

## **THE ROLE OF THE CULTURAL MEDIATOR IN REDUCING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN ROMANIA AND CHINA**

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### ***Abstract***

*In Romania, the interest for the Chinese language and culture within the civil society is considerable. In order to meet this demand, the institutional efforts made by specialists at the level of schools and universities down to the language teaching centres of other cultural institutes is combined with the activity of cultural mediators. In this paper I will try to present the versatile role of the cultural mediators, as engaged in the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture in the broader context of literary translations and the whole cultural phenomenon brought about by the dialogue with China.*

**Keywords:** cultural mediator, translator, sinologist, otherness, representation.

**DOI:** 10.24818/SIC/2021/04.02

### ***Introduction***

Despite the success of present technology in reducing the distance between people and cultural spaces, the degree of closeness or separation between China and Romania seems to be conditioned by a series of political, geostrategic or economic factors. Yet, considering that in Romania the individual freedom of choice represents an alternative to the institutional matrix, there is a vast concern for a cultural dialogue with aims that are considerably high.

The “China” theme has long been an inciting one, for the whole world, not only for the Romanian people. Beyond its economic success, the ubiquity at the commercial level, or of political or strategic dissensions, there are the average people, with their own hobbies, ideals or objectives concerning knowledge, education or career, who feel the desire to come closer to China. This kind of attitude has been manifesting for decades, even though sometimes with *méfiance*, but nevertheless with good intentions.

The purpose of my research is to demonstrate the high complexity of the role of the cultural mediators, with an emphasis on the popularization activity, which means that they are involved in presenting to the general public details of their specialized activity or domain, making available a series of information related to the deeper layer of Chinese culture and civilization.

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## ***1.The actors and the audience***

If we are to look at the actors that perform the task of presenting Chinese language and culture to the Romanian public, the list is rather long. There are teachers, translators, managers of cultural institutes, sinologists, China experts, followed closely by graduates or even students of Chinese studies, then there are the readers themselves, even some of the Chinese writers, and, why not, the *qigong* masters with their disciples. This list is not necessarily organised hierarchically, these degrees of specialisation correspond to each and everyone's career, economic interest or life passion or even health status. What is more interesting is the fact that these roles are not played by completely different individuals, so that we can speak about various "roles", "hypostases" or even "personae" of the same individual. What differentiates these roles is mainly the circumstances or the degree of specialisation which can be directly connected to the target and scope of each particular action.

The roles of sinologist (*hanxuejia*) or of China expert (*zhongguo tong*) often combine with that of professor, and they are, very often, the same individuals who engage in the work of translating or interpreting. These multiple roles can naturally be concentrated in one and the same person as long as the high degree of specialisation, long and reach experience and other characteristics allow that particular person to act as such. But to linger in a very narrow circle and to address exclusively other highly specialised scholars is not really an option today! Now is the time when the China researcher or scholar cannot afford to stand alone in a lofty tower.

In my opinion, the sinologist, or the China expert, as well as the professor or the translator must engage in a very important and urgent mission, that is, as Paul Ricoeur put it, "to reduce the otherness of the other", to make efforts in order to help people "-welcome the difference" or to professionally assist fellow countrymen in "receiving the word of the Other into one's own home." (Ricoeur, 2006:7)

Regarding the target audience that these highly specialised professionals are speaking to, there is a vast sphere from policy makers, business agents, students, readers and the China-enthusiasts or Sinophiles. What differentiates these types of receivers is mainly their interest, which determines the degree of specialisation of the knowledge imparted. There are many enthusiasts of the art of spiritual cultivation through *qigong*, senior members of some specialised clubs in Romania, who feel the need to complete their physical effort with some knowledge about Chinese language and even culture. There are, on the other hand, young people who are faced with decisions concerning their future career, and, in a relatively uncertain Romania, in terms of employment prospects, Chinese language looks like the kind of key that, hopefully, will be able to unlock certain doors or even padlocks in the future.

On the other hand, there are people who just want "something else", who feel the need to go beyond the usual patterns which they see around, in movies, in songs, and to find out things that are always different and surprising. But there is also the gallery of those forever fascinated by a culture too old and too vast for them to have had the time to go deeper into, and who constantly consume the various products that can be obtained at home, from literature translated and commented by scholars at various cultural events or just simple tastings of Chinese delicacies.

What is it that they are expecting? They seem to be eager to ask, in order to find out something, but also they would also like to be able to say something, to express their opinion and get some sort of confirmation. And this concern is especially related to parts that seem rather unclear in a translated book, symbols and metaphors which are more difficult for non-experts to interpret or understand, to know more about the author of the respective novel or about similar authors, also about the historical background of both the author and the work of literature; to learn more about the Chinese people, both of their past and the present; to establish a connection and an open dialogue with other people with the same interest and, eventually, to gain membership to such groups.

But there is also a group of passers-by whose attention can also be won, people burdened with prejudice, whose biased convictions can be changed. This is where the role of the cultural mediator comes best into play. In a cultural market with such characteristics, not to mention a relatively small room for manoeuvre (with a private initiative of almost negligible proportions), the effort of those who, by virtue of their professional evolution, assume the role of cultural mediator has no way of unfolding on a single, narrow level.

## **2. A cultural mediator is more than a translator**

In his work entitled “The Role and Personality of the Mediator” (1981), Ronald Taft wrote:

*A cultural mediator is a person who facilitates communication, understanding and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture. The role of the mediator is performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions and expectations of each cultural group to the other, that is by establishing and balancing the communication between them. In order to serve as a link in this sense, the mediator must be able to participate, to some extent, in both cultures. Thus, a mediation must be, to a certain extent, bicultural (Taft, 1981: 53, apud Katan).*

Therefore, in Taft’s view, the role of the cultural mediator is not only linked to translating texts or ideas, to presenting some aspects of history or mentality or engage in “author-text-reader negotiated translation” (Reiner-Ming, 2014: 9) but also to supply the representative of both cultures with the basic knowledge and to encourage the necessary openness in order to be able to engage in mutual understanding. Taft goes on by saying that mediators must have a certain set of knowledge and skills, in communication as well as of technical and social nature, and be flexible in switching their cultural orientation. Mediators participate in explaining elements that are not so easy to grasp and interpret, they have a broader perspective as compared to the average audience, but they must also be experts in their own languages and cultures, to be able to find the similarities and grasp the differences and, of course, to express themselves in a proper manner. Generally speaking, cultural mediators are specialists in facilitating understanding between cultures.

Confronted with the basically uninformed choice to study Chinese language and culture in a university programme, I myself have presented my students with the possibility of becoming cultural mediators, at first within their own families and then within the community and the society at large. It was also an attempt to present them with this kind of responsibility, to arouse their interest and passion in assuming this task and to start, under their teachers’ guidance, to prepare earnestly for it.

On the other hand, another specialist in the source language and culture, who should be a master of his own culture and should also be capable of negotiating understanding and facilitating communication is the translator. Let’s review some of the most popular views on the role of the translator and of translations: First of all, it was George Steiner who said that “Inside or between languages, human communication equals translation” (1975: 47 *apud* Hatim and Mason, 1990: 128). Shortly afterwards, Eugene Nida said that “Translation is an aspect of a larger domain, namely that of communication” (1976: 65, *idem*: 223-224). “Translation is the most economical method of explaining one culture’s way to another”, it “mediates cultures” said Peter Newmark (1995: 66, *idem*: 223-224). To Julianne House, translation means “Taking a text out of its original frame and context and placing it within a new set of relationships and culturally-conditioned expectations” (2006: 356, *idem*: 223-224), whereas to Ming Dong Gu “it is a complex hermeneutic act with the aim to produce a performative continuum in which the translator assumes multiple roles of reader, scholar, critic, thinker, and writer” (Schulte-Ming , 2015: 15).

But as long as the work of translating remains enclosed in the narrow space of the translator's study or office, not to mention of the book covers, there is a big chance that this endeavour remains isolated and sterile.

To further quote Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, "A mediator is more than a translator" (1990: 224). Because there is the work of further explaining that has the translated work open up to the readers. Even if the mediator is the same person as the translator, this has to involve a broader task and more comprehensive actions, because in his mediating endeavour, the translator has the opportunity to make his own agenda, to follow his own strategy in leading the audience to the point he aims to touch upon, resorts to a certain selection of data and, also, has the chance to embrace a stronger position, of critical thinking, than in mere translation and footnote explanation. In the words of Basil Hatim: "Mediation points to translators' decision regarding the transfer of textual reference" (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 128).

### ***3. The range of actions that make up the mediator's mission***

When speaking about the role of cultural mediators that Romanian sinologists, experts or translators often assume, one can point to a rather large range of events or actions, such as book release ceremonies, cultural events organised by Confucius Institutes, from lectures on literature, history, philosophy, to presentations of arts and crafts, festivals, tea ceremonies, movies or exhibitions; there are, also, similar events organised by other institutions, such as the Romanian Cultural Institute, Romanian Writers Association, some publishing houses and bookstores or, sometimes, even by private individuals; in terms of published articles, there are the book reviews, analytical studies written by sinologists or interviews, also uploaded on digital platforms or broadcast on radio and television.

Usually, the dialogue between professors and students goes on, even after the courses are finished. Then, we should think about the way translations are always supplied with personal interpretations in prefaces, indications on pronunciation, historical references and so on. The more and more rich collection of Chinese words that are kept as such, untranslated, and explained in the footnotes has also a very important role in bringing the Chinese culture closer to the Romanian reader, in a manner that other Western cultures have benefited from for decades, already.

On the other hand, some of the translated works, be them prose or poetry, are analysed at a deeper level by other sinologists within the online publication of Translators branch of the Romanian Writers Association – *FITRALIT*, articles which usually target a rather specialised audience. Such articles present a very detailed evaluation of the translated work or even look at the whole career of some of the most renowned Romanian sinologists, establishing sets of conclusions about things that have become their signature. Within such studies, readers have the opportunity to grasp the notions and methods used in translation that, otherwise, would remain hidden to them. When writing such articles, the sinologists involved are able to make available their insights on both the source culture and the target one, also to add explanations that translators would not usually provide. This way, the authors of this kind of articles act not only as mediators between the Chinese and the Romanian cultures but also between the translators and the readers.

There are, also, some bookstores that organise various discussions on recent translations or on the professional aspects of translation, together with gatherings of various translators who discuss the history of Chinese literature translated into Romanian. Usually moderated by sinologists or translators, these discussions are a very valuable occasion for establishing connections between the source and the target cultures, because they bring up elements of tradition, history, art or even language that aim to prepare or to educate the audience in order to understand Chinese literature better. Such events seem to contribute to the open-minded attitude of fellow Romanians, that is a prerequisite of approaching the vast Chinese culture.

Last but not least, there are different social media platforms who promote Romanian sinologists and present their works, their upcoming activity, even their opinions or their correspondence with the writers they are translating, which bring about very interesting and vivid discussions with the Sinophiles. This way, the audience has the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the Chinese culture and to become, in their turn, promoters of this culture.

What are translators and, widely speaking, cultural mediators talking about on such occasions? Most of all they put forward elements related to the context of the action in novels, possibly unknown to the wide audience or not clearly specified in the novel. They discuss, mainly, history, literary history, their own experiences in translating, this time touching upon linguistic matters, and other problems about China's past and present. If there are two or more specialists present, they usually engage in debates, turning very specific at times, in comparisons and even arguments. The Q&A section, if included, completes the connection between writer, mediator and readers, and gives the occasion for assessing some aspects regarding the reception of the published work or a particular writer, and combining this kind of information with other statistics linked to the commercial aspect of publishing, so that they can actually have a complete grasp over the relevance of their own activity.

These discussions tend to break down to the fundamental topics of the source culture and this is the moment when the mediators exert their special power, that of synthesizing, making use of their rich and long experience, and reduce the distance that the readers might have felt before.

Consequently, either during these actual, on the spot, public events, or around the reviews published online within personal blogs, book-clubs or other readership platforms, or within the dialogues on social media, the general public gets into a real contact with the translators, sometimes even with the writers, other kinds of experts or cultural mediators, a contact that will definitely increase their understanding of the Chinese civilisation.

#### **4. *Presentation and representation***

Another aspect that has to be emphasized is the bidirectional orientation of the cultural mediators' mission. The quotations that I have presented earlier seem to be very careful to underscore this aspect: that cultural mediators are "masters of their own culture", who "must be able to participate, to some extent, in both cultures. Thus, a mediation must be, to a certain extent, bicultural" (Taft, 1981: 53, *apud* Katan).

For example, when such professionals turn to what is called, in the work of translation, the source culture, when they resort to what is called "collaborative translation", as Eusebiu Camilar or other translators did, when turning to the writer or other native-speakers in order to clarify some passages in the original text, but also when they welcome the writers in their own countries, when presenting to foreign guests the translators' own cultures, together with the way they talk, dress, look, smell, eat and so on – all of these aspects become a very complex and profound act of representation of one's own culture to the "other", the ones whom they are, otherwise, engaged in presenting to their own compatriots.

Therefore, this is when mastering one's own culture and having the capacity to participate in both cultures is extremely important and relevant. And to quote Paul Ricoeur once again, "The inputs at the two ends, the two halves of the problem, so to speak, clarify each other and present again the enigma and the richness of the relationship with the Other" (Ricoeur, 2006: 14).

It is not only that translators or experts are capable of assuming this role of cultural mediators! As we can see from various statements or confessions made by Chinese writers, they are not only aware that their works could be eventually translated into foreign languages but they seem to pay a special attention to the fact that their message must go beyond the physical borders of China.

As professor Dinu Luca pointed in an interview published online (Segal, 2016), the renowned Chinese writer Mo Yan, winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 2012, divides the translators of his works into “good ones”, i.e. those who write to him to ask him what he meant in one context or another, and “the others”, who do not write to him and therefore, in his view, do not come to understand exactly the meaning of one passage or another. This entails, to some extent, the fact that the foreign readers are not just happening, by chance, in the international literature market but are, somehow, lured into a conversation mediated by the translator but intended by the writer, from the very beginning.

Another important Chinese writer, Yan Lianke, winner of the prestigious Kafka Prize in 2014, after participating in numerous conferences around the world and answering questions coming from readers everywhere, confessed in an interview published in the Romanian cultural magazine *Dilema veche* (Martin, 2014), that Western readers are the ones who truly appreciate the artistic value of his novels, namely the language, structure or the narrative. He points, as examples, his 2004 novel *Lenin's Kisses* [*Shouhuo*] or *The Four Books* [*Sishu*], published in 2011, emphasizing the fact that readers in France or England, for instance, have been very interested in the way the story is told, while Chinese readers still remain at the basic level, of the content, of what the narrator is telling. So he finds that Chinese readers are more concerned with the content and realities of his novels, as if they were chronicles or reports about particular events, interested about the what, more than the how.

From this, one can presume that Chinese writers are actually oriented towards an international understanding of their work, that the barriers they are trying to break are not only those of language or of territory but also of mentality and education, that they are truly engaged in representing their own culture to the world, an endeavour which entails a certain attitude, the kind of openness that makes “reducing otherness” a less difficult task for the translator.

## 5. Conclusion

Cultural mediators face a very complex task, that of actively engaging in presenting a foreign culture to their own fellow countrymen, to find the most appropriate way to mirror their own culture in that of the foreigners’ and to establish a live and relevant exchange of ideas between the two. Going beyond the translator’s task, cultural mediators assume the mission to stimulate the necessary openness and dialogue in order to ensure that the experiences of their local partners are enriched by the information coming from another culture. It is very interesting that both Paul Ricoeur and a well-known Chinese thinker, Tu Weiming (1997), share the same idea that the best path to selfhood is through otherness, that the fundamental aspects of, say, the Chinese culture may come back to China enriched, after having been discussed or even tried-on by people from around the world.

Ricoeur wrote that the self

*...only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, this time altered and enlarged, ‘othered’. The moi gives way to the soi, or more precisely to soi-même comme un autre. The arc of translation epitomizes this journey from self through the other, reminding us of the irreducible finitude and contingency of all languages* (Ricoeur, 2006: 20).

Regarding China and its vast culture, the Romanian experts who are trying to “negotiate understanding” have a rather difficult mission, considering both the richness of the Chinese history and civilisation and the amount of prejudice encountered. To such an endeavour, the similar wounds that people from the two countries still carry might seem to play an important role in reducing the distances, and the Romanian cultural mediators will surely know how to relate to this. Ricoeur also suggests that the future of world politics should be one based upon an exchange of memories and narratives between different nations, “for

it is only when we translate our own wounds into the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place”(2006: 21) This seems even more true when linked to the effort of the Chinese writers since the 1980’s to heal their historical wounds by telling their bitter stories to the whole world.

This journey through time and space of the most important elements of the Chinese culture not only that makes them arrive enriched back in their own cultural space but also enrich so many other cultures, such as the Romanian one. The role of the cultural mediator in reducing the distance between China and Romania is a permanent one. No matter under which guise or during which period of time, cultural mediators have to kindle and deepen the passion and openness for this amazing culture and succeeds in re-evaluating the features of their own culture as mirrored in “the Other’s”.

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