

INTRODUCTION

Franco-Chinese Political and Cultural Relations since 1964

The year 2024 marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between France and the People's Republic of China. Following the founding of the latter in 1949, France under Charles de Gaulle became, in 1964, one of the first major Western powers to recognize the young and internationally isolated PRC which was, in David Gosset's (2009) words, 'not only in an ideological battle against the American-led Western world' but also 'at odds with its two gigantic neighbors, India and the USSR'. As Gosset continues, 'by recognizing Mao's government, Paris signaled to both Washington and Moscow that France intended to deploy an independent foreign policy.' De Gaulle never actually met Mao Zedong in person, but his perception of China was significantly mediated through the novelist André Malraux, de Gaulle's Minister of Cultural Affairs and special envoy to Beijing in 1965, whose subsequent works drawing on his contact and experience with Mao and China (as well as his meeting with Richard Nixon later) were instrumental in shaping French intellectuals' and the general public's understanding and imagining of Maoism and China in the late 1960s and 1970s (see Jiao Jinghan's article in this special issue). Indeed, as Muriel Détrie (2004: 82) observes, 'dans le contexte français des années 1960 où le modèle soviétique ne fait plus rêver et où l'agitation sociale est grande, la jeunesse contestataire projette sur la Chine maoïste son idéal d'une société égalitaire établie par le moyen d'une "révolution permanente."' This French ideological and cultural fascination with Maoist China then led to a three-week trip undertaken by some left-wing intellectuals associated with the literary journal *Tel Quel*, such as Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleyne, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes in 1974, a year after Georges Pompidou's official visit to China—the first Western European head of state to have done so (Zhang, 2024: 62).¹ Telquelians, having little knowledge of what was actually happening on the ground during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), ideologically turned Maoist China into, to borrow Alex Hughes's (2007: 7) expression, 'a site of pilgrimage', a destination of 'ideological tourism' (3), a political and cultural imaginary for them to work through their own intellectual agendas in France. Ironical though it may sound, the influential French left-wing intellectuals' and the public's political sympathies towards Maoist China may also explain, at least in part, why

¹ Another significant international event worth noting here is the American President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, which established the diplomatic tie between the US and the PRC.

France 'maintained the most amicable diplomatic relationship with China among major Western European states during the Cold War' (Ma, 2020: 44).

In the following decades, after Mao's death in 1976 and the Economic Reform and Opening Up Policy in 1978 led by Deng Xiaoping, France and China have engaged enthusiastically in bilateral projects in the fields of trade, science, technology, culture, and education. While a wide range of large-scale cooperative projects have come out of state-level strategic partnerships,² Franco-Chinese or Sino-French cultural productions and relations in the past 60 years are often seen to have 'peaked' around the early 2000s (Silvester and Thouroude, 2024: 4), most especially marked by the elaborate 2003-2004 cross-year celebration of the 40th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Not only were notable contemporary writers based in mainland China made Chevaliers de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, such as Han Shaogong 韩少功 in 2002 and Yu Hua 余华 in 2004; but by then, a significant number of first-generation Chinese migrant writers and artists settled in France, such as François Cheng 程抱一, Gao Xingjian 高行健, Dai Sijie 戴思杰, Shan Sa 山飒, [and](#) Zao Wou-Ki 趙無極, had also already enjoyed the highest French and Western institutional recognitions ([e.g.](#) the Grand Prix de la Francophonie, Prix Femina, Prix Goncourt des lycéens, [and](#) the Nobel Prize in Literature).³ While Cheng was elected to the Académie française in 2002, Zao became a permanent member of the Académie des beaux-arts in the same year. In a short space of time, the latter writers and artists, linguistically and culturally cognizant of both France and China, were perceived as the de facto 'cultural ambassadors' of China to France, however problematic and varied their individual and family entanglement with contemporary Chinese politics and history were. The *Nouveau Magazine littéraire* (now rebranded as *Lire - le Magazine littéraire*) dedicated their entire March issue of 2004 to Chinese and Franco-Chinese literature and philosophy. Back in 2001, the influential French weekly political magazine, *Le Point*, had already published an 82-page double edition titled 'Spécial Chine' (21-28 December). In China, major (re)translation projects of French literature were commissioned. Zhou Kexi's and Xu Hejin's competing individual retranslations of Proust's monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu* were underway and published in part in 2004 and 2005 (see Zhao Yangjie's article in this issue for a more recent development of Chinese writers' creative rewriting of Proust). While it is important to always assess individual literary and artistic merits, the endorsement,

² See Zhang (2024) [for more details](#).

³ See Chirila (2012: 68-69) for a more comprehensive list of [the](#) awards these writers garnered.

recognition, and promotion of those Chinese or Franco-Chinese works clearly reflected the broader political will for rapprochement until the early 2000s.

In the years that followed, a high-profile diplomatic incident dramatically soured the political and cultural relations between the two countries. In April 2008, the disruption caused by pro-Tibet protesters during the Paris leg of the Olympic torch relay, which was amplified by Nicolas Sarkozy's subsequent political framing of his appearance at the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony later in the summer as advocacy of 'progress on human rights in Tibet', sparked public protests in several big cities in China—the first Chinese protests specifically targeting France since Paris and Beijing established diplomatic relations in 1964' (France24, 2008). The Chinese president then Hu Jintao described the series of events as 'unfriendly to the Chinese people' and 'hurting the feelings of the Chinese people' (*China Daily*, 2008). As Chinese public resentment lingered, the Chinese state media had to repeatedly call for its citizens 'to harness their patriotic feelings for the purposes of economic development' (France24, 2008). The French supermarket chain and retailer Carrefour, which officially exited the Chinese market in 2019, was arguably the biggest economic victim of this incident due to the boycott in China.⁴ It has been argued that China's growing assertiveness after 2009 (and many national policymakers' perceptions thereof) have led to a key change in French security policy in the Asia-Pacific from regional economic interests to the 'political-military dimension of its regional presence', particularly in relation to France's colonial past and overseas territories in the Pacific Oceans (Meijer 2023: 1246).

2014 marked the 50th anniversary and Xi Jinping's first state visit to France, a tradition he has continued every five years since. There were still major political, commercial, and public celebrations in France and China. The official 224-page bilingual publication in hardback titled '50 周年: 中国 France Chine 法国 1964-2014' (2015), beautifully printed on glossy paper, documents 100 commemorative events organized in both countries, with an impressive committee of commercial sponsors including EDF, Bank of China, Huawei, Air France, Peugeot, and Société Générale, and media partners, such as FranceTélévisions, Radio France, and TV5Monde.⁵

⁴ For detailed analysis of how Carrefour and the Chinese government responded to this 'crisis', see Coombs (2012). ['Olympic Torch Protests in France, Reactions in China: Carrefour Learns about International Crisis', in *Case Studies in Crisis Communication*]

⁵ See also the 190-page French publication by *Nouvelles d'Europe* (Europe-based Chinese-language newspaper, headquartered in Paris), titled '50 ans d'amitiés: France Chine' (2014).

However, the celebratory and commemorative attitudes and atmospheres for 2019 and 2024 were drastically different. China's rise as a major global economic, political, and military power capable of challenging and changing the current global order dominated by Europe and the USA in particular has increasingly been perceived as a threat. Rosalind Silvester and Guillaume Thouroude recapitulate this 'fièvre géopolitique' and describe it as 'autant martiale qu'idéologique' (2024: 2). China's increased assertiveness and even hostility on the international political scene may be best reflected in what many media and pundits term 'wolf warrior diplomacy' during Xi's presidency, referring to a realist 'dare to fight' (Dai and Luqiu, 2022: 253). On the French side, the decades of enthusiastic collaborations and partnerships with China in business, science, technology, culture, and education now seem to be fraught with accusations of Chinese industrial, military, and political espionage, cyber-attacks, financial frauds, money laundering, economic manipulation and political intimidation through soft power influence (Izambard, 2019). More recently, as Silvester and Thouroude remark,

le soutien visible d'Emmanuel Macron envers l'Ukraine, après l'invasion du pays par la Russie, et ses premières tentatives de négocier un accord de paix ont fortement contrasté avec position de la Chine, qui a poursuivi les pourparlers avec la Russie et s'est abstenu du vote crucial des Nations Unies sur la résolution ES 11/1 le 2 mars 2022 exigeant un retrait complet des forces russes et un renversement de sa décision de reconnaître les républiques populaires autoproclamées de Donetsk et de Lougansk. (2024: 2-3)

Admittedly, since 2023, China has made a renewed effort to improve its diplomatic relations with France and Europe. Interestingly, China's ex-Foreign Minister, Qin Gang, widely seen as the chief advocate of 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, was removed from the post in 2023.

There was very limited media coverage of celebratory and commemorative events taking place in France in 2024. For example, the high-profile conference organized in Paris, titled 'Échanges et enrichissement mutuel des civilisations chinoise et française: rétrospectives et perspectives,' co-organized by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, involving more than 100 academics, researchers, and members of think tanks, went largely unreported in French media. The event took place only days before Xi's official visit, and it [was](#) even [featured](#) on the official CPC News (2024). The Chinese Ambassador Lu Shaye's (2024) address on this occasion was titled 'Navigating Challenges, Embracing Opportunities,' calling 2024 the China-France Year of Cultural Tourism promoting 'people-to-people and cultural exchanges' as a 'new guarantee for peace and stability in the world.' This also aligns with China's broader governmental initiative to 'bring back'

foreign tourists and investments to the country after the Covid episode. As of November 2024, citizens of 38 countries, including France, are exempt from visa requirements to enter China for stays of up to 30 days.

While France was busy preparing for the 2024 Summer Olympics, which might have resulted in the perceived diplomatic lukewarmness in relation to China, some notable French commemorative initiatives were materialised in over 30 Chinese cities. According to the French government's official webpage, 'prestigious French institutions such as the Palace of Versailles, the Mobilier National, and the Ballet of the Opéra national de Bordeaux' have offered 'an exceptional series of events in order to introduce audiences to the French arts, whether classic or contemporary, in fields ranging from music to arts and crafts, filmmaking, and literature' (France Diplomacy, 2024). Perhaps the most symbolic collaborative event was the exhibition 'The Forbidden City and the Palace of Versailles: Exchanges between China and France in the 17th and 18th Centuries/紫禁城与凡尔赛：17、18 世纪的中法交往' held at the Palace Museum in Beijing (1 April to 30 June 2024), which started with the arrival of King Louis XIV's first Jesuit missionaries at Emperor Kangxi's court in Beijing in 1687 (see Liu 2024).⁶ Another memorable event was the special exhibition of Zao Wou-Ki's works organised at China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, titled 'The Way is Infinite: Centennial Retrospective Exhibition of Zao Wou-Ki/大道无极—赵无极百年回顾特展' (20 September 2023– 20 February 2024).⁷ There were also events targeted at younger Chinese audiences, such as the itinerant exhibition of *Le Petit Prince* held in Nanjing (5 March-12 May 2024), which recreated six artistic settings from the story and ten performance and experience areas, employing multimedia and immersive art technologies. The exhibition was co-curated by Huang Hong, Professor of French at Nanjing University, who translated Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* into Chinese (Xu, 2024: 76). To align cultural activities with political developments may be suspected of deliberately instrumentalising literature and art or even reducing them to political propaganda. Yet, in times of global political uncertainty and economic precarity, literature and art, writers and artists could still provide more complex, profound, tangible as well as symbolic means by which political leaders and the general public alike could bridge

⁶ This was an itinerant exhibition which also took place in Hong Kong between 18 December 2024 - 4 May 2025.

⁷ Admittedly, the exhibition was initially planned for 2020 to commemorate the centenary anniversary of the artist. This was postponed due to Covid restrictions.

and negotiate differences and improve intercultural understandings. [This](#) is also what the various contributions to this issue are trying to demonstrate.

Migration and Transculturation in Sino-French Contexts

The timeliness and significance of this special issue also lies in the way it highlights how migration and transculturation in Sino-French contexts have changed over the past six decades. Our knowledge and perspectives are inevitably shaped by the particular point in time we stand, dependent on the migratory trajectories and creative synergies that have happened so far. The exploration of Sino-French exchanges has an underlying temporal dimension, namely, what does it mean to think about Sino-French arts and histories now, in the mid-2020s, when the world order is increasingly fractured and cultural identities no longer align with broad-brush East-West categories? As mentioned above in the discussion of Sino-French socio-political relations, cultural exchanges need institutional support but are not *limited* by the latter. While diplomatic relations and government policies are directed, officiated and maintained by institutional guidelines and efforts, cultural interactions and developments materialise in specific ways and often depend more on individual creativity than official sponsorship. Namely, they are also experiential, circumstantial, unpredictable, ramifying in unintended directions and generating unique phenomena from intersections of persons and artworks. This is evidenced by the case studies in this special issue, which present an extraordinary range of artistic activities and historical figures in Sino-French contexts, from French Polynesia to the Chinese countryside, from the Daoist *Hundun* (渾沌) character to Xuefeng Chen's 陈雪峰 relational contemporary art.

This diversity owes much to migration, not simply in the conventional sense of uni-directional emigration from one's birth country to settle in a foreign land but also encompassing temporary or uncertain periods of geographical displacement both long and short, situated in fluid in-between spaces where neither location nor identity is clear-cut. The duration of travel and migration across Sino-French contexts does not, apparently, necessarily determine the intensities of experience nor the aesthetic identity of literature and arts produced through this process. As many writers and artists in this field demonstrate, the temporality of migration is not always linear or definitive, but ongoing, multiple and oscillating, spanning diverse forms of travel, study abroad, settlement, and alternating residence periods between France and China. We may think of sinophile and comparatist René Étiemble's 1957 travels in China narrated in

his *Tong yeou ki ou le nouveau singe pèlerin* (1958), performatively entitled to suggest a mirroring counterpart to the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (西游記), a fictionalised narrative about Tang-dynasty monk Xuanzang's (seventh century) laborious expedition from China to India to seek authentic Buddhist scriptures and knowledge. Evoking images of spiritual pilgrimage and epistemic enlightenment, Étiemble's Chinese trip, though barely two months, is presented as a transformative migration of knowledge, literature, and scholarship from China to France via himself, both 'singe' and sage. In other cases, long-term residence does not guarantee cultural authenticity, and sometimes even reveals how the process of becoming Chinese is ever elusive, performed vainly by acts of assimilation, as Suzanne Bernard's fictional 'étrangère à Pékin' Julie tells herself: 'Pourquoi t'habiller comme une Chinoise? Tu seras toujours une étrangère' (Bernard, 1986: 12).

On the Chinese side, a cursory glance across the twentieth century shows us that some of the most prominent and pioneering figures of modern Chinese poetry and Sino-French arts arrived in France initially as international students or exchange scholars, for instance, Fu Lei 傅雷, Dai Wangshu 戴望舒, Li Jinfa 李金發, Lin Fengmian 林風眠, Xie Jinglan 謝景蘭 (known as Lalan 拉蘭), Pan Yuliang 潘玉良, and, as mentioned previously, François Cheng and Zao Wou-Ki. This migratory flow, very much driven by the high reputation of France in China as the destination for studying visual arts and literature, is sustained in the latter half of the twentieth century, exemplified by figures studied in this issue such as Dai Sijie, Shan Sa and Xuefeng Chen. Since 2000, the number of Chinese international students in France has further increased, with Campus France reporting 27,123 Chinese students in 2023-2024.⁸ Doubtless, new generations of writers and artists nourished by synergistic Sino-French cultures are emerging from these movements of people and learning, often resulting in geographically dispersed creative communities that are not limited to metropolitan France and mainland China. Indeed, 'les communautés flottantes/浮游的共同体' was the title for the 2015 inaugural bilingual French-Chinese issue of the contemporary art magazine LEAP,⁹ an apt characterisation of the fluid locations and evolving cultural lineage of many artists featured there. LEAP's chief editor Cao Dan lives and works between Shanghai and Paris; other contemporary artists such as Shen Yuan 沈远 and Yao Qingmei 姚清妹 pursue their careers in

⁸ See https://ressources.campusfrance.org/publications/mobilite_pays/fr/chine_fr.pdf (accessed 10 May 2025).

⁹ See <https://www.leapleapleap.com/2016/06/presse-le-bond-sans-frontieres/> (accessed 12 May 2025).

France while remaining well connected to art institutions in major Chinese cities. Moreover, not only do people ‘float’, but also production activities and distribution channels, demonstrated by Chinese film director Geng Jun’s 耿军 queer Chinese-language film *Bel ami* 漂亮朋友 (2024), produced in France by Blackfin, a film production company that recently relocated from Beijing to Paris.¹⁰ At the heart of the notion of ‘floating’ (浮), we find diverse experiences and perceptions of ‘旅居’, literally ‘travelling residence’, a term often employed to describe the life of the Chinese diaspora, even when one has left their hometown for decades. Although Hong Kongese-French poet and painter Chung-hing 陳重馨, pen named ‘le Cavalier Vert’ 綠騎士, has lived in France since the 1970s, she is still introduced in 2024 as a ‘travelling resident writer in France’ (旅法作家) by the Museum of Hong Kong Literature. These Chinese expressions evoking the multi-dimensionality of migration capture some of the changing conditions, the identity fluctuations and (mis)perceptions of home that underpin Sino-French creative practices and their agents.

A unique and cosmopolitan transculturality organically grows from these Sino-French spheres and entangled histories. The cultural hybridity in question here is not a version of homogenised globalisation, international airport-style, but a *sui generis* field of cultural dynamism, inflected by French and Chinese languages, with its own cultural lineage that is shaped by France-China historical relations and punctuated by specific intersections between broader francophone, modern and premodern Chinese, and sinophone traditions. As a keyword that has been increasingly used in discussions about globalisation, Comparative and World Literature, transculturality encompasses different definitions ranging from the negative to the positive. It has been explained as creolisation due to colonialism and unequal power hierarchies, with the colonised dominated by the colonising culture (Pratt 1992); as an international style that is as rootless as it is ethnically and culturally unidentifiable (Pavis, 2010: 12); as processes of ‘self-distancing’ and ‘self-criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions’ (Berry and Epstein, 1999: 307); and as the free and assertive act of self-redefinition, illustrated by exophonic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Vassilis Alexakis and Tawada Yoko, as well as the

¹⁰ Such transnational activities disseminating films are corroborated by the association (since 2018) Allers-Retours, which is dedicated to the Festival du Cinéma d’Auteur Chinois and promoting Chinese films in France, see: <https://www.allersretoursasso.fr/qui-sommes-nous/>.

Sino-French writers mentioned earlier. Transculturation in Sino-French contexts, however, should be primarily understood from the latter two constructive, critical-thinking and positive perspectives. For colonialism is not a substantial historical connection between France and China, and Sino-French hybridity clearly does not lack literary and cultural specificity. Consider, for example, Judith Gautier's numerous allusions to Tang history and legends in her *La Fille du ciel* (1919) or Ma Desheng's 马德升 re-appropriation of Maoist-era rhetoric in his poetry (see articles by Chevalier and Pröll).

Starting from the discussions in our 2024 conference 'France/China 60 Years On / France/Chine, 60 ans et au-delà' at Queen's University Belfast, and continuing to the contributions in this issue, what has struck us in particular is the crucial role Sino-French transculturation plays in the birth of comparative critical awareness and new forms of creativity. Exhibitions of Chinese paintings in France at the turn of the century (Zhi Bie's article) sparked comparative reflections and analogical methods that sought to make sense of Chinese aesthetic taste and art forms, without necessarily imposing European parameters of style or genre. Though initially inspired by Parisian Surrealism and mediated through the Japanese avant-garde, Shanghai Surrealists in the 1930s developed their own artistic visions and reinvented, via the vehicle of Surrealism, aspects of classical Chinese culture including calligraphy and Daoist motifs (Walden 2024). We may also trace a shift from the political exoticism of postwar French writers towards Maoist China—manifested in André Malraux's writings (Jiao's article), Étiemble's encomiastic Chinese anecdotes, and the Tel Quel group—to remarkably diversified approaches to Chinese culture that recognise its modernity and plurality. If Sino-French relations started with travellers, Jesuits, artisans, and diplomats who facilitated encounters across radical difference, by now the transcultural phenomena we currently witness are no longer merely about representations of the self to the other (or vice versa), but constant renegotiations of the very boundaries that constitute self and other. In other words, 'France' and 'China' are active and dynamic cultural signs and images, grounded in concrete experience and historical confluence but simultaneously beyond the factual and the limits of what already exists.

The term 'Franco-Chinese'/'franco-chinois' or 'Sino-French'/'sino-français,' often with slightly different emphases on the direction or linguistic choice of transnational exchange, needs further nuancing. In many intercultural discussions, there is a tendency to treat France and China as unified, self-contained entities or 'civilizations,' respectively. Yet, both France and China are internally diverse. As shown in Noémie Marques-Verhille's article on Sino-

French legacies in the Insular Pacific, the 'French' dimension must be understood to include the diversity of contemporary French identities—in terms of population and territory—and how this diversity shapes and interacts with Chinese diasporic experiences differently. In turn, the growing body of work by francophone Chinese creators—or Chinese artists and writers with significant personal and professional ties to France—also underscores the rich ethnic and linguistic diversity within the People's Republic of China. The dynamics of migration and transculturality invite us to look beyond a binary understanding of Franco-Chinese relations as interactions between two stable, homogenous identities.

Two combined approaches may help undo this binary: a non-culturalist, language-focused perspective, and a diasporic or migratory one. Internal diversity within France becomes especially significant when the nation is not treated as a monolithic institution, but rather as part of an 'archipelagic' French-speaking world (Glissant, 1997: 31-32)—one in which France is only one among many areas and French cohabits with other languages and indeed different kinds of French. In the case of Franco-Chinese or francophone Chinese creators and authors, this means recognizing their participation in a global literary and cultural movement that does not hinge on a hierarchical configuration between 'France' and 'Francophonie,' nor necessarily on a centre-periphery model. Similarly, tying Chinese identity to a singular territorial or political framework must be contested, as the circulation and development of the Chinese language and culture vary significantly across different regions, and what we perceive as uniquely Chinese often coexists with other languages and traditions, not always occupying a dominant position. The sinophone or sinosphere, historically defined by the commonly-shared Sinitic script and Chinese heritage in East and Southeast Asia, and continuing to be shaped by global Chinese communities, illustrates this multiplicity in different ways. Beyond the Franco-Chinese dyad and the framework of diasporic identity, the field of Franco-Chinese or Sino-French studies continues to expand. Communities, families, and individuals increasingly bear witness to transnational, transcultural, and translingual trajectories, giving rise to original forms of expression. This field is decidedly marked by plurality, where notions of 'francophonie chinoise' (Zhang, 2008: 89-147), 'francophonie de cohabitation' (Kang, 2018: 9-28), and 'sinité francophone' (Daniel, 2021: 144) interpenetrate and cross-fertilize.

France today is witnessing the emergence of a self-affirmed Franco-Chinese community with its own history, intergenerational dynamics, and challenges related to integration, discrimination, and inequality—challenges often explored by writers, artists, and activists such as Grace Ly, or graphic novelists like Kei Lam and Lucie Quémener. This evolving identity, inherently unstable and continually reinvented, also has the potential to

redefine community boundaries. Through shared experiences of racialization, stereotyping, and discrimination in French society, the Franco-Chinese community is increasingly perceived as emblematic of broader experiences faced by other communities of Asian origins in France (Chuang, 2021: 9, 14, 218). This shared reality invites reflection on the usefulness of a broader 'Franco-Asian' paradigm, one that transcends national origins and foregrounds solidarity and common aspirations. In this light, the Franco-Chinese dynamic becomes a space of negotiation and creativity—a dynamic complementarity embodied in individuals and cultural productions. It plays an essential role in ongoing debates about the reinvention of French identity.

The contributors and articles in this issue testify to the richness and energy of the Sino-French cultural and scholarly field, one that has the infelicity of sometimes falling between the cracks of academic disciplines organised around nation-state units. We gain insight into engaging, emerging but less-studied topics such as Alain Mazars's film, Yan Bin's trans-fiction, and touring Chinese theatre groups in France, all of which demonstrate the expanse of this research area and the amount of work that remains to be done. We therefore hope this issue will spark more interest and relevant discussions in the near future, from inter-state relations and cultural exchanges viewed through the lens of nationhood, to transnational and global perspectives such as 'sino-francophone' or 'franco-sinophone' approaches, to personal, familial, and local experiences of plurality. While this special issue marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between France and China, it also contributes to a broader and fluid field of inquiry—one the terminology of which must be continuously reassessed to reflect the richness, nuance, and internal diversity of the phenomena it seeks to describe.

Sino-French Studies in the 2000s

The critical antecedents of this special issue may be traced back to the significant date of 2004 which, if we recall from earlier, marked the 40th anniversary of official diplomatic relations between France and China. As part of the bilateral celebrations, 2004 was deemed The Year of France in China, following *l'année Chine* in France in 2003. Coincidentally, 2004 also signalled the apogee of interest in francophone Chinese writers, filmmakers and artists. In 2004, Muriel Détrie published both *France-Chine. Quand deux mondes se rencontrent*, an overview of the intellectual, political, cultural and creative exchanges between the two nations from the seventeenth century, and a seminal article in *Le Magazine Littéraire* on the francophone Chinese novel as a literary phenomenon. Indeed, that particular issue of the *Magazine* was entirely devoted to Chinese and Franco-Chinese literature and philosophy, again in

acknowledgement of the anniversary. Another French scholar, Annie Curien, produced in the same year the first collection to bring together Chinese and French writers and sinologists on the theme of modernity in contemporary writing. In the first part of *Écrire au présent: débats littéraires franco-chinois* (2004), the authors reflected on their experiences of the city, temporality, aesthetics, language and exile, while the second part contained disparate articles exploring such topics as the evolution of literature in the light of social and historical transformations, ‘foreignness’ in language, the genre of the fantastic, and close readings of works by Chinese writers.

Thus, the beginnings of enquiries into francophone Chinese creative works had its roots firmly in literature, but it was not until several years later that they were formally recognised as a genre in such publications as Lena Bisinger’s thesis turned book *Rencontre interculturelle dans le roman franco-chinois: invitation au voyage d’un genre émergent* (2016), although franco-Chinese writing had been treated in practice as a distinct category within francophone studies from the early 2000s. Also, almost a decade passed before book-length collections including the visual arts appeared. Silvester and Thouroude’s edited volume, *Traits chinois, lignes francophones: images, écritures, cultures* (2012), aimed to widen the genres associated with the field by analysing Gao Xingjian’s films and cinematography, the paintings of Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 in the early twentieth century, and the Nanjing-based blogger and academic Cao Dong Xue 曹冬雪, alongside an interview with Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian and articles on francophone Chinese figures and writers from the nineteenth century, such as Tcheng Ki-Tong 陳季同, to those of the twenty-first century, like Ying Chen 应晨, François Cheng and Shan Sa. This effort to account for both the verbal and visual arts continued in Silvester’s subsequent special journal issue, ‘Convergences franco-chinoises: la valeur de la créativité transculturelle’ (2024). While examining the evolution of the relationship between France and China from the early 2000s to the early 2020s, which was tested by major ideological and geopolitical differences, the introduction also noted the continuing, healthy production of francophone Chinese creative works during the period, with its slight shift to more visual and intermedial expressions, and their appeal to both the general public and scholars. The latter contributed to the development of the field with new approaches based in, notably, Food Studies, zoopoetics and ecocriticism. It also identified a tendency, increasingly apparent over the last decade, to go beyond mainland China and consider the creative outputs of artists

originating from other sinophone regions, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.¹¹ In this respect, Michelle E. Bloom's (2016) monograph on contemporary Sino-French cinemas is particularly relevant: it not only analysed literature and film side-by-side, for instance in a study of Dai Sijie's adaptation of his novel *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* (2000) to the screen two years later, but also engaged meaningfully with questions of the sinophone and francophone via Taiwanese and Chinese filmmakers' links to France and the wider context of transnational cinema and world cinema.

In the period between the two collections mentioned above, the critical interest in intermediality was represented by the publication of four books. Firstly, Lee and Liu's edited volume *Gao Xingjian and Transmedia Aesthetics* (2018) showcased the breadth of Gao's transcultural, transdisciplinary and transmedia explorations with chapters exploring his plays, films, ink paintings, fiction and multilayered narratives involving poetry, dance, music and art. Gao Xingjian reappears in Li's *Travel, Translation and Transmedia Aesthetics: Franco-Chinese Literature and Visual Arts in a Global Age* (2021), along with Shan Sa, Dai Sijie and François Cheng whose well-known writings are studied in conjunction with their lesser known calligraphic works, paintings and films. It is precisely due to this ability to express themselves across different media and cultures that, according to Li (2021: 2), they 'find their creative inspiration, freedom, desire, and new life and identity'. Weiwei Xiang, too, explores Gao Xingjian, Dai Sijie and Shan Sa as intermedial artists and adds Zhou Qinli 周勤丽, all of whom are studied in the second part of *Interculturalité et intermédialité chez les auteurs francophones chinois* (2021). The first part focuses on the theme of interculturality in the works of a range of writers from the late nineteenth century to the early 2000s and includes reflections on the development of francophone Chinese literature and the important concept of 'l'entre-deux'. Angie Chau also unites Chinese writers (Li Jinfa, Xu Xu 徐許) and artists (Chang Yu 常玉, Pan Yuliang), but also adds an art critic (Fu Lei), in *Paris and the Art of Transposition: Early Twentieth Century Sino-French Encounters* (2023). Focusing on an earlier period than Li and Xiang, she explains why Paris played such a central role in the global reception of modern Chinese literature and the artistic strategies that created a transnational imaginary. Incidentally, articles are beginning to be published on the archetypal intermedial genre, the graphic novel,

¹¹ During that decade, too, studies emerged that included other East Asian cultures alongside China, such as *Translation and Literature in East Asia: Between Visibility and Invisibility* (2019), edited by Kiaer, Guest and Li, which reconsidered the notion of translational (in)visibility when translating between the Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages and literatures and European languages.

most notably by Bloom (forthcoming) in the USA and Bernard (2024) in Europe. As well as writers/illustrators of Chinese origin, they include a Taiwanese-born graphic novelist and thus also interrogate the limitations of the label ‘francophone Chinese’, preferring instead the term ‘Sino-French’ to refer to a broad geographical and cultural sphere.

The 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations offered another occasion for academics to reflect on the particularities of this intercultural relationship, with a sizable proportion of each volume dedicated to historical perspectives. Meng and Didier presented a long temporal span in *Miroirs croisés Chine-France: XVIIème - XXIème siècles* (2014), a predominantly historical survey of interactions involving travellers, merchants, missionaries, scholars and writers in chapters revolving around the idea of encounters that lead to refracted perceptions: it is proposed that when each of these civilisations look at themselves through the mirror of the other, they modify their own image. The hefty volume edited by Yvan Daniel and several colleagues from the University of La Rochelle, *France-Chine: Les échanges culturels et linguistiques. Histoire, enjeux, perspectives* (2015), began with special contributions from the francophone writer Shen Dali and from Joël Bellassen, former Professor of Chinese at l’Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales and the first Inspector General in the field of Chinese Language Teaching at France’s Ministry of Education. The following sections dealt with Franco-Chinese exchanges relating to history, literature, linguistics, translation, pedagogy and visual art. Although not explicitly marking the fiftieth anniversary, Bouvier-Lafitte and Prouteau’s *Tissages littéraires franco-chinois* (2016) was published sufficiently close to the event to benefit from the renewed interest it generated in the field. Returning to the anchor of literature, it brought together French (Voltaire, Victor Segalen) and Chinese (François Cheng, Shan Sa, Ying Chen) writers up until 2015 and included an interview with Ying Chen, who settled firstly near Montreal and then moved to Vancouver. A few years later, *Rencontres et interculturalité entre la Chine et l’Occident* (Li, Pinson and Pei, 2022) emphasised not only the French-Canadian contribution to the field of research, but also Belgian scholarship. Comprising an initial three sections on missionaries, literature, media and science, in a way that revealed similarities with the extensive coverage of Daniel et al’s volume (2015), it ended with two sections on cultural adaptation and ‘Un regard croisé et la perception de l’Autre: l’image de la Chine et de l’Occident’, reminiscent of Meng and Didier’s overarching theme in *Miroirs croisés* (2014).

Undoubtedly, the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries will give rise to another wave of publications, besides this special issue. Collaborations between francophone and Chinese research teams will continue to produce edited volumes that

reflect the intellectual and financial investment of their institutions and research centres, with an emphasis on the experience and expertise of the contributors. Publications led by anglophone scholars will, for their part, continue to encourage articles written by a wide range of international researchers at all career stages and will be reliant on individual initiatives and research agendas. Such an inclusive and geographically diverse approach may be seen in this collection. Furthermore, around this anniversary, several new directions are appearing in, as yet, unpublished research presented at conferences by both postgraduate and established researchers. Studies on the built environment explore, for instance, architecture and urbanism in Shanghai's former French concession, the connection between 'hai pai' culture and French influences in the design of buildings and town planning, and the replicas of iconic French landmarks, whether full size or as miniatures in the popular theme parks constructed from the 1980s across China. In addition, investigations that go beyond the bilateral relationship to form triangular configurations involving France, China and another nation or culture are increasing. Particularly noteworthy amongst these are studies involving Africa: Chinese publishers using existing francophone networks in Africa to sell Chinese-language and translated works; francophone-African writers whose novels include Chinese characters to represent another ethnic face of the *quartiers défavorisés* of Paris and their socio-economic underbelly; Chinese and French investment, cooperation and competition in the ports of Cameroon and its energy sector. Research is also being conducted into Chinese-born artists who settled in France after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and who are becoming known in other art scenes and markets around the world, such as Australia, the USA and the Middle East. Indeed, the new wave of migration from China since 2020, especially from Beijing and Shanghai where artist studio complexes have been demolished, has sparked interest in the Beijing-style artist colonies on the outskirts of a few major cities in the USA and Europe. Such innovative avenues of investigation as the aforementioned not only attest to the ever-expanding and thriving field of franco-Chinese studies as we enter the seventh decade of this special relationship, but also to its wider appeal and relevance to Transnational Studies, Area Studies, Migration Studies and Comparative Studies.

Overview of Articles

The articles in this special issue reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the field, spanning the arts, humanities and social sciences, and are organised into three sections: 'Encounters with History and Heritage', 'Franco-Chinese Visual Arts, 1960 to Today', and 'Franco-Chinese

Novels of the 20th and 21st Centuries'. The first part explores intersections of history, art, politics, and economics at key moments of Franco-Chinese interaction. It highlights how these disciplines converge to shed light on deeper cultural dynamics, from early art-historical engagements with Chinese painting, to the mythologization of Mao Zedong in French political discourse, to the complex legacies of Chinese diasporic communities in the French Pacific. Bie Zhi's article, 'Les premières expositions de la peinture chinoise en France', examines the earliest exhibitions of Chinese painting in France during the first two decades of the 20th century. These exhibitions marked the emergence of a critical, scholarly approach to Chinese art, moving beyond exoticized representations. Drawing on catalogues and archival materials from pioneering exhibitions at the Louvre, Musée Guimet, and Musée Cernuschi, the article explores how this moment represented both the birth of a new academic field and a significant cultural transfer involving not only painting, but also philosophy and spiritual aesthetics. In 'André Malraux et le maoïsme: l'entretien entre Malraux et Mao dans les *Antimémoires*', Jiao Jinghan analyses how Malraux, following his 1965 meeting with Mao Zedong as an emissary of General de Gaulle, progressively reinterpreted the encounter in his writings. The article traces the transformation of the original interview into a mythologized narrative, shaping Mao as an archetype of political power and Malraux himself as a creator of historical meaning. By comparing the original transcripts with the version presented in *Antimémoires*, the study reveals a process of mutual mythification that continues to resonate in French political imagination. Noémie Marques-Verhille's contribution, 'Interpreting the Franco-Chinese Legacy in the Insular Pacific', broadens the geographical and historical frame by turning to the Chinese diaspora in France's overseas territories, particularly French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Focusing on the politics of integration and discrimination, the article examines the long-term impact of colonial and post-colonial policies on these communities. It argues that Franco-Chinese relations are not only defined by bilateral diplomatic history but also shaped within a globalised context that includes transnational migration and cultural hybridity.

The second section focuses on the field of visual and performing arts, showing how Franco-Chinese artistic collaborations have evolved from state-sponsored exchanges to independent, transcultural modes of creation. Each case study engages with themes introduced in the first section—French Sinological discourse, political myth-making, and intercultural entanglement—demonstrating how these relationships continue to shape contemporary artistic practices. In 'Dynamiques diplomatiques au cœur des échanges théâtraux franco-chinois', Célia Dumont-Malet investigates early theatrical exchanges between France and the People's Republic of China. Drawing on French Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, the article shows

how these initial interactions were tightly orchestrated within diplomatic constraints. It also charts the gradual opening of space for private companies and less formalised artistic initiatives, revealing the evolving nature of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Philippe Met's article, 'Rêveries filmiques d'Alain Mazars', offers a different perspective by analysing the independent film work of French director Alain Mazars. After a formative visit to China in the late 1970s, Mazars began producing films that reflect a dreamlike, critical engagement with Chinese society. Focusing particularly on *Le Pavillon aux pivoines* (1988), the article explores how Mazars' avant-garde techniques allow for a meditation on individual memory, aesthetic perception, and the multiplicity of Chinese cultural realities, framed within tensions between political context and poetic imagination. In 'Xuefeng Chen and Relational Art', Rosalind Silvester explores the work of francophone Chinese artist Xuefeng Chen through the lens of Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of 'Relational Aesthetics'. Chen's installations are multimodal, participatory, and deeply rooted in transcultural processes. They reflect both personal and collective histories while promoting a philosophical and ecological approach to cohabiting the world—what Silvester refers to as a distinctive 'ecosophy'. The article highlights how Chen's work exemplifies the potential of art to serve as a bridge between people, cultures and temporalities.

The final section turns to literature, examining how contemporary Franco-Chinese authors engage with iconic historical figures, philosophical themes, and cultural taboos to rethink issues such as power, embodiment, suffering, and sexual identity. Just as the previous section showed how artistic practices have moved toward transcultural co-creation, this section reveals a similar dynamic at work in the literary field—where writers use cultural reference points like Wu Zetian or Proust to construct new literary visions. Oriane Chevalier's article, 'Le pouvoir au féminin: de la scène politique chinoise à la scène littéraire française', investigates how three powerful female figures from Chinese history—Wu Zetian, Cixi, and Jiang Qing—have been represented in French literature. From Judith Gautier's idealised feminism to Lucien Bodard's sensualised orientalism and Shan Sa's introspective reinterpretations, Chevalier traces the shifting literary portrayals of these women, examining how their representations reflect broader debates around Orientalism, gender, and power. In 'Ma Desheng et Dai Sijie: deux "ironistes" relus dans le contexte des Humanités médicales', Julia Pröll offers a novel reading of two francophone Chinese authors through the framework of the medical humanities, exploring how their work engages with the human body, its suffering, and its creative potential. Irony emerges as a central tool in negotiating the tension between personal expression and cultural or ideological constraints. The article positions both authors

as chroniclers of embodied experience in a transcultural context, where artistic expression is shaped by historical trauma and diasporic belonging. Finally, Zhao Yangjie's article, 'Purifying Proust: Transfiction, Heterotopia, and the Reimagining of Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Reception', examines the rewriting of Proustian themes and characters in the short stories by the contemporary Chinese writer Yan Bin. The study reveals how global literary canons are reinterpreted and rewritten through culturally specific lenses, especially when it comes to sensitive topics like homosexuality. Through transfiction and heterotopia, Zhao shows how internalized and systemic forms of censorship affect the reception and transformation of Proust's work, and how such rewritings reveal tensions between transcultural influence and local moral frameworks.

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