



Transcultural Memories and Transmission: The Case of Ying Chen's *La lenteur des montagnes*

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
CONVERGENCES
FRANCO-CHINOISES:
LA VALEUR DE
LA CRÉATIVITÉ
TRANSCULTURELLE

ARTICLES – FRENCH
AND FRANCOPHONE

GABRIELLE PARKER



ABSTRACT

As a plurilingual, nomadic writer shaped by and immersed in different cultures, Ying Chen rebels against the facile expectation of the transnational writer to be “a bridge” between cultures and calls for a degree of reciprocity in the nurturing of exchanges across cultures and contexts. Yet, as this article argues, Chen’s preoccupation with transmission and her transcultural perspectives on transcultural memories are evident in her literary practice. Although for the main part her creative writing has presented a female character suspended in an in-between space and distanced from specific cultural boundaries, Chen’s recent fiction is more explicit in articulating transnational/transcultural constructions of identity in characters who have experienced cultural and linguistic dislocation. Her twin concerns are clearer still in her essays, more particularly in *La lenteur des montagnes* (2014), which will be the main focus of our study of the author’s exploration of the value of transcultural creativity and the notion transmission.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Gabrielle Parker

University of Middlesex, United Kingdom

G.Parker@mdx.ac.uk

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Parker, Gabrielle 2024
Transcultural Memories and
Transmission: The Case of
Ying Chen’s *La lenteur des
montagnes*. *Modern Languages
Open*, 2024(1): 7 pp. 1–18.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.3828/
mlo.v0i0.432](https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.432)

Ying Chen's writing is characterized by consistency, fluidity and continuity. *La lenteur des montagnes* (2014) is the author's second essay after *Quatre mille marches* (2004). Her first two novels, *La mémoire de l'eau* (1992) and *Les lettres chinoises* (1993), were followed by the *femme fantôme* cycle comprising eight novels starting with *L'ingratitude* (1995) and concluding with *La rive est loin* (2013). A new cycle with two titles to date,¹ *Blessures* (2016) and *Rayonnements* (2020), would appear to break with Chen's preceding fiction in so far as political and historical themes are introduced in the narrative, locating them in time and place, albeit opaquely. *Blessures* conjures up the Second Sino-Japanese War² and focuses on an unnamed male protagonist whom the reader can identify as a historical figure: Norman Bethune, a Canadian surgeon and advocate of socialized medicine who served as a front-line trauma surgeon in the Spanish Civil War before supporting the National Revolutionary Army of the Republic of China (Deslauriers and Goulet).³ *Rayonnements* is inspired by Marie Skłodowska Curie's life and work.⁴ Curie, like Bethune a scientist and a migrant, displaced as a result of historical circumstances and personal choice, straddled at least two cultures and several languages. Both are portrayed as tormented by the ethical ambiguities of their contributions to the advancement of scientific knowledge and public good. The titles appear to suggest these ambiguities, *blessures* references "wounds", those suffered and those alleviated, whilst "rayonnements" brings to mind the international renown of the scientist, the reach of her discoveries, as well as the radiations that harm and heal. Both characters met with resistance and prejudice – Curie because of her gender and foreign status; Bethune as a result of his political beliefs at home – he identified with the communist cause – and with the combatants he helped as he did not distinguish between sides in treating casualties. Both were belatedly recognized and celebrated.⁵

Such tropes are consistent in Chen's work to date and confirm her engagement with what Silvester has termed "an aesthetics of non-belonging". Further threads of continuity between the two fictional series can be found in the unreliable nature of the main protagonists (see Lapointe) and in their sense of otherness – not to mention their status as revenants. Further, the narratives explore long-standing preoccupations of the author, whether as motifs in her fiction or as notions developed and examined in her essays. In particular, the notion of transmission is a recurring theme in both books.⁶ In *Blessures*, the field surgeon is anxious to teach his skills and pass on his knowledge, training doctors, nurses and orderlies across linguistic and cultural barriers. Teaching others is less of a preoccupation for the protagonist of *Rayonnements*, who is more anxious to transmit her own language and cultural heritage to her daughters. In both narratives the main characters seek to accomplish the journey that Chen has been beseeching her Western readers to attempt – the reverse journey, that which she herself has travelled: "Mais je supplie toujours les gens: ne parlez pas de la Chine avec moi, avant d'avoir fait une traversée semblable, en sens inverse" ("Hors" 35; *Lenteur* 79).

Chen abhors any form of "transmission" that would entail becoming "l'anthropologue de sa propre culture" (Jean-Marc Moura, qtd. in Croiset §12), refusing to indulge an expectation of exoticism: "Je rêve de n'être plus une personnalité exotique ou un soi-disant pont entre les

1 A third, inspired by Gandhi, *Ahimsa* [non-violence], has just been published (Leméac, 2023); a fourth based on a poetess from the Song dynasty (Li Quingzhao) is in progress. This new cycle might be called *Les morts-vivants*, after one of *Ahimsa's* characters' self-description (82). A third essay is expected in 2024; see n. 10.

2 The Second Sino-Japanese War, 7 July 1937–2 September 1945, fought mainly between the Republic of China and the empire of Japan and known as the War of Resistance. Chen, however, would quibble with the notion of "locating" this narrative: "dans 'Blessures', ni l'époque ni lieu ne sont précisés, car ces guerres sont intemporelles" (private email from Ying Chen, 22 Feb. 2020).

3 A statue of Bethune, donated to the city of Montreal by the People's Republic of China in 1975, stands near Concordia University. Chen had sketched a summary of Bethune's significance to both Canadian and Chinese cultures in "Fin des 'Lettres chinoises'" (*Quatre* 57–58) some twenty years earlier.

4 Again, the protagonist is not named but recognizable as Maria Skłodowska Curie (1867–1934), a physicist and chemist born in Poland who chose to study and work in France. She coined the word "radioactivity" and received the Nobel Prize twice: in 1903 in physics with her husband Pierre Curie and physicist Henri Becquerel; and again in chemistry in 1911 for her discovery of polonium and radium, names she also invented. Like Chen's protagonist, she had two daughters.

5 In 1995 Curie's remains were transferred to the Paris Panthéon, the first woman to be so honoured on her own merits. In 1972 Canada's federal government declared Bethune "a Canadian of National Historical Significance".

6 *Blessures* is written in the third person by an omniscient narrator, whilst *Rayonnements* is narrated by the character's elder daughter, also unnamed.

cultures.”⁷ As she stated in *Quatre mille marches*, “je n’ai jamais voulu pratiquer le folklore et la littérature ethnique” (87), rather, “J’espère que mes lecteurs me lisent non pas pour connaître mon pays natal mais pour se connaître eux-mêmes” (15). The passing of the years seems to have strengthened that determination. Thus, the protagonist of *Blessures* declares: “Il est vrai qu’il déteste les ponts. Les arrière-pensées, les prétextes, les précautions, les compromis que sous-entendent les ponts. Les ponts renvoient à des structures solides, à des oppositions insurmontables, à des écarts toujours persistants, à des divisions et des séparations changeantes mais éternelles” (46).⁸

As a writer, Chen has always reflected on her creative process inspired by her own literal and metaphorical crossings:⁹

J’ai mis des années, avec la lenteur qui m’est propre, à traverser le Pacifique et l’Atlantique, avec l’aide des traductions d’abord et en apprenant des langues ensuite. Même si, à cause de ma lenteur, cette traversée ne sera jamais accomplie, et je devrai sans cesse la questionner, et continuer à transpirer en route. (“Hors” 35)

It is clearly a solitary spiritual quest, mediated by those who have already undertaken a similar journey:

La traversée peut s’entreprendre de diverses façons [...] Mais la plus efficace, la plus profonde serait la traversée effectuée en soi. C’est par notre intérieur, avec notre connaissance et notre intuition de la nature humaine, à la fois grandiose et désastreuse, des lois terrestres essentiellement animales, et avec notre compassion, qu’elle soit chrétienne ou bouddhique, que nous pouvons espérer nous approcher de l’autre. Dans ce sens, Kong-Zi dit: “Le gentilhomme connaît le monde sans avoir à enjambrer le seuil de sa maison”. La traversée se fait dans la solitude, dans la générosité et dans l’humilité. (“Hors” 35)

She has logged her progress in a number of short pieces and essays, in particular in *Quatre mille marches. Un rêve chinois* (2004) and in *La lenteur des montagnes* (2014),¹⁰ thereby engaging with both her current readership and with posterity. The consistency of her project and the nature of the journey itself come to light particularly in the latter, together with a growing preoccupation with transmission hitherto implicit in her fiction whilst explicit in her essays. It is the nature of that transmission which will be explored here, more specifically in *La lenteur des montagnes*, an essay that also engages in a continuous dialogue with the author’s previous writing, expanding on it, informed by her extensive reading of other authors and other works, and in communication with them. This practice of *transtextuality* (Genette, *Architext* 81) is at the root of the author’s transcultural sensibility and of transculture itself.

Further, this article will analyse how the author’s transcultural perspective prompts, informs and shapes her project of transmission in an essay written as a letter, a form both direct and at one remove from its reader, a *décalage* that mirrors Chen’s way of being in the world. The object of transmission is both intangible – a culture, an ethos – and material – a library. In particular, Chen examines the afterlife of a book that, we argue, exemplifies the notion of transcultural heritage, the *Yi Jing*. This ongoing process of transmission establishes a form of dialogue beyond death, maintaining the continuity of the legacy and of life itself. Finally, Chen’s practice of transtextuality is witness to a wide culture imbued with Chinese philosophy and encompassing Western thought: we suggest that the former may be as relevant as the articulation of current posthumanist concepts in elucidating Chen’s apparent predilection for posthuman characters, be they entirely fictional or inspired by historical figures.

7 Text read by Chen in the film *Voyage illusoire* (1997), partly included in *Quatre mille marches* (15).

8 As it happens, the Second Sino-Japanese War began with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, in which a dispute between Japanese and Chinese troops escalated into a battle. The event is also known as the Lugou Bridge Incident.

9 With regard to these crossings and bio/bibliographical details, see <https://ilcs.sas.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-study-contemporary-womens-writing-ccww/ccww-author-pages/french/ying-chen>; <https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13193>. Also *inter alia* Parker (“Emblematic”).

10 Another collection of short texts is planned for 2024 (private email from Chen received by Parker 16 Oct. 2020), confirming the author’s habit of standing back from her fiction in order to reflect. With reference to the first two collections of essays, see Parker, “Critical”.

Transmission implies movement in time, space and contexts. As a plurilingual, nomadic writer shaped by and immersed in different cultures, Ying Chen is a transcultural writer almost by definition. As Welsch contended of such a writer, her cultural formation is transcultural, having been shaped “not by a single homeland” – China in Chen’s case – “but by differing reference countries and their cultures” (199), both during her Chinese education and thereafter.¹¹ Dagnino explicated Welsch’s initial concept with a definition altogether broad and apposite in the case of Ying Chen, describing “transcultural writers” as “imaginative writers who, by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities” (“Writers” 1). As Welsch had already pointed out, cultures are neither homogeneous nor separate and “For most of us” – that is, both readers and writers – “multiple cultural connexions are decisive in terms of our cultural formation” (194). Chen would endorse these comments with regard to Chinese culture itself which, she has stated, “n’a jamais été purement chinoise”, citing the influence of Buddhism, or the contributions of the Silk Road to the Han dynasty, or again much more recently the Fourth of May movement (1919) establishing Western influence over the language itself (*Quatre* 24). She insists on China’s exposure to Western cultural influences in *La lenteur des montagnes*, contrasting Shanghai’s receptivity with Vancouver’s provincialism (42). Not only is transculturality inherent to literature as a medium but memory itself is fundamentally transcultural: “No version of the past and no product in the archive will ever belong to just one community or place, but usually has its own history of ‘travel and translation’. This is not only the case in our present age of globalization, but as mnemohistory has shown, this holds also true in a *longue durée*-perspective on memory” (Erl, “Transcultural” 178; emphasis original).¹²

As we have seen, Chen rebels against a facile expectation of the transnational writer to serve as “a bridge” between cultures and calls for a degree of reciprocity in the nurturing of exchanges across cultures and contexts. Her creative project eschews cultural markers so that the very notion of transmission appears compromised. She does, however, assert that her personal project is one of transmission to her children, so it can be argued that the very act of publishing does turn it into literature, a medium of cultural memory (Erl, “Travelling” 9). As Erl further argued about traumas such as the Holocaust or Apartheid, “mnemonic processes unfold *across* and *beyond* cultures” (“Travelling” 13; emphasis original) – be it the Chinese Cultural Revolution experienced by Chen herself, or the Sino-Japanese War, or the discovery of radium and polonium obliquely referred to in her more recent fiction. Those historico-cultural events belong to humanity. They have a “virtually global reach – and an equally broad range of localized appropriations”, which underlines the tension in Chen’s writerly project between her reluctance to “bear witness”, as it were, and her ambition to transmit her experience.

The former stems from the author’s active distaste for the constraining nature of definitions and labelling. In 1999 she was already deploring the gentle but firm assignation to either her birthplace or “la terre où je vis” (“Entre la fin et la naissance”, *Quatre* 41). Some fifteen years on she would still lament “une vie où l’on fait de ma naissance quelque chose de prédominant, où chacune de mes actions est interprétée sous l’angle de la ‘culture’, voire de la ‘race’, où mes livres sont interprétés comme essentiellement ‘chinois’, où l’on nie mon individualité” (*Lenteur* 13). “Fin des Lettres chinoises”, by far the longest essay in *Quatre mille marches*,¹³ is

11 For details of this formation, see *infra* as made explicit in Chen’s essays. Transculturalism became part of the vernacular language in the middle of the twentieth century and followed upon the work of Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969), a Cuban anthropologist who coined the term “transculturation”. The concept was developed in Quebec in the 1980s and 1990s through *Vice Versa*, a plurilingual journal founded in Montreal (1983) by Fulvio Caccia, Antonio D’Alfonso, Bruno Ramirez and Lamberto Tassinari (see n. 14). Welsch further elucidated the notion.

12 The notion has emerged from and been developed by the work done in Memory Studies.

13 Dated 2000, it takes the form of a long letter, never to be sent and deliberately written in a language the addressee does not understand in order to terminate the correspondence (65). At the time the author’s children were aged two and four.

fiercely hostile to the notions of roots,¹⁴ their “betrayal”, “Occidentalizing”, “culture of origin”, “authenticity”, “strangers”, etc. It is addressed to a former Chinese friend in China but is equally critical of Western well-meaning approaches that seek to either integrate her or Orientalize her. In fact, transculture reaches *beyond* bounded modes of cultural identities, both etymologically and conceptually.

As Dagnino posits: “transcultural literary works engage with and express the confluent nature of cultures”, quoting Alberto Manguel: “our identity, and the time and place in which we exist, are fluid and transient, like water” (“Literature” 3). Merging fluidities is a particularly apt image for an author who wrote: “Chacun de nous est un mince ruisseau qui se jette dans la mer où se retrouve l’humanité entière” (“Carnet de voyage in Chine”, dated “30 avril [1997]”, *Quatre* 25). Watery metaphors seem to be particularly suited to the notions of continuity and movement. In “En tant que moi” (dated 2003), the affirmative text which concludes *Quatre mille marches*, Chen stated: “Ici et ailleurs se confondent, comme des courants qui se croisent dans une même rivière, la seule distinction se trouve désormais dans l’expression” (106). This is congruent with the grandmother’s aphorism which concludes Chen’s first novel *La mémoire de l’eau* and is reiterated a number of times in *Quatre mille marches* (54, 100, 101...): “L’odeur de l’eau est partout la même”. The metaphor of water is a pervasive one in Taoism. *Tao* (or *Dao*) [the way],¹⁵ has also been called “the watercourse way”. Just like water, the sage will go around obstacles rather than aggressively confront them. For her part, Chen aspires to “[s]’installer dans la rivière adorée, assise comme une pierre parmi des courants” (106). It is not surprising, therefore, that *La lenteur des montagnes* sets the tone by reviving a watery image with the assertion: “j’ai décidé que je ne peux plus tenir à quoi que ce soit de local, que je bois de toutes les mers, que je respire l’air de l’univers, que je reçois l’enseignement des maîtres de tous les temps sans être disciple d’aucun” (13–14). With this statement, the author asserts her position in the war of prefixes – inter-, pluri-, multi-, trans- – that has surrounded the cultural debate. Chen situates herself firmly in the trans- whilst rejecting the multi- with equal force. Indeed, she has frequently expressed her unease with the latter¹⁶ – “une politique qui tente non pas de réunir mais de séparer” (38)¹⁷ – and points to the vacuity of notions when they are not followed by action. Thus, “malgré la politique du multiculturalisme [...] les cours de chinois sont rarement offerts dans les écoles publiques à Vancouver où la jeune population chinoise représente près de la moitié des enfants, sinon plus” (37).

As a professor of Russian and Cultural Theory at Durham University (UK), born in Moscow (then in the Soviet Union), where he worked as a researcher at the Institute of World Literature before moving to the USA (1990) and teaching there for twenty years at Emory University (Atlanta), Mikhail Epstein is a literary theorist with a keen understanding of boundaries and of the necessity of trespassing. In his view, “Origins are essential, but the purpose of culture is not to affirm them, but to go away from them, to become a river and not a dam” (341). Edward Said, another nomadic intellectual, went further, asserting: “The more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance” (*Orientalism* 259).¹⁸ Chen could make this idea her own, but asks of her readers in the

14 Chen’s “répugnance [aversion] pour les racines” (*Quatre* 55) brings to mind Amin Maalouf’s remark: “Je n’aime pas le mot ‘racines’, et l’image encore moins. Les racines s’enfouissent dans le sol, se contorsionnent dans la boue, s’épanouissent dans les ténèbres; elles retiennent l’arbre captif dès la naissance, et le nourrissent au prix du chantage; ‘Tu te libères, tu meurs!’” (9).

15 Taoist ethics vary depending on the particular school, but in general tend to emphasize *wu wei* [action without intention], “naturalness”, simplicity, spontaneity and the Three Treasures: 慈 [compassion], 儉 [frugality] and 不敢為天下先 [humility].

16 Multiculturalism as public policy was introduced by Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s government in 1972. Transculturalism may have been a response to government policy in Canada after *Vice Versa* had made the term part of the vernacular from the mid-twentieth century (see n. 9), by the end of that century “the transcultural turn” was manifest “Throughout the literary, cultural, historical, geographical and philosophical discourse” – to which one might add the discourses of psychiatry, social work, etc., not to mention Memory Studies (*Bond and Rapson* 6).

17 Chen expands on this notion in her second essay (*Lenteur* 30–40); see also Parker, “Critical” 170–71.

18 Said’s remark was prompted by his appreciation of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, written during the latter’s exile in Turkey. Elsewhere, Said observed: “Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (*Reflections* 191).

West to adopt the same distance: “Je dis à des amis occidentaux: parlons de l’Occident, parlons de l’Europe, parlons de l’Amérique. Je crois que je peux les suivre, non pas parfaitement mais approximativement” (*Lenteur* 79).

Broadening the notion, Epstein describes “transculture” as “a new phase of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender) [...] We acquire transculture at the boundaries of our own culture and at the crossroads with other cultures through the risky experience of our own cultural wanderings and transgressions” (330). In *La lentueur des montagnes* Ying Chen asserts her personal experience of border-crossing which informs, inspires, nurtures her intellectual, ethical and philosophical outlook. Her own journey as an individual and a writer is further informed by her experience as a mother and by that of her children, ethnically defined – racialized – by a culture they are not allowed to appropriate on the one hand, and on the other finding themselves unable to identify with a culture they hardly know. As a result, *La lentueur des montagnes* is a very personal account, emotional at times,¹⁹ a *vade mecum* intended for her son, Lee, a guide showing him The Way. We shall now examine the form given to the essay, its intent and its transtextual character, the latter a gauge of the author’s transcultural perspective, and interrogate the two-way relationship between a spirituality embedded in Chinese thought and more recent developments in Western philosophy.

LA LENTEUR DES MONTAGNES: UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE

Ostensibly, *La lentueur des montagnes* takes the form of a long letter²⁰ addressed to “Mon enfant, ma vie” (9).²¹ Further into the text, however, the author draws a similarity with “ce qu’on appelle en chinois *san wen*” (27), which she describes as “textes littéraires libres”, for want of a better term. Indeed, *san wen* [free prose], refers to a type of writing resistant to classification,²² perhaps more a style of writing than a genre – “notes au fil du pinceau”, in Zhang’s felicitous phrase à propos the vogue for such essays at the end of the Ming dynasty (81). Chen likens the freedom of *san wen* to that of the epistolary genre, which puts the reader in mind of Montaigne’s essays. Indeed, Montaigne claims that he only renounced the letter form for want of a specific correspondent: “Sur ce subject de lettres, je veux dire ce mot, que c’est un ouvrage auquel mes amys tiennent que je puis quelque chose. Et eusse prins plus volontiers ceste forme à publier mes verves, si j’eusse eu à qui parler” (*Essais* I, 40).²³ For her part, Chen explains the appeal of its flexible form: “J’aime beaucoup la forme épistolaire, pour moi elle est à mi-chemin entre l’oral et l’écrit, elle offre l’occasion de communiquer très directement et spontanément et aussi *le temps et l’espace de creuser*” (qtd. in Aubonnet n.p.). She reiterates that predilection in *La lentueur des montagnes*: “J’adore écrire des lettres qui permettent la spontanéité et l’intimité sous une apparence informelle” (27). Yet, unlike its predecessor addressed to Yann,²⁴ and beyond its affectionate address, this text is not *stricto sensu* a letter. It is a hybrid which shares with Montaigne’s approach an inclination for introspection. Lacking the final form of a concluding formula, neither dated nor carrying a signature, it does not entirely respect the framing that corresponds to the rules of the genre. In fact, the writer occasionally appears to forget entirely both stated form and purported reader. Perhaps because this text is a simulacrum which turns out to be a collection of “scattered writings” – another definition of *san wen*²⁵ – in Chen’s own description, a “montage” (Parker, “Critical” 168). Yet it remains

19 In a private email exchange she wrote: “les émotions exprimées dans le livre me sont encore vives” (22 Feb. 2020).

20 The allusion here is to Mariama Bâ’s novel of this title. Ostensibly written by Ramatoulaye to her childhood friend Aïssatou, the novel has also been read as a letter from the author to African women and beyond.

21 The dedication states “Pour Lee” (7), although it adds “Et aussi pour Yann”, his elder brother.

22 A fitting form of literary non-belonging that supports Silvester’s argument with regard to Chen’s style of writing resistant to classification under any of the fixed literary or literary-critical categories. See Silvester.

23 See Cicero himself on conversations carried out with absent friends, *amicorum colloquia absentium* (*Phil.* 4.7).

24 “Mon cher Yann, mon cœur”, dated “le 24 août 2003”, when Yann was soon to be seven, signed “Maman” after the valedictory phrase: “Je te prends dans mes bras”. The text is interspersed with affectionate formulae and direct references to the young child. “Lettre d’Umbertide” (*Quatre* 83–90).

25 On the composition of *La lentueur des montagnes* and a survey of its various source texts, see Parker, “Lectures” 83–87, and Sing.

coherent, its consistency ensured by the foundational ethics of the author. This text is a pretext: more of a testament written in an intimate, affectionate tone; an epistle, perhaps, since it is intended to be instructive and broaches questions of conduct.

However informal at times, it is also a carefully composed literary piece designed for publication, and therefore to find its place in literature, and to be read well beyond Chen's intimate circle. Its hybridity also stems from the fact that Chen is writing both as a mother and as a writer, in dialogue with herself whilst charting her own trajectory in both roles. Its timing suits her double persona, too: Lee is on a threshold, at a stage in his life when he requires support and advice: "c'est la fin de l'enfance" (*Lenteur* 10). At the same time, his mother has come to the end of a writing project, that of the *femme fantôme* series of novels, and is looking back on her work (93). She also happens to be at a half-way stage in her personal trajectory since she has now spent about the same amount of time in China (1961–89) and in Canada (1989–2014).

Chen has frequently asserted both her total and intimate engagement in her fiction and how motherhood has inflected her writing. Thus: "malgré mon désir de me tenir 'en dehors', tous mes livres, sans exception, sont écrits avec un profond engagement social et émotionnel, et avec tant de sérieux que je me sens fragilisée par l'exercice de l'écriture. Aussi longtemps que j'écrirai des romans, je m'engagerai" (*Impressions* 12; reiterated *Lenteur* 94). *Quatre mille marches* also records how motherhood gave a sense and direction to a writer's quest: "Cette indicible maternité a déclenché en moi un besoin de changement de perspective" (85). Motherhood had imposed a new reckoning, embarking her on a new destiny, "un autre temps qui ne sera pas complètement le mien mais dont je me sens en partie responsable" (87),²⁶ leading her to conclude: "Au fonds, je n'écris que pour toi et ton frère, répandant les mots comme jadis je vous nourrissais tous les deux avec le lait sortant de mon corps. Dans ce sens, l'écriture devient un élément intégré et grandissant de ma maternité" (88). She expands on this in *La lenteur des montagnes*, stating that before the birth of her children, "le roman était pour moi un prétexte pour exprimer une certaine vision du monde" (50). There ensues an urgent sense of "engagement" both towards the society one lives in, and towards one's children which she compares with the commitment demanded by motherhood (51). Moreover, this responsibility towards her children also exacerbates her own sense of dignity and her determination to be herself, to refuse to play the role of exotic other (50–52) as well as the development of an ethics that is to be left as heritage to one's children. Motherhood makes it imperative to go on living (121) in order to fulfil this aim.

Chen definitely understands the word "mother" as "a verb", following Chandler: mothering as "doing", as practice, and a transformative one at that,²⁷ one that is extremely demanding: "l'arrivée des enfants [...] me précipite dans un endroit où la misère et la splendeur sont difficiles à démêler. L'épreuve de cette maternité est extrême [...] Je me sens parfois au bord d'un précipice", she wrote in *Impressions d'été* (13–14). A few years later, in *La lenteur des montagnes*, she could observe that as a mother she needs a firm ground, a settled situation and a progeny; as a writer, she yearns for disquiet and movement, fluidity and perpetual motion (43). "L'enfantement exige l'oubli de soi, le triomphe de l'amour sur la douleur [...] un acte gratuit pur" (46). Further, she compares her conscious and informed choice of becoming a mother to Odysseus, "qui a opté pour une existence ordinaire plutôt que pour une vie d'aventures" (59).²⁸ An "ordinary life" in this case, is one that allows the world to impinge on one's conscience, demands that she abandons the very notion of peace, of that "vie calme, sans attaches, purement artistique ou spirituelle", the "silence et obscurité" she requires as a writer (57), and expose her own vulnerabilities. Exposure to the "noise" of the world has altered her writing and what she writes about, the question of racism, for instance.

Inevitably, an ordinary life as a mother carries with it maternal *mauvaise conscience*, that feeling of guilt that stems from the knowledge that her own life choices carry consequences for

26 It is pertinent to note that the gestation and publication of *L'ingratitude*, which marked a first turning point and announces the nameless narrator of the *série fantôme*, coincided with Yann's birth, whilst *Immobile*, which marks a before and after in Chen's trajectory as a writer, coincided with that of Lee. See Parker, "Critical".

27 "It is my position that 'mother' is best understood as a verb, as something one does" (Chandler 273, quoted in Stone 125).

28 Plato, *Republic* 10, 620c–d: "Now, it chanced that the soul of Odysseus got to make its choice last of all, and since memory of its former sufferings had relieved its love of honour, it went around for a long time looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work". When he found it "he chose it gladly and said that he'd have made the same choice even if he'd been first".

her children. She does not regret her own impulsive decision to emigrate (*Quatre* 56); however rash it may have been, she had even anticipated the consequences and worried about their impact on her children: “On ne manquera pas de leur demander Mais d’où venez-vous? [...] je m’en sens responsable” (57). At the time, she accepted the truth of the proverb that s/he who plants a tree will have to taste its fruit, whilst acknowledging: “Mes enfants, qui ne savent rien encore, vont le partager avec moi” (61). She reckons that time has now come: “Tu es projeté dans cette errance que tu n’as pas choisie, que j’ai seule commencée” (54). In addition, “Contrairement à moi, ton frère et toi n’avez pas un pays – bon ou mauvais – sur lequel vous appuyer, même pas un monde imaginaire où vous réfugier” (38). As an adult the author can thrive as a multifaceted persona, on her own contradictory desires, even on the disquiet or near-anguish that result from her double linguistic exile – that from her mother tongue and from French in Vancouver. In contrast, growing children yearn for the stability of concepts, to feel at home within their social and cultural environments. Children need to belong, something that Chen’s children are denied – “Le Canada est votre pays natal. Vous ne comprenez pas que vous pourriez devenir les *autres*” (*Lentueur* 36; emphasis in original) – whereas she feels the need to detach herself, to *dis-identify* (45).

Transmission is therefore undertaken as a motherly duty made all the more urgent and necessary by the fact that she has bequeathed her sons an in-between that is not of their choosing. She proposes to be both guide and mediator to them.

THE TRANSMISSION PROJECT: AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, A LIBRARY, AN ETHOS

In an uncharacteristically long sentence running practically a full paragraph, Ying Chen outlines her project from the start – one of transmission – and summarizes its ethos – a transcultural perspective:

Je voudrais t’écrire, au moment où tu sors de ton enfance et t’approches du monde adulte, à propos de cette relativité, de cette incertitude et de l’importance de comprendre qu’une situation et un événement peuvent être vus dans une multitude de perspectives possibles, selon l’angle où l’on se situe, et que les vérités absolues n’existent pas. (*Lentueur* 10)

The very gracious, tentative conditional tense opening her statement combines proposal, wish and advice, whilst remaining open to being declined. The fact that the book consists of a single letter which neither requires nor expects any response confirms its status as a document of transmission: a testament. Yet, although no response is expected from the addressee at this stage of his life, it could be argued that a dialogue is implied, albeit postponed. In that earlier letter to Lee’s older brother, Yann, the “Lettre d’Umbertide”, the author had made that *décalage* explicit: “Ne crois donc pas mon enfant, que cette lettre ne te soit pas destinée parce que tu ne la comprends pas en ce moment. Tu vas la retrouver quelque part sur ta route, tu la liras, j’en suis sûre” (*Quatre* 84).

Aware that part of her personal legacy to her children is a sense of un-belonging, she feels that her responsibility to weave threads of continuity for them is all the more critical. Yet, just as she cannot escape motherly guilt for having imposed her life choice on her children, Chen is also keenly aware that she has failed to transmit a personal heritage. Her sons are reluctant to learn their mother’s language; consequently, the culture it carries remains closed to them: “Vous avez grandi à Vancouver, loin de la langue et de la culture de votre mère, les refusant” (*Lentueur* 38) and further, “J’ai tout essayé pour que tu apprennes un peu ta langue maternelle” (71), forgetting that the “langue dite maternelle” is “Cette langue qui ne s’apprend pas” (Anderson and Laseldi-Grelis, qtd in *Bouvier-Laffitte* 276) that Lee’s mother’s tongue is not his native tongue, that of the country he was born in. She uses the same phrase during a family trip to Shanghai: “D’ailleurs tu connais très peu ta langue maternelle” (*Lentueur* 103). These strictures are fictionalized in *Rayonnements*, where the narrator refers to her mother’s country: “Un pays auquel, discrètement sans Espoir ni insistance, maman avait espéré que ses enfants s’attachent./Une langue de plus pour nous. Un refuge ou une fenêtre de plus. Ainsi l’ambitionnait maman” (77).

On a visit to Shanghai with Lee, the noisy, overcrowded and dirty city proves something of a disappointment, making her wonder whether she ought to have visited on her own and sent him a few letters instead, imagining how her well-chosen words and stylistic turns to describe its untidy mix would afford her son “un plaisir exotique et un léger attendrissement, un peu comme les nouvelles de guerres étrangères suscitent dans ton jeune cœur une indiscible curiosité, une excitation neutre” (*Lenteur* 103–04). These sad, resigned words spell out the distance and her son’s lack of interest *vis-à-vis* his mother’s birth country, as well as his dismay when he experiences it for himself.²⁹ Although Chen is fully aware that her own sensibility is tinged with subjective attachment, her son’s lack of rapport with China prompts the author to worry in anticipation of possible quarrels such as those she already has with Westerners who lack empathy and public media who hide their prejudices under the guise of objectivity. Yet it is perhaps telling that she projects an exoticism in her imagined mediation.

In fact, it would seem that Chen herself has almost inadvertently let slip that part of her own inheritance. Whereas in 1997, reflecting on her mother tongue in Shanghai, she could still observe: “La connaissance de la langue chinoise, pour moi, est un cadeau du ciel, le meilleur héritage qui soit” (*Quatre* 23), six years later in Paris she would confide:

[L]’ombre du doute n’a pas cessé de guetter mon travail [exercice d’auto-traduction]. Le doute envers ma connaissance de ma langue maternelle. Le doute aussi envers ma mémoire, envers tout ce qui est acquis par la naissance, la honte de déclarer encore du chinois “ma langue maternelle”. Pour cela, j’ai voulu faire mieux en chinois qu’en français. Peur de perdre cet héritage, facile à recevoir et difficile à garder. Effroi devant le spectacle où ma vie d’avant s’engouffre dans le vide en emportant la mémoire de la langue. Je vois dans ma volonté de me traduire un souhait, un rêve, un désir de me réconcilier avec le passé, une possibilité de récupérer ma vie d’avant, une illusion de survivre non seulement ailleurs, mais là précisément où je me croyais morte. (“Lettres chinoises/lettres françaises”)

Reflecting on her inability to fulfil what she sees as a motherly duty of transmission is also an opportunity to reflect on languages and cultures and on why she was doomed to fail. She concludes forlornly: “Je ne peux pas t’aider, je peux seulement te confier ce que je pense des langues et comment je m’en suis servie jusqu’à présent” (*Lenteur* 73). This is a cue for the author to consider her writing and what it means to write in a second language; much of it is taken from previously published texts too (86f.), confirming the sense that this “letter” is intended to go beyond its purported addressee. Her conclusion that the choice of language is indifferent is stated as a general truth: “Dans le langage, au fond de ce puits aussi vieux et en même temps aussi jeune que l’humanité, se trouve un concentré de soi et de collectif, du passé et du présent” (91). Here again Chen dwells on the relationship between language and writing (91), the very stuff of her literary production, and the multiple echoes of her multiple selves (115): “L’influence de la langue première est forte et omniprésente, [...] les deux langues semblent se juxtaposer ou se confondre pour renaître en une seule” (85). The underlying current of original language and culture may occasionally surface in a motif, manifest to readers familiar with the Chinese language and hidden to others.³⁰

Since that intangible inheritance, language and culture cannot be transmitted satisfactorily, Chen proposes to bequeath her library to her children. Her books are her anchors: “Depuis longtemps ma bibliothèque est le seul lieu solide où je me rends fidèlement, quand je sors de ma maison secrète pour me promener ailleurs” (*Quatre* 91), thus echoing Montaigne: “Chez moi, je me détourne un peu plus souvent à ma librairie [...] Là, je feuillette à cette heure un livre, à cette heure un autre, sans ordre et sans dessein à pièces décousues, tantôt j’enregistre et dicte, en me promenant, mes songes que voici” (*Essais* III, 3). Beyond the simple collection and use

29 In *Rayonnements*, the protagonist’s elder daughter reminisces about the trips she used to make to her mother’s homeland and the fact that she did not feel at home there, declaring unflinchingly on her return “avec [sa] cruelle franchise”: “C’est bien beau ton pays, maman, mais je préfère le mien”. And remembering “une imperceptible douleur” fleetingly marking her mother’s face (64).

30 In her doctoral thesis, Ziyang Yang draws attention to the character *wáng* 亡 (1. “flee/escape”; 2. “die”), shared by the two words signifying respectively death, *sǐ wáng* 死亡, and exile, *liú wáng* 流亡 (*Désorienter* 110). Yang also developed a study of the links between themes and language in “La figure de réincarnation, la sinité pulvérisée et l’identité hybride dans la ‘série fantôme’ de Ying Chen” (24).

of her library lies a symbolic intent. Chen explains her habit of classifying books in alphabetical order by their authors' names, regardless of the genre, language, time or place they are written "car je voudrais que les esprits circulent librement dans ce petit monde qu'est ma bibliothèque" (*Quatre* 91). Thus her library shelves, actual and imaginary, are lined with works translated from a multiplicity of languages.³¹ Chen's brief essay "L'arbitraire et l'approximatif" with its stern title addresses the responsibility of literature and its institution. Each of her chosen books has a responsibility to her children as readers – "j'assume la mienne en faisant le choix, en transmettant cet héritage"; her library as a transcultural wealth store, as it were: "Leur véritable patrie se trouve là et nulle part ailleurs" (*Quatre* 92). Chen adapts the symbolism of the library legacy in *Rayonnements* in which the protagonist's daughter – "fière héritière" in science (80) – considers her mother's laboratory her legacy: "le meilleur héritage qui soit", "une vraie patrie", the symbol of the universal character of her mother's achievements (79).

Beyond the tangible books, this legacy yields lessons on reading with an open mind and in continuous dialogue, and on engaging with thinking outside one's own language or languages. The role of literature is to "procurer au monde ... un lieu de repos, de recueillement, de communication vraie, un lieu qui ne soit pas la terre" (*Quatre* 93), a refuge, not an escape. Ten years later, in *La lenteur des montagnes*, she expresses a more tentative faith in literature, both as a corpus and as an institution: "Si les mots avaient réellement du pouvoir, si la littérature pouvait encore influencer la vie en profondeur, alors je pense que l'optimisme serait un extraordinaire remède pour l'humanité dans son bref et difficile passage sur terre" (109). Literature is not envisaged as a distraction, nor as a remedy, but rather as something that transcends the human condition and nourishes the soul (110–12). Those thoughts reiterate reflections recorded in an issue of *Frontières*, a multidisciplinary research journal, dedicated to the theme "Penser sa mort?" (Chen, "Poussière"),³² reminding us that her stated aim for this book is to "alléger [Lee's] jeunes épaules de deux choses qui, mine de rien, [l]e hantent: la mort et la vérité" (*Lenteur* 59).

The main object of transmission is therefore a personal ethos – that "souci de l'éthique", made urgent by the responsibility for one's children (*Quatre* 92) – forged from life experience, itself shaped by a multiplicity of encounters with diverse cultures. Learning to distance oneself is a form of wisdom: "se libérer du poids de la matière et reconnaître le caractère multiple de la vérité" (*Lenteur* 63).

The text's pedagogic intent is spelt out in the conclusion: "Je t'ai parlé de tout et de rien". To summarize the main points:

Un peu au hasard, comme on se promène, j'ai évoqué le calme intérieur, la nécessité du silence et du recul, l'importance de cultiver un regard à la fois sensible et détaché, de nos rapports avec la Chine, qui nous hante de loin, Rilke, la surface et la profondeur des océans, la pluralité de la vérité, ta venue au monde et le sens d'être mère, l'importance de la pensée positive et du contentement. Maintenant, je veux aussi te rappeler que vivre n'est pas synonyme de faire [...] que vivre, c'est d'abord être. (*Lenteur* 119)

The ultimate legacy is therefore that of a personal experience and example – what will become a baggage of transcultural memories, a sort of viaticum ready to guide him through adulthood.

31 Among them: Camus (*Lenteur* 36, 87, 88, 112), Sarrate (87 and 97), R.M. Rilke (17, 85, 92, 11, 117, 123–5), Balzac, Flaubert, Hugo, Brontë (112), Shakespeare, Hemingway or Kafka; Beckett, Ionesco, Duras, Sarrate (87), Voltaire (34), Laozi (33), Proust (87, 88), Pascal (99–100), Maeterlinck (117), Witold Gombrowicz (106), Valéry (16, 17). Most of these names had already appeared in *Quatre mille marches*.

32 A presentation of the journal can be found on the online platform *Érudit*: "Frontières est une revue québécoise de recherche et de mobilisation des connaissances en études sur la mort. Publiée depuis 1988, elle s'inscrit dans le domaine des sciences sociales et des sciences de la santé. Son objectif principal est de contribuer à une meilleure connaissance des phénomènes reliés aux rapports entre la vie et la mort dans une perspective interdisciplinaire, en mettant en relief les liens dialectiques et épistémologiques entre théories et pratiques. Elle s'adresse tant aux chercheurs qu'aux praticiens, aux professeurs et aux étudiants qui sont préoccupés par la fin de vie dans différentes disciplines [...] L'objectif principal de la revue est de contribuer à une meilleure connaissance des phénomènes reliés aux rapports que la vie et la mort entretiennent" (<https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/fr/>).

The memories transmitted are less personal recollections than interpretations of a broad human heritage of thought. Chen evokes few personal memories, in part perhaps to preserve her privacy but also out of an awareness of relativity, having come to terms with the fact that she holds contrasting and even contradictory, multiple appreciations of her own childhood, different memories and interpretations coming up to the fore, depending on the psychic state she is in when those memories surface or are actively sought: “je ne me représente jamais mon enfance de la même façon, comme si j’avais eu plusieurs enfances” (*Lenteur* 113–15). A tentative explanation for that sense of un-belonging is offered in *Rayonnements*, where the elder daughter describes her younger sibling as an “intruse” in her own family, later an “exilée” from it, ascribing this to the fact that “la petite” had never had the chance to receive “de nos aïeux cet enseignement parfois tacite qui constituait le véritable héritage” (56).

Chen’s formative years coincided with turmoil and turbulence.³³ There are some allusions to all these events in both her fiction and her essays.³⁴ The trauma of forcible erasure – the “May 16 Notification” (1966) which urged Red Guards to destroy the “four olds” (old ideas, old customs, old habits and old culture) and led places of worship, shrines, libraries, shops and private homes to be ransacked or destroyed – together with an assault on “feudal” traditions – the forbidding of memory, the attack on time-honoured Chinese values (family, religious beliefs, education) cannot but have affected her sense of self. In 1995, she was wondering: “si je possède une culture, moi qui ai grandi dans la révolution et qui fais partie d’une génération dite perdue” (“La charge”, *Quatre* 38), which leads us to read her patient and systematic apprenticeship of learning and writing as a reconstruction. Seeing only “un tas de ruines nostalgiques” standing in lieu of Chinese civilization (38), she had remarked: “Je continue de penser que les civilisations sont mortelles”, echoing Paul Valéry’s “nous voyons maintenant que l’abîme de l’histoire est assez grand pour tout le monde. Nous sentons qu’une civilisation a la même fragilité qu’une vie” (*Variété* 11–12).³⁵ It is worth noting that this was the first of two letters Valéry had published in translation in *Athenaum* and offered in their original version under the title “La crise de l’esprit” by the *Nouvelle revue française* (321).³⁶ So that Valéry’s famous sentence which haunts Chen’s text first reached a different readership than his own compatriots, earlier, and in translation, in the form of an open letter – a process and progress similar to the course followed by the *Yi Jing*. What Chen realizes through her children’s experience is that nothing lasts in this world:

L’expérience de la migration a rendu très claire pour moi la mortalité des choses
[...] Elle a en quelque sorte précipité la mort d’une langue au sein d’une famille,
à une vitesse mille fois plus grande qu’à l’échelle d’une nation. Ce processus de
déculturation se produit quotidiennement sous mes yeux. Au moment de partir de
Shanghai et au moment de ta naissance, j’avais prévu cela, je l’avais compris, mais je
ne savais pas que j’en souffrirais autant. (*Lenteur* 72)

33 Having been born in 1961 in Shanghai, the 1966–76 Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that closed schools and universities shadowed her schooling and adolescence whilst the consequences of the famine that had ensued from the economic and social campaigns of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) could still be felt. Ying Chen started university at Fudan in 1979, “peu de temps après la Révolution Culturelle”. She adds: “J’avais toujours faim” (*Quatre* 19).

34 *La mémoire de l’eau* is probably the most explicit with its historical background and references to successive exiles, political trouble and background of war whilst in contemporary times the grandmother is humiliated and assaulted by an unruly mob and her embroidery skills, acquired thanks to her bourgeois status, are put to good use.

35 The civilization referred to in Valéry’s letter (written in April 1919) is the European; “nous” are “les modernes”, and “maintenant” refers to the aftermath of the first World War. Valéry looks neither to hope or to despair, but to understanding.

36 “L’Athenaeum, très antique et célèbre revue londonienne, actuellement dirigée par un des hommes les plus distingués et les plus pénétrants de l’Angleterre, M. John Middleton Murry, a publié dans ses numéros des 11 Avril et 2 Mai 1919 deux lettres de M. Paul Valéry. Bien que ces lettres aient été écrites spécialement en vue de leur traduction en anglais, et pour le public d’Outre-Manche, nous pensons intéresser nos lecteurs en leur en offrant le texte français inédit”. See also: “Maintenant, sur une immense terrasse d’Elsinore, qui va de Bâle à Cologne, qui touche aux sables de Nieuport, aux marais de la Somme, aux craies de Champagne, aux granits d’Alsace, – l’Hamlet européen regarde des millions de spectres. Mais il est un Hamlet intellectuel. Il médite sur la vie et la mort des vérités. Il a pour fantômes tous les objets de nos controverses; il a pour remords tous les titres de notre gloire; il est accablé sous le poids des découvertes, des connaissances, incapable de se reprendre à cette activité illimitée. Il songe à l’ennui de recommencer le passé, à la folie de vouloir innover toujours. Il chancelle entre les deux abîmes, car deux dangers ne cessent de menacer le monde: l’ordre et le désordre” (Valéry, “Crise” 329).

As this reference to Valéry reminds the reader, transtextuality is key to Chen's understanding of culture. Gérard Genette defines it as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (*Palimpsests* 1). That relationship in the first instance would be with components of Chen's *œuvre*, in which she habitually practises a dual intertextuality, "endogène et exogène", that is self-referential in her writing, revealing from within the full extent of her writing project, and alluding to an external network of referencing which reveals her intellectual hinterland.³⁷ Traces of her own fiction – or occasionally explicit references – can be found in other fictional pieces and in essays, together with traces of, or explicit references to, her readings. *La lenteur des montagnes* inserts itself within that network of relationships.

Perhaps more explicit are the formal quotations of other writers such as Ricœur (*Lenteur* 21) whose "règle de vie" – "Vivre bien, avec et pour l'autre, dans des institutions justes" (*Ricœur* 102) – she subscribes to. R.M. Rilke, has been her literary guide and a source of spiritual inspiration throughout, hence the unsurprising conclusion of this extended letter enjoining her son to read Rilke's poems. Yet it is Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* that would appear most apt in this context. Beyond the commonality of the epistolary genre, the *Letters* are of a similar nature to *La lenteur des montagnes*, since they proffer spiritual guidance, nurture and encouragement to a young man on the threshold of adulthood, but also because they are musings and reflections written by Rilke to himself, addressing both his past and his present, just as Chen's essays are personal notebooks – *cahiers d'écriture*. In addition, both authors are nomadic, both have adopted a new country and language – Switzerland and French in the case of Rilke – both are mapping their journeys and embracing writing as a way of life, as Mikhail Epstein put it: "Transculture lies both inside and outside of all existing cultures as a Continuum encompassing all of them", adding by way of example "in transculture, the Chinese *Book of Changes* corresponds and interacts with Bach's music and Georg Cantor's mathematical theory of sets" (333).

Now, it is precisely the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*, which serves as the fundamental guide in *La lenteur des montagnes*.³⁸ At the heart of Chinese thought, consisting in part of "commentaries" that attempt to explain the world and its philosophical and ethical principles by means of a dialectic approach, the *Yi Jing* is exemplary not just in itself but because of the way it has been transmitted, precisely. What might appear to be a return to Chen's cultural wellsprings has to be mediated by a double Western translation: Richard Wilhelm's into German and Etienne Perrot's subsequent translation into French (*Lenteur* 14). And that is Chen's point illustrated: borders are of the mind. In order to be able to translate the *Yi Jing*, Wilhelm was willing to translate himself into a different thought-system so as to bring this perspective to Western readers. Chen in turn is able to not only read the text thus brought to her through Perrot's further mediation, but to decipher the original thoughts which transpire through Wilhelm's translation. These serial interpretations by men whose minds were shaped by Western education but who crossed the threshold into Oriental philosophy are in turn read by a woman who has performed the reverse crossing, illustrating her observation to Lee: "L'identité est moins un héritage qu'une création" (*Lenteur* 45), and an evolutive one at that. In short, "identity" is not an object of transmission; rather, the text presents possible clues to be unravelled, threads of thought that weave its various components together so as to reimagine one's own. *La lenteur des montagnes* offers both a mediation between two cultural identities and a meditation on their multiple character.

TRANSFORMATIONS AND WAYS OF BECOMING: A SINGULAR POSTHUMANISM?

The vicissitudes of the *Yi Jing* offer further matter for reflection. It is clear, for instance, that this spiritual guide had become literally a *lettre morte* since "le *Yi Jing* primitif n'existe plus" (*Lenteur* 15). Its traces were still discernible in translations by Confucius and Laozi but their antique idiom is no longer accessible to contemporary Chinese speakers. It would have remained a dead letter had not Wilhelm breathed a new life into it through his double translation. For Chen, the twists and turns that mark the text's progress through the ages are symbolic of its very

37 Such relationships have been studied in detail in *inter alia* Parker, "À mi-chemin" 77–98, and "Lectures" 83–87.

38 The *Yi Jing* or *I Ching* is also known as *Classic of Changes*.

philosophy, that of *transformation*: she sees the text's central concern as the movements and interrelationships of things as they transform, rather than the pursuit of an essence as defined by their physical limits (16).

This insistence on the book's afterlife, albeit in a different form, is an apt metaphor for the continuity of lifeforms beyond death, the latter a passing rather than an end. The fate of the *Yi Jing* also mirrors Chen's own life experience and nourishes her reflections. The notion of transformation is at the heart not only of the book, but also of her own philosophy, stemming, as we have seen, from an original uprooting. She could state in 2002 "arbre mouvant [... o]n se transforme en une autre espèce" ("*Fin des 'lettres chinoises'*", *Quatre* 67). Now in *La lenteur des montagnes*, she reminds her son – and beyond him her readers – that according to the *Yi Jing*, those who have left their villages have detached themselves from their forms and become "fantômes", their lives become a journey, a contemplation, a dream (21). Her own transhumance has convinced her that "rien dans ce monde n'est fait pour durer. L'expérience de la migration a rendu très claire pour moi la mortalité des choses, alors qu'habituellement on ne la voit pas" (72).

In her *femme fantôme* series, and in the more recent fiction staging revenants, Chen appears to explore this impermanence and lack of substance. Thus she describes her post-1995 novels as "Presque sans sujet", their characters "presque inexistants", offering a mere "echo" of the world, barely the "shadow" of its constructions (86). In Rosalind Silvester's analysis, this fiction is permeated with a form of posthumanism which she identifies in the evolution of the protagonists from the "living-dead narrator" to her "becoming-animal" (7–8) through the introduction of "monstrous" and "non-human forms" and "post-anthropocentric elements" (121) which underscore her argument. Silvester posits that the evolution of Chen's "living-dead" narrator's attitude to death "shows a reconceptualization of the parameters of death in line with posthumanist concerns" (123). This observation chimes with Braidotti's assertion that "Death is the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces" (*Posthuman* 137). Braidotti has firmly established her position on a contested spectrum of thought that shares an anti-dualist perspective, the notion of fluidity rather than divide between species: an interconnection and interdependence between and within them; a recognition of the blurring of boundaries between organic and inorganic, human and non-human animals.³⁹ Chen's "aesthetics of non-belonging", a "reinvented" form of aesthetics which Silvester identifies as the hallmark of Chen's fiction (130), a progressive process of "defamiliarization" (Braidotti "Posthuman" 19) that characterizes her novels, could indeed be interpreted as that "disconnection of the subject from familiar and habitual patterns of identity" which Braidotti singles out as the most important criterion in the posthuman critical theory arsenal (19).

To frame Chen's thinking within a posthumanist figuration might seem somehow paradoxical, however, since she is steeped in a tradition that never embraced those "classic" – that is, Western – humanist divisions, from which posthumanist thinking seeks to break away. Chen's thinking is less situated "beyond" humanism than bypassing it altogether. Her essays, *La lenteur des montagnes* in particular, bear witness to the fact that her transcultural education has drawn her to those Western writers whose ethics question humanism. Her sources long anticipated any current reimagining of what it means to be human.⁴⁰ Although her conception of time as a continuum, of the present as a process, may recall Deleuzian philosophy, Chen herself expresses her "envie de retourner à la source" (*Lenteur* 42) and anchors her thinking in Chinese tradition. Of the elusiveness that characterizes her writing she declares: "Cet écho et cette ombre peuvent constituer une réalité toute autre", one that originates in "une très vieille croyance, un peu bouddhique, un peu 'chinoise', où notre passage au monde est perçu comme une fiction, un rêve, une illusion" (86). The notion that life is an illusionary dream and reality an illusion is indeed a recurring theme in Chinese classical literature and compatible with Buddhist

39 There are important philosophical divisions within the posthumanist current. See Wolfe (xi–xxxiv) for its genealogy in Western philosophy that maps out its "different and even irreconcilable definitions" (xi); also Soper; Braidotti, "Posthuman" *inter alia*.

40 The *Yi Jing*, for instance, is generally thought to have appeared during the Western Zhou period (1000–750 BCE); early Greek philosophy is dated to around the sixth century BCE.

philosophical claims about the ultimately illusory nature of the phenomenal world.⁴¹ Chen's "posthumanistic stance" is *sui generis*, poised between classic (Chinese) oneiric tradition and current (Western) understanding of posthumanism.

Francesca Ferrando, also a philosopher of the posthuman, notes that "One of the main characteristics of philosophical Posthumanism is its emphasis on a post-dualistic understanding of existence. Such an ontological approach finds revealing parallels in ancient Asian traditions." Braidotti for her part outlines a solely Western lineage in the development of what she terms the posthuman turn. Indeed, the edited collection *Deleuze and the Humanities: East and West* draws a charge of "covert [...] Orientalism" (Dickman 1, 2, 5) on account of its lack of engagement with Asian resources, particularly with religious thought.⁴² Conversely, "parallels" is a key word in Ferrando's statement, suggesting that commonality and shareability of human experience beyond cultural differences identified by Dagnino as the "confluent nature of cultures" ("*Literature*" 3; see *supra*). As Montaigne wrote, each of us "porte en soi la forme entière de l'humaine condition" (*Essais*, III, 2). I would argue that it is from a standpoint of transnational ethics of mutual exchange that, as a writer, Chen aims to "écrire l'universalité". Writing, for her, demands a form of distancing ("recul"), not just the distance that space or time might afford, but the ultimate fault line that is death ("À propos du 'Champ dans la mer'", *Quatre* 98). The loss of organic matter yields spiritual gains, enabling the writer, freeing her to move across space and time (99). Chen pursues this line of thought in *La lenteur des montagnes*, noting that writing implies a withdrawal from the world that compares with the experience of the *écrivain migrant* for whom the distancing from her country and language amounts to a form of death (54–55) allowing her to be born again through fiction and a new language. The asceticism implicit in her life choices leads to the conclusion that "La suppression de la vie et de la forme ne devrait plus nous inspirer de sentiments particulièrement dramatiques dès que nous comprenons que [...] la matière – le corps et les choses – est un pur hasard sur lequel nous ne pouvons pas nous appuyer" (60).

According to the author, her narrator bears witness to what is simultaneously an "immense contradiction" and an "impossible truth": "Tout s'en va et pourtant rien ne se perd" (101). This last formula may recall "rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd, tout se transforme", the apocryphal maxim attributed to Lavoisier, likely to have been inspired by Anaxagoras of Clazomenae's remarks: "No complex entity comes to be or perish, but is formed by mixing and separating from pre-existing entities. Therefore, one should more correctly describe the birth by mixing and the death of separation" (Anaxagoras fr. 17).⁴³

CONCLUSION: A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE AND A MINDSET

The axiom "nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed" appears to govern Chen's thinking steeped into "cette perpétuelle décomposition et recomposition du monde visible et du soi profond" (*Lenteur* 22), as well as her approach to writing. It is worth recalling

⁴¹ *Quatre mille marches* opens with a reference to *Rêve dans le pavillon rouge* (Cao Xuequin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also called *The Story of the Stone*), one of the Qing dynasty classics, which is also cited in *Impressions d'été* (12). On dream narratives, see, for instance, Durand-Dastès and Lanselle.

⁴² The volume focuses on Gilles Deleuze's philosophical project and the critique of European humanism. In their introduction, the editors assert that "not enough attention has been paid to the specific relationship of Deleuze's philosophy of Life and difference, to the naturalistic and holistic traditions of Asian, and notably Chinese philosophy". Consequently, the volume "stresses the multiple convergences between Buddhism and Daoism on the one hand and Deleuze's ecosophy and vital materialism on the other" (Braidotti et al. 1); one of its "transversal lines of enquiry is the question of how the traditional humanities may be revitalized specifically through an emphasis on a nomadic encounter between the East and the West" (3) – "traditional humanities" are taken as synonymous with "European humanism" (4). The book presentation goes on to state that in our "globally interconnected and mediated world, the question of the inter-relations between Western and Asian philosophies needs to come centre stage". Hence, for the editors, it is a question of "composing together margins of overlapping concerns and webs of shared cultural and ethical passions". The "sharing" appears to be all one-way, however: "Contributors focus on critical evaluation of the reception and creative adaptation of Deleuze in the Austral-Asian region, with special focus on China" (9). A quiet confidence prompts them to assert that "Deleuze's philosophy offers key navigational tools to confront the intellectual and institutional challenges of our times – both in the East and in the West" (3), concluding, "The best we can do is to go on becoming-Deleuzian", albeit "in an intensive, nomadic manner" (9). Such a positioning appears more Eurocentric than transcultural.

⁴³ "Rien ne naît ni ne périt, mais des choses déjà existantes se combinent, puis se séparent de nouveau" (qtd. in Voilquin 147–50). He adds: "The Greeks do not think correctly about coming-to-be and passing-away; for no thing comes to be or passes away, but is mixed together and dissociated from the things that are. And thus they would be correct to call coming-to-be mixing-together and passing-away dissociating" (Simplicius, in *Phys.* 163.20–24, qtd. in *Curd* 105).

that her second novel, *Les lettres chinoises*, appeared in three successive editions (1993, 1998, 2003), each version slightly altered and progressively trimmed of material references, all under the same copyright.⁴⁴ Reprising, welding together previous publications and adapting them are regular features of her essays made especially evident in *La lenteur des montagnes*, that “montage” of scattered notes, more substantial pieces and new reflections arising both from existing observations and new developments, a form of transformation that also attests to the flow of continuity. Not only is writing/rewriting, the recomposing of various texts the writerly equivalent of shape-changing and new life arising from those forgotten fragments of the *Yi Jing*, but writing also allows for a form of *survie*: the text lives on as a trace, a de-materialized presence, of its author. “Post-human”, “si nous devons l’appeler ainsi”, to echo Chen’s reluctant acceptance of the “migratoire/migrant” label.⁴⁵ Transformations and becoming underscore the notion of a continuum in time: “le présent nous parle du passé et de l’avenir. Quand on connaît le présent [...] on connaît tout” (*Quatre* 100).

According to Chen, such continuity in flux characterizes a whole people and its collective sense of self. She argues that Western perceptions of China as closed to the world for centuries and inward bound is only explained by general ignorance of its history:

Les mots tels que “la Chine”, “les Chinois” me paraissent à la fois trop vastes et trop limités, trop larges et trop étroits [...] peut-être à cause de la façon dont ils sont prononcés les termes “Chine” et “Chinois” me paraissent trop reliés à un peuple spécifique et figé, ce qui est le contraire de la réalité chinoise: l’identité de ce peuple est en perpétuelle mutation et en reconstitution depuis la nuit des temps jusqu’aujourd’hui. (*Quatre* 105)

She reiterates this view in *La lenteur des montagnes* insisting on a collective “déracinement” that goes back to China’s various and often bruising encounters with the West over the centuries (42). These observations point simultaneously to a form of identification – a *belonging* to the culture described – and an individual and forceful detachment from it – an *unbelonging*, *pace* Silvester. At the same time, she is eager to explore and understand other cultures without necessarily adhering to them: she “boi[t] de toutes les mers”, as we have seen (*Lenteur* 13), hence a *Weltanschauung* that is decidedly idiosyncratic. Her own experience and the specific example of the very formation of the *Yi Jing* and of its transmission act as proofs of ongoing forms of transculture.

As the mother assures her child: “Un seul motif, je dirais même une seule passion [...] m’anime en ces lettres: mon désir d’assurer ton bonheur et mon espoir en l’avenir de l’humanité, que tu incarnes avec tes contemporains, dans ta vie ascendante et, malgré tout, riche et lumineuse” (*Lenteur* 119). Beyond the legacy to her children, *La lenteur des montagnes* is a lesson in reading and a pretext for that transcultural transmission her contemporary readers expect from a transnational writer. It offers the *Yi Jing* as emblematic of Chen’s dialogic approach. Its form lends itself to intellectual to-ings and fro-ings, yielding serial interrogations and answers that may vary depending on the reader’s standpoint – their perspective. It is, however, first and foremost a dialogue with oneself: the answers, such as they are, to be found in the questions themselves. This method is in turn mirrored in Chen’s epistle to her son. It is written for the future, to be read in adulthood, and no doubt to elicit new interpretations with each (re) reading. Chen finds in the *Yi Jing* a mental kinship that sustains both her personal slant on life and its translation into her fiction: “Selon le *Yi Jing*, notre mémoire se transforme au fur et à mesure que notre vie change, que les souvenirs se superposent, que les impressions prennent racine. Ainsi naît la fiction” (18). In “Carnet d’un voyage en Chine” (dated 30 April 1997), Chen had written of her conscious distancing from her native land – a “distanciation psychique plutôt que physique”: “[elle] crée en moi la conscience de mes limites, me fait rendre compte de la relativité des valeurs, de la multiplicité des vérités”. Adding by way of a conclusion: “Et *L’Ingratitude* tente justement de traiter de la férocité banale de la filiation et de l’aspect futile des racines” (*Quatre* 25). *La lenteur des montagnes* achieves the opposite, delivering an original and fertile disquisition on the generosity and receptiveness of the mind.

44 See Parker, “À mi-chemin” *inter alia*.

45 The former in “Tunnel” (119); the latter in *La lenteur des montagnes* (55).

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Parker
Modern Languages Open
DOI: 10.3828/mlo.v0i0.432

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Parker, Gabrielle 2024
Transcultural Memories and
Transmission: The Case of
Ying Chen's *La lenteur des
montagnes*. *Modern Languages
Open*, 2024(1): 7 pp. 1–18.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.3828/
mlo.v0i0.432](https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.432)

Published: 19 June 2024

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Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.