

# From Transformative Travels to Translingual Poetics: the "Ultime voyage" of Victor Segalen and François Cheng

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Article abstract

François Cheng and Victor Segalen are widely acknowledged for their common role of "cultural ambassador" between China and France. However, according to Jean Moultapa who wrote the preface for Cheng's book *L'Un vers l'autre*. *En voyage avec Victor Segalen* (2008), there exists a "spiritual affinity" between the two authors that connects them in a fundamental way. Focusing on this unusual bond, this article examines how the dual destinations of travel – lieu (Other/Elsewhere) and milieu (Self/Home) – are represented in two poetic creations, namely "Perdre le Midi Quotidien" by Segalen and "Ultime voyage" by Cheng. At the intersection of French and Chinese, the travelers-poets trace and translate the courses of their internal progress through their physical displacements. Drawing on essential concepts from Segalen's theory such as the Divers and the Exote, my analysis reveals the extent to which Segalen and Cheng's translingual poetics serve as a powerful vehicle to display and disseminate their positive view of the Self-Other bond.

## From Transformative Travels to Translingual Poetics: the “Ultime voyage” of Victor Segalen and François Cheng

Xinyi Tan

At the opening of his book *L'Un vers l'autre. En voyage avec Victor Segalen* (2008), François Cheng poses a crucial question about Victor Segalen's works: “Segalen avait-il jamais songé à être lu par un lecteur chinois?” (16) Known as a marine doctor, ethnographer, archeologist, and explorer from Brittany, France, Segalen has produced extensive works about his adventures in distant lands, especially in central China. An esteemed Francophone writer of Chinese descent himself, Cheng demonstrates a particular interest in analyzing how the translingual aspects of Segalen's Chinese collections—especially his poetic creations—communicate the essential theme of the Self-Other binary in different realms of transformative travels. According to Charles Forsdick, Cheng's emphasis on reading Segalen in the perspective of “un lecteur chinois” serves as another invitation for transnational and interlingual approaches to literatures of French expression (“Global France, global French” 26). Living in France since 1949 as an expatriate writer and scholar, Cheng was able to revisit his long-lost homeland by tracing the footsteps of Segalen in the latter's three pilgrimages to mainland China at the beginning of the twentieth-century.<sup>1</sup> While both authors are widely acknowledged for their common role of cultural ambassador between China and France, Jean Mouttapa's preface to *L'Un vers l'autre* highlights the existence of a “profonde fraternité spirituelle” (7) that transcends the simple overlapping of their geo-cultural journeys. Mouttapa furthermore attributes this unusual bond to the authors' shared vision of the Other, which turns them into *exote*, a term invented by Segalen to describe those who travel to “voir ailleurs pour mieux voir ailleurs” (10).

Throughout the book, Cheng portrays an imaginary journey taken by himself, “l'un,” in company with his spiritual interlocutor Segalen, “l'autre.” The preposition “vers” and the phrase “en voyage avec” in the title not only reveal the former's affection and respect towards the latter, but also underline a major theme of the book: transformative travel.<sup>2</sup> The author addresses three realms of travel with a series of questions: “Est-il réellement possible de voyager dans le Temps et dans l'Espace, à travers Soi-même et à travers l'Autre? [...] Est-il réellement possible de voyager à travers les signes ?” (16). The reminder of the book (a collection of three analytical essays on Segalen's major works and a long poem “Ultime voyage”) probes for answers to these questions while tracing the evolution of the strong affinity between the two writers.

It is noteworthy that the third realm of travel—travelling through languages—is the focus of the two texts selected for this article. In reading two poems, namely “Perdre le Midi quotidien” by Segalen and “Ultime voyage” by Cheng, my article sheds light on how the two poets engage one another in a timeless dialogue about the Self-Other relation through their literary creations, marked by a symbiosis of two languages: Chinese, “signe idéographique” (*L'Un* 16), and French, “signe alphabétique” (*L'Un* 16). Drawing on the

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1 Segalen has conducted three expeditions in mainland China. The first (1909-1912) was a result of his personal interest in the country, whereas the second (1913-1914) and the third (1917) were both official archeological missions sponsored by the French government.

2 Monique Grandjean comments on the theme of transformative travel with a Taoist interpretation of the book's title. She claims that “l'un/Cheng” incarnates “yin,” whereas “l'autre/Segalen” represents “yang,” and the preposition “vers” bridges the two to create “qi,” or “créateur d'un espace vivifiant en vue d'une créative interaction” (42). The interplay of the three elements forms the basis of “Tao,” the circle of life.

metaphorical functions of the dual destinations of travel—“lieu” (other/elsewhere) and “milieu” (self/home), this article traces and translates the courses of the travelers-poets’ internal progress through a series of physical displacements.<sup>3</sup> In light of several key notions from Segalen’s theoretical masterpiece *Essai sur l’exotisme: une esthétique du divers* (1978), such as *exote* and *le Divers*, my following analysis examines the role of translingual poetics in presenting the parallels between the three realms of travel addressed earlier in Cheng’s questions.

### A translingual approach to an “aesthetics of diversity”

Although Segalen’s ideas of exoticism failed to strike a chord amongst his contemporaries—colonial writers such as Pierre Loti and Claude Farrère, with the increasing popularity of transcultural/lingual studies, it has been received with acclamation by his subsequent readers—postcolonial scholars, namely Édouard Glissant, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Tzvetan Todorov. In his celebrated book *On human diversity: nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought* (1993), Todorov describes Segalen as a trailblazer who “gave more intense thought to the experience of exoticism than anyone else in France” (323). Forsdick posits that Segalen’s “conceptualization of diversity”—*le Divers*—established his reputation as “a key thinker of exoticism and intercultural contact” (92 “Victor Segalen”). One way to understand the revolutionary impact of Segalen’s aesthetics of exoticism is to compare it with another groundbreaking postcolonial theory: Edward Said’s orientalism. It is noteworthy that Said’s masterpiece *Orientalism* and Segalen’s posthumous work *Essai sur l’exotisme* were both published in 1978. However, the latter—a collection of unfinished travel notes originally taken by Segalen between 1904 and 1918—were completed six decades before the former. In his book, Said exposes the deleterious aspects of exoticism with a case study featuring the West’s clichéd cultural representations of the Eastern world, especially the Middle East region. However, Segalen, concurring with Said’s opinion that “la littérature coloniale n’est pas notre fait” (*Essai* 40), proposes a rather modernist interpretation of exoticism by granting it an ultimate extension with the notion of *le Divers*. He asserts, “L’exotisme est tout ce qui est Autre. Jouir de lui est apprendre à déguster le Divers” (*Équipée* 28). To Segalen, exoticism is simply an intense feeling of difference, and an *exote* is the type of traveler who is capable of enjoying “la sensation du Divers” (*Essai* 23).

Additionally, Segalen circumvents the limits of a theoretical invention by using the word “esthétique,” which indicates his interest in discussing the epistemological significance of the subject rather than presenting a moral judgement. His vision, born amidst, but not limited to, the colonial context, touches something that exists in all of us—an earnest search for a neutral other through whom we reflect on our own strangeness. In Segalen’s own words: “Je sais d’où il (l’autre) vient; de moi-même” (*Essai* 43). In his article “A Poetics of Displacement: Victor Segalen,” James Clifford argues that in Segalen’s literary world, the experience of displacement is recounted through a modernist viewpoint, which places “self and other [in] a sequence of encounters, the stable identity of each at issue” (155). Segalen’s writings prove that exoticism extends beyond geographical boundaries. For instance, a traveler, after a long sojourn elsewhere, can find his homeland has become exotic. The traveler in “Perdre le Midi quotidien” lives such a modernist experience of displacement.

From his hometown Brest, the west edge of continental Europe, Segalen, a practitioner of his own belief, has journeyed to many far and alien territories—Polynesia, America, and Asia—to experience “toute la saveur du Divers” (*l’Essai* 42). Among these destinations, China serves as a primary source of inspiration for his literary and theoretical creations. In

3 The terms “lieu” and “milieu” come from Cheng’s summary of Segalen’s transcontinental path as an exote-poet: “Il [Segalen] a pu tranquillement dire: ‘J’ai trouvé mon lieu et mon milieu’” (*L’Un* 62).

addition to three expeditions in China between 1909 and 1917, Segalen completed several works about his China years, including *Stèles* (1912), *Peintures* (1916), and *René Leys* (1922). The fact that two of the only three works that he published in his lifetime are centered around China attests to the author's unusual affection for the country.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Segalen is less interested in giving a truthful presentation of China than in recreating a China rooted in his own imagination. He wrote to his wife Yvonne during his first visit in China: "je suis venu [en Chine] chercher certaines formes" (*Lettres de Chine* 19). In another letter addressed to his friend Jules de Gaultier, he reiterates his goal of "[placer] simplement ce qu'[il] avai[t] à exprimer" in "ce moule chinois" (*Stèles, Peintures, Éuipée* 593). What are the "formes" that Segalen has found in China? "Wên," a kind of lapidary ideograms inscribed on the country's typical architecture, is undoubtedly one of his most valuable discoveries. This language exists as the Other to French, Segalen's authoring language. In attempting to interpret the Chinese characters, and due to his rudimentary knowledge of the language, Segalen uses an innovative approach: appreciating the "imprégnabilité" (*Essai* 38) of the words.<sup>5</sup> For example, in his poetry anthology *Stèles*, Segalen emphasizes the uncommon use of *wên*, with the interpretation that the ancient-style characters "dédaignent d'être lus" in that "ils n'expriment pas; ils signifient; ils sont" (*Stèles* 60). These remarks imply that the author's intent of embedding Chinese in his writing is not to simply translate what he sees on a variety of standing stones, but rather to reproduce the original text through an innovative combination of French and Chinese.

In her book chapter "Literary Exploration: The Chinese Works of Victor Segalen," Yvonne Hsieh underlines that, in Segalen's writings, the Chinese world plays the role of a medium, "a point of departure from which the poet moves on to his own personal world" (77). All the poems in *Stèles* share a distinctive design that features a Chinese epigraph in salient calligraphy placed alongside the French title. Without any historical or anthropological reference, these epigraphs are either borrowed or created by Segalen as a poetic means of self-expression. They illustrate a recurring trajectory throughout the entire collection of *Stèles*: "le transfert de l'Empire de Chine à l'Empire du soi-même est constant" (*Trahison fidèle* 108). Aware of the epigraph's hermeneutic resistance, Segalen uses his Chinese sources in a playful or ironic way. At times, he writes provocatively "unfaithful" verses to push the Self-Other dyad to an extreme. For example, the Chinese epigraph for the poem "Pour lui complaire" is 撕綢倒血 ("Sī Chou Dao Xie"), which does not mean "to please her," but rather "to tear silk and pour blood." The poet's deliberate misinterpretation underscores the tension between the two points of the title and the epigraph, attesting to the split between the self and the other, which is also the foundation of his radical diversity.

Responding to the original epigraph in Chinese, Segalen, in turn, defamiliarizes French. In his autobiographical book *Le Dialogue : une passion pour la langue française* (2002), Cheng notes that between Chinese and French, there exists "le plus grand écart qu'on puisse imaginer" (7). The question is: how can a text bridge such a gap in order to become "porteur de deux langues"? Cheng himself turns to poetry, a unique platform where he applies an ideogrammatic manner to present a meaningful reading of the French language. For instance, in his poem entitled "Arbre," Cheng treats the French term "arbre" as an ideographical character, highlighting the imagery of a tree embodied in the phonetic and graphical features of the word. By contrast, Segalen's primary concern in his poetic

4 The three books are *Les Immémoriaux* (1907), *Stèles* (1912), and *Peintures* (1916). While the first one recounts Segalen's travel experiences in the South Pacific, the other two are about his thoughts on Chinese architecture, language, and paintings.

5 "[L]'imprégnabilité" or "l'inassimilable," in Segalen's opinion, is the precondition of "le Divers." He posits that one should be grateful for the fact that the Other is impenetrable and separate from the Self (*Essai* 38).

practice is not to unearth the common ground between the two languages, but instead to juxtapose them to invent a new language as a carrier of his artistic and philosophical views. Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin believes that language is not a neutral medium. He contends that “the word in language is half someone else’s” until it is translated and transposed to express the intentions of the speaker (239). In *Stèles*, Segalen’s translingual approach, realized by opposing the impenetrable Chinese to the unfamiliar French, allows him to communicate his thoughts and emotions in “son propre langage,” defined by Cheng as “dense et distant, apparemment impersonnel et cependant infiniment personnel [...]” (*L’Un* 46). My following analysis of “Perdre le Midi quotidien,” an essential poem from *Stèles*, offers an example of how such translingual poetics convey the poet’s vision of diversity, difference, and the Self-Other bond.

#### An exote’s trajectory: “J’ai trouvé mon lieu et mon milieu.”

*Stèles* (1912), a pivotal piece of Segalen’s Chinese *oeuvres*, is a collection of prose poems, inspired by the traditional Chinese calligraphic texts on *bēi*, or steles. The architecture is a funereal monument established to honor the righteous deeds of noble men. To Segalen, the main parts of a stele—a hewn stone, a base shaped like a squat pyramid, and a crest—possess the symbolic qualities of stability and nobility. His book has a striking structure: based on the orientations of their corresponding steles, the poems are arranged under six categories (facing south, north, oriental, occidental, by the wayside, and of the middle). Furthermore, each respective orientation is associated with a central theme: imperial decrees, friendship, love, heroism, travel, and selfhood. This structure, when examined in parallel with the book’s original format (a single roll of paper folded like an accordion into around 100 pages), forms what Cheng calls a “Livre-Espace” (*L’Un* 51). According to Cheng, there is a latent “vide” in Segalen’s language, which allows him to “[transformer] le Temps vécu en Espace vivant” (*L’Un* 52). Even though French remains the authoring language, Segalen’s writing exudes a distinctive Chinese flavor owing to his frequent use of Chinese poetic techniques, such as “l’emploi spécifique des mots vides, le parallélisme, la juxtaposition des métaphores, etc.” (*L’Un* 47).

In “Perdre le Midi quotidien,” the leading poem in the last section of the book “Stèles du milieu,” the traveler-poet delineates a tortuous expedition through an intricate Chinese garden. The poem originates from a conversation that Segalen had with Paul Claudel.<sup>6</sup> The latter shared with Segalen his observation of the Chinese strolling in their gardens: “Il semble que les Chinois, par ces détours [...] veulent s’isoler en oubliant les cardinaux auxquels ils sont d’ordinaire sensibles” (*Stèles* 380). In the poem, the verse “Et par un lacis réversible égarer enfin le quadruple sens des Points du Ciel” contains strong echoes from Claudel’s depiction. In addition, it is hard to overlook the fact that the itinerary portrayed in this poem epitomizes the entire journey of the traveler and covers all four orientations in the previous sections of the book. In overcoming the tribulations of setback, loss, and disorientation, the traveler-poet will gain a more profound knowledge of himself only by abstaining from everything familiar, as suggested by the title. The poem unfolds:

6 Paul Claudel (1868-1955) was a French Catholic poet and diplomat. He lived in China as a French consul around the same time as Segalen. Despite their different religious scopes, the two became friends and Segalen dedicated *Stèles* to Claudel.

PERDRE LE MIDI QUOTIDIEN 為  
自  
難

Perdre le Midi quotidien ; traverser des  
cours, des arches, des ponts; tenter les  
chemins bifurqués; m'essouffler aux marches,  
aux rampes, aux escalades;  
Éviter la stèle précise ; contourner les murs  
usuels; trébucher ingénument parmi ces  
rochers factices; sauter ce ravin; m'attarder  
en ce jardin; revenir parfois en arrière,  
Et par un lacis réversible égarer enfin le  
quadruple sens des Points du Ciel.  
Tout cela,—amis, parents, familiers & femmes,—tout cela, pour tromper aussi vos  
chères poursuites ; pour oublier quel coin  
de l'horizon carré vous recèle,  
Quel sentier vous ramène, quelle amitié  
vous guide, quelles bontés menacent,  
quels transports vont éclater.  
Mais, perçant la porte en forme de cercle  
parfait ; débouchant ailleurs : (au beau  
milieu du lac en forme de cercle parfait,  
cet abri fermé, circulaire, au beau milieu  
du lac, & de tout,)  
Tout confondre, de l'orient d'amour à l'occident  
héroïque, du midi face au Prince au  
nord trop amical,—pour atteindre l'autre,  
le cinquième, centre&Milieu  
Qui est moi. (*Stèles* 106)

The first two stanzas are composed of a series of infinitives, which have no expressed or implied subject and indicate no tense (except for the reflexive verbs, such as “m'essouffler” and “m'attarder”). Given that omitting subjects and tenses is a norm in classical Chinese poetry, and common even in modern Chinese prose, it is clear that Segalen seeks to create a literary space of otherness, which exists in parallel with the traveler's adventure in the labyrinthine Chinese garden. The enumeration of travel motifs (i.e. “des arches,” “les chemins bifurqués,” “ces rochers factices,” etc.) depicts an exotic environment. Moreover, the progression of verbs—from “traverser” and “tenter,” to “trébucher” and “m'attarder”—suggests that with every step the traveler takes comes more hardship for him to overcome. Given that the first line “Perdre le Midi quotidien” reveals a fundamental goal of his trek, the traveler must not linger at any specific location: “éviter la stèle précise” and “contourner les murs usuels.” These instructions are at once explicit and symbolic since the final destination is internal rather than external.

It is worth mentioning that “Stèles du milieu,” as the last section of the book, encompasses thirteen poems inspired by a group of steles whose imprints are the most ambiguous. Segalen stresses their obscurity in the following description: “Certains [stèles][...] désignent le lieu par excellence, le milieu [...] On les suit ou les récuse, sans commentaires ni gloses inutiles, - d'ailleurs sans confronter jamais le texte véritable : seulement les empreintes qu'on lui dérobe” (16). On one hand, Segalen's perception of the middle steles can be read as an “aveu d'impénétrabilité” (*Essai* 38), the precondition of recognizing *le Divers*. These remarks clearly indicate that his primary interest lies in

borrowing the Chinese mold instead of learning about “le texte véritable.” On the other hand, differing from the previous sections focusing on *le Divers*, and reified by a variety of external relationships and experiences, the final section provides insights on how the traveler’s improved ability of apprehending the Other enriches the Self.

Considering the dual connotations of the word “midi”: south and noon, the poem’s title “Perdre le Midi quotidien” also sheds light on the Self-Other binary. With the meaning of south, the poet makes a direct reference to the first section “Stèles face au midi,” the traveler’s first exotic encounter. Centering around imaginary imperial decrees, these opening steles form the chief metaphor of the collection: The Self-Emperor, an embodiment of the relation between the *exote* and the exotic. Additionally, as a significant orientation in ancient China, the south is the one toward which the emperor faces in court. Noon, the second meaning of “midi,” also bears the importance of orientation because the sun, especially at midday, plays a key role in indicating time and directions. The Chinese epigraph “為自難”(wéizì nán), meaning “How difficult it is to be oneself!”, confirms the message in the French title. According to the research conducted by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush, the annotators of the 2007 edition of *Stèles*, the same epigraph appears in Segalen’s manuscript for his unfinished work *L’Histoire de l’art en Chine*, where it is identified as the seal of the emperor Yongzheng: “It is difficult to be a sovereign/prince” (*Stèles* 379).<sup>7</sup> What renders being the Self-Emperor challenging, to the poet, is making the resolution to diverge from one’s routine and to embrace other views and voices waiting on the new path, which eventually leads back to the Self (“Milieu”/ “Qui est moi”).

The fourth and fifth stanzas are crucial for underlining the parallel between the obstacles in the traveler’s physical displacement and the concerns in his inner world, reminding us of the constant transfer from the Chinese Empire to the Self Empire. The expression “chères pousuites” is used to summarize all the relations that hold value for the traveler-poet in his everyday life, such as “amis, parents, familiers & femmes.” These human relationships are explored at length in the first four sections of *Stèles* and altogether constitute the four cardinal points of “l’horizon carré” that he must forget in order to reach “la porte en forme de cercle parfait.” According to Hseih, as opposed to another shape such as a square, a circle “conveys an impression of enclosure and inviolability” (*Chinese Moulds, Western Thoughts* 58). In addition, the metaphor of the perfect circle is essential for illuminating the poet’s vision of otherness. While the square represents a linear way of thinking, the circle, depicted as a circular harbor situated at the heart of a round lake, symbolizes a new approach to understanding the world, unfettered by habits and stereotypes.

It is striking that the perfect circle metaphor stems from a key feature of the stele: the eye on its crest, which functions as a measurement of daylight in many Chinese dynasties. Segalen grants this feature an allegorical meaning: “un jour de connaissance au fond de soi: l’astre est intime et l’instant perpétuel” (*Stèles* 59). In the poem, the traveler discovers the fifth direction—“centre&Milieu”—by looking through the circle. What he discovers on the other side is a still lake, disparate from the habitual encounters throughout his journey, and only reflective of his inner world.

The last stanza presents a cogent argument about the poet’s reflections on the Self-Other dynamic with evident references to the previous steles. Michael Kelly claims that the end of the poem reveals the totalizing possibilities inherent in the symbolic compound of the stele since “[t]he guiding polarities are collapsed into the viewpoint and the voice of the poet” (160). As the traveler’s journey through a referential Chinese universe attains its end, a fresh perception of the Self emerges. To this point, he has completed a

7 Chinese scholar Haiying Qin confirms the origin of the epigraph in her book chapter “A texte bilingue, lecture bilingue” in her book *Segalen et la Chine: Écriture Intertextuelle et Transculturale* (2003).

metamorphosis from the external to the internal, from the peripheries to the center, and from otherness to selfhood. He can finally exclaim with relief, to borrow Cheng's witty statement, "J'ai trouvé mon lieu et mon milieu" (*L'Un* 75). This statement, when read alongside the last verse of the poem, "pour atteindre l'autre, le cinquième, centre et Milieu. Qui est moi," affirms that the encounter with the Other, or "lieu," and the (re)discovery of the Self, or "milieu," are two simultaneous incidents. The fact that the word "lieu" is part of the word "milieu" implies the possibility of what Édouard Glissant describes as "[l']Autre est en moi, parce que je suis moi" (*L'intention poétique* 101).

Through the experience of transformative travel, Segalen is interested in illustrating not only his vision of exoticism, but also the becoming of an *exote*, the kind of traveler known for his strong individuality and capacity of appreciating but without assimilating his surroundings. From one symbolically charged moment to another, after groping through the familiar and the habitual, the *exote*-poet has wandered through a full circle and reached the (mi)lieu, his final destination, interpreted by Cheng as "le Moi profond où réside le plein du Plein, le vide du Vide, le désir du Désir" (*L'Un* 54). Looking back upon the relation between the French title and the Chinese epigraph, we can conclude that the former elucidates the latter. The poem shows that gaining in-depth knowledge of one's inner world is a trying process, during which one must overcome uncomfortable and even frightful feelings of loss and disorientation. Travelling as an *exote*, one must first recognize the fact that "c'est le tu qui dominera" (*Essai* 21), then he will reject preconceived notions to create space for *le Divers*, and eventually gain new insights into the Self.

### Traveling side-by-side: death, the beginning of an "ultimate voyage"

As mentioned in the introduction, there exists "une intime proximité spirituelle entre les deux poètes [Cheng et Segalen]" (*L'Un* 8), which begins with Cheng's rediscovery of China through Segalen's works, and results in the publication of *L'Un vers l'autre*. In 1978, during a colloquium held to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Segalen's birth at the Musée Guimet, Cheng delivered a speech entitled "Espace réel et espace mythique," which later became the first part of his book project. During the next three decades, he continued to write about Segalen and produced two articles—"Je renonce à être fait dieu" in 1998 and "Homo Viator" in 2005—forming the bulk of *L'Un vers l'autre*. The book ends with "Ultime voyage", a fervid poem by Cheng, featuring an imaginary journey in company with his French precursor.

For Cheng, starting life anew in France in the early 1950s as a Chinese expatriate writer and scholar allows him to reflect on his long-lost homeland with refreshing eyes. Either by chance or by fate, Cheng offered private Chinese tutoring to Segalen's granddaughter Laure Segalen, through whom he discovered Segalen's writings about China. In exploring these works, Cheng declares that it is "[p]ar personne interposée" that he revisited his remote native land (*L'Un* 112). He drew the conclusion that for an *exote*-poet like Segalen, "réaliser ses randonnées sur cette terre lointaine [la Chine], c'était se réaliser" (*L'Un* 20). In "Ultime voyage", Cheng travels side-by-side with Segalen, crisscrossing the borderlines of Self and Other, life and death. The dyad of "lieu" and "milieu" is replaced by the poets-travelers' *aller-retour* between "terre autre" and "terre nôtre" (*L'Un* 122), which they attain together over the course of their imaginary journey.

Both "Perdre le Midi quotidien" and "Ultime voyage" are highly symbolic due to a fascinating interplay of three realms of travel, namely "l'espace réel, l'espace mythique, et enfin, l'espace du signe" (*L'Un* 20). Regardless of the striking similarities between them—e.g. abundant travel motifs, discussion on different levels of travel, and translingual elements—two major differences must be underscored. First, in Segalen's poem, the traveler-poet is driven by a desire to avoid his daily routine and arrives alone at his destination; on the contrary, in Cheng's poem, the consistent use of the pronoun "nous" since the very first line—"Au bout du chemin de la vie, nous entrons dans la forêt



d'obscure" (*L'Un* 117)—indicates that "ultime voyage" is a collective act. Furthermore, in Cheng's poem, instead of a random Chinese garden, the travelers-poets set off from a concrete site: "la forêt d'obscure" where Segalen's body was found in 1919. But is this locale the final destination of his journey, or is it another start? How does such an abrupt "departure" manifest his life and vision of exoticism? What new light does it shed on the reoccurring "lieu-milieu" binary in his works? These are the leading questions in Cheng's poetic eulogy of Segalen.

Segalen's cryptic death serves as a telling medium through which Cheng examines the transformative effects of travel. Cheng is apparently not the first one intrigued by Segalen's premature decease—an almost unavoidable issue in many Segalenian scholars' and literary critics' works. In the first biography of Segalen, *Segalen* (1991), Gilles Manceron offers a chronological account of the author's demise based on several witnesses' testimonies. The excerpt "Segalen en son dernier décor" is included by Cheng as an annex of *L'Un vers l'autre*. Forsdick's book *Victor Segalen and Aesthetics of Diversity: Journeys between Cultures* (2000) presents a thorough study of the theorist's life and writings. The author begins the book with a section entitled "death of an exote: the mythologization of Victor Segalen," in which he makes marked comparisons of Segalen with Rimbaud, Gauguin, and the protagonists in Segalen's works.<sup>8</sup> A more recent book *Mes pas vont ailleurs* (2017) by Jean-Luc Coatalem, investigates the truth behind the enigmatic scene of Segalen's death by revisiting the correspondence between the author and the two women he loved. While the cause of his death—natural, accident, or suicide—remains unclear, scholars' unanimous fixation on the incident has made it, to borrow Forsdick, "an enigma of mythical status rooted in [posthumous and second-hand] textual interpretations" (*Victor Segalen* 6).

What fascinates Cheng the most, nevertheless, is the location of the body—in the center of Brittany's Huelgoat forest, not far from Segalen's birthplace Brest. This salient "coincidence" justifies Cheng's new interpretation of the event: an "alliance avec le sol" (*L'Un* 118). In a collection of inspirational essays titled *Cinq Méditations sur la mort : autrement dit sur la vie* (2013), Cheng accentuates the imperative of addressing life in light of death: "au lieu de dévisager la mort à partir de ce côté de la vie, envisager la vie à partir de la mort" (27). Construing death as "fruit de l'être" (*Cinq Méditations* 26), he furthermore cites the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke—"Seigneur, donne à chacun sa propre mort ; Qui soit vraiment issue de cette vie; Où il trouva l'amour, un sens et sa détresse" (25)—to emphasize the importance of ending one's life with a becoming and meaningful death. Cheng has no doubt that Segalen is remembered for such a death which defines his life, a death "en poète" (*Cinq Méditations* 25), which Cheng aspires for himself.<sup>9</sup> This belief clarifies Cheng's choice of the pronoun "nous" in his poem. The highly symbolic and lyrical verses of "Ultime voyage" allow Cheng to not only honor his precursor's extraordinary life, but also "experience" every phase of it in the literary realm of travel.

In 1919, two years after his last expedition in China, Segalen returned to his hometown Brittany and never left it again. At the age of forty-one, he was found dead in his marine uniform, with one shoe off, revealing a wounded ankle wrapped in a handkerchief. Alongside his body, three objects were discovered: a walking stick, a cup, and a copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* opened to Hamlet. Cheng reproduces the scene with the following verses in "Ultime voyage":

8 "Its premature status is prefigured, for example, by the deaths of the eponymous protagonists of Segalen's Chinese diptych, René Leys and le Fils du Ciel" (4).

9 "Je me répétais : 'Peu importe la durée de ma vie, pourvu que je meure d'une mort qui soit à moi, que je meure en poète.' Mourir en poète, à l'instar d'un Keats, d'un Shelly, dont les portraits ornaient ma chambre" (25).

Des pierres pointues, des souches taillées ?  
 Voilà qu'à la cheville une nette blessure  
 Nous fait saigner. Blessure inattendue ?  
 Ou inespérée ? Qui d'autre pourrait le dire  
 Sinon nous-mêmes ? Nous qui toujours avons su  
 Tirer sens de ce qui vient, bénissons  
 Ce sang versé qui renouvelle, une ultime fois,  
 Notre alliance avec le sol.

Blood is an alternative motif of death, a central event, which is rarely mentioned but insinuated in different ways throughout the poem. The use of the verb "renouvelle" rids the blood of stagnancy, turning it into a flowing carrier of the dead back to the source of his life. The idea of "alliance avec le sol" marks a full circle of Segalen's inbound journey, like falling leaves reuniting the roots (a common analogy the Chinese use to describe the best destiny of exiles and immigrants). In a later stanza, the poet questions the meaning of an exile's arduous journey on a foreign land— "l'insoutenable souffrance...[et] la muette solitude de cet autre 'arraché' volontaire, si loin du sol natal" (*L'Un* 122)—which contrasts the destination of embracing a serene demise "at home."

Segalen's death is depicted as a return to the source of life and a passage to eternity. While the body rests peacefully on the ground, according to Cheng, there is no sound that one can hear except "la voix issue de l'âme" (*L'Un* 119). The existence of soul is a precondition for the transformative power of death, which marks both the end of a worldly journey and the beginning of an "ultimate voyage." Thus, earth plays an indispensable role in connecting these two realms of travel, granting it an openness. Drawing on the British romantic poet John Keat's poem, Cheng compares the earth to "une vallée où poussent les âmes" (*L'Un* 106). The soul continues the unfinished exploration of the dead, navigating the frontiers of the unknown. In Segalen's case, a proper, albeit premature, death allows him to begin an infinite adventure.

Cheng is convinced that Segalen, an ardent world trotter all his life, returns to his roots only to recover his energy for an eternal departure. The following stanza further illustrates this belief:

Oui, nous le savions. Rien ne peut faire  
 Que cette vie, énigmatique, n'ait été vécue,  
 Que ce qui a été vécu ne soit à revivre !  
 Senteur de l'herbe, bourdonnement d'insectes,  
 L'invisible loriot, là-haut, faisant écho  
 À la cascade, dit encore toute la nostalgie  
 De nos très longues saisons d'attente,  
 D'un bref été d'amour.

Differing from the explicit statement in the first three verses, the rest of the stanza portrays a lively scenery of several natural attractions, such as "senteur de l'herbe," "l'invisible loriot," and "la cascade." These features, interwoven in a harmonious singing, conjure characteristics of summer. The word "été" appears twice. When examined in parallel with the first use (the past participle of the verb "être"), its later appearance in the expression "un bref été d'amour" has dual meanings: summer and existence. With the adjective "bref," Cheng places stress on the transiency of life; meanwhile, by defining Segalen's life with "amour" worthy of "nos très longues saisons d'attente," the stanza ends in a hopeful tone. It is also worth stressing that "la cascade" reoccurs at the end of the poem, and is depicted as the source of "le limpide liquide," a symbol of vitality and truth.

We must not forget that the premise of the "ultimate voyage" of Cheng and Segalen is that they share "une fraternité spirituelle" (*L'Un* 10). The unusual bond is manifested in

their similar cross-continental trajectories, their genuine interest in another culture, and maintained by their common vision of otherness. From Segalen's decease, Cheng reflects on his devoted life-long career revolving around the search for *le Divers*. A beguiling object discovered in the death scene can be interpreted as Segalen's final attempt to make his voice heard. It was his watch, which (possibly) stopped at noon.<sup>10</sup> Even though Cheng did not discuss the meaning behind the object, the following verses regarding Segalen's aesthetics of exoticism, melded with his life as an *exote*-writer, express striking similarities with the traveler's route in "Perdre le midi quotidien":

La faim avivant la faim, la soif  
 Attisant la soif, toute une vie  
 À arpenter la singulière planète du Divers.  
 Nul doute qu'à la fin tout voyageur se rendra  
 À l'évidence : le Divers ne divertit point,  
 Il dérouté : fouilles des licornes enfouies,  
 Forage du for intérieur. Dans les rets  
 Du mandat du Ciel, toute une vie  
 À l'épreuve de l'amour ! Toute une vie  
 À l'épreuve de la mort !

First, the phrase "arpenter la singulière planète du Divers" is a telling representation of Segalen's life as a traveler and archeologist who strives to unearth the secrets of diversity. Furthermore, to accentuate his unusual desire for knowledge and truth, Cheng uses the metaphors of insatiable hunger and unquenchable thirst. It becomes more interesting when "l'évidence" or the truth is unveiled: "le Divers ne divertit point, il dérouté: fouilles des licornes enfouies, forage du for intérieur." These verses express Cheng's understanding of the essence of his predecessor's lifelong pursuit. By the end of his journey, the traveler realizes that the search for diversity ("fouilles des licornes enfouies") led him back relentlessly to himself ("forage du for intérieur"). The Other creates an opening in the Self—whether it is a divergence from the routine or a fresh slant on the road—that composes *le Divers*. It is the Self that has become exotic in the end. The expression "il dérouté" reminds us of the rugged path taken by the traveler-poet in "Perdre le Midi quotidien", who must defy his routine and habitual ways of thinking to reach the "milieu."

The last two verses pay homage to Segalen's life, brief and brave, taking the challenges issued by the "mandate du Ciel." The notion of 天命 (Tianming; Mandate of Heaven), originally created to justify the rule of the emperor, is a traditional Chinese belief that everyone should live up to his destined duties. Cheng claims that in overcoming all the obstacles to fulfill Tianming, one's existence "se relève à sa vérité irréductible, à sa part irremplaçable" (*Cinq Méditations* 43). Segalen has definitely accomplished his destined mission as an *exote*-poet. As early as nine years before his mysterious death, during his first expedition in China, he wrote from the viewpoint of an emperor who contemplates the end of his worldly voyage: "Je choisis ma sépulture...Je suis sans désir de retour; sans regret, sans hâte et haleine...C'est bien ainsi: je suis mort et m'y complais" (*Briques et tuiles* 38). These lines indicate an unflinching attitude "à l'épreuve de la mort" praised in Cheng's poem. At the end of the poem, Cheng claims that as *exotes*, their destiny "n'est autre que voyage" (*L'Un* 123). In the vicissitudes of life, traveling towards "(mi)lieu" is a call from within. Provided that "toute demeure est une partenance, et toute partenance une provisoire demeure" (*L'Un* 123), in Cheng's impassioned poem, Segalen's death is depicted merely as a return to the source of life and a start of another voyage, an ultimate one this time.

10 It is possible that the watch stopped at midnight; however, if Segalen did stage his own death to convey his last thoughts to the world, the interpretation of noon is legitimate.

## Conclusion

Reading Victor Segalen and François Cheng side by side is a good way to stress the importance of recognizing the diverse possibilities of French literature, which is defined and enriched by exchange, dialogue, and encounters with the Other. Focusing on their poetries created at the intersection of Chinese and French, this article reveals that instead of a simplistic biographical parallel, a fundamental connection between the two authors lies in their genuine interest in other languages and cultures, and in their shared understanding of travel, life, and the Self-Other dyad. With *L'Un vers l'autre*, Cheng expresses his appreciation for the discovery of Segalen's texts, which inspired him to emerge as a translingual author; in return, he has played a key role in the recovery and illumination of his predecessor's Chinese collections.

In conclusion, we shall return to the two questions posed by Cheng in his book. The first one—"Segalen avait-il jamais songé à être lu par un lecteur chinois?" (*L'Un* 16)—highlights the significance of Cheng's recognition of his French precursor's works. It is worth noting that Cheng is not just any reader from China; he sees Segalen as his kindred spirit. Like Segalen, Cheng has himself experienced the transformative powers of language, since his "rebirth" as a French writer is inextricably linked to his unreserved adoption of the French language<sup>11</sup>. In addition, he appreciates Segalen's deep understanding of Chinese culture and innovative approach to the Chinese language, describing how—as a political expatriate in Paris—reading Segalen's travel notes about China transported him back to his homeland (*L'Un* 59-68). Moreover, as a Chinese native well versed in French, in his analysis of *Stèles*, Cheng is most impressed by the influence of Chinese literary traditions, especially classical poetry, on Segalen's poetic language. Such a language is characterized by the defamiliarization of French. The juxtaposition of Chinese characters with a French title in the closed frame of each poem is one of the many examples of such an approach, which also prevails in Cheng's poetic works.

In light of language and mobility, the second question considers the central theme of transformative travel, examined in both authors' poems: "Est-il réellement possible de voyager à travers les signes?" (*L'Un* 16) Cheng and Segalen have both selected translingual poetries as the carrier of their thoughts about the Self-Other relation in the frame of transformative travel. Following the footsteps of the travelers in "Perdre le Midi quotidien" and "Ultime voyage," it is striking that Segalen and Cheng seek to promote the same type of adventure: an inbound journey which "se situe au niveau de l'être" (*L'Un* 20) through the varied relations—e.g. interwoven, opposed, juxtaposed, etc.—of two languages between which, according to Cheng, there exists "le plus grand écart qu'on puisse imaginer" (*Le Dialogue* 7). In their poems, the travelers experience transformations at an internal level as they repeatedly surmount hardships and cross boundaries in the outside world. To them, travel is not a discovery of a distant land so much as an incitement to appreciate what lies outside of the Self, and to embrace strangeness in one's own being. Furthermore, Cheng's response to his own question—"Dans le cas d'un poète, il n'est de vrai dépaysement que celui incarné par les signes" (*L'Un* 16)—affirms Segalen's primary identity as an *exote*-poet who has discovered the ideal *signes* to circulate his poetic, aesthetic, and philosophical visions. It is indeed these visions that Cheng's "Ultime voyage" eulogized along with Segalen's extraordinary life and symbolic death.

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11 In his speech delivered at the reception to the Académie Française, Cheng emphasized that his French naturalization began "surtout à partir de ce moment où [il a] résolument basculé dans la langue française, la faisant l'arme, ou l'âme, de [sa] création" ("Discours").

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