

NEW DEVELOPMENTS OF CHINESE INTERPRETATION OF FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE'S LINGUISTIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

The introduction of Saussure's linguistic ideas in China began in the thirties thanks to scholars such as Wang Li, Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao and Chen Wangdao. They were the first to disseminate and apply to the analysis of their language the constructs included in the *Cours de linguistique générale*. Masini (1985) has thoroughly investigated this issue, pointing out how troubled the first phase of Saussurean studies in China was. Completed in the 1960s but published only in 1980, the first translation of the *Cours* made by Gao Mingkai marked a new beginning of Saussurean studies in China, as confirmed not only by the debate raised by the reading of this work but also by the translations of other sources which have made the portrait of the Swiss linguist more accurate (Péi 2003; Zhào 2005; Mǎ 2008; Romagnoli 2007; 2012). Three Chinese translations of the *Cours*, several monographs on Saussure, hundreds of academic papers are now available to Chinese readers, whose linguistics knowledge and linguistic background have also changed compared to the first decades of the last century. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the most recent development of the debate regarding Saussurean linguistics in China. In order to do so, two issues are taken into account: the critical stances expressed by Chinese scholars toward the interpretation of the ideas of the Swiss linguist in China and the latest development of the debate on Saussurean semiology.

Keywords

Semiology, arbitrariness, Saussure in China

Résumé

Les idées linguistiques de Saussure ont commencé à être introduites en Chine dans les années trente sous l'impulsion de chercheurs tels que Wang Li, Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao et Chen Wangdao. Ceux-ci ont été les premiers à diffuser et à appliquer à l'analyse de leur langue les concepts issus du *Cours de linguistique générale*. Dans le cadre d'une étude détaillée, Masini (1985) a souligné la complexité de cette première phase des études saussuriennes en Chine. La première traduction du *Cours*, terminée dès les années 1960 mais publiée uniquement en 1980, est due à Gao Mingkai. Elle a marqué un nouveau départ pour les études saussuriennes en Chine, comme le confirment non seulement le débat suscité par cette traduction mais également la publication des traductions d'autres textes qui ont permis une appréhension plus juste du linguiste suisse (Péi 2003; Zhào 2005; Mǎ 2008; Romagnoli 2007; 2012). Trois traductions chinoises du *Cours*, plusieurs monographies sur Saussure, des centaines d'articles académiques sont maintenant disponibles pour les lecteurs chinois, dont les connaissances et l'expérience linguistiques ont également évolué par rapport à celles des lecteurs des premières décennies du siècle dernier. L'objectif du présent article est de présenter les évolutions les plus récentes du débat sur la linguistique saussurienne en Chine. Pour ce faire, deux questions sont prises en compte: les positions critiques exprimées par les chercheurs chinois à l'égard de l'interprétation des idées du linguiste suisse en Chine et les derniers développements du débat sur la sémiologie saussurienne.

Mots-clés

Sémiologie, arbitraire, Saussure en Chine

INTRODUCTION

Unlike his brother, the sinologist Léopold de Saussure, Ferdinand never went to China and showed interest in Chinese only in the last period of his life. Nevertheless, the ideas expressed by his lectures deeply influenced the first Chinese linguists who studied in France during the first decades of the twentieth century. Scholars such as Wang Li, Gao Mingkai, Fang Guangtao and Chen Wangdao were the first to disseminate and apply to the analysis of their language the constructs included in the *Cours de linguistique générale*.

The interpretation of Saussurean linguistic ideas by Chinese scholars partly reflects the development of modern linguistics in China: if the reception of the *Cours* during the decades around the foundation of the People's Republic was deeply influenced by the political circumstances, the reading of the text, in recent years, certainly shows a distance from the initial criticisms imbued with ideological stances¹.

Chinese scholars' interest in Saussurean linguistic ideas is confirmed by a simple query in the National library online catalogue and in the China Academic journals database (CNKI): the keyword *Suǒxù'ěr* 索绪尔 (Saussure) brings up more than 1,500 results in the National library and 1,925 titles in the database². Among them, we find 20 monographs, 1,400 journal papers, 61 proceedings papers and 28 dissertations. As reported elsewhere, three different translations of the *CLG* are available in Chinese (two from French and one from English), two versions of the third course have been published (one from French and the other from English), and the manuscripts published in 2002 in French have been also translated into Chinese. This wealth of sources and studies confirms how Saussure's linguistics is still discussed in China³.

Having analyzed Chinese reception of Saussurean linguistics in the past three decades, I claim that Chinese literature on this issue can hardly provide an original contribution to the reading of the Swiss linguist but can surely reflect the development of Chinese linguistics itself, showing a shift from the previously investigated fields and providing a measure of the awareness expressed by several scholars on the state of Chinese linguistic research.

1 See Masini (1985) for the first stage of Saussurean study in China; Romagnoli (2007) for the comparison of Saussurean terminology in Chinese translations and Romagnoli (2012) for a full account of the interpretation of Saussure in China.

2 The catalogue is available at www.nlc.cn (last access: December 2017). CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) is a database which includes different types of sources (journals, doctoral dissertations, masters' theses, proceedings, newspapers, yearbooks etc.) widely used for academic research.

3 See Romagnoli (2017) for an updated account of the Saussurean sources available in Chinese.

As reported elsewhere, Chinese scholars have constantly devoted attention to linguistic phenomena, but the way they deal with them differs sharply from the Western system: the same features exhibited by Chinese language and the close relationship between the knowledge of written classical texts and the exertion of political power, have to be taken into account in the analysis of the reasons why only certain fields of linguistic investigation were preferred by Chinese scholars. Instead of being interested in general, theoretical issues, they have traditionally devoted attention to the interpretation of ancient texts and to the development of Chinese writing system. This is why lexicography, etymology and philology blossomed whereas less attention was paid to issues such as the origin of language or the comparison among different linguistic systems.

The features and tendencies of linguistic investigation in China partly explain the intrinsic distance between the themes investigated and the methods adopted by general linguists and the interests and outcomes of Chinese linguists.

Although the latter are more and more conscious of the complexity of Saussurean linguistic thought and of the problems posed by the making of what has been for too long the only Saussurean source, that is the *Cours*, a few papers express some doubts about the quality of Chinese interpretation of the Swiss linguist. In this contribution, I will start from these critical stances toward Chinese interpretation of the *Cours*; then I will report and comment the contributions recently appeared about Saussurean linguistics in China, focusing on two different yet related aspects, the first principle of sign and the notion of linguistic system. This part is followed by a brief section which describes how recent debate still reflects tendencies of the past, followed by a conclusive paragraph. The main sources of this work are articles published in Chinese academic journals starting from 2012. For the debate developed before this date the reader is referred to [Zhào \(2005\)](#) and [Romagnoli \(2012\)](#).

1 THE MISINTERPRETATION OF SAUSSURE IN CHINA

The good state of Saussurean research in China is confirmed by the publication of various and copious contributions of Chinese linguists which include not only papers regarding the notions proposed by the Swiss linguist but also reports on the Chinese interpretation of the *Cours* with the attempt to assess how long is the way to correctly read the text in the Middle Kingdom.

A remarkable novelty of Saussurean research, emerged in the last two decades, is the presence of voices more and more critical toward Chinese interpretation: according to these linguists, the theoretical constructs included in the *Cours* and in other Saussurean sources are of general validity and include also the case of Chinese, which does represent an exception.

According to [Xiāo and Lǚ \(2013\)](#), Chinese scholars do not properly account for the notions of signifier and signified and tend to disregard the core of Saussurean view of language, that is the semiological dimension. This is confirmed by the usage of the terms sound and meaning (respectively *yǔyīn* 语音 and *yìyì* 意义) instead of *signifier* and *signified* (respectively *néngzhǐ* 能指 and *suǒzhǐ* 所指) which can be found in handbooks of general linguistics widely used in China⁴. According to these scholars, the improper usage of terminology does not help in grasping Saussurean view of sign. In particular, the signifier is wrongly given a concrete, material dimension thus negating the formal view of language expressed by the Swiss linguist. The construct of linguistic sign is linked to the notion of value and system of values, whose entities define themselves thanks to their opposition and differences. Interpreting the signifier as a concrete sound does entail the view of language as a nomenclature, a list of labels to be assigned to preexisting concepts, whereas Saussure's first principle of sign, arbitrariness, goes far beyond this view. Xiāo, and Lǚ claim also that, in interpreting Saussure, Chinese linguists have been deeply influenced on one hand by Bloomfield's works, on the other hand by Pavlov's theory of language, thus providing an empirical reading of Saussurean semiology.

In [Zhang and Zhang \(2014\)](#) we find a periodization of Saussurean studies in China divided into four stages: introducing Saussure (1930–65), explaining and evaluating Saussure (1977–89), re-explaining and re-evaluating Saussure (1990–98) and focussing on arbitrariness and iconicity (1999–present). This periodization on the one hand reflects the development of Chinese modern linguistics, on the other hand corresponds to the publication in different decades of the Chinese translations of Saussurean sources⁵.

Zhang Yanfei and Zhang Shaojie are the authors of a recent paper, significantly entitled “How and why Saussure is misread in China”, which is one of the few published in English by Chinese scholars. The aim of the work is to describe and account for misunderstandings concerning Saussure, which relate to three thematic nodes: *langue* and *parole*, arbitrariness and motivation, and arbitrariness and iconicity. As regards the first issue, the two authors claim that “far from neglecting a linguistics of *parole*, what Saussure develops in his lecture series is a linguistics of *langue* which is the cornerstone of a linguistics of *parole*” ([Zhang and Zhang](#)

4 For the Chinese version of Saussurean terminology the main reference is the translation of CLG made by Gao Mingkai in the sixties and published in 1980. Nevertheless, different renderings have also been proposed, such as included in the Chinese version edited by Pei Wen and published in 2002. See [Romagnoli \(2012\)](#), p. 52-57.

5 Zhang Shaojie is the author of the Chinese translation of Saussure's *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics* based on the bilingual version (English and French) edited by Harris and Komatsu (1993). For a comparison of this version and the other existing Chinese translation see [Romagnoli \(2012\)](#), p. 77-90.

2014, p. 154). The authors are not the first to stress the importance of the analysis of *parole*: since the nineties, Cen Yunqiang has published several papers concerning the origin, essence and meaning of *parole*, whose domain implies the exploration of different branches of linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics and text linguistics⁶.

According to Zhang and Zhang, Chinese scholars tend to ignore the role of relative arbitrariness and to underline the role of motivation in language, which was actually also considered by Saussure. These scholars, influenced by the cognitivist paradigm, usually support the thesis of 'iconicity', but the perspective they depart from is strongly limited by a misunderstanding of the terminology relating to this issue: "The most serious problem is that some Chinese scholars consider 'iconic', 'symbolic', and 'motivated' as the same, all of which are contradictory to Saussure's arbitrariness" (Zhang and Zhang 2014, p. 160)⁷. In addition to the observations regarding the reading of the *CLG*, Zhang Yanfei and Zhang Shaojie also specify other reasons to explain why Saussure is misread in China. The first relates to the influence exerted by cultural and political circumstances; secondly, the Chinese educational system has to be taken into account and in particular, the lack of competence in French which prevents many scholars from reading the original sources; finally, Chinese scholars rely mainly on the *CLG*, without taking into account other sources nor studies authored by western scholars. To support the authors' point, we can surely confirm that the vast majority of contributions proposed by Chinese scholars are written in Chinese and published on Chinese journals thus limiting the circulation of their reading of Saussurean linguistics to Chinese readership.

The conclusion drawn by Zhang and Zhang in this paper implies an evaluation of Chinese approach toward Saussurean linguistics: "We think that our future research should be oriented towards Saussure's own manuscripts. Otherwise, it will be hard for us to achieve more progress in research on Saussure" (Zhang and Zhang 2014, p. 164).

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE DEBATE ON SAUSSURE'S SEMIOLOGY

2.1 *The first principle of the sign: notion, terms and debate*

The 100th anniversary of Saussure's death in 2013 represented an occasion also for Chinese scholars to provide new readings and interpretations of his ideas. Among the passages most lively discussed by Chinese scholars, we find the first principle of the sign, arbitrariness, and the notion of linguistic system.

6 See Romagnoli (2012), p. 96–98.

7 See next section for an understanding of the debate on Saussurean semiology in China.

As for the first issue, Xǔ's (1988) proposal to underline the role of iconicity (*xiàngsìxìng* 象似性) instead of arbitrariness (*rènyìxìng* 任意性) in language has been supported by many scholars in China, starting from Shěn (1993), who focuses on the syntactic level and follows the analysis provided by Haiman (1985)⁸. More recently, Wáng Yín, one of the most radical supporter of iconicity who has regularly published papers on this issue since the late nineties, has underlined, and praised, the philosophical foundations of Saussurean ideas starting from the relationship between language and thought⁹. If the appraisal shown by the Chinese scholar toward the Swiss linguist apparently marks a distance from the past, following his analysis we still find a partial acceptance, and comprehension, of Saussurean linguistics. As we know, the *Cours* states that no concept exists before the appearance of language. The conclusions drawn by Wáng are that: 1) language makes thought clear; 2) language is itself thought therefore existence; 3) language reflects reality and shares the same structure of world; 4) language is itself the subject, not an instrument¹⁰. If it is certainly arguable whether the *Cours* implies Wáng's deductions, the Chinese scholar is undoubtedly right in stressing the novelty of Saussure's notion of *relation* and *value* in linguistic system. Saussure took into account the internal elements of language and emphasizes the priority of this perspective in analyzing language: according to Wáng, this view not only influenced the development of phonology, semiology and literature but also shaped schools of linguistics apparently distant from structuralism such as the functionalist one because the notions of *cohesion* and *coherence* can be explained only within the text as a system¹¹.

Another analysis about Saussure's passage on the aprioristic definition of language is provided by Lǐ (2016), who linked the view of the Swiss linguist to some philosophical constructs proposed by Kant and partially goes against the stance expressed by Wáng (2013) quoted above. According to Lǐ, to grasp the notions of arbitrariness and unity of the linguistic sign it is necessary to start from the formal view of language and ignore the level of substance, of materiality. This claim surely marks a distance from the criticisms raised during the first phase of the reception of Saussure, when the abstractness of his view and the distance from a material dimension were interpreted as strong limits. In this respect, the Chinese versions of the *Cours* do not help readers to correctly understand this view of

8 A detailed report on the debate about arbitrariness in China can be found in Romagnoli (2012).

9 Wáng Yín is the author of the monograph significantly entitled *On the iconicity of linguistic sign – challenge and integration to Saussure's theory of arbitrariness* (Wáng 1999).

10 In the last decade several papers have been published in Chinese about Saussure's philosophical background and the relationship between his view of language and previous or contemporary schools. Romagnoli (2017) reports the main contributions on this issue.

11 See Halliday and Hasan (1976). Wáng (2010) focuses instead on the "dialogue" and possible integration of the notion of *language* and *text* in Saussure and Bakhtin's views.

language. According to Lǐ's analysis, the terms for *substance*, *entity*, *reality*, *identity* and *material* have been not differentiated in the Chinese translation, where we find only *shí* 实体. The two morphemes this word is made of, *shí* (real) and *tǐ* (body), can be easily linked to the notion of material reality of the experience, thus going far from the purely abstract notion of linguistic sign implied by the *Cours*.

According to Yáng (2013), the consideration of the individual and collective aspect is another important contribution which has shaped the development of modern linguistics. As for the first principle of sign, Yáng, wondering if we can still accept its validity, takes into account the different levels of signs and claims that if we consider the single morphemes no motivation can be found whereas if we only combine two or more morphemes a syntagmatic rule can be applied and thus motivation occurs: the longer is the linguistic unit, the stronger is the motivation. Without quoting the case of Chinese, as other scholars do, Yáng expresses a cautious stance in this respect: "We can say that linguistic sign is arbitrary, but it is arguable to claim that arbitrariness is the fundamental feature of the system of signs or of the sign" (Yáng 2013, p. 23).

As pointed before, Chinese scholars are more and more aware of the problems posed by the compilation of the *Cours*: the recourse to other sources also benefited the debate on arbitrariness, as the contribution provided by Lǐ Guānxué (2014) demonstrates. His paper retraces the elaboration of the first linguistic principle and reports the passages directly connected to this issue. The lectures notes kept during the first course in general linguistics reveal only four mentions of the word *arbitrariness*, and in one case what the notion implies does not correspond to the first principle of sign but it is rather synonym of *accidental*. More articulated appears the argumentation in the second course's notes, where we find 12 mentions of arbitrariness and the treatment of semiology. In the second course, we do not only find a more precise use of the terms, with *sign* replacing *symbol*, but also the treatment of notions of key importance for Saussurean semiology, that is those of *opposition*, *value* and *system*. Lǐ also underlines the social constraints within which arbitrariness occurs and works providing a detailed analysis of the formation of this important construct.

A fresh stance is that expressed by Duàn Shèngfēng and Lǐ Shīhuì who briefly report the debate on arbitrariness in China, remind how Chinese scholars have often criticized the first principle proposed by Saussure and try to clarify Saussure's position about this issue. They correctly noticed how many Chinese scholars did not consider the attention given by Saussure to the linguistic levels which are not arbitrary, that is vocabulary and syntax and did not take into account the different degree of arbitrariness existing in linguistic signs (Duàn and Lǐ 2015, p. 81). The scholars' argumentation is aimed at showing the component of motivation existing in linguistic arbitrariness and the analysis is based on three different levels, i.e.

phonological, lexical and syntactical. Even at the phonological level, as they underlined, Saussure mentions the regularity of the phonetic change and the presence of items such as onomatopoeias and interjections based on iconicity. At the lexical level, the mechanisms of derivation, compounding and inflection fully show the motivation existing in language, which could be further explained thanks to the etymological information¹². According to Duàn and Lǐ, if at the phonological level Saussure is more focused on arbitrariness, at the lexical level he spends more words to show the effects of motivation whereas at the syntactical level he only underlines motivation without taking into account arbitrariness.

2.2 *The notion of language as system of signs*

The definition of language is the starting point of another paper on Saussurean linguistics, published as many others in 2013. According to Yang, the definition provided by the *Cours* has exerted influence not only on western scholars but also on Chinese tradition. To prove this point, the author quotes the entry of the authoritative monolingual dictionary of modern Chinese *Xiàndài Hànyǔ cídiǎn* which defines language, *yǔyán* 语言, as “the instrument uniquely owned by human beings to express meanings and exchange ideas, a peculiar social phenomenon, a definite system made of phones, vocabulary and grammar”¹³. Yáng claims that Saussure’s view of language as a system implies an important novelty for the conception of language and that it has been widely accepted and supported within Chinese academia. According to him, the notion of system of signs has laid the scientific foundations for linguistics from the ontological, cognitive and methodological perspectives. Yáng underlines the complexity of this system, since signs exist at the same time within social world and psychological world and complex relationships occur within the signs, between signs, between signs and world, between signs and individuals and between signs and collectivity. The complexity of language makes some purely instrumental views inadequate to account for it: for this reason, Yáng claims that Stalin’s definition of language as an instrument is inadequate to explain the functions of language and can even negatively affect the teaching of language. It has to be noted that it is not unusual for Chinese linguists to quote the stances of a non-linguist such as the Russian

12 Although modern Chinese abounds with compounds, Duan and Li do not draw examples from their language to support the presence of motivation and prefer to quote the case of languages such as English and French.

13 Although the author does not provide the details of this quotation, we can find it in the sixth edition of the monolingual dictionary (*Xiàndài Hànyǔ cídiǎn* 2012, p. 1591). The original entry reads: “人类所特有的用来表达思想、交流思想的工具, 是一种特殊的社会现象, 由语音、词汇和语法构成一定的系统。”

politician since Chinese scholars were deeply influenced by Soviet academy during the forties and the fifties¹⁴. What marks a clear distance from the past is the straight and unequivocal criticism to Stalin's position.

The features displayed by the system of signs are discussed by Hú and Máo (2015), who focus on the notion of *value* and on the difference between value in linguistics and value in other fields such as economy and philology. In clarifying Saussure's view, the authors reflect on the one hand on the restriction imposed by the collective mind (*jítǐ xīnlǐ* 集体心里), which makes impossible for individuals to change language and, on the other hand, they underline the occasional feature of the changes which can take place in language. This same feature regards the mechanism of analogy, on which linguistic changes are often based but that can not be predicted.

Wáng and Yú (2013) provide a reading of Saussurean linguistic theories which takes into account the development of structuralism and semiology. The last section of their work is focused on the distinction traced in the *Cours* between language and writing: the latter has the only function to register the former although, according to the Swiss linguist, writing is given an undeserved importance for various reasons. The short passage of the *Cours* dedicated to this issue has stimulated a lively debate among Chinese scholars, who often base the criticism to the first principle of sign, i.e. arbitrariness, on the particular case of logographs. According to them, it is unacceptable to consider (their) writing as having a secondary, subordinate role with respect to language: on the contrary, it is the character *hànzì* 汉字, as the convergence of the phonetic, semantic, lexical, and grammatical level, to be considered the basic unit of analysis (and of Chinese teaching)¹⁵. Some linguists underline the particularity of Chinese and even claim that Saussure's theory can only be applied to Western languages. These positions have been briefly reported and commented by Wáng and Yú who express a critical stance toward Chinese linguists. Interestingly enough, Wáng and Yú maintain that "Chinese characters are not essentially different from alphabetic letters, since they both copy language by means of specific forms" (2013, p. 372). Moreover, they minimize the impact of Chinese writing on language: without characters it is difficult to imagine the historical continuity of Chinese, but writing could not have affected the Chinese linguistic system *per se*.

14 For the politicization of linguistics studies in China see Abbiati 1993.

15 Among the most representative supporters of this view, called *zìběnwèi* 字本位 "character unit", we mention Xú Tōngqiāng who claim that Chinese does not even have a unit corresponding to the word.

3 NEW VOICES, OLD STANCES

Of course, even in recent times critical stances and doubts about Saussurean linguistic ideas are still expressed in Chinese academic debate. One of this is represented by Yú (2015) who provides a short account on Saussurean linguistics claiming that the weak points of the Swiss linguist's view have to be linked to the historical period. According to him, the first limitation is that the notion of sign, viewed as essential in linguistic system, does not entirely reveal neither explain the essence of language. The second limitation is the consideration of language as a synchronic system, which leaves out the diachronic aspect and the relationship between humans and language. Based on this criticism, often raised by Chinese scholars in the first phase of Saussurean reception, the author claims that the object of linguistic study, if does not take into account speakers, usage and diachronic perspective, becomes an abstract entity without life. More original appears the third limitation quoted by Yú, i.e. the view of language as something controlled by human beings neglecting the proactive role of language towards the users. According to the Chinese scholar, on the one hand language is used by humans to express and exchange ideas and feelings, on the other hand language can influence humans' thinking and acts. Language can function as a structure to know the world and thanks to the historical development inherited by language itself, it can affect human beings. These limitations are due to Saussure's philosophical background and to his deep relationship with the traditional ontology, which implies a strong, aprioristic conceptualization of reality and, as a consequence, a departure from it.

The attention given by Chinese scholars to the Marxist tradition has decreased but not stopped in recent times and Fù Lì's short paper certainly proves this. The starting point of his argumentation is the relationship between thinking and language: according to Fù (2016) the close link between the two make impossible to separate them but, differently from the psychological perspective Saussure started from, the Chinese scholar bestows the language the function of material instrument to express thinking. In tracing the difference between Marxist and Saussurean view of language, Fu underlines the key role played by society in the former and lists the well-known conceptual pairs proposed by the Swiss linguist, i.e. *langue* and *parole*, diachrony and synchrony, mutability and immutability. The social dimension of language is a key point in Saussurean linguistics and this demonstrate the link, according to Fu, between the *Cours* and the Marxist tradition. In addition to this, the frequent use of conceptual oppositions by Saussure is interpreted as the recourse by the linguist of dialectical materialism, thus confirming his relationship with Marxism.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Chinese literature regarding Saussurean linguistics shows a complex picture: on the one hand a clear break from the past can be found in the critical stances expressed by Chinese scholars toward the interpretation of the *Cours* provided by several Chinese linguists; on the other hand, looking at the topics investigated and at the criticisms still raised, a continuity with the past can be noticed. As for the first aspect, it is noticeable how Chinese scholars are more and more aware of the making of the *Cours*, thus considering, much more than before, questions related to the rendering of terminology and to the chronological development of Saussurean linguistic ideas. These scholars have often engaged in the translation of Saussurean sources, master more than one foreign language and benefit from Saussurean lesson because are equipped with the methodological instruments to correctly understand it.

Differently from them, other scholars still base their accounts only on the reading of the Chinese version of the *Cours*, which is not without problems, and link specific issues included in this work to their language, often negating the general validity of Saussurean theoretical proposal as for the first principle of sign. The link with the past is evident from the recourse to and comparison with Marxist tradition and from the attempt to demonstrate Saussure's criticalities without the support of the sources published in the last decades to clarify the emergence of specific constructs in Saussurean view of language.

From this perspective, observing how Chinese scholars interpret a cornerstone of Western humanities provides an opportunity to see how receptive and ready is Chinese academia to value a view very distant from its own tradition.

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