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Abstract

“Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao”:

A New Historical Analysis of Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*

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St. Mary’s University, 2019

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Launched in 1966 in China, the movement of the Cultural Revolution affected millions of people, including seventeen million urban youths who were sent down to rural villages to receive re-education. In 2000, Dai Sijie incorporated his experience at the re-education camp in Sichuan in his debut novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. With a close reading from the new historical perspective, this research explores the life of sent-down urban youths during the Cultural Revolution and how banned Western literature impacted people’s experience in a remote village in Southwest China. Facing little chance of returning to city, Urban youths risked their lives to steal and read Western literature; what literature brings to them is unreplaceable by the re-education demanded by the Chinese government. In addition, different forms of literature give rise to a new life with more possibilities and choices for the local villagers as well; the inspiration from Western lifestyle transforms their routine country life and leads the little seamstress to pursue her future in the city.

Introduction

Launched in 1966 in China, the movement of the Cultural Revolution affected China and its millions of people negatively in the economic, political, cultural, and social aspects. By 1976 when the movement ended, seventeen million urban youths, following Chairman Mao's summons, were sent down to the remote countryside to receive re-education (Rene 1). Dai Sijie was one of those urban youths. Over twenty years later, in 2000, Dai included his experience at the re-education camp in Sichuan in his debut novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. In 2002, Dai directed his novel into a movie. Dai's novel *Balzac* subtly uncovers how banned Western literature affect people's experience in a tiny village in Southwest China during the Cultural Revolution. Reading from the new historical perspective, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* provides insights of the forms and functions of literature for different people in a remote Chinese village.

During the Cultural Revolution, Western literature was banned in China, and domestic arts and literature were strictly scrutinized, but people's need for literature and arts did not decrease due to political forces. For both the literate and the illiterate citizens in *Balzac*, reading or listening to stories from Western literature brings them a life with more possibilities and choices. Urban youths Luo and the narrator learn nothing but working in the fields in their re-education; in the isolated village, their desire for reading becomes stronger than usual. Being brought into Balzac's literature world, the little Chinese seamstress reads to change her own life—she does not want to waste her youth and beauty in the tiny village any more. And for the illiterate peasants, listening to stories from movies or books brings them laughter and enables them to know something other than their daily routine.

To read the novel from new historical perspective, understanding new historicism is essential. New historicism is mainly developed by literary theorists including Stephen Greenblatt. Unlike in formalism or historicism where literature is read as a pure literary or historical text. In new historical criticism, Greenblatt and others seek to reveal the “Poetics of Culture,” a term coined by himself. According to Jan Veenstra in “The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and Interpretation of Shakespeare,” “cultural Poetics assumes that texts not only document the social forces that inform and constitute history and society but also feature prominently in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and the sociohistorical situation” (174). Greenblatt sees art and society as interrelated, and his new historical perspectives encourage readers to map out the connection between literary text and the social and historical context. To put in another way, when reading, readers should situate the text in its historical and social context. In *Critical Theory & the Literary Canon*, Dean Kolbas believes that in new historicism, “history is taken as inextricably textual, and approaches to it—themselves textual—are necessarily mediated by other texts that aggregate continually to form and reform ‘History’ into a changing ensemble of local ‘histories.’” (113). Kolbas shares a similar attitude towards history with Dobie; they both agree that history is not one fixed entity and gain historical understandings from multiple sources and dynamic narrations. Alan Liu in “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism” argues that the new historicism is “a method of metaphor or cultural intertextuality” (756); it requires readers to contextualize the text in its cultural and historical event, so as to form a discourse between the text and the history.

In new historicism, the key issue is not what happened exactly during the Cultural Revolution, but rather, to hear and to recognize the different stories throughout history. Scholars

like Ann Dobie believes that history is more complex than pure observation; the stories that are told to one generation after another make history a narration. She argues that “traditionally, history has been recorded by the winners. The losers, or those who lack political or social power, have their stories to tell as well. Although they may not have published those stories in official documents or textbooks, they have circulated them as separate discourses, or ways of seeing and talking about the world” (Dobie 178). For Dai Sijie and many other urban youths who spent years in isolated villages, the Cultural Revolution is not a mere concept from history textbooks; it is true stories in their deepest memories, of tears and laughter, bitterness and sweetness, pain and solace, and of the past time that can never come back.

Dai Sijie is a Chinese director and writer living in France. He was born in Chengdu, China in 1954. He keeps the Chinese tradition of naming by putting his family name “Dai” prior to his first name “Sijie.” His parents were both doctors. During 1971 to 1974, Dai was sent down to Ya’an, Sichuan Province, to receive re-education following Chairman Mao’s call for intellectual youths to go “Up the Mountains and Down to the Villages.” After the Cultural Revolution came to an end, in 1977, Dai was enrolled in Sichuan University to study history. In 1983, Dai received a scholarship and went to France to study movie arts. Since then, he has been living and working in France.

In 2000, Dai published his debut novel, *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise*, in French. The English translation, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, was published in the following year. Combining his expertise in screenwriting and movie arts, in 2002, Dai adapted his own novel and directed it into a movie with the same name. The movie, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film by the Golden Globe Awards in 2003.

In the novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the narrator and Luo are two city youths from Chengdu and the little Chinese seamstress is the “princess” in the mountains “Phoenix of the Sky.” Born and raised in the mountains, the little seamstress is taught elementary reading and writing by her father, the only tailor on the Phoenix mountain. She admires intellectuals from the city like Luo and the narrator, and she appreciates their story-telling talents. Both Luo and the narrator are sent down to receive re-education because their parents are classified as the enemies of people during the Cultural Revolution. The repeated everyday labor makes the re-education boring, and the two city youths feel desperate and depressed by the mere possibility of returning home. The lives of the protagonists change because of Four-Eye’s foreign literature books. Four Eye is also a city youth receiving re-education on the Phoenix mountain; his father is a writer and his mother is a poet. In order to save the Western literature books from being burned by Red Guards in the city, Four-Eye “smuggles” a collection of foreign literature to the village. He hides the banned Western literature books in a leather suitcase under his bed, but the suitcase is later stolen by Luo and the narrator on Four-Eye’s last day of re-education. The Western literature books open a new world of desire and imagination to the city youths, and after reading Balzac’s books, the little seamstress decides to leave her home village and pursue her future in the city.

In the light of Dai Sijie’s emigration to France, some Western researchers read Dai’s novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* from perspectives of Chinese Francophone émigré writing and glorify the influence of French literature to Chinese readers. This essay shares the point of view that literature saves the spirits of the protagonists in the novel *Balzac*, but the essay challenges Cooper’s view of the irreplaceability of French literature. For instance, Karen Thornier integrates Dai’s *Balzac* and another Chinese Francophone émigré writer’s novel to

illustrate the paradoxes of Chinese Francophone émigré writing. Thornier believes that “establishing Chinese as consuming, reconfiguring (adapting/translating), and writing French-language literature, *Balzac* and *Tianyi* destabilize divisions among national literatures and cultures. They do so both by their mere existence and also, paradoxically, by their attention to translation, which is necessitated by divisions among (national) languages” (223). Some scholars examine the influence of French literature based on the protagonists’ reading experience in *Balzac*. Barbara Cooper, in “‘Dent Pour Dent’: Injustice, Revenge, and Storytelling in *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*,” sees that “literature can sometimes provide consolation and guidance to its readers... what literature saves is the human spirit, and, perhaps, our faith in some ultimate form of justice” (203). It is reasonable that Dai Sijie’s selection of French literature in his novel is based on his own reading and learning experience in France. But for the protagonists in *Balzac*, the key issue is not what type of literature they read; their problem is that there is nothing for them to read during the Cultural Revolution. Given any literature book, like British literature or American literature, or even Chinese modern literature that explores individuality other than calling for socialism, the human spirit of the protagonists would be awakened. The complexity lies in the historical background that all books are forbidden; this novel does not specifically glorify French literature for its influence on Chinese people’s lives.

In *Oxford English Dictionary*, the extended use of “diaspora” is that “any group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin” (“Diaspora”). For 申文靜 (Shen Wenjing), Dai’s *Balzac* is a diaspora memoir that reflects his experience during the Cultural Revolution; the two cultural locations that Dai presents in his novel claim Dai’s unique cultural identity (136). Some other Chinese scholars, including the

translator of the Chinese version *Balzac*, asserts that *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is a novel about binary oppositions. 吴晓荣 (Wu Xiaorong), in the master's thesis asserts three binary oppositions appear in *Balzac*, namely "foreign and local," "mainstream and the marginalized," and "modern and traditional" and the binary oppositions reveal Dai's understanding of culture. This essay supports Shen's proposition that *Balzac* serves as a diaspora memoir for Dai but disapproves of the idea that *Balzac* is a novel about binary oppositions. For instance, foreign literature books do not oppose with the local culture—Balzac is not the opponent of the little Chinese seamstress. Rather, the little seamstress' reading of Balzac shows the integration of the foreign and the local; reading Balzac gives the little Seamstress courage and ambition to pursue her future in the city instead of being confined in the village for the rest of her life.

Since not much work has been done to read *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* through the new historical lens, this project is of vital importance in uncovering to what extent the banned Western literature influence the Chinese protagonists in the novel from its historical and cultural context during the Cultural Revolution. Dai's experience in France shapes his selection of Western novels, mainly the French novels that appear in *Balzac*, but the theme of this novel is not how Western culture conquers Eastern culture, as some scholars argue in their articles. It is the reading of the banned books that opens a new world for the protagonists. Situating the protagonists' experience in the context of the Cultural Revolution, this essay examines the overall influence that occurs after the banned books are read by Chinese peasants and urban youths. The novel is divided into three parts, each with a different focus. To respond to each part of the novel, this essay summarizes the three parts with three slogans of the Cultural

Revolution: “Sweep away All Monsters and Demons,” “Three in a Thousand,” and “Eight-hundred Million People Watching Eight Shows.”

“Sweep away All Monsters and Demons!”

According to historian Frank Dikötter, the author of *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976*, “on 1 June 1966, an incendiary editorial in the *People's Daily* exhorted readers to ‘Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!’ It was the opening shot of the Cultural Revolution, urging people to denounce representatives of the bourgeoisie who were out to ‘deceive, fool and benumb the working people in order to consolidate their reactionary state power’” (ix). Though the call for denunciations aims for strengthening the foundation of Mao’s socialism, what makes the revolution a catastrophe is the vague but fatal classification of “monsters” and “demons.” Anything that relates to Capitalism, even those that have the slightest relation, are defined as the “monsters” and “demons” that must be swept away. Anything that the wealthy bourgeois class used to own or consume must be destroyed or removed to stop the working class from being affected.

In the beginning of the 1960s, Mao, in his own words, was “searching very hard to find a way to keep China from becoming corrupt, bureaucratic and revisionist;” Mao disapproved of Nikita Khrushchev’s revisionism, worried that “bourgeois ideology still held sway, making it possible for a few people at the top to erode and finally subvert the entire system” (Dikötter x). Meanwhile, Mao’s colleagues, some other top leaders in the People’s Republic of China wanted Mao to step down from office, because they believed that Mao was responsible for the three years of famine following the Great Leap Forward. So, Mao feared that “his legacy was in

jeopardy... he would meet the same fate as Stalin, denounced after his death” (Dikötter xii).

Therefore, as Dikötter contends, “a new revolution was required to stamp out once and for all the remnants of bourgeois culture... Just as the transition from capitalism to socialism required a revolution, the transition from socialism to communism demanded a revolution too (Dikötter x). And Chairman Mao gave this revolution a gentle name, the Cultural Revolution.

In the beginning of *Stories from the Wake*, Mary Lynne Hill lists seven definitions of the word “revolution” as a noun and specifies that “during the last two hundred years, *revolution* has experienced a semantic shift. As well as a circular meaning, it also developed a linear one that focused on change, particularly a radical social change that impacts phenomena occurring after it in chronological time” (2). In the Cultural Revolution, “revolution” is a linear concept that changes people’s life radically in many social aspects. The waves of revolution are unstoppable due to people’s cult of personality toward Chairman Mao, which also causes the campaign to become out of control soon after its opening.

After examining Mao’s purpose of starting the Cultural Revolution, Dikötter defines the Cultural Revolution as “the second attempt to become the historical pivot around which the specialist universe revolved” because it was “the second stage in the history of the international communist movement, safeguarding the dictatorship of the proletariat against revisionism” (xi). The personal influence of Mao upon the Cultural Revolution was so huge that Dikötter further argues that Mao himself was in fact the revolution. Similarly, Paul Clark in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* also observes Mao’s attempt to avoid revisionism, and argues that “Mao Zedong called on Chinese, particularly the young, to renew his revolution in order that China might avoid the perils of revisionism and complacency he observed in the Soviet Union” (1). Clark defines the Cultural Revolution as “the biggest non-wartime, concentrated social upheaval

in world history” and describes Chairman Mao’s influence as “the event saw a nation of 800 million people apparently respond to the whims of one man” (1).

In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, Dai Sijie does not introduce much historical background of the Cultural Revolution in his novel; he simply explains from the narrator’s perspective that “towards the end of 1968, the Great Helmsman of China’s Revolution, Chairman Mao, launched a campaign that would leave the country profoundly altered. The universities were closed and all the ‘young intellectuals,’ meaning boys and girls who had graduated from high school, were sent to the countryside to be ‘re-educated by the poor peasants’” (6). In the Cultural Revolution, poor peasants and workers were the most respected because of their contribution to the country. In contrast, intellectuals were ranked the lowest class called “Chou Lao Jiu,” meaning the notorious number ninth class. The eight notorious classes before intellectuals were landlords, rich peasants, reactionists, criminals, the right politicians, traitors, and capitalists. The three city youths in the novel are all from intellectual families; they are sent down to be re-educated by peasants so that their “bad” habits from intellectual families could be fixed.

During the Cultural Revolution, the subjects of curriculum were changed for political purposes. In addition, textbooks were adapted to serve the propaganda of socialism and communism. At the narrator’s junior high school, “mathematics had been scrapped from the curriculum, as had physics and chemistry. From then on our lessons were restricted to the basis of industry and agriculture” (Dai 7). And as the narrator depicts, “decorating the covers of our textbooks would be a picture of a worker with arms as thick as Sylvester Stallone’s, wearing a cap and brandishing a huge hammer... For several years it was these textbooks and Mao’s ‘Little Red Book’ that constituted our only source of intellectual knowledge. All other books were

forbidden” (Dai 8). No books were permitted to be written, published, or read at all, except the books written by Mao or his cronies and the purely scientific works, like the only book in the little seamstress’ house, a tailoring book. In *Balzac*, Luo’s aunt has copies of foreign books in Chinese translation, but those books are seized and burnt by the Red Guards.

潘雯 (Pan Wen) explores the theme of *Balzac* and called the protagonists “the Lost Generation in China” (122)—they are lost because they realize their internal desires, but the external environment is so harsh that they have to hold their desires inside and take risks. Not able to fulfill their needs of reading and learning, the narrator believes that teenagers in the 1960s are not lucky: “by the time we had finally learnt to read properly, there had been nothing left for us to read. For years the ‘Western Literature’ sections of the bookshops were devoted to the complete works of the Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha” (Dai 51). And the illiterate village youths are even unluckier: they do not even know about Enver Hoxha; all the foreign names they know are Karl Max, Lenin, and Stalin. In the novel when some village youths catch the narrator and finds his copy of a literature book, they look closer and see “the black-white portrait of Balzac wearing a long beard and silvery moustache” (154), but all they can assume is that the portrait is of either Karl Max, Lenin, or Stalin.

Upon the arrival of the two city youths, the village headman finds the narrator’s violin, “a bourgeois toy” as he calls it. In the village, no one has ever seen a violin before, so they curiously pass the violin around the crowd, touch it, sniff it and peer into the interior, but nobody figures out what the violin is. Simply because the violin is brought from the city, and that the look of violin is Western and exotic, the village headman orders the peasants to burn the seemingly toy of the bourgeois class. The violin is classified as “monsters” and “demons” that must be swept away. To save the narrator’s musical instrument, the narrator’s friend Luo defends

that the narrator is a musician and suggests that the musician play a Mozart sonata called “Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao”. Although “all music by Mozart or indeed by any other Western composer had been banned years ago” (5), Luo’s audacious and tricky made-up name of a Mozart piece turns a cold welcome of re-education into a peaceful Mozart concert. “The peasants’ faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence of Mozart’s limpid music like parched earth under a shower, and then, in the dancing light of the oil lamp, they blurred into one” (Dai 6). After the peasants and the village headman listen to the narrator’s debut violin performance in the village, the village headman withdraws the order of burning the violin. They are convinced that the violin plays communist songs to honor Chairman Mao, and they enjoy the privilege of honoring Mao.

Like the narrator who brings his favorite musical instrument to the village, Luo brings an alarm clock. It is “a proud rooster with peacock-like feathers of shimmering green with flashes of deep blue” (Dai 13). Unlike the violin that is suspected to be the toy for the bourgeois class, the rooster alarm clock is cherished by the village headman at the first sight. No one in the village has seen a clock either, but the concept of measuring time is well accepted by them. “Before our arrival, there had never been an alarm clock in the village; indeed, there had been no clocks or watches at all. The people had timed their days by sunrise and sundown” (Dai 14). But after Luo brings his alarm clock to the village, the peasants start having a more accurate working schedule. “At nine o’clock sharp he (the village headman) would give a long piercing whistle to summon the villagers to work in the fields... ‘Time to get off your backsides, you lazy louts, you spawn of bullocks’ balls! What are you waiting for?’” (14). For the first time, the village is modernized by a ticking clock that works 24 hours to remind the peasants of time management.

The violin and clock receive opposite treatments in the village. At first sight, because of its unfamiliar sound and look to the village peasants, the exotic and useless violin is regarded as a bourgeois toy and is almost burnt by the peasants. The violin represents exotic Western musical art. The violin faces fatal persecution because it is classified as “monsters” and “demons.” First, it has a Western capitalist origin; and second, the music that the violin plays are all banned in the Cultural Revolution. In contrast, the clock is welcomed and cherished because it represents pure mechanics and science, and it brings civilization and modernization to the remote village. In addition, the shape of the clock, a rooster, is a common livestock in the countryside, and of its practical function, the clock seizes “the imagination of the peasants” and becomes “an object of veneration, almost” (Dai 14). The clock is welcomed by poor peasants in the village because of its familiarity and utility.

Not willing to do the forced daily labor, especially some dangerous tasks as to carry buckets of shit on the narrow mountain path, the two urban youths manually set the time on the clock backward to get more sleep while the village headman is waiting outside of their room. Sometimes they would set the time forward to end the field work earlier. Gradually, because the two urban youths keep readjusting the time on the alarm clock for so many times, they lose track of the standard time, a previous privilege that they used to have in the city. Losing the standard time signifies that the two city youths lose the only connection with the city—the simultaneity. From then on, they isolate themselves in a different village time zone from the standard time zone of the city.

Besides violin and clock, in the novel, the name of “Fu Lei”, a famous Chinese translator, is mentioned several times. He is a typical example of “monsters” and “demons” that was swept away in the Cultural Revolution. Dai puts in his novel that “the translator was himself a great

writer. Having been forbidden to publish his own works for political reasons, he spent the rest of his life translating French novels” (56). Fu Lei’s translation of foreign novels is well accepted in China. At the end of the novel, when the narrator shows a Balzac’s book to a doctor, the doctor immediately tells that the translation of the book is by Fu Lei. The doctor says to the narrator, “I can tell from the style. He’s suffered the same fate as your father; poor man: he’s been labelled a class enemy” (Dai 172). Unfortunately, even prestigious translators like Fu Lei cannot escape the fate of being denounced and swept away in the Cultural Revolution. After being classified as enemy of people, Fu Lei and his wife could not tolerate the false accusation and public humiliation, so they ended their own lives by hanging themselves on the window.

The suicide of Fu Lei implies the darkness of the Cultural Revolution. According to Dikötter,

“by all accounts, during the ten years spanning the Cultural Revolution, between 1.5 and 2 million people were killed, but many more lives were ruined through endless denunciations, false confessions, struggle meetings and persecution campaigns. Anne Thurston has written eloquently that the Cultural Revolution was neither a sudden disaster nor a holocaust, but an extreme situation characterised by loss at many levels, ‘loss of culture and of spiritual values, loss of status and honour, loss of career, loss of dignity,’ and of course, loss of trust and predictability in human relations, as people turned against each other” (xvi).

The loss of millions of lives during the Cultural Revolution turned out to be painful for their families. And for those who suffered political persecution, the lives of their close families were ruined as well. In the novel, the two protagonists from Chengdu are sent down to the village because their parents are labelled enemies of the people. The narrator’s father is a lung specialist, and his mother is a consultant in parasitic diseases. “Their crime was that they were ‘stinking scientific authorities’ who enjoyed a modest reputation” (Dai 8). Luo’s father is famous dentist who fixed Chairman Mao’s teeth before the Cultural Revolution, and the teeth of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), “the president of the Republic prior to the Communist takeover” (Dai 8).

Luo's father has committed two crimes: first, he should not have revealed to the public that Chairman Mao's teeth get fixed because the health condition of the national leader is considered a secret of national security; second, he should not have dared to mention Chairman Mao and Jiang Jieshi "in the same breath as that of the worst scum of the earth" (Dai 9). As a result of committing double crimes, Luo's father suffers public humiliation in the hospital playground. "A great slab of cement hung around his neck from a wire so deeply embedded in the skin as to be invisible. Written on the slab were his name and his crime: REACTIONARY" (Dai 9). And as the son of a reactionary enemy, Luo's fate is at the hands of the people.

In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the fate of an old preacher also lies in the hands of the people—the working class and the poor peasant class. No religion, including Buddhism, is allowed to be practiced during the Cultural Revolution, and Christianity is banned before the 1960s. The narrator describes the old preacher that "there was an air of nobility around him, even when he was in his blue worker's uniform sweeping the street with a remarkably long-handled broom... for the past twenty years he had been forbidden to practice his faith" (166). The old preacher is forced to sweep the street because of his faith. When the Red Guards ransack his house, they find a book written in foreign words, which turns out to be a Latin Bible after the book is sent to Beijing for identification. "After his exposure as a member of the Christian faith the unfortunate fellow was forced to spend the rest of his days sweeping Yong Jing's high street from morning to night, rain or shine" (166). Once classified as the "monsters" and "demons," no one could escape persecution from the people; even the Deputy Chairman Liu Shaoqi were persecuted to death in the Cultural Revolution. There was no free will nor individuality at that time, and the society was turned upside-down: the once privileged

intellectuals suffered, and the illiterate poor peasants and workers enjoyed the privilege of being the people.

“Three in a Thousand”

The two urban youths are sent down to a village that is in a lost corner of the mountains, known as “the Phoenix of the Sky” (Dai 11). Over there, partly due to the illiterate population, partly due to the phenomenon that individuality is not encouraged, none of the characters has a full name in the novel. They are called either by their occupation, like the village headman and the little seamstress, by the last name, like Luo, or by the person’s unique feature—for example, the boy who wears glasses is named “Four-Eye.” In a conversation when speakers are not known to each other, in the Cultural Revolution, it is appropriate to address one another “comrade.” For instance, when the two urban youths arrive in the village on the first day, they call the villagers comrades. The narrator’s full name is never addressed by somebody else. However, when the narrator dedicates books to Luo, he draws three figures representing the three Chinese characters of his name: a horse, a sword, and a bell, which implies that his full Chinese name is Ma Jian Ling, with Ma being his family name.

In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the full name of a person remains unknown and does not represent one’s identity, but different accents stand out to show one’s originality. In a memoir article, Dai Sijie’s friend 王浙滨 (Wang Zhebin) describes Dai as gentle and a little stubborn, “he has been in France for more than a decade, but he still keeps his strong Chengdu accent from his hometown” (7). Dated back to the Cultural Revolution, the spread of standard Mandarin has not reached the western part of China. People from Chengdu have Chengdu accent, and the peasants from different villages have their distinct accent, so one’s hometown

accent can easily reveal the person's hometown and educational level. For the two city youths, when they encounter Four Eye's mother on the mountain path, she immediately notices their Chengdu accent and starts talking to them. When the narrator and Luo disguise themselves as government officials, they fake a Beijing accent to convince the old miller that they are important political figures. The little seamstress is not well-educated and has a village accent. After she decides to leave the village for the city, she tries to adopt the Chengdu accent from the urban youths.

For the urban youths, re-education by poor peasants in the village is depressing with its endless labor. They feel like their entire lives will be spent in the village to be re-educated. For the youths from an ordinary family, or in Dai's words, "the offspring of average parents, whether workers or revolutionary intellectuals" (Dai 17), they will be released from re-education and reunite with families in about two years. But for the youths like the narrator and Luo whose parents are classified enemies of the people, "the chances of returning home were infinitesimal: three in a thousand" (Dai 17). Dikötter's research also proves the rare chance of returning to the city, "exile to the countryside was supposed to be permanent. Students had to hand in their registration card at the police station and could no longer legally reside in a city. They lost all the perks and privileges associated with urban residency, not to mention the trauma they underwent of permanent separation from family and friends" (193). Regardless of their willingness, the urban students were sent away from their parents, and most of them were doomed to spend the rest of their lives in the countryside.

Though the chance of returning to the city is merely three in a thousand, the narrator hopes that one day he can get onto a propaganda committee with his violin performance skills. Comparatively, Luo is more desperate; he cannot even dream of being the three in one thousand

because of his reactionary father. The desperation of having no hope leads to the teenage boy's outburst. One day when they work in the coal mine, the narrator hears Luo's cry, "it did not sound like grief, nor like the groans of a wounded man; it was more like someone weeping with passionate abandon. The sound bounced off the walls and echoed all the way to the other end of the shaft before subsiding into the shadows" (Dai 31). Luo is scared that his life will be taken away by the dangerous coal mine or the endless village labor.

Not only some students, but also their parents try to resist the fate of being sent down to the countryside. "Many parents refused to lose their children to the countryside, pleading with local cadres or pulling strings with their superiors. They rushed to find employment for their offspring in local government units or factories before they could be transported to rural areas" (Dikötter 194). Government- or revolution-related employment serves as one way to escape re-education in the countryside. In the novel, Four-Eye is from a well-educated family and that puts him in a deprived situation in the re-education. He lives in fear in the village; even "eating meat struck him as a crime typical of the bourgeois class to which his family belonged" (46). To save Four-Eye from the re-education, Four-Eye's mother seeks help from her friend, an editor-in-chief of a revolutionary literature journal. The editor promises to find a position at the journal as long as Four-Eye can publish some "popular ballads" or "authentic folk songs full of romantic realism" that can be collected from the peasants on the mountain (Dai 64). Guessing that Four-Eye has books in his leather suitcase and hoping Four-Eye would share his books, Luo and Ma collect folk songs for Four-Eye from a poor old miller living on the Thousand-Metre-Cliff.

The original folk song collected by Luo and Ma is as follows:

"Tell me:
An old louse,

What does it fear?
 It fears boiling water,
 Boiling bubbling water.
 And the young nun,
 Tell me,
 What does she fear?
 She fears the old monk
 No more and no less
 Just the old monk” (74).

And Four-Eye adapts it into:

“Tell me:
 Little bourgeois lice,
 What do they fear?
 They fear the boiling wave of the proletariat” (79).

The romantic realism and the revolutionary spirit in the folk song that Four-Eye adapts is successfully published on the revolution journal, and Four-Eye luckily becomes one in three of a thousand to return to the city with his mother.

“Eight-hundred Million People Watching Eight Shows”

To describe the cultural situation during the Cultural Revolution, Paul Clark argues that “many Chinese, when asked about culture in these years, will suggest only half facetiously that there was no culture” (2). The slogan “Eight-hundred million people watching eight shows” reveals the limited access people had towards culture in the Cultural Revolution. For the eight-hundred million population, there is no books to read, and very few movies to watch for political purposes. “During these years film’s function in the People’s Republic as the main conveyor of a

new, mass culture to all corners of China reached its apogee. More Chinese probably saw the eight 'model performances' not live on stage, but as feature films. These and other films served to 'fix' Cultural Revolution culture, taking it in standardized form to the farthest reaches of the nation" (Clark 109). The model performances were not designed to fulfill people's cultural needs, but like the textbooks, they were used to promote political and cultural propaganda.

In the novel, on the first day of their arrival, the narrator describes themselves as "reactionary soldiers from a propaganda film after their capture by a horde of Communist farm workers" (4). During the Cultural Revolution, only propaganda films could be produced and released to the public. Coming from the city, Luo watches many films. His good comprehension and memory of films make him a good story-teller. Though the talent of story-telling does not increase Luo's chance of returning to the city, the village headman, a devotee of narrative eloquence, is entertained by hearing Luo's film stories. To bring more film stories to the remote village, "so remote from civilisation that most of the inhabitants had never had the opportunity of seeing a film" (Dai 18), the village headman sends Luo and the narrator to watch a film in Yong Jing and asks them to put on an oral cinema show for the peasants when they return. Their movie-telling is such a success that even the little seamstress invites them to tell a movie story in the neighboring village.

Taught by her father to read and write, the little seamstress' educational level is equivalent to elementary school. Comparing with the illiterate village girls, the little seamstress is less wild. She admires people who are educated in the city and can read and write. Luo adores the little seamstress for her beauty and her personality, but he regards her as a simple village girl and is not good enough for him.

As his urban fellows who bring a violin or clock with them, Four-Eye carries a suitcase of Western literature books to the village and keeps it carefully as a secret, even from his friends Luo and the narrator. Coincidentally, the narrator finds this suitcase under Four-Eye's bed and feels that "it gave off a whiff of civilisation" (49). In return for Luo and Ma's help to carry sixty kilos of rice to the storage station in a snowy day, Four-eye lends them a copy of Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* in Chinese translated by Fu Lei. Before reading Balzac, he two urban youths have never heard of anything other than "revolutionary blather about patriotism, Communism, ideology and propaganda" and they are stunned by "a story of awakening desire, passion, impulsive action, love, of all the subjects that had, until then, been hidden from me" (Dai 57). And Balzac's story of love and miracles awakens the narrator's desire for love; he suddenly feels jealous of the love between Luo and the little seamstress, "a bitter wrenching emotion I had never felt before" (Dai 58). The story of *Ursule Mirouët* also awakens Ma's desire to copy sentences from a book. He does not want to lose the pieces of the story after the book is returned, so he writes on the entire inside his sheepskin coat with pieces from the story.

Luo and the narrator return the book to Four-Eye immediately after reading, in want of borrowing more books, but Four-Eye rejects. Hence, to educate the simple village girl and make her good enough, Luo reads the story to the little seamstress from the narrator's sheepskin coat. "This fellow Balzac is a wizard...he touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream. It took a while for her to come down to earth" (Dai 62). For the first time ever, Luo, the narrator, and the little seamstress are brought to a new world with imagination and dreams by a literary book. Four-Eye's suitcase is like a treasure box. Once opened, nobody can forget about the treasure and put the box back. Both Luo and the narrator wants to read more books for their own sake, and Luo especially craves more

books so as to transform the smile little seamstress with the power of reading— “she’ll never be a simple mountain girl again” (Dai 100).

The night before Four-Eye’s departure back to the city, Luo and Ma decide to steal Four-Eye’s secret suitcase that is filled with literature books. They are assured that even Four-Eye realizes that the suitcase is stolen by Luo and Ma, he cannot denounce his friends because it is also a crime for Four-Eye himself to hide forbidden books.

As expected, stealing Four-Eye’s books is a success with impunity. The narrator and Luo open the suitcase and see that it is full of books written by Balzac, “Victor Hugo, Stendhal, Dumas, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Romain Rolland, Rousseau, Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and some English writers, too: Dickens, Kipling, Emily Brontë...” (Dai 99). They cannot imagine what miracles will happen if they enter the literary world created by these exotic names.

Before reading *Jean-Christophe*, Ma’s favorite reading is short stories.

“I was more dubious about full-length novels. But Jean-Christophe, with his fierce individualism utterly unpainted by malice, was a salutary revelation. Without him I would never have understood the splendor of taking free and independent action as an individual. Up until this stolen encounter with Romain Rolland’s hero, my poor educated and re-educated brains had been incapable of grasping the notion of one Man standing up against the whole world. The flirtation turned into a grand passion” (Dai 110).

The Western ideas of independence and individuality is beyond the narrator’s recognition. None of the model performances ever pictures a single character fighting against the whole world. The propaganda films honor collective success and individual sacrifice. If individual interests clash with collective clashes, one must give way to collective interests.

The intense reading experience also develops the narrator’s sense of literary taste. He can feel that “even the excessively emphatic style occasionally indulged in by the author did not

detract from the beauty of this astonishing work of art. I was carried away, swept along by the mighty stream of words pouring from the hundreds of pages. To me it was the ultimate book: once you had read it, neither your own life nor the world you lived in would ever look the same” (Dai 111).

The only tailor on Phoenix Mountain, the little seamstress’ father, does not read the foreign novels by himself, but the stories from the novel told by Luo and the narrator give him new inspiration on his occupation. He picks up some details from the stories and combine the Western dressing code with Chinese tailoring for his villagers. “Dumas would have been most surprised to see the mountain men sporting sailor tops with square collars that flipped in the breeze. You could almost smell the briny Mediterranean air. The blue sailor trousers conquered the girls’ hearts with their fluttering bell-bottoms and whiff of the Cote d’Azur... some women went so far as to embroider tiny anchors on buttons with gold thread” (Dai 127). Restrained by the economic and industrial level in China during the 1970s, people’s choice of clothing, in terms of color and style is limited. However, the enthusiasm of adding new design to their clothing reveals the villagers’ pursuit of novelty; they accept and appreciate the gift of the tailor’s new inspirations.

周怡 (Zhou Yi) reads the novels about urban youths as a genre and explains how urban culture clashes rural culture in the process of communication (84). Pan Wen in “the Lost Generation” and Zhou Yi have opposite opinions in terms of the communication of culture: Zhou believes that there is clash between Western and Eastern culture and between urban and rural culture, whereas Pan argues that the influence of reading Balzac on the little seamstress is a personal experience. Pan does not see clashes of cultures; she perceives that the changes brought to the little seamstress are integrated with Western literature. This essay maintains Pan’s

perspective in that the novel does not suggest negative consequences after the little seamstress reads Balzac. All readers know is that the little seamstress chooses to leave for the city without external pressure; it is not clear if she fails or succeeds, so the clash is unclear.

Reading makes the little seamstress no longer a simple mountain girl. She learns to read literature books, and the plots in the literature inspire her to think and rethink about the world inside the stories, and the world around her. Once she and Luo act out a reunion scene from the book with enriched emotions; she regards acting as a totally new experience: “Before, I had no idea that you could take on the role of a completely different person, actually become that person—a rich lady, for example—and still be your own self. Luo told me I’d make a good actress” (Dai 145). With Luo’s encouragement, the little seamstress realizes that she can be more than a seamstress from the mountains. For the first time, she is told that she can be a good actress in the city, and she feels the confidence in herself that she can make it to the city. To make herself closer to a city actress, the little seamstress adjusts her accent and learns the accent that Luo speaks. The mountain girls never wear brassieres before, but she makes one for herself. The little seamstress starts wearing jackets that “would only be worn by a woman in the city”, and she asks her father to buy her a pair of white tennis shoes, a color that would not last long on the muddy mountain paths (Dai 179). She even cut her long pigtail hair into a short bob, giving herself a modern-looking style like the actress on the movie poster.

However, before the little seamstress realizes her dream of being an actress, she finds herself pregnant with Luo’s child when Luo visits his sick mother in the city. In the Cultural Revolution, nothing can be more desperate than a young mountain girl who gets pregnant outside of wedlock. “There was not a hospital, doctor or midwife to be found in these parts who could be persuaded to break the law by offering assistance to an unmarried woman in labor. And Luo

wouldn't be able to marry the Little Seamstress for several years, given that marriage under the age of twenty-five was illegal" (Dai 160). The narrator knows of the little seamstress' helplessness and decides to help her. "There was nowhere for them to go, for there was no conceivable place where a Romeo and his pregnant Juliet might slide the long arm of the law, nor indeed where they might live the life of Robinson Crusoe attended by a secret agent turned Man Friday. Every nook and cranny of the land came under the all-seeing eye of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which had cast its gigantic, fine-meshed net over the whole of China" (Dai 160). In the end, the narrator successfully persuades a physician in the town to perform abortion on the little seamstress in exchange for Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* and Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, both translated by Fu Lei. At the end of the novel, the little seamstress learns from Balzac that "a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price" (Dai 184). Born and raised in the mountains, the pretty little seamstress is always regarded as the princess of the Phoenix Mountain, but she never realizes that her beauty can be treasure until she reads Balzac. To take the advantage of her beauty as priceless treasure, she wants to become the phoenix who can fly over the mountain rather than having a useless princess title. The little seamstress' departure shocks Luo and the narrator. They enjoy the accompany of the little seamstress and the banned book, but after the little seamstress leaves for the city, they decide to burn all the books. 张倩伟 (Zhang Qianwei) discovers the internal world of the three protagonists, namely the narrator, Luo, and the little seamstress, through a character analysis. She proposes that the relationship among three characters enriches the plot of the novel—the two urban youths enlighten the little seamstress in terms of thoughts and the little seamstress enlightens the two urban youths about love (270). The distance between the world in literature books and the real world around the Phoenix Mountain is far. Luo and the narrator, the two intellectuals from the city, know the

impossibility of connecting the two worlds so they stick to reality. After the little seamstress is gone, they realize that the imaginative dreams brought by Balzac and other authors are broken. They host a funeral for the burning books, as well as for all the risky and ecstatic moments in their youth.

In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, reading or listening to Western literature inspires the literate and the illiterate in different ways and saves their spirits. Luo, the narrator, and the little seamstress are led to a world of individuality, desire, and love by the literature books. The tailor is inspired by the sailor's dressing code after listening to Western literature books and adds new designs for the village people's clothing. The village headman and other peasants have never seen a movie in their life but listening to movie stories bring laughter in their leisure time. The need for culture and arts exists among all the literate and the illiterate in the village, but the cultural situation in the Culture Revolution cannot fulfill their needs. Though classical Western literature does not point out the best direction of life for Chinese urban youths and peasants in the village, it does make an immense difference for their lives. Without literature and arts, all they have is a routine life that repeats every day—working in the fields during the day and rest at night. Violin music brings peace to the villagers, and story-telling creates imaginative spaces in people's life.

It remains unclear if the little Chinese seamstress' career would take off after she leaves for the cities, or if the two urban youths could finally make it back to their hometown city after the Cultural Revolution, but what literature brings to them is unreplaceable by the routine countryside life or reeducation demanded by the Chinese government. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is not a novel about clashes between cultures, nor does it aim at honoring the

great influence brought by certain French literature works. In an era where there are no books to read, the protagonists would be awakened by any type of literature works that proposes different ideas from socialism ideology or propaganda. It is the process of reading and thinking about literature that changes their life and allows them to influence someone else's life in the remote village.

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