. Translated by Michael Hays. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

18.

耳畔的迴響與簌簌的落葉：《白蛇傳》中的白娘子和《哈德吉·迪米特爾》中的狼兄弟形象¹²²

王閱
湖北師範大學(中國)

The Whispering of Echoing Air and the Rustling of Leaves: Madame White Snake in *The Legend of Madame White Snake* and Brother Wolf in *Хаджи Димитър*

Wang Yue
Hubei Normal University, (China)

Abstract: This paper explores the evolution of Madame White Snake from a sinister figure in Tang dynasty legends to a compassionate heroine in later works, including adaptations by Feng Menglong and Tian Han. It draws parallels with Brother Wolf in

¹²² I would like to thank Prof. Kalina Stefanova at National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia for fully guiding my study of „Хаджи Димитър“ in Bulgarian Language and Literature, Prof. Eleonora Ringler-Pascu at Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara for greatly improving my written English, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and suggestions. Any errors or omissions are mine alone. Unless otherwise indicated, all texts in Bulgarian are provided by Prof. Kalina Stefanova, and all translations from Chinese are my own.

Hristo Botev's „Хаджи Димитър“ (1873), who aids in Bulgaria's fight for liberation. Both characters, though non-human, embody heroic resistance against oppression, highlighting the transcendent spirit of verse drama. Their portrayal reflects the authors' poetic imagination and the use of personified animals as symbols of revolutionary spirit.

Keywords: Madame White Snake; Brother Wolf; *The Legend of Madame White Snake*; “Хаджи Димитър”; verse drama; poetry

The Whispering of Echoing Air: the Evolvement of Madame White Snake

In “On the Fall of Leifeng Pagoda,” (1924) Lu Hsun defends White Snake and denounces Fahai for torturing Madame White Snake, writing, “[B]ut who wouldn't be outraged at the wrongs Madame White suffers and condemn Fahai for charging too much?”¹²³ The first depiction of Lady White Snake can be found in the Tang dynasty legend of *Li Huang*. The Lady White Snake of subsequent generations is modeled by the lady in a white robe transformed from the white snake in this piece.¹²⁴ The magical beings самодиви also appear in the poem *Хаджи Димитър* (1873):

И самодиви в бяла премена,
чудни, прекрасни, песен поемнат, –
тихо нагазят в трева зелена
и при юнакът дойдат та седнат.

They are always ladies wearing white clothing, and only show up at night. At times they are portrayed as good characters, at times somewhat beguiling. The самодиви are pictured as fairy goddesses in the verse above. Despite being first portrayed as a she-demon, Lady White Snake has evolved into a more kind, magical being who is now more reminiscent of a fairy. The *Benshi* (the source of the theatrical narrative) of White Snake is recorded by Zheng Huang in the Tang dynasty's (AD 618-907) legend *Li Huang*. Besides, it also appears with certain new plots in *The Records of the Three Pagodas at West Lake*¹²⁵ by an unnamed author during Song dynasty (AD 960-1279). The *Travel Journal at West Lake* by Tian Rucheng, *The Notes by My Little Window* by Wu Congxian, *Madame White Eternally Kept under Leifeng Pagoda* by Feng

¹²³ Lu Hsun: *The Complete Works of Lu Hsun. vol.1*. Beijing: Guangming Daily Press. 2015: 60.

¹²⁴ Zheng Huang. *Li Huang*. Included in Li Fang et al. Ed. *Records of the Taiping Era. Vol. 458*. (AD 206-978). republished by Beijing Yanshan Press, 2011: 8188-8192.

¹²⁵ Anonymous. *The Records of the Three Pagodas at West Lake*. Included in Hong Pian. *Qing Ping Shan Tang Huaben* (AD 1522-1566). Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019: 14-20.

Menglong (all three in Ming dynasty, AD 1368-1644), *The Wonders About Leifeng Pegoda* by Song Yushan, *The Legend of Leifeng Pegoda* by Huang Tubi, and *Leifeng Pegoda* by Fang Chengpei (all in Qing dynasty, AD 1616-1911), are representative works that continued to update this legend throughout the late imperial. Among them, *Madame White Eternally Kept under Leifeng Pegoda* by Feng Menglong¹²⁶ (during Ming dynasty, AD 1368-1644) is the most representative. Feng's edition, which is based on the Tang and Song editions, adds certain storylines, such as the borrowing and returning of the umbrella, the theft of the official silvers, the transformation back into the white snake, and the painful oppression under the pagoda. White Snake's image has occasionally undergone changes, growing pluralistic as theatricality has grown more complex. The image of White Snake, meantime, changes with time due to the evolving social-historical context and communication technology.

In the Tang dynasty edition, Li Huang, the nephew of Commissioner Li Hsun, is "gazing at her without moving, enthralled by her elegance and gorgeousness which soars beyond the commonplace" because he is so enamored with this Lady White with the maiden name Yuan¹²⁷. Li Huang insists on marrying this married widow Lady White despite the fact that she „has been a Madame Li to a past Li family“ and that she is truly a femme fatale below her attractive exterior. In the end, his pitiful skull is all that is left after his body has been slowly consumed by his own passion. When visitors arrive at Lady White's home, they discover a deserted garden (the Chinese character for „garden“ is a homophone of the maiden name „Yuan“) where a gigantic white snake had lived but has since vanished. Some claim that when a few little white snakes appeared at that time, people killed them.¹²⁸

White Snake is still a sinister beauty in the Song dynasty edition: „Her dark hair contrasts with her snow-white cheekbones. Her arched eyebrows are interwoven with elegance, and her speaking eyes sparkle with appeal.“ She is successful in at-

¹²⁶ Feng Menglong. *Madame White Eternally Kept under Leifeng Pegoda*. Included in Feng Menglong. *Jing Shi Tong Yan* (AD 1624). Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019: 284-304.

¹²⁷ Madame White Snake's name has changed over history: Yuan in Tang dynasty, White in the Song dynasty and Ming dynasty, and White Pearl (Suzhen) in Qing. The herbalist's name has also changed throughout history: Li Huang in Tang dynasty, Xi Xuanzan in Song dynasty, Xu Xuan in Ming, and Xu Xian in Qing. In the Qing era, their kid was known as Xu Mengjiao, and in contemporary times, Xu Shilin. In various writings, like as folktales, legends, fictions, xiqu (theatrical) playscripts, film scripts, TV series scripts, and scripts for animated motion pictures, the titles as well as the characters' names change. Due to translation or localization, the names also differ in various locations. Madame White Snake has other iterations in Singapore, Canada, Japan, Korea, etc. The names Bai Suzhen (Madame White Snake), Xu Xian (Herbalist), Xiao Qing (Maid Green Snake), Fahai (Buddha), and Xu Shilin (Talent-Endowed Child, Half-Snake-Fairy, Half-Human) are now the most well-known.

¹²⁸ Zheng Huang. *Li Huang*. Included in Li Fang et al. Ed. *Records of the Taiping Era*. Vol. 458. (AD 206-978). republished by Beijing Yanshan Press, 2011: 8188-8192.

tracting Xi Xuanzan, staying behind with him and waiting impatiently for the right moment to pull out his heart and liver. Xi Xuanzan misses his elderly mother a lot, which makes him homesick. The White Snake then lashes out at him and makes several attempts to devour him but is unsuccessful. Xi Xuanzan has finally realized that the woman in white is a femme fatale.¹²⁹

Madame White Eternally Kept Under Leifeng Pagoda in *Jing Shi Tong Yan* represents a new stage in the evolution of *The Legend of Madame White Snake* in the late imperial. Madame White has evolved into a more compassionate person on the inside and out, and she now fits in with the culture and way of life of the secular society. The narrative framework has improved throughout this stage, which has also given White Snake's character a more comprehensive representation. The supernatural curtain is suddenly lifted by White Snake, revealing her mundane side. It is revealed in the plot twist that White Snake and Xu Xuan met at the Duan Bridge, where Xu later returned the umbrella after borrowing it. And every time Xu is involved in lawsuits, Madame White troubles herself so much and makes a long trip to save him. Madame White Snake suppresses her instincts to devour him and calmly makes explanations for the entire procedure, despite the fact that Xu does not appreciate her and flings out hard words at her.¹³⁰

In the Qing dynasty edition of *The Wonders About Leifeng Pagoda*, Xu Xian is twice involved in legal disputes, and Madame White Pearl looks for him twice. Xu questions White Pearl's identity and tempts her to drink a special water that will reveal her true snake form. Madame White Pearl doesn't point the finger at Xu in response to his suspicion and employs some subtlety to diffuse the situation. Madame White fearlessly responds to Xu's interrogation as a snake-transformed woman and decides to stick with him, displaying unwavering commitment to him. Madame White is known as Madame White Pearl in this instance. She is a snake woman who has practised Taoism at Mount Qingcheng for more than a thousand years and has an identified name. Xu Xian is startled to death as he enters the room and removes the curtain to reveal the white snake. "Now that we are married, we shouldn't be so callous as to decline to save him," says Madame White Pearl, who is furious with Maid Xiaoqing who wants to devour him. "How can you think that way?" Madame White then devises a scheme to keep the truth from him after saving him. After hearing that Xu Xian had been successful in delivering the twins for the prefect's wife, the other doctors plotted to trap him. Madame White is unsurprised by what they do and is prepared to fix the issue, and continues to run the pharmacy with Xu. The counsellor attempts to possess Madame White because of her fair beauty, but she deftly rejects him. Madame White's loyalty to Xu demonstrates her removal of her demonic aspect

¹²⁹ Anonymous. *The Records of the Three Pagodas at West Lake*. Included in Hong Pian. *Qing Ping Shan Tang Huaben* (AD 1522-1566). Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019: 14-20.

¹³⁰ Feng Menglong. *Madame White Eternally Kept under Leifeng Pagoda*. Included in Feng Menglong. *Jing Shi Tong Yan* (AD 1624). Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019: 284-304.

and purging of the evil and immoral, resulting in her transformation into a virtue and obedient wife in the mortal world. According to the plot, she gives birth to Xu Mengjiao and becomes a devout mother. All of these details make White Snake more humane.¹³¹

Jiangnan (to the south of the Yangtze River), the birthplace of capitalism, was chosen as the backdrop for *The Legend of Madame White Snake* during the late imperial period. A humanistic and secularized trend in the characterization of Madame White during this period may be seen as a result of the literati's writing activities being inspired by new ideas and patterns of thought that criticized feudalistic customs and glorified the growing citizen class and their culture. The white snake who was formerly a she-demon has evolved into a fairy snake in modern times. She has completely shed her demonic identity and presents herself to the general public as a human-like figure. Madame White appears to be residing on the antique lute's strings during the arduous trek into the historical ashes. She occasionally makes certain delayed sounds that resemble the whispering of the echoing air that surround us.

The Rustling of Leaves: A Comparative Analysis of Modern Madame White Snake (1955–) and Brother Wolf in „Хаджи Димитър“ (1873)

Tian Han has updated the most iconic version of Madame White for the contemporary era, making her even more revolutionary and humanitarian. The 1955 edition of *The Legend of Madame White Snake*,¹³² which Tian Han altered several times, is the

¹³¹ Song Yushan: *The Wonders About Leifeng Pagoda*. Taiyuan: Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1987: 27.

¹³² Tian Han: *The Beijing Opera Script for The Legend of Madame White Snake*, Beijing: The Writers Publishing House (established in 1953), 1955. Based on this script, in the same year, the Beijing opera stage performance of *The Legend of Madame White Snake* on European tour (1955) can be accessed through this website on Feb. 5th 2023: 歐洲八國巡演（1955年）《斷橋》 葉盛蘭、杜近芳 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1co4y1X78d/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.1&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595.

There is also a most well-known video recording of the entire play with English subtitles: 《白蛇傳》張火丁 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1tW41187hA/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595; The two episodes of xiqu animated motion pictures, one with English commentary and the other without: 雙語動畫民間四大愛情傳說《白蛇傳》 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wT4y1v7U2/?spm_id_from=333.788.recom

most significant. Madame White Snake loses her feudalistic colouring and becomes more resilient under Tian Han's pen. She is unquestionably resisting Buddha in her fight against Fahai. Despite being a monster, White Snake exhibits virtue. Fahai, on the other hand, carries out bad deeds. This is the irony that this edition satirizes, and via this incisive mockery, it pushes readers to reconsider the complexity of humans in actual life.

In ХаДжи Димитър (1873), in the quest for liberation, the hero is aided by a number of animals (an eagle, a falcon, and a wolf) who are portrayed as his brothers:

Тоз, който падне в бой за свобода,
той не умира: него жалеят
земя и небо, звяр и природа,
и певци песни за него пеят...
Денем му сянка пази орлица
и вълк му кротко раната ближе;
над него сокол, юнашка птица,
и тя се за брат, за юнак грижи!
Настане вечер – месец изгрее,
звезди обсипят сводът небесен;
гора зашуми, вятър повее, -
Балканът пее хайдушка песен!

In the last stanza, the Brother Wolf makes another appearance, consoling the protagonist and repeatedly licking his wounds, slightly and tenderly:

Но съмна вече! И на Балкана
юнакът лежи, кръвта му тече, -
вълкът му ближе лютата рана,
и слънцето пак пече ли – пече!

The inner-text tension, which is similar to Madame Snake, is created by the wolf's transformation (like the snake's)–whose image is often fairly terrible and

mend_more_video-1&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595 and 戲曲動畫 – 京劇《白蛇傳》 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1C44y147ET/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595.

Tian Han's *The Legend of Madame White* was remade into a Beijing Opera film in 1980: 京劇戲曲電影《白蛇傳》(1980) 編劇 田漢 傳超武執導 李炳淑 方小亞 陸柏平主演 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV13s411E7jD/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595.

And on July 2nd, 2018, the 120 anniversary memorial of Tian Han's Birth, the entire play was performed at Chang'an theatre: 李勝素、王豔等《白蛇傳》紀念田漢誕辰120周年2018-07-02 長安大戲院 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19s411G7eN/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595

monstrous—to become considerably more compassionate, and even more delicate and tender, in this instance. The transcendent aspect is now embodied by the non-human. Additionally, poeticization is crucial to the revelation in both works. The scene where Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian first meet is portrayed as poetic and romantic in the Beijing Opera *The Legend of White Snake* (1955-), and the singings and lines are also written in the style of rhymed poetry: „In the blink of an eye, the sky above the lake clears up; the willows’ dewdrops flutter over to the robes; the rains washing the lake and mountain have passed and the sun has now arrived; the spring winds flowing warmth, slightly flipping our clothing.” (一霎時湖上天清雲淡，柳葉飛珠上布衫；雨過天晴湖山如洗，春風送暖拂羅衣。) The scenes of Bai Suzhen fighting (demonstrating acrobatic martial arts) with Fahai and other fighters in the revolutionary opera highlight “the water-covered fighting” (*Shui Dou*, 水鬥) are miraculous, and well-known arias like “How can you hurt me like this” at Duan Bridge (“你忍心將我傷” 唱段, Duan Qiao, 斷橋) use rhymed parallels to depict the sympathetic and loving White Snake’s inner life. And in Хаджи Димитър (1873), in addition to creatures like the wolf, hawk, and falcon, the night, the moon, the stars, the woods, and the wind also sing for the hero. (Настане вечер – месец изгрее, звезди обсипят сводът небесен; гора зашуми, вятър повее, -Балканът пее хайдушка песен!) The hero’s surroundings are personified in this song scene, making it seem as though they are all engaged in the fight and demonstrating their steadfast commitment to defending their land. The hero is not alone in either piece because of the personified and poeticized descriptions. In order to give the hero some strengths in battle, both authors used revolutionary romanticism to demonstrate the tremendous might of nonhuman animals. The inner voice of the people is represented by both the snake and the wolf images; in fact, they stand up for, defend, and care for them. And this is crucial for the classicalization of both pieces.

“В произведението се преплитат митологичните и фолклорните мотиви, с познанието от автора на хайдушкия начин на живот. Първо се чува шумоленето на листата на дърветата и чак по-сетне се усеща полъха на вятъра.”¹³³ During a fight, the sound of approaching wind is typically represented by the rustling of the leaves. Additionally, it shows that this ballad poetry, which combines the motif of the local myth and folklore with the author’s expertise and writing style, visually captures the way-of-life of the locals. The picturesque sound of “the rustling of leaves,” in my opinion, blends beautifully with “the whispering of the echoing air” of Madame White Snake. The two aural pictures may be used to draw comparisons between the two wolf and snake visuals as well as the two scripts individually.

¹³³ Уикиизточник разполага с оригинални творби на/за: Хаджи Димитър. Вж. „Referential source in Bulgarian“.

The Echoing Air of Madame White Snake: The Cultural Logic and the Influence of Beijing Opera *The Legend of Madame White Snake* (1955-) on the Present-Day Theatre Trends, with an Analogy with the Brother Wolf

Although different performers would slightly alter the scripts or the singing arias in accordance with the feature and style of that specific school, Tian Han's *The Legend of Madame White Snake* (1955-) has been frequently performed by theater performers from many schools and is a part of the classic repertoire. If a xiqu actress hadn't played Madame White, she wouldn't be considered skilled. Saying that an actor would not be eligible to participate in drama if he had not done Hamlet is analogous to this.

The Legend of Madame White Snake has soared in popularity since the 1980s due to the expanding mass media. The public is impressed by a more vivid Madame White thanks to such audio-visual media as film and television. For example, in *The New Legend of Madame White* (1992, a 50-episode television series), Bai Suzhen helps Xu Xian treat patients and manage the herbal pharmacy; in *The Legend of White Snake* (2006, a 30-episode television series), Bai Suzhen uses magic to make rain fall to stop the devastating droughts. Despite being a snake, she exudes charm of humanity with her noble qualities, such as her compassion for every average life and her benevolence as well as generosity towards the sick.

The author contends that the classicalization of both Brother Wolf and Madame White is a result of *shen-suu*¹³⁴ (poeticization), which conveys the inner voice of the people. The first reason is that both authors uphold progressive viewpoints and write in a romantic manner, which gave the inhuman pictures a good connotation. The second reason is that the snake/wolf must objectively develop more virtue in temperament in order for the verse drama's folklore poetry to spread. The third argument is that more viewers would be affected by mass media, particularly film and television, without regard to their level of intellectual sophistication, for infectious emotions could be expressed more effectively through the audio-visual combo. In order to spread the good vibes, situations, visuals, context, setting, surroundings, nonhuman figures, etc. might be poeticized.

To conclude, the author maintains that the evolution of White Snake and the virtue-transformed Brother Wolf is a result of changes in human epistemological knowledge regarding cultural psychology and social structure. In order to oppose the more powerful, nonhuman beings would stand in for the heroes, displaying both writers' transcendent and critical spirits as well as their poetic creativity (*shen-suu* in

¹³⁴ Shen-suu is a concept in ancient Chinese Classic *Wen Xin Diao Long* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*), please refer to Liu Hsien: *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*. trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih. Taipei: Zhengda Press. 1957: 154-157.

ancient Chinese). The more compassionate snake and wolf have broken through the rigid animal stereotypes, revealing a more lyrical view of the human condition.

References

- Anonymous. Xihu Santa Ji 西湖三塔記 [The Records of the Three Pagodas at West Lake]. Included in Hong Pian 洪楸. *Qing Ping Shan Tang Huaben* (AD 1522–1566) 清平山堂話本 [Short Stories from the Hall of Mount Qingping]. Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019.
- Feng, Menglong 馮夢龍. *Bainiangzi Yongzhen leifengta* 白娘子永鎮雷峰塔 [Madame White Eternally Kept under Leifeng Pagoda]. Included in Feng, Menglong. *Jing Shi Tong Yan* 警世通言 (AD 1624) [Stories to Caution the World]. Changsha: Yuelu Press. 2019.
- Lu, Hsun 魯迅. Lu Hsun Quanji 魯迅全集第一卷 [The Complete Works of Lu Hsun]. vol.1. Beijing: Guangming Daily Press. 2015.
- Song, Yushan 宋玉山. *Leifengta Qizhuan* 雷峰塔奇傳 [The Wonders About Leifeng Pagoda]. Taiyuan: Shanxi People's Publishing House, 1987.
- Tian, Han 田漢. *Jingju Baishezhuang Juben* 京劇白蛇傳劇本 [The Beijing Opera Script for The Legend of Madame White Snake], Beijing: The Writers Publishing House (established in 1953), 1955.
- Zheng, Huang 鄭還古 (古神子). *Li Huang* 李黃. Included in Li Fang 李昉 et al. Ed. *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記 [Records of the Taiping Era]. Vol. 458. (AD 206–978). republished by Beijing Yanshan Press, 2011.

The Beijing opera stage performance of *The Legend of Madame White Snake* on European tour (1955) can be accessed through this website on Feb. 5th 2023:

歐洲八國巡演 (1955年)《斷橋》葉盛蘭、杜近芳 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1co4y1X78d/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.1&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595.

There is also a most well-known video recording of the entire play with English subtitles: 《白蛇傳》張火丁 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1tW41187hA/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595;

The two episodes of xiqu animated motion pictures, one with English commentary and the other without:

雙語動畫民間四大愛情傳說《白蛇傳》 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wT4y1v7U2/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.1&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595 and

戲曲動畫——京劇《白蛇傳》 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1C44y147ET/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595

The Legend of Madame White (1955) by Tian Han was turned into a Beijing Opera movie in 1980:

京劇戲曲電影《白蛇傳》(1980)編劇 田漢 傅超武執導 李炳淑 方小亞 陸柏平主演 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV13s411E7jD/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595

And on July 2nd, 2018, the 120 anniversary memorial of Tian Han's Birth, the entire play was performed at Chang'an theatre:

李勝素、王豔等《白蛇傳》紀念田漢誕辰120周年2018-07-02 長安大戲院 https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19s411G7eN/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=ea232341806e4bce32b15ab661fb4595

Referential source in Bulgarian:

1. Хаджи Димитър. // slovo.bg. Посетен на 14 януари 2010.
2. Маркова, Зина. Четата от 1868 година : По случай 150-годишнината от рождението на Хаджи Димитър и Стефан Караджа. София, Издателство на Българската академия на науките, 1990. с. 101 – 102.
3. Георгиев, Никола. Жанр, херменевтика и един прочит на „Хаджи Димитър“. // Сто и двадесет литературни години. Електронно издание Варна: LiterNet, 2001–2002.
4. Богданов, Иван. „Балада“. // Енциклопедичен речник на литературните термини. София: Петър Берон, 1993, с. 51.
5. Георгиев, Никола. Ботевата балада „Хаджи Димитър“. // Сто и двадесет литературни години. Електронно издание. Варна: LiterNet, 2001–2002.

SECOND SINO-BALKANICA CONFERENCE

*Sino-Balkan Cultural Dialogue:
Challenges and Perspectives in a Global Context*
Proceedings

Bulgarian. First Edition

Editor-in-chief **Antonia Tsankova**
Coordinators **Neli Nanova, Nora Chileva**

Design **Kaloyan Tomov**
Cover design **Rumyana Damyanlieva**

Format **16/70/100**

Prepress and press **East-West Publishing House**



Central and editorial office

Sofia 1000, ul. „Stara planina“ №5
tel.: 02/946 35 21

e-mail: iztokzapad.books@gmail.com
iztok_zapad@abv.bg

For orders and deliveries

tel.: 0888 465 635; 0887 550 859
e-mail: order@iztok-zapad.eu
office@iztok-zapad.eu

www.iztok-zapad.eu