



Weekly Briefing

Romania political briefing:
Romanian Perspectives on Translating China in 2023
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Romanian Perspectives on Translating China in 2023

Introduction

The process of translating Chinese literature into Romanian has garnered significant attention and examination within modern Romanian society. At a first sight, this could be due to the fact that comprehending China and its culture is crucial for cultural exchanges and the notions associated, along with the significance of Romanian translations in facilitating enduring literary interactions between Europe and China. The discussions pertaining to this subject have persisted for the past 74 years in Romania, emphasizing the contrasting characteristics of social and intellectual history. Therefore, studying Chinese translations in Romanian entails analyzing the development of concepts and theories in the action of humans, leading to a deeper comprehension of intellectual history in this particular setting.

In recent decades, discussions in this field have centered around placing historical events and changes in a new context, as well as reassessing the social, political, and economic transformations that have taken place. Intellectual history is an interdisciplinary field that examines the development and transformation of ideas and intellectual traditions over time, including in modern and, perhaps even more, in contemporary times, thus becoming relevant for the conscribed debate of this briefing. It serves as a central focal point for the discussion of the evolution of Chinese translations into contemporary Romanian, beginning with the 1950s – the period of “institutionalizing” Chinese studies in Cold War Romania¹ –, and continuing with generations of Romanian sinologists that have followed suit, respectively.

Furthermore, it succinctly analyzes the influence of intellectuals on the evolution of these *translating* customs and tendencies, and their connection to broader societal, political, and cultural changes in both Romania and China. An illustrative example of the study of ideas in translating China is the translations conducted by the initial cohort of Romanian sinologists who pursued their studies in China. Notable scholars such as Anna Eva Budura and Toni Radian have made significant contributions to the field of Chinese history, diplomacy, and culture by means of their translations. Hence, their research and adjacent translations of Chinese works illustrate that intellectual history transcends political occurrences and economic institutions, centering on the domain of concepts and the development of intellectual legacies on multiple

¹ For further reference, see Radu Sava, “Institutionalizing ‘Chinese Studies’ in Cold War Romania. An Empirical Retrospective into the 1950s” in *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2023, pp. 187-191.

levels, including (but not limited to) the overall knowledge related to China and the Chinese world, as well as the long-term literary exchanges between Europe and China.

In other words, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Romania and China, Ionela Staicu (Voicu), a Romanian sinologist, has initiated a project entitled “Buchina” that focuses on the presentation of translations from Chinese into Romanian, achieved and published by Romanian sinologists. The objective of the project is to facilitate cultural exchange, intellectual growth, and dialogue by showcasing Chinese literature and the works of Romanian sinologists in an *up-to-date* form or *closer-to-date* format. The inaugural event showcased an exhibition of 70 books translated from Chinese to Romanian, symbolizing the 70th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations, celebrated throughout 2019. And despite the obstacles faced in 2020 due to the subsequent worldwide health crisis, there has been a significant increase in the publication of Chinese to Romanian translations in recent years. These Chinese-Romanian and Romanian-Chinese translations encompass a wide range of subjects including cultural studies, politics, economics, and literature. Ultimately, “Buchina”, as discussed in the following paragraphs, seeks to commemorate the ongoing growth in the publication and reception of Chinese-translated literature in Romania, specifically in anticipation of the constant deepening of interest that has developed over the past three to four years in Romania, and more generally, in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of Romanian-Chinese diplomatic relations in 2024.

Some considerations on the general *State of the Art*

Translating China – in the sense of translating works of Chinese authors from various disciplines, most notable literature, irrespective of genres – is a matter of scrutiny in contemporary Romanian from the perspective of overall knowledge related to China and the Chinese world, on the one hand, as well as from the perspective of the role Romanian translations have in long-term literary exchanges between Europe and China, on the other hand. As such, these two senses remain a critical component, most evident for the debate of this briefing. Therefore, it is essential to begin by asserting that debates are often antithetical in social terms and from the perspective of intellectual history, as the empirical, transformative experience of *translating China* in Romanian demonstrates for the past 74 years.

When discussing Chinese translations in Romanian, it is vital to consider the role of literary exchanges in cultural and educational cooperation by focusing on the evolution of concepts and theories in the actions of humans, as this can contribute to a better understanding of *applied* intellectual history in the case of Chinese translations in Romanian. For the past two

to three decades, debates in this direction have become recurrent, some of which imply a *re*-contextualization of past events and evolutions, while others remain subject to ontological and empirical *re*-evaluations, given the specific social, political, and economic transformations that have taken shape. In this regard, it is equally important to note that intellectual history is one sort of historical inquiry that seeks to address the issue of progression and evolution of thinking, of ideas and intellectual endeavors throughout history, including contemporary history, focusing on the contribution of thinkers or scholars to the development of (intellectual) traditions, in this matter. Subsequently, intellectual history, being an interdisciplinary field, frequently entails the examination of intellectual advancements and the wider social, political or cultural transformations, as well as their interrelation entanglement.

Undoubtedly, one of the most relevant examples related to the study of ideas in *translating China*, including the origins of certain ideas, traditions, cultural beliefs, transformations and impact on society and individuals over time are those translations forwarded by the first generation of Romanian students in New China². For example, Anna Eva Budura (born 1931) is one of the foremost Romanian sinologists, having significant contributions in the study of China, particularly in terms of history, diplomacy, and culture³. Another example from the very same generation is Toni Radian (1929-1990) whose translations manage to focus and bring, for the first time in Romanian, Chinese works related *inter alia* to mythology or classical literature. Beyond doubt, the experience of the first generation of Romanian sinologists, their achievements and contributions to Romanian-Chinese relations since 1949, and their subsequent efforts of *translating China* are a confirmation that intellectual history looks beyond political events and economic establishments. It is, in this respect, that intellectual history indeed portrays the realm of ideas through the exploration of how scholars, thinkers, philosophers and writers have acknowledged the establishment and – advancement of *the* – evolution of intellectual traditions throughout time.

Considering these evolutions, it is comparable significant to take note of the fact that *translating China* in Romanian has become a continuous tradition and is now part of an intellectual history that has made substantial contributions to long-term literary exchanges between Europe and China, despite the fact that one might not be able to depict this at a first glance. Nonetheless, although the intellectual landscape and the *application* of intellectual history in the context of *translating China* into Romanian are undergoing continuous changes,

² *Ibidem*.

³ See Radu Sava, “70 Years of Romanian-Chinese Academic Exchanges (1950-2020): Dialogues with Professor Dr. Anna Eva Budura” in *Romanian Review of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1-2, 2020, pp. 243-262.

the endeavor of *translating China* remains a focus for successive generations of renowned Romanian sinologists, such as Ioan Budura, Florentina Vișan, Constantin Lupeanu, Eufrosina Dorobanțu, Luminița Bălan and Mugar Zlotea. In this regard, translating per se holds significant reasons for continuous cultural exchange(s), mutual understanding, intellectual enrichment, literary heritage, and holds value for persistent dialogue, education for Romanian-Chinese bilateral relations as well as for European-Chinese relations.

A ‘Made in Romania’ project for China: *Buchina*

In 2019, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Romania and China, Ionela Staicu (Voicu), a young Romanian sinologist, established a new project dedicated to Chinese translations into Romanian. The inaugural event served as a platform for cultural exchange(s), intellectual enrichment and dialogue, specifically focused on Chinese literature and Romanian sinologists, scholars specializing in Chinese studies whose works have been published throughout time in Romanian, this being of particular interest, given that Romanian is spoken worldwide by almost 30 million people⁴. Hosted by the National Museum of Romanian Literature – with the support from the University of Bucharest, the Confucius Institute at the University of Bucharest as well as the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Bucharest, various publishing houses and media outlets –, the inaugural event has attracted a considerable, interested audience.



Figure 1. The logo of the “Buchina” project. Source: Ionela Voicu.

⁴ For further reference, see Uniunea Latină [The Latin Union], https://www.unilat.org/DPEL/Promotion/L_Odysee_des_langues/Roumain/ro, (n.d), accessed 29 December 2023.

Entitled Buchina – and stylized as $\#$ *uchina* –, the event, according to Ionela Staicu (Voicu), has a “distinctive script”, with experts in – and speakers of – the Chinese language recognizing the character 书 (*shū*), meaning *book*, in the letter *B*⁵. With this interaction, Ionela Staicu’s (Voicu) aim is to “emphasize the convergence of languages and cultures”, as well as the ambition of “the Chinese book for global recognition, analogous to the English book”⁶. Therefore, as the same Ionela Staicu (Voicu) underscores, “Buchina” refers to the “inclination of Romanian sinology to situate [itself] and assimilate the culture of others”⁷, particularly given that *Buc* is colloquially used in Romanian to refer to Romania’s Capital City of Bucharest. In this train of thoughts, the 2019 inaugural event featured an exhibition of 70 books that were translated from Chinese to Romanian, thus the number being symbolic for the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Romanian-Chinese diplomatic relations. In addition to this, it is noteworthy to highlight the fact that Bucharest is by no choice a major economic and cultural center in Central and Eastern Europe, let alone Romania, especially due to the fact that the 2015-2025 Bucharest Cultural and Creative Strategy promotes “culture as a producer of sustainable economic development and social cohesion”⁸.

Furthermore, being assembled on a remarkable assortment of both classic and contemporary translations from Chinese to Romanian, alongside a numerous renowned scholars, educators, and translators specializing in Chinese, the inaugural event was centered around the concept of *double seven*. According to Ionela Staicu (Voicu), this holds significance in Chinese culture and represents the *joy of meeting*, and “unlike the Chinese folklore about chicken tails”, the concept focused on the pages of books, serving “as a gathering [platform] that brought together different cultures and individuals” together, solely on the basis of *books* or – as framed by the initiator of “Buchina” in her own words –

“As translators, we strive [through books] to accurately convey their significance within the context of our own [Romanian] language and culture. Indeed, if we examine these translations, we can observe a consensus among experts that has been formed spontaneously due to the fact that they employ specific strategies in the areas where differences are negotiated, resulting in linguistic and cultural equivalences of high quality. In my opinion, these translations exhibit a cohesive stylistic coherence. The

⁵ Author interview with Ionela Staicu (Voicu), Bucharest: 02 November 2023.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Strategia Culturală și Creativă a Bucureștiului [The Cultural and Creative Strategy of Bucharest] (2015-2025), <https://www.postmodernism.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Strategia-culturala-si-creativa-a-Bucurestiului-2015-modificat18.03.2016.pdf>, 2015, p. 64, accessed 30 December 2023.

Romanian language used for the translations is exceptionally exquisite and abundant [...] There is a remarkable balance between staying true to the original text and effectively bridging the cultural gap with China, thereby making these texts relatable and embedding them within a stylistic framework that is familiar, this unity also extending to a shared set of values between Romanians and Chinese”⁹.

After launching the project in 2019, Ionela Staicu (Voicu) has decided to extend it and to continue “Buchina”. This is, once again, of particular interest – and, therefore, interesting in connection to the general *State of the Art of translating China* in Romanian – because discussions in this regard revolve around another important milestone for continuous cultural exchange(s), mutual understanding, intellectual enrichment and literary heritage, all embedded in Romanian-Chinese relations and its subsequent *Romanian perspective(s) on translating China*. To rephrase this, Ionela Staicu (Voicu) has pointed out on successive occasions several aspects connected to *translating China* in Romania. First, the unity of the inaugural concept is evident at an intellectual level and at the level of ideas. Thus, it is worth nothing that, as previously mentioned in the Romanian specialized literature¹⁰, “with the exception of the distinguished sinologists who had pursued their studies in China”¹¹, all other Romanian translators who work directly with Chinese texts have been educated at the University of Bucharest.

Second, “despite the scarcity of cultural events” during 2020, “numerous” translations from Chinese had been published in Romanian in the last three years, culminating with an *in-person recalibration* of “Buchina” in 2023¹². Consequently, this year’s exhibition on China presented 23 translations from Chinese to Romanian, “the bookshelf being quite extensive, considering the challenging circumstances...”¹³ Hence, Ionela Staicu (Voicu) had reviewed the latest translations, observing that “the majority of books” were published “in the field of cultural

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Radu Sava, “Postfață: China din noi înșine... Încotro?” [trans. Afterword: China from Ourselves... Where to?] in Anna Eva Budura, *Șaptezeci de Primăveri și Toamne cu China* [trans. *Seventy Springs and Autumns with China*], Bucharest: Top Form, 2021, pp. 303-307; Radu Sava, Review of Anna Eva Budura, *Șaptezeci de Primăveri și Toamne cu China* (Top Form, 2021) in *Hiperboreea*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 287-290, <https://doi.org/10.5325/hiperboreea.9.2.0287>.

¹¹ Author interview with Ionela Staicu (Voicu), Bucharest: 02 November 2023.

¹² Nora Zainea, *2023 nian 11 yue 20 ri: Hanxue jia Younala Woyiku*, in *Radio România Internațional*, 20 November 2023, https://www.rrr.ro/zh_cn/2023%E5%B9%B411%E6%9C%8820%E6%97%A5_%E6%B1%89%E5%AD%A6%E5%AE%B6%E5%B0%A4%E5%A8%9C%E6%8B%89_%E6%B2%83%E4%BC%8A%E5%BA%93-2694156, accessed 29 December 2023.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

studies” (9 volumes), representing “a continuation of the series on key concepts from Chinese thought and culture”, for instance, or books on “Chinese auspicious images [...] highly beneficial and valuable for both the general public and professionals”, including books on politics and economics (3 volumes) or books on studying Chinese – Chinese for beginners, everyday Chinese and business Chinese (3 volumes)¹⁴. Furthermore, for the past two years (2021-2023), translations comprised literary works (8 volumes), primarily consisting of contemporary literature, most notably *The Travels of Lao Can* (translated by Florentina Vișan) and *The Art of War* (translated by Mugur Zlotea), the latter representing the first direct translation of Sun Zi from Classical Chinese in Romanian.

Finally, given the conceptual importance and significance of “Buchina” since its launch in 2019, in light of yet another significant milestone for Romanian-Chinese relations in 2024, that of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the project aims to mark the continuous significant increase in the publication and popularity of Chinese translated literature in Romania, in stark contrast to the scenario a decade or two before¹⁵. However, Ionela Staicu (Voicu) believes, on the one hand, that the majority of the books available are translations from English. Romanian novels, on the other hand, serve the purpose of promoting Chinese civilization to the international community. Chinese literary masterpieces are immediately translated from Chinese into Romanian, which places the translation of the English works in second position¹⁶, the significance of Romanian translations in facilitating sustained literary interactions between Europe and China becoming more than evident.

Some final ideas...

Translating China into Romanian has been a critical component of the overall knowledge related to China and the Chinese world in contemporary Romanian society. The role of Romanian translations in long-term literary exchanges between Europe and China cannot be underestimated, given the current tendencies, as well as the perspective of Romanian-translated Chinese works. The study of ideas in *translating China*, including the origins of certain ideas, traditions, and cultural beliefs, has made significant contributions to understanding the intellectual history of both countries and their respective cultures. Thus, the first generation of Romanian sinologists, such as Anna Eva Budura and Toni Radian, played a crucial role in translating Chinese works into Romanian and fostering Romanian-Chinese relations. Their

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Nora Zainea, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

efforts demonstrate that intellectual history goes beyond political events and economic establishments, focusing on the evolution of intellectual traditions throughout time.

Subsequently, *translating China* in Romanian has become a continuous tradition and has contributed to cultural exchanges, mutual understanding, intellectual enrichment, and bilateral relations. In this regard, the “Buchina” project, initiated by Ionela Staicu (Voicu), is a proof of the ongoing efforts in *translating China* into Romanian, emphasizing the convergence of languages and cultures, while promoting the European recognition of Chinese books. Beyond any doubt, as the project continues and as 2024 approaches – a year throughout which Romania and China will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations –, “Buchina” aims to further increase the publication and popularity of Chinese authors from various disciplines, most notable literature, irrespective of genres. This milestone reflects the significant progress made in Romanian-Chinese relations, in terms of translation(s), and the continuous cultural exchange between people. Nonetheless, *translating China* into Romanian is an ongoing and important endeavor that contributes to cultural understanding, intellectual enrichment, and bilateral relations.

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