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# Translating and publishing French theatre in China

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This article examines transformations in the literary translation environment in the People's Republic of China (PRC) specifically in relation to French-language theatre. After an initial survey of literary translation in the PRC from its foundation to the present, the article studies how French-language plays have been translated and adapted for publication. In particular, it considers how French theatre has occupied a favoured position in the Chinese translation literary system over the past four decades. It then focuses on three emblematic cases, those of Molière, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett. Regarding the latter, two Chinese translations of *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* will be examined to determine how contextual factors affected translation choices. In this way, the article seeks both to contribute to current discussions on 'translatability' and to consider the reception of canonical French-language writers in the Chinese literary system.

**Keywords:** theatre, translation, China, Molière, Sartre, Beckett

Cet article examine les effets des transformations successives du contexte de réception des traductions littéraires en République populaire de Chine (RPC) par rapport au théâtre d'expression française. Après avoir dressé un panorama de la traduction littéraire en RPC depuis sa fondation à nos jours, l'article se penche sur les différentes manières de traduire et d'adapter les pièces de théâtre de langue française pour être publiées. Plus particulièrement, il analyse comment le théâtre français occupe une position privilégiée dans le système littéraire chinois au cours des quarante dernières années. La focale est ensuite réduite afin d'étudier trois cas représentatifs : Molière, Jean-Paul Sartre et Samuel Beckett. S'agissant de ce dernier, deux traductions d'*En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* sont commentées afin de déterminer l'influence des facteurs contextuels sur les choix de traduction opérés. Ainsi, cet article entend contribuer d'une part aux discussions théoriques concernant la notion de « traduisibilité », et, d'autre part, à l'analyse de la réception des auteurs d'expression française dans le système littéraire chinois.

**Mots clefs:** théâtre, traduction, Chine, Molière, Sartre, Beckett

## Introduction

The extent to which a particular context is ‘hospitable’ to translation determines how much it is inclined to modify its own ideological, economic, or poetological norms. The more an environment is receptive, the more it is prepared to accept texts or ideas that go against its dominant ideologies, economic policies, and poetics. Conversely, the less receptive, or more ‘hostile’, an environment, the less it is prepared to do so.<sup>1</sup> An environment’s receptivity can change over time, alternating between periods of relative openness and comparative closure. Analysis of an environment in terms of its greater or lesser resistance to translation helps explain how and why certain texts and ideas circulate or are prevented from circulating. In this regard, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) makes for a particularly relevant case study. Since its foundation in 1949, changes in state policies have impacted how literature is translated in significant ways.

This article examines transformations in the translation environment in the PRC specifically in relation to French-language theatre. The way theatrical works have been selected for translation and publication is tributary to the reception of foreign literature in general. While for dramatic works issues of ‘translatability’ and ‘performability’ are interrelated, the production of drama on stage involves a different set of intermediaries from publication.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the focus in this article is not so much on performance, though occasional references to productions will be made.

After an initial survey of literary translation in the PRC from its foundation to the present, the article will examine how French-language plays have been translated and adapted for publication. In particular, it will consider how French theatre has occupied a favoured position in the Chinese translation literary system over the past four decades. It will then focus on three emblematic cases, those of Molière, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett. In particular, regarding the latter, two Chinese translations of *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* will be examined to determine how contextual factors affected translation choices. In this manner, the article

- 1 The discussion of target cultures in terms of ‘hospitable’ or ‘hostile’ environments for translation is taken from Dominic Glynn, ‘Outline of a Theory of Non-Translation’, *Across Languages and Cultures*, 22.1 (2021), 1–13 <<https://doi.org/10.1556/084.2021.00001>>. The comment about analysing the receptivity of an environment to translation is a reformulation of an idea expressed in that article.
- 2 Specifically on the relation between translatability and performability, see Dominic Glynn and James Hadley, ‘Theorising (Un)performability and (Un)translatability’, *Perspectives, Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* (2020), 20–32 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2020.1713827>>.

seeks both to contribute to current discussions on ‘translatability’ and to consider the reception of canonical French-language writers in the Chinese literary system.<sup>3</sup>

### Literary translation in the new China

After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, literary translation was valued by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, this did not mean that all foreign literature was able to be translated into Chinese. Rather, the CCP’s interest in translation led to reinforced controls of what was translated. In the early years of the regime, literature was deemed (un)translatable on essentially ideological grounds. Until the Sino-Soviet split in the mid-1950s, the PRC followed recommendations made by the Soviet Union about whether literary works were sufficiently ideologically aligned.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the PRC was particularly receptive to literature from the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, as well as to works from Latin America, and from regime-friendly African and Asian nations. Literature from the Western bloc, however, was considered more problematic. Though consecrated works by Shakespeare, Balzac, and Molière were deemed artistically worthy and ideologically compatible,<sup>5</sup> contemporary Western European writers were shunned, and for the most part left untranslated.

From 1966 to 1976, the PRC experienced the Cultural Revolution, and the authorities held a negative attitude towards all forms of literature. Literary translation was so severely restricted as to almost disappear. It was only when China entered a period of cultural transition in the 1980s, when ‘literature is the study of man’ became the new critical mantra, that there was a change of attitude.<sup>6</sup> It was then that critics, writers, and other professionals of the literary system held a strong belief in the value of translation as a means of broadening the Chinese literary repertoire by offering new

3 The use of the term ‘system’ in this article follows in the wake of Itamar Even-Zohar’s work on translation ‘polysystems’. See Itamar Even-Zohar, ‘The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem’, *Poetics Today*, 11.1 (1990), 45–51 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1772668>>.

4 Yan Wu, 放出眼光来拿, *Fang chu yan guang lai na* [Show your foresight and take it], *Dushu*, 7 (1979), 6–11 (p. 6).

5 These authors in particular were celebrated for what was perceived to be their anti-feudalism and criticism of ‘the evils of capitalism’. On this matter, see Mingjian Zha and Tianzhen Xie, *A History of the 20th Century Foreign Literary Translation in China* (Wuhan: Hubei Education Press, 2007), p. 571.

6 Gurong Qian, *Statement on Literature is the Study of Man* (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 1981).

poetological models.<sup>7</sup> In sharp contrast to earlier periods, there was a pronounced interest in translating contemporary Western literature. As ideological resistance to translation waned, works were selected according to their perceived literary and aesthetic value. In the 1990s, China became an even more hospitable environment for translation, following the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's socialist market reforms.<sup>8</sup> Changes to the publishing environment followed with Chinese presses gaining more autonomy to publish 'without state-sanctioned inspection' while foreign presses brought 'their own classics to China'.<sup>9</sup> From this point onwards, economic rather than poetological considerations determined publishing houses' choices. Prize-winning works continued nevertheless to be valued by publishers as they were thought to guarantee a large readership, with Nobel laureates particularly sought after.

### Translating French theatre

From 1949 to 1977, the translation and publication of literature in the PRC were subject to a 'high degree of politicization'.<sup>10</sup> Between 1949 and 1966, when China played lip service to the Soviet Union, translations were subjected to heavy censorship. The result was not a blanket ban on the translation of all foreign literature, but it did mean that choices were oriented towards classics of world literature. This is particularly evident with respect to French theatre, as Molière was the most translated playwright.

According to figures in the *Catalogue and Summary of Chinese Translation of Foreign Literature Masterpieces (1949–79)*, from 1949 to 1960, sixty-four French plays were translated and published.<sup>11</sup> Of these, fifty-seven were pre-twentieth century plays, including forty-one by Molière alone. This contrasts with the years 1961 to 1966, when only two

7 The reference to 'professionals' of the literary system is taken from André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

8 Tan Zaixi, 'Censorship in Translation: The Case of the People's Republic of China', *Neohelicon (Budapest)*, 42.1 (2015), 313–39 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-013-0231-8>>.

9 Subha Xavier, 'The Global Afterlife: Sino-French Literature and the Politics of Translation', *French Cultural Studies*, 30.2 (2019), 153–65 (p. 157).

10 Gisèle Sapiro, 'The Literary Field Between the State and the Market', *Poetics*, 31.5–6 (2003), 441–64.

11 China Archives of Publications, 1949–1979 翻譯出版外國文學著作目錄和提要, 1949–1979 *fan yi chu ban wai guo wen xue zhu zuo mu lu he ti yao* [Catalogue and Summary of Chinese Translation of Foreign Literature Masterpieces (1949–79)] (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 1986).

French-language plays were translated. Intriguingly, these were *Les Chaises* by Eugène Ionesco and *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. However, both were initially labelled ‘internal publications’. So-called ‘internal publications’ could only be accessed by specialists and high officials in the government.<sup>12</sup> The lack of dramatic action in both plays as well as the scatological references in the Beckett meant that they were deemed inappropriate for wider distribution. Moreover, they were specifically translated to be derived as forms of decadent Western art. It was not until much later that these plays reached a wider readership.

During the Cultural Revolution, only literature that clearly reflected the official ideology in China was deemed translatable by the authorities.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, all plays from capitalist nations, including France, were labelled as ‘untranslatable’. Thus, from 1966 to 1977, no French plays at all were translated into Chinese. When China’s social and economic reforms were implemented in 1978, reinforced political and cultural links with other nations created a more hospitable environment for literary translation. This led to a notable increase in the number of publishing houses from only three during the Cultural Revolution to around forty.<sup>14</sup> Between 1977 and 1992, 189 plays from France were translated into Chinese. This number placed French theatre as the most translated during the period, with Molière still the most popular choice of playwright.

After 1992, the authorities took an even more lenient view of translation. Economic factors then became an essential criterion in deciding translatability. This was even more the case since China signed up to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (15 October 1992) and the Universal Copyright Convention (30 October 1992). Henceforth, the payment of copyright duties became an issue of consideration. From a cost control perspective, publishers chose either to translate literary works which had passed the copyright protection period or went for guaranteed bestsellers. From 1993 to 2010, the most popular French playwright was still Molière, and in this period, 181 French plays were translated into Chinese, ranking second only to the UK as the source of translated foreign dramas in China.<sup>15</sup> From 2011 to 2020, the statistics

12 Lidan Lin and Helong Zhang, ‘The Chinese Response to Samuel Beckett (1906–89)’, *Irish Studies Review* (2011), 413–25 (p. 415) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2011.623465>>.

13 Meng Zhaoyi and Li Zaidao, 中国翻译文学史, *Zhong guo fan yi wen xue shi* [Chinese History of Translating Literature] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), p. 396.

14 Meng Zhaoyi and Li Zaidao, p. 418.

15 He Huibin, 新中国外国戏剧的翻译与研究, *Xin zhong guo waiguo xi ju de fan yi yu yan jiu* [The Translation and Research of French Dramas in New China] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2017).

are incomplete, but it seems that fifty-three French plays were translated and published in China. The number of translations of twentieth-century French dramas was on the rise, with *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* being the most translated.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Beckett's work along with Molière's was included in senior middle school textbooks, highlighting how they had become accepted parts of the Chinese literary system.<sup>17</sup>

From a purely quantitative perspective, there was a notable increase in the number of translations of French-language plays from the late 1970s onwards. This went hand in hand with a period of opening up to the world economy. When the socialist market system economic reforms were implemented in the early 1990s, there was added commercial incentive to publish more literature and consequently to publish more translations. It follows that there were more translations of drama as part of a general increase in literary translations. However, in China, just as in France, theatre is a minor art form in terms of numbers. Thus, the percentage of translations of drama fell even though in absolute terms there were more works translated. More revealing is the fact that French-language theatre was second only to English-language theatre as a source. Also, Molière stands out as being the go-to source for Chinese translators of French drama. The reasons for this are explored in greater detail in the following section.

### Monsieur Jourdain in the PRC

According to figures in *The Translation and Research of French Theatres in New China* and self-collected data, since the establishment of the PRC, Molière has been the most translated French playwright in China, and second only to Shakespeare in terms of world dramatists.<sup>18</sup> From 1977 to 1992, six of the sixteen most translated plays were by Molière. Between 1993 and 2010, 1,826 Chinese translations of European plays were published in total, of which 181 were from France. Molière's works account for more than a third of this number.<sup>19</sup> However, figures in the *National New Books Information* reveal that after 2010, the number of Chinese translations of

16 He Huibin, 'Quantitative Studies on Foreign Drama Translation and Reviews in New China', *Studies in Cultural & Art*, 7.4 (2014), 109–15 (p. 115).

17 The People's Education Press selected Molière's *Le Tartuffe* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* for inclusion in the Chinese elective textbook for senior middle school students. See 中外戏剧名作欣赏, *zhong wai xi ju ming zuo xin shang* [Appreciation of Chinese and Foreign Drama Masterpieces] (Beijing: People's Education Press, 2019).

18 He Huibin, p. 14.

19 He Huibin, p. 72.

French plays declined to fifty-three, with only four by Molière.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it is to be noted that the figures include both ‘retranslations’, or translations of a previously translated play, and new editions of an existing translation.

Molière’s pre-eminent place in the ranks of translated French playwrights is not surprising if we follow Dominic Glynn and James Hadley’s reasoning that ‘a play which has accumulated symbolic value in its source culture is more likely to be translated but also more likely to be performed in a given target culture’.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, initially at least, due to the USSR’s strong political and cultural influence on China, it was Soviet scholars’ appreciation that made Molière the most popular French playwright in China. Later, it was the Chinese literati’s tastes that maintained high levels of translation, before market economics took over.

Gisèle Sapiro has highlighted both a long-term and short-term strategy in relation to the publication of French works in the USA.<sup>22</sup> Sapiro identifies a major disconnect between the translation and publication strategies of non-for-profit and university presses on the one hand, and commercial publishers on the other. While the former play the long game, and accumulate prestige by publishing authors who are valued by professionals of the literary system, the latter go for short-term profits and choose authors that are likely to sell well.

In China, many publishers also play the long game, and take the fame of the authors, alongside the quality and international influence of the source text, into consideration before translating and publishing a work of literature.<sup>23</sup> However, Pierre Bourdieu’s opposition between a pole of restricted and large scale distribution, which forms the basis of much of Sapiro’s analysis, does not hold sway in contemporary China. As Michel Hockx has highlighted by drawing on Shao Yanjun’s 2003 monograph *The Inclined Literary Field*, the 1980s is credited as being an exciting time of literary experimentation and invention.<sup>24</sup> However, the literary doxa promoted by a small clique ended up alienating ‘so many readers that many literary

20 This figure is calculated based on the statistics in *National New Books Information* published by National Press and Publication Administration from 2011 to 2019.

21 Glynn and Hadley, p. 24.

22 See Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Les échanges littéraires entre Paris et New York à l’ère de la globalisation’ [Rapport de recherche] (Paris: Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique/Le MOtif (Observatoire du livre d’Île de France), 2010) <hal-01621786> [accessed 10 August 2021].

23 See Wu Xianyun, 翻译生产模式的改变及其对翻译研究的影响, *fan yi sheng chan mo shi de gai bian ji qi dui fan yi yan jiu de yan jiu* [How the Changes in Translation Production Influence Translation Studies], *Journal of Southwest Minzu University (Humanities and Social Science)*, S2 (2011), 208–11 (p. 209).

24 Michel Hockx, ‘The Literary Field and the Field of Power: The Case of Modern China’, *Paragraph*, 35.1 (2012), 49–65 (pp. 58–59).

magazines and publishing houses ran into trouble' which resulted in a greater incline towards 'market-driven popular literature' when they were weaned off subsidies in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup>

Since 1992, literature has increasingly been considered as a commodity produced by the cultural industry. Such a context explains the drop in publications of foreign drama in general and Molière in particular between 1992 and 2010. Meanwhile, the decrease in performances of Molière in China in recent years also reflects the overall shrinking of the impact of European classical theatre in the Chinese cultural system.<sup>26</sup>

The decline in popularity notwithstanding, Molière's works have nevertheless attracted considerable attention in the Chinese literary system since the mid-twentieth century. In addition to the structural reasons previously evoked, Xu Huanyan suggests that Molière's comedies such as *Le Tartuffe* and *L'Avare* share common ground with works of Chinese literature, which goes some way to explaining their positive reception in China.<sup>27</sup> For instance, Harpagon in *L'Avare* is reminiscent for Chinese audiences of characters who are mean and miserly, like Mr Yan in *The Scholars* [儒林外史, *Ru lin wai shi*].<sup>28</sup> *The Scholars* (1749) is a great satirical novel of the late Qing Dynasty (1636–1912) which mocks the hypocrisy of many Chinese intellectuals of the time. Mr Yan is so miserly that he is distressed when he finds a lamp with two wicks (one is enough for him) shortly before his death.

Moreover, Chinese intellectuals warmed to the socio-critical dimension of Molière's plays since they were first introduced into China in the early twentieth century. During this period in China, translators imported revolutionary ideas in translation, and in literary translation in particular.<sup>29</sup> Molière was perceived as an opponent of feudal mentalities given his biting satire of the aristocracy and the church in plays such as *Le Tartuffe*, *L'Avare*, *L'École des femmes*, and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*.<sup>30</sup> He was also appreciated on stylistic grounds at a time when reformists such as Qian Xuantong

25 Michel Hockx, p. 58.

26 Xu Huanyan, 莫里哀喜剧在中国的舞台实践, *mo li ai xi ju zai zhong guo de wu tai shi jian* [The Performance of Molière's Comedies in China], *Journal of Hainan Normal University*, 22.5 (2009), 125–28 (p. 128).

27 Xu Huanyan, 莫里哀喜剧中国舞台传播的文化动因, *mo li ai xi ju zhong guo wu tai chuan bo de wen hua dong yin* [The Cultural Motivation of the Popularity of Molière's Dramas in China], *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art*, 6 (2013), 129–32 (p. 129).

28 Xu Huanyan, p. 132.

29 Chang Nam Fung, 'Politics and Poetics in Translation: Accounting for a Chinese Version of "Yes Prime Minister"', *The Translator*, 4.2 (1998), 249–72 (p. 252).

30 Liang Wei, 民国时期的“莫里哀热”及其文化动因, *min guo shi qi de "mo li ai re" ji qi wen hua dong yin* [The Cultural Motivation of "Molière Heat" During the Period of the Republic of China], *Journal of Zhejiang University of Media and Communications*, 22 (2015), 103–08 (p. 107).

(钱玄同) called for new forms of theatre without the trappings of traditional Chinese sung drama, ‘xiqu’ [戏曲], which was written in Classical Chinese.<sup>31</sup> Foreign theatre works were translated into the vernacular and helped spread the influence of Modern Chinese.

The translation and performance of Molière inspired Chinese playwrights such as Ouyang Yuqian and Cao Yu to adapt Chinese xiqu plays and foreign theatre, and to write new forms. For instance, Ouyang adapted a series of Beijing Operas such as *Wine of Lure* [宝蟾送酒, *Bao chan song jiu*].<sup>32</sup> He explained that his adaptation was also inspired by *George Dandin ou le mari confondu*,<sup>33</sup> though the former tells a different story about a wife who hates her husband, a rich but coarse person who sends a maid to seduce her brother-in-law. As for Cao, apart from adapting foreign plays such as *L'Avare* in 1920s,<sup>34</sup> he wrote many modern dramas in the vernacular, including *Thunderstorm* [雷雨, *Lei yu*] and *Sunrise* [日出, *Ri chu*].

Since the foundation of the PRC, there have also been imaginative stage performances of Molière’s work. For instance, in the Chinese production of *L'Avare* in 1959 by Liaoning People’s Art Theatre, the lead actor made reference to the story of ‘a lamp with two wicks’ from *The Scholars* in the performance of the last scene.<sup>35</sup> Revivals of *Tartuffe* and *L'Avare* in the 1980s openly mocked the Cultural Revolution in performance,<sup>36</sup> while the Beijing People’s Art Theatre’s 2013 production of *Le Médecin malgré lui* added internet slang, jokes, and real stories about Chinese society into the dialogue.<sup>37</sup> This strategy of linking the comedies with better-known works in China has ensured that they have continued to be performed on stage, even though, as has been noted, there has been a notable decrease in the performances as well as publication of Molière over the years.

31 Ding Luonan, 二十世纪中国戏剧整体观, *er shi shi ji Zhong guo xi ju zheng ti guan* [An Overview of Chinese Drama in the Twentieth Century] (Shanghai: Baijia Publishing House, 2009), p. 35.

32 Ding Luonan, p. 35.

33 Ouyang Yuqian, 自我演戏以来, *zi wo yan xi yi lai* [My Ages on Stage] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 1990), p. 56.

34 Xu Huanyan, 莫里哀喜剧在中国的舞台实践, *mo li ai xi ju zai Zhong guo de wu tai shi jian* [The Performance of Molière’s Comedies in China], p. 126.

35 Xie Junhua, Sun Hao, and Yang Yangeng, 中国话剧艺术的一颗明珠: 辽宁人民艺术剧院四十年, *Zhong guo hua ju yi shu de yi ke ming zhu: liao ning ren min yi shu ju yuan si shi nian* [The Pearl in the Crown of Chinese Huaju: Liaoning People’s Art Theatre from 1954 to 1994] (Beijing: Chinese Theatre Publishing House, 1994).

36 Xu Huanyan, 莫里哀喜剧在中国的舞台实践, *mo li ai xi ju zai Zhong guo de wu tai shi jian* [The Performance of Molière’s Comedies in China], p. 128.

37 Xu Huanyan, 民族化的实验性演出, *min zu hua de shi yan xing yan chu* [The Localized Experimental Performance *Le Médecin malgré lui*], *Commentaries on Literature and Art*, 16 (2014), 106–11.

### Jean-Paul Sartre's humanism

Another French dramatist who has been frequently translated into Chinese is Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is exceptional among twentieth-century dramatists from the Western bloc by virtue of the fact that he was translated at a time when few were. Indeed, the first play to be translated into Chinese by Sartre was *La Putain respectueuse* [恭顺的妓女, *Gong shun de ji nü*] in 1947.

There is no doubt that Sartre's Marxism favoured his publication, while his travels to China in 1955 consolidated his reputation. However, it was not until after the Cultural Revolution that his works received considerable attention. Chinese intellectuals began to praise modern and contemporary plays from the West highly, valuing their humanitarianism. At this point, Sartre's concept of 'existentialism' swept across Chinese intellectual circles, leading to a 'Sartre Fad' in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup>

In 1978, the journal *Foreign Literature and Art* [外国文艺, *Wai guo wen yi*] published *Les Mains sales* [肮脏的手, *Ang zang de shou*], translated by Lin Qing. In 1980, the journal *Contemporary Foreign Literature* [当代外国文学, *Dang dai wai guo wen xue*] introduced *Huis Clos* [禁闭, *Jin bi*] and *La Putain respectueuse* [可尊敬的妓女, *Ke zun jing de ji nü*], translated by Zhang Yuenan and Yang Jian, respectively. Moreover, *Foreign Modernists Selected Works* [外国现代派作品选, *Wai guo xian dai pai zuo pin xuan*] included *Morts sans sépulture* [死无葬身之地, *Si wu zang shen zhi di*] in 1981, and *Foreign One-act Play Selected Works* [外国独幕剧选, *Wai guo du mu ju xuan*] included *La Putain respectueuse* [丽瑟, *Li se*] in 1983.

In 1985, *The Collection of Sartre's Theatre* [萨特戏剧集, *Sa te xi ju ji*] was published, which included eight plays, namely *Les Mouches* [苍蝇, *Cang ying*], *Huis Clos*, *Morts sans sépulture*, *La Putain respectueuse* [恭顺的妓女, *Gong shun de ji nü*], *Les Mains sales* [脏手, *Zang shou*], *Le Diable et le bon dieu* [魔鬼与上帝, *Mo gui yu shang di*], *Nekrassov* [涅克拉索夫, *Nie ke la suo fu*], and *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* [阿尔托纳的隐居者, *A ka tuo na de yin ju zhe*]. In 1986, three of Sartre's plays – *Les Mouches*, *Huis Clos*, and *Le Diable et le bon dieu* – were combined into *Le Diable et le bon dieu* with new translated versions.

It has been argued that Sartre's theatre was popular in China since the way in which it dealt with the trauma of the Second World War and the

38 Shouhua Qi and Wei Zhang, 'Total Heroism: Reinterpreting Sartre's *Morts sans sépulture* (*The Victors*) for the Chinese Stage', *Theatre Research International*, 44 (2019), 171–88 (p. 173).

Occupation of France found resonance in ‘Scar Literature’, which emerged in the 1970s to describe the trauma of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Sartre started to write theatre after the Second World War, since, in his words, ‘that was when I experienced the profound alienation of the captivity. It was also when I had relations with people, with the enemy’.<sup>40</sup> His writing for the stage openly dealt with the Occupation, political and social repression, but also with the quest to find one’s own position. In China, the ‘Sartre Fad’ was interwoven with discussions about humanitarianism and the subject in the 1980s. Criticism of the ultra-left’s actions during the Cultural Revolution was rife in Chinese intellectual circles, which adhered to Sartre’s belief that intellectuals should take on humanist responsibility and be writers of their time.<sup>41</sup> However, it was precisely Sartre’s critique of oppressive power structures and emphasis on the individual which rendered his works less acceptable in China following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Some scholars argued that Sartre’s existentialism was the breeding ground for bourgeois liberalization.<sup>42</sup> As a result, there was a hiatus in both the translation and performance of his works, until a 1997 performance of *Morts sans sépulture* directed by Zha Mingzhe. Sartre’s *Morts sans sépulture* went on to be regularly performed on the student drama scene, with performances at Fudan University (2009), Xiamen University of Technology (2011), Beijing Film Academy (2014), and Southeast University (2014). In 2014, Zha Mingzhe redirected the play at the National Theatre of China, and since then, it has become part of the theatre’s repertoire.<sup>43</sup>

When comparing the reception of Molière and Sartre in China, it becomes apparent that ideology was a factor in the reception of both dramatists. However, in Sartre’s case, political ideology played an even greater

39 Ning Wang, ‘French Theories in China and the Chinese Theoretical (Re)construction’, *Modern Language Quarterly (Seattle)*, 79.3 (2018), 249–67 (p. 250).

40 Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Self-Portrait at Seventy’, in *Life/Situation: Essays Written and Spoken*, ed. by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 48. The original text is: ‘c’est là que j’ai connu l’aliénation profonde qui était la captivité, c’est là que j’ai connu aussi le rapport aux gens, l’ennemi, l’ennemi réel’. Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Autoportrait à soixante-dix ans’, in *Situations, X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 180.

41 See Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Présentation Des Temps Modernes’, in *Situations, tome II: Septembre 1944-décembre 1946*, ed. by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

42 Ma Xiaozhao, 萨特存在主义文学的价值论批判, *sa te cun zai zhu yi wen xue de jia zhi lun pi pan* [The Criticism of Sartre’s Existentialism Literature], *Foreign Literature Review*, 4 (1992).

43 The performance information can be found on: 死无葬身之地, *si wu zang shen zhi di* [Men Without Shadows], Douban <<https://www.douban.com/location/drama/10864015/>> [accessed 14 August 2021]. *Men Without Shadows* is under the Repertoire section of the National Theatre of China, available here: <<http://www.ntcc.com.cn/zggjhjy/swszsdf/xjcmcontent.shtml>> [accessed 14 August 2021].

part. He was deemed ideologically compatible very early on in his writing career, but was shunned both during the Cultural Revolution and in the immediate aftermath of the events in Tiannanmen Square. Yet, during the 1980s, it was his particular blend of humanism and political engagement that seduced professionals of the literary field. Other dramatists writing in French were also received favourably on poetological grounds in the 1980s. These dramatists brought forms of linguistic invention that were formerly unknown in China and contributed to a wave of literary experimentation.

### Waiting for Beckett

During the 1980s, the Chinese literary system underwent a phase characterized by a heightened interest in experimental writing from the West. The translation environment was considerably more hospitable than it had been previously for twentieth-century works that had accumulated prestige in their source cultures. Thus, the writers of the ‘theatre of the absurd’ were translated and favourably received in this period.

The term ‘theatre of the absurd’ was used by Martin Esslin in his 1961 eponymous book to describe dramatists better known in France under the label ‘nouveau théâtre’.<sup>44</sup> These writers, who along with Beckett include Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet, deconstructed the precepts of dramatic unity and the well-made play. In France, their works were originally performed in small theatres of the Left Bank in Paris but rapidly attracted critical attention. For instance, the success of Roger Blin’s initial production of *En attendant Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1953 transformed Beckett from a relatively unknown writer into a literary sensation.<sup>45</sup>

Eugène Ionesco, one of the proponents of the new theatre, described his interpretation of the absurd as ‘anything without a goal [...] when man is cut off from his religious or metaphysical roots, he is lost; all his struggles become senseless, futile, and oppressive’.<sup>46</sup> This is exemplified in *La Cantatrice chauve*, where the characters endlessly chatter and tie themselves

44 See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1980).

45 On the critical reception of the première of *En attendant Godot*, see Jean-Michel Gouvard, ‘En attendant Godot en 1953: Performance et réception’, *Francosphères*, 9.1 (2020), 7–24.

46 See Eugène Ionesco, *Notes & Counter Notes: Writing on the Theatre*, trans. by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 257. The original text is: ‘ce qui n’a pas de but: [...] coupé de ses racines religieuses ou métaphysiques, l’homme est perdu, toute sa démarche devient insensée, inutile, étouffante’. Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et Contre-notes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 344.

up in knots. Just as Sartre was favourably received in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the broken language systems and non-referential absurdism spoke to the Chinese intelligentsia, which was left reeling after having been severely repressed. Beckett's work in particular was translated and re-translated, using both the French and English versions of his plays as the source texts. Both *Absurdist Theatre Portfolio* [荒诞派戏剧集, *Huang dan pai xi ju ji*], published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 1980, and *Absurdist Theatre Selected Works* [荒诞派戏剧选, *Huang dan pai xi ju xuan*], circulated by People's Literature Publishing House in 1983, included *Godot* [等待戈多, *Deng dai ge duo*] translated by Shi Xianrong. In 1981, the journal *Contemporary Foreign Literature* published *Oh les beaux jours/Happy Days* [啊, 美好的日子!, *A, mei hao de ri zi!*] translated by Xia Lian and Jiang Fan, and *Play* [终局, *Zhong ju*] translated by Feng Han.

Since 1992, many publishers have republished Samuel Beckett's works for economic reasons. This started with Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, who firstly translated and published a five-volume *Beckett Selected Works* [贝克特选集, *Be ke te xuan ji*] in 2006. In 2016, it published twenty-two volumes of *Beckett Collected Works* [贝克特全集, *Bei ke te quan ji*]. In addition, *Godot* has frequently appeared on the Chinese stage. It was first performed in the Shanghai Theatre Academy in 1986. Then in 1991, a production by Meng Jinghui was staged at The Central Academy of Drama. In 1998, *Godot* was performed on the stage of Beijing People's Art Theatre, which marked its acceptance by mainstream theatre practice in China.<sup>47</sup> Since then, *Godot* has been performed in Chinese theatres almost every year.

The translation of Beckett's works into Chinese is particularly interesting, given that the author self-translated his own works from French to English and vice versa. Thus, while *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* are considered the same play, there are a number of differences between the two. As Jean-Michel Gouvard has noted, discrepancies include the erasure or substitution of geographical and historical references in the English *Godot*.<sup>48</sup> What is more, translating Beckett into a third language, such as Chinese, 'present[s] something of a conundrum for Beckett's other

47 The Beijing People's Art Theatre is one of the most famous Chinese theatres. It is a public institution under the jurisdiction of the Beijing Committee of the Communist Party of China. The plays selected by this theatre must accord with China's ideology. Selection by the theatre acts as a marker of what is ideologically acceptable for the regime.

48 Jean-Michel Gouvard, 'Beckett and French War Propaganda', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 19.1 (2019), 1–22. For more analysis of the differences between Beckett in French and English, see issue 9.1 of *Francosphères* edited by Dominic Glynn and Jean-Michel Gouvard on 'Jouer Beckett/ Performing Beckett'.

translators' who have to either choose to translate one version or make sense of the differences between the bilingual oeuvre.<sup>49</sup>

The first Chinese rendition of *Godot*, 等待戈多 [*Deng dai ge duo*], was by Shi Xian Rong in 1965 from the English version, while Yu Zhongxian translated from the French in 2016. Gouvard explains that the French version of *Godot* contains allusions to Beckett's life during the Second World War, when he worked for a farmer named Bonnelly in the village of Roussillon, but that these are replaced in the English.<sup>50</sup> He quotes the following two passages in particular to highlight the changes:

ESTRAGON. – Mais non, je n'ai jamais été dans le **Vaucluse!** J'ai coulé toute ma chaudepisse d'existence ici, je te dis! Ici! Dans la **Merdecluse!**

VLADIMIR. – Pourtant nous avons été ensemble dans le **Vaucluse**, j'en mettrais ma main au feu. Nous avons fait les vendanges, tiens, chez un nommé **Bonnelly**, à **Roussillon**.<sup>51</sup>

ESTRAGON. – No, I was never in the **Macon country**. I've puked my puke of life away here, I tell you! Here! In the **Cackon country!**

VLADIMIR. – But we were together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for **a man called ...** (*He snaps his fingers*) ... can't think of the name of the man at **a place called ...** (*Snaps his fingers*) ... can't think of the name of the place, do you remember?<sup>52</sup>

While in both the French and English versions, Vladimir and Estragon picked grapes, the location changes. Gouvard hypothesizes that the change of locality might in part be explained by the fact that, in his opinion at least, the Macon country is better known in the English-speaking world than the Vaucluse. However, the main reason for him is the fact that Beckett tried to protect his past by erasing concrete references to events in his life, following the runaway success of the French *Godot* on stage in 1953.<sup>53</sup> Another shift, not picked up by Gouvard, is the fact that the reference to venereal disease in the French is changed in the English to vomiting. Such differences are

49 Matías Battistón, 'How I Did Not Translate Beckett', *Translation Studies*, 12.1 (2019), 109–23 (p. 109) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2019.1602562>>.

50 Gouvard, 'Beckett and French War Propaganda', pp. 8–9.

51 The use of bold in the quotations is our own. We have used it to underline the similarities and differences between the versions. The reference for the French quote is Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1952), p. 86.

52 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, ed. by Mary Bryden (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 55.

53 Gouvard, 'Beckett and French War Propaganda', pp. 9–10.

common in Beckett's self-translations. Another example includes the change from a scatological reference in the title of the English-language play *Krapp's Last Tape* to an erectile one in the French *La Dernière Bande*. With regards Godot, changes are also evident in the Chinese translations of these passages. Yu Zhongxian kept the reference by translating 'chaudepisse' into '花柳病' [*hua liu bing*], which means venereal disease. Shi, translating from the English, makes no such reference. Moreover, he tones down 'puke my puke of life away' in his translation to end up with '虚度过我的一生' [*xu du guo wo de yi sheng*], which literally means 'idle my life away'. Thus, the underlying meaning of the expression is conveyed but without Beckett's idiosyncratic use of language.

In Yu Zhongxian's translation, below, references to the Vaucluse and the joke about the 'Merdecluse' are translated with a similar pun:

爱斯特拉贡: 没有, 我从来就没有在沃克吕兹待过! 我对你说, 我整个花柳病的一生, 全都是在这里度过的! 在这里! 在这臭大粪的克吕兹!

弗拉第米尔: 然而, 我们曾经一起在沃克吕兹的, 我敢把我的手放在火上。我们在那里摘过葡萄, 对了, 住在一个姓波奈利的人家里, 在鲁西永。<sup>54</sup>

[Ai si te la gong (ESTRAGON): mei you, wo cong lai jiu mei you zai wo ke lü zi dai guo! wo dui ni shuo, wo zheng ge hua liu bing de yi sheng, quan dou shi zai zhe li du guo de! zai zhe li! zai zhe chou da fen de ke lü zi!

Fu la di mi er (VLADIMIR): ran er, wo men ceng jing yi qi zai wo ke lü zi de, wo gan ba wo de shou fang zai huo shang. Wo men zai na li zhai guo pu tao, dui le, zhu zai yi ge xing bo nai li de ren jia li, zai lu xi yong.]

In the above, 沃克吕兹 [*wo ke lü zi*] means Vaucluse, while 波奈利 [*bo nai li*] is a transliteration for Bonnelly and 鲁西永 [*lu xi yong*] is Roussillon. As for 臭大粪的克吕兹 [*chou da fen de ke lü zi*], it can be broken down into 'stinking dung' [臭大粪, *chou da fen*] of [的, *de*] 'cluse' [克吕兹, *ke lü zi*], and thus renders 'Merdecluse'. Shi Xianrong's translation (below) both refers to the Macon country, 麦康地区 [*mai kang di qu*], and provides a phonetic transcription of Cacon country, 凯康地区 [*kai kang di qu*], but does not preserve the scatological reference. While there is a similar play on the sonorities in the Chinese as in the English, the pun, to use Chang Nam Fung's taxonomy, is translated into a 'non-pun'. As Chang notes,

54 Samuel Beckett, 等待戈多, *deng dai ge duo* [Waiting for Godot], trans. by Yu Zhongxian (Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2016), p. 100.

this translation procedure can result in a ‘possible loss of cohesion in the target text’.<sup>55</sup>

爱斯特拉冈：不，我从来没有到过麦康地区。我是在这儿虚度过我一生的，我跟你讲！这儿！在凯康地区！

弗拉季米尔：可是我们一起到过那儿，我可以对天发誓！采摘葡萄，替一个名叫……（他把指头拈得啪的一声响）……想不起那个人叫什么名字了，在一个叫作……（把指头拈得啪的一声响）……想不起那个地方叫什么名字了，你也不记得了？<sup>56</sup>

[Ai si te la gang (ESTRAGON): bu, wo cong lai mei you dao guo mai kang di qu. Wo shi zai zhe er xu du guo wo de yi sheng de, wo gen ni shuo! zhe er! zai kai kang di qu!]

Fu la ji mi er (VLADIMIR): ke shi wo men yi qi dao guo na er, wo ke yi dui tian fa shi! zai zhai pu tao, ti yi ge ming jiao .....(ta ba zhi tou nian de pa de yi sheng xiang) ..... xiang bu qi na ge ren jiao shen me ming zi le, zai yi ge jiao zuo ..... (ba zhi tou nian de pa de yi sheng xiang) ..... xiang bu qi na ge di fang jiao shen me ming zi le, ni ye bu ji de le?]

A different but significant change in the Chinese translations of Beckett occurs in relation to the passage when Estragon and Vladimir consider hanging themselves. The French and English versions are below:

ESTRAGON. – Si on se pendait?

VLADIMIR. – Ce serait un moyen de bander.

ESTRAGON (aguiché). – On bande?<sup>57</sup>

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

55 Chang Nam Fung, p. 257.

56 Samuel Beckett, 等待戈多, *deng dai ge duo* [Waiting for Godot], trans. by Shi Xianrong, in 荒诞派戏剧选, *huang dan pai xi ju xuan* [Absurdist Theatre Selected Works], (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1983), pp. 1–126 (pp. 75–76). No translation has been provided as significant differences are explained within the text. A literal translation is provided for passages where there are considerable divergences between the source and target texts. In addition, a pinyin transcription is provided for each translation from Chinese.

57 Beckett, *En attendant Godot*, p. 18.

ESTRAGON: (highly excited). An erection!<sup>58</sup>

In both the French and English versions, the two vagrants consider hanging themselves as a means of putting an end to the cycle of boredom and gaining some cheap thrills. Yu Zhongxian explains in a footnote to his translation that in the French ‘bander’ and ‘se pendait’ have a similar pronunciation, and that ‘bander’ is slang for to have an erection.<sup>59</sup> However, Yu chose to go with the meaning of ‘tightening’ and to erase the sexual reference:

爱斯特拉贡：咱们上吊怎么样？

弗拉第米尔：那可以算是一种拉紧的方法。

爱斯特拉贡：（被挑逗起来）咱们拉紧一下怎么样？

[Ai si te la gong (ESTRAGON): zan men shang diao zen me yang?

Fu la di mi er (VLADIMIR): na ke yi suan shi yi zhong la jin de fang fa.

Ai si te la gong (ESTRAGON): (bei tiao dou qi lai) zan men la jin yi xia zen me yang?]

[ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: That can be regarded as a way of tightening.

ESTRAGON (teased): How about we tighten it?]<sup>60</sup>

The English version from which Shi Xianrong was working is even more explicit, however, Shi chose to delete the reference in favour of a stage direction:

爱斯特拉贡：咱们上吊试试怎么样？

【弗拉季米尔和爱斯特拉贡耳语。爱斯特拉贡大为兴奋。】

[Ai si te la gang (ESTRAGON): zan men shang diao shi shi zen me yang?

58 Samuel Beckett, ‘Waiting for Godot’ <<https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Waiting-for-Godot.pdf>> [accessed 7 August 2021], p. 10.

59 Beckett, 等待戈多, *deng dai ge duo* [Waiting for Godot], trans. by Zhongxian, p. 20.

60 A literal translation is provided here and below to highlight differences with the French and English versions.

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[Fu la ji mi er (VLADIMIR) he Ai si te la gang er yu. Ai si te la gang da wei xing fen.]

[ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

[Vladimir and Estragon whispered. Estragon was very excited.]]

The partial non-translation of a particular segment of a text is a frequently used procedure in translation when a particular idea or form is not acceptable in a target culture. Indeed, it is the ‘omission’ of a particular element that often enables the translation of the text as a whole.<sup>61</sup> In China, translators need to tread carefully when dealing with explicit sexual references or they may be penalized. As Chang Nam Fung explains, ‘[i]deological control of literature in China is exercised through a system of post-publication censorship in the form of criticism and punishment, thus ensuring pre-publication self-censorship through the manipulation of fear’.<sup>62</sup> Translators thus are inclined to omit references to passages that might be considered ‘morally unhealthy’,<sup>63</sup> one of the grounds for censorship. In addition, publishing houses actively encourage translators to adopt this practice, out of concern that a book may be banned after it is published, which would lead to ‘considerable financial losses and potential bankruptcy’.<sup>64</sup>

In general, there is considerable ideological resistance to translation in the PRC, even in the contemporary period, which means that not all literary works are able to be translated. Those that are tend to have their problematic content toned down in order to fit with perceived moral standards in the target culture. In Beckett’s case, the fact that translators have had to deal with a bilingual text has added to the complexity of the task.

## Conclusion

This article has surveyed the reception of French-language plays in China from the foundation of the PRC to the present day. It has outlined trends

61 See Glynn, p. 7.

62 Chang Nam Fung, p. 250.

63 See Tan Zaixi, ‘Censorship in Translation: The Dynamics of Non-, Partial and Full Translations in the Chinese Context’, *Meta*, 62.1 (2017), 45–68 <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1040466ar>>.

64 Chang Nam Fung, p. 251. In his article, Chang provides a reference to Perry Link on the topic of censorship in China: Perry Link, ‘Introduction: On the Mechanics of the Control of Literature in China’, in *Stubborn Weeds: Popular and Controversial Chinese Literature after the Cultural Revolution*, ed. by Perry Link (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 1–30.

in the translation of dramatic material, identifying how at different points French theatre was more or less translatable into the Chinese context due to ideological resistance. In the early years of the regime, the Soviet Union, which largely influenced Chinese cultural policy until the Sino-Soviet split, determined that contemporary literary works from the Western bloc were largely untranslatable. While Molière was popular throughout the period, Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett were not translated until much later. Even when they were translated, ideological, economic, and poetological forces shaped the extent to which their works were widely circulated. Translation into the Chinese context is thus a constrained activity. Future research may reveal how the trends identified in terms of variations in levels of ideological, economic, and poetological resistance here play out in the reception of other French-language dramatists – most notably, other writers of absurdist theatre. This would help to show more generally how French literature has been perceived and received in China in the modern and contemporary period.