

Book Review

Hong Huang, *Marguerite Duras: La chambre noire de l'écriture*. Wuhan: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press, 2021, pp. 299, Paperback, RMB 48, ISBN: 9787568068789.

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1 Introduction

Bringing a fresh perspective to Marguerite Duras's life and writing, *Margaret Duras: La chambre noire de l'écriture* (2021) serves up a special biography of the French novelist, playwright, and film director Marguerite Duras (1914–1996) by Hong Huang, professor in the French Department at Nanjing University. Focusing on the theme of “writing,” the book analyzes the writing style of Duras in various periods and shows how Duras's writing characteristically involves constant revision, “becoming,” and intervention. It explores the intertextuality of her novels, plays, and films, as well as the translations and reception history of her works in China. The author demonstrates the profile of love, literature, and politics in Duras's legendary life. Following this biography, readers experience Duras's life of writing and her stand against oblivion, death, injustice, and nothingness together with the legendary writer. The biography favorably reintroduces Marguerite Duras, a celebrated writer and a profound thinker, for Chinese readers, and insightfully studies her works by focusing on the theme of writing.

In her interpretation of several major French women writers, Adele King contends that Duras's works have “emphasis on a passion that is all-powerful but never fulfilled, the search for self-definition, a ‘madness’ that rejects ordinary society, a consideration of politics in its relation to private life” (King 1989: 34). Biographers such as Alain Vircondelet, Michèle Manceaux, Laure Adler, and Jane Vallier have paid tribute to Duras with their own interpretations. While many biographical studies unconsciously interpreted Duras's works as the footnotes of her legendary life, Huang's book turns to the mystery of Duras's writing and the inextricably intertextual relationship of her life and writing. The writer Jian Mao highly endorses Huang's thinking in her essay, “Taking Duras alive,” commenting that Huang, as a biographer, is qualified to be “a rival of Duras,” and the completion of *Marguerite Duras: La chambre noire de l'écriture* is “a process of conquering Duras” (Huang 2021: IV).

Compared with the existing biographies of Duras, this book provides detailed textual analysis from the unique perspective of a literary researcher. It emphasizes that “writing” itself is the most important theme in Duras’s life, which, as Huang states, is “the story of writing.” Huang somewhat leads readers into a darkroom of dim red light, sorting through Duras’s memories over the decades. Since the “field of memory” is also “a field of oblivion” (p. 294), Duras’s full-length works are the process of multiple resistances. The biography is an effort to “restore memory and even oblivion” of Duras and her work (p. 295), and interpreting Duras’s writings is also a process of resisting oblivion, death, injustice, and nothingness with Duras.

2 Exploring Duras’s writing and rewriting

The key word of this biography is “writing,” and the six chapters offer a perspective from a literary critic on Duras’s life, showing the readers different aspects of the legendary author. According to Laure Adler, Duras “has built most of her work on the legend of her family” (Adler 1998: 23). However, as Huang says, “Duras is an autobiography” (Huang 2018: 43), for she wrote “I” again and again. The book proceeds first through Duras’s childhood in the first chapter, “Continent noir, l’interminable enfance,” which lays bare the idea that Duras seems always to linger in her childhood. The important images haunting her life can be distilled from the subtitles of this chapter: “La mère et l’histoire du barrage,” “Les petits pieds de la Chine,” “L’amant,” and “La folle de Vinh Long et le cycle indien.” The author points out that the third person perspective in Duras’s self-introduction has transferred the notion of the “I” to her literary work, making Duras a figure in the writing. Duras’s works can be regarded as her “life writing,” duplicated on a “palimpsest.” The book innovatively turns to the emergences of the word “Orient” as a general reference in Duras’s works, tracing her complex feelings about the Orient, which were sown at an early age. In many of her stories, both “l’amant” and the “dreams” are about money. Furthermore, the author argues that the plural form of “lover(s)” and the constant reappearance of the “specters” of family members in *Les impudents*, *La vie tranquille*, *L’amant*, etc. form a complex, mercurial, and unstable self of Duras.

The story of the Orient is Duras’s unsolved mystery, and the author explores this problem thoroughly. In Western eyes at that time, China was “an object to be named” (p. 24). Huang applies “Les petits pieds de la Chine,” an unpublished essay from around 1950, to accurately grasp Duras’s “Oriental” memory. In the essay, Duras, a five-year-old white girl, witnesses two cruel images: “the bound feet of Chinese women and eggs with chicken embryo inside sold on the roadside” (p. 24), which “symbolized strangled and imprisoned freedom and life” (p. 24).

As the author observes, the interpretation should be made by the adult Duras as she recalled the tragedy, rather than interpreting it from the perspective of a five-year-old girl. Duras found “a way to survive from the freedom of memory” (Huang 2014: 27). Indeed, Duras’s subsequent connections with others seem to be “constant echoes of her childhood” (Adler 1998: 162).

Duras’s extended childhood and her life form a great tension. The author holds that the Durassien cognitive model can be concluded as “cultivation–inception–forgetfulness–oblivion–suspicion–reminiscence/recurrence–reappearance” (p. 26). Her repeated depictions of “lover” also confirm this pattern. In *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L’Eden Cinéma*, *L’amant*, and *L’amant de la Chine du Nord*, the lover is represented in five versions. Readers can understand Duras’s desire, burden, and expectation from her girlhood in these vague and leaping images of “lover(s).” Duras’s desires are intertwined with material things, and her desires are “integration with other, more obscure desires” (Blot-Labarrère 1992: 53), after which comes Duras’s “grave discourses” (Blot-Labarrère 1992: 62). It is clarified that the mother’s colonial dream runs through Duras’s writing about relationship, “even in the end” (p. 38), and “the mother’s story becomes [her] story” (p. 38). The author cites a large number of textual examples to explore Duras’s changing state of mind from the perspective of narratology and rhetoric, and the analysis of the gradually full-fledged image of “Chinese lover” never deviates from the keynote of Duras’s creation.

The constant act of writing and revising are Duras’s resistance to oblivion. Death is the end of memory, and the theme of death can be traced back to her childhood. In the view of the writer Mei Zhao, Hong Huang “not only excavates the connotations of Duras’s works, but also clears up the doubts with her own interpretation” (Zhao 2015: 121). The stories of marginalized women reflect Duras’s doubt on “the certainty of human existence as a whole” (p. 50). These works have already revealed Duras’s concern for the underprivileged and her efforts to “witness the collective trauma of that era through writing” (p. 51). Gradually, Duras’s works move somewhat toward “writing degree zero.” Her works are dominated by the changing memories rather than the author herself. Only in this way can “the real feeling of the ‘conceptualization’ of the Orient beyond the reality” (p. 55) be realized. In sum, the silent Orient is able to speak through Duras.

3 Study on Duras’s writings of invention

The book goes on to talk about Duras’s life in Paris in chapter II, “Paris, la vie pas si tranquille,” and the keywords are still “money–love–writing” (p. 68). This chapter combs through the darkest wartime moments in *Le bureau de poste de la rue Dupin*

et autres entretiens and *La douleur*, demonstrating that “Pas mort en deportation” (1981) also shows Duras’s way to salvage the memory of her husband, who survived the concentration camp, and to bravely accuse the Nazis of their outrageous crimes. Duras wants to write “in the name of truth” (p. 92), taking historical responsibility with her pen. Then, the third chapter, “5 rue Saint-Benoît,” shows a strong realistic concern on how Duras engaged formally in literature and how she became a responsible intellectual. It deftly unveils that, during this period, the “Jews” came to be a “symbol” of “those who were segregated, persecuted, exiled, and destroyed” and of their “way of seeing all the suffering and ‘maladie de la mort’ in the world” (p. 99). French intellectuals regarded “Judaisation and Communism” as a remedy against nothingness, and Duras even felt that she herself were a “Jewish” (p. 100). The author explicates the intellectuals’ perception of their belief in as well as their adherence to “cultural freedom” (p. 104).

The book provides an incredibly insightful reading of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, showing that the “cinematic novel” (p. 107) was “constantly rewritten” (p. 108) over six years. Huang argues that the vivid descriptions of dialogues and scenery in the book bring “the crumbling world back to the reader like a ghost” (p. 108). She compares Duras with Proust and indicates that Duras is also good at capturing the details of life, which forms “la petite musique de Marguerite Duras.” Both *Le marin de Gibraltar* and *Les petits chevaux de Tarquinia* in this period show Duras’s delicate writing of emotions, and the hidden narrative processes as well as a shift of her writing toward cinematic style are clarified. These works are bold linguistic experiments and breakthroughs in the style of novels. The chapter also pays attention to what position the reader takes in the work, and the visual mechanism in the novel, which renders the work a nested narrative construction to describe subtle human nature.

4 Research on both texts and films

Duras’s attempt at a new style of fiction is the forerunner of her foray into film. In the chapter “Filmer le désastre du film,” Duras is quoted as saying that she was inspired to make the film because of the feeling that film adaptation was a betrayal of her novel. The author draws on several important films, *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Une aussi longue absence*, *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, *Détruire, dit-elle*, and *Le camion*, included, to explain how Duras moved from the text to the screen and remained “an all-powerful author” (p. 128). Duras brought her work to the screen “as a gamble,” in order to “invent a form” (Blot-Labarrère 1992: 246). The book interprets Duras’s concept of filmmaking, and creatively illustrates that Duras demands her film to be one that is in process of “being shot and being

accomplished,” which never stops “becoming” and “generating meanings” (p. 142). *Le camion* in particular shows a state of “being completed” (p. 164). Duras’s film aesthetics is in line with her life aesthetics to a certain extent, embracing the “repetition of difference” in Deleuze’s sense, which in Duras’s works is “sometimes an indication of repression, sometimes an indication of the process of working through the repression” (Hofmann 1991: 146). This part elaborates on the narrative technique, themes, choice of actors and music, and the design of close-up shots in the film, which in all make the text, film, and drama an inseparable trinity in Duras’s creation.

Writing is the most important theme to which Duras can return forever. In the author’s opinion, Duras’s late writings accelerate “the process of returning to the self” (p. 197). The study keenly links this style to the “autobiographical novel boom” in French literature in the 1970s and 1980s. Writing about the self is helpful for resisting the instability of modern identity. Meanwhile, Huang’s book attaches great importance to the role of image in biography, and gives full play to the function of photograph as “image narration.” The absent photo, like the “trace” representing the “absence,” exists both in the past and the present, and bridges the chasm between Duras’s memory and oblivion. As suggested, perhaps for every book there is another version, one shifting the perspective and another adjusting the intensity of the emotion. Words construct Duras’s “personal history,” and her various writings are her freedom to integrate her “memory of oblivion” into her life (p. 209).

Duras’s works generated enough buzz to form the “events of literature.” Duras’s “rewriting” of the case of little Grégory and other cases (p. 228) indicates that she took writing as a weapon, to “break the silence” (p. 225) and to make the invisible visible, for freedom is to “speak the truth” (p. 232). “Potential writing” (p. 236) is the integration of reality into works and a path of self-understanding and acceptance, so that “the ‘replacement’ or ‘displacement’ from the self to the text” can be achieved (p. 239). According to Huang, Duras’s writings give the reader the opportunity to experience the “infinite reading” (p. 250), which can be read “for once, or, infinite times” (Huang and Xu 2008: 113). The book’s critique of Duras’s fictions and films focuses on the dissemination of her works as well as on the reader’s response, adding depth to the meaning of Duras’s works.

In addition, the last chapter of the book contains an important study on the translation history of Duras in China. The film *L’amant* (1992) in particular struck a chord with Chinese audiences and readers, but Duras’s influence in China did not stop there. The author examines the translation of Duras in China from the lens of comparative literature and historical reflection, and notes that several of her earlier translations fit the temperament of “scar literature” in the 1980s in China. However, the book suggests that Duras does not owe popularity

to her humanitarian concern or her exploration of novel technique, but to her conspicuous autobiographical writing style. Many readers are impressed by Duras's "feminine, sensitive and autobiographical writing style" (p. 255). From the perspective of communication and emotion studies, the author explains why Duras is so popular among Chinese readers. Hong Huang links what Michel Foucault terms as "l'ère d'aveu," and this demonstrates the influence of Duras's works on Chinese autobiographical fictions. The author lists the reference of famous writers such as Xianliang Zhang, Xiaobo Wang, Mei Zhao and other popular writers to the works of Duras in a comparative study, and reveals the formation of the myth of Duras. Nevertheless, Hong Huang's critique reminds readers of Duras's pursuit of both writing and politics. Moreover, the author dialectically analyzes several "misinterpretations" made by both readers and the translations, which can be seen as interesting sparks from Duras's work on their way to become classics.

5 Significance of the book for Duras studies in China

Marguerite Duras: La chambre noire de l'écriture based on decades of research into Duras by Prof. Hong Huang, for Duras is significant in Huang's academic life. Huang attaches great importance to the study of texts, and the excavation of untranslated or unpublished texts is also very precious. Overall, the biography is brilliant and insightful, and should be considered a must-read for knowing Duras profoundly. In the process of reconstructing Duras's life, Huang does not presuppose it, but rather, constantly explores the multiple possibilities of writing Duras and her writings on the basis of text and historical materials in order to make this biography accessible and palatable to both the expert and the layman. Duras's works are so widespread that many may regard her as a popular writer, but the author mentions that her works are in the process of being "canonized," with "a quality to entitle her to a place in the pantheon of literature – immortality" (pp. 290–291). In the epilogue, Hong Huang states, "reading, too, is incomplete and is constantly becoming. It is also a life process (repeating) through the lives of others or the (different) lives that one can experience and has experienced" (p. 298). As Huang concludes, to read Duras is to stand with Duras against the torrent of life and, as Huang puts it, experiencing Duras makes this possible "[b]ecause we also have a passion for life and an infinite love for the world, which is the daily resistance of each of us" (p. 299).

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