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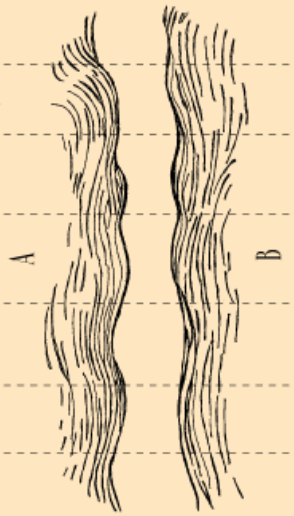

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Saussure's "passage" to China: introduction and current debate

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This paper examines the reception of Saussurean linguistics views in China with particular attention on the latest developments in the debate on the ideas of the Swiss linguist. In the first section I will illustrate the main features in the reception of the *Cours de linguistique générale* (hereafter *CLG*) in China with reference to the specific cultural context; the second section will examine the various stances taken by Chinese scholars over the last few years to provide a picture of the current state of Saussurean research.

1. Linguistics studies and Saussurean studies in China

In the early decades of the twentieth century, when Saussure's *CLG* was first published in Paris, Chinese linguistics studies were just entering a new phase; this has been labelled as 'the foundation period', 'the imitation period' and 'the beginning stage'[1]. The different terms given to define this period share a common understanding that the phase marked a break with the past.

As a matter of fact, two distinct factors play a significant role in the emergence of this new trend in linguistic studies: the influence of Western models in analyzing Chinese and the reform of the Chinese linguistic standard itself. The former had a direct impact on the creation of the first grammar books in Chinese, which began in 1898 with the publication of a milestone in the history of Chinese linguistics, the *Mashi Wentong*. This work aimed to describe literary Chinese (*wényán*) according to Latin-based categories with particular attention on the definition of parts of speech but scarce consideration of Chinese syntax. Despite its limitations, the book stimulated analysis of Chinese grammar and was followed by the publication of several works focusing both on literary and on vernacular Chinese (*báihuà)*.

The shift from literary language, used since the Han dynasty as the written linguistic standard, to the vernacular, based on Tang popular literature and given full vent in Ming and Qing fiction, represented one of the changes advocated by the May Fourth Movement. Originating in 1919 as a protest to the terms of the Versailles Treaty, the Movement was critical of traditional Chinese culture based on Confucian values which were deemed responsible for the subordinate weak position of China following the Opium wars. Replacing the 2,000-year-old classical language with the vernacular was not an easy task: confirmation of this can be found by examining the grammar books produced in those years. The model offered by *Mashi Wentong* was still very influential and works written in *wényán*, and focussing on *wényán*, continued to be published.

At the same time, grammar books dealing with the vernacular gradually appeared, often written by those who took an active part in the promotion of the vernacular language. Among these, Li Jinxi's *Xin zhu guoyu wenfa* certainly deserves a mention: it was published in 1924 and considered the standard grammar book until the 1040s. As claimed by Peverelli, this work "was the first extensive grammar of the vernacular language, and it was published at the right time, i.e., during the years in which wenyan was replaced by baihua as the primary language taught at schools" (1986: 142).

In those decades, Chinese linguists gradually tried to avoid the Western model when analyzing their own language despite the fact that, or probably because, some of them had the opportunity to study abroad and had been deeply influenced by the works of Saussure, Vendryès, Jespersen and Bloomfield. Scholars such as Chen Wangdao, Fang Guangtao, Wang Li, Lü Shuxiang and Gao Mingkai played a key role in introducing the works of general linguistics to China. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even those who were mostly aware of, and came into contact with, Western works on general linguistics did not simply focus on theoretical issues but tried to link and apply the notions expounded by European and American linguists for the analysis of Chinese. This approach can be explained by a general tendency found in the Chinese tradition of linguistic studies.

During the long course of China's intellectual history, its scholars have constantly devoted attention to linguistic phenomena, but the way they deal with them differs sharply from the Western system of

[1] See Romagnoli 2012 for a description of the periodization of Chinese linguistics studies.

knowledge. Linguistic studies in traditional China were called *Xiao xue* and constituted one of the four branches (*si bu*) of literature as classified by the imperial librarians. These studies were part of the Classics (*Jing*) and were thus at the core of learning until modern times[2]. As underlined by several scholars, among them Jia and Sun 2002, the ideas on language expressed by ancient Western and Chinese philosophers interestingly coincide on certain key issues. Nevertheless, the development and achievements of the two traditions differ in many respects with Chinese scholars mostly engaged in the description of the vocabulary and internal variety of their own language/s, but little interested in grammar and more general topics[3]. This approach to linguistic research partly explains the distance between Chinese scholars and Saussurean linguistic ideas. Linguists such as Wang Li, Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao and Chen Wangdao, who firstly introduced the works on general linguistics to China, had a linguistic and cultural background deeply imbued with Classical Chinese and based on a epistemological system modelled on the Chinese tradition. At the same time, they were eager to discover Western knowledge, included linguistic phenomena, and apply it to the Chinese world. The gap between the legacy of the *Xiao xue* tradition and the notions of general linguistics makes the efforts of the above-mentioned scholars even more remarkable.

Zhang and Zhang 2014b proposes a periodization of Saussurean studies in China and identifies fours stages: introducing Saussure (1930-65), explaining and evaluating Saussure (1977-89), re-explaining and re-evaluating Saussure (1990-98) and focussing on arbitrariness and iconicity (1999-present). In particular, Chen Wangdao was one of the most representative figures of the first phase, and his article on the distinction between verb and adjective triggered the debate on Chinese grammar in the late 1930s. Indeed, its application of Saussurean categories made the views of the Swiss linguist available in China for the first time. The other pioneer in the introduction of general linguistics was Fang Guangtao, who personally met some of Saussure's students like Meillet[4].

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, the first books on theoretical linguistics were published in China by scholars such as Cen Qixiang and Gao Mingkai. For these authors, apart from the aforementioned cultural gap between western knowledge and Chinese tradition, we have to take into account the obstacles posed by political circumstances which hampered the circulation of Western books. As a matter of fact, along with the growing strength of the Chinese Communist Party, a process of radical politicization of every aspect of life took place. The field of linguistics was no exception and thus the authors and works of Western masterpieces were read through the lens of political activism[5]. The influence of Soviet linguistics also played a role in this process, as it is particularly evident in the works of Gao Mingkai and Cen Qixiang. Saussure was accused of idealism, psychologism and antihistoricism, although the two scholars based their own lectures on *CLG* and were also the authors of the first translations of the book[6]. As Masini notes, "Saussure's theoretical thought influence, although not officially recognized by the linguistic publications, is so strong that the translation of the Cours becomes the essential text of the course in general linguistics" (1985: 15).

The beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) marked a halt to studies, which were only resumed towards the end of the 1970s, that is, the second phase of Zhang and Zhang's 2014b periodization. This gained momentum in the 1980s with the so-called cultural fever (*wenhua re*). This label refers to the nationwide discussion of different notions and the influence of Western knowledge that took place in China after the economic reforms. After decades of closure, Chinese intellectuals and writers felt free to explore their fields and benefit from the works of Western authors. In this context, the publication of the Chinese translation of the *CLG* made it possible for the book to be read widely, and it stimulated a lively ongoing debate.

According to Zhang and Zhang 2014b, during the last decade of twentieth century the debate focused on Saussure's semiological theory and philosophy of language. They comment on Chinese scholars' approach to the field as follows: "Although Chinese scholars created a good atmosphere for academic research on Saussure, their studies relied wholly on English and Chinese translations of the CLG and notes

[2] The knowledge of Classics was required in order to take the imperial examination and to serve as an administrative official in China until 1905.

[3] The first dictionary of Chinese, the *Erya*, dates back to approssimately the third century BC, whereas the first work dealing with Chinese dialectology dates back to the first century BC (*Fangyan* by Yang Xiong).

[4] See Romagnoli 2012 for an overview of this period.

[5] See also Abbiati 1993.

[6] Cen Qixiang (1903-1989) based his course textbook on the *CLG* changing only the order of the sections and omitting the appendix on phonology. Gao Mingkai (1911-1965) is the author of the first Chinese translation of the *CLG*, published in 1980.

from Saussure's courses" (2014: 152). The last phase of Saussurean studies in China is characterized by a heated debate concerning the first principle of the sign with a large number of scholars supporting iconicity and questioning the validity of the arbitrariness of the sign[7].

2. The ongoing debate regarding Saussurean linguistics

As we can notice from the data reported in table 1, three different translations of the *CLG* are available in Chinese (two from French and one from English), two versions of the third course have been published (one from French and the other from English), and the manuscripts published in 2002 in French have been also translated into Chinese. The Japanese version of the *CLG* has been available in China since the 1930s, when a few Chinese scholars returned to their country from Japan, an important country in the reception of Saussure outside Europe.

In the 1960s Fang Guangtao worked on the Chinese translation of selected parts of the Japanese version of the *CLG*, while in the same period, Gao Mingkai completed the first Chinese translation based on the French text, revised by Cen Qixiang and then by Ye Feisheng. Gao Mingkai, an important figure in Chinese linguistics circles, compared the source text with the Russian, English, German and Japanese versions. Gao's translation, only published in 1980, has been the most important tool over the last three decades for the study of Saussurean theories in China[8].

Publication type	Title	Author/ Translator	Year of publication	Publishing house
Translations	CLG 普通语言学教程	Gao Mingkai 高名凯	1980	Commercial Press 商务印书馆
	CLG- 1910-1911 Saussure's third cycle of lectures 普通语言学教程 1910－11 索绪尔第三度讲授	Zhang Shaojie 张绍杰	2001	Hunan Jiaoyu 湖南教育
	CLG 普通语言学教程	Pei Wen 裴文	2002	Jiangsu Jiaoyu 江苏教育
	Saussure's third CLG 索绪尔第三次普通语言学教程	Tu Youxiang 屠友祥	2007	Shanghai renmin 上海人民
	CLG 普通语言学教程	Liu Li 刘丽	2009	Chinese academy of social sciences 中国社会科学
	Manuscripts of CLG 普通语言学手稿	Yu Xiuying 于秀英	2011	Nanjing University 南京大学
Monographs	Saussure and structuralist linguistics 索绪尔与结构主义语言学	Liu Fuhua 刘富华	2003	Jilin University 吉林大学
	Saussure: the authentic feature and its tension 索绪尔：本真状态及其张力	Pei Wen 裴文	2003	Commercial Press 商务印书馆
	A study in arbitrariness of linguistic signs 语言符号任意性研究	Zhang Shaojie 张绍杰	2004	Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu 上海外语教育
	Reading CLG	Shen	2005	Fudan University

[7] See Romagnoli 2012, 124-37.
[8] For a comparison of the different translations, see Romagnoli 2012.

	《普通语言学教程》精度	Xiaolong 申小龙		复旦大学
	Saussure in China 索绪尔研究在中国	Zhao Ronghui 赵蓉晖	2005	Commercial Press 商务印书馆
	Analysis of Saussure's main issues of linguistic theories 索绪尔语言理论要点评析	Ma Zhuanghuan 马壮寰	2008	Beijing University 北京大学
	Linguistic research on Saussure's view of linguistic sign 索绪尔语言符号思想观照下的语言研究	Zhu Wei 朱炜	2008	Hehai University 河海大学
	The structure of language: Saussure's philosophy of language and its actuality 语言的结构之思：索绪尔语言哲学思想及其现代张力	Liu Yanru 刘艳茹	2008	Jilin renmin 吉林人民
	Analysis of Saussure's manuscripts 索绪尔手稿初检	Tu Youxiang 屠友祥	2011	Shanghai renmin 上海人民
	The social norm theory and the natural theory of language 语言之社会规范说与自然说	Ye Qichang 叶起昌	2013	Beijing University 北京大学

Table 1: Saussurean sources in Chinese

In addition to the translations, other academic works have appeared in recent years, especially monographs investigating specific issues regarding Saussurean linguistic theory. Chinese scholars' interest in Saussurean linguistic ideas is confirmed by a simple query in the National library online catalogue: the keyword 'Suoxu'er' (Saussure) brings up more than 1500 results[9]. Among them, we find 20 monographs, 1,400 journal papers, 61 proceedings papers and 28 dissertations. This wealth of sources and studies confirms how Saussure's linguistics is still discussed in China. The discussion below details the most recent important works by Chinese scholars on Saussure since 2013. For earlier decades, the reader is referred to Romagnoli 2012.

Wang and Yu 2013 provide an interesting study: starting from the scientific premises the Saussurean view is based upon, the two authors recall the main issues of *CLG* and link the effort to establish the field of linguistics with the subsequent development of "Chomskyan revolution". They also underline the importance of factors such as language user, meaning, communicative context, society and psychology to deal with linguistic phenomena- factors that are seen as external in a formalist view of language. Apart from pointing out how the functional perspective, taking into account external factors, can integrate with formal linguistics, Wang and Yu also stress the importance of the Saussurean linguistic sign as the foundation of semiotics. The arbitrary nature of the relationship between *significant* and *signifié* has been repeatedly discussed and criticized by Chinese scholars, but not by Wang and Yu who confirm the validity and the centrality of the first principle of the sign. The Chinese scholars also mention the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in the Saussurean view of language, claiming that the Swiss linguist encourages a revolution in the study of grammar, breaking through the barriers separating morphology, syntax and lexicology, which are all included within syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations (2013: 370).

As mentioned by Wang and Yu, *CLG* deals with Chinese by discussing the relationship between writing and the language. The authors report the criticisms expressed by several Chinese scholars based on the supposed diversity of Chinese writing from an alphabetic one. According to them, "Chinese characters and alphabetic

[9] The catalogue is available at www.nlc.cn (last access: December 2017).

writing are not substantially different: they all imitate language using specific forms, it is only that the forms of Chinese characters do not correspond to phonemes, but correspond to syllables and may be more or less related to the meaning" (2013: 372). Interestingly enough, the authors question the validity of the so-called 'character-unit' theory proposed by some Chinese scholars, who even claim the superiority of written over spoken language[10]. It is the distance, expressed by Wang and Yu 2013, from ideological positions like the one just mentioned, that signals, in my opinion, a more mature and fresher approach to scientific research, which entails a discussion of a key figure in linguistics such as Saussure.

The 100th anniversary of Saussure's death in 2013 also represented an occasion for Chinese scholars to provide new readings and interpretations of his ideas, often starting and focussing on his philosophical background and the relationship between his view of language and other previous or contemporary schools. According to Jiang 2014, it is more appropriate to consider Saussure as a philosopher than as a linguist but, in order to do so, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between linguistics and philosophy at the turn of the last century. In a paper significantly entitled "De Saussure as a philosopher", the Chinese scholar claims that Saussure, whose formation was imbued with comparative linguistics and social psychology, aimed at establishing a general knowledge of the world through linguistic investigation and, in doing so, he was working in the same direction as his philosopher contemporaries Peirce, Frege and Husserl. According to Jiang 2014, Saussure was aware of the need to formalize language, but he did not apply logics to carry out this operation like philosophers such as Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein did later. Nevertheless, since Saussure's investigation has to do with linguistic phenomena, with the essence of language and with the structure of language, it deserves, in Jiang's opinion, to be called a 'philosophy of language'. The bulk of this philosophy has been summarized in four key notions: the distinctions between *signifiant* and *signifié*, between *langue* and *parole*, between synchrony and diachrony, and the relationship between structuralism and poststructuralism. According to Jiang, the Saussurean view partly reflects the postmodernist philosophy since "it pursues neither centrism, nor a foundation and, based on the synchronic structure of language, it destroys the uniformity and objectivity of language" (2014: 7). As for the label of 'structuralist', which is often attached to Saussure, Jiang maintains that "he did not establish a structure beforehand to define linguistic elements or constituents, and this is the difference between him and the structuralist philosophers, linguists and theoreticians after him" (2014: 3). Jiang's intentions to clarify Saussure's ideas on language show a solid theoretical knowledge, and the literature the paper is based on includes the most recent Western studies.

While Jiang 2014 only mentions Derrida's criticism of Saussure, Li 2014 focuses on a comparison between the *CLG* and *De la grammatologie* with the aim of overcoming the misunderstandings of the French philosopher in reading Saussure and finding similarities between the two. Starting from the abstractness of the Saussurean view of language and the key role played by the difference in the linguistic system, Li states that: "Derrida's intuition about difference was actually Saussure's intuition (…). The 'semiology' described by Saussure and Derrida's 'grammatology', in underlining the uncertainty, freedom and character of a game, do not present substantial divergence" (2014: 233). Another issue linking Derrida and Saussure is the notion of value and the application of this notion from economy to linguistics. In dealing with this topic, Li recalls the influence exerted by Marx and Nietzsche over the French philosopher, but asserts that Saussure's impact was even deeper: "Thanks to Saussure's solid base of synchronic semiology, Derrida was freed from synchrony and could deploy his ideological criticism (…)" (2014: 239)[11].

Ye and Zhao 2014 investigate the notion of time in Saussurean linguistics and link it to Greek philosophy, in particular to Zeno's paradoxes. The coexistence of mutability and immutability is discussed extensively in the *CLG* and investigated in detail by the two Chinese scholars: if the flow of time implies mutability, factors such as 'tradition', 'continuity' and 'heritage' are also deeply connected with the life of language, whose present depends on the past. The notion of time is also connected to the principle of the linearity of linguistic signs, whose components can only appear one after another and whose time is homogeneous. Time permeates the entire linguistic system, and Ye and Zhao claim that the notion of time is the huge contribution that Saussure makes to linguistics, adding that "time is the soundless language" (2014: 10). Unlike Tu Youxiang, who is the author of the Chinese translation of the third course in general

[10] According to the 'character-unit' theory, character, as the convergence of the phonetic, semantic, lexical, and grammatical levels, should be considered the basic unit of analysis. The supporters of this position claim that the notion of word is not adequate to explain the Chinese language.

[11] Another work focussing on the comparison between Saussure and Derrida is Jiang 2014.

linguistics, Ye and Zhao do not think that Saussure's concept of time derives from Hegel's dialectics and, while not negating the German philosopher's influence on Saussure, they prefer to refer to Greek philosophy.

A constant feature of the debate on Saussure in China is the dialogue between individual scholars hosted by academic journals[12]. Among the most recent ones, Zhang and Zhang 2014a discuss the position expressed by Li 2012 who claims that there is inconsistency between "social convention" and "linguistic system" in the Saussurean view of language. Zhang and Zhang describe the relationship between *langue* and *parole* and underline the importance of the latter as it emerges in the *Écrits*. Contrary to the interpretation provided by Li, the two authors maintain that the linguistic system described by Saussure is based on a social convention and is open. Moreover, to evaluate correctly the role played by arbitrariness, society and individual usage, it is necessary to refer to Saussure's own notes and the notes not included in *CLG*. Zhang Yanfei and Zhang Shaojie are also the authors of a recent paper, significantly entitled "How and why Saussure is misread in China", which is one of the few published in English by Chinese scholars, and which also provides a periodization of Saussurean study in China (see §1). The aim of the work is to describe and account for misunderstandings concerning Saussure, which relate to three thematic nodes: *langue* and *parole*, arbitrariness and motivation, and arbitrariness and iconicity. As regards the first issue, the two authors claim that "far from neglecting a linguistics of parole, what Saussure develops in his lecture series is a linguistics of langue which is the cornerstone of a linguistics of parole" (2014:154). Regarding the principle of arbitrariness, Chinese scholars tend to ignore the role of relative arbitrariness and to oppose the first principle of motivation in language, which was actually also considered by Saussure. These scholars, influenced by the cognitivist paradigm, usually support the thesis of 'iconicity', but the perspective they depart from is strongly limited by a misunderstanding of the terminology relating to this issue: "The most serious problem is that some Chinese scholars consider 'iconic', 'symbolic', and 'motivated' as the same, all of which are contradictory to Saussure's arbitrariness" (2014: 160). In addition to observations relating to the reading of the *CLG*, Zhang Yanfei and Zhang Shaojie also specify other reasons to explain why Saussure is misread in China. The first relates to the influence exerted by cultural and political circumstances, as was argued in §1; secondly, the Chinese educational system has to be taken into account and in particular, the lack of competence in French which prevents many scholars from reading the original sources; finally, Chinese scholars rely mainly on the *CLG*. The authors end the paper by writing: "We think that our future research should be oriented towards Saussure's own manuscripts. Otherwise, it will be hard for us to achieve more progress in research on Saussure" (2014: 164).

The overall negative evaluation made by these scholars is certainly true regarding the first two points, although recently published literature evidences important changes in the Chinese approach to Saussure. To confirm this, Chinese scholars in recent years are increasingly aware of how the Saussurean semiotic view was formulated. Xiao 2015, for instance, underlines criticism of the conventionalist notion of the sign and of the historical linguistics expressed by the Swiss linguist. The author clearly sets out the philosophical foundations of Saussurean view of language, the importance of Saussure's cultural background and his constant concern for terminological accuracy. Xiao 2015 is one of the few papers produced by Chinese scholars that is entirely based on an analysis of the *Écrits* published in 2002 and on the comparison between that text and the *CLG*. According to Xiao, one of the differences between the *CLG* and the *Écrits* is that while the former includes a strong criticism of the rationalist view of language (and of the possibility of the existence of thought before language), the latter conveys a decisive refutation of the materialism and focuses on the dual nature of language. The latter issue is also included in the *CLG*, especially in those parts concerning the notion of value.

Nie 2015 moves in the same direction as the aforementioned paper, but focuses on the comparative analysis of the third *CLG* and the *CLG*, again showing the author's sensitivity to problems relating to the writing of the text. The scholar claims that the part called "Principles of phonology" is an integral part of Saussure's teaching and, at the same time, questions the influence of the philosophical views expressed by Husserl and by Gestalt psychology on Saussure.

Duan 2016 starts with the rupture between language and reality supposedly encouraged by Saussure when claiming that the linguistic sign is "une entité psychique à deux faces". Quoting the definition of semiology and the features of the linguistic sign Saussure proposes, Duan describes the relationship between sign and signifier, and argues that: "Although Saussure himself disagrees on the correspondence between

[12] See, for instance, the dispute between Suo Zhenyu and Li Baojia in the1994/95 issues of *Yuyan Wenzi Yingyong*, that between Wang Yin and Wang Dechun (1999/2003, *Waiyu yu waiyu jiaoxue*), and that between Lu Ling and Zhao Yanchun (2001, *Shandong waiyu jiaoxue*). See Romagnoli 2012 for a description of these papers.

sign and signifier, he occasionally confuses them" (2016: 72). Duan then follows the reasoning we find in the *Cours* to describe how the linguistic sign links abstract entities and how the relationship between these entities is arbitrary. The Chinese scholar also examines the key notions to define the meaning of signs, i.e. 'value', 'opposition' and 'difference'.

As we have tried to demonstrate, the reception of Saussure in China, a history that began in the 1930s, has changed over time, and has gradually been freed of cultural and political constraints. Chinese scholars are increasingly competent in foreign languages and their recent readings of Saussure show signs of improvement and maturity with respect to past criticism. These factors, and the rich corpus of studies available in Chinese, can hopefully reduce the distance involved in Saussure's "passage" from Europe to China.

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