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Mathilde Kang, *Francophonie en Orient: Aux croisements France-Asie (1848-1940)*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 240 pp. € 89. (hb). ISBN 978-9462985148.

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The starting point of the monograph is a critique of the claim, said to be widely held in Francophone studies, that French Indochina is the sole Francophone region in Asia. Such a view rests, the author contends, on the assumption that colonization is a necessary condition of Francophonie: “Derrière cette idée transcendante [that only Indochina could be considered as Francophone] qui va de soi, se cache l’opiniâtre conviction que la colonisation seule conduit inéluctablement à la francophonie” (p. 9). By thus conflating colonization with Francophonie, Asian countries such as China, India, Korea, and Japan, which could have qualified to be part of the Francophone world, find themselves excluded from it. The challenge *Francophonie en Orient* takes up is to argue that colonization should not be tied to Francophonie: “le présent ouvrage voudrait s’interroger sur le phénomène de manifestation francophone dans les pays asiatiques classés comme non-francophones” (p. 10). The main undertaking of the study is to reclaim the status of Francophonie for China by showing that the latter had a great many historical and cultural links with France without having been a full-fledged French colony.

The book is organized into two sections. The task in section one, which consists of the first two chapters, is to reconstruct the history of the French presence in China, in particular along the Chinese coastal areas such as Macao, Canton and Shanghai. Chapter one traces the initial contact of France with China to the arrival of Catholic missions in the seventeenth century. This first interaction was to be followed by France’s renewed interest in China after her loss of the Indian *comptoirs* to the British in the eighteenth century. The second part of the chapter discusses the role of the relations between China and Indochina in the French imperialist venture in Vietnam. According to Kang, the chief reason for France’s intervention in Vietnam was to use the latter as a springboard to China, hence Indochina “ne joue qu’un rôle de second violon” (p. 38) in the French expedition in Asia. It is no doubt the case that by the mid-nineteenth century, one of France’s preoccupations was to claim her share in the Chinese market, and the motive behind her invasion of Tonkin, which borders on the Chinese province of Yunnan, was to set up an exclusive trading route into south-western China, a part of the Middle Kingdom that had yet to be claimed by any European power. However, the historiography of the French presence in Vietnam involved much more complex issues than the sole desire to open a trade path to China. To begin with, the earliest French armed intervention in Vietnam occurred well before the mid-nineteenth century as it was carried out in the 1770s by Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine of the Society of the Foreign Missions to assist the Vietnamese Emperor Gia-Long to quell the Tây Sơn peasant uprising. In return for their help, the French missionaries and their Vietnamese flock enjoyed a relatively high degree of toleration which ended with Gia-Long’s passing. Faced with the ruthless persecutions of the Christians by Gia-Long’s descendants, the missionaries sought the help of Napoleon III, who then sent an expeditionary force to Vietnam in 1857. In 1860, Saigon was taken, leading to the signing of the treaty of Saigon, which ceded to France the archipelago of Poulo Condore, and three southeastern provinces of My Tho, Gia Ding, and Bien Hoa. In 1866, three more provinces, Vinh Long, Chau Doc,

and Ha Tien were annexed. These six southern provinces subsequently became the French colony of Cochinchina. It was not until the 1880s that Annam and Tonkin became French protectorates and not in 1856 as the author claims: “la flotte française conquiert le Tonkin en 1856 pour ensuite s’emparer de la péninsule de Mékong....Au traité de Saigon en 1862, la France s’installe donc au Tonkin et en Annam” (p. 39).^[1] Chapter two focuses on the French concession in Shanghai and Guangzhouwan, a small enclave on the southern coast of China. The emphasis of the chapter is on the impact of French culture in Shanghai where the French set up their own schools, businesses, and newspapers. As for Guangzhouwan, in spite of its status as a leased territory, the French presence there did not develop on the same scale as in Shanghai, due partly to its geographical isolation and lack of resources.

The second section of the book comprises three chapters in which Kang provides different kinds of evidence to support China’s claim to Francophonie. Chapter three discusses the spreading of French culture in China with special focus on Shanghai. The earliest Francophone speakers in China were students of the work study program, many of whom attended the Institut franco-chinois de Lyon. Another equally important channel for popularizing the French language were the French printing houses run by both French religious orders, such as the Jesuits and the Society of Foreign Missions, and lay publishing companies. A third way of propagating Western ideas and cultures was translation. One of the most notable translators of the time was Lin Xu 林紓, known for his widely popular translation of Alexandre Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* even though he spoke no French at all. During the early decades of the twentieth century, a few French-speaking Chinese intellectuals such as Sheng Cheng 盛成 and Chen Jitong 陳季同 composed a number of works in French, which made them the “pionniers de la francophonie chinoise” (p. 108). Chapter four introduces the notion of “littérature de cohabitation” to refer to the works written in Chinese that either imitate French works or adopt western literary conventions: “Une telle littérature, qu’elle soit pastiche d’œuvres françaises ou conçue selon l’esthétique française, s’exprime de prime abord en langue indigène” (124). Examples of such a literature include Zeng Pu’s (曾樸) *Fleur sur l’océan des péchés* 孽海花, a novel that draws on Western esthetics, and Li Jieren’s (李劫人) *Rides sur les eaux dormantes* 死水微瀾, a pastiche of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. In the last chapter, Kang moves her discussion to French writings about Asia which are said to illustrate the “croisements France-Asie.” The examples chosen to illustrate this category of works include Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysenhème*, Paul Claudel’s *Le Soulier de satin*, and Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé*.

One of the objectives of the book is to show that certain Asian countries traditionally classified as non-Francophone such as China could be considered Francophone if one jettisons the assumption that “colonisation fait francophonie.” For in today’s digital world, Kang argues, “le français n’est plus l’apanage des Français ou des ‘colonisés’, mais la langue de celui qui veut bien la pratiquer” (p. 19). Hence, “attribuer l’acquisition du français ou son utilisation à la seule cause de colonisation ne peut plus tenir” (p. 14). The assertion that colonization is a sine qua non condition of Francophonie is indeed problematic. To my knowledge, if a large part of the corpus of works discussed in Francophone studies are authored by writers hailing from former French colonies, this in itself does not mean that scholars in the field believe that French is the exclusive preserve of the French people and their (former) colonial subjects. For historically, the learning and use of French was widely prevalent among the upper and cultured classes in many European countries and the acquisition of the French language outside the Hexagon has not been tied to colonization even though the latter did occasion its imposition on the peoples France colonized. In fact, today’s membership to the International Organization of Francophonie is not confined to exclusively former French colonies as seen in the cases of Albania, Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria.

One of the main arguments in section two of the book is to challenge the division between Francophone literature and non-Francophone literature as conceived in the field of Francophone studies, the former being defined as “littérature des anciennes colonies” and the latter as “littérature des pays non-colonisés” (p. 121). Kang proposes a more inclusive understanding of Francophone literature that does not

mandate the adoption of French as the medium of expression so as to accommodate “l’hégérogénité (de degré et de nature) francophone qui se manifeste en Asie,” as exemplified by Chinese works written by Francophone Chinese writers using French esthetics, works she refers to as “littérature de co-habitation” (p. 121). But what has not been made clear is the relation of “littérature de co-habitation” to Francophone literature. Should the former be considered Francophone literature or a subgroup within Francophone literature? Besides francophone literature and “littérature de co-habitation,” the author also talks about “littérature d’expression française.” Examples of Chinese writers of this last category of writings in French include Gao Xingjian, Ying Chen, François Cheng and Dai Shijie (p. 149).^[2] Here again, we are not told what the relation of “littérature d’expression française” to the other two categories is. In fact, writers who are neither French nationals by birth nor former French colonized writing in French are not uncommon. The examples that come readily to mind are the Irish-born Samuel Beckett, the Romanian-born Eugène Ionesco, the Armenian-born Arthur Adamov, and the two Bulgarian-born philosophers and thinkers Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva. What would then be the status of their works according to the arguments of the present monograph? Should they be labelled as French, Francophone, or “littérature d’expression française”? How might the classification impact on our appreciation of their writings?

The merit of the monograph is that it helps foreground the conundrum of classification and categorization, in particular when dealing with open-ended corpuses of works as it is the case of literature written in French. Another point of interest of the study is its attempt to reclaim for China the status of Francophonie at a time when the very category of Francophone literature has been the subject of a great deal of polemics, precisely due to its historical association with colonization and its subsequent marginalization vis-à-vis metropolitan French literature. The controversy over the status of Francophone literature has led forty-four writers among whom featured Dai Sijie to sign the manifesto “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français” in 2007 demanding the end of Francophonie.^[3]

In this otherwise informative study on the influence of French cultural and literature in China, what is wanting is the engagement with the large corpus of scholarship that investigates many of the same writings and issues examined in chapters two, three, and four.^[4] The question of transcultural flows between France and Asia which is central to the book has also been addressed in a series of recent writings on cultural and literary relations between France and East and South East Asia.^[5] The inclusion of at least some of these critical sources could have further enriched the monograph’s discussion.

NOTES

[1] For details of France’s conquest of Vietnam, see chapter one of Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémy, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995) and Charles Fourniau, *Vietnam: Domination coloniale et résistance nationale, 1858-1914* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2002).

[2] It is interesting that the works of this group of Chinese writers are referred to by some critics as Sino-French literature rather than Francophone or “littérature d’expression française.” See Ileana D. Chirila, “Writing in a Cosmopolitan Age: Considerations of Ethnicity and Transculturalism in Sino-French Literature,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 21.1(2017): 36-44.

[3] See Alec G. Hargreaves et al., eds., *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-Monde* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

[4] See Leo Oufan Lee’s *Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), which has a chapter on Lin Xu and one on the influence of Western writers such as Goethe, Byron, and Romain Rolland on Chinese writers at the turn of the century and his *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

1999). See also David Der-Wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), which has a chapter on *Fleur sur l'océan des péchés* (translated in English as *A Flower in a Sinful Sea*). An example of French studies of the subject is Yinde Zhang's *Le roman chinois moderne (1918-1949)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992) with a chapter on Li Jieren's *Rides sur les eaux dormantes*.

[5] See the special issue “France-Asie: Cultural Identity and Creative Exchange” of *L'Esprit Créateur* 56.3(2016), which features an article on Chen Jitong and one on Claudel in China; and the special issue of *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 21.1(2017), which contains articles on Sheng Cheng's *Ma Mère*, and François Cheng.

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