China and Its Other: The Economy of Writing in Dai Sijie’s *Le Complexe de Di*  

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**Abstract**  
The French-language novel *Le Complexe de Di* (“Di’s complex” and also “The Oedipus complex”), by the recently-acclaimed Chinese writer Dai Sijie, is playful, “complex” and, on the reading suggested here, inherently duplicitous. Dai looks at China from a French perspective and at France (or Europe) from a Chinese one, showing the cultural and linguistic limitations of both perspectives. Among the many Western commodities which now dominate the global marketplace are French intellectual traditions (the theories of Freud, Lacan, Althusser, Levi-Strauss and Derrida) which do not always accommodate contemporary China and yet which, along with the French language, are often pursued by Chinese intellectuals themselves, including the expatriated Dai. This paper argues that, by bringing these theories into play within the narrative structure of the novel, the author engages in parody by pointing to the limits or ruptures of the theoretical paradigms when considered within a sharply cross-cultural perspective. In other words, Dai’s “treacherous” writing at once reinforces and mocks, confirms and revises these theories, thereby complicating their use-value when applied to a global reality inflected by the experience of migration.  

**Keywords**  
Dai Sijie (戴思杰), *Le Complexe de Di* (釋夢人), French poststructuralism, narrative games, desire, exchange, *trahir* (betrayal), linguistic-cultural ruptures, postmodern self-parody
China has long occupied a prominent place in France’s literary imaginary political consciousness. Victor Hugo defended its rights to sovereignty, condemning the burning of the Yuanmingyuan Palace by French and British invaders in 1861.\(^1\) Paul Claudel, as French consul to China from 1895-1909, sought to capture its materiality in his verse, while his friend Victor Segalen searched to convey the spirituality he discovered during his many trips to China in the early nineteenth century in his own poetic works. André Malraux celebrated the power of Chinese political resistance after participating in the Kuomintang revolutionary movement in 1925, and Marguerite Duras, raised in nearby Indo-China, reveled in the country’s sensual mystery.

Despite their passion and enthusiasm, however, none of these writers fully escapes Edward Said’s warning against orientalist appropriations of the “East” by Western thinkers. Although scholars disagree about how Said’s work is relevant to China, most accept Edward Graham’s dictum that “Said makes such a strong case for ‘orientalism’ as a prejudicial mode of knowing, that we can never again be quite sure that our understanding of China (or whatever) is not tainted” (Graham 42). French literature’s fascination with China has thus historically inspired a poetics of otherness rooted in the geographical, political, and cultural opposition of East and West\(^2\)—that is, until Chinese immigrants to France began adding their voices to the French literary canon, collapsing old boundaries, and introducing a new ethics of alterity between France and China. Since François Cheng and his many award-winning collections of poetry,\(^3\) a growing number of Sino-French novelists

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2 The East-West binary is not without its limitations especially when applied to China. The notion of an “Oriental” hemisphere in opposition to an Occidental one originated in Europe with the Romans, and “was sharpened by the medieval conflicts between the world of Christendom and the worlds of the Mongols and Islam” (Hay 1). Indian, Japanese and, to a lesser extent, Chinese scholars later took up this terminology, adopting the language of the European and American traders in Asia. Stephen Hay points out that in the early 20th century when Indian thinkers were most amenable to the idea of a shared “Eastern” sensibility, culture and spirituality, Chinese intellectuals remained very resistant. China, for its part, historically alluded to all non-Chinese as “barbarians,” “foreign devils” or “ghosts,” an age-old tradition that further isolated it from other nations and countries (Ang). Myths of otherness have perpetuated the dichotomy from a Western vantage point over the years and it is today a part of a global imaginary replete with the historical short-sightedness that often accompanies such arbitrary drawing of lines.
3 Le Dit de Tayanyi (1998) earned the Prix Femina while Shitao: La Saveur de Monde (1998) won the Prix André Malraux that same year. Double Chant (2000) was awarded the Prix Roger Caillois.
are adding their perspectives to the bastion of French literature, often making France and the West a mirror for the once haunting otherness of China.

These more recent novels complicate the discourse of alterity as it has traditionally positioned China as Other to the West from both a literary and philosophical point of view. Scholars trace this discourse back to eighteenth-century France, nineteenth-century Britain and twentieth-century America, as during each period one country has typically dominated Western images of China (Mackerras 6). Yet some of the most notable French thinkers of the twentieth century, such as Foucault and Derrida, contributed greatly to the continued Othering of China, especially as their thought was taken up in the American academy. Much of this surrounded the Chinese language and what both philosophers signaled as its incomprehensible logic and otherworldly characteristics, thereby reinforcing old myths about China and its people. Recent Sino-French novels thus engage in a provocative reversal of such myths by writing from the vantage point of the Chinese and often displacing its otherness onto the West by foregrounding the very foreignness of Western culture and thought when considered from the perspective of China.

Dai Sijie is one such example. Born and raised in China, his journey westward to Paris occurred in adulthood. Entertaining hopes of higher education, he earned a scholarship to study art history in Paris before entering the IDHEC, where he specialized in film production. Soon afterwards, he began making films about Chinese life and culture in France. Of his three films, none have earned him the international acclaim of his first French novel *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise* (*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*), published in 2000. A semi-autobiographical story that takes place during the Cultural Revolution, it traces the story of two friends during their Mao-instructed re-education among the peasants and farmers of China. In 2003, Dai published his award-winning novel *Le Complexe de Di* (*Mr. Mu'o's Travelling Couch*). While other migrant writers such as Ying Chen in Quebec came close to earning prizes as illustrious as the Prix Femina, Dai was the first to win the prize with this second novel.

As writers of Chinese origin break into the canonical domain of French literature, their work brings out not only a physical experience of migration from East to West but a dynamic process of translation—both literal and figurative. In a prime example of this mode, Dai employs a carefully-crafted economy of writing that makes the French literary text continuously return to another language, culture, and reality. While the Chinese language and script are entirely absent from *Le

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4 See Longxi Zhang’s analysis of this question.
Complexe de Di, the novel overflows with references to Chinese places, characters and situations. Thus China’s historical and geo-political landscape, its traditional culture and language haunt a novel that dares to evoke that which it will not speak.

This paper examines the inherent duplicity of Le Complexe de Di, a novel in which figurations of modern-day China interact with certain Western intellectual paradigms, thereby creating a gap—what Pierre Macherey would term an “epistemological rupture.”5 In other words, Dai’s second novel carries a secret, the revelation of which exposes a point of rupture between what the text claims to say and what it does in fact say. The novel’s secret thus extends beyond its textual field and into the playful and satirical ways in which Western theoretical models are drawn upon to describe and understand Dai’s China. Most notably, Dai’s overt references to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis throughout the novel suggest his acquaintance with Western theories of the self; his characterization and narrative structure also point to other well-known Western conceptual frameworks—the anthropological work of Lévi-Strauss and the economic readings of Marx and Althusser.

By bringing out these embedded influences, this paper argues that Le Complexe de Di contributes to the discourse of the Chinese Other through a playful engagement with Western theories of capital and exchange, culture, language, desire, sexuality and the “self” (psychology). “Playful” is the operative term here: by submitting Western theories or modes of thought to the circumlocutory play of numerous perspectives, Dai’s writing at once reinforces and mocks, confirms and revises them. Dai takes up knowledge paradigms that originated or are typically espoused in Western countries such as France only to adapt and deconstruct them within a Chinese framework, while at the same time, he mocks his native China too.

Sexuality, Desire, Exchange, Culture

As the title suggests, Le Complexe de Di plays on the Oedipus complex. When pronounced in French, the novel’s title is only a syllable away from Freud’s famed discovery.6 And yet that missing /p/ makes all the difference, for it distinguishes

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5 Macherey points to a moment of rupture between two questions that define all literary texts: the first question concerns the secret that needs to be explained and in which the work originates, while the second question concerns the revelation of this secret by which the work is ultimately realized. “The simultaneity of the two questions defines a minute rupture, minutely distinct from a continuity,” writes Macherey (95).

6 The novel’s title is pronounced /lo kɔplɛks də di/ and the Oedipus Complex in French is pronounced /lo kɔplɛks dədip/.
Judge Di, the character to whom the novel owes its name, from Sophocles’ exiled king, all the while pointing to an unspeakable absence between two languages. *Le Complexe de Di* tells the story of Muo, China’s self-proclaimed “first psychoanalyst,” baptized as such by the narrator in the opening chapter entitled “Un disciple de Freud” [A Freudian Disciple]. Having recently returned to Chengdu from Paris where he studied Freud and Lacan, Muo wants to introduce psychoanalytic theory—the Oedipus complex and the interpretation of dreams—to his fellow Chinese citizens.

Yet this man, who wishes to reveal the Western secrets of sex to China, is a sexually inexperienced virgin. Muo claims to be saving himself for his one true love, Volcan de la Vieille Lune [Volcano from the Old Moon], a jailed photographer found guilty of treason for having disclosed pictures of Chinese torture to the European press. It is in the hopes of having Volcan released that Muo tries to befriend the infamous dictatorial character, Judge Di. After a clumsy attempt to bribe the judge fails, Muo is informed by his go-between friend, the mayor’s son-in-law (who serves a prison sentence by night and runs a state-owned all-you-can-eat buffet by day), that the prisoner will be released in exchange for a virgin. Thus begins the protagonist’s quest for a virgin whose sacrifice will secure the freedom of a political prisoner.

The terms of the barter proposed by Judge Di are clearly reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ exchange based on the principle of reciprocity. In *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss explains that the transformation of primitive societies from nature to culture was realized through the prohibition of incest and the adoption of rules governing sexual behavior. The new system of power was organized around a reciprocal exchange of gifts, which varied in nature from material objects to social values and women (Lévi-Strauss 62). “The purpose that it did serve was a moral one. The object of the exchange was to produce a friendly feeling between the two persons concerned,” writes Lévi-Strauss, quoting Radcliff-Brown on the Andaman Islanders (Lévi-Strauss 55). Of course, it was understood that the subjects of the reciprocal exchange were not only male but powerful enough to claim ownership over the objects of exchange.

Dai’s Judge Di and Muo therefore agree to engage in the traffic of women. Di, a former state executioner turned corrupt legal official, brandishes his power to capture and release prisoners based upon his sexual whims; Muo, a Chinese psychoanalyst and intellectual, believes that the seductive power of his Western theories of sex will enable him to fulfill his part of the pact. Both characters articulate their power through a commodification of sex, granting women a purely
objective status. In Lévi-Strauss’ view, the exchange of women differs from all other forms of trade because they are indeed the most precious possession:

> Women are not primarily a sign of social value, but a natural stimulant; and the stimulant of the only instinct the satisfaction of which can be deferred, and consequently the only one for which, in the act of exchange, and through the awareness of reciprocity, the transformation from stimulant to the sign can take place. (Lévi-Strauss 62-63)

Thus the exchange of women takes on a symbolic function within the *socius*, the institutionalization of which is at once that of culture itself. The agreement between Muo and Judge Di placates a primal rivalry through the mutual recognition of the symbolic order of culture, where enmity between men is quelled by their reciprocally displaced desires. Muo sets out on a quest for a virgin to offer up as gift to the powerful official, but also on a quest for sexual gratification.

By setting the conditions for the exchange within a Lévi-Straussian paradigm, Dai mocks the corruption of the Chinese bureaucracy where society is reduced to its primitive forms. He also takes a jab at China’s human rights record by introducing the character of Volcan. This photographer-activist behind bars confirms Western suspicions of state-mandated torture just as Judge Di remains completely impervious to the possibility. As the novel sets up its plot, it appears to play into Western stereotypes of a China replete with sexism, corruption and, most importantly, the curtailment of basic human freedoms.

And yet, while *Le Complexe de Di* does satirize present-day China’s antiquated values in amusing and circuitous ways, it also rejects Freudian psychoanalytic theory and the Western compulsion behind it. Indeed, the novel takes a decidedly feminist tone by the end, as Muo’s pursuit proves harder than expected. While the psychoanalyst cannot resist falling in love with the women he finds for his opponent, the women he finds are not easily duped. Even the most naïve of Chinese women turns out to be savvy enough to outsmart her psychoanalyst suitor. The novel’s opening chapter describes Muo’s first encounter with a poor salesgirl from Pingxiang whom he tries to woo using his psychoanalytic skills:

> Écoutez-moi jeune fille... N’ayez pas peur... Je voudrais que vous me racontiez un de vos rêves, si vous vous en souvenez. Sinon, vous me dessinerez un arbre—n’importe lequel, grand ou petit, avec ou sans
feuilles. . . . J’interpréterai votre dessin et vous dirai si vous avez perdu ou non votre virginité." (Dai 32)

Listen to me young lady. . . . Do not be afraid. . . . I would like you to tell me one of your dreams, if you can remember one. If not, you will draw me a tree—any tree, big or small, with or without leaves. . . . I will interpret the drawing and tell you if have or have not lost your virginity.\footnote{All translations are my own.}

The girl knows nothing of psychoanalysis nor does she give it any credence; she is only intent on stealing Muo’s Western shoes by taking advantage of the darkness on the overnight train. Meanwhile, Muo imagines he is caressing her feet and ejaculates on himself, only to discover that he had been fondling the end of her broomstick while she left the wagon with his possessions. The next two virgins also get the better of him and fail to meet the terms of the agreement decided upon with Judge Di. Although the second virgin, known only as l’Embaumeuse [the Embalmer], is imprisoned by Judge Di because she refuses him sex, she does indeed lose her virginity to Muo—hence suggesting that she is the one in control of the situation after all. The third virgin, Petit Chemin [Little Pathway], must then serve to free l’Embaumeuse rather than Volcan de la Vieille Lune. As the novel progresses, Muo sinks deeper and deeper into his unworkable gamble, until at last he is ready to capitulate. Yet the last scene of the novel throws the cycle back into motion: a young girl appears on his doorstep as the agreed-upon price—marriage—for a service rendered Muo by the girl’s father. Somehow, all Muo can think to ask her is: “Tu es vierge? [Are you a virgin?]” (Dai 347). As the novel comes to a close, its title seems to refer to a Lévi-Straussian cycle of exchange that constitutes the symbolic order of culture. At the same time, Dai makes this overt—though perhaps unconscious—reference to Western anthropological thought into a derisory play of events—one that ultimately points to the impotency of the male subject through the subversive tactics of the female body.

While the circle of exchange is a reference to—and subversion of—the anthropological symbolic, it also stands as a critique of Chinese culture and the corruption of male public officials and intellectuals, something that is more easily done in French than Chinese. In the course of a chapter ridiculing the sexual antics of Judge Di, the narrator, whose interventions are often enclosed in parentheses as if
to separate his thoughts from those of the character, speaks directly to the novel’s Chinese bride-to-be readers:

Note de l’auteur aux lectrices chinoises qui se préparent au mariage: ici, l’appellation de son époux par le titre officiel de sa fonction me semble excessif, atypique, surtout dans l’intimité. . . . Voilà la clé de l’art conjugal qui maintient la solidité de nos familles, depuis des milliers d’années: ne posez jamais de questions gênantes. Ne demandez jamais à un homme d’où il vient ni ce qu’il fait. Jamais. (Dai 318)

Author’s note to his female Chinese readers who are preparing for marriage: Here, calling the spouse by the official title seems rather excessive to me, atypical, especially within intimate circles. . . . This is the key to the art of marriage that has maintained the solidity of our families for thousands of years: Do not ask any embarrassing questions. Never ask a man where he is coming from, nor what he is doing. Never.

This advice follows a scene between Judge Di and his wife, who upon her husband’s arrival home simply states the fact of his return in the form of a question rather than interrogating him as to his whereabouts. The narrator’s interjection is therefore pregnant with irony and intended for the Francophone, non-Chinese reader’s amusement. By the same token, it is a shocking admonition that serves to undermine the significance of marriage and family bonds that are much emphasized in the Chinese tradition. In this way, the passage creates an uncomfortable complicity between the Chinese narrator and Western reader, who together belittle marital fidelity in China. Humor is used in this way throughout the novel to mask the reader’s complicity in such disparagements of Chinese culture. The parentheses serve to isolate the narrator from his condemnation of the hollow symbolism of his own culture through an ad hoc Westernization that simultaneously exposes his own position of anxious non-belonging and dissipates it through the reader’s nervous laughter.

Muo’s inability to complete transactions, either through exchanges with men (Judge Di) or sexually with women, is justified by the character’s profound admiration, even obsession, with chivalry. Muo credits the French with the
development of this “courtly” quality that requires men to risk their lives for women with no hope of gain for themselves:

En quoi consiste la différence entre la civilisation occidentale et la mienne? Qu’a apporté le peuple français à l’histoire mondiale? Selon moi, ce n’est pas la révolution de 1789, mais un esprit chevaleresque. (Dai 240-41)

What constitutes the difference between Western civilization and my own? What have the French contributed to world history? According to me, it is not the Revolution of 1789 but the spirit of chivalry.

Muo thus accepts a beating from Judge Di so as to allow l’Embaumeuse to flee the scene with her virginity intact. He overcomes his physical humiliation at the hands of the Judge by writing it off as chivalry in one more note in his journal, only to sacrifice his own virginity to the Embaumeuse a few hours later. His attempt to portray himself as a modern-day French knight in China fails when he is exposed as a premature ejaculator in the act of love that follows.

Dai further develops a Lévi-Strauss-like model of homosexuality where same-sex relations are displaced, set outside the socius because their prohibition, like that of incest, is what ensures the viability of hetero-normative culture. Many chapters after his discussion of chivalry, again in parentheses, Muo tells us that he almost turned to homosexuality during his adolescence because of his physical repulsiveness. The character’s latent homosexuality is mocked by this aside, which further widens the gap between Muo’s symbolic function and his actual ineptitude, his inability to participate in culture. He thus can only solicit our alternating laughter and pity as a character who is persistently aware of his worthlessness to the socius, but desperate to remedy his situation through a repetitious reentry into the cycle of culture. Each failed effort to procure Judge Di a virgin is followed by a bout of cold sweat as Muo fearfully awaits his capture and execution. Indeed the only alternative to culture is death for Lévi-Strauss, because the return to any primitive state of nature can no longer be tolerated once culture is established as the dominant mode of being. At the very moment of Muo’s surrender to death, however, he happens upon yet another virgin through whom he can miraculously reintegrate the socius. Muo is hence as reluctant to quit as the cycle is to let him go, thereby confirming the frail tension between culture and death. Yet the humor that inflects
this tension is how Dai queers the Lévi-Straussian paradigm, since over time we understand that the threat of death is as illusory as hetero-normative sex.

Language

Alongside that of culture, which works to ensure the survival of the *socius* as a group, stands another symbolic order, a more primordial one: language. Drawing on Freud’s topography in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan maintains that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan, *Four*, 20). It is not to the subject that the unconscious owes its status, but to the linguistic structure that renders the unconscious “definable, accessible and objectifiable” (Lacan, *Four*, 21). Thus Lacan identifies a gap between cause and effect in Freud. This gap also appears in the kind of conceptual thinking that has traditionally grounded the function of “causes” in philosophy. It translates in language as a discontinuity between signifier and signified—in the primal case, between “nothing” (“no,” “not,” “un”) as signifier and as signified—allowing an absence to emerge: “At this point, there springs up a misunderstood form of the *un*, the *Un* of the *Unbewusste*. Let us say that the limit of the *Umbewusste* is the *Unbegriff*—not the non-concept, but the concept of lack” (Lacan, *Four*, 26).

Lacan’s reading of Freud posits loss as the fundamental catalyst of desire for which language serves but a surrogate role. Language, at its founding moment, inherits a lack that it cannot overcome, and it is into such a symbolic order that the child must necessarily enter in order to repress his own loss, the loss experienced at the primal scene of his life. Afterwards, all access to the signified or to the constitution of the object “is to be found only at the level of the concept” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 150). For Lacan, every language nonetheless covers the whole spectrum of the signified because it must answer to all needs, even while this response is limited to the concept.

Dai’s protagonist, Muo, privileges the French language (much as the author does himself) because of its beauty and musicality. During his time in Paris, Muo claims to have paid a lot of money in order to learn French, and his study of Freud and Lacan is mediated through the foreignness of this tongue. In the novel’s opening chapter, the narrator recounts Muo’s days in a Paris studio, noting down his dreams and those of others from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. with the help of his French dictionary. He purposely chooses French and not English, proudly rejecting the “langue de la mondialisation” (the language of globalization) in favor of a language whose very name possesses a disturbing foreignness in the ears of his fellow man:
Complètement déconcerté, le voisin lui demande avant de s’endormir :
“C’est vrai, vous écrivez en français? ”
“Oui.”
“Oh, en français! répète-t-il plusieurs fois, et ce mot résonne dans le wagon de nuit comme un faible écho, une ombre, une réminiscence du glorieux mot “anglais,” tandis qu’une expression de désarroi envahit son visage de bon père de famille.” (Dai 14)

Completely disconcerted, his neighbour asks him before going to sleep:
“Is it true, you write in French?”
“Yes.”
“Oh, in French! he repeated several times, and the word resounded in the night wagon like a soft echo, a shadow, a reminiscence of the glorious word “English,” as an expression of disarray overcame his gentlemanly face.”

French affords Muo a certain freedom in a country where every word is policed. It is a protective coat that shields him from the power of his own people, as it does from that of his own repressions. Somehow, the concept of a lack that resides in the language of his favorite poets—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry and Hugo—and in that of his adored master Lacan, is not experienced as painfully as the lack he experiences in his native tongue. Muo’s love affair with French is one that is oblivious to the signified; it is a relishing of sounds and reverberations where meaning is subordinate. This is exemplified by Muo’s preference for the word “l’amour” over its Chinese or English equivalents simply because of its softness and beauty. Upon a visit to the prison where Volcan is held, he shares this linguistic penchant with her, and she begins to repeat the word with the slight variation of a non-French speaker:

Como elle ne parvenait pas à distinguer le “n” du “l”, elle avait supprimé l’article et dit seulement “amour,” d’abord du bout des lèvres, puis de plus en plus fort, jusqu’à ce que la grâce et magie de ce mot résonnent comme une note musicale dans le parloir grouillant des
prisonniers et de leurs parents, qui avaient tous été charmés. . . . Quel parfum enivrant, voluptueux, dans ce mot étranger! (Dai 198)

Since she could not distinguish between the “n” and the “l”, she eliminated the article and said only “amour,” first from the tip of her lips, then louder and louder, until the grace and magic of this word resounded like a musical note in the swarming parlour of prisoners and their families, who had all been charmed. . . . What an intoxicating, voluptuous scent, in this foreign word!

The narrator ends by telling us that the prison guards had to intervene to prevent the word from being taken up in chorus by all those around. The French signifier has a mesmerizing quality that is described first as a magical sound and then as an enticing smell. It invites entry into a language where use-value is not dictated by need but by sensory appreciation. The power of the word is enhanced by its indecipherability, its ethereal existence that threatens the very structure that demands obedience in language, the structure defined by the lack at its core. The prison guards’ reaction betrays the power of language when individual signifiers are freed from meaning and relished as such.

One of the later chapters of the novel is a letter written by Muo in French to his beloved prisoner. In the form of a riddle, he asks her why he is writing in French when she to whom the letter is destined will not understand “un traître mot: le français?” (Dai 267). “Traître” here means “solitary” and “traitor,” and Muo reveals his own predicament as an outsider, having opted for the foreign language over his native tongue. Suddenly however, Muo is surprised by the ingenuity of his linguistic choice as he realizes that the prison guards will not be able to decipher the content of his letter, nor will they be able to afford the exorbitant fee that the University of Sichuan’s three or four French-speaking professors will require for its translation:

Désormais, ma chère Vieille Lune, mon splendide Volcan, une langue étrangère nous unit, nous réunit, nous attache en un nœud qui s’épanouit, sous ses doigts magiques, en deux ailes de papillon exotique. (Dai 267)
Henceforth, my dearest Old Moon, my splendid Volcano, a foreign
tongue unites us, reunites us, binds us into a knot that unfolds, through
its magical fingers, into the two wings of an exotic butterfly.

Muo revels in the oddity of the French orthographic signs—its “accents aigu,
grave ou circonflexe” (Dai 267)—that become a love language of signifiers
detached from their significance. It is a flight through language, away from the halls
of incarceration and death to the life, beauty and music of a far-off land: “l’autre
bout du monde”—the other side of the world.

Despite all of this, the character’s ravings about French signal the absence of
his native Sichuan dialect, the entrapment of Chinese pictograms, and the erasure of
an original loss. His quest is not only to speak, write and celebrate French, but to do
so in China amidst a people who are alienated by its every letter. Muo, like Dai
Sijie, resorts to a different system of signifiers to elude the structure of his first
language. The one Chinese word that he espouses is the ancient pictogram for
“dream”: Two horizontal lines symbolizing a bed with an open eye above them,
representing the ever-seeing unconscious. This symbol is sewn on the banner under
which Muo sets up his public stall for the interpretation of dreams. This pictogram
never appears in graphic form in the novel, so its representation remains mediated
by the French language. Dream-content, then, becomes the only means to access
Chinese in Dai’s novel, much like the unconscious in psychoanalysis.

The text operates or operationalizes Freudian theory in this way, relegating
Chinese to the domain of an unconscious that only psychoanalysis can unlock. Muo
like Freud interprets the dreams of various characters in the novel, the most
impressive of which involves a murder. In a parody of Freudian interpretation,
Muo’s analysis of the dream in terms of the sounds of spoken language solves a
mystery and puts a man in jail. The dream involves the Chinese words “Fong
Chang,” again given to us only via their French (and in this case also English)
sounds. In parentheses, the narrator tells the reader how to derive different
meanings from the pictogram, and then how Muo identifies them through the
appearance of their signifieds in the dream. These parentheses at once undermine
the Chinese and valorize the interpretation, as if to mark the character’s brilliance
irrespective of the language of analysis. The narrative thus conspires to suppress all
that is Chinese in its presentation of Muo as an avant-garde intellectual, that is, as
psychoanalyst. Just as Freud’s demonstration of the unconscious reveals his own
desires for fame and notoriety in the dream of the monograph (Freud 290-92), this
narrative betrays Muo’s desire for recognition in the eyes of his audience.
As Paul Ricoeur argues in his interpretation of Freudian thought, Freud’s notion of the unconscious was intended to be suspect, as readers of Freud were discouraged from ascribing a prophetic role to the unconscious (Ricoeur 32-36). Dai Sijie similarly surrounds the Chinese language and culture with an aura of suspicion by subordinating them to the French narration, thereby refusing to mystify or idealize “China” as foreign thinkers have been known to do. When the narrator recounts Muo’s first psychoanalytic sessions in Paris, he tells us that Muo often slipped back into his native Sichuan dialect: As he had not as yet mastered French, his memories came flooding out in Sichuan. Muo’s French psychoanalyst, however, could not understand a single word (“traître mot”) of the foreign language and suspected him of mockery. While Dai undoubtedly does not find his native language “suspect” in this way, he does not think it a system of abstruse metaphysical or magical symbols, but his efforts to minimize the presence of Chinese in the novel seem to play into the Western reader’s own apprehensions about the mystical powers of this exotic pictographic language. It is as though Dai wants to rid Chinese of its mystery in the minds of his Francophone readers and, in this sense, demystify it. The novel is hence a reading of China through Western eyes, and of the Chinese language through French.

At the same time, of course, Le Complexe de Di is a reading of the West (more specifically France) through Chinese eyes—hence the novel’s playfulness, its complex ironies. Indeed, many of the novel’s characters trivialize and scoff at Muo’s psychoanalytic knowledge. Some of them laugh at the notion of the Oedipus complex for its lack of originality (it appears to them to be common sense), while others pass over the centrality of sex in Freud’s theories as being, again, all too obvious. Still others make up dreams to indulge their resident psychoanalyst or to win his favor. Muo is exploited and humiliated over and over again as he flees Judge Di, carrying bags filled with the seven volumes of Freud’s complete works in Chinese, the Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse and a commentary of Zhuangzi, his favorite Chinese author. His intellectual recourse to French is derided in China, where he lacks all savoir-faire in a world run by corrupt politicians and government officials. Every time he is incapacitated (whether by being beaten or getting drunk), he reassures himself that his mind is still intact, verifying the powers of his memory by citing a passage from Lacan or Freud, remembering Freud’s birth date, or recalling any French word or phrase—an ironic tribute to the French reader:

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8 Both Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault fell prey to this tendency, see Zhang.
Le premier mot français qui vient à son esprit est “merde.” Il se souvient des Misérables et récite : “un général anglais . . . leur cria : ‘Braves Français, rendez-vous!’ Cambronne répondit : ‘M. . . !’ Le lecteur français voulant être respecté, le plus beau mot peut-être qu’un Français ait jamais dit ne peut lui être répété.” (Dai 197-98)

The first French word that comes to his mind is “shit.” He remembers Les Misérables and recites: “an English general . . . cried: ‘Brave Frenchmen, rendez-vous!’ Cambronne replied: ‘S. . . !’ The French reader needing to be respected, the most beautiful word that a Frenchmen has perhaps uttered cannot be repeated.”

The language of Hugo is thus ridiculed while Chinese, in absentia, escapes such mockery. While French becomes a battleground upon which the rupture between language and its referent is ultimately laughable—merde is after all a signifier detached from its repressed signified, and even the signifier is repressed (oppressed) by social decorum—Chinese carries a gravity that is silently brushed aside.

Chinese also makes its absence felt through Muo’s childhood memories. He recalls a song sung by his father, tales told by his grandfather and a poem he wrote during his adolescence. The words, of course, are translated into French, although the texts themselves tell of the Cultural Revolution, mah-jong matches and Chinese brand-name cigarettes. This abundance of Chinese cultural referents without Chinese signifiers bespeaks the foreignness of an over-determined French text. As in the Freudian dream-content, Le Complexe de Di trivializes and condenses as it seeks to distort its longing to fill the original void. Chinese, because it is foreclosed, thus floods Dai Sijie’s French text with empty signifiers and pregnant concepts that somehow cannot seal the hole that gapes back at them.

The unvoiced weight of Muo’s mother tongue gains force in the conversations between characters, some given to us in the form of dialogues and others reported indirectly by the narrator. These conversations, most of which take place in Sichuan and Mandarin, are filtered through the French narration, replete with lofty commentary in parentheses. The narrative distance is exacerbated in these dialogues, and the double sense of loss through both translation and writing (Derridean écriture as différence) is masked by humor. In the example below a potentially serious telephone conversation in Sichuan is interrupted by Muo’s reflections on the French translation of the Chinese verb “to pedal”:
“La première fois que j’ai su que ça existait?”
“Oui, les homosexuels. On dirait que tu as peur du mot.”
“Avant l’âge de vingt-cinq ans, je ne l’ai jamais entendu prononcer.”
“Tu te souviens de la première fois?”
(Il pédalait. Péda le. Au bout de la ligne, Muo songe à cette expression française . . . .) (Dai 39)

“The first time that I knew that there existed such a thing?”
“Yes, homosexuals. You seem afraid of the word.”
“Before the age of twenty-five, I never heard the word pronounced.”
“Do you remember the first time?”
“Yes. . . . It was about two years before my wedding, but Jian and I were already engaged. . . . I got on the back of his bicycle, on the baggage carrier, as usual. He was pedaling. . . .”
(He was pedalling. Pedal. At the other end of the telephone line, Muo thinks about this French expression. . . .)9

This contemplative interjection on the narrator’s part is disturbing—first because it bears no actual relevance to the conversation at hand, and secondly because its comedic effect arises from a contrast with the gravity of the preceding conversation. The mention of French only serves to remind the reader that the conversation should have been taking place in Chinese and opposes the ludicrous function of one language to the crucial function of the other.

Desire, Power, Narrative Treachery

This “traître” (treacherous) quality of the French is an important element of Dai’s novel. On more than one level—linguistic but also meta-linguistic—we are not sure what or who can and cannot be taken seriously. Not only is the narrator

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9 Although the author (and Muo) might be thinking of a play here on “pedophile” or possibly on “pedaling” as “pedaling one’s wares,” there is no absolutely certain pun; rather, there is a diversion that is troubling precisely because the character’s homosexuality is a constant question in the novel.
hard to pin down, but so is Muo and to a certain degree even Judge Di. For one thing, the judge’s “complex” is very much China’s own complex, its disgruntled hunger for power. A brief conversation between Muo and the mayor’s son-in-law about sex in China goes like this:

“You mean to say that when this dirty judge wants to deflower a girl, it’s for his own vitality?”

“Of course, it is for his vitality, his power and his health. . . . When the Chinese make love, it is for two fundamental things, which have nothing to do with each other. The first is to have children. . . . The second is to nourish themselves, during the sexual act, with the energy of their partner. . . . Can you imagine the energy one gets from a virgin? That is where the world’s most precious vital energy lies.”

This helps to explain, both China’s overpopulation and its quest or lust for power to the Western reader. Likewise, the protagonist’s failings as a psychoanalyst are blamed on his sexual inexperience and virginity, for which he is berated by his friends: “Comment peux-tu oser parler de psychanalyse, alors que tu n’as jamais fais l’amour? [How dare you speak of psychoanalysis, when you have never made love?]” (Dai 73). The narrator also participates in this criticism but points, in parentheses, to Muo’s sexual inadequacy as the key to understanding and deciphering this character’s secret:
(Il est temps de trahir le secret de notre ami psychanalyste: en termes vulgaires, il est encore puceau, mais un puceau qui ne recherche pas les expériences, cela saute aux yeux quand on le voit en présence des femmes.) (Dai 188)

(It is time to betray the secret of our friend the psychoanalyst: in vulgar terms, he is still a virgin, but a virgin that does not look for experiences, this fact leaps to the eye when one sees him in the presence of women.)

Not only is this interjection in the middle of the novel awkward, but it seemingly questions the reader’s ability to interpret the text. It pretends to explain the secret of the novel by implying Muo’s latent homosexuality and/or sexual impotence. By the end of Le Complexe de Di, neither of these hypotheses is completely disproved, although they both remain part of the novel’s problematic. Within the narrative’s circular structure such revelations, on the part of the narrator, form a pivotal contradiction, and exert a force that is both centripetal and centrifugal. There thus emerges an “epistemological rupture” between the secret the novel claims to explain and the one it in fact conceals.¹⁰ In this way, Dai is able to salvage some hidden possibility for his native land, a hope that the novel simultaneously reveals and suppresses through a delicate balance and the evocative power of its subtle prose.

The French language betrays itself as much as it betrays the object of its representation, just as the novel’s themes are a constant repetition of scenes of betrayal: Men misleading women and women deceiving men; dishonest public officials and shrewd peasant people; the abuses of power and the virtues of weakness; the ambition of knowledge and the guile of ignorance. Therein lies the constant migration of Dai Sijie’s text—from confession to denial, from revelation to disguise. Permeating all else, there appears the question of the narrator’s (self-)betrayal, his (self-)deception or “disguise,” for closely tied to language and culture (French/Chinese) is the human need or desire for power and/or sex. In the various duplicities of theme and language, the narrator, the author by extension, gains a certain power vis-à-vis the reader, who can never “know” or “essentialize” him. In a sense the novel’s ironic (and to a degree self-parodying) duplicities are a kind of mystification of the “truth”—and thus of the narrator and the reader.

¹⁰ I refer here to Pierre Macherey’s elaboration on the Althusserian problematic (Macherey 95-97).
“Mystification” is a term used, among others, by Althusser in his Neo-Marxist critique of capitalist ideology. In re-reading those structures of production and exchange that Marx identifies as essential or absolute determinants of capitalist ideology and all the forms of “culture” associated with it, Althusser posits a whole in which the structure presents and dissimulates itself simultaneously. Marx’s empirical reading of the history of production separates the parts from the whole, while Althusser’s “demystifying” reading recognizes the structure as being nothing outside its parts, the cause nothing outside its effects. Thus we have another variation on the pervasive poststructuralist awareness of difference or lack in the “center,” but for Althusser this means that a given nation’s (society’s, culture’s) dominant ideology is a form of mystification: It pretends to be a kind of unifying, essentializing “form” where in fact it is nothing but its “parts” (or in Marxist terms the forces and relations of production that actually constitute it).

The “surface” of Dai’s text is laden with an over-abundance of commodities that cross national lines and signal the current economic reality of a global China. A remarkable number of brand-name products are mentioned throughout the novel and especially in its opening pages: Muo’s suitcase is a Delsey; there are Coca Cola cans rolling around the train; we are told of the abundance of various Chinese brand-name mineral-water bottles as well as French ones such as Evian. The clothing of the salesgirl Muo meets smells like Aigle soap, the scent of which brings back memories of his mother’s and grandmother’s hair. She is taking an Arc-en-ciel television as a gift to her father and recognizes the fine quality of Muo’s Western shoes—which she proceeds to steal by the end of the chapter—by their strong Western soles. Muo consults a Larousse dictionary as he takes his notes on the train. In the next chapter, he remembers a comical anecdote involving China’s first brand-name washing machine, Vent d’Est. The hotel receptionist in the following chapter wears Nikes. There are references to American films, the Far West, Clint Eastwood and Jodie Foster, and then Mao’s Little Red Book. Later the narrator mentions a pack of Jin Sha Jiang, translated in parentheses as Fleuve des Sables d’Or (River of the Golden Sands) cigarettes. Another virgin whom Muo meets on a train holds onto a six-pack of Heineken for dear life; again, the beer is but a present taken by a poor working girl to her peasant father back home.

Thus the novel is obviously critical, satirical of China’s commodity fetishism, of the shallowness and mindlessness of a dominant nouveau-capitalist ideology. This ideology is demystified: What only appears to be a totalizing cultural form
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Once Western, now Chinese is in fact nothing but a conglomeration of many fragmented (and more or less meaningless) parts. Yet if Dai is demystifying this quintessentially Western ideology that has come to somehow replace traditional Chinese culture, he also makes a further, mystifying move. For this late-capitalist language of signs and slogans, this superficial (literally on-the-visual-surface) ideology of advertising and desire has not only changed from being Western to Chinese; it has become global. Thus rather than taking a stand either on the side of (traditional) China or on that of the (postmodern) West, Dai mystifies both in the mind of the reader.

Dai presents us with an impenetrable and indefinable linguistic-cultural-ideological melting-pot, at the heart of which lies the narrator’s ultimately undecidable application of Western theories to a culture where they somehow cannot fit yet must inevitably be made to fit. These self-consciously complex theories (of desire and exchange, language and power, sexuality and capital) are after all originally an important expression or embodiment of Western ideology and culture. They constitute an ideology which now, precisely because it is intellectually fashionable to do so (marked as they are of intellectual sophistication much like the French language itself), not only becomes Chinese, but also global.

At the same time Dai shows us the other side, the appropriation of the mysterious and exotic East (with its profound and mystical philosophies and impenetrable language) by the contemporary West and more specifically France. Accordingly, the reception or potential understanding of the philosophy-ideology of the “Other” is complicated by linguistic and cultural boundaries; and we are left with a global “theory” or “discourse” of the Other that is deliberately rendered contradictory.

Conclusion: Mystification and Self-Promotion

Dai’s first novel, Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise, earned him international recognition, and he was invited to produce the filmic version of the novel no sooner it was published: This after many of his prior films on Chinese culture and life in France had met with repeated failure. With Le Complexe de Di’s sarcastic criticism of and humorous look at capitalist China, it seems that Dai has found his own recipe for success within the French literary market (Two publications by Gallimard are clearly nothing to scoff at). In an interview after receiving the Prix Femina for his Complexe de Di, Dai noted that it is mainly a satire of present-day capitalist China, a country which, as Kraimps puts it, “abounds
with new and improved products and devices and yet is caught in the vestiges of a corrupt and antiquated system of governance” (“Recontre avec Dai Sijie”). Yet as we have seen, while China’s first steps towards a capitalist market economy is an important theme in the novel, just as the country’s new relationship to consumerism is the target of much criticism and satirical humor, Dai also moves “beyond” this theme.

Thus in the interview Dai does not try to account for the novel’s commodification in the West as a French-language text about China given China’s increasingly important role in the global economy. Indeed, as Rosalind Silvester has argued, Dai has shown himself to be an “exuberantly pro-French” migrant writer (372) who has found a way to appeal to Western sensibilities while recounting stories about his native China. In other words, Dai Sijie is in effect selling himself as a writer worthy of inclusion in the French canon—and it is no surprise that many of the French articles and interviews on Dai in the months surrounding the novel’s publication praise him for his mastery of the French language and French literature (372). It is evident that Dai intends to prove to his French and Francophone audience, that he can indeed compete with contemporary French writers.

If the profusion of late-capitalist (or nouveau-capitalist) brand names mentioned earlier is striking in the narrative, one might say that another form of mystification takes place in the very eloquence of the French writing. Dai Sijie’s novel is a carefully crafted French text, ripe with rhetorical figures, genre experimentation and various tributes to celebrated French and Western authors, poets and thinkers. Dai not only shows off his knowledge of Freud and Lacan, but also pays homage to Hugo, Baudelaire and Flaubert. He honors Verlaine, Valéry and Mallarmé and cites the Bible, Joyce and Confucius. Even in mockery, Dai makes certain that his readers are aware of his vast knowledge of literature, his familiarity with the founding texts of modern French culture as well as China’s celebrated literary heritage.

Dai’s *Le Complexe de Di* is then a playfully complex performance, one that parodies both China and France as Other and thereby complicates the (cross-cultural, geopolitical, global) politics between them. In exploring the limitations of Western theories within Chinese culture, as well as the limits of traditional Chinese thought when perceived from a contemporary Western (European, French) perspective, Dai’s writing evades all absolutes where East-West relations are concerned, leaving us only with the text’s playful “undecidability.” The deepest “secret” of the novel seems after all to be the masterfully hidden paradox or self-contradiction at its core.
Yet on a more cynical note we might also say, thinking again of Althusser, that Dai’s writing produces an object all its own, a form of knowledge as object of production which, contrary to the novelist’s claims in interviews, has little to do with a rediscovery of modern day Chinese culture. Rather, the novel is a brilliant commodification of China’s current economic and political situation, packaged in articulate, expressive French prose. *Le Complexe de Di* surrounds China with an atmosphere of suspicion from a Western point of view, thereby reinforcing China’s inferiority complex, and the author’s style betrays a refusal of otherness even as the novel’s content ultimately relies upon the marketability of China as Other. This then would be the deepest, darkest secret of the novel, if not also that of its author.

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**About the Author**

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[Received 5 May 2008; accepted 23 July 2008; revised 27 Aug. 2008]