

Keynote Speech 1

Thursday, 23 March, 10.10-10.40 / Room 307

Language: English

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Crossing the rural-to-urban border: stories of migrant workers in recent Chinese fiction

During the last few decades, the migration of farmers from their hometowns, situated in China's most backward and poor rural areas, towards the big cities, constitutes a broad and relevant phenomenon, involving now millions of people and which attracts the attention of media and intellectuals in China and abroad.

In fact, the huge and incredibly fast social and economic changes brought by the introduction of capitalism, the spread of globalization and the rapid and steady urbanization process, have caused a growing gap between rural and urban areas, so that an increasing amount of migrant workers (called in Chinese *nongmingong*) cross the virtual border between countryside and metropolis, in order to pursue the dream of becoming urban dwellers, getting a well-paid job and enjoy a wealthier life.

As a consequence of this situation, especially after the beginning of 21st century, the stories and experiences of the members of this so called 'floating population' are becoming a significant aspect of literary creation and many Chinese writers show a growing concern for the representation of characters inspired to subaltern classes people, especially migrant workers. This kind of literature not only brings to light all the real everyday problems *nongmingong* have to face, but often focus on the psychological consequences and the inner reactions due to their unstable working condition. Many contemporary literary trends, such as subaltern fiction, workers' literature, migrant poetry, new urban fiction, just to mention a few examples, depict this kind of characters and even authors who are not involved into these tendencies sometimes describe them.

In my paper, I assume that the spatial separation between metropolis and countryside becomes for these characters a symbolic border, which marks the dividing line between two utterly different worlds, endowed with antithetical ideals and values and which, above all, defines people's identity. By analyzing fictional works of Chinese writers telling stories of migrant workers, we will in fact often find out that, beyond the need of making more money to help family members left back in the village and obtain a brighter future for themselves, their actual and ultimate goal seems to be acquiring an urban identity, with all its implications. Most of them will nevertheless stand on the hybrid border between city and countryside, which is represented by industrial suburbs, where many of them live and work, never really becoming urban citizens but yet not willing to go back to a rural reality of which they do not share the values anymore. The border between city and countryside is, in this perspective, a psychological, insurmountable border.

During the presentation, after a theoretical introduction, I will analyze and compare some fictional works by Chinese authors published during the last fifteen or twenty years, whose main characters are migrant workers.

Keynote Speech 2

Thursday, 23 March, 10.40-11.10 / Room 307

Language: English

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Arabic Motifs in *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* of Jan Potocki (d. 1815)

The Manuscript Found in Saragossa is a frame-tale novel written in French (*Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*) by Polish author Count Jan Potocki. Potocki (1761–1815) was a Polish nobleman, ethnologist, Egyptologist, linguist, adventurer and traveler of the Enlightenment period. In Poland owing to his life and exploits he is a legendary figure. As he was educated in Geneva and Lausanne, his first language was French and he wrote mainly in French. He spent some time as novice to the Knights of Malta. Then he spent most of his colourful life traveling across Europe, Asia and North Africa and visiting Italy, Sicily, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, France, England, Russia, Turkey, Dalmatia, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Spain, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Mongolia. He could be named one of the first travel writers of the modern era, penning lively accounts of many of his journeys. During them he also undertook extensive historical, linguistic and ethnographic studies, and finally he contributed to the birth of ethnology. Moreover, he was one of the first person to study the precursors of the Slavic peoples from a linguistic and historical standpoint.

His most famous work, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, originally written in French, has drawn comparisons to such celebrated works as the *Decameron* and the *Arabian Nights*. The main plot presents the description of a period of sixty-six days, which a young officer, Alphonse van Worden, spend in Spain, where he encounters a varied group of characters, including Muslim princesses, cabbalists, and outlaws, who tell him an intertwining series of bizarre, amusing and fantastic tales.

These stories cover a wide range of themes, subjects and styles, including oriental novel, gothic horror, picaresque adventures, and comic, erotic and moral tales. The stories reflect Potocki's interest in oriental cultures.

In the paper I will concentrate on showing Arabic plots and motifs in *The Manuscript*, and I will try to point out Potocki's sources of inspiration and of his knowledge of classical Arabic history, Islam and Muslim religious groups.