

Saussure's "travel" to China: history, debate and legacy

Unlike his brother, the sinologist Léopold de Saussure, Ferdinand never went to China and showed interest in synology only in the last period of his life. Nevertheless, the ideas expressed by his lectures deeply influenced the first Chinese linguists who studied in France during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Scholars such as Wang Li, Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao and Chen Wangdao were the first to disseminate and apply to the analysis of their language the constructs included in the *Cours*. Masini (1985) has thoroughly investigated this issue, pointing out how troubled the first phase of Saussurean studies in China was. Besides the intrinsic difficulty of the *Cours*, Chinese scholars had to face the additional complexities due to their different cultural and linguistic background, as well as obstacles posed by political circumstances. This makes the first attempts to circulate the book, undertaken by Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao and Chen Wangdao, even more remarkable. Not only did they provide a first reading of the *Cours*, laying the foundation for a debate that is still continuing, but they also tried to apply Saussurean ideas to their own linguistic research.

Completed in the 1960s but published only in 1980, the first translation of the *Cours* made by Gao Mingkai marked a new beginning of Saussurean studies in China, as confirmed not only by the debate raised by the reading of this work but also by the translation of other sources which has made the portrait of the Swiss linguist more accurate (Pei 2003; Zhao 2005; Ma 2008; Romagnoli 2007; 2012). Three translations of the *Cours*, several monographs on Saussure, hundreds of academic papers are now available to Chinese readers, whose linguistics knowledge and linguistic background have also changed compared to the first decades of the last century.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the interpretation of Saussurean linguistics in China starting from the first, introductory phase, highlighting the most discussed topics and describing how different fields of knowledge have been influenced in China, as elsewhere, by Saussure's linguistic view.