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Sea in *Guchuan* [The Ancient Ship]: A study of the novel of Zhang Wei (1956-)

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Abstract:

Guchuan [The Ancient Ship] offers a panoramic reality and development of China from the first Land reform in the 1940s until the economic reforms in the 1980s. The sea is present as a backdrop, woven by different elements which are important in the story, like the ancient ship which was excavated by people of Wali, the abandoned old port which evokes the maritime trade in historical times, the Luqing river which led to the sea, the old uncle Sui Buzhao which would have sailed on the rivers and the oceans in his youth, as well as the spiritual master Ming Admiral Zheng He (1371-c.1433) and his mythical book on navigation. The image of the sea seems to represent a bygone past in the novel. Is it really the case? We will try to address in the present study, the relationship between the sea, the present, the past and the future. In other words: - the representation of the sea at the present time, - the past time as it is illustrated by the sea, - and the meaning of the sea by regards to the future. In most previous academic studies on *The Ancient Ship* novel, the values of the land and the popular cultures are favorite topics. Here, we will try to offer a new reading of the novel in terms of maritime culture. We will try to include that the maritime culture, like the old ship excavated from the land, which was formerly buried and neglected in the history of Chinese civilization, finds its values in this novel and vehicles a spirit of openness, scientific invention and economic wealth. It is like a distant call, no less pressing; which encourages people to start an adventure, to find happiness in harmony with natural law, the sky.

Key words:

Zhang Wei, *Guchuan* [The Ancient Ship], maritime culture, Chinese contemporary literary, *Haidao zhenjing* [Classic of Waterway]

1. INTRODUCTION

Guchuan [The Ancient Ship]¹ is the first novel of Zhang Wei (1956-)². Originally appeared in 1986 in *Dangdai* literary magazine (n°5, October), it was then published in one volume in 1987 by *Renmin chubanshe* after suffering multiple negative reviews from the Chinese authorities who resented how the novel reveals the misfortune of the Chinese people. Soon after the novel was published, Zhang Wei attracted immediately the Chinese literary circle for his original writing on the history of China from the first Land Reform in the 1940s until the Economic Reforms in the 1980s.

At the very beginning of the novel, majestic land, strengthened ramparts, silent mills, and dried up river seem to reinforce the presence of land. Thus, the landed value, the popular cultures and the intense feeling with nature are favorite topics of most academic studies, and few of them focused specifically on the theme of the sea.

However, the place where the story occurs is a fictional town located on the East China Sea coast. As the title suggests, the sea is as a backdrop, woven by different elements which are important in the story, like the ancient ship which was excavated by people of the town, the abandoned old port which evokes the maritime trade in historical times, the Luqing river which leads to the sea, the old uncle Sui Buzhao which would have sailed on the rivers and on the oceans in his youth, as well as his spiritual master Ming dynasty Admiral Zheng He (1371-c.1433) and his mythical handbook on

¹ The Chinese version that we use in present study is from Zhang, Wei (1996). *Guchuan*, Beijing: Zuojiachubanshe. The quotations of the novel in the English version are from Goldblatt, Howard [translator] (2008). *The Ancient Ship*. London: Harper Perennial. The French version is to appear: Annie Bergeret Curien & Shuang XU [translators] (2014). *Le Vieux bateau*. Paris: le Seuil.

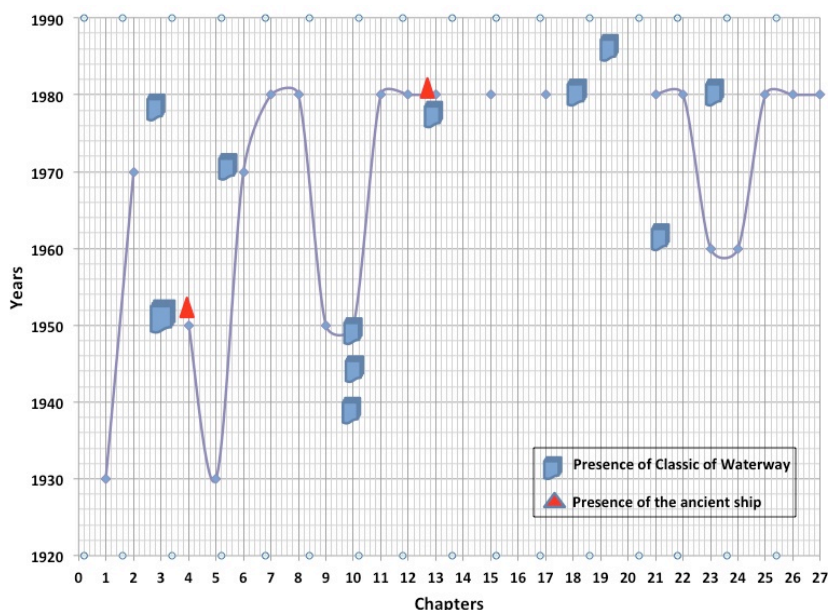
² Born in 1956 in a small seaside town of Shangdong Province, Zhang Wei began to publish his creative writing since 1975. Author of various kinds of writings, including novels, poems, prose and essays, he is one of China's most influential and most prominent authors. In 1999, *The Ancient Ship* was ranked as one of the One Hundred Most Important Chinese Literary Works of the 20th Century and Zhang Wei as one of the Ten Most Important Chinese Literary Writers of the 1990s. In 2011, he was one of five winners of the highest Chinese national literary award - the *Mao Dun* Literature Prize - for his latest novel, *Ni zai gaoyuan* [On the Plateau]. The latter, a 4.5 million characters book (10 volume), is qualified as a "book of walking on the land", an "excellent witness of our time", for his "thinking on the future of humanity", his questioning of the moral conscience and destiny of the people" (see: *Dibajie Mao Dun wenxuejiang huojiang zuopin shoujiangci* [Award speech of 8th Mao Dun Literature Prize] (20-09-2011). Zhongguo zuojiawang [chinawriter.com.cn]. Available in <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2011/2011-09-20/102619.html>.

navigation – *Haidao zhenjing* [Classic of Waterway]. The image of the sea seems to represent a bygone past in *The Ancient Ship*. Is it really the case?

In a previous study³, we have analyzed the representation of the land and have concluded that the time in this novel is based on the cycle of nature, circular. Such vision is summed up by a steady past, doubled by another one which is involved in the process of renewal. Does the sea representation give the same view of the time as the land does? In order to respond to such question, we will try to address in the present study, the relationship between the sea, the present, the past and the future. In other words: - the representation of the sea at the present time, - the past time as it is illustrated by the sea, - and the meaning of the sea by regards to the future.

1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SEA AND THE PRESENT TIME

Let us first list all the passages of *The Ancient Ship* which evoke the sea, and draw a graphic where the x-axis represents the chapters of the novel and the y-axis represents the era of the history.



(figure 1: Sea representation in *The Ancient ship*)

³ XU, Shuang (2010). « Le futur dans le passé : l'intention temporelle dans *Vieux bateau* de Zhang Wei» [The future in the past: the time in the *Ancient ship* of Zhang Wei]. Duanmu, Mei & Tertrais, Hugues (ed), *Temps croisés I*. Paris : La Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 69-76.

We remark that the representation of the sea is recurrent and continuous as it appears in 21 out of 27 chapters. And according to the y-axis, the sea appears in every decade except in the 1940s'.

Nevertheless, despite the high frequency of the sea occurrence all along the novel, we should underline the weakness of presence at each occurrence. Indeed, each appearance lasts generally only few lines, a half page, but no more than one page. In overall, less than 20 pages out of 372 pages.

These passages relate landscape of the sea, life of navigation, maritime trade and naval battles, including also quotations from the *Classic of Waterway*, mentioning of the exploits of Admiral Zheng He.

The sea emerges with the past time, linked to expressions like “*xiri*” [in the past] (Zhang, 1996: 4), “*dangnian*” [that year] (Zhang, 1996: 5), “*guoqu*” [once] (Zhang, 1996: 5), “*dangshi*” [at the time] (Zhang, 1996: 5). Moreover, it is a bygone past, because “the ship whistles they’d grown used to were no longer heard” (Zhang, 1996: 9; Goldblatt, 2008: 9). In the present time, the sea is separated from the town of Wali due to the progressive drying of the Luqing River and the stagnation of maritime vessels at the entrance of Wali.

However, this bygone past reappears in the present.

It is either as fragments of conscious and unconscious memories indicated by words such as “*huixiang*” [recall] (Zhang, 1996: 4), “*yiqi*” [remember] (Zhang, 1996: 51, 127), “*jiyi ruchao*” [memory waves], “*mengjian*” [dream], “*xiangdao*” [think] (Zhang, 1996: 111, 335); or as visions introduced by expressions such as “*yinyue*” [indistinct] (Zhang, 1996: 4), “*huanghujian kandao*” [see dimly] (Zhang, 1996: 51), “*fangfu kandao/tingdao*” [as if to see / hear] (Zhang, 1996: 372); or as a prediction, marked by the verb “*tuiduan*” [deduce], the conditional “*hui*” [may be] or the adverb of affirmation “*biding*” [must be] (Zhang, 1996: 8); or as quotations of the *Classic of Waterway*, an old book that nobody understands a word, which was "placed in a metal box", "hidden behind a brick in a wall, the yellowing pages were creased and dog-eared" (Zhang, 1996: 46; Goldblatt, 2008: 56).

In parallel, the sea is present in oral evocations which often take the form of fabulous stories, as those told by Sui Buzhao, the only inhabitant of Wali who lived in the oceans. The mentioning of the great navigator Admiral Zheng He by Sui Buzhao as

his contemporary makes the narration implausible; despite this fact, his narration attracts young people. Here is a description about him:

What came out of his mouth was unadulterated none sense and unbridled boats. He'd traveled the world over the decades he'd gone, from the South Seas to the Pacific Ocean, under the guidance, he said, of the great Ming dynasty sea captain Zheng He. "Uncle Zheng was a good man!" He proclaimed with a sigh. But, of course, no one believed a word of it. He spun yarns about life and death on the open sea, often drawing a crowd of curious youngsters (Zhang, 1996: 6; Goldblatt, 2008: 5)

The evocation may be done also in a state of delirium, as Buzhao Sui, during his drunkenness (Zhang, 1996: 46, 77, 318), or as Sui Jiansu, when he was affected by "yang-induced madness" (Zhang, 1996: 203).

Finally, the distance from the sea with reality is implied by its distance with the life on land. For example, Sui Buzhao cannot run "a double-wheel, dual-share plows" despite his assumed experience navigation, and he admitted that he spent half of his life on the water and being "useless on land "(Zhang, 1996: 113; Goldblatt, 2008: 139). Another example is in the episode where Sui Buzhao offered a maritime compass to find the lead tube lost by the geological survey team, but the technician Li made him understand that this had nothing to do with shipping (Zhang, 1996: 289).

While the sea appears as something distant, unreal or bygone, it creates a desire to leave. This is the case of Sui Buzhao, as the following passage describes:

The discovery of the ancient ship had restored the seafaring passion of Sui Buzhao. His memories were so powerful that his mind and body were totally absorbed in imaginary masts (Zhang, 1996: 127; Goldblatt, 2008: 155).

As for Sui Jiansu, he decided to leave temporarily the town Wali and to enrich in the city as his uncle Sui Buzhao did for the sea, because for him, "many years earlier, ships transporting noodles from Wali to the South Pacific had crowded the river"; the forest of masts was "one of the most beautiful, captivating images anywhere in the world" (Zhang, 1996: 100; Goldblatt, 2008: 122).

So, we could say that despite the real and psychological distance represented by the sea at the present time, the sea appears as a source of strength, permanent for some, latent for others.

2. THE PAST TIME THAT THE SEA REPRESENTS

What is this past that the sea represents and why it is able to affect the present time in such way? First let us observe how the ancient ship was once people of the town have dug up it in the 1950s':

It had once been a large wooden ship whose deck had long since rotted away, leaving a sixty - or seventy - foot keel with a pair of iron objects - the remnants of two cannons - lying athwart it. A rusty anchor lay to the side, along with other scattered, unidentifiable items, turned black by gooey mud. A pair of iron rods lay across what had been the bow of the ship, seemingly some sort of staffs that had been stuck in the deck. A strange odor rose from the ship, attracting a hawk that was circling above them. The smell turned the people's throats dry, inducing a sense of nausea. (Zhang, 1996: 52; Goldblatt, 2008: 63)

Here, the terms such as “rotted away” (*xiusui wucun*), “lying athwart” (*wai*), “unidentifiable items” (*kanbuchu meimu*), “strange odor” (*qiguaide qiwei*), describe a past that is altered in its integrity, which has lost its qualities, its value, and its strength. Here is the second and also the last appearance of the ancient ship in the 1980s' when Sui Buzhao saw it at the museum:

They're calling it a treasure and they've put it in a big building in the provincial capital. They've replaced all the boards that rotted away and set it up on an impressive painted metal stand inside a chained-off area to keep people away.(...) It underwent numerous chemical treatments after being moved to the capital, so the offensive odor we smelled when it was first dug up is gone and has been replaced by a fresh scent. (Zhang, 1996: 173; Goldblatt, 2008: 211)

Here, we discover that the ancient ship was repaired and put in value because it is considered as a “treasure” (*baowu*), it is exposed in a prestigious manner - “impressive” (*weifengde*) and it emits “fresh scent” (*qingxiang pubi*).

These two descriptions of the ancient ship reveal undoubtedly a metaphorical sense. We have the impression of seeing the ancient China, silent, crumbled by time, whose value is exploited and admired in contemporary society.

In the novel, there is passage about another ancient ship, narrated by Sui Buzhao who while being drunk, talked about naval battle in the following terms:

An armada of war ships came from the south to wage war on Wali. There were corvettes, frigates, corsairs, towered ships, and bridged ships. They didn't know we had a giant ship of our own in port, a seven-thousand-tonner with four or five hundred men and six cannons. (...) Our ship pulled noisily away from the pier and moved out with a following wind. (...) It was a battle for the ages, recorded in the history of our town. You can check it (...) it happened in 485 BCE. (Zhang, 1996: 78; Goldblatt, 2008: 97)

Of course, the delirious aspect of this discourse is apparent from the temporal confusion in the use of fire guns in 485 BCE, as gunpowder was invented later in China around the seventh century during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and the first Chinese cannon (made of bronze) was invented in the fourteenth century. However, this passage relates the first sea battle documented in Chinese naval history. Indeed, *Zuozhuan* [Chronicle of Zuo] (722 - 468 BC)⁴ confirms an expedition of the Wu State against the Qi State, launched by Sea, from Zhejiang to Shangdong in 485 BC. It took place near the port Langya of Shangdong Peninsula, that is to say the location of the fictional town of Wali; the navy of Wu State, together with its allies (Lu, Shu, Yan States) attacked Qi by the south coast and suffered a total defeat. This is an important event for historians of Chinese maritime to confirm that sea routes have existed from 485 BC.⁵

Among the warships mentioned by Sui Buzhao in this passage, one finds *louchuan* [towered ships] which is according to *Wujing zongyao* [Collection of the Most Important Military Techniques]⁶, a very ancient model. It was one of six types of

⁴ Zuo, Qiuming. *Zuozhuan·Aigong shinian* [Chronicle of Zuo·10th year of the reign of Duke Ai of Lu] (722 - 468 BC). Available in <http://ctext.org/chun-qi-zuo-zhuan/ai-gong-shi-nian/zh>.

⁵ See Dars, Jacques (1992). *La marine chinoise du Xe siècle au XIVe siècle*. Paris : Economica, p.195 : « La relative proximité de la presqu'île du Liaodong et de la péninsule du Shandong, le grand nombre d'îles au large de la Corée et du Shandong, l'existence de courants marins en arc de cercle dans le golfe de Bohai (allant des côtes de Corée à celle du Shandong septentrional), expliquent sans doute que dès la période des Royaumes Combattants, les pays de Yan et Qi aient déjà eu une navigation de cabotage qui reliait le Shandong au Liaodong et à la Manchourie ».

⁶ The book was written in 1044, during the Northern Song Dynasty. Its authors were Zeng Gongliang, Ding Du, and Yang Weide, whose writing influenced many later Chinese military writers. See Zeng Gongliang & Ding Du & Yang Weide (1990), *Wujing zongyao* [Collection of the Most Important Military Techniques]. Shanghai : Shanghai guji chubanshe. Also available in <http://www.cos.url.tw/book/4/O-1-040.htm>.

vessels which have been listed in *Taibai yinjing*⁷, a work dating from 759 (Dars, 1992, 103).

This passage reveals on one hand the progress of Chinese navigation in history, and on the other hand, the scientific and technological advances of ancient China, such as shipbuilding, navigation and the invention of gunpowder. Otherwise, these two points are stressed in the novel by the recurrent mentioning of Zheng He and that of the *Classic of Waterway*.

Zheng He, the great navigator of the Ming Dynasty, represents the apogee of Chinese Maritime. According to *Mingshi* [Official History of the Ming Dynasty], Zheng He carried out seven expeditions successively between 1405 and 1433 including 62 giant ocean-going junks, along with over 200 boats of smaller size, more than 27,000 soldiers embarked and the boats contained untold amounts of goods. The French historian Jacques Dars mentions in his book that both for the construction of large ships and the navigation needs, these trips require extraordinary technical means "that no country had at that time" (Dars, 1992: 350).

Technical progresses of navigation are more exposed in the quotations of the *Classic of Waterway*⁸ cited in the novel. One finds descriptions of how to set up a mariner's compass (*xiazhen fa*, chap. 21), how to pinpoint the four directions (*dingsizhen fa*, chap. 10), how to measure the distance (*xingchuan gengshu*, chap.10), seaports and coasts, as well as information which is useful for navigation and access to ports. Sometimes, the description of the coasts, islands, and reefs is given with accurate reconstitution, as in the following passage:

Head in the *yi mao* direction for three *geng* to reach Mount Langmu and continue eight more *geng* to reach the bay at Mount Sanbawa. Do not enter the bay. At close range, the hill to the right of the entrance resembles the gate to a fortress. The water there is shallow. To the east are two volcanoes; the

⁷ It is a book on the art of war for generals to improve military stratagems. It was finished in the middle period of Tang Dynasty. Author: Li Quan (712 - 779). See Li,Quan & Zhu,Shida (translator) (2007). *Taibai Yinjing (Chinese-English)*. Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe [Military Science Publishing House].

⁸ For the Chinese version, see Xiang, Da (ed) (2000). *Liang zhong haidao zhenjing* [Two versions of *Classic of waterway*]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju. According to the Chinese historian Xiang Da (1900-1966), the present version of *Classic of Waterway* is a copy of the original book which is in Badleian Library of Oxford University. Xiang Da supposed that the original book, dating from 16th century in the era of Ming dynasty, was brought in Europe by the Jesuits (Xiang, 2000 : 3).

easternmost has a high peak, the westernmost spews fire. (Zhang, 1996: 127; Goldblatt, 2008: 155)

Navigation techniques include also the use of astronomy (celestial coordinate system), geography and mapping for charts, as shown in the following quotation: “Keep adjusting course, follow the stars, record the islands, the currents, and mountains to draw a map”. (Zhang, 1996: 345; Goldblatt, 2008: 431).

According to historians, these techniques are the result of a long experience and oral secret transmission between browsers before being written down gradually until completion of a *Classic of Waterway* in the era of the Ming dynasty. Jacques Dars notes that it was "at a time when centers of economic and political gravity of Chinese world moved to the Yangtze and the eastern seaboard", the market economy was expanding rapidly, and China fitted into the huge flow of trade connecting East Asia to India and the Middle East. "Wealth", "China's advance in many areas" and the expeditions of Zheng He finally showed universally the supremacy of China on the Oceans (Dars, 1992: 52).

Thus, the sea evokes a specific time when China civilization reached its peak in scientific, economic and diplomatic areas. After the death of Zheng He, the Chinese government implemented a downturn policy in both land and sea. Thereafter, the Chinese sea power declined.

Does the novel make a deliberate call to the reconstruction of this power?

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEA FOR THE FUTURE

To answer this question, the mentioning of the name of Xu Fu in the novel appears interesting. According to *Shiji · Qinshihuang benji* [The Records of the Grand Historian · Imperial Biographies of the First Emperor of Qin]⁹, Xu Fu was a geomancer the time of the First Emperor of Qin (259 BC - 210 BC). It would have been sent by the emperor as an emissary to Japan by sea.

⁹ Sima Qian (2002 17th edition). *Shiji · Qinshihuang benji* [The Records of the Grand Historian · Imperial Biographies of the First Emperor of Qin], Beijing: Zhonghua shuju. Volume 1, 246-247.

In the following passage, the appearance of Xu Fu does not seem like a mere delirium of Sui Buzhao personage. After telling the story of the naval battle, Sui Buzhao said this:

A few years after, (...) Xu Fu, from the Xu family in East Wali (...) insisted on taking me to meet the First Emperor. (Zhang, 1996: 78; Goldblatt, 2008: 97)

It is not a coincidence that the homeland of Xu Fu is located near the town of Longkou in Shandong, region of the fictitious town of Wali. Moreover, Zhang Wei, the author of the novel, is actually the president of the International Xu Fu Cultural Exchange Association (*Zhongguo guoji Xu Fu wenhua jiaoliu xiehui*). He is also the editor of a collection of books on Xu Fu culture and author of the 4th volume entitled *Dongxun* [The Journey to the East]¹⁰.

In a recent speech on Xu Fu¹¹, Zhang Wei contrasts the agriculture culture (*nonggeng wenhua*) and the maritime culture, and regrets that because of the dominant agriculture culture for thousands of years, the Chinese people are attached to their land, still and folded on themselves. For Zhang Wei, since the First Emperor of Qin, the Chinese people hoisted the great wall to strengthen the country; this culture leads to the fact that they were afraid of the sea, the overseas and its openness. The First Emperor of Qin sent Xu Fu in Japan to look for herbs of immortality (not to strengthen the country). However, Xu Fu didn't submit the emperor; he went through Korea and landed in Japan. He discovered a "new land" (Japan) long before Columbus. His achievements merit to be enhanced in the current context where the economic policy reform and the opening to the outside incite people to strengthen maritime power on military, economic and cultural levels.

From this point of view, we may now better understand the following scenes: when the geological survey team discovered the secret underground river, Sui Buzhao sang seafaring chants, and said that he really missed the ancient ship, that "we must get it back ...It belongs to us" (Zhang, 1996: 295; Goldblatt, 2008: 361); or elsewhere, Sui Buzhao, "crawled along, cursing the town for being ungrateful and for

¹⁰ Zhang, Wei (1996). *Dongxu*, collection « Xu Fu wenhua jicheng » [Compilation of Xu Fu culture], volume 4. Shandong : Youyi chubanshe.

¹¹ Zhang, Wei (2011). *Weidade hanghaijia Xu Fu* [Great navigator Xu Fu], Jiaoyu Zhongguo – Zhongguowang [edu.china.com.cn]. Available in http://edu.china.com.cn/2011-10/21/content_23688542.html.

forgetting their ancestors, the old ship and the Uncle Zheng He”, called out sailing chants and said to people of Wali: ‘You are young and strong, so why cower around here, losing face for your ancestors? Hurry up, come aboard. The water in the Luqing River is rising, the wind is good, and the current is right.’ (Zhang, 1996: 353-354; Goldblatt, 2008: 430)

We can see therefore that the sea does not only belong to the past, but it calls people to go forward, towards a future that gives an opening on both spatial and spiritual levels.

In the novel, quotations from the *Classic of Waterway* are cited ten times with long passages as shown clearly by the “sea representation figure” above: 4 times in the 1950s’, during the Great Leap Forward; 1 time in the 1960s’, during the Cultural Revolution; 2 times in the 1970s’, during the Sino-Vietnamese war; and 4 times in 1980s’, era of economic reform.

Besides information on the technical advances which we mentioned above, these quotations show not only the direction, route, but also represent warnings of dangers. For example:

You **must** fix your direction with care and make no mistake in your calculation. The ship cannot veer. **If** it heaves to the west it will run aground, so you **must** heave east. **If** you heave too far to the east, the water will be dark and clear, with many gulls and petrel. **If** you heave too far to the west, the water will be crystal clear, afloat with driftwood and many flying fish. **If** the ship is on the right course, the tails of bird will point the way. When the ship nears Wailuo, seven *geng* to the east will be Wanli Shitang, where there are low red rock formations. The water is shallow **if** you can see the side of the boat and you **must** be careful **if** you see rocks. From the fourth to the eighth month, the water flows southwest, and the currents are quite strong” (Zhang, 1996: 78; Goldblatt, 2008: 95)

Here, we can observe the significant presence of imperative sentences introduced by “must” (3 times) and that of hypothesis sentences marked by “if” (6 times). As far as in the following examples, where expressions such as “don’t”, “It is imperative to”, “Take care”, “study it” are used to point out the importance of the direction:

There are three or four oxtail reefs just below the hull, so **don’t sail** over them; better to sail between them.” (Zhang, 1996: 176; Goldblatt, 2008: 215)

It is imperative to choose as navigator one who knows the compass well, who observes the stars, mountains, and islands closely, and for whom the color of the water is meaningful. **Take care** in deep water, **study it** repeatedly and **do not take** it lightly. In this way, there will be no problems.” Zhang, 1996: 354; Goldblatt, 2008: 431)

This observation reveals the deep significance of the sea in the novel: the importance of the helmsman to carry out navigation.

From this point of view, we can say that the main personages of this novel are presented each as a helmsman on the ship of life.

Sui Baobu, the eldest son of the clan of Sui, believes that "the struggle of interests" (*wei ziji pinqiang*) is the source of human misfortune. He is benevolent, honest, and respectful to Confucian values which can be summarized by « Do not be arbitrary, doctrinaire, vulgar, or egocentric ». He helps others, and he saves the glass noodles factory from technical accidents regardless of his health. However, he realizes that his individual efforts cannot change the fate of Wali, plunged into human cruelty. He reads *Tianwen* [Heavenly questions] of Qu Yuan (339 BCE – 278 BCE) to trace the origins of humanity, he reads the *Communist Manifesto* to understand the industrial civilization. This book seems for him very obscure, perhaps because it failed to propose solutions for today's China. But thanks to this book, he finally learned to act for the good of everyone, dared to fight against injustice. He leaved the old mill - his refuge, and took over management of the glass noodles factory. Having confidence in future, he decided to venture into the waves of economic reform.

Sui Jiansu, the youngest son of Sui clan, is a person who acts on the basis of his instinctive individual feelings, whether by regards to love or to hate. His action is based entirely on family revenge. He ventures between town and country; he tries to apply the concepts of the modern economy to succeed and to change the mindset of the people of Wali. These acts concern ultimately only material level. He failed. Certainly, a ship that is based solely on economic aspects would not advance very far. At the end, suffering from an incurable disease, Jiansu recovered gradually by Guo Yun, a doctor, specialist of *Huangdi Neijing* [Inner classic of Yellow emperor].

Sui Buzhao appears to be outside the socio-political life of Wali. He lives without being bound by norms. He has two great passions: navigation and science. He seems to be there to remind the glorious past of maritime culture, advancing

technological progress. In the novel he supports undeniably all the marginal persons that have any relationship to science such as engineer Li Qisheng, inventor Li Zhichang and the technician Li of the geological survey team. At the end of the novel, he sacrificed himself to save the life of Li Zhichang who might be crushed by the production machine of glass noodles. By his desire for innovation, openness, imagination, by its evocation of Zheng He and the *Classic of Waterway*, he seems to want to save Wali by a ship which is technically efficient.

Guo Yun, the traditional doctor of the town of Wali could be regarded as an assistant helmsman. He appears in 10 of 27 chapters. Whenever there is a sick person, he observes the symptoms of his disease and prescribes a remedy. However, he is not confined to prescribe only to his patient; he quotes abundantly *Inner classic of Yellow emperor* to explain both the principle of the human body works, and the way of Heaven¹² (*tiandao*). He seems to represent the Taoist cosmological vision of ancient China.

The presence of the Taoist dimension is indeed significant but implicit in the novel. The first names of personages such as Baopu, Jiansu, Buzhao, Zhichang are all from the *Tao de jing*¹³.

“Baopu”, “Jiansu” come from Chapter 19 of *Dao de jing*, passage where Laozi explains the method of non-action:

Jiansu baopu, shaosi guayu

[Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block, have little thought of self and as few desires as possible (Lau, 1982: 29)].

They are measures of good government that Laozi suggests. The first name of the inventor “Zhichang” comes from the Chapter 16 of *Dao de jing*, which emphasizes the importance of capturing the natural law for the proper functioning of the society:

Zhichang yue ming

[Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment (Lau, 1982: 25)]

¹² See Unschuld, Paul Ulrich (2003). *Huangdi nei jing su wen : nature, knowledge, imagery in an ancient Chinese medical text, with an appendix: The doctrine of the five periods and six qi in the Huang Di nei jing su wen*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London : University of California press.

¹³ In this study, quotations in English version are from Lau, Dim Cheuk [translator] (1982). *Tao Te Ching*, Hong Kong : The Chinese university press.

Finally, the first name of “Buzhao” is in Chapter 73 of *Dao de jing*, in the following sentence:

Tian zhi dao, bu zheng er shan sheng, bu yan er shan ying, bu zhao er zi lai, tan ran er shan mou. Tian wang huihui, shu er bu shi.

[The way of heaven

Excels in overcoming though it does not contend,

In responding though it does not summon,

In laying plans though it appears slack.

The net of heaven is cast wide.

Though the mesh is not fine, yet nothing ever slips through. (Lau, 1982: 107)]

This first name is associated with the image of the heavenly way, invisible but omnipotent and omniscient, which connects the victory to the act of not acting, which emphasizes the natural harmony between man and heaven.

As we can see, the sea represents also the hope for a better future, guided by a qualified helmsman who can afford a better view of the world and find harmony for humanity.

CONCLUSION

So we can say that in the novel, the sea reveals openness, it is different from the representation of land culture, which is attached to the time circular. As we can conclude, the study of the sea representation allows us for a new reading of *The Ancient ship* novel in terms of maritime culture. Like the ancient ship excavated from the land, this culture, which was formerly buried and neglected in the history of Chinese civilization, finds its values in this novel and vehicles a spirit of openness, scientific invention and economic wealth. It is like a distant call, no less pressing, which encourages people to start an adventure, to find happiness in harmony with natural law, the sky.

From the literary point of view, allusions or references to ancient texts, such as the *Classic of Waterway*, *Dao de jing*, *Inner Classic of Yellow Emperor*, *Tianwen*, etc. are juxtaposed with references to modern or contemporary writings such as the *Communist Manifesto*, and quotations from Chinese newspapers. These intertexts from different periods are of different prose or poetry genres, and of a variety of fields -

history, technology, philosophy, literature, sociology. This polyphonic writing¹⁴ makes the time reversible, and offers a poetic form which opposes openness and dialogue to downturn. From this perspective, *The Ancient ship* novel may be considered as an innovative literary boat which is moving in the new era of China.

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¹⁴ See Bakhtine, Mikhaïl (1978). *Esthétique et théorie du roman*. Paris : Gallimard. Todorov, Tzvetan (1981). *Mikhaïl Bakhtine, le principe dialogique*. Paris : Le Seuil.

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GLOSSARY

Ding Du 丁度
ding sizhen fa 定四針法
Dongxun 东巡
Guchuan 古船
Guo Yun 郭运
Handao zhenjing 海道针经
Huangdi Neijing 黄帝内经
Jiansu baopu, shaosi guayu 见素抱朴，少私寡欲
Li Quan 李筮
Li Zhichang 李知常
louchuan 楼船
Mingshi 明史
nonggeng wenhua 农耕文化
Qu Yuan 屈原
Sui Baopu 隋抱朴
Sui Buzhao 隋不召
Sui Jiansu 隋见素
Taibaiyinjing 太白陰經
Tao de jing 道德经
Tian zhi dao, bu zheng er shan sheng, bu yan er shan ying, bu zhao er zi lai, tan ran er shan mou. Tian wang huihui, shu er bu shi. 天之道，不爭而善勝，不言而善應，不召而自來，坦然而善謀。天網恢恢，疏而不失。
tiandao 天道
Tianwen 天问
Weidade hanghaijia Xu Fu 伟大的航海家徐福
Wujing zongyao 武經總要
xiazhen fa 下針法
xingchuan gengshu 行船更數
Xu Fu 徐福
Yang Weide 楊惟德
Zeng Gongliang 曾公亮
Zhang Wei 张炜
Zheng He 郑和
Zhichang yue ming 知常曰明
Zhongguoguoji Xu Fu wenhua jiaoliu xiehui 中国国际徐福文化交流协会